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Muslim Feminist Activism in Indonesia: Seeking (and finding) gender equality in the Quran

- In Indonesia, Islamic religious piety is not in conflict with feminism but is instead being used to advance feminist aims.
- Key to this progress: Muslim women in Indonesia are pushing for interpretations of key Islamic texts that encourage gender equality.
 - Progress in Indonesia can be a model for charting feminist activism in other Muslim societies.

What does the future hold for a growing and increasingly global Muslim feminist movement?

As Muslim women utilize the teachings of Islam to fight for greater gender equality, Indonesia has become a microcosm for understanding the challenges facing Muslim feminists, according to new research from Rachel Rinaldo, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia.

“Much of what has happened in Indonesia ... anticipates recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa – including the rising power of Islamist political actors; a broad turn toward more conservative understandings of Islam, including with regards to gender; and increasing participation of women in religious study and education,” Rinaldo writes in a recent article published in *Gender & Society*.

Indonesia is a majority Muslim nation that began the process of democratization in 1998, offering a history for measuring progress around gender equality. Paying attention to the interplay between women activists, religion, and politics in Indonesia can offer insights for other Muslim countries on the path toward democracy. “As the Middle East is going through

this turmoil and there's a lot of concern about whether democracy is possible," Rinaldo says, "...The women's rights movement has been an important part of how that transition has been navigated [in Indonesia]."

For this brand of activists, being a good Muslim and being critical of non-feminist interpretations of Islamic texts or practices are not contradictory. Rinaldo features the work of Indonesian Muslim women who advocate for greater gender equality within Islam by asserting that, when interpreted correctly, the sacred texts of Islam give women and men equal rights and responsibilities. These activists are arguing for interpretations of Islamic texts that support feminist aims, such as reducing rates of female circumcision, allowing for gender equality in inheritance, and permitting exceptions to the ban on abortion in the case of rape or if the health of the mother or fetus is endangered.

According to Rinaldo, one of the real world implications of this research is that we need to cultivate better understandings of different types of feminisms, especially those that are emerging from Muslim societies where feminism is a part of a "religious narrative."

The women featured in Rinaldo's study use a pious but critical stance to engage in political activism as women who are devoted to their religion and also dedicated to highlighting more gender equitable interpretations of the truths contained within the sacred texts of Islam. For these Muslim feminists, Islamic piety is not in conflict with feminism but is instead being used to advance feminist aims.

NOTE: To explore feminist activism in Indonesia, Rinaldo conducted fieldwork and interviews in 2002-2003, and conducted follow-up research for a number of months in 2005, 2008, and 2010. She interviewed forty-seven Muslim women activists who were members of one of four women's or political organizations in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Further information

Gender & Society is a peer-reviewed journal, focused on the study of gender. It is the official journal of Sociologists for Women in Society, and was founded in 1987 as an outlet for feminist social science. Currently, it is a top-ranked journal in both sociology and gender studies. *Gender & Society*, a journal of Sage Publications, publishes less than seven percent of all papers submitted to it. For additional commentary, you can also read the *Gender & Society blog* and follow the journal on Twitter: @Gend_Soc. For more information, contact Gender & Society editor Joya Misra, Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts. Her research and teaching focus is primarily on gender inequality. She can be reached at misra@soc.umass.edu.

Sociologists for Women in Society (SWS), currently headquartered at the University of Kansas, works to improve women's lives through advancing and supporting feminist sociological research, activism and scholars. Founded in 1969, SWS is a nonprofit, scientific and educational organization with more than 1,000 members in the United States

and overseas. For more information, contact Dr. Joey Sprague, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas and SWS Executive Officer, at jsprague@ku.edu. Follow us on Twitter and Facebook: [@socwomen](https://twitter.com/socwomen) and facebook.com/SocWomen.