



Women's Leadership in the Quran: A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Muslim Interpretation and Social Practice

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Abstract

The debate over women's leadership in Muslim societies reveals a tension between the normative character of the Quran, the interpretive constructions developed in a patriarchal social context, and the increasingly inclusive contemporary Muslim social practices. Previous studies have tended to separate textual analysis, interpretation, and social practices, thereby underexamining the normative-interpretive relationship among the three. This study aims to critically analyze the concept of women's leadership in the Quran, its interpretive constructions in classical and contemporary commentaries, and the dynamics of its acceptance and negotiation in modern Muslim social practices. The study uses a qualitative approach based on a literature review, with a thematic-critical interpretive framework and a gender analysis perspective, drawing on leadership versus representative interpretive works across periods and contemporary socio-religious literature. The results show that the Quran does not establish leadership based on gender determination, but rather emphasizes the principles of competence, trustworthiness, justice, and moral responsibility as the normative foundations of leadership. The limitations on women's leadership that emerge in some classical interpretations are primarily influenced by the epistemological framework, the structure of scholarly authority, and the patriarchal socio-historical context of the time of their interpretation. Contemporary interpretations, meanwhile, tend to reinterpret the verses on leadership with a contextual and ethical-universal approach. In contemporary Muslim social practice, the authority of interpretation

is not a hegemonic one, but is negotiated through religious reinterpretation, public policy, and women's participation in socio-political institutions. These findings confirm that the discourse on women's leadership in Islam is dynamic and opens up a space for normative legitimacy for capacity-based leadership practices and social justice.

Keywords: Women's Leadership; Quranic Interpretation; Gender; Islam; Social Practices

Abstrak

Perdebatan mengenai kepemimpinan perempuan dalam masyarakat Muslim menunjukkan adanya ketegangan antara karakter normatif Al-Quran, konstruksi tafsir yang berkembang dalam konteks sosial patriarkal, dan praktik sosial Muslim kontemporer yang semakin inklusif. Studi sebelumnya cenderung memisahkan analisis teks, tafsir, dan praktik sosial sehingga relasi normatif-interpretatif di antara ketiganya belum dikaji secara integratif. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis secara kritis konsep kepemimpinan perempuan dalam Al-Quran, konstruksi penafsirannya dalam tafsir klasik dan kontemporer, serta dinamika penerimaan dan negosiasinya dalam praktik sosial Muslim modern. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan dengan kerangka analisis tafsir tematik-kritis dan perspektif analisis gender terhadap ayat-ayat kepemimpinan, karya tafsir representatif lintas periode, serta literatur sosial-keagamaan kontemporer. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Al-Quran tidak menetapkan kepemimpinan berdasarkan determinasi gender, melainkan menekankan prinsip kompetensi, amanah, keadilan, dan tanggung jawab moral sebagai fondasi normatif kepemimpinan. Pembatasan kepemimpinan perempuan yang muncul dalam sebagian tafsir klasik terutama dipengaruhi oleh kerangka epistemologis, struktur otoritas keilmuan, serta konteks sosial-historis patriarkal pada masa penafsirannya, sedangkan tafsir kontemporer cenderung menafsirkan ulang ayat-ayat kepemimpinan dengan pendekatan kontekstual dan etis-universal. Dalam praktik sosial Muslim mutakhir, otoritas tafsir tidak diterima secara hegemonik, tetapi dinegosiasikan melalui reinterpretasi keagamaan, kebijakan publik, dan partisipasi perempuan dalam institusi sosial-politik. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa diskursus kepemimpinan perempuan dalam Islam bersifat dinamis dan membuka ruang legitimasi normatif bagi praktik kepemimpinan berbasis kapasitas dan keadilan sosial.

Kata Kunci: Kepemimpinan Perempuan; Tafsir Al-Quran; Gender; Islam; Praktik Sosial

Introduction

The issue of women's leadership has become a strategic theme in contemporary Islamic discourse because it is closely related to normative authority, religious legitimacy, and the social construction of gender relations in modern Muslim society (Surya et al., 2025). The Quran, as the primary source of Islamic teachings, emphasizes the principles of justice, moral responsibility, and human equality without distinction based on gender (Alfani et al., 2025). However, interpretations of verses on gender relations are often shaped by historical interpretive frameworks developed in a patriarchal social environment. Consequently, some socio-religious practices still limit women's participation in public leadership even though the Quran's normative values emphasize trustworthiness, capacity, and integrity as the basis of leadership (Koburtay, Abuhussein, & Sidani, 2023). The tension between the normative principles of the sacred text and social reality not only influences academic discourse but also

impacts the policies of religious organizations, Islamic education, and the social acceptance of Muslim women's leadership.

The phenomenon of inequality in women's leadership has been empirically confirmed through various global and regional indicators. The International Labour Organization (2020) report shows that women's representation in strategic decision-making positions remains far below that of men, despite significant increases in women's education levels. Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023) indicates that women's representation in world parliaments remains in the minority range, while several Muslim-majority countries show lower rates of female political participation than the global average. UNESCO (2025) emphasizes that cultural norms, patriarchal social structures, and conservative religious interpretations are often the main factors limiting women's access to social and political leadership positions. The close link between the interpretation of religious texts and social practices indicates that the issue of women's leadership in Muslim societies is not merely a social issue, but also an epistemological issue of religious interpretation that requires critical and integrative analysis.

Several previous studies have examined women's leadership from an Islamic perspective with varying focuses. Wadud (2021) affirms the ontological equality of men and women through a hermeneutical tauhidic approach. However, her analysis focuses more on the spiritual and ritual dimensions and therefore does not systematically elaborate on the implications for social leadership. Abbas and Rawabdeh (2022) propose a contextual approach that opens up space for women's leadership based on capacity and welfare, but do not comprehensively link interpretive constructions to social practices across cultural contexts. Rahmawati (2020) highlights gender-justice-based reforms in Islamic family law, but her discussion is limited to family jurisprudence and lacks an analysis of public leadership. Ismail, Firdaus, and Darmawijaya (2024) critique patriarchal interpretations by pointing out that the Quran does not affirm gender hierarchy, but have not examined the relationship between these interpretations and the reality of contemporary women's leadership. Kusuma et al. (2025) explore the political role of women in early Islamic history from a historical-sociological perspective, but have not conducted an in-depth analysis of Quranic interpretations as a normative basis for leadership. These limitations indicate a lack of integrative studies that simultaneously analyze the construction of Quranic interpretation and the social practice of women's leadership in contemporary Muslim societies across socio-cultural contexts.

The research problem formulation includes: how the Quranic verses on leadership are interpreted in classical and contemporary exegetical literature; how the social practices of Muslim communities represent or deviate from these normative principles; and what epistemological and sociological factors influence the relationship between exegesis and the social practice of women's leadership. The

research objective is to critically analyze the construction of Quranic exegesis on women's leadership and to assess its relevance to the social dynamics of contemporary Muslim communities through an integrative approach to exegesis and social analysis. The basic argument of the research is based on the assumption that the Quran does not stipulate a normative prohibition on women's leadership, but rather emphasizes the principles of justice, trustworthiness, and competence as the foundation of universal leadership, so that historical exegetical constructions and patriarchal social structures have more influence on restrictions on women's leadership. The research contribution is expected to strengthen the development of a critical-contextual exegetical approach grounded in social analysis. In contrast, the methodological contribution is the development of an integrative analytical framework that connects normative texts and social practices. The practical contribution is expected to provide an academic basis for developing policies and practices for Muslim women's leadership aligned with the principles of justice, moral equality, and social welfare.

Method

This research is a normative-interpretive qualitative study grounded in a literature review and employing an integrative critical hermeneutic approach that combines thematic analysis of Quranic verses on leadership with historical-contextual studies of classical and contemporary exegetical traditions, including reformist and feminist Muslim tendencies. Primary data consists of Quranic verses selected for explicit thematic relevance to the concept of leadership and to female figures in Quranic narratives, as well as representative exegetical works across periods, determined by criteria of scholarly authority, academic influence, and methodological diversity. Secondary data includes reputable journal articles, academic books from scientific publishers, and reports from international institutions relevant to the social practice of women's leadership in contemporary Muslim societies. Data collection was conducted through a systematic search of international academic databases with inclusion-exclusion criteria that consider thematic relevance, publication quality, time span, and terminological consistency. Data analysis was carried out through the stages of thematic analysis of texts, comparison of interpretive arguments across periods, identification of ideological constructions and power relations in interpretation, and critical synthesis between normative-theological findings and the dynamics of contemporary social practices in order to produce reflective, contextual, and methodologically accountable interpretations.

Results and Discussion

Leadership in the Quran: Normative Principles and Gender Boundaries

The concept of the caliphate has a strong normative basis through the Quran, Surah 2:30, which refers to humans as God's representatives on earth. Semantic

analysis of the root word *ف-ل-خ* across the entire Quranic corpus indicates the meaning of succession, representation, and responsibility, not the ontological privilege of a particular group (Ibn Farīs, 1979). Al-Ṭabarī (2001), al-Rāzī (2001), and al-Qurtubī (1964) interpret the verse as a collective mandate for humanity without gender restrictions, while contemporary scholars such as Fazlur Rahman (1980) and Abdullah Saeed (2013) emphasize the universal ethical character of the concept of the caliphate. A comparison of the two interpretive traditions demonstrates the consistency that the legitimacy of leadership stems from moral capacity and a commitment to justice. Quranic verse 38:26, concerning David's caliphate, completes the normative framework by emphasizing the judicial function and the obligation to restrain desires. The integration of these two verses yields a Quranic model of leadership based on transcendental accountability, which does not rely on biological indicators to determine the legitimacy of authority.

A thematic hermeneutic framework demonstrates that the relationship between Surah 2:30 and Surah 38:26 forms a leadership spectrum encompassing both a universal anthropological mandate and a contextual political mandate. A comparative analysis of the *tafsīr* literature reveals a difference in emphasis between the universal moral dimension and specific administrative functions, yet both remain centered on the principle of justice. Toshihiko Izutsu's (2002) semantic field analysis approach demonstrates the interconnectedness of the terms *khalīfah*, *ḥukm*, and *ʿadl* within a network of ethical leadership meanings. Ingrid Mattson (2013) and Kecia Ali (2016) strengthen the argument that the Quran places ethical capacity as a primary parameter of legitimacy. This framework rejects the generalization that leadership in the Quran is inherently gender-bound. The argument for the universality of the caliphate gains methodological legitimacy through a synthesis of classical *tafsīr*, linguistic analysis, and modern Quranic ethical theory that emphasizes collective human moral responsibility.

The concept of imamate in Surah 2:124 affirms the legitimacy of leadership based on ethical merit through the phrase *lā yanālu ʾahdī al-Ẓālimīn*, which explicitly links leadership to moral integrity. Al-Ṭabarī (2001) and al-Rāzī (2001) interpret this verse as a requirement for a leader's morality, while Shia commentators such as al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī (1997) emphasize the continuity of spiritual authority grounded in justice. Cross-traditional analysis demonstrates a consensus that leadership requirements are rooted in ethical qualities rather than genealogical or biological factors. Wael Hallaq (2015) and Andrew March (2009) demonstrate that the concept of moral legitimacy has remained the foundation of Islamic leadership theory throughout history. When the verse is read through the lens of the *maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah*, it appears that the normative goal of leadership is closely related to protecting social justice. The absence of gender indicators in the structure of the verses strengthens the conclusion that the criteria for leadership in the Quran are based on universal moral competence.

A thematic analysis of the concept of imamate reveals a close relationship between leadership and the moral testing mechanism Ibrahim undergoes. The test serves as an indicator of ethical legitimacy, not a selection based on social or biological status. Noah Feldman (2008) shows that early Muslim political traditions understood the legitimacy of authority through a framework of normative justice, in line with the message of Surah 2:124. Integrating classical exegesis and modern political theory demonstrates that the concept of imamate rejects structural privileges without an ethical basis. This perspective provides a strong argumentative basis for a non-exclusive reading of the gender leadership issue. This normative structure demonstrates the Quran's consistency in assessing leadership by applying standards of justice, responsibility, and ethical integrity open to all believers.

The concept of *wilāyah* in Surah 9:71 expands the framework of leadership through reciprocal relations between believing men and women. Semantic analysis of the term *awliyā'* across various verses reveals a spectrum of meanings, including protectors, allies, and collective moral authority. Ibn 'Āshūr (1985) and ash-Sha'rāwī (1997) interpret the verse as social solidarity that demands the active participation of the entire believing community in the task of *amar ma'rūf nahy al-Munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil). Amina Wadud (1999) and Asma Barlas (2001) develop this reciprocal reading as a model of participatory moral authority that transcends historical patriarchal structures. An integration of classical exegesis and modern gender studies demonstrates that the verse does not place gender relations in a pattern of hierarchical subordination. The syntactic structure of the verse, which addresses men and women in parallel, demonstrates their equal social function. The mutual leadership argument gains strong textual legitimacy through linguistic analysis and comparative interpretation.

Historical studies of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh siyāsah*) show that the public-private dichotomy is often shaped by post-classical socio-political constructions rather than by the normative formulation of verses (Hacak, 2014). Karen Bauer's (2015) study of gender interpretations demonstrates how historical interpretations influenced the restriction of women's roles to the domestic sphere. A thematic reading of Surah 9:71, alongside the verse on the caliphate, reveals a collective leadership model grounded in shared social responsibility. This approach produces a "multi-layered ethical leadership" framework that combines individual, community, and political dimensions within a single normative system. This leadership framework in the Quran grounds the legitimacy of social authority in the solidarity of faith. The argument for equality of leadership gains methodological strength through a combination of semantic analysis, historiography of interpretation, and contemporary social studies that demonstrate the continuity of the principle of participatory justice.

The concept of *qiwāmah* in Surah 4:34 requires a thorough linguistic analysis of the phrases *bi-mā faḍḍala* and *bi-mā anfaqū*, which indicate a causal relationship grounded in economic responsibility. A grammatical analysis by Ibn 'Ashūr (1985) shows that the verse's structure links family authority with the obligation to provide for others, making this leadership characteristic functional rather than ontological. Al-Ṭabarī (2001) identifies economic responsibility as the primary reason, while modern scholars such as Muhammad Asad (1980) interpret the verse through a historical context. Kecia Ali (2016) shows that changes in modern economic structures affect the relevance of this function. The dialogue between classical and modern interpretations shows that the generalization of *qiwāmah* as gender superiority lacks a universal textual basis. A contextual reading provides an interpretive basis more consistent with the Quranic principle of justice.

The historiography of *tafsīr* shows that the expansion of the meaning of *qiwāmah* into a universal, masculine leadership doctrine emerged through the construction of social *fiqh* in a particular patriarchal context. Karen Bauer's (2015) analysis of the classical *tafsīr* tradition reveals variations in interpretation, often influenced by the social structures of the time. The integration of linguistic approaches, comparative *tafsīr*, and contemporary gender studies yields the understanding that the verse regulates familial responsibilities, not the exclusive legitimacy of male public leadership. The synthesis of four key concepts—caliphate, imamate, *wilāyah*, and *qiwāmah*—forms the “Quranic Ethical Leadership Framework,” which grounds leadership legitimacy in justice, moral responsibility, and ethical competence. This integrative framework demonstrates the consistency of the Quran's normative structure, which does not make gender the primary criterion for authority but rather assesses leadership on the basis of moral qualities, professional capacity, and commitment to universal social justice.

Classical Interpretations of Female Leadership: Genealogy and Hermeneutic Bias

A genealogical study of classical interpretations of female leadership requires a hermeneutic theoretical foundation that explains the relationship between knowledge production, authority structures, and the social configurations that shape interpretive horizons. Michel Foucault's (1980) genealogical perspective on knowledge provides analytical tools to explore how power relations shape the boundaries of meaning's legitimacy, while Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1977) historical hermeneutics asserts that every interpretation operates through a pre-understanding bound by historical circumstances. The integration of these two approaches demonstrates that classical interpretations are not merely expressions of individual intellectual piety, but rather the result of interactions between scholarly traditions, clerical institutions, and the socio-political order of medieval Islamic society. Marshall Hodgson (2002) and Ira Lapidus (2002) demonstrate the dominance of patriarchal structures in family organizations, political bureaucracy,

and religious authority. These conditions form epistemological assumptions that position public leadership as a masculine domain, thereby influencing the methodological orientation of commentators when interpreting verses on gender relations and social authority.

The *tafsīr bi al-Ma'thūr* approach developed by al-Ṭabarī (2001) demonstrates how the transmission of narrations stabilizes meaning while simultaneously conveying the social assumptions of the period in which they are narrated. An analysis of the interpretation of Surah 4:34 reveals al-Ṭabarī's tendency to prioritize the companions and the successors, positioning men as holders of family authority and legitimacy for social leadership. Studies by Andrew Rippin (2022) and Walid A. Saleh (2004) on the early *tafsīr* tradition emphasize that the authority of the *sanad* is not merely an instrument of historical verification but also a means of reproducing social norms accepted by the scholarly community. This framework explains why interpretations of narration often affirm dominant gender structures without critically problematizing the narration's historical setting. A comparison with the rationalist tendencies of the Mu'tazilah reveals the possibility of an epistemological alternative that opens up more space for ethical argumentation, thus showing that the patriarchal reading is not a necessary consequence of the text, but rather the result of a methodological choice that gives absolute priority to the authority of transmission (Sinaee, 2025).

The normative construction of male leadership gained systematic articulation in al-Māwardī's political thought, which integrated the theory of the imamate with the assumption of gender hierarchy in Abbasid society. In his work, *al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah*, al-Māwardī (2001) demonstrated the structural relationship between the conception of patriarchal family leadership and the legitimacy of political leadership, thereby interpreting verses concerning social authority as reinforcing established models of governance. Research by Patricia Crone (2004), Aziz Al-Azmeh (1997), and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (1997) on classical Islamic political theory demonstrates that religious legitimacy often served as an instrument for stabilizing the power structure. Al-Māwardī's interpretation of the verses on leadership cannot be understood separately from the ideological needs of the Abbasid state, which demanded theological legitimacy for masculine political structures. The reciprocal relationship among text, political theory, and social configuration shows that interpretation serves to normalize patriarchal values by rationalizing public law as a theological rather than a debatable historical choice.

The intensification of hermeneutic bias is more evident in the Islamic jurisprudence tradition of al-Qurṭubī (1964), which integrates linguistic analysis with the normative goal of establishing law. The interpretation of verses on gender relations is directed toward legal conclusions formulated by the Mālikī school, so that the Quranic text serves as a basis for a jurisprudential construction that presupposes male dominance. Ibn Kathīr (2004) reinforces this pattern through a

selection of hadith that narrate women's rational weakness, including hadith about "lack of reason and religion" that are presented as justification for restrictions on public leadership. Fatima Mernissi's (1991) study of gender hadith shows that the use of such hadith is often detached from analysis of their historical context and the rhetorical purposes of their emergence. Jonathan Brown's (2007) theory of hadith authority asserts that the canonization of narrations in the Sunni tradition results in the sacralization of interpretation, so that particular social generalizations acquire universal normative legitimacy and close off the possibility of alternative readings.

Al-Rāzī's (2001) rational philosophical orientation does not completely free interpretation from the naturalization of patriarchy, as his rational arguments draw on Aristotelian-influenced natural theories of biological differences and the hierarchy of social functions. Dimitri Gutas's (2001) study of the transmission of Greek philosophy to the Islamic world shows how classical natural theories shaped the intellectual assumptions of medieval scholars, including the view of male rational superiority. Al-Rāzī's rationality served to reinforce dominant social beliefs through philosophical legitimacy, rather than to critique established hierarchical structures. Al-Baghawī's (1999) emphasis on *ijma'* (consensus of scholars) as the normative basis for male leadership demonstrates the transformation of historical consensus into a universal claim across time. Wael B. Hallaq (2005) argues that the consensus of scholars is a historical construction that developed through specific social dynamics. Interpretations that present *ijma'* as an ahistorical fact obscure the process of its social formation and reinforce the naturalization of restrictions on female leadership.

A methodological critique of classical exegesis requires a comparative analysis of interpretive approaches to demonstrate that gender bias does not arise solely from the revealed text, but rather from different epistemological configurations. The traditions of narration, *fiqh*, and philosophical rationalism produce a variety of arguments that consistently legitimize male leadership because they share patriarchal social assumptions. A genealogical framework demonstrates that this uniformity of conclusions is not evidence of a universal normative consensus but rather an indication of the homogeneity of the male-dominated '*ulamā'* community's social structure. Leila Ahmed's (1992) research on the gender history of Islam demonstrates the close relationship between changes in social structure and changes in religious interpretation. This comparative approach emphasizes that classical exegesis must be understood as the product of the interaction among texts, methodological traditions, and the need for social legitimacy, thereby opening the possibility of a historical critique of claims to interpretive universality that are rooted in particular contexts.

The synthesis of findings shows that the limitations of classical interpretations regarding female leadership stem not from the intellectual weaknesses of the interpreters, but rather from a historical horizon that limits the

methodological questions that can be asked. Power relations, the institutional structures of scholars, and dominant theories of knowledge limit the legitimacy of interpretation, allowing patriarchal views to acquire theological normative status. Genealogical awareness enables a critical evaluation of universal claims that are rooted in specific social conditions, while also opening space for constructive dialogue between the classical exegetical tradition and modern hermeneutic approaches. The contribution of this analysis lies in the assertion that reinterpreting female leadership does not mean a rejection of tradition, but rather a reactivation of hermeneutical principles that recognize the historicity of human understanding. This analytical framework provides a conceptual basis for discussions of contemporary interpretations that aim to formulate a reading of the Quran more responsive to Muslims' social realities today.

Contemporary Interpretations and Efforts to Reinterpret Women's Leadership

Contemporary interpretive approaches to women's leadership develop through a contextual hermeneutic framework that explicitly integrates linguistic analysis, discourse structure, and the sociohistorical conditions of verse revelation. This approach departs from the theoretical assumption that the normative meaning of the Quran cannot be separated from its historical context, while maintaining that the Quran still contains a universal ethical message (Moosa, 2020). Ibn Āshūr (1985) and Quraish Shihab (2010) position the text as the center of normative authority by rejecting literalistic readings that generalize certain social provisions into universal laws across space and time. The *qiwāmah* verse is analyzed through relational semantics and sentence structure to demonstrate the conditional social function of household leadership. The fundamental difference with classical interpretations lies in the epistemology of interpretation: classical interpretations tend to treat patriarchal social structures as ontological assumptions. In contrast, contemporary interpretations treat them as historical variables. Reinterpretative arguments gain legitimacy when linguistic analysis is systematically combined with the ethical rationality of the Quran, rather than simply the interpreter's moral preferences.

The methodological consistency of contextual interpretation is evident through the use of measurable analytical indicators, including analysis of lexical meaning, syntactic relations, and the pragmatic function of verses within the context of revelation (Saeed & Akbar, 2021). This approach allows for a functional reading of the verses on leadership, so that leadership is understood as a social mandate grounded in capacity and responsibility, rather than biological identity. Classical interpretations generally view *qiwāmah* as legitimizing gender hierarchy by attributing male superiority to the nature of creation. In contrast, contemporary interpretations reject this generalization by challenging ontological assumptions about gender (Ismail et al., 2024). The advantage of the contextual approach lies in its ability to maintain a normative attachment to the text while avoiding ahistoricism. Potential weaknesses arise when context is treated as the sole

determinant of meaning, thus obscuring the normative transhistorical dimension (Koikkalainen, 2015). Therefore, a balance between historicity and normativity is an epistemological prerequisite to prevent reinterpretation from falling into relativism of meaning.

The *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* approach occupies a strategic position as an evaluative tool for interpreting verses on leadership. Ibn 'Āshūr (1998) formulated *maqāṣid* as the ethical objectives of sharia that serve to direct the interpretation of texts toward justice, welfare, and the protection of human dignity. This framework shifts leadership from gender-based rights to value-based social functions. The operationalization of *maqāṣid* involves identifying legal objectives, evaluating the verse's social context, and reconstructing norms in accordance with these ethical objectives. Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī's (2007) thinking expands the horizon of *maqāṣid* as a critical criterion for literal reading, though his approach still maintains certain normative boundaries. A significant difference from classical interpretation lies in the function of *maqāṣid*, which is no longer merely legal legitimacy, but rather an instrument of epistemological criticism. The consistency of this approach depends on the clarity of the hierarchy of *maqāṣid* and on methodological discipline, so that it does not become an ideological justification.

Critical hermeneutics offers the most reflective approach to the issue of women's leadership by deconstructing traditional interpretive epistemology. Fazlur Rahman (1980) developed a theory of double movement that separates universal moral messages from historical legal formulations, thus understanding leadership verses as contextual responses to specific social structures. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (2004) views texts as products of historical communication whose meaning is shaped through the interaction between text, interpreter, and context. Abdullah Saeed (2013) strengthens this approach through an ethics of reading that emphasizes the values of justice and equality as interpretive principles. The epistemological differences between these figures demonstrate that critical hermeneutics is not a single approach, but rather a methodological spectrum. The strength of this approach lies in the transparency of the interpreter's assumptions and ideological awareness. Its main challenge lies in the potential for subjectivity, which is addressed through explicit methodological argumentation and strict adherence to the text's linguistic structure.

The contributions of contemporary Muslim feminism enrich the discourse on exegesis through intratextual analysis and critique of patriarchal authoritarianism. Amina Wadud (2021) asserts the moral equality of human beings as a fundamental principle of the Quran by rejecting textually incoherent gender hierarchies. Asma Barlas (2001) furthers this critique by separating revelation from patriarchal interpretive constructions, thus viewing claims of exclusive male leadership as the result of historical power relations. This approach differs from classical exegesis, which relies on traditional consensus as its authority. The relevance of the feminist

approach is evident in its ability to connect exegesis to global discourses on gender and justice. Its scholarly validity rests on methodological consistency and critical engagement with the exegetical tradition, rather than a complete rejection of the classical heritage. Thus, Muslim feminism functions as an epistemological correction rather than a substitution for the authority of the text.

Comparative analysis shows that contemporary interpretations form a methodological spectrum with varying degrees of radicality. Quraish Shihab maintains the continuity of tradition through contextual moderation, while Rahman and Abu Zayd pursue a deeper epistemological deconstruction. This difference directly impacts the position of the leadership verse as a legal norm or ethical message. Classical interpretations affirm male leadership as a universal decree through literal readings and gender-ontological assumptions. Contemporary interpretations challenge this universalization by critiquing its epistemological foundations. The methodological strengths of contemporary interpretations lie in reflexivity, historical awareness, and the integration of linguistic, ethical, and social analysis. Fragility arises when methodological differences are not explicitly explained, resulting in selective reinterpretation. A solid synthesis requires integrated argumentation across analytical dimensions.

The contribution of contemporary exegesis to Quranic studies lies in shifting the focus from normative debates to epistemological evaluations of interpretation. Contextual approaches, *maqāṣid*, and critical hermeneutics broaden analytical tools and open up space for critique of the authority of exegesis without denying the sacredness of the text. Reinterpreting women's leadership demonstrates that Quranic norms are dynamic through a dialogue between the text and social reality. The tension between methodological objectivity and ethical commitment presents a challenge that must be managed through disciplined theory and transparent argumentation. The global relevance of contemporary exegesis is evident in its connection to the international discourse on gender justice and the development of Quranic studies as a critical discipline. With a rigorous methodological framework and a reputable international literature base, contemporary exegesis contributes significantly to an understanding of women's leadership grounded in textual, ethical, and intellectual responsibility.

Women's Leadership in Contemporary Muslim Social Practice: Between Interpretation and Reality

Studies of women's leadership in contemporary Muslim societies demonstrate the close relationship between interpretive authority, modern social structures, and institutional transformation across countries. Empirical analysis shows the emergence of female leaders across Indonesia and Malaysia in the political sector, Islamic education, philanthropic organizations, and public bureaucracy, with varying configurations of religious and social legitimacy (Muqtada et al., 2024). Andok's (2024) research confirms that religious authority is not static

but is reproduced through relations among the state, civil society, and public media. The reality of women's leadership demonstrates measurable administrative success through institutional performance indicators, the effectiveness of social policies, and recognition from local communities, although some interpretive authorities maintain normative reservations (Alyamani & Morsi, 2025; Kalbarczyk et al., 2025). This phenomenon reflects the epistemic distance between institutionalized textual interpretations and evolving empirical social practices, thus requiring simultaneous sociological, hermeneutic, and political-knowledge approaches to analysis of women's leadership.

Debates over the legitimacy of female leadership often center on the selection of specific verses deemed to represent orthodoxy. However, contemporary hermeneutic studies demonstrate a far more complex diversity of interpretive methodologies. A study by Tafkir, Hidayat, and Ayob (2026) demonstrates that traditional normative readings often ignore the historical dimensions of interpretive discourse and the social construction of gender in classical societies. Comparative data indicate that countries with pluralistic institutional structures of the ulama, such as Indonesia and Morocco, tend to create a broader space for the legitimacy of female leadership than contexts with centralized interpretive authority structures (Gray, 2019; Nugroho, Mustaniruddin, & Taufik, 2024). These legitimacy mechanisms rely not only on theological argumentation but also on institutional support, state regulation, and performance-based public recognition. A Weberian analysis of traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic legitimacy helps explain how female leadership gains social acceptance despite facing normative resistance from some conservative interpretive authorities (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2021).

Symbolic negotiation strategies employed by female leaders demonstrate creative adaptation to community religious expectations while maintaining professional administrative authority. Ethnographic studies of Indonesian women's Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and Malaysian Islamic educational institutions demonstrate the use of moderate religious language, public representations of morality, and an emphasis on professional competence to gain community legitimacy (Asmanto et al., 2023; Latief et al., 2021). This approach aligns with Bourdieu's (2020) habitus theory, which explains how social actors utilize dominant symbolic structures to acquire new legitimacy capital without open confrontation. Field evidence suggests that successful female leadership often increases social acceptance faster than changes in the normative positions of formal interpretive institutions (Zhang & Basha, 2023). These dynamics emphasize that social practices function as arenas for the production of alternative religious meanings that do not always rely on classical institutional authority but are instead shaped through the interaction of collective experiences, policy successes, and community recognition.

The relationship between interpretation and social practice also demonstrates interpretation's role as a symbolic regulatory mechanism that shapes

the distribution of leadership authority. Foucault's (1980) power-knowledge perspective explains that religious discourse not only interprets texts but also shapes social norms regarding who is considered legitimate to lead. Armita's (2025) analysis of sermon discourse, religious organization fatwas, and digital media debates reveals the existence of moral narratives that set stricter standards for female leadership than for male. These empirical findings demonstrate that resistance to female leadership is often related to efforts to maintain symbolic authority structures, not simply a matter of theological argument. This situation demonstrates that interpretation is not neutral but operates within a network of social power relations that influence public acceptance of female leadership, while simultaneously opening up a space for ever-evolving interpretive negotiations.

The development of digital media and transnational public spaces has accelerated the shift in the locus of religious authority toward a more plural and participatory configuration. Zaid et al.'s (2022) study on digital religion shows that religious discourse is now produced through interactions between religious scholars, academics, activists, and social media users, creating an open arena for interpretation. Women's leadership gains alternative legitimacy through representations of successful public policies, administrative transparency, and support from digital communities, thereby broadening the basis of social recognition (Zhang & Basha, 2023). This phenomenon does not negate theological legitimacy, but rather creates a dialectical pattern between social and normative legitimacy that influences each other. Comparative analysis shows that religious organizations that actively interact with digital spaces tend to display greater interpretive flexibility than institutions with a closed authority model; the dynamics of information technology play a significant role in shaping new configurations of interpretive authority (Andok, 2024).

The dialectic between social and theological legitimacy shows that rapid changes in normative interpretive structures do not always accompany changes in women's leadership practices. The cases of local-level women's leadership in Indonesia and Bangladesh demonstrate that public acceptance, grounded in administrative performance, often emerges first, followed by adaptations of religious arguments to accommodate new social realities (Dewi, 2024; Tanjeela, 2021). The lived religion approach emphasizes understanding religious practices as concrete social experiences, rather than merely reflections of normative texts (Knibbe & Kupari, 2020). This analysis demonstrates that interpretations develop through historical interactions with social practices, so that emerging conflicts reflect a temporal asynchrony between rapid social transformations and the gradual discursive changes in interpretive institutions. This understanding helps explain why women's leadership persists and gains community legitimacy despite facing resistance from some interpretive authorities.

The analytical synthesis demonstrates that the conflict surrounding women's leadership lies not in the opposition between the Quranic text and social practice, but rather in the historical dynamics of institutionalized interpretation and contemporary social structural changes. Women's leadership practices serve as empirical indicators that test the elasticity of religious interpretation methodologies and the capacity of interpretive institutions to respond to new social realities. Strengthening the integration between interpretation studies, the sociology of religion, and political knowledge analysis yields a more comprehensive understanding of the process of producing religious legitimacy in modern Muslim societies. This multidisciplinary approach emphasizes that leadership legitimacy is determined not only by normative arguments but also by institutional performance, community recognition, and symbolic negotiations within the public sphere. This analytical framework provides an important theoretical contribution to the study of Islamic women's leadership while offering a more adaptive methodological perspective to the complexities of global social transformation.

Conclusion

The discourse on women's leadership, as analyzed through Quranic verses, shows that the Quran affirms leadership based on ethical capacity, without gender distinction. At the same time, normative restrictions are more dominantly derived from classical interpretations intertwined with patriarchal social structures and interpreters' historical assumptions. The main findings reveal significant epistemological differences between classical interpretations that emphasize gender hierarchy and contemporary interpretations that prioritize a contextual approach, thereby enabling the articulation of women's leadership relevant to the social reality of modern Muslims. Theoretical implications emphasize the urgency of a historical-critical approach and contextual hermeneutics to reconstruct the authority of interpretation and enrich Islamic gender studies. In contrast, the practical implications are reflected in the strengthening of textual arguments for Islamic educational institutions and religious organizations, and in the formulation of more inclusive public policies. The limitations of the study are evident in the uneven representation of interpretive sources across schools of thought, the dominance of qualitative-textual analysis, and the focus on a particular social context, all of which limit the generalizability of the findings. The further research agenda is directed at comparative studies across Muslim regions, integration of sociological empirical methods, and intersectional analysis to close the gap in the relationship between texts, interpretations, and contemporary leadership practices.

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Author Contribution Statement

EP contributed to the formulation of the research concept, the development of the theoretical framework, data analysis, and the final drafting and revision of the manuscript. AO was involved in data collection, literature search, and the preparation of the literature review section. RD contributed to data processing and interpretation, as well as the writing of the results and discussion sections. DS contributed to data validation, argument consistency checking, and language editing. ZR contributed to the development of the research methodology, reference verification, and manuscript formatting in accordance with publication guidelines. All authors reviewed the manuscript and approved the final version for publication.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that this manuscript was prepared independently and has no conflicts of interest whatsoever. They have no financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the writing process, analysis, or conclusions. The entire contents of the manuscript reflect the authors' academic views, grounded in objective data and scientific studies. The authors also confirm that no other parties have exerted any influence that could potentially bias the substance of this manuscript.

AI Usage Statement

The authors declare that the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in preparing this manuscript was limited to improving language quality, correcting grammar, and assisting with text formatting. All scientific content, including research results, findings, concepts, analyses, ideas, and conclusions, is entirely the result of the authors' own thinking and academic work. AI was not used to formulate ideas, process data, interpret results, or develop scientific arguments. The authors are fully responsible for the authenticity, validity, and integrity of the contents of this manuscript in accordance with applicable academic ethics.

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