

THE CONVERSATION

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Theology students sit an exam at the Islamic University in Jakarta. Photo by Idris Thaha, Author provided

Indonesian Muslim women engage with feminism

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Can a Muslim be a feminist? Many Muslim women and men have fought for liberation, justice and freedom, but some still question if feminism and Islam are aligned.

The practice of Muslim women wearing headscarves is often taken as a sign that they are objectified through religious practices. Genital mutilation, child marriage, domestic violence and polygamy in Muslim majority societies are practices said to be based on Islamic teachings.

This leads to the argument that being a Muslim means one lacks “agency” as one must submit to certain teachings.

Western feminism understands agency as a self-realisation and freedom for everyone to exercise their free will. Therefore, they should not be subject to tradition, culture or social coercion.

Indonesia’s first feminist



Indonesia's first feminist and national hero, Kartini. Tropenmuseum, part of the National Museum of World Cultures via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA

Stories of Indonesia's early feminist, Kartini, and the recent world-first female Muslim clerics congress in Indonesia both offer insights in this discussion. They highlight the struggle of Muslim women for equality, justice and freedom.

A national hero, Kartini was a young woman fighting against feudalistic and patriarchal Javanese culture founded on diverse foreign values, including Hinduism, Islam and Western colonialism. In her time (she was born in 1879), education was not for girls. Society's expectation was only for girls to become a wife, give birth and look after children.

Her story, which has recently been made into a feature film in Indonesia, suggests her ideas about equality were influenced by her Dutch friends. But it was also Kartini's encounter with Islamic teachings that allowed her to learn that the Quran guaranteed equality for men and women.

Tragically, although she campaigned against polygamy, her ailing father's request forced Kartini to accept marriage to a man who already had three wives.

Female clerics taking over

As if in the steps of Kartini, the gathering of almost 500 female religious scholars in Cirebon, West Java, is a milestone in Muslim women's fight for equality.

The well-versed clerics are leaders of Islamic boarding schools and preachers. They believe gender equality is guaranteed in Islam and that the Quran, the source of Islamic teachings, is not misogynistic. The subjugation of women has instead been influenced by the male domination of Quranic interpretation.

Since the time of the Prophet, the authority to read and interpret the Quran has always been in the hands of men. In the congress, female religious scholars from the Middle East and the region passionately discussed strategies to take over this space and gain authority.

Zainah Anwar of Sisters in Islam. Albert Gea/Reuters

Malaysian Zainah Anwar, the founder of Sisters in Islam, delivered a passionate speech about fighting male domination in Quranic interpretation.

She told congress participants Islam gives women the right to define what Islam is. It is important for women to initiate reform and participate in public policy within the framework of Islam, the Indonesian constitution and universal human rights and women's rights, she said.

The clerics believed complex issues like child marriage, domestic violence, polygamy and women's role in combating the rise of radicalism could only be challenged if women took the lead in the interpretation of Islamic teachings.

Polygamy was one of the prominent themes in the congress. Ruhaini Dzuhayatin, a former human rights official at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, told the audience she always had to argue against her male colleagues in various meetings on women's rights, and on polygamy in particular.

She said: "I told them it [polygamy] is not the teaching of Islam and I use verses in the Quran to support my argument."

The audience responded with a big round of applause.

Nur Rofiah, a professor in Quranic studies, explored how men have exploited particular verses to justify taking additional wives. According to Nur, Islam says every human being has to elevate the status of humankind, and polygamy does not.

At the congress, the female clerics released a fatwa to lift the minimum age for girls to marry to 18. The Indonesian Marriage Law stipulates 16 as the minimum marrying age for girls.

Although a fatwa does not have legal force in Indonesia, by issuing it the female clerics have taken a bold stand. Fatwa-making is traditionally a male-dominated field.

By taking this approach, the female clerics are attempting to open Muslim women's minds to the idea that they should not only listen to male clerics on questions affecting their identity as Muslim women.

Muslim women's agency

The idea that Muslim women lack agency is hard to reconcile with this vibrant new network of intellectual women. They no longer accept becoming victims of male domination and they use Islamic teachings to challenge patriarchal practices. They take advantage of any available public avenue to express their need for independence, to be seen and heard.

Does this make them feminists? If they look upon their faith as one source of inspiration that motivates and helps them to achieve strength and independence, then Indonesia has millions.