

Susanne Schröter, ed. *Gender and Islam in Southeast Asia: Women's Rights Movements, Religious Resurgence, and Local Traditions*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013. 335 pp.

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As the first edited volume on gender and Islam in Southeast Asia, this book has the ambitious aim of documenting how Muslim women in that diverse region are engaged in current debates involving Islam and women's rights. Readers seeking an ASEAN catalog of issues pertaining to gender and religion will be disappointed. Instead, this volume concentrates on the four historically majority Muslim areas of the region: Indonesia, Malaysia, Mindanao,¹ and Thailand's southernmost provinces (Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala, and Satun). The result is a generally well-integrated and insightful contribution to scholarship on gender and Islam in the Malay Muslim region of Southeast Asia.

Schröter's introduction presents a cogent overview of gender and Islam across the archipelago, with close attention to distinctive histories of each of the four areas covered in the book. (This review will concentrate primarily, but not entirely, on the essays pertaining to Indonesia.) It is well established in the literature that gender hierarchies across the Malay Archipelago are not rigidly defined. For all of recorded history, women have played important roles in the economic and social life of their communities. And yet, as is widely documented historically and ethnographically, there are typically highly valued forms of power or prestige that are culturally defined in ways that make them more accessible to men than to women.²

Islam has often operated as one of those powerful domains to which men have had privileged access. At the same time, Islam also teaches that women and men are both equal before God. Islam has developed and flourished for centuries in this part of the world, where gender constructs and dynamics offer a striking contrast to those that obtain in the religion's birthplace. These contrasts are very apparent to Southeast Asian Muslims, who have long engaged in negotiating these differences through periods of reform and revitalization of their faith. This volume provides valuable insight into

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¹ The Muslim population of Mindanao has declined over the last century from 98 percent in 1913 to 30 percent today due to government-sponsored resettlement of Christians in the area and economic marginalization of local Muslims, 80 percent of whom are now landless (Schröter, this volume, 24).

² For fresh insights into this pattern of gender relations and ideology in a monograph on rural south-central Java, see Ann R. Tickamyer and Siti Kusujarti, *Power, Change, and Gender Relations in Rural Java: A Tale of Two Villages* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012). Documenting women's extensive participation in production, commerce, and community relations in the special region of Yogyakarta, Tickamyer and Kusujarti explore the cultural reasons why women's accomplishments in these spheres do not translate into prized forms of symbolic power and status. They make the case that contradictions involving the gendered division of labor, control over economic resources, and ideological representations of gender are inherently paradoxical and irresolvable. While their analysis is specific to Javanese culture, their insights are useful in considering gender orders across the archipelago.

contemporary engagement of these issues by Muslims representing a wide range of perspectives on Islam and its implications for gender roles and relations in society.

The last several decades have seen profound changes in Southeast Asia, including—but by no means limited to—the collapse of Indonesia’s New Order government followed by decentralization and democratization, as well as the wave of Islamic revitalization that has been transforming politics and public culture across the region. Schröter highlights what these changes have meant for women and how Muslim women are responding. On the one hand, there are Muslims, both women and men, committed to gender equality in both their faith and their nations (all of which have ratified CEDAW, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women). On the other hand, there are conservative and neo-orthodox Muslims, both women and men, who regard gender inequality as religiously mandated. Essays in this book present effective expositions of both these camps. And at the same time, they demonstrate Schröter’s point that Muslims of the region cannot be neatly sorted into these two discrete and opposing categories. A variety of factors help to shape the outlook and choices of individuals. Broad issues of nationality, ethnicity, class, and social status, of course, are at play. So, too, are a host of micro-level factors involving personal opportunities and circumstances. A strength of this collection is its demonstration of how women of various backgrounds and perspectives are engaging religion to transform their lives and communities.

Five of the essays deal with gender issues in policy and politics. These include family values, law, and policy in Indonesia and Malaysia (Nelly van Doorn-Harder, Siti Musdah Mulia, Maila Stivens); and women’s leadership and political involvement in the southern Philippines (Birte Brecht-Drouart, Amina Rasul-Bernardo). Four essays examine women’s involvement in neo-orthodox movements: Tablighi Jama’at in southern Thailand (Alexander Horstmann), Salafi-based Islamic movements in Southern Thailand (Amporn Marddent), Muslim conversion in the Philippines (Vivienne S. M. Angeles), and constructions of gender in the texts and practices of the Tablighi Jama’at (Farish A. Noor). The remaining two essays analyze literary texts: lesbian experience as depicted in a pair of novels written in the post-Suharto era (Monika Arnez), and gender dynamics in a twentieth century Bugis lontara’ manuscript (Nurul Ilmi Indrus). Interesting in their own right, these literary analyses are not tightly integrated with the other two sets of essays.

Van Doorn-Harder explores a generational divide within ‘Aisyiyah, the women’s branch of Indonesia’s reformist Islamic organization Muhammadiyah.³ ‘Aisyiyah helped to develop the model of Keluarga Sakinah, or “Harmonious Family,” a campaign that coincided with New Order government policies that, for the first time, articulated a vision of proper roles for men and women in Indonesian society.⁴ ‘Aisyiyah did not directly challenge Islamic teachings concerning men’s authority over women, but

³ See also Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: Reading the Qur’an in Indonesia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

⁴ Kathryn Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2009), 68–88. See also Tickamyer and Kusujiarti, *Power, Change, and Gender Relations in Rural Java*, for a detailed account of how these policies played out at the local level.

instead underscored the importance of mutual respect and interdependence between husband and wife. Through its model of the ideal family, the organization discouraged polygamy and, beginning in the 1970s, took an active role in promoting the use of birth control. Van Doorn-Harder shows how 'Aisyiyah effectively succeeded in recasting marital and family relations without questioning the teachings of the Qur'an.

A younger generation of women activists, calling themselves *Nasyiat ul-'Aisyiyah*, "Young" (or "Growing") 'Aisyiyah, has critiqued the "Harmonious Family Model" for its primary focus on women's roles as mothers and wives, and failure to advocate for women's rights. *Nasyiat ul-'Aisyiyah* grounds its efforts in a broader vision of universal human rights and democratic transformation. *Nasyiat ul-'Aisyiyah* has strongly denounced polygamy, declaring it sinful because a man who commits it denies his wife equality. In so doing, the organization incites its conservative Islamist critics who find even the Harmonious Family Model to be a step too far.

Whereas Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, has generally maintained a commitment to religious pluralism, Malaysia's Muslim-Malay dominated government and major political parties have led the process of Islamization and conservative family values in tandem with the promotion of nationalism, modernization, and economic development. In doing so they have explicitly advanced a concept of modernity distinct from the secular model of Western countries. Across the political spectrum there is resistance to what is deemed "Westoxification." Stivens explores how many Malaysian women activists work within the family-values framework to strengthen the family by promoting women's legal rights.

Over the past half century, Qur'anic scholarship, like other fields, has experienced a hermeneutical turn, shifting away from a primarily philological approach to contextual analysis of scripture and commentaries that considers the social, historical, and cultural influences that have helped to shape them. Muslim scholars adopting this approach consider the Qur'an and Hadith to be divinely given and hence immutable, but regard interpretations of those scriptures—including translations and legal readings—as shaped by historical and cultural factors that reflect customs and attitudes of their time, not divine truth. Both Schröter and Stivens detail the pioneering work of the Malaysian organization Sisters in Islam in employing contextual interpretation to challenge conservative religious efforts to impose restrictions on women's freedom.

Siti Musdah Mulia's essay "Towards Justice in Marital Law: Empowering Indonesian Women" summarizes a landmark demonstration of contextual exegesis in the service of legal reform. Mulia, a distinguished Islamic scholar and, at the time, a research professor at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, led the Gender Mainstreaming Working Group, appointed by Indonesia's Religious Affairs Ministry in 2003 to review the Islamic Code of Law, issued by Suharto as Presidential Instruction No1/1991. This Code of Law provides legal guidance to Indonesian religious courts in the areas of marriage, inheritance, and religious donation. While upholding women's equality in the family and under Allah, the code disadvantages women in a number of respects, including, but not limited to polygamy and marital disobedience.

The Gender Mainstreaming Working Group was composed of eight members, six men and two women, all affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, the two

largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia.⁵ The group conducted a detailed review of the Islamic Code of Justice and proposed a series of changes in a document that came to be known as Counter Legal Draft. Among these proposed changes is the willing consent of both parties to a marriage, a common age of consent, a definition of marital disobedience that applies to both spouses, equal partnership between wife and husband, the lawfulness of interfaith marriages, and a ban on polygamy. Mulia's essay in this volume provides a cogent overview of the project and a summary of its recommendations and their basis in Islamic scripture and jurisprudence.

Those familiar with this case will know that Counter Legal Draft met with vigorous opposition from conservative Muslim quarters. The ensuing controversy resulted in its withdrawal by the Ministry of Religious Affairs as well as a *fatwa* by the Council of Indonesian Ulama condemning liberal reform. This episode represented a full-on clash between liberal and conservative Muslims in the wake of Suharto's resignation and the collapse of the New Order.⁶ Although implementation of the Counter Legal Draft was blocked, Islamic feminism,⁷ among other social justice movements, continues to thrive.

As a counterpoint to the essays on liberal Muslim efforts to advance women's rights, the volume offers four essays focusing on women's participation in contemporary forms of neo-orthodox Islam in the region. Horstmann and Noor examine the history and dynamics of Tablighi Jama'at, a fundamentalist Islamic missionary movement. This movement began in northern India in the 1920s and is now active in over 150 countries worldwide. It established a presence in Southeast Asia during the 1950s and has spread since that time. Tablighi Jama'at teachings emphasize the spiritual rather than the legal and political dimensions of Islam. The movement is welcoming and socioeconomically egalitarian. No prior education or training is required to participate. As such, it has particular appeal to people with few material resources who may be facing personal challenges in their lives. Whereas Tablighi Jama'at began as an exclusively male organization, as it spread through Asia and Africa, it has opened up to provide avenues of religiosity for women to pursue.

Both Horstmann and Noor discuss the challenges, particularly for male researchers, of studying women's experience in these highly conservative and gender-segregated settings. As a Muslim woman who grew up in southern Thailand, Marddent is able to document more fully how participation in various neo-orthodox Islamic movements has become a transformative experience for women that broadens their horizons and provides them identity and membership in a transnational religious community. Her essay examines Salafi-inspired Islamic reformation movements not simply as resistance

⁵ Zezen Zaenal Mutaqin, "Culture, Islamic Feminism, and the Quest for Legal Reform in Indonesia," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 24, 4 (2018): 438.

⁶ For illuminating assessments of the political context and dynamics of this time, see Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia*; Suzanne Brenner, "Private Moralities in the Public Sphere: Democratization, Islam, and Gender in Indonesia," *American Anthropologist* 113, 3 (2011); and Robert W. Hefner, "Islamic Law and Muslim Women in Modern Indonesia," in *Islam, Gender, and Democracy in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Jocelyne Cesari and José Casanova (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 82–112.

⁷ Susanne Schröter, "Islamic Feminism: National and Transnational Dimensions," in Cesari and Casanova, *Islam, Gender, and Democracy in Comparative Perspective*, 113–36.

to Thai-Buddhist authority, but also as dynamic arenas for redefining gender, piety, and Islamic identity, especially among university-educated women seeking an Islamic alternative to a secularized Western version of modernity. Both Marddent and Horstmann shed light on the socioeconomic, generational, and ideological fissures neo-orthodox religious commitment has provoked not only between Muslims and Buddhists, but also within Thailand's Muslim population.

In her essay, Angeles examines neo-orthodox movements in the Philippines that have attracted Christian converts.⁸ Of particular interest for our purpose here is the connection she draws between these movements and the experience of overseas contract labor in Muslim countries. Indonesia and the Philippines both export labor to Muslim areas within and beyond Southeast Asia. Angeles's essay highlights the potential of overseas labor for changing or deepening religious commitment, cultivating new understandings of the faith and its obligations, and realigning relationships with spouses, children, natal families, and the global community of Islam.

What unites the essays in this volume is attention to how Muslim women of different backgrounds, circumstances, and political outlooks are seeking spiritual fulfillment and working to improve their lives and those of their families and consociates. As some of these cases show, even in its most conservative forms, Islam is providing ways to broaden women's horizons and to give them opportunities for learning and leadership in a dynamic and changing world. The regional discourse and debates concerning Islam and gender reveal their firm grounding in the terms of Malay Muslim history and cultural realities as well as their engagement with global conversations.⁹

For many women, these new avenues of religious exploration and engagement have meant expanding possibilities for self-actualization, religious standing, and, in some cases, greater parity with men.¹⁰ Writing on Islam and feminism in Indonesia, Rachel Rinaldo has observed that while Indonesian women have been active politically throughout their country's history, "visibly pious women" are new on the political scene¹¹—a phenomenon evident elsewhere in Muslim Southeast Asia. Rinaldo argues that pious agency and feminism are not inherently contradictory. She highlights ways in which religiously observant women activists are exercising their religious and political agency in public advocacy and reform. Rinaldo makes a distinction between "pious critical agency" (which involves the exercise of critical interpretation and judgment) and "pious activating agency" (which accepts and promotes established interpretation) to contrast the agency of liberal and conservative religious actors. This distinction captures well the contrasts represented in the Schröter volume by advocates

⁸ See also Vivienne Angeles, "The Middle East and the Philippines: Transnational Linkages, Labor Migration, and the Remaking of Philippine Islam," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 7, 1–2 (2011): 157–81.

⁹ Kathryn Robinson, "Islamic Cosmopolitics, Human Rights and Anti-violence Strategies in Indonesia," in *Anthropology and the New Cosmopolitanism: Rooted Feminist and Vernacular Perspectives*, ed. Pnina Werbner (Oxford: Berg, 2008), 111–33; and Maila Stivens, "Gender, Rights, and Cosmopolitanisms," in Werbner, *Anthropology and the New Cosmopolitanism*, 87–109.

¹⁰ In her book *Submitting to God: Women and Islam in Urban Malaysia* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2009), 189–90, Sylvia Frisk argues that women's submission to God need not imply submission to men. Instead, through rites of worship, women seek to maintain a relationship with God by exercising religious discipline and virtue. The deepening spiritual practices of Muslim women illustrate how the Islamic revival is increasing women's access to a religious domain that has often been a male purview.

¹¹ Rachel Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety: Islam and Feminism in Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

of women's rights, marriage law reforms, and related issues, on the one hand, and advocates of gender hierarchy, polygamy, and—in some cases—state imposed Islamic law, on the other. Contemporary forms of religious engagement are clearly helping to strengthen women's social and political activism, even as critical issues involving women's legal rights and gender equality hang in the balance.