Gender Equality:
International Journal of Child and Gender Studies

ISSN (p): 2461-1468; ISSN (e): 2548-1959
Vol. 12 No. 2 September 2026
Pages 352-368

Moderate and progressive voices in Indonesian feminist Qur'anic interpretation: Huzaimah Tahido Yanggo and Siti Musdah Mulia

Kusmana Kusmana*✉

**The Qur'an and Tafsir Studies, Faculty of Ushuddin, Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia*
Email: kusmana@uinjkt.ac.id

ABSTRACT

In Indonesian Islam, as in many Muslim societies, discourses on women have largely been shaped by male scholars, with patriarchal values from medieval traditions dominating classical interpretations. While feminist approaches often critique these established values, this study examines women's agency through the concept of kodrat, viewed as a fluid construct in which women's engagement is continually shaped by internal and external factors. Focusing on two prominent female scholars, Huzaimah Tahido Yanggo and Siti Musdah Mulia, the paper analyzes their Qur'anic interpretations and intellectual contributions to Islamic knowledge. Both scholars, while negotiating patriarchal norms, were significantly influenced by education, career opportunities, and constitutional protections that enabled broader epistemological engagement. Employing a descriptive-analytic method and Anthony Giddens' theory of agency, the study explores how their thought reflects both structural constraint and the expansion of gender discourse. Data were analyzed by examining their exegetical frameworks and scholarly trajectories. The findings reveal that although they acknowledge conventional views, such as the husband's role as family leader, their advanced training in Islamic sciences enabled them to extend interpretive horizons and establish significant precedents in feminist Qur'anic interpretation. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how female scholars navigate traditional frameworks to contribute meaningfully to the dialogue between Islamic scholarship and broader gender studies.

Keywords: Women's Agency; Nature; Qur'anic Interpretation; Indonesian Islam; Anthony Giddens.

✉ Corresponding author:
Email Address: kusmana@uinjkt.ac.id
Received: April 23, 2026; Accepted: September 24, 2026; Published: September 30, 2026
Copyright © 2026 Kusmana Kusmana
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.22373/equality.v12i2.34728

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.22373/equality.v12i2.34728

ABSTRAK

Dalam Islam di Indonesia, sebagaimana di banyak masyarakat Muslim, wacana tentang perempuan sebagian besar dibentuk oleh ulama laki-laki, dengan nilai-nilai patriarki dari tradisi abad pertengahan yang mendominasi penafsiran klasik. Meskipun pendekatan feminis sering mengkritik nilai-nilai yang telah mapan ini, penelitian ini mengkaji agensi perempuan melalui konsep kodrat, yang dipandang sebagai konstruksi cair di mana keterlibatan perempuan secara terus-menerus dibentuk oleh faktor internal dan eksternal. Dengan berfokus pada dua ulama perempuan terkemuka, Huzaimah Tahido Yanggo dan Siti Musdah Mulia, artikel ini menganalisis penafsiran Al-Qur'an dan kontribusi intelektual mereka terhadap pemikiran Islam. Kedua ulama tersebut, saat menegosiasikan norma-norma patriarki, dipengaruhi secara signifikan oleh pendidikan, peluang karir, dan perlindungan konstitusional yang memungkinkan keterlibatan epistemologis yang lebih luas. Menggunakan metode deskriptif-analitis dan teori agensi Anthony Giddens, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana pemikiran mereka mencerminkan hambatan struktural sekaligus perluasan wacana gender. Data dianalisis dengan meneliti kerangka penafsiran dan rekam jejak akademis mereka. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa meskipun mereka mengakui pandangan konvensional, seperti peran suami sebagai pemimpin keluarga, pelatihan tingkat lanjut mereka dalam ilmu-ilmu keislaman memungkinkan mereka memperluas cakrawala penafsiran dan menetapkan preseden penting dalam penafsiran Al-Qur'an berperspektif feminis. Pada akhirnya, penelitian ini menunjukkan bagaimana ulama perempuan menavigasi kerangka kerja tradisional untuk memberikan kontribusi berarti bagi dialog antara pemikiran Islam dan studi gender secara lebih luas.

Kata Kunci: Agensi Perempuan; Kodrat; Penafsiran Al-Qur'an; Islam Indonesia; Anthony Giddens.

1. INTRODUCTION

Female narratives in Indonesian Islam are often analyzed through essentialist feminist perspectives that define *women's nature* narrowly around biological functions like menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, asserting that eliminating essentialization removes gender discrimination and ensures equal opportunities. However, significant gaps persist between this aspirational ideal and lived realities, as essentialist feminism frequently employs oppositional strategies that trigger resistance from traditionalists. In response, the construct of socially nurtured women's nature offers an alternative framework: it affirms gender equality while rejecting radical social upheaval, advocating instead for persuasive, incremental transformation. Within this paradigm, women operate as fluid agents whose public engagement expands or contracts based on internal capacities, social capital, and supportive structural conditions.

This study examines how two leading Indonesian Muslim scholars navigate this dynamic through their distinct intellectual trajectories and Qur'anic interpretations. Huzaimah Tahido Yanggo, trained in traditional Islamic jurisprudence and Cairo's Al-Azhar University, critically engaged modern concepts while remaining anchored in traditionalist frameworks;

conversely, Siti Musdah Mulia synthesized her Islamic training with democracy, human rights, and global feminism to form a progressive orientation. Addressing a key gap in Southeast Asian Islamic gender discourse—where studies often oversimplify women's scholarship as either purely patriarchal or radically iconoclastic—this research investigates how Yanggo and Mulia conceptualize women's nature in their exegesis and how their intellectual trajectories reflect both the structural constraints and the expansion of female agency in Indonesian Islam.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent decades, feminist Qur'anic exegesis has evolved into a vibrant field characterized by two primary methodological orientations: rationalizing the Qur'an's universal message and applying historical-contextual readings. Scholars in the first orientation, such as Amina Wadud (1999) and Asma Barlas, foreground women's lived experiences to challenge androcentric frameworks, establishing that divine revelation inherently rejects patriarchal dominance and promotes gender equality. The second orientation engages historical, ethical, and legal contexts; thinkers like Leila Ahmed (1992), Kecia Ali (2006), Olfa Youssef (2022), and Zia H. Shah (2023) emphasize that scriptural meaning emerges through the dynamic interplay between text, social realities, and contemporary ethical dilemmas, while Aysha A. Hidayatullah (2014) critically assesses the boundaries and potential impasses of reconciling modern egalitarian ideals with classical texts.

Indonesian feminist hermeneutics actively contributes to this global discourse, balancing progressive reformism with traditionalist continuity to reflect local socio-political realities. Within this spectrum, Huzaimah Tahido Yanggo and Siti Musdah Mulia exemplify distinct interpretive approaches: Yanggo embodies a cautious, fiqh-based moderation that supports female leadership within traditional frameworks (Hayati, 2023; Rofiah, 2015; Sharifi, 2020), whereas Mulia advances a progressive reformist agenda that aligns Qur'anic reinterpretation with universal human rights, pluralism, and global feminist discourse (Blackburn & Robinson, 2004; Rinaldi, 2020; Zulkarnain, 2021). As recent scholarship situates both figures at the intersection of constitutional guarantees, democratization, and transnational gender studies (Amin et al., 2026; Yulia, 2024), their scholarship highlights the rich spectrum of Islamic gender discourse in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Unlike prior studies that examine these scholars through generalized religious or political frameworks, this research establishes its distinction by adopting a lived lens, embodied and embedded in daily life, centered on the socially constructed concept of women's nature. By recognizing female scholars as active subjects in knowledge production, this study situates their exegesis within a broader analytical structure encompassing descriptive-analytic methods, Anthony Giddens' agency theory, the evolution of Qur'anic interpretation, and the socio-historical trajectory of modern Indonesia.

3. METHOD.

3.1. Method

Methodologically, this study employs a descriptive-analytic approach, defined as a systematic effort to portray complex social phenomena, situations, and attitudes to derive deep analytic insights (Kumar, 2012; Rossman & Rallis, 2012), integrated with Anthony Giddens' theory of agency to trace how structural conditions and individual capacities intersect in shaping

women's scholarly contributions. Operationally, the data gathered from the writings, academic careers, and epistemological engagements of Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo and Siti Musdah Mulia are organized into analytical units structured to identify the gaps between normative ideals of equality and lived realities, while highlighting the incremental strategies of transformation these scholars advanced. Ultimately, this inquiry underscores the significance of their intellectual output in bridging classical Islamic scholarship with feminist thought, providing vital precedents for future research on gender, agency, and religion in Indonesia.

3.2. Approach: Anthony Giddens Theory of Agency

To interpret the categorized data into a coherent narrative, this study combines Anthony Giddens's theory of agency with contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics to analyze how Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo and Siti Musdah Mulia respond to issues of gender and feminism. Giddens's structuration theory posits human agency as the capacity of individuals to direct their life trajectories by mobilizing internal resources such as motivation, knowledge, and conviction—alongside external supports, including social rules, opportunities, and institutional frameworks (Giddens, 1984). Within this framework, agents are capable actors whose skills, networks, and influence continually expand or contract through the dynamic interplay of internal capacities and external conditions, navigating social structures that simultaneously enable and constrain their actions.

By applying Giddens's conceptual model, this inquiry analyzes Yanggo and Mulia as active agents who systematically cultivate their competencies, deploy social and symbolic capital, and construct reformist or moderate gender discourses through rigorous engagement with religious sources, particularly the Qur'an. Their scholarly trajectories illustrate how female Muslim intellectuals strategically navigate, negotiate, and reshape existing institutional rules, religious authority, and resource structures within the socio-political landscape of Indonesian Islam.

3.3. Concept: Qur'anic Interpretation

Rooted in the classical concept of *tafsīr* as a verse-by-verse (*tartībī*) or thematic (*mawḍū'ī*) clarification of divine intent, Qur'anic exegesis has evolved into a dynamic, dialogical hermeneutical enterprise that negotiates text, historical context, and lived realities to address contemporary social and ethical issues (Hidayatullah, 2014). In feminist hermeneutics, scholars like Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Kecia Ali, and Olfa Youssef exploit this interpretative openness by foregrounding women's experiences and contextual ethics to challenge androcentric readings. Within this evolving framework, Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo and Siti Musdah Mulia extend the Qur'an's applicability to Indonesian gender discourse—Yanggo through fiqh-based moderation rooted in traditional continuity, and Mulia through radical egalitarian reformism. By leveraging their advanced education, social capital, and institutional opportunities, both figures demonstrate how tafsīr functions as a vital site of human agency that bridges classical textual fidelity with modern ethical imperatives, feminist aspirations, and civilizational progress.

3.4. Indonesian Context

Historically, Indonesia provided flexible social spaces and considerable public autonomy for women across political, military, and economic spheres, as demonstrated by Majapahit's central architect Gayatri Rajapatni (Drake, 2020), 18th-century prajurit èstri female soldiers (Kumar, 2008), and widespread female economic agency in local trade (Reid, 2020). Customary practices (adat) further reinforced female authority through Padang's matrilineal kinship, Aceh's military command under Cut Nyak Dien and Cut Meutia, and equitable marital property traditions (*gono-gini*) (Blackburn, 2004). However, between the 16th and 18th centuries, the arrival of foreign traders, Sufi scholars, and European colonial powers introduced rigid patriarchal norms that gradually restricted women's public engagements (Reid, 2020; Blackburn, 2004). This shift was further formalized through 19th-century Islamic revivalist movements and Western colonial institutions—including social stratification and nyai concubinage (Baay, 2010)—entrenching domestic gender roles that persisted into the late 20th century despite constitutional guarantees of gender equality (Blackburn, 2004). A major intellectual turning point occurred in the early 1990s as translated works by progressive Islamic scholars like Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, and Asghar Ali Engineer circulated widely, offering new frameworks that aligned constitutional rights with Islam's egalitarian ethos (Burhanuddin & Fathurahman, 2004).

This historical trajectory intersected with three interconnected traditions of Indonesian Islamic knowledge production: oral, textual, and written (Robinson; van Doorn-Harder). The oral tradition, centered on community da'wah, continuously negotiated the construct of women's nature (kodrat) between restrictive domestic models and practical family necessities. The textual tradition expanded in the 19th century as enhanced maritime routes connected Indonesian scholars to Middle Eastern hubs, institutionalizing canonical Kitab Kuning studies in pesantren and fatwa-issuing bodies like MUI, NU's Majelis Bahtsul Masail, and Muhammadiyah's Majelis Tarjih (Hallaq, 2009). Moving beyond strict Shafiʿite boundaries, this textualism exposed scholars to diverse interpretive tools to justify women's expanding social roles. Simultaneously, the written tradition—evolving from early Arabic and Latin print networks (Reid, 2020; Bruinessen, 2025; Azra, 2004; Meuleman, 2011) to post-1957 Islamic higher education institutions—transformed into a modern academic enterprise shaped by empirical research, peer-reviewed publishing, and formal analytical rigor (Blackburn, 2004; Hefner, 2009).

Within this evolving academic and institutional landscape, Indonesian Islamic scholarship developed a crucial distinction between perempuan ulama (female scholars focusing specifically on gender status) and ulama perempuan (a broader category of male and female scholars advocating for women's progress). Initiated in the early 2000s by landmark publications such as PPIM's Ulama Perempuan di Indonesia (Burhanuddin, 2002) and Siti Musdah Mulia's work on female religious authority (Mulia, 2005), this conceptual framework reached its institutional peak at the 2017 Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia (KUPI) in Cirebon, preceded by Jejak Perjuangan Keulamaan Perempuan Indonesia (Yafie, 2017). Bringing together over 500 scholars to issue groundbreaking fatwas on child marriage, gender-based violence, and environmental protection, KUPI successfully established a collective network that mainstreamed women's religious authority into national public policy and media discourse.

3.5. Profile and Thought:

3.5.1. Huzaimah Tahido Yanggo

Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo (1946–2021), born in Donggala, Central Sulawesi, stands as a pioneering Indonesian scholar of comparative Islamic law who made history as the first Indonesian woman to earn a doctorate from Al-Azhar University, Cairo, in 1984. Upon her return, she served as a senior lecturer at IAIN (now UIN) Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta and held leadership roles including Rector of the Institut Ilmu al-Qur'an (IIQ) from 2014 to 2018, member of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) since 1987, and member of the National Syari'ah Council. Alongside her academic career, she actively led gender advocacy initiatives as head of the al-Khaerat Union of Muslim Women and director of the Center for Women's Studies at IAIN (1994–1998), earning the "Dedicated Woman" award from UIN Jakarta in 2014. A prolific author and preacher, her influential publications, including Masail Fiqhiyyah (2005), Perempuan: Antara Idealitas dan Fakta Kekinian (2003), and Fikih Perempuan Kontemporer (2010), demonstrate her lifelong commitment to bridging classical jurisprudence with contemporary gender discourses (Yanggo, 2010).

3.5.2. Trajectory and Performance: Restriction and Extension

Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo's intellectual framework was profoundly shaped by her doctoral studies at Al-Azhar University from the late 1970s through 1984, a transitional era when patriarchal values and medieval religious traditions still heavily dominated Egyptian and Indonesian societies. During this period, prominent Muslim thinkers like Muhammad Rashid Rida, Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, and Abul Aʿla al-Mawdudi reinforced traditional gender hierarchies that positioned men as breadwinners and leaders while confining women to domestic roles based on the operative norm of women's nature (Yamani, 2010). Although secular and Islamist groups contested foundational assumptions around human rights frameworks—such as CEDAW (1979)—feminist and gender discourses had not yet become mainstream in Islamic scholarship, and Yanggo completed her studies prior to landmark events like the 1990 Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (Yamani, 2010).

Unlike Siti Musdah Mulia, whose doctoral studies (1990–1997) coincided with the rise of progressive gender discourses in Indonesia, Yanggo navigated an era where alternative social forces advocating for women's rights were only beginning to emerge. Consequently, the prevailing patriarchal and religious norms bound Yanggo's scholarly and social engagement within culturally sanctioned limits deemed appropriate to her women's nature. While she successfully extended her intellectual horizons and achieved unprecedented academic authority, her work largely operated within the boundaries of traditional fiqh and culturally acceptable spheres for women, reflecting the socio-historical constraints of her formative period.

3.5.3. Siti Musdah Mulia

Siti Musdah Mulia, born in Bone, South Sulawesi on March 3, 1958, is a prominent ulama perempuan and activist-scholar who earned her early education at Pesantren As'adiyah, UMI Makassar, and IAIN Alauddin, before completing her master's (1992) and doctoral degrees (1997) at IAIN/UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (Mulia, 2005; 2011). She established significant historical milestones, including becoming the first woman designated as Ahli

Peneliti Utama (Senior Researcher) by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 1999, while serving as expert staff on human rights and minority protection. Mulia systematically expanded her intellectual horizon through extensive international training in human rights, democracy, gender, and educational leadership across Australia, Sweden, Thailand, France, and the United States, synthesizing classical Islamic scholarship with multidisciplinary contemporary frameworks across her prolific writings on Qur'anic exegesis, da'wah, human rights, and gender reform.

Her intellectual trajectory extended seamlessly into sustained civic activism through leadership roles in Fatayat and Muslimat NU, KNPI, and various non-governmental organizations like LKAJ. Taken together, Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo and Siti Musdah Mulia represent two distinct generational phases of female scholarly agency in Indonesian Islam. While Yanggo's career in the 1970s–1980s operated as a cautious reformer from within traditional institutional frameworks and culturally sanctioned boundaries of women's nature, Mulia's trajectory in the 1990s–2000s actively engaged global feminist and human rights discourses to challenge patriarchal norms directly, illustrating a dynamic evolution from bridging tradition to advancing egalitarian transformation.

3.6. Trajectory and Performance: Restriction and Extension

Siti Musdah Mulia and Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo illustrate two distinct modalities of female agency within Indonesian Islamic scholarship, reflecting different generational contexts, educational trajectories, and strategies for navigating patriarchal structures. While Indonesian social forces remain heavily influenced by patriarchal values and the restrictive construct of women's nature, Mulia responded by synthesizing classical Islamic disciplines with Western non-degree programs in human rights, democracy, and feminism, utilizing modern analytical tools to reform Islamic thought through writing, public discussion, and active involvement in organizations like NU without abandoning her religious heritage. In contrast, Yanggo's intellectual formation at Al-Azhar University during the late 1970s and 1980s occurred before feminist discourses entered mainstream Islamic scholarship, leading her to operate as a cautious reformer who expanded women's presence within institutional frameworks—such as MUI, the National Syari'ah Council, and academic leadership—while largely remaining within culturally sanctioned boundaries. Together, Mulia's transformative activism and Yanggo's pioneering institutional integration demonstrate how female scholars navigate structural constraints to expand the horizons of women's religious authority and social engagement in Indonesia.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Deciphering Islam and the Qur'an

4.1.1. Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo

4.1.1.1. Islam

Yanggo presents herself as a scholar addressing diverse issues of daily life, with particular emphasis on women's affairs. Her writings tend to uphold the traditional wisdom of Islamic teachings. Having attained the highest academic training in comparative Islamic law, she largely embraces the intellectual legacy of earlier *ulama*, whose development of Islamic sciences was shaped by medieval thought, and she approaches this heritage with a protective orientation.

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.22373/equality.v12i2.34728

Generally, Yanggo sees Islam as the religion which will bring human beings into salvation here in the world and in Hereafter. She explains that:

> *"Islamic teachings which are found in the Qur'an and Sunna, are God's guidance, which must be used as guidance for the whole human beings, for the sake of salvation and happiness of human being here in this world, and in Hereafter. For every Muslim, Islamic teachings should be treated as way of life in dealing with things and activities in different time and place until death picks him/her up. How far a change takes place in a society, Islamic teachings can certainly be in accordance with the demand of age, until the end of age."* (Yanggo, 2005).

As Islam is believed as guidance and way of life, Yanggo argues that it must be treated so for dealing with gender relations and women's affairs. In Yanggo's view, Islam does not discriminate against women or subordinate them to men. Both sexes are fundamentally equal before God, within the family, and in society, sharing the same rights and obligations. What distinguishes them lies in the specific functions and primary responsibilities divinely assigned to men and women. Both of them have very important tasks. She illustrates as follows:

> *"Islam has eradicated discrimination between man and woman. Woman in Islam is treated as a creature who has the same potency with what a man has. Her existence is seen harmonically as equal partner. There is no difference in status, and rights and obligation between man and woman, either as individual (servant of God), member of family, or member of society. If there is difference, it must be because of the implication of function and main task imposed to each different sex, and that does not make one sex superior over the other. Either man or woman, both have the same important task, either in the family or in social life."* (Yanggo, 2010).

In her use of references, Yanggo relies primarily on works authored by Muslim scholars, consulting texts in Indonesian and Arabic. She seldom engages with English-language materials, except occasionally through a bilingual dictionary or translated works such as Sydney Hook (1987) on human rights and Fatima Mernissi (1995) on gender. Her central concern is to provide Indonesian Muslim readers with books and articles that present Islam as authentic yet tolerant and non-discriminatory in matters of gender. To achieve this, she adopts the conventional scholarly style of descriptive and comparative analysis, typically beginning with a controversy and concluding with her own position. Overall, her thought can be characterized as that of a moderate traditionalist, marked by deep respect for the Islamic intellectual heritage.

4.1.1.2. The Qur'an

As she was trained in Islamic jurisprudence and *fiqh*, Huzaimah Tahido Yanggo uses the Qur'an in her writings as a believing Muslim woman, placing it as her main source of argumentation. For example, in discussing about jilbab, she quoted several of the verses of the Qur'an to support her Islamic view of the discussed subject. In so doing she quotes QS. 33: 59; QS.24: 31to illustrates the necessity of covering the entire of the body except face and the palm of the two for Muslim woman. She also quotes QS 33: 32, 33, 53, and 59 to advice Muslim women to behave when they interact with others particularly with other man (Ghair al-Muhrim),

to stay at home if they do not have any business to deal with, and if they do, they are advised to wear proper and Islamic cloths. In another part of her discussion, she also quotes QS. 24: 30,31; QS. 17: 32 and 85: QS. 33: 33, and 59, to illustrate the importance of wearing cloth and behaving properly for Muslim women in order them to be able to maintain dignity and respect (Yanggo, 2019).

4.1.1.3. Polygamy: A Case in Point

In discussing polygamy, Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo maintains the primacy of Qur'anic textuality, centering her analysis on Surah al-Nisā' verses 3, 129, and 19 using the official translation from the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Yanggo, 2005). Written as part of her engagement with early governmental efforts to revise Marriage Law No. 1/1974—a legal framework later amended by Law No. 16/2019, her work categorizes the discussion into four sub-themes: introduction, definition (drawing on Sidi Ghazalba), responses to Orientalist critiques, and the Islamic legal rulings on polygamy (Yanggo, 2005). To counter accusations that polygamy is an Islamic invention, she references Ahmad Muhammad Jamal's *Muftarayāt 'alā al-Islām*, which outlines historical practices in Western and Jewish traditions, including 17th-century Church Council permissions and pre-11th-century practices regarding women's social status.

Yanggo frames polygamy as an exceptional measure, affirming the classical consensus that while the Qur'an privileges monogamy, it permits a husband to take up to four wives provided he fulfills the strict conditions of justice (*'adl*), proper attitude, and fair treatment (Yanggo, 2005). Synthesizing classical sources with modern scholars, such as Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashīd Riḍā, Maḥmūd Shaltūt, Muḥammad al-Bahī, and Masyfuk Zuhdi—she reiterates Riḍā's argument that polygamy is permissible only under specific necessity. These conditions include a wife's infertility, severe illness impeding marital relations, a husband's heightened sexual needs, or demographic imbalances where women significantly outnumber men (Yanggo, 2005). Through this textual and fiqh-based approach, Yanggo upholds traditional legal boundaries while providing a structured, conditional rationale for scriptural rulings.

4.1.2. Siti Musdah Mulia

4.1.2.1. Islam

Siti Musdah Mulia articulates her theological vision through a critical engagement (*al-taʿāmul al-naqdī*) with Islamic tradition, asserting that:

> *"Islam as religion actually can be identified from humanistic values which are embedded in it. One of its elaborations is honestly confession over equality and unity of human beings. Everyone is the same in front of, and created by God, that is the One. In front of God, the difference of one from another is only the prestige and quality of one's taqwa, and talking about taqwa, only God, the One who has the prerogative right to judge it, and not humankinds."* (Mulia, 2007; Mulia, 2005).

Inspired by scriptural principles such as Qur'an 49:13, she frames *taqwa* not as a metric for human judgment, but as an expression of *tawḥīd* that dismantles human hierarchies and establishes the fundamental equality and liberation of all individuals under God (Mulia, 2005).

Building on this egalitarian foundation, Mulia positions tawḥīd as a liberating force that mandates systemic justice (*ʻadl*) across all social relations, particularly toward family members, orphans, adversaries, and marginalized groups (Mulia, 2005). She explicitly categorizes women alongside the oppressed (*al-mustaḍʻafīn*), a group that includes religious minorities, the poor, and those seeking spiritual freedom, arguing that true adherence to Islamic monotheism demands the eradication of their subjugation. By anchoring her normative vision of Islam in this radical conception of human dignity and divine justice, Mulia employs continuous *ijtihād* to reinterpret gender relations, systematically privileging scriptural narratives that affirm women's full status, rights, and public agency (Mulia, 2005).

4.1.2.2. The Qur'an and Proposal of Reform in Interpretation of the Qur'an

Siti Musdah Mulia approaches the Qur'an through a distinct epistemological framework that positions the holy text as the primary *Sumber Inspirasi Reformasi* (Source of Inspiration for Reform) grounded in the fundamental worldview of *tawḥīd* (Mulia, 2005). From this philosophical foundation, she articulates three overarching values, humanity, plurality, and equality, which she translates into seven core values: *ʻal-ʻadl* (justice), *al-maṣlaḥah* (public benefit), *al-ḥikmah* (wisdom), *al-musāwah* (equality), *al-raḥmah* (affection), *al-taʻaddudiyyah* (plurality), and *al-ḥuqūq al-insāniyyah* (human rights) (Mulia, 2007). These core values align directly with the traditional *Maqāṣid al-Sharīʻah* framework formulated by Imam al-Ghazālī—protecting religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property. To operationalize these principles, Mulia relies on two main methodological considerations: acknowledging the inherent relativity of *fiqh* as a contextual act of human *ijtihād* aimed at human *maṣlaḥah*, and applying thematic Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr mawḍūʻī*) to prevent textual distortion (Mulia, 2007).

To execute her thematic methodology, Mulia adapts the cross-referencing technique developed by Bint al-Shāṭiʾ (*ʿĀʾishah ʿAbd al-Raḥmān*), structuring her analysis in three distinct stages: establishing the lexical meaning of a key term, mapping its usage across the entire Qur'an, and synthesizing its occurrences into a holistic, interrelated framework (Mulia, 2007). This rigorous textual method operates within an open framework that explicitly connects Qur'anic teachings with contemporary global discourses on democracy, women's rights, and human rights. Mulia's capacity to bridge classical Islamic heritage with modern analytical tools was significantly enriched by her participation in specialized international training programs across Australia, Thailand, the United States, Sweden, and Bangladesh, covering civil society, human rights enforcement, leadership, and educational management (Mulia, 2007).

4.1.2.3. Polygamy: A Case in Point

Siti Musdah Mulia initiates her critique of the 1974 Marriage Law (*Undang-Undang Perkawinan/UUP*) by targeting the internal inconsistency between Article 3, which establishes monogamy as the core principle, and Article 4, which permits husbands to take up to four wives under conditions such as a wife's illness, disability, or inability to bear children. While these justifications mirror traditional legal arguments, Mulia insists they contradict the spirit of Surah al-Nisā' verse 19, which mandates proper treatment and patience toward wives (Mulia, 2007). She contends that the UUP's polygamy provisions are gender-biased and distort scriptural intent. In her reading, *Surah al-Nisā'* verse 3 primarily concerns the protection of orphans—one of the three vulnerable groups (*mustaḍʻafīn*) highlighted in the Qur'an alongside women

and slaves, meaning polygamy was revealed as a highly contextual, strictly conditional mechanism to ensure justice rather than a general male prerogative (Mulia, 2007).

To further demonstrate the human costs of polygamy, Mulia highlights prophetic precedent, noting that Prophet Muhammad practiced monogamy throughout Khadījah's lifetime and explicitly forbade 'Alī from taking a second wife to protect Fāṭimah's emotional well-being (Mulia, 2007). Grounding her arguments in human rights and democratic principles, she advocates for a total legal ban on polygamy in Indonesia, citing successful legal precedents in Tunisia (1956) and Turkey (1926) that adapted family law to modern societal advancements. Mulia argues that prohibiting polygamy is necessary to prevent child marriage, domestic violence, economic instability, and psychological harm (Mulia, 2007). Structurally framing this analysis in chapters dedicated to legal reform and human rights, she argues that Indonesia's marriage laws must be revised to align with scriptural ideals and the Prophet's best practices rather than patriarchal customs.

Mulia's broader proposal for reforming Qur'anic interpretation is fully operationalized in her examination of interfaith marriage, where she outlines a distinct "women's interpretive model" (Mulia, 2005). Grounding her introduction in the egalitarian essence of religion, she analyzes the semantic range of *nikāḥ* and *zawj* across the Qur'an to deduce five core principles of Islamic marriage: monogamy, mutual love (*mawaddah wa-raḥmah*), complementary protection, respectful association (*mu'āsharah bi al-ma'rūf*), and free partner selection (Mulia, 2005). Critiquing traditional scholars who portray women as weak, objectified, or easily misled into apostasy to justify prohibiting Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men, Mulia dismisses such reasoning as deceitful and politically motivated. She asserts that marital prohibitions must rely solely on demonstrable harm, arguing that interfaith unions should be permitted based on mutual respect, equality, and state protection, necessitating reforms in the Compilation of Islamic Law (KHI), the Marriage Law, and MUI fatwās (Mulia, 2005).

To ensure hermeneutical rigor, Mulia applies Bint al-Shāṭiʾ's thematic methodology, combining linguistic analysis, semantic mapping across the Qur'anic corpus, and contextualization (*al-siyāq al-khāṣ and al-siyāq al-'ām*) to interpret key verses on interfaith marriage, such as QS. 2:221, 60:10, and 5:5, without textual distortion (Mulia, 2005). By integrating *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* with a deconstructive hermeneutic, she positions women as equal interpretive subjects and acknowledges interfaith marriage as an unavoidable reality in pluralistic societies. Ultimately, Mulia calls on the state to step in and legally protect interfaith couples, fulfilling the core purpose of Islamic teachings: securing compassion, human dignity, and societal benefit (Mulia, 2005).

4.2. Women's Making Islam

Yanggo, and Mulia are exemplary female reformist voice of Indonesian Muslim scholars which arose in the initial phase of feminist discourse in the country (Burhanuddin and Fathurahman, 2004). Yanggo's higher education (master and doctoral degree, about 1979-1984) is a decade earlier than Mulia's. She was in fact one of Mulia's lecturers while her student took master and doctoral degree at IAIN (UIN since 2002) Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (1990-1997). Despite the natural dynamic of the discourse of Islamic thought in the Middle East in general and in Egypt in particular (Abu Rabi, 1995), Yanggo, on one hand, seemed exposed more to the dominant Islamic studies tradition which tended to revitalize the formative history

of Islam as way of life. Mulia on the other hand, was introduced to new voices and being more acceptant over Western feminist thoughts. It appeared that Yanggo's and Mulia's study at master and doctoral degree influenced their academic and activism engagement. Yanggo has limited access to non- Indonesian and Arabic literatures. She rarely uses literatures in English or in other European language. She very rarely refers to references written in English in its translated Indonesian form. In contrast, Mulia can read what Yanggo refers to, and other references written in English. As she has been quite often invited by Wester audience, she also presents her works in English.

4.2.1. Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo: Rationalization of the Traditional Wisdom, and Accepting the Tolerated New One

Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo absorbed the *salafīyah* form of Islam during her formative intellectual history at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. This Middle Eastern academic environment provided rich soil for ahl salaf thought, shaped by the legacy of Muhammad Rashid Ridha alongside prominent figures such as Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, al-Maraghi, Mutawali al-Sya'rawi, al-Ghazali, and Yusuf Qaradawi. This trajectory led her to rationalize and expand upon the rulings of previous scholars (ulama), which she considered still relevant to contemporary demands. Yanggo was not *anti-ijtihād*; rather, she appreciated rigor in scholarly deduction provided it respected established boundaries, explicitly stating: "*Kita menghargai orang berijtihad. Silakan saja berijtihad. Tapi, bila kita berijtihad jangan menyalahi aturan-aturan yang telah ada, bahkan yang telah dikenal oleh ulama-ulama Islam sedunia*" (https://www.eramuslim.com/berita/nasional/prof-dr-huzaimah-t-yanggo-gigih-patahkan-pemikiran-pemikiran-islam-liberal.htm#.WYK4MWf-Lrc. Accessed August 3, 2017).

This methodological stance was further shaped by her intended audience and institutional affiliations as a graduate lecturer in the Faculty of Syari'ah, a leading member of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), and an active scholar within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). As the first Indonesian woman to earn a doctoral degree from Al-Azhar, Yanggo found her comfort zone by supplying Indonesian Muslims with an interpretation that rendered traditional Islam relevant to modern necessities, following a path similar to her senior, Quraish Shihab. Her inclination to maintain traditional gender norms was achieved through the rationalization of traditional wisdom, framing Islam as a religion of *raḥmah* for the universe through an exclusive salafīyah methodology. This paradigm operates as a moderate path between textualist and liberal tendencies, tracing its roots to Shāfiʿī jurisprudence, Ashʿarī theology, and Ghazālian ethics (Rahman, 1984; Rahman, 2000, converted to Digital in 2003).

4.2.2. Siti Musdah Mulia: Producing New Signification of Islam

Siti Musdah Mulia deploys a contextual reading of Islamic texts that integrates the historical circumstances of Qur'anic revelation with contemporary readers' contexts, grounded in the view that Islam is fundamentally a peaceful, respectful religion for humanity and the universe (Mulia, 2011). Similar to Fazlur Rahman's hermeneutical method, this approach requires creating an analytical distance from the text to navigate history and construct a distinct narrative, while also incorporating Western scholarly traditions, such as Talcott Parsons, Letty M. Russell, Sidney Verba, A.S. Tritton, and Helen Tierney (Mulia, 2005). Although fellow

feminist scholars like Amina Wadud (1992) and Asma Barlas (2002) similarly utilize hermeneutical readings to harmonize divine text with empirical reality, Mulia distinguishes herself procedurally by using a descriptive-analytical approach focused on identifying historical facts and arguments that support justice, equality, and human dignity.

Ultimately, Mulia aims to transform interpreters' understandings of Islamic teachings and gender-related verses rather than the Qur'an itself, encouraging Muslim scholars to formulate progressive concepts for modern civilization. She anchors her feminist hermeneutics in a core theological foundation (*tawḥīd*), emphasizing that absolute submission to Allah frees human beings from all other forms of dependence and establishes absolute equality among them, where individuals are distinguished solely by their piety (*taqwā*) (Mulia, 2007). This *tauhidic* framework positions gender justice directly at the ethical and theological heart of Islamic belief (Solikha, 2025).

5. CONCLUSION

As an important articulation of female Islamic authority in Indonesia, Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo and Siti Musdah Mulia represent two distinct yet complementary trajectories within modern Islamic gender discourse. Yanggo, who pursued comparative Islamic law at Al-Azhar University during the 1980s revivalist period, adopts a traditionalist approach rooted in classical consensus and constructed kodrat, applying modern rationalizations to allow conditional polygamy while maintaining continuity with historical jurisprudence. Conversely, Mulia, educated through an open, interdisciplinary environment at IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, advocates for a complete legal prohibition of polygamy by proposing revisions to the Marriage Law (UUP), the Compilation of Islamic Law (KHI), and MUI fatwas to protect women and children. By integrating maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ’s thematic exegesis, and interdisciplinary frameworks, Mulia constructs a creative, academically oriented hermeneutic, contrasting with Yanggo’s exegetical moderation and highlighting how their respective post-graduate contexts, Yanggo’s grounding in historical ideal models versus Mulia’s engagement with reformist gender justice—bridged classical Islamic sciences with broader scholarly disciplines during the formative phase of Indonesian Islamic feminist discourse.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The completion of this article was made possible through the support of several institutions and individuals. I am indebted to PPIM for granting me the opportunity to participate in its international conference, and to Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah, particularly the Research and Publishing Center, for providing research funding in 2022. My deepest gratitude goes to my family for their unwavering encouragement throughout the writing process. I also wish to thank Irfan Sanusi for his invaluable assistance, both in administrative matters and in engaging discussions that helped refine many parts of this work.

References

Abdullah, A. (2017). Islamic studies in higher education in Indonesia: Challenges, impact and prospects for the world community. *Al-Jāmi‘ah: Journal of Islamic Studies, 55*(2), 403–404.

Ahmed, L. (1992). *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Ahmed, L. (2000). *Wanita dan gender dalam Islam: Akar-akar historis perdebatan modern*. Jakarta: Lentera.

Ali Yafie, KH. Helmi (ed.) (2017). *Jejak perjuangan keulamaan perempuan Indonesia*, Jakarta: KUPI.

Ali, K. (2006). *Sexual ethics and Islam: Feminist reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and jurisprudence*. Oxford: Oneworld.

Ali, S., & Kelly, M. (2004). Ethics and social research. In C. Seale (Ed.), *Researching society and culture* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oak, CA: Sage

Al-Qur'ān al-Karīm wa tarjamatu maʿānihi ilā al-lughah al-Indūnīsiyyah (2010). Medinah: Mujamma' Khadim al-Haramain as-Syarifain al-Malik Fahd, li thiba'at al-Mushhaf asy-Syarif.

Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., & Sorensen, C. (2010). *Introduction to research in education* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth

Azra, A. (2004). *The origins of Islamic reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'Ulama' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*. Crows Nest & Honolulu: Asian Studies Association of Australia; Allen & Unwin; University of Hawai'i Press.

Baay, Reggie (2010). *Nyai & pergundikan di Hindia Belanda* Depok: Komunitas Bambu.

Barlas, A. (2001). The Qur'an and hermeneutics: Reading the Qur'an's opposition to patriarchy. *Journal of Quranic Studies, 3*(2), 15–38.

Barlas, A. (2002). *Believing women in Islam: Unreading patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Barrie, S., Andrews, J., Dean, L., & Heimanis, I. (2010). Employability: Realising the potential of a university education. In Steve Denton & S. Brown (Eds.), *A practical guide to university and college management*. New York, NY: Routledge

Bintu al-Shatī, 'A. 'A. (1982). *Al-Qur'ān wa qaḍāyā al-insān*. Beirut: Dār al-'Ilmi li al-Malāyīn.

Bintu al-Shatī, 'Aishah 'Abdurrahmān. (1982). *Al-Qur'ān wa Qaḍāyā al-Insān*. Beirut: Dār al-'Ilmi li al-Malāyīn.

Blackburn, S. (2004). *Women and the state in modern Indonesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Burhanuddin, J. (2002). *Ulama perempuan di Indonesia*. Jakarta: Gramedia.

Burhanuddin, J., & Fathurahman, O. (Eds.). (2004). *Tentang perempuan Islam: Wacana dan gerakan*. Jakarta: Gramedia.

Burhanuddin, Jajat, and Fathurahman, Oman (eds.) (2004). *Tentang Perempuan Islam: Wacana dan Gerakan*, Jakarta: Gramadia.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2003). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Drake, Earl. (2012). *Gayatri Rajapatni: Perempuan di balik kejayaan Majapahit* Yogyakarta: Ombak.

Hallaq, Wael B. (2009). *An introduction to Islamic law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hayati, N. (2002). Profiles of women leaders and the history of women's organizations in modern Indonesia (1890 to 1945). In *Women in Indonesian society: Access, empowerment and opportunity* edited by M. Atho Mudhar et.al. Yogyakarta: Sunan Kalijaga Press. Kumar, Ann. 2008. *Prajurit Perempuan Jawa: Kesaksian Ihwal istana dan Politik Jawa Akhir Abad e-18*. Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu.

Hayati, S. (2023). Studi pemikiran Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo tentang peran perempuan di ranah publik. *USRATY: Journal of Islamic Family Law, 1*(1), 1–20.

Hefner, R. W. (2009). Islamic schools, social movements, and democracy in Indonesia. in *Making modern Muslims: The politic of Islamic education in Indonesia* edited by Robert W. Hefner Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Hidayatullah, A. A. (2012). Feminist Interpretation of the Qur'an in a comparative feminist setting. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, 28*(2): 25–45.

Hidayatullah, A. A. (2014). *Feminist edges of the Qur'an*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jamal, A. (2009). Gendered Islam and modernity in the nation-space: Women's modernism in the Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan. *Feminist Review,* 91, 9-28.

Kumar, A. (2008). *Prajurit perempuan Jawa: Kesaksian ihwal istana dan politik jaqat akhir abad ke-18.* Depok: Komunitas Bambu.

Kumar, R. (2012). *Research methodology: A step-by-step guide for beginners.* Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC.: SAGE, 3rd Edition.

Kusmana (2012). Heremeneutika Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: Al-Qur'an sebagai Wacana. In *Kanz Philosophia: A Journal for Islamic Philosophy ad Mysticism*, Vol. 2 Number 2, 265-290.

Meuleman, J. (2011). Dakwah, competition for authority and development. In *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 167. 2-3.

Muhammad, A. S. (Vol. I (2004), II (2004), III (2007), IV (2007), VII (2007), VIII (2007). *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya*. Jakarta: Kementrian Agama.

Muhammad, H. (2004). *Islam agama ramah perempuan: Pembelaan kiai pesantren*. Yogyakarta: LKiS.

Muhammad, H. (2007 4th edition, 2001 1st edition). *Fiqh Perempuan: Refleksi Kiai atas Wacana Agama dan Gender*. Yogyakarta: LKiS.

Nurdin, A. (2021). Modernization of Islamic higher education in Indonesia at a glance: Barriers and opportunities. In *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding*, *8*(3), 288-296.

Rahman, F. (1967). The qur'anic concept of God, the universe and man. *Islamic Studies, 6*(1), 1-19.

Rahman, F. (1983). Translating the Qur'an, Religion & Literature, *The Literature of Islam 20*(1), 23-30.

Reid, A. (2020). *Asia Tengggara dalam Kurun Niaga 1450-1680, Jilid 1: Tanah di Bawah Angin* Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia.

Reid, A. (2020). Asia Tenggara dalam Kurun Niaga *1450-1680, Jilid 2: Jaringan Perdagangan Global* Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia (4th ed.)

Rinaldi, M. (2020). Reformist feminism in Indonesia: The thought of Siti Musdah Mulia. *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies, 10*(1), 45–70.

Robinson, K. (2002). Gender, Islam and democracy in Indonesia. *Inside Indonesia, 71*.

Rofiah, N. (2015). Genealogi tafsir feminis di Indonesia. *Musãwa: Jurnal Studi Gender dan Islam, 14*(2), 101–120.

Rossman, G. B. & Rallis, S. F. (2012). *Learning in the Field: An introduction to qualitative research*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Shah, Z. H. (2023). The best way to interpret the Qur'an: A progressive, contextual approach. *The Muslim Times.*

Sharifi, M. H. (2020). An examination of the nature and necessity of feminist interpretation of the holy Qur'an. *Kom* (9)2: 65–85.

Shihab, M. Q. (2000). *Wawasan Al-Quran: Tafsir Maudhu'i atas pelbagai persolan umat*. Bandung: Mizan.

Shihab, M. Q. (2006). *Perempuan dari cinta sampai seks, dari nikah mut'ah sampai nikah sunnah dari bias lama sampai bias baru*. Jakarta: Lentera Hati.

Shihab, M. Q. (2006). *Tafsir al-Mishbāb: Pesan, kesan dan keserasian al-Qur'an*, Vol. 2 (2000), Vol I, Vol 4 (2001, 2003), Vol 10 (2002), Vol 5 (2002, 2004). Jakarta: Lentera Hati.

Shihab, M. Q. (2010). *Al-Qur'an dan maknanya*. Jakarta: Lentera Hati.

Suryakusuma, J. I. (2012). *Agama, seks, dan kekuasaan: Kumpulan Tulisan 1979-2012*. Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu.

Suryakusuma, J. I. (1988 1st ed., 2011). *State ibuism: The social construction of womanhood in new order Indonesia*. Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu.

Suryakusuma, J. I. (1996). The state and sexuality in new order Indonesia. In Lauri J. Sears (Ed.) *Fantazing the Feminine in Indonesia*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Tan, Charlene, (2011). *Islamic education and indoctrination: The case in Indonesia* New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

van Bruinessesn, M. (2015). *Kitab kuning, pesantren dan tarekat* Yogyakarta: Gading Publishing.

Wadud, A. (1999). *Qur'an and woman: Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wadud, A. (2021). Reflections on Islamic Feminist Exegesis of the Qur'an. *Religions, 12*(7), 497.

Wadud, A. (1999). *Qur'an and woman: Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wadud, A. (2021). Reflections on Islamic feminist exegesis of the Qur'an. *Religions, 12*(7), 497.

Wadud, A. (Summer, 2005). Women's identity and the Qur'an: A new reading by Nimat Hafez Barazangi. *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 59, No. 1, Democratization and Civil Society, 510-511.

Yin, R. K., (2005). *Studi kasus: Desain & metode*. Jakarta: Rajawali Press.

Youssef, O. (2022). Text and context in Qur'ānic interpretation. *Almuslih*.

Yulia, H. (2024). Kepemimpinan perempuan di ranah kekuasaan khusus (studi komparatif pendapat Siti Musdah Mulia dan Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo). *Undergraduate thesis*, UIN Prof. K.H. Saifuddin Zuhri Purwokerto.

Zulkarnain, I. (2024). Gender equality and Islamic law in Indonesia: The contributions of Huzaemah Tahido Yanggo and Siti Musdah Mulia. *Thesis.* PTIQ Jakarta.