



ROLE OF ISLAMIC MICROFINANCE ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: THE CASE OF ZAKAT & WAQF FOUNDATION, GOMBE, NIGERIA

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KEYWORDS

Islamic microfinance, women's empowerment, micro credit, micro insurance, training and capacity building, PLS-SEM.

ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of Islamic microfinance in promoting women's empowerment in Gombe metropolis, Nigeria. Specifically, the study investigated the effects of micro credit, micro saving, micro insurance, training on women's empowerment. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was adopted, and data were collected from 100 women beneficiaries of Islamic microfinance services using a structured questionnaire. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to analyze the data. The findings revealed that micro credit ($\beta = 0.183$, $p = 0.007$), micro insurance ($\beta = 0.146$, $p = 0.034$), training ($\beta = 0.627$, $p < 0.001$) exert significant positive effects on women's empowerment, whereas micro saving ($\beta = 0.073$, $p = 0.258$) had a positive but statistically insignificant effect. The model explained 63.3% of the variance in women's empowerment, indicating substantial explanatory power. The study concludes that Islamic microfinance contributes significantly to women's empowerment, particularly when financial services are complemented with entrepreneurial training and risk protection mechanisms. The study recommends that Islamic microfinance institutions strengthen capacity-building programs, expand access to Shariah-compliant financing and Takaful services, and redesign saving products to enhance their developmental impact.

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1.0 Introduction

Women's empowerment has become a global development priority because of its contribution to poverty reduction, inclusive economic growth, and sustainable development. Empowered women are better able to access productive resources, participate in income-generating activities, and make strategic household and business decisions (Kabeer, 2021). Nevertheless, women in many developing countries continue to face financial exclusion, limited entrepreneurial opportunities, and socio-cultural barriers that constrain their economic participation.

Financial inclusion has been widely recognized as a key mechanism for improving women's empowerment. Although conventional microfinance has expanded access to credit, saving, and business support services, its interest-based structure discourages participation among many Muslim women due to the prohibition of *riba* (interest) under Islamic law (Abdullah et al., 2023). Consequently, many women entrepreneurs remain financially excluded despite the availability of conventional financial services.

Islamic microfinance has emerged as a *Shariah*-compliant alternative that promotes financial inclusion through ethical financing mechanisms based on risk sharing and social justice. Financing instruments such as *Murabahah*, *Mudarabah*, *Musharakah*, *Qard al-Hasan*, micro-saving, and *Takaful* provide access to financial services while complying with Islamic principles (Kahraman et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2024). These services are increasingly viewed as effective tools for promoting entrepreneurship, reducing poverty, and improving women's socio-economic well-being.

Empirical studies from Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and other developing countries generally report that Islamic

microfinance improves women's access to finance, entrepreneurial performance, household income, and financial decision-making (Hamdan & Kassim, 2022; Soemitra et al., 2022; Zulfiqar & Tabasum, 2023). However, evidence from Nigeria, particularly Northern Nigeria, remains limited despite the increasing adoption of Islamic microfinance services. Existing studies have largely focused on conventional microfinance or institutional aspects of Islamic finance, with little attention to women's economic empowerment at the local level.

This study addresses this gap by examining the role of Islamic microfinance in promoting women's economic empowerment in Gombe metropolis. Specifically, it investigates the effects of microcredit, micro-saving, micro-insurance, training on women's economic empowerment. The findings are expected to contribute to the literature on Islamic microfinance and provide evidence to guide policymakers and practitioners in designing effective financial inclusion programs for women.

Zakat & Waqf Foundation, Gombe, Nigeria was established in 2018 as a non-governmental, not-for-profit organization to collect alms from philanthropies, distribute them to deserving individuals, establish Islamic endowments, and offer capacity building training. The foundation has a vibrant 3 tiered women empowerment section that offers skills development for teenage girls, women economic empowerment, and the Wadata cooperative society for women with micro businesses. For the purpose of this study, the Wadata Cooperative Society was selected as the unit of analysis because of its focus on women operating micro businesses and its relevance to the provision of Islamic microfinance services.

The aim of the study is to investigate the effect of Islamic microfinance on women empowerment in the case of Zakat & Waqf

foundation, Gombe state, Nigeria. Gombe state is in northeast region of Nigeria that is bedeviled with insecurity for more than a decade. Many recovery strategies are being used to improve the well-being of people in this region. The main objective of this study is to investigate the role of Islamic microfinance towards women empowerment. What works here can be replicated in other regions facing similar challenges.

Drawing on the theoretical framework and the reviewed empirical literature, the study formulates the following null hypotheses for empirical testing:

1.3 Hypotheses

H0₁: Micro credit has no significant effect on women's empowerment in Gombe metropolis.

H0₂: Micro saving has no significant effect on women's empowerment in Gombe metropolis.

H0₃: Micro insurance has no significant effect on women's empowerment in Gombe metropolis.

H0₄: Training has no significant effect on women's empowerment in Gombe metropolis.

2.0 Literature Review

Women's economic empowerment refers to women's ability to access productive resources, exercise control over financial decisions, and improve their socio-economic well-being through participation in income-generating activities (Kabeer, 2021). Access to financial services has been recognized as a key driver of women's entrepreneurial development, increased household income, and enhanced decision-making authority (Osei Assibey et al., 2024). However, institutional, cultural, and religious barriers continue to limit women's access to formal financial services, particularly in developing countries.

Islamic microfinance has emerged as a *Shariah*-compliant alternative to conventional microfinance by providing ethical financial services based on risk-sharing rather than interest (*riba*). Through financing instruments such as *Murabahah*, *Mudarabah*, *Musharakah*, *Qard al-Hasan*, micro-saving, and *Takaful*, Islamic microfinance promotes financial inclusion while supporting entrepreneurship and poverty reduction (Malik, 2024; Ahmad et al., 2024). The study is underpinned by Women Empowerment Theory, Financial Inclusion Theory, and Social Capital Theory, which collectively suggest that culturally compatible financial services can enhance women's economic participation, entrepreneurial capacity, and decision-making power (Sen, 2020; Kabeer, 2021; Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2022; Putnam, 2021).

Previous empirical studies consistently demonstrate that Islamic microfinance positively influences women's access to finance, entrepreneurial performance, income generation, and financial autonomy across countries such as Yemen, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Hamdan & Kassim, 2022; Soemitra et al., 2022; Alaghbari et al., 2023; Zulfikar & Tabasum, 2023). Similarly, Nigerian studies indicate that Islamic financial services improve women's business performance and financial inclusion, although awareness and utilization of *Shariah*-compliant products remain relatively low (Hussaini et al., 2024; Islam & Adesina, 2024). Despite these findings, empirical evidence from Gombe Metropolis remains limited, particularly regarding the combined effects of micro credit, micro-saving, micro-insurance, and training on women's empowerment. This contextual gap highlights the need for further empirical investigation to determine how these dimensions of Islamic microfinance influence women's economic empowerment within the study area.

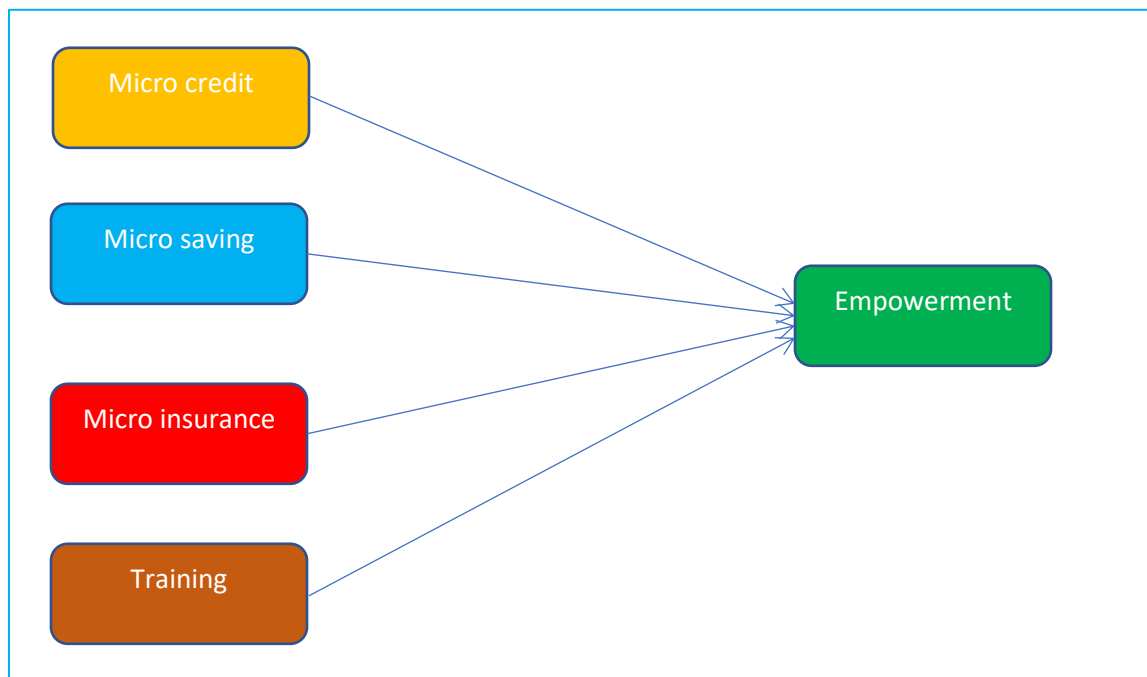


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

3.0 Research Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine the influence of Islamic microfinance on women's empowerment in Gombe Metropolis, Nigeria. The study targeted 100 women entrepreneurs who had benefited from the Zakat and Waqf-based Islamic microfinance programme through the Wadata Cooperative Society (Wadata Coops). Given the relatively small population, a census approach was employed, allowing all eligible beneficiaries to participate in the study.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising demographic

information and measures of microcredit, micro-saving, micro-insurance, training and capacity building, and women's economic empowerment, all assessed using a five-point Likert scale. The instrument was validated through expert review, while reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. The collected data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondents' characteristics, whereas the structural model was estimated using the bootstrapping procedure to examine the hypothesized relationships at a 5% significance level.

4.0 Results and Discussion

Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Characteristics (N = 100)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	2	2.0
	Female	98	98.0
Age (years)	18–29	63	63.0
	30–39	8	8.0
	40–49	17	17.0

	≥50	12	12.0
Marital Status	Single	70	70.0
	Married	30	30.0
Education	Primary	18	18.0
	Secondary	73	73.0
	Diploma	6	6.0
	Degree	3	3.0
Experience	<1 year	57	57.0
	1–3 years	21	21.0
	4–5 years	7	7.0
	6–7 years	10	10.0
	>7 years	5	5.0

Table 1 shows that a total of 100 valid questionnaires were analyzed. The respondents were predominantly female (98%), young (63% aged 18–29 years), single (70%), and had secondary education (73%).

Most participants (57%) had less than one year of experience with Islamic microfinance programs, indicating that the study largely captured the perceptions of relatively new beneficiaries.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Microcredit	4.381	0.528	0.762
Micro-saving	4.607	0.347	0.744
Micro-insurance	4.633	0.396	0.722
Training and capacity building	4.175	0.789	0.853
Women's Empowerment	4.177	0.711	0.879

Descriptive statistics revealed high mean scores for all study variables, suggesting positive perceptions of Islamic microfinance services and women's empowerment. Micro insurance recorded the highest mean ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.40$), followed by micro-saving ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.35$), microcredit ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.53$), training ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.79$), and women's empowerment ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.71$).

The measurement instrument demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.722 to 0.879, confirming acceptable internal consistency, while corrected item-total correlation values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.30, indicating adequate construct validity.

Table 3: Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (rho_a)	Composite Reliability (rho_c)	AVE
Micro credit	.762	.850	.756	.461
Micro saving	.744	.780	.827	.493
Micro insurance	.722	.742	.808	.416
Training	.853	.874	.886	.470
Women empowerment	.879	.884	.906	.582

Table 3 shows that all study constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .722 to .879 and Composite Reliability values exceeding the recommended threshold of .70. Although the AVE values for micro credit, micro insurance, micro saving, and training were slightly below the recommended .50 threshold, their composite reliability values above .70 suggest acceptable internal consistency; however, the AVE values indicate that convergent validity should be interpreted with caution. In contrast, Women's empowerment achieved an AVE of .582, confirming adequate convergent validity. Overall, the results indicate that the measurement model possesses satisfactory reliability and acceptable convergent validity, making it suitable for structural model analysis.

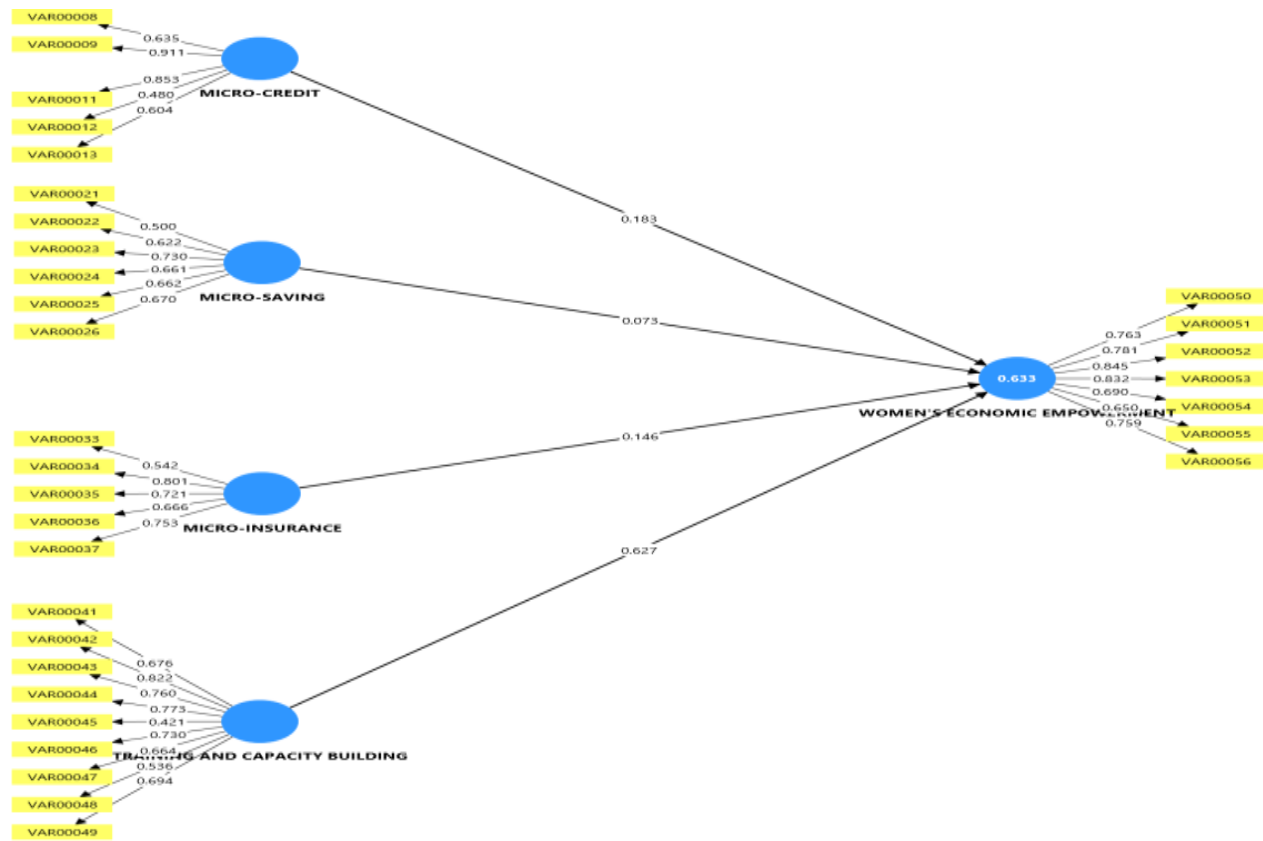


Figure 2: Measurement Model

Figure 2 presents the measurement model showing the relationships between the latent constructs and their respective indicators. The values on the outer paths represent the standardized outer loadings, indicating the

contribution of each indicator to its corresponding construct. The model was evaluated using indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

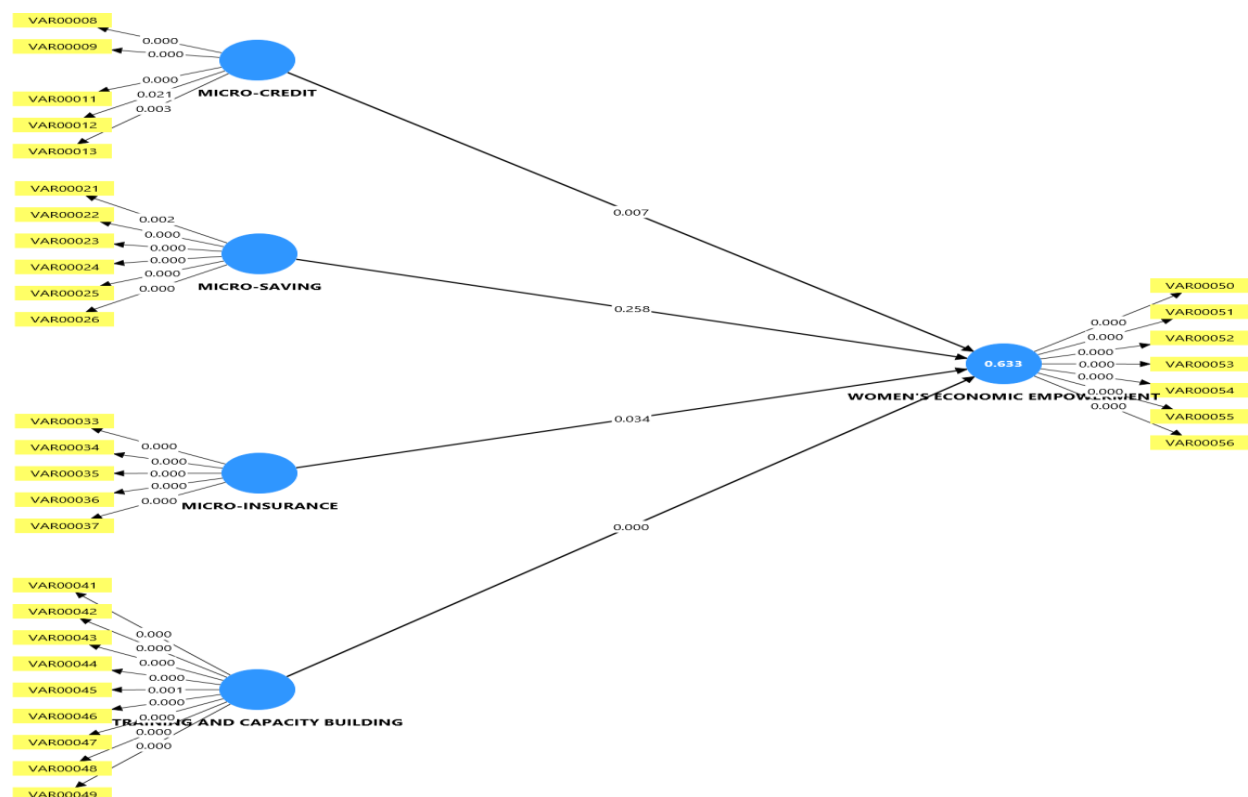


Figure 3: Structural Model

Figure 3 illustrates the structural relationships between the independent variables and women's empowerment. The path coefficients (β) represent the effects of

the predictor variables, while the R^2 value (.633) indicates that the model explains 63.3% of the variance in women's economic empowerment.

Table 4: Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Women's Empowerment	.633	.617

Table 4 shows that the coefficient of determination (R^2) for Women's Empowerment is .633, indicating that 63.3% of the variance in women's empowerment is explained by micro-credit, micro-saving, micro-insurance, and training, while the remaining 37.2% is explained by factors outside the model. The adjusted R^2 of .634 further confirms that the model explains 63.4% of the variance after adjusting for the number of predictors. The difference between

the R^2 and adjusted R^2 values indicates a relatively small adjustment in the model's explanatory power. Based on the benchmark suggested by Hair et al. (2022), the R^2 value of .633 demonstrates moderate to substantial explanatory power, indicating that the selected dimensions of Islamic microfinance adequately explain women's economic empowerment in Gombe metropolis.

Table 5: Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesized Relationship		β (Original Sample)	Sample Mean	Standard Deviation	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	Decision
Micro-credit Women's Empowerment	→	.183	.191	.067	2.712	.007	Rejected
Micro-insurance Women's Empowerment	→	.146	.130	.069	2.121	.034	Rejected
Micro-saving Women's Empowerment	→	.073	.091	.064	1.131	.258	Not rejected
Training→ Women's Empowerment		.627	.639	.055	11.348	< .001	Rejected

Table 5 presents the results of the structural model analysis obtained through the bootstrapping procedure. The path coefficients, *t*-statistics, and *p*-values were used to test the four null hypotheses of the study.

The findings indicate that micro-credit has a positive and statistically significant effect on women's empowerment ($\beta = .183$, $t = 2.712$, $p = .007$). Since the *p*-value is less than the .05 significance level, the null hypothesis stating that micro-credit has no significant effect on women's economic empowerment is rejected. This implies that micro-credit significantly contributes to improving women's economic empowerment.

Similarly, micro-insurance has a positive and statistically significant effect on women's empowerment ($\beta = .146$, $t = 2.121$, $p = .034$). Because the *p*-value is below .05, the null hypothesis is rejected. This finding suggests that micro-insurance significantly enhances women's empowerment.

Conversely, micro-saving has a positive but statistically insignificant effect on women's empowerment ($\beta = .073$, $t = 1.131$, $p = .258$).

Since the *p*-value exceeds the .05 threshold, there is insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, the study does not reject the null hypothesis, indicating that microsaving does not have a statistically significant effect on women's empowerment.

Finally, training exerts a strong positive and statistically significant effect on women's empowerment ($\beta = .627$, $t = 11.348$, $p < .001$). Given that the *p*-value is well below .05, the null hypothesis is rejected. This result indicates that training and capacity building are the strongest predictors of women's economic empowerment among the variables examined.

Overall, the results reveal that the null hypotheses relating to micro-credit, micro-insurance, and training are rejected, while the null hypothesis relating to microsaving is not rejected. These findings suggest that three dimensions of Islamic microfinance significantly influence women's economic empowerment, whereas micro-saving does not exert a statistically significant influence.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

The findings demonstrate that Islamic microfinance plays a significant role in promoting women's economic empowerment in Gombe metropolis. Specifically, micro-credit, micro-insurance, and training exert significant positive effects on women's economic empowerment, whereas micro-saving has a positive but statistically insignificant effect. The significant effect of micro-credit indicates that access to *Shariah*-compliant financing enhances women's ability to establish or expand businesses, increase income, and improve their economic decision-making. This finding supports Financial Inclusion Theory and Women's Empowerment Theory, which posit that access to appropriate financial resources strengthens economic participation and autonomy. The result is consistent with the findings of Hamdan and Kassim (2022), Soemitra et al. (2022), and Hussaini et al. (2024), who reported that Islamic micro-credit improves women's entrepreneurial performance, household income, and financial inclusion.

In contrast, micro saving did not significantly influence women's economic empowerment. This finding suggests that savings alone may be insufficient to generate meaningful economic outcomes, particularly where beneficiaries have limited incomes and investment opportunities. The result differs from those of Zulfiqar and Tabasum (2023) and Osei Assibey et al. (2024), but supports evidence from developing economies indicating that savings are more effective when combined with credit and capacity-building interventions.

The positive and significant effect of micro-insurance confirms the importance of Islamic *Takaful* services in reducing financial vulnerability and strengthening business resilience among women entrepreneurs. This finding supports Social Capital Theory and agrees with Alaghbari et al. (2023) and

Ahmad et al. (2024), who found that Islamic micro insurance enhances financial security and promotes women's economic participation.

Training emerged as the strongest predictor of women's empowerment, highlighting that entrepreneurial skills, financial literacy, and business management competencies are essential for maximizing the benefits of Islamic microfinance. This finding is consistent with Women's Empowerment Theory and Sen's Capability Theory and aligns with previous studies by Hamdan and Kassim (2022), Soemitra et al. (2022), and Islam and Adesina (2024), which reported that entrepreneurship training significantly improves women's business performance and financial independence.

Overall, the findings indicate that Islamic microfinance contributes substantially to women's empowerment, with the structural model explaining 63.3% of the variation in the dependent variable. The results suggest that integrating *Shariah*-compliant financial services with entrepreneurial training and risk protection provides a more effective strategy for achieving sustainable women's economic empowerment in Gombe Metropolis.

Practical Implications

The findings indicate that Islamic microfinance can effectively enhance women's empowerment when financial services are complemented with capacity-building initiatives. Islamic microfinance institutions should therefore expand access to *Shariah*-compliant micro credit and micro insurance while strengthening entrepreneurship and financial literacy training, which emerged as the strongest predictor of women's empowerment. The insignificant effect of micro saving suggests that saving product should be redesigned and integrated with credit and business support services to improve their developmental

impact. The study also provides evidence for policymakers, Zakat and Waqf institutions, and development partners to formulate policies and programs that combine Islamic financial services with skills development to promote sustainable women's economic empowerment and inclusive economic growth.

Study Limitations

This study was limited to women beneficiaries of Islamic microfinance programs in Gombe metropolis, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other settings. In addition, the cross-sectional research design captured data at a single point in time, restricting the ability to establish causal relationships. The study also focused only on microcredit, microsaving, microinsurance, and training and capacity building. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable evidence on the contribution of Islamic microfinance to women's economic empowerment.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the influence of Islamic microfinance services on women's empowerment in Gombe metropolis. The findings demonstrate that Islamic microfinance plays a significant role in improving women's economic well-being. Specifically, micro credit, micro insurance, and training were found to have positive and statistically significant effects on women's empowerment, while micro saving did not produce a statistically significant independent effect.

Among all the dimensions examined, training emerged as the strongest predictor of women's economic empowerment, highlighting the importance of equipping women with entrepreneurial, financial management, and business development skills alongside financial support. Furthermore, the structural model explained

63.3% of the variation in women's economic empowerment, indicating that the selected Islamic microfinance dimensions have substantial explanatory power in relation to women's economic empowerment.

Overall, the study concludes that Islamic microfinance serves as an effective mechanism for promoting women's empowerment in Gombe metropolis. However, its effectiveness is maximized when financial products are integrated with continuous capacity-building initiatives and risk protection services. These findings provide empirical evidence supporting the expansion of *Shariah*-compliant financial inclusion programs as a strategy for enhancing women's socio-economic development.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Islamic microfinance institutions should expand access to *Shariah*-compliant micro credit facilities with flexible repayment arrangements to enable more women to establish and expand income-generating enterprises.
2. Providers of Islamic microfinance should strengthen *Takaful* (micro insurance) programs to protect women entrepreneurs against business risks, health emergencies, and unexpected financial shocks.
3. Training programs should be made an integral component of Islamic microfinance services. Regular entrepreneurship training and capacity building, financial literacy education, business management, digital skills, and marketing support should accompany financial assistance.
4. Islamic microfinance institutions should redesign micro saving products by linking saving schemes with investment opportunities, access

to credit, and incentive-based programs to improve their contribution to women's economic empowerment.

5. Government agencies, Zakat and Waqf institutions, and development partners should collaborate with Islamic microfinance providers to increase funding, outreach, and awareness of *Shariah*-compliant financial services among women entrepreneurs in Gombe metropolis.
6. Future studies are encouraged to investigate additional determinants of women's empowerment, including financial literacy, digital financial inclusion, institutional support, and socio-cultural factors, using larger samples and broader geographical coverage.

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