

In Search of Autoethnography of Female Ulama: An Alternative Approach to the Study of Islamic Family Law

Atun Wardatun & Abdul Wahid
State Islamic University of Mataram
awardatun@gmail.com

Abstract

Autoethnography is a method of qualitative inquiry that reveals the personal experiences of an individual in relation to social phenomena as a source of knowledge. Despite criticism of its subjectivities, many disciplines have widely used this approach but it is still rarely employed in Islamic Family Law (IFL). As a guide that regulates the relations of family members in the most important social institution, family law is very close to the lives of both sexes, male and female. Unfortunately, IFL is seen as suffering from gender inequality due to imbalanced gender authorities or male-centered characteristics. This article explores the works of three Indonesian female ulama – Musdah Mulia, Badriyah Fayumi, and Nina Nurmila – which are relevant to issues surrounding IFL to provide answers to the following questions: How are IFL issues – particularly in public and private spheres, ideal husband-wife relations, and women’s domestication – represented in female ulama’s works? Why should the autoethnography approach be incorporated into their works? After reviewing the female ulama's publications, this article maps different approaches and methods they have used in discussing the above IFL issues. It argues that an autoethnographic approach must still be present or visible from their extensive works. This approach allows for a better understanding of the deeper aspects of family life, which is private and intimate. This article, therefore, proposes that autoethnography should be a significant part of female ulama’s future works and that utilizing this approach to reformulate IFL based on the ulama’s personal, reflexive, and analytical accounts of family issues will contribute to more transformative and emancipatory Islamic Family Laws.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Islamic Family Laws, gender authority, female ulama.

Introduction

Arskal Salim (2020), in his article "From Ushul Fiqh to Legal Pluralism: An Autoethnography of Islamic Legal Thought," shares a personal account of his intellectual journey towards becoming one of the leading Indonesian figures in Islamic legal studies. By doing so, he aims to introduce autoethnography as a method to study Islamic law based on the postmodernism paradigm that recognizes "each of different ways of knowing becomes equally legitimate" (Salim, 2020, p. 82). For him, autoethnographic writing is natural, profound, and academic because of its balanced character, namely "personal and intellectual, evocative and analytical, descriptive and theoretical" (Salim, 2020, p. 104).

Another great example is the work of Hamdan (2012) on how gender and Islam interact and formed her identity as a Muslim woman who lived in Saudi Arabia and moved to Canada for her graduate studies. She concluded that "autoethnography is an educational resource and a source of privileged knowledge that ought to be shared with others" (Hamdan, 2012, p. 600).

Autoethnography has become a trend in gender and feminist research because this approach enables narratives to understand the uniqueness of women as individuals and their collective experiences (Hamdan, 2012). For example, Patai (1991) and Reinharz (1992) use the life history approach in discussing gender issues. Afshar and Maynard (2000) encourage feminist research to use various cross-disciplinary approaches by emphasizing the importance of listening to women's narratives. Unfortunately, the approach has received minimal attention from researchers, academia, and scholars specialising in Islamic Family Laws (IFL) concerning gender issues.

The term autoethnography was first introduced in 1979 by David Hayano to argue that personal experience can be a source of knowledge (Hayano, 1979). Autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience (auto) to explain and interpret (graph) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (ethno) (Ellis, 2004; Maréchal, 2010). This method relies heavily on "reflexivity" in finding meaning from the intertwined experience, knowledge, and work owned by the individual and their social life (Maréchal, 2010).

This approach has been criticised because it is considered less scientific due to its subjectivity. However, personal and family experiences are an essential source of

knowledge in studying and formulating family law. Therefore, this article aims to highlight the use of autoethnography in two distinct but interrelated ways: for female ulama to produce knowledge and to study and transform contemporary IFL issues, particularly concerning the imagined line between public and domestic gendered spheres.

In doing so, we review the works of three Indonesian female scholars related to IFL to understand whether they have applied autoethnography in their works by looking at the "triadic balance of reflection, analysis, and interpretation" (Synder, 2015, p. 94). Reflection refers to the style used by female scholars by prioritising "I" or personal experience. Analysis means how their writing shows the relationship between "I" and "other" in the form of context and existing literature related to the topic discussed. Meanwhile, interpretation is a narrative that combines the relationship between personal and social context into "something" that is offered.

These female ulama's works were identified online through Google Scholar as well as *kupipedia*,¹ news, and articles that mention their writings. Several works related to family law issues were collected, and we examined the primary concept of each for further analysis; Musdah Mulia on "*Muslimah Reformis*" (Reformist Muslim Women) for the public role of women, Badriyah Fayumi on "*Makruf*" (equity) in family life and Nina Nurmila on the issue of domestication of women. Therefore, we do not focus only on particular books or articles but on those that touch on the issues.

This paper does not intend to identify the work of women scholars into academic-objective writing on the one hand and autoethnography-subjective writing on the other because, as explained earlier, the boundaries between the two are somewhat vague. We believe that the autoethnography will provide a more nuanced approach to studying IFL, where women's personal experiences are often hidden.

In addition, family law, especially marriage law, is an important site for studying gender systems. "If we want to understand the system of gender in a culture, the rules of marriage are the place to begin" (Kerber dan de Hart, 2004, p. 55). There are at least two limitations in family studies, namely under-representation and overgeneralisation. The first can be seen in the lack of safeguards and women's

¹ *Kupipedia* is an online portal that contains information related to Indonesian female ulama. It can be accessed in https://kupipedia.id/index.php/Halaman_Utama

voices. At the same time, the second is a further result of this problem, namely the construction of a one-sided epistemology of family studies based on the experience of one gender only, in this regard, men (Wardatun, 2019). So, it is no wonder that there is still a fierce debate until now regarding how to establish a gender perspective as an approach to improving Islamic family law (Hosseini, 2019).

This article shows the semi-permeability of Islamic family law, gender issues, and female ulama. It proposes the following three underlying reasons why autoethnography can interact with those three entities. First, Islamic Family Law (IFL) is a place for contesting domestic and community rights on one hand and public issues (state identity) of family affairs on the other. Within this contestation, conservatism of understanding and modernism of social life continue to engage in dialogue and negotiation (Mallat, 1989). This provision of law is still deemed male-centered; therefore, with discursive practices and interpretation, there is a basic notion of gender differences and hierarchies (Tucker, 2008, p. 83). As a consequence, the presence of female ulama in the process of interpreting and reformulating IFL is increasingly important.

Second, IFL and female ulama are closely related and influence each other. One factor that hinders the emergence of female ulama is the family law rules that domesticate women.² Unfortunately, this has become the generally accepted ideological view and sense in Muslim society. Therefore, the emergence of female ulama who can share their experiences is expected to play an important role in overcoming this misperception and making family law a source that provides equal opportunities for the advancement of both men and women.

Third, the rising significance of female ulama is a long journey filled with patriotic and dramatic experiences and, therefore, full of lessons learned. This experience is often not recorded in their works, even though they have significant meaning for IFL. These women's personal experiences are likely to be kept from those who write about them, even though these scholars have become public figures and research topics. An autoethnographic method will enable these female ulama to reveal the deepest side of their lives, particularly concerning how they were able to break

²Compared to other issues such as political participation and education, the issue of separating the public world as belonging to men and the domestic world as women's sphere is still a key part of discussions on gender and feminism. In fact, according to Lies Marcoes (2023), the demarcation is an imaginary one that causes changes in perspectives related to family law, such as early marriage and polygamy.

through the limitations set by family law and how they struggle to make that experience the basis for improving people's lives.

The discussion in this article will begin with a brief description of IFL and how gender analysis has been used as a perspective. The next section describes the three female ulama's knowledge, experience, and works to illustrate their authority in reinterpreting IFL. Methodologically, the data presented here are from their written works that can be accessed publicly through books and articles relevant to IFL issues, especially related to the problem of women's domestication and ideal husband-wife relations. This section will map the crucial issues arising from their thoughts and methodology. The last section outlines the contribution of this article, namely finding the autoethnography in these women's works and formulating it as an alternative approach, including explaining the limitations of this approach and possible strategies to minimize these shortcomings.

Islamic Family Laws and Gender Perspective

Family Law (*ahwal al Syakhsiyyah*) is part of civil law that regulates family relationships. This law includes rules relating to the formation of a relationship (marriage), its termination (divorce), and the legal consequences of the relationship (property and children).³

One of the critical reasons for the reform of family law in the Islamic world after the formation of the nation-state and the end of colonialism is the improvement of the position of women and children before the law (Mahmud, 1987). There are at least 13 themes that are considered to intersect with women's lives, including: age restrictions for marriage, guardianship, marriage registration, finances in marriage, polygamy, post-divorce women's rights, rights and obligations of husbands and wives, child care, and inheritance (See Mudzhar, 1999, see also 1998, p. 178). These issues involve personal experiences, which are often difficult to explore objectively because they relate to ethical research issues. In this article, the main discussion

³ Family law is "...a law of relationships, between adults inter se, between adults and children, and between both adults and children and the State, as continually influenced by social and demographic change." See (Burton, 2003, p. 3). In Islam, family relations are formed by blood relations and marriage. Meanwhile, in the context of the Western world, defining family law is difficult because the definition of family itself continues to evolve. In modern times, the family includes not only heterosexual relationships but also homosexual relationships, and relationships without marriage.

that serves as an example of a topic requiring an autoethnographic approach is related to husband-and-wife relations and the issue of gender roles, public vs. domestic.

To date, studying IFL has been generally approached in two ways: desk studies and field studies. The focus of desk study includes written Islamic law in the form of *Fiqh*, *Fatwa*, Law, and Court Decisions (jurisprudence). The approaches that are usually used are legal normative, critical legal studies, and content analysis. Meanwhile, field studies target IFL at the practical level using a normative inductive and normative deductive approaches, such as legal anthropology and sociology of law. The normative inductive approach is used to look at practice, change, continuity, the effectiveness of the law, and the meaning of the law, while the deductive approach is utilized to examine the dynamics and contestation of legal norms regarding their implementation in the field (Jayus, 2013). Suppose that those two approaches are associated with three legal aspects: material, law enforcement, and legal culture. In that case, the desk study targets the first variant, namely legal material, while the field study looks at the other two aspects, which are more compatible with an autoethnography approach.

John Bowen, a researcher on Islamic law in Indonesia, divides Islam into resources and practices. Resources are normative-static; there is nothing new following the end of prophethood. Meanwhile, practices will continue to develop as long as Muslims still exist and practice the teachings of Islam. Interpretation bridges the two. The experiences of female ulama which can be uncovered through autoethnographic writings can illuminate how resources, interpretation, and practices of Islamic law inter-shapes.

As an anthropologist, Bowen sees that the power to carry out this interpretation is not only at the level of Muslim jurists or *faqih*, but also at the level of communities, which seek to interpret Islamic law and implement it according to its potential and various challenges. In short, Bowen called this "studying religion through practices," which in the context of Muslim society could give birth to "a New Anthropology of Islam" (Bowen, 1998, see also 2012).

Observing practices will reveal the diversity and particularity of the expression of Islamic law, while by studying the resources, researchers will reveal the universality of Islamic law itself. It seems that the "resources" referred to by Bowen are *sharī'ah* which Muslims understand as a source of teachings, namely the Qur'ān and al-

Hadith. Meanwhile, *fiqh*, as an understanding and interpretation of *sharī'ah*, is categorized as a mediator between the resources and practices of Islamic law itself.

Bowen's opinion provides legitimacy for a more open legal interpretation authority. In this case, the role of the female ulama discussed in this paper has epistemological justification. They have been actively involved in reinterpreting Islamic teachings by continuing to make meaning in bridging these resources and practices so that they are in tune with the times while continuing to maintain the fundamental values of monotheism, servitude to the Almighty, as well as the function of Islamic teachings as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (a blessing for all creation).

Recently, several methods have been proposed, such as the thematic-interdisciplinary method which attempts to identify the postulates of IFL based on the theme and then analyzed with various perspectives. This method is expected to produce an IFL formulation that is more adaptive to contemporary issues (Darlis, 2019; S. Anwar, 2002). Incorporating gender studies as a perspective in examining IFL is a relatively recent phenomenon. The gender perspective emphasizes three principles: Justice, Equality, and Fairness (JEF) in forming IFL. These three principles can methodologically be included in normative and empirical studies (Z. Anwar & Rumminger, 2007; Z. Anwar, 2008).

The relationship between IFL studies and gender perspectives is very close. Both need each other so that the study of family law produces legal formulations that are equal and fair. At the same time, IFL is the right field to test and validate relevant gender theories. However, in their implementation, their relationship is dynamic, influenced by contestation and negotiations, which are expected to lead to accommodation and integration eventually.

This contestation is illustrated in the formative (the first three centuries of Islam 7-9 C.E.) and classic (4th through 6th centuries of Islam 10-12 C.E.) eras of Islamic history. Differences in the interpretation of various family law rules have existed for a long time. Susan Spectrosky, in her introduction to the book "Women in Classical Islamic Family Law" explains that discussions about the gender role of a woman in Islamic law always led to family matters because of the assumption that women's main task was to get married (Spectrosky, 2010), so the topic of marriage and divorce is full of differing opinions from Muslim jurists on gender roles. She further said;

In the areas of women's lives covered here, the patriarchal framework within which they are expected to live is depicted vividly. The opportunities men are given to misuse their power are enormous. However, in these areas, the limitations on men's behavior and the protection of women's interests are as much a part of the discussion as the extent of a man's authority over his wife and daughters. (Spectrosky, 2010, p. 202)

It should be noted that negotiations between those two subjects also led to accommodation and integration. In Indonesia and other Muslim countries, the emergence of regulations such as increasing the legal age of marriage, divorce before the court, and marriage registration have been due to efforts to accommodate the interests of women. In these developments, of course, there has been negotiation and contestation. The Indonesian Female Ulama Congress (KUPI, 2017) is a source of success for female ulama in fighting for gender issues. KUPI's analysis has had some positive impacts on politics, resulting in an amendment to the legal age of marriage as recorded in the Indonesian Marriage Law No. 16 of 2019, which mandates a marriage age of 19 years for men and women. This represented an increase from 16 years for women and 18 years for men in Marriage Law No.1/ 1/1974.

The Works of Female Ulama on Islamic Family Law

Changes in family law in Indonesia, both before and after the reform period, were heavily influenced by the women's movement (Cammack et al., 2015). IFL covers the rules of life of the Muslim community, including women, across a considerably broad spectrum, both related to life such as marriage and divorce as well as post-death events such as inheritance (Esposito, 1982). At the time of its formation, IFL involved the sharing of experiences and knowledge of Aisyah r.a, the wife of the Prophet, who narrated the most hadiths about her family relations, as a source of law (Kurnialam, 2021).

This precedent proves how vital the autoethnography approach is in revealing the various dynamics of Muslim community life in the family towards contributing to developing a more emancipatory IFL. The same should be true with the more active participation of female ulama, who still need to be more visible in becoming resource persons for the validity, dynamics, and transformation of IFL.

The individual experiences of female ulama in their positions as places of

consultation and leaders of women's communities need to be explored and shared through autoethnographic research methods and writing. This method enables them to exercise authority in sharing their personally-embedded knowledge to become lessons learned.

The history of female ulama in Indonesia, as well as in various parts of the Muslim world, is influenced by discussions regarding the recognition of whether women can take part in this male-centered institution (Ulfa, 2012; Khariroh, 2011). Even when they eventually can access this institution, the next challenge is how they utilize their agency both in building authority as well as carrying out various activities and programs that strengthen the basis and recognition of their position as ulama (Kloos, 2016; Kloos & Künkler, 2016; Kull, 2013).

Although some individual female ulama from various regions who have played an active role over a long period of time, have already been mentioned, KUPI is the ulama institution which has led to Indonesian female ulama becoming more visible (Nisa, 2019; Syukur, 2018). Further developments regarding KUPI are included in the collection of profiles of Indonesian female ulama through one of the sections in organization's online encyclopedia, *KUPIPEDIA* (Kupipedia, n.d.).

In this case, the three female ulama mentioned in this article, Musdah Mulia (*Muslimah Reformis*, 2021), Badriyah Fayumi (Muthmainnah, n.d.), and Nina Nurmila (Latief, n.d.), have proven their ability to overcome obstacles that have long existed in IFL, for example, related to the demarcation of public and domestic areas for men and women, ideal husband-wife relations, and the domestication of women through the family. Those issues are very prominent stumbling blocks and have become a "glass ceiling" for Muslim women.⁴ However, these three female ulama have crossed that line. Methodologically, the gender equality movement requires women's experience as a source of knowledge; women can no longer be voiceless but need to speak up and use that voice to achieve better legal protection for men and women.

The works of these three female ulama describe their intense involvement in understanding, reinterpreting, and formulating Islamic family law topics by bringing together resources and practices, as defined by Bowen. Tracing their

⁴ The glass ceiling is a metaphor illustrating structural hindrance for women to reach a higher position in a particular organization, in that the position is visible for them as they can see through the glass, but the barriers are invisible, see (Babic & Hansez 2021 p. 202)

works, this paper intends to identify their main characteristics. However, it must be noted that these characteristics overlap with one another. For example, Musdah Mulia is a progressive interpreter and a cross-cultural academic; she is often dubbed a 'reformist Muslimah'. The same applies to other female ulama.

Despite their differences, the three female ulama have the same critical-rational thinking characteristics in offering an alternative approach to IFL. They also progressively advocate for the reconstruction of the interpretation of texts, which are contextual, by basing this process on the practical experience of women living in a patriarchal culture. In Bowen's terms, this is called "opening outward," which opens the possibility of the meaning of a text based on the empirical experience of the Muslim community.

It should be noted that the patriarchal experience of the Muslim community as the context of the social environment of these three female ulama is reflected in their views on women's issues that develop in the world of discourse and practice. Although in their daily life, they have not personally experienced the practice of polygamy or gender injustice in the family, as intellectual women they absorb social experiences which become intrinsic awareness. Due to their intellectual and humanist engagement, they become part of this gender struggle and position themselves as "insiders" who speak out to represent their people. This could be further developed if their narratives using autoethnographic research and reports are shared, primarily on how they fight against polygamy and women's domestication, as well as how they build reciprocal-equal relations in families, ideologically and practically.

A. Musdah Mulia: A reformist muslimah

Musdah Mulia is a female Muslim intellectual who frequently speaks out against gender bias and seeks to change perspectives on the relationship between men and women, both in the domestic and public sphere. IFL issues have been the main and essential aspect of her works. This is reflected in her involvement as chairman of the Work Program for the establishment of the CLD (Counter Legal Draft) under the Ministry of Religion in 2004. The CLD includes various reforms for family law (S. M. Mulia, 2009). Although the CLD has yet to become part of the Compilation of

Islamic Law (1/1991), the ideas of renewal in the CLD continue to develop and are raising public legal awareness.⁵

Mulia grew up as a female Muslim intellectual in a religious environment. She was born in Bone and became a student at the As'adiyah Islamic Boarding School, Sengkang, South Sulawesi. Her intellectualism grew through various levels of religious education as she studied in qualified Islamic educational institutions. She completed a bachelor's degree at the Alauddin State Islamic Institute (IAIN) Makassar, a master's degree, and a doctorate at IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta, Indonesia. She became the first woman to receive a doctorate in Islamic political thought with her dissertation on "Islamic State: Thoughts of Husain Haikal." In addition to formal education, she also received non-formal education through her work in civil society on democracy, human rights, and women's leadership.

Her intellectualism was further honed through her work as a lecturer at IAIN Alauddin Makassar, the Indonesian Muslim University in Makassar, the Institute of Al-Qur'an Sciences (IIQ) Jakarta and as a Postgraduate staff member at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. At the same time, she took the position of director of the Central Al-Wathoniyah College in Jakarta.

Her career as a researcher began at the Makassar Religious Literature Research Institute, Research and Development Centre (*Balitbang*) Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA), after which she then served as Head of the Division of Studies of the Indonesian Ulema Council. At the peak of her career as a researcher, she was the first woman to be appointed by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) in 1999 as a research professor in the field of religious literature at the MORA and delivered an inaugural speech entitled "Portrait of Women in Religious Literature: Reconstruction of Islamic Thought towards an Egalitarian and Democratic Society."

Apart from being a thinker, Mulia is also an activist. She is passionate about fighting for equality between men and women because that is the true spirit of Islam as a religion of peace and love for all. The elemental spirit of Islam drives her involvement in various scientific institutions and women's organizations. She

⁵ <https://scholar.google.co.id/citations?user=frYseLkAAAAJ&hl=en>. In her google scholar list, her works related to family law are quite dominating, and the ones that get the most citations are on polygamy.

always speaks up about her passion for realizing a just and civilized civil society in her various engagements in numerous forums and her works.

With deep expertise and extensive experience developing religious thought and women's activism, Mulia is seen as a progressive and reformist Indonesian Muslim woman. Mulia has received various prestigious awards nationally and internationally for her involvement, dedication, and work.

Mulia's intellectual works emphasize the values of humanity, peace, and equality as reflected in her major works, among others: *Ensiklopedia Muslimah Reformis: Pokok-Pokok Pemikiran untuk Reinterpretasi dan Aksi*, 2019 (Encyclopedia of Reformist Muslimahs: Thoughts for Reinterpretation and Action); – as the latest edition of *Muslimah Reformis*, 2005, (Reformed Muslimah); *Perempuan dan Politik*, 2005 (Women and Politics); *Islam and Violence Against Women* (2006); *Islam dan Inspirasi Kesetaraan Gender*, 2007 (Islam and Inspiration for Gender Equality); *Muslimah Sejati*, 2011 (True Muslim Women); *Membangun Surga di Bumi: Kiat-Kiat Membina Keluarga Ideal dalam Islam*, 2011 (Building Heaven on Earth: Tips for Fostering an Ideal Family in Islam).

Islam, for Musdah Mulia, is a religion of love and peace, which, from its inception, has fought for equality and freedom and guarantees tolerance and the rights of citizens. Equality, especially in the relationship between women and men, is the essence of Islamic teachings and the values of other religions. Thus, women must have an equal place to men, especially in the public sphere. Islam, in Musdah Mulia's understanding, always guarantees freedom to anyone. Imposing specific religious identities in the public sphere will interfere with the right to freedom.

Inequality and discrimination have occurred, especially in gender relations, due to a bias in understanding religious texts. Therefore, Mulia offers a humanist-feminist interpretation of religious texts. The Humanist-feminist interpretation provides space for a gender perspective in the study of religious texts. This interpretation has three characteristics or ways of working. First, identifying misogynistic religious texts that have been the basis for the marginalization of women's positions. Second, examining the texts of the Qur'ān and hadith in general (not just texts about women) to form a theological perspective to criticize patriarchal values. This second mode of operation is referred to as the "liberation perspective." Third, examining texts about women to learn from historical encounters and stories of

classical and modern women who live in a patriarchal culture (M. Mulia, 2019, pp. 568–582).

B. Badriah Fayumi: A progressive mufassir

Badriyah Fayumi is a female ulama who is also a member of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) and Head of the Steering Committee of KUPI. KUPI's first congress was held on 25-27 April 2017 at the Kebon Jambu Islamic Boarding School, Cirebon, West Java, and attended by around 1280 female ulama and scholars from Indonesia. This congress succeeded in issuing fatwas related to sexual violence, child marriage, and the destruction of nature (Ulumiyah, 2021). The second congress was held in Bangsri Islamic Boarding Jepara, Central Java, on 24-26 November 2022.

Fayumi was born in Pati, Central Java, on 5 August 1971. She was educated in the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) tradition since childhood. She underwent formal education and also studied at the Mathaliul Falah Islamic Boarding School, Kajen, Pati, Central Java, under KH Sahal Mahfud. After completing her studies and secondary education, Fayumi continued her undergraduate studies at IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta at the Ushuluddin (Islamic Theology) Faculty, graduating in 1995 and earning the a bachelor's degree. From IAIN she continued her master's studies at Al-Azhar University, Egypt. After finishing in Egypt, she returned to the State Islamic University (UIN) Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta to continue her postgraduate studies. She was then appointed as a teaching staff at her alma mater (1997-2004). She is now a caretaker of the Mahasina Darul Qur'an wal Hadith Islamic Boarding School in Bekasi, West Java.

Badriyah Fayumi emphasizes the democratic aspect of the family with a participatory spirit. In one of her writings on arrahim.id entitled "Becoming an Ideal Wife and Ideal Husband" (Fayumi, 2020), she emphasizes the involvement of all parties in formulating a definition of social categories that affect gender relations. In a patriarchal society, the formulation of ethical categories that are "husband-centered" arises because most people do not understand the meaning and context of the verse, reject other verses and *hadiths* and ignore the principles of *ma'ruf* (good deed) and *mashlaha* (common good).

Her work on social and political movements and da'wah (preaching) began when she was a student. She focuses on bringing the mission of gender justice and

equality for women. She served as Chair of KOPRI (Female PMII corps) in 1993. Fayumi was then active as a National Awakening Party (PKB) politician and was elected to the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR) from 2004-2009. In the DPR, she worked on DPR Commission VIII, which oversaw religious and social affairs, women's empowerment, and child protection. The establishment of a 30% quota for women's participation in the DPR and political parties was also a result of her efforts at that time.

In the social realm, Fayumi founded the Mahasina Foundation in 2005 with the mission of developing the spirit of *ukhuwah* (brother/sisterhood), *ta'awun* (help), and *tasamuh* (tolerance). In 2009, together with activists from Komnas Perempuan (The National Commission For Women), *Fatayat* (the Women's Youth Wing of Nahdhatul Ulama), *Aisyiyah* (the Women's Wing of Muhammadiyah), *Nasyiatul Aisyiyah* (the Women's Youth Wing of Muhammadiyah), the Fahmina Institute and others, she also initiated the establishment of *Alimat*, an Indonesian family movement for equality and justice, which aims to achieve gender equality and justice in the family from an Islamic perspective. In 2015-2020, she became leader of this organization.

In addition, Fayumi was also appointed as an expert staff of the First Lady of the Republic of Indonesia (2000-2001), served as a commissioner of the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) for the 2010-2014 period, and served on the Indonesian *Waqf* (Confinement) Board. Then, in early 2017, she and her fellow Islamic activists fighting for equality and moderation succeeded in organizing KUPI's congress in Cirebon. This was the culmination of the struggle of Fayumi and her colleagues in fighting for gender equality. Her work and leadership in this event confirmed her position as one of the most influential contemporary Indonesian female ulama.

Fayumi's intellectual expertise as an activist in interpreting the Qur'ān makes her struggle with gender justice distinctive. In 2008, she completed her thesis entitled "The Concept of Makruf in Munakahat Verses and Its Contextualization in Some Marriage Problems in Indonesia." This work served as a primary resource for analysis in this article.

Her writings on the interpretation of the Qur'ān as well as her thoughts on gender justice, are widespread in articles and have been codified in a book, including *Keadilan dan Kesetaraan Jender Perspektif Islam* (the Islamic Perspective of

Justice and Gender Equality); *Dari Harta Gono Gini Hingga Izin Poligami* (From Mutually-Owned Assets to Polygamy Permits); *Tubuh, Seksualitas, dan Kedaulatan Perempuan: Bunga Rampai Pemikiran Ulama Muda* (The Body, Sexuality, and Sovereignty of Women: A Bouquet of Young Scholars' Thoughts) and *Halaqah Islam: Mengaji Perempuan, HAM, dan Demokrasi* (Study Group: Discussing Women, Human Rights and Democracy) (2004).

With her intensive training in Islamic thought and social movements, Fayumi understands well that gender inequality based on dogma and patriarchal culture is deeply ingrained in the minds of Muslims. Therefore, she tries to deconstruct this patriarchal dogma through the theological understanding of Muslims.

In order to reinterpret the verses of the Qur'ān with a more gender-friendly perspective, Fayumi uses a historical and contextual approach (Katjasungkana & Munti, n.d.) by translating the concept of Western feminism into traditional Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)-style interpretations (Jazuli, n.d.). Some of Fayumi's reinterpretations of the Qur'ān include QS An-Nisa' [4]: 34 on disciplining disobedient women; QS An-Nisa' [4]: 11 concerning the inheritance of women and men; QS An-Nisa' [4]: 19 regarding polygamy; Q.S. Al-Baqarah [1]: 233 regarding responsibilities to parents; QS Al-Ahzab [33]: 59 regarding the *hijab* (headscarf); QS Al-Hujurat [49]: 13 about equality.

C. Nina Nurmila: A cross-cultural academia

Nina Nurmila, a female thinker, and activist from Bandung, grew up to become a Muslim intellectual in an environment of Islamic studies and was strongly influenced by her secular education abroad. She first studied at IAIN Bandung for her undergraduate degree in Islamic education (1994). Following this, she took a master's degree in development studies, focusing on women's issues and development, at Murdoch University Western Australia (1997). She took a diploma in conflict resolution at Uppsala University, Sweden (2000) and later earned her doctorate at the University of Melbourne in Gender and Islamic Studies (2004). This education led her to explore women's issues with a religious and interdisciplinary perspective.

Her interest in IFL is evident in several of her relevant works. One of her most famous works, published by Routledge in 2009,⁶ is related to polygamy in the daily life of women and Indonesian society. Much of Nurmila's research is based on the daily experiences of her informants. IFL issues can also be seen in her works on the husband-and-wife relationship in the discourse understood by Indonesians (Nurmila, 2013).

Nurmila has had a prominent academic career and activities that have enabled her to produce various thoughts and ideas about religion, women, and development. Apart from being a lecturer at UIN Bandung at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, she also served in a similar capacity at various other universities, such as the Indonesian Education University (UPI) in 2011-2013, and Nusantara Islamic University (UNINUS), in 2010-2013.

She was a visiting professor in the field of Islamic studies at the Department of Islamic Studies and in Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Redlands, California, USA (2008-2009). She also served as the Head of the Gender Division at the Center for Studies of Religion and Societies (CESRAS) UIN Bandung; the Head of the English Study Program at UIN Bandung; the Head of Australian-American-European International Cooperation UIN Bandung; as a translator and editor at Mizan Publisher, Bandung; as a Commissioner of the National Commission on Anti-Violence against Women; and the selection team for West Java General Elections Commission (KPU) members. Her current position is the Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Education at the Indonesian International Islamic University (UIII), a high-profile, newly-established Islamic university in Indonesia.

As a thinker and female activist, Nurmila continues to express her thoughts and positions through various seminars, symposiums, workshops, conferences, public lectures, consultations, and training forums. Women's issues are the main topic she explores in these forums, in addition to other related issues, ranging from polygamy, violence against women, democracy and human rights, counter-legal drafts, and IFL issues. Among her works which are relevant to mention here are: 'Indonesian Muslim's Discourse on Husband-Wife Relationships' (2013), 'Negotiating Polygamy in Indonesia: Between Islamic Discourse and Women's lived experience' (2008), 'Polygamous Marriages in Indonesia and their impacts on Women's access to income and property' (2016), 'Divorce narratives and class

⁶ <https://scholar.google.co.id/citations?user=CXnKUD8AAAAJ&hl=id>

inequalities in Indonesia' (coauthor, 2022), 'The concept of gender education in the family to help achieve sustainable development goals' (2021).

Routledge, London, published her book on *Women, Islam, and Everyday Life: Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia*. This book talks about Islam and women's daily lives, especially regarding polygamy and the interpretation of the verses of the Qur'ān, which are controversial among Muslims regarding polygamy. In this discussion, some consider polygamy as an inherent right of the husband, others see it as permitted, and other groups argue that Islam implicitly prohibits polygamy. This book provides an empirically-based report on the life experiences of Indonesian women in polygamous marriages, describing different perceptions of practices and strategies for dealing with them. This book also looks at the impact of changes in public policy, particularly the 1974 Indonesian Marriage Law, which limits the practice of polygamy. This book argues that polygamy has become a source of injustice against women and children, contrary to Islamic teachings. Therefore, Nurmila presupposes that a just Islamic law needs to call for the abolition of polygamy.

In proposing ideas about justice in Islamic law related to polygamy, Nurmila has a paradigmatic basis that she draws from the messages of the Qur'ān itself, which receive contextual interpretation. In her opinion, sociologically, polygamy has a destructive impact on women and children and perpetuates power relations in the relationship between women and men. The cause of this practice is a conservative interpretation of verses that are considered to support polygamy.

In search of Autoethnography in the works of three female ulama

Autoethnographic writing intersects autobiography and ethnography (Jones, 2005). In an autobiography, a writer describes personal experiences to be shared with others to narrate certain aspects of cultural experiences and provide space for others to feel those experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, pp. 733–768). While ethnography is writing that conveys the results of intense observations related to experiences involving a culture within a certain period. Ethnographic writing aims to create a representation of a cultural practice so that it becomes understood by outsiders and they feel the sensation of being in the same experience. Therefore, ethnographic writing usually uses detailed and concrete stories (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

So, autoethnography is a method that combines these two aspects where the source of the data written is the author's own experience and knowledge. Then the experience and knowledge are used to reveal certain cultural practices based on in-depth observations of relevant trinkets of personal experience.

We use “reflections, analysis, and interpretation” to assess whether the works of Indonesian female ulama, especially in family law issues related to the public and private sphere, the ideal relationship between wife and husband, and the domestication of women, have used the autoethnography approach. Reflection refers to using the word "I" to integrate personal experience in their writing. Furthermore, analysis means linking the experience to a broader socio-cultural context or the experience of others. The interpretation incorporates the analysis results into a narrative related to the topic under study to raise lessons learned and contribute novelty to IFL knowledge. We found, these reflections aspects are still invisible in their works about family issues and this resulted in the absence of their personal experience in the next two aspects.

As reflected in their works and involvement in social movements to fight for equality, the three female ulama mentioned above are intense academics and insiders of the social groups they are fighting for. Their voices are the voices of the women they represent. Gayatri C Spivak presupposes a style of intellectualism as illustrated in the involvement of these three women thinkers and activists as authentic engagement with the subaltern. They define themselves not as others or merely as experts in women's issues, but they are in subaltern experiences in a patriarchal culture (Setiawan, 2018). For example, Musdah Mulia, in the introduction to her encyclopedia, emphasizes this "insider" position:

"The writing in this encyclopedia explains how Muslim women should respond to various contemporary social changes that are so fast without having to lose their identity as Muslim women. How should Muslim women position themselves in family life, in positions as children, wives, and mothers? What should be the attitude of Muslim women in the wider social life as citizens of the world" (M. Mulia, 2019, p. xiv).

With their work and experience described above, these women qualify to become auto-ethnographers. They have 'something' to share by ensuring the objectivity of their experience as required in the autoethnographic work described below. However, they have not made their personal experience explicit part of their works,

even though the issues they raise are loaded with their personal experiences. The involvement of the subject "I" in the narrative is the most vital aspect to fulfill in autoethnography. Furthermore, they are female figures who have succeeded in breaking down the bias of domestication of women, as echoed in the works of Nurmila, so that they can become reformist Muslim women, like Musdah Mulia's work, and realize "*makruf*" in the ideal relationship between husband and wife, as intended by Badriyah Fayumi.

The autoethnography method is compatible with Islamic studies, which places religion as a belief as well as a personal experience. Moreover, the discipline of family law is laden with internal affairs and privacy. Many ethical issues are taken into consideration so that often family cases cannot be revealed in detail. Researchers, as outsiders, certainly have limits to how far they can explore an issue. Informants, as insiders, cannot always reveal the most profound matters of their family affairs. An autoethnographic method could handle such shortcomings as it situates the researcher as an informant. They can work on boundaries and make decisions to reveal personal stories and experiences without having problems with consent. This method could be an alternative to studying IFL in order to enrich paradigms, approaches, and research findings to contribute to the development, renewal, effectiveness, and meaning of IFL in Indonesia.

From a feminist methodological perspective, this method also provides an open space for subordinate and marginal groups, whether due to gender, geographical location, or other reasons, to voice their opinions and perspectives (Skeggs, 2001). Women are not generally considered a source of knowledge or experts for specific discipline of study, and therefore, autoethnography makes it possible for them to share insights into the discussion. Breaking their silence is the primary goal of feminist methodology, which aims to use women's voices and experiences in knowledge production (Reinharz, 1992; see also Stanley & Wise, 1983).

Fayumi, for example, sees that the ideal relationship between husband and wife based on the concept of "*makruf*" guarantees a harmonious and happy family. This concept will be more pronounced if Fayumi's personal experience can be utilized, because it is a proven example of a family that can balance the public and domestic worlds. Similarly, when Nurmila discusses the discourse of the ideal relationship between husband and wife in Indonesia, where the domestication of women is still common, she should have shared her personal experience of overcoming this challenge, so that she can become an internationally-recognized academic as well

as a productive Indonesian female scholar. Mulia writes at length about being a reformist Muslimah, that is, a woman who continues to move to improve her life situation, and the data presented is the result of her observations from her social life. Mulia has had a long experience of being a reformist Muslim woman and this is what is expected to be written in autoethnography.

Nurmila herself has started writing an autobiography in her latest work, "*Menjadi Feminist Muslim*," (Becoming a Muslim Feminist) published by Afkaruna in 2022. Here she recounts her journey to becoming a feminist and it is full of valuable lessons. Not many women dare to claim to be Muslim feminists because the term feminist is still controversial when juxtaposed with the word Muslim. This life history can be further developed into autoethnography by fulfilling the abovementioned conditions.

In the authors' view, this method provides a wider space for these female ulama to assert their power as insiders in their position as researchers. The position as an insider has long been seen as problematic and less objective in revealing the phenomena of life involved. Under the positivistic paradigm, the distance from a problem and context is the main factor ensuring knowledge's objectivity (Plummer, 2001). However, in reality, subjectivity is unavoidable. Even when a researcher determines the topic and method used, subjectivity has already come into play. Subjective experience can be an alternative source of knowledge because its presence can provide a new perspective on a particular problem (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

The three female ulama have yet to widely use this method, most likely because it is considered subjective and narcissistic. Autoethnography is often heavily criticized with regards to this subjectivity. In this case, several conditions must be met so that subjectivity can convey the "objectivity" of the findings by analyzing the personal experience critically, not just telling a story. It should be related to the experiences of others to illustrate that the experience is no longer valued just on a personal level, but is also culturally acknowledged.

"Auto-ethnographers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, but also must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make

characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsider (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 4).

In providing more objective data and analysis, an auto-ethnographer does three things: first, relating the experience to the context by comparing or contrasting it with existing literature related to the topic presented; second, connecting with other people's experiences by interviewing members of the same cultural group; and third, examining cultural artifacts relevant to the experience (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 4). In short, three conditions need to be fulfilled for autoethnographic works, namely: a) providing justification or legitimacy for the shared experience, b) offering new knowledge, and c. helping others to better understand the world they live in (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 10).

As previously mentioned, the works of the three female scholars have a very academic nuance, providing legitimacy that life experience can cater to knowledge and help others understand life better. However, personal experience has yet to become the starting point in these writings, even though this is the main requirement for a work to be categorized as autoethnographic writing. This writing requires a high level of integrity from the writer, so only some are qualified to undertake it.

The reliability and validity of the data in the autoethnography are ensured through the credibility of the storyteller and how the reader captures the story as "lifelike, believable, and possible" (Plummer, 2001). The narrator must ensure credibility in distinguishing between fiction and actual events from personal experience and then present factual evidence of that experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, pp. 733–768). The readers will assess the validity of this data if the auto-ethnographer can invite the readers into the experience, namely when the reader can feel the experience being told is also related to their experience and the experience of other people they know (Ellis & Bochner 2000, pp. 733–768).

Departing from the description of autoethnography above, the three female ulama can use this method as an alternative approach in their subsequent works related to IFL for three main reasons: first, they have been involved in many women's issues, especially IFL, and this experience guarantees more objectivity in explaining their personal experiences; second, their credibility as writers, researchers, and activists provides confidence for readers to accept their experiences as a source of knowledge, which offer something new; and third, as women, their experiences represent the voices of other women who in many ways are still silenced by

personal, cultural, and religious barriers. Their success in fighting for equality in the family will provide a positive image for other women.

Conclusion

This article has outlined several important points. First, the study of Islamic Family Laws (IFL) in Indonesia has been undertaken with many different approaches. However, those which are focused on more personal aspects, such as autoethnography, have yet to be widely used, particularly in the works of three female ulama. This approach could reveal more detailed information about private life, compared to the current approaches. Research conducted by those who are, at the same time, acting as informants related to family law, will offer a new perspective that is more compelling in IFL reformulation.

Second, although the female ulama have expressed many experiences of women they have studied in IFL reform with different methods, such as Musdah Mulia with her feminist, humanist interpretation, Badriyah Fayumi with her progressive interpretation, and Nina Nurmila by incorporating gender theory with her experiences as cross-culture academia, their personal experiences which have led them to their current position are very significant as a role model for others.

Third, these three female ulama have met the criteria to be autoethnographic researchers to enrich their subsequent works by connecting their personal experiences with studies and literature as well as the experiences of other women with whom they have been involved. Their credibility and integrity allow their autoethnographic writings to become an alternative source of knowledge, especially in breaking the bias of domestication of women and deep-rooted patriarchy in IFL. This step will provide a more grounded and affluent epistemological and logical reasoning base for IFL reform.

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