

Women in Leadership: Exploring Potential and Challenges in the Islamic Context

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article information	Abstract
Submitted: 2024-02-26 Revised: 2024-06-10 Published: 2024-07-16	Women's leadership role has increasingly garnered attention in various global contexts. More Muslim women are actively seeking leadership roles across diverse fields. However, they face challenges related to traditional perceptions and gender stereotypes. This research aims to delve deeper into factors such as religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and experiences of Muslim women in navigating challenges within the context of Islamic leadership. The study employs a mixed-methods approach. Data collection involves interviews and surveys. Qualitative data from interviews are analyzed using thematic text analysis, while quantitative data from surveys are processed using statistical software and descriptive statistical analysis. The research reveals several significant findings concerning the potential, challenges, and aspirations of Muslim women in leadership. Out of 127 respondents, 63% expressed strong confidence in the leadership qualities of Muslim women. Religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and multitasking abilities are identified as primary strengths supporting them in leadership roles. However, 47% of respondents perceive barriers stemming from traditional interpretations of religious teachings that limit women's roles. Additionally, 56% of respondents express positive hopes regarding the development of women's roles in Islamic leadership in the future. These findings highlight the substantial potential of Muslim women in leadership while also indicating challenges that need to be addressed to maximize their roles.
Keywords: Islam, Leadership, Woman.	

Introduction

The role of women in leadership has gained increasing global attention across various sectors. Around the world, there is a growing movement to enhance women's access to leadership roles, aiming to achieve gender equality and foster inclusive progress (Mukherjee, 2015; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). UN Women reports that, as of now, 26 countries have 28 women serving as Heads of State or Government, and women make up 22.8% of cabinet ministers leading government departments (Facts and Figures, 2023). In the corporate sphere, the McKinsey Global Institute highlights that women hold only about 15% of executive-level (C-suite) positions within Fortune 500 companies (Marshall, 2021). In the context of Islam, although there are historical examples of female leaders—such as Khadijah, the Prophet Muhammad's wife and a successful entrepreneur, and Aisha, a renowned scholar—Muslim women continue to face considerable challenges. Despite Islam being the second-largest religion globally, the subject of women's leadership remains a topic of ongoing debate, shaped by differing interpretations, cultural norms, and societal structures (Shah, 2020).

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Koburtay and Abuhussein (2023) note that several Muslim-majority countries still enforce laws or policies that limit women's access to leadership positions, such as restrictions on running for the presidency or limitations on women's political participation. While traditions and religious interpretations have long shaped views and practices regarding women in Muslim societies, social, cultural, and economic transformations have increasingly enabled Muslim women to take on more visible leadership roles (Haq, 2013). Today, more Muslim women are actively pursuing leadership positions in various sectors, including politics, business, education, and civil society (Abadi et al., 2022). However, despite this progress, barriers such as gender stereotypes, traditional perceptions, and cultural and structural constraints continue to hinder their full leadership potential (Bako & Syed, 2018). Previous research has identified various challenges and opportunities that Muslim women face in achieving leadership within Islamic contexts. However, while studies such as those by Thompson (2015), Zuhro (2021), and Abalkhail (2017) highlight social and policy-related barriers, few have explored in depth the specific individual factors influencing women's participation in leadership.

Table 1. Previous Research

Author	Research Focus	Conclusion	Limitation
Thompson	Role of women in leadership in Arab countries	Social constraints and policies limit women's mobility in the public sphere.	Does not delve into individual factors affecting women's participation in leadership
Fathimatuz Zuhro	Role of Muslim women in leadership in Indonesia	Challenges include gender stereotypes and a lack of policies supporting gender equality.	Does not explore other factors affecting women's ability to achieve leadership positions
Abalkhail	Importance of religious education in preparing Muslim women for leadership	Religious education provides a strong foundation for Muslim women's leadership roles	Does not delve into more specific individual factors affecting women's participation in leadership

This study seeks to address a gap in existing research by exploring in greater depth factors such as religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and the lived experiences of Muslim women in facing challenges within the context of Islamic leadership. Through this approach, the research aims to contribute new perspectives in understanding both the potential and the obstacles encountered by Muslim women in leadership roles within Islamic settings. Furthermore, the study aspires to offer deeper insights into the development of policies and practices that support and enhance women's participation in leadership arenas. The findings are expected to serve as a foundation for creating more inclusive and responsive strategies that recognize and nurture the capabilities of Muslim women, enabling them to play a more active and effective role in both religious and broader social leadership contexts.

Based on the above explanation, the hypothesis of this study is that religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and life experiences significantly contribute to the ability of Muslim women to face challenges and perform leadership roles within the Islamic context. These factors are believed not only to shape the individual capacities of Muslim women as leaders but also to influence the extent of their active participation in leadership spaces often shaped by specific social and religious norms. Therefore, the higher the level of religious knowledge and emotional intelligence, along with stronger experiences in overcoming challenges, the greater the potential for Muslim women to assume effective and influential leadership roles within both Islamic communities and the broader society.

Method

This research utilizes a mixed-methods design, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Vebrianto et al., 2020). This method is selected to obtain a comprehensive and detailed

understanding of the potential and obstacles encountered by Muslim women in leadership roles. Data are collected through interviews and surveys. The interviews target women in leadership roles across sectors like education, business, and community organizations, focusing on their journeys to leadership, challenges faced, and views on gender within Islamic teachings. Surveys complement this by collecting quantitative data regarding women's leadership participation, educational attainment, income, and societal perspectives.

Participants in this study are Muslim women currently occupying leadership roles in different professional and community sectors. The selection criteria include women with relevant leadership experience and varied backgrounds in terms of education, work sectors, and career progression. Focusing on women within Islamic settings helps explore the influence of religious principles on women's leadership journeys. This approach ensures a diverse representation of perspectives and enables the study to assess how Islamic values and social expectations shape women's experiences and opportunities in leadership.

Thematic text analysis is used to interpret the qualitative interview data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). This method helps identify recurring themes, unique experiences, and patterns related to women's leadership journeys. At the same time, survey data are analyzed using statistical tools to produce descriptive statistics. These analyses highlight trends and comparisons regarding variables like educational background, salary levels, and leadership participation. This dual approach allows the study to present both narrative insights and measurable patterns.

Findings from both qualitative and quantitative methods are integrated to offer a thorough understanding of the opportunities and barriers Muslim women face in leadership. The qualitative data serve to elaborate or contextualize patterns seen in the quantitative results, while statistical findings may reinforce or challenge qualitative insights. This mixed-methods integration enables the research to provide a richer, more nuanced picture of women's leadership in Islamic contexts, linking personal experiences with broader social patterns. The goal is to contribute meaningfully to discussions on gender roles in Islam and support efforts toward achieving greater gender equity in leadership.

Results and Discussion

Potential of Muslim Women in Leadership

In this study, the focus on the potential of Muslim women in leadership yielded exciting findings. Data from 127 respondents indicated that Muslim women are identified as having significant potential to play leadership roles, with a majority of respondents expressing confidence in the leadership qualities of this group.

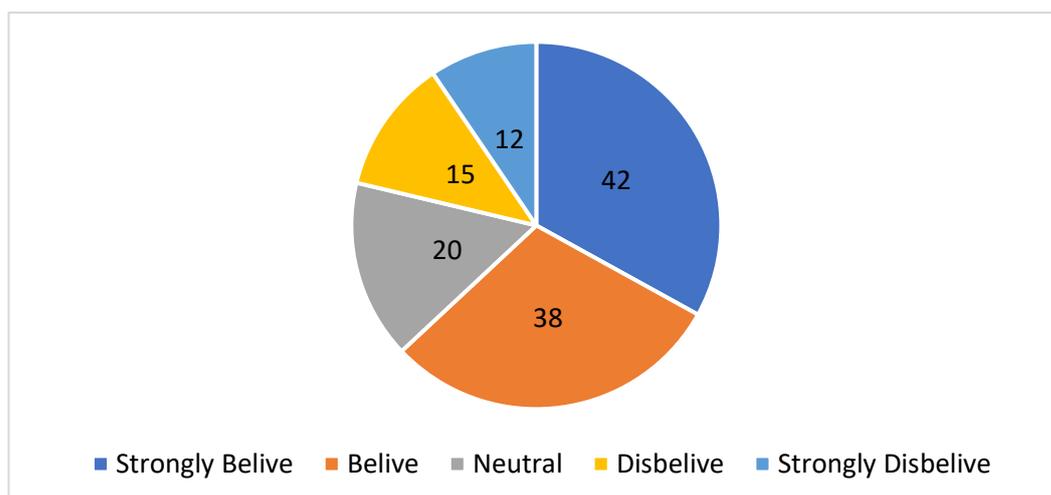


Figure 1. Survey on the Leadership Potential of Muslim Women

The data above results from a survey on the extent to which respondents believe in the potential of Muslim women in leadership. The survey results show that out of 127 respondents, 33% expressed strong confidence in the leadership potential of Muslim women, 30% expressed confidence, 16% were neutral, 12% expressed a lack of confidence, and 9% expressed a strong lack of confidence. Therefore, 63% of respondents expressed confidence in the significant leadership qualities of Muslim women, indicating optimism regarding their potential contributions across various sectors.

Findings from this study provide a positive outlook on perceptions of the leadership potential of Muslim women. Most of the 127 respondents expressed high confidence in the substantial potential of Muslim women in leadership roles. This reflects the broad acceptance of Muslim women as leaders with significant qualities. Further analysis revealed that respondents identified leadership qualities, including integrity, communication skills, and wisdom in decision-making. These qualities align with findings in the literature indicating that influential leaders possess strong moral values, good communication abilities, and wisdom in decision-making (Mercader et al., 2021).

The findings consistently highlight that religious values—specifically Islamic principles—can serve as a powerful foundation in developing leadership qualities among Muslim women (Tranby & Zulkowski, 2012). A strong grasp of Islamic teachings equips women with a clear moral compass, enabling them to lead with integrity, responsibility, and ethical awareness. Rather than being a limitation, religion can empower Muslim women by reinforcing values such as justice, compassion, and accountability in their leadership practices. This moral grounding not only strengthens their confidence but also helps them navigate complex social and organizational dynamics. In this way, Islam becomes a meaningful source of guidance and resilience, supporting women in leadership positions to act with wisdom and remain true to their principles while managing responsibilities in various professional, social, or religious settings.

It is important to highlight that a minority of respondents (21%) showed a lack of belief in the leadership potential of Muslim women. This indicates the presence of differing societal views on the role of Muslim women in leadership positions. Such differences may stem from cultural norms, varying interpretations of religious teachings, or other underlying social influences. These perspectives reflect that, while many support women's leadership, a segment of society remains hesitant or resistant, pointing to the need for deeper investigation. Understanding the reasons behind this skepticism is essential to addressing the broader challenges Muslim women face in leadership and to promoting more inclusive attitudes within both religious and cultural contexts.

This study adds to the existing literature on Muslim women in leadership by emphasizing the strong belief in their potential. It highlights the positive outlook many have regarding their leadership abilities. However, it also underscores the need for further research to gain a deeper understanding of the factors shaping these perceptions. Specifically, more exploration is needed to identify the challenges Muslim women face in reaching higher leadership roles. By examining the barriers and opportunities they encounter, future studies can provide valuable insights into how these women can navigate obstacles and expand their leadership presence across various sectors. This research could ultimately contribute to strategies that foster greater support and development for Muslim women in leadership positions.

Key Supporting Factors in Muslim Women's Leadership

The research findings reveal several critical factors that enhance the leadership potential of Muslim women. A thorough examination of these factors offers a deeper insight into how Muslim women manage leadership roles and make meaningful contributions to their organizations or workplaces. Understanding these elements helps to highlight the strategies and qualities that enable them to overcome challenges and succeed in leadership positions. By analyzing these key

factors, the study provides a clearer picture of the ways Muslim women leverage their skills, values, and experiences to create positive changes within their professional environments. This deeper understanding can inform policies and practices that support and empower Muslim women in leadership roles.

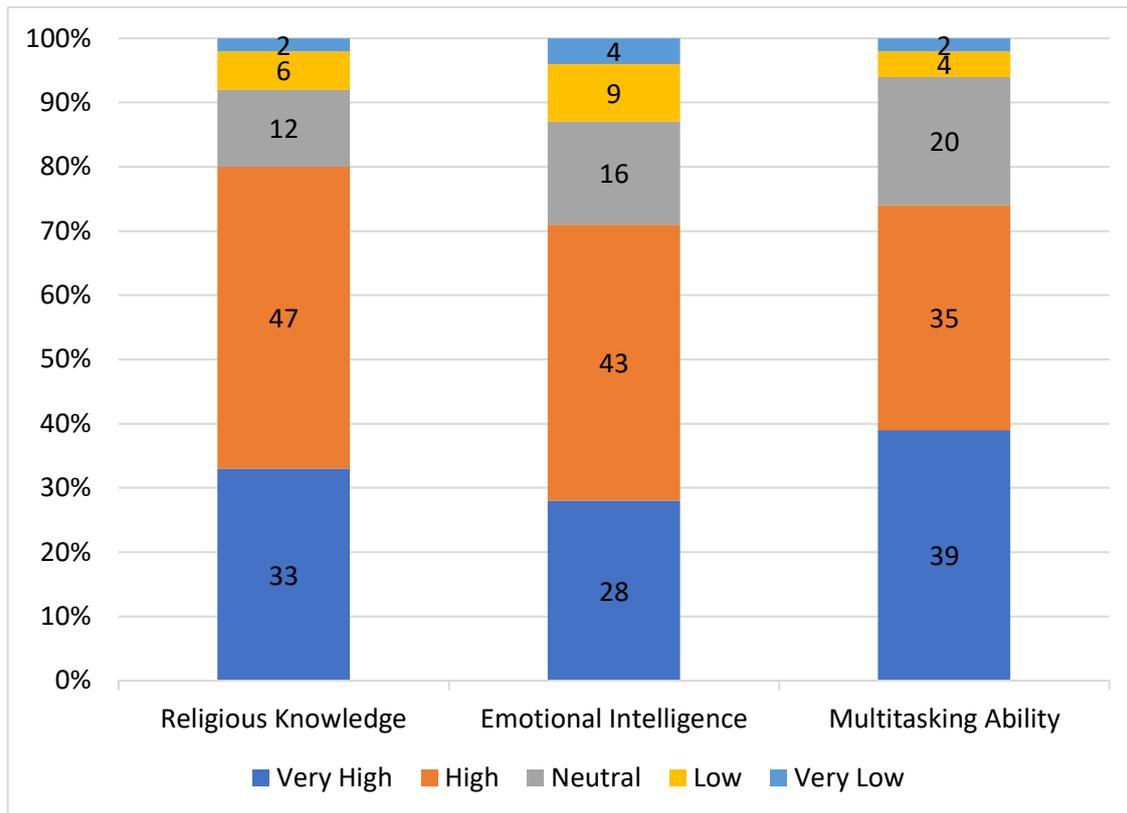


Figure 2. Supporting Factors for Muslim Women's Leadership

The data analysis shows that a significant number of respondents view religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and the ability to multitask as crucial factors enhancing the leadership potential of Muslim women. These findings align with existing literature that highlights the value of a comprehensive approach to leadership (Dhiman, 2022), where both an understanding of religious principles and emotional intelligence play integral roles in decision-making (Hess & Bacigalupo, 2011). This holistic perspective emphasizes the importance of combining intellectual, emotional, and spiritual strengths to effectively navigate leadership challenges. The results reinforce the idea that these combined attributes contribute to the effectiveness and resilience of Muslim women leaders in various settings.

Religious knowledge plays a vital role in enabling Muslim women to effectively carry out leadership responsibilities. According to 80% of the respondents, a profound understanding of Islamic values offers a solid ethical foundation that guides decision-making. This aligns with existing literature, which asserts that religious knowledge provides moral and ethical direction in leadership decisions (Kassim & Alias, 2016). The study highlights that when Muslim women have confidence in their understanding of religious principles, it enhances their leadership capabilities. By integrating their religious values into their leadership approach, they can navigate complex decisions with integrity and wisdom. This belief in their religious foundation strengthens their ability to lead with confidence and fosters a leadership style that is both ethical and impactful, benefiting not only themselves but also their communities and organizations.

Emotional intelligence, defined as the ability to recognize and manage emotions, is identified as a crucial factor in fostering positive relationships within Muslim women's leadership roles.

According to 71% of respondents, emotional intelligence plays a key role in enhancing interpersonal connections. Research supports this, indicating that emotional intelligence improves communication and collaboration skills, contributing to a healthy and efficient work environment (Ana, 2023). By understanding their own and others' emotions, Muslim women leaders can navigate complex social dynamics and build strong teams, ensuring a productive and harmonious work atmosphere. This ability to manage emotions effectively is instrumental in fostering trust and respect among colleagues, ultimately enhancing leadership effectiveness.

Multitasking emerges as an important strength that helps Muslim women manage the complexities of leadership roles. Seventy-four percent of respondents acknowledge its significance in tackling diverse responsibilities. In management literature, multitasking is recognized as an essential skill for successful leaders, enabling them to juggle multiple tasks effectively (Carrier et al., 2015). This capability allows Muslim women to maximize their time and resources, ensuring that leadership duties are executed efficiently. By effectively managing several responsibilities at once, they can maintain high performance and drive positive outcomes in their professional and personal lives. This skill is key in navigating the fast-paced demands of leadership.

These findings have significant implications for the development of Muslim women's leadership. Training and development programs can focus on strengthening religious knowledge, enhancing emotional intelligence, and improving multitasking skills. Additionally, further studies can explore the relationship between these factors and long-term leadership success indicators, such as organizational goal achievement and team member satisfaction.

Challenges Based on Religious Teachings

Challenges in Muslim women's leadership, particularly rooted in religious teachings, often arise from differing interpretations of Islamic texts and traditions. While some interpret Islamic teachings as supportive of women's leadership, others view them as restrictive due to historical or cultural contexts. These varying interpretations influence societal perceptions of women's roles, limiting their opportunities for leadership positions. Religious doctrines can sometimes be misinterpreted to justify gender inequality, leading to resistance against women taking on leadership roles. Additionally, cultural norms often reinforce the belief that leadership is primarily a male responsibility, further complicating the acceptance of women leaders within Islamic communities. Understanding and addressing these challenges is crucial for promoting more inclusive leadership practices aligned with Islamic principles.

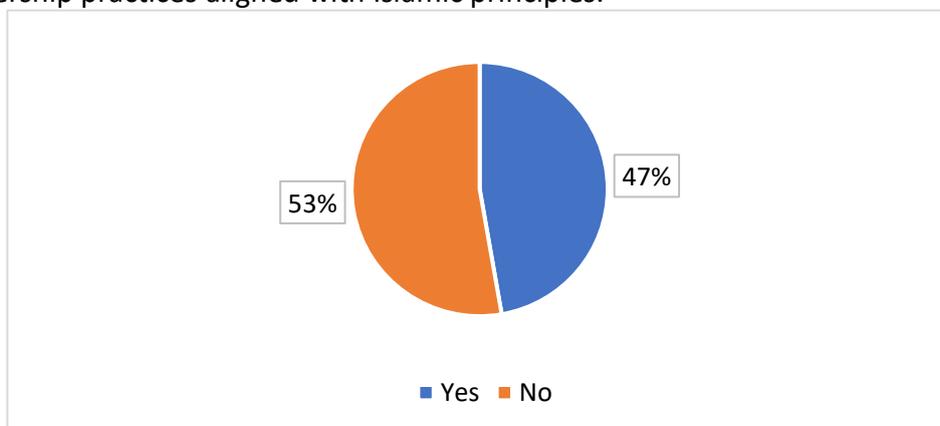


Figure 3. Challenges in Muslim Women's Leadership

The research findings reveal that, despite the considerable leadership potential of Muslim women, 47% of respondents identify challenges arising from traditional interpretations of Islamic teachings. These challenges include societal attitudes that reinforce gender stereotypes, which can shape perceptions and limit opportunities for women aiming to attain leadership roles. Such

interpretations often create obstacles for women in leadership, as they may be seen as conflicting with cultural or religious norms. These views can discourage women from pursuing leadership positions or hinder their progress when they do. Addressing these traditional interpretations and promoting more inclusive understandings of Islamic teachings is essential for creating a more supportive environment for women leaders in Muslim communities.

Scholarly literature offers valuable insights into the complexity of the challenges Muslim women face in leadership roles. Prior studies emphasize that traditional interpretations of religious teachings often support patriarchal systems, restricting women's roles across various domains, including leadership (Abalkhail, 2017). These interpretations can perpetuate gender-based limitations, affecting women's opportunities to take on leadership positions. Additionally, societal gender stereotypes often create harmful expectations for women aspiring to leadership roles, narrowing their potential and creating significant barriers to career advancement (Heilman, 2012). These ingrained stereotypes may portray women as less capable of leadership or assume their responsibilities should align with traditional gender roles, further hindering their progress. Overcoming these entrenched views requires a shift in both religious interpretations and societal attitudes toward women's leadership potential, allowing for greater equality and inclusion in leadership spaces.

These challenges highlight the need to challenge restrictive perspectives that limit women's roles based on traditional interpretations of religious teachings. Education and advocacy play crucial roles in promoting a deeper understanding of inclusive Islamic teachings that support gender equality. By broadening knowledge and awareness, these efforts can help dismantle misconceptions that hinder women's participation in leadership. It is essential for society to recognize that Islam, at its core, advocates for justice and equality for all its followers, regardless of gender (Hyder, 2021). Promoting these values can help shift societal attitudes and create an environment where Muslim women can fully engage in leadership roles. Thus, redefining the understanding of Islamic principles in a way that supports gender equality is crucial to empowering women in leadership positions and achieving a more inclusive society.

This discussion reflects the need for reforming religious interpretations to fully support Muslim women in realizing their leadership potential. Collaborative efforts among religious communities, governments, and civil society organizations can create an environment that supports and expands leadership opportunities for Muslim women while upholding the fundamental values of religious teachings.

Perspectives on Gender Equality

The research findings reveal diverse viewpoints among respondents concerning gender equality within their workplaces or organizations. Based on survey responses to the question "Is there gender equality in your workplace/organization?", 64% of participants stated that they believe gender equality is present. This suggests a generally optimistic outlook regarding gender inclusivity in professional settings. However, the results also indicate that a portion of respondents either remain uncertain or perceive existing gender disparities. This variation in perspectives highlights that, while progress has been made toward achieving gender equality, some challenges and gaps may still persist. These findings underscore the need for continued efforts to promote fairness and inclusiveness in organizational environments, ensuring that gender equality is not only perceived but also effectively implemented in practice.

It is essential to recognize that perceptions of gender equality are shaped by multiple factors, such as cultural norms, social influences, and organizational settings (Schneid et al., 2015). The fact that the majority of respondents view gender equality positively suggests that steps have been taken toward fostering inclusivity in professional environments. Notably, 82% of those who believe

equality exists credit the support they receive from colleagues, supervisors, and other members of their organization. This highlights the critical role of a supportive workplace culture in promoting gender equality. Encouragement and cooperation within the organization significantly contribute to building an inclusive atmosphere where both men and women have equal opportunities to grow and succeed.

Numerous studies have emphasized the importance of social support and inclusive work environments in the literature as key factors in achieving gender equality. Research by Shinbrot et al. (2019), underscores that collective support and recognition of women's contributions in the workplace can enhance the effectiveness of women's leadership. Additionally, studies by Warren et al. (2019), highlight that an organizational culture supporting gender equality can enhance well-being and individual productivity in the workplace.

These findings underscore the need to sustain and enhance efforts supporting gender equality in the workplace. Involving colleagues, supervisors, and organization members in gender equality initiatives can have significant positive impacts. Furthermore, expanding awareness and education on gender equality in the workplace can be a strategic step to reinforce positive perceptions and minimize existing inequalities (Grantham et al., 2021).

Moreover, these findings indicate that engaging and supporting women in leadership roles can be crucial in creating a more inclusive work environment (Meng & Neill, 2021). Greater support from management and the implementation of progressive gender equality policies can be practical steps towards achieving equality goals in the workplace.

Hopes and Aspirations

The survey results indicate that 56% of total respondents express positive hopes and aspirations regarding the future development of women's roles in Islamic leadership. These optimistic hopes and aspirations include expectations for increased participation of women in decision-making within Islamic institutions and aspirations to create a generation of strong and integrity-driven Muslim women leaders. This reflects optimism and a strong encouragement to strengthen women's roles across various sectors. Analysis of these findings provides insights into the changing positive perceptions of women's roles in leadership, particularly within the context of Islamic values.

These findings are consistent with existing literature that points to a growing shift in the Muslim world regarding women's roles in leadership. Research by Koburtay (2023) emphasizes that ongoing social changes, along with broader and more inclusive interpretations of Islamic teachings, have opened up greater opportunities for women to assume leadership roles. The positive outlook and aspirations expressed by respondents in this study mirror these transformations, suggesting that both cultural attitudes and religious perspectives are evolving in ways that increasingly support women's active involvement in leadership. This shift reflects a changing landscape where Muslim women are more empowered to participate and lead across various sectors, signaling progress toward more inclusive and equitable leadership practices grounded in both social progress and faith-based values.

Research also shows that women's involvement in leadership roles contributes positively to organizational effectiveness, promotes gender balance, and fosters community development (Valduga et al., 2023). Their participation can lead to more inclusive decision-making processes and a broader range of leadership perspectives. As such, the optimistic expectations for women's roles in Islamic leadership reflect more than just personal aspirations—they signify a growing movement toward gender equality and social progress. These hopes serve as motivation to strengthen the presence of women in leadership positions, ultimately contributing to the empowerment of Muslim communities. Encouraging women's leadership not only improves diversity within organizations but

also supports the overall well-being and development of the broader society through more balanced and inclusive leadership practices.

Within this context, the research findings offer a foundation for exploring policy implications and practical measures that can enhance women's roles in Islamic leadership. Key strategies may include providing access to leadership education and training tailored for women, formulating inclusive policies, and actively promoting gender equality across both workplaces and communities. These efforts represent important actions toward strengthening women's leadership potential and fostering a more equitable environment. As noted by Kossek et al. (2017), such initiatives reflect a clear commitment to supporting women's active participation in leadership roles. By implementing these approaches, organizations and institutions can contribute to creating a more inclusive society where Muslim women are empowered to lead and influence positive change across various sectors.

Thus, these optimistic hopes and aspirations can be considered drivers towards positive transformation in the paradigm of Islamic leadership, providing a solid foundation for creating a fairer and more inclusive society.

Conclusion

This study reveals several significant findings regarding Muslim women's potential, challenges, and aspirations in leadership within Islam. The findings indicate that Muslim women have significant potential in leadership, with 63% of respondents expressing high confidence in their leadership qualities. Religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and multitasking abilities were identified as key strengths supporting Muslim women's leadership roles. Additionally, there is optimism among respondents about the future development of women's roles in Islamic leadership, with 56% of respondents expressing positive expectations. The contribution of this study to the field lies in its emphasis on individual factors supporting Muslim women's leadership, which have been underexplored in the literature. This research provides new insights into how religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and multitasking abilities can enhance Muslim women's leadership roles.

The theoretical implication of this study highlights the importance of integrating individual factors, such as religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and multitasking abilities, into leadership theories, particularly in the context of Muslim women. It challenges traditional leadership models by emphasizing the unique strengths these women bring to leadership roles. Practically, the study suggests that empowering Muslim women with education and training in religious teachings, emotional intelligence, and multitasking can enhance their leadership potential. Policies and programs that support these areas can create more inclusive leadership environments in both religious and secular settings. Additionally, fostering positive societal attitudes toward women in leadership within the Islamic framework can further encourage their active participation in leadership roles across various sectors.

Future research should further explore how religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and multitasking abilities specifically influence Muslim women's leadership across various sectors. It would be valuable to examine how these factors interact with cultural and societal norms in different Islamic contexts. Additionally, studies could investigate the role of educational programs and mentorship in enhancing these leadership qualities among Muslim women. Longitudinal research could also explore how the development of these skills impacts career progression and leadership effectiveness over time. Finally, comparative studies across different Muslim-majority countries could provide deeper insights into regional variations and challenges. However, the study's limitations include a limited sample that does not cover a wide geographical variation. For future research, expanding the sample scope and exploring more complex cultural and structural factors that influence women's participation in leadership is recommended.

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Author Contribution Statement

MFI was responsible for the research design, data collection and analysis, and the initial drafting of the article. N provided guidance and critical input in the research design, data analysis, and the revision and refinement of the draft article. MH contributed to the article's framework, editing, and revision, while TSN offered essential perspectives and contributions to the interpretation of the research findings. All authors participated in the final approval of this article before submission.

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