# Dealing with Diversity

Religion, Globalization, Violence, Gender and Disaster in Indonesia

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# REDISCOVERING GENDER INCLUSIVE RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS AND PRACTICES

*A Response to Rita M. Gross*

*Siti Syamsiyatun*

It is a great honour for me to write a brief response to the paper presented by Rita M. Gross, a distinguished and productive scholar on gender and comparative religions. Rita Gross's paper is very impressive; it has clearly outlined and discussed major questions and problems in world religions raised by feminists, and how they have offered responses to develop feminist understanding of today's world religions. The paper is so rich and condensed that it would be impossible for me to present a thorough response to it for at least two reasons. Firstly, I am not highly trained in the field of comparative religions or feminist theology, rather I received considerable training in Islamic studies and gender politics; and secondly, technical terms restrict me to do so. For these reasons, I will highlight only a few points and issues discussed in Rita Gross's presentation, namely on how feminists have problematized the so-called sexist beliefs and teachings, and on the strategies employed by feminist theologians in developing gender inclusive theology. I would also like to share the findings of my research that are relevant to support her

argument on the lack of scriptural studies on the part of Muslim feminists. In doing so, I am using my experience as an Indonesian Muslim woman, and am commenting from the perspective of Muslim feminists in Indonesia, which is absent in her presentation,

## Feminist Scholars Problematizing Sexist Beliefs and Practices in World Religions

While feminist scholars and theologians in the West had defined sexist beliefs and practices in world religions by using feminist standards and definitions, in the 1970s, they began formulating answers to questions of what to do next, as pointed out in Gross's paper. In Indonesia, feminist scholarship has just begun to grow. There are many possible arguments to explain the gap of this differing state of feminist scholarship. From a political perspective we might argue that macro socio-political and intellectual situations in the West has allowed more freedom in challenging religious discourse than most Eastern and Muslim countries have. This is partly because of the prominent presence of modernity and secularism in the region. Developing feminist theology as engaged scholarship and social activism is relatively less problematic in secular and modern countries than in countries with a strong religious identity, such as Indonesia.

The difference in how people of particular societies have perceived the sanctity of religions has significant influence on the growth of feminist theology in a particular space and time in history. The secular *worldview* tends to limit the role of religions in public policy and domain, and decreases the influence and image of religions as a social force and common identity in the minds of people. Indonesia, while it is not a theocratic country, does regulate the religious affairs of its citizens.

The state ideology, called *Pancasila*,[1] requires that Indonesians adhere to one of the religions approved by the state, religions that witness the unity of God. As a consequence, feminist scholars in the West and in Indonesia have developed distinct approaches and directions in the area of feminist scholarship in religious studies.[2]

In the Western academic context religious studies, generally speaking, are treated equally with other fields of study; in Indonesia religious studies are still widely regarded and treated as a sacred and restricted field of study. One can hardly find Indonesian books offering concepts of feminist theology in any of the world religions, particularly in Islam, although there are some books examining the social aspects of

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[1] The Indonesian state ideology, Pancasila, consists of five basic philosophical values: belief in the unity of god; just and civilized humanity; Indonesia united; deliberations through people's representatives; social justice for all Indonesians.
[2] The following books illustrate how feminism and gender issues are developed in Indonesia: Frances S. Adeney, *Christian Women in Indonesia: A Narrative Study of Gender and Religion* (New York: Syracuse, 2003); Siti Baroroh Baried, "Islam and the Modernization of Indonesian Women" in *Islam and Society in Southeast Asia*, ed. T. Abdullah and S. Siddique (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986); Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jajat Burhanuddin and Oman Fathurahman, eds., *Tentang Perempuan Islam: Wacana dan Gerakan* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama and PPIM IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2004); Jajat Burhanuddin, ed., *Ulama Perempuan Indonesia* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama and PPIM IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2002); Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin et al., *Rekonstruksi Metodologis Wacana Kesetaraan Gender dalam Islam* (Yogyakarta: PSW IAIN Sunan Kalijaga and McGill-CIDA and Pustaka Pelajar, 2002); Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin, "Kajian Gender di Perguruan Tinggi Islam di Indonesia: Catatan dari PSW IAIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta" in *Problem dan Prospek IAIN: Antologi Pendidikan Islam*, ed. K. Hidayat and H. Prasetyo (Jakarta: Ditbinperta Depag RI, 2000); Darmiyanti Mukhtar, "The Rise of the Indonesian Women's Movement in the New Order State" (Thesis, Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia, 1999); Nunuk Prasetyo Murniati, *Gerakan Anti Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1998); Siti Muslikhati, *Feminisme dan Pemberdayaan Perempuan dalam Timbangan Islam* (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2004); Istiadah, *Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Investigating Paths to Resist the Patriarchal System*, working paper, Clayton Centre of Southeast Asian Studies (Monash University, 1995).

Islamic law using a gender perspective.[3] This does not mean, however, to imply that feminist questions are absent from the minds of Muslim feminists. Feminist or women's questions in theology and religious traditions are often raised in a "casual manner".

To illustrate this, in the 1970s when I was a student in a *pesantren* and began learning Arabic and Qur'anic exegesis and other Islamic subjects, my friends and I asked our teacher why our God Allah was referred as *huwa* (male pronoun – He), and whether we could refer to Allah using the female pronoun *hiya*. The answer of our teacher was something like, "Allah is neither male nor female, but 'He' refers to himself in the Qur'an by using the pronoun *huwa*. In Indonesian we translate it as *Dia*, and the pronoun is for both male and female." We also often questioned some sexist practices within Islamic traditions such as why girls and women received different treatments from boys and men? Why the birth of a baby girl was celebrated by slaughtering one goat whereas a baby boy merited two goats? Why menstruating women are not allowed to enter the mosque, to fast and to do *sholat* (prayers)? Why it is only men who could be a *wali* (guardian)? It seemed that our teachers did not have satisfying, scholarly answers for us other than requiring students to obediently accept the prescribed teachings. We had to wait for about two decades to be able to engage in scholarly discussions on the aforementioned issues. This was possible only if we raised the questions in Islamic learning institutions such as IAINs and UINs.[4] Other religious venues, such as mosques, Islamic organizations or religious councils, are not yet ready to provide

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[3] See for instance: Forum Kajian Kitab Kuning, *Wajah Baru Relasi Suami Istri: Telaah Kitab 'Uqud al-Lujjayn* (Yogyakarta: LKiS and FK3, 2003); Siti Musdah Mulia, *Pandangan Islam tentang Poligami* (Jakarta: LKAJ, Solidaritas Perempuan dan The Asia Foundation, 1999); Mukhotib, MD (ed), *Menghapus Poligami, Mewujudkan Keadilan* (Yogyakarta: YKF dan The Ford Foundation, 2002); _____, *Menolak Mut'ah dan Sirri: Memberdayakan Perempuan* (Yogyakarta: YKF dan The Ford Foundation, 2002).

[4] IAINs are State Institutes for Islamic Studies, whereas UINs are State Islamic Universities.

discursive space for such engagement as critical examination of our own religion and traditions.

The rise of women scholars with feminist convictions in Islamic studies in the 1990s broke the silenced discourse on feminist theology. By applying gender as an analytical tool, Muslim feminists began pointing out sexist practices that claimed to be based on Islamic doctrines. This task was made possible because it was carried out by highly educated women (and men) who could not be academically dismissed, as they hold licenses – the same degrees as those gained by male scholars.

My research on the rise of women scholars in Islamic studies and *ulama* shows that IAINs and UINs play a significant role. IAINs and UINs provide training in Islamic studies for both sexes. Consequently women graduates of those higher Islamic institutions have similar authority in the academic domain as male graduates to speak on Islamic teachings. Thus in the mid 1990s, upon their graduation from Islamic universities, Muslim women began taking positions in religious courts and Islamic universities, domains formerly reserved for men, and since then the number of women *ulamas* has increased. Because women have similar doctorate degrees in Islamic studies as many men do, they may engage in scholarly debates on religious issues. As a result a number of women have been able to participate as full members of the Indonesian Islamic Council, and religious councils in two of most popular Islamic organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, and to establish as well as to head NGOs focusing on women's empowerment in an Islamic perspective. [5]

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[5] Siti Syamsiyatun, "Serving Young Islamic Women in Indonesia: The Dynamic of the Development of Gender Discourse in Nasyiatul Aisyiyah 1965-2005" (PhD dissertation, Monash University, 2006); Siti Syamsiyatun "A Daughter in Indonesian Muhammadiyah: Nasyiatul Aisyiyah Negotiates New Images and Status", *Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies* 18.1 (2007): 69-94.

Another major issue that I would like to respond to is the "standard" of defining *sexism used by* feminist scholars mentioned in Gross's paper. If I understand it correctly, the indicator they used is equality between men and women in all respects. While such a standard is widely accepted by most feminists mentioned by Gross, the case in Indonesia is quite different. The discussion on the issue is heavily influenced by *feminist* gender theories on difference and sameness between women and men. Should both men and women have identical rights and duties with regard to religions? Should we let women and men perform different roles but regard these roles of equal value in religions?

As far as my research amongst Muslim women feminists is concerned, most of them tend to mix the two approaches to look at so-called "sexist beliefs and practices" in Islam. In the area of religious precepts, particularly in what is usually termed by Muslims as *ibadah mahdhah* (strict worship), they use the gender difference theory. For instance, a man becomes an *imam* (leader) in a congregational prayer and a woman becomes the *makmum*. In this case, men and women perform different roles in different positions. But an *imam* will never be an *imam* without a *makmum*, and vice versa, thus both roles have equal value. When they are dealing with religious teachings with heavy 'social flavour' (usually called *ibadah 'amah* or *mu'amalah*), they employ the sameness theory. For example, whether or not Muslim women should be allowed to become leaders of a country, heads of Islamic courts, or guardians and witnesses in marriages, most Muslim feminists I interviewed answered that they are entitled to the positions. Thus the perceived internal structure of religions will determine the way feminists respond to the problems of sexist beliefs and practices within their own traditions.

### Strategies of Indonesian Scholars in Transforming Islamic Traditions

Gross outlined two most significant strategies adopted by feminist theologians to overcome sexist and patriarchal religions, namely by reforming the religions from within as proposed by the so-called reformists, and by creating new post-patriarchal religions as championed by the revolutionaries. From my observations, the newly emerging Indonesian Muslim feminist scholars are more interested in applying the strategy of reforming Islamic traditions from within. [6]

It must be acknowledged that Indonesian scholars adapted their feminist analysis to religions and their traditions from their counterparts in Western academia. Theories produced in feminist studies, as well as those produced in religious studies such as hermeneutics and phenomenology are amongst the most popular frameworks used to explain sexist practices in religions and how to eliminate them.

This kind of adaptation and linkage between Indonesian (Muslim) feminists and Western feminists inevitably resulted in the rise of suspicion from some conservative Muslim groups in Indonesia. The conservatives argued that reforming religious traditions using Western feminist approaches means destroying the religions and their eastern cultures. Such an accusation is partly based on long mutual hatred, mistrust and suspicion (sometimes with a brief friendship) in the relationships between the West and the East. In this regard, Muslim feminists reply that knowledge and scientific theories are fluid disciplines that cross national boundaries. To learn from feminist and other social theories is similar to learning from the West's contributions in the areas of politics, economics, computer science, physics and mathematics.

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[6] Siti Syamsiyatun. "Serving Young Islamic Women in Indonesia" in *Ketika Pesantren Membincang Gender*, ed. Mukhotib. MD (Yogyakarta: YKF and The Ford Foundation, 2002a)

Hermeneutical, phenomenological and feminist approaches to interpreting the Islamic text were only introduced in the 1990s, and the validity of their usage is still widely debated today. One major problem encountered by Western feminist theologians and Indonesian Muslim feminists with regard to hermeneutics lies in the perception of authorship of the religious texts. While the idea of human authorship of the Bible is well established, the authorship of the Islamic text, the Qur'an, is still an ongoing debate. Most Muslims believe that the very words of the Qur'an – all of them – are revealed from Heaven. Thus the Prophet Muhammad simply received them verbatim through the angel Jibril. When the main premise regarding the authorship of the Qur'an is such, how could we, as humans, go deep into the socio-psychological environment of the author? To overcome the problem, what has been done by many Muslim scholars is the making of distinctions between various "realities" of Islam: 1) Islam as contained in the actual message of Qur'anic text; 2) Islam as interpreted and practiced by the Prophet during his lifetime in seventh-century Arabia; 3) Islam as interpreted and formulated by companions and later Muslim scholars; 4) Islam as practiced and expressed by Muslim communities around the world with all its variations.[7] It is in the second, third and fourth levels above, where current Muslim feminists are focusing and re-examining sexist *beliefs and teachings* found in Islam and proposing new light and perspective in the interpretation of those verses.

While most Indonesian feminists take into account the need to include women's experiences in the process of reforming their religious

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[7] See for examples Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Barbara Stowasser, "Gender Issues and Contemporary Qur'an Interpretation" in *Islam, Gender and Social Change*, eds. Y.Y. Haddad and J.L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Nasaruddin Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Gender: Perspektif Al-Qur'an* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999); Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Women's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

traditions, they are also challenged by questions such as: Is feminist theology simply reversing the androcentric theology into women-centred theology? If so, what's the difference between feminist and androcentric theology, where the former takes the side for women and the latter for men? Are there feminist proposals in the language of religion that include the experiences of men and women as equal participants in religious engagements?

Gross's observation that many feminists have used the neutral gender and gender free vision of religious texts or scriptures as their starting point to launch their reform perfectly accords with strategies employed by most Indonesian Muslim feminists. However, as pointed out by Gross, comprehensive scriptural study of the Islamic sacred text, which involves detailed archaeological, historical and linguistic study, is still in its infancy. Indonesian Muslim feminist scholars, similar to their colleagues in the West, mostly concentrate on the area of interpretation and *ijtihad* in understanding the Qur'an and the *hadith* (the recorded deeds, sayings and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad). With the *hadith*, they question in what context, to whom and for what purposes the Prophet was reported to have said such and such. They also intensify their examination into the history of the narrators of the *hadith*. With regard to the Qur'an, Muslim feminist interpreters, following in the footsteps of their colleagues who are experienced in Biblical studies, distinguish between text and interpretations. In recent years, they also began to examine the accompanying social and historical contexts of the revelation of the verses (the Qur'an was revealed piecemeal over 23 years) to include the moral values conveyed by the text rather than to adopt the 'literal vehicle' in interpreting the text to make its readers understand the message. This method was proposed by Fazlur Rahman,

Rifaat Hasan, Amina Wadud, Asghar Ali Engineer, and Nasaruddin Umar.[8]

Indonesian feminist scholars also turn more to the linguistic aspect and analysis of the Qur'an, as exemplified by Nasaruddin Umar. By employing various strategies of approaching the text and offering new interpretations of the text, Muslim feminists claim genuine progress in their feminist transformation from within. This is partly because the Arabic language "borrowed" by the Qur'an to speak to human beings has the potential of both empowering women and maintaining the patriarchal tendency. For example, the fact that Arabic is a gendered language requires that everything is designated as either male or female for grammatical purposes. But a male and female gendered word does not necessarily imply male and female sexuality. Thus the word *Allah*, which uses a male pronoun, does not mean that God is sexually male. The issues that arise from this kind of gendered language are rather foreign to Indonesians, because we do not share a similar language construction.

Furthermore the analysis of some Arabic words, such as *khalaqa* and *ja'ala*, which in Indonesian are translated similarly as *mencipta* (to create), reveals a different understanding of the creation of Adam and Hawa (Eve) and humankind as a whole, as pointed out by Nasaruddin Umar. This is because in Arabic the two words signify different levels of creation. It is the word *khalaqa* that is used by the Qur'an to explain the creation of Adam and Eve (*Hawa*), and not *ja'ala*. Also the words *rijal* and *dzakar*, which in Arabic denote male gender and biological man respectively, in Indonesian are translated similarly as *laki-laki* (man). A similar problem is found in the translation and interpretation of the

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[8] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*; Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Women*; Asghar Ali Emgineer, *Hak-hak Perempuan dalam Islam* (The Rights of Women in Islam) trans. F. Wajidi (Yogyakarta: LSPAA, 2000); *Pembebasan Perempuan*, trans. Agus Nuryatno (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2004); Nasruddin Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender: Perspektif Al-Qur'an*.

Qur'anic words of *nisa'*, *mar'ah* and *untsa*.[9] Whereas the first two words in Arabic refer to female gender, the third one points to biological woman. Because Indonesian doesn't have terms to distinguish between the meaning of these words, all three words are translated as "women".

Closer analysis of the *asmaul husna* (beautiful names) by which Allah wishes to be known to humans also reveals different dimensions of the reality of Allah. The number of names or attributes that are traditionally associated with femininity (from the 99 beautiful names) is very significant.[10] Even the very names that Allah uses most in the Qur'an, *rahman* and *rahim*, are rooted in the Arabic *r-h-m*, which can be constructed to form various words, all of which connote feminine nature and traits, such as love, compassion, mercy, womb and grace.

Based on my research amongst the Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama families, the above approach, analyzing the linguistic aspects of the Qur'an, is more acceptable than proposing a completely different interpretation of the text using hermeneutic methodology or ones that based heavily on human experiences and reasoning.

## Women Claiming Space in Religious Institutions

Apart from participating in the area of *ijtihad* in the interpretation of the Qur'an and understanding the *hadith*, Muslim feminists have developed a new strategy of aligning their struggles for gender justice into popular religious institutions. This is because in the Indonesian context, most religious edicts or opinions are developed within these religious institutions before they are launched or announced to the public. Feminists see their inclusion and involvement in the debates within these long standing religious institutions to be more strategic than creating a new religious council for post-patriarchal religious edicts and opinion.

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[9] Nasruddin Umar, *Argumen Kesetaraan Jender*.
[10] Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam*.

From the mid 1990s, when the number of women scholars in Islamic religious studies increased steadily, they also began to take positions in various *religious institutions, from* local mosque committees to social-religious mass organizations, from administrative positions in local religious offices to higher provincial courts.[11]

## Conclusion

Muslim feminists in Indonesia have encountered different theories of sexist beliefs and practices. They encounter theological difficulties in attempting to change patriarchal symbols as well as the male pronoun of Allah in the Islamic text, because each word in the Qur'an is believed to be sacred and revealed from Heaven. Their solution is in rediscovering the feminine attributes, as well as symbols, images and doctrines, that empower women but have been masked by former male-dominant interpretations

While adopting external, individual and physical symbols of religiosity, Indonesian Muslim feminists also assert that internal, social and spiritual meanings and symbols of religiosity are very important to empower ourselves as humans.

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[11] Siti Syamsiyatun, "Serving Young Islamic Women in Indonesia".

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