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Pushing Against Patriarchy: Indonesian Muslim Women Using Islam as a Form of Resistance

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Indonesian Muslim Women Using Islam as a Form of Resistance

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By

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Abstract

Seldom has Islam been understood in mainstream discourse as a means of achieving gender equality and resisting patriarchal powers. However, Indonesian Muslim women organizers did just that. This project analyzes how patriarchal culture, colonialism, the state, and religious powers have shaped current gender norms regarding women in the public and private sphere since the twentieth century. Centering how Javanese Muslim women have used Islam to resist patriarchal authorities, I analyze sociological, historical, and gender and sexuality studies. This project challenges conservative interpretations of Islam used within Muslim communities to limit women’s rights, and challenges Islamophobic misconceptions that frame the religion as misogynistic. The case of Indonesia is important. The extensive history of Muslim women leaders has only recently been highlighted because most literature on Muslim women centers the Arab world. My project contributes to studies on Muslim women’s leadership and more broadly aims to improve their ability to organize transnationally.

Key words: Indonesian feminism, Islamic feminism, women and Islam in Indonesia, State sponsored patriarchy, Ethical Policy, Suharto, New Order,

I. Introduction

Seldom has Islam been understood in mainstream discourse—scholarly and public, Indonesian and Anglophone—as a means of achieving gender equality and resisting patriarchal powers. Indonesian Muslim women organizers did just that beginning in the early-twentieth century. Islam first arrived in coastal regions of Java through Arab traders in the thirteenth century and became the predominant religion through the influence of Javanese rulers. Dutch colonization began in Indonesia with the establishment of Batavia—present-day Jakarta—in 1619 and lasted until the establishment of Indonesia as an independent nation in 1945. My research will first explore the ways Javanese culture, colonialism, and state and religious patriarchal powers have shaped gender norms for women in Indonesia, primarily Java. I will then examine the ways Muslim women organizers have interacted with cultural norms, colonial administration, and state and religious authorities, to resist patriarchal gender norms. Much of the literature I will review will discuss the formations of gender practices in Indonesia based on the influences of Javanese collectivist culture, Dutch colonization which projected Western Christian ideas of womanhood, state sanctioned patriarchy, and religious authorities who widely accept conservative, textual interpretations of Islam. It will also review how social norms and gender and kinship relations were shaped by the above forces and how Muslim women and reformists are contributing to the re-shaping of gendered laws and social norms through the use of Islam. Research on Indonesian Muslim women who resist institutions of power are challenging long held conceptions of Indonesian women which have been historically dictated by Dutch men and women and Indonesian men. Generally speaking, these key scholars have found that Dutch colonization and state powers have played a major role in shaping gender norms and relations as well as law regarding women. In addition, Indonesian religious authorities wield much power on

national policy formation, but Islamic reformists sparked new dialogue on religious interpretation especially during the Islamic revival which began in the 1970s. While Islam has been popularly viewed by modern Western societies as a main barrier to women’s liberation, Indonesia’s history shows how patriarchal cultural traditions, Dutch colonialism, and state and religious powers have collectively had the most limiting effects on women’s roles in Javanese society. Increased access to religious materials enabled by the Islamic revival gave many Muslim women in Indonesia the resources to expand their participation in society and challenge patriarchal powers.

I chose this topic because, as a Muslim woman myself, I have experienced many phases of understanding and misunderstanding my own religion and my place in it. Since the experience of growing up as an Afghan Muslim woman raised in both the east and west coasts of the United States is uniquely different from the multitude of other Muslim women’s experiences, I was inspired to learn more about them. I wanted to know more about other Muslim women’s experiences and journeys with Islam and gender roles in their own local context and community. Learning about Islamic Feminism and its scholars led me to do further research on the women who are challenging conservative, textual interpretations of the Quran, that often hold significant influence over gender norms of a respective society. During my time studying in Amman, Jordan, I conducted research on if and how the politicization of Islam was contributing to low levels of women’s participation in the Jordanian government. The findings suggested that it was primarily tribal cultures that contributed to the discrimination of women in Jordanian society and politics, and that many believed Islam actually promoted a more progressive reality for women. Since the majority of literature on women and Islam focuses on West Asia and the Arab World, I wanted to explore a Muslim society from a different culture and region. Indonesia often came up

in my previous research on Islamic feminism and there seemed to be a sufficient amount of content on Indonesian Muslim feminists and reformists. Since Indonesia is the largest Muslim society in the world, I thought it would be especially valuable to research Indonesian Muslim women leaders, who can serve as important examples of what using Islam to advocate for gender equality can look like.

My thesis will focus on Java and Javanese women. Islam is centralized in Java, and the island is also home to Indonesia’s capital, Jakarta, making it the center for many social movements and political activity. Most scholars would agree that Indonesia would not be the nation-state it is without its history of colonization. With over 17,000 islands, Indonesia is massively diverse in geography, religion, culture, gender norms, ethnicities, races, and more. My project uses the general terms “Indonesia” and “Dutch East Indies” (colonial Indonesia) at times, but is specifically referring to the central cultural norms supported by the authorities in power which were historically situated in Java especially since Dutch colonization. Class is a key topic in this thesis, and I am to provide a nuanced understanding of how different classes of women were affected by popular gender norms and how they interacted in the movement of resistance. The experiences of the people with the identity “women” are not universal. Neither are the experiences of “Muslim women” or “Javanese Muslim women” and so on. While it is impossible to speak to the complexity of all the diverse number of experiences of Javanese Muslim women, this paper provides some context for the differences faced between rural, working class women, and upper class, aristocratic women, and later urban, educated women. It is important that any feminist research that cares to explore the experiences of women does not universalize their experiences. The universalization of womanhood has been a historical part of much Western feminist discourse and literature. This essentializes a very broad identity that encompasses many

different experiences. Universalizing womanhood has helped uphold imperial interests that understand women in the Global South behind the backdrop of Western gender norms that often do not apply to them (Mohanty 1984). This has allowed Western imperial powers to control the narratives of marginalized women in the Global South, and use it to justify military intervention abroad. The Dutch used this tactic in Indonesia.

In this paper I also use the term "public sphere" and "private sphere" often. It should be noted that these are terms not used during the time frame of my study, but instead terms later conceptualized by the West. I use "private sphere" to refer primarily to the domestic circle and "public sphere" to broadly refer to society outside the home, work, and political life. Lastly, I use the word feminism to refer to any organized women's activity that resists or challenges patriarchal structures. I also use it to refer to the theory of Islamic feminism which promotes the idea that women's rights and gender equality are a core element of Islam. However, it should be noted that not all Indonesian women organizers use this term or are comfortable with this term. While the word feminism has become more popular in global use in the last two decades, it is still a term that many in the Global South still heavily associate with the West. Because of a history of Western feminism that has excluded and mistreated many marginalized women, and women in the colonized world, many continue to connotate the word with the Western powers. This has been used in the past to decrease the legitimacy of feminist groups in the Global South, where men accuse feminists of being sympathizers of the West. Nonetheless, some women's organizing groups and Muslim women in Java have reclaimed the word to apply to their own advocacy work.

This project asks a few central questions. The first asks what the main historical forces responsible for shaping gender norms in contemporary Java are. The second looks at how the

institutionalization of gender norms affects working class and upper class women differently. Finally I ask, how has Islam been used as a force against patriarchal structures in Indonesia by Muslim women? The paper is divided into two big themes. The first deals with the development and formation of gender norms in Java, Indonesia. I explore what I found to be the most influential forces in the construction of gender roles in Java. This begins with Javanese culture and tradition itself that began to configure in the pre-colonial period. Javanese culture stresses a collectivist nature that centers the needs of the community. The discouragement of any and all individualism also paved the way for fixed gender roles that became vital to the stability of the community. This locked many women’s positions in society as caregivers, limiting their social mobility. However, the way Javanese culture specifically interacted with Islamization, or the process of Islamic influence over a society, created an entirely unique identity formation for the Javanese Muslim woman.

The next section moves on to the impacts of Dutch colonialism on gender norms. Dutch “Ethical Policy” secured the concept of the European housewife as the standard metric for ideal womanhood in Indonesia. This created a new set of standards for the upper-class Indonesian women, and worsened the conditions of working-class women who were unable to achieve this ideal womanhood and received the social consequences of this in the form of classism and colorism. The vision of an ideal womanhood projected by the Dutch and upheld by the Javanese elite is particularly fleshed out in the section about Kartini, a national icon used by the state and colonial administration for their own personal interests. I explore the ways she is depicted as an example of ideal womanhood and a feminist hero, despite her narrow, aristocratic lens, through the popular 2017 Indonesian film *Kartini*.

This section is followed by one that examines the use of *pesantrens*, or Islamic boarding schools, as a form of colonial resistance and platform to discuss gender equality and other social issues. Then, using the context of gender norms formed by the interaction between Javanese culture and Islam, and Dutch colonial ethical projections, I briefly explore early Muslim women's organizing. I discuss which classes of women were involved in organizing, how they were mobilizing, and how they interacted with the authorities in place whether that was Dutch colonialism, Sukarno, or Japanese occupation. I then move to the crucial section on Suharto's New Order and its function as a state-sponsored patriarchy. I examine how he controlled gender norms and sexuality through the enforcement of a nuclear style family modeled after a Western framework. I then discuss the ways Suharto used conservative Islamic groups to uphold the state's interests, sponsoring a disbursement of Islamic materials that led to the cultivation of counter-ideologies.

This section bleeds into the next main theme of the project, which is categorized as women, Islam, and organizing. Here I cover the Islamic revival which began in the 1970s and led to a proliferation of fresh Quranic interpretation and the mobilization of Muslim women organizers. A new level of accessibility to Islamic materials gave many Muslim women the materials to advocate for gender equality, women's rights, and an end to the military state. This process introduced new understandings of Islam, that stressed the idea that gender equality is a core element of the religion.

II. Literature Review

The significance of this study comes from the importance of contributing research on the work of Muslim women worldwide to the larger mission of creating gender equality within the

Muslim community. More and more scholars are questioning patriarchal interpretations of Islam, especially since the mid-twentieth century with the advent of transnational Islamic feminist discourse, and its consequential gender biased jurisprudence. It is therefore important to provide research that highlights the resistance work of Muslim women so other Muslim women can learn from and engage with others like them around the world. This will further transnational feminist goals specifically within the Muslim community. Moreover, this project is important because it explains the roots of a lot of gender inequalities present in Indonesia, which parallel the conditions of many other formally colonized societies in Asia, re-framing a topic that has often been Orientalized.

While all of the previous works mentioned below have contributed to the literature on gender and Islam in Indonesia, my project aims to provide a broader overview of the history of gender relations in the Muslim society in Indonesia and an overview of specifically how Muslim women organizers and reformists have engaged with the country's power structures to advocate for their rights using Islam as a strategy of resistance. The literature review is divided into themes of Javanese gender norms, colonialism's role in the construction of gender norms in Indonesia, the Suharto era and state-sponsored patriarchy, and women and Islam in Indonesia. This roughly mirrors the organization of the paper.

Javanese Gender Norms

Javanese cultural edict and gender norms were a formative part of building contemporary gender practices in Java. Javanese culture interacted with Islam from the thirteenth to the twentieth century to construct gender identities. Susan Blackburn discusses the diverse gender relations across ethnic groups that began to form in the pre-colonial period. Javanese tradition

typically gave women a big role in commerce and agriculture but limited their entrance to public and political life. Clarissa Adamson discusses the collectivist nature of Javanese culture that centers life on the family and community specifically focusing on the post-Suharto era. Adamson describes how this comes with a static set of gender roles that secure women’s roles as care givers and therefore vital for family and community stability. Diah Ariani Arimbi describes how Javanese *adat* beliefs informed these fixed gender roles that defined women as followers of their husbands (Ariani Arimbi). Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi takes a critical look at how Islamiziation in Java shaped Javanese women’s roles and identities (Hastuti Dewi). Hastuti Dewi argues that the institutionalization of Islam had the most direct effect on the formation of upper-class Indonesian women’s identities.

Colonialism’s Role in the Construction of Gender Norms in Indonesia

Colonization has disrupted and re-shaped gender relations in much of the Global South. The same goes for the Dutch’s brutal interventions in Indonesia. Lauri J. Sears has studied the way the Indonesian men and Dutch men and women have represented and debated about Indonesian women. Sears explores the ways the voices of Indonesian women has been largely lost in the mainstream representation of them. Sears’s research in *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia* examines dialogues between Indonesian women activists, scholars, religious figures, writers and professionals, breaking down essentialist notions of womanhood in Indonesia. She also breaks down central forces in the formation of gender roles, elaborating on the Dutch’s contribution in creating the concept of the Indonesian housewife (Sears). Elsbeth Locher-Scholten discusses how Dutch colonial influences shaped Indonesian women’s labor and domestic roles. Specifically, she looks at the ways the Dutch conception of gender norms and

their disparity between women from the colonial world and women from the colonized world formed the standard norms for Indonesian women in the public sphere (Locher-Scholten). Sylvia Tiwon outlines the ways the Dutch Ethical Policy, which began around 1900, implemented European gender norms and kinship relations. Tiwon also discusses how this impacted working-class women and upper-class women differently. While upper-class women were expected to conform to a Dutch standard of ideal womanhood, working-class women continued to be exploited for their labor (Siwon).

Kartini (1879-1904) is a key Indonesian figure used by Dutch colonizers to uphold their standard of womanhood and reinforce colonial rule. Jean Gelman Taylor and Laurie J. Sears both discuss Kartini’s contemporary portrayal as a national hero and feminist icon as well as her complexity as a noblewoman used by Indonesian elite and Dutch colonial administration to fulfill their own socio-political goals. (Gelman Taylor) (Sears) Kathryn Robinson discusses how Kartini’s resentment with Javanese tradition was rooted in the fact that having a Dutch education as a Javanese elite allowed you social mobility in the colonial circles (Robinson). Finally, Auliya Ridwan discusses the use of *pesantrens,* or Islamic boarding schools, to organize and resist Dutch colonial rule and host conversations on women’s rights in Islam (Ridwan).

Suharto Era and *State-Sponsored Patriarchy*

Most of the literature on Muslim women in Indonesia has been on their participation in resisting the New Order (the name for Indonesia’s former President Suharto’s regime), during the Islamic revival. Many authors have examined important elements of the women in the New Order (1966-1998). To name a few, Kathryn Robinson addresses a critical element of the New Order’s state sponsored patriarchy: State Ibuism, a state policy which relegated women’s roles to

strictly mothers and wives (Robinson). Rachel Rinaldo explores the ways Suharto used civil servants to uphold his gendered system, mobilizing primarily middle-class women into state-controlled groups that promoted the New Order (Rinaldo). Julia L. Suryaksuma expands on the use of civil servants to uphold the New Order, examining the *Dharma Wanita*, the association of spouses of civil servants, and how they reinforced the idea that women’s purpose is to support their husbands in their service to the state. (Surayaksuma)

Women and Islam in Indonesia

Traditional patriarchal understandings of women’s role in Islam have dominated discourse on women’s rights in most Muslim-majority countries. An increasing number of authors, especially since the mid-twentieth century, however, have challenged androcentric exegesis of the Quran, prompting a fresh analysis of interpretations of Islamic texts in regard to women’s rights. This discourse argues that women’s rights are a core tenet of Islam, not a barrier to their empowerment. A growing number of authors are contributing to the literature on women in Islam and Islamic feminism specifically in Indonesia. Clarissa Adamson, an anthropologist, argues that the moral hierarchy of gender relations in Java is determined by national identity, social insecurities, and culturally influenced religious beliefs and practices. Her research examines the work of Javanese Muslim women’s rights activists to explain what they regard as misinterpretations of Islam used to control women. Adamson concludes that deep-rooted social, political, and theological anxieties of social change thwart the advocacy work of women educated in Islamic law who argue that women’s rights are fundamental to the religion (Adamson 5).

Susan Blackburn takes a more political approach, looking specifically at Indonesian women's involvement in political Islam groups. She argues that the act of women challenging or questioning prevailing religious beliefs and practices is inherently a political act (Blackburn 83). Syafiq Hasyim is an analyst for issues related to women in Islam and political Islam and is from Jakarta, Indonesia herself. In her book *Understanding Women in Islam, An Indonesian Perspective*, she discusses gendered discourse in Islamic jurisprudence, breaking down methodological deadlocks regarding traditional understandings of women's role in Islam and by greater extent Islamic society (Hasyim). Rachel Rinaldo uses an ethnographic approach to study both secular and Muslim women's rights activists and Islamic feminism in Indonesia. She examines a feminist NGO, Muslim women's organizations, and a Muslim political party, to highlight the ways democratization and the Islamic revival have contributed to women's new assertion of personal and political agency in Indonesia (Rinaldo). Diah Ariani Arimbi writes about specific gender issues in Islam in contemporary Indonesia, covering topics such as a need for new Quranic interpretations, Muslim women and their legal rights, the politics of the hijab, and Indonesian Islamic feminisms. Her research analyzes four writers who reveal the construction of Indonesian Muslim women's identities and argue that gender roles are negotiable and not inherent (Ariani Arimbi). Michale Laffan studies how the mainstream image of Islam in Indonesia has been shaped by interactions with Dutch colonial forces and reformist Islamic scholars (Laffan).

My research aims to broaden the depth of understanding of the formation of gender relations in Indonesia as shaped by religious, national, and colonial influences. While most studies on the topic focus on separate aspects of and approaches to understanding gender norms and Islam in a post-colonial Indonesia, my project aims to create a comprehensive literature

review of how Muslim women activists have engaged with national, religious, and colonial authorities, using Islam to resist patriarchal projections. My research will explore how Muslim women have advocated for women’s rights since the early twentieth century against the backdrop of conservative, patriarchal authorities. This work is important because Indonesian Muslim women have been misrepresented and their participation in society restricted. Despite this, they have played a major role in Indonesian society. Highlighting the work that Indonesian Muslim women are doing to advocate for themselves, in the context of larger power structures that work against them, contributes to the growing literature on women’s movements in the formerly colonized world. This helps scholars and organizers establish solidarity and collaborate in transnational feminist theory and action.

III. Methodology

My methods are largely interdisciplinary. I use approaches drawn from women’s history, as well as feminist, colonial, imperial, and intellectual history. I specifically utilize transnational feminist theories informed by postcolonialism. My revisionist approach questions the idea of a neat-and-tidy boundary between the colonial period and the post-colonial period. I seek to highlight the historical continuity that significantly manifests in societies recovering from generations of colonization. The “post-colonial” period is not some new, transformative era that has been suddenly extracted from the impacts of European colonization. I am also interested in investigating patterns of cross-cultural exchange and how ideas circulated, within colonial Indonesia, between Holland and colonial Indonesia, and also within the broader region of Southeast Asia.

IV. History of Gender Norms in Indonesia

Javanese Tradition

Because Javanese cultural beliefs and practices have interacted with the process of colonization and the practice of Islam in Indonesia, this section briefly provides context for Javanese conceptions of gender and kinship relations. There are a vast number of ethnic groups in Indonesia, all with different forms of gender and kinship relations. For instance, in West Sumatra, the local traditions have been constructed based on a matrilineal system. Some ethnic groups have more fluid definitions of sex that do not depend on a binary system of male and female. For this project, we focus on Java and Javanese practices. Java has historically been organized bilaterally with a greater level of equality between the sexes than some other cultures in Indonesia. Women in Javanese culture have a big role in commerce and agriculture, but tradition bars them from entering public, political life (Blackburn 2004, 8). Javanese culture stresses a collectivist structure and has a strong emphasis on family and hierarchy. Anthropologist Clarissa Adamson states: "Javanese culture discourages individualism and focuses instead on central values of family and community" (Adamson 9). She argues that that deeply rooted gendered moral hierarchy in Java contributes to securing women's roles as the care givers and therefore essential for familial and national stability. Within the structure of a culturally defined moral hierarchy, each person fulfilling their role ensures that the community is provided for. If one goes outside their expected roles, the future of the community as a whole is viewed as being at risk. This is what informed many of the anxieties of the Javanese community in regard to women's roles expanding beyond the private sphere.

Upholding these familial and societal structures is dependent on four Javanese principles: "Four cultural concepts are central to the governance and maintenance of the Javanese family:

rukun (harmony), *hormat* (respect), *mysyawarah* (mutual deliberation) and cooperation (*gotong-royong)"* (Adamson 17). Adamson explains how these foundational elements of Javanese kinship relations would be drawn on later in the Suharto era to support the nuclear family structure with strict gendered social roles. These concepts were used to emphasize the promotion of community harmony over individual interests. This was meant to legitimize the supposed essential natures of men and women, confining women to the private, domestic sphere for the sake of communal well-being, and societal stability.

Javanese *adat*, or local custom, and its' beliefs became central to the formation of gender roles in Java, and much of Indonesia. Diah Ariani Arimbi explains further stating:

> The role of women is reflected in three prominent Javanese *adat* beliefs. The first lies in the saying '*konco wingking'* (literally enaing: companion whose place is in the back part of the house); the second in '*suargo nunut neraka katut'* (meaning: a wife will go wherever her husband goes, to hell or heaven, making her a mere follower of the husband's deed); and the third says women's roles are '*manak, masak, macak'* (to breed, to cook, and to adorn herself for her husband) which correlate closely to women's places in '*kasure, dapur,* sumer' (bed, kitchen, doing household jobs) (Arianai Arimbi 61).

The fundamental structure of Javanese society depended on the preservation of designated gender roles. Women are viewed as the companions and supporters of their husbands. A woman's role is to manage the domestic sphere which is a crucial element of a community's sustainability. The framework was largely patriarchal in arrangement. Javanese cultural practices, specifically the traditions from the noble *priyayi* class, defined women and their roles as followers and supporters of their husbands. Javanese cultural beliefs contributed to the idea that a women's role in the family reflects the stability of the larger society, and so for her to engage in self-interested behavior is to put the overall community at risk. This idea feeds into Suharto-era ideology which defined the security of the state through gendered social positions and statuses.

While Javanese cultural practices influenced the way Islam and other parts of society were carried out in Indonesia, Javanese culture itself was largely shaped by Islam according to Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi. The process of Islamaization starting in the late fifteenth century was a transition away from the Javanese Hindu-Buddhist rule. These shifts brought changes not only to religious practice, but to how people practiced their daily lives (Hastuti Dewi 109). There are many theories about the primary form of institutionalized Islam, whether it is orthodox Islam, or a syncretic Islam marked by a mix of Hinduism, animism, and Islam, or a Sufi-dominated approach. One thing that is clear is that the influence of Islamiziation in Java has been closely linked to the religious practices of the region’s nobility. Hastuti Dewi argues that through the history of Islamization, aristocratic Javanese women’s identities have been the most influenced because they have had to engage with the shift in practices the most. These shifts altered cultural-religious practices, in turn shaping Javanese culture and its beliefs on gender.
Hastuti Dewi argues that, in the twentieth- and twenty first-century period, the identity of a Javanese women continues to be uniquely influenced by Islam in different ways. She identifies four critical periods of Javanese Muslim women’s identify formation. In the first, the “syncretic” nature of Islam in Java limited primarily the role of Javanese noble women. In the second phase starting in the early twentieth century, Islam and nationalism intertwined to delimit the social positioning of Javanese women. In the third phase of resurgent Islam since the 1970s, Islam was used by Javanese Muslim women to challenge the New Order. In the fourth, Hastuti Dewi asserts, “Islam as a belief has provided a strong religious foundation for female leadership in local politics that has facilitated the rise of Javanese Muslim women as political leaders in the direct local elections since 2005” (111). The interaction between Islam and Javanese culture

played a significant role in shaping gender norms for Javanese women and eventually propelled them to resist patriarchal tradition.

Dutch Colonialism: Ethical Policy

Similar to the situation in much of the Global South, Indonesia's contemporary gender norms and roles were altered by Western intervention. Dutch influence was responsible for disrupting traditional Javanese gender and kinship relations especially at the start of the twentieth century. The way colonialism disrupted already-established norms was dependent on class status as well. Western gender norms impacted the labor culture and practices of early twentieth century Java, impacting working-class women and upper-class women in distinct ways. Dutch interference exacerbated classism and colorism, negatively impacting working-class women, and additionally decreasing the agency and social mobility of upper-class women in Indonesia.

The Western Christian idea of women as the "weaker vessel" framed much of the Dutch policy and discourse surrounding women, specifically upper-class women in Indonesia. Derived from a biblical reference in which Peter, one of Jesus's apostles, was reported to have described women as the "weaker vessel," this concept informed the culture in Europe around "protecting" and shielding women away from the public sphere into exclusively the private one. (Locher-Scholten 49). Again, this notion was only applied to women who did not need to work and completely excluded working-class women both in Europe and in Indonesia. It shaped the colonizer's classist conviction that the ideal Indonesian women is one who mirrors the Dutch housewife who was contained to the home. The concept of the housewife for the upper class also helped propel a rapidly industrializing world while the working class were left to materialize it (49). Prior to Dutch involvement, in Javanese tradition, or *adat*, it was normal for women of all social classes to work. In 1925 however, the Dutch People's Council, comprised entirely of men,

colonizers, and the Indonesian upper class, met to discuss a bill to regulate women’s night labor. Because Dutch colonizers reasoned that the Indonesian women must be weaker like the Dutch women and therefore in need of protection, they thought night labor was too exhausting for them. It also prevented them from focusing on their supposedly natural duties in the home with their families. Night labor was therefore a threat on “future generations” (50). Married women were expected only to work out of economic necessity. Working-class women were still forced to work. There was no supposed protection for them.

Meanwhile, ideas around the ideal womanhood began to formulate, worsening stigmatization against working-class women who did not match up to this elitist, Western definition. They continued to work and therefore did not fall under the newly created ideal womanhood of domesticity. In the Preanger region in West Java, an official stated: “’If the economic conditions are favourable, here too the men will let the women work as little as possible, because they, too, like pretty hands and a pretty complexion’” (Locher-Scholten 50). This statement exemplifies the classism and colorism that are made worse out of the creation of a Western housewife. The way misogyny functions against women with additional marginalized identities such as being working class or having darker skin is unique to their intersectional identities. While upper-class women lost social mobility and agency, they were still considered the national ideal while working-class women were forced to hold laborious jobs to survive. There is nothing empowering about being forced to work to live. The opposition to abolishing night labor came from big agricultural companies who risked losing their labor force. Self-interested employers of tea, sugar, and coffee production for European consumption further essentialized and Orientalized the perceived nature of Indonesian women. They stressed their belief in the inherent difference of Eastern women vis-à vis Western women. They argued that

Indonesian women were fundamentally different and therefore, it was culturally appropriate for them to work. This argument completely ignored the existence of working-class women in Europe and emphasized the essentializing and Orientalist narratives concerning Indonesian women. The mainstream discourse around women’s natural roles in Indonesia in the early twentieth century was between Western colonizers and Indonesian elite, and Javanese factories that had economic interests in mind (Locher-Scholten 54).

Part of the way the Dutch upheld Western codes of morality was through the “Ethical Policy” disguised as a way to promote welfare for Indonesians. In reality, it served to implement Western Christian sets of norms which the Dutch believed were superior. Queen Wilhelmina announced the policy in 1901, highlighting Dutch responsibility to supposedly improve the welfare of the native Indonesian population (Ridwan 372). Dietrich Jung explains how the Ethical Policy was introduced as a new political strategy of the Dutch East Indies in 1901. As a response to Islamic militant resistance against colonial rule, the Dutch believed “modernizing” Indonesian society, according to their standards, would strengthen the ties between the colony and the colonizers (Jung 5). These attempts were ultimately unsuccessful.

Believing that the European nuclear family was a morally superior unit of society, the Dutch framed their intervention as a sort of “benevolent colonialism” (Jung 5). There was a number of ways the Netherlands approached implementing this structure. Tiwon explains that “[a]s part of its “Ethical Policy” objective to train a native core of lower-level professionals, administrators and civil servants, the Dutch held up the model of the European-style nuclear family in which the father was employed in a European style job, the children were sent off to European-style schools, and the mother stayed at home and looked after her family” (Tiwon 58). The nuclear-family structure was further reinforced by the Dutch through the utilization of

vocational schools for girls. These schools taught European housewife skills such as “[c]hild rearing, hygiene and first aid, cooking and nutrition, interior decoration and cleaning, sewing, embroidery, and even knitting: the skills needed by a woman who did not have to spend time planting or harvesting rice and selling her wares in the market place” (58). Similar to the tactics used by other Western colonizers in the Global South, the Dutch enforced a European set of morals for the elite class while the working class continued to be exploited for their labor.

The construction of an ideal womanhood that is associated with domesticity, motherhood, and wifely duties, created what Sylvia Tiwon calls “[a] new kind of prison for women like the lower-class laborer” (54). By perpetuating the idea that the ideal womanhood is contained in the home, the working-class women is excluded from a role that is unattainable for her. She is, by default, considered less than the natural ideal for a woman. This worsens the conditions for working class women while upper class women are sequestered with limited social mobility. We can see here the limiting role that Dutch influence had on the rights of women, particularly on working class women who underwent additional stigmatization.

Kartini as a Figure of Ideal Womanhood

A figure that in many ways stands in Indonesia, even today, as embodying the ideal womanhood, is Kartini, an aristocratic woman born in 1879. She has been portrayed as a national hero and defender of women’s rights. Most Western literature and research on Indonesian women hyper-focuses on Kartini as a prominent figure over leaders from other backgrounds (Gelman Taylor 295). In Indonesia, she is viewed as a role model for young girls and women. Laure J. Sears explains, “On Hari Ibu Kartini, Mother Kartini Day, most little Indonesian girls who go to government or private schools dress in imitation and honor of Kartini as national

heroine" (Sears 37). However, Kartini's depiction as a feminist role model was an intentional move on the part of Indonesian elites and Dutch colonists. She was a complex figure who rejected the oppression of Javanese patriarchal conditions, while also promoting her own noble class, all while being used to uplift the goals and visions of the Dutch colonial administration. A good reflection of the sentiments of the "Ethical Policy," she was used to construct a specific model of womanhood and perpetuate gender roles that fulfilled the purposes and goals of multiple different groups in power. Kartini was highlighted through the publication of her short essays and her private letters with Dutch friends. These letters consisted of complaints about limited social mobility and seclusion for upper class women like herself (Gelman Taylor 297). Her opinions were not directly offensive or revolutionary, so she was a convenient figure for the Dutch and post-colonial Indonesian government. Since her writings were not directly offensive to any group, it was easy to use her letters in different ways by several different groups. Her early death at the age of twenty-five also allowed for people to project interpretations of her work onto her without much pushback (Hahn).

Kartini was part of a noble class and her father was a *bupati*, or regent appointed by the Netherlands East Indies colonial administration (Gelman Taylor 296). The noble class in Indonesia worked closely with the Dutch colonists. Gelman Taylor explains key features of the life of aristocratic Indonesian women: "For Kartini, being born a female into a noble lineage in the nineteenth century meant a life of semi-seclusion, restrictions on travel and personal conduct, and subordination of ambition to considerations of family, female propriety and husband's honour" (297). For the most part, noble women were confined to the home. Kartini's gendered lens was influenced by her upper-class status that led her to address issues that were exclusively relevant to women born of high lineage.

Kartini received a Western education during primary school. This became an influential factor in her later advocacy of Western education for all other girls. Receiving European schooling also shaped how she viewed gender roles and ideas surrounding personal freedom. Her relationships with Dutch women who demonized many Javanese marriage practices, made her reject practices of polygamy and child marriage (305). All of this made her an apt figure whom the Dutch sought to associate with and aid. The Dutch’s disdain for polygamy and child marriage did not come from some supposed “progressive views.” By 1900, most senior functionaries in the Dutch colonial service, typically upper-class Indonesians, likely had European-born wives. These women wanted to be considered equal to their husbands and have an equal role in engaging with colony life. For this reason, they were against the practices of polygamy and child marriage which they saw as threats to their positionality. This warped version of gender equality has been historically popular amongst many Euro-American upper-class feminists. A desire to be equal in oppressing others is antithetical to a call for equality. European gender norms were not as progressive as they were framed. Kartini’s desire to distance herself from practices of seclusion that she was familiar with drew her to promote Western education as part of an enlightened culture. Obtaining a Western education was useful for a marriage to a Dutch man or bupati. If you had this background and married either of these men, you had mobility in Dutch circles. This obviously only applied to upper-class women. If you married a Javanese official, you had a life of isolation, typical of “high born” Javanese women (304). It is clear to see why Kartini would romanticize and encourage Western education when she resented a life of seclusion. Additionally, her ability to speak Dutch allowed her to circulate amidst Dutch circles. Popular conversation in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, including in Dutch circles, revolved around ideas described as nationalism, freedom, social equality, and women’s rights.

Because of this, the Dutch appeared as progressive and liberatory to Kartini despite their role as colonizers and the inclusion of only noble-born, Dutch-speaking Indonesians (Robinson 133). Upper-class women with education like Kartini began opening up organizations in the 1910s that were mostly social in orientation, but also engaged in welfare work and religious activities. However, these groups, because of the status of their founders, were limited in regional reach, and focused mostly in areas with some access to European education (Blackburn 2004, 18).

It is important to note that Kartini was interested in promoting her own class within a colonial context. She believed and advocated that the solution to improving poverty in Indonesia was through Western education and cooperation with the Dutch, and she maintained that the priyayi class was fit to improve the status of Java’s peasantry (Taylor 297, 305). Her reinforcement of class rankings is transparent in the way she believes the aristocratic class will save the poor, working class with an education from the colonizers. Today, Kartini schools are open all over Java providing free education to all. However, most girls drop out before the age of fifteen because their families need them to work (Al Jazeera, 2017). This is a reflection of the disconnect between the ruling class and the working class and the different needs of women from each respective group. Even though the school is free, attending still takes time away from a young girl that could be contributing to a family’s income by working. Structural changes are necessary to alleviate poverty. It also exemplifies how the rich cannot “save” the poor. In this way, feminism cannot be led by those with positions of privilege, rather the other way around if it is to attend to the needs of the masses.

Kartini’s image as the ideal womanhood persists today. We can see this through popular discourse, national holidays, and media. A stark example of how she is popularly depicted is the 2017 film *Kartini* directed by the Indonesian director Hanung Bramantyo. Overall, the film

depicts the close relationship between Indonesian elite and Dutch colonizers while also glorifying and romanticizing the presence of the Dutch. Western society is framed as supposedly "modern" and Dutch women as allegedly "liberated."[1] Kartini is exalted as "forward-thinking" because of her promotion of Western education. The film begins with a distraught young Kartini who wants to sleep with her biological mother, a housekeeper. Her mother must explain to her that she should address her as "maid" and she must address Kartini as "my lady." Class hierarchy is strongly emphasized but the experiences of the working-class women, like Kartini's mother are not examined beyond their connection to Kartini. The film highlights the struggles of seclusion heavily dramatizing scenes in which Kartini is sequestered to her room, all struggles only a noble woman in this context would have. Housekeepers seemed to be similarly confined to the house, showing them only ever leaving the house to complete chores for the regent's family. However, this form of forced isolation is not engaged with in the film.

The film then shows Kartini's first introduction to Western education, through her brother who lived in the Netherlands and offered her an "escape" from aristocratic Javanese practices with Dutch books. Kartini is shown imagining a fantasy in which she is in the Netherlands, with windmills and hills in the background, and sees Dutch women engaging in public society while also acting as mothers and wives. She calls them "so intelligent" and also wishes to "liberate her mind." The general theme of equating Dutch women with liberation continues throughout the film. The fantasy of an imaginary Dutch women guiding Kartini and her upper-class sisters through the hardships of Javanese nobility is used throughout as well. The Dutch are illustrated as kind, respectful, and progressive with a desire to help noble women like

[1] I use the words "modern" and "liberated" guardedly, knowing they are weighted with Western cultural association

Kartini reach “her full potential.” They are heavily invested in the life of Kartini, often coming to her “rescue” when Kartini writes them to save her from her marital seclusion. The white savior complex is played out by framing Kartini as enamored with the Dutch and seeking them out for help. This is also followed out by romanticizing Dutch society, such as in one scene where Kartini and her sisters shyly attend a Dutch colonial function. It is here she witnesses the mobility Dutch women had in the colony, and she desires the same. Upper class Javanese traditions are heavily demonized and framed as oppressive and backward while the Dutch are framed as progressive saviors, not as politically interested colonizers.

The continuation of a savior complex persists as the film shows Kartini’s Dutch educated brother encouraging her to spread her Western knowledge to the rest of Indonesia to create change. We can see how a mentality involving moral and class superiority as well as Western superiority dominated the approach towards “liberating” the rural and working-class Javanese population. Even the way she approaches “saving” the rural population lacks collaboration with their wants and needs. In the movie, Kartini’s idea of what would help is unintentionally reflective of her disconnected noble status. With the intention of popularizing local Jepara wood carving to increase the demand for work of wood carvers, she has local engravers carve multiple copies of her own drawing to sell in a Dutch gallery in honor of Queen Wilhelmina. The film depicts the carvers as initially reluctant but with her persistence, later thank her for saving them and providing them an income and food now that the Dutch buy their work. Her approach to help the poor is to commodify their art and sell it to the colonizers. The film portrays this as inspiring rather than misguided. Her ideas of liberation exclude the needs of working-class and rural women. Her portrayed desire to mobilize in society through assimilation of Dutch norms does not apply to the majority of women in Java. In the film, understanding Dutch is considered a

metric of education and progress. It is not just that the rural communities do not have access to the same educational materials as Kartini (although the disparity in access is coincidently highlighted when Kartini expresses a desire to read and write and instantly receives a desk and writing materials to do so, accommodations a working class woman would never have), but it is also that having that access does not provide the kind of liberation Kartini imagines.

The movie clearly illustrates the Dutch’s invested interest in Kartini, but frames it as an act of liberation, not of manipulation. Even in the film when the Dutch approach Kartini’s father explaining to him how they could “use Kartini in the Netherlands” and in return for his permission, they will make two of his sons regents, it is not depicted as an act of manipulation or political control. Instead, the film upholds Kartini’s portrayal as a feminist heroine that preserve the interests held by the Dutch colonizers and the Indonesian elite. The film is an example of how strongly Kartini continues be a national figure and how she is illustrated as one. Her heroine status also reflects the shift to state sponsored gender norms that promoted family structures that more closely aligned with Western nuclear frameworks and moved away from Javanese practices. Into the New Order, she is introduced as “Mother Kartini,” conveniently using her life as a way to endorse women’s roles in society as mothers and wives and in turn uphold the patriarchal structure intended by Suharto.

Despite the glorification of Dutch occupation and exclusive depictions of elitists’ perspectives, this popular Indonesian film was widely liked by the general Indonesian public. There is something to be said about the fact, this was a popular, mainstream film that reached many audiences and not just some indie, avant-garde film with a narrow audience. *Kartini* was well received and the historical figure continues to be used as a symbol of ideal womanhood in the country.

Pesantrens as a Form of Colonial Resistance

Islam and religious leadership are briefly mentioned in one scene of the film *Kartini*. Kartini approaches a visiting *kyai,* or Islamic expert, after he translates some of the Quran into Javanese. She asks him afterwards about what the Quran says about education, specifically about women obtaining education, and he replies saying Islam requires followers, all followers, to be seekers of knowledge. She is seemingly amazed and excited and asks why the rest of the Quran is not translated into the local language so people can understand what it says and use it for good. He replies saying he is trying but most want to read in Arabic without understanding. This point in the film alludes to very real and very important elements of Islam's role in social change in Java but does not elaborate. The role of kyai, specifically in *pesantrens*, or religious schools, were instrumental in the resistance against colonization and proliferation of dialogue surrounding women's empowerment and other social justice issues.

During the colonial period, alongside a rising nationalist movement from 1900 onwards, pesantren activity was strong (Ridwan 372). As part of the "Ethical Policy," the Dutch began to set up European schools for indigenous populations. However, these schools were often unaffordable. Ridwan explains how in 1930 to 1931, only 0.14% of the total population of school age attended school within the European schooling system. Pesantrens offered an alternative schooling for the everyday person. This became political as Ridwan states that "[a]lternatively, the presence of pesantren came to be a seed of resistance towards European education amongst the Muslim community, due to the socio-political context of the periods" (373). This new alternative contributed to a rise in religiosity. This rise led to more people, specifically those with the financial means, performing Hajj. It was in Mecca where pilgrims of all backgrounds exchanged ideas about their own circumstances as a result of Western intervention. Ridwan

states, “As the pilgrims mingled with all races and classes in Mecca, they learned about the global crisis as the result of Western expansion and returned home with ideas of anti-colonization” (374). People from all over the world were able to congregate and draw on similarities between their experiences with Western expansionism. This also opened the space for collaboration on tactics of resistance.

Resistance in the religious pesantren circles began to take different forms. Ridwan explains how some of these tactics continued even after Indonesia’s independence explaining: “This resistance could be found in various formats, even in the post-Independence period, e.g. when learning European languages was considered *haram*, forbidden or sinful, by resistance groups” (Ridwan 375). Not all pesantrens became arenas of resistance, and different kyai responded to the Netherlands Indies in diverse ways. Regardless, many pesantrens did become a space of colonial resistance and a way to engage in discourse away from colonial supervision. Ridwan argues that this was able to continue because pesantrens made sure not to aggravate the Dutch powers too much to the point of colonial retaliation, saying that “[o]rganizations still had to make sure they did not provoke colonial powers too much and receive colonial discipline or displeasure” (377). This allowed them to grow and continue to organize communities despite limitations. The have historically had a role in engaging in socio-political issues and improving community development. Many continue this role today. The author observed several pesantrens and found that some use their schools as a way to promote women in Islamic outreach, discuss women’s empowerment, and more (390). These establishments are another example of how Islam has and is continuously used as a tool for social improvement and progress. Ridwan explains how for many Muslims in Indonesia, “[m]odernization in the Indonesian Islamic world involves faith and piety at its heart, to counter the ‘secularization of consciousness’ which marks

much of the modern world (396). Orientalist narratives that associate modernity with secularism, particularly a distancing from Islam, are strongly challenged here. Instead, we continue to see Islam being used as a tool to resist oppressive powers such as colonization and patriarchy.

Early Muslim Women’s Organizing

Early women’s organizing in Indonesia in the early twentieth century was partially influenced by popular Islamic views. Women’s organizing in the 1910s engaged in religious activity in addition to social activity and welfare work. These groups were primarily started and run by women from the upper class with European educations. Later, when groups were more formalized in the 1920s, they were largely defined by “Western bourgeois notions of femininity,” local custom, and mainstream Islamic tradition. This was also the same time in Javanese history when prominent male-led religious organizations were beginning to form women’s wings that commonly worked with other women’s organizations, or challenged them (Blackburn 2004, 19). Because modernity and progress were so commonly associated with European tradition and Dutch moral codes, Western educated women from the Javanese upper class who formed these women’s groups concentrated on appearing “modern.” Blackburn argues that colonialism and their efforts to frame themselves as models of progress, are partially to blame for the lack of outreach to poor and rural women from Indonesia’s popular women’s groups. The Dutch retaliated against any nationalist, radical groups, and police harassment prevented many women from engaging in such organizing (19). Sundanese women’s leader Emma Puradireja categorized the women’s movement into two groups, the first based off religion and the second, religiously neutral, nationalist groups. The religious groups reached a wider audience because Islam appealed to the wider population’s centrally held beliefs. This

meant that the religious movements were typically more inclusive of poor, rural area women whereas the secular, nationalist groups typically engaged educated, urban women (20).

Under Japanese occupation, women’s independent organizing was banned and gender roles were modeled on a military regime with women designated to support their men in the war movement. These policies inadvertently helped mobilize women for the nationalist movement. Japanese occupation motivated many to organize, with women serving instrumental roles in the push for independence (20-21). Then when Indonesia declared independence in 1945, the new constitution outlined the equality of men and women. While patriarchy did not disappear overnight, independence opened the door for women’s continued mobilization and women’s organizing had much more agency and freedom under the new leader Sukarno. This time period allowed for women’s groups to organize, establish themselves, and advance their own agendas. However, organizing was still limited in rural areas. The doors being opened were for primarily upper class, educated women who pushed for political representation and participation in the public sphere. Meanwhile, working-class women’s social mobility remained limited by their income levels which forced them to work. They were not advocating for an escape from domesticity because they were never afforded the privilege to stay home in the first place. While upper-class women fought for the right to work, poor, rural women had no choice but to work. (23). Society was not a newly found feminist utopia under Sukarno by any means. Sukarno was clear about his views on gender roles in the nation and believed women’s primary role was to serve the state and preserve national unity before addressing any “women’s issues” (24).

The Suharto Era and State-Sponsored Patriarchy

After Indonesia's independence in the mid-twentieth century, gender norms, kinship relations, and women's roles in Indonesian society were further influenced and shaped by Indonesia's second president Suharto, who took power and established his regime as the New Order in 1966. Using the gendered moral hierarchy from Javanese culture, the Dutch framework of a nuclear family, and the idea that women's loyalty to the state is crucial for national unity, Suharto implemented a state enforced patriarchy. "State Ibuism" was the official policy that relegated the role of women strictly as mothers and wives under Suharto's New Order state (Robinson 171). The twentieth-century Indonesian state was already defined by the endorsement of *kodrat*, or natural destiny, in which men were understood as the main income earners and women as responsible for childbearing and home care. Emphasizing this concept under Suharto's rule, the family unit determined the state's stability, and any deviation from the ascribed norm was considered a threat to national security. These state-held convictions did not apply to low income women who were also income earners of their family out of necessity (Blackburn 2004, 11).

Upholding a state-sanctioned patriarchy required strict adherence to ascribed gender roles from civil servants. Suharto used civil servants who he believed reflected his own authority, to uphold the state's patriarchal structures. Many middle-class women in particular were assembled into state-controlled groups that promoted the New Order domesticity (Rinaldo 2013, 48). State enforced domesticity required heavy regulation, surveillance, and control. The reasoning behind this system was that government workers and employees of state institutions were thought to represent the state and therefore must set an example for the rest of society (Suryakusuma 92). Partially due to the set of moral ethics established by the Dutch, sexual conduct and sexuality

were considered indicators of moral integrity and by extension, the stability of the state (92). The integration of patriarchy in society upheld a standard of paternal power in which Suharto was the ultimate father figure, or *bapak* (95). Reinforcing a patriarchal structure in society legitimized Suharto’s political power as a paternal authoritative figure. Building a family was considered a foundational element of building a strong nation. It was believed that strong family units were an essential part creating a strong state (97). For this reason, Suharto and his military government were heavily involved in the sexual activity of their government employees who reflected the state. This extended to spouses of civil servants. Suryaksuma explains that “[t]he female auxiliary of Korpri, Dharma Wanita, the association of wives of civil servants was established to support husbands in their service to state and nation. Dharma Wanita espouses the ideology of ‘State Ibuism’, which defines women as appendages of their husbands and casts female dependency as ideal” (98). Under the New Order, the ideal womanhood was still associated with domesticity and subservience.

These set of enforced gender practices applied primarily to middle and upper-class women who had the financial flexibility to assume the positions of housewives. There was a contradiction in Suharto’s state gender ideology. While he emphasized the role of women as wives and mothers who should be contained to the domestic sphere, his Department of Labor was increasingly seeking out women as a form of cheap labor in the manufacturing sector in an ever capitalizing world (Blackburn 2004, 11). While working class women were laboring behind the scenes, Suharto simultaneously demanded that womanhood must be confined to the private sphere. This era cemented a strong correlation between the continuation of patriarchal gender norms and the stability of the state. Clarissa Adamson finds that many Indonesian men in

contemporary Indonesia continue to view deviations in traditional gender norms as a threat to state and social stability.

Suharto used other avenues to reinforce state control over gender roles and kinship relations. One such means was the Jakarta Pilot Project in 1967 which was a product of the state’s concern over population control. This was a family-planning program that used women’s bodies as the canvases for Suharto’s political agendas, and was accused of even using forced sterilization (Menchik 367). This program was also an example of the state beginning to use the influence of religious institutions to carry out state determined gender roles in the rest of society. Suharto recognized that if prominent religious leaders and institutions which held significant influence over the Indonesian population, were to oppose policies he wanted to implement, then his plans would remain unsuccessful. Suharto needed the support of religious institutions to carry out his goals of upholding an authoritarian regime through gendered means. To carry out his family planning program and maintain control of the population, he assigned a Deputy Head of the National Family Planning Coordination Board [BKKBN], to customize the program based on gathered information and opinions of Islamic leaders. Following this, the state then utilized schools, mosques, prayer circles, hospitals, social networks, and Islamic organizations to implement their plan (366). Suharto initiated the support of religious elites specifically, by buying them off with political and monetary incentives (367).

Originally Suharto was opposed to religious activity and did not work with or cater to the religious institutions in Indonesia. However, once he realized that he could benefit from the influence Islamic groups had over society, he used them to his political advantage. Muslim organizations also historically mistrusted the state since the colonial period (Blackburn 2004, 12). Initially Suharto attempted to marginalize religion from the public sphere. During these

early periods of the regime, women were used in state-controlled organizations to decentralize the impact of religion. Muslim women had an insignificant role in the public sphere in this period, but by the time Suharto was utilizing religion for his own state goals, women were using Islam to mobilize resistance to the state and advocate for gender equality (Rinaldo 2013 40). By supporting the creation of a more religious society, Suharto unintentionally provided the foundation and resources to for his own downfall and for the proliferation of organizing around gender equality and human rights.

V. Women, Islam, and Organizing

Islamic Revival

Beginning in the 1970s, a surge of new interest and engagement with Islamic discourse surfaced across the Muslim world, including in Indonesia and is commonly referred to by scholars as the Islamic revival. This period was also marked by a global trend of more and more Muslim women seeking a bigger voice in Islamic exegesis (Rinaldo 47). In Indonesia, the revival consisted of a rise in conservative interpretations on one end (40). But on the on the other, gender analysis during this time also became an increasingly popular mode of interpreting Islam. Indonesian Islamic intellectuals were influenced by critical women Islamic scholars such as Amina Wadud (Robinson 172). The Islamic Revival in Indonesia was also shaped by the increasing number of translations on women and gender in Islam, published by NGO activists that circulated the work widely (Rinaldo 2013, 47).

Despite the proliferation of Muslim feminist work, Suharto had taken advantage of the increasingly popular conservative interpretations of Islam which supported some of the state’s ideals. The government began to put Muslim content on state radio and TV. They also banned

lotteries, supported the creation of an Islamic bank, funded Quran recitation competitions, and more. Suharto had even used some Muslim organizations to violently eradicate communists and other resistance groups that threatened his authority. The creation of a more religious society was also in part motivated by the association of atheism with communism. Indonesian society was pushed to choose a religion and many lower-class Indonesians choose Islam. Fearing that the use of religious conservatism would lead to further restrictions on women’s rights and mobility in Java, many Muslim women’s rights advocates rushed to highlight the ways Islam and culture have been used by the state to control women. Adamson explains that “[M]uslim activists, educated in Islamic universities and members of prominent Muslim social organizations, drew on their knowledge of Islamic law, teaching and Indonesian-Muslim cultures to devise such strategies” (Adamson 11). Muslim women were using their knowledge of Islamic texts to challenge the conservative exegesis and redirect the public opinion on Islam and women’s rights. Many of these activists worked as a part of the Indonesia’s larger Islamic organizations that held significant influence over the rest of Javanese society.

Today, Indonesia has three main Islamic organizations: the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) who are considered traditionalist, the Muhammadiyah, considered reformist, and the Indonesian Council of Ulamas (MUI) who are considered conservative. The NU and the Muhammadiyah are both Indonesia’s biggest Islamic social organizations founded in the early nineteenth century. They are not political parties but play significant roles in shaping the country’s politics while maintaining some autonomy from the state (Siddiqui-Dennis 2020, 4; Al-Ansi, Ishomuddin, Kartono 1). During the Islamic Revival, the Islamic institution Nahadlatul Ulama (NU) advocated for the more progressive interpretations of Islam, and as a way to respond and compete with this trend, the state established Muslim day schools, or madrassahs modeled after

the Indonesian Islamic institution, Muhammadiyah’s more conservative understanding of Islam (Rinaldo 2013, 42). The creation of these schools had an adverse outcome from Suharto’s original intentions. An increase in access to Islamic education now provided more people the opportunity to interpret on their own terms. Religious knowledge was no longer limited to religious authorities and powers, but rather, Islam was now able to be understood by the everyday person. Soon, Islam became known as the discourse of opposition to the elite and the state by the lower and middle classes in Indonesian society. An increase in Islamic discourse activated an increase in conversation around social justice, leading to a rise in activism and organizing. Changes in the education system brought on by the Islamic revival prompted many young women to organize, attend university, hold professional jobs, and mobilize into the urban middle class (48). It is clear that the Islamic Revival was used both for top down efforts and grass roots goals.

With an increase in accessibility to Islamic materials, people began to regard Islam as a resource to promote an egalitarian society. As a result, the 1990s saw a burgeoning democratic reform movement that involved many young Muslims. Suharto’s attempt to use religiosity to uphold the New Order also continued into this era. Rinaldo points out that “Hefner maintains that the New Order government, in an effort to split the opposition, attempted to co-opt religious forces. According to Hefner, the state and elements of the military covertly funded and promoted extremist Muslim groups” (Rinaldo 2013, 43). The New Order’s attempt to direct religious energy towards a conservative materialization was met with prevailing resistance. The ‘90s saw more middle-class women entering the formal workforce and educational institutions. Many young women started to become progressively more drawn into Islamic activism. The means in which progress was sought by the state and by Muslim organizers diverged, with the former

attempting to structure Indonesian society based on a Western capitalist model, and the latter attempting to structure Indonesian society based on Islamic values. The states’ construction of gender norms was also fashioned based on the development of a global capitalist system. Rachel Rinaldo shares a quote from Suzanne April Brenner who explains that while women’s role was delegated to the domestic sphere, their participation in a growing capitalist world was also important to the state asserting that

> their foremost duty is to tend to their husbands’ needs, nurture the family, and socialize their children to become loyal and obedient citizens of the nation-state-as well as good consumers, one of the keys to promoting capitalist development…In short, the domestic sphere is being recast ideologically to fit an image that more closely resembles the stereotypes of American middle-class family life in the 1950s than any social reality in Java’s (or Indonesia’s history) (pp.238-240) (Rindaldo 2013, 44)

Evidently, women’s roles in the state were determined by how they could best serve the state. Lower income women were still permitted to work while the cultural norm was created around gendered domesticity, placing them at a social disadvantage. In spite of the state’s continued efforts to institutionalize patriarchy using conservative Islamic groups for support, Muslim women organizers used Islamic material to resist and advocate for their own equality. As a result of the Islamic revival and the state’s promotion of a “culturally Islamic society,” engagement with religious texts for social activism flourished in the 1990s (42).

The Islamic Revival had a significant role in providing a platform for Muslim women to mobilize. While it introduced a rise in conservative discourse due to Suharto’s sponsoring, it was also met with an upsurge of progressive dialogue. The revival prompted a transnational exchange of ideas on Islamic discourse. This provoked conversations about marginalized Quranic interpretations, such as an egalitarian understanding that argued that women’s rights were at the core of Islam. The rise in a contextual interpretation of Islam opened the door for discussions on gender equality, women’s rights, and democracy. Arimbi notes that a contextual interpretation

acknowledges the influence of the positionality of the one interpreting the texts asserting: “What is important to note here is that Islam cannot be separated from the locality of the life of Muslims. The subject position of those interpreting and of those practicing the religion—their culture, gender, race, ethnicity and class differences, need to be taken into account” (Arimbi 58). This approach is often categorized under the theory of Islamic feminism. An Islamic feminist interpretation employs a historical contextualization and intra-textual reading of the Quran and Sunnah that takes linguistic context into account. (Hidayatullah, 2014).

Scholars of Islamic feminism argue that institutionalized interpretations of Islam were derived from male scholars who did not only retrieve meaning, but also created their own meaning by projecting personal, gendered biases. These biased interpretations translated into Islamic jurisprudence and social practice, establishing a gender hierarchy that Muslim feminists argue does not inherently exist in Islam. Muslims who believe Islam is a faith of gender equality, stress that the religion’s normative, underlying values such as social justice and care and consideration for the marginalized, are fundamental. More plainly put, Islamic feminism believes that Muslims should recognize the Quranic values initiated in the Quran, and not those reflected based on the surrounding time period and culture (Duderija). Much of this understanding is informed by the rights Islam outlines for women, giving Muslim women in the 7th century more autonomy than women in the West would receive centuries later. These rights included the right for women to keep and accumulate her own money and property. This allowed for women to develop financial independence from men. Islamic feminism argues that established rights such as this suggest that Islam is encouraging steps towards women’s empowerment in society (Bishin & Cherif, 2017). It is important that this understanding challenges the notion that Islam is defined by a rigid, monolithic definition of piety. Instead, it highlights an important point that the

conservative, textual interpretations of the Quran, only apply to a specific time and culture—7th Arabia—not to modern day Indonesia. This opens the door to using Islam as a way to respond to current conditions, in this case, institutionalized patriarchy in Indonesia.

Many Muslim women began to participate in these conversations through discussions which were often facilitated by the many Muslim groups and organizations forming during this decade. A resulting Islamic feminist movement arose, primarily on university campuses. Conversations on gender equality in these settings generally stressed women’s equal political participation. Rinaldo explains: “When it comes to Indonesia Brenner (2005,1996) and Van Doorn-Harder (2006), argue that Islamic piety provides Indonesian women with a medium to express new ideas about religious and political authority” (Rinaldo 2010, 423). An expansion in Islamic education contributed to a rise of the middle class and women’s mobilization in it. Women from the lower class could now use the benefits from the expansion of Islamic education and government scholarships to attend state or Muslim universities, seek professional jobs, and participate in the public sphere with more mobility (Rinaldo 2013, 46). A growing class of urban middle-class Muslim women used the opportunities granted to them to utilize Islam as a way to advocate for gender equality, posing a clear challenge to institutionalized patriarchal authorities.

A particularly salient example of Muslim women’s resistance to patriarchal power was the donning of the hijab, or *jilbab* in Indonesia, by many Muslim activists. Historically, headscarves were not popularly worn in Indonesia, even among self-identified pious Muslims. Instead, they were worn more commonly during special occasions (Rinaldo 2013, 46). Under the New Order, however, with the influence of the Islamic revival, the jilbab became a symbol of resistance and Muslim identity. Rinaldo elaborates that “[t]hey rejected the state’s definitions of modernity, as well as their own cultural traditions, which they regarded as provincial. They

considered Islam a more cosmopolitan discourse. The jilbab was a symbol of resurgent Islam that emphasized a global community of Muslims but also a marker of opposition to the state” (Rinaldo 2013, 46). Similar to how Islam was associated with anti-colonial sentiments during Dutch occupation, and later as a counter to elites and the upper class, Islam was now being used by Muslim activists as a means to resist state definitions of modernity, in this case through the symbolism of the jilbab. While there was a push from different Muslim groups for women to adopt more modest clothing and maintain patriarchal gender roles, many young Muslim women took this to advocate for their own goals and desires, viewing Islam as a means towards social progress, not a barrier . Even when Islam was used in the name of promoting patriarchy, Muslim activists took it upon themselves to engage in Islamic feminist discourse occurring across the Muslim world, and use it to resist androcentric interpretations in Indonesia. The state’s use of patriarchal Islamic interpretations to uphold the New Order society, was met with substantial resistance by Muslims who argued that the religion, at its core, advocated for women’s rights.

Beginning in the 1980s, the jilbab was something discouraged by the state, even commonly called *jilbab beracun* or “poisonous *jilbab*,” criticized for its association with Arab influence. The state even banned the wearing of the jilbab altogether in public non-religious school and government offices. Muslim women students were denied their schooling rights if they refused to remove it, and the same applied to Muslim women civil servants. These restrictions led to student-led strikes and protests, primarily led by young Muslim women (Arimbi 71). Due to the organized demonstrations, the government repealed the jilbab restrictions in 1991. As Rinaldo asserts, “It was one of the first instances of women’s anti-state mobilization during the New Order” (Rinaldo 2013, 46). Suharto’s regime depended on the preservation of conservative gender roles. Young Muslim women were actively challenging the

state’s rules and regulations, and in turn destabilizing the very legitimacy of Suharto’s patriarchal New Order structure. Using Islam, these organizers, primarily Muslim women students and activists from the urban middle class, were taking control of the direction of the country.

Human rights and women’s NGOs, women’s factions of Islamic groups, and other student activists and women’s organizations resulted from the Islamic feminist discourse of the Islamic revival and from an increase in accessibility to Islamic texts from the Indonesian government (Rinaldo 2010, 423). After the fall of Suharto in 1998, Islam continued to be a much more central part of life in Indonesia. New Muslim women’s rights groups like the NGO Rahima, based in Indonesia’s capitol, Jakarta further established themselves. Rahima aims to reform society and how Islam is practiced, focusing on gender equality as a key element of the changes they propose (423). The group is informally associated with Indonesia’s largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama. In the 1980s, Rahima focused on a revitalized understanding of Islam that centered the ideas of democracy and human rights. Many members of the group joined through their activism with student and women’s organizing. A major part of Rahima’s mission is to implement views on gender equality through the avenue of Islamic schooling, or pesantrens. The same institutions that were used as a form of anti-colonial resistance continue to be used as a way to resist other patriarchal powers. They advocate for a revisionist understanding of Quranic texts that centers gender equality at the forefront through the organization of workshops and trainings for teachers, students, and community members (424).

Similar NGO groups and other women’s rights advocates gained additional steam after the fall of Suharto in 1998. Dialogue around democracy gave organizers more leverage to discuss gender equality, and their organizations received increased funding from international donor agencies (Adamson 11). Discussion on women’s leadership arose with the presidential

candidacy of Megawati Sukarnoputri who was Indonesia’s first female president who served from 2001 to 2004. The Indonesian Council of Islamic scholars (the Magelis Umat Islam, or MUI) announced that Sukarnoputri’s campaign was not permitted according to Islamic law. This caused an eruption of public debate around how women’s roles, specifically as leaders, are defined by Islam. Adamson adds, “These debates provided activists with a timely context in which to encourage people to re-consider their understandings of women’s roles in Islam” (Adamson 12). Activists took advantage of this time where so many were being challenged to rethink what they knew about women’s roles and Islam, and used the expertise of Islamic scholars to support their messages. They argued that women’s rights were a core tenet of Islam, instead of something the religion limited. In order to address these issues with the larger community, Muslim women’s rights activists created education and community outreach programs that taught an understanding of Islam that stressed women’s rights as a crucial, core element of the religion. Organizers targeted these programs to members of Java’s pesantrens because of their influential role in shaping Javanese communities’ views on Islam. Their hope is to create generational changes in how local communities view and treat gender roles using Islam and education (Adamson 12).

VI. Conclusions

While Islam continues to be popularly viewed in the West as a restricting instrument regarding women’s empowerment, Muslim women in Java, Indonesia have taken the initiative to use Islam as a tool to destabilize and subvert the patriarchy. Indonesia’s history shows how patriarchal cultural traditions, Dutch colonialism, and state and religious powers have collectively had the most limiting effects on women’s roles in Javanese society. Increased access to religious materials

enabled by the Islamic revival gave many Muslim women in Indonesia the resources to expand their participation in society and challenge patriarchal powers.

The construction of an ideal womanhood and normative gender roles in contemporary Java was shaped by several central forces in Javanese society. The first, Javanese culture, shaped gender roles around a patriarchal arrangement that placed women as the supporters of their husbands first and foremost. However, the way the institutionalization of Islam interacted with Javanese traditions led to a unique identity formation that transitioned over the decades for Javanese Muslim women, particularly upper-class women who had to do the most conforming to the continuous changes. Dutch colonialism disrupted Javanese gender and kinship relations and projected a Western Christian morality that constructed the concept of the Indonesian housewife. This was considered the ideal womanhood which increased the stigmas against working-class women who could not afford to be housewives. Early on, Islam was used as a tool of resistance. As an alternative to the unaffordable Dutch schools, Islamic schools, or pesantrens became a popular option for many Javanese lower and working-class people. Many pesantrens were used as anti-colonial spaces to discuss women’s rights. Islam continued to be the discourse of the opposition into Suharto’s New Order period. Suharto’s state-sponsored patriarchy attempted to lock women’s roles as their husband’s supporters. Using the Western model of a nuclear family, Suharto strongly believed the stability of the family unit tied into the stability of the state. As the patriarch of the nation, any deviations from ascribed gender roles were perceived as threats to the state. Understanding the influence Muslim organizations had over Indonesian society, Suharto used conservative Muslim groups to carry out his political goals. In this process, he attempted to institutionalize an understanding of Islam that aligned with his ideas around gender and kinship relations. To do this, he increased accessibility to Islamic

materials making it easier for people to interpret and draw conclusions on their own. This, coupled with the rise of the Islamic revival expanding Islamic discourse exchange and translation, led to a huge surge of resistance, particularly from Muslim women who were using Islam to advocate for women’s empowerment. Their religious and social engagement, protests, and organizing, shifted the socio-political environment of Java. Their work continues to educate generations of Muslims on a feminist understanding of the Quran.

Javanese Muslim organizers have displayed the important potential Islam holds for women’s empowerment in Muslim societies across the world. To understand the religion as something that fundamentally promotes the equality of genders, could radically shift patriarchal practices that exist in so many communities. The purpose of this work is to add to the growing pool of literature on Muslim women’s leadership, resilience, and organizing. It also aims to support Islamic feminist theory and its goal in educating Muslim communities on an understanding of Islam that highlights women’s empowerment. This paper raises some important questions that I hope can be fleshed out in future research. How does the work Indonesian Muslim women have done change how Islam is practiced and perceived? How can they serve as inspiration and support for Muslim women’s organizing transnationally? How does their work and research on it, invite other Muslim women to reclaim the narrative of women in Islam? Consequentially, how does all of this contribute to how Islam and Muslims are perceived and treated in the broader world? I plan to continue my research and envision a collective work on Muslim women’s organizing from regions all across the Muslim world to serve as a sort of educational tool for transnational organizing.

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