Controversy of Women's Leadership in Islam: Muhammadiyah's Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the leadership of women in Islam from the perspective of Muhammadiyah. The theme has always generated both support and opposition among the Muslim community. The central point of debate regarding women's leadership in Islam revolves around a hadith narrated by Abu Bakrah, stating that a community will not prosper if led by a woman. The result of this research is that Muhammadiyah has decided that women are allowed to become leaders, starting from school principals, directors, or even presidents. They believe there is no explicit text that clearly prohibits women from being leaders. Regarding the hadith, Muhammadiyah interprets it contextually based on historical analysis. At that time, women held a very weak position in society, casting doubts on their ability to lead a community institution. Additionally, they did not receive adequate education, resulting in limited experience and knowledge. Therefore, in the present era, if a woman has the capacity to be a leader, it is considered permissible.

Keywords: *Women's Leadership, Muhammadiyah, Fatwa*

Introduction

Leadership of women in Islam seems to never be free from controversy. There are both supporters and opponents, each basing their opinions on the Qur'an and Hadith. They have their respective arguments to strengthen their points. This indicates that there are differences in understanding these two main sources of Islam.

Muhammadiyah, as a religious organization synonymous with reform, is also involved in highlighting the issue of women's leadership. They, through their Tarjih Council, have issued a fatwa on this matter. The results of this fatwa need to be studied and explained systematically to understand Muhammadiyah's opinion on texts related to women's leadership. Additionally, the method used in the legal issuance process is also crucial to be presented. This way, Muhammadiyah's thought process on this issue, leading to a conclusion, will be outlined.

This research falls into qualitative research using a literature study method. The research is conducted by accessing primary and secondary books related to the discussed theme. Subsequently, the materials are analyzed to find answers in line with the formulated research questions.

Discussion

Brief History of Muhammadiyah Muhammadiyah is a socio-religious organization founded by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan on November 18, 1912, in Yogyakarta. It is known as one of the Islamic reform movements in Indonesia. However, later on, this organization also spread to several countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and others. According to Amin Abdullah, quoted by Abdul Halim, initially, it was a 'splinter movement' of a religious organization that managed to survive until now, while many movements like it could not sustain their existence.

In general, Muhammadiyah was born in response to the socio-political conditions of the Muslim community due to Dutch East Indies government policies. It also responded to the cultural and religious conditions developing in Indonesia. At that time, the religious beliefs of Muslims, especially in Java, were syncretic due to the influence of Hindu-Buddhist culture. Such religious beliefs would give rise to polytheism, superstition, heresy, and superstitions in society. Therefore, Muhammadiyah was founded to purify the understanding and religious practices of a society mixed with traditions. Then, Muhammadiyah echoed the slogan of returning to the Quran and Sunnah.

Meanwhile, educational institutions in society did not teach about openness but blindly followed certain madhabs. Such educational institutions were not

considered ideal because they would only foster conservative teachings that nurture a stagnant spirit. The problem is that the community could not access modern education applied by the Dutch because only certain groups could enter. Therefore, Muhammadiyah was established to provide modern education services at that time.

This situation was exacerbated by the unjust policies of the Dutch towards Muslims. For example, in 1917, the government's contribution to the Islamic side was f127.029, while the contribution to the Christian side reached f1.235.500. However, the number of Muslims was much larger than Christians. This means that there was discrimination by the colonizers against Muslims. This discrimination led to the suffering of the predominantly Muslim population.

With the significant support of the colonial government for Christians, it allowed them to develop the Christian mission of Christianization. The suffering Islamic community became the main target, with promises of material benefits to free them from suffering. In this context, the establishment of Muhammadiyah was a logical development in facing the mighty power of the Dutch. Muhammadiyah offered itself as a way to defend against Christian missions.

In conclusion, the background of the establishment of Muhammadiyah can be categorized as follows: a. The backwardness and ignorance of the Indonesian Muslim community in almost all aspects of life. b. Severe poverty suffered by the Indonesian Muslim community. c. Outdated Islamic education. d. Dutch political policies towards Muslims.

The above conclusions can be categorized as internal factors, meaning they arise from the reality that developed in Indonesia. Meanwhile, there are also external factors, which are the intellectual struggles of Ahmad Dahlan when studying in Hijaz. When he was in Hijaz, he had a lot of contact with the renewal movement in Egypt, with Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida as actors. This interaction is evidenced by his fondness for reading the al-Manar magazine. Al-Manar is an Egyptian publication managed by Muhammad Abduh and his friends.

Muhammadiyah's Ijtihad Method

Within the Muhammadiyah organization, there is an institution responsible for issuing fatwas called Majelis Tarjih Muhammadiyyah. This council functions to address various issues faced by the community based on the primary sources of Islamic law according to Muhammadiyah, namely the Qur'an and authentic Sunnah (Djamil, 1995). The term "Sunnah al-Shahihah" refers to the accepted Sunnah as a legal evidence. Sunnah Shahihah consists of hadiths that are authentic in and of themselves, authentic due to external evidence, good in and of themselves, and good due to

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external evidence (Abdurrahman, 2007). Thus, Muhammadiyah does not accept weak hadiths as a basis for law.

The Qur'an is the primary reference for establishing law, while hadiths serve as explanations of the Qur'an. However, a comprehensive understanding requires an integrated approach. In the search for legal rulings on a particular issue, evidence related to the problem at hand is gathered from both the Qur'an and hadiths. The Tarjih Council avoids taking isolated or limited pieces of evidence directly. There are indirect pieces of evidence relevant to the issue under consideration (Abdurrahman, 2007: 99).

If there are matters not explicitly addressed in the texts or new issues, ijtihad (independent legal reasoning) and *istinbath* (deduction) can be performed, as long as it does not involve matters of worship. Muhammadiyah's ijtihad is a collective effort rather than an individual one. Therefore, during a Tarjih congress, experts in specific fields related to the discussed cases, such as economics, medicine, and others, attend. Additionally, experts in Islamic religious fields, such as Arabic language, usul al-fiqh (principles of Islamic jurisprudence), tafsir (Qur'anic exegesis), hadith, and others, also participate. This is intended to meet the criteria for those engaged in ijtihad (Djamil, 1995).

Muhammadiyah adopts three methods in ijtihad. First, *Ijtihad bayani*, which explains the law of cases found in the texts of the Qur'an and hadiths. Second, *Ijtihad qiyasi*, which resolves new cases by analogizing them with cases whose laws have been established in the Qur'an and hadiths. Third, *Ijtihad istislahi*, which resolves new cases not covered by the above two legal sources using reasoning based on public interest.

Legal Leadership of Women from Muhammadiyah's Perspective

The issue of women's leadership has been discussed by Muhammadiyah in the 17th Tarjih Congress in Wiradesa and perfected in the 18th Congress in Garut. The results of these congresses are documented in a book titled "Adabul Mar'ah fil Islam" and republished in the book "Fatwa-Fatwa Tarjih: Tanya Jawab Agama edition 4." In this book, it is stated that religion does not reject or hinder a woman from becoming a judge, school director, company director, subdistrict head, village head, minister, mayor, and so on (Tarjih and Tajdid Council Muhammadiyah, 2011). The Central Leadership of Muhammadiyah's Tarjih Council does not see any evidence in the texts prohibiting women from being leaders. Therefore, Muhammadiyah concludes that women are allowed to be leaders.

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Muhammadiyah's Legal Basis and Argumentation

The discussion in the congress indicates that there is a polemic in society regarding the position of women as leaders. In this discussion, Muhammadiyah first presents three arguments that are usually used as the basis for prohibiting women from being leaders (Tarjih and Tajdid Council Muhammadiyah, 2011).

First, the words of Allah SWT in Surah An-Nisa, verse 34.

> "Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth."

Second, a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad narrated by Bukhari, Nasa'i, Turmudzi, and Ahmad from Abu Bakrah:

> "A people will not succeed if they entrust their affairs to a woman"

Third, a hadith of the Prophet narrated by Ahmad:

> "The time of destruction will come when men are subjected to women."

The explanation will focus on the hadith that is the main issue. Muhammadiyah considers the hadith narrated by Abu Bakrah to be authentic, and thus, it can be used as evidence. Muhammadiyah does not interpret this hadith literally but contextually. They understand this hadith based on its spirit and its *'illah* (legal cause) as per the principle of *usul al-fiqh* (tarjih.or.id).

> "Judgment is based on its cause, whether present or absent."

The *'illah* in this hadith is the condition of women at that time, which was not conducive for them to handle societal affairs. The position of women at the time of the Prophet's revelation was distressing. There were even practices of burying baby girls alive out of shame. The Prophet came to uplift the status of women. Although he succeeded, the deeply rooted traditions did not completely change. After his passing, women still remained second-class citizens (Tarjih and Tajdid Council Muhammadiyah, 2011).

Furthermore, Muhammadiyah highlights the issue of education at that time. They argue that only certain groups educated women. Due to the lack of knowledge, Muhammadiyah deems it reasonable for the Prophet to say that a community would suffer if led by women. Thus, the 'illah of the Prophet's statement is that the condition of women at that time did not allow them to take on the responsibility of societal affairs due to a lack of knowledge and experience.

Muhammadiyah considers the dimensions of space and time. According to them, these dimensions can lead to changes in laws, based on the usul al-fiqh

principle: "The change of laws cannot be denied with the change of times and places." This is different from the present time, where many women have education and knowledge about society. Therefore, Muhammadiyah allows women to become leaders in a societal institution.

Muhammadiyah also considers this hadith in light of its historical context. It turns out that the Prophet directed this hadith towards the event of appointing the daughter of the highest ruler of Persia as the heir to her father's power. They also argue that there is an example of successful female leadership in the Qur'an, as seen in the story of the wise Queen of Sheba, who led the land of Yemen, as mentioned in Surah An-Naml (27): 44 (tarjih.or.id).

> "She was told, 'Enter the palace.' But when she saw it, she thought it was a body of water and uncovered her shins. [Solomon] said, 'Indeed, it is a palace [whose floor is] made smooth with glass.' She said, 'My Lord, indeed I have wronged myself, and I submit with Solomon to Allah, Lord of the worlds."

In addition to the story of Queen Bilqis, they also correlate it with other verses in the Qur'an. They believe that men and women are equal before Allah (Q.S. Al-Hujurat (49): 13), (Q.S. An-Nahl (16): 97), women and men have the potential to achieve accomplishments (Q.S. An-Nisa (4): 124), (Q.S. An-Nahl (16): 97). Both women and men are commanded to do good (Q.S. At-Taubah (9): 71). From these verses, they conclude that Islam is a religion that honors women and places them on equal footing with men.

Regarding the third hadith narrated by Ahmad, which is cited as a reason for the prohibition of women leaders, Muhammadiyah views it as a weak hadith. Its weakness lies in its chain of narrators, with Bakkar Ibnu Abdul Aziz being weakened by hadith scholars. Therefore, this hadith cannot be used as a legal basis (Tarjih and Tajdid Council Muhammadiyah, 2011).

Polemic Surrounding Women's Leadership in Islam

There is no denying that the issue of women's leadership in the state has divided Islamic scholars into two groups: those who are in favor and those who are against. Each scholar has their own arguments to strengthen their stance. This difference is due to variations in understanding religious texts, both from the Qur'an and hadith. Each group has specific methods for deriving legal rulings from the texts.

Muhammadiyah's opinion above represents one group that supports women's leadership as heads of state. However, many scholars or religious organizations reject such a fatwa. They believe that the consensus of scholars on this matter is final.

Generally, the Qur'anic verse most often used as an argument against women's leadership is in Surah An-Nisa: 34.

> "Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth."

For example, Ibn Kathir understands this verse as justification for the superiority of men over women. According to him, men are leaders, parents, and judges over women because men are better than women. Prophethood is exclusive to men. This applies to other major positions of authority as well. To strengthen his argument, Ibn Kathir also quotes a hadith narrated by Abu Bakrah, stating, "A group of people will never succeed if they entrust their affairs to a woman" (Ahmad, 2014).

On the other hand, Rashid Rida, a modernist scholar, explains that this verse emphasizes the position of men as leaders because men are better and superior to women. This specificity is a divine decree because, by nature, men are stronger and more perfect, while intellectually, men have a more perfect mind than women (Mannan, 2011).

From the explanations of these two scholars, it can be concluded that they reject women's leadership. They not only oppose women being heads of state but also do not recommend women as leaders in lower positions such as judges. They still believe that men are more deserving of leadership due to physical strength and intellect. Despite this, these scholars are often cited in their interpretations by many Muslims. Therefore, it is not surprising that a significant portion of the Muslim community still rejects women as heads of state, considering it deviates from religious texts.

Indonesian Context: Political Assurance for Women in Indonesia

Indonesia, as a sovereign and independent nation, has committed to recognizing equal rights for all its citizens, regardless of gender. Both women and men have rights in all aspects of national life, including politics. As a member of the United Nations, Indonesia is obligated to adhere to conventions regarding women's political rights. These rights include the right for women to vote in all elections without discrimination, the right to be elected to public bodies under the same conditions as men, and the right to hold public office and perform public functions without discrimination (Sihite, 2007).

Additionally, Indonesia has regulations safeguarding women's political rights, as stated in Law No. 39 of 1999 concerning Human Rights, Article 46. This article emphasizes the need for women's representation in general elections, party selection of legislative members, and appointments in the executive and judiciary, in accordance with specified requirements (Sihite, 2007).

Therefore, Indonesia has ensured and granted political rights for women to compete with men in occupying strategic positions in the government. However, a challenge persists, as some Indonesian communities are still influenced by gender-biased religious doctrines. Interestingly, interpretations of these religious texts are diverse, and the texts themselves do not explicitly prohibit women from holding leadership positions.

Islamic Women in the Socio-Cultural Reality of Indonesia

Indonesian society generally exhibits a patriarchal structure, placing women in domestic roles such as caregivers, educators, and moral guardians. In contrast, men are often perceived as heads of households, decision-makers, and breadwinners. Despite these traditional roles, women assert that Islam teaches equality between genders, earning them respect in society. While their roles are often associated with domestic duties, the patriarchal construction influences women's participation in the workforce and professions (Faiqoh, 2001).

Nevertheless, in daily family life, the dynamics between men and women in poor families differ from the typical authoritarian male leadership found in some other Islamic countries. In Indonesia, there is a division of labor between husbands and wives, and gender relations within families depend on individual decisions (Faiqoh, 2001).

In rural areas, such arrangements are commonplace. Families often work together in fields every day, sharing the burden of livelihood without imposing it solely on one family member. Despite this departure from traditional gender roles, which might be perceived as contrary to traditional Islamic views, it aligns with Indonesian cultural values.

In the realm of education, Indonesian women enjoy equal opportunities with men. They can pursue education at any level, and there are no restrictions on acquiring academic knowledge. In fact, women with significant capabilities can rise to prominent positions, as exemplified by figures like Sri Mulyani and Susi Pudjiastuti. Indonesia has even had a female president, Megawati Sukarnoputri.

Women's Political Participation in Indonesia

Over time, social norms and values have evolved, leading to progress for women in various fields, including education, social engagement, and employment. Consequently, women can now occupy important positions across different sectors, including government. However, according to Romany, women are still considered second-class citizens in Indonesian political arenas. Gender stereotypes portraying women as indecisive, slow decision-makers, and weak, combined with patriarchal

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religious values, reinforce the notion that women are unfit to be leaders. These arguments are used to resist women holding strategic positions in political institutions (Sihite, 2007).

The issue of women's leadership primarily stems from socio-cultural constraints that limit access and opportunities for women to occupy central positions in government institutions, despite their leadership, intelligence, and managerial capabilities. The political world is often associated with masculinity, making it seem taboo for women to enter this domain.

While these challenges exist, it's crucial to understand that the state does not restrict political space for women. They have the right to vote and be elected, including running for positions such as mayor, governor, or even president. The constraints faced are social constructs within a patriarchal society, further compounded by literal interpretations of religious doctrines.

Critical Notes on Muhammadiyah's Fatwa

Muhammadiyah, through its Tarjih council, has issued a fatwa allowing women to become leaders, whether as school principals, directors, or even presidents. They interpret the hadith narrated by Abu Bakrah contextually, arguing that, at that time, women were not feasible leaders due to their weak social position and insufficient education for leadership.

The author agrees with Muhammadiyah's fatwa. Evaluating leaders based on gender is highly irrelevant today, especially in Indonesia, where both men and women have equal opportunities in various fields. Cases would be different in a country like Afghanistan, where some women are still not allowed to leave their homes, including for education and work. In such situations, women cannot become leaders due to a lack of capability, a deficiency caused by the deprivation of women's rights. While the effort aims to protect women's honor, it poses a risk of violence against women.

In the Indonesian context, the situation is different. As a democratic nation, Indonesia has regulated and ensured political freedom for every citizen, irrespective of gender. This freedom should be utilized by women to showcase their true qualities, which, of course, requires skills attainable through education.

Regarding the hadith from Abu Bakrah, its '*illat* or condition is competence. As long as this condition is met, it is permissible for women to be leaders. If the hadith is understood literally, it implies a regression for the Islamic world, perpetuating the notion that women will forever be servants to men. Such a scenario is susceptible to violence against women. However, Islam emerged with the spirit of liberation and

justice, elevating the status of women in Arab society, which was highly oppressed at the time. This spirit should be ingrained in the minds of Muslims.

What Prophet Muhammad did was a revolution against the norms of Arab society. Women, who previously had no inheritance rights, were given a share, albeit not equal to men's. If the division were made equal immediately, it could have caused severe social upheaval. This approach demonstrates that Islam recognizes the need for gradual societal change.

In conclusion, while the texts of Islam remain unchanged as they are final, the paradigm of Muslims must shift. New methodologies for understanding these texts are crucial to address contemporary challenges. This way, Islam will continue to be relevant in every time and place (*shalih li kulli zaman wa makan*).

Conclusion

Muhammadiyah has decided that women are allowed to become leaders, starting from school principals, directors, or even presidents. They believe there is no explicit text that clearly prohibits women from being leaders. As for the hadith narrated by Abu Bakrah, Muhammadiyah interprets it contextually. They view the hadith from a historical perspective and consider its context and circumstances (asbab al-wurud). It turns out that, at that time, women held a very weak position in society, casting doubts on their ability to lead a community institution. Additionally, they did not receive adequate education, resulting in limited experience and knowledge.

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