

Gender Equality Perspective and Women Position in Islam

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to investigate and explain the principles of equality with a gender perspective and women position in Islam. The results showed that: women and men in Islam have an equal position, as a servant of God who is created through the same reproduction method. Islam introduces the concept of gender equality, referring to the verses of the Qur'an which at the same time become a general goal of sharia to realize the justice and virtue (Surah An-Nahl: 90), gender equality perspective in Islam has been established in the Sharia to benefit human in the world and in the hereafter both individually and in congregation. Thus, if there is an interpretation that is not in line with the principles of justice, then the interpretation must be reviewed both textually and contextually. In the Islamic view, women position is equal to men, as humans who have two capacities, namely as servants ('abid) and as a representative of God or as a leader on earth without distinguishing gender, ethnicity and skin color. This issue continues to be fought for by Muslim feminists.

Keywords: *equality, gender, Islam*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the general provision in the addendum of Presidential Instruction of Republic of Indonesia Number 9 of 2000, concerning the Guideline of Gender Mainstreaming in National Development, gender equality is defined as the parity of condition for men and women to acquire the opportunities and rights as humans to contribute and participate in political, economy, socio-cultural, national security and defense activities as well as the parity to relish the development results.

The gender disparity is not an issue as long as it does not result in gender inequality. However, gender disparity has produced various inequalities for men or particularly for women. Gender gap is a reality that has to be faced by each woman worldwide and can be found in every public or private domain, domestic-reproductive or productive, including in legal sector.¹ For instance, in a public organization, it can be said that women are in the marginalized position. Patriarchal culture system embedding a perception in which the public domains (politics and employment sector) as the domain of men is commonly accused as the main factor causing the progress of women in public domains is commonly in the subordinate position of men². The powerless perception about women keeps maintained and spread by all philosophers, including reputable religious actors³ as well as some Islamic scholars. Since the beginning of its arrival, Islam has eradicated the discrimination on women⁴ because all the matters that are beneficial and fair for the women will never be put as the issue and it has

been proven throughout history that Muslims have never criticized the rule.

Only when the western civilization entered the Islamic world, Islamic Sharia was criticized and prosecuted. What is believed by Muslims concerning rights, roles, and responsibilities is challenged by Western notions by emerging the gender equality issue. The objectives are the liberty of status and the parity of role between men and women in every aspect of life⁵. Thus, this study aimed to describe the concept of equality in gender perspective and the position of women in Islam.

2. The Equality of Gender Perspective in the View of Islam

In Islamic law, the command to act just is for everyone without any exception. The right words have to be conveyed although they might harm the relationships. The obligation to act has to be enforced in families and the Muslim community themselves. Even to the heathens, Muslims have to be fair. Social justice will has to be enforced without discrimination because rich or poor, officials or commoners, men or women, they all have to be treated equally and have equal opportunities⁶. Since almost a century ago, lots of women, including Muslim women experiencing the discrimination in gender have fought to establish gender equality, which embodied through the act of feminism. In general, there is no difference between Islamic feminism and the feminism

that grows in Western world, except that the Islamic feminism stands on sacred religious literatures⁷.

The particularity of Islamic feminism is that it attempts to unveil the sources of problem in the teaching of Islam and questioning the cause of domination of men in the interpretation of hadith and Quran⁸. Through the perspective of feminism, various gender-biased normative knowledge that are used as the orientation of religious life, especially concerning the gender relation is unveiled, reconstructed, and returned to the Islamic spirit which positions more liberation ideology of women in the ideological framework of human dignity⁹. Thus, some feminist scholars have emerged, such as Riffat Hassan (Pakistan), Fatima Mernissi (Mesir), Nawal Sadawi (Mesir), Amina Wadud Muhsin (Amerika), Zakiah Adam, Zainah Anwar (Malaysia), and Asghar Ali Engineer. There are also some from Indonesia. With the spirit of feminism, thus, various notions and studies on the interpretation of Quran's verses and hadiths performed by Muslim scholars, known as Muslim feminists, have emerged¹⁰.

In the criticism discourse of Islamic law, there are three groups of gender perspective, Islamic law perspective, including conservative, liberal, and collaborative schools¹¹. Conservative group perceives Islamic law as providing limited space for women, this view departs from the perception in which women are considered as weak and less strong physically, thus, they have to be protected in any aspects of life. Based on this view, men are more superior than women¹². The liberal view contains more counter-discourse toward Islamic law or *fiqh*, which demands the absolute equal rights of women and men, perceiving that women in Islam have equal position to men. Their common existence as the worshipper of Allah who have similar human reproduction process, even in Quran of which either men and women have the same duty as the caliph on earth and as the leader or ruler. Therefore, men and women have equal superiority. The mere difference is only on the natural aspects of men and women, such as giving birth in women. However, the natural aspects do not indicate the difference in other aspects. The difference is only related to physical-biological function instead of the existence, position, and dignity.

In Indonesia, the discourse concerning feminism and Islam relatively began around 1980s, with the Riffaat Hasan's writing in the journal of "*Sejajar di hadapan Allah*". The treasury of Islamic feminism thinking was becoming popular along with the publication of translated books i.e. "*Perempuan dalam Islam*" by Fatima Mernissi, "*Perempuan di dalam Al-Qur'an*" by Amina Wahdud Mushin, "*Perempuan dalam Islam*" by Asghar Ali Engineer, "*Perempuan Islam Korban Patologi Sosial dan Sebagainya*" by Mazhar ul-Haq Khan, and "*Menjadi Muslim apa Maknanya*" by Mailoa Marantika consisting the claim of Raffat Hassan and Fatimah Mernissi over the authenticity of misogyny's hadiths¹³.

In promoting the gender equality, the Muslim

feminists are more focusing on two crucial aspects. First, the inequality between men and women in the social structure of Muslims is not rooted on the existing Islamic teachings but on a men-biased understanding, which is then crystalized and believed as the standard teachings of Islam. Second, in the effort of establishing the equality, the sources of Islamic teachings related to the gender relation need to be reviewed by referring to the fundamental principles of the teachings, namely the justice and equality based on the Quran i.e. Al Hujurat verse 13.

3. The Position of Women in Islam

Quran is the fundamental guidance for Muslims. Of 114 verses in Quran, one verse is dedicated specifically for women. It clearly mentions the rights of women and the rules that regulates how women are supposed to act in their marriage, family, and life. This verse is known as surah An-Nisa', but there is not a single verse that is addressed to men. In the perspective of Islam, humans have two capacities, namely as the servant (*'abid*), and as the representative of God or the caliph on earth without differentiating the sex, ethnic/race, and skin color, as mentioned in surah Al-Hujarat verse 13 of the Quran. The translation is "O mankind, We created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you".

Regarding the social role in the society, no verse of Quran or hadiths forbids women to be active within it (society). On the contrary, Quran and hadiths have numerously indicated that women are allowed to actively pursue various professions¹⁴. Gender equality is a just condition for men and women to actualize and dedicate themselves for the development of nation and state. Nasaruddin Umar mentioned several aspects indicating the principle of gender equality¹⁵ by referring to the positions of men and women in Quran, as follows.

1. Women and men are both equal, as the servant. This aspect is based on the Quran Surah Adh-Dhariyat verse 56. The translation of the verse is "And I (Allah) created not the jinns and humans except they should worship Me (Alone)".

According to this verse, there is no disparity between man and women in the capacity as the servant. Both have the same potentials and opportunities to become the ideal servant. The ideal servant in Quran is usually referred to as the devoted individual (*mutaqqun*), and there is no difference in sex, nation or certain ethnic to reach this *mutaqqun* level as mentioned in surah Al-Hujurat verse 13.

2. Women and men are the caliph one earth, the capacity of human as the caliph upon the earth is emphasized in

Quran Surah al-An'am verse 165, "And it is He who has made you successors upon the earth and has raised some of you above others in degrees [of rank] that He may try you through what He has given you. Indeed, your Lord is swift in penalty; but indeed, He is Forgiving and Merciful".

In this verse, the word "*khalifah*" (خَلِيفَةً) does not refer to a specific sex, indicating that both men and women have the same role, as the caliph.

3. Women and men accept the initial agreement with God. As mentioned in Surah Al-A'raf verse 172, as the pledge on the existence of God which is witnessed by the angels, "And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam - from their loins - their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, we have testified." [This] - lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, "Indeed, we were of this unaware."
4. Adam and Hawa Involved Actively in a Cosmic Drama

The entire verses that tell the cosmic drama as the story about the situation of Adam and Eve in heaven until they fell to earth, always emphasizing the involvement of two of them actively with the use of pronoun for two people (*huma*), i.e. the pronoun for Adam and Eve, found in several cases as follows.

- a) Both was created in heaven and use the facilities of heaven, which mentioned in Quran Surah Al-Baqarah verse 35, "O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise and eat therefrom in [ease and] abundance from wherever you will. But do not approach this tree, lest you be among the wrongdoers."
- b) Both had the same quality, based on the Satan who persuade them, as mentioned in Quran Surah al-A'raf verse 20, "But Satan whispered to them to make apparent to them that which was concealed from them of their private parts. He said, "Your Lord did not forbid you this tree except that you become angels or become of the immortal".
- c) Both begged for forgiveness and were forgiven by God, as mentioned in Quran Surah al-A'raf verse 23, "They said, "Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers".
- d) After they fell to earth, both grow offspring, needing and perfecting each other as mentioned in Quran Surah al-Baqarah verse 187, "They (wives) are your garments and ye are their garments".
- e) Women and men have equal potentials to reach maximum achievement, with no disparity between men and women, as specifically affirmed in three verses. They are Quran Surah Ali Imran verse 195, "Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female: Ye are members, one of another", An-Nisa verse 124, and An-Nahl verse 97.

These three verses indicate the ideal concept of equality and justice of gender. They provide assertiveness that individual achievements, either in the spiritual domain or professional career, do not have to be dominated by one gender. In the Islamic concept, each individual should not

use their liberty to fulfill their own interest while abandoning the interest of the society. If this matter is not managed, thus, conflict of interest will occur. On the contrary, if the interest of the society is being prioritized and the individual interest is abandoned, the individual potentials will not developed. Hence, the concept of equality need to be enforced.

4. CONCLUSION

In promoting the gender equality, the Muslim feminists focus more on two crucial aspects. First, the inequality between men and women in the social structure of Muslims is not rooted on the existing teachings but on a men-biased understanding, which was then crystalized and believed as the standard teachings of Islam. Second, in the effort of establishing the equality, the sources of Islamic teachings related to the gender relation need to be reviewed by referring to the fundamental principles of the teachings, namely the justice and equality.

The position of women in Islam is equal to men in the aspects which are not related to their nature (God's will) because the best humans in the sight of Allah are those who best devote, either men or women.

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