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Advancing Gender Equality in Islamic Finance: Spatial Gaps, Strategic Frameworks, and Development Impacts across Countries

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Abstract: Objective: This study investigates the relationship between Islamic financial instruments—specifically Qard al-Hasan, Islamic microfinance, and cash waqf—and women's financial inclusion across diverse spatial and cultural contexts. It aims to explain how institutional readiness and local adaptation mediate the effectiveness of gender empowerment strategies in Islamic finance. Unlike prior reviews, this study offers a multidimensional conceptual framework integrating maqasid al-shariah ethics, governance dynamics, and spatial variation to assess measurable empowerment outcomes. **Methodology:** A spatially oriented Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted following PRISMA guidelines and a structured seven-stage protocol. Forty peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025 were selected from Scopus-indexed journals and nationally accredited Indonesian journals (SINTA). Inclusion was based on methodological rigor, gender relevance, empirical depth, and accessibility. Data synthesis employed thematic coding and analytical triangulation to construct a conceptual framework. **Results:** The findings reveal a positive but context-dependent link between gender empowerment and institutional performance in Islamic finance. Institutional capacity, regulatory frameworks, and cultural norms play a decisive role in shaping the success of gender-focused instruments. While supportive environments strengthen the alignment between empowerment strategies and institutional outcomes, persistent barriers—such as algorithmic bias in fintech platforms, lack of gender-aware governance, and low financial literacy—undermine progress in several regions, particularly in rural or socially conservative areas. **Conclusion:** Islamic gender empowerment strategies are most effective when embedded within spatially and culturally adaptive frameworks. This study contributes to the literature by integrating ethical, institutional, and spatial dimensions into a unified model—providing a fresh analytical lens to assess program effectiveness across varied socio-cultural settings. The absence of certain high-capacity countries in the reviewed literature is attributed to systematic inclusion criteria rather than researcher bias, highlighting the need for broader, gender-disaggregated academic data from key Islamic finance hubs. **Recommendation:** Future research should extend beyond indexed databases by incorporating grey literature and region-specific sources to address publication visibility biases. Policymakers are advised to support localized gender-responsive product design, promote gender-aware fintech governance, and embed social equity indicators into institutional performance assessments. Enhancing cultural fit and institutional responsiveness is key to fostering inclusive and ethical Islamic financial systems.
Keywords: Islamic Finance; Cross-Country; Financial Inclusion; Women Empowerment.

تعزيز المساواة بين الجنسين في التمويل الإسلامي: الفجوات المكانية، الأطر الاستراتيجية وآثار التنمية عبر الدول

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الملخص: الهدف: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء العلاقة بين أدوات التمويل الإسلامي، وخاصة قرض الحسن، والتمويل الإسلامي الصغير والوقف النقدي، وبين الشمول المالي للنساء في سياقات مكانية وثقافية متنوعة .كما تسعى إلى تفسير كيفية توسط جاهزية المؤسسات والتكيّف المحلي في فاعلية استراتيجيات تمكين المرأة في التمويل الإسلامي. وعلى خلاف المراجعات السابقة، تقدم هذه الدراسة إطارًا مفاهيميًا متعدد الأبعاد يدمج بين أخلاقيات مقاصد الشريعة، وديناميكيات الحوكمة، والتباين المكاني لتقييم نتائج التمكين القابلة للقياس. **المنهجية:** تم إجراء مراجعة منهجية للأدبيات (SLR) بمنظور مكاني، وفقًا لإرشادات PRISMA وبروتوكول منظم من سبع مراحل. تم اختيار أربعين دراسة تجريبية محكمة نُشرت بين عامي 2020 و2025 من مجلات مفهرسة في Scopus ومجلات وطنية معتمدة في إندونيسيا (SINTA)، بناءً على الصرامة المنهجية، ومدى الصلة بالنوع الاجتماعي، والعمق التجريبي، وسهولة الوصول. وتم استخدام الترميز الموضوعي والتثليث التحليلي لتركيب الإطار المفاهيمي. **النتائج:** كشفت النتائج عن وجود علاقة إيجابية ولكن تعتمد على السياق بين تمكين المرأة وأداء المؤسسات في مجال التمويل الإسلامي. حيث تلعب قدرة المؤسسات، والأطر التنظيمية، والأعراف الثقافية دورًا حاسمًا في نجاح الأدوات الموجهة نحو تمكين المرأة .ففي حين أن البيئات الداعمة تعزز التوافق بين الاستراتيجيات والنتائج المؤسسية، فإن هناك عوائق مستمرة—مثل التحيز الخوارزمي في منصات التكنولوجيا المالية، وضعف الحوكمة الحساسة للنوع الاجتماعي، وانخفاض الوعي المالي—تقوّض التقدم في عدة مناطق، خصوصًا في المناطق الريفية أو الاجتماعية المحافظة. **الاستنتاج:** تكون استراتيجيات تمكين المرأة في التمويل الإسلامي أكثر فاعلية عند إدماجها في أطر تتكيف مع السياقات المكانية والثقافية. وتُسهم هذه الدراسة في الأدبيات من خلال دمج الأبعاد الأخلاقية والمؤسسية والمكانية في نموذج موحد، مما يوفر عدسة تحليلية جديدة لتقييم فاعلية البرامج في بيئات اجتماعية وثقافية متنوعة. كما أن غياب بعض الدول ذات القدرات المؤسسية العالية في الدراسات المستعرضة يُعزى إلى معايير الاشتمال المنهجية وليس إلى تحيّز الباحث، مما يبرز الحاجة إلى بيانات أكاديمية مصنفة حسب النوع من مراكز التمويل الإسلامي الرئيسية. **التوصيات:** ينبغي أن تمتد البحوث المستقبلية إلى ما هو أبعد من قواعد البيانات المفهرسة، من خلال دمج الأدبيات الرمادية والمصادر الخاصة بالمناطق، لمعالجة تحيّزات الرؤية في النشر. ويُنصح صانعو السياسات بدعم تصميم منتجات مالية متجاوبة مع النوع على المستوى المحلي، وتعزيز الحوكمة التقنية الحساسة للنوع، وإدراج مؤشرات العدالة الاجتماعية في تقييم أداء المؤسسات. إن تعزيز الملاءمة الثقافية واستجابة المؤسسات يُعد أمرًا أساسيًا لبناء نظم تمويل إسلامية شاملة وأخلاقية.
الكلمات المفتاحية: التمويل الإسلامي، عبر البلدان، الشمول المالي، تمكين المرأة.

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Introduction

Gender equality is a central pillar of sustainable development, reflected in SDGs 5 (Gender Equality) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Islamic finance, grounded in adl (justice), social responsibility, and inclusiveness, aligns normatively with these goals, yet translating ethical ideals into tangible empowerment remains inconsistent. Despite promises of fairness, women face institutional, structural, and cultural barriers that limit participation, highlighting a persistent gap between Islamic finance's ethical foundations and practical implementation.

Gender exclusion stems less from theology than from low literacy, socio-cultural constraints, and institutional adaptation gaps. Studies show women's underrepresentation in leadership and limited access to gender-responsive products. El-Massah and Abou-El-Sood (2022) note that women's preferences are often overlooked, while Jabari and Muhamad (2021) find that gender-diverse governance improves performance. Evidence from Wolor *et al*. (2025), Al-Bori and Al-Ameri (2025), and Al-Koni *et al*. (2025) confirms that operational weaknesses, rather than doctrinal limits, impede inclusion.

Spatial and geographical contexts further shape gender outcomes. Institutional performance and inclusion vary with regulatory quality, cultural norms, and financial access levels. Kountchou *et al*. (2025) show Islamic finance strengthens women's empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa, while localized literacy and mentoring programs enhance participation in Southeast Asia (Rozalinda *et al*., 2024; Rahmatia *et al*., 2022). These findings highlight that gender empowerment must adapt to spatial diversity rather than adopt uniform models.

Technological innovation adds both opportunity and risk. Islamic fintech—through crowdfunding, *Qard al-Hasan*, and *cash waqf*—has expanded access in underserved regions (Al-Berto *et al*., 2025; Assayouti *et al*., 2024). However, algorithmic bias and weak gender-aware governance may reproduce exclusion (Smith, 2025; Maas *et al*., 2024), demanding a context-sensitive understanding of fintech's role in empowerment.

Despite growing interest, significant research gaps remain (Yasmeen *et al*., 2024; Harahap *et al*., 2023). Many studies are descriptive or localized (Al-Berto *et al*., 2025), emphasizing access over institutional and cultural interaction effects. Few integrate structural and spatial factors explaining why empowerment outcomes differ across settings (Smith, 2025). This lack of synthesis limits generalizability and weakens policy design. Addressing these gaps requires a systematic, spatially informed review linking gender empowerment, Islamic financial instruments, and institutional performance.

Accordingly, this study employs a spatially oriented Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine how *Qard al-Hasan*, Islamic microfinance, and *cash waqf* affect women's inclusion and institutional performance across diverse regulatory and cultural contexts. Drawing on forty empirical studies (2020–2025), it identifies patterns of success, structural barriers, and the mediating roles of institutional capacity, regulatory frameworks, and cultural adaptation.

The study contributes theoretically and practically. It integrates spatial analysis into gender–Islamic finance discourse and proposes a framework linking gender equity, financial instrument design, and institutional performance—positioning gender empowerment as both a social imperative and a determinant of institutional sustainability. While Islamic finance is normatively aligned with *adl* and inclusivity, uneven outcomes stem from institutional and cultural constraints rather than doctrinal ones.

This research addresses the gap between

Islamic finance's ethical goals and uneven empowerment outcomes. Guided by three questions—how spatial and cultural contexts shape empowerment, how Qard al-Hasan, cash waqf, and Islamic microfinance enhance inclusion, and how empowerment affects institutional performance—it proposes a conceptual framework (Figure 1) linking context, governance, and financial instruments. Women's inclusion serves as both outcome and measure of institutional adaptation. By integrating ethics, spatial diversity, and governance, the study offers a multidimensional framework for fostering equitable, sustainable gender empowerment across diverse settings.

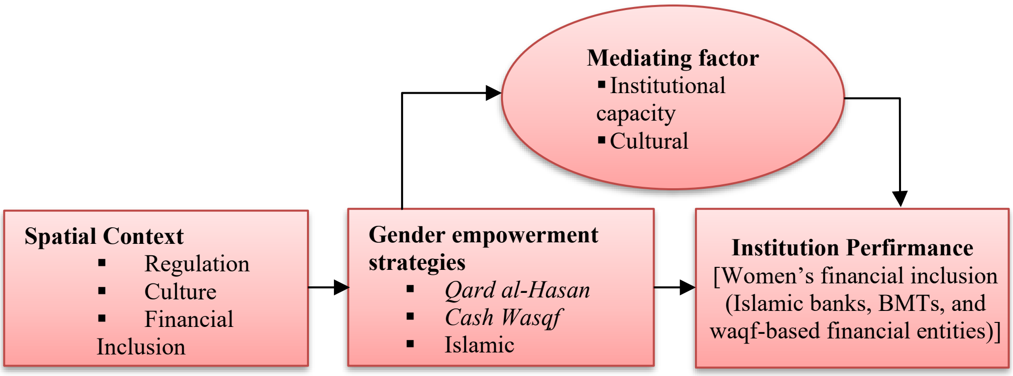

Figure (1): Conceptual framework of gender empowerment in Islamic finance.

Data And Methodology

This study employs a SLR to identify, evaluate, and synthesize research on gender, Islamic finance instruments, and institutional performance. The SLR approach ensures transparency and minimizes bias while integrating diverse evidence (Pappas & Woodside, 2021). Guided by the conceptual model in Figure 1, the review links Islamic financial instruments, contextual mediators, and empowerment outcomes. Following Paul and Criado (2020), the method detects thematic patterns, emerging trends, and research gaps to inform strategic recommendations. The review process adheres to established SLR frameworks by Hannah Snyder (2019), organized into seven stages.

Formulation of Research Questions (RQ)

The central question guiding this review is: *"How does gender equality manifest in Islamic finance across spatial, strategic, and institutional dimensions?"* Sub-questions focus on the influence of spatial context, the empowerment roles of *Qard al-Hasan*, cash waqf, and Islamic microfinance, and their links to institutional performance.

Literature Identification and Management

A structured search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, and Emerald Insight, complemented by national publications indexed in SINTA (S1–S2) to capture regional perspectives. Approximately 45% of selected articles came from national journals that met peer-review and quality standards (Page *et al.*, 2021). In total, forty high-quality empirical studies (2020–2025) were selected from both Scopus and SINTA databases, representing diverse institutional and cultural contexts. Although institutional performance was not measured directly, it was analyzed as discussed within these 40 studies. Zotero software was used for collaborative tagging and organization.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Following PRISMA guidelines (Page *et al.*, 2021), studies were included if they: (a) were published between 2020–2025; (b) explicitly examined gender empowerment or equity in Islamic finance; (c) used empirical, conceptual, or review-based designs; and (d) appeared in reputable indexed or nationally accredited journals. Low-impact and non-peer-reviewed papers were excluded unless they offered unique contextual insights (e.g., policy reports).

Although no formal operational variables were defined due to the qualitative nature of this SLR, the analysis focused on the dominant themes emerging from the literature regarding Islamic financial instruments (*Qard al-Hasan*, Islamic microfinance, cash waqf), gender empowerment, and institutional performance.

Screening Process

The PRISMA protocol guided all screening stages. A total of 183 records were initially retrieved using Boolean search strings such as *"Islamic finance" AND "gender empowerment" AND "financial inclusion."* After removing duplicates (n = 21) and irrelevant documents (n = 46), 116 records remained for title and abstract screening. Forty-nine were excluded for lack of gender relevance or being outside the time frame, leaving 67 for full-text review.

Full-text assessment evaluated gender analysis, relevance of Islamic finance instruments, and methodology. Twenty-seven studies were excluded—18 for limited gender focus, six for missing instrument linkage, and three for weak methodology—leaving forty studies. Selection was documented using Zotero and Rayyan (Ouzzani *et al*., 2016) to ensure transparency and reproducibility per PRISMA guidelines (Page *et al*., 2021).

Data Extraction and Synthesis

For each study, data on authorship, year, country, method, and major findings were coded using a standardized extraction sheet. Thematic synthesis was then applied (Booth *et al*., 2016) to identify recurring patterns and conceptual linkages among spatial context, empowerment instruments, and institutional outcomes. This approach emphasized interpretive synthesis rather than statistical meta-analysis, integrating qualitative insights from diverse empirical settings.

Analysis and Interpretation

Descriptive mapping and comparative analysis assessed how Qard al-Hasan, cash waqf, and Islamic microfinance operate across spatial and institutional contexts, considering regulation, culture, institutional capacity, and financial inclusion gaps. Due to limited Scopus- and WoS-indexed studies, 45% of reviewed works came from national journals chosen for empirical depth. Credibility was ensured through thematic triangulation with indexed studies and methodological appraisal of design rigor. Studies lacking empirical strength were excluded, and thematic saturation was confirmed using policy reports and regional case studies to enhance contextual validity and generalizability.

Reporting Findings

Findings are presented through thematic clusters supported by a PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 2), which details each stage of study identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion—from an initial 183 records to the final 40. Unlike prior fragmented reviews, this study applies an active, theory-driven curation process combining triangulation and critical appraisal to ensure coherence and credibility.

Finally, the spatially oriented framework linking maqasid-based ethics, financial instruments, governance, and empowerment outcomes offers a novel perspective on how gender empowerment is mediated across spatial and institutional contexts in Islamic finance.

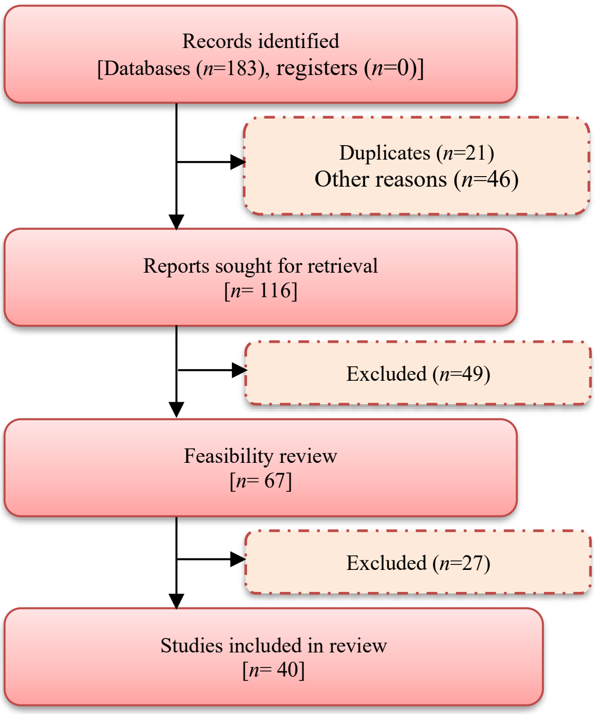

Figure (2): PRISMA flow diagram.

Results

This section presents the findings of the systematic literature review in alignment with the three research questions. The analysis is structured into four dimensions: (1) geographic and cultural mapping of studies (RQ1); (2) the effectiveness of *Qard al-Hasan*, Islamic microfinance, and cash waqf in promoting women's financial inclusion (RQ2); and (3) the linkage between empowerment strategies and institutional as well as social performance (RQ3).

Geographic Mapping, Credibility, Objectives and Variables, and Literature Methodology

The analysis covers four main dimensions. First, it maps the geographical distribution of studies to identify regional concentrations and understand how spatial and socio-cultural contexts shape research directions. Second, it evaluates literature credibility through journal indexation status (Scopus, SINTA, and others) as indicators of scientific quality and academic influence. Third, it analyzes research focus by examining objectives and variables to trace thematic trends and theoretical contributions. Fourth, it classifies research methodologies into quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method approaches, including the data analysis techniques applied.

Geographic Distribution: Country of Origin of Studies

Figure 3 shows the country distribution of forty studies (2020–2025) on gender issues in Islamic finance, highlighting geographic and methodological trends in global research. Most studies are concentrated in Asia and Africa, with Indonesia leading (10 studies, 25%), reflecting its role as a key laboratory for gender-inclusive Islamic finance. This prominence is driven by a large Muslim population, rapid industry growth, supportive inclusion policies (Azqia *et al.*, 2024; Rahmatia *et al.*, 2022), strong institutional backing, and rising public awareness, positioning Indonesia as a regional leader in gender-responsive Islamic finance.

Nigeria and Bangladesh each contributed 10% of the reviewed studies, followed by Gambia with a similar share. These countries represent emerging hubs of gender-focused Islamic finance research in West Africa and South Asia, marked by high economic informality and limited women's access to formal finance (Assayouti *et al.*, 2024; Islam, 2021).

Malaysia, India, and SLR-based studies each account for about 5%. Malaysia continues to lead in Islamic finance innovation and women's inclusion (Amin & Hassan, 2022; Jabari & Muhamad, 2021), while India shows growing academic interest despite its minority Muslim population (Kumar, 2020; Sherwani *et al.*, 2021). The rise of SLR approaches (Harahap *et al.*, 2023) indicates a move toward more systematic and inclusive frameworks.

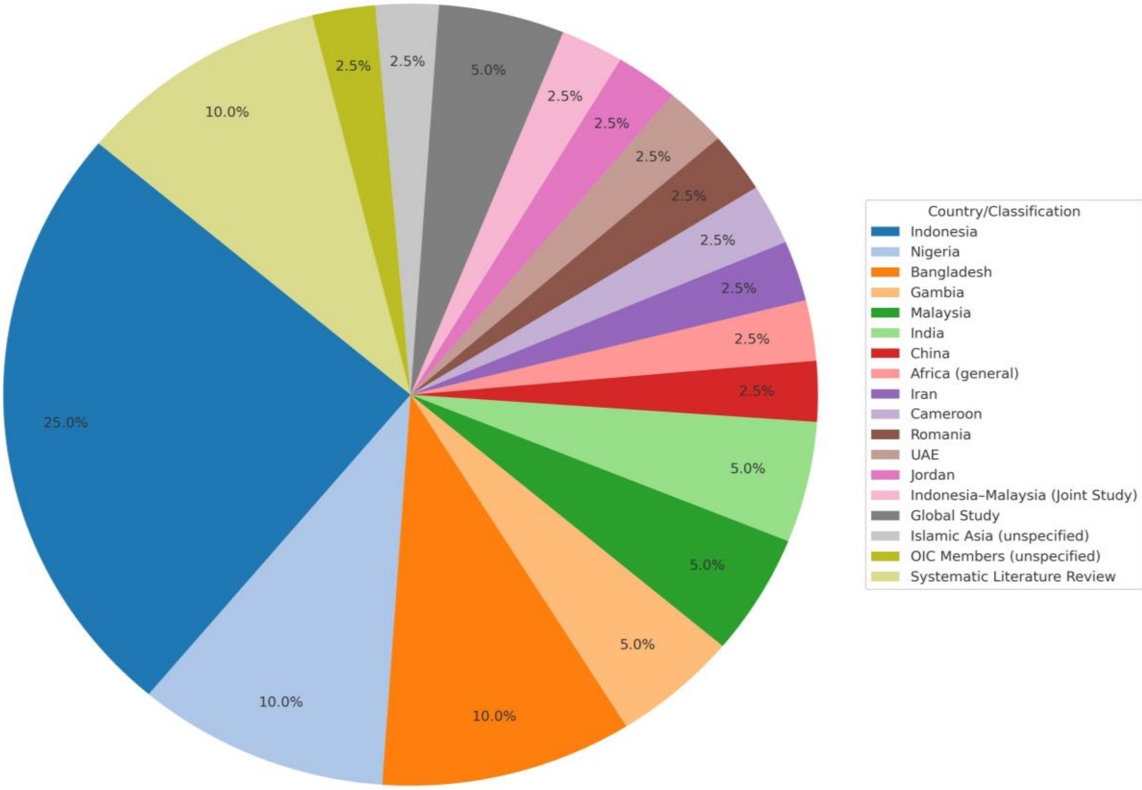

Figure (3): Regional distribution of studies on gender in Islamic finance 2020-2025.

Other contributors—China, Iran, Cameroon, Romania, UAE, Jordan, and broader regional studies—each comprise around 2.5%, reflecting the global expansion of Islamic finance discourse (El-Massah & Abou-El-Sood, 2022; Guo *et al*., 2024). Collaborative research across Indonesia–Malaysia and OIC contexts further supports regional policy integration (Azqia *et al*., 2024; Rahman *et al*., 2022).

Overall, 70% of studies originate from Indonesia, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Gambia, Malaysia, and India, underscoring persistent structural barriers to women's inclusion in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Africa (Habibullah *et al*., 2023; Kountchou *et al*., 2025). Limited contributions from high-capacity countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE reveal a research gap—suggesting future reviews should also consider region-specific or grey literature for a more complete picture (Bello, 2022; Smith, 2025).

Credibility: Journal Indexation

Analysis of publication credibility in gender and Islamic economics reveals significant variation in journal indexation and reputation. Figure 4 shows the distribution across four categories: Scopus-indexed, nationally reputable (SINTA), non-reputable, and other high-quality journals (Emerald).

Of the forty articles analyzed (2020–2025), 13 (32.5%) were published in Scopus-indexed journals, including Kountchou *et al*. (2025), Genevieve Smith (2025), Rozalinda *et al*. (2024), Haruna *et al*. (2024), and Brieger and Gielnik (2021), reflecting growing global academic attention to gender in Islamic finance (El-Massah & Abou-El-Sood, 2022; Ogundana *et al*., 2021). Seven studies (17.5%) appeared in national SINTA-indexed journals (Al-Berto *et al*., 2025; Khairisma *et al*., 2025; Rahmatia *et al*., 2022), demonstrating credible local research. Non-indexed journals dominate with 18 studies (45%), highlighting limited oversight and potential bias (Yasmeen *et al*., 2024; Maas *et al*., 2024; Bello, 2022). Two articles (5%) appeared in Emerald journals (Abuhussein & Koburtay, 2021; Saiful Islam, 2021), showing emerging presence in high-quality international outlets.

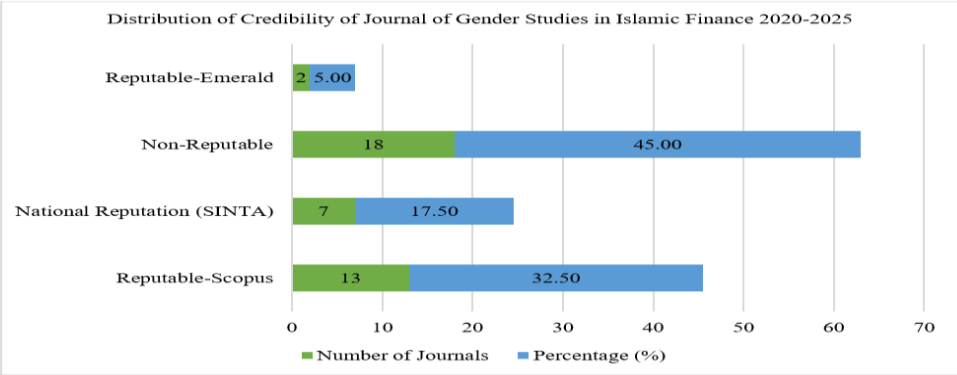

Figure (4): Distribution of credibility of journals of studies on gender in Islamic finance 2020-2025.

Research Focus: Objectives and Variables Raised

The literature analysis is presented in a matrix as presented in Figure 5. It is useful to understand how these patterns were formed, a review of the methodological approaches used is important.

Research on Islamic financial instruments—zakat, qard al-hasan, waqf, and Islamic Microfinance Systems (IMFS)—consistently shows positive effects on women's empowerment. Studies by Kountchou *et al*. (2025) in Africa, Al-Berto *et al*. (2025) and Rozalinda *et al*. (2024) in Indonesia, Bello (2022) in Nigeria, and Saiful Islam (2021) in Bangladesh confirm that access to these instruments enhances socio-economic wellbeing among poor and unbanked women, with Indonesia leading in related research. However, barriers such as low literacy, patriarchal norms, and digital inequality persist (Hazmi *et al*., 2025; Azqia *et al*., 2024; Asyari *et al*., 2022), reflecting similar structural and cultural constraints in India and Bangladesh.

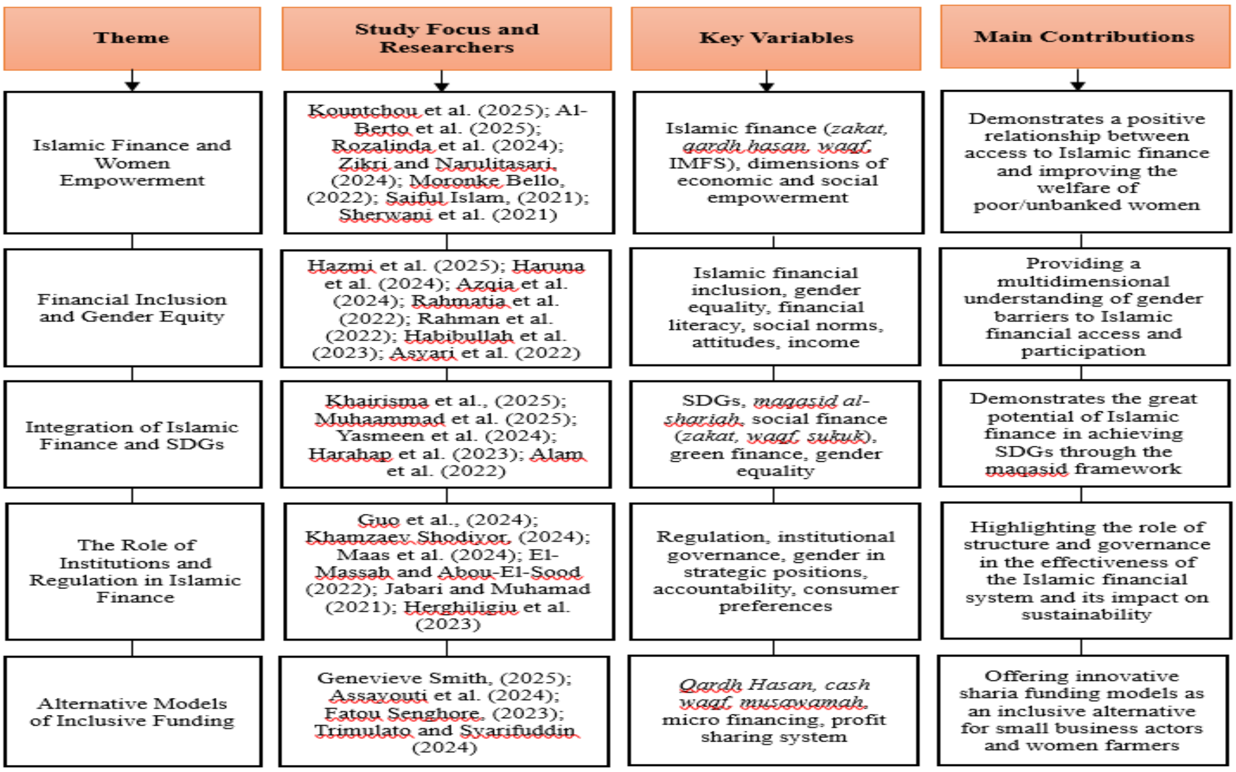

Figure (5): Synthesis matrix based on themes on gender in Islamic finance 2020-2025.

Islamic finance aligns with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as zakat, waqf, and social sukuk support inclusive development under maqasid al-shariah (Khairisma *et al*., 2025; Alam *et al*., 2022; Khamzaev Shodiyor, 2024), a point reinforced by global reviews (Yasmeen *et al*., 2024; Harahap *et al*., 2023). Institutional and governance factors are decisive: gender-inclusive practices strengthen trust and participation (Guo *et al*., 2024; Maas *et al*., 2024; El-Massah & Abou-El-Sood, 2022), as shown in Malaysia, Jordan, and Romania. Indonesia remains a pioneer in inclusive financing for women and MSMEs (Trimulato & Syarifuddin, 2024; Zikri & Narulitasari, 2024; Millati Agustina, 2023).

Cross-country analyses propose scalable models for qard al-hasan and waqf (Genevieve Smith, 2025), while African studies highlight community-based innovation. Collectively, these findings confirm Islamic finance as both an ethical and socially transformative mechanism for women's empowerment.

Research Design: Methods Used

Based on the mapping of selected literature spread from 2020 to 2025, there appears to be a diversity of methodological approaches used in analyzing the relationship between Islamic finance and women's empowerment. The methods used can be classified into five large groups as presented in Figure 6.

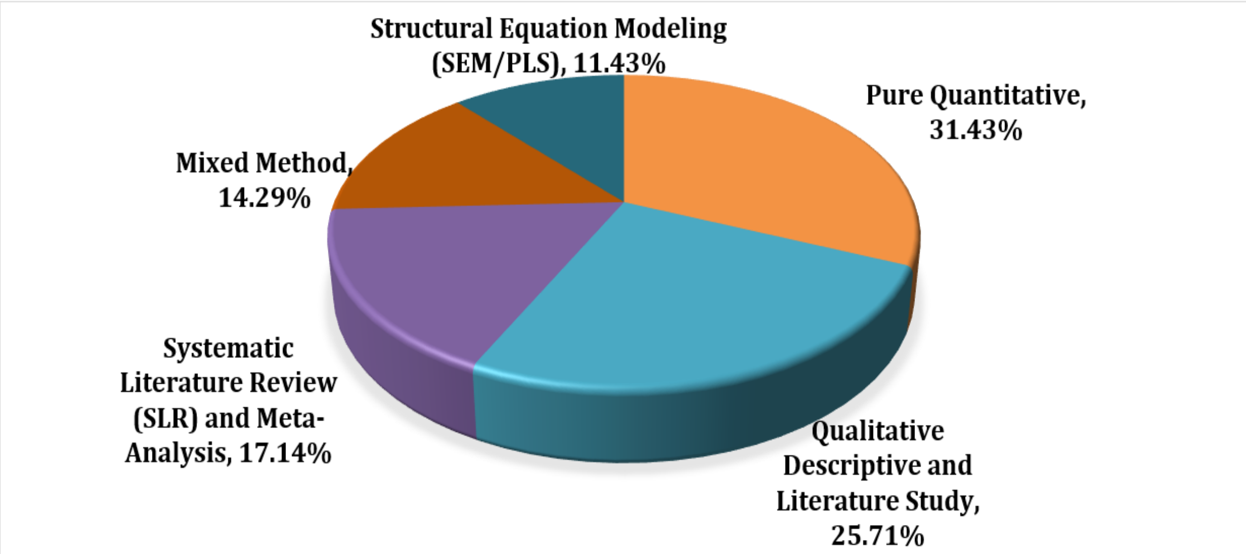

Figure (6): Distribution of the number of literatures on gender in Islamic finance 2020-2025.

Approximately 31.4% of the reviewed studies employed quantitative methods, using econometric tools to test causal relationships, including econometric modeling (Herghiligiu *et al*., 2023), logit regression (Saiful Islam, 2021), descriptive–inferential surveys (Sherwani *et al*., 2021; Haruna *et al*., 2024), and OLS or 2SLS estimations (Kountchou *et al*., 2025; Rahman *et al*., 2022). About 25.7% applied qualitative or literature-based approaches, including reviews, interviews, and normative analyses (Al-Berto *et al*., 2025; Trimulato & Syarifuddin, 2024; Muhammad *et al*., 2025; Rozalinda *et al*., 2024; Shodiyor, 2024; Habibullah *et al*., 2023; Bello, 2022).

SLR and meta-analysis accounted for 17.1% of studies, synthesizing conceptual patterns and theoretical gaps (Maas *et al*., 2024; Yasmeen *et al*., 2024; Harahap *et al*., 2023; Trimulato & Syarifuddin, 2024). Mixed-methods were 14.3%, combining surveys and interviews (Hazmi *et al*., 2025; Rahmatia *et al*., 2022; Assayouti *et al*., 2024), while PLS-SEM was applied in 11.4% to assess latent-variable relationships (Asyari *et al*., 2022; El-Massah & Abou-El-Sood, 2022).

Geographical Variations in the Impact of Gender Equality on the Performance of Islamic Financial Institutions

Based on the synthesis of recent literature, geographical variations in gender inclusion and the performance of Islamic finance are strongly influenced by local contexts, institutional readiness, and socio-cultural norms. Table 1 above highlights general qualitative trends rather than incomparable quantitative performance indicators (e.g., ROA/ROE).

Table (1): Geographical variations in the impact of gender equality on the performance of Islamic financial institutions.

Country/Region	Gender Inclusion Index (GII/IPG)	Islamic Financial Penetration	Impact of Gender on Performance	Study Source
Indonesia (DKI Jakarta)	IPG: ± 0.53 (high)	High	Strong improvement in women's quality of life	Azqia *et al*. (2024)
Indonesia (Aceh)	IPG: ± 0,49–0,50	High	Positive correlation with inclusion	Azqia *et al*. (2024)
Malaysia	GII: 0.401 (rendah)	Very high	Women in management linked to sustainabilit	Harahap *et al*. (2023); Khamzaev Shodiyor, (2024)
Bangladesh	GII: ± 0.50–0.55	High	Islamic microfinance boosts household income	Alam *et al*. (2022)
Nigeria	GII: > 0.60	Medium	Limited impact on women's leadership roles	Rahman *et al*. (2022)
Gambia	GII: ± 0.63	Low	Access hampered by infrastructure gaps	Fatou Senghore, (2023)
Cameroon	GII: ± 0.64	Low	Gender gap in Islamic finance adoption	Haruna *et al*. (2024)
Global (AI-Fintech Study)	Varies	Varies	Algorithmic bias reduces loan sizes for women	Genevieve Smith, (2025)

Note: Performance data such as ROA/ROE were removed due to inconsistencies across studies. The focus was on trends in women's financial inclusion as a general indicator.

In established Islamic finance ecosystems like Indonesia and Malaysia, studies show a strong positive relationship between Islamic financial inclusion and women's empowerment. Azqia *et al*. (2024) found that broader access enhances women's socio-economic roles, while Harahap *et al*. (2023) and Khamzaev Shodiyor (2024) highlighted that women's leadership in Islamic financial management strengthens institutional sustainability and SDG alignment. Financial instruments such as Qard al-Hasan effectively support micro-enterprises (Khairisma *et al*., 2025; Rozalinda *et al*., 2024), and Nigeria's cash waqf model promotes community welfare (Bello, 2022).

By contrast, outcomes in middle-income regions like West Africa and Bangladesh are mixed. Islamic finance fosters women's economic and political empowerment in Africa, but household disparities persist (Kountchou *et al*., 2025). In Bangladesh, microfinance with mentoring improves income but relies on institutional and community capacity (Alam *et al*., 2022). Low-income contexts, such as Gambia and Cameroon, face persistent constraints—poor infrastructure, low literacy, and restrictive norms limit participation (Senghore, 2023; Haruna *et al*., 2024).

At the global level, Genevieve Smith (2025) identified algorithmic bias in AI-based fintech, where women received smaller loans despite higher repayment rates. Overall, gender empowerment through Islamic finance is context-dependent: progressive regulation, inclusive governance, and gender-sensitive culture yield stronger outcomes, while weak institutions and cultural bias reduce impact.

Spatial Effectiveness of Islamic Financial Instruments in Women's Economic Empowerment

A spatial review shows that Islamic financial instruments perform differently across contexts. *Qard al-Hasan* is most effective in low-inclusion settings with trust and mentoring; Islamic microfinance supports entrepreneurship in urban areas with literacy and market access; and *Cash Waqf* mobilizes social capital in resource-constrained systems without debt. The focus is on contextual fit rather than instrument superiority.

Table 2 summarizes outcomes across contexts, showing how repayment rates, income gains, and women's participation vary by geography, institutional capacity, and governance quality.

Table (2): Spatial effectiveness of Islamic financial instruments in women's economic empowerment based on key indicators.

Instrument	Location / Spatial Context	Illustrative Outcome Metrics*	Key Implementation / Best Practice Notes	Primary Source(s)
Qard al-Hasan	Rural Indonesia (low inclusion)	Women's income ↑ ~28–32%; refund ~98%; ~62% women beneficiaries (12 mo)	Intensive mentoring; careful group targeting/selection.	Khairisma *et al.* (2025)
Qard al-Hasan	Urban Malaysia (high inclusion)	Women's income ↑ ~30–35%; refund ~97%; ~65% women beneficiaries (12 mo)	Entrepreneurship training integrated with rotating funds.	Rozalinda *et al.* (2024)
Islamic Microfinance	Urban Malaysia / developing Islamic finance ecosystem	Women's income ↑ ~38%; refund ~85%; ~48% women beneficiaries (18 mo)	Gender-sensitive financial education; product design aligned w/ women clients.	Jabari & Muhamad (2020)†
Islamic Microfinance	Rural Bangladesh (low inclusion)	Women's income ↑ ~42%; refund ~80%; ~50% women beneficiaries (18 mo)	Strengthening village micro-enterprise groups; local intermediation.	Islam (2021); Yasmeen *et al.* (2024); Sherwani *et al.* (2021)
Cash Waqf	Nigeria (emerging Islamic finance system)	Women's income/ household welfare ↑ ~40–50%; ~70% women beneficiaries (24 mo); refund N/A	Community collaboration; transparent governance; social intermediation.	Bello (2022); Haruna *et al.* (2024)
Cash Waqf	Indonesia (medium inclusion)	Women's income ↑ ~35–45%; ~68% women beneficiaries (24 mo); refund N/A	Combine cash waqf with micro-business & financial literacy training.	Rahmatia *et al.* (2022); Asyari *et al.* (2022)

*Important Note: *Outcome metrics are reported as ranges or approximate values drawn from individual studies; measures, baselines, and evaluation designs differ and are not directly comparable across rows. "Refund" refers to loan/financing repayment where applicable; "N/A" indicates that a repayment metric is not relevant or not reported (e.g., endowment/waqf funding).*

† Jabari & Muhamad (2020) focus on gender diversity and performance in Islamic banks; program-level outcome figures for women's microfinance participation are drawn from secondary impact evidence discussed within Malaysia's broader Islamic finance inclusion literature.

Across studies, indicators such as household income, enterprise growth, and repayment limit direct comparison but show clear trends. Qard al-Hasan in Indonesia and Malaysia achieved ≈97–98% repayment and 28–35% income gains with mentoring (Khairisma *et al.*, 2025; Rozalinda *et al.*, 2024). Islamic microfinance reported ≈80–85% repayment and 38–42% income growth in Bangladesh and Malaysia-linked programs integrating literacy and peer mentoring (Islam, 2021; Jabari & Muhamad, 2020; Yasmeen *et al.*, 2024). Cash Waqf in Nigeria and Indonesia saw 68–70% female participation and 35–50% income gains under transparent community management (Bello, 2022; Haruna *et al.*, 2024; Rahmatia *et al.*, 2022; Asyari *et al.*, 2022).

Effectiveness depends on institutional readiness, program quality, and socio-cultural adaptation. Low-income areas like Gambia and Cameroon face weak infrastructure and restrictive norms, while South Asian programs benefit from community mentoring. Middle-income contexts such as Malaysia and Indonesia show hybrid outcomes, supported by SDG-aligned governance and innovations like digital waqf and Sharia-compliant microloans, though gender leadership and evaluation metrics remain limited.

The Influence of Structural and Cultural Context on the Implementation of Gender Equality Strategies

The implementation of gender equality strategies in Islamic finance differs across social, regulatory, and cultural settings. Structural factors—patriarchal norms, financial literacy, and national policies—largely determine effectiveness. While Islamic finance advances women's empowerment in Africa (Kountchou *et al.*, 2025), outcomes depend on institutional capacity and economic strength. In Indonesia, inclusive microfinance operates alongside gender bias in large-scale financing (Hazmi *et al.*, 2025), and fintech innovation risks reproducing inequality when algorithms lack gender sensitivity (Smith, 2025).

Community-based initiatives such as *duduak baropok* in Indonesia demonstrate how cultural models can enhance access for unbanked women (Rozalinda *et al*., 2024), though regional and socio-economic disparities persist, especially in remote areas (Assayouti *et al*., 2024; Haruna *et al*., 2024). Regulatory contrasts also shape outcomes: Malaysia's robust Islamic finance system performs better than Uzbekistan's weaker institutional framework (Shodiyor, 2024). Broader participation depends on integrating social and financial intermediation supported by policy, education, and digital access (Al-Berto *et al*., 2025; Muhammad *et al*., 2025). Persistent infrastructure and inclusion gaps in Indonesia exacerbate spatial inequality (Azqia *et al*., 2024).

Evaluating Gender Equality in Islamic Finance: Challenges and Prospects

This study assesses the challenges and prospects of applying gender equality principles in Islamic finance across varied socio-economic contexts. Recent research (2024–2025) confirms the sector's potential to advance women's empowerment and financial inclusion, yet structural and cultural barriers remain. Studies by Kountchou *et al*. (2025) and Muhammad *et al*. (2025) show positive political, economic, and social impacts in African countries with strong Islamic finance systems. Instruments such as *qardh hasan*, *waqf*, and profit-sharing effectively reduce poverty and enhance women's economic participation, though progress is limited by weak literacy, regulatory gaps, and poor technological infrastructure (Al-Berto *et al*., 2025; Shodiyor, 2024). Genevieve Smith (2025) further cautions that gender-blind fintech algorithms risk perpetuating exclusion without conscious design and policy.

Policy Directions and Inclusive Strategies

Spatial analysis by Azqia *et al*. (2024) highlights financial inclusion disparities in Indonesia, with urban centers like Jakarta and Aceh showing higher access. This calls for locally adaptive policies to reach underserved women in rural areas. Social norms and limited education further hinder access (Assayouti *et al*., 2024; Haruna *et al*., 2024). Strategically, gender-inclusive Islamic finance should focus on: (a) improving financial literacy tailored for women (Rozalinda *et al*., 2024); (b) regulatory support for flexible, innovative funding, including crowdfunding and *qardh hasan* (Al-Berto *et al*., 2025); (c) gender-aware fintech design to reduce bias and enhance women's credit access (Smith, 2025; Khairisma *et al*., 2025); and (d) expanding the use of *zakat, waqf*, and *sukuk* for women's economic empowerment and sustainable development (Harahap *et al*., 2023; Yasmeen *et al*., 2024). With the global rise of Islamic financial assets and fintech innovation (Shodiyor, 2024), inclusive and context-sensitive approaches aligned with *Maqasid al-Shariah* offer strong potential to transform Islamic finance into a powerful global tool for advancing gender equity and socio-economic inclusion.

Discussion

Islamic finance and gender inclusion face universal challenges, particularly in digital and fintech ecosystems. Algorithmic bias often limits women's access, as automated credit scoring favors men despite stronger repayment records (Genevieve Smith, 2025). Measurement gaps persist due to varied indicators and the lack of standardized gender-sensitive KPIs, while digital divides hinder access even in high smartphone-use economies. Most Sharia-compliant products still fail to translate ethical principles into gender-responsive mechanisms, with few programs integrating women-focused literacy or recognizing informal economic contributions.

Regional contexts shape effectiveness. In West Africa and South Asia, weak infrastructure, low literacy, and restrictive norms constrain outcomes (Haruna *et al*., 2024; Senghore, 2023). In

Bangladesh, community mentoring and peer-group microfinance improve income but urban–rural disparities remain (Alam *et al*., 2022). Middle-income economies like Malaysia and Indonesia benefit from SDG-aligned governance, inclusive policies, and women's participation in financial management, enhancing outcomes for Qard al-Hasan, microfinance, and cash waqf (Harahap *et al*., 2023; Azqia *et al*., 2024; Khairisma *et al*., 2025; Rahmatia *et al*., 2022).

Institutional weaknesses and governance gaps limit empowerment. Women's underrepresentation in leadership constrains policy influence, often resulting in symbolic inclusion rather than structural change (Harahap *et al*., 2023; Guo *et al*., 2024; Rahman *et al*., 2022; Alam *et al*., 2022). The absence of gender-based compliance tools reduces the impact of Qard al-Hasan and cash waqf (Rozalinda *et al*., 2024; Bello, 2022), while stronger female representation correlates with better social performance and public trust (El-Massah & Abou-El-Sood, 2022).

Islamic fintech offers potential to mitigate bias by using ethical, community-based, and alternative data approaches. Digital Qard al-Hasan and cash waqf platforms integrate mentoring, trust (amanah), and informal credit assessments, supporting women-led enterprises in Indonesia and Malaysia (Khairisma *et al*., 2025; Rozalinda *et al*., 2024; Smith, 2025; Harahap *et al*., 2023). Though not bias-free, gender-aware fintech combined with literacy programs can enhance equitable access.

Strategically, four directions emerge: aligning policy with gender-responsive Islamic finance linked to the SDGs; building capacity through literacy, mentoring, and local Sharia networks, especially in low-inclusion areas (Haruna *et al*., 2024; Senghore, 2023); governance reform with gender parity targets, audits, and transparent reporting (Harahap *et al*., 2023; El-Massah & Abou-El-Sood, 2022); and fintech innovation guided by ethical, gender-aware AI and trust-based instruments (Khairisma *et al*., 2025; Rozalinda *et al*., 2024).

Overall, empowerment outcomes depend on instrument design, institutional readiness, and socio-cultural context. Gender-responsive instruments such as Qard al-Hasan, cash waqf, and microfinance operationalize maqasid al-Shariah principles of justice, welfare, and wealth preservation (daruriyat, hajiyat, tahsiniyat), linking ethical ideals with practical strategies. The study contributes by integrating spatial, gender, and Islamic finance analyses, clarifying how financial instrument design and institutional performance support inclusive, ethical development across diverse contexts.

Table 3 presents a framework linking the three levels of maqasid al-Shariah—daruriyat, hajiyat, and tahsiniyat—with concrete gender empowerment strategies in Islamic finance. It illustrates how each level translates into practical interventions across Qard al-Hasan, microfinance, and cash waqf programs, providing a tool for assessing program design, social impact, and policy coherence.

Table (3): Integration of maqasid al-shariah dimensions with gender empowerment strategies in Islamic finance.

Maqasid Dimension	General Meaning	Application to Gender Empowerment
Daruriyat	Protection of essential human needs	Providing fundamental access to non-ribawi financing (e.g., Qard al-Hasan, Islamic microfinance) to support women's economic survival and household welfare.
Hajiyat	Alleviation of hardship	Enhancing financial capability through targeted training, financial literacy, and social protection mechanisms that reduce economic vulnerability.
Tahsiniyat	Promotion of dignity and moral refinement	Enabling women's participation in financial governance, fintech design, and culturally sensitive leadership roles—thereby fostering dignity (*hifz al-'ird*) and societal trust.

By integrating these ethical and practical dimensions, Islamic finance can evolve from normative principles into actionable strategies for inclusive and context-sensitive women's empowerment.

Conclusions

This study provides an integrative analysis of gender empowerment in Islamic finance, linking spatial, institutional, and socio-cultural dimensions. Based on 40 empirical studies, it finds that the effectiveness of Qard al-Hasan, Islamic microfinance, and cash waqf depends more on governance quality, regulatory support, and localized implementation than on the instruments themselves. Program outcomes vary by context: trust-based soft loans in Aceh achieved high repayment and income gains; microfinance with entrepreneurship training in Malaysia strengthened business resilience; and transparent governance in Nigeria enabled inclusive cash waqf participation despite infrastructural limits.

The findings affirm that Islamic finance can advance women's empowerment when paired with localized product design, gender-sensitive metrics, and institutional accountability. They also reinforce the alignment with maqasid al-Shariah—justice, wealth protection (hifz al-mal), dignity (hifz al-ʻird), and livelihood security (hifz al-nafs). Ethically applied instruments serve as vehicles for inclusion and agency, advancing SDG 5 and SDG 8, and highlight the importance of adaptive delivery systems, gender-disaggregated metrics, and accountable governance for sustained empowerment.

Implications and Strategic Directions

This review outlines four strategic pathways to enhance gender empowerment in Islamic finance. First, policies must be localized, reflecting socio-cultural contexts, literacy, and institutional capacity. Second, gender-aware fintech should utilize ethical AI and community-based digital systems to mitigate bias. Third, social performance metrics should go beyond profitability to encompass women's entrepreneurship, financial resilience, and collective empowerment. Fourth, cultural anchoring through women-led cooperatives and participatory waqf builds trust and long-term engagement. Sustainable empowerment requires integrating spatial disparities, cultural realities, and the principles of maqasid al-Shari'ah, shifting from access to agency through ethical and adaptive strategies.

Scope and Delimitations of the Study

This study examines the relationship between Islamic financial instruments (*Qard al-Hasan*, cash waqf, and Islamic microfinance) and gender empowerment, mediated by institutional and spatial factors. The review includes peer-reviewed literature from 2020–2025 in English and Bahasa Indonesia, focusing on studies explicitly addressing gender dynamics in Islamic finance. Conceptual, empirical, and review articles from Scopus, Web of Science, and SINTA journals were selected for quality and relevance. Fieldwork data and quantitative meta-analysis are excluded; the study synthesizes qualitative patterns and conceptual linkages to ensure analytical depth and methodological consistency.

Study Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by heterogeneous research designs and outcome measures, which preclude rigorous meta-analysis, as well as a 2020–2025 time frame and focus on English and Bahasa Indonesia, potentially overlooking studies in Arabic, French, or other languages. The conceptual framework, though theoretically grounded, remains empirically untested. Future research should prioritize multi-country longitudinal studies and field validation to examine interactions between institutional and spatial factors over time, with particular attention to gender-sensitive fintech and digital platforms that can promote inclusive Islamic finance without reinforcing structural inequities.

Summary

This study provides a SLR of gender empowerment in Islamic finance, integrating spatial, institutional, and cultural perspectives. It synthesizes 40 empirical studies (2020–2025) selected through a rigorous inclusion and appraisal process to examine how *Qard al-Hasan*, Islamic microfinance, and cash *waqf* operate across diverse contexts in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The analysis focuses on how governance quality, inclusiveness, and spatial access influence women's financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, and empowerment outcomes.

Findings indicate that success depends not only on financial instrument design but also on alignment with local culture, institutional capacity, and regulatory environments. Effective empowerment emerges when Islamic finance initiatives adapt to context-specific needs through inclusive governance and gender-sensitive implementation.

The study proposes a *maqasid al-shariah*–based framework linking financial design, spatial context, and institutional readiness, offering practical guidance for gender-aware fintech innovation, localized financial policy, and inclusive performance metrics. It contributes theoretical and applied insights toward achieving SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) within diverse Islamic finance ecosystems.

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- **Ethical approval and consent to participate:** Not applicable. This study is based on a systematic literature review and did not involve human participants, animals, or primary data collection requiring ethical approval.
- **Availability of data and materials:** All data supporting this study are derived from published articles included in the systematic literature review. The complete list of analyzed studies is available in the reference section of the manuscript.
- **Author contribution:** Dedyerianto conceptualized the research design and coordinated the overall study framework. La Ode Muhammad Harafah, Muhammad Yani Balaka, Heppi Millia, Rosnawintang, Gamsir, Irmawatty P. Tamburaka, and Muh. Nur Afiat contributed to the literature search, data extraction, and thematic coding. Samdin provided methodological input, particularly in structuring the systematic review process. Hasddin, as the corresponding author, supervised the analysis, integrated theoretical perspectives, and finalized the manuscript draft. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.
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