

# A CRITIQUE OF CONSERVATIVE MEDIA EXPOSURE ON WOMEN: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE CONCEPT OF WOMAN BY SYAYKH RAMAḌĀN SA'ĪD AL-BŪṬĪ

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**Abstract:** In this modern era, the widespread social media trend has increased the issue of the gender gap, where men are portrayed as superior to women. Hence, this research aims to criticize the media exposure of women within conservative media based on the concept of women in Islam. This research will apply a qualitative methodology with an ethnographical approach. The data are collected from the content posted in social media, particularly Instagram, which tend to advocate the conservatism idea about women. This article will first discuss the notion of new media, concept of women in Islam, and the critics toward conservative media exposure on women. The critique will be divided into two major discussions; the content and methodology. The discussion is framed by the concept of women proposed by *Shaykh Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī*, a prominent contemporary scholar, in his book *'Al-Mar'a Bayna Ṭughyān Al-Niẓam Al-Gharbī Wa Laṭā'if Al-Tashrī' Al-Rabbānī*. This research finds that there are some media managed by conservative groups that portray women as a source of fitna, impermissible, and unable to be leaders, implying that women's rights are still marginalized compared to men.

**Keywords:** Women, gender gap, conservative, media.

## INTRODUCTION

The discussion about gender issues, specifically women's rights in Islam has become a subject of scholarly debates. Muslims scholars has put more attention to the gender discourse, attempting to clarify the position of women in the perspective of Islam such (Badawi, 2016; Nisa, 2021; Othman, 2006). Simultaneously, the idea of conservatism is readily disseminated through the media (Kirana & Garadian, 2020). The conservatism, in this article, is defined as those who strictly believe in Islam through the textually, while ignoring its context, claiming that they follow the Islamic practices performed by the Prophet PBUH and his companion. On the other hand, Schroeder (2021) mentioned that the media has transformed into a platform that facilitates communication and interaction, implying that people can freely express themselves through the media, including their piety (Husein & Slama, 2018).

The conservative media often portrayed Muslim women, which still uphold the traditional gender roles that apply the patriarchal cultures, assuming the stereotype and stigma about women. Thus, this research aims to evaluate the conservative media framing on Muslim women to prevent the misconception about women in Islam, which strongly advocate justice and respect for women. The article will be framed by the concept of women proposed by *Syaykh Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī* Al-Būṭī, one of the prominent Muslim scholars who offers the concept of women from the Islamic perspective, encompassing the comprehensive analysis of women's rights and their social roles with a deep understanding of religious texts. This

research is expected to contribute in stimulating better understanding of Islamic view on women as well as creating the positive change on social perception about women.

## METHOD

This research applies the qualitative methodology with the study case approach of Instagram posts to analyse the conservative media exposure on women. This study will also apply a critical analysis using the concept of women by *Syaykh Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī* in his book, *'Al-Mar'a Bayna Ṭughyān Al-Niẓam Al-Gharbī Wa Laṭā'if Al-Tashrī' Al-Rabbānī* in analysing the data. Qualitative methodology is used to examine the social issues, resulting in a structured report based on the interpretation of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The data are collected through the ethnographical analysis in terms of overserving the Instagram posts which is supported by the library research from books, journals, and articles related to the topic. This study attempts to interpret the collected data objectively. However, some limitations occurred in this research due to the limited time.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the research will be discussed in three chapter by elaborating the notion of new media, the concept of woman in Islam, the critique of conservative media exposure on women which will highlight the content and methodology of dissemination the information.

### The Notion of Conservatism in the New Media

Conservative understanding is not static. If we look at the literature relating to conservatism, or more precisely, religious conservatism, then we will find the flow of discussion as follows: In the beginning, it was the Nahdhatul Ulama group that was often referred to as a conservative group; then the conservative definition changed to belong to anyone from any group; and now, the Salafi group is the most frequently mentioned group as an example of a conservative group. According to Sebastian et al., (2020), the term conservatism in Indonesia was firstly discussed in scholarly work at Suharto's authoritarian New Order era, by Peter Christian Hauswedell (1973).

By examining the findings of previous works on religious conservatism in the modern era, many researchers have cited the Salafi movement as an example (Hasan, 2007; Meijer, 2014). Even some works classify it as an ultra-conservative group. It is categorized as an ultra-conservative group in some writings. It is described as being technologically modern and theologically ultra-conservative at the same time by Asep M. Iqbal (2014), as evidenced by its eagerness to engage with information and communication technologies like the internet (Iqbal, 2014).

The conservatism is nowadays easily spread through the notion of new media. The easy accessibility of social media with the advance technology has facilitate any kinds of thought to easily spread. Hence, Muslims have experienced the period of "interactive silence" where people can achieve their freedom in expressing their views (Saleh et al., 2022). Hence, Muslims are currently facing the digital challenges and the da'wa digitization becomes crucial to combat the misinformation on the teaching of Islam in media. One of the issues is the role of women in Islam since this is massively discussed along with the new trend of gender equality and feminism to protest against patriarchy.

### The Concept of Woman in Islam

The concept of women in Islam is stated in the Quran and Sunna, as Allah said in the Quran: "I will never deny any of you—male or female—the reward of your deeds. Both are equal in reward" (Qs. Ali-Imran: 195). This implies that Allah provides equal opportunities, responsibilities, religious and moral obligations to both women and men. However, they possess distinct rights when it comes to contributing to the greater good (*maṣlahah*) (Al-Ghazali,

2007). Achieving absolute equality between women and men is unattainable. Instead, their uniqueness creates cooperation and complementarity, leading Islam to emphasize gender equity rather than gender equality (Badawi, 2016).

Moreover, the main duty of creatures, women or men, is to worship Allah. So, if there is an equality in worshipping God, there should be an equality in duties and obligation. Similarly, if there is an equality in human nature, there should be an equality in rights. Thus, the different types of sharia for women and men are not for the sake of differentiation between men and women. It does not mean that Allah distinguish men from women. Instead, if one sees it clearly, he will find that some obligations is aimed for men and sometimes it aims for women due to some reasons, especially social circumstance (al-Būṭī, 1996)

As the Prophet PBUH said:

*"Allah's Right upon His slaves is that they should worship Him Alone and associate nothing with Him; and His slaves' right upon Him is that He should not punish who does not associate a thing with Him."* (Al-Bukhari and Muslim)

Al-Būṭī further explained that the word "slaves" does not mean only men or only women, as the hadith is for both women and men. Thus, Allah includes both men and women in the sharia. However, there must be some obligations for men that are not for women, including the Jumaa prayer. According to Al-Būṭī, Jumaa prayer in the mosque is mandatory for men, but this is waived in some conditions. For example, it is not mandatory for a man to go to the mosque for Jumaa prayer if someone is sick in his home and no one is with him. Instead, he must focus on curing and treating the sick. Similarly, if the presence of women in the mosque ignores such *maṣlaḥa*, the obligations are then waived for women. But still, women have the same rights as men because if she goes to the mosque, she can still perform their prayers just like men do (al-Būṭī, 1996).

All mentioned above is the proof how Islam treat women and men equally without ignoring the inevitable different for the *maṣlaḥa* in their life. Unfortunately, some misinterpretations on the teaching of Islam led to the marginalization of women and this practice does not reflect the concept of women in Islam which emphasize the justice and respect for women.

### **The Critique of Conservative Media Exposure on Women**

The critique will be delivered in two ways, based on content and the methodology in the Instagram posts. There are various types of accounts, according to the researchers' observations on conservative accounts. There are accounts that are actually affiliated with organizations, individual accounts with a fan base or on their own initiative, anonymous accounts with a mentor (described in the bio), and accounts from well-known, large organizations. The materials that are typically gathered are written works or lectures from Middle Eastern or Indonesian salafi figures that have been translated into Indonesian. We discover that those show gender gaps in the position of Muslim women in the public sphere.

#### **Critiques of the Content**

##### **Media portrayal of woman as a wife**

Woman as a wife is respectful in Islam, as the marriage in Islam must be based on the compassion, mutual love, and peace, and not solely for the human desire (Badawi, 2016). Mutual love and peace must be noted to be a crucial consideration of the marriage because to be married is to be live happily with someone who is trusted. However, there is still some media portray the position of woman as a wife disrespectfully. Instead, they advocate the polygamy without giving a broader context (retrieved from Instagram: @bimbingan\_islam).

Although, polygamy is permissible in Islam as mentioned in the verse al-Nisa (4), there must be paying attention to the broader context. Al-Būṭī (1996), in this context, propose the concept of *sallam al-awwaliyyāt*, prioritizing the urgent one. For example, if there is a two

context, a man can stay with a wife, he fulfilled everything for her. At the same time, he cannot avoid the zina. In this case, man urgently choose to marry again in avoiding the zina as it is a part of biggest sin in Islam. Hence, *sallam al-awwaliyyat* is the way to see what must be prioritized for the *maslaha*. Therefore, it is clear that the sharia does not merely permit the polygamy without any context. There must be based on justice and equality of fulfilling the rights of women (al-Būṭī, 1996).

In addition, al-Būṭī (1996) emphasized that it is better for men to treat his wife carefully without only looking at the opportunity to remarry for the sake of human desire. One should fulfil the needs of his woman, treat her well with justice and humanity because necessities must be answered proportionately (*tuqdar al-darurat bi qadriha*).

#### **Media portrayal of woman as a leader**

The discussion of woman to be a leader in Islam invites pros and cons among the ulama. Leadership of women becomes a sensitive issue within the Muslim communities, some of them agree that women have her right to take the role as a leader and some of them reject it to maintain the status quo (Rohman, 2013). The pros and cons within some discourse in Islamic teachings may happen to the different type of interpretation. However, it becomes a complex issue while citing the text without clear explanation and this may lead to marginalization of woman which is contradicting with the Islamic teaching on treating a woman.

Some posts in the media portray women as if she has not ability to be a leader with citing the hadith narrated by Abu Bakra without giving a broader explanation, as the Prophet PBUH said:

*"Never will succeed such a nation as makes a woman their ruler."* (Al-Bukhari)

The grade of the hadith is *sahih* and qualified, Al-Buthi (1996) asserted that the hadith was about the Persian rule that is controlled by the woman after taking the throne of his father. Badawi (2016) mentioned that the context of Persia during that time is showing the enmity towards the Prophet, and hence, the Prophet's statement is the impending doom of the unjust empire and has no relation with the gender issue.

However, al-Buti has different idea regarding the woman leadership. He divided leadership into two, religious matter (*dīnī*) and political matter (*siyāsī*). To be a caliph in the Islamic caliphate system is not permissible in Islam because it is considered as religious matter (*dīnī*) not merely a political matter (*siyāsī*). As a result, women can still become a leader politically.

#### **Media portrayal of woman in society**

As mentioned above, women and men are basically equal, they are equally occupied with the sharia. In fact, the conservative media exposure on women often portrayed women as *fitna*, thousands of hashtags in Instagram show the narration of women as a *fitna* which imply the obligation of covering the body. They cite what the Prophet PBUH said: "'After me I have not left any trial more severe to men than women" without any explanation. The transnational Islamist movement may contribute to such understanding, the notion of women as a source of *fitna*, being spread in Indonesia (Nisa, 2021). This kind of narration has misled to blame women in being sexually harassed. While at the same time, the emphasis on man to keep their sights are not more than the notion of women being a source of *fitna*.

On the other hand, al-Būṭī (1996) emphasized that women and men are equally free. The freedom in this context does not absolutely free, but freedom which is limited to maintain *maṣlaḥa* and protect others' freedom. For this reason, woman is free to have a job and being involved in political leadership. In addition, women can also participate in social activities to shape their skills in all aspects as long as it benefits them. For example, academic activities, *halaqa*, and many other things.

## Critiques of the Methodology

### *Interpretation of religious texts and deliberating ideas in the media*

Conservatives claim to religious certainty and seemingly endless capacity to cite scripture to support their account for a significant portion of its appeal. Abdullah Saeed (2005) divided three various approaches in the interpretation of ethico-legal content of the Quran in the current era; Textualist, Semi-textualist and Contextualist. This categorization is based on two points, how much the interpreters rely solely on linguistic criteria to ascertain the text's meaning and how much they consider both the socio-historical context of the Quran and the present-day context. In this regard, Saeed include Salafis as the obvious example of textualist group. Textualists advocate for a strict adherence to the text and take a literalistic stance toward it. According to textualists, Muslims should follow the Quran rather than any purported modern "needs" They believe that the meaning of the Quran is unchanging and applicable to all people.

As an example, consider the issue of Muslim women's travel restrictions. As demonstrated by the preceding example, Salafi writings on social media accounts strictly prohibit women from traveling without a *mahram* in accordance with the literal meaning of the hadith used as evidence. Meanwhile, those who believe that understanding the text and context is required for interpreting a hadith, such as Al-Qardawi (2008) argue that people should consider that the *illat* (the basic cause) of the hadith prohibits women from traveling without a *mahram* because, in the past Arab context, women did not have security guarantees when traveling, both modes of transportation and against what they will go through or meet during their voyage. Meanwhile, at this point, the context is different. This mode of transportation is much more comfortable and security is guaranteed.

The use of clear explanation of text and context in disseminating information to the media is very crucial to avoid misunderstanding. Media is a social platform that everyone can access and see, and hence, one should wisely use the social media by posting something clearly explained. In terms of Islamic posts, they are inseparable from the arts of da'wa and its ethics are reflected in the best communication techniques based on skills and etiquette (*maw'iza hasana*) without harming, insulting, and harsh (Saleh et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to understand the social challenges and the audience circumstances to deliver the ideas through social media to be well accepted. The ideal preacher does not solely acknowledge the normative theological aspects but also comprehend the worldview, human rights, cultural and local tradition to produce a peaceful da'wa (Haramain & Aminah, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

Muslim scholars attempt to put more attention to gender issues from the perspective of Islam. At the same time, the spread of conservatism among Muslims increased through the media which led to the misconception of the concept of women in Islam. Islam emphasizes gender equity where women and men are basically equal without ignoring the inevitable differences for cooperation and achieving the common good (*maşlaḥa*). Although the concept of women in Islam is clear, there is still some conservative media that portray women to be marginalized, and unfortunately, it still happens within the Muslim communities themselves. The research finds that there are still posts, not all, on media portraying women as a source of fitna, impermissible, and unable to be leaders, implying that women's rights are still marginalized compared to men. While in fact, women and men have the same rights, opportunities, and responsibilities to complement each other. Moreover, discussing information dissemination, it is essential to apply the right methodology in avoiding misconceptions about the information. Therefore, future researchers are suggested to examine specific media to gain comprehensive insights into the portrayal of women and gender issues.

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