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## THE ROLE OF WOMEN ULAMA IN GENDER FAIR EDUCATION IN ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS

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**Abstract:** *Di kalangan para ulama, istilah gender masih sangat asing. Kesan pertama yang mereka tangkap tentang gender adalah istilah asing dan kebarat-baratan. Sebagian ulama bahkan mencurigai gerakan gender dan feminisme sebagai ideologi barat, orientalis yang bisa menghancurkan syariah Islam. Sejumlah aktivis perempuan mencari padanan istilah gender dalam bahasa Arab atau bahasa Indonesia, namun belum berhasil menemukan dan mengubah pandangan ulama yang apriori menjadi lebih simpatik. Kondisi ini dipicu oleh kesalahan yang dilakukan oleh kalangan feminis sekuler era 80-an. Mereka secara pukul rata menyalahkan agama sebagai salah satu penyebab ketertindasan perempuan. Sedangkan mereka tidak mempunyai argumentasi yang kuat dari sisi agama untuk mendukung pandangannya. Penelitian ini mencoba melihat peran ulama dalam membongkar pandangan ulama yang misoginis, sekaligus upaya ulama perempuan untuk merebut tafsir dan membangun pendidikan berbasis adil gender di pondok pesantren. Melalui metode penelitian library research penelitian ini ingin menunjukkan bahwa peran ulama perempuan berperan dalam membalikkan pandangan patriarki dan misoginis di kalangan pesantren sangat signifikan. Penelitian ini juga menyoroti berbagai upaya yang dilakukan ulama perempuan untuk mendobrak dominasi ulama laki-laki, merebut tafsir dan membangun pendidikan yang adil gender di kalangan pesantren. Hasil penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan kontribusi bagi pengembangan kebijakan pendidikan yang inklusif dan berkeadilan gender di masyarakat pada umumnya, dan di pondok pesantren pada khususnya.*

**Keyword:** *Gender; Patriarki; Misoginis; Ulama Perempuan; Pendidikan Adil Gender; Pondok Pesantren*

## INTRODUCTION

As human beings, men and women are blessed with reason, so that they can contribute in producing ideas, works of art, morals and laws in social life. The way society views the differences between men and women is still an interesting theme to discuss from the past to the present. In the Jahiliyah era, girls were a disgrace to their families. So there is a story where a father buried his daughter alive out of shame and did not want her to be born. It was part of the past history that marginalized women in social life.

Islam, brought by the Prophet Muhammad, strictly prohibits this tradition. Islam views that the position of women and men are equal as servants of Allah Swt. Men and women are equal in the eyes of Allah, they have the same rights and obligations in worship and good deeds. Both men and women can work together in the domestic and public spheres, including taking a role in the social life of the community. One proof that Islam honors women can be seen in Allah's words in Surah al-Hujurat verse 13 as follows:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَىٰكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

*Meaning: "O people, We have created you from a male and a female. Then, We made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, among you the noblest in the sight of Allah is the most pious. Verily, Allah is the All-Knowing and the All-Absorbing."*

In fact, women often have less opportunity to take part in social life than men. This is due to gender injustice in society which manifests itself in the form of marginalization or impoverishment of women, subordination or underestimation of women, violence, even discrimination and women's double burden. Why is there gender injustice?

The term gender is a distinction of roles between men and women as a result of socio-cultural construction. It refers to *masculinity* and *femininity* that are influenced by culture, symbols, stereotypes, and self-recognition. Gender is the social construction of the roles of men and women as demanded by society and performed by each. Gender is related to the division of roles, positions and duties between men and women that are considered appropriate for men and women according to the norms, customs, beliefs and habits of society. Basically, the discussion about gender refers to men and women, but in reality the focus of the conversation is more on women because women have long been marginalized in the history and culture of society.

Gender injustice occurs because of the differentiation of gender roles that are formed, socialized, reinforced, and even socially or culturally constructed through religious teachings and the state. Because it is passed down from one generation to the next centuries ago, gender distinctions are considered as God's provisions. When social constructions are lived as God's provisions and something that should not be changed because it is considered natural and natural, gender ideology is formed. This is the root of gender inequality and injustice.

## TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

### 1. Patriarchal Culture and Misogynistic Views

Gender-biased roles and views stem from a patriarchal culture that tends to favor men over women. According to Riffat Hassan, negative ideas and attitudes towards women in Muslim societies are generally rooted in theological understanding. Although there have been improvements in women's educational, occupational and socio-political rights, women are still treated harshly and discriminatively if the theological foundations that give birth to misogynistic tendencies in the Islamic tradition are not dismantled.

Misogynistic tendencies are not only in the Islamic tradition, but also in the Jewish and Christian traditions. According to Riffat Hasan in her study, there are three theological assumptions that form the basis of male superiority over women. *First*, men are the primary creation of God because women come from Adam's rib, so ontologically women are derivative and secondary. *Secondly*, women are the cause of man's 'fall' from heaven, therefore all women should be viewed with hatred, suspicion and disgust. *Third*, women were created not only from men but also for men.<sup>1</sup>

Based on the above opinions, the inequality of gender relations in society, especially Muslims, is caused by two factors, namely internal and external factors. Internally, Muslims have not been separated from gender-biased understanding. While externally there are global socio-political and economic factors that are characterized by patriarchy. There are many possible contributing factors to the oppression and subordination of women in the history of patriarchy that has been deeply rooted and influential in religious interpretation.

Patriarchal culture always brings oppression and gender injustice. Patriarchy is a social system that recognizes men as the primary and dominating power holders in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social rights and control over property. In the family, the father has authority over women, children and property. Some patriarchal societies are patrilineal, meaning that property and titles are inherited from male descendants. Thus, the patriarchal system institutionalizes male rule and privileges and places women under men.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. Sexual Violence Cases in Islamic Boarding Schools

Islamic boarding schools have long been an institution that contributes to educating the nation and is a sub-culture of Indonesian society. The number of pesantren and the number of students in each pesantren make the role of pesantren an institution that deserves to be taken into account, especially in moral education. In its development, pesantren make continuous improvements and improvements, both in terms of management, academics (curriculum) and facilities. So that the conservative and traditional impression that has been carried by boarding schools is slowly changing. Some pesantrens have even become models of *leading* educational institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the position of women in society, the perspective that develops in the life of Islamic boarding schools is also interesting to examine. Given that recently, there have been many cases of sexual violence in educational institutions, including in Islamic boarding schools, that have surfaced to the public. Data from the National Commission on Violence against Women (Komnas Perempuan) in 2020 showed that sexual violence in the educational environment amounted to 27% at the college or university level, 19% at the boarding school or religious institution level, 15% at the high school or vocational high school level, 7% at the junior high school level and 3% at the elementary school, kindergarten, special school and Christian-based education level.

<sup>1</sup> Riffat Hassan, *The Issue of Male-Female Equality in Islam, in Equal before God*, ed. LSPPA Team. (ed) (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Prakarsa, 1995), 43-44.

<sup>2</sup> Siti Rahmah, *et al.*, "Paper at the World Conference on Gender Studies (WCGS), Patriarchal Oppression in Kim Ji-Yeong, Born 1982 By Cho Nam Joo: A Feminist Literary Study. Accessed on 07/15/2025 at 10.44 WIB, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Hambali, "Gender Fair Education in Islamic Boarding Schools (Study on Building Gender Awareness in Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School Paiton Probolinggo)", in *Journal of Pedagogics* Vol. 04 No. 02, July-December 2017, 2017.

Based on this data, it can be seen that sexual violence in the pesantren environment is ranked 2nd. This means that even religious-based educational institutions cannot guarantee the safety of their students. Sexual violence is not a case that can be considered light or trivial because the victim has the courage to speak up let alone report it to the authorities. These cases are still rarely revealed for various reasons such as being considered to worsen the image of the madrasa, fear of being considered dirty, maintaining the dignity and honor of the family, and many more.

### 3. Female Ulama

Clerics as central figures in society often become role models. Their words are heard, their behavior is imitated and they are expected to answer the challenges of changing times, especially religious issues. The clerics should welcome the challenges of changing times by providing solutions to the problems faced by the community without losing their critical attitude.

In the view of Indonesian society, the word ulama is synonymous with saints, religious experts and men. Whereas in history, women are able to take part like a scholar, for example: Siti Aisyah r.a, (the Prophet's wife) in narrating hadith, Khadijah who played an important role in the early days of the Prophet's preaching, Sumayyah Ummu Ammar, a woman who was martyred for defending her faith, and others.

The position of women in Muslim society, especially in Indonesia, cannot be understood without a thorough appreciation of the context in which they live. The existence of women to be called ulama in society is influenced by various factors, such as: cultural, social, political and religious that have created differences in the perception of women ulama. On the other hand, the figure of a female ulama is difficult to find due to the scarcity of written historical sources that write about the role of female ulama. Even if there are, their history is only found in *oral history*.

In the 19th century, there were many Indonesian female scholars who proved their abilities. By historians, women scholars are divided into several categories. *First*, scholars of socio-religious organizations such as Nyai Ahmad Dahlan who founded Aisyiyah (Muhammadiyah women's organization), Sholihah Wahid Hasyim active in Muslimat and Fatayat, Tutty Alawiyah, Hadiyah Salim and Surayani Thahir. *Second*, the category of pesantren scholars such as Hj Chammah and Hj Nonoh Hasanah. *Third*, socio-political activist ulama such as Hj Rangkayo Rasuna Said, Baroroh Baried, Sinta Nuriyah Wahid, and Aisyah Amini. *Fourth*, the category of educational scholars such as Rahmah El-Yunusiyah, Mrs. Nyai Khoiriyah and Zakiah Daradjat.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses the *Library Research* method, which is an approach to collecting, analyzing, and interpreting existing data from various written sources, both from books, scientific journals, articles, research reports, documents and other publication materials. This method is very useful for gaining an in-depth understanding of the topic under study without being directly involved with respondents or research objects.

This research uses primary sources from books, scientific journals, theses, dissertations, and research articles that focus on the topic of the role of female scholars in gender equitable education in Islamic boarding schools. Meanwhile, secondary sources are taken from literature reviews, reference books, research reports, and articles that review previous research. From the existing data, researchers analyze, review and dig deeper into the key findings. Furthermore, researchers conducted a literature synthesis by combining relevant findings to get a comprehensive picture of the role of ulama in gender equality education in Islamic boarding schools.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. The Role of Female Ulama

The existence of female scholars should not be in doubt. However, the number of female scholars is arguably smaller than the number of male scholars. Moreover, their popularity is clearly far less than that of male scholars. Even Ibn Hajj, an Egyptian scholar and biographer, argues that female scholars generally have lower quality than men. The opportunity for women to explore religious knowledge in depth is often hindered by various problems. The specificity of female scholars is related to their struggle against 'patriarchy'.

In addition, female scholars face multiple challenges. On the one hand, women ulama must complete the book to become 'ulama', but on the other hand, they must fight for their rights, such as the story of Hajjah Sua from Pesantren Cipasung who refused to be married by the big kyai in the area. Many Mrs. Nyai are giddy and silent when facing the issue of domestic violence. Even in history, we know that the Prophet's great-granddaughter once filed a case against her polygamous husband. Patriarchal culture often considers women unworthy of higher education because they have to take care of domestic affairs. Limited access to education, which causes women's religious knowledge to be less extensive than men's, also legitimizes the injustice experienced by women. Another inhibiting factor is religious interpretation that legitimizes injustice against women. The conservative and patriarchal perspective can still be seen in the views of Al-Nawawi, a prominent scholar from Banten in his book *Uqud Al-Lujjain*, which teaches that women's place is at home, their main task is to give birth to children, take care of the household, and serve their husbands.<sup>4</sup>

The patriarchal system in pesantren refers to male dominance in power structures and hierarchies. Where men have more power, control and privilege than women. This affects decision-making, participation, leadership and management of pesantren. Patriarchal culture places women as 'other'. In the pesantren tradition, the inheritance of leadership is often passed down to sons, because women are considered incapable of leading and are weak, emotional and illogical. This fact shows how male dominance and pesantren leadership have been assimilated into a custom or culture that is institutionalized in the social life of the institution.<sup>5</sup> In addition to patriarchal culture, the phenomenon of polygamy thrives in pesantren. Polygamy is considered part of the tradition of legitimate religious teachings, providing opportunities for men to form large families and strengthen social networks. Proponents of polygamy often quote religious texts and argue that polygamy is a solution to social problems. On the other hand, polygamy causes women's economic instability or gender imbalance in society.<sup>6</sup>

This very patriarchal and misogynistic perspective is certainly very detrimental to women in general, especially female scholars. Efforts to fight patriarchy emerged with the birth of the feminism movement. In its development, this movement provides opportunities for equality between men and women. The 'seizing tafsir' movement emerged, which was led by female scholars with a gender perspective. Women scholars have become an important force in opposing patriarchal culture in pesantren. Not only in leading, guiding and educating santri, but also active roles in various aspects of pesantren and community life. Through their various roles as lecturers, teachers, deans, and leaders. Women clerics bring changes not only in religious understanding, but also in daily life.

<sup>4</sup> Read Syech Muhammad Nawawi al Bantani, *Uqud al Lujjain*, (Surabaya: Salim bin Nabhan, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> Fitri Pebrianyah., *et.al*, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Rifdah "Rifdah, Polygamy Trends in Social Media from the Perspective of Gender Equality", dalam *Mizan: Journal of Islamic Law* 6 (3), 2022.

The feminism movement and the Congress of Indonesian Women Ulema (KUPI)<sup>7</sup> became the foundation for resistance to various gender discrimination and fought for the recognition of women's roles widely. Along with the emergence of feminist values in pesantren, the patriarchal culture gradually began to shift.

## 2. Gender Fair Education Strategy in Islamic Boarding Schools

Religious ideals that teach the value of humanity and equality are often not found in reality. According to Muhtador, this reality is due to the fact that some religious teachings, especially hadiths, narrate women as *second created*. The ease of finding misogynistic hadiths in primary books is a way to strengthen the position of men while placing women as weak creatures who have no potential. Therefore, religion has the potential and role in legalizing patriarchal culture. This situation is exacerbated by the dominance of men in understanding religious teachings. This reality has long developed and occupied an established position, so it has an impact on women. In this position, religion no longer provides solutions to humanitarian problems but instead becomes a prison for women. Riffat Hasan considers it important to criticize gender-biased traditions. This is where the important role of scholars, especially female scholars, is to reread misogynistic hadiths with gender readings. The goal is to remove the barriers of difference and initiate a new understanding of religion on gender relations.

According to KH. Husein Muhammad<sup>8</sup>, the term gender among scholars is still very unfamiliar. On average, they are still a priori towards the term gender, which according to them is the language of westerners. Some ulama even suspect that the gender movement or feminism is an attempt to incorporate western, orientalist ideology that can destroy Islam. Therefore, a number of women activists tried to find an acceptable equivalent of the term gender in Indonesian. However, they could not find one. Gender cannot be synonymized with '*al-jins*', type or *genus*. Contemporary Arabic books use the word gender, sometimes by adding al in front of it, to become '*al-gender*'.

In KH Husein Muhammad's experience socializing the issue of gender equality, it is not uncommon to get misunderstandings or suspicions, such as: the deconstruction of religion, the movement of wives against husbands, or the suspicion that men must become women or vice versa. Because of these suspicions and misunderstandings, they often reject with a cynical tone. According to them, the idea of equalizing men and women is an idea that destroys the order of society and religion. This problem was actually also triggered by the unpreparedness of secular feminists in the 80s who promoted gender justice by blaming religion as one of the causes of women's oppression.

Breakthroughs began to be made by several Muslim activists who entered the world of pesantren through advocacy programs for women's reproductive rights in Islam. Masdar F. Mas'udi, Lies Marcoes Natsir were the first to introduce this discourse among santri and kyai. Abdurrahman Wahid said that the success of the development of gender issues in Indonesia is due to the success in domesticating (read: grounding) gender issues into the Islamic style in Indonesia.

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<sup>7</sup> The first Indonesian Women Ulema Congress (KUPI) took place at Pondok Pesantren Kebon Jambu, CIwaringin, Cirebon on April 24-27, 2017. This congress was attended by more than 700 people from various backgrounds, even attended by participants from 16 countries from Asia, Africa, and America.

<sup>8</sup> Hussein Muhammad, "Women Ulama on the Stage of History", (Yogyakarta: tp, 2020).

### 3. The Role of the Nyai in the Pesantren

Women clerics play an important role in teaching and practicing gender equality, rejecting patriarchal culture and showing that pesantren can be managed with the principles of justice and equality. The rejection of polygamy by female ulama is a concrete step in responding to and negotiating the patriarchal culture in pesantren, forming a new view that is fair and equal, and bringing positive changes in the socio-cultural structure of pesantren towards a just and equal society.

There are several female ulama who fight against the patriarchal culture that spreads within the pesantren and society. For example: Mrs. Nyai Nuriyah, a woman cleric from Lasem, Rembang, Central Java who was respected by the community in her day. She was the wife of the great cleric who founded Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), KH Ma'shoem Ahmad. Bu Nyai was concerned about the poverty of the community due to colonization. At that time there were not many women who studied outside the home so she pioneered learning for women for the first time by establishing Pondok al-Hidayat Putri. Mrs. Nyai Nuriyah was dubbed a *waliyullah* by the local community because she specialized in the study of the Qur'an and her prayers were effective.

In addition, there is Mrs. Nyai Mulazaimah at Rodlotul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School as a teacher of gendered tafsir. Nyai Mulazaimah teaches tafsir books such as *Tafsir Al-Misbah* and *Tafsir Jalalain*. Mrs. Nyai's teaching method in explaining the verse on polygamy is different from the teaching of male scholars in general. According to Mrs. Nyai, polygamy is allowed on the condition that it must be fair, but however polygamy is unfair to women. The alumni of the Jakarta Institute of Quranic Sciences also teaches the importance of gender equality in Islamic boarding schools. The teaching pattern uses classical recitation such as *bandongan* so that students can understand the meaning of tafsir related to gender bias.

## CONCLUSION

Efforts to socialize the idea of gender equality and justice based on pesantren eventually reaped optimal results. This can be seen from the number of ulama, especially female ulama from pesantren, who understand gender issues well. Some are even more advanced by carrying out concrete actions or movements to defend women. The success was influenced by three things.

*First*, the delivery of gender discourse begins with empirical facts and social realities that cannot be denied, relating to injustice against women within the Muslim community itself. *Second*, the ability of Muslim women activists to critically analyze religious discourses, especially those concerning women's issues contained in the reference literature of classical scholars through their traditional approach. They answer the arguments of classical books (*kitab kuning*) with classical books as well. As well as seriously finding religious texts that support justice for women from various literatures. That is, finding counter-texts that favor and then offering them as solutions. *Third*, people increasingly realize that human rights and democracy are the main messages of religion.

In addition to these three factors, there are still many things that support, for example, *gender mainstreaming* programs by the government and a number of other legal instruments, both national and international.

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