



RELIGION, TRADITION AND THE STATUS OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN MAMPRUGU, GHANA: GENDER, AGENCY, TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY AND SOCIOECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract:

This article examines the status of Muslim women in Mamprugu, Ghana, through the interconnected dimensions of religion, tradition, gender, political authority, economic life, and community development. Mamprugu provides an important context because Islamic practices coexist with a resilient traditional political system centred on the Nayiri, while women navigate expectations within families, religious institutions, markets, agriculture, and traditional governance. Using a qualitative, interpretive documentary-review approach, the article synthesises Mamprugu-focused materials with scholarly literature on Muslim women, gender relations, customary authority, education, land access, economic empowerment, traditional leadership, and community development. The analysis reveals a central paradox: although Muslim women face structural disadvantages, they exercise meaningful agency through Queen Mother institutions, Magaziya and other leadership roles, religious organisations, agriculture, trading, informal enterprises, education, peacebuilding, and community mobilisation. Women's status is therefore shaped not by Islam or tradition alone, but by their interaction with religious interpretations, customary practices, patriarchal authority, socioeconomic resources, and women's strategies of negotiation. The article highlights challenges involving land, credit, education, marriage, widowhood, political participation, and witchcraft accusations. It concludes that culturally grounded empowerment should distinguish Islamic principles from patriarchal customs while strengthening education, productive resources, decision-making, female leadership, and Muslim women's organisations.

Keywords: Muslim women; Mamprugu; gender; tradition; women's empowerment

1. Introduction

The status of women in African societies is neither fixed nor adequately explained by a single institutional factor. Women's everyday opportunities are shaped by the interaction of religion, kinship, customary authority, political institutions, markets, education, household arrangements and access to productive resources. In Muslim communities in northern Ghana, these influences are particularly significant because Islamic norms are interpreted within social environments in which older customary institutions continue to organise authority and community life. The resulting experience is often ambivalent: the same social setting can provide women with recognised leadership positions and collective organisations while also limiting their access to land, education, credit, political decision-making and household resources.

Mamprugu is especially useful for examining this complexity. The traditional territory associated with the Nayiri has historically been an important centre of Mamprusi political organisation, and the contemporary district environment remains characterised by strong traditional institutions, ethnic diversity and predominantly

Muslim religious practice. Current district information identifies the Chief, elders and functionaries, including the Mangazia, or women's leader, as components of local traditional governance, demonstrating that women's authority is institutionally visible even within a hierarchical political order. The coexistence of Islamic practice and traditional authority therefore provides an important setting for analysing how gender is negotiated rather than simply imposed. The historical literature also shows that Mamprugu's political order has undergone changes in the relationship between chiefs, subjects and competing claims to authority (Tonah, 2005).

The supplied study material presents Muslim women as occupying a contradictory social position. Women are described as experiencing restrictions in education, land access, credit, political participation, marriage, widowhood and economic decision-making, yet they also appear as Queen Mothers, Magaziyas, Sarrah Naas, traders, farmers, educators, counsellors, community organisers and peacebuilders. Muslim women's organisations associated with different Islamic traditions similarly participate in education, health, agriculture, sanitation, skills development and community mobilisation. This combination of constraint and agency is analytically important because it challenges representations of Muslim women as either passive victims of patriarchy or completely empowered actors.

The problem, therefore, is not simply whether Islam improves or worsens women's status. Such a binary formulation obscures the processes through which religious teachings, customary expectations and patriarchal interpretations become embedded in everyday practice. Scholarship on Muslim women has long cautioned against treating Muslim women as a homogeneous category whose lives can be reduced to doctrinal prescriptions (El-Solh & Mabro, 2020). Research on Muslim female youth in Ghana likewise demonstrates that gendered identities are negotiated through intersecting religious, national and social identities rather than determined by religion alone (Fielmua & Wumbei, 2021).

The issue is also socioeconomic. In northern Ghana, women's access to land, financial services and household decision-making remains closely tied to customary institutions and gendered expectations. Recent research finds that gendered land access produces consequences for poverty reduction, food security and women's empowerment (N-yanbini & Owusu-Ansah, 2024), while research on changing land-tenure arrangements in Ghana shows that women continue to face discrimination in access to secure agricultural land (Addaney et al., 2022). Evidence from the northern shea economy further indicates that financial inclusion can enhance several dimensions of women's empowerment (Kodom et al., 2024). These findings make it necessary to interpret women's status not merely as a cultural issue but as a question of resources, capabilities and institutional power.

The political dimension is equally important. Ghanaian women remain underrepresented in formal political institutions, although their roles within traditional governance can be substantial. Recent Ghanaian scholarship demonstrates that Queen

Mothers can undertake community development activities beyond ceremonial responsibilities, even while facing financial constraints and gender biases (Otoo et al., 2025). Evidence from northern Ghana also shows that women's traditional leadership can contribute to community welfare, cultural preservation and development (Konzabre & Zuure, 2026). The Mamprugu case therefore provides an opportunity to explore a form of political agency that is sometimes overlooked when women's representation is measured only through elected office.

This article addresses a gap in the literature by bringing these strands together in a focused analysis of Muslim women in Mamprugu. While there is scholarship on Mamprugu political history, northern Ghanaian gender relations, Muslim women's identities, women's land access and traditional leadership, these literatures are rarely integrated into one account of women's status in Mamprugu. The article consequently asks: How do religion and tradition interact in shaping the status of Muslim women in Mamprugu? What forms of agency do women exercise within traditional, religious and economic institutions? Which structural constraints continue to limit their empowerment? And what culturally grounded interventions could strengthen women's capabilities without dismissing the positive social functions of religion and traditional authority?

The article makes three contributions. First, it rejects the tendency to treat religion and culture as mutually exclusive explanations of gender inequality. Second, it places women's agency alongside structural constraint, thereby avoiding both romanticisation and victimisation. Third, it links gender justice to community development by showing that education, secure land access, financial inclusion, leadership and women's collective action are not separate issues but mutually reinforcing dimensions of social transformation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Religion, Gender and Muslim Women

The literature on Muslim women increasingly recognises the diversity of women's experiences and the importance of context. El-Solh and Mabro (2020) argue that Muslim women's lives cannot be adequately understood through a universal image of Muslim womanhood because women interpret, negotiate and sometimes contest religious and cultural expectations in different settings. This perspective is particularly relevant to Mamprugu, where the supplied material shows that practices presented as religious may also reflect customary or patriarchal interpretations.

The distinction between religious principle and social practice should nevertheless be made carefully. It would be misleading to assume that all restrictions on women are purely cultural, just as it would be misleading to attribute every patriarchal practice to Islam. Religious institutions are themselves sites of interpretation and contestation. Muslim women may use religious education, associations and leadership roles to expand

their participation in public life. Ghanaian evidence on Muslim female youth shows that religious identity can coexist with aspirations for education, citizenship and participation in modern institutions (Fielmua & Wumbei, 2021).

The question is therefore not whether religion is an obstacle or an instrument of empowerment in the abstract. It is how religious authority is interpreted, who possesses interpretive power, and how those interpretations interact with customary norms and material conditions. This approach is consistent with capability-oriented thinking, which treats freedom as the real opportunity people have to achieve valued forms of living rather than simply the formal absence of legal restrictions (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000).

2.2 Tradition, Chieftaincy and Women's Authority

Traditional authority remains consequential in Ghanaian community life. Tonah's (2005) study of Mamprugu shows that chieftaincy continues to matter even amid disputes and transformations in the authority of traditional rulers. More recent evidence from Mamprugu Moagduri identifies a structured traditional system in which the Mangazia occupies an established position among community functionaries. This provides important context for interpreting women's leadership as part of, rather than external to, traditional governance.

The institution of Queen Mothers offers a broader Ghanaian comparison. Research shows that Queen Mothers can participate in community planning and development, mobilise women, support social welfare and provide counsel to male traditional leaders. Otoo et al. (2025) find that contemporary Queen Mothers undertake development initiatives beyond traditional responsibilities, although financial limitations and gender biases can restrict their effectiveness. Konzabre and Zuure (2026) similarly show that women traditional leaders in northern Ghana can be recognised for protecting women and children, supporting cultural development and contributing to community welfare. These findings complicate conventional assumptions about patriarchy. Patriarchal structures can coexist with recognised female authority. The relevant analytical question is consequently not whether women have authority, but what kind of authority they possess, over which resources, within which institutional boundaries, and with what consequences for women's everyday lives.

2.3 Women's Economic Empowerment, Land and Financial Inclusion

Economic resources are central to women's bargaining power. Women may participate extensively in agriculture and trade while remaining dependent on men for access to land, capital or major productive assets. In Ghana, Addaney et al. (2022) demonstrate that changing land-tenure arrangements have not eliminated gender discrimination in agricultural land access. N-yanbini and Owusu-Ansah (2024), focusing on northern Ghana, further show that precarious land access has consequences for poverty, food security and women's empowerment.

Land is particularly important in Mamprugu because agriculture and natural-resource-based livelihoods are central to rural household survival. Where women provide labour but lack secure control over land or perennial resources, their contribution can remain economically undervalued. This produces a structural paradox: women may be indispensable to production without possessing equivalent power over the assets that make production possible.

Financial inclusion provides a second pathway to empowerment. Kodom et al. (2024) find that access to and use of financial services among rural women in the northern Ghanaian shea value chain are positively associated with several dimensions of empowerment. Local evidence from the West and East Mamprusi areas similarly shows that Village Savings and Loans Associations have been used to support women's businesses, agriculture and household resilience. These developments suggest that women's empowerment should not be framed simply as giving women jobs; it involves strengthening their control over income, assets, savings, credit and decisions.

Women's unpaid care responsibilities must also be considered. UN Women (2024) emphasises that gender-responsive social protection is important because women continue to carry disproportionate unpaid care burdens. In Ghana, women and girls spend substantially more time than men on unpaid care and domestic work (UN Women, 2024). Such burdens are relevant to the Mamprugu context because domestic expectations can reduce the time available for education, enterprise, political participation and leadership.

2.4 Education and Gendered Opportunity

Education is one of the strongest predictors of women's socioeconomic mobility. The supplied Mamprugu material identifies early marriage, domestic labour, farming responsibilities and perceptions that girls' education is less important as barriers to female educational advancement. These constraints should be understood within wider regional inequalities. Ghana Statistical Service (2021) reports substantial regional differences in literacy, with female literacy lagging especially in less advantaged regions. Education also changes the relationship between women and institutions. Literate women are more likely to understand formal procedures, access information, engage with financial services and claim legal rights. Education may therefore increase women's ability to negotiate within both traditional and formal institutions rather than simply preparing them for formal employment.

The importance of education is also evident in contemporary Muslim women's advocacy in Ghana. Muslim women's leaders have publicly emphasised the need for girls to remain in school before marriage, reflecting an emerging religiously grounded discourse that links education with women's dignity and social contribution. Such developments reinforce the article's argument that religion can be a platform for empowerment when interpreted through education, welfare and justice rather than restrictive gender stereotypes.

2.5 Marriage, Widowhood and Household Relations

Marriage is a major institution through which gender expectations are reproduced. In Mamprugu, the supplied material identifies expectations surrounding domestic labour, childbearing, obedience, polygyny and household responsibilities. These practices cannot be evaluated adequately without distinguishing formal religious permissions from lived consequences. Pesando (2020) cautions against simplistic assumptions about the relationship between polygyny and women's status, while Naqvi (2023) demonstrates the continuing importance of law and social context in understanding polygamous family arrangements.

Widowhood deserves particular attention because the death of a husband can alter women's access to property, protection and social status. The vulnerability of widows is documented across different settings, and recent research on women's economic welfare and widowhood highlights the importance of social and economic resources in determining post-widowhood wellbeing (Begum et al., 2024; Mir et al., 2023). In the Mamprugu context, widowhood can also intersect with accusations of witchcraft, increasing the risk of exclusion and violence.

2.6 Witchcraft Accusations and Gendered Vulnerability

Witchcraft accusations represent one of the most severe manifestations of gendered vulnerability in northern Ghana. The supplied material notes that widows and other socially vulnerable women can be blamed for deaths and misfortunes. Recent empirical research at the Gambaga witches' camp documents psychological distress, social isolation, loss of dignity, trauma and inadequate living conditions among older women accused of witchcraft (Yakubu et al., 2024). CHRAJ (2024) likewise describes witchcraft accusations as a women's rights concern involving ridicule, assault, banishment and stigma.

The significance for the present article is twofold. First, accusations reveal the consequences of having limited social power. Second, they demonstrate why women's status cannot be understood solely in terms of formal religious doctrine. A woman may live within a predominantly Muslim environment while experiencing harmful treatment that is mediated through customary beliefs, local authority structures and socioeconomic insecurity. This is precisely why an intersectional approach is necessary.

2.7 Collective Organisation, Peacebuilding and Agency

Women's organisations are important because individual empowerment can be difficult where structural constraints are strong. Collective action can provide access to information, savings, training, political voice and social support. Research on women's cooperatives in northern Ghana shows that women organise collectively to pursue welfare, advocacy, recognition and economic security (Arthur-Holmes & Mengba, 2024). Similar principles are visible in Muslim women's organisations described in the supplied Mamprugu material.

Women's collective agency also extends to peacebuilding. Traditional female leaders can mediate disputes and mobilise women, while religious women's organisations can provide counselling and community education. Recent evidence from Mamprugu itself reports Queen Mothers participating in peacebuilding discussions aimed at strengthening unity and stability within the kingdom. Such roles suggest that women's empowerment has consequences beyond individual welfare: it can strengthen community resilience and social cohesion.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

3.1 Intersectionality

The principal theoretical lens is intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989) introduced intersectionality as a way of understanding how systems of power can overlap to create experiences that cannot be explained through a single category. Applied to Mamprugu, women's experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by religion, age, marital status, socioeconomic position, lineage, locality and access to authority.

Intersectionality helps explain why Muslim women do not experience patriarchy uniformly. A wealthy trader, a Queen Mother, an elderly widow, a young student and a land-poor farmer may all be women but occupy very different positions within community structures. Similarly, a woman who is both economically dependent and socially isolated may face constraints that a woman with strong family networks does not. The framework therefore directs attention to differentiated experiences rather than a single category of "Muslim women."

3.2 Capability Approach

Sen's (1999) capability approach complements intersectionality by shifting attention from formal rights to substantive opportunities. A woman may formally possess the right to education, property or political participation while lacking the economic resources, social support or institutional access necessary to exercise that right. Nussbaum (2000) similarly emphasises central human capabilities such as bodily integrity, practical reason, affiliation and control over one's environment.

The capability approach is particularly useful for interpreting the Mamprugu evidence. Women's empowerment is not achieved merely by declaring them equal. It requires practical access to education, secure livelihoods, land, finance, healthcare, leadership opportunities and freedom from violence. This perspective also explains why women's organisations and Queen Mother institutions matter: they can expand women's effective capabilities even when formal structures remain male-dominated.

3.3 Gender and Development

A gender-and-development perspective is used to connect women's personal experiences to broader institutions of power. Kabeer (1999) conceptualises empowerment in relation

to resources, agency and achievements. This framework is especially suitable because the Mamprugu evidence repeatedly demonstrates that women's agency is shaped by resource access. Women can trade, farm, organise and lead, but the scale and sustainability of these activities depend on land, credit, education, social recognition and decision-making power.

Together, intersectionality, the capability approach and gender-and-development thinking provide a framework for understanding the article's central argument: women's status is produced through the interaction of identities, resources, institutional power and agency.

4. Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, interpretive and critical documentary-review design. It is not presented as a new household survey or interview study. Instead, it systematically reworks and critically interprets the supplied Mamprugu-focused study material and places its claims in conversation with relevant scholarly, institutional and policy literature. This distinction is important because the available source material contains rich contextual descriptions of women's roles but does not provide a sufficiently documented sampling frame, interview protocol, participant count or fieldwork chronology to justify presenting the article as a new empirical survey.

The review was guided by four analytical questions: how religion and tradition shape women's status; how women exercise agency; what structural constraints limit empowerment; and what institutional responses could strengthen women's capabilities. Sources were selected for relevance to Mamprugu, northern Ghana, Muslim women, gender and development, customary authority, land, education, financial inclusion, traditional leadership and gender-based violence. Priority was given to peer-reviewed scholarship, established academic books, official Ghanaian statistical and legal sources, and recent reports from recognised international institutions.

The analysis followed an interpretive thematic process. First, the supplied paper was read for its substantive claims and recurring concepts. Second, these concepts were grouped into themes including traditional authority, religious interpretation, education, marriage, widowhood, economic life, land, collective organisation, peacebuilding and witchcraft accusations. Third, each theme was compared with recent scholarship and institutional evidence. Fourth, areas where the supplied material made claims broader than the available evidence were reframed cautiously. Finally, the themes were synthesised through the theoretical framework.

Because the article is documentary rather than interview-based, conventional claims of interview saturation are not appropriate. Trustworthiness was instead pursued through source triangulation, conceptual consistency, explicit distinction between source-derived claims and analytical interpretation, and preference for recent verifiable evidence. Where local Mamprugu-specific evidence was unavailable, the article draws

cautiously on northern Ghana or Ghana-wide research and identifies the geographical limitation.

Ethically, the article does not expose identifiable participants or reproduce private personal information. It is based on the supplied scholarly material and publicly accessible sources. The article therefore treats ethical responsibility primarily as accurate representation, appropriate attribution and avoidance of unsupported generalisation. This methodological transparency is particularly important for a journal article because it prevents contextual observations from being presented as statistically representative findings.

5. Results/Findings

5.1 A Paradoxical Status: Constraint Alongside Agency

The strongest finding is the coexistence of structural constraint and meaningful agency. Muslim women in Mamprugu are not simply marginalised, nor are they fully empowered. Their social position is better described as negotiated agency within unequal institutions. Women contribute to agriculture, trade, household welfare, religious organisations and community governance while still experiencing unequal access to resources and formal decision-making.

This finding corresponds with Kabeer's (1999) emphasis on the relationship between resources, agency and achievements. It also reflects the intersectional character of women's experiences: authority and vulnerability can coexist in the same person. A Queen Mother may possess social influence but lack direct control over public resources; a successful trader may generate income while carrying heavy unpaid care responsibilities; a widow may possess recognised religious identity but face insecurity over property.

5.2 Traditional Leadership Provides Recognised but Bounded Authority

Women's leadership is visible in institutions such as Queen Mothers, Magaziyas and Sarrah Naas. These roles provide culturally legitimate platforms for advising chiefs, mobilising women, supporting children, mediating disputes and organising community development. The current institutional description of Mamprugu Moagduri identifies the Mangazia among the recognised functionaries of traditional governance, supporting the supplied paper's emphasis on female authority.

Yet this authority is bounded. Women may be invited to participate in issues concerning women and children without possessing equivalent authority over the full range of political decisions. The result is a form of gendered inclusion: women are recognised as leaders, but often within defined social domains. This finding parallels wider Ghanaian evidence that Queen Mothers contribute substantially to community development while facing institutional and financial constraints (Otoo et al., 2025).

5.3 Religious Identity is Not Synonymous with Gender Subordination

The analysis indicates that Islam functions in two ways. First, religious interpretations can be used to legitimise conservative expectations concerning marriage, domestic roles and leadership. Second, Islamic organisations and female religious leaders can provide spaces for education, welfare, economic activity and collective agency.

The implication is that religion should be analysed as a field of interpretation rather than a single causal variable. This is consistent with El-Solh and Mabro (2020) and with research on Muslim female identities in Ghana (Fielmua & Wumbei, 2021). The practical significance is considerable: gender interventions that frame Islam as the problem may undermine their own legitimacy, whereas partnerships with Muslim scholars and women's organisations can use religious resources to support empowerment.

5.4 Education Remains a Decisive Dividing Line

Educational opportunity emerges as one of the strongest mechanisms shaping women's life chances. Girls' domestic responsibilities, early marriage, poverty and social expectations can restrict educational participation. The consequences are cumulative: limited education reduces access to formal employment, financial services, legal information and political participation.

The finding is supported by Ghana Statistical Service data showing substantial regional literacy inequalities and by the broader evidence linking education with women's empowerment. Education should therefore be understood not only as an individual benefit but as an institutional resource that changes women's bargaining position.

5.5 Land and Finance Constrain Economic Agency

Women participate extensively in agriculture and commerce, but their ability to turn labour into durable wealth is restricted by insecure land access and limited capital. Recent northern Ghana research shows that women's land access remains gendered and that these inequalities affect poverty, food security and empowerment (N-yanbini & Owusu-Ansah, 2024). Research on financial inclusion in the shea value chain further demonstrates that access to financial services can enhance women's empowerment (Kodom et al., 2024).

The Mamprugu evidence therefore points to an important distinction between participation and control. Women participate in economic activity, but empowerment requires stronger control over productive assets, income and decisions.

5.6 Women's Organisations Convert Social Networks into Development Resources

Muslim women's organisations are significant sites of collective agency. They provide religious education, health information, vocational training, agricultural support, sanitation activities, counselling and peacebuilding. Their importance lies not simply in

the services they provide but in the social capital they create. Collective organisation can reduce isolation, increase information, improve access to finance and create a platform for community advocacy.

This finding is consistent with research on informal women's cooperatives in northern Ghana, where collective action has been used to pursue welfare, advocacy, social recognition and economic security (Arthur-Holmes & Mengba, 2024).

5.7 Marriage and Widowhood Remain Important Sites of Vulnerability

Marriage practices and household expectations can constrain women's autonomy, particularly when combined with polygyny, unequal domestic labour and economic dependence. Widowhood can intensify vulnerability through loss of income, property insecurity and social suspicion. The supplied evidence also connects widowhood with witchcraft accusations, a pattern that has serious human-rights consequences.

Recent research on women in Ghanaian witches' camps demonstrates that accusations and displacement can produce trauma, anxiety, loneliness, loss of dignity and inadequate access to basic services (Yakubu et al., 2024). Thus, widowhood and witchcraft accusations should not be treated as isolated cultural issues; they can become mechanisms through which social and economic vulnerability compounds.

5.8 Women Contribute to Peacebuilding and Community Resilience

Women's community roles extend beyond household production. Queen Mothers, Magaziyas and religious women's groups can mediate disputes, counsel families, mobilise communities and promote social cohesion. This is especially important in a socially diverse environment where traditional, religious and modern institutions overlap.

Recent evidence from the Mamprugu Kingdom shows Queen Mothers participating in peacebuilding initiatives, while wider northern Ghana research demonstrates the developmental potential of women's traditional leadership. Women's participation in peacebuilding should therefore be regarded as a form of civic and political agency rather than merely an extension of domestic responsibility.

6. Discussion

The findings reinforce the argument that women's status in Mamprugu is relational rather than categorical. Religion, tradition and gender cannot be isolated from material resources and institutional authority. A woman's opportunities depend partly on how religious teachings are interpreted, but also on whether she possesses land, education, income, social networks and access to decision-making.

The first major implication concerns the danger of cultural reductionism. If every restriction on Muslim women is attributed to Islam, analysts risk overlooking customary practices and patriarchal power. Conversely, if tradition is treated as inherently

oppressive, the analysis misses the positive authority exercised by Queen Mothers, Magaziyas and other women leaders. The evidence instead points to a process of negotiation in which women work within institutions that are simultaneously enabling and constraining.

The intersectional framework explains why these contradictions are not anomalies. Gender intersects with age, marital status, class, lineage, religion and economic position. The elderly widow who lacks land and family support occupies a fundamentally different position from a Queen Mother with social authority. Crenshaw's (1989) insight is therefore particularly useful: categories of disadvantage become meaningful through their interaction.

The capability approach further clarifies why formal equality is insufficient. A woman may have a formal right to education but be unable to attend school because she must perform unpaid care work. She may have a formal right to property but lack social authority to claim land. She may participate in trade but remain unable to expand her business because she cannot access credit. Empowerment consequently requires the conversion of formal rights into real opportunities (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000).

The findings on land are particularly important. Addaney et al. (2022) and Nyanbini and Owusu-Ansah (2024) show that gendered land access remains a persistent issue in Ghana. In an agricultural setting such as Mamprugu, insecure access to land can reproduce poverty even when women work extensively in farming. This suggests that agricultural interventions that provide inputs without addressing land rights may improve productivity without substantially altering women's bargaining power.

Financial inclusion presents a more promising pathway. Kodom et al. (2024) show that access to financial services can improve women's empowerment in northern Ghana's shea value chain. Community savings schemes similarly demonstrate that women can use collective finance to build businesses and support household welfare. Such mechanisms are valuable because they build on women's existing social networks rather than requiring them to enter institutions that may be difficult to access.

The findings on traditional leadership also deserve careful interpretation. Women's positions as Queen Mothers and Magaziyas demonstrate that traditional governance is not exclusively male. Yet recognition does not automatically mean equal authority. Otoo et al. (2025) show that Queen Mothers can undertake significant development activities while facing gender bias and financial limitations. This distinction between recognised leadership and effective institutional power should remain central to future research.

The role of religion is similarly ambivalent. Religious institutions can reproduce gender hierarchies, but they can also provide education, welfare and organisational resources. The most productive policy approach is therefore not to displace religious institutions but to engage them. Muslim women's organisations can become partners in girls' education, family counselling, health promotion, entrepreneurship and

peacebuilding. This is more likely to produce sustainable change because it works through locally meaningful institutions.

The findings on education support the capability perspective. Education expands women's access to information, employment and political participation, but it also changes expectations within families and communities. Where girls remain in school longer, the timing of marriage can change, economic opportunities can expand and women's capacity to engage with formal institutions can improve.

The issue of witchcraft accusations reveals the harshest consequences of unequal power. CHRAJ (2024) and Yakubu et al. (2024) demonstrate that accusations can lead to banishment, violence, psychological distress and loss of dignity. The persistence of such accusations demonstrates that legal prohibition alone is insufficient. The state must combine enforcement with social protection, community education and support for women leaders and religious authorities who can challenge harmful interpretations.

The findings therefore suggest a broader conception of empowerment. Women's empowerment in Mamprugu should not mean replacing traditional institutions with external models of governance. It should mean increasing women's effective voice, access to resources and freedom of choice within a transformed institutional environment. This approach allows positive elements of tradition and religious solidarity to remain while addressing practices that produce inequality or harm.

7. Implications

7.1 Theoretical Implications

The article demonstrates the value of combining intersectionality, the capability approach and gender-and-development theory. No single framework adequately captures the Mamprugu case. Intersectionality explains differentiated vulnerability; capabilities explain the importance of substantive opportunity; and gender-and-development theory connects resources and agency to institutional power.

7.2 Implications for Islamic Education and Religious Leadership

Muslim scholars and leaders should strengthen accessible education on women's rights, inheritance, property, family responsibilities and social justice. Religious education should also distinguish clearly between Islamic principles and customary practices that have acquired religious legitimacy through repetition. Women should be encouraged to participate as teachers, counsellors and organisers within Muslim institutions.

7.3 Implications for Traditional Governance

Traditional authorities should recognise women not merely as representatives of women's interests but as partners in community governance. Queen Mothers and Magaziyas should have defined opportunities to contribute to local development planning, dispute resolution and social protection. Contemporary Ghanaian policy now

provides a stronger national context for this agenda through the Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act, 2024 (Act 1121).

7.4 Economic Implications

Development programmes should combine skills training with access to finance, land, markets and technology. Evidence from northern Ghana suggests that financial inclusion can strengthen empowerment, but credit alone is insufficient when women lack secure productive assets. Community savings groups, digital finance and women-focused agricultural value chains should therefore be linked with land-rights support.

7.5 Educational Implications

Girls' education should be approached as a community development strategy. Interventions should address school retention, domestic labour, early marriage and the opportunity costs of girls' schooling. Muslim and traditional leaders can play a particularly important role in reshaping community expectations.

7.6 Human-rights Implications

Harmful widowhood practices, gender-based violence, forced exclusion and witchcraft accusations require coordinated legal and community responses. Ghana's Domestic Violence Act, 2007 (Act 732) already provides a legal basis for protection against physical, economic, emotional and other forms of domestic abuse. The challenge is therefore implementation, awareness and access to justice.

7.7 Community-development Implications

Women should be treated as development actors rather than beneficiaries alone. Their organisations already contribute to sanitation, health, education, agriculture and peacebuilding. Supporting these institutions can produce locally legitimate pathways to development while strengthening women's collective voice.

8. Conclusion

This article has argued that the status of Muslim women in Mamprugu is best understood as a negotiated condition produced through the interaction of religion, tradition, gender, resources, authority and women's agency. The evidence does not support a simple conclusion that either Islam or Mamprugu tradition determines women's status. Instead, women's experiences emerge from the ways religious teachings are interpreted, customary practices are maintained or challenged, and socioeconomic resources are distributed.

The Mamprugu case reveals a central paradox. Women can be structurally disadvantaged while exercising meaningful leadership. They may face unequal access to land, credit, education and political authority while simultaneously serving as Queen

Mothers, Magaziyas, farmers, traders, educators, counsellors and peacebuilders. This paradox is not a contradiction to be eliminated from the analysis; it is the defining feature of women's social position.

The article therefore concludes that women's empowerment requires more than formal equality. It requires substantive capabilities: education, secure access to land, financial inclusion, freedom from violence, meaningful participation in decision-making, health services and social protection. It also requires institutional transformation. Traditional authorities and religious organisations should be treated as potential partners in reform, while women should be supported to exercise authority within and beyond these institutions.

The most sustainable pathway is consequently one that is culturally grounded but rights-based. Positive aspects of traditional leadership and religious solidarity should be retained, while practices that restrict women's dignity, opportunities or security should be critically reformed. Empowering Muslim women in Mamprugu is not merely a gender-equity objective. It is central to stronger families, resilient livelihoods, inclusive governance, peaceful communities and sustainable development.

9. Recommendations and Future Research

9.1 Recommendations

- Strengthen girls' education. District authorities, schools, Muslim organisations and traditional leaders should establish locally appropriate retention strategies addressing domestic labour, early marriage and school dropout.
- Improve women's access to land. Customary land institutions should develop transparent procedures for women's access, documentation and long-term security, consistent with Ghana's land governance reforms and gender-equity objectives.
- Expand women's financial inclusion. Savings groups, mobile-money services, affordable credit and financial literacy should be integrated into women's agricultural and trading activities.
- Institutionalise women's participation in traditional governance. Queen Mothers, Magaziyas and other recognised women leaders should be included systematically in local development planning and community decision-making.
- Support Muslim women's organisations. Government and development partners should strengthen existing women's organisations rather than creating parallel structures that may have weaker local legitimacy.
- Promote religious literacy on gender justice. Islamic education programmes should address women's rights, inheritance, education, economic participation, family welfare and the ethical prohibition of abuse.
- Address harmful widowhood practices. Community dialogues involving religious scholars, traditional authorities, women leaders and health professionals

should distinguish legitimate mourning practices from practices that expose widows to humiliation or insecurity.

- Strengthen responses to witchcraft accusations. Local authorities, police, religious leaders, Queen Mothers and social welfare agencies should develop rapid community responses to allegations that place women at risk of violence or forced exile.
- Reduce unpaid care burdens. Community development initiatives should recognise unpaid domestic labour and encourage household-level redistribution of care responsibilities.
- Link women's economic programmes to markets. Skills training should be combined with entrepreneurship support, market access, technology, storage, value addition and financial services.

9.2 Future Research

Future research should undertake primary qualitative studies involving Muslim women from different age, marital, occupational and leadership categories across Mamprugu. Comparative studies between West Mamprusi, East Mamprusi and Mamprugu Moagduri could clarify how local institutional differences shape women's experiences. Further research should also examine the actual decision-making powers of Queen Mothers and Magaziyas, women's experiences of customary land allocation, the role of Muslim women's organisations in peacebuilding, and the relationship between religious education and women's economic empowerment. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for assessing whether recent legal and policy developments, including Ghana's Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act, 2024, produce measurable changes in women's participation and resource access.

Ethics Statement

This article is a documentary and critical review based on the supplied scholarly material and publicly accessible sources. It does not report new interviews or experiments involving human participants.

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The authors are collectively responsible for the conceptualisation, literature synthesis, analysis, interpretation and preparation of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no known conflict of interest.

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