

CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM WOMEN IN NORTHERN NIGERIA; CHALLENGES AND PROSPECT

Aisha Balaraba Bello* Faiza Kabir Umar** & Muhammad Garba Wakili***

Abstract

Contemporary Muslim women in Northern Nigeria are facing numerous challenges in their social, educational, behavioral, and cultural development within their respective societies. The challenges faced by Muslim women in Northern Nigeria have emerged and escalated due to the gradual adoption of Western culture and civilization facilitated by modern technological advancements. These changes have not occurred by chance; rather, they have been influenced by various factors, including Western biases against Muslim women and a lack of awareness and understanding of Islamic teachings among some Muslim women. These teachings are crucial for safeguarding the sanctity of Muslim women and the entire Muslim Ummah in Northern Nigeria and the wider world. The findings of this paper highlight the behaviors and challenges experienced by contemporary Muslim women in Northern Nigeria, which have led to a decline in their moral values within the religious context, their pursuit of Western education, and their cultural norms. This paper will also offer evidence of certain social issues that some Muslim women have adopted, while further elucidating the status and role of Muslim women in Islam. However, it's important to note that the methodology employed in this paper is solely explanatory in nature.

Keywords: *Contemporary, Challenges, Northern Nigeria, prospect, Women*

* Aisha Balaraba Bello, Department of Islamic Studies, Faculty of Arts, Sa'adu Zungur University Bauchi, Nigeria. Email: aishabellobalaraba24@gmail.com

** Faiza Kabir Umar, Department of Islamic Studies, Faculty of Arts, Sa'adu Zungur University Bauchi, Nigeria. Email: Faiza@basug.edu.ng

*** Muhammad Garba Wakili, Department of Islamic Studies, Faculty of Arts, Sa'adu Zungur University Bauchi, Nigeria. Email: mohdgarbawakili@gmail.com

Introduction

In the modern world, every society, whether it is comprised of Muslims or non-Muslims, has achieved a high level of social, economic, political, academic, and spiritual development. However, alongside these achievements, societies may also encounter negative social and Western influences that pose challenges, potentially leading to the erosion of their cultural and moral values. Present-day Northern Nigeria, with its focus on Muslim women in this study, is one such society affected by these social, cultural, and Western ideologies.¹ The history of Islam demonstrates that Muslim women possess numerous rights and responsibilities, although these are distinct from those afforded to their male counterparts. The Glorious Quran and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) delineate how Muslim women should present themselves modestly in public, conduct themselves within their homes both before and after marriage, and serve as role models for their children and others. This is crucial for fostering morally sound generations within contemporary societies. Achieving this necessitates adherence to Islamic religious teachings and a heightened awareness of the potential negative impacts of Western culture and civilization on the Muslim Ummah. It also involves discarding unnecessary traditional and social behaviors that fall outside the scope of Islamic principles and scholarship. Furthermore, the Glorious Quran and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) remain the primary sources from which the Muslim Ummah derives their fundamental rights and duties. This stands in contrast to the misconception held by some non-Muslims that Muslim women should possess identical rights as males. Islam, a religion of peace and justice, has never impeded or denied the rights of Muslim women—whether as human beings, citizens, or mothers. However, certain contemporary Muslim women in Northern Nigeria, influenced by Western biases or lacking fundamental Islamic knowledge that guides them towards a righteous path in both this life and the hereafter, have adopted misguided perspectives that disregard their essential rights and responsibilities. This adoption of Western culture has resulted in numerous challenges within their societies.

In light of these circumstances, this research delves deeply into the present status and challenges faced by Muslim women in Northern Nigeria. Moreover, it aims to provide potential solutions for overcoming these challenges, thereby fostering an environment where the rights and roles of Muslim women in Northern Nigeria are upheld and respected.

Status of Women in Islam

In Islam, men and women are considered morally equal in the sight of God Almighty and are expected to fulfill the same duties of worship, such as prayers, faith, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca, among others. Islam has generally elevated the status of women compared to earlier Arab cultures by prohibiting female infanticide, recognizing women's full personhood, and guaranteeing women's rights to own and manage property.² The Prophet's final wife, Aisha, was a well-known authority in medicine, history, and rhetoric. Biographies of distinguished women, particularly within the Prophet's household, demonstrate that women behaved relatively

¹ Federal Republic of Nigeria 2006 Population and Housing Census Priority Table, Vol. III, P.43, Abuja- Nigeria, April 2010, Published by National Population Commission, Abuja Nigeria. (2010).

² Musa Ibrahim "Contemporary Muslim majority societies with special reference to Northern Nigeria: challenges and prospects" *Alhabeer Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol.1 No.2.

autonomously in early Islam.³ In the contemporary era of Northern Nigeria, women have once again taken up leadership and administrative positions, making positive contributions to societal development, particularly in sectors such as health and education. Women today actively participate in grassroots organizations, development projects, and various economic, educational, health, and political initiatives. Consequently, the improvement of women's status has become a significant issue in modern Islam.

Features of Contemporary Muslim Women in Northern Nigeria

Historical records indicate that Northern Nigeria is a region comprised of traditional Hausa kingdoms and states that have existed since the year 1804 and continue into present-day Nigeria. A prominent Islamic scholar, Usman ibn Fodio, led a successful Fulani jihad against the non-believers of the Hausa region, commonly known as *Maguzawa*. This jihad movement brought about a revolution that transformed Northern Nigeria into a region characterized by Islamic religious tolerance and an orderly society. This led to the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, which guides and safeguards the norms and values of the Islamic religion not only in Northern Nigeria but also beyond.⁴

Before the jihad movement led by Sheikh Usman ibn Fodio, Muslim women in Northern Nigeria were not widely known for their religious devotion, as they lacked fundamental knowledge of Islamic teachings. This lack of knowledge resulted in their involvement in activities that were not aligned with Islamic teachings, such as superstitions and other ritual beliefs, due to their limited religious orientation. Despite this, Nana Asmau, the daughter of Sheikh Usman ibn Fodio, actively worked to enlighten women through her writings, advocating against un-Islamic practices and encouraging adherence to Islamic principles in their daily lives. Contemporary Muslim women in Northern Nigeria are influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. Internal factors encompass cultural practices and innovations within their own communities, including local drum dancing and traditional ceremonies like marriages and naming ceremonies. External factors encompass influences from cultures outside their own, often from the Western world. These factors have both encouraged women to strive for equal rights and representation alongside men in various religious duties and obligations.

Islam has historically granted women different rights since its inception. However, as time has progressed, the influence of Western culture and technological advancements has significantly impacted the behavior and character of contemporary Muslim women in Northern Nigeria. This has led to changes in native cultural practices related to dressing, greetings, marriage, Western education, employment, and political participation. In response, Northern Nigerian Muslim clerics and women's organizations have risen to address the negative impacts and challenges faced by Muslim women in the region.⁵ They aim to counteract these negative influences that erode women's character and religious values, while also enhancing the religious state of women and girls in contemporary Northern Nigeria.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Suraiyya Zubair Banuet al, Africa Program Occasional Paper series Former Wilson Center Public Policy Scholar, 2014.

⁵ British Council "Promoting Women's Rights through Sharia in Northern Nigeria, Centre for Islamic Legal Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (2005).

One of the prevailing feature of contemporary Muslim women in Northern Nigeria is their adherence to Islamic dressing norms, with most of their body parts covered. However, in certain situations, some women may not strictly adhere to these norms, particularly during wedding ceremonies, naming ceremonies, and *Eid* celebrations. During such occasions, some women may dress in ways that do not fully comply with Islamic teachings on modesty. Allah's guidance in the Glorious Quran outlines the expected appearance of Muslim women:

“And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity, and not to reveal their adornments except what normally appears, let them draw their veils over their chests, and not reveal their hidden adornments except to their husbands, their fathers, their fathers-in-law, their sons, their stepsons, their brothers, their brothers sons or sisters sons, their fellow women,(those bondwomen) in their possession, male attendants with no desire, or children who are still un aware of women’s nakedness. Let them not stomp their feet, drawing attention to their hidden adornments. Turn to Allah in repentance all together, O believers, so that you may be successful.”⁶

Wearing the *Hijab*⁷ is exclusively regarded as an important Islamic norm and value, and it is often seen as a cultural expression among Muslim women in Northern Nigeria. By the 1990s, the concept of the *Hijab* began to challenge government uniform policies in the public service sector, including professions such as nursing and law. With the introduction of Islamic law in 1999, several Northern states made *Hijab* a compulsory component of uniforms for women and girls, including those in tertiary institutions such as nursing schools and universities. However, in the academic and cultural discourse of contemporary Northern Nigeria, the *Hijab* is not always worn as Islam prescribes for covering the body⁸. In present-day Northern Nigeria, a significant number of Muslim women do not wear the *Hijab* as Islam instructs. Instead, they often opt for the mini *Gyale* or mini *Hijab*, which does not adequately cover their entire body as the standard *Hijab* should. This tendency is particularly noticeable in their homes before marriage, within higher education institutions, workplaces, and matrimonial homes. This culture of not wearing the proper *Hijab* is widespread among Muslim students, regardless of the courses they are studying in higher education. This is due to the perception that wearing the full *Hijab* is considered old-fashioned⁹. By failing to adequately cover their bodies as outlined in the Glorious Quran, Muslim women risk exposing themselves to spiritual vulnerabilities, including potential attacks by supernatural entities known as Jinn. Moreover, they might suffer from various spiritual illnesses that are difficult to address, in addition to committing a grave sin. In contemporary Northern Nigeria, especially in urban societies and among the middle-class families, Muslim women, particularly the unmarried ones, are highly influenced by and fall victim to the trend of imitating Western styles of dressing and behavior. Unfortunately, some parents show little concern about their daughters' behaviors, which can result in a loss of respect and the neglect of the God-given responsibilities they have as parents. In the present day, certain parents seem to overlook their responsibility to instill moral and virtuous characters in their children. Neglecting this duty goes against Sharia principles, which emphasize that both men and women should be equally guided toward good morals and character development by their

⁶ Glorious Quran verse 31.

⁷ Hijab mean a long loose veil covering the whole body worn mostly by Muslim Women.

⁸ Hauwa Mahdi, “The Hijab In Nigeria, the Woman’s body and the Feminist Private/Public Discourse” Center for Global Studies Seminariergatan 1 Gohenburgh University, Sweden n.d.

⁹ *Ibid.*

parents. The West African Jihad leaders of the 19th century condemned the hypocritical practices of some of the *Ulama*¹⁰ of that time, who focused primarily on teaching others while neglecting the education of their wives and female children. In the present day, when parents fail to monitor and guide the conduct and behavior of their children, it creates a conducive environment for moral and character vulnerabilities to thrive. This can lead to a resurgence of the very practices that Sheikh Usman ibn Fodio and his knowledgeable associates fought against.¹¹

Some Errant Behaviors Among Contemporary Muslim Women in Northern Nigeria

Numerous sins and acts of disobedience are frequently observed among a significant number of Muslim women in Northern Nigeria. These behaviors tend to occur during various occasions, particularly weddings and social gatherings. Unfortunately, some women view these events as opportunities to set aside certain Islamic principles and adopt behaviors that run counter to Islamic teachings. Some of the disobedient behaviors prevalent in contemporary Muslim societies in Northern Nigeria include:

Mingling of Sexes:

One of the prevalent acts of disobedience is the mingling of men and women who are not *Mahrams* (unmarriageable relatives) according to Islamic law. Such mingling leads to behaviors that are prohibited in Islam, such as physical contact, handshaking, chatting, laughing, and even flirting between men and women. These actions are explicitly prohibited by Islamic teachings and can lead to significant harm both at the individual level and within Muslim societies. Allah has forbidden such mingling, as it paves the way for individuals to engage in actions contrary to their faith.¹²

Unveiling of Physical Structures

Today, many contemporary Muslim women in Northern Nigeria appear to be in a state of moral and character depression. Consequently, they seem to lack mindfulness regarding proper coverage during various cultural and religious occasions. This behavior is seen as a sign of civilization or modern development by some women. However, Islam, being a religion of prudence, strictly prohibits Muslim women from revealing their physical beauty to those who are

¹⁰ Ulama means Muslim Clerics.

¹¹ British Council “Promoting Women’s Rights through Sharia in Northern Nigeria, Centre for Islamic Legal Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (2005).

¹² Muhammad al-Jibaly The Quest for Love and Mercy, Regulations for Marriage and wedding in Islam, Alkitab and Assunnah Publishing.

not meant to see it. Therefore, the practice of Muslim women covering their physical beauty signifies a virtuous and God-fearing tradition, as nudity has consistently been viewed as immodest and disrespectful within Islamic principles and human common sense throughout history. Regrettably, the current trend among most females reflects a decline in both inner character and outward appearance. This decline is largely attributed to the influence of Western civilization, which often disregards values such as modesty, bashfulness, and ethical responsibility. With each passing day, the dress code of contemporary Muslim women is becoming increasingly inadequate, as their clothing fails to adequately cover their bodies, preserve their dignity, or shield them from harsh weather conditions.¹³

Muslim women must distinctly stand apart from other women in terms of their character, temperament, and appearance. They hold a unique position among women and should not be associated with the prevailing moral decline in today's societies. Instead, they should embody a model of virtues and ethics. When addressing the women of faith, Allah says:

“And tell the believing women to lower their gaze (from looking at the forbidden things), and protect their private parts (from illicit sexual acts) and not to show off their adornment except that which is apparent, and to draw their veils all over , and not to reveal their adornment except to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husband’s father, or their sons, or their husband’s sons, or their brothers or their brother’s sons, or their sister’s sons, or their (Muslim) women (i.e. sister in Islam) or the (female) slaves whom their right hand possess, or old male servants who lack vigor, or small children who have no sense of feminine sex. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And all of you beg Allah to forgive you all, O believers, that you may be successful...”¹⁴

The Islamic injunction regarding the covering of physical attributes and beauty for Muslim women serves to preserve and protect their psychological and spiritual well-being. Additionally, it contributes to establishing an honorable mode of interaction in situations where conversations may occur, such as markets, hospitals, motor parks, and other social settings.

When Muslim individuals approach this matter in accordance with Islamic ethics and principles, this decree provides a viable means of safeguarding the modesty of Muslim women. It communicates that certain parts of a woman's body are private and should not be exposed to those who are not her *Mahrams*¹⁵ (close relatives). Furthermore, when addressing the esteemed wives of our Prophet, who serve as role models for believing women, Allah says:

“O wives of the Prophet! You are not like any other women. If you keep your duty (to Allah), then be not soft in speech, lest he is whose heart is a disease (of hypocrisy, or evil desire for adultery) should be moved with desire. But speak in an honorable manner. And stay in your houses and do not display yourselves like that of the time of ignorance, and perform prayer and give charity and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah wishes only to remove Ar-Rijs (evil deeds and sins) from

¹³ Hauwa Bako et al Challenges of the Contemporary Muslims An exposition on their Nature, Effects and Solutions sahabah publication Kaduna Nigeria pg.80.

¹⁴ Glorious Quran 24:31.

¹⁵ Bukhari, Istizan, 12; Muslim, Destiny, 20.

you, O members of the family (of the Prophet), and to purify you with a thorough purification.”¹⁶

Allah has illuminated in the Glorious Quran the concept of women who display their bodies uncovered. Allah states: "Women who may be clothed, yet are effectively naked, diverting from the path of righteousness and misguiding others. In addition to the injunctions and rulings found in the Glorious Quran, the Prophet (peace be upon him) also forbade nudity for women. This is evident in a saying attributed to the Prophet and reported by Abu Hurairah:

“Two are the types of the denizens of Hell whom I did not see: people having flogs like the tails of the ox with them and they would be beating people, and the women who would be dressed but appear to be naked, who would be inclined (to evil) and make their husbands incline towards it. Their heads would be like the humps of the bukht camel inclined to one side. They will not enter Paradise and they would not smell its scent whereas its scent would be smelt from such and such distance”¹⁷

Smoking and Drug Abuse

This is referred to as the intentional consumption of illicit drugs and associated substances such as heroin, tobacco, cocaine, alcohol, or the excessive use of prescribed medications like analgesics and cough syrups, which gradually leads to drug dependence and addiction. Drug abuse is a grave issue that paves the way for other vices such as suicide, violence (domestic or otherwise), and the abuse of children and women, to name a few. Islam strictly forbids the use of any substance that would impair the soundness of a believer's mind.¹⁸ This is another undesirable behavior prevalent among many contemporary Muslim women in Northern Nigeria. Presently, the consumption of hard drugs, typically associated with males, has unfortunately become a growing trend among Muslim women. Smoking is one of the problematic practices that has caused significant issues and negative consequences in contemporary Muslim societies, particularly in the context of Northern Nigeria and with respect to Muslim women. This disturbing trend has rapidly proliferated in recent times, much like an uncontrollable wildfire.¹⁹

Allah the Almighty has categorized things in the world, including food and drinks, into two groups: those that are permissible and those that are not permissible. Given this reality, both smoking and consuming hard drugs fall within the category of strictly prohibited and impermissible habits according to Islam. There exists unanimous consensus among Muslim scholars and physicians that smoking and using hard drugs are detrimental to health. They are among the causes of ailments like lung cancer and other related diseases, which can ultimately lead to death. Given that Islamic law prohibits anything harmful to human beings, it is pertinent to highlight the Quranic verse that emphasizes this principle. Allah says: *“Do not kill yourself, Allah is merciful to you.”²⁰*

Considering this, it can be confidently stated that smoking and the consumption of hard drugs are among the many evils prohibited by Islam. It is impermissible not only to partake in

¹⁶ Glorious Quran 33:32-33.

¹⁷ Sahih Muslim, Hadith 2128.

¹⁸ Hauwa Bako et al Challenges of the contemporary Muslims an exposition on their, Effects and Solutions Sahabah Publications, Kaduna Nigeria. pg. 110.

¹⁹ <https://www.quora.com/Is-smoking-forbidden-in-Islam> (accessed on 4th January 2021).

²⁰ Quran 4 verse 29.

their use but also to engage in their purchase or sale. In contemporary times, women have unfortunately become involved in the consumption of various prohibited substances such as cigarettes, shisha, weed (marijuana), tramadol tablets, and other medically-prescribed cough syrups.

Celebrating Birthday

This is another factor that contributes to the erosion of behavioral norms among Muslim women in contemporary Northern Nigeria. The practice of celebrating significant occasions has become prevalent among Muslim women. This form of celebration encompasses events such as birthdays, wedding anniversaries, new marriages, and other non-Islamic festivities. It's important to note that these types of celebrations are not exclusive to women; men also participate in them.

These celebrations have been adopted by Northern Nigerian Muslim women from the Western world, often through exposure to Western media or the internet. Such celebrations run counter to Islamic teachings, as they were not observed during the golden age of Islam. During these events, both married and unmarried women are often enticed to dress immodestly, revealing their concealed beauty, contrary to Islam's mandate of modesty.

Moreover, women frequently share their photos and videos from these celebrations on internet platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook, making them accessible to the public. This practice garners attention from others, leading to the viewing of these images and videos.

Bleaching and Hair Attachment

The practice of skin pigmentation among Muslim women in the Northern Nigerian region has become increasingly common, particularly among both married women and unmarried young ladies. The usage of skin lightening creams and injections for cosmetic purposes is unequivocally regarded as prohibited (haram) according to Islamic sharia law. Allah has uniquely bestowed each human being with a beauty that complements their nature as servants of Allah. Women should find contentment and gratitude in the way Allah has fashioned them.²¹

Islam does allow, in cases of genuine necessity, the correction of deformities or injuries to restore normalcy to the body. However, altering dark skin to light skin is viewed as an unnatural alteration in the perspective of Islam. Thus, Islam emphasizes that beauty is not determined by skin color, but rather by one's piety, good deeds, and conduct towards others. In line with this principle, the Prophet stated that "*A white person has no superiority over a black person, nor does a black person have superiority over a white person, except by their piety and fear of Allah (Taqwa).*"²²

Furthermore, a recent report published by the BBC revealed that certain face-lightening creams contain harmful substances like hydroquinone, which can lead to lasting damage to the skin and, in more severe cases, significantly increase the risk of developing skin cancer.²³ This

²¹ <https://daruliffa.com> (Accessed on 6th January, 2021).

²² Taqwa means piety in the sight of Allah.

²³ <https://daruliffa.com> (Accessed on 6th January, 2021).

underscores the impermissibility of using such creams, as causing harm to oneself is not allowed in Islam, as Allah states in the Glorious Quran: "And do not contribute to your destruction with your own hands."²⁴

Possible Solutions

In light of the challenges outlined and discussed above that confront Northern Nigerian Muslim women in their communities, the following are suggested as potential avenues to address these issues:

1. Educating Muslim Children

Parents and guardians need to recognize the significant challenge at hand in providing the finest education and upbringing for today's children, who will be the leaders of tomorrow. Neglecting the education and proper nurturing of children is akin to having a ticking time bomb waiting to detonate. Moreover, Muslim parents should remain vigilant, putting forth concerted efforts to monitor their children's education and the content they are exposed to in schools. Emphasis should be placed on fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills, grooming the future Muslim leaders in a manner that underscores their religious foundations and reduces the prevalence of blind imitation and conformity among believers. Parents and guardians should leverage all available sources and resources, including books, mass media, and the internet, to instill knowledge, wisdom, discipline, and morality in their children. The lack of parental involvement and the absence of suitable alternatives have lasting negative repercussions on the behavior and moral values of their children.

2. Supporting Underprivileged Children

In today's Muslim world, countless children are experiencing true orphanhood due to the rampant violence prevailing in Muslim societies. Whether it's due to ethnic cleansing in Northern Nigeria or other tragic circumstances, Muslim children are losing their parents and finding themselves with limited or no support systems to rely on. Consequently, many of these children's basic needs go unmet, leading to a deterioration of their character and moral values. This distressing situation demands the attention of the entire Muslim Ummah. It is a solemn responsibility of paramount importance for the Muslim Ummah to closely examine the plight of underprivileged children, regardless of their gender, and take proactive measures to rescue them from such circumstances that could potentially erode their moral values.

3. Effective Planning and Strategic Execution

Muslim youth, driven by their desire for change and accompanied by their energy and enthusiasm, often neglect the importance of proper planning and strategizing. Whenever embarking on a task, it is crucial to initiate it with comprehensive planning and well-thought-out strategies that will pave the way for a productive and successful outcome. This principle applies

²⁴ Glorious Quran 2 verse 195

to various aspects of life, including crucial matters like marriage and business. Without proper planning and strategic foresight, marriages may end in separation and businesses may collapse, leading individuals towards unfavorable behaviors and outcomes.

4. Choosing a Career

A career refers to a specific occupation or profession for which an individual undergoes training and development over a certain period. Making the right career choice is a crucial step towards achieving personal goals, objectives, and ambitions. A well-informed intention, supported by thorough research and thoughtful consideration, is necessary when selecting from a wide array of options, aiming to attain success in both this life and the hereafter. Given its significance, seeking appropriate guidance and counseling is imperative before reaching any critical decision. This process entails evaluating one's talents, passions, dedication, mental aptitude, and capabilities. It also requires considering the needs of the Muslim community and society as a whole. For instance, the broader contemporary Muslim world has a pressing requirement for female professionals in fields like medicine and education. Many mothers, wives, and sisters are compelled by circumstances to remove their veils for examination by male medical practitioners, leading to unnecessary embarrassment. In the realm of education, female students often experience intimidation and harassment from male teachers and lecturers within tertiary institutions. Hence, there is a strong call for more Muslim women to participate in these professions, addressing the specific needs of the community and contributing to positive change.

5. Government Intervention

In Muslim-majority societies, there is a need to consider government initiatives that establish institutions such as hospitals, colleges, and factories that are exclusively operated and managed by women. This approach seeks to create an environment where workplaces are staffed solely by women, thus minimizing inter-gender interactions. This not only aligns with Islamic principles of modesty but also offers women the opportunity to make meaningful contributions towards the advancement of the Ummah.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by contemporary Muslim women in Northern Nigeria are undeniably numerous, substantial, and multifaceted. They pervade both the spiritual and worldly dimensions of their lives, affecting women of all ages, statuses, and levels of education. However, these challenges are not insurmountable. While they present complex obstacles, this paper has successfully highlighted some of the most critical challenges and offered potential solutions. The intention is to inform not only Muslim women but also men about these issues. It's important to recognize that these challenges serve as tests and trials on the journey of righteousness, which believers must navigate with determination. Confronting these challenges and finding ways to overcome them is a means for individuals to reaffirm their unwavering commitment to their faith.

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