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Why are Women Subordinated? The Misrepresentation of the Qur'an in Indonesian Discourse and Practice

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Why are Women Subordinated? The Misrepresentation of the Qur'an in Indonesian Discourse and Practice

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Abstract

Discourse and gender practices show that women occupy a weak position in Indonesia. Women are portrayed as their husbands' "companions", or as "complementary" to a male-centered system. This article aims to explore unilateral interpretations of the Qur'an that ignores verses that venerate women. Misrepresentations of verses that honour women, or erroneous reading of said verses, have caused women to be disadvantaged in public discourse, in social practice, and in policy. By analysing the Qur'an and hadiths, as well as a series of interviews, this article shows that arguments promoting gender inequality are founded on the deliberate selection of specific Qur'anic verses and hadiths in ways that reproduce existing social inequalities. As such, the interpretation process is biased by the patriarchal structures of contemporary Indonesia. A theoretical reading of various texts also shows that the positioning of women as subordinates has historical roots that can be conceptually recognised.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Subordination, Indonesian Muslim Discourse, Qur'anic Interpretation

Introduction

In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, women are frequently perceived as unequal to men as a result of local patriarchal cultures and religious understandings. There has been what might be called "discrimination" against women by some Muslims in Indonesia, citing discourses about the position of women in Islam (Muhammad, 2019). In global discourses regarding gender equality in Islam, women have also been understood as being positioned as subordinate by Islam, and as such they have limited space in social, economic, and

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political life (Syed 2009; Rinaldo 2011; Prihatini 2019). This has contributed to women's limited autonomy when determining their futures (Brenner 1996; Kabeer 2005; Warren 2018). A number of Islam's teachings have been interpreted in order to buttress men's dominance and limit women's agency. Sentences such as "women came from the rib bone of Adam" (i.e. a man), "women accompany men", and "women are the clothing of men" have been understood as guidelines for positioning women, and thus been continuously reproduced through public discourse. In many sermons and Islamic texts, such sentences are quoted to justify the subordinate positioning of women. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, an internationally reputed author and Muslim feminist, asks, "Why do Islamic jurisprudential texts—which define the terms of the sharia—treat women as second-class citizens and place them under men's domination?" (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, 633). These jurisprudential texts, which Mir-Hosseini considers little more than the interpretations of humans, have a strong patriarchal spirit that has limited their ability to provide justice and equality.

This inequality traces its roots to pre-Islamic (*jahiliyyah*) times, when women were placed subordinately. Yusuf Qardhawi (2007), a classical Muslim scholar, explains that the cultural context when the Prophet Muhammad first began spreading Islam crucially influenced the religion's gender values; the patriarchy of Arab culture strongly influenced how women were understood and treated (Intan 2014; Abidin 2015; Mehregan 2016). Women lacked the power to shed the shackles of suppression placed upon them by men, including their closest family members (fathers, brothers, and husbands). The Prophet could not directly challenge gender inequality, and these pre-Islamic values did not simply vanish with the revelation of Islam.

Various patriarchal interpretations were used to perpetuate a dogma that differentiated men and women (Intan 2014; Abidin 2015). Mernissi and Hasan (as quoted by Widyastini, 2008: 59–73) argue that some classical interpretations of women's position in the Qur'an have influenced many Muslim scholars' works. For example, Surah An-Nisa—which states that women were created from the rib bone of Adam (QS 4:1)—was interpreted to indicate that "women were complementary." Similarly, Surah Al-Baqarah (QS 2:30–31) and Surah Ali-Imran (QS 3:59), which indicate that Adam was created from the earth, were read as showing the superior position of men, while Surah Al-Ahzab (QS 33:33) was interpreted as prohibiting women from leaving their homes. Likewise, various hadiths have been referenced to justify the subordination of women and primacy of men.

Legal references that position women as equal to men have historically been ignored, and women's involvement in society has frequently been neglected. Public discourse, citing Surah An-Nisa, Verse 34—which holds that men are the leaders of women (QS 4: 34)—has taught women that their place is after men. Referring to the Qur'an and the hadiths, this article argue that the subjugation of women has occurred as a result of specific Qur'anic verses and hadiths being deliberately selected to reproduce gender inequalities. Similarly, Qur'anic exegesis has been conducted within and biased by the patriarchal structure of Indonesian society. As stated by Mir-Hosseini (2006), the process of interpretation—including exegesis—cannot be separated from its human context. This article, thus, shows how the misinterpretation of Qur'anic verses and the hadiths has led to women being misrepresented in social theory and practice in Indonesia.

Discourse on the Subordination of Women

The issue of gender equality and Islam has drawn the attention of numerous scholars within the Muslim world (Mernissi 1991; Engineer 2001; Umar 2001; Darakchi 2018); this includes in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country (Dzuhayatin 2001; Ilyas 2006; Mulia 2014; Abidin 2015). Much of the literature discusses women's struggles to find justice. Four specific tendencies can be found in existing studies into gender, Islam, and the relationships between women and men. First, many studies have focused on the relationship between wives and husbands in Islam, including the positioning of wives as needing to serve their husbands. Hoel and Shaikh (2013), for example, have shown how South African Muslims see the fulfilment of husbands' sexual desires as a form of service to their husbands and as a form of *ibadah* or service to God. Similarly, Nina Nurmila (2013) has shown that Muslim women in Indonesia, citing hadiths that depict the rejection of husbands' demands as drawing the wrath of the angels, are often confined to the domestic sphere. Several Qur'anic verses, such as QS 4:34, have been interpreted to support the idea that wives must serve their husbands,[4] and women's obeisance to their husbands has thus been understood as proof of their obeisance to God (Siddiqui 2016).

Second, studies have positioned women as the victims of various acts of violence. For example, studies by Afrianty (2015), Laeheem (2016; 2018), and Aisyah (2012) have explored the religious and traditional acceptance of violence against women. Afrianty, in her study of Indonesia, shows that women activists have fought to ensure that the State does not ignore the violence experienced by women and their families. Aisyah, meanwhile, notes that the Indonesian State's laws against domestic violence have been unable to stifle its practice (Aisyah, 2012). As these studies have shown, not all Muslim women believe that they must silently agree with the dominance of men. Many Muslim women have attempted to voice their own views and to position themselves as their husbands' equals (Muhammad, 2019). Indeed, Wadood (2006) has argued that women have the right to lead men—and indeed have the capacity to do so. Similarly, Eidhamar (2018) has explored how, in patriarchal societies such as Indonesia, Islam has given husbands permission to hit disobedient wives, thereby granting institutional power to men (Pakri and Anandan, 2015). Such authors argue that women's experiences with violence show that its practice in Islam cannot be separated from discursive constructions of power (Hasyim 2000; Dzuhayatin 2001), and that it has a foundation in patriarchal culture (Abdullah, Dzuhayatin, and Pitaloka 1992).

Third, studies have debated the role of women in Islamic society and the normative rules that regulate it. Spierings (2014), for example, has explored the limited role of women in the economies of Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia and Nigeria, finding that they do not receive higher wages than non-Muslim women. Discourse that women must stay in the domestic sphere lies at the core of discourses related to women's involvement in the public sphere. Surah Al-Ahzab (QS 33) has been used to justify prohibitions against women leaving the house, and a number of hadiths (such as one by Al-Bukhari regarding women requiring their husbands' permission for all activities) are used to teach women to be subordinate to their husbands. Such arguments are rejected by Intan (2014), who firmly asserts that Islam expressly does not limit women's involvement in the public sphere.

[4] Awwam (2017), in his book *Fiqih Wanita*, argues that women must play as a supporting role and help men lead their families. Hamid (2016), another female Indonesian writer, similarly supports the idea that Muslim women must do their best to support their husbands—including by serving them—and seek their husbands' blessings.

Nonetheless, there thus exists a sort of dualism. Asnawi (2012) notes that women have normatively and legally become the equals of men, but many Islamic organisations—even the most modern of them—have yet to provide equal space for men and for women. Women's groups are positioned subordinately, as offshoots of male main organisations (Asnawi, 2012). Similarly, efforts to mainstream gender equality have been undertaken since the Arab Spring in Egypt, but receive significant opposition and thus require significant political and cultural support (Shash and Forden 2016).

Fourth, certain discourses have examined the changing opportunities available to women. Education has been seen as giving women space for autonomy. For example, more women have pursued education in Indonesia than men; this can be seen, for example, in *pesantren.*[5] According to Srimulyani (2012), such educations empower women and promote greater self-actualisation. These findings are reaffirmed by Smith-Hefner (2007), who argues that Muslim women have had more autonomy over their veiling in Indonesia's modern educational institutions since the fall of the Soeharto regime. Education, particularly literacy, has had a positive influence on women and their positions over time (Dimici 2015).

However, even as women's literacy has improved, they have not been able to free themselves from male dominance (Muhammad, 2019). Such a perspective has informed the division of labour and women's value in social discourse and practice (Uhlmann and Uhlmann 2005). Marnissi, for example, argues that the "world of women" is a historical power construct, and that this construct must be dismantled to return women to their true origins (Mernissi 1991) and find the essence of male–female relationships (Abdullah 2001). The natural relationship between men and women has been configured by Islamic culture as it has developed and been reproduced, thereby creating inequality.

The relationship between husbands and wives, a more open and dialogic space, requires particular attention. Extant studies have examined issues and offered historical and sociological explanations of dominance and inequality but failed to pay sufficient attention to opportunities to create harmony and equality. To fill this gap, this article explores the symbolic space in the language and meaning of the Qur'an and hadiths that can be used to create dialogue and equality, particularly between husbands and wives.

Gender equality in Islam

Islam's position regarding gender equality can be explored through three levels of analysis. First is the equality found in the chapters and verses of the Qur'an, which promote egalitarian relationships between men and women. Second are the hadiths of the Prophet that offer concepts of gender equality and harmonious social practices; these hadiths have been passed through various figures, and as such are known in several versions. Third, the fatwas and views of ulamas who have conducted personal interpretation (*ijtihad*) of gender relations. These three levels are discussed individually in the following sections.

[5] Interviews in some *pesantren* show that most *pesantrens* in Java have more female students than male ones. This shows that women have equal access to education, as the decision to send children to *pesantren* is made in the family context (i.e. by the child's father and mother).

First, Gender Equality according to the Qur'an

Multiple verses of the Qur'an discuss the equal positions of women and men. These include, for example, verses that teach mutual assistance and social harmony, such as Surah an-Nisa, Verse 1:

> O mankind fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women. And fear Allah, through whom you ask one another, and the wombs. Indeed, Allah is ever, over you, an Observer. (An-Nisa' 4:1)

The Qur'an also presents women and men as having equal access, as seen in Surah an-Nisa, verse 32, Surah an-Nisa, verse 124, and Surah an-Nahl, verse 95:

> And do not wish for that by which Allah has made some of you exceed others. For men is a share of what they have earned, and for women is a share of what they have earned. And ask Allah of his bounty. Indeed, Allah is ever, of all things, Knowing. (An-Nisa' 4:32)

> And whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, while being a believer – those will enter Paradise and will not be wronged, [even as much as] the speck on a date seed. (An-Nisa' 4:124)

> Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while he is a believer - We will surely cause him to live a good life, and We will surely give them their reward [in the Hereafter] according to the best of what they used to do. (An-Nahl 16:97)

The Qur'an also discusses gender equality in marital relations (including sexual intercourse), including responsibility, respect, and privacy. This is seen, for example, in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 187; Surah Ali 'Imran, verse 47; and Surah Ar-Rum, verse 21:

> It has been made permissible for you the night preceding fasting to go to your wives [for sexual relations]. They are clothing for you and you are clothing for them. Allah knows that you used to deceive yourselves, so He accepted your repentance and forgave you. So now, have relations with them and seek that which Allah has decreed for you. And eat and drink until the white thread of dawn becomes distinct to you from the black thread [of night]. Then complete the fast until the sunset. And do not have relations with them as long as you are staying for worship in the mosques. These are the limits [set by] Allah, so do not approach them. Thus does Allah make clear His ordinances to the people that they may become righteous. (Al-Baqarah 2:187)

> [Miriam] said, "My Lord, how will I have a child when no man has touched me?" [The angel] said, "Such is Allah; He creates what He wills. When He decrees a matter, He only says to it, 'Be,' and it is. (Ali 'Imran 3:47)

> And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquillity in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought. (Ar-Rum 30:21)

Furthermore, the Qur'an contains several verses that use terms of equality (such as "companions") when referring to wives. These include, for example, Surah Al-An'am, verse 101; Surah Al-Jinn, verse 3; and Surah Al-Ma'rij, verse 12:

> [He is] Originator of the heavens and the earth. How could He have a son when He does not have a companion and He created all things? And He is, of all things, Knowing. (Al-An'am 6:101)

> And [it teaches] that exalted is the nobleness of our Lord; He has not taken a wife or a son. (Al-Jinn 72:3)

> And his wife and his brother (Al-Ma'arij 70:12)

These are not the only verses of the Qur'an that discuss egalitarian ideals. Surah an-Nisa, verse 1, emphasises that men and women cannot live on their own, and as such they must help each other. Similarly, Surah An-Nisa, verses 32 and 124, and Surah an-Nahl, verse 97, explain that men and women enjoy equal access. Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 187, specifies that men and women have equal responsibilities in the household; Surah Ali Imran, verse 47, indicates that men and women were created as companions; and Surah Ar-Rumm, verse 21, holds that men and women must love and honour each other. Husbands and wives being on equal footing is also presented in Surah Al-An'am, verse 101; Surah Al-Jinn, verse 3; and Surah Al-Ma'rij, verse 12; all of which refer to wives using the term 'friend' or 'companion' (*shohibah*).

Given these verses, it may be surmised that husbands have responsibilities equivalent to those of their wives, and that wives have responsibilities equivalent to those of their husbands. Furthermore, the division of labour within the family must be based on recognition of each member's role, rather than subordination. As such, there should not be any violence against women in the household, as these verses clearly indicate an equal relationship.

Transforming women from the objects of men (as in Arab culture), Islam has identified women as equal to men in many aspects of life; its spirit is thus compatible with men and women living as equals in a modern context. However, several verses (including Surah Ar-Rumm, verse 21) have been interpreted to argue that wives must serve their husbands. In practice, such a message of gender equality has been marginalised, with focus given to another element of these verses: the power and oneness of God. More broadly, Indonesia's patriarchal society has yet to accept equality. It is not uncommon for verses that support gender equality to be juxtaposed with other verses, interpreted in a manner that suits male tastes and reinforces female subordination. As such, these verses and their equal positioning of men and women have yet to be referenced in promoting gender equality in Indonesian society.

Second, Gender Equality in the Hadiths

The hadiths, the reported sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad, are the second-most important references in Islamic law (after the Qur'an). A review of them also shows that

men and women are equal in Islam. Imam Bukhari, for example, records a hadith that shows women have autonomy:

> Abu Huraira (Allah be pleased with him) reported Allah's Apostle as saying:
> He who believes in Allah and the Hereafter, if he witnesses any matter he should talk in good terms about it or keep quiet. Act kindly towards woman, for woman is created from a rib, and the most crooked part of the rib is its top. If you attempt to straighten it, you will break it, and if you leave it, its crookedness will remain there. So act kindly towards women. (HR. Al-Bukhari)

Bukhari also records a hadith that indicates the possibility of women being leaders, as follows:

> Narrated `Abdullah bin `Umar:
> Allah's Messenger said, "Surely! Every one of you is a guardian and is responsible for his charges: The Imam (ruler) of the people is a guardian and is responsible for his subjects; a man is the guardian of his family (household) and is responsible for his subjects; a woman is the guardian of her husband's home and of his children and is responsible for them; and the slave of a man is a guardian of his master's property and is responsible for it. Surely, every one of you is a guardian and responsible for his charges." (HR. Al-Bukhari).

The equal responsibilities of men and women in the household are similarly discussed:

> Those who are patient in dealing with their wives' poor characters, Allah will give blessings as He blessed the Prophet Job after his trials; in turn, those who are patient when dealing with their husbands' poor deeds, Allah will give blessings as He blessed Asiah, the wife of Pharaoh.

The hadiths also indicate that women and men have an equal legal standing, even in the most intimate of manners. Abu Daud records one hadith that presents men and women as being on equal footing:

> Narrated Aisha, Ummul Mu'minin:
> The Prophet was asked about a person who found moisture (on his body or clothes) but did not remember the sexual dream. He replied: He should take a bath. He was asked about a person who remembered that he had a sexual dream but did not find moisture. He replied: Bath is not necessary for him. Umm Salamah then asked: Is washing necessary for a woman if she sees that (in her dream)? He replied: Yes. Woman are counterparts of men (HR. Abu Daud).

The hadiths discussed above show how Islam has given equal space to men and women, including in autonomous behaviour, leadership, responsibility, and law.

The hadiths regarding the equal status of men and women tend not to be used within their primary contexts. Take, for example, the hadith regarding the creation of women from Adam's rib bone. As this bone is considered part of the male anatomy, this hadith is cited as a reason to subordinate women. Its true message, reported in the context of "treating each other kindly", is

obscured in such interpretations. Another hadith about leadership is similarly used partially, presenting men's leadership of women as absolute, even though—reading the hadith—there is still space for husbands and wives to hold equally important leadership roles (viz. "A woman is the guardian of her husband's home and of his children and is responsible for them"; HR. Bukhari). Meanwhile, the hadith about patience is interpreted not in the context of spouses being patient with each other, but only in the context of men dealing with their wives' shortcomings. Similarly, the hadith regarding the need to bathe after having sexual dreams is examined only partially, being understood not as presenting men and women as equal in Islamic law, but more narrowly as proscribing behaviours for persons with wet dreams.

It can be seen that hadiths that promote gender equality are often interpreted partially, or even have their validity questioned. Meanwhile, gendered interpretations of these hadiths— read and understood in a power context dominated by male interests—have resulted in women becoming increasingly subordinated.

Third, Gender Equality according to Ulamas

In the hierarchy of Islamic jurisprudence, the views of ulamas (i.e. of religious scholars) are accepted as third-level references, under the Qur'an and the hadiths. A number of ulamas have promoted gender equality, basing their arguments on references to the primary sources of Islamic law (i.e. the Qur'an and the Hadiths). Ustadzah Ema (age 60), for example, cites Qur'anic verses and the hadiths that discuss the creation of humanity in her arguments:

> "… Perumpamaan perempuan sebagai tulang rusuk memperlihatkan kesetaraan antara laki-laki dan perempuan. Karena tulang rusuk itu letaknya tidak lebih depan tidak lebih belakang, tetapi sejajar dengan dada. Artinya pemilihan perumpamaan dengan tulang rusuk adalah yang paling tepat dibanding dengan anggota tubuh lainnya seperti tulang belakang misalnya" (… the likening of women to rib bones shows the equality of men and women. Because the rib bone is located not before and not behind, but equal to the chest. Likening women to rib bones is thus more accurate than comparing [them] to other parts of the body, like the tailbone) – Ustadzah Ema, age 60

Ustadzah Ema further argues that the marginalisation of women violates the spirit of Islam, particularly its positioning of women as the pillars of social structure. She adds, "…tidak akan berhasil suatu kaum jika perempuan dipinggirkan, karena Islam menempatkan perempuan sebagai tiang negara (… no nation could survive with its women pushed aside, because Islam recognises women as pillars of the state)." Another *ulama*, Ustadz Nurdin (age 65), asks why many people have been unable to accept men and women as equals. He notes that:

> "… sering kita tidak memperhatikan ayat-ayat atau hadist yang menempatkan perempuan pada posisi yang setara dengan laki-laki. Bahkan jika itu berupa hadist sering kita pertanyakan kekuatan hukumnya…." (… we often don't heed the verses or hadiths that position women as equal to men. If it is a hadith, we even question its strength.)

Ustadz Nurdin views gender equality as no longer being in question. Similarly, Ustadz Abdul Mu'in (age 58) states that:

> "... banyak umat muslim yang salah menempatkan perempuan dalam Islam, kita harus berfikir ijtihadi yakni berfikir secara rasional, obyektif dan argumentatif.… Artinya, kedudukan perempuan dan laki-laki yang setara tidak dapat dibantah. Jika memang memiliki argumennya kuat, rasional, dan obyektif justeru harus kita dukung" (… many Muslims have mispositioned women in Islam. We need to think with *ijtihad*, think rationally, objectively, and argumentatively. … This means that the equal position of women and men cannot be denied. If there is a strong, rational, and objective argument, then we must support it.)

Ulamas' views on gender equality have developed within a dynamic academic discourse. However, these views have yet to be fully adopted as legal references, and some Indonesians understand them as being limited solely to equality in spousal relations. Other ulamas have rejected the equal positioning of women altogether. It is not uncommon for these ulamas to question gender equality, to state that wives must obey their husbands, and that wives' service to their husbands reflects their service to God. These ulamas, as well as the members of the public who follow them, view gender equality as contrary to mainstream Islamic teachings. Arguments supporting gender equality, despite their rationality, objectivity, and scriptural basis, are claimed to be woven from whole cloth or even deviant.

When gender equality is promoted by women ulamas, it is often perceived as representing inacceptable female ambition; meanwhile, when such views are voiced by men, they are seen as disenfranchised. As Ustadz Romli (age 47) said, "saya ini sering dianggap terjajah oleh perempuan karena ceramah-ceramah saya yang membela perempuan. Pembacaan ayat dan hadist itu harus berdasarkan akal sehingga kita bisa melihat alasan turunnya suatu ayat. Nabi sendiri selalu mendahulukan dan memuliakan perempuan." (I am often said to have been dominated by women because of my sermons that defend women. Readings of the [Qur'anic] verses and hadiths must be rooted in a rational mind, so that we can understand why a verse was revealed. The Prophet himself always prioritised and honoured women). However, among Muslims who are more open—often those with higher levels of education—arguments that support gender equality are more readily accepted.

Wives in the Qur'an

Qur'anic verses and hadiths have been "cherry-picked" as part of a process through which gender inequalities are reproduced by actors and agents with a vested interest in women's subordination. Verses that emphasise equality, as well as hadiths that honour women, have been ignored. To address this situation, a number of concepts central to the positioning of women are discussed below.

Wives as Companions

Islam's positioning of women as the companions of their husbands has not been properly realised in social practice. Expectations that women must serve their husbands are still enforced, and the rejection of husbands' demands is still seen as sinful (Hoel and Shaikh, 2013; Nurmila, 2013). Furthermore, violence against women is still perceived as acceptable and natural (Laeheem 2016; Afrianty 2015; Aisyah 2012). This has occurred despite the strong basis for gender equality in Islamic jurisprudence. Take, for example, the use of the term *shibbat* to refer

to wives in Surah al-An'am, verse 101; Surah al-Jinn, verse 3; and Surah al-Ma'rij, verse 12. Derived from the word *subhat*, meaning 'to accompany', the word implies that a wife will always accompany her husband; this, in turn, implies equality (Aziz 2002). The Qur'an thus presents husbands and wives as equals.

The first two verses mentioned above, Surah al-An'am, verse 101, and Surah al-Jinn, verse 3, identify God is a *dzat* (essence) with no wife or child, seemingly indicating His masculinity. However, examining them in more detail, it is clear that these verses seek to emphasise the oneness of God, and show that—if God were to require a partner—it would have to be an equal, as indicated through the use of the word *shibbat* (Aziz 2002). In other words, they imply that men do not occupy a higher position than women, and that husbands are the companions (equals) of their wives. Meanwhile, the third verse (Surah Al-Ma'rij, verse 12) uses the word *companion* to refer to wives, thereby emphasising that spouses are equal, bound by a sense of togetherness and mutual assistance.

Despite the strong basis for gender equality in Islamic jurisprudence, many Muslim societies remain patriarchal. In the case of Indonesia, women are frequently treated by their husbands not as companions, but as domestic servants. This may be a result of misinterpretation (Aziz 2002), and/or a result of ulamas focusing on hadiths that position women as subordinates (Nurmila, 2013). Either way, religious leaders are involved in the subordination of women, and gender inequality is rooted not in the Qur'an or in the hadiths, but in exegeses that promote patriarchal values.

Wives as Partners

The concept of gender equality is also present in Islam through its positioning of wives as partners, references for which can be found in Surah al-Baqarah, verse 187 (which describes husbands and wives as clothing for each other), and Surah Ali Imran, verse 47 (which shows men and women as needing to unite to continue their bloodlines). Surah al-Baqarah, verse 187, uses the Arabic word لِبَاسٌ, which means "that which covers something"; it thus infers something that covers or protects the body. Implicitly, husbands and wives are presented as complementing each other, i.e. as covering their shortcomings (Aziz 2002). In practice, however, this idea of "protecting each other" has been corrupted by ulama who identify this "clothing" as an accessory, rather than as a necessity, and thereby legitimise the subordination of women.

Further investigation indicates that women are not often positioned as men's partners in most Muslim societies; rather, men receive institutional power (Pakri and Anandan 2015). Violence against women in Muslim societies cannot be separated from this ideological positioning, which has seemingly justified violence as acceptable and even natural. Ultimately, this has curbed the effectiveness of laws against domestic violence. In Indonesia, for example, the law has focused more on children than women and been poorly socialised (Aisyah 2012); at the same time, the discursive positioning of women as subordinate has remained dominant.

Education has been seen as giving Muslim women considerable space for autonomy (Smith-Hefner, 2007; Srimulyani, 2012). However, their involvement in the public sphere remains limited (Asnawi 2012; Spierings 2014). Despite having autonomy, women are not necessarily willing to use it. As a result, autonomy has not offered women a mechanism for their liberation; they have instead relied on the patriarchal structure of society. Autonomy does not directly correlate with gender inequality in this case.

Intan (2014) argues that spaces for equality are apparent, with decisions to stay in the domestic sphere being those of women, while decisions to become involved in the public sphere

being made jointly. Nonetheless, a number of modern Muslim organisations have continued to position women as subordinate, with women being confined to designated offshoots of predominantly male main organisations (Asnawi 2012). Women are thus not given equal space in organisational structures, even when organisations identify themselves as modern.

Wives as Lovers

Aside from positioning women as companions and partners, Islam also promotes gender equality by positioning women as lovers. A number of Qur'anic verses and hadiths discuss the romantic relationship between husbands and wives. This includes, for example, Surah ar-Rum, verse 21, which promotes harmony and love between men and women as equals. This is supported by a number of hadiths, including one that stresses that those who are patient with their spouse—male or female—will receive blessings such as those granted to the Prophet Job or Asiya, the wife of Pharaoh (Aziz 2002).

While recognising that most people would agree with women being called 'lovers', it is necessary to understand how this term is interpreted. Some may see the term *lover* as implying a husband's protection. However, further examination indicates that the term *lover* indicates a love between two equals. This is shown by Aziz:

> … The existence of the individual gives way to the one, working towards a shared goal. There is no 'I' in the family; there is only 'we', as the 'I' has diffused to become 'we'. In other words, neither may maintain a sense of egotism, because if they were to do so, and one were to maintain a vested interest that was opposed to the other's, fights would be inevitable. If this condition were to continue, it's not impossible for the household to fall into chaos and the marriage to end in divorce. If this were to happen, that would be the end of the household… (Aziz, 2002: 35).

However, the concept of equality in marital relations has not been practiced as described by Aziz. Various inequalities, and even practices of violence, exist (Afrianty 2015; Eidhamar 2018; Pakri and Anandan 2015). Worse, it is not uncommon for Muslim women to be seen only as the satisfiers of their husbands' sexual desires, with the satisfaction of libidinal urges part of their wifely duties (Hoel and Shaikh 2013).

Conclusion

A reading of the Qur'an and the hadiths indicates that space for gender equality exists and has a foundation in Islamic jurisprudence. However, the application of these texts within the Indonesian socio-cultural context has laid fertile ground for the seeds of inequality. Although various parts of the Qur'an present men and women as occupying equal positions, this is not firmly practiced in society. Islamic jurisprudence's egalitarian treatment of men and women has been less influential than discursively maintained and manipulated inequalities.

These inequalities, including the subordinate positioning of women, have lengthy historical roots. Back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad, exegetists have justified inequality by reading Qur'anic verses that support equality as promoting women's obeisance, service, and surrender to their husbands. As such, it is necessary to understand gender equality within its historical and sociological context, with reference to the Qur'an guiding the recognition of women and men having equal status in Islam.

Further research is necessary to understand the life history of these Qur'anic verses, including their revelation, application, and exegesis within specific socio-political spaces. Through such research, the discourses and practices of gender inequality can be dismantled. The idea of gender equality in Islam has inspired many studies, including in Indonesia. Nevertheless, only a few of these works have received popular attention; studies supporting male dominance have been more prominent. As such, efforts to promote the public consumption of egalitarian views are strongly encouraged.

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