WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP IN ISLAM: A CASE STUDY IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

Women in leadership positions is a sensitive issue in most Moslem societies. Even though reality has shown that women can compete with men, some people continue to use ‘religious reasons’ to block women’s advancement to leadership roles and maintain the status quo. This article will examine the conservative and liberal thinking about women as leaders in Muslim society especially in Indonesia.

Keywords: Women, Leadership, Islam, Gender

A. Introduction

Women in early Islam had shown that a woman could become a leader in Muslim society. For example, Khadija (555-623 AD), the first Muhammad’s first wife, was successfully running her business and Aisha (615-680 AD), the mother of believers, who was well-known as an Ulema (Islamic religious leader) and was a commander in waqiatul jamal (the battle of camel). However, in Indonesia, which is the country with the biggest Muslim population in the world, many people still think that Syariah law does not allow women to be leaders. People still remember that Megawati Soekarno Putri, the woman who won the 1999 election in Indonesia, could not be president because she was a woman. Although a year later Megawati became president and ruled from 2001-2004 because Wahid was dismissed by the Indonesian People’s Council. Related to this, Mernissi says, ‘Space, employment, and education seem to be the areas where the struggles which agitate society (especially the class struggle) show up in the life of women with the greatest clarity’.

Nowadays, many Muslim scholars who are popular as Muslim feminists are reinterpreting the Qur’an and hadiths (Muhammad’s sayings) and contradicting conservative doctrines. This has triggered a long debate between conservative and liberal Muslims.

B. Conservative Perspectives on Women’s Leadership

Discussion of the struggle for gender equity in Islam cannot ignore the work of three significant female, Muslim scholars, Amina Wadud, Leila Ahmed, and Fatima Mernissi. For example, Fatima Mernissi, a Muslim feminist from Morocco is a woman who is questioning the validity of some hadiths due to their misogyny which subordinates women and is far from the spirit of Islam. Similarly, Leila Ahmed, a Muslim feminist from Egypt believes that the practices which oppress women in Muslim society are due to patriarchal interpretation rather than Islam itself. She also believes that the gender inequality in Islam appeared in the Abasiyah’s era (750-1258 AD) which she describes as androcentric and misogynistic. The third woman who contributes significantly to the debate on women and leadership is Amina Wadud, a Muslim feminist from America. She mentions that the Qur’an needs to be reinterpreted, especially the verses which marginalise women’s position. She believes that both men and women can be an imam (leader).


come up with arguments and solutions which may have harmful consequences in the struggle for democracy in the Islamic world and the struggle for women’s rights’. The conservatives claim that the Qur’an \(^4\) says: ‘Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them’. The Ulemas’ consensus from 4 main mazhab (Islam’s school’s of thought) state that a woman cannot be a leader. Although there were several Ulemas who were not so strict and allowed women to be leaders but not political leaders.

The conservatives also use another section of the Qur’an \(^4\) to support their argument, saying: ‘Believers, obey God and obey the Apostle and those in authority among you’. They interpret this verse very strictly that the only person who can become a leader is a man. This is from their interpretation that the word ‘apostle’ refers to a man not a woman.

Besides using the Qur’an to support their argument, the conservatives also use some hadiths. The main hadith that they cite out of context, was told by Abu Bakrah (d. 52 AH), which says that ‘A nation that is led by a woman will not succeed’. Another hadith which has been quoted by the conservatives was Muhammad’s saying, ‘I have not seen any one more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious, sensible man could be led astray by some of you’. \(^6\)

C. Liberal Perspectives on Women’s Leadership

The interpretation of women and leadership in Islam by the conservatives has been challenged by contemporary Muslim scholars. They believe that the conservatives’ interpretation should be re-evaluated. This is because they feel that most of the conservative interpretations tend to marginalise the position of women and do not respect them. Therefore, the liberal philosophy begins with the main belief that the original spirit of Islam is to raise women’s status. \(^7\) Stowasser says, ‘...the modernist blueprint of women’s Islamic rights eventually also included the right to work, vote and stand for election - that is, full participation in public life’. \(^8\) They also believe that the interpretation of the Qur’an and the hadiths could be done by using a different approach called liberation theology. This method requires understanding of the historical context of the Qur’an and hadiths. Based on their studies, they declare that a woman is equal to a man so a woman can also be a leader.

Firstly, the liberals argue that the Qur’an \(^9\) talks about women in the familial context. They interpret this verse to mean that a man can be a leader in his household only if he fulfils his responsibilities. If he does not do this well, a woman can become the leader in his household. \(^10\) The liberals refer their argument to the Qur’an: ‘The true believers, both men and women, are friends to one another. They enjoin what is just and forbid that is evil; they attend to their prayers, and render the alms levy, and obey God and his Apostle’. The liberals say that in this verse the position of a man and a woman is equal. For example, in Indonesia 60 % of women have to survive

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4 The Qur’an, Women 4:34, Penguin Classics translation.
5 Ibid. 4:59.

9 The Qur’an, Women 4:34.
11 The Qur’an, Repentance 9:71.
without any help from men, so that in reality they are leaders in their household.\textsuperscript{12}

In the context of equality between men and women, Moghissi\textsuperscript{13}’s work questions the domination by men because it does not respect the spirit of Islam. Islam has a good record in helping women to attain higher status and equality with men in the beginning of Islam. This was supported by the Qur’an\textsuperscript{14}: ‘But the believers who do good works, both men and women, shall enter Paradise. They shall not suffer the least injustice’. This verse points to gender equity in Islam.

Secondly, the liberals say that the hadith which says that women have less intelligence and less spirituality needs to be questioned. This is because Muhammad would go to his wife Ummu Salamah and ask her advice. Muhammad took her advice to solve his problems\textsuperscript{15}. Based on this story, if the woman is really less intelligent, why would Muhammad ask and take Ummu Salamah’s advice to solve a complicated problem?

The liberals also mention that there is a hadith qudsy (Muhammad’s saying but the redaction was from God) which says that women are also intelligent. In this hadith, Moses asks Benjamin to show him Joseph’s cemetery. Benjamin then goes to an old Israeli woman. The old woman asks them to go to the lake and empty it. After that, she asks them to dig a hole and to lift out Joseph’s bones.\textsuperscript{16} This hadith shows that women were respected for their knowledge and understanding.

The liberals disagree with the argument that women are less spiritual. They reveal that in early Islam, there was Aisha who was very knowledgeable about Islam. She contributed 1,210 hadiths, 300 hadiths which were used by many Ulema, especially Bukhari and Muslim, as a reference. Aisha also protested when women could not attend the mosque in the Umar period (634-644 AD)\textsuperscript{17}. Many people went to Aisha for advice for religious and political problems. People admired her as a brilliant woman who knew many things about astrology, Syariah law, and politics. Islam in this early period also noticed that Aisha was not the only woman who had a good understanding and knowledge of Islam. Many great Ulemas studied Islam from women. Aisha had 229 students, Ummu Salamah had 101 students, Hafsah had 20 students, Asma’ had 21 students, Hajimah had 22 students, Ramlah had 21 students and Fatimah had 11 students.

Lastly, Muslim feminists oppose the conservatives’ argument that women cannot be leaders because there is a hadith saying that a nation that is led by a woman will not succeed. Muslim feminists explain that people need to read this hadith within its context.\textsuperscript{18} In the liberal opinion, this hadith refers to Muhammad’s response to the fall of Persia, which was ruled by a woman, Princess Kisra. This hadith from Abu Bakrah who was known as a liar in the court in that era, is questioned by Muslim feminists.\textsuperscript{19} The liberals also say that the Qur’an\textsuperscript{20} acknowledges Queen Bilqis of Sheba in the time of Solomon.\textsuperscript{21}

D. Women in Early Islam

The liberals’ studies on women in early Islam have shown that Islam in Muhammad’s era tried hard to raise women’s status in Arabia.\textsuperscript{22} Once, Muhammad said that ‘The most perfect

\\textsuperscript{12} Kompas, 4 July 2000, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{13} Moghissi, \textit{Feminism}, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{14} The Qur’an, Women 4:124.
\textsuperscript{15} Istibsyaroh, ‘Hak’, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 7.
\textsuperscript{18} Istibsyaroh, ‘Hak’, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 9.
\textsuperscript{20} The Qur’an, The Ant 27:23.
belief is that of those who are best-mannered and most tender with their wives’. Then he said that ‘Paradise lies at the feet of the mother’. In the context of equality between men and women, Muhammad also addressed women’s aspirations when they protested to him to gain access to the mosque and learn Islam like men did. Furthermore, he allowed women to pray in the mosque and made a time to teach women about Islam. In Muhammad’s era, women were also allowed to participate in the battle for Islam.

The treatment of women in early Islam changed dramatically, especially after Muhammad passed away. The climax happened during the Umar period when he created many rules which marginalised women. It seemed that Umar did not like women participating in public and political activities. For example, he did not allow Muhammad’s widows to go for a pilgrimage to Mecca, and told women to not pray in the mosque. These rules restricted women to domesticity and oppressed women.23 The liberals’ studies have also found that many hadiths have come from Abu Huraira in the Umar period. Related to this, Fatima Mernissi said that Abu Huraira (603-681 AD) was a man with problems in dealing with women which could explain why hadiths in this period are coloured by misogyny.24 However, these rules had been changed in the Usman period (579-656 AD) because Usman respected women more than Umar did. He allowed Muhammad’s widows to marry again, allowed them to go for a pilgrimage and allowed women to pray in the mosque.25 However this situation did not exist for long because he was killed. In the next period, the women’s role in public and political life was reduced significantly and it became worse when Abasiyah (750-1258 AD) led the government. As a consequence women were put into the dark history of Islam that focuses on domesticity.26 Many hadiths which referred to the equality of men and women were ignored and are still being ignored.

**E. Liberal Movement in Indonesia**

The study of conservative perspectives of women in Indonesia was started by Muslim scholars. The movement for gender equality in Islam became more cohesive in 2001 when Jaringan Islam Liberal (The Liberal Islamic Network) was formed. They criticised ‘Kitab Kuning’, old books for using the teaching of pesantren (traditional Islamic schools), which have a male perspective and have been contaminated with Indonesia’s culture. According to van Bruinessen, this situation became worse when many cheap books were published and sold for a long time. The content of these books became institutionalised in Indonesian society, so that there were many negative stereotypes of women. Most importantly, liberal studies have shown that conservative Ulemas have been successfully planting the ideas that women are not equal to men, that men should be leaders and that women have been created to serve men. The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) has stated that prerequisites to becoming a leader are that he must be a Muslim, man, baligh (mature), intelligent, fair, independent and capable. It shows that this council, as the highest Ulemas’ organisation in Indonesia is still closed to idea of women as leaders.

Van Bruinessen27 and Srimulyani28 explained that in the past, many Ulemas in

Indonesia were men. They did not provide space for women to become great Ulemas. Furthermore, van Bruinessen\textsuperscript{30} mentioned that it can be shown by a popular book about essential principles in Islam which was written by a woman in South Kalimantan as a case. Her identity as a woman writer, Fatimah Binti Abdulwahhab has been boycotted and replaced by her uncle’s name, Jamaluddin Bin Arsyad al-Banjari so that people in Indonesia have never known that the original author of that book was a woman. They did not know that in the past a woman could also write books of good quality which were printed and published many times. Van Bruinessen\textsuperscript{31} also mentioned that this situation existed to keep the status quo of domination by men in a patriarchal system.

Indonesian Muslim scholar, DR. Jalaludin Rakhmat\textsuperscript{32}, says the trend in thinking about equality between men and women in Indonesia has been corrupted by male Ulema. For example, hadiths saying, 'If mankind can sujud (bow from kneeling position so that forehead touches floor as a part of prayer ritual). God will ask wives to kneel before their husband'. The complete hadith before that part is ‘Aisha said that Muhammad serves his wives, sweeping the floor, sewing the clothes, repair sandal and milks the cow’. Rakhmat also mentions another incomplete hadith says, ‘If a woman hurts her husband, God will not receive her prayers until she has made her husband happy’. This hadith continues saying that ‘A man’s prayer will not be received if he hurts his wife’. Finally, Rakhmat says that many people often use a part of a hadith, saying, ‘A woman is who patient, suffering from what her husband does will be rewarded’. However, the hadith before this states that, ‘A man who is patient, suffering from what his wife does will be rewarded by God’. These are some of the hadiths that are often used by Ulemas to maintain hegemony and oppress women in Indonesia.

F. Conclusion

In conclusion, Islam has an egalitarian spirit that is shown by the history of Muhammad’s life. However, since the death of Muhammad, the treatment of women has changed significantly in most Islamic societies. In Indonesia’s case, women are still rejected by Ulemas as leaders in a political context by using their interpretation of the Qur’an text and hadiths. They have done this to keep the status quo of men’s domination. That is why the debate about women and leadership in Islam in Indonesia between the conservatives and liberals continues. Thus, it is very important to allow women in Indonesia to be leaders and have the same opportunities to interpret Islam. Full acceptance from Ulemas to allow women to become leaders in Indonesia is still a very difficult task, however many Muslim scholars in Indonesia have started through Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL) which is more moderate and respectful to women.

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\textsuperscript{30} Van Bruinessen, ‘Kitab’, p. 169.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p. 168.


