"Exploring the Spiritual Puzzle of Silence": Religion and the Construction of Gender Inequality in Tanzania

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Abstract

This article explores how religion shapes gender inequality in Tanzanian society. Although scholarship on women and religion has expanded globally, African feminist engagement remains limited, partly due to the sensitive nature of critiquing religion in deeply religious societies. Drawing on ten years of classroom observations at the University of Dar es Salaam, I identify a persistent reluctance among students to question religion's influence on gender inequality, calling this the "spiritual puzzle of silence." Despite Tanzania's legal and policy commitments to gender equality, patriarchal norms persist within religious and cultural life, shaping attitudes in both private and public spheres. The article highlights factors reinforcing silence such as the sanctity of religious knowledge, patriarchal religious institutions, fear of conflict, the divide between scientific and divine knowledge, and parental authority over religious identity. These factors normalize silence around religion's role in gendered socialization. While Tanzanian feminist movements have advanced socioeconomic and political rights, they largely avoid religion due to its sensitivity. The article calls for more nuanced, critical engagement and open dialogue to address how religion perpetuates gender inequality in Tanzania.

Keywords

Gender inequality, religion, gender construction, women and religion, Tanzania

1   Introduction

Interest in the "women and religion" theme has evolved considerably across different eras and regions. In the 1960s and 1970s, a significant number of European and North American female researchers—primarily from sociology, history of religions, and feminist studies—began examining female religious experiences, frequently from an internal feminist perspective within mainstream religious traditions (Giorgi 2016: 52). Since

the late 1990s, this theme has gained increasing traction in European academia, reflecting a broader surge of interest among non-specialist scholars in the role and significance of religion within contemporary societies (Beckford 1996; 2000).

The growing scholarly attention has also highlighted the importance of women's experiences and roles within various religious traditions, particularly when compared to non-Christian contexts (Giorgi 2016). However, the discourse on "women and religion" remains underdeveloped in Africa. Feminist scholars in the region have yet to fully engage with this area, and research efforts have primarily focused on how religion can promote gender equality, often resulting in a one-sided analysis. This limited engagement is partly attributable to the deeply religious character of African societies, where religion is central to social identity and life. Consequently, religion in African scholarship is often discussed in relation to development, peace, and conflict, rather than as a factor shaping gender dynamics.

Religion, more than any other social cleavage, is deeply embedded in people's lived experiences and significantly influences the socioeconomic and political trajectories of societies (Stump, 2008; Peach, 2006). In Tanzania, religion is described as "pervasive, useful and seemingly powerful" (Mukandala 2006:1), and the society is widely acknowledged as deeply religious (Makulilo 2019; Kelsall 2005; Ukah 2019; Chabal 2009). Religious identities are leveraged for spiritual, material, and political purposes (Glickman 2011). To this day, religion remains one of the most influential agents of socialization, its impact varying across time and place.

It is, therefore, reasonable to argue that the status of women in society is shaped by interpretations of religious texts and the cultural and institutional structures of religious communities (Klingorová and Havlíček, 2015). Gender scholarship has established a correlation between religion and gender (Hopkins, 2009; Seguino, 2011; Moghadam, 1991; Chaudhuri, 2013). One strand of this literature asserts that religion can promote gender equality, while another contends that gender inequality often results from religious doctrines and practices (Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Klingorová and Havlíček 2015; Page and Yip 2017). Gender roles are thus constructed through the combined influences of religion, culture, lifestyle, and upbringing (King, 1995).

This article investigates the "spiritual puzzle of silence" surrounding religion and gender inequality in Tanzania. Specifically, it interrogates the lack of academic engagement with religion as a powerful agent of gender socialization in the country. To address this topic, the article is organized into six main sections: introduction, situation analysis of gender inequality,

methodology, explanations for the spiritual puzzle of silence, deconstructing the puzzle, and conclusion.

2   Gender Inequality in Tanzania: An Overview

Tanzania has demonstrated a strong commitment to addressing gender inequality across all areas of women's lives. As a signatory to numerous international instruments, the country is legally bound to uphold standards of equity and to implement non-discriminatory policies and practices. As a member of the United Nations, Tanzania is obligated to adhere to the principles of equality enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Bill of Rights, both of which prohibit discrimination based on race, gender, and ethnicity. Furthermore, Tanzania is a party to key regional and international agreements, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (2001), the New Partnership for African Development (2001), the African Peer Review Mechanism (2003), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003), the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008), and the Constitutive Act of the African Union (2000), among others.

Gender equality is also integrated into national frameworks: it is a core component of the National Five-Year Development Plan (2021/22-2025/26), and is articulated in the Tanzania Development Vision 2050, which emphasizes the nation's ongoing commitment to promoting gender equality in social, economic, and political spheres. The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania (1977) sets out provisions for the full and equal participation of women and men in all areas of life. Specifically, Article 9(g) mandates that the government and its agencies provide equal opportunities to all citizens regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, or social status. This constitutional principle is further reinforced by Article 12, which affirms that all human beings are born free and equal, and Article 21, which guarantees every citizen the right to participate in the governance of the country, either directly or through elected representatives.

Despite these robust legal and policy frameworks, gender inequality persists in various aspects of Tanzanian society (Oppong, M. Yaa Pokua Afriyie et.al. 2022; NBS 2021). For women to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes, the principles of equality and non-discrimination must be enshrined in the nation's constitution, including measures to challenge discriminatory traditions and customs. In Tanzania, customs, traditions, and public attitudes continue to influence not only the

number of women considered and nominated for political office, but also the number who ultimately succeed in elections. During the 2011–2014 constitution-making process, women repeatedly advocated for explicit prohibitions against discriminatory customs and traditions, recognizing the longstanding barriers these pose to equitable participation, especially in decision-making arenas.

Constitutional guarantees of equality are typically accompanied by non-discrimination provisions that enumerate prohibited grounds for discrimination, such as gender. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has consistently urged state parties to incorporate the definition of 'discrimination against women'—as set out in Article 1 of CEDAW—into their constitutions. This article defines discrimination as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field."

Tanzania's 2014 Proposed Constitution reflects these international standards by incorporating critical elements of Article 1 of CEDAW in its definition of discrimination against women, as set forth in Article 33(5). Articles 12(a) and 33 of the Proposed Draft Constitution explicitly prohibit all forms of discrimination, including those based on sex. Additionally, Articles 8 and 14(b) require national authorities to ensure equal opportunities for women and men, without discrimination. These provisions collectively safeguard women's rights to political participation and protect against discriminatory traditions, customs, and beliefs that have historically excluded women from electoral and decision-making spaces.

Women's rights clauses within the constitution serve as powerful tools for advancing gender equality. In addition to general guarantees of equality and non-discrimination, constitutions should include explicit provisions dedicated to women's rights. Article 54 of the Tanzanian Proposed Constitution guarantees every woman the right to be respected, valued, and to have her dignity recognized; to protection against discrimination, harassment, abuse, violence, sexual violence, and harmful traditional practices; and to participate in elections and decision-making processes without discrimination. These specific provisions enable the adoption of active measures to uplift the status of women—socially, economically, and politically—thereby fostering meaningful gender equality and empowerment throughout society.

3. Methodology

This case study examines PS 342: Gender and Politics in Africa, an undergraduate course offered at the University of Dar es Salaam. I taught this course for nearly a decade, from 2008 to 2019, except for 2009 and 2010. Each academic year, the class typically enrolled between 100 and 150 students, with a gender composition of approximately 60% male and 40% female, reflecting broader societal patterns of gender imbalance.

The course provides a comprehensive overview of key topics at the intersection of politics and gender, analysing how political life and power dynamics are influenced by gender constructions. It specifically explores the social construction of femininity and masculinity across all domains of society and examines how these constructs shape individual mindsets and practices. The curriculum interrogates both historical and contemporary processes contributing to women's subordination and discrimination in African politics.

One of the central topics is "discrimination against women," which includes a subtopic on "religion and gender inequality." Core readings for this thematic area included Fatina Mernissi's "Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry" (1991) and Letty M. Russell's "Feminist Interpretation of the Bible" (1985). Students were assigned relevant chapters to facilitate informed class and seminar discussions.

Throughout the ten years, a consistent observation emerged: students were generally reluctant to critically engage with the topic of religion and gender inequality. Given the deeply religious context of Tanzania and the historical sensitivity surrounding religious issues, both Christian and Muslim students were hesitant to discuss how their respective faiths treat women in principle and practice. Instead, students often highlighted scriptural passages that suggest gender equality, thereby defending their faith traditions. I refer to this phenomenon as the "spiritual puzzle of silence."

Consequently, the primary data source for this study comprises classroom discussions and observations from PS 342 over the past decade. Additionally, the study draws on relevant documents, including reports, previous research, and legal texts. The interpretation of data from these sources employed qualitative methods to better understand how the "spiritual puzzle of silence" contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequality.

4 Explaining the Spiritual Puzzle of Silence

4.1 *Religion as a System of Holiness*

Religion is a complex and multifaceted concept, and scholars have long debated its precise definition. Despite these debates, one central characteristic found in most definitions is the idea of "holiness"—a quality that sets religious beliefs, practices, and objects apart as sacred or worthy of reverence.

At its core, religion can be understood as a belief system centred on the worship of a superhuman controlling power, often described as a personal God or a pantheon of gods. This worship is not merely an individual act of faith but forms the basis of an organized, socio-cultural system. Within this system, followers are guided by a set of behaviours, rituals, ethics, and moral codes that are believed to be divinely inspired or mandated by spiritual forces. These practices shape daily life and establish a framework of meaning and purpose for believers.

The sense of holiness in religion is deeply embedded in its teachings and traditions. Followers are often expected to accept the existence of God or gods, along with associated doctrines and rituals, without question. The authority of religious texts, spiritual leaders, and long-standing customs is rarely challenged because they are seen as originating from the divine. To question these teachings is not only considered a sign of doubt but may also be interpreted as an act of defiance against the divine itself, sometimes perceived as sinful or dangerous.

Insights from PS 342 classes provide a vivid illustration of how individuals are socialized into religious systems from an early age. Students spoke of being immersed in religious texts, stories, and rituals within their families and communities. This early socialization fosters a sense of awe and fear regarding the authority of God or gods. The internalization of religious values leads believers to view any deviation from prescribed teachings as morally wrong, often associated with the concept of sin. The idea of divine punishment—ranging from spiritual consequences to physical misfortune or even death—serves as a powerful deterrent against questioning or abandoning religious norms.

Thus, religion as a system of holiness functions not only as a set of beliefs but as a powerful mechanism for shaping behaviour, fostering group identity, and maintaining social order through its sacred, unquestionable authority.

4.2 The Embeddedness of Patriarchy in Religion

Patriarchal structures are deeply interwoven into the fabric of most world religions, shaping the social, cultural, and institutional frameworks in which religious communities operate (Young, 1987). Despite the fact that women often demonstrate greater participation and commitment to religious life (Renzetti & Curran, 1999), prevailing religious doctrines, norms, and practices continue to reflect and reinforce male dominance. These patriarchal values are not simply incidental but are characteristic features of religious societies across the globe (Seguino, 2011).

Often, the divine or the creative force at the heart of a religion is conceptualized as male. This is reflected in religious texts, iconography, and leadership structures, where male figures are privileged as spiritual authorities, prophets, and founders. Women, in contrast, are primarily valued for their roles as mothers and caregivers, with their influence largely confined to the private sphere of the household. Their participation in public religious ceremonies and leadership positions remains limited (Klingorová & Havlíček, 2015).

The marginalization of women's voices in religious discourse can be traced to the patriarchal contexts in which these religions originated and developed. As a result, women have historically had little influence on the formation of religious norms, rituals, and traditions. Nonetheless, there are noteworthy exceptions. In certain religious traditions and periods, women have succeeded in having their normative views recognized, and some male religious leaders have advocated for the greater inclusion of women in religious life (Page & Yip, 2017; Holm, 1994; Klingorová & Havlíček, 2015).

Contemporary research among young adults in the UK from diverse religious backgrounds reveals a nuanced engagement with the subject of gender equality and religion. These individuals navigate the tension between the ideal of gender equality and the reality of gendered religious practices. Despite varying perspectives and the inherent ambivalence in reconciling doctrine with contemporary values, participants commonly expressed a strong commitment to gender equality. They tended to interpret gender-unequal practices as distortions of their faith traditions and rejected the notion that religion is fundamentally incompatible with gender equality (Page & Yip, 2017).

In Tanzania, the patriarchal nature of society is pronounced, and this characteristic is deeply embedded in religious life. The intertwining of patriarchy and religion exerts a powerful influence on the socialization of both men and women, beginning in the family and extending into public life. The pervasive effect of this nexus is evident in educational settings as

well. For instance, in PS 342 classes, students often normalized male-dominated cultural patterns. Those who attempted to challenge or debate these patterns tended to selectively cite scriptural or doctrinal passages that support equality before God, rather than engaging in a comprehensive critique of patriarchal religious discourses, even when provided with relevant scholarly literature to facilitate deeper discussion.

4.3   Fear of Religious Violence

Tanzania is constitutionally established as a secular state. Article 19(1) of the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania affirms that "Every person has the right to the freedom of thought or conscience, belief or faith, and choice in matters of religion, including the freedom to change his religion or faith." Furthermore, Article 19(2) provides that, subject to relevant laws, "the profession of religion, worship and propagation of religion shall be free and a private affair of an individual; and the affairs and management of religious bodies shall not be part of the activities of the state authority."

Despite these constitutional guarantees, Section 129 of the Penal Code stipulates that "Any person who, with the deliberate intention of wounding the religious feelings of any person, utters any word, or makes any sound in the hearing of that person, or makes any gesture in the sight of that person, or places any object in the sight of that person, is guilty of a misdemeanour, and is liable to imprisonment for one year."

The relationship between Christianity and Islam in Tanzania has historically oscillated between cordiality and tension (Mesaki 2011; Ndaluka 2014; Makulilo 2019), making religious matters particularly sensitive. In recognition of this sensitivity, the government has refrained from including questions about religion in national censuses to prevent any group from using such data in ways that could disrupt national peace and stability.

Consequently, students have demonstrated caution when discussing their own or others' religious texts, teachings, and practices. There is an underlying concern that open discussions may inadvertently lead to discomfort or mobilization along religious lines, potentially threatening harmony. To safeguard peace and mutual respect, many students have therefore chosen to remain silent on religious matters.

4.4   The divide between divine and scientific knowledge

The foundations of scientific and divine knowledge are typically different. The former is premised on empiricism and experimentation. This kind of

knowledge is testable and verified empirically. In contrast, divine knowledge is God-centred. Most of its assumptions are God-given, and in most cases, they are unquestionable.

Scientific knowledge is grounded in observation, measurement, hypothesis formulation, and critical scrutiny. Scientists gather data, propose theories, and seek evidence to support or refute their claims. This process is open to revision and invites scepticism, allowing previous findings to be challenged or replaced as new evidence emerges. The pursuit of scientific knowledge is therefore dynamic, progressive, and open-ended.

On the other hand, divine knowledge is rooted in faith, revelation, and spiritual experience. It is often conveyed through sacred texts, traditions, and teachings of religious leaders. This form of knowledge is less concerned with empirical verification and more focused on spiritual truth and moral guidance. For adherents, divine knowledge offers certainty, purpose, and a framework for understanding existence that is grounded in the belief in a higher power. Such knowledge is typically accepted based on faith and is not subject to the same scrutiny or scepticism as scientific claims.

In the academic context of Tanzania, particularly during the mid-1960s to mid-1980s, Marxism was the dominant paradigm at the University of Dar es Salaam and other institutions of higher learning. This influence led researchers to shy away from religious themes, focusing instead on materialist and secular explanations. However, from the 2000s onward, religion has been increasingly included in discussions of development, peace, and security. Policymakers and researchers recognized the potential of religious institutions to promote these goals and thus welcomed their involvement in state-building projects.

Despite this growing recognition, the intersection of religion and gender has remained largely unexplored by feminist scholars, who have tended to treat these domains separately. In classroom discussions, students often expressed the view that religious matters should be left to religious leaders and their followers, reflecting a broader hesitation to integrate religious and gender concerns. This separation highlights ongoing challenges in bridging the gap between religious and feminist perspectives in academic and policy debates.

4.5   The Parent Effect

The place of parents in religion is central and special. Parents have to be respected and their guidance to children should be respected. In Islam, whether one is a kid, teen, or adult, he or she should never disrespect his or

her parents. Allah says in the Quran, "Do good to your parents. If any one of them or both of them reach old age, do not say to them *uff* and do not scold them, and address them with respectful words" (Q. 17:23). Similarly, in Christianity it is written "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord" (Colossians 3:20).

Parental influence in matters of faith extends beyond childhood and is embedded in the ongoing process of socialization. From a young age, children absorb religious values, rituals, and beliefs primarily through their parents' teachings and daily examples. As children grow into teenagers and adults, parents remain significant moral guides, shaping their children's understanding of right and wrong through religious teachings and personal conduct.

At the university level, this influence is both challenged and reinforced. While students encounter new ideas and increased independence, the foundational role of parents often persists. Many students continue to rely on their parents for emotional, financial, and spiritual support, which can enhance their sense of obligation to heed parental guidance, especially in matters concerning religion. This ongoing connection was observable in PS 342 classes and seminars, where students often referenced parental advice when discussing faith and religious practices.

Moreover, parents may express concern about the impact of higher education, particularly exposure to Western philosophies, on their children's religious beliefs. This anxiety can lead parents to reinforce religious values even more strongly, emphasizing obedience and respect for tradition. Children, still dependent on their parents for support and guidance, may feel an increased responsibility to comply with their parents' expectations regarding religious observance. In this way, the parental role remains a powerful and enduring force in shaping the religious identity and practices of young adults, even as they move toward greater independence.

5   Deconstructing the Spiritual Puzzle of Silence

When examining the intersection of women's rights, gender equality, and the deconstruction of traditional gender roles, religion is frequently perceived as a significant barrier. This perception is reinforced by the fact that many religious actors who participate in public debates often adopt strong positions against commonly recognized feminist issues and even question the very notion of gender itself (Giorgi 2016:52). This has led to the widespread belief that religion and feminism are inherently incompatible.

Despite these challenges, religious feminism emerged as a movement in the 1970s, aiming to reinterpret sacred texts and religious traditions in ways that advocate for gender equality. These efforts have sought to demonstrate that principles supporting women's rights and equality can be found within religious frameworks. However, the acceptance and legitimacy of these progressive interpretations have encountered significant obstacles. One major hindrance is the deeply ingrained and widely accepted traditional understanding of religious teachings among large segments of believers, which often resists change. Additionally, there is a shortage of women scholars who possess the necessary training and authority to engage in such reinterpretations. The few women who do occupy these scholarly roles are sometimes perceived as elitist, Western-influenced, or disconnected from the lived realities of ordinary women, further limiting their influence and reach (Tomalin 2011).

In the Tanzanian context, feminist movements that gained momentum in the 1980s—particularly in the wake of the Beijing Conference—primarily focused on addressing gender disparities in the socioeconomic and political arenas. These movements, however, have largely refrained from critically examining other influential agents of socialization, such as religion. This omission is partly due to the high sensitivity surrounding the topic of "women and religion," which makes it a particularly challenging area to research and address. Consequently, it is not surprising that most civil society organizations have avoided engaging with the complex issues at the intersection of religion and gender.

Nevertheless, education continues to be viewed as a crucial tool for empowerment and emancipation. The PS 342 course document has explicitly highlighted the persistent difficulties in transforming aspects of gender inequality. This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that Tanzanian society is profoundly religious, and patriarchal cultural norms remain deeply entrenched. As a result, the discourse on gender inequality within the context of religion has yet to gain prominence in Tanzania, and significant work remains to be done to bring these critical conversations to the fore.

6   Conclusion

This article aimed to critically examine the "spiritual puzzle of silence" observed among students at the University of Dar es Salaam who were enrolled in PS 342: Gender and Politics in Africa between 2008 and 2019. The central objective was to investigate the underlying reasons for students' reticence during discussions on the theme of "women and religions." Within gender studies literature, scholarly interest in the

intersection of "women and religions" is recognized as a relatively recent development, particularly in Europe and North America. One of the pioneering works to explicitly address religion from a gendered perspective is the volume "Religion and Gender," edited by Ursula King (1995). This collection brings together analyses of both women's and men's experiences and explores the construction of gendered subjectivities across various religious traditions, incorporating a range of theoretical insights and interdisciplinary empirical studies. In her introduction, King highlights that, although the 1970s and 1980s saw a proliferation of studies on women's religious experiences, the broader literature on religion still lacked both a focused examination of male experiences and a comprehensive gender perspective (Giorgi 2016:52).

In contrast, the "women and religions" theme is yet to be fully established as a field of inquiry in Africa. Several factors contribute to this gap. Notably, African societies are characterized by deep religiosity, with religious beliefs rooted in supernatural powers and values. This makes it challenging to question or critically examine the sanctity of religion. Furthermore, Tanzania, like many African societies, is inherently patriarchal, perpetuating cultural and spiritual values that disadvantage women. To date, there have been few, if any, serious academic efforts to interrogate the "spiritual puzzle of silence" in this context.

Drawing on my experience teaching the Gender and Politics course, particularly the subtopic of religion and gender inequality, I have observed that students are often reluctant to engage in discussions on religious matters. They perceive such topics as private to religious denominations and inherently sensitive. As a result, there is a tendency to normalize silence on these issues. The lingering legacy of Marxism at the University of Dar es Salaam has further discouraged academic inquiry into these sensitive subjects, leading feminist movements to avoid directly engaging with the relationship between religion and gender.

As an initial step toward revisiting the nexus between religion and gender inequality in Tanzania, it would be beneficial for scholars and researchers to draw lessons from the International Association for the Study of Religion and Gender, which offers valuable frameworks and comparative perspectives for advancing this important line of inquiry.

7   Author Biography

Professor Alexander Makulilo is a distinguished scholar in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. He earned his Ph.D. in Political Science (Summa Cum Laude) from Leipzig University in Germany, as well as an M.A. and B.A. in

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