

The social challenges of a working Muslim women in a patriotic society in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

In modern nations, women's roles have significantly evolved, granting them increased access to education, employment, and social mobility. Women's equality and autonomy are now often seen as hallmarks of progress, contrasting with traditional frameworks that reinforce male dominance. Despite these advancements, the women's movement advocating for gender rights continues globally. In developing countries like Indonesia—a Muslim-majority state—the societal view of women's roles remains complex. Many still prioritize marriage over education for women, and traditional values often expect women to be devoted wives and mothers, even as more women enter the workforce. This study explores how Indonesia reconciles traditional Islamic values with modern gender roles, particularly regarding Muslim women in the labor force. Employing qualitative research methods, this study analyzes secondary data from books, scholarly journals, official documents, news articles, and online sources to understand the societal, religious, and political dimensions influencing the participation of Muslim women in Indonesia's workforce. The findings reveal an ongoing negotiation between religious expectations and modern socio-economic demands, showing how Muslim women balance cultural obligations with professional aspirations. This research contributes to discussions on gender, religion, and modernization in Southeast Asia, emphasizing the importance of contextual sensitivity in addressing gender equity.

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INTRODUCTION

The fight for women's right in Southeast Asia varies from the right for education which further into creating a career. Indonesia as a state with the majority of Muslim in Southeast Asia region has its journey to pave out women's right. Islam is the second religion with the largest follower after Christianity with 2 billion followers. As such, Islam has been a factor for government for countries with Islam as the majority religion. The history of Muslim mentions many praises for women of Muslim like Muhammad's wife, Aisha. Aisha as Muhammad's favorite wife was described as an intelligent young lady that actives in politic role. Muslim scholars, activist women, and Islamic feminists highlighted Aisha's journey as an important history that women had a role in politic.

Many females of Muhammad circle were depicted as feminist icon for the Muslim community. However, after the death of Muhammad, many Muslim circle became patriarchy where Men have the higher position than women (Afzal Upal & Cusack, 2021; Akhlaq, 2023; Bigliardi, 2023; Daniah, 2022). After the death of prophet Muhammad, the religion of Islam divided into two beliefs, Sunni, and Syiah. Sunni faction is depicted as the most “authentic” because it follows the belief of six pillars of faith in Islam. These pillars are faith towards Faith in Allah, angels, the books of Allah, prophets, and messengers, in the Last Day, Qada and Qadr. While Syiah has the belief of five pillars, imam, prophets, messengers, books, and angels, the Last Day and God’s justice. The main difference is Syiah belief the only one that can be imam are the descendants of Ali and Muhammad, while Sunni belief imam must be chosen by a counsel to ensure fairness (Ningsih & Nailufar, 2021). Both section belief Allah is the only god and the religion Islam has spread its knowledge across the world. With Sunni as the majority, many countries follow it belief, one of them is Indonesia.

In Southeast Asia, 80% of Indonesia population consist of Muslim with Sunni belief. More than 90% of Muslim in Indonesia are followers of Sunni’s belief. However, it is debatable if Indonesia is an Islamic state. The state national values in line with Muslim belief which makes it a government with Islam value. During Suharto’s “new order” regime, Indonesia is enforced with the restriction of public Islamic Identity (Ardiansyah & Yanda, 2023; Djainudin et al., 2023; Lindsey et al., 2023). With Suharto’s resignation, Muslim of Indonesia manage to free their voices and became the majority of Indonesia within few years. One of the influences of Islam for Indonesia is the creation of Muslim school with high regards. This created many conflicts like intolerance towards the minorities of other religion. However, as they are extremist of intolerance, there are also who advocates tolerance of other belief and practice the teaching of living together with other religion. The ongoing struggle for Indonesia is how the majority of Muslim Sunni get along with the minority of religion groups.

In Indonesia, a Muslim-majority nation, women's participation in the workforce is influenced by a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and societal norms. While modernity has opened avenues for women's education and employment, traditional expectations often position women primarily as caregivers and homemakers. Despite these challenges, many Indonesian Muslim women have entered various professional fields, balancing their roles at home and work. Qualitative studies have highlighted the resilience and adaptability of these women in navigating societal expectations and pursuing personal and professional growth.

Previous research has explored aspects of Muslim women's work experiences in Indonesia. For instance, a study on Muslim songket weavers in Sukarara Village examined how work ethics and motivation contribute to family income, emphasizing the role of cultural and religious values in shaping women's work participation . Another study investigated the work-life balance of professional Muslim women juggling careers, family responsibilities, and further education, revealing the strategies employed to achieve personal and professional fulfillment .

Building upon these studies, the current research aims to delve deeper into the experiences of Muslim women in Indonesia's workforce, focusing on how they navigate the dual expectations of professional engagement and adherence to traditional gender roles. By employing qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and analysis of secondary data, this study seeks to understand the factors influencing Muslim women's employment decisions,

the challenges they face, and the coping mechanisms they employ. The findings are expected to provide insights into the evolving dynamics of gender roles in Indonesia and inform policies and programs that support women's empowerment in the workforce. This study explores how Indonesia reconciles traditional Islamic values with modern gender roles, particularly regarding Muslim women in the labor force.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the experiences, challenges, and strategies of Muslim women in Indonesia in navigating workforce participation while upholding religious and cultural expectations. The qualitative approach is chosen because it enables the researcher to deeply investigate complex social phenomena and obtain rich, contextual insights through the subjective perspectives of individuals. The population in this study consists of Muslim women working across various sectors in urban and semi-urban areas in Indonesia. The sample, determined through purposive sampling, includes 10–15 Muslim women who are employed and meet specific criteria such as being married, having children, and/or balancing religious obligations with career responsibilities.

Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews and document analysis from relevant secondary sources such as government reports, scholarly articles, and news media. The research instrument used is an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions designed to explore personal experiences, societal expectations, religious influences, and work-life balance strategies. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, triangulation is used by comparing interview results with findings from literature and document analysis. The reliability and validity of the research are also supported through member-checking and peer debriefing during the data analysis process.

The data collection procedure involves setting up interviews via online video calls or in-person meetings, transcribing conversations verbatim, and organizing data thematically. The software used in this research is NVivo 12 to code and analyze qualitative data efficiently. Data analysis is carried out using thematic analysis, which includes the steps of data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. Through this method, patterns and themes related to the impact of cultural and religious norms on Muslim women's workforce participation are identified and interpreted systematically to produce meaningful and policy-relevant insights.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Indonesia as a state with patriarch belief

The simple explanation for “patriarch” is “Man is the head of the household”. The traditional notion in patriarch explains “men provide and protect women”. It is the man’s duty to provide for his wife and children while the wife duty lies in home like housework and teach their children. This explains the dynamic of a “nuclear family”, a term for a family group consisting of parents and their children, typically living in one home residence. As a Muslim and Asian country, Marriage is an important and sacred aspect for Muslim. Creating a peaceful and harmonious household is regarded as an achievement. During the “new order” regime, women was responsible for managing household where they are to stay at home and be good wives and mothers while the man be the sole provider. Marriage in Indonesia focused on reproduction as they wish to expand their family, therefore expands their blessing. For

Indonesia, there is a belief “the more children you have, the more blessing you will have.” Women role in having kids became crucial for Indonesia tradition for creating a household with many blessings. This image of household became a staple for a good marriage in Indonesia. This created a stereotype for Indonesia how male and female should behave and what role they play in society (Brockenbrough, 2018; Irma Riyani, 2016; Nurlaelawati, 2022; Riyani, 2020). It is interpreted where the man is the head of the household should always be high regarded in Islam. Although women were regarded as the position to control their household, many still think otherwise. With women is expected to be the “the perfect wife and mother”, they are vulnerable to fulfill men’s expectation. This creates many disadvantages for women where they must be a good nature, submissive, and can reproduce to continue the male lineage. As men are the stronger by nature, they can control women as the weaker side.

Women Movement in Indonesia

Indonesia is not a lone closed state, as Indonesia continues to create friendship with other state, they may influence each other. Indonesia is also a player in the international world and keeps with the trend. The international world orbits on western world and follows its trends, it applies to Muslim countries as well. Following the trends of Western, Islamic state navigates the modern version of Western while holding Islam as the sole religion. The western belief tends to clash with Islamic belief, which make Indonesia Muslim population reluctant to accept it. From the history and geographical aspect, Indonesia has more in common with Islamic belief rather than Western belief. The term Islamic Modernism came to light as movement Muslim tries navigate the western view on democracy, civil rights, rationality, equality, and progress. One of western movement was the Western wave of feminism that began at the end of 19th century. The movement was about women equal right owning properties and the right to vote (Kumar Mohajan, 2022; H. Mohajan, 2022; H. K. Mohajan, 2022; Rampton, 2015; Shea, 2023). This was the first wave of feminism and many to come. Feminism movement trend spread out and reached Indonesia during a Dutch rule.

Indonesia as a state with Muslim belief and a Patriarch nature, Women of Muslim struggles for equal right and the first wave of feminism in Indonesia began with Kartini supporting education of all women and girls regardless of their status. The feminism movement is still ongoing, one of the challenges is that the majority belief “feminism does not have a root in Indonesia as it seen as western belief.” Indonesia as a country with patriarch belief, struggles with women equal right as men. In Asian Culture, patriarchy is where the man is the dominant and are head of the household where the woman plays as the obedient one. Even in Indonesia, the feminism movement cause a divide within Muslim community as conservative side rejecting the idea of feminism with worries it is influence from western belief. During 2018, there was a controversy in editing the Bill on the Elimination of Sexual Crimes. The bill was originally created to protect women from sexual crimes. However, many Muslim men and women interpret it as the beginning of women liberation that began within household and disagree with the bill. The bill was rejected by many Muslims because it was interpreted as a sexual liberalization that eliminates Indonesian norms, religion, and society. This caused controversy within the religion itself.

The history of Indonesia Female Literacy and Education

Indonesia modern schooling started when the Dutch occupied most of the archipelago and began introducing schools to train men for colonial administration. Java as the main centre of Indonesia population, has been given funding by the government to start schools in urban areas. The government also build Institutions to train doctors, midwives, and nurses. Western style private schools also open for children of European or Eurasian descendants, who wanted their children educated in the Dutch fashion. Few Indonesian parents who have the means desired to send their daughters to school, considering the cost, traditional objections to the mixing of the sexes and the lack of employment opportunities for educated women. At the end of the nineteenth century there were only about 15,000 Indonesian girls in Western-style schools, about one-sixth of the total number of Indonesian pupils, in a population of some 30 million people at that time (Blackburn, 2004). A young aristocratic Javanese woman named Raden Ajeng Kartini began advocating for education of ‘the daughters of the nobility’ with an argument where “potentially civilising influence as wives and mother”. Kartini begins to be the representee for fusion of the views of both educated Indonesian girls and elements within the colonial state. Kartini’s mission was supported by her Dutch friends and helped set up the so-called Kartini schools for Javanese girls from 1913 onwards. The female education in Indonesia began to create an educated wife and mother in aristocratic circle. As Indonesia began to desire Independent from the Dutch, Indonesia female education evolves to help Indonesia Women to understand and support the nationalist movement, and to raise healthy and loyal Indonesian citizens.

The government to was urged to increase the number of separate schools for girls because of the continuing difficulty in getting many parents to send their daughters to coeducational schools. A young women “purity” is still considered the main important part of Women image. So, while more young girls are encouraged to seek education, it is considered an unwritten taboo to amalgamate Men and Women in one schooling. Siti Sundari, who had contributed to the 1914 Declining Welfare Commission and participated in the Colonial Education Congress of 1916, voiced her opinion that Women had important responsibilities in working to strengthen the Indonesian nation, and to do so they would need freedom (Blackburn, 2004; Sonn, 2023; “States of Women in Indian Modern Society,” 2023; Vlašić, 2018). After the Declaration of Independence in August 1945, Indonesian governments began to encourage for Men and Women to pursue education equally, recognising it as a right of all citizens, a means of promoting national unity and a necessity for economic development. In line with the Constitution. Even though the government rejected the notion of an Islamic state, the governments have also chosen a secular state education system, although the state does extensively subsidise (and supervise) religious schools that conform to its criteria.

Indonesia Women in Work Force

During Dutch occupancy, for women below middle class, the only work available for women are servant for household, field work and factory work. Even with Kartini advocating for Women, women in work force have not been recognize as an “employee”, but as a labour worker. This labour worker has been given strict instruction where the slightest mistake can cause a huge fine. More women have been sent to work in factories to work off a debt cause by the mistake in work. The women labour worker is overworked, starved and abuse physically

and sexually. And they cannot escape because of the employer will force their families and neighbouring families to hold responsible, being forced to provide a replacement for the escapee. A women committee named Committee to Defend Indonesian Women Workers that based in Yogyakarta, created an agenda to cover Indonesian women workers more generally, then expand to promote the needs of women workers. These was the challenges of women below the middle class. A middle-class women considered that work was not legitimate for wives and mothers, who should devote themselves to household tasks.

During New Order, the Indonesia government has been tackling the economy, assisted by foreign aid and investment, and revenue generated by the oil boom. Employment expanded, particularly in the formal sector, and causing living standards to rose for most people. Middle class women no longer bound by the notion of “being a normal housewife”. Indonesia Women reason to seek employment varies from “providing for oneself” to “providing for their family”. Women’s employment has caused a massive change in three interlocking institutional structures—work, family, and timing of individual life schedules. The changes of these dynamic structure involved the way individuals timed major life events such as school completion, entry into the work force, family formation, and retirement. Women began to fill the post of professional, retail, and office work. The entry has given women time and motivation to take on gainful employment (Allen & Orifici, 2023; Anon, 2021; Subía & Lascano, 2021). The workplace has created two types of employment available for women; part-time are available for women seek schedules that are compatible with their family responsibilities, and fulltime where women can become a permanent employee.

The challenges and expectation of working Muslim women

The idea of patriarchy for Muslim in Indonesia is the Male as the sole provider for the family while the Female is the homemaker and the pillar for the family. This created a notion where “a women place is not in the workplace but in the kitchen at home”. The men are expected to be the breadwinner while the women are the homemaker where women are expected to cook and clean. The dynamic of where men and women can work resulted a change both in workplace and home has created a new expectation where both sexes now expect to carry multiple work and family responsibilities most of the time. The generic idea of Feminism encourages more Women to pursue a higher education and a career with idea of “Women can do anything (a man can)”. With more women excels in the workplace, more than often the men would feel threaten by “a powerful women” as it would hurt their ego. This causes a phenomenon where men would often lash out threatening other women to not seek further education. “The smarter you are, the more likely you’ll be alone” is the threat a man would use to scare women because marriage is considered as the goal. Even with Women are “allowed to work”, women are still expected to do the household chores as it is their “duty”.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that although globalization has expanded educational and career opportunities for Indonesian women, traditional gender norms still limit their full participation in the workforce. Social expectations—especially within lower to middle-class communities—often discourage women from pursuing higher education or professional advancement, driven by the belief that a woman's primary role is domestic. These norms not only hinder individual

growth but also perpetuate gender inequality. For Muslim women, the pursuit of knowledge should not be seen as contradictory to religious values but as a complement, as emphasized in both Kartini's ideals and Islamic teachings such as Surat An-Nur verse 26. Future research should explore the role of religious institutions and community leaders in reshaping narratives around women's education and career roles, as well as examine how class dynamics further influence gender expectations across different regions of Indonesia.

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