

Women as Heads of Families: An Analysis of Musdah Mulia's Thoughts and Interpretation Methods on Women's Leadership

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Abstract

The discourse on women's leadership in the family has gained increasing scholarly attention, particularly in the context of gender equality and social transformation. In patriarchal societies, the role of family head has traditionally been ascribed to men, often marginalizing women's contributions. However, as Musdah Mulia exemplifies, modern Islamic thought challenges these conventional gender roles. This study analyzes Musdah Mulia's thoughts and interpretative methods regarding women as heads of families. Through a hermeneutic-contextual approach and thematic interpretation (*tafsir maudhu'i*), Musdah Mulia argues that the concept of *qiwamah* in QS. Al-Nisa: 34 should be understood as a flexible, context-dependent construct rather than an absolute principle of male superiority. Her reinterpretation highlights the necessity of education, economic access, and shared responsibility within family leadership. The findings suggest that Musdah Mulia's reinterpretation of women's leadership as heads of families contributes to a more egalitarian understanding of gender roles, challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for policy changes supporting women's empowerment. However, resistance from traditionalist perspectives and cultural biases remains a significant obstacle. This study recommends further research on the practical implications of Musdah Mulia's reinterpretation, particularly in legal and policy frameworks related to Islamic family law.

Keywords: Women's leadership, family headship, gender equality, islamic interpretation, *qiwamah*.



INTRODUCTION

Women's leadership in modern Islamic thought is receiving growing attention (Munir et al., 2024), alongside the historical transformation of women's roles within the family (Ashari, 2024). In the context of patriarchal cultures, women have often been placed in subordinate positions to men (Liu, 2024; Mardiana & Andayani, 2023; Modiano, 2021), particularly in the role of head of the family. However, in modern contexts, with increasing awareness of gender equality, new interpretations of women's roles in the family have emerged, particularly regarding women as heads of families. One of the most vocal figures advocating for the reinterpretation of women's roles is Musdah Mulia (Kamalia & Mukhsin Achmad, 2025), a feminist Islamic scholar who holds progressive views on the role of women in both family and society (Fajrussalam et al., 2023; Jannah & Hermawan, 2022).

Through her critical and humanistic thoughts, Musdah Mulia promotes an egalitarian and inclusive interpretation of the Qur'an, emphasizing the fulfillment of women's rights and justice. She views the role of women as heads of families not merely as a responsibility but also as an opportunity for empowerment and contribution to family welfare. In this context, Musdah Mulia highlights the importance of education and economic access for women to effectively fulfill their roles as heads of families. She also advocates for the application of justice and equality principles in family decision-making and underscores the role of men in supporting and assisting women in carrying out their responsibilities as heads of families.

The reinterpretation of women's roles as heads of families from Musdah Mulia's perspective has significant implications for the understanding of family and gender in society. It creates space to challenge social norms that place women in inferior positions and encourages the establishment of more egalitarian and democratic family structures. This necessitates a restructuring of family systems that recognize the crucial role of women in both family and societal contexts. However, the reinterpretation of women as heads of families still faces challenges. In societies that strongly adhere to patriarchal traditions, resistance to changing women's roles within the family remains prevalent. Tlaiss & Kauser (2019) highlight that women often experience rigid gender roles and patriarchal cultures as obstacles. These challenges are further reinforced by gender biases that assume the head of the family must always be an adult male, even when women make significant socio-economic contributions to household maintenance (Yoganandham G et al., 2023).

The research gap and novelty of this study lie in its focus on Musdah Mulia's interpretation of women as heads of families. Existing studies have primarily discussed Mulia's thoughts on gender bias (Nuraidah et al., 2023), views in the political domain (Kamalia & Mukhsin Achmad, 2025), or leadership in a general sense (Mumayyizah & Redjosari, 2023). This study will delve deeper into Musdah Mulia's thoughts and interpretative methods regarding the role of women as heads of families and its implications for gender role changes within the family and society. It will contribute to a deeper understanding of women's roles in the family while offering relevant solutions to address the challenges faced by women in fulfilling the role of head of the family in the context of modern life.

Thus, the aim of this study is to analyze Musdah Mulia's thoughts and interpretative methods regarding the discourse on women as heads of families. With this objective, the study is expected to contribute to a more profound understanding of Musdah Mulia's thoughts and interpretative methods concerning the discourse on women as heads of families, as well as the role of women in families. Additionally, it aims to offer relevant solutions to overcome the challenges women encounter in assuming the role of head of the family in modern life. Furthermore, this research is expected to enhance knowledge about Musdah Mulia's perspectives on women's roles in the family and provide deeper insights into the position of women within both familial and societal structures. Lastly, this study aspires to present practical solutions to address the challenges faced by women in household leadership.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with a library research approach to analyze the reinterpretation of women's roles as heads of households based on Musdah Mulia's interpretation of female leadership. This approach is chosen because the research focuses on theoretical and conceptual studies derived from academic literature, primarily scholarly journals as the primary sources. Data collection techniques are carried out through literature reviews, including previous studies, scientific articles, and relevant literature discussing the concept of female leadership and Musdah Mulia's approach to interpreting women's roles in the family.

The data analysis in this study is conducted using content analysis techniques, where the collected data is categorized, examined, and interpreted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the concept of female leadership in the household context. The main focus of the analysis is to explore Musdah Mulia's arguments regarding women's roles as heads of households and how her thoughts contribute to the discourse on female leadership in Islamic and gender studies. The research findings are expected to provide new insights into the dynamics of female leadership in the family and enrich academic discussions related to the interpretation of women's roles in Islam.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Musdah Mulia's Thoughts and Interpretative Methods on Women's Leadership

Musdah Mulia applies a methodological approach that can be categorized as *tafsir maudhu'i* (thematic interpretation) (Adryanto, 2022), in which the interpretation of Qur'anic verses is conducted based on specific themes (Rofiah et al., 2019), particularly those that are controversial and relevant to women's issues, such as women's leadership within the household. Additionally, she adopts a *hermeneutic-contextual* method and a *fiqh-based* approach in analyzing religious texts. This is evident when she examines women's leadership in the political sphere, where she not only elaborates on the arguments of scholars who oppose it but also analyzes the socio-cultural context in which these verses were revealed.

According to Musdah, the subordination of women within social structures, both in the public and domestic spheres, is influenced by deeply rooted patriarchal biases in scriptural interpretations (Solikha, 2022). Mulia argues that historical facts indicate that the interpretation of Islamic sacred texts, since the classical Islamic period, has been predominantly male-dominated. As a result, women's experiences have been largely ignored in theological reflections

and religious exegesis (Hakim, 2017). It is acknowledged that the awareness of patriarchal biases in scriptural interpretation was first recognized by women from Christian and Jewish backgrounds (Hakim, 2017; Mulia, 2011). This gender disparity is further reinforced by the literal interpretation of QS. Al-Nisa: 34, which asserts male superiority over women. Classical commentators, such as Ibn 'Abbas and Rashid Rida, understood the phrase *al-rijāl qawwāmūn 'alā al-nisā'* as legitimizing absolute male authority, citing men's intellectual and physical superiority as justification (Masruroh et al., 2021).

However, Musdah considers such interpretations to be products of patriarchal historical contexts. Al-Razi, for example, argued that male superiority lies in intellectual capacity (*al-'ilm*) and physical ability (*al-qudrah*), which were then used as a basis for justifying gender dominance (Khalilullah & Rahmah, 2021). Musdah rejects this view by asserting that spiritual, intellectual, and moral potential are not confined to a specific gender. Modern women have demonstrated their capabilities in various fields that were previously considered exclusive to men (Mulia, 2011). Contemporary social changes indicate that the argument for male superiority is no longer relevant. Many women have successfully led both in domestic and public spheres, suggesting that claims of male superiority should be understood as cultural constructs rather than absolute theological doctrines. Musdah emphasizes that religious texts must be interpreted contextually, considering principles of justice and social welfare (Sary, 2022).

Furthermore, Musdah explains that QS. Al-Nisa: 34 is sociological and particular rather than normative-universal (Hakim, 2017). This verse emerged in a society where women's economic dependence on men was extremely high. In today's context, where women have achieved financial and social independence, such interpretations must be adjusted accordingly. A contextual approach to religious texts is necessary to ensure that Sharia remains relevant to contemporary developments (Bakar & Sahman, 2024). Islam fundamentally recognizes the equality of men and women, as stated in QS. Al-Hujurat: 13 and QS. Al-Baqarah: 30, which affirm that all humans are created as *khalifah* (stewards) on earth. The term *khalifah* is gender-neutral, indicating that leadership is not restricted by sex (Mulia, 2011). Musdah juga menekankan bahwa hak asasi manusia dalam Islam bersifat universal, sehingga tidak ada alasan untuk mendiskriminasi perempuan berdasarkan agama, ras, atau gender (Murtaza MZ et al., 2024).

However, in reality, women continue to be victims of violence and negative stereotypes (Alhakim, 2021). Musdah points out that gender injustice manifests in various forms, including domestic violence and marginalization in public spaces. Mulia asserts that tawhid (the concept of monotheism in Islam) should eliminate all forms of discrimination, as all humans are equal before God. Musdah's thoughts are significantly influenced by Islamic reformist scholars such as Fazlur Rahman, who emphasizes contextual interpretation by considering 'illat (the underlying reason for a legal ruling). For example, in interpreting the term *qawwāmūn*, Musdah argues that its meaning is not static but rather depends on social conditions. If women's economic dependence has diminished, then the concept of male leadership must also be reassessed.

Additionally, Musdah refers to QS. Al-Taubah: 71, which emphasizes the partnership between men and women in managing societal welfare. This verse indicates that women have the same rights to participate in social and political leadership. Therefore, there is no explicit

scriptural prohibition against women assuming leadership roles, whether in domestic or public spheres. Ultimately, Musdah Mulia offers a progressive interpretation by integrating hermeneutic-contextual approaches with gender justice principles (Anggoro, 2020). Mulia rejects patriarchal biases in religious text interpretation (Muqtada et al., 2024) and asserts that women's leadership is not contrary to Islamic values, as long as it is based on justice, welfare, and equality. Her thoughts represent a significant contribution in advocating for women's rights within the framework of an inclusive Islam.

Analysis of Musdah Mulia's Thought and Interpretation Method on the Discourse of Women as Household Heads

Siti Musdah Mulia asserts that women, including wives, can serve as household heads, challenging the stigma that women are merely homemakers while men hold absolute authority as family heads. Musdah Mulia presents a progressive perspective in the discourse of Islamic gender studies by stating that a wife can assume the role of the household head (Mualim, 2020). Mulia (2014) deconstructs the conventional understanding of the term "household head," traditionally perceived as male dominance, by explaining that the concept of domestic leadership is more of a structural function rather than a gender-based determination. Musdah Mulia specifically emphasizes that the term "head" in the context of household leadership entails decision-making authority and household management responsibility, rather than gender superiority. This perspective effectively challenges deeply rooted patriarchal social constructs by demonstrating women's capacity as equal partners to men within family structures. Furthermore, it opens space for a redefinition of gender roles towards a more egalitarian framework in contemporary Muslim societies (Mualim, 2020).

Mulia (2011) deconstructs the conventional understanding of male domestic leadership through a contextual hermeneutic approach. In her analysis of QS. Al-Nisa: 34, she asserts that the concept of *qiwāmah* should be understood as a socio-historical construct tied to the patriarchal social structures of the time when the revelation was received, where women's economic dependence on men was absolute. In today's context, where women have achieved financial independence and equal decision-making capacity, a rigid textual interpretation of male leadership within the household is sociologically irrelevant and contradicts the fundamental principle of justice (*'adl*) in Islamic law (Mulia, 2005:308).

Epistemologically, Mulia (2014) differentiates between the universal norms of Islam and particular interpretations that are temporal in nature. She argues that the reading of texts concerning gender relations must consider the aspects of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (circumstances of revelation) and *maqāṣid al-syarī'ah* (objectives of Islamic law). In the context of household leadership, the provisions regarding *qiwāmah* cannot be separated from the socio-economic conditions of 7th-century Arabia, where women lacked access to economic resources. However, in modern societies where women increasingly serve as primary breadwinners, a literal interpretation of male leadership contradicts the *maqāṣid* of Islamic law, which aims to ensure the well-being (*maṣlaḥah*) of families.

Musdah's critical analysis of the concept of *qawwāmūn* (QS. Al-Nisa: 34) reveals that this term carries a functional rather than an essentialist meaning. Based on philological studies, Mulia,

like other feminist-liberal exegetes, rejects the notion that *qiwāmah* is a male prerogative by virtue of gender (Adyatama et al., 2023; Ismail, 2023). Instead, she argues that *qiwāmah* is a responsibility assigned to the individual most capable of managing household affairs. This argument is further reinforced by a semantic analysis of the term *al-rijāl* (certain men), which is particular rather than universal in meaning. Consequently, in families where women possess superior managerial and financial competencies, the transfer of domestic leadership authority to women aligns with the Islamic jurisprudential principle of *istiḥsān* (legal preference for justice) (Mulia, 2011:56).

Sociologically, Musdah Mulia's perspective reveals that resistance to women's leadership within households is more cultural than theological. Through a comparative study of matrifocal families in Indonesia, she demonstrates that female-led domestic leadership does not result in family dysfunction, provided it is supported by competence and social legitimacy. This finding strengthens her thesis that Islam does not prescribe a fixed (*qat'ī*) structure for household leadership but instead provides foundational principles such as justice, consultation (*shūrā*), and shared responsibility, which can be adapted to different contexts (Mulia, 2014:301).

The theoretical implication of Musdah Mulia's thought is the necessity of a new paradigm in Islamic family law that is more responsive to social change. The reinterpretation of *qiwāmah* as a dynamic and contextual function, rather than a fixed gendered rule, paves the way for legal recognition of women as household heads. This approach aligns with contemporary Islamic legal theories that emphasize the teleological dimension of law (*maqāṣidī approach*), wherein gender justice is one of the primary objectives of *sharī'ah*. These findings make a significant contribution to the global discourse on gender equality in Islamic family law.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that Musdah Mulia's thoughts and interpretative methods provide a critical and progressive perspective on women's leadership, particularly in the domestic sphere. Through a hermeneutic-contextual approach and thematic interpretation (*tafsir maudhu'i*), Musdah challenges the patriarchal bias in traditional scriptural interpretations, which have long positioned men as the absolute leaders in households and society. She argues that the concept of *qiwāmah* in QS. Al-Nisa: 34 should not be understood as an essentialist doctrine of male superiority but rather as a sociological construct influenced by historical context. The reinterpretation of this concept emphasizes justice, shared responsibility, and gender equality, which align with the core principles of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*). Furthermore, her analysis highlights that the role of a household head should be based on capability and not restricted by gender, reinforcing the idea that women can assume leadership roles both in the domestic and public spheres.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that further studies explore the practical implications of Musdah Mulia's reinterpretation of *qiwāmah*, particularly in legal and policy frameworks related to Islamic family law. Policymakers and religious scholars should consider integrating a gender-sensitive and contextual approach in their interpretations of religious texts to ensure that Islamic law remains responsive to contemporary social realities. Additionally, increasing public awareness of gender justice within Islamic teachings is essential to combat stereotypes and discrimination against women in leadership positions. Future research may also

focus on comparative analyses between different Islamic legal traditions to identify common patterns and variations in gender role constructions within Muslim societies.

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