

Female Evangelical Scholars in Indonesia: A Crisis or Opportunity?

Abstract:

Female evangelical scholars in Indonesia have not played a significant role either in contributing to theological thoughts or giving answers to social issues. In contrast female Muslim scholars are very active in their role of shaping theological thoughts in Indonesia and also combating various forms of oppression. Therefore, female evangelical scholars in Indonesia must begin to think of appropriate ways to play an active role in addressing the issues.

I. Introduction

Indonesian female evangelical scholars are facing very unique yet complex challenges today. In a country with the largest Muslim (patriarchal) population in the world, we should play a more active role not only within the context of the church, but to make a broader contribution to society.

However, there is no solid theological framework from a gender perspective within the Indonesian churches that would empower us to do our mission in this kind of context. There are very few Indonesian female scholars that contribute to the discussion of feminist theology, gospel and social justice.

In contrast, Indonesian female Muslim scholars are very active in contributing to the discussion of feminist theology around the world. For example Diah Ariani Arimbi, in her book *Reading Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Women Writers* (2009) discusses the construction of gender and Islamic identities in literary writing by four prominent Indonesian Muslim women writers: Titis Basino P I, Ratna Indraswari Ibrahim, Abidah El Kalieqy and Helvy Tiana Rosa. This book is a very important source for revealing the construction of Indonesian Muslim women's identities. In the conclusion of this book, Arimbi summarizes: "Within their feminist reading the writers understand that gender roles are negotiable rather than inherent. In representing women in a variety of discourses they draw multi-faceted women struggling against repression and domination, and resisting their status as powerless."¹

Nina Nurmila in her book, *Women, Islam and Everyday Life: Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia* (2009) examines the issue of polygamy. She discusses the hermeneutical issue of the Quranic verses that are often used to support the practice of polygamy. Nina argues that polygamy has been a source of injustice towards women and children, that this is against Islamic teaching, and that a just Islamic law would need to call for the abolition of polygamy.²

Another great book written by Dina Afrianty, *Women and Sharia Law in Northern Indonesia* (2015) examines the life of women in the Indonesian province of Aceh, where Islamic law was introduced in 1999. The book shows that although the Islamic law in Aceh has placed restrictions on women's freedom, "the Acehnese women respond to it by mobilizing for change, shaping local discourse on women's

¹ Diah Ariani Arimbi, *Reading Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Women Writers: Representation, Identity and Religion of Muslim Women in Indonesian Fiction* (Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 181.

² Nina Nurmila, *Women, Islam and Everyday Life: Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia* (Routledge, 2009).

equality and status, promoting equality, women's civil and political rights and demanding law reform within Islamic framework.”³

Alicia Izharuddin (2016) offers a very creative angle in looking at the issue of Islam and gender. In her book “Gender and Islam in Indonesian Cinema” Alicia presents discussion on the issue of media, Islam, power and gender.⁴ Apart from these four books there are many other books and journal articles on the similar topic that have been published.⁵

Sadly the contribution of female Christian scholars on the same issue is very minimal. From the ecumenical perspective we only have Marianne Katoppo, she published her first book of Asian feminist theology in English. Entitled *Compassionate and Free*, the volume criticizes patriarchal religion and society and calls for a life-giving theology that affirms women's dignity.⁶ But there is none from evangelical perspective.

II. Evangelical and Feminism

Feminist scholarship within the evangelical Indonesian context carries a negative connotation with the assumption that the feminist theologians are usually those who believe in liberal theology. Many people assume that feminist theology is a product of western civilization, which is not applicable for Indonesian society.

For most people, the terms “evangelical” and “feminism” are contradictory. “Evangelical” refers to a person, church, or organization that is known for their core convictions of the triune God, the Bible, faith, Jesus, salvation, evangelism and discipleship as well as their support of social conservatism and traditional gender roles. Therefore it is unusual for evangelical to support feminism, a movement that addresses inequalities, injustice, and discrimination that women face because of their gender.

Those who call themselves as “evangelical feminists” declare that “the goal of evangelical feminism is that men and women be allowed to serve God as individuals, according to their own unique gifts rather than according to a culturally predetermined personality slot called ‘Christian manhood’ or ‘Christian womanhood.’”⁷ Although this goal is far more evangelical than other groups within feminism,⁸ some evangelical scholars argue that this movement is another form of liberalism.⁹

³ Dina Afrianty, *Women and Sharia Law in Northern Indonesia: Local Women's NGOs and the Reform of Islamic Law in Aceh* (Routledge, 2015), 1.

⁴ Alicia Izharuddin, *Gender and Islam in Indonesian Cinema* (Springer, 2016).

⁵ For example: Eva Fahrur Nisa, *Embodying the True Islam: Face-Veiled Women in Contemporary Indonesia* (Australian National University, 2011). Eka Srimulyani, *Women from Traditional Islamic Educational Institutions in Indonesia: Negotiating Public Spaces* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012). Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, *Indonesian Women and Local Politics: Islam, Gender and Networks in Post-Suharto Indonesia* (NUS Press, 2015).

⁶ Marianne Katoppo, *Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman's Theology* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000). See also Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000), 25.

⁷ Rebecca M. Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War between Traditionalism and Feminism* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 110.

⁸ Secular feminists are those who do not accept the Bible as authoritative. See Thomas J. Fricke, “What is the Feminist Hermeneutic? An Analysis of Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,” Wisconsin Lutheran

The debates concerning feminism and evangelical never move beyond the definition and the struggle concerning gender and equality. This never-ending debate has actually kept evangelical female scholars from moving forward in their broader role in the world of theology and society.

III. Feminism is For Everybody

The word “feminism” itself deeply rooted in the “women’s liberation” movement of the 1960s which means *equality of women with men in every aspect of society*.¹⁰ However in its development, feminism is not only limited as female struggle to gain equality but feminism as a broader movement as the role of women to end all kinds of oppression.

Bell Hooks, a prominent black feminist says:

Feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression directs our attention to systems of domination and the interrelatedness of sex, race, and class oppression... The foundation of future feminist struggle must be... solidarity based on recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression.¹¹

Similar to that Gita Sen notes:

For many women in the world, problems of nationality, class and race are inextricably linked to their specific oppression as women. Their definition of feminism to include the struggle against all forms of oppression is legitimate and necessary.¹²

With this definition I assume that female evangelical scholars in Indonesia should all want to be a feminist. In fact feminism is not exclusively for women but is for everybody. The call to end all kind of oppressions is very biblical and it is a mission that Jesus himself did and it is now our calling as an evangelical scholars.¹³

Therefore as female evangelical scholars, we need to broaden our mind, we should not limit ourselves only in the struggle to gain equality in the church, especially with the issue of ordination, but we need to step out to fight against all kind of oppression. Together with our Muslim friends we need to have confidence in giving our theological contribution in relation to social injustice.

Quarterly 91 (Winter 1994), 45. Religious feminists" are "individuals who do not identify with Christianity, but whose beliefs nevertheless include a religious worldview. See R. Letham, “The Hermeneutics of Feminism,” *Themelios* 17 (April/May 1992), 4.

⁹ Grudem wrote two books to challenge the idea of evangelical feminism. See Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions* (Crown Publishing Group, 2009). Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism?* (Crossway Books, 2006). Twenty two authors have written articles concerning the issue of “evangelical feminism” including John Piper, D.A Carson, Douglas Moo, John M. Frame John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Crossway Books, 2012).

¹⁰ Alison M. Jaggard, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature (Philosophy and Society)* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1988), 5.

¹¹ Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Pluto Press, 2000), 31

¹² Gita Sen and Caren Cowen, for the project Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), *Development, Crisis and Alternatives Visions: Third World Women’s Perspectives* (Norway: A.s Verbum, 1985), 13.

¹³ Robert Kysar, *Called to Care: Biblical Images for Social Ministry* (Fortress Press, 1991), 42.

IV. Muslim Female Scholars and Their Contribution for Indonesia

While the evangelical Christian in Indonesia will struggle in defining feminism, Muslim female scholars in Indonesia have developed their theology in such a way that it empowers them to be actively involved in social activities. Since the beginning of the twentieth century Muslim women in Indonesia have been deeply involved in the development of Islamic theology and mission. For example, 'Aisyiyah was founded in 1917. This organization is the largest national organization for Muslim women dedicated to female empowerment and charitable work. They trained thousands of Muslim female scholars focusing on the study of Qur'an and giving access to health care and social services.¹⁴

Another organization similar to that is Muslimat Nahdlatul Ulama, which was established in 1945. This organization trained their women to be experts in Quranic reading and the "complex science of its interpretation".¹⁵ Indonesia also has thousands of institutions including university and *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), where women can study to be Islamic/Quranic scholars.¹⁶ These women are trained to become theologians and educators in many area of Indonesia.¹⁷

These women are not only expert in theology but they actively put themselves on the front lines of many social issues such as justice, corruption, human rights, gender and equality. The feminist movement in Indonesia is endeavoring to empower women whilst remaining Islamic.¹⁸ Radicals tend to *react* strongly against criticism, while moderate Islamic Indonesians have re-examined their teachings concerning the issues of women leadership.¹⁹

Julian Millie describes the lives of older Muslim women in Bandung who usually join religious study groups, travelling all over town on spiritual pilgrimages. One reason he proposes for the piety of these women is the concern they feel about social issues like corruption and rising crime: they believe that acquiring religious knowledge will help strengthen society against such perils.²⁰

On April 24-27, I attended the Indonesian Female Ulama Congress, or KUPI, which was held in Cirebon, West Java as an observer. The congress was a historic

¹⁴ Bianca J. Smith and Mark Woodward, *Gender and Power in Indonesian Islam: Leaders, Feminists, Sufis and Pesantren Selves* (Routledge, 2013), 87.

¹⁵ Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur'an* (University of Illinois Press, 2006), 165.

¹⁶ Natana J. DeLong-Bas, "Women, Islam, and the Twenty-First Century," *Oxford Islamic Studies*, 2011, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/Public/focus/essay1107_women.html.

¹⁷ In 2014, Indonesian government launched a scholarship program for 5000 Muslim scholars to get their doctoral degree. Although there is no data that stated the number of Muslim female scholars who join this program but we can assume that there are many Muslim female scholars will come out of this program.

¹⁸ Fran Love and Jeleta Eckheart, *Ministry to Muslim Women: Longing to Call Them Sisters* (William Carey Library, 2000), 12.

¹⁹ A visit from the Minister of Religious Affairs, Lukman Hakim Saifuddin and some leading male Muslim leaders at the closing ceremony of the Indonesian Female Ulama Congress, was seen as a clear message that women ulama were recognized as legitimate. "In Indonesia, Female Clerics Seek Recognition and Rights for Women," *Women & Girls*, accessed June 22, 2017, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/womenandgirls/articles/2017/05/31/in-indonesia-female-clerics-seek-recognition-and-rights-for-women>.

²⁰ Julian Millie, *Inside Indonesia* 103: Jan-Mar 2011

event, the first of its kind in the world.²¹ The title of the congress was “The role of women clerics in upholding the values of Islam, nationhood and humanity. The attendances were over 570 participants from over 15 different countries, the vast majority of whom were ulama, or Islamic religious scholars.²²

KUPI was more than just an event; it is a movement that empowers Muslim women to be actively involved in humanitarian spirit of Islam, nationhood and humanism. Throughout the congress they discussed, questioned and searched for solutions to some of the important issues in Indonesian such as religious radicalism, sexual violence, polygamy, child marriage, environmental degradation, and protections for migrant workers.²³

Apart from social concern, these women are also very open to dialogue. For example in 2016 Semarang Archdiocese's commission for ecumenical and interreligious affairs facilitated a dialogue for Catholic and Muslim women in Ungaran. About 400 women participated in this dialogue, 270 Muslim women and 130 Catholic nuns.²⁴

V. Female Evangelical Scholars in Indonesia (Crisis or Opportunity?)

Evangelical female scholars in Indonesia are undergoing a crucial moment because of the empowering processes that are being generated and reproduced by our theology. Although the development of feminist theology in Indonesia is very small, efforts to give women a chance to become leaders have taken place in some places. For example in GMIM, the number of female pastors is 1,250 people while the number of male pastors is only 587.²⁵ Since 2014 the appointed leader of Indonesian Council of Churches is a female pastor from *Gereja Toraja*. However, the number, female theologians in Indonesia is still very small that their role in formulating theology and involvement in social justice are very limited. An assessor from National Accreditation Agency said that Indonesia has less than 50 female biblical/theological scholars in the whole country.²⁶

Apart from that, our theology does not provide solid foundation for women to play an active role in society. This is in fact influenced by evangelical theology as a whole, in Indonesia the evangelicals tends to think more about personal salvation, heaven and hell without being too concerned about the social issues of society. David Moberg confirms “there was a time when evangelicals had a balanced position that

²¹ “The Importance of the World’s Largest Gathering of Female Islamic Clerics,” *Jakarta Globe*, accessed May 30, 2017, <http://jakartaglobe.id/opinion/worlds-first-womens-islamic-cleric-congress-hosted-w-java-significant/>.

²² Tri Ispranoto, “Kongres Ulama Perempuan Di Cirebon Dihadiri Oleh 15 Negara,” *Detiknews*, accessed May 31, 2017, <https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-barat/d-3483496/kongres-ulama-perempuan-di-cirebon-dihadiri-oleh-15-negara>.

²³ “The Importance of the World’s Largest Gathering of Female Islamic Clerics.”

²⁴ “Nuns and Muslim Women Join to Promote Peace in Indonesia,” *Vatican Radio*, 2016, http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/03/10/nuns_and_muslim_women_join_to_promote_peace_in_indonesia/1214422.

²⁵ Sinode GMIM, “Peta Pelayanan,” *GMIM - Gereja Masehi Injili Di Minahasa*, June 29, 2012, <https://www.gmim.or.id/peta-pelayanan/>.

²⁶ List of some theological school’s web that shows the list of their female scholars (Ph.D in all kinds of studies-not limited to biblical/theological study) are: STT Jakarta: 2; SAAT: 3; STTB: 3; STTAA: 2; STTRII: 1; UKDW: 2; STBI:2; STII:3; STT HKBP:1; STT INTIM:2; STT Berita Hidup: 3; STT Sunderman: 4.

gave proper attention to both evangelism and social concern, but a great reversal in the [twentieth] century led to a lopsided emphasis upon evangelism and omission of most aspects of social involvement.”²⁷

Female evangelical scholars in Indonesia are facing a great crisis because we are very small in number and the enormous work in front of us. If we want to communicate effectively with our female muslim scholars we need to challenge ourselves to make contributions in the sphere of theological thinking and social concern.

V.1. Developing our Feminist Theology

There is a great need in Indonesia to formulate our biblical theology of women. Theology that not only giving answer to the struggle for gender equality within the church but to empower women to play an active role in contributing ideas to counter all forms of oppression in Indonesia.

Until now we have seen that evangelicals are not interested in developing a contextual feminist theology. However, we must move forward and not continuously get caught up in fighting for our rights in the church alone. We must begin to dare to formulate theology to address social issues that occur in society, including the oppression experienced by Muslim women.

If we consider our Muslim sisters as the potential receiver of the Gospel, we can see the necessity of developing feminist theology in the context of Islamic theology. Thus we can build a bridge for dialogue and discussion with our Muslim sisters.

V.2. A Response to Oppressions Against Women

The oppression of women is a crucial issue in Indonesia, even more crucial than the debate about women's ordination in the church. Exploitation of female migrant workers, human trafficking, sexual exploitation are cases that very often appear in society. Unfortunately female evangelical scholars in Indonesia have not responded to gender issues like this.

One of the most crucial concerns is the status and freedom of women in areas that implement shariah law. The protection of women in Aceh is still minimal. The Aceh government has not yet seen violence against women, especially domestic violence, as an important problem to overcome.

Many female Islamic organizations in Indonesia strongly reject the enactment of sharia law in Aceh. Dina Afrianty shows that Sharia law has been used as a tool of discrimination to women.²⁸ Since the local government implement shariah law in 2001, the number of cases regarding sexual abuse, human trafficking and domestic violence has increased significantly.²⁹

²⁷ David Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Reconciling Evangelism and Social Concern* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 25-26.

²⁸ Afrianty, *Women and Sharia Law in Northern Indonesia*, 70-73.

²⁹ “Pada 2016, Kekerasan Pada Perempuan Dan Anak Bertambah 10 Kasus,” *GoAceh*, accessed June 1, 2017, <https://www.goaceh.co/berita/baca/2017/03/02/pada-2016-kekerasan-pada-perempuan-dan-anak-bertambah-10-kasus/>.

Female evangelical scholars in Indonesia must see themselves as part of the Indonesian society and therefore take up their role to fight against oppression of women in Aceh. Since the sharia law in the Quran is rooted from the Law of Moses in the Old Testament, there is a call for female biblical scholars to study the particular law concerning women in relation to sharia law as a contribution to this issue.

V.3. A Response to Radicalism

One of the results of KUPI is a statement that Indonesian Muslim women are against religious radicalism. Radicalism is a form of religious oppression that must be opposed. They demand a reinterpretation of Qur'anic verses that are often used as a basis for acts of terrorism. Muslim female scholars offer a hermeneutic approach that is different from the hermeneutic used by terrorists.

If Indonesian Muslim women have shown their attitude and role in resisting religious radicalism, it is time for us to make a contribution to this area. We need to offer theological and biblical thoughts that show that the practice of terrorism and religious violence are incompatible with the Christian faith. We need to do this because some of the Indonesian Muslims are still looking at the crusades. Some even think that the conflict in the Middle East is between the Muslims and the Christians. We need to publicly express our position in fighting religious violence.

We should not only stand against persecutions to the Christians, but we must also stand against all forms of hate crimes and racism aimed at Arabs and Muslims around the world. The victims of religious violence are not only Christians but also Muslims, who suffer because of racism, discrimination and prejudice against them. Now is an unprecedented moment for us to express our love for our Muslim neighbors by working together with them in a fight against terrorism.

V.2. A Response to Corruption

Corruption is a major problem in Indonesia. Unfortunately the church does not take an active role in fighting corruption. So far there are no solid academic theological articles in Indonesia about a biblical response to corruption. On the other hand there are many discussions about anti-corruption among Muslims. Some Islamic boarding schools even include an anti-corruption course in their curriculum. Female evangelical scholars in Indonesia should start to make seminars and publish concerning this issue.

VI. Conclusion

Female evangelical scholars in Indonesia need to realize that we are part of the Indonesian community with its complex problems and issues. Therefore our contribution should not be limited on the issues within the church but we need to fulfill our calling as Christ's witnesses in the world. Our contribution should move beyond the issues of women equality in the church. We need to fight against all kinds of oppressions. Therefore, Indonesian female evangelicals scholars need to be encouraged to speak up, to produce theological and biblical thoughts that fit the context we are facing.

Bibliography

- Afrianty, Dina. *Women and Sharia Law in Northern Indonesia: Local Women's NGOs and the Reform of Islamic Law in Aceh*. Routledge, 2015.
- Arimbi, Diah Ariani. *Reading Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Women Writers: Representation, Identity and Religion of Muslim Women in Indonesian Fiction*. Amsterdam University Press, 2009.
- DeLong-Bas, Natana J. "Women, Islam, and the Twenty-First Century." *Oxford Islamic Studies*, 2011. http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/Public/focus/essay1107_women.html.
- Dewi, Kurniawati Hastuti. *Indonesian Women and Local Politics: Islam, Gender and Networks in Post-Suharto Indonesia*. NUS Press, 2015.
- Doorn-Harder, Pieternella van. *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur'an*. University of Illinois Press, 2006.
- GMIM, Sinode. "Peta Pelayanan." *GMIM - Gereja Masehi Injili Di Minahasa*, June 29, 2012. <https://www.gmim.or.id/peta-pelayanan/>.
- Groothuis, Rebecca M. *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War between Traditionalism and Feminism*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997.
- Grudem, Wayne. *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism?* Crossway Books, 2006.
- . *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions*. Crown Publishing Group, 2009.
- Hooks, Bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Pluto Press, 2000.
- "In Indonesia, Female Clerics Seek Recognition and Rights for Women." *Women & Girls*. Accessed June 22, 2017. <https://www.newsdeeply.com/womenandgirls/articles/2017/05/31/in-indonesia-female-clerics-seek-recognition-and-rights-for-women>.
- Ispranoto, Tri. "Kongres Ulama Perempuan Di Cirebon Dihadiri Oleh 15 Negara." *Detiknews*. Accessed May 31, 2017. <http://>.
- Izharuddin, Alicia. *Gender and Islam in Indonesian Cinema*. Springer, 2016.
- Jaggar, Alison M. *Feminist Politics and Human Nature (Philosophy and Society)*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1988.
- Katoppo, Marianne. *Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman's Theology*. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000.
- Kysar, Robert. *Called to Care: Biblical Images for Social Ministry*. Fortress Press, 1991.
- Love, Fran, and Jeleta Eckheart. *Ministry to Muslim Women: Longing to Call Them Sisters*. William Carey Library, 2000.
- Moberg, David. *The Great Reversal: Reconciling Evangelism and Social Concern*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007.
- Nisa, Eva Fahrur. *Embodying the True Islam: Face-Veiled Women in Contemporary Indonesia*. Australian National University, 2011.
- "Nuns and Muslim Women Join to Promote Peace in Indonesia." *Vatican Radio*, 2016. http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/03/10/nuns_and_muslim_women_join_to_promote_peace_in_indonesia/1214422.
- Nurmila, Nina. *Women, Islam and Everyday Life: Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia*. Routledge, 2009.

- “Pada 2016, Kekerasan Pada Perempuan Dan Anak Bertambah 10 Kasus.” *GoAceh*. Accessed June 1, 2017. <https://www.goaceh.co/berita/baca/2017/03/02/pada-2016-kekerasan-pada-perempuan-dan-anak-bertambah-10-kasus/>.
- Piper, John, and Wayne Grudem. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Crossway Books, 2012.
- Pui-lan, Kwok. *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000.
- Smith, Bianca J., and Mark Woodward. *Gender and Power in Indonesian Islam: Leaders, Feminists, Sufis and Pesantren Selves*. Routledge, 2013.
- Srimulyani, Eka. *Women from Traditional Islamic Educational Institutions in Indonesia: Negotiating Public Spaces*. Amsterdam University Press, 2012.
- “The Importance of the World’s Largest Gathering of Female Islamic Clerics.” *Jakarta Globe*. Accessed May 30, 2017. <http://jakartaglobe.id/opinion/worlds-first-womens-islamic-cleric-congress-hosted-w-java-significant/>.