

THE CONCEPT OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN ISLAMIC GENDER DISCOURSE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE THOUGHTS OF ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER AND AMINA WADUD

Cikita Andini

STAI Sadra, Jakarta, Indonesia

andinicikita@gmail.com

Abstract

The discourse on women's leadership in Islam has frequently centered on the interpretation of Q.S. An-Nisā':34, which historically has been associated with patriarchal social structures. This study aims to compare the thoughts of Asghar Ali Engineer and Amina Wadud in order to reexamine the concept of women leadership through a methodological analysis of their interpretations. The method used is qualitative with a literature study and comparative analysis approach. The focus of this research is the influence of liberation theology in the thinking of Asghar Ali Engineer and the feminist hermeneutical framework developed by Amina Wadud. The results show that although both thinkers reject the religious legitimation of women's subordination, significant differences emerge in their interpretive orientations. Asghar do not absolutely reject male leadership in the family sphere, as long as that leadership is remains functional, ethical, and non-oppressive. Whereas Wadud advances a more radical critique of gender-based leadership by emphasizing ontological equality and non-hierarchical relationships. Accordingly, this research contributes to the development of Islamic gender studies by offering a more contextual, critical, and substantively justice-oriented reading of women's leadership.

Keywords: Asghar Ali Engineer, Amina Wadud, Liberation, Feminist Hermeneutics

Abstrak

Diskursus kepemimpinan perempuan dalam Islam kerap berpusat pada penafsiran QS. An-Nisā':34 yang secara historis dilekatkan pada struktur patriarkal. Penelitian ini bertujuan menyandingkan pemikiran Asghar Ali Engineer dan Amina Wadud secara komparatif untuk meninjau ulang konsep kepemimpinan perempuan melalui analisis metodologis atas penafsiran keduanya. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi kepustakaan dan analisis komparatif. Fokus penelitian ini yaitu pengaruh teologi pembebasan dalam pemikiran Asghar Ali Engineer dan kerangka hermeneutika feminis yang dikembangkan Amina Wadud. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun kedua tokoh sama-sama menolak legitimasi subordinasi perempuan berbasis teks keagamaan, terdapat perbedaan signifikan dalam orientasi penafsiran keduanya. Engineer tidak secara mutlak menolak kepemimpinan laki-laki dalam ranah keluarga, selama kepemimpinan tersebut bersifat fungsional, etis, dan tidak menindas, sementara Wadud mengajukan kritik lebih radikal terhadap konsep kepemimpinan berbasis gender dengan menekankan kesetaraan ontologis dan relasi yang non-hierarkis. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan kajian gender Islam dengan menawarkan pembacaan kepemimpinan yang lebih kontekstual, kritis, dan berorientasi pada keadilan substantif.

Kata Kunci: Asghar Ali Engineer, Amina Wadud, Kebebasan, Hermeneutika Feminis

Introduction

The discourse on leadership in Islam has long been a subject of active debate within the intellectual tradition, especially when it intersects with gender relations. This discussion is frequently grounded in Q.S. An-Nisā': 34 — *al-rijālu qawwāmūna 'alā al-nisā' bimā faḍḍala Allāhu ba'dahum 'alā ba'din wa-bimā anfaqū min amwālihim* ("Men are the leaders of women. Allah has made some of them (men) superior to others (women), and they (men) have spent some of their wealth"). Classical scholars have often interpreted this verse in a literal manner, thus giving rise to a patriarchal social structure that positions men as absolute leaders both within the household and in the public sphere. Such interpretations are frequently legitimized at the societal level, resulting in the normalization of unequal relations, the restriction of women's agency, and at times used to justification of male dominance over women.

At the same time, hierarchical readings of the verse encounter serious challenges when confronted with modern social realities that increasingly demand equality and justice. Many contemporary Muslim thinkers argue that such practices are inconsistent with the Islamic ethical foundations of justice and equality. Consequently, Islam is sometimes accused of harboring misogynistic tendencies.¹

Given the tension between the text, classical interpretations, and social needs, there is a need to critically review and reexamine the concept of female leadership in Islam in a more critical, contextual, and equitable manner. Reopening this discourse is particularly relevant for addressing interpretive bias arising from ahistorical and androcentric readings, so that leadership is no longer understood as domination but as a relational framework grounded in reciprocity and equality between men and women.

A number of researchers have examined the issue of leadership and gender in Islam from various perspectives. One study titled "*Konsep Qiwamah dalam Yurisprudensi Islam Perspektif Keadilan Gender*" by Nur Faizah (published in Jurnal Ahwal) examines household leadership (qiwamah) through a gender-justice framework by reinterpreting Q.S. An-Nisā' 4:34. The research concludes that the concept of qiwamah in Islamic jurisprudence is open and dialogical in nature with the developments of the times; it is grounded in human values rather than biological sex. The relationship between husband and wife is understood as mutualism (mutually beneficial), not only within the family but also for society and the

¹ Ida Novianti, "Dilema Kepemimpinan dalam Islam" *Yin Yang: Jurnal Studi & Anak*, Vol. 3 No. 2, 2008, p. 255

country.²

From the perspective of scholars, an article was found entitled “*Kepemimpinan Perempuan: Penerapan Metode Tafsir Hermeneutika Feminisme Amina Wadud*” by Arsal, Busyro, and Maizul Imran demonstrates that Wadud’s interpretive approach is rooted in feminist hermeneutics employing linguistic analysis, justice, and equality.³ Another research, “Discourse on Women’s Leadership in Islam: Asghar Ali Engineer’s Thought Analysis Study” by Muhammad Adress Prawira Negara, shows that Asghar Ali Engineer permits women’s leadership. He argues that classical scholars overlooked the socio-historical context in interpreting Q.S. An-Nisā’ 4:34, resulting in distortions of gender discourse.⁴

Despite the growing of research discussing the concept of leadership and examining the thoughts of Asghar Ali Engineer and Amina Wadud, most analyses address these figures separately. Very few studies have specifically conducted an in-depth comparison between the two. Even in discussions of leadership in the discourse on gender in Islam, no research has been found that compares these two figures.

Recognizing these limitations, this research takes the position of a comparative approach by juxtaposing the thought of Asghar Ali Engineer and Amina Wadud with the aim of reviewing the concept of women’s leadership in Islam through an analysis of their interpretations of Q.S. An-Nisā’ 4:34. Specifically, the research not only compares the results of interpretation, but also analyzes the influence of liberation theology developed by Asghar Ali Engineer and the feminist hermeneutical framework employed by Amina Wadud in shaping their interpretations of the verse. In this respect, the present study differs from previous works that interpret Q.S. An-Nisā’ 4:34 without positioning liberation theology and hermeneutics as primary methodological foundations.

Method

In conducting this research, the method used was library research, which is research conducted by collecting, analyzing, and concluding data sourced from books, journal articles, and literature relevant to the theme of women's leadership in the discourse of Islam and

² Faizah, “Konsep Qiwāmah dalam Yurisprudensi Islam Perspektif Keadilan Gender.” *Jurnal Ahwal*, Vol. 11, No.1, 2018 (DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14421/ahwal.2018.11102>) p.13.

³ Arsal, Busyro, Maizul Imran, “Kepemimpinan Perempuan: Penerapan Metode Tafsir Hermeneutika Feminisme Amina Wadud” *Jurnal Al Quds*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2020 (DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29240/alquds.v4i2.1976>) p. 498.

⁴ Muhammad Adress Prawira Negara, “Discourse on Women’s Leadership in Islam: Asghar Ali Engineer’s Thought Analysis Study” *An-Nisa: Jurnal of Gender Studies* Vol. 15, No. 2, October 2022, p.137.

SABLUNA: Journal of Islamic Studies E-ISSN: 3109-6581

gender.⁵ Meanwhile, the approach used in the research was a comparative study, which aimed to systematically compare Amina Wadud and Asghar Ali Engineer's interpretations of Q.S An-Nisa: 34.⁶ The main focus of this approach is to examine the hermeneutic theory developed by Amina Wadud and the liberation theory formulated by Asghar Ali Engineer, especially in terms of gender relations and the concept of women's leadership in Islam.

Biography of Asghar Ali Engineer

Asghar Ali Engineer was an Islamic intellectual, author, social activist, and human rights advocate born on 10 March 1939 in Sulumbar, Rajasthan, India.⁷ He was raised within the socio-cultural environment of the Shi'i Islamic tradition. His mother was Mayram and his father, Shaikh Qurban Hussain, was a leader of the Daudi Bohra community who has an open mind, liberal, and inclusive outlook profoundly influenced Asghar's intellectual formation, preventing him from adopting a narrow sectarian perspective despite his affiliation with Ismaili Shi'ism. From an early age, he was introduced to religious pluralism through his father, whom he frequently observed engaging in dialogue with leaders of non-Muslim faiths. These experiences contributed significantly to the development of his open and dialogical worldview.

His father also introduced him to religious sciences and the history of both classical and contemporary Islamic civilization. He studied theology (kalām), Qur'anic exegesis (tafsīr), jurisprudence (fiqh), and ḥadīth, which indirectly also taught him about Judaism, Christianity, and even philosophical thought. Engineer was also an avid reader of Bertrand Russell and Karl Marx, which influenced his analysis and ideas toward themes often associated with "leftist" discourse, such as injustice, oppression, social transformation, radical change and so on.⁸ In addition, Engineer mastered several languages, including English, Arabic, Urdu, Persian, Gujarati, Hindi, and Marathi.⁹ This linguistic ability enabled him to engage extensively with a wide range of scholarly works produced by both Muslim and non-Muslim authors.

⁵ Milya Sari, "Penelitian Kepustakaan (Library Research) dalam Penelitian Pendidikan IPA" *Jurnal Natural Science*, Vol 6. No. 1, 2020, p. 44.

⁶ Revi Angeli Siahaan, Riyanthi Angrainy Sianturi, "Analisis Perbandingan Payment Gateway untuk Sistem Pembayaran Berbasis aplikasi dengan comparative Study" dalam *Jurnal JTIK*, Vol.11, No 2, April 2024, hal 292.

⁷ Abdul Rasyid Ridho, "Reformulasi Pemikiran: Studi Pemikiran Gender Asghar Ali Engineer" *Jurnal Sophist; Sosial Politik Kajian Islam dan Tafsir*, Vol. 2 No. 2, Juli-Desember 2020, p. 220.

⁸ Abdul Rasyid Ridho, "Reformulasi Tafsir: Studi Pemikiran Gender Asghar Ali Engineer" *Jurnal Sophist; Sosial Politik Kajian Islam dan Tafsir*, Vol. 2 No. 2, Juli-Desember 2020, p. 220-221.

⁹ Asghar Ali Engineer, *Hak-hak Perempuan dalam Islam*, Terj. Farid Wajidi (Yogyakarta, LSPPA, 2000) p.295.

In 1972, Engineer began his reformist engagement within the Bohra community and served as a dā'ī (religious leader) within the Shi'i Ismaili tradition, following in his father's footsteps.¹⁰ The position required rigorous qualifications, there are 94 categories summarized into four categories: educational, administrative, moral, and personal/familial. Even more interestingly, a Da'i must be a defender of oppressed people and fight against injustice.¹¹ In addition to being a Da'i, Asghar is also involved in education, lecturing at various renowned universities around the world.

Engineer was also a prolific thinker and writer. His publications covered a broad spectrum of topics, ranging from Islamic studies to communalism and human rights. Among his notable works are *Islam and Its Relevance to Our Age*; *The Origin and Development of Islam*; *Islam and Muslims: Critical Perspectives*; *The Bohras*; *The Islamic State*; *Islam and Liberation Theology*; *On Developing Liberation Theology in Islam*; *Islam in South-East Asia*; *Seminar on Sufism and Communal Harmony*; *The Spirituality of Social Movement*; *Rights of Women in Islam*; *Communalism and Communal Violence in India*; *Ethnic Problem in South Asia*; *The Qur'an' and Women and Modern Society*.

Engineer's thought was influenced by Karl Marx's emphasis on intellectual liberation as well as the modernist ideas of Muhammad Iqbal.¹² His multidisciplinary background led him to engage deeply with gender issues, developing an analytical framework that is far from taqlīd (uncritical imitation) and critically examined dogmatic attitudes. This commitment was evident in his involvement in voicing for human right issues and fighting for democratic values. In recognition of his humanitarian contributions in India, he was awarded the honorary Doctor of Letters (D.Litt.) degree by the University of Calcutta in 1983.¹³

He also served as Vice President of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Chairman of the Likas Adhyayan Kendra organization, and Chairman of EKTA (the Committee for Communal Harmony). His efforts to promote harmony between Hindu and Muslim communities in India were widely acknowledged. He received *The National Communal Harmony Award* from the Government of India in 1977 and again in 2004, followed by further recognition from Indian governmental institutions. This was also the

¹⁰ Ainun Hakiemah, Faridah Nur' Afifah, "Kesetaraan Gender dalam Pandangan Asghar Ali Engineer: Interpretasi antara Teks Keagamaan dan Konteks Sosial" *dalam Jurnal Mafatih*, Vol. 2 No. 2, November 2022, p. 20.

¹¹ Janu Arbain, Nur Azizah, Ika Novita Sari, "Pemikiran Gender Menurut Para Ahli: Telaah atas Pemikiran Amina Wadud Muhsin, Asghar Ali Enginner dan Mansour Fakih" *Jurnal Sawwa*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Oktober 2015, p. 81.

¹² Ainun Hakiemah, Faridah Nur' Afifah "Kesetaraan Gnder....." *Jurnal Mafatih*, Vol. 2 No. 2, p. 20.

¹³ Muhammad Adres, "Konstruksi Teologi Pembebasan Dalam Islam." *Dirasat Islamiyah*, Vol. 4 No.1, 2023, p.24

culmination of his recognition, namely the *Right Livelihood Award*.

Asghar Ali Engineer's Concept of Liberation Theology

According to Asghar Ali Engineer, liberation theology has several characteristics. *First*, liberation begins with the concrete condition of human beings, both in this world and in the hereafter. *Second*, liberation does not desire a status quo that protects the wealthy while marginalizing the poor. *Third*, it aims to defend oppressed groups whose rights have been denied and to cultivate critical awareness that oppression should neither be accepted as natural nor allowed to persist. *Fourth*, liberation emphasizes human agency, affirming that individuals are free to determine their own destiny.¹⁴

For Engineer, the foundational premise of liberation theory is that human beings are inherently free. Consequently, people will naturally resist all forms of oppression and injustice directed against them. Within this framework, religion assumes a dual role: it can function either as a tool of anesthesia that prolongs oppression or as a force that promotes social change. The determining factor lies in how religion is understood. Religion becomes a sedative when it sides with the status quo, thereby playing a greater role in perpetuating injustice. In this context, religion harms the oppressed. Conversely, religion can also be an instrument of change when formulated within the framework of liberation theology. In this formulation, religion is no longer passive, but becomes a powerful force that is effective in driving change. For this reason, Engineer conceptualizes liberation theology as a framework that places freedom, equality, and distributive justice as its central principles. This theology explicitly opposes all forms of human exploitation and oppression.

Women's Leadership According to Asghar Ali Engineer

Prior to the advent of Islam, women in the Arabian Peninsula occupied a highly marginalized social position. They were subordinated, deprived of basic rights, and frequently subjected to inhumane treatment. The coming of Islam introduced fundamental changes to this social structure. Women began to receive legal protection, gained inheritance rights, acquired personal autonomy, and were granted the ability to determine the course of their lives. For this reason, the Prophetic period is often regarded as an ideal era for women's social existence.¹⁵ Women were able to participate freely in public life without discrimination in relation to men. This transformation indicates that Islam originally emerged as a religion of liberation that

¹⁴ Naila "Hak Perempuan dalam Islam", *Jurnal Studi Islam, Gender dan Anak*, Vol.15, No.2, Juli 2020, p.190.

guarantees women's dignity and welfare.

However, after the Prophet's death—particularly during the caliphate of 'Umar—women increasingly experienced restrictions, including policies that confined Muslim women to the domestic sphere and limited their presence in mosques.¹⁶ Over time, such unequal treatment became more pronounced, especially in discussions of leadership. Although the Qur'an does not explicitly prohibit women from assuming leadership roles, however some classical scholars refer to Q.S. An-Nisā' 4:34 to assert male superiority and reject women's leadership. The term *qawwāmūn* in the verse was frequently interpreted as “rulers” or “absolute leaders,” thereby placing men in a naturally higher position than women.

Engineer argues that the central problem lies not in the text itself but in the way it is interpreted. He emphasized that interpretation that place women as inferior are products of classical scholars who lived within patriarchal social structures and lacked a conception of gender equality. According to Asghar, this verse must be understood by considering the social context of Arab society during the time of the Prophet, which at that time was still influenced by feudal culture and hierarchical structures. Because social equality between men and women was not yet fully recognized at that time Therefore, it is inappropriate to take a purely theological view, but rather a socio-theological view must be used.¹⁷

In interpreting Qur'anic passages concerning women, Engineer adopts a socio-historical approach consisting of three major principles. *First*, he argues that the Qur'an contains two sides: normative and contextual.¹⁸ The normative side refers to the system of values and foundational ethical principles of the Qur'an, which are universal and applicable across time and place. The contextual side, by contrast, relates to verses revealed in response to specific social conditions or problems of a specific period of the time. Thus, as times change, these verses can be *naskh* (نسخ). Through these two sides, Asghar suggests prioritizing the normative side over the contextual side, arguing that the normative side contains the values and principles that form the basis of the holy book. If we look at it from a normative perspective, it is clear that the Qur'an upholds the principle of equality between men and women as stated in several verses, one of which is QS. Al-Hujurat: 13, which emphasizes that

¹⁵ Abdul Rasyid Ridho, “Reformulasi Pemikiran: Studi Pemikiran Gender Asghar Ali Engineer” *Jurnal Sosial Politik Kajian Islam dan Tafsir*, Vol. 2 No. 2, Juli-Desember 2020, p. 222.

¹⁶ M. Agus Nuryanto, “Islam, Teologi Pembebasan dan Kesetaraan gender Studi atas Pemikiran Engineer Ali Engineer (Yogyakarta: UII Press, 2005) p. 61.

¹⁷ Asghar Ali Engineer, *Hak-Hak perempuan dalam Islam*, terjemah Farid Wajidi dan Cici Farkha Assegaf (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Benteng Budaya, 1994) p. 98

¹⁸ Muhammad Adress Prawira Negara, “Discourse on Women's Leadership in Islam: Asghar Ali Engineer's Thought Analysis Study” *Jurnal An-Nisa': Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 15 No. 2, October 2022, p. 145.

human dignity in the eyes of Allah is not determined by gender, but by the level of piety.

In understanding Q.S An-Nisa: 34, Asghar argues that the verse is contextual, but not separate from normative principles. Asghar explains that the verse only describes male leadership in the domestic sphere. The term *qawwām* signifies duties such as managing household affairs, providing financial support, and ensuring the fulfillment of family needs. Consequently, *qiwāmah* is functional and conditional rather than a fixed legal hierarchy based on biological sex. If the concept of *qawwam* extended to all spheres of life, women will continue to be subordinated. Therefore, in the spirit of liberation, Asghar Ali emphasizes that the message of the Qur'an actually carries a vision of gender equality in line with the grand vision of Islam, which is *rahmatan lil'alam*.¹⁹

According to Asghar Ali, the interpretation of classical scholars who use this verse as a basis for prohibiting women from holding leadership positions is not in line with Allah's words in Surah An-Naml verses 32-35 about Queen Balqis and Surah At-Taubah verse 71. Looking at these verses, Asghar emphasizes that women are allowed to be leaders of the country. He argues that if Allah disliked female leadership, then why did the Qur'an present the story of Queen Balqis without criticizing or condemning her leadership? In short, according to Asghar, as long as the Qur'an itself does not explicitly prohibit female leadership, women have the opportunity to participate in various fields as long as they remain within the boundaries set by Allah.²⁰

Second, Engineer emphasizes that interpretation of the Qur'an cannot be separated from the interpreter's perceptions, experiences, and socio-cultural background.²¹ Interpretation is inevitably influenced by the interpreter's socio-cultural environment, and no interpreter is free from this influence. Therefore, it can be said that a pure interpretation of the Qur'an is impossible. Thus, the interpretation of Surah An-Nisa: 34 by classical scholars was greatly influenced by the Arab culture at that time, which adhered to a patriarchal system. It is therefore not surprising that the interpretation tends to place men in a higher position than women, especially in the domestic sphere.

In Asghar's view, the revelation of Q.S An-Nisa verse 34 was motivated by two main factors, namely: *first*, the low level of awareness among women at that time and the fact that domestic work was considered a woman's duty. *Second*, the perception of male superiority due

¹⁹ Dendy Wahyu Anugrah, M. Amir Mahmud, "Kepemimpinan Perempuan dalam Perspektif Hukum Islam *Jurnal Asasi: Journal of Islamic Family Law*, Vol. 2 No. 2, April 2022, p. 102.

²⁰ Muhammad Adress, "Discourse on Women's Leadership in Islam: Asghar Ali Engineer's Thought Analysis Study" *Jurnal An-Nisa': Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 15 No. 2, October 2022, p. 145-146.

SABLUNA: Journal of Islamic Studies E-ISSN: 3109-6581

to their power and ability to earn a living and spend their wealth for the benefit of their wives.

However, if we interpret this verse by considering the contemporary social context, where women have equal capacity, competence, and opportunities in the public sphere, then Q.S An-Nisa verse 34 is no longer relevant to be understood as legitimizing male superiority over women. Therefore, a contextual reading of this verse is needed in the form of functional regulation, taking into account the normative principles of the Qur'an regarding justice, equality, and benefit.

Third, the meaning of the Qur'anic verse spans time, so it is not surprising that there are many differences in interpretation between classical and modern scholars. Such is the case with the interpretation of Surah An-Nisa verse 34, where there are differences between classical and modern scholars. This can happen because the Qur'an uses symbolic language that requires deep understanding to know its true meaning. It is this symbolic language that then produces various interpretations. In this context, Asghar interprets this symbolic language from the perspective of the historical situation and the experience of the person who wants to interpret it.²²

Thus, from the above description, it can be seen that Asghar Ali Engineer acknowledges the superiority of men (husbands) in the economic sphere within the family, but according to him, this superiority is contextual in nature, so it cannot be used as a normative reason for male leadership over women in the household, as long as the man proves his superiority and uses it to protect his wife.

Biography of Amina Wadud

Amina Wadud is a contemporary feminist Muslim thinker born on 2 September 1954 in Bethesda, Montgomery County, United States. Prior to her conversion to Islam, her birth name was Mary Teasley, which she later changed to Amina Wadud. Her father was a Methodist Christian minister, while her mother descended from enslaved Arab Muslim lineage associated with the Berber people of North Africa.²³ She grew up in a modest economic environment as one of eight siblings.

Wadud pursued her formal education from primary to tertiary levels partly in Malaysia, where she completed her undergraduate studies at university Antara Bangsa. During

²¹ Abdul Rasyid Ridho, "Reformulasi Pemikiran: Studi Pemikiran Gender Asghar Ali Engineer" *Jurnal Sosial Politik Kajian Islam dan Tafsir*, Vol. 2 No. 2, Juli-Desember 2020, p. 224.

²² M. Agus Nuryanto, "Islam, Teologi Pembebasan dan Kesenjangan....", Yogyakarta: UII Press, 2005, p. 63.

²³ Kunawi Basyir, "Menggugat Syirik Intelektual Bersama Nasr Hâmid Abû Zayd Dan Amina Wadud" *Jurnal Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2011 p. 320–321.

her early academic years, she was involved in Buddhist practice; however, in 1972, at the age of twenty, she embraced Islam.²⁴ One of her main hopes when she converted to Islam was that she would be spared religious and social discrimination as an African-American woman trying to survive in America. She later earned a master's degree from the University of Michigan in 1989 and subsequently completed her doctoral studies at Harvard University in 1991 - 1993.

While living in America, Wadud tried to hide her African-American heritage by wearing a hijab. Then, in 1975, she moved to Libya for two years. There, she also faced more gender struggles related to identity and Islamic practices. In her article entitled "Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam," she mentions that Libya had begun to initiate ideas about defending the rights of marginalized women in the intellectual history of Islam. It was in Libya that Wadud began to build a network of Muslim women. She also mentions that as a young, poor, black woman who was Muslim, she was accepted unconditionally by the community. In other words, the position and rights of women were respected here.

After two years in Libya, Wadud returned to the United States and became actively involved in discussions related to women's welfare amid the broader second-wave feminist movement.²⁵ In 1992 she began teaching at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), specializing in religious studies with a focus on Islam, gender, and Qur'anic studies. On 18 March 2005 she attracted global scholarly and public attention—including criticism from prominent scholars such as Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi—when she delivered the Friday sermon and led a mixed-gender congregational prayer attended by more than one hundred male and female worshippers in New York City.²⁶ The event generated significant controversy within Muslim communities; many opposed her action, and she subsequently faced social exclusion and hostility.

Currently, Amina Wadud resides in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, where she continues her work as an academic and researcher in Islamic studies, gender, and justice since approximately 2018. She has authored numerous influential works, including *Qur'an and Woman*: which proposes a rereading of the Qur'an from a female perspective, and *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*, which reflects her intellectual and activist engagement with gender justice. She has also written important articles such as *Qur'anic Models of Gender, Islam Beyond Patriarchy Through Gender-Inclusive Qur'anic Analysis*,

²⁴ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an Menurut Perempuan*, terj. oleh Abdullah Ali (Jakarta: Serambi, 2001), p. 23.

²⁵ Farid Esack, "Islam, Feminism and Empire: A Comparison between the Approaches of Amina Wadud and Saba Mahmood" *Journal of Gender and Religion* Vol. 21, No. 1 (Juli 2015): p. 28–29.

SABLUNA: Journal of Islamic Studies E-ISSN: 3109-6581

and *The Ethics of Tawhid Overcomes Patriarchy*, all of which underscore her commitment to a hermeneutics of justice and gender-inclusive Qur'anic interpretation.

Amina Wadud's Feminist Hermeneutics

The discussion of women's leadership in Islam cannot be separated from the longstanding debate over how sacred texts are understood and interpreted. As a leading figure in Islamic feminist hermeneutics, Amina Wadud positions women as full subjects in the interpretive process rather than merely objects of legal formulations or social structures constructed by male interpreters. For Wadud, many gender-related issues in Islam do not originate from the Qur'an itself but from interpretive biases inherited from centuries of patriarchal exegesis.

Wadud's intellectual framework is strongly influenced by the thought of Fazlur Rahman, a point she openly acknowledges. Her method incorporates reinterpretation and the double movement approach.²⁷ Reinterpretation refers to rereading Qur'anic verses in a manner relevant to contemporary circumstances. The double movement method involves analyzing both the historical context in which the verses were revealed and their relevance to present conditions. Verses are first interpreted according to the socio-historical setting of their revelation and then related to current realities; conversely, contemporary circumstances are also evaluated in light of the original context of revelation. This reciprocal analytical process reflects Fazlur Rahman's theory of double movement.

According to Wadud, completely objective interpretation is unattainable. The educational, cultural, and social backgrounds of interpreters inevitably shape their exegesis, this is in line with the opinion expressed by Asghar. Wadud also observes that exegetes addressing women's status in Islam typically employ three primary interpretive models: the traditional, reactive, and holistic approaches.²⁸

First, the traditional method emphasizes linguistic competence, including grammar (naḥw) and morphology (ṣarf), supplemented by disciplines such as jurisprudence, philosophy, and Sufism. Wadud argues that this approach has been predominantly developed by male scholars, thereby incorporating male subjectivity into interpretation while minimizing

²⁶ Janu Arbain, Nur Azizah, Ika Novita Sari, "Pemikiran Gender Menurut Para Ahli: Telaah atas Pemikiran Amina Wadud Muhsin, Asghar Ali Enginner dan Mansour Fakih" *Jurnal Sawwa*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Oktober 2015, p. 76-77

²⁷ Saif Ali Yasin, Skripsi: Kesetaraan Gender Tentang Kepemimpinan Perempuan (*Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Malang*, 2025) p.57

²⁸ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman, Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 55

women's lived experiences. *Second*, the reactive method represents the responses of modern thinkers to contemporary issues faced by women. However, Wadud contends that analyses within this approach often lack depth and comprehensiveness. *Third*, the holistic method employs a multi-dimensional framework, incorporating social, moral, economic, and modern political considerations. Wadud situates her own interpretation within this category by explicitly including women's rights. This method pays close attention to cultural and linguistic contexts during textual engagement, producing a more comprehensive interpretation.

As an alternative, Wadud also introduced a hermeneutic model of the Qur'an that differed from the approaches of previous exegetes. For her, hermeneutics is a method of interpreting sacred texts in order to derive meaningful conclusions from a verse or passage.²⁹ The hermeneutical framework she offers aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of Qur'anic meaning by considering three essential elements. *First* is the historical context of revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl). *Second* is linguistic and grammatical analysis of the text, including how the message is articulated, what is conveyed, and to whom it is addressed. *Third* is the Qur'an's overarching worldview (weltanschauung) and its comprehensive ethical message, rather than relying on isolated textual fragments. Through this approach, Wadud seeks to present an interpretation that is more inclusive and gender-just.³⁰

Women's Leadership According to Amina Wadud

The feminist hermeneutics formulated by Amina Wadud constitutes the primary foundation for her reading and understanding of the Qur'anic text. In addressing the issue of women's leadership, Wadud emphasizes the principles of justice and human equality. In her influential work, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, she asserts that her interpretation of Qur'anic verses rests upon two fundamental principles. *First*, the Qur'an does not assign inherent value to a particular sex; consequently, no permanent hierarchy exists between men and women. *Second*, the Qur'an does not prescribe rigid and fixed social roles for either gender.

With regard to the term qawwām in Q.S. An-Nisā' 4:34—which has become a focal point of debate among Muslim scholars—classical exegetes and some modern interpreters have commonly understood the word to signify responsibility and authority: the authority to educate women, lead them, protect them physically and morally, exercise superiority, and

²⁹ Indah, Pemikiran Amina Wadud Tentang Kepemimpinan Perempuan Perspektif Hermeneutika Jorge J. E. Gracia (Studi Kajian Tafsir Surat An-Nisa Ayat 34 (*skripsi*, UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, 2022) hlm 73.

regulate their affairs. Male superiority in this interpretation is often justified by assumptions drawn from inheritance regulations in the Qur'an, whereby men receive a larger share because they bear financial responsibility for their wives. Additional assumptions attribute to men greater rational capacity, strength, determination, and courage, noting that prophets, many scholars, and religious leaders historically have been male.

Wadud argues, however, that the term *qawwām* should not be confined solely to the marital relationship but must be understood within the broader social framework. She interprets male leadership as conditional, applying only under two circumstances: *first*, when the husband is able to demonstrate his competence and capability; and *second*, when he fulfills his obligation to provide materially for his wife.³¹ If these conditions are not met, the husband cannot be considered the leader of his wife. This interpretation responds to contemporary realities in which many women work and even serve as heads of households, suggesting that the concept of family leadership must also evolve. In this respect, Wadud's view differs from Engineer's position in the domestic sphere as discussed previously.

Wadud further maintains that each individual possesses distinct roles. Within the family, for example, a woman's biological role in pregnancy and childbirth necessitates an equally significant responsibility on the part of men in order to achieve justice and avoid oppression. The function of the *qawwām* for men is therefore to ensure that women are not burdened with additional responsibilities that would undermine their primary obligations. In practical terms, men are required to provide both physical protection and financial support; if these duties are not fulfilled, the designation *qawwām* is no longer applicable.³²

She also emphasizes that in Surah An-Nisa: 34 it does not say "they". The verse does not state that all men are favored over all women but uses the expression *ba'dhum 'alā ba'd* ("some of them over others"). Accordingly, not all men are superior to women in every respect, nor are all women inferior to men. Some women may excel over some men in particular domains.³³ Thus, divine favor is not absolute or universally applicable.

For Wadud, there is no indication that women possess greater limitations than men. She locates the roots of inequality not in divine creation but in human interpretation. Men and women are equally created as human beings and endowed with comparable potential.

³⁰ Zainah Anwar, ed., *Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family* (Selangor, Malaysia: Musawah, 2009), p. 95.

³¹ Amina Wadud Muhsin, *Wanita di dalam Al-Qur'an*, terjemahan Yaziar Radianti (Bandung: Pustaka, 1994) p. 93-94.

³² Amina Wadud, *Quran Menurut Perempuan: Membaca Kembali Kitab Suci dengan Semangat Keadilan*, terjemah Yaziar Radianti (Bandung: Pustaka, 1994) p. 126.

SABLUNA: Journal of Islamic Studies E-ISSN: 3109-6581

Consequently, both possess the capacity and the right to occupy positions of leadership, including within religious practice. Wadud argues that recognizing women's leadership in religious contexts can support broader acceptance of women's leadership in other spheres, although her position has been widely contested by many scholars.

However, her opinion is widely debated by scholars. The analytical principles applied by Amina tend to be based on her subjective opinion. This certainly deviates from the teachings of Islam agreed upon by scholars.³⁴ Interpretation through *ijtihad* does exist, but that does not mean that anyone can interpret everything arbitrarily and interpret everything on their own without involving the opinions of previous interpreters. Interpretation through *ijtihad* is permissible as long as it does not deviate from the interpretations of previous interpreters.

Thus, Amina Wadud's thinking presents a new reading of the Qur'anic text that emphasizes the principles of gender equality and justice, particularly in the issue of women's leadership. Although this idea broadens the horizon of interpretation and provides space for responses to contemporary social realities, the hermeneutical approach she uses continues to spark methodological debate. Criticism is mainly directed at the tendency of interpretation that is considered to emphasize the personal perspective of the interpreter rather than classical references that have become the foundation of Islamic scholarship. In the tradition of Islamic scholarship, *Ijtihad* is indeed recognized as an important instrument in responding to changing times, but it still requires adherence to the epistemological framework and interpretive authority established by previous exegetes. Therefore, Wadud's thinking can be positioned as a critical discourse that contributes to contemporary Islamic discourse, but it still needs to be constructively dialogued with the exegetical traditions of earlier scholars in order to maintain a balance between context and textual authority.

Comparative Analysis of the Thought of Asghar Ali Engineer and Amina Wadud

A close reading of Q.S. An-Nisā' 4:34 demonstrates that differing views on women's leadership in Islam arise not merely from divergent interpretive conclusions but also from the theoretical and methodological frameworks employed in interpretation. Asghar Ali Engineer and Amina Wadud are contemporary thinkers who both critique classical exegetical interpretations often characterized as patriarchal; however, they develop distinct approaches and methodologies in understanding the verse.

³³ Amina Wadud Muhsin, *Wanita di dalam Al-Qur'an*, terjemah Yaziar Radianti (Bandung: Pustaka, 1994) p. 123.

Engineer situates Q.S. An-Nisā' 4:34 within the framework of liberation theology by clearly distinguishing between the Qur'an's universal normative values—such as justice, equality, and humanity—and contextual provisions that emerged in response to specific social realities. By contrast, Wadud proposes a feminist hermeneutical approach that emphasizes the coherence of the Qur'anic text and employs linguistic analysis oriented toward justice and equality, positioning women as full interpretive subjects. These methodological differences directly influence how each thinker understands the concept of *qiwamah* and the legitimacy of women's leadership.

In beginning his interpretation, Asghar Ali emphasizes the importance of the socio-historical context surrounding the revelation of Q.S. An Nisa verse 34. According to Asghar, this verse was revealed in an Arab society that adhered to a patriarchal system, in which men generally held dominant roles in economic and social aspects. Therefore, the affirmation of men as *qiwamah* is not intended as a legitimization of ontological superiority, but rather as a regulation of social and economic responsibilities within the family in accordance with the conditions at that time. Asghar emphasized that *qiwamah* should be understood as a mandate and responsibility in managing the household, providing for it, and ensuring that its needs are met within the family sphere, not as a natural or universal and permanent privilege.

Wadud, on the other hand, adopts a holistic reading that integrates linguistic structure, social context, and justice as a fundamental Qur'anic value. She maintains that male leadership within the domestic sphere is justified only under two conditions: first, when the husband can demonstrably prove his competence; and second, when he fulfills his obligation to provide materially for his wife. If these conditions are not met, the legitimacy of male leadership over women is nullified. Consequently, *qiwamah* is not determined by biological sex but by capacity, responsibility, and adherence to justice—even within the family.

A fundamental similarity between Engineer and Wadud lies in their rejection of classical and patriarchal interpretations that have long dominated the understanding of Q.S. An-Nisā' 4:34. Both agree that the verse cannot serve as a theological basis for excluding women from leadership or for positioning women as inherently inferior to men. They equally emphasize the centrality of justice and equality in gender relations as part of the Qur'an's moral message.

Another fundamental similarity between Asghar Ali and Amina Wadud lies in their

³⁴ Moh. Isom Mudin, Muhammad Dhiaul Fikri, Munar Moh Shobirin, Rohmah Akhirul Mukharom, "Hermeneutika Hans-Georg Gadamer: Studi Analisis Kritis Penafsiran Amina Wadud tentang Ayat Kepemimpinan", *jurnal Intizar*, Vol 27 No 2 (2021) p.124.

epistemological awareness of the process of interpreting the Qur'an. Both believe that interpretation never occurs in a vacuum, but is always influenced by the social, cultural, intellectual, and historical background of the interpreter. This awareness encourages both figures to be critical of classical interpretations that are considered to have become frozen in a particular historical context and then generalized as final truths. Asghar Ali Engineer assesses that many interpretations related to gender relations reflect the patriarchal social structure of the society in which the interpreter lives rather than the normative message of the Qur'an itself. Meanwhile, Amina Wadud explicitly asserts that the interpreter's life experience, including gender position, has a significant influence in determining the direction and emphasis of interpretation.

Asghar Ali and Amina Wadud differ in their construction of the concept of leadership. Asghar Ali tends to focus his criticism on patriarchal social structures that perpetuate gender inequality. He does not outright reject the existence of male leadership in the family, but emphasizes that such leadership is functional and must be carried out as a social responsibility, not a tool of domination. Asghar highlights the dimensions of structural liberation and social change as the main objectives of Qur'anic interpretation.

By contrast, Wadud more explicitly deconstructs the meaning of male leadership. She rejects the notion of inherent male superiority and views leadership as a social construct that can change according to capacity and circumstance. In her view, when women possess the necessary competence and opportunity, there is no theological justification to deny their leadership in domestic, public, or religious domains. She also critiques interpretations that employ religion as a justification for gender inequality.

Ultimately, both Asghar Ali Engineer and Amina Wadud encourage a paradigm shift in interpreting QS. An-Nisā' verse 34. They invite Muslims not to get caught up in a literal reading that limits women's roles, but rather to open up space for dialogue and reinterpretation oriented towards values of justice, equality, and humanity. Thus, the main difference between the two lies in their strategies and levels of radicalism in interpretation, while their ultimate goal remains the same: to free women from discriminatory religious legitimacy and open up leadership opportunities for anyone with the capacity, regardless of gender.

Conclusion

Based on a comparative analysis of the thoughts of Asghar Ali Engineer and Amina Wadud, this study shows that the concept of female leadership in Islam cannot be separated from the methodological framework used in interpreting the text of the Qur'an, particularly

Q.S An-Nisa verse 34. Although both thinkers share a commitment to gender justice and reject the subordination of women, they display important differences in their understanding of the leadership relationship between men and women, especially in the context of the family.

Asghar Ali Engineer views male leadership in the family sphere not as an absolute theological provision, but as a social construct born out of the historical context of a patriarchal society. However, Asghar does not outright reject male leadership in the family. He argues that such leadership is acceptable as long as it functions ethically, is not oppressive, and is in line with the principles of justice and reciprocity. With a liberation theology approach, Asghar emphasizes the dismantling of oppressive power relations rather than the total elimination of male leadership roles. Within this framework, leadership is understood as a moral and social responsibility, not as a legitimization of social superiority.

In contrast, Amina Wadud adopts a more critical stance toward leadership associated with biological sex. Through a feminist hermeneutical approach, she rejects interpretations of Q.S. An-Nisā' 4:34 that position men as normative leaders over women, including within the family. For Wadud, gender-based leadership contradicts the principle of *tawhīd* and the ontological equality of human beings before God. She therefore advocates a reinterpretation of the verse emphasizing its functional and contextual dimensions, so that family leadership is understood as a dynamic and negotiable relationship that may be exercised by any individual possessing the necessary capacity and responsibility, regardless of gender.

These differences indicate that Engineer and Wadud diverge not only in their interpretive conclusions but also in their analytical emphases. Engineer tends to adopt a moderate reformist position, allowing space for male leadership that is just and non-dominative, whereas Wadud advances a more radical critique of patriarchal interpretive structures by rejecting the legitimacy of gender-based leadership itself. Nevertheless, both approaches contribute to challenging theological claims historically employed to justify the subordination of women.

References

- Adress, Muhammad, "Discourse on Women's Leadership in Islam: Asghar Ali Engineer's Thought Analysis Study" *Jurnal An-Nisa': Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 15 No. 2, October 2022.
- Anugrah, Dendy Wahyu, M. Amir Mahmud, "Kepemimpinan Perempuan dalam Perspektif Hukum Islam Jurnal Asasi: *Journal of Islamic Family Law*, Vol. 2 No. 2, April 2020.
- Anwar, Zainah, ed., *Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family* (Selangor, Malaysia: Musawah, 2009).

SABLUNA: Journal of Islamic Studies E-ISSN: 3109-6581

- Arbain, Janu, Nur Azizah, Ika Novita Sari, "Pemikiran Gender Menurut Para Ahli: Telaah atas Pemikiran Amina Wadud Muhsin, Asghar Ali Engineer dan Mansour Fakih" *Jurnal Sawwa*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Oktober 2015.
- Arsal, Busyro, Maizul Imran, "Kepemimpinan Perempuan: Penerapan Metode Tafsir Hermeneutika Feminisme Amina Wadud" *Jurnal Al Quds*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2020 (DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29240/alquds.v4i2.1976>)
- Basyir, Kunawi, "Menggugat Syirik Intelektual Bersama Nasr Hâmid Abû Zayd Dan Amina Wadud" *Jurnal Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2011.
- Engineer, Asghar Ali, *Hak-Hak perempuan dalam Islam*, terjemah Farid Wajidi dan Cici Farkha Assegaf (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Benteng Budaya, 1994).
- Esack, Farid, "Islam, Feminism and Empire: A Comparison between the Approaches of Amina Wadud and Saba Mahmood" *Journal of Gender and Religion* Vol. 21, No. 1 (Juli 2015).
- Faizah, Nur. "Konsep Qiwāmah dalam Yurisprudensi Islam Perspektif Keadilan Gender." *Al-Ahwal: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Islam* 11, no. 1 (2018): 13–22. <https://doi.org/10.14421/ahwal.2018.11102>.
- Hakiemah, Ainun, Faridah Nur' Afifah, "Kesetaraan Gender dalam Pandangan Asghar Ali Engineer: Interpretasi antara Teks Keagamaan dan Konteks Sosial" dalam *Jurnal Mafatih*, Vol. 2 No. 2, November 2022.
- Indah, Pemikiran Amina Wadud Tentang Kepemimpinan Perempuan Perspektif Hermeneutika Jorge J. E. Gracia (Studi Kajian Tafsir Surat An-Nisa Ayat 34 (*skripsi, UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang*, 2022).
- Mudin, Moh Isom, Muhammad Dhiaul Fikri, Munar Moh Shobirin, and Rohmah Akhirul Mukharom. "Hermeneutika Hans-Georg Gadamer: Studi Analisis Kritis Penafsiran Amina Wadud Tentang Ayat Kepemimpinan." *Intizar* 27, no. 2 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.19109/intizar.v27i2.10104>.
- Muhsin, Amina Wadud, *Wanita di dalam Al-Qur'an*, terjemahan Yaziar Radianti (Bandung: Pustaka, 1994).
- Naila "Hak Perempuan dalam Islam", *Jurnal Studi Islam, Gender dan Anak*, Vol.15, No.2, Juli 2020
- Negara, Muhammad Adres Prawira. "Konstruksi Teologi Pembebasan Dalam Islam: Studi Pemikiran Asghar Ali Engineer: The Construction of Liberation Theology in Islam: A Study of Asghar Ali Engineer's Thought." *Dirasat Islamiah: Jurnal Kajian Keislaman* 4, no. 1 (2023) <https://doi.org/10.56324/drs.v4i1.49>.
- Novianti, Ida, "Dilema Kepemimpinan dalam Islam" Yin Yang: Jurnal Studi & Anak, Vol. 3 No. 2, 2008.

- Nuryanto, M. Agus, "Islam, Teologi Pembebasan dan Kesenjangan gender Studi atas Pemikiran Engineer Ali Engineer (Yogyakarta: UII Press, 2005)
- Ridho, Abdul Rasyid "Reformulasi Pemikiran: Studi Pemikiran Gender Asghar Ali Engineer" *Jurnal Sophist; Sosial Politik Kajian Islam dan Tafsir*, Vol. 2 No. 2, Juli-Desember 2020.
- Sari, Milya, "Penelitian Kepustakaan (Library Research) dalam Penelitian Pendidikan IPA" *Jurnal Natural Science*, Vol 6. No. 1, 2020, p. 44.
- Siahaan, Revi Angeli Rianthi Angrainy Sianturi, "Analisis Perbandingan Payment Gateway untuk Sistem Pembayaran Berbasis aplikasi dengan comparative Study" dalam *Jurnal JTIK*, Vol.11, No 2, April 2024.
- Wadud, Amina, *Qur'an Menurut Perempuan*, terj. oleh Abdullah Ali (Jakarta: Serambi, 2001)
- Wadud, Amina, *Qur'an and Woman, Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- Wadud, Amina, *Quran Menurut Perempuan: Membaca Kembali Kitab Suci dengan Semangat Keadilan*, terjemah Yaziar Radianti (Bandung: Pustaka, 1994).
- Yasin, Saif Ali, "Kesenjangan Gender Tentang Kepemimpinan Perempuan" (Skripsi: Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Malang, 2025).