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Leader Women:

Portrait, Opportunities, and Challenges in
Contemporary Islamic Perspective

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I. Introduction

Nowadays, the discussion dealing with women's leadership is important and relevant issues by looking at their resurgence in the various sectors of lives. It is particularly interesting to observe the women leaders phenomenon in various countries around the world relating to their successful roles and activities in leadership as what can be done by the men. In this case, certain jobs and tasks that were previously regarded only done by men can also be done by the women.

Indonesia, for example, has the history and experience dealing with the women issues stated previously. Indonesian women have even been further stepped up with the appearance of women in various sectors of lives and activities. It includes their achievement in politics such as being a president, ministers, parliament member, governors, regents, and mayors. In addition, they also work in the field of education (teachers or lecturers), industry (secretary or directors), health (doctors or nurse), law (lawyers), and other professions. Nowadays, it has become quite common although it is still being a controversial point of view.

Other women issues that can also be observed is women's development. In Saudi Arabia, women recently are also able to break the thick walls of the culture that curbs them. They began to occupy important positions in several sectors of lives including business and politics (Rahman, 2017). Their success careers seem to rule out the polemic dealing with the women issues in the country that are still forbidden to drive a car. Then, their emergence in various top positions in the economic sector is a part of social and economic reformation movements that are underway nowadays. One of those reported by national media in Indonesia, *Kompas*, is Lubna S. Olayan. She is viewed as a woman who is able to penetrate the confines of Saudi Arabia culture against women. It was reported that she led more than 40 family of companies including as CEO of Olayan family company engaged in financial and capital markets. Nowadays, Olayan Company on the two areas is one of the largest companies in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East (Rahman, 2017).

The phenomenon of leaderwomen seems to challenge the existing understanding over the years, both by culture and religion, which is related to the understanding of the women's duties and roles regarding their ability to have work and activities outside the home. In this case, there is a view that does not allow women to work outside home, and there is also a view that thinks women should not work outside the home. The reason is that the women's or wives' task is only in the household and the men's or husbands' duty is outside the home to earn money. For those who disagree, the women who do the men's work are considered to transcend her nature as a woman.

The views and understanding found based on the cultures and religions show their polemics or controversial views about the women existence associated with the tasks and roles belonging to the women. The restrictions on women can be found in the community that embraces the patriarchy pattern. Meanwhile, dealing with Islam, the verses in Al-Quran understood by some adherents also teach the same thing. Therefore, there are some problems related to relationships between men and women including sexual and gender relations.

This requires prudence to understand sexual and gender relations in order to avoid bias. Both of these should be differentiated so that there is no misunderstanding dealing with the position and responsibilities between men and women. Hidayat cited in Umar (1999) explains that the sexual relation is the relationship between men and women based on the demands and biological category. While gender relation is a concept and a social reality that is different where the division of sex between men and women is not based on a normative understanding as well as a biological category but on the quality, skills, and roles based on the social conventions (Hidayat cited in Umar (1999)). Both of these relationships need to be well understood in order to obtain proportional equality arguments between men and women, particularly those related to the role of women as leaders.

In fact, where the women get more opportunities to have education, it will provide them access to participate in and contribute to the various opportunities and jobs- certainly, it still needs ideas of the possibilities. In addition, the identification of supporting factors and correspondence with the understanding in the Islamic teachings is another inseparable thing.

II. Women Leadership: Between Sexual Relation and Gender Relation

This world is not just men's world as stated by Martin (2014: 1). This statement implies that women also have the same rights in this life. Women should gain recognition and equality with the men. In this case, the view of women including the rights and leadership is an actual thing that remains an important theme. Unfortunately, there are cultural and religious views that have not always been in line with the spirit of gender equality.

In the pre-history, women are often used as a scapegoat, offerings to the God when the nature does not provide beneficial anymore or when nature brings danger to their survival. Then, in the modern era, women have also not fully got the proper position. It is supported by the persistence of the men who do not put women at actual value and dignity. Some cases such as abuse, violence, and castration political rights, social, and cultural rights of women are the indication of the need to still struggle for the women's rights (Samad, 2017).

Externally, women's issues are affected by the socio-political reality as well as the global economy that still rests on the preservation of the patriarchy culture. Then, internally most Muslims are still not in spite of the views of gender bias in understanding the doctrines and Islamic teachings dealing with the feminist issues. In fact, religion is often used as a tool by those in power to subdue the people under their control (Harun, 2015:18). Therefore, they view women as the second human.

Sexual relations are often confused with gender relations implications, and then lead to the division of roles, functions, and responsibilities of men and women in social contexts both in the domestic and the public area. Gender differences that implicate to the functions and roles of men and women are basically not problems if it is based on a conscious choice and not a compulsion or discrimination. However, when we examine more deeply, sexual difference can be a cause for gender discrimination (Harun, 2015: 18). In this case, if it is analyzed further, it would seem the restrictions and the discrimination experienced by women due to no clear agreement on the are natural and non-natural aspects.

The history of human being shows how the various civilizations and religions put the women's position and status. Greek societies that are famous for their thought philosophy, do not talk a lot about the women's rights and obligations.

Then, in Roman civilization, the woman is fully under the authority of her father, even after getting married the power moves into her husband's hands. Hindu and Chinese civilization are not better than the Greek and Roman civilization, a married woman's right to live shall end upon the death of her husband. It ended in the 17th century AD (Shihab, 1996: 296-297). However, based on existing records women had experienced dismal and gender injustice.

The arrival of Islam preaches equality among human beings, including between men and women. In the Quran, Allah swt will never allow to be lost the work of workers among us, whether male or female (QS. Ali Imran [3]: 195). This verse shows the eagerness of the Quran to scrape out any view that distinguishes between male and female, especially in the humanitarian field. Essentially, the teachings of the Quran put women in reasonable positions and straighten all the wrong views including those relating to the origin of the women incidence.

One of the factors of the success of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings is the teachings that contain exemptions from various oppressions. Prophet Muhammad was present in the Arab community who embraced patriarchal system which gave a greater role to the men, whether in the household or in the public affairs. In this tradition, the roles division had been set a pattern clearly. The men have roles for a living and protect their family; whereas, the women have roles in matters of reproduction, such as caring for children and preparing food for the whole family (Umar, 1999: 128). This condition is more or less the same as the Indonesian culture.

There is a fundamental difference among the society introduced by the Prophet Muhammad in the form of tribe society that he visited. In tribe society, a woman has never appeared as a community leader. However, in a *ummah* society, the women have equal opportunities with men. In the history of the Islamic world, women are not getting the chance to become the leader affected by the cultural tradition factors (Umar (1999; 130). It also causes little or a lot of understanding of Islamic texts that come from the culture and the view.

The spirit of Islam derived from the Quran which preaches the equality between men and women suggests things that need to be distinguished clearly from the positions and roles of the women. In this case of the manifestation of sexual relation category, it needs to be distinguished from the category of gender relations

(Hidayat cited in Umar (1999). The interpretation of religious teachings often confounds two distinctly different categories and even likely to identify with the one with the other. In fact, gender issues are the area that is open to be interpreted by considering the social context.

Various interpretations are somewhat different from one another about women emerge due to the differences in social conditions and customs as well as the tendency of each that affects their perspectives and conclusions on the verses of the Quran and the hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad. If all experts were alive now, in the twenty-first century, and experienced the development of modern science, they will understand the verses of the Quran as understood by the young generation nowadays and vice versa (Shihab, 1996: 317-318). The understanding of Islamic teachings regards to the context in understanding the relevant views to the real conditions faced by the community.

The involvement of women in the area of Prophet Muhammad in various fields of business and employment included in the war is viewed by some scholars that Islam justifies the active women in various activities or work in various fields within and outside the home independently, together with another person or with government and private institutions, as long as the job is done in an atmosphere of respectable, polite, and can also prevent the negative impacts of such work towards themselves and their surroundings. Shihab (1996: 306) concluded that the women have the right to work as long as she needs it, or the work needs her and as long as religious norms and moral are maintained well.

There are undeniably sides that distinguish between the women and men. In addition to their similarities, sexual relationship category clearly shows the natural differences because men and women as individuals and sexes have their own nature. The Quran suggests the existence of such a distinction, at least in terms of biological, and each has a distinctive (QS. Al-Nisa [4]: 32). On the other hand, it can also be ascertained that there is no difference in the level of intelligence and thinking ability between the men and the women (Shihab, 1999). The argument is the praise of Allah against "Ulul al-Bab" that is not confined to the men alone (QS. Ali Imran [3]: 190).

Biological reality that distinguishes the male and the female has spawned two major theories: *nature* and *nurture theory*. The nature theory assumes that

the different roles between men and women are natural (nature). Anatomy of male biology that is different from female becomes a major factor in determining the social roles of the sexes. The men play a major role in society because they are more potent, powerful, and productive. Meanwhile, the women with their reproductive organs are deemed to limit their movement such as pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. These differences cause the separation of functions and responsibilities between men and women. The men take on the role of the public sector and the women take on the role in the domestic sector.

In other sides, nurture theory views gender differences in the relationship of men and women that is not determined by biological factors but public construction. The social role that is considered as standard and understood as religious doctrine by nurture followers is not the will of God and not also as a product of biological determination but as a product of social construction. So, there are gender bias values that occur in society caused by biological factors, but in fact they are affected by the cultural construction (Hidayat cited in Umar (1999)).

In the gender relation category, there is an opportunity and a chance for women to fulfill their rights and obligations as a whole, as it is for men. Biological attributes as sometimes understood in sexual relations actually have an implementation within the socio-cultural lives. However, biologic attributes should not necessarily determine the identity and gender burden. Therefore, the women's roles and positions in society, for example, can extend beyond their domestic duties. So, the women can also have a career in the public domain.

Career opportunities in the public domain affect the conversation dealing with the female leadership issues. Generally, Syafiq Hasyim stated that there are three opinions evolving with regard to women's political rights. First, the conservative views states that Islam, especially fiqh sector since its appearance in Mecca and Medina, never allows the women plunged into the political sectors. Second, the progressive liberal views stated that Islam from the beginning has allowed the women in politics. Third, the apologetic views state that there are parts of specific politics areas that can be taken a part by the women and there is also totally not allowed. According to this group, the political realm for the women is to be a mother (2001: 190).

Islamic thinkers and scholars have different views dealing with the women's position in politics. Ibn Taymiyyah, a medieval thinker, allows the women in authority positions gained through politics, but it is only as *amir* (minister). In this case, it is difficult for the women given responsibility as a major, immediate policy maker for emotional reasons. Meanwhile, Yusuf Qaradawi, a contemporary Muslim thinker, states that women can occupy the top position (king or president). The reason is no texts that prohibit the women serve any position in the public domain (Samad, 2013).

Growing feminist commentary on the contemporary era has different assumptions of the typical interpretation previously in the patriarchy system. Feminist's interpretation paradigm tends to be in conflict with the old paradigm in the classical interpretation that had been regarded the verses relating to gender relations as *qat'i al dalalah* verses. Classical interpretation paradigm views the verses of gender relations as a normative statement that seems to be a general proposition where it applies textually in any condition (Andri, 2014: 766). So the majority of classical scholars argue that the post of presidents, ministers, and judges must be held by the men (Abdillah, 2014).

Different opinions about women and their leadership roles are the reality that cannot be denied. However, it is while giving the option to develop a deeper understanding that is more appropriate with the substance of the Islamic teachings without being in conflict with contemporary phenomena. In Islamic view, the women occupy a respectable position because Islam views the women from all aspects. Ismail Yusanto argues the aspects in forms of; 1) as a human being with their nature; 2) as women with their feminine nature; 3) with her husband and his parents as part of the family; 4) along with men and women as part of the community (Hulwati, 67).

Differences in the sexual relation category that create the socio-cultural view dealing with the women's roles and positions do not necessarily have to be accepted as an absolute. In this case, the real socio-cultural construction which refers to the gender relation category is more appropriate and ensures the equality and justice for the women. Connecting to the fair Islamic social system, then the women's leadership should be seen as something dynamic and culturally. So, it

makes possible for women to develop their leadership based on their own willing and certainly without violating the Islamic teachings.

III. The Images of Leader Women: Islam Accommodation and its Relevance to the Contemporary Developments

The emergence of leader women is a phenomenon which could directly take the public's attention. In this case, it differs from the common belief that has been dominating the assumption that the men are more superior socially and biologically than the women (Ritonga, 2016: 541). The bad stereotypes and marginalization of women in a world dominated by men, according to Ritonga, manifest through the assumption that women are weak, irrational, emotional, teasers, and prosecution. This assumption is getting worse with the backing of misunderstanding toward religious teachings.

Imaging against the women should seek to fulfill the true essence of Islamic teachings and be in line with the current development that more demands the equality and gender justice. Globalization due to the development and advancement of information and communication technology puts this issue became urgent because it inevitably becomes a universal human concern. Bad stereotypes that already exist need to be scrutinized so it does not damage the women. Moreover, the women today hold a greater percentage of leadership roles in political life and the workforce than ever before both in the United States and around the world (Hoyt&Murphy, 2016: 388).

Seeing the current phenomenon, the women can make a significant contribution when they have the opportunities and strengthen the belief that women can participate more at various levels up to the top position (Alisjahbana, 2017: 11). Among women begin to believe that between family and career do not have to choose one of them. Career and family can walk together. In fact, they can be added to the roles and contributions to society (Alisjahbana, 2017: 11). It also means that the involvement of women in the work and activities in the public domain and even being a leader does not mean reducing femininity.

At Prophet Muhammad's period, the women are also involved in many types and kinds of work (Shihab, 1996: 306). The names such as *Umm Salama* (the Prophet's wife), *Shafiyah*, and *Umm Sinam al-Aslamiyah* are recorded as figures

involved in the war. Imam Bukhari booked the chapters in his Saheeh book about the women's activities such as *The Chapter of Women Involvement in Jihad*, *The Chapter of Women Warfare in the Sea*, and *The Chapter of Women Involvement in Caring for the Victims*. There are also women who are active in various fields of work. Some of them work as bridal makeup, nurses, and midwives. In the field of trade, the first wife of the Prophet, *Khadija bint Khuwailid*, is noted as a very successful woman.

In addition to working in a variety of jobs as mentioned previously, the women also have the right to learn and take a part in politics. None found any religious requirements which can be understood as a ban on women's involvement in politics, or religious requirements that restrict the field only for the men. On the other hand, Shihab (1996: 314-315) points out that a lot of verses and traditions that can be the foundation of understanding to establish the existence of such rights.

One of the verses often cited by Islamic thinkers relating to the political rights of women is QS. al-Tawbah [9]: 71. Generally, this verse is understood as a picture of the obligation to make cooperation between men and women for various areas of lives indicated by the phrase "*telling what is right and forbidding what is wrong*". Telling what is right includes the understanding of all aspects of goodness and the life improvement including giving advice or criticism against the authorities. Therefore, every male and female Muslim should follow the society development so that they are able to see and gave suggestions for various lives (Shihab, 1996: 315).

Another verse used as the basis for proving the existence of political rights for all men and women by the Islamic scholars is the Qur'an Surah al-Shura [42]: 38 that invites His people (male and female) in order deliberation, through "praise the Lord to those who have always done". *Shura* according to the Koran is one of the management principles of the common lives areas, including political life. In short, Shihab (1996: 316-317) explains that the history of Islam shows women without exception involved in various areas of society and even practical politics. *Umm Hani*, for example, was justified his attitude by the Prophet Muhammad when he provided security to the most of polytheists. Even the Prophet's wife, *A'ishah*, led a war against

Ali ibn Abi Talib who was occupying the post as the head of state. The war named *Camel Battle*(656 AD).

The women are male siblings (*Syaqaiq al-Rijal*), so that the position and rights can hardly be said as the same. Even if there is a difference, Shihab (1996: 317) states just the result of functions and the main task assigned by God to each gender. So that the differences do not involve that one feels has advantages than others (QS. Al-Nisa ' [4]: 32). Therefore, the women have the right to work and have activities in various fields. It also includes when they have the knowledge and skills to work and occupy the highest positions or to gain confidence as a leader.

Leadership in Islam can be done by anyone whether men or women who have the capacity and capability to lead. Only this time, it appears that the social and cultural reality shows the relationships of men and women that are still lame. The women are still positioned as a part of the male (subordinated), marginalized, and even discriminated against. It should be recognized the prohibition for women to become leaders. Some scholars view Surah al-Nisa '[4]: 34, "The man is a leader for women" that is understood as the only men who should be the leader. Interpretation of this verse is sometimes used as an argument to strengthen the rule of men over the women. The men have more power and a higher status than women, so that a pattern of power and status are universally influential in determining the policies and rules applied in the social lives.

The word of Allah in Surah al-Nisa '[4]: 34 is not appropriate as a reason to deny women become leaders in society (Umar, 1999: 150). The man who becomes "*qawwamun*" which means "leader" or "protector" is a man who has virtues. In accordance with *sabab nuzul* of this verse, the men's primacy associated with their responsibilities as head of household. Harun (2015: 7) states that "*qawwamun*" should not be understood apart from the social context at the time this verse was revealed. The verse revealing the superiority of the male does not mean the gender superiority but it deals with the functional superiority because the men earn money and spend it for the women. The social function performed by men is balanced with social tasks carried by the women in carrying out domestic tasks in the home. The assertion was given by Muhammad Abduh, as cited in Umar (1999: 150) that the verse does not absolutize the men leadership towards the women.

The various views that provide opportunities for women's leadership can be reinforcement arguments to support women's leadership. The efforts for the acceptance of women's leadership can be started from a positive image to the women's dignity. In this case, Al-Quran portrays an ideal woman is not the same as the woman's image that developed in the history of Islamic world. Even, it can be clearly read in the Quran that discusses the women. One of them is "al-Nisa" which means "women".

Hidayat cited in Umar (1999) states that the women's image idealized in the Quran is the women who; 1) have political independence (*al-liberty al-Siyasiyah / QS. Al-Mumtahanah [60]: 12*) - for example the Queen Balqis, a women leader who had a super power kingdom (*laha 'arsyun' adzim/QS. al-Naml [27]: 23*); 2) have a good economic independence (*al-liberty al-iqtishadi / QS. al-Nahl [16]: 97*) such as a woman who was a farm manager seen by Moses (QS. al-Qasas [28]: 23); 3) have independence in determining the personal choices (*al-liberty al-syakhshiy*) that were believed the truth - though they had to face their husband for those who have family (QS. *al-Tahrim [66]: 11*); or 4) defy public opinion for the women who have not married (QS. *al-Tahrim [66]: 12*). Further, Komaruddin Hidayat states that the women are justified to speak the truth and to conduct the opposition to various wrack (QS. *Al-Tawbah [9]: 71*). Even the Quran calls for war against the country that oppresses the women (Qur'an, al-Nisa [4]: 5) because the men and the women are equally potential as *khalifah* of the earth and as a servant.

Ideal imaging women as stated previously shows the Islamic accommodation to the roles, functions, and positions of women in various aspects of lives. It is also being an argument that rejects the view that weakens and discriminates against the women in the public area. Therefore, Alisjahbana (2017: 7) quotes Eleanor Roosevelt "A woman is like a tea bag, you can tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water". This expression means that woman can be very potential.

The women involvement in the public areas supported by several studies. For example, it concludes that the women's roles have contributed positively to the increase in corporate profits. Citing a report written entitled "Is Gender Diversity Profitable? Evidence from a Global Study" revealed that the company or

organization with 30% of women leaders was going to increase the percentage of profit to 6%. At least a contemporary phenomenon shows that women leadership can inspire the advancement in society. In addition, the simple reason may also be made here, for example, regarding to the interests of women themselves in terms of health. Handling their health will be maximized and better guarantee of satisfaction when handled by the women.

Helen Fisher as cited in Alisjahbana(2017: 79) in the book entitled "The First Sex: The Natural Talents of Women and How They are Changing the World"explains that the women have the ability to change the world. Fisher states that the women have an innate character as good at communicating and being able to read nonverbal language. As usual, the women also have high emotional sensitivity and empathy. So they can feel what their subordinates feel. Other female trait is multitasking capabilities. Also they have tendency to make long-term planning, and well-skilled in networking and negotiating. In addition, the women also have a tendency to work together and find win-win solutions, and lead in egalitarian.

The world is currently in a competitive era and change is moving very fast. So, the ability is needed to adapt towards change and lead the change to be a requirement for success. Now, it is no longer the big swallow the small, but the nimble undermines the slow. The emphasis shifts from industrial economy to a knowledge-based entrepreneurial economy driven by technological innovation. This world character has created leadership style of *Command and Control* being obsolete. Alisjahbana (2017: 80-82) argues that egalitarian leadership style will replace bureaucratic management. Flexible leadership replaces the rigid things. The women's natural properties that tend to be egalitarian build collaboration, flexibility, nurturing, and building the human resource capacity in accordance with the leadership profile needed today. Therefore, according to Alisjahbana, it is time for the women to participate significantly in the leadership.

At least the women involvement in various fields of work and social society will contribute positively. The women and men have their own strengths that can be complementary. Today, gender diversity is considered as one of the keys to success in business. Thus, the women are no longer seen as a constraint, whereas they are positioned as a potential factor to bring success for the company.

The phenomenon of leaderwomen is not without challenges or constraints. The obstacles still remain regarding to the religion and culture understanding that does not support. Other obstacle is the factor of individual women themselves and the organization culture. However, the idea and the feminist movement that emerges and develops today supported by the emergence of leader women in various sectors can find solutions dealing with these problems. The next factors that could be an opportunity are educational access for the women increasingly opened and the struggle for gender equality and justice as well as the sophistication of the advancement of science and technology. The use of science and technology, for example, further reduces the need to use physical power and abilities that are often used as an obstacle for women.

IV. Conclusions

The phenomenon of the leader women's emergence in the contemporary era is being attractive and inviting serious concern considering that the position and role of women are still contradictive in a patriarchal culture. Cultural and religious understanding as the gender bias can add to the complexity against leader women reception. It is as a consequence of cultural and religious views which have put women in a subordinate position than the men. However, the contemporary developments in the understanding of Islamic teachings about women show their chances of acceptance of the leader women's role in the community. At least there is a theological argument against women to take a part in the world that has long been regarded as a man's world, to work in the public sector and even to be a leader woman.

Women's leadership has dimensions of excellence that can be optimized for the benefit of society as a whole. In this case, it is found several positive sides of leadership played by the women. Meanwhile, the experts state that the women have the ability to change the world. This is possible because women have an innate character as good at communicating and being able to read nonverbal language. Then, the women also usually have high emotional sensitivity and empathy as well as being able to do several things simultaneously. They are also multitasking as well

as being able to lead in egalitarian. Therefore, the leadership qualities of women are considered to be in accordance with the required leadership profile today.

The opportunity to be a leader woman is not supposed to violate their nature as women. In other words, to be a leader, a woman can maintain her femininity. Also, they should maintain the values of Islamic laws. The main issue related to women leadership is related to whether or not leader women perform their roles in maintaining the Islamic laws and in harmony with their nature as women. Similarly, if they have already got married, they can still carry out their duties as wives and mothers

Rereading the various interpretations and explanations of the existence of religion and the role of women is necessary, especially by looking carefully at the understanding that refers to the local culture and the environment as well as the circumstances where the understanding comes. At the same time, it should also be seen the changes that occur at this time which may give a new perspective to the existence and role of women without violating the Islamic teachings.

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