
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ghanaian Muslim Women and The Conundrum of Secular Education: A Historical Perspective

Alhassan Abdul-Rahman¹ and Yahaya Halidu² ✉

¹The Ohio State University, College of Arts and Sciences, Department of History, Columbus, Ohio/ USA

²Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Institute of Social Sciences; Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ankara / TÜRKİYE

Corresponding Author: Yahaya Halidu, **E-mail:** greatsymbo@yahoo.com

| ABSTRACT

Debates about the question of why Muslim women lag behind their male counterparts in the access to and acquisition of secular education in Ghana continue to linger among academics and non-academics. Although many scholars have touched on the subject, there has not been a comprehensive analysis of the issue. This paper attempts to provide a history of the Muslim female denial of secular education, especially from the precolonial period to the 1980s. While some girls continue to face denial, Muslim women's activism in the 1990s and beyond brought a lot of changes in the gender stereotyping that had existed in Muslim communities. The paper argues that both missionary/ colonial engagements and gender stereotyping in Muslim communities are responsible for the gender disparity in education among Muslims in Ghana, particularly from the pre-colonial period to the 1980s. Notwithstanding their high population, Ghanaian women, in general, and Muslims, in particular, were denied access to secular knowledge that became the source of social mobility and economic autonomy in the newly formed state. The result was the gender gap in education in Ghana, not only affecting women but the nation at large.

| KEYWORDS

Secular Education, Gender Disparity, Gender Equity, Activism, Gender Stereotyping, Economic Development.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 20 January 2025

PUBLISHED: 03 February 2025

DOI: 10.61424/ijah.v2.i3.189

1. Introduction

"Islam is founded on knowledge, which has significant implications for socio- economic and spiritual development of Muslims."

Fatimatu N-eyare Sulemanu¹

By this quote, Sulemanu is not downplaying the significance of the five pillars of Islam but emphasizing the position of knowledge in Islam and in Muslims. Knowledge here must be understood in its general context, as both religious and secular knowledge are important to Muslims in many ways. In her "Education as a Tool for Sustainable Development..."², Sulemanu shows how Muslim women in Ghana used education to empower the Muslim *ummah*

¹ Fatimatu N-eyare Sulemanu, "Education as a Tool for Sustainable Development: The Role of Muslim NGOs in Ghana" in *Religion and Sustainable Development: Ghanaian Perspectives*, ed. Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah, George Ossom-Batsa, and Nicoletta Gatti (Roma: Urbaniana University Press, 2018), 243

² Ibid., 243.

in Ghana to develop their socio-economic lives. As important as this is, it illuminates the *longue duree* history of Muslim women's education in Ghana. This paper takes us back to the pre-colonial period till the 1980s and helps us to understand why Muslim women in the 1990s had to mobilize to challenge the status quo that had negatively affected their educational pursuits. The paper examines Ghanaian women, particularly Muslim women's denial of secular education and argues that in understanding the gender gap in holistic education (both religious and secular) among Muslims in Ghana, one cannot deny the causative effects of missionary/ colonial administrators as well as gender stereotyping in Muslim communities. Their engagements culminated in creating a gender gap in education that was much experienced till the 1990s. The paper emphasizes secular knowledge because, as Scanlon³ and others have shown, no matter how Africans resisted Western-styled education, missionary/ colonial influences, as well as internal challenges of the newly formed African states, made the system thrive above indigenous African knowledge, at least at the national level. Consequently, secular education became the main source of facilitating Ghanaians' social mobility and economic autonomy. Those who had it had the key to socio-economic development and leadership opportunities.

Historically, Muslim women's lack of access to education emanates from two sources. Firstly, within the gender bias in education by missionaries and the British colonial government as well as under the newly independent state. Secondly, failure to recognize the importance of secular education to Muslim girls by the Muslim communities even when Muslims had admitted the importance of secular education to their socio-economic development and had accommodated it in the 1970s. Although the newly independent state made attempts to bridge the literacy gap between males and females, it did not do much during the early decades after independence. It was not until the 1990s that substantive efforts were made to achieve higher levels of gender parity in enrollment in public schools.

2. Missionary/ Colonial Governments and Muslim Women Education

In his "Islamic Institutions of Higher Learning in Ghana," Kobo⁴ argues that we have to understand Ghanaian Muslim's quest for education (secular) from two perspectives: rejection and accommodation. He asserts that prior to the colonial period, secular education in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) was offered by Christian missionaries in Southern Ghana in non-Muslim enclaves. Moreover, the British colonial government further facilitated the expansion of mission schools throughout its territories, leaving Muslim dominated enclaves when it could not create public schools. The colonial government declined to grant requests to missionaries to open schools in Muslim territories (northern territories or protectorate of the Gold Coast), fearing a possible conflict between missionaries and Muslims. Although many scholars have argued that this facilitated the spread of Islam by not opening schools to Muslim territories, the southern part developed than the north, which was dominated by Muslims. It was not until after independence that secular education sprang into northern Ghana. Muslims' rejection of secular/missionary education during the turn of the twentieth century, according to Kobo, was to resist Christian evangelism from expanding into their territories and to prevent their children from converting to Christianity.

Kobo continues that by the time of independence, the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims with regard to public employment and leadership had widened owing to the limited number of schools in Muslim areas and the Muslim's apprehension towards secular schooling. Some Muslims from the late 1960s began to admit that their lack of secular knowledge had negatively affected their employment opportunities in the public sector and leadership. However, Muslims persisted in resisting secular schooling, although the post-independent government had established some public schools and subsidized the cost of education in the north. This ambivalence began to change in the 1970s. The importance of secular education to the socio-economic development of children in general and Muslims in particular has become unquestionable. While a large number of Muslims in the urban centers began to patronize secular education, some few Muslim communities also established primary and secondary schools to cater to Muslim interests.

³ David Scanlon, *Traditions of African Education* (New York: Bureau of Publications, 1964), 4-5.

⁴ Ousman Murzik Kobo "Islamic Institutions of Higher Learning in Ghana: The Case of the Islamic University College" In *Muslim Institutions of Higher Education in Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Mbaye Lo and Muhammed Haron (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 180-184.

The 1980s saw an aggressive quest towards secular education. Secular education was fashioned in a system of integrated Islamic education that combined both secular and religious knowledge in a single curriculum. This started with the expansion of Islamic madrasas in the 1980s, mostly by Ghanaians who had completed their education in the Arab world and had gained financial support in that regard. During this time, many Muslim madrasa proprietors and groups put pressure on the government to facilitate the transformation of the madrasas into Anglo-Arabic schooling. An Islamic education unit was established and inaugurated in 1987 to see to the introduction of secular education into the existing madrasa schooling. Thus, in the integrated Islamic education, which was confirmed in the 1980s, Muslims found a way to accommodate secular education without having to lose their religious knowledge in the process. The integrated curriculum ushered a new horizon for most Muslim children in Ghana from the 1990s.

Within Kobo's two perspectives of rejection and accommodation in its general sense, I argue that with regard to Muslim women's experience, even under accommodation, girls were denied education until the emergence of Muslim women activists. Having been denied access to education up until the 1990s, Muslim women activists in the 1990s found new ways to motivate each other to access secular education and to open up opportunities for their female wards to enroll in secondary and tertiary institutions. After struggling through both religious and secular forms of knowledge, some of the women became seasoned educationists, serving in several official positions within the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service. Others joined women's NGOs, which aimed to support the socio-economic development of women.

Gender disparity in literacy (missionary/ secular) began with missionaries who provided education before the British colonial administration. Most of the personnel and teachers were men. This was partly due to racial and gender dynamics in Europe in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries, where 'race' and 'sex' became categories for undermining black and white women's cognitive strength toward excellence in education.⁵ In addition to male personnel, missionaries focused on converting and training mostly male indigenous 'African' to take over the proselytizing mission as well as providing educational and other services to blacks. Indeed, Frankema argues that as missionary activities increased in Africa, much work, such as religious ceremonies, schooling, and medical care, was performed by African converts (predominantly male).⁶ 340. Some authors, in the context of comparing missionary works and British as well as French colonial legacies in various regions in Africa, have reiterated that in the Gold Coast, girls had more educational opportunities than in other regions in tropical Africa. Examples of these works include Francis Bartels' "Education in the Gold Coast"⁷ and Erin Hern's "Colonial Education and Women's Political Behavior in Ghana and Senegal."⁸ I argue that it is by examining both missionary motives and colonial policies as well as real data on both male and female enrolment, which I provide here, that one can really see the gender discrimination embedded in the provision of secular knowledge within this period.

Similar to other places in Africa, missionary schools were used for conversion to Christianity and proselytization and not to serve the larger interests of the indigenous communities. Moreover, within this general objective, women were to function as wives and domestic workers for the males. The few girls who were given opportunities to be educated were to be provided with the knowledge needed to serve this purpose. Both white men (single), either in missionary service or pre-colonial trading, and converted black men needed Indigenous women who at least could read and write English as wives and partners. Here, It is important to point out that in West Africa, the enslavement of Africans began in the context of missionary work. Adu Boahen, Jacob Ajayi, and Micheal Tidy⁹ argue that ten Africans were presented to Prince Henry in Lisbon in 1441 by Gonzalves, one of the Portuguese explorers, to be converted to Christianity and educated so that the most talented would be sent back to their countries as

⁵ Londa Schiebinger, "The Anatomy of Difference: Race and sex in eighteenth-century science." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23, no. 4 (1990): 392-404.

⁶ Ewout Frankema, "The origins of Formal Education in sub-Saharan Africa: was British Rule more Benign?" *European Review of Economic History* 16, no. 4 (2012): 340.

⁷ Francis Bartels, "Education in the Gold Coast." *African Affairs* 48, no. 193 (1949): 300-311.

⁸ Erin A. Hern, "Colonial Education and Women's Political Behavior in Ghana and Senegal." *African Studies Review* 64, no. 1 (2021): 217-241.

⁹ Adu Boahen, Ade Ajayi and Michael Tidy, *Topics in west African history* (London: Longman, 1966), 107

missionaries¹⁰. What Prince Henry did not notice was that more Africans were brought later to Portugal only to be sold.

Thus, from the mid fifteenth century onwards, European missionary work went hand-in-hand with the enslavement of Africans until the slave trade was abolished in 1807 and slavery in 1833. Ipsen has shown, with examples, how indigenous women of the Gold Coast were treated in interracial marriages with the Danish as well as other European explorers along the coast. In the introduction, she asserts that over the period from the seventeenth century until 1850, when the Danish Christiansborg fort was sold to the British, there was an interracial marriage on the Gold Coast in practice called "cassare" or "calisare." The European men who settled on the Gold Coast married into African families to have all the needed help to adjust to the new circumstances. She further states that "Interracial marriages on the Gold Coast resembled Luso-African marriages in other parts of West Africa in much more than name. As in the Luso-African cases, women on the Gold Coast not only helped their European husbands survive and resettle in Africa; they also helped them as translators, cultural ambassadors, and trading partners."¹¹

Bartels contends that Both Danish and the English established schools in 1722 and 1766, respectively, and that these schools had parallel schemes for girls, but it is important to note that the motives of gender roles of both Europeans and Africans limited Indigenous girls' enrolment and academic success. Bartels even states that "Capitein, the African school master at the Dutch fort, St. George d' Elmina, is reported to have had in his school in the 1740s the African girl he hoped to marry."¹² Furthermore, the missionaries sometimes took girls into their houses to teach them. Hence, it is fair to say that missionaries did not prioritize girls' education as they did to boys. Adu Boahen, Ajayi, and Tidy provide that by 1827, the Wesleyans had set up four girls' schools and twenty boys' schools in the Gold Coast. Besides the fact that many schools were established for boys, some African male students were taken overseas to further their education. The Dutch started this practice by sending Jacob Capitein and William Anton Amo to Europe, where they obtained Master of Arts degrees and a doctorate from German universities.¹³

The British colonial administration continued to downplay Ghanaian women's education. It must, however, be stated that missionary work continued on the Gold Coast even during the formal establishment of British authority. As Kobo argues, the British supported the expansion of missionary schools as they were unable to establish public ones. Furthermore, they avoided supporting missionaries to open up schools in the northern territories where Muslims dominated. Iddrisu reiterates that since the north lacked exploitable minerals, the place became the hub for cheap labor for the southern plantations and mines. Quite apart from this, the British later recruited young, intelligent, and energetic young men from the north to join forces in the First World War. By 1907, a labor camp was set up in Tamale, one of the cities in the North, for this exercise. This resulted in a reduction in skilled and young men in the Salaga area.¹⁴ In the process, secular/ mission schools became limited in the area in contrast to the southern territories of the Gold Coast. Consequently, as Muslims lagged behind in secular knowledge, their women, who were already relegated to the private spheres, suffered the most.

Furthermore, the British Indirect Rule system, which targeted males instead of females as administrators, negatively affected females' education in general and Muslim females in particular. In "Education in Northern Ghana, 1906-1940..." Thomas¹⁵ asserts that one of the main features of the British colonial government's Indirect Rule was the stress put on educating the chiefs for efficient protectorate administration. While supporting a few missionary schools, the administration established some other government schools all over the Gold Coast for this purpose. For example, in 1908, "a number of intelligent boys" who were sons of chiefs were sent to the government school in

¹⁰ Ibid.7

¹¹ Pernille Ipsen, *Daughters of the Trade* (U. S. A: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 9.

¹² Francis Bartels, "Education in the Gold Coast." 303.

¹³ Adu Boahen, Ade Ajayi and Michael Tidy, *Topics in west African history*, 105.

¹⁴ Abdulai Iddrisu, "The growth of Islamic learning in Northern Ghana and its interaction with Western secular education." *Africa Development* 30, no. 1-2 (2005): 58.

¹⁵ Roger G. Thomas, "Education in northern Ghana, 1906-1940: a study in colonial paradox" *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 7, no. 3 (1974): 429.

Cape Coast in the south after going through some schooling in the north. Between 1919-1928, one of the most celebrated British governors of the Gold Coast, Sir Gordon Guggisberg, introduced reforms in education, but this did little to address girls' enrolment in public school. In showing his aversion to the educational system at the time, he said:

"... rotten to the core. Not only is it inadequate in not going far enough, but it has proved inefficient in its results. inadequate, because it fails to provide facilities for that secondary and higher education which is essential Inefficient because the character-training necessary to citizenship and leadership has been largely omitted in the existing system; and because the actual primary education imparted at our schools has seriously failed to give good results except in comparatively few instances."¹⁶

As Williams shows further, the governor went ahead to enunciate his "fifteen principles of education." The first three principles touched on the framework of education. The fourth and fifth sought to address pitfalls in girls' education. The seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth all dealt with the quality of education. The twelfth emphasized the use of the vernacular. The thirteenth argued against free and compulsory education in the short-run due to lack of funding. The fourteenth principle stressed cooperation between the government and the missionaries and critiqued the utterly evangelizing objective of the missions. The final principle gave sovereignty to the colonial government in controlling education throughout the Gold Coast. In his fourth and fifth principles, the governor argued for equal educational opportunities for both boys and girls. For the country to advance in civilization, he contended that there was a need for women to be as well-educated as men. He argued this view further in the fifth principle by stressing Co-Education at certain stages in education since that was cost-saving and, at the same time, provided chivalry on the part of the boys and mutual respect among the sexes.¹⁷

At least Guggisberg's policies showed an improved focus on education as a source of development for the colonial African state compared to what missionaries provided. Thomas¹⁸ asserts that Guggisberg did a lot to promote education by opening the Achimota school, raising teaching standards, and increasing government grants. Yet his achievements "cannot be isolated from his central belief in the importance of protecting traditional institutions, wherever possible, from 'the advance of the semi-literate class of African and from his consequent emphasis on molding the educational system to produce citizens who were prepared to respect those institutions and to work within rather than against them"¹⁹. This central belief mired the progress of his policies, especially in closing the gap between the North and the South and girls' education. Thomas continues that although he thought of expanding education by introducing his policies for the protectorate, his policies instead promoted further restrictions. He shows how bad the north-divide was in the table below.

¹⁶ David Williams, "Sir Gordon Guggisberg and educational reform in the Gold Coast, 1919-1927." *Comparative education review* 8, no. 3 (1964): 209.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 293-294.

¹⁸ Thomas, "Education in northern Ghana, 1906-1940: a study in colonial paradox" 438.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Table 1: The Gold Coast Educational System In 1919

Area /Colony	Number of Government Schools	Number of Government Assisted Mission Schools		Boys	Girls
Eastern Province	5		114	12130	2877
Central Province	3		42	5723	1107
Western Province	3		19	2370	321
Ashanti Province	4		19	2292	287
Northern Territories	4		0	203	8

Table 1 above clearly shows the regional disparity at the start of Guggisberg’s policies in 1919. While the Eastern Province boasted 119 schools, the Northern Territories only had to contend with 4 government schools without any government assisted mission school. With respect to women pupils, girls had very low enrollment compared to boys. In the Eastern Province, out of 15000 pupils, 12,130 were boys while girls numbered only 2 877. The number of girls reduced drastically in the Northern Territories, which had the highest population of Muslims were boys from 4 schools while only 8 were girls. Thomas again asserts that by 1939, the total number of pupils in the protectorate had risen to 1183 with 1075 boys and 108 girls. In the same year, the total Gold Coast colony, including Ashanti, Northern Territories, and Togo Mandate, recorded an enrollment of 43,825 boys and 14,534 girls. He²⁰ provides more data on enrollment below to facilitate further analysis of the north-south divide.

Table 2: Enrollment in Northern Territories’ Schools (Including Mission Schools)

	1919	1931	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
Boys	203	600	643	696	744	806	842	998	1075
Girls	8	65	134	145	175	139	102	79	108
Total	211	665	777	841	919	945	944	1077	1183

Table 2 above shows that although Guggisberg’s efforts had yielded some positive results in the number of schools and pupils, including women, the disparity between the North and the South was very prevalent. What is astonishing from the data is the gender question. For about two decades after Guggisberg’s policy to increase girls’ enrollment in schools, the number of girls in the protectorate rose from 8 in 1919 to 108 in 1939, while boys rose from 203 in 1919 to 1075 in 1939. In the entire colony, enrollment was 43825 for boys and 14534 for girls by 1939. Thus, relative to boys’ enrollment, the number of girls was not encouraging. It is clear that while there were views and policies that recognized girl’s education, little was done to really bring that to fusion. Indeed, Thomas argues that in 1931, the total number of children in the protectorate was estimated at 184 000 boys and 168 480 girls. However, 600 boys and 65 girls were enrolled in schools (both government and mission). It is, therefore, difficult to argue that the girls’ population was low, and that culminated in their reduction in enrollment. Both missionary/ colonial government gender/ racial discriminatory policies, as well as African/ Muslim resistance to secular education, reduced enrollment generally and women, including Muslim women, in both pre-colonial and colonial periods.

²⁰ Ibid., 443.

3. The Post- Colonial State and Muslim women's education

The Gold Coast gained its independence in 1957, and the newly formed state became Ghana with a new vision and an African president, Kwame Nkrumah. Ghana inherited both territorial and gender disparity in education, which negatively affected women. Like Guggisberg and subsequent colonial governors, the newly formed state also made several attempts to address the situation. However, not much changed in terms of gender parity in education for Ghanaian women in general and Muslim women in particular until the 1990s. As Ghana became a republic in 1960, the National Council of Women was established in recognition of Women's activism during the nation's struggle for independence. The council was responsible for the establishment of nurseries and vocational centers and was also to organize educational programs for women. The government also made most of its schools co-educational and established new educational reforms such as the Education Act of 1961 and the accelerated development plan for education partly to facilitate female enrollment. Yet, post-independence existing patriarchal structures neither allowed the council nor females to achieve gender parity.²¹

Female students continued to study courses under home science, while their male counterparts studied science and technical subjects. As Sutherland-Addy²² shows, although the 1960s saw improvement in secondary-technical schools, none of them was either co-educational or single sex female. Science continued to be associated largely with males than females. A similar trend continued in the 1970s and the 1980s with little improvement. The statistics below give a picture of the gradual improvement of gender equity. Sutherland-Addy provides the data below to examine such gradual improvement.

Table 3: PRIMARY ONE ADMISSION, 1961- 2000 ACADEMIC YEAR BY SEX AT 5-YEAR INTERVALS

Year	Girls	Boys
1961/62	43.2	56.8
1965/66	46.3	63.7
1971/72	45.5	54.5
1976/77	45.6	54.4
1981/82	46.1	53.9
1986/87	46.2	53.8
1991/92	47.2	52.8
1995/96	47.3	52.7
1999/00	48.1	51.9

Table 3 shows a gradual improvement in female enrollment from 1961 to 2000. As can be observed from the table, the national statistics for females in Primary one in the 1961/62 academic year was 43.2%. By the 1990/2000 academic year, it increased to 48.1%, an increase of less than 5%. Conversely, boys' admission dropped from 56.8% in 1961.62 to 51.9%, showing a decrease of almost 5%. Although girls' enrollment looked encouraging, especially in the 1990s, the greater challenge was for them to remain in school and continue to the higher levels to ensure parity at all levels. That notwithstanding, female enrollment was still less than males' enrollment.

By conducting case studies in many Muslim-dominated communities, such as the Wa District in the Upper West Region, Bolgatanga and Builsa Districts in the Upper East, Sutherland-Addy asserts that many factors affected Muslim girls from accessing secular education. These included the withdrawal of girls from schools to assist family socio-economic life, early marriages, and elopement to the south. Others were poverty and lack of prioritizing girls' education.²³

²¹ Ghana Statistical Service, *Women and Men in Ghana: A Statistical Compendium: 2006* (Ghana: Statistical Service, 2006),1.

²² Esi Sutherland-Addy, *Impact assessment study of the girls' education programme in Ghana* (Ghana: UNICEF, 2002),

²³ *Ibid.*, 153-157.

4. Muslims Communities and Girl-Child Education in Ghana

Besides the general setbacks that have negatively affected females' education, including Muslim girls, specific factors from Muslim communities contributed enormously to denying Ghanaian Muslim girls access to secular education. This was the case even from the 1970s when Muslims realized that secular education had become an inevitable commodity to the socio-economic well-being of their lives. Many families prioritized male education at the expense of females. Similar to other African communities, many research and scholars have shown that this phenomenon was not limited to Ghana but also to many countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Until recently, fewer Muslim girls in many West African communities had full access to education, whether secular or religious and in situations where they had access, several factors militated against their academic pursuits. In emphasizing the embodied knowledge students were to acquire in the Qur'an schools in Senegambia 1890-1945, Ware III²⁴ gave an account of the plight of Muslim girls. He observes that many people did not consider girl's education a priority in Senegambia, irrespective of the high presence of Islam in the region. Perception of female bodily impurity and engendered social order played significant roles in undermining female education. Only a few girls attended the Qur'an schools. Ware III quoted David Ames' 1950 anonymous male interviewer who remarked, "Why does a woman need an education to bear children, pound grains, and draw water?"

Drawing from colonial census data from Dakar and Saint-Louis, Ware III asserts that boys out-numbered girls by five-to-one and four-to-one ratios. Girls who were fortunate to attend the Qur'an schools faced challenges of gender roles and could learn very few verses of the Qur'an because they had to stay in the schools for a few hours. The aim for the girls was for them to be able to read some portions of the Qur'an enough for the daily rituals and to be able to write the Arabic alphabets. Ultimately, the girls were to be prepared not only for marriage but to be good wives. Therefore, girls performed other forms of 'domestic' education where *marabou* wives taught them to sew and further trained them on moral uprightness. Nevertheless, some daughters from clerical lineages were able to memorize the entire Qur'an and scholarship in Islamic literature. Ware III cites Ruqqaya Niass, the daughter of Tijānī Shaykh Ibrahim Niass of Kaolack, as an example of her intellectual ability by composing Arabic-language poetry shortly after the independence of the state. Similarly, Boyd and Last²⁵ emphasize that several learned Muslim women in the nineteenth century Sokoto Caliphate, especially the founder, Usman Dan Fodio's daughter, Nana Asma'u (1793-1864), made huge Islamic intellectual contributions. Nana Asma'u, for example, was an astute scholar of Islamic literature, poet, and teacher. Ware III furthermore notes that, unlike Senegambia, many girls had access to Qur'an schools in Niger, as Ousseina Alidou argued. But, in Senegambia, there was significant gender disparity in the education of girls.

As shown in other regions in sub-Saharan Africa, religio-cultural as well as socio-economic factors sustained by Muslims in Ghana contributed negatively towards gender parity. Several personal testimonies by Muslim females, especially from the 1970s, illustrate the challenges they faced in their quest for secular education. In an interview by David Owusu-Asah,²⁶ Ayishetu Abdul Qadir,²⁷ one of the members of the Federation of Muslim Women Association of Ghana (FOMWAG), gave her views about how she got into formal secular education. She said that:

"I started my formal secular education in 1971 when I was 8 years old. My grandfather was still alive, but let me add something here. I would have missed formal [secular] education had it not been for the timely intervention of my [maternal] uncle. Because I was brought to my grandfather when I was just three years old. He [was so pleased with me] that he did not like to lose sight of me, so he did not like me go anywhere. So I was 8 years old and, but looking at my

²⁴ Rudolph T Ware III, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (USA: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 172.

²⁵ Jean Boyd and Murray Last, "The Role of Women as 'Agents Religieux' in Sokoto," *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue canadienne des études africaines* 19, no. 2 (1985): 283-300

²⁶ David Owusu Ansah's interview with Ayishetu Abdul Kadir. Accessed 9/24/21

(<https://aodl.dev.matrix.msu.edu/islamictolerance/seculareducation/about/>)

²⁷ Ibid.

behavior at the house, my uncle determined that I was a brilliant kind, so he said, why don't we send this child to school because her mind is matured. But infant, my grandfather did not agree with him, so my uncle arranged everything with me, and even with [having the appropriate school uniform, but in my house clothing], he took me to the school and wrote my name [registered me]."²⁸

Besides some parents reluctantly denying their female wards access to secular knowledge because of so much affection, as in the case of Ayishetu, others continued to perpetuate the view that their wards would leave the fold of Islam in the process. Fatimatu N-eyare Sulemanu²⁹ recalls her own experience when she could not have a kindergarten education because her father could not buy the furniture she would use. In the 1970s, when she wanted to pursue secular education after attending some madrasa and could read the Qur'an, her father did not want her to go, fearing that she would become a non-Muslim. There were other instances where she and her friends had to enroll themselves in either secular or Qur'an schools. Her motivation to pursue her passion and to reach high levels in education kept her going. Sulemanu also argues that there were several females who were not as lucky as her. Although they were brilliant, they never had the opportunity to access secular education.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the historical factors that forced Ghanaian women in general and Muslim women in particular to trail behind their male counterparts in the quest for secular knowledge. The period before the 1990s registered the worst experience for the women due to the unwelcoming legacies of missionary and colonial administrative policies in the Gold Coast. Both Christian missionaries and the British colonial administration deepened the north-south divide and turned the north, which accommodated most Muslims, into a hub of exploitation. As Muslim men became sources of labor, their women were stripped of secular knowledge. The newly independent state's *Africanization* policy, though, recognized the need to educate women, but a patriarchal establishment that relegated women to the private spheres continued to keep them in domestic work, leaving few to access secular knowledge, which had become the foundation for social mobility. However, the 1970s looked promising for Muslim girls since their communities had admitted the importance of secular education, and a myriad of factors, including early marriages and stereotyped gender roles, militated against them. But from the 1990s, Muslim activism grew out of the socio-economic transformations of the state to confront the status quo. How this happened and what the women did need separate studies to add to the literature on the history of Muslim women's education in Ghana.

ORCID: Yahaya Halidu: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5290-6379>

ORCID: Alhassan Abdul-Rahman: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1805-9234>

References

- [1] AMMAH, R D, OSSOM-BATSA, G, & GATTI, N (2018). eds. *Religion and Sustainable Development: Ghanaian Perspectives*. Urbaniana University Press.
- [2] BARTELS, F. L. (1949). *Education in the Gold Coast*. African Affairs 48, no. 193 (1949): 300-311.
- [3] BOAHEN, A. A, JF Ade A, and Michael T. (1966). *Topics in west African history*. London: Longman.
- [4] FRANKEMA, E HP. (2012) *The origins of formal education in sub-Saharan Africa: was British rule more benign?*. European Review of Economic History 16, no. 4 (2012): 335-355.
- [5] HERN, E A. (2021). *Colonial Education and Women's Political Behavior in Ghana and Senegal*. African Studies Review 64, 1 (2021): 217-241.
- [6] KOBO, O M (2016). *Islamic Institutions of Higher Learning in Ghana: The Case of the Islamic University College*. In Muslim Institutions of Higher Education in Postcolonial Africa, pp. 179-191. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- [7] IPSEN, P. (2015). *Daughters of the Trade*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.
- [8] IDDRISU, A. (2005). *The growth of Islamic learning in Northern Ghana and its interaction with Western secular education*. Africa Development 30, no. 1-2: 53-67.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Interviewed on 31st August, 2020 at 12:30 pm. Fatimatu N-eyare Sulemanu was the first Officer in charge of Islamic and Arabic studies at the Greater Accra IEU. She served this position from 1993 to 2009.

- [9] SUTHERLAND-ADDY E (2002). *Impact assessment study of the girls' education programme in Ghana* (Ghana: UNICEF, 2002), 75-76.
- [10] THOMAS, R G. (1974). *Education in northern Ghana, 1906-1940: a study in colonial paradox.*" *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 7, 3 (1974): 427-467.
- [11] WILLIAMS, T. D. (1964). *Sir Gordon Guggisberg and educational reform in the Gold Coast, 1919-1927.* *Comparative education review* 8, 3 (1964): 290-306.
- [12] WARE III RUDOLPH, T. (2014). *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa.* USA: University of North Carolina Press.