

Salafi Ideology and the Question of Women Empowerment among Kenyan Muslims

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ABSTRACT Muslim groups that promote strict religious norms like Salafis are often associated with male dominant culture. Such a patriarchal may be put on a question in the context of the recent global trend that significantly altered the circumstances for Muslim women, leading to a gradual shift from dependence on husbands for financial sustenance. This article investigates the primary research question: In what ways has Salafi ideology impacted the social integration and empowerment of Muslim women in Kenya? To explore this, a purposive sampling approach was employed, selecting twenty former students from the Maahad Girls' Training Institute for a focus group discussion regarding the influence of Salafi beliefs on their lives. The study utilized Islamic critical pedagogy theory to assess how Salafi ideologies have affected the educational accomplishments of Maahad graduates, which they have utilized for self-empowerment. Furthermore, pragmatism-agency theory was instrumental in examining the social integration and empowerment of Muslim women, as well as evaluating the compatibility of Salafi beliefs with the societal context in Kenya. The findings indicate that while Salafism is frequently perceived as limiting women's public engagement and visibility, it has been locally adapted to foster women's empowerment. The experiences of Salafi women reveal the obstacles they encounter in achieving social integration within Kenyan society. However, they demonstrate remarkable resilience, employing various strategies to enhance their economic situations and navigate their social environments. This paper underscores the opportunities presented by the Kenyan Constitution of 2010, which champions gender equality and women's rights, and calls for collaboration between Muslim organizations and religious institutions to educate women about available governmental resources and incentives. Such partnerships could significantly empower Muslim women and aid their integration into Kenya's socio-economic framework.

KEYWORDS Empowerment; Muslim women; Niqab; Salafi ideology; Social integration.

INTRODUCTION

The notion that Islam marginalizes women and limits their public roles is often a misconception. It overlooks the historical context of Islam's emergence, particularly the injustices faced by women before its advent. The Qur'an sought to address these issues by granting women specific rights. However, post-Prophet Muhammad's era, the interpretation of these teachings became heavily influenced by existing patriarchal norms (Arpagus, 2013). Thus, complicating modern understandings of the faith.

In the early 20th century, various Muslim factions developed unique strategies to address modernity's challenges, resulting in reform movements based on *Salafi* ideals (Loimeier, 2016:336). This period witnessed the rise of prominent *Salafi* reformers in East Africa, including al-Amin bin Ali al-Mazrui (1891-1947) and Abdallah al-Farsy (1912-1982). Al-Mazrui was instrumental in founding the first *Salafi* newspapers in the region, *al-Saheefa* and *al-I'la*, in 1930 and 1932, respectively. These publications

ignited essential debates on Islamic reform, critiquing missionary education and colonial influences (Bakari, 2013). The reformers sought to differentiate their practices from traditional *Sufi* customs, advocating for modern educational approaches to help the community adapt to evolving socio-political contexts. Their efforts aimed to align Islamic practices with contemporary life, significantly impacting the ongoing (re-) Islamization movement in Kenya.

African Islam differentiates between indigenous and external practices, seeing local customs as peaceful and tolerant, while foreign influences are often seen as violent and fundamentalist (Østebø, 2012:13). This stance arises from a misinterpretation of the cultural distinctions between local and foreign Islamic practices, leading to a common perception of *Salafism* as aggressive and intolerant, which clashes with local traditions. In Kenya and East Africa, *Salafism* has been labelled a violent movement, primarily due to educational connections with Saudi Arabia that have introduced younger Muslims to more fundamentalist views, especially since the 1980s with groups like *Ansari Sunnah* (Ali-Koor, 2016; Ndzovu, 2018). Partnerships with Middle Eastern *Salafi* proponents have led to the establishment of various Islamic institutions, including schools and *madrasas*, affecting many individuals (Ali-Koor, 2016). In the 1990s, Muslim youth began advocating for a return to Islamic norms, particularly in dressing, which they viewed as essential to their faith (Gordon, 2016:267-285; Khan, 2015:412-435). Recent research indicates that *Salafi* ideology suggests a more progressive view on women's roles, suggesting potential shifts in social integration and empowerment

for Muslim women, challenging traditional perspectives (Parvez, 2016; Nielsen, 2020).

The Maahad Girls' Training Institute in Nairobi, Kenya, plays a crucial role in the region's educational framework. Founded in 1987, it focuses on delivering quality Islamic education while adapting to the varied needs of its students. The institute's dedication to promoting academic achievement and religious values is essential for nurturing individuals who can positively impact on society. This research explores how *Salafi* ideology influences the social integration and empowerment of Muslim women in Kenya, using the institute as a primary example. It challenges the oversimplified perceptions of Kenyan Muslim women, particularly *Salafi*, and aims to provide a nuanced understanding of their societal roles.

Methodology

This study utilized a descriptive survey design within a mixed-methods framework. This comprehensive strategy allowed for an in-depth examination of how *Salafi* ideology influences the social integration and empowerment of Muslim women, providing diverse perspectives and significant insights. A purposive sample of 38 participants—including 2 (two) *Ustadha* (teachers), 2 (two) administrators, 20 alumni, 2 (two) *sheikhs*, 4 (four) education professionals, and 8 (eight) members of the general Muslim community— was selected. Kothari (2008:9) characterizes a sample as a segment or subset that reflects the entirety of a population. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with administrators, teachers and education professionals to elicit views on *Salafi* education and focus group discussions with the Maahad alumni, which were aimed at exploring

their experiences and integration within the community. Further, informal talks from the general Muslim community were essential in understanding the perception of *Salafi* education and women. Finally, secondary sources were obtained from institutional reports, academic literature, and relevant records to contextualize the findings.

Qualitative data were examined using descriptive and content analysis while identifying key themes. Quantitative data were manually analysed using descriptive statistics such as percentages presented in both tabular and narrative formats. Ethical considerations were carefully adhered to, maintaining confidentiality and obtaining informed consent, with personal names disclosed only for those who provided consent (specifically Mudira Azrah and *Ustadha* Amina), while the names of other participants remained anonymous. Additionally, respect for cultural differences and commitment to academic honesty, including obtaining research permits and accurately citing all secondary sources, were maintained. The study was carried out from 2021 to 2023. The collected information revealed various attitudes and perspectives regarding the impact of *Salafi* ideology on the education of Muslim women (Taherdoost, 2016: 23).

DISCUSSION

Salafi Restrictions and Social Integration of Muslim Women in Kenya

The implications of *Salafi* ideology within the context of Kenya and its impact on the integration and empowerment of Muslim women in Kenyan society underscore the intersection of religious beliefs and social dynamics. It is vital in understanding how

Salafi principles shape the experiences and roles of Muslim women, as well as their participation in the broader societal framework. “The restriction of women in activities outside the home is simply a cultural reality that has been developed in various places,” according to Tobibatussaadah et al. (2022:22). The idea that women have no unique role outside of the house is reinforced by biased and patriarchal readings of religious scriptures. *Salafi* emphasizes the importance of Islamic dress and modesty, which has led to an increased visibility of Muslim women in public spheres who align with these values, such as wearing a *niqab* (face cover).

Research on the *niqab* and women’s seclusion is quite limited, with only four specific verses in the Qur’an discussing veiling and privacy, and these are subject to various interpretations. These verses are Qur’an 24:31, 24:60, 33:32-33, and 33:59. Two of these verses pertain directly to the wives of the Prophet (PBUH), specifically found in Qur’an 33:32-33 and 33:59. For instance, the verses in Qur’an 33:32-33 emphasizes the importance of women’s behaviour in the Prophet’s family, urging them to maintain modesty and avoid excessive effeminateness, and maintain a homely lifestyle. It emphasizes prayer, obedience, and charity as means to purify and prevent evil.

Some scholars, as noted by local *sheikhs* who promote the practice of veiling, interpret these scriptural verses as endorsing their viewpoint. In contrast, other scholars challenge this interpretation, contending that the verses are intended specifically for the Prophet’s wives, which implies a distinct status and level of respect granted

to them. They use Qur'an 33:59 to support the argument that the command involves all Muslim women. The verse commands the Prophet (PBUH) to tell his wives, daughters, and believing women to observe *hijab* (Sheikhs, oral interview, July 2022).

The *niqab*, according to Arpagus (2013), originated from a verse revealed around 6-7 A.H., during a period marked by significant challenges and violence against Muslims in Arabia, largely due to the rapid spread of Islam. This unrestrained time often left women and children in vulnerable positions, exposed to severe conflicts. The verse aimed to protect the honour and dignity of the Prophet's wives and all faithful women, highlighting a broader concern for their safety amid the chaos. Local *sheikhs* agreed that women in the Prophet's household played active roles in community service and social welfare. They cared for the sick and tended to the needs of injured soldiers, demonstrating their multifaceted contributions during this time (Sheikhs, personal communication, July 2022). This involvement illustrates how women balanced domestic duties with vital social initiatives to support those affected by ongoing conflicts. Duderija (2016:584) articulates that the Qur'an establishes a symbiotic relationship with the concept of good *ma'ruf*, highlighting the necessity to eradicate the harmful impacts of gender-based customary practices that were prevalent during the time of its revelation. The Qur'an 24:31 instructs believers to protect their chastity and only show their adornments to their family members, including husbands, fathers, sons, stepsons, brothers, and young children. They are advised to avoid revealing their hidden decorations.

The interpretation of the verses necessitates an understanding grounded in historical and cultural contexts. The complete veiling of women would remove the necessity for men to lower their gaze, underscoring the intricate gender dynamics and societal norms. In significant religious practices such as prayer and pilgrimage, women are typically advised against covering their faces. Local *sheikhs* (personal communication, July 2022) indicate that while the face-veiling *niqab* is not mandatory, *hijab* is deemed obligatory for Muslim women. This range of academic inquiry underscores the necessity for more in-depth study and understanding of how these rulings are perceived and practiced in different cultural settings, particularly given the differing levels of adherence to Islamic principles in more secular contexts like Kenya. These views illustrate the ongoing discourse surrounding modesty and the impact of cultural factors on religious practices.

Salafi education avers that most Muslims have strayed from the Prophet's path, leading to a moral crisis that demands the practice of pure monotheism, advocating for the good while forbidding evil in the society. This is achieved through proselytization (*da'wah*) and nurturing correct beliefs and practices (*tarbiya*). The *Salafi* teaching as posited by Inge (2017) implies that men and women should imitate Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his wives in life. Any action that is done in accordance with the life of the Prophet is considered worship, while its contravention is sin. Inge (2017) asserts that this is a process that involves the eradication of all cultural accretions from Islam to restore it to its pure and original form. However, this process eliminates differences in

cultural backgrounds, which is an essential component in the practice and interpretation of Islam.

The evolution of women's roles in public participation in Kenya goes beyond mere compliance with constitutional requirements, as noted by one educationist; it is vital for fostering inclusive governance (Participant, personal communication, August 2022). The Kenyan Constitution promotes women's involvement in public life, addressing historical exclusion. This form of empowerment ensures Women's perspectives are integrated into policymaking. Despite progress, traditional customs and ethnic dynamics still hinder full political participation, particularly for marginalized groups like Muslim women (Mwinyihaji, 2012). The absence of both secular and religious education has limited their engagement and hindered their Arabic literacy, essential for expressing their interpretations of Islam. However, recent changes in Islamic spirituality and secular education have sparked a renewed awareness among these women, who have been historically marginalized from advanced Islamic literacy programs (Mwinyihaji, 2012).

Gender equality in politics is measured by access, participation, and decision-making power. While state constitutions and legal frameworks aim to ensure equal access for all, actual participation in political activities and leadership roles reveals ongoing disparities. These disparities are often misinterpreted as male superiority rather than cultural biases hindering women's advancement (Dzuhayatin, 2020). Kenya's Constitution, particularly Article 24(4), allows

for the application of Muslim law in *Kadhis'* courts, addressing personal status issues for Muslims while considering gender equality dynamics. A solid grasp of Islamic principles empowers Muslim women to assert their rights in these courts, yet many struggle due to not understanding their rights under both Islamic and state laws. When fundamental rights are threatened, Article 20(3)(a) mandates that "in applying a provision of the Bill of Rights, a court shall develop the law to the extent that it does not give effect to a right or fundamental freedom," thereby safeguarding all Kenyans from discrimination (The Constitution of Kenya 2010, 2022). Moreover, Article 32(4) of the Bill of Rights states that "a person shall not be compelled to act or engage in any act that is contrary to the person's belief or religion." It affirms that Muslims have the constitutional right to resolve disputes in accordance with their faith (The Constitution of Kenya 2010, 2022). These constitutional guarantees ensure that Muslims in Kenya can engage in public life free from discrimination based on their beliefs.

The rise in Al-Shabaab attacks has intensified the challenges facing Muslim women, particularly the *Salafi*, influencing how non-Muslims view them. Heightened examination and scepticism towards Muslim women, particularly those adhering to *Salafi* customs, have posed challenges to social acceptance and integration (Ustadha, personal communication, August 2021). The violent actions of Al-Shabaab have further stigmatized Muslims in Kenya, especially those who strictly observe Islamic principles, including *Salafi* customs. One woman

recounted being labelled a 'terrorist' in Nairobi simply for wearing a *niqab*, showcasing the deep-seated fear and suspicion that extremist violence has fostered in social interactions for *Salafi* women (participant, FGD, July 23 2022). There exists a common belief among some non-Muslim groups that the *niqab* is reserved for married women or virgins, which discourages engagement with those who wear it (Informal talk, 2022).

The obligation of wearing the *niqab* is debated among Muslim scholars, yet there is a general agreement among them on its necessity in public spaces. The majority of non-*Salafist* Muslims agreed that women are not obliged to cover their faces. They argued that the verse in Qur'an 24:31 has not mentioned the face cover but specifies the parts to be covered, including concealing the bosom. However, according to one *sheikh* (personal communication, July 2022), it is preferable for Muslim women to wear a *niqab*.

The educators at Maahad GTI stress that it is important to wear a *niqab*, which should be flat and loose, draping from the back to camouflage both the face and the bosom. According to one *Ustadha* at Maahad GTI, the curriculum strongly advocates for women to wear the *jalabiya*, a full-body garment that includes a face-covering *niqab*, alongside strict gender segregation (personal communication, August 2021). It has led to both positive and negative experiences for *Salafi* women, highlighting the complexities of their realities. The social impact of *Salafi* education on Muslim women in Kenya has elicited varied responses. Interviews with graduates from Maahad GTI reveal that

many struggle to integrate into the broader community.

Women engaged in focus group discussion expressed that their primary motivation for enrolling in Maahad GTI stemmed from a profound aspiration to deepen their understanding of their faith (Participants, FGD, July 23, 2022). At that time, Maahad was relatively obscure, prompting some young girls and women to pursue educational avenues that would enhance their religious knowledge. This quest for faith-oriented education underscores the significance of spiritual development for these women. Several female participants indicated that their choice to study Islamic subjects was influenced by their parents or guardians (Participants personal communication, July 23 2022). The institution welcomed primary school graduates from Kenya and attracted students from neighbouring countries, including Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania. The education offered at Maahad GTI significantly impacted the students' lives, empowering them to engage with and practice Islamic principles within a supportive environment. This setting enabled students to apply Islamic teachings, facilitating their recognition of these principles' relevance in everyday life. However, after completing their training, *Salafi* women have shown a discernible trend of lessening their rigorous adherence to instructions about the veil and other religious observances. Due to cultural and financial influences, some women choose to work without gloves and face coverings like the *niqab*, but they nevertheless uphold Islamic principles. The different legal and

social structures in Islamic nations like Saudi Arabia—especially the application of Sharia law—cause cultural variance and make it more difficult for Kenyans to adopt comparable behaviours (Participant, personal communication, July 23 2022). This evolution mirrors broader societal changes and varying degrees of commitment to traditional norms.

Graduates from Maahad GTI encounter varied perceptions within their families and communities. Some are valued for their Islamic knowledge and encouraged to disseminate it, while others are perceived as excessively strict, resulting in increased expectations due to their education. One female respondent noted that some Muslim men consider them as candidates for polygamy, complicating social interactions (Participant, personal communication, July 23 2022). Certain graduates have experienced marital issues, such as one woman who divorced her *Kadhi* husband due to mistreatment and struggled to attain justice in a court of law, while others voiced frustrations regarding their husbands' unrealistic demands for tolerance (Participants, July 23 2022).

Community views on Maahad graduates are divided; some see them as esteemed religiously educated women, while others perceive them as distant or problematic in family contexts (Informal talks with Muslims, 2022). Some Muslim men often expect Maahad women to embody the virtues of Khadija (RAA), Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) wife (Mudira Azrah, personal communication, August 2021). Azrah argued that these men should first aim at emulating the Prophet's admirable traits. Some Muslims, according

to Mudira Azrah also criticize some Maahad women, calling them “challenging” and “arrogant.” The concepts of “good man” and “good woman” are not intrinsically true; rather, they are socially constructed ideals shaped by changing political, cultural, and geographic contexts. These gendered expectations are defined and enforced in large part by government policies, cultural norms, and religious institutions (Syamsiyatun, 2022).

These women assert their right to recognition for their deep knowledge and ability to interpret Islamic teachings, as well as understanding their rights in the Qur'an (Mudira Azrah., personal communication, August 2021). However, such claims can create dissent and resistance among some Muslim men, potentially altering social dynamics and fostering economic empowerment. When confronted with assertive Maahad women, married Muslim men's reactions vary; some may choose divorce, while others might adapt by providing social and economic empowerment. This intricate relationship of expectations and responses highlights the changing gender roles and the influence of education on traditional societal frameworks within the Muslim community as advocated by the Maahad Girls Training Institute in Kenya.

Maahad Girls' Training Institute and Economic Empowerment

Research on the economic engagements of *Salafi* women in Indonesia has shown that a significant number of these women actively participate in various economic activities while adhering to their religious

norms. Their roles extend beyond traditional responsibilities, which include household management, spousal support, and childcare, which are often influenced by economic circumstances, patriarchal societal structures, and biased interpretations of religious scriptures (Tobibatussaadah et al., 2022). Further, Dzuhayatin (2020) affirms that Indonesia is a model among few Muslim nations to demonstrate well-organized opportunities for women, including their voices in religious discourse.

The Maahad Girls' Training Institute offers diverse training programs such as education, tailoring and embroidery, computer science, and culinary arts, aimed at equipping graduates with essential skills for better financial empowerment opportunities (Administrator, personal communication,

August 2021). Many alumni own various *madrasas* and schools that integrate Islamic teachings, focusing on subjects like the Qur'an, Hadith, Jurisprudence, and the History of the Prophet. Notably, some graduates have established their own private Islamic integrated schools, employing both fellow alumni and secular teachers. Some graduates are actively involved in teaching across different platforms, including *madrasas* and home-schooling for both women and children. Some have ventured into entrepreneurship, while others have continued their education at local and international universities (Participants personal communication, July 23, 2022). Maahad GTI is thus the foundation for many Muslim women who have empowered themselves economically as shown in table 1.0.

Table 1. 0: Economic Empowerment of Maahad Graduates

Economic career of Maahad graduates	No. of graduates	Percentage %
Teachers	9	45
Islamic integrated school owners	6	30
Authorship	1	5
<i>Madrasa</i> owners	3	15
Entrepreneurship	1	5
Total	20	100

Source: Fatuma Kassim Mwatamu, 2021

The majority of Maahad GTI graduates, 45%, are teachers who are holders of the Maahad certificate, while some have advanced their qualifications by studying for a certificate in ECDE. Thirty percent (30%) of the graduates run their own schools, which offer Islamic and secular education with the support from their spouses or family. It is only fifteen percent (15%) of the graduates that operate as *madrasa* owners only. Some

graduates have jointly formed groups and started other or school business enterprises, which were established as *madrasas* and later developed into Islamic integrated schools. Five percent (5%) of the graduates who were initially teachers have authored Islamic books. A considerable number of teachers hold the Maahad certificate and have further qualified in Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE). One graduate has developed Islamic

educational resources for the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), which have been endorsed for teaching by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD). Additionally, several graduates have pursued non-academic entrepreneurial ventures with community support, while others have excelled as dedicated housewives.

A teacher who is also an administrator, from Maahad GTI observed that in her community, women pursuing careers or higher education face societal stigma. This often results in severe criticism. Although she achieved a B (plain) average in her Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) exams and aspired to further her studies at a local university, her father opposed her plans. She considered enrolling in an Islamic university, but her parents were concerned about the distance. Ultimately, she decided to study at Maahad GTI, and after completing her education, she got married. But, with her husband's support, she now works as a curriculum coordinator at Maahad in a flexible role, overcoming her family's initial resistance (Administrator, personal communication, August 2021). This situation illustrates the determination of modern Muslim women to achieve academic success despite various challenges. Family dynamics and cultural influences frequently impede girls' educational progress in both secular and religious contexts. Many women have considerable academic potential but often face limited opportunities to enhance their skills. Some Muslim women assert that their experience at Maahad GTI has been vital in helping them discover their true potentials.

Networking, Job Opportunities and Social Dynamism

The Maahad GTI has a system for alumni reunions every three years, fostering interaction and sharing experiences. Graduates stay connected via social media such as WhatsApp groups and can discuss religious matters, job opportunities, and socio-economic projects (Administrator, personal communication, August 2021). These initiatives also help alumni create job prospects for recent graduates, with many securing positions in Nairobi's private sector, while those with academic degrees from Sudan secure public roles as Arabic and Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers with the Teachers Service Commission (TSC).

Recent global trends, particularly advancements in technology and improved digital literacy in education, have greatly empowered Maahad graduates. They are now stepping into leadership roles to develop innovative teaching methods and enhance school facilities (Administrator, personal communication, August 2021). In wealthier neighbourhoods of Nairobi, educators are adopting modern tools like interactive smart boards, projectors and other digital devices to enrich the learning experience. As a result, these schools often charge higher tuition fees than those in less affluent areas. This practice has drawn criticism for being prohibitively expensive and inaccessible to the economically disadvantaged Muslim families living in Nairobi's slums (Mwatamu, 2012). However, the school administrators argue that their operational costs are significantly higher due to the need to hire teachers who are skilled in both secular and *madrassa* education.

Besides education, Maahad GTI also plays a crucial role in empowering female students to do *da'wah* among Muslim women throughout Kenya (Mudira Azrah, personal communication, August 2021). Neilsen (2020) argues that religion is a channel through which women can enter public politics. Conservative Muslim female preachers pragmatically use their vast religious knowledge and charisma to gain empowerment and authority. This is through the influence that they hold within their circles and the community at large. These students engage in community outreach programs by delivering Islamic teachings in mosques during *halaqa* sessions before or after prayers. They also offer guidance and counselling services during significant life events, such as during funerals and weddings. Their teachings encompass essential acts of worship and domestic responsibilities, rooted in the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions, while also tackling modern societal issues. As a result, many Muslim women have been inspired to adopt *Salafi* practices, such as wearing the *jalabiyya* and *niqab*, indicating a notable transformation in their understanding and practice of Islam (Mudira Azrah, personal communication, August 2021).

Challenges and Opportunities for *Salafi* Muslim Women to Access Empowerment Programmes

Nuraan (2014:435) posits that comprehending the identities of Muslim women requires an exploration of the elements that shape and define their identity construction and lived experiences. The nature of this identity formation among

Muslim women significantly influences the kind of Islamic education they receive. In Kenya, *Salafi* education places a strong emphasis on Islamic dress and modesty, resulting in a noticeable presence of Muslim women in public who adhere to these standards. While the movement traditionally views women primarily as caregivers and homemakers, it has inadvertently contributed to their empowerment through educational initiatives and community engagement. Some *Salafi* women have emerged as educators, promoting girls' education as a religious duty while also enhancing their economic independence.

Since gender is a sociocultural construct, it is naturally dynamic and changes in response to changing social contexts, such as changes in gender relations. Women have increasingly overcome structural barriers in education and other fields in the modern era (Dzuhayatin, 2020). Muslim women in Kenya are thus defying conventional gender roles by taking huge societal responsibilities. However, cultural and religious prejudices make it extremely difficult for *Salafi* women to integrate into mainstream society (FGD, 23 July 2022). Their cultural beliefs are commonly misrepresented as extremist by outsiders, and they frequently continue to perform traditional domestic roles (Khan, 2015:412-435). This is similarly evident for *Salafi*-educated women in Indonesia with stable jobs who quit to adopt *Salafi* lifestyles and encounter opposition from their families (Tarawiyah, 2012).

An interview with *Ustadha* Amina, a former graduate of Maahad GTI, revealed she established another Maahad at Kibera

in Nairobi in 2015 (personal communication, August 2023). She registered it under Community Based Organization (CBO). The institute has relaxed its certification standards, allowing girls aged fifteen and older to enrol without academic prerequisites in a two-year curriculum program. However, the institute encounters multiple challenges, notably a negative community perception. Locals often criticize both the institute and its students, particularly given the scarcity of local girls in the institute, despite a large population of young Muslim girls in Kibera. High dropout rates are common, especially among those pressured by parents. Many students find it difficult to adjust due to lifestyle differences, and some do not return after breaks. The institute's Kibera location is also associated with insecurity. However, Ustadha Amina has effectively trained academically unqualified girls, providing them with vital life skills for self-employment. Ustadha Amina is an example of a Muslim woman committed to empowering young girls despite the challenges, through both religious and practical education after her own education at Maahad GTI.

Muslim women face challenges in empowerment programs due to gender norms, societal expectations, socio-economic barriers, family obligations, and negative perceptions of female education. Discrimination and stigma, especially against *Salafi* women from local and broader communities, also hinder their involvement (Ustadha, Oral Interview, August 2021). Islamic political actions have negatively labelled Muslim women and made them to articulate their identity through

symbolic dress *jalabiya* and *niqab* in public appearances. This is the reason why some *Salafi* women have faced dire consequences of rejection, stigmatization, hostility, and aggression (Parvez, 2016; Inge, 2017; Sunesti, Hassan et al., 2018). The public media as argued by Inge (2017:4), has judged *Salafi* women as being extremist, self-segregators, oppressed, and radicalization tools. They are pitied as domestic slaves because of their manner of dressing, which puts them at the risk of marginalization and criminalization. It was observed during the study that these women refuse to be categorised or referred as *Salafi* Muslims. During the 2000s, *Salafism* was often depicted as a transnational Islamist militant entity targeting the West, a characterization prevalent in both academic and media narratives (Hegghammer, 2009). The association of *Salafism* with radicalisation, extremist policies and government action to counter it, has incited alarm. *Salafi* women lack awareness of available resources, and government initiatives often overlook their cultural and religious contexts. Financial constraints and lack of *Salafi* women in leadership roles can exacerbate their marginalization (Sheikh, Oral Interview, July 2022). Some members of the Muslim community express reluctance towards the strict Islamic principles advocated by *Salafi* teachings, while traditionalist groups may perceive women's empowerment initiatives as challenges to cultural norms and family structures. This resistance significantly hinders women's involvement in empowerment programs.

To combat these challenges, the Kenyan government has introduced several initiatives

aimed at enhancing women's empowerment, including the National Policy on Gender and Development, the Women Enterprise Fund (WEF), the National Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Framework, and the Presidential Legacy Fund for Women and Youth, all designed to support women, girls, and youth across the country (Government of Kenya, 2000; Government of Kenya, (n.d.); Women Enterprise Fund). However, many Muslim women encounter difficulties in accessing these resources due to cultural and religious constraints, particularly the prohibition of interest on loans, which conflicts with Islamic teachings.

To tackle the specific challenges faced by Muslim women in Kenya, Islamic non-governmental organizations are essential in providing various empowerment, educational, and advocacy programs, such as the Muslim Women Advancement of Rights and Protections (MWARP) and the Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance (KMYA), among others. They aim to elevate the status of Muslim women through education, entrepreneurship, and advocacy, offering training and resources to improve their socio-economic conditions.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated how *Salafi* ideology influences Muslim women's perspectives, behaviours, and actions, particularly regarding their faith and gender roles. It highlighted the changes and obstacles these women encounter in their social environments and the private sphere. The article also assessed how *Salafi* beliefs affect their religious interpretations

and gender relations, as well as their social integration and empowerment, especially in Maahad GTI.

The paper emphasizes the important impact of social initiatives by *Salafi* Muslim women's organizations in empowering these women through their active roles in community development. It is essential for both governmental and religious institutions to create supportive frameworks that facilitate their participation. However, many empowerment programs from various organizations are often inaccessible due to misalignment with Islamic principles or lack of awareness. To address these challenges, the government should tailor programs to align with the cultural and religious contexts of *Salafi* women, enabling their full participation in Kenyan society. Additionally, further research is needed on socialization within religious communities and how *Salafism* can engage with contemporary issues in Kenya.

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