The Women's Movement in Indonesia's Pesantren:
Negotiating Islam, Culture, and Modernity

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the women’s movement in Indonesia’s pesantren and their contributions to develop gender equality in the traditionalist Muslim communities, particularly in Java, after the downfall of the Suharto regime 1998. By looking at two pesantren as instructive case studies, it provides the historical and sociological context of the women’s movement in pesantren and the issues for which they are striving, such as women’s advocacy against domestic violence, women’s leadership, and reinterpretation of religious texts. This study also examines the internal and external factors influencing the movement to provide deeper understanding about women in pesantren, and how they negotiate gender roles in the light of Islamic tradition, local culture and a modern context.

This thesis argues that the women’s movement in pesantren constitutes an independent development that explicitly breaks with the secular premise that grounds their ideologies. Secular feminism gains resistance within pesantren circles. The rise of Islamic feminist criticism among pesantren women, by contrast, directly challenges the patriarchal structure of these communities on religious grounds.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLOSSARY</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Research Questions</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Methods</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Historical Background and Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The Muslim Women’s Movement: A Brief Survey</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Literature Review</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: WOMEN AND PESANTREN: THE DIALOGUE OF MODERNIZATION AND TRADITION</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. The Role of Pesantren in Indonesia</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Pesantren and Modernization</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. The Status Of Women in Pesantren</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Women in the Classical Islamic Texts (Kitab Kuning)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: THE INVOLVEMENT OF PESANTREN IN DEVELOPING WOMEN'S RIGHTS (TWO CASE STUDIES)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. The Role of Governmental Organizations (NGOs)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 4: ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN PESANTREN: THE INTERSECTIONS OF ISLAM, CULTURE AND MODERNITY .............................................................. 109

A. Discussing Islamic Feminism: A Brief Survey .............................................. 109

B. Indonesian Muslim Women, International Feminism and Democratization ...... 117

C. The Women’s Movement in Pesantren and Islamic Feminism .................... 123

D. The Challenges of the Women’s Movement in Pesantren ............................ 131

   1. Religious Legitimacy .................................................................................. 131
   2. Polygamy ..................................................................................................... 134
   3. Capital Resources ....................................................................................... 138

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION ................................................................................... 141

REFERENCES .................................................................................................... 151

APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW ............................................... 161

APPENDIX B: INFORMANT BACKGROUNDS .................................................... 163
ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CEDAW : Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

FK3 : Forum Kajian Kitab Kuning (the Forum to Discuss Islamic Classical Texts)

IAIN : Institute Agama Islam Negeri (The Islamic State Institute of Higher Learning)

ICIP : International Center for Islam and Pluralism

IPPNU : Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdhatul Ulama (The Female Student Union of Nahdhatul Ulama)

ISIS : Institute for Social and Institutional Studies

KOMNAS Perempuan: Komisi Nasional Perempuan (the National Commission on Violence against Women)

KUII : Konferensi Umat Islam Indonesia (the Congress of the Indonesian Muslim Community)

LAKPESDAM NU : Lembaga Pengkajian dan Pengembangan Sumber Daya Manusia NU (Nahdlatul Ulama Institute for Human Resource Study and Development)

LKIS : Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Social (Institute for Islamic and Social Studies)
LP3ES : Lembaga Penelitian, Pendidikan dan Penerangan Ekonomi dan Sosial (Institute for Social and Economic Research, Education and Information)

MUI : Majlis Ulama Indonesia (The Indonesian Ulama Council)

MDI : Majlis Dakwah Islamiyyah (The Organization for Islamic Propagation)

NGO : Non Governmental Organization

NU : Nahdhatul Ulama

PUSPITA : Pusat Pelayanan Wanita (The Center of Women’s Affair)

P3M : Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat (The Union for the Development of Pesantren and Community)

RMI : Rabithah Ma’ahid al Islamiyyah (The Association of Islamic Pesantren)

TAF : The Asia Foundation

UIN : Universitas Islam Negeri (The Islamic State University)

UNFPA : United Nation Population Fund

WHO : World Health Organization

UNDP : United Nations Development Programme

UNICEF : The United Nations Children's Fund

WCC : Women Crisis Center

YKF : Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat (The Fatayat Welfare Foundation)
GLOSSARY

‘Aisyiyah: A Women’s branch of modernist organization Muhammadiyah founded in 1917.

‘Aqiqah: in Islamic terminology, is defined as the animal that is slaughtered on the occasion of child birth.

Asbab al-Nuzul: The historical and sociological context in which the specific verses of the Qur’an are revealed.

Azan: The Islamic calling to prayer, recited by muazzin in the mosque.

Bahtsul Masa’il: Religious discussions taken by ulama within the NU traditions.

Bandongan: A method of teaching in pesantren in which the senior students read the kitab kuning one by one in front of a kyai.

Baraka: Means 'blessing', a spiritual power believed to be possessed by certain persons such as a Sufi master.

Dakwah (Ar.: Da’wah): Islamic predication.

Fatayat: NU-related organization for young women, founded in 1950.

Fiqh: Islamic jurisprudence.

Fitnah: The Arabic word with connotations of secession, upheaval, chaos and disorder.

Hajj: The fifth pillar of Islam; a pilgrimage to Mecca during the month of Dhu al-Hijja; at least once in a lifetime a Muslim is expected to make a religious journey to Mecca and the Ka’ba.

Halaqah: A discussion forum.

Ijtihad: Independent reasoning in the interpretation of the holy Qur’an.
Imam: A leader of prayer.

Infaq: Spending wealth for a certain purpose as guided by Islam.

Jama’ah: Religious followers.

Keraton: Javanese kingdom.

Khaul: Feast to commemorate the passing way of a kyai.

Khilafiyah: Things that have not been decided yet by Islamic scholars, or debatable issues.

Kitab Kuning: literally means yellow books because they were written in the yellow papers; they are classical Islamic texts written by medieval Islamic scholars which are widely used in pesantren, such as *Hidayat al-Shibyan, Tuhfat al-Athfal, Jawharatu al-Tawhid* and so forth.

Kitab: the Arabic word for a book.

Kodrat: An elusive concept signifying a women’s innate or essential nature.

Kutub al Mu’tabarah: Arabic books which are recognised and used in religious cases within pesantren and NU community.

Kyai: A male religious leader who owns or teaches in pesantren.

Ma’had Aly: The advanced Islamic schools.

Madrassa: Islamic schools.

Majlis Dakwah Islamiyyah (MDI): An organization of the Islamic propagation wing of the Golongan Karya (GOLKAR) party.

Majlis Ta’lim: Women’s and men’s Islamic learning groups.

Muballighah: (masculine; *muballigh*): Islamic preacher.
Muhammadiyah: Reformist or modernist Muslim organization, founded 1912, with approximately twenty five million followers; is the second largest Islamic organization in Indonesia.

Muhrim: The close relatives of the opposite sex, detailed by the Qur’an, whom a Muslim may not marry.

Murid: Sufi disciple.

Mursyid: Sufi Master.

Musawah: An international coalition of Muslim feminists, initiated in March 2007 by Sisters in Islam in Malaysia.

Muslimat: NU-related organization for married women, founded in 1946.

Nahdhatul Ulama (NU): Traditionalist Muslim organization, founded by Indonesian ulama in 1926, with approximately forty million followers; is the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia.

Nushuz: Disobidience to the husband.

Nyai: A female teacher in pesantren or wife of a kyai.

Pesantren: Traditional Islamic boarding schools, where students focus to study Islamic knowledge.

Pondok: Dormitory for the students under direction of a kyai.

Salaf or Salafiyah (Arabic): Traditional.

Santet: Black magic.

Santri: Male students at pesantren.

Santriwati: Female students at pesantren.
Shadaqah: A voluntary act of giving alms for the cause of Allah.

Shari’a: The Islamic law derived from the holy texts of Islam.

Sorogan: A method of teaching in pesantren in which a kyai reads and explains the kitab kuning while the students take notes.

Sunat: Female circumcision.

Sunna: The words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad; It is often used synonymously with the Hadith.

Tafsir: The Arabic word for exegesis or commentary, usually for the interpretation of the Qur’an.

Tarekat (Ar.: Tariqa): Mystical or Sufi brotherhood.

Ulama (Ar.:’Ulama’): Scholars of Islam (in Arabic the singular is ‘alim, but in Indonesia ulama is used for both the plural and singular).

Ummah: A religious community, usually referring to an Islamic one.

Ustadz (feminine; ustazah): Teacher.

Usul al Fiqh: The study of the origins, sources, and principles upon which Islamic Jurisprudence (or Fiqh) is based.

Waqaf: The Arabic word meaning charity simply to please God without asking for any favor or hoping for a return.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

It was an Indonesian movie entitled *Perempuan Berkalung Surban* (Woman with a Turban) that inspired the topic of this thesis. The movie was adapted from a novel with the same title, written by a woman novelist, Abidah el-Khaliqy, published in 2001. Since its release in January 2009 in the cinemas, the movie has triggered widespread controversy among Indonesian Muslims. I followed the resultant public debates in Indonesian newspapers, magazines, websites, and mailing lists.

In brief, the movie told the life story of Annisa, a strong, beautiful and intelligent woman, the daughter of the leader of a traditionalist and very conservative pesantren (Islamic traditional boarding school) in East Java. Her father's school, described as "salaf" or "salafiah" (traditional), teaches that knowledge must be based on the Qur’an and Sunnah (the sayings and doings of the Prophet), and that modern works without such basis are harmful to read. Annisa struggles with this teaching because she feels that Islam, or her father's version of it, does not treat women fairly. She often protests that the Prophet Muhammad treated women in a very just and equal manner. However, Annisa’s opinions are ignored as the musings of a little girl by all her extended family, except the handsome Khudori, a relation on her mother's side. Annisa falls in love with him but Khudori, mindful of the blood link and his relationship to the girl's father, attempts to quell the romance and flees to Egypt to continue his studies.

The most striking part of the movie is that the pesantren leaders such as kyai (a male leader) and asatidz (male teachers) taught gender discrimination by referring to the Qur’an and Sunnah as a source of legitimacy. For example, Annisa’s father often claimed
that, based on Islamic teaching, a woman cannot go off by her own without a *muhrim* (companion relative), wives should obey totally to their husbands, and a woman cannot be a leader. Annisa was forced into an unhappy marriage with the son of another *Salaf* pesantren, and she eventually learns that her husband is a polygamist. Annisa experienced domestic violence and her husband said that the Qur’an allows a husband to beat his wife because of *nushuz* (disobedience to the husband). After suffering severe, Annisa gets a divorce, and when her first love Khudori returns from Cairo, their previously interrupted love is rekindled.

Unlike the movie that created as much debate and controversy among Indonesian Muslims, the novel itself provoked little response. Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat (The Fatayat Welfare Foundation /YKF) in Yogyakarta published the novel which has been circulated among women, gender activists and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the country. I read it in 2001 when I volunteered with LAKPESDAM NU, an Islamic NGO in Jakarta. I was not surprised by the content, which revealed the gender-biased interpretation within the pesantren community of Muslim women’s status, since I have studied in this institution for several years.

The controversy about the movie occurs between the Islamic conservative groups and the more moderate ones. Majlis Ulama Indonesia (MUI/The Indonesian Ulama Council) protested against the movie because it was regarded as creating negative stereotypes about Islam and discrediting pesantren institutions. Some people viewed the movie as part of the propaganda of Liberal Islam which is influenced by Western thoughts. The MUI and opponent groups urged a boycott of the movie and asked the
movie’s director to revise some offensive scenes. However, the director, Hanung Barmayanto refused claiming the message of the movie was not to discredit Islam and pesantren, but rather to show how many Indonesian parents often use patriarchal interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith against their daughters. On the other side, proponents of the movie argued that nothing was wrong with its content because, to some extent, it revealed the reality of the pesantren environment. They questioned MUI as to why Muslims cannot criticize their religious teaching. The proponents gave credit to the movie because it opened the public’s eyes to the discrimination against women based on misogynistic interpretations of Islam within the pesantren community.

My own opinion of the movie and the novel is that I agree that the status of women in pesantren remains subordinate to men. Pesantren teachers do teach gender-biased interpretation of the Islamic texts to the santri (students). However, the movie did not give sufficient representation of the reality of pesantren approximately 10,000 that exist throughout the Indonesian archipelago, the picture seems to be unbalanced where pesantren are concerned, since it merely focuses on the conservative and patriarchal tradition, while ignoring the ongoing process of transformation within many pesantren communities. Some pesantren are very active in engaging gender education, and striving for an interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunnah which is more just and friendly to women. It is one kinds of pesantren that my research focuses. The transformation process within pesantren, particularly in regard to the gender movement, fascinates me since the conservative and progressive ideas go hand-in-hand. Therefore, it seems unfair to generalize about patriarchal traditions in pesantren in the manner in which the movie has
exposed it to the public. Pesantren are very diverse in terms of leadership, teaching and tradition.

To put it in broader context, the movie has definitely reinforced the stereotypes of pesantren as the heartland of religious conservatism in Indonesia. They have long been perceived as male-dominated, one of the places where misogynist Islamic beliefs and practices are nurtured. The pesantren textbooks, the so-called kitab kuning (yellow books), have been cited of being a source of gender-biased interpretation within the pesantren community. Modern scholars, such as Djajadiningrat (1908), Geertz (1960), Samson (1968), and Noer (1973), have tended to see pesantren as backward and conservative institutions.

Recently, the involvement of some pesantren alumni with terrorism activities, such as the 2002 bombing in Kuta, Bali, has created another stereotype of pesantren as supporters of Islamic radicalism and violence. Indonesia’s pesantren have been increasingly described as fostering radicalism and violent militancy. On the whole, media coverage has been negative. In its September 2003 issue, for example, Misra wrote in the Journal of Asian Affairs alleged, “Like Pakistan’s madrassa, there exists an entire education system, the ‘pesantren’, which is independent of the government and provides the Islamists fertile ground to train the children of the poor in the mould of radical Islam” (as cited in Pohl, 2006, p. 389). This generalization has distorted the diverse reality of Indonesia’s pesantren. Although there are, indeed, a few radical pesantren in the country, the system’s most striking feature is not radicalism but the willingness of Muslim educators to adapt their programs to the ideals of Indonesian nationhood and the Muslim
public’s demand for marketable skills and general education (Hefner & Zaman, 2007).

Carrying such stereotypical baggage, how do pesantren make a contribution to the advocacy of gender equality in the Islamic community? It might sound counterintuitive to ask that question, however, in the light of the fact that over the last ten years, pesantren education has been undergoing reform led by a group of Islamic “feminists” (both male and female). What I meant by Islamic feminism here is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminists derive their understanding from the Qur’an, and seek rights and justice for women and men as equal humans before God. According to Badran (2002), the distinction between secular feminist discourse and Islamic feminist discourse is that the latter is a feminism articulated within a more exclusively Islamic paradigm. This is not to suggest a binary between a secular feminist and Islamic feminist discourse but rather to point to the discursive categories mobilized. However, there are imbrications of the secular and the religious in both discourses. I will discuss the debates on Islamic feminism in chapter four.

The involvement of pesantren in advocating women’s rights is part of the ongoing process of religious reformation in Indonesia. Leading Indonesian Islamic thinkers who are in the forefront of Islamic reform, such as Abdurrahman Wahid, Nurcholis Madjid, and Masdar F. Ma’sudi, were educated in pesantren. They have produced influential works on Islam and actively supported gender education in Indonesian Muslim communities. The emergence of contemporary Islamic feminists from pesantren has led to an intensive dialogue about Islam, culture and modernization within the pesantren community. They have also challenged strong traditions since both patriarchal culture
and Islamic patriarchal interpretations have shaped social relations and education in pesantren. The image of pesantren as backward, conservative and anti-modern institutions is due to ignorance of this reform movement.

The study of pesantren by Dhofier (1982) and Mas’ud (2004), among others, has mostly focused on kyai and their role in the society. Until recently, the emergence of the women’s movement in pesantren received little scholarly or journalistic attention. As a result, the roles of women in pesantren and how they understand and negotiate their gender status remains largely unexplored. This thesis is concerned with the women’s movement in pesantren to promote gender equality. A comprehensive definition of women’s movement is very difficult since women’s movement have never spoken with a single voice. A broad definition is best suited to capture their heterogeneity, plurality and complexity. A women movement can be seen to constitute “the entire spectrum of conscious and unconscious individual or collective acts, activities, groups, or organizations concerned with diminishing various aspects of gender subordination, which is understood as intersecting with other relations of oppression such as those based on class, race, ethnicity, age and sexual preference” (Wieringa, 2002, p. 38). I deliberately use the term women’s movement for two reasons. First, most of the activists in pesantren, who advocate women’s rights on the basis of an Islamic framework, are women. However, it does not deny the role of men in the movement, since there are men actively involved. Second, the women’s movement in pesantren is part of a continual struggle of Indonesian women for greater equality in both the private and the public sphere which started before independence and exists today.
There are four stages of the women’s movement in Indonesian that have developed over time. The first began at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of 20th. It was driven by individuals who were un-institutionalized, and systematically unorganized. Women activists in this period include R.A. Kartini, Rohana Kudus, and Rahmah el-Yunusiyah. The second stage of the movement was an institutionalized struggle, marked by the establishment, between the 1920s and the 1950s, of women organizations such as *Aisyiyah* Muhammadiyah and *Muslimat* Nahdlatul Ulama. The third stage consisted of women’s emancipation actively engaged in supporting Indonesian national development from the 1960s up to the 1980s. The fourth stage of the women’s movement, which started in the 1990s and continues until now, was marked by the mushrooming NGOs which advocate women’s rights, and their overarching activities at the grassroots level. This movement also penetrated Islamic institutions such as pesantren, and was based on religious interpretation. In its current stage, Islamic feminist cooperates with a secular feminist movement in advocating women’s rights in Indonesia. The democratization and freedom of expression which followed the downfall of Suharto in 1998, has allowed women activists to be more vocal.

This thesis will look at the women’s movement at two Islamic boarding schools, Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid Cirebon and Pesantren Cipasung, which provides an instructive case study. Both pesantren have Women Crisis Centers (WCC), which are not only concerned with the issue of violence against women, but also challenge the patriarchal religious interpretation within the pesantren community. The findings will be placed in the broader context of contemporary development of the women’s rights movement in
Indonesia. In this thesis, I argue that the study of women’s movements in pesantren provides the basis for a more positive view of Muslim women’s capacity to resist and challenge patriarchy and to initiate social change. It also shows the wide range of women’s movements in contemporary Indonesia, striving for gender equality in the local and religious context. I believe that the women’s movement in pesantren cannot be separated from the wider context of women’s rights advocacy at both the national and international levels. Due to rapid modernization, women in pesantren have been struggling to negotiate their gender role in society, while at the same time maintaining Islamic tradition as the primary basis for everyday life.

It is obvious that the women’s movement in pesantren has been influenced by outside actors such as NGOs, focusing on women’s empowerment at the grassroots level. Yet, I argue that the internal struggle of women in pesantren against their gender roles as constructed by religious institutions and culture constitutes an independent and equally important development contributing to the ability of women in these settings to challenge patriarchal hegemony. Secular feminist ideologies—which inspire much of the NGOs work with women—are problematic for pesantren women for reasons that I detail in greater depth below. In essence, though, the secular premise of these ideologies presumes the fundamental incompatibility of adherence to revealed religious authority and the exercise of religious liberty. This is so especially in the case of women because, as secular feminist critiques have pointed out, the authoritative texts of various religions, especially the monotheisms, are undeniably androcentric and misogynistic (see Ruether, 1983 & Fiorenza, 1992). In an Islamic context, Haideh Moghissi (1999), for example,
argues that Islamic feminism is based on a prescribed set of religious ideas and teachings that are rooted in an irreconcilably sexist discourse. She asks, “How could a religion based on gender hierarchy be adopted as the framework for struggle for gender democracy and women’s equality with men?” (p.126). She then re-inscribes a singular conception of Islam as being essentially misogynistic and thereby irreconcilable with feminist goals and aims, as the only possible narrative. This reduces the broad epistemological expressions of Islam to a singular negative framework, de-legitimating the discursive challenges made by Muslim women who advocate gender reform. To embrace the premise entails, for pesantren women, a denial of what is most essential to their religious identity—the centrality and authority of the Qur’an and the hadith traditions. By developing a critique of patriarchy that stands on Qur’anic authority, however, these women are able to remain Muslims and advance a far more convincing argument within pesantren communities on behalf of women’s rights and empowerment than would be the case if they simply adopted secularist ideas. I propose, therefore, to evaluate the role of external NGOs’ influence through the critical perspective and experience of pesantren women themselves. Such an approach will reveal not only areas overlapping concern and cooperation but, even more critically, points of tension and difference that indicate the limits of this external influence.

A. Research Questions

In Indonesia, feminism as a discipline has been popular since the 1970s. However, the terms “feminism”, “feminist” and even “gender” are still questioned by the
majority of Indonesians. They are considered to be non-indigenous concepts irrelevant to Indonesian values. Certain assumptions remain common that feminism is a Western or northern concept; that it is anti-men; that it perceives men to be the source of all gender inequality; that it promotes the acceptance of lesbianism; that it is a part of a Western agenda to destroy Islam, and so forth. This is despite the fact that the principle of gender equality is embodied in article 27 of the 1945 Constitution, and in other basic laws of the Republic of Indonesia (Sadli, 2002).

In the 1990s, feminism was accepted carefully by a relatively small group of Indonesian Muslim women and men in relation to Islam. The rise of several NGOs dedicated to advocacy on Muslim gender issues began to influence Muslim thinking on women’s issues. The works of Islamic thinkers on the role of women in Islam, including the works of Riffat Hasan, Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud and Asghar Ali Engineer, have been translated into Bahasa (Indonesian language) and have gained widespread attention. At the same time, some Indonesian Muslim intellectuals have strived for Islamic reform that called for freedom of rational thinking (ijtihad) in order to establish religious interpretation which is more just and equal toward women.

But it was not until the downfall of Suharto in 1998, when the state’s tight watch on all matters to do with religion, ethnicity and public discourse in general was relaxed, that gender issues come to the fore. Major factors influencing the increased attention given to gender issues included the growth of Muslim radicalism, the rise of activism based on women’s gender rights, the spread of democratic principles, and the implementation of regional autonomy with its decentralization of political power (White
& Anshor, 2008). Some women’s groups work primarily within a secular paradigm, addressing their activism toward the state and its legal and institutional framework, while others work within an Islamic framework. The women’s movement in pesantren is a part of the second group. This movement addresses their activism toward their own Islamic communities, seeking to change attitudes at both an intellectual and a grassroots level by challenging traditional interpretations of Islamic teachings on gender, and by training men and women to be “gender sensitive” in their actions and ideals.

The involvement of pesantren in developing women’s rights has become an interesting phenomenon since conservative and progressive ideas compete each other in that venue. On the one hand, the women’s movement in pesantren puts emphasis on the essential equality between men and women, interpreting religious teachings in a contextual manner. Yet on the other hand, the conservative view of traditional gender roles remains pervasive and powerful in pesantren. For example, polygamy is still practiced by many kyais (see Blackburn, 2004) and a son of kyai is preferred as heir to pesantren leadership instead of a daughter. Gender tension takes place not just in relation to interrelated lives of men and women, but also in relation to the changing position of women in traditional Islamic schools and the global context wherein a range of feminist debates occur about women’s place in the workforce and in the domestic sphere (Srimulyani, 2008).

This thesis contributes to the literature of women in Indonesian pesantren by examining the ongoing gender movement which is part of the larger social empowerment at the grassroots level. Using literatures and interviews data derived from conversations
with key persons within the movement, it explores the following questions: (1) When and how did the pesantren community become involved in the gender movement in Indonesia? How do factors such as culture, religion, ethnicity, language, and politics shape their gendered perspectives? (2) What are some important issues for which the women’s movement in pesantren strives? What are the strategies to develop gender awareness within the pesantren community? (3) How did the national and transnational gender movements influence the women’s movement in Indonesia’s pesantren? (4) What are some contributions of the women’s movement in pesantren in the way of developing gender education in Indonesia? (5) What are some responses and challenges to the gender movement in pesantren?

B. Methods

This research focuses on the women’s movement in two pesantren in West Java--Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid Cirebon and Pesantren Cipasung--as case studies. I chose these pesantren for numerous reasons. First, the leaders of both pesantren have become leading activists of the gender movement in Indonesia. Kyai Husein Muhammad, the leader of Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid, is one of the most influential Muslim activists in Indonesia who advocates for women’s rights issues in Islamic contexts. Enung Rasyida is the daughter of Kyai Ilyas Ruhiyyat, the leader of Pesantren Cipasung, who actively engages on gender issues within the Muslim community and currently is the director of Pusat Pelayanan Wanita (PUSPITA/The Center of Women’s Affairs) Puan Amal Hayati Cipasung. Second, both pesantren have established Women Crisis Centers (WCC),
advocating such women’s issues in the Muslim community, as domestic violence, rape and trafficking.

I chose to use qualitative research methods by employing semi-structured and unstructured interviews. I conducted in-depth interviews with 10 participants (male and female) via Skype (an internet chat function) with an approximate duration 45 minutes to an hour per person. I selected my participants based on my own knowledge and on recommendations from friends familiar with the movement. Four participants were key persons of the movement in Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid, and two were from Pesantren Cipasung. I conducted supplementary interviews with four proponents of the Islamic feminism movement who have a strong network with the gender movement in pesantren. Two of them are female leaders in pesantren from East Java and another two are NGO activists in Jakarta who spent several years studying Islamic knowledge in pesantren.

The interviews were conducted in both Indonesian and the Javanese language. Even though I used prepared questions to lead the conversations, the method was flexible. Most of the interviews were informal. I allowed interviewees to talk freely rather than directing the conversation with my questions. I recorded what they said and then transcribed and translated the interviews into English.

My own experience necessarily helped me to do this research. Before I began my study in the United States, I worked in Puan Amal Hayati for one year and the Union for Development of Pesantren and Community/Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat (P3M) for five years. Both are Islamic NGOs in Jakarta, advocating gender issues throughout the Islamic community, including pesantren. I got my bachelor degree
in Islamic theology from the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta. Prior to that, I spent six years studying Islamic knowledge such as ‘ulum al-Qur’an, ‘ulum al-Hadith, fiqh, and tafsir in both traditional and modern Islamic boarding schools in Central Java. Pesantren are familiar places for me since in my hometown, most parents, including mine, sent their children to study in pesantren. Therefore, I have a close attachment to the pesantren environment.

Methodologically, this research combines data both from interviews and from literature investigation about women and Islam in order to understand the women’s movement in pesantren, particularly within the larger context of the women’s movement in the Islamic world.

C. Historical Background and Theoretical Framework

1. The Muslim Women’s Movement: A Brief Survey

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, but it is not an Islamic state. The population numbers approximately 220 million and 90% claim to be Muslims. The majority of Indonesian Muslims follow the Shafi’i mazhab (school of Islamic thought) and only a few belong to the Shi’ite tradition. The ways in which Indonesian Muslims practice Islam differ across the country’s numerous islands and ethnic groups, and is intricately enmeshed in local cultural and personal conditions. Islam in Indonesia has a centuries-old tradition of being tolerant, compassionate, and inclusive. The two biggest and most influential Islamic organizations that strongly advocate the moderate view of Islam, namely Muhammadiyah and Nahdhatul Ulama (NU).
This research provides the historical and sociological context of the women’s movement in pesantren and the issues for which they are striving, such as violence against women, women’s leadership, and reinterpretation of religious texts. It investigates strategies and measures that they advocate to develop gender education in the pesantren community. This study also examines the internal and external factors influencing the movement to provide deeper understanding about women in pesantren, and how they negotiate gender roles in the light of Islamic tradition, local culture and a modern context. The debates, tensions, challenges and barriers which confront the movement will be explored to understand its dynamic within the larger context.

In the historical context, Raden Ajeng Kartini (1879-1904), the daughter of a Javanese regent, is considered Indonesia’s first female advocate for women’s rights. She was among the first indigenous women to be allowed to attend the Dutch elementary school, and she briefly ran a small school for girls herself. In letters to Dutch and Indonesian friends, Kartini regularly emphasized the importance of education for girls and the predicament women faced because of the customs of polygamy and arranged child marriage. Her letters became famous in 1911, a few years after her untimely death. Around the same time, the Dutch colonial government, moved by increased awareness of the plight of the indigenous population, started to implement its so-called Ethical Policy that opened Dutch education to larger groups of the Indonesian population (see Kartini’s letters to Stella Zeehandelaar 1899-1903 in Cote, 2005).

Railways were built at the beginning of the 20th century. Along with faster transportation, the increased use of the printed word helped spread new ideas rapidly
throughout the archipelago. The number of girls attending school was rising, and separate schools for girls were opened. Between 1913 and 1918, women’s associations such as Putri Mahardika (The Independent Woman) came into being and lobbied for education for girls and were concerned with issues such as child marriage, forced marriage, polygamy, the trafficking of women and children and prostitution. Most of the women active in these associations were of noble birth or from the upper classes. At the same time, religious organizations such as the Sarikat Islam and Muhammadiyah created sections for women, among them ‘Aisyiyah, that appealed to middle and lower-middle-class Javanese women (van Doorn-Harder, 2006).

Although most women’s activities were on the local level, during the first decades of the 20th century, the women’s movement was divided into two currents: secular-nationalist and religious-nationalist. Both movements regarded women as a vital force for national and/or religious development and eventually for the independence struggle. National coordination started to become evident in 1928 when about 600 women representing 30 women’s associations gathered in Yogyakarta for the first Indonesian Women’s Congress. The main points on the agenda were education and marriage (see Department of Information RI, 1968).

Until the 1950s, women and men worked in close partnership in the struggle against the Dutch and in the quest for public and political rights. World War II ended with the Japanese defeat in 1945; Indonesia declared independence, and the Dutch started a vicious war to regain their territory. Women joined the struggle and volunteered as medical aides, couriers, or weapons smugglers. Some women even took up arms. This
was a period of great enthusiasm in Indonesia, during which a heightened Islamic consciousness became the motivating force for Muslim political involvement and devotion to the liberation movement.

However, after independence, men competed with women for jobs and political opportunities, pushing women away from prominent positions. Many countries certainly share these general tendencies. In Egypt, for example, when the independence was achieved, the nationalists betrayed their promises to Egyptian feminists. The principle of gender equality was soon cancelled when an electoral law restricted suffrage to males only (Badran, 2001). Another example is in Algeria. Soon after independence, Algerian men obliterated the strong ties they forged with their female compatriots during the revolution and denied them their basic civil rights. Most Algerian men have always seen the liberation of women as neither specific nor a priority. Similarly, therefore, they do not acknowledge the need for a women's movement which is seen as secondary to the endless list of priorities faced by the country and government (Salhi, 2009).

In Indonesia, by the 1970s, the Suharto government tried to confine women once again to domestic roles by establishing its own women’s organizations, Dharma Wanita (for female civil servants and the wives of civil servants, founded in 1974), patterned after Dharma Pertiwi (for the spouses of those serving in the police or military departments, founded in 1964). These developments greatly influenced the Indonesian discourse on gender (see Suryakusuma, 1996).

Some of the main issues facing the women’s movement between independence and the 1980s included the clashes with the Communist women’s movement of Gerwani
at the end of the Sukarno era, the marriage law, and the introduction of birth control. Marriage legislation had been a contentious issue since the 1920s and 1930s. Liberals wanted to ban polygamy and grant women the right to divorce if a husband took a second wife. ‘Aisyiyah and other Muslim women’s associations were vehemently opposed to such legislation, since in their opinion it ruled against the injunctions of the Qur’ān. However they did want to tighten the conditions under which polygamy was allowed. Because of this and other disagreements, the legislation did not materialize until 1974. The final version gave women the right to initiate divorce and required permission of the first wife before the husband could take a second wife (Robinson, 2009).

According to van Doorn-Harder (2006), the social-religious activism of the women’s associations during the colonial time prepared for contemporary feminist-activist movement. Women of Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdhatul Ulama (NU), helped create the foundation for contemporary women who advocate for women’s rights from an Islamic frame of reference. Many Muslim activists and feminists have a background in Muhammadiyah or NU, where grassroots advocacy preceded theory.

From the start, Islamic women activists tackled questions related to women’s position within Islamic law and Jurisprudence. During the 1990s, several simultaneous developments intensified the Indonesian discussion about women, gender, and Islam: Islamic resurgence opened Muslim vistas to feminist writings in other Islamic countries; participation in global events, such as the Beijing conference on women in 1995; and a
growing number of women and men whose educational level allowed them to understand the significance of these developments.

The emergence of Islamic NGOs developed new ways of thinking about topics such as Islam and democracy, gender, pluralism and so forth. Some NGOs had been set up to strengthen Muslim knowledge and awareness about Islam and the rights of women. The Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat (P3M/Union for the Development of Pesantren and Community) and Rahima in Jakarta, and Rifka Annisa in Yogyakarta were among the first which focused on women’s issues within an Islamic framework. On an academic level, the Islamic State University (UIN) in Jakarta and Yogyakarta opened Centers for Women Studies, which researched such diverse women’s issues in Islam. At the same time, many UIN scholars, women and men alike, obtained graduate degrees in gender studies from western universities.

Between 1995 and 2000, the theories and ideas developed by feminists and activist gradually became known outside of academic and NGO circles. Seminars, conferences, and discussions held about the topic of gender and Islam mushroomed. Participants discussed the extent to which western feminist ideas were compatible with Islamic teachings about women’s rights and duties. They wondered whether it was local culture or Islamic teaching that assigned women secondary status.

Men and women, many of them trained in pesantren, discussed the traditional interpretation of Islam as represented in the classical Arabic texts written by men. The gender awareness movement had spread to pesantren communities through the engagement of their leaders both in academics, and at NGO levels. Many of the daughters
and sons of Kyai went to Islamic State Universities that introduced them to gender issues. Islamic NGOs focusing on women’s rights played a significant role in developing gender education in pesantren. They invited pesantren leaders to join seminars, training sessions, and discussions about women’s rights. Frequently, the training was conducted in pesantren to reach a greater audience within a community. As Kyai Husein Muhammad argued, gender issues have become a matter of massive awareness in the Muslim community because of pesantren involvement with the issue (Personal Interview, December 2009).

2. Literature Review

Although there is growing literature on Indonesian Islam, there is a lack of western scholarship on women and Islam in Indonesia. Some scholarly volumes about women and Islam did not include chapters on Indonesia (see for example Kandiyoti 1991; Saliba et. al. 2002; Moghissi 2005). Similarly, in English-language volumes on Indonesian women, chapters on Islam are scarce. While there have been excellent scholarly works on gender studies and feminist theory on Indonesia, these studies tend to avoid or completely ignore the role of Islam as a powerful cultural, religious, intellectual and socio-economic centrifugal force. Earlier major volumes in English on women and Indonesia, such as Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia (Atkinson & Errington, 1990), and Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia (Sears, 1996) do not include any chapters on Islam. A partial exception is Daniel Lev (1996), who has a chapter discussing Islam and women. Lev argues that Indonesian Islam provides women more
freedom than do other Islamic countries, which marks Indonesian Islam as an interesting and isolated case to explore (Lev, 1996: 194).

Recent English-language volumes on Indonesian women, such as *Women and Households in Indonesia* (Richmond, 2000) and *Women in Indonesia: Gender, Equity and Development* (Robinson & Bessell, 2002), sometimes include chapters on Islam, but tend to be written by Indonesian women. For example, in *Women in Indonesia*, Khafifah Indar Parawansa (2002), Endriana Noerdin (2002) and Lies Marcoes (2002) contribute to knowledge about Muslim organizations, the marginalization of women in *shari’a* law, and the changing social role of women’s religious organizations in the context of ongoing political change since 1998. Western authors’ chapters in these books do not explicitly address Islam. Not surprisingly, *Indonesian Women, the Journey Continues* (Oey-Gardiner & Bianpoen, 2000) (see the chapters by Rahman and Marcoes), the recent book on Indonesian women was originally written in Indonesian.

Even among feminist writers in the West, there have been relatively few inquiries into women and Islam in Indonesia (see, for example, Whalley 1993; Brenner 1995; 1996; 1998; Feillard 1999; Robinson 2000; Newland 2001; van Doorn-Harder 2002; Bennet 2005). Significantly, most of these authors are anthropologists whose interest in Islam is incidental to their studies of particular communities. No one has conducted a systematic study of women and Islam in Indonesia. Legal experts interested in the practical implications of Islamic law, such as Hooker (2003), constitute the exception.

Significantly, even among those western feminist writers, women in Indonesian pesantren have been largely overlooked. The fact that these women have actively
engaged in gender education through the process of reinterpretation of Islamic texts is invisible in English works. In fact, Indonesian women provide alternatives to misogynist readings of the texts in their everyday activities. Most of the time, the influence of women in pesantren concerning the process of religious consensus building has gone unnoticed, since the men’s interpretations usually overshadow those of the women. Yet within the circles of classes and groups they teach, the women present their own opinions and indirectly influence thousands of women. The discussion surrounding the use of birth control during the New Order in the 1970s illustrates how this process develops. Several women preachers (muballighat) with pesantren backgrounds studied the texts and concluded that the Qur’an allows it. Women in pesantren are actively involved in the grassroots activities, they participate in formal and informal levels of textual interpretation.

Recent volumes on women and Islam in Indonesia that address women in pesantren include *Women Shaping Islam* (Van Doorn-Harder, 2006), *Indonesian Islam in a New Era* (Blackburn et al., 2008), and *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia* (Robinson, 2009). Van Doorn-Harder presents the life stories of Indonesian women active in national Muslim organizations, both Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Throughout her book, Van Doorn-Harder revisits the theme of the generational tensions among women members within both organizations as well as the conditions women manage within the gendered ranks of the organizations themselves. Her chapters 5-7 are specifically focused on women in pesantren which are associated largely with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) communities. She made a case study about the new critical
edition of the classical text on marriage *Kitab ‘Uqud*, as a sign of widespread gender reform in pesantren communities. Although she focuses on the leaders of organizations and movements, Van Doorn-Harder demonstrates that, in many cases, progressive change has originated at the grassroots.

In chapter 5 of *Indonesian Islam in a New Era* (2008), Eka Srimulyani focuses her research on women’s leadership roles in pesantren. Her study shows that women have by no means been absent from the leadership of these institutions in the past. She gives biographical data on three generations of *nyais*, female religious leaders in pesantren. In some ways, her data resemble those concerning female political leaders in Islamic countries: they rise to top not only because of their own talents but also because of the legitimacy granted them by influential men to whom they are closely related. Despite their apparent flouting of tradition, these exceptional women have to be careful to abide by gendered Islamic rules in such respects, as their dress, their relations with men and their reputations as household managers. In other words, they have been active in public life, both in educational establishments and in representative political institutions, by negotiating a socially and religiously acceptable niche for themselves.

Women in pesantren have been discussed to a limited degree in Robinson’s book *Gender, Islam, and Democracy in Indonesia* (2009). In chapter 7, “Islam and Politics of Gender,” she observes the gender dimension of current Islamic politics. She reviews the re-emergence in the *Reformasi* (Reform) period of controversy about the secular marriage law, the re-legitimization of polygamy, and the attempts by newly empowered local governments under a decentralization policy to implement laws based on *shari’a*. These
are associated with debate about appropriate Islamic gender relations based on textual interpretations of the Qur’an and Hadith. Women are active participants on both sides of this debate: as proponents of hermeneutic readings that emphasize humanistic ideals rooted in Qur’anic values linked to Islamic feminism and as proponents of literalist readings that argue for subordinated femininities. Interestingly, women from pesantren backgrounds, particularly those associated with the localized version of Islam related to so-called “traditionalist” NU, belong to the first group. They assert social justice, democracy and pluralism as fundamental Islamic values. That women fought side by side with men in the Indonesian national revolution adds force to the argument for local understandings of Islam that embrace women’s rights.

These feminist inquiries do not specifically address the process of a widespread women’s movement in pesantren in recent years, especially after the downfall of Suharto (1998). They also ignore the fact that the women’s movement within the pesantren actually constitutes an independent development that explicitly breaks with the secular premise that grounds their ideologies. Secular feminism gains resistance within pesantren circles. The rise of Islamic feminist criticism among pesantren women, by contrast, directly challenges the patriarchal structure of these communities on religious grounds. What has been the impact of this development on the male-dominated conservative ethos of pesantren? How has this emerging Islamic feminism affected the discussion of feminism at the national level in Indonesia? These are the questions I wish to pursue in this thesis.
This thesis will be divided into five chapters. Chapter One is an introduction, which underlines the background of the research, methodology, theoretical framework and literature review. Chapter Two, on women and pesantren, deals with the process of reformation within pesantren which includes the opening of Islamic schools for girls. It also discusses the status of women in pesantren and how gender roles are constructed through interpretation of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*). Contradictions between religious discourse in pesantren and social reality created tensions that are crystallized in the women’s movement are discussed in Chapter Three. It explores the involvement of pesantren in developing women’s rights in the Muslim community. By looking at two case studies, it shows how the women’s movement in pesantren has worked on both the exegetical reform and direct social engagement. Chapter Four places the women’s movement in pesantren within the wider context of Islamic feminism both at the national and international levels. It also shows some of the challenges of the movement in the way of developing women’s rights, which is based on Islamic framework. The last chapter contains the conclusion of the study.
CHAPTER II: WOMEN AND PESANTREN:
THE DIALOGUE OF TRADITION AND MODERNIZATION

In this chapter I begin by describing the role of pesantren in Indonesia, starting from the colonial era until the present day. My intent is to show how pesantren have transformed Muslim society in the economic, social, cultural and religious spheres. I then explore some changes and reforms that are occurring in pesantren as a result of the rapid penetration of modernization and globalization. In this regard, providing education for females in pesantren is one of the responses by pesantren leaders to adjust to the modernization process. I then explain the historical and social background of Muslim women in pesantren in order to understand the gender roles that are emerging. This chapter also includes descriptions of some general attitudes held toward women in pesantren, which derive from the interpretation of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning)*.

A. The Role of Pesantren in Indonesia

*Pesantren* derives from the word *santri*, meaning a student at a traditional type of Muslim school, and means a place where rural people can study. The word *santri* originates from the Sanskrit word *shastri* which means an expert in the holy books of the Hindu religion. Unlike many of the Islamic terms which are usually Arabic, the word *pesantren* appears to have both traditional and cultural roots which are typically Indonesian (Billah, 1985). Pesantren that pervade the country have strong cultural affiliations with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Over the years, Indonesia’s pesantren are considered to have played a major role in shaping the development of the nation.
The ulama (Islamic leaders) who directed the pesantren were themselves graduates of traditionalist schools or from Mecca and Medina. The aim of traditionalist education was to transmit religious knowledge, preserve the Islamic tradition as a whole, and serve as a center for training and social reproduction of ulama. Although the pesantren have been influenced by Middle Eastern values (see Geertz, 1960; Azra, 1999; Dhofier, 1999; Hefner & Zaman, 2007), the concept is considered an “indigenous” educational institution deeply rooted in Indonesian society. The pesantren synthesize religious, educational and socio-cultural dimensions. In other words, the pesantren develops as community-based schools which engage in creative activities offering alternative education by combining education and learning and community development (Wirosarjono, 1987). To some extent, the pesantren have become identical to the sekolah rakyat (school of the people) and sekolah kehidupan (school of life) offering education to people mostly in rural areas. As a social institution, the pesantren have also emphasized core values of sincerity, simplicity, individual autonomy, solidarity and self-control (Purwadi & Siregar, 2003).

The history of the growth of these pesantren cannot be separated from the introduction and development of Islam in Indonesia. Many scholars have debated about the origin of these Javanese pesantren. Early scholars such as Pigeaud (1967) and de Graaf (1974) argued that pesantren existed in Indonesia in the early part of the 16th century, as independent Islamic centers derived from the pre-Islamic era, called mandala and asyrama. Other scholars such as Fokkens (1886), Schrieke (1919), Geertz (1960), and Orr et. al. (1977) considered pesantren as a continuation of a perdikan village, as a
pre-Islamic religious institution, namely Hindu-Buddhist monasteries. However, Bruinessen (1995) rejected these perceptions, arguing that the nature of pesantren differed from the *perdikan* village. The real pesantren did not exist in Indonesia until the 18th century. However, the tradition of studying Islamic classical works had been known since the 16th Century, when they were translated into the Javanese and Malay languages. It was only in the late 18th or early 19th century, however, that pesantren spread into interior Java, as a fast-growing community of returning *hajji* (pilgrims) and students trained in Mecca and Medina took advantage of the colonial peace to establish schools in territories which prior to this time had been only nominally Muslim (see Bruinessen, 1995; Dhofier, 1999; and Laffan, 2003).

The pesantren were led by Muslim scholars called *kyai*, who taught people all about Islam. Santris came from far away to study with the *kyai*, and they provided *pondok* (dormitory) for the santris. Zamakhsyari Dhofier (1999) pointed out five basic elements of the pesantren, which are: *pondok* (a religious boarding school under the direction of a kyai), *masjid* (the mosque as a place for training students), *kitab kuning* (for teaching classical Islamic texts, particularly of the Shafi’ite school), *santri* (male and female students), and *kyai* (a male leader, often founder, of a pesantren).

The *pondok* usually consisted of a simple building which was established by the *kyai* and the local society. There is a mosque in the center of the complex for praying and religious teachings. The students mostly studied religious books, in Arabic, on numerous classical Islamic texts which can be classified into eight groups: *nahwu* (syntax) and *sharaf* (morphology), *fiqh* (Islamic laws), *usul fiqh* (methodology of Islamic laws), *hadith*
(Prophet tradition), *tafsir* (Qur’anic exegesis), *tauhid* (theology), *tasawwuf* (sufism), ethics, *tarikh* (history of Islam), and *balaghah* (rhetoric). However, this is not a fixed or standard curriculum since pesantren tradition has changed over the years, as I describe later in this chapter.

The role of the *kyai* is the most important element in the pesantren. He is highly respected and always obeyed, not only by the *santri* but also by the local community as an informal leader. It is not easy and not everyone can become a *kyai*, and it cannot be compared with someone getting a degree or diploma from a university. The *kyai’s* authority comes from the people themselves, as they claim him to be their missionary, from their own pure feelings toward him, which is not in any way inaugurated. The *kyai* also plays important roles in the community as a religious leader, and in recent years, as a political figure. There are *kyai* families that have a long history of filling this role. Some contemporary *kyais* are the grandsons and great-grandsons of famous figures who established well-known pesantren.

As educational and social institutions, the Javanese *kyai* and pesantren have played a major role in shaping Indonesia over the centuries. During colonialism, from the time of the Dutch arrival until around the middle of the 19th century, Muslims were placed under severe restrictions, preventing the spread of Islamic teaching in Java. The Dutch forbade Muslim scholars, or what they called “Mohammedan priests,” from spreading Islamic orthodoxy, due to Muslim opposition to colonial rule. Since Islam thus could not play an important role in the political struggle in Javanese cities, the centers of scholarly studies moved to villages in pesantren complexes that had been developed by
the *kyai*. The Islamic political thinking of the *kyai* was confined to religious authority, and the teaching and essence of Islam. In the *kyai’s* mind, it was possible to accept the authority of “infidels” (Dutch colonizers) as long as the latter did not destroy the *kyai’s* goal of spreading Islam. Furthermore, the pesantren tradition formed part of the Islamic traditional education system in the Javanese community. *Traditional* here means that it was still strongly bound to established Islamic ideas created by scholars, jurists, doctors, and Sufis during the early centuries of Islamic theological and legal development, sectarian conflicts, and the rise of the Sufi movement and brotherhoods in the 13th century (Dhofier, 1999).

By the 20th century, the pesantren had become the center of Islamic educational institutions in Java. The Islamic spirit of the pesantren was acknowledged as a fortress for the defense of the Islamic community and for the spread of the Islamic faith. As well as being an educational institute, the pesantren were also an institution of village society. The members of pesantren always respond to the problems of the community, whether political, social or cultural, economic or ideology problems. Therefore, the pesantren established themselves as agents of change and new ideas, strategically located in order to promote development of the rural community. Since the 1970s pesantren have received a lot of attention and been the focus of discussion for some observers as well as the decision-makers of national development.

The *kyai*, as religious elites, also became a major part of one of the leading factors in the development of a traditional social movement. They were, in fact, a major symbol of the traditional order, and enjoyed a high social standing amongst the rural population.
At the village level, a *kyai* frequently assumed political leadership. Popular belief in their supernatural attributes and magical capacities allowed the religious leaders to exercise charismatic power, and by means of such religious institutions as the pesantren and the *tarekat* (mystical brotherhood), as well as by their own personal following, they could often exert a considerable amount of control over the village communities (see Geertz, 1960). Absolute obedience to his guru required the *murid* (disciple) established a solidarity which could cut across limits imposed by kinship ties and local loyalties. This religious elite, through the ability to found and exercise leadership in the pesantren and *tarekat*, was thus able to establish its power against other groups with more limited, segmented bases of support.

The deepening impact of the westernization process deprived the religious leaders of much of their political predominance at the national level. They were compelled to become more vehement adversaries of colonial rule. During the course of the 19th century, there was a growth of militant agitation against foreign rule, led by the religious elites. They succeeded in increasing their hold over the peasantry, and their religious institutions provided effective instruments for launching political campaigns in which an atmosphere of religious spirit was combined with animosity toward foreign rule (Kartodirdjo, 1973).

The overwhelming dominance of pesantren began to decline dramatically after 1950, when Indonesia became an independent country. After independence, employment in modern occupations was opened to those Indonesians trained at secular schools maintained throughout the country by the government. This resulted in fewer young
people being attracted to pesantren education. Most minor pesantren disappeared during the 1950s and 1960s; major pesantren survived, only because they also taught secular subjects (Dhofier, 1999).

In the 1950s and 1960s, as it became clear to parents of school age children that education was critical to economic success, many pesantren responded by opening madrasa or sekolah dasar (general elementary schools) to provide nonreligious and vocational instruction. The trend accelerated in the 1970s and 1980s, so that, today, the largest and most popular pesantren have madrasas, or general elementary schools, located on their grounds. Many students attend the madrasa, or general school, during the morning, and devote their afternoons and evenings to religious instruction. Although pesantren provide training in Islamic traditions of knowledge, most pesantren students receive considerable instruction in subjects of a general as well as a religious nature.

The increasing diversity of the Javanese community has also resulted in increased complexity in the development of pesantren institutions. Pesantren can be classified into two important categories: (1) Pesantren Salafi, which preserve the teaching of classical Islamic texts as essential education, and (2) Pesantren Khalafi, which has either introduced the teaching of secular subjects or incorporated secular schools.

During the Suharto regime (1966-1998), familiarly called Orde Baru (New Order)-- to differentiate his rule from that of his predecessor, Sukarno (dubbed the Old Order, or Orde Lama)-- the Indonesian government applied a double attitude toward the pesantren. On one hand, pesantren were often marginalized and associated with backwardness and underdevelopment. Yet, on the other hand, the government needed
pesantren to secure their status quo. For example, politicians who know little about the kyai and pesantren simply come around at election time to seek votes and support. They acknowledge the kyai’s ability at vote-getting; however, they do not appreciate the educator’s views or experience. Policymakers also took advantage of pesantren, when they involved the kyai in smoothing the way for major government plans in education or family planning. Whatever the reason, the negative view of the kyai remains a constant and ever-present prejudice, despite their continuing potential and popularity within Indonesian society.

This popularity derives from the strong connection that the pesantren have with the needs of people. Thousands of pesantren graduates work in various vocational sectors throughout society, and still maintain a firm connection with many kyais. This tie is firmly rooted in the lowest levels of society, such as farmers, fishermen and small businessmen, and forms a reliable, strong social organization. The relationship between the students and the people at the rural, suburban and provincial levels is maintained through traditional and religious meetings, such as khaul (an annual festival to commemorate the merits of the founder of the pesantren, when santri from all over the place came to visit their former pesantren). Through these frequent meetings, the santris are able to relay information and messages on how to solve problems, by working together. Nowadays, with joint efforts between several private institutes and the government, many of the pesantrens now actively carry out community development programs, promoting cooperation, private enterprise, farming, biological environmental
studies and village leadership training. These activities help pesantren and people in surrounding areas to develop their condition.

B. Pesantren and Modernization

Education is widely recognized as an important part of how a society engages modernization and globalization. Here, I explore some of the ways in which the pesantren community has used education to appropriate the materials of modernity. The leaders of this community have created an educational system to address the educational needs of a modernizing society and, at the same time, to guard against the perceived moral decay that comes with modernization and globalization.

The demands of educational reform and modernization facing Indonesia’s pesantren coincide with difficulties confronted by Muslim educational institutions worldwide. With the advent of colonial rule in many Muslim countries, indigenous systems of education either collapsed or became marginalized. The complex legacy of indigenous reform, colonial rule, post-independence nationalism and socialism, as well as more recent expressions of Islamic revival, further complicate attempts at educational reform. Muslim schools are portrayed as unable to prepare children adequately for the needs of the modern world. They are thought unfit to help students take advantage of the scientific, technological, and economic progress that characterize modern life and, instead, are deemed to deliver what is dangerously akin to indoctrination (Pohl, 2006).

The process of modernization in the pesantren, however, led some Indonesian scholars to view them as very much a part of modernity and a key to Indonesia’s further
development. Most of this literature is based on the work of Zamakhsyari Dhofier and Taufik Abdullah, which remain the primary introductions to the study of the pesantren. This scholarship asserts that the pesantren and modernity are not incompatible but can work together for the betterment of Indonesia. Others argue that the pesantren has already adopted its own role toward modernity (Dhofier, 1999). In the view of these scholars, the major question is how the pesantren deals with a rapidly changing society resulting from modernization and globalization.

Starting in the second half of the 20th century, some pesantren started adding secular subjects to their curriculum as a way of negotiating modernity. The change was primarily in response to two developments: the Dutch colonial authorities’ introduction of general education for native youth, and the spread of modern Islamic madrasa across Indonesia. In the 1920s, several pesantren expanded their curricula offerings to include general educational materials (mathematics, history, English) as well as the religious sciences (Dhofier, 1999). This affected the traditional pesantren in a number of ways. It led to greater control by the national government, which decreased the number of hours allocated for teaching traditional subjects. Many pesantren leaders decided that the training of religious leaders was not their sole purpose, and they were now satisfied to graduate young male and female students who had moral integrity. Through curricular redesign, the pesantren communities engaged in a process of re-imagining modernity that was at first seen as potentially dangerous in terms of the moral stance that was often found to be accompanying it (Lukens-Bull, 2005). There were still pesantren which tutored students in the traditional way, reading out a text individually in front of the
teacher, who corrects mistakes and gives explanations. However, some teach a fixed curriculum in which general subjects are taught in addition to classical Islamic texts, as in madrassa. In other words, almost all pesantren have had a shift in their educational material as a result of the penetration of state-driven modernization programs.

In Indonesian discourse how a pesantren engages with modernity leads to one of three labels: salaf (traditional), khalaf (modern), and terpadu (mixed). Salaf pesantren teach only religious education and character development. Khalaf pesantren are characterized by religious education conducted exclusively in Indonesian and by the importance placed on general education and skills training. The less an institution emphasizes religious education and character development, the less likely it is to be considered a true pesantren. The most traditional pesantren tend to limit innovations in the teaching of this curriculum. Most pesantren today are labeled "mixed" because they engage in some combination of all types of curriculum. Even so, there is considerable variation within these categories (Lukens-Bull, 1997).

Many of the trappings of globalization, especially global popular culture, are seen as promoting a blind, self-interested consumerism that threatens to dissolve social solidarity. One basic way pesantren people imagine an acceptable modernity is found in an oft-quoted Arabic principle that says; ‘Al-Muhafadzatu ‘Ala al-Qadim as-Shalih, wal Akhdzu bil-jadid al-Ashlah’ (One should continue old ways that are good and adopt new ways that are better). This means that a pesantren can be compatible with the modern world, while at the same time maintaining its traditional values.

The fact that pesantren have supported the need for education and socio-
economical interests among Indonesian people in rural areas for approximately 200 years reveals that they have the necessary elements to adapt to modernity. For many years, thousands of pesantren fulfilled the function of _pemberadaban_ (humanization) by integrating _santri_ into surrounding communities. It is the contrast with modernity that brings the phenomenon of social alienation. Here, the _santri_ have the potential to be socio-cultural agents, bringing enlightenment to people in the villages. A strong mission to support surrounding villagers through spiritual and social empowerment has been the prominent characteristic of the pesantren from the beginning (Purwadi and Siregar, 2003).

The authentic values of the pesantren, such as sincerity, simplicity, social mission and religious dissemination, are directly challenged by modern values such as secularism, individualism, materialism and pragmatism. This clash is not a new story. The impact of modernization is often felt in the erosion of spirituality in public life. Modernity, in some ways, destabilizes communal life and the values of social cohesion, as well as lessening humanitarian projects through its capitalistic interpretations. However, this could be the best moment for a traditional institution like a pesantren to examine its religious messages or Islamic prophetic mission in order to be relevant and valuable to modern society. The pesantren as an educational institution can act as a counter-balance against the elements of modern culture that undermine social virtues and spiritual ideals.

Since the pesantren provides low-cost education, it can help people who lack other opportunities to prepare for life as modern citizens. Because not all potential pupils have the opportunity to pursue higher education, the pesantren model of education can be
relevant even today. The easy accessibility of a kyai and the pesantren enables participation by all segments of society in their educational facilities. The pesantren found within Indonesian society is a fruitful educational system supported by religious values. What is valuable is that pesantren, with their limitations and simple ways, have eased scarcity and illiteracy in rural areas. Since most Indonesians live in rural areas or villages, the existence of the pesantren should be taken into account in any effort to reduce poverty outside the main urban centers.

A key issue is the notion that imagining and reinventing modernity is necessarily linked to imagining and reinventing tradition. Imagining here means the conceptualization of modernity and tradition in ways that allow and even demand that both be transformed. Tradition, as understood in pesantren, centers around the study of classical texts, the practice of Sufism, and a number of ritual activities, including special intercessory prayers, chanting religious formulae, and ritual meals. The defining feature is the teaching of classical texts. Imagining modernity and tradition is the first step in the reinvention of both. As life in rural Java changed and pesantren changed to meet new educational goals, certain 19th century practices were idealized and made into traditions. In this way, in classical Islamic education in Indonesia, the imagining and reinvention of tradition and the imagining and reinvention of modernity are two sides of the same coin (Luken-Bull, 2007).

To sum up, this is precisely the component of modernity with which pesantren people are most concerned. They want the technology and the benefits of political and economic modernism, but they want to define an Islamic modernity. As Zamakhsari
Dhofier (1999) has observed, pesantren are no longer just concerned with training of religious scholars, but also aim to educate ordinary Muslims in Islamic virtues and knowledge as well as scientific and professional fields of learning. Today, only a small percentage of pesantren limit themselves to training in the Islamic sciences. Consistent with their expanded mission, many also operate grassroots economic programs, including cooperatives and credit unions.

C. The Status of Women in Pesantren

Studies have shown that Muslim women in Indonesia enjoy relatively high levels of social and personal freedom in contrast to women in Middle Eastern countries (Bennett, 2005; Blackburn et al., 2008; & Lev, 2001). The case of Indonesia’s first female president, Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-04), confirms the moderate nature of Indonesian Islam, and shows that the majority of Indonesian Muslims do not have a problem with women’s leadership in Islam. The highly specific nature of Islamic cultural practice is central in determining the gendered experiences women have across Indonesia as they maneuver within their changing, modernizing societies (Kull, 2009).

Dominant western constructions of Islam are historically situated in the Middle East and through the accumulated traditions of orientalist scholarship which have portrayed Muslims and Islam as “the Other “(see Said,1979). This homogeneous construction of western consciousness has portrayed Muslim women as oppressed, weak, passive and submissive as a result of the sexist practices of patriarchal regimes. By referring to Mohanty’s (2003) argument about the discursive homogenization and
systematization of the oppression of women in the Third World in much of western feminist discourse, I aim to show the diverse conditions of Muslim women in Indonesia, especially within the pesantren community.

Until about 1910, pesantren and madrassa were male-only institutions. Some girls, especially from pious families, received religious instruction, but it was usually provided by teachers invited into the girls’ homes or through informal religious study at a mosque or prayer house. Then, several pesantren opened special separate facilities for girls. The first was Pesantren Denanyar in the Jombang district, established in 1917. Before this, pengajian (religious congregations) were the only available education for women. These were limited to teaching elementary knowledge of Islam (Dhofier, 1999).

The introduction by the western-type education to native Indonesians at the end of the 19th century encouraged the emergence of the madrassa system, which taught secular subjects and opened the opportunity for girls to attend Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren. However, when, on the advice of Snouck Hurgronje, the Dutch established new types of secular schools, it was, from the beginning, aimed at extending the influence of the colonial government and counteracting the overwhelming influence of pesantren (Kartodirjo, 1966).

The opening of a pesantren complex for female santri indicates that there was a growing consciousness amongst the kyai and Muslim women in Indonesia of the need for advanced Islamic education for women. At the 1931 national congress in Banten, the NU leaders allowed official education for women as a result of a debate on the rights of women to have their own pesantren schools (Marcoes-Natsir, 2000). This meant that
women could broaden their education beyond the study of Arabic and the Qur’an.

As Dhofier (1999) observed in 1978, the number of female students in Javanese pesantren is relatively high. Like their male counterparts, female students came from widely dispersed areas. They were taught separately, and most of their teachers were male. The number of female santri rapidly increased, especially after some women’s pesantren were established in Java. Pesantren Salafiyah Seblak, for example, had a dominant female leadership for several generations (see Srimulyani, 2008). Additionally, many parents preferred to send their daughters to pesantren because they provided a secure environment for adolescent girls and would prevent them from being too free. In some pesantren female students outnumbered the males as a result of a new trend of sending male students to secular schools. These schools prepared students for prestigious national universities, while female students studied at the pesantren to become teachers of religion or to go to an Islamic State Institute of Higher Learning (IAIN) (Van Doorn-Harder, 2006).

Some madrasas eventually opened their doors to girls and the movement of young women into Islamic schools has increased, until female enrollment today equals or exceeds that of males. This challenges the assumption that girls and women have fewer educational opportunities in the Muslim world. In Indonesia, as far as education is concerned, girls have similar opportunities to their male counterparts. Since the Islamic resurgence of the 1970s, young women have come to play an increasingly important role in Islamic predication (da’wah), and religious education is an important pathway into this new religious field (Mahmood, 2005; Hefner & Zaman, 2007).
Nevertheless, the pesantren institution is still perceived as male-dominated. It applies some limitations to women, such as the preference for a son of a kyai as successor of pesantren leadership instead of a daughter. If a kyai has only a daughter, then his son-in-law will be given preference as future leader of the pesantren. Female instructors, both nyai (wives of kyais) and ustadzah (female teachers), are generally not allowed to teach the male santri. In student organizations, a santri will also be preferred for high-ranking positions such as chairperson, whereas a santriwati (female student) will be given a role that are assumed to suit her nature as a woman, such as secretary or treasurer (as cited in Srimulyani, 2008).

It is commonly assumed that pesantren maintain strict segregation of the sexes, shielding women from public life. However, the participation of pesantren women in public roles and activities is not a new phenomenon. The nyai of pesantren have served as teachers for santriwati and people in the village. Many of them preach to larger audiences through pengajian or majlis ta’lim in the mosques. As the nyai of pesantren, these women are responsible for leading the female students in communal prayers. They are the leaders or managers of the pesantren, resolving any issues or problems relating to the pesantren or the students.

In most pesantren today women teach the females. As far as the nyai are concerned, some still limit their activities to being the spouse of the kyai, but an increasing number have started to play an active role in reforming pesantren by, for example, introducing innovative ideas concerning the position of women. Many women in pesantren have held important positions in the Fatayat and Muslimat, the female
branches of Nahdhatul Ulama (NU). This organization has widely endorsed the participation of Muslim women in the political field.

In performing public activities, women in pesantren have to conform to the standard norms or values of respectability, either derived from the Islamic teaching or their society. This was one of the prerequisites for them to negotiate a possible path into the public sphere. They accommodate those values, while still being active in public. Nevertheless, the struggle to implement gender equity within the pesantren is still far from over.

D. Women in the Islamic Classical Texts (*Kitab Kuning*)

According to Amina Wadud (1992), the issue of women in the Qur’an has two significant implications: first, in order to maintain its relevance, the Qur’an must be continually re-interpreted. Second, the progress of civilization has been reflected in the extent of women’s participation in society and the recognition of the significance of their resources. In the context of Islam, the understanding of the Qur’anic concept of woman established over 1,400 years ago indicates the advanced level of civilization (in the Prophet’s era). If it had been fully implemented in a practical sense, Islam would have been a global motivating force for women’s empowerment.

Every discussion of women’s position in Islam will necessarily refer to the Qur’an, especially the chapter (*Sura*) an-Nisa, because an-Nisa means *women* in Arabic. This chapter is one of the parts of the Qur’an that most often discuss topics related to women’s rights, obligations and the legal regulations pertaining to them. For example, it
discusses male-female relations as human beings, and as spouses in the home, as well as in social, cultural and political life.

Although women are the focus of attention in an-Nisa’, problems relating to discrimination, segregation, and subordination of women are believed to be derived from and legitimated by an-Nisa’ (4), verse 34, in which Allah speaks thus: “Men are leaders for women, because God has made some of them (men) excel over others (women), and because they (men) spend from their (own) means”. The general interpretation is that men as leaders (qawwam), superiors, cannot be challenged even if they are wrong. This interpretation is then applied to all aspects of life. The more serious practical implications of male leadership are visible in the contents of hadith and fiqh.

The hadiths are used as a lens through which to read the Qur’an. However, not all are direct reports on the sayings and doings of the Prophet. There are several types of hadith, such as dhai’if (weak), maudhu’ (made/fake), or sahih (legitimate). Many hadith that were unquestionable in the past may now be challenged by current standards and criteria. Fatima Mernissi in her book Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry (1991) investigated several hadiths on women which she decried as misogynistic (antipathetic toward women). One concerns the leadership of women. Abu Bakrah narrated from the Prophet: "A nation which placed its affairs in the hands of a woman shall never prosper." Mernissi argues that the hadith should be studied carefully because one does not know in what context it was said and how it was understood by the narrator from the Prophet. It conflicts with the Qur’an which speaks highly of a women ruler, the
Queen of Sheba. Yet, this tradition has been widely used by the ulama and Muslim jurists to deny women any role in the political affairs of Muslim countries.

The subjugation of women can also be found in the *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). The term “patriarchal fiqh” may sound unfamiliar as it refers to a male discourse. But to challenge the *fiqh* is to challenge a great tradition upheld by Muslims over the centuries. Historically speaking, the *fiqh* was established only to implement the messages of the Qur’an and the Hadiths in practice, but there were many subjective and ideological factors involved. Although the *fiqh* began as a religious call, there were many influences in terms of cultural and political values (Hasyim, 2006).

The *kitab kuning*, as commentaries of the Qur’an and Hadith, has compounded some patriarchal teachings. Some materials in the *kitab kuning* have been criticized as promoting gender inequality. These pesantren textbooks on women’s issues usually stress the significance of being a good wife and mother. Emphasis is placed on the relationship between husband and wife, urging a woman to serve her husband well. In fact, pesantren as institutions existing in a patriarchal (Javanese) society, maintain those patriarchal values.

Mas’udi (1993), in his critical study on pesantren literature, argued that most of the descriptions of women in the *kitab kuning* have cast them as a “secondary creation.” Men are superior and women are inferior. For example, in the religious and social domains, women cannot achieve men’s prestige, and are seen as sexual objects for men. The status of men in this world and in the hereafter is higher than that of women, and one
man is equal to two women. These misogynistic and biased interpretations are deep and clear.

The most influential *kitab kuning*, widely used in the Javanese pesantren regarding the relationship between women and men in the households, is called Kitab Úqud al-Lujjayn fi Bayan Huquq al-Zawjayn (Binding Two Waves: An Explanation of the Rights of Husbands and Wives), written by Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani, the great Indonesian ‘alim who lived in the 19th century. According to Nyai Ruqayyyah, the leader of Pesantren al-Ma’shumiyah Bondowoso East Java, *Kitab ‘Uqud* is usually taught in pesantren during Ramadhan (fasting month) for adult santris (Personal Interview, December 2009). This classical book expresses a traditional Islam-based gender view that subordinates women to men, particularly in marital life. For example, *Kitab ‘Uqud* writes that a woman:

> should know that she is like a slave marrying her master, or weak prisoner who is helpless under someone’s power….A wife has to feel timid (*malu*) toward her husband, she may not contradict him, she has to lower head and gaze when in front of her husband no matter what he asks her to do, apart from what Islam forbids, she has to remain silent when her husband talks, stand up at his coming and going (FK3, 2001, as cited in Van Doorn Harder, 2006).

Since this book was written before the 20th century and carries cultural baggage that has long been abandoned in other areas of life, is clear that reinterpretation is called for. Because it is sacrosanct, great care must be applied in researching and criticizing it.

The classical works being studied in the pesantren should be understood in a contextual way by paying attention to historical, social and political backgrounds. The contents of the *kitab kuning* were not absolute truths, however; their interpretations of the Qur’an and Hadith have often reflected more upon general cultures and social paradigms.
at a particular period (zeitgeist). This understanding should be applied to discussion of the status of women in the pesantren communities. In the medieval centuries, when the classical books were written, male domination or patriarchy was paramount and considered to be absolute in society (Mas’udi 1999, as cited in Bruinessen, 1999).

In this case, some revision by members of pesantren community of classical Islamic books about women is worth mentioning. In the Forum to Discuss Classical Books (FK3/Forum Kajian Kitab Kuning) in 2003, some Muslim thinkers and Muslim feminists had regular meetings led by Sinta Nuriyah, the wife of the former President Abdurrahman Wahid, to challenge religious interpretations about gender. They conducted critical study of Kitab ‘Uqud and offered a new interpretation. They published three important books resulting from these studies; Ta’liq wa Takhrij ‘ala Sharh Kitab ‘Uqud al-Lujjayn (Critical Analysis of the Book ‘Uqud al-Lujjayn); Terjemah Uqudulujjain: Etika Berumah Tangga (The Translation of ‘Uqud al-Lujjayn); and Kembang Setaman Perkawinan (The Garden of Marriage).

These soon become new reference books for women activists in pesantren (Tempo, March 26-April 1, 2007). The books have also spread over to the pesantren community and the public in general. As the pesantren community and those reinterpreting the text have strong influence in society, the reinterpretation has resulted in quite significant influence in the pesantren community and society in general. One women’s organization, Nahdina from Cipasung, Tasikmalaya, West Java, socializes this new book through discussions and religious gatherings. It attempts to offers a new perspective about relations between men and women, about reproduction health and other
relevant women’s issues. People around the pesantren particularly have become the target of the socialization. Nahdina also attempts to include gender perspective in some subjects in the school curricula. It often gathers school teachers to explain gender perspective in some subjects such as biology. After such meetings, the teachers are expected to introduce gender perspective to student (Nyai Djuju’, Personal Interview, December, 2009).

The receptivity of the pesantren community to this reinterpretation is quite significant. Research conducted by LP3ES (Lembaga Penelitian, Pendidikan dan Penerangan Ekonomi dan Sosial/ the Institute for Social and Economic Research, Education and Information) and Forum Sebangsa in 2004 found that gender issues have become part of public discourse and some pesantren had actually empowered women before the gender equality campaigns were started (Tempo, March 26-April 1, 2007).

However, the counter to this kind of interpretation of gender relations is also strong because the current openness in Indonesian society has given people opportunities to speak. From inside pesantren, reactions against these commentaries came from conservative kyais, something that indicates a heated debate. This debate originated in the pesantren but spread to the entire Nahdhatul Ulama organization and especially its female branches (van Doorn-Harder, 2006). Outside the pesantren, freedom of speech has strengthened conservative Islamic groups which are against this new interpretation. Kamala Chandrakirana, the director of the National Commission on Violence against Women, states that these groups have grown significantly and attempt to discredit the new interpretation by calling it part of a western campaign to destroy Muslim society.
According to Chandrakirana, the so-called right-wing groups get strong support because they can use media and use a cell system to recruit young people including middle-class students in secular universities (Eby Hara, 2007).

The complexity of identity among contemporary Muslim women in pesantren is difficult to capture with simple labels, which too often seem to distort as much as they clarify. Women’s identity in pesantren has been reshaped by colonialism, nationalism, Middle Eastern, and western ideas and values. Therefore, in saying that all Muslim women are oppressed because of patriarchal Islamic doctrines, some western feminists have treated Islam as an ideology separate from and outside social relations and practices. By taking one version of Islam as the Islam, they attribute a singularity and coherence to the entire religion (Mohanty, 2003). This unitary notion of a religion (Islam) does not recognize ideological specificities and differences that exist within Muslim communities throughout the world.

In contrast to these generalizations, women in pesantren have been active in public life, both in educational establishments and in political institutions, negotiating a socially and religiously acceptable niche for themselves. Even though the situation at the pesantren is even more gender unequal and oppressive, due to the traditional power of the individual kyai and his male heirs (see Kull, 2009), we should not merely assign women to the object position, we should look at them as agents. Seeing women as historical actors enables us to be more positive about their capacity to change or even initiate new social processes. We will be encouraged rather than discouraged. Looking at women from this position we can see their ability to resist and challenge patriarchy.
Due to the ongoing reformation in pesantren, including the popularity of gender issues, one must be optimistic that it may challenge the dominating Islamic patriarchal discourses. Indeed, education and knowledge are the keys to women’s liberation from religion-based oppression and discrimination. There must be a way for women to participate in the public sphere and demonstrate their intellectual achievements.
CHAPTER III: THE INVOLVEMENT OF PESANTREN IN DEVELOPING WOMEN’S RIGHTS (TWO CASE STUDIES)

This chapter examines the engagement of pesantren in women’s rights issues in Islam. By looking at the women’s movement in two pesantrens in West Java—Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid Cirebon and Pesantren Cipasung Singaparna, Tasikmalaya— as case studies, I investigate some important aspects related to the movement, including socio-historical backgrounds, major issues, influential factors, and achievements. I would clarify that among the thousands of pesantren that exist in Java today, only a few are apparently involved in developing women’s rights in the Islamic community. The two pesantren which will be discussed here are among them. Therefore, my intent is not to make a generalization about the women’s movement in all Javanese pesantren, but it might speak to a wider context of the women’s movement in Indonesia.

A. The Role of Non Governmental Organizations

The involvement of pesantren with women’s rights is inseparable from the acceptance of a small group of Muslims, mostly affiliated with Nahdhatul Ulama (NU), with gender issues in relation to Islam in the 1990s. These people include young progressive activists who have worked in Non-Govermental Organizations (NGOs) on varied projects. They began with translation into Bahasa treatises about women’s rights in Islam, written by some prominent Muslim thinkers, such as Fatima Mernissi, Asghar Ali Engineer and Amina Wadud Muhsin. In addition, many discussion forums about gender issues have been carried out with participation by very supportive young Muslim
male intellectuals. Some leading Muslim feminists from different countries such as Ziba Mir-Hosseini (Iran), and Amina Wadud (United States) were invited, to share experiences with the Indonesian activists.

By the early 2000s, some Islamic NGOs had been established, advocating women’s rights issues in Islam, such as Rahima, Puan Amal Hayati, and Fahmina, among others. However, it was the Indonesian Union for Pesantren and Community Development (P3M), an old NGO established by NU leaders in 1983, which initiated the dissemination of gender issues to the pesantren community. In 1994, they began to conduct gender awareness workshops called *Fiqh al-Nisa* (the study of Islamic jurisprudence on women’s issues) programs for the pesantren community. The reproductive rights issues in Islam became a starting point from which to question Indonesian Muslim paradigms about gender relations. Reproductive rights which had been seen as a personal and private issue has become a social concern and an entry point to disclose the patriarchal interpretation in the Qur’anic exegesis, Hadith, and Fiqh.

The P3M’s *Fiqh al-Nisa*’ program is a forum for discussions of topics related to women’s rights, human rights in general and democratic issues for the pesantren. This program tries to transform the pattern of unfair relationships between men and women by giving women a chance to speak and to interpret for themselves some aspects of Fiqh. P3M interprets reproduction as a right through a process of reinterpreting Islamic teachings that relate to women’s issues (Marcoes-Natsir, 2000). P3M believes that women have three types of rights in relation to their reproductive roles. First is the right to safety and health, which is grounded in one of the five fundamental rights guaranteed
under Islamic law, namely the right to physical well-being and respect for life (*hifidz al-nafs*). Secondly, they have the right to social welfare (economic), under which compensation should be provided to women for their reproductive role. Thirdly, there is the right to make decisions. This is the most controversial, since dominant Islamic interpretations see men as the absolute decision-makers. According to P3M, however, women also have this right which is inherent in Islam and its cardinal belief that each person—man or woman—is responsible and accountable for his or her own individual action (Scortino, Marcoes-Natsir & Mas’udi, 1996).

It is precisely because pesantren schools and communities are vital agents of change in society that P3M has to work closely with them to raise gender awareness. As agents of change, pesantren exhibit three characteristics: *First,* they were a source of knowledge or thinkers. Through the knowledge held by the *kyais* as caretakers, pesantren offered contextual religious thought in accordance with the needs of their community. They interpreted as well as giving a dynamic spirit to new understandings of Islamic teachings relevant and suited to the needs of the era. *Second,* they supervised religious practice. With the *kyai’s* wise, simple, moral, humble (*tawadlu’*), accepting (*qana’ah*) behavior and their efforts to uphold the values and norms of Islamic teachings they became an example for their community. *Third,* they were social activists. Pesantren, as an informal group, have widened their influence throughout society, both with the government and with the legislature as public decision-makers (Anshor, 2007). Therefore, the engagement of pesantren in developing gender equality has allowed the
dissemination of gender issues to reach the grassroots level. This makes it all the more important to count on pesantren for sensitizing the Indonesian society to women’s rights.

P3M has trained hundreds of people about women’s rights in Islam within the pesantren community, which consists of three main groups; First, the \textit{jamaah}, are people living near the pesantren community schools. These people live in rural village areas and the pesantren is where they look for guidance about moral values. A second group comprises the \textit{ustadzah} (Islamic female teachers), \textit{muballighah} (female preachers), the \textit{kyai’s} wife and \textit{kyai} in general. The third group consists of pesantren institutions and mass organizations affiliated with the Nahdhatul Ulama organization (Marcoes-Natsir, 2000). These three groups formulate guidelines on moral values and dictate norms of conduct with regard to the way women and men relate to each other are potential agents of change in society. This is done through workshops, training, discussions, circulation of information (newsletters, pamphlets), and networking.

A similar program about gender awareness has been conducted regularly by other Islamic NGOs, working closely with the pesantren community. Rahima, Puan Amal Hayati, Fahmina Institute, International Center for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), and the Wahid Institutes among others, consider the pesantren as a potential partner for their programs. The willingness of the pesantren community to attend workshops, trainings, and seminars about women’s rights in Islam, has indicated the accommodative attitudes of the pesantren toward new ideas and changes, though this characteristic is actually not a new phenomenon. The pesantren has always evolved with changes and reforms in order to adjust to the demands of modernization. Therefore, engagement of the pesantren
with regard to women’s rights has represented successful accommodation of the pesantren within the demands of modernity.

 Apparently, the reason gender issues were not popular in pesantren before some encounters with women’s NGOs was because the gender discourse *per se* had been limited mainly to an exclusive intellectual elite. It had been primarily a matter of interest for NGOs, women’s organizations, feminist groups, universities, academic groups and well-educated people only, thus limiting local communities access to such discourse. Gender issues had preoccupied only to the middle and higher classes.

 The spread of gender education in pesantren is related to the development of the NU organization. It is difficult to separate the pesantren world from the NU. It is often their relationship: “NU is the pesantren writ at large, the pesantren is NU writ small.” This slogan affirms the close relationship between the organization and its roots in pesantren. This analogy was taken one step further when someone described NU, in 1995, as the pesantren headed by the late Kyai Abdurrahman Wahid (familiarly called Gus Dur) (Lukens-Bull, 2005).

 A very important step taken by NU regarding the rights of Muslim women occurred during the 1997 NU National Congress of the ‘Ulama (MUNAS) in Lombok. Women’s topics became serious issues for NU’s *Bahtsul Masail* (religious discussions taken by ulama) because so many questions were raised by the participants regarding the role of women in Islam. During the discussion, some *kyais* argued that Islamic law does not justify women’s emancipation at all. This provoked a strong reaction from the women participating in the congress. Citing many passages from the Qur’an, they argued that
women and men are on an equal footing before God. They were able to influence participants in the congress to the point that many kyais acknowledged the importance of letting women decide on matters pertaining to their own lives. As a result, the *Bahtsul Masa’il* declared that women and men are on equal footing before God. It was also clearly stated that women are responsible for the implementation and exercise of their own right to decide on reproductive health and women’s rights. These rights have to be respected by husbands, society, and the state (Marcoe-Natsir, 2000).

For matters concerning women’s issues, NU has an autonomous branch called Muslimat and another branch called Fatayat formed by and for younger generations of women. The relationship and the task division between Muslimat and NU are primarily based on gender similar to that of a husband and wife relationship understood by Indonesians in the New Order politics. NU represents the husband figure while Muslimat the wife figure. For example, it is not uncommon to see NU adopts the husband figure role in the public sphere while Muslimat took care of kindergartens, family health, nutrition, family planning programs and so forth. However, this role has changed. Muslimat and Fatayat have played a major role in developing gender issues in the Indonesian Muslim community. For instance, in recent developments, Muslimat began to respond to the current issue of gender relations in Indonesia, which had become mainstream in the NU organization. In 1990, Fatayat NU developed a more social welfare-oriented organization for women, namely Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat (YKF). It is particularly concerned with the issue of women’s reproductive health within the
context of Islamic teachings. This organization has organized intensive training for kyai and nyai juniors.

Most women in pesantren have become members of Fatayat and Muslimat NU. According to Baidlowi (1993), Muslimat NU grew out of the pesantren, since the leaders of Muslimat are mostly wives or daughters of kyai, or students from a pesantren background. The female students in pesantren schools usually become members of Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdhatul Ulama (IPPNU/ The Female Student Union of Nahdhatul Ulama). Therefore, when NU supports women’s rights in terms of education, politics, and economics, it creates a very positive impact in the local pesantren. Such projects and socialization will more or less influence the emergence of a women’s movement in pesantren. Although the works of Islamic NGOs and the development of NU have become influential factors that triggered the movement, it lies in the hearts of women in pesantren to question the existing gender relations which have been male-dominated for a long time. According to Kyai Husein and Faqihuddin, both women’s rights activists, the emergence of gender awareness in the pesantren community is not determined by NGOs’ programs on women’s issues; rather, it reflects the continuous questions of many women in the pesantren about their gender relations. It also involves the natural process of internal reforms within pesantren in order to face the changes within society. The NGO’s projects in pesantren, therefore, accelerate this process to be more visible (Personal interview, December, 2009).

To understand the picture of the women’s movement in pesantren, struggling to develop gender awareness within the Muslim community, I will provide two case studies
to show how they engage in women’s advocacy and women’s empowerment. Case studies help us to observe how these activists conduct their activities in everyday life, what issues they concerned, and what kind of challenges they face in promoting women’s rights in the pesantren community.

B. The First Case Study: Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid, Cirebon

Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid is located in Arjawinangun, Cirebon West Java. It was founded by Kyai Sanawi bin Abdullah bin Muhammad Salabi in the first decade of the 20th century. The pesantren flourished and from 1953 to 1970, under the leadership of Kyai Syatori, the son of its founder, many parents were attracted to enroll their children there to gain Islamic knowledge. Kyai Syatori traveled and learned from famous and influential kyais in the Javanese pesantren, including Kyai Hasyim Asy’ari from Pesantren Tebuireng Jombang, the best-known kyai in Java. In recent years, this pesantren has been under a familial leadership of Kyai Ibnu Ubaidillah Syatori, Kyai Husein Muhammad, Kyai Ahsin Sakho, Kyai Khozin Nasuha, and Kyai Mahsun Muhammad.

Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid has around 700 male and female students, most of whom come from the West Java province, though some are from Jakarta, Central Java, and Sumatra. This pesantren has various educational divisions and levels, such as Madrasah Dinniyyah from elementary to advanced level; Madrasah Tahfidz al-Qur’an, Markaz Ta’lim al-Lughah al-Arabiyyah, all Islamic schools from elementary to high schools and disability schools (http://daraltauhid.com/profil-pesantren/sejarah.html).
The educational system can be divided into; Salafi (traditional) and ‘Ashri (modern). The traditional system teaches classical Islamic texts in a way that studying is not bound by a specific curriculum or classes. This way of teaching is known as sorogan (the kyai reads and explains the Kitab while the students take notes), and bandongan (the students read the Kitab one by one in front of the kyai). The advanced Islamic school (Ma’had Aly) is designed for the senior students who do not attend the modern schools. Modern teaching on the other hand, refers to the classical system with formal levels and is based on a designed curriculum, in the way of modern schools in Indonesia, which are based on the national standard curriculum.

The beginning of the Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid initiatives for the empowerment of women has been linked to several factors. First, Kyai Husein Muhammad, one of its leaders, is one of Indonesia's leading progressive Muslim thinkers, working on gender issues in Islam. He founded the Fahmina Institute, and wrote such books about women’s rights from an Islamic perspective as *Fiqh Perempuan* (Women in the Fiqh, 2001), and *Islam Agama Ramah Perempuan* (Islam is a Religion Friendly to Women, 2004). Kyai Husein was appointed as a commissioner of the National Commission on Violence Against Women (KOMNAS Perempuan) for the period 2007-2009.

Kyai Husein is one of the few kyais who have a serious concern about gender injustice in Muslim society. According to him, religious interpretations and cultural practices have contributed to subordinating and marginalizing women in Indonesia. In the Islamic context, the biased gender interpretations stem from an inability of religious scholars to differentiate between the universal and the particular within the Islamic texts,
such as Qur’an and Hadith (Personal interview, December, 2009). Therefore, he insisted, reinterpretation of religious texts is necessary to understand their historical background and contextual meaning. In fact, the message of gender justice was exemplified by the Prophet in the context of the Arabian patriarchal culture. For example, when the practice of burying baby girls alive was common in the tradition of the pre-Islamic Arab culture, the Prophet himself proudly played with his daughter, Fatima, in public and carried her everywhere. The Qur’an also strongly condemned the barbaric practice in Chapter at-Takwir [81]: 8-10:

“And when people are brought together,
And when the girl-child buried alive is questioned about,
For what crime was she killed?”

The second factor linked to the involvement of Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid in women’s rights issues is related to the concerns of some leaders of the pesantren about the high rate of violence practices against women in Cirebon and the surrounding areas. In the conference of ulama from Java, Madura and Sumatra in 2000, Shinta Nuriyah (the wife of former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid) shared her vision to tackle violence against women by establishing the Women’s Crisis Center (WCC) which is based on the pesantren. She argued that the pesantren can be a strategic institution to fight against domestic violence because it has a deep connection with society. Therefore, WCC with a pesantren-based center can be a hub of women’s empowerment. This idea meshed with the concerns of some pesantren leaders regarding the problem of violence against women in Cirebon. The WCC was established in the pesantren in May, 2001, under the branch of PUAN Amal Hayati Jakarta. The inauguration of WCC was a very big
celebration since the late Abdurrahman Wahid was then incumbent president. At that time, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was made between the WCC Puan Cirebon and such governmental institutions as the police, hospitals, courts, and social departments. The first year was in success and in 2002, the WCC Puan Cirebon became independent and changed its name to WCC Balqis. The name Balqis is taken from the story of Queen Sheba in the Qur’an who symbolized the autonomy of women (Personal interview with Lilik, December, 2009).

Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid takes advocacy for women as the core of its struggle because violence against women occurs everyday but many people are reluctant to talk about it. Domestic violence is a taboo topic for public discussion, since it is considered a private matter. A woman who dares to speak about the violence publicly, is perceived to tarnish the honor of her husband and family. Many victims of domestic violence have been silenced through such cultural beliefs and religious teachings. Ibu Lilik (one of the founders of WCC Balqis) mentioned that “It is a calling for the pesantren community to help free women from any kind of violence. When we see a woman who has been battered by her husband, what should we do as either human beings or religious people?” (Personal interview, December, 2009). Some of the founders of WCC Balqis have experienced domestic violence in their own lives, which is a strong weapon for them to tackle violence against women in their community. Since patriarchal religious understanding and cultural practices, have to some extent contributed to the legitimization of violence, addressing those problems has become necessary. WCC Balqis has concluded that raising gender awareness is an important step to breaking the
circle of violence. They conduct trainings, workshops, and seminars about women’s rights in Islam. In running their activities, WCC Balqis have collaborated with other institutions such as schools, pesantren, majlis ta’lim (women’s Islamic learning groups) and NGOs in the Cirebon areas.

After two years, WCC Balqis gained support from The Asia Foundation (TAF) and expanded their programs to not only advocate for victims of domestic violence, but also to tackle the problems of trafficking, migrant workers, HIV/AIDS, and economic empowerment for women. With the problem of trafficking, the regencies of Cirebon, Indramayu and Majalengka have been alerted to rings trafficking of women and children in Indonesia, due to the high number of the cases. Indramayu Regency, though one of the richest oil producers in Indonesia, has a high rate of poverty. Daughters are seen as a solution. They are expected to work away from home and send money back to their family. This condition is an opportunity for brokers and trafficking mafia to come to the villages, promising jobs in the cities. Due to a lack of information and from economic pressures, many parents believe them and allow their daughters to go to the city with the brokers. The promises become poison for the girls as many of them are trapped in sexual industries and become objects of sexual exploitation.

Understanding this problem, WCC Balqis has conducted public education sessions about trafficking of women and children. They have collaborated with other institutions to find ways to break the cycle of trafficking. The biggest challenge is that the brokers seem much more organized. They approach the parents, promising good jobs, and give money as bribes in order to take the daughters to the cities with them. Poverty
and lack of education have perpetuated trafficking of women and children in the area. So WCC Balqis has created programs designed to economically empower women as one of the solutions to trafficking. They follow the model of Grameen Bank to help women to generate income and alleviate poverty (Personal interview with Masruchah, December, 2009).

Concerning the issue of HIV/AIDS, WCC Balqis has opened the public’s eyes to the severity of the problem. According to Masruchah (current director of WCC Balqis), the common assumption in the Muslim community is that HIV/AIDS is a dirty disease, to which only prostitutes, gay communities, and men who use their services are exposed. However, WCC Balqis found that this is only partially true, since many women and children are at risk to exposure. So far, WCC Balqis has found five people infected with the disease in the pesantren community, and all of them are ordinary housewives. They are exposed to HIV/AIDS because their husbands, who were migrant workers, transmitted the virus to their wives. These facts counter the general misunderstandings about the HIV virus. When WCC Balqis exposed this reality in a HIV/AIDS seminar for pesantren leaders in Cirebon and surrounding areas, most of the participants were surprised. WCC Balqis is fully aware of the importance of pesantren dealing with the issue of HIV. Since the pesantren is considered a center for guidance in religious and social values, introducing the issue to kyais and nyais, can revise public misconceptions. The leaders of pesantren have jama’ah (followers), who listen to what their leaders say during pengajian (religious congregation).
WCC Balqis also collaborates with *majlis ta’lim* to disseminate their agenda. *Majlis ta’lim* consists of young and adult women seeking Islamic knowledge from the preachers in the mosques. In Cirebon, there are thousands of *majlis ta’lim*, the usual activities of which include Qur’anic recitation, *marhaban* (songs to praise the Prophet) and the study of Islamic classical texts. WCC Balqis uses this forum to socialize the notion of gender equity and justice. They preach a range of issues, including domestic violence, women’s rights, trafficking of women and children, and HIV/AIDS. WCC Balqis also screens a movie about these issues, assuming that visual media can influence people’s opinions about a phenomenon. Most of the women say the movie is good and enlightening. After the screenings, public dialog is conducted to discuss the message of the movie. This method seems effective in raising consciousness about gender issues in the Muslim community.

The efforts of WCC Balqis to turn domestic violence from a private and taboo topic into a social concern, have been disseminated through radio and television (RCTI Cirebon). In our interview, Masruchah pointed out that one of the biggest challenges in addressing the problem of domestic violence comes from women themselves. Many women blame and discredit the victims of domestic violence, calling them as wild and rebellious. Blaming women as a cause of domestic violence rather than condemning men as perpetrators represents how women often oppress other women. In addition, blaming women as the cause rather than victims of domestic violence reinforces patriarchal cultures which encumber women with the burden of purity, chastity and moral beliefs. A similar analogy is applied when a woman is raped. Many people discredit the victim as
having seduced men by wearing a miniskirt and showing her body. Moghissi (1999) argued that underpinning the sexual and moral beliefs and practices in Islamic societies is the conception of women as weak in moral judgment and deficient in cognitive capacity, yet sexually forceful and irresistibly seductive. The susceptibility of women to corruption, in this view, explains the obsession with sexual purity in Islamic cultures and justifies surveillance of women by family, community and state. Therefore, raising consciousness about gender equity and justice should involve men and women working together to combat violence against women.

The advocacy against domestic violence is not an easy task. Some perpetrators, ashamed that their negative behavior will become known by other people have terrorized the counselors. Since some people in Cirebon still believe in magic, some female counselors have been intimidated with santet (witchcraft or black magic). This has challenged counselors to find ways to approach victims of domestic violence without creating frontal resistance. Some women abrogated their cases when they were being processed by the police, because of family anger and shame, accusing the women of putting their husbands in jail. Therefore, WCC Balqis took a mediation approach, as many women are not ready to see their husbands jailed (Personal interview, December, 2009).

Another challenge comes from the pesantren community, as some perpetrators of domestic violence were in the families of kyais. For the cases involving kyais and their families, WCC Balqis took a different approach, in an effort to protect the dignity of ulama and pesantren. Counseling is conducted outside the office and the cases are
recorded in secret files to avoid tensions within the pesantren. Domestic violence can happen in every segment of society regardless of class, race and religious affiliation.

C. The Second Case Study: Pesantren Cipasung, Tasikmalaya

Pesantren Cipasung, Tasikmalaya, West Java was founded by Kyai Ruhiyat in 1932. It evolved from *majlis ta’lim*, consisting of men and women, where Kyai Ruhiyat discussed Islamic teachings as well as social problems. He traveled from one pesantren to another in order to learn from many ulama. The tradition of traveling to different places to seek Islamic knowledge was common for Indonesian Muslims before the advent of modern education which is based on a strict curriculum and levels. This traveling created a strong network of ulama connected one to another in terms of knowledge, genealogy, and kinship (see Azra, 2004 & Horikoshi, 1987).

The presence of Pesantren Cipasung created some resistance from the local people and the colonial Dutch. Some people in the village rejected the pesantren because it taught values which conflicted with their habits, such as gambling and drinking. However, Rather than forcing them to convert to Islam, Kyai Ruhiyat gave examples of how to live according to Islamic values. On the other side, the Dutch put pressures on the pesantren because it nurtured a sense of nationalism and mobilized the students to fight against foreign rule. In 1941, along with other kyais, Kyai Ruhiyat was captured by the Dutch and jailed in Sukamiskin Bandung. When the Japanese took over the country, Kyai Ruhiyat was again jailed several times because of his stance of anti-colonial rule. After
independence, Pesantren Cipasung developed quickly with the opening Islamic schools ranging from elementary to high school levels.

After the death of Kyai Ruhiyat, the pesantren continued under the leadership of his son, Kyai Muhammad Ilyas Ruhiyat. Following of his father’s steps, Kyai Ilyas expanded the educational institutions by establishing institutions of higher learning. Nowadays, Pesantren Cipasung administers the Higher Learning Institute of Economy, the Higher Learning Institute of Technique, and the Islamic Institute of Cipasung. However, non-formal education such as the teaching Islamic classical texts (*kitab kuning*) is still preserved as the pesantren’s tradition. *Santris* go to schools in the morning and study *kitab kuning* with *kyai* and *asatidz* or *asatidzah* (male or female teachers) in the evening. In addition to the schools, this pesantren also established a foundation for social and economic empowerment, such as cooperation, a savings and loan system, and some functional technology like sanitation systems and animal husbandry. In this regard, a pesantren as a center of social empowerment is not a new phenomenon, since it always accompanies religious teaching. As Kyai Ilyas often preached, Islam teaches not only devotion to God through rituals (*kesalehan pribadi*/individual piety), but also urges building of a good relationship between human beings and developing social conditions (*kesalehan sosial*/social piety) (Yahya, 2006).

The involvement of Pesantren Cipasung with women’s rights issues began after some women leaders in the pesantren joined the *Fiqh al-Nisa* P3M program. Djuju Juwariyah, a senior teacher, and Enung Nursaidah Rahayu, familiarly called Teh Enung, the daughter of Kyai Ilyas, have become representatives to develop gender education in
Pesantren Cipasung. Since then, each has worked with several NGOs, advocating women’s rights in an Islamic framework. Djuju and Teh Enung are currently the backbone of the women’s movement in the pesantren.

Djuju is a senior teacher in the Islamic High Schools in Cipasung. She is also a chairwoman of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) in Tasikmalaya regency and is the only woman on the nine-member council. In 2002, she founded Nahdina, a study forum which focuses on gender education and dissemination of women’s rights discourse in the Islamic community. Nahdina worked in Tasikmalaya Regency by conducting seminars, discussions, workshops and training on gender equality. This organization has concentrated a great deal on paradigm levels, disclosing how religious interpretations and cultural practices affect the status of Muslim women in society. Nahdina facilitates public education and develops gender awareness among communities in the region, often collaborating with the local government to implement gender mainstreaming in public policy.

On September 13, 2004, Nahdina facilitated the establishment of PUSPITA (Pusat Perlindungan Wanita/The Center for Women’s Protection), a kind of women’s crisis center (WCC), in pesantren Cipasung. PUSPITA is a major program of Puan Amal Hayati in Jakarta, formed by Ibu Shinta Nuriyah Wahid to tackle the problem of domestic violence in society using pesantren’s institution as their basis of struggle. The branch of PUSPITA was established in Cipasung because this pesantren has been very active in terms of social empowerment at the grassroots level. In addition, Kyai Ilyas was a noted ‘alim and was one of the chairmen in NU headquarters for several years. Many people
rely on the pesantren in terms of religious and social matters, so, the existence of PUSPITA Cipasung is expected to reduce violence against women in the Muslim community in Tasikmalaya.

Teh Enung is currently the director of PUSPITA Cipasung. She earned her master’s degree in biology from the private university in Bandung. Aside from her activities in PUSPITA, she teaches at the State of Islamic High Schools in Cipasung, is on the board of Fatayat NU in the West Java Province, and is a member of the human rights organization in Tasikmalaya. Teh Enung is an alumna of *Fiqh al-Nisa* P3M and a member of the Nahdina forum as well. Her devotion to women’s advocacy cannot be separated from her own experience. Her grandfather, Kyai Ruhiyat, was polygamous. Even though both of her grandmothers seemed to live harmoniously, Teh Enung felt that the children from the younger wife were marginalized in the pesantren communities. She also witnessed that many Kyais in Tasikmalaya were polygamous and often their wives experienced domestic violence. In other words, polygamous families seem at risk for domestic violence against both women and children. Perpetrators of domestic violence often receive light punishment, and sometimes no punishment at all, since it is considered a private affair. Therefore, many women become victims of domestic violence, but remain silent. These facts triggered Teh Enung’s dedicating herself to the realm of women’s advocacy.

As a WCC, PUSPITA Cipasung runs programs such as consultation, counseling, and advocacy for the victims of violence against women. Pesantren dormitories function as shelters, because the victims need a safe place to stay while their cases are being
processed. The victims are encouraged to participate in pesantren activities, if they feel comfortable. However, some women, especially victims of rape, do not engage in pesantren communities because of deep trauma. This personal factor is respected by the counselors, as the victims must be treated based on their specific cases.

PUSPITA Cipasung is located in Teh Enung’s garage, which serves as an office. It is open from Monday to Saturday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m, the hours are flexible since some clients often come at night or during holiday time. Teh Enung cannot refuse them because these women ask for help in desperation. There is a permanent staff and volunteers. The volunteers are university students in Cipasung who are eager to get experience in women’s advocacy. This program was initiated by Teh Enung to encourage students with interest in women’s right issues. Interestingly, the volunteers are both female and male students.

Since its introduction, Puspita Cipasung has handled many cases of domestic violence, incest, and rape. In its first year, PUSPITA relied on the outreach method in which the counselor went to the victims, offering some help. After many people heard of PUSPITA’s activities through mass media, brochures, and pamphlets, the outreach approach has been reduced because the victims themselves, or their families, come to report the violence. In many cases, PUSPITA gets clients from the police, courts and hospitals. When PUSPITA was launched, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was established between it and just such related institutions, as well as governmental departments which are committed to tackling the problem of violence against women.
PUSPITA Cipasung had been supported by UNFPA to run their programs, but this cooperation only lasted a short time. Currently, PUSPITA is struggling to fund their own activities by running such free enterprises, such as a beauty salon and raising livestock. Even though the funding issue has become a big challenge, PUSPITA remains consistent with its goals. With its success in advocating for the victims of domestic violence, PUSPITA Cipasung has attracted many foreign organizations. In 2006, 15 representatives of United Nation’s organizations such as WHO, UNDP, UNICEF, shared experiences about pesantren-based WCC. There were also gender specialists from Bangkok, the United States, and Japan who visited PUSPITA to understand the women’s movement in pesantren. During these visits, some misrepresentations of women in Islam and particularly in pesantren, were discussed and clarified in the dialogues (Personal interview with Teh Enung, December, 2009). The perception of the pesantren as a backward and conservative institution has been strongly challenged by this progressive movement.

Pesantren Cipasung has become a good partner to NGOs advocating women’s rights. For example, in July, 1997, P3M conducted *halaqah* (a discussion forum) to study a specific problem related to reproductive health and women’s rights theoretically and empirically from an Islamic point of view. The theme was “The need to guarantee the provision of basic needs for the family and the dilemma of working women.” There were approximately 70 male and female participants. The participants discussed the changes in relations between husband and wife and worker and boss created by economic changes in the world. Such changes require a conceptualization of Fiqh compatible with
contemporary circumstances, in order for Fiqh to have historical relevance and moral and legal influence.

In 2007, The International Center for Islam and Pluralism, supported by NOVIB, The Asia Foundation, and HIVOS, facilitated a workshop featuring women's rights activists from Iran and Indonesia, held at Pesantren Cipasung. This workshop sought to discuss and learn from the approaches and challenges to women's rights in these two countries and to work towards developing more effective programs to promote women's rights with the possibility of shared programs between Indonesian and Iranian activists. Over the course of the workshop, participants discussed various issues such as the stipulations of *shari'a* (Islamic law), how this law is applied, women's rights discourse, advocacy and strategies. Participants spoke from their own experiences in working with women's rights, in both Iran and Indonesia as well as the different challenges that each country presents (http://www.icipglobal.org).

The existence of PUSPITA Cipasung created strong resistance from both inside and outside the pesantren community. Some of *kyais* in Cipasung refused to acknowledge the institution, because it condemned polygamy as a source of domestic violence. These *kyais* believed that the Qur’an permits polygamy and the Prophet himself was polygamous. They also claimed that gender issues represent a western agenda against Islam. Seeing that PUSPITA Cipasung was supported by UNFPA, they believed their arguments were valid. Facing this challenge for senior *kyais*, who were also part of the family, Teh Enung continued to run the organization and avoided arguing with them. She reacted to the opponents not with rhetorical arguments but with such practical activities,
as helping women to be free from domestic violence. In other words, the real activities countered the accusations. The principle of hierarchy in pesantren let the senior kyais feel at ease to impose their arguments on the juniors. Teh Enung is aware of this situation, exhibits the achievements of PUSPITA and maintains this is much better than confronting them in direct way.

Even tough many women in Cipasung began to speak out about domestic violence and come to PUSPITA to seek counseling and advocacy, it is common to find that some of them abandon their cases in the middle of advocacy process because of family pressures. These women are not prepared to be widows because of their economic dependence and anxiety about the future of their children. In this context, women are the most disadvantaged group since they suffer physically and psychologically from ongoing domestic violence. Meanwhile the perpetrators, mostly men, are free from any punishment and responsibility. This reality eventually reinforces subordination and marginalization of women in the domestic sphere.

D. Evaluation and Analysis

The two case studies I presented above show us how gender activists in pesantren ran their programs to develop gender awareness within the pesantren community. Both pesantren established women’s crisis centers, in which the advocacy program on domestic violence became the focus of their struggle. They share a similar concern because, originally, both were branches of Puan Amal Hayati Jakarta, an NGO dedicated to address violence against women. However, WCC Balqis of Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid
soon became an autonomous organization, while PUSPITA Pesantren Cipasung, until now, remains under the umbrella of Puan Amal Hayati.

Despite the issue of domestic violence, which constitutes immediate response of the women’s movement in pesantren concerning practical need of women in their daily lives, the issue of exegetic reform and status of women in Islam has generated a great concern. Domestic violence, however, is a starting point to reveal gender inequality, which is sustained by patriarchal religious interpretation and patriarchal culture. From the interviews that I conducted with the key leaders of the women’s movement in pesantren, there are at least three major issues that become their concerns namely: women’s rights advocacy; the role of women’s ulama; and the debates on women’s leadership in both religious and non-religious realms. These three issues will be discussed in the following section.

1. Pesantren-Based Women’s Rights Advocacy

This section focuses on domestic violence that has become a major concern of the women’s movement in the two pesantren (Dar al-Tauhid and Cipasung) discussed earlier. It analyzes to what extent this movement has been effective in addressing the issue. There are at least three factors that sustain domestic violence, particularly among the Indonesian Muslim community. The first is related to culture. Patriarchal values and culture practices have shaped gender relations in which women have been considered inferior to men. For example, in the Javanese society, women are seen as konco wingking (domesticated women), who walk behind their husbands. This means that men are seen as absolute
decision-makers and women should obey them at all costs. Subordination of women occurs in many aspects of life such as in the family, in the office and in the society. Women become susceptible to violence because of cultural beliefs of male superiority.

The second factor is linked to relationships within the family. In general, the social structure in Indonesia has granted men the public domain and placed women in the domestic sphere. Many people still believe that women’s *kodrat* (innate nature) is about work related to *dapur, sumur, dan kasur* (kitchen, well/bathroom, and bed). In other words, *kodrat* means that the domestication of women is natural and given. Women should stay at home, raise children, cook and do other household chores. On the other hand, men are supposed to be breadwinners and heads of households. This causes women to be dependent on men in terms of economics, because they do not earn their own income. This eventually leads to an imbalance in women-men relations within the family. This gender imbalance has been used to legitimize acts of violence against women in the domestic realm.

The third factor stems from the religious-biased interpretation. A patriarchal socio-cultural setting influences society’s way of understanding religious texts and, vice versa. Male-biased understanding of religious texts entrenches patriarchy. For example, the *ayah* (verse) of *nushuz* (disobedience) in the Qur’an has been used to legitimize the rights of husbands to beat their wives because of disobedience. It says in the Qur’an (Chapter al-Nisa, [4]:34):

“So virtuous women are those who are obedient, and guard the secrets of their husbands with Allah’s protection. And as for those on whose part you fear
disobedience *nushuz*, admonish them and leave them alone in their beds, and chastise them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Surely, Allah is High, Great.”

Some Muslims interpreted as when wives erred, husbands were responsible for their discipline. In order to discipline their wives effectively, husbands were granted the right to use physical violence. This kind of interpretation has perpetuated domestic violence among Muslims today. However, this verse has become an area of contestation between different groups of Muslims, seeking interpretation which suit to their own interests.

Considering the problem of domestic violence among Indonesian Muslims, the women’s movement in pesantren gave serious attention to the issue. Some reasons underlying this concern include the fact that domestic violence is not recognized as a crime in the eyes of the public at large, despite its harsh and even inhuman forms. Economic or sexual exploitation; rape, including marital rape; incest; or battering perpetrated against a wife or other female member of the family is often viewed as “natural”, as part of a woman’s fate. Furthermore, women in pesantren have also experienced violence, including restrictions on women’s access to the public domain, the demand of absolute obedience of wives to their husbands, forced marriage for daughters and the practices of polygamy. As Nyai Ruqayyah said, violence can be experienced by any woman, by financially independent public figures with high education and social status, or by women of little education and economic dependence. Nyai Ruqayyah was one of the pesantren leaders in East Java who experienced domestic violence in her life. Instead of keeping silent, she has been outspoken in public about her experiences
(Personal interview, December, 2009).

The experiment of the pesantren-based Women Crisis Center (WCC) is a novel program in the realm of women’s advocacy, because it could serve as a base deeply attached to the grassroots for opposing violence against women. Since Indonesian women’s organizations are generally based in cities, getting pesantren involved in women’s advocacy programs would overcome the lack of women’s advocacy programs in rural areas. Pesantren have close connections with governmental and non-governmental institutions. Besides the influence of kyai, the intimate social relationships of pesantren alumni could play a role in implementing a program of women’s advocacy. Pesantren have a wealth of infrastructural facilities. Homes of kyai and teachers, as well as students’ rooms, could be used as shelters. Survivors and their children could be involved in the educational process in pesantren. Children could continue their education in the study programs during their mothers’ advocacy program (Muttaqin, 2008).

Pesantren-based WCC and other women’s organizations have been given new hope for justice for women and oppressed groups within the household since the Anti Domestic Violence Law (Undang-Undang Anti Kekerasan Dalam Rumah Tangga/UU KDRT) was passed on September 14, 2004. The need for a specific law criminalizing violence against women, particularly, in the domestic sphere, had long been felt, but for many years, the issue was of no concern to the public. Victims did not know what to do or to whom they should turn for help. Because of the influence of culture and religion, they preferred to keep their experiences to themselves and bear the violence silently. The passing of the law was a significant achievement for the House of Representatives and
also meant a victory of some 60 women’s and non-governmental organizations which, along with the National Commission on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, (Komnas Perempuan), have relentlessly struggled and applied pressures for endorsement of the bill. Under the new law, perpetrators of sexual violence can be sentenced to 20 years in jail or fined up to $50,000 for assaults causing serious injury, mental disorder, damage the reproductive organs, or leading to the death of an unborn child (Munir, 2005). However, five years after bill’s implementation, domestic violence remains a big problem in Indonesia, partly because of weak law enforcement, cultural practices hostile to women, and gender-biased religious (Islamic) interpretation.

Even though there is no statistical data that show whether the existence of pesantren-based WCC help to reduce the cases of domestic violence, I believe that their existence help many women, especially low class women, to solve their problems. In addition, women activists in pesantren provide not only legal assistance for the victims of domestic violence, but also offer spiritual guidance. Many Muslims believe that praying to God makes their heart become peaceful, thus they are able to deal with their problems in a peaceful way. This spiritual approach is one of the differences between pesantren-based advocacy and other WCCs’ advocacies.

2. Women’s ‘Ulama and Interpretation of Islamic Sources

This section discusses the role of women’s ulama in developing gender education in pesantren community. Due to the fact that most of these women’s activists in pesantren also serve as women’s preachers and female teachers, their role in reinterpreting Islamic
sources have been significant to challenge the dominant discourse on women in Islam that rife of patriarchal perspectives.

Women activists in pesantren recognize on the intricate relationship between gender issues and religion. Religion influences gender-related issues, especially reproductive health and women’s rights at a very deep and fundamental level. The first challenge is to have the courage to question the religious legitimacy of men’s domination of women that is so imbedded in all religions. In this regard, one concern of the women’s movement in pesantren is to question what are believed to be sacred and non-debatable issues in gender relationships from a religious (Islamic) point of view.

The role of nyai, ustadzah, and muballighah in teaching Islamic knowledge to their jama’ah has involved a creativity of interpretation. In their sermons, these women usually explain the content of Islamic texts and contextualize them with regard to the daily problems within the pesantren and the Muslim community at large. For example, Aan Anshoriyah is a female teacher (ustadzah) in Pesantren Al-Qur’aniyyah and also a faculty member of the State Islamic University (UIN) in Jakarta. Her involvement in promoting women’s rights issues in pesantren was motivated by the lack of female teachers in the pesantren. According to her, this problem is caused by imbalances in education between men and women with women are often burdened with higher eligibility requirements, limiting chances for women to teach in pesantren schools. Another problem is that the voices of female teachers are rarely heard in decision-making and the management of pesantren education. This issue can be placed in a context of the patriarchal values incorporated in the pesantren’s structural leadership. In Pesantren al-
Qur’aniyyah, Aan Anshoriyah is the only a female teacher recognized by the male leaders as an equal to her male counterparts. She is recognized because of her ability to convince pesantren leaders of her deep knowledge of Islam and her wide range of educational experiences.

In the pesantren, Aan Anshoriyah is considered a respectable female teacher. She teaches Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence) and *balaghah* (the art of Arabic language) for advanced classes. She uses *Kitab of Kifayatul Ahyar* and *Fathul Qarib*, both Fiqh compilation books, widely used in pesantren. These kitabs contain some discussions related to such gender issues as marriage, divorce and reproductive rights in Islam. She explains the contents of the kitabs, using what she calls a “humanity perspective”. In exploring gender issues, she has made a connection between the text and the context, and made a comparison between Arabic and Indonesian cultures. Aan Anshoriyah avoids using foreign terms, such as gender and feminism, to limit resistance from students, since those concepts have been wrongly associated with western cultural imperialism, seeking to destroy the Muslim community. However, she injected gender perspectives into her teachings based on daily problems within the society. For example, many students questioned her about incest and the practices of female circumcision. Some questions were related to the role of wives and husbands from Islamic points of view, such as why women should ask their husbands for permission if they want to fast or go outside of the home; or what are the rights of men toward their wives, and vice versa? Such questions has challenged her to interpret the Islamic texts while considering gender equity and justice, which she believes are addressed in the Qur’an. Aan Anshoriyah often refers to
the stories of Khadijah and Aisyah (the wives of the Prophet), to respond to her students’ questions on women’s rights according to Islam.

Concerning sensitive issues such as sunat (female circumcision), ‘aqiqah, heritance, polygamy and female imam (leading prayer in a mixed jama’ah), Aan Anshoriyah gave challenging counter responses to her student’s questions. She questioned why the Prophet Muhammad prohibited Ali (his son-in-law) from engaging in polygamy; why women, who usually have more burdens in the society, don’t have the same heritance rights. In the context of Indonesian society, where there is no preference between a son and daughter, is it fair to slaughter two goats for a son and only one for a daughter to perform ‘aqiqah? What about female circumcision which leads to dangerous health risks and deformation of the genitals, since it usually done by unskilled midwives? These questions have stimulated the students to critical dialog between the text and the context. As Aan Anshoriyah taught, the formulation of Fiqh has been strongly influenced by patriarchal culture in the Middle East. Therefore, the important question is how to differentiate between what are fundamental or universal values and what are the instrumental and contextual values in the Fiqh (Personal interview, December, 2009).

In Islamic history, the puzzle between universal and particular values has been discussed within the domain of ushul fiqh (methodology of fiqh). In the ushul fiqh, there is a principle of qath’î (fixed, standard) and dzanni (relative) in understanding nash (al-Qur’an and Hadith). Most ulama argue that whatever is decided by the Prophet explicitly (sharikh) and contains no ambiguities in its interpretation is qath’î. Everything qath’î is valid universally, anytime and anywhere, including women’s capacity in transactions and
also in heritance, which is only half of what men inherit presumably should be understood as a fixed-religious standard. These are conventional ushul fiqh views. On the contrary, if there is ambiguity meaning within the text, it might fall into the dzanni category, which is relative, changeable and open to ijtihad (rational examination). However, according to Mas’udi (1999), a kyai who wrote a book entitled Women’s Reproductive Rights in Islam (1997), the qath’i is not just principles or teachings because their explicitness is explained by nash (Qur’an and Hadith). Qath’i must be understood as basic fundamental principles of religious teachings, i.e. basic principles of egalitarian, justice and equality. Meanwhile, instrumental, operational values are dzanni or relative, although in terms of their nash, they are very explicit. Therefore, the condition of being qath’i and dzanni is not measurable from a formal linguistic standpoint, but from the contents or strata of the meaning.

In terms of women’s issues, the basic principle which is qath’i is egalitarianism as mentioned in the Qur’an, such as in Chapter al-Nahl [16:97]: “Who acts righteously, whether male or female, and is a believer, We will surely grant him a pure life....”; in the Chapter of al-Hujurat [49:13]: “Verily, the most honorable among you, in the sight of Allah, is he who is the most righteous among you”, and so forth. So, how do we resolve controversial issues regarding women’s rights in Islam, such as witness and inheritance? Cited from Mahmud Taha (1996) related to the concept of Makiyyah and Madaniyyah, Mas’udi (2004) argued that those issues are conditional, in evaluating them we have to consider the context. Do not judge ideas revealed 15 centuries ago from the perspective of today. What Al-Qur’an offers in terms of instruction about women’s rights and
inheritance is not rational anymore in today’s world. However, from the perspective of that time, it was very revolutionary to give women inheritance, since in the pre-Islamic era, women were considered goods which could themselves, be inherited. Islam uplifted the status of women from being inherited to that of a subject who obtained heritance, although not yet an equal inheritance. This is because Islam used an evolutionary approach (tadriji) to transform society.

The involvement of women in pesantren in rereading the holy texts of Islam has been largely overlooked, as it is often overshadowed by men’s role in religious interpretation. Van Dorn-Harder (2006) observed the shifting role of muballighat (women preachers) affiliated with women’s organizations in Indonesia, such as ‘Aisyiyah and Muslimat NU that evolved continuously. At the beginning of the 20th century, they were limited to simple literacy classes for women, as they learned the basic Islamic prayers. Today, their activities encompass grassroots and academic levels, for some groups including advocacy for women’s reproductive rights. At the heart of their religious activities lies a quest to participate in the interpretation and reinterpretation of core Islamic teachings, concerning the role and rights of women.

Women’s participation in interpreting religious sources has taken place in formal and informal settings, such as majlis ta’lim, schools and pesantren, orchestrated by nyai, muballighat and ustadzah. As Nyai Ruqayyah Ma’shum argued, the role of muballighat in developing gender issues to reach the grassroots level has been very significant. Nyai Ruqayyah is the head of the female pesantren al-Ma’shumiyyah in Bondowoso East Java. Despite her teaching activities in the pesantren, she is well-known as a prominent
preacher with hundreds of active followers in the majlis ta’lim. Her audiences of both women and men are seeking Islamic knowledge in religious sermons (pengajian), commonly in Indonesia conducted regularly in the mosque. Ruqayyah is a very respected nyai, who also preaches every weekend on a local radio station in Bondowoso, East Java.

According to Nyai Ruqayyah, there has been great change and progress related to the status of women in pesantren. In the past, the role of nyai, in particular, had been related almost exclusively to the domestic works. However, nowadays, many nyais are engaged in public activities including in economic, social and religious domains. Some have become members of the House of Representatives and many are famous muballighah or da’iyyah (women preacher). These muballighat also work as religious counselors and give religious advice to individuals or married couples. Other leaders teach and interpret the Qur’an on different occasions.

Nyai Ruqayyah argued that the problem of gender inequality emerged when the interpretation of the classical Islamic texts was considered as a “closed corpus”, a text that is unchallengeable, and which forbade any critical examination. The pesantren community generally used the old framework: whatever is pointed out explicitly in the Islamic text is fixed, no matter whether it contains fundamental or instrumental values. Thus, there could be no controversy of issues concerning Islamic views of women. For pesantren members, all the regulations in Islamic texts are fixed (qath’i). The choice is black or white, take it or leave it. In general, most religious leaders in the pesantren have such opinions. Nyai Ruqayyah has challenged those arguments, saying that classical
Islamic commentaries are subject to change, as they involve human understanding of the Islamic texts, which are influenced by place and time.

Currently, Nyai Ruqayyah is a leading women’s activist in the pesantren community, speaking in gender forums on national and international levels. She has become a regular speaker in gender training from an Islamic perspective in Malaysia, conducted by Sisters in Islam (SIS). She went to Hong Kong in March, 2009, to monitor the condition of Indonesian women migrant workers who have encountered many problems in the workplace. Her national and international experiences dealing with women’s issues are discussed in pesantren communities. As a result, new chances have opened for dialogue between what is taught in the Kitab Kuning and modern reality.

Nyai Ruqayyah believes that people, particularly in rural areas, respect and listen to their Islamic leaders. Therefore, kyai and nyai have played crucial roles in changing patriarchal views imposed upon the society by religious interpretation and Javanese culture. Although Nyai Ruqayyah is a woman preacher, she has preached to mixed-gender audiences in mosques. Unlike other Islamic preachers who merely teach Islamic jurisprudence, Nyai Ruqayyah has combined the teaching of Kitab Kuning with such contemporary issues as trafficking of women, migrant workers, and women’s education. She has disagreed with the perception of secular feminists who view Islam as oppressive rather than liberating of women. Nyai Ruqayyah has used non-confrontational methods to raise gender awareness in pesantren communities by teaching the Kitab Kuning from a new perspective. This approach has been effective because the Kitab Kuning is one of the most important elements of the pesantren tradition.
Regarding the Kitab ‘Uqud al-Lujjain, written by Syeikh Nawawi al-Bantani, Nyai Ruqayyah decided not to teach Kitab ‘Uqud because of its irrelevancy to current situations. A pesantren has the option of finding another Kitab more suitable and just to women. For her, the Prophet Muhammad liberated women from oppression in his time; therefore, Muslims should follow his great examples (Personal interview, March & December, 2009).

The nyais in the pesantren are usually responsible for leading the female students in communal prayers. They are the leaders or managers of the pesantren, resolving any issues or problems that arise. They also actively engage in women’s organizations, such as Muslimat NU and Rabithah Ma’ahid Islamiyah (RMI). Regardless of their public activities, the nyai still set aside time to manage their households. The question is, do they carry a double burden? Almost all kyai households have several assistants, either santris or local people, for different jobs. So these nyais are more like managers of kyai households; servants who carry out domestic chores. However, since a kyai has a great deal of power in determining the ethos of the pesantren, women have to negotiate their goals, not only with their male counterparts, but also with people from the pesantren circles who holds patriarchal views. Yet, capabilities and qualifications are significant factors that determine a nyai’s involvement in public activities.

3. Women’s Leadership

The issue of women’s leadership both in religious and non-religious contexts has generated a great concern for the women’s movement in pesantren. The question of
whether or not a woman could hold a high political position such as the head of the state or a member of parliament, or whether or not a woman could lead religious worship in a mixed-gender congregation, have been debated among activists in the movement. In terms of nonreligious leadership, most Muslim women activists have agreed that there is no restriction on a woman holding a high position in the economic, social and political realms. The fact is that women constitute more than half the world population and many are clever and able to run public positions. However, in the context of religious leadership, activists of the women’s movement in pesantren have different opinions. Some argue that Islam allows a woman to be an imam (leader) and lead prayers in a mixed-gender congregation, whereas, others remain doubtful about the religious legitimacy of female imam, because the basis of this in the Islamic texts has been contested among religious scholars. This is still one of the khilafiyah (something that has not been decided) issues.

Hot and fierce debates within Indonesian Muslim communities about the place of women in political leadership occurred after the downfall of Suharto in 1998. In the so-called Reformasi era, many women wanted to be involved in the political arena and their voices heard. The debates about women’s leadership were triggered by the candidacy of Megawati Sukarnoputri, the daughter of President Sukarno, to run for the presidency. The strong opposition to Megawati came from such Islamic groups, as Majlis Dakwah Islamiyyah (MDI/The Organization for Islamic Predication). They used religious rhetoric to reject the rights of a woman to hold the highest power in the country. It was ironic and strange that the gender factor proved a barrier to Megawati holding the office
of president, even though she is prominent in Indonesian politics. For example, in November, 1998, a Congress of the Indonesian Muslim Community (KUII, autumn 1998) was held in Jakarta, and some 2000 participants, including 132 of whom were women, denied women the right to be a president. There were disagreements among congress participants concerning interpretation of certain verses in the Qur’an that are said to bar women from occupying the country’s top position (see Van Dorn Harder, 2002).

The debates about the religious legitimacy of women’s leadership surround the interpretation of Chapter al-Nisa: [4:34]: “Men are protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means.” For some Muslims, this verse is used as a basis to reject the notion of women being in power. However, many argued that the verse should not be detached from its historical context. By understanding the background and context (asbabun nuzul) of the verse, we understand that it was delivered when a wife of a Prophet’s Companion was hit by her husband. The wife reported the case to the Prophet who answered "al-qishash" (Take revenge!). When the lady left the meeting, Angel Gabriel came with the above verse. By looking at the asbab al-nuzul, the verse was revealed to be a special case about a family problem and unrelated to women’s participation in politics. This is clearer if we understand the text as a whole. The leadership in a family happens because some (not all) men have a degree of advantage over women (bima fadhdhalallahu ba ‘dhahum ‘ala ba ‘dhin) and because the husband raises the family. If this is the case, there is no reason to broaden the scope of the verse from the domestic to the public sphere (Fayumi, 2008). In fact, in the Qur’an Chapter 27
(al-Naml), there is a story about Queen Balqis from Saba State, who brought her country to a very prosperous state.

Although much effort was made by conservative Muslims to attack Megawati Sukarnoputri in her presidential candidacy in 2001, she won the general election and became the first woman president of Indonesia (2001-2004). This reality indicated that the majority of Indonesian Muslims did not buy the idea of rejecting a woman to be a president on the basis of her gender. Historically, in the distant past, Indonesia had experienced kingdoms and sultanates ruled by women, such as Sultan Shafiatuddin of Aceh (North Sumatra), Sultan Kalimanyat of Demak (Central Java), and the Queen of Tri Buana Tungga Dewi of the Javanese Kingdom in Majapahit (Machali, 2001). A woman holding the highest political position was not a new phenomenon in Indonesia. Every attempt to deny women leadership on the basis of gender seemed doomed to fail. Nevertheless, women’s political rights have always been contested, especially during general elections.

In recent years there has been increasing women’s participation in politics in Indonesia, following the demand of a coalition of women’s groups in the 2009 elections that called for a 30 % quota to be made mandatory and to apply to the leadership of all political parties at every level. Coalition said that sanctions should be applied to political parties that failed to reach the 30 % threshold, and the electoral system needed to be reformed to give women candidates a better chance of being elected. While not all of their demands were accommodated, the women were successful in their demand that 30 percent of the members of the central committee of a political party, as well as 30 percent
of the candidates for election to the legislature, be women. Concerning a quota for female candidates, women activists argued for the need for affirmative action to bring more women into politics, given the difficulties they face in getting elected, such as gender-biased interpretations of religious teachings that limit the role of women in politics and emphasize their domestic responsibilities. The dearth of women in leadership roles in the major religious organizations shows that strong cultural barriers remain against women taking up such positions. For example, in 1997 the central board of NU issued a celebrated fatwa legitimizing a political role for women by stating that women have an equal right to men “to devote themselves to religion, homeland, people and state.” However, this resolve has not yet been translated into practical measures, and no woman has held a position on the central board of NU since the fatwa was issued (White & Anshor, 2008).

In the pesantren context, women’s leadership has been long accepted, as some of nyais have become members of parliament in local and national contexts. According to Nyai Lilik, one of founders of WCC Balqis and currently a member of parliament in Cirebon Regency, the problem is not related to whether or not a woman can be a political leader, but rather, how to prove to the general public that women have the same leadership capability as men. Some stereotypes still exist which preclude women from having power. The stereotype of women as emotional and less rational than men has created obstacles for women to be involved in political leadership. A similar argument about women’s leadership was affirmed by Nyai Ruqayyah, saying that instead of the gender factor, qualification and capability should determine a man’s or a woman’s fitness
to be a leader. Today, pesantren communities do not judge leaders on the basis of their gender, but on their achievements (Personal interview, December, 2009). Women and men have an equal right to engage in public activities. Nevertheless, women are often saddled with double burdens-- they may engage in the public domain but they still must tend to domestic responsibilities.

Ironically, although there is wide recognition of equal opportunity for men and women in leadership positions, most pesantren are still headed by males. Of course, there are exceptions, but pesantren traditions still place limitations on women, such as preferring that a son of kyai inherit pesantren leadership instead of a daughter. As Djuju Juwariyah emphasized, it is hard for a woman to be a head of pesantren which has male and female students. Women can be teachers and heads of Muslim women’s organization but not top leaders of pesantren (Personal interview, December, 2009). Patriarchal leadership in pesantren is maintained through cultural practices and gender-biased interpretations of Islamic sources.

In regard with women’s leadership in the religious domain, women activists in pesantren have different opinions, especially in the case of a female imam. There is no controversy about a female imam leading prayers for women’s groups, but, debates have taken place whether or not she should be allowed to lead prayers in a mixed-gender congregation. This is still one has not been decided. In dealing with this question, Nur Rofi’ah, a gender activist who graduated from pesantren, gave a provoking response when she said; “Compare ‘Aisyah Binti al-Syathi’ (a famous woman exegete from Egypt) with Syamsudin (a man, my neighbor, who lacks Islamic knowledge) If they were in the
mosque together, should Syamsudin become an imam rather than Binti al-Syathi’?” Someone could lead prayers because of his or her qualifications as an imam. Therefore, if a woman who more knowledgeable about Islamic science and more devout than a man, she deserves to be an imam (Personal interview, December, 2009).

The sophisticated discussion about the validity of female imams was explained by Kyai Husein, arguing that there is a Hadith that supports a woman as an imam in a mixed-congregation. Fiqh ‘ulamas of Hanafi, Maliki, Syafi’i and Hanbali schools of thought agree that women are not allowed to lead prayers (shalat) where men are present, but only for their own gender group. Even Imam Malik bin Anas, the founder of the Maliki school of thought, totally prohibits women from leading in prayers including for women, both wajib (obligatory) and sunnah (non obligatory) prayers. However, Fiqh figures such as Qadhi Abu Thayyib (348-450 H) stated that the legitimacy of women as prayer leaders is not only mentioned by Abu Tsaur but also by Ibnu Jarir ath-Thabari (d. 923) and Imam al-Muzani (175-264 H). Ath-Thabari was a famous mufassir, historian, and the founder of a Fiqh school of thought, while al-Muzani was the main student of Imam Syafi’i.

The first view, which rejects female leadership in prayer and is followed by a majority of Fiqh experts, is based on a Prophet Hadith from the Companion Jabir, in which the Prophet states: “Do not allow women to become leaders in prayer for men, Badui Arab people for Muhajir and bad people for good people”, narrated by Ibnu Majah. The second argument, favoring women as imams is also supported by the Prophet Hadith. As narrated by Abu Dawud......................, that when the Prophet would go to Badr War, Ummu Waraqah said: I told the Prophet: "Oh the prophet of Allah, allow me to go
to war together with you, I will take care those who are sick. May Allah bless me as a person who will die as a martyr.” The prophet answered: “It is better for you to stay at your house. Allah will reward you as a martyr.” Abdurrahman bin al-Khallad said: "She was then called syahidah. He said: "Umm Waraqah, after reading Al-Qur'an asked permission from the Prophet to take a muadzin (caller for adzan), and he agrees.” The lady took a man and woman as her helpers (Muhammad, 2005).

In the Fiqh, many problems relating to the relationship between men and women, in worship and social activities, particularly those related to face-to-face meetings between men and women and any other women’s activities inviting men attention, the Fiqh ulama always relate to blasphemy (khauf al-fitnah). A situation leading to blasphemy needs to be avoided, in order to prevent the emergence of fitnah (disorder or chaos), that can disturb and tempt hearts and thoughts of men. Based on this, many issues such as being in line (shaf) in prayer together (jama’ah). Women and men need to be separated and women should be behind the men. Women have no obligation to attend Jum’ah (Friday) prayer, they are not allowed to give Jum’ah preaching or make the call for prayer (azan) with a voice that can be heard by men, and so forth. Even women leaving their houses to pray not good. The primary reason for the prohibition is because the worry that it will lead to fitnah (Personal interview, December, 2009 & Muhammad, 2008).

Clearly, the above arguments show the gender bias interpretation. The fitnah concerning disturbance and temptation suggests it will emanate from women to men. In other words, it can be stated that in women, there are inherent elements strongly assumed
to tempt men. Therefore, the argument goes, to save men from temptation, women are prohibited from conducting activities together with men, particularly in *shalat* (prayer), when full concentration is required. This is a general conclusion that can be drawn from some of the above ulama. This is also probably not a conclusion that will satisfy a majority of people. A conclusion that may satisfy all groups is by looking at *fitnah* factors, for both men and women. The interest and temptation one to another can be belong to either gender group. Therefore, the reasons to not allow a woman to lead a mixed-gender prayer because she is a temptation to men, needs to be evaluated under critical scrutiny.

The Hadith about legitimacy of a female imam is less popular than the one which rejects it. Even though many kyais in pesantren know about the Hadith supporting a woman as an *imam*, they do not have the courage to follow it in their daily lives. One reason is related to the dominant discourse in the Muslim world that prohibits a female *imam*. There is an ambiguous attitude about female *imam* within the pesantren community. On one hand, many kyais cannot argue against the Hadith that supports the idea, but on the other hand, the issue remains sensitive within the Muslim world that needs a complete deconstruction of a well-established Islamic tradition which does not prefer female *imam*. The case of Amina Wadud who led a mixed Friday prayer in New York in 2005 is a good example of how difficult it is to challenge a long-held, male-dominated of Islamic tradition. By leading a mixed-gender prayer, Amina Wadud was accused by many Muslims of tarnishing the whole Islamic faith. Activists of the women’s
movement in pesantren have been careful in dealing with this issue, as to not create a backlash against their struggle to develop gender equity within the Muslim community.
In this chapter, I will explore the women’s movement in pesantren within the wider context of both national and international feminism. My purpose is to understand the position of the women’s movement in pesantren within the discourse of Islamic feminism movements around the globe. I will discuss some general characteristics of Islamic feminism, and the debates that surround it. To understand Islamic feminism in pesantren, it is necessary to view the gender movement in Indonesia in a broader context and its relationship to international feminism and democratization. This chapter argues that the women’s movement in pesantren has been influenced by the global discourse of women’s rights in Islam. However, this movement is also supported by a democratic space in the country which allows public airing of the women’s rights discourse. The activism of Islamic feminists has become part of the democratic struggle. In the contemporary world, the struggle for democracy is not only about formal political institutions but also about the “democracy of everyday life.” Finally, I will investigate some of the challenges and barriers of the women’s movement in pesantren in promoting women’s rights within the Muslim community.

A. Discussing Islamic Feminism: A Brief Survey

This section briefly discusses the emergence of Islamic feminism in the Muslim world and how it differs from other brands of feminism. As a global phenomenon, it is very evident that Muslim women are striving to fight oppression and the subjugation of
women within the Islamic framework. In this context, Muslim women consider Islam itself as one of the strongest weapons to argue against gender discrimination, because the Qur’an mandates justice for all and equality between men and women. Thus, Islamic feminism is a feminist discourse grounded in the sacred text of the Qur’an.

The term *Islamic feminism* has been the subject of much ideological, political and theoretical debate. Moghissi (1999) argued that as a concept and a marker for a specific brand of feminism, Islamic feminism was from the start a product from outside Islamic societies, chiefly of diasporic feminist academics and researchers of Muslim background living and working in the West. In Islamic societies, the majority of gender-conscious women, who, in one way or another, are active in the women’s rights struggle rarely choose to identify themselves or to be identified by others as feminists, be it Islamic feminists or not. This does not suggest, however, that non-western discourse on gender cannot be considered as feminism.

Badran (2002), in her article in *al-Ahram*, pointed out that the term *Islamic feminism* began to be visible in the 1990s in various global locations. It was derived from the writings of Muslims about women’s issues in Islam. Iranian scholars Afsaneh Najmabadeh and Ziba Mir-Hosseini explained the rise and use of the term in Iran by women writing in the Teheran women's journal *Zanan* that Shahla Sherkat founded in 1992. Saudi Arabian scholar Mai Yamani used the term in her 1996 book *Feminism and Islam*. Turkish scholars Yesim Arat and Feride Acar in their articles, and Nilufer Gole in her book *The Forbidden Modern* (published in Turkish in 1991 and in English in 1996) used the term *Islamic feminism* in their writings in the 1990s to describe a new feminist
paradigm they detected in Turkey. South African activist Shamima Shaikh employed the term Islamic feminism in her speeches and articles in the 1990s, as did her sister and brother co-activists. Already by the mid-1990s there was growing evidence of Islamic feminism as a term created and circulated by Muslims in far-flung corners of the global ummah (religious community). These Muslim scholars, journalists, and activists started to refer to this new form of feminism in opposition to the more well-known and established secular feminism that was, in many Muslim countries, intimately linked to Islamic modernism and anti-colonialism.

Badran, however, rejected the widespread assumption that feminism is exclusively a western product and an alien concept in the Muslim world, when she said:

Yes, the term originated in the West, specifically France. No, feminism is not Western. American feminism is not French (as both Americans and French would loudly acclaim). Egyptian feminism is not French and it is not Western. It is Egyptian, as its founders attested and as history makes clear.

Feminism for her, therefore, is produced in particular places and articulated in local terms; it transcends East and West. By this, if feminism, at its core, is a political and intellectual project advocating equal gender rights and demanding women’s access to public life, then feminism has always been crucial in Islamic society. For example, in Egypt and Iran debates over women’s rights started with male reformers such as Muhammad Abduh, Qasim Amin, Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh and Mirza Aghakhan Kermani, but women’s eloquent voices against patriarchal traditions and practices were also recorded as early as the mid-19th century (Moghissi, 1999). In hindsight one can say that these expressions were feminist. Feminist struggle takes place anytime anywhere any female or male resists sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. Feminist movement
happens when groups of people come together with an organized strategy to take action to eliminate patriarchy (Hooks, c2000).

Nevertheless, representation of the Muslim world, especially in the western media, has focused more attention on sensationalist and fear-generating sectarian, extremist-political, or ultraconservative Muslim movements. In this context, the condition of Muslim women is often depicted as oppressed or mute victims. Similarly, in the western feminist scholarship, there is an unfortunate discourse portraying the Muslim female as hopeless and oppressed, a woman without agency or voice (Mohanty, 2003). This dominant western perspective on Muslim women makes no attempt to address the disparities among Islamic primary sources, intellectual developments, and Muslim cultural practices. It is true that many women in Muslim countries suffer terribly because of Islamic fundamentalist forces. From Afghanistan to Algeria to Sudan, Pakistan and Iran, women are systematically brutalized and caught in a deadly crossfire between the secular and fundamentalist movements. The issue, however, is often isolated from the massive interests of western countries, particularly the United States. For example, the USA supported the Taliban in Afghanistan, hoping that its firm grip would allow the Turkmenistan gas pipeline to reach Pakistan via western Afghanistan, bypassing Iran (Roy, 1997). Therefore, it seems simplistic to say that the oppressive treatment by Islamic fundamentalist regimes of women is solely because of religious ideology and practice.

Muslim women throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia have relentlessly challenged Islamic fundamentalist policies that are hostile to women, seeking to achieve the same basic rights that women enjoy in the West. For example, in Egypt,
when the Egyptian government promoted extreme conservatism, feminism emerged as an oppositional discourse. These feminists, for whom the women question is central, have meaningfully attacked patriarchal interests and opposed male supremacy (Badran, 1991). One of the Muslim feminists’ strategies to confront the fundamentalist movement is to embark on the path of religious reform as a means to combat authoritarianism, patriarchy and religious puritanism in the interpretation of Islamic texts and the laws derived from them. Islamic feminists reexamine religious interpretations which intentionally or unintentionally support the historical absence of women’s voices, and render women as objects of men’s fancy and utility. For a long time the realm of *tafsir* (exegesis) has been exclusively dominated by males. *Ijtihad* (independent rational exercise), therefore, becomes a tenable strategy for Muslim women to employ radical and continual rethinking of the Qur’an and *Sunna*. Wadud (2000) argued that the continual interpretation of the Qur’an and continual critical examination facilitates both the comprehension and actualization of Islam in a plethora of new contexts. It would also expand the perception of the role of women, which could lead to implementation of a social system with genuine justice and equity between women and men. If justice and equity are clear principles of the Qur’an, then justice and equity must also be manifested for any real social system to be considered truly Islamic.

Attempts to address the question of Muslim women’s autonomous agency and authentic Islamic identity in the context of Islam and modernity can only be successful with a complete reexamination of the primary sources of Islamic thought, praxis, and worldview. This reexamination should intentionally include female perspectives on these
sources and validate female experiences. I see this as one of the goals of the Islamic feminist movement. In a broad sense, Islamic feminists struggle against patriarchy and gender inequality, challenging traditional, patriarchal gender systems which promote segregation of men and women. By advocating rereading of the sacred texts, the Qur’an and the Hadith, Muslim feminists dispute discriminatory family and shari’a law in countries such as Morocco, Nigeria, Indonesia, and Malaysia as well as cultural traditions limiting women’s freedom and participation in society. This struggle takes place within an Islamic framework, drawing on the unconditional belief that the Qur’an does not justify patriarchy and that a deconstruction process is needed. A form of hermeneutics with a feminist narrative by which the message of the Qur’an can be regained, along with its call for an egalitarian society is necessary. By drawing on the Qur’anic message on gender equality and social justice, Islamic feminists compose an important countermovement to the patriarchal mission of political Islam (Badran, 2006 & Jeenah, 2006).

However, rather than seeing Islamic feminism as separate and isolated from other kinds of feminisms, it was stressed during the first international conference on Islamic feminism in October, 2005, in Barcelona, Spain, that this movement and discourse are an integral part of the global women’s rights movement, of a global feminism drawing on the vision set up during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. While some western feminists might reject the possibility of women voicing feminist, dissident ideas within a patriarchal tradition, Islamic feminists stress the importance in working within the very system that marginalizes them while as the possibility of
embracing multiple and seemingly irreconcilable ideas and positions (Cooke, 2000). For Muslim feminists themselves, their religious identity and belief in social justice and equality for all women is far from contradictory, but rather at the very core of their struggle (McGinty, 2007).

It should be stressed that feminist voices, claiming the gender egalitarian message in Islam, are hardly a new phenomenon in the Muslim world (Badran & Cooke, 1990; Moghissi, 1999). However, as a popular term, *Islamic feminism* emerged in the 1990s as a quest for an Islamic identity to counter the effects of the Eurocentric hegemony paradigms in the feminist discourses that continue to dominate, even in the post-colonial era. Just as there is not one *western feminism*, there are also various developments and perspectives within *Islamic feminism* in which scholars and activists approach certain issues differently. Beyond different ideas on gender and various agendas reflecting different needs in various political, national, and cultural contexts, whether through NGOs such as Sisters in Islam (SIS) fighting against conservative, sexist shari’a law implementations in Malaysia or Muslim women in countries such as South Africa and the U.S. claiming the right to lead the Friday sermon for mixed-gender audience, Islamic feminists share the common cause, of their right to claim their own faith based on justice and equality.

As general levels of education increase and women join the ranks involved in determining what is an authentic Muslim identity, there is no option more readily in need of articulation than the one that reexamines the primary and ultimate texts of Islam, to unravel the mysteries that have resulted from silencing the female voice. Through the
emerging global discourse of Islamic feminism, Muslim women make a claim to their own agency and voice. Muslim feminist viewpoints go along with their own interpretation or search for meaning (ijtihad) in the sacred texts.

Islam and feminist studies appear to struggle against each other as a result both of the projection of Islam as a patriarchal religion and of the projection of feminism as anti-Islamic values. Despite the excellent work of scholars such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Khalid Abou El Fadl, who have opened up the hermeneutic spaces of Qur’anic exegesis and corresponding elaborations of shari’a, to alternative readings and interpretations based on gender justice, some secular feminists remain dismissive and reject any form of epistemological reform. Such theorizing actually reinforces patriarchal, fundamentalist views and reading of the Qur’an by closing off any possibilities for invoking more gender-positive readings. By dismissing alternative or progressive readings, secular feminists uphold the most rigid and dogmatic narrations as being the authoritative voice. Secular feminists also argue that religiously based feminism does not represent the only legitimate form of indigenous feminism in Muslim societies. They contest all moves that situate the debates over women’s rights on exclusively religious terrain closing off possibilities for secular intervention (Zine, 2006).

Regardless of the debates, the different approaches between secular and Muslim feminists on women’s issues should not dismiss their common goal which is equality between the sexes. In fact, the dismissal by secular feminists of the struggles for faith-based feminism does little to build political awareness or solidarity across feminist divides. Even though Islamic feminism focuses on religious paradigms, it does not mean
it reduces women’s subordination to an issue of religious patriarchy. In contrast, an intersectional framework is taken up to connect religion to the broad nexus of social, economic, and political factors. Overall, while religion can contain sites or sources of oppression, it also offers powerful spaces of resistance to injustice and provides avenues for critical contestation and political engagement.

B. Indonesian Muslim Women, International Feminism and Democratization

Before discussing Islamic feminism in pesantren, it is important to explore how Muslim women activists in Indonesia have engaged in international discourse regarding the feminist movement. Since women’s rights issues have become a global concern, Indonesian Muslim women have shared their causes with women from other parts of the world to achieve greater gender equality. In this section, I argue that international feminism has influenced the discourse on women’s issues in Indonesia as a consequence of the dynamic process between the international agenda and the national struggle for the advancement of women. For example, encounters between Islamic feminists from Indonesia and from other countries have created vibrant debates on gender issues within the framework of Islam and local cultures. This engagement has worked to benefit women, but has also impacted the broader agenda of democratization in the country.

Some scholars, including Lev (1996), Bahramitash (2004) and Van Doorn-Harder (2006), among others, have argued about the distinctive character of Indonesian women in comparison to other regions such as Middle East, the West or South Asia. Indonesia is culturally diverse and Muslim practitioners practice Islam in particularized ways unique
to their own cultural understandings and interpretations of Islam. Indonesia has a long-standing tradition of granting greater freedom to women, especially in public spaces. Among non-Indonesian feminist writers, for instance, there is a long-standing fascination with the matrilineal practices of the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, which is regarded by most Indonesians as a strongly Islamic area, but which departs from strict Islamic legal laws in relation to inheritance. Secondly, unlike Afghanistan or Pakistan, almost all Indonesian women are now literate and have at least elementary schooling. It would be impossible to eject Indonesian women from the workforce, which was attempted in Afghanistan and Iran. Women have always dominated the informal economic sector, and there are now growing numbers of women in the formal workforce getting better pay and enjoying more independence from their families. The notion that Indonesian women prefer to stay at home and look after their families is clearly unthinkable. Thirdly, in terms of gender issues, Van Doorn-Harder (2006) argued that in many Middle Eastern and African countries, the energy of activists for women’s rights is consumed by fighting practices that are virtually unknown in Indonesia, such as honor killings, dowry and invasive and even debilitating female genital mutilation. In Indonesia, equality between men and women is enshrined in the 1945 constitution. In the same spirit, Indonesia ratified international conventions that guaranteed women equal pay for equal work and pledged to eliminate discrimination against women. The marriage law of 1974 allowed women the same right to initiate divorce as men. Divorce cannot be unilateral, but has to be carried out before a court of law. However, though this law treats women quite fairly, Indonesian feminists have regularly pointed out that it is rife with ambiguity and
patriarchal values. For example, the law considers the husband to be the head of the household; it promotes stereotypical roles for men and women and ultimately sees the woman as subordinate.

Gender analysis gained greater popularity among social activists in Indonesia in the 1980s and became a factor in contemporary Islamic thought in the 1990s, with Indonesian Islamic intellectuals drawing on the analyses of critical Islamic writers, such as Amina Wadud Muhsin from the United States, Fatima Mernissi from Morocco, Pakistani scholar Riffat Hassan, and the Indian proponent of gender equity in Islam, Asghar Ali Engineer. Indonesian authors were citing English versions of their works in the early and mid-1990s. This phenomenon exemplifies how Indonesia draws on current international intellectual discourse on feminism. Most of the works supporting feminist contextual analysis were not translated from Arabic, but from English, French and German. Women’s advocacy groups, such as Rahima, established links with Sisters in Islam in Malaysia. Many Indonesian women activists, a number of whom benefited from the flowering of Islamic education in the New Order period, argued that feminism is not exclusive to western cosmopolitanism. They view Islam as the basis of a distinctive feminist movement and of a unique form of gender equity. The unique feature of this Islamic movement for women’s rights in Indonesia is the significant influence of male scholars, who have been subjected to criticism and even threatened for their supportive stance (Robinson, 2006).

Calls for women’s rights and changes in the relationships between men and women were not new to Indonesia, and were part of the agenda of the nationalist
movement. However, in contemporary Indonesia, the form of these demands and their political effectiveness relates also to Indonesia’s engagement with international organizations and their political agendas for women’s rights. Indonesia has actively participated in the series of international conferences on women, beginning with International Women’s Year (1975), and these meetings have provided an important framework for Indonesian policy concerning women and women’s rights. Official documents proudly announced that Indonesia was the first country in the region to establish a “women machinery”, in the form of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in 1978. However, this ministry was not created to achieve equity goals invoked by feminist theory and politics, but in order to further the economic development of the nation. One outcome from the ministry was the establishment of the Women’s Studies Centers (Pusat Studi Wanita) at the state universities in 1995. The goal is to promote research and scholarship on women, and to have input into policy agendas in the region. Regardless of the authoritarian New Order regime, the international agenda for women’s rights forced the Indonesian government to focus on issues facing women, and allowed for the possibility of international censure for noncompliance with international agreements. Hence, by embracing international agendas, Indonesia has provided leverage for domestic claimants for political rights.

The downfall of the Suharto regime in 1998 created a new momentum for women’s rights advocacy in the country. The new advocacy of the post Suharto era was coupled with pro-democracy and political participation movements. Not only did many new and pre-existing women’s rights organizations receive a generous influx of funds
from international donor agencies, but they quickly discovered that people desire democracy—when it is understood as equal representation and voice for all, and which could include gender equality. However, Wieringa (2006) argued that secular women’s groups do not command mass appeal and they need to collaborate with more religiously oriented groups. The outcome is that secular and Islamic feminists go hand-in-hand to develop gender awareness in the society. Islamic feminist discourse, which is built around the reform of Islam, goes along with gender-sensitive terms, incorporating women’s rights, such as those contained in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action. Contrary to conservative Muslims claiming these rights were a product of western thought and not applicable to Islam, Indonesian Muslim feminists insisted that these rights were universal and in conformity with basic principles of Islam.

Recently, Indonesian Muslim gender activists from different organizations (including mass-based ones) and individuals (including academics from both Islamic and secular universities) united in a new group called Alimat (knowledgeable women). Founded on May 12, 2009, as a movement for justice in Indonesian Muslim families, Alimat has been particularly active around the significant amendments in family law and the legalization of *Hudud* law in Aceh. While these amendments are still in codification process, Alimat has been organizing around them due to their important implications for women’s rights within the family. One of the most important amendments is the replacement of the implementing authority of family law from the religious courts under the Department of Religious Affairs to the courts under the Department of Law and
Human Rights, which are accessible to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Alimat was an Indonesian branch of the international coalition of Muslim feminists, called Musawah (egalitarian). Musawah was initiated in March, 2007, by Sisters in Islam (SIS), a Malaysian non-governmental organization committed to promoting the rights of women within the framework of Islam, and a 12-member international planning committee of activists and scholars from 11 countries. The committee came together to consolidate information, experiences, and ideas that have been used by NGOs and activists in countries around the world to advance equality within the family. Individuals and NGOs from 48 countries became involved with or supported Musawah by participating in the Musawah Global Meeting in February 2009 (http://www.musawah.org/who_we_are.asp).

The mushrooming movement for gender equity has paralleled the democratic agenda in the country. Operating within a freer political climate since 1998, women activists have taken stronger action to protect women’s rights. One such action can be seen in the challenging of the clauses allowing polygamy in the 1974 Marriage Law as a contradiction of CEDAW, of which Indonesia is a signatory. Women parliamentarians have formed a women’s caucus, and many unsuccessful candidates have vowed to work across party lines in order to strengthen their capacity to propose and evaluate legislation. While there are conflicts and divisions within the women’s movement, there is also a strong consciousness of the need to organize and push such legislation, as abolishing gender discriminatory legislation and promoting social policies that address women’s needs, such as reproductive health.
In spite of democratic reforms, there is continuity in the New Order’s gender ideology, in which women are seen as pillars of the nation. This ideology was meant to serve the interests of the state and its male citizens (see Suryakusuma, 1996). The democratic transition after 1998 has become the arena of power struggle between progressive Islamic groups, which have been at the forefront among the moderate Muslims, and the conservative groups that are gaining ground. Needless to say, not all women support feminist ideas. As elsewhere, fundamentalist groups have strong women followers who adopt strict Muslim dress codes and glorify women’s domestic and reproductive roles.

Overall, the struggle for gender equality has become part of the democratization in Indonesia and the international arena. The achievement of Indonesian activists in promoting gender issues will serve to strengthen the democratic process which allows women and men the same opportunities in many aspects of life. There is no democracy without greater participation of women in the public sphere.

C. The Women’s Movement in Pesantren and Islamic Feminism

This section explores two major questions: To what extent does the women’s movement in pesantren engage in the Islamic feminist movement? What are some characters of Islamic feminism in pesantren? These questions are important to understanding the movement within the broader context of the women’s rights movement, which is based on Islamic framework. However, considering the experience of women’s movement in pesantren, I argue that besides the discursive arena of exegeti
reform, as I explained elsewhere, we need to look at how the discourse of Islamic feminism is employed in the everyday lives of Muslim women and men, individually and collectively.

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, many Indonesian Muslims still carry a negative attitude toward the terms *feminism*, *feminist*, and even *gender*. Some conservative Muslims accuse Muslim activists who advocate for gender equality of conspiring with westerners and Zionists, because they receive foreign aid from western sources, such as the Ford Foundation and the Asia Foundation. Many *kyais* in pesantren are suspicious of the emergence of the women’s rights movement, especially of those who ground their theories in secular perspectives. Of necessity, gender activists in pesantren have been careful about using foreign concepts and terms, preferring to adopt local or religious idioms to promote gender issues. The label *feminist* is avoided for strategic purposes. Arabic terms are often chosen because they are always associated with Islam. In fact, pesantren, as centers of learning Islamic knowledge, frequently use the Arabic language and Arabic textbooks in their teaching. Thus, in gender training, instead of talking about women’s rights as a secular term, women’s activists used the term *huquq al-ummahat*. Similarly, Islamic NGOs such as P3M, the office for which I worked for five years, labelled their programs in Arabic, --*Fiqh al-Nisa* (Islamic jurisprudence on women) and *Fiqh al-Siyasah* (Islamic jurisprudence on politics)-- to promote women’s rights in pesantren community.

Nevertheless, questions about the usefulness of the term *feminism* did not discourage women activists in pesantren from attempting to achieve social justice for
both men and women. They placed more emphasis on the spirit of feminism than on feminist labels. This is also a common expression of what is often called “Third World feminism”. Most Third World feminists prefer to redefine the term feminist and use it for themselves, rather than change the terminology (Schussler Fiorenza, 1992). Others “have always engaged with feminism, even if the label is rejected in many instances” (Mohanty, 1992, p.8). An example of this latter trend is Indonesian women’s rights activists. In the long and impressive history of the Indonesian women’s movement, they were seldom associated with feminism or feminists, either by the women themselves or by the general public. They never thought of themselves as feminists, although they were very active in fighting for what is now called women’s rights.

Individuals who get involved in the women’s movement in pesantren preferred to identify themselves as aktifis jender (gender activists), and they been reluctant to be identified as feminists, even though they do in fact discuss feminist methodologies and issues. Of the 10 participants I interviewed, only one deliberately identified herself as a Muslim feminist. Nevertheless, these people became activists through their own exposure to women’s issues and the range of women’s experiences. They are diverse in age and cultural backgrounds, and most of them have stable family situations. However, they described experiencing direct and indirect discrimination, marginalization and inequality in the society.

Gender activists in pesantren consider Islam as a legitimate source to argue against gender discrimination, since in their interpretations, Islam preaches justice for all and equality between men and women (see the Qur’an 21:107 & 33:35). They struggle to
improve women’s conditions and bring about women’s betterment because of their deep commitment to Islam. Muslim gender activists argue reconstruction of Islamic values and the eradication of patriarchal traditions that have taken root in Islamic thought and practice. The activists hold these tradition hold to be in contradiction to the true egalitarian spirit of Islam (Viviani, 2001), and with the distinctive Indonesian accommodation between Islam and indigenous values. These women and men are feminists, in the sense that they want to liberate women from the shackles of religious and cultural injunctions; and they seek religious, social, economic, and political equality between men and women.

Van Dorn-Harder (2006) considered women activists and leaders who develop gender education in the context of Islam, within Muhammadiyah and Nahdhatul Ulama (NU) organizations, as “Islamic feminists”. This term is used to distinguish among secular, Islamist, and Islamic feminists. Secular feminism is an amorphous term in the Muslim world, generally referring to those whose activism is not grounded in the Islamic tradition. To these feminists, Islam should be restricted to the private and spiritual domains. In line with Van Dorn-Harder’s argument, I hold that gender activists in pesantren might fall into the “Islamic feminist” category, because most of them were also NU activists and leaders. Their activism was drawn from the spirit of equality and justice addressed in the Qur’an. Yet, they compared those principles to the reality of women in the Indonesian Muslim community. For them, there was a wide gap between the Qur’anic ideals regarding women’s rights and the day-to-day reality of Muslim women.
The basic argument of Islamic feminism is that the Qur'an affirms the principle of equality of all human beings, but that the practice of equality of women and men has been impeded or subverted by patriarchal ideas and practices. For example, the subjugation of women can be found in the Islamic jurisprudence and *tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur'an) compilations. Therefore, Islamic feminists employed the classic Islamic methodologies of *ijtihad* (independent investigation of religious sources) and *tafsir*. Feminist hermeneutics, therefore, render compelling confirmation of the gender equality in the Qur'an that was lost as male interpreters constructed a corpus of interpretation promoting a doctrine of male superiority reflecting the mindset of the prevailing patriarchal culture. It distinguishes between the universal or timeless basic principles and the particular and contingent, ephemeral, ones (Badran, 2002).

Islamic feminism in pesantren encompasses the writings of gender activists as well as their social engagement, in which Islamic teachings became the framework to address women’s rights and role in Islam. The emergence of literature written by gender activists from pesantren backgrounds illustrates the cosmopolitan character of Islamic social and political thought, as a counterpoint and complement to western thinking. However, as Kyai Husein argued, women’s movements in pesantren share characteristics with feminism in general, such as sensitivity to women’s issues, a commitment to transform cultural norms that have a negative impact on gender relations, critical of the impact of religious and cultural values on women’s condition, and respect for differences (Personal interview, December, 2009). Literature written by gender activists in pesantren comprises a wide range of issues on women’s rights in Islam. Kyai Husein in his book
Fiqh Perempuan (Women in the Fiqh) discusses some important and debatable issues on women’s rights, such as female imams, female circumcision, women’s reproductive rights, women’s leadership, and sexual relations.

Another characteristic of Islamic feminism in pesantren is that it operates within the constraints of local cultures and local expectations about the role of women. The idea of piety and modesty is very important for nyais, active in promoting gender awareness in the Muslim community. As Nyai Ruqayyah said “People will listen to what you say, because they see you as a pious woman, fluently reciting the Qur’an, praying five times a day, fasting, and maintaining your modesty by wearing the veil” (Personal interview, December, 2009). While for some women activists, the struggle for empowerment also includes freedom to choose whether or not to wear the veil, for the pesantren women, it is perceived as an obligation, and it is rare to hear an opposing opinion on the issue among them. All of them appear in public in so-called “Islamic” dress (Srimulyani, 2008). However, the practice of veiling in the Javanese pesantren has been very flexible and evolved from time to time. The way of women in pesantren wear the veil seems to be following the Muslim fashion trends in Indonesia. In the past, women in pesantren wore the kerudung, or headscarf, draped loosely over their heads, but nowadays they wear tight veils (see Smith-Hefner, 2007). The women activists in pesantren that I interviewed chose to wear the veil as an expression of Muslim identity and piety, and opposed any forms of compulsion. Thus, the position adopted by contemporary Islamic feminists on veiling cannot be read as a practice supporting Islamic patriarchy.
The rapid development in Indonesia of gender issues, ranging from academic level to pesantren community, has indicated a positive signal for the ongoing process of Islamic reformation. It can be said that gender advocacy has been in the forefront among the contemporary trends of Islamic thought. For example, in comparison to the issue of pluralism, which is becoming more and more controversial among Indonesian Muslims, gender issues have gained relatively wide acceptance and support. This is the result of the ability of Muslim gender activists at the grassroots level to disseminate the issue of women’s rights in Islam using local idioms, language and traditions. Unlike secular feminist ideas and thoughts that seems very elite because only the educated and academia have access to them, the issue of women’s rights in Islam is gaining popularity among Indonesian Muslims. The task of promoting a gender-sensitive interpretation is not just in the hands of women. Several male Islamic intellectuals such as Kyai Husein Muhammad, Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, among others, have been significant in the movement.

For years, Muslim gender activists have relentlessly worked on three levels. First, at the top level, a group of Muslim feminists put pressure on implementing gender mainstreaming in government policies and regulations. At the middle level, Islamic women’s organizations developed gender awareness through public education, training, workshops and so forth. At the grassroots level, nyais and women preachers disseminated gender issues through pesantren and majlis ta’lim networks. Pesantren, thus, have become the laboratory of the Muslim women’s movement. One outcome is the emergence of religious leaders who advocate women’s rights in the Muslim community, such as Kyai Husein Muhammad, Nyai Ruqayyah and so forth.
Despite grassroots work on issues of jurisprudence, theology, hermeneutics, women’s education, and women’s rights, the women’s movement in pesantren has also gotten involved in direct social engagement in response to the local problems of Muslim women. For example, the women’s movement in pesantren advocated against violence against women, such as domestic violence and trafficking, because those were the problems faced by many women in their everyday lives. The home and family is where discrimination against women most frequently occurs. Since Women Crisis Centers (WCC) usually exist in big cities, pesantren based-WCC help women from rural areas to find assistance. In addition, this women’s advocacy is combined with the efforts to pursue women friendly interpretation of Islamic texts. Gender activists in pesantren have paid particular attention to the need for reinterpretation of the teachings that many Muslims use to justify domestic violence. Since most of the activists are university graduates, usually from Islamic institutions funded by the state, they are armed with good educational qualifications, and able to challenge conservative Islamic views on women.

In this context, the women’s movement in the pesantren has committed itself to “practical and strategic gender interests” at the same time (see Maxine Molyneux, 1985). This means that working on such pragmatic issues as domestic violence may serve as a prerequisite for considering strategic gender issues in which women begin to explore the deeper causes of their life situations and inequality.

Muttaqin (2008) considered gender activists in pesantren to be parts of progressive Muslim feminists, because of their deep commitment to upholding gender justice in society. Citing from Safi (2003), progressive Muslims are concerned with
Islamic tradition, social justice, gender justice, and pluralism. Thus, progressive interpretation of Islam guarantees the rights of women in order to achieve the broader concerns of social justice and pluralism. The work of the women’s movement in pesantren is a model for understanding how Islamic religious texts support women’s rights and women’s advancement rather than their subjugation, thus contributing to a progressive Islamic theology. The two pesantren that I discussed in Chapter 3 have profoundly challenged the perception about conservative attitudes on gender relations within traditional pesantren. As some of my interviewees mentioned, even though they still maintain classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) as sources of teaching in pesantren, they read those texts with a new perspective, injecting gender-sensitivity in the light of Islam, culture and modern times. Thus, this movement is deeply rooted in the pesantren tradition.

D. The Challenges of the Women’s Movement in Pesantren

We must recognize that there has been some development in the participation of women in pesantren. However, despite the accomplishments on gender issues in pesantren, the women’s movement still faces significant challenges. This section elaborates some critical barriers against which Muslim gender activists have been striving, in the way of developing women’s rights in the Muslim community.

1. Religious Legitimacy

One of difficulties faced by gender activists is the question of legitimacy; that is, whether they have a deep enough knowledge of Islamic sources to be taken seriously
when they comment on gender and Islam. In the pesantren context, the issue of legitimacy has been crucial. Kyai Husein pointed out that many kyais resisted gender issues with a secular approach because they demanded religious arguments. In fact, this religious argument derives from the so-called *kutub al mu’tabarah* (popular classical books), written by great ulama either during the medieval era or afterward, and were familiarly studied in traditional pesantren. Kyai Husein further said: “In promoting gender issues in pesantren, you cannot cite your argument on the opinions of Muslim feminists, such as Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi and so forth, since the pesantren community did not recognize them. Rather, you should base your arguments on classical Islamic texts or Islamic thinkers who are well-known in pesantren, such as Syeikh Muhammad Alawy” (Personal interview, December, 2009). In a similar argument, Faqihuddin argued that the pesantren community continues to question the legitimacy of the knowledge touted by the people who promote gender issues, whether they have deep knowledge of Islam or whether they are able to read the *kitab kuning*. However, this does not mean that gender activists should abandon their ideals, rather, they have to compete with those who are perceived to have authoritative knowledge in the pesantren by finding an alternative space, the basis of knowledge and strategy (Personal interview, December, 2009).

The debates in pesantren about who has authority to speak about the role of women in Islam have challenged gender activists to ground their arguments on a theological basis. Of course, the greatest competitor for Muslim gender activists is the *kyai*. A *kyai* exemplifies Islamic ideals with his learning, behavior, and role in society.
Even though not all kyai reach the highest level of Islamic knowledge, those who do belong to the elite of ulama, are considered inheritors of the Prophet’s charisma. Such a kyai enjoys the greatest respect from his students, who hope that obedience will help them derive some of his power of blessings (baraka). Often students are afraid to question their kyai’s teachings. This attitude of obedience is rooted in the ideal of the traditional relationship of the mursyid (Sufi master) and his murid (pupil), as some kyais are leaders of tarekat (Sufi brotherhood). Thus, there is a popular belief among gender activists that if the kyai is open to and welcomes gender issues, the whole pesantren community will also accept them.

Based on the experience of the two pesantren I described earlier, one of the successful keys of their movement is that these gender activists were also leaders of pesantren or parts of a kyai’s family. Therefore, they have some legitimacy in speaking about religious matters, and the pesantren community listens to them. This situation triggers gender activists who work in the Muslim community to involve pesantren leaders in their gender programs. They invite kyais and nyais to participate in gender training, workshops and seminars. However, it is mostly their sons or daughters who attend gender training. Nothing is lost though, as the young generations will be the inheritors of pesantren in the future.

The existence of a religious hierarchy also coupled with the social hierarchy within the pesantren community. Some people have compared the pesantren and kyai to a keraton (Javanese kingdom) and a king. As a central figure, the kyai has a great deal of power in determining the ethos of the pesantren. If he is flexible, this provides a scope for
women from the pesantren to have access to the public sphere. However, it is unfair to conclude that such access for women in the pesantren is simply due to the blessing of the respective *kyai* (Srimulyani, 2008). The agency of women to negotiate within this patriarchal structure is also an important factor. As Nyai Ruqayyah told me, when she performed several public roles in pesantren al-Ma’shumiyah and in different *majlis ta’lim* activities, she was not challenged by the pesantren and local community because she was adequately equipped to undertake these roles. Surely, qualifications and capabilities of women in pesantren have become determinant factors to participation in public spaces.

2. Polygamy

Polygamy has become a major concern in the history of the women’s movement in Indonesia. The fact that the incidence of polygamy in Indonesia has always been relatively low has not stopped women from despising it. This issue has always triggered hot debates, especially within the Indonesian Muslim community. In my observation, public opinion has divided into three major arguments. First, the proponents of polygamy believe that Islam permits it and they justify their opinion by referring to the Prophet Muhammad’s practice of polygamy. Second, the opponents of polygamy argue that it is prohibited. They point out that the verse on polygamy should be interpreted comprehensively and contextually. The third group falls between these two extremes. They believe that polygamy is only permitted under certain circumstances, when wives can be treated equally. As an issue, polygamy does not simply divide Muslim men and women, because some women proclaim themselves to be pro-polygamy (see Nurmila, 2009).
The 1974 Indonesian Marriage Law provides for certain exceptions to the general marriage regulations. For instance, it specifies that the basis of marriage is monogamy, but makes an exception for polygamy among Muslims. Polygamy is allowed with the permission of the existing wife if she is unable to fulfill her duties as a wife, is incurably ill or is infertile. The husband must prove to a local court that this is the case, that he can support his existing family as well as a new one, and that he is able to treat all involved fairly (White & Anshor, 2008). However, many Muslim men do not go through the proper legal channels, and instead take new wives secretly.

Polygamy has been practiced by many kyais in traditional pesantren for a long time. Most of them argue that polygamy is allowed explicitly in the Qur’an, Chapter an-Nisa (4:3):

If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; But if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands posses. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice.

Based on this verse, polygamous kyais often claim that human beings have no right to prohibit something which God has made licit. For them, polygamy falls under the category of religious observance (ibadah), and is a means of combating such evils as prostitution and adultery. Rejecting polygamy means rejecting religion and Qur’anic verses; polygamy was Sunnah Rasul (recommended by the Prophet). Muslim gender activists in pesantren have different interpretations regarding the verse. They argue that the verse should be understood in a contextual way, in which the socio-historical context
of the revelation was related to the battle of Uhud. The Uhud war killed 70 Muslim men and left as many widows and even more children orphans. This was an acute social problem that was solved by the revelation of the verse which asked male Muslims who could afford to take care of the orphans, to marry the their mothers so the orphans had guardians. However, many Muslim men ignore the context of the revelation, as they usually take a second or third wives, who are younger and more beautiful than the existing one (Personal interviews, December, 2009).

According to one of my respondents, her grandfather was polygamous because he wanted to expand the pesantren. Since there was an increase in the number of students in the pesantren, her grandfather took a second wife to help him organize the pesantren. This kind of reason was often used to legitimize the practice of polygamy. Since one of the major roles of a kyai is to broaden the da’wah (religious proselytizing) in the society, and taking another wife was considered a means to achieve it. As an illustration, I found in some pesantren in Java, which were divided into two blocks. One was under the management of the first wife of the kyai, the other block was under his second wife’s control. Even though the highest figure was the kyai, the day-to-day practical activities were under the management of his wives. When I asked to my respondent whether there was a conflict between the wives, she said it often occurred because the kyai would favor one more than the other.

The practice of polygamy in pesantren was also sustained by traditionalist Muslims’ perception of baraka (power of blessings). Some parents allowed the kyai to take their daughters as second or third wives, because they wanted to receive blessings in
this world and in the afterlife. However, to some extent, polygamy benefits particular groups of women in terms of building economy and status through forging kinship alliances with kyai. Since a kyai enjoys high status in society, being the wife of a kyai enhances one’s social status. My friend who became the second wife of a kyai told me that her parents forced her to marry with him because they wanted to acquire high social status. Nevertheless, people often stigmatize to the second wife, if she came from low class status, as doing cuci darah (“blood laundry”). In Java, kyai descendents are often called darah biru (blue blood), which means they belong to a noble family and distinguishes them from ordinary people.

The practice of polygamy among kyais has challenged the women’s movement in pesantren in the way to reduce violence against women. Muslim gender activists in pesantren argue that polygamy was harmful to both first and second wives. Many cases of polygamy have triggered domestic violence as well as physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence. The goal of marriage in Islam was to achieve sakinah (peace, serenity and happiness). In fact, polygamy is one of the main causes of divorce, and many polygamous families are at risk of discriminating against women and children. As managers of Islamic discourses, kyais have played a pivotal role in the reproduction of religious interpretations which created disadvantages for women. Therefore, the women’s movement in the pesantren has struggled against the dominant discourse on polygamy, as well as provided data about the social reality of polygamous families.
3. Capital Resources

Money has become an important factor in the women’s movement in pesantren. Although it was not the only determinant element for the success of the movement, the availability of funding has made it possible to carry out women’s advocacy in pesantren reaching a wider scope in the Muslim community. The women’s movement in Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid and Pesantren Cipasung received foreign assistance that enabled them to implement their agenda. Unfortunately, this partnership only lasted for a short time. According to Masruchah, the current director of WCC Balqis Cirebon, many foreign funding agencies seem to prefer to fund intellectual and discursive activities about women’s rights, rather than advocacy programs. However, WCC Balqis remains consistent with their goals, funding their programs through partnerships with the local government and individuals (Personal interview, December, 2009).

Similarly, after UNFPA stopped their financial support, WCC Puspita Cipasung collaborated with the local government and ran some small enterprises, such as salons and cattle raising. Teh Enung, the current director, argued that they could not depend on foreign funding to implement their programs since there is no a guarantee in terms of a sustainable collaboration. Therefore, she started to build a network with institutions such as hospitals, governmental departments, courts and legal aid organizations to support women’s advocacy on domestic violence (Personal interview, December, 2009). By doing this, Teh Enung indirectly raised gender awareness in multiple segments of people in her region.
The financial dependence on foreign funding is a classic problem for many NGOs in Indonesia. One reason is because many NGOs and donors alike put emphasis on project-based funding rather than building more a sustainable project. This dependency has created the problem of sustainability. NGOs have to meet their donor’s preferences in order to get support. In line with this problem, Tripp (2006), in her article *Challenges in Transnational Feminist Mobilization*, highlighted the issues of selection within international donors. She stated that one tendency in international campaigns is to select sensational issues that may affect a few instead of issues that are not as likely to grab attention yet may affect millions of women in an even more direct and harmful way. She further questioned why is it that the issues that tend to capture the western imagination have to do with female genital cutting, honor killings, stoning as an Islamic punishment for adultery, the burqa in Afghanistan, and the like! Why is there an intense focus on the 15 women who die every year in Jordan as a result of honor killings when more than 3,000 women in the United States (about one-third of all women murdered) also die of domestic violence? This argument can be used to understand why foreign donors in Indonesia seemed to give more attention to the issues of *shari’a* law and polygamy, rather than to women’s economic empowerment programs.

The problem of funding has challenged the women’s movement in Pesantren to find local resources to support their activities. The tradition of Islamic philanthropy, such as *shadaqah*, *waqaf*, *infaq*, and so forth could be used to fund women’s advocacy programs. However, this requires theological deconstruction in which recognizing the
works to fight for gender equality is part of religious duties. This is not an easy task, but nothing is impossible.
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters, I have discussed the emergence of the women’s movement in Indonesia’s pesantren and some factors that contributed to it. Their activities have provided a positive view about the condition of women in Islamic countries, as opposed to the general western assumption that often portray them as oppressed and passive victims. There is no doubt that many women in the Muslim world suffer from gender-based oppression. It is true that Islam has been and can be a source of such oppression. However, it is simplistic and reductionist to attribute this exclusively or even primarily to Islamic religious beliefs and practices. Such an over-determined link falls far short of the scholarly standards that would permit a careful and critical examination of the real situation of women in the Muslim world. In Indonesia, by the 1990s, Islam was fast becoming a resource for a spectrum of the women’s movement to develop a common discourse of women’s rights, human rights, and democracy.

The women’s movement in pesantren provides a good example of how Muslim women can act as agents of change in facing patriarchal repression derived from cultural practices and gender-biased religious interpretation. Instead of being mute victims, these women seek a more active role in the interpretation of religious teachings on women’s rights issues. Although the conservative groups in pesantren have tried to silence or dismiss their works by simply labeling them as “followers” of a secular western agenda, women activists in pesantren have argued that their framework was grounded in Islamic
teaching. These women and men have struggled to improve women’s conditions and women’s betterment because of their deep commitment to Islam.

Women in pesantren locate their struggles for what Zine (2006) called “faith-based feminism” within both an anti-imperialist framework as well as the discursive arena of exegetical reform based on anti-patriarchal readings of religious texts. These women advocate new understandings of gender justice in Islam by moving from narrow, patriarchal interpretations as the only authoritative and legitimate epistemic possibilities to more contextual reading. While many Muslims as well as non-Muslim secular scholars are highly critical and ultimately dismissive of attempts to extract liberatory modes of feminist theorizing and praxis from the pervasive and totalizing grasp of fundamentalism (Moghissi, 1999; Mojab, 1995; Winter, 2001), for women activists in pesantren, their religious identity and belief in social justice and equality for all women and men are far from contradictory. They believe, however, it is a mandate from the Qur’an itself. Drawing on the Qur’anic teaching on human agency and subjectivity, they argued that women and men are equally able to acquire taqwa (moral personality). There is not the least suggestion that women and men, because they are biologically different, are in any way unequal or opposites or that God has endowed men with capabilities or potential that God did not confer upon women. Therefore, faith based-feminism in pesantren emerges as a means to negotiate their roles within the Muslim community, as well as in the hegemonic western paradigm.

Mojab (2001) in his criticism of Islamic feminism argued “the regime of rights in general and women’s rights in particular are products of the democratization struggles in
western societies. The question of rights is inseparable from citizenship, the democratic state and civil society, all of which are western concepts and realities. It would be appropriate, therefore, to examine the ‘Islamic feminist’ project in the light of the western experience which has, despite claims to the contrary, shaped all the discourses of rights among the Muslims” (p.137). This critique has totally ignored the fact that women’s protest against male hegemony in the production of official Islamic knowledge is not a new phenomenon in the Muslim world. For example, In the 1920s, the Libanese author Nazira Zayn al-Din (1908-1976) noted with dismay in her article *Unveiling and Veiling* (1928) and its sequel *The Girl and The Shaykhs* (1929), that Islamic prescriptions for women have been historically framed by men (Cooke, 2000). Similarly, the literature on women’s rights and Islam written by gender activists from pesantren backgrounds indicates that Islamic feminism transcends geographical boundaries, and moves beyond East and West. Despite the transnational character of the Islamic feminism movement, however, their strategies, issues, practices, and so forth are produced within the local and national context.

I am optimistic that the women’s movement in pesantren holds considerable promise, for improving the condition of women. The movement may make some concrete progress toward remedying the consistent failure of religious institutions to protect women’s rights. More importantly, as these activists’ voices become louder and more persistent, making the Muslim community—clerical and lay alike—increasingly aware of the issues, some amount of change is inevitable. These women share similar goals to spread awareness of “the correct teachings of Islam” about women’s rights and find ways
to help women gain practical access to them. The work of the women’s movement in pesantren shows that not every public expression of a traditional religious institution is conservative, dominating, or exclusive but it can be part of a progressive movement.

As an institution with a nationwide network and strong loyalty to the cause of Islam, pesantren has become a strategic place to produce religious leaders who have commitment to gender equality and justice. The experiment of pesantren-based advocacy thus constitutes one of their efforts to raise gender awareness within the Muslim community. Addressing the issue of domestic violence is actually an entry point that reveals the much deeper problems related to subjugation of women in the home, in the family and in society. The standpoint is to foster awareness among women about unjust treatment, abuse and violence that may happen in marital and familial life. The activists of the movement conduct mass education through religious institutions, such as Islamic schools, mosques and majlis ta’lim, on these gender issues and urge women to seek assistance to pesantren-based WCC if they experience domestic violence. These activists have systematically empowered women by providing them with the necessary tools, mainly in the form of religious knowledge and a gender perspective, to safeguard women’s rights without disturbing social harmony. They work from within the systems that are trying to marginalize them, and are using pesantren traditions as well as social and religious networks to disseminate their agenda.

Even though the women’s movement in pesantren seems not to engage in very sophisticated theoretical discourse over gender roles and women’s rights, they put emphasis on the social and practical needs of women. One reason is that because the
terms, such as “gender” and “feminism” are conceived by the local population as culturally foreign concepts thus create more resistance than support for the movement. As a result of such considerations, many of my participants referred to Islamic based principles such as 'adalah (justice) and musawah (egalitarianism) to develop gender sensitivity in the Muslim community. Consequently, the discourse on gender and Islam within the movement seems to be much more theological rather than sociological and anthropological inquiry, which make it difficult for non-Muslim scholars to discuss the Islamic texts. It is understandable, however, since gender activists in pesantren mostly attended Islamic educational institutions where study of Islam focused on sacred and legal texts.

Unlike some secular feminists who represent the relationship between women and men as antagonistic, the women’s movement in pesantren does not regard men as culprits in advancing its gender discourse; rather, it treats them as partners. The involvement of some men who are in the forefront of the movement illustrates this point. Nevertheless, their struggle to implement gender equity within the pesantren community is still far from being accomplished. There is an ambiguity between gender discourse and the practice of it. Many kyai view women’s rights issues and Islam as compatible, but they do not implement them on a practical level. For example, many kyais have shown strong resistance to the leadership of women, preferring their sons to inherit pesantren instead of their daughters. However, this inconsistency might happen because leadership means power, and this very word makes many men feel threatened.
In broader context, the women’s movement in pesantren has supported the democratization process in Indonesia because achieving gender equality and respect for women’s rights is an important pillar of it. The democratization and freedom of expression have allowed women activists in Indonesia to be more vocal. The issue of gender-based violence is now widely recognized because of their activism. Today, Islamic and secular feminists are working together to promote women’s rights issues. However, whatever benefits democratization may have for women in Indonesia or elsewhere, it also creates an intended consequence, such as the rise of religious conservatism. Many Muslim and secular women activists are now unified by concerns over the implementation of Islamic shari’a law and growing conservatism. Advocates of political Islam have increasingly turned their efforts to the provincial level, where they have enjoyed some success. Several provinces have instituted shari’a inspired legislation, especially laws requiring Muslim women to wear headscarves or forbidding them from being out alone after dark (see Bush, 2008). Muslim women’s rights groups are actively trying to contest such interpretation of shari’a. What are the impacts of shari’a based-law on Muslim women in Indonesia? How does the women’s movement in pesantren respond to it? These are questions that can be explored for further research.

The emergence of the women’s movement in pesantren has been intertwined with the development of the Nahdhatul Ulama (NU) organization. Most of gender activists in pesantren are also activists within the NU circles. Historically speaking, since the 1970s pesantren have come to be seen as potential partners in various development projects sponsored by Indonesia’s burgeoning NGO sector. LP3ES in particular began to engage
in creative ways with kyai in pesantren and other NU leaders, foremost among whom was the late Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur). Wahid served as an important bridge between the pesantren and NGO communities at an early stage and facilitated the invitation of kyais across Java to join in discussions on various programs (Feener, 2007). In the mid-1980s, a number of new NGOs were formed by a new generation of social activists within NU backgrounds, such as LAKPESDAM (Institute for the Research and Development of Human Resources), LKiS (Institute for Islamic and Social Studies), and P3M (The Union for Pesantren and Community Development). In this regard, P3M pioneered efforts within NU-NGO circles to address issues of women’s rights in Islam, under the banner of the Fiqh al-Nisa program. Many of the gender activists in pesantren that I interviewed such as Kyai Husein, Nyai Ruqayyah, Djuju’ Juwariyah, and Teh Enung were alumni of the Fiqh al-Nisa program.

The rise of NGOs working on issues of Islam and gender is, however, only one aspect of the diverse contemporary projects of young scholars coming out of NU backgrounds. This phenomenon of a new generation of santri active in projects well beyond pesantren walls has been referred to as a new Hybrid Culture (Kultur Hibrida) by some of those involved (see Salim & Ridwan, 1999). After more that three decades of NU engagement with NGOs, these santri have begun exploring their own ways to critically engage in pesantren traditions. In this process, these people have moved beyond their pesantren studies into a wider world of social critique and grass-roots activism. Unlike da’wah activists or the modernist movement, the aims of this young “hybrid” santri have generally been rather different. They pursued primarily not toward the
cultivation of personal piety and cultural “Islamization,” but rather toward agenda of social and economic justice and advocacy of the rights of underprivileged groups in Indonesian society, irrespective of their religious identities (Feener, 2007).

The openness to progressive and even “liberal” views within NU circles in particular cannot be separated from the influence of Abdurrahman Wahid’s thoughts and his activisms. Many young generations of NU often claim themselves as “Gus Dur-ian” (Gus Dur followers). The progressive pattern of thought nowadays has been institutionalized among NGO activists with NU backgrounds, which they referred as Post-Tradisionalisme Islam (Islamic Post-Traditionalism). Post-Traditionalism is a phrase which emerged firstly in the workshop held in Jakarta on March, 2000, by the ISIS (Institute for Social and Institutional Studies), an NGO run by young NU activists, to respond the new phenomenon of intellectual enthusiasm among their community. This idea of Post-Traditionalism is being developed simultaneously by an expanding number of “new santri,” especially after LKiS (Institute for Islamic and Social Studies) in Yogyakarta used the term as an ideological basis for its strategic planning in 2000. Post-Traditionalism also happens to be the title of Ahmad Baso’s Indonesian translation of a collection of articles by the contemporary Maroccan philosopher Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabiri. Ahmad Baso is one of the young NU intellectuals who has drawn on European postmodern thinkers such as Focault, Derrida, and Lyotard in formulating cultural critiques of pembaharuan (modernization) intellectualism. Post-Traditionalism, therefore, is defined by Zuhairi Misrawi, a young NU intellectual, as the following:
A new way to liberate and further expand the potential of humanity by building a society that values difference, upholds the law, and develops understandings of pluralism and democracy. In this way, Post-Traditionalism affirms that the critical study of tradition is the best way to build a culture and a way of thinking that can stimulate social transformation and change on a practical level (as cited in Feener, 2007, p. 194).

Rumadi (2008) in his dissertation on Post-Traditionalism pointed out that one of the important themes which become a concern of Post-Traditionalist community is the issues related to Islam and feminism. Even though there is no single discourse on gender issues among NU activists, the special attention is given to the need to reinterpret Islamic texts which are rife of gender-biased interpretation. However, Post-Traditionalists addressed not only women’s issues in Islamic texts such as inheritance, polygamy, and female imam but also in the social realm as how men and women should have equal access in the public sphere. Post Traditionalists locate feminism within post-colonial framework, which no longer focuses on the victimization of women in order to legitimize the empowerment project, but rather, looks at the agency of women to resist patriarchal hegemony and to initiate social change. In this sense, Post-Traditionalists aim to raise the voices of marginalized women which are often ignored by “bourgeois feminists.”

The wave of liberalism among young intellectuals of NU, however, has provoked significant opposition from the older generations, mostly senior kyais, within both the NU organization and pesantren circles. Many kyais criticized that these young santri were gone far away from Islamic teaching and were influenced by Western thoughts. We can
say that in the contemporary situation, NU as an Islamic and social organization has divided into two strands: conservative and progressive wings. On one hand, the conservative wing has tried to maintain established tradition with its exclusivism attitudes. Yet on the other hand, the progressive wing has critically questioned religious doctrines and interpretations as things that are changeable, historical, and contextual. This division has created tensions and disputes between the younger and older generations of NU members.

Finally, the emergence of young scholars from NU and pesantren backgrounds engaging in social and intellectual activism has become an interesting phenomenon. These activists have developed capacities to integrate the diverse strands of modern Muslim thought from around the world. They move back and forth between Islamic classical texts and modern Muslim writings from the Middle East and elsewhere, as well as Euro-American literature in the fields of humanities and social sciences.
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APPENDIX

A. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

1. Personal Biography:
   - Date of Birth
   - Family Background
   - Educational Level
   - Occupation

2. Women’s Status in Islam
   - What do you think about women’s status in Islam?
   - How do Islamic sources describe women?
   - Do you think that there is gap between what it says in the Islamic texts and how it is practiced in the daily lives of Muslim community in Indonesia?
   - Can you tell me about the difference between the life of Muslim women in Indonesia and other Islamic countries?
   - Some Western feminists have said that Islam has become a source of women’s subordination. What is your opinion about it?
   - Do you think that Islam can be a source of women’s empowerment?
   - What do you think about women’s rights movements among Indonesian Muslims?

3. The Women’s Movement in Indonesia’s Pesantren
   - What is the role of women in pesantren?
   - Can you tell me about the pesantren’s textbooks that teach about gender role in Islam?
• What are some women’s issues in pesantren?
• When did the women’s movement become popular in pesantren?
• How did you get involved in women’s movement in pesantren? Can you describe the importance of this movement?
• What are some factors that influence women’s movement in pesantren both from inside and outside pesantren?
• What is the goal of the women’s movement in pesantren?
• What kind of activities have been conducted to increase gender education in pesantren? Who are the main stakeholders of this movement?
• What are the major challenges of this movement?
• Do you think that there are differences between the women’s movement in pesantren and other women’s rights movements. If yes, can you explain about it?
• What are the impacts of the movement in the way of developing women’s status in Islam?

4. Gender Roles and Negotiation in Pesantren

• What do you think about women’s leadership in pesantren?
• Can women preach in front of gender-mixed congregations in pesantren?
• Do you think that women have equal opportunity to interpret Islamic texts within pesantren circles?
• Can women lead gender-mixed prayers in pesantren?
• Can women become active in the public sphere?
• What kind of gender roles are being negotiated in the pesantren’s community?
• To what extent has Javanese cultures influenced the role of women in pesantren?
• How do you regard the practice of polygamy in pesantren?
B. INFORMANT BACKGROUNDS

**Aan Anshariyah:**
She was born in Bintaro, Tangerang on March 8, 1971. She went to pesantren in Jakarta for her senior high school. She graduated from the State Islamic University (UIN) Jakarta for her bachelor degree and earned master degree from UIN Medan, West Sumatra. Currently, she teaches in Pesantren al-Qur’aniyyah Jakarta and also a faculty member of UIN Jakarta. In the university, she has been active in Pusat Studi Wanita (PSW/the Center of Women Studies).

**Enung Nursaidah Rahayu (Teh Enung)**
She was born on March 11, 1968 from the kyai family. She is the granddaughter of Kyai Ruhiyat, the founder of Pesantren Cipasung Tasikmalaya, and is currently the director of PUSPITA Cipasung. She earned her master’s degree in biology from the private university in Bandung. Aside from her activities in PUSPITA, she teaches at the State of Islamic High Schools in Cipasung, is on the board of Fatayat NU in the West Java Province, and is a member of the human rights organization in Tasikmalaya. Teh Enung is an alumna of Fiqh al-Nisa P3M and a member of the Nahdina forum as well.

**Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir**
He was born in Cirebon, December 31, 1971. He got his bachelor degree from faculty of Shari’a Damaskus University, Syiria, and his master degree from the Islamic University of Malaysia. He is currently a Phd student in ICRS Gajah Mada University Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Since 2002, he teaches in STAIN Cirebon. He is one of the founders of the Fahmina Institute, and a board from Rahima Foundation, Jakarta. He wrote a book entitled *Memilih Monogamy: Pembacaan atas al-Qur’an dan Hadis Nabi (2005)*/Choosing to be Monogamy: A Reading of the Qur’an and the Hadith.

**Kyai Husein Muhammad**
He was born in Cirebon, May 9, 1953. After finishing his study in Pesantren Lirboyo Kediri, one of the most famous pesantren in Java, in 1973, he went to the Qur’anic Science Institute of Higher Learning (PTIQ) in Jakarta, and graduated in 1980. He got his master degree from Al-Azhar University Cairo, Egypt in 1983 and then led pesantren Dar al-Tauhid Arjawinangun Cirebon, West Java until today. He is the founder of the Fahmina Institute Cirebon, and one of the directors of Rahima Foundation Jakarta, and also one of the executive boards of Puan Amal Hayati Jakarta. He wrote several books, including *Fiqh Perempuan, Refleksi Kiai atas Wacana Agama dan Gender (2001)*/ The Fiqh of Women: The Reflection of a Kyai about Religion and Gender Discourse and

Masruchah
She was born in October 29, 1965. She spent several years in pesantren to learn Islamic knowledge. She graduated from the faculty of Islamic education of the State Islamic University (UIN), Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta. Currently, she is the director of WCC Balqis Cirebon.

Najlah Naqiyah
She was born in Pesantren as-Shomadiyah, Bangkalan Madura, East Java and went to pesantren Denanyar, Jombang for her junior and senior high schools. She earned her bachelor degree from the State Islamic University Sunan Ampel, Surabaya. She studied in the State University of Malang for her master and Phd. She is currently a lecturer in the State University of Surabaya (UNESA) and the University of Zainul Hasan, Probolinggo. She is one of the leaders in Pesantren Syekh Abdul Qodir Al-Jailani, Kraksaan, Probolinggo, East Java. She wrote a book titled Otonomi Perempuan (2005)/ Women’s Autonomy.

Nur Rofi’ah
She studied in Pesantren Salafiyah Seblak, Jombang, during her junior and senior high schools. She graduated from the State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN) Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta for her bachelor degree. She earned master and doctorate degree from Ankara University Turkey. She is currently a lecturer in the State Islamic University (UIN) Jakarta and is a national executive board of Fatayat Nahdhatul Ulama. She is also an NGO activist working for women’s rights issues in Islam.

Nyai Djuju’ Juwariyah
She is a senior teacher in the Islamic high schools in Cipasung. She is also a chairwoman of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) in Tasikmalaya regency. In 2002, she founded “Nahdina”, a study forum which focuses on gender education and dissemination of women’s rights discourse in the Islamic community. Nahdina worked in Tasikmalaya Regency by conducting seminars, discussions, workshops and training on gender equality. She is also one of the female leaders in Pesantren Cipasung.

Nyai Lilik Nihayah Fuady
She was born in July 28, 1972, and was trained of Islamic knowledge in Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid Cirebon. She graduated from Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah Cirebon (STAIC/ the Islamic Education Institute of Higher Learning). She was the former director of WCC Balqis. Currently, she is the member of regional parliament (DPRD) of Cirebon.
Nyai Ruqayyah Ma’shum
She was born in Bondowoso, East Java on December 2nd, 1970. She grew up and trained in Pesantren al-Ma’shumiyyah since her father is the owner of the pesantren, a kyai who studied Islamic knowledge in al-Azhar University, Cairo Egypt. Her father’s pesantren only received male students, but since 2004, Nyai Ruqayyah opened the pesantren for female students. She has been active in Rahima Foundation Jakarta, and become a gender activist, speaking in national and international forum. She is also a famous woman preacher with hundreds of followers.