Female Leadership in Muslim Societies
Theological and Socio-Cultural Debates in Contemporary Literature

Farjana Mahbuba and Sumaiya Rabeya

FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES: THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL DEBATES IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Farjana Mahbuba[*] and Sumaiya Rabeya[**]

Abstract: For centuries, Muslim women have been considered, according to *fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence, legally ineligible to hold leadership positions in public sectors such as government, civil society and the judiciary. Contemporary debates on female leadership in Muslim societies range from constructing and reconstructing theological contestation to identifying and analysing the socio-cultural realities around Muslim women's lives that make it more challenging for them to claim leadership. Today, on one side, a growing amount of literature is challenging conservative religious interpretations that disfavour female leadership and calling to reread religious source texts. On the other side, literature is raising voices on social gender perceptions and cultural biases that create barriers to women's leadership. The recent inauguration of hijab-clad Muslim female presidents in Tanzania and Singapore also manifests a positive paradigm shift in the collective Muslim consciousness of female leadership. To understand this change, this article aligns with the Western feminist framework to investigate theological and socio-cultural debates to outline the different positions and new developments in contemporary literature in identifying the burdens on Muslim women's shoulders that curtail their aspirations for leadership participation. This study argues that contemporary literature reveals a complex and formidable development in the debate that demands more careful attention to accommodate the changing environment and attitudes in Muslim societies regarding the permissibility and plausibility of female leadership.

Keywords: *female leadership*, *Islam*, *ḥadīth*, *culture*, *Muslim societies*

INTRODUCTION AND SIGNIFICANCE

In 2017, a hijab-clad Muslim woman, Halimah Yacob, a former lawyer, became the first Muslim female president of Singapore. A few years later in 2021, another hijab-clad Muslim woman, Samia Suluhu Hassan, who is affectionately called 'Mama Samia' by her nation, became the first female president of Tanzania. Currently, five Muslim women are leaders

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[*]   Farjana Mahbuba is conducting her PhD on religion, gender and migration at the Australian Catholic University, Australia.
[**]   Sumaiya Rabeya is a PhD student in gender studies at University Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia.

across the world in offices as head of state or prime minister, who are modern examples of the many historical Muslim female figures who ruled different lands, such as Al-Malika or 'the Queen' Arwa, who was a long-reigning 12th-century ruler of Yemen, first as co-ruler with her first two husbands then as sole ruler for 39 years.[1] Throughout Muslim history across the world, female figures like Queen Arwa exercised leadership and authority in the highest positions of their respective societies. Many of them were heads of state, de facto joint rulers, co-rulers, regents or politically powerful queens. Like those historical figures, current Muslim female heads of the state also manifest a degree of acceptance and exercise of female leadership within Muslim societies. Nonetheless, the fact all Muslim caliphs throughout Islamic history have been male is one of the strongest challenges that Muslim female leadership questions must answer.

The dominating question that always leads conversations and controversies in this context is: Does Islam prohibit women from taking leadership positions? This is a theological question with enormous social impact and a complicated one situated in a highly cultural context, particularly when it is often considered in the context of Taliban-dominated Afghanistan, Wahabi-ruled Saudi Arabia and militant-governed post-revolutionary Iran.[2] Media, often highlighting the most radical cases from these places, has constructed popular notions and narratives of Muslim women as veiled and voiceless victims. Discussing Muslim female leadership issues in the spread of ultraconservative versions of Islam is uniquely challenging from the inside out. It demands close examination from disparate scholarly perspectives. This article does so by reviewing the literature on theological debates while accommodating sociological perspectives and historical examples. Interpretation of religious source texts cannot be done without serious consideration of the sociocultural development of Muslim societies past and present. In doing so, this article aligns itself with the Western feminist framework and sets a unique precedent in its engagement with historical references, religious source texts and relevant literature to unwrap contemporary debates on Muslim female leadership.

THE THEOLOGICAL CONTESTATION

Although a growing number of scholars today are challenging rigid conservative religious interpretations that disfavour female leadership[3] and calling to reread religious source texts with a consideration of contemporary contexts,[4] for centuries, Muslim women have been

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[1]   Taef El-Azhari, *Queens, Eunuchs and Concubines in Islamic History, 661–1257* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

[2]   Maliha Marri, "Muslim Female Leadership" (PhD diss., Pepperdine University, 2011).

[3]   Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001); Hibba Abugideiri, "Revisiting the Islamic Past, Deconstructing Male Authority: The Project of Islamic Feminism" *Religion & Literature* 42, no. 1/2 (2010).; Masooda Bano and Hilary E. Kalmbach, eds., *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority* (Brill, 2016).

[4]   Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002); Heba Raouf Ezzat, "Women and Ijtihad: Towards a New Islamic Discourse," *Al-Raida Journal* (2019).

considered legally ineligible for judicial, political and other high leadership positions in the public domain. Most classical and contemporary scholars regarded 'manhood' (*adh-dhukurah*) to be an essential condition for leadership, *Imamat* (the role of leading prayers) and the position of judge. They denied these roles to women mostly based on a *ḥadīth* and two verses from the Qur'ān. First, the *ḥadīth* of Abu Bakrah, who narrated from others:

> During the Battle of Al-Jamal, Allah benefited me with a word (that I heard from the Prophet). When the Prophet heard the news that the people of Persia had made the daughter of Khosrau their Queen (ruler), he said, 'Never will succeed such a nation as makes a woman their ruler.'[5]

Second, two Qur'ānic verses apparently acknowledge men's leadership over women: (i) "Men are in charge of (*qawwamun*) women, because God has given to some more (*faddala*) than others";[6] and (ii) "And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them in kindness, and men are a degree above them."[7] Contemporary Syrian Muslim scholar Zuhaylī cites the scholarly consensus on manhood as a condition for leadership.[8] Quoting the *ḥadīth* of Abu Bakrah and verse 4:34, he mentions that leadership positions require immense capabilities that women usually do not bear. Leaders also may face dangerous circumstances in peace and war, which are not appropriate for women. That is why the consensus of Muslim jurists is that leaders and imams (who lead the prayer) must be men. However, Zuhaylī also acknowledges there are other views in Islamic legal tradition, although in the minority, that do not require manhood as a condition for leadership. Classical jurist Ibn Rusdh (d. 1198) stresses that most scholars made manhood a condition for a judge for the validity of their judgment.[9] In interpreting verse 4:34, one of the most revered classical scholars Imam Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) wrote in his tafsir:

> He (men) is her (women's) leader…her judge, her discipliner if she deviates…Men excel over women and are better than women. This is why prophethood and state leadership are exclusive to men. The prophet said, 'People who appoint a woman to be their leader will never achieve success'. Such is the case with appointing women as judges or in other (authoritative) positions.[10]

Imam Razi (d. 1210) also, in explaining verse 30:21, maintains that:

> Women are created like animals, plants, and other useful things…women are not created for worship and divine commands, rather their creation is to complete Allah's blessings on

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5   Muhammad bin Isma'il bin Ibrahim bin Al Mugeera al-Bukhari, *Sahih Al Bukhari* [Authentic Collections of Bukhari] (Riyadh: Dar Al hadara Lin Nashar wat taoji', 2015), *ḥadīth* no. 7099.

6   Qur'ān 4:34. Qur'ān quotes have been taken from M. A. S. Abdeel Haleem, trans., *The Qur'an: A New Translation by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem* (Audible Studios, 2004).

7   Qur'ān 2:228.

8   Wahbah Zuḥaylī, *al-Fiqh al-Islami wa-adillatuhu* (Islamic Jurisprudence and its Evidence], 2nd ed. (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār 'al-Fikr, 1985), 178.

9   Salem Al Jazaeeri, ed., *Bidayat Al-Mujtahid Wa Nihayat al-Muqtasid by Ibn Rushd (d. 1198)* [The Distinguished Jurist's Primer] (Damascus/Beirut: Resalah Publishing, 2015).

10 Hafiz ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Al Qur'an Al 'Azim* [The Greatest Interpretation of the Qur'an] (USA: Darussalam, 2000), vol. 1, 419-20. Translated by author.

us (men), and they are created for us (men)…So, women are not to become fully responsible like men…because women are weak, silly, and like a child.[11]

Imam Ibn Kathir and Imam Razi held views that did not support women's leadership roles. They believed men are better suited to hold leadership positions in the public domain.

Imam Abu Hanifa adopts a more lenient stance on women's leadership, allowing them to serve as judges with non-criminal judicial authority while denying them the position of head of state.[12] In contrast, Imam Tabari and Ibn Hazm believe women should be permitted to serve as a judge in all cases, including criminal and financial matters.[13] However, Qaradāwī cautions that this permission should not be normalised in society, as women's leadership goes against their natural disposition as mothers and exceeds the capacity of most women. While Badawi does not discourage women from holding general leadership and authority,[14] he agrees with Qaradāwī that women are ineligible to *imamat*, i.e., leading prayers or serving as head of state. Badawi recognises there is no explicit prohibition in the Qur'ān against Muslim women assuming leadership roles, except for the roles of leading prayer and headship of state. He bases his argument on the premise that the Islamic guidelines for gender interaction may not be suitable for women to carry out the duties of leading prayers or becoming the head of state. This is because, as head of state, a woman would have to negotiate with male officials from other states and participate in confidential meetings with them, which may not align with Islamic gender norms. Another reason Badawi presents is the priority of feminine functions within a Muslim family and society, which he believes might be compromised if women take on leadership roles beyond certain limits. In Muslim scholarship, this perception is nothing new. It is a commonly held belief that women's primary roles are as wives and mothers, so their involvement in the public sphere should be limited, except in cases of necessity or emergencies.[15] This perspective is often based on the *ḥadīth* of Abu Bakrah, which prophesied the failure of a nation under female leadership and is considered the "linchpin" of all theological arguments against female leadership in Islamic scholarship.[16] Classical scholars like Ibn Hajar, Ibn 'Arabi, Qurtubi and Ibn Kathir have prohibited female leadership in politics and judiciary based on this *ḥadīth*. However, contemporary literature aligned with the Western feminist framework challenges the validity of this *ḥadīth* from three angles: examining its historical context, analysing the text and looking into the rationales behind the text.

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[11]   Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *Tafsir Al Fakhkr Ar Razi* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Al Fikr, 1981), vol. 25, 111. Translated by author.
[12]   Abdulkadir Salaudeen and Saidu Ahmad Dukawa, "A Critique of Abu Bakrah's Hadith on Women Political Leadership," *'Abqari Journal* 24, no. 1 (2021).
[13]   Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Status of Women in Islam* (Cairo: Islamic Home Publishing and Distribution, 1997).
[14]   Jamal A. Badawi, *Gender Equity in Islam* (Maryland, USA: World Assembly of Muslim Youth, 1995).
[15]   Asma Afsaruddin, "Literature, Scholarship, and Piety: Negotiating Gender and Authority in the Medieval Muslim World," *Religion & Literature* 42, no. 1/2 (2010).
[16]   Salaudeen and Dukawa, "A Critique of Abu Bakrah's Hadith."

The Historical Settings of the Ḥadīth

Scholars aligned with the Western feminist framework who question the validity of the *ḥadīth* on women's leadership argue that it is context-specific and cannot be applied universally.[17] They maintain that the best person for leadership should be selected regardless of gender and a generalisation of this *ḥadīth* goes against the actions of the Prophet, who allowed women to participate in political negotiations and discussions during his time. For instance, during the second pledge of al-Aqaba, the Prophet, accompanied by men and women, negotiated with the people of Madina in preparation for the *hijra* (migration) to Madina.[18] Scholars like the Moroccan feminist writer Mernissi have also pointed out the political situation at the time the *ḥadīth* was narrated by Abu Bakrah.[19] She argues that he related this *ḥadīth* against the Prophet's wife Aisha and in support of Caliph Ali, whom he sided with during the Battle of the Camel, 24 years after the Prophet's death. Mernissi also questions Abu Bakrah's moral integrity as a narrator since he was flogged by Caliph Umar for false accusations. Additionally, it has been argued that the *ḥadīth* was specifically related to the tyrannical rule of Chosro's daughter and should not be generalised to all societies governed by women.[20] Therefore, the context-specific nature of the *ḥadīth* and its limitations have been highlighted by contemporary scholarship.

Analysing the Text

Scholarly literature that focuses on analysing *ḥadīth* texts has argued that a *ḥadīth* cannot be accepted as genuine if it fails to meet any of the three criteria. First, a *ḥadīth* that conflicts with the Qur'ān cannot be accepted. Second, a *ḥadīth* that contradicts historical facts cannot be considered genuine. Third, a *ḥadīth* that describes something that is impossible to believe cannot be accepted.

The *ḥadīth* narrated by Abu Bakrah clearly conflicts with the Qur'ānic verses that portray the Queen of Sheba as a legitimate ruler of her people. This confirms that the *ḥadīth* fails to meet one of the criteria and is therefore rejected. The *ḥadīth* in question is also an "*ahad ḥadīth*," meaning it is isolated and narrated by only one of the Companions of the Prophet. Therefore, it cannot be the only source for Sharia.[21] It has been argued there is a possibility that Abu Bakrah might have misheard the *ḥadīth*, confusing the word "this woman" with "a woman."[22] It is also possible that a Companion quoted the *ḥadīth* verbatim but out of context.[23] For example, when the *ḥadīth* is narrated from the Prophet that "Evil omen is in

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[17]   Ibid.

[18]   Anne Sofie Roald, *Qur'an on Women's Leadership* (International Museum of Women, 2008).

[19]   Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

[20]   Muhammad Sharif Chaudhry, *Women's Right in Islam* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers and Distributors, 2003); Lamido Sanusi, "Women and Political Leadership in Muslim Thought," Islam Awareness, October 2001, https://www.islamawareness.net/Women/leaders.html.

[21]   Mohammad Ali Syed, *The Position of Women in Islam: A Progressive View* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

[22]   El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*.

[23]   Salaudeen and Dukawa, "A Critique of Abu Bakrah's Hadith."

three things: the house, the woman, and the horse."[24] 'Aisha corrected this and said, "the prophet said, people from jahiliyyah (the time of ignorance) used to say that evil omen is in three things…"[25] El Fadl argues that the Prophet was simply predicting the downfall of Persia, which was plagued with a cycle of no less than eight emperors in four years between 628 and 632, including two daughters from the royal family, neither of whom had any experience with command.[26] Jalajel engages with the text and its context in his argument that a legal prohibition can be derived from a text in two ways.[27] The first is directly from the text when a negative imperative statement like "do not" is clearly mentioned. The ḥadīth of Abu Bakrah does not contain any such direct prohibition. The second is to consider contextual indicators to make a claim that the speaker intended a prohibition when uttering the statement. The wordings used in the ḥadīth of Abu Bakrah are not commanding or prohibiting, nor does the context indicate that any command or prohibition was intended. The act of deriving a categorical prohibition on female leadership from a ḥadīth like this is contradictory with Islamic legal methods and a highly subjective interpretive move.

The Rationales behind the Text

However, the prohibition of female leadership based on the ḥadīth in question raises significant concerns and merits scrutiny. This prohibition not only undermines women's moral agency but also contradicts the Qur'ānic theological underpinnings, which uphold the principle that a person's worth is not determined by gender, race or any other factor, but solely by *taqwa* or piety, fear, love and consciousness of God (49:13). Moreover, the Qur'ān asserts that every individual is a trustee (2:30), equal in creation (4:1, 7:189, 32:28 and 6:45) and a partner in community affairs (50:21). Thus, denying Muslim women the highest political leadership positions is antithetical to the Islamic spirit of equity and justice, as there is no explicit or implicit verse in the Qur'ān that bars women from the highest leadership positions. The Qur'ān establishes the principles of leadership, such as the requirements that believers obey their leaders (4:59) and leaders consult with their followers (42:38),[28] which are not gender-specific. Scholars aligned with the Western feminist framework argue that the lived reality of female political leadership in different times and places contradicts the apparent meaning of the ḥadīth.[29] The prosperity of nations led by women throughout history, such as Golda Meir of Israel, Indira Gandhi of India and Margaret Thatcher of the UK, further highlights the discrepancy between this ḥadīth and empirical evidence.[30] Al-Ghazali

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[24]   Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Al Bukhari*, ḥadīth no. 2858.

[25]   Ahmad Bin Hanbal, *Musnad Al-Imam Ahmad Bin Hanbal* [The Codification of Imam Ahmad Bin Hanbal d. 855] (Beirut, Lebanon: Muassasatu Ar-Risalath, 1995), ḥadīth no. 24841.

[26]   Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*.

[27]   David Solomon Jalajel, *Women and Leadership in Islamic Law: A Critical Analysis of Classical Legal Texts* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).

[28]   Ingrid Mattson, "Can a Woman be an Imam? Debating Form and Function in Muslim Women's Leadership" (paper presented at the Sisters: Women, Religion and Leadership in Christianity and Islam Conference at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, 2003).

[29]   Salaudeen and Dukawa, "A Critique of Abu Bakrah's Hadith."

[30]   Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*, reprint ed. (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015).

emphasises that the *ḥadīth* was a remark made by the Prophet in reference to the specific context of the Persian Empire's ruling family's dismal condition,[31] rendering it implausible as a universal declaration.

Some literature aligned with the Western feminist framework has taken an action-focused perspective on defining Muslim female leadership through a historical analysis of biographies of Muslim female leaders. This approach demonstrates that constructions of leadership can be based not only on knowledge of religious source texts but also on reference to the example set by historical figures.[32] Although leadership in Muslim society has traditionally been a gendered issue, with males leading and females being relegated to the private sphere or female-only spaces, literature on biographies of Muslim female leaders aligned with the Western feminist framework argues that female leadership is not a new concept in Muslim societies.[33] The history of Muslim female leadership, in politics and knowledge production, is as old as the history of Islam. There is now sufficient historical evidence of participation by Muslim women in rulership, public issues, lawmaking, administrative positions and even on the battlefield.[34] Recovering Muslim women's historical leading voices from the past is critical to set the tone for contemporary debates.[35] In the modern democratic era, debate on women's leadership gained momentum with the ascent of Benazir Bhutto to power in Pakistan in 1989 and Khaleda Zia's appointment as Prime Minister of Bangladesh in 1991.[36] These events prompted pro-women leadership and other groups aligned with the Western feminist framework to re-interpret Islamic literature and find explanations for the new norms.

The absence of female leadership in Muslim communities can lead to an increased likelihood of gender-based injustices and a negative experience of religion for women. Although this is not a universal experience for Muslim women, many face exclusion from mosques and religious spaces, encounter demeaning sermons or find themselves sidelined by religious clerics when seeking family counselling. In response to this, contemporary female leaders in Muslim societies have taken on a range of roles, such as revivalist instructors, speakers and advisors,[37] to solidify or expand female leadership in public religious spaces.[38] These leaders occupy mosques and madrasahs to teach and lead prayer for other women and serve as mosque preachers and teachers. In some cases, such as among women in Hui communities in China, this has led to the creation of women-only mosques led entirely by

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[31]   Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Al-Sunna al-Nabawiyya Bayn Ahl al-Fiqh Wa Ahl al-Ḥadīth*, 11th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1998).
[32]   Bano and Kalmbach, *Women, Leadership, and Mosques*.
[33]   Marri, "Muslim Female Leadership."
[34]   Badawi, *Gender Equity in Islam*.
[35]   Abugideiri, "Revisiting the Islamic Past."
[36]   Saheed Badmus Suraju, "An Analysis of Women Leadership in Islam," *Ad-Dirayah International Journal of Islamic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2013).
[37]   Hilary Kalmbach, "Introduction: Islamic Authority and the Study of Female Religious Leaders," in *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*, ed. Masooda Bano and Hilary E. Kalmbach (Brill, 2012).
[38]   Bano and Kalmbach, *Women, Leadership, and Mosques*.

female leadership.[39] The complex role of religion in Muslim societies has resulted in many women becoming keepers and transmitters of religious knowledge, leading to the avoidance of male religious authority and development of female religious leadership. Bouzar notes a Swiss women's association that was established as a legally independent organisation to distance itself from the limitations of male control, highlighting the strength of local Muslim women's religious leadership and their ability to reject traditional male scholars' authority if necessary.[40]

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DEBATES: THE COMPLEX INTERPLAY BETWEEN RELIGION, CULTURE AND PATRIARCHY

The notion of leadership in the production of sacred knowledge has been historically associated with masculinity, with male gender traits often conflated with leadership traits. This tendency has marginalised and isolated women, further perpetuating gender inequalities.[41] However, Afsaruddin has brought to light the vibrant agency of Muslim women who have been involved in shaping Islamic religious and literary traditions throughout history.[42] She notes that women played diverse roles, including as combatants on the battlefield, religious authorities and poets. Over the past three decades, the emergence of female Muslim scholars aligned with the Western feminist framework has ushered in a new paradigm shift in contemporary Muslim scholarship, with women challenging and transforming religious authority and leadership in Islamic theological knowledge production and reproduction. Prominent Muslim female scholars, such as Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed,[43] Azizah al-Hibri,[44] Amina Wadud,[45] Ziba Mir-Hosseini,[46] Asma Barlas,[47] Nimat Hafez Barazangi,[48] Kecia Ali,[49] Zainab Alwani,[50] Riffat Hassan,[51] Ayesha A. Hedayatullah,

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[39]   Maria Jaschok, "Sources of Authority: Female Ahong and Qingzhen Nüsi (Women's Mosques) in China," in *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*, ed. Masooda Bano and Hilary E. Kalmbach (Brill, 2012).

[40]   Petra Bleisch Bouzar, "'She is Always Present': Female Leadership and Informal Authority in a Swiss Muslim Women's Association," in *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*, ed. Masooda Bano and Hilary E. Kalmbach (Brill, 2012).

[41]   Abugideiri, "Revisiting the Islamic Past."

[42]   Afsaruddin, "Literature, Scholarship, and Piety."

[43]   Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Yale University Press, 1992).

[44]   Azizah al-Hibri, "Islam, Law and Custom: Redefining Muslim Women's Rights," *American University International Law Review* 12, no. 1 (1997).

[45]   Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[46]   Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[47]   Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*.

[48]   Nimat Hafez Barazangi, *Woman's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004).

[49]   Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

[50]   Zainab Alwani, *Muslim Women and Global Challenges: Seeking Change Through a Quranic Textual Approach and the Prophetic Model* (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 2012).

Heba Raouf Ezzat and Celene Ibrahim,[52] are reshaping religious authority and leadership by aligning with the Western feminist framework and critically examining and interpreting religious source texts within the classical structure, creating an independent female space[53] and empowering women to participate more actively in society. However, women's marginalisation from leadership and authority in societal and communal spaces continues to be a pervasive issue in many Muslim societies.[54] Literature aligned with the Western feminist framework highlights social gender perceptions and cultural biases that create barriers to women's leadership. In addition, Muslim women face challenges such as discrimination, gender-based harassment, constant questioning of authority, Islamophobia, the glass ceiling and the glass cliff phenomena that drags females away from leadership positions.[55]

Religion and culture are tightly intertwined and shape each other, making it difficult to distinguish the extent to which gender disparities in Muslim societies are due to religion or culture. Tamara Gray, the founder of Rabata, a non-profit organisation for Muslim women, points out that Muslim women are not given respect and value recognition in sacred spaces, making it a challenging space for women's leadership. The problem intensifies when gender-based religious roles like *Imamat* (leading) in prayers are held as the central measuring criteria for authority and social power.[56] This argument, linking women's inability to lead prayers to their incapability to lead men in other ways, raises a concern in the literature aligned with the Western feminist framework about the necessity of distinguishing 'true' Islam from cultural Islam in addressing the debates on female leadership. While many aligned with the Western feminist framework argue that the existing gender disparity is due more to patriarchal interpretations of Islam,[57] the boundary between culture and religion is often blurred, and patriarchal control of women thrives within it.

Alajmi argues, in the context of Saudi Arabian women, Islamic law is perceived through cultural interpretations, and because most Arab customs and cultures are heavily patriarchal, it spontaneously subjugates women and places them in a subservient role at work and in the family.[58] A similar argument is presented by Sarumi, Faluyi and Okeke-Uzodike in the context of establishing correlation between religion and low female political participation that

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[51]   Riffat Hassan, "Woman and Man's 'Fall': A Qur'anic Theological Perspective," in *Muslima Theology: The Voices of Muslim Women Theologians*, ed. Ednan Aslan, Marcia Hermansen and Elif Medeni (Peter Lang AG, 2013).

[52]   Celene Ibrahim, *Women and Gender in the Qur'an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[53]   Marcia Hermansen, "Introduction: The New Voices of Muslim Women Theologians," in *Muslima Theology: The Voices of Muslim Women Theologians*, ed. Ednan Aslan, Marcia Hermansen and Elif Medeni (Peter Lang AG, 2013).

[54]   "Despite Challenges, Muslim Women Seek Diverse Paths to Leadership," *The Arab Weekly*, December 9, 2021, https://thearabweekly.com/despite-challenges-muslim-women-seek-diverse-paths-leadership.

[55]   Raheela Al Karim, "Muslim Women and Centered Leadership Practices" (PhD diss., DePaul University, 2020).

[56]   Mattson, "Can a Woman Be an Imam?"

[57]   Ann Langlois and R. Johnston, "The Development and Progress of Female Leadership in the United Arab Emirates," *Journal of Business and Economics* 4, no. 10 (2014).

[58]   Abdullah Alajmi, "Factors that Support Arab Muslim Women in their Career Roles" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2001).

dictates Nigerian Muslim women's exercise of authority and decision-making power.[59] Abuhussein and Koburtay in Jordan and Sadeghi et al. in Iran likewise observe that women's roles are culturally assorted into private space, which is often reinforced by religious norms and values.[60] During an interview for research on female leadership participation in Jordan, a respondent stressed how religious interpretation has been mixed with tradition, making it difficult for women to break through.[61] "The problem is how people actually view and understand [Islam]; it is mostly influenced by the traditions and what people grow up knowing as rightful," said another respondent.[62] The same argument is expressed by others as well, as one said, "Islam did not prevent or deny the work of women in leadership positions, but people have moved away from their religion, by giving preference to males over females."[63] The study concludes by stating that cultural practices are often conflated with religious perspectives, making it hard to determine who is responsible for what, like "how Islam is erroneously positioned and how socio-cultural forces use it to advance their agendas,"[64] particularly in dismissing female leadership.

Despite Islam's easing of certain difficulties for women, such as waiving the burden of prayers during menstruation and post-partum bleeding, these accommodations are often perceived as weaknesses that render them unfit for leadership positions. Some make it a reason to define women's unfitness to be leaders. Restrictions on women's travel without a *mahram*[65] further intensify the debate on female leadership.[66] The emotional and empathetic nature of women is also scrutinized as a hindrance to effective leadership.[67] Even when Muslim women manage to overcome these hurdles and obtain leadership positions, they are often subjected to non-stop scrutiny and discrimination. Studies reveal that Emirati, Omani and Bahraini women in top leadership positions face constant distrust, discrimination and accusations of cultural degradation.[68] The notion that Islam restricts women in public affairs is used to argue against their participation in political and administrative processes, resulting in the under-use of human resources in Muslim societies and hindering national development.[69] Attempts made to accommodate Muslim women into political leadership are

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[59]   Rofiah Ololade Sarumi, Olumuyiwa Temitope Faluyi and Obianuju E. Okeke-Uzodike, "Transcending Ethnic and Religious Barriers in Decision-Making: A Case of a Muslim Women Civil Organisation in Nigeria" *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2019).

[60]   Tala Abuhussein and Tamer Koburtay, "Opportunities and Constraints of Women Entrepreneurs in Jordan: An Update of the 5Ms Framework," *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research* 27, no. 6 (2021); Shohreh Sadeghi et al., "Social-Cultural Barriers of Muslim Women Athletes: Case Study of Professional Female Athletes in Iran," *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2 (2020).

[61]   Tamer Koburtay, Tala Abuhussein and Yusuf M. Sidani, "Women Leadership, Culture, and Islam: Female Voices from Jordan," *Journal of Business Ethics* 183, no. 2 (2023).

[62]   Ibid., 8.

[63]   Ibid., 10.

[64]   Ibid., 10.

[65]   Persons with whom marriage is unlawful.

[66]   Suraju, "An Analysis of Women Leadership in Islam."

[67]   Quinn O'Neill, "Are Women too Emotional to be Effective Leaders?" *3 Quarks Daily*, March 31, 2014.

[68]   Majd Megheirkouni, "Women-Only Leadership Positions in the Middle East: Exploring Cultural Attitudes towards Syrian Women for Sport Career Development," *Advancing Women in Leadership* 34 (2014).

[69]   Haifa R. Jamal Al-Lail, "Muslim Women between Tradition and Modernity: The Islamic Perspective," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 16, no. 1 (1996).

often labelled as part of Western liberal or feminist agendas that do not respect and value enough the other leadership roles that Muslim women take on, such as their roles as mothers, teachers, community leaders, nurses, etc.

Literature has also highlighted that patriarchal traditions, norms and expectations,[70] along with perceived male natural authority over women who are vulnerable and in need of male protection,[71] create gender-segregated spaces where men are restrictive to include women into their works.[72] In doing so, the concept of the hijab[73] is stretched and overused in limiting Muslim women's social and political participation and relegating their voice and presence to a lower rank in public life.[74] A survey of 2,805 companies throughout the Gulf states found that women hold only 5.2% of managerial or leadership positions.[75] Similar studies on Emirati women showed they are mostly assigned to lower-level management positions with minimum access to leadership roles because even the women there subscribe to the idea that a good leader "must exhibit male attributes."[76] The statistics do not increase much in the global context. Throughout Muslim countries, Muslim women occupy only 15.9% of decision-making seats.[77] This is not surprising in the context where the same study found that Muslim men in most Muslim societies are less supportive of women's rights and more than nine-in-ten Muslims in Iraq (92%), Morocco (92%), Tunisia (93%), Indonesia (93%), Afghanistan (94%) and Malaysia (96%) expressed their view that Muslim wives should unconditionally obey their husbands. The prevalence of this gender ideology of men being the main and only breadwinners,[78] and women being limited to home chores and child-rearing,[79] indicate a socio-cultural environment where women's responsibility is restricted to housewifery and mothering. Consequently, the majority of roles women are left with are those men do not traditionally assume and having them assumed by women may negatively affect women's empowerment and their potential for leadership.[80]

Working women in most Arab countries are in fields like teaching and social services, and only 1% of the employed females hold leadership positions.[81] Surveys also found that those

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[70]   Jeri Altneu Sechzer, "'Islam and Woman: Where Tradition Meets Modernity': History and Interpretations of Islamic Women's Status," *Sex Roles* 51, no. 5 (2004).

[71]   Beverly Metcalfe, "Women, Empowerment and Development in Arab Gulf States: A Critical Appraisal of Governance, Culture and National Human Resource Development (HRD) Frameworks," *Human Resource Development International* 14 (2011).

[72]   Zeinab Al Subeh and Karem Alzoubi, "Cultural and Religious Barriers Influencing the Participation of Women in Research: A Study from Jordan," *Gender Issues* 37 (2020).

[73]   Sadeghi et al., "Social-Cultural Barriers of Muslim Women Athletes."

[74]   Sarumi, Faluyi and Okeke-Uzodike, "Transcending Ethnic and Religious Barriers."

[75]   Linzi J. Kemp, Susan R. Madsen and James Davis, "Women in Business Leadership: A Comparative Study of Countries in the Gulf Arab States," *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management* 15, no. 2 (2015).

[76]   Langlois and Johnston, "The Development and Progress of Female Leadership," 992.

[77]   Luis Lugo et al., *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Centre, 2013).

[78]   Abuhussein and Koburtay, "Opportunities and Constraints of Women Entrepreneurs in Jordan."

[79]   Sadeghi et al., "Social-Cultural Barriers of Muslim Women Athletes."

[80]   Yuting Wang, "Muslim Women's Evolving Leadership Roles: A Case Study of Women Leaders in an Immigrant Muslim Community in Post-9/11 America," *Social Compass* 64, no. 3 (2017).

[81]   Alajmi, "Factors that Support Arab Muslim Women."

who have reached leadership positions are threatened by their male counterparts due to cultural impediments.[82] Some examples of cultural threats Arab female leaders reported in the survey are: "ignoring women's opinions in meetings," "male leaders refused all forms of criticism by women," "not accepting working under female leadership," "ignoring the privacy of women" and "promoting the belief that women must do what they are asked to do."[83] Muslim female leadership is still marred by "remnant androcentrism,"[84] accolading the concept of authority and leadership with masculine features using a flawed interpretation of Islam.[85] This gender ideology, perceiving women as only good for caring and nurturing roles, slips through the boundary of private into public and further disempowers women in their perseverance for leadership and authoritative roles. Surveying over 39 Muslim-majority countries, a study found that most employers habitually approach female employees with gender-myopic views. Women are mostly promoted where they are expected to bring their familial managerial skills armed with compassion and empathy into the commercial enterprise.[86]

Moreover, the overstress of family responsibilities on women throughout their formative years unfortunately creates a mindset where women in Muslim societies like the UAE feel that having a leadership position means they need to compromise their family.[87] Women, who strive to take part in the public domain, are expected to maintain harmony and balance between their private domestic responsibilities while keeping the same pace as their male counterparts in public life. Failing to do so means they are often penalised and ostracised in society and their leadership abilities are challenged and questioned.[88] It is important to note that the responsibility of nurturing a family is something Muslim female activists aligned with the Western feminist framework do not deny; rather, they stress that these should not be used to keep the women hostage from claiming leadership roles. Alaa Murabit, the UN High Commissioner for Health, Employment and Economic Growth, explained in a recent interview that it is unrealistic to expect women to participate in the workforce or political leadership when there is no institutionalised help for childcare, family planning and healthcare for women.[89] Abdullah Alajmi, in his thesis, points out the economic situation of Muslim women as one of their barriers to leadership roles.[90] When women's resource base is equal to that of their husbands, they gain more equalising power and influence at home and work. He argues the financial stability of Muslim women, or lack of it, is pushing Muslim women away from holding powerful positions. The gender segregation criteria are one of the

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[82]   Megheirkouni, "Women-Only Leadership Positions in the Middle East."
[83]   Ibid., 66.
[84]   Ibid., 4.
[85]   Marri, "Muslim Female Leadership."
[86]   Belinda Parmar, *The Empathy Era: Women, Business and the New Pathway to Profit* (Lady Geek, 2014).
[87]   Langlois and Johnston, "The Development and Progress of Female Leadership."
[88]   Koburtay, Abuhussein and Sidani, "Women Leadership, Culture, and Islam."
[89]   Alaa Murabit, "Towards an Inclusive Peace: Three Dangerous Assumptions about Security," blog post, The Aspen Institute, March 5, 2019, https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/towards-an-inclusive-peace-three-dangerous-assumptions-about-security/.
[90]   Alajmi, "Factors that Support Arab Muslim Women."

core thoughts that is holding Muslim females from getting into better careers, being financially independent and seeking political leadership.

These are a few of many socio-cultural barriers that result in many Muslim women not regarding themselves as good as men and becoming dispirited when aspiring for conventional leadership positions.[91] Samia Omar, the first Muslim woman chaplain from Harvard University, highlights that women are often taught a deprived version of Islam, which strips them of their rights to make decisions to the point that they forgot they are important in Allah's eyes too.[92] A better example of how Muslim women are sidelined in leadership is the statistics that represent their political participation in various Muslim countries. While most non-Muslim countries in the world have secured a 57.9% internal quota for women in political parties, this is in comparison to only 16.2% in Muslim-majority countries.[93] In Yemen, women are so politically absent that a whopping 80% said they are not even aware of the concept that there can be a quota for securing women's positions in a political party.[94] As one of the leading African Muslim nations, Nigeria has a population of 198 million with 49.5% women; still, merely 3.1% of elected political posts are assumed by women.[95] Similarly, Bangladesh, a prominent Muslim country in South Asia, has seen female prime ministers ruling continuously for over three decades. Yet, to date, "Bangladesh has only one-woman city corporation mayor, and only 102 out of 4701 municipal corporation positions were women in 2021."[96] While in Lebanon, a survey shows parents are demotivating their daughters from being active in any political realm because they believe Islam does not support the participation of women in politics.[97]

Lack of female support, network and mentoring have also been identified by researchers as barriers to female leadership in Muslim societies. Women in the Middle East lack formal mentoring or networking in the public sphere other than the traditional community that confines themselves within home and family ties.[98] The same study found, even when a female returns home from school or work, their conversation with other family members is usually regarding household matters, which means they lack creative and physical support for issues they face outside the home. Keeping men aside, many women often reproduce and reinforce prohibitions of women's leadership in conservative societies. According to *The Arab Weekly*, when in Palestine a woman judge named Kholoud al-Faqeeh was appointed to the Islamic religious court, many women walked out on her because they did not want a

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91   Katlin Omair, "Typology of Career Development for Arab Women Managers in the United Arab Emirates," *Career Development International* 15, no. 2 (2010).
92   "Despite Challenges."
93   Lugo et al., *The World's Muslims*.
94   IFES, IWPR and CIDA, *The Status of Women in the Middle East and North Africa (SWMENA) Project: Focus on Yemen* (International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES); The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR); Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), 2012).
95   Sarumi Faluyi and Okeke-Uzodike, "Transcending Ethnic and Religious Barriers."
96   UN Women, *Women's Effective Participation and Decision-Making in Public Life, Elimination of Violence, for Achieving Gender Equality, and Empowerment of all Women and Girls* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: UN Women Bangladesh Country Office, 2021), 4.
97   Katerina Dalacoura, "The 2011 Uprisings in the Arab Middle East: Political Change and Geopolitical Implications," *International Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2012).
98   Langlois and Johnston, "The Development and Progress of Female Leadership."

woman to rule their case.[99] Additionally, academicians are concerned that women in such traditional settings grow too comfortable living within shadows. If Muslim countries today start providing women with the opportunities and assistance they need to aspire to leadership positions, most women will not be ready to make the necessary moves to grab these opportunities.[100]

Surprisingly, Muslim women are comparatively more thriving in social participation in Muslim minority countries like the USA and Australia.[101] The reason may include the higher drive for women to prove their identity as immigrants as well as opportunities to address sensitive religious issues in a more gender-non-discriminatory secular setting and environment. Wang describes an interesting case study on Muslim women in leadership roles in post-9/11 America.[102] While most American mosques, which are regarded as the functioning body of Muslim communities in the USA, strictly implemented gender discrimination and segregation in the name of religious values and norms, after 9/11, the situation changed almost overnight. Since women became immediately visible targets of Islamophobia throughout the country, it pushed Muslim women aligned with the Western feminist framework to reclaim their space not only in Muslim society in general but also particularly in mosques in a more assertive manner. Moreover, the openness of Western society became nesting grounds for Westernized Muslim feminist leaders whose security was threatened in their home countries. Raufa Hassan, a professor of women studies from Yemen, and Asma Barlas, from Pakistan, took asylum in the USA after receiving death threats while Iranian feminist Ziba Mir-Hosseini moved to London for the same reason.[103] Despite being forced to make great personal sacrifices, Muslim women aligned with the Western feminist framework are taking a bold stand to keep the radicals in check in Muslim societies, gradually advancing towards more acceptance of female leadership.

CONCLUSION

Even though there is a long way to go until societies accept women in leadership positions as a natural disposition, things are in motion. The appointment of female deans in Al-Azhar University, allowing them to interpret religious scripts and even issue fatwas, for example, is a great starting point.[104] This indicates a newly developing paradigm shift within Muslim societies on female leadership issues. The story of Sudanese Islamist, Souad al-Faith, during the 1960s, is worth mentioning. She was active in protests against leftists in Sudan. She shouted slogans while being carried by the male demonstrators. She led the processions and

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[99]   "Despite Challenges."
[100] Alajmi, "Factors that Support Arab Muslim Women."
[101] Wang, "Muslim Women's Evolving Leadership Roles"; Helen McCue, *The Civil and Social Participation of Muslim Women in Australian Community Life* (Canberra, Australia: Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008), http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-115221.
[102] Wang, "Muslim Women's Evolving Leadership Roles."
[103] Susanne Schröter, "Female Leadership in Islamic Societies Past and Present," in *Goddesses, Heroes, Sacrifices. Female Power in Asian Politics (Southeast Asian Modernities)*, ed. Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam and Andrea Fleschenberg (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2008).
[104] Ibid.

had regal appearances throughout. She called people to action while seated on a chair that was placed on top of men's heads.[105] Later, in 1994 Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood's directive about women's political participation clearly demonstrated a radical shift to become more welcoming to women when they asserted that a woman could compete for any leading position within the party except as the main leader. This was a significant step forward and influenced Islamist policy in many other Muslim societies. The inclusion of Muslim women at the decision-making table and in leading positions will certainly accelerate change for betterment in Muslim societies everywhere. As Jones observes,[106] the purpose of exercising power is perceived differently by men and women; men view power as a means of having influence over other people, while women view power as a means to promote change. Murabit says, if women are included in decision-making, peace processes are 35 times more likely to last 15 years and 64% less likely to fail.[107] Mattson stresses that the essence of leadership in Islam is "relational," so when Muslims are excluded by their gender from taking part in creating and sustaining authority, "it is oppression."[108] Hence, a paradigm shift in perception and practices about female leadership is not only necessary but unavoidable in this changing contemporary environment. Thus, this article, which is aligned with the Western feminist framework, reveals a complex and formidable theological and socio-cultural debate that demands more careful and strong attention to accommodate the changing environment and attitudes in Muslim societies regarding the permissibility and plausibility of female leadership.

Leadership studies have become increasingly important in comprehending the intricate dynamics and complexities of societies. However, each research endeavour is encumbered by limitations and this study is no exception. The primary focus of this study was aligning with the Western feminist framework to investigate theological and socio-cultural issues related to female leadership in Muslim societies. Furthermore, the study relied heavily on English publications, which presents a significant limitation. It also conducted a broad overview of the literature without any specific geographic or segmental focus. Acknowledging these limitations is crucial for future research to ensure more comprehensive examination of female leadership in Muslim societies, considering the diverse dimensions, cultural contexts and regional variations that contribute to effective leadership practices. To further advance research in this area, scholars may investigate additional dimensions of female leadership, such as academia and corporate sectors, and expand their sources of literature to include non-English publications. By actively seeking out and analysing non-English publications, researchers can gain diverse perspectives, cultural insights and regional nuances. Additionally, future research should embrace a regional focus to explore region-specific challenges, cultural influences and contextual factors that shape leadership dynamics.

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[105]   Roald, *Qur'an on Women's Leadership*.
[106]   Diane C. Jones, "Power Structures and Perceptions of Powerholders in Same Sex Groups of Young Children," *Women & Politics* 3, no. 2/3 (1983).
[107]   Murabit, "Towards an Inclusive Peace."
[108]   Mattson, "Can a Woman be an Imam?"

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