



The Role of Women in Islam from the Perspective of Leila Ahmed's Feminist Epistemology

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[The author informations are in the declarations section. This article is published by ETLIN in Unity Lens, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2026, Page 1-5. DOI: 10.58920/unity0201594]

Received: 11 February 2026

Revised: 30 April 2026

Accepted: 14 May 2026

Published: 19 May 2026

Editor: Refti Handini Listyani



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Keywords: Islamic feminism, Feminist epistemology, Women in Islam, Patriarchal interpretation, Gender justice.

Abstract: Gender inequality in Muslim societies persists despite normative Islamic principles that emphasize justice and equality, largely due to historically constructed patriarchal interpretations. This study aims to analyze women's roles in Islam through Leila Ahmed's feminist epistemology, focusing on how such interpretations were produced and institutionalized. A qualitative library research design was employed, using primary works of Leila Ahmed and relevant secondary literature. Data were analyzed through historical and epistemological approaches, including thematic categorization and conceptual analysis. The findings indicate that women's marginalization originates from historical Islam rather than normative teachings. The institutionalization of patriarchal norms during the Abbasid period significantly limited women's participation in intellectual and public spheres. In addition, classical Islamic knowledge production reflects socially situated perspectives that exclude women as epistemological subjects. These findings demonstrate that gender inequality is structurally embedded within interpretative traditions rather than derived from religious doctrine. This study contributes by integrating historical context and feminist epistemology to provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender issues in Islam. Unlike previous descriptive studies, this research highlights the role of power relations in shaping religious knowledge. The results suggest that achieving gender justice requires not only reinterpretation of texts but also reconstruction of epistemological foundations. Future research is recommended to explore empirical applications of feminist epistemology in contemporary Muslim societies. Additionally, the study reinforces the importance of critically revisiting dominant interpretative frameworks and encourages inclusive knowledge production that acknowledges women's experiences as valid sources of religious understanding within broader Islamic intellectual traditions in contemporary scholarly discourse today.

Introduction

Gender inequality in Muslim societies remains a central issue in contemporary Islamic studies, particularly in relation to women's social, religious, and intellectual roles. Although Islam normatively promotes justice, equality, and human dignity, the lived experiences of Muslim women often reflect a different reality shaped by patriarchal interpretations of religious texts (1, 2). Classical Islamic scholarship, which developed within male-dominated socio-political contexts, frequently positioned women as subordinate rather than as active contributors to religious authority and knowledge production (3, 4). This historical condition has created a persistent gap between normative Islamic principles and social realities (5).

The research problem in this study lies in the dominance of patriarchal interpretations that continue to influence contemporary understandings of women's roles in Islam. In many cases, religious interpretations have been used to justify gender hierarchy and restrict women's access to leadership, education, and legal autonomy (6). Limitations on women's participation in public and religious authority are often rooted in interpretative traditions rather than in the foundational teachings of Islam itself. Despite the emergence of Islamic feminist thought, these patriarchal frameworks remain influential due to claims of objectivity and the perceived finality of classical interpretations (7, 8). This condition also contributes to the marginalization of women's experiences within authoritative Islamic discourse, despite normative principles that emphasize moral and equality (9, 10).

In response to this issue, feminist epistemology provides a critical framework to examine how knowledge is constructed and legitimized. Leila Ahmed's perspective is particularly important, as she distinguishes between normative Islam and historical Islam, arguing that women's marginalization is a product of socio-historical and political processes rather than inherent religious doctrine (2, 11). Previous studies have primarily examined gender inequality and feminist interpretations in Islam through socio-cultural and textual perspectives (12, 13). However, many of these studies remain descriptive and pay limited attention to how patriarchal religious authority was historically constructed and legitimized through epistemological processes. In particular, the integration of Leila Ahmed's feminist epistemology with historical analysis remains insufficiently explored in contemporary Islamic feminist scholarship. Therefore, this study contributes to Islamic feminist discourse by critically examining the historical construction of patriarchal interpretations through the lens of feminist epistemology. The study also reinforces the distinction between normative Islamic values and historically institutionalized gender ideologies.

Methodology

Study Design and Rationale

This study employed a qualitative research design using a library research approach, which is appropriate for examining philosophical, epistemological, and conceptual issues within Islamic thought (13). This approach allows for in-depth interpretation of theoretical frameworks, particularly Leila Ahmed's feminist epistemology, in analyzing women's roles in Islam.

Participants, Population, and Sampling

The primary data sources consisted of Leila Ahmed's key works, especially *Women and Gender in Islam*, which serves as the main theoretical foundation of this study (2, 11). Secondary sources included academic books and journal articles on Islamic feminism, epistemology, gender discourse, and women's roles in Islam that have been cited in the original manuscript, such as works by Fithriani *et al.*, Harahap *et al.*, and Wadud (14–16). Data selection followed purposive sampling, focusing only on sources that: (1) discuss women's roles in Islam, (2) address feminist or epistemological critiques of religious knowledge, and (3) provide historical or philosophical insights into gender construction in Islamic tradition (17). This selection ensures relevance and consistency with the research objectives.

Materials and Analytical Techniques

The study applied qualitative textual analysis through close reading, thematic categorization, and conceptual comparison. The analysis focused on identifying patterns related to patriarchal epistemology, gender representation, and the distinction between normative and historical Islam (2, 9). No digital coding software was used, as interpretative depth and conceptual coherence were prioritized.

To strengthen analytical rigor, the study combined historical and philosophical approaches. Historical analysis was used to examine the socio-political context that

shaped patriarchal interpretations, while philosophical analysis was applied to evaluate the epistemological assumptions underlying Islamic knowledge production (18–22).

Research Procedures

The research procedures were conducted systematically, beginning with the identification and classification of relevant literature, followed by in-depth textual analysis. Key concepts and arguments were extracted and organized into thematic categories such as patriarchal interpretation, epistemological bias, and gender exclusion. These themes were then analyzed within broader historical and intellectual contexts to ensure interpretative consistency (20, 21).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a descriptive analytical method combined with historical and philosophical approaches, as commonly applied in Islamic epistemological studies. Descriptive analysis was used to present Leila Ahmed's arguments systematically, while analytical interpretation was employed to critically examine the epistemological foundations of patriarchal discourse (2). This combination of methods ensures that the analysis is not only descriptive but also interpretative, aligning with the study's objective to explore the construction of knowledge and power relations in Islamic thought.

Results and Discussion

The findings demonstrate that women's marginalization in Islamic intellectual traditions is rooted not in normative Islamic teachings but in historically constructed patriarchal interpretations (16). Leila Ahmed's distinction between normative Islam and historical Islam provides a critical framework for understanding how gender hierarchy became embedded within religious discourse and institutionalized through interpretative traditions (23). This distinction is significant because it challenges essentialist assumptions that gender inequality is inherently derived from Islam itself. Instead, the findings indicate that patriarchal authority emerged through historical and socio-political processes that shaped religious interpretation and legitimized male dominance within Islamic scholarship.

Historically, this process can be traced to the Abbasid period, when socio-political conditions reinforced male-dominated scholarly authority and restricted women's participation in public and intellectual life (2, 24). The consolidation of religious authority during this period contributed to the normalization of patriarchal interpretations, which were gradually perceived as fixed and unquestionable religious truths. As a result, gender inequality continued to persist despite Islamic normative principles emphasizing justice, equality, and human dignity (25). This finding supports Ahmed's argument that the marginalization of women is closely related to historical power structures rather than theological necessity.

Ahmed's perspective is strongly influenced by her intellectual background, which combines Middle Eastern historical context with critical academic analysis. Through this perspective, Ahmed demonstrates that religious knowledge is not neutral but socially constructed and shaped by relations of power and authority. Consequently,

women's exclusion from knowledge production reflects structural and epistemological bias rather than authentic Islamic doctrine (16). This also suggests that the dominance of male-centered interpretations in classical Islamic scholarship cannot be separated from the political and cultural conditions in which such knowledge was produced.

From an epistemological standpoint, the findings emphasize that classical Islamic knowledge is situated and reflects the perspectives and interests of its producers. This aligns with feminist epistemology, which argues that knowledge production is influenced by social position and that marginalized voices, particularly women, have historically been excluded from authoritative discourse. Therefore, the study highlights the importance of critically re-examining the epistemological foundations of Islamic scholarship in order to create more inclusive and egalitarian interpretations.

Compared to previous studies that are largely descriptive, this study contributes by integrating historical and epistemological analysis to explain how patriarchal interpretations are constructed, legitimized, and sustained within Islamic discourse. The findings suggest that addressing gender inequality requires not only reinterpretation of religious texts but also critical reconstruction of the epistemological structures that shape religious authority and knowledge production. In this regard, the study reinforces the distinction between normative Islamic values and historically institutionalized patriarchal ideologies.

Conclusion

This study concludes that women's marginalization in Islamic tradition is primarily the result of historically constructed patriarchal interpretations rather than normative Islamic teachings. Through Leila Ahmed's feminist epistemology, the analysis demonstrates that religious knowledge is socially situated and shaped by power relations that have systematically excluded women as epistemological subjects. By integrating historical and epistemological analysis, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how gender inequality is constructed and sustained within Islamic intellectual traditions. The findings highlight that the issue is not merely interpretative but also structural, rooted in the processes of knowledge production. This study contributes to the existing literature by offering a more critical and analytical perspective that goes beyond descriptive accounts of gender inequality. It emphasizes that achieving gender justice in Islam requires not only reinterpretation of religious texts but also a reconstruction of the epistemological foundations that shape those interpretations. Furthermore, this study implies that future scholarly efforts should focus on developing more inclusive frameworks that recognize women's experiences as valid sources of knowledge. These frameworks may also contribute to strengthening women's participation in religious, educational, and intellectual spheres, thereby supporting a more equitable understanding of Islamic values in modern Muslim societies. Future research is recommended to explore the practical and empirical implications of feminist epistemology in contemporary Muslim societies.

Declaration

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicting interest.

Data Availability

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was not required for this study.

Funding Information

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Additional Information

How to Cite

APA 7th Edition: Puteri, A. S., Rasyidin, Y. & Nofrizal, N. (2026). The Role of Women in Islam from the Perspective of Leila Ahmed's Feminist Epistemology. *Unity Lens*, 2(1), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.58920/unity0201594>

Vancouver: Puteri AS, Rasyidin Y, Nofrizal N. The Role of Women in Islam from the Perspective of Leila Ahmed's Feminist Epistemology. *Unity Lens*. 2026;2(1):1-5. <https://doi.org/10.58920/unity0201594>

Harvard: Puteri, A. S., Rasyidin, Y. & Nofrizal, N. (2026) 'The Role of Women in Islam from the Perspective of Leila Ahmed's Feminist Epistemology', *Unity Lens*, 2(1), pp. 1-5. doi: 10.58920/unity0201594

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