

Etin Anwar

*Sexing the Prayer:
The Politics of Ritual and
Feminist Activism in
Indonesia*

The Friday congregational prayer led by a woman, Amina Wadud, in New York City on March 18, 2005, is a celebratory yet controversial event.¹ Muslim feminists in America, such as Amina Wadud and Asra Q. Nomani, perceive the woman-led *Jum'ā* prayer as a stepping stone to gender equality and a challenge to women's place as second class citizens, excluded from the sphere of spiritual authority.² This event is, indeed, celebratory because it is the first time in the history of Islamic civilization that a woman led a *Jum'ā* prayer in front of a mixed congregation in public. Its powerful effect reached as far as Indonesia.³ For over fourteen centuries, men led all ritual prayers in public,

1 Intense scholarly and theological-legal interest in the implications of this prayer is evidenced by continuing attention to it in academic papers. For example, Juliane Hammer, "Performing Gender Justice: The 2005 Woman-Led Prayer in New York," *Contemporary Islam* 4, no. 1 (2010): 91–116; Juliane Hammer, "Gender Justice in a Prayer: American Muslim Women's Exegesis, Authority, and Leadership," *Hawwa* 8, no. 1 (2010): 26–54; Simonetta Calderini, "Contextualizing Arguments about Female Ritual Leadership (Women Imāms) in Classical Islamic Sources," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2009): 5–32; and Laury Silvers and Ahmed Elewa, "I am one of the People: A Survey and Analysis of Legal Arguments on Woman-Led Prayer in Islam," *Journal of Law and Religion* 26, no. 1 (2010–11): 141–171.

2 Asra Nomani invited Amina Wadud to lead a mixed congregational prayer in New York City that eventually took place on March 18, 2005. Thomas Bartlett, "The Quiet Heretic" [on Amina Wadud, professor of Islamic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University], *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 8, 2005, Section: The Faculty, vol. 51, Issue 49, A10, <http://chronicle.com> (accessed February 15, 2009). See also Asra Q. Nomani, *Standing Alone in Mecca: An American Woman's Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005), 226.

3 I would like to thank Dr. Nurlena Rifai Hassan, Dr. Amani Lubis, Dr. Musdah Mulia, Dr. Nurasiah Harahap, Ida Rasyidah, Neng Dara Alfiah, MA, Yoyoh Yusroh, Kyai Husein, Inayah Rohmaniyyah, MA, Dr. Siti Ruhayini Zuhayatin, Professor Amin Abdullah, Dr. Ema Marhumah, Ida Ahdiyah, and Jarot Wahyudi for their generous assistance and friendship during my research in Jakarta, Cirebon, and Yogyakarta in 2009.

whereas women's leadership (*imāmat al-mar'a*) of a mixed congregation in the public sphere was nonexistent. Male leadership in Islamic ritual prayer was a mainstream practice, along with their maintaining control of women, subjugating them in the public domain, and relegating them as sexual and domestic beings in the private sphere.

Although ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*) is obligatory for both men and women and is considered to be the foundation of Muslim religiosity, the performative practice of prayer is embedded in patriarchal cultural norms in which only men are empowered to lead the prayer and have the power to express themselves through public piety. Embedded in the social and cultural practice of prayer is its politicization through the discursive narratives of the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition. As the Qur'an is silent about male leadership in prayer, Muslims turn to the hadith and the example of Muhammad's life as a source of religious legitimacy. The epistemic production of prayer is well documented in the legal, ethical, theological, exegetical, and mystical narratives, but not in the Qur'an itself.

The politics of prayer in public as a male domain is nurtured through the gender divide between the social, cultural, and religious roles of men and women: men are responsible for the public sphere and are the leaders of the family, while women are the leaders of the household. As men's grip over power has been cemented in all aspects of private and public spheres and has been embedded throughout history, a woman breaking the cycle of masculine power in ritual leadership is regarded as "sin," "defiance," and "religious innovation (*bid'a*)" as echoed by institutions, like Majma' al-Fiqh al-Islāmī, and by scholars, like Yūṣuf al-Qaradāwī, whose religious edict (*fatwa*) is respected, even in Indonesia.⁴

In this paper, I will first discuss the theological discourses around women's leadership in prayer (*imāmat al-mar'a*) or lack thereof. Then, I will examine the existing assumptions about women, upon which the prohibition of women's leadership in prayer is founded. Finally, I will present some feminist responses to the discourse of women's leadership in prayer in Indonesia. Throughout this paper, I will reiterate what Muslim women scholars such as Amani Lubis,⁵ Musdah Mulia,⁶ Yoyoh Yusroh,⁷ and Neng Dara Affiah⁸ say about the nature

4 Shaykh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, March 16, 2005. "A Collection of Fatwas and Legal Opinions on the issue of women leading prayer," April 5, 2005, http://mac.abc.se/~onest/d/fwlp_e.pdf (accessed October 26, 2011).

of women's leadership in prayer and its relevance within Indonesian contexts.⁹

*The Theological Foundation of
Imāmat al-Mar'a and Controversies
Surrounding It*

In this section, I will discuss the theological foundation of female leadership in prayer. The debate over female leadership in prayer has its root in the interpretation of the prophetic tradition. Both legalistically minded (male) and feminist-oriented scholars refer to the hadith as the theological point of departure for whether or not women could lead the congregational prayer for a mixed group of followers.¹⁰ The theological foundation of the male imam is not incidental but is constructed through the institutionalization of hadith that promotes men's leadership in prayer, such as in one of the hadiths coming from Jābir, and is narrated by Ibn Mājah: "Let absolutely no woman lead a man in prayer."¹¹ Although al-Nawāwi characterizes this hadith as weak in transmission (*isnād*), the *fiqh* (the science of understanding jurisprudence) manuals endorse the institution of a male imam in all prayer, and this becomes a hegemonic practice. Both *salaf* and *khalaf*¹² scholars affirm the prohibition of women becoming imams in front of men and boys. If they do pray in this manner, their prayer will not be accepted. Hermaphrodites are also forbidden to pray "behind" women, but women's prayer "behind" the former will be accepted (by God). If a woman prays along with men and she stands at the end of the line of men or in the male line, it is legally considered *makrūh*

5 Amani Lubis is currently Professor of Arabic Literature at the Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic State University in Jakarta.

6 Musdah Mulia is Professor of Islamic Law at the Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic State University in Jakarta.

7 Yoyoh Yusroh was a Member of Parliament from the Justice Party. The interview was conducted in June 2009. She passed away on May 21, 2011.

8 Neng Dara Affiah currently serves as Commissioner in the National Commission on the Violence against Women in Jakarta.

9 I would like to thank Marcia Hermansen, the editor of this book, for her detailed comments and thoughtful suggestions.

10 Any ritual prayer is potentially congregational and may be performed in a group following the leadership of an imām (prayer leader). But, some prayers are better performed solitarily.

11 Al-Imām Abū Zakariyyā Muḥyī al-Dīn b. Sharaf al-Nawāwī, *al-Majmū': Sharḥ al-Muḥadḍḥab*, ed. Muḥammad Najīb al-Muṭṭī'i, vol. 4 (Jeddah: Maktaba al-Irshād, n.d.), 223.

(abominable), and her prayer is not acceptable. Similarly, the prayer of any man who prays beside her is not accepted as well. As a general rule, it is not permitted for women to perform *adhān* (the call to prayer) and *iqāma* (the second call to prayer),¹³ let alone to lead the prayer.¹⁴

Husein Muhammad, a male Muslim feminist from a Pesantren (Indonesia's Islamic boarding school) setting,¹⁵ however, documents the competing theological voices regarding the issue of a female *imāma* in the prophetic tradition. Prior to Amina Wadud's spectacle of leading the publicized prayer in New York City, he argued that the theological foundation of female *imāma* was well founded in Islamic tradition. Normally, a mixed congregational prayer is led by a male imam, and women pray behind him. The theological view of men as the leaders of prayer comes from the hadith, among which the following is narrated by Jābir and verified by Bayhaqī:¹⁶

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) talked to us. He said that a woman cannot serve as an imam for a man. If the man prays behind the woman unknowingly, then it is acceptable to pray behind her. If he prays behind her unknowingly and subsequently he comes to recognize this due to the fact that there is some evidence indicating that she is a woman, then he has to redo the prayer. A man cannot pray behind a hermaphrodite because this person could be a woman. The hermaphrodite cannot pray behind another hermaphrodite because the hermaphrodite congregant [*makmūm*] could be a male, and the imam a female.

Although the hadith from Jābir as narrated by Ibn Mājah and Bayhaqī is weak in transmission, it has become widely accepted as establishing the norm of male leadership in prayer.¹⁷ Traditional Islamic scholars agree with the prohibition of a woman leading men in both obligatory and recommended prayers.

12 *Salaf* refers to the pious predecessors, including Mālik b. Anas, Abū Hanīfa, Sufyān, Aḥmad, Dāwūd, and scholars of Medina; *khalaf* refers to scholars after the scholars who follow the *salaf*. See al-Imām al-Nawāwī, *al-Majmū': Sharḥ al-Muḥadḍḥab*, 223.

13 *Adhān* (the call to prayer) is performed to announce the arrival of the prayer time, whereas *iqāma* refers to the call to prayer immediately before the actual prayer is performed.

14 Jamāl al-Dīn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Nisā'* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1996), 64–65.

15 A pesantren is an Indonesian Islamic boarding school. This institution is usually head by a Kyai who is equivalent to a religious scholar ('ulema). In the present time, some modern pesantrens have formal educational systems, whereas the traditional ones still maintain informal educational settings.

16 Al-Nawāwī, *al-Majmū'*, vol. 4, 223.

Progressive scholars, such as Muhammad and Najwah,¹⁸ however, disagree. They founded their analysis of the permissibility of women's leadership in prayer (*imāmat al-mar'a*) on the basis of the hadith in the *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*. Abū Thawr argues that a man's prayer behind a woman is acceptable and valid.¹⁹ Qāḍī Abī Ṭayyib and al-'Abdarī also support the validity of women's leadership in prayer (*imāmat al-mar'a*). These scholars' opinion comes from the hadith as follows:²⁰

The Prophet Muhammad visited [Umm Waraqa's] house, gave her a *mu'adhdhin*, a person who calls for prayer, and commanded Umm Waraqa to become the leader of the prayer in her household. Abdurrahman said that, "he indeed saw that the *mu'adhdhin* [a person who calls to prayer] was an old man" [a person not sexually potent].

Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Ṣan'ānī argues that this hadith is a foundation for the validity of a woman's leadership in prayer (*imāmat al-mar'a*) in her own house, even with the presence of a man. In addition, the Prophet's permission included the fact that Umm Waraqa led the prayer with an old man, a young male slave, and a female slave as her *ma'mūm* (whoever prays behind the imam).²¹

In order for the norms set by the hadith to be accepted, there must be verification of the event and the chain of transmission. Najwah, a female scholar of hadith, argues that although Umm Waraqa's hadith supports woman's leadership in prayer, the chain of the transmitters of the hadith is problematic because the credibility of one transmitter (Laylā bint Mālīk) was not known, and she only transmitted the hadith to one person, al-Walīd.²² This hadith is also categorized as *maqṭū'*, which means the chain is not directly connected to what the Prophet Muhammad did, but to Umm Waraqa. Despite both criticisms, Najwah, as a scholar of hadith, points out that the reliability of Laylā bint Mālīk is *maqḅūl* (accepted) among the hadith transmitters. This acceptability provides a theological foundation for a woman leading a man in the prayer.

17 Ibid., and Nurun Najwah, "Pembacaan Ulang terhadap Imamah Sholat Perempuan," *Musawa: Journal Studi Gender and Islam* 6, no. 2 (2008): 225.

18 Nurun Najwah is a lecturer and an expert of hadith at the Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University in Yogyakarta.

19 Al-Nawāwī, *al-Majmū'*, vol. 4, 223.

20 Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, vol. 1, Ḥadīth 592 (Cairo: Dār al-Hadīth, 1999), 284.

21 Imām Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Ṣan'ānī, *Subul al-Salām*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār Ḥiyyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabi, n.d.), 35.

Amani Lubis, a female lecturer and an expert of Arabic literature, however, doubts that Umm Waraqa's example could be universally applicable to all Muslim women.²³ She argues that while the chain of transmitters of Umm Waraqa's hadith is valid, the content is situational. A woman's leadership in prayer (*imāmat al-mar'ā*) is not theological and customarily acceptable because Muslims are obliged to observe the Prophet Muhammad's examples closely and firmly.

Although the prophetic tradition offers two models of leadership in prayer, male leadership in prayer becomes institutionalized through the theological apparatus of the performative role of men as imams in the public sphere, especially in the mosque,²⁴ where obligatory prayer in a congregation is regarded to confer more reward by twenty-seven degrees.²⁵ Najwah views this hadith to have been applicable to men, whereas women are enjoined to pray in their houses.²⁶ While men are commanded to observe the congregational prayer on Friday (Q 62:9),²⁷ women are exempted from going to the mosque. Yet, several hadith record that women are required to bathe before attending prayer in the mosque.

These competing views about women's leadership in prayer generate contradictory claims of gender hierarchy and egalitarianism. Gender hierarchy argues that "the natural difference between men and women entails ontological, moral, spiritual, financial, social, cultural, and political difference; whereas gender egalitarianism argues for an intrinsic equality between men and women before God and their fellow humans, regardless of sexual and gender differences."²⁸ A hierarchically gendered culture, however, has been dominant since the majority of the Muslim scholars, jurists, mystics, and philosophers who upheld the production and the maintenance of gender culture have been men. Ritual prayer is defined according to what meets the public norms of Islam.

22 Nurun Najwah, "Pembacaan Ulang terhadap Imamah Sholat Perempuan," *Musawa: Journal Studi Gender and Islam* 6, no. 2 (2008): 219.

23 Interview with Amani Lubis in Jakarta on June 16, 2009.

24 Najwah, "Pembacaan Ulang terhadap Imamah Sholat Perempuan," 228–229.

25 Imām 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Muslim al-Hajjājī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, vol. 2 (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007), 149–152.

26 *Ibid.*, 1472–1475, 491.

27 Yusuf Ali's translation of al-Jumu'a 62:9 states: "O ye who believe! When the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday (the Day of Assembly), hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of Allah, and leave off business (and traffic): That is best for you if ye but knew!"

28 Etin Anwar, *Gender and Self in Islam* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1.

Any defiance of the public norm faces a harsh consequence. For example, Abū Dawūd reported that ‘Umar commanded people to arrest both Umm Waraqa’s male and female slaves who had left the city after the death of their master and ordered both slaves to be punished in Medina.²⁹ Abū Dawūd did not elaborate on what caused both slaves to be punished. The narrative of both slaves being punished is, however, mentioned in the context of the hadith, which relates to the *imāma* of Umm Waraqa in prayer. Not only was Umm Waraqa’s *imāma* granted by the Prophet, it was also characterized by her excellence and fluency in Qur’anic recitation. Both slaves reportedly used to pray behind Umm Waraqa until her death. In any case, accounts of the slaves receiving harsh chastisement for exercising what the Prophet Muhammad implicitly supported, raises the question of whether Muslims could hold fundamentally different opinions about rituals.

The existing gap between hierarchical and egalitarian views of women’s *imāma* in prayer reflects the conservative and moderate strains of Islam in Indonesia. The Indonesian Scholars’ Assembly issued a fatwa (a juristic opinion) in 2005 that women’s leadership (*imāmat al-mar’a*) is *ḥarām* (forbidden). The arguments used to support the prohibition of women leading prayer include:³⁰

- First, Muhammad commanded Umm Waraqa to become an *imam* only for her family.
- Second, Muhammad said in another hadith that “let not be a woman be an imam for men.”
- Third, when the *imam* makes a mistake in prayer, men correct the mistake differently than women. Men exclaim “*subhānallāh*” (“Praise be to God”) aloud while women clap their hands.
- Fourth, the best row for men in prayer is the first row and the worst is in the last row, whereas the best row for women is the farthest row in the back of men and the worst row is the first row after men.
- Fifth, dogs, women, and donkeys are said to be distractions in prayer.³¹
- Sixth, the best prayer for a woman is performed in her room, inside her house.

29 Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1999), Hadith 591, 284.

30 <http://www.republika.co.id/berita/dunia-islam/fatwa/11/06/20/ln3biv-fatwa-mui-hukum-wanita-menjadi-imam-shalat> (accessed March 17, 2013).

31 There are hadith reports attesting to all of the above as recorded in “The Book of Prayer” in Imām ‘Abd al-Husayn Muslim al-Hajjā, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, vol. 1 (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007), 483–621.

- › Finally, the consensus of the companions (*ṣaḥāba*) is that there had never been a female leading the prayer for a mixed congregation but that women can lead a prayer of female congregants.³²

Given that the principle of deriving law in matters of ‘*ibāda*’ (obligatory religious rites) is *tawqīf* (abiding by the guideline set by Prophet Muḥammad) and *ittibā’* (following the example of the Prophet), Indonesian scholars state that a female imam in a mixed congregation is seen as legally *ḥarām* (forbidden) and not acceptable. Similarly, a woman’s functioning as an imam for female only congregants is seen as legally *mubāḥ* (permissible).

Lubis concurs with the Indonesian Scholars’ Assembly’s religious edict on women’s leadership in prayer. At the outset, she responds positively to the Wadud-led prayer and then reiterates her stand on the issue, saying that Muslim women’s perceptions vary.³³ First, women could become leaders for the prayer insofar as they meet the requirement for becoming an imam (a leader of the prayer). However, Lubis adds that women’s leadership in prayer (*imāmat al-mar’a*) is not acceptable because there is no precedent in the history of Islam and no example from the Prophet Muḥammad and his companions that continues to exist in Islamic tradition. Finally, Lubis says that women could exercise their roles as prayer leaders when necessitated by the existing community and in emergency situations. For example, Amina Wadud could lead the prayer if she was the leader by community appointment. Converted women, and those males whose hearts were not yet strongly inclined to Islam and had not fully come to terms with Islam could become the *ma’mūm* for Wadud. However, this situation is culturally specific and cannot be applied to other places, like Indonesia. Lubis urges Wadud not to propagate women’s leadership in prayer or come to Muslim majority countries to disseminate this idea to them. She cautions that Indonesian women who promote the idea of women leading the prayer will not receive support from the majority of Indonesian Muslims. Lubis perceives ritual in Islam as complete and unchangeable. There is no need to change the traditional form of the ritual. She seems to suggest that women’s leadership in prayer is not an important issue. What needs to be done, she urges, is to encourage

³² In the Ḥanafī school of law even a female leading other females in prayer is deemed to be repugnant (*makrūh*).

³³ Interview with Amani Lubis on June 16, 2009.

Muslims to improve their faith (*īmān*) in Islam and for those who have faith to help others improve their faith.

As a scholar of Islam, a feminist, and a leader of an Islamic boarding school in Cirebon, Indonesia, Husein Muhammad, nevertheless argues that it is permissible for a woman to become an imam for men and women.³⁴ He himself has encouraged his wife to become a prayer leader for him and his family, but she has not met his challenge.³⁵ Muhammad contemplates a broader context in which the discursive narrative of women's leadership in prayer (*īmāmat al-mar'a*) is less popular for several reasons.³⁶ First, Muhammad maintains that the nature of Islam is more political, in that the production of Islam within the hegemonic power of Islamic dynasties tended to politicize Islam for their own advantage, and therefore it became more patriarchal in nature. The second reason for male hegemony, Muhammad believes, is the view that male and female relationships in ritual and social activities are filled with the fear of temptation (*khauf al-fitna*). Fiqh scholars are wary of any temptation men would face as a result of the sexes mixing in the public sphere. The third reason is that leadership in prayer is seen as a matter of religious ritual (*'ubūdiyya*) to which the Prophet Muḥammad provided guidance and examples. Based on these gendered thinking processes, the discursive narrative of women's leadership in prayer (*īmāmat al-mar'a*) raises the question of whether women are fit to lead the prayer in a mixed congregation and even to attend the mosque at all for performing rituals.

The discrepancy between a conservative and moderate view on women's leadership in mixed prayer stems from the two accounts of the way in which women's participation in the mosque or lack thereof is constructed. Some prophetic traditions record that women prayed alongside the Prophet Muhammad. Since they came fully covered and left unnoticed due to darkness, Muslim men tended to not notice women's presence in the mosque.³⁷ Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad also commanded men not to prevent their wives and female

34 Ulil Absar-Abdalla, "K.H. Husein Muhammad and Nur Rofi'ah: Perempuan Boleh Mengimami Laki-laki," April 4, 2005, <http://islamlib.com/id/komentar/perempuan-boleh-mengimami-laki-laki/> (accessed November 5, 2009).

35 Interview with Husein Muhammad in Cirebon on May 29, 2009.

36 Husein Muhammad, *Fiqh Perempuan: Refleksi Kiai atas Wacana Agama dan Gender* (Yogyakarta: LIKIS, 2001), 36–37.

37 Jamāl al-Dīn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Nisā'* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1996), 63–64.

slaves from going to the mosque.³⁸ *Ṣalāt al-jum'ā* (Friday congregational prayer) is not mandated (*wājib*) for women, but if a woman goes to the *Jum'ā*, her prayer is accepted and rewarded. If she wants to be present in the *Jum'ā*, then she must have bathed.³⁹ Although an egalitarian view of women's participation and *imāmat al-mar'a* is rooted in Islamic tradition, the hegemonic practice of the mosque culture is sexist. In what follows, I will discuss the correlation between a sexist view of women's roles and politicized ritual in Islam.

Gendered Views of Women and the Sexed Prayer

This section will explore how gendered perceptions of women correlate with the restrictions on women participating in communal prayer and *imāma* (prayer leadership). Most prohibitions of women from performing prayer at the mosque stem from the fear of *fitna* (trial or temptation). This fear creates restrictive measures for women going to the mosque that are grounded in several hadith. For example, women and female slaves may go to the mosque if they wear no perfume.⁴⁰ Other hadith say that women should be prevented from coming to the mosque and that staying home is preferable.⁴¹ The emphasis on female domesticity resonates strongly among *fiqh* scholars (who define degrees of temptation, as well as rules for obedience and disobedience). Going to the mosque is permitted (*mubāḥ*) for a woman. However, if she fears that she would cause *fitna* by males looking at her, she should pray at home.⁴² Women are basically responsible for not creating any temptation, to the point that if a woman goes out, she needs to be cautious so that no man is tempted by her presence; if she does not contain herself, people would not control themselves for her sake.⁴³ Equally important for a woman before she goes out is to receive her husband's permission. When she is on the street, she should make her way to an empty street, not crowded streets or markets, make sure her

38 Ibid., 64.

39 Ibid., 65.

40 Ibid., 64.

41 Ibid., 65.

42 Ibid., 64.

43 Ibid., 68.

voice is not heard, and walk on the roadside, not in the middle.⁴⁴ Abū Hurayra maintains that Muhammad prevented women from walking in the main street.

The fear of *fitna* (trial) as a male ideological institution that produces norms and rules for women not only flourished among male jurists but also created a gendered culture. This gendered culture is assumed to derive from the Shari‘a, that is, a complete set of legal injunctions imposed God’s Divine Will on human behavior.⁴⁵ *Fiqh* is understood as the product of understanding the Shari‘a and is considered to be “an approximation of the true law of God.”⁴⁶ The Shari‘a and *fiqh* are often conflated with each other. I will argue that while the legal rulings are derived from the Qur’an and the hadith, I must concede that the jurists’ perspectives on gender issues often invoke the sacred texts in order to legitimize the politics of gender difference and the construction of gender-specific roles for men and women in Muslim societies, which are not necessarily present in the Qur’an. The use of narrative citations functions to confirm patriarchal ideologies, institutions, and practices that further inscribe the superiority of men over women.

The conformity of the cited rules, roles, and rights of women to patriarchal ideology should not come as a surprise, since the Qur’an and the hadith were historically situated in the pagan, tribal Arab culture and locality. The historicity of the Qur’an and the hadith capture a glimpse of the social, economic, political, and cultural condition of tribal cultures and of how women were valued at this time. This historical context of the Qur’an shows how certain practices continued to exist and to grow in influence, and how the Qur’an has come to carry a legal emphasis, despite the fact that there are only a limited number of Qur’anic verses that deal with legal rulings. In this sense, male juristic-minded interpretations reflect the existing cultures and establish what are seen as appropriate rules by which women should act, roles that women ought to enact, and rights to which women are entitled. The dominant ruling of male prayer leadership reiterates women’s subordinate status as secondary, domestic, and sexual beings.

Perhaps the marking of women as secondary beings is noticeable in Qur’anic narratives that seem to render for readers the immediacy

44 Ibid., 68.

45 Daniel Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam* (Malden, MA: Backwell Publishing, 2004), 120.

46 Ibid.

of women's inferiority. Al-Nisā', 4:34 suggests that men are superior to women due to male economic capacity and leadership. Al-Nisā', 4:11 and 176 suggest that daughters and sisters are entitled to receive half of the male's share in inheritance. Al-Baqara, 2:282 cites the testimony of two female witnesses as being equivalent to that of one male witness. Al-Nisā', 4:34 gives men the right to marry up to four women. While these verses are few in number, they have had an immeasurable impact on the status of women. In the hands of Muslim jurists, these verses affirm the view that women are not equal to men because God has given men superiority in economics, politics, and epistemology. As the economically superior group, men command women in all areas of life, both private and public. The economic relation of husbands and wives is one of exchange. Husbands supply the dowry and economic maintenance⁴⁷ and wives in return secure their sexual organs for the husband's convenience, by completely obeying them, and by complying with discipline, should they rebel.

Al-Nawawī argues that men are factually and juristically (*sharī*) superior to women. He maintains that the actual difference between men and women includes: the superiority of men's intellectual capacity, men's forbearance in calamity, men's greater physical strength, men being scientifically-oriented in writing, men's skill in driving horses, men constituting the majority of scholars, and the preponderance of male leaders (imam); men's superiority in war, men's superiority in leading the Friday prayers through calling the *adhān*, delivering the *khutba* (sermon), and being the prayer leader, men's superiority in spending time during Ramadan in retreat at the mosque (*i'tikāf*), men's superiority in court testimony, men's superiority in inheritance, men's superiority in the lineage of inheritance, men's being legally responsible guardians for female marriages, men's privilege in divorce, remarriage, and polygamy; and male superiority in lineage.⁴⁸ The legal superiority of men includes men's responsibility for the financial maintenance of women.

There is, furthermore, a seamless relationship between obedience and punishment. Several prophetic accounts recall how angels, husbands, and God would be displeased at a wife's failure to satisfy the sex-

47 Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ 'uqūd al-lujayn fī bayān bi-ḥuqūq al-zawjayn* (Semarang: Karya Saputra, n.d.), 7.

48 Ibid.

ual rights of her husband. The deployment of severe punishment reinforces a mental framework that renders violence necessary to compel female obedience at all levels. Without it, women would surely face hellfire in this lifetime and the afterlife. Returning to the earth on the eve of the *Isrā'* and *Mi'raj* (Night Journey and Ascension), the Prophet Muhammad recalls his vision of the majority of women who will become dwellers in hell. They would be thrown into hell due to their rebellion against their husbands.⁴⁹ The interpretive narrative of the Night Journey vision could plausibly support the existential and eschatological destiny of a woman that is defined on the basis of her sex. Thus gendered thinking becomes an institution of power “that one attributes to a complex strategic situation”⁵⁰ to which the multiplicity of power relations are connected. Yet, the *Isrā'* and *Mi'raj* accounts could also be seen as laying the foundation of gendered moral equality in which obedience is directed to God, not to human beings. In this case, punishment becomes God’s business, not something to be exercised by abusive husbands.

Given the general view of women as secondary, sexual, and domestic beings, male scholars’ views on women’s presence in the mosque vary, from it being *mubāh* (permissible) or *makrūh* (abominable), to *ḥarām* (forbidden). Going to the mosque is permissible only for old women. It becomes *makrūh* (abominable) for women whom men could find attractive. It is, however, absolutely forbidden for pretty girls to attend the mosque for the fear of *fitna* (temptation). *Fiqh* scholars, like Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767), Mālik b. Anas (d. 795), and Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 819) are in agreement that old women who are no longer attractive are permitted to attend the mosque, while mature and young women who are attractive should preferably stay home.

Yoyoh Yusroh, a member of the Indonesian Justice Party and Parliament, concurs with the idea that a woman’s body could become a source of men’s distraction. She vehemently disagrees with a woman leading a mixing prayer, as Wadud did in New York. For her, women’s nature entails different treatment. When women want equality, it does not mean that everything could be equal. As men and women are different, she predicts the repercussions of such a mixing at prayer, stating that:⁵¹

49 Ibid., 12.

We could imagine if women lead the prayer and men were praying behind them. They could distract the congregants. This means that we [Muslim women] should not just think about how we want to be equal with men. We need also to foresee the potential effect to mitigate conflict or any other impact of the action.

Although she disagrees with women leading prayer in a mixed context, she believes that Islam allows women to lead the prayer in front of women. Among the Betawi community in Jakarta, for instance, a woman leading the prayer, especially the *tarawih* prayer, is common. She admits that she had led prayer for women congregants in her mother's house. Piety and fluency in the Qur'anic recitation were among her repertoire. She recalls her meeting with a feminist who told her that she could be an *imām* for the prayer in the mosque because she has a beautiful voice. She opposes the idea because she believes that only men should be leaders for the prayer. She adds that such a belief is more acceptable and in accordance with what God and the Prophet Muhammad have stipulated. Yusroh certainly does not reject the equality of men and women, but ritual is not an area in which equality should be debated, since men and women are equal before God.

Activist Neng Dara Affiah, however, expressed her dismay at the relationship between the prohibition of women leading prayer and women being perceived as *'awra*.⁵² She sees a fallacy in the reasoning that allows Muslims to accept women as public teachers such that these women are not perceived as *'awra*. However, when it comes to the leadership of prayer, the woman's entire body becomes tabooed as *'awra*. Affiah asserts that the perception of women as *'awra* derives from a male-centered ethical system. It assumes that religious ritual is a male domain from which women are excluded. She argues that the sexing of the prayer is a contested space for feminists, in that the ritual is not only for men, but is also inclusive of women. Women are God's creatures and are yearning for proximity to God. Consequently, men and women are each representatives of God on earth. Privileging men as the only creatures to serve God perpetrates injustices against women. It is to these injustices that Muslim feminists of diverse backgrounds are responding.

50 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 93.

51 Interview with Yoyoh Yusroh on June 17, 2009.

*The Praxis of Imāmat al-Mar'a
and Feminist Activism*

The uniformity of women being considered as secondary, domestic, and sexual beings in Muslim cultures demonstrates the long effect of masculine dominance in prayer. Women's exclusion from prayer means that they are also excluded from the production of "the local centers of knowledge/power,"⁵³ yet they ironically never feel excluded. Women perpetuate the knowledge/power paradigm of *fiqh* (understanding of the law) through the institutionalization of *taqlīd* (a blind following of past rulings). Only if they go beyond the insistence on *fiqh* and move toward the opening of *ijtihād* (independent legal reasoning) in a broader sense would Muslim women be able to revive the spirit of *hilm* (forbearance), which values moral reasonableness and spiritual piety. In an attempt to transform the construction of the ritual prayer that is essentially patriarchal in nature, Musdah Mulia, a scholar of Islam and an activist, proposes a gradual change of cultures in three steps: (1) the transition from patriarchal culture to egalitarianism; (2) legal reforms to end practices discriminatory to women; and (3) reinterpretations of religious texts in ways that are more humanistic and more accommodative to women. Muslim feminists from the Pesantren setting also attempt to discuss the intricacy of the prayer within Indonesian contexts. I will now discuss how feminist scholars and activists from this background argue for moral and spiritual equality by analyzing their responses to the *imāmat al-mar'a*.

Women's *imāma* in prayer is commonly practiced in the Pesantren setting, especially among the female congregants. In the Pesantrens (Islamic boarding schools), the scholars train students to understand Islam and become knowledge producers in Islam. There, young men and women receive religious training and exercise their agency in becoming self-directed learners. Female students learn not only the foundational knowledge of Islam from *kitab kuning* (literally "yellow books," but used to refer to books containing classical knowledge about Islam), but also to occasionally teach other students Islam and play the role of prayer leader for female congregants. Although women graduates from the Pesantrens are knowledgeable about Islam, they

52 *ʿAwra* literally means pudenda (and thus sexually tabooed).

53 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 98.

neither reach prominence due to their knowledge nor do they exercise their roles as religious teachers (*ustadha*) or preachers (*muballiga*) at a level equal to men. This is also the case for women graduates from prominent universities, such as al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. Highly educated women from religious institutions are disempowered the moment they live and mingle with the community. Only a very few women with religious knowledge and from Pesantrens exercise their power of knowledge by becoming activists and instructors at the higher Islamic institutions. These women are in the vanguard of the re-interpretation of Islam and gender justice. In their reinterpretation of Islam, the question of *imāmat al-mar'a* can be addressed and debated.

Feminist responses to the issue of *imāmat al-mar'a* revolve around the nature of prayer, whether it is theological, spiritual, or social, and its permissibility and impermissibility within the Indonesian context. Traditionalists, like Lubis, perceive the prayer as a matter of *'ubūdiyya* (obligatory ritual following the Prophet Muhammad's examples). In Islam, the Prophet Muhammad provides the guidelines for prayer and offers examples of how to conduct prayer. Throughout his life, he asked men, like Abū Bakr, to lead the prayer, but not any of his wives or daughters. Since there is no prior example of a woman leading a prayer, Lubis says that⁵⁴

I think that men should lead the prayer, whereas women can lead the prayer only with the old, blind men and children as *ma'mūm* (congregants). Although this example was approved by the Prophet Muhammad, he never really appointed female companions to lead the prayer so his male companions did not propose it.

The necessity of the imam, in Lubis's eyes, symbolizes the wisdom of unity in Islam. She says that prayer is personal; therefore, even when it is performed in a congregation, the individual is responsible for the prayer. The prayer leader is needed to invoke the sense of unity in prayer where a leader is required to lead a communal prayer. Islam's regulation of the prayer is flexible, as in the example of the prayer performed during war. Although facing the *qibla* (direction of prayer) would normally be a requirement for prayer, it is not an issue when under duress. Regularity in prayer is important to show the virtue of

54 Interview with Amani Lubis on June 16, 2009.

unity. She insists, however, that a woman could not be an imam because such examples do not exist from the time of the Rightly Guided Caliphs who understood the spirit of Islam.

A moderate feminist, like Musdah Mulia,⁵⁵ a scholar of Islam and a Nahdlatul Ulama activist, argues that prayer in Islam is a matter of reward that is open to both men and women. In Islam, both the congregant (*ma'mūm*) and the leader (imam) receive reward. Neither the Qur'an nor the hadith indicate that the *imām* receives more or less reward than the congregant; it depends on the individual's consciousness of God (*taqwā*). The context of ritual in Islam promotes the value of striving for good deeds (*istibāq al-khayrāt*).⁵⁶ She explains that the requirement for ritual prayer includes piety, proficiency in Qur'anic recitation, and seniority. Nothing in the Qur'an is mentioned about sex as a requirement in the leadership. There is no instance in the hadith where men are required to be the leaders of the prayer. The rules about men as the prayer leaders are prevalent among legal scholars, like Abū 'AbdAllāh Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī (d. 820). In this sense, women leading prayer is an area of *ijtihād* (independent legal reasoning). Lubis argues, however, that although the Qur'an does not mention the *imāmat al-mar'a*, it also does not promote it. In Islam, any legal decision should be based on the Qur'an, the hadith, and *ijtihād*. If the hadith does mention specifics, it does not mean that we jump to the Qur'an. The Qur'an does not cover everything that may come up in the future. The process of *ijtihād* requires the unity of three sources.

In contrast to Lubis's perspective, a liberal feminist and women's rights activist like Neng Dara Affiah argues that *imāmat al-mar'a* is more sociological than theological.⁵⁷ The Qur'an, she reasons, did not prohibit women's leadership in prayer, and the Prophet Muhammad allowed it to happen; thus what has impeded the acceptance of the *imamat al-mar'a* is the society. She laments that

for ages, we did not have any examples of women leading prayers and women have also been marginalized in ritual events. I often feel sad that in some occasions, women are placed in the subordinate places during the ritual. As the

55 Interview with Musdah Mulia on June 17, 2009.

56 See Yusuf Ali's translation of Q 2:148: "To each is a goal to which Allah turns him; then strive together (as in a race) towards all that is good. Wheresoever ye are, Allah will bring you together. For Allah has power over all things."

57 Interview with Neng Dara Affiah on June 19, 2009.

performativity of prayer is social, it raises the question of whether Muslims are eager to transform the condition in which ritual is performed.⁵⁸

Affiah also criticizes Muslims who refer to the Prophet Muhammad as an established example setting no female precedent in *imāma*. She argues that the Prophet constantly led the prayer because he was the only one who understood the Qur'an. He was also morally superior, even in comparison to the previous prophets. She insists that what are at stake here are spiritual, moral, and humanistic qualities, not sex or other categories. Should such qualities exist in women, women should lead the prayer, regardless of their sex.

As feminists' understanding of the nature of the prayer varies, so do their discursive narratives of the applicability of women leading prayer within the Indonesian context. Lubis argues that women leading prayer (*imāmat al-mar'a*) cannot be performed in Indonesia because in each household, there must be a man that is able to lead the prayer. She also insists that men leading prayer is part of the tradition and that the scholars require them to lead the prayer. Even if the man lacks religious knowledge and he happens to have children who have studied in an Islamic institution, like the State University of Islamic Studies, the man should lead the prayer. The role of men as the leader in prayer is in accordance with the examples of the Prophet Muhammad and his closest companions.⁵⁹

Quite different from Lubis, Mulia argues that what is at stake in the Indonesian context is not the contestation of women wanting to lead the prayer, but rather a discursive process of how men and women are equally valued in ritual. The requirement for prayer includes piety, fluency in Qur'anic recitation, and credibility. Anyone who meets these criteria, be they man or woman, could lead the prayer. Mulia makes acceptance of the equality of men and women a condition for women leading prayer. She says that once the equality of men and women has become mainstream in society, women leading the prayer either at home or in public would not be problematic. She indicates that what impedes women from leading the prayer is psychological, not theological. Although women are equipped with the training to lead the prayer, the existing system discourages women from doing so. In her

58 Ibid.

59 Interview with Musdah Mulia on June 17, 2009.

case, she is married to a scholar of Islam whose characteristics meet the requirement for leading the prayer. Mulia insists that women leading prayer is not the goal, but the awareness of men and women being equal in all aspects of life is far more important.

Affiah does not recoil from women leading the prayer as a new social phenomenon, but she proposes three interrelated steps along the way to disseminate such a practice in Indonesia. First, Muslim societies need to be prepared to see some mosques with women as imams and some other mosques with male imams. Second, they need to exercise and partake in supporting female prayer leaders in order to change the popular mindset. Finally, they need to be willing to participate in the creation of the role of female prayer leaders as acceptable and normal. When interviewed, she recalled her own experience of leading prayer in her own community and family as follows:

I was a student in 1989, my friend and I used to lead the *tarāwīḥ* prayer⁶⁰ with a mixed congregation, we never perceived it as something wrong. I did not see any problems and the guys felt the same. I sometimes lead the prayer in the house and my husband does not mind. He thought that I have a better Qur'anic recitation and fluency because I went to an Islamic boarding school (Pesantren) specialized in Qur'anic training for women.

Affiah is taking her position of being a woman leading prayer seriously. She sees herself spiritually being very close to God and capable of loving God. The act of loving God is expressed through ritual. Ritual is, therefore, the heart of religion. Unfortunately, she laments, ritualism that carries authority is used arrogantly by men in order to exclude women.⁶¹ Ritual as a system of life has been constructed so as to become men's monopoly, just like the *tahlilan* ceremony⁶² or the Friday congregational prayer. She admits that sometimes Islamic religious institutions are not welcoming for her and for women generally. At the individual level, however, Islam allows the exercise of the spiritual for both males and females.

60 *Tarāwīḥ* prayer is a recommended prayer during Ramadan and is usually performed right after the evening (*Ishā'*) prayer.

61 Interview with Neng Dara Affiah on June 19, 2009.

62 *Tahlilan* is a ceremony following the death of a Muslim. It is usually performed in the mosque or in the houses of the dead. During the ceremony, men recite the Qur'an and litany for the dead.

Concluding Remarks

Although these Indonesian feminists offer diverse worldviews on *imāmat al-mar'a*, ranging from traditional to moderate to liberal, they, to certain degree, exercise agency in the epistemic production of the morality of women leading the prayer. They agree that Muslim women need to prioritize the equality of men and women and address the inequalities and injustices against women. For traditional feminists, women's empowerment derives from accepting the traditional value of women and from practicing what has been established by the Prophet Muhammad, his closest companions, and the pious successors to them. The traditionalist feminist's priority is for women to enhance their piety, not to challenge the mechanisms of piety, such as female leadership of mixed congregational prayer. Moderate feminism, however, perceives equality as essential to the pursuit of female prayer leadership, yet it is more interested in the preparative process, rather than the actual practice. Moderate feminists are more critical of the discursive narratives of religion regarding women, even though they may continue to exercise more traditional expectations of male and female relationships.

Quite different from both traditional and moderate feminist strains, liberal Islamic feminism not only proposes that *imāmat al-mar'a* is essential for gender equality, but also engages in a more radical interpretation and practice of religion by criticizing the very foundations of religion and acting in accordance with newfound belief and agency.⁶³ In this sense, the *imāmat al-mar'a* can be channeled through a multifaceted apparatus of epistemological interpretation of Islam, women's agency as moral individuals, and social participation in the public realm. After all, ritual in Islam is the most basic action. If ritual is exclusionary of women, it would be expected that other institutions, like family, law, marriage, and inheritance would also contain elements of sexism. The fact that women are subjugated in the realm of ritual calls for a rethinking of the epistemological foundation and formulation of ritual as well as its praxis in everyday life.

63 The discourse of Islamic feminism in Indonesia is still in the making. However, some categories of Islamic feminism could be postulated in terms of the degree in which the Qur'an and the hadith are subject to interpretation. Traditionalist Islamic feminism tends to reiterate the existing dogma of Islam by showing how Islam essentially treats men and women equally while liberal Islamic feminism argues for equality by offering an alternative reading of both of these sources in order to demonstrate that Islam is liberatory for women.