



Dynamics of Women's Leadership Thought from the Perspective of Amina Wadud and Zainab Al-Ghazali

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Article Info

Article history:

Received: Feb 22, 2026
Revised: May 17, 2026
Accepted: June 06, 2026

Keywords:

Contextual Hermeneutics;
Epistemological Framework;
Islamic Leadership;
Normative-Textual Approach;
Women's Leadership.

Abstract

This study investigates the dynamics of women's leadership thought in Islam by examining the perspectives of Amina Wadud and Zainab al-Ghazali. The background of this research arises from ongoing debates regarding the legitimacy of women's leadership, which are shaped not only by interpretations of religious texts but also by differences in epistemological approaches. The study aims to analyze how these distinct frameworks influence the conceptualization of leadership for women in Islamic contexts. A qualitative approach was employed, using library research and a descriptive-comparative method to examine primary sources from both figures, supplemented by supporting literature in gender studies and contemporary Islamic scholarship. The findings indicate that Amina Wadud adopts a contextual hermeneutic approach, emphasizing justice, equality, and social relevance, thereby broadening opportunities for women's leadership. In contrast, Zainab al-Ghazali employs a normative-textual approach that reflects classical traditions and imposes certain limitations on women's roles in leadership. These differences demonstrate that epistemological frameworks significantly shape interpretations of women's leadership in Islam. Despite these divergences, both scholars recognize the importance of women's participation in the public sphere. The study concludes that a dialogical and integrative approach, combining contextual and normative perspectives, offers a viable pathway for formulating a concept of women's leadership that is both adaptive and relevant to the needs of contemporary Muslim society.

To cite this article: Nurhidayat, E., Arifin, M., Inayatillah, I., Manan, A., & Sa'i, S. (2026). Dynamics of women's leadership thought from the perspective of Amina Wadud and Zainab al-Ghazali. *Al Qodiri: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sosial dan Keagamaan*, 24(2), 588-595.

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on women's leadership in Islam has gained increasing scholarly attention, reflecting broader social demands for gender equality and inclusive participation in public life (Erwani & Siregar, 2025; Koburtay et al., 2023a; Nyhagen, 2019; Samier & ElKaleh, 2021). Contemporary debates are not merely about textual interpretation but also about the epistemological frameworks that shape understanding of religious teachings. Divergent paradigms normative-traditional versus contextual progressive inform whether women are perceived as fully capable of leadership roles or confined to specific spheres (Da Silva Pereira, 2023; Fayek, 2026). The dynamic interplay between religious texts, social realities, and interpretive methods underscores the complexity of constructing Islamic concepts of female leadership. Understanding these frameworks is therefore essential to appreciate both historical and modern perspectives on women's roles within Muslim communities.

Empirical observations indicate that, despite increasing female participation in educational, social, and political sectors, women's leadership is still contested in many Islamic societies (Arar et al., 2022; Lopes Cardozo & Srimulyani, 2021; Mahbuba & Rabeya, 2023; Shah, 2020). Cases in Indonesia, Egypt, and other countries reveal that social, cultural, and institutional factors often constrain women's access to leadership positions (Ahmad et al., 2024; Mahbuba & Rabeya, 2023;

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Rana et al., 2024; Yusuf et al., 2024). Moreover, popular perceptions shaped by classical jurisprudence sometimes clash with reformist interpretations, generating tension between tradition and contemporary gender expectations. These ongoing challenges highlight the necessity to explore not only the textual foundations but also the contextual applications of women's leadership in Islam. Consequently, there is a pressing need to examine how epistemology influences leadership discourses and practical empowerment.

The urgency of this research is further amplified by global movements advocating gender justice and the increasing awareness of women's potential contributions in various sectors (Aulia et al., 2024; Hawkes et al., 2025; Hessini, 2020; Rana et al., 2024). Scholars argue that without a dialogical understanding bridging classical and contemporary approaches, initiatives to enhance women's leadership may remain fragmented or ineffective (Bakhshilloyevich, 2025; Collinson, 2020; Putnam et al., 2016). In particular, the divergent hermeneutical approaches of Amina Wadud and Zainab al-Ghazali offer a unique lens to analyze the epistemological underpinnings of Islamic leadership thought. By investigating these contrasting perspectives, this study seeks to inform both theoretical debates and practical strategies for promoting gender-sensitive leadership within Muslim communities.

Rationalizing the importance of this topic, the study addresses a dual challenge: recognizing the legitimacy of women's leadership while respecting Islamic ethical and social norms (Ayubi, 2020; Lahmar, 2024; Saifullin et al., 2026). Exploring these frameworks contributes to an integrative understanding that accommodates justice, competence, and moral responsibility. It also allows scholars and practitioners to identify pathways for reconciling traditional restrictions with contemporary social realities. Therefore, examining the thought dynamics of Wadud and al-Ghazali is crucial to developing leadership models that are contextually relevant, socially inclusive, and normatively coherent.

Previous studies on women's leadership in Islam have largely focused on single figures or isolated epistemological approaches (Barlas, 2019; Koburtay et al., 2023b; Lashari & Shah, 2026; Mansouri, 2020). While research has examined Wadud's feminist hermeneutics (Al-Sharmani, 2023; Ramadhan, 2024; Wadud, 2021) and al-Ghazali's normative contributions (Erlwein, 2023; Parrey, 2024; Soleh et al., 2023), few studies offer comparative analyses. Moreover, most literature emphasizes textual interpretation without adequately considering socio-cultural influences or practical implications for leadership development (Altynbasov et al., 2024; Massouti et al., 2024; Schedlitzki et al., 2017). This fragmentation indicates a research gap, highlighting the need for studies that integrate multiple perspectives and contextual factors to comprehensively understand the dynamics of female leadership in Islam.

Addressing these limitations, the current study critically examines the epistemological frameworks and interpretive strategies of Amina Wadud and Zainab al-Ghazali. By combining descriptive and comparative analyses of their primary works and supporting literature, this research identifies points of convergence, divergence, and potential synthesis (El Sherif et al., 2024; Gajary et al., 2024; Geremew et al., 2024). The study also situates these approaches within contemporary social contexts, offering insights into how different interpretive methods influence the perception, legitimacy, and implementation of women's leadership. In doing so, the research fills a critical gap and contributes to both the theoretical discourse and practical application of gender-inclusive leadership within Islamic societies.

Based on this framework, the study aims to investigate the dynamics of women's leadership thought from the perspectives of Amina Wadud and Zainab al-Ghazali, emphasizing the epistemological underpinnings and practical implications of their approaches. The research contributes theoretically by clarifying how interpretive frameworks shape leadership constructs in Islam, and practically by offering guidance for promoting inclusive leadership practices that respect both justice and normative traditions. By fostering a dialogical approach between contextual and normative perspectives, this study provides a pathway toward more adaptive, balanced, and socially relevant models of female leadership in contemporary Muslim societies.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive-comparative approach, selected to provide an in-depth understanding of the construction of female leadership thought in Islam. This approach is appropriate for examining interpretive and contextual phenomena that cannot be quantified, as it allows for systematic description and critical comparison of the epistemological perspectives of Amina Wadud and Zainab al-Ghazali (Creswell, 2014). The descriptive component enables detailed exposition of each figure's conceptual framework, while the comparative element highlights similarities, differences, and potential integrative insights, offering a comprehensive view of the dynamics underlying Islamic leadership thought.

The research was conducted as a library study, drawing primarily on written sources that form the foundation of each figure's intellectual contributions. Primary data consisted of seminal works by Amina Wadud, including *The Qur'an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Wadud, 1999; 2006), and Zainab al-Ghazali's *Ayyām min Ḥayātī* (al-Ghazali, 1977; 1994), which directly address women's roles and leadership in Islam. Secondary data were obtained from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other academic literature relevant to gender studies in Islam, Qur'anic hermeneutics, and normative Islamic thought (Moleong, 2017). The study was conducted between January and April 2026, ensuring access to the most recent and relevant publications to maintain the study's contemporary relevance.

Data collection followed a systematic documentation process, which included tracing, selecting, and classifying literature based on established academic criteria such as credibility, topical relevance, and novelty. Each source was critically evaluated to ensure that it contributed meaningfully to the understanding of epistemological frameworks and interpretive strategies (Miles et al., 2014). The collected materials were then subjected to data reduction, organizing information according to thematic categories, followed by descriptive analysis to map the conceptual structures and thought patterns of each figure. This process enabled rigorous synthesis of ideas while maintaining transparency and traceability in the research process.

A comparative analysis was subsequently conducted to identify points of convergence and divergence between Wadud's contextual hermeneutics and al-Ghazali's normative-textual approach. This stage involved triangulation of sources, cross-referencing interpretations, and critically evaluating both primary and secondary data to ensure validity and reliability of findings (Manan, 2021). The analysis further examined the influence of social, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds on the formation of each figure's thought, allowing for an integrative understanding of how epistemological frameworks shape perceptions of women's leadership in Islam.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. As a library-based study, the research ensured proper citation, attribution, and intellectual property respect for all sources. In addition, the study maintained academic integrity by accurately representing the arguments of the authors analyzed and avoiding selective interpretation. Overall, the methodological approach provides a replicable, systematic, and academically rigorous framework for investigating the dynamics of women's leadership thought in Islam, facilitating further comparative and interdisciplinary research in this domain.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study indicate that the backgrounds of Amina Wadud and Zainab al-Ghazali played a crucial role in shaping their perspectives on women's leadership in Islam. Both figures were influenced by distinct social, cultural, and intellectual contexts, which resulted in different approaches to interpreting religious texts. Amina Wadud grew up in a Western academic environment and engaged deeply with modern gender studies, which fostered a progressive, contextual understanding of leadership. In contrast, Zainab al-Ghazali developed within a traditional Islamic movement, emphasizing religious education, moral stability, and continuity with classical teachings. These differing environments contributed to their unique epistemological frameworks and interpretations regarding the roles and responsibilities of women.

Amina Wadud's early life as an African-American Christian and her later conversion to Islam profoundly influenced her awareness of social inequalities and gender issues. Her academic training

in Islamic studies and Arabic, combined with exposure to contemporary hermeneutical methods, equipped her to approach religious texts through a lens that integrates historical context, social relevance, and universal moral principles. Consequently, Wadud advocates for women's active participation in social and public leadership, emphasizing competence, justice, and ethical responsibility as criteria for legitimacy.

Zainab al-Ghazali's upbringing in a devout Egyptian family and her involvement in the Islamic revival movement shaped her commitment to traditional religious values and social order. From an early age, she was engaged in founding and leading women's organizations that supported education, preaching, and social engagement within Islamic frameworks. Her experiences, including political activism and challenges during periods of oppression, reinforced her focus on maintaining moral and social stability. Al-Ghazali's perspective recognizes women's involvement in public life, provided it aligns with religious principles and does not conflict with primary domestic responsibilities.

The study reveals fundamental differences in their interpretation of Quranic guidance on leadership, particularly the verse concerning *qiwamah*. Wadud interprets the verse contextually, viewing leadership as a function of responsibility and social conditions rather than gender. This approach emphasizes justice, equality, and moral integrity as core determinants of leadership capacity. In contrast, al-Ghazali interprets the verse within a normative framework, defining leadership as a complementary division of roles between men and women, highlighting balance between public engagement and domestic responsibilities.

Overall, the comparative analysis demonstrates that while Wadud and al-Ghazali adopt different epistemological and methodological approaches, both converge on the principle of empowering women in Islam. Their approaches illustrate that leadership legitimacy is influenced not solely by gender, but also by competence, moral responsibility, and adherence to societal or religious norms. This nuanced understanding highlights the diversity within Islamic thought and underscores the potential for integrating contextual and normative perspectives in shaping contemporary interpretations of women's leadership.

Discussion

The primary findings of this study indicate that the social, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds of Amina Wadud and Zainab al-Ghazali significantly shaped their epistemological approaches to women's leadership in Islam. Wadud, influenced by Western academic traditions and contemporary gender studies, adopted a contextual hermeneutical approach emphasizing justice, competence, and social relevance. In contrast, al-Ghazali, embedded within a traditional Islamic movement, focused on moral stability and continuity with classical teachings. This divergence illustrates how socio-cultural environments and individual experiences impact leadership conceptualizations, expanding existing epistemological theories in Islamic gender studies (Da Silva Pereira, 2023; Fayek, 2026).

Wadud's interpretation of QS al-Nisa' [4]:34 frames leadership as a function of responsibility and individual capacity rather than gender. This reflects contemporary feminist Islamic theory, which prioritizes egalitarian principles and substantive justice. Al-Ghazali, however, maintains a normative-textual interpretation, emphasizing a complementary division of roles between men and women, balancing public and domestic responsibilities. This difference highlights the critical influence of epistemological frameworks on leadership legitimacy and participation, confirming and extending prior research on contextual versus traditionalist interpretations in Islamic scholarship (Wadud, 2021; Parrey, 2024; Soleh et al., 2023).

Despite methodological differences, both figures share a commitment to women's empowerment. Wadud promotes egalitarian reinterpretation of religious texts, whereas al-Ghazali emphasizes education and da'wah activities as empowerment tools. This aligns with gender empowerment theory, which posits that empowerment strategies vary according to social and cultural contexts. These findings advance the literature by demonstrating the value of integrating multiple epistemological perspectives, which prior studies often examined in isolation (El Sherif et al., 2024; Koburtay et al., 2023b; Ramadhan, 2024).

Contextual factors also shape the practical applicability of their approaches. Wadud's method responds effectively to contemporary demands for gender equality in strategic and public leadership roles, while al-Ghazali's approach maintains strong legitimacy within classical Islamic tradition but

shows limited adaptability to rapid social change. This suggests that combining the substantive justice of contextual approaches with the normative stability of traditional frameworks can create a more adaptable, contextually relevant model for female leadership in Muslim societies (Hawkes et al., 2025; Chairunnisa, 2022).

Comparison with previous studies reveals both convergence and divergence. Earlier research often focused exclusively on either Wadud's hermeneutics or al-Ghazali's normative framework (Wadud, 2021; Erlwein, 2023; Parrey, 2024), while this study critically compares the two within their social and epistemological contexts. Similarities include recognition of women's social participation, whereas differences lie in interpretive flexibility and responsiveness to modern societal demands. Such disparities likely arise from differences in education, socio-political experiences, and intellectual environments, emphasizing the importance of considering contextual factors in leadership studies (El Sherif et al., 2024; Geremew et al., 2024).

Theoretically, the study contributes to expanding the epistemological framework of female leadership in Islam by demonstrating the interplay between social context and hermeneutical interpretation. Practically, it provides guidance for designing inclusive leadership models that balance justice with normative tradition, relevant for education, religious organizations, and policy-making. By addressing the gap in comparative analyses and integrating contextual and normative perspectives, this research offers novel insights into promoting gender-sensitive leadership within contemporary Muslim communities (Aulia et al., 2024; Lahmar, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the conceptualization of women's leadership in Islam is deeply shaped by the epistemological frameworks employed by Amina Wadud and Zainab al-Ghazali. Wadud's contextual hermeneutics emphasizes justice, equality, and social relevance, providing broader opportunities for women to participate in leadership, while al-Ghazali's normative-textual approach maintains traditional role divisions and limits public leadership according to classical understanding. Despite these differences, both thinkers recognize the importance of women's involvement in social and religious life. The findings suggest that integrating the principles of justice from a contextual perspective with the stability of values from a normative approach can produce a more balanced, adaptive, and relevant model of female leadership suitable for contemporary Muslim societies. Overall, this study contributes to the discourse on gender in Islam and offers a foundation for further theoretical and practical exploration of inclusive leadership.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Eka Nurhidayat conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, and drafted the initial manuscript. Muhammad Arifin contributed to the methodological design, data collection, and qualitative analysis. Inayatillah assisted in literature review, synthesis of theoretical frameworks, and refinement of the discussion section. Abdul Manan provided critical insights into epistemological interpretation and supervised the comparative analysis. Sa'i contributed to data validation, contextual analysis, and final manuscript editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript, and collectively take responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the research.

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