

Reading at the Terras of Pesantren: The Encounter between Secular and Muslim Feminists in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article reflects my involvement in Indonesia's Islamic feminist movement through gender training activities in *pesantren* and a re-evaluation of classical texts from a feminist perspective. In these ways, the concept of gender and key elements of equality and justice, such as women's reproductive rights and political rights, can be widely accepted by the Muslim community. In Egypt, the feminist movement, according to Saba Mahmood, has failed to understand the agency of the fundamentalist women's movement. But in Indonesia, active collaboration has occurred between secular and Muslim feminists. They opposed the discourse of identity politics and the patriarchal political ideology legitimised by the New Order regime. They built concepts and collective action through *pesantren*, Islamic universities, and the networks of two Islamic women's organisations, the *Fatayat of Nahdlatul Ulama* and the *Aisyiyah of Muhammadiyah*. The convergence of these two streams of feminism is a key strength and essential feature of the Islamic feminist movement in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Kitab kuning*, feminist Muslim, political identity

Introduction

This article describes how the Indonesian women's movement developed ideas, concepts, and actions for gender equality through the active collaboration of Muslim and secular feminists during the New Order and Reform eras. I played a part in this, particularly in introducing the concept of gender to clerics, female clerics, mainstream religious organisations, and young people at several Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Java (Effendi 2010).

While fundamentalist movements continue to grow stronger globally and weaken the struggle for gender equality and justice, the collaboration between these two feminist movements, which are rooted in secular and Islamic traditions, has developed genuinely unique Indonesian concepts of gender (Marcoes 2021).

This is thanks to the role of *pesantren* and the *Fatayat* and *Aisyiyah* Islamic women's organisations — two autonomous institutions within the world's two largest Islamic organisations, *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) and *Muhammadiyah*. Gender and feminist concepts have been accepted within mainstream Islamic communities without fierce opposition (Arimbi 2009; Effendi 2010; Rinaldo 2017).

Fatayat itself is an autonomous body within NU for young women. Meanwhile, *Aisyiyah* is an autonomous women's organisation within Muhammadiyah. These two organisations are the women's wings of the two largest Islamic civil organisations in Indonesia and the world.

Although NU has a special autonomous body for women, *Muslimat NU*, to ensure that gender and reproductive health issues are discussed within NU, the role of *Fatayat* as an autonomous youth body is "bolder" in bringing gender and feminist issues into NU. They remain steadfast in the face of rejection of the feminist ideas they develop in NU's women's empowerment programmes.

In contrast, within the Muhammadiyah organisation, it is *Aisyiyah* — the women's organisation — rather than the youth wing, "*Nasyiatul Aisyiyah*", that is actively advancing progressive ideas on gender and feminism within the organisation.

I note that the introduction of relatively new progressive ideas, such as the use of feminism as a lens through which to advocate for women's rights within the NU and Muhammadiyah organisations, was influenced by the agency of their leaders. In *Fatayat*, for

example, there is Maria Ulfah Anshor, and in *Aisyiyah*, there is Ruhaini Dzuhayatin. Both figures had sufficient social, political, economic, and symbolic capital within the male-dominated organisations, and they gained a platform at the right moment (Bourdieu 1986).

However, the growth of the women's rights movement with a feminist approach in the early 1980s was also influenced by geopolitical developments following the Iranian Revolution and by the emergence of collective awareness to combat the repression of the New Order regime. The regime aggressively promoted a population programme that disregarded women's health and reproductive rights (Aripurnami 1996). At that time, the regime's approach was considered to have failed to take into account the feelings of Muslims, who suspected that the family planning (KB) programme was a racist project aimed at Muslims. This suspicion only diminished when the socialisation of the KB programme was socialised through the network of *pesantren* and religious organisations, especially NU (Hull 1981; Mahfudh 2011 & 2013).

Women's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with a feminist ideology began to emerge in the 1980s. *Kalyanamitra* was founded in Jakarta in 1985, followed by *Yasanti* in Yogyakarta in 1982. Since then, young researchers and activists within NU, Muhammadiyah, and Islamic universities have begun to explore discourse and reference materials on gender and feminism. Some of these individuals later pursued postgraduate degrees in the UI Women's Studies Programme (Poerwandari 2005).

Interestingly, raising awareness of the need for feminism among Muslims in Indonesia did not follow the same approach as in other Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia, Egypt, and Morocco, where the concept of feminism entered through the concept of universal human rights. In Indonesia, Islamic feminism grew at the heart of Islamic religious institutions, particularly *pesantren* and universities, where activists from the NU and Muhammadiyah women's organisations sowed the seeds of change.

They conducted critical studies with little apologetics regarding gender bias in Islamic narratives concerning the subjugated and misogynistic roles of women in the past. Methodologically, they carried out this effort with confidence, using text-reading methodologies that they recognised and lived by. These methodologies had developed within the tradition of Islamic legal thought in Indonesia and included the theory of *ushul fiqh*

(legal maxim), linguistic criticism, and anthropological studies. These studies revealed contradictions between the ideal Islamic concept of women's noble position and their subordinate status in reality.

More specifically, they critiqued the Hadith and reinterpreted references like *fiqh* (Islamic law) from the perspective of gender and feminist analysis.¹ In this way, they constructed arguments about equality and justice based on recognised traditions of thought and approaches within the Indonesian Islamic tradition.

This paper outlines a number of challenges in the final section. Overall, however, collaboration and networking are key to the strength of the feminist movement in Indonesia, even in the face of strengthened fundamentalist movements that utilise Islamist campaigns as cheap political identities, such as the "Indonesia without feminists" campaign.²

Research Methodology

This paper is based on personal experience and uses autoethnography as its research method. This approach has long been recognised in feminist studies. Several studies have adopted an autoethnographic approach in relation to Islamic feminism. One example is the work of Syeda Madiha Mohsin (2023). In her dissertation, she uses autoethnography to reflect on her life experience as a South Asian woman wearing a hijab at a university in the United States. Through recounting her own story, she challenges the discourse of Islamophobia and Orientalism within higher education. Another researcher who employed this approach earlier is Amani Hamdan (2012). Although she does not specifically discuss Islam, her autoethnographic study elaborates on the experiences of Muslim women in education. She emphasises the methodological value of exploring identity construction among Muslim women.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method. Essentially, it is the study of an individual's experiences in relation to their life, activities, and emotional explorations. In this article, I draw on my experience of establishing an Islamic feminist movement in Indonesia during the New Order era. In addition to using reflective methods, this article draws on reference readings in Islamic thought to develop concepts grounded in Islamic tradition. In short, this article recounts the encounter between the two feminist movements that emerged and developed in Indonesia within the political context of the New Order.

Growing Up as a Feminist

I was born into a *Muhammadiyah* family, but I spent a lot of time with activists at *pesantren* and within NU. As a female activist, I have identified myself as a feminist from the outset and have endeavoured to live my life in accordance with feminist principles. This was not easy, of course, as I was born into a Muslim family based on traditional Javanese values, which often resulted in women being culturally subordinated (*trima ing pandum*), accepting of whatever role was assigned to them, or whatever was imposed on women. Conversely, this attitude also accepted men's superiority.

However, my mother was a godmother in the Javanese tradition. She was born into a family of batik merchants from Cilacap who later migrated to Yogyakarta. She was a savvy businesswoman and very strict with herself when it came to saving money. Although she was the main breadwinner, she left all family decisions to my father.

The son of an Islamic religious leader from a *pesantren* background, my father was a true patriarch who would not allow my mother to eat before him. He was like a "gus" (a young Islamic scholar) and the son of a local Islamic figure who, in his old age, still had a caretaker named "Siwo Dul". My grandmother (*Mbah Putri*) sent *Siwo Dul* to look after my father. He came from a village called Kebarongan, which is now one of the centres of non-NU and non-*Muhammadiyah pesantren* in Banyumas. *Siwo Dul* had been with my father since he was a bachelor, accompanying him when he migrated to the southern Ciamis region of West Java to manage my grandfather's (*Mbah Kakung*) agricultural assets and waqf. *Siwo Dul* remained single and devoted himself to my father until he married and had children and grandchildren.

My feminist consciousness probably developed at home. I saw my mother as powerful: she employed a number of male workers and managed her children to the extent that they obeyed her every wish. However, my father was also very strong and dominant.

In addition to the basic philosophical understanding I gained while studying at IAIN Jakarta (1978-1984), critical feminist thinking continues to challenge my self-awareness and help me grow as a person who negotiates the standardisation of the "definition" of a Muslim woman. In this context, I interpret feminism as a way of thinking that stems from an appreciation of experience, identity, and comfort. It offers an alternative to the traditional role of a woman who imitates her

mother's attitude towards her father, as my seven sisters did.

I am fortunate to have grown up in an academic environment that introduced me to ideas about gender and feminism. This gave me the opportunity to learn from Indonesian feminist pioneers such as Julia Suryakusuma and Mies Grijns, who taught at the Faculty of Anthropology at Leiden University in the Netherlands. At that time (1984-1985), Julia invited me to be her research assistant studying female rubber tappers in Citandoh, Sukabumi. Meanwhile, Mies involved me in designing a study and conducting research on female tea pickers in Goalpara, Sukabumi.

I have also read widely on the subject, including the works of Ratna Saptari on gender and feminism, Wardah Hafidz on critical Islam and feminism, and Nursyahbani Katjasungkana on feminist legal theory. The latter is particularly important to me in my advocacy work to prevent child marriage and abolish female circumcision. I have gained a great deal of insight from her writings.

Through these readings, they introduced me to feminism and encouraged me to develop my background in anthropology and in critical Islamic sociology.

Several men have also influenced my persistence in building critical feminist awareness. My husband, Ismed Natsir, is a tough editor and a captivating historian. From him, I have learned to read history in the context of time and politics rather than simply memorising dates. My interest in anthropological research stems from my mentor, Martin van Bruinessen, a scholar of the NU cultural Islamic movement and *pesantren*. Although he did not introduce me to feminism, Martin exemplified the importance of adopting a critical attitude when questioning power relations — a valuable skill in feminist studies.

Bringing Together Two Feminist Strands in Indonesia

I do not think it is an exaggeration to describe myself as a "matchmaker" and facilitator of the union between two feminist schools of thought: secular feminism and Muslim feminism. These two schools of thought converge, engage with each other, and struggle within the realm of thought and action of the women's movement in Indonesia.

After spending a year as a research assistant to Martin van Bruinessen in a poor neighbourhood in Bandung, living alongside our research subjects, the urban poor

(Bruinessen & Marcoes 1984), I felt confident enough to conduct independent research to understand the role of *mubalighat/ustadzah* as mediators in translating Islamic teachings on the role of women.

It was then that I realised how the New Order regime's interpretation of the concept of wife had a major influence on the *ustadzah's* interpretation of what is referred to as the role of women in Islam (Marcoes 1988). The concept of the wife as *makmum* and the husband as *imam* essentially aligns with the role of women in Javanese culture. This concept was adopted by New Order politics and translated into norms governing women's roles, as affirmed in the *Panca Dharma Wanita* (Rahayu 2009).

In this paper, I propose a concept of convergence between "secular feminists" and Muslim feminists. This concept refers to a critical perspective and attitude that originates in philosophy, international conventions, and law, all the result of secular rational thinking (Arivia 2002). Meanwhile, Islamic/Muslim feminists refer to those who use religious arguments as the basis for their critical thinking and attitude that questions the causes of women's oppression (Affiat 2021).

I also refer to Affiat's definition (Affiat 2021), which states that the relationship between Islam and feminism is neither linear nor singular. At least, she identifies four groups of relationships: Islamic Feminism, Feminism in Islam, Feminism and Islam, and Islam without Feminism. Except for the last category, Islam without Feminism, I do not strictly distinguish between the first three categories because, essentially, all three accept feminism as a methodology for studying and taking action to change the situation of women within Islam.

However, the concept of "Islam without feminism", as categorised by Affiat, argues that the two entities do not require convergence or collaboration, as they differ in their approaches, objectives, and sources of reference when positioning women in relation to religion. For this group, the source and basis of truth regarding gender relations must come solely from revelation. However, in the context of feminism as a critical philosophy and its application, even revelation should be open to criticism. After all, it is a product of human interpretation that can be biased and contradict the core message of Islamic teachings. Therefore, it can be corrected and reinterpreted, provided it can be methodologically traced and accounted for.

In this paper, the term "Muslim feminist" refers to arguments whose actions are not limited to objective

rational views but also originate from religious discourse, including the realm of faith. The issues addressed by these two groups may be the same, but their sources and references may differ.

As Rachel Rinaldo's research (Rinaldo 2013) shows, in reality, feminism does not prevent Muslim communities in Indonesia from criticising Islamic teachings that are considered to subordinate women. In her research, Rinaldo shows that piety can be a driving force for women's activism and feminism in Indonesia, rather than an obstacle. She observed how Muslim women use religion as a basis for fighting for their rights and participating in the public sphere. Piety is not merely a ritualistic activity detached from worldly concerns. Rather, it becomes social and political capital to fight for women's interests. Therefore, they actively engage in public spaces where women's issues are debated through various institutions, including religious, social, educational, political, and economic ones, as well as various forums, ranging from associations to NGOs, to advocate for change.

Feminism in Indonesia, using other terms—gender equality and justice—is not considered a threat. On the contrary, it has been adopted by the state through various policies such as Gender Mainstreaming (PUG), as set out in Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2000, issued by President Abdurrahman Wahid. Anyone knows that this was only possible when gender and feminism as the operational basis of the instruction had been accepted by Islamic organisations. For context, PUG was launched when Khoffiah Indar Parawansa, a prominent figure in the *Muslimat NU*, served as the *Minister of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection*.

As in Rinaldo's research, I see that an important factor in this success is the role of women's organisations in negotiating with donors such as the Ford Foundation. Through their support for the Fiqh An Nisa P3M (Islamic Programme for Adolescent Health/PIKER), managed by Muslimat NU, they offered ideas for methods and approaches that are acceptable to *pesantren* (Marcoes & Hasyim 1995). This shows that feminism can reinforce and support itself in the fulfilment of women's rights, regardless of its basis — whether secular or Islamic — as embodied in programmes to strengthen reproductive and political rights.

Indonesia's experience is notable for its successful convergence of two seemingly incompatible approaches, in contrast to the situation observed by Mahmood in Egypt. This convergence involves Islamic

thought traditions meeting within a framework based on the principles of *ushul fiqh* (legal maxim), interpreted through a feminist lens. I have witnessed this convergence as the essence of the growth of the Islamic feminist movement in Indonesia through *pesantren* and the wealth of knowledge contained therein, such as classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*).

At the heart of this combination lies the rejection of the idea that gender inequality is permanent, inherent, and unchangeable because it is considered to be the will of God. This view is rejected, even though it stems from respected cultural values or religious beliefs (*fiqh*), derived from the classical Islamic texts (Fakih 2006; Muhammad 2017).

Of course, many *pesantren* remain closed to such ideas, maintaining an interpretation of classical Islamic texts that explicitly justifies the subordination of women. Meanwhile, *Kiai*, as *pesantren* leaders, perpetuate the patriarchal system within *pesantren* in the name of preserving tradition. However, changes within *pesantren* that accept women's roles are becoming increasingly inevitable due to practical needs.

Evidence of this social change is everywhere, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to find *pesantren* that exclusively accept male students based on the assumption that women do not need an education. *Kiai* themselves are becoming more open to allowing their daughters to continue their education outside the *pesantren*, even abroad, without being accompanied by a mahram (a husband or male relative), despite this being considered fundamental in classical Islamic texts. In everyday reality, however, what is written is not always put into practice for various reasons, including the fact that people are becoming more open-minded about the concept of a chaperone. This is reflected in regulations that guarantee security in public spaces (Ulil Abshar Abdalla, interview, 1 August 2022).

The encounter between *pesantren* activists and secular feminists has brought about internal changes to *pesantren* while preserving institutional traditions, such as the study of classical Islamic texts. They provide new interpretations of these texts and negotiate what they can, especially with the *kiai* or *nyai*, who are the authorities within the *pesantren*.

It should be noted that, until the 1980s and 1990s, these two groups of feminists tended to have a tense yet harmonious relationship, particularly with regard to their respective views on religion as a construct of gender roles.

Kiai Husein Muhammad, now a leading expert on Islam and gender issues in Indonesia, admits that, when I first invited him and Wardah Hafidz to meet Riffat Hassan, a first-generation Muslim feminist from Pakistan, in early 1995, he assumed that the demands of feminist activists regarding gender injustice in Islam were due to their failure to study the scriptures, i.e., the classical Islamic texts. However, he also acknowledged that the interpretation of the Qur'an and other religious texts used in *pesantren* tended to be gender biased and misogynistic. This reality prompted him to further explore the study of Islam and gender in classical Islamic texts, interpreting them in new ways using methodologies acceptable in *pesantren*.

The tension between these two feminist movements gradually melted away after both sides were brought together by the Fiq An Nisa P3M programme that I managed. They realised that the problem lay not in the text itself, but in how it was interpreted and for whose benefit. They realised that interpretations of this issue tended to be gender biased and in line with the politics of the New Order regime in defining the role of women.

Ultimately, both sides recognised the need for a reading methodology that would enable a proper understanding of the texts' meaning. This would involve placing the text in dialogue with reality and context (historical), as well as acknowledging women's experiences as facts of life. They are essentially seeking a way to read texts from a humanitarian perspective that aligns with the universal ideals of Islam (Wadud 2001; Umar 2002; Muhammad 2017; Mulia 2020; Rofiah 2021).

In this context, the gender approach and analytical tools introduced by secular feminists help them to understand gender inequality issues and develop relevant methodologies for Muslims in Indonesia (Marcoes 2017; Anwar 2021).

One factor that eases the tension between the two groups is that some secular feminists come from Muslim families or have studied at Islamic institutions such as UIN/IAIN and have family backgrounds in NU or Muhammadiyah. Therefore, from a young age, they have been familiar with the teaching materials in the critical study of texts in the classical Islamic texts. When they delved into gender studies, they discovered methodologies for critiquing texts.

History of Encounters

In retrospect, the first formal meeting between the two feminist groups was arranged by the LSAF (*Lembaga*

Studi Agama dan Filsafat/the Institute for Religious and Philosophical Studies), led by M. Dawam Raharjo, via the journal he edited, *Ulumul Qur'an* (UQ). Among other things, the journal published an article by Riffat Hassan entitled "Women's Theology in Islamic Tradition: Equal Before God" (*Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, January-May 1987), translated by Wardah Hafidz (Hasan 1990). In the article, Riffat concluded that questionable Bible and Hadith doctrines influenced anti-emancipation practices developing among Muslims. In 1993, as a follow-up to this article, the LSAF invited a number of female activists and academics to discuss the issue at a forum, the proceedings of which were later published in *Ulumul Qur'an*, Vol. V, Nos. 5-6 (1994).

At the same time, however, Ratna Megawangi published an article in the daily newspaper *Kompas*, asserting that feminism oppresses housewives. Saba Mahmood later elaborated on this idea in more sophisticated terms in her studies in Egypt. Ratna Megawangi's idea then became the catalyst for the emergence of anti-feminist groups in Indonesia that reject gender equality, viewing it as a "Western concept" that aims to destroy Muslim family ties. While they did not reject the differentiation of roles as the basis of the concept of gender, for them, the concept of gender—in accordance with Islamic teachings—placed men as leaders (*imams*) and women and children as followers (*ma'mum*). In other words, they accepted the concept of "gender harmony" as the basis for family resilience, as introduced by the New Order regime's gender politics.

P3M (*Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat*/Association for *Pesantren* and Community Development) initiated meetings between *pesantren*-based and secular feminists as part of the Fiqh An-Nisa programme (Marcoes 1995). At that time, I was the programme coordinator responsible for designing a framework for dialogue between the two groups. The programme specifically addressed issues of sexuality and reproductive health in line with the mandate of the 1995 Beijing Conference to raise awareness among *pesantren* communities and congregations led by female religious leaders (*mubalighat*). The programme aimed to reduce maternal mortality and prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS caused by unsafe and irresponsible sexual behaviour (Mas'udi & Sciortino 1997).

Supported by the Ford Foundation, the Fiqh An-Nisa P3M programme has become a forum that unites two strands of feminism in their work to empower women in *pesantren* communities and Islamic women's organisations within NU and Muhammadiyah.

As Gus Dur often noted, the role of *pesantren*-based NGOs is to bridge the gap between *pesantren* and the outside world (the general public). To this end, they contextually reinterpret religious teachings to inform their social movement, which is rooted in tradition.

However, prior to the inception of Fiqh An-Nisa in mid-1995, initiatives aimed at fostering connections between the "outside world" and the internal realm of *pesantren*, such as the development of *ulama* or the reinterpretation of classical Islamic texts and traditions, failed to address the conceptual framework concerning women's interests.

Against this backdrop of neglect, P3M — managed at the time by Masdar F. Masudi, Syafiq Hasyim, and me — developed the Fiqh An-Nisa and Forum Rahim programmes. These programmes offered a more equitable perspective for women by adopting feminist concepts that I had introduced to P3M regarding gender equality and justice as a lens through which to view women's reproductive rights issues (Marcoes 1995). Fiqh An-Nisa was developed by P3M in several major *pesantren* throughout Java and Madura, including the Kempek *Pesantren*, Babakan Ciwaringin in Cirebon, Cipasung in Tasikmalaya, Maslakhul Huda in Kajen, Nurul Jadid in Paiton, and Nurul Islam Antirogo in Jember, as well as several other large *pesantren* in Situbondo and Madura.

In 1999, an internal crisis occurred within P3M, prompting its activists to oppose polygamy. This led to the establishment of *Rahima* in 2000, which focuses specifically on training female *ulama* (Kloss & Ismah, 2023).

At the same time, FK3 PUAN Amal Hayati, hereafter referred to as PUAN, conducted studies of classical Islamic texts focusing on gender issues. PUAN was founded by Sinta Nuriyah Rahman and several clerics to specifically study the book *Uqud al Lujain*, written by the 20th-century scholar Nawawi Al Bantani from Banten. The results of this research were published in several versions according to the needs of readers and provoked a small reaction among *pesantren*. One response came from a traditional *pesantren* managed by Lajnah Bahsul Masail (LBM) at Pondok *Pesantren* Lirboyo in East Java (Nuriyah 2006).

Training programmes were also developed at Muhammadiyah, especially within the Aisyiyah environment, which promoted gender equality through initiatives such as those for women's economic empowerment, reproductive health protection, and the

prevention of child marriage and female circumcision. The organisation also offered leadership cadre training programmes for women.

Conclusion

The first and second congresses of the Indonesian Women Ulama (KUPI) took place in Cirebon (2017) and Jepara (2021), respectively, following the reformation era. This was the result of a meeting between secular and Muslim feminist movements. However, these activities had already begun during the New Order era, which was marked by the emergence of two feminist movements in Indonesia (Kloos & Ismah 2023).

The meeting between Muslim and secular feminists has led to notable progress in addressing the injustices faced by women in Indonesia. This progress has been driven by the reinterpretation of classical Islamic texts through a feminist lens in *pesantren*. This has provided a platform for criticising injustices and inequalities normalised by tradition, body politics, and religious teachings.

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Footnotes

- 1 For example, Mansour Fakhri, an alumnus of IAIN/UIN Jakarta, formulated a theory of gender analysis and social transformation, giving him the authority to speak on issues of gender and Islam.
- 2 <https://www.dw.com/id/tubuhku-bukan-milikku-geliat-anti-feminisme-di-indonesia/a-48158720>.