



## 19 | NEGOTIATING DEVELOPMENT: CONTRIBUTIONS OF GHANA MUSLIM MISSION WOMEN FELLOWSHIP

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### Abstract

The contributions of Muslim women in society have manifested in varied ways throughout Islamic history. Muslim women have contributed significantly to the development of Islam in its formative years. Yet, due to ignorance, misinterpretation of texts, mediation of Islam by *ulama*, traditions and culture, the rights of Muslim women and their active participation in the development of Muslim societies declined. Since the early 1990s, Muslim women in Ghana have contributed in diverse forms to the holistic development of the Muslim ummah. However, the dominant connection of development with economic growth diminished the immense contributions of Muslim women to development in Ghana. Using in-depth interview and focused group discussions, the paper does an analysis of the activities of one Muslim women group, which reveal the multidimensionality of development. This paper argues that Muslim women groups have contributed significantly to the discourse and praxis of development within the context of Islam. On the whole, the paper will contribute to the discourse on Muslim women and development in Ghana.

**Keywords:** Islam, Muslim women, Development, Ghana

### Introduction

Ghana's quest for development – socially and economically – has been one of the main aspirations behind the country's decolonization agenda. Nkrumah's declaration that Ghanaians should seek the political kingdom and everything else will follow will cast within the realm of development (Buah, 1998). His understanding was that, once Ghanaians got rid of the colonialists, Ghanaians could determine the contours of their development. Indeed, independence brought some gains to the Ghanaian community. In the early days of postcolonial excitements, Nkrumah embarked on ambitious programmes, including the building of schools and

the construction of the Akosombo dam, which engineered confidence in the Ghanaian masses that really independence was the best for the nation (Biney, 2011).

However, at the turn of the 1960s, things began falling apart (Killick, 2010). Corruption and partisan politics merged to suffocate the nation (Killick, 2010). In response, several attempts were said to have been made by a few individuals to overthrow Nkrumah. In his response, Nkrumah passed several laws that suppressed political freedom and eventually led the country into a one-party state in 1964 (Gocking, 2005). The masses' dissatisfaction with Nkrumah's regime heightened, resulting in the military and the police, backed by the America CIA, toppling the Nkrumah's regime in 1966 (Gocking, 2005).

Since 1966, Ghana was thrown into cusps of military coups, until the regime of Jerry John Rawlings in the 1980s. As a military leader, Rawlings succeeded in stabilizing the country's freedom, including reports of his violation of human rights, until internal and external pressures compelled him to re-democratize the country in the 1990s (Aidoo, 2006). Since the 1990s, the country's search for socio-economic development has been a usual outcry. Much as the country's developmental challenges has a long history going back to the colonial exploitative regime, the country's introduction of neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s rendered life very difficult for several Ghanaians (Donkor, 2019).

Consequently, at the time Ghana was re-transitioning to democracy in the late 1980s, the Rawlings' Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) extended invitation to every Ghanaian constituency, including the religious ones, to contribute to the nation's development. In response, the various religious groups responded. Nevertheless, given the historic marginalisation of women's voices and their contributions to human flourishing, the role of Muslim women and their organizations has hardly had the deserved attention. Even if it had been discussed at all, their role as social activists, socializers of children, educators, are less considered as development issues.

In this paper, therefore, my goal is to participate in the conversation on development, highlighting the fault lines in the construction of development as economic enrichment. I will point out how concentrating on

materialism as development tends to obscure the critical roles Muslim women play in advancing the “common good” in Ghana. Considering that my discussion takes Islam as the focus of discussion, I will look at what Islam considers as development and how women are not left out in the attainment of Islamic vision of human flourishing. I will then narrow the discussion to the contributions that the Ghana Muslim Mission Women Fellowship (GMMWF) has brought to the frontiers of development.

## **Islam, Women and Development**

Religion remains very pervasive globally. Contrary to the predictions in the 1960s that religion would fizzle out under yoke of modernity and modernization, religion has surged back strongly since the late 1970s (Cox, 1965). The idea of religion having staged a comeback has been concretized in the title of John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge’s co-authored book, *God is back* (John and Adrian, 2009). The title of the book is itself revealing of a certain understanding that God had gone into hibernation. Nevertheless, whether in the West or East or Africa, God has always been present – He never went anywhere to even think of coming back. What may explain the idea that God may have gone into a quiet mode was the lingering impact of the nineteenth century western flirtation with its enlightenment – which assumed that religion must liberalise or cease to exist. Religion may have liberalised to accommodate some elements of modernity, such as religious use of technology – but in Africa religion remains very strong. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Christianity and Islam had not completely taken over several countries in Africa. But by the middle of the twentieth century, Africa had become the stronghold of the so-named Abrahamic religions (Jenkins, 2002).

Even so, the idea that there is a surge in religion is not also to say that religion remains what it has always been in terms of ecclesiastical unfettered control. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, the spread of religions, particularly Islam has had significant impact on the extent to which the religion has accommodated indigenous cultures. In Ali Mazrui’s insightful analysis, he observed that the penetration of Islam into “black” Africa was more economically driven than politically motivated (Mazrui, 1985). This

means that until the nineteenth century, when Osman dan Fodio launched his reformist jihad in Northern Nigeria, the spread of Islam was mediated by itinerant Mande Dyula and Hausa traders (Trimingham, 1970). These traders were interested in their business and hardly entangled themselves in local politics. The elites *Mualims* or religious scholars who followed these traders were employed as administrators in the emerging Western African medieval kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. In the sixteenth century, the Mole-Dagbani kingdoms of what is now Ghana incorporated Islamic clerics in their state formation (Levtzion, 1968).

Islam in these Mole-Dagbani kingdoms became readily identifiable with local cultures. The important point to mention here is that the Mole-Dagbani people did not give up on their indigenous cultures, even though they assimilated Islam into local governance. The implication of this was that the indigenous understanding of gendered relations concurrently got typified as Islamic version of womanhood. Meanwhile, the Islamic view of women is historically and socially discursive. Since the time of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), women have played important roles in the establishment of the Islamic *ummah* – the Islamic community. As a nascent community, women's role as mothers and nurturers was considered highly relevant in ensuring the continuity of the faith. *Tawhid* (Unity of God) is the foundation of Islam which teaches the Oneness of God as the Sovereign and Creator of all things. It articulates the Islamic world and defines the basis of knowledge, social action and social organization (Kounsar, 2016). It expresses equality of humankind in the sight of God the ultimate source of value and knowledge. Framed as part of the Islamic creation account of and women were not considered inferior to men and their roles in society were not also considered any lesser to their male's counterpart (Barazangi, 2004).

Similarly, as part of the Islamic idea of human beings as God's viceroy (*khalifat*) on earth, men and women have the same responsibility to keep law and order in the cosmos (Wadud, 2006). Nevertheless, their roles were gendered, but not rated in terms of quantity – such as whose work was more important than the other. From the Islamic perspective, men and women, playing different roles, complement each other, rather than

compete, to advance the Islamic *ummah* (Badawi, 1976). For this purpose, men and women participated in education and religious rituals of the five pillars of Islam (shahadah, salat, zakat, Saum Hajj) in the same sense to derive ultimate inspiration and guidance from Allah to undertake their respective responsibilities. Girls and boys were therefore not discriminated against in their pursuit of knowledge; men and women also had equal access to God – though their roles in the mosque may also be gendered. But before God, men and women are the same in their search for piety (Barlas, 2002).

Consequently, Islam greatly reconstructed the social environment of the pre-Islam Arabia, where androcentric and male-centrism had marginalized women. Until the advent of Islam, women in the pre-Islamic world – often called *Jahiliyya* to mark the first century before Islam – were not part of state governance; as a society ridden with feud, women's non-military role was considered a bane to society (Hitti, 1970). For all this reason, the rise of Islam marked a major shift in the lives of women and the reformation of the Arabian society. Consequently, women actively participated in public life during the time of the Prophet (SAW) and that of the orthodox caliphs (Kamali, 2015).

It is against this background that several Islamic scholars have contested the attempt by some male Islamic scholars to impose inferiorization and marginalization on Muslim women. These ulama's treatment of gendered roles in Islam as fossilized in history is a product of the nineteenth century when the Islamic civilization showed signs of collapse. To grip their hold on priestly control, several male *ulamas* are believed to have imposed culturally-informed gendered assumptions on Islam.

Returning to the West African sub-region, therefore, the African agency in the introduction of Islam mainstreamed indigenous gendered relations into the religion. Women had to subsist under the guise of androcentric control. The situation was almost worsened by the slave trade and colonialism (Roberson and Klein, 1997). Both the trans-Saharan slave trade and the trans-Atlantic slave trade rendered the position of women very precarious. Women were the easy target as forced labourers, pawns or sex objects in the slave trade (Roberson and Klein, 1997). Again, under the guise of protecting women against slave traders, men deepened and firmed their control over women.

Similarly, given that the missionary regime of the nineteenth century coincided with the reign of Queen Victoria of England, who was bent on restoring Christian ethics into the public sphere in England and the colonies, women had yet another layer of experience (Van Wyk Smith, 1972). What became known in feminist scholarship as Victorian concept of womanhood was routinized through gendered mission education that prepared women for domestic roles and men for public roles (Oyewumi, 1997). While the missionaries may not have had a bad intention for this gendered education, at the time of independence in several countries in West Africa, including Ghana, women's representation in politics was very low. In the Islamic regions, the *Madrasa* education was open to all, but most women had to give up on their education to marry, once they attain what society considered as marriageable age. Again, on the Islamic front, at the time of independence, several countries in West Africa could only boast of a handful of women Islamic scholars.

The impact of the above is that men came to define what development is. As public workers, men conceptualised development as public activities. Women's domestic roles were hardly rated and valued as development. Given this, women's activities in supporting human flourishing had hardly attracted attention. The situation is even dire for Muslim women in Ghana. Much as women have played critical roles in supporting Ghana's economic recovery since the 1990s, scholars have choreographed themselves from women's roles. It is for this reason that I dedicate the next section discussing the role of the Ghana Muslim Women Fellowship (GMMWF). I will provide a brief historical background of the group, their mission, activities and how they are re-negotiating the public sphere to engender growth in Ghana. To contextualize my analysis, I will draw from Islamic perspective on women's position in society.

## Ghana Muslim Mission Women Fellowship (GMMWF)

Ghana Muslim Mission Women Fellowship was founded in 1967 as the Women's wing of the Ghana Muslim Mission, an indigenous Ga Muslim Organization. It is non-doctrinal, multi-ethnic, apolitical and non-profit organization open to all Muslim women in Ghana. It has an active membership of about 1000 which consists of literate and non-literate women

between the ages of 25-75 years. Through the dynamic leadership of the founding members, the group has founded branches in six other regions in the county. The Greater Accra branch which is the focus of this discussion is made up of seven (7) sub-branches. Its main objectives are to educate Muslim women about Islam, promote holistic education for Muslim children, support the needy and the poor in society and promote peaceful coexistence with other women groups both Muslims and non-Muslims. It has a well-defined leadership structure made up of 8-member executive committee, for effective administration of the group. Their activities reflect the mission and vision of the Ghana Muslim Mission, which is to promote unity among its members and produced a well-educated and disciplined, spiritual and healthy Muslim community who shall live by the principles of the Qur'an and the sunnah of the Prophet (SAW) to contribute towards national development. To this end, it is envisioned to be the most vibrant Muslim organization which strives for the socio-economic, moral, spiritual and intellectual development through the provision of education, health and other social infrastructure. The mission and vision of the GMM underpin the activities of the women's Fellowship.

### **Activities**

Having understood the implication of *khalifahip* for education, the Women's fellowship engaged in educational activities in its varied forms to educate their members. Through their own ingenuities, and with assistance from an Islamic NGO, Islamic Council for Development and Humanitarian Services (ICODEHS) in 1998, constructed a four-classroom block which accommodates the kindergarten department of the Hijaz Islamic basic school, one of the Ghana Muslim Mission Islamic schools in Accra, and have also contributed to build one nursery block each in the Central and Western regions respectively. As mothers, the Women's Fellowship is concerned about the training of Muslim children, and nursery and kindergarten departments are important as they provide a firm basis for the moral foundation of children in their formative years. For members of the Women's Fellowship, therefore, development is about giving one's child holistic education which reflect their own development as mothers.

As part of the strategy to informally educate their members, through the use of conferences, conventions, seminars, workshops and symposia, the group has reached out to a large number of women to educate, preach, enhance spirituality, do advocacy and raise funds for their projects. They also discuss contemporary social and religious issues which affect the development of women. The conferences also provide opportunity for the group to demonstrate kindness and generosity as they donate food, clothes, toiletries and other essential items to the needy, poor and the vulnerable in society, as part of the human development agenda.

The non-formal educational activities of the group include the weekend Islamic classes where they are educated on the proper observance of the Islamic daily rituals as essential element of human development in Islam. These classes have also been used to provide vocational skills in soap and bead making, Batik, weaving and catering for the economic empowerment of the members. The women are also educated on time and home management for efficient use of their time as mothers, and wives. Again, through preaching, members have been taught moral lessons which has transformed attitude and behaviour for moral and spiritual development. Significantly, the used of indigenous languages have enabled effective teaching, preaching and communication which mirror the pedagogy of wisdom preaching stated in Q 16:125. Closely linked to the use of indigenous language is its use in the composition of songs to explain various aspects of Islam. The songs have been innovatively used to raise funds for projects in a competitive manner as well as for evangelism. It is therefore not surprising that their financial contribution has immensely sustained the active existence of Ghana Muslim Mission. The women's fellowship is the longest existing Muslim women groups in Ghana that has stood the test of time.

Despite the manifestation of the Christian influence in the formal uniform for functions, the mode of dressing of the women fellowship is informed by the desire to maintain their cultural identity as Ga/Akan and practice the faith without any form of Arabization. It is also used to distinguish them from the non-indigenous Muslim women who hitherto discriminated against them as pervert in Islam. Essentially, modernization and technological awareness had led to the proliferation of digital station with female participation as hosts which created other platforms



for Muslim women. The Fellowship uses the electronic media to perform *da'wah* (propagation) activities on popular programmes on Television and Radio such as Aqeedah, An-Nissa etc. Through the media, they have helped to remove the stereotypes non-Muslims have about Muslim women. All these helped the better appreciation of Islam and affected behavioural change towards female education hence development. As Ahmad (1979) avers, Islam implies efforts, struggle, movement and renewal, all of which constitutes social change.

### **Women as Negotiators of Change**

Development has had different shades of meaning and conceptualisation. In much of Africa, development is equivalent of westernization and modernization – embodied in material progression (Gyekye, 1997). Nevertheless, the western notion of development is not universally shared. This is also because, development as economic enrichment, other than shared social values to foster inclusive society has rather stimulated multidimensionality of exclusion (Sen and Nussbaum, 1993). In his philosophical foundation of development, Khurshid Ahmad (1994) elucidates that Islamic development is rooted in *tawhid* which teaches the Sovereignty of God over all things with humankind as the *khalifah*. So, entrusted with *Khalifahship* and naturally imbued with responsibility to develop morally, politically, economically, socially and spiritually within the *ummah* towards *Tazkiyah* i.e.; “purification and growth,” the human being becomes the focus of development. Thus, the Islamic understanding of development is value based and human oriented. Consequently, the Qur'an, has mandated women to self-actualize as independent individuals and also provide leadership to enable holistic development of the *ummah*. *Khalifahship* is thus, permeated with different elements with leadership and education as salient components. Wadud (2006) espouses that inherent in the agency of humankind, is the conscious recognition of choice and its exercise to fulfill the purpose of creation and cultivate the mental faculties through education and deep reflection on the signs of God (Rabiatu, 2015). So, women as *khalifahs*, with full rights, responsibilities and obligations to self-actualize are also called to social action through practicalization of *Amr bi maruf wa nahy an Munkar* (advocating what is right and

eschew what is wrong as stated in Q 3:104). Women of the Ghana Muslim Mission Women Fellowship, individually as wives, mothers and daughters and collectively as a group, have appropriated *khalifahship* or moral agency, and freely came together to resist ignorance through different forms of education to acquire Islamic knowledge which underpin Islamic human self-development.

This resonates with the view that *khalifahship* implies continuous efforts both individually and collectively to promote development (Wadud, 2006). The objectives, and activities of the group is thus, informed by Islamic awareness and consciousness about need for proper understanding of the Quran and Islam at the individual and communal levels as a response to the call by Allah to social action for development. The attempting to live out *khalifahship* as self-development is directly linked to the development of society with the ultimate aim to achieve ‘goodness in this world and goodness in the life here after. Their understanding of *khalifahship* underpin the zeal to resist the patriarchal and several cultural / un-Islamic practices and attitudes that in several ways negatively impacted Muslim women’s lives as manifested in their illiteracy, ignorance and poverty etc; and its implication for their marginalization in Ghanaian society.

The move by the founders of the group to assist women develop holistically is a manifestation of the innate qualities of women’s leadership as expressed in the Hadith which teaches that every individual occupies a position of leadership, and would be held accountable. Having identified ignorance and lack of holistic education as the bane in development, it was not unexpected that education became a major project to embark on; for, a knowledgeable and educated mother contributes significantly to the overall development of society and in line with the oft repeated statement of the Prophet that “Paradise lies at the feet of mothers”. So, by laying emphasis on education as seen in the activities and the objectives of the group, *khalifahship* as a fellowship has sought to offer leadership to address this pressing issue. Hajia Mariama Obeng, the national chairperson of the women’s fellowship explained that, “I wanted to serve Allah and any work which is said to be for the sake of Allah, I am prepared to do and get actively involved in it, as my contribution to the work of Allah.”

Unlike the liberal notion of development which focused on economic growth, the Islamic understanding of development is interested in the holistic development of human society to reflect the multi-dimensional nature of human beings who must develop in this world and the life hereafter. Accordingly, the varied notion of development underpins its contextual understanding and application by various societies. So, the Women Fellowship in their context, negotiate their divergent visions of development within the context of globalized concepts and local discourse and practices. Islam is founded on the basis of knowledge and this was established by the first revelation (Q 96:1-5) to the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). These verses commanded humankind to learn, explore and seek enlightenment which underscore the importance of learning and education in Islam (Abdulai, 2014). It is to this end that in the understanding of the women fellowship to acquire knowledge and apply it to the various aspects of human activities implies development. As expressed by some members of the group, “Development is about learning about Islam and using the knowledge to enhance your own practice of Islam. Money is development only if it can be used to help others and when you have peace of mind it is development.” Thus, their ability to recite the Qur’an and understand it well, together with the Sunnah are considered as prerequisite to development. This is because the knowledge of the Qur’an and the Sunnah are fundamental to the understanding of Islam and the ability to practice it properly (Sulemanu, 2018). Again, the study of fiqh (jurisprudence) of the pillars of Islam and the practicalization of the inner dimensions is considered as development.

As expressed by Ramatu Ankrah, “there are a lot of Muslims who do not know how to perform ablution, how to perform Salat and other basic principles and knowledge in Islam, this for me is development.” For the women, the ability to perform ablution properly having been educated on these rituals is tantamount to development because it is a prerequisite for the five-daily obligatory Salat (prayers) which serve as a reminder of the purpose of human existence and remind the women of their obligation to God, their fellow human beings and their own self-development. So, performance of the pillars of Islam; the practicalization of the inner dimensions of the rituals and the applicability in their daily lives, are all tantamount to development as far as the women are concerned.

As the critical mass of every society, women are regarded as the custodians of social norms and values that lead to peace and development in society (Zagoon, 2018). Thus, the conferences of the GMMWF has been used to promote peaceful co-existence with other non-Muslim women's groups such as the Presbyterian and Methodist Women's Fellowship. The GMMWF in all its conferences invites non-Muslim Women Fellowship members and not only acknowledge them as sisters in the "call to social action" but reciprocate and honour the invitation of non-Muslim Women's Fellowship. This is clearly exhibited in the patronage of the programmes and activities organized by the Thalitha Kumi Centre which has created space and brought women of diverse faiths to deliberate on issues that affect the well-being of women. This fosters good relationship and enables people of diverse socio-cultural and religious backgrounds to work together devoid of misconceptions and stereo-types which hinder harmonious and peaceful co-existence (Zagoon, 2018). This practice of inclusiveness is a *sine qua non* for Islamic development as it brings people irrespective of the different backgrounds together first "to know one other" as the Quran enjoins and second, for best social cohesion and national development.

## CONCLUSION

The paper discusses the status of women within the context of pre-Islamic era and how the Qur'an granted women rights which placed them in the position of responsibility as *khalifahs* to actively participate in the holistic development of human society. Even though women were subsequently denied these rights, due to socio-cultural norms and misinterpretation of text, through activism and expression of agency, Muslim women have engaged in activities which has promoted Islamic development with the context of their understanding of what it means to develop. It discusses the Ghana Muslim Mission Women Fellowship, its objectives and activities and how it has contributed to the development of its members and the Muslim community in Ghana. As an indigenous culture sensitive group, the fellowship has rallied Muslim women for effective participation in development.

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