

Unveiling Empowerment: Navigating Historical Roles and Contemporary Challenges for Muslim Women Leaders

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Based on the insights gathered from the literature review, this historical study embarks on a multifaceted exploration with several pivotal objectives. At its core, it seeks to illuminate the intricate relationship between Islamic teachings, the historical roles of Muslim women in leadership, and their contemporary challenges within the political landscape of Pakistan. Through a thorough examination of these aspects, the research aims to provide valuable insights and actionable recommendations that can shape policy formulation, procedural refinement, and organizational culture. The primary goal is to promote gender diversity and empower Muslim women in leadership roles, particularly in Pakistan. A central objective of this study is to deeply explore Islamic teachings and principles and their implications for women's active participation and contributions to society, especially in leadership positions. By meticulously analyzing relevant literature and historical examples from Islamic history, the research intends to uncover the theological and cultural foundations that historically influenced the status of Muslim women in leadership. Moreover, it seeks to evaluate how these teachings have empowered Muslim women in leadership roles, fostering a nuanced understanding of the interplay between religion and women's leadership.

1. Introduction

In the rich tapestry of human history, the narrative threads of women's leadership have often been intricately woven yet frequently overlooked (Nan & Bahauddin, 2023). Within the Muslim community, this narrative takes on unique dimensions, shaped by centuries of tradition, culture, and evolving interpretations of religious doctrine (Ammerman, 2020). "Unveiling Empowerment: Navigating Historical Roles and Contemporary Challenges for Muslim Women Leaders" seeks to unravel this tapestry, casting light upon the remarkable journeys of Muslim women who have risen to leadership roles amidst the complexities of their historical context and the contemporary challenges they confront (Rorintulus, 2023). For centuries, Muslim women have played pivotal roles in various spheres of society, from the private domain of family and community to the public arena of politics, education, and commerce (Rahiman, 2023). Yet, their contributions have often been obscured by prevailing patriarchal norms and misconceptions about the role of women in Islam (Öztürk, 2023). As we embark on this exploration, it is essential to recognize that the experiences of Muslim women are diverse, shaped not only by their faith but also by intersecting factors such as culture, geography, and socio-economic status (Hosseini et al., 2022).

Throughout history, Muslim women have defied stereotypes and shattered glass ceilings, leaving an indelible mark on their communities and the world at large (Doddapaneni & Sk, 2024). From the leadership of early Islamic figures like Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, who was not only a successful businesswoman but also the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, to contemporary trailblazers in fields ranging from politics to science and the arts, Muslim women have continually demonstrated resilience, intellect, and courage in the face of adversity (Muhammad, 2021). In a world where biases and preconceived notions often mold our perspectives, the significance of Muslim women in leadership roles holds both historical importance and contemporary relevance (Islam et al., 2023). For too long, prevailing stereotypes have obscured the multifaceted contributions of Muslim women leaders, hindering their recognition and appreciation (Tlaiss & Khanin, 2023). This study embarks on a mission to challenge and overcome these deeply rooted stereotypes. To achieve this goal, the study undertakes a thorough exploration that spans both time and geography. It delves into the annals of Islamic history, unearthing examples of Muslim women who have held leadership positions in various domains. Their remarkable achievements are highlighted, showcasing their stories. Simultaneously, the study scrutinizes the modern political landscape, examining the ongoing presence and influence of Muslim women in leadership roles on a global scale.

Through this exhaustive review of both past and present, the aim is to illuminate the intricate tapestry of leadership among Muslim women. The study emphasizes their diverse and dynamic roles, ranging from political leaders and scholars to entrepreneurs. This exploration seeks to provide a nuanced understanding that challenges the stereotypes that have obscured the true essence of Muslim women's leadership for so long. In doing so, it strives to celebrate the resilience, intellect, and determination of Muslim women who have played, and continue to play, pivotal roles in shaping our world. Following are the research questions of current research.

- a. What are the key Islamic teachings regarding the role of women in society, and how do these teachings impact the empowerment of Muslim women in leadership positions?
- b. What policy recommendations can be derived from an analysis of Islamic teachings and historical examples to promote gender diversity and the career advancement of Muslim women in high-ranking leadership roles?
- c. How can organizations in Pakistan leverage Islamic principles and cultural nuances to create more inclusive and supportive environments for the career development of Muslim women in leadership positions?

2. Research Methodology

The study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) research methodology to address its research questions. This approach entails a thorough and unbiased examination of all pertinent pre-existing literature pertaining to a particular research question or subject. It is a widely utilized method in multiple disciplines, such as medicine, social sciences, engineering, and others, with the purpose of offering a comprehensive summary of the existing knowledge on a given topic (Moher et al., 2010). In this study, the systematic literature review methodology was meticulously applied to respond to the research questions. Specifically, the literature review focused on Islamic history to investigate the role of women in public activities.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Islamic Teachings on Gender Equality and Spiritual Worth in the Quran

In the realm of religious perspective, Islam's stance on the status of women is noteworthy. Over 1400 years ago, Islam, as articulated in the Holy Qur'an and through the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him), delineated the rights of women as mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters, endowing them with full privileges and honor across all facets of their lives including political participation (Badawi, 2000; Chishti, 2003). The Qur'an explicitly affirms that women are entirely equal to men in the eyes of Allah, with equal rights, responsibilities, and eligibility for rewards based on their deeds (Badawi, 1995; Shabana, 2007). For instance, the Qur'an states:

"For Muslim men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise. For them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward" (Quran Surah Al-Ahzab, 33:35).

This verse underscores the equality of men and women in the eyes of Islam, recognizing their shared rights and virtues, and emphasizing the potential for forgiveness and substantial rewards for both genders based on their faith, patience, humility, charity, and devotion to Allah.

In the eyes of Allah, the Creator of humanity and the universe, an individual's worth and respectability are not determined by their wealth, social status, intelligence, physical strength, or physical beauty. Instead, what truly matters is one's "taqwa" (piety and righteousness) (Badawi, 1995; 2000). The Quran reiterates this concept, emphasizing that anyone, whether male or female, who performs righteous deeds and has faith will enter heaven, with no injustice done to them (Quran Surah Al-Nisa, 4:124). Furthermore, it promises a good

life and the best rewards for those who, regardless of gender, engage in good deeds as believers (Quran Surah Al-Nahl, 16:97).

3.2 The Message of Equality and Accountability in the Final Sermon

In the final sermon delivered on the 9th of Dhul Hijjah, the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) emphasized the equality of all individuals. He stated that no one holds superiority over others except through their piety and good actions. He cautioned that everyone will ultimately stand before Allah and be held accountable for their deeds, urging them to stay on the path of righteousness (Al-Bukhari and Khan, 1987). This message underscores the fundamental principle in Islam that an individual's worth is determined by their piety and righteous actions, regardless of their gender, wealth, or social status.

3.3 The Pursuit of Knowledge: Gender Equality in Education According to Islamic History

Throughout history, women enjoyed equal opportunities with men in their pursuit of education and knowledge (Badawi, 1995). Nearly fourteen centuries ago, Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) proclaimed that "seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim man and Muslim woman" (Ibn Majah/Al-Bayhaqi). According to Sahih Al-Bukhari, women during the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) were eager to acquire knowledge to such an extent that they approached him and requested a dedicated day for their education. The Prophet (peace be upon him) agreed and personally taught them (Al-Bukhari and Khan, 1987). Shilling (1980) noted that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) (peace be upon him) (peace be upon him) acted as the first teacher for both women and men, and he sent representatives to educate Muslim women. Consequently, women of that era became some of the most knowledgeable individuals of their time and began imparting guidance to others in matters of education (Rafiabidi, 2007).

3.4 The Empowerment of Women's Voices and Opinions in Islamic Tradition

In Islam, a woman possesses the right to express herself freely, on par with a man (Badawi, 1995). Her judgments and opinions should be taken seriously and not disregarded simply because of her gender (Ali, 2004; Hussain, 1987). According to Badawi (1971), both in the Qur'an and Islamic history, there are examples of women who engaged in intellectual discussions and reasoned with the Prophet (peace be upon him) and other Muslim leaders (Quran, Surah Al-Mujadila 58). An illustrative incident occurred during the Caliphate of Hazrat Umar Ibn al-Khattab. While discussing matters with Sahabas Ikram and contemplating placing an upper limit on Meher (the dowry), a woman from the back of the mosque objected. She cited a Quranic reference from Surah Nisa (V.4:20) and said, "*When the Quran imposes no limit on Meher, Omar, you have no right to interfere in a matter already decreed by Allah the Almighty in the Quran.*" Hazrat Umar humbly withdrew his decision in front of the gathered people and admitted, "*The woman is right, and Omar is wrong*" (Haleem, 2007; Badawi, 1971). This incident illustrates the respect and consideration accorded to women's perspectives in Islamic tradition.

It is evident that women during that era possessed a deep understanding of their rights and responsibilities (Hassan, 2004). There are instances where some women even challenged renowned scholars of their time if they made statements contradicting the rights granted to women by the Quran and the Sunnah (Badawi, 1971; Ahmad, 2003).

3.5 The Empowerment and Equal Rights of Women in Islam: Examining Historical Examples and Misinterpretations

The history of Islam also reveals that Muslim women actively participated in various aspects of life as early as the seventh century (Haleem, 2007; Rafiabidi, 2007; Rasool, 1977). An exemplary case is that of Hazrat Khadija (RA), Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) wife, who was a highly successful businesswoman and employed the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to trade her goods internationally (Al-Jada, 2009; Rasool, 1977). This clearly illustrates that Islam grants women equal rights in terms of the ability to work, earn, and possess independently (Hamdan, 2009). The Quran emphasizes this equality, stating, "To men is what they earn and to women what they earn, but ask God of His bounty" (Quran, Surah Al-Nisa: 4.32). Consequently, a woman's life, property, and honor are as highly valued as those of a man (Shabana, 2007; Ahmad, 2003).

These pieces of evidence affirm that in Islam, a woman enjoys full rights in every aspect of her life (Hamdan, 2009; Nasir, 2009). She is recognized as an independent individual possessing human qualities and worthy of spiritual aspirations (Khan, 2001). Her intrinsic nature is neither inferior nor deviant from that of a man (Hassan, 2004; Haleem, 2007; Rasool, 1977). The treatment of women in various Islamic countries is often influenced by cultural practices rather than the teachings of Islam (Hamdan, 2009; Badawi, 1995; Nasir, 2009). In many cases, this discrepancy arises from misinterpretations of the Quran and Sunnah (Hussain, 1987; Shabana, 2007; Ahmad, 2003; Shah and Shah, 2012).

3.6 The Islamic Perspective on Leadership and the Legacy of Accomplished Muslim Women

From an Islamic perspective, leadership carries profound implications, particularly the idea of guiding individuals toward knowledge and righteousness through both words and actions. It entails a knowledge-based status for the teacher or leader, and it involves perceiving them as a role model in a comprehensive sense (Shah, 2006, p. 366).

Contrary to common beliefs, the history of Muslims is replete with accomplished women who excelled in various fields (Ghadanfar, 2001). From the earliest days of Islam to the present, Muslim women have been and continue to be dynamic leaders of their time (Al-Jada, 2009). They have made significant contributions to society as scholars, legal experts, rulers, warriors, businesswomen, and in various other roles (Hassan, 2004).

3.7 The Exemplary Sahabiyat: Pioneering Women Companions of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the Shaping of Islamic History

The Sahabiyat, or women companions of the Prophet Muhammad, were exemplary individuals. They were virtuous advocates of Islam, honored during the Prophet's lifetime with the prophecy that they would reside in paradise in the Hereafter. These remarkable women left their mark in every aspect of that pivotal period in world history. They were active in religion and politics, courageous in times of conflict, and persuasive in promoting the teachings of Islam. They played roles in politics, education, Islamic jurisprudence, Sharia interpretation, trade, agriculture, medicine, and nursing. In essence, there was no sphere untouched by their intellect, wisdom, and gentle yet resolute character (Ghadanfar, 2001).

3.8 Hazrat Aisha (RA): A Trailblazing Scholar and Influential Figure in Islamic History

Islam has elevated women to positions of dignity and honor (Al-Jada, 2009, p. xii). Many of the women companions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) (peace be upon him) achieved remarkable feats and gained fame. Throughout Islamic history, there have been prominent intellectuals and jurists among women (Hassan, 2004). An outstanding example is Hazrat Aisha (RA), the wife of the Prophet (peace be upon him), who received education under the guidance of the Prophet for nine years. After his death, she gained renown as a scholar and became one of the most significant sources of Hadith literature (Rafiabidi, 2007). She provided guidance to the early Muslim society, including renowned companions and the Rashidun Caliphs, who sought her counsel on various matters (Ibid). Her profound knowledge of various aspects of religion, including Tafsir (Quranic exegesis), Hadith (Prophet's sayings), Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), and Shari'ah, as well as her wisdom in interpretation and mastery of the teachings of the Prophet, established her as one of the most remarkable figures of her time (Ghadanfar, 2001). Her student, Urwah bin Zubayr, testified, "I did not see a greater scholar than Aisha in the learning of the Quran, obligatory duties, lawful and unlawful matters, Arab history, and genealogy" (Ghadanfar, 2001; Rafiabidi, 2007, p. 1094). During the period of Hazrat Abu Bakar's leadership, she even served as a Mufti (legal expert) (Rafiabidi, 2007, p. 1095).

3.9 Pioneering Women Scholars in Islamic History: Their Contributions and Legacy

Usmani (2008) highlights the remarkable contributions of several prominent women in Islamic history. Hazrat Ashifa bint Abdullah is celebrated as one of the earliest female teachers in Islam, a successful professional, scholar, and intelligent woman. Hazrat Umar (RA) entrusted her with the role of public administrator of the Madina market, valuing her opinions and insights above others. Among the second generation of early Muslims, Hazrat Amra bint Abdurrahman stood out as one of the greatest scholars and jurists, surpassing many male scholars of her time. She provided legal verdicts and was considered an authority on Hadith. Caliph Hazrat Umar ibn Abdul Aziz actively encouraged Muslims to learn from her. Hazrat Aisha bint Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqass was another jurist and scholar of note. Hazrat Sayyida Nafisa, the Prophet's great-granddaughter, was renowned as a scholar and a teacher of Islamic jurisprudence, with students traveling from afar to learn from her. It is said that Imam al-Shafi'i, a founder of the Shafi'i school of law, had immense respect for her and even studied Hadith under her guidance. Hazrat Umm Salim, Hazrat Umm Anas, the mother of the famous Sahabi Hazrat Anas, was highly respected and had a multitude of admirable qualities. Additionally, Hazrat Saffiyah, Hazrat Umm Salamah, and Hazrat Fatima Bint Qays were also esteemed scholars known for their intellectual brilliance (Haleem, 2007).

3.10 Challenging Stereotypes: Empowering Women in Early Islamic History through Education and Public Participation

These examples from Islamic history debunk the notion that women were confined to domestic roles or restricted from participating in intellectual and public activities (Ahmad, 2003; Shabana, 2007). The documented accounts of learned women from the early days of Islam emphasize that women were not kept illiterate; rather, they were actively encouraged to engage in the process of education and learning (Hassan, 2004). They also played roles in public life, particularly during times of emergency when they accompanied Muslim armies to

battlefields, providing essential support by distributing water and offering first aid to soldiers (Haleem, 2007).

It is regrettable that the significant contributions of women in the early days of Islamic history have often been overlooked or underrepresented, resulting in a lack of available historical data. Nevertheless, these women's legacy is one of courage, integrity, and deep devotion to the message brought by the Blessed Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) for all of humanity (Al-Jada, 2009, p. vii).

3.11 Breaking Boundaries: Muslim Women Leaders across History and in Contemporary Politics

The historical accounts provided by Abidi (2013) and other sources reveal a rich tradition of Muslim women leaders who have made significant contributions to various fields and held positions of authority from the 11th century onwards. This challenges the common perception that Muslim women are universally oppressed, as highlighted by Bennett (2010).

Prominent examples of Muslim women leaders include Razia Sultana, who ruled in 13th-century India and was the first Muslim woman to do so. Noor Jahan, the wife of Jahangir, wielded substantial political influence in the Mughal Empire. Zaibun Nisa, the daughter of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, distinguished herself as a poet and theologian. Chand Bibi is remembered as one of the kindest Muslim women in Indian history. Begum Hazrat Mahal played a crucial role in India's first war of independence, displaying leadership and diplomatic skills. Bhopal saw a long line of Muslim women rulers, including Qudsiya Begum, Sikandar Begum, Shah Jahan Begum, and Sultan Jahan Begum (Abidi, 2013).

Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah, the sister of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was a prominent political leader and a key figure in the founding of Pakistan. Begum Rana Liaqat Ali Khan served as an ambassador to multiple countries. Moreover, since 1988, several Muslim countries have had women rulers and presidents, including Turkey, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Indonesia (Bennett, 2010).

These historical examples challenge the stereotype of Muslim women as universally oppressed. They raise important questions about the role of culture versus religion in shaping the status of women in different societies. Bennett (2010) aptly summarizes the situation by highlighting the need to consider the interplay between culture and Islam when examining the roles and status of Muslim women, as these examples demonstrate that Muslim women have indeed played significant leadership roles throughout history.

3.12 Shifting Societal Norms: The Changing Landscape of Women's Education and Career Opportunities in Pakistan

Historically, Pakistan has been characterized as a patriarchal society (Madhani, 2007). However, in the past decade, there has been a notable shift in social dynamics, allowing women greater access to education and opportunities in the workforce (Murtaza, 2012). This marks a departure from traditional Pakistani culture, where women were primarily expected to focus on domestic responsibilities (Ibid). In earlier times, girls in Pakistan often faced limited educational prospects, leading to lower literacy rates among females (Lall, 2009). Thankfully, the situation is gradually improving, and more women are gaining access to higher education institutions (Murtaza, 2012). The number of women pursuing higher education has risen significantly, reflecting a cultural shift among parents who now recognize the value of

educating their daughters. This shift is driven by the realization that educated women can contribute economically to their families and pursue careers (Murtaza, 2012).

Globalization has played a role in reshaping Pakistan's societal norms (Yoganandan, 2010). After completing their education, women are entering various fields of work (Jabeen and Iqbal, 2010). They are enrolling in programs related to management sciences, telecommunications, mass communication, computer sciences, communication sciences, software engineering, and more at the university level. As a result, women in Pakistan are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and experience needed to excel in these fields and assume leadership roles (Jabeen and Iqbal, 2010).

3.13 Challenges and Opportunities: Advancing Women's Representation in Leadership Roles in Pakistan

Despite these positive changes, Pakistan still grapples with deeply entrenched traditional and social views about women, and the pace of change remains slow (Qureshi and Rarieya, 2007). While women have held esteemed positions in Islamic history and contemporary society (Ghadanfar, 2001; Bennett, 2010), they continue to face challenges in attaining senior political and higher education management roles (Jabeen and Iqbal, 2010). It is clear from available statistics that there is much work to be done to increase women's representation in senior management positions.

Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive examination of the problem, focusing on its root causes and identifying what perpetuates the gender disparity. To bring about real change, it is essential for the government to demonstrate a genuine commitment to appointing women to key administrative positions, where their presence is currently lacking. This commitment should go beyond educational and professional programs and extend to creating a more inclusive and diverse leadership landscape (Jabeen and Iqbal, 2010).

4. Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations

The exploration of these themes in the literature review provides a comprehensive understanding of how Islamic teachings intersect with matters of gender equality, spiritual value, and economic empowerment for women, both historically and in the contemporary context. The Quran's clear messages regarding equality and accountability, along with the remarkable contributions of women companions of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) from Hazrat Khadeeja, a successful merchant, to Hazrat Aisha, a jurist and scholar, and Hazrat Umm-e-Salma, a political counselor - serve as exemplars of Islamic principles that empower women as equal members of society.

Islamic teachings grant women the rights to inheritance and property, the ability to participate in marriage and divorce decisions, the capacity to act as witnesses in court, access to education and employment opportunities, and an equal responsibility to fulfill religious duties, with equal consequences for violating laws and moral principles (Lamrabet, 2016). These rights empower women to acquire knowledge, skills, and personal qualities that enable them to take charge of their life choices and make informed decisions leading to positive outcomes.

To promote effective policies derived from Islamic teachings, governments and societies must demonstrate a strong commitment to advancing gender equality and cultivating a culture of inclusivity, cooperation, recognition, and acceptance, allowing women to

participate in all aspects of life. Empowering Muslim women should be a top priority on the government's agenda and should be enshrined in constitutions and governmental policies. This commitment should go beyond merely providing equal educational and employment opportunities; it should also involve creating inclusive and diverse leadership environments where women can thrive and access various resources. Access to higher education serves as a vital instrument for enriching women's knowledge, intellectual capabilities, and employability skills (Mandal, 2013). It plays a crucial role in achieving social, economic, and political transformation for women (Mandal, 2013; Kundu and Chakraborty, 2012). Similarly, religious knowledge enables women to develop their Islamic identity, become aware of their rights, and take appropriate actions to defend them. Policies should be enacted to:

- Educate the entire population about women's rights in the context of the Quran and Sunnah, helping society recognize Islam as a religion where women hold a prestigious status with equal rights and responsibilities as men.
- Allow women to pursue higher education and religious knowledge from institutions of higher learning without discrimination.
- Enable women to achieve financial independence through businesses or paid employment and provide access to financial resources.
- Obligate organizations not only to increase women's representation in senior leadership roles but also to include women in executive councils and boards of directors.
- Offer flexible working hours for women to enhance their participation in the labor market.

By establishing an inclusive and supportive environment based on Islamic principles, societies can uphold the principles of gender equality and the spiritual value of women inherent in Islam. This journey toward equality and justice aligns with the teachings of Islam and is crucial for the progress and well-being of Muslim communities and the global community as a whole.

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