



ISLAM AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

ISLAM DAN PERAN PEREMPUAN DI RUANG PUBLIK

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Abstract

This article examines the role of Muslim women in the public sphere using a systematic literature review approach. By integrating indexed scientific sources, gender theory, and Islamic studies, this research aims to outline the evolution of women's roles from historical to contemporary perspectives. Historical approaches and methodological frameworks are employed to structure arguments systematically, covering the basic Islamic concept of women's roles, the methodology applied in the literature review, analysis of social dynamics and relevant case studies, and critical discussion of challenges and opportunities faced by women in the public sphere. This study also identifies internal and external factors that influence women's roles, ranging from geographical context to public policy developments. The findings show that interpretations of the concept of equality in Islam have shifted over time and are shaped by socio-political dynamics. This research is expected to stimulate further academic debate on women's roles in the public sphere and contribute to more inclusive policies. This article explores various historical and contemporary dimensions that shape the role of Muslim women in the public sphere, highlighting both the potential and challenges in translating Islamic values of equality into policy and social practice. It is hoped that this study will enrich academic discourse on the relationship between religion, gender, and modernity, and pave the way for policy initiatives that support women's empowerment in the Islamic world.

Keywords : Muslim Women, Public Sphere, Islam, Literature Review, Gender, Social Dynamics.



Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji peran perempuan Muslim di ranah publik dengan menggunakan pendekatan tinjauan pustaka sistematis. Dengan mengintegrasikan sumber-sumber ilmiah terindeks, teori gender, dan studi Islam, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memaparkan evolusi peran perempuan dari perspektif historis hingga kontemporer. Pendekatan historis dan kerangka kerja metodologis digunakan untuk menyusun argumen secara sistematis, yang mencakup konsep dasar Islam mengenai peran perempuan, metodologi tinjauan pustaka, analisis dinamika sosial dan studi kasus yang relevan, serta pembahasan kritis mengenai tantangan dan peluang yang dihadapi perempuan di ranah publik. Studi ini juga mengidentifikasi faktor internal dan eksternal yang memengaruhi peran perempuan, mulai dari konteks geografis hingga perkembangan kebijakan publik. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa interpretasi terhadap konsep kesetaraan dalam Islam telah mengalami pergeseran seiring waktu dan dibentuk oleh dinamika sosial-politik. Penelitian ini diharapkan dapat mendorong perdebatan akademis lebih lanjut mengenai peran perempuan di ranah publik serta berkontribusi pada perumusan kebijakan yang lebih inklusif. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi berbagai dimensi historis dan kontemporer yang membentuk peran perempuan Muslim di ranah publik, dengan menyoroti potensi maupun tantangan dalam menerjemahkan nilai-nilai kesetaraan Islam ke dalam kebijakan dan praktik sosial. Studi ini diharapkan dapat memperkaya diskursus akademis mengenai hubungan antara agama, gender, dan modernitas, serta membuka jalan bagi inisiatif kebijakan yang mendukung pemberdayaan perempuan di dunia Islam.

Kata Kunci : Perempuan Muslim, Ruang Publik, Islam, Tinjauan Pustaka, Gender, Dinamika Sosial.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the history of Islamic thought, the role of women has always been a complex and multidimensional topic. Traditionally, interpretations of women's roles in Muslim societies have often been linked to religious values, local culture, and evolving social norms. However, debates over women's roles in the public sphere have also undergone significant transformation alongside the rise of feminist movements and paradigm shifts in gender studies. This article examines the role of Muslim women by tracing historical, contemporary, and policy-related challenges within the context of the public sphere. The study is motivated by several key issues: how Islamic concepts shape understandings of women's roles in public life, how interpretations of Islamic teachings have evolved in modern social contexts, and what implications this has for women's participation in political, economic, and cultural dynamics. Using a systematic literature review approach, this article offers a critical analysis of women's roles from two main perspectives: historical and contemporary. This study targets academics, researchers, and practitioners in the fields of religious and gender studies, and contributes to a deeper understanding of the social dynamics that shape Muslim women's roles in the public sphere.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopts a systematic literature review method to identify, evaluate, and analyze relevant literature on women's roles in the public sphere within an Islamic context. This method is chosen because it allows researchers to integrate various indexed data sources—primarily reputable journals—and apply strict inclusion and exclusion criteria. The research stages include: (1) formulating specific research questions, (2) identifying potential literature sources through databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, (3) filtering articles based on topic relevance, publication year (focusing on literature from the last 10 years), and methodological quality, (4) extracting data and identifying key variables, and (5) analyzing and synthesizing findings through comparative analysis. The main research questions are: How do Islamic concepts historically ground women's roles in the public sphere? How do case studies across regions demonstrate variations in



women's roles within local and global contexts? Data analysis is conducted qualitatively, integrating findings from multiple case studies, policy analyses, and in-depth theories of gender and Islamic studies. Data reliability and validity are ensured through cross-verification of indexed literature sources.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

1. Historical Assessment of Women's Roles in Muslim Societies

Early Islamic history records women as active members of society. In the context of Medina and the early spread of Islam, women played strategic roles in economic, educational, and community-level decision-making (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Ahmed, 2005). Historical documents and oral traditions show that women held rights to property ownership, participated in trade, and even advocated for their views in social settings. However, interpretations of these roles shifted alongside political and cultural developments across different regions. Studies by Mernissi (1991) and Wadud (1999) note that religious discourse on women's roles became increasingly codified and at times restrictive in certain contexts, despite historical evidence supporting women's active participation in public life.

2 Contemporary Transformation and Social Dynamics

In the contemporary era, globalization and the rise of feminist movements have triggered a paradigm shift in understandings of women's roles in the public sphere. Muslim women are no longer merely recipients of traditional interpretations, but agents of change who critique and renew interpretations of religious teachings. Contemporary research reveals that women are active across sectors including education, politics, and the economy, significantly reshaping social dynamics in many Muslim-majority countries (Boutouta, 2011; Mahmood, 2012). Case studies from countries such as Morocco, Turkey, and Indonesia show a resurgence of women's engagement in local politics, participation in civil society organizations, and collaborative efforts to advocate for legal reforms related to gender equality (Mahmood, 2012; Hasan & Nasr, 2016). These initiatives are often driven by critical rethinking of religious interpretations toward more progressive and inclusive frameworks, as highlighted by academic scholarship in Islamic and gender studies (Mahmood, 2012; Wadud, 1999).

3 Case Study: Women's Participation in Indonesia

Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, offers a compelling illustration of the evolution of women's roles in the public sphere. Historically, women in the Indonesian archipelago have played key roles in local communities and kinship systems, both in customary leadership and interactions with Islamic legal frameworks (Hidayat, 2014; Rofiq, 2017). In contemporary times, increased women's participation is visible in education, politics, and the economy. Women are involved not only in non-governmental organizations but also actively serve in legislative and executive bodies (Suryadinata, 2015). Research by Riyadi (2018) emphasizes that this transformation is closely tied to social change and policy reforms supporting women's empowerment. Analysis of statistical data shows significant growth in women's participation in higher education and entrepreneurship, reinforcing the argument that reinterpretations of Islamic teachings have expanded the scope of women's public engagement.

4 Islamic Concepts as a Foundation for Women's Roles

When interpreted contextually, the concept of equality in Islam holds potential to facilitate women's participation in the public sphere. Theories such as Islamic feminism argue that principles of justice and equality in the Quran can serve as a foundation for social and religious reform (Badran, 2009; Mernissi, 1991). In examining religious texts, some scholars emphasize justice (*adl*) and compassion (*rahmah*) as core values that promote women's active roles. Hermeneutical approaches to Quranic studies have created space for more progressive reinterpretations, contributing positively to social dynamics and women's empowerment (Ahmed, 2005; Wadud, 1999). By linking these religious principles with modern gender theory, this study underscores the importance of dialogue between



religious tradition and evolving social values, enabling productive collaboration between gender groups and religious institutions (Boutouta, 2011; Mahmood, 2012).

Discussion

1. Interpretive Dynamics and Social Challenges

Discourse on women's roles in the public sphere within Islamic contexts reveals complex interactions between tradition, religious interpretation, and modern social issues. Despite historical evidence supporting women's active participation, structural barriers and conservative interpretations often hinder the realization of gender equality in practice. Factors such as patriarchy, cultural norms, and identity politics strongly shape how women are positioned in public life (Mahmood, 2012; Badran, 2009). In many cases, there is a gap between Islam's foundational principles and their real-world implementation, as reflected in ongoing discrimination against women in access to education, employment, and political participation across several countries (Hasan & Nasr, 2016). Critical evaluation of national policies and local practices demands collaborative action from governments, religious institutions, and civil society organizations to realize progressive religious interpretations.

2. Evolution of Women's Roles through Gender Theory

Analyzing women's roles in Muslim societies requires a theoretical framework that integrates feminist and Islamic studies perspectives. Theories such as intersectionality and the social construction of gender provide relevant analytical tools for understanding how women negotiate religious and social norms. Mahmood (2012) and Ahmed (2005) explain that women's roles cannot be separated from existing social structures and public policies. Islamic feminist theory highlights the potential for social transformation through reinterpretations of religious teachings that emphasize justice and equality. Here, women are not merely objects of interpretation but active subjects who shape religious and social agendas. This approach aligns with findings from the systematic literature review, which identifies a correlation between increased women's participation and reforms in the interpretation of religious texts (Badran, 2009; Wadud, 1999).

3. Case Studies as Reflections of Local Dynamics

Regional case studies offer concrete examples of how women navigate public sphere challenges. In Indonesia, for instance, initiatives that combine religious values with social action have expanded women's participation across sectors. For example, women's movements in Central Java and Bali have advanced empowerment agendas through education, entrepreneurship, and advocacy for more gender-responsive legal reforms (Riyadi, 2018; Suryadinata, 2015). Similar trends appear in other Muslim-majority countries such as Turkey and Morocco. In Turkey, for example, gender equality policies driven by domestic and international pressure have increased women's participation in politics and the economy (Hasan & Nasr, 2016). These developments confirm that paradigm shifts in religious interpretation can play a vital role in opening opportunities for women's fuller public engagement.

4. Policy Implications and Academic Recommendations

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both public policy and academic discourse. For policy, structural reforms are needed to support the implementation of gender equality values within Islamic legal frameworks. Governments and religious institutions should adopt inclusive approaches that enable reinterpretations of religious teachings responsive to social dynamics and women's needs. Academically, this article recommends expanding cross-disciplinary research integrating gender studies, anthropology, sociology, and theology. Future studies should use empirical methods to quantitatively measure the impact of policy reforms on women's participation across regions. A multidisciplinary approach is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between Islamic principles and social practice. Academic recommendations also emphasize the need for dialogue between scholars, policymakers, and religious leaders to build shared understanding that supports interpretive reforms of religious texts contributing to women's empowerment.



4. CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that the role of Muslim women in the public sphere has undergone significant evolution, spanning historical contributions to contemporary dynamics shaped by globalization and feminist movements. The systematic literature review confirms that interpretations of Islamic teachings are not static, but can be reformed to meet demands for equality and social justice. Despite structural challenges and cultural barriers, long-term shifts in women's participation across public sectors show that Islamic values of justice hold strong potential for empowering women—when interpreted through progressive frameworks. Case studies from Indonesia and other Muslim-majority countries provide empirical evidence of these dynamics. Finally, this study calls for cross-sector dialogue between religious institutions, academics, and policymakers to build an inclusive public sphere responsive to gender needs. Collaborative efforts are expected to overcome structural constraints that hinder women's full participation in social, economic, and political life.

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