

Women's leadership in Islam: Comparing Queen Balqis and Aisha through Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics

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Article Information

Submitted: 2023-08-17

Revised: 2023-10-21

Published: 2023-12-19

Abstract:

Women's leadership in Islam remains contested because patriarchal interpretations associate leadership authority with men, raising questions concerning gender equality, women's agency, and leadership legitimacy. This study aims to analyze the legitimacy of women's leadership in the Qur'anic narrative of Queen Balqis, reconstruct Aisha's authority and agency, and compare the two through Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics. This qualitative literature-based study examines Qur'an 27:23–44 (Al-Naml), Qur'an 25:74 (Al-Furqan), literature on Aisha's authority, and Amina Wadud's thought. The data were analyzed textually, historically, and comparatively by considering historical context, grammatical structure, the Qur'anic worldview of tawhid, sources of legitimacy, forms of authority, spheres of agency, and leadership orientations. The study produced three findings. First, the Qur'an positions men and women as equal moral subjects and portrays Balqis as a deliberative, diplomatic, protective, and truth-oriented leader. Second, Aisha demonstrated multidimensional authority through the acquisition and transmission of knowledge, teaching, religious criticism, domestic partnership, advocacy for women, and sociopolitical participation. Third, the comparison generated two leadership typologies: Balqis's political-deliberative leadership and Aisha's epistemic-relational leadership. These findings demonstrate that the legitimacy of women's leadership in the examined sources rests on agency, competence, integrity, piety, responsibility, and the public good rather than gender identity. This study contributes a multidimensional typology of women's leadership and provides a conceptual foundation for Islamic education, expanded access to leadership, and the development of institutions free from gender discrimination.

Keywords:

Women's Leadership;
Gender Equality; Queen
Balqis; Aisha; Amina
Wadud's Gender
Hermeneutics.



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To cite this article (APA Style):

Huriyah, L., Endiana, Y., Ningsih, Y. S., Hajar, L., & Nafisah, A. (2023). Women's leadership in Islam: Comparing Queen Balqis and Aisha through Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics. *An-Nisa' Journal of Gender Studies*, 16(2), 237–252. <https://doi.org/10.35719/annisa.v16i2.180>

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INTRODUCTION

Women's leadership remains contested because of the assumption that men are inherently more suitable for leadership. Leadership, however, is not attached to a particular gender but is shaped by competence, experience, integrity, access to resources, and supportive social conditions. Gender equality requires equal opportunities for men and women in all spheres of life, including leadership (Iqbal et al., 2022; Mashtalir et al., 2022). Restrictions on women's leadership are influenced more by patriarchal social constructions than by biological or psychological differences (Dutta, 2018; Hendra & Hakim, 2023; Shellock et al., 2022). Within the Islamic tradition, the legitimacy of women's leadership is reflected in Queen Balqis, who is portrayed in Qur'an 27:23–44 (Al-Naml) as a deliberative, diplomatic, and rational leader. Women's authority is also demonstrated by Aisha through her transmission of hadith, teaching, issuance of legal opinions, correction of the Companions' interpretations, and political participation. Her involvement in the Battle of the Camel demonstrates women's agency in the public sphere, although its meaning remains contested in Islamic historiography (Abror, 2020; Florentina & Alimni, 2023; Saepudin & Zahra, 2023).

Previous research on women's leadership reveals three major tendencies. First, women continue to experience marginalization because of limited educational opportunities, insufficient social support, unequal access to leadership positions, and cultural norms that privilege men (Cahyati et al., 2023; Gaus et al., 2023; Yulianti et al., 2018). Second, leadership capacity is not determined by gender but develops through education, experience, organizational environments, and an equitable distribution of responsibilities (Faralita, 2023; Hirsch et al., 2019; Lui et al., 2021). Third, men's assertiveness is often perceived as a sign of competence, whereas similar behavior among women is viewed as aggressive or unfeminine. Women are also frequently characterized as emotional and less rational in strategic decision-making (Astuti, 2019; Brescoll, 2016; Mukhlisah, 2014; Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). Nevertheless, these studies have not adequately connected structural barriers and gender stereotypes with Qur'anic legitimacy and the diversity of women's authority in Islamic history. Studies of Balqis tend to focus on formal political power, whereas research on Aisha examines her scholarly authority, domestic life, and political involvement separately. This fragmentation impedes a multidimensional understanding of women's leadership encompassing formal power, knowledge production, social relations, and political participation.

This study addresses this gap by comparing Queen Balqis's leadership with Aisha's authority through Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics. This approach considers historical context, grammatical structure, interrelationships among Qur'anic verses, the Qur'an's overall message, and a tawhidic worldview affirming moral equality. Qur'an 27:23–44 is analyzed to identify the principles of consultation, rationality, diplomacy, responsibility, and the public good in Balqis's leadership. Qur'an 25:74 (Al-Furqan), meanwhile, is employed as an ethical foundation for leadership based on piety, exemplary conduct, and moral responsibility rather than as direct textual evidence concerning women's political office. Aisha's authority is reconstructed through epistemic, relational, social, and political dimensions encompassing knowledge production, teaching, intellectual correction, opinion formation, and public influence. The study's novelty lies in the development of two leadership typologies: Balqis's political-deliberative leadership and Aisha's epistemic-relational leadership. These typologies establish competence, integrity, piety, agency, responsibility, and social welfare rather than gender identity as the foundations of leadership legitimacy.

Based on this gap, the study aims to analyze the legitimacy of women's leadership in the Qur'anic narrative of Queen Balqis, reconstruct Aisha's authority and agency, and compare the two through Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics. It addresses three questions: (1) How is the legitimacy of women's leadership constructed through moral equality, Qur'an 27:23–44, and the leadership ethics of Qur'an 25:74? (2) How can Aisha's authority and agency be reconstructed through epistemic, relational, social, and political dimensions? (3) How can the two models be compared to develop a theoretically and contextually relevant typology of women's leadership? Theoretically, this study offers a multidimensional framework connecting formal power, knowledge production, social relations, and public participation. It also extends the application of Wadud's gender hermeneutics by establishing a dialogue between Qur'anic narratives and women's historical agency. Practically, the study supports Islamic education, gender studies, and the development of women's leadership based on competence, justice, integrity, responsibility, piety, and the public good across religious, educational, social, and political spheres.

METHOD

Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with a library research approach. This approach was selected to describe, interpret, and compare the legitimacy and forms of women's leadership within the Islamic tradition, drawing on the Qur'anic narrative of Queen Balqis and the historical experience of Aisha (Bowen, 2009). The study does not involve fieldwork but analyzes religious texts, Islamic historical sources, books, and relevant scholarly articles. Library research enables researchers to examine written sources covering diverse spatial and temporal contexts (Snyder, 2019). The research framework is textual, historical, and comparative, employing Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics as an analytical framework to connect historical context, linguistic structure, and the Qur'anic worldview concerning tawhid, justice, moral equality, women's agency, responsibility, and the public good.

Data Sources

The data sources comprise primary and secondary materials. The primary sources include the Qur'an, particularly Qur'an 27:23–44 (Al-Naml) concerning Queen Balqis and Qur'an 25:74 (Al-Furqan) concerning leadership as exemplary conduct; hadiths transmitted by Aisha; and Islamic historical sources documenting her scholarly authority, domestic life, advocacy for women, and sociopolitical participation. The secondary sources include books, journal articles, research reports, and other scholarly works addressing women's leadership, gender interpretation, the history of Aisha, and Amina Wadud's hermeneutics. Sources were selected for their relevance, scholarly authority, provenance transparency, and alignment with the analytical categories of moral equality, leadership legitimacy, authority, agency, competence, integrity, responsibility, piety, and the public good.

Data Collection

Data were collected through documentary analysis and a literature review without conducting fieldwork. The collection process involved identifying Qur'anic verses, hadiths, historical sources, books, and journal articles related to Queen Balqis, Aisha, women's leadership, and Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics. The collected sources were subsequently screened for relevance, credibility, and alignment with the research focus. Relevant information was recorded, classified, and mapped into the categories of moral equality, leadership legitimacy, epistemic authority, relational agency, political participation,

and orientation toward the public good. Data concerning Balqis and Aisha were initially treated separately in accordance with their distinct epistemological status. They were then organized into a comparative matrix to identify their similarities, differences, forms of authority, characteristics of action, spheres of participation, and analytical implications.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed descriptively, interpretively, and comparatively using Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics (1999). The analysis involved three stages. First, the narrative of Queen Balqis was examined in the historical context of Qur'an 27:23–44, including the theological conditions of the people of Sheba and the surrounding political circumstances. Second, grammatical structures and key expressions were examined to understand the text's meaning, particularly the phrases *waj'alnā lil-muttaqīna imāmā* and *azwājīnā* in Qur'an 25:74. Third, the narrative was situated within the Qur'anic worldview, grounded in tawhid, justice, moral equality, agency, and human responsibility. Aisha's experiences were analyzed historically through these principles without equating their epistemological status with that of the Qur'anic narrative. The analytical results were subsequently categorized, compared, and synthesized to construct two leadership typologies: Queen Balqis's political-deliberative leadership and Aisha's epistemic-relational leadership, both oriented toward truth and the public good.

Data Trustworthiness

Data trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation and interpretive consistency checks (Valencia, 2022). Qur'anic evidence was compared with exegetical works, books, and scholarly articles, whereas information concerning Aisha was cross-checked against hadiths, historical sources, and relevant academic studies. Each finding was traced back to its source to ensure consistency among the data, analytical categories, interpretations, and conclusions (Assarroudi et al., 2018). The different epistemological status of the two subjects was also maintained by treating the account of Queen Balqis as a Qur'anic narrative and Aisha's experiences as historical data. Interpretive validity was strengthened by consistently applying Wadud's hermeneutical principles and comparing the findings with previous studies. The processes of source selection, coding, categorization, and comparison were systematically documented to ensure that the analysis remained traceable and reviewable and to minimize excessive generalization and researcher interpretive bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The legitimacy of women's leadership from a Qur'anic perspective

The Qur'an positions men and women as equal moral subjects, equally capable of faith, righteous action, and social responsibility. This moral equality provides a foundation for evaluating leadership in terms of faith, competence, integrity, and responsibility rather than gender. Narratives relevant to women's leadership appear in Qur'an 27:23–44 (Al-Naml), which portrays Queen Balqis as the ruler of the kingdom of Sheba, and Qur'an 25:74 (Al-Furqan), which contains a prayer to become an *imām*, or an exemplar for the righteous. These findings are analyzed through Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics in three stages: examining the historical context, analyzing the grammatical structure, and situating the passages within the Qur'anic worldview grounded in tawhid, justice, moral equality, and human responsibility.

Table 1
Women's Leadership from a Qur'anic Perspective

No.	Finding	Description	Implication	References
1	Moral equality of men and women	The Qur'an evaluates and rewards human beings according to their faith and righteous deeds rather than their gender. Women bear direct moral and spiritual responsibility before Allah.	Moral equality provides a foundation for recognizing women's capacity to undertake social and leadership responsibilities.	Wadud (1999); Qur'an, Al-Naml: 23–44
2	Qur'anic recognition of women leaders	Qur'an, Al-Naml: 23–44 narrates the story of Queen Balqis as a woman who ruled the kingdom of Sheba. The Qur'anic narrative acknowledges her position as a ruler without treating her gender as a leadership problem.	Women cannot be deemed unfit for leadership solely on the basis of their gender identity.	Qur'an, Al-Naml: 23–44; Nurmila (2021)
3	Balqis's deliberative and diplomatic leadership	Queen Balqis consulted her royal dignitaries before making decisions. She also chose diplomacy and considered the consequences of warfare for her kingdom and people.	Leadership eligibility is determined by wisdom, deliberative ability, political intelligence, and responsibility toward society.	Qur'an, Al-Naml: 29–35; Haeri (2020)
4	Women's leadership oriented toward truth	Queen Balqis did not selfishly preserve her power. After recognizing the truth conveyed by Prophet Solomon, she reflected, acknowledged her error, and submitted herself to Allah.	Ideal leadership requires openness to truth, the capacity for self-evaluation, and moral-spiritual responsibility.	Qur'an, Al-Naml: 41–44
5	Leadership as an example for both genders	The phrase <i>waj'alnā lil-muttaqīna imāmā</i> in Qur'an, Al-Furqan: 74 contains a prayer that believers be made leaders or exemplars for the righteous. The word <i>azwājīnā</i> indicates a marital context involving both men and women.	Ethical leadership and exemplary piety are not monopolized by men but are open to every believer.	Qur'an, Al-Furqan: 74; Koburtay et al. (2023); Wadud (1999)

Source: Author's analysis, 2023.

Table 1 demonstrates that the Qur'anic legitimacy of women's leadership encompasses three dimensions: moral, narrative, and ethical. Moral legitimacy is grounded in the equality of men and women as subjects of faith, righteous action, and accountability before Allah. Narrative legitimacy is reflected in the Qur'an's recognition of Queen Balqis as the political ruler of the kingdom of Sheba, whereas ethical legitimacy is evident in her deliberative, diplomatic, and rational leadership, her concern for the safety of her people, and her openness to truth. Furthermore, the phrase *waj'alnā lil-muttaqīna imāmā* in Qur'an 25:74 (Al-Furqan) extends the meaning of leadership beyond formal office to encompass moral exemplarity for the righteous. Although this verse does not specifically address women's political leadership, it reinforces the principle that ethical leadership is not restricted by gender. The legitimacy of women's leadership is therefore grounded in moral equality, the recognition of women's political agency, and the ethical exercise of authority.

Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics interprets the Qur'an by examining its historical context, grammatical structure, and broader worldview to distinguish universal principles from patriarchal social constructions. In Qur'an 27:23–44 (Al-Naml), the Qur'an does not use Queen Balqis's gender as a basis for delegitimizing her political authority; instead, its

criticism is directed toward the Sheban people's worship of the sun. Balqis is portrayed as a deliberative and diplomatic leader who consults her dignitaries, considers the risks of conflict, protects the interests of her people, and remains open to evaluation and truth. This narrative affirms that leadership should be assessed by the quality of one's actions and accountability before Allah, rather than by gender identity.

Grammatically, the phrase *waj'alnā lil-muttaqīna imāmā* in Qur'an 25:74 expresses a prayer to become leaders or moral exemplars for the righteous without explicitly imposing gender restrictions, whereas *azwājinā* refers to spouses who bring tranquility within the family. Although the verse does not specifically regulate women's political leadership, it affirms that ethical leadership is open to all believers. It should therefore be interpreted alongside the narrative of Queen Balqis and the Qur'anic principle of moral equality. Within Wadud's tawhidic paradigm, absolute authority belongs solely to Allah; consequently, gender differences cannot legitimately serve as a basis for superiority, subordination, discrimination, or restrictions on women's participation.

The analysis identifies three dimensions of Qur'anic women's leadership: egalitarian legitimacy, grounded in moral equality; deliberative competence, demonstrated through consultation, rationality, diplomacy, and the protection of society; and tawhidic accountability, which conceptualizes power as a trust directed toward truth and the public good. The novelty of these findings lies in integrating Queen Balqis's political agency, the ethical inclusiveness of Qur'an 25:74, and Wadud's tawhidic paradigm. This integration produces an egalitarian, deliberative, and morally and spiritually accountable model of leadership. Accordingly, leadership eligibility should be determined by competence, integrity, piety, social responsibility, and commitment to the public good rather than gender identity.

Aisha's leadership authority and agency

Aisha was one of the most influential women in Islamic history. Her close relationship with the Prophet Muhammad provided her with direct knowledge of the contexts of revelation, the Prophet's domestic life, and the practical application of Islamic teachings. However, Aisha's authority did not derive solely from her status as the Prophet's wife; it was also established through her intellectual capacity, extensive knowledge, critical engagement, and participation in sociopolitical life. Aisha can therefore be positioned as an active subject who produced, transmitted, developed, and critically examined religious knowledge. Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics is employed as an analytical lens to examine Aisha's historical experiences in light of the principles of tawhid, moral equality, women's agency, and the critique of patriarchal interpretations. This framework is not intended to verify historical facts but to explain how Aisha's intellectual authority, social roles, and political participation demonstrate women's capacity to exercise leadership within the Islamic tradition.

Table 2
Sayyidah Aisha's Leadership Authority and Agency

No.	Finding	Description	Implication	References
1	Aisha's scholarly and hadith authority	Aisha mastered hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, Qur'anic exegesis, <i>asbāb al-nuzūl</i> , history, Arabic, literature, inheritance law, and medicine. She reportedly transmitted 2,210 hadiths and belonged to the <i>al-mukthirūn</i> . Her closeness to the Prophet	Women possess the capacity to become scholars, educators, hadith transmitters, and producers of Islamic knowledge. Their testimony and transmission of religious knowledge contribute significantly to	Tidjani (2016); Muhsin and Inah (2014); Nuruzzaman et al. (2023)

		provided important knowledge of his private life and teachings, while the Companions and scholars consulted her on religious matters.	the formation of Islamic teachings.	
2	Aisha as teacher and critic	Aisha not only transmitted hadiths but also explained, corrected, and critically examined religious interpretations that she considered inaccurate. Her scholarly authority was acknowledged by the Companions and subsequent generations of Muslims.	Women possess the legitimacy to interpret religious teachings, offer scholarly criticism, and shape Islamic discourse.	Adilan (2020); Nuruzzaman et al. (2023)
3	Aisha's domestic and social partnership	As the Prophet's wife, Aisha participated in household life while understanding social issues and the affairs of the Muslim community. Her role was not confined to domestic matters.	Marital relationships can be constructed as partnerships that enable women to contribute to family and social life.	Nugraha (2019)
4	Aisha's political agency and leadership	Aisha's involvement in the Battle of the Camel demonstrated her courage, influence, charisma, and ability to mobilize political support. Despite its historical controversy, the event demonstrates women's presence as political actors in Islamic history.	Politics is not inherently a male domain. Women possess the capacity to articulate positions, build influence, and participate in matters of state.	Sabuncu (2017); Nuruzzaman et al. (2023)
5	Aisha's advocacy for women's interests	Aisha used her extensive knowledge and position to articulate women's concerns and defend vulnerable groups. She emerged as a critic of interpretations and practices that disadvantaged women.	Religious knowledge can become a source of women's agency for criticizing injustice and advancing social welfare.	Wadud (1999); Geissinger (2011)

Source: Author's analysis, 2023.

Table 2 identifies three principal forms of Aisha's leadership. The first is epistemic authority, reflected in her roles as a hadith transmitter, jurist, exegete, teacher, and critic. The second is relational and social agency, demonstrated through her domestic partnership with the Prophet Muhammad, contributions to the Muslim community, and advocacy for women's interests. The third is political participation, evident in her willingness to articulate political positions, build influence, and mobilize support during the Battle of the Camel. These findings demonstrate that women's leadership in Islamic history was not confined to formal authority but also encompassed knowledge production, education, religious criticism, social partnership, and political participation.

From the perspective of Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics, women's experiences are integral to the formation of Islamic knowledge and history. Aisha is therefore positioned as an active subject who contributed as a hadith transmitter, jurist, exegete, teacher, and critic. The Companions' recognition of her scholarship demonstrates that religious authority was established through knowledge, competence, and integrity rather than gender. Her domestic experiences with the Prophet also became a source of public knowledge

concerning the Sunnah, thereby challenging the hierarchical separation between women's domestic sphere and men's public sphere.

Aisha's involvement in the Battle of the Camel demonstrates women's political visibility, influence, and capacity for mobilization; however, it cannot serve as the sole normative justification for all forms of women's leadership. The controversy surrounding her political decision must be distinguished from her capacity as a political actor and cannot be generalized as evidence of women's unsuitability for leadership. Within Wadud's tawhidic paradigm, absolute authority belongs solely to Allah; consequently, men and women possess equal standing as moral subjects. Eligibility to exercise scholarly, social, and political authority should therefore be assessed according to competence, integrity, courage, responsibility, and commitment to the public good.

The findings establish three dimensions of Aisha's leadership: epistemic authority, exercised through the acquisition, transmission, interpretation, and critical examination of religious knowledge; relational agency, expressed through domestic partnership, social contributions, and advocacy for women; and political participation, demonstrated through the articulation of political positions, the development of influence, and involvement in affairs of governance. The study's novelty lies in reconstructing Aisha's leadership as a multidimensional authority that connects domestic, intellectual, social, and political spheres. Women's leadership is therefore not limited to formal power but also encompasses knowledge production, discourse formation, and sociopolitical influence, whose legitimacy rests on competence, integrity, moral responsibility, and commitment to the public good.

A comparison of Queen Balqis's and Aisha's leadership

The leadership of Queen Balqis in Qur'an 27:23–44 (Al-Naml) and that of Aisha represent two distinct models of women's leadership within the Islamic tradition. Queen Balqis exemplifies political-structural leadership as the ruler of the kingdom of Sheba, whereas Aisha demonstrates intellectual, religious, social, and political leadership during the formative period of Islam. Although these models are derived from different types of evidence, both reveal the relationship between women's authority, competence, integrity, moral agency, and commitment to the public good.

This comparison does not equate the epistemological status of the Qur'anic narrative concerning Queen Balqis with the historical evidence concerning Aisha. Instead, the analysis compares their sources of authority, forms of leadership, characteristics of action, spheres of participation, and orientations toward the public good. Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics is applied directly to the interpretation of the Qur'anic narrative of Queen Balqis, whereas the principles of tawhid, moral equality, and women's agency serve as an interpretive lens for examining Aisha's historical experiences.

Table 3

Comparison of the Leadership of Queen Balqis and Sayyidah Aisha

No.	Comparative Dimension	Queen Balqis	Sayyidah Aisha	Analytical Implications
1	Source of leadership legitimacy	Queen Balqis's legitimacy is textual-narrative, reflected in the Qur'an's recognition of her position as the ruler of the kingdom of Sheba without questioning her gender.	Aisha's authority is historical-epistemic, established through her close relationship with the Prophet, extensive knowledge, integrity, and recognition by the Companions.	Women's authority may derive from formal office or from knowledge, competence, integrity, and social recognition.

2	Form and basis of authority	Queen Balqis exercised political-structural leadership based on her governmental position and ability to govern the state.	Aisha exercised intellectual, religious, social, and political leadership grounded in her scholarly mastery and critical-thinking abilities.	Women's leadership is multidimensional and is not limited to formal political power.
3	Leadership characteristics	Queen Balqis demonstrated consultative and diplomatic leadership through deliberation, consideration of the risks of warfare, and protection of her people.	Aisha demonstrated educational and critical leadership through hadith transmission, teaching, correction of religious understandings, and articulation of political positions.	Despite their different forms, both models demonstrate intelligence, decision-making ability, critical thinking, and social responsibility.
4	Agency in the public sphere	Queen Balqis acted as the head of government and political decision-maker of the kingdom of Sheba.	Aisha connected her domestic experience with the Prophet to her public roles as a scholar, teacher, critic, and political actor.	Women's agency can be exercised in government, scholarship, education, social life, and politics.
5	Orientation and exemplary values	Queen Balqis's leadership was oriented toward diplomacy, national security, conflict prevention, and openness to the truth.	Aisha's leadership was oriented toward preserving knowledge, educating the Muslim community, religious criticism, defending women, and participating in sociopolitical affairs.	Leadership eligibility should be assessed according to knowledge, integrity, responsibility, piety, and the public good rather than gender.

Source: Author's analysis, 2023.

Table 3 demonstrates that Queen Balqis and Aisha represent separate yet complementary forms of women's leadership. Balqis exemplifies political-deliberative leadership through formal authority, consultation, diplomacy, and the protection of her people. By contrast, Aisha demonstrates epistemic-relational leadership through scholarly expertise, hadith transmission, education, religious criticism, advocacy for women, and political participation. These differences indicate that women's authority may develop through both formal office and intellectual, moral, religious, and social capacities.

Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics interprets religious texts and experiences by studying their contexts, structures of meaning, and the Qur'anic worldview of tawhid, justice, and moral equality. This system positions women as active subjects capable of producing knowledge, making decisions, and assuming responsibility for their actions. Given the different epistemological status of the sources, the narrative of Queen Balqis is analyzed through textual and contextual analysis, whereas Aisha's experiences are analyzed historically through the principles of agency and moral equality.

Qur'an 27:23–44 (Al-Naml) does not use gender as a basis for delegitimizing Queen Balqis's political authority but instead portrays her as a deliberative, diplomatic, protective, and truth-oriented leader. The Qur'anic criticism is directed toward the Sheban people's worship of the sun rather than women's leadership. Aisha, meanwhile, exercised agency through scholarly expertise, hadith transmission, teaching, religious criticism, advocacy for women, and sociopolitical participation. Her role connected domestic experience with public

authority, while her involvement in the Battle of the Camel demonstrated women's political visibility and capacity for mobilization, despite the event's continuing historical controversy.

The comparison produces two leadership typologies: Queen Balqis's political-deliberative leadership, exercised through formal authority, consultation, diplomacy, and the protection of society; and Aisha's epistemic-relational leadership, expressed through knowledge production, education, religious criticism, social partnership, and political participation. Within Wadud's tawhidic paradigm, these models are connected by moral agency, social responsibility, and an orientation toward the public good. These findings show that women's leadership constitutes a plural and multidimensional form of human agency. Leadership legitimacy should therefore be determined by competence, knowledge, integrity, piety, responsibility, and devotion to the public good rather than gender identity.

Discussion

This study produced three principal findings concerning women's leadership in the Islamic tradition based on Qur'anic evidence, Islamic historical sources, and a comparison of the two figures. First, the Qur'an positions men and women as equal moral subjects and portrays Queen Balqis as the ruler of the kingdom of Sheba who practiced consultation and diplomacy, protected her people, and remained open to truth. Second, Aisha demonstrated multidimensional authority through hadith transmission, mastery of Islamic knowledge, teaching, religious criticism, domestic partnership, advocacy for women, and sociopolitical participation. Third, the comparison generated two typologies of women's leadership: Balqis represents political-deliberative leadership derived from formal authority, whereas Aisha represents epistemic-relational leadership developed through knowledge and social influence. Despite their different sources and forms of authority, both figures demonstrate that the legitimacy of women's leadership rests on moral agency, competence, integrity, social responsibility, piety, and an orientation toward truth and the public good rather than gender identity.

These findings are relevant to contemporary society because women continue to be perceived as weak, dependent on men, and unsuitable for leadership. Gender equality does not eliminate biological differences but guarantees equal rights, opportunities, and treatment, free from discrimination, in education, politics, law, and social life ([Mubarak & Misbah, 2022](#)). In Indonesia, patriarchal attitudes continue to influence public support for women's political representation and leadership ([White et al., 2024](#)). Balqis exercised political authority through consultation, diplomacy, risk assessment, and the protection of her people. Aisha demonstrated that women's authority could be established through knowledge, education, religious criticism, and sociopolitical participation ([Tidjani, 2016](#); [Nuruzzaman et al., 2023](#)). Both figures challenge a rigid separation between domestic and public spheres and illustrate contextually distinct forms of authority. These findings do not seek to replace male domination with female domination but affirm that leadership should be determined by capacity, integrity, responsibility, and commitment to the public good. Women's participation must also be supported by an equitable distribution of domestic responsibilities to prevent the imposition of a double burden.

Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics interprets the Qur'an by considering its historical context, linguistic structure, and worldview grounded in tawhid, justice, and moral equality ([Wadud, 1999](#)). This approach emphasizes the importance of social context and interpreters' underlying assumptions ([Bauer, 2015](#); [Ibrahim, 2020](#)). Wadud's hermeneutics is applied directly to Balqis's narrative, whereas Aisha's experiences are examined historically through the principles of moral equality and women's agency. Queen Balqis is not criticized

for her gender; rather, the theological problem for the Sheban people lies in their worship of the sun. Balqis is portrayed as a leader who consulted others, considered the risks of conflict, pursued diplomacy, and protected her people (Abbas & Rawabdeh, 2022; Lala, 2022). The phrase *waj'alnā lil-muttaqīna imāmā* in Qur'an 25:74 (Al-Furqan) opens ethical exemplarity to believers without gender restrictions, although it cannot serve as the sole textual basis for women's political leadership (Koburtay et al., 2023; Zakaria, 2013). Differences between this interpretation and restrictive readings are shaped by distinct social contexts and methodologies (Riyani, 2017; Yakar, 2022). The Qur'an's universal principles establish competence, integrity, accountability, and the public good as criteria for leadership, as embodied in Balqis's political-deliberative leadership and Aisha's epistemic-relational leadership, both of which are consistent with tawhid and justice.

This study demonstrates that men and women possess equal moral standing and cannot be differentiated on the basis of claims regarding permanent gender superiority. Qur'an 16:97 (Al-Nahl) affirms the equality of men and women in faith and righteous action, whereas Qur'an 49:13 (Al-Hujurat) identifies piety as the measure of human distinction (Riyani, 2017). Qur'anic leadership is determined by moral capacity, responsibility, and trustworthiness rather than gender. Within Wadud's hermeneutics, men and women are equally positioned as moral agents and vicegerents; consequently, women's agency constitutes an integral element of Qur'anic ethics (Irsyadunnas, 2015; Thayyibi & Santosa, 2022). Balqis demonstrated consultation, diplomacy, protection of society, risk assessment, and openness to evaluation. Representations of Aisha in Islamic literature have also shaped the political and religious memory of women's roles in Islamic history (Sabuncu, 2017; Tidjani, 2016). Together, these figures conceptualize leadership as a trust grounded in knowledge, courage, self-correction, social responsibility, truth, and the public good. Equality, therefore, signifies equal dignity, moral agency, and the capacity to assume responsibility rather than the erasure of all differences.

The findings are consistent with Mubarak and Misbah (2022), who define gender equality as equality of rights, opportunities, and treatment in education, politics, law, and social life. Aisha's expertise in hadith, jurisprudence, Qur'anic exegesis, language, and literature supports the findings of Tidjani (2016) and Nuruzzaman et al. (2023). The representation of Balqis as the ruler of Sheba reinforces Haeri's (2020) account of women's political authority, whereas Aisha's position within Islamic gender and political discourse supports Izzuddin's (2012) analysis. Unlike studies that examine these figures separately, the present study applies Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics and develops two typologies: Balqis's political-deliberative leadership, grounded in formal authority, consultation, diplomacy, risk assessment, and the protection of society; and Aisha's epistemic-relational leadership, exercised through the production and transmission of knowledge, education, religious criticism, and sociopolitical influence. Both models share moral agency, competence, integrity, social responsibility, piety, commitment to truth, and orientation toward the public good. This dual typology demonstrates that the legitimacy of women's leadership may derive from formal authority, epistemic authority, and social influence, without treating any single form as a singular or universal model.

The findings have practical implications for education, religious institutions, family life, and public policy. Islamic educational institutions should integrate the narrative of Balqis and Aisha's exemplary contributions into their curricula in critical, contextual, and gender-sensitive ways. Islamic boarding schools and universities should expand women's access to roles as researchers, educators, interpreters, academic leaders, and decision-makers. Higher education can foster egalitarian attitudes toward women's leadership, whereas patriarchy

continues to hinder their political representation. Religious organizations and public institutions should provide training, mentoring, competency-based promotion, and mechanisms to prevent discrimination. The activism of Indonesian Muslim women demonstrates that social agency can contribute to policy change and the protection of women's rights. Within families, domestic responsibilities should be distributed proportionately so that women's public participation does not create a double burden. Leadership should be evaluated based on knowledge, integrity, consultation, diplomacy, courage, accountability, protection of society, and commitment to the public good, rather than on gender. Effective implementation requires institutional support and periodic evaluation to ensure that gender equality develops from a normative principle into a sustainable practice.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Islamic tradition provides theological, historical, and ethical foundations for legitimizing women's leadership. Through Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics, the moral equality of men and women is understood as a consequence of tawhid, which rejects claims of permanent gender-based superiority. Queen Balqis represents political-deliberative leadership through formal authority, consultation, diplomacy, risk assessment, protection of her people, and openness to truth. Aisha represents epistemic-relational leadership through scholarly expertise, hadith transmission, education, religious criticism, domestic partnership, advocacy for women, and sociopolitical influence. Their distinct sources of authority do not diminish the legitimacy of their leadership, as their eligibility is grounded in moral agency, competence, integrity, social responsibility, piety, accountability, and a commitment to the public good. Both figures also demonstrate that domestic and public spheres should not be rigidly separated when assessing women's contributions. Within the framework of Amina Wadud's gender hermeneutics, women's leadership can therefore be understood as a form of trust exercised according to individual capacity and the context of service rather than as a deviation from Islamic principles.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the construction of a dual typology of women's leadership that connects formal political authority with epistemic authority and social influence. This typology expands the understanding of women's leadership in Islam beyond formal political office or any single leadership model. In practice, the findings encourage Islamic educational institutions to integrate the narratives of Queen Balqis and Aisha's exemplary contributions into their curricula in critical, contextual, and gender-sensitive ways. Islamic boarding schools, universities, religious organizations, families, and public institutions should expand women's access to education, leadership positions, decision-making processes, training, and competency-based promotion. A proportionate distribution of domestic responsibilities, prevention of discrimination, institutional support, and periodic evaluation are also necessary to transform the principle of equality into sustainable practice across the social and religious spheres of community life.

This study is limited by its literature-based focus on only two figures and, therefore, cannot represent the full diversity of women's leadership in Muslim history and societies. The analysis also depends on the availability, selection, and interpretation of Qur'anic and historical sources and secondary literature, without empirically examining how the proposed typologies operate within contemporary institutions. Its focus on Amina Wadud's hermeneutics further limits comparisons with other gender-sensitive and traditional exegetical approaches. Future research should therefore examine other female figures,

compare diverse interpretive methodologies, and empirically test the political-deliberative and epistemic-relational typologies through field research. Comparative studies across countries, religious organizations, Islamic boarding schools, universities, families, and public institutions are also needed to evaluate their acceptance, effectiveness, structural barriers, and implications for the sustainable advancement of gender equality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to colleagues for their valuable feedback, suggestions, and support throughout the preparation of this article. Their contributions greatly enriched the author's perspective, strengthened the arguments, and improved the overall quality of the article.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Lilik Huriyah: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Writing Original Draft; Validation; Visualization; Writing Original Draft. **Yeni Endiana:** Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Writing Original Draft; Validation. **Yuni Setya Ningsih:** Conceptualization; Formal Analysis; Writing Review & Editing. **Lum'atul Hajar:** Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis. **Afra Nafisah:** Formal Analysis; Writing Original Draft; Validation.

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