

## Islamic Feminism in Indonesia: Reflection, Action, and Praxis

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### Abstract

This paper reflects the author's experience working as both an academic and activist in the Islamic feminism movement. Unlike other feminist movements, Islamic feminism bases its ideas on the humanist, inclusive and egalitarian teachings of Islam. Islamic feminism seeks to empower women spiritually and morally, eliminate injustice, and promote gender equality in all spheres of life. Being an Islamic feminist is synonymous with jihad against a hierarchical gender system that erodes the humanitarian potential of women, and further reformulates Islam as a source of authority that liberates women. Islamic feminists contributed to the production of the idea of egalitarianism and gender activism by putting women centred on their own freedoms. They managed to rediscover the hidden knowledge of the egalitarian principles of Islam buried in patriarchal culture, which is the main feature of Islamic feminist epistemology. The author further recommends the importance of Islamic feminism being integrated into Islamic studies in universities in Indonesia.

Keywords: Islamic feminism, Islamic studies, patriarchy, khalifah fil ardh, tawhid, feminist epistemology, CLD KHI, CEDAW, reform of family law

### Introduction

The term Islamic feminism began to appear in various literatures in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including in Thomas Philipp's *Feminism and Nationalist Politics in Egypt*, 1978. The paper portrayed the Islamic feminism movement in Egypt due to the influence of the Egyptian Revolution of 1919. He also mentioned a number of Islamic reform thinkers, such as Rifa'ah Rafi al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), Qasim Amin (1865-1908), and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). Their writings sharply criticised various Islamic understandings that undermine the dignity of women, causing social regression and injustice in society. Philipp's writing also documented the activities of early Islamic feminists such as Huda Sha'rawi, founder of the Egyptian Women's Organisation in 1923 (Lois Beck & Nikki Keddie 1987 p. 277).

Other writings on Islamic feminism can be found in the works of Aisyah Taymuriyah (Egyptian writer and poet), Malak Hifni Nasir, and Nabawiyah Musa (both Egyptian feminists), Zainab Fawwaz (Lebanese writer), Taj Sultanah (Iran), Fatma Aliye (Turkey), Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Nazzar Sajjad Haydar, and Ruete (all three from Zanzibar). They were all known as pioneers in fostering feminist awareness and working to eradicate cultural values and ideologies that marginalise women

(Romli 2010). For the Indonesian context, early thoughts that were considered the forerunners of the idea of Islamic feminism can be explored from the writings of colonialism-era female figures, such as Kartini, Dewi Sartika, and Rahmah El-Yunusiyah (Anwar 2021, p. 43).

The term Islamic feminism is still controversial; largely, conservative groups refuse to attach the term feminism to Islam because the two words are considered contradictory, Islam is on the path of faith, while feminism is considered secular. Therefore, Islam and feminism cannot be united (Moghadam 2002, p. 71). Moderates and progressives, such as Laila Ahmed, Rifat Hassan, and Fatima Mernissi agree with Islamic feminism because feminism is in no way contradictory to the essence of Islam as both are in line to promote justice and equality of all human beings, including men and women. Although in practice Islamic societies tend to position women as subordinates because the teachings of equality are still poorly understood (Mojab 2001, p. 124). I agree with the second group's view that the core of Islamic teachings is to uphold justice in its essence, including gender-based justice. There is no contradiction between feminism and Islam.

Unlike other feminist movements, Islamic feminism directs its movement towards the transformation of just and democratic social systems and institutions by promoting the principles of justice and gender equality based on Islamic teachings and traditions. Islamic feminism refers to thoughts and movements that are always historical and contextual and in line with the growing awareness of Islamic society in responding to various social inequalities.

Islamic feminism moves to ensure that people, especially women, do not experience discrimination, exploitation, and violence due to gender-biased religious understanding and practice and patriarchal values. Their efforts included promoting, critically questioning, reinterpreting, and internalising the value of justice by considering the context based on Islamic teachings (Anwar 2018). Thus, Islamic feminism is an idea and movement that bases its struggle on Islamic teachings and traditions that are humanist, inclusive, and prioritise the principles of *maqashid shari'ah* (the objective purpose of sharia) to eliminate all forms of gender injustice in society.

Furthermore, the terms Islamic feminist and Muslim feminist are debated. Some experts, such as Cooke, define Muslim feminists as feminists who do not always base their studies on religious texts like Islamic Studies. They are called Muslim feminists because they are Muslims, but they do not necessarily pay attention to or refer to Islamic teachings in their feminist ideas. Instead, Islamic feminists use the Islamic tradition as a basis for consideration in their studies and movements. Islamic feminists assert that they are questioning the epistemology of Islamic teachings and believe that the essence of Islam is not contradictory to the idea of feminism (Badran & Cooke 1990, p. 60).

In this paper, I avoid the term Muslim feminist for simply linguistic reasons; the term is only suitable for male feminists; for women it is called *Muslimah* feminists. To avoid linguistic ambiguity, I choose to use the gender-neutral word "Islam". Therefore, Islamic feminists are those (women and men) who critically question various forms of gender injustice in Islamic teachings and traditions and take concrete actions to end the oppression that causes these injustices by using Islamic teachings as a basis. In other words, Islamic feminists seek to uphold justice, realise equality, and humanise human in order to create morally good people for the creation of a just and civilised society (in Islamic terms, *baldah thayyibah wa rabbun ghafur*).

This paper elaborates on the ideas and movements of Islamic feminism in Indonesia, especially through the reflection on the author's personal experience of being an Islamic feminist. Furthermore, it portrays various actions and praxis of Islamic feminism in Indonesia in formulating a humanist-feminist interpretation of Islam in order to uphold the values of gender justice towards the realisation of a democratic, just, and civilised society.

### **Becoming an Islamic Feminist**

As a woman who grew up in a traditional Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*), I, no different from most Islamic women, was taught that women are God's creatures who are different from men. Not just physically, but also in status. Men's status is higher because they can be prophets, prayer leaders, family leaders, and many professions that only men can do. Women are simply called husband's companions, helping to earn a living even though they are the main support of the family economy. Women, even if they are highly educated, are still expected to be wives who obey their husbands, give birth to offspring, and maintain the good name of the family, even the good name of the community, religion, nation, and state.

The discourse about women circulating in *pesantren* and society generally revolves around the issues of well, bed, and kitchen. No wonder, if the title of housewife is far more important than all educational degrees and professions that women struggle to achieve; some even achieve them with tears. In addition, most women are haunted by fear, insecurity, lack of confidence, and even a sense of sin because throughout their lives they are intimidated by religious teachings that contain horror and threats of *haram*; all are *haram*! Even worse, in the afterlife it has been clearly described that most women inhabit hell, even though they have the chance to enter heaven, they are just spectators because all the pleasures in the form of angels, sexual satisfaction, and spirituality are fully prepared for men.

Fortunately, various interpretations of Islam that undermine women's humanity were not strong enough to influence my life because my family environment was moderate and placed great importance on education. My mother was the first woman in her village to complete *pesantren* education, and my father completed higher education, which was rare in his community. In addition, my maternal grandmother was a brave woman. She chose to be a single parent, raising her five sons by

cultivating the rice fields and managing ponds left behind by her husband. Every year, after the harvest, she travelled around South Sulawesi, Java, and Sumatra to visit relatives and families while enjoying tourism. To me, she was a true example of an independent, strong, and authoritative woman.

However, my family still expected me to be a skilled woman, so I took sewing, cooking, and embroidery courses. My grandmother and mother still believed that women should be skilled in domestic work, so I became a feminist who enjoyed cooking and sewing. My mother's message, which has stuck in my memory, was full of feminism spirit: "women must have morals, work, and have wealth". This means that women must have spiritual strength to be noble, productive by producing works and services, and economically independent. The spirit of feminism intensified after I got married because I met a husband who also shares the sense of humanity.

In addition, the long experience of struggling with issues of education, women's empowerment, and vulnerable groups, which started from activities in the IPPNU youth organisation, then the *Fatayat NU* and *NU* women's organisation, honed my sense of gender sensitivity. Being part of *NU* women's organisation for more than 25 years has taught me that women are the main victims of unjust behaviour in society, but most of them do not realise that they are victims. How ironic! Many women still believe that they were created as weak and subordinate beings and must submit to men. In fact, they believe that obedience to men is a prerequisite to enter heaven.

Seeing this reality in society, I was inspired to make efforts to strengthen literacy and education in order to make people, especially women, aware of their true identity as whole human beings, endowed with dignity, and equal to men. At the same time, it reminds women of their moral responsibility as spiritual beings as well as family members and community members.

My critical awareness increased after moving to Jakarta and pursuing postgraduate education at *UIN Syahid Jakarta* (1991-1997). I was fortunate to do my postgraduate education with Prof. Dr. Harun Nasution, a renowned Islamic reformer and pioneer of the Islamic higher education movement in Indonesia. Although he did not call himself a feminist, his ideas and activities in education were full of egalitarian values and gender justice. During my study, I digested the writings of Islamic feminists, such as Rifa'ah Rafi al-Tahtawi, Qasim Amin, Muhammad Abduh, Riffat Hassan (1995), Fatima Mernissi, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Asghar Ali Engineer

(1992), Amina Wadud (1994), Nawal As-Sa'adawi, Laila Ahmed, Margot Badran, and Azza Karam. I also read the writings of Indonesian thinkers, such as Saporinah Sadli, Toeti Heraty Noerhadi, Wardah Hafid, Lies Marcoes, Nurul Agustina, Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, Julia Suryakusuma, Kamala Candrakirana, Mansour Fakih, and Masdar Mas'udi. At that time, there was not much Indonesian feminist writing. Now, I am happy to see the emergence of a number of Islamic feminists, both women and men, some of whom seem very militant.

My feminist thinking continues to evolve, influenced by encounters, conversations and intense discussions with women activists and pro-democracy activists in various organisations that are vocal about gender justice, such as Kalyanamitra, Solidaritas Perempuan, Kapal Perempuan, Mitra Perempuan, Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia, Komnas Perempuan, Komnas HAM, Yayasan Rahima, Fahmina Institute, Rumah KitaB, Yayasan Pulih, Yayasan Kesehatan Ibu, Yayasan Puan Amal Hayati, and last but not least, *Jurnal Perempuan* with Gadis Arivia's feminist perspective on philosophy. Likewise, I gained insight from fellow progressive researchers at the Institute for Religious and Gender Studies (Lembaga Kajian Agama dan Gender/LKAJ). Finally, through ICRP, an interfaith organisation, I have come to realise that religious-based gender injustice is not only found in Islam, but also in all religions and beliefs. Therefore, it is important to collaborate with feminists from all religions and beliefs to eliminate gender-biased and patriarchal interpretations and practices of religious traditions.

I am very careful not to mention the names of feminists in this paper because not everyone is comfortable with the term feminist. There are still many who, despite their efforts to fight for gender equality and justice, are reluctant to be called feminists. This is also the case in Egypt, as told by Omaima Abou-Bakr, the founder of the Islamic feminism movement in Egypt. As she explained in our conversation in Cairo in 2014, the term feminist was not widely recognised by the public, so it was no surprise that we feminists were only known in academic circles. It was only in the last few years, especially after the 25 January 2011 Revolution that we started organising seminars, conferences, and workshops, and since then the term Islamic feminism has been commonly used.

The discomfort of using the term feminist is partly due to various misconceptions about feminism. Some consider feminist movement as a Western product that was deliberately developed to destroy Islam; an anti-family movement, anti-women's nature, anti-marriage,

and anti-child protection. All these accusations are baseless and highly erroneous. The core of feminist movement is to uphold justice and equality for all human beings, especially women who have been the most disadvantaged. I believe that upholding justice is at the core of the teachings of all religions and beliefs.

Being a feminist, including an Islamic feminist, is not just about fighting or demanding for women's human rights as human beings and as full citizens, but also actively making efforts to strengthen women's literacy and education so that they are able to fulfil their human obligations as family members, community members, citizens, and even at the global level as citizens of the world. Women must appear as moral agents in various transformation and humanisation actions to defend and uphold justice for all, especially vulnerable and oppressed groups (*mustadh'afin*), including groups with disabilities, promote compassion and empathy for humanity as spiritual beings, maintain peace and social cohesion, and care for environmental sustainability. The characteristics of Islamic feminists are certainly far from being arrogant, self-willed, enslaving others: men or women, ignoring individual obligations to parents and family and social obligations to the wider community. And finally, and most importantly, is that feminists do not neglect spirituality.

My dissertation entitled *Negara Islam: Pemikiran Husain Haikal (Islamic State: The Thought of Husain Haikal)* (1997; 2001) has included feminist thoughts regarding the rights of Islamic women in politics. The Islamic state is obliged to protect and fulfil the basic rights of citizens, including women. Therefore, all forms of discriminatory, exploitative and violent behaviour, especially against women, are not justified in an Islamic state for any reasons. Similarly, my inaugural speech as Research Professor of Religious Literature (1999) addressed the theme *Potret Perempuan dalam Lektur Agama: Rekonstruksi Pemikiran Islam Menuju Masyarakat Egaliter dan Demokratis (Portrait of Women in Religious Literature: Reconstruction of Islamic Thoughts towards an Egalitarian and Democratic Society)*. It strongly condemned views that undermine the dignity of women as written in various types of religious literatures in Indonesia. After that, I produced a number of books that outspokenly discussed the importance of strengthening religious and cultural literacy and the fulfilment of women's human rights, especially reproductive rights and health.

In early 1998, along with the reformation era in this country, researchers at the Office of Research and Development Agency (Balitbang) of the Ministry

of Religious Affairs established the Institute for Religious and Gender Studies (LKAJ), which actively facilitated various critical discussions related to issues of democracy, feminism, and human rights, especially from the perspective of Islamic teachings. Then, at the end of 1999, LKAJ, together with Solidaritas Perempuan, launched six books voicing the views of Islamic feminism, namely *Ikhtiar Mengatasi Kekerasan dalam Rumah Tangga (Efforts to Overcome Domestic Violence)* by Ciciek Farha (1999), *Pengasuhan Anak dalam Keluarga Islam (Childcare in the Islamic Family)* by Fuaduddin T.M. (1999), *Kodrat Perempuan dalam Islam (The Nature of Women in Islam)* by Nasarudin Umar, *Perempuan sebagai Kepala Rumah Tangga (Women as Heads of Households)* by Ratna Batara Munti (1999), *Pembagian Kerja Rumah Tangga dalam Islam (Division of Domestic Work in Islam)* by Istiadah (1999), and *Pandangan Islam tentang Poligami (Islamic Views on Polygamy)* by Musdah Mulia (1999).

Then, in early 2000, the idea of revising Islamic family law emerged and this became a central feminist issue in various Islamic countries. Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2013), an Islamic feminist from Iran, was one of the figures who sharply criticised the existence of gender injustice in Islamic family law. As the Chairperson of the Gender Mainstreaming Team at the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2001-2007), I also positively welcomed the idea of reforming Islamic family law. Together with feminists and progressive scholars, our team managed to formulate a reform of Islamic family law under the name Counter Legal Draft: Compilation of Islamic Law (abbreviated as CLD KHI) in 2004 (Gender Mainstreaming Team 2004).

The concept of Islamic family law reform in the form of CLD KHI did not receive a positive response in the country; it has even been strongly rejected. Surprisingly, even though it was officially rejected by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, the desire of many groups to study it scientifically remains. In fact, it was warmly welcomed and highly appreciated internationally. Not only Islamic educational institutions were interested in studying it scientifically, but also secular institutions. Of course, as the result of scientific research, no one has the right to abolish CLD KHI or prohibit its dissemination.

Since its publication in 2004 until now, there have been more than 50 institutions and universities, both at home and abroad, that have invited me and other team members to discuss its contents. It was such a blessing in disguise that because of CLD KHI I had the opportunity to travel to various countries, fulfilling the invitations of a number of institutions and universities interested in

studying it. I was also active in explaining the importance of reforming Islamic family law to end various forms of discrimination, exploitation, and gender-based violence, especially against women in family life. This activity also made me more intensely involved in the global Islamic feminism movement.

I need to mention some of key institutions that have reviewed CLD KHI, namely the Islamic Family Law Institute, Harvard University, USA (2004) - just a few months after CLD KHI was announced - then, respectively, Passau University in Germany (2005), Aga Khan University (The Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilization) in London (2005), The 10<sup>th</sup> AWID International Forum on Women's Rights and Development in Bangkok (2005), EHESS institute in France (2007), and Islamic Feminism Training in Davao, Philippines (2007).

Most surprisingly, I was invited to present CLD KHI at the 2008 International Conference on Islamic Feminism in Barcelona, Spain, organised by Junta Islamica Catalana, a progressive Islamic organisation in Spain. A year later (2009), the International Conference on Islamic Feminism in Malaysia also provided space to discuss CLD KHI. In 2011, the Moroccan Islamic feminist movement held a workshop on Islamic family law reform and CLD KHI became the main reference. In 2012, the Wellesley College in Boston chose CLD KHI as one of the materials for training women leaders. In the same year (2012), CLD KHI draft was presented at Dokuz Eylul University in Izmir, Turkey. The discussion of CLD KHI gained momentum at the Islamic Feminism Conference in Alexandria, which gave birth to the Alexandria Declaration (March 2014), published by Bibliotheca Alexandrina Egypt. This Declaration was not only formulated by Islamic feminists, but also famous scholars, including from Al-Azhar, Egypt. The Declaration places the principle of gender equality as an integral concept in defining the relationship between men and women in Islam and encourages women's broad participation in the public sphere.

Not to exaggerate, CLDKHI was the most phenomenal product of Indonesian Islamic feminism. Unfortunately, the idea of reform has yet to be implemented, mainly due to the low level of religious and cultural literacy among the government and the public. However, I remain optimistic that the idea of Islamic family law reform will be accepted in the future. It is evident that after 15 years, one of CLD KHI's proposals, namely an increase in the minimum age of marriage, was successfully adopted with the passage of Law Number 16 of 2019 on the Amendments to Law Number 1 of 1974 concerning Marriage, that marriage is permitted

when the male and female parties have reached the age of 19 years old. Equality in marriage age has been recognised.

Reflecting on our work in drafting CLD KHI, I conclude that feminism's work patterns are identical to the ones of intellectual work. They are always critical of social phenomena and sharply question why inequality and injustice occur, especially against vulnerable groups such as women. Feminists are actually warriors who tirelessly search for new ideas that better guarantee the realisation of justice and fight to implement them in people's lives despite facing a steep and winding road full of challenges and obstacles.

For me, being a feminist and a Muslim woman is not confusing; both go hand in hand without any contradiction. Feminist theories are like reading glasses, helping me to see more clearly the reality of society and various gender injustices in it. The fact of social inequality stirred my humanitarian consciousness to formulate an advocacy movement to realise justice for all. Feminist thinking that is drawn from Islamic teachings has actually strengthened my spirituality because I am increasingly convinced of the truth of Islamic teachings in upholding justice.

In conclusion, being a feminist and a Muslim woman is to be a person who is responsible for implementing the vision of human creation as *khalifah fil ardh* with a concrete mission of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (transformation and humanisation efforts) to the best of my ability, in order to create a society free from the fetters of ignorance, poverty, and evil, free from patriarchal culture that erodes women's humanity. In other words, being an Islamic feminist is synonymous with being a moral or ethical agent who is firmly grounded in Islamic spiritual values.

### Epistemological Foundation of Islamic Feminism

Awareness of the bias of patriarchal values in the interpretation of sacred texts has long been felt by Islamic reform thinkers, such as Rifa'ah Rafi al-Tahtawi, Qasim Amin, Muhammad Abduh, and Tahir Mahmood (Romli 2010). Starting with Rifa'ah Rafi al-Tahtawi, the first Islamic thinker who wrote about the status of women. He boldly stated that a woman's honour lies in her education, not her dress. *Hijab* is not a guarantee of a woman's honour. According to him, Islam is a religion that places great importance on education, including for women. Islam values human logic so much that it places critical reasoning on par with revelation. That is why, after

returning from France, he fought for the promotion of education for Egyptian women (Al-Tahtawi 1843).

Qasim Amin was no less firm in his fight for justice for women. He highlighted in his two books: *Al-Mar'ah al-Jadidah (New Women)* and *Tahrir al-Mar'ah (Women's Freedom)* the need to liberate women. According to him, a nation cannot develop well when women are powerless. Wives, according to him, have only been treated as sexual objects. Women must be empowered through education, freedom of dress, and the abolition of polygamy. Islam glorifies women as free human beings, so all forms of restraint on women in the form of *hijab*, *muhrim*, and others must be eliminated (Amin 1998).

Meanwhile, Muhammad Abduh elaborated on Islamic teachings related to the concept of family and strictly prohibited polygamy. To him, the Qur'anic verse on polygamy only explains the socio-historical context of the *Jahiliyah* culture at that time, not the commandment of polygamy. Islamic teachings on family prioritise the principle of equality between husband and wife; both must complement, protect, and communicate with respect and love. The ultimate goal of Islamic marriage is to realise *sakinah mawaddah wa rahmah*, a peaceful life for husband and wife (Abduh 1881).

Finally, Tahir Mahmood, an Islamic law expert from Tunisia, said that family law used in Islamic societies is the result of a patriarchal interpretation of Islam. He then identified thirteen crucial issues in Islamic family law that must be reformed, namely the minimum age of marriage, the role of guardians, the importance of marriage registration, the economic capacity of husband and wife in marriage, polygamy, family live, restrictions on the husband's right to divorce, the rights and duties of husband and wife in marriage and after divorce, pregnancy and its implications, parental consent (*ijbar*), the distribution and amount of inheritance rights, mandatory wills (*wajibah*), and endowment (*waqf*) (Mahmood 1987, pp. 11-12).

The religious interpretations challenged by Islamic reformers are not only discriminatory against women, but also ignore women's feelings and experiences. Whereas women's experiences are important to be considered in various public policies, including in the drafting of family law. Women feel patronised because their experience and knowledge are ignored in theological reflection. Another form of marginalising women's experience in theological interpretation is by prohibiting women from actively studying and

teaching theological traditions. A critical attitude towards tradition in the context of women's experience is essential, not just adding a new perspective to the existing order. Women's experience is indispensable in reconstructing gender-biased interpretations in the name of religion.

For this reason, Islamic feminists choose Islam as a frame of reference in their epistemic production of gender justice and equality and the elimination of various gender injustice practices in Muslim societies. Generally, feminists use a contextual approach that prioritises critical reasoning and women's experiences. In addition, Islamic feminists are particularly interested in supporting spiritual equality because it gives women the ethical agency they need to be valued as equal beings before God (Anwar 2021, p. 34).

At least the following four things can be used as the epistemological foundation of Islamic feminism. *First*, the liberating concept of tawhid (monotheism). Tawhid is actually a testimony of Muslims that affirms that there is no God except Allah SWT and Muhammad as his messenger. With tawhid, Muslims (women and men) are committed not to worship other gods in the form of humans (rulers, businessmen, religious leaders, husbands, and so on), or power, wealth, ideology, intellectual ability, political parties, organisations, tribes, and so on.

Islamic feminism concludes that a correct understanding of tawhid will lead to the principles of equality, justice and human freedom. The belief that no human being is equal to God, in turn, gives birth to a view of human equality as fellow creatures. No human being should be deified in the sense that it is to be depended upon, feared, worshipped, and all their actions are to be regarded as unconditionally right. The king is not god to the people, the husband is not god to the wife, the rich is not god to the poor, and so on. Unconditional fear and obedience to a king, leader, superior or husband that exceeds the faithfulness and fear of God is a denial of the principle of tawhid. Thus, tawhid is not just a static religious doctrine. It is an active energy that enables humans to place God as God, and humans as humans. The acceptance of the meaning of tawhid not only leads to individual salvation, but also gives birth to an egalitarian and civilised society (Mulia 2005, pp. 6-9).

*Second*, the vision of human creation. A number of verses explain the vision of human creation to be *khalifah fil ardh* (leader or ruler of life on earth). This vision can be realised through the main human mission of *amar*

*ma'rûf nahi munkar* (transformation and humanisation efforts). This sacred task cannot be done by one gender, male or female only. As human beings, who both carry the mandate of caliphate, men and women and other gender types are ordered by God to work together and collaborate to carry out *amar ma'rûf nahi munkar* for the sake of the realisation of a right, decent, and beautiful world order in God's grace (al-Taubah 9: 71).

All human diversity is in order to carry out the mandate as *khalifah* by making various transformation and humanisation efforts in order to create a civilised society. In this context, humans are not judged based on sex, gender, ethnicity, religion, and other primordial ties, but solely based on the quality of faithfulness, namely their sincerity in carrying out the mandate of *khalifah* and carrying out the main mission of humanity.

Third, the concept of Islam as a religion of mercy (*rahmatan lil-'âlamîn*). Islam is a religion that was taught to spread mercy (love full of goodness) for all creatures in the universe (al-Anbiyâ 21:107). The message of mercy in Islam is widespread in Islamic texts, both in the Qur'an and Hadiths. The word *rahmah*, *rahmân*, *rahîm*, and its derivatives are mentioned repeatedly in the Qur'an in a large number of verses, more than 90. The genuine meaning of the word is compassion or love. A Hadith Qudsi states, "*Anâ ar-rahmân. Anâ ar-rahîm*" (I am the most merciful. I am the most loving). This function of mercy was elaborated by the Prophet Muhammad with his saying: "*Inni bu'itstu li utammima makârim al-akhlâq*" (I was sent by God to establish the noble morality of humanity). The Prophet condemned violent, coercive, discriminatory, and other such behaviours (Âli 'Imrân, 3:159).

The message of mercy should inspire Muslims to build a life order based on the following four pillars. First, respect for human dignity (*karamatul insan*). Second, respect for human equality before the law (*al-musâwah amâma al-hukm*). Third, respect for the rights of human fellowship (*al-ukhuwwah*). Fourth, enforcement of justice (*iqâmat al-'adl*). The four pillars of life must be upheld by every Muslim, regardless of sex, gender, ethnicity, skin colour, language, and so on.

Fourth, the concept of *maqâshid al-syarî'ah*. Religious leaders conclude that the objective goal of Islam (*maqâshid al-syarî'ah*) is to humanise humans through the protection of the following five basic rights. First, *hifdz al-nafs*, the protection of the right to life. This implies that Islam guarantees the protection of human life and body, without exception. The implication is that no one should harm, harass, kill, or discriminate and

commit violence against others on any grounds. Second, *hifdz al-'aql*, the protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. This means that Islam provides space for all humans to have opinions and express opinions, thoughts, ideas, of course in appropriate and polite ways so that no one restricts and suppresses the thoughts and opinions of others.

Third, *hifdz an-nasl*, the protection of reproductive rights, especially for women. Islam teaches respect for human reproductive functions so that women who are menstruating, pregnant, giving birth, and breastfeeding get special dispensation not to perform certain worship services, and they are even promised rewards for obeying to keep these reproductive functions. In relation to reproductive functions, Islam guarantees protection for all women from discriminatory, exploitative, and violent treatments. Fourth, *hifdh al-mâl*, the protection of individual property rights. This protection implies the guarantee of choices of work, profession, right to wage, as well as security of property rights. Islam condemns all forms of unjust and brutal treatment of human property, such as deprivation of private property rights, corruption, misappropriation, embezzlement, eviction, environmental destruction, and so on. Finally, *hifdh al-dîn*, the protection of the right to freedom of religion. Islam guarantees freedom of religion, and on the contrary, condemns all unjust actions, such as intolerance, intimidation, coercion, and oppression of others just because their beliefs are different. Islam continues to encourage parents to teach the correct religion to children. Preachers may also spread religious teachings while maintaining a polite attitude full of wisdom, without threats, intimidation, and coercion.

### **The Core of the Study of the Indonesian Islamic Feminist Movement**

The Reformation era in Indonesia after the fall of the New Order (1998) provided new spaces for the process of democratisation and regional autonomy that should be able to change the culture and structure of Indonesia to become more egalitarian. However, the reinforcement of fundamentalism, especially *Salafism* and *Wahabism*, which has led to radicalism in Indonesia, has made efforts to uphold democracy, especially in relation to gender relations, more exhausting.

Why so? There have been many convincing theses that women are always in the position of victims whenever a society experiences fundamentalism, especially in the context of religion. Women often become the target object of fundamental interpreters who hate women -

misogynists. Because most of the interpreters are men, the interpretations also have the tendency to undermine the dignity of women. Religious fundamentalism gives birth to acts of radicalism that erode women's humanity. If a society or state is radicalised, the domestication of women becomes the first political programme (Armstrong 2003, pp. 23-25).

Actually, the development of Islamic discourse and gender equality in Indonesia is much more progressive than in Islamic countries, especially in the Middle East; it is just that the progressive discourse has never become mainstream in society. Indonesian Islamic feminist activists face substantial challenges from within the majority of Muslims, who tend to be more conservative due to the strong influence of Islamic fundamentalism. The struggle of Islamic feminists to abolish the practice of female circumcision, child marriage, forced marriage, trafficking (of women and children), polygamy, various forms of sexual harassment and violence, as well as advocacy efforts to defend minority rights have faced enormous obstacles, not only from fundamentalist groups, but also from conservative circles within moderate Islamic organisations such as NU and Muhammadiyah (Marcoes 2021, pp. 253-255).

Conservative and fundamentalist groups both use religious arguments to relegate women to the domestic sphere and perpetuate patriarchal culture even more strictly. This can be seen in the massive fundamentalist campaign with the slogans: "The beauty of polygamy", "Let's get married early to avoid adultery", "Stop Dating", "Indonesia LGBT emergency", "Islam anti-feminism", and so on. Faced with increasingly undemocratic conditions, especially due to the obstacles of radicalism that impose anti-humanist-feminist interpretations, as well as due to economic globalisation that makes women trapped in poverty and underdevelopment, Indonesian Islamic feminists rise up to find solutions. Among other things, they try to reformulate a theological system that prioritises universal religious moral messages, such as the values of equality, fellowship, freedom, justice, and peace.

The focus of Islamic feminist studies is very broad, ranging from countering the issue of radicalism by offering a new understanding of the meaning of jihad, the concept of nationality and citizenship, and other political issues. It includes discussions and advocacy efforts to build gender equality in various regulations, laws, and public policies that contain discriminatory elements against women. In addition, it also formulates

cultural efforts to strengthen the religious literacy of the community, especially women's groups so that they have a full understanding of their identity as dignified human beings.

However, in this paper I limit myself to three issues of Islamic feminist studies. Firstly, the issue of women's bodies and existence. Secondly, the issue of marriage and the revision of the Family Law, and finally, the issue of women's leadership in the public sphere. On these three issues, I try to formulate a new interpretation that I call a humanist-feminist religious interpretation as stated in the book *Muslimah Reformis: Perempuan Pembaru Keagamaan (Muslimah Reformist: Women Religious Reformers)* (2005) and I then expand the discussion of the book to *Ensiklopedia Muslimah Reformis: Pokok-Pokok Pemikiran untuk Reinterpretasi dan Aksi (Encyclopedia of Muslimah Reformists: Key Thoughts for Reinterpretation and Action)* (2019).

### **Interpretations of Women's Bodies, Existence, and Creation**

Generally, mainstream interpretations of women's bodies are very dehumanising. Women's bodies are considered *aurat* and therefore women should not show their bodies in public spaces. Islamic teachings that are widely socialised almost entirely lead to the domestication of women; women should stay at home taking care of their husbands and children with the promise of going to heaven. This makes women insecure about their activities.

Similarly, mainstream interpretation of human existence and creation places women as subordinate beings. For example, it is said that Prophet Adam was the first human being, while his wife, Eve, was created from his rib. In fact, the story of Eve's creation from a rib has no accurate basis in the Qur'an. There is not even a single word in the Qur'an that means rib. This gender-biased interpretation must be eliminated in order for society to value women more as whole human beings.

Regarding the creation of human beings, a number of Qur'anic verses are found, especially *an-Nisa*, 4:1, *al-Baqarah*, 2: 187 and 228, *al-Nisa*, 4:1, *al-Hujurat*, 49:13, *al-Mu'min*, 40:40, *al-Dzariat*: 56, *al-Isra'*:70, affirm the common origin of human creation; that all humans are created from one, namely *nafs wahidah*. The moral message is that humans must respect each other because essentially, they come from the same source. There is no distinction between one human being and another, except for the quality of their faithfulness and

that only Allah should judge, not humans (al-Hujurat, 49: 13).

Islamic feminism offers a new interpretation that is more humanist-feminist to ensure that women's bodies are not *aurat*, and their existence is highly valued as human beings with dignity. Islamic feminists campaign for the belief that all humans, regardless of gender, are created by God from one source (*nafsun wahidah*). This belief leads to the recognition of the principles of justice, equality, and human freedom. No human being should be mistreated for any reason. A woman's position is equal to that of a man; she can be anything, including being the most righteous human being in the sight of Allah SWT, being the most faithful human being.

Islamic feminism teaches that the glory of a human being lies in the quality of their faith and it is God's prerogative to judge the quality of one's faith. Humans, regardless of gender, are all encouraged to compete in doing good (*fastabiqul khairat*). In essence, God encourages humans, regardless of gender, to increase their spirituality to become human beings who benefit others and care for their environment. This is the meaning of the Prophet's hadith: "the best person among you is the one who bring the most benefits".

### **Interpretations of Marriage and Efforts to Reform Islamic Family Law**

Islamic feminists from various countries agree that a number of articles in the Islamic family law still perpetuate discriminatory views towards women. The definition of marriage in the family law places women as sexual objects, not partners or in an equal position with their husbands. The understanding of marriage that is not gender-equitable hinders the efforts to build a family that is *sakinah, mawaddah wa rahmah* as taught by Islam. Analysis of legal cases related to marriage reveals that gender inequality in marriage law is found in three aspects of the law, namely the content of law, the culture of law, and the structure of law (Katjasungkana 2002). This condition is clearly seen in the Marriage Law No. 1 of 1974 and the Compilation of Islamic Law in 1991. The Islamic interpretation of marriage in society as read in the Compilation of Islamic Law (1991) places women as helpless sexual objects.

Islamic feminists offer an interpretation that defines marriage as a sacred commitment, an important transaction involving two equal parties: wife and husband. This transaction is referred to as *mitsaqan ghalidzan* in the Qur'an (al-Ahzab, 7; an-Nisa, 21 and

154). *Mitsaqan ghalidzan* is a sacred covenant between two equal parties filled with love and affection. Thus, both parties are obliged to maintain the sanctity and perpetuity of the agreement. Both (husband and wife) have equal responsibilities in family life.

This is where the importance of the offer of reforming the Islamic marriage law lies, such as CLD KHI. At least, there were fourteen reform issues proposed, namely a more egalitarian definition of marriage; the role of guardian may be given to women; mandatory marriage registration to protect the rights of husband and wife; the minimum age of marriage is 19 years old; dowry is a symbol of love and may be given by the husband or wife; equality of position and position of husband and wife; equality of rights and duties of husband and wife; equality of husband and wife in earning a living, but reproductive duties must be valued more than earning a living; *nusyuz* can be done by the husband or wife; allowing interfaith marriages if there is court permission; prohibition of polygamy; wives have the right to divorce and the right of reconciliation; *iddah* applies to both husband and wife, as well as *ihdad*. Meanwhile, in terms of inheritance, the following reforms were proposed: permissibility of inheritance of different religions, equal shares of inheritance for sons and daughters, and inheritance rights for children outside marriage proven through DNA tests. As for *waqf law*, it is proposed that *waqf* of different religions is allowed (Gender Mainstreaming Team 2004).

CLD KHI offers a fair and democratic marriage law based on Islamic teachings that are humanist, inclusive, and egalitarian. The main objective is to build a happy marriage full of love (*sakinah, mawaddah wa rahmah*), polite husband-wife behaviour (*muasyarah bil ma'ruf*), mutual respect, mutual understanding, and complementarity towards happiness in this world and in the afterlife. CLD KHI strives for no more discrimination, exploitation, and violence in marriage by anyone and for any reasons. No more child marriage, *sirri* (unregistered) marriage, contract marriage, and polygamy that suffers women and children, and finally all marriages are only valid if they are registered. This offer is intended to protect women and children from discriminatory treatments as have been the case in society. In addition, it is also to realise the comprehensive protection of the human rights of all human beings, especially women, as stipulated in the Indonesian Constitution and the International Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

## Interpretations of Women's Leadership in Public Spaces

The majority of interpretations regarding women's leadership in the public sphere contain misogynistic elements. Among other things, women are considered unfit to be leaders because they are physically weak, have short minds, are very emotional, and their feelings are delicate so it is feared that they will not be able to make firm decisions. Usually, the arguments used are based on the hadith: "women are weak in mind and religion" (narrated by Bukhari) and the hadith: "never will succeed a nation that entrusts its leadership to women" (narrated by Bukhari) as well as the Qur'anic verse that means men are leaders of women (al-Nisa' 4:34).

Islamic feminists have proven that all theological arguments about the prohibition of women becoming leaders and doing activities in the public sphere are a misunderstanding of interpretation. This is partly because in the discourse of women's leadership in the public sphere, most Muslims find it difficult to distinguish between the provisions of revelation and *fiqh*. Revelation is eternal, unchanging. In contrast, the provisions of *fiqh*, including *fiqh an-nisa*, are the result of *ijtihad* or reasoning that is always influenced by socio-political and socio-cultural factors; therefore, they are relative and can be changed.

Islamic feminists ensure that Islam explicitly invites humans (men and women) to always deliberate (al-Syura, 42:38). *Syura* (deliberation) according to the Qur'an is one of the principles of managing collective life, including women's leadership in the public sphere. The Qur'an clearly records the stories of women's requests at the time of the Prophet to make *bai'at* (political pledges to the Prophet). The Qur'an also clearly notes that Allah SWT commanded the Prophet to accept their *bai'at* (al-Mumtahanah 60:12). The story of *bai'at* is evidence of women's freedom in making political decisions. The Qur'an also contains a letter called *al-Saba'*, which tells the story of a woman's leadership as a very wise and peace-loving head of state.

Islamic feminists remind the followers not to dissolve in textualist understanding so as to ignore the consideration of *al-maslahah al-'ammah* (public good), which in fact is the objective purpose of sharia (*maqashid al-syariah*). Islamic feminists invite all religious communities to constantly make efforts to reinterpret so that their religious teachings are always relevant to the dynamic and changing situation of society, especially due to advances in science and technology, especially digital technology. If not, it is feared that religious teachings will

one day become fossils that are forgotten because they are no longer functional in human's life.

## Closing

I am formulating a concrete effort to foster the study of Islamic feminism at Indonesian universities. This is an ideological and epistemological project that will be worked on by Islamic academics in Islamic studies. The aim is, among others, to evaluate Islamic paternalism, then develop alternative teachings that are more just and egalitarian and prioritise the principles of Indonesian diversity.

The idea first emerged at the International Conference on Islamic Feminism in Barcelona in 2008. At least the Conference agreed on three things. Firstly, Islamic scientists and scholars must join hands and collaborate to spread the values of Islamic feminism that promote justice, especially in the form of Islamic feminism studies at the university or college level. Secondly, Islamic scientists and scholars must actively voice Islamic views that are humanist-feminist and this requires a holistic reinterpretation of religious teachings. It is hoped that in the future, mainstream religious teachings in society will fully contain religious interpretations that prioritise universal human values, such as gender equality and justice. Thirdly, it is important for Islamic scientists and scholars to advocate for the government in their respective regions to produce gender-sensitive laws and public policies, especially related to family law or marriage law. Only by developing gender-responsive policies towards women and vulnerable groups can society enjoy a just, peaceful, and prosperous life.

Feminist knowledge is the result of feminist epistemology and knowledge methodology that emphasise on gender justice and equality with all its aspects including dynamic and diverse relations, identities, roles as crucial dimensions of knowledge, identifying, and understanding social issues. One of the most important practices of feminist knowledge is to give voice to marginalised gender and sexual groups as sources of information and knowledge production.

Today, non-feminist knowledge production is male-centric, misogynistic, patriarchal, homophobic, and heteronormative. Of course, misogynistic knowledge production does not make women's experiences and opinions an important source of knowledge in understanding social issues. Women's daily experiences that directly reflect on social issues are not accepted as a source of data to analyse or understand various social

phenomena. As a result, the entire knowledge building is formulated without involving women's valuable experiences.

Therefore, Indonesian Islamic feminists need to collaborate to formulate a new Islamic epistemology that is more comprehensive, including the study of *akidah*, *tasawuf*, morals, *tafsir*, *hadith*, and *fiqh* by including the approach of women's experiences. This commitment needs to be developed considering that various knowledge and policies developed in various universities, especially Islamic universities, reflect more knowledge from and about men. Women have experiences, especially bodily experiences with their unique reproductive potential and this has implications on perspectives, needs, and thoughts that also need to be specifically understood. For this reason, the study of Islamic feminism needs to be integrated into Islamic studies in Indonesian universities. *Wallahu a'lam bi al-shawab*.

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