



Tauhidic Feminism and Gender Justice: Musdah Mulia's Ethical-Theological Framework for Empowering Muslim Women

Rahmatus Solikha ✉

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Abstract: Gender inequality remains a persistent issue in many Muslim societies, often reinforced by patriarchal interpretations of religious texts and institutional practices that constrain women's agency. This study examines a particular strand of Islamic feminist thought by analyzing Musdah Mulia's reinterpretation of tauhid as an ethical-theological framework for gender justice. Using a qualitative descriptive, library-based approach, the study analyzes selected texts, publications, and documented initiatives associated with Mulia through thematic content analysis. The findings indicate that tauhid is articulated as an ethical principle that rejects hierarchical gender relations and emphasizes moral and ontological equality between men and women. Contextual interpretations of Qur'anic passages such as Q.S. al-Aḥzāb: 35 and Q.S. 7:189 are used to challenge gender hierarchy and affirm shared religious responsibility. The analysis further shows that this framework integrates elements of Islamic ethics, liberal feminist theory, and critical pedagogy, resulting in a dual orientation toward institutional reform and cultural-educational transformation. Rather than proposing a universal model, the study situates this approach within the Indonesian context as part of a humanist-liberal current in Islamic feminism. This study contributes to existing literature by demonstrating how tauhid-based interpretation can be analytically linked to feminist theory and social praxis while remaining contextually and methodologically bounded.

Introduction

Gender inequality remains a pressing global concern, particularly within religious and patriarchal societies where dominant interpretations of sacred texts have historically been used to legitimize structural discrimination against women (1). Although feminist movements and gender justice initiatives have generated significant progress, revealing limitations in existing scholarly approaches (2). In Muslim-majority societies, including Indonesia the country with the largest Muslim population in the world patriarchal norms are frequently reinforced through conservative religious interpretations that limit women's autonomy, marginalize their social roles, and normalize gender-based violence (3). Empirical data illustrate the severity of this issue; for instance, in 2021 the Indonesian government recorded more than 6,500 cases of sexual violence against children, a phenomenon that exposes the failure of prevailing religious discourses to adequately address gender-based injustices, many of which were justified through moral or religious authority (4). This condition underscores a critical gap between ethical ideals promoted by religion and their contemporary interpretive practices.

Despite the growing body of literature on Islamic feminism and gender justice, existing studies often remain conceptually broad and predominantly descriptive, focusing on general critiques of patriarchy without sufficiently examining theoretical weaknesses in traditional Islamic hermeneutics or offering systematically grounded alternatives from within Islamic theology itself (5). Feminist discourses are often misrepresented as antagonistic to religious doctrine, generating public skepticism and even hostility toward advocates (6). As a consequence, patriarchal exegesis continues to dominate religious discourse and is rarely interrogated as a historically constructed product rather than a fixed theological truth (7). This limitation indicates a clear research gap: the lack of in-depth analysis of reformist Islamic frameworks that simultaneously engage theological authority and feminist ethics (8). Within this context, Musdah Mulia represents a critical yet insufficiently examined figure in Indonesian Islamic feminist scholarship. As an Islamic scholar, human rights activist, and gender equality advocate, Mulia advances a humanist-feminist hermeneutic grounded in the Islamic doctrine of *tauḥid* (the oneness of God), which she formulates as a normative theological basis for equality, justice, and human dignity.

Through her writings and activism most notably the establishment of the Muslimah Reformis movement Mulia challenges patriarchal Qur'anic interpretations and promotes a transformative rereading of Islamic texts that bridges theological reasoning with social activism (9). However, existing scholarship has not sufficiently explored how her interpretive framework operates both as an intellectual paradigm and as a practical strategy for gender reform within Muslim communities.

Accordingly, this study investigates Musdah Mulia's intellectual framework and activist strategies concerning gender equality in Islam. This research is analytically bounded by two primary focuses: first, examining how her Qur'anic interpretations reconstruct gender narratives within Islamic thought; and second, analyzing the implications of her reformist movement for Indonesian Muslim women within socio-religious contexts (10). Employing a qualitative, library-based research methodology with content analysis, this study examines primary and secondary sources, including Mulia's writings, interviews, and relevant scholarly works. By positioning Mulia's thought within broader Islamic feminist discourse, this study addresses the identified research gap and demonstrates the potential of faith-based feminist hermeneutics as a viable approach to advancing gender justice through religious reinterpretation (11).

Methodology

Study Design and Rationale

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design using a library-based approach. This design was selected to enable an in-depth examination of Musdah Mulia's theological ideas and interpretive strategies as articulated in textual sources. A qualitative descriptive approach is particularly appropriate for studies that aim to analyze meaning, concepts, and interpretive frameworks rather than to measure variables or test hypotheses. In the context of Islamic gender studies, this approach allows for a systematic exploration of how religious texts are interpreted, reconstructed, and mobilized to support gender equality within an established intellectual tradition.

The library research approach facilitates critical engagement with both primary and secondary texts, enabling the identification of conceptual patterns, normative assumptions, and reformist arguments embedded in Musdah Mulia's works. This method is especially suitable for examining feminist hermeneutics within Islamic scholarship, where meaning is constructed through textual interpretation, intertextual dialogue, and historical contextualization.

Data Sources and Sampling

Primary data consisted of texts authored by Musdah Mulia, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, public lectures, policy papers, and published interviews that explicitly discuss gender, equality, women's rights, or feminist interpretations of Islam. These sources were selected through purposive sampling to ensure direct relevance to the research objectives. Only works that clearly articulated Mulia's theological arguments or interpretive positions on gender issues were included.

Secondary data were drawn from peer-reviewed journals, academic books, theses, and scholarly commentaries that analyze, critique, or contextualize Musdah Mulia's thought within broader discussions of Islamic feminism, Qur'anic hermeneutics, and gender reform movements. Inclusion

criteria for secondary sources required that the texts provide analytical insight rather than purely descriptive accounts. Sources lacking clear academic grounding or methodological transparency were excluded to maintain analytical rigor.

Data Collection and Analytical Procedures

Data collection was conducted through structured document analysis. Relevant texts were systematically retrieved from academic databases, university libraries, official publications, and credible digital repositories. Each document was read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with its content and context. Initial notes were taken to capture key arguments, interpretive approaches, and recurring themes.

Data analysis employed qualitative content analysis using thematic coding techniques. The analytical process began with open coding, in which key concepts and statements related to gender equality, *tauhid*, hermeneutics, and activism were systematically identified across the texts. These initial codes were then organized through a process of categorization, whereby conceptually similar codes were grouped into broader thematic categories. Subsequently, an interpretive analysis was conducted to examine these themes in depth in order to uncover underlying theological assumptions, interpretive strategies, and reformist objectives embedded in Musdah Mulia's works.

The analysis focused on three main dimensions: (1) the theological foundations of gender equality in Musdah Mulia's thought, (2) her interpretive strategies, particularly her humanist-feminist approach to Qur'anic interpretation, and (3) her models of religious reform and gender-based activism within Muslim communities.

To enhance analytical rigor and reliability, triangulation was applied by comparing findings across multiple primary texts and situating them alongside relevant secondary literature on Islamic feminism and contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics. An intertextual approach was also employed to contextualize Mulia's interpretations within broader Islamic intellectual traditions and socio-religious reform movements, thereby strengthening the coherence and credibility of the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

This study relied exclusively on publicly available documents and secondary sources; therefore, no human participants were involved, and formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, ethical research standards were strictly observed, including accurate citation practices, faithful representation of source material, and careful interpretation to avoid misrepresentation of the author's original arguments.

Results

Monotheism as the Ethical-Theological Basis for Gender Equality in Islam

This study finds that Musdah Mulia situates *tauhid* (monotheism) not only as the foundational doctrine of Islam but a critical ethical-theological framework that challenges dominant patriarchal interpretations within Islamic thought. Her interpretation transcends ritual devotion, embedding *tauhid* within the ethical and social spheres of human life. This repositioning directly addresses the limitations of traditional theological approaches that reduce monotheism to abstract belief while neglecting its socio-ethical implications, particularly in relation to gender justice. In

doing so, she redefines the believer (*muwahhid*) as one who is not only obedient to God but also actively committed to justice, compassion, and human dignity principles that must be upheld in both divine and human relationships (*ḥabl min Allāh* and *ḥabl min al-nās*).

Mulia argues that the principle of *tauhid* is fundamentally incompatible with all forms of oppression, which she categorizes under the Qur'anic term *ṭāghūt*, entities or systems that arrogate divine authority and subjugate others. Her critique explicitly targets patriarchal religious structures that naturalize male dominance by presenting it as divinely sanctioned, a tendency that has been insufficiently problematized in conventional Islamic jurisprudence. By framing patriarchy as a manifestation of *ṭāghūt*, Mulia exposes a critical weakness in prevailing religious interpretations that fail to interrogate power relations embedded in gender hierarchy. According to her, "*tauhid* should be the guiding principle for both spiritual submission and ethical emancipation."

The Qur'an, when read contextually, offers substantial support for this egalitarian view. Musdah highlights verses such as Q.S. al-Aḥzāb: 35 and Q.S. at-Tawbah: 71, which present men and women as equal partners in faith, moral responsibility, and social engagement. Her reading stands in contrast to literalist and atomistic approaches that isolate verses from their ethical trajectory, thereby reinforcing gender asymmetry. The repeated gender pairing in Q.S. al-Aḥzāb: 35 "believing men and believing women, devout men and devout women" is interpreted as a deliberate Qur'anic strategy to affirm equal spiritual capacity and moral agency, regardless of gender.

Musdah also challenges hierarchical interpretations of human creation, particularly those that posit men as ontologically primary and women as derivative beings. Drawing on Q.S. 7:189 and Q.S. 39:6, she advances the concept of *nafs wāḥidah* (a single soul), arguing that both men and women originate from the same existential essence. This interpretation directly critiques classical exegetical traditions that have uncritically absorbed patriarchal cosmologies, thereby reinforcing gender inequality at the ontological level. By re-centering human unity, Mulia reframes gender difference as diversity without hierarchy.

Furthermore, Musdah conceptualizes gender equality as an intrinsic expression of Islam's universal mission of *raḥmatan lil 'ālamīn*. She asserts that both men and women are equally entrusted with the role of *khalīfah fil arḍ*, positioning justice and ethical responsibility as the ultimate objectives of human stewardship. This theological move challenges reductionist readings that confine women's religious roles to domestic or private spheres, emphasizing instead their full moral and social agency.

Finally, Musdah's perspective resonates with core liberal feminist principles, particularly the affirmation of equal rationality, moral agency, and ethical responsibility shared by all human beings regardless of gender. Yet, rather than adopting liberal feminism as a fixed or external framework, she critically rearticulates these values through an Islamic ethical and theological vocabulary grounded in the Qur'an's vision of justice (*'adl*) and human dignity (*karāmah al-insāniyyah*). This approach responds directly to critiques that Islamic feminism merely reproduces Western paradigms, demonstrating instead its capacity for internal reform and contextual reinterpretation. Musdah's call to dismantle the "established order" (*kemapanan*) functions as a normative

critique of institutionalized patriarchy embedded in religious interpretation, legal structures, and social practice. It also emphasizes that gender justice in Islam is not a one-time reform but a continuous process requiring sustained reinterpretation of texts, transformative education, and persistent advocacy to ensure that ethical ideals are translated into lived social realities.

Historical Manifestations of Gender Equality during the Prophet's Leadership

Musdah Mulia emphasizes that gender equality is not a modern imposition on Islam but a historical reality rooted in the prophetic tradition. This argument directly challenges orientalist and conservative claims that portray gender justice as incompatible with Islamic history. Under the Prophet Muhammad's leadership, *tauhid* was actualized not only as a theological doctrine but as a lived social ethic that affirmed human equality across gender, ethnicity, and class.

The Prophet's domestic practices exemplify this ethic. His active participation in household labor and his respectful, dialogical relationships with his wives undermine patriarchal assumptions that associate masculinity with authority and domestic disengagement. Musdah interprets these practices as intentional ethical interventions rather than incidental personal behavior, demonstrating how prophetic conduct functioned as a counter-cultural model of gender relations.

Beyond the household, the Prophet actively encouraged women's participation in public life. Figures such as Khadijah and Aisyah illustrate women's economic, intellectual, and political agency within early Islam. These historical examples serve as counter-narratives to later jurisprudential traditions that restricted women's public roles, revealing a disjunction between prophetic praxis and subsequent patriarchal institutionalization.

Contemporary Issues of Gender Inequality in Islam

Musdah Mulia identifies contemporary gender injustice as a product of intersecting theological, cultural, and legal factors. Her analysis moves beyond moral critique by offering a structural diagnosis of inequality, highlighting how gender-biased interpretations of religious texts, patriarchal cultural norms, and gender-insensitive legal systems mutually reinforce one another.

She argues that uncritical acceptance of inherited interpretations stems from limited theological literacy and the sacralization of male authority. This critique exposes a central weakness of traditional interpretive approaches that prioritize textual literalism over ethical coherence and justice-oriented interpretation. Patriarchal culture further codifies gender hierarchy, while discriminatory legal frameworks institutionalize these inequalities, particularly in matters of family law, bodily autonomy, and access to justice.

Structural and Cultural Approaches as Pathways to Gender Justice

In response to these challenges, Musdah proposes a dual strategy encompassing structural reform and cultural transformation. This integrative model addresses the shortcomings of single-track approaches that focus exclusively on legal reform or moral exhortation. Structural reform emphasizes gender-sensitive legislation and institutional accountability, aligning with liberal feminist

theories of rights and citizenship. Cultural transformation, meanwhile, prioritizes education, critical consciousness, and public engagement as mechanisms for reshaping social norms.

Drawing on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, Musdah advances a humanistic educational model that empowers individuals to interrogate injustice and participate actively in social change. This synthesis of Islamic ethics and critical pedagogy represents a distinctive contribution to Islamic feminist praxis, bridging theology, education, and activism.

Musdah Mulia's Initiatives in Advancing Gender Equality among Muslim Women

Musdah operationalizes her framework through the Muslimah Reformis movement, which translates theological principles into lived practice. Unlike abstract normative models, this initiative demonstrates how feminist theology can be institutionalized at the grassroots level. Through education, advocacy, and knowledge production, Muslimah Reformis cultivates women's agency and intellectual participation in religious discourse.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Musdah Mulia's reinterpretation of *tauhid* functions as a normative, critical, and emancipatory framework for gender justice in Islam (10). By identifying patriarchy as a theological deviation rather than a religious norm, her approach directly addresses the analytical limitations of traditional Islamic jurisprudence that fail to interrogate power relations embedded in gender hierarchy. This position aligns with broader Islamic feminist scholarship emphasizing justice (*'adl*), mercy (*rahmah*), and human dignity (*karāmah*) as core Qur'anic values (11).

Her engagement with prophetic history further strengthens the legitimacy of her claims (12). By grounding gender justice in Islamic historical praxis, Musdah effectively counters arguments that frame feminism as a Western intrusion, a claim frequently raised by conservative and literalist scholars, by demonstrating that egalitarian gender relations were practiced during the Prophet's lifetime (13). This position aligns her thought with scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, who similarly locate gender parity within the Qur'anic worldview rather than external ideological frameworks (14). Her contextual and *maqāsid*-oriented reading of the Qur'an reflects a justice-centered hermeneutic that challenges literalist and androcentric interpretations (15).

Contemporary gender injustices, as identified by Musdah, reveal how patriarchal interpretations, cultural constructs, and deficient legal systems continue to hinder women's full participation in public life (16). Her multi-pronged diagnosis corresponds with intersectional feminist analysis, which recognizes the interplay of religion, culture, and law in reproducing systemic inequities (17). Musdah's dual strategy, structural reform and cultural transformation, mirrors the praxis-oriented models found in critical pedagogy and liberal feminism (18). Her application of Paulo Freire's emancipatory education model in Islamic contexts is particularly notable, representing a synthesis of theological ethics and humanistic pedagogy that advances gender consciousness among Muslim communities (19). The establishment of Muslimah Reformis exemplifies how theory can be translated into praxis, reinforcing the transformative potential of faith-based feminist engagement (18).

Taken together, Musdah Mulia's work bridges Islamic theology, feminist ethics, and critical pedagogy, offering a coherent and actionable model for gender justice (20). This synthesis not only strengthens the theoretical grounding of Islamic feminism but also addresses critiques regarding its practical applicability, positioning her framework as a significant contribution to contemporary Islamic thought.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Musdah Mulia's reinterpretation of *tauhid* provides a coherent hermeneutical and ethical framework for articulating gender equality within Islamic thought. Rather than positioning gender justice as an external or oppositional discourse, her approach situates it as an internal theological implication of divine unity, thereby challenging patriarchal interpretations while remaining grounded in Islamic epistemology. Through a humanist-feminist reading of Qur'anic texts, Musdah's framework demonstrates how normative Islamic principles can be reoriented toward justice-oriented gender narratives.

Consistent with the qualitative, library-based methodology employed in this study, the analysis highlights conceptual patterns and interpretive strategies found in Musdah Mulia's writings and public engagements. The activities of Muslimah Reformis are examined not as empirical measurements of social impact, but as illustrative expressions of how theological reinterpretation may be translated into reform-oriented discourse and advocacy within Muslim communities. This alignment ensures that the study's claims remain analytically grounded in textual and documentary evidence.

At the same time, the findings must be interpreted within the acknowledged methodological boundaries. The exclusive reliance on textual sources and the focus on a single intellectual figure limit the generalizability of the conclusions and do not capture the diversity of lived experiences or internal debates within broader Islamic feminist movements. These limitations underscore that the study offers an interpretive contribution rather than a comprehensive sociological account of gender justice practices in Islam.

Despite these constraints, the study contributes to Islamic feminist scholarship by clarifying how faith-based gender advocacy can be articulated through internally grounded theological reasoning. By aligning gender equality with Qur'anic ethics and *tauhid*-centered hermeneutics, this research offers a conceptual reference point for further comparative, ethnographic, and multi-actor studies. Such future inquiries may extend the present analysis by examining how similar interpretive frameworks are negotiated across diverse Muslim contexts, thereby strengthening the dialogue between theology, gender justice, and social praxis.

Declarations

Author Informations

Rahmatus Solikha ✉

Corresponding Author

Affiliation: Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Ushuluddin and Philosophy, Sunan Ampel State Islamic University, Surabaya - 60237, Indonesia.

Contribution: Data Curation, Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicting interest.

Data Availability

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

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