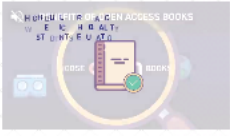


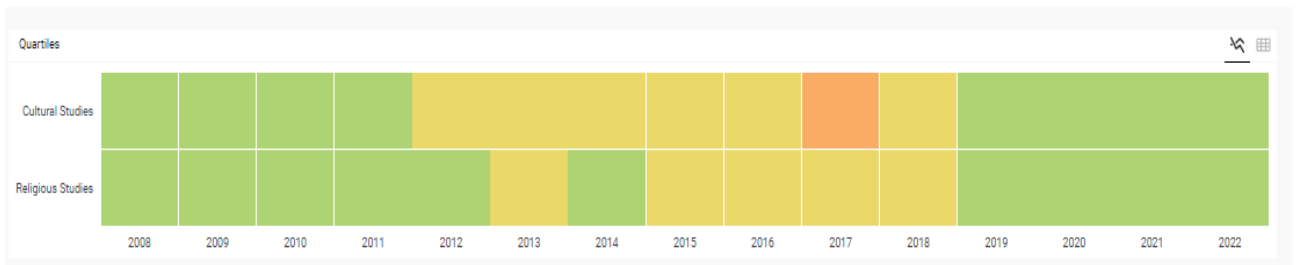
# Jurnal Contemporary Islam

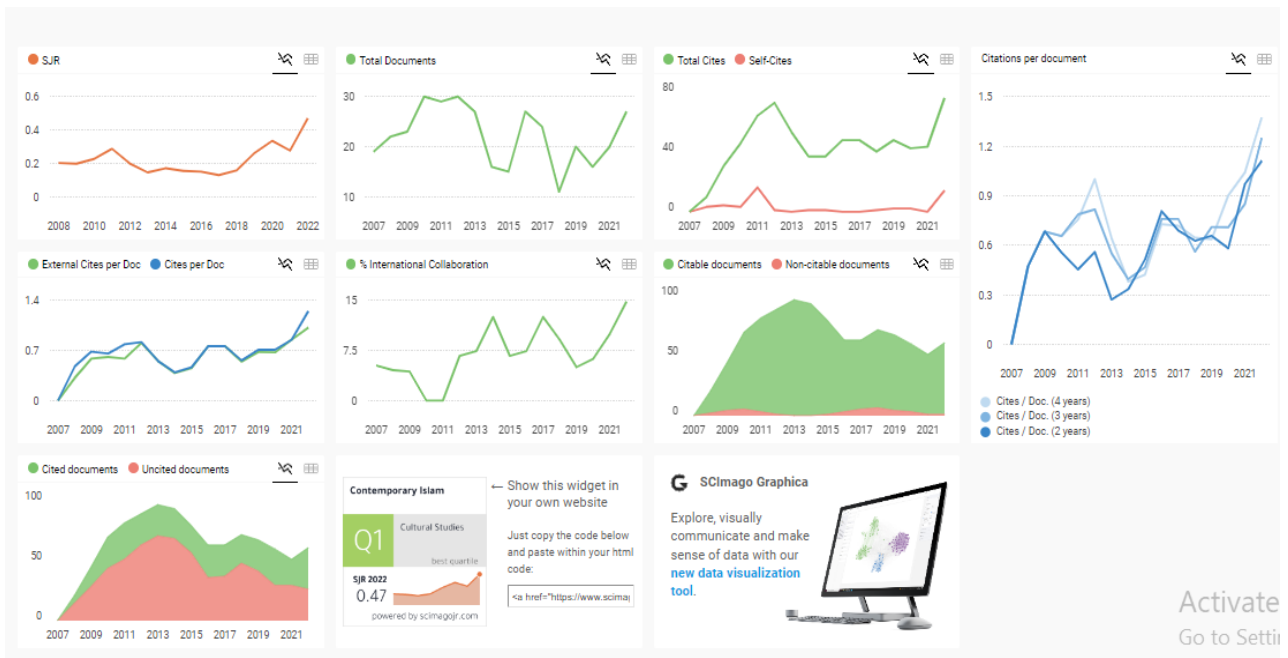
## Hermeneutics Approach in Indonesia's Contemporary Campaign for Gender Equality by Indonesian Progressive Muslim Women Scholars

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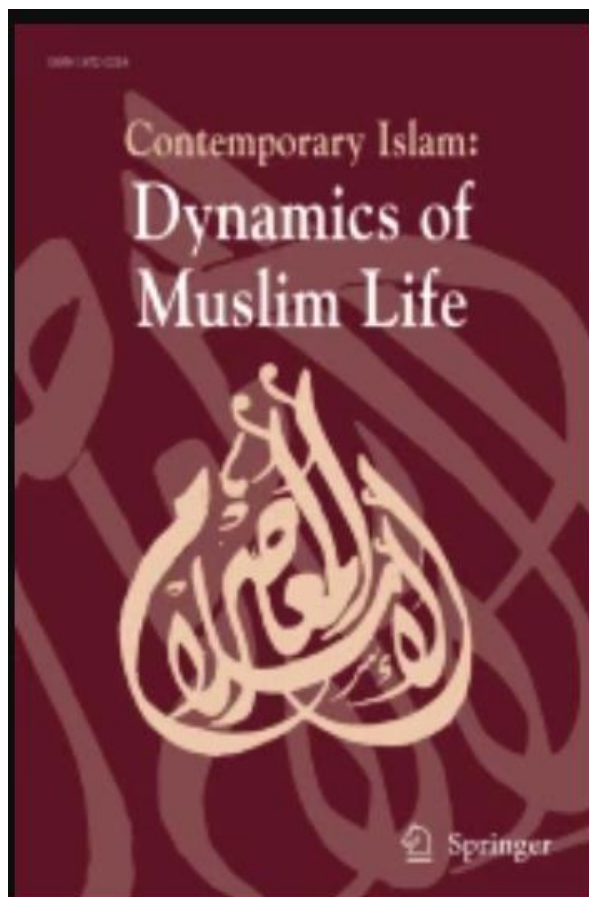
#### Contemporary Islam

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# Contemporary Islam

## Hermeneutics Approach in Indonesia's Contemporary Campaign for Gender Equality by Indonesian Progressive Muslim Women Scholars --Manuscript Draft--

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|--|--|
| <b>Manuscript Number:</b>                            | COIS-D-23-00083R2  |
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| <b>Funding Information:</b>                          |  |
| <b>Abstract:</b>                                     | <p>There are two competing approaches to understanding gender equality in the Qur'an, the textualist and the progressive. The textual approach is propagated by male conservative ulama who have the interest to preserve patriarchal tradition or male domination. The progressive approach argues that the textual approach discriminates against women. Textualists believe women's roles are limited to those in the domestic sphere hence marginalizing women to participate in the public sphere. This article investigates the way Indonesian progressive Muslim scholars explore the progressive approach to interpreting gender equality in the Qur'an. Through qualitative methods with an in-depth review of the primary literature and interviews with Indonesian progressive Muslim scholars, this article discusses efforts that have been made in promoting gender equality. They believe there is a need to reform Indonesia's Islamic thoughts propagated by textualist Muslim scholars to transform social attitudes towards women's status in the private and public domains.</p> |
| <b>Response to Reviewers:</b>                        | <p>RESPONSES TO REVIEWER 1:</p> <p>1.The article is divided in two parts, one being the background of the hermeneutics approach in favor of gender equality in Indonesia, the second being a description of two specific campaigns in favor of this approach. Both parts are important, but the second part is the result of new research that needs to be given more space (p 8-10) as it is highly interesting. A more thorough study of these two KGI and AFM would be worthwhile.</p> <p>Our response:<br/>We have added more explanation on Ngaji KGI dan AFM, based on additional interviews with both Rofiah and Qibtiyah.</p> <p>Further explanation on Ngaji KGI, See page 8-10<br/>Further explanation on AFM, See page 10-12</p>  |

2.This part on KGI and AFM is based on how many interviews apparently (this is not clear, it should be in notes)?

Our response:

We have explained about the number of interviews, as below:

In the next section, we discuss two interesting developments about the campaign conducted by progressive women Muslim scholars to promote and shape a new understanding of the status and role of women in Islam. This section draws its foundation from 4 interviews, with Rofiah and Qibtiyah (each interviews conducted twice for both Ngaji KGI and AFM). This section is also strengthened by comprehensive observation of the social media profiles affiliated with Ngaji KGI and AFM.

See page 8

3.The author might say more about the reception of auditors, given that Ngaji KGI has a major impact with 14,5K followers in Indonesia. How does its impact compares with other more conservative social media on the subject ?

Our response:We have explained the impact of ngaji KGI to her followers.

Her followers actively engage in the discussion as can be seen from the way they comment and like 466 posts of @ngaji\_kgi and 1308 posts of @nrofiah instagram accounts. From the comments, it can be assumed that most participants have only learned that Islam actually teaches gender equality, where women have the same rights as men in both domestic and public spaces. Rofiah received many stories on the impact of ngaji KGI to their followers. For example, there is an alumni of Ngaji KGI, a male about 40s, who claims that his perspective has changed in observing anything nowadays. For instance, watching films, reading novels, hearing people's conversations, and seeing daily activities. In the past, he used to see these matters as normal, but now there is an awareness that there are underlying gender equality issues. There has been a shift in how he perceives the world. Another example of impact she received from a female participant of Ngaji KGI related to her perspective on women reproduction. She is a girl who often experiences prolonged menstruation. She feels that she is not a complete woman and believes that, if she gets married, she won't be able to have children due to her abnormal reproductive system, which is different from other girls. Before participating in Ngaji KGI, she prepared her mental for polygamy in case of marriage. After regularly attending Ngaji KGI sessions, she developed a different perspective and opposes polygamy.

See page 9

4.How does it compare with earlier feminists like Kiai Husein Muhammad's publication ?

Our response:

See page 8

5.What do these women receive as a response from conservative ulama ?

Our response: We have explained the example of responses from conservative ulama, as below:

However, critiques have been directed at her teachings regarding polygamy and the human aspects of women. She recounted an incident involving the conservative ulama's response to her activism. Last year, she was invited to speak by a young female leader at a prominent pesantren (boarding school) in East Java. This pesantren, renowned for its conservatism, accommodates thousands of santri (boarding school students). Prior to the event, the female leader (Ibu Nyai) expressed concerns raised by someone regarding the perceived 'safety' or appropriateness of the speaker's perspective for their pesantren. Initially, Rofiah's views on gender equality were considered 'unsafe' or not suitable for the pesantren. Subsequently, the female leader received another suggestion assuring her that Rofiah's ideas on women would be 'safe' because of she is graduated from a pesantren and she is a lecturer in Tafsir

and Qur'anic studies. Consequently, she was ultimately accepted to address the santri.

See page 10

6. The English language needs to be corrected, the errors are those made by many Indonesians (difficulties with plural, singular, etc. past and present etc). But not much editing needs to be done.

Our response:

we have checked and edited all English errors, throughout the manuscript.

7. The author should translate all Arabic expressions (see p 3, maqasid al shari'at, sahabah etc)

Our response: We have translated all Arabic words into English, such as maqasid al shari'at (the purposes of Islamic law), sahabah (means the companions of the Prophet), Burhani (means rational), Bayani (means scriptural), and Irfani (means intuitional).

See page 3

8. Page 4: explain more about the Asaria code, in what way it was marginalizing and oppressing women? Even in a note.

Our response: We have explained about Assyrian code below and used 2 new references and a website:

Historically, Hammurabi Code similar to Assyrian Code or Assyrian Law as a result of the knowledge transfer between the kingdom of Babylon and the kingdom of Assyrian. Hammurabi's Code was introduced to Assyrian society to become one of the written legal guidelines (Jastrow, 1921). Assyrian Code was an ancient legal code designed between 1450 and 1250 BCE. The Assyrian Code includes the law that marginalizing and oppressing Assyrian women, related to marriage, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, divorce and domestic abuse (Mendelsohn, 1948). See footnote no. 9. on page 5.

9. Page 5, the list of publications by progressive Muslim scholars need not be in the text, but eventually in footnotes. And it does not need to be exhaustive.

Our response:

We have moved the list of publications by progressive scholars in the footnotes. See footnote no. 3, 4, and 5 on page 4.

10. Page 6

More could be said on the link between on the ulama and the vote for women. Is there no study about this?

Our response: We have added more explanation on this issue, below:

The Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), however, called for the Muslim community to ignore it because there are still many ikhtilaf (contestation of ideas) among ulama about the issue of female president. This conservative fatwa from East Java ulama on banning women to become President influenced the public debate and shaped public attitudes toward women's leadership and strengthens the idea that women cannot lead. It is also believed to affect the preference of many Muslim voters.

We have also added more relevant references such as van Doorn-Harder, 2002; Ichwan, 2005.

See page 5

11. Page 5, the first paragraph on the status of Muslim women in Indonesia is based on Mas'udi only. It may be a bit simplified for a scientific review, not mentioning the great variety of Indonesian Islam and adat in this huge archipelago. For example, Is « Harta, Tahta dan Wanita » a general saying heard all over Indonesia or in certain circles or

regions ? explain.

Our response:

We have added another scientific review on this issue, as below:

In Indonesia, for example, in a small town of Banjar society women are seen only as a commodity that is contested by a man (Krismanti, 2020). The position of women are nothing more than servants for their husbands. They have to say 'yes' when their husband want to take a new wife (Nadhiroh, 2017). Polygamy and nikah siri (secret marriage) are practiced in Java, Lombok, and other parts of Indonesia (Smith, 2014). Similar culture happens in Balinese women who are restrained by local tradition and culture (Wayan & Nyoman, 2020). As a result, they are marginalized and positioned in a passive state in the midst of married life (Suyadnya, 2009). The adat (cultures) of marginalisation against women are indeed varied from one region to another in this huge archipelago.

See page 5

12.P 5 et 6

The presentation of women status in Indonesia is meant to show how misogynic the context is. But it may be worth noting important aspects of it, for more nuance :

- the only female governor is a Muslim woman linked to the Nahdlatul Ulama. Not a secular personality. (East Java's Kofifah) which is line with a tradition of women involvement in politics, that dates back to the 1950s. What does It mean?.

Our response:

We have added the explanation on female governor.

The only female governor is Khofifah Indar Parawansa a Muslim woman linked to the Nahdlatul Ulama. She is not a secular personality. Her role as a female governor of East Java is in line with a tradition of women involvement in politics, that dates back to the 1950s. The role of female NU in politics was not marginal in 1940s and 1950s. Women from this religious organization were involved in the national political struggle from the end of Dutch colonialism to de jure Indonesian independence in 1945. NU women through Muslimat and Fatayat (women's wing of NU) provided political spaces for NU women to be involved in national diplomacy and various national political activities (Arnez, 2010).

See page 6.

13.Under President Jokowi, six women are ministers. The author should give some historical data to compare with earlier cabinets. Is it an improvement or a regression ? The author should give a measure of societal transformations in the 20th century. Comparison is needed.

Our response:We have compared, as below:

This representation, however, indicates the improvement in the inclusion of female ministers within the cabinets of President Joko Widodo (commonly known as Jokowi). Serving two consecutive terms from 2014 to 2024, Jokowi appointed 8 female ministers during his initial tenure and 6 during the subsequent period of his presidency. In comparison to earlier administrations led Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, Megawati, and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (well known as SBY), underscores a discernible societal shift. Notably during the tenures of Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, and Megawati only 2 female ministers were appointed collectively, while SBY appointed 4 in his first term and 5 during his second term as President. This trend signifies a gradual transformation in Indonesian society during the 20th century (See Lee, D.S & Park, S, 2018; Graham Davies, 2005).

See Page 6

14.17 female vice chancellors of of 937 Islamic tertiary institutions. Yes, but the number of female students in IAIN there is higher than male students (check). Does it mean that tertiary Islamic education institutions are progressing in terms of women issues?

Our response: In Indonesia's Islamic education sector, there is a higher representation of male lecturers. Interestingly, the enrollment of female students surpasses that of male students. This statistical information indicates advancements in tertiary Islamic education institutions concerning the increased presence of female students. The progress is further evidenced by the establishment of study centers focused on women and children. These centers engage in activities such as researching women's issues, formulating curricula based on gender equality, and reducing the prevalence of all-male panels in academic forums. (Qibtiyah, 2012).

See page 6

15. Page 7

Give more information on the new law of 2019 on polygamy. It is unclear here. In a note.

Our response: We have deleted "the new law of 2019 on polygamy", as it cannot be found a strong and valid literature.

See page 7

16. The section on gender equality is based on three authors' opinion. The author starts only with Nasarrudin Umar (2003). Is he the first one? No earlier figure during the 20th century?

Our response:

We have extended this part. See page 6

17. For non-Indonesianist readers, it might be important to have a small paragraph on the history of women representation in politics: compare with other Muslim countries and with past experiences, the role of NU women in politics was not marginal in the 1940s and 1950s.

Our response:

We have compared this part. See page 6.

18. Could the author add a word on how adat influences the position of women (to give a more complete picture, not centering on only the Islamic law as if Indonesia was ruled merely by Islamic law which might give the wrong picture for non-Indonesianists). Indeed, patriarchal tendencies are mentioned, but more could be said about this, as this as they are different from region to region. Just one paragraph on the high diversity of Indonesia would help).

Our response: Adat (culture) also influences the position of women. Kartini, Indonesia's first feminist, was the first to challenge and oppose the practice of polygamy as she was a victim of such practice (Kartini, 2005; Nurmila, 2009; Robinson, 2009; Taylor, 1989). During her time, polygamy was practiced as part of Javanese culture. Men who have several wives would be having higher social status (Reid, 1998; Lubis, 2000). Kartini was among the first to fight against polygamy (Taylor, 1989). In her book entitled "Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang" (Out of dark comes light), she criticized her culture as marginalizing and discriminating against women (Kartini, 2005). Adat (culture) with patriarchal tendencies to marginalize women are varied from region to region.

19. The conclusion of the article needs to be rewritten and to take into account the new findings of page 8-10. Simply speaking about the existence of textualists and contextualists is disappointing. This is not a new finding.

Our response:

We have made a new conclusion. See page 12-13.

20. For a more complete bibliography on Muslim women issues, the author might consult this excellent monography especially:

Nancy J. Smith-Hefner, *Islamizing Intimacies. Youth, sexuality and Gender in*



Contemporary Indonesia. Honolulu: University of Hawai Press, 2019.

Our response:

We have consulted with this bibliography.

21. One article on the author's subject might also be useful, not in the bibliography:

Andrée Feillard and Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, « A new Generation of Feminists within Traditionalist Islam : an Indonesian Exception ? », in Jajat Burhanudin & Kees van Dijk (eds), 2014. Islam in Indonesia : Contrasting Images & Interpretations, Amsterdam : Amsterdam University Press.

Our response:

We have consulted with this bibliography. See page 10.

#### RESPONSES TO REVIEWER 2

1. Line 38 p. 2, please insert the word "partly" into the following sentence to avoid misunderstanding as if it is only interpretation of the Qur'an as the only source of discrimination against women: " Discrimination against Indonesian women and the unequal treatment experienced by women are believed to be shaped by the way Islamic teachings are understood and interpreted." The revised version becomes: Discrimination against Indonesian women and the unequal treatment experienced by women are believed to be partly shaped by the way Islamic teachings are understood and interpreted.

Our response:

We have inserted the word "partly" into the following sentence to avoid misunderstanding.

The revised version becomes: Discrimination against Indonesian women and the unequal treatment experienced by women are believed to be partly shaped by the way Islamic teachings are understood and interpreted.

See page 1

2. Line 38, p. 3, there seems to be jumping sentences. The author writes about the textualist/conservative from line 32 (the beginning of the paragraph), but then, in line 38 the content is about the argument of the contextualists: "These scholars emphasize the need to develop a contextual method for interpreting the Qur'an, known as contextualists." I think the author needs to insert transition words before introducing the contextualists standpoint.

Our response: We have inserted the transition word "however", before introducing the contextualists standpoint.

The revised version becomes: However, these are scholars who emphasize the need to develop a contextual method for interpreting the Qur'an, known as contextualists. See page 2.

## **Hermeneutics Approach in Indonesia's Contemporary Campaign for Gender Equality by Indonesian Progressive Muslim Women Scholars**

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### **Abstract**

There are two competing approaches to understanding gender equality in the Qur'an, the textualist and the progressive. The textual approach is propagated by male conservative ulama who have the interest to preserve patriarchal tradition or male domination. The progressive approach argues that the textual approach discriminates against women. Textualists believe women's roles are limited to those in the domestic sphere hence marginalizing women to participate in the public sphere. This article investigates the way Indonesian progressive Muslim scholars explore the progressive approach to interpreting gender equality in the Qur'an. Through qualitative methods with an in-depth review of the primary literature and interviews with Indonesian progressive Muslim scholars, this article discusses efforts that have been made in promoting gender equality. They believe there is a need to reform Indonesia's Islamic thoughts propagated by textualist Muslim scholars to transform social attitudes towards women's status in the private and public domains.

**Keywords:** Qur'anic interpretation, hermeneutics, patriarchy, discrimination, women, gender.

### **Introduction**

The experience of Indonesian Muslim women with discrimination and marginalization is the product of the intermingling of tradition and politics, with patriarchy at its center. Women's roles are restricted and relegated to the private space, their mobility is restricted, and their bodies and sexualities have become subject to the nation's morality standards (Afrianty, 2022; Blackwood, 2007; Robinson, 2006; Wieringa, 2015). Influenced by patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teachings, Indonesia's 1974 Marriage Law was the first legislation to define women as responsible for the care of their children and husbands, while men are to earn income (Nurmila, 2009). Such division of labour perpetuates a national imagining about the place of women in society.

As religion has continued to encroach on public life in the past twenty years, women's bodies and religiosity continue to be at the center of cultural and moral debates. Women are tasked to obey rules created by religious and state institutions to do what is acceptable and morally appropriate (Platt et al., 2018; Afrianty, 2019). Veiling, female genital mutilation, child marriage, and polygamy are some of the prescriptions outlined for women to follow to maintain their purity and honor.

Islam is professed by more than 80% of Indonesia's total population. Islamic teachings hence influence the development of social relations, socio-economic, legal, and political development. Discrimination against Indonesian women and the unequal treatment experienced by women are believed to be partly shaped by the way Islamic teachings are understood and interpreted (Nurmila, 2021). This has led to continuous debate among Indonesian Muslims about the construction of alternative religious interpretations that promote equality to legal, socioeconomic, and political rights between men and women and to other minority groups.

The debate about the status of women had, in fact, begun since the twentieth century alongside nationalist movements (Afrianty, 2015; Blackburn, 2004). Women's struggles for equal opportunity to education and to fight against child marriage, and polygamy started during the colonial occupation, when Kartini, later coined as Indonesia's first feminist questioned why she was prevented to continue her education and forced to marry a man who already has a wife. Women's rights to education and the right in marriage and access to divorce become the subject of discussion during the first Indonesia's women's congress in 1922.

Central in the struggle of Indonesian women's movements is the demand for the need to critically interpret and examine Islamic teachings that do not discriminate against women and create injustices. Women's relegated status to men and discrimination against women in both public and private domains are propagated by the way religious leaders such as *ulama* interpret and convey religious values (Nurmila, 2021). According to progressive religious scholars, these religious leaders interpret and understand the Qur'an textually justifying their patriarchal perceptions of the status of women as unequal to men. This textual approach in interpreting and understanding Qur'an resulted in positioning men as superior to women, and that women are not equal to men.

In the past thirty years, Indonesia has seen the emergence of progressive Muslim scholars and activists such as Alimatul Qibtiyah, Nur Rofiah, Nasarudin Umar, Husain Muhammad, Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin, Nina Nurmila, Lies Marcoes, and Ciciek Farha whose works continue to counter the conservative teachings that discriminates women. They believe messages in the Qur'an respects, empowers, and liberates women from misogynist and patriarchal tradition of the Arab world before the revelation of Islam. These scholars believe that the spirit of Islam as shown in the Qur'an does not discriminate against women. This contradicts the teaching propagated by conservative religious scholars who interpret the messages in the Qur'an based on the textual approach in which they believe women and men are not equal.

This paper discusses the latest campaign efforts by young and progressive Muslim women's scholars to promote gender equality and to counter the conservative agenda to roll back decades of progress Indonesian women have gained in the past forty years. Informed by hermeneutics approach and critical discourse in reading and understanding Islamic teachers, progressive women scholars and activists make significant efforts to counter the textualists understanding of Islamic teachings. Alimatul Qibtiyah, through her *Akademi Feminis Muslim* (AFM) and Nur Rofiah through *Kajian Gender Islam (Ngaji KGI)* are among the newest activism emerged.

This paper is structured into several sections. First, it discusses the differences between the textual and hermeneutics approach and its implication for the competing discourses on gender relations. The second section elaborates on the profile of Indonesia's progressive Muslim scholars who have been at the forefront of promoting the hermeneutics approach. At last, it explores messages on gender equality in the Qur'an based on hermeneutics interpretation and how progressive Muslim scholars draw their campaigns to the Muslim community.

## **The textual interpretation and hermeneutics**

The textual interpretation of the Qur'an is mostly produced and promoted by conservative *ulama*. They are often called as textualists. They promote a strict following of the text and adopt a literalistic approach (Saeed, 2006). Textual interpretation defines Qur'anic messages literally as written in the text. It sees texts as identical with its meaning. As a result, a text in the Qur'an will be defined by a single meaning. Textual interpretation thus marginalizes the role of reason to explore and elaborate the meaning, aim, and spirit of the text (Umar, 2003). According to this conservative *ulama*, the meaning of the Qur'an is fixed and universal in its application. The texts and their meanings cannot be contextualized. They are prohibited from being interpreted freely or based on recent human contexts, developments and needs since the meaning of the texts are one and permanent. According to them, the text is an absolute divine language. For this *ulama*, the accommodative attitudes towards human needs are regarded as a threat to Islam as the sacred religion. They believe that messages in the Qur'an can be applied in all circumstances regardless of the differences in contexts.

However, these are scholars who emphasize the need to develop a contextual method for interpreting the Qur'an, known as contextualists. According to contextualists Islamic teachings consist of primary and secondary texts. Primary texts include the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet, while the secondary texts include the *ulama*'s interpretation of the primary text (Mas'udi,

2000; Muhammad, 2001; Umar, 2003). The primary texts are absolute truth, while the secondary text is relative. There is a difference between absolute and relative texts. The relative texts must be contextualized according to the dynamics of human needs, and social and political contexts. As argued by Saeed, in order to understand texts there is a need to understand the ethical and legal content of the Qur'an in relation to the political, social and historical contexts in which the texts were revealed, interpreted, and applied (Saeed, 2006). Thus, it will be more compatible with human issues and follow the aims of *shari'ah* (*maqashid al-syariah*) (Umar, 2003). Progressive ulama who promotes this way of thinking are often accused of undermining Islamic doctrines and influenced by Western agenda (Fuad, 2019; Fuad, 2017).

The method that considers the importance of context in understanding the Qur'an is called hermeneutics (Saeed, 2006). Hermeneutics is part of a philosophical thinking that is used to understand texts (Esack, 1997). It sees texts as the product of a particular culture and time. Hence, the meaning of the texts as produced by its author has a particular meaning, which cannot be generalized in changing contexts. In that sense, as an approach, hermeneutics tries to bridge the distance between the author, the reader, and the context of the texts (Saeed, 2013). Hermeneutics calls for the need to look at the social, political, and cultural conditions of when the text is written and produced. Understanding the context will help readers to understand the spirit of the texts. Hermeneutics is not a new approach to interpreting Islamic scriptures. It has been practiced for centuries.

Hermeneutics has also been employed to interpret other religious texts. Esack (1997) argued that scholars have applied hermeneutics to explore and define the contemporary meaning of the Qur'an. Esack defined hermeneutics as a science that seeks to describe a word, a text, and an event that occurred in the past so that it can be understood meaningfully in today's time. Esack further argued that the function of hermeneutics operates to bridge the past and the present (Esack, 1997). In line with this, Abdurrahman highlighted that to produce a more relevant meaning of the Qur'anic verses, it is important to first understand the current situation (Abdurrahman, 2003). Abdurrahman (2003) asserted that to understand the meaning of a text, one needs to first look at the contemporary social context. By doing this, the interpreter will produce a progressive meaning of the texts.

Texts, in hermeneutics, are viewed as dependent. There is a close relationship between the process of the revelation, language, content, and the community who consume the texts (Abdurrahman, 2003). Consistent with the principle of hermeneutics, those religious texts are not produced in an empty context. Verses in the Qur'an were revealed behind certain social context of its time. The Qur'anic texts are dominantly influenced by the Arabic culture where patriarchal values are strongly entrenched (Saeed, 2013). Thus, in hermeneutics interpretation, it needs to find the meaning that the author meant in its beginning context. After that, the meaning will be brought and faced with contemporary human problems. Hermeneutics requires one to have the expertise of understanding the Qur'an and the knowledge of modern sciences such as anthropology, sociology, history and so on and so forth to critically understand the spirit of the Qur'anic texts.

Muslim scholars are practicing critical thinking not only through hermeneutics. The other approach is known as *Burhani* (means rational and empirical). *Burhani* uses rationality as its tool in understanding religious texts (Saeed, 2006). Based on the *burhani* approach, the texts are explored and defined in deductive and inductive ways before the *maqasid al shari'at* (the purposes of Islamic law) is being determined. The texts are seen as a symbol of the universal causality principle. The textual meaning can distance Muslims from the core message of the texts as it ignores the fact that the texts were produced within certain social-cultural contexts (Rofiah, 2020).

During the *Khulafa' ar-Rosyidin* period, religious scholars had a clash over which method of interpretation should be applied (Basya, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Umar bin Khattab's, the third caliph of *Khulafa ar-Rosyidin*, was the one who triggered the clash of opinion. The caliph Umar offered different Islamic jurisprudential opinions regarding booty. He refused to distribute the land of Iraq as booty to the Muslim army after its conquest, even though a verse in the Quran (8:41) commands Muslims to distribute the booty. During the Prophet's time, the land was allocated for Muslims who participated in a war. Umar saw that such a policy would make the Muslim army the landowner. As a result, they would monopolize the property. Monopoly is not good for the prosperity and justice of all Muslim societies. That was why Umar proposed a new legal opinion based on the best interest of the public. His policy provides the opportunity for the previous owner

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<sup>1</sup> *Khulafa ar-Rosyidin* (Arabic) is the first four rulers of the Islamic peoples after the death of the prophet Muhammad, usually rendered as the righteous caliphs. The historical epoch encompassing their combined rule, about forty years, is regarded by Muslims as a time when the 'true' teachings of Islam were practiced.

of the land to maintain their property, while they must share some of the profit with the Muslim state. The state will use it to support educational and other programs related to the public interest. Umar believed he could choose to introduce a different policy when the 'public interest' demanded it (Saeed, 2006). Certainly, Umar's policy attracted controversy. Many opponents were coming from the *sahabah* (means the companions of the Prophet). This story reveals how Umar relied on upon in *Burhani* (means rational) way of thinking (Zohdi, 2017).<sup>2</sup>

## Progressive Muslim scholars

Islamic educational institutions including the tertiary educational institutions play an important role to promoting critical thinking in reading, understanding, and interpreting sources of Islamic teachings (Douglass & Munir, 2004). Graduates from these Islamic educational institutions possess the skills, knowledge, and competency to critically read and interpret the Qur'an, the Sunnah and other authoritative Islamic scriptures. Some of the progressive Muslim scholars who studied in Islamic educational institution include, Nasaruddin Umar,<sup>3</sup> Ruhaini Dzuhayatin,<sup>4</sup> Husein Muhammad<sup>5</sup>, Alimatul Qibtiyah, and Nur Rofiah. Their Arabic language skills and knowledge of Islam allow them to understand not only the texts but also the history and contexts around the revelation of the texts. Dzuhayatin, Qibtiyah, and Rofiah are the leading Indonesian Muslim scholars who actively advocate for progressive readings of Islamic scriptures through their publication and certainly part of the female religious authority in Indonesian Islam (Fuad, 2021). These scholars also work as university professors or senior lecturers at various state network of Islamic higher educational institutions. Apart from being academics, they actively engage in religious activities including in public debate on matters pertaining to social justice and gender equality.

Apart from Islamic higher educational institution, Indonesia's Muslim based organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdhatul Ulama (henceforth NU) also have prominent roles in disseminating progressive understanding of Islamic scriptures.<sup>6</sup> Through their educational institutions and many other communities works they advance the issue of social justice as well as facilitate public debate on issues pertaining to women's rights and gender equality. Muhammadiyah and NU have significantly shaped the development of Indonesia's theological reference on women's rights and gender equality (Arnez, 2010; Barton, 2014; Pohl, 2012; Syamsiyatun, 2007; van Doorn-Harder, 2006).<sup>7</sup> Indonesian progressive Muslim scholars including those mentioned above are mostly affiliated with these two organizations. Dzuhayatin and Qibtiyah are prominent female scholars and activists affiliated with Muhammadiyah. Rofiah, Umar, Muhammad, on the other hand, are affiliated with NU.

Hermeneutics approach heavily influenced the religious thinking of these progressive Muslim scholars. Nasaruddin Umar, a male professor of Qur'anic exegesis (*Ilmu Tafsir*) at the state Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, is among the first Muslim scholars who proposes for

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<sup>2</sup> Different from *Burhani*, *Bayani* (means scriptural) is an approach or the philosophical system to get knowledge that based on the sacred text (revelation) as an absolute truth and *Irfani* (means intuitive) is an approach that lies on intuition and purifying soul.

<sup>3</sup> His thoughts can be read from his books such as *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender Perspektif Al-Qur'an* (Means Argument of gender equality in Qur'anic perspective, 1999) and *Membangun Kultur Ramah Perempuan* (means Building friendly environment for women, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Dzuhayatin has published many articles, such as *Islamism and nationalism among the Niqabis Women in Indonesia* (2020) and *Rekonstruksi Metodologis Kesetaraan Gender dalam Islam* (means Methodological reconstruction on gender equality in Islam, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Husein Muhammad or widely known as Kyai Husein is considered Indonesia's male feminist. With his broad knowledge of classical Islamic jurisprudence, Muhammad has a strong influence among traditionalist Muslims. He published widely including *Ijtihad Kyai Husein: Upaya Membangun Keadilan Gender* (means Kyai Husein's Ijtihad: Efforts to promote gender equality, 2011), *Fiqh Perempuan; Islam dan Gender* (means Fiqh on Women: Islam and Gender, 2006), and *Islam Agama Perempuan* (means Islam is the religion of women, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Muhammadiyah is the oldest and biggest modernist Islamic organization, established by KH. Ahmad Dahlan in 1912. This organization since its emergence have been contributed to empower women through education and trainings. (See Latief and Nashir, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Nahdhatul Ulama (NU) is the largest traditionalist Islamic organization, established by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari in 1926. The NU has also been recognized for its contribution to the development of Indonesian Islam and gave attention to the women involvement in various organizational activities to increase their capacity (See Sila, 2020).

the need to apply hermeneutics to understand scriptural texts (Umar, 2003). Umar's interpretation of women's status, roles, and position in Islam is based on hermeneutical approach. He believes messages in the Quran which were revealed by God through his Prophets are constructed based on their historical contexts. In Islamic tradition, history is called *asbab an-nuzul* (reasons of revelation).<sup>8</sup> It is for this reason that Umar (2003) encourages the need to understand the context behind the revelation of Qur'anic verses by understanding *asbab an-nuzul*.

Umar argues that long before the arrival of Islam, the worldview of the people in the Arabian land was strongly influenced by the ancient cosmology and mythology of other civilizations which tended to be misogynists, such as ancient Egyptian cosmology, ancient Greece, and Sasanian-Zoroaster (Umar, 2003). In addition to that, the Arabs were also affected by the Mesopotamian civilization. A king named Hammurabi introduced a code to regulate the interaction between the men and women. The code regulated the rights and obligations for women, which was an attempt to marginalize women. Around the 10<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, there was also a kingdom called Assyria, currently known as Iraq, Iran, and Egypt. This kingdom also introduced a regulation, called Assyrian code (Jastrow, 1921; Mendelsohn, 1948). Similar to Hammurabi Code, Assyrian Code was introduced to marginalize and oppress women.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the interpretation of the Qur'anic texts at the time was influenced by predominantly misogynist views (Ahmed, 1992; Aslan, 2011; Barlas, 2002).

## The status of Muslim women in Indonesia

Marginalisation and discrimination against women derived from misogynic values and patriarchal cultures that live in many societies both in the Muslim East and the Christian West (Afrianty, 2022). In Indonesia, for example, in Banjar society women are seen only as a commodity that is contested by a man (Krismanti, 2020). The position of women are nothing more than servants for their husbands. They have to say 'yes' when their husband want to take a new wife (Nadhiroh, 2017). Polygamy and *nikah siri* (secret marriage) are practiced in Java, Lombok, and other parts of Indonesia (Smith, 2014). Similar culture happens within Balinese, Madurese and Acehnese women who are restrained by local tradition and culture (Wayan & Nyoman, 2020; Sudarso et al, 2019; Afrianty, 2015). As a result, they are marginalized and positioned in a passive state in the midst of married life (Suyadnya, 2009). The *adat* (cultures) of marginalisation against women are indeed varied from one region to another in this huge archipelago.

In certain communities in Indonesia, women (*wanita*) are often considered as one of the three sources of social illness, along with wealth (*harta*) and throne (*tahta*) framed in the famous saying "*Harta, Tahta and Wanita*". Muslim men are told they need to ask for God's protection from women (Mas'udi, 2000; ). This attitude is influenced by a *fatwa* propagated by 'ulama such as Ibnu Hajar al-Haitami, a prominent *ulama* in the Eighth century who issued a *fatwa* saying that women are unable to control themselves and if they possess knowledge they tend to endanger not only themselves but also others (Mas'udi, 2000; ).<sup>10</sup> For this reason, many in the society believe women should be prevented from getting education and must be confined to private spaces (Smith-Hefner, 2019). In addition, there are still believes that women do not need extensive knowledge to be housewives. They want women to only responsible on their household or domestic affairs

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<sup>8</sup> *Asbab an-Nuzul* (Arabic) is part of the Qur'anic studies that explains the context in which a Qur'anic verse was revealed. Makiyah verses were revealed in Mecca period, which was before the hijra of the prophet Muhammad, while Madaniyah verses were revealed in Medina period which was after the *hijra* (*The Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE*). Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im differentiates Makiyah and Madaniyah verses. Na'im explains that the message of Makiyah verses is the principal ideas of Islamic values such as human right, justice, and social virtue, while the Madaniyah is related to Islamic jurisprudence that regulates social order of the Muslim society. The different content and orientation of both Makiyah and Madaniyah verses are affected by its political, social, and cultural contexts (Na'im, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Historically, Hammurabi Code similar to Assyrian Code or Assyrian Law as a result of the knowledge transfer between the kingdom of Babylon and the kingdom of Assyrian. Hammurabi's Code was introduced to Assyrian society to become one of the written legal guidelines (Jastrow, 1921). Assyrian Code was an ancient legal code designed between 1450 and 1250 BCE. The Assyrian Code includes the law that marginalizing and oppressing Assyrian women, related to marriage, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, divorce and domestic abuse (Mendelsohn, 1948). (see further on [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian\\_law](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian_law), accessed on 23 November 2023)

<sup>10</sup> *Fatwa* (Arabic-pl: *fatawa*) is a legal term indicating a pronouncement by a qualified religious scholar on an issue of belief or practice. *Fatwa* can be understood as an opinion on a point of law given by an institution or a person with recognized religious authority (Ichwan, 2005).

(Dzuhayatin, 2020). In the section below we discussed some of the consequences of this misogynistic and patriarchal interpretation of Islamic scriptures to the status of women in contemporary Indonesia.

### ***a. Women's leadership and public roles***

Women's leadership remains a contentious issue in Indonesia (Nurmila, 2021). Whether a woman can hold a leadership position once became a subject of national debate. Megawati's nomination to become Indonesia's first female president in the 1999 and 2004 general elections was quickly 'attacked' by the conservative Muslims (Ichwan, 2005). Some religious leaders in East Java issued a *fatwa* banning Muslim voters to elect a woman presidential candidate (Mys, 2004; Van Doorn-Harder, 2002; Ichwan, 2005). Hosen (2004) argued that the construction of the *fatwa* follows the conservatives' views (Hosen, 2004). The Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), however, called for the Muslim community to ignore it because there are still many *ikhtilaf* (contestation of ideas) among ulama about the issue of female president.<sup>11</sup> This conservative *fatwa* from East Java *ulama* on banning women to become President influenced the public debate and shaped public attitudes toward women's leadership and strengthens the idea that women cannot lead. It is also believed to affect the preference of many Muslim voters.

Women continue to face challenges to hold leadership positions including in politics, in academic institutions such as universities, government offices and others. Despite the increased number of women representations in the national and local parliament, women's representation continues to be under twenty per cent. Of the thirty-four provinces in Indonesia, only one province is led by a female governor ([www.infojabodetabek.com](http://www.infojabodetabek.com)), and of thirty-four Ministers under Joko Widodo's administration, only six of them are women ([www.presidentri.go.id](http://www.presidentri.go.id)).<sup>12</sup> The only female governor is Khofifah Indar Parawansa a Muslim woman linked to the *Nahdlatul Ulama*. She is not a secular personality. Her role as a female governor of East Java is in line with a tradition of NU women involvement in politics, that dates back to the 1950s. The role of female NU in politics was not marginal in 1940s and 1950s. Women from this religious organization were involved in the national political struggle from the end of Dutch colonialism to de jure Indonesian independence in 1945. NU women through *Muslimat* and *Fatayat* (women's wing of NU) provided political spaces for NU women to be involved in national diplomacy and various national political activities (Arnez, 2010).

The issue of women leadership can also be seen in how the two biggest Muslim organizations in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah and NU perceive women's roles in the organizations. Both Muhammadiyah and NU established their women's wings, 'Aisyiyah and Muslimat. By having its own women's wings, women are given the roles to lead their own only women members. It was only in 2019 that NU appointed a woman to sit on their Central Board, while Muhammadiyah continues to have no women's representation in their central board. Both NU and Muhammadiyah argue that the fact that women do not sit on the leadership board is because women have their own women's wing within the organization. Hence, they are given the full authority to lead. The problem with this argument is that it justifies that women can only lead women but not men (See Fuad, 2020). Meanwhile, outside their internal organizations, Muhammadiyah through 'Aisyiyah and Nasiyatul 'Aisyiyah and NU through Muslimat and Fatayat have empowered and prepared female cadres political activists. Muhammadiyah and NU both supported their female cadres to participate and speak up their progressive ideas in parliament (Arnez, 2010; Syamsiyatun, 2007).

Despite a recent report indicating that there is a slight increase in the number of women getting leadership position in higher education (Nurmila, 2021), the number of women's representation in leadership roles remains low. In Indonesia's Islamic education sector, there is a higher representation of male lecturers. Interestingly, the enrollment of female students surpasses that of

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<sup>11</sup> <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-160786/mui-fatwa-haram-presiden-perempuan-tak-perlu-ditanggapi>. Accessed in 22 November 2023.

<sup>12</sup> This representation, however, indicates the improvement in the inclusion of female ministers within the cabinets of President Joko Widodo (commonly known as Jokowi). Serving two consecutive terms from 2014 to 2024, Jokowi appointed 8 female ministers during his initial tenure and 6 during the subsequent period of his presidency. In comparison to earlier administrations led Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, Megawati, and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (well known as SBY), underscores a discernible societal shift. Notably during the tenures of Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, and Megawati only 2 female ministers were appointed collectively, while SBY appointed 4 in his first term and 5 during his second term as President. This trend signifies a gradual transformation in Indonesian society during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (See Lee & Park, 2018).

male students. This statistical information indicates advancements in tertiary Islamic education institutions concerning the increased presence of female students. The progress is further evidenced by the establishment of study centers focused on women and children. These centers engage in activities such as researching women's issues, formulating curricula based on gender equality, and reducing the prevalence of all-male panels in academic forums (Qibtiyah, 2012).

Of a total 937 Islamic tertiary education only 17 are led by female vice chancellor (Rector) ([www.diktis.kemenag.go.id](http://www.diktis.kemenag.go.id)).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in public education sector the number of female vice chancellor is also very low (Dzuhayatin, 2020).<sup>14</sup> Mulya and Sakhiyya (2021) argued it is the existing patriarchal connections, gender bias, and discriminative policies and attitudes against women that prevent women to achieve equally as men.

The challenge for women to exercise their roles in public domain, including to be in leadership position derives from the way Qur'anic verse of An-Nisa: 34 is being interpreted. It says: "*men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them for their means.*" This verse is often cited and used to prevent women from taking leadership roles. Men are perceived to be more capable and suitable to hold leadership positions compared to women. Many believe in the conservative interpretation that men are leaders of women and women's power is subordinate to men. The Arabic proverb sayings: '*al-mar'ah aw al-umm hiya al-madrasah al-uula* (the women or the mother is the first school [for their children]), indicates that Muslim women have a key responsibility to raise their children [at home]. This strengthens the idea that women's roles are in domestic space rather than in public (Afrianty, 2022; Fuad, 2020).

### ***b. Gender Equality in Marriage***

Indonesian family law is influenced by Islamic teachings, including Law No. 1/1974 on marriage. The law regulates the role of wives is in the domestic space while husbands are responsible to protect and provide for the family. It also regulates that a husband is permitted to take additional wife if he can obtain permission from his first wife. Men are also granted the permission to take additional wife on the ground that their wife become ill, disabled, or infertile. This provision is used to legitimizing the practice of polygamy (Nurmila, 2009). Polygamy continues to be a subject of internal debate within the Muslim community.

*Adat* (culture) also influences the position of women. Kartini, Indonesia's first feminist, was the first to challenge and oppose the practice of polygamy as she was a victim of such practice (Kartini, 2005; Nurmila, 2009; Robinson, 2009; Taylor, 1989). During her time, polygamy was practiced as part of Javanese culture. Men who have several wives would be having higher social status (Lubis, 2000; Reid, 1998). Kartini was among the first to fight against polygamy (Taylor, 1989). In her book entitled "*Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang*" (Out of dark comes light), she criticized her culture as marginalizing and discriminating against women (Kartini, 2005). *Adat* (culture) with patriarchal tendencies to marginalize women are varied from region to region.

Those who believe Islam allows polygamous marriage is influenced by a theological interpretation of conservative *ulama*. Supporters of polygamy rely on Qur'anic verse 4:3 to justify their conviction that Islam allows men to marry up to four wives. Nurmila divides Muslims' interpretation of polygamy into three groups: 1) Accomodating polygamy (the textualists), 2) Resisting polygamy (the semi-textualists), and 3) Rejecting polygamy (the contextualists) (Nurmila, 2009; Nurmila, 2021). The first belongs to those who literally interpret verse 4:3 and says Islam allows polygamy. The second group believes polygamy is allowed if a husband can fulfil the criteria to be just among his wives. The third group argues that Islam prohibits polygamy based on their contextual readings of the whole verses An-Nisaa (4): 2,3 and 129 (Nurmila, 2009; Nurmila, 2021). The conservative *ulama* believes that Islam allows polygamy, and they believe that verse 4:3 should not be interpreted according to their contextual considerations. On the other hand, contextualizing the verse has led progressive and reform-minded *ulama* to prohibit polygamy. Despite the ongoing debate, the Indonesian government through Law No. 1/1974 restricted the number of polygamous women. This restriction aims to protect women's dignity and to create peace and harmony in the family.

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<sup>13</sup> Look at this data - [https://diktis.kemenag.go.id/bansos/cari\\_nspt.php](https://diktis.kemenag.go.id/bansos/cari_nspt.php). Accessed 10 February 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Knowledge Sector Initiative (KSI), Sumber Daya Manusia Gender pada Pendidikan Tinggi Indonesia (Human Resources and Gender in Indonesian Higher Education), Kementrian PPN/Bappenas and Australian Government has reported that gender disparity in Indonesian higher education is still exist because the socio-cultural factor put men as more important than women and career as lecturers is men domain or stereotypical masculinities (see Report of KSI, page 14-15)



## Campaign for gender equality

Progressive Muslim scholars have long argued that Islam is a religion that respects and guarantees women equal status to men. Gender inequality, according to progressive Muslim, is shaped and influenced by both patriarchal and misogynistic culture that forms the community's understanding of Islamic teachings (Fiorenza, 1996). This is to say that apart from the socio-cultural constraints, there is also a strong theological influence that prevent Indonesian women to exercise their rights equally with men in Indonesia's public sphere. This is why they see a need to work within the theological domain to deconstruct discriminatory treatment against women (Dzuhayatin, 2020). This therefore leads to strengthening the struggle for gender equality within Islamic framework.

*Rahima* (stands for compassion) is a women's organization that actively promote gender equality and that messages of Islam teach about gender justice. *Rahima* was established in Jakarta following Indonesia's democratic reformasi in 1998 ([www.swarahima.com](http://www.swarahima.com)).<sup>15</sup> In its early campaign, *Rahima* emphasizes the need to reinterpret the Qur'anic concept of *fitrah* (natural state of being), a concept that has been used to construct gender roles, expectation, and attitudes towards women and men. The concept indeed requires the need to reestablish the balance of rights and responsibilities in the relationships between husband and wives in a marriage. In their campaign to promote equality, they engage with texts, traditions, modern ethics, as well as considering contemporary social contexts. Muslim women's organization such as *Rahima*, together with other Muslim groups follow the work of progressive scholars to engage with Islamic texts and with the local and global contexts.

In his book *Fiqih Perempuan* (Islamic Jurisprudence for Women), Husain Muhammad discussed that most classical *ulama* put women in unequal position to men in both the physical and psychological aspects. They believed that women are inferior to men. This perspective according to Muhammad perpetuates discrimination and gender inequality in Muslim societies. Muhammad argued that God commands Muslims not to marginalize women. As stated in the Qur'an, God asks Muslims to establish gender justice and respect women's rights (Muhammad, 2001).

Referring to Umar ibn al-Khattab, the companion of the Prophet (*sahabat*), Husain Muhammad highlighted that the caliphate Umar admitted that in the pre-Islamic period, he and many other Arab people did not respect women. When Islam came and with the revelation in the scripture, they learn about the requirement to respect women and that woman have the same rights as men. Muhammad concluded that the marginalization, discrimination, and violence against women are part of the pre-Islamic culture which contradict Islamic teaching. Muhammad proposed for the need of having an emancipatory interpretation from the Qur'an which put women in equal status as men. Nasarudin Umar (1999) supports Muhammad's argument agreeing that the true message of Islam is to liberate women from any forms of discrimination and injustice. Umar highlighted that any view that discriminates against women is not part of Islamic teaching. He believes Muslim societies need to reassess and reevaluate misleading interpretations that put women as a target of discrimination, injustice and violence (Umar, 1999). This perspective on the liberation of women was also promoted and disseminated by Indonesian female scholars such as Qibtiyah dan Rofiah.

In the next section, we discuss two interesting developments about the campaign conducted by progressive women Muslim scholars to promote and shape a new understanding of the status and role of women in Islam. This section draws its foundation from 4 interviews, with Rofiah and Qibtiyah (each interviews conducted twice for both *Ngaji KGI* and AFM). This section is also strengthened by comprehensive observation of the social media profiles affiliated with *Ngaji KGI* and AFM.

### a. *Ngaji Keadilan Gender Islam (Ngaji KGI)*

Rofiah is a leading female scholar with an NU background. She possesses a strong knowledge in interpreting classical Islamic jurisprudence. Her interest in promoting a progressive approach to promote gender equality can be seen in her works *Nalar Kritis Muslimah: Refleksi atas Keperempuanan, Kemanusiaan dan Keislaman* or Muslim Women's critical thought: Reflection on Womenhood, humanity, and Islam (2020); *Kekerasan dalam Rumah Tangga dalam Perspektif Islam* or Domestic violence in Islam (2017); *Pandangan Islam atas Perkosaan dan Pernikahan* or Rape and Marriage in Islam (2007); *Bahasa Arab sebagai Akar Bias Gender dalam Wacana*

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<sup>15</sup> <https://swarahima.com>. Accessed on 22 December 2022.

*Islam or Arabic Language as the root of Gender Bias in Islamic Thoughts* (2006) and many others. Rofiah uses her publication to disseminate her perspective on how Islam promotes gender justice. She is among the leading female ulama who initiated the Indonesian first female ulama's congress (*Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia*, KUPI) in 2017.

Since May 2019, she has organized an intensive and regular training program on gender justice in Islam, named *Ngaji Keadilan Gender Islam (Ngaji KGI)*. Trainings are conducted both online and face-to-face with the objective to increase literacy and awareness on gender justice and the rights of women guaranteed in Islam. The word *ngaji*, is the short version of the word "*mengaji*" which literally means reading, learning, or studying the Qur'an. Javanese say they are doing 'ngaji' when they are reading, learning, or studying the Qur'an. Keadilan means justice. Thus, *Ngaji Keadilan Gender Islam* means learning about gender justice in Islam.

The idea to launch and run *Ngaji KGI* program is driven by Rofiah's earlier activity in promoting the idea of justice, which she calls *keadilan hakiki perempuan* (real justice for women). Through this program, she wants to promote a gender perspective that not only lies on a formal justice that is fake. She initiates the real justice (*keadilan hakiki*) that roots on the integration of women's biological and social experiences. This idea was resounded at first time in *Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia* (KUPI means Congress of Indonesian Female *Ulama*) in 2017. With 16 years of experience teaching *Metodologi Tafsir Qur'an* (Methodology of Qur'anic Tafsir) and gender equality in Islam at the University of Qur'anic Studies in Jakarta, she feels the need to talk about the topic to the broader community.

Rofiah designs the curricula of *Ngaji KGI* and delivers the content herself. The curricula of *Ngaji KGI* comprises three series which according to Rofiah, represent the core essence of *Ngaji KGI*. The first series focuses on "The map of opportunities and challenges of gender justice in Islam", with two themes: "the Concept of Women's Ultimate Justice and the Islamic Revolution on Women's Humanity." The second series is titled "Gender Relations in Arabic and Tafsir", encompassing themes such as "Gender Relations in Arabic and Gender Relations in Tafsir". Additionally, this series includes discussions on "Islam and the Full Humanity of Women." The last series is divided into two themes: "Islam as a Teaching System for the Full Humanity of Women" and "Islam in the Perspective of Women's Ultimate Justice."

In practice, Rofiah employs two approaches as the basis of her curriculum: methodological studies and thematic studies. Specifically, she consistently imparts the methodology on gender equity in the initial series, while subsequent two series predominantly focus on thematic studies on women issues. This progression illustrates that the structure of the *Ngaji KGI* curriculum genuinely emerges from profound methodological and substantive reflection. It is only after the completion all three series that they are considered sufficient and adequate as a basic method of interpretation from an Islamic gender justice perspective.

This program is designed to be delivered face-to-face. Anyone who are interested to learn what Islam says about the role and status of women can join. In the beginning, classes were organized at her house but later she received invitations from participants for classes to be delivered in their places. In mid-2019, this program was conducted at the University of Nahdhatul Ulama (UNU) Yogyakarta and extended to 9 (nine) cities across Indonesia. She highlights that the programs operated on a self-sustaining financial basis. Preceding the Covid-19 pandemic, *Ngaji KGI* was conducted weekly via a *WhatsApp Group* (WAG) where Rofiah explained the topic on gender justice through voice notes and texts. During Ramadan 2020, *Ngaji KGI* transitioned to was run online through Skype platform to reach wider participants not only from diverse cities in Indonesia, but also overseas. It successfully attracts many audiences, not only young female, but also young male Muslims. Most of them are university students, young lecturers, activists, and young professionals. They heard about this program from their friends who joined the program earlier. The information about Rofiah's program was spread through social media within circle of friendship, colleagues, and religious organization.

When pandemic hit in 2022, Rofiah switches her program to online platform. She conducted *ngaji KGI* through the Website-based Seminars (webinars) mostly using the platforms Zoom and Google Meet. To manage these webinars, Rofiah has been helped by Cak Masykur Management (CMM). She also started to use social media to promote *Ngaji KGI* through Instagram account @ngaji\_kgi and her personal Instagram account @nrofiah. At the time of writing, @ngaji-kgi has about 8.224 followers and @nrofiah has about 15,1 K followers on Instagram. Apart from Instagram, *Ngaji KGI* is also delivered on Facebook @ngaji\_kgi, Twitter @ngaji\_kgi, Spotify @ngaji\_kgi, Youtube @ngajikgi6182, and Tik Tok @ngaji\_kgi. Rofiah has about 4,983 followers on Facebook, *Ngaji KGI* has about 1.245 followers on Twitter, 677 subscribers on Youtube, and 27 followers on Tik Tok. *Ngaji KGI* was also uploaded videos on Spotify.

Her followers actively engage in the discussion as can be seen from the way they comment and like 466 posts of @ngaji\_kgi and 1308 posts of @nrofiah instagram accounts. From the comments, it can be assumed that most participants have only learned that Islam actually teaches gender equality, where women have the same rights as men in both domestic and public spaces. Rofiah received many stories on the impact of *Ngaji KGI* to their followers. For example, there is an alumni of *Ngaji KGI*, a male about 40s, who claims that his perspective has changed in observing anything nowadays. For instance, watching films, reading novels, hearing people's conversations, and seeing daily activities. In the past, he used to see these matters as normal, but now there is an awareness that there are underlying gender equality issues. There has been a shift in how he perceives the world, especially see the women as full human being, equal to men.

Another example of impact she received from a female participant of *Ngaji KGI* related to her perspective on women reproduction. She is a girl who often experiences prolonged menstruation. She feels that she is not a complete woman and believes that, if she gets married, she won't be able to have children due to her abnormal reproductive system, which is different from other girls. Before participating in *Ngaji KGI*, she prepared her mental for polygamy in case of marriage. After regularly attending *Ngaji KGI* sessions, she developed a different perspective and opposes polygamy. There are still many stories from Rofiah's participants recognizing that their perspectives have been shifted. Significant public responses to *Ngaji KGI* both online and offline have shown that the discourses of Islamic feminism was able to develop within the framework of traditionalists Islamic movement such as NU (Feillard and van Doorn-Harder, 2014). Feillard and van Doorn-Harder highlights that this development gives a considerable degree of impact on the discourse of gender equality and polygamy.

However, critiques have been directed at her teachings regarding polygamy and the human aspects of women. She recounted an incident involving the conservative ulama's response to her activism. Last year, she was invited to speak by a young female leader at a prominent *pesantren* (boarding school) in East Java. This *pesantren*, renowned for its conservatism, accommodates thousands of santri (boarding school students). Prior to the event, the female leader (*Ibu Nyai*) expressed concerns raised by someone regarding the perceived 'safety' or appropriateness of the speaker's perspective for their *pesantren*. Initially, Rofiah's views on gender equality were considered 'unsafe' or not suitable for the *pesantren*. Subsequently, the female leader received another suggestion assuring her that Rofiah's ideas on women would be 'safe' because of she is graduated from a *pesantren* and she is a lecturer in Tafsir and Qur'anic studies. Consequently, she was ultimately accepted to address the *santri*.

Rofiah teaches that gender equality is not about considering men as a single standard of justice for women. Equality must be considered as the whole aspect of women's humanity. Equal does not mean the same (or in her words, do not stop at the sameness). Women's lived experiences must not lower their status to men. Women and men are *kholifah fil ardh* (means God's ambassador on earth) or that there is no difference between women and men in their role as *kholifah fil ardh*. According to Rofiah *kholifah fil ardh* means that both women and men have an equal responsibility both inside and outside their houses, that is in domestic and public spaces. She said that women are not the guest in public spaces, while men are also not the guest in their own houses. She further argued in both public and domestic spheres, women and man need to share their roles based on their responsibility in order to achieve the common good. Rofiah emphasizes the problem with literal interpretation of Islamic teachings. She said the problem with the literal interpretation of the verse 4:3 as to promote polygamy is that it does not only go against the moral foundation of Islam, it also challenges the current norms where the majority of Muslims practice monogamous marriage. Textual interpretation, according to Rofiah, will distance the society to achieve an ideal social system expected and aspired by Islamic teachings. On polygamy, she argues that every Muslim needs to see the current context, where society becomes a monogamous society. Monogamous society in her argument is the destination and it is the main aim of the Qur'anic verse 4:3. Therefore, in her argument there is no reason to practice polygamous marriage because it is contradictive Islamic value.

Rofiah's *Ngaji KGI* online has attracted thousands of participants. This means there is a significant interest from the public to learn about various issues related to gender justice in Islam. One of the main reasons for people to join *Ngaji KGI* is the fact that Rofiah discusses and explains social problems based on her 'critical thinking' approach to understanding Qur'an and Hadith through a scientific approach. This is something that can be considered new to members of the Muslim community. In particular, this is because the general perception around gender equality and the status of women are influenced by patriarchal values that result in the promotion or justification of polygamous marriage, normalizing violence against women and child marriage.

According to Rofiah, such perspectives will continue to stigmatise, and marginalise women, making them vulnerable to violent and unjust treatment. In both *Ngaji KGI* online and offline, she consistently reminds her participants of the root cause of such a problem that neglect to see and consider the human aspect of women.

Understanding the potential backlash of her campaign, she argued that her campaign is not an attempt to hate men, but rather an attempt to promote equality between men and women. In her activism she challenges the social stigma that is attached to Javanese women's roles as someone who is tasked with domestic roles, commonly known as 3M: *macak, manak dan masak* (means: dressing-up, giving offspring and cooking). With entrenched patriarchal culture, Rofiah believes that women continue to be burdened by their perceived domestic roles affecting their roles and status in public space. An attempt to promote equality between men and women must then be centered on calling for the need to realize the full humanity of women (*kemanusiaan perempuan secara penuh*). Her campaigns to eliminate stigma and bias towards women relies on her attempt to rereading and reinterpret Qur'anic texts at the same time reinserting the principle of human rights. Although she rarely mentioned that her works is being informed by hermeneutics, her approach is indeed inspired by hermeneutical approach as she contextualized the sacred texts with contemporary contexts of society.

### ***b. Akademi Feminis Muslim (AFM)***

Another interesting program organized by a progressive female scholar is *Akademi Feminis Muslim* (AFM or Feminist Muslim Academy), founded by Alimatul Qibtiyah. Qibtiyah is a professor of Gender Studies at Kalijaga State Islamic University in Yogyakarta and a prominent activist within Muhammadiyah. Qibtiyah founded AFM following the inauguration of her professorship in 2020. She was approached by a group of young Muslim activists who talked to her and asked if it is possible for her to speak to their community about feminism and Islam. The idea that a Muslim can be a feminist propagated by Qibtiyah is considered controversial. Therefore, this group of young Muslim activists would like to learn directly from Qibtiyah.

Qibtiyah understands that she could face resistance from some of the public to use the term feminist and to say that one can be a feminist and a Muslim at the same time. She is aware that being a self-identified feminist is controversial among women's rights activists and scholars, within the Muslim community (Qibtiyah, 2010). She believes such attitude is due to the different interpretations given to the term 'feminist,' as well as, the negative stereotypes attached to the word 'feminist.' This is the reason that has led her to disseminate and promote the term 'feminist'. She believes the more she talks, shares, and discusses her views on feminism the better it is for the campaign for gender equality. She believes that the discussion on feminism will raise awareness of gender equality, strengthen feminist identity, and develop religiosity (Qibtiyah, 2010).

Qibtiyah has published many books and articles including *Feminis Muslim di Indonesia* or *Muslim Feminist in Indonesia* (2019), *Mapping of Muslims Understanding on Gender Issues in Islam* (2018), *Feminist Identity and the Conceptualization of Gender Issues in Islam* (2012), *Indonesian Muslim Women and The Gender Equality Movement* (2009). In her book "*Feminis Muslim di Indonesia* (Muslim Feminist in Indonesia)", she argued that men and women can call themselves a 'feminist'. Women who claimed or called themselves a 'feminist' will be confronted, considered corrupt and influenced by Western liberal culture. The common understanding about being a feminist is that women will dominate their husbands, violating their natural role (*fitrah*) and (*kodrat*). However, she noticed the tendency that it is much easier for Muslim men to call themselves 'feminists'. 'Feminist men' are perceived to be those who respect women's rights, promote justice, and therefore support the women's movement.

She recounted an instance where a male member of a WhatsApp group (WAG) expressed disagreement with her use of the term 'feminist' and her assertion that Prophet Muhammad could be characterized as such. In response, she extended an invitation for him to participate in a forum where she intended to elaborate further on this topic, but he declined to take part. She reflected on the fact that the resistance to her ideas in the past was more severe than the current disagreements. During the late 1990s, she faced outright rejection from her participants, who insisted she perform ablution (*wudlu*) and engage in the repentance prayer (*Shalat Taubat*) as they perceived her perspectives as entirely incompatible with their religious beliefs.

Young activists who participated in AFM program believe the current socio-economic and political situation in Indonesia poses a serious challenge to Indonesian Muslim women. Rising conservatism means there is a need for someone with knowledge of Islam and gender to share and educate the community on the need to critically engage with the message of the Qur'an and

Hadith, in particular those related to women. Among the principal subjects frequently addressed by her under discussion are violence against women and women's reproductive health. Concerning the former, she underscores a shared objective between Islamist and progressive feminist movements in advocating for the dignity of women. However, she observes divergent approaches between these two feminist groups. Islamists contend that women's dignity is safeguarded through veiling and concealing their bodies, positing that such practices shield women from male disturbance. Conversely, progressive feminist groups emphasize the concept that women's dignity is rooted in gender equality with men, enabling them to participate in virtuous actions. This group posits that altering the mindset of men is the solution to mitigate disturbances directed at women. Turning to the second topic of women's reproductive health, progressive Muslim feminists assert that women can engage in negotiations with their husbands to determine the optimal approach for both parties. In contrast, a prevailing perspective among Islamists asserts the non-negotiability of women's compliance and obedience regarding their reproductive tasks, positing women's dependence on their husbands in such matters.

It is following her discussion with these young activists that Qibtiyah initiated to run a short course on Islam and Feminism on 17 September 2020. Qibtiyah designs and delivers AFM with the objective to engage young Indonesian Muslims to have better perspectives on women, feminism, and gender equality in Islam. The first class was conducted online on 21st November 2020, through zoom as the initial platform. To date, Qibtiyah has managed to run four batches of online classes and each class was attended by hundreds of participants from Bengkulu, Jambi, Lampung, Riau, Nusa Tenggara Barat and other cities in Indonesia. Qibtiyah said that she just realized AFM has many alumni spread in Indonesia when she visited to these cities. On a visit, she met with people, and said 'I am an alumni of AFM batch 1' and on another visit, someone informed her 'I am an alumni of AFM 2'. They knew about this program from social media and registered as participants in advance through the link that was provided on social media. She informed and invited participants of her AFM programs via the registration link: [s.is/AkademiFeminisMuslim](https://s.is/AkademiFeminisMuslim), and she also put the contact person and mobile number of the person in charge for each program.

Social media has been used from the beginning of AFM to disseminate her knowledge including through her Facebook and Instagram accounts. She has about five thousand followers on both social media accounts. She created an Instagram account for the *Akademi Feminis Muslim* (AFM) @AkademiFeminisMuslim in February 2021, prior to the AFM batch 2 in March 2022 which is informed through this new Instagram account. It currently has 924 loyal followers. This account is handled by two assistants or administrators.

To engage with these loyal followers and participants, AFM invited expert hosts such as Devie Rahmawati, and Mila Viendyasari for special program during Ramadhan month called *KURMA MANIS* (stands for "sweet date"). It is expected that these two expert hosts will explore the concept of feminism, as has been understood and implemented by Qibtiyah. Other expectation was to communicate the idea of feminism and Islam through more popular and interactive ways.

One of the interesting approaches Qibtiyah did in her classes is she invites her participants to write about their experiences being Muslim woman and what challenges they face in participating in public life. Stories written by women in her classes are collected, reviewed, and published. She believes that stories about the experiences of Indonesian Muslim women will increase awareness of the struggle of Indonesian women in achieving gender equality.

Qibtiyah's effort in promoting feminist discourses are also through her capacity as an active speaker in international and national forums. For example, in the forum of Spirited Voices from the Muslim World at the University of Sidney and the Annual Women's Studies Conference at the Pennsylvania State University. She has a very strong academic background in Women's Studies and a professorship in gender studies. Such backgrounds may lead her to integrate the discourses in the academic sphere into the practices and activism through her program *Akademi Feminis Muslim* and as a commissioner of the National Women Commission.

## **Conclusion**

Regarding how Muslim societies understand gender equality, we argue that their understanding is partly shaped and influenced by the way religious scriptures are interpreted and approached. There are two competing approaches in understanding scriptures on gender equality in Islam. The first approach is what the conservative ulama use in reading and interpreting texts in the Qur'an, that is textual interpretation. The other approach is hermeneutics, an approach that has been used by progressive ulama in understanding and interpreting Islamic scripture. Both interpretational

approaches have continued to be supported and disseminated by different groups of Muslim scholars in Indonesia. In this paper we categorized them as conservative and progressive. The conservatives are also known as textualists, who choose to understand the text as it is written in the Qur'an without contextualizing it with today's needs and the modern challenges. The progressive or contextualists, on the other hand, engage with the texts, the human contexts, and the contemporary needs. Each approach of interpretation has significant impact to the way Muslim societies understand the role and status of women both in domestic and public spheres. The textual interpretation contributes to the way women being discriminated, marginalized, and violated in both domestic and public life. The contextualists influence reform efforts to respect and promote women's equal status with men.

This paper studies the campaign of progressive Muslim women's scholars to promote the ideas of gender equality. Nur Rofiah through *Kajian Gender Islam (Ngaji KGI)* and Alimatul Qibtiyah, through her *Akademi Feminis Muslim (AFM)*. Inspired by hermeneutics approach in reading and understanding Islamic teachings, these progressive women scholars and activists make important efforts to counter the textualists' views concerning gender in Islam. Nur Rofiah is a NU female scholar who has a solid knowledge in classical Islamic jurisprudence. One of the important issues and controversial addressed by Nur Rofiah is polygamy. She argues that the context in which polygamy was practiced in the early period of Islamic history, during Prophet period, was different with the current context. The main aim of Quranic verse 4:3, in her interpretation, is to recommend monogamy, not polygamy. Respecting women's humanity is the value that the verse is addressing. Therefore, she argues that polygamous marriage is not in line with the Islamic value.

Lectures conducted by Nur Rofiah through *Ngaji KGI* have influenced its participants' perspective in dealing with gender issues, particularly polygamy. They become more critical in assessing the polygamous marriage practiced by their community. Furthermore, many of the participants have more awareness on gender issues when they watch movies, read novels and newspaper. Of course, her campaign is not empty from critiques. However, her capacity in Islamic knowledge such as Quranic studies and jurisprudence enables her view to be accepted widely. Meanwhile Alimatul Qibtiyah is a Muhammadiyah scholar whose expertise is in Islam and Gender Studies. Rising conservatism in the beginning of the post-New Order government (1998-2000s) encouraged her to be more involved in educating Indonesian women about gender equality. Her depth knowledge on modern social theories and Islamic teachings led her to offer new approach in understanding Quran and Hadis, particularly those related to women. Through AFM Alimatul Qibtiyah has enlightened her audiences on the significance of using social theories in understanding Quranic verses related gender issues. Like Nur Rofiah, Qibtiyah has also been responded critically due to her adoption of Western concept such as feminism.

These progressive female scholars believe that in Islam, men and women are assessed equally before God. Through their contextualists interpretation they articulate a just and egalitarian reading of the texts. They criticize textual interpretations that put women as unequal partner to men resulting in gender inequality. These scholars insist for the need to use contextual interpretation, a method of interpretation that consider the socio-cultural, economic, and political context as the important point in understanding the messages of Qur'an.

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#### **Interviews**

- Interviews with Rofiah and Qibtiyah on 18 October 2022 in Jakarta
- Interviews with Rofiah and Qibtiyah on 22 November 2023 in Jakarta

## Hermeneutics Approach in Indonesia's Contemporary Campaign for Gender Equality by Indonesian Progressive Muslim Women Scholars

### Abstract

There are two competing approaches to understanding gender equality in the Qur'an, the textualist and the progressive. The textual approach is propagated by male conservative ulama who have the interest to preserve patriarchal tradition or male domination. The progressive approach argues that the textual approach discriminates against women. Textualists believe women's roles are limited to those in the domestic sphere hence marginalizing women to participate in the public sphere. This article investigates the way Indonesian progressive Muslim scholars explore the progressive approach to interpreting gender equality in the Qur'an. Through qualitative methods with an in-depth review of the primary literature and interviews with Indonesian progressive Muslim scholars, this article discusses efforts that have been made in promoting gender equality. They believe there is a need to reform Indonesia's Islamic thoughts propagated by textualist Muslim scholars to transform social attitudes towards women's status in the private and public domains.

**Keywords:** Qur'anic interpretation, hermeneutics, patriarchy, discrimination, women, gender.

### Introduction

The experience of Indonesian Muslim women with discrimination and marginalization is the product of the intermingling of tradition and politics, with patriarchy at its center. Women's roles are restricted and relegated to the private space, their mobility is restricted, and their bodies and sexualities have become subject to the nation's morality standards (Afrianty, 2022; Blackwood, 2007; Robinson, 2006; Wieringa, 2015). Influenced by patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teachings, Indonesia's 1974 Marriage Law was the first legislation to define women as responsible for the care of their children and husbands, while men are to earn income (Nurmila, 2009). Such division of labour perpetuates a national imagining about the place of women in society.

As religion has continued to encroach on public life in the past twenty years, women's bodies and religiosity continue to be at the center of cultural and moral debates. Women are tasked to obey rules created by religious and state institutions to do what is acceptable and morally appropriate (Platt et al., 2018; Afrianty, 2019). Veiling, female genital mutilation, child marriage, and polygamy are some of the prescriptions outlined for women to follow to maintain their purity and honor.

Islam is professed by more than 80% of Indonesia's total population. Islamic teachings hence influence the development of social relations, socio-economic, legal, and political development. Discrimination against Indonesian women and the unequal treatment experienced by women are believed to be partly shaped by the way Islamic teachings are understood and interpreted (Nurmila, 2021). This has led to continuous debate among Indonesian Muslims about the construction of alternative religious interpretations that promote equality to legal, socioeconomic, and political rights between men and women and to other minority groups.

The debate about the status of women had, in fact, begun since the twentieth century alongside nationalist movements (Afrianty, 2015; Blackburn, 2004). Women's struggles for equal opportunity to education and to fight against child marriage, and polygamy started during the colonial occupation, when Kartini, later coined as Indonesia's first feminist questioned why she was prevented to continue her education and forced to marry a man who already has a wife. Women's rights to education and the right in marriage and access to divorce become the subject of discussion during the first Indonesia's women's congress in 1922.

Central in the struggle of Indonesian women's movements is the demand for the need to critically interpret and examine Islamic teachings that do not discriminate against women and create injustices. Women's relegated status to men and discrimination against women in both public and private domains are propagated by the way religious leaders such as *ulama* interpret and convey religious values (Nurmila, 2021). According to progressive religious scholars, these religious leaders interpret and understand the Qur'an textually justifying their patriarchal perceptions of the status of women as unequal to men. This textual approach in interpreting and understanding Qur'an resulted in positioning men as superior to women, and that women are not equal to men.

1 In the past thirty years, Indonesia has seen the emergence of progressive Muslim scholars and  
2 activists such as Alimatul Qibtiyah, Nur Rofiah, Nasarudin Umar, Husain Muhammad, Siti  
3 Ruhaini Dzuhayatin, Nina Nurmila, Lies Marcoes, and Ciciek Farha whose works continue to  
4 counter the conservative teachings that discriminates women. They believe messages in the Qur'an  
5 respects, empowers, and liberates women from misogynist and patriarchal tradition of the Arab  
6 world before the revelation of Islam. These scholars believe that the spirit of Islam as shown in the  
7 Qur'an does not discriminate against women. This contradicts the teaching propagated by  
8 conservative religious scholars who interpret the messages in the Qur'an based on the textual  
9 approach in which they believe women and men are not equal.

10 This paper discusses the latest campaign efforts by young and progressive Muslim women's  
11 scholars to promote gender equality and to counter the conservative agenda to roll back decades of  
12 progress Indonesian women have gained in the past forty years. Informed by hermeneutics  
13 approach and critical discourse in reading and understanding Islamic teachers, progressive women  
14 scholars and activists make significant efforts to counter the textualists understanding of Islamic  
15 teachings. Alimatul Qibtiyah, through her *Akademi Feminis Muslim* (AFM) and Nur Rofiah  
16 through *Kajian Gender Islam* (Ngaji KGI) are among the newest activism emerged.

17 This paper is structured into several sections. First, it discusses the differences between the  
18 textual and hermeneutics approach and its implication for the competing discourses on gender  
19 relations. The second section elaborates on the profile of Indonesia's progressive Muslim scholars  
20 who have been at the forefront of promoting the hermeneutics approach. At last, it explores  
21 messages on gender equality in the Qur'an based on hermeneutics interpretation and how  
22 progressive Muslim scholars draw their campaigns to the Muslim community.

## 23 **The textual interpretation and hermeneutics**

24 The textual interpretation of the Qur'an is mostly produced and promoted by conservative ulama.  
25 They are often called as textualists. They promote a strict following of the text and adopt a  
26 literalistic approach (Saeed, 2006). Textual interpretation defines Qur'anic messages literally as  
27 written in the text. It sees texts as identical with its meaning. As a result, a text in the Qur'an will  
28 be defined by a single meaning. Textual interpretation thus marginalizes the role of reason to  
29 explore and elaborate the meaning, aim, and spirit of the text (Umar, 2003). According to this  
30 conservative ulama, the meaning of the Qur'an is fixed and universal in its application. The texts  
31 and their meanings cannot be contextualized. They are prohibited from being interpreted freely or  
32 based on recent human contexts, developments and needs since the meaning of the texts are one  
33 and permanent. According to them, the text is an absolute divine language. For this ulama, the  
34 accommodative attitudes towards human needs are regarded as a threat to Islam as the sacred  
35 religion. They believe that messages in the Qur'an can be applied in all circumstances regardless  
36 of the differences in contexts.

37 However, these are scholars who emphasize the need to develop a contextual method for  
38 interpreting the Qur'an, known as contextualists. According to contextualists Islamic teachings  
39 consist of primary and secondary texts. Primary texts include the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the  
40 Prophet, while the secondary texts include the ulama's interpretation of the primary text (Mas'udi,  
41 2000; Muhammad, 2001; Umar, 2003). The primary texts are absolute truth, while the secondary  
42 text is relative. There is a difference between absolute and relative texts. The relative texts must be  
43 contextualized according to the dynamics of human needs, and social and political contexts. As  
44 argued by Saeed, in order to understand texts there is a need to understand the ethical and legal  
45 content of the Qur'an in relation to the political, social and historical contexts in which the texts  
46 were revealed, interpreted, and applied (Saeed, 2006). Thus, it will be more compatible with  
47 human issues and follow the aims of *shari'ah* (*maqashid al-syariah*) (Umar, 2003). Progressive  
48 ulama who promotes this way of thinking are often accused of undermining Islamic doctrines and  
49 influenced by Western agenda (Fuad, 2019; Fuad, 2017).

50 The method that considers the importance of context in understanding the Qur'an is called  
51 hermeneutics (Saeed, 2006). Hermeneutics is part of a philosophical thinking that is used to  
52 understand texts (Esack, 1997). It sees texts as the product of a particular culture and time. Hence,  
53 the meaning of the texts as produced by its author has a particular meaning, which cannot be  
54 generalized in changing contexts. In that sense, as an approach, hermeneutics tries to bridge the  
55 distance between the author, the reader, and the context of the texts (Saeed, 2013). Hermeneutics  
56 calls for the need to look at the social, political, and cultural conditions of when the text is written

and produced. Understanding the context will help readers to understand the spirit of the texts. Hermeneutics is not a new approach to interpreting Islamic scriptures. It has been practiced for centuries.

Hermeneutics has also been employed to interpret other religious texts. Esack (1997) argued that scholars have applied hermeneutics to explore and define the contemporary meaning of the Qur'an. Esack defined hermeneutics as a science that seeks to describe a word, a text, and an event that occurred in the past so that it can be understood meaningfully in today's time. Esack further argued that the function of hermeneutics operates to bridge the past and the present (Esack, 1997). In line with this, Abdurrahman highlighted that to produce a more relevant meaning of the Qur'anic verses, it is important to first understand the current situation (Abdurrahman, 2003). Abdurrahman (2003) asserted that to understand the meaning of a text, one needs to first look at the contemporary social context. By doing this, the interpreter will produce a progressive meaning of the texts.

Texts, in hermeneutics, are viewed as dependent. There is a close relationship between the process of the revelation, language, content, and the community who consume the texts (Abdurrahman, 2003). Consistent with the principle of hermeneutics, those religious texts are not produced in an empty context. Verses in the Qur'an were revealed behind certain social context of its time. The Qur'anic texts are dominantly influenced by the Arabic culture where patriarchal values are strongly entrenched (Saeed, 2013). Thus, in hermeneutics interpretation, it needs to find the meaning that the author meant in its beginning context. After that, the meaning will be brought and faced with contemporary human problems. Hermeneutics requires one to have the expertise of understanding the Qur'an and the knowledge of modern sciences such as anthropology, sociology, history and so on and so forth to critically understand the spirit of the Qur'anic texts.

Muslim scholars are practicing critical thinking not only through hermeneutics. The other approach is known as *Burhani* (means rational and empirical). *Burhani* uses rationality as its tool in understanding religious texts (Saeed, 2006). Based on the *burhani* approach, the texts are explored and defined in deductive and inductive ways before the *maqasid al shari'at* (the purposes of Islamic law) is being determined. The texts are seen as a symbol of the universal causality principle. The textual meaning can distance Muslims from the core message of the texts as it ignores the fact that the texts were produced within certain social-cultural contexts (Rofiah, 2020).

During the *Khulafa' ar-Rosyidin* period, religious scholars had a clash over which method of interpretation should be applied (Basya, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Umar bin Khattab's, the third caliph of *Khulafa' ar-Rosyidin*, was the one who triggered the clash of opinion. The caliph Umar offered different Islamic jurisprudential opinions regarding booty. He refused to distribute the land of Iraq as booty to the Muslim army after its conquest, even though a verse in the Quran (8:41) commands Muslims to distribute the booty. During the Prophet's time, the land was allocated for Muslims who participated in a war. Umar saw that such a policy would make the Muslim army the landowner. As a result, they would monopolize the property. Monopoly is not good for the prosperity and justice of all Muslim societies. That was why Umar proposed a new legal opinion based on the best interest of the public. His policy provides the opportunity for the previous owner of the land to maintain their property, while they must share some of the profit with the Muslim state. The state will use it to support educational and other programs related to the public interest. Umar believed he could choose to introduce a different policy when the 'public interest' demanded it (Saeed, 2006). Certainly, Umar's policy attracted controversy. Many opponents were coming from the *sahabah* (means the companions of the Prophet). This story reveals how Umar relied on upon in *Burhani* (means rational) way of thinking (Zohdi, 2017).<sup>2</sup>

## Progressive Muslim scholars

Islamic educational institutions including the tertiary educational institutions play an important role to promoting critical thinking in reading, understanding, and interpreting sources of Islamic teachings (Douglass & Munir, 2004). Graduates from these Islamic educational institutions

<sup>1</sup> *Khulafa' ar-Rosyidin* (Arabic) is the first four rulers of the Islamic peoples after the death of the prophet Muhammad, usually rendered as the righteous caliphs. The historical epoch encompassing their combined rule, about forty years, is regarded by Muslims as a time when the 'true' teachings of Islam were practiced.

<sup>2</sup> Different from *Burhani*, *Bayani* (means scriptural) is an approach or the philosophical system to get knowledge that based on the sacred text (revelation) as an absolute truth and *Irfani* (means intuitive) is an approach that lies on intuition and purifying soul.

1 possess the skills, knowledge, and competency to critically read and interpret the Qur'an, the  
2 Sunnah and other authoritative Islamic scriptures. Some of the progressive Muslim scholars who  
3 studied in Islamic educational institution include, Nasaruddin Umar,<sup>3</sup> Ruhaini Dzuhayatin,<sup>4</sup> Husein  
4 Muhammad<sup>5</sup>, Alimatul Qibtiyah, and Nur Rofiah. Their Arabic language skills and knowledge of  
5 Islam allow them to understand not only the texts but also the history and contexts around the  
6 revelation of the texts. Dzuhayatin, Qibtiyah, and Rofiah are the leading Indonesian Muslim  
7 scholars who actively advocate for progressive readings of Islamic scriptures through their  
8 publication and certainly part of the female religious authority in Indonesian Islam (Fuad, 2021).  
9 These scholars also work as university professors or senior lecturers at various state network of  
10 Islamic higher educational institutions. Apart from being academics, they actively engage in  
11 religious activities including in public debate on matters pertaining to social justice and gender  
12 equality.

13 Apart from Islamic higher educational institution, Indonesia's Muslim based organizations  
14 such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdhatul Ulama (henceforth NU) also have prominent roles in  
15 disseminating progressive understanding of Islamic scriptures.<sup>6</sup> Through their educational  
16 institutions and many other communities works they advance the issue of social justice as well as  
17 facilitate public debate on issues pertaining to women's rights and gender equality.  
18 Muhammadiyah and NU have significantly shaped the development of Indonesia's theological  
19 reference on women's rights and gender equality (Arnez, 2010; Barton, 2014; Pohl, 2012;  
20 Syamsiyatun, 2007; van Doorn-Harder, 2006).<sup>7</sup> Indonesian progressive Muslim scholars including  
21 those mentioned above are mostly affiliated with these two organizations. Dzuhayatin and  
22 Qibtiyah are prominent female scholars and activists affiliated with Muhammadiyah. Rofiah,  
23 Umar, Muhammad, on the other hand, are affiliated with NU.

24 Hermeneutics approach heavily influenced the religious thinking of these progressive Muslim  
25 scholars. Nasaruddin Umar, a male professor of Qur'anic exegesis (*Ilmu Tafsir*) at the state Islamic  
26 University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, is among the first Muslim scholars who proposes for  
27 the need to apply hermeneutics to understand scriptural texts (Umar, 2003). Umar's interpretation  
28 of women's status, roles, and position in Islam is based on hermeneutical approach. He believes  
29 messages in the Quran which were revealed by God through his Prophets are constructed based on  
30 their h i s t o r i c a l contexts. In Islamic tradition, history is called *asbab an-nuzul* (reasons of  
31 revelation).<sup>8</sup> It is for this reason that Umar (2003) encourages the need to understand the context  
32 behind the revelation of Qur'anic verses by understanding *asbab an-nuzul*.

33 Umar argues that long before the arrival of Islam, the worldview of the people in the Arabian  
34 land was strongly influenced by the ancient cosmology and mythology of other civilizations which  
35 tended to be misogynists, such as ancient Egyptian cosmology, ancient Greece, and Sasanian-

36 <sup>3</sup> His thoughts can be read from from his books such as *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender Perspektif Al-Qur'an*  
37 (Means Argument of gender equality in Qur'anic perspective, 1999) and *Membangun Kultur Ramah*  
38 *Perempuan* (means Building friendly environment for women, 2004).

39 <sup>4</sup> Dzuhayatin has published many articles, such as *Islamism and nationalism among the Niqabis Women in*  
40 *Indonesia* (2020) and *Rekonstruksi Metodologis Kesetaraan Gender dalam Islam* (means Methodological  
41 reconstruction on gender equality in Islam, 2002).

42 <sup>5</sup> Husein Muhammad or widely known as Kyai Husein is considered Indonesia's male feminist. With his  
43 broad knowledge of classical Islamic jurisprudence, Muhammad has a strong influence among traditionalist  
44 Muslims. He published widely including *Ijtihad Kyai Husein: Upaya Membangun Keadilan Gender* (means  
45 Kyai Husein's Ijtihad: Efforts to promote gender equality, 2011), *Fiqh Perempuan; Islam dan Gender* (means  
46 Fiqh on Women: Islam and Gender, 2006), and *Islam Agama Perempuan* (means Islam is the religion of  
47 women, 2004).

48 <sup>6</sup> Muhammadiyah is the oldest and biggest modernist Islamic organization, established by KH. Ahmad  
49 Dahlan in 1912. This organization since its emergence have been contributed to empower women through  
50 education and trainings. (See Latief and Nashir, 2020).

51 <sup>7</sup> Nahdhatul Ulama (NU) is the largest traditionalist Islamic organization, established by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari  
52 in 1926. The NU has also been recognized for its contribution to the development of Indonesian Islam and  
53 gave attention to the women involvement in various organizational activities to increase their capacity (See  
54 Sila, 2020).

55 <sup>8</sup> *Asbab an-Nuzul* (Arabic) is part of the Qur'anic studies that explains the context in which a Qur'anic verse  
56 was revealed. Makiyah verses were revealed in Mecca period, which was before the hijra of the prophet  
57 Muhammad, while Madaniyah verses were revealed in Medina period which was after the *hijra* (*The Prophet*  
58 *Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE*). Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im differentiates  
59 Makiyah and Madaniyah verses. Na'im explains that the message of Makiyah verses is the principal ideas of  
60 Islamic values such as human right, justice, and social virtue, while the Madaniyah is related to Islamic  
61 jurisprudence that regulates social order of the Muslim society. The different content and orientation of both  
62 Makiyah and Madaniyah verses are affected by its political, social, and cultural contexts (Na'im, 1996).

1 Zoroaster (Umar, 2003). In addition to that, the Arabs were also affected by the Mesopotamian  
2 civilization. A king named Hammurabi introduced a code to regulate the interaction between the  
3 men and women. The code regulated the rights and obligations for women, which was an attempt  
4 to marginalize women. Around the 10<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, there was also a kingdom called  
5 Assyria, currently known as Iraq, Iran, and Egypt. This kingdom also introduced a regulation,  
6 called Assyrian code (Jastrow, 1921; Mendelsohn, 1948). Similar to Hammurabi Code, Assyrian  
7 Code was introduced to marginalize and oppress women.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the interpretation of the  
8 Qur'anic texts at the time was influenced by predominantly misogynist views (Ahmed, 1992;  
9 Aslan, 2011; Barlas, 2002).

## 10 **The status of Muslim women in Indonesia**

11 Marginalisation and discrimination against women derived from misogynic values and patriarchal  
12 cultures that live in many societies both in the Muslim East and the Christian West (Afrianty,  
13 2022). In Indonesia, for example, in Banjar society women are seen only as a commodity that is  
14 contested by a man (Krismanti, 2020). The position of women are nothing more than servants for  
15 their husbands. They have to say 'yes' when their husband want to take a new wife (Nadhiroh,  
16 2017). Polygamy and *nikah siri* (secret marriage) are practiced in Java, Lombok, and other parts of  
17 Indonesia (Smith, 2014). Similar culture happens within Balinese, Madurese and Acehnese women  
18 who are restrained by local tradition and culture (Wayan & Nyoman, 2020; Sudarso et al, 2019;  
19 Afrianty, 2015). As a result, they are marginalized and positioned in a passive state in the midst of  
20 married life (Suyadnya, 2009). The *adat* (cultures) of marginalisation against women are indeed  
21 varied from one region to another in this huge archipelago.

22 In certain communities in Indonesia, women (*wanita*) are often considered as one of the three  
23 sources of social illness, along with wealth (*harta*) and throne (*tahta*) framed in the famous saying  
24 "*Harta, Tahta and Wanita*". Muslim men are told they need to ask for God's protection from  
25 women (Mas'udi, 2000; ). This attitude is influenced by a *fatwa* propagated by '*ulama* such as  
26 Ibnu Hajar al-Haitami, a prominent *ulama* in the Eighth century who issued a *fatwa* saying that  
27 women are unable to control themselves and if they possess knowledge they tend to endanger not  
28 only themselves but also others (Mas'udi, 2000; ).<sup>10</sup> For this reason, many in the society believe  
29 women should be prevented from getting education and must be confined to private spaces (Smith-  
30 Hefner, 2019). In addition, there are still believes that women do not need extensive knowledge to  
31 be housewives. They want women to only responsible on their household or domestic affairs  
32 (Dzuhayatin, 2020). In the section below we discussed some of the consequences of this  
33 misogynistic and patriarchal interpretation of Islamic scriptures to the status of women in  
34 contemporary Indonesia.

### 35 **a. Women's leadership and public roles**

36 Women's leadership remains a contentious issue in Indonesia (Nurmila, 2021). Whether a woman  
37 can hold a leadership position once became a subject of national debate. Megawati's nomination to  
38 become Indonesia's first female president in the 1999 and 2004 general elections was quickly  
39 'attacked' by the conservative Muslims (Ichwan, 2005). Some religious leaders in East Java issued  
40 a *fatwa* banning Muslim voters to elect a woman presidential candidate (Mys, 2004; Van Doorn-  
41 Harder, 2002; Ichwan, 2005). Hosen (2004) argued that the construction of the *fatwa* follows the  
42 conservatives' views (Hosen, 2004). The Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), however, called for  
43 the Muslim community to ignore it because there are still many *ikhtilaf* (contestation of ideas)

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52 <sup>9</sup> Historically, Hammurabi Code similar to Assyrian Code or Assyrian Law as a result of the knowledge  
53 transfer between the kingdom of Babylon and the kingdom of Assyrian. Hammurabi's Code was introduced  
54 to Assirian society to bocomo one of the written legal guidelines (Jastrow, 1921). Assyrian Code was an  
55 ancient legal code designed between 1450 and 1250 BCE. The Assyrian Code includes the law that  
56 margilizing and oppressing Assyrian women, related to marriage, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, divorce and  
57 domestic abuse (Mendelsohn, 1948). (see further on [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian\\_law](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian_law), accessed  
58 on 23 November 2023)

59 <sup>10</sup> *Fatwa* (Arabic-pl: *fatawa*) is a legal term indicating a pronouncement by a qualified religious scholar on an  
60 issue of belief or practice. *Fatwa* can be understood as an opinion on a point of law given by an institution or  
61 a person with recognized religious authority (Ichwan, 2005).

1 among ulama about the issue of female president.<sup>11</sup> This conservative *fatwa* from East Java *ulama*  
2 on banning women to become President influenced the public debate and shaped public attitudes  
3 toward women's leadership and strengthens the idea that women cannot lead. It is also believed to  
4 affect the preference of many Muslim voters.

5 Women continue to face challenges to hold leadership positions including in politics, in  
6 academic institutions such as universities, government offices and others. Despite the increased  
7 number of women representations in the national and local parliament, women's representation  
8 continues to be under twenty per cent. Of the thirty-four provinces in Indonesia, only one province  
9 is led by a female governor ([www.infojabodetabek.com](http://www.infojabodetabek.com)), and of thirty-four Ministers under Joko  
10 Widodo's administration, only six of them are women ([www.presidentri.go.id](http://www.presidentri.go.id)).<sup>12</sup> The only female  
11 governor is Khofifah Indar Parawansa a Muslim woman linked to the *Nahdlatul Ulama*. She is not  
12 a secular personality. Her role as a female governor of East Java is in line with a tradition of NU  
13 women involvement in politics, that dates back to the 1950s. The role of female NU in politics was  
14 not marginal in 1940s and 1950s. Women from this religious organization were involved in the  
15 national political struggle from the end of Dutch colonialism to de jure Indonesian independence  
16 in 1945. NU women through *Muslimat* and *Fatayat* (women's wing of *NU*) provided political  
17 spaces for NU women to be involved in national diplomacy and various national political activities  
18 (Arnez, 2010).

19 The issue of women leadership can also be seen in how the two biggest Muslim organizations  
20 in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah and NU perceive women's roles in the organizations. Both  
21 Muhammadiyah and NU established their women's wings, 'Aisyiyah and Muslimat. By having its  
22 own women's wings, women are given the roles to lead their own only women members. It was  
23 only in 2019 that NU appointed a woman to sit on their Central Board, while Muhammadiyah  
24 continues to have no women's representation in their central board. Both NU and Muhammadiyah  
25 argue that the fact that women do not sit on the leadership board is because women have their own  
26 women's wing within the organization. Hence, they are given the full authority to lead. The  
27 problem with this argument is that it justifies that women can only lead women but not men (See  
28 Fuad, 2020). Meanwhile, outside their internal organizations, Muhammadiyah through 'Aisyiyah  
29 and Nasiyatul 'Aisyiyah and NU through Muslimat and Fatayat have empowered and prepared  
30 female cadres political activists. Muhammadiyah and NU both supported their female cadres to  
31 participate and speak up their progressive ideas in parliament (Arnez, 2010; Syamsiyatun, 2007).

32 Despite a recent report indicating that there is a slight increase in the number of women getting  
33 leadership position in higher education (Nurmila, 2021), the number of women's representation in  
34 leadership roles remains low. In Indonesia's Islamic education sector, there is a higher  
35 representation of male lecturers. Interestingly, the enrollment of female students surpasses that of  
36 male students. This statistical information indicates advancements in tertiary Islamic education  
37 institutions concerning the increased presence of female students. The progress is further  
38 evidenced by the establishment of study centers focused on women and children. These centers  
39 engage in activities such as researching women's issues, formulating curricula based on gender  
40 equality, and reducing the prevalence of all-male panels in academic forums (Qibtiyah, 2012).

41 Of a total 937 Islamic tertiary education only 17 are led by female vice chancellor (Rector)  
42 ([www.diktis.kemenag.go.id](http://www.diktis.kemenag.go.id)).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in public education sector the number of female vice  
43 chancellor is also very low (Dzuhayatin, 2020).<sup>14</sup> Mulya and Sakhyya (2021) argued it is the

44  
45 <sup>11</sup> <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-160786/mui-fatwa-haram-presiden-perempuan-tak-perlu-ditanggapi>.  
46 Accessed in 22 November 2023.

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48 <sup>12</sup> This representation, however, indicates the improvement in the inclusion of female ministers within the  
49 cabinets of President Joko Widodo (commonly known as Jokowi). Serving two consecutive terms from 2014  
50 to 2024, Jokowi appointed 8 female ministers during his initial tenure and 6 during the subsequent period of  
51 his presidency. In comparison to earlier administrations led Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, Megawati, and  
52 Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (well known as SBY), underscores a discernible societal shift. Notably during  
53 the tenures of Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, and Megawati only 2 female ministers were appointed  
54 collectively, while SBY appointed 4 in his first term and 5 during his second term as President. This trend  
55 signifies a gradual transformation in Indonesian society during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (See Lee & Park, 2018).

56 <sup>13</sup> Look at this data - [https://diktis.kemenag.go.id/bansos/cari\\_nspt.php](https://diktis.kemenag.go.id/bansos/cari_nspt.php). Accessed 10 February 2023.

57 <sup>14</sup> Knowledge Sector Initiative (KSI), Sumber Daya Manusia dan Gender pada Pendidikan Tinggi Indonesia  
58 (Human Resources and Gender in Indonesian Higher Education), Kementrian PPN/Bappenas and Australian  
59 Government has reported that gender disparity in Indonesian higher education is still exist because the socio-  
60 cultural factor put men as more important than women and career as lecturers is men domain or stereotypical  
61 masculinities (see Report of KSI, page 14-15)

existing patriarchal connections, gender bias, and discriminative policies and attitudes against women that prevent women to achieve equally as men.

The challenge for women to exercise their roles in public domain, including to be in leadership position derives from the way Qur'anic verse of An-Nisa: 34 is being interpreted. It says: "*men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them for their means.*" This verse is often cited and used to prevent women from taking leadership roles. Men are perceived to be more capable and suitable to hold leadership positions compared to women. Many believe in the conservative interpretation that men are leaders of women and women's power is subordinate to men. The Arabic proverb sayings: '*al-mar'ah aw al-umm hiya al-madrasah al-uula* (the women or the mother is the first school [for their children]), indicates that Muslim women have a key responsibility to raise their children [at home]. This strengthens the idea that women's roles are in domestic space rather than in public (Afrianty, 2022; Fuad, 2020).

### ***b. Gender Equality in Marriage***

Indonesian family law is influenced by Islamic teachings, including Law No. 1/1974 on marriage. The law regulates the role of wives is in the domestic space while husbands are responsible to protect and provide for the family. It also regulates that a husband is permitted to take additional wife if he can obtain permission from his first wife. Men are also granted the permission to take additional wife on the ground that their wife become ill, disabled, or infertile. This provision is used to legitimizing the practice of polygamy (Nurmila, 2009). Polygamy continues to be a subject of internal debate within the Muslim community.

*Adat* (culture) also influences the position of women. Kartini, Indonesia's first feminist, was the first to challenge and oppose the practice of polygamy as she was a victim of such practice (Kartini, 2005; Nurmila, 2009; Robinson, 2009; Taylor, 1989). During her time, polygamy was practiced as part of Javanese culture. Men who have several wives would be having higher social status (Lubis, 2000; Reid, 1998). Kartini was among the first to fight against polygamy (Taylor, 1989). In her book entitled "*Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang*" (Out of dark comes light), she criticized her culture as marginalizing and discriminating against women (Kartini, 2005). *Adat* (culture) with patriarchal tendencies to marginalize women are varied from region to region.

Those who believe Islam allows polygamous marriage is influenced by a theological interpretation of conservative *ulama*. Supporters of polygamy rely on Qur'anic verse 4:3 to justify their conviction that Islam allows men to marry up to four wives. Nurmila divides Muslims' interpretation of polygamy into three groups: 1) Accomodating polygamy (the textualists), 2) Resisting polygamy (the semi-textualists), and 3) Rejecting polygamy (the contextualists) (Nurmila, 2009; Nurmila, 2021). The first belongs to those who literally interpret verse 4:3 and says Islam allows polygamy. The second group believes polygamy is allowed if a husband can fulfil the criteria to be just among his wives. The third group argues that Islam prohibits polygamy based on their contextual readings of the whole verses An-Nisaa (4): 2,3 and 129 (Nurmila, 2009; Nurmila, 2021). The conservative *ulama* believes that Islam allows polygamy, and they believe that verse 4:3 should not be interpreted according to their contextual considerations. On the other hand, contextualizing the verse has led progressive and reform-minded *ulama* to prohibit polygamy. Despite the ongoing debate, the Indonesian government through Law No. 1/1974 restricted the number of polygamous women. This restriction aims to protect women's dignity and to create peace and harmony in the family.

### **Campaign for gender equality**

Progressive Muslim scholars have long argued that Islam is a religion that respects and guarantees women equal status to men. Gender inequality, according to progressive Muslim, is shaped and influenced by both patriarchal and misogynistic culture that forms the community's understanding of Islamic teachings (Fiorenza, 1996). This is to say that apart from the socio-cultural constraints, there is also a strong theological influence that prevent Indonesian women to exercise their rights equally with men in Indonesia's public sphere. This is why they see a need to work within the theological domain to deconstruct discriminatory treatment against women (Dzuhayatin, 2020). This therefore leads to strengthening the struggle for gender equality within Islamic framework.

*Rahima* (stands for compassion) is a women's organization that actively promote gender equality and that messages of Islam teach about gender justice. *Rahima* was established in Jakarta



1 following Indonesia's democratic reformasi in 1998 (www.swarahima.com).<sup>15</sup> In its early  
2 campaign, *Rahima* emphasizes the need to reinterpret the Qur'anic concept of *fitrah* (natural state  
3 of being), a concept that has been used to construct gender roles, expectation, and attitudes  
4 towards women and men. The concept indeed requires the need to reestablish the balance of rights  
5 and responsibilities in the relationships between husband and wives in a marriage. In their  
6 campaign to promote equality, they engage with texts, traditions, modern ethics, as well as  
7 considering contemporary social contexts. Muslim women's organization such as *Rahima*,  
8 together with other Muslim groups follow the work of progressive scholars to engage with Islamic  
9 texts and with the local and global contexts.

10 In his book *Fiqih Perempuan* (Islamic Jurisprudence for Women), Husain Muhammad  
11 discussed that most classical *ulama* put women in unequal position to men in both the physical and  
12 psychological aspects. They believed that women are inferior to men. This perspective according  
13 to Muhammad perpetuates discrimination and gender inequality in Muslim societies. Muhammad  
14 argued that God commands Muslims not to marginalize women. As stated in the Qur'an, God asks  
15 Muslims to establish gender justice and respect women's rights (Muhammad, 2001).

16 Referring to Umar ibn Khattab, the companion of the Prophet (*sahabat*), Husain Muhammad  
17 highlighted that the caliphate Umar admitted that in the pre-Islamic period, he and many other  
18 Arab people did not respect women. When Islam came and with the revelation in the scripture,  
19 they learn about the requirement to respect women and that woman have the same rights as men.  
20 Muhammad concluded that the marginalization, discrimination, and violence against women are  
21 part of the pre-Islamic culture which contradict Islamic teaching. Muhammad proposed for the  
22 need of having an emancipatory interpretation from the Qur'an which put women in equal status as  
23 men. Nasarudin Umar (1999) supports Muhammad's argument agreeing that the true message of  
24 Islam is to liberate women from any forms of discrimination and injustice. Umar highlighted that  
25 any view that discriminates against women is not part of Islamic teaching. He believes Muslim  
26 societies need to reassess and reevaluate misleading interpretations that put women as a target of  
27 discrimination, injustice and violence (Umar, 1999). This perspective on the liberation of women  
28 was also promoted and disseminated by Indonesian female scholars such as Qibtiyah dan Rofiah.

29 In the next section, we discuss two interesting developments about the campaign conducted by  
30 progressive women Muslim scholars to promote and shape a new understanding of the status and  
31 role of women in Islam. This section draws its foundation from 4 interviews, with Rofiah and  
32 Qibtiyah (each interviews conducted twice for both *Ngaji KGI* and AFM). This section is also  
33 strengthened by comprehensive observation of the social media profiles affiliated with *Ngaji KGI*  
34 and AFM.

### 35 **a. Ngaji Keadilan Gender Islam (Ngaji KGI)**

36 Rofiah is a leading female scholar with an NU background. She possesses a strong knowledge in  
37 interpreting classical Islamic jurisprudence. Her interest in promoting a progressive approach to  
38 promote gender equality can be seen in her works *Nalar Kritis Muslimah: Refleksi atas*  
39 *Keperempuanan, Kemanusiaan dan Keislaman* or Muslim Women's critical thought: Reflection  
40 on Womenness, humanity, and Islam (2020); *Kekerasan dalam Rumah Tangga dalam Perspektif*  
41 *Islam* or Domestic violence in Islam (2017); *Pandangan Islam atas Perkosaan dan Pernikahan* or  
42 *Rape and Marriage in Islam* (2007); *Bahasa Arab sebagai Akar Bias Gender dalam Wacana*  
43 *Islam or Arabic Language as the root of Gender Bias in Islamic Thoughts* (2006) and many others.  
44 Rofiah uses her publication to disseminate her perspective on how Islam promotes gender justice.  
45 She is among the leading female ulama who initiated the Indonesian first female ulama's congress  
46 (*Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia*, KUPI) in 2017.

47 Since May 2019, she has organized an intensive and regular training program on gender  
48 justice in Islam, named *Ngaji Keadilan Gender Islam (Ngaji KGI)*. Trainings are conducted both  
49 online and face-to-face with the objective to increase literacy and awareness on gender justice and  
50 the rights of women guaranteed in Islam. The word *ngaji*, is the short version of the word  
51 "mengaji" which literally means reading, learning, or studying the Qur'an. Javanese say they are  
52 doing 'ngaji' when they are reading, learning, or studying the Qur'an. Keadilan means justice.  
53 Thus, Ngaji Keadilan Gender Islam means learning about gender justice in Islam.

54 The idea to launch and run *Ngaji KGI* program is driven by Rofiah's earlier activity in  
55 promoting the idea of justice, which she calls *keadilan hakiki perempuan* (real justice for women).  
56 Through this program, she wants to promote a gender perspective that not only lies on a formal  
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60 <sup>15</sup> <https://swarahima.com>. Accessed on 22 December 2022.

1 justice that is fake. She initiates the real justice (*keadilan hakiki*) that roots on the integration of  
2 women's biological and social experiences. This idea was resounded at first time in *Kongres*  
3 *Ulama Perempuan Indonesia* (KUPI means Congress of Indonesian Female *Ulama*) in 2017. With  
4 16 years of experience teaching *Metodologi Tafsir Qur'an* (Methodology of Qur'anic Tafsir)  
5 and gender equality in Islam at the University of Qur'anic Studies in Jakarta, she feels the need to  
6 talk about the topic to the broader community.

7 Rofiah designs the curricula of *Ngaji KGI* and delivers the content herself. The curricula  
8 of *Ngaji KGI* comprises three series which according to Rofiah, represent the core essence of  
9 *Ngaji KGI*. The first series focuses on "The map of opportunities and challenges of gender justice  
10 in Islam", with two themes: "the Concept of Women's Ultimate Justice and the Islamic Revolution  
11 on Women's Humanity." The second series is titled "Gender Relations in Arabic and Tafsir",  
12 encompassing themes such as "Gender Relations in Arabic and Gender Relations in Tafsir".  
13 Additionally, this series includes discussions on "Islam and the Full Humanity of Women." The  
14 last series is divided into two themes: "Islam as a Teaching System for the Full Humanity of  
15 Women" and "Islam in the Perspective of Women's Ultimate Justice."

16 In practice, Rofiah employs two approaches as the basis of her curriculum:  
17 methodological studies and thematic studies. Specifically, she consistently imparts the  
18 methodology on gender equity in the initial series, while subsequent two series predominantly  
19 focus on thematic studies on women issues. This progression illustrates that the structure of the  
20 *Ngaji KGI* curriculum genuinely emerges from profound methodological and substantive  
21 reflection. It is only after the completion all three series that they are considered sufficient and  
22 adequate as a basic method of interpretation from an Islamic gender justice perspective.

23 This program is designed to be delivered face-to-face. Anyone who are interested to learn what  
24 Islam says about the role and status of women can join. In the beginning, classes were organized at  
25 her house but later she received invitations from participants for classes to be delivered in their  
26 places. In mid-2019, this program was conducted at the University of Nahdhatul Ulama (UNU)  
27 Yogyakarta and extended to 9 (nine) cities across Indonesia. She highlights that the programs  
28 operated on a self-sustaining financial basis. Preceding the Covid-19 pandemic, *Ngaji KGI* was  
29 conducted weekly via a *WhatsApp Group* (WAG) where Rofiah explained the topic on gender  
30 justice through voice notes and texts. During Ramadan 2020, *Ngaji KGI* transitioned to was run  
31 online through Skype platform to reach wider participants not only from diverse cities in  
32 Indonesia, but also overseas. It successfully attracts many audiences, not only young female, but  
33 also young male Muslims. Most of them are university students, young lecturers, activists, and  
34 young professionals. They heard about this program from their friends who joined the program  
35 earlier. The information about Rofiah's program was spread through social media within circle of  
36 friendship, colleagues, and religious organization.

37 When pandemic hit in 2022, Rofiah switches her program to online platform. She conducted  
38 *ngaji KGI* through the Website-based Seminars (webinars) mostly using the platforms Zoom and  
39 Google Meet. To manage these webinars, Rofiah has been helped by Cak Masykur Management  
40 (CMM). She also started to use social media to promote *Ngaji KGI* through Instagram account  
41 @ngaji\_kgi and her personal Instagram account @nrofiah. At the time of writing, @ngaji-kgi has  
42 about 8.224 followers and @nrofiah has about 15,1 K followers on Instagram. Apart from  
43 Instagram, *Ngaji KGI* is also delivered on Facebook @ngaji\_kgi, Twitter @ngaji\_kgi, Spotify  
44 @ngaji\_kgi, Youtube @ngajikgi6182, and Tik Tok @ngaji\_kgi. Rofiah has about 4,983 followers  
45 on Facebook, *Ngaji KGI* has about 1.245 followers on Twitter, 677 subscribers on Youtube, and 27  
46 followers on Tik Tok. *Ngaji KGI* was also uploaded videos on Spotify.

47 Her followers actively engage in the discussion as can be seen from the way they comment and  
48 like 466 posts of @ngaji\_kgi and 1308 posts of @nrofiah instagram accounts. From the comments,  
49 it can be assumed that most participants have only learned that Islam actually teaches gender  
50 equality, where women have the same rights as men in both domestic and public spaces. Rofiah  
51 received many stories on the impact of *Ngaji KGI* to their followers. For example, there is an  
52 alumni of *Ngaji KGI*, a male about 40s, who claims that his perspective has changed in observing  
53 anything nowadays. For instance, watching films, reading novels, hearing people's conversations,  
54 and seeing daily activities. In the past, he used to see these matters as normal, but now there is an  
55 awareness that there are underlying gender equality issues. There has been a shift in how he  
56 perceives the world, especially see the women as full human being, equal to men.

57 Another example of impact she received from a female participant of *Ngaji KGI* related to her  
58 perspective on women reproduction. She is a girl who often experiences prolonged menstruation.  
59 She feels that she is not a complete woman and believes that, if she gets married, she won't be able  
60 to have children due to her abnormal reproductive system, which is different from other girls.

1 Before participating in *Ngaji KGI*, she prepared her mental for polygamy in case of marriage.  
2 After regularly attending *Ngaji KGI* sessions, she developed a different perspective and opposes  
3 polygamy. There are still many stories from Rofiah's participants recognizing that their  
4 perspectives have been shifted. Significant public responses to *Ngaji KGI* both online and offline  
5 have shown that the discourses of Islamic feminism was able to develop within the framework of  
6 traditionalists Islamic movement such as NU (Feillard and van Doorn-Harder, 2014). Feillard and  
7 van Doorn-Harder highlights that this development gives a considerable degree of impact on the  
8 discourse of gender equality and polygamy.

9 However, critiques have been directed at her teachings regarding polygamy and the human  
10 aspects of women. She recounted an incident involving the conservative ulama's response to her  
11 activism. Last year, she was invited to speak by a young female leader at a prominent *pesantren*  
12 (boarding school) in East Java. This *pesantren*, renowned for its conservatism, accommodates  
13 thousands of santri (boarding school students). Prior to the event, the female leader (*Ibu Nyai*)  
14 expressed concerns raised by someone regarding the perceived 'safety' or appropriateness of the  
15 speaker's perspective for their *pesantren*. Initially, Rofiah's views on gender equality were  
16 considered 'unsafe' or not suitable for the *pesantren*. Subsequently, the female leader received  
17 another suggestion assuring her that Rofiah's ideas on women would be 'safe' because of she is  
18 graduated from a *pesantren* and she is a lecturer in Tafsir and Qur'anic studies. Consequently, she  
19 was ultimately accepted to address the *santri*.

20 Rofiah teaches that gender equality is not about considering men as a single standard of justice  
21 for women. Equality must be considered as the whole aspect of women's humanity. Equal does not  
22 mean the same (or in her words, do not stop at the sameness). Women's lived experiences must not  
23 lower their status to men. Women and men are *kholifah fil ardh* (means God's ambassador on  
24 earth) or that there is no difference between women and men in their role as *kholifah fil ardh*.  
25 According to Rofiah *kholifah fil ardh* means that both women and men have an equal  
26 responsibility both inside and outside their houses, that is in domestic and public spaces. She said  
27 that women are not the guest in public spaces, while men are also not the guest in their own  
28 houses. She further argued in both public and domestic spheres, women and man need to share  
29 their roles based on their responsibility in order to achieve the common good. Rofiah emphasizes  
30 the problem with literal interpretation of Islamic teachings. She said the problem with the literal  
31 interpretation of the verse 4:3 as to promote polygamy is that it does not only go against the moral  
32 foundation of Islam, it also challenges the current norms where the majority of Muslims practice  
33 monogamous marriage. Textual interpretation, according to Rofiah, will distance the society to  
34 achieve an ideal social system expected and aspired by Islamic teachings. On polygamy, she argues  
35 that every Muslim needs to see the current context, where society becomes a monogamous society.  
36 Monogamous society in her argument is the destination and it is the main aim of the Qur'anic  
37 verse 4:3. Therefore, in her argument there is no reason to practice polygamous marriage because  
38 it is contradictive Islamic value.

39 Rofiah's *Ngaji KGI* online has attracted thousands of participants. This means there is a  
40 significant interest from the public to learn about various issues related to gender justice in Islam.  
41 One of the main reasons for people to join *Ngaji KGI* is the fact that Rofiah discusses and explains  
42 social problems based on her 'critical thinking' approach to understanding Qur'an and Hadith  
43 through a scientific approach. This is something that can be considered new to members of the  
44 Muslim community. In particular, this is because the general perception around gender equality  
45 and the status of women are influenced by patriarchal values that result in the promotion or  
46 justification of polygamous marriage, normalizing violence against women and child marriage.  
47 According to Rofiah, such perspectives will continue to stigmatise, and marginalise women,  
48 making them vulnerable to violent and unjust treatment. In both *Ngaji KGI* online and offline, she  
49 consistently reminds her participants of the root cause of such a problem that neglect to see and  
50 consider the human aspect of women.

51 Understanding the potential backlash of her campaign, she argued that her campaign is not an  
52 attempt to hate men, but rather an attempt to promote equality between men and women. In her  
53 activism she challenges the social stigma that is attached to Javanese women's roles as someone  
54 who is tasked with domestic roles, commonly known as 3M: *macak, manak dan masak* (means:  
55 dressing-up, giving offspring and cooking). With entrenched patriarchal culture, Rofiah believes  
56 that women continue to be burdened by their perceived domestic roles affecting their roles and  
57 status in public space. An attempt to promote equality between men and women must then be  
58 centered on calling for the need to realize the full humanity of women (*kemanusiaan perempuan*  
59 *secara penuh*). Her campaigns to eliminate stigma and bias towards women relies on her attempt  
60 to rereading and reinterpret Qur'anic texts at the same time reinserting the principle of human  
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rights. Although she rarely mentioned that her works is being informed by hermeneutics, her approach is indeed inspired by hermeneutical approach as she contextualized the sacred texts with contemporary contexts of society.

### ***b. Akademi Feminis Muslim (AFM)***

Another interesting program organized by a progressive female scholar is *Akademi Feminis Muslim* (AFM or Feminist Muslim Academy), founded by Alimatul Qibtiyah. Qibtiyah is a professor of Gender Studies at Kalijaga State State Islamic University in Yogyakarta and a prominent activist within Muhammadiyah. Qibtiyah founded AFM following the inauguration of her professorship in 2020. She was approached by a group of young Muslim activists who talked to her and asked if it is possible for her to speak to their community about feminism and Islam. The idea that a Muslim can be a feminist propagated by Qibtiyah is considered controversial. Therefore, this group of young Muslim activists would like to learn directly from Qibtiyah.

Qibtiyah understands that she could face resistance from some of the public to use the term feminist and to say that one can be a feminist and a Muslim at the same time. She is aware that being a self-identified feminist is controversial among women's rights activists and scholars, within the Muslim community (Qibtiyah, 2010). She believes such attitude is due to the different interpretations given to the term 'feminist,' as well as, the negative stereotypes attached to the word 'feminist.' This is the reason that has led her to disseminate and promote the term 'feminist'. She believes the more she talks, shares, and discusses her views on feminism the better it is for the campaign for gender equality. She believes that the discussion on feminism will raise awareness of gender equality, strengthen feminist identity, and develop religiosity (Qibtiyah, 2010).

Qibtiyah has published many books and articles including *Feminis Muslim di Indonesia* or *Muslim Feminist in Indonesia* (2019), *Mapping of Muslims Understanding on Gender Issues in Islam* (2018), *Feminist Identity and the Conceptualization of Gender Issues in Islam* (2012), *Indonesian Muslim Women and The Gender Equality Movement* (2009). In her book "*Feminis Muslim di Indonesia* (Muslim Feminist in Indonesia)", she argued that men and women can call themselves a 'feminist'. Women who claimed or called themselves a 'feminist' will be confronted, considered corrupt and influenced by Western liberal culture. The common understanding about being a feminist is that women will dominate their husbands, violating their natural role (*fitrah*) and (*kodrat*). However, she noticed the tendency that it is much easier for Muslim men to call themselves 'feminists'. 'Feminist men' are perceived to be those who respect women's rights, promote justice, and therefore support the women's movement.

She recounted an instance where a male member of a WhatsApp group (WAG) expressed disagreement with her use of the term 'feminist' and her assertion that Prophet Muhammad could be characterized as such. In response, she extended an invitation for him to participate in a forum where she intended to elaborate further on this topic, but he declined to take part. She reflected on the fact that the resistance to her ideas in the past was more severe than the current disagreements. During the late 1990s, she faced outright rejection from her participants, who insisted she perform ablution (*wudlu*) and engage in the repentance prayer (*Shalat Taubat*) as they perceived her perspectives as entirely incompatible with their religious beliefs.

Young activists who participated in AFM program believe the current socio-economic and political situation in Indonesia poses a serious challenge to Indonesian Muslim women. Rising conservatism means there is a need for someone with knowledge of Islam and gender to share and educate the community on the need to critically engage with the message of the Qur'an and Hadith, in particular those related to women. Among the principal subjects frequently addressed by her under discussion are violence against women and women's reproductive health. Concerning the former, she underscores a shared objective between Islamist and progressive feminist movements in advocating for the dignity of women. However, she observes divergent approaches between these two feminist groups. Islamists contend that women's dignity is safeguarded through veiling and concealing their bodies, positing that such practices shield women from male disturbance. Conversely, progressive feminist groups emphasize the concept that women's dignity is rooted in gender equality with men, enabling them to participate in virtuous actions. This group posits that altering the mindset of men is the solution to mitigate disturbances directed at women. Turning to the second topic of women's reproductive health, progressive Muslim feminists assert that women can engage in negotiations with their husbands to determine the optimal approach for both parties. In contrast, a prevailing perspective among Islamists asserts the non-negotiability of women's compliance and obedience regarding their reproductive tasks, positing women's dependence on their husbands in such matters.

1 It is following her discussion with these young activists that Qibtiyah initiated to run a short  
2 course on Islam and Feminism on 17 September 2020. Qibtiyah designs and delivers AFM with  
3 the objective to engage young Indonesian Muslims to have better perspectives on women,  
4 feminism, and gender equality in Islam. The first class was conducted online on 21st November  
5 2020, through zoom as the initial platform. To date, Qibtiyah has managed to run four batches of  
6 online classes and each class was attended by hundreds of participants from Bengkulu, Jambi,  
7 Lampung, Riau, Nusa Tenggara Barat and other cities in Indonesia. Qibtiyah said that she just  
8 realized AFM has many alumni spread in Indonesia when she visited to these cities. On a visit, she  
9 met with people, and said 'I am an alumni of AFM batch 1' and on another visit, someone  
10 informed her 'I am an alumni of AFM 2'. They knew about this program from social media and  
11 registered as participants in advance through the link that was provided on social media. She  
12 informed and invited participants of her AFM programs via the registration link:  
13 s.is/AkademiFeminisMuslim, and she also put the contact person and mobile number of the person  
14 in charge for each program.

14 Social media has been used from the beginning of AFM to disseminate her knowledge  
15 including through her Facebook and Instagram accounts. She has about five thousand followers on  
16 both social media accounts. She created an Instagram account for the *Akademi Feminis Muslim*  
17 (AFM) @AkademiFeminisMuslim in February 2021, prior to the AFM batch 2 in March 2022  
18 which is informed through this new Instagram account. It currently has 924 loyal followers. This  
19 account is handled by two assistants or administrators.

20 To engage with these loyal followers and participants, AFM invited expert hosts such as Devie  
21 Rahmawati, and Mila Viendyasari for special program during Ramadhan month called *KURMA*  
22 *MANIS* (stands for "sweet date"). It is expected that these two expert hosts will explore the concept  
23 of feminism, as has been understood and implemented by Qibtiyah. Other expectation was to  
24 communicate the idea of feminism and Islam through more popular and interactive ways.

25 One of the interesting approaches Qibtiyah did in her classes is she invites her participants to  
26 write about their experiences being Muslim woman and what challenges they face in participating  
27 in public life. Stories written by women in her classes are collected, reviewed, and published. She  
28 believes that stories about the experiences of Indonesian Muslim women will increase awareness  
29 of the struggle of Indonesian women in achieving gender equality.

30 Qibtiyah's effort in promoting feminist discourses are also through her capacity as an active  
31 speaker in international and national forums. For example, in the forum of Spirited Voices from  
32 the Muslim World at the University of Sidney and the Annual Women's Studies Conference at the  
33 Pennsylvania State University. She has a very strong academic background in Women's Studies  
34 and a professorship in gender studies. Such backgrounds may lead her to integrate the discourses  
35 in the academic sphere into the practices and activism through her program *Akademi Feminis*  
36 *Muslim* and as a commissioner of the National Women Commission.

## 37 38 39 **Conclusion**

40 Regarding how Muslim societies understand gender equality, we argue that their understanding is  
41 partly shaped and influenced by the way religious scriptures are interpreted and approached. There  
42 are two competing approaches in understanding scriptures on gender equality in Islam. The first  
43 approach is what the conservative ulama use in reading and interpreting texts in the Qur'an, that is  
44 textual interpretation. The other approach is hermeneutics, an approach that has been used by  
45 progressive ulama in understanding and interpreting Islamic scripture. Both interpretational  
46 approaches have continued to be supported and disseminated by different groups of Muslim  
47 scholars in Indonesia. In this paper we categorized them as conservative and progressive. The  
48 conservatives are also known as textualists, who choose to understand the text as it is written in the  
49 Qur'an without contextualizing it with today's needs and the modern challenges. The progressive  
50 or contextualists, on the other hand, engage with the texts, the human contexts, and the  
51 contemporary needs. Each approach of interpretation has significant impact to the way Muslim  
52 societies understand the role and status of women both in domestic and public spheres. The textual  
53 interpretation contributes to the way women being discriminated, marginalized, and violated in  
54 both domestic and public life. The contextualists influence reform efforts to respect and promote  
55 women's equal status with men.

56 This paper studies the campaign of progressive Muslim women's scholars to promote the  
57 ideas of gender equality. Nur Rofiah through *Kajian Gender Islam (Ngaji KGI)* and Alimatul  
58 Qibtiyah, through her *Akademi Feminis Muslim (AFM)*. Inspired by hermeneutics approach in  
59 reading and understanding Islamic teachings, these progressive women scholars and activists make  
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1 important efforts to counter the textualists' views concerning gender in Islam. Nur Rofiah is a NU  
2 female scholar who has a solid knowledge in classical Islamic jurisprudence. One of the important  
3 issues and controversial addressed by Nur Rofiah is polygamy. She argues that the context in  
4 which polygamy was practiced in the early period of Islamic history, during Prophet period, was  
5 different with the current context. The main aim of Quranic verse 4:3, in her interpretation, is to  
6 recommend monogamy, not polygamy. Respecting women's humanity is the value that the verse is  
7 addressing. Therefore, she argues that polygamous marriage is not in line with the Islamic value.

8 Lectures conducted by Nur Rofiah through *Ngaji KGI* have influenced its participants'  
9 perspective in dealing with gender issues, particularly polygamy. They become more critical in  
10 assessing the polygamous marriage practiced by their community. Furthermore, many of the  
11 participants have more awareness on gender issues when they watch movies, read novels and  
12 newspaper. Of course, her campaign is not empty from critiques. However, her capacity in Islamic  
13 knowledge such as Quranic studies and jurisprudence enables her view to be accepted widely.  
14 Meanwhile Alimatul Qibtiyah is a Muhammadiyah scholar whose expertise is in Islam and Gender  
15 Studies. Rising conservatism in the beginning of the post-New Order government (1998-2000s)  
16 encouraged her to be more involved in educating Indonesian women about gender equality. Her  
17 depth knowledge on modern social theories and Islamic teachings led her to offer new approach in  
18 understanding Quran and Hadis, particularly those related to women. Through AFM Alimatul  
19 Qibtiyah has enlightened her audiences on the significance of using social theories in  
20 understanding Quranic verses related gender issues. Like Nur Rofiah, Qibtiyah has also been  
21 responded critically due to her adoption of Western concept such as feminism.

22 These progressive female scholars believe that in Islam, men and women are assessed equally  
23 before God. Through their contextualists interpretation they articulate a just and egalitarian reading  
24 of the texts. They criticize textual interpretations that put women as unequal partner to men  
25 resulting in gender inequality. These scholars insist for the need to use contextual interpretation, a  
26 method of interpretation that consider the socio-cultural, economic, and political context as the  
27 important point in understanding the messages of Qur'an.

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**Interviews**

Interviews with Rofiah and Qibtiyah on 18 October 2022 in Jakarta

Interviews with Rofiah and Qibtiyah on 22 November 2023 in Jakarta