

Original Research Article

Inclusivity in Social Spaces: A Lens on Deaf Muslims' Religious Participation

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ABSTRACT

A socially inclusive society is one in which all people feel valued, and their inherent differences and diversity are respected while their basic needs are met, guaranteeing a life of dignity. While efforts are being made to promote a socially inclusive society for all, existing evidence suggests that Deaf people remain excluded in key social spaces particularly, places of worship. This study sought to explore the extent to which the Deaf access spaces of worship, the barriers, and the mechanisms for their inclusion in such spaces in Ghana. Framed by Social Inclusion Theory and case study design, the study employed semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and key informant interviews in obtaining data from 31 respondents, including Deaf Muslims, religious leaders and parents. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were employed in the data analysis. The study revealed that there are Deaf Muslims who desire to participate in worship but are often excluded due to the absence of sign language interpretation, limited awareness of Deaf needs among Imams, gendered religious rules, and negative societal attitudes. It is recommended that sign language interpreters be prioritised and engaged in places of worship while awareness-raising through educative programs on the communication needs of the deaf and elimination of discriminatory tendencies be stepped up in order to attain meaningful inclusion of Deaf Muslims in social spaces.

Keywords: Social Spaces, Sign Language, Interpreters, Places of Worship, Mosque

Editor: Solomon Mekonnen

Article History:

Received: January 30, 2025

Accepted: June 07, 2025

Published: October 12, 2025

Citation: Duorinaah B. & Duorinaah E. (2025). Inclusivity in Social Spaces: A Lens on Deaf Muslims' Religious Participation. *DCIDJ*. 2025, 36:3. doi.org/10.20372/dcidj.854

Publisher: University of Gondar

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BACKGROUND

Introduction

It is globally acknowledged that a socially inclusive society is one in which all people feel valued and where their inherent differences and diversity are respected while people's basic needs are met, guaranteeing everyone a life of dignity (Robo, 2014). The plurality of ways and spaces for guaranteeing social inclusion is also well acknowledged (Jones, 2010; Crouch, 2007). Within this plurality is the right to association, which includes freedom of worship. As observed by Jones (2016), the right to association and freedom of worship are essential human rights protected under international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Religion is a crucial component of personal growth for everyone, including persons with disabilities (Treloar, 2002; Carter, 2013; Mikołajczuk, & Zielińska-Król, 2023). The spiritual, emotional, psychological, and

physical growth of a person is believed to be influenced by religion (Mikołajczuk, & Zielińska-Król, 2023; Koenig, 2012). Where people's religious activities and practices are highly regarded and the required spaces are created for them to exercise these, they experience a much more structured life in the ways they desire (Jones, 2010; Mohad et al., 2018).

Given their centrality to worship, the places in which people worship are not just loci for spirituality but also critical spaces for promoting association (Williams, 2016), community bonding, and social cohesion, which are all aspirations of social inclusion (Ahmed, 2018). Beyond the locus of worship, the characteristics of the worshipers also matter when it comes to social inclusion (Maraschin, 2017). Persons with disabilities, particularly Deaf Muslims, remain a critical group of worshippers whose characteristics, juxtaposed with the spaces for worship and related issues, may reflect the extent to which inclusion or exclusion manifests. Despite this importance, Deaf Muslims are believed to be excluded from participating effectively in public spaces of Islamic worship.

Laws and conventions abound to safeguard the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Evidence also exists regarding the extent to which countries adhere to these laws and conventions. In Indonesia, for instance, the constitution in Article 14 letter d of Law No. 8 of 2016 concerning Persons with Disabilities states categorically that religious rights for Persons with Disabilities include the right to obtain services based on their needs when carrying out worship according to their religions and beliefs (Wilson, 2013). Thus, PWDs should also be able to fulfil their religious rights without inhibitions. In compliance with these laws, some places of worship have been architecturally designed, making them disability-friendly, but that only serves the needs of persons with physical challenges. Communication facilities, however, have not been factored in many places of worship for the Deaf community (Kahfi & Jamaluddin, (2025). The United States of America has also implemented the Accessible Congregation Campaign (ACC), where places of worship that are physically and communicatively easy to access for Persons with Disabilities are prioritized. The Americans with Disability Act requires places of worship to have architectural designs, means of communication, and attitudes that encourage the full participation of children and Persons with Disabilities to engage in full religious practices.

In Ghana, the constitution provides for freedom of association, and this includes religious affiliations (Addai et al., 2013; Pokimica et al., 2012). Additionally, the Persons with Disability Act, 715 of 2006, guarantees the right of persons with disabilities to affiliate with any religion and be provided with services that enable the fulfilment of participation in the religious activity. The Ghana Statistical Service notes that about 470,737 people in Ghana have some degree of hearing loss (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Of this number, 385,794 have some difficulties, 65,495 have a lot of difficulties, while 19,448 cannot hear at all (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). On the religious affiliation of the citizenry, there are currently 6,135,572 Muslims in Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Despite these provisions and the presence of many Deaf Muslims in need of congregating to meet their spiritual and social needs, many social spaces and worship centres in Ghana lack adequate provisions for the Deaf.

Evidence regarding the exclusion of the Deaf in social spaces of worship in Ghana is limited. The limited evidence suggests that exclusion from information from religious leaders, due in part to communication barriers, significantly affects the inclusion of the Deaf in spaces of worship (Smith, 2011). Communication barriers, such as the lack of sign language interpretation and limited accessibility to religious text, are also believed to hinder Deaf Muslims' full participation in religious activities (Pokimica et al., 2012). The specificity of the exclusion of the Deaf in places of worship within the context of Ghana, however, remains unknown. This study, therefore, examined the specific barriers and manifestations of the exclusion of the Deaf in social spaces such as places of worship.

The goal of the study

The study sought to explore the extent to which Deaf Muslims accessed social spaces in Ghana. The following were the specific objectives.

To examine barriers to access to the Deaf to social spaces of worship in Ghana

To assess the mechanisms for promoting and sustaining the inclusion of Deaf Muslims in social spaces of worship

Theoretical underpinning

Social inclusion theory by David Pocock (Allman, 2013) was employed in understanding the phenomenon of inclusivity in social spaces, particularly places of worship. Social inclusion postulates that hierarchical notions of exclusion and inclusion run counter to development. Improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in social activities in society should be central to a just world. Problematizing and disadvantaging particular groups and the improvement of the ability, opportunity, and dignity of such groups of people, particularly based on their distinctiveness, reflect the central realms of social inclusion. Social inclusion is increasingly identified as both a process and a desired outcome for people with disabilities, with multiple ways of approaching and attaining real inclusivity. There exist multiple perspectives and ways of approaching social inclusion. Dominant approaches transcend economic participation to health and access to services, personal independence, self-determination, education, and general social interaction and fulfilment of social roles (Taylor, 2012). Irrespective of the approach, social inclusion is about improving the terms of participation to address exploitation and/or further deprivation of those affected due to resource poverty and/or multiple dimensions of their identity (World Bank, 2021).

Operationally, Deaf people in Ghana are among the most excluded groups in the country (Nortey, 2009). Religion and places of worship are the social products and spheres within which the inclusion of the Deaf as a matter of right, mandated by the constitution of Ghana, becomes critical. Among believers in Ghana, participation in religious activities plays a great role in strengthening their spiritual and physical well-being (Asaah, 2020; Benyah, 2023). Their religion also has a great influence on their other dimensions of life, including opportunities for education, livelihood, and social advancement (Dey, Ampomah & Wiafe-Akenteng, 2021). The terms for the participation of Deaf Muslims include the physical environment within which worship takes place, the knowledge and response to disability issues and other mediating factors, notably religious leaders and Deaf responsive communication mechanisms.

METHODS

The study employed a case study design in realizing the set objective. Even though the study was qualitative, limited quantitative data were required to justify the scope and depth of exclusion. Consequently, a concurrent mixed method approach was adopted, involving a simultaneous collection of both quantitative and qualitative data (Fobi, 2023; Merriam, 1998). The limited quantitative results offered a broad overview of patterns and trends, while the interview excerpts provided deeper, contextual insights that brought the numbers to life. This blend not only strengthened the credibility of the findings but also captured the lived experiences behind the statistics.

The study area was Tamale Metropolis in the Northern Region of Ghana. Tamale Metropolis was chosen for its significant population of Deaf Muslims (Ghana National Association of the Deaf, 2023; Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). In terms of spaces of worship, the study initially targeted as many centres and mosques as they existed in and around the Metropolitan center and the adjoining communities. Eventually, six centres of worship were covered due to their confirmation as the most frequented by Deaf Muslims.

Data on the exact number of Deaf Muslims in the study locations was unavailable at the time of the study. As a result, given the largely qualitative nature of the study with limited quantitative elements, the study adopted a manageable sample size of 16 Deaf Muslims, comprising 11 males and 5 females, as well as 9 parents of target Deaf Muslims. This comprised 5 males and 4 females who were themselves Muslims. The sample further included 6 Imams of the various mosques, having been convinced that the findings would eventually reflect the key characteristics of the population (Creswell, 2012).

Table 1: Sample Size

Category	Gender	Age range
Deaf Muslims	Male:	11
	Female:	5
Imams	Male:	6
	Female:	0
Parents	Male:	5
	Female:	4

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was adopted in reaching out to respondents (Creswell, 2012; Fobi, 2023; Hitchcock & Hughes, 2002). The study team first contacted the Ghana National Association of the Deaf (GNAD) to be linked to any Deaf Muslims in their contact list in the study region. Two contacts were provided after GNAD had an initial discussion with them for their consent. The team got in touch with the 2 contacts for a briefing, and having understood the rationale for the study, they obliged and participated in the study. They then referred the team to other participants since they are in a circle. As the members are familiar with each other, their guidance facilitated easy access to others. Thence, the Deaf participants served as a conduit for reaching out to the Imams in their respective centres of worship and their parents.

The instruments for data collection were a semi-structured interview guide, a key informant interview guide, and a focus group discussion guide. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. The sampled Deaf Muslims were interviewed guided by the semi-structured interview guide and through interviews in their respective homes based on pre-arranged dates. The data collectors were all proficient in Ghanaian sign language; therefore, the team collected the data directly. Additionally, one focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted in order to confirm and cross-fertilise the perspectives of the respondents. The members of the focus group were five Deaf Muslims (two females and three males) who were earlier interviewed. This was possible because the respondents resided in the same geographical location. On their part, the Imams and parents were interviewed in their capacity as key informants and using their native language, as they were typically non-Deaf with no formal education. The “Twi” and “Dagbani” languages were used as media of communication. The team is speakers of “Twi”, hence the “Twi” speakers were interviewed directly, while a language translator service was employed to facilitate communication for the “Dagbani” aspect.

Ethical considerations included prior informed consent from each participant. This comprised ensuring that each participant was provided with a comprehensive explanation of the study's general objective, procedures, potential risks, benefits, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the process, with all data being anonymised (Deaf Muslims- DM1 to DM16, Imam-IM1-IM6, and Parents of Deaf Muslims- PDM1 to PDM5. Also, IM1, IM2, etc., were used to anonymize the Imams) and stored securely to prevent any disclosure of participants'. The principle of respect for participants was upheld, as they were treated

with dignity, and their autonomy was honored by allowing them to make informed choices about participation. Additionally, the team planned thoroughly to minimize harm and ensured that the research process did not cause psychological, emotional, and social distress.

As part of the data analysis, the limited quantitative data was analysed using simple Excel. This data was mainly biographical information of the respondents. Simple charts were used in presenting and analysing the questionnaire's data. The qualitative data, which was also strengthened by recorded transcripts, were transcribed for analysis purposes. This was followed by thorough reading and familiarisation with the transcribed data, where the team patiently and repeatedly read and immersed themselves in the transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding of the content (Bryman, 2012). Subsequently, a preliminary list of initial codes was generated, identifying meaningful segments related to the research objectives. These codes were then organised into potential themes, considering patterns and variations across the data. Through repeated reviewing and refinement, themes were finalised based on their coherence, relevance, and ability to capture participants' perspectives.

Once the themes were established, the study team conducted a thorough analysis within each theme, comparing data segments to ensure consistency and coherence. Quotes were selected to exemplify each theme, providing supporting evidence for the interpretations made. Finally, the entire analysis was reviewed and refined to ensure an accurate representation of participants' experiences and perspectives, and the findings were presented in a comprehensive thematic framework, linking back to the research objectives and interview context. In presenting the data, the study employed a complementary approach by integrating both quantitative and qualitative findings to enrich understanding.

RESULTS

Demographics of participants

Table 3.1: Demographics of participants

Participants		
Educational Status		
Educational Level	Frequency	Percentage
No Education	18	58
Basic	7	23
Senior High/Vocational	4	13
Tertiary	2	6
Total	31	100

The data showed that the majority of the respondents, 18 (58%), had no education. Only 7 (23%) had basic education, and another 4 (25%) had up to Senior High School/Vocational education. Two (6%) of the respondents reported having a tertiary education. They were either at the University, College of Education, Technical University, or had completed one of these.

Barriers to the Access of the Deaf to Social Spaces of Worship in Ghana

The first objective investigated the barriers to the inclusion of Deaf Muslims in social spaces of worship in Ghana. Respondents' views through questionnaires are presented in the figure below.

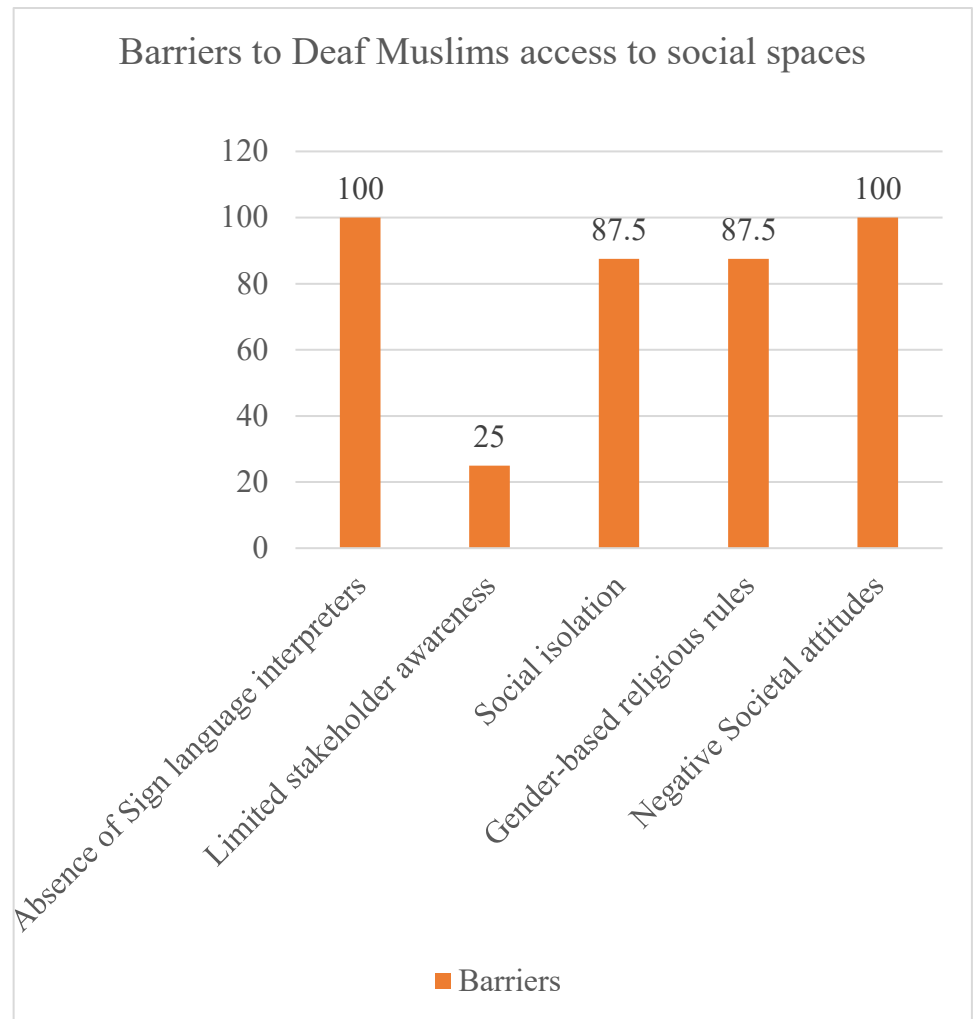


Figure 1.0: Barriers to Deaf Muslims' access to social spaces

Figure 1.0 shows that 100% of the Deaf participants confirmed the absence of sign language interpreters as a barrier to their access to social spaces; 25% also raised limited stakeholder awareness as a barrier. Also, 87.5% identified social isolation as a barrier to participation in social spaces. Among these, 87.5% noted that gender-based religious rules as a barrier, and negative societal attitudes were also raised by all the participants, with 100% mentioning it. The qualitative data supported these concerns and stressed that they were major issues that affected their full participation. The qualitative data are presented below:

Availability of Sign Language Interpretation Services

Supporting the quantitative responses, the interviews indicated that none of the 6 worship centres that the study covered had sign language interpretation services provided. Due to these challenges, all the Deaf Muslims and nearly all the Imams noted that the limited access to communication services through sign language interpreting deprives many Deaf people of participation in their religious activities. In buttressing their position, DM2 said;

“There is no sign language service provided at the mosque for us (Deaf people,) and as a result, I mostly do not feel included”. This assertion was corroborated by DM8 by saying; I am not factored into the plans of the mosque. This is because there is no sign language interpreter to facilitate communication for me. So I decided not to go.

In the effort of some religious centres to provide information to their congregants, they integrate technology through mounted television sets that project prayers and scriptures scrolling. However, it was observed that such information was inaccessible because the Deaf have little knowledge of Arabic, in which the scriptures were presented. The English was missing in the projection. DM12 indicated,

"There is a television set mounted in the mosque I worship, but the projections are in Arabic. I cannot read Arabic, so it doesn't make any sense to me".

In the opinion of DM16, the projection moves so fast that even if they are able to read Arabic, they would still not be able to read it:

"The projections move very fast. You know some of us are slow in reading. Even if I could read Arabic, the speed at which it moves, I will not be able to read, and it is not repeated, too".

Due to the challenges in communication, some of the Deaf fail to join other congregants in the designated public places of worship. It also emerged that their exclusion is further heightened during festivities, where the Deaf congregants become passive participants or simply absent. It is also a common practice to find the Deaf Muslims seated among other congregants and only observing proceedings, as lamented by one of the respondents in the following:

"During festivities, I join family and friends at the mosque dressed in my festive wear. Everybody is happy listening to the sermons, while I sit without information. Sometimes I see them laughing and looking happy, but I am just seated, not knowing what is happening" (DM6).

This points to a broader accessibility issue beyond the mere presence of sign language interpreters. Even with technological provisions, if content is not linguistically and visually adapted, it excludes Deaf persons from full participation (Napier, 2011; McKee, 2015). Sign language services must be formalised and not treated as optional or volunteer-driven offerings (Hauser et al., 2010; Fellingner et al., 2012) if full inclusion is to be achieved. Moreover, worship content should be presented in simple, readable language and appropriate formats, as emphasised by Emond et al. (2015) and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD, 2018).

Stakeholder awareness

In the quest to confirm and validate the quantitative data on limited stakeholder awareness, the team reached out to the stakeholders (Imams) for their responses on the challenges facing the Deaf congregants at their various mosques. Their responses showed that the majority (4) of Imams in the study were unaware of the presence of deaf congregants at their centres. The cause, according to the participants, was the failure of the deaf congregants to make themselves and their needs known; IM 5 reported:

Deaf! I have never seen a Deaf person in our mosque. They are not there and do not worship with us. However, issues of the Deaf are delicate and would need many plans to be able to accommodate them.

Some participants value diversity and are willing to make provisions for their communication needs. IM2 said:

"If we were aware, we would gladly make provisions for their inclusion. Qur'an preaches of acceptance and inclusion of all persons without discrimination, hence on that basis, provisions could be made for them".

The exceptions were two participants who reported their awareness of some deaf congregants during worship, but added that their presence was occasional. They indicated that despite their occasional presence, their mosques did not have a dedicated sign

language interpreter due to the uncertainty of their presence. IM4 indicated that there was a volunteer sign language interpreter who provides service as and when he is at prayers, and the Deaf are also present. The respondent said:

“There is a sign language interpreter to help the Deaf from time to time. The interpreter is, however, not permanently engaged, so the dedication to duty is not encouraging. The interpreting is offered on a voluntary basis since the interpreter is also a Muslim and worships with us. As a result, it is only when the interpreter is available during prayers, there is an interpretation service.” (IM 5).

This unawareness echoed (Steinberg et al., 2006; Kusters et al., 2017) that the exclusion of Deaf persons in public institutions was often a result of systemic invisibility rather than deliberate intent. To minimise this, sensitising religious leaders through inclusive education is crucial, especially in societies where disability is stigmatised or misconstrued (Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Shakespeare, 2013).

Social Isolation at Worship Places

Society plays a critical role in the nurturing of the young. Social acceptance in human life helps provide the individual with confidence in being loved, cherished, and valued. That, in turn, helps in the complete development and socio-emotional development of the individual. One issue that was raised was the issue of social isolation in places of worship. When the Deaf Muslims are seated in the mosque, a cross-section of the congregants does not like to sit near them or socialise with them. They are often isolated, and the feeling of isolation affects their socio-emotional well-being. DM1, who is a female, reported;

The few times that I have been to the mosque, some of those who know I am Deaf do not want to sit close to me. They have a bad attitude towards me. Maybe they feel I am not fit to be in their midst. They would rather make my family members sit by me on both sides.

Stigma of this kind is pervasive and is widely reported in disability studies literature. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2011), attitudinal barriers are often more debilitating than physical ones. De Clerck (2019) argued that for true inclusion, spiritual communities must promote emotional belonging, not just physical presence. This is the sure way of ensuring that, irrespective of a person's ability, the person can function effectively.

Gendered Religious Rules

Two female respondents from the focus group discussion supported the quantitative assertion that gender-based religious rules posed a significant barrier to accessing social spaces. They noted that the seating arrangements in the mosque did not facilitate their effective participation in worship. They indicated that the mosque is structured such that females are seated at the back, separated from the men by a barricade. This physical barrier obstructs their view of the front pew of the mosque, where the male worshippers are situated. Consequently, they noted that even if a male sign language interpreter was present, they would be unable to benefit from his services, as the barricade prevents them from seeing him or engaging with the front of the congregation.

“We sit at the back end of the mosque with fellow women, separated by a barricade that blocks our view of what is happening at the front. This arrangement leaves us completely disconnected from seeing the leader and whatever is happening in the front” (FGD DM1)

“Even if there is a male interpreter present, it doesn’t help us because we can’t see him from where we are seated. It feels like we are excluded from fully participating in worship, simply because of our position in the mosque and our disability” (FGD DM3)

This setup posed a significant challenge to their inclusion and access to the spiritual and communal aspects of worship. The research team sought the perspectives of Imams regarding the practice of separating women from men during worship. Specifically, they inquired about the protocol for accommodating a deaf female congregant who requires the services of a male sign language interpreter. The question focused on whether the interpreter could be permitted to accompany the deaf female worshipper in the women’s section or if the deaf female would be permitted to join the men’s section to facilitate effective communication. In response, IM 5 said:

“Islamic teachings discourage the mixing and close interaction of men and women in the same space without boundaries, as it is believed to potentially lead to temptation or inappropriate behaviour. Such interactions are considered a risk to moral integrity and are therefore discouraged. This principle is supported by the Quran, in Surah Al-Ahzab (33:53), which advises believers to communicate with women from behind a screen for the sake of maintaining purity of heart for both parties.”

Social norms and attitudes

Participants of the interviews echoed the report from Table 1.0 above that negative societal attitudes towards the participation of Deaf Muslims in worship exist, as they face discrimination and misunderstanding about their needs within the Muslim community. Respondent DM 12 shared: *People in the mosque often assume we cannot understand what is being taught or prayed because we cannot hear, so they ignore us completely, leaving us out of important activities.*

This exclusion not only isolates Deaf individuals but also reflects a lack of awareness about the potential for Deaf Muslims to fully engage in worship with appropriate accommodations. Similarly, respondent DM 16 expressed frustration, stating:

“Some people believe that because we are Deaf, we are not fully capable of practicing Islam properly. They sometimes make hurtful comments or even refuse to sit near us, as if our disability makes us less faithful or less clean.”

Such attitudes create an unwelcoming environment that discourages active participation and often leads to hurtful feelings among Deaf Muslims. These experiences accentuate the urgent need for sensitisation within Muslim communities about the capabilities and rights of Deaf individuals, as well as the importance of fostering inclusivity. Negative perceptions not only alienate but also diminish the spiritual connection of Deaf Muslims in worship settings.

Mechanisms for promoting and sustaining the inclusion of Deaf Muslims in social spaces of worship

One of the study’s objectives was to investigate the strategies that parents of deaf children or relatives who are Muslims use to inculcate Islamic values in their younger ones. The figure below presents the responses from the 6 participant parents.

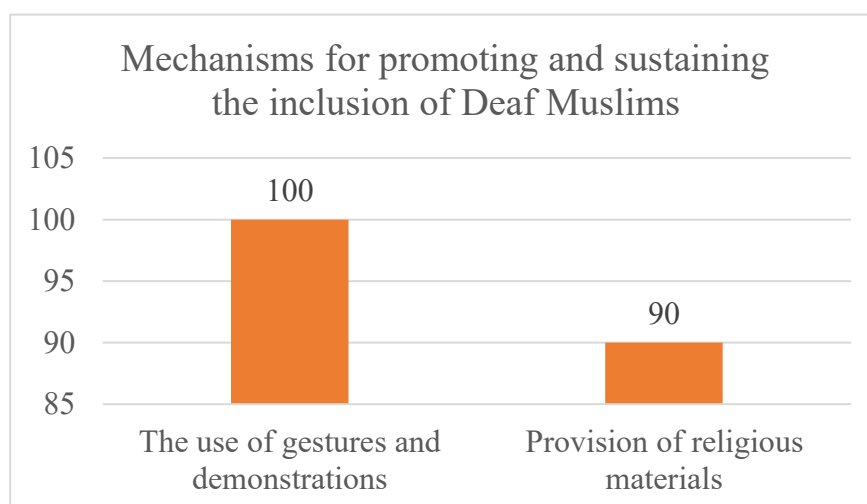


Figure 1.2: Parental Strategies for Imparting Religious Values to Deaf Muslims

Figure 1.2 shows that all the parents (100%) indicated using gestures (local signs) to communicate with their children about how some rituals are performed in Islam. These responses were further validated through in-depth interviews, as said by PDM6:

“Communication with my deaf daughter is through gestures and body language, like pointing to objects. Sometimes I point to the objects. Once I point at the thing, she automatically understands what I mean.”

Parents also demonstrated how ablution is performed for the deaf children without uttering any words. The words in the recitations are meditated upon, and they are also expected to do similar meditation while demonstrating as done.

“I only demonstrate the performance of ablution to my Deaf Muslim child. He imitates what I do, such as the positioning, bowing, etc. Aside from that, the actual recitations and prayers, I am unable to teach him, but Allah, in his mercy’s shall have mercy on them” (PDM 2).

In their effort to provide opportunities for the Deaf to undertake their daily obligation of worship, almost all the parents (83%) again said they provided religious materials as a way of supporting their Muslim deaf children to perform the religious activity of worship. A participant said,

“I make provisions for her (Deaf Muslim) prayer dresses, hijab, and ablution can, which aid her to pray. There are mats she can use, and the mosque is in the yard where she can pray” (PDM 1).

PDM 4 corroborated the accession of PDM1 and said,

“I made sure I bought her all the dresses he needs and I ensured he does not lack anything. Even when we are late, I still make sure he gets an ablution can for himself while the other people pair the cans left.”

DISCUSSION

The study findings show that none of the centres of worship had basic sign language interpretation services, nor were there Deaf-friendly technologies in place to facilitate

communication. The absence of these essentials, which could otherwise deepen the effective participation of the Deaf, is consistent with Rana (2025), whose study on North American Deaf Muslims revealed that even though Islamic doctrine requires believers to acquire essential religious knowledge to fulfil religious obligations, many Deaf and Hard of Hearing Muslims face significant barriers due to the lack of accessible resources, particularly sign language translations of sermons and instructions. From the rights perspective, these absences are counter to the Disability Act of Ghana (Asante & Sasu, 2015).

Research such as that by Pokimica et al. (2012) and Fobi & Oppong (2019) shows that sign language interpretation services are crucial to the full participation of the Deaf in this all-important component of human existence. While availability and utilization are clear demonstrations of the effort toward an inclusive community, the absence of these services, as revealed by the study, is a great void. In most Ghanaian and African social contexts, religion and matters of faith are paramount, and therefore, no one should be excluded due to the absence of sign language interpretation services.

The study also revealed that most Imams lacked awareness about Deaf and Deaf-related issues. As the leaders in places of worship, some Imams were unable to detect the presence of Deaf congregants. This finding supports earlier studies by Shah and Bhatti (2023), Lewis (2020), and Mokhtar and Omar (2018), which all confirmed that a critical knowledge gap exists among religious leaders regarding Deaf-related issues, significantly hindering the participation of Deaf individuals in religious activities and related social spaces. While acknowledging the effects of awareness and disability-friendly mosque facilities, Muhammad and Fitriani (2025) observed that positive attention from mosque authorities and Jemaah or congregants can be effective remedies for increasing the participation of persons with disabilities in worship. If the Imams, who are the leaders of the service, are aware of Deafness and the needs of the Deaf, adequate provisions could be put in place to accommodate and welcome them. Social inclusion theory situates this ignorance as a barrier to opportunity and dignity, which are two of its central pillars. A lack of understanding of Deaf culture, communication methods, and the unique needs of Deaf congregants often results in their marginalization within religious spaces. Their limited awareness has been linked to the exclusion of Deaf individuals from meaningful engagement in worship and leadership roles, as seen in contexts ranging from Pakistan to Malaysia and beyond.

Due to the nature of the Deaf being unable to benefit from incidental learning, it is difficult for them to benefit from some aspects of religious activities, such as Qu'ran recitals. As admonished by Fobi and Oppong (2019), deafness is a hidden disability that is hardly noticed unless the person demonstrates certain behaviours. Where religious leaders are intentional about the presence of everyone, the Deaf can also be noticed and supported inclusively. From the social model perspective, Deaf people, like other persons with disabilities, patronize settings only as long as they support their communication needs. The elimination of awareness and material barriers and guaranteeing persons with disabilities unimpeded participation in all spheres of community life. For Deaf individuals who desire an inclusive worship, their challenge is the environment, which requires an adjustment in the communication and related needs of these Deaf congregants. Anything short of this implies the potential for or reality of their exclusion.

Beyond the awareness gap and resource barriers, social isolation emerged as a key exclusionary practice faced by the Deaf who patronise places of worship. This finding supports existing literature on the stigma and discrimination faced by Deaf individuals in religious and social spaces. For instance, Shah and Bhatti (2023) reported that cultural misconceptions about Deafness often result in exclusion and marginalisation, particularly in communal worship settings. Mokhtar and Omar (2018) found in their study that Deaf Muslims in Malaysia frequently experienced social isolation in mosques due to a lack of

awareness and understanding among other congregants. Acts and omissions that tend to isolate the Deaf have detrimental effects on their socio-emotional well-being, confidence, and self-worth. Social acceptance is a critical aspect of human development, fostering a sense of belonging and emotional stability. Therefore, the revelation that a cross-section of congregants in mosques displayed a reluctance to sit near Deaf individuals or socialise with them is at variance with inclusivity. Viewed under Pocock's framework (Taylor, 2012), inclusion in places of worship must involve meaningful social interaction and not just access to physical space. The lack of acceptance, whether overt or covert, also violates the goal of social interaction and role fulfilment, which is an essential domain of social inclusion.

From the gendered perspective, the practice of confining women to the back of the worship area behind a barricade emerged as a significant barrier to the full participation of Deaf individuals. This arrangement posed a double burden for Deaf females who desire to participate in worship, as it restricts visual access to the front, which is often problematic for Deaf worshippers who rely heavily on visual cues to engage with the service. This finding is consistent with Mokhtar and Omar (2018), who observed that structural arrangements in Malaysian mosques often limited the participation of Deaf Muslims by failing to accommodate their visual needs. Earlier studies by Burke et al. (2011) emphasised the importance of accessible religious spaces, noting that barriers to visibility and communication hinder the spiritual engagement of Deaf individuals. The findings are also consistent with Shah and Bhatti (2023), who stressed how an inadequate understanding of Deaf culture and needs by religious leaders perpetuates exclusion in worship settings. As provided in Social Inclusion Theory, rigid social norms disadvantage distinct groups. When religious practices fail to accommodate diversity, they reinforce exclusion even while claiming universality. Rather, the adaptation of the physical and symbolic arrangements in spaces of worship presents a positive route for inclusive participation.

Furthermore, pervasive negative societal attitudes faced by Deaf Muslims in worship were identified as significant obstructions to effective worship by the Deaf. Discriminatory tendencies by peer worshipers who are non-Muslim and misconceptions and stereotypical posture towards Deaf individuals as an incapable group relative to comprehending prayers or teachings, also impact their inclusion. Shah and Bhatti (2023) documented similar challenges among Deaf Muslims in Pakistan and noted that misconceptions about the capabilities of Deaf Muslims often led to exclusion and isolation. The finding, however, disagrees with Lewis's (2020) report that some faith communities work to accommodate individuals with disabilities, including the Deaf, by ensuring inclusive practices such as the use of sign language interpreters and accessible worship formats. This contrast, however, reflects the differences in the level of disability awareness and resources available in various communities. These negative societal attitudes reflect deeply ingrained misconceptions. Such stigma exemplifies Pocock's claim that inclusion is not only structural but also relational—restoring dignity requires shifting social attitudes. These attitudes prevent the fulfilment of Deaf Muslims' social and spiritual roles, stressing the need for widespread disability awareness and education in religious contexts.

The fact that parents found it difficult to communicate and transmit religious values to their children can be a major factor for Deaf Muslims. Due to the challenges of communication, parents resort to other means, such as gestures, to inculcate the values in the younger ones. It was heart-warming that the study found that parents only rely on gestures to send their messages. This finding agrees with Shah and Bhatti (2023), who identified similar strategies among parents of Deaf Muslims in Pakistan. In their study, gestures and demonstrations were primary tools for teaching religious practices due to the lack of accessible religious instruction. This finding exposes the issue of parents' inability to learn sign language since most Deaf persons are born to hearing parents and their mode

of communication is verbal. The Deaf are compelled to make do with verbal communication coupled with gestures. This accentuates the communication gap in transmitting religious values. From a social inclusion lens, this limitation constrains both the child's opportunities and the parent's role in religious education, hence violating the principle of empowerment through opportunity. Advocacy for sign language education among hearing parents is thus a necessary step toward inclusive spiritual development.

The study also found that parents played an initiative-taking role in ensuring that their Deaf children performed their daily obligations of worship by providing essential religious materials such as hijabs, ablution cans, and prayer mats. This is in line with the view of Mokhtar and Omar (2018), who found that parents often take the lead in providing material and emotional support to ensure their children can participate in religious activities. While parents provided physical materials to support religious practice (e.g., prayer mats, hijabs), these efforts, though important, are not sufficient for genuine inclusion. Pocock's theory calls for structural and procedural changes that go beyond material access to communication, dignity, and role fulfilment. The findings support this by demonstrating that while material support facilitates routine participation, it must be supplemented by systemic changes to truly empower Deaf Muslims.

The concept of inclusion, particularly within the framework of disability and religious spaces, refers not only to the physical presence of persons with disabilities in communal settings but also to ensuring their full, meaningful participation in the spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions of religious life (Haynes, 2020; Booth, 2011; Ainscow, 2016). Inclusion in this context implies equitable access to information, communication, and community belonging. Focusing on this study, inclusion is not just an outcome, but a process shaped by communication accessibility, social attitudes, religious doctrine, and structural alignment. However, as the data revealed, deaf Muslims in the sampled worship centers experienced consistent exclusion across these dimensions. Moreover, the study espoused the intersectional nature of exclusion. Deaf Muslim women faced a double burden due to both their gender and disability. The gendered structure of mosques, where women are positioned at the back, separated by barricades, physically isolates them from potential male interpreters, further creating a layered exclusion (Crenshaw, 1991). This intersection of disability and gender roles reveals how outwardly neutral religious norms can become tools of systemic exclusion when they intersect with disability. The data, therefore, supports the conceptual position that true inclusion in social spaces, particularly places of worship and community life, cannot be achieved without addressing the underlying social and structural barriers. As noted by McIlroy & Storbeck (2011), inclusion in religious spaces requires not just presence but participation, something the current mosque environments fail to provide due to a lack of awareness, institutional readiness and interpretive services. Through this lens, the findings of the study challenge the passive or tokenistic interpretations of inclusion and instead support a more robust, transformative model of inclusion that involves active engagement, accommodation, and restructuring of communal norms.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings brought to light the barriers to the inclusion of Deaf Muslims in worship, which include a lack of sign language interpretation services, with its resultant effect on the inability of Deaf Muslims to participate meaningfully in worship, the failure of the religious leaders to notice and prioritise the needs of the Deaf, and social isolation through overt and covert discriminatory tendencies. The combined effect of limited stakeholder awareness and structural and attitudinal challenges is reflected in the depth of exclusion of Deaf Muslims in social spaces of worship. These barriers reflect a broader failure to

embrace the principles of inclusivity mandated by both religious and human rights frameworks. The persistent exclusion of Deaf Muslims in worship settings contradicts this principle, necessitating vital action to enhance a culture of inclusivity. The study, therefore, concluded that social spaces for Muslim worship remain largely inaccessible to Deaf Muslims despite efforts by the state in the form of the enactment of a Disability Law, by families, and few religious leaders to ensure meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities, including Deaf Muslims.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended:

Mosques should engage professional sign language interpreters permanently, in collaboration with Deaf associations. This would ensure consistency and reliability in communication.

Religious content should be linguistically accessible using visual aids, slower-paced projections, and translations into simplified English or Ghanaian Sign Language where applicable.

Imams and congregants need targeted awareness training about the rights and capabilities of Deaf persons to dismantle harmful attitudes.

Female Deaf congregants should be accommodated through trained female interpreters or real-time video relay systems within the women's section.

Deaf Muslims must be involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of inclusive religious practices to ensure their needs are authentically represented.

Data availability

The data from this study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and the need to protect participant confidentiality, particularly because of the identifiable nature of the qualitative data involving the participants. However, anonymised data may be made available on reasonable request from the corresponding author. Access to the data will be granted to qualified academic researchers who provide a sound data usage plan and have obtained approval from an appropriate institutional review board or ethics committee. All shared data will exclude any personally identifiable information and will comply with data protection policies in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and institutional ethical guidelines.

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