EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH ISLAM:
FATAYAT NU BETWEEN TRADITION AND
CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

The Muslim mass organizations (ormas), the modernist Muhammadiyah and the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), have been playing an important role in Indonesian civil society and politics since their foundation. Kiai Haji Ahmad Dahlan established Muhammadiyah in Kauman, Yogyakarta, in 1912, at a time when civil associations and political organizations were emerging nationwide in Indonesia. The Muhammadiyah has a predominantly urban, middle-class base throughout Indonesia. As Muhammad Fuad observes, it was Dahlan’s concern with the poverty and backwardness of the people of the Netherlands East Indies, the majority of whom belonged to the Islamic umma, which led him to the fields of education and health. He was interested in issues such as reform of Islamic law and the introduction of modern education. In addition, kiai Dahlan’s revolutionary social treatment of women should be highlighted. He considered women as independent human beings, responsible and accountable for their own deeds in the same fashion as men, and that they should be given access to and opportunity to acquire religious knowledge. Aisyiyah, the women’s branch of

1 Author’s note: I would like to thank Prof. Susanne Schröter and three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments on an earlier version of this paper. My thanks also to Jeff Lucash for editing this article. However, the responsibility for this article is mine alone.
Muhammadiyah founded in 1917 in Yogyakarta, is recognized as the oldest of the Muslim women’s organizations.4

Nahdlatul Ulama was founded in 1926 in Surabaya by a group of ulema, Hasjim As’ari (d. 1947), Wahab Chasbullah (d. 1971) and Bisri Syamsuri (d. 1980). Their aim was to represent the interests of traditional Islam, specifically the pesantren (Islamic boarding school) system. The kiai, Islamic leaders of the pesantren, have always exerted strong influence on the regional community through their religious knowledge and authority. Nahdlatul Ulama attracted the more conservative, traditionalist Muslims in rural and small-town Java, with strongholds in Central and Eastern Java. Nowadays the NU is said to be the largest religious mass organization in Indonesia.

Several scholars5 have reflected on various political, social and religious roles that these organizations have played in different historical periods but for a long time scholars have neglected the women’s branches of NU and Muhammadiyah. This led some authors to assert that the study of Muslim women’s organizations is underdeveloped.6 However, in the last several years the women’s branches of Muslim organizations have increasingly become a topic for research. It is not my objective to give a thorough account of all of these studies, but I will draw on specific aspects of works I consider important in the context of this paper.7


6 This has been especially highlighted in S. Blackburn, Women and the State in Modern Indonesia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 225; K. Robinson, ‘Islam, Gender and Politics in Indonesia’ in V. Hooker and A. Saikal (eds.), Islamic Perspectives on the New Millenium (Singapore: ISEAS, 2004), 184.

Andrée Feillard has argued that although the Muslim feminist movement aims at reform within Islam, it does straddle two goals, the search for an Indonesian way of being a good Muslim in a modernized society and faithfulness to Muslim tradition, culture and values. In highlighting that the women are ‘unsure of their impact in an “ocean” of conservative literature, intensive courses and preaching’ and observing that they often experience distrust in the santri population, Feillard exposes the difficulties that Muslim women activists have been facing.

Several scholars have highlighted the value of reinterpreting Islamic sources in the context of Muslim feminist activism. In *Women Shaping Islam* Pieternella van Doorn-Harder considers women’s activism or Islamic feminism as a new force within Muhammadiyah and NU. She describes Muslim women in these organizations as agents of change, who slowly change the paradigm concerning women’s position and place. She highlights the women’s effort to reinterpret Islamic sources as a step towards emancipation. Masdar F. Mas’udi, Rosalia Sciortino and Lies Marcoes have also observed in the context of the Indonesian Society for Pesantren and Community Development (P3M) that alternative interpretations of Islamic texts form an important source for women in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) to understand their rights.

In her recent PhD. thesis Rachel Rinaldo has linked religion to women’s participation in the public sphere. She has argued that women’s knowledge of religious texts and use of religious discourses and practices is the key to their legitimacy in the public sphere. She concludes, however, that their participation is highly dependent on the political context and particular religious practices and interpretations. She claims that, in the current period, with religion becoming an increasing element of the Indonesian public sphere, women activists make their


Ibid.


I.e. Pusat Penelitian dan Pengkajian Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat.


R. Rinaldo, ‘Mobilizing Piety: Women, Islam, and the Public Sphere in Indonesia’, (PhD. Diss., Chicago, IL, Department of Sociology, 2007), i. 290.
voice heard by mobilizing religious texts and discourses. The reforms they call for range from those intended to achieve gender equality to those intended to make Indonesia a more Islamic country.\(^\text{14}\)

Siti Syamsiyatun has targeted her research mainly on one women’s organization, Nasyiatul Aisyiyah or Nasyiah, the young women’s branch of Muhammadiyah.\(^\text{15}\) Taking a historical perspective, she has reflected on the dynamics of the discourse on young womanhood in Indonesia. Observing that, after Nasyiah became an autonomous entity, its members reconstructed their image of young womanhood, she claims that it was in the 1960s that they increasingly identified ‘youth’ with the spirit of exploring new roles and programmes for women. She notes that young Indonesian Muslim women have won recognition of the right to take on new roles as they have become better educated and more independent.\(^\text{16}\) In her PhD thesis—completed one year before the article referred to was published—she had asked how Nasyiah utilized its autonomy to develop a new identity of young womanhood, what kinds of ideal womanhood and gender interests its members envisaged, and how this gender discourse evolved within Nasyiah from 1965 to 2000.\(^\text{17}\) She explicitly links the history of Nasyiah with developments of the Indonesian state, arguing that the state, women’s organizations, and religious organizations have been competing to dominate gender discourse within society since its early development.\(^\text{18}\)

This paper looks at the way in which Fatayat NU utilizes Islam as a strategy to promote women’s empowerment. Fatayat NU, originally a section of Muslimat NU, struggled for several years to become a badan otonom or banom (autonomous body) of NU, succeeding finally at the PBNNU congress in 1962.\(^\text{19}\) It sheds light on this struggle, explaining the development of key concepts, especially women’s empowerment, in the recent history of Fatayat NU. It shows how strategies for women’s

\(^{14}\) Ibid, 291.

\(^{15}\) Occasionally, she has also discussed developments in other Muslim youth organizations.


\(^{18}\) Ibid, 66.

\(^{19}\) Fatayat NU was formally established in 1950; its status as an autonomous organization was confirmed at the PBNNU congress in Solo in 1962. Affiah, Neng Dara *et al.*, *Menapak Jejak Fatayat NU: Sejarah gerakan, pengalaman dan pemikiran* (Jakarta: Pucuk Pimpinen Fatayat NU, 2005), 81.
empowerment have changed during the history of Fatayat NU, as a reaction to resistance and disapproval from its paternal organization, Nahdlatul Ulama. Particular attention is given to the methods the young women have chosen to put their vision into practice. I will especially draw on the programmes Fatayat NU has set up and on their experiences as far as reinterpretations of Islamic sources are concerned.


Fatayat NU (Young Women of NU) was officially founded on 24 April 1950 for NU women between the ages of 20 and 40, based on a decision taken on the occasion of the 18th Muktamar NU (Highest National NU Congress) in Jakarta. Like its sister organization, Muslimat NU (founded 29 March 1946 at the 16th NU Muktamar in Purwokerto, Central Java), it has its roots in the pesantren-based Nahdlatul Ulama, their ‘parental organization’. Fatayat NU became a banom of NU in 1962, on the occasion of the Muktamar NU in Solo. Thus, the young women of NU organized themselves much later than their sisters of Muhammadiyah, who had already established a ‘young generation of Aisyiyah’ in 1931. It was not until 1940 that the young women of Nahdlatul Ulama first expressed their aspiration to become an autonomous body of NU, and it was not until the 15th Muktamar NU in Surabaya that they laid the foundation for the creation of Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU. The statutes of the former were already formulated at the time of this conference, and Muslimat became a body of NU, called

20 This paper does not especially focus on the (sometimes problematic) relationship between Fatayat NU and Muslimat NU.
21 Until the Fatayat congress in July 2005 the age of women in Fatayat was 20–40; at that congress the limit was raised to 45 years because Maria Ulfah Anshor, the current chairwoman, was about to turn 45 at that time. See Setiawan, ‘Fatayat NU lebih tua’, Suara Merdeka (22 July 2005). (http://www.suaramerdeka.com/harian/0507/22/nasb.htm. Last accessed 15 January 2008.)
22 Affiah, Neng Dara et al., Menapak Jejak Fatayat NU, 35.
23 The target group of Muslimat NU is women above 40. However, since Fatayat NU raised the age limit to 45 years in July 2005, members of Muslimat NU are now sometimes younger than Fatayat NU members.
24 Author’s interview with Neng Dara Affiah, vice chairwoman of Fatayat NU, 19 Sep. 2006.
25 Affiah, Neng Dara et al., Menapak Jejak Fatayat NU, 81.
26 In 1940 women played an active role in the 15th NU congress. In a song they called young women of NU to defend their country and religion. They
Nahdlatul Oelama Moeslimat (NOM). In 1946 at the 16th Muktamar NU in Purwokerto NOM, the precursor of Muslimat NU, was officially established under NU. At the 19th Muktamar NU in Palembang in 1952 the name NOM was changed to Muslimat NU, which became an autonomous body of NU. Although the women envisioned the creation of their own women’s branch, they were still reluctant to put this idea into practice; they feared that they lacked sufficient knowledge and experience to be successful, anxious that their numbers were few and, furthermore, they had difficulty in raising their voice in a male-dominated community. A history of Muslimat NU describes the trouble women within that organization had in getting permission to speak at NU conferences, and the difficulties they faced in establishing Muslimat. As the book states, ‘the history of the birth of Muslimat NU can really be called a spectacular political event within the circle of NU’. These factors explain in part why it took Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU so long to realize their ideal of establishing NU-associated women’s organizations.

It was kiai Muhammad Dahlan, general NU chairman at that time, who gave the decisive push to set up a young women’s branch under NU. He encouraged young NU women to found ‘Fatayat’ and specifically asked three women to set up this association under the NU umbrella: Aminah Mansur, Khuzaimah Mansur and Murthosiyah. From that point these three members of the leadership council called themselves ‘Tiga Serangkai’, the Triumvirate. The support that these women received from kiai Dahlan has to be viewed in the context of NU politics at that time. NU encouraged the foundation of new associations under its auspices because it had aspirations to become an independent

increased their awareness of being an important group that needed their own identity and visions. See Sejarah Fatayat NU (Jakarta: PP Fatayat NU, 1984), 50.  
  
  
28 S. Ma’shum and A. Zawawi, 50 tahun Muslimat NU: berkhidmat untuk agama, negara dan bangsa (Jakarta: Pucuk Pimpinan Muslimat Nahdlatul Ulama 1996), 84.  
  
29 In the case of Muslimat NU it was six years, in the case of Fatayat NU ten.  
  
political party, as a result of internal differences worsening the relationship between Masyumi and NU. This aspiration to establish its own party meant that NU needed members of all age levels to participate in the political process.

Despite this support by kiai Dahlan, Fatayat NU was marked by a limited scope and had to cope during its early period with much resistance from other influential, conservative kiai such as Hasjim As’ari and Wahab Hasbullah. The conservative kiai rejected the idea that women should become more influential within NU, putting the small number of women, who played an active part in the organization, under further pressure. Several male authorities attempted to limit the women’s scope from the onset, while those kiai whose attitude was more favourable towards women tended to support Muslimat NU because, in contrast to Fatayat NU, it had been accepted as one of the rightful NU bodies. The leaders, especially advisory chairman KH. Bisri Syamsuri, Wahab Hasbullah’s nephew, did not support the aspirations of the young women, who had announced their wish to found a women’s organization at the National Congress in 1950. Bisri Syamsuri felt that it would have been sufficient if the young women had simply joined Muslimat NU instead of founding another women’s organization. This explains why it took the Syuriah (Religious Council) several years to confirm the banom status of Fatayat NU.

As a result of the resistance that the Fatayat women encountered from the NU leadership, the organization was in practice intertwined with Muslimat NU, when the Syuriah eventually affirmed it as a banom. This interconnection between the two organizations was reflected in its management structure. In the early years it was a common, though unofficial, practice that Muslimat appointed the general chairwoman...
(Ketum) of Fatayat and Fatayat appointed the general secretary (Sekum) of Muslimat. This arrangement rendered it more difficult for Fatayat women to develop an individual profile. Based on accounts of Fatayat women, however, we learn that they did not regard this as a particular problem until 1962, when the desire grew to become more independent from Muslimat, as far as financial resources and the imitation of individual programmes were concerned. 33

A further problem for Fatayat NU was in its membership. The cadres were usually not well educated, and married under age. The young age of marriage in Fatayat NU was nothing extraordinary in Indonesia in the 1950s. Gavin Jones observes:

age at marriage for girls was very low in Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s. This represented the traditional situation with little evidence of change up to that time. The highest ages of marriage tended to be recorded in non-Muslim areas such as Bali, Maluku, East Nusa Tenggara, and the Minahasa area of North Sulawesi. 34

Since many of their members married young, Fatayat NU lost a great number of its cadres to the patriarchal system—the women were expected to care for their husband and children rather than spend their time and energy on the organization. The poor education of its members—the majority of them were illiterate—was another challenge for Fatayat NU. An historical account of Fatayat NU mentions that in the early fifties only one of its members had studied at university. 35

From the beginning, Islam had inspired Fatayat NU; all of its activities were related to religion. In the first years its activities mainly focused on preaching gatherings and Qur’ān recitation (pengajian), recitation of the confession of faith (tablîd) and praises of the Prophet (berzanji). Arabic poetry (qasîda) was also read on the occasion of feasts, the birth of a child or the death of a parent. 36

In the years from 1952 to 1969 Fatayat NU tried to enlarge its membership and to develop its structure. Although during the early 1950s the association mainly focused on Java, in a few years it created branches in almost all parts of Indonesia, including Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Sumatra. 37 It was able to expand during this period

33 Affiah, Neng Dara et al., Menapak Jejak Fatayat NU, 74.
34 G. Jones, Marriage and Divorce in Islamic South-East Asia (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994) 75.
35 Affiah, Neng Dara et al., Menapak Jejak Fatayat NU, 12.
36 Van Doorn-Harder, Women Shaping Islam (2006), 242. Pengajian continues to be important within Fatayat until the present.
37 Affiah, Neng Dara et al., Menapak Jejak Fatayat NU, xvi.
because it placed more emphasis on recruitment and made use of its existing network among the pesantren. Recruitment mostly took place in pesantren, with the greatest number of new members coming from daughters of kiai or santri. Pesantren had and still have an important function in recruiting members and producing junior leadership.

During this period education became increasingly important. As Fatayat established an increasing number of branches in different parts of the archipelago, its leaders realized that cooperation between the different regions was difficult because many members did not yet speak Bahasa Indonesia but only their respective regional language. Therefore, after Fatayat had set up six branches in Surabaya, Sidoarjo, Pasuruan, Jember, Malang and Gresik in 1950, their next step was to eradicate illiteracy. They started to offer courses in Bahasa Indonesia to their members to facilitate communication. They taught their members, many of whom were still illiterate, to read and write and they occasionally offered English language courses, as well as organizing sewing and cooking courses. The idea was that the women would see a benefit from their decision to join Fatayat NU. In the early 1950s the women also founded several educational institutions, especially for santri women from poor families, including kindergartens and schools for teachers. The women collected a considerable part of the money needed for these activities through common initiatives, by selling the food and clothes which they had produced in some of their courses and during events that NU organized.

The political climate was generally positive for the further development of Fatayat NU. Women were offered more opportunities to expand their scope of action. An increasing number of women occupied positions in the local government, such as Rukun Tetangga (RT, neighbourhood association), Rukun Warga (RW, citizens association) and Kepala Desa (village heads). At the Syuriah NU congress in 1957 it was decided that women should be represented in the legislative bodies (DPR/DPRD). At this time NU appointed part of its female membership as legislative members, choosing candidates from various Indonesian regions. Examples are Maryam Junaidi and Hadinah Hadi from East Jawa, Mahmudah Mawardi and Maryam Kartasumpena from Central Jawa and Asmah Syahrani from South Kalimantan.


However, in the late 1950s Fatayat NU leaders realized that their scope for action was becoming more limited due to the unclear political situation during Sukarno’s Guided Democracy.⁴⁰ Although the leadership were aware that cooperating with other organizations would be important for the future development of Fatayat NU, they hesitated to significantly expand their network. The only organization they joined at that time was PORPISI,⁴¹ whose members, supported by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, took part in teaching members of the Muslim community Arabic.

During the early years of Soeharto the activities of Fatayat NU and its sister organization Muslimat were further reduced and many were temporarily frozen. Several NU members observed that an atmosphere of fear prevailed at that time, which caused many former NU members to join Golkar, the official government party. An unknown number of activists in Muslimat and other NU affiliates like Ansor began to return their membership cards and several officials were reluctant to invite Fatayat NU or Muslimat leaders because they feared repercussions from the government. Furthermore, the deep crisis NU fell into in the 1970s and 1980s added to the women’s problems. When NU drifted into opposition to the government, they lost a significant part of their membership as did other NU affiliates such as Muslimat and Fatayat.⁴²

Despite these problems, women activists still did not give up all of their activity. In 1969 they found a new field of action, when NU issued a fatwa that encouraged family planning for the creation of keluarga maslahah (family welfare). This was in line with the strong emphasis that the New Order government placed on birth control. The New Order regime tried to limit the birth rate, arguing that development, the basis for the legitimacy of the New Order, was not possible without effective means of contraception. Furthermore, the main aid donors of the Indonesian government, such as the USA, urged them to implement a family planning programme, and in 1970 Soeharto set up BKKBN (Badan Koordinasi Keluarga Berencana Nasional, Family Planning Programme), with the assistance of Western countries.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid, 54.
⁴¹ Perserikatan Organisasi Pemoeda Islam Seloeroeh Indonesia, Union of Islamic Youth Organizations in All Indonesia.
⁴³ S. Blackburn, Women and the State in Modern Indonesia (2004), 152.
The New Order government was aware that the family planning programme would not be successful without the support of religious authorities. They needed the support of *kiai* to successfully implement the programme and thus tried to involve NU. Initially, NU leaders rejected the idea of family planning, believing that it opposed God’s will. However, in 1969 they changed their minds, stating that it was allowed for the purpose of improving mothers’ and children’s welfare, although they still rejected abortion and sterilization. The method of family planning had to be similar to the mechanism of ‘azl (withdrawal), to fit within religious teachings and to avoid conception. Contraception was permissible only on an exceptional basis, not as a regular activity.

NU refers to family planning as *maslahā* (‘public benefit’, ‘welfare’), rather than to the officially used term *keluarga berencana* (family planning). After the fatwa was issued in 1969, Fatayat NU and Muslimat became extensively involved in the promotion of *keluarga maslahah*. The Muslimat’s Welfare Foundation founded LKK (*Lembaga Kemaslahatan Keluarga*, Family Welfare Institute) as a body within NU to promote family welfare through reproductive health and family planning. NU’s decision in 1972 to accept family planning as a mass programme was made upon the request of Muslimat and Fatayat to conduct family planning activities in line with Islamic teachings.

By the end of the 1970s Fatayat NU had become very active in the fields of both mother and child care. They provided advice and information about birth control, breastfeeding, and health care for babies.

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45 In this context M. van Bruinessen writes: ‘The principle of family planning, on condition of being voluntary, was declared to be acceptable to Islam, basically on grounds of maslahah, ‘ensuring the welfare of the ummah’’. See van Bruinessen, ‘Indonesia’s Ulama and Politics: Caught between Legitimising the Status Quo and Searching for Alternatives’ Prisma – The Indonesian Indicator 49 (1990), 52–69. (http://www.let.uu.nl/~martin.vanbruinessen/personal/publications/Ulama_and_politics.htm. Last accessed 15 January 2008.)
HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE 1980s:
REVITALIZATION OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT

The early 1980s mark a watershed in the history of Fatayat NU, caused by transformations within Nahdlatul Ulama. In that period NU experienced a revitalization of Islamic thought, especially resulting from the increasing influence of a group of young, reform-minded men, known as Majlis-24, a forum established in mid-1983, which wanted to change the political direction of NU. They intended to strengthen NU’s focus on religious, social and economic matters and called for the ‘restoration’ (pemulihan) of the khittah of 1926, when the organization was established.49 The result was that in the early 1980s NU broke with its past as a political party and shifted from political to welfare-oriented activities, strengthening their focus on education, economics and modern science and technology.

Many of the young reformers at that time were convinced that dialogue rather than confrontation was needed with the umma and with non-Muslims.50 An example illustrating the effort of this reconciliation is the attempt of kiai Ahmad to raise the narrow concept of ukhuwwa (brotherhood) to a higher level. Using the terms ukhuwwa basyariyya (human brotherhood) and ukhuwwa wataniyyya (national brotherhood), he indicated that the ideal of ukhuwwa did not only apply to Muslim organizations but encompassed the entire fatherland and all of humanity. Martin van Bruinessen observes:

These terms stood for his [kiai Ahmad’s] concern with the common interests of all Indonesians in their nation’s economic and political welfare and with the common interests of all humanity in world peace and protection of the environment.51

It can be assumed that the spirit of change in NU described above enabled an approach that was more tolerant and open towards non-Muslims, thus facilitating cooperation with international organizations. Foreign aid donors welcomed this move, realizing that strengthening Indonesia’s civil society would be an effective way to counterbalance Soeharto’s authoritarian regime.

49 The best known member of this forum was Abdurrahman Wahid. M. van Bruinessen, ‘Traditions for the Future: The Reconstruction of Traditionalist Discourse within NU’ in Barton and Fealy (eds.), Nahdlatul Ulama, 182.
50 Ibid, 187.
51 Ibid.
The young women’s branch of Nahdlatul Ulama, Fatayat NU, has been part of these changes and in some cases has helped to push them. In the 1980s they showed their interest in developing an intensive dialogue on feminist issues within their Islamic traditions. Furthermore, the women strengthened their cooperation with international organizations in the 1980s. The cooperation with foreign donors began a new era in Fatayat NU: large sums of money flowed into the organization, enabling it to implement new programmes over a wide area and more easily spread publications. According to Mahfudoh Ali Ubaid, Fatayat NU general chairwoman from 1979–89, the cooperation with international donors gave the organization more room for action. She states that the new ties enabled the organization to realize ‘old’ Fatayat programmes, for instance on the improvement of children’s lives, when Fatayat started to work together with UNICEF:

Through cooperation with UNICEF, we could save funds managed by a treasurer so that we were able to revive the organization. We contributed a great part of UNICEF’s budget, which was meant to be allocated as remuneration, to the organization.

Thus, supported by international organizations, Fatayat NU strengthened its role in defending women’s rights and in doing advocacy work. This is especially reflected in the programmes it has launched in the last decade, outlined next.

PROMOTING REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

In the 1980s Fatayat NU increasingly began to focus on reproductive health topics, partly as a reaction to the governmental family planning, which did not adequately educate or enable women to use contraceptives. Aware that insufficient knowledge about reproductive health,

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53 One example is the programme on the advancement of children’s lives, sponsored by UNICEF, from 1979 to 1984.

54 Affiah, Neng Dara et al., Menapak Jejak Fatayat NU, 97.

55 Candland and Nurjanah, ‘Women’s Empowerment’.
including pregnancy and its health risks, was a serious threat for Indonesian society, Fatayat NU started the programme Bina Balita, as a part of Bina Keluarga. Among its activities Bina Balita gave counsel on issues such as proper nutrition for pregnant women and children.

Issues of reproductive health were also addressed by YKF (Fatayat Welfare Organization), which, according to Emma Marhumah, one of the YKF founders and now director of the Center of Women’s Studies at IAIN Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta, was established in 1990. The YKF founders felt that Fatayat had been unable to address health issues professionally and wanted this gap to be filled. Structurally, YKF was outside Fatayat NU. YKF itself has not been active since 2003, as its former members have accepted positions in other institutions.

In 1998 Fatayat started to implement socialization programmes in east, west and central Java and south Sulawesi. At that time they also initiated grassroots peer education programmes on reproductive health, focusing explicitly on HIV/AIDS, and the programme ‘Empowerment of Women’s Reproductive Health Rights’. As a part of this programme, Fatayat NU established Reproductive Health Information Centres (PIKER) with branches in eleven provinces in Sumatra, west Java and south Sulawesi in 2001, in cooperation with the Ford Foundation. PIKER serves to inform society about reproductive health and women’s rights through counseling and media support. These centres give community members the ability to discuss reproductive (or general) health problems and to seek advice from Fatayat counsellors, who are either doctors or obstetricians. Issues frequently discussed are genital infections, nutrition of mothers and measures to prevent HIV/AIDS. The advocates also assist community members in accessing better health facilities. Like other programmes launched by Fatayat NU, PIKER concentrates on the grassroots level.

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56 The other founders were Masruchah, Habibah and Sri Andari Faqih. According to Emma Marhumah these women had formerly all been members of PMII Puteri and then Fatayat. Author’s interview with Emma Marhumah, 23 May 2008.

57 Author’s interview with Habibah, 30 May 2008.


59 Affiah, Neng Dara *et al.*, *Menapak Jejak Fatayat NU*, 175.
In the late 1990s Fatayat NU explicitly started to use a gender-sensitive approach. This move was at least partly determined by Abdurrahman Wahid, who was elected as the general chairman of NU in 1984, and who stood for gender justice, gender equality, human rights, religious pluralism and democracy. He thought of NU as a force for peaceful change and a transition towards a democratic, tolerant society, although he realized that this goal would be difficult to achieve because Soeharto manipulated Islam for political purposes. During the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001) an atmosphere of discussion prevailed that was more open than in other Muslim mass organizations and indeed even non-Muslim ones. This is not to say that the traditional voices of NU fell silent due to the new ‘liberalization’, as a great number of kiai still stick to the traditional Islamic values, as they can be read in classical fiqh, especially that of the Shafi’i school.

This split between conservative and progressive forces in NU also affects Fatayat NU, forcing them to position themselves carefully between these two ‘poles’. The women have no intention to confront the kiai as they are dependent on their support and as they can, in their function of pesantren leaders, exert considerable influence on their activities. Nevertheless the activists often reject the ideas of the kiai and vice versa. Many kiai do not favour the young women’s attempts to break up their monopoly on the interpretation of religious texts or to demand political rights for women. According to a great number of kiai, such efforts must be rejected because they are not in accord with Indonesian society, especially its Islam. Furthermore, they fear that the women’s emphasis on social construction of gender roles and opposition to what they see as inequality between men and women on the basis of gender undermines Islamic teachings, especially as far as Nahdliyin, the general membership of the NU association, are concerned. The women,

60 Siti Syamsiyatun (‘A Daughter in the Indonesian Muhammadiyah’, 85) has also observed that Nasyiatul Aisyiyah, the young women’s wing of Muhammadiyah, adopted a gender perspective in looking at women’s issues in Islam in the 1990s.


62 S. M. Mulia, Muslimah reformis: Perempuan pembaru keagamaan (Jakarta: Mizan, 2005), 518.
however, argue for equality of women and men on the basis of Islamic teachings, referring to Qur’anic verses that emphasize their equal status.

COUNTERACTING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In an effort to rebalance the relationship between men and women the organization started initiatives to counter domestic violence against women. From 1997–2000 they launched their programme ‘Penguatan Hak-hak Perempuan’ (Strengthening Women’s Rights), which is the predecessor of the recent programme LKP2 (Consultative Institute for Women’s Empowerment), which was established in 2000. LKP2 has established 26 branches in 25 regencies all over Indonesia, supported by The Asia Foundation. It provides consultation, guidance, information and advocacy to the society at large, familiarizing them with women’s rights. More specifically, the focus of LKP2 is to empower women and to counsel victims of violence. The decision to found LKP2 was based on the awareness that many women, including members of Fatayat NU, experience violence due to gender-biased interpretations of Islamic sources. Most of the cases that LKP2 has handled deal with domestic violence, where women are sexually, physically, mentally or economically abused.

Members of LKP2 not only offer advice to the women who come to their office, they also visit the victims’ homes if they have been informed of a case of violence, as they know that many victims hesitate actively to seek help for their problems at a public institution. LKP2 also utilizes the media as another way to get in touch with victims. In Yogyakarta, for instance, LKP2 seeks dialogue with society, especially with women, through the broadcasting station Rosala FM and discusses problems such as violence. Although there are governmental institutes offering counsel for women who have been abused, such as WCC (Women Crisis Center) or BP4 (Board for Marriage Counselling and Divorce Settlement),


65 Author’s interview with Siti Rohmah Nurhayati, local chairwoman of Fatayat NU (DKI Yogyakarta), 10 September 2006.
Muslim women sometimes prefer LKP2 because they want religious advice from a female Muslim counsellor. As several cases collected by LKP2 reveal, many of these women are doubtful if their own or their husbands’ behaviour is in accord with social norms and Islamic teachings. They fear divorce because they are afraid of the consequences, such as the difficulty in earning their living and facing exclusion from society. The advisors use their interpretations of Islamic sources as a basis for their counselling. According to the cases collected in a Fatayat NU publication, LKP2 tries to empower women by encouraging them to lead an economically independent life, not to fear social stigmatization, to inform themselves about correct behaviour in accord with Islamic teachings, to look after their (reproductive) health and to seek guidance from God.66

However, activities in this programme have decreased over the last few years, as it is no longer being funded by the Asia Foundation. Several LKP2 branches, such as the one in Yogyakarta, Bantul, have closed, and others have changed their focus, according to the needs of the umma, turning their attention to advising santri in pesantren on issues of reproductive health. The latest programme created by Fatayat NU is concerned with human trafficking. Through it Fatayat NU tries to ‘empower society and local caring groups to build a “joint movement”, making efforts to stop the selling of women and children’.67 The organization especially wants to prevent the TKW (Female Migrant Workers) from becoming victims of inhumane working conditions in countries of the Middle and Far East, such as Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and Singapore, where they go to seek higher wages. The women of Fatayat NU intend to prevent abuse of TKW and their children. They, among others, advocate better education for the children of TKW and for fair working conditions, such as a one day paid leave per week. According to the estimates of Maria Ulfah Anshor, between 700,000 and one million women and children have become victims of trafficking.68

The women criticize the fact that neither the home nor the host countries have established a properly functioning system to protect the

66 Mujib, Perempuan di balik tabir kekerasan.
migrant workers from exploitation and physical abuse by their employees or their environment. In many cases these women are exploited, do not have any leisure time or holidays and often are not paid for their services. In the aftermath of the economic crisis that hit Indonesia in the late 1990s, Indonesian women and children have reportedly become more vulnerable to illegal and irregular forms of migration, such as being trafficked abroad.69

Trafficking can also assume the shape of ‘fixed-term contracts’ where the woman is married for a certain period of time and is taken to a foreign country, where she is forced to earn a living as a sex worker. This ‘fixed-term contract’ is often found in areas around West Java between Saudi Arabian men and Indonesian women. A local penghulu (village chief) handles the marriage but does not record it at the Office of Religious Affairs (Kantor Urusan Agama). According to secular law such a marriage is illegal since there is no official document recording it. And women living in such a marriage have no security, neither in terms of property nor inheritance.

Since governmental measures directed at the prevention of trafficking are still limited, several international and local NGOs and Muslim organizations have increased their efforts to combat it since the late 1990s.70 Fatayat NU began its efforts to counteract human trafficking in 2001, on the occasion of a national workshop, in cooperation with ILO-IPEC (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour). At that workshop the women agreed that steps needed to be taken to counteract trafficking because the contracts of migrant workers (under-age children and adult women) are often manipulated so that the workers become victims of exploitation and abuse.

As the following interview reveals, the victims of trafficking frequently originate from villages that have ties to NU or Fatayat itself.71 When Maryam Fithriati, a Fatayat counsellor, went as assistant to Medan, a ‘transit region’, she met with the local NU board and discussed the ways

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70 A recent example from organizations combating trafficking are the International Organization of Migration (IOM), which helped the Indonesian government to repatriate women who had become victims of trafficking from Malaysia in 2006.
trafficking is organized and carried out in Medan. In this context the counsellor recounts the following experience:

They [the NU board] also gave counsel to deported TKW, and when they came across several TKW, it turned out that they did not have any documents. There was only one document they possessed: the Fatayat membership card. I was immediately startled. What, that means many of our members become victims [of trafficking]. This formed the basis for my enthusiasm to counteract trafficking afterwards. The majority of Fatayat members are groups at grassroots level in the villages. People that likely become victims of trafficking.\(^72\)

In 2002 Fatayat NU started an anti-trafficking campaign and launched the Trafficking Awareness Movement (Gerakan Sadar Trafiking) in cooperation with ILO (International Labour Organization) in three Javanese provinces.\(^73\) This campaign served mainly to increase public awareness about the widespread problem of trafficking. In 2004, supported by the IOM (International Organization for Migration), it started motivator training for religious figures in Aceh, and in 2006 the women organized study circles (halaqoh), attended by kiai in five provinces. The halaqoh dealt with how to prevent trafficking and how to protect its victims. Furthermore, they made the Muslim community familiar with the contents of the RUU Anti Trafiking,\(^74\) in Tangerang, Depok and Bekasi. The short-term aim of the anti-trafficking campaign is to establish a better system of protection for women migrant workers; the long-term goal is to eradicate trafficking in women and children. Before the anti-trafficking law was passed, NU, together with its women’s branches, had pressed the government to counteract trafficking. In 2006 NU had issued a fatwa, prohibiting trafficking of women, upon the urging of its women’s branches.\(^75\) Fatayat NU has also increased efforts against trafficking, launching campaigns at the grassroots level in different regions of Indonesia, offering training for women and child workers, and building shelters for the victims of trafficking.

\(^72\) Author’s interview with Maryam Fithriati, Fatayat counsellor, 11 October 2006.
\(^73\) Ener, ‘Masalah utama: lemahnya perlindungan’.
\(^74\) After long deliberations in parliament Indonesia’s president signed the anti-trafficking bill into law in April 2007. In it, trafficking is defined according to international standards, and criminalizes both cross-border and internal trafficking. In addition, sexual exploitation and debt bondage are also defined.
As we can see from the history of Fatayat NU, this organization has defended women’s rights from its very beginning, albeit with very limited influence then, but with increasing effect on social issues in its recent history. Women’s empowerment has been promoted more effectively by using a gender-sensitive approach than had been the case in the past.

The next section shows how the gender-sensitive approach of Fatayat NU in this period is reflected in its interpretations of Islamic sources, the Qur’ân and hadith, and how the concrete programmes and activities described above are linked to those interpretations.

FATAYAT NU INTERPRETING ISLAMIC SOURCES

The women refer to the Qur’ânic verse in the sūra Āl Īmārān (3. 104) as dasar perjuangan, the basis of struggle: ‘Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong; they are the ones to attain felicity.’ Among other verses that inspire the activism of Fatayat NU, one is from al-Hujurāt (49. 13), saying that men and women are not distinguished by gender, rather, it is quality of belief in God and humanity, which make people different from one another;76 another is from Luqmary (31. 14): ‘We have commanded people to be good to their parents: their mothers carried them, with strain upon strain, and it takes two years to wean them. Give thanks to Me and to your parents – all will return to Me.’

One of the most important goals Fatayat NU formulated on the occasion of their 12th congress in 2005 is ‘to shape young Muslim women who are obedient to Allah SWT berakhul karīmah (are of good character), have high moral standards, are capable of taking responsibility and are beneficial for religion and homeland’.77

76 Andrée Feillard has shown, through the example of an interview with Khuzaimah, Fatayat co-founder, that the discourse about gender equality was prominent within Fatayat leadership already in the mid-1990s. Khuzaimah’s view was in line with the opinion of all 23 of the Muslim women leaders that A. Feillard interviewed, except one. They ‘believed in equality between men and women’. A. Feillard, ‘Indonesia’s Emerging Muslim Feminism: Women Leaders on Equality, Inheritance and Other Gender Issues’, Studia Islamika 4/1 (1997), 91.

77 The other goals are: to shape a gender-just society, to create a feeling of loyalty towards the principles, ‘aqīda (creed) and goals of NU, and to uphold Islamic Sharī’ā. Their vision is to ‘eradicate all kind of violence, injustice and poverty in society, to develop a socially constructive, democratic and gender-just
The young women argue that their gender-sensitive approach is based on Islamic sources. In accord with many other Muslim activists and scholars they argue that these sources have to be reinterpreted according to the current historical and social context. Re-reading Islamic sources requires the young women to have the relevant expertise: several members of Fatayat NU have acquired specialist knowledge of Shari’ah and fiqh (law and jurisprudence). Many have made use of the well-developed network of pesantren and studied Islamic sources there for years; others have acquired the relevant knowledge at Islamic universities or other institutions concerned with the study of Islam. A great number of Fatayat NU women have entered the organization due to personal contacts inside pesantren, their relatives being kiai or other NU members.78

Interpreting Islamic sources is seen as a strategy to strengthen women’s empowerment. Fatayat NU sees the need to interpret the Qur’an, the Sunna, hadith and opinions of Islamic scholars to reach this aim. Furthermore, since the organization firmly clings to fiqh, they interpret Islamic laws in the context of justice between men and women. They especially see the need to interpret Sūrat al-Nisā’ (4. 34), which is often interpreted as illustrating gender hierarchy.79 Neng Dara comments upon the practice of reinterpreting Islamic sources in Fatayat NU as follows:

To enable husband and wife to be equal in everyday life, the verses of the Qur’an must be reinterpreted. The main reason, why we have taken the sources of Islamic teachings as a strategy for women’s empowerment is that the Fatayat community, the NU community, regard religion as the basis of values.80

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES: WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP, POLYGAMY AND ABORTION

As the gender-sensitive approach has increasingly determined the direction of the organization, the issue of women’s leadership has

discourse, a wacana kehidupan (discourse of life)’. Their mission is to ‘build a critical awareness of women to shape gender equality and justice’. Before 1999 Fatayat NU did not have a written mission and vision statement.

78 Author’s interview with Maryam Fithriati, 11 October 2006.
79 ‘[…] Righteous wives are devout and guard what God would have them guard in their husband’s absence. If you fear high-handedness from your wives, remind them [of the teachings of God], then ignore them when you go to bed, then hit them […]’
80 Author’s interview with Neng Dara Affiah, 19 September 2006.
become an important topic for debate. A first example, where a Fatayat leader strongly disapproved of the reluctance of the ulema to support women as possible leaders, comes from the national NU meeting in 1997.\textsuperscript{81} The Central Java Fatayat NU chairwoman Madijihah Muhtarom rejected a draft paper written by K. H. Zidny, a Jakarta \textit{ālim}, at the national NU meeting in November 1997, which questioned women’s right to participate in public life. Madijihah Muhtarom objected to the conservative interpretations supporting K. H. Zidny’s position, arguing that Islam had given an equal status to men and women right from the start of the revelation, but that local cultures had distorted the understanding of this egalitarian religion and wrongly interpreted the Qur’an. She explained:

If the Qur’ān continues to be interpreted wrongly […] then one should not be surprised if ‘Muslim feminists’ sometimes feel like breaking away from the Muslim umma.\textsuperscript{82}

The issue of female leadership again became a topic of heated discussion (within but also outside NU), when Megawati stood for the office of president. At that time a theological debate started in santri circles, where the religious arguments used against a female presidency were primarily based on the \textit{hadith} and \textit{fiqh} and secondarily on the Qur’ān. Within both NU and Muhammadiyah there were controversial opinions about this subject, and the conservative groups advised their members not to vote for a woman as president, arguing that Muslims were prohibited under Islamic law from choosing a woman leader, except in an emergency. In this context the former factions refer to a \textit{hadith} which implies that a nation would never succeed if it made a woman their leader. As a second argument, according to these groups, references from the \textit{hadith} and \textit{fiqh} state that the ruler of a Muslim country should be adult, male, intelligent, and from the Quraysh tribe. Third, they explain that references from the \textit{hadith} and \textit{fiqh} have revealed that the highest leader should be male. The progressive groups, which defend gender equality, argue against these interpretations by referring to the historical contexts in which the texts were composed.

\textsuperscript{81} For the first time ever at a national NU meeting an \textit{ālim} raised the issue of women’s role in public in November 1997.

\textsuperscript{82} Although in the course of the session several \textit{kiai} supported the argument of Muhtarom, the text written by Zidny was approved unanimously at the plenary session that same night. See Barton and Feillard, ‘Nahdlatul Ulama’, 20.
Furthermore, they point to the discrepancies and inconsistencies that arise when these texts are compared to other hadith and fiqh texts. As Fatayat NU is representative of the progressive factions, they reason that disallowing a woman to become president contradicts their interpretations of Islamic sources. They argue that there is no verse in the Qur’ān indicating that women are not allowed to become leaders in society, as men and women are equal. According to them, women deserve to hold a leadership position as long as they are able to meet necessary conditions such as competence, trustworthiness and leadership skills. If in a community a woman is more competent than other community members, she is more eligible to be a leader of the community. Leaders of Fatayat NU believe that a woman is allowed to hold a leadership position, including that of president, as long as she meets the qualifications required by the post. Therefore, the organization clearly rejects the fatwa ‘Pasuruan’, issued by NU clerics in June 2004, stating that it is harām for a woman to become president:

Fatwa Pasuruan, which includes the prohibition of choosing a woman president, put activists and figures of the movement for women’s empowerment in Indonesia on the alert (at that time) because it is in conflict with universal principles about women’s rights, both in Islam and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other declarations such as the Convention on the Eradication of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. NU circles, especially Fatayat NU, regret if charismatic NU figures issue a fatwa only to serve the short-term interests of certain groups.

84 Muslimat NU and Aisyiyah also both declared that they did accept women as national leaders. See B. Platzdasch, ‘Islamic Reaction to a Female President’ in C. Manning and van Diermen (eds.), Indonesia in Transition: Social Aspects of Reformasi and Crisis (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), 343.
86 On 3 June 2004 a number of NU ulema issued this fatwa in Pondok Pesantren Raudatul Ulum, Pasuruan, Java. It has been subject to critique. The NU ulema were reproached for issuing this fatwa only to promote Wiranto and Solahuddin Wahid for the presidential elections in 2004. The fatwa was seen as a device to prevent Megawati from becoming president.
In line with their aim of further promoting women’s leadership, Fatayat NU also played a role in the elections of 2004, when they started a campaign to repeal the 30 percent quota for women members of parliament in East Java, along with leaders of Muslimat NU and Aisyiyah. The results of Siregar’s fieldwork reveal that Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU actively conducted voter education for female voters and public dialogue with female candidates and thus contributed significantly to the perception that ‘women vote for women’ in the 2004 elections. 88

Another issue, which has recently been fervently discussed with reference to the interpretation of Islamic sources, is polygyny. After being out of fashion under the New Order, which tried to suppress polygyny, it seems to be making a come-back at present. 89 In 2006 the debate about the legitimacy of polygyny was fuelled by the fact that Abdullah Gymnastiar (Aa Gym), a famous Muslim preacher, took a second wife. The news of his second marriage surprised many of his followers, who started to question his modern outlook and his trustworthiness: they felt that Aa Gym’s credibility was called into question because he contravened his own principles (he had once stated that he was not interested in practising polygyny). 90

Within the Muslim mass organizations the attitude towards polygyny is divided. For instance, according to Hasyim Muzadi, the current NU chairman, polygyny is in accord with Islam. He is among the conservative clerics who bristle at the suggestion that the practice of polygyny should be further regulated. Fatayat NU, however, rejects polygyny because they believe that this practice is only possible because women and men are not equal. A prominent argument Fatayat NU


90 Aa Gym’s second marriage became a national issue when, in the aftermath of the news, President Susilo Yudhoyono summoned Minister of Women’s Affairs and officials of the Ministry of Religion to discuss the controversy over polygamous marriage. The Minister of Women’s Affairs delivered a statement that the government would look into the legal ramifications of polygamous marriage. But conservative Muslims reacted strongly to the statement by pointing out that according to the Qur’ān polygyny is allowed and that the government’s initiative to control polygyny is a transgression against religious teaching.
leaders put forward is that the Qur’anic verse 4. 3, ‘If you fear that you will not deal fairly with orphan girls, you may marry whichever [other] women seem good to you, two, three, or four” marry a woman which suits you, two, three, and four […], must be read in context with the following verse ‘If you fear that you cannot be equitable [to them], then marry only one, or your slave(s): that is more likely to make you avoid bias’. As Maria Ulfah Anshor explains, reading verse 4. 3 by itself results in a wrong interpretation, as far as the Prophet’s understanding of marriage is concerned.

Another argument she puts forward is that there are indications in certain hadiths that the Prophet disapproved of polygyny. In this context both Maria Ulfah Anshor and Siti Musdah Mulia refer to the hadith which recounts that ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib wished to marry another wife besides Fâtima, the daughter of the Prophet. Siti Musdah Mulia explains:

[…] when the husband of Fâtima, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, wanted to marry again, the Prophet was angry. He summoned ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib. He said: For your information, Fâtima is my child. If Fâtima is troubled, I’m also troubled. If Fâtima suffers, I also suffer. Don’t you ever marry anyone but Fâtima. And ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib did not do so.

The Prophet immediately expressed his reluctance. And the Prophet repeated the sentence ‘I will not allow it’ three times. Immediately, at the end of his commentary, he said that in fact Fâtima was a part of him. This meant that whoever made her happy, made the Prophet happy. This meant, on the contrary, that whoever hurt her, hurt the Prophet. This clearly indicates to Siti Musdah Mulia the Prophet’s disapproval of polygamous practice.

Fatayat NU reject polygyny for the following reasons: first, according to them, the chance for abuse is reportedly higher for children living in


92 I include the interview with Siti Musdah Mulia here for several reasons: first, she is still advisor of Fatayat, and second, she has been chairwoman of this organization for altogether 15 years. Musdah Mulia is now general secretary of ICRP (Indonesian Conference for Religions and Peace).

93 Author’s interview with Siti Musdah Mulia, 15 September 2006.

94 U. Abshar-Abdalla, ‘Maria Ulfah Anshori: Jika Rasul hidup sekarang, tak akan poligami’, Jaringan Islam Liberal, 28 April 2002. It should be noted here that this hadith relating to ‘Ali and Fâtima has to be regarded as a special case, not as a normative prohibition of polygyny as such, as Musdah Mulia understands it.
households where polygyny is practised than it is in families where it is
not; second, there are more cases of domestic violence in polygynous
marriages than in monogamous marriages; and third, there tend to be
more conflicts due to the dissonance between the families of the first and
the second wife. Furthermore, the women believe that Indonesian law,
which allows for polygyny on three conditions (that the wife is infertile,
sick or does not fulfil her conjugal duty), is not adequately implemented.
As Siti Musdah Mulia observes, in many cases men take a second wife,
even though none of these conditions apply. She highlights the fact that
this hypocrisy further strengthens the gender-injustice firmly rooted in
Indonesian society.

Abortion is another controversial topic on which Fatayat NU has
contributed. In this context the recently published Fikih Aborsi
(Jurisprudence of Abortion) by Maria Ulfah Anshor deserves special
mention. The book won the Saparinah Sadli Award for the defence of
women’s rights; in it she advises government authorities to formulate an
alternative fiqh of abortion, granting women the right to abortion under
circumstances that might endanger their reproductive health. She
demands a moderate fiqh, that enables women, who have become
involuntarily pregnant, to undertake ‘safe’ abortions, that is, abortions
by a trained doctor. In her opinion formulating a fiqh about abortion,
which takes a gender perspective, is necessary to defend women’s
reproductive rights. One aim of her book, which is based on research
carried out by the Health Centre of Universitas Indonesia (UI) and the
Women’s Health Foundation in 2003, is to reveal that in contrast to the
widespread opinion in Islam that abortion is harām, there are also
scholars in all four Sunni schools of law who allow abortion under
certain circumstances. Ulfah brings up the controversial discussion about
the terminal period for aborting a foetus among Muslim scholars.
Among those scholars, who support abortion under certain circum-
stances, several have argued that a foetus may not be aborted after it is
120 days old. She quotes Shafi’i and Hanafi scholars like Abū Sa’d, al-
Haskafi and Ibn ʿĀbidīn, who claim that before the 120 day-period the
foetus is in the ‘biological’ stages of a drop of sperm, a clot of blood, and
a lump of flesh, and it is not yet ‘ensouled’. According to Maria Ulfah
Anshor, the terminal period for aborting a foetus is before and not after it

95 Author’s interview with Siti Musdah Mulia, 15 September 2006.
96 Ibid.
97 M. U. Anshor, Fikih aborsi: Wacana penguatan hak reproduksi perempuan
(Jakarta: Kompas, 2006), 149.
98 Fatayat, similarly to NU, follows the interpretation of fiqh according to the
Shafi’i school, although the other three Sunni schools of law are also accepted.
is eight weeks old. Ulfah defends the age limit of eight weeks, arguing that this age is decisive in the development of a foetus; and that before this age the foetus is not yet sufficiently developed to be claimed a human being. She quotes from the hadith reported in the Šahih of Muslim:

I have heard the Messenger of God, salla l-Lāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam, say that if the seed of life has exceeded 42 days, God sent for an angel to form its shape, to create its sense of hearing, its sense of seeing, its skin, flesh and bones. Afterwards the angel asked: my God, shall it be made male or female? Then God decided what He wished, and the angel wrote it down.99

Another suggestion Anshor makes in her book is that the question of abortion ought to be secondary to the issue of women’s health. Activist and scholar Marcoes-Natsir shares this view, stating that it is important to look for ways to solve the problem of female health and health care, from both a medical and non-medical point of view.100

By interpreting Islamic sources in relation to the current historical context Fatayat NU tries to improve women’s status in society. It tends to interpret the sources, where in its opinion, the equality between men and women is disrespected, as shown in the above examples. The starting point for the concrete programmes and activities, which Fatayat NU has developed, is closely related to their awareness of gender injustice and their motivation to move against it. The strong reason for the initiation of their recent programmes and activities, such as LKP2 and PIKER, is this commitment to fight against the violation of women’s rights.

Fatayat, however, stresses that it does not interpret Islamic sources by itself but along with male ulema. The women are aware that it is still impossible for them to reinterpret Islamic sources without the support of NU male leaders:

We try to build a network with NU. When recently the National Meeting in Surabaya took place, the discussions revolved around contemporary issues, looked at from a religious perspective. We took the yellow books, then we took reinterpretations of the Qurʾān. Evidently, we did not discuss trafficking there. In fact, trafficking is a problem of humanity, a problem of criminality, a problem that the ulema have to discuss from a religious perspective. Fatayat is only the sector implementing this issue.101

101 Author’s interview with Maryam Fithriati, 11 October 2006.
Since the Fatayat NU women feel that their influence on the NU leadership might not be strong enough to achieve their goals, they prefer to carry their reinterpretations of Islamic sources to those ulema who work at grassroots level, thinking that those men are more accessible. The need to inform and train these male ulema is an important project for Fatayat’s future, as Maryam Fithriati states:

We try to involve the ulema because, as far as this issue is concerned, NU does not know much yet, whereas Fatayat has already done much work in that field [trafficking]. We involve the ulema to discuss reinterpretations of the Qur’an, reinterpretations of Islamic law, talk about what in fact the trafficking law is about, and how the law enables people to prevent trafficking. There was a clear decision that it is *haram* and that it’s people’s duty to prevent trafficking […] First, we want to inform the ulema, second we want to make them sensitive towards what is happening in their environment. Because in fact many ulema in the regions give women the legitimacy to work outside, but they do not know what kind of information they have to provide them. That is, they only give prayers, but they do not have any information about how to get safe work, for instance. This is what we actually want for the future. We want to train the ulema. Not only the female, but also the male ulema. We cannot reinterpret religious teachings on our own, we do it together with others.\(^{102}\)

This interview clearly demonstrates the present conflict of interest within Fatayat NU. Since the women cannot do Qur’anic exegesis on their own, the consequence is that their rereading of Islamic sources does not have much effect, at least not at the top level of NU. Looking for alternative means of action, Fatayat feels that re-readings of Islamic sources can be an effective tool to exert more influence on the ulema at grassroots level. While Fatayat has made progress in this matter, the jury is still out as to their success.

**CONCLUSION**

The foregoing account of the strategies Fatayat NU used to promote women’s empowerment suggests the following conclusions:

In its early history, it had the difficult task of sensitizing people to gender issues within NU. As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the

\(^{102}\) Author’s interview with Maryam Fithriati, 11 October 2006. A recent PhD. thesis has also pointed out for Nasyiatul Aisyiyah, the young women’s branch of Muhammadiyah, that these women have tended to form alliances with young, sympathetic ulema. See S. Syamsiyatun, ‘Serving Young Islamic Indonesian Women: the Development of Gender Discourse in Nasyiatul Aisyiyah, 1965–2005’ (PhD. diss., Monash University, Clayton, 2006).
organization was largely determined by kiai at its foundation and it was only by slow steps that the women were able to increase their influence. Between the years 1952 and 1969 Fatayat NU placed emphasis on educating its members. The idea was that new members could be more easily recruited if they directly benefited from the activities of the organization. This tradition of educating its members has continued—at present training seminars are frequently organized for associates, as are readings of gender-sensitive texts.

In the 1970s Fatayat NU shifted its focus to providing women with information on issues of mother and child care. To date, its members give considerable attention to this field, arguing that insufficient knowledge of these issues leads to an increased risk of women and children suffering serious health outcomes. The 1980s did not bring a focus on new topics, but instead new orientations within the organization. The revitalization of Islamic thought Fatayat NU experienced during that period, partly as a consequence of greater changes within NU, had the effect of making its women members more responsive to new influences. International donor organizations, which started to support the activities of Fatayat NU in the 1980s, were one such influence.

Since the late 1990s Fatayat NU has declared women’s empowerment as one of its central aims and has used gender-just interpretations of Islamic sources to legitimate this goal. For Fatayat, interpreting Islamic sources serves two causes. First, it enables the women to contribute to the discourse about gender equality within the Indonesian Muslim community and to spread their views in public. The interpretations relating to topical themes such as women’s leadership, abortion and violence against women are examples of this contribution. Second, the practice of interpreting Islamic sources serves as an ideological basis for programmes Fatayat has launched, such as LKP2 and PIKER, which are strongly based on advocacy work. The interpretations are used to provide women, especially in rural areas, with information about their rights and duties in modern Indonesian society. They serve to inform women about the position they ought to have in society and about how a good Muslim should live. The reason why Fatayat NU strongly moves against a gender-biased interpretation of Islamic sources, is that its

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103 In the context of these programmes the interpretation of Islamic sources serves to inform women about the topics of reproductive health, violence against women and human trafficking in the whole archipelago.

104 For instance, they advise kiai not to use male-biased sources in pesantren, such as the ‘Uqūd al-Lujayn by Imām Nawawī al-Bantani, which forbids a wife to manage her own property without permission from her husband and prohibits her to leave the house without permission from her husband.
members believe gender bias leads to a distorted self-perception by women, which, according to Fatayat NU, is at the heart of many of the problems that women face. As several interviewees have pointed out, these ‘biased interpretations’ are one reason why women, who seek counsel from counsellors of Fatayat NU, often simply accept being beaten by their husbands, considering their inferior position to men as something given by God.

It should, however, be noted that the achievements of Fatayat NU in the context of interpreting Islamic sources are not always accepted. Siti Musdah Mulia, formerly chairwoman of Fatayat NU, who now works as advisor for the ministry of religion in Jakarta, has pointed out, for instance, that the level of success in interpreting Islamic sources within Fatayat NU is not yet satisfactory. According to her, although interpretation of certain verses of the Qur’ān has got underway, it remains theoretical, and cannot be sufficiently applied in the field, and she gives the strong position of men in mosques and pesantren and their authority as ulema as the reason for that. She believes that as long as the key positions in Islam are occupied by men, it will still be very difficult for Muslim women to exert considerable influence.105

The discrepancy between the women’s wish to push for reform and the fact that male authorities still dominate Qur’ānic exegesis, gives rise to the question of how Fatayat NU will resolve this conflict. In future studies, the question of how Muslim women’s organizations try to cope with the strong position of men in mosques and pesantren and their authority as ulema in social practice requires further attention. Do Muslim women’s organizations put more emphasis on educating and placing more female kiai in strategic positions? Or should they work together with those kiai who take a democratic, humanist, pluralist and gender-just perspective on religion, as Siti Syamsiyatun has shown for Nasyiah? Or, as Maryam Fithriati indicated, do the organizations, for the present, exert more effective influence by educating male ulema in the regions? These questions deserve further examination so that the contribution of Muslim women’s organizations to a possible redefinition of women’s role in Indonesian society can be better understood.

105 Author’s interview with Siti Musdah Mulia, 15 September 2006.