

Islamic Civilization and Women's Rights A Historical Review of Women's Position and Contribution in Science, Politics, and Family

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Abstract: This study is motivated by the stigma that Islam limits women's roles to the domestic sphere, which often ignores the historical fact that Islamic civilization has a rich history of women's contributions in the fields of science, politics, and family. The purpose of this study is to historically review the position and role of women in the three main domains of Islamic civilization while reanalyzing key fiqh concepts that are often misused to limit women's public participation. The methods used were historical-analytical literature study and critical discourse analysis, tracing 40 primary and secondary sources in the form of scientific books, accredited journal articles, and reputable proceedings. The results of the study reveal that Muslim women have made significant contributions, ranging from hadith narrators such as Aisha r.a., scientists, founders of large institutions such as Fatima al-Fihri, to sovereign political figures such as Syajarat ad-Durr and Sultana Aceh. The analysis shows that restrictions on women's public roles in post-classical fiqh traditions are more influenced by cultural patriarchal bias ('urf) than by absolute theological foundations. In the archipelago, the Aisiyah organization, through the Dakwah Bil Hal movement and the figure of Prof. Siti Baroroh Baried as the first female professor in Indonesia, proves the transformative role of women in education and health. The novelty of this research lies in the critical reinterpretation of the concepts of qawwamah and wilayah, which are oriented towards benefit and justice, as well as the strengthening of the view of women as vital agents of change in the domestic and public spheres in Tamadun Islam Nusantara, contributing significantly to contemporary gender and Islamic studies.

Keywords: islamic civilization, women's rights, aisiyah, siti baroroh baried, gender fiqh, reinterpretation.



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Introduction

Discourse on women's rights and position in Islam is often trapped in a sharp polarity between Western narratives that highlight the limitations of women's domestic roles and rigid, literal interpretations of Islamic texts. This dominant view, which often reduces women to the status of 'konco wingking' or 'backseat partner' in Javanese terms, tends to reflect patriarchal cultural biases and static interpretations of fiqh, which ignore the rich, dynamic, and complex history of Islamic civilization. In reality, there is a striking contradiction between the basic teachings of Islam, which place women in a position of honor and respect, and contemporary social practices that often significantly limit their roles. This raises fundamental academic concerns about how the position of women in Islam is understood and applied.

The Islamic Reformation in the 7th century brought revolutionary changes in women's rights, including property rights, inheritance rights, the right to marry and divorce, and, most fundamentally, the right to seek knowledge (thalab al-ilm). The Qur'an explicitly affirms spiritual equality and moral responsibility between men and women before God, with piety as the only criterion for superiority, as stated in verses such as 49:13 and 3:195. The history of the golden age of Islam (8th to 13th centuries AD) also shows the active participation of Muslim women in various fields, ranging from science, politics, to social affairs. An important example is the figure of 'Aisha bint Abu Bakr, who is not only known as the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, but also as a faqihah and a major source of hadith and Islamic law. In addition, figures such as Fatima al-Fihri, who founded Al-Qarawiyyin University in Morocco, demonstrate the leadership role of women in the development of major institutions that are still influential today.

However, the gap between historical narratives that empower women and contemporary practices that limit their public space is a central issue in this study. The transmission of knowledge and female leadership that once existed indicates the need for a re-examination of gender discourse in Islam using a comprehensive historical approach, rather than relying solely on literal textual interpretations that are detached from the socio-cultural context. In particular, key fiqh concepts such as qawwamah (male leadership in the household) and wilayah (public leadership) need to be reinterpreted to be in line with the principles of justice and universal benefit in Islam.

In the context of the archipelago, the spirit of progressive and transformative Islamic renewal is embodied by women's organizations such as Aisiyyah, which was founded in 1917 as the largest and oldest Islamic women's organization in Indonesia. Aisiyyah consistently fights for education, health, and women's empowerment based on progressive Islamic values. Figures such as Prof. Siti Baroroh Baried, the first female professor in Indonesia and an influential activist, symbolize the success of this movement. This reality enriches our understanding of women's contributions as agents of change in the Islamic civilization of the archipelago, which is rooted in tradition while responding to the dynamics of the times. Scientifically, studies on the position of women in Islam are still divided into three main schools of thought: conservative textualists who emphasize rigid interpretations and restrictions on women's roles, especially in the public sphere; historical moderates who recognize women's roles in education and society but still limit them to political leadership; and reformists/feminists who critically reject patriarchal interpretations and assert women's equal rights and public participation. Previous studies have been limited in their integration of historical, theological, and sociocultural approaches to overcome existing rigidity and interpretive bias.

The novelty of this research lies in the use of a historical discourse critique framework, which allows researchers to critically collect and analyze historical evidence, as well as formulate reinterpretations of key fiqh concepts with due regard to the principles of justice and universal benefit. This approach connects the legacy of classical Islamic civilization with current practices of women's empowerment, particularly through Islamic movements in the archipelago such as Aisiyyah. This study opens up new horizons in understanding the rights and roles of Muslim women, not only theoretically but also practically in a socio-cultural context.

This research hypothesis states that reinterpreting the concepts of qawwamah and wilayah based on the principles of al-adalah (justice) and mashlahah (public interest) enables a paradigm shift in understanding the role of women in Islam as agents of social and intellectual change, particularly in the

unique and pluralistic archipelago. The main objectives of this study are to analyze the theological basis of women's rights in Islam and their historical implementation in the fields of science, politics, and economics; to identify the significant contributions of Muslim women during the golden age of Islam as illustrations of women's authority; and to examine the role and contributions of the Aisyiyah organization in advancing women's empowerment in the public and domestic spheres in Indonesia. Through this study, it is hoped that it will strengthen the understanding and practice of women's empowerment based on authentic and contextual Islamic values.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a historical-analytical literature review method reinforced by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The historical approach serves to trace and analyze the traces of women's roles in various periods of Islamic civilization while identifying anomalies that arise, such as cases of female leadership, which often contradict the dominant narrative in fiqh literature. The CDA approach is used to evaluate and deconstruct the language and narrative structure in post-classical fiqh literature, which has reproduced gender inequality, while exploring alternative narratives that challenge the status quo of this discourse, especially the narrative of the Aisyiyah movement. The types of data used include primary and secondary data. Primary data consists of translations and reviews of classical hadith books such as Sahih Bukhari and Sunan Ibn Majah, which contain accounts of female figures, historical records from Islamic dynasties such as the Mamluks and Fatimids that document female leadership, and biographies of female scientists. Secondary data consists of scientific books, accredited journal articles, and leading proceedings, with a total of more than 40 references discussing gender reinterpretation in Islam, the history of the Aisyiyah organization, and biographies of figures such as Prof. Siti Baroroh Baried.

Data collection was carried out through in-depth literature studies. Data was collected systematically from authoritative references selected based on the credibility of the authors and the quality of the publications (Sinta/Scopus accredited journals and renowned university publishers). In addition, a detailed biographical catalog was created for each female figure mentioned, serving as a basis for further comparison and analysis. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, by comparing historical narratives from various classical and contemporary sources, for example, comparing classical Middle Eastern historians with modern interpretations from authors such as Fatima Mernissi and Amina Wadud, to ensure the consistency and credibility of the findings.

Data analysis was conducted in three main integrated stages. First, historical data reduction to sort and focus on information related to women's participation and authority outside patriarchal norms, grouped into categories of scientific fields (science and hadith), politics/military, and economics/social (waqf). Second, critical narrative analysis to identify theological arguments that support or limit women's public roles and evaluate why anomalies such as sultana or muftiyah leadership are ignored in dominant fiqh. Third, synthesis and reinterpretation of findings based on the principles of mashlahah (public interest) and al-adalah (justice) in Islam, particularly with regard to progressive Islamic views in the Aisyiyah movement, as well as revised concepts of qawwamah and wilayah to comprehensively address the research objectives. This research was conducted with flexible time and place, given the nature of the literature study based on the collection of historical and academic sources from various libraries and reliable digital databases.

Results and Discussion

Women's Intellectual Authority: The Traditions of Sanad and Ijazah in Classical Islamic Science

Islamic civilization was built on the strict traditions of *sanad* (chain of transmission) and *Ijazah* (teaching license). In this system, intellectual authority was based entirely on competence, not gender. Women played a central role, especially in the transmission of Hadith, which was the most fundamental science after the Qur'an.

- a. The Central Role of Muhaddithah and Faqihah
Aisha bint Abu Bakr r.a. became the main role model. She narrated more than 2,000 hadiths and

is known as the highest reference in Fiqh. Even great male scholars such as Abu Musa al-Ash'ari testified that they never had any problems in Hadith or Fiqh unless they found the answer in Aisha (Al-Qardhawi, 1995). Her status was not merely that of the Prophet's wife, but also an independent *muftiyah* and *faqihah*. In the post-companion period, this tradition continued. Important figures such as Shuhdah al-Baghdadiyyah (12th century CE) were nicknamed *Fakhr an-Nisa'* (Pride of Women) because of their authority. Shuhdah gave *ijazah* to hundreds of male and female students, which shows that the *chain* of Hadith knowledge flowing through a woman was considered valid and authoritative (Ansari, 1999). The presence of Zainab bint al-Kamal (13th century CE) in Damascus, who taught *Sahih al-Bukhari* in the grand mosque, also affirmed that the public space of the mosque was an open learning space for female authority.

b. Contributions to the Exact Sciences, Medicine, and the Arts

Women's intellectual contributions are not limited to religious studies. Lubna of Córdoba (10th century AD), during the Umayyad Caliphate in Andalusia, was known as a poet, mathematician, and grammarian. She served as secretary and librarian at the court of Al-Hakam II, overseeing thousands of manuscripts and recognized for her intelligence in mathematics (*al-hisab*) (Waitkus, 2007). This is evidence that women achieved the highest professional positions in administration and the exact sciences. In the field of medicine, women served as midwives, nurses, and even doctors, often treating other women, but sometimes also treating male patients. During the Fatimid and Abbasid eras, there are records of women involved in compiling medicinal recipes and performing minor surgical procedures (Khalifa, 2019). These contributions confirm that science and professionalism were not limited by gender during the heyday of Islamic civilization.

Women in Politics and Economics: From Sultanas to Waqf Administrators

Although the fiqh debate on *the al-'ammah* (highest leadership of the state) has always been a point of controversy, women's political practices in Islamic civilization were far more extensive and powerful than is acknowledged in the dominant *fiqh* narrative.

a. Sovereign Political Leadership and Patronage

History is filled with examples of women who held the highest power as queens or sultanas. Among them: First, Syajarat ad-Durr (Egypt, 13th century AD). She was the only woman to officially rule Egypt as a sultana. Her reign in 1250 AD marked an important transition from the Ayyubid Dynasty to the Mamluks. She was recognized as a legitimate ruler, her name was mentioned in Friday *sermons*, and it was printed on coins (Holt, 1995). Her case is strong historical evidence that female supreme leadership, although rare, was a recognized fact in the classical Islamic period. And the Four Sultanas of the Sultanate of Aceh (17th century AD) such as: Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah, Nurul Alam Naqiatuddin Syah, Inayat Syah Zakiatuddin Syah, and Kamalat Syah Zinatuddin Syah. Their reign lasted for about half a century (1641-1699 AD). Their existence demonstrates local adaptation (custom) that prevailed over the *fiqh* objections of the time (Badran, 2009).

b. Economic Control and Institutional Development Through Waqf

One of the greatest strengths of women in Islamic civilization was their legitimate economic control, thanks to inheritance and property rights guaranteed by the Qur'an (Qur'an 4:7). These rights enabled women to become powerful philanthropists and administrators of public *waqf* (endowments). The Impact of Women's Philanthropy: Royal women (*Khātūn*) and wealthy women in the Abbasid and Seljuk eras established thousands of public institutions: mosques, madrasas (schools), *ribats* (hostels), and hospitals. These projects were often managed and funded entirely by women's personal wealth. The management of *waqf* required managerial, accounting, and property supervision skills, indicating that women held significant executive positions in social and infrastructure development (Qasim, 2018; Patel, 2017). Through *waqf*, women effectively led large-scale public projects, filling important socio-economic leadership roles.

Aisyyiah and Tamadun Islam Nusantara: Corrective and Emancipatory Movements

In Indonesia, the discourse on women and public roles reached a turning point through the Islamic reform movement. Aisyyiah, which was founded on 27 Rajab 1335 H (1917 AD) by Nyai Ahmad

Dahlan, was the first and largest modernist Islamic women's organization in the archipelago.

a. Dakwah Bil Hal and the Institutionalization of Education

Aisiyiyah was born in response to three major challenges: (1) the rigidity of traditional *fiqh* that restricted women, (2) poverty and ignorance caused by colonialism, and (3) the influence of Christianization through education. Aisiyiyah took the approach of *Dakwah Bil Hal* (preaching through concrete actions), focusing on institutional development as a means of preaching and emancipation (Nasir, 2014). First, Educational Reform. Aisiyiyah pioneered formal education for women, launching girls' schools, *Busthanul Athfal* (the first modern kindergarten), and teacher training colleges. The goal was to combat illiteracy and the view that women were only worthy of informal education (Said, 2010). This education not only taught religion, but also general knowledge and life skills, in line with the principles of *Progressive Islam* (Hidayat, 2022). Second, Health Network. Aisiyiyah built an extensive network of clinics, polyclinics, and maternity hospitals throughout Indonesia. This was a concrete effort to address maternal and child health issues and raise the standard of living of the community, making the organization a key actor in national social welfare development (Mulyadi, 2021).

b. Prof. Siti Baroroh Baried: Symbol of Intellectual Victory

The work of Prof. Siti Baroroh Baried (1921-1994) was the intellectual peak of the Aisiyiyah movement. She was not only a persistent Aisiyiyah and Muhammadiyah activist, but also a leading scholar in the field of Arabic literature. In 1964, she was appointed as the first female professor in Indonesia by Gadjah Mada University (UGM) (Baried, 2003). Baried's achievement was both a symbolic and substantive victory. Symbolically, she shattered the myth that Muslim women were incapable of achieving the highest scientific authority in the public sphere. Substantively, she used her academic platform to continue advocating for women's education and rights. Her success confirmed that Tamadun Islam Nusantara, through the Aisiyiyah organization, actively encouraged and celebrated women's intelligence and intellectual authority, echoing the spirit of the classical *muhaddithah*.

c. Advocacy and Changes to Family Law

Aisiyiyah plays an active role in legal reform in Indonesia, most significantly in its support for Marriage Law No. 1 of 1974 and the Compilation of Islamic Law (KHI). Through representation and lobbying, Aisiyiyah succeeded in incorporating principles that are more equitable and oriented towards the protection of women, such as restrictions on polygamy and the protection of women's rights after divorce. This is a form of progressive political leadership and contemporary *ijtihad*, placing *mashlahah* above rigid *fiqh* traditions (Supriyadi, 2023).

Critique of Discourse and Reinterpretation of Key Fiqh

Historical findings on women's contributions to science and politics fundamentally contradict several post-classical *fiqh* concepts that limit women's public roles. Therefore, a discourse critique of key concepts is necessary.

a. Reinterpretation of Qawwamah (Husband's Leadership)

The concept of *Qawwamah* (found in QS. An-Nisa '4:34) is often interpreted as the absolute superiority of men. Conservative interpretations interpret *bima faddhalallahu ba'dhum 'ala ba'dh* (with what Allah has favored some of them over others) as the essential (*dhahir*) superiority of men over women. Criticism and Reinterpretation: First, Historical Contextualization. Wadud (1999) and Al-Jamil (2021) argue that *qawwamah* must be understood in the context of financial protection and responsibility. Verse 4:34 states: *wa bima anfaqu min amwalihim* (and because they have spent some of their wealth). This indicates that the husband's leadership is tied to economic obligations. If the husband is unable or unwilling to provide, the foundation of *qawwamah* as " " functionally collapses. Second, Functional vs. Structural Leadership. *Qawwamah* should be seen as functional leadership within the family unit, not structural superiority that can be extrapolated to all public spheres. In the modern context, where women also become breadwinners, *qawwamah* can be interpreted as *ta'awun* (mutual assistance) and the division of roles based on competence and mutual agreement (*mashlahah*) (Hassan, 1999).

b. Reinterpretation of the al-'Ammah Domain (Public/State Leadership)

The *fiqh* discourse that limits women's leadership in the state is often based on the Hadith *lan*

yufliha qawmun wallaw amrahum imra'atan (a people will not prosper if they entrust their affairs to women) (Ibn Majah, Hadith No. 224). Criticism and Reinterpretation: First, analysis of the context of the Hadith. This Hadith was narrated in the specific context when the Prophet heard the news of the coronation of the daughter of Kisra in Persia. This Hadith was strongly criticized by Mernissi (1993), who pointed out problems in its *chain of transmission* and emphasized that its historical context was a criticism of the corrupt Persian system, not a universal prohibition on Muslim women's leadership. Second, Historical Evidence of Anomalies. The existence of Sultana Syajarat ad-Durr and four Sultanas of Aceh is strong evidence that Islamic political practice historically accommodated this anomaly. Third, Public Interest (*Mashlahah*). The highest principle of *fiqh* is *mashlahah*. If a woman's leadership is proven to bring justice, prosperity, and welfare to the people, then such leadership must be supported ethically and theologically, regardless of differences in *fiqh* views on *the region* (Zainuddin, 2020). Tamadun Islam Nusantara, through its support for women's leadership in various public institutions, has chosen this principle of *mashlahah*.

Conclusion

Based on historical-analytical studies and discourse criticism of forty scientific sources, this study concludes that *Islamic civilization* fundamentally provides a solid theological foundation for the equality of women's rights and obligations. Within the framework of *nafs wahidah*, women are positioned as true partners of men in building civilization. Historical facts from the golden age of Islam (8th–13th centuries AD) prove the significant public role of women—as scholars, educators, founders of educational institutions, political leaders, and economic managers. This condition shows that the restrictions on women's roles that emerged in post-classical *fiqh* were more influenced by patriarchal cultural bias (*'urf*) than by purely theological principles. The implications of these findings emphasize the importance of reinterpreting the concepts of *qawwamah* (leadership) and *al-'ammah* (public leadership) towards a functional and *maslahat* paradigm, as well as strengthening modern Muslim women's movements such as Aisyiyah, which have proven successful in reviving Islamic intellectual traditions and mainstreaming education, health, and family law reform. The limitations of this study lie in the scope of sources, which are predominantly secondary literature and do not fully cover empirical field data, so that the generalization of the results is still conceptual. Therefore, further research is recommended to explore the field of leadership practices and the contributions of contemporary Muslim women in various socio-religious sectors.

Thus, this study confirms that Muslim women are agents of change and drivers of civilization who play a strategic role in both the domestic and public spheres. The synergy between the two forms the theological and social basis for a more holistic reinterpretation of religious texts, in order to realize *Islam rahmatan lil 'alamin*, which honors human dignity without gender bias.

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