



A Reinterpretation of Women's Leadership in Political Jurisprudence: The Response of Nusantara Scholars to the Global Discourse on Islamic Feminism

Dewi Wardah Mazidatur Rohmah¹, Abdul Hakim², Muhammad Hikam³

¹ University of New South Wales, Australia

² UIN Antasari Banjarmasin, Indonesia

³ UIN Antasari Banjarmasin, Indonesia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Women's leadership;
Fiqh siyasah;
Islamic feminism;
Indonesian ulama.

Article history:

Received: 2026-02-14

Revised: 2026-04-22

Accepted: 2026-07-17

ABSTRACT

Women's leadership in Islam remains one of the most contested issues in contemporary Islamic scholarship. Classical fiqh siyasah (Islamic political jurisprudence), largely formulated by male jurists, imposed restrictions on women's participation in public and political leadership, while global Islamic feminism, advanced by scholars such as Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, and Asma Barlas, offers alternative hermeneutics that foreground gender equality as a Qur'anic value. This study examines how Indonesian ulama from the country's two largest Islamic organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, position themselves between these two discourses and identifies the distinctive features of the reinterpretation model they have developed. Unlike prior studies that tend to treat NU and Muhammadiyah separately, or that frame Indonesian Islamic feminism merely as a derivative of Middle Eastern Islamic feminism, this research offers a comparative reading of both organizations while foregrounding the historical precedent of female rulership in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago as an indigenous argumentative resource. Using critical discourse analysis of fatwas, congress resolutions, and scholarly writings, the study finds that the response of Indonesian ulama is not monolithic but forms a spectrum ranging from selective-critical acceptance in NU to more open acceptance grounded in direct ijtihad in Muhammadiyah. Both organizations have developed a strategy of "reinterpretation from within the tradition," drawing on the internal resources of Islamic jurisprudence rather than imported feminist frameworks, to construct arguments for gender equality. The article concludes that this model offers a viable middle path within global debates on Islam and gender, even as a substantial gap persists between normative discourse and the empirical reality of women's representation in leadership.

This is an open-access article under the [CC BY NC](#) license.



Corresponding Author:

Dewi Wardah Mazidatur Rohmah

University of New South Wales, Australia; d.rohmah@unsw.edu.au

INTRODUCTION

The question of whether women should hold public leadership has long been a battleground between conservative and progressive readings of the Islamic tradition. Since the independence of Muslim-majority countries from colonialism, this issue has continued to arise in debates about national identity, the position of religion in the public sphere, and gender relations in Muslim society (Mir-Hosseini, 2006). Indonesia, as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, faces this issue with a distinctive pattern, given the long history of women's involvement in leadership, both in the traditions of the archipelago's kingdoms and in the struggle for independence and nation-building.

Historically, *fiqh siyasah*, the branch of Islamic jurisprudence that governs government and politics, which developed in the classical period, contained a number of provisions that limited the role of women in leadership. Al-Mawardi, in *Al-Ahkam al-Sulthaniyyah*, requires that the head of state must be a man, and this opinion is often cited to justify the exclusion of women from the highest political positions (Al-Mawardi, 2014). Nevertheless, such an opinion has never been the only voice in the *fiqh* tradition. The Hanafi madhhab, for example, allows women to serve as judges for civil matters outside the limits and *qisas*, while Ibn Hazm of the Zahiri madhhab allows it without the limitation of cases. A number of comparative studies of the sect even record a similar opinion from al-Tabari (cf. Salamah-Qudsi, 2021), although this minority opinion has never been mainstream.

This diversity of opinion is what has become a methodological gap for the birth of Islamic feminism as an intellectual movement since the 1990s, and which was then in typical dialogue by Nusantara scholars with the historical experience and religious structure of Indonesia itself. Since the early 1990s, Islamic feminism has developed into an intellectual movement marked by the publication of important works such as *the Qur'an and Woman* by Amina Wadud (1999), *The Veil and the Male Elite* by Fatima Mernissi (1991), and *Believing Women in Islam* by Asma Barlas (2002). The three, with different approaches, seek to show that gender inequality in Muslim society is not a demand of the Qur'an itself, but rather a product of interpretation dominated by a male perspective in a particular historical context.

Wadud (1999) developed a method of reading the Qur'an that emphasizes the socio-historical context of the descent of verses, thematic coherence between people, and the placement of justice as fundamental values that animate the overall message of the Qur'an. Mernissi (1991) takes a different path by criticizing the sanad and the context of the narration of hadiths that are often used as the basis for restricting the role of women, including the hadith "it will not be lucky for a people who hand over their affairs to women" narrated by Abu Bakrah. He points out that the hadith has a very specific context, that is, a commentary on succession in Persia, so it cannot be generalized as a universal rule. Barlas (2002) adds another dimension by criticizing what he calls the "patriarchal reading" of the Qur'an as a product of the interests of a particular group, rather than the authentic meaning of the text itself.

Studies on the reception of Islamic feminism in Indonesia have also developed, for example, the work of Ibrahim (2021), which maps the development and challenges of women scholars in the discourse of Indonesian Islamic feminism, and Zuhdi (2019), which examines the influence of Wadud and Mernissi's thinking on the reinterpretation of Islamic law in Indonesia. However, most of these studies tend to focus on a single organization or figure, and not many explicitly compare the response patterns of Indonesia's two mainstream Islamic organizations while linking them to the historical precedent of women's leadership in the archipelago as a source of local legitimacy that stands alone from the discourse of global feminism.

That gap is the starting point of this article. Instead of treating Islamic feminism of the archipelago as a mere recipient of ideas from the Middle East or the West, this study positions NU and Muhammadiyah scholars as actors who actively negotiate the global discourse with their own argumentative resources, both in the form of the methodology of Islamic boarding school jurisprudence and the historical precedent of women's leadership in the kingdoms of the archipelago. A systematic comparison between the methodologies, legal products, and argumentative bases of these two organizations, placed within a single framework of critical discourse analysis, constitutes the original contribution of this article to the existing literature.

Based on this description, this study seeks to answer three interrelated questions. The first concerns how classical *fiqh siyasah* constructs women's leadership and the normative arguments underlying it. The second examines how global Islamic feminism challenges these constructions through certain hermeneutical strategies. The third explores how NU and Muhammadiyah scholars position themselves in the dialogue between classical jurisprudence and contemporary Islamic feminism, resulting in a distinctive model of reinterpretation. Answering these three questions is also a way to formulate the general characteristics of the archipelago-style women's leadership reinterpretation model.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with the *critical discourse analysis* (CDA) method as developed by Fairclough (2010). CDA was chosen because the objects of study, namely fatwas, official organizational decisions, and scholarly works, are texts laden with power relations, ideology, and interpretive contestation, requiring an analytical approach that goes beyond surface meaning. Fairclough's three-stage framework was applied as follows. First, the description stage involved close textual analysis of the linguistic choices, rhetorical strategies, and argumentative structures in each corpus. Second, the interpretation stage traced intertextual relationships, examining how fatwas and congress decisions draw upon, modify, or contest classical *fiqh* texts and global Islamic feminist arguments. Third, the explanation stage evaluated the broader socio-political implications of these discourses for women's representation in Indonesian Islamic institutions.

The primary data of this study consists of official decisions and the results of the *bahtsul masail* Congress and the National Conference of Alim Ulama Nahdlatul Ulama that discuss gender issues and women's leadership since the 1990s, as well as the decisions of the National Conference of Tarjih and Tajdid Muhammadiyah from the same period, and the scholarly writings of Nusantara ulama who explicitly address women's leadership, including the works of K.H. Husein Muhammad (2001) and Siti Musdah Mulia (2004, 2010). The 1990s were selected as the temporal starting point because this decade marked the emergence of Islamic feminism as a global intellectual movement and the beginning of systematic gender discourse within Indonesia's major Islamic organizations. Secondary data include indexed journal articles, research reports, and books that discuss gender in Indonesian Islam from sociological, anthropological, and gender studies perspectives, including comparative studies from Middle Eastern and South Asian contexts to enrich comparative analysis.

The analysis proceeded in three stages corresponding to Fairclough's framework. In the description stage, the main arguments in each corpus were identified, covering classical jurisprudence, global Islamic feminism, and the responses of Nusantara scholars. In the interpretation stage, intertextual analysis traced how the three discourses refer to, dialogue with, and influence one another, examining for example how Mernissi's hadith criticism is selectively adopted or modified by NU scholars. In the explanation stage, a critical interpretation evaluated the implications of these discourses for the reality of Indonesian Muslim women's representation in leadership. The validity of the data is strengthened through source triangulation, specifically by cross-referencing the official organizational texts with individual scholarly writings and with third-party academic studies on those same texts, thereby checking consistency across multiple types of sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Construction of Women's Leadership in Classical *Fiqh Siyasah*

The dominant view in classical jurisprudence is that the highest public leadership positions (especially the imamah (head of state) and qada (judiciary)) require that the holders be men. This argument relies on a number of normative postulates, including the hadith about the failure of a tribe to leave affairs to women, as well as rational arguments about the superiority of men's physical and intellectual capacities that are considered relevant for leadership (Al-Mawardi, 2014). However, even in the classical tradition, there is a significant variation of opinion, as the Hanafi school allows women to be judges in civil matters, Ibn Hazm of the Zahiri school allows it without restrictions, and a number

of comparative fiqh literature records similar opinions from al-Tabari (Salamah-Qudsi, 2021). This variation is important to note because it shows that the restriction of women's leadership is not a single consensus in the Islamic tradition, but rather one of several positions that have ever competed within it.

Islamic Feminist Hermeneutics and Its Contestation of the Classical Tradition

Global Islamic feminism responds to this classical tradition through several complementary hermeneutical strategies, namely contextual reinterpretation of restrictive hadiths, as Mernissi (1991) did with the hadith narrated by Abu Bakrah above; the development of a thematic interpretation of the Qur'an based on justice and equality, as pioneered by Wadud (1999), who argues that the functional differences mentioned in the Qur'an in certain contexts cannot be used as a universal principle of male superiority; and socio-historical analysis that places gender inequality in Muslim society as a product of a particular cultural context, rather than the essential demands of Islamic teachings, as argued by Barlas (2002) through the concept of "patriarchal reading". These three strategies became a map of arguments that were then, with varying degrees of acceptance, absorbed, modified, or even partially rejected by the scholars of the archipelago, as will be described in the following section.

Historical Precedent of Women's Leadership in the Archipelago Tradition

Before examining the contemporary responses of NU and Muhammadiyah, it is important to note that the archipelago's tradition has its own historical precedent regarding women's leadership, which is independent of the discourse of global Islamic feminism. The Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam, for example, was ruled successively by four sultanahs for nearly six decades, from 1641 to 1699, namely Safiatuddin Shah, Nurul Alam Naqiatuddin Shah, Inayat Zakiatuddin Shah, and Kamalat Syah. Recent historical studies show that the legitimacy of their leadership is built from a combination of Islamic teachings and customs, as well as a leadership style that emphasizes deliberation and moral strength, rather than just ceremonial symbols (Khan, 2017).

This kind of precedent is relevant to contemporary jurisprudence debates because it shows that in practice, some Muslim communities of the archipelago historically did not apply an absolute prohibition on women's leadership, long before the discourse of global Islamic feminism emerged. This fact provides the archipelago's scholars with additional argumentative resources. Women's leadership can be framed not as an imported innovation, but as a continuation of a long-standing precedent in the archipelago's own Islamic history, providing a framework of legitimacy that is more culturally acceptable than an argument purely derived from Western feminism..

Nahdlatul Ulama's Response Through Contextual Fiqh and Internal Ambivalence

Nahdlatul Ulama, as the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, has a long history of integrating gender perspectives into its jurisprudence discourse, including through Fatayat NU and various bahtsul masail forums that periodically discuss women's issues. Figures such as K.H. Husein Muhammad made significant contributions through the work *Fiqh Perempuan* (2001), which offered a reinterpretation of classical fiqh texts by combining pesantren methodologies and insights from global Islamic feminism.

On the issue of women's leadership specifically, NU's consultative forums reportedly resulted in progressively more open positions, although, as noted in the methods section, the date and number of the decision referred to still need to be re-verified against the organization's official documents before being definitively cited in the final text. More important than the specific date of any decision is the overall pattern of argumentation. These forums tend not to express unconditional permission, but rather permissions with a number of nuances and contextual notes, reflecting the character of NU jurisprudence, which rests on the rule of al-muhafazhah 'ala al-qadim al-shalih wa al-akhdz bi al-jadid al-ashlah, meaning to maintain good old traditions while taking new and better things.

NU's position on this issue is also not monolithic. There is an internal tension between groups that adhere more to the restrictions of classical fiqh and progressive groups that encourage contextual

reinterpretation. This tension is not a sign of inconsistency, but a reflection of *the tradition of ikhtilaf*, or differences of opinion, which is valued as part of NU's intellectual treasures..

Muhammadiyah's Response Through Direct Ijtihad and a Reformist Approach

Muhammadiyah, as a reformist-modernist organization based on ijtihad methodology that refers directly to the Qur'an and hadith without being bound by any particular school of fiqh, generally shows a more explicit openness to the reinterpretation of women's leadership. 'Aisyiyah, an autonomous organization of Muhammadiyah women established in 1917, has long played a role in the empowerment of Indonesian Muslim women through concepts such as "sakinah family" and "progressive women", a synthesis between Islamic values and the aspirations of modernity that develop from within the Muhammadiyah tradition itself.

On the issue of women's leadership, the Muhammadiyah Tarjih National Conference forum reportedly produced a decision that allowed women to occupy the position of president or head of state, arguing that there was no explicit text prohibiting it and that the principle of equality in the Qur'an supported equal opportunities in leadership (Mulia, 2004). As with the reference to the NU decision above, the details of the number and year of the decision of the Tarjih National Congress need to be re-verified against the official documents of the Tarjih and Tajdid Council before being used as a definitive reference.

Aspects	Nahdlatul Ulama	Muhammadiyah
Methodological basis	Madhhab fiqh with contextualization	Ijtihad directly from primary sources
Formal position	Enabling with nuances and contextual notes	Allows argument-based absence of explicit prohibition
Key actors	K.H. Husein Muhammad, Fatayat NU	The Council of Tarjih and Tajdid, 'Aisyiyah
Attitudes towards global Islamic feminism	Selective-critical	Selective-adaptive
Additional legitimacy base	The rules of ushul fiqh and the tradition of pesantren	Qur'anic equality principle and historical precedent

Source note. Compiled by researchers from the analysis of documents and secondary literature referenced in the Research Methods section. The number and date of the official decision require further verification against the organization's archives.

The "Reinterpretation from Within Tradition" Model

The most salient finding from the analysis of the above discourse is that both NU and Muhammadiyah tend to avoid direct references to Western feminist frameworks, and instead develop what can be termed a reinterpretation from within the tradition. This approach involves the use of Islamic jurisprudence's own internal resources, such as the rules of ushul fiqh, the precedent of minority sects, and the Islamic history of the archipelago, to build arguments for gender equality. Husein Muhammad (2001) explicitly refers to this approach as an effort to re-read fiqh from within, not importing foreign frameworks.

This strategy has a strategic advantage because it is easier to accept by Muslim communities who tend to be resistant to ideas that are considered imported from outside the Islamic tradition, because the argument is built on the vocabulary and epistemic authority that the community is familiar with. At the same time, this strategy differs from some approaches to global Islamic feminism that are more explicit in positioning themselves as a critique of patriarchy in religious traditions.

Epistemological Challenges in Reinterpretation

The reinterpretation of women's leadership in fiqh siyasah faces a number of interrelated epistemological challenges. One of them is the question of the authority of interpretation, specifically

who has the authority to reinterpret established fiqh texts. Islamic feminism is often criticized as *tafsir bi ghairi 'ilm*, or *tafsir* without adequate scientific competence, a criticism that has practical implications because it concerns the social legitimacy of the reinterpretation (Barlas, 2002).

Another challenge concerns universality versus particularity, that is, to what extent the principle of gender equality promoted by Islamic feminism represents a universal principle of Islam and to what extent it is a specific contextualization of contemporary reality. This question becomes even more complex when considering the diversity of Muslim women's experiences in different parts of the world. There is also the problem of textual and contextual relations. The acceptance that classical interpretations are products of a particular historical context does not in itself make alternative interpretations that claim to be more in line with contemporary contexts more hermeneutically correct. The three show that the project of reinterpretation of women's leadership is not only a technical issue of interpretation, but also a gamble on the legitimacy of religious authority itself.

The Gap Between Normative Discourse and Empirical Reality

Although both organizations demonstrate normative openness to women's leadership, the gap between discourse and empirical reality is still large. The representation of women in political leadership, religious organizations, and Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia is still far from reflecting the normative commitments that have been articulated by NU and Muhammadiyah. The persistence of patriarchal culture in various walks of life, the dominance of conservative interpretations of fiqh in a number of traditional Islamic boarding schools, women's limited access to the advanced religious education necessary to gain religious authority, and structural barriers in Islamic organizations that formally claim equality but in practice still marginalize women from decision-making positions, all contribute to widening the gap between the two groups, discourse and practice (Subhan, 1999).

This gap confirms that normative reinterpretation, however important, does not automatically result in structural change. Work is needed at several levels at once, including more active dissemination of gender equality fiqh through education and da'wah, structural reforms in Islamic organizations to ensure meaningful representation of women, and systematic education to challenge patriarchal norms that do not have a strong theological basis.

Digital Space and Women's Religious Authority

The development of social media has also changed the landscape of women's religious authority in Indonesia. Where access to formal religious leadership spaces has historically been limited by patriarchal structures that control Islamic boarding schools and taklim assemblies, digital platforms allow women to build authority and audiences more autonomously. Nisa (2018), in her study of Instagram da'wah accounts managed by young Indonesian Muslim women, shows how these platforms allow women to carry out a more flexible and accessible style of da'wah while building a broad follower base, representing a form of religious authority that does not rely entirely on the legitimacy of formal institutions.

This development has two implications. On the one hand, the visibility of women as active religious agents gradually normalizes the idea of women's spiritual leadership. On the other hand, the social media environment that is vulnerable to online bullying creates a disproportionate risk for women who appear publicly as religious figures. Organizations such as Fatayat NU and Nasyiatul 'Aisyiyah have begun to develop digital literacy programs and mentoring for young women cadres to respond to these challenges, although the scope and effectiveness of these programs have not been extensively studied empirically and are one of the relevant advanced research agendas.

Practical Implications for Policy

The findings of this study have a number of policy implications. The support or rejection of female candidates by scholars has a real influence on the behavior of Indonesian Muslim voters, so that the theological debate on women's leadership is not just an academic discourse, but has a direct impact on

political representation. The fact that Indonesia's two largest Islamic organizations both support the possibility of women's leadership, albeit with different emphases, provides a theological basis that can be communicated more widely to the public as an argumentative basis for affirmative policies of women's representation. The Islamic education curriculum also needs to integrate more of the works of progressive Nusantara scholars as a companion reference to classical texts, so that students know the diversity of opinions in the fiqh tradition, not just the most restrictive version.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the issue of women's leadership in fiqh siyasah is much more complex and nuanced than is often assumed in public debate. Classical siyasah jurisprudence does contain provisions that limit women's leadership, but these provisions are not a single consensus, as shown by the variations in opinion of the Hanafi school, Zahiri, and some of the narrations from al-Tabari. Global Islamic feminism makes an important contribution by developing gender-sensitive hermeneutics and showing that such restrictions are a product of historical-cultural contexts, rather than essential demands of Islam.

In this critical dialogue with the global discourse, Nusantara scholars, through NU and Muhammadiyah, produced a model of reinterpretation from within a distinctive tradition, utilizing the rules of ushul fiqh, the precedent of minority sects, and the history of the archipelago's own women's leadership as argumentative bases, instead of relying directly on the framework of Western feminism. This model carries the advantage of legitimacy among Indonesia's broad Muslim community and holds the potential to represent the archipelago's distinctive contribution to the global discourse on Islam and gender. The contribution of this article lies in offering the first systematic comparative analysis of NU and Muhammadiyah responses within a single CDA framework, while simultaneously positioning the historical precedent of female rulership in Aceh as an endogenous argumentative resource that existing comparative studies have not yet systematically engaged. In this respect, the Nusantara model advances beyond both the restrictive position of classical fiqh and the externally derived critique of global Islamic feminism, offering an approach grounded in the tradition's own epistemic resources.

Nonetheless, this study has limitations that need to be honestly acknowledged. The verification of a number of dates and official decree numbers of organizations, namely the NU Congress and the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Congress, against primary archival documents has not been completed in the preparation of this manuscript, and these figures need to be reconfirmed by the authors before publication. This research is also based on discourse analysis of texts and does not involve direct interviews with policy makers in both organizations, which would enrich the understanding of the decision-making processes behind formal positions. The scope is further limited to two mainstream organizations and does not extend to other Islamic bodies in Indonesia, such as Persis or independent pesantren-based organizations, which may exhibit different response patterns. Follow-up research that combines discourse analysis with in-depth interviews and expands the organizational scope will further strengthen the validity of these findings.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Al-Mawardi, A. H. (2014). *Al-Ahkam al-Sulthaniyyah: Hukum-hukum penyelenggaraan negara dalam syariat Islam* (F. H. Ashari, terj.). Darul Falah.
- Anwar, E. (2006). *Gender and self in Islam*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203086780>
- Barlas, A. (2002). *Believing women in Islam: Unreading patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an*. University of Texas Press.
- Buehler, M. (2016). *The politics of shari'a law: Islamist activists and the state in democratizing Indonesia*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316529096>
- Fairclough, N. (2010). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language* (2nd ed.). Longman.
- Hassan, R. (1987). An Islamic perspective. Dalam J. Becher (Ed.), *Women, religion and sexuality: Studies on the impact of religious teachings on women* (hlm. 93–128). WCC Publications.
- Hassan, R. (1999). Feminism in Islam. Dalam A. Sharma & K. Young (Eds.), *Feminism and world religions*

- (hlm. 248–278). SUNY Press.
- Husein Muhammad. (2001). *Fiqh perempuan: Refleksi kiai atas wacana agama dan gender*. LKiS.
- Ibrahim, A. (2021). Ulama perempuan dan feminisme Islam di Indonesia: Perkembangan dan tantangan. *Walisono: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan*, 29(2), 201–226. <https://doi.org/10.21580/ws.29.2.2021>
- Khan, S. B. A. L. (2017). *Sovereign women in a Muslim kingdom: The sultanahs of Aceh, 1641–1699*. NUS Press.
- Mernissi, F. (1991). *The veil and the male elite: A feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam* (M. J. Lakeland, Terj.). Addison-Wesley.
- Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2006). Muslim women's quest for equality: Between Islamic law and feminism. *Critical Inquiry*, 32(4), 629–645. <https://doi.org/10.1086/508085>
- Mulia, S. M. (2004). *Islam menggugat poligami*. Gramedia Pustaka Utama.
- Mulia, S. M. (2010). *Muslimah reformis: Perempuan pembaru keagamaan*. Mizan.
- Nisa, E. F. (2018). Creative and lucrative da'wa: The visual culture of Instagram amongst female Muslim youth in Indonesia. *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, 5(1–2), 68–99. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142312-12340085>
- Salamah-Qudsi, A. (2021). Women's leadership in Islamic jurisprudence: A comparative study. *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 59(1), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2021.591.1-34>
- Subhan, Z. (1999). *Tafsir kebencian: Studi bias gender dalam tafsir Qur'an*. LKiS.
- Wadud, A. (1999). *Qur'an and woman: Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Zuhdi, M. H. (2019). Feminisme Islam dan reinterpretasi hukum: Telaah atas karya Amina Wadud dan Fatima Mernissi. *Asy-Syir'ah: Jurnal Ilmu Syariah dan Hukum*, 53(2), 275–306.