

Women in leadership: Exploring potential and challenges in the Islamic context

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Abstract:

Muslim women's leadership has gained global attention. They actively pursue leadership positions while facing gender stereotypes and traditional perceptions. This study explores the factors of religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and their experiences of challenges. The study aims to analyze the level of trust in the leadership potential of Muslim women, identify the main supporting factors (religious knowledge, multitasking, emotional intelligence), and explore the challenges arising from traditional interpretations of Islam and low public trust. This study employed a mixed-methods approach with 127 Muslim women leaders. Data were collected through interviews and surveys, analyzed using thematic analysis and descriptive statistics, and then integrated. The findings revealed three key points: (1) The leadership potential of Muslim women is demonstrated by high trust (63%) and optimism about future role enhancement (56%). (2) The main supporting factors include religious knowledge, multitasking, emotional intelligence, and perceived gender equality. (3) The main challenges stem from traditional interpretations of Islam and low trust in Muslim women's leadership, which limit acceptance. The study concludes that Muslim women's leadership is influenced by individual potential, supporting factors, and religious and social interpretive barriers, although progress in perceptions of gender equality in the workplace is evident. This study contributes to the development of human capital and intersectionality in Muslim women's leadership and offers practical recommendations including inclusive training, affirmative policies, and advocacy for more egalitarian religious interpretations.

Keywords:

Muslim Women;
Leadership; Potential;
Challenges.



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INTRODUCTION

The role of women in leadership has gained increasing global attention, with movements aimed at achieving gender equality and fostering inclusive progress (Mukherjee, 2015; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). However, although only 26 countries had 28 women serving as Heads of State or Government and women accounted for just 22.8% of cabinet ministers worldwide, gender disparities in political leadership remain substantial (UN Women & Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). Furthermore, women continue to be underrepresented in corporate leadership, occupying fewer than one-quarter of C-suite positions in corporate America (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2021). This persistent leadership gap has also been widely documented in the academic literature (Mah et al., 2023). Muslim women in Islamic contexts continue to face significant challenges. This persists despite historical examples such as Khadijah and Aisyah. The issue of Muslim women's leadership remains an ongoing debate, shaped by interpretations, cultural norms, and social structures (Shah, 2020). Thus, the gap between equality movements and reality underscores the need for structural reforms, cultural change, and more inclusive reinterpretations of religious teachings to support Muslim women's leadership.

Based on previous studies, research on women's leadership can be classified into three main thematic groups. First, several Muslim-majority countries still restrict women's access to leadership through legal and policy frameworks; thus, formal legal barriers reduce women's participation in politics (Cherayi & Jose, 2016; Meng & Neill, 2021; Koburtay & Abuhussein, 2023). Second, social, cultural, and economic transformations have enhanced Muslim women's leadership roles; however, gender stereotypes, traditional perceptions, and structural barriers continue to constrain the development of their potential (Haq, 2013; Abadi et al., 2022; Bako & Syed, 2018). Third, existing studies identify challenges and opportunities for Muslim women in leadership, yet in-depth analyses of individual-level factors influencing their participation remain limited (Thompson, 2015; Zuhro, 2021; Abalkhail, 2017). Accordingly, this study offers a novel contribution by integrating individual-level factors of Muslim women's leadership, addressing the existing research gap that has predominantly focused on structural determinants, and emphasizing potential, enabling factors, and challenges within a unified empirical analytical framework.

This study aims to analyze the level of trust in the leadership potential of Muslim women, identify key enabling factors (religious knowledge, multitasking ability, and emotional intelligence), and explore challenges arising from traditional interpretations of Islam and low public trust. Accordingly, the research questions are as follows: (1) How is the leadership potential of Muslim women characterized? (2) What are the key supporting factors of Muslim women's leadership? and (3) What are the main challenges faced by Muslim women in leadership? This study contributes to the human capital theory by identifying religious knowledge, multitasking ability, and emotional intelligence as key leadership assets of Muslim women. In addition, it extends intersectionality theory within the Islamic context. From a practical perspective, the findings provide a basis for affirmative policy development, inclusive value-based leadership training, and public advocacy aimed at addressing restrictive traditional interpretations.

The core argument of this study is that public perceptions of Muslim women's leadership tend to be positive and optimistic, indicating the presence of substantial social capital that can enhance their participation in strategic sectors. Their leadership capacity is strengthened by three key factors: deep religious understanding as a foundation of ethics and integrity, multitasking ability as a manifestation of flexibility in managing complex roles, and emotional intelligence, which although recognized still requires further strengthening in terms of

perceived empathy and self-regulation. However, structural challenges remain significant, particularly those stemming from traditional interpretations of religious texts that tend to be restrictive and reinforce gender stereotypes. These barriers not only limit women's access to leadership positions but also perpetuate the belief that leadership is inherently a masculine domain. Therefore, reform of more inclusive religious interpretations, along with broader cultural norm transformation, is necessary.

METHOD

Research approach

This study employed a mixed-methods design that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches (Vebrianto et al., 2020). This design was selected to obtain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the potentials and challenges faced by Muslim women in leadership roles. The qualitative approach enables the exploration of subjective experiences and personal meanings, while the quantitative approach provides an overview of general trends and statistical patterns. The integration of both approaches ensures that the research findings are not only rich in narrative detail but also measurable and limitedly generalizable.

Data collection

Data were collected through interviews and surveys. The interviews were conducted with women holding leadership positions in various sectors, including education, business, and community organizations. The interview focus included their leadership trajectories, the challenges they faced, and their perspectives on gender within Islamic teachings. Meanwhile, the survey was used to complement the quantitative data regarding women's leadership participation, educational attainment, income levels, and broader public perceptions.

Participants

The participants in this study were Muslim women currently occupying leadership positions in various professional and community sectors, totaling 127 respondents. The selection criteria included women with relevant leadership experience and diverse backgrounds in terms of education, occupational sectors, and career development. Focusing on Muslim women enables the study to explore the influence of religious principles on women's leadership trajectories. This approach ensures the representation of diverse perspectives and allows for an examination of how Islamic values and social expectations shape women's experiences and opportunities in leadership.

Data analysis

Thematic text analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative interview data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). This method facilitates the identification of recurring themes, unique experiences, and patterns related to women's leadership trajectories. The analytical process involved coding, categorization, and the derivation of key themes. Simultaneously, the survey data were analyzed using statistical tools to produce descriptive statistics. This analysis highlights trends and comparisons related to variables such as educational background, salary level, and leadership participation. This dual approach provides both narrative insights and measurable patterns.

Data integration

Findings from the qualitative and quantitative methods were integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and barriers to Muslim women's leadership. The qualitative data explained and contextualize patterns observed in the

quantitative results, while the statistical findings were used to reinforce or, in some cases, challenge the qualitative outcomes. This mixed-methods integration enables the study to generate a richer and more in-depth account by linking individual experiences with broader social patterns. The aim is to make a meaningful contribution to discussions on gender roles in Islam and to support gender equality in leadership contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

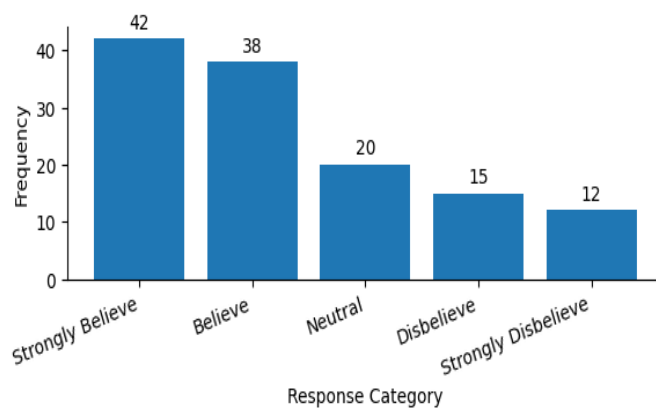
Result

Potential of muslim women in leadership

In this study, the focus on Muslim women's leadership potential yielded notable findings. Data from 127 respondents indicate that Muslim women are perceived to have significant potential to perform leadership roles, with the majority of respondents expressing confidence in the leadership qualities of this group.

Figure 1

Survey on the Leadership Potential of Muslim Women



Source: Processed by the author, 2024

Figure 1 shows that, based on a survey of 127 respondents, 63% expressed confidence in the leadership potential of Muslim women, with 33% strongly agreeing and 30% agreeing. Meanwhile, 16% remained neutral, 12% reported low confidence, and 9% reported very low confidence. These findings indicate a perception predominantly characterized by optimism, although 21% of participants still held doubtful or negative views. The positive tendency among most respondents reflects public support for Muslim women's leadership. However, the presence of neutral and low-confidence responses highlights the need to enhance literacy and awareness regarding gender equality in leadership contexts.

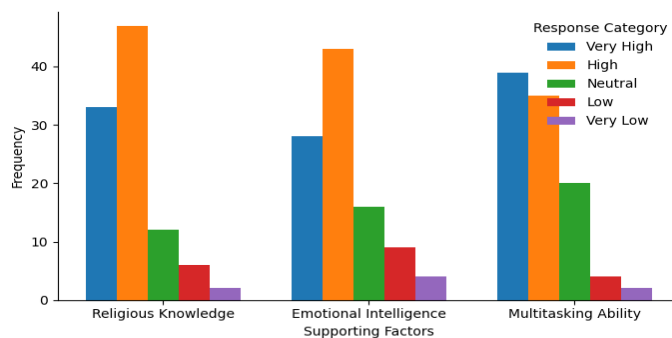
Public perception of Muslim women's leadership is generally supportive, offering valuable social capital to boost their participation in strategic roles. The high confidence level suggests a social shift toward greater acceptance within Islamic contexts, driven by changing norms and visible female role models. However, a notable neutral segment reflects uncertainty or limited exposure, while a smaller but meaningful low-confidence group indicates persistent skepticism. These respondents require targeted interventions, including educational campaigns, role-model presentations, and inclusive reinterpretations of religious teachings. Overall, the dominant positive tendency provides a foundation for progress. Yet, converting neutral and doubtful individuals into active supporters remains essential for achieving meaningful structural and cultural change. Without such efforts, the existing support may not translate into sustained increases in Muslim women's leadership representation across sectors.

Key supporting factors in muslim women's leadership

This study identifies key factors that enhance the leadership potential of Muslim women, including their strategies, values, and experiences in overcoming challenges. These insights illustrate how they generate positive change within professional environments. The findings may serve as a basis for policies and practices aimed at empowering Muslim women in leadership roles.

Figure 2

Supporting Factors for Muslim Women's Leadership



Source: Processed by the author, 2024.

Figure 2 shows that the supporting factors of Muslim women's leadership were measured using three indicators among 100 respondents. For religious knowledge, 33% reported a very high level, 47% high, 12% neutral, 6% low, and 2% very low. Emotional intelligence was rated as very high by 28%, high by 43%, neutral by 16%, low by 9%, and very low by 4%. Meanwhile, multitasking ability recorded 39% very high, 35% high, 20% neutral, 4% low, and 2% very low. Overall, most respondents rated all three factors at high to very high levels.

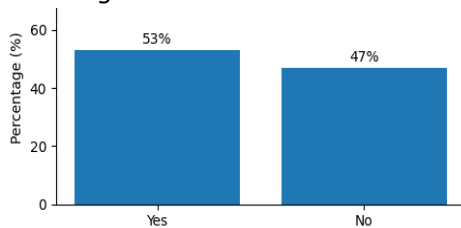
Based on the findings, the supporting factors of Muslim women's leadership, comprising religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and multitasking ability, received predominantly positive assessments from respondents. Religious knowledge emerged as the most favorably rated factor, with a substantial majority reporting high to very high levels. Emotional intelligence also demonstrated strong positive perceptions, though with a slightly higher proportion of moderate and low ratings compared to religious knowledge. Multitasking ability showed a notable pattern, with a majority rating it at high to very high levels, yet it also recorded a relatively larger neutral category than the other two factors. This pattern suggests that while multitasking is generally recognized as a strength, it may be perceived as less consistently developed across respondents. Across all three indicators, the concentration of high ratings confirms that these supporting factors are collectively perceived as well-established among Muslim women leaders. However, the presence of neutral and low responses indicates room for further strengthening, particularly in emotional intelligence and multitasking competencies to enhance leadership effectiveness comprehensively.

Challenges based on religious teachings

The challenges of Muslim women's leadership arise from differing interpretations of Islamic texts and traditions; wherein certain parties restrict women's roles due to historical or cultural contexts. Religious doctrines are often misinterpreted to justify gender inequality, while cultural norms reinforce the belief that leadership is a male domain. Understanding these challenges is essential for promoting inclusive leadership practices that align with Islamic principles.

Figure 3

Challenges in Muslim Women's Leadership



Source: Processed by the author, 2024.

Figure 3 shows that the greatest challenge to Muslim women's leadership does not lie in a lack of individual capacity, but rather in social constructions shaped by traditional interpretations of Islamic teachings. A total of 47% of respondents acknowledged that rigid religious interpretations reinforce gender stereotypes and position leadership as a masculine domain. These barriers are twofold: first, they limit women's opportunities to access strategic positions; and second, they create an unsupportive environment even when women attain leadership roles. As a result, some women tend to hesitate or feel reluctant to pursue leadership positions. Therefore, efforts to promote a more inclusive and contextual understanding of Islam are essential to creating a more equitable ecosystem that supports the full participation of Muslim women in leadership.

Discussion

This study on women and leadership identifies three key findings. First, the leadership potential of Muslim women is indicated by 63% of respondents expressing strong confidence, along with 56% who are optimistic about the increasing role of women in the future. Second, the main supporting factors for Muslim women's leadership include religious knowledge (80%), multitasking ability (74%), and emotional intelligence (71%), which collectively strengthen leadership capacity; moreover, 64% of respondents support gender equality in the workplace. Third, the main challenges are traditional interpretations of Islam (47%) and a lack of confidence in Muslim women's leadership (21%), which continue to limit acceptance in leadership contexts. Overall, Muslim women demonstrate strong leadership potential supported by religious knowledge, multitasking ability, and emotional intelligence. However, they still face barriers in the form of traditional interpretations and low confidence in women's leadership.

The findings are relevant to ongoing social debates in Muslim societies, including Indonesia, where discussions on women's leadership remain contested. Amid growing awareness of gender equality, many Muslim women continue to face cultural barriers and restrictive religious interpretations. Ali & Naylor (2013) and Strid & Hearn (2022) emphasize that traditional exegeses often reinforce patriarchal systems, thereby limiting women's roles. Heilman (2012) further notes that gender stereotypes generate detrimental expectations for female leaders. However, Grantham et al. (2021) highlight an emerging social shift toward more inclusive interpretations. In the Indonesian context, the feminization of poverty and the marginalization of women with disabilities also intersect with issues of women's leadership (Shinbrot et al., 2019). The finding that 56% of respondents expressed optimism reflects a growing hope for change, although entrenched traditional interpretations persist and require sustained advocacy at both community and institutional religious levels.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce Becker's human capital theory, which posits that religious knowledge, as a form of human capital, provides an ethical foundation for leadership. This is consistent with Kassim and Alias (2016), who argue that religious knowledge offers moral direction. In addition, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is relevant for explaining

how disability, gender, and religious background intersect to shape the leadership experiences of Muslim women. The high rating of multitasking ability (74%) supports segmented labor market theory, in which women are often positioned in sectors that require flexibility due to domestic responsibilities (Carrier et al., 2015; Kossek et al., 2017). Meanwhile, the relatively higher proportion of neutral responses regarding emotional intelligence indicates that emotional intelligence has not yet been fully recognized as a leadership competency, which contrasts with the findings of Ana (2023). Therefore, a critical interpretation is necessary to ensure that Islamic values are not misinterpreted as justifying inequality but rather understood as a source of empowerment (Schneid et al., 2015; Hyder, 2021).

This study provides an understanding that Muslim women's leadership is not a matter of ability, but rather a matter of perception and interpretation. Most respondents (63%) believe in women's leadership potential, indicating that the primary obstacles are social constructs rather than theological ones. Tranby and Zulkowski (2012) affirm that religious values can serve as a strong foundation for leadership development. This study offers the lesson that change requires a collective reform of religious interpretation, involving religious communities, governments, and civil society organizations (Warren et al., 2019; Valduga et al., 2023). Furthermore, the role of a supportive work environment (82% of respondents expressed support from colleagues and superiors) is crucial in realizing equality. The main takeaway of this study is that empowering Muslim women in leadership is insufficient with formal policies alone; it also requires changing cultural narratives and inclusive religious interpretations, as well as building a collaborative ecosystem that genuinely values women's contributions.

This study aligns with Mercader et al. (2021), who found that influential leaders possess strong moral values and wisdom. However, this study goes beyond Dhiman's (2022) findings on comprehensive leadership approaches by empirically demonstrating that multitasking ability, rather than religious knowledge, emerged as the highest-rated factor (74%). In contrast to Hess and Bacigalupo (2011), who emphasized structural barriers, this study found that 64% of respondents perceived gender equality as already present in the workplace. This difference indicates contextual progress. Compared to Heilman (2012), who highlighted gender stereotypes as the primary barrier, this study identifies traditional interpretation (47%) as the dominant challenge. Meanwhile, the finding that 56% of respondents hold optimistic expectations reinforces Koburtay's (2023) work on positive shifts in the Muslim world. Thus, the scholarly position of this study is to demonstrate that positive perceptions of Muslim women's leadership have grown, although the challenge of religious interpretation still requires intervention.

Based on the findings, the recommendations for concrete actions include the following. First, the development of leadership training modules based on inclusive Islamic values, with a focus on strengthening multitasking, emotional intelligence, and literacy in gender-equal religious interpretation. Second, government and religious institutions need to formulate a fatwa or official guidance that supports Muslim women's leadership, accompanied by massive dissemination in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) and madrasahs. Third, organizations and workplaces should implement affirmative policies, such as a minimum 30% quota for women in decision-making positions, as well as provide mentoring programs and psychological support to overcome stereotypes. Fourth, public advocacy through social media and awareness campaigns should be conducted to change cultural narratives that question women's leadership. Fifth, further research using mixed methods is needed to explore the factors shaping the doubts of the 21% of respondents, as well as to test the effectiveness of the interventions that have been designed.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the leadership potential of Muslim women is not questioned in terms of capability but is constrained by social constructions and religious interpretations. Many respondents demonstrate a high level of confidence in this potential, and most are optimistic about the increasing role of women in the future. The three main supporting factors religious knowledge, multitasking ability, and emotional intelligence constitute important assets. However, structural challenges remain significant: most respondents identify traditional interpretations of Islamic teachings as the primary barrier, while a smaller proportion still exhibit limited confidence. Notably, most respondents perceive gender equality to have been achieved in the workplace, indicating contextual progress. Thus, the core issue does not lie in women's capacity, but rather in the need for more inclusive reform of religious interpretations and the transformation of restrictive cultural norms.

This study contributes to strengthening the understanding that human capital is not limited to formal education but also encompasses religious knowledge and emotional intelligence as leadership assets. In addition, the study highlights the relevance of intersectionality theory in analyzing the intersections of gender, religion, and culture in shaping Muslim women's leadership experiences. From a practical perspective, the findings offer three main recommendations: first, the need for leadership training grounded in inclusive Islamic values; second, the strengthening of affirmative policies in the workplace, such as women's leadership quotas; and third, public advocacy through religious forums to transform traditional restrictive interpretations into more gender-equitable understandings.

This study has several limitations. First, the data are based on a quantitative survey with a relatively limited sample (127 respondents), meaning that generalizability should be tested across broader and more geographically and culturally diverse populations. Second, the cross-sectional design does not capture changes in perceptions over time. Third, the study does not deeply explore the underlying factors contributing to the 21% of respondents who expressed doubt regarding women's leadership. Future research is recommended to adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining large-scale surveys with in-depth interviews to capture the qualitative nuances of traditional interpretations. In addition, longitudinal studies are needed to observe shifts in attitudes in response to policy interventions and advocacy efforts. Cross-national comparative studies across Muslim-majority countries are also important to understand contextual variations.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

M. Ferry Irawan: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Validation; Writing Original Draft. **Noptario:** Conceptualization; Data Curation; Methodology; Project administration; Writing Review & Editing. **Muhammad Hulkin:** Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Writing Review & Editing. **Ts. Saiful Nazri bin Nordin:** Formal Analysis; Supervision; Visualization.

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