PIOUS AND CRITICAL:

Muslim Women Activists and the Question of Agency

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Recent turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa has prompted renewed concerns about women's rights in Muslim societies. It has also raised questions about women's agency and activism in religious contexts. This article draws on ethnographic research with women activists in Indonesia, the country with the world's largest Muslim population, to address such concerns. My fieldwork shows that some Muslim women activists in democratizing Indonesia manifest pious critical agency. Pious critical agency is the capacity to engage critically and publicly with religious texts. While some scholars have argued that pious and feminist subjectivity are inherently at odds, the emergence of pious critical agency in Indonesia demonstrates that piety and feminism can intersect in surprising and unexpected ways. Moreover, it shows that women's agency can draw on both secular and religious resources and that religion can be used to promote critical discourses on gender.

Keywords: *Islam; Women; Agency; Indonesia; Feminism*

The past decade's turmoil in the Middle East has prompted renewed concern for the future of women's rights in the region. A resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, sexual assaults in public spaces in Egypt, and the rising power of jihadi extremists in Syria and Iraq are troubling signs for those interested in gender equality. Yet these dramatic events are only a part of more longstanding social and political transformations in Muslim societies. Such changes include a renewed emphasis

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on more public forms of Islamic piety such as veiling and participation in religious study, often driven by women themselves; public pressure for a greater role for religion in family or civil law; growing numbers of women entering higher education; and, in some places, renewed political activism demanding greater equality or rights for women, including within an Islamic framework (Bayat 2013; Hasso 2011; Moghadam 2012; Salime 2011). What are the consequences of such changes for women's rights and freedoms? What do they tell us about women's agency in contemporary Muslim societies and, more generally, in contexts where religious piety has an increasingly public presence?

Recent studies propose that Muslim women are agentive in ways that differ from conventional Western notions of agency (Abu-Lughod 2002; Deeb 2006; Mahmood 2005). Such work draws on longstanding feminist discussions of agency and has generated lively scholarly debates about agency, religion, and gender in Muslim societies (Osella and Soares 2010; Schielke 2010). Anthropologist Saba Mahmood's study of Muslim women in Egypt has been especially influential in this regard. She maintains that such women demonstrate a "nonliberal" (Mahmood 2005, 38) pious agency as they work to conform to religious ideals and transform themselves into virtuous Muslim subjects. Such agency, according to Mahmood, challenges the assumptions of Western feminism. Yet at a time of rising religious piety among women in many parts of the world, this begs the question: Is pious agency necessarily incompatible with feminism and women's rights? In this article, I expand on and complicate Mahmood's notion of pious agency to show how some Muslim women activists in Indonesia manifest *pious critical agency*. I define pious critical agency as the capacity to engage critically and publically with religious texts. I build on Mahmood's argument that piety can be a source of agency, but I depart from her proposal that Islamic piety is generally at odds with the liberal ideals of feminism (Mahmood 2005, 5, 192). Pious critical agency, I propose, demonstrates not only that Islam can be a resource for women's agency but that religion and feminism can intersect in surprising and unexpected ways.

What makes Indonesia especially interesting for the study of Muslim women's agency is that it began a process of democratization in 1998. Much of what has happened in Indonesia since then anticipates recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa—including the rising power of Islamist political actors; a broad turn toward more conservative understandings of Islam, including with regards to gender; and increasing participation of women in religious study and education (Brenner 2011;

Van Bruinessen 2013; Van Doorn-Harder 2006). Despite persistent problems with religious tolerance, Indonesia is committed to electoral democracy and continues to enjoy a dynamic civil society, including a movement for women's rights which includes Muslim organizations. With the largest Muslim population of any country in the world, Indonesia is a vital site for sociological investigations of social and political changes in Muslim societies, including the question of women's agency in religious contexts.

RELIGIOUS WOMEN AND AGENCY

Agency is typically defined as people's capacity to make choices and take action in the world. The question of whether social structures or individual agency determine human action has long been central to social science, and it has been of special interest to feminist scholars. Many feminists initially assumed that women wanted (or should want) liberation and that women's collective action grows out of their common oppression. However, later feminist studies challenged such assumptions by showing how women's actions can reproduce gender inequality, and by questioning the stability of gender identities and shared interests (Butler 1990; Collins 2000; Kandiyoti 1988; Mohanty 1988). More recently, some scholars have proposed that women may be agentive in ways that do not align with feminist expectations—such as choosing not to resist unequal social arrangements; embracing the family, nation, or other social structure that feminists see as a location of oppression; or even contributing to the subjugation of others (Jeffery and Basu 1998; Mahmood 2005; Mohanty 1988).

Agency is an equally central issue for scholars of gender and religion, many of whom have aimed to dispel the stereotype that religious women are simply victims of patriarchy (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Davidman 1991; Gallagher 2007). Currently, however, a conceptual divide has emerged in the study of religion, gender, and agency. Avishai (2008) and Burke (2012) point to a gap between studies that draw implicitly on the "cultural toolkit" approach to questions of structure and agency (Swidler 1986) and a newer conceptualization that Avishai labels "doing religion" and Burke calls "compliant agency." The toolkit perspective tends to present women's agency as instrumental, with pious women drawing on religion's resources to accomplish their goals. The "compliant" perspective, in contrast, draws more on practice theorists who emphasize how subjects are constituted within (and often reproduce) prevailing social

structures. In this perspective, pious women are agentive by practicing and conforming to religious teachings. While these two perspectives on religion and agency are typically presented as dichotomous, I will show that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Instrumental Agency and the Cultural Toolkit

Many recent sociological studies of women and religion present religion as providing a set of skills, tools, schemas, or other resources for agency (Swidler 1986). Religious women may be agents rather than simply acted upon by religious institutions or doctrines. Even conservative traditions, such as Evangelical Christianity and Orthodox Judaism, can therefore offer unexpected possibilities for empowerment. Women can reinterpret religious narratives to resolve life dilemmas, and they draw on the cultural repertoires of their religious communities to forge modern lifestyles (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Brasher 1997; Davidman 1991). Religious women's agency can also be political. For example, some Turkish Muslim women choose to veil as part of their rejection of Western models of modernity in favor of an Islamic model, and they interpret Islam in ways that suit their aims for a role in public life (Göle 1996).

Recent scholarship adds complexity to this perspective by emphasizing how religions can simultaneously constrain and empower women. Veiling provides urban Egyptian women greater mobility and access to jobs, but also upholds gender norms that define public space as masculine (Macleod 1992). Evangelical Christianity helps South Korean women find emotional resources to deal with difficult marriages, but in ways that sustain patriarchal gender norms (Chong 2006). The cultural toolkit approach has been criticized for implying a rational actor model of behavior in which people simply "use" culture or religion, a framework that potentially downplays religious devotion and casts religion as a means to achieve something else (Avishai 2008; Smilde 2012; Smith 2003). In my view, this may be a result of widespread application of the toolkit approach, sometimes in simplistic ways, and I propose that this concept may be more productive if it is deepened by the insights of practice theory. Such a combination can help us better understand how pious agency can also be critical, and even hospitable, to feminism.

Compliant Agency and Practice Theory

The recent literature on women and religion that emphasizes "compliant" agency presents structure and agency as closely intertwined. Most

prominently, Mahmood (2005) argues that subjectivity is produced in relation to normative discourses. According to Mahmood, for women in the Egyptian mosque movement, religious practices such as veiling are not a means of gaining something outside religion but are done to fashion oneself as a good religious subject (Mahmood 2005, 24). Mahmood maintains that feminists have difficulty acknowledging this as agency because feminism is predicated on secular liberal ideas that assume that people want, or should want, liberation, as opposed to the pious ideal of submission to religious discipline (2005, 13). Mahmood calls for scholars to consider agency outside of such secular liberal frameworks. For Mahmood, agency must be understood as a capacity for action that is contextually contingent, located within structures of power rather than outside them (2005, 34).

Mahmood's work has inspired some sociologists to consider how the process of becoming a religious subject can be agentive. Avishai (2008) draws on Mahmood's work as well as on the sociological "doing gender" literature (West and Zimmerman 1987) to argue that Orthodox Jewish women are actively "doing religion" with the aim of becoming good religious subjects. Similarly, Winchester (2008) examines how Muslim converts produce new moral selves through embodied religious practices.

The compliant agency perspective has been criticized for defining agency too broadly (Burke 2012; Lazreg 2013), with some scholars arguing that agency should be defined as acting against domination (Moghissi 2011). In my view, Mahmood's work has helped social scientists to see that agency may include different capacities for action, including those not aimed at liberation. However, this conception of pious agency as compliant or docile has its limits. How, for example, can it account for women who take a critical stance on some aspects of their religion despite fervently adhering to religious doctrine in other respects, or how devout women can use religion for diverse ends, some of which might be instrumental, expressive, or even nonreligious (Macleod 1992)? In this sense, the compliant agency perspective suggests an incompatibility between toolkit frameworks, in which religion is used for various ends, and practice frameworks, in which women's subjectivities are fully constituted by religion. The alleged mismatch between feminism and piety is a manifestation of this divide.

Toolkit and practice approaches to religion and agency are not, however, irreconcilable. Sociologists of religion and culture have called for recognition of how religion both constitutes actors and is put to diverse

uses by differently positioned actors (Smilde 2012).[1] From this perspective, religions are powerful cultural schemas that shape how individuals understand themselves, while simultaneously providing a range of resources that allow people to take action in different ways. In this framework, pious and feminist agency are two forms of agency among others. And as I demonstrate here, they are not necessarily dichotomous, but instead can be intertwined in a form of agency I call pious critical agency.

Pious Critical Agency

Pious critical agency (PCA) is the capacity to engage critically and publically with religious texts. It is a type of pious agency in that it emphasizes being a religious subject. PCA does not necessarily mean that women are directly involved in exegesis of religious texts, though more women are engaging in such activities. It also does not mean interpretation in the general sense of making meanings, which we do all the time. My concept of PCA aims to capture a new involvement of women in public, politicized discussions about the meaning of religious texts, in which they often contest conventional interpretations. In this sense, PCA involves not only women's reflection on religious texts but also critical reinterpretations that they use in political activism.

Women activists who adopt *contextual* approaches to Islamic texts are more easily able to connect their religious beliefs with an egalitarian vision of women's rights because such an approach provides interpretive flexibility. The activists I discuss demonstrate PCA as they draw on and combine Islamic and transnational feminist discourses to argue for women's rights and religious reform. However, although PCA facilitates activism for women's rights and equality, it should not be conflated with feminism. PCA can combine elements of feminism with more traditional religious ideals.

Pious critical agency is similar to Mahmood's pious agency in that it captures how an individual's attempt to live up to religious norms can be a form of agency. However, it also encapsulates a different process than what Mahmood describes—a process in which women try to be virtuous religious subjects through a *critical* approach to religion. While Mahmood examines Egyptian women's interest in interpreting the Quran (both privately and in prayer group sessions), and shows that at times they interpret it unconventionally, she argues that their doing so is a way of living up to pious norms, and that ultimately they are not seeking to reform the religion (although their involvement may produce changes). This fails to

account for the political consciousness that often underlies critical interpretation, as well as for the fact that the critical interpretation that I see in Indonesia often goes beyond overtly religious spaces. As my fieldwork attests, public interpretation is often an essential aspect of this agency.

In formulating this concept, I aim to bring sociological discussions of agency into conversation with the insights of the literature on Muslim feminisms. Scholars have chronicled movements in countries as diverse as Morocco, Iran, and Malaysia that seek to reconcile Islam with feminism (Badran 2009; Gonzalez 2013; Mir-Hosseini 2006; Moghadam 2012; Salime 2011). These movements stress reinterpreting Islamic texts to press for women's equality and rights. They are influenced by scholar-activists such as Fatima Mernissi, Asma Barlas, Zainah Anwar, Leila Ahmed, and others who interpret Islamic texts in egalitarian ways and argue for using historical context to understand Islam.[2] These movements differ from earlier feminist movements in the Middle East and Asia that generally did not attempt to reinterpret religious texts or address gender inequality within religion (Badran 2009; Roded 2012). One of the most vibrant manifestations of the new Muslim feminism is the transnational network Musawah, which advocates for reforms to Islamic family law and includes scholars such as Mir-Hosseini. The critical interpretive methods used by Musawah are similar to those used by Indonesian women's rights activists, and some Indonesians are active within the network.

Muslim feminism also has affinities with feminism in other religious traditions. Since the 1970s, feminist movements have emerged in Catholicism, Evangelical Protestantism, and Orthodox Judaism (Manning 1999; Roded 2012). These movements also stress reinterpreting religious texts in order to promote rights for women. The scholarship on Muslim and other religious feminisms has challenged assumptions that feminism is necessarily secular and that religion is inherently patriarchal. Yet while this literature sees women as empowered through efforts at religious reinterpretation, it tends not to discuss the particular contours of women's agency. What I aim to demonstrate here is that critical public religious interpretation is a distinct manifestation of agency for Muslim women, one that combines elements of more conventional pious agency with feminist agency. PCA is also a useful concept for understanding women's efforts at critical interpretation in a variety of religious traditions.

Reformist religious activists have long used critical interpretations to press for social change. What is new is who is doing the interpretation—women—and the fact that they are using their interpretations to buttress their calls for women's rights and equality. Islam has multiple interpretive

traditions, but as DeLong-Bas (n.d.) observes, "Women have generally been marginalized from the male centers of Islamic interpretation, including both scripture and law, and leadership roles in public worship." It is only in the last few decades that women have become more visible in many countries as Quranic reciters, prayer leaders, and teachers.

In Indonesia, secular and religious women's movements were divided for much of the twentieth century (Blackburn 2004). What appears also to be happening in Indonesia and elsewhere is a melding of secular and religious women's activism, in which proponents draw on both human rights and egalitarian interpretations of Islam to argue for women's rights and equality (Charrad 2011; Rinaldo 2013; Salime 2011). Women mobilize their religious traditions for a variety of purposes, including emancipatory ones, and PCA is a crucial component of this process.

After discussing the methods, in the next sections, I examine the two closely related aspects of PCA: critical engagements with interpretations and public mobilization of these interpretations. My analysis demonstrates that PCA is deeply shaped by Islamic traditions, yet also enables activists to mobilize religion in unexpected ways that facilitate their goal of empowering women.

METHODS

This article draws on an ethnographic study of women activists in the capital city of Jakarta, Indonesia. The study began with fieldwork in Jakarta from 2002 to 2003. Four organizations were part of the study: Solidaritas Perempuan (a feminist NGO), Rahima (a Muslim women's rights NGO). Fatayat NU (the women's organization of Nadhlatul Ulama), and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), a Muslim political party. Several months of additional fieldwork were conducted in 2005, 2008, and 2010. Aside from participant observation, I conducted in-depth interviews and follow-up interviews with approximately 47 members of these four organizations.[3]

This article focuses on women activists from the national headquarters of Rahima and Fatayat NU. Rahima, founded in 2001, has about a dozen paid female and male staff. Rahima organizes trainings and workshops about Islam and gender equality for teachers and students in Muslim schools. Fatayat, founded in 1950, has a paid head and 25-30 volunteer staff in Jakarta, as well as hundreds of volunteers in branches at regional, district, and city levels across the country. Fatayat provides services for

women in various areas, particularly reproductive health and economic empowerment. The staff of these organizations were in their twenties to forties. Most were married with children. Nearly all were university educated and a few had master's degrees. Fatayat volunteers also often had separate jobs such as teachers or university lecturers.

Both Fatayat and Rahima are affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama, an organization that has long had a major role in Indonesian religious and civic life (Hefner 2000). Nahdlatul Ulama was established as an organization of religious scholars in 1926, but today it runs 44 universities and thousands of Muslim boarding schools (*pesantren*), encompasses semiautonomous foundations and institutes, and estimates its membership at 40 million. Fatayat is the younger (age 25-45) women's division of NU. Rahima was created by Muslim intellectuals with links to NU, has NU scholars on its advisory board, and works in communities where NU is strong. These activists in Indonesia's most global city are more cosmopolitan and educated than most Indonesians. That such Muslim women activists have agency is a given. Rather, what this article shows is how their agentive capacities are shaped by a particular religious context.

ISLAM AND GENDER POLITICS IN INDONESIA

Indonesia was ruled by the authoritarian military government of Suharto from 1965 to 1998. Under this regime, civil society and social movements were very constrained. However, by the 1980s, religious and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) began to emerge due to loopholes in state policy, and activism often worked through these outlets (Hefner 2000; Sidel 2007). An Islamic revival, connected to transnational influences, also developed by the early 1980s. It especially resonated with young, educated women, many of whom began to adopt the veil (Brenner 1996). By the 1990s, a new generation of Muslim intellectuals became influential. In addition, the popularity of piety was increasing among the growing middle class, creating a broader audience for Islamic politics (Sidel 2007).

Paralleling these shifts was the rise of women's rights activism. Since the late 1960s, women were mostly confined to state-controlled women's organizations, which emphasized charitable or educational activities, and promoted women's roles as mothers and wives. However, in the late 1980s, a few women who had attended feminist conferences overseas began to

establish NGOs with an activist bent, pressing for rights for women. In the 1990s, religious groups, students, and women activists became the backbone of a democratic reform movement. This *reformasi* movement, along with an economic crisis, helped force Suharto to step down in 1998. Significantly, *reformasi* fostered personal and organizational connections between Muslim groups and women activists (Rinaldo 2013).

Following the first democratic elections in 1998 and 1999, Indonesia experienced a wave of bombings linked to Islamic terror networks. Islam became increasingly politicized during the 2000s, as some Muslim groups sought to impose Islamic law. Women's rights activists became concerned by local regulations requiring women to wear headscarves or preventing them from going out at night without a guardian. Muslim organizations and women's rights activists began to influence each other in new ways: Islamic politics included exhortations for women to act in accordance with Islamic gender norms, while proponents of women's rights spoke out against Muslim conservatives.

Yet the relations between these actors are not necessarily conflictual, as the democracy movement demonstrates. In the years since 1998, a new generation of pious, middle-class women has emerged. They have been schooled in Islam, but unlike older generations, they also have access to middle-class careers and ties to the NGO and international development milieu. Such activists are in the leadership of Fatayat and Rahima. In the 1990s, Fatayat leaders also began attending workshops and seminars on gender equality sponsored by international NGOs. Since then, developing and disseminating revisionist interpretations of Islamic texts has become an important aspect of the organization, although its day-to-day focus is programs for low-income women.

Like Fatayat leaders, Rahima activists are influenced by the transnational circulation of ideas of gender equality, as well as a contextual approach to Islamic interpretation. They also have connections to progressive activism. Leaders of both maintain that the real Islam supports gender equality, but that this aspect of the religion has been obscured by dominant patriarchal interpretations. For this reason, an emphasis on interpretation is necessary to empower women.

Contextual Religious Interpretation

The Muslim feminist call for reinterpretation is often accompanied by an emphasis on contextual interpretation. In Islam, c*ontextualists* take into account the sociohistorical context of the Quran and/or the contemporary

world. *Textualists* argue that the meaning of the Quran is fixed and universal (Saeed 2006). Both approaches exist in Indonesia, though many Indonesians gravitate to a more contextual approach. However, until recently the work of formal interpretation was limited to men. Indonesian women were first allowed to join NU's Central Religious Council in 1999, though without voting power (Van Doorn-Harder 2006).

Women's organizations within the NU milieu have benefited from its interpretive approach. Like most Muslims, NU Islamic scholars draw on the Quran and Hadith (the collected words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad). However, NU scholars also emphasize *fikh*, the body of Islamic jurisprudence developed over centuries. This approach is common in Southeast Asia and is taught in schools associated with NU. The *fikh* tradition foregrounds the process of interpretation, and use of *fikh* thus lends itself to contextualism (Mir-Hosseini 2006). During the 1980s and 1990s, Indonesian Muslim thinkers were exploring how Islam could be reconciled with ideas of human rights, democracy, and pluralism. In this climate, some NU scholars adopted a more explicitly contextual approach, emphasizing the need for religious interpretations to be relevant to the problems of the modern world. From childhood into adulthood, many of the staff of Fatayat and Rahima have been part of schools, networks, and organizations tied to NU. In this milieu, they were trained in the NU approach to Islam and influenced by the contextualist turn. The contextual approach provides significant interpretive flexibility, on which these activists capitalize.[4]

FATAYAT, RAHIMA, AND PIOUS CRITICAL AGENCY

Critical engagements with interpretation

Muslim feminists sometimes lack public credibility because they do not have formal training in Islamic jurisprudence or theology. In the Indonesian context, however, a traditionally more flexible approach to religious texts lends greater legitimacy to such arguments, as does the fact that a growing number of women proponents of this approach are trained in Islamic exegesis.[5] Maria Ulfah Ansor, head of Fatayat from 2002 to 2008, explained her stance on interpretation to me:

> I think the most important thing of all is to implement the teachings of Islam in our everyday lives, and because life is dynamic, there is always room for reinterpretation of texts. That way, the values contained in the texts will be applicable to all ages and will always be meaningful. We won't

> be trapped in one particular interpretation, which in the end will make life difficult. . . . I am of the opinion that a text cannot be understood literally on its own; rather, we also have to consider its socio-historical context, and this socio-historical context cannot, of course, be exactly the same as the present context.

Rahima activists made similar arguments, stressing what they called a "substantive" approach to Islam that highlights the spirit of the religion, as opposed to what they called a "formalist" approach that emphasizes the symbols of Islam. One staff member told me:

> We use alternative verses and interpretations with the conviction that God does not discriminate against women or impact one group negatively. God gives goodness to all people, including women. Actually, there is no problem with the texts, but just with people who misuse them.

The interest in critical interpretation was evident in everyday discussions at both offices, as well as at public events. For example, in 2008 I observed a debate among the staff of Rahima, Islamic scholars, and staff from other women's rights NGOs. The event was a public discussion of the new Indonesian translation of Azar Nafisi's book *Reading Lolita in Teheran*. Longtime staff member Ayu explained how she thought the book was relevant to Indonesia. She told the audience that in Iran books dealing with "secularism, liberalism, and pluralism" were banned, and that the *jilbab* (headscarf) had become a symbol of religion and nation. She cited the politicization of Islam and headscarves becoming required by law rather than a matter of individual choice as examples of how Indonesia and Iran are similar. "Women who reject *jilbab*ization are seen as un-Islamic," Ayu said, "but Nafisi argues that forcing women to wear the *jilbab* is not Islamic. The *jilbab* has become an instrument of power."

A young man asked, "Is the *jilbab* in Iran an instrument of liberation or a symbol? Is it a problem for women's movements or does it give women freedom to be involved in the public sphere? Why is the *jilbab* seen as the manifestation of the ideal woman, theologically speaking? Ayu responded impatiently,

> This book is not about the *jilbab*, but about forcing women to wear the *jilbab*. It should be our own choice, we should wear it how we want to. Women's rights are human rights. Each woman has a different reason for wearing the *jilbab*. . . . We have to let people make choices on their own. . . . We have to appreciate individuality and give space to everyone to express themselves in their daily lives.

A young Islamic scholar, Ustadz Husni, was not satisfied with this response. "Allah created Islam as a religion, but people make it into politics," he told the questioner. "The *jilbab* is not substantive *Shariah* but symbolic, it comes from Arab society. I think women who wear *jilbab*s feel they are more virtuous than others—otherwise why do they wear it? Indonesians don't admit the history of the *jilbab* here as an ideological influence."

Kyai Faizullah, an older and respected NU Islamic scholar who is also on Rahima's board, added to this, "The *jilbab* is a symbol of political resistance," explaining that Muslim countries are not empowered. "But is it the politicization of religion or the religification of politics?" he asked. Answering his own question, he went on, "Religion is becoming a political commodity. The *jilbab* has become internalized as a religious teaching. The different practices of wearing the *jilbab* do not come from religion, but from the social context." He went on to note that Javanese women used to wear the *kerudung*, a simple gauzy scarf, rather than the Arab style *jilbab*, which covers the neck and shoulders.[6]

Yulita, from another feminist group, was one of the few women in the audience not wearing a headscarf. "The *jilbab* is still very much a subject of debate," she said. "These days, women here are also not given a choice. It's often a result of social pressure; there is ideology in the background. It's not just about choice." These remarks sparked murmurs, and another audience member, Esti, stood to speak, emotion rising in her voice. She talked about her experience in a PhD program in Australia. When she defended her dissertation proposal, her Australian friends asked how a woman wearing a *jilbab* could oppose *jilbab*ization. Esti said, "I had difficulty answering. I wanted to stay loyal to my country and also be a pious Muslim." She told them she opposed both those who forced women to wear it and those who would ban it. But now, she continued, she had more questions than answers.

Ayu brought the discussion to an end. "As an activist, I am sometimes criticized by feminists about my commitment," she said. "Every person has his/her own reason for wearing the *jilbab*, his/her own way of interpreting the text." She explained that she wore it to express her own identity, and that she felt protected by that identity. "I don't wear the *jubah* (overcoat), because that's not me. I don't take off the *jilbab*, because that's not me. This is my identity, my choice," she reiterated, looking at Kyai Faizullah and Ustadz Husni. Then she turned to face Esti. "My answer to you is to just be yourself."

A different perspective on critical interpretation came out of a Fatayat seminar on the subject of female circumcision. Female circumcision is

widespread in Indonesia but differs from the way it is practiced in parts of Africa. The most prevalent form is a ritualistic pricking or small cut on the clitoris of an infant at birth. Many Indonesians believe the practice is mandated by Islam. The Indonesian government banned female genital cutting in 2006. However, Muslim organizations including NU condone the practice. In 2011, the Ministry of Health issued guidelines directing health professionals to "scrape the skin covering the clitoris, without injuring the clitoris" (IRIN 2011). Many women's rights activists are concerned that the guidelines implicitly encourage the procedure. The prevalence of female circumcision in Indonesia is difficult to estimate because many births occur outside medical facilities. However, a recent study found that 12 percent of female babies born in hospitals and birth centers or assisted by government midwives undergo the procedure (Uddin 2010).

The speakers at Fatayat's seminar consisted of a representative from the Population Council (an international NGO), a woman doctor, and Kyai Ahmad, a Muslim scholar with a degree from a university in Syria. After the participants watched a video of a baby girl being circumcised in an Indonesian hospital, the doctor presented a list of the negative consequences of circumcision. She told participants that the more extreme forms of the practice cause women to suffer painful sexual intercourse, and that women have a right to enjoy sexual relations. Next, Kyai Ahmad started out by saying that his own daughters were not circumcised because his wife is not Indonesian. He passed out a document with citations from the Quran, the Hadiths, and other sources, containing both Arabic quotations and Indonesian translations. First, he said that the Quran does not make any regulations about this particular issue, and that therefore, the circumcision law is not based on a commandment of Allah. He added that his reading of the Hadiths suggested that they appear only to permit the least invasive forms of female circumcision, and neither encourage nor require it. He presented an example of a discussion between the Prophet Muhammad and Ummi 'Atiyyah: "She said that in Medina she found a woman who was an expert circumciser, and then the Prophet said to her, 'Don't overdo it because it is more pleasurable for women and more pleasant for the husband.'" Kyai Ahmad argued that this and other Hadiths are ambiguous or possibly inauthentic, and that scholars interpret them differently. However, he acknowledged that the four main schools of Sunni Muslim jurisprudence do not forbid the practice. Kyai Ahmad concluded by saying that in Islamic law, circumcision is clearly *wajib* (obligatory) for men, and seems to be *mubah* (neutral) for women. He added that he was not able to say

whether it is *wajib* or *haram* (prohibited) for women, because it is not clear if it is a sin or not. In the end, Ahmad suggested, it depends on medical research. If doctors find that it has negative side effects, then it probably should not be done.

This sparked a discussion about whether female circumcision is a religious practice or a cultural practice that is attributed to religion. Lies Marcoes, a well-known feminist and NGO activist, observed that according to Kyai Ahmad's handout, the Hadiths permit an already existing practice, but don't require it. She referred to another handout which had also been passed around. This one was in English and it cited Quranic verses that seem to oppose female circumcision. Marcoes also said that even if the practice is done safely, the symbolism is dangerous because it is about controlling women's sexuality. For Marcoes, this was reason enough to ban it. At the end of the seminar, a Fatayat volunteer read out conclusions. She said that Islam does not seem to require female circumcision, and that female circumcision in Africa and the Middle East is more about culture than religion, but is thought of as a religious practice. She said that female circumcision in Indonesia is mostly symbolic, but medical research has found that there are many problems associated with it, especially infections. Thus, she ended, "We conclude that it's not necessary, but should maybe be up to women. We need more research from social scientists about the reasons for the practice."

Both events featured a critical approach to religious texts in which the process of interpretation was foregrounded, though in different ways. At the Rahima discussion, Ayu warned of the danger of the *jilbab* being imposed on women, even though she herself wears the *jilbab*. The Islamic scholars argued that the *jilbab* is a cultural practice, implying that it is not required by the religion. Finally, Ayu and other women present challenged the male scholars. They supported wearing the *jilbab* as part of Islam, using the language of rights and choice, a departure from the conventional interpretation that the *jilbab* is an obligation for women. However, one woman contested even this view, suggesting that the *jilbab* is a tool of social control. Essentially, the participants were arguing over how to understand the Quranic injunction for women to dress modestly.

Meanwhile, at the Fatayat seminar, it was clear that while participants were moved by the video and the explanations of medical problems associated with female circumcisions, the Hadiths provided what they considered to be more conclusive evidence that Islam does not require girls to be circumcised. The weakness and vagueness of Hadiths was evidence enough to limit or abandon the practice. The scholar's explanations of the Hadiths

gave the participants permission to conclude that female circumcision is not *wajib*, and may not be truly Islamic. This finding enabled a more radical discussion of the symbolism of female circumcision and the suppression of female sexuality. The Fatayat women were convinced that female circumcision is not necessary by a credentialed Islamic scholar who used a complex, *fikh*-based interpretive approach.

The participants in these events came to counterconventional conclusions about headscarves and female circumcision based on critical approaches to religious texts. Significantly, their reference points came both from within the Islamic tradition and outside of it. Rather than simply arguing that female circumcision is a human rights violation or a health hazard, the participants at the Fatayat seminar sought evidence to show that Islam does not require it. Meanwhile, at the Rahima event, an Islamic scholar suggested that the Arabic-style *jilbab* is not required in Islam, while female participants used liberal discourses of choice, rights, and identity as reasons to continue wearing it. These activists are profoundly influenced by their religious tradition, but interpret it creatively to make claims for women's rights and equality. They demonstrate agency as they grapple critically with religious texts, working to understand them in ways that favor women's rights and equality. Islamic piety here does not conflict with feminism but is being used for feminist aims. At the same time, religion is not just being used instrumentally, as being a good Muslim is also important. Fatayat and Rahima here show that they are influenced both by their Islamic heritage and global feminist discourses. These events were aimed at group members. As I show in the next section, Fatayat and Rahima also engage in critical interpretation with an eye toward public consciousness-raising.

Mobilizing Critical Interpretations

Mobilizing critical interpretations is a vital aspect of work for both organizations. For example, Maria Ulfah's master's thesis research led her to conclude that Islam permits abortions in the first 42 days of pregnancy. She later published her research as a book, *Abortion in the Fikh Perspective* (Ansor 2002). While Fatayat does not advocate legalizing abortion, the group joined with a coalition of other women's groups to push for a slight liberalization of the abortion law to allow for abortions in cases of rape or incest. In late 2009, they had some success—the Parliament approved a new Health Bill, which permits early abortions in the case of rape or if the health of the mother or fetus is endangered.

However, abortions in the case of rape are permitted only in the first six weeks of pregnancy, a stipulation that prevents many victims from accessing the procedure (Amnesty International 2011).

Fatayat leaders made an effort to disseminate these ideas and explain the critical interpretive methodology behind them. In 2008, I attended such a workshop on women's reproductive rights for Fatayat chapters in West Java. Maria introduced the first session by stating that NU scholars are still debating whether the fetus is a human being or just cells. "There is a debate about when the fetus becomes a viable human," she told the audience. "All *fikh* scholars agree that when a fetus is viable, it is *haram* to do something to it, except in emergencies." However, she continued, various Hadiths give different recommendations about when a fetus should be categorized as viable, and even modern science is unsure about this issue. Maria went on to argue that many factors influence unplanned pregnancies, which can result in unsafe abortions. In fact, she said, "People think abortions are done by doctors, but in practice most are done by *dukun*s (traditional healers) and are not categorized as abortions." Farida explained that such traditional methods are dangerous, and contribute to maternal deaths. She concluded by saying, "State laws are partly the cause of this. We need to open an opportunity for safe abortions that are not expensive. Reproduction needs to be more planned to prevent unplanned pregnancies."

Much of Rahima's public mobilization of critical interpretations is done through its trainings of *pesantren* teachers and administrators, as well as its journal *Swara Rahima*, which is published in print and online. *Swara Rahima* features columns such as Tafsir, which is for exegeses of the Quran. Another feature, Fikrah, discusses the work of *fikh* scholars. While most of these articles are written by male staff of Rahima who are trained in Islamic theology, some are written by women, including those who have been involved in Rahima's trainings for female Islamic scholars, an initiative intended to foster more female *ulama*s.

For example, a recent Hadith column entitled "The Spirit of Justice in Inheritance" is written by Badriyah Fayumi, a female *pesantren* head and Islamic state university graduate, as well as a former member of parliament for the NU-associated political party PKB. In the column, Fayumi (2012) writes that the Hadiths that gave an inheritance to women were a significant reform in the context of the Arab peninsula in the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Fayumi argues that not only were women excluded from inheriting but that they were often the property being inherited. For Fayumi, "The coming of Islam changed the tradition that made women

property and made them inheritors whose rights are protected as children, wives, mothers, or even siblings of someone who has died." Fayumi acknowledges the inequity of women receiving half the inheritance of men, but she notes that this is not the case when a woman is the only child, or when all the children are female, or in certain other circumstances. Thus, she argues, the 2:1 proportion is not always imposed. This leads Fayumi to contend that the inheritance should be seen as a form of aid for those lacking resources. Ultimately, she concludes, "We can say that if the relative is recommended to divide the inherited property as a form of concern/caring, furthermore if that caring is translated into the form of willingness to divide the inheritance equally between male and female relatives . . . the inheritance will indeed foster ties of friendship." While Fayumi does not argue that inheritances *must* be divided equally, she is arguing that inheritances *may* (and should) be divided equally and still be in accord with Islam.

Both Fatayat and Rahima are using these nuanced and critical interpretations of religious texts as part of public mobilizations for social change. While Fatayat leaders use their analysis of Islamic jurisprudence to justify their calls for reform of reproductive health policies, Rahima activists disseminate their alternative interpretations of *fikh* and Hadiths to contest gender discrimination and provide support for more egalitarian religious practices. Certainly, this is not the only example of Muslim women wielding religious interpretations for political mobilization. For example, women in more conservative Muslim organizations also draw on religious texts to make arguments for political and social change. However, according to my research on the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), a political party that advocates a greater role for Islam in the Indonesian state, these activists demonstrate a different approach to Islamic texts. Although they acknowledge diverse understandings, they view the core texts as relatively straightforward. They see less scope for debate about issues like the headscarf. The PKS women I interviewed told me that believers should not pick and choose, but must accept Islam as a whole (Rinaldo 2013).

Rahima and Fatayat activists, on the other hand, argue for greater equality and rights using critical interpretations of texts as evidence. Through their workshops and publications, they model their approach to interpretation and disseminate their interpretations for a national audience. This is not only a critical approach to interpretation, but it is also a very public mobilization of interpretation. While many people engage critically with texts or mobilize interpretations, it is the combination of these two processes that constitutes PCA.

PCA is a type of pious agency in which being a good Muslim and being critical of interpretations or practices are not contradictory. In that sense, it differs from Mahmood's pious agency, but also from feminist agency, for which liberation or empowerment of women is primary. Nevertheless, as is clear from these examples, critical interpretation can facilitate a feminist Islamic perspective. PCA is shaped by Indonesia's Islamic traditions, but it also gives women activists the chance to put those traditions to use in new ways. In this sense, PCA runs counter to pervasive contemporary tropes of Islam and feminism as irreconcilable.

CONCLUSIONS

Fatayat and Rahima activists have developed PCA as they engage critically with religious texts and use them to argue for women's rights, equality, and social justice. It is historically new for Muslim women to be undertaking and disseminating Islamic interpretations. What is also new is that they are using their interpretations to challenge what they consider to be patriarchal and intolerant practices.

PCA is informed by the trajectories of Fatayat and Rahima activists, as well as their fertile location in the overlap between Islamic organizations and women's rights activism. These activists' educations in NU networks introduced them to a flexible approach to Islamic texts. Once they joined these organizations, they became educated about women's rights and learned a more explicitly contextual approach to Islamic texts that is influenced by the NU heritage as well as by global currents of Islamic reformism and feminism.

Examining Muslim women's activism in Indonesia provides a vital perspective on the question of agency among women in Muslim contexts. The concept of PCA highlights women's increasing involvement in critical, public religious interpretation, which is a part of feminist movements that have emerged in various religions, including Islam. These movements often demonstrate a blend of secular and religious activism, as women mobilize multiple frames to claim rights (Charrad 2011). Religious women can both seek to comply with religious norms and take a critical stance, and such a critical stance can facilitate feminist efforts to promote equality and rights. PCA shows that religious piety and feminism can intersect or overlap, with the contours of such agency shaped within historically and culturally specific contexts.

The leaders of Fatayat and Rahima are from Indonesia's growing urban middle class and are well positioned to capitalize on the social and

political changes of the last 15 years. They are training women around the archipelago to understand Islam in ways that can support ideas about women's rights, equality, and religious pluralism. However, the same developments have also empowered more conservative Indonesian Muslim women activists who do not challenge gender inequality and who exhibit an agency that is less hospitable to feminism (Rinaldo 2013).

Women in many other Muslim societies are also increasingly significant as religious actors in politics, including in efforts for democratization. The reforms pious Muslim women seek are diverse but in some cases they do challenge the gendered status quo. In Indonesia, democratization has politicized Islam in ways that sometimes promote intolerance or even violence. But PCA shows that the rise of a more public Islam can also facilitate new manifestations of agency that are compatible with challenges to gender hierarchies and the building of a more just society. PCA demonstrates that women's agency can draw on both secular and religious sources, in some cases simultaneously. Indeed, my research suggests that religious and secular claims for women's empowerment are not always very different. While religion is often used to press for a return to allegedly traditional gender norms, many of my informants were inspired by religious texts that they interpreted as emphasizing similarities between men and women.

Theories of gender as a social structure and discussions of undoing or transforming gender rarely consider religion's role in these processes, or if they do, it is usually conceptualized as a cultural constraint on women. Yet religion is not necessarily experienced as a constraint by women; as scholars like Mahmood (2005) argue, it is a core aspect of many women's subjectivities. PCA shows that religion can also be mobilized by adherents in support of critical discourses on gender and advocacy for women's rights. PCA gives Muslim women in Indonesia and beyond the opportunity to reinterpret religious traditions and to combine such reinterpretations with global discourses such as feminism in their struggle for a more egalitarian future.

NOTES

1. For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see also Rinaldo (2013).

2. These scholars have been influenced by reformist Islamic theologians such as Abdulkarim Soroush, Muhammad Arkoun, and Fazlur Rahman. Their interpretive methods have been important for Muslim feminism.

3. I use the real names of these groups with their encouragement. I have used aliases for individuals, except for those who are known public figures.

4. Not all contextualists use a *fikh*-centered approach.

5. As a result of the expansion of the Islamic educational system since the 1990s, increasing numbers of Indonesian women are becoming Muslim preachers or scholars (Van Doorn-Harder 2006).

6. Many Javanese women wore the *kerudung* only for religious holidays, while the *jilbab* is worn daily.

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