In this publication, six women tell their story. Six devout Indonesian Muslim women who have their roots in the traditional pesantren world, the world of the Indonesian Islamic boarding school. Not hampered but inspired by their faith, they oppose patriarchal dominance and other forms of oppression: sexual and domestic violence, social inequality and, last but not least, rising political extremism of Islamists in the largest Muslim country in the world.

They all tell a story of social change, religious reform and emancipation. The actions of these women have an impact in their own schools, their own communities, in their districts, and sometimes even on a national level.

These women have not just been shaped by their faith; they shape their faith and they do it as experts in Islamic theology. They seek and use all options for personal theological interpretation and reflection that Islam has to offer. Their Muslim activism has its roots in the conviction that all creatures are equal to God, a principle of equality that has moral as well as sacred significance to them.

We think these stories are important to be heard. Not only as gripping examples of personal courage and liberation, but more importantly as a contribution to discussions taking place on countering violent extremism in communities worldwide. These practices provide inspiring examples of preventative mechanisms in and from religious communities to combat violent repression and extremism.
LOOKING FOR THAT OTHER FACE
WOMEN MUSLIM LEADERS AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN INDONESIA

FRANK VAN LIERDE

CORDAID
THE HAGUE, 2013
A WORD OF THANKS

The research for this book and the publication itself were made possible by many people and several organisations. Foremost I wish to thank Inayah Rohmaniyah, Aini Masruri, Ibu Umi Hanisah, Enung Nursaidah Ilyas, Badriyah Fayumi and Nyi Ruqqoyah for sharing their stories and allowing us to share them. Nursyabhani Katjasunkana and Ratna Batara Munti, from the Indonesian women’s organisations LBH Apik and KIAS, have contributed greatly to the research, both logistically during the field trip in February 2011, and intellectually by acting as interpreters and sources of information and knowledge. This is true of Farha Ciciek as well. Your Indonesian hospitality will not be forgotten. Misha Johanna, thank you for your excellent work as an interpreter and your positive energy.

I am grateful to Cordaid for having commissioned and financed this research project and to the co-commissioning foundation the Human Security Collective.

To my colleagues Jeanne Abdulla, Lia van Broekhoven, Fulco van Deventer and Dewi Suralaga: thank you (once again).

Frank
One day it finally happened. The only classrooms they had known had always been divided by a curtain separating the santriwatis, the Islamic boarding school girls, from their unseen male teacher, the ustad. For years, a male voice had imparted knowledge on the girls like an invisible oracle. For years, the girls had struggled to avoid being lulled to sleep by this monotonous, disembodied voice. Until the day that one of them, Anisah, stood up and pulled down the curtain. Consternation. Revolution. “Look at us!” she shouted to the dumbfounded ustad. “How can you teach us important things in life if you do not open your eyes and your heart to us?”

This scene took place in 1987, in a pesantren or traditional Islamic boarding school in South Aceh, Indonesia. It should come as no surprise that after her school years, Ibu Umi Hanisah became a leader in her community and beyond. Today she is one of the very few women to have established her own pesantren in Aceh.

Just like Umi Hanisah, Inayah Rohmaniyah is someone who looks for faces. From the time she was a little girl, growing up in the religious environment of a Wahabi pesantren, she felt the inequality between herself and her brothers. One day she asked her mother “Is there no other face of our religion?” Later on in life, while liberating herself through study and through a happy marriage, she found that other face. She shows it today to her students and her son.

In this publication, six women tell their story. Six devout Indonesian Muslim women who, like Umi Hanisah and Inayah Rohmaniyah, have their roots in the traditional pesantren world. Inspired by their faith, they oppose patriarchal dominance and other forms of oppression: sexual and domestic violence, social inequality and, last but not least, rising political extremism of puritanical Islamists. They all tell a story of social change, religious reform and emancipation. And just like Ummi Anisah and her classroom protest, the actions of these women have an impact. They make change happen, in their own schools, their own communities, in their districts, sometimes even on a national level.

Faith shaped them and they shape their faith, as experts in Islamic theology. They interpret and reinterpret the Qur’an, the hadiths and other sacred works such as the kitab kuning. They seek and use all options for personal theological interpretation and reflection that Islam has to offer. Their Muslim activism has its roots in the conviction that all creatures are equal to God, a principle of equality that has moral as well as sacred significance to them.

They by no means represent the whole of Indonesian Muslim feminism or women’s activism. Both Indonesian Islam (largely Sunni) and Indonesian women’s activism are too varied and rich to make any such claim. They do, however, show us the world of the Indonesian pesantren, a world that for many is only associated with rigid religious traditionalism, stifling imprisonment and ‘pre-modern’ conceptions.

They tell different story. Traditional Islam, human rights activism and feminism need not be mutually exclusive – they can inspire and augment one another. Women religious leaders are succeeding in seeking out space for dialogue with persons and parties who are dedicated
to imposing their version of absolutist or radical Islam on others. The interpretations of Islam these women profess, as a source of peace, dialogue and tolerance, contradict the current mainstream perspective on Islam as a threatening force and a source of extremism. They are a powerful answer to a western Islamophobic ‘clash of civilisations' paradigm that tries to dissociate ‘modernity', ‘feminism' and ‘women’s activism' from ‘the Muslim world'.

The women interviewed for this publication, grew up and became community leaders in the post-Suharto era of the Reformasi. Under Suharto both women activism and Islamists had been suppressed for many decades. After his dictatorship, not only were secular and religious social activists given more space to speak up but the radical political Islam of Arab signature came to the rise as well, competing with the ancient Sunni and syncretic Indonesian Islam. In this particular setting these women developed their political and social visions that counter prevailing sexual, religious and patriarchal stereotypes and advocate for social equality and change.

This publication is focusing on exactly this nexus of women religious leadership on the one hand and growing political extremism and radical Islam on the other. It contains stories of women who are a bridge to as well as a defence against puritanical and radical groups in the largest Muslim country of the world. It is high time their voices are heard.

Hence this research. A significant civil, political and religious current dynamic is how modern women Muslim leaders are dealing with radical political Islamist powers. Yet too little has been written about them. We fill in a small part of the gap by portraying six religious women leaders from the grass root level and their vital role in countering radicalization and community violence. In the most closed and at times remote communities they manage to do this successfully. Their steadfast faith provides them credibility to act as bridge builders in their communities, across religious interpretations of Islam. Against the background of violent extremism and identity politics they form a pillar of strength in combating violence in their communities and communicating values to young people that encompass human security.

We are proud and grateful to share these examples of women Muslim leadership in Indonesia with a wider audience. They show us their successes and their dilemmas, their courage and their grief, not as victims of radicalism, but as modern, powerful and resilient actors of change.

We think these stories are important to be heard. As gripping examples of personal courage and liberation, but more importantly as a contribution to discussions taking place on countering violent extremism in communities worldwide. These practices provide inspiring examples of preventative mechanisms in and from religious communities to combat violent repression and extremism.

Cordaid supports the Indonesian Women’s Association for Justice (LBH Apik). This association consists of religious and community leaders like the women you will meet in this book, activists and gender experts committed to counter gender and patriarchal biases in religion and culture.

This publication was commissioned by Cordaid and the Human Security Collective. We believe in the essential role civil society and especially women play in enhancing justice, security, conflict prevention and human rights and in fostering a human security approach to countering terrorism and other forms of violent extremism.

Frank van Lierde
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Jeanne Abdulla
Human Security Collective
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CHAPTER 1

PLEASE, LOOK AT US!

“THOSE WHO USE ISLAM ONLY TO PUNISH ARE DESTROYING THEIR OWN RELIGION.”

IBU UMI HANISAH (44), HEAD OF A GIRL’S PESANTREN IN ACEH
Rich in raw materials, devout and burning for autonomy. This might just sum up the land of Aceh and its conflict-rich history. It was here, on ‘Mecca’s veranda,’ that Islam came to Southeast Asia. It was here where a mighty sultanate rose up against colonial exploitation and external meddling. First against the trading vessels, the administrators and the soldiers who came here from Amsterdam and London, and then later, after independence, against Jakarta and the Indonesian Republic.

In 2001, the bloody struggle for self-determination seems to be drawing to a close. Unlike East Timor, Aceh does not become an independent state, but the province is granted sufficient political freedoms, or ‘special autonomy,’ to introduce Sharia laws and Sharia courts, and even to establish a Sharia police force (Wiliyatul Hisbah). In so doing, Jakarta hopes to win over the devout Muslims of Aceh and defuse the growing problem of the separatist GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka). Between 2002 and 2004, the province passes official Sharia laws prohibiting alcohol use, gambling, and khalwat (‘seclusion,’ inappropriate physical proximity between unmarried and unrelated members of the opposite sex). ‘Islamic attire’ is made mandatory. Those who ignore these prohibitions are publicly flogged. Meanwhile, the conflict between GAM and the Indonesian army goes on unabated. Only in 2005, in the wake of the devastating tsunami, do the conflict parties sign a peace accord in Helsinki, ending thirty years of war.

As peace returns, so does freedom; the freedom to travel and to speak out, to seek out and to distribute information, to receive visitors. And the massive international aid flows that come after the tsunami abruptly expose the long-isolated and disturbed Muslim area to Western values and customs. It is not long before the reins of the Sharia are tightened. In 2009, the people’s parliament of Aceh votes in a new, stricter and faith-based criminal code. The punishment for gambling is raised from twelve to sixty lashes. Ikhtilat (illicit intimacy between unmarried people, such as kissing or holding hands) is punishable by sixty lashes by stick or whip, sixty months in prison or the payment of six hundred grams of gold. Homosexuality and adultery between unmarried persons is punishable by one hundred lashes. And sexual infidelity by married persons is subject to the death penalty. It is telling that Sharia law in Aceh does not recognise that a crime such as rape can take place within marriage, while the national law on domestic violence does so explicitly.

Women’s organisations across Indonesia reject the qanuns in Aceh in the strongest terms. Komnas Perempuan, the National Commission on Violence Against Women, is all the more concerned by the numerous local governments in Indonesia that follow the example of Aceh by imposing strict religious laws on clothing and conduct, most of which target women. Human Rights Watch condemns in pointed terms, the law on khalwat and the law that prescribes the Muslim dress code. They are, according to the human rights organisation, discriminatory, selectively and arbitrarily applied: young people, women and the poor are punished much more frequently. They are in violation of the constitution and of universal rights such as freedom of religion, thought and conscience.

TWILIGHT ZONE
The Sharia in Aceh, most prominently the death penalty by stoning for zina (illicit sex) by married people, led to a worldwide outcry. Was this the end of the ‘Islam with a smile’ for which Indonesia was known and praised?

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1 This and more information on Sharia qanuns and their brutal, often random and unofficial enforcement in Aceh, can be found in: Policing Morality. Abuses in the application of Sharia in Aceh, Indonesia. Human Rights Watch, 2010.

2 Arskal Salim. Politics, Criminal Justice and Islamisation in Aceh. Background paper series, Centre for Islamic Law and Society. The University of Melbourne, 2009, p. 6

Will ‘Mecca’s veranda’ become a platform for Muslim extremism? In Aceh itself, the laws of 2009 are a subject of heated debate and controversy. Officially, they are not yet in force, because the new governor, Irwandi Yusuf of the Partai Aceh (a secular party affiliated with the former GAM) refuses to sign them, fearing that strict Sharia law will be a deterrent to foreign investment. But neither does he withdraw them.

Meanwhile, Aceh lives in limbo. Peace has come, but the economy is stalled. The estimated two hundred thousand dead from the tsunami are buried or officially listed as missing, but the loss remains beyond comprehension. Death and loss have nestled in the landscape itself, as they have in the minds and hearts of its people. Twisted stumps of drowned houses, buildings and trees stick out from an eerily silent coastal sea. Whole tracts of land still are uninhabitable, or have simply vanished without trace. People are allowed to travel, but many bridges and roads are still gone. Where flood alarms and early warning systems sound, they lead to panic, and even to fatal accidents. Sometimes alarm posts are smashed in rage and frustration. Thirty years of war and a natural disaster of unprecedented proportions still hold these people in the grip of fear. Their fear cannot be cured with peace accords and disaster plans, no matter how much political will and foreign solidarity there may be behind them. Only fishermen and farmers, public officials, children, men and women, only the survivors can pull themselves and their country out of this twilight zone. They have done it for centuries, and do it today, with faith, pride and perseverance.
For nearly all the people of Aceh we meet, faith is an indispensable source of strength and comfort. It is not (or not only) a matter of laws and rules, punishment and controversy. Their perspective on faith and how faith works in the world they live in, stands in stark contrast to how the world looks at Aceh. For the people of Aceh the Sharia controversy, that outsiders watch with great concern, is only one brushstroke on a much larger canvas of faith and daily existence, of misfortune and reconstruction, loss and promise, survival and mourning.

To see more of this canvas, we speak to Ibu Umi Hanisah. Just outside the coastal city of Meulaboh, we find her pesantren, a small and orthodox boarding school for Muslim girls. Of a thousand schools like this across Aceh, only five are run by women, one of which is Umi Hanisah. So her position in Aceh can be considered fairly unique. How does she see the tension between tolerance and faith, equality and Sharia, emancipation and obedience? And what is her own story? We spend a day and a night in her pesantren. In between religious classes, entrancing moments of salawat chanting and the humming of mopeds on the village road, we listen to her story.

“I know that people get very worked up about Sharia. But Sharia is not only about punishment. Quite the opposite. Those who interpret Islam purely to justify fighting, punishment and repression are destroying their own religion. The keys to Islam are dialogue and reconciliation - within the family, in society and at the political level. My faith is an indispensable part of doing my work, and that work includes fighting for total equality between men and women. That the Qu’ranic concept of nusyuz (disobedience) is primarily used to keep women subjugated is a form of abuse - not only of women, but of the Qu’ran itself. Nusyuz applies equally to men and women. No one can go around choosing individual words and sentences from the Qu’ran in order to judge or to punish.

The message is always a question of interpretation and reflection, not only on different holy scriptures and sources, the Qur’an, the hadiths, the fiqh, but also on the situation and the context in which you want to apply them. And the message always has to reflect the essence of faith, namely, reconciliation and justice.”

In her pesantren, Umi Hanisah takes charge of 115 girls, thirty of them boarders. The pesantren is their home. They sleep here, cook their own food and wash their clothes in washbasins on the banks of a mighty river. Over a third of the boarders are orphans. The rest of the girls come here every day for their classes, from five to seven in the morning then again from six to ten in the evening. Between the morning and the evening programmes, they all go to local public schools. “They get all kinds of subjects here,” says Hanisah, “but all with a focus on Islam: religious history, Qu’ran interpretation, grammar, Islamic philosophy, and the one I teach, akhlak, or how to behave. On Sunday, they have computer classes from a man and a woman trained by us. After ten at night, we give practical courses and trainings, things like flower arrangement and sewing, but also composting and gardening, things they can use later to make some extra money.”

“I don’t believe in making a strict difference between the ‘worldly’ and the spiritual subjects. Economy, gardening, planting and harvesting, all these things are also based on principles and knowledge of Islam. The same goes for commerce and banking. The practical and the spiritual go hand in hand. Handbooks like the kitab kuning teach us how our faith is expressed in all aspects of life.”

GROUND BENEATH OUR FEET

The curriculum looks quite burdensome, to say the least. The santriwatis, girls between the ages of eight and twenty, are on the go from five in the morning until past ten at night. During the day, they have maths and language
classes in the public school. Before sunrise and after sunset, they are arranging flowers, composting, learning to use computers, and above all, focusing on God, faith and prayer. “In the pesantren, these girls learn how to survive and to make better circumstances for themselves than the ones they were born and raised in,” Hanisah explains. “I want to prepare them for a hard life ahead of them. This life, and hereafter. They come from poor to extremely poor rural families; many of them have lost parents in the conflict or in the tsunami. Education emancipates these girls, it opens doors, and teaches them to stand on their own two feet.”

Hanisah’s pesantren is more than a school. After it was founded in 2000, the simple classroom (doubling as prayer room) and the scanty dormitories have also served as emergency relief centre, field hospital, women’s shelter, safe house in the years of armed conflict, information centre for women’s rights and gender equality, and neutral ground for mediation in domestic violence. And several times a week, while the santriwatis are in public school during the day, Hanisah and her seven teachers are teaching literacy skills to illiterate adult women in the surrounding villages. “But even then, we are talking about the domestic situation, how their husbands treat them, about their rights as women and about God and faith.”

Umi’s pesantren is a place where people come to from far and wide as well as from just around the corner. They come for advice, urgent assistance, a meal or just to chat. Even during the brief time we are there, we see women riding to and fro on their motor scooters, some with two or three children on the back; we see taciturn men loitering patiently and mysteriously with letters in their hands, near the entrance of the pesantren, seemingly in no hurry; proudly, but also hesitantly, as though they are waiting or hoping for something. This much is clear: Umi Hanisah’s pesantren is not a closed theological community. It is a community centre par excellence, a place where Qur’anic exegesis and women’s rights go hand-in-hand, where negligent police and wife-beaters are held to account against the backdrop of prayers and God’s call. Where soup kitchens for the masses can be organised at a moment’s notice in the face of a natural disaster. Where people can seek protection from flying bullets and mortar shells when war rages outside. Where locals socialize and have a chat in times of peace.

“The suspicions and made-up stories were enough to get someone killed.”

“I started the pesantren in 2000, when the GAM and the TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, the Indonesian Army) were still waging a bloody battle here, in the villages, in the streets and in the brush all around us. Like most locals, I supported the GAM, not by fighting but by doing things like smuggling medicine to wounded combatants. And boys from the GAM also came to our school in secret, for care and treatment. The fighting was very heavy in those years, between 2000 and 2004. Bullets could rip your head off and the army used heavy artillery. I kept teaching, though. When shots were fired, often at night, I would make the students lie down on the ground, lie with them and try to soothe their fear and keep the children from running away in panic. I was never really scared myself, and I never gave up hope, even though it was a harrowing time. The army was all around us, they went into the villages. Soldiers would rape women, sometimes kill them, sometimes just to get information about their husbands. Suspicions and made-up stories were enough to get someone killed. Sometimes women were taken
hostage by the army. They were accused of being GAM spies. Soldiers were known for particularly singling out the older women to rape and beat. The GAM fighters killed too, but mainly the military enemy. Once in a while you would hear of them taking away women, saying they were spies. These women would never be seen again. But the GAM never committed mass rapes and beatings. There were isolated incidents and when it happened I would go to the local GAM quarters and denounce that kind of violence. I could do that because they were willing to talk and to listen to me, not only because of my position but because we shared the same faith. In the end, it’s the same thing you see everywhere in the world: when armed parties fight, it is always civilians who get hit hardest."

**RAPED BY THE POLICE**

Hanisah’s misi sosial is put to a heavy test in the first turbulent, chaotic and dangerous years of the pesantren. “My strategy at the time was very simple. At night, during the shooting: stay inside, hide and survive, all of us. During the day, when there was a lull in the fighting, I tried to find out where the wounded were. And then we would go there, gather the locals together, pray together, console each other, and even though I wasn’t trained for it, give people psychological care, trauma care. We looked for children who had lost their parents, and we gave them a place in the pesantren. Sometimes we had children in the class whose parents had been killed by the TNI, and sometimes children whose parents had been killed by the GAM. But I made sure that they never knew that about each other. We tried to keep the children’s background outside the pesantren as much as possible. In those years, too, we would sometimes have GAM fighters in the pesantren and sometimes soldiers from the army. They needed care or treatment, and without the uniforms they didn’t know that they were enemies. Both groups participated in our meetings, prayers, the singing, the meals. I demanded this kind of participation from everyone. And to both groups I conveyed our message of equality, social justice and peace. Of course we looked for girls and mothers who had been raped. We wanted to provide care for them. But this is so difficult. They hide. No one dares to talk about it. Fear and stigma are so heavy. Besides that, many rape victims were abducted. They just disappeared. Sometimes assaulted, abused or raped women found their way to us, and we would take them in as well. They would get a roof over their heads, food, and they would follow our classes and become part of the group. I would listen to their story, and when they were ready I would go with them to the police to report it. Most of them could only find the courage to come to us long after being raped and after having given birth. Once a pregnant woman came to us. She had been raped by the police. In the end she had an abortion by her own hand, with her assailant helping. She only told us afterwards. Finally, after much counselling, she was ready to report the rape. We went to the military authorities, the rapist was convicted and sent to prison. After his release he was transferred to another place in Northern Sumatra.”

Rape cases are not only individual tragedies; they are powder kegs in the kampong community. One case put so much pressure on Hanisah that she had to find a new location for her school - not far away, no more than a few hundred metres, just far enough to put it in another kampong. “A girl of fifteen was raped by her father. When she came to us, she had already given birth and given up her child. Her mother had died some years before. I took care of her, and later I took up her case. Ultimately there was a criminal case, and her father was convicted. But no matter how many times I went to see the family, even in the beginning, to mediate and try to bring her back into her own community, I always ran up against hate and aggression. Her own family considered her to be the perpetrator, a slut. In their eyes I was a troublemaker just making it worse. Only much later, after the father had been
in prison for a while, things changed. They started to understand that the girl was a victim. But at the beginning, it wasn’t safe for us in the pesantren. That’s when I moved to the place where I am today.”

In those years of conflict, Umi Hanisah co-wrote a book about peace education. “Pesantren teachers, police officers and NGO aid workers met with residents in villages and in cities like Banda and Medan. I took part in it, too. We held workshops on peace building, reconciliation, and ways of preventing escalation and violence. The knowledge and the stories from those meetings were compiled into a book. It’s really a book about conflict control according to Islamic ideals of reconciliation. It’s good to know that this book is still being used now, if only to prevent new armed conflict. We can keep conflicts and violence from flaring up, but we can never make them disappear completely. The traumas that women, men and children suffer in times of war are things that they will always carry with them in times of peace. They shape the present. For years I have had to help children conquer their fear of army uniforms, and not sit and hide at home.”

**A STRANGE SOUND**

The armed conflict, holding the community including the pesantren in its grip, is still raging when at the end of December 2004 Aceh is struck by the most deadly natural disaster in modern world history. Estimates of the number of tsunami victims in Aceh still vary widely, but most are far above two hundred thousand. The coastal town of Meulaboh, eight kilometres from Umi Hanisah’s school, is one of the least accessible places in the disaster area. When Umi talks about that day, when our interpreter gives her own snippets of what happened after the water came, when our taxi driver and a fisherwoman along the roadside share their stories, time seems to stands still. It is as if that Sunday has nestled like a bat in the heart of every living soul in Aceh, never to depart. What has been lost and destroyed has deeper roots than what remains. Whoever talks about that Sunday speaks in hushed whispers.

“**That’s another mystery to me, even today. How was I able to pick up and carry five children.”**

“We were in the pesantren,” says Hanisah. “There was an earthquake, and the children came running to me and held me tight. We started praying. When it subsided I got on the motorbike and went to town. On the way I met people running madly the other way, shouting, ‘The sea, the sea!’ As I kept going I saw black water. It was ankle-high and it was all around. In the city, I helped people to get to the mosque to rescue themselves. I didn’t think it would get much worse, and I went back to the pesantren, where it was dry and where the children were waiting for me. Then a little later we heard a strange, heavy, rolling sound like a whole series of muffled explosions. That could only come from the water rolling out of the sea, eleven kilometres away. It was a ghastly sound. I explained to the children that an earthquake had made big waves in the sea and that the water was flooding the land. Our place in the pesantren remained dry. I had to go to Meulaboh, to the coast, to help people there. And I wanted to find my good friend and fellow activist Maimanah in the city. I jumped on the motorbike again, but I never made it there. Before I even knew it the water was up to my shoulders. Many strange things happened that day. One of them was, that even though I had never learned to swim, when I was up to my neck in water and saw people drowning
all around me and wanted to help them, suddenly I could swim! I saw bodies floating, I dragged them with me to a floating pile of rubble and furniture. I didn’t want to lose the bodies. So many bodies. So many bodies. The living helped each other. Some had huge open wounds and couldn’t do anything to help the dying. It was impossible to find Maimanah. I had to go back to the pesantren. Swimming and holding onto floating things, I turned around. On the way I came across children, totally lost. Children who couldn’t swim, I took five of them with me. That’s another mystery to me, even today. How was I able to pick up and carry five children. Three to six-year-old children. Very slowly, as I swam inland, the water started subsiding. I could stand on my feet. But everything was gone. I couldn’t find the road. There were gigantic pieces of rubble everywhere. Whole houses lay in the middle of the street. After a while I thought I knew which way to go. A house blocked our path. I had to get through that house, with the five children. The door was stuck so I broke it down. Behind the house there was a sharp drop, a kind of ravine with splinters, rocks and rubble on one side and uprooted trees on the other. I made a bridge with planks. Behind me, dozens of people were following me. They followed me and the children through the house and over the bridge. And so we made it to the road. I will never know where I found the strength that day. I see the images, I see me doing it, but I don’t know how I did it. There was only one thought in my mind, an obsession: I had to help people, help, help. I even bent an iron fence to be able to pull myself up out of the water with the children. Once we made it to the road I found my motorbike again, broken. With the children and about a hundred other survivors, we walked to the pesantren. In my memory, that journey of eight kilometres took ten minutes. On our way to the pesantren some people went looking for family in nearby villages, but most came to the school with me.”
DIGGING HOLES

And so the pesantren becomes a refugee camp. For three months, Umi Hanisah feeds and shelters some hundred survivors. “By that time I had gone around with some pupils, the santris and santriwatis who were old enough, to the nearby villages that had been hit, to scope out the situation and assess what the biggest needs were. There was a huge need for clothes and rice. In the pesantren we set up a big kitchen and we cooked for the drowned-out villages nearby. Many people came to us with raw food to get it cooked or to cook it themselves.”

“No doubt, Umi Hanisah’s actions during the military conflict and her amazing strength during and after the tsunami increased her authority as a female leader in the community. It is the authority she uses to act in cases of rape and domestic violence against women - work in which she brings parties together who are literally at each other’s throats. It is the authority that allows her to open discussions on social and relational conflicts that communities and families would rather sweep under the rugs of taboo and stigma. “Married women face every kind of violence you can imagine: blows to the face until their eyes and ears bleed, hot irons to the legs, stab wounds in the neck, fingers cut off...” she says. “I have seen it all, I have heard the stories. Men commonly never register the marriage, that combined with the refusal to officially recognise divorces is an extra disaster for women. It allows men to flaunt their matrimonial obligations and responsibilities. And they think they can get away with messing around with other women. Don’t complain about that bloody nose, they think, don’t whine about me running around with other women, you’re not even my wife... That’s what they think... But they forget that we are there and we fight back.”
FEAR, REPRISAL AND RECONCILIATION
Few battered and misused women dare to seek help, dare to break the cycle of fear, stigma and reprisal. Up to now, Umi Hanisah has been able to mediate in some twenty cases of severe domestic violence. Some women she has accompanied and counselled for years. Her work has left its mark on her, but forged her as well. She knows all the ins and outs of hard negotiations, she can find her way through the intricate mazes of family scandals, she has the delicacy to deal with trauma, she can stand up to the police, and when an offender cannot be found, she does detective work. This is what she does in the evening hours, after work as a teacher and director of the pesantren is done. Two of the cases of abuse she was handling led to a criminal case, with the spouses being convicted and sent to prison both times. During the mediation and attempts at reconciliation she organises in the pesantren between offenders and victims, not only Islamic but also pre-Islamic cultural traditions and the cultural legal rules of the adat play an important role. As we will see later, the adat makes a significant distinction between abuse that does and does not cause the victim to bleed.

“Almost all cases of domestic violence involve a husband beating or abusing his wife or a father or uncle beating his daughter or niece. One time we dealt with a boy of seven who came to hide with us because his mother was tying him up at home and beating him because he was not doing his best at school. He's been at our boarding school for three years now, and he is going to fourth grade in Meulaboh. He's doing well and enjoys school. In all the other cases, the victims were women and girls.”

“After the abused woman tells her story, and the victim thinks there is a slight chance at reconciliation, we try to talk to the offending spouse. We do that here, in the pesantren classroom and prayer room. We invite the families of the husband and the wife. They are witnesses, and if it comes to making official commitments, their presence is important. Sometimes the man has disappeared without a trace, leaving his wife and children behind. When that happens, I go looking for him. I go to the villages, call around and talk with friends and family of the man until I find him, and then try to restore contact and arrange the mediation meeting. Women who need it get a place to stay here. They can come with their children. It’s free of charge, they just have to provide for their own food. Some women stay a few days, others stay for a few months.”

LAW, RELIGION, RITUAL
“The mediation only ends when I am truly convinced that the woman can return home safely. And in cases of severe physical abuse, we always close the reconciliation process by signing a written contract in which the man declares that he will never again use any form of violence against his wife. Along with members from both families, representatives from the police, village leaders, government officials and members of social organisations take part in the closing sessions.”

On occasion, Hanisah’s mediation has resulted in official criminal proceedings and formal divorce cases. The Sharia courts and the public legal system take over from there. But in most of the cases Umi Hanisah handles, arrangements are made and settled by mutual agreement in sessions that are a mix of therapy and social work, with a form of people’s litigation combining law, religion and ritual custom. “In essence, the written agreement comes down to a promise to resolve all future marital problems without violence,” says Hanisah. “If this promise is not kept, the police will prosecute the offender. That’s there in black and white. If the woman has lost blood from abuse, even just one drop, then the husband is required to slaughter a goat, and give the meat for food and a certain amount of flour to the mosque as a gift to the community. This flour is called ‘pesijuk’, it is used as a
symbol of peace for spouses. Sometimes these gifts are given to the pesantren. In cases of abuse without blood, the man has to pay a fine, generally one million rupees. That money goes to the mosque, in other words, to the community. People in the village, both families, police officers, the government and the social organisations then come together to eat and celebrate that the couple that lived in such discord has made a new, peaceful start.

Husband and wife publicly shake hands and read out loud what is written on paper, so that everyone, even those who cannot read, is witness to their promise: that they will go on living together and deal with their conflicts without resorting to violence.”

“Sharia police crackdowns on women and girls in the street did decline.”

Of course, divorce is an option. It is less common, because in many cases divorce would be a cure that is worse than the disease. The spiral of poverty and social isolation into which a single woman and her children risk falling into after divorce can be even more gruesome than an abusive husband. But divorce does happen. “Pasakh is what we call a divorce that the woman requests due to abuse or neglect by her spouse,” explains Hanisah. “When women come to me seeking a divorce, I help them with the whole process. They can stay with us in the pesantren to await the divorce. I go with them to the Sharia court and, if it comes to that, we look for witnesses. Judges generally honour these requests very quickly. Sometimes the husband does not come to the hearing. If that happens twice, the divorce is granted automatically. The same happens if after three full sessions, the wife still does not wish to go home and the husband agrees. Then the wife pays 400,000 rupees and the husband pays twice that sum. If the man does not consent, then witnesses are called. In cases I have been involved in, judges have taken the side of the abused woman.”

LOOSE MORALS, TIGHT TROUSERS AND CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

We have to go back to where we started - the Sharia controversy. How would Hanisah respond if she were asked for help by a girl who had been roughed up by the Wiliyatul Hisbah, the Sharia police, for wearing trousers deemed too tight? “There are so many Sharia rules at the provincial and district level that discriminate against women,” she says. “Rules that oblige women to cover themselves from head to toe in public, for example, or prohibit women from walking around in trousers. But women traditionally wear trousers here! It is an old Islamic tradition in Aceh. These new rules are completely at odds with our Islam, with our Islamic culture. So that’s why I objected strongly to them, in protest marches and in the media. This women’s protest movement helped.”

“Sharia police crackdowns on women and girls in the street did decline. Today it looks like these rules and laws are hardly being implemented. But they have not been withdrawn or abolished either. Now, about this girl you mention knocking on my door for help, if she was wearing trousers that I would deem too tight, I would first advise her to put on a more loose-fitting pair. If she did that, and the Sharia police still came after her about her clothes, then I would go with her to the police station to make clear that there is nothing in Islam that forbids women wearing trousers. And if the Sharia police use violence on a woman, any woman, for any reason, I always protest to the authorities. Any victim of violence can always come to us in the pesantren. We always help a person in need.”
intention of this accusation was to damage her political career. It happens with men, too. There was a public figure, a big shot from the construction industry, who was bidding on a big contract. Business rivals framed him with the khalwat prohibition. He was sitting in the dark somewhere and a woman came in and sat with him. It was recorded, photographed, and distributed widely. The result: he didn't get the contract and suffered a tremendous blow to his reputation. The Sharia can be abused just like that.”

“As long as Sharia punishments are dished out to the lowest levels of society or being used to play political games, it is not the true Sharia, and Islam is being abused for power and profit. But Islam and Sharia as I see it are exactly the opposite; they inspire to counter abuse of power, corruption and injustice. Our governor knows that very well, which is why he hasn’t signed the latest laws. In short, there is a lot of
Ahisah claims to be against any form of violence and she embraces the Sharia as long as it is applied justly and equally. But what about the principle of corporal punishment, an undeniably primitive and sometimes exceedingly brutal form of violence that is part and parcel of the Sharia? Let’s start with the minor forms of crime and punishment. Hanisah does not consider the controversial punishment for *khalwat* (lashes on the back with a *cambuk*, a type of whip) wrong in itself. “If the *khalwat* prohibition is enforced consistently, and everyone is treated equally, then I am not against this corporal punishment. It is not so much about physical punishment, but about symbolically humiliating a person. Three slaps on the back, before the eyes of the community, is not wrong if you committed *khalwat*, that is, if you have really been intimate with someone as an unmarried man or woman. And mind you, man and woman should receive the same punishment and all offenders should be treated the same way, including people from highest societies.”

Umi’s story is echoed by Helmi, the taxi driver who carefully shuttles us over virtually invisible mountain roads and who expertly manoeuvres his car onto tiny pontoons that are then pushed by small motorboats across raging rivers. “Sharia, Sharia, Sharia, all anyone talks about is Sharia,” says Helmi. “But we have been living by the Sharia for centuries! It’s in everything we do. In our business, in our banking, in the way we deal with each other, in how we approach God, in how we look at ourselves. And then all of a sudden the Sharia is put down in official laws and rules. And what did we see? The penalties and the punishments only hit the little guy. The Sharia itself is not a problem, it’s the unjust application of it.”

“Go home, He says, pray to God, acknowledge your guilt and disavow your sins, show *taubat* (repentance).”
can never be blindly and literally enforced without looking at the social and economic circumstances that can lead people to commit punishable acts; without a comprehensive interpretation and consideration of both the religious sources and the context in which the crime is committed. This is an approach we, Islamic women activists, can and must call for. We have already succeeded in convincing the Consultative Council of Ulama (MPU) in Aceh to reinterpret the concept of *nusyuz* (disobedience). Their decision is binding, and qualifies as law, and they say that disobedience or dispute within marriage can no longer be a reason for physical aggression against a woman, that disobedience in a marriage or family has to be resolved with consultation and dialogue. We could also get this kind of binding reinterpretation for more serious crimes like theft or illicit sex.”

**REINTERPRETING, REWRITING, REFRAMING**

The road that Umi Hanisah has travelled is an impressive one. It has not only been a struggle against wife-beaters and abusers, but also a social struggle against poverty, ignorance and stigma. It has been the struggle against bullets and raging waves, a struggle that unites all people of Aceh. Every step of the way, she turned potential adversaries into allies, among the police, the authorities, the conservative ulamas. Nothing seems to indicate that that struggle will be over anytime soon. “I still have so many dreams,” says Hanisah. “Religious reinterpretation and social reform go hand in hand. So to really deal with discrimination against women once and for all, we have to go even deeper into the *hadith*, the *fiqih*, the *kitab kuning* and other religious sources, reinterpret them and where possible, rewrite them to better establish the equality between man and woman in religious matters, in arrangements that apply to all. This we have to do in collaboration with the ulamas, both men and women, with intellectuals and scholars and with the government. I want to get the most progressive and the most conservative ulamas to the table in international meetings with women activists, to openly discuss women’s rights, equality, tolerance and the Sharia. And I want to become an ulama of the MPU myself, so I can have my say at that level as well.”

**HIJAB**

When Umi Hanisah was nineteen, she lived in a pesantren in Aceh Selatan. “I learned to speak in public, I learned how to reason and for the first time I heard about women who dared to take initiative, who took up leading positions. That stuck with me. In those days we sat in classrooms where we, the female students, were separated from the *ustad* (male teacher) by a *hijab*, a big curtain. We couldn’t see him, only hear his voice, and he could only hear us. It was so boring, we always fell asleep! It was like he was so far away. One day I stood up and I pulled the *hijab* aside and I said to our shocked *ustad*, ‘Look at us! He who closes his eyes closes his heart. How can you teach us the important things in life if you do not open your heart to us?’ He was angry and dumbfounded and went straight to the director of the pesantren to have me punished. But the director thought about it, and decided to abolish the *hijab* in the classroom right there. On that day I learned to stand up for what I believe is right and just. And to never accept rules unquestioningly, and certainly not rules made by closed circles of men. I learned to be critical, to question and to claim a seat for us women and girls, when arrangements, rules and laws are made that affect our lives.”

Hanisah says that she has never been afraid in her life. Not for a minute. Never has she been so desperate or broken that she couldn’t go on. This is hard to believe. But the expression in her face affirms her words: she looks strong, firm and yet serene. Always this engine that never stops running, this misi *social* and this unshakeable faith. Always making plans, full speed ahead from five in the morning till ten in the evening. Even while talking with us, she never loses control of her emotions.
Chapter 1

Please, look at us!

of women in a neighbouring kampong. Over a hundred young girls, mothers with bouncing babies, grandmothers and young women have gathered around a podium under a knotted, ancient tree. Even in the wrought-iron drum in the nearby playground, grown women and mothers cuddle up together, legs high in the air. They are passing time in the most agreeable of ways, by enjoying each other’s presence. They wait for Umi’s and Maimanah’s speeches and prayers. Veils in all sizes, fabrics and colours flutter, wave, fold and fall. Finger food is passed from hand to hand in banana leaves. Women smile, eat, chat and wait.

At the fringe, some men from the kampong look somewhat lost, held at bay outside the circle of feminine solidarity. This is woman power. When Umi Hanisah takes the podium and addresses the group of gathered women, something changes in her. She beams. She prays, she preaches, she instils courage.

One begins to understand why this is the only

Not when she speaks about the bullets, the artillery, the smuggling of medicines. Not when she talks about the giant flood, the bodies, the children she pulled from death with superhuman strength. Not when she speaks about the hot irons, the knives, the fists and the blood she has seen streaming from women’s eyes. There is one moment when she does lose control. It is when she mentions that, before she became a widow after two years of marriage, she gave birth to a stillborn daughter. The only child she ever had. She turns her head to hide her tears. “The grief was so heavy. Sometimes I feared I was losing my mind. It took a long time before life came back to me. It came back to me at the pesantren, taking care of abused girls, women and orphans.”

UNDER AN ANCIENT TREE
After the interview, Umi and her good friend Maimanah speak in a majelis taklim, a meeting of women in a neighbouring kampong. Over a hundred young girls, mothers with bouncing babies, grandmothers and young women have gathered around a podium under a knotted, ancient tree. Even in the wrought-iron drum in the nearby playground, grown women and mothers cuddle up together, legs high in the air. They are passing time in the most agreeable of ways, by enjoying each others presence. They wait for Umi’s and Maimanah’s speeches and prayers. Veils in all sizes, fabrics and colours flutter, wave, fold and fall. Finger food is passed from hand to hand in banana leaves. Women smile, eat, chat and wait.

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A majelis taklim, a gathering of women who come to listen to Ibu Umi Hanisah.
district with a council of female ulamas, and why Umi Hanisah heads it. “Aceh can change”, Hanisah tells the gathered women. “We can change it. But it depends on what we women can do. We have to fight, more actively, more courageously, for a just Aceh where women and men live in equality.” This majelis taklim breathes the same atmosphere as last night in the pesantren, when some fifteen young santriwatis came together to pray and discuss. It is these remarkable moments in which women and girls share their sufferings and hopes, in a casual and caring way. In which religious devotion and social protest go hand in hand. In which the spoken word takes on something sacred and activist. In which village grandmothers, women and girls empower and enlighten one another simply by being together and enjoying it in the most serene of ways. Simply by being. All this they express in words, powerful words of Umi and Maimanah, and in silence. In between the words: laughing, praying silently, sharing food, looking, touching. It is a gathering taking place under an ancient tree and in the comforting and unshakeable conviction that the world is in the hands of a good and benevolent God. The good face of fate. Maybe it’s sisterhood. Or maybe there is no accurate word for this.
CHAPTER 2

THERE ARE NO LIMITS TO LJTIHAD

“MEN HAVE BEEN ALLOWED TO PROCLAIM THEIR STEREOTYPICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FAITH FOR TOO LONG.”

BADRIYAH FAYUMI (41), POLITICIAN, HEAD OF A PESANTREN AND WOMEN’S ACTIVIST IN KOTA BEKASI (WEST JAVA)
When it comes to having a say, Badriyah Fayumi gets her share. She has extensive networks, gets the attention from the media and is a respected member of the National Awakening Party. Like everyone who stands out from the crowd, this Muslim feminist sometimes has the wind against her. But in the face of a strong headwind, she never misses an opportunity to spread her message. Longtime a member of the national parliament, she knows the halls of power first-hand. With her columns in the Muslim glossy lifestyle magazine Noor, read by well to do orthodox Muslim women, she reaches the Indonesian middle class. As an expert on Islam, in television appearances, she has reached millions with her views on issues of faith and everyday life. And in Yayasan Mahasina, her pesantren in Kota Bekasi on Jakarta's east side, she preaches and teaches in intimate circles of followers and students: santriwatis from far and wide; women from the region who come for counsel and spiritual support; mixed audiences of boys and girls, women and men.

In all these positions, Badriyah Fayumi makes endless variations on the same theme: the equality of men and women before Allah. It is the fundamental message of Muslim feminism. Badriyah's busy life, in which media, politics and the pesantren draw her into widening public circles, has a two-chambered heart: faith and feminism.

Badriyah is born in 1971, at the height of the Suharto era and over a decade before progressive women in Indonesia first banded together in an initial feminist wave across Indonesia. She grows up in Central Java, in the rural municipality of Kajen, district of Pati - traditionally a stronghold of Muslim movement Nahdlatul Ulama and home to over thirty small and medium-sized pesantrens. Prayer and the Qur'an guide the comings, goings and thoughts of every man, woman and child in her community. One of the pesantrens here was founded by her father, Raudhatul Ulum, also a Sharia judge. From a very early age, she sees the family celebrations, social issues and marriage problems that people bring before her father. It is there she hears the stories of discrimination and violence that women and girls have to face. It leaves a lasting impression on the young Badriyah.

The 1980s are a key period for the women's movement in Indonesia. These years see the start of activism that opens the doors and paves the path Badriyah, still a little santriwati, would later walk. Following in the footsteps of groundbreaking activists like Katjasungkana Nursyabhani and Wardah Hafidz, Indonesian women begin claiming their rights and positions in politics, civil society, the media, and religious and academic circles. At this time, the debate on gender equality and Islam is already fully underway in the Arab world, with major Muslim feminists such as Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi and Egyptian author and political activist Nawal El Saadawi leading the way. Their views on Islam and society aim to break open the patriarchal, established political and religious order and give rise to discussions across the world. It inspires critical Muslim women to take action, also in strict and closed pesantren environments.

One of these is teenager Badriyah Fayumi. It is in this period that Lies Marcoes emerges in Indonesia to become one of the country’s most influential feminist activists. She is a pioneer. Marcoes bridges the gap between the secular women’s movement and the emerging Indonesian Muslim feminism. She approaches Islam not so much as an orthodox system of standards for good and evil, but rather as a source of social change and an answer to discrimination against women. Marcoes has a place of honour in Badriyah Fayumi’s personal gallery.
This gallery is not reserved for women only. It also has room for men like Masdar Farid Masudi, who, in 1983, founded *Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat* (P3M, the association for pesantren and community development). P3M is a large Muslim non-governmental organisation, affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and which calls on traditional Muslim leaders to work more constructively on solutions to political issues and social questions such as pluralism, inter-religious dialogue, democracy and women’s rights. Masudi wants to see that traditional Muslim schools do not resist modern times, but embrace them, and distance themselves as far as possible from the religious radicalism and fundamentalism that has been on the rise since the fall of Suharto in 1998 - the radicalism and fundamentalism with which pesantrens are all too readily associated. Masdar Farid Masudi is a role model, who surprises the feminist movement when in 2000 he suddenly chooses to take a second wife, going from feminist to polygamist in one fell swoop.

One theme frequently recurs in our long talk with Badriyah Fayumi: sexuality. For her, religion not only has spiritual, political and economic dimensions, but sexual implications as well. These implications have both an inclusive sense (sexual pleasure is an important tenet of Islamic faith) as well as exclusive ones (sexual pleasure is forbidden outside of the normative heterosexual, marital context). And conversely sexuality (particularly the relationship between husband and wife) and gender are major themes in Badriyah’s activism and in her thinking. They have sociological (sexual stereotypes and roles), demographic (reproduction, ageing of the population) and political (patriarchal power structures) implications. It is no coincidence that during her years in parliament (2004-2009), the pornography legislation is a major concern to her.

**PLAYING WITH FIRE**

This pornography debate rages during the Reformasi, the period of democratic reforms after the fall of the repressive Suharto regime. Opponents, thinkers, artists, religious leaders and other critical minds, who previously had been silenced, put in labour camps or prisons, or forced underground, can finally speak up in public again. In the turbulent years following 1998 pro-democracy, human rights and feminist activists on the one hand and radical and extremist Muslim groups on the other, claim more political freedom. Everywhere, in the media, in parliament, in the mosque and in people’s homes, debates break out between ‘moderates’ and ‘hard-liners’ on subjects such as religious pluralism, the relationship between state and church, gender equality and the rights of minorities and people with different beliefs and sexual orientations. Disagreements boil over into violence in the streets, attacks against women who walk around ‘too sensually’, against cafés and other ‘excesses’ from the west. There are the bombings in Bali. There are lynching parties and arson attacks against atheists and those of different persuasions. Exercising free speech becomes dangerous. Just using the word ‘pluralism’ or taking a position of tolerance in the pornography debate is a serious risk.

This is the Indonesia that throws off the iron yoke of dictatorship. It is the new reality in which Badriyah Fayumi grows up and becomes politically active. Activists like her, who come from a traditional Muslim background and who take a progressive and tolerant political position, who undermine the dominant sexual stereotypes and act as leaders at the national or local level, play a vital role in this new arena. With their steadfast faith in the Qur’an, their political tolerance and their fight for women’s rights, they build bridges across critical political, religious and social divides. They lend gravity and maturity to this fledgling, but groundbreaking, achievement of the last
decade, an achievement of major geopolitical significance: the establishment of a democracy in the largest Muslim country in the world.

“In practice, fitna almost always affects only women: women cannot come too close to men, women have to stay indoors.”

“There were six children in our family, four daughters and two sons. I am the third daughter. My parents considered knowledge very important. For them, studying was a fundamental need. They had their own pesantren, where we all took Islamic subjects, and they sent all their children to the highest level of education they could get. My father headed the pesantren until he died, and then my mother took over. In the 1980s and 1990s, she had proven herself as an activist and leader of Muslimat, the women’s arm of NU, in our district of over four hundred villages. My parents made no distinction between sons and daughters in the way they brought us up. At home we all had the same love, the same freedoms, the same opportunities. But outside of the house, this equality did not always hold true. My parents yielded to cultural and religious rules and customs that had a discriminatory effect for girls. For example, boys went to school in the morning and girls in the evening. That was the way it worked in the pesantrens and in the public Islamic schools. Of course that’s to the girls’ disadvantage. In the morning, you’re refreshed and your mind soaks up everything like a sponge. After a day of doing housework, you sit down in class and start to nod off. There was a practical reason for that segregation: usually there was not enough room to teach everyone at the same time. But there was also a religious reason, namely that the physical proximity of boys and girls in the same space is a source of sin, of temptation and trial, of fitna.”

“Fitna is a complex concept with a great number of theological and historical meanings. As a term for sin, and the seduction to evil, fitna technically applies in the same way for the behaviour of boys as for girls. But in practice, fitna almost always affects only women: women cannot come too close to men, women have to stay indoors, women cannot hold certain positions like that of imam. The roots of these restrictions lie in the reduction of woman to an object of lust, woman as source of sin. This has its effect on all aspects of society, education and the composition of classes is just one of them. But the concept of fitna does not have its origin in the Qur’an. And there is certainly nothing in the Qur’anic verses that supports the belief that women are a source of sin or evil. Men and women are equals, born of one and the same soul, created by Allah, says Sura An-Nisa, verse one. In the Qur’an, we do not have the concept of woman as made from man’s rib, as it says in the Old Testament. What the Qur’an says is that they come from one soul.”

CORE TASK OF MUSLIM FEMINISM

“My personal position is that neither the Qur’an nor the hadiths have any verses or passages that are discriminatory. But you have to make the effort to read them historically and contextually. Without in-depth study, you don’t get there. There are verses that appear unjust. Sura An-Nisa 34 refers to disciplining the woman for disobedience. An-Nisa 11 says that daughters should inherit half of what sons inherit. Sura Al-Baqarah 189 is about commerce, and says that in commercial agreements, the testimony of one man counts as much as that of two women. These
revelations, for that is what the verses are, came about in a social context, and you have to see that context and take it into account in your interpretation. The verse refers to the disciplining of women as the last resort or solution for disputes and disobedience. It only follows third after dialogue and advising, and taking leave of each other for a period of time and have a sexual break. Even after these steps or phases no disciplinary measures are allowed that cause physical injuries or leave scars. In other words, violence is not allowed. When you consider how barbaric seventh-century Arabic society was towards women, this in itself is an enormous step forward! And with regard to inheritance law, determining that women get to inherit anything at all was just as revolutionary in the context of that time. Until then, women had no rights to inherit anything. On the contrary, they were part of the inheritance, like the rest of the estate or like livestock. And, for that matter, if you study the whole Qur’an properly, there is nothing that precludes making inheritances fully equal among male and female family members. As to commerce, the Qur’an opened the way for women to take part in trade. It gave them economic rights. So my message is to put the Qur’an in its social and historical context. This also means, placing it in the context of today. No ulama in the world would be able to deny today that women have the right to participate in commerce and industry as businesswomen. This reinterpretation and contextualisation of the holy writings is a core task of Muslim feminism.”

“However tolerant, open-minded and loving my parents were, I, too, grew up with values like fitna. My mother did question them, but for a long time could not change anything. She wanted to be able to teach and preach in front of men as well, but my father would not allow it because no elderly cleric’s wife was doing that.
Today, years after my father passed away, she heads the pesantren. Sometimes she teaches, even boys. And at the language institute here in my own pesantren in Kota Bekasi, we have boys and girls together. I also preach in my own pesantren, and sometimes do so in front of boys and girls together and for alumni."

“Once, in 1999, I preached in my father’s pesantren for a mixed audience. It was the first time my father witnessed me doing that. I had already proven myself academically and politically, I had a career, but this was something different. This was a milestone for me personally, for my father and my mother, and for the pesantren as well. A woman who, as a preacher, is an inspiration and a role model for both women and men, that was unheard of! My father was very proud of me. I will never forget that day. He died two years later. It was an important day for another reason, too; because after that I was able to go to the local villages more easily, to preach, mediate and listen. I am still doing that today. Preaching, being an ustada, gave me the authority to build social inroads and networks that later became the key to my electoral and political campaigns.”

With one simple personal example, Badriyah shows what social change, and in particular the fight for gender equality, is about: by dismantling one stereotypical example, one dogma (“women are not apt to become leaders and preach in front of men”), she opens doors not just for herself, but opens political, social, religious and even psychological doors for others. She is leading by example.

“I’m happy to say that in NU circles, it has become commonplace for men and women to organise debates together about problems and issues in Muslim society. But in some pesantrens, gender segregation is still the rule today, which is a pity. We have long since shown that women can preach just as well as men. I think that everyone now understands, or at least should understand, that women have every bit the intellectual capacities that men do. In coeducational public Islamic schools, women can teach boys’ classes, and men can teach girls’ classes. But in many pesantrens, women are not allowed to teach boys’ classes.”

ALHAMDULILAH!
With knowledge, study and hard work, Badriyah moves up in society. To get there, she has to perform twice as well as a man. “Studying was fun for me,” says Badriyah, “but I put a lot of time into it. I wanted to give it my all. In primary and secondary school in my village, I was almost always the best in my class. Then I went on to study theology at the Islamic University of Jakarta. And there, too, I graduated with the best results. Alhamdulilah! Praise be to God, because as a woman, academic excellence was important capital to achieve anything, including getting a good position in life.”

“Men who force their abused wives into silence are doubly malignant.”

Discrimination in education is not just a question of girls only being able to go to school after boys do. It goes much further. “You have the pre-1980s period and the post-1980s period: before and after the first major women’s movement,” explains Badriyah. “Before, when I was a little girl, women suffered from polygamy, restrictions, exploitation, physical, economic and sexual abuse at home, much more than today. Even talking about those things was taboo, much more than it is today. Openly resisting it was out of the question. I saw so many couples with marriage problems come to my father, because he was a Sharia
There are no limits to ijtihad

Chapter 2

There are no limits to ijtihad

I picked up a lot of stories; polygamous men who did not live up to their obligations, commotions about men who beat their wives, sexual abuse. People would skirt around it, avoid talking about it openly. Talking openly about it was taboo, even at school, among my friends, though there were so many families in which things went wrong. There was also a religious aspect to this code of silence; talking about ‘that sort of thing’ was a sin. A ‘good Muslim’ does not air the dirty laundry in public. Mistakes, bad behaviour of your husband, your wife, your parents, these are things you keep to yourself. People in any culture, in any community in the world, prefer to keep ‘that sort of thing’ to themselves. But turning this into a religious prohibition is an incorrect religious interpretation, certainly in Islam. The Qur’an and the hadiths are very clear. In certain circumstances, as a Muslim you are required to tell secrets and identify wrongs of which you are ashamed or that you consider too personal to talk about outright. And doing that is not slander, but enhancing justice. You are permitted to speak of it, and in many cases, even required to do so, in the following cases: when you are the victim of violence, if you can prevent violence by speaking out, in cases of criminal behaviour such as corruption or other crimes, when you want to share your experiences as a victim with others or when you want to listen to others who have gone through the same as you, and in general, if your information can help others to avoid all forms of evil, which in Arabic we call munkar. Men who force their abused wives into silence about the violence they inflict on them for the reason that speaking out would make them bad Muslims are therefore doubly malignant. Luckily, the women’s movement in the 1980s broke through many of those fears and taboos. There’s even an Arabic poem that I used a lot when I started out as an activist, and I still use, a song that summarises all these situations from the Qur’an and the hadiths to get abused and neglected women to speak out, to come out from the shadow of their men and their fears. And it works! For what can be better to make women stronger than a poem or a song?”

Men Made the Rules

“I myself only became an activist after the 1980s. I started in the early 1990s as a student at the Islamic State University of Jakarta. Ratna Batara Munti and I led the movement of female Muslim students. Ratna was head of HMI-Kohati, the women’s section of the Islamic Student Group (HMI), and I was head of KOPRI, the women’s branch of another Islamic student coalition, the Indonesian Islamic Students Movement (PMII). Together we set up an independent women’s study centre in 1993 called Tjut Nja ‘Dhien. Our goal was to fight the macho stereotypes and male dominance at the university. Inequality between men and women was something you saw everywhere on the campuses. Women hardly ever participated in debates. Their positions at the university were stereotypical. They had office jobs, they were secretaries, they poured the coffee, they took care of the refreshments... They kept their mouths shut. There were almost no women in higher supervisory positions. Men did the talking, men made the rules, men came up with the brilliant ideas and explanations...” Ratna Batara Munti, who is also there when we speak to Badriyah, jumps in with another example. “There was also the phenomenon we called ‘intellectual dating violence’ - male students dating women activists, subordinating them and telling them their only greatness lies in their relationship with these men. That happened a lot!”

Badriyah continues. “At the students organisations, girls and women were not appreciated for their merit. They didn’t dare to protest, or in any case, they didn’t protest enough. Like the rest of society, the university was a male stronghold, a patriarchal system. That’s the system we were trying to fight by setting up our centre. And by presenting a different image of women, we showed the female students that...”
they had other possibilities besides stereotypical tasks like pouring coffee. I was one of the founders of a student organization and vice chairman in the first period. After a few years at university in Jakarta, I went abroad, to Cairo, to study tafsir - Qur’anic exegesis. And later, after I returned, I moderated a huge number of debates and expert meetings. Of course, we were not the first women to fight subordination. We had our own role models. For me, the most influential senior to me was Lies Marcoes. She was also the first one to invite me to go into the muslim feminist movement.” Ratna adds, “I was also very much inspired by Wardah Hafidz, a famous feminist who at that time was making the connection between Islam and women's rights.”

“I didn’t have to buy votes, like so many corrupt politicians do.”

Smart and determined as she is, Badriyah keeps moving up. She graduates with a thesis on the hadiths that were handed down by Aisha, the Prophet's first wife. Aisha was a preeminent Muslim intellectual, is her conclusion in a nutshell. Aisha belonged to the first generation of Muslim women who made clear that no one was in a better position to identify and solve women's problems than women themselves. And that women are fully-fledged partners in matters of religion and weighty social and political issues. After completing her degree, Badriyah gets an appointment as a lecturer. Between 2002 and 2005, she appears as a TV preacher for national broadcaster TPI. “It was live, it was exciting, and it was new to me, working in front of the cameras in a huge studio,” Badriyah recalls. “We had high ratings - every show in the millions. I had a morning programme about faith, about women, family life, democracy and human rights. Viewers could call in and take part in the discussion. It was also broadcast in Jeddah and Malaysia. I had to stop doing it when I became a member of parliament.”

In 2002, she joins the PKB, the National Awakening Party. It is a major political party, the party of former president Aburahman Wahid, and an obvious choice for Badriyah - strongly Islamic and with strong ties to Nahdlatul Ulama, the movement in which she was brought up. While not advocating the establishment of an Islamic republic, the PKB does have the goal of vesting Islamic doctrine in the political and administrative governance of the country. “For me, politics was just another way of achieving the same thing,” explains Badriyah. “What I did at university, I went on doing within the party: working towards women's empowerment. I was given an important position within the party, and in 2004 I ran in the elections for the house of people's representatives, the DPR, and even though I spent very little campaign money, I was elected. Along the way I had become accomplished in public speaking and I knew how to get my ideas across to an audience. I had a lot of electoral support from my parents' circles and networks and those of their pesantren students. That was the deciding factor. I didn't have to buy votes, like so many corrupt politicians do. In parliament my topics were religion, social issues, women's rights and child protection, besides being actively involved in drafting the state budget in the budget committee. I did that for five years.”

**SEXUALITY AND RELIGION**

Pornography, reproductive health, women's rights in marriage, prostitution... many of the controversial issues that people's representative Fayumi is concerned with, have to do with sexual norms. In Fayumi's opinion there can be no talk of sexuality without religion. “As a Muslim woman, I can't
say what many secular people say, which is that faith should be purely a private matter,” she explains. “Faith is a determining factor in public issues like economy, politics, society, law and justice, every bit as much as it is in my private life. My thinking about sexuality, and my own sexuality, are strongly dictated by my faith. In secular societies, religion has been taken out of the realms of politics, economics, and law, and hidden away as a personal life choice. When you do that, you take religious values like justice and equality before God, charity and compassion, out of the public environment. Religion is, at least in my experience, a factor that connects the intimate and personal with the social, the common good, and ultimately with the all-encompassing, the divine. If you take religion and faith out of politics and economics, you lose a connection between God, mankind and society.”

“I can’t disconnect sexuality from my faith or strip it from other major frameworks like reproduction and marriage. In secular societies, this disconnection is a fact. In secular societies, sexuality has made a contrary movement. While with us it belongs to the intimate sphere but is strongly defined by a normative religious framework, in a strictly secular context sex has been pulled out of the realm of intimacy and also out of other normative frameworks like the religious, moral, social, and even biological or natural. This puts sexuality on a sometimes raw or wild public display, and places it so far away from my faith, but also from my sense of love and even from my sense of pleasure and enjoyment.”

“In the secular modern welfare state, reproduction, sexuality and family life are no longer automatically connected. They have become independent units to which people claim separate, individual rights. This disconnection between sexuality and reproduction and the recognition of individual sexual rights of women are milestones in Western secular feminism. And in many ways these rights are important to women. But they do not define sexuality nor do they rid sexuality of a religious, moral, social and biological sense. I want to ask you to think about things like the social and demographic impact of sexual emancipation in the modern welfare state. About aging in society, about the population decline because people are reluctant to have children, about growing social isolation, to name just a few phenomena. We in Indonesia still see social and familial connections and sexuality very strongly from the perspective that people need each other, not only for love and friendship, but simply to survive, to get ahead in life, to secure your future. Faith and religion reinforce community life and cement these familial, economic and political bonds between people. The fact that faith can still play such a strong role for us, of course, is also partly due to the fact that we do not have the welfare resources and structures that can partially address social fragmentation. Like care for elderly without family, or the facilities that single mothers and divorced women can turn to.”

“Muslim feminism seeks to increase women’s sexual freedoms and sexual position, within the frameworks and values of Islam. This limitation has nothing to do with prudishness. Sexuality and sensuality have a prominent place and a rich tradition in Islam. Many hadiths are about eroticism and sexual enjoyment. For example, it is the obligation of a Muslim man to give his wife pleasure before the end of intercourse. And vice versa. The kitab kuning, the great Islamic book of teachings, explains in great detail how to touch each other and give pleasure to each other. In Islam, sex is just one of the many ways of honouring God, along with praying, fasting, preaching, giving alms to the poor... But even just by smiling to fellow human being, you also bring honour to God. Islam says much about the ‘good relationships’ between people, between
There are no limits to ijtihad. These busy couples should find a balance for the two of them and show each other the respect that each person deserves. If that doesn’t work, then you should separate or divorce.

**POLYGAMY**

“There can be many obstacles to a harmonious sexual relationship in marriage. As a feminist, I fight them all: repression, coercion, financial dependence or financial neglect, stereotypical role patterns of the father as breadwinner and mother as housewife, domestic violence... And polygamy. Just like *fitna*, polygamy has many confusing, as well as wrong, interpretations. For example, there is nothing in the Qur’an or the hadiths that says that a husband has to ask his wife for permission to take another wife, but this permission is a requirement under our national marriage law, which is therefore considered to be contrary to the Qu’ran. What you do find in the Qur’an, in Sura An-Nisa verse 19, is that a husband must always treat his wife just and well (ma’ruf). But in fact, this requirement is violated in many ways. Many wives are forced to accept polygamy. If you follow verse 19 through to its logical conclusion it means that you cannot force a woman to accept polygamy against her will. Surah An-Nisa verse 3, teaches us that the spirit of Islam propagates monogamy.”

“Originally, polygamy was intended for emergency situations, in times of war in the Prophet’s day, when the ratio of men to women was at times extremely unbalanced. The crazy thing is that even today progressive, modern women sometimes welcome polygamy, even on the part of their own husbands. They want to succeed in life, pursue demanding academic studies, they have busy jobs, work themselves to the bone during the day to then take care of the children at home. After all that, they just can’t seem to bother to maintain a complete sexual relationship with their husband. He in his turn will not accept that either, so she lets him marry another woman. In my opinion...”

“Muslim feminism seeks to increase women’s sexual freedoms and sexual position, within the frameworks and values of Islam.”

“Polygamy only disrupts the balance and equality that is necessary in any relationship. And in today’s still very strongly patriarchal, and therefore imbalanced, Indonesian society, I think it’s an illusion to say that women truly voluntarily consent to their husbands’ polygamy. It speaks volumes that even the Prophet himself did not wish to marry his daughters into polygamous marriages. Instead of accepting polygamy as a response to whatever tensions or frustrations there are in a marriage, you are better off working on balance and harmony by breaking through role patterns and stereotypes. And here, too, you can turn to the Qur’an. Sura Al-Baqarah sets out in clear terms that fathers and mothers do not have strictly separate tasks and responsibilities in the family. Bathing, changing, feeding, upbringing, these are all things that are part of parenting, not exclusively of being a mother. Parenting is not the same thing as mothering, any more than being the breadwinner should be the exclusive responsibility of the father.
There are no limits to ijtihad

The Prophet himself kissed and cuddled his grandchildren in public, and when Sahabat, one of his friends of the Bani Tamim, was told that a man shouldn’t do that, his response was ‘those who cannot love others, including children, cannot be loved by God or by man.’ When you marry and have children, then you jointly bear all the joys and burdens, and you distribute them as you see fit, in mutual consultation, without coercion and with respect for each person’s individual skills, desires and freedoms. That’s in essence what Surah Al-Baqarah says.”

A MATTER OF EXEGESIS

Faith defines what forms of love and sexuality are legitimate. What about the forms of sexuality that deviate from the heterosexual, marital standard? A growing emancipation movement in Indonesia is standing up for the rights of gays and lesbians. How hard does this secular and feminist movement clash with the fight Badriyah is fighting? “Homosexuality is a very sensitive subject in Islam,” Badriyah answers. “Just like zina, casual sex outside marriage, homosexuality is forbidden because it disconnects sex from the marriage between a man and a woman. And homosexual sex has no reproductive dimension; in the Sharia, the continuation of the genealogical line is a crucial principle. There are sexual medical procedures that seem to be a violation of that principle, and which the Sharia allows without problem, like contraception and, in cases of emergency, abortion. But those are different things. Abortion and contraception are not a violation of the marriage between a man and a woman, nor do they terminate the genealogical lifeline. In Indonesian Islam abortions are allowed under a fatwah. Also by fatwah tubal litigation and vasectomy without medical reasons are prohibited, because these do terminate the lifeline. That said, the principle of the genealogical line does not by definition mean that as a good Muslim you have to bring as many children into the world as you can. Even though many Muslims, especially polygamous men, use this as a religious argument. Yes, there are sources and books that say that men should above all marry women who can bear many children, in order to increase the numbers of believers. But Sura An-Nisa 9 says that those who leave their progeny weak should fear the wrath of God. Now, what does this mean? It means that parents’ primary obligation is not to have as many children as possible, and certainly not that men should be polygamous to produce more and more children. It means in the first place, that they have the obligation to raise their children as good as they can into healthy, happy, knowledgeable and noble human beings, to protect them from poverty and exclusion; to send them to school and give them all the resources and opportunities to succeed in life and develop a strong personality. So the message is not ‘have as many children as possible’, but ‘try to do as good as possible for your child or children’.”

“You live your faith and interpret what is good and what is wrong, according to your own insight and your own ability.”

“You live your faith and interpret what is good and what is wrong, according to your own insight and your own ability.”

“Here, again, this is a matter of exegesis and interpretation. Where do you put the emphasis, what verses and sources do you quote? Men have been allowed to proclaim their stereotypical interpretations for too long. We female scholars emphasise different things and draw different connections. Tafsir and reinterpretation of the Qur’an is also the best
method and the best strategy for initiating change inside Muslim communities, because we speak the same religious language, and we have the same fundamental values as the people we are trying to persuade. We show that our view of equality and justice is based on the same faith. And often, our discussions deepen the religious knowledge and the religious consciousness of the people who participate in it. This process of reinterpretation is endless for different reasons. First, because the times and the circumstances change continually, and we have to keep on finding new answers to new questions. But also because the sources and the depth of Islam are infinite, and finally because every believer, every Muslim, has the task to shape his or her faith personally, by finding answers to personal questions and dilemmas. This process of making personal religious considerations and critical interpretations of your faith is what we call *ijtihad*. It is the opposite of *taklīd*, which is strictly following the formal or traditional doctrine within the movement or school to which you belong. Basically, there are no limits to *ijtihad*. Every person has his or her own personal background, her own story, her own knowledge. This is your personal intellectual, spiritual and emotional history and with that background you look at your faith, you live your faith and interpret what is good and what is wrong, according to your own insight and your own ability. We women are doing this now, more and more. Only God can say how well or how poorly we are doing it.”

“Our view of homosexuality is not that much different from that of the other major religions. But just because we do not permit homosexuality does not mean that we have to take a radical position, or that homosexuals should not have any rights or freedoms. Like any human being, they have individual human rights that protect them or should protect them against repression, violence and deprivation of freedom. This is not in contradiction with Islam. Violence is a sin, that includes violence against a person with a different sexual orientation. As a Muslim, I am not allowed to judge people with different norms of belief or behaviour, and certainly not
to condemn them and punish them, as long as they are tolerant towards me as well. Only God can pass judgement on others.”

“My religious doctrine and the doctrine of human rights have both shaped me, are both close to my heart and are perfectly compatible. What connects them are the values of tolerance and pluralism. I write about this often in Noor, the magazine for which I am a regular columnist. How different can you be, how different can you think, how different can you act, how different can you dress in Islam? How many cultures, traditions and customs can you embrace within Islam? The answer is all of them! And you can’t force anyone to share your positions. Islam has something called ikrah, which means that you cannot force anyone to accept your religion. Recognising diversity and pluralism is sunnatullah, that is, in keeping with the will of Allah over all beings and things.”

**PORNOGRAPHY**

Just like fanatics in any other place in the world, whether Christian, Hindu, Jew or atheist, some Muslims do not wish to leave the final judgement on others to God. There are many who want to speak for Him, also about Badriyah’s ideas and interpretations, her activism and her parliamentary work. And usually they do not take His place in order to make compliments. In particular, Badriyah’s positions in the pornography debate are a source of vexation and anger among the more radical of the Muslim community. “The first anti-pornography legislative proposal criminalised women while completely failing to tackle the porn industry,” says Badriyah. “Women could not dress in any way that could cause sexual arousal. But that is rather vague and open to interpretation, wouldn’t you say? Because who decides what is sexually arousing? Well, the law defined it: the shape of the buttocks and breasts could not be visible. Are women supposed to walk around as if they have no breasts? And what part of the breasts do we have to hide? How far? And what about nursing mothers? An impossible discussion. I rejected that proposal. Firstly, because in practice, it is primarily women who are targeted and discriminated against. Any woman who looked even a little bit sexy could be rounded up and punished. But ‘sexiness’ is a very subjective matter and therefore this proposal was objectionable. Secondly, because this law went much too far in allowing the state to interfere in people’s private lives. And thirdly, because Indonesia is tremendously diverse ethnically, culturally and religiously. Every tribe, every ethnic or religious group, every minority has its own conceptions about nudity, about what is and what is not proper. And moreover, that first legislative proposal made no clear distinction between titillation and sensuality in the street or in the media and pornography, which is the explicit depiction of sexual acts. You have to make this distinction, because if you don’t, before you know it every pair of tight trousers will be a crime against morality. With my party, we wanted to revise the law and focus on what was really the problem: a strict regulation of the pornography industry, an industry that is nothing more than gross sexual exploitation of women on a massive scale, and which poisons the social and moral fabric of society.”

“Recently three boys of eight, nine and eleven were arrested for raping two girls, age five and seven, after having watched pornography on the internet. I mean, really. Curtailing the pornography industry does not mean that the state can ban porn for adults, for personal use in private circles. After our criticisms, the law was revised - even its name was changed. It is no longer the anti-pornography and anti-porn action law, but the pornography law. The revised law prohibits the commercial production and distribution of pornography, not the private use of pornography by adults. As a member of parliament I fought very hard on this last issue. I think you can’t prohibit use by adults, but consumption of pornography...
with, for or by children should always be prohibited by law. No question about it. But whatever married couples do with their sexuality is their own business, as long as it is consensual. Also, if you criminalise the use and storage of pornography by adults you have another problem. There are so many viruses on the internet that can send anyone spam or other undesired e-mails with pornographic content. Or there are people who send porn pictures to your mobile phone or use your phone to take pornographic pictures. It has happened to me. You can risk being branded as a porn criminal just by turning on your computer. For these reasons, in the end, the Pornography Act does not criminalize the storage of adult pornography. Nevertheless I always tell that, whether there is a Pornography Act or not, a Muslim is prohibited by his or her religion to see anything that is not obscene as pornography. In other words, storing and watching adult pornography is a private matter that concerns the viewer and God, rather than the state. Islam is the religion of the majority of Indonesia’s population, but still this is a diverse nation. Religion continues to occupy its position as a guide and a handle on life to its adherents, laws are the agreements of citizens in a pluralistic nation to regulate things that need to be agreed upon in order to live together. That is, looking at pornography, for a Muslim it is considered sinful, yet it is not a criminal offence by state law.”

As a member of parliament, Badriyah fights for more than just a revision of the pornography law. She also pushes legal reforms to allow handicapped persons to run for president. Her illustrious fellow party member and party founder Abdurahman Wahid, who himself was blind, had been elected president, but the law still lagged behind. She stands up for equal opportunity and equal treatment in education, between boys and girls, between East and West Indonesia, between public schools and pesantrens. When pesantrens were given the same educational status and placed under the same subsidy scheme as public schools, it was a personal victory for her. As was the day when the electoral legislation was amended to allow alumni of pesantrens to run for any public office. “With these changes in law, we are taking another step towards putting the legacy of Suharto’s New Order behind us,” Badriyah says. “It was a time when pesantrens were extremely marginalised and suppressed.”

“YOU’RE GOING TO HELL”
Badriyah does a great many things in the People’s Consultative Assembly, but it is primarily her positions in the pornography debate that brings the anger of others down upon her - the anger of those who share her faith in Islam, but not her belief in human rights. “Islamic fundamentalists in Hizb ut Tahrir and the FPI harassed me while I was working on the pornography legislation,” she says. “I would get texts, sometimes they would even come to me personally. Always with the same message: I was going to Hell, simply because I even considered not to fight for Syariah. But the message I sent back to them was always the same, too: we have to regulate the pornography industry, not the freedom of expression in people’s personal lives. I never let myself be intimidated. Nor was I ever afraid. I was always willing to open a dialogue with them. And there were always people on the extremist side who were willing to talk. It is not as if they can only threaten and condemn, they can listen and debate too.

“Fundamentalist Muslims came to my office, and I went to them in their communities.”
I spoke and preached in lots of mosques and in other gatherings that were also attended by radical Muslims. Fundamentalist Muslims came to my office, and I went to them in their communities. And because I speak in the same religious terms and cite the same sources, I can also get my message across: that Islam is not about regulating all activities in all areas as strictly as possible, but that it is a faith that revolves around the inspiration of a number of core values. That Islam can and must go together with respect for diversity, for religious, cultural and ethnic pluralism, for human rights. I tell them that as Muslims, their own practice of the core values and core teachings of Islam should not be dependent on simple rules and strict bans. Actually I always say the same thing, to believers and non-believers, to fundamentalist believers or radical secular activists, man or woman: don’t discriminate, be respectful yourself and respect others.

Ex-member of parliament, ex-TV personality, ex-university professor... What does the future hold for Badriyah Fayumi? What does she still want to achieve? Where is Indonesia heading? What role does she still want to play in keeping radical zealotry from gradually overshadowing traditions of pluralism and tolerance?

**JIHAD AT SCHOOL**

“Of course, I have my pesantren,” Badriyah says. “I will continue to lead it, propound my positions and keep doing my social work with and for women there. I am also still a member of the National Commission for Children (KPAI). Child protection is vital, and is also a critical element of the struggle against radicalism as children are easily indoctrinated. Child abuse has to be monitored very closely, at all levels, from the family to the state. Violence against children is increasing, including sexual violence in families and also in schools. More and more children at school are being approached by extremist and even terrorist groups. There was a study about this done at the public Islamic schools in West Java. Not at the pesantrens, which historically have frequently been associated with radical Islam, but public schools. School kids are shanghaied into so-called regular extra-curricular activities where, in reality, they are being trained and brainwashed into rabid warriors of faith, in other words, terrorists.

“Indonesia should promote its tolerant Islam in a much more active way.”

These trainings have more in common with jihad camps than with what a public Indonesian school should be. In some cases the schools aren’t even aware of what is going on in them. And the parents often don’t know either. But it is a form of child abuse, and one that is extremely dangerous. This study is still very recent, and has not yet been published. Whatever the case, this is something I will be following very closely and about which I will speak in schools, at social and religious meetings, in the living rooms and the villages all the way up to the national committees that I have connections with.”

**INDONESIA MUST RISE**

“If I ever go back to working for TV, then it won’t be in a sound-bite call-in show, but in a programme that would allow me to delve deeper into subjects like faith, gender equality, democracy and pluralism. These are subjects that merit an open and in-depth debate. And I want to do something else: put down my experiences, insights, fundamental questions and answers on paper. So my message and my ideas will survive me. I want to keep inspiring others. I want the girls and boys who are in my pesantren today to become the leaders of
their communities tomorrow.”
“That’s what I want to do myself. And what do I want for my country? To see Indonesia, as the world’s largest Muslim country, hold on to her tolerant Islam, to see that she can control radicalisation within her own borders and play a more proactive role in counteracting religious radicalisation and extremism worldwide. Including among extremist Christians. Including in the Middle East. Indonesia must rise, the country should promote the strength of its own tolerant Islam and our religious thinking in a much more active way. This will be difficult, but we have to try. Difficult, because Middle Eastern society in general still looks down on all forms of Islam that are not Arabic. I know that because I studied in Cairo for a year. I know how deep the pride of Arab Muslims goes; they consider their religious culture the mother of all civilisations and look down on anything ajam, anything non-Arabic. So, yes it is difficult. But it is worth it, because pluralism and tolerance are deepening and enriching values, and because violence and Islam essentially have less in common than Islam, justice and equality.”
CHAPTER 3

THE HOUSE IS WHERE IT STARTS

“FIGHTING FOR GENDER JUSTICE BRINGS ME CLOSER TO GOD.”

ENNUNG NURSAI-DAH ILYAS (44), SCHOOL HEAD-MISTRESS AND HEAD OF A CRISIS CENTRE FOR ABUSED WOMEN IN TASIKMALAYA, WEST JAVA
Tasikmalaya, a regency in the province of West Java, is known for being a conservative Muslim area. In the nineteen fifties and sixties, the militant opposition movement of Darul Islam tried to establish an Islamic state here, but failed. Until today the regency (kabupaten) remains a stronghold for hard-line Islamists and traditional Muslim schools.

Like elsewhere in Indonesia, radical Islamic parties failed to win significant electoral victories in this region (at the national level, generally attracting something in the area of 10% of the vote). But the recent enactment by some local governments of Sharia-based laws shows that their prescriptive and fundamentalist religious views are becoming more widely accepted in governance and political circles. Sharia law imposes far-reaching religious restrictions on public, economic, cultural and social life, and penetrates deep into the private lives of citizens. The most recent Sharia bylaw, on morals and values, sweepingly tars corruption, abuse of power, prostitution, extramarital sex, gambling, abortion, alcohol consumption, entertainment and even tourism, with the same brush. They are all forms of ‘sin’ and, as such, criminal behaviour.

While some laws are still the subject of parliamentary debate and others have been withdrawn in the wake of social protests, on the streets civil service police units, the Satpol PP, dictate the rules. They arrest street merchants selling food during Ramadan and women who, in their eyes, look or act “immoral.”

In Tasikmalaya, the spirit of pancasila, the philosophical and religious foundation of the secular republic of Indonesia in which religious pluralism and social justice is enshrined, seems far away. In fact, recent Sharia laws in Tasikmalaya and their enforcement, appear to be a direct assault on the deep-seated Islamic doctrines of social equality and tolerance.

Certainly, this is what Enung Nursaidah Ilyas feels. Her grandfather, kyai Haji Rohiyat, founded the boarding school, Cipasung pesantren. The pesantren is a private traditional Islamic community school, and this one is situated on the premises of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), one of the two major Islamic mass movements that so strongly determined the course of Indonesian Muslim communities in the last century. Teh Enung was born here. She was raised in the relatively silent and closed world of religious education, reflection and prayer, but grew up into a modern multitasker in touch with all layers of society. Education would become a permanent feature in her life. As a young woman, she studied biology at university, and today she teaches biology, alongside a number of religious courses, at the pesantren’s Islamic secondary school. She also heads an upper secondary pharmaceutical and nursing institution, is an active member of Fatayat (the women’s organisation of NU) and the government’s provincial working group set up to combat violence against women, and works on the district advisory commission on reproductive health. She works herself to the bone. And she actively participates in social and political debates on gender, Islam and social justice in the Tasikmalaya regency.

The heart of her work, as she describes it, is Puspita, the crisis centre for women she has headed since 2004. The centre is housed in her own home. She and her husband, medical doctor Jajang, are providing services for abused and battered women and girls. Along with providing medical and psychosocial care and legal assistance for abused women, the centre also lobbies policymakers and public administrators for better legal protection and women’s rights. The women’s centre is an integral part of the pesantren in Cipasung. That in itself is a victory of Teh Enung’s fight for social justice. Not a single one of the
hundreds of other pesantren in Tasikmalaya has anything like it, and not one of them addresses the sensitive subject of gender inequality in their own traditional Muslim communities so prominently.

In her teachings and social work inside and outside of the school, Teh Enung stresses the importance of gender equality and women’s rights. But with Puspita, she comes across most strongly as a progressive and modern female leader in a very traditional and male-dominated Muslim community. She propounds a devout and yet progressive view of religion in which Islam, human rights and tolerance go hand in hand. She follows her own agenda and pursues her own strategy.

The school in which Teh Enung lives and works hardly resembles a school at all. It is a small village, a sprawling complex of buildings, institutes, dormitories and prayer buildings connected by a maze of streets. Tasikmalaya’s Cipasung pesantren is a district unto itself and is known far and wide. All the Indonesian presidents have visited the place. The spot where Suharto’s presidential helicopter landed twice is still pointed to with pride and reverence.

Some seven thousand boys and girls, from preschoolers to university students, are taught, cared for and raised here according to strict Islamic principles. These days, along with Arabic, tarbiya (Islamic education), Sharia (Islamic law), akhlak (ethics) and other religious subjects, students can take “general” subjects like economics or technology. Students from outside of the pesantren community are welcome too, as long as they are Muslim. Of Cipasung’s seven thousand students, one thousand live at the boarding school, with male boarders housed in separate dormitories and female boarders being placed with families living near the pesantren. The underlying thought behind this is that girls need more support and protection than boys. Teh Enung has also opened part of her home to girls from the boarding school. And abused women who urgently require shelter can also come to her.

How did Teh Enung acquire her leading position in this bastion of patriarchy? How does she deal with rising violence against women? How does she sway fundamentalists who stick to principles of polygamy and the ‘inborn subservience’ of women? To find out, we went to see her in her own home, the women’s centre in the heart of Cipasung pesantren.

**THIS, TOO, IS ISLAM**

She first takes us to school classes for nurses and pharmaceutical assistants. Teenage boys and girls (in veils) share the same classroom but are seated on separate benches, their immaculately ironed school uniforms are so white that they almost shine with a light of their own. The students are all smiles and curious. They try out their English on us, unexpected visitors from abroad.

“Many people in this area go abroad out of pure necessity,” says Teh Enung after we leave the classroom. “They have little to no education, and if they find a job at all it’s generally in a rich household where for years they are exploited in a modern form of slavery, or sexually abused. They have no choice but to leave their children behind. At school and in the pesantren, we give children and youths the chance for a better future than their parents. Many of these boys and girls will go abroad, not to serve as house slaves but to compete for good jobs. Indonesia has invested too little in knowledge and education geared for the international labour market, and certainly the market here in Southeast Asia. This has furthered exploitation, human trafficking, and particularly the trafficking in women. The education in the pesantren gives young people not only a body of intellectual knowledge, but enables them to get ahead in life in practical terms, to stand up for their rights and to pull
themselves up out of poverty. This, too, is Islam.”

It will not be the last time that Teh Enung underlines the importance of education, particularly for girls. “Education makes you independent, instils self-confidence, and enables women not only to find work but to fight injustice, unequal treatment and abuse, whether it’s within the marriage and the family, at work or in the public debate. Rights, freedoms, obligations and traditions are always a question of interpretation and negotiation. And education gives the power to negotiate, to men as well as women.”

“Rights, freedoms, obligations and traditions are always a question of interpretation and negotiation.”

“Especially to women,” Teh Enung corrects herself. “It’s girls who really need education and training, especially before they marry. This helps them to discover which dreams they can make true, to express what they want to do with their lives and to learn how they can negotiate roles and divisions of responsibilities in their marriage. So that later in life they can discuss, negotiate and defend their own sexuality and their motherhood. I want to provide the full spectrum of services abused girls and women really need: education, financial support with microcredit and income-generating projects, psychosocial and medical care and legal support. With Puspita and my work as a headmistress, I can do a lot. But we can do better. We should do more. Who knows, perhaps with some kind of cooperative organisation in which all these services are even better coordinated, and in which the women themselves have co-ownership.”

LENI

Teh Enung knows better than anyone how desperately Tasikmalaya needs people fighting this struggle for women’s rights. She catalogues the forms of discrimination that women in her environment have to face, in order of outrageousness. “The biggest problem is domestic violence. This can be physical aggression, mental abuse, sexual abuse or economic abuse, like neglect and exploitation. The physical violence we see is beatings, batterings and injuries to the face and body. Men hit their wives, daughters or cousins with their fists, with household items, sometimes with hot irons. What we see less are murders and attempted murders on the street. But it does happen. There was a soldier who beat his wife’s head against a sewer grate until she almost died. None of the passers-by dared to do anything. Most cases of sexual assault we deal with are incest and marital rape. Many traumatised women only come to understand after we talk to them that a husband does not have the right to force his wife to have sex if she doesn’t want to; that forced sex within a marriage is rape and that it is a crime. And that there are things a woman can do and must do to defend herself and claim her rights, for example by invoking the Domestic Violence Act of 2004. The same goes for incest. Puspita shelters victims of incest and girls who become pregnant from rape by a male family member. We give them a safe place to stay, care and medical attention. In many cases, abortion is something that has to be considered. There is nothing in Islam or Sharia that forbids inducing abortion after rape or incest or if the health of the mother is at risk. As long as abortion happens within the first 120 days of the pregnancy, no Sharia court will object. In cases we have had to deal with, it was not an option because the girls were more than four months pregnant when they came to us. We
found out too late. So we gave them medical assistance up until birth, and then we made sure that the newborns would be taken care of properly by family members.”

“Girls who have been through incest went through a hell of rape, silence, taboo and fear, sometimes for years at a time. Take Leni. She was fourteen when her father started raping her. Her mother left the family, and the children had to stay with their father. She gave birth five times, each time being made pregnant by her father. And each time, the father smuggled Leni into another village where she gave birth in secret. No one knew her there, and no one knew about the incest. Finally, she couldn’t take the violence and abuse any longer. Her brother alerted the police and people in the community found out about the agony she had endured. But even then they took the father’s side; in their eyes, the daughter was immoral, a temptress, not a victim. The police did not take any action against the father, but they did refer the daughter to Puspita. Leni was twenty-one when she came to us, and had given birth to five incest children. She was given protection and shelter, and with her help, Puspita got the father prosecuted and he got fourteen years in prison. It hardly ever comes to prosecution; most women don’t dare to or can’t take that step, for fear of being killed or mutilated or because the financial impact of a conviction would be devastating for the whole family. After she lived at Puspita for three months, we tried to help Leni integrate back into her family. The aggression against her proved to be so severe that she had to come back to us. She took a hairdressing course. While she was learning, she fell in love with a man. He knew her whole story. They married, and today they have two children of their own. This story would never have ended like this without her own personal courage and without real perseverance in the support we gave. It’s not a happy end; you can’t have a happy end with a past like that. Leni doesn’t know anything about her first five children. We think that the father sold them all to strangers in the towns they went to. What goes for Leni goes for any woman who is the victim of brutal violence and abuse. Without persistent aid and without a dialogue between perpetrator and victim, family and in-laws, and within the community, with the local police, with the courts, with hospitals and religious leaders, without this, the girl is condemned to a life of exclusion, stigma and repression. If the reconciliation fails, we look for alternatives. But in all cases of severe abuse, women’s shelters, medical and psychosocial care are necessities, and we use all legal means available to us, both under Sharia courts and national law, to stand up for the rights of these girls and women.”

Within the pesantren where Teh Enung lives and works and takes care of abused women and girls, sexual violence against women occurs as well. “I heard from a friend,” Teh Enung says, “that a kyai (male religious leader/teacher) in another pesantren sexually assaulted a student. In the end he wasn’t punished very severely, but the facts did come to light. He was sanctioned, but what was more painful for him was that he was no longer welcome at religious meetings. It has happened at our school, too. Once, the son of a prominent teacher raped a young girl, and we found out about it. The father put a lot of pressure on Puspita not to investigate the case. But we did.”

**THAT’S ONLY WHERE IT STARTS**

Domestic violence and sexual abuse may be the most shocking forms of repression that girls and women face, they are by no means the only ones. “That’s only where it starts,” says Teh Enung. “Physical domestic violence reverberates at all levels of society, and all these levels reinforce each other. We have talked about violence within the family. But financial dependence, economic neglect and exploitation within the family are also part of the systematic repression. This financial
dependence keeps a woman imprisoned and makes it all the more difficult for her to defend herself against an uncle, father or spouse when she becomes a victim of physical and sexual violence. What would you do? Choose for justice and redress or the meal and the school fees for your children? Most mothers choose the latter. The simple fact that they are forced to make that choice is itself an injustice. That’s the family situation. But take the educational system. This too is characterised by deep-seated and biased gender patterns. Access to education is many times more difficult for girls than for boys, which means that women have to fight much harder for the emancipation and liberation that come with knowledge and diplomas. And in health care, we see the government systematically denying or minimising the urgency of reproductive health care for girls and mothers. Health care laws as they now stand only provide for reproductive care like abortion for married women, not for women or girls who are not married. And if we look at the political and democratic decision-making, at the participation of women in public administration and policy at any level of government, we see that here again, the doors are usually closed to women. The repression of women is systematic, and happens in the bedroom, in the village, in school, in the hospital, in all levels of politics and governance.”

“Physical domestic violence reverberates at all levels of society.”

There is another source of discrimination that is a severe threat to the position of women in private and public circles. It is mentioned by all the women we meet, and one that many of them struggle with: polygamy. Teh Enung even calls it the second most important form of discrimination to be fought, after physical and sexual violence. But this battle is much more difficult to fight within traditional Muslim environments like the pesantren, because taking on polygamy means getting into the slippery slope of religious rules and interpretations. Yet the question arises whether polygamy is a religious issue or primarily a cultural phenomenon. Anyone entering the sphere of religious interpretation will quickly come up against purists claiming that there is only one Islam: an Islam that follows the Qur’an literally. Islam that says the holy texts cannot be placed in a historical and social context. Polygamy is one such concept that evokes hot religious debate and controversy. And just like the interpretation of the concept of ‘disobedience’ or nusyuz (very prominent in the Sura An-Nisah and Muslim men often cite it to justify the abuse of their wives, daughters or cousins), discussing the values of polygamy is a good barometer for the level of religious fundamentalism or modernism.

POLYGAMY

Independently of the theological question of whether the Qur’an, the Prophet, or ‘true Islam’ allow (or even promote) polygamy, all the female leaders we interviewed, each and every one highly schooled in theological matters, expressed the opinion that in practice, polygamy is in virtually all cases degrading, humiliating, and all too often a marriage form that promotes violence towards women. As such, they conclude, polygamy is a form of repression. In their struggle against the devastating effects of polygamy, especially when they occur within the pesantren, faith and orthodoxy sometimes clash with gender activism or feminism. They even clash within one and the same person. “There are women activists who say outright that the principle of polygamy is haram, that is, strictly forbidden,” says Teh Enung. “I don’t say that. I take another tack from strict theology to practical
real world, and I say that polygamy is haram if the requirements set on it in the Qur’an are not met. Namely, that a husband has to treat his wives perfectly equally, as the Prophet did. In practice, this never happens. Once, polygamy may have been a possible response to underpopulation in desert and war torn societies like in Saudi Arabia in the days of the Prophet. But in today’s world, and in our social context, we see that polygamy leads to financial and emotional subordination of one wife and her children to another, that many men with multiple wives prove to be unable to keep all their wives and children out of poverty, that polygamy leads to harrowing neglect of women and children, and that for most men who engage in it, polygamy is mainly about increasing their status and influence. In debates, in religious meetings, in women’s groups and in the newspaper articles I write, I always expound on that negative impact of polygamy, and the direct relationship between polygamy and violence against women. 36% of violence against women happens in polygamous family situations.”

“This means that there are practical and moral grounds for fighting injustice that comes along with polygamy. But there are also religious arguments to counter the negative effects of polygamy. In my struggle for gender justice, the Qur’an is one of my most important allies, and exegesis is part of my activism. You can point to numerous verses of the Qur’an that forbid every form of physical violence and abuse and that call for social justice and equality for all people and all creations before God. But there is also a specific verse of the Qur’an that says that God believes that men, unlike the Prophet, can never treat their wives fully equally and that therefore polygamous men can never truly be completely just. And because justice and equality are, according to the Qur’an, requirements for polygamy, you can use that same Qur’an as a reference and an argument against the practice of polygamy.”

“The fact that I do not openly reject the principle of polygamy is a strategic choice rather than a theological one. My uncle is head of Nahdatul Ulama in Tasikmalaya, so he is a very prominent religious and social leader. He has more than once rebuked me in public meetings for my positions on polygamy, and demanded that all people from Puspita leave the audience. For him, an attack on polygamy is an attack on Islam. My perspective on Islam is different. Islam inspires me to fight injustice, especially injustice towards women. But I can’t get around the influence and power of my uncle, so I have to manoeuvre very carefully, both theologically and in practice.”

**REWITING, REINTERPRETING**

“It is a fact that men largely call the shots in politics, the business world, and here in the pesantren. They have the top jobs, they are in power, they have the strategic networks. But to my mind, that has less to do with religion and more to do with a culture of male dominance. For me, every Muslim and especially every religious leader has the obligation to fight injustice, and violence against women is one such injustice. For me, standing up for equality between men and women is part of my faith. And whenever we take on male abuse and aggression, there will be resistance, and there will be radical Muslim men who will use their traditional interpretation of Islam to attack us for our ‘liberalism’ or our ‘Western feminism’. But once again, this abuse has more to do with power, and abuse of power, than with the essence of religion. I am not a westerner. I am
an Indonesian Muslim woman standing up for social justice. And the only way for me to deal with religious radicalism and keep fighting for social justice within the Muslim community in which we live is by using the Qur’an, the hadiths (the narrations on the words and deeds of the Prophet), and the fiqh (the doctrines of Sharia law) in our struggle for justice. I do this wherever and whenever I can. Also by participating in projects set up to rewrite and reinterpret those parts of the traditional religious schoolbooks of the pesantren (the Kitab Kuning) that promote inequality and discrimination against women. But my message as a woman activist, as a teacher in a Muslim school, and as a publicist remains essentially the same; I speak as a Muslim woman, as a believer."

“Puspita is part of a religious community. Abused women get medical and psychosocial aid, mediation, accommodation and legal assistance from us. But they also get spiritual and religious counselling. Abused women are torn. They face issues they cannot resolve. Sometimes they still love the men who abused and battered them. And applying for a divorce or taking legal action often has life-threatening financial and economic consequences. Sometimes justice does not outweigh the fear of an uncertain future. Praying and calling upon Allah (wirid) gives these faithful women moments of peace and hope, closure, self-reliance. Praying helps them make decisions, and so it helps them stand up for themselves. This is also part of what Puspita does.”

ROOT CAUSES
Teh Enung spent her life countering all forms of gender violence. What does she think are the root causes of that aggression? “Cultural and religious practices feed off each other and combine to create patriarchal social structures and power relationships,” she explains. “So both have to be reformed, culture as well as religious practice and religious interpretation. It may be that the bottom line of violence against women is a matter of biology, that when it comes down to it, in a one-to-one fight men can simply hit harder. Even though you can’t say that men are physically, biologically, medically or psychologically stronger. I daresay that women can take more. But that brute difference in muscle strength has expressed itself through the ages into social, cultural, political, economic and religious inequalities, and these patriarchal inequalities are persistent, complex and very deep-rooted. These are the arenas we are working in. It is a daunting task.”

Teh Enung’s efforts to rewrite the interpretations of the Kitab Kuning (the ‘yellow book’ of religious teaching used in Indonesian pesantren in actuality comprises a whole series of books and ancient writings) prove that social reform and theological reform go hand in hand. “There was a time when I set up a separate team within Puspita to thoroughly review the Kitab Kuning and reinterpret it in a way that would promote equality between men and women. Certainly, the yellow books that concern the relationship between husband and wife paint a traditional, and for me completely outdated, picture of a world of master and slave. With Puan Amal Hayati, the national women’s organisation that provides crisis care for abused women in pesantren, we wrote an alternative Islamic book of teachings on male/female relationships in which we meticulously refute those hadiths4 that are traditionally used by men to justify the subjugation of women. Against them, we set out our own exegesis to support equality between man and woman in religious and theological terms. We printed a

4 The ahadith or hadiths, the narrations of the deeds and words of the Prophet, are seen by Muslims as an important supplement to the Qur’an. With the Qur’an they are one of the main sources for Sharia law. The interpretation of the hadiths demands years of study and a high level of expertise, and their interpretation is a cause of dispute and discussion. The hadiths are divided into a number of different categories: sahih (very reliable), hasan (good, but less reliable), da’ief (dubious) and mawdoe (apocryphal).
large number of copies, both in Arabic and in Indonesian. They are being used in more and more schools all the time, and our work’s value as a reference is growing. Let me give you one small example of our reformulation. The old pronouncement reads: ‘A husband may beat his wives if they are disobedient and if they refuse to put on cosmetics to please him.’ The new one reads: ‘Our Prophet never beat his wives. Men are therefore never allowed to beat their wives in whatever circumstance.’”

**CONNECTOR**

The more Teh Enung talks about her work as a leader, teacher and activist in the pesantren, the clearer it becomes that the essence of her strategy is not confrontation, but cooperation and dialogue, be it with women, with offenders, with families, with hospitals, with the police, with courts or public authorities. And also with men who use their faith to justify radical, extremist or violent attitudes against ‘disobedient women’ or unorthodox practices. She is a connector, and her faith enables her to build bridges, including bridges to the banks of radical opponents. “When we discovered that Puspita was drawing the ire of men in important positions, I started creating a coalition of twenty pesantren in the area. We talked about our views on gender equality, our struggles against domestic violence, our view of religion as a basis for social justice. And with all these schools, I set up a network with men who supported our philosophy and approach. That broad support base, especially among men in traditional Muslim communities, is of absolutely vital importance for Puspita.”

Puspita is about cooperation. This approach has led to official arrangements with government institutions, and legislation that can make a lifesaving difference for women in need. “When we first started Puspita,” explains Teh Enung, “we very quickly made arrangements with all the institutions that have a role in the fight against gender violence: the police, the Sharia courts, the hospitals, district officials, the mayor. This resulted in a memorandum of understanding in which all parties committed to support Puspita and to promote gender equality not only in the pesantren but throughout society, to fight violence against women, to offer legal protection to victims and to provide them with both medical and spiritual care. The cooperation with hospitals resulted in a new local reproductive health law that entitles women who are victims of violence to medical care, no matter what the circumstances are. Even if they can’t pay for it. Before that, every time we had a beaten or raped woman knocking on our door we had to convince the hospital to take her in. A woman now has a right to a hospital birth, Caesarean section, abortion or care even if she has no money or her husband refuses to pay. This new law is a huge victory.”

“Divorce laws are still very biased towards men, which makes our legal work an uphill battle.”

Since 2004, Puspita has handled 221 cases of abuse, sometimes by mediating, sometimes by assisting in divorce cases, and in a few cases by taking legal action. “Most abused women do everything they possibly can to reconcile with their husband and to save their family,” says Teh Enung. “The mediation process is an incredible challenge. What we do first and foremost is to tell them that they have rights and legal options, also before Sharia courts, which are normally the courts that decide on divorces. We go over the domestic violence act, the law passed in 2004, also recognised by our Sharia courts. We explain that domestic violence is a crime. We inform, counsel, and let the victims decide for themselves.
That can take years. We never push them to go to court, but if they personally decide to do so, they can count on a Puspita litigation team. Most women don’t go to court. But even then, in our mediation process commitments are never without liabilities. We never close the mediation process before the man has formally declared that he will no longer use violence against his wife. We have these statements drafted and signed by the husband and wife and by witnesses. This becomes an official document recognised by judicial institutions and the police. The official stamps for this document cost some 6,000 rupees. If a woman decides to divorce instead, because the physical violence continues or because her husband refuses to support her and does not pay nafkah or housekeeping money, then there will be a hearing before a Sharia court. Divorce laws are still very biased towards men, which makes our legal work an uphill battle. But the domestic violence act, which was passed after a long and bitter struggle by the women’s movements in Indonesia, has brought some change. We are managing to convince judges that a divorce is necessary and that the property should be divided fairly between husband and wife. Women who use our services don’t pay anything for them. Even women who end up taking shelter in our premises don’t pay. How we manage financially? Up until 2009, we were funded by the UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund. Since then I try to finance Puspita with money from the nursing school that I head in the pesantren. It’s just getting by, and it’s a financial battle. But I am never going to close Puspita’s doors, no matter what.”

TAKDIR, KODRAT

“The big problem is that I am promoting gender equality in a religious environment that still clings very strongly to traditional values such as the inferiority of women.
In that environment, my environment, the obedience and subjugation of women has a religious connotation. By that I mean that many people consider obedience to the man takdir, that is, dictated by God. But subjugation of women is neither takdir, nor kodrat - that is, inherent in the essence of woman. These traditional values are not Islamic values, strictly speaking, but cultural constructs and interpretations of men. What I show with my work and my own position is that women can take any leading position, that women are not predestined to follow, to be obedient, let alone to be beaten. And that standing up against violence is not rebellious, but a question of fundamental rights and freedoms that are in no way in conflict with Islam. Leadership has nothing to do with gender, but with qualities and skills. In the family, in the pesantren, in the political sphere, in the business world, nowhere are men predestined to rule, and there is no position that a woman cannot hold. The fact that this is not yet a reality is a great social injustice, but not really something you can attribute to Islam.”

Talking about leadership, does Enung Nursaidah Ilyas believe that formal religious leadership should be accessible to women as well, in other words, that women should be entitled to be imam? According to the Sunni faith (to which most Indonesian Muslims are adherent), no specific education, position, or divine authority is required to be an imam or to lead people in prayer. But in the mosques, there are as yet no women leading the prayers. “You ask me a difficult question. I admit that women are barred from religious leadership, but that does not stop us from doing tafsir, commentary and explication of the Qur’an. In my work, I use fundamental religious texts constantly, as do all other Muslim feminists. The Kitab Kuning dictates that only men can be imams. But as I said before that doctrine is open for discussion and reinterpretation. Faith and doctrine are not static, but living and dynamic, and in every context and at every historical juncture Muslims must reinterpret and shape their faith anew. I admit that it would be a nearly impossible task to convince male religious leaders to allow women to become imams. There are two reasons why that is not a fight I choose to fight. Firstly, I am not convinced that gender inequality in religious leadership is a big factor in the plague of hardships women face, namely physical, sexual and domestic violence. Secondly, I don't want to fight to become an imam myself, because as imam you have very little social impact outside the mosque. As a leader in the pesantren, as teacher, as director of Puspita, as publicist and as member of Fatayat and other women's networks, I have much more impact, and I can do more to improve women's situations and fight injustice. I say that nothing should prevent me from becoming an imam, as long as I can prove that I have the qualities to be one. And nothing in my nature as a woman precludes having those kinds of qualities. But it’s not something that I want to focus on in my personal career.”

“I am not a westener. I am an Indonesian Muslim woman standing up for social justice.”

The imam discussion brings us to other religious restrictions for women. Restrictions that Western critics of Islam, as well as secular feminists, typically point at to argue that Islam is incompatible with feminism: strict rules on clothing, chastity and free movement, corporal punishment for infidelity and ‘licentiousness’. These rules would have only one purpose: imposing a prescriptive and submissive sexuality on women. Just like polytheism or apostasy, ‘licentiousness’
would, after all, lead to the ultimate evil: utter chaos, discord and confusion (fitna). “I will always fight prescriptive positions and rules of conduct that restrict the freedom of women more than that of men,” says Teh Enung, “because I oppose inequality between man and woman. Even if those rules are propounded to be based on religion. But we can’t just lump all these things together. Wearing the jilbab, the veil, for example, I don’t see as discrimination, as long as it’s a personal choice. Women do that because it makes them feel safer and more comfortable. But even though I wear the veil myself, I cannot accept Sharia laws obliging me to wear it, so I will oppose them. It has to be a matter of personal choice. As I see it, Islam does not compel women to wear the jilbab. As to freedom of movement, women can and must be able to go and stay wherever they want, just like men, as long as the objective is clear: going to school, going to work, going shopping, or just spending free time. That in the process, women will talk with men, work with them, study with them, travel with them... is only normal, even if they are not accompanied by a male family member. But if boys and girls are meeting for sexual reasons or with any sexual connotation, then I am in favour of prohibiting that.”

“Of course these are things we have to deal with in the pesantren as well. There’s no use in forbidding boys and girls to fall in love and feel attracted. But Islam compels unmarried couples to control those feelings. The traditional punishment for flirtatious behaviour or secret trysts is jilid: five times five lashes on the soles of the feet for simple flirting, five times twenty lashes for kissing. It is a punishment for young people starting at about age fourteen. And if they are caught having sexual activity, they are expelled from school. Jilid is a typical form of punishment by example. It is done in public to scare other young people. But you have to understand that this corporal punishment is a cultural tradition, it is not based on Islam. And because I am against all forms of physical violence I look for alternative punishments for my students who cross the line, like paying a small fine or reciting a sura. And I’m happy to say this is a general trend in the pesantren. Jilid is being used less and less.”

**ANTI-PORNOGRAPHY**

But even if corporal punishment in the pesantren is becoming passé, religious violence in Indonesia in general, and in Tasikmalaya, is on the rise. Can Teh Enung counterbalance an Islam that is conservative, prescriptive, punitive and inclined to violence, even at the local level, with study, dialogue, and an exegesis of the Qur’an based on human rights and equality? A few recent national laws and legislative proposals have a strong puritanical and religious fundamentalist tint, and, say critics, promote discrimination and violence. Women’s organisations like LBH Apik and the Woman’s Health Foundation are strongly criticizing the new health law, which, they say, marginalises unwed couples by only entitling married people to safe reproductive and sexual health care. Moreover, they claim, the law promotes exclusion of people with a non-marriage-based and non-heterosexual sex life, such as gays, lesbians and prostitutes. When questioned, proponents and agitators for the law acknowledged that their goal was to eliminate prostitution and ‘abnormal sexuality’.5

Previously, in 2008, the anti-pornography law had led to controversy and even anger among progressive Muslims and social organisations. That law and the rabid and violent anti-pornography crusade that ensued in its wake across the country in nightclubs, in the streets and in the media, were in part the result of hard campaigns by parties such as the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), Indonesia’s largest radical Islamist party, which has close ties to the International Muslim Brotherhood.

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5 Health law discriminates against marginalised groups: Activists, The Jakarta Post, September 17 2009.
NGOs called before the Constitutional Court for the abolishment or amendment of the blasphemy law, which, they contended, is itself discriminatory and defamatory, violates constitutional rights such as freedom of religion and freedom of expression, and is in violation of numerous international human rights conventions ratified by Indonesia. In April of 2010, the Court ruled that the law would be maintained unchanged. Broad popular Islamic movements such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama objected to a revision of the blasphemy law.

Meanwhile, the murderous attacks and lynching parties on followers of Ahmadiyah continue to take place.

**THE KYAI BENDO PHENOMENON**

Apart from national legislation, some fifty local governments in Indonesia have established elements of the Sharia in local legislation as well. The government of Tasikmalaya is one of them. Here, Sharia laws passed in 2009 and 2010 are as unambiguous as they are radical. “We haven’t had any lynching parties here yet,” says Teh Enung, “but fundamentalism is raising its head, in legislation as well as in the streets where militias try to impose their Sharia standards on the community by force and violence. It’s getting ever closer. My husband and I have to be on guard. We are known as the people behind Puspita, as activists standing up for equality and religious tolerance, and against the negative impact of polygamy. That can be enough to get a visit from fundamentalist militants.”

Teh Enung picks up a copy of the latest bylaws. “The new law on prostitution criminalises an entire group of women who are forced to work in the sex industry out of poverty, or who are forced into it by pimps. In Tasikmalaya, prostitution is a huge problem that is only aggravating the AIDS epidemic. Tasik has the second-highest number of AIDS patients in West Java. But instead of looking for a social
solution for the misery that prostitutes and AIDS patients are suffering, the government votes in a law that allows police to go after these people. And the police are not even the biggest problem; it’s the Sharia militias like the Kyai Bendo that take the law into their own hands with impunity. Prostitutes, or women who dress like them, are dealt with harshly, harassed, beaten up, not only on the street, in clubs and hotels as well.”

“Standing up for equality can be enough to get a visit from fundamentalist militants.”

Tasikmalaya is not an autonomous Muslim area like Atjeh, even though the latest public order regulation might make you think otherwise. ‘The religious standards need to be respected by everyone in Tasikmalaya,’ reads the introduction. What follows is frightfully clear. It is forbidden for persons and businesses to engage in ‘entertainment’, to run pubs, cafes, discos, massage parlours or nightclubs. That would be against ‘our religion’ and ‘our culture’. Another bylaw addresses ‘values’. This one refers even more explicitly to the Qur’an, and enumerates the various forms of ‘sin’, the behaviour which is accordingly forbidden to Muslims: corruption, abuse of power, prostitution, sex outside of marriage, homosexuality, gambling, drinking alcohol, abortion, organising shows and other forms of entertainment, producing provocative advertising... Even tourism is a sin, and so, according to the letter of the law, forbidden. “The fines or minor prison sentences that might soon be imposed are not the biggest problem,” says Teh Enung. “These Sharia laws have not been officially enforced yet by the police, so there have been no convictions. The biggest danger comes from the unofficial, uncontrollable and extrajudicial actions of street militias. They all wear the Kyai Bendo attributes (a Bendo is a turban). They are already invoking the new laws to justify their actions. They started last Ramadan. I’ve already told you how they deal with women. These groups act like violent mobs in places of prostitution, in nightclubs and restaurants that are open during the day in the month of Ramadan. The merchants who sell food during Ramadan before Maghrib (evening prayer) are also an easy target. They break their marketstalls in the streets and beat up the merchants themselves. And none of the eyewitnesses and passers-by dare to do anything. It’s street terror in the name of Islam, pure and simple.”

Teh Enung is fighting this radicalism tooth and nail. “We are constantly lobbying parliament and the Tasikmalaya executive, as well as Komnas Perempuan, the National Commission on Violence Against Women. I do this with women’s networks like Alkhaham and ASPER, as a representative of Puspita and as a publicist. We inform policymakers about the negative impact their laws and legislative proposals are having in our streets, villages and cities. We serve as a barometer. Finally, we got a promise from the government that the legislation in question would be revoked. Then Komnas Perempuan wanted to organise a meeting between parliament, government and the NGOs and women’s networks to facilitate that decision-making process. But the government didn’t respond. So the message is: keep lobbying!”

“The best strategy is to keep on telling the stories of victims as much as you can. Concrete testimonies of girls, of women, of small street merchants. That’s how to illustrate the harvest that these abstract and ill-considered laws sow. Only it’s terribly difficult to get victims to
Chapter 3

The house is where it starts.

The Kyai Bendo and their followers come from small fundamentalist pesantren. So in that sense, coming from a pesantren ourselves we have some authority in their eyes.” How long that protection will hold is not clear. But there is no doubt that it is much needed. “Not long ago, Kyai Bendo people burned down a house of a leader of the Wahidiyah school, a movement which is considered by many to be a deviation from the teachings of Islam”, she says.

Why is Teh Enung sticking out her neck? Why is she putting her own life, the lives of her husband and children and those who live at Puspita, at stake? “But I’m not putting lives in the balance. I am always in dialogue; with my husband, with the women and girls I’m trying to help, with the authorities, the courts, the police, and wherever I can, with radical groups. I try to assess the risks and I never do anything foolhardy. What I do is risky, but it’s a calculated risk. Why do I do it? I have to. Now more than ever, we have to be the face of the moderate, tolerant and social Islam for which Indonesia has stood for so long. It’s my way of curbing fundamentalism. And not just my way, but Puspita’s way, and to a large degree, of my pesantren. We are at a crossroads in Indonesia.

A radical and fundamentalist form of Islam is gaining ground in society. But fortunately it has not been able to translate its influence into major political or electoral gains - yet. The people who want to turn Indonesia into an Islamist state are still a political minority. At the same time, you see that the present government is doing little to nothing to stop fundamentalists. That means those of us who stand for the traditional Indonesian Islam have to fight harder to show that tolerant face of Islam. Not only to the whole of Indonesia, but to the world.”

ATTACK ON ISLAM

“This repressive legislation and the violence it breeds are attacks on fundamental freedoms and rights. They represent a form of intolerance that scares me. In fact, they are also attacks on Islam itself and the reputation of Muslim men and women in Indonesia and throughout the world. They are diametrically opposed to my experience of Islam. The message of Islam is reconciliation, dialogue, justice and love for all beings. And if we, Muslim activists, are concerned, just imagine how religious minorities, marginalised groups and non-Muslims must feel. They’re scared to death. At Puspita we work with and for everyone, including minorities, prostitutes, homosexuals, apostate or heterodox Muslims, rape victims seeking an abortion... The consequence of this inclusiveness is that the Kyai Bendo could come down on us at any moment. It used to be a concern somewhere in the back of our minds, but today it’s a very real fear. It’s something that my husband and I have to learn to live with.”

“The fact that Puspita is part of a pesantren, a traditional and respected Islamic institution, is an important source of protection for us.

Faith and equality: these seem to be the two legs on which Teh Enung’s activism stands. As religious radicalism rises in the post-Suharto age, her struggle is gaining urgency.

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8 Darul Islam (‘House of Islam’) is an Islamist group that aims for the establishment of an Islamic state of Indonesia. It was founded in West Java in the 40’s by militias who opposed Dutch colonization and later the Indonesian Republic.
and significance. But her real motivation, the answer to the question of why she dedicates herself the way she does, may lie in her own past. Her own history is not marked by brutal violence and injustice. She comes from a Sundanese Muslim environment of good standing; her parents and grandparents had the influence and respect, on which she builds today. The fact that she as a woman is in control of her own path, and that her husband supports her in it, is perhaps not entirely new in her family. Like Teh Enung herself, her mother was once a teacher and headmistress. But the fact that she takes on such an outspoken leadership role in her pesantren in defence of equality is new indeed. That she is so fearless in helping other women to take control of their own lives, after a lifetime of exclusion, fear and abuse, is a testament to the new form of female leadership she represents. In pursuing it, she holds steadfast to Islam, not as the instrument of power that men so often use to seal their own dominance, but as an inspiration for the equality of all people before God and as a source for a new, just reality.

“Discrimination can never be sunnah, it can never be the true path in Islam.”

“I was six years old when I first saw what inequality does,” says Teh Enung. I lived in the pesantren with my brother and sister. My grandfather had two wives. One of them was my grandmother, she was his first wife. His two wives had 27 children in all. It was only much later that I understood the real reason for his polygamy. He wanted to build new schools, and a second marriage opened new perspectives, increased his influence and opened up new locations for him to build those schools. My grandfather treated his wives well. They lived in the same house, they were financially stable and they were not abused or beaten. To the outside world, it looked perfect. But as a little girl, I sometimes saw my grandmother crying. I saw how her grief was destroying her, though I couldn’t understand much of it. My mother told me stories of how my grandmother cried on the eve of her husband’s second marriage. And how the next day she had to walk next to him and officially escort him to his second bride. Already as a young girl I felt that polygamy was discrimination, and that discrimination can never be sunnah, it can never be the true path in Islam. As a little girl, I felt that even if these wives are treated equally, polygamy is a source of suffering. And that what gives men more standing and influence must not be something that causes women suffering. My father had only one wife, my mother. She taught, she even headed a school, and she wrote poems about justice. My parents loved one another and they treated each other as equals. My parents showed me the way beyond the injustice and sadness I had seen in my grandmother’s face. After my studies, when I was twenty-three, I started teaching in the pesantren where I had grown up, the pesantren that had been founded by my grandfather. I taught biology. But for me, biology was always a door to discussions on gender, equality and justice. And faith. Because for me, fighting for gender justice is a way to come closer to God and to give Islam another face. And when I see that even the leaders in the pesantren like my uncle, who once made my life so difficult and who denounced my ideas support me today, then I think I am on the right track.”

When we have finished talking, Teh Enung and her husband take us past the dormitories of the santriwati, the girls who take lessons in the pesantren and who live with them. Teenagers flit nervously by, on the way to their rooms, masked in white veils, giggling. Slippers at the doors, washing on the line, teddy bears on beds, colourful stickers on the
in which the founder of the school, Teh Enung’s grandfather, lies buried. He rests here, his first wife - The Enung’s grandmother - at his side, in a grave where visitors still come to pay their respects every day. Outside, in a grave beneath the gravel of a small inner courtyard, lies his second wife. Teh Enung’s husband tells me that to this day, the other grandchildren feel second rate as the descendants of a woman who always came in second place. They want her grave to be given the place of honour it deserves, alongside the founder of this large and renowned Islamic boarding school in West Java, the Cipasung pesantren.

It is doubtful whether she will ever be granted this posthumous rehabilitation; the mausoleum in the house looks far too small.
IF THEY ARE DOGS, THEN WHO ARE WE?

“EVEN AS A LITTLE GIRL, I KNEW THERE WAS ANOTHER FACE TO ISLAM.”

INAYAH ROHMANIYAH (41), TENURED LECTURER AT THE STATE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY OF YOGYAKARTA, RESEARCHER, FEMINIST, RELIGIOUS LEADER
We meet her on a sunny evening between *Maghrib* and *Isha*, the penultimate and the final prayer of the day. Radiant, self-assured, and with great zeal she shares her thoughts about faith, discrimination, pluralism, feminism, equality and fundamentalism. With an open mind, her eyes screened off by a pair of sunglasses, she gives context and meaning to these thorny and weighty subjects.

All the women we interview grew up in the traditional world of the pesantren. All worked their way up in their own communities. All practice and live their faith in ways that question, challenge, even subvert dominant religious paradigms of power and participation, of justice, of the relationship between men and women. In doing that they enrich and reshape religious, social and political practice and thinking.

Of all these women, Inayah is perhaps the one who has the easiest time switching from secular (‘western’) conceptions of sexuality, feminism and faith to Islamic interpretations and back again. This may be connected with her time spent studying in the United States (Arizona and North Carolina). She is very outspoken. She believes unshakeably and wholeheartedly in Islam. She is unwavering in her convictions, some of which would rile traditional Muslims and confuse western Islamophobes at the same time. “There is no hair on my head that can believe that homosexuality is a disease,” she says. For a woman with a strict salafi-wahabi older brother that is a bold position to take. She was the only daughter, surrounded by brothers who got all the privileges. Three of these brothers, when old enough, left Indonesia to study in Egypt or Saudi Arabia. When home, their sister bore the full brunt of their wahabi or Ikhwanul Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood) philosophy. “In my early teens, I cried almost every day,” says Inayah. “It was impossible to both freely and unashamedly be a woman and a Muslim.” In those same years of suffering her self-confidence and her activism awoke. Today she is an Islamic scholar with the authority to lead women as well as men in prayer. In the environment she comes from, this is nothing short of a Copernican revolution.

“I grew up in a village in Central Java, between Bandung and Yogyakarta, in the *Madrasah Wathoniyah Islamiyah*. It’s theologically a wahabi pesantren, not affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama or Muhammadiyah. It was run by my grandfather and my father. My father was a man of high standing. I was his only daughter from my mother’s side and I had to behave as a model young girl in every way. How I spoke, how I dressed, who I spent time with, everything I did was scrutinised. The pressure was horrible, especially after my brother came home from Saudi Arabia. Boys in my environment, particularly my brothers, were much freer to do what they wanted. Singing, dancing, even simply playing sports, for me all these things were simply out of bounds. It was completely contradictory. I was at the centre of my parents’ and my brothers’ attention, but I could not call attention to myself with my behaviour in any way. And the older I got, the more challenges I had to face. Not only because I was turning into a woman, but also because around the mid 1980s, society was becoming more puritanical and the influence of fundamentalist Arab Islam was rising.”

**ONE GENERATION AGO**

“There’s a world of difference between the time before the 1980s and after. I still recall very well when I was a little girl how feminine the women in our community looked. They would wear the beautiful traditional Javanese clothing, which was cut tight, sometime with a transparent, light and long head scarf called *kerudung* or *kudung*. Almost no one wore the *hijab*, the Arabic head cover for women. Today you see almost nothing else. My little brother, who was very conservative concerning the *hijab*, went to study at Al Azhar University in Cairo, the chief...
centre for Sunni Islamic learning in the world and the center of the Muslim Brotherhood movement. When he came home in 1996 he was extremely outspoken about wearing or not wearing the head scarf. ‘A woman who does not wear the hijab or kerudung is nothing more than a dog.’ That’s what he came back from Cairo saying, with all the wisdom he had absorbed over there. Even though I was kept on a pretty short leash myself as a little girl in the 1970s and early 1980s - when my father still ran the pesantren - things were different, more open and democratic in those days.”

“Very early on, I felt that I should follow my father’s example rather than that of my brothers, who were more radical and more short-sighted. Within the pesantren environment, my father was a feminist. His ideas were much more progressive and tolerant than those of his sons. He never forced my mother to keep house. She was free to come and go where she pleased, even outside of the pesantren. My mother taught in the pesantren, sometimes seventy santris or more. She was given the freedom to empower herself and to gain standing. And she urged my brothers that they should never become polygamous and they must give their spouses every opportunity to become all they could be. And today? Today, my eldest brother from my father’s side forbids his wife to even come near a male visitor. Today, his wife is eager to find another women to be his second wife to help her with the housekeeping and to bear him even more children. Simply following the idea that polygamy is good because it increases the ranks of the faithful and contributes to generate more pious Muslims. What does that mean? What does polygamy mean? I respect my brother’s conviction but for me it means that a woman’s life is reduced to procreation and housekeeping, to bed sheets, nursing and cooking. No distractions, no excursions, no radio, no TV, not a single step outside the confined world of table, bed, husband and child, and the female students who live around the house. Just to give you an idea of how different and how much freer it all was just one generation ago.”

**CONTROL**

“My father died in 1981 when I was ten, and things only got harder after that, particularly when I entered junior high school in my pesantren. By that time I was no longer a child, I had my periods. I was becoming a young woman. And ever more strongly, I felt first-hand one of the central and guiding principles in the traditional and very male-oriented interpretations of Islam, namely that the woman is a temptress who if not reined in will be a cause of disaster. That was a huge factor in junior Islamic high school. And even more so at home. Certainly when my older brother, son of my father but not of my mother, came back from the Ibn Saud University in Saudi Arabia, the house became very puritanical. This compulsive idea to reduce a woman to an object of lust, to an object of temptation and danger, is an obsession. Anything even remotely associated with pleasure, enjoyment and the unchecked experience of happiness is haram, is seen as a distraction and an obstacle to what life should be about - the focus on God - and so must be forbidden. Mixed classes in the pesantren were abolished, even though our traditional Javanese Islamic culture does not at all have this kind of uptight response to the interaction between boys and girls. I suffered terribly. I was always very close to my friends, boys too, but suddenly as a girl I couldn’t do anything anymore. You would even be punished if they found out that you had sent a letter to a boy. Still, to this day, girls are not under any circumstances to walk alone after Maghrib, the evening prayer. In short: control, control, control. That’s what you have to live with as a girl. I couldn’t do that. I was never hit or otherwise physically abused. Luckily! But, the fact that my brothers were free to come and go as they pleased, to play, and to enjoy life, while I was under such extreme supervision, made me jealous. I just didn’t
know how to deal with this feeling. I often cried in those days. I constantly asked myself, ‘Is this the only face of our religion?’ And I asked my mother the same question, but never got a real answer, let alone that I got to see any other face of Islam. There was no one else I could talk to about this, not even my friends, or other girls.”

“Within the pesantren environment, my father was a feminist.”

“My father was never polygamous, but he was married three times. His first wife went back to her parents’ village. She found life in my father’s pesantren too hard, given all the duties to take care of female students and other responsibilities. After that my father remarried and again the marriage broke down. His third wife was my mother. She had six children. One daughter - me - and five sons. And my father has another five children from his previous wives, two of them are twin daughters. You often see people go into marriages as a means of binding between pesantrens, to increase the power and position of the pesantren and of persons and families. As I come from the heart of the pesantren world I’ve seen marriages like that up close. Very early on I promised myself that I would never marry anyone from a pesantren. It’s too much about power, position and standing, and too little about the relationship and personal development. I kept my word.”

JUST WAIT

Like so many girls who are held in bondage in the name of religion, young Inayah seeks a way out through study. Her sharp mind is a weapon, but standing out intellectually is also a source of discrimination. “My struggle was not just about freedom of movement and emotional freedom,” says Inayah. “At school, I was very good. I was the best student of the pesantren and later, when I graduated, of the province. I wanted to be able to stand out and grow, intellectually as well. At a certain point I was offered a scholarship to go to university in Egypt. It was a tremendous opportunity. But my mother wouldn’t let me go. ‘You’re my only girl,’ she said, ‘It’s not safe for you as a girl.’ Whereas my brothers could go and study in the Middle East! I can still hear my father’s student who succeeded him, saying, ‘Unfortunately, our star student is a girl.’ Unfortunately... that word says it all. I was so angry. Just wait, I thought to myself. Just wait and see.”

“So after finishing senior high school, I didn’t go to Egypt. But I did continue my studies at the State Islamic University in Yogyakarta. I wanted to study philosophy. But again I was frustrated. My brother forbade me. ‘Philosophy? You?’ he said. ‘Either you’ll go crazy from thinking too much, and that is not good, or you will get too smart and liberal-minded, and I’m not sure which is worse.’ I was grown up, I was smart, but I couldn’t make my own decisions. If I really wanted to study, then it was going to be tafsir, Qur’anic exegesis, and the study of the hadiths. So I gave in. And I found another way to get to where I wanted to be.”

“The faculty for tafsir and hadith studies turned out to be very progressive within the already progressive academic environment. I could study Islamic philosophy, and could even do so in mixed classes. And I discovered the works of great progressive Muslim thinkers, like Fazlur Rahman and Nurcholis Madjid. Men who expanded my horizons. And most of all, I discovered Islamic women thinkers and feminists, like Amina Wadud and Fatimah Mernisi. Their strength, their quest, their reasoning resonated within me. It was like...
recognising and acknowledging who I was: a feminist and a devout Muslim. For the first time, I got the answer to that question I had asked myself as a young girl. For the first time, I saw that other face of Islam, the face I had been looking for since I was a little girl in my parents’ house and at our pesantren.”

“For the first time, I saw that other face of Islam, the face I had been looking for since I was a little girl.”

“This discovery was a source of energy and enthusiasm. I also became a member of the Muslim Student Association, a progressive organization. Since then I’ve been following my way, the way of progressive Islam. Islam that gives man and woman, rich and poor, Muslim and non-Muslim equal opportunities to participate in society, in leadership, equal rights to education, to health care, equal opportunities to enjoy knowledge and art. Islam that unites tradition and modernity. Islam that embraces major sociological concepts and processes like social change, human rights and emancipation, and gives them a unique, non-western sense or meaning. Not Islam that is an obstacle in the fight against discrimination and political elitism, but Islam that is a driving force and inspiration in that struggle.”

SACREDNESS, DOCTRINE AND CULTURE

“From Fazlur Rahman and Nurcholis Madjid I learned that you have to make a clear distinction between key elements that Islamophobes and Islamic extremists alike tend to jumble together, namely, the sacred in Islam, the Islamic doctrine, and Islamic culture. The sacred is the core of religion that revolves around the revelation of the values of peace, justice and charity. We say revelation because it is given by God. Both the doctrine, that is the teaching as formulated and interpreted in rules and laws, and the Muslim culture as it is seen in our social interaction and in our mores, are constructed and set by human beings. In other words, doctrine and culture are open to change. In fact, they are the product of continuous interpretation, discussion and negotiation. The fiqh or Sharia law is not static or God-given. And if the laws facilitate discrimination or repression of women, then I see it as my duty to come up with a theological and social interpretation that is closer to a sacred value, namely the equality before God of all beings. The classical distribution of labour between man and woman, the role patterns that condemn women to the hearth and send men out into the world, and which many religious Muslim leaders like to give a divine status, is purely culture. The wearing of the jilbab is not a sacred phenomenon, but a cultural custom that influential men would like to see elevated to a rule, or even a sacred law. Of course I fight against this. Not against the custom - I wear the head scarf myself! - but against the assumption that wearing the jilbab is something that God decided. The obligation is about modesty, not the head scarf itself. This is about the differentiation I was just referring to, between the sacred, the doctrine and culture. When my little brother came back from Egypt and said that a woman without a jilbab was nothing more than a dog, I wouldn’t let it pass. I talked to him about it one day. Not with the theological knowledge I would later gain at university, but just using common sense. ‘If women without the jilbab are all dogs,’ I told him, ‘that means that our ancestors, our mothers and grandmothers, our aunts and great-grandmothers, all of whom went around without the jilbab up until the 1980s, were all dogs. That all our fathers, uncles and grandfathers who let their wives walk around with
bare heads in those beautiful Javanese clothes, were all doing something utterly wrong. That we are the children of wild dogs.’ That’s what I told him. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘you’re right, it’s a question of interpretation, of culture.’ He couldn’t say anything else.”

ASSALAAM ALAIKUNNA

“There is even a distinction in the holy revelation of God’s message and its expression in language, that is, in the Qur’an. The message is holy, but the language is a part of culture, of people and power relationships between people. Even the Qur’an is a part of historical dynamics, of cultural and social processes. Processes in which men have historically had a dominant position, and which have, as a result, taken on a patriarchal character. You can see that even in Arabic, the language of the Qur’an. Take the well-known greeting assalaam alaikum, peace be upon you. That suffix kum is masculine. When addressing a woman or a group of women, you would have to say salaam alaiikunna, but you don’t hear that. Or take the pronoun huwa, which is used for God or Allah. That means ‘he.’ Not ‘she,’ not ‘it,’ but ‘he.’ I started expressing these gender views very young, in my parent’s house and in school, and of course in academia this approach clashed with how established figures saw things. I wrote my bachelor’s dissertation on women in the Qur’an. One of my conclusions was that based on the Qur’an, men and women were in all respects equal before God, and so had to be treated equally on earth. Only ones devotion determines ones status before God, not ones gender. My examiner attacked my work on the day I defended my dissertation, but his arguments were weak. ‘Who screams first when a snake crawls by,’ he asked me, ‘a man or a woman?’ He really did ask this ridiculous question! ‘That depends,’ was my answer. ‘If the woman works in the zoo taking care of snakes, then only the man would scream.’ It seems like a banal argument, too easy for words, but in its essence it is crucial: always incorporate the social, economical, psychological, historical context into your interpretation of religion, and do not elevate every prejudice, every stereotype, every rule, every instruction or injunction into something unchangeable and sacred.”

THREEFOLD LIBERATION

“In fact, my activism, my feminism and my academic research essentially come down to the same thing. In all these activities, I, as an Indonesian Muslim woman, want to help bring about a liberation. A liberation with multiple aspects. Firstly, a liberation from patriarchal thinking and action, which is a liberation for both women and men. But also a liberation from western colonialism and western hegemony. Colonial thinking is still so deep-rooted in Indonesia, but you also find it in the way the West looks at Islam and at Muslim feminism. They look at us in the stubborn conviction that feminism, human rights and religion are incompatible, let alone feminism, human rights and Islam. And finally, I challenge Arabic religious colonialism. It is not true that Arab Islam is the only true Islam. The Islam as it arose and grew in Indonesia, in all its diversity, depth and richness, has just as much legitimacy, value and authority as what comes from Cairo or Riyadh. Patriarchy, western hegemony, Arabic hegemony, are forms of arrogance that have much in common.”

Inayah’s intellect easily outmanoeuvres conservative men at university. The most stubborn problem remains the home front. “After my bachelor’s degree, I won a grant from the Ministry of Religious Affairs to go to Mecca for two weeks. I would be doing the little hajj! It was a sort of reward for the high grades I had earned at university. After that I was planning to go to McGill University in Canada. I was offered a scholarship to study there. But my brothers, my uncle and my mother forbade me to go. Too dangerous for a girl - the same old argument. ‘You can go if you get married first and your husband lets you go’, this was what
they said. The same old catch. And as before, I accepted what came my way and followed my path. I had a hope to get married and then go and study abroad. This was my dream since Junior High school.”

MARRIAGE
In her own, self-selected way, she meets her own, self-chosen husband. She marries. And what goes for so many women in strict Muslim environments, including some who tell their stories in this publication, does not go for Inayah: her marriage is not a prison, it is a release, a boost to her personal development. “I met my husband in the student association. He was studying in the philosophy department, where I had so wanted to study. We talked for hours about so many things for so long, about social justice, faith, philosophy. In those hours, we forged our relationship, we found the way to each other’s heart. We were on the same wavelength, intellectually, theologically and emotionally. We challenged each other, complemented each other, spurred each other on. This was the man I wanted to marry. He did not have a pesantren background, and maybe that was exactly the reason why he was the man for me. For me, my marriage was a liberation.”

“At a certain point, I focused my theological research on a hadith that permits women to become imam. I was completely over the moon about this discovery. It opened a door for women that had always been closed. My husband not only shared my enthusiasm, but also acknowledged my authority as a religious scholar. I didn’t have to put up any kind of fight on the home front. That’s when I started leading prayers in our own family circles. You cannot imagine what kind of revolution that is. And what this means for gender equality and gender justice. And my husband acknowledged this leadership by standing behind me during the prayer. Now, outsiders might look at this and say that it doesn’t mean very much, because it’s just an intimate family circle. But in fact, doing this in front of the family is even more daring than in a public meeting, because a husband thus acknowledges his wife’s religious authority over him.”

“Being an imam is not comparable to, say, being a Catholic priest. For one thing, Christian ecclesiastical institutions are set up totally differently from the institutions in Islam. Less institutional, also less hierarchical, but that’s not something we can get into here. What is important is that there are three essential criteria for becoming an imam. You have to be fluent in Arabic, you have to have a certain seniority in terms of age, and you have to act as a host. There is no training, diploma, official degree or position you have to possess to become an imam. Apart from the criteria I just said, it has much more to do with the authority you have in the community. It is an authority you gain with your knowledge of the Qur’an and other religious sources, with your wisdom, with your aptitude for listening and mediating.”

PRINCIPLE OF JUSTICE
Taking the courageous, unprecedented and self-determined step to becoming an imam puts Inayah in the heart of spiritual life. It is an exciting new place. But a place where she proclaims essentially the same message and the same insights she developed and expressed in her parental home, in the pesantren, at university, and in her own family. “These insights ultimately come down to the same principle of justice: the equality of all people before God: man or woman, believer or unbeliever, and the respect for all beings.”

The liberation Inayah experiences in her marriage pushes her to make an old dream of hers come true, studying abroad. “After completing my master’s in Yogy, I was offered a Fulbright fellowship in Religious Studies at Arizona State University in the United States. This time I packed my suitcases and went abroad. I got a second master’s degree with a
“The Muslim Brotherhood and the Indonesian PKS are very clever in the way they bind local communities to them.”

research on the role of women in radical and fundamentalist networks and movements, specifically within Majelis Mujahedeen Indonesia (MMI), a network of radical Islamist militants. We don’t really have the time to discuss the research I did there, as it is still very new. But one of its most important conclusions was that women in MMI force us to take a new look at terms like ‘progressive’ and ‘feminist.’ Many women affiliated with MMI go out into the world, go from door to door and in fact exhibit a great degree of proactive behaviour, independence, freedom and even leadership. But yet, they operate in a strict Wahabi and extremely patriarchal context. MMI and the Muslim Brotherhood and the Indonesian PKS, are all very clever in the way they bind local communities, the building blocks of society, to them. Of course, the mosques are a centre of leadership and influence. These are the places of welcome, gathering and preaching. Everything happens there. People even sleep there. It is a blanket of friendliness and solidarity that you find there. Radical fundamentalists are very forthcoming and kind if you go to them and ask for information or if there is something you need. But their messages are not usually very deep. They are very jingoistic. Many fundamentalist leaders also have a technical background, coming from the ICT sector, for example. They don’t have the intellectual or theological baggage to get into deep discussions. They are very active campaigners, with very little baggage. But they do more than that. They receive money from the Middle East, zakat for jihad is what it really is. With that money, they also do useful things, mostly things that a community of poor villagers is in need of. They combine propaganda with services. They establish schools, from nurseries to universities, where parents can place their children in a strictly religious environment for very little money. This is just one example. So they are smart, perseverant, and they have something to offer, even for the woman with ambitions to make something of herself. And so, I have to be smarter. As an expert on Islam, as a woman who comes from a traditional and even a Wahabi pesantren, I have more than enough cards to play to share my message, my view of Islam, with this same audience. I will quote the same religious sources and appeal the same religious aspirations. I will appeal to people’s same desire to get ahead in life, and with women in particular, I will talk about the situation at home and on the street, the future prospects for their children.”

DIALOGUE

“But I do not only talk to them, I talk with them. I try to find ways to talk about things that are difficult for women to talk about. Things they suffer from, like polygamy, domestic and sexual abuse, neglect. The subjects may differ, sensitivity may differ and the level of depth changes, but the most important thing is that in these gatherings I show a different side of Islam, another methodology for gaining insights and making decisions. Not the literal, text-based approach to the Qur’an that radical puritans hold on to, where every rule or law is considered absolute, and precludes any participation or interpretation, but the approach that along with the text also looks at the spirit of the message, the context and the historical perspective. That approach is built on discussion, it’s a process of dialogue and
arriving at a shared interpretation. In other words, the starting point is participation and responsibility, not just commandments and prohibitions. Now, this doesn’t at all mean that there are no commandments or prohibitions that a good Muslim needs to live by, it means that every faithful person needs to follow them according to his or her own rational, empirical, hermeneutic grounds. God and commandment, good and evil, cannot be dependent on the intangible oral authority of a few old men with a lot of power.”

“As an academic, I contribute to the intellectual debate, and as an activist I go out into the villages, the living rooms.”

“It may seem like you can never bridge the gap between these approaches. But you can. Don’t forget that we share the same faith. That’s where we differ, but it’s also where we can come together. When I encounter resistance to me as a person, resistance to me coming to a community, then I say that I studied tafsir at the theological faculty, that I come from a Wahabi pesantren, and I say who my father was. Then my authority is acknowledged. Me and my colleagues also give human rights training to Sharia judges, also in fundamentalist environments. The first, almost reflexive reaction is that we are Zionists with a western or secular agenda. As if all westerners are Zionists. Or secular. But after a few days of training, I see the openness, and by the end, I see understanding. They exhibit the willingness to look at ways of integrating human rights and women’s rights in their dispensation of justice. Or they show that they want to take a new look at something unassailable, like polygamy. Once I even saw how a judge, after initially not wanting to hear a word about it, started telling women in his own court that they had the right to refuse polygamy in certain circumstances. Before, man’s will was law, whether he treated his wives justly or not. The fundamental assumption of many men in closed and radical environments is still that the Qur’an teaches that we hit our wives and that we can be polygamous whenever we feel like it. And after discussions, after training, you see that their convictions start to break down. That even judges, central, established and influential figures, can take a different look at it. That human rights are not necessarily a western threat, but can be defended by deeply devout people from the same area, and might just be compatible with Islam.”

“So dialogue is possible, even with the most radical. Not only with Sharia judges or Islamic militants, but more importantly, with women in closed religious communities. Our faith binds us, but of course there is also solidarity as women, as mothers, as spouses, as daughters. This kind of dialogue is becoming ever more crucial for our country. Conservative Islam is rising. Islamist rules and laws are gaining ground. Take the religious blasphemy laws or the draconian pornography legislation. This kind of fundamentalism is on the rise because the state and the government are losing power and influence. Our state is getting weaker. The fact that political Islam is jumping in and trying to fill the power vacuum has more to do with the politics of power than religion. However loud radical extremists may shout their religious slogans, political Islam is about power and politics and has little to do with faith. And the louder they scream, the more necessary dialogue becomes. If the government has no response to extremism, and it is becoming increasingly clear that they do not,
it makes our job of stimulating dialogue even more important. We do the work, we come up with strategies for conducting the dialogue, we are sticking out our neck. But the government doesn’t acknowledge this, doesn’t see us as an example, and so is missing the point a second time.”

“Another important message that I share with fellow believers is that justice is a universal principle. It is not just about equality and equal rights between man and woman, but between young and old, poor and rich, believer and non-believer. Every citizen has the same claim to education, welfare, health care, participation in governance, freedom of religion, in short to a good life free of violence and repression. And only God can take a life away. Anyone who kills one person, kills a community, kills a generation. This message is clear in the Qur’an. These fundamental rights and freedoms are like sunlight; they are of and for all people. And another thing that I often bring into the discussions is a sort of moral imperative: do not act purely out of your own conviction, but base your actions on what you have thoroughly discussed. First discuss and listen before you act or decide. Speak long and intensively with your wife or husband, your child, your community, with the outsider. This concept is something deeply rooted in Islam. This in itself makes me a true Muslim: everything I have achieved in my life, all my liberations, have been based on these values of dialogue and the art of listening. My marriage, my religious leadership, my academic work and my motherhood.”

“One difficult dilemma that I sometimes struggle with, and that is borne out of my different roles and positions, is that my work as an activist sometimes puts a strain on my work as an academic, or vice versa. Academic research is something you do with an empirical and rational perspective. It demands a certain detachment, while activism springs from a deep social drive. They don’t conflict all the time, but sometimes I have to choose. A rule of thumb and a guiding principle in my work I never depart from, is: never politicise. My activism, my faith, my research, can never serve power politics or party politics. I refuse to revert to sloganeering. Slogans and buzzwords shut down dialogue. This also means that, so far, I never went into the political arena to try to change the things that need to change. As an academic, I contribute to the intellectual debate, and as an activist I go out into the real communities, the villages, the pesantrens, the living rooms. If one day I think it can help me make a significant change, I might change my mind and get involved in politics. We’ll see.”

**SEXUALITY**

In addition to polygamy and domestic and sexual violence, there are other subjects that are sensitive in many Muslim environments. One is homosexuality. It is a subject that Inayah does not shy away from. “To start with, I respect every personal choice as long as it respects the freedom of others. And that includes a person’s sexual orientation. I have lesbian and gay friends and there is not a single hair on my head that can think of them as abnormal or sick. I am, in the first place, their friend. As ulama, as a Muslim leader, I have another, harder challenge: I have to also convince conservatives and extremists to respect and accept people’s personal choices, their sexual choices, their religious choices, whether a person is gay, lesbian or bisexual, Muslim, Jew, Christian, Hindu or atheist.”

“When you discuss homosexuality, a frequent part of the discussion is whether it is takdir - determined by God - or not. Is it inborn, or is it a choice borne out of social and environmental influences? Or a combination of both? With my students at the university, I can talk more openly about it. But with men and women in remote and isolated villages, it is an extremely delicate and difficult discussion. It goes to the heart of the matter, which is tolerance and acceptance of things that are different.
And yet, here too Islam helps to get the discussion going, with the fundamental value of equality of all people before God and the idea that only God can pass judgement on a person."

“It is my task to first uncover these injustices and then help break through the taboo.”

“But however interesting and necessary the discussion of homosexuality is, in these remote villages domestic and sexual abuse of women remains the most important issue. Media often report that women and girls are being hit with sticks, cut with knives, beaten, burned with acid. Almost always this is done by men. It is my task to first uncover these injustices and help break through the taboo. Fear keeps most victims from even talking about it, let alone going to the police or the Sharia court. It not only happens in the backward villages. One of my best friends is a teacher at a secondary school. Her husband is ulama and teacher as well, and he severely abuses his wife. I have tried so many times to convince her to divorce and to report the abuse to the police. I even hired a lawyer for her. But she doesn’t dare. And on top of that, like so many women she is afraid of the consequences, economic and otherwise, once her husband has to go to prison. Fear of taking action is not just about ignorance; there are so many vicious circles of economic dependence, social exclusion and psychological oppression. Did you know that about 67% of the divorces in 2009 were requested by women and that mostly they were the result of domestic violence? That should tell you how widespread the plague of violence against women is. What that percentage doesn’t tell you though, is how many women keep silent and suppress their pain out of fear. Most women who do step up in public and point to the violence only do so after suffering for decades, when their children have left and they can stand on their own two feet. Only then do they dare to stand up for themselves and throw off the chains of stigma and taboo.”

2030

“What are my dreams? Where do I hope my country will be in twenty years time, in 2030? I hope subjects like gender equality and pluralism will be standard curriculum in all schoolbooks, handbooks and courses from kindergartens to universities and from madrasas to pesantrens. I hope that in all these books, the sexual stereotypes and gender roles are thrown out and replaced by realistic, modern and just depictions of the relationships between men and women. I hope that people of different faiths and non-believers are no longer spoken of with hate and aggression in Islamic schools. That they no longer teach that Valentine’s Day is a despicable celebration of degenerates. I hope that by then our contextual theology that takes regard of text, context and the spirit of the revelation, has taken root among more people. If all this fails, then I fear the worst. Even now I see that the power of fundamentalism is taking hold in universities. Universities have always been the places of innovation, discussion, debate. But at my own university in Yogyakarta, I see that two new departments have been set up, one for social affairs and one for technical sciences, and in them, most of the students and many lecturers come from extremely radical Muslim groups. And you notice the impact immediately. The number of female students with long headscarves is exploding. If this trend continues, then I fear that in the future the fundamentalists will be in charge, with all the regional and global consequences this implies. That’s why I keep doing what I’m doing.”

“But I want to do more than that. I want to go abroad, to Islamic countries where the situation for women is even more dire.”
I want to go to Afghanistan this year to work there with the department for women’s affairs. There, I want to learn, listen, study and see whether I can do anything to ease the suffering of those women. With my faith, my knowledge, my activism, my feminism. I know this is possible, because ultimately, all of us, radical as well as progressive believers, men and women, we are all fighting the same enemies: poverty, violence, injustice, inequality and exclusion.”

“Once my six-year-old son shook me up with something that he said to me offhandedly. Something that touches on the core of all the things we talked about in this conversation. He said, ‘You know mama, we should actually be bombing God. He is so cruel, so hard, so angry, and he only punishes.’ A boy of six! My son! I know why he said that. His teacher at school must tell him misleading things about God. He teaches that God only punishes and is angry with the world. It’s up to me to show him another face of God, another face of the world, and another face of his fellow man. A face of love, faith and understanding.”
“Patriarchy is a creation of men, not of God.”

Nyir Ruqqoyah
(42), activist and Pesantren leader in Bondowoso (East Java)
In an instant, she went from being a happy girl to a woman enchained. On a day like any other, she was suddenly forced to go with a man she had never seen before. Struggling, crying, questioning, all to no avail. Without knowing it, she had become the brand new bride of the man who took her away to another village, another family, another life. She was fourteen. She had no idea what a marriage meant, let alone a wedding night. She was about to find out.

For young Nyi Ruqqoyah it came like a thunderclap out of a clear blue sky, for her parents it was the natural outcome of expectations and venerable traditions. As daughter of a kyai, head of a pesantren, there was but one future in store for her: to live meekly and humbly as the wife of the son of another kyai. Things worked out differently. Ruqqoyah defied traditions and challenged expectations. Today, after years of abuse and domestic violence and having gone through two divorces, she is going her own way. In Bondowoso in East Java, she heads a small girls’ pesantren and is known far and wide as a religious leader as well as a gender activist. Wherever she can she engages in dialogue with Salafi hardliners, but she is also highly in demand as a speaker and preacher to the moderate Muslim community.

Justice, gender equality and faith are the three pillars of Ruqqoyah’s mission. In her view, Islamic teachings and women’s rights go hand in hand. She does not have the slightest doubt about Islam or the truth of her own faith, but she does challenge the patriarchal dominance that many men profess with dubious religious arguments.

More than half of her life, Nyi Ruqqoyah has been an active member of Fatayat and Da’wah, the women’s and mission arms of Nahdlatul Ulama. She is forty-two, divorced, and has a grown-up son. In her small pesantren in the eastern Javanese village of Prajekan, she tells her story.

“Just like me my father headed an Islamic boarding school. He died when I was young, and I grew up with my uncle here in Bondowoso. But before my father died, when I was nine, he had already chosen a husband for me. My future spouse was the son of a local religious leader. But I knew nothing about it and was left completely unprepared. For years, my parents kept my future a secret from me. Five years after their choice, when I was fourteen, the day came when I had to go away with the man who turned out to be my husband, a man who had his own pesantren. I thought I was to go on studying as a santriwati in his pesantren. But suddenly I was a married woman! My own mother had a more pleasant youth by comparison. She married at twenty-five. Being a mother, she did not have the position or the power to keep me from being married off as a little girl.”

Ruqqoyah has blocked out all memory of the first year of that marriage. “That’s how unbearable those days were. I do not even remember the first night I had to go to bed with him. The only thing I do remember from that year is being sick all the time and that I often fainted, which continued to happen in the years thereafter. Sometimes I was unconscious for days. No one understood why. But my situation was just too much for me. That’s why I would faint. I have erased that whole first year from my memory, even to this day.”

However obvious the cause of her frailty may seem, those around Ruqqoyah have no idea what to do with the fainting fourteen year old bride. “They sent me to the doctor. I was treated by all kinds of medical persons. But nothing helped. And because regular caregivers and doctors had no answers, they turned to the paranormal. And they prayed a lot. But still to no avail. It was not until I was fifteen, sixteen that I started to get a little better. That’s where my memory picks up again. I did not love my husband. Not that I hated him. He didn’t hit
me, he didn’t yell at me. I just had no feelings for him. Not then, and not later. I felt very little emotion of any kind. I wanted to just go on living as a child, as a girl, but yet I had only one task in life: to obey my husband.”

In a stifling environment, imprisoned in a forced marriage, the girl seeks ways to grow, to live and to empower herself. Playing and the simple pleasures of childhood are things of the past, for good. Sexual and other marital obligations are coupled with studies and prayer. But also, being the wife of a kyai. with notable privileges, which gives rise to envy and hatred among other young girls and women in her husband’s family. “At sixteen, I joined Fatayat, the women’s organisation of NU, and also became a member of Da’wah, the NU’s proselytising branch. In this devout Muslim environment, it was only natural for a bright young Muslim girl to join an organisation like that. But not everyone was given this opportunity. In some sense, it was my salvation. I noticed that my father-in-law encouraged me to immerse myself in faith and study. He was also the one who encouraged me to do the social work that I did in Fatayat and Da’wah. With my father-in-law I read the Qur’an and the kitab kuning, the ‘yellow book’ of religious teachings. I was like a private tutee in his own school, it was wonderful. I was also the only daughter-in-law who lived in my father-in-law’s pesantren. I quickly discovered that I had a talent for public speaking and preaching, and I always looked forward to going to the Fatayat lessons and training. It was actually quite unusual that I had so much freedom to come and go. None of the other daughters-in-law had this kind of liberty. Inside the house I had a special position as well. I could spend more time on studies and prayer. I also did housework, but to be honest I didn’t have all that much to do in the house. So often, while the other women had to cook and clean, I could sit in my own study and read the Qur’an. You might say I was given preferential treatment. The others thought I was spoiled, and the family turned against me, first my sisters-in-law and later my husband as well. Every time I needed to go out my in-laws would say the most horrible things to me, they would start a row, they would stop me from leaving the house. Then my husband started to do the same thing, and the pressure to stay at home started mounting. My husband knew very well that outside home, I was only learning and doing the things a proper Muslim girl should do, but he still joined in with the rest of them. He did not have the backbone or the character to stand up to his own sisters and mother. Then when my father-in-law died, that was it - the whole family turned against me.”

THAT STUPID KEY

After three years of marriage, at the age of seventeen, Nyi gives birth to a son. Five years later, the situation has become so hard that she leaves her husband. She considers it the biggest and most rewarding step in her personal history. “It all started with a key, of all things, a stupid key. I came home after preaching in a number of different places. Immediately my husband and my sisters-in-law came down on me all at once. They were in such a state. What was the problem? My husband, who had a house key just like I did, had locked himself out. Apparently he had been standing there calling at the locked front door for a very long time. Finally he had kicked the door down. When I showed up they threw it all in my face. Why was I always gone, why couldn’t I just stay home like other women? But it was my husband who had just forgotten his own key! My husband’s sister also screamed at me. It went from bad to worse. Finally he had kicked the door down. When I showed up they threw it all in my face. Why was I always gone, why couldn’t I just stay home like other women? But it was my husband who had just forgotten his own key! My husband’s sister also screamed at me. It went from bad to worse. Finally my husband said that he wanted to divorce me. I always felt I shouldn’t be the one to take the initiative to split up. I didn’t really have a problem with my husband, but all the more with his family. But because it stayed at words, and they never did anything official about it, I had really just had enough. In the end it was me who went to the Sharia court with my mother to apply for a divorce. In 1992 I took my son and left
my husband. I was a divorced woman and I felt liberated! No regrets, no joy either, no major emotions at all, really. But I did feel that freedom.”

By that time Ruqqoyah is in her early twenties. Locally, she is already somewhat famous as a young, eloquent religious leader. While the divorce gives her more freedom to play this public role, it also makes her more vulnerable. The community generally looks askance at widows and divorced women. After all, what can a woman do on her own? What is a woman on her own? Little, at least in the eyes of those who surround her. Without a father, and now without in-laws, her social safety net is quite a bit smaller. And she has new financial worries. “I had some savings, and after my divorce I earned money on the side farming,” says Ruqqoyah. “I had bought some land and farmed on part of it. I could live in this house, where I live now and where I now have my own pesantren. It was one of my father’s houses. Because of my reputation and my father’s, the community still respected me even though I was divorced. But I did have to take care of everything on my own and start over from scratch. The hardest part was that from then on I had to be both a father and a mother to my son, and I felt so guilty for his sadness. I had to gain hope, strength and self-confidence, not only for myself but for my son as well. My ex wasted no time in taking a new wife, and in his new life there was no place for our son. I taught my son to never let himself be dependent on his father, to never ask for money. The last thing I wanted was to see him rebuffed by his father yet again.”

“OWN PESANTREN

After a stolen youth, a child marriage and now, a divorce, Ruqqoyah pulls herself up by her bootstraps and returns to walk the path denied to her as a young girl. Instead of serving a kyai in his pesantren, she sets up her own school, continuing the work her father started but doing it in her own way. “My father died when I was twelve. I had come back to the place where he had once taught and had his school. But it had been closed for twenty years, and it was in an awful state. Before, I had been too young to take over his position. I was a girl, I had to be obedient, I was married off. But now I was a free woman with my own house. I was healthy, I was strong. I had earned my stripes as a female leader and speaker, and I knew the Qur’an and other sources of knowledge. All in all, I was in a position to reopen the pesantren. My pesantren. Everything was run down – the classrooms, the walls, the courtyard. We had to repair or rebuild everything. People from all around helped me. They brought building materials, meals. Everyone rolled up their sleeves and helped. The little pesantren you see today was truly a community project.”

“I wanted to do something for the local girls who were too poor to get an education. Today I provide housing, boarding and religious education to thirty girls aged eleven to seventeen. They pay nothing. They receive lessons, akhlak, tafsir, fiqh, Arabic, Qur’an exegesis... But they also have a home here where they can feel safe and where they can have fun together, share their hopes and fears, and comfort each other when feeling homesick or lovesick. Of course, young girls must not have an intimate relationship with a boy before marriage. But that doesn’t mean that they have to suppress their feelings. There is one santriwati, for example, who has a fiancée. In her own community they would not be able to see each other as a couple. That would be risky, because such closeness between a man and a woman in public before marriage is
strictly condemned. Here in the pesantren I allow her to meet her boyfriend. Not for kissing or anything like that, but I offer them a place to talk and be themselves without having to worry about prying eyes.”

“I run things here with the money I earn as a preacher at celebrations and gatherings, and with the profit from my crops. All my santriwatis come from Bondowoso and Jember, a neighbouring district. They stay here at the pesantren, but during the day they go to the nearby Islamic junior high school for basic education. Many of these girls weren’t going to school at all. It was too expensive, too far, too difficult, or just not allowed. We managed to convince all these girls and their parents to get around all these things so they could go to school. And for the ones who can’t afford a school uniform, we cover those costs as well. I find it to their credit, and to mine, that they are all going to school today. It makes me proud. I know as well as anyone that study is the path to freedom and independence, especially for girls.”

THE PHILOSOPHY OF WATER

In her personal life, freedom and happiness never seem to coincide with the married state. She marries a second time, but this marriage fails as well. She does not want to say much about it. At the time, her second husband was a member of the national parliament and their marriage problems were paraded in public and scrutinised in the media. “My second husband was a violent man,” says Ruqqoyah. “He beat and abused me, and on top of that, he started a relationship with another woman. He refused to grant me a divorce because then he would have had to pay me. In the end I went to court myself, just like I did in my first marriage. It was another painful chapter in my life. But it’s behind me now. I fought for my own place, for my own rights and for my own independence. Today, I can finally say that I am senang, I am happy. I have a hard struggle every single day, but I have the peace that comes with what I call the philosophy of water: I go with the flow. Come what may, I am ready for it.”

Today, Ruqqoyah is both a single mother and a respected Muslim leader. She preaches in the community, mediates in family conflicts, represents the interests of abused women, and is head of a pesantren. Her status is expressed in the title of ‘nyi’ given to her by locals. It is a traditional Javanese honorific given to female religious leaders. But Nyi Ruqqoyah is not undisputed. Into this traditional religious environment, she brings a message of equality between man and woman, a concept that gives rise to resentment in some circles, particularly among radical Muslim men. In some gatherings, it can come to real ‘preaching battles’, in which she must face male preachers - which she does. Diplomatically, but without giving in.

“I often preach to large groups of people, for example on Maulid, the day of the Prophet’s birth, or on Isra and Mi’raj, the day on which we celebrate the night Mohammed travelled with the angel Gabriel from Mecca to Jerusalem. Or on the founding day of the pesantren. I also speak at wedding parties. It’s quite unusual that as a woman I can preach to a mixed audience, but what is even more exceptional is that sometimes I preach to all male groups or lead them in prayer. All these occasions are an opportunity to discuss of inequality and discrimination against women, and to condemn it.”

ANOTHER MESSAGE

Nyi Ruqqoyah is fighting the same fight that Umi Hanisah is fighting in Aceh, and that Teh Enung is fighting in West Java: the fight against abuse and exploitation of women in the family and against the lack of access to education for girls; for religious leadership by women and equal opportunities in the political arena; for elected positions and true participation in public decision-making. “The standard message is that women have to follow men, be obedient, care for the children; women are
there to support men in their duties, dreams and ambitions. This is their role, their essence, their reason for being. Kyais (male heads of pesantren), ustad (male teachers in Muslim schools) and other male religious leaders play a vital role in spreading and reinforcing this message. And because 99% of all religious leaders are men, this is the dominant message. I bring a different message. We women have the same rights as men on every front. However you define it, our role is not one of subservience; quite the contrary, we can play the same roles and hold the same positions as men in any field. The fact that I say this in the traditional religious environment of the pesantren gives my message extra weight. It means that I can reach people who normally never hear this type of message. And that I, myself, as head of a pesantren, am taking the first step towards giving shape to female religious leadership, and do something about the distorted proportion of men versus women in leadership positions."

“Leadership is not determined by your gender but by the role you play. And that role is not gender-dependent.”

However outspoken Nyi Ruqqoyah is, she cannot air her ideas and convictions freely everywhere. “I always try to profess my message clearly, consistently, and plainly,” she says. “Sometimes one has to be diplomatic, and other times subjects are too sensitive for a specific group or community. Insulting or belittling people is something I would never do. Wherever I go, I will always treat everyone present with the utmost respect, and certainly the male dignitaries. I will always speak a language that the local people can understand and connect with. This means that in very conservative communities, I don’t talk about women’s rights. For many traditional Muslims, that comes across as too western. It makes men feel insulted and they quickly close off. But talking about equality between men and women is more acceptable, and I can convey my message just as well with that as a theme. I only formulate positions or express opinions after discussing specific injustices and practical dilemmas, so everyone present has an idea of what we are talking about. Take, for example, the position that the man is the head of the family and, by the same token, the household. Most people think that’s just the way it is. They never question it. But assuming that’s true, it means that he is responsible for financially supporting the family in all circumstances. In practice, many men don’t do that and many of those present know this all too well. These men are spending beyond their means, not able to deal with money, and often being polygamous they cannot maintain their wives and children. There may be more reasons why a man is unable to support his family. Whatever the case, if they do not succeed in keeping up their responsibility, then we cannot call these men leaders or heads of a household. The fact that men are not the head of the household by definition does not mean that women automatically are. It means that the leadership falls to the person best capable of bearing the responsibility for the family. Generally, that is the mother; her sense of responsibility is greater, her focus on the future is better because the will to care for the children is greater. But likewise, when it comes to income and the household economy, mothers play a much greater role than is assumed. So leadership is not determined by your gender but by the role you play. And that role is not gender-dependent.”

SPIRAL
As Ruqqoyah’s argument goes on, it becomes clear that women’s social disadvantage is not
a linear phenomenon that you can catch up with or undo with a simple ‘affirmative action’ programme. It is a complex downward spiral of exclusion, driven by degrading traditions and grinding poverty and by unequal power relationships in the city, in the village, at church, in school and in the family. “In every race in life men have a privileged starting position. In education, in the relationships within the family, in inheritance law, in divorce law, in politics, and on and on. Take education. It takes years of work before you can be considered well-studied in Islam. In a pesantren, you will spend at least three years getting a good foundation in the kitab kuning, one of our most important religious sources of knowledge. Girls do not get that time; they are married off young, are kept at home, and have to put all their time and energy into housekeeping. As a result, they never get to enjoy the education they are entitled to, they never get the tools to make their way in the world and they never have the opportunity to stand up for their place in society and fight discrimination against women with all available arguments, including religious ones. It puts them at a lifetime disadvantage. And with every girl kept in a disadvantaged position men are freer to dominate and to put their patriarchal spin on Islam. Here, at my pesantren, they do get the time, and when they leave here they are much stronger at the starting line.”

Like all faithful or secular feminists or women’s activists in Latin America, Europe, or anywhere else in the world, Muslim activists like Ruqqoyah stress that gender must not be confused with sex. “I consider gender to be the role patterns imposed on men and women, boys and girls,” says Ruqqoyah. “These are cultural and social constructs that are sometimes so deeply rooted in tradition and in people’s psyche that they are no longer even seen as constructs, that is, as something created and imposed by people, and so something that is even changeable.
Masculinity and femininity, and all the characteristics, roles, positions, tasks and responsibilities attributed to them, are human constructs. This unlike our biological sexual differences, which are not of man’s design but are, in my eyes at least, created by God, despite everything being done to change and control the human body these days. An important concept from the Qur’an, kudrat, describes the biological uniqueness of man and woman, as well as the biological differences.”

“In every race in life men have a privileged starting position.”

“Only kudrat can limit a woman or man in her or his conduct or role. Simply put, a man cannot bear children or breastfeed them, and a woman cannot produce sperm. Just to name one example. But that doesn’t mean that the nurturing role automatically falls to the woman. Adhering to the principle of kudrat also means that Islam does not preclude things like in vitro fertilisation. But it does preclude trans-gender operations, for example, because this is a violation of the boundary set by kudrat, and so by God. Note that this de-biologisation of masculinity and femininity does not mean that I am disconnecting sexuality from reproduction or that I am condoning homosexuality. What I do say is that masculinity is not something reserved to men, and men can also express femininity and have feminine tasks. Men can take on the caring and nurturing role just as well as mothers can. In fact, they need to do this more. And women can just as easily bear the leadership roles that we associate with masculinity. To put it bluntly, arijal (masculinity) and ad’dahar (penis) do not mean the same thing. All familial, social and political roles, positions and tasks have to be equally accessible to both men and women. Biological differences must not impede that access in any way. If the prevailing opinion here in Java still is that women need to be in the kitchen and their duty is at home, that just means we still have a lot of work to do. Just look at nearby Bali, where they have very different ideas. There you see women working in the construction business and no one bats an eyelid. Patriarchy is a creation not of God but of men, men who want to exercise power. The Islam that I practice has nothing to do with patriarchy.”

NUSYUZ AND JIHAD

“For me, it’s very simple: true Islam does not restrict or discriminate against women in any way. Just the opposite. True Islam is a faith that liberates women from discrimination and slavery. Part of this liberation lies in the fact that Islamic social teachings inspire and move people to resolve conflicts in the family, in the community, in a state, even in the world, through dialogue, reconciliation and compassion. The guiding principle in this dialogue is the equality of all creations before God. Because women are the first casualty in many of these conflicts, Islam’s doctrine of social equality is first and foremost something liberating for women. Faith cannot be a blueprint, not a step-by-step instruction manual - neither for fundamentalists nor for feminists or the so-called progressives. Rules of faith and theological principles must always be reinterpreted in the specific social context in which you are applying or practicing them. Take controversial Islamic concepts like nusyuz (disobedience) or jihad. The former is frequently cited by fundamentalist or radical believers, particularly in the fourth Sura of the Qur’an, to justify violence against women, and the latter to incite violence against non-Muslims or unbelievers. Nusyuz is something that has to be interpreted. Where does disobedience end and standing up for your rights begin?”
“Absolute knowledge is not given to man. A Muslim should know that better than anyone.”

“This question opens up discussion on important issues, such as justice and injustice in a family or a community. This type of discussion and negotiation is part of the religious education that I offer. The Qur’an says that physical violence can never be the first choice, not even for nusyuz. The first option is that of the word, giving advice, counselling and opening dialogue to resolve the conflict. The second option or phase, when it comes to marital conflict, is separation of bed, to allow some time to cool off, literally, and then to enter into a discussion about the relationship with more detachment and reason, without emotions flaring up and escalating. The Qur’an only refers to chastisement as a last resort. If these first attempts at reconciliation are not first pursued in earnest, then physical violence is a sin. Trust me, husbands who hit their wives are in no way living up to the many prescriptions and principles in the Qur’an on the interaction between men and women. And even if they have exhausted every attempt to reconcile with their wives, or if they have always treated their wives fairly and justly and it is the woman who is acting unreasonably or unjustly, then the Qur’an still says that a man can never hit a wife in the face and can never cause injury. Yet that is exactly what happens in so many cases of domestic violence. The Qur’an also describes a situation in which a wife is permitted to hit her husband. Does that mean women should always choose to hit their husbands when their husbands are ‘disobedient’? Of course not. In the Qur’an, physical punishment mainly serves as a deterrent, intended to encourage every attempt at dialogue, discussion and reconciliation and to promote social justice and equal treatment.”

“The subject of jihad always starts off heated discussions about war, suicide bombings and other forms of extreme religious violence. For me, jihad has an entirely different meaning. It is literally the ‘strive for something good,’ turning a bad situation into a good one. Of course, the question is then how you define ‘good’ and ‘bad’, and of course this is about the ‘good faith’ and being a ‘good believer.’ But a core value of Islam is that you never look down on others, never put yourself above others, whether Muslim, non-Muslim, or kafir, which is someone who does not believe in God. You cannot look down on others because in the end only God can judge men; only God can separate good from evil. Who is kafir and who is not? Even someone who calls himself a good Muslim can be kafir. And an unbeliever can do more acts of compassion and justice in his or her life than someone who invokes the name of God at every turn. What Islam teaches me is that no one has the right to denounce another as kafir because no one knows another’s deepest thoughts, deeds and motivations. Only God knows that. No one has strayed further from the ‘good faith’ than Amrozi, the brain behind the bombings in Bali in 2002, the man who claimed to be acting on the instructions of ‘true faith’. He thought himself able to preside in absolute judgement over his fellow man. He claimed to have absolute knowledge over the difference between good and evil. And in that delusion, all he did was kill innocent people. Absolute knowledge is not given to man. By definition, that knowledge lies with God, and a Muslim should know that better than anyone.”

BATTLES
Religious meetings in Bondowoso are platforms where the best local preachers and religious leaders practice their talents and rhetoric, and test their positions against...
Chapter 5  Dialogue in the Lion’s Den

public opinion. Often, they speak in succession before the same audience. Every speaker wants to inspire and influence those present in his or her own way, and to take the wind out of the sails of the other speakers. One might be tempted to think it something akin to a rap battle with the ‘battlers,’ Qur’an in hand, following the Muslim code. When it is Ruqqoyah’s turn, it is usually not the men and women of the audience who have problems with her message, but the other clerics. “Many women open their eyes when I preach; they discover their rights and freedoms. It is especially the male clerics who have problems with that, because I undermine the positions that they are promulgating before me or after me. If the man before me says that women must always obey their husbands, then I say that the situation determines who must be obedient, and there is no law that says that women must always be submissive. If the man before me says that it is woman’s task to cook, then I say that is not true. Audiences nearly always accept this, because I construct my arguments logically and illustrate them with numerous everyday examples. Suppose the husband insists that his wife always cooks for him, but is himself not capable of providing his wife with rice or other necessities. ‘What then?’ I ask the audience.”

“We are anything but prudish; sexual matters are very clearly arranged in Islam.”

“As in other parts of the country, Bondowoso has a growing community of radical Muslims: men (and women) who applaud the fatwas against tight trousers, yoga and other ‘immoral’ acts. Or people with ties to international militant Muslim movements fighting for a worldwide
caliphate want to enforce strict segregation of men and women in the public domain and which denounces democracy as a godless system of government. “I know that extremism is rearing its head in Indonesia,” Ruqqoyah says. “Sometimes this is accompanied by extreme violence, lynching parties, arson... Luckily, I have yet to see anything like that in my own area. So far, my battles are restricted to the debating arena. There can be very fierce debates, but they do not erupt into extreme violence. I feel resistance all the time. There is talk. I know that in radical circles I am considered too liberal, too free-thinking. But fundamentalists prefer to keep blinkers on, they avoid dialogue, they choose to operate in small circles, they prefer to work in cells. I try to counter that, to engage them, because I do want dialogue and discussion. And we can have it, because we speak the same language, we use the same sources of faith and law, and we all come from an orthodox and traditional Muslim environment.”

**WATCH MY STEP**

Organising dialogue demands tact. If you’re not careful and tactful, doors that are open can suddenly close or turn out to be a trap. “We get requests, warnings and demands from all corners,” says Ruqqoyah. “There are Muslim women who feel more and more unsafe and who are having more and more trouble with their own faith. They do not want to hear about increasing restrictions on clothing or anything else. So they invite me to talk about it. But there are also fundamentalists who approach me to come to speak in their communities. They usually approach me through someone else rather than come to me directly, I am not asked to speak in their big gatherings but to small groups, to meet each other and exchange ideas. At the same time I am also being warned by women in the majelis taklim, the local women’s group, that radical political Islamist groups see me as too liberal, too progressive and that I have to watch my step. Once, with some people from Nahdlatul Ulama, I decided to organise a meeting in a musholla6, not far from a secretariat where militant Muslims from two radical parties7 were holding a meeting, in the same community. With NU and with the person responsible for the musholla, we prepared this prayer meeting and made a list of possible questions and answers for discussion with the community. This was the same community where women were feeling increasingly threatened by extremists. Tensions were palpable. Of course, in this kind of situation I will never be able to speak as freely as in my own pesantren or in my own circles. In the end, that meeting went off without incident. The most important thing is that we made some form of contact. Later, someone from that radical group personally invited me to speak at one of their religious meetings. They gave me a subject to talk about. I was to talk about forgiveness after the Ramadan. I got my message across in veiled terms. Without naming any individual people, parties or movements, I said that no group has the right to look down on other groups. I did not provoke anyone, and yet still, everyone knew what I was talking about: about men and women, about Muslims and kafirs.”

A female Muslim activist and friend of Ruqqoyah who is also present during the interview, expresses concern about radical cells using infiltration tactics. “Three radical groups, have been trying to infiltrate the traditional and non-radical Muslim networks of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah for some time,” she says. “So that has given rise to a lot of suspicion and panic. NU and Muhammadiyah have warned their members of the dangers of radicalism. In some cases danger comes very close. Jember, where I

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6 A musholla is a public prayer room, smaller than a mosque, where the faithful can perform the salaat, the ritual prayer to be performed five times daily.

7 All specific names of Islamist radical and militant groups mentioned in the following sections have been replaced by the general description of 'radical group' or 'radical party'. This was done for security reasons.
limit. If people start promoting violence based on their religious convictions - burning houses of prayer, lynching people of other faiths, assaulting and suppressing women or any form of aggression whatsoever, this has to be rejected in the strongest possible terms. Violence is the limit of freedom. That I am concerned does not mean that I am afraid. I know how skilfully hardline followers of a specific group spread their radical message. And they do it in the very communities in which I speak. Our messages and our methods are different. They choose to knock on doors virtually every day. They have the people and the money to do so. I don't. I have neither the time nor the money. Nor do I believe that I should spread my message by going door to door. I preach in my communities once a week and I deliver a consistent message. And I am not worried about losing ground. In these parts, this specific radical group has fewer followers than we do, and I see that they are losing them in growing numbers. Firstly, because they do not have a consistent story - just a ragbag of populist religious slogans.

live, has seen outbreaks of violence by radical militias more than once. And in Bondowoso, some Islamic groups recently tried to invite Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, former head of the Indonesian Mujahedeen Council (MMI) and leader of a radical jihadi group. Luckily, the local department of religious affairs blocked his visit. But you have to stay on guard. Radical Muslim groups are extremely good with their communications and recruitment techniques. They go tirelessly from door to door in small groups with their personal message. That persistence and personal one-to-one communication is threatening, but at the same time it is something that we Muslims who stand for a tolerant Islam based on gender equality can learn a lot from.”

**VIOLANCE IS THE LIMIT OF FREEDOM**
Ruqqoyah shares her friend’s concerns, but remains optimistic and deliberately chooses her own approach. “Of course I am extremely concerned. Extremism is on the rise, as I said. People are entitled to their own beliefs, and can even preach them, but this freedom has its
Secondly, because this specific radical Islamist group and other Salafi cells have no connection with our Javanese culture. I come from this culture, I know these people, my roots here go deep. These militant cells spread an imported Saudi and Arab ideology. Our language, our clothes, our way of thinking, our way of doing things, are totally different. And our Islam has been engrained in that Javanese culture for centuries. The fact that extremists stubbornly keep going from door to door is more a sign of desperation than of a successful strategy. It shows what little connection they find here. For the time being, the East Java Muslim community is not a fertile ground for Salafism. The fact that women and women’s organisations here protest en masse against radical clothing laws shows this. It is a very hopeful sign. But also, the fact that we go on celebrating Maulid, the birth of the Prophet, even though that is something truly haram for the radical followers of Arab Islam, shows our distinct character and our opposition to Arab extremism. And there is only one way to keep the clash of these opposing forces from erupting into violence and fanaticism: not by excluding, prohibiting or punishing, but by finding ways to dialogue. That’s what I do. By talking to radical Muslims and by inviting extremists to my own meetings and speeches. In these exchanges, I do not look for differences but try to share insights, and to find common ground.”

Ruqqoyah has a wide and varied network in Bondowoso. The nerve centre of that web is her own pesantren. As much as it is a place of prayer and education, it is also a place for action, activism and community care. “People know my struggle for women’s rights,” she says. “Women, mothers and girls can come to me for counsel. Victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse ask me for help. Often they have nowhere else to go. I make sure they can buy medicine, that they get the medical care they need. We take pictures of their injuries, prepare a file to help them defend their case and help the women enter into dialogue and to confront their violent husbands. And I have someone who comes to the pesantren regularly to give massages. She gives these women moments of peace and relaxation in the midst of the terrible stress and fear in their lives."

RAPED BY THE MUEZZIN
All cases of domestic and sexual violence are harrowing, but some hit harder than others. “There was an eleven-year-old girl who had been raped by her own grandfather, who was in fact the muezzin of the village. She was pregnant, and she told her grandmother what had happened. The grandmother went to the midwife, but the midwife brushed it off and said the girl just had a touch of flu. Then they came to me. The grandmother knew me because she was a member of a woman’s group I preached to. I tried to convince them to have an abortion immediately. The midwife, who finally saw that she was pregnant, still refused. I insisted. In some cases of pregnancy after rape, there might be a reason to insist on marriage and keep the child. But this was incest, rape at a shockingly young age, and moreover, the girl was only one month pregnant. They finally did do the abortion. Luckily, Then I advised them to prosecute the grandfather. But the resistance and the shame in the family was too strong, and most of all the girl was too fragile. She couldn’t handle a long and drawn-out criminal case, and I didn’t want to push her. She had already been through hell long enough.”

Almost touched an unknown man! That would have undone her wudhu.
After telling her story, Ruqqoyah takes us through the rooms of her pesantren. It is evening, time for the Maghrib prayer. In the dwindling light, we see the santriwatis silently moving off to the prayer room. In their long white dress robes, they look as though they are floating above the ground. Rina, a girl of fourteen, takes a moment to talk with us. She tells us that she gets up every morning at 3.30 for the Subuh prayer, like everyone else. After morning prayer and lessons in the pesantren, she goes to school. She doesn't like maths and science and technology are her favourite classes. Before she could never go to school but she can now, thanks to the pesantren. When she grows up she wants to preach and to be a leader, like Nyi Ruqqoyah. Our female translator shakes Rina’s hand. When I try to do the same, Ruqqoyah stifies a scream and Rina quickly draws back her hand. Goodness - almost touched an unknown man! That would have undone her wudhu, the ritual hand-washing before prayer.

In the prayer room, we retreat to a corner. Before us, the santriwatis stand in a long row with their backs to us, praying in the waverong glow of a hanging light bulb, their young girl voices reciting beseeching incantations. The girls almost disappear, absorbed as they are in the dim light, in their surrender to prayer and ensconced in their veils. Sniffling toddlers run zigzag lines through the snowy white robes, playing tag. On the walls hang laminated posters, some with religious verses others with lists of sexual and reproductive rights. Girl power meets pious humility.

To be sure, faith shows these girls the way of repentance and reflection; faith draws them into a closed and traditional world, the world of the pesantren, the world of the veil, the world of ritual cleansing. With Nyi Ruqqoyah, that same faith draws them out of the stifling cycle of ignorance, exclusion and poverty.
“FOR ME THERE IS NO CLASH BETWEEN JUSTICE, EQUALITY AND FAITH. HUMAN RIGHTS ENRICH MY KNOWLEDGE OF ISLAM AND VICE VERSA.”

AINI MASRURI (44), MEMBER OF THE PROVINCIAL PARLIAMENT IN LOMBOK AND HEAD OF A GIRL’S PESANTREN
Her name is Aini Masruri, but no one calls her by that name. ‘Sarkawi’s Mother’ is how she is known - Ummi Sarkawi. It wasn’t marriage that changed her maiden name, but the birth of her first son. This is not so unusual in Indonesia. What is extraordinary is the path she walked and still walks and the fight she fought and continues to fight.

Aini, as we will call her, grew up in a strict orthodox and closed pesantren environment in Lombok, the most Islamic of the Sunda islands east of Java. She still lives there today, heading the girl’s section of her father’s boarding school complex. Her husband is in charge of the boys in the same pesantren. Although they live in the same complex, and are husband and wife on paper, in reality, and in Aini’s experience, it is no longer a marriage. They are in the same place, but live separate lives, practically, financially and emotionally. Shared parenthood of nine children does little to bridge the gap between them. Quite the contrary, their views on child-rearing, religion, marriage, the roles of man and woman, in short on life, are too different to ever be bridged. Aini is not her husband’s only spouse. He has three. Three households, three families, three circles, one man, one guru.

Aini is her father’s daughter, mother of nine children and the spouse of a polygamous man. But above all, Aini is Aini, a deeply religious woman who has risen like a phoenix from a marriage she was forced into as a teenager. A woman who gives young girls the chance to rise higher than their stifled mothers.

Aini Masruri is a strong activist and a politician. She is a member of a political party (PBR, Partai Bintang Reformasi) and elected representative in the provincial parliament. On the island of Lombok, she goes from kampong to kampong, from women’s meeting to women’s meeting, from prayer group to prayer group. In so doing, she builds bridges between political, administrative and religious bastions in the city and in poor, rural Lombok communities. She organises participation, by sharing the latest legislative proposals and rules coming through parliament with the rural villages. She listens to the responses, grievances and wishes of the destitute and often abused women and girls of remote villages. In their weekly meetings, they discuss taboo subjects of sexual rights, domestic violence and disobedience. She takes the realities of voiceless village women into the arena of parliament. By screening government budgets and expenditures with the interests of the rice-farming woman in the sawah in mind, by submitting legislative proposals in the name of the young girls who cannot speak up for themselves, she is exercising democratic control and enhancing rural participation.

In the evening she returns to her pesantren, teaches her santriwatis, the young pupils of her Islamic boarding school, she sees to her nine own children, feeds them and keeps house. This is the place where she lives, eats, sometimes with her lawfully wedded spouse, and sleeps, always alone.

25 years ago, as a teenaged bride, she spent more than a year inside this house, deprived of her freedom as a human being. Aini is still married to the man who did this to her, she still lives in the house where she spent months in solitary confinement. Today she is anything but tame and obedient. She rose above her marriage, she became more than a mother and proved to be stronger than her father’s house. This is her story.

**BATHROOM**

“One day, when I was seventeen, my parents told me that in a week I would be marrying someone I didn’t even know, a thirty-five-year-old man, a religious leader. I didn’t want to. There were seven children in our house, four brothers and three sisters. I was the youngest daughter. My older sisters were already married, but with men they had chosen and
with whom they were in love. But I wasn’t allowed to choose. When I refused, my mother was furious. She locked me up in the bathroom for some time, hit me and tore my clothes. After that I had to stay home and couldn’t go school for a week. I was in the first year of secondary school. The next week 15 people came from religious families to pick me up. They call this the adat marari, the traditional collection of the bride, but I call it what it is: merariq (taking a girl to marry her). It was two in the morning. I had to get into the car and was driven to the guru of another pesantren - my husband. I tried to resist, but being a teenage girl I didn’t have the power. I was naïve and did not understand anything of what was going on.”

“It wasn’t the first time that push has come to shove in the house. Aini’s older sisters had also been physically punished for what, for girls, is evidently a great transgression: following your heart. “They had started relationships with boys who my parents did not think were befitting our station,” Aini explains. “Shortly before I was told about my own marriage, my elder sister had been beaten and locked up in a room for days. No matter how hard she screamed, the neighbours lived too far away to hear her. But I heard everything. In the end, she did marry the man she loved. But because of that harsh treatment against my eldest sister, I was afraid to object to my own marriage. My brothers also had relationships with girls that my parents didn’t think were good enough, but they were never hit. They were only ever hit if they made a mistake reciting verses from the Qur’an.”

“Too long I had internalised the law of obedience.”

“That marriage was a nail in the coffin of my existence. As a daughter in my family, I had always seen that my brothers could choose their schools and were given preferential treatment. I could never choose anything. The most important thing in my life was keeping house: cooking, ironing, doing my brothers’ laundry, shining their shoes, satisfying their every need. I made their breakfast in the morning, their dinner in the afternoon and their supper at night. And when they finished their last bites, they were gone again. My sisters and I were their girls, we were treated as domestic servants. When we were not serving their needs we were going to public school. At 5 PM we were back in the pesantren, where we were taught by my father. Now, on top of that, I was also imprisoned in a marriage.”

AN ADDED DIMENSION

Aini’s father uses the arranged marriage to secure the future of his own pesantren. None of his sons had had the religious training that would allow them to take over his position as kyai, and Aini’s older sisters’ husbands were even less suitable. In Aini’s husband, Lalu Alas, he had found an orthodox ustad, a Qur’an scholar, of proper orthodox standing and fluent in Arabic. But also someone with very repressive ideas about relationships between men and women. Ideas he puts into practice with Aini. “My married life was a continuation of my youth, with the same repression, the same patterns of subjugation to the man. But with added dimensions: sex and motherhood. The first year, I refused to have sex with him. I cried the whole time. Then he locked me in the house during the first year, not in his pesantren, but in my father’s, where he had come to live and teach. He was afraid that I would run away. He didn’t hit me, but he did keep me imprisoned in the house. Before he left home to teach, he made sure people kept close watch over me. The first four years he wasn’t aggressive towards me, except for the

[10] Because of her household duties, Aini was several years behind in school.
fact that I couldn’t go anywhere. But after the fourth year, when I had a child of four and a four-month-old baby, things got worse. He became polygamous. He took a second wife, and later a third, and I couldn’t say a thing about it. I was completely against it. He changed, he started to be rude to me whenever I spoke up. So many times I asked him for a divorce... And every time he abused me. I did not have access to justice, I didn’t know what to do, no one was willing to help me because I was the wife of a prominent tuan guru. I had less and less respect for my husband, and I was less and less afraid of him, too. I didn’t feel the slightest shred of love for that man. I told myself that he did not have any power over me. I stopped feeling anything when he acted rudely. Love and affection had become tasteless. The only thing I always made sure of was that the children weren’t around when he hit me.”

“But my parents were my parents, I respected them. In a certain way they were entitled to punish me, and I knew that they would never accept a divorce and a court case. More than anything else, I was scared of how they would react. That was the main reason why I didn’t dare go to court and ask for a divorce.”

STRUGGLE

In these polygamous years, the number of Lalu Alas’ children grows dramatically. In 2011, he has nineteen children by his three different wives. And there are more to come, but not from Aini. She bears him nine, and it ends there. “My husband forbade me to use contraception. And he forced me to have sex. Too long I had followed the teachings of obedience. These teachings are advantageous to men, they are propagated in the name of Islam, and I grew up with them. Too long I had internalised the law of obedience. But after the birth of my youngest, I decided that enough was enough. ‘I am tired,’ I told my husband. ‘I can’t raise any more children. And it’s too expensive. I don’t care what you think, I’m done.’ So I had myself sterilised. Today I have nine children. My husband never provided a living for me and the kids. He doesn’t even pay for their education. I pay everything. I feed them and make sure they can study. My eldest is studying Islamic law and English literature in Saudi Arabia. My youngest is three and hasn’t started school yet. All the others go to school or follow advanced studies. I am proud of all my children. They are my joy. And the day I can say that all my daughters and sons have succeeded in their studies will be the happiest day of my life. Only after they have diplomas will they be really free, and I am doing everything I can to give them that passport to a successful life. But no more children for me, not one more!”

“I have liberated myself from the teachings of obedience, even in my own house, even in my own bedroom. I haven’t shared a bed with my husband for many years. And for years I have refused to go to ceremonies and parties with my husband and his other wives. The first time I refused he shouted at me and said that I was sinning against our religion. I let him scream, knowing myself that I am truly committed to the Sharia. I never went to gatherings with him again. Not once. Sometimes he threatens to be rude with me again like he used to. But when I say that if he does that I will go straight to the Sharia court, he backs down. And if he will ever be aggressive to me again I really will get a divorce. Maybe I will even go to the police and press charges. Because today we have the Domestic Violence Act, a law that was passed in 2004 thanks to the efforts of the women’s movement. We didn’t have that law when I was young. That law opened my eyes, and now I use it to open the eyes of thousands of women in the villages. We talk about our rights and the fact that getting beaten by your husband is not natural or god-given, but a gross injustice. These last years I have become more aware of what I really am: a pemberontak, a rebel.”
“Never, in all those hard years, did I ever doubt my faith. Quite the opposite. In my most difficult times, I took comfort in the Qur’an. It is not religion that is to blame for the injustice I suffered, it is my husband. When I was a girl I didn’t know enough. Today I know that though there are verses of the Qur’an that permit a husband to hit his wife - lightly! - there are also verses that oblige the husband to treat his wife, or wives, justly and equally. And even though my husband is a scholar of Islam, I don’t think his behaviour towards me comes from his faith, but from his need to be the boss. That’s not the same thing.”

Aini expands her freedom to speak one step at a time. In the pesantren and in the public domain, she is a fighter. “After I had been married for a couple of years, I went to study at the university in Mataram, the capital of Lombok,” explains Aini. “I studied Tarbiyah, Islamic education. That is the only good thing that my husband ever did for me, and later for his other wives: he allowed us to study. And he gave countless hours of Arabic lessons to my eldest son, from which I learned Arabic by listening in. In 1995, our pesantren opened a school for girls. Officially my father was the founder, but it was my idea. And I led the construction works, with the help of my son. My father and I are officially the founders of the girls’ pesantren. And I have been the school’s head since then. Even though I’m not formally teaching anymore, deep down I still feel like a penceramah, a teacher, an educator. There are now four hundred girls studying here, one hundred of them boarders. They are all girls from poor families and forty of them are orphans or children who have lost a parent. We always try to keep thirty places available free to girls from families who cannot afford it. We cover the cost of education and boarding for these girls. Along with all the religious subjects, Qur’an studies, the history and philosophy of Islam, and Islamic law, we also teach subjects from the national curriculum. Girls who cannot read and write learn that here. And eight years ago, we also started teaching informatics, English and professional courses like electronics, flower arranging and cooking.”

“Today we can speak freely without it costing us our lives.”

Though Aini grows up in an orthodox religious pesantren environment, she and her family do not live in a social and political vacuum. On the contrary, the repressive Suharto regime leaves its mark on their personal history, as it does on the fate and fortunes of every Indonesian family. “In the Suharto years, I often saw how the police and local militias would molest people on the street and how farmers were robbed of their land and then driven out to other parts of the country. In escalations and conflicts, the authorities always took the side of the richer party. The poor farmer, fisherman or labourer always drew the short straw. During elections, they would make everyone vote for Golkar, Suharto’s ruling party. If you didn’t you could lose your job or get passed up for a promotion. That was the reason the sub district officer fired my mother as a teacher in 1982, and my father was banished to another village for a while at that time. The only positive thing about those years was that basic needs like rice and oil were cheaper then than they are today. But there’s no way you could make me go back to those days! Today we can speak and vote freely. We have a free press and we can get into real debates without it costing us our lives. And we have better social security. That’s worth more than the price of rice. I am going to keep voting for Megawati’s party, because she is a woman, but also because when she was president at least she kept food prices affordable. And because in her days pesantrens were better subsidised...”
than Nahdlatul Ulama, because NU was less outspoken against Dutch colonisation.”

Four times, Aini is elected in her subdistrict as chair of Muslimat, the women’s arm of NW. These twenty years as chairperson put her in a confusing, even somewhat schizophrenic, situation. For fifteen of those twenty years, Aini chairs meetings of the most influential women’s organisations on Lombok. She travels all over Indonesia as a Muslimat representative, spreading a message of emancipation, while she herself, especially in the early years, is being abused and confined at home. In the end, her position outside of the home gives her the strength to fight inequality inside her house. And to win.

Fifteen years to finally gain at home what you have been fighting for outside, standing up for reproductive rights, sexual rights, condemning polygamy and claiming a safe refuge for yourself and your children. It seems a long period.

**MUSLIMAT**

With her position in the pesantren, Aini gains respect among the families of her santriwatis and their communities. She begins to become a part of the broad Indonesian women’s movement standing up for more political participation in the villages, districts and national government, pursuing a hard-fought campaign against domestic violence, trafficking in women and sexual abuse, and fighting for women in public leadership positions. Aini herself is a shining example of the latter. For generations, her family has been active in Nahdlatul Wathon (NW), the largest Islamic mass movement in Lombok. NW organises education at all levels, from toddlers to university students, pursues major socio-economic programmes to fight poverty in Muslim communities, and is an important political player on the island. “NW was founded in the 1930s,” she says. “Our family made a deliberate choice to join NW rather than Nahdlatul Ulama, because NU was less outspoken against Dutch colonisation.”

Aini’s santriwatis in front of their dormitory.
And I intend to go further. I want a seat in the national parliament. And in 2014 I want to run for *bupati*, district head. I already have my campaign team, my whole party is behind me. Even the men!"

Democracy and Islam, come together in the life and work of Aini Masruri, member of parliament, *ustaza*. She combines politics and faith in a can-do philosophy that speaks to traditional Muslim communities, and which brings women out of their houses, away from the hearth, out of the shadow. “Every week I go to the communities in my electoral district, and once a month I host the women from the area in and around the pesantren. About a thousand women come. A thousand women listening, speaking, debating! I explain what I’m doing as a member of parliament, I talk to them about what is going on in parliament, especially the things that are important to women: the domestic violence act, child protection laws, the law against trafficking in women. We discuss the importance of financial independence, food prices, which sometimes skyrocket... Many of the women who come know first-hand what domestic violence is. They are abused, beaten, married off, can’t make ends meet, can’t feed their children properly or send them to school, and often weren’t allowed to study themselves. We talk about our women’s rights, about laws intended for us. We are the ones being abused, humiliated and neglected, and in these meetings I urge these women to resist and to stand up for their rights. I tell them that if they are ever beaten, they have to go to the police. And if they don’t dare to, then I tell them that I will go with them or that I can represent them. That’s my strategy: first take away the fear, then stand up. Fear of their own husbands, of violence, of the police. And we always look at justice and injustice from an Islamic perspective. Democracy and religion go hand in hand in these meetings. I preach about human rights; I am a believer, and I also see it as one of my tasks in life.

But triumphs like these take a lifetime. They are a revolution. There is nothing so deeply engrained as the mores of matrimony, nothing as compulsory as the doctrine of the home, nothing so convenient for hiding scandals as the front door of a respectable home in an orthodox pesantren.

In the end, her public position gives Aini the strength to fight the inequality inside her own house.

Her political activities for the PBR\(^\text{12}\) also put wind in Aini’s sails. She becomes a party member in 2000. In 2004, at a district meeting, she meets women who, like her, are religious leaders in their communities. “It was a seminar I was participating in as an *ustaza*, pesantren teacher. Luckily, I met other women there who, like me, were active in social, non-governmental projects and who were also politically active. We became friends, sisters in the revolution. In 2007, we formed a provincial women’s network. We went on the road trying to get other women from all corners of the land out of their houses, out of the darkness, and out from the shadows of men. Because everything starts with that first step: coming out of your home, listening, and daring to speak up. The rest will happen by itself. At that time I was pregnant with my last child, so I was less involved. But I made up for it later. The amazing thing is that six of the women who started that initiative in 2007 are members of the provincial parliament today. I’ve been in parliament for a few years now.

\(^{12}\) The Partai Bintang Reformasi (Reform Star Party) is an Islamist political party. In the provinces it gained 1% to 5% of the votes in the 2009 legislative elections.
to expand the political consciousness and political participation of women in Muslim communities. That’s why I also take the discussion to the authorities, like the district head or the provincial governor, for example, to keep insisting that they have at least 30% women in their offices, working groups, boards and councils. This is required by law, but in reality they barely make 8%! Or to construct irrigation systems on the land where these women work. And also to deal with trafficking in women, prostitution and the porn industry. In parliament, I introduce legislative proposals designed to protect these women and their children. In the department for development, I call for more employment for them, and for access to microcredit to allow them to increase their income and independence. Economic independence is the first and most important step for a woman to stand up against domestic violence. With your own money you can make your own decisions, demand respect and exert pressure.”

**Porn and Pluralism**

Aini touches upon a delicate subject: pornography. Recent anti-pornography legislation\(^\text{13}\), intended in part to combat prostitution and ‘licentiousness,’ was met with harsh criticism from many Indonesian feminists, because it sticks to a very broad definition of pornography. Many forms of nudity and dress that are normal in traditional dance, in the media, or even on the streets of large cities, go beyond the standards of the law, and are liable to prosecution. Moreover, in practice the law is extremely sexist; crusaders or agents of the Sharia police who take it on themselves to enforce the law, single out women and girls. Aini is not entirely sure what to make of this. “I hope that this law allows us to curtail the pornography industry. That’s what it is intended for. No woman would willingly subject herself to the humiliation and exploitation of pornographers. Here in

\(^\text{13}\) See also p.51
Lombok, I still see very little of the feminist objections to the anti-pornography law. If it is true that the law is giving rise to aggression against women with tight clothes or exposed arms or legs, then that’s wrong. Not that I am encouraging women to go around with bare arms and legs, quite the contrary. But aggression or punishment against women who feel otherwise? No, that is not the idea. And moreover, it goes against the pluralism of Indonesia. The cultures and religions in this country are extremely diverse. Look at Aceh, Bali, Kalimantan, Papua, look at Lombok. You can never impose the same standards on everyone in all these different cultural and religious contexts. I can only say that my belief imposes certain sexual and moral standards on me, which I also impose on my children and my students, and propagate in the communities I go to. There are lines that I will never cross: for example, no sex before marriage, no adultery, no nudity in public, no homosexuality. Not that I think homosexuals should go to jail or that they deserve to get beaten because they have sinned. Beating a person is just as much of a sin, as well as being a violation of human rights. I know that myself only too well. It only means that just like adultery or free sex, homosexuality is a violation of the standards I adhere to. For me it is haram, forbidden. But I do not believe in death by stoning, rajam, as the penalty for infidelity by married people. That is the extreme legal interpretation as applied in places like Iran or Saudi Arabia. And I do not agree with it. What Islam teaches me above all is that human beings make human mistakes, that only God does not, and that there is always a moment of taubat, repentance, and maghfira, forgiveness.

**POLYGAMY**

Another thorny issue at the intersection of sexuality, religion and culture is polygamy. As we have seen, Aini is still married to her polygamous husband, but only on paper. She has custody of her children, and she is in charge of her money, her career and her bedroom. “I don’t have to ask my husband for anything,” says Aini. “I have my own convictions, my own networks, my own position. And I make my own money, not as head of the girl’s pesantren, which I do for free, but as Member of Parliament and by selling clothes, including the uniforms for the pesantren. But this kind of independence is the exception for a woman in a polygamous situation. Lombok is full of polygamous households where things are very different. In fact, I have yet to meet a woman who was happy that her husband was polygamous.”

“There will come a day, I hope, that pesantren classes will be mixed.”

“Polygamy is more a part of Islamic culture and social customs than of Islamic religious doctrine. Yes, it is described in the Qur’an, and yes, the Prophet had multiple wives. I cannot disagree with the Qur’an and so I don’t condemn the phenomenon of polygamy on theological grounds. But in practice, men don’t meet the strict conditions Islam attaches to polygamy; polygamous men have to have the economic means, generosity, and sense of wisdom and justice to treat their wives properly, equally and respectfully. This, too, is in the Qur’an. And I have never met a man who had enough brains, enough heart and enough in his wallet to make multiple women equally happy at the same time. Only the Prophet could do that, it is not something people can aspire to. That’s also in the Qur’an, in Sura An-Nisa: a polygamous man can never do justice to all his wives equally. Usually, a woman is forced to accept that her husband will marry one or more other women. That coercive aspect is in itself a reason to oppose it.”
“It took me years to process the pain my husband inflicted on me by marrying other women. I had to disconnect myself from the pain, I couldn’t let the pain control my life. I can’t even tell you how hard that was. And today I feel nothing for him. I don’t miss him, I don’t hate him, I just try to cut out all intimacy from our relationship. I am married, yes, but no longer in my heart. My heart is full of my work, my children, my faith. And that feels good and that makes me happy. My eldest son was once asked straight out in whose footsteps he wanted to follow in his life, his father’s or his mother’s. ‘My mother’s,’ he said, ‘because of what she thinks, because of what she does in the pesantren and because she’s against practice of polygamy.’ He’s still studying in Saudi Arabia, where he is getting a strict orthodox education. But I’m not afraid that Salafis will indoctrinate him with their radical views, I know that he carries me, my ideas and my perspectives in his heart. He’s the grandson of my father, the owner and founder of the pesantren. So when he comes home, in a couple of years, he will become the head of the boy’s school. My son will take over the position of the man who is legally my husband. And then he will teach my ‘rebellious’ ideas before the boy’s classes, something I cannot do. He will teach about equality of girls and boys, of women and men, about marriage and polygamy, about the horror of domestic violence, about the rights and freedoms of all people and about the obligations and duties that our faith imposes on us. There will even come a day, I think and hope, that classes here in the pesantren will be mixed. Boys and girls should sit together, not only in the religious subjects, but also during the vocational trainings we give. They should take sewing lessons together, cook together, take electronics lessons together, computer lessons, learn to arrange flowers together. To put an end to the segregation and the inequality between boys and girls, even here in the pesantren. After my son comes back, it will happen.”

**Priorit**

To do what she has to do, as she herself puts it, Aini has to juggle her time. “One-third of my time goes to Muslimat, one-third to my work as a member of parliament and one-third to the pesantren. And on top of all that I am a full time mother. That may actually be the main reason why I am still married; divorce is not a big priority anymore, because I have the freedoms I want to have and because I don’t have any time left. I fill my heart and my time with things that matter to me. I invest everything I have in my children, my pesantren, my political career. That is more than I had ever dreamed. I don’t want to put any energy into a divorce; that would demand too much from those around me, from myself, and it would detract me from what I really want to do, can do and have to do.”

“Sometimes my husband and I preach at the same meetings. Sometimes we clash, sometimes not. For example, he recently asked me to preach and read the Qur’an at one of his public meetings with his students and guests. So I did. I spoke mainly about women’s rights, about fairness between husband and wife. I knew he was seething, but he didn’t interrupt me. But if I do the same thing in a private setting, he scolds me. One of the last times he started shouting that what I was saying was wrong and against Islam, that I was not a good Muslim, that I had to stop provoking women to stand up against men or spouses. What I do is something very different: I teach women what their rights are. I made him understand that it is my duty as a member of parliament to inform women about Indonesian laws and constitutional rights and freedoms. Many people, like my husband, but even many intellectuals in the West as well, see in this a clash between two paradigms, the ideals of human rights and the national legislation versus the world of faith and Islam. I don’t see it that way at all. As if
Islam is not made up of humane principles of equality before God, of goodness, of justice, of dialogue, wisdom, repentance and forgiveness! Of course it is. That these values are violated or ignored out of hunger for power, personal interest or ignorance, is something different. For me, then, it’s not an opposition between two worlds, but cross-pollination. Take the national law against domestic violence in 2004. That made me even more aware that many kyais and gurus, male religious leaders, interpret the Qur’an wrongly; they twist it. They make a patriarchal instrument out of their faith. For me there is no clash between justice, equality and faith. Human rights enrich my knowledge of Islam. And vice versa. Democracy and Islam go together perfectly. You just have to fight for it.

EXTREMISM OR HOSPITALITY?
Like the other women we interviewed, Aini is concerned about religious radicalism that is on the rise in her country. “I travel a lot and I see very well what is happening. But for the most part, it is happening outside Lombok. Here, the communities of other beliefs are not yet openly under assault, their churches are not being burned and their followers are not being lynched, as has sometimes happened with the followers of Ahmadiyya or with Christians. At the national level, I see that the dissatisfaction of radical Muslims with government policies is increasing, and I see that the government has no response to that extreme violence. In Jakarta and on Java, there are many new regional laws inspired by Sharia law that restrict women’s freedom of movement and freedom of dress. Here in Lombok, that is not happening yet. No woman here is made to wear the jilbab. And should there be any plans to introduce any law like that, I will fight them with every fibre of my being. Just imagine if the things they do in Tasikmalaya caught on here, like forbidding tourism because it supposedly promotes ‘Western’ licentiousness - madness! How can you have a community without visitors, without guests, without hospitality? Hospitality is deeply rooted in our faith, in our Islamic culture, in the Qur’an. And don’t our children, don’t we ourselves want to travel and discover the world? Imagine how I would feel if my children went abroad and were not welcome there! And Lombok, which is so dependent on tourism, which just built a new international airport to attract more international visitors, would
certainly be in an absurd situation with such radical laws.”

When asked to describe how she feels today, she smiles. For the first time in our conversation, her face really brightens. Then she explains. “I am senang, I am happy. Because my daughters will never go through what I have gone through: forced marriage, polygamy. They still have yet to marry, but I know that they are freer and better educated than I was when I married. And if my husband tries to marry off our daughters against their will, I will not allow it. He doesn’t have the power or the money to do that and even if he did, I would give my life to prevent it. I am senang, because no one can stop me from pursuing my ideals and doing my work. I am not dependent - not on my father, not on my husband, not on my family. I am happy because I have succeeded in reforming this pesantren. It is no longer the patriarchal kingdom of father, son and husband. I have freed myself from that closed culture. I have opened that circle.”

When it gets too dark inside Aini’s house, we go and sit in the pesantren’s musholla, the prayer room. The twilight casts its mild glow on the posters of the bearded men with stern faces. They look like her husband.

We talk about what she is still missing in her life. “The love of a man,” she says. “I do not have someone who wants to protect me, someone who loves me. Someone who is there when my needs are greatest or when I can’t see any way out. Being able to be find that someone, is the last missing piece of my dream. But that door is shut. I’m married. I will not divorce. Cannot. I am getting older, and I have brought nine children into the world. Perhaps it is better if that last dream remains a dream.”

**ASTRONAUT**

As we talk, the boarding school girls, the santriwatis, patter past us on the way to their nearby rooms. They linger around the musholla and listen to Aini - to Ummi Sarkawi. Then they come closer, veiled, shy and yet tremendously curious. Like adolescent girls anywhere in the world, they try to stand out without standing out. We ask what they want to be when they grow up. “An astronaut!” one of them shouts. Everyone laughs, including herself. Yet in a way she means it.

Each one of these girls is trying to spread her wings and fly. No matter how long the flight lasts, no matter how high she gets, whether she ultimately falls or not, each and every one of these girls is a reformer. Of their own lives, of their families, of their future families and of their religious community. They want to be like Aini, who, ensnared in the nets of stifling traditions and violence, learned herself how to fly. The question is: will the pesantren follow? Will the men follow? Will Islam follow? A few years down the line, will there be a poster in this musholla of Aini Masruri, founder and leader of the girl’s pesantren, member of Parliament, penceramah, and above all a pemberontak, a fighter? Will she be the first woman among the yellowing, faded portraits of stern-looking, bearded and turbaned men? Let us hope so.

Before we leave the pesantren and say our goodbyes to Aini, the santriwatis want to have their picture taken with us. It is raining. They take snapshots with their mobile phones. Somehow their long white veils, the streetwise hip hop gestures they make and the drizzling rain match perfectly. Aini watches the girls from a distance, smiling. Next to her stands a young women in a long black robe. It is Aini’s husband’s latest wife. She comes from a far, far away village in Kalimantan. She is forty years younger than the man who took her away to marry her. There she stands before a simple, ramshackle shed. Inside only gloom and grinding poverty. It is her home. Her paradise.
ABOUT CORDAID

Cordaid is the Catholic Organisation for Relief & Development Aid, with its headquarters in The Hague, the Netherlands. We have been fighting poverty and exclusion in the world’s most fragile societies and conflict-stricken areas for almost a century. Cordaid is founding member of Caritas Internationalis and Cidse. Our network consists of 890 partner organisations in 28 countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. As social entrepreneurs we jointly work together with organisations, enterprises, local, national and international authorities and other parties who want to participate in development and cooperation. Cordaid is one of the largest development organisations in the Netherlands. With almost 400,000 private donors we enjoy broad public support and are deeply rooted in Dutch society.

We strive for a fair and sustainable society in which every individual counts; a society in which people share the Global Common Goods and respect diversity. We support people in vulnerable regions and areas of conflict to build flourishing communities. We do this by enhancing security, by creating opportunities and bringing out the best in people.

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ABOUT HUMAN SECURITY COLLECTIVE

The Human Security Collective advocates for an approach that incorporates the principles of human security, centering on the needs of people and communities, in counter terrorism and violent extremism strategies.

This foundation provides a platform to link local communities with policymakers to enhance alternative approaches that complement and support the work of governmental bodies and policymakers on current security and counter terrorism and violent extremism practice. HSC encourages and supports practitioners to document, analyze and disseminate their security alternatives among civil society, security and development actors.

www.humansecuritynetwork.net
Frank van Lierde (1968) graduated in communication sciences and social and cultural anthropology (Catholic University of Leuven). He worked as a researcher for the Refugee Desk of Amnesty International (Amsterdam) before joining the Dutch development agency Cordaid in 2002. Previous publications he wrote include *Countering the Politics of Fear. Social Activists between Terror and Counter-terror* (Cordaid, 2010), *We, Widows of the Gun. Women from Manipur break the Silence around extrajudicial killings, fake encounters and violence against women in India’s Northeast* (Cordaid, 2011) and a series of witness accounts from Palestinian and Israeli human rights defenders in Dutch (United Civilians for Peace, 2012). Currently he works as a corporate journalist for Cordaid and as an independent freelance writer.
In this publication, six women tell their story. Six devout Indonesian Muslim women who have their roots in the traditional pesantren world, the world of the Indonesian Islamic boarding school. Not hampered but inspired by their faith, they oppose patriarchal dominance and other forms of oppression: sexual and domestic violence, social inequality and, last but not least, rising political extremism of Islamists in the largest Muslim country in the world.

They all tell a story of social change, religious reform and emancipation. The actions of these women have an impact in their own schools, their own communities, in their districts, and sometimes even on a national level.

These women have not just been shaped by their faith; they shape their faith and they do it as experts in Islamic theology. They seek and use all options for personal theological interpretation and reflection that Islam has to offer. Their Muslim activism has its roots in the conviction that all creatures are equal to God, a principle of equality that has moral as well as sacred significance to them.

We think these stories are important to be heard. Not only as gripping examples of personal courage and liberation, but more importantly as a contribution to discussions taking place on countering violent extremism in communities worldwide. These practices provide inspiring examples of preventative mechanisms in and from religious communities to combat violent repression and extremism.