

## 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	The role of women's leadership has increasingly gained attention in various global contexts. More Muslim women are actively seeking leadership roles across different sectors. However, they face challenges related to traditional perceptions and gender stereotypes. This study aims to explore factors such as religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and experiences of Muslim women in navigating challenges within the context of Islamic leadership. This research employs a mixed-methods approach. Data collection involved interviews and surveys. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using thematic text analysis, while quantitative survey data were processed using statistical software and descriptive statistical analysis. The findings indicate the potential, challenges, and aspirations of Muslim women in leadership. Among 127 respondents, 63% expressed strong confidence in the leadership qualities of Muslim women. Religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and multitasking abilities were identified as key strengths supporting their leadership roles. However, 47% of respondents experienced obstacles stemming from traditional interpretations of religious teachings that limit women's roles. Additionally, 56% expressed positive expectations regarding the development of women's roles in Islamic leadership in the future. This study contributes by revealing the potential, challenges, and aspirations of Muslim women in leadership. The findings highlight strengths such as religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and multitasking, alongside obstacles from traditional interpretations. The study provides empirical insights to support the development of policies, inclusive leadership practices, and the empowerment of Muslim women in the future context of Islamic leadership.
<b>Keywords:</b> Islam, Leadership, Woman.	



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## INTRODUCTION

The role of women in leadership has gained increasing global attention across various sectors. Mukherjee (2015) argues that there is a growing movement worldwide to enhance women's access to leadership roles, aiming to achieve gender equality and foster inclusive progress. Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) note that, as of now, 26 countries have women serving as Heads of State or Government, while women hold approximately 22.8% of cabinet minister positions leading government departments (UN Women, Facts and Figures, 2023). In the corporate sphere, Marshall (2021) highlights that women occupy only about 15% of executive-level (C-suite) positions within Fortune 500 companies. In the context of Islam, Shah (2020) emphasizes historical examples of female leaders, such as Khadijah, the Prophet Muhammad's wife and a successful entrepreneur, and Aisha, a renowned scholar. Despite these examples, Muslim women continue to face considerable challenges, as debates over women's leadership are shaped by differing interpretations of religious texts, cultural norms, and societal structures.

Based on several introductory studies, much research has addressed the topic of women's leadership. Koburtay and Abuhussein (2023) note that in some Muslim-majority countries, laws and policies still limit women's access to leadership positions, such as restrictions on presidential candidacy or political participation. Haq (2013) observes that while traditions and religious interpretations have long shaped societal views and practices regarding women in Muslim communities, social, cultural, and economic transformations increasingly enable Muslim women to assume more visible leadership roles. Abadi et al. (2022) point out that more Muslim women are actively pursuing leadership positions across politics, business, education, and civil society. However, Bako and Syed (2018) emphasize that obstacles such as gender stereotypes, traditional perceptions, and cultural and structural constraints continue to hinder the full realization of their leadership potential. Previous studies have identified various challenges and opportunities faced by Muslim women in attaining leadership within Islamic contexts. Nonetheless, researchers such as Thompson (2015), Zuhro (2021), and Abalkhail (2017) argue that while social and policy-related barriers have been highlighted, few studies explore in depth the specific individual factors that influence women's participation in leadership.

Despite growing research on Muslim women's leadership, most studies have primarily focused on structural, cultural, and policy-related barriers, such as gender stereotypes, traditional perceptions, and limited access to political or organizational positions. However, there remains a significant gap regarding the individual factors that shape women's leadership experiences in Islamic contexts. Specifically, little attention has been given to how personal attributes including religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and lived experiences enable Muslim women to navigate challenges and exercise leadership effectively. This study addresses this gap by examining these factors in depth, aiming to provide a nuanced understanding of both the potential and obstacles faced by Muslim women in leadership roles, thereby contributing valuable insights for scholarship and practice in Islamic leadership and gender studies.

This study aims to address a gap in existing research by examining in greater depth factors such as religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and the lived experiences of Muslim women in navigating challenges within the context of Islamic leadership. By focusing on these individual attributes, the research seeks to provide new perspectives on both the potential and the obstacles faced by Muslim women in leadership roles within Islamic settings. Additionally, the study intends to offer practical insights for the development of policies, educational programs, and organizational practices that support and enhance women's participation in leadership. The findings are expected to inform strategies that foster inclusive and gender-responsive leadership environments, recognize and nurture the capabilities of Muslim women, and enable them to play more active, effective, and meaningful roles in both religious and broader social leadership contexts. Ultimately, the study

contributes to advancing scholarship on gender and leadership while offering actionable guidance for empowering Muslim women leaders.

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 adopts a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. Vebrianto et al. (2020) argue that this method allows researchers to obtain a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the potential and obstacles encountered by Muslim women in leadership roles. Interviews are conducted with women leaders across sectors such as education, business, and community organizations, focusing on their leadership journeys, the challenges they face, and their perspectives on gender within Islamic teachings. Surveys complement the qualitative data by collecting quantitative information on women's leadership participation, educational attainment, income, and societal perceptions (Vebrianto et al., 2020).

Participants in this study are Muslim women who currently hold leadership positions across various professional, educational, and community sectors. Selection criteria include women with demonstrable leadership experience, as well as diverse educational backgrounds, career paths, and work sectors, ensuring a wide range of perspectives. By focusing specifically on women operating within Islamic settings, the study aims to explore how religious principles, cultural norms, and social expectations influence women's leadership journeys, decision-making processes, and career advancement. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between individual capabilities, organizational contexts, and Islamic values in shaping leadership experiences. Ensuring such diversity among participants provides a richer, more nuanced analysis of both the opportunities and challenges faced by Muslim women leaders.

Thematic text analysis is employed to interpret qualitative interview data. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) suggest that this method is effective for identifying recurring themes, unique experiences, and patterns related to women's leadership journeys. Meanwhile, survey data are analyzed using statistical tools to generate descriptive statistics, highlighting trends and comparisons across variables such as educational background, income, and leadership participation. By combining these approaches, the study is able to present both rich narrative insights from participants' experiences and measurable quantitative patterns, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Muslim women's leadership within Islamic contexts.

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.

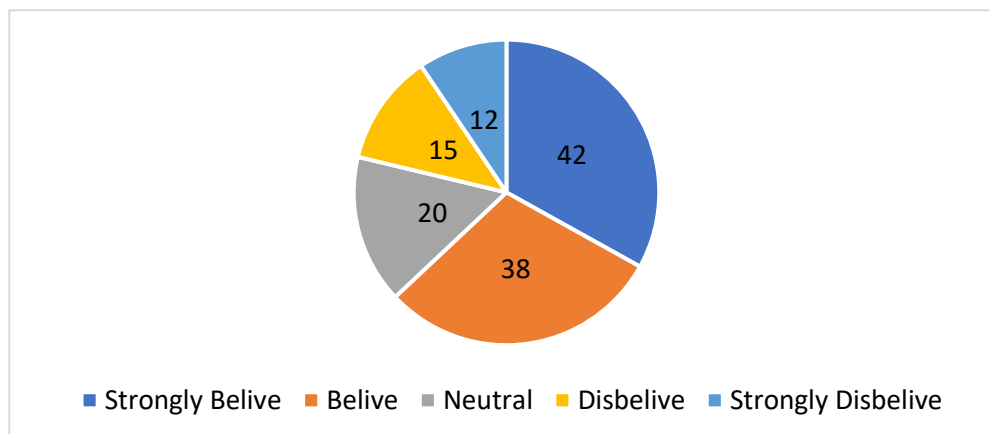
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 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 offer a positive perspective on perceptions of Muslim women's leadership potential. Among the 127 respondents, most expressed strong confidence in the capabilities of Muslim women to assume leadership roles, indicating broad societal acceptance of their leadership qualities. Further analysis highlighted key attributes identified by respondents, including integrity, effective communication skills, and wisdom in decision-making. Mercader et al. (2021) similarly argue that influential leaders demonstrate strong moral values, excellent communication, and sound decision-making. Compared to these prior findings, the current study underscores that Muslim women not only embody these leadership qualities but are also increasingly recognized for them, suggesting a convergence between theoretical expectations of effective leadership and the real-world perceptions of Muslim women leaders.

The findings of this study consistently highlight that religious values, particularly Islamic principles, can serve as a significant foundation for developing leadership qualities among Muslim women. Tranby and Zulkowski (2012) argue that a strong understanding of Islamic teachings provides a moral compass, enabling leaders to act with integrity, responsibility, and ethical awareness. In comparison to this perspective, the current study shows that Islam not only guides but actively empowers Muslim women, reinforcing values such as justice, compassion, and accountability in their leadership practices. This moral grounding strengthens their confidence and enhances their ability to navigate complex social and organizational dynamics. These findings suggest that Islamic principles function as both a source of resilience and a practical framework for decision-making, allowing Muslim women leaders to uphold their values while effectively managing professional, social, and religious responsibilities.

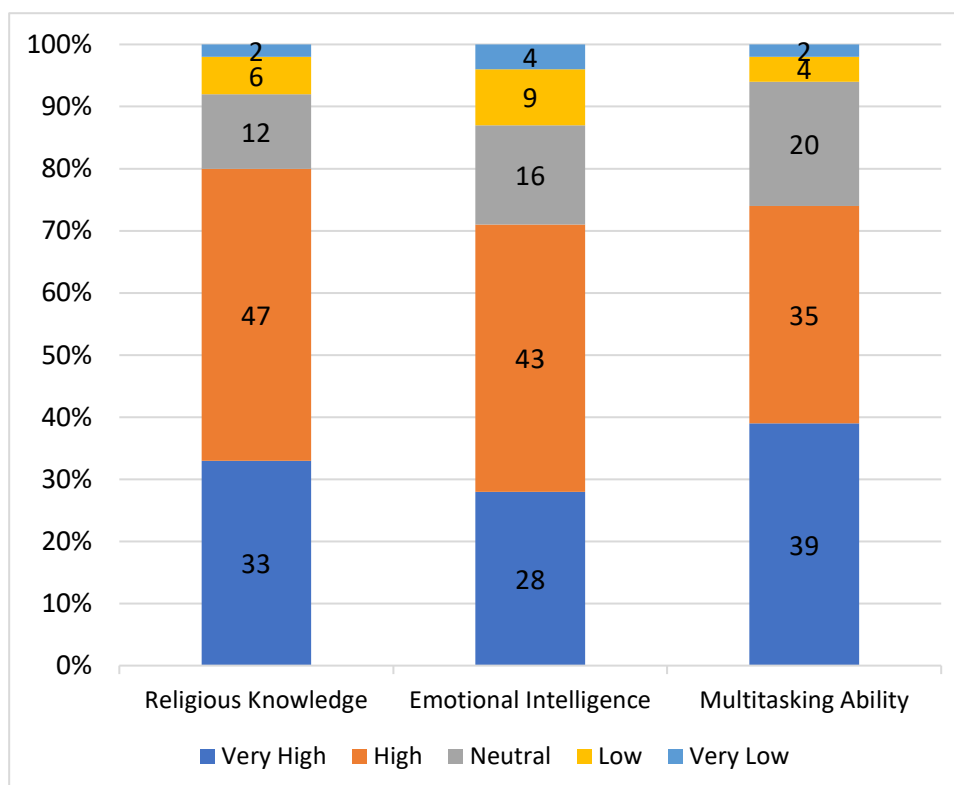
It is noteworthy that a minority of respondents (21%) expressed skepticism regarding the leadership potential of Muslim women, highlighting the existence of differing societal views on women's roles in leadership. Such skepticism may arise from cultural norms, varying interpretations of religious teachings, or other social influences. While many respondents strongly support women's leadership, this minority perspective underscores the need for deeper investigation into the roots of resistance. Understanding these factors is crucial for addressing broader challenges Muslim women face and for promoting more inclusive attitudes within both religious and cultural contexts. This study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the generally positive perceptions of Muslim women's leadership potential while also revealing areas of societal hesitation. The findings underscore the importance of further research to explore the barriers and opportunities influencing Muslim women's advancement to higher leadership roles. Such investigations can provide insights into strategies and interventions that support their development, enhance leadership participation, and foster more equitable and inclusive environments across professional, social, and religious sectors.

### 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 study's findings indicate that religious knowledge, emotional intelligence, and multitasking ability are essential factors enhancing the leadership potential of Muslim women. Respondents emphasized that these attributes support effective decision-making, ethical awareness, and resilience in navigating leadership challenges. Dhiman (2022) suggests that holistic leadership combines intellectual, emotional, and spiritual competencies, while Hess and Bacigalupo (2011) stress the importance of integrating ethical or religious understanding with emotional intelligence for sound leadership. The present study confirms these perspectives, showing that Muslim women actively draw on religious principles alongside cognitive and emotional strengths to manage diverse professional, social, and religious responsibilities. This convergence between theory and lived experience underscores the value of a comprehensive, multidimensional approach to leadership that empowers Muslim women, strengthens their resilience, and promotes inclusive, effective, and ethically grounded leadership practices across various contexts.

Religious knowledge emerges as a crucial factor enabling Muslim women to carry out leadership responsibilities effectively. In this study, 80% of respondents indicated that a deep understanding of Islamic values provides a strong ethical foundation for guiding decision-making. Kassim and Alias (2016) similarly argue that religious knowledge equips leaders with moral and ethical direction, which aligns with the current findings. The study further demonstrates that confidence in religious understanding enhances leadership capabilities, allowing Muslim women to integrate their values into decision making processes with integrity and wisdom. This moral grounding strengthens both their leadership confidence and their ability to positively influence communities and organizations.

Emotional intelligence is another critical factor identified, defined as the capacity to recognize and manage one's own emotions and those of others. Seventy-one percent of respondents emphasized its role in fostering interpersonal relationships. Ana (2023) notes that emotional intelligence improves communication, collaboration, and team cohesion, supporting effective organizational outcomes. In comparison to this theoretical perspective, the current study highlights that Muslim women leaders leverage emotional intelligence to navigate complex social dynamics, build trust, and maintain respect among colleagues, thereby enhancing leadership effectiveness in diverse professional and social contexts.

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.

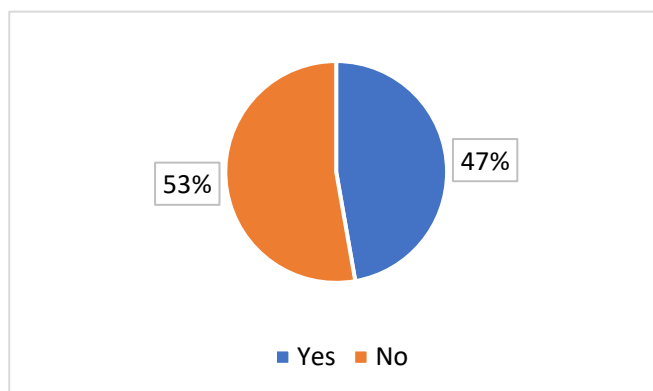
### **Challenges Based on Religious Teachings**

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 provides valuable insights into the challenges Muslim women face in leadership roles. Abalkhail (2017) notes that traditional interpretations of religious teachings often reinforce patriarchal systems, limiting women's participation in leadership. The current study confirms that such interpretations continue to shape societal expectations, creating barriers for women aspiring to leadership positions. Heilman (2012) emphasizes that gender stereotypes further restrict women by portraying them as less capable or confining their responsibilities to traditional roles. The findings of this study align with these perspectives, showing that respondents experience similar societal pressures that constrain their leadership opportunities. By comparing existing literature with the empirical data, it becomes evident that addressing these barriers requires both a reinterpretation of religious norms and a shift in societal attitudes. Such changes are essential for fostering inclusive, equitable spaces where Muslim women can fully exercise their leadership potential across professional, social, and religious contexts.

These challenges underscore the need to critically examine restrictive perspectives that limit women's roles based on traditional interpretations of religious teachings. Hyder (2021) argues that Islam, at its core, promotes justice and equality for all followers, regardless of gender. In comparison to this theoretical perspective, the findings of the current study reveal that misconceptions about Islamic principles continue to constrain Muslim women's leadership opportunities. Education and advocacy are therefore crucial in promoting a more inclusive understanding of Islamic teachings that support gender equality. By enhancing knowledge and awareness, such efforts can challenge societal biases and create environments where Muslim women can fully engage in leadership roles.

The study emphasizes that redefining religious interpretations to align with egalitarian principles is essential for empowering women in leadership. Collaborative initiatives among religious communities, governments, and civil society organizations can facilitate broader participation while maintaining fidelity to core religious values.

### **Perspectives on Gender Equality**

The research findings reveal diverse perspectives among respondents regarding gender equality in their workplaces or organizations. Survey results show that 64% of participants believe gender equality exists, reflecting an overall optimistic outlook on inclusivity in professional settings. However, some respondents remain uncertain or perceive ongoing disparities, indicating that challenges persist. Schneid et al. (2015) argue that perceptions of gender equality are shaped by cultural norms, social dynamics, and organizational contexts. In comparison, the current study highlights that 82% of respondents attribute positive perceptions of equality to the support they receive from colleagues, supervisors, and other organizational members. This underscores the critical role of a supportive workplace culture in fostering inclusivity. Encouragement, collaboration, and equitable treatment not only enhance women's leadership opportunities but also contribute to a broader culture of gender equity. These findings suggest that organizational support is integral to translating positive perceptions into practical, sustainable gender equality in professional environments.

Numerous studies emphasize the critical role of social support and inclusive work environments in promoting gender equality. Shinbrot et al. (2019) argue that collective support and acknowledgment of women's contributions in the workplace enhance the effectiveness of women's leadership. Similarly, Warren et al. (2019) suggest that organizational cultures that actively support gender equality can improve both well-being and individual productivity. In comparison to these perspectives, the findings of the current study confirm that respondents experience tangible benefits from supportive organizational environments. Women who perceive encouragement and recognition within their workplaces report higher confidence and leadership effectiveness. These findings highlight the interplay between social support, organizational culture, and gender equality, underscoring that creating inclusive and supportive environments is crucial for empowering women leaders and aligning practical outcomes with theoretical insights.

These findings emphasize the importance of sustaining and strengthening efforts to support gender equality in the workplace. Grantham et al. (2021) argue that increasing awareness and providing education on gender equality can reinforce positive perceptions and reduce existing disparities. In comparison, the current study shows that involving colleagues, supervisors, and other organizational members in gender equality initiatives produces tangible benefits, enhancing women's leadership participation and effectiveness. Meng and Neill (2021) similarly suggest that active engagement and support for women in leadership roles are critical for fostering inclusive work environments. The present findings align with these perspectives, highlighting that organizational support, combined with progressive gender equality policies and managerial backing, can create practical pathways toward achieving workplace equality and empowering women leaders, thereby bridging theoretical insights with observed outcomes in professional settings.

### **Hopes and Aspirations**

The survey results indicate that 56% of respondents hold positive hopes and aspirations regarding the future development of women's roles in Islamic leadership. Grantham et al. (2021) argue that such optimism reflects a desire for greater participation of women in decision making within Islamic institutions and the cultivation of a generation of integrity-driven Muslim women leaders. In comparison, the current study shows that respondents not only share these aspirations



but actively envision expanded leadership roles across various sectors. Schneid et al. (2015) note that evolving perceptions of women's leadership are influenced by cultural and organizational dynamics, while Koburtay (2023) emphasizes that ongoing social transformations and broader interpretations of Islamic teachings create new opportunities for women to assume leadership positions. The findings of this study align with these perspectives, suggesting that both religious understanding and shifting societal attitudes are increasingly supporting Muslim women's empowerment in leadership, signaling progress toward more inclusive, equitable, and faith-informed leadership practices.

Research indicates that women's participation in leadership roles positively impacts organizational effectiveness, promotes gender balance, and supports community development. Valduga et al. (2023) argue that women's involvement fosters inclusive decision-making and brings diverse leadership perspectives. In comparison, the findings of the current study demonstrate that respondents' optimistic expectations for women's roles in Islamic leadership reflect not only personal aspirations but also a broader commitment to gender equality and social progress. These aspirations align with theoretical perspectives suggesting that empowering women in leadership strengthens organizational and community outcomes. The study further highlights that encouraging Muslim women's leadership enhances diversity, equity, and inclusion within institutions, while simultaneously contributing to the well-being and development of communities. By integrating these insights, the findings underscore the significance of women's leadership in driving more balanced, inclusive, and socially responsible practices across professional, organizational, and societal contexts.

The research findings provide a foundation for exploring policy and practical measures to enhance women's roles in Islamic leadership. Kossek et al. (2017) argue that initiatives such as leadership education and training for women, inclusive policy formulation, and active promotion of gender equality reflect a commitment to supporting women's leadership participation. In comparison, this study shows that respondents perceive these strategies as essential for strengthening leadership potential and fostering equitable environments. By integrating education, policy, and advocacy, organizations and institutions can empower Muslim women to lead effectively while contributing to broader societal transformation. These measures also create inclusive workplaces and communities that align with evolving social and religious perspectives. Ultimately, the study highlights that the optimistic aspirations of Muslim women act as catalysts for positive change, providing a solid foundation for developing a fairer, more inclusive, and socially responsible paradigm of Islamic leadership across various sectors.

## 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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