

Women, faith, and authority: Malama Zainab Ja'afar and the navigation of religious authority in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

This research examines female religious authority in northern Nigeria, with a specific emphasis on Malama Zainab Ja'afar Mahmood Adam. The research investigates how *Malama Zainab* negotiates her authority amidst controversies surrounding her public presence as a preacher and Qur'anic exegete within the male dominated Izala movement, a prominent reform movement with widespread influence throughout West Africa and beyond. Employing a qualitative approach, the study delves into Malama Zainab's background, social capital development, and association with Izala, utilizing both secondary sources and in-depth interviews with her. The findings highlight *Malama Zainab*'s efforts in bringing women to the forefront within mosque spaces and other gender-segregated settings, fostering their religious participation publicly. While her public activities primarily target female audiences, her preaching and proselytizing reach males through social media platforms, expanding her influence beyond traditional boundaries. Importantly, the findings also shed light on how the historical exclusion of women in socio-religious spaces in northern Nigeria is based on cultural and traditional interpretations rather than explicit religious prohibitions. Hence, the research contributes to the broader understanding of female religious authority, shedding light on the under-recognition of female scholars in comparison to their male counterparts in many Muslim-majority countries.

Keywords: Religious Authority, *Salafi* Movements, Izala, Female preachers, *Zainab*.

INTRODUCTION

For much of Islamic history, men have predominantly held public religious authority, particularly in the aftermath of the Prophet Muhammad's death (Upal & Cusack, 2021). Women were excluded from social activities, and their roles were perceived negatively. The status of women declined significantly, limiting their freedom in society (Sechzer, 2004). This strict tradition still exists in some Muslim countries. In Nigeria, for example, women have traditionally played a limited role in religious scholarship or authority. It is not because they are incapable of preaching or holding positions of religious authority, but their roles have often been underestimated or misinterpreted. And most often, this has been based on cultural and traditional misinterpretations of Islamic teachings rather than on any explicit prohibition in the religion itself (Umar, 2001). According to Bano and Kalmbach (2012), gender norms or traditions that are deeply hierarchical are believed to be one of the factors contributing to the limitation of women's religious authority (Bano & Kalmbach, 2012). This is especially true because female religious authority can only be considered 'natural' and acceptable when the teaching audiences are also female. This phenomenon highlights the constraints faced by female religious authorities, as they can only interpret their societal roles but lack the opportunity to alter the social system.

However, recent years have witnessed a notable shift in the hierarchy of Islamic authority where more women actively involved in Islamic preaching (Hasanuddin, 2018). Female participation in public prayers and mosque teachings has increased, and male dominance in important religious venues like the mosque and *madrassahs* has decreased because of the activities of female scholars. Sounaye contends that women's participation in formerly male-dominated public spheres has altered conventional ways of constructing Islamic religious authority (Sounaye, 2011). Many women have been changing the misconception on religious authority by participating in preaching and other roles in mosques and other socio-religious spaces. This represents a significant change in the structures of Islamic authority (Ghafournia, 2022).

In Nigeria, it is undeniable that women ulama have significantly contributed to the transmission of knowledge, especially in the late 2000s after their integration into the JIBWIS initiative of '*makarantar matan aure*' (Hausa language: meaning 'schools for married women') in the 1970s/1990s (Umar, 2001). The JIBWIS (*Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'a Wa Ikamatus Sunnah*), commonly referred to as Izala. Since its establishment in 1978, JIBWIS became a religious

Organization that focuses on spiritual and socio-political reform (Chesworth & Kogelmann, 2014). Within less than five decades of its establishment, the organization has transformed the patriarchal worldviews and ideological persuasions of millions of Muslims in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa, where men were traditionally believed to be the ultimate teachers capable of transmitting knowledge to women in schools. This transformation has been recognized as the largest reform movement in West Africa, with branches throughout Nigeria. Notably, as women were taught and elevated to positions of scholarship, they began teaching their fellow women in those schools.

Thus, this study employs *Malama Zainab Ja'afar* as a case study to illustrate the significant role of female Muslim authority in Northern Nigeria. In less than a decade of her advent in religious spaces, *Malama Zainab* has become a role model to many young Muslim women. She is now a national *mufassira* (female exegete of the Qur'an) and a preacher, holding fatwa sessions and public lectures related to females on both mainstream media and social media. The role of *Zainab* in the community exemplifies the recent development of community's acceptance toward women who hold public lectures for their women in public mosques. In fact, in some cases, their lecturers are becoming prevalent and acceptable among men. This research will examine the female religious authority in northern Nigeria by considering how *Zainab* built her authority and to what extent the societal contention, both in support and opposition of her public appearance, affects her role as religious authority. Nigeria, with its diverse cultural and religious landscape, serves as a compelling example for understanding female religious authority in a socio-religious context due to the complex interplay of tradition, culture, and Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa.

METHODS

This is a qualitative research approach study using in-depth interviews as the primary data. Participants in the study include *Zainab Jaafar Mahmood*. Interviews in-depth with *Zainab Jaafar Mahmood* were undertaken. The interviews were conducted in the Hausa language and translated into English. Her background, how she built her social capital, her function within the socio-religious contexts, and the difficulties she encountered were the main topics of the questioning. The interviews with the *Malama Zainab* were conducted through WhatsApp, utilizing a combination of text-based messaging and voice notes. Text messaging provided a convenient platform for asynchronous communication, allowing the participant

To respond at her convenience. In addition, voice notes were employed to capture the nuanced expressions conveyed in the *Malama Zainab's* words, enhancing the depth and richness of the qualitative data. This tailored approach was chosen to accommodate the preferences and schedule of the participant, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the research questions within the unique context of female religious authority in Northern Nigeria. The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved identifying patterns and themes in the data that related to the research questions. Most importantly, in terms of ethical considerations, Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The participants' identities were identified based on their approval.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Unveiling the Discourse of Female Religious Authority

A comprehensive understanding of religious authority in Islamic contexts is necessary to comprehend women's religious authority. Again, understanding religious authority is required to fully understand Islam or any other religion (Künkler & Stewart, 2021). This is because it determines who has the right to interpret religious texts and apply them to the religion's followers. The influence of Muslim religious leaders and their teachings has affected social, political, and economic activities in different contexts. Nevertheless, Islamic authority can take many forms, which presents difficulties for scholars using it as a point of discussion while studying Islam and Muslim society (Bano & Kalmbach, 2012). Islamic authorities do not employ a hierarchical church nor an official clergy, unlike in religions such as Christianity. Without a single arbitrator, there is "role uncertainty" and disagreement over the qualifications and experience needed to hold a position of religious authority. Although there are specific routes to religious authority in the Islamic tradition, they are less rigid and more decentralized than in many other religions. While Islamic leaders provide crucial guidance and instruction, their presence is optional for the observance of many religious rituals, including daily prayers, fasting, and pilgrimage (Bano & Kalmbach, 2012).

The concept of religious authority in Islam can be approached from several angles. Some people believe that it is a representation of how religious power is used and negotiated among various Muslim organizations (Kister, 1994). This investigation may involve studying the transmission of religious authority within these societies and investigating many other factors that affect the use of religious authority. These factors include the social and political

environment, cultural customs, and personal beliefs and practices. To appreciate how Islamic authority is exercised and negotiated within Muslim communities, some people may take a diversified approach, employing various tactics and methods. Others may take a holistic approach (Alatas, 2021).

Kunkler's representation of religious authority in Islam would be more accurate for this study, as it included at least some individuals or organizations listed below as potential claimants to the position of religious authority. Thus, *imams* or caliphs, kings or *sultans*, theologians, *hadith* specialists, jurists, philosophers, *Sufi* masters, and preachers. Moreover, in the eyes of Muslim scholars from the middle-ages, Islamic religious authority consisted of several "categories" (social or professional terms: *taiga*, pl. *tawafs*) that constantly competed with one another for the position of preeminence in the market for religious doctrines. According to this point of view, the *caliphs* and *imams*, theologians, *hadith* specialists, *Sufi* gurus, philosophers, and preachers, amongst others, are all excellent sources of authority (Künkler & Stewart, 2021).

There has been increased interest in studying female religious authority in Islam recently. Some of the most relevant scholars, like Masooda Bano, (Bano & Kalmbach, 2012) have looked at the effects of female authority on Muslim cultures and conceptions of Islamic authority in different contexts. Their research "Women and Gender: The Middle East and the Islamic World" provides valuable insights into the female religious authority in general. The study centered on how female authority affected Muslim societies and how people perceived Islamic authority. The chapters' authors examine different ways Muslim women have questioned the traditional notions of authority in their various communities but does not explicitly draw a case in the Nigerian context.

On the other hand, scholars like Künkler and Stewart (2021) have studied the historical and present perspectives of female religious authority in Shi'i Islam. They assembled chapters from several scholars that all addressed the issue of female religious authority in the context of Shi'i Islam. A different case study or academic study of the subject is presented in each chapter, encompassing various periods and places. Nevertheless, other works needed to draw some cases from the west African context or Nigeria, especially in the Sunni *\Salafism*.

Despite this rising corpus of work, there still needs to be a gap in the literature on female religious authority in the context of Sunni *\Salafi* Islam in northern Nigeria. Although Umar Sani's study on "Mass Islamic education and the emergence of female Ulama provides

some insight into the emergence of female scholars in Nigeria, it does not examine the attainment of religious authority. He provides examples of the two female ulama to buttress the idea that mass Islamic education has expanded female access to advanced Islamic learning and led to the emergence of female ulama as a recent development that is still unfolding (Umar, 2001).

The importance of studying female religious authority in Northern Nigeria arises from the region's distinct cultural and religious interpretations. The research attempts to give a more nuanced understanding of how female religious authority develops within the local dynamics of Northern Nigeria by concentrating on a particular female preacher and *mufassira*. This approach acknowledges regional differences in religious practices and interpretations, providing discussions for challenges, possibilities, and socio-religious subtleties unique to region. By filling the gap in the current literature, the study adds to a more thorough understanding of female religious authority, particularly in the Nigerian setting, extending the ongoing discussion on this topic.

By giving a thorough case study of *Malama Zainab Jaafar Mahmood*, in northern Nigeria, who has attained a level of religious authority within the *Salafi* community in women's socio-religious spaces specifically, the current study seeks to close this gap. The study tries to comprehend Zainab's background, her role in the community, and the difficulties she encountered in gaining her place as a religious authority. This study adds to the existing body of literature by offering a novel viewpoint on the barriers experienced by female preachers in northern Nigeria's context. Exposing the difficulties and methods used in this situation adds to the more significant discussion on female religious authority.

The discussions sheds light on the traditional roles and limitations imposed on Salafi Muslim women, emphasizing the concept of '*Al-Awra*' and the historical practice of confining women's activism to gender-segregated settings within Salafi oriented groups like JIBWIS. The historical limitation of recognizing women as religious authorities within the organization aligns with broader patterns in Muslim-majority countries (Upal & Cusack, 2021). This underscores a significant theoretical implication for scholars investigating the evolving role of women in Islamic education and religious proselytization or preaching. The increasing involvement of women in religious instruction and *da'wa*, albeit within specific constraints, provides an opportunity for scholars to reevaluate and expand existing

theoretical frameworks concerning women's agency and influence within conservative religious movements.

In my assertion, I posit that *Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'a wa Ikamatus Sunnah*, the largest and most influential Islamic movement in Nigeria to which Zainab is affiliated, holds the distinction of being the first Islamic organization to champion women's education rights in the region. This historic initiative was realized through the establishment of 'makarantun matan aure' in the 1990's, translating to 'schools for married women' in Hausa language. Since its inception, the organization has been actively involved in advocating for Islamic education and ethical values through preaching (Da'wah) and social welfare endeavors (Nasir, 2023). The Izala educational program stands out for its notable emphasis on women's education, going so far as to influence traditional Sufis to enroll their wives in schools.

A noteworthy aspect of *Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'a Wa Ikamatus Sunnah* is its encouragement for members to allow their wives to partake in educational pursuits. This pioneering effort by the organization in granting Muslim women access to advanced Islamic learning represents a significant milestone, especially as the first of its kind in Northern Nigeria (Chesworth & Kogelmann, 2014). Therefore, *Malama Zainab's* preaching activities align with the broader initiatives of the organization. However, her approach distinguishes her from other preachers in the region, possibly influenced by the increasing trend of disseminating preaching clips through new media platforms. This strategy enables her to reach a substantial audience, contributing to the unique character of her outreach within the organization's overarching objectives.

A Brief Profile of Malama Zainab Ja'afar

Malama Zainab Ja'afar is the daughter of one of Nigeria's most prominent Islamic religious figures (late), Shaykh Ja'afar Mahmood Adam. In her early 30s, she gave her debut tafsir in one of the earliest and most important Salafi mosques known as '*Masjid Uthman Bin Affan*' in Kano state's "*Gwale*" local government area during the month of Ramadan of 2018. The Tafsir quickly drew a sizable female audience. This sparked a heated debate among scholars on various pulpits and social media users about whether a woman should conduct Ramadan Tafsir in a public mosque, leading to a broader discussion about her role as a woman interpreting the Qur'an. Despite the contentions, the Tafsir persevered, supported by the majority of JIBWIS scholars.

Zainab has since gathered increased audiences, with more people following the trend and listening to her on social media. Another intriguing aspect of her presence as a preacher and *mufasssira* is the impact on fashion in northern Nigeria. Zainab's choice of attire, including the use of niqab, hand gloves, and a long veil, is not commonly seen in the region. Typically associated with very religious women affiliated with Salafi-inspired groups, her style has influenced young women. Now, more women are emulating her dress, adopting a long veil covering their body from head to toe, along with niqab, hand gloves, and sunglasses.

JIBWIS (Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'a Wa Ikamatus Sunnah)

This section is vital to explain how organization is defined as the backbone of the religious authority that supports the legitimation of female preacher. The *JIBWIS* Salafi inspired group is the first Islamic sect in Nigeria to provide a platform for women to pursue education and work as instructors and preachers. *JIBWIS*'s initiative in giving Muslim women access to advanced Islamic learning is the first of its kind in Northern Nigeria (Umar, 2001). Muslim women's enrollment at *JIBWIS* schools is a remarkable feature that portrays the importance of giving an overview of the organization in this study.

The acronym *JIBWIS* denotes the Arabic words *Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'a Wa Ikamatus Sunnah*, often translated as "The Society for the Removal (or eradication) of Innovation and the Reinstatement of Traditions." It is renowned as *Izala* in popular parlance, and its adherents are known as *Yan-Izala* (The *Izala* devotees). It is a registered Islamic organization founded in Nigeria in the early 1980s to oppose the *Sufi* orders, which *Izala* proponents saw as advancing heresies and innovations in Islam that are contrary to the actual teachings of the prophet Muhammad (Renne, 2012). This trend defines itself by uncompromising opposition to *Sufi* orders. Since then, it has spread widely in Nigeria, and its influences are felt in other west African countries of Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Ghana, and Sudan. *JIBWIS* espouses a *Wahabism variant of Salafi* conception of Islam, comparable to many Islamic modernists like Muhammad Abduh's reform. Sani Umar asserts that the *Wahabism* that *Izala* openly upholds is doctrinally identical to *Salafism* (Umar, 2001). *JIBWIS* also emphasizes the reformation of Islamic principles, strict adherence to the Quran and Sunnah, and the rejection of the religious innovations (*bid'a*). This organization presence extends beyond Nigeria to the bordering nations. Right from its inception, it has taken an active role in promoting Islamic education, moral standards through preaching (Da'wah) and social welfare activities.

The organization essentially promotes Islam based on the Qur'an and the traditions of the prophet, reminds Muslims of their obligations to Allah and rejects any revelation made after the death of the Prophet, and disapproves of any viewpoint contrary to that. They are stating that the Prophet left nothing undiscovered. The society's teaching maintains that the Qur'an fulfils the Prophet's mission and rejects the notion that anyone can communicate with the Prophet or that the Prophet physically visited him. It also opposes any expansion of the five fundamental tenets of Islam, fosters better relations and mutual understanding among Muslims, and declares that it is "determined to guard these principles at all costs without any options for compromise. (Chesworth & Kogelmann, 2014).

In addition to the Qur'an and Prophetic tradition, which together form the foundation of *Izala* doctrine, there are significant additional sources that *Izala* draws upon. *Izala* cited Muhammed b. Abd al-Wahhab's ((1703–1792) Treatise on the Oneness of God, known in Arabic as *Kitab al-tawhid*, is a significant source of its theology. However, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's writings are not the only ones from which the *Izala* doctrine derives. It also refers to other works by Sunni scholars, including Ibn al-Qayyim, Ibn Kathir, Ibn Taymiyya, and Ibn Ab Zayd al-Qayrawan. Notably, *Izala* adheres to the teachings of the Maliki School of Law (Chesworth & Kogelmann, 2014).

The Transformation of Female Education in JIBWIS

Not as long as the organization's history is the involvement of women in it. Women were not included in the earliest stage until the establishment of the women's education system in the 1980s (Renne, 2012). For married women, the founders organized classes that mainly addressed Islamic texts, notably the Qur'an and Hadith, with a resounding condemnation of any innovation that was not in accordance with the prophet's tradition.

The establishment of the women's classes initially faced significant opposition from some traditional *ulama*. These protests primarily originate from the *Tijjaniya* and *Qadiriyya* sufi sects. Possibly due to their doctrinal rivalry with *Izala*. As the former is perceived as an anti-Sufism campaign. *Izala* insists on educating Muslim women over the strenuous opposition of some traditional *ulama* who argue that mixing the sexes in school contravenes Islamic teaching. For *Izala*, mixing the sexes is a lesser evil than leaving Muslim women ignorant of Islam (Umar, 2001). The opposition was not only from the community. Even the immediate family of those women opposed the idea of women's classes. Many husbands banned their

wives from attending these classes because they believed they could learn the Quran at home without leaving. Even with that, some women challenged this deeply engrained patriarchal notion and participated in the classes, which its repercussions, in some cases, led to divorce (Renne, 2012). However, with the introduction of the *Izala* doctrine in several parts of northern Nigeria by 2002, this started to change.

It is yet unclear what the implication and effects of women having greater access to Islamic education will be. One can imply that women who attend *Izala* schools are likely to embrace *Izala* ideologies and become active members, thus, adding a gender aspect to Islamic modernism as portrayed by *Izala* (Umar, 2001). A section of the Higher Islamic Studies Certificate course was opened for adult women students to join. At first, the organization hired male instructors to teach women in those adult literacy programs. In return, the women can teach at JIBWIS and other public schools, work as preachers, or pursue higher education if they complete the program. This initiative by JIBWIS is a first of its kind in Northern Nigeria, providing Muslim women with access to advanced Islamic instruction (Metcalf, 2009).

Women's Roles in Teaching, Training, and Preaching within JIBWIS

Giving women a chance to become very influential figures in society is rare from a *Salafi* viewpoint. Women rarely make an appearance in public. They only function with women in specific settings where there are no men. Often their voice is considered '*Al-Awra*' (Arabic.) Even if she is knowledgeable, it is unacceptable for her to teach males (Muazu, 2022). That is the limit of *Salafi* Muslim women's activism. The *Salafi* group JIBWIS (Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'a Wa Ikamatus Sunnah), to which Zainab claimed membership, follows the same tradition of giving women opportunities within women only.

Historically, the organization has been led by men. Women have not been recognized as religious authorities within the group. But there has been an increasing tendency of women to participate more actively in religious instruction and *da'wa*, specifically among their fellow women. It is hardly surprising because Muslim women have traditionally been essential to the advancement of Islam (Upal & Cusack, 2021). Part of this is that women now have more access to education and religious training. Also, their role in spreading and interpreting Islamic teachings among their fellow has been given more attention. Women are becoming more involved in religious education, such as teaching Quranic recitation and memorization,

Islamic knowledge, and *da'wa*. But compared to men, they still have less to do. They still have to deal with problems and limits, like social and cultural norms. With the emergence of *Izala*, even though women's role is limited in public spaces, they are becoming more involved in religious education and *da'wa* in the community.

Malama Zainab Ja'afar: A Case in Female Religious Authority

The JIBWIS leaders have recently realized the importance of integrating women into *da'wa*, especially among other women. The *Nisau's-Sunnah* (women's organization under the JIBWIS) attests to that. By her virtue of being an "*Alima*" (Arabic, knowledgeable), *Malama Zainab* heads the Kano state chapter of the organization. And that signifies a turning point in the organization's history, creating more opportunities for women within women's circles.

The subject of this research is a woman named *Malama Zainab*, whose father is Shaykh Ja'afar Mahmood Adam, a leading exegesis of the Quran scholar in Nigeria. Her mother is *Malama Aisha Idris Zakariyya*, also a female preacher in Nigeria. *Malama Zainab* was born in 1988 in the north-central Nigerian state of Jos North Plateau. A state is renowned for its cultural and religious diversity. At the age of three, her parents moved to Kano State, where she spent most of her formative years. Kano state is known for its rich Islamic history and culture, growing up in such an environment exposed *Malama Zainab* to different perspectives and ways of life, laying a foundation for her future engagement with other, more prominent communities.

Malama Zainab joined her first school '*Yan Dutse*' nursery and primary school, where she did her nursery section. She later received part of her primary education at *Badr* nursery and primary school. After primary school, she was subsequently enrolled in the newly established *Salafi*-oriented School called *Uthman bin Affan* (under her father's control) in 1994 in the same Kano. *Malama Zainab's* father, Shaykh Ja'afar Mahmood Adam (1960-2007), was one of the pioneers in propagating *Salafi* ideologies in Nigeria. His effect can still be felt today throughout the country. In 2005, *Malama Zainab* obtained her secondary leaving certificate in *Uthman bin Affan*. Although *Uthman bin Affan* School offered both circular and Islamic education, the school preferred the former at that time.

However, the Islamic studies competitions that her father and his friend Muhammad Sani Umar *Rjiyar Lemo* (a well-known Islamic scholar with competence in Hadith and Quran exegesis) organized three times in succession: in 2002, 2003, and 2005 gave *Malama Zainab*

a new perspective. The competitions had an emphasis on Islamic education, and she discovered she was more passionate about it than she was about circular education. Hence, the competition influenced her choice of taking a new path in the study of Islam and solely concentrating on it. Similarly, the guidance she received from *Malam* (Hausa term for 'teacher') Ilyasu *Dorayi* was among the factors that influenced her. It is clear that right from inception, *Malama* Zainab was born into a family where searching for Islamic knowledge was the norm, which significantly inspired her quest for Islamic learning.

After the last round, her father selected 10 to 15 students with the top scores and gave them tutoring at the *Dorayi* mosque in Kano state. The privileged students were taught by both Shaykh Ja'afar and his friend Muhammad Sani Umar. They were taught *Tafsir*, *Mamzumatul Tafsir*, *Musdalahul Hadith*, *etcetera*. *Malama* Zainab was motivated to concentrate on Islamic education due to these events, which inspired her to study the *Ulumul Quran* at Aminu Kano College of Legal and Islamic studies after graduating from secondary school in 2005. Although, she did not finish the program before she got married and departed for Madina. Even at Madina, Zainab picked up where she left off once she arrived. She memorized the Quran while in Madina and enrolled in several other short-term courses taught by local Islamic scholars. She studied and taught for two years in Madina, exposing her to various Islamic teachings and scholars. That enhanced her understanding of Islam and her capacity to instruct others about it.

Upon returning to Nigeria in 2014, her teacher and mentor, *Malam* Ilyasu *Dorayi*, asked her to lecture the female students at his institution. This opportunity led her to become more involved in *da'wa*, and quickly gained a large following. Her popularity led to her being invited to give *fatwas* (religious verdicts) on several mainstream media platforms. Where she hosted Q&A sessions, issuing *fatwas* to women on matters related to them. It was not until her father's death that *Malama* Zainab came into the spotlight in the *da'wa* space. The community's expectations of her to become the heir of her late father were one of the motivations. Hundreds of women attended her debut Ramadan *Tafsir* in 2022, thus raising a great debate about women "*Mufassira*" in the region. Despite this, Zainab continues to deliver public lectures in northern Nigeria's socio-religious settings, gaining increasing followers.

Strategies of Proselytization: Malama Zainab's Multifaceted Approach

The establishment of the Nisa'u'sunnah (the women's wing of JIBWIS) underscores the importance of women's roles in the community. This women's wing holds the potential to expand opportunities for women to lead and participate in JIBWIS activities, promoting the work and teachings of female scholars within the organization. This initiative could contribute to creating more significant space for women in socio-religious settings. However, in the socio-religious context of northern Nigeria, fostering increased space for women requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing the challenge of traditional gender roles, the promotion of female religious leaders, and the involvement of more women in decision-making processes within religious organizations.

In the socio-religious setting of northern Nigeria, it becomes evident from the research that there is a pressing need for greater spaces for women. Historical exclusion of women from mosque activities and other socio-religious affairs is rooted in cultural and traditional interpretations of Islamic teachings rather than any legitimate prohibition in the religion itself. However, the emergence of *Malama Zainab Jaafar Mahmood Adam*, a female preacher and member of JIBWIS, implicitly advocates for expanding women's opportunities in these settings.

The discussions underscore *Malama Zainab's* crucial role as a religious authority, leading the Nisau's-Sunnah women's organization in Kano state under JIBWIS. Her preaching activities across the states of Nigeria and annual Ramadan Tafsir events contribute significantly to the socioreligious landscape of northern Nigeria, particularly among women. Notably, *Malama Zainab's* teachings align with the broader objectives of JIBWIS, emphasizing a shared framework rather than personal interpretations. This distinction sets her apart from emerging trends, such as women leading congregational prayers, and distinguishes her from conventional preachers in the region. *Malama Zainab's* unique standing is emphasized by the increasing audience she has gathered, a departure from the experiences of many other female preachers in similar roles in the region.

Malama Zainab's main preaching theme centers on women's marital affairs and the emulation of virtuous women from Islamic history, emphasizing the concept of being a "mace ta gari" or a virtuous woman. Her audience has grown significantly, with more people following her on social media. The circulation of her video clips on platforms like YouTube,

Facebook, and WhatsApp. The WhatsApp group, in which *Malama Zainab* actively participates, plays a vital role in sharing her daily preaching, whether in video format or accompanied by written quotations on a flyer with her photo done by her students or adherents. Interestingly, this group includes not only women but also men, including myself as a participant observer. This inclusivity underscores the widespread reach of *Zainab's* preaching activities and the recognition she has gained.

Beyond religious discussions, *Malama Zainab's* influence extends to the fashion scene in northern Nigeria. Her distinctive attire, which includes a niqab, hand gloves, and a long veil, makes her stand out in a region where such clothing is uncommon. Although typically associated with very religious women linked to Salafi-inspired groups, *Malama Zainab's* fashion choices have become influential. Young women, inspired by her style, are increasingly adopting a similar dress code, including a long veil covering their bodies, niqab, hand gloves, and sunglasses. This trend highlights the broader impact of her presence as a preacher, extending beyond religious teachings to influence fashion preferences in the community. This signifies a pivotal moment in the organization's history, breaking from the traditional trend of male leadership especially in the issues regarding women. *Malama Zainab's* role becomes emblematic of a nuanced shift within the organization, providing scholars with an intriguing case study to delve into the complex interplay of gender dynamics and religious authority.

CONCLUSION

This study provides an in-depth examination of *Malama Zainab Jaafar Mahmood Adam's* pivotal role in cultivating female religious authority within mosques and other socio-religious spaces in northern Nigeria. *Malama Zainab* emerges as instrumental in expanding the influence and recognition of women in the region's socio-religious landscape, as evidenced by her active engagement with the Salafi oriented organization, *Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'a Wa Ikamatus-Sunnah (JIBWIS)* under her leadership of *Nisau's sunnah* (women wing of *JIBWIS*) Kano state chapter. Significantly, *Malama Zainab's* contributions within *JIBWIS* are emphasized, shedding light on her instrumental role in highlighting the presence and contributions of female scholars within the organization. This is a notable stride, given the prevalent lack of recognition for female scholars in many Muslim-majority nations. The fact

That JIBWIS acknowledges and supports the work of female scholars, exemplified by *Malama Zainab's* experience, signals a positive shift towards the acceptance of women in religious leadership roles. The findings demonstrate that *Malama Zainab Jaafar Mahmood Adam's* efforts have not only expanded the space available for women in social-religious domains but have also fostered more recognition of female scholars within the Salafi organization JIBWIS. Also, the findings underscore the urgency for further research that will acknowledge and examine female religious authorities in the changing sub-Saharan African Muslim majority countries.

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