



Gender Equality and Strategic Leadership: Lessons from R.A. Kartini and Queen Esther for Contemporary Women

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Digital Object Identifier (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.33856/kerugma.v8i1.394>

Article history

Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
14 June 2024	15 June 2024	16 June 2025	16 June 2025

ABSTRACT

R.A. Kartini and Queen Esther are two prominent female figures who emerged from vastly different historical and cultural contexts colonial Indonesia and ancient Persia yet both exemplify strategic leadership and moral courage in confronting patriarchal structures and social crises. Kartini is known for her intellectual resistance against colonial hegemony and Javanese feudal culture, utilizing education as a transformative means for women's emancipation. Meanwhile, Queen Esther demonstrated a form of faith-based leadership and moral diplomacy in the face of a systematic threat of ethnic annihilation (genocide), employing a strategic approach rooted in moral courage and a deep awareness of collective identity. This study offers a comparative analysis across three key dimensions: (1) resistance to structural injustice, (2) the construction of female leadership in historical narratives, and (3) the social impact of value-driven collective action. Using a historical-hermeneutic approach and critical gender studies, the research highlights how the legacies of Kartini and Esther remain relevant in understanding contemporary dynamics of women's empowerment, through narratives of struggle and the advocacy of gender justice values across time. It argues that the historical experiences of these two figures reveal a model of female leadership grounded not only in moral identity, but also in the capacity to effect social transformation through collective resistance strategies and cultural renewal.

Keywords: R.A. Kartini; Queen Esther; female leadership; emancipation; gender justice; historical comparative study; social transformation.

Citation Style (APA): Sugianto, S. (2025). Gender Equality and Strategic Leadership: Lessons from R.A. Kartini and Queen Esther for Contemporary Women. *Theological Journal Kerugma*, 8(1), 11–18. <https://doi.org/10.33856/kerugma.v8i1.394>

INTRODUCTION

R.A. Kartini is one of Indonesia's prominent female heroes known for her struggle to eliminate social barriers that hindered women from learning, creating, and realizing their full potential. She believed that education is the key to unlocking freedom and equality for women. Her thoughts remain highly relevant today, particularly in the context of equal access to education, fair employment opportunities, and improving the quality of life for women (Kartini, 2007). Despite significant progress over recent decades, challenges to achieving gender equality and fulfilling women's rights in Indonesia remain substantial (Kemenko PMK, 2024). Government policies and social movements have sought to address injustice and oppression against women, yet many still face barriers in accessing quality education, equal employment opportunities, and participation in decision-making processes that affect their lives (Palulungan et al., 2020). This highlights the ongoing importance of deepening discussions on the contributions

and inspiration of figures like R.A. Kartini in promoting awareness of the need for sustained efforts to achieve equality and justice for women in Indonesia (Komnas Perempuan, 2024).

In a different context, the Bible presents another female figure who fought against injustice: Queen Esther. As a Jewish figure in the Persian Empire, Queen Esther risked her life to save her people from extermination (Esther 4:1-17; 5:1-8). Her courage and determination in the face of threat and oppression have inspired countless women to stand up for their rights and the rights of their communities (Sinaga et al., 2022). Queen Esther's story also holds significant relevance within the Indonesian context, where many women continue to struggle for equal educational opportunities, fair employment, and the right to participate in decision-making processes. While many studies have explored the inspiration of R.A. Kartini in education (Putri & Hudaidah, 2021), the struggle for gender equality (Samijo et al., 2023), and the historical role of women in advocating for women's dignity (Kusuma, 2022), few have compared her influence and contributions with those of other significant female figures like Queen Esther. Yet, both figures share notable similarities in terms of courage, determination, and their fight against injustice. This study, therefore, aims to conduct a comparative analysis of R.A. Kartini and Queen Esther across three critical aspects: (1) their struggle against injustice and oppression, (2) their empowerment of women through leadership, and (3) their efforts in community collaboration and involvement.

The research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. How did R.A. Kartini and Queen Esther struggle against injustice and oppression?
2. How did these two figures empower women through their leadership?
3. How did they contribute to building community collaboration and involvement in the fight for women's rights?

This study aims to: Analyze the forms of struggle against injustice and oppression demonstrated by R.A. Kartini and Queen Esther. Identify the strategies these figures employed to empower women through their leadership. Explore their roles in building community collaboration and involvement as part of their efforts to promote women's rights. This research is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions, including expanding the understanding of the importance of female leadership in the context of social struggle. Practically, this study also aims to serve as a source of inspiration for Indonesian women facing various social and structural challenges today. Additionally, this research is intended to enrich the literature on the comparative analysis of female figures from different cultural contexts, providing a strong foundation for gender equality advocacy and the fulfillment of women's rights in Indonesia. Previous studies have examined R.A. Kartini's influence on education (Putri & Hudaidah, 2021), gender equality (Samijo et al., 2023), and the historical role of women in advocating for women's dignity (Kusuma, 2022). Similarly, the inspirational leadership of Queen Esther has been explored in various studies (Isaac, 2020; Hatzaw, 2021). However, comparative studies linking these two figures in the context of their struggles against injustice and their contributions to women's empowerment remain scarce, highlighting a critical research gap that this study seeks to fill.

RESEARCH METHOD

The This study involves a comparative analysis of the roles and contributions of R.A. Kartini and Queen Esther, drawing from existing literature sources. The analysis explores similarities and differences in their contexts of fighting against injustice, empowering women through leadership, and emphasizing the importance of

collaboration and community involvement. By thoroughly examining various sources, this article aims to provide a clear and cohesive overview of the inspirations that R.A. Kartini and Queen Esther offer for contemporary women.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Struggle Against Injustice and Oppression

Both R.A. Kartini and Queen Esther faced injustice and oppression in their respective eras. Kartini grew up in Jepara, Central Java, Indonesia, during Dutch colonial rule, where women were restricted by traditional and colonial rules that limited their access to education and equal rights. She wrote letters to her friends in the Netherlands, expressing her desire to empower Indonesian women through education and resistance against restrictive norms. Kartini emphasized the importance of education for women to overcome injustice and empower themselves. Education served as a tool for women to achieve their full potential and to have a voice and influence in society. Kartini believed that educating women would benefit society as a whole by empowering them to educate future generations (Jaquet, 1989, p. 54).

In her letters, Kartini lamented, "It is sad the fate of Indonesian women who live in darkness and ignorance, bound by cruel customs. Education is the only way out of this ignorance" (Jaquet, 1989, p. 63). This statement reflects her belief that education was the pathway out of the ignorance and injustice experienced by women in her time.

On the other hand, Queen Esther faced injustice and oppression in a different context. In the book of Esther in the Bible, Esther, a Jewish woman, became queen of Persia after winning the heart of King Ahasuerus. When Haman, a high official in the Persian court, planned to destroy all Jews, Esther's uncle Mordecai asked for her help (Fox, 2001, p. 132). Despite the grave risk, Esther agreed to approach the king uninvited, an act punishable by death (Fox, 2001, pp. 147-148).

Esther asked the Jewish people to fast for three days before she approached the king, demonstrating the power of prayer and community solidarity (Bush, 1996, pp. 375-380). With exceptional courage, Esther revealed her identity as a Jew to the king and pleaded for the salvation of her people. King Ahasuerus, moved by Esther's request, reversed Haman's decree and instead punished him. In a critical moment, Esther even boldly stated to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite" (Esther 7:3). Her courage in speaking before the king reflects the determination and bravery required to confront injustice. Contemporary women can draw inspiration from Esther's courage in facing oppression and injustice, as well as her determination to fight for the rights of her people (Halvorson-Taylor, 2012, pp. 467-485).

Both R.A. Kartini and Queen Esther demonstrate that women can and should speak and act boldly against oppression, whether it concerns their own rights or the rights of others. They are two inspirational figures who show that women possess the strength and courage to confront injustice and oppression in their respective contexts. Kartini, with her determination to empower Indonesian women through education, paved the way for generations of women to surpass the traditional and colonial barriers that restrained them. Her passionate writings on the importance of education for women have left a legacy that continues to drive efforts for gender equality and women's empowerment in Indonesia today. Kartini taught that education is key to overcoming injustice and opening equal opportunities for all.

Meanwhile, Queen Esther's bravery and sacrifice in saving her people from annihilation demonstrate the power of solidarity, prayer, and individual courage in the face of injustice. Esther became a symbol of courage that transcends personal fear for the greater good. Her story teaches that courage to speak and act can bring significant change in confronting oppression. Contemporary women can draw inspiration from both figures to continue fighting for their own rights and the rights of others, remembering that bold actions and strong determination have the potential to create profound societal change.

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Empowerment of Women Through Leadership

R.A. Kartini was a figure who led with her pen, using her writings to drive social change. Her letters not only spoke about gender equality but also the importance of embracing societal change. Kartini endeavored to inspire and empower women to pursue learning and development beyond the traditional roles constrained by cultural norms (Martyn, 2005, p. 113). Moreover, in her letters, Kartini expressed her desire to see women in her environment have

equal access to education and employment opportunities as men. She wrote about women's roles as educated and independent mothers who could set positive examples for their children (Jaquet, 1989, p. 78).

Kartini believed that empowered women could become strong leaders, not only within their households but also in various aspects of life. She wrote, "Educated women can not only manage their households better but also serve as role models for their children. They can teach values of kindness and wisdom that are crucial for the development of future generations" (Jaquet, 1989, p. 82).

On the other hand, Queen Esther also exemplifies women's empowerment through leadership. As queen, Esther held significant influence in the Persian court. However, she used her position wisely and bravely to lead her people through a crisis. Esther demonstrated that a woman can lead with strength and steadfastness, even in perilous situations (Fox, 2001, p. 166).

In the book of Esther, readers can observe how Esther utilized her position to influence the king's decisions. "On the third day, Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand" (Duguid, 2005, p. 65). This illustrates Esther's courage and wisdom in using her position for the good of her people. Contemporary women can learn from Esther's leadership in taking initiative, making difficult decisions, and combining wisdom with determination.

Collaboration and Community Engagement

R.A. Kartini not only fought for women's rights but also collaborated with other figures to advance education and equality. She had extensive correspondence with her friends in the Netherlands, discussing her ideas on improving the fate of women in her environment. Kartini also played a role in establishing girls' schools, working with supporters to realize her vision (Blackburn, 2004, p. 142). She demonstrated that collaboration and community engagement are key to achieving meaningful change. Kartini leveraged networks and support from her friends to fulfill her aspirations for women's empowerment. Contemporary women can learn from Kartini's approach of working together with others and different communities to achieve common goals (Blackburn, 2004, p. 152). Kartini wrote, "Without the support and cooperation of those who care about the fate of women, I would not have been able to achieve what I have achieved. It is important for us to work together, support each other, and strive for the same goals" (Jaquet, 1989, p. 98).

Queen Esther also exemplifies the power of collaboration with others to achieve goals in her story. She worked with Mordecai, her relative, to plan a rescue mission for her people. Esther also relied on the support of the Jewish people by asking them to fast and pray before she approached the king, highlighting the importance of unity and cooperation in achieving desired outcomes (Duguid, 2005, pp. 66-67). In the book of Esther, the collaboration between Esther and Mordecai was crucial to their success. Mordecai said to Esther, "Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14).

Implications for Contemporary Women

Contemporary women can learn from both of these figures about the importance of education, courage, leadership, and collaboration in advocating for their own rights and the rights of others. Drawing inspiration from

R.A. Kartini and Queen Esther, contemporary women can continue to pursue opportunities for learning and growth, speak out against injustice, and play an active role in bringing about positive change in society.

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In understanding the comparison between lessons learned from these two figures and their implications for contemporary women, the following table provides a clearer overview:

Aspect	R.A. Kartini	Queen Esther
Struggle Against Injustice and Oppression	She Faced social restrictions and Dutch colonialism. Emphasized the importance of education as a tool to overcome injustice.	She faced the threat of her people’s annihilation in Persia. Showed extraordinary courage in approaching the king to plead for their safety.
Women’s Empowerment Through Leadership	Used her writings to lead social change and inspire women to pursue educational opportunities. Believed in the vital role of women in society.	Utilized her position as queen to lead her people through a crisis. Demonstrated courage and wisdom in decision-making.
Collaboration and Community Engagement	She collaborated with other figures to advance education and equality. She leveraged her network and support from friends to achieve women's empowerment goals.	She worked with Mordecai and sought support from the Jewish community to fast and pray for her people’s safety. Demonstrated the importance of unity and cooperation to achieve goals.

These aspects highlight how both R.A. Kartini and Queen Esther serve as inspirational figures whose lessons resonate strongly for contemporary women, encouraging them to embrace education, courage, leadership, and collaboration in their pursuit of equality and positive societal change.

CONCLUSION

The R.A. Kartini and Queen Esther are two legendary figures who provide extraordinary inspiration for contemporary women. Despite coming from different backgrounds and contexts, both figures embody values of courage, resilience, leadership, and collaboration that resonate deeply in the struggle of modern women against injustice and in their empowerment.

In the discussion of their fights against injustice and oppression, Kartini and Esther each displayed remarkable courage in facing the challenges before them. Kartini confronted social constraints and Dutch colonialism by emphasizing the importance of education as a tool to overcome injustice. Conversely, Esther faced the threat of her people's annihilation in Persia and exhibited extraordinary bravery in approaching the king to plead for their safety.

Regarding the empowerment of women through leadership, Kartini used her writings to lead social change and inspire women to pursue educational opportunities beyond traditional roles. She believed in the pivotal role of women in society. On the other hand, Esther leveraged her position as queen to lead her people through crises, demonstrating courage and wisdom in decision-making.

Lastly, in the context of collaboration and community involvement, both Kartini and Esther underscored the importance of cooperation and solidarity. Kartini collaborated with other figures to advance education and equality, while Esther coordinated with Mordecai and sought the support of the Jewish people in their rescue plan.

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