

Dayana Parvanova

Islamic Feminist Activism in Indonesia: Muslim Women's Paths to Empowerment

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries Indonesia's Islamic field has experienced a profound transformation reminiscent of the first decades of the 20th century that marked the beginning of a conscious response by Indonesian Muslims to global flows originating mainly in Europe and the Middle East. Back then the two major Islamic organizations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, struggled to reach out and encompass the majority of the Indonesian population and promote Islamic religious ideas and values. Today, these organizations effectively include and represent the voices of Muslim women who actively work toward the promotion and integration of women's rights into all spheres of public life.

By the end of the 20th century, Islamic renewal and reinterpretation together with the introduction of feminist and democratic ideas has become a major concern for Muslim women activists. Competing paradigms, including human rights, gender equality, Islamic principles, and feminist ideas, have shaped the debate on women's social position and empowerment in Indonesia. Numerous organizations dedicate their ambition and aspiration to the promotion and advocacy of women's rights. At the same time, Indonesia's women's movements have to navigate shifting alliances on local, regional, national and international levels in their attempt to build a solid basis of knowledge, skills and argumentation in order to increase their political influence and social authority.

In the following essay I will relate to issues such as women's rights, women's empowerment, gender equality and justice within the Indonesian Islamic context. Suggesting that all of these issues revolve around one major body of ideas and activities, which can be subsumed under the term *Indonesian Islamic feminist activism*, I will proceed to assess the emergence, dynamics, central topics and concerns of this movement. As an alternative path among present Islamic currents, Islamic feminism presents a pioneering approach to combine Islamic principles with feminist ideas, ethics of gender equality and human rights. Given the social, economic and political changes in the region and the constant influx of ideas, from liberal to radical, Indonesian Islamic feminism is a creative response to restrictive regulations and discriminatory practices that impose a subordinate status on women. Based on the professional knowledge and autonomous reinterpretation of the Islamic sacred sources and on methodology deriving from social and gender studies, Indonesian Islamic feminism provides comprehensive tools to promote women's issues in Indonesia's public sphere. In combination with further civil activism, it represents a decisive move to enhance women's representation on both public and governmental level.

Beginning with some basic categories such as women's activism and empowerment in Indonesia's recent past, I shall proceed to explore more specific topics of gender equality and justice within the Indonesian Islamic feminist discourse. Further on, this account shall continue with a more vivid picture of Indonesian Islamic feminist activism by focusing on its pioneers and leading personalities, including the organizations they have founded. The information included in the following pages is based on the analysis of recent academic works and public resources on women and Islam in Indonesia.

1. Women's empowerment and the Indonesian context

“Poor fool,’ I hear you say, ‘if you will push all your might against the gigantic structure of ignorance, will you be able to over-turn it?’ But we will push, little Mother, with all our strength, and if only one stone of it falls out, we shall not have worked in vain.”

Raden Adjeng Kartini, early Indonesian feminist¹

Women's empowerment, a key issue in the struggle of Indonesian women's organizations, is closely linked to particular ways and strategies of women activists to deconstruct common gender relations and to revise existing gender hierarchies inside the Indonesian state. Women's empowerment depends largely on their political, social and economic independence and self-determination as well as on their active participation in the political and public spheres. Ever since Indonesian women became aware of existing gender hierarchies and discriminatory attitudes and predispositions not only within the larger socio-political and economic system but also within their most immediate surroundings, such as the family², the local community has become a main venue of women's activism.

1.1 *Priyayi* gender ideologies

In her letters to a friend in Holland, Kartini, an inspiring figure and a outstanding example for a forward-looking Javanese woman at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, expressed her wish to go beyond existing cultural restrictions, and to dedicate her enthusiasm to the work with and for women, but, in her own words, “[...] age-long traditions that cannot be broken hold us fast cloistered in their unyielding arms” (Kartini 2010, URL 1). The “age-long traditions” Kartini refers to are an expression of established norms and standards set by the Javanese aristocracy, infused with ideas of women's appropriate behavior, position within the family and within society: “[...] we Javanese women must first of all be gentle and submissive; we must be as clay which one can mould into any form that he wishes” (Kartini 2010, URL 1).

Women's physical and spiritual weakness, their submission to men, lack of power and self-control are, according to Doorn-Harder, prevailing stereotypes associated with *priyayi* (elite aristocratic class) culture that can still be observed in present popular culture and public discourse: “The perfect wife as portrayed in the media excels in silent, selfless surrender to her husband, which in turn results in a harmonious household” (Hatley 1997: 91, in Doorn-Harder 2006: 42). Yet, as Suzanne Brenner indicates, Indonesian women, by taking care of the family, managing the household, leading small businesses, and supporting their men, actively contribute to the family's economic wealth and social welfare (1998: 134-170). Moreover, through their essential role in running the financial affairs of the household – the domestic sphere, which is also considered to be an “intrinsically *political* domain” (Brenner 1998: 85) rather than private – actively shaped their own status and the one of their family (Brenner 1998: 166-170). However, they did not overtly challenge existing gender hierarchies; and as the Suharto regime (1966-1998) embarked on its mission to rearrange

¹ Kartini, R.A. Letters of a Javanese Princess: 1900. Gutenberg Project, see URL 1.

² One of the first Indonesian feminists to protest against practices which marginalized women was Raden Adjeng Kartini (1879-1904). Born and raised in an aristocratic Javanese family, the young woman became inspired by European literature and argued for the education and greater autonomy of women within the community, for further reference, see Kartini, R.A. 1912. *Door duisternis tot licht*. J.H Abendanon (ed.). Den Haag.

configurations of the nation, the local community and the family, Indonesian women became subjects of revisited *priyayi* gender ideologies (Brenner 1998: 236-241).

1.2 Recourse to religion

Alongside these conservative political developments during the Suharto era, promising dynamic movements toward the revision of prevailing gender roles and social hierarchies emerged from within the circles of Islamic associations and mass organizations. These refer to both Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, and their respective women's wings, 'Aysiyah and Muslimat NU, which have a long history in Indonesia going back to colonial times.

Muhammadiyah, one of the largest Muslim organizations in Indonesia was founded in 1912, addressing mainly the urban middle-classes with a strong Islamic identity. *Kyai*³ Haji Ahmad Dahlan, an Indonesian Islamic modernist and the founder of the organization, was committed to the idea of reforming the Islamic faith in Indonesia by stressing ideas of equality and justice, including in the realm of gender relations. Consequently, 'Aysiyah, the women's wing of Muhammadiyah, was founded in 1917 representing the oldest of Indonesia's Muslim women's organizations (Baried 1977). Since then autonomy, education and increasing independence have been the main driving forces for the development of new roles and ideals among Muslim women, which are closely related to the changing social and cultural realities of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Nahdlatul Ulama was founded in 1926, representing the interests of more traditional Islam and addressing mainly Muslims in the rural and small-town countryside of Java. Today it is the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, increasingly concerned with gender issues, human rights and the role of Islam in Indonesian society. Muslimat NU, the women's wing of Nahdlatul Ulama which was founded in 1946, did not have an unproblematic past of self-assertion and self-determination within its Islamic male-dominated circles.⁴ However, Indonesian Muslim women, through their direct work and engagement in local Muslim communities and through focusing on specific training and education, successfully challenged predominant perceptions concerning women's social position.

One strategy to reinforce women's empowerment is the reinterpretation of Islamic sacred sources, an approach thoroughly integrated within Islamic feminism that advocates women's rights within an Islamic framework. Islamic feminism, according to Doorn-Harder's analysis, poses a "new gender paradigm" (2006: 7), which "encompasses the work of Muslim scholars and leaders for whom Islamic teachings form the frame of reference for their discussions about women's rights and role in Islam" (2006: 8). Generally, Islamic feminism opposes oppressive Islamist emphasis of men's authority over women and its favor of an Islamic state based on the Shari'ah Law (Doorn-Harder 2006: 8). But despite common ideas of gender equality and social justice, we cannot speak of one explicit, consistent, and unequivocal conceptualization and representation of Islamic feminist ideas. In the Muslim world, opinions concerning the role of women and their position are as divergent as their frames of emergence and reference. In Indonesia, complementary roles between women and men (Doorn-Harder

³ A Javanese term for a person of profound knowledge in Islam and its sacred sources, often leading a *pesantren* (traditional religious boarding school); for further reference: Geertz, Clifford. 1960. The Javanese Kijaji: The Changing Role of a Cultural Broker. In: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2 (2), pp. 228-249.

⁴ Susan Blackburn's article *Indonesian Women and Political Islam*, in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39(1), (2008), pp. 83-105, provides a sound review over the foundation and development of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and its women's wing, Muslimat NU.

2006: 7-8, 129) and the role of women as reproductive agents (Sen 1998: 41) and bearers of the family have frequently been stressed instead of notions of equality. Gendered hierarchies and identities exist both in local Indonesian ideologies as well as within the structures of large Indonesian Muslim organizations and socio-political associations, and specific ideas on the status and role of women have been promoted by both religious authorities⁵ and the Indonesian government⁶. However, expert knowledge and interpretation of the Islamic sacred sources as well as professional education and training on Islamic issues have formed a firm basis for the contest and challenge of predominant gender identities and hierarchies, and for the promotion of a contemporary idea of Muslim women's empowerment.

1.3 Increasing knowledge and conflicting views

Indonesian Muslim women activists and women's rights advocates have effectively incorporated strategies of rereading the Qur'an and reinterpreting Islamic sources to sustain their ideas of gender equality and justice. Profiting from a large international network and knowledge exchange, Indonesian feminists have adhered to ideas promoted by prominent figures such as Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Mai Yamani, Shamima Shaikh⁷. Many of them also distanced themselves from the more fundamental and literal interpretations and implications of the Islamic Law, which are perceived as the product of a prevailing patriarchal hegemony. Definitely, Indonesia holds a large stock of Muslim intellectuals, including numerous women, as a result of the expansive Islamic education under Suharto's New Order (1966-98). As Kathryn Robinson draws from her research on Indonesian gender politics, many of these scholars actively protest against gender biased interpretations of the Islamic sources and argue for the "reconstruction of Islamic values and the eradication of patriarchal traditions that have taken root in Islamic thought and practice" (2009: 166).

Influenced by the global Islamic resurgence, in the 1970s and 1980s *political Islam*⁸ increasingly became an issue in various Muslim public organizations, associations and social networks (Robinson 2009: 165). Given the fact that there is no universal interpretation of Islam and regarding the great socio-linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity of Indonesia, the question of the role of religion in the political system of Indonesia is a highly complex issue, which shall not be analyzed in detail here. However, it shall be mentioned that Islam, as

⁵ One example constitutes the Majlis Tarjih, a leading institution at Muhammadiyah, which exercises *ijtihad*, i.e. interpretation of the basic Islamic texts (Doorn-Harder 2006: 73). By issuing official statements concerning women, such as on their freedom of movement, it actively contributed to the formulation of rules and principles concerning the role and status of Muslim women (Doorn-Harder 2006: 79).

⁶ For further reference, see Sen's discussion on the role of the two key governmental institutions, PKK and Dharmawanita, on the construction of women's social position during the Suharto regime (Sen 1998: 41-44).

⁷ These are some of the few names connected with the early emergence of the term *Islamic Feminism* within the Muslim world, for further reference, see Badran 2002, URL 2.

⁸ In its simplest definition, *political Islam* is a notion of political action on the basis of Islam. Susan Blackburn suggested an interpretation of political Islam as "referring to Islamic groups and individuals who take political action in the public arena on the basis of their religion" (Blackburn 2008: 84). However, the author differentiated between Islamic and Muslim Indonesians, using the former to denote Muslims who perceived Islam as a main aspect of their identity and the latter to refer to a general religious affiliation. Consequently, Blackburn suggests that "Islamic Indonesians are likely to be motivated to act politically in ways that they find compatible with their religion" (Blackburn 2008:84). Although it is not the main issue of this essay, it shall be stressed that the notion of *political* is, as Blackburn states, problematic in itself. When referring to women, their activity becomes political whenever they enter the debate concerning the interpretation of religious texts to challenge discriminatory beliefs and practices. Here I use *political Islam* as the idea of political activity of individuals or groups, for whom Islam poses a central aspect of their identity.

Robert Hefner (2000) convincingly showed, occupied a central position in the democracy-oriented developments in the late 20th century Indonesia. Muslim agents played key roles in the democracy movement, which emerged during the reformation period or *reformasi* and resulted in the overthrow of the Suharto regime in 1998. Yet, within the present Islamic politics there clearly remains a gender dimension that shall not be disregarded.⁹ There is an ongoing debate on the appropriate Islamic gender relations based on textual interpretations of the Islamic sacred sources, and women as possessors of detailed knowledge of the Islamic texts are active on both sides of the debate. On the one side, women linked to Islamic feminism act as proponents of hermeneutic interpretations that emphasize ideals of gender equality rooted in Qur'anic values. On the other side, there are women who advocate more literalist readings that argue for strict gender hierarchies. This picture is further complicated by dividing lines of class, religion and ethnicity.

In recent years, conflicting views¹⁰ on the role of women in the Indonesian society have been increasingly addressed by academic research within and outside Indonesia. A number of Indonesian Islamic feminist thinkers came to the forefront of the Islamic gender discourse, such as Lies Marcoes-Natsir, Lily Zakiyah Munir, Etin Anwar, Siti Musdah Mulia, and many others. Before relating to some of their criticism of prevailing gender hierarchies and to their main arguments for an explicit version of Indonesian Islamic feminism, let us focus on the concrete emergence and expansion of Islamic feminism in Indonesia.

1.4 The emergence of Islamic feminism in Indonesia

Islamic feminist activism can be perceived as an emancipatory project that emerged at the periphery of political Islam. Male-dominated religious organizations, in which women particularly had the greatest difficulty to articulate their ideas of empowerment and emancipation, represented at the same time a fertile ground, on which women could reorganize and claim status and power (Blackburn 2008: 88). Indonesian Muslim mass organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama, but also Muhammadiyah, adhered to profoundly conservative perceptions concerning the position of Muslim women, which is at best detached from the public sphere (Blackburn 2008: 88). Yet some well educated prominent women, in the function they received as teachers and preachers in local Muslim communities – which is in fact considered “a revolutionary step” (Doorn-Harder 2006: 79) toward women’s empowerment – obtained large knowledge in Islamic teaching and experience in public performance and argumentation (Blackburn 2008: 88, 90). Certainly, these additional qualifications and skills present an exceptionally positive result of a rather tense relationship between women’s associations and their respective Muslim organizations. To be allowed to preach in public and to teach to both women and men, and in the same time to depend on certain restrictions of movement and agency, is one of the conflicting stands Indonesian Muslim women faced in the assertion of their social and religious role in the beginning of their public commitment.

The end of the colonial period marked the beginning of increased political activity of Muslim women, mainly on behalf of nationalist endeavors.¹¹ Since independence women have been

⁹ For further reference, see Blackburn 2008: 83-84.

¹⁰ Conflicting ideas on the role of Muslim women in Islam include their perception as obedient, self-sufficient housewives, while stressing their importance as leaders of religion and society. For further reference, see Doorn-Harder 2006: 126.

¹¹ Susan Blackburn (2008: 90) convincingly argued that nationalist developments during the first half of the 20th century actively promoted and enforced the entry of Islamic women into the political arena: „Nationalists were

ever more active in the public and political spheres, through their active involvement in Islamic political parties and religious organizations¹², and through their enthusiastic engagement within the women's movement¹³. Yet after the fall of parliamentary democracy in the 1950s, the power of political Islam diminished, especially following some restrictive measures established by the Sukarno regime and later by his successor Suharto (Blackburn 2008: 94).¹⁴ In the late 1980s, however, due to increasing access to education and the rise of the middle class in economically prospering Indonesia, non-governmental women's associations were able to establish and develop new connections within and beyond national borders. Hence connectivity became a moving force and a key characteristic of the Indonesian Islamic women's activism. Young, well-educated middle class women mainly from the urban areas, involved in Islamic organizations and associations, such as *Nasyiatul 'Aisyiyah*, Muhammadiyah's young women's branch, or the Association for the Development of Islamic Boarding Schools and Society (Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat – P3M), a non-governmental organization set up by Nahdlatul Ulama, both dedicated to the promotion of democratic ideas and of women's rights, increasingly embraced the practice of women-friendly reinterpretation of the Islamic sacred sources.¹⁵ Thus, by the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, Islamic feminism has become a noteworthy issue in Indonesia's Islamic discourse both within and outside the academic and political sphere (Doorn-Harder 2006: 35-36).

Yet, not all Islamic women activists have willingly accepted the label of feminism, presuming its connection to *western*¹⁶ ideas of individualism and secularism (Adamson 2007: 7, 25, 27; Blackburn 2008: 101). However, this attitude does not affect their success in local public activities, nor the establishment of practical connections within international networks and non-governmental organizations (Blackburn 2008: 95).

In order to identify an explicit form of an Indonesian Islamic feminism, I shall refer to key aspects and topics constituent of the emerging Indonesian Islamic feminist discourse by discussing the following questions: What are local Indonesian understandings and interpretations of gender equality, feminist activism, and women's empowerment? How do Indonesian Islamic women address these topics within their local framework and how do they reach out beyond the state borders to engage with other feminists within the Islamic world? What are the consequences of increased connectivity and networking, and do they contribute to the improvement of women's status and position within their respective political and social arenas?

eager to mobilize women in support of their goal of independence, and to involve them in their political project of shaping the citizens of a modern nation.”

¹² Some of them are named by Susan Blackburn (2008: 85), such as Sarekat Islam (SI), Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia (PSII), and Persatuan Muslimin Indonesia (Permi).

¹³ Toward the end of the colonial period, the rising idea of an independent Indonesian nation-state had an increasing impact on the women's movement; for further reference, see Blackburn 2008: 88-90.

¹⁴ For further reference, see Blackburn, Susan 2004: Chapter 5.

¹⁵ According to Susan Blackburn, the practice of women-friendly reinterpretation of Islamic texts gained ground in Indonesia from the 1980s onward (Blackburn 2008: 95).

¹⁶ *Western*, here and elsewhere in the following text, signifies a corpus of ideas which supposedly derive from European and US-American secular ideologies. Among these ideologies are often negatively perceived notions of capitalism, secularism, individualism, and liberalism.

2. Indonesian Islamic Feminism

Particular to Indonesian Islamic women's activism and struggle is, as mentioned above, the notion of the community, a general definition inclusive of social relations between both women and men. Indonesian feminism, according to Doorn-Harder (2006: 37), is inclusive of religion, gender, and community. Hence, to be an Indonesian feminist involves both the promotion of women's rights, and the liberation of women and men. As Doorn-Harder indicates: „Indonesians use the terms ‘feminism’ and ‘activism’ to denote activities that work to improve the condition of women and men of all classes, strive for equality between sexes and classes, and engage in Islamic discourse with the goal of empowering women, men, and the suppressed” (2006: 37). Therefore, the shift from “women's rights” to “gender issues” represents both a precondition and a requirement to involve and address not only women but also men, stressing the relational aspect of gender and presenting women's rights' issues as a concern of the community (Adamson 2007: 7; Doorn-Harder 2006: 152-3). The reference to an explicit gender perspective presents an innovative approach often associated with the younger generation of Indonesian Islamic feminists and activists, such as members of *Nasyiatul 'Aisyiyah* (Doorn-Harder 2006: 153; Syamsiyatun 2006: 13-14), who draw their knowledge from the global agendas of gender studies (Doorn-Harder 2006: 153, 155). Siti Ruhaini, a member of *Nasyiatul 'Aisyiyah*, speaks about the organization's current endeavors: “We are now preparing material to teach our women about gender injustice in society. The women have to learn about their rights, such as in reproduction” (Doorn-Harder 2006: 153). Training and education indeed occupy a central position.

The term and issue of *gender* eventually entered into Indonesian official discourse in 1993, following its adaptation by the Ministry of Women's Affairs (Adamson 2007: 7). As a result, various women's organizations and women's rights activists demonstrated a strong willingness to debate on gender issues, showing increasing eloquence and argumentative skills (Blackburn 2008: 101). In the 1990s the movement reached a critical point representing one of several paradigms that shaped anxieties within Indonesia. As the term *gender*, an English definition linked to a feminist body of knowledge, is frequently perceived as an intruder to existing traditional analytical frameworks, such as *'Aisyiyah's* model of the harmonious family (Doorn-Harder 2006: 152), young Indonesian women activists are still concerned when introducing and applying this term both within their respective organizations and within a broader socio-political discourse.¹⁷ Prejudices on the side of older men, whose extended experience of traditional interpretation of the Islamic texts have shaped conservative ideas of men's authority over women, frequently pose an obstacle to the advancement of young Muslim women's ideas (Doorn-Harder 2006: 158). As Clarissa Adamson indicated (2007: 9), internal hierarchies can be very resistant, when arguments for the revision of gender relations are expressed through ideas of gender equality. Drawing on ethnographic material from her Muslim women's rights work in Central Java, Adamson examined various anxieties among women's rights advocates and activists in a period of growing activism and social change. As the author points out, *gender activists*¹⁸ in Indonesia insisted on a more inclusive form of the term *gender* emphasizing the relational aspect of discrimination against women and addressing both women and men in their struggle for gender equality and justice. According to these activists, women's rights represent not simply a women's issue but a

¹⁷ For further reference, see an interview with Siti Ruhaini, led by Siti Syamsiyatun in 2003, quoted in Syamsiyatun 2006: 14.

¹⁸ A self-definition of organizations and individuals promoting women's rights in Indonesia in the 1990s; for further reference, see Adamson 2007: 7.

social issue, favorable for both men and women.¹⁹ Imbedded in present political changes, economic crises and globalization, anxieties about social change and security become intimately connected to subjective anxieties about personhood and gender identity as well as to existing moral hierarchies and persisting gender roles in the Muslim community. As Adamson states, “the deeply relational aspect of gender roles, in which gendered beings knew their place and their place ensured security from the subjective to familial and national levels, meant that changing or challenging these roles opened a Pandora’s box of anxiety, uncertainty, and insecurity” (2007: 31). Ambivalent opinions concerning social change and reinterpretations of Islamic sacred sources were most visible at gatherings among young men and women students at the Islamic boarding schools, created in co-operation with gender activists in order to promote issues on women’s social and religious role.

Gender equality has become an issue that permeates the work of intellectuals and experts on a global scale. But the way gender equality is interpreted and the role it plays in Islamic movements and in reinterpretations of the Islamic sources varies widely. In Indonesia, equality between women and men is preserved in the constitution of 1945 (Doorn-Harder 2006: 16). Additionally the state has ratified some fundamental international conventions, such as the UN Convention on the Political Rights of Women and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).²⁰ However, women still remain underrepresented on the level of political decision-making positions and therefore have fewer possibilities to control political processes (Findeisen 2008: 2). The question of political empowerment has therefore preoccupied most of the Muslim and non-Muslim activists in Indonesia. CEDAW is regularly being employed as an internationally recognized instrument to address the issue of gender equality. This is clearly the case with the rejection of the *Fatwa Pasuruan* that states that it is *haram* (forbidden by faith) for a woman to become president.²¹ Both Fatayat NU and Nasyiatul ‘Aisyiyah, the progressive women’s groups within the two leading Indonesian Muslim mass organizations, reject interpretations of the Qur’an that argue against women in the political sphere. According to their interpretations “a woman is allowed to hold a leadership position, including that of president, as long as she meets the qualifications required by the post” (Arnez 2010: 81).²² In the case of the eligibility of women for the position of president, both Islam and CEDAW are perceived as legitimate, internationally recognized sources of universal principals for the benefit of women. In fact, the term “universal” has become a key aspect in the endorsement of Nasyiatul ‘Aisyiyah’s gender-based models of analysis. As a Nasyiatul ‘Aisyiyah member suggests: “When you discuss what is limited to your own group only, and not look at those outside you, it becomes problematic” (Abdullah, Amien in Doorn-Harder 2006: 158). Rather than an imposition the notion of universality becomes a principle and a positive ideal.

Thus, the struggle against the subordination of women is observed on a global scale. Yet, in Indonesia, it is the tendency to “domesticate” women that has shaped the ongoing discourse on women’s social and political position (Doorn-Harder 2006: 17). Indonesian women’s general attachment to the household and the family has put them into a marginal position with

¹⁹ For further reference, see Adamson, Clarissa. 2004. Globalization, Islam, and the Idea of ‘Woman’ in Post-New Order Java. Ph.D. thesis, The George Washington University: Washington, D.C.

²⁰ Indonesia ratified the convention in the year 1984, during the Suharto regime, not only as a matter of symbolical politics but also for the regime’s reliance on foreign donors requiring high “commitment to international rights’ agendas as a condition of funding” (Robinson 2009: 139). A list with the International Human Rights Conventions ratified by Indonesia can be found online: <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/research/ratification-indonesia.html>, accessed June 18, 2011.

²¹ On the assertion by the Indonesian Council of Islamic scholars that Megawati Sukarnoputri was not permitted to be president according to Islamic law, see Adamson 2007: 11.

²² For further reference, see also Arnez 2010: 59-88, and Syamsiyah 2006: 23.

regard to official political, social and economic affairs. Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, a prominent Indonesian legal specialist and feminist, points at widespread stereotypes in the current bureaucratic system of Indonesia that enforce subordinate images of women as housewives and mothers – roles predominantly associated with the domestic sphere.²³ Among the regulations that support such images are the rape law, which excludes married women, and the health and marriage laws, which define men as the head of the household and allow polygyny whenever a woman cannot fulfill her “duties” as wife.²⁴ Katjasungkana reasonably argues (2003: 63-68) that the 1974 marriage law among other legislations rather denotes than confronts the subordinate position of women. Furthermore she argues, that existing legislations “have created obstacles to women’s public roles” (2004: 157).²⁵ Siti Ruhaini is another prominent Indonesian Islamic feminist to criticize the “housewifeization” program” (Doorn-Harder 2006: 155) during the Suharto regime, which places women in an idealistic role of wives and mothers, who take care of the family and household, while awaiting for their men to increase the family’s economic wealth and social position.²⁶ Topics such as the reproductive role of women and the wellbeing of the family have repeatedly challenged religious public and political agendas, while issues such as marital rape and domestic violence have remained in the background. Until recently young members of Nasiyatul ‘Aisyiyah and Fatayat NU have rarely addressed these issues. Polygyny and abortion on the other hand present two topics that have spurred heated debates within Indonesian Islamic organizations, often ending in divided positions and irreconcilable views.²⁷ The ongoing discussion on the issue of polygyny is an example for the delay of national legislation that encourages the full protection and observation of women’s rights.

After this introduction into the context and main issues of Indonesian Islamic feminism, it is exciting to see how movement is upheld by women pioneers, leaders, and intellectuals in Indonesia. How does a gender paradigm transform into personal motivation and public agency? What are these women’s goals and expectations in their engagement with women’s rights and gender justice? How do they structure their arguments and how does gender affect their social position and their work?

2.1 Pioneers and leaders: the example of Lies Marcoes-Natsir

The focus on Indonesian women who oppose subordinating attitudes and practices leads us to the person of Lies Marcoes-Natsir. Marcoes-Natsir is an Indonesian feminist who has dedicated most of her work on Muslim women and their emancipation in Indonesia. With her extensive knowledge of and ambitious engagement with Muslim women’s issues, she represents one of several Indonesian feminist scholars who have productively contributed to the Indonesian women’s movement. Together with Farha Ciciek Assegaf, the leader of the

²³ Katjasungkana points at the ambiguity of the Marriage Law of 1974, which, despite granting some equal rights to both women and men (as in the case of divorce), is still dominated by patriarchal values. For further reference, see Katjasungkana 2004: 157.

²⁴ For further reference, see Bhaiya, Wieringa 2007, URL 3.

²⁵ Katjasungkana (2004: 157) refers to regulations made by the Minister of Labor and the Minister of Finance, such as the rule that “only men receive family benefits while working women are defined as single”, or “only the head of household is entitled to a tax identity number”, which makes it almost impossible for married women, who are not considered head of the household, to obtain a bank credit and conduct a business.

²⁶ As Ruhaini accurately indicates, “this is not the realistic model, but the model taken from the colonial *priyayi* class; [...] In Java, the non-*priyayi* women worked as farmers, batik sellers, and merchants. They were independent [...]; they controlled the money” (Doorn-Harder 2006: 155). For further reference, see also Brenner 1998: 72-86.

²⁷ For further reference, see Arnez 2010, with emphasis on pages 82-86.

Muslim NGO Rahima, she was one of the pioneers of the gender discourse in the 1980s (Blackburn 2011, URL 4). As Blackburn recognized, she has been instrumental for the creation of a discursive space for feminist interpretations both within and outside Indonesian women's rights organizations.²⁸

Inside Indonesia, a quarterly online journal providing a detailed image of Indonesia, has currently published several essays and contributions on the topic of women and Islam (URL 6). Within its pages a short but noteworthy contribution on the life and activism of Lies Marcoes-Natsir has been submitted by Clare Harvey (2011), a program officer at The Asia Foundation, a non-governmental organization in the region of Asia and the Pacific, with which Marcoes-Natsir is currently collaborating. The essay highlights the contributions made by this exceptional woman toward gender mainstreaming, gender-sensitivity and the understanding of gender equality (Harvey 2011, URL 5).

Born and raised in a small town in rural West Java, Marcoes was one of the young Muslim women who profited from the improvement of the educational system during the Suharto regime and had the opportunity to study at the State Islamic Institute in Jakarta.²⁹ The years spent at university were decisive for her increasing interest in pioneering perspectives within both Islam and secular social sciences. During that time Marcoes got involved with social research organizations, student associations and intellectual circles. Islamic as well as social sciences became instrumental in her work and training. Through her enthusiastic commitment to women's issues, she became acquainted with prominent feminist activists and continued to work with them on several occasions. Gradually Marcoes became familiar with feminist theory, ideas and practices. Ever since she grew aware of the constant gender bias permeating all spheres of social life, she devoted her work to the development and provision of training and seminars on contemporary gender issues and gender sensitivity. Marcoes gave her first workshop on gender and Islam in Indonesia in the year 1992 (Doorn-Harder 2006: 35). The success of her workshops has soundly contributed to her reputation as a gender adviser to numerous non-governmental organizations.

Linking gender issues with Islam is more than a strategic move in connecting *western* feminist ideas with Muslim values. The development of elaborate argumentation within Islamic circles promoting women's rights and gender equality is a central path in addressing the needs and concerns of the Indonesian Muslim community. Together with Kyai Hussein Muhammad, a recognized Islamic leader and religious scholar, Marcoes provided training workshops on gender equality and reproductive health in Islamic schools and local communities. The gender-sensitive methodology of interpreting the Qur'an developed by Kyai Hussein has become instrumental for changing the attitudes of Indonesian Muslim scholars concerning the status of women in Islam. At present, both Lies Marcoes and Hussein Muhammad are members of the Board of Directors of the International Centre for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), an organization combining Islamic principles with ideas of pluralism.³⁰

Lies Marcoes is an inspiring and encouraging voice within Indonesian Islamic feminism. As one of the founders of the Muslim non-governmental organization Rahima, she has dedicated her life to women's empowerment and to the promotion of women's rights within Islam. Internationally renowned, Marcoes has successfully contributed to the re-orientation of

²⁸ For further reference, see Blackburn 2011, URL 4 and Harvey 2011, URL 5.

²⁹ The following two paragraphs depict the highlights of Lies Marcoes-Natsir's life and activism. The information given represents an abstract of Clare Harvey's *Living Islam* (2011).

³⁰ ICIP considers itself a "civil society organization" aimed at the promotion of a "democratic, pluralist, tolerant Islam"; for further reference, see ICIP's homepage, URL 7.

Indonesian Islamic intellectuals and scholars toward gender mainstreaming and gender sensitivity. She has paved the ground for an ongoing gender debate that still permeates issues of women's empowerment and is constantly present in the struggle against gender biased discriminatory perceptions and representations.

2.2 Public activism

Rahima, an active member of ICIP's NGO network, is an example of a pluralist, progressive organization in Indonesia that offers information and training on women's issues and Islam to a large spectrum of the Indonesian society (Blackburn 2008: 101). The organization and its activities put effort in representing and promoting liberal and pluralist views within Islam, including ideas of gender equality and justice, while focusing on issues previously disregarded.³¹ Rachel Rinaldo has carried out extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Jakarta focusing on Muslim women activists and non-governmental organizations, such as Rahima. Her PhD dissertation (2007) elaborates on the mobilization of piety among Muslim women in the public sphere. She convincingly puts forward the argument that religiosity and Islamic piety are not considered to be simply personal characteristics among Muslim women in Indonesia, but are actively mobilized in the form of political action and participation in the public sphere. In an essay on Islamic piety and women's activism in Indonesia Rinaldo (2008) gives a detailed account on Rahima and its public activities.³² According to her analysis, through religious piety within public activism Rahima's leaders seek not just to reform religious orientations but the Indonesian society as a whole. Gender equality and justice constitute important factors and key aspects of Rahima's work and political and social involvement. Rahima, like many other NGO's concerned with women's rights and empowerment, have recognized the importance of working on a community level and provide intensive training on gender equality in Indonesia's traditional Islamic boarding schools.

Rahima presents an example for how personal practices, behavior and attitudes can become practical tools to raise social awareness and develop a political stance on issues previously considered a matter of ethics and personal morality.³³ For these women activists feminist ideas and Islam do not contradict each other. On the other hand, as a member of Rahima indicates, "a truly pious Muslim is one who works to achieve gender equality and human rights" (Rinaldo 2008: 5-6), two aspects intimately linked to feminism and feminist activism. Another of Rahima's members expresses her perception of Islamic feminism in the following way: "In relation to feminism, Islam teaches us to respect women and to never deny their rights, and so it is in line with feminist values" (Rinaldo 2008: 4). Religious and social piety, which is ultimately linked to social justice and equality, gives women a voice and grants legitimacy to their revised position.³⁴ Religious awareness, knowledge and practice provide

³¹ Issues include Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Adolescent Reproductive Health (ARH), issues related to the concept of *Mahram* (a male guardian who accompanies women when travelling), women as migrant workers, domestic violence, rape, incest, etc.; for a broader review of current issues, discourses, and reflections, see Rahima's homepage, URL 8.

³² For further reference, see also Rinaldo 2010.

³³ The current debate on *jilbabisasi*, the legal imposition on women to wear a *jilbab* (headscarf), presents one case in which a sign of religious devotion becomes an example of "publicly enforced morality". According to Rinaldo, members of Rahima oppose these legal efforts, stating that personal and social piety rather than specific clothing stands at the centre of religious devotion. For further reference, see Rinaldo 2008: 4-6.

³⁴ In order to promote women's rights in Islam, Rahima stresses the necessity of gender-sensitive interpretations of the Islamic sacred sources. In their advocacy Rahima activists focus "on the spirit of Islam" (Rinaldo 2008: 4) – a "substantive approach" toward religion. This approach allows to be pious and practice politics, thus piety becomes visible in public activism. As follows, the public aspect of social justice transforms personal piety in a

women with access to essential issues within Islam. Thus, the way these women position themselves within the larger context of the Indonesian Muslim society reinforces their potential to promote gender equality and human rights.

Members of Rahima have been subjected to the influence of both the Islamic movement and the educational proliferation of the last decades (Rinaldo 2008: 11-14). These Indonesian women activists were both embedded in Islamic institutions since childhood, and therefore acquainted with Islamic teaching, and obtained a proliferated university education as well as a professional training. These two factors became more than crucial for women when they decided to challenge lingering discriminatory perceptions and beliefs and to eagerly pursue their goals of gender equality and justice.

2.3 Research, Advocacy and Commitment

When it comes to the legal implication of Indonesian Islamic feminism, Nursyahbani Katjasungkana represents a leading figure. A recognized Muslim feminist lawyer, she introduced the concept of gender sensitive transformative legal aid (Wieringa 2009, URL 10).³⁵ Her life experience and extensive legal work with young women and teenagers have shaped her perceptions on women's sexuality, gender roles and sexual violence. She eventually became aware of subordinating, discriminatory and oppressive aspects that permeate social practices against women's agency and self-determination. For Katjasungkana, witnessing young girls undergoing female genital mutilation, which is practiced among some Muslim communities in Indonesia, was a revealing experience "of seeing female sexuality shaped by a social construct and women perceived merely as sexual creatures" (Katjasungkana, in Sabarini 2010, URL 9).

Katjasungkana has recognized the growing necessity for a change toward gender sensitivity and gender equality, which shall take place not only within the family and the local community, but further challenge discriminatory social perceptions and predispositions on a higher governmental policy level. Thus, she suggests an active collaboration between researchers and activists in the elaboration and implication of policy advocacy.³⁶ Although this kind of cooperation is partly reality in the case of Indonesia, as in many other parts of the Muslim world, as long as a comprehensive and gender-sensitive legislation is not introduced on a governmental level, gender equality will remain a "well-meant" endeavor confined within the "good intentions" of state officials.

Katjasungkana is a co-founder of the Indonesian Women Association for Justice and Legal Aid and was the first secretary general of Indonesia Women's Coalition for Justice and Democracy. As a member of the Indonesian People's Consultative Assembly, Katjasungkana has committed herself to an active involvement in central issues within Indonesia's public and political sphere. As a lawyer and a trainer she enjoys the access to a large network of scholars, human rights activists, members of parliament and leaders of international legal organizations. As a coordinator of Kartini Asia, a gender and women studies network, she is committed to women's rights advocacy and legal consultancy. Her endeavor in raising gender awareness

social matter. Therefore, "social piety" in the words of Rahima activists, becomes a central aspect of their activism as Muslim women.

³⁵ For further reference, see Katjasungkana 2003.

³⁶ The Indonesian Women's Association for Justice and Legal Aid Institute, an Indonesian non-governmental organization, which was founded in 1995 by Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, relies on a combination of legal aid, research and advocacy to promote women's rights and enhance gender equality.

and sensitivity and building a movement on sexual rights in Indonesia by combining academic research and civil activism and by initiating a dialogue between national and international scholars, activists and policy makers is widely acknowledged by civil society groups. Katjasungkana continually points at restrictive legal regulations, at lacks and ambiguities in existing laws, at the insufficiency of legal resources and at other institutional barriers to women's empowerment.³⁷ Yet she is only one among many women – Indonesian Islamic feminists, secular activists, intellectuals, civil servants and Islamic experts – who struggle not only to enhance the political debate on women's role and position, but to obtain better strategic positions in Indonesia's public and political sphere, i.e. to better counter discrimination and promote women's rights, gender equality and social justice.

3. Conclusion

Considering what has been said so far in this discussion of Indonesian Islamic feminist activism, the issues concerning women social position and status in Indonesia largely differ from oppressive conditions and practices relevant in other parts of the Muslim world. As repeatedly indicated, Indonesian Muslim feminists' activism focuses on strategies to promote gender sensitivity and induce awareness of existing gender bias as well as on ideas of gender equality and social justice. Enduring stereotypical perceptions imposing a subordinate role and status on Indonesian women, prior taboo subjects such as domestic violence and sexuality, but also the practice of polygyny and female circumcision are among the most vigorously debated topics within Muslim women organizations in Indonesia. While issues facing women are prominent within the public sphere and within a large number of civil organizations, and while many Indonesian Muslim feminists are renowned for their active engagement in the promotion and protection of women's rights, Indonesian women's struggle against discriminating laws, fundamentalist Islamic movements and Indonesian traditional practices continues to be highly relevant.

Gender equality forms the central theme that permeates and binds the work and ideas of Indonesian women activists and women's rights advocates. Through their engagement with social equality and justice they consciously and meticulously create a discursive space for women's issues, in order to articulate their pioneering concepts and ideas of gender sensitivity. Their inspiration ranges from religious piety within public activism to the active collaboration between researches and women's rights activists. Gender sensitive transformative legal aid is one of the appealing concepts, which still faces restrictions within existing legal regulations. Other activities include the large number of seminars and workshops provided to local communities and Islamic boarding schools in order to raise gender awareness and promote gender mainstreaming as well as the provision of information on women's issues and legal consultancy. However, as long as Indonesian women still depend on the authority and support of men in order to implement their ideas within a men-dominated political arena, their main sphere of activism remains the local community within the scope of grassroots politics, training and education. The impact of this form of activism is not strictly limited to the premises of the local community, but reaches far beyond its precincts to construct and deconstruct existing social perceptions and motivations. It is a sensitive bottom-up approach, through which roles and social positions are directly challenged and transformed.

³⁷ For further reference, see Katjasungkana 2008.

As the basis of their knowledge and as the field of their actions Islam plays a fundamental role in Muslim feminist's activism and represents a key element in Indonesian Muslim women's empowerment. Hence, religious awareness, piety and commitment to Islam do not disagree with democratic and feminist ideas on gender equality and social justice. Islamic feminists emphasize a sound combination between Islamic principles and core values deriving from global discourses on human rights. The relationship between political, social and economic change in Indonesia and the constant influx of new democratic values and Islamic ideas has shaped women's position and agency. Considering shifting local and global contexts, the collaboration between Islamic feminist activists, research groups, civil institutions and governmental bodies has been stressed upon, and ever new creative strategies and agendas are developed to address the discriminatory practices, restrictive regulations, selective laws and deficiencies which can still be encountered in today's Indonesia.

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