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Exploring Female Muslim Educational Leadership in a Multicultural Canadian Context

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Abstract: This study explores the stories and experiences of female Muslim leaders in K-12 Islamic schools in Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Canada. Using the Islamic Leadership theory and practice framework, visible minority leaders from K-12 Islamic Schools were empowered to share their leadership narratives reflecting on their own identities as females and Muslim leaders in a multicultural context. Based on interviews with five school leaders, this study unveils that female Muslim leaders in K-12 schools prioritize personalized leadership, compassionate treatment of individuals, adaptive leadership, a strong emphasis on faith-based identity, and a theocentric worldview in their practice of educational leadership. Ultimately, this study sheds light on female Muslim educational leaders' diverse and profound perspectives, showcasing their roles as initiators, role models, and facilitators of positive change in their communities. Their narratives reveal the significance of faith, compassion, and inclusivity in leadership, serving as valuable insights for enhancing leadership practices in Canadian K-12 Islamic education.

Keywords: Islamic leadership; K-12 context; female Muslim educational leaders; multicultural; intersectional identities



Citation: Amatullah, Tasneem. 2024. Exploring Female Muslim Educational Leadership in a Multicultural Canadian Context. *Religions* 15: 215. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020215>

Academic Editors: John P. Bartkowski and Fella Lahmar

Received: 10 October 2023

Revised: 16 January 2024

Accepted: 1 February 2024

Published: 14 February 2024



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1. Introduction

Islamic schooling is on the rise in the global north and so is a growing body of literature that analyzes a wide variety of issues related to Islamic schooling, such as culturally relevant leadership (Ezzani and Brooks 2019), spiritual leadership (Egel and Fry 2017), educational leadership stories of Muslim women in Qatar (Amatullah 2018, 2023), school culture (Lahmar 2020), Muslim identity, (Ezzani and Brooks 2019; Ezzani and King 2018), Islamic school leadership and social justice (Ezzani et al. 2021), women's narratives around gender and stereotypes about Islam (Alghamdi 2007, 2012; Alghamdi et al. 2022) and balanced leadership model from an Islamic perspective (El-Bassiouny et al. 2023; ElKaleh 2023). Scholars have even developed frameworks around Islamic leadership (Brooks and Ezzani 2021; Arar et al. 2023; Brooks and Mutohar 2018) and carried out systematic literature reviews (Ezzani et al. 2021; Arar et al. 2023). Despite this progress in embracing inclusivity with Islamic schooling options in the global north, orientalism and Islamophobia continue to perpetuate the hegemonic discourses in dehumanizing Muslims (Abu-Lughod 2006; Pew Research Center 2017) and reiterate similar stereotypes about Muslims being dangerous on one end of the spectrum and oppressed on the other (Tessler 2003; Droogsmas 2007). Much scholarship exists around the educational leadership theme, but none focuses on female Muslim educational leaders in the global north. In order to explore the real-life experiences of Muslims in this part of the world, I share female Muslim educational leaders' experiences in the K-12 Canadian context, specifically in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

Canada is a land of immigrants and opportunities, and every citizen has equal rights, privileges, and opportunities to succeed in their lives, although it is very competitive and challenging. Canada stands out for its ethnocultural and religious diversity, with 450 ethnic or cultural origins reported in the 2021 census. About half of the Canadian population, 53.3%, has reported following Christianity, with 34.6% reporting no religious affiliation.

Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism have more than doubled in the past 20 years, increasing from 16.5% in 2001 to 34.6% in 2021, with a rise of 2.0% to 4.9% for Muslims alone.

On the one hand, diverse immigrants appreciate the quality of life in Canada, which includes excellent education and health benefits, to name a few. At the same time, because of the extreme diversity in the Canadian population, ethnic minorities are vulnerable and face much struggle for immigrants to settle down in Canada. The category of ethnic minorities, especially certain visible minorities such as Muslims and Sikhs, face a whole different scenario in the job market (Rahim 2014). Hence, in light of this study, I argue that being a Muslim and a female is a multi-layered minority identity an individual holds, and studying their leadership experiences will shed light on a variety of issues from a gender lens, leadership lens, and Islamic lens. The central question guiding this study is: How do female Muslim leaders in Canada narrate their experiences in K-12 settings? Specifically, my research focuses on how these Muslim women integrate Islamic Leadership Theory and practice in the multicultural context of Canada. I aim to emphasize the positive narratives these female leaders may bring rather than reiterating the same negative stereotypes on which much has been studied (Tessler 2003; Droogsmma 2007). I believe these stories would empower the leaders from visible minority populations to share their experiences through reflection, illuminating ways to maneuver their leadership roles as visible minority members.

This research focusing on Muslim female leaders' experiences in K-12 settings in the Canadian context addresses four gaps in the literature: (1) that of Muslim leader narratives on leadership; (2) that of female Muslim leader narratives on leadership; (3) that of female leader narratives in K-12 settings, and (4) that of female leaders themselves narrating about their experiences as a leader in a Canadian context. Furthermore, I envision that these women leaders' narratives may offer exciting insights into their experiences and highlight the challenges associated with working in a K-12 setting in Canada.

2. Exploring Educational Leadership Models: Instructional, Transformational, Distributed Leadership and Islamic Leadership

Educational leadership has been studied for several decades in different contexts. Despite the wealth of literature on various forms, functions, and definitions of leadership, there is no universally agreed-upon description or model (Dimmock and Walker 2005; Stewart 2006). Research on different types of leadership initially focused on different traits of leaders; later, the discourse shifted to the skills and behaviors of leaders while also considering contextual factors (Dimmock and Walker 2000). In this section, I will broadly summarize the evolution of leadership styles and briefly talk about the three most prominent educational leadership styles followed by Islamic leadership.

Starting with the notion that "leaders are born, not made," the Great Man theory existed from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s. It came with a notion that leaders have superior abilities and are "rooted in the presumptions of royalty and the privileged class traditions" (Roberts 2007, p. 42). Eventually, from 1907 to 1947, leaders' traits gained dominance over the family inheritance, moving on to the behavioral skills of the leaders from the 1950s for about three decades. Roberts (2007) explains that research back then consistently confirmed some leadership behaviors to be successful that "there is one best way to lead and that to be effective required combining relational and task dimensions in leadership" (Roberts 2007, p. 23). However, situational and contingency theories in the 1950s to 1960s presented a contrary perspective that leaders did not practice the same behavior in all situations and that the situations defined how leaders behaved and made decisions. The focus then shifted to leaders being influential on their team members, as leadership is a social process that demands leaders to be constructive and empowering. Finally, the chaos and systems theory began in 1990, highlighting the ever-changing dynamics of the education systems. Leaders must be agile, adaptive, and simultaneously cognizant of the system they operate in.

3. Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership started gaining popularity in the 1980s and has been prevalent in education until now (Bush and Glover 2014). The central premise is that an instructional leader provides an effective teaching and learning environment for school improvement by increasing student outcomes. Hallinger (2005) further elaborates that this type of leadership aims to create more accountability in the school systems.

Early descriptions of instructional leadership, such as Heck and Marcoulides (1990), highlighted vital practices like setting high academic expectations, promoting professional development, using data to monitor student progress, and emphasizing quality instruction. Hallinger (2003) expanded on this, defining instructional leadership with three central features: defining the school's mission, supervising teaching and learning, and fostering a positive learning atmosphere. Research on instructional leadership underscores its positive impact on student learning. For example, Kleine-Kracht (1993) found that instructional leadership involves direct interactions between principals and teachers concerning classroom teaching and student performance. Glasman and Heck (1992) proposed that school leaders influence outcomes through indirect pathways like decision-making processes, vision development, goal-setting, and stakeholder engagement.

In a study by Bryk et al. (2010), instructional leadership emerged as a significant factor in school improvement and enhanced student learning in urban U.S. schools. Robinson et al. (2007) identified five aspects of instructional leadership that substantially influence students: setting goals and expectations, strategic resource allocation, curriculum planning and evaluation, teacher learning and development, and creating a supportive environment.

However, instructional leadership has not been without criticism. Some argue that it places excessive focus on principals, ignoring the roles of teachers, leadership teams, and other potential leaders (Bush and Glover 2014). Critics like Dimmock (1995) find it prescriptive and top-down, potentially leading to bureaucracy and excessive centralized decision-making. Lee et al. (2012) even suggest that direct supervision of instruction may weaken students' perceptions of school.

4. Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership, introduced by Burns (1978), involves leaders transforming organizations by enhancing followers' attitudes, motivation, behaviors, and achievements. In educational contexts, this model emphasizes shared vision-building, high-performance expectations, intellectual stimulation, and enthusiasm to improve commitment to organizational goals and enhance educational outcomes (Bush and Glover 2014).

Leithwood et al. (1998, 2004) have significantly positioned transformational leadership within an educational context. They emphasized the importance of leaders in enhancing problem-solving capabilities and promoting a shared vision, making school leaders central to the educational change process. Research has shown the positive effects of transformational leadership on student learning outcomes. Leithwood et al. (1999) found a high correlation between transformational leadership and students' test scores. Moreover, transformational leadership impacts the psychological states of individuals experiencing it, leading to increased commitment, job satisfaction, and motivation (Leithwood et al. 1999; Stewart 2006).

On the contrary, Bush and Glover (2014) posit that transformational leadership cannot be effective in rigid or hierarchical systems where principals do not have the authority to implement change. Furthermore, in systems of accountability, the principal transformational approach has not been proven effective (Bottery 2004). Finally, Avolio et al. (2009) say that transformational leadership lacks universal applicability as the cultural context informs it of respective schools.

5. Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership emphasizes more collaborative and shared forms of educational leadership. Bush and Glover (2014) posit that distributed leadership enhances organiza-

tional capacity as it is collective and empowers all school members in leadership roles irrespective of whether or not they hold formal leadership positions. The underlying principles of distributed leadership are trust, collaboration, interpersonal relationships, teamwork, and fluid leadership roles depending on the individual's expertise (Bennett et al. 2003). Scholars have further argued that effective distributed leadership helps improve student achievement (Leithwood et al. 2008; Hallinger and Heck 2010). Another leadership model, teacher leadership, focuses on empowering teachers and on school improvement efforts within the distributed leadership domain (see Muijs and Harris 2007).

As with other leadership models, distributed leadership has its challenges. Helterbran (2010) argues that distributed leadership may not be sustained in systems where collective leadership is not feasible. Furthermore, if teachers do not have the necessary expertise to lead an initiative, teacher leadership may be challenging to implement (Timperley 2005). Furthermore, people accustomed to hierarchical systems would resist distributed forms of leadership and refrain from being accountable (Lieberman et al. 2000).

6. Islamic Educational Leadership

According to Beekun and Badawi (1999), from an Islamic perspective, "Leadership is a trust (Amaanah). It represents a psychological contract between a leader and his followers that he will try his best to guide them, to protect them, and to treat them justly" (p. vii). Arar et al. (2022), in their systematic review of Islamic-based educational leadership, reveal that no studies were published on Islamic leadership between 1990 and 2003, with the first study coming in 2003. Furthermore, although several scholars have been studying Islamic educational leadership, efforts to define educational leadership from an Islamic lens are theoretical (Brooks and Mutohar 2018). Amatullah (2018), however, shares that "one common thread grounds it [Islamic leadership], that is understanding leadership based on Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH)" (p. 23).

The Journal of Educational Administration and History (2018) released a special issue on Islamic educational leadership. Brooks (2018) shares that "authors in this special issue, Muslim and non-Muslim, advocate for increased understanding of Islam and Muslims, especially during the current rise of nationalist rhetoric, fearmongering, and heightened socio-political tensions" (p. 51).

Brooks and Mutohar (2018) propose a framework for educational leadership drawing from Islamic values and belief systems, such as demonstrating good counsel, engaging in shura (consultation), working for the community in the interest of the public, encouraging the right and discouraging wrong, be accountable for their actions while also engaging in constant reflection (p. 57). These values, further personalized by individual leaders, shape their beliefs about Islam, education, culture, and leadership, allowing leaders to adapt their leadership to their respective contexts.

Another article in this issue by Arar and Haj-Yehai (2018) carried out a hermeneutic content analysis of four texts by Islamic scholars during Islam's Golden Age. The authors compared Islamic educational leadership with modern educational leadership theory and practices, arguing that scholars studied Islamic educational leadership several ages ago, which could offer historical insights into the recent development of the diverse and inclusive educational leadership realm.

On the other hand, Maysaa Barakat (2018) focused on the rights of Muslim students' public education opportunities in the United States, as many Muslim families prefer faith-based schools and pay out of pocket to continue their ward's education based on their religious value system. Barakat (2018) presents an autoethnography account that sheds light on various challenges for Muslims in the public education system, such as assimilation, integration, and multiculturalism, drawing from her experiences as a Muslim educator (p. 87).

Khalil and DeCuir (2018) focused on female leaders' agency as an emancipatory praxis to combat injustice and oppression, aligning with the principles of Islamic Feminism. Through empirical research, they highlighted how Muslim female school leaders prioritize

equity, community, and resistance when leading American Islamic Schools. This study contributed to developing an Islamic feminist school leadership framework, emphasizing themes such as modeling an equitable and just ethic, nurturing a communal culture, and leading for transformational resistance. Furthermore, [Ezzani and King \(2018\)](#) presented an oral history of an American Muslim educational leader's journey within U.S. public schools. This narrative offered valuable insights into the struggles faced by Muslim students dealing with Islamophobia, portraying the essence of their "jihad" or struggle.

In parallel with these studies, faculty members in the leadership and management department at the University Sains Islam Malaysia conducted significant research. They aimed to develop themes forming the basis for an Islamic Leadership Inventory ([Mahazan et al. 2015](#)). This research extended their previous study, encompassing literature from the Quran and Hadiths, managerial leadership, servant leadership, contemporary Islamic leadership, and classical texts of Islamic leadership. The culmination of this research identified 25 key themes, including trustworthiness and integrity, empowerment, social responsibility, and justice and equity. These themes were aligned with Maqasid Al-Shariah, a higher-level perspective of Islamic Shariah, further enhancing the framework's credibility and applicability.

In summary, the diverse range of studies on Islamic educational leadership underscores the importance of dispelling misconceptions, understanding Islamic leadership values, and developing comprehensive frameworks. These frameworks, rooted in Islamic principles and aligned with Maqasid Al-Shariah, offer valuable guidance for leaders in various educational contexts, fostering equity, justice, and inclusivity.

7. Theoretical Framework

This narrative inquiry is informed by Islamic Leadership theory and practices. [Beekun and Badawi \(1999\)](#), in their book *Leadership: An Islamic Perspective*, identified vision as one of the main criteria for defining leadership that is common to both Western and Islamic leadership. However, they delved further and suggested leadership as a "social exchange process" that requires leaders to communicate their vision clearly with followers, thereby making leadership a mutually responsible process. [Padela \(2015\)](#) contributes to the existing Islamic leadership literature and posits that humans were created for the sole purpose of worshipping God ([Al-Attas 1993](#); [Beekun and Badawi 2005](#)) and further argues that any action that is taken in conformation to the Islamic law correlates to worship ([Chittick 2007](#)). Therefore, leadership, from this perspective, becomes a form of worship. [Padela \(2015\)](#) concludes that there are two main categories characterizing Islamic leadership: modeling and directing behaviors and motivating followers to a theocentric worldview. These findings emerge from his extensive study of a standard textbook of Hadith, *Riyad al-Salihin*. [Uthaymeen \(1998\)](#) clarifies that 1896 hadiths have been taught and read for centuries until now from this source. I will analyze these female leaders' narratives in light of Padela's Islamic leadership theory and practice (2015), given the in-depth and critical study of Prophet Muhammad's teachings and sayings from the most prominent textbook of Hadith.

7.1. Modeling and Directing Behaviors

In the initial core category, Padela's study underscores Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) modeling and guiding behaviors, which gave rise to four primary themes: leadership behaviors. These themes are personalized leadership, the relationship with God and humanity, the treatment of people, and adaptive leadership. Additionally, each theme led to the distinct leadership qualities that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) exhibited, as outlined in [Table 1](#) below. Furthermore, according to Padela's analysis, "Prophet Muhammad believed that everyone had a contextual leadership role, and that leadership was personalized on a person's social, political, and economic standing" (p. 66).

Table 1. Leadership Behaviors of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Conceptual Category: Modeling and Directing Behaviors.

Conceptual Category	Themes (Leadership Behaviors)	Properties
Modeling and directing behaviors	Personalized leadership	Leadership roles Role Modeling
	Relationship with God and humanity	Devotion to God Concern for followers
	Treatment of People	Promoting gentleness Promoting justice Promoting the welfare of the weak
	Adaptive leadership	Follower potential

To elaborate, personalized leadership delves into the various leadership roles that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) played and his exemplary qualities as a role model. The second theme, the relationship between God and humanity, underscores the leader's dual role of devotion to God while fulfilling their responsibilities toward their followers. The third theme emphasizes the importance of treating individuals with kindness and fairness and actively promoting the well-being of the vulnerable. Lastly, the fourth theme centers on an adaptive leadership approach, where leaders consider their followers' abilities when assigning tasks. It is worth noting that the first three themes lean towards a leader-centered theory model, while the final theme adopts a follower-centric perspective (Padela 2015).

7.2. Developing a Theocentric Worldview

The second category Padela (2015) developed to create a model for Islamic educational leadership to guide leaders in K-12 Islamic schools in the United States. However, in this study, the model has been adapted for application in the Canadian K-12 context, which is similar to the context of the U.S. yet is more multicultural. Table 2 below contains themes and characteristics aimed at constructing a theocentric worldview, or in Islamic terms, a Tawhid-centered model (Amatullah 2018).

Table 2. Islamic Educational Leadership Model based on the Leadership Behaviors of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Conceptual Category: Developing a Theocentric Worldview.

Conceptual Category	Themes (Leadership Behaviors)	Properties
Developing a theocentric worldview	Fidelity to God and His Prophet	Active reflection Precedence of the afterlife
	Developing a faith-based identity	Ummah Familial ties Social responsibility Preventing harm

Note: From (Padela 2015). A grounded theory study of the Prophet Muhammad's leadership behaviors: A Model for Islamic School Principals. Doctoral dissertation. Retrieved from Fisher Digital Publications. Education Doctoral, Paper 243, p. 77.

Within this conceptual category, there are two primary themes. The first theme centers on unwavering devotion to God and His Prophet, involving active contemplation and a firm belief in life after death as its two fundamental characteristics. The central concept behind this theme is that leaders are constantly reminded of God and the accountability of all their leadership actions and decisions, as they will be held accountable in the afterlife.

The second theme emphasizes the importance of cultivating a faith-based identity by serving the Ummah (the Muslim community), maintaining solid familial bonds, demonstrating social responsibility, and avoiding causing harm to anyone through their actions.

8. Methodology

This study employed an interpretivist discourse of research to illuminate Muslim female leaders' experiences in Canadian schools and specifically to address how female educational leaders in Canada narrate their experiences of leadership (Benton and Craib 2010). As Quantz (2015) asserts, interpretivists seek to "understand how others make meaning of their world with a further assumption that people construct their worlds in some way" (emphasis in original). Interpretive discourse complements my present inquiry by prioritizing female leaders' narratives about the meaning of leadership roles in a multicultural context. The core of the narrative inquiry is to listen to the narratives and experiences of the researcher and the participants in a particular place, at a given particular time, and that which is ongoing and transactional. Furthermore, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain that "experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of [studying] narrative experience. Therefore, the educational experience should be studied narratively" (p. 19).

Creswell (2013) elaborates that narrative as a method emphasizes the experiences of individuals as told by the participants from their "lived" and "told" stories (p. 70). Leavy (2008) also adds that narrative methods help the researcher and the participant work collaboratively to explore their [participants] lived stories and unravel "multidimensional meanings" from the data (p. 27), making the narrative inquiry process complex. Moreover, the process gets even more complicated since the researcher and the participant work collaboratively to construct these stories by telling and retelling them. Furthermore, Kim (2016) clarifies that narratives help organize human leadership experiences and can be studied to help illuminate leadership practices for further reflection.

As the core of the narrative research is to shed light on participants' experiences in-depth, the number of research participants should not be of concern as "narrative inquiry focuses on deep explorations of a small number of cases in a particular context" (Bold 2012, p. 57). Furthermore, qualitative research focuses not on a generalization of data but on the "transformation of the practice in a specific context" (p. 57). Riessman (2008, p. 23) emphasizes that interviews are more like "narrative occasions" and that "the narrative inquirer may note stories but more often records actions, doings and happenings, all of which are narrative expressions" (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p. 79) which helped develop a comprehensive narrative of the leaders. To be clear, the object of study is the narratives female leaders use to share their leadership experiences and not the experiences of the leaders themselves. I am more interested in what the leaders say or how they interpret or make meaning of their own experience than I am in their actual experiences from some "objective" or outsider lens.

For this study, I used convenience sampling to find five leaders in Islamic schools in GTA, Canada, with three or more years of K-12 leadership experience (see Table 3). I conducted two one-on-one interviews with each leader, each meeting lasting 45–60 min. The interview questions focused on understanding female leaders' perspective on educational leadership based on their lived experiences, such as how they define leadership being a female leader, keeping in mind the Canadian context, the influence of multicultural context, examples of leadership experiences that complemented her as a female Muslim leader in Canada, and some examples that were of challenging experiences.

I adopted a thematic analysis approach to analyze the interview data that helped me develop their stories (Riessman 2008; Bold 2012). In Bold's words, "thematic experience analysis encompasses two ideas that the researcher is often seeking and identifying themes (or not) within the narratives; and that experiences usually involve relationships between people and contexts" (Bold 2012, p. 129). The interviews were transcribed and analyzed for codes manually. The transcripts were read and re-read as individual cases, then analyzed for cross-cutting themes by carrying out a preliminary set of coding followed by a round of secondary coding. The narratives were developed meticulously sincerely to reflect the leaders' voices as closely as possible while also maneuvering my identity as a Muslim female educator aware of Canada's K-12 Islamic schooling context from an insider lens.

Table 3. Research Participants: Demographic Information.

School Leader	Position	Educational Background	Years of Experience	Pseudonym
Leader 1	Head of Social Worker	Degree in Counseling	7 years	Sarah
Leader 2	Principal	Electronic and Communications Engineer	4 years	Amna
Leader 3	Vice Principal	Graduate degree in Math and Statistics	14 years	Fatma
Leader 4	Character Education Program Lead	Graduate degree in Science	3 years	Nadia
Leader 5	Vice Principal	Graduate degree in Education	3 years	Khadija

9. Data Analysis

Each narrative case was further analyzed for overlapping themes and variations, leading to a cross-case analysis (Stake 1995). Several main themes and sub-themes emerged from the analysis, leading to six themes. The first theme presented leaders' understanding of educational leadership from their perspectives. The second theme highlighted what it means to them to be a female leader in K-12 Islamic schools in Canada. In contrast, the third theme gathered their experiences as female leaders in a multicultural context. The fourth theme explained their leadership stories, highlighting how leaders maneuver their intersectional identities. The fifth and the sixth themes shed light on female leaders' complementary and challenging leadership experiences, respectively.

In addition to their diverse insights on their own leadership experiences, the five leaders who participated in this study reflected diversity concerning their positions and years of experience. One leader was a Principal, two were Vice Principals, one was a subject head, and another was a social worker head. Their years of experience ranged from a minimum of three years to a maximum of fourteen years in K-12 Islamic schools in Canada.

9.1. Insights on How Leaders Define Educational Leadership: Leading by Example, Community and Service-Oriented, and Teacher Empowerment

Sarah's notion of leadership was community-oriented and moved beyond her level. She expressed that educational leadership does not extend to just serving the Muslim community but even to the broader community as well. She said, "Leadership is not about just what we do but how we can better our community, and that is not just to say our Muslim community but the greater community as well" (Sarah). She said leadership is also about bringing positive change in their school contexts in collaboration with the community. Likewise, Amna echoed her leadership to be more collaborative, community, and service-oriented. Amna is a strong team player who believes leaders succeed because of their teams. She strongly argues that leadership is about letting the team members work and learn from each other.

Fatma and Nadia, on the other hand, believe that leadership is about empowering and supporting the growth of teachers professionally by "helping" them rather than "scrutinizing" them (Fatma). For Nadia, as well, leadership is about guiding and supporting people.

Fatma, to elaborate on her understanding of leadership, recalled her way of communicating with teachers:

I tell them [teachers] regularly that my job is I am not here to scrutinize you as much as I am here to help you to do your job, to help you with challenging children, help you with parent concerns, help you with like, you know, even your practice, you know, by giving them tips on how they can improve all those things. I see it [leadership] as a support role and understanding the people I work with.

So, my strength in this school is understanding who is good at what. Knowing people's strengths and what they are good at is an asset, and I work very much on building relationships. (Fatma)

Finally, Khadija brought a new perspective to educational leadership. She explained that leadership is more about initiating and leading by example for impactful teaching and learning practices. She further clarified that any change she suggests tries and implements herself, so she sets an example for her team to follow.

9.2. Female Leadership, in Their Own Words

When leaders were asked what it means to be a female leader, they paused for a quick reflection and shared various perspectives. Sarah began to express her thoughts by praising Allah with words such as "Subhan Allah" and "Alhamdulillah". She identified the progress the society has made, whether in secular or non-secular countries, with women being seen in many leadership positions. She acknowledged that she faced some challenges, which were never due to gender biases or that she was hindered due to her female identity. For Sarah, being a Muslim woman and a leader has always been a positive experience. It has empowered her to make impactful changes in her community that benefit society.

Amna critically reflected on this question and shared the purpose and creation of man and woman from an Islamic perspective. She argues that Allah has created men and women with specific traits, and women especially lead with compassion and care. In her own words,

I still understand that Amir [leader], Allah has made men as leaders, Amirs, for a reason. You know, whether it is in a family structure- your father or your husband is an Amir. Moreover, I cannot deny that fact. Moreover, that fact is for a reason. Likewise, women are strong and have been given Allah's different kinds of compassion, strength, and resilience. Those are different traits, and these are different traits that men have. There is no comparison. Furthermore, bringing the compassion and care that women naturally have out in a community, out of the family, to raise these kids, I am just bringing the traits that Allah has given me and bringing it out more to a more extensive family structure than a smaller one. That is for me, what I am doing as a leader here. . . There is no feminism in this. You know, women can be leaders, and we can do this, we can do that. Allah talks about justice, the 'Adl' like, you know, you have your characteristics and way of dealing with things. You are here to serve the school and community; you are doing and playing your leadership role in an extended family circle. (Amna)

Fatma and Khadija echoed similar thoughts that they are more empathetic as female leaders. Fatma shared that staff feel more comfortable coming to her because of her empathetic relationship with them. She further expressed that it is partly due to the motherly traits that women bring to the workplace. On the other hand, over the years, she has also learned that she needs to be firm to achieve specific goals for school improvement. So, finding the right balance between empathy and firmness was her way of being a female leader. In addition to being empathetic, Nadia added that women as leaders are more detail-oriented, which has helped her lead better as a female leader in her institution.

9.3. Multicultural Context of Canada and School Leadership Experiences

All leaders unanimously acknowledged the considerable diversity in their schools in terms of culture, students' geographic locations, and familial practices. Leaders agreed that although there is no explicit religious diversity because all students enrolled in their schools are Muslims, there was diversity in their religious values and practices within the same religion. For example, Fatma explained that the concepts of "halal" and "haram" come to light with eating preferences from various Muslim family backgrounds, "some families are very strict about these things, whereas some are flexible," and we teach children to be accepting of each other irrespective of the differences. Leaders expressed that some

teachers from non-Muslim backgrounds collaboratively work together, embracing each other's differences. Nadia shared one of her experiences as a leader in her community: she faced rejection due to differences and was the only diverse member in the group. However, she emphasized that when she worked building rapport with her community members, they were keen on learning more about people from different cultures and belief systems. On the other hand, Khadijah expressed multiculturalism in terms of immigrant students from different geographic locations, such as India, Pakistan, and the Middle East, who migrate to Canada for good. She continued to share that their school embraces and celebrates diversity in events such as Islamic Heritage Month, where "teachers showcase their culture through art, food, and flags; it is very inclusive". Amna attests to this in her comment,

We come up with events in our school to understand diverse cultures that impact my leadership skills and role- welcoming diversity, understanding it, representing it, and being a proud leader of a diverse institution or culture is unique. It changes my perspective of leadership. (Amna)

Sarah acknowledged that Canada's multicultural context greatly influences her leadership style in her role as a head social worker. Considering her role, Sarah remarked that mental health is universal and does not look at caste, creed, ethnicity, or religion. However, in designing interventions to support individuals coping with mental health concerns, Sarah highlights the following:

Religion plays a huge part in planning the interventions. If a person does not believe in something and you use it as an intervention, it will not be very effective. In fact, within our community, I have seen families often want to seek counseling from Muslim professionals. Furthermore, even other community organizations with Muslim representation in their workforce have invited me to deliver workshops. (Sarah)

In conclusion, these leaders showcased a deep commitment to embracing diversity within their institutions. Their collective efforts reflect a dedication to fostering inclusivity, understanding, and representation, creating environments where students and communities can thrive regardless of their cultural differences. These leaders demonstrate that by actively engaging with diversity, they not only enhance their leadership skills but also contribute to the creation of inclusive spaces that celebrate the richness of varied backgrounds and perspectives.

9.4. Maneuvering Intersectional Identities

Regarding intersectional identities, Amna highlights that it is impossible to have a clear divide between personalities at home and work, further emphasizing that her religious and gender identity has been framed from childhood and how one is raised. She also shares that the principle she was raised with does not discriminate between genders but believes in roles and responsibilities based on their ability as per Islamic teachings. She exclaims that she firmly holds on to this principle in her leadership role. For Khadijah, her intersectional identity revolves more around gender and religious identities. She argues that intermingling these identities has made her leadership more empathetic. In her own words,

It [various identities] makes me more empathetic. It just makes me more human. It makes me more humble. Sometimes, I even ask Allah SWT¹ if I deserve this position. Moreover, if I do, I pray that Allah takes the best work from me because I need to justify why I am here and please make me just and fair in my practices. . . I want to be a better version of myself. (Khadijah)

Fatma, while reiterating similar thoughts that her leadership is more caring, being a Muslim female leader brings to light an experience of dissonance, which is more ingrained in society as a cultural stereotype. Fatma's experience below confirms the perpetuating nature of gender stereotypes in the culture. She explains,

In our culture and society, if a man and a woman exist, people will believe the man. This has happened to me when interacting with the parents. I am the Vice Principal, and the Principal was a male. They would insist, 'No, I want to meet the Principal,' even though I deal with academic concerns. Even with traffic control duty outside the school during student arrival and dispersal times, people are more compliant if there is a male member outside on duty than the female members. It is a remnant of the colonial mentality, and if people have British or American accents, it is like icing on the cake!

Collectively, these leaders highlight the need for ongoing reflection, challenge cultural stereotypes, and strive for a more just and inclusive leadership landscape that acknowledges and respects diverse, intersectional identities.

9.5. Complementary Female Leadership Experiences

All leaders reflected on their leadership journeys and shared complementary experiences in their respective roles. As the head of social work, Sarah recalls that her identity as a Muslim female leader enables her to respond holistically to counseling needs. She elaborates that generally, in the mental health and social work field, there is a clear dominance of secular ideas. Nevertheless, her approach to mental health relates to non-secular ideas. One of her community projects was providing mental health and counseling workshops to frontline workers during the pandemic. After offering the workshops and reflecting on the feedback, Sarah explained the following:

Being a female and having an Islamic background, the workshops were well received by frontline workers and administrative staff because they provided a holistic perspective to counseling. They said it helped them develop more culturally sensitive counseling strategies to meet the diverse needs of their clients.

Fatma shared one of her complementary leadership experiences, which was very satisfying in her role. She shared that one student had been very anxious since he started schooling as a kindergartener and would cry all the time up until he moved to grade 2. So, as a Vice Principal, she would constantly develop strategies that could help him transition into school settings with lots of motivation and play-based learning. Finally, as the student grew, he performed a role play on stage, and she witnessed him as a confident young student; she felt accomplished in her role as a leader.

Khadijah reflected more on the teamwork between herself as a Vice-Principal and other coordinators while recalling the complementary leadership experiences. She explained that the leadership team has reinforced the principle of working in the teaching profession for the sake of Allah and that it has transformed all aspects of their work life. She reflects and continues to say, "We are all working to please Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala, and because we have that underlying principle, all teachers are mindful of what they are doing, and the result is always excellent, Alhamdulillah". Furthermore, the school has a culture of consultation (shura), which helps quickly achieve the shared vision.

Finally, Amna recalled her transition from Vice Principal to Principal as one of the most memorable leadership experiences. She elaborated that the school board was looking for a candidate for the former school principal who recommended her. She delightfully remarked,

I did not realize my efforts and contributions as a Vice Principal until the Principal described me. He went on and on with many adjectives describing me and providing a rationale for why I fit that role, not because I am a successor but because of my skills and abilities. It is still afresh in my memory, and I was literally in tears! As it came from my mentor and the board, it was exceptional and motivating for me to continue delivering my best in my new leadership role. (Amna)

Collectively, these narratives underscore the multifaceted nature of effective leadership and the transformative impact leaders can have on individuals and institutions.

9.6. Challenging Female Leadership Experiences

Khadijah recalled that one of her challenging leadership stories relates to how she welcomes all tasks and cannot say “no.” She further reflects that in the quest to learn more and be supportive and collaborative, she has suffered from a heavy workload because of accepting all tasks from senior and junior staff, which has had adverse consequences on her health for a long time. She has since strived to sustain a more collaborative and accountable work culture and does most of her work with “Shura”. She expressed that she is also learning to say a “mindful yes” when accepting additional workload. Fatma, a Vice Principal, reflects on her leadership role and explains that teacher resistance is one of the challenges she faced when she started. However, she invested more time in creating an inclusive work culture, listening more to the issues that teachers have, and making them involved in decision-making. For example, she shares using a restorative approach, engages with teachers in hearing their workload-related issues, and identifies strategies to overcome them in collaboration with the teachers.

Sarah experienced a gendered situation that made her role challenging in one situation at school. She explains,

As a female leader in mental health, I remember meeting with a parent to consult about their ward. I felt that my view and the feedback were received, perhaps not taken seriously, and parents started to argue with me despite knowing that it was professional advice. At that moment, I felt it was due to gender bias, and because it was ‘pink,’ I immediately called my male Principal into that meeting. The meeting turned productive, and the Principal confirmed my advice.

While recalling some challenging leadership experiences, Amna shares a situation that could be positive and negative, given her female identity. She elaborates that as a female leader, she comes from a world of care and compassion, and she believes that females are much more transparent and offer more explanations of their decisions to their team members. She explains that male leaders speak less, and female leaders often fill in the gaps. So, in one way, this creates a more collaborative and friendly relationship with her team. However, on the other hand, it also turns out to be challenging in some situations where people use the detail out of context, then too much knowledge sharing becomes a challenge. She asserts that it is a “fitra” women have from her perspective, and when situations demand less explanation, she feels that she needs to learn how male leaders lead people in minimum words.

10. Discussion and Conclusions—Applying Padela’s Islamic Leadership Framework

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the perspectives and experiences of female Muslim leaders in the context of education in Canada. To analyze these findings effectively within the context of Padela’s (2015) Islamic Leadership Framework, I categorize the discussion into four main sections, as follows.

10.1. Educational Leadership Defined by Muslim Female Leaders

The study reveals that Muslim female leaders in Canada define educational leadership in diverse yet interconnected ways. Sarah and Amna emphasize the community and service-oriented aspects of leadership. Their leadership is not limited to serving only the Muslim community but extends to the broader community. They emphasize collaboration and teamwork, recognizing that leaders are successful because of their teams. While community-oriented educational leadership is a core characteristic of Islamic educational leadership, according to Padela (2015), the emphasis on collaboration and teamwork aligns with the principles of distributed leadership (Bennett et al. 2003).

On the other hand, Fatma and Nadia view educational leadership through the lens of teacher empowerment. They see their role as support and guidance rather than scrutiny, fostering professional growth among teachers. The focus on teacher empowerment also aligns with transformational leadership, whereby the leader motivates their team members through shared vision-building, high-performance expectations, and overall improved

commitment to organizational goals and student achievement (Bush and Glover 2014). Fatma particularly emphasizes the importance of understanding the strengths and needs of individuals, highlighting the value of building solid relationships. Khadija brings a unique perspective by emphasizing the role of leadership as an initiator and exemplar. She believes in leading by example to bring about positive change in teaching and learning practices. Her approach encourages her team to follow her lead.

These perspectives align with Islamic leadership framework (Padela 2015), where personalized leadership, treatment of people, and adaptive leadership are essential leadership behaviors. The personalized leadership aspect resonates with Khadija's emphasis on being an initiator and role model. At the same time, the treatment of people aligns with the community and service-oriented approach emphasized by Sarah and Amna. The focus on teacher empowerment and support, as highlighted by Fatma and Nadia, aligns with the adaptive leadership aspect.

10.2. Female Leadership in Islamic Terms

When asked what it means to be a female leader, the respondents provided various perspectives rooted in their Islamic faith. Sarah's experience as a Muslim woman and leader has been largely positive, empowering her to make positive changes in her community. Her experience aligns with the theme of fidelity to God and His Prophet in Padela's framework, emphasizing the accountability of leadership actions in the afterlife.

Amna, in contrast, reflects on the distinct roles and traits assigned to men and women in Islamic teachings. She believes that women lead with compassion and care, which she considers her strength as a female leader. This perspective reflects the faith-based identity theme of the framework, emphasizing social responsibility and maintaining familial ties.

Fatma and Khadija, like Amna, emphasize female leaders' empathy and caring nature. Fatma's experience highlights the challenges of gender stereotypes in society, where women sometimes face skepticism in leadership roles. Khadija emphasizes the intersection of her gender and religious identity, which makes her leadership more empathetic and humble.

These perspectives align with Islamic leadership framework (Padela 2015) by emphasizing the importance of faith-based identity, maintaining familial ties, and treating people with gentleness. Prophet Muhammad promoted kindness and gentleness in his actions and teachings. One of the Hadith clearly states, "God is kind and loves Kindness" (Riyad al-Salihin, Hadith 634). Hence, drawing from the Hadith, Padela's framework encourages leaders to be mindful of their accountability to God and their responsibility to society.

10.3. Multicultural Context and Intersectional Identities

The study also highlights the multicultural context of Canadian schools where diversity in culture, geography, and religious values is evident. While all students are Muslim, there is a rich diversity within the Muslim community itself. Leaders emphasize embracing this diversity, fostering inclusivity, and celebrating different cultures, reiterating the findings from Ezzani and Brooks' (2019) study on culturally relevant leadership in K-8 Islamic schools in the United States.

In terms of intersectional identities, the leaders' experiences vary. Amna and Khadija note that their identities as Muslim women and leaders are deeply intertwined, influencing their leadership styles. Amna emphasizes the importance of transparency and detailed communication, which aligns with her belief in the compassionate nature of female leaders. Khadija emphasizes humility and accountability in her leadership role, driven by her intersectional identities.

According to Beekun and Badawi (1999), Islamic leadership's core tenets are faith (iman), piety (taqwa), and spiritual excellence (ihsan), which inform the leaders of certain behaviors such as trust (Amanah), justice (adl), spiritual struggle (mujahadah), promise (ahd), and righteousness (birr) (see Padela 2015, p. 37). In alignment with these core tenets, Amna emphasized the concept of "adl" justice that she believes in and practices. She explained,

There is no feminism in this (female leadership in general). You know, women can be leaders, and we can do this, we can do that. Allah talks about justice, the 'Adl' like, you know, you have your characteristics and way of dealing with things. You are here to serve the school and community; you are doing and playing your leadership role in an extended family circle.

These experiences align with the literature (Padela 2015) in that they emphasize the need for leaders to be mindful of their faith-based identity and treat people with gentleness, humility, and justice, especially in a diverse, multicultural context.

10.4. Complementary and Challenging Leadership Experiences

The study also highlights complementary and challenging leadership experiences. Complementary experiences, such as those shared by Sarah, Fatma, Khadija, and Amna, demonstrate the positive impact of their leadership roles on individuals and their communities. These experiences align with personalized leadership behaviors and people's treatment, as highlighted by Padela (2015).

However, the leaders face challenges, including gender biases, heavy workloads, and teacher resistance. These challenges reflect the adaptive leadership aspect of the framework, where leaders must navigate complex situations and adapt their leadership style to overcome obstacles.

In conclusion, the findings from this study provide valuable insights into how Muslim female leaders in Canada define educational leadership, navigate their intersectional identities, and contribute to the multicultural context of their schools. These insights align with Padela's Islamic Leadership Framework, emphasizing the importance of faith-based identity, treating people with gentleness, and adaptive leadership. As portrayed in this study, Muslim female leaders play a vital role in their communities and educational institutions by modeling the values and behaviors outlined in the framework, thereby contributing to positive change and inclusivity. These narratives can further inspire leaders from visible minority backgrounds to articulate their experiences through reflection, shedding light on effective strategies for navigating leadership roles as members of visible minority communities.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of State University of New York in Oneonta (2019).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Note

¹ SWT—Subhanahu wa ta'ala.

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