The Role of Women in Islamic Politics: From the Early Period to the Contemporary Era through the Lens of Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality Perspective

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

This study explores the development of women's roles in Islamic politics from the early Islamic era to the contemporary period using Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework. This theory is employed to analyze how Muslim women navigate layered discrimination at the intersection of gender, religion, and other social structures. Data were obtained through literature reviews and analyzed descriptively and analytically. The findings reveal that during the early Islamic period, women like Khadijah and Aisha played strategic roles in the economy, politics, and education. Khadijah provided financial support to Prophet Muhammad, while Aisha made significant contributions to political decision-making and the dissemination of knowledge, such as the Prophet Muhammad's hadiths. In the contemporary era, the involvement of Muslim women has become increasingly diverse, encompassing formal positions such as heads of state, parliament members, and social activists. For instance, in Indonesia, figures like Megawati Soekarnoputri, Puan Maharani, and Sri Mulyani exemplify inclusive political representation by women. The intersectionality theory reveals that Muslim women face complex discrimination within patriarchal structures but have also leveraged education, technology, and social media to expand their influence. Despite progress, challenges such as resistance to changing gender roles and limited political representation persist. This research contributes by offering a new perspective on gender and Islamic politics, while also providing a foundation for further studies on women's strategies in fostering a more equitable and inclusive society.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in politics is a crucial indicator in measuring the health of a nation's democracy (Muslimat, 2020). This issue is not only about gender equality but also about ensuring that the voices and interests of half the population are adequately represented (Putri & Raihan, 2023). Women's involvement in politics brings unique perspectives essential for policy-making (Nurcahaya & Akbarizan, 2023). Policies formulated by incorporating the views of both genders tend to be more comprehensive and address a broader range of societal needs (Firdausia, 2023, hlm. 2019–2024). Furthermore, when children, for instance, see women actively engaged in politics, they learn that leadership is not tied to a specific gender, helping to dismantle gender stereotypes and promoting greater gender equality (Arif Sugitanata & Sarah Aqila, 2023). Therefore, supporting and encouraging women's political participation is not merely about achieving gender balance(Hasanah & Musyafak, 2017) but also about building a more inclusive, diverse, and democratic society (Firman dkk., 2023).

Scholars have also explored the roles and dynamics of women's participation in politics, highlighting a positive shift in socio-cultural constructions regarding women's leadership in modern political arenas. Despite these positive developments, women, particularly in the Sundanese region, face persistent challenges when entering the political sphere, especially related to courage and self-confidence (Amanah dkk., 2023). Other researchers have identified limited access for women to media coverage, particularly in the context of election reporting. Studies indicate that women receive less media exposure than men, especially in national print media. This disparity creates unequal opportunities in the media industry for women to become prominent figures in disseminating information (Exmanda, 2023). Further research highlights the political activism of female politicians in Banten, Indonesia, showing that women continue to strive for gender justice and pro-women policies (Nurrohman dkk., 2023).

Based on these explanations and previous research findings, this study offers a unique contribution by specifically focusing on the evolution of women's roles in Islamic politics from the early Islamic era to the contemporary period, combined with an analysis through the lens of intersectionality theory. Using intersectionality as an analytical tool, this research provides a novel perspective on understanding how women negotiate their political roles amid the dynamics of intersecting discrimination and privilege—an area that remains underexplored in similar studies. Thus, this research aims to elucidate the development of women's roles in Islamic politics from the early Islamic period to the present day while exploring how intersectionality theory can explain these negotiation processes. In doing so, the study not only illustrates the transformation of women's roles in Islamic politics but also offers a theoretical framework that enriches the discourse on gender and Islamic politics.

From an academic perspective, this research is expected to contribute to three main aspects. First, it expands the literature on Islamic politics by highlighting women as

active and influential subjects. Second, it introduces a new theoretical framework by applying intersectionality theory to explain women's roles in the context of Islamic politics. Third, it lays a foundation for further studies on the strategies and dynamics of women's negotiations within broader political power structures, both within and beyond religious contexts. As such, this research has the potential to serve as a significant reference for studies on gender, politics, and religion.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive-analytical approach. The data utilized includes primary sources, such as historical literature and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, as well as secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, and recent news related to women's political participation. Data collection was conducted through a literature review, while the analysis is based on intersectionality theory to explore how women navigate layered discrimination at the intersections of various identities, such as gender and religion, within dominant patriarchal power structures.

Through this methodology, the study aims not only to understand and explain the position of women within political structures often dominated by patriarchal values but also to offer a new perspective on gender dynamics in the context of power and Islamic politics. The findings of this research are expected to contribute both theoretically, by enriching the literature on gender and intersectionality, and practically, by encouraging the strengthening of women's participation in a more inclusive and equitable political sphere.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Social Conditions of Women in the Classical Era in the Public and Political Sphere

Long before the contemporary era, the condition of women in Arab society, for example, and much of the ancient world, was markedly different from what is known today. In general, women's social status and rights were significantly limited. In the context of pre-Islamic Arab society, or the Jahiliyyah period, women's roles were constrained, and they often experienced various forms of discrimination (Sugitanata, 2020). Jahiliyyah society was dominated by a strong patriarchal social structure (Arif Sugitanata & Anisatul Latifah, 2023). Men held dominant roles in all aspects of life, while women had little to no voice or influence in decision-making, whether at the family or societal level (Brahmana & Ramadi, 2023). Women in the classical period rarely had access to formal education (Sugitanata & Zakariya, 2021). Their opportunities to work or participate in economic activities were limited, contributing to their dependence on men, whether fathers, husbands, or other male relatives (Masfufah dkk., 2023).

Widowed or older women often faced particularly unfavorable treatment (Suwandi, 2019, hlm. 1–240). They were perceived as having little social or economic value, which often led to poverty and marginalization (Azizah, 2020). These harmful practices against women were frequently justified on the grounds of culture and tradition (Muhammad, 2021, hlm. 1–396). Social norms and prevailing beliefs of the time played a significant role in maintaining the status quo and hindering progress toward improving women's conditions (Syamaun, 2016). The beliefs of the Jahiliyyah period also influenced

women's roles in society (Ariziq, 2022), with certain myths often used to legitimize discriminatory practices against women (Amallia, 2022).

In another context, during the era of Ancient Greece, women's conditions were similarly shaped by dominant social and political structures. Women were not only prohibited from participating in governance and decision-making processes but also had restricted access to education (Adinugraha dkk., 2018). They were generally taught household skills, such as cooking and sewing, which were deemed necessary to prepare them for their roles as wives and mothers. Even within the family, women were expected to submit to the authority of their husbands or fathers. This situation contrasted sharply with that of men, who enjoyed broad access to formal education and opportunities to actively engage in various aspects of social and political life (Asmanidar, 2015).

In the era of Ancient Rome, the situation was somewhat different but still far from achieving gender equality. Although women from the upper classes could enjoy greater economic and social freedom, they were still constrained by societal norms and expectations (Gerkens & Vigneron, 2000). Upper-class women might have access to education and even participate in business activities, but they remained dependent on men for legal and social status. They were barred from holding public office or having voting rights (Kamp, 2020). While some notable women, such as Livia Drusilla, the wife of Emperor Augustus, achieved recognition in Roman history, such cases were exceptions rather than the norm (Chrystal, 2017, hlm. Part 2, No. 5). A similar condition prevailed in other ancient civilizations across the world. In many societies, women were regarded as inferior to men, and their roles were often confined to the domestic sphere (Abidin, 2017). In ancient Egypt, for instance, women did have greater legal and economic rights compared to those in Greece and Rome. They could own and inherit property, engage in contracts, and participate in litigation. However, despite these legal advantages, socially, they still lived in a patriarchal society. Their primary roles were centered on the family and household, and they rarely engaged in political or leadership activities (Allam, 1990).

3.2. The Role of Women in Islamic Politics: From Early History to the Contemporary Era

History in Islam records that women have made significant contributions, both directly and indirectly, to the political sphere (Hadi, 2017). During the early Islamic era, figures such as Khadijah and Aisha, the wives of Prophet Muhammad, were renowned for their intelligence and influence. Khadijah, a successful entrepreneur, provided financial and emotional support to Prophet Muhammad, while Aisha was recognized for her expertise in narrating hadiths and her contributions to education and political decision-making after the Prophet's death. One of her notable roles was her involvement in the Battle of the Camel, although this remains a controversial topic in Islamic history. Generally, Aisha is acknowledged for offering critical advice and perspectives on various political issues of her time (Susilo, 2023).

In the contemporary era, women's involvement in Islamic politics demonstrates significant diversity (Hasanah & Musyafak, 2017). In countries like Indonesia, women have achieved key positions in political institutions, becoming members of parliament and even leaders. For example, Puan Maharani Nakshatra Kusyala Devi currently serves as the Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia (DPR RI) for the 2019–2024 term (Haryanti Puspa Sari, 2019), while Sri Mulyani (Minister of Finance) and Retno Marsudi (Minister of Foreign Affairs) hold prominent ministerial positions in the same period (Ardito Ramadhan, 2019). Moreover, Diah Permata Megawati Setiawati

Soekarnoputri served as Indonesia's fifth president from July 23, 2001, to October 20, 2004 ("Ini Urutan Presiden Indonesia serta Wakil dan Masa Jabatannya," 2023). These achievements illustrate how Indonesia's inclusive and progressive approach to gender reflects a unique combination of local culture, religious interpretation, and international influence.

The role of women in Islamic politics also encompasses broader social and cultural influence (Wahyudi, 2018). In many Muslim communities, women play pivotal roles in advancing social, educational, and health-related issues, which not only improve community welfare but also strengthen their political standing (Amar, 2017). For instance, in Pakistan (Omar & Mustafa, 2019) and Bangladesh (Thaharah & Rizky, 2022), women have been instrumental in advocating for the rights of women and children. Women-led organizations in these countries focus on education and economic empowerment, directly contributing to increased female participation in politics and policymaking. Additionally, in the Middle East, Muslim women in countries like Tunisia and Morocco have made significant contributions toward advocating for gender equality and legal reforms that benefit women. In Tunisia, women's movements were vital in safeguarding their rights during the political transition following the Jasmine Revolution (Moghadam, 2017). In Europe, Muslim women face distinct challenges, such as discrimination based on religion and gender, yet they continue to act as agents of social change through community empowerment initiatives, advocacy, and political participation, particularly in countries like France and the United Kingdom (Werbner, 2007).

The development of technology and social media has played a key role in enhancing the visibility and influence of women in Islamic politics. Social media serves as a primary platform for women to voice their political views, raise awareness about women's rights issues, and organize campaigns, especially in countries with limited access to formal political arenas (Rosyidin, 2022, hlm. 1–99). On a global scale, the interaction between Islamic culture and international influences also shapes the dynamics of women's political participation. Broader access to education and economic opportunities has encouraged Muslim women to contribute more significantly to various aspects of societal life. For example, in Indonesia, interpretations of Islamic politics are often influenced by local values emphasizing social harmony and mutual cooperation. This is reflected in the participation of Muslim women in politics through community-based organizations focusing on social issues, such as education and healthcare (Priandi & Roisah, 2019). In the Middle East, more dominant patriarchal cultures shape interpretations of Islamic politics that often place women in traditional roles, although progressive movements are working to challenge these norms (Moghadam, 2017). Meanwhile, in Western countries like the United Kingdom and France, Muslim women face distinct challenges due to social and political pressures stemming from religious and gender-based discrimination (Werbner, 2007). These challenges, coupled with intercultural and interfaith dialogues, have contributed to reshaping traditional views on women's roles in politics and social life (Bashori, 2018). Despite progress, challenges remain, including gender discrimination and resistance to changing gender roles. In some regions, women continue to struggle for equal representation in politics (Nurcahaya & Akbarizan, 2023). For instance, in several Middle Eastern countries, women have only recently gained the right to vote and run for office (Jill Crystal, 2005).

Ultimately, the role of women in Islamic politics reflects a long journey marked by dynamics and transformations, from the significant contributions of prominent figures in the early Islamic era to their engagement in modern and global politics. History demonstrates that Muslim women—whether through figures like Khadijah and Aisha or contemporary leaders such as Megawati, Puan Maharani, and activists across various nations—have played a vital role in shaping society. In an increasingly inclusive global context, the influence of Muslim women extends beyond formal politics into social, educational, and cultural spheres, including the use of technology and social media as tools for advocacy. While many achievements have been made, the struggle for gender equality, better political representation, and the elimination of discrimination continues. This requires a synergy of religious understanding, cultural practices, and universal values to ensure that Muslim women can contribute to building a just and inclusive society to their fullest potential.

3.3. Intersection of Identity and Power Dynamics: An Intersectional Analysis of Muslim Women's Contributions to Islamic Politics

Intersectionality theory, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, analyzes various interconnected dimensions to explain how social categories such as race, gender, class, and other factors interact to create unique experiences of oppression or privilege within society. The first dimension is the identity dimension, which examines how the combination of various identities, such as gender and race, shapes an individual's experience of discrimination. For instance, the experience of Black women cannot be fully explained by focusing solely on either gender or race discrimination, as they face complex forms of oppression at the intersection of these two categories. The second dimension is the structural dimension, which explores how systems of power, such as patriarchy and racial supremacy, work together to maintain inequality. This can manifest in discriminatory policies or injustices in workplaces and other institutions. The third dimension is the representational dimension, which examines how cultural meanings, symbols, and stereotypes create and sustain unequal social hierarchies. For example, the portrayal of Black women in media as submissive or aggressive reinforces social inequalities (Crenshaw, 2013).

Through these three dimensions, intersectionality provides a framework to understand oppression as complex and often invisible in analyses that focus solely on a single social category. In the context of Islamic politics, this theory can be applied to analyze how Muslim women navigate discrimination arising from the intersection of gender, religion, and other social factors (Arif Sugitanata & Anisatul Latifah, 2023). History demonstrates that women in Islam have made significant political contributions since the early Islamic era (Hadi, 2017). Figures such as Khadijah and Aisha, two women who held important positions in the life of Prophet Muhammad, exemplify the strategic roles women played, even within the patriarchal framework that dominated Arab society at the time. Khadijah, a successful entrepreneur, provided financial and emotional support to Prophet Muhammad (Susilo, 2023), illustrating her influence within an economic structure that often marginalized women (Sugitanata, 2020). Her position demonstrates how a woman can transform power dynamics through strategic economic control. Meanwhile, Aisha, with her intelligence in narrating hadiths and her involvement in political matters (Susilo, 2023), contributed to the representational and symbolic dimensions that defined gender relations of her time. Her participation in the Battle of the Camel reflects the complexity of women's roles in politics (Susilo, 2023). Aisha became

both a part of the power dynamics and a subject of controversy, revealing resistance to changes in gender roles (Crenshaw, 2013).

In the contemporary era, the diverse contributions of women to Islamic politics have become increasingly evident (Hasanah & Musyafak, 2017). For instance, in Indonesia, women such as Puan Maharani (Haryanti Puspa Sari, 2019), Sri Mulyani, and Retno Marsudi have attained key positions in political institutions, demonstrating that women can play vital roles within formal power structures (Ardito Ramadhan, 2019). This phenomenon reflects Indonesia's progressive and inclusive approach to gender, which integrates local cultural influences, religious interpretations, and international dynamics. This approach has enabled women to navigate structural barriers and expand their participation in politics. Women's leadership is also exemplified by Megawati Soekarnoputri, whose presidency symbolizes the highest political achievement for women in Indonesia ("Ini Urutan Presiden Indonesia serta Wakil dan Masa Jabatannya," 2023).

Similarly, women's contributions to Islamic politics are evident in other countries like Pakistan (Omar & Mustafa, 2019) and Bangladesh (Thaharah & Rizky, 2022), where women have not only emerged as political leaders but also as agents of social change through organizations advocating for women's and children's rights. In the Middle East, Muslim women in countries such as Tunisia and Morocco have made significant contributions to advancing gender equality and advocating for legal reforms that support women. In Tunisia, for example, women's movements played a crucial role in protecting their rights during the political transition following the Jasmine Revolution (Moghadam, 2017). In Europe, Muslim women face different challenges, such as discrimination based on religion and gender, yet they continue to act as agents of social change through community empowerment initiatives, advocacy, and political participation, particularly in countries like France and the United Kingdom (Werbner, 2007). These activities demonstrate that women do not solely rely on formal positions to influence policies but also leverage emotional bonds and social solidarity within their communities.

Technology and social media have also paved new avenues for Muslim women to enhance their visibility and influence in politics. Digital platforms enable women to voice their political views, organize campaigns, and raise awareness about women's rights issues, even in countries with limited access to formal political arenas (Rosyidin, 2022, hlm. 1–99). These developments illustrate how women are utilizing representational dimensions to reshape traditional perceptions of gender roles in politics and social life (Bashori, 2018). However, despite significant progress, challenges remain, particularly in combating gender discrimination and resistance to change. In some regions, women still struggle for equal representation, both as voters and political candidates. For example, in several Middle Eastern countries, women have only recently gained the right to vote and run for office, reflecting the persistence of patriarchal dominance within formal power structures (Jill Crystal, 2005).

Thus, the contributions of women to Islamic politics, from the early era to the contemporary period, reveal a complex dynamic of identity, structure, and representation. From Khadijah's financial support and Aisha's political acumen to women's involvement in modern politics, it is evident that women have been able to navigate social structures that often place them in subordinate positions. With advancements in technology, increased access to education, and intercultural dialogue, Muslim women continue to expand their roles in various aspects of society. This not only

transforms power dynamics but also creates opportunities for renegotiating gender relations toward greater equality. While challenges persist, the achievements thus far demonstrate that gender transformation through the lens of intersectionality in Islamic politics is an ongoing and promising process.

4. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the development of women's roles in Islamic politics from the early Islamic era to the contemporary period reflects a dynamic journey and significant transformation. In the early Islamic period, figures such as Khadijah and Aisha made substantial contributions in the fields of economy, politics, and education. Khadijah, through her strategic role in supporting Prophet Muhammad, demonstrated the influence of women in the sphere of production relations, while Aisha actively participated in political decision-making and the dissemination of knowledge. In the contemporary era, Muslim women have increasingly engaged in formal and social politics, serving as government leaders, legislators, and activists. This phenomenon reflects a positive shift in women's representation across various Muslim-majority countries, including Indonesia, which serves as a prime example of progress in women's political roles.

From the perspective of intersectionality theory, the analysis indicates that Muslim women navigate and negotiate experiences of discrimination at the intersection of their identities, such as gender and religion, within complex social structures. This theory highlights how the interaction between identity, power structures, and symbolic representation shapes women's roles in politics. In the early Islamic period, Khadijah's financial support and Aisha's political involvement exemplify how women utilized economic and symbolic dimensions to navigate patriarchal systems. In the contemporary era, Muslim women leverage education, technology, and social media to expand their influence not only in formal political arenas but also in advocating for social change at the community level. These advancements demonstrate that women are capable of creating new spaces to negotiate their roles amid ongoing gender discrimination and patriarchal structures. However, the limitations of this study include the interpretative nature of historical data and the geographic representation, which does not encompass the entire Muslim world. These limitations highlight opportunities for more comprehensive future research.

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