

SPREADING GENDER EGALITARIAN ISLAM IN INDONESIA

HUSEIN MUHAMMAD

Abstract: This narrative draws on conversations between Kyai Husein Muhammad and Margot Badran reconstructed by the latter upon careful review of recorded discussions that began in the Netherlands at the Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) in Leiden in 2003 and continued in Jakarta in 2004. Kyai Husein, as he is usually called, is religious scholar and self-identified Islamic feminist. In recounting his life trajectory Kyai Husein reveals a journey from Islamic modernism to Islamic feminism in Indonesia. His story demonstrates how Islamic feminism is practiced as it is being constructed. It shows the rise and spread of Islamic feminism in the hinterland dispelling the notion that egalitarian Islam cannot flourish in a rural environment. Kyai Husein points out that Islamic feminists and Islamic radicalists (to use his word) are both concerned with women and gender but in diametrically opposed ways. The narrative published below captures conversations that occurred nearly a decade and a half ago and thus must be read as part of the historical record and a prelude to the present.

Keywords: study of Islam, Islamic feminism, Islamic boarding school, self identity, Islamic modernism

In 2003 when I was a visiting fellow at the Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) in Leiden, I was told that an Islamic feminist had recently arrived from Indonesia. I hadn't seen anyone who seemed to be our new colleague when suddenly one day a man appeared at the door of my office. He introduced himself as Husein Muhammad. He was the Islamic feminist from Indonesia. From that first moment, we plunged into what would be the first of many conversations on Islamic feminism in Indonesia, a country of over two million Muslims, the largest number in any single nation. Our conversations continued the following year in Jakarta when Kyai Husein had just published his latest book *Islam Agrama Ramah Perempuan: Pambelaan Kyai Pesantrun* (Islam a Woman Friendly Religion: A Kyai's Support for Women).

It might come as a surprise for many to find a Kyai, a religious scholar who teaches at a *pesantran*, an Islamic boarding school, to be an Islamic feminist, and, moreover, who publicly acknowledges this identity. Kyai Husein started his schooling at the *pesantren* his grandfather had founded in Cirebon in West Java where he was born in 1953. His father and mother were teachers in the *pesantren* where both boys and girls were educated. Women religious scholars or *nyais* taught the girls. Husein did his secondary school studies at a *pesantren* in Lirboyo in East Java graduating in 1973.

Lacing the sprawling Indonesian archipelago, *pesantrens* were created, and have been sustained, by local communities. These Islamic boarding schools serving the vast hinterland have not only survived over the centuries but continue to multiply. In the mid-1990s there were estimated to be 6,000 *pesantrens*. Now in 2004 there are some 14,000 Islamic boarding schools educating a million *santris* (male) and *santriwatis* (female) as *pesantren* students are called. Females are among the increasing numbers of those both receiving and imparting this religious schooling.

Kyai Husein describes the *pesantrens* as typically conservative. Teachers use traditional religious textbooks known as *kitab kuning* (literally, yellow books) written in Arabic. Kyai Husein acknowledges that this conservative schooling left a mark on him. Years later he would revise the school books used in his family's *pesantren*.

In 1980, after earning a diploma from the Higher Institute of Qur'anic Studies in Jakarta, Husein Muhammad followed in the foot-steps of many compatriots who journeyed to Egypt for further religious studies. There has been a long tradition of Indonesians seeking higher Islamic learning at the renowned university of Al-Azhar in Cairo. When Husein's diplomas from Indonesia were not recognised by Al-Azhar preventing his enrollment he turned to *dirasa khassa* or private study during his stay from 1980 to 1983. He joined various study-circles, or *halaqas*, as he explained "to deepen my horizon of knowledge about contemporary Islamic issues." In Egypt, he became acquainted with the works of religious thinkers such as 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq and Sayyid Qutb and secular scholars and writers like Taha Husain and 'Abbas al-'Aqqad. He had already been introduced to the thought of the influential Islamic modernist Muhammad 'Abduh back in Indonesia.

I asked Kyai Husein about Muhammad 'Abduh's influence in Indonesia. He explained that 'Abduh's thought--which was first introduced in Indonesia early last century by students returning from Al-Azhar - has left a dual mark. Progressives, valuing his modernist

thinking call for *ijtihad* (independent investigation of religious texts), while conservatives, by far the majority, have been critical of ‘Abduh’s thinking as propagated by the disciples of Ahmad Dahlan who formed the Muhammadiyah in 1912 which created a women’s section called Aisiyiyah. Men upholding a more traditionalist approach established the Nahdlatul Ulama in 1926 which also formed a women’s section called Muslimat. While the Nahdlatul Ulama continues overall to be the more traditionalist network it also displayed a liberal strand according to the daughter of one of its founders Lily Munir who identified herself as an Islamic feminist activist. Although Indonesian *pesantren* culture remains largely conservative, Kyai Husein says ‘Abduh’s legacy can be found in the more modern *pesantrens*. He points out that Islamic modernist thought has been propagated more generally in recent decades not so much by Indonesians who have graduated from universities in Arab countries but by those who have studied in western universities. Kyai Husein notes that many Indonesian women study at Al-Azhar. When these women return to Indonesia they often become *pesantren* teachers and women religious leaders in their hometowns. Those who settle in Jakarta are often found leading *majalis ta’lim* or women’s weekly or monthly study sessions.

Upon his return to Indonesia from Egypt, Kyai Husein continued to teach in the *pesantren* system that had nurtured him. At the beginning of the 1990s, about ten years after he was back in Indonesia, his understanding of religion began to change. He recalls this as a moment of coming into a new consciousness of religion, of becoming a “new version” of his former self. Until then he admitted: “I represented the traditional *pesantren* point of view that saw religious knowledge as merely a textual truth. The truth in the *pesantren* culture in general was a truth that came from the yellow books not from life itself and social realities.”

At the core of his change in outlook was a different perspective on gender. A new awareness began to surface after Kyai Husein attended a seminar in Jakarta on gender and religion. His first reaction to the liberal thought he heard expressed was skepticism. But, he said, “I started to think about it and began to realise that what was being said about gender was in line with the spirit of the Qur’an. I began to explore further.” Kyai Husein said he was especially influenced by the work of Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, the Egyptian professor of Islamic thought at Cairo University “who was driven into exile for his enlightened views.” Abu Zaid spent the final decades of his life at the University of Leiden in Netherlands. Kyai Husein said: “I have read almost all of Abu Zaid’s works,” (Abu Zaid is well-known for his seminal contributions to Islamic feminist discourse.) Kyai Husein started being asked to speak on Islam and gender in open seminars and other public events.

I asked Kyai Husein how his new thinking about Islam and public identity as an avowed Islamic feminist was received by his family, the *pesantrens*, and the broader society. “My new thinking was not at first well received by the *pesantren* world and the community in general,” but “the initial criticism has evolved into widening acceptance. My family accepts my thinking and supports me in my advocacy of women’s rights. Members of my own *pesantren* now welcome my approach. There is a younger generation today which has been socialised in my new thinking. I have been criticised but I am also listened to.” He continues: “Overall, I am optimistic that the discourse I am promoting will be widely received. Women’s participation in the public arena has been seen by some as violating women’s values, but nowadays we have many women legislators, judges, and ministers of state, and we even have had a woman head of state. These facts speak for themselves.”

Kyai Husein is a compelling example of the scholar-activist. In 1999, he helped create the Puan Amal Hayati Foundation in Jakarta where he serves as vice chair. In 2000 he became the founding director of the Rahima Foundation, the Center for Education and Information on Islam and Women’s Rights Issues, and acts as editor-in-chief of its journal *Swara Rahima*. He also created the Fahima Foundation. These NGOs serve as bridges between the *pesantrens* and the activist communities. Ciciek Farah, who along with Kyai Husein, is one of three directors of Rahima, spoke to me in Jakarta about the gender training the organisation conducts to develop women teachers, scholars, and trainers who can act as authorities. As it becomes harder to refute the message, Cicek points out, people attack the messenger. Rahima’s directors, she says, are well aware of the importance of the locations of knowledge re/production and the mechanisms for imparting knowledge. “We see,” she tells me, “*pesantrens* that reproduce new discourses on gender becoming important references for the community.” Kyai Husein’s position in society and his widened authority help promote the spread of new gender interpretations and practices.

Kyai Husein thrives being at the intersection of the activist and the academic worlds. “I enjoy being in both worlds. However, I must admit that activists are more tolerant and possess a better understanding of current problems. This is because they see the immediate impacts of acts stemming from inequality such as sexual abuse and violence against women. I see that the activists’ views are richer than those of the academicians. Maybe this is because they use participatory methods to investigate unlike the more aloof and abstract approaches of academicians.”

Kyai Husein asserts that: “Islamic feminists are on the rise in Indonesia. Their thought and activism is making itself felt more and more.” He goes on to say that: “Islamic radicalism is also concerned with women. Women are at the center of both the feminist and radicalist movements.” The radicalists, as he calls them, denounce, as he puts it, “the (liberal) gender movement.” He explains, “they use women as a lynchpin of their radicalism anchored in their reactionary view of Islam. In some regions of the country they are fighting for the implementation of the *shar’iah*, as they see it. Wherever there is *shar’iah* enforcement women become the prime targets. Compulsory veiling, forbidding women to go out at night without a *mahram* (male guardian), and other restrictive measures are imposed. The feminists promote the idea of justice and its implementation and support women in taking up whatever work or positions they aspire to including that of the head of state. The radicalists’ notion of justice is allocating to each sex its own place. For them, justice for women is to stay at home or to go out only in the company of a *mahram*. I see that the Islamic radical movement in Indonesia is out to destroy the feminist movement.”

Kyai Husein notes “Outside the gender movement itself, most who promote Islamic feminism are men.” “I think the main problem Muslims face in Indonesia is that we lack a sufficient number of Muslim women activists. Most of the activists we have come from the *pesantrens*. Having *pesantren* graduates as activists is a big advantage (in the wider scene) as they are more highly regarded by society than those without a *pesantren* background.”

Contributor:

HUSEIN MUHAMMAD. Is known in Indonesia as the” feminist kyai (venerated scholar)”. He began his education at his parents’ *pesantren* (a religious boarding school) in Cirebon in West Java and continued his schooling at in *pesantren* in Lirboyo in East Java. He did his undergraduate studies at Al-Quran Higher Education Institute (PTIQ), Jakarta and studied briefly at Al-Azhar University in Cairo. He established the Fahmina Institute. With former first lady, Sinta Nuriyah Wahid he founded the Puan Amal Hayati, an NGO dealing with Islam and women. Kyai Husein served on the National Commission on Violence Against Women. He is the author of numerous books including *Women’s Fiqh: A Kyai’s Reflection on Religion and Gender Discourse* (2005).