

---

## How Gender Orders and Islamic Influence Affect Women's Participation in Indonesian Politics?

*Fitria Nurul Ramadhani*

SOAS University of London

e-mail: [fitriarRamadhani14@gmail.com](mailto:fitriarRamadhani14@gmail.com)

---

**Abstract:** *This paper explores the long history of gender orders construction in Indonesia. How gender order and the influence of religious taught affect women political participation in Southeast Asia will be explored. In this case, the author focuses on Indonesian women and the influence of Islam as the majority religion in Indonesia. This paper argues that women political participation in Indonesia, although it seems limited by cultural and the so-called Islamic values, actually has experienced significant growth, especially after the Reformation. The gender relations that formed under the New Order that enshrined women as secondary to men which also emphasised by Islam teachings about men prerogative may seem to hinder women participation in public. However, this paper found that there were some contradictions of positioning women role under the state gender order, which has led to some positive effects on women. This contributed to the rise of women participation in Indonesia politics, especially after the reformation era.*

**Keywords:** *gender, gender mainstreaming, Islam and gender, Javanese, Indonesia.*

---

### 1. Introduction

As one of the most dynamic and diverse regions in the world, Southeast Asia as a single ethnography region has offered many complexities on its societies and cultures. This has generated important discourses that intrigue many anthropology scholars to explore the region main issues in regards to its diverse cultural patterns and societies. One of the most ubiquitous issues in contemporary Southeast Asia studies are the debates on gender order and gender relations and how they have been created and shaped in Southeast Asia culture. This area of study has shown its importance from the significantly growing number of ethnographic analyses around this topic to help understanding how gender relationship operate within a particular context (Andaya, 2007). For instance, scholars may identify to what extent women in Southeast Asia can give valuable contributions to economics and politics through understanding the gender relations in this region (Karim, 1993).

Looking at Southeast Asia case, women in this region have a relatively favorable position compare to its neighbour (East and South Asia) which affected by the region kinship tradition, for example in Javanese culture. Javanese women are portrayed to have power in the domestic sphere and in nurturing children, which then generalise Indonesian women that appear to have more autonomy compared to other women in other Southeast Asian countries or Islamic cultures (Tickamyer and Kusujarti, 2012). However, the spread of world's religions teaching along with the local traditions have contributed privileging men and strengthened the female subordination (Women in Southeast Asia, 2019), in which has heavily influenced women role in Southeast Asia culture, and Indonesia is no exception. In terms of women's role in public, there has been a notable increase on women political representation in Southeast Asia (Choi, 2018), and Indonesia as the most populous country in Southeast Asia has also experienced the trend.

Therefore, departing from these arguments this paper will discuss how gender order and the influence of religious taught affect women political participation in Southeast Asia. In this case, I will focus on Indonesian women and the influence of Islam as the majority religion in Indonesia. This paper will argue that women political participation in Indonesia, although it seems limited by cultural and the so-called Islamic values, actually has experienced significant growth, especially after the Reformation. I will also argue that Islamic legitimacy does not seem to necessarily restrict women participation in politics. This has challenged the patriarchy against women that has been thriving in Indonesian society. I will then contextualise my argument particularly in referring to the rising number of Javanese Muslim women in the political direct election.

## 2. Gender order in Indonesian Context

Anthropological views account that gender orders in Indonesia engage with many areas of social life. The gender orders of the archipelago vary from ethnographic studies of kinship, marriage, and inheritance that have been analysed as adat or custom. It is important to highlight that adat or custom is quite hard to characterise as autonomous or origin domain of social practice as it is usually influenced by religious traditions (in particular Islam, but also Christianity and any other religions) in Indonesia context (Robinson, 2009). Another aspect that needed to be outlined in understanding Indonesia gender order aside from Islamic influence as the major religion of its population is the promotion of women role that was constructed by the New Order regime and the cultural values.

Gender orders in Indonesia are commonly associated with bilateral kinship. Robinson (2009) argues that the dominant form of ordering principles of kinship and marriage relations in Indonesia is 'ego centred bilateral kinship (reckoning descent through maternal and paternal lines) that incline into matrilineality (reckoning descent in the female line through mother) and matrilocality (living with the wife's kin)' (Dube, 1997, cited in Robinson, 2009, p.13). This pattern can be found in Javanese society in which kin relations expand through both parental lines and their own descendants. Thus, men and female are in an equal position in terms of reckoning relatedness and often in terms of inheritance (Robinson, 2009).

In Indonesia context, the bilateral kinship implication on gender order can be represented by the matrifocal elements that may give women sources of power in everyday relations. Women's roles in Javanese family as mothers are 'structurally, culturally and affectively central' (Robinson, 2009, p. 16). This is due to the predominantly bilateral family structure where women have more authority, influence, and responsibility in the family. For instance, women usually take control in household financial management and further having rights in taking the rights of the children when divorcing with the husband (Robinson, 2009) which depicts that women in Javanese society may seem to be equal with men. However, the emergence of Islam and the patriarchal ideology promoted by the state contradict this notion of 'overemphasising Javanese women's autonomy' (Tickamyer and Kusujarti, 2012, p.3), which these factors seem to limit the majority of Javanese women's role.

Islam association to adat or custom in fashioning gender relations tends to limit women development in Indonesia, particularly in Java. Robinson (2009) argues that Islam has accommodated the structure of gender relationship in the archipelago by regulating women's rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance alongside the customary law. On one hand, the Quran passages tend to widely correlate with the male's prerogative and women's subordination, which include the justification of polygamy, husband's right to punish wife and unequal inheritance law based on gender (Berninghausen and Kerstan, 1992, cited in Tickamyer and Kusujarti, 2012). But on the other hand, there are some other verses in Quran that interpreted to justify the equality of women and men which depicted in its basic principle that all people are equal to God. These have brought many debates about the status of women in Islam due to the mixed messages regarding this issue. In addition, discourses on to what extent Islam is merged into Indonesian law are also still ongoing which more likely to contradict women role in Indonesia. Furthermore, there is also one example of contradictory values adopted by Islamic women's groups. Religious parties like PKS (Prosperous Justice Party), have active women leadership and promote women's participation in public sphere while still emphasising women's role as mothers and obedience to their husbands. These then illustrated how Islam has layered its influence that created gender relations and ideology in Indonesia and Javanese women (Robinson, 2009).

State policy also played an important role in constructing gender role in Indonesia. During the New Order regime, the state reinforced the idea of women as mothers and wives through all the government policies (Suryakusuma, 1991, cited in Tickamyer and Kusujarti, 2012). It was organised on the patriarchal principle, where women main role is to be mothers of the state and taught that marriage and motherhood are the ultimate destinies (kodrat) of Indonesian women, while men are the head of the family. This had led the state to promote the gender ideology that women

“appropriate” roles are as housewives that deal with domestic responsibilities at home. However, a contradiction appeared as Indonesia actively participated in international forums about women equal rights and opportunities. At that time, the government started to implement policy chapters on women’s roles in national buildings, which stressed women to have peran ganda (dual role) at home and in the public. Thus, during the New Order, these contraries in the state gender role were too evident. Further, the formal public discourse defined women as mitra seajar (equal partner) and pendamping suami (the husband’s companion) that have equal rights to men, which gave some unintentional positive effects on Indonesian women themselves (Robinson, 2009). Conversely, the state concurrently authorised women responsibility on domestic chores and unable to diverge from their kodrat, which then embraced by Javanese women as part of their lives (Tickamyer and Kusujiarti, 2012).

Javanese culture has a long history of accommodating contradictory as part of the law of life. Having adjusted to contradictory in their life is even perceived as ‘a sign of power’, as the Javanese philosophy sees that powerful individual and society should be able to harmonising and coinciding with opposing viewpoints in life (Tickamyer and Kusujiarti, 2012). Thus, Javanese’s tolerance in contradiction may be part of the Javanese culture, which led to the formation of gender order that strongly associated under the New Order government. For instance, women are expected to serve well at home as mothers that make them wanita sejati (true women) in Javanese context, while also being able to work outside home due to educational opportunity, formal equality, and growing demand of cheap labour (Tickamyer and Kusujiarti, 2012). These orders present the ambivalent views on women performance in public and social spheres, yet they also being criticised for being ignorant to their domestic responsibilities as mothers. Departing from Connell argument (2002, cited in Robinson, 2009) about state i a crucial arena for gendered power relation, this gender ideology of patriarchal authority was successfully indoctrinated by the New Order regime by penetrating into common ground of existing religious customs and Javanese cultural concept of power, therefore they were ‘accepted’ by the society and became a part of Javanese heritage (Tickamyer and Kusujiarti, 2012).

### **3. Women Political Participation and Islamic Influence in Indonesia (Study case: The Javanese Muslim Women as political leaders in the direct election)**

The collapse of the New Order that led to Reformation and decentralisation has become an important political agenda that showed the rise of women’s political role in Indonesia. Under Suharto’s regime, women subordination toward men was strongly emphasized. However, at the end of the regime, women groups were started to emerged and they gained roles as key decision-makers in national politics (Robinson, 2009). Their engagement in the reconstruction of civil society in Post-Suharto era has expanded their access on to the political sphere, although they still had to face several failures in the process of enforcing women issues on political agenda. The momentum about the importance of women in Indonesian politics was the nomination of Megawati Sukarnoputri as the presidential candidate in 1999. As the only woman president candidate and later the first female president of Indonesia, Megawati has become a breakthrough for women political rights (Dewi, 2015). Therefore, as Robinson (2009) suggests that women movements in the post-Suharto have found their space in public to pursue political career and access to democratic power which have also challenged the stategender regime.

Looking at the discourse of development of women roles in Indonesia politics, the importance of Islamic influence also cannot be neglected. Islam as the majority religion in the country has been emerging as the political force. The Megawati case had raised debates on the possibility of woman to be a leader in the majority Muslim nation. Many Islamic groups against the ideas as they referred to the Quran that women are inappropriate to hold such high position as a leader (Robinson, 2009) due to their domestic nature and kodrat (Tickamyer and Kusujiarti, 2012). However, to understand Islamic views on female leadership, Dewi (2015) suggests to see the positions of two major Islamic organisations in Indonesia, which are Muhammadiyah, the Islamic reformist movement and

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). They both emphasise Muslim women's role in the family but their position has changed that now they support women who take political roles to meet current social challenges. Muhammadiyah even released a book titled *Tuntunan Menjadi Isteri Islam yang Berarti* (Guidance for Becoming Truly Islamic Wife) which in its section of Muslim women in politics, the book asserts that women's role in politics is 'underpinned in the Quran, verse 71 of At-Taubah' that accentuate Muslim women and men are expected to contribute to *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (doing good deeds and preventing bad deeds) even in the arena of politics (Dewi, 2015). This complements many religious-based texts and works on Islamic feminist, which brought up fundamental argument that 'discrimination practices arise from gender-biased interpretation of Quran and hadith which are contradictions with the true egalitarian spirit of Islam' (Robinson, 2009, p.182) that further supported by Rinaldo's finding (Rinaldo, 2010) about Islamic revival that empowers women activist in Indonesia. She found that Islamic female activists believe that Islamic piety is more than carrying out the religious obligations, but truly pious Muslims also concern about social piety including to achieve gender equality and human rights (Rinaldo, 2010).

Women political participation in contemporary Indonesia, although seems to be halted by the gender relations and Islam, has experienced significant upsurge and do not seem necessarily limited by gender order and Islam. Instead, the gender order, particularly in Javanese culture and Islam perspectives may provide a strong foundation for Javanese Muslim women to be political leaders, as suggested by Dewi (2012). This can be illustrated through the victory of Javanese Muslim political leaders, in the case of Rustriningsih, who was elected as (Dewi, 2015) the Regent of Kebumen, the district located in Central Java in 2008. Rustriningsih's victory in the local direct election in Kebumen has showed how Javanese Muslim women can utilise their gender role as women in the society and their Islamic piety as the strategy on gaining political power. For instance, Rustiningsih embraced the norm of Islamic piety by adopted *kerudung* (veil), went on the pilgrimage and got married. The latter made her be portrayed as *wanita sejati* (true women) in Javanese society in which women have to serve well at home as wife and mother. Her marriage and her Islamic piety have helped her build strong political confidence because 'she was able to fit the normative social expectations of Javanese Muslim Women' (Dewi, 2012, p. 179) then gain popularity in the Kebumen regency where most of the Muslims are affiliated with NU, thus led her to a victory as the Regent.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper explores the long history of gender orders construction in Indonesia. As Connell (2002, p.105) suggests that 'state power is a resource for a struggle for hegemony in gender and hegemonic masculinity is a resource in the struggle for state power', gender orders in contemporary Indonesia, particularly in Java, has been also structured through the heavy influence of the New Order hegemony along with Islam values and customs. The gender relations that formed under the New Order that enshrined women as secondary to men which also emphasised by Islam teachings about men prerogative may seem to hinder women participation in public. However, this paper found that there were some contradictions of positioning women role under the state gender order, which has led to some positive effects on women. This contributed to the rise of women participation in Indonesia politics, especially after the reformation era. The case study mentioned above also illustrated how Javanese Muslim Women have achieved their victory in local politics by using their identity as Javanese and Muslim Women while still fulfilled their role as women according to gender order in Indonesia context. This has proved that gender order and Islam justification about women role do not necessarily restrict women to participate in public. Instead, they provide string foundation for female Javanese Muslim roles in political sphere in contemporary Indonesia (Dewi, 2015).

#### References

- Andaya, B.W., 2007. Studying Women and Gender in Souteast Asia. *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 4(1), pp.113-136.
- Anon 2019. Women in Southeast Asia. [online] Asia Society. Available at: <<https://asiasociety.org/education/women-southeast-asia>> [Accessed 20 Apr. 2019].

- Choi, N., 2018. Women's political pathways in Southeast Asia. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, pp.1-25.
- Connell, R.W., 2002. *Gender*. Cambridge: Wiley.
- Dewi, K.H., 2012. Javanese Women and Islam: Identity Formation since the Twentieth Century. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1(1), p.32.
- Dewi, K.H., 2015. *Indonesian Women and Local Politics: Islam, Gender and Networks in Post-Suharto Indonesia*. [online] NUS Press Pte Ltd. Available at: <<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/49004>> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2019].
- Karim, W.J., 1993. Gender Studies in Southeast Asia. *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 21(1), pp.98-113.
- Rinaldo, R., 2010. The Islamic revival and women's political subjectivity in Indonesia. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 33(4), pp.422-431.
- Robinson, K.M., 2009. *Gender, Islam, and democracy in Indonesia / . ASAA women in Asia series*. Milton Park, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Tickamyer, A.R. and Kusujarti, S., 2012. *Power, Change, and Gender Relations in Rural Java*. [online] Ohio University Press. Available at: <<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/13472>> [Accessed 21 Apr. 2019].

