




# Portraying Women's Agential Practices of Ideological Muslimah Community: A Passionate Approach to Islamist Politics

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## ABSTRACT

The issue of women and Islamism has been an increasing area of study to explore considering the number of women subscribing to the ideology continues to rise. Plenty of research has been conducted on this subject, but those available suggest that women were fragile victims of the ideology and were portrayed as passive actors who enact no agency. As we shall see, this research finds the opposite. Exploring the motivation and activism of the Ideological Muslimah community in Yogyakarta through a passionate politics approach, it discovers the agential practices of women in Islamist movement. Their motivation and engagement in Islamist politics demonstrate pluralities of women's experiences and affirm the strong nexus of agency, emotion, and identity. By focusing on the agency and the play of emotion, this article aims to provide an alternate perspective to the burgeoning study of feminism and social movement, which has thus far been dominated by rational calculation of the action.

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## Introduction

Islamism, as a form of political Islam that aspires for Islamic supremacy (Ayoob, 2008, p. 2) constantly attracts sympathizers, including women. As female participants in the Islamist movement grow in number, their participation also increasingly attracts scholarly attention. Some research on them (Abu Hanieh, 2008; Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2011; Dyer, 2016; Gray, 2012; Mohammad, 1999), consider women more susceptible to the patriarchal doctrines of Islamism as they share support for the ideology. As they show no resistance to the Islamist patriarchal structure, some works (Marcoes, 2022; Rohmaniah, 2020) view them pejoratively as having no agency. My fieldwork on the Ideological Muslimah community that I am about to elaborate on in this paper, however, shows that Islamist women perform agentic behavior to pursue their choices in any attempt possible for their own well-being. But yet, because agency is commonly viewed as

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operating only within a framework of resistance towards power (Butler, 1999), the agency of these Islamist women, who choose to comply with the structure of patriarchy, receives considerable neglect. Women are often portrayed as narrative objects (Udasmoro, 2017), and it is worse for Islamist women because they experience symbolic annihilation due to the underrepresentation of their narratives. In addition to that, the general studies on women's movements (Abu Hanieh, 2008; Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2011; Bouras, 2017; Davis, 2006; Dyer, 2016; Franks, 2001; Jamille & Vogelstein, 2019; Lillevik, 2012; Mujahidudin, 2012; Omayma & Ottaway, 2007; Widani, 2017) have been focusing on cognitive aspects of the action; meanwhile, the power of emotion as a driving force for action has not received considerable attention (Azca, 2011; Goodwin et al., 2009; Gould, 2004).

This paper seeks to fill in the void by studying the experiences of the Ideological Muslimah community and their involvement in Islamist politics. The Ideological Muslimah community I study in this paper is a study group of Muslim female students in Yogyakarta who devote themselves to diligently studying and implementing the thoughts of Taqiyuddin An-Nabhani. They advocated for a *khilafah*, or Islamic government, to oversee religious affairs for Muslims since they think Islam is the answer to all of humanity's problems. They also believe that men and women alike are equally obligated to participate in politics and uphold the law. Therefore, the women in this community have been observed participating in a variety of *da'wāh*-related initiatives, either individually or as a group. Many of them are educated women, who choose to advocate for Islamism that many scholars view as masculine politics (Aslam, 2014, p. 148; Duriesmith & Ismail, 2019, 2022; Dzuhayatin, 2020, p. 56; Marcoes, 2022, p. 25). It is, therefore, important to learn about their motivations and experiences in participating in politics, whose agendas seem inimical to the perceived women's interests. By looking at the emotional aspect that lingers around the Ideological Muslimah members' motivation and activism, this research seeks to highlight the agentic experiences that have not featured much in the study of women and Islamist movement.

The concept of agency employed here refers to Saba Mahmood's definition, that is "(a) capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of moral action which, (b) ineluctably bound up with historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed" (Mahmood, 2011, p. 29). Different from what has been postulated by Judith Butler on agency as performativity (Butler, 1999, pp. 184–185), Mahmood said that agency is not a reiterated being, but a way of becoming. It is not always operationalized within acts of subversion since norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted, but also performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways (Mahmood, 2011, p. 134).

To better comprehend the role that passion and/or emotion play in the activity of the members of the Ideological Muslimah community, I am urged to also use Jeff Goodwin's theory of passionate politics. Passionate politics theory considers passion as a dynamic force that shapes how political players interpret events, form their identities, and determine their actions. According to this theory, actors are motivated to protect themselves through strategic mobilization due to sentiments of anger, aggravation, impatience, high solidarity, love, and friendship (Goodwin et al., 2009, pp. 21-22).

This research is conducted by employing both participant observation and in-depth interviews with five members of the Ideological Muslimah community in Yogyakarta. Most of them are not native to Yogyakarta but are coming from different cities in Indonesia. They are selected here because they are members of the community and uphold An-Nabhani's teachings of Islamist politics. For ethical reasons, their name will be a pseudonym.

To demonstrate their agency, I focus on discussing four main subjects, including identity, strategy, motivation, and activism by scrutinizing the element of passion/emotion in each issue and how they intersect with one another. Examining these topics, the paper will demonstrate the Islamist women's agency that has been undervalued in feminist and social movement studies and offer alternatives to the growing body of literature on collective action that focuses solely on the cognitive aspect and ignores the emotional element of the movement.

### **The Profile of Ideological Muslimah**

The Ideological Muslimah community is a study group that follows the thoughts of Taqiyuddin An-Nabhani. The name of the group may sound unfamiliar because it is especially used in this paper to facilitate discussion and to respect the group's request not to be associated with any Islamist groups in Indonesia. The name was selected by the members to accentuate their peculiar character, which is ideological to Islam and political for aspiring the establishment of *khilafah* through *da'wāh*. Hence, the members of the community identify themselves as activists and politicians (Komara, 2016).

Despite the small size of the group members I interviewed, Taqiyuddin An-Nabhani's spiritual and political thinking has a global following, the amount of which is difficult to estimate. On a larger scale, An-Nabhani's followers form a sizable congregation and network, giving them a greater capacity for hierarchy and discipline. But their numbers fluctuate constantly on a local scale. The exact quantity is unknown in Yogyakarta or anywhere else. Prior to the pandemic of COVID-19, their regional public agenda in Yogyakarta could draw up to 20-30 participants, but during the pandemic, that number often grew to 70-80 participants in online forums. But this

number does not accurately reflect the size of the Yogyakarta-based Ideological Muslimah community since, of all those present, many of them were public audiences.

Despite the global network, this paper will only focus on Ideological Muslimah as a community of students studying the thoughts of An-Nabhani in Yogyakarta. Since the focus will be on agency and their passionate politics, I limit the scope of this paper to addressing the personal experiences of the group members, especially those related to why and how they engage with the ideology. Seeing the ideas presented by the community, it is not surprising that many women are interested in learning the ideology and participating in its activism. In their teachings, the role of women is recognized and even accommodated. Although men and women are differentiated in roles, they are considered equal in terms of creation. An-Nabhani said, "The woman is a human, as is the man, and they do not differ from each other in terms of their humanity. Nor is one distinguished from the other in any aspect of that humanity" (An-Nabhani, 1990, p. 15).

Despite assuming that women and men are equal in creation and allowing women to have a wide range of occupations, the teachings state that women are forbidden from holding positions of authority. Using the biological difference between the sexes as justification, the argument states that men should take on leadership roles because they are seen as more logical decision-makers, while women should focus on parenting because they are nurturing and patient. They see the distinction as neutral, merely a reflection of their biological differences. But even though such differences restrict women's ability to carry out roles as rulers, they are not neglected in their politics. Their definition of politics as taking care of *ummah* allows these women to actively promote the ideology and help pave the way for the caliphate through political activism. In doing so, they can still work as lawyers, doctors, judges, or any other profession (except holding a political office) to support the caliphate.

### **On Becoming an Ideological Muslimah**

There is no short cut to joining the Ideological Muslimah community. To join, one must first qualify as a student. Getting the necessary education can take a long time, often several years. Only after finishing the *ngaji* (education) process do they officially become members. A *musyrifah*/mentor will keep a watch on the *dāris* (students) to make sure they are ready to commit before appointing them as an official member. Whether or not she can be inaugurated as a full member depends on her loyalty, readiness, and ability to look at and respond to a problem using their ideological framework.

There are various reasons that motivate them to participate in the community. My interaction with the Ideological Muslimah community in Yogyakarta helps me understand that emotion can be a force that stimulates an active quest for the self and even configures new identities and

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sensibilities that determine members' trajectory in the community. In a conversation with Nada, she said:

"When I was in college, I was more concerned with finding identity. In those early years I was confused because I couldn't go to Egypt. And I felt like blaming my mom. But after I was mentored by the Ideological Muslimah, I realized that skipping Egypt wasn't such a bad idea after all. My needs could be fulfilled by the community. The community holds the keys to my questions" (Interview, April 17, 2022).

Nada acknowledged that becoming a part of the community helped her overcome her sadness at her mother's opposition to her studying abroad. She also admitted that her initial interest in the community stemmed from simple curiosity, but she ultimately found comfort and reassurance in her studies alongside the community. The group gives her failure a new, positive meaning that fuels her growth.

But Nada did not want to disappoint her mother, so she decided to keep her active life as a member a secret from her. Her mother had always disapproved of her getting involved in the community. Nada clarified that her mother's reluctance had nothing to do with the ideology itself but rather the potential dangers she might face as a result of social stigma.

The many rejections of Islamist ideology also became a concern for Ayu's (pseudonym, 35 yo) closest people, who warned her not to join the movement. Instead of keeping a distance, Ayu's curiosity led her to get to know everything about the group, especially considering negative narratives about Islam as a terrorist ideology. It was during her bachelor's programs that Ayu began to search for answers about Islam being labelled a terrorist. She joined the public forum held by the Ideological Muslimah community in her university, which ultimately brought her into contact with the collective emotion culture of Muslims being unfairly blamed by secular power. The close bonds she forged with older members of the community also played a role in her becoming well-versed in ideology. When asked about how she initially engaged, she said:

"I felt that what was conveyed (by the community) was in accordance with Islam. They convey various opinions of scholars and do not completely deviate. But why is this activity labeled as a terrorist? It is because there are certain political conditions behind it. Well, that thing was conveyed in the community as well. So, when I first became aware of such constellation of opinions, the realization came that I should not let myself be influenced by such politics. I was ready to be trained and put in the work. Though it is not a requirement to join (the movement), training can certainly help you along the way" (interview, November 21, 2021).

The widespread stigmatization of Islam as a terrorist organization had an impact on Ayu's feelings, thoughts, and perceptions. The media's portrayal of Islam in a negative light made her (as a Muslim) feel wronged and imprinted a sense of crisis that nourished her animosity towards secular Western power. This feeling empowered Ayu to take passionate action by participating in Ideological Muslimah politics as an activist.

Unlike Ayu, who got to know the community through her university program, Rima (pseudonym, 30 yo) got introduced to the ideology when she was in senior high school. Her family never demanded that she study religion diligently. Her willingness to then wear hijab and slowly take part in small discussions about Islam at school was initially because she did not want to disappoint her friend, who had been persistent in inviting her to join religious gatherings. But as the discussion progressed and she learned about Islam, her interest in studying the religion began to grow.

“The more the discussions make senses to me, the more likely it will set off my defenses. That is why I enjoy discussing new topics so much. Junior high school religious education classes typically began by discussing common topics like prayer and morality, but then these people (the proponents of An-Nabhani’s thoughts) came up with a new thesis. That was a tough one for me to grasp. Therefore, initially, I was intrigued because it seemed challenging. Their explanation made sense, and it piqued my interest all the more for it. Somehow, I felt drawn to this, but I was not ready to fully commit. That’s not where I wanted to put my focus. But now I’m able to see things from a different angle. I asked myself earlier, “how can you think of being trapped (if becoming committed)?” In fact, there will always be limits to our freedom of choice, right? By being part of the group, you have values to live by” (interview, September 13, 2022).

Rima admitted that she is a free-spirited soul type of person who wants to explore many things without limitation. It took her five years of ups and downs to finally decide to join because, while she was interested in the ideas, she was hesitant to make a permanent commitment. When I asked what made her finally decide to join, she said:

“I have to admit that this community has a settled system. There is a meeting every week that not only discusses thoughts but also personal passions. This is not only about the community but also about ourselves” (interview, September 13, 22).

Since Rima thrives on challenges, she is very active in her community. She is a curious young lady who enjoys making new friends and doing challenging activities. Engaging in community has strengthened her own skills and abilities in many ways. Being trained in the community as either an organizer or speaker for their regular religious gatherings, Rima now has good confidence and great public speaking skills to interact with more people.

Different from Rima, Farah (pseudonym, 30 yo) joined the study group at her mother's urging. Farah has participated in the Ideological Muslimah’s programs since her bachelor’s study. But due to the strict rules and age gap in the community (as many members were her mother’s age), she did not feel comfortable attending. It was only after moving to Yogyakarta for her master’s program and becoming involved with Yogyakarta’s branch community that she finally found solace and elation.

It was not easy to be in a position where she, as a woman, feels comfortable doing what she likes now. Her relatives from the Javanese palace were not very supportive of her active lifestyle. Farah felt she was singled out for special treatment just because she was a woman. Therefore, being loved and valued by the group aided in her psychological rehabilitation. She is now frequently asked to speak before groups with different membership levels, where she boosts her energy to be more actively engaged with the community.

“During my healing process in 2017 I felt that “yes there should also be improvements”, improvements in terms of the quality of faith, then there I also improved myself slowly, I started to join in and broaden my thoughts” (interview, December 31, 2021)

In contrast to Farah, Rere (pseudonym, 30 yo) was not a devout Muslim. Therefore, she was shocked to learn, upon enrolling at the Islamic university in her hometown, that she was far from being a model Muslim. In so doing, her friend invited her to the Ideological Muslimah community, where Rere grew curious about the political thought of Taqiyuddin An-Nabhani. It was during regular religious meetings that she read, learned, and internalized the thought of An-Nabhani. Rere said it timidly:

“The fact that I went to an Islamic college meant that I had to devote a lot of time to learn Islam. I began my search for a group to call home during the third semester, comparing, and contrasting various university students’ clubs and associations. Including LDK (campus missionary organization). But in LDK, the discussion was only about *ḥablun minallāh* (spiritual relation to Allah). There was no discussion of what our contribution as students is to the condition of the people. There also used to be a perception that Ideological Muslim women were heretical and violent, so I wanted to prove it and see it in person” (interview, January 28, 2021).

As we see, there is no single motivation behind women’s participation in the Ideological Muslimah community. But it is apparent that personal emotional experiences also serve as stimulants that trigger the members to partake in the community. Emotions such as self-worth, guilt, anger, and optimism are not spontaneous but rather developed through repeated behavior/habitation. Emotional culture conditioned by the Islamist structure, which appeals to the sensibilities of some Muslim communities by employing the language of grievance, has even stimulated cognitive aspects like curiosity over the ideology. Their moral code and the identity crisis they face drive them to self-proof through community activism.

People are motivated to take part in activism because they have a strong need to feel like they belong somewhere or because they want to be part of a community that can meet their basic requirements for survival. Therefore, the training process through intensive learning becomes the arena of habituation that shapes their self-identity, preferences, and expectations that stabilize their path in carrying the ideology.

Those findings explain that the reason for joining the Islamist movement is not solely driven by the doctrine, but also by emotional forces such as passion, expectation, safety, and solidarity. These discoveries both support and refute Lies Marcoes' argument regarding the reasons for women joining Islamist movements.

Along with Marcoes, this research confirms that one of the motivations for these women to join Islamist politics is the need for a community that recognizes their agentic selves. Lies Marcoes says that Islamist women want to be recognized for the sacrifices they have made to advance the cause of establishing the caliphate or sharia law (Marcoes, 2022, p. 62). It is in line with what Farah said, that being part of the community gave them a sense of mental and spiritual fulfillment just as she had felt when her version of womanhood was valued, the community's designation of them as Muslim activists and politicians gave them meaning and made them confident of their identity and duty as Muslims.

Nevertheless, this study also refutes Marcoes' argument, which states that engaging with Islamist ideology shuns women's rational abilities. Marcoes said: *"apa yang dialami perempuan akibat konservatisme ideologis/fundamentalisme telah 'membunuh' pikiran atau akal sehat perempuan"* or in English it reads "...the ideology of conservatism/fundamentalism has shut off women's minds or common sense". For Marcoes, the way Islamist women believed that the world can be saved through domestic lives indicate women's closed off minds (Marcoes, 2022, p. 41).

Marcoes' view is common in feminist studies. Liberal feminists' analysis often assumes a generic feature of women that presumes women to have the same worldview and are supposed to feel oppressed under Islamic pretexts and therefore need to be saved. Such a precept in feminism equates women's agency with liberation, which scholars working on Muslim women communities like Saba Mahmood, Azza Karam and Lila Abu Lughod strongly oppose (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Karam, 1997; Mahmood, 2011).

In contrast to Marcoes, this research finds that rejecting gender notions does not indicate women's inactive rational minds or common sense. As we see and as we shall see in the following section, those Islamist women do not lose their active agency and critical reasoning. These women are aware of their rights and are pushing to have them realized, despite their rejection of the term "gender" and their tendency to conform to the patriarchal nature of Islamism.

### Variety of Expressions

Common perception tends to see Islamist women as fundamentally different from others. They are typically portrayed as being submissive (Marcoes, 2022; Marcoes-Natsir & Octavia, 2014; Rohmaniah, 2020; Rohmaniyah, 2021), passive and unadventurous (Abu Hanieh, 2008; Berman, 2003; Gray, 2012). They are also stereotyped as being backward, unable to adapt to new



developments in science and technology, opposed to music, resistant to change, and closed off to the rest of society. My interactions with people from the Ideological Muslimah community, on the other hand, painted a picture that diverged from the popular conception. On the contrary, this research finds that those women are well equipped with modern technology, complemented by critical reasoning, and quite open to popular culture.

Those qualities are enabled by the character of the Ideological Muslimah platform, which takes a path in political-intellectual activism. The features of the ideology that uphold intellectualism, politics, and piety attracted many educated women to participate. It is therefore not surprising that Nada, Ayu, Rere, Rima, and Farah who are quite intelligent, are attracted to this ideology. The political ideas adopted by the Ideological Muslimah community provide sufficient space for the involvement of women to play multiple roles in both public and private spheres following the portrayal of an ideal woman they shared. Such a recognition of their capacities energizes them to further their engagement.

Despite Ideological Muslimah activism being oriented towards intellectual activities, the strategy being used has been utilizing the power of passion/emotion. This strategy is even addressed in their manual *da'wāh* strategy book which emphasizes the importance of knowing the thoughts and feelings of the community to determine the doctrines that must be conveyed (*Titik Tolak Perjalanan Da'wāh Hizbut Tahrir*, n.d., p. 11). It includes the process of recruiting new potential members, where each *musyrifah* should fully pay attention to their students' progress. Farah recalled that the community, especially her *musyrifah* became like a family that reprimanded and supported her for good.

Interestingly, from the side of *musyrifah*, the training process has always been challenging. Aside from being responsible for students' successful performance during the training process, they also need to manage their personal lives. Nada as a *musyrifah* said:

"Yeah, I don't see it (the training) as a burden anyway. But that doesn't mean you're never tired either. I won't lie that it is physically tiring. Surely our bodies have certain limits. But psychologically and mentally, it's mostly because we have something to think about. Which aspect to think about first is sometimes tiring. But if tiring means that you are mentally tired, or that you continue to feel stressed, you continue to feel hopeless, you continue to no longer want to carry out this mandate, you continue to feel tormented by the congregation, I do not think it goes those ways" (interview, April 17, 2022)

Nada admits that each student poses different challenges that a *musyrifah* should anticipate. The difficulties also vary depending on the students. When asked whether training older people is easier, Nada said that it totally depends on the personalities of the students. The older generation is mentally and emotionally stable, but their knowledge of particular things is often hard to change. Meanwhile, the younger ones are normally more open to new information and innovation but have not yet been stable mentally and emotionally (interview, April 17, 2022).

The bond between participants in the study group is not only tied by shared thoughts but also by shared feelings as a congregation. As an intellectual-political group, the challenges they face because they carry the concept of the caliphate are quite diverse due to strong resistance from society at large. However, these difficulties only strengthen the bond between them. Rere said, "the dissolution of the organizations that carry the idea of the caliphate actually makes us more solid" (interview, 2020). They build patterns of family-style interaction and communication. In the regeneration process, seniors assist juniors in solving various problems they face so that the kinship between them is also strengthened both ideologically and emotionally. Farah mentioned:

"To be honest, I found a family here (group), so the family is basically protective, right? When you are wrong, you don't want to be shunned, but you are reminded, right? When they saw that I had my mistake, they wanted to give advice. And what I'm even more sure of is because what they say is all based on an understanding of Islam, so it is easier for me to accept what they say" (interview, December 31, 2021)

Along the way, the members also experience ups and downs. Though the dynamics are natural, I find the way they deal with boredom very interesting. Farah said:

"In the past, I felt bored and lazy, I thought, "Well, I'm lazy now, I don't want to recite the Qur'an, I don't want anything like that." But lately, the more I feel bored and lazy, the more I contemplate, "who knows if it was me who was less creative, less open-minded, too busy with worldly affairs?" sometimes when we take care of worldly matters, it's just empty, right? that's what I feel" (interview, December 31, 2021)

To overcome boredom, Farah explores and learns new things, including making a podcast to express her creative ideas. Together with Rima, Farah, fills her podcast with creative content from books, novels, films, and songs, including those produced in the West. One of them, for example, was when they talked about the novel and film "Eat, Pray, Love", where they mentioned in their podcast that eating, praying, and loving are dimensions of life, and are natural human instincts. For them, the instincts for survival, worship and sharing love exist within every individual. Farah and Rima are not much different from young women in general. Although for some other *da'wāh* activists the activity of reading novels and watching Western films is often considered negative, Farah and Rima admitted that they gained inspiration from the novels they read and the films they watched.

Rima also watched Korean dramas that many of her friends recommended. For her, reading books and watching movies help open her horizons and add insight into the learning process. As long as these activities do not distract them from their obligations, Farah and Rima consider these activities permissible. These stories illustrate that their commitment to Islamic political ideas does not necessarily make them different from other women. Rima even emphasized repeatedly that they are ordinary people, like women in general, who do restful activities outside of the group's "political" agenda. Identity as a politician is not always inherent in the daily lives of activists. Not

everything they do is politically oriented, although it is undeniable that sometimes their political views naturally emerge in their daily practice. In contrast to Asef Bayat's description of *everyday life as politics* (Bayat, 2020), the women activists of the Ideological Muslimah community express a different picture whose lives are not always about politics. When making a podcast, for example, Rima and Farah said they were not identifying themselves as politicians, who intentionally made a podcast for a *da'wāh*. Creating a podcast is just one way to express creativity and to fill leisure that allows them to rest and do something they like by inviting guests outside their circle to discuss interesting topics such as scholarships, studying abroad, films and novels and things that are not directly related to politics and religion. They also invite outsiders including men to join podcasts, something is rarely seen in Islamist activism. This further confirms the categorization of front and backstage as described by Erving Goffman (Goffman, 2021). In this context, the women separate two different realms; being politicians who carry out public roles and being their ordinary selves who live their own personal activities.

In terms of marriage, there is no stipulation that members of the Ideological Muslimah must marry men of the same ideology. Normally, they will choose a partner who gives them the freedom to stay on the path of *da'wāh*. Though many of them whose husbands are not activists ended up leaving the community, many also managed to persuade their spouse to accept the ideology. Nada was unable to persuade her husband, meanwhile, Ayu who is also married to a non-activist, managed to convince her husband to join her doing a political activism.

On the other hand, Rere, Rima and Farah prefer not to rush into marriage. Rima and Farah are now 30 years old. The average age in Indonesian society is generally considered to be beyond the ideal age for marriage. Even so, Farah and Rima were not worried, Farah said: "In the community, there is no judgment against unmarried women. Even some more mature seniors are also unmarried" (interview, December 31, 2021). This indicates consciousness of marriage preferences and freedom to make personal choice. When asked about polygamy, Farah said:

"Polygamy is conveyed by Allah in the Qur'an. In the first verse of surah An-Nisā'. But what I understand is that so far people have only focused on the first verse of An-Nisā'. Meanwhile, there's a second, third, fourth verse which states that basically you have to be responsible. If you can't afford it, don't take that option. From that point of view, I regret it because many people who practice polygamy are only based on sorry...the excessive lust. So (through polygamy) they want to channel it lawfully. But on the other hand, he (the man who did polygamy) doesn't know that there is a responsibility behind his decision. So, humanly and as a woman, I don't want to stay in a polygamous marriage... Even though women's feelings are not explained in the Qur'an, but a man whom we choose him as a husband as a lifelong friend, we believe he can treat us well, right? If he puts as in that situation, is it a form of good treatment?" (interview, November 11, 2022)

Farah's firm response to her disagreement with a polygamous marriage was not only based on her views of the Qur'an, but also on her woman's and human's feeling. In her social circle, Farah

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was exposed to unhealthy polygamy. For her, the polygamous marriage conducted by contemporary Muslims today does not reflect the teachings of the prophet Mohammed.

Likewise, Rima complains about society's demands that constantly urge single women to get married and married women to have children. She said:

“For example, about free child marriage. I half agree with the proponents of free child marriage. Why? I feel like they are aware that having a child is not a coincidence that “you are pregnant, and the child is born”. But is the practice (free child marriage) justified? Well, that is another story. (But) I like them more than people who see life as a cycle, “now that you are this old, when will you get married?” That's annoying. But I don't necessarily judge free child marriage as okay. It is important to clarify this issue before coming to judgment” (interview, September 13, 2022).

Indeed, the community did not provide specific provisions regarding the practices carried out by the participants. Although, in terms of political ideology, they appear to be uniform, in terms of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and daily religious practice, they are diverse. This shows that while they have a common view on politics, they carry out different perspectives on daily practices.

### **On Islamist Women's Agency, Identity and Politics**

The findings described above break the assumption about the uniformity of thoughts and the demise of the agency of the women who live in Islamist activism. Although the ideological Muslimah community rejects the concepts of gender equality, negotiations for wider spaces for the role of women in the Islamist movement continue to occur. The diversity of expression is the result of the operationalization of agency which allows them to have different choice from other women in general. Having such an unpopular preference takes determination and courage that emanates from their potential capacity for action. As an embodied capacity, their agency encourages them to make a conscious choice to either accept or reject the surrounding structure. The examples of how the members of the Ideological Muslimah consciously decided to join the community and their dissenting opinions about leisure, household and polygamy explain how subjectivity still appears in their thoughts and activism.

The Ideological Muslimah community's rejection of the gender concept does not make them passive. They rather wanted to prove that Islam (which is placed against concepts from the West) provide an active space for women. Although they do not use gender labels, they essentially agree on the importance of a fair relationship between men and women, even though at the same rate, the terms they used to achieve this goal still reflect and support patriarchal domination. When asked about the alternative ideas to contest gender concepts, they said that "Islam" is sufficient to accommodate various concepts including women's rights. They insist that gender role divisions in "Islam" is not a form of discrimination, but an acknowledgment of the supposedly different

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characters of men and women (An-Nabhani, 1990; Nur, 2009).

There are pluralities of interpretation regarding gender roles in Islam. While literalist school believes the biological dichotomy of men and women, the contextualist one is confident about the fluidity and exchangeability of gender roles. What all women need—they insisted—is not gender, but Islam. For them, biological differences make a perfect complementarily partnership between men and women. Although men are assigned to be leaders, their existence is highly dependent on women who are created with a high emotional capacity to be a wife and mother. In the book of Taqiuddin An-Nabhani it is stated: "Hence, it can be said that the primary role of the woman is that she is a mother and housewife because it is through this action the human race survives and because she is distinguished by this from the men" (An-Nabhani, 1990, p. 90).

The ways in which ideological Muslim activists express themselves are so diverse. The findings in this article refute Inayah Rohmaniah's assumption about the "depersonalization" of the Ideological Muslimah members that causes the demise of the members' agencies (Rohmaniah, 2020, p. 141). Rohmaniah claims that women involved in Islamism tend to experience depersonalization in which members' personal selves disappear in favor of uniformity in a collective identity. For her, depersonalization occurs when individuals see themselves as embodiments of the group prototype therefore put aside their distinctive individual characteristics and/or uniqueness (Rohmaniah, 2020, p. 140). She accounts that soon as the members adopt the identity, they lose their active agency, will and freedom to resist the doctrines instilled in them. For her, Islamist ideology had weakened women's agency that makes them accept anti-woman doctrines for granted (Rohmaniah, 2020, p. 141).

Rohmaniah appears to step upon liberal feminists' notion of agency that define it as a form of resistance to the dominant power. Those who decide to accept the patriarchal structure are perceived as passive, subordinated, and indoctrinated by ideology. However, understanding agency only in terms of resistance or performativity will reduce the richness of actors' multiple ranges of expression that mark out their unique personhood as a member of the community.

By understanding agency as a capacity for action (Mahmood, 2011), we can see how each member deals, negotiates, and locates themselves within the community. Different perspectives on polygamy, livelihood, and marriage issues as described earlier show that the members have ample room to express their personal thoughts and build their own trajectory in the community. The uniformity may appear in political aspirations, but in daily conducts and jurisprudences, there can be quite variety of perspective among the women. Such pluralities are possible due to the play of agency that is enabled by the habituation patterns that shape the members' ways of doing and becoming within the relation of power they encounter.

It is important to pay attention to agency as the capacity and/or power to do something to

explore actors' diverse micro expressions. Agency is not merely a matter of resistance but is an embodied capacity within the actor to make conscious choices for themselves. The operational form of the agency is not single, but results in a variety of perspectives and practices that determine actors' existence both within and outside the community. This is in line with the non-singular form of masculinity. Wening Udasmoro et al in her research on GAM (Free Aceh Movement) combatants found three different types of masculinity, namely militarized masculinities, insurgent forms of masculinity, and non-violent forms of masculinity (Kunz et al., 2018). In post-conflict conditions, militarized masculinity is no longer popular and hegemonic. Instead, the non-violent form of masculinity has become the choice of combatants to show their male leadership role. One of the reasons for transforming militarized masculinities into a non-violent type was public's disappointment with the GAM's elites who lived in luxury after the Helsinki treaty, while the members were side-lined (Kunz et al., 2018, p. 312).

Emotional force makes the strategies and approaches of the social movement actors vary. My interview with Rere, for example, mentioned that the feeling of *ewuh pekewuh* (uneasy) held by Javanese activists had hindered the recruitment process. Javanese activists often find it difficult to communicate with candidates they want to recruit. Rere compared her activities in Medan and in Jogja, and concluded that Medan's open culture with a strong collective identity creates a fairly solid ideological Muslimah community than in Java, where the *ewuh pekewuh* culture and high individuality make mobilization among members of the Ideological Muslimah slow. Indeed, local culture influences the identity configuration and politics of the Ideological Muslimah community.

The inculcation of such patriarchal Islamist values does not emerge from the Ideological Muslimah's ideology alone but has also been engraved, habituated, and structured by the society that holds strong the male superiority. In traditional Muslim communities, patriarchal values are still deeply rooted and accepted because of the legitimacy of religious texts. Some of the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) community for instance are still struggling to accept arguments that women have the right and deserve to be leaders (Kusmana, 2019; Marhumah, 2011; Prasetiawan & Lis, 2019; Syatibi, 2009; Wulpiah, 2018). Some of them also still adhere to the notion that polygamy is allowed in Islamic teachings (Farid, 2017; Kusairi & Thabrani, 2022; Muzzammil et al., 2021; Sa'adah et al., 2015). Saying so, without intending to simplify the complex realities of Islamism, the Ideological Muslimah community's acceptance of the patriarchy is not strange considering the strong structure of patriarchy in Indonesian Muslim society.

## Conclusion

With the development of post-modern analysis in 1970s, feminist study has placed emphasis on agency—by which the subject' 'self' gained attention. Departing from the notion of truth, the

construction of knowledge, the structure of power and the problem of misrepresentation, the demands to understand 'others' in a manner that accounts for the subject's freedom to create their self-knowledge stimulate the development of feminist study in the issue of 'agency'. Analyzing the way, the relation of power operates in society notably with regard to gender structures, some feminists went on to argue against patriarchal domination in society. Nevertheless, feminists tend to explicate different models of analysis when it comes to experiences that are discrete to the general norms of feminism. The popularity of Islamism among women—for instance, has provoked various reactions. While some of the feminist analyses consider that the female proponents of Islamist politics enact no agency as if women were given no choice but to comply with the patriarchal structure, this research stands off from such a simplistic point of view for the lack of comprehension of the diverse expressions of women's experiences.

Employing Saba Mahmood's notion of agency as the capacity for action and observing the role of emotion through a passionate politics approach, this research confirms the play of active agency by the members of the Ideological Muslimah community. Their agency is visible, one of which is through their passionate activism that is built upon conscious consideration of the action. Their motivations to participate and methods of carrying out the group's agendas are not isolated from emotional elements that configure their very criteria of activism. The emphasis on awareness suggests that recruitment is based not only on how well-versed the candidate is with the teachings, but also on a commitment to sticking to the group. In its ride, this commitment is formed through a long process involving the role of reason and emotion. Inner experiences such as feeling unappreciated, doubted, and underestimated, as well as things that arise due to moral construction such as shame, guilt, anger, and desire for significance contribute to action. It is through their passionate politics in the community that they find a place for expression.

Focusing on agency and emotion, I need to clarify that this research does not mean neglecting the role of reason. Instead, I argue that it is important to also consider the emotional components of the movement besides its rational calculation. Both aspects are interpolated and/or interwoven in actors' either personal or collective actions. Therefore, it is not a matter of the question of which component comes first and dominates another.

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