

GENDER CONCEPT: From the Perspective of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of gender from the perspective of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest religious organization in Indonesia. Through a textual analysis and religious thought approach, this paper explores NU's views on the roles and relationships between men and women in society and religious life. Nahdlatul Ulama's perspective is grounded in Islamic teachings, yet also considers Indonesia's socio-cultural context. The analytical study method is employed to investigate this issue, highlighting NU's stance on gender-related matters such as family roles, education, and participation in community life. In this context, the paper analyzes how NU responds to contemporary issues regarding women's rights, gender equality, and social changes related to gender roles. The analysis reveals that NU possesses a unique and contextual framework in addressing the concept of gender. While rooted in Islamic values, NU also demonstrates the capacity to adapt religious teachings to social realities. NU's understanding of gender impacts religious practices and societal values in Indonesia, creating space for discussion and reinterpretation of existing gender norms. This research contributes to understanding the dynamics of gender concepts within the Indonesian religious context, particularly through the lens of Nahdlatul Ulama's perspectives. The implications of these findings may serve as a foundation for further discussions on how religious organizations can formulate inclusive gender views that positively impact broader society.

A. Introduction

As a social phenomenon, gender cannot be separated from dynamic sociological issues. Gender—as a socio-cultural construct regarding traits attributed to men and women—is a widespread social concern. Gender, long assumed to be natural or divinely ordained, has in fact perpetuated injustices against women through marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, violence, disproportionate workloads, and the socialization of rigid gender-role ideologies. Women have been mythologized as beings deficient in intellect and religious capacity. This myth is deeply tied to patriarchal culture, which positions male-

female relationships hierarchically: men as superior beings, women as inferior.

In Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—as the nation’s largest socio-religious organization—has actively participated in gender discourse by issuing significant rulings on gender-related issues. These NU decisions constitute valuable Islamic legal reasoning that serves as practical guidance. NU’s rulings function as fatwas aimed at providing direction for NU members and the wider Muslim community. Such fatwas often arise in response to urgent public cases, government programs widely socialized among the populace, or other socio-political factors.

At the national level, NU uses institutional forums—namely the Mukhtamar (National Congress), Musyawarah Nasional (National Deliberation/Munas), and Konferensi Besar (Grand Conference/Konbes)—to examine various issues, including gender. Specifically, these discussions occur in forums organized by the Lembaga Bahtsul Masail (LBM – Institute for Islamic Legal Deliberation):

- **Bahtsul Masail Diniyyah:** addressing casuistic religious issues
- **Bahtsul Masail Maudhu’iyyah:** examining thematic-conceptual matters
- **Bahtsul Masail Qanuniyyah:** reviewing state legislation

These forums feature intense debates among NU scholars and participants. Nevertheless, decisions remain anchored in the traditional madhhab (school of jurisprudence) framework. LBM NU consistently adheres to classical fiqh methodologies aligned with one of the four Sunni madhhabs—Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’i, and Hanbali—with the Shafi’i school dominating in practice, except under special circumstances.

Gender discourse has rapidly spread across NU grassroots communities. In Cirebon, the Fahmina Institute (established in the early 2000s) emerged as a pioneer in “Islamic gender” advocacy through book publications, bulletins, training modules, websites, and audio

cassettes. LKiS in Yogyakarta runs a “Belajar Bersama” (Learning Together) program that includes gender as a core topic. Desantara integrates gender discourse critique into its emancipatory madrasah curriculum.

Key gender issues promoted include women’s oppression, reclaiming male-dominated public spaces, and opposing discrimination in all life domains. Religious topics are also critically examined—such as polygamy, inheritance, legal testimony, and women leading prayer. The primary concern of Islamic feminists, including NU gender activists, is the reinterpretation of religious doctrines and practices that disadvantage women. They aim to establish perspectives of justice and gender equality across all aspects of life, toward a democratic social construction free from male-female dichotomies. Power relations between men and women serve as the central focus of NU gender activists’ movements.

Over time, gender issues have penetrated scholarly circles, prompting NU ulama to address them in Muktamar, Munas, and Konbes forums. NU gender activists—particularly from Muslimat and Fatayat—actively engage in these forums, both in pre-congress workshops and during official proceedings, including formulation processes. Rather than waiting for opportunities, they proactively seize platforms to voice ideas and vigorously negotiate, communicate, and advocate to influence the mindset and legal decisions of authoritative ulama. They organize discussions, seminars, and similar activities to enlighten scholars who hold the authority to issue gender-just legal rulings.

Given these phenomena, this paper aims to explore how NU—as one of the largest and most influential Islamic communities—views the concept of gender and its various forms of equality.

B. Discussion

1. Definition of Gender

Linguistically, the term *gender* is defined as “the grouping of words into masculine,

feminine, and neuter, according as they are regarded as male, female, or without sex.” Thus, gender refers to differences that are **not biological** and **not divinely ordained**. The concept of gender must be distinguished from *sex* (biological sex). Biological differences between men and women—such as physical structure, reproductive anatomy, and biological functions like pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding (for women) or fertilization (for men)—are natural, universal, innate at birth, and unchangeable.

In contrast, gender refers to socially constructed roles, behaviors, and identities assigned to men and women based on biological differences that societies culturally institutionalize—for example, “this is for men, that is for women.” Because gender is learned through socialization rather than innate, it is **malleable** and can change over time and across cultures.

Gender biases in society stem largely from cultural norms and **misinterpretations of religious teachings**—particularly incomplete, fragmented, or decontextualized readings of Qur’anic and Hadith texts. Various cultural and religious traditions reflect disempowering views of women, often marginalizing or blaming them as sources of societal corruption. Examples include:

- a. **Ancient Chinese (Taoist) Philosophy:** The universe consists of two elements—*yang* (aggressive/male) and *yin* (passive/female). A woman’s duty is to serve: before marriage, her father or brothers; after marriage, her husband; and upon widowhood, her sons or male relatives.
- b. **Jewish Tradition:** Women serve husbands, bear and raise children. Wives were historically equated with property or livestock; disobedient wives could be stoned. Only men could become rabbis.
- c. **Ancient Roman and Greek Societies:** Women (per Demosthenes) existed to please men. Gladiatorial contests sometimes fought over beautiful women. The goddess Aphrodite (of love) was shared among three men, who killed each other for her favor.

- d. **Persian Empire:** Menstruating women were considered impure and exiled. Incestuous marriages (e.g., brother-sister) were permitted. Some priests advocated celibacy for purity.
- e. **Hindu (Indian) Culture:** Women paid dowries to “buy” husbands. To prove loyalty, widows were expected to immolate themselves on their husband’s funeral pyre (sati)—but not vice versa.
- f. **Book of Genesis (3:12, 16):** Eve tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, leading to their expulsion from Eden. Women were thus portrayed as temptresses prone to sin, cursed with ten divine punishments: menstruation, pain in first intercourse, pregnancy, childbirth, body shame, labor pains, domestic duties, breastfeeding, menopause, delayed arousal, etc.
- g. **Pre-Islamic Arab Culture:** Female infants were buried alive. Women were marginalized; wealthy men kept harems of up to 100 wives, treating women as objects for male sexual gratification.

From this historical backdrop, Muslim women have played a strategic role in educating the ummah, reforming society, and building civilization—as exemplified by the Prophet’s companions. They participated fully in all spheres of life, optimizing their potentials without neglecting any aspect of societal contribution.

This active role arose from a comprehensive understanding of Islam as a holistic way of life, instilled through education alongside the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). However, over time, Muslim women’s understanding of Islam—especially regarding their status and roles—has shifted, leading some to doubt the integrity of Islamic norms. This stems partly from the Muslim community’s growing distance from the Qur’an and Sunnah.

Concurrently, feminist movements have offered gender-based “solutions” through theoretical and practical maneuvers. Without adequate critical capacity, many Muslim women have accepted these concepts uncritically, viewing them as panaceas for women’s

issues—often without examining their underlying assumptions or implications.

2. Gender in Islamic Perspective

Islam affirms human equality through a framework of balance, justice, harmony, and integrity. It rejects injustice and promotes proportional fairness—not uniformity. The Qur'an commands justice and kindness:

“Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct and giving generously to relatives. He forbids indecency, wrongdoing, and oppression. He advises you, that you may take heed.”
(Q.S. an-Nahl [16]:90)

Men and women share equal rights and responsibilities as *khalifah* (stewards) and *'abd* (servants of God). No Qur'anic verse or authentic Hadith prohibits women from participating in public life. On the contrary, many texts endorse women's engagement in diverse professions. Thus, **gender justice** entails ensuring both men and women can actualize their potentials for national and societal development—grounded in their equal status as God's servants.

According to Dr. Nasaruddin Umar, the Qur'an affirms gender equality through several key principles:

a. Men and Women as Equal Servants of God

No distinction exists between genders in their capacity as servants (*'ibad*). Both equally possess the potential to attain piety (*taqwa*), which is the sole criterion of human nobility:

“O mankind, indeed We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you.” (Q.S. al-Hujurat [49]:13)

b. Men and Women as Co-Stewards (Khalifah) on Earth

Both genders share the divinely entrusted role of stewardship, as affirmed in Q.S. al-An'am (6:165) and al-Baqarah (2:30). The term *khalifah* is gender-neutral—implying

equal responsibility and accountability.

c. Equal Covenant with God

Both men and women accepted the primordial covenant with God (Q.S. al-A'raf [7]:172), affirming equal spiritual agency from the dawn of human history—no gender-based discrimination exists in this foundational pact.

d. Equal Participation in the Cosmic Drama (Adam and Eve)

Qur'anic narratives consistently use dual pronouns when describing Adam and Eve:

- Both were created and placed in Paradise (Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]:35)
- Both were equally tempted by Satan (Q.S. al-A'raf [7]:20)
- Both repented and were equally forgiven (Q.S. al-A'raf [7]:23)
- Both became complementary partners on Earth (Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]:187)

e. Equal Potential for Achievement

Three Qur'anic verses explicitly affirm equal opportunity for spiritual and worldly excellence:

- Q.S. Ali Imran [3]:195: *"I will not let the work of any worker among you be lost, male or female..."*
- Q.S. an-Nisa [4]:124: *"Whoever does righteous deeds, male or female, while believing—will enter Paradise..."*
- Q.S. an-Nahl [16]:97: *"Whoever does righteous deeds, male or female, while believing—we shall grant them a good life..."*

These verses dismantle the notion that any domain—spiritual or professional—should be dominated by one gender.

3. Gender Concept in Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)

NU's gender discourse reflects internal diversity among its scholars, shaped by NU's foundational adherence to classical *madhhab*-based jurisprudence—primarily Shafi'i fiqh. Despite varied educational and organizational backgrounds, NU's gender analyses remain rooted in its legal identity. NU's moderate paradigm allows **contextual interpretation of revealed texts (*naql*)**, guided by reason (*aql*) but always within the Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah framework.

Key NU Gender Rulings:

a. Interfaith Marriage is Prohibited

At the 1989 Mukhtar (Yogyakarta), NU reaffirmed that interfaith marriage is invalid in the Indonesian context, citing classical Shafi'i texts and prior rulings (1962 Mukhtar, 1968 Thariqah Conference).

b. Women May Work at Night Under Certain Conditions

At the 1994 Mukhtar (Tasikmalaya), NU ruled that employing women at night is **prohibited** unless:

- It is safe from *fitnah* (moral/social harm)
- Permission is granted by husband or guardian. If *fitnah* is merely feared (not certain), the act is *makruh* (disliked). This ruling responded to widespread exploitation of female migrant workers (TKW), aiming to protect their dignity and safety.

c. Mut'ah Marriage (Temporary Marriage) is Forbidden

At the 1997 Munas (Lombok), NU declared *nikah mut'ah* **haram and invalid**, citing consensus among the four Sunni schools. This addressed rising concerns about disguised prostitution and extramarital relations.

d. Women's Leadership is Recognized in Islam

At the same 1997 Munas, NU affirmed that women may hold public leadership roles,

citing Qur'anic verses (e.g., al-Mu'minun, Ali Imran, al-Ahzab) and Hadiths. This position was reinforced at the 1999 Mukhtar (Kediri), which emphasized Islam's commitment to justice and balance in gender relations.

e. Female Circumcision is Obligatory (Wajib) According to Shafi'i Madhhab

At the 2010 Mukhtar (Makassar), NU upheld female circumcision (*khitan*) as **obligatory** per Shafi'i jurisprudence, based on several Hadiths. The proper method involves minimal removal of the clitoral hood—**not excision**—as advised by the Prophet:

“Do not cut severely; it is more beneficial for the woman and more pleasurable for the husband.” (HR. Abu Dawud)

The optimal time is on the seventh day after birth. NU rejected claims that the practice is un-Islamic, stressing that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence (*adam ad-dalil laisa bi dalil*).

Conclusion

Gender discourse remains highly relevant and often controversial in Islamic contexts. As a religion claiming to be *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (a mercy to all creation), Islam must address evolving social challenges. While the Qur'an affirms human equality—especially between genders—social realities often deviate due to **patriarchal interpretations**, not divine texts themselves.

NU scholars maintain strong reliance on classical texts (*kitab kuning*) in matters of worship (*ibadah*), as seen in rulings on interfaith marriage, mut'ah, and circumcision. However, in socio-legal matters (*mu'amalah*)—such as women's leadership, trafficking, and labor—they demonstrate **contextual flexibility**, accommodating social change while remaining anchored in textual evidence.

Empirical realities—like the exploitation of female workers—have awakened previously

apathetic scholars to gender injustices. Though not all reformist agendas succeed, NU's moderate voices have achieved significant breakthroughs in key areas. Ultimately, correcting gender-biased religious practices requires **contextual, holistic interpretation** of scripture—not merely literalist readings.