



## Gender and Religious Authority in Muslim Communities: A Systematic Qualitative Literature Review (2000-2025)

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### Abstract

*Gender relations in Muslim community's influence access to religious authority, leadership, and participation in social and spiritual life. Despite increasing research on Islam and gender, there is still limited understanding of how these dynamics are constructed, negotiated, and changed in various contexts. This study aims to examine how gender affects religious authority and social roles in Muslim communities through a detailed qualitative literature review. The research uses a qualitative meta-synthesis method, following PRISMA 2020 standards. It gathers data from peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2025 in databases like Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR. Each study was critically evaluated using the CASP checklist, and the findings were interpreted thematically. The analysis shows that gendered hierarchies still shape religious authority. However, women and marginalized groups are increasingly exercising informal and interpretive power in educational and community spaces. Additionally, new reformist ideas based on Islamic feminism challenge patriarchal interpretations of religious texts and institutions. The review concludes that religious authority in Muslim communities serves as both a source of restriction and change, as gender norms are constantly questioned and redefined in response to evolving social, theological, and global conditions.*

**Keywords:** Gender relations; Religious authority; Muslim communities; Islamic feminism; Qualitative meta-synthesis.

### Introduction

Gender and religion are closely linked social aspects that influence the daily lives of Muslim communities worldwide. Religious authority, which means the power to interpret, lead, and represent Islamic teachings, has traditionally favored men as legitimate leaders [1]. This has often restricted women's roles to informal or private settings. However, in recent decades, Muslim societies have

experienced major changes due to globalization, education, migration, and fresh interpretations of Islamic thought [2]. These shifts have increased academic interest in how gender affects religious leadership, spiritual authority, and social involvement among Muslims in various settings [3].

In Islam, issues of gender and authority are both theological and socio-political. The ways in which men and women interact with religious knowledge, assert interpretive authority, or take on leadership positions illustrate the fluid intersections of power, culture, and faith[4]. For centuries, Islamic jurisprudence, scholarship, and institutional authority have been predominantly controlled by male scholars, leading to interpretations that frequently marginalize women's voices within religious contexts. Feminist scholars like Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Saba Mahmood have, on the other hand, questioned these patriarchal frameworks[5]. They want new ways to read Islamic texts that focus on justice, equality, and human dignity. Their work has motivated a new cohort of researchers and activists aiming to comprehend how Muslim women navigate religious norms while asserting their own identities. Their work has motivated a new cohort of researchers and activists aiming to comprehend how Muslim women navigate religious conventions while establishing their own expressions of spiritual leadership and authority [6].

Even with all this new research, there still isn't a systematic way to put together qualitative studies that look at gendered religious authority in Muslim settings. Most of the studies that are out there are either focused on one region, like Indonesia, Egypt, or the UK, or they are thematically fragmented, looking at separate issues like women's mosque participation or women's religious scholarship. Consequently, there exists a constrained cross-contextual comprehension of the functioning of gendered power within religious institutions and communities worldwide [7]. This gap highlights the necessity for a systematic qualitative literature review that aggregates and analyzes evidence from various studies to offer a holistic understanding of gender and religious authority within Muslim societies.

Islam's religious authority is complex. It encompasses unofficial networks of influence in families, schools, and local communities in addition to the official structures of mosques, madrasas, and fatwa councils [8]. Despite their exclusion from formal leadership roles, women frequently exercise spiritual authority through community service, teaching, and counseling. By establishing new avenues for female agency within religious life, recent initiatives like women-led prayer groups, female Quran teachers (ustadha), and female preachers (da'iya) have challenged established hierarchies [9]. These changes raise important questions about the definition, acceptance, and legitimacy of authority in Islamic philosophy and practice [10]. It is important to comprehend gendered religious

authority for a number of reasons. First, it directly affects justice and social inclusion in Muslim societies. Access to education, family rights, and public engagement are all influenced by one's capacity to understand religious texts and set community standards [11]. Second, Muslim communities are increasingly navigating multiple cultural and legal frameworks in an era of globalization and migration, which complicates the negotiation of gender and authority [12]. Third, from an academic standpoint, combining qualitative research on this subject reveals the underlying discourses and power dynamics that characterize religious participation and leadership in various geographical areas.

Although this study does not directly adopt a Foucauldian framework, Michel Foucault's ideas of power and knowledge offer a helpful theoretical backdrop for comprehending these dynamics [13]. In Muslim contexts, religious authority can be understood as a type of power that establishes truth claims and controls behavior within a faith community. Whether they are female teachers or male clerics, those in positions of interpretive authority contribute to the creation of knowledge that excludes some gender roles while validating others. By documenting lived experiences, meanings, and negotiations that quantitative studies frequently miss, qualitative research provides profound insights into these processes [14]. Studies on gender and religious authority in Muslim communities that were published between 2000 and 2025 are examined in this review using a methodical qualitative meta-synthesis. The chosen timeframe represents a moment of profound change, characterized by the emergence of Islamic feminism on a global scale, rising female literacy in nations with a majority of Muslims, and the digitization of religious discourse [15]. To guarantee methodological rigor and transparency, the review adheres to PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Major academic databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR, were searched in order to find studies. Each study was critically appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist to assess credibility and quality before thematic synthesis was conducted [16].

The following guiding questions are intended to be addressed by the review:

1. What effects do gender norms and identities have on how Muslim communities perceive religious leadership and authority?
2. What opportunities and obstacles do Muslim women face when trying to exercise or obtain religious authority?
3. What effects are feminist or reformist interpretations of Islam having on conventional notions of authority?

By asking these questions, the review aims to document how gendered hierarchies still exist in modern Muslim contexts as well as how transformative opportunities are emerging. It recognizes the diversity of Muslim women in terms of class, geography, sect, and cultural background rather than treating them as a monolithic group. As a result, the review highlights both common challenges and context-specific patterns by drawing on research done in a variety of locations, including Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and North America [17],[18],[19],[20].

## Method

This study explored the connection between gender and religious authority in Muslim communities using a meta-synthesis approach within a systematic qualitative literature review. It focused on studies from 2000 to 2025 examining how gender impacts authority, participation, and leadership in religious contexts. The research adhered to PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency and rigor. A comprehensive search was conducted across databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR, using keywords like Islam, gender, and religious authority. Only peer-reviewed journal articles in English (and a few in Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia, and French) were included. The PICOS framework guided the inclusion and exclusion criteria, focusing on qualitative studies with a gendered analysis of Islamic contexts [21],[22],[23].

A three-step screening process was used to manage and evaluate articles. The CASP Qualitative Checklist assessed the methodological quality, and studies scoring below seven were excluded. The PRISMA flow diagram documented the selection process. Data was extracted using a standardized matrix, and thematic synthesis was employed to identify key themes regarding gender and religious authority. The study ensured reliability by adhering to Lincoln and Guba's qualitative criteria, maintaining transparency and reflexivity throughout. Ethical research standards were checked for all included studies, but no ethical approval was needed for secondary data use. This approach resulted in a thorough understanding of how gender dynamics shape religious authority within Muslim communities [24],[26],[27].

## Result and Discussion

### Overview of Included Studies

47 studies that were published between 2000 and 2025 and satisfied the inclusion criteria were found by the systematic qualitative review. Muslim communities in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and North America were among the various geographic and cultural contexts that were covered by the chosen works. Four main themes continuously surfaced,

regardless of contextual differences: (1) the continuation of gendered hierarchies in religious authority; (2) women and marginalized groups negotiating informal and interpretive power; (3) the emergence of feminist and reformist reinterpretations of Islamic texts; and (4) the impact of globalization, education, and digital platforms on shifting gender norms. When taken as a whole, these themes show the nuanced ways that power and gender interact in Islamic religious life [28].

**Table 1.** Overview of Included Studies (2000–2025)

Region/ Country	Number of Studies	Dominant Focus	Methodological Approach	Key Themes Identified
Middle East (Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan)	11	Women's access to mosque leadership, fatwa councils, and religious education	Ethnography, semi-structured interviews	Gendered hierarchies, authority legitimization, and male clerical dominance
Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei)	10	Female <i>ulama</i> , pesantren leadership, and Islamic feminism	Fieldwork, narrative analysis	Informal authority, Islamic feminism, reinterpretation of texts
Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania)	7	Gender roles in local Islamic courts and da'wah movements	Case studies, participant observation	Negotiation of social and religious roles, intersection of gender and class
South Asia (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh)	5	Women's religious education and reformist activism	In-depth interviews, document analysis	Patriarchal traditions, reformist hermeneutics, local gender activism
Europe (UK, France, Germany)	6	Muslim diasporas, mosque participation,	Focus groups, digital ethnography	Transnational authority, online visibility, gendered

		and online da'wah		participation in religious institutions
North America (USA, Canada)	4	Women-led mosques, interfaith initiatives, and digital sermons	Ethnography, discourse analysis	Globalized Islamic leadership, new forms of digital authority

## Persistence of Gendered Hierarchies in Religious Authority

The Religious education programs and interpretive traditions that prioritize male authority reinforce gendered hierarchies in religious leadership. Many Islamic universities and madrasas continue to promote androcentric readings of classical texts, often overlooking women's contributions. Hadith and fiqh interpretations that limit leadership to men justify this exclusion, even as women gain advanced religious knowledge, typically confined to private or women-only roles. Michel Foucault's concept of epistemic power explains this marginalization, where authority determines what is considered legitimate knowledge. Cultural and social factors also support patriarchal norms, associating femininity with domesticity and emotionality, while religious authority is linked to masculinity and rationality. This socialization perpetuates gendered roles, with women excluded from decision-making in mosque committees. Foucault's idea of normalization is evident as male dominance in religious life is reinforced [29],[30],[31].

## Islamic Feminism and Reformist Hermeneutics

Islamic feminism is an internal reformist movement grounded in Qur'anic values of justice, compassion, and human dignity, aiming to reclaim interpretive authority (ijtihad) from male scholars. It challenges patriarchal interpretations by using hermeneutical techniques like contextual and linguistic analysis to highlight the moral and egalitarian nature of the Qur'an, countering centuries of male-dominated interpretations. Islamic feminist movements have emerged in various regions, such as Rahima and Musawah in Indonesia promoting women's roles in mosque governance, and the training of female religious guides (murshidat) in Morocco. Digital platforms have also enabled international networks of female scholars and activists. Despite criticisms of Westernization, these efforts affirm gender justice within Islam, demonstrating its evolving intellectual landscape [32],[33]. Islamic feminist hermeneutics also redefines religious epistemology by valuing women's lived experiences as legitimate

sources of theological reflection. This democratizes Islamic knowledge creation, involving underrepresented groups in shaping religious understanding. Islamic feminism, therefore, is not just a demand for women's rights, but a revolutionary intellectual endeavor that rethinks the relationship between text, context, and believer, fostering a more equitable understanding of Islam in modern society [34].

### Globalization, Education, and Digital Transformation

Globalization and transnational networks have enhanced Muslim communities' understanding of gender and religious authority. International discussions on gender justice and human rights have led to reinterpretations of Islamic ethics that emphasize inclusivity and respect. Muslim women scholars and activists are collaborating across continents, sharing reform strategies and experiences, challenging the idea of a monolithic Islam. Digital platforms and education have transformed how religious knowledge is created and shared. Muslim women theologians and educators now use platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram to address topics like feminism, mental health, and modesty, bypassing traditional institutional constraints. While digital literacy fosters decentralized authority, it also exposes women scholars to risks such as social backlash, accusations of heresy, and online harassment. The digital sphere thus offers both empowerment and new forms of control [35],[36].

**Table 2.** Impact of Globalization, Education, and Digital Transformation on Gendered Religious Authority

Aspect	Transformation Observed	Illustrative Example	Impact on Gender and Authority
Globalization	Cross-cultural exchange and feminist reinterpretation of Islam	Collaboration between Southeast Asian and Western Muslim scholars	Diversifies theological perspectives and challenges local patriarchy
Higher Education	Increased access to Islamic and gender studies for women	Female graduates from Islamic universities in Morocco, Indonesia, and the UK	Expands women's interpretive authority and theological competence
Digital Da'wah	Rise of online female religious influencers	Muslim female preachers on YouTube and Instagram	Creates decentralized authority based

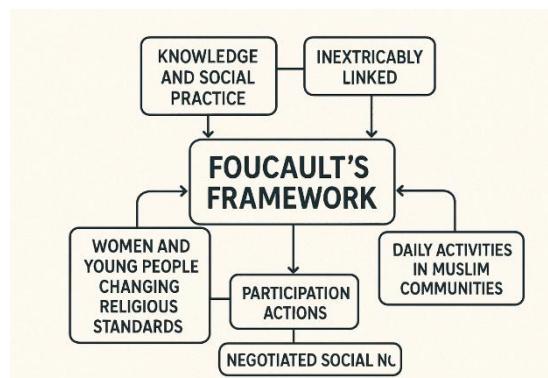
			on authenticity and audience trust
Social Media Activism	Transnational advocacy for gender justice	Hashtag campaigns like #WomenInMosques and #Musawah	Amplifies feminist Islamic discourse and mobilizes global solidarity
Surveillance and Backlash	Online harassment and institutional scrutiny	Conservative pushback against female digital scholars	Reinforces gendered control, highlighting ongoing resistance and negotiation

### Religious Authority as a Site of Control and Transformation

Religious authority functions as a dynamic site of power and resistance, shaping both personal faith and collective identity. Institutionalized structures, like councils and mosque hierarchies, reinforce traditional gender roles, while women preachers, youth leaders, and independent scholars challenge these norms by reinterpreting religious texts to align with contemporary realities. Transformation in Islamic religious life occurs through gradual reinterpretation, negotiation, and social practice rather than rupture. Religious authority also has the capacity to transform by creating new ethical and intellectual frameworks in response to global issues. Education, international communication, and digital connectivity have expanded the interpretive community, allowing underrepresented voices to shape religious discourse. Initiatives supporting female jurists, community-based theological training, and gender-inclusive mosque leadership show that gender justice in Islam involves rethinking legitimacy and spirituality, not just role equality [37],[38],[39]. Religious authority mirrors broader societal changes, with globalization and younger generations reinterpreting faith through contemporary ethics and social justice. The increasing involvement of women, young academics, and lay intellectuals in theological discussions exemplifies the democratization of religious discourse, reflecting a rebalancing between divine guidance and human interpretation without undermining Islam's spiritual foundations.

### Theoretical Interpretation: Power-Knowledge and Resistance

Foucault's framework connects knowledge and social practice, showing how authority over religious interpretation is intertwined with daily activities in Muslim communities. Women and youth are actively reshaping religious life by engaging in teaching, digital scholarship, and public discourse, challenging established hierarchies. Their actions highlight how social norms are negotiated rather than imposed. Resistance in religious settings often takes subtle forms, such as social media activism or women-led study groups, which aim to make authority more inclusive rather than dismantle it. This reflects Foucault's idea that resistance and power coexist, with resistance emerging where power flows, creating new modes of engagement. The relationship between resistance, knowledge, and power underscores the importance of context in understanding religious authority. Gendered authority changes are influenced by sociopolitical factors, education, and technological infrastructures. Using a Foucauldian perspective reveals that gendered authority in Muslim communities evolves through both creative engagement and constraints, not through linear progress [40],[41],[42].



**Figure 1:** Foucault's Framework

### Summary of Findings

This review highlights the gradual yet significant transformation of gendered religious authority in Muslim communities. While formal religious hierarchies remain dominated by patriarchal structures that limit women's authority, women, youth, and reformist intellectuals are increasingly challenging and reshaping these power dynamics. Education, both formal and informal, plays a crucial role in empowering marginalized voices in community leadership and theological discourse. The rise of digital platforms further democratizes religious knowledge, enabling discussion and dissemination beyond traditional authority. Social activism, community involvement, and reformist movements are redefining what constitutes acceptable religious authority. This

transformation is not uniform but varies by socio-political, cultural, and regional contexts, reflecting the relational and negotiated nature of authority in Islam. Islamic traditions are continually reinterpreted through lived experiences, where religious authority acts as both a site for renewal and a tool for social control. The intersection of social activism, theology, and gender norms signals ongoing and possible transformative change in Muslim communities [43],[44].

**Table 3.** Gendered Religious Authority in Muslim Communities: Key Findings

Theme	Findings	Examples/Evidence	Implications
Persistence of Traditional Hierarchies	Male-dominated structures continue to control formal religious authority	Limited access for women to roles like imams, jurists, and recognized scholars	Gender norms remain a barrier; structural change is gradual
Emergence of Female Leadership	Women increasingly participate in interpretation and leadership	Female scholars, educators, and activists producing religious knowledge	Expands interpretive authority; challenges patriarchal norms
Role of Education	Education equips marginalized groups to engage in theological discourse	Formal institutions, community programs, and online courses	Enables knowledge production and informed religious participation
Digital and Social Platforms	Technology allows wider dissemination and debate of religious knowledge	Online forums, social media, webinars	Democratizes authority; creates spaces for reformist voices
Social and Theological Reform	Reformist movements reinterpret Islamic teachings	Community activism, youth engagement, gender-sensitive theology	Encourages inclusion, empowerment, and evolving religious practices

Dynamic Nature of Authority	Religious authority is relational and negotiated	Variations across regional, cultural, and socio-political contexts	Authority is not fixed; ongoing potential for transformation
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## Conclusion

The review concludes that gendered religious authority in Muslim communities is gradually changing, with traditional male hierarchies being challenged by the growing involvement of women, youth, and reformist intellectuals. This shift highlights the relational and negotiated nature of authority in Islam, shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts. Education and digital platforms are central to empowering marginalized groups, especially women, by providing the skills and opportunities to participate in leadership and theological discussions. While patriarchal structures persist, the active engagement of women and reformists opens new pathways for social justice and inclusion. Ultimately, the review emphasizes that transformative change in Muslim communities is underway, driven by education, digital engagement, and the inclusion of marginalized voices, creating a more inclusive and responsive religious authority.

## Author Contributions

**Alwy Ahmed Mohamed:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Hanan Zakirah Harun:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Usman Aliyu Yunusa:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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