

**Gender and Islam in Southeast Asia:  
Women's Rights Movements, Religious  
Resurgence, and Local Traditions**

*Susanne Schroter, ed.*

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Emerging from a 2005 conference at the University of Passau (Germany), Susanne Schroter's edited volume brings together an interdisciplinary group of scholars, from anthropologists and historians to literary scholars and Muslim female activists, to examine this complex subject. The book is organized into four country-specific sections on Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, respectively. The fifth and final section, consisting of only one chapter, adds a transnational dimension by analyzing the Tablighi Jama'at. Despite the volume's breadth of disciplinary and geographic contributions, its authors share a common project: the recuperation of Muslim women's history, and especially female Muslim agency, amidst the rise of Islamization in Southeast Asia.

In her introductory essay, Schroter works to unite the country-specific contributions under a broader regional framework. She argues that whereas Islam in Southeast Asia has traditionally been "moderate, especially with regard to its gender orders" (p. 7), the recent "upsurge of neo-orthodox Islam poses a threat" (p. 37) to women's rights. With characterizations of conservative Muslims as "religious zealots" (p. 16) and "hardliners" (p. 19), she presents Islamization as a process in which "orthodox" Muslims, often with international ties, have imperiled the moderate Islam of traditional Southeast Asia and the liberal Islam of Muslim reformers. The majority of the volume's contributors embrace this framing narrative. On the one hand, this global story enables them to shine new light on the region's pressing debates over Islam and gender. Yet, on the other hand, the framework consistently places female agency in absolute distinction with so-called orthodox Islam, thereby eclipsing a more complicated landscape of ethical contestation and cultural difference.

Building on Schroter's framework, the book's opening section on Indonesia features four chapters, each of which emphasizes challenges Muslim women face in asserting their rights and identities in various Indonesian Islamic spheres. To begin, Nelly van Doorn-Harder investigates the Harmonious Family Program of 'Aisyiyah, Muhammadiyah's sister organization, as "a tool to transmit the reformist views on gender and women's position within marriage"

(p. 56). She argues that, although 'Aisyiyah rejected polygamy in favor of a partnership of mutual respect between husband and wife, it nonetheless continues to accept female subordination both in the home and within the Muhammadiyah movement. Monika Arnez analyzes two post-Suharto novels to reveal how some Indonesian Muslim women have negotiated the relationship between lesbianism and Islam. Specifically, she favorably contrasts the efforts of one protagonist to reconcile lesbian love with her Islamic piety against a second novel that characterizes lesbianism as no more than the psychological aftermath of sexual violence.

Nurul Ilmi Idrus examines South Sulawesi's little-studied Bugis manuscripts, which relay a tale of spousal discord, loyalty, and remarriage. While the Bugis legend contains many Islamic idioms, Idrus concludes that "the influence of Islam in the text, however, is not necessarily similar to the teachings of Islam, which identifies women as subordinates to men" (p. 108). In the section's final chapter, Siti Musdah Mulia provides insight into the struggle to reform the 1991 Islamic Code of Law and thus guarantee greater gender equity on issues ranging from the legal definition of marriage to dowry-related regulations.

In the volume's only chapter on Malaysia, Maila Stivens for the most part echoes the theme of female empowerment versus an increasingly prevalent conservative Islam. She uses ethnographic interviews with middle-class Malay women to examine the cultural politics of state family value programs. While noting disagreements among her informants over the model of an ideal family, Stivens concludes that state teachings on Muslim family values are deeply entrenched and pose "formidable challenges to those working for change in family relations" (p. 168) in the country.

Shifting to the Philippines, the next three chapters examine the space for Muslim women in that Muslim-minority nation. Amina Rasul-Bernardo opens the section with a brief essay on the challenges facing Mindanao's Muslim women. Given that these women must contend with both the an oppressive, militarized state and conservative Islamic groups, Rasul-Bernardo places her hope for female empowerment in peace advocacy and democracy. Vivienne S. M. Angeles investigates the experience of female Muslim converts within the rapidly growing Return to Islam (Balik Islam) movement that, since the 1980s, has claimed over 200,000 predominantly Catholic converts. While highlighting how they emphasize their own agency in choosing Islam, she also underscores their embrace of conservative gender roles that subordinate them to Muslim men. Returning to the Philippines' Muslim South, Birte Brecht-Drouart focuses on political leadership by Muslim women. She argues

that most Muslim women in political positions “belong to, or are supported by, the traditional elite that seems to attach more value to the perpetuation of its own dynasties than to an Islamic debate about women in leading positions” (p. 217).

Containing the book’s two strongest contributions, the section on Thailand challenges the frequent equation of conservative Islamic movements with a decline in female agency. In his chapter on the Tablighi Jama‘at in southern Thailand, Alexander Horstmann shows how the revivalist movement creates new possibilities for community and empowerment among Thai Muslim women by forging connections with a global Islamic network. Yet, he also demonstrates how it simultaneously destroys old modes of local belonging with Buddhist neighbors. In another notable essay, Amporn Marddent argues that public controversies over the hijab have pushed women forward as leading activists in the Thai Muslim community. While often lacking the Islamic educational credentials of their male counterparts, they have nevertheless located a new religious authority and even emancipation through their visible displays of piety with the veil.

In the fifth and final section, Farish A. Noor examines how the transnational Tablighi Jama‘at, often noted for its male domination, relies on women as its “constitutive other” (p. 285). Through textual analysis, he argues that the movement characterizes the ideal Muslim woman as charitable, willing to sacrifice, and spiritually pious while at the same time projecting women as dangerous temptresses whose sexuality as well as domesticity lure men away from the virtuous duty of Islamic missionary work.

Taken as a whole, the volume’s strength lies in its nuanced exploration of how Islamic gender politics intersect with local traditions, state projects of national development, and even broader global trends. For Indonesia, van Doorn-Harder, Arnez, and Mulia all highlight how the New Order’s own gender ideology both shaped and was shaped by Islamic debates over marriage and sexuality. Stivens draws intriguing connections between the Malaysian state’s discourse on Muslim family values and those propagated by global networks of conservative Christians. For Muslim-minorities in the Philippines and Thailand, the five contributors elucidate the depth to which the non-Muslim states and histories of conflict have structured local gender dynamics. Indeed, the volume insists that Islamic gender politics cannot be understood in the abstract but must be located within a proper nexus of local, national, and global forces.

Despite the emphasis on contextual particularity, the volume nevertheless projects certain concepts (e.g., equality, women’s rights, and freedom) as uncomplicated universals. With the notable exceptions of Horstmann and Mar-

dent, the authors consider these concepts as stable and relevant across cultural and religious differences and therefore apply them, often without qualification, to their Southeast Asian milieus. Schroter's introductory essay establishes this pattern by identifying the equality of men and women as a "universal value" (p. 21); however, she neither defines equality nor considers why a supposed universal value would elicit disagreement from anyone, including conservative Muslims. Universalizing these values obscures the fact that equality, rights, and other related concepts are fiercely contested and often brandished in contradictory ways by competing groups. Therefore, while Schroter may criticize Islamist organizations as having a "detrimental effect on women's newly-won freedom" (p. 22), whose definition of freedom, or of detrimental, are we abiding by? Likewise, other authors discuss equity, oppression, and agency without considering their underlying cultural politics. While the contributors need not disavow their own commitment to gender equality, a more critical approach that acknowledges the heated contestation over the very meaning and relevance of equality itself would greatly enrich our understanding of gender and Islam in the region.

Overall, with its broad geographic and interdisciplinary scope, *Gender and Islam in Southeast Asia* will serve as an accessible resource for those approaching the region from another field within Islamic studies. Although its conceptual framework remains heavily dependent on assumed universals, the volume does offer a richly detailed glimpse into Southeast Asian Islam that will engage both newcomers to the region and specialists alike.

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