

# THE CONCEPT OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL JUSTICE ACCORDING TO FATIMA MERNISSI AND HANNAH ARENDT

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## Abstract

*This study aims to examine the concept of women's political justice according to Fatima Mernissi and Hannah Arendt. Political justice refers to granting equal rights and treatment to all individuals regardless of gender, favoritism, or discrimination in the process of forming and distributing power within society, particularly in state decision-making processes. This research employs a literature study method by collecting data through keyword searches, followed by a search for relevant subjects in books, journals, scholarly articles, and other academic sources. The next step involves analyzing the collected data and drawing conclusions. Fatima Mernissi's concept of women's political justice stems from her efforts to explore Islamic scholarly traditions, especially the interpretations of Qur'anic verses and misogynistic hadiths. On the other hand, Hannah Arendt's thought centers on political freedom, where action and freedom are seen as identical—meaning that to be free is to act or to take initiative.*

**Keywords:** *Fatima Mernissi, Hannah Arendt, Islamic Feminist, Political Justice*

## A. INTRODUCTION

The question of justice for women in political life has long occupied a central place in both feminist and political philosophical discourse. Historically, women have been structurally excluded from political decision-making processes, denied leadership roles, and portrayed as naturally unfit for governance. This exclusion is not only a sociological reality but is often legitimized by cultural, religious, and philosophical narratives that define power as inherently male. The present study focuses on the contributions of two influential thinkers—Fatima Mernissi and Hannah Arendt—who, though situated in different intellectual and cultural traditions, offer significant and transformative perspectives on women's political justice. Their work represents a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between gender, authority, and public life.

Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist and Islamic feminist, deconstructs patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts that have historically been used to legitimize the subjugation of women. Her intellectual project critically engages with hadith literature and Qur'anic exegesis to expose how religious discourse has been manipulated to exclude women from political leadership. Operating within the tradition of *siyâsah syar'iyah* (Islamic political

thought), Mernissi challenges the epistemological foundations of gender-based political discrimination and proposes an alternative reading rooted in ethical egalitarianism. Meanwhile, Hannah Arendt—drawing on existentialism, classical republicanism, and the phenomenology of action—builds her political philosophy around the concepts of freedom, plurality, and public space. Though not explicitly a feminist, Arendt’s theory of political action and citizenship offers a powerful framework for understanding the conditions under which women can become political agents in a world that often silences them.

The significance of comparing Mernissi and Arendt lies in their shared commitment to restoring dignity, autonomy, and visibility to women within the political sphere, albeit through different methodologies. While Mernissi aims to reclaim women's roles by reinterpreting sacred Islamic texts, Arendt situates political justice in human action and the creation of shared meaning in the public realm. Previous studies on Mernissi’s views on female leadership reveal a critique of hadiths used to exclude women from power, whereas research on Arendt’s philosophy underscores the insufficiency of numerical representation without substantive participation. This study aims to bridge these perspectives by exploring how both thinkers conceptualize women’s political justice, the theoretical foundations of their ideas, and the implications for contemporary discourses on gender and governance.

## **B. METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive-comparative approach. The primary method used is literature review (library research), involving the collection, classification, and critical analysis of academic texts, including books, journal articles, and other scholarly materials that discuss the political thought of Fatima Mernissi and Hannah Arendt, particularly concerning women's justice and leadership.

Sources were selected based on thematic relevance, credibility, and scholarly impact. The study focuses on two main types of texts: (1) primary texts authored by Mernissi and Arendt, and (2) secondary texts that analyze or interpret their political and feminist ideas. Data were collected through purposive keyword searches using terms such as “women’s political justice,” “gender and leadership,” “feminist hermeneutics,” “republican freedom,” and “public sphere.”

The analysis method is interpretative-critical, combining textual hermeneutics with socio-political contextualization. Fatima Mernissi’s thought is examined through feminist Islamic hermeneutics, with emphasis on hadith criticism and re-reading Qur’anic texts. Hannah Arendt’s political philosophy is explored using conceptual analysis, focusing on her theory

of action, public space, and citizenship. The comparison is conducted to illuminate both convergences and divergences in their philosophical foundations and practical implications for women's political agency.

## C. RESULT

### **The Concept Of Women's Political Justice According To Fatima Mernissi**

In her critique of the patriarchal system, Fatima Mernissi's thinking appears to be shaped by her educational and cultural experiences in France. She greatly appreciated the Western concepts of individualism, liberalism, and personal freedom. Western feminism made her increasingly aware of the enduring male dominance in the Arab world. This became particularly evident during the Gulf War when many—including women—advocated for independence and called for an end to the war. However, once the war ended, Arab women were instructed to return to seclusion, symbolized by being required to wear the veil (*pardah*) and being barred from interacting with the outside world.<sup>1</sup>

Mernissi asserted that religion must be understood progressively to properly interpret social realities and structures of power, particularly because religion has often been used as a justification for violence. She argued that dismantling primitive and irrational interpretations was essential to eliminating political oppression and violence. For her, the confusion between the sacred and the profane—between God and the head of state, or between the Qur'an and the fantasies of religious leaders—must be deconstructed.<sup>2</sup>

Her mode of thinking was also influenced by Muhammad al-Ghazali, particularly in the field of hadith criticism. Mernissi believed that certain misogynistic hadiths concerning female leadership were shaped by al-Ghazali's interpretations, which referenced Surah al-Mu'minun (verse 23) about the Queen of Sheba. Mernissi concluded that the Qur'an, as a divinely revealed scripture, holds a higher rank than hadiths, which are mere reports from companions of the Prophet. In addition, she was influenced by the thought of Muhammad 'Abid al-Jabiri, particularly his works *Nahnu wa al-Turath* and *Takwin al-'Aql al-'Arabī*. Al-Jabiri criticized Muslims and Arab politicians for their inability to respond justly to modern changes, emphasizing the need for transformation in their modes of thinking.<sup>3</sup>

One of the misogynistic hadiths she examined is the following:

Abu Bakrah reported: During the days of the Battle of the Camel, I remembered a message from the Prophet—peace be upon him—who, upon learning that Persia had appointed a woman as its ruler, said: "No nation will prosper that places a woman in charge of its affairs."

Mernissi categorized this narration as a misogynistic hadith. She criticized it on two fronts: the *isnād* (chain of transmission) and the *matn* (content). Regarding the *isnād*, she questioned the credibility of Abu Bakrah as the primary narrator, arguing that his motive was political—seeking favor with the ruling power, namely Caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib, who was then in conflict with Aisha. Many companions refused to support the civil war among Muslims, fearing division and hostility, but Abu Bakrah justified his position using this hadith. Moreover, Mernissi highlighted that Abu Bakrah had once been flogged by Caliph Umar for perjury, raising doubts about the hadith's authenticity.<sup>4</sup>

As for the *matn* (content), Mernissi pointed out that it contradicts the Qur'anic account in Surah al-Naml, which portrays the leadership of the Queen of Sheba in a positive light. Therefore, the hadith should be rejected due to its inconsistency with the Qur'an, whose validity is unquestionable. Mernissi concluded that women are entitled to leadership roles just like men. The historical preference for male leaders is not rooted in any inherent deficiency of women but was instead a matter of social practicality. The supposed male advantage in leadership is merely contextual, particularly in family leadership, rather than absolute.

According to Mernissi, traditional Muslim understandings of women's roles, shaped by certain hadiths, have significantly distorted the true and elevated image of women. This distortion must be corrected through a socio-historical approach. She traced the roots of this misconception to the widespread dissemination of fabricated hadiths that legitimized male superiority. Mernissi urged Muslims to adopt a more critical approach to understanding hadiths concerning women so that women could reclaim their rightful place both in family life and in society at large.<sup>5</sup>

She also examined another hadith that suggests male superiority and female deficiency, which reads:

Muhammad bin Rumhi bin al-Muhajir al-Misri narrated to us, al-Layth reported to us, from Ibn al-Hadi, from Abdullah bin Dinar, from Abdullah bin Umar, from the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him), who said: "O women! Give charity and seek forgiveness frequently, for I have seen that you are the majority of the inhabitants of Hell." One intelligent woman among them asked, "O Messenger of Allah, why is it that women form the majority of the people of Hell?" He replied, "Because you curse a lot and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intellect and religion than you." The woman asked, "What is meant by the deficiency of intellect and religion?" The Prophet responded, "Isn't the testimony of two women equal to that of one man? That is the deficiency of your intellect. And isn't it true that during menstruation, women neither pray nor fast? That is the deficiency in your religion." (Narrated by Ibn Majah)

Mernissi cautioned that a literal reading of this hadith can be dangerous, as it degrades and insults women and contradicts the principles of gender equality. Therefore, she advocated a contextual interpretation. The so-called deficiencies in intellect and religion do not imply that women are inherently less capable than men in terms of intellect, worship, or spiritual attainment. Instead, the hadith reflects the socio-historical realities of the Prophet's time, when men were more involved in public functions like testimony and inheritance.

Nevertheless, from a functionalist perspective, Mernissi noted that women engage in remarkable spiritual acts, often under conditions of physical weakness, demonstrating patience and strength that may even surpass that of men. In the domestic sphere, women play a deeply functional role. Men, on the other hand, tend to rely more on rational thinking than emotional sensitivity, which makes them more inclined toward objective reasoning. However, this difference should not justify the marginalization of women from public or political leadership.

If the hadith is understood textually, it can be dangerous as it belittles and demeans women, and it strongly contradicts the principles of gender equality. Therefore, the hadith should be interpreted contextually whenever possible. The notion of women's "deficiency in intellect and religion" does not imply that women are inherently incapable of matching or even surpassing men's intellectual and spiritual achievements, including acts of worship and other religious obligations. When viewed narrowly, the hadith reflects the everyday life of men and women during the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him), when men held dominant public roles, including testimony and inheritance—domains in which men were granted greater authority and shares due to their social responsibilities at the time.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, when viewed through a functionalist lens, it becomes apparent that women perform extraordinary acts of worship even in states of physical weakness, fulfilling their duties with a patience and resilience that men may not possess. Within the household, women fulfill critical roles. Conversely, men's strengths are often attributed to their reliance on rational thinking over emotion. As such, men tend to think more objectively than women, though this should not justify the exclusion of women from leadership or public life.<sup>8</sup>

The question of whether women may assume the role of head of state has been a point of debate among Islamic scholars. One group argues that women are permitted to hold such positions, as Islam grants equal political rights to both men and women. The opposing view rejects female leadership based on certain hadiths that appear to prohibit women from assuming high political office. Mernissi concluded that the argument in favor of women occupying such roles is more reasonable when referring to sound Qur'anic texts. Her

approach clearly aims to reinterpret the religious sources by integrating their sociopolitical contexts.<sup>9</sup>

Mernissi engaged deeply with Islamic scholarly traditions, including interpretations of Qur'anic verses, misogynistic hadiths found in *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*, and major classical works such as *Fath al-Bari*, *al-Isabah fi Tamyiz al-Sahabah*, *Tarikh al-Tabari*, *Tabaqat al-Kubra* by Ibn Sa'ad, *Sirah* by Ibn Hisham, among others. Her analytical method was clearly historical-sociological, utilizing a hermeneutic approach—more specifically, a hermeneutics of hadith. This approach reflects her determined effort to deconstruct misogynistic interpretations that had long gone unchallenged in Muslim discourse. In advocating for gender equality, Mernissi also critiqued certain Qur'anic verses and their patriarchal interpretations, arguing that many of these interpretations deviated from the original spirit of divine revelation. One of her central points of critique was the prohibition of women's leadership.<sup>10</sup>

As previously mentioned, Mernissi was a Muslim feminist intellectual who strongly advocated for women's rights. Her reputation extended well beyond Morocco, particularly in France, where she was widely known due to her prolific writing of books and articles. Her works have been translated into many languages, including English, German, Dutch, and Japanese, as well as Indonesian.

In her book *Beyond the Veil*, Mernissi noted that one of the distinctive characteristics of Muslim societies with respect to sexuality is the strict spatial segregation between genders, which reflects rigid divisions of labor and hierarchical power relations. The spatial separation of genders creates stratified responsibilities and authority. Because women's mobility is restricted, they are materially sustained by men in exchange for their complete obedience and provision of sexual and reproductive services. The entire system is structured such that Muslim societies are, in practice, male-dominated, with women constituting nearly half the population yet remaining in a state of ownership.<sup>11</sup>

Muslim men have always held privileged status over Muslim women, including the right to punish or even kill women deemed as their property. This structure imposes severe restrictions—both physical and spiritual—on women's movement and autonomy. To understand what the Qur'an truly says about women, Mernissi turned to various Qur'anic verses and hadiths, along with the interpretations of classical Islamic scholars.

Her book *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* discusses hadiths about women's leadership, revealing how hearing such hadiths once devastated her emotionally. Much of her work

illustrates how religion can be easily manipulated for patriarchal purposes. This led Mernissi to believe that the oppression of women is not rooted in Islamic teachings, but rather in artificially constructed traditions. Thus, she courageously deconstructed customs long regarded as sacred.<sup>12</sup>

In her work *Women in Islam*, Mernissi firmly rejected the notion that a Muslim woman striving for her civil rights is betraying her faith or has been brainwashed by Western propaganda. Such accusations, she argued, stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of Islam's religious legacy and cultural identity. She maintained that women's rights pose a challenge to some modern Muslim men not because of the Qur'an or Sunnah, nor even due to Islamic tradition, but because these rights threaten the interests of a male elite.<sup>13</sup>

While Mernissi acknowledged that women, like men, bear equal responsibility in enjoining good and forbidding evil (*amr ma'rūf nahi munkar*), she recognized that challenges arise when applying this equality to more specific, practical, and public domains—particularly politics. Though some opinions permit women to assume political leadership roles, they often impose limits, such as allowing them to be judges but not heads of state. On the other hand, scholars like M. Quraish Shihab are more open to the idea of female leadership, asserting that there is no legitimate restriction barring women from holding the highest political offices.

In his book *Women: From Love to Sex, from Temporary Marriage to Sunnah Marriage, from Old Bias to New Bias*, Quraish Shihab states: "It must be acknowledged that classical scholars and thinkers in the past generally did not permit women to become heads of state. However, this was primarily due to the conditions of the time, particularly the unpreparedness of women to assume such roles—let alone as heads of state, even as ministers or regional leaders. Changes in doctrines and perspectives are inevitable as conditions evolve, and therefore, it is no longer relevant to prohibit women from participating in politics or leading a nation."<sup>14</sup>

### **The Concept of Women's Political Justice According to Hannah Arendt**

In Arendt's view, action and freedom are identical—in other words, to be free means to engage in action or to take initiative. Action, as a form of new beginning, actualizes freedom. Our capacity for freedom is expressed through concepts such as citizenship and the public sphere. For Arendt, these are two of the three essential ideas in her political thought, with the most central being her "theory of action." These three concepts are deeply interconnected. Discussing citizenship and the public sphere without grounding them in

the theory of action, Arendt believed, is impossible. Therefore, before understanding Arendt's concepts of citizenship and the public realm, one must first examine her theory of action.

Arendt's concept of citizenship is based on her unique anthropological view of humans through the lens of *vita activa*, which consists of three dimensions: labor, work, and action. Among these, action is the one that best expresses and underpins the political dimension of human life. What does this mean? Politics is not something natural or inherent, but rather something constructed, and therefore contingent.

Politics is a deliberate act, yet action itself cannot occur without society. While the other activities—labor and work—can be understood outside of a social context, action cannot. Action is the exclusive prerogative of human beings. It is what distinguishes humans from all other creatures—even from the gods. A person may still be considered human without labor or work, but without action and speech, one ceases to be human. Action means initiating something new, and this initiation is the expression of human freedom—another fundamental condition, alongside plurality. As Arendt wrote, “With the birth of each human being, a new beginning enters the world; this is merely another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when human beings were created—not before.”

One of the key influences on Arendt's thought was Aristotle (384–322 BCE), the ancient Greek philosopher who tutored Alexander the Great. For Aristotle, politics is intrinsic to human nature; he famously stated that man is a *zoon politikon*—a political animal—who can only actualize his full potential by participating in politics. Politics, then, is the medium through which humans realize their highest good and collective happiness within a community (*polis*) of free citizens.<sup>15</sup>

However, Aristotle's conception was closely tied to the structure of Greek city-states, where only adult males could participate freely in public political life. Therefore, when he spoke of humans as political animals, he meant it as a universal nature that applied wherever humans existed. Arendt partially agreed with Aristotle's idea, maintaining that politics should serve to build a shared life where each citizen is recognized as a free human being. Nevertheless, Arendt observed that this ideal political structure did not exist during the time of World War II. She argued that human beings are not automatically political animals. Drawing on her mentor Heidegger, Arendt believed that humans always live in particular historical and social conditions. Thus, political participation is a unique responsibility that must be undertaken by free individuals to realize collective life.

Unlike Aristotle, who saw politics as a natural consequence of human nature, Arendt viewed politics as a shared responsibility to build a better world.

Agreeing with Aristotle, Arendt argued that among all human activities, it is *praxis* (action) and *lexis* (speech) that form the foundation of political life. More specifically, she saw that action and speech are not only related, but coeval (always occurring together) and coequal (of equal importance). Speech itself is a form of action, but action without speech is meaningless. This is where Arendt's view of politics as intersubjective communication becomes clear. Politics is a forum where shared interests are placed "on the round table." These shared interests emerge from filtering the diverse, individual interests of each agent. In this way, the public sphere comes to know private interests through expression—through action and speech.<sup>16</sup>

Action and speech reveal *who* a person is, not just *what* they are. The question of "what" a human is relates to essential identity and presumes the sameness of all people, portraying humans as a singular species. In contrast, the question of "who" refers to existential identity and presupposes human plurality. Thus, Arendt's claim that action and speech reveal "who" someone is reflects her view that human plurality and freedom are the fundamental conditions of political life.

To quote Arendt:

"In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world... The disclosure of who someone is, is implicit in everything somebody says and does."<sup>17</sup>

Arendt articulated her political philosophy most clearly in *The Human Condition*, particularly in contrast to other human activities. On the very first page, she divides human activity into three categories: labor (*Arbeiten*), work (*Herstellen*), and political action (*Handeln*). For Arendt, labor refers to the tasks necessary for biological survival. It fulfills basic needs and is primarily linked to the private realm. The meaning and value of labor are shaped by each society's cultural and social context. In this stage, the human is reduced to an *animal laborans*—a laboring animal. The key objective is simply to sustain life through a balance between production and consumption.

Work, in contrast, plays a more distinctive role. Work involves creating something durable and meaningful, not only for oneself but also for others. Through their works, human beings distinguish themselves from animals, multiplying their capacity through tools and technologies they themselves design and use.

Arendt's concept of political freedom is rooted in a tradition she embraced—namely, the classical republican tradition. This tradition views freedom as inherently public, something that is possessed and enjoyed by citizens who actively maintain their *res publica*. Although Arendt framed her inquiry as an effort to recover and articulate the political experiences of the past, her understanding of freedom contains distinctively modern elements, particularly those derived from existentialism and Kantianism—specifically, the notion of spontaneity.<sup>18</sup> Her distinctive approach to freedom arises from a fusion of these modern philosophical traditions with her sharp understanding of ancient political philosophy. From existentialism, she drew inspiration for an open future available to every individual, which she then integrated with the classical republican ideal where citizens stand together in solidarity to safeguard their collective freedom. However, if individual spontaneity is the root of freedom, why is politics needed as the space where freedom is realized?

Arendt's answer—elaborated by political theorist Margaret Canovan—returns to the idea of human plurality. Plurality means that whenever an individual wishes to act, they require the cooperation of others. Political freedom is thus characterized by an “I-can” quality rather than an “I-will.” Freedom (specifically political freedom) exists only when there is real action—a deed that brings something into being that did not exist before. This is what Arendt called *initiation*, a uniquely human capability. And for something new to come into existence, it requires collaboration with others—a collaboration that empowers through *power*, not *violence*. It is in this cooperation that the spontaneity of individuals converges into a fully manifest collective freedom.

#### D. DISCUSSION

The juxtaposition of Fatima Mernissi's feminist Islamic reformism and Hannah Arendt's existential-republican political philosophy reveals profound insights into the idea of women's political justice, rooted in distinct yet intersecting traditions.

Fatima Mernissi grounds her critique in the internal epistemology of Islam. Her approach challenges patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts, particularly misogynistic hadiths that have long been used to justify the exclusion of women from political leadership. Her method is historical and socio-hermeneutical: she deconstructs hadith through *isnād* (chain of transmission) and *matn* (content) analysis, aligning her interpretation with the broader ethical principles of the Qur'an. Mernissi does not argue against religion, but rather insists that religion has been misinterpreted to serve male interests. Her feminist reading of Islamic

texts reframes justice not as gender neutrality, but as equity grounded in spiritual and moral agency.

Her analysis culminates in the affirmation that women's exclusion from political authority is not divinely ordained but historically constructed. Leadership, in her view, should be based on competence and ethical responsibility, not gender. This interpretation subverts classical political theology by placing interpretive agency in the hands of women themselves, urging a reconstruction of Islamic political thought from within.

Hannah Arendt, in contrast, builds her theory of political justice on ontological and existential premises. For Arendt, politics is not an institutional function but an existential condition—rooted in *action*, *speech*, and *plurality*. Her republican conception of freedom is not freedom from constraint, but freedom to act in a shared world. Arendt does not approach women's justice from a feminist standpoint per se, yet her emphasis on *praxis* and *publicness* provides a fertile framework for feminist political agency.

She argues that being fully human requires one to appear in the public space and participate in collective deliberation. Thus, the denial of women's access to political life is not merely a social injustice but an ontological negation of their humanity. Arendt's notion of freedom as "the capacity to begin anew" places women—who have been systematically excluded from the *polis*—at the center of political rebirth and renewal.

When these two frameworks are compared, several points of convergence emerge. Both thinkers reject essentialist notions of gender roles and affirm that political subjectivity must be redefined beyond traditional structures. Both underscore the role of narrative, memory, and symbolic power in shaping who is included in the political. However, their strategies diverge: Mernissi operates within a reformist religious discourse, whereas Arendt constructs her critique from a secular, phenomenological tradition.

Together, Mernissi and Arendt offer a dialogical path forward: a vision of women's political justice that is both anchored in cultural context and open to universal human freedom. Mernissi challenges exclusion through theological reform; Arendt empowers through participatory action. Both articulate that justice is not given, but must be continuously reasserted through interpretation, participation, and solidarity.

## E. CONCLUSION

The concept of women's political justice, as articulated by Fatima Mernissi and Hannah Arendt, reveals the following:

According to Fatima Mernissi, the concept of women's political justice involves a deep exploration of the Islamic intellectual tradition, including interpretations of Qur'anic verses and misogynistic hadiths found in major sources such as *Sahih al-Bukhari*, *Sahih Muslim*, *Fath al-Bari*, *al-Isabah fi Tamyiz al-Sahabah*, *Tarikh al-Tabari*, *Tabaqat al-Kubra* by Ibn Sa'd, and *Sirah* by Ibn Hisham. Her analytical method is historical-sociological, relying heavily on hermeneutic analysis—particularly what can be termed the hermeneutics of hadith. This approach underpins her effort to challenge and deconstruct misogynistic narratives. In advocating for gender equality, Mernissi critically examined these hadiths and various Qur'anic verses, arguing that many prevailing interpretations stray from the spirit of divine revelation. One of her most central concerns is the issue of female leadership.

On the other hand, Hannah Arendt's political philosophy centers on the idea of freedom—specifically political freedom—where action and freedom are seen as identical. To be free, in Arendt's view, is to act and to initiate. This freedom is made manifest through her interconnected concepts of citizenship, the public sphere, and above all, the theory of action. Her notion of political freedom is grounded in the classical republican tradition, which holds that freedom is always public in nature—possessed and sustained by citizens who actively engage in maintaining their *res publica*.



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