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Barriers And Opportunities for Women's Participation in Islamic Religious Practices and Institutions in Kakamega County, Western Kenya

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Abstract- ***This study examined the barriers and opportunities for women's participation in Islamic religious practices and institutions in Kakamega County, Western Kenya, where Muslims form a minority within a predominantly Christian population. A qualitative design was used. Data were gathered through 24 key informant interviews and four focus group discussions involving 32 participants, and were analysed thematically. Seven barrier themes were identified: domestic role expectations and time poverty, honour culture and restricted mobility, the silencing of women in mixed religious discourse, inadequate mosque infrastructure, exclusion from institutional governance, poverty and economic trade-offs, and limited knowledge of women's rights in Islam. Four opportunity themes were identified: self-organised women's groups, progressive interpretation and male allies, digital connectivity, and community-based re-entry pathways for marginalised women. The barriers were found to intersect, so that rural, poor and widowed women faced compounded exclusion, while urban, educated and connected women were better placed to use the available opportunities. The evidence shows that the constraints stem mainly from patriarchal culture rather than Islamic theology, and that women's self-organised groups and digital access are reshaping participation from below. The study recommends flexible programming, investment in women's Islamic rights education, improved mosque facilities for women, and support for women's groups and their digital networks.***

Keywords: Muslim Women; Barriers and Opportunities; Islamic Institutions; Kakamega County

I. INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in Islamic religious practices and institutions is shaped by a mix of enabling and constraining forces. Recent studies show that Muslim women's access to mosques and to religious learning is often limited by patriarchal norms rather than by Islamic teaching. Analysing Muslim women's resistance to their exclusion from a mosque in Johannesburg, Joosub (2023) found that male-led institutions treated female religious authority as a threat and cast women's presence in gendered terms that justified segregation and marginal space.

Across countries, Çokgezen and Nyhagen (2025) found that restrictions on women's wider social participation carry over into lower mosque attendance, though they also noted signs, including evidence from Kenya, that these restrictions may be easing.

Alongside the barriers, a set of opportunities has grown. Female Islamic teachers are emerging as role models (Koburtay et al., 2023), women's self-organised groups have become primary vehicles for advancement (Mwiti & Kimani, 2021), and social media allows women to reach Islamic scholarship without passing through local gatekeepers (Ndaro et al., 2025).

Within Kenya, the little that is known comes from the coast and the capital. Mohamed and Abdi (2019) studied Mombasa and Mwiti and Kimani (2021) studied Nairobi, both long-established Muslim settings. Kenyan Muslims are, moreover, a demographic and political minority (Ndzovu, 2021), and Muslim women within that minority have been described as doubly marginalised (Ndaro et al., 2025).

No study has examined the barriers and opportunities that shape Muslim women's participation in Western Kenya. This paper addresses the second objective of a larger study and asks: what barriers and opportunities shape women's

participation in Islamic religious practices and institutions in Kakamega County?

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The number of women taking part in Islamic religious life in Kakamega County has continued to grow, yet many still find their participation limited, and it is not clear which factors constrain them, which factors help them, or how these factors interact.

Existing Kenyan evidence is drawn from Mombasa (Mohamed & Abdi, 2019) and Nairobi (Mwiti & Kimani, 2021), and gives little guidance for a minority setting in which Muslim women are doubly marginalised (Ndaro et al., 2025; Ndzovu, 2021).

Without local evidence on the specific barriers women face and the opportunities open to them; this was the current problem the study set out to address.

The consequences of this gap are practical. Islamic institutions and leaders in Kakamega County cannot design programmes that respond to women's real constraints when those constraints have not been documented, and they risk maintaining arrangements, from meeting times to mosque facilities, that quietly exclude women.

Policy makers seeking to widen women's economic and civic participation lack the evidence needed to reach Muslim women in the county. Women themselves, and especially poor, rural and widowed women, continue to be shut out of religious learning, networks and the economic support these carry, while the more visible opportunities remain within reach only of the urban and educated.

Documenting both sides is therefore necessary if participation is to be widened rather than left to depend on a woman's location, income or marital status.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by Islamic Feminism Theory and Empowerment Theory. Islamic Feminism Theory (Ahmed, 1992; Mir-Hosseini, 2015) holds that the Qur'an affirms the equality of men and women, and that the restrictions women face arises from patriarchal interpretation and custom rather than from Islamic teaching.

It treats religious literacy, women's direct engagement with Islamic sources, as the route through which women reclaim rights that custom has withheld. This makes it well suited to separating cultural barriers from theological ones and to reading the emergence of female teachers and progressive male scholars as a return to, rather than a departure from, Islamic tradition.

Empowerment Theory (Kabeer, 1999) defines empowerment as the expansion of a person's ability to make strategic life choices where that ability was previously denied, across three dimensions: resources, agency and achievements.

It allowed the study to read barriers as constraints on women's resources and agency, and opportunities as means of enlarging them. Together the two frameworks made it possible to interpret the same institution, such as the mosque or the women's group, as both a site of exclusion and a source of empowerment, depending on how it is organised and led.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Cultural and Institutional Barriers

Recent scholarship locates the main barriers to women's religious participation in culture and institutional design rather than in doctrine. Joosub (2023) showed how male-led mosques in Johannesburg framed women's presence as a threat and confined them to marginal spaces, and documented the disparity between well-appointed men's facilities and cramped women's sections. Çokgezen and Nyhagen (2025) found that broader social restrictions on women translate into lower mosque attendance across countries. Koburtay et al. (2023), drawing on women leaders in Jordan, reported that cultural norms rather than Islamic teaching limited women's leadership. These studies point to exclusion from governance, inadequate facilities and honour-based limits on mobility as recurring institutional and cultural barriers.

4.2 Knowledge and Socio-Economic Barriers

A second strand identifies religious illiteracy and economic pressure as barriers. Where women lack direct knowledge of their rights in Islam, custom is easily presented as religion (Ahmed, 2019; Tajkia, 2023), and Tajkia (2023) showed that the economic rights Islamic law grants women are frequently blocked in practice by cultural barriers, leaving poorer women most exposed.

Afsar and Masood (2017) found that community support for women's education, while growing, remained uneven and sensitive to household circumstances. This literature suggests that poverty and limited access to Islamic knowledge reinforce one another.

4.3 Opportunities and the Knowledge Gap

On the opportunity side, women's self-organised groups are consistently identified as primary vehicles for advancement (Mwiti & Kimani, 2021), female teachers are emerging as role models (Koburtay et al., 2023), and digital platforms are widening women's access to scholarship beyond local gatekeepers (Ndaro et al., 2025).

Çokgezen and Nyhagen (2025) note early evidence from Kenya and elsewhere that participation restrictions may be easing. Yet the Kenyan literature remains focused on Mombasa (Mohamed & Abdi, 2019) and Nairobi (Mwiti & Kimani, 2021), and none of it addresses a minority setting such as Western Kenya, where Muslim women are doubly marginalised (Ndaro et al., 2025; Ndzovu, 2021). The present study addresses this gap.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This objective was addressed through a qualitative design, chosen because barriers and opportunities are best understood through the meanings participants attach to their own experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The study was conducted in Kakamega County, Western Kenya, selected because Muslim women there participate as a religious minority within a predominantly Christian population.

Participants included women who practise Islam in rural and urban areas, together with Islamic leaders, teachers, community elders and officials of Islamic institutions.

Data were collected through 24 key informant interviews and four focus group discussions involving 32 participants. Key informants and focus group participants were selected purposively to capture a range of ages, locations, marital statuses and institutional roles, and recruitment continued until data saturation, the point at which further interviews produced no new themes.

Interviews used a semi-structured schedule and focus groups a thematic guide, both organised around the barriers and opportunities for women's participation. Trustworthiness was supported through an audit trail, member checking and peer debriefing, and through triangulation across informant types and between interviews and focus groups.

Interviews and discussions were conducted in the language each participant preferred, transcribed verbatim and translated where necessary. The transcripts were analysed thematically following the six-step framework of Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the account.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Kibabii University Institutional Ethics Review Committee and a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation. Informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and cultural sensitivity were observed throughout, and participants are identified here only by role, sex, age and a code.

VI. FINDINGS

The analysis produced four categories of barriers and two categories of opportunities, summarised in Table 1 and presented below as six findings. Each finding is set out through an introduction to the theme, a description of the supporting evidence, an interpretation, and a discussion in relation to the

literature. Participants are identified by an interview or focus group code, sex and age.

Table 1
Thematic Framework of Findings

Domain	Finding	Constituent themes
Barriers	Cultural and domestic	Domestic role expectations; honour culture and mobility
	Institutional	Silencing in mixed discourse; mosque infrastructure; governance exclusion
	Socio-economic	Poverty; transport and geography; widowhood
	Knowledge	Limited knowledge of women's rights in Islam
Opportunities	Self-organisation	Women's groups; community-based re-entry
	Progressive and digital	Progressive interpretation; male allies; digital connectivity

Note. Themes derived from 24 key informant interviews and four focus group discussions.

6.1 Cultural and Domestic Barriers

The barrier participants raised most often was cultural, combining the expectation that women's domestic role comes before religious learning with concern for family honour that limited women's movement to religious venues and events.

A female madrasa teacher described the resistance she met on taking up her role:

> When I wanted to start teaching at the madrasa, many people questioned me. They said, who will cook for your husband, who will look after the children? Some families still do not send their daughters to my classes because they think it will make them too independent.
>
> (KI-04, female, 43 years)

Younger women added that study circles are timed for late afternoon or evening, exactly when they must prepare meals and settle children, so that attendance depends on another woman taking over the household. A community elder framed the honour restriction as protection:

> We are not trying to oppress our women; we are protecting them. When a woman goes out too much, people talk. This is not only about religion; it is about our culture as a community.
>
> (KI-19, male, 61 years)

The fear that religious education would make a woman "too independent" shows that the objection was social rather than doctrinal, and the elder's closing distinction between religion and culture concedes as much even as the restriction is maintained.

The barrier works not through open prohibition but through scheduling and social surveillance, so that women who travel or attend too freely risk comment, and access to learning depends on domestic circumstances.

These accounts align with Çokgezen and Nyhagen (2025), who found that broader social restrictions on women translate into lower mosque attendance, and with Joosub (2023), who showed how gendered readings of women's public presence are used to justify their exclusion from religious space. In Kabeer's (1999) terms, the constraint operates first on women's time and mobility as resources, well before any question of agency arises.

6.2 Institutional Barriers

A second set of barriers was built into the way mosques are run and designed, and appeared in three related forms: the silencing of women in mixed religious discourse, inadequate physical facilities, and exclusion from institutional governance.

A female Islamic teacher with long training described how her authority was dismissed:

> When I give a different interpretation from a male scholar, some men say, what does a woman know about fiqh? I have studied for fifteen years, but my gender is used to disqualify my knowledge.
>
> (KI-06, female, 51 years)

She also described being kept from mosque leadership despite her qualifications, likening it to being allowed to play only on "the small field while the men play in the big one," while another woman noted that when women propose changes to meeting times, they are told the schedule suits the majority, "and the majority means the men." The physical design of mosques compounded the exclusion:

> There is only one wudhu area and it is used by the men. During Ramadan when the mosque is full, it is very embarrassing. Some women stopped coming because of this.
>
> (FGD-3, female, 48 years)

That a qualified scholar's knowledge could be set aside on the basis of gender shows how authority in religious discourse is policed, while the absence of adequate prayer space and separate ablution facilities turns physical design into a barrier in its own right. Exclusion from committees then denies women any say in the very arrangements that shape their participation.

The pattern matches Joosub (2023), who documented both the treatment of female religious authority as a threat to male privilege and the allocation of marginal space to women while men's areas are better provided for, and it echoes Koburtay et al. (2023), for whom culture rather than doctrine limits women's standing.

The lack of ablution facilities adds a sanitary dimension not previously documented in the Kenyan literature, and in Kabeer's (1999) framework governance exclusion is a direct limit on agency.

6.3 Socio-Economic Barriers

For poorer women, participation competed directly with earning a living, and economic constraint intersected with geography and widowhood to deepen exclusion.

A market vendor described the trade-off between worship and survival:

> I would love to attend the Friday prayers and the Darsa regularly, but I cannot afford to close my stall. If I do not sell, my children do not eat.
>
> (KI-13, female, 38 years)

Rural women added transport cost and impassable roads to this burden, and noted that husbands with bicycles attended more easily, while a widow recounted dropping out of mosque life for almost two years after her husband's death because she could not meet the cost of transport and attire, until a women's group brought her back.

Poverty did not act alone but compounded the other barriers, and its effect was gendered, since limited household resources and reduced mobility fell more heavily on women than on men. Economic vulnerability could tip into complete withdrawal from religious life, as the widow's account shows.

These findings support Tajkia (2023), who showed that economic barriers keep women from the rights and resources Islam provides, and they extend that argument by demonstrating how poverty, geography and marital status combine rather than operate as separate obstacles.

6.4 Knowledge Barriers

Underlying the cultural, institutional and economic barriers was a further constraint: many women had limited knowledge of what Islam actually grants them.

A progressive imam identified this as the root barrier:

> Many women do not know what Islam actually says about their rights. When I teach them about Khadijah's independence or Aisha's scholarship, they are shocked and ask, why did nobody tell us this before? The biggest barrier is not Islam; it is ignorance about Islam.
>
> (KI-01, male, 56 years)

That women were "shocked" to learn of their rights shows how knowledge deprivation itself disempowers, and how custom fills the space left by religious illiteracy. Where women cannot read the

sources for themselves, others define for them what Islam requires.

This is the mechanism Islamic Feminism Theory identifies, in which patriarchal interpretation is mistaken for Islamic teaching (Ahmed, 1992; Mir-Hosseini, 2015), and it is reinforced where women lack the Arabic and the access to materials that would allow direct engagement with the texts (Ahmed, 2019).

6.5 Self-Organisation and Community Re-entry

The strongest opportunity was the self-organised women's group, which combined religious learning with economic and social support and served as a route back for women who had been excluded.

A group chairperson described what her group had built without institutional backing:

> We started ten years ago with eight members meeting in a house; today we are sixty-two. We meet every week for prayers, for studying the Qur'an and for our table-banking. We have helped over thirty women start small businesses and sent twelve girls to secondary school. We are not waiting for the mosque committee to include us.
>
> (KI-02, female, 49 years)

Other women described being mentored through divorce or widowhood and taught both religious knowledge and a trade, and the widow in Finding 3 was returned to religious life through exactly such a group.

Where institutions excluded them, women built parallel structures that delivered learning, credit and social support together, and these structures doubled as re-entry pathways for marginalised women. The growth from eight to sixty-two members shows agency and resources being built in tandem.

These groups are the primary vehicles for advancement that Mwiti and Kimani (2021) identify, and in Kabeer's (1999) terms they expand women's resources, agency and achievements simultaneously, compensating for the institutional exclusion documented in Finding 2.

6.6 Progressive Interpretation, Male Allies and Digital Connectivity

A further opportunity came from progressive interpretation among some scholars, including male allies, and from digital access to Islamic scholarship beyond local gatekeepers.

A male imam described revising his own position after closer study:

> I used to think a woman's place was only in the back room. But when I studied more deeply, I found that in the Prophet's time women prayed in the same mosque, asked questions and took part in decisions. I have started allowing women to ask questions during my Friday sermons.
>
> (KI-16, male, 42 years)

Younger women described following female scholars from Malaysia, Turkey and Egypt on social media and sharing their teaching within local groups, which offered models of respected female religious authority that local norms had denied them.

Digital access supplied alternative models of women's religious authority and bypassed the local gatekeepers who had controlled religious knowledge, while the imam's change of view shows that reform was emerging from within male scholarship rather than only from women.

This is the gatekeeper-bypassing role of digital access that Ndaro et al. (2025) describe, and the imam's return to prophetic precedent illustrates the Islamic feminist claim that deeper engagement with the sources, not departure from them, is the route to women's inclusion (Mir-Hosseini, 2015). Çokgezen and Nyhagen (2025) similarly note early signs that participation restrictions are easing.

6.7 Overview: Intersecting Barriers and Uneven Opportunities

Across the six findings, the barriers did not operate in isolation. A rural woman facing transport cost, poor roads and a husband with the only bicycle showed poverty, geography and gender combining, while the young mother whose attendance depended on her mother-in-law showed domestic expectation meeting institutional scheduling.

The opportunities were real but unevenly reachable, since urban, educated and connected women could draw on groups, mentors and digital scholarship, whereas rural, poor and widowed women often found the barriers dominant.

The overall pattern supports the study's guiding premise: the constraints are cultural and institutional rather than theological, and women's own groups and their growing access to knowledge are shifting participation from below.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

This study found that women's participation in Islamic religious practices and institutions in Kakamega County is shaped by seven main barriers, namely domestic role expectations, honour culture, silencing in mixed discourse, inadequate mosque infrastructure, exclusion from governance, poverty, and limited knowledge of women's rights in Islam, and by four main opportunities, namely self-organised women's groups, progressive interpretation and male allies, digital connectivity, and community-based re-entry for marginalised women.

The barriers arise from patriarchal culture and institutional design rather than from Islamic theology, a distinction drawn by participants themselves, and they intersect so that rural, poor and widowed women face compounded exclusion. The opportunities are strongest where women organise themselves and where knowledge reaches them directly, whether through women's groups, female teachers or digital platforms.

Women's religious literacy again emerges as the decisive factor, and the minority setting both sharpens the barriers and prompts the self-reliant responses through which women create their own space.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

First, Islamic institutions should offer flexible programming, including afternoon and weekend sessions and childcare arrangements, so that domestic schedules no longer exclude women from religious learning. Second, deliberate investment in women's Islamic rights education, led where possible by qualified female teachers, would address the knowledge deprivation that underlies the other barriers.

Third, mosque committees should improve facilities for women, in particular adequate prayer space and separate ablution facilities, and should include qualified women in governance and in decisions about scheduling and resources.

Fourth, women's self-organised groups, which proved the most effective route to participation, should be supported and linked to institutions and financial services, and their digital networks strengthened so that rural and migrating members remain connected. Future research should use comparative designs across other minority-Muslim counties to test how far these barriers and opportunities travel.

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