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The Evolving Role of Women in Contemporary Indonesian Da'wah

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Abstract

Since *the advent of Islam, women have played a significant role in shaping social and religious dynamics, epitomized by figures like Khadijah bint Khuwaylid. This study employs a qualitative library research method, utilizing content and thematic analysis of relevant literature, to explore the patterns and implications of women's roles in contemporary Islamic preaching (da'wah) from a gender studies perspective. Using Indonesia as a case study, the research investigates how communication strategies in da'wah shape religious beliefs and behaviors. The findings reveal that while traditional structures often limit women to supportive roles, the rise of digital platforms and female leadership in Muslim-majority countries has facilitated a significant shift. The analysis identifies three key themes: the reclamation of female Islamic scholarship, the use of social media for creating inclusive religious narratives, and the strategic negotiation of gender norms within religious discourse. The study concludes that empowering women in da'wah is crucial not only for gender equity but also for fostering a more dynamic and responsive Islamic discourse in the modern era, offering a critical framework for understanding the evolving agency of Muslim women in religious spheres.*

Keywords : Da'wah, Education, Role of Women

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of Islam, women have played a significant role in shaping social and religious dynamics. One of the most prominent examples is Khadijah bint Khuwailid, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, who was known as a successful businesswoman as well as a key supporter of the early Islamic mission. Khadijah's strategic role was not limited to domestic responsibilities as the mother of the household, but also extended to providing financial, emotional, and intellectual support for the Prophet Muhammad's religious mission. This reflects women's capacity to contribute actively in various areas of life, including social, economic, and religious spheres. In the Qur'an, the concept of egalitarianism—emphasizing the balance between men and women—is strongly affirmed, providing a theological foundation for women's participation in both social and religious life. Verses that stress justice and shared responsibility demonstrate that Islam, from its inception, acknowledged women's potential for active roles in society, both as individuals and as members of the community. However, the implementation of these principles in real life often faces challenges due to culturally biased interpretations of religion that are influenced by patriarchal norms. (Masruri, 2012)

Di Indonesia, wanita memiliki sejarah panjang dalam berkontribusi pada pembangunan nasional, termasuk partisipasi dalam perjuangan kemerdekaan dan gerakan reformasi sosial. Meskipun peran signifikan mereka telah diakui, keterlibatan wanita di sektor publik masih terbatas. Keterbatasan ini sering kali berakar pada budaya patriarki yang dominan, stereotip gender, misogini, dan interpretasi agama yang bias faktor-faktor yang kerap menghalangi wanita untuk mengambil peran kepemimpinan (Masruri, 2012). Dalam konteks ini, perspektif dari feminis Muslim menawarkan sudut pandang progresif dengan menekankan bahwa reinterpretasi teks-teks agama dapat menjadi langkah strategis untuk mendukung pemberdayaan perempuan. Berbagai aliran pemikiran feminis Muslim mencerminkan pendekatan yang beragam, yang dibentuk oleh konteks budaya dan latar sosiopolitik. Feminisme Reformis, misalnya, berupaya mereformasi interpretasi Islam yang berlaku dengan berfokus pada penafsiran ulang teks-teks agama, dengan tokoh seperti Amina Wadud dan Fatima Mernissi yang menganjurkan pembacaan ulang Al-Qur'an melalui lensa yang sensitif gender. Sementara itu, Feminisme Akademik yang diwakili oleh pemikir seperti Ziba Mir-Hosseini dan Asma Barlas, menekankan penelitian ilmiah untuk mendekonstruksi teks agama dan praktik budaya yang melanggengkan bias gender. Feminisme Progresif berusaha mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai feminis global dengan prinsip-prinsip Islam, dengan Musdah Mulia sebagai tokoh terkemuka yang aktif mempromosikan kesetaraan gender dalam wacana Islam Indonesia. Terakhir, Feminisme Budaya-Agama muncul dari komunitas religius tradisional seperti pesantren dan berfokus pada pemberdayaan perempuan melalui pendidikan Islam; aliran ini diwakili oleh organisasi seperti Fatayat NU, yang berkomitmen untuk memperjuangkan hak-hak perempuan dalam kerangka budaya dan agama yang diterima. Aliran-aliran ini, meskipun berbeda dalam pendekatan, memiliki keyakinan bersama bahwa Islam dapat menjadi dasar untuk mengejar keadilan genderMuslim feminist streams represent diverse approaches in the struggle for gender equality. Despite their differences, they share a common belief that Islam can serve as a foundational basis for pursuing gender justice—through understanding and reinterpreting its teachings in accordance with contemporary contexts. One of the major challenges faced by these movements is navigating criticism from both conservative religious groups and secular feminist circles, while also striving to find a balance between Islamic values and the demands of modern feminist discourse.

A study by Rifai (2021) shows that the Qur'an can be interpreted as a guide for promoting a more gender-equitable society. Through this approach, women are given greater opportunities to contribute optimally in various spheres of life. Awareness of the importance of gender equality continues to grow amid rapid social transformation. The Indonesian government has adopted a gender mainstreaming policy as an effort to integrate gender perspectives across various sectors of life. This policy not only aims to address gender inequality but also seeks to create equal opportunities for both women and men. (Rifai, 2020).

In the context of Islamic education, gender mainstreaming (*Pengarusutamaan Gender* or PUG) serves as a strategy to ensure that gender-related issues are acknowledged and implemented systematically. This approach is expected to create broader opportunities for women to take active roles in public spaces—as educators, preachers, leaders, and agents of change within religious institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and madrasas. This strategy aligns with Islamic values that emphasize justice and equality without discrimination based on gender. (Khozin, 2011). Islamic organizations such as Muslimat NU, Aisyiyah, Persistri, and Women of Persis exemplify the real transformation of women's roles in Indonesian society. These organizations are not only active in education and religious outreach (*da'wah*), but also run comprehensive women's empowerment programs that have a wide-reaching social impact. For instance, these women's organizations have established early childhood education institutions and Qur'anic learning centers throughout Indonesia, aiming to nurture a qualified future generation. With an approach rooted in values of equality, Indonesian women today are not only active in religious preaching but also hold strategic leadership roles that significantly influence both social and religious life. This transformation reflects the strengthening of women's positions as key agents of change in the public sphere.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach utilizing library research methods to investigate women's roles in contemporary Islamic da'wah from a gender studies perspective. The research process follows the framework proposed by Adlini et al. (2022), encompassing several systematic stages. First, relevant literature was identified through comprehensive searches of academic databases and library catalogs, focusing on sources related to gender studies, Islamic da'wah, and women's leadership in religious contexts. Second, selected materials were critically read and annotated to extract significant information and emerging patterns.

The analytical process employed both content analysis and thematic interpretation to ensure comprehensive data examination. Content analysis was applied to systematically categorize and code textual data from various sources, enabling the identification of recurring themes and discursive patterns regarding women's participation in da'wah activities. Thematic interpretation was then utilized to develop deeper insights into the contextual factors and underlying meanings embedded in the literature. This involved iterative reading and constant comparison techniques to identify, analyze, and report themes within the data, particularly focusing on how gender dynamics shape women's roles in Islamic preaching.

To maintain academic rigor, all sources were meticulously documented in a structured bibliography, and the research process was carefully managed through systematic time allocation and regular review cycles. This methodological approach ensures the reliability and validity of the findings while providing a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Role of Women in Contemporary Da'wah Movements in the Indonesian Muslim Community

As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia serves as a central hub for various forms of Islamic *da'wah* (preaching). A wide range of communication methods and media are used to disseminate religious messages, including sermons in mosques, television and radio programs, and digital platforms such as social media (Maulana, Saefullah, Konten, & Sukayat, 2020). Despite its tremendous potential, Islamic da'wah communication in Indonesia faces various challenges, as it must navigate a diverse society composed of different ethnicities, cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds. As Prianto (2023) notes, "preaching must be delivered while taking these differences into account." Women play a vital role in the communication of *da'wah* in Indonesia, contributing significantly to the dissemination of Islamic teachings and influencing social and cultural transformation within the community (Hasanah, 2017). Their contributions can be categorized into several key areas:

a. Religious Educators in the Domestic Sphere
   Women often serve as key agents in spreading religious messages within the household. They act as spiritual educators for family members, including children and spouses, thereby playing a significant role in shaping the religious values and moral foundation of the family (Choiron, 2017).
b. Social and Community Engagement
   In the broader social sphere, women actively participate in community-based *da'wah* initiatives. These include involvement in social empowerment programs, charitable activities, and religious study groups, all of which contribute to improving the spiritual and social welfare of their communities.
c. Digital Da'wah through Media and Technology
   Women are increasingly using digital platforms and computer-based technology to disseminate Islamic teachings. They produce and share religious content in various forms, including articles, short films, and podcasts. Rohman (2019) emphasizes that "the development of technology and media has had a significant impact on the communication of Islamic preaching in Indonesia."
d. Promoting Interfaith Harmony and Tolerance
   Women also play a crucial role as mediators in interfaith and intercultural communication. By participating in interreligious dialogues, they help to foster mutual understanding, social harmony, and peaceful coexistence in Indonesia's pluralistic society.
e. Moral and Religious Instruction for Future Generations
   As religious teachers and both formal and informal educators, women contribute significantly to the development of young people's religious understanding and practice. They serve as role models and provide guidance on Islamic morals and values (Solehuddin & Wahib, 2020).
f. Agents of Social and Political Change

Through involvement in social and political activism grounded in Islamic principles, women act as agents of change in society. Their participation in movements advocating for justice, gender equality, human rights, and other humanitarian values reflects their growing influence in shaping public discourse (Ernanda, 2023).

g. Leadership in Religious and Community Organizations

Women also hold leadership positions in Islamic religious and community-based organizations. They are actively involved in institutions focused on *da'wah*, community development, and promoting women's active participation in both religious and social life.

2. How Gender Studies Perspectives Influence Interpretations of Women's Roles in Preaching

With Appearance women in various field show that has happen shift paradigm in The emergence of women in various public spheres reflects a paradigmatic shift in societal thinking and the way women's roles are evaluated in social and political domains, both in Western societies and in the Islamic world—especially in Indonesia. The growing visibility of women occupying leadership roles such as presidents, prime ministers, and cabinet ministers in various countries, including Indonesia, has triggered extensive debates and discussions among scholars and religious experts.

One significant moment in this discourse occurred during the 1999 *Congress of Indonesian Muslims*, which controversially recommended that Islam prohibits women from serving as heads of state or presidents. This provocative suggestion sparked intense debates and revealed deep disagreements among Islamic scholars and the broader Muslim community. A central point of contention is the interpretation of verses from the Qur'an particularly Surah An-Nisa (4:34)**:**

> *Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means..." (Qur'an 4:34)*

This verse has often been cited to support male leadership and the subordination of women. However, from a gender studies perspective, scholars challenge traditional interpretations, arguing that such readings are heavily influenced by patriarchal contexts and do not reflect the ethical universality of the Qur'an. Gender studies offer a critical lens through which religious texts are re-examined, emphasizing historical, linguistic, and contextual factors that shape interpretation. Despite the controversies, women have been elected to the highest political offices in several Muslim-majority countries, including Indonesia. This reality challenges rigid interpretations and necessitates new theological understandings that reconcile Islamic teachings with contemporary gender roles. Moreover, Islamic history itself demonstrates the active participation of women in various spheres of life, including leadership, education, commerce, and religious scholarship.

Although women have been elected to presidential and other political leadership positions, controversy surrounding gender perspectives in Islam

continues to persist. These debates often revolve around differing interpretations of religious texts concerning women's roles in leadership. Nevertheless, Islamic history shows that women have actively participated in various aspects of social life, including politics, education, commerce, and religious matters. This is illustrated in Surah Al-Mumtahanah (60:12), which acknowledges women's capacity for moral agency and their active participation in religious and social contracts:

> *"O Prophet! When believing women come to you to give you the pledge that they will not associate anything with Allah, nor steal, nor commit adultery, nor kill their children, nor utter slander, intentionally forging falsehood, and that they will not disobey you in what is right—then accept their pledge and ask Allah to forgive them. Verily, Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful."* (Qur'an 60:12)

This verse provides evidence of women's engagement in formal pledges and public commitments during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, demonstrating their recognition as responsible moral subjects in both spiritual and social dimensions. As a result, it is clear that Islam, as a religion grounded in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, views women and men as spiritually and ethically equal in terms of rights and responsibilities. While Islam acknowledges natural and functional differences between the sexes, it calls for mutual respect, cooperation, and appreciation between men and women. Therefore, both genders are to be seen as complementary partners in the shared task of upholding justice, faith, and social responsibility.

3. Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Women in the Contemporary Da'wah Movement

Muslim women involved in contemporary Islamic education and preaching often confront a range of challenges that can limit their academic and public participation. Among the most significant difficulties are:

a. Stereotypes and Prejudice, muslim women frequently face societal biases and stereotypes that undermine their capabilities. These negative perceptions can create psychological barriers and institutional limitations that hinder their ability to achieve academic and professional potential.
b. Limited Access to Quality Education, in several parts of the world, Muslim women still struggle to access high-quality education. Challenges such as poverty, gender-based discrimination, and inadequate educational infrastructure disproportionately affect their opportunities for intellectual development and professional advancement.
c. Balancing Multiple Roles, the harmonization of social and familial obligations with academic or professional aspirations remains a major difficulty. Muslim women are often expected to fulfill traditional roles as wives and mothers, which can place added pressure and constraints on their academic progress and career growth.

Despite these challenges, Muslim women scholars play a vital role in addressing critical issues in contemporary Islamic education and thought. In such

contexts, they are required to think critically and creatively to offer relevant solutions to the complex problems facing modern Muslim societies. Moreover, it is essential for Muslim women to continue defending their right to education, self-development, and active participation in shaping the intellectual and religious landscape of their communities.

Muslim women scholars play an essential role in addressing the issues currently affecting Islamic education and thought. In this context, they are expected to think critically and creatively in order to provide solutions to the challenges facing contemporary Muslim societies. Furthermore, Muslim women must be able to assert and preserve their rights to education and personal development, as these are fundamental to their meaningful participation in religious. A number of opportunities available to women in contemporary da'wah include:

1. Social media, a form of mass media oriented toward personal needs and interaction, has emerged as a powerful platform for spreading religious teachings and values among Muslims. In the context of da'wah, social media provides a strategic space for conveying Islamic messages to a broad audience. It has significantly contributed to the rise of popular Islamic preachers in Indonesia, showcasing how digital platforms have opened up new arenas for religious discourse and identity formation. (Khumaedi & Fatimah, 2019)
2. Da’wah and Education, da'wah is understood as a noble activity, conducted through speech, writing, or behavior, and carried out systematically with the aim of influencing individuals or groups to develop awareness, attitudes, and appreciation of Islamic teachings—without coercion. (Sumadi, 2016) Islam promotes the equality of men and women in both reward and responsibility. As more women become visible in the public sphere, their role in da'wah has grown significantly. Prominent female preachers such as Mamah Dedeh, Ustadzah Oki Setiana Dewi, and Ustadzah Halimah Alaydrus exemplify this progress, contributing to public religious knowledge and discourse.
3. Modern female preachers have adapted to the shift from traditional print media to digital and internet-based platforms. Devices such as smartphones and tablets facilitate their engagement with various communication technologies including WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. This transition has expanded the reach and impact of women's da'wah, especially in addressing contemporary issues such as misinformation about Islam, social problems, and moral crises. The Qur'an emphasizes the importance of wisdom and ethics in conveying religious messages. Surah al-Nahl (16:125) states: *"Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in the best way. Indeed, your Lord is most knowing of who has strayed from His way, and He is most knowing of who is rightly guided."* This verse supports the involvement of women in da'wah, both in private and public spaces, including on social media—provided that the message is delivered with wisdom and decorum.

CONCLUSION

In Indonesia, Islamic preaching communication plays a vital role in shaping religious beliefs and behaviors. As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia utilizes diverse strategies and media channels—from traditional sermons to digital platforms—to disseminate Islamic messages. While this landscape holds vast potential, it also presents significant challenges, particularly for women who encounter unique obstacles in fully participating in the da'wah movement. Nonetheless, Islam's core principle of equal spiritual and moral responsibility for men and women provides a foundational basis for their inclusion.

To translate this principle into practice and foster a more inclusive and progressive Islamic society, several practical implications emerge. Firstly, Islamic educational institutions should integrate gender perspectives into their curricula and actively promote women into leadership and scholarly positions within these institutions. Secondly, religious organizations and government bodies can develop targeted capacity-building programs to equip women with advanced skills in religious interpretation, public speaking, and digital media for da'wah. Finally, policy frameworks that actively support and fund women-led da'wah initiatives are crucial to creating a more representative and dynamic religious public sphere. By implementing these recommendations, the Indonesian da'wah landscape can not only overcome existing barriers but also harness the full potential of its female population to address the complex challenges of modern society.

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