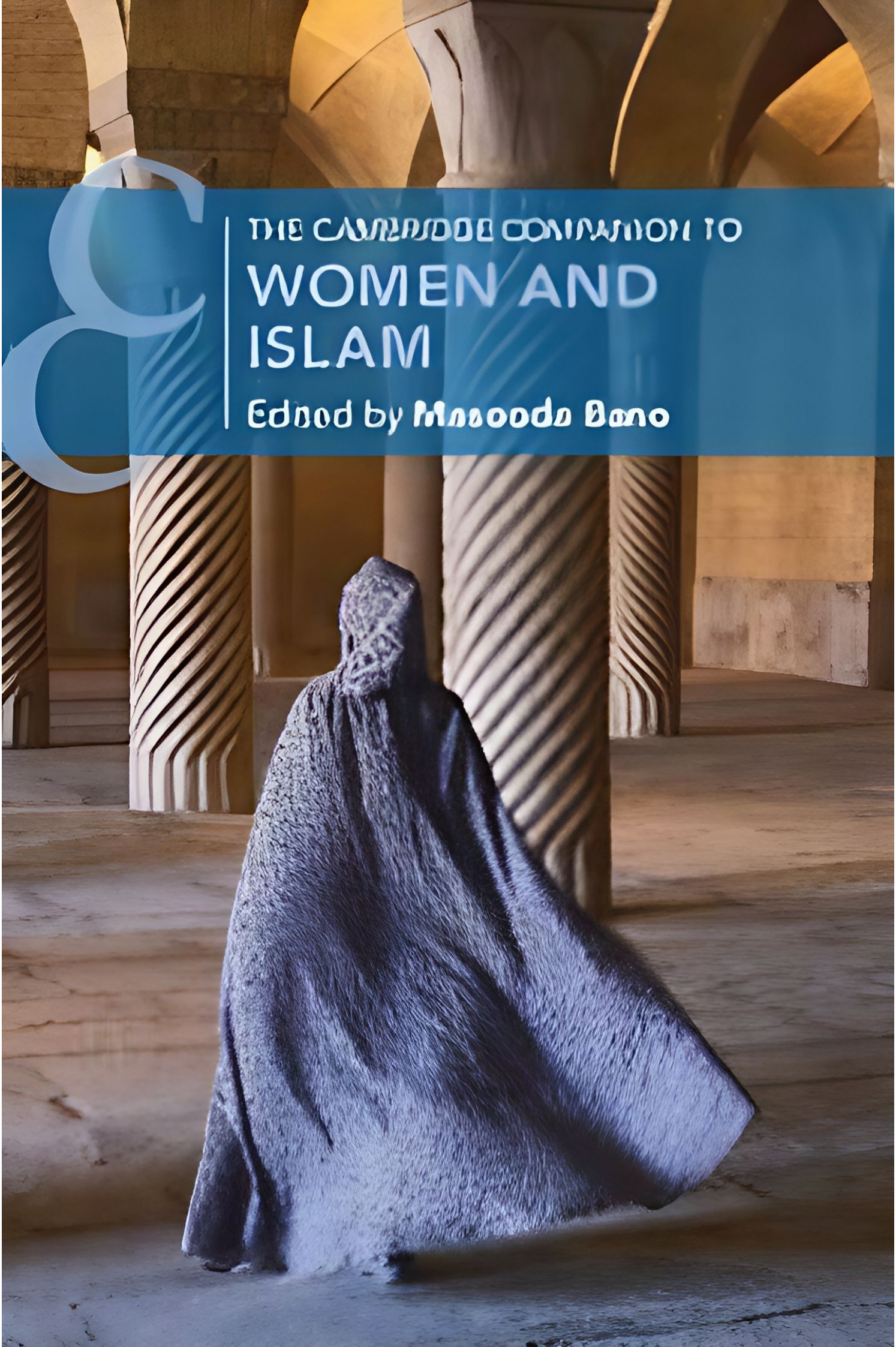
THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
WOMEN AND ISLAM
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University of Oxford

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009206716

DOI: 10.1017/9781009206587

When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781009206587

First published 2025

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
NAMES: Bano, Masooda, editor.
TITLE: The Cambridge companion to women and Islam / edited by Masooda Bano.
DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom : Cambridge University Press, 2025. | Series: Cambridge companions to religion | Includes bibliographical references and index.
IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2024037711 | ISBN 9781009206716 (hardback) | ISBN 9781009206563 (paperback)
SUBJECTS: LCSH: Women in Islam. | Feminism – Religious aspects – Islam. | Muslim women – Social conditions. | Muslim women – Conduct of life. | Women in the Hadith.
CLASSIFICATION: LCC BP173.4 .C352 2025 | DDC 297.082–dc23/eng/20241015
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024037711

ISBN 978-1-009-20671-6 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-009-20656-3 Paperback

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Contributors

Masooda Bano is Professor of Development Studies at the University of Oxford and a Senior Golding Fellow at Brasenose College, Oxford. She specializes in the comparative study of Muslim societies and leads large-scale, multidisciplinary projects. Among other themes, she has explored the conditions fostering the emergence of female religious engagement with Islamic knowledge acquisition and dissemination across the Muslim world and in diaspora communities in recent years. She has published many books, including *Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-Democratisation of Islamic Knowledge* (2017), and has edited several volumes on Islamic educational institutions in Muslim-majority countries as well as in the West. Professor Bano has also held numerous prestigious research awards, including European Research Council Starting and Advance grants.

Karen Bauer is Associate Professor at the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London. Her books include *Women, Households and the Hereafter in the Qur'an: A Patronage of Piety* (with Feras Hamza), *Gender Hierarchy in the Qur'an: Medieval Interpretations, Modern Responses*, and *An Anthology of Qur'anic Commentaries: On Women* (with Feras Hamza). In addition to her work on women in the Qur'an and in Muslim tradition, Dr Bauer has written several articles on emotions in the Qur'an and in early Islam.

Mahjabeen Dhala is Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies and Chair of the Women's Studies in Religion program at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Her work focuses on reviving premodern Muslim women's contributions to Islamic theology, exegesis, and activism. Her recent book, *Feminist Theology and Social Justice in Islam: A Study on the Sermon of Fatima*, explores the seventh-century protest of the Prophet Muhammad's daughter against the government's confiscation of her lands and denial of her inheritance rights. Her current research project examines early African Muslim women's role in shaping Islamic thought and institutions.

Nelly van Doorn-Harder teaches Religious Studies at Wake Forest University (USA) and at the Center for Islamic Theology (CIT) at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Her research explores Islam in Indonesia and Coptic Christianity in Egypt, with a focus on leadership, gender, freedom of religion, and interfaith dialogue. Currently, she is working on a book about the Indonesian National Commission for Women's Rights (Komnas Perempuan), analyzing Komnas' efforts to combat violence against women, including domestic violence and

child marriage. She is the author of *Women Shaping Islam: Reading the Qur'an in Indonesia* (2006).

Alyaa Ebbiary is Lecturer in Religion, Society, and Politics at Lancaster University. Prior to this, she held a postdoctoral position in the Department of Anthropology at Durham University, where she worked on the cross-European Encounters project. She completed her PhD in Social Anthropology and Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), focusing on Islamic higher education in the UK. Her research particularly delved into pedagogy, religious authority, and female scholarship. Beyond her academic pursuits, Alyaa has been actively involved as a teacher, community organizer, and interfaith trainer.

Arndt Emmerich is Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Hertfordshire, a guest researcher at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, and an honorary research fellow at the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. He specializes in conducting in-depth ethnographic fieldwork, particularly with Muslim youth communities. Emmerich's research has resulted in numerous journal articles, and his work has been featured by major media outlets, including the BBC. His doctoral thesis was published as *Islamic Movements in India: Moderation and Its Discontents* (2020).

Shahla Haeri is Professor of Anthropology and a former director of the Women's Studies Program (2001–10) at Boston University. A pioneer in Iranian anthropology, she is the author of *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi'i Iran* (1989, and translated into Arabic). Her other books include *No Shame for the Sun: Lives of Professional Pakistani Women* (2002) and *The Unforgettable Queens of Islam: Succession, Authority, Gender* (2020). Professor Haeri has also produced and directed the video documentary *Mrs President: Women and Political Leadership in Iran* (2002), which focuses on six women presidential contenders during the Iranian presidential election of 2001. She has received numerous grants and fellowships.

Sohail Hanif began his journey with traditional Islamic Studies in Jordan before completing his doctoral thesis at Oxford, focusing on Hanafi jurisprudence. His research is especially centred on its development between the fifth and eighth Islamic centuries. Through his thesis, Hanif delves into the foundational ideas of this legal system and their role in interpreting classical legal commentaries. Hanif is an experienced teacher in various settings, both formal and informal. Recently, he accepted the position of director at the National Zakat Foundation in the UK. Previously, he was a faculty member at Cambridge Muslim College and continues to contribute as an associate lecturer.

Maria Jaschok is Senior Research Associate in Contemporary China Studies at the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, as well as a supervisor and tutor for the MSt in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Oxford. From 2019 to 2021 she held the position of director at the International Gender Studies Centre at Lady Margaret Hall. Her research primarily focuses on gendered constructions of memory, feminist and aural ethnography, innovative research methodologies, and the application of oral history in documenting the history of

Muslim women in Asia, with a particular emphasis on China. Jaschok is actively involved in numerous international academic and professional organizations, contributing to steering committees, editorial boards, and advisory panels.

Faraz A. Khan is a lecturer and senior research fellow at Zaytuna College in Berkeley, California, where he specializes in teaching Kalam (Islamic philosophical theology) and ethics. He completed his classical Islamic scholarship in Jordan, where he studied a broad range of religious sciences, including Ash'ari and Maturidi scholastic theology, Hanafi jurisprudence, Prophetic narration (*sira* and hadith), and logic with renowned scholars. He received scholarly authorization (*ijazah*) to teach these subjects. His most recent work, *An Introduction to Islamic Theology: Imam Nūr al-Dīn al-Ṣābūnī's Al-Bidāyah fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, was published in 2020. His current projects include a translation of a text in logic by al-Ghazali.

Katerina Nordin holds an MPhil in Islamic Studies and History from the University of Oxford and a History BA from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Her research interests lie in education in Islamic communities, with a focus on female-led spaces. She has been involved in various research projects focused on the Muslim world and Muslims in the European context. Notably, she possesses a deep understanding of the Islamic educational landscape in the UK, focusing on how young Muslim women strive to carve out their own spaces in a manner that honors tradition.

Nina Nurmila serves as the Dean of the Faculty of Education at Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII) and is Professor of Gender and Islamic Studies at the State Islamic University (UIN SGD) Bandung. She is author of *Women, Islam, and Everyday Life: Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia* (2009). As a self-identified Muslim feminist, Nurmila is an active participant in both the Indonesian academic community and activist networks. She is dedicated to promoting Islamic feminist scholarship in Indonesia and connecting it with women's rights activism.

Zuzanna Olszewska is Associate Professor in the Social Anthropology of the Middle East at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of St John's College, Oxford. She is author of the award-winning *The Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood among Young Afghans in Iran* (2015) and numerous articles on Afghan literature and culture. She is also a translator of Persian-language Afghan poetry.

D. Fairchild Ruggles holds the Presidential Chair in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where she directs the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory and teaches in the Department of Landscape Architecture and the School of Architecture. She serves as the art and architecture field editor for the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. In addition to her book publications on Islamic architecture, landscape, and environmental history, she has edited two volumes on the cultural patronage of women in the Islamic world and South Asia, and is the author of the award-winning *Tree of Pearls: The Extraordinary Architectural Patronage of the 13th-Century Egyptian Slave-Queen Shajar al-Durr* (2020).

Zilka Spahić Šiljak is Associate Professor in Gender Studies and serves as the Academic Director of the Gender Resource Center at the University of Sarajevo. She is also Director of the TPO Foundation (Transcultural Psychosocial Educational Foundation), which champions gender equality, dialogue, and peace through collaborations among civil society, academic institutions, and government. Her efforts are particularly concentrated on promoting gender mainstreaming in Bosnia's higher education, and she is a co-founder of the Balkans' first online school on Feminism and Religion.

Liv Tønnessen is Senior Researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) and director of the Center on Law and Social Transformation. A political scientist specializing in gender and politics, Tønnessen has been involved in long-term academic collaborations with local researchers and institutions in Sudan. Tønnessen has published extensively on women's rights and Islam.

Vanessa Vroon-Najem is an anthropologist affiliated with the University of Amsterdam, where she also earned her PhD. Her main research interest lies in the study of conversion experiences to Islam in the Netherlands, on which she has published extensively. She has curated three museum exhibitions based on her research and created a documentary entitled *Marrying before Allah – Personal Stories of Converts* with visual anthropologist Wendy van Wilgenburg. Additionally, she works as an educator at the Amsterdam Museum and serves on the board of editors of the Amsterdam Museum journal.

9 Islamic Feminists' Approaches

NINA NURMILA

The continuously expanding body of literature within Western academia often termed as Islamic feminism traces its origins to the mid to late 1970s.* Noteworthy authors from this period include the Egyptian scholar Nawal Saadawi,[1] the Moroccan thinker Fatima Mernissi, and Azizah al-Hibri, who made significant early contributions. As we will see in this chapter, these pioneering efforts paved the way for a subsequent wave of influential figures in the 1990s and early 2000s, including such prominent names as Amina Wadud, Asghar Ali Engineer, Riffat Hassan, and Asma Barlas. This chapter serves a dual purpose. First, it acquaints the reader with the fundamental methodological approaches developed by these initial two generations of authors, most of whom were affiliated with Western academic institutions. It delves into their arguments for the reinterpretation of Islamic texts from a feminist perspective, providing a detailed exploration of the methodological stances they advocated. References to various issues they addressed in their scholarship, such as polygamy, husband–wife relationships, and leadership within the family, are also included. Secondly, the chapter documents how the works of these writers influenced the discourse on Islamic feminism in Indonesia, particularly by shaping the perspectives of young men and women who encountered their scholarship, especially during their graduate studies.

The increased availability of translations of the works by these international scholars in Indonesia since the mid 1990s, coupled with the proactive role played by the *Pusat Studi Wanita* (Women's Studies Center) on Indonesian campuses in organizing gender training sessions, significantly facilitated the transmission of their ideas. This influence is vividly evident in the body of Indonesian Islamic feminist scholarship

* Please note that the majority of the translations from the Qur'an used in this chapter are based on that of Abdullah Yusuf Ali.

1 N. Saadawi, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (London: Saqi Books, 1988).

that has emerged since the late 1990s. The gender training sessions and translated publications authored by the aforementioned Islamic feminists, along with books penned by Indonesian feminists inspired by their work, have been actively studied by many lecturers and students within Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia. This engagement has resulted in a substantial increase in publications addressing gender issues in Islam, featured in journals managed by *Pusat Studi Gender dan Anak* (PSGA) – the Center for the Study of Gender and Children, which has now adopted a new name, throughout Indonesia.

This systematic exchange of ideas across various levels, as discussed by Nelly van Doorn-Harder in Chapter 13 in this volume, on women's basic human rights in Indonesia has empowered some Indonesian Islamic feminists to take the lead in pioneering platforms aimed at promoting gender justice within Muslim families and societies. They have also joined transnational movements, such as Musawah, established by a Malaysian feminist, Zainah Anwar, with the goal of achieving justice and equality within the Muslim family. Additionally, they have played a pivotal role in establishing influential institutions within Indonesia focused on promoting gender justice, including the hosting of the Indonesian Women's Ulama Congress (KUPI) in 2017 and 2022.

I would like to emphasize that I personally prefer to refer to these scholars and activists in Indonesia who advocate for the reinterpretation of Islamic texts through a gendered lens as Muslim feminists. I make this distinction to highlight their approach, which differs from that of Muslim scholars who advocate for the defense of the traditional model of Islamic reasoning with an emphasis on gender differentiation.[2] However, since this volume primarily aims to capture the dominant debates within the field of scholarship, I use the term Islamic feminism, as it remains the prevailing terminology in established scholarship.

[2] I refer to Azza M. Karam's book in using the term "Muslim feminist" instead of "Islamic feminist": Azza M. Karam, *Women, Islamism and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998). In this book, Karam differentiates Muslim feminists from Secular and Islamist feminists. Muslim feminists use Islam, mainly the Qur'an, to liberate women. These Muslim feminists argue that the Qur'an has been interpreted to justify women's subordination, and therefore to liberate women is to reinterpret the Qur'an from gender-equal perspectives. I use the term "Muslim feminist" in my other publications, even though I am aware that these Muslim feminists are normally referred to as "Islamic feminists," for example by Etin Anwar, *A Genealogy of Islamic Feminism: Pattern and Change in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2018), and Lana Sirri, *Islamic Feminism: Discourses on Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Islam* (London: Routledge, 2022).

REINTERPRETING THE QUR'AN AND HADITH

It is important to begin by acknowledging that feminist methodology is rooted in the postpositivist paradigm[3] and asserts that research is inherently subjective and that knowledge is not devoid of values.[4] Scholars who engage in the re-examination of Islamic texts have adopted a similar approach, contending that the traditional understanding of gender norms in Muslim societies is a product of its time and influenced by male religious authorities who controlled the interpretation process. In this section, I will focus on how such scholars as Fatima Mernissi, Asghar Ali Engineer, Amina Wadud, and Asma Barlas, while working towards the shared goal of revealing Islam's egalitarian essence, use slightly different methodological approaches. First, I will briefly introduce each author before delving into their respective approaches to challenge historically dominant interpretations.

The late Fatima Mernissi stands out as one of the most influential Islamic feminists. Born in Fez in the 1940s, she pursued her higher education at Mohammed V University in Rabat. She furthered her academic journey with an MA in France and obtained her PhD from Brandeis University in the US. Proficient in English, Arabic, and French, she has been translated into numerous languages, including Indonesian. Mernissi's multifaceted career encompassed roles as a sociologist, writer, novelist, artist, and civil society advocate, making her an iconic figure in the field of Islamic feminism.[5] One of Mernissi's core concerns was centered on critically analyzing the authenticity of hadith (sayings attributed to the Prophet). To illustrate her methodological approach, I examine her treatment of a frequently cited hadith used to justify the notion that women cannot hold leadership positions: "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity." This hadith is often accepted as authentic by many ordinary Muslims because it appears in Shahih Bukhari, a compilation of hadith considered authentic.[6] However, Mernissi raised doubts regarding the authenticity

[3] Sotirios Sarantakos, *Social Research* (Brisbane: Macmillan Education Australia, 1993).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Margalit Fox, "Fatema Mernissi, a Founder of Islamic Feminism, Dies at 75," *New York Times,* December 9, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/12/10/world/middleeast/fatema-mernissi-a-founder-of-islamic-feminism-dies-at-75.html; Fatima Sadiqi, "Biographical Sketch of Fatema Mernissi (1940–2015)," 2018, Middle East Studies Association (MESA): https://mesana.org/awards/category/fatema-mernissi-book-award/biographical-sketch-of-fatema-mernissi.

[6] The chapter employs a classical style of referencing hadith. Readers unfamiliar with this system can find relevant information at https://sunnah.com.

and validity of this hadith. She delved into *Fath al-Bari*, a work by Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani (d. AH 852), one of the commentators on Shahih Bukhari.[7] Mernissi highlighted that the narrator of this hadith, Abu Bakra, relayed it twenty-five years after the Prophet's passing, during a tumultuous political period when the Muslim community had to choose between supporting Aisha, one of the Prophet's wives, who led the Battle of the Camel against Ali bin Abi Thalib, the fourth Caliph in Islam.

Mernissi further examined the character of Abu Bakra, building on Imam Malik Ibn Anas's emphasis on the importance of moral integrity in those who narrate hadith. Mernissi's research revealed that during the time of Caliph Umar bin Khattab, Abu Bakra had been punished with eighty lashes for making false accusations of adultery without being able to provide the required four witnesses. According to Imam Malik's criteria for morality, Mernissi argued that the hadith narrated by Abu Bakra should not be categorized as authentic (*shahih*), despite its inclusion in Shahih Bukhari.[8] Additionally, Mernissi demonstrated that not all early Muslim scholars accepted the prohibition of women assuming public leadership, even though this hadith is found in Shahih Bukhari. Prominent exegetes like al-Tabari opposed the content of the hadith, as they did not find sufficient grounds within it to deny women the right to exercise political authority.[9]

While Mernissi focused on scrutinizing the authenticity of contentious hadith, other scholars have often concentrated on reinterpreting the interpretations and explications of Qur'anic verses in contrast to traditional readings. Amina Wadud, whose work has wielded significant influence in this area, was born in Bethesda, Maryland, USA, in the early 1950s as a Methodist. She converted to Islam at the age of twenty. After completing her PhD in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Michigan in 1988, she furthered her studies in Islamic sciences in Cairo. From 1989 to 1992 she taught at the International Islamic University, Malaysia, before returning to the US, where she held various teaching positions. During her time in Malaysia, Wadud engaged with women activists associated with Sisters in Islam, a platform dedicated to interpreting the Qur'an from a woman's perspective. Her book, *Qur'an and Woman*, was published in Malaysia in 1992[10] and, republished in 1999 in

[7] Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 3.
[8] Ibid., 49–61.
[9] Ibid., 61.
[10] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman* (Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti SDN BHD, 1992).

New York under the longer title *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*,[11] garnered significant attention. Wadud is also renowned for her religious activism, such as leading a Friday congregational prayer involving both men and women in 2005 in New York, a role traditionally reserved for men. Wadud's approach to reinterpreting the Qur'an is heavily influenced by Fazlur Rahman's contextual approach, known as the "double movement." Wadud explicitly states that she utilizes Rahman's method in interpreting the Qur'an.[12] Rahman's double movement is an approach aimed at contextual understanding of the Qur'an by moving twice: first from the current era to the era of the Qur'anic revelation. This initial movement seeks to distil the general principles or intended message of the Qur'anic revelation. The second movement is a return to the current time, with the aim of applying the spirit of the Qur'an or the intended message derived from its historical context to conform to these general principles and values in the current context. To apply the spirit of the Qur'an to the contemporary situation, one must thoroughly understand the present circumstances.[13]

Adopting this approach to studying Qur'anic texts through a gendered lens, Wadud provides an example of how to extract the intended principles from the Qur'an regarding veiling and seclusion, especially in the context of wealthy and powerful tribes, as an indication of protection. In this context, the spirit or intended message of the Qur'an is not solely about the importance of veiling and seclusion for women, but rather emphasizes the significance of modesty, a virtue applicable to all women, regardless of their economic class. The practice of modesty and how it should be implemented to respect and safeguard women can be culturally defined and may vary within various societal contexts. In building her arguments, Wadud underscores the importance of understanding the intricacies of the Arabic language to make readers aware that the Qur'an is not exclusively directed at men but encompasses both men and women.

[11] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). This is the edition referenced throughout the chapter.

[12] Ibid., 3–4.

[13] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5–7.

In Arabic, the masculine plural form includes females, unless specific indicators exist to denote exclusively masculine plural forms, typically by adding the plural form for females.[14] Furthermore, she highlights the distinction between the text (the Qur'an) and its interpretation, emphasizing that interpretation is subjective and influenced by the backgrounds and interests of the interpreters, which she terms "prior text."[15] Following the publication of her book, Wadud often faced resistance from those who failed to differentiate between the text and its interpretation, accusing her of altering the Qur'an. Her proposed hermeneutical model for analyzing Qur'anic verses is thus fourfold: (1) within the context in which the text was originally produced; (2) in the context of discussions on similar topics within the Qur'an; (3) with reference to similar language and syntactical structures used elsewhere in the Qur'an; and (4) in relation to the overarching Qur'anic principles and within the framework of the Qur'anic worldview.[16]

The benefit of employing such a hermeneutical approach becomes evident when examining her reinterpretation of the nature of marital relationships in Islam. She makes four key analytical points. First, the context of the revelation in the Arabian Peninsula was patriarchal, characterized by a culture of male domination and female subordination, and featuring an androcentric bias where male experiences were considered the norm and women were positioned in relation to male interests, primarily in reproductive roles.[17] Second, two Qur'anic verses support the idea that marital relationships are meant to be equal and reciprocal. In Q. 2:187, the relationship between men and women is likened to garments for each other, and in Q. 30:21, the purpose of marriage is to foster love and mercy between husband and wife.[18] Third, in response to the prevailing patriarchal construct that expects women to be obedient to their husbands, Wadud analyzes the use of the term *qanitat*, often interpreted as implying that wives should obey their husbands. However, by referencing the use of *qanitat* in other Qur'anic verses like Q. 2:238, 3:17, and 33:35, she concludes that *qanitat* actually means "being cooperative with one another and subservient before Allah,"[19] emphasizing a reciprocal and equal relationship as worshippers of Allah. Obedience to other human beings is described as *ta'a*, not

[14] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 10.
[15] Ibid., 1–5.
[16] Ibid., 5.
[17] Ibid., 80–1.
[18] Ibid., 83.
[19] Ibid., 74.

qanitat. Finally, Wadud underscores key principles of human development within marital relationships, including justice, equity, harmony, moral responsibility, spiritual awareness, and development.[20] Applying these principles leads to a view of husband and wife as equal partners who cooperate in their efforts to submit to Allah. Such a relationship leaves no room for polygamous marriages, where a husband–father is divided between multiple families. According to her interpretation, Q. 4:3 is not about permitting polygamy but rather concerns justice in managing funds for orphans and providing for wives, as affirmed by Q. 4:129.[21]

Another scholar who has employed a similar methodological approach is Asghar Ali Engineer. Born in India and not affiliated with a professional academic institution, Engineer authored more than fifty books and articles. In his work *The Rights of Women in Islam*,[22] akin to Wadud, Engineer advocates for discerning the substance, norms, morality, and ethics contained within Qur'anic verses, recognizing that their application may vary in different contexts. Engineer also utilizes the same example as Wadud to illustrate this differentiation, focusing on the case of veiling, which he refers to as *purdah*. Similar to Wadud's perspective, Engineer contends that in the past, *purdah* was a means to safeguard women's chastity. However, it was misconstrued as synonymous with chastity, leading to the judgment that women not wearing the veil were deemed "immoral."[23] In contrast to this assumption, Engineer emphasizes that chastity represents the norm, while *purdah* serves as a contextual means to achieve that norm. Consequently, a woman can be considered chaste even without wearing a veil.[24] Consistent with Wadud's approach, Engineer also distinguishes Qur'anic verses into normative and contextual categories. To comprehend the norm prescribed by the Qur'an, it must be contextualized within concrete circumstances, rather than being considered an abstract concept. When circumstances change, the norm can be preserved but may take on a different form. Engineer cites Ibn Taymiyya's argument that the law can evolve with changing times.[25] Therefore, he suggests selecting what is transcendent from what the Prophet practiced while disregarding context-dependent aspects.[26]

[20] Ibid., 95.
[21] Ibid., 83.
[22] Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1992).
[23] Ibid., 5.
[24] Ibid., 6.
[25] Ibid., 11.
[26] Ibid., 12.

I will illustrate how the approach used by Engineer informs his reinterpretation of Qur'anic verse 4:34. According to him, the Qur'an literally states that men have a slight edge and social superiority over women. However, he contends that this should be understood in a contextual or socio-theological context, rather than purely theological. Engineer believes that Q. 4:34 does not endorse sexual superiority or excellence but is a reflection of the societal roles of men as family breadwinners and economic providers at that particular time. He interprets Q. 4:34 as describing the social circumstances prevalent at the time of its revelation. It states that men "are *qawwam* [guardians]," not that men "should be *qawwam*." He emphasizes that Q. 4:34 is a contextual statement, not a normative one. It would be normative if the verse stated that men should always be *qawwam*, applicable universally and at all times, but the verse does not convey this directive. In response to feminist recognition of women's domestic contributions to the family, Engineer cites Q. 53:39, which acknowledges that each person will reap the consequences of their own actions: "That every person will get only the fruit of their own deeds." He also refers to Q. 45:22, which guarantees that each person will be treated justly: "Allah created the heavens and the earth for just ends, and in order that each soul may find the recompense of what it has earned, and none of them be wronged."[27] Engineer's reading of Q. 4:34 allows us to understand that social conditions in certain societies can change. In some cases, women may assume the role of family breadwinners and, as a result, they can be *qawwam*, a social function that either men or women can undertake. It is not binding exclusively for men in all eras and under all circumstances.

Similarly, Asma Barlas, a Pakistani-born American scholar who obtained her PhD in International Studies from the University of Denver and served as a professor of politics and director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity at Ithaca College in New York, has advanced similar arguments advocating for a gender-based re-evaluation of the Qur'an in her book *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*.[28] In this work, Barlas challenges the oppressive interpretations of the Qur'an and focuses on "recovering the liberating and egalitarian voice of Islam."[29] In the acknowledgments section of her book, the first name that Barlas mentions as a source of gratitude is Amina Wadud, highlighting

[27] Ibid., 45–46.

[28] Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002).

[29] Ibid., 4.

Wadud's profound influence on her work.[30] Like Wadud, Barlas criticizes the position of hadith, asserting that the Qur'an does not require the hadith, but rather the opposite: the hadith needs the Qur'an to be accepted as a source of Islamic teaching, because Muslims cannot accept hadith whose content contradicts the Qur'an. Furthermore, Barlas criticizes the politicization of Qur'anic access and interpretation, emphasizing the imposition of numerous requirements for engaging in *ijtihad* (independent scholarly interpretation). Consequently, the Qur'an has been positioned as inaccessible to many Muslims or has been displaced by patriarchal classical Islamic jurisprudence, which is often regarded as sacrosanct.

As someone who acknowledges being influenced by Wadud, who in turn drew inspiration from Rahman, Barlas employs a methodology for reinterpreting the Qur'an that aligns with that of Wadud and Rahman, albeit using distinct terminology. In her Qur'anic reevaluation, Barlas engages in three primary modes of reading: (1) *reading the Qur'an as a text*: this involves seeking to understand the intention of the text and discern what God may have intended in its verses,[31] akin to Rahman's concept of distilling the intended message or the spirit of the Qur'an; (2) *reading behind the text*: here, Barlas endeavors to uncover the context of the Qur'anic revelations, delving into the circumstances and conditions surrounding its revelation;[32] and (3) *reading in front of the text*: in this step, Barlas recontextualizes the Qur'anic text in light of contemporary needs, ensuring that the spirit of the Qur'an is applied to current situations.[33] Notably, she explicitly cites Rahman's approach, which advocates a double movement: first, moving from the present to the past (the time of revelation), and then back to the present. Additionally, Barlas references Wadud's perspective, emphasizing that considering the context of revelation during the interpretation process serves to distil the spirit or intended message of the Qur'an, thereby confirming its universality.

According to Barlas, patriarchal and oppressive interpretations of the Qur'an are a result of reading the Qur'an in a fragmented and decontextualized manner, such as giving precedence to specific words, phrases, or lines over the Qur'an's teachings as a whole. Additionally, this issue arises when less clear verses take precedence over those with fundamental meanings or when the Qur'an is not read in its entirety. She advocates

[30] Ibid., xv.
[31] Ibid., 21.
[32] Ibid., 22.
[33] Ibid., 23.

for a holistic reading of the Qur'an.[34] I will now demonstrate how Barlas applies this methodology to reinterpret Qur'anic verses pertaining to husband–wife relationships and the issue of polygyny. First, in reading the Qur'an as a text, Barlas contends that the Qur'an promotes ethical and egalitarian values and opposes patriarchy. She highlights the Qur'anic support for egalitarianism, citing Qur'anic verse 16:72, which asserts that God has created mates of "your own natures" and has crafted "helpmeets from yourselves" to enable tranquillity (*sukun*), love, and mercy, as expressed in Qur'anic verse 30:21. According to Barlas, this verse underscores the capacity of both men and women, created from the same nature, to love each other as husband and wife. It also suggests that they share the same ethical standards, as emphasized in Q. 24:30–31, which instructs both men and women to protect their chastity.[35] Barlas posits that the Qur'an can be seen as anti-patriarchal based on such examples as Abraham, who challenged his father's authority to obey God. Furthermore, she notes numerous Qur'anic verses that prohibit blindly following the ways of fathers.[36]

Secondly, when reading behind the text or delving into the context of the Qur'anic revelations, Barlas is acutely aware of the historical context and the plight of women during that era. At the time of revelation, women were not considered fully equal human beings, and they suffered from severe mistreatment within a deeply patriarchal culture. Misogyny was rampant in many societies, husbands being allowed to subject their wives to horrific abuses, including pulling out their hair, mutilating their ears, and smashing their teeth with burnt bricks. Polygyny was also prevalent without significant restrictions. In this context, Islam emerged with the aim of improving the status and condition of women.[37]

Thirdly, in reading in front of the text, or recontextualizing the text to address contemporary needs while upholding the spirit of the Qur'an, Barlas acknowledges the existence of controversial views on Islamic marriage. Some perceive it as oppressive and patriarchal, while others view it as elevating women's status.[38] Despite these differing perspectives, Barlas maintains that the Qur'anic concept of the family is rooted in egalitarianism and nurturing. She substantiates her argument by highlighting Qur'anic injunctions to prioritize the needs of women and children, considering the home as the central place for the family. Barlas

[34] Ibid., 168–169.
[35] Ibid., 183–184.
[36] Ibid., 173.
[37] Ibid., 169–170.
[38] Ibid., 200–201.

emphasizes that the Qur'an treats wives as independent agents with rights in marriage and divorce, and that marriage is founded on mutuality. She posits that Islamic marriage, characterized by rights and responsibilities, represents a structured and nonoppositional framework that is nonhierarchical, thereby fostering liberation for both men and women.[39]

In this context, Barlas asserts that the values of Islamic marriage applicable in the present day emphasize egalitarian, nurturing, and mutual relationships between men and women, encompassing their respective rights and responsibilities, all contributing to liberation. Within such a marital framework, there is no room for polygamy, and polygyny does not align with the Qur'anic ideals. Barlas maintains that Qur'anic verse 4:3, often cited to justify polygyny, is intended to ensure justice for female orphans. Disagreeing with polygyny, she underscores Qur'anic admonitions to marry only once, the Qur'an's recognition that men cannot treat women justly under polygamous conditions, and the concept of the oneness of the human heart.[40]

INDONESIAN FEMINISTS' RE-READING OF THE QUR'AN

The study of gender in Indonesia has been a burgeoning field since the early 1990s, fostering critical thinking among Indonesian Muslims. Translations into Indonesian of works by Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud, Asghar Ali Engineer, and Asma Barlas have played a pivotal role in this development. Consequently, numerous doctoral dissertations have been dedicated to the reinterpretation of the Qur'an, authored by established scholars including Nasaruddin Umar, Zaitunah Subhan, Nurjannah Ismail, and myself. Furthermore, several feminist scholars, such as Kiyai Husein Muhammad, Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, Nur and Badriyah Fayumi, have made significant contributions by writing and publishing their own feminist reinterpretations of religious texts. This section will provide an overview of the profiles and approaches adopted by these scholars, with a particular focus on their perspectives regarding husband–wife relationships and family life.

Nasaruddin Umar, a prominent scholar who also serves as the high priest of the Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta, the largest mosque in Southeast Asia and the sixth largest globally in terms of its congregational capacity, has played a pivotal role in advancing Gender Studies within Islamic scholarship in Indonesia. Previously, he held the position of vice

[39] Ibid., 202.
[40] Ibid., 190–192.

minister of religious affairs from 2011 to 2014. His academic journey included pursuing master's and doctoral degrees at the State Islamic University (UIN) in the 1990s. During that time, he was also a visiting student at various international universities, including McGill University in Canada (1993–4), Leiden University in the Netherlands (1994–5), and the University of Paris in France (1995). Additionally, he conducted library research at several universities around the world, spanning America, Japan, England, Belgium, Italy, Turkey, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, the Philippines, and Malaysia.

One of his significant contributions to the field of Gender Studies in Islam in Indonesia is his book titled *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender: Perspektif al-Qur'an* [Gender Equality Argument in Qur'anic Perspective].[41] This book represents the published version of his doctoral dissertation. Within its pages, he underscores the theme of gender equality in the Qur'an, asserting that men and women are equal as God's servants, vicegerents on Earth, participants in the cosmic drama, and possessors of potential for achievement. A noteworthy contribution from his work is the differentiation he establishes between the terms "sex" and "gender" in Qur'anic terminology. He contends that the Qur'an employs *dzakar* (male) and *untsa* (female) to refer to biology, while *rijal*, *nisa'*, and *mar'ah* represent the concept of gender.[42]

This critical distinction holds significance when interpreting Qur'anic verse 4:34 concerning family leadership. Q. 4:34, as translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, states:

> Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (Next), refuse to share their beds, (And last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means (of annoyance): For Allah is Most High, great (above you all).

While many Muslims interpret this verse literally to justify male-only family leadership, Umar's differentiation between sex and

[41] Nasaruddin Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender: Perspektif al-Qur'an* [Gender Equality Argument in Qur'anic Perspective] (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999).

[42] Ibid.

gender in Qur'anic terms provides a more nuanced understanding. According to Umar, *rijal* denotes males with specific capacities, as not all males are inherently superior to women. This implies that females possessing certain capacities can assume leadership within the family as well. Q. 4:34 outlines two key qualifications for serving as the protector (leader) of the family: (1) having superiority over the spouse; and (2) providing financial support to the family. In the contemporary context, superiority may manifest in the form of higher educational levels and/or greater income. Consequently, anyone, whether male or female, who fulfils these two requirements can assume the role of family protector or leader.

Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, a prominent Indonesian scholar born in Cirebon, West Java, in the early 1970s, has made significant contributions to the fields of Islamic Studies and gender justice. He received his education in Syria, earning two degrees from the Faculty of Dawah and the Faculty of Shari'a at Damascus University. Later, he pursued a master's degree in Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences at the International Islamic University Malaysia, specializing in the development of *fiqh* of zakat (Islamic law on almsgiving). He completed his doctoral studies at the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) at Universitas Gadjah Mada, focusing on Abu Syuqqah's interpretation of hadith texts for empowering women's rights in Islam. Abdul Kodir serves as a lecturer at IAIN Cirebon and is an active advocate for religious tolerance and gender justice. He cofounded such organizations as Fahmina, Rahima, and Alimat, dedicated to promoting equality and justice in Muslim families.

He also played a key role in organizing KUPI I in 2017 and KUPI II in 2022. A prolific writer, his renowned work *Qirā'ah Mubādalah: Progressive Tafsir for Gender Justice in Islam*[43] introduces a method for reinterpreting religious texts, including the Qur'an and hadith, to foster a just understanding of these texts. This approach, inspired by Abd-al-Halim Muhammad Abu Shuqqa, seeks to engage women as active participants in the interpretation process and advocates for egalitarian gender relations (*musawah*) through a "hermeneutics of equality."[44]

[43] Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, *Qirā'ah Mubādalah: Tafsir Progresif untuk Keadilan Gender dalam Islam* [Qirā'ah Mubādalah: Progressive Interpretation for Gender Justice in Islam] (Banguntapan, Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2019). The volume has been reprinted six times in 2019, twice in 2020, in 2021, 2022, and 2023.

[44] Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, "*Qirā'a Mubādala*: Reciprocal Reading of Hadith on Marital Relationships," in *Justice and Beauty in Muslim Marriage: Towards Egalitarian*

Abdul Kodir's *Qirā'ah Mubādalah* method advocates for equal cooperation between men and women in all aspects of social life, including family and society. This approach ensures that both sexes are considered equal subjects when interpreting religious texts, addressing kindness, and preventing wrongdoing. Regardless of whether a text is directed explicitly at men or women, its core message must apply to both sexes. Abdul Kodir emphasizes reading religious texts holistically, similar to Amina Wadud's approach in *Qur'an and Women*, instead of dissecting them piecemeal. He categorizes texts into three types: *al-mabadi'* (fundamental values), *al-qawa'id* (thematic principles), and *al-juz'iyyat* (contextual implementations). Verses mentioning men or women often fall into the last category (*al-juz'iyyat)*, which can be reinterpreted to align with the broader principles of *al-mabadi'* and *al-qawa'id*. The steps of the *Qirā'ah Mubādalah* method involve identifying texts related to gender relations in either family or society, recognizing whether they mention men or women explicitly, and determining whether they convey principles or behaviors. Principles apply directly to the unstated subject, while behavioral texts require a deeper understanding of their general meanings regarding kindness and wrongdoing before being applied to both genders. This method promotes a balanced and cooperative approach to interpreting religious texts, emphasizing gender equality in all aspects of life.[45]

Abdul Kodir employs the *Qirā'ah Mubādalah* method to reinterpret hadith related to husband–wife relationships. He illustrates that hadith advising men to display good character, kindness, and responsibility towards their wives[46] are ethically applicable to women as well. These fundamental norms (*al-mabadi'*) become the foundation of marriage (*al-qawa'id*) binding both genders for mutual benefit. Abdul Kodir posits that the Prophet delivered partial hadith to men due to their societal roles, emphasizing the responsible use of authority for women's benefit, and discouraging authoritarianism or cruelty.

Another example of understanding hadith through *Qirā'ah Mubādalah* relates to statements targeting "a woman" or wife who shows ingratitude, fails to fulfill her husband's biological needs, or

Ethics and Laws, ed. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Mulki al-Sharmani, Jana Rumminger, and Sarah Marsso (London: Oneworld Academic, 2022), 181–209.

45 Ibid., 2022.

46 "A woman" or a wife who is not grateful for the kindness of her husband will enter hell (Bukhari no. 305); "a woman" who cannot serve/fulfil her husband's biological need will be cursed by the angel (Bukhari no. 5248); and "a woman" who asks for a divorce without any crucial reason will not enter Paradise (Abu Dawud no. 2228).

seeks divorce without valid reasons. These texts only mention women as subjects and impose rewards or punishments without addressing men. Abdul Kodir rejects the idea that Islam exclusively addresses one gender. Instead, he seeks broader principles rooted in the Qur'an and hadith (*al-mabadi'*) that emphasize believers, good deeds, gratitude, service, and maintaining household unity for both men and women. Five principles (*al-qawa'id*) underpin husband–wife relationships: partnership, maintaining a strong marital bond, mutual kindness, consultation, and striving for each other's comfort. Using the concept of *mubādalah* (reciprocal reading), Abdul Kodir interprets these hadith as applicable to both spouses. Failure to reciprocate kindness, meet sexual needs, or seek divorce without substantial reasons can lead to exclusion from Paradise for either husbands or wives. Thus, the *mubādalah* approach ensures equal expectations and responsibilities for both partners in marital relationships.

Another prominent Indonesian scholar and activist is Nur Rofiah, who holds a doctoral degree in Qur'anic exegesis from Ankara University, Turkey. She is actively engaged in various Islamic organizations, including Fatayat (Nahdlatul Ulama's Young Women's Organization), Alimat (a movement advocating for equality and justice in Indonesian Muslim families), and Rahima (the Center of Information for Islam and Women's Reproductive Rights). Nur Rofiah has developed an approach she terms "women's substantive justice" (*keadilan hakiki perempuan*) for interpreting the Qur'an. The concept of substantive justice that she advocates rejects the idea of favoring the strong and dominant over the weak and vulnerable. Instead, this approach insists on considering women's unique biological experiences, such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, along with their social realities when interpreting the Qur'an to achieve substantive justice. Nur Rofiah also emphasizes the importance of recognizing the diversity among women, avoiding the imposition of a single woman's experiences as a universal standard. Simultaneously, she underscores the equal status of men and women as servants of Allah.[47]

Similar to Abdul Kodir, Nur Rofiah categorizes Qur'anic verses into three hierarchical groups: (1) *the mission*: these verses aim to establish a life system that is a blessing for all, including women; (2) *moral foundations*: these verses encompass the fundamental values of Islam,

[47] Nur Rofiah, *Nalar Kritis Muslimah: Refleksi atas Keperempuanan, Kemanusiaan, dan Keislaman* [Muslimah's Critical Reasoning: Reflections on Women, Humanity, and Islam] (Bandung: Afkaruna, 2020).

such as monotheism (*tawhid*), belief (*iman*), *ihsan* (perfection), justice, humanity, benefit, safety, health, security, peace, sustainability, and other virtues that encourage the development of noble character, including noble treatment of women; and (3) *methods*: these verses provide practical guidance for transforming the concrete life system during the Qur'an's revelation into the idealized system of Islam. Nur Rofiah argues that this hierarchical categorization implies that lower-tier verses cannot contradict higher-tier ones. The mission and moral foundations are nonnegotiable and immutable in any system. In contrast, the verses related to methods not only can be negotiated but also should be adaptable to changing contexts if the textual interpretation leads in a direction that contradicts the attainment of the mission and moral foundations.[48]

Furthermore, Badriyah Fayumi, the leader of Alimat 2015–24 and one of the organizers of KUPI, stands out as a prominent activist and *pesantren* leader. Her notable contribution is the development of the *makruf* approach.[49] Fayumi highlights that the term *makruf* is mentioned thirty-two times in the Qur'an, with eighteen occurrences in verses related to marriage, the family, and husband–wife relationships. *Makruf* signifies what is "known" or "understood," and also conveys the meaning of "kindness" or "the truth" that is generally accepted, contrasting with *munkar*, which denotes something unacceptable or incomprehensible. Another exegetical definition of *makruf* is "anything considered right and good according to shari'a, reason, and social traits."[50] According to the Hanafi school of law, it is synonymous with '*urf*, signifying anything widely accepted due to its sound reasoning and positive community response. Building on these definitions, Fayumi defines *makruf* as "anything deemed right and good according to shari'a, reason, and social norms and can be accepted wholeheartedly."[51] To qualify as *makruf*, an action should align with the dialogue between universal values found in revelation and the local and specific social realities.[52] Based on this framework, Fayumi argues that polygamous marriage is not considered *makruf* if the existing wife cannot

[48] Nur Rofiah, "Tafsir Perspektif Keadilan Hakiki Perempuan [Interpretation of Women's Essential Justice Perspective]," https://ibihtafsir.id/2022/02/14/tafsir-perspektif-keadilan-hakiki-perempuan/.

[49] Badriyah Fayumi, "Konsep Makruf dalam Ayat-ayat Munakahat dan Kontekstualisasinya dalam Beberapa Masalah Perkawinan di Indonesia" [Makruf Concept in the Verses on Marriage and Its Contextualisation in Several Marital Problems in Indonesia], unpublished MA thesis, UIN Jakarta, 2008.

[50] Ibid., 40.

[51] Ibid., 43.

[52] Ibid., 57.

wholeheartedly accept it or if it has a detrimental impact on the existing marriage, despite its literal mention in the Qur'an. Fayumi supports Indonesian state laws, such as the 1974 Marriage Law and the 1991 Compilation of Islamic Law, which impose various requirements on polygamous marriages, including obtaining permission from the existing wife. She regards these legal restrictions as *makruf* and even suggests seeking the consent of the children, as they will also be affected by their father's additional marriage.[53]

In my scholarly work, I have also focused on the subject of polygamy, using Fazlur Rahman's double movement method. My educational journey began with secondary schooling at a *pesantren* in Central Java and culminated in a doctoral degree from the University of Melbourne. While many scholars generally concur on the need for restrictions on polygamy, I advocate for its outright prohibition, using Fazlur Rahman's double movement method. I categorize existing interpretations of polygamy into three groups. The first group interprets polygamy as permissible in Islam, relying on the Qur'anic verse 4:3, which states, "then marry other women of your choice – two, three, or four." The second group, while also citing Qur'anic verse 4:3, believes that polygamy is restricted in Islam, as the verse continues with "then marry other women of your choice – two, three, or four. But if you are afraid you will fail to maintain justice, then [content yourselves with] one." The third group, to which I belong, argues for the prohibition of polygamy by employing the double movement method. Instead of selectively quoting the verse, I base my argument on a comprehensive examination of Qur'anic verses 4:2–3 and 129 together.

The first movement in the double movement method is to move back to the time of revelation of the Qur'an to distil the intended message of the Qur'an. The context of the revelation of Q. 4:3 stems from the aftermath of the Muslims' defeat at the Battle of Uhud, which resulted in the death of seventy Muslim men who had left behind wives, children, and wealth. Some male guardians, entrusted with caring for the orphaned girls, misappropriated their wealth. Others expressed interest in marrying these orphaned girls for their beauty and wealth, but were unwilling to provide them with a proper marital gift (*mahr*). In response to the mistreatment of vulnerable orphaned girls by certain male guardians, verses 4:2–3 were revealed:

> Give orphans their wealth [when they reach maturity], and do not exchange your worthless possessions for their valuables, nor cheat

[53] Ibid., 153.

> them by mixing their wealth with your own. For this would indeed be a great sin. (Q. 4:2)
>
> If you fear you might fail to give orphan women their [due] rights [if you were to marry them], then marry other women of your choice – two, three, or four. But if you are afraid you will fail to maintain justice, then [content yourselves with] one or those [bondwomen] in your possession. This way you are less likely to commit injustice. (Q. 4:3)

Q. 4:2 reveals Allah's awareness of the male guardians' exploitation of orphaned girls and admonishes them to cease such dishonest practices. In Q. 4:3, God instructs these male guardians to marry women other than the orphaned girls, expecting that they will provide a proper *mahar,* fearing the consequences from the girls' fathers if they fail to do so. Examining this context of revelation clarifies that the Qur'an's intended message is not to promote polygamy. During the time of revelation, polygamous marriages were prevalent and unrestricted. Instead, the emphasis lies on the instruction to treat wives justly, particularly highlighting the importance of justice for vulnerable orphaned girls. These verses underscore the crucial role of justice in the treatment of multiple wives, a requirement mentioned repeatedly in the text. Notably, Q. 4:129 acknowledges that achieving perfect justice in such situations may be exceedingly challenging:

> You will never be able to maintain justice between your wives – no matter how keen you are. So do not totally incline towards one leaving the other in suspense. And if you do what is right and are mindful ˹of Allah˺, surely Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

Hence, considering the context of the revelation and the relation between Q. 4:2–3 and 129, I have constructed a case for the prohibition of polygamy.[54]

CONCLUSION

The growing number of Islamic feminist scholars and activists is today playing a crucial role in challenging prevailing interpretations of religious texts in Indonesia that often subordinate women. Renowned

[54] Nina Nurmila, *Women, Islam and Everyday Life: Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia* (London, New York: Routledge, 2009), 44.

non-Indonesian Islamic feminists like Fatima Mernissi, Asghar Ali Engineer, Amina Wadud, and Asma Barlas have employed hermeneutical and contextual readings of the Qur'an. Their fresh perspectives have influenced Indonesian Muslim scholars to reinterpret religious texts through a gender-equal lens, addressing such issues as women's leadership, husband–wife relationships, and polygamy. All these Islamic feminists reject literal and fragmented Qur'anic interpretations, opting instead for holistic approaches.

Their methods yield interpretations supporting equal relations between men and women. These reinterpretations have inspired not only Indonesian but also Malaysian Islamic feminists like Zainah Anwar and Rozana Isa to establish Sisters in Islam in 1988 and, later, Musawah in 2009, a global movement advocating for equality and justice in Muslim families. In Indonesia, Alimat was founded in 2009 with a similar mission. These feminist movements bridge theory and practice, combining knowledge production and activism. Musawah and Alimat have published numerous books and articles authored by scholars within their movements, including such prominent figures as Amina Wadud, Ziba Mir Hussaini, Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, and Kiayi Husain Muhammad, who champion gender justice. Additionally, both Musawah and Alimat offer grassroots support for women who are victims of violence, exemplified by initiatives like Sisters in Islam's Telenisa and the Women's Crisis Center/WCC Balqis, affiliated with Alimat. These endeavors underscore their commitment to advocating for women's access to justice.

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