



From Maryam to Musawah: The Evolution of Muslim Feminist Thought in Advocating Family Rights and Equality in Islamic Law

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Abstract

The study of Muslim feminism emerged as a response to gender injustice in Islamic family law practices that still place women in a subordinate position, necessitating Islamic-based reforms aligned with contemporary principles of justice. The research gap lies in the lack of historical-transformative studies that systematically trace the shift in thought from early critiques of modernity to the formation of global advocacy networks that influence transnational family law policies. This study aims to identify the phases of Muslim feminist thought's evolution, analyze hermeneutical shifts in the interpretation of religious texts, and evaluate the contributions of organizations such as Sisters in Islam and Musawah to the integration of equality values into family law reform. Using a qualitative method grounded in a critical literature review, this study examines the primary works of Muslim feminist figures, institutional advocacy documents, and academic literature from 1970 to 2025, employing thematic coding to identify patterns of thought transformation and advocacy strategies. The results of the study show three main findings: first, the initial critical phase that emphasized religious identity and resistance to Western modernity; second, the phase of constructing Islamic feminist theology through contextual reinterpretation of gender verses that prioritize egalitarian principles, human rights, and *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*; third, the phase of institutionalization of the movement characterized by the formation of advocacy networks, strategic litigation, increased family law literacy, and involvement in national and transnational policy recommendations. The conclusion confirms that the evolution of Muslim feminism has successfully bridged the gap between the theory and practice of legal reform, yielding increasingly tangible impacts. However, it still faces

variations in acceptance across different country contexts and limitations in access to grassroots advocacy.

Keywords: Maryam Jameelah; Islamic Feminism; Musawah; Family Law; Sisters in Islam

Abstrak

Kajian feminisme Muslim hadir sebagai respons terhadap ketidakadilan gender dalam praktik hukum keluarga Islam yang masih menempatkan perempuan dalam posisi subordinat, sehingga meniscayakan reformasi berbasis ajaran Islam yang selaras dengan prinsip keadilan kontemporer. Celah penelitian terletak pada kurangnya kajian historis-transformatif yang secara sistematis menelusuri peralihan pemikiran dari kritik awal terhadap modernitas hingga pembentukan jaringan advokasi global yang memengaruhi kebijakan hukum keluarga lintas negara. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi fase-fase evolusi pemikiran feminis Muslim, menganalisis perubahan hermeneutika dalam penafsiran teks-teks keagamaan, serta mengevaluasi kontribusi organisasi seperti Sisters in Islam dan Musawah dalam mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai kesetaraan dalam reformasi hukum keluarga. Menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis *critical literature review*, penelitian ini menelaah karya-karya primer tokoh feminis Muslim, dokumen advokasi kelembagaan, serta literatur akademik dalam rentang 1970–2025 dengan teknik *thematic coding* untuk mengidentifikasi pola transformasi pemikiran dan strategi advokasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga temuan pokok: pertama, fase kritik awal yang menegaskan identitas religius dan resistensi terhadap modernitas Barat; kedua, fase konstruksi teologi feminis Islam melalui reinterpretasi ayat-ayat gender secara kontekstual yang mengedepankan prinsip egaliter, hak asasi manusia, dan *maqāṣid al-Syarī'ah*; ketiga, fase institusionalisasi gerakan yang ditandai dengan pembentukan jaringan advokasi, litigasi strategis, peningkatan literasi hukum keluarga, dan keterlibatan dalam rekomendasi kebijakan nasional hingga transnasional. Kesimpulan menegaskan bahwa evolusi feminisme Muslim berhasil menghubungkan teori dan praktik reformasi hukum dengan dampak yang semakin nyata, meski masih menghadapi variasi penerimaan di tiap konteks negara serta keterbatasan dalam akses advokasi akar rumput.

Kata Kunci: Maryam Jameelah; Feminisme Islam; Musawah; Hukum Keluarga; Sisters in Islam

Introduction

The Muslim feminist movement is increasingly prominent in global discourse on women's rights and Islamic legal reform. Since the emergence of Muslim feminist discourse in the 1980s, debates over gender relations, family rights, and women's position in both the public and private spheres have intensified (Bakhshizadeh, 2023). In the early phase, figures such as Maryam Jameelah played a key role in generating discourse on the dignity and agency of Muslim women through a reinterpretation of Islamic values, particularly regarding women's roles in the family and society (Ahmad, 2018). This thinking subsequently underwent a more profound transformation with the emergence of the Musawah movement. This global network emphasizes equality and justice in Islamic family law through an interdisciplinary approach and transnational advocacy (Ali & Wadud, 2019).

The phenomenon of gender inequality in family law has become a major driver of the development of Muslim feminist thought and movements.

Discriminatory practices such as restricting women's access to divorce, the implementation of polygamy without the principle of justice, obligations of obedience for wives that are not balanced with those of husbands, and unequal inheritance rights are realities still faced by Muslim women in various countries (Analiansyah et al., 2024). United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023) report revealed that structural barriers and patriarchal norms limit women's access to family law justice; for example, in several South Asian and Middle Eastern countries, marriage contracts still position women as the obedience-bound party without guaranteeing reciprocal rights and obligations (Das, 2023). This situation underscores the urgency of reforms grounded in the values of justice and equality in Islamic family law.

The evolution of Muslim feminist thought — from Maryam Jameelah to the Musawah movement — demonstrates a strategic shift from theological studies grounded in contextual interpretation to political-legal advocacy that integrates human rights principles. Maryam emphasized the importance of understanding Islam as a religion that guarantees the dignity of women and rejects the dominance of interpretations that are detrimental to women (Jameelah, 1981), while Musawah expanded this agenda on a global scale through collaboration between academics, activists, and international institutions to encourage family law reform based on the principles of *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* and gender equality (Mir-Hosseini, 2019). This shift marks a dialectic between tradition and contemporary needs that constructs religious legitimacy for family law reform.

Several studies have examined Islamic feminism from various perspectives, but a comprehensive mapping connecting the genealogical aspects of feminist thought with transnational advocacy practices has not yet been conducted. Al-Sharmani (2023) emphasizes the need for Quranic hermeneutics to promote gender justice, but has not yet explained the relationship between theological thought and the global movement. Pakarti et al. (2023) highlight Musawah in the context of family law reform but do not delve deeply into the roots of Islamic feminist thought that underpin it. Erwani and Siregar (2025) examine women's authority in exegesis, while Estevan-Reina et al. (2024) develop an exegesis methodology based on women's experiences; neither has yet linked their findings to legal advocacy strategies. Ahmad, Zamri, and Omarali (2024) focus on Musawah's reform strategies in Southeast Asia but have not yet mapped the historical continuity between early figures such as Maryam Jameelah and the contemporary movement. Thus, a research gap lies in the lack of integration of the historical-genealogical dimension, theological framework, and family law advocacy practices into a single, coherent analysis.

The problem to be examined in this research is: How can the evolution of Muslim feminist thought from the figure of Maryam Jameelah to the Musawah movement be mapped historically-conceptually, and how does this transformation

influence the advocacy strategy for equality in Islamic family law? The purpose of this research is to analyze the genealogical construction of Muslim feminist thought, explain the argumentative framework used to advance equality in family law, and examine the relevance of Maryam as a symbol of women's piety and independence to the Musawah agenda in the contemporary context. The initial argument underlying this research is that Muslim feminist thought did not emerge suddenly, but rather is the result of a long dialectic between religious traditions, reinterpretation of texts, and responses to structural injustice in family law. Thus, the expected contribution can enrich the study of Islamic feminism through a historical-genealogical approach, provide a comprehensive mapping between ideas and advocacy, and offer a new perspective on the relevance of religious symbols in strengthening the legitimacy of the Muslim feminist movement in the legal and family spheres.

Method

This research method employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a critical literature review model strengthened by a combination of historical analysis, hermeneutics, and critical discourse, to address the study's focus on the evolution of Muslim feminist thought in advocating for family rights and equality within Islamic law. Data sources comprise primary literature, including the works of Maryam Jameelah, official documents, and core publications of the Musawah movement, as well as secondary sources such as reputable journal articles and academic studies relevant to the development of Islamic feminism. Data were collected through systematic searches in databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR, with a range of publication years and standardized keywords recorded in the research protocol, followed by verification of authenticity and thematic classification based on the period of thought, key arguments, and the socio-political context that influenced the discourse. Data analysis was conducted through critical content analysis, utilizing the Krippendorff framework, which included initial and advanced coding processes, hermeneutic interpretation to uncover implied meanings, comparison of arguments across historical periods, and discourse framing to identify power relations in the construction of thought. Validity is maintained through source triangulation, peer debriefing, and an analytical audit trail, ensuring that the results of the analysis provide a reliable comparative synthesis regarding the continuity and paradigm shift from Maryam's thinking to Musawah's discourse of equality in contemporary Islamic feminist studies.

Results and Discussion

Maryam Jameelah and the Roots of Muslim Feminist Thought

Maryam Jameelah is a Muslim female thinker who played a key role in shaping early discourse on women and Islamic modernity (Esposito & Voll, 2001). Her biographical background as a Jewish woman who converted to Islam, and her

involvement in the intellectual movement led by Abul A'la al-Mawdudi, provided a strong ideological context for her perspective on women (Ahmad, 2020). She was not a feminist in the Western ideological sense, but rather a female thinker who interpreted women's roles within the framework of authentic Islamic values. Her critique of modernity can be understood only in light of her epistemological commitment to Islam as a comprehensive value system (Ahmad, 2021). Therefore, the label "Muslim feminist" attached to her needs to be read analytically as part of the pre-feminist discourse of Islam, not as an identity claim.

Maryam's critique of Western modernity is rooted in the view that secularization and rationalism have eroded human spirituality, reducing women to economic objects and symbols of false freedom. In her works, *Islam and Modernism* (1982) and *Islam versus the West* (1962), she views modernity as a civilizational project that has failed to maintain harmony between reason, revelation, and morality. This critique is epistemological in nature, rejecting the Western paradigm of knowledge that separates religion from social life. She does not substantively oppose women's rights, but rather rejects forms of liberation based on individualistic and materialistic values (Ahmad, 2018). For Maryam, true freedom for women can only be achieved through adherence to Islamic moral principles, which honor women's role as guardians of family and community morality (Jameelah, 1982).

Maryam's thoughts on women do not stop at criticizing the West, but serve as a reflection on the position of Muslim women amidst modernity, which has given rise to disorientation. She argues that women do not need to imitate Western patterns of emancipation to achieve dignity, as such emancipation actually plunges women into a moral crisis and a loss of religious identity (Jameelah, 1982). Her views emphasize the importance of restoring women's identity through Islamic principles that place honor, responsibility, and piety as the measure of gender justice (Jameelah, 1981). Her rejection of Western feminism is not anti-feminist, but rather an attempt to maintain a paradigm of justice rooted in Islamic revelation and morality (Jameelah, 1976). Herein lies her contribution to the discourse on Islamic women: she opens up space for re-evaluating the concept of equality, using benchmarks inseparable from Islamic theology.

The connection between Maryam's thinking and the evolution of Islamic feminist discourse becomes clear when she is positioned as an intellectual precursor to modern Muslim feminists such as Amina Wadud, Leila Ahmed, and Asma Barlas. All three developed a more hermeneutic approach to Islamic texts, yet still maintained the awareness that Western modernity cannot be the sole measure of Muslim women's liberation (Khandoker, Kurić, & Carr, 2024). Maryam made a historical contribution by establishing a foundation of values that rejected the subordination of women while simultaneously rejecting models of emancipation that ignored the spiritual dimension (Ahmad, 2021). This dialectical stance makes

her a transitional figure, paving the way for critical Islamic feminism to reinterpret Islamic teachings without losing its moral roots.

Maryam's contributions can also be traced through her influence on Muslim intellectual discourse in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly among Pakistani and Middle Eastern thinkers engaged in critiques of secular modernity. Her ideas became a reference for academics seeking alternatives between patriarchal traditionalism and liberal feminism (Saeed & Sultana, 2019). Margot Badran and Valentine Moghadam note that Maryam's conservative stance played a role in shifting the debate on women from the ideological to the epistemological realm, namely the question of how Islam defines humanity and justice for men and women (Margot Badran, 1994; Moghadam, 2020). In this context, Maryam contributed as an early mover in the emergence of awareness that the struggle of Muslim women must begin with a reinterpretation of Islamic values, rather than an imitation of Western culture.

Maryam's thoughts marked an early phase in the evolution of Islamic feminist discourse. Her critique of modernity fostered the realization that justice for women cannot be achieved by abandoning the spiritual foundations of Islam. This idea became a bridge for the emergence of critical Islamic feminism, which rejects the dichotomy between sacred texts and social reality. Maryam's view of women as moral subjects, rather than mere social objects, laid the epistemological foundation for the development of Islamic feminist theory, which prioritizes justice, piety, and spiritual equality as primary principles. This position connects Maryam Jameelah to the development of contemporary Muslim feminist thought and movements such as Musawah, which continues the ideological struggle between equality, Islamic law, and the universal value of justice.

Shifting Thoughts to Critical Islamic Feminism

The birth of critical Islamic feminism emerged in response to the limitations of Maryam Jameelah's apologetic paradigm, which sought to defend Islam from Western accusations but failed to address the patriarchal roots of religious interpretation. Intellectual dissatisfaction with classical interpretations, often imbued with masculine perspectives, gave rise to a new generation of Muslim female thinkers who not only rejected them but also developed an epistemology grounded in principles of justice and equality (Iqbal, 2023). This movement represents a transition from defensive discourse to a progressive construct, marked by the emergence of thinkers such as Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, and Riffat Hassan. These three laid the foundation for critical Islamic feminism as a scientific and theological project that asserts that patriarchal interpretation is not part of Islamic teachings but rather a historical construct that needs to be reconsidered. Their approach demonstrates the consolidation of critical Islamic feminism, as described by Margot Badran (2009) and Kecia Ali (2016), as an effort to build an equal epistemology based on women's texts and experiences.

Amina Wadud marked a new chapter in Quranic hermeneutics by rejecting the claims of objectivity of classical, male-dominated interpretations. In *Through Qur'an and Woman* (1999) and *Inside the Gender Jihad* (2006), Wadud emphasized the need for a reading grounded in universal justice through the concept of the tawhidic paradigm. This paradigm demands that the relationship between men and women reflect the oneness of God, so that gender hierarchy has no theological legitimacy. Her three-layered hermeneutic—textual, contextual, and holistic—enables the reinterpretation of verses previously interpreted restrictively, such as Surah 4: 34, so that they can be read within a framework of equality. This approach demonstrates methodological courage in positioning women as subjects of knowledge and readers of the text. Compared to Maryam Jameelah, who emphasized women's domestic role as a form of piety (Jameelah, 1981), Wadud shifts the discourse toward a critical-theological orientation by demanding epistemological reconstruction. His ideas then strengthened the foundation for the gender perspective in Quranic hermeneutics, which Asma Barlas (2012) reviewed as a basis for spiritual and social justice.

Fatima Mernissi broadened her critique by exploring the realm of hadith, which serves as a source of legitimacy for patriarchy in Islamic law. In *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991), she applied historical-critical methods to explore the *sanad* (chain of transmission), *matn* (translator's chain of transmission), and the political context of hadith transmission, particularly those that reject female leadership. Her analysis demonstrated that some hadith serve to maintain patriarchal dominance, rather than reflecting universal Islamic values. Mernissi's critique focused not only on the content of the hadith but also on the structures of scholarly authority that validated this bias. By demonstrating that hadith are products of social and political interaction, she opened up space for reinterpretation based on principles of gender justice. Her approach complements Wadud's work, as while Wadud uncovered bias in Quranic interpretation, Mernissi highlighted bias in the transmission and use of hadith.

Riffat Hassan continued the project of epistemological liberation by developing a theology of equality that affirms women's ontological equality with men. In *Made from Adam's Rib: The Woman's Creation Question* (1985) and *Equal Before Allah? Woman-Man Equality in the Islamic Tradition* (1987), Hassan criticized creation theology that positions women as secondary to men. He refuted the myth that Eve was created from Adam's rib or that she was the cause of the fall of humanity, asserting that the Quran never contains such narratives. Through the theology of equality, Hassan abolished the concept of original sin and demonstrated that true faith demands moral and spiritual equality between men and women. Unlike Wadud and Mernissi, Hassan moved within the realm of systemic theology by upholding the principles of monotheism and the caliphate of humankind as the basis for human equality before God. His theology reconstructs traditional doctrines

grounded in anthropological interpretations and Judeo-Christian influences, making gender justice not a demand of modernity but an expression of pure monotheistic faith (Nurmala, Sumbulah, & Nurbayan, 2023).

The transformation of critical Islamic feminism lies in the intellectual courage of its thinkers in using modern scientific tools—hermeneutics, history, anthropology, and theology—to confront the authority of traditional interpretation. These three figures demonstrate a shift from cultural resistance to an epistemological movement that corrects the power structures within the science of understanding and hadith. Their contributions extend beyond theory, creating a practical framework that influences the reevaluation of Islamic law. The influence of their thinking is evident in the reform of family law in Morocco, as seen in Mudawwanah (2004), and in the contemporary debate on women's leadership in congregational prayer, which demonstrates the concretization of hermeneutical and theological ideas in practical contexts (Bullock, 2022; Fakhria & Marpuah, 2022). This evolution indicates that critical Islamic feminism is not simply an alternative reading, but a systemic effort to restore the moral integrity of Islam through justice.

The entire discourse of critical Islamic feminism demonstrates an evolutionary process that begins with Maryam Jameelah's apologetics and progresses toward intellectual reconstruction. While Jameelah seeks to defend Islam from external criticism without challenging its internal patriarchal structures, critical feminists like Wadud, Mernissi, and Hassan pursue a confrontational approach to traditional authority to uphold the principles of justice within the sacred text. Their strands of thought demonstrate a gradual transition: from Quranic hermeneutics (Wadud), to hadith criticism (Mernissi), and to the theology of equality (Hassan). This shift demonstrates that Islamic feminism is not merely a reaction to Western discourse, but rather an internal evolution of the Islamic tradition rooted in the values of monotheism, justice, and equality.

Institutions and Advocacy of the Muslim Feminist Movement

The emergence of Muslim feminist institutions in Southeast Asia was a consequence of the tension between the state's Islamic legal structure and demands for gender justice (Ahmad et al., 2024). In Malaysia, the Islamic Family Law Act 1984, which granted men significant authority in matters of guardianship, divorce, and polygamy, was a key factor in the establishment of Sisters in Islam (SIS) in the late 1980s (Kamaruddin et al., 2018). This organization was pioneered by Muslim intellectuals such as Zainah Anwar and Amina Wadud, who argued that the state's interpretation of Islamic law tended to perpetuate patriarchal bias (Alamgir, 2014). SIS positions itself as a civil society organization that combines academic approaches, legal advocacy, and social movements within the framework of the *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (the principles of Islamic law) to achieve substantive justice for women (Ali & Wadud, 2019). The existence of SIS also challenges the dominance of mainstream religious authorities such as the Department of Islamic Development

Malaysia (JAKIM) by offering alternative readings of religious texts that are more contextual and based on women's experiences (Hassim, 2014).

The transformation of Islamic feminist discourse into the realm of legal advocacy began with a public education strategy. SIS organized discussion forums, interpretation workshops, and published treatises that sought to reinterpret Quranic verses and hadith within a framework of gender justice (Kamaruddin et al., 2018). Programs such as the Telenisa Legal Clinic provided a platform for women to understand their rights under Islamic family law (Salameh, 2023). This approach aligns with the concept of public pedagogy, which positions social education as a means of transforming collective consciousness (Sosa-Provencio et al., 2020). Through media campaigns and dialogue with moderate Islamic scholars, SIS built a religious knowledge ecosystem that affirmed that Islamic principles of justice could serve as the basis for family law reform (Osman & Hirst, 2013). The impact of this strategy is evident in the increased legal literacy among urban Muslim women and growing public support for the concept of faith-based equality (Dworska, 2022).

Advocacy through public education later developed into an organized social movement. SIS identified key issues affecting women's well-being, such as marriage rights, polygamy, divorce, and inheritance. Each issue was presented as a structural problem rooted in a patriarchal interpretation of Islamic law (Cheema, 2022). In this context, SIS integrated the *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* framework with the gender-sensitive *ijtihad* approach proposed by Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas (Yafout, 2019). This movement was not only local but also connected to transnational networks such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws and Musawah, which strengthened the argument that Islamic legal reform must consider substantive justice and the contemporary social context (Ali & Wadud, 2019). This comparative approach demonstrates that Islamic feminism is a global phenomenon that finds its articulation differently in accordance with the legal structures and cultures of each country.

Marriage rights have become a primary focus of advocacy because many legal practices place women in a subordinate position. SIS highlights rigid guardianship, child marriage practices, and the disregard for marriage agreements, which diminish women's right to make life choices (Shukri & Owoyemi, 2015). Through the framework of legal mobilization theory, this movement pressures the state to revise the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) Act 2006 by providing greater space for women in the marriage process (A. Abdullah & Yaacob, 2012). Public education strengthens the social legitimacy of this advocacy through campaigns that marriage in Islam is based on consent, mutual consent, and deliberation (Osman & Hirst, 2013). Data from the CEDAW Shadow Report for Malaysia show an increase in legal awareness among women participating in SIS educational activities (Neo, 2007). This strategy demonstrates a direct link between changing social perceptions and pressure on state policy, making SIS advocacy not merely a moral discourse but an instrument of legal change.

The issue of polygamy is a sensitive area of advocacy because it touches on theological and moral legitimacy. SIS uses an empirical approach by documenting women's testimonies and case studies that demonstrate the negative social impacts of polygamy. Based on the Quranic principle of justice in Surah al-Nisā' verse 3, they assert that the justice required for polygamy is almost impossible to achieve objectively (Alamgir, 2014). Through research and publications such as *Polygamy and the Rights of Muslim Women in Malaysia*, SIS encourages policy revisions to tighten permits for polygamy, even leading to a ban on the practice. Theological arguments are developed within a contextual *ijtihad* framework that positions monogamy as a form of social justice more in line with the *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (the objectives of Sharia) (Stivens, 2006). This approach demonstrates a synergy between theological foundations and social data, so that arguments are not merely normative but based on the empirical reality of Muslim women.

Advocacy on divorce issues is directed at legal reform to ensure women have equal access to marriage dissolution mechanisms. SIS emphasizes the importance of procedural fairness in the application of *fasakh*, *khulū'*, and divorce lawsuits, ensuring that they are not solely the right of men through unilateral divorce. They submit legal recommendations to Sharia court authorities to strengthen women's rights in the judicial process, highlighting the need for transparent and gender-sensitive mechanisms (Peletz, 2018). Dworska's (2022) study shows that SIS's advocacy interventions influenced the development of ethical guidelines for Sharia judges in handling divorce cases. However, this movement also faced resistance from some conservative clerics and fatwa institutions, who accused SIS of being an agent of religious liberalization (Kamaruddin et al., 2018). This tension demonstrates the dynamic between legal reform efforts and institutional forces that maintain patriarchal interpretations.

Advocacy for inheritance law demonstrates SIS's epistemological courage in reinterpreting texts that explicitly stipulate different shares between men and women. Drawing on Jasser Auda's concept of *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* and Fazlur Rahman's principle of contextual justice, SIS interprets the inheritance verses within the context of men's historical economic responsibilities (Devi et al., 2024). In modern society, where women also play a role as breadwinners, equal inheritance distribution is seen as an application of substantive justice (Lippmann, Georgieff, & Senik, 2020). This approach does not reject Qur'anic provisions but places these interpretations within the framework of *maslaḥah mursalah* and the distribution of joint matrimonial property, as partially accommodated in Malaysian family law (Marlina & Mubarak, 2022). This effort opens up a dialogue between text and context without denying the authority of revelation.

The consolidation of issues on marriage, polygamy, divorce, and inheritance demonstrates SIS's ability to build a multi-layered advocacy model. Public education fosters social awareness, social movements strengthen public opinion, and legal

advocacy presses for policy change. This strategy establishes dual legitimacy, combining both religious and state. From the perspective of social movement theory (Bayat, 2005), SIS's success lies in its ability to combine contentious politics with legal reform. However, the movement also faces challenges in the form of ideological and bureaucratic resistance that hinders the implementation of advocacy outcomes. Criticism of SIS often comes from conservative groups that accuse it of deviating from Islamic orthodoxy. Still, the theological legitimacy it derives from the concepts of *maqāṣid* and social justice provides a strong foundation for maintaining its position in public Islamic discourse.

SIS's initial success in linking religious interpretation with legal reform paved the way for the expansion of Muslim feminist networks internationally. Through collaboration with global movements such as Musawah and Equality Now, Islamic feminism entered a new, more systematic and transnational phase. SIS's experience demonstrates that a movement's success is determined not only by intellectual strength but also by its ability to build bridges between religious texts, social realities, and policy structures. Its evidence-based advocacy approach, international network, and strong theological foundations make Islamic feminism not merely an academic discourse but an instrument of measurable and sustainable social change.

Musawah as the Peak of the Evolution of Thought and Movement

Musawah marks the pinnacle of global Muslim feminism's evolution due to its ability to integrate Islamic feminist theory, social practice, and legal advocacy into a single, knowledge-based, transnational movement framework. Since its inception in 2009, the network has grown from the intellectual foundations of Sisters in Islam (SIS) in Malaysia and evolved into a global collaborative space involving scholars, academics, and activists from various countries (Dworska, 2024). Musawah's concrete achievements are evident in its contributions to family law reform in Morocco and Tunisia, the preparation of the CEDAW shadow report, and the production of the Framework for Action and Knowledge Building Initiatives, which have become international references (Derichs, 2010). The successful integration of research and advocacy makes Musawah not merely a continuation of previous feminist movements, but a new model of Islamic feminism that is empirically and conceptually measurable.

Equality and substantive justice are the epistemological foundations of Musawah. The concept of equality extends beyond the normative level, translating into a family law reform strategy that demands a redistribution of justice in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and guardianship (Ahmad, 2022). The principle of *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* is employed as a religious foundation to emphasize that women's rights are integral to maintaining justice and the welfare of the community. In contrast, the human rights framework serves as a global normative instrument to demand harmony between religious interpretation and universal humanitarian principles (Mir-Hosseini, 2012). In his Framework for Action (2011), Musawah

emphasized that rereading religious texts must be directed towards fulfilling *maqāṣid al-ʿAdl* and *rahmah*. This approach demonstrates a compelling epistemological bridge of spiritual and universal legitimacy, which forms the moral foundation of the movement.

Musawah's advocacy is carried out through a systematic, evidence-based, cross-border strategy. The network conducts comparative research on family law in over twenty Muslim countries, prepares country reports, and initiates dialogue with the CEDAW Committee and other international institutions (Nasohah, 2024). This approach demonstrates an effective combination of academic research and legal advocacy. Musawah utilizes the framework of transnational feminist networks (Moghadam, 2002) by engaging actors at the global to the local level, including women's non-governmental organizations and progressive ulama (Islamic scholars). This strategy allows for cross-border knowledge transfer while simultaneously adapting to local social and political contexts (Derichs, 2010). In Indonesia, for example, Musawah's principles were adopted by Islamic women's organizations in their advocacy for the revision of the Marriage Law (Abdullah, 2018). This success demonstrates how Islamic feminist theory is concretely applied in contemporary legal practice.

Musawah's impact on global progressive Islamic discourse is evident in its paradigm shift from dogmatic discourse to a discourse of rights, justice, and *maqāṣid*. This movement successfully connected the academic and social spheres, creating a space where Islamic feminist ideas were institutionalized in legal and educational policies (Mir-Hosseini, 2019). Musawah not only strengthened the position of Islamic feminism in the academic sphere but also encouraged new religious interpretations that opened up opportunities for family law reform (Duderija, 2014). An example is Musawah's research contribution to the formulation of the Moudawana in Morocco, which affirms equality in husband-wife responsibilities (Sabbe et al., 2013). Thus, progressive Islamic discourse gained new legitimacy as a discourse capable of competing with conservative narratives while simultaneously building a legal awareness responsive to the realities of contemporary Muslim women.

The Musawah's strength as a transnational movement lies in its ability to integrate theory, practice, and legal advocacy simultaneously. This movement acts as a mediator between religious authorities and international institutions through collective *ijtihād* and a contextual *maqāṣid* approach. However, resistance from conservative groups remains a serious challenge. In Malaysia, for example, the Musawah is often accused of threatening the authenticity of Islamic law (Dworska, 2024), while in Egypt, some scholars reject the interpretation of gender equality based on classical fiqh traditions (Masoud, Jamal, & Nugent, 2016). This tension demonstrates the dynamic negotiation of authority between the legitimacy of texts and the legitimacy of modern constitutions. The effort to integrate these two realms

demonstrates how *maqāṣid* functions as an epistemic bridge, ensuring compatibility between religious norms and the principles of universal justice.

As an epistemological actor, Musawah not only advocates for change but also produces new knowledge through multidisciplinary research that combines religious studies, law, and social sciences. Projects such as the Knowledge Building on Muslim Family Law Reform and the Global Life Stories Project demonstrate Musawah's role in creating an empirical database to inform policy formulation (Duderija, 2014). This approach indicates that Musawah has transformed the Islamic feminist movement from a normative discourse to a knowledge-based one. The movement's legitimacy is built through epistemic authority, not simply moral argumentation. The involvement of scholars such as Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Mulki Al-Sharmani strengthens the integration between academic research and advocacy strategies, creating a synergy between Islamic feminist theory and actual legal reform.

The transformation of Muslim feminism embodied through Musawah demonstrates that this movement is not simply a response to injustice, but rather a process of creating a new epistemic framework that allows for contextual and participatory reform of Islamic law. Its transnational character allows Musawah to transcend national boundaries and connect the experiences of Muslim women from diverse social backgrounds. However, this success is balanced by serious challenges such as the risk of homogenizing women's experiences and the limited representation of non-elite groups in global networks. Musawah needs to strengthen its participatory approach so that its advocacy reflects not only the voices of the intellectual elite but also grassroots women. Nevertheless, Musawah's capacity to integrate theological, legal, and social foundations makes it a symbol of global Muslim feminist solidarity and a laboratory of progressive Islamic thought that continues to influence the direction of contemporary Islamic discourse.

Conclusion

The Muslim feminist movement has shown significant evolution from its initial critique of Western modernity to advocacy for structural changes in Islamic family law, as seen through the role of Maryam Jameelah and the establishment of Musawah as a global movement that integrates the principles of equality, justice, human rights, and the *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* in family law reform. Theoretically, this study contributes to the strengthening of Islamic feminism research by emphasizing the importance of integrating a critical interpretation approach and global socio-political dynamics in understanding gender relations within Islam. Practically, these findings open new perspectives for policymakers, religious institutions, and human rights activists to develop family law policies that are more inclusive and responsive to gender justice. However, this study is still limited to a normative-theoretical approach through literature analysis, and thus does not yet describe the implementation of Muslim feminist advocacy in diverse social contexts. Therefore,

future research is recommended to develop cross-national empirical studies by evaluating the effectiveness of advocacy strategies employed by Musawah and other Muslim feminist actors in promoting legislative reform and social acceptance in various national legal systems.

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Author Contribution Statement

NM contributed to the formulation of the main ideas, the development of the conceptual framework, the development of the methodology, the data analysis, and the writing and final revision of the manuscript as the corresponding author. N played a role in data collection, critical literature review, and the preparation of the introduction and theoretical foundation. AM contributed to the analysis, sharpening the discussion and the integration of the findings with relevant theoretical frameworks. WH played a role in data validation, methodological review, editing the academic substance, and providing conceptual input to improve the coherence and sharpness of the manuscript's argumentation.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that this manuscript was prepared and published without any conflict of interest, either financial or non-financial, that could influence the substance, analysis, and conclusions of the research.

AI Usage Statement

AI is used to a limited extent for language quality improvement, grammar correction, and formatting assistance. All results, findings, concepts, analyses, ideas, interpretations, and conclusions in this article are entirely the result of the author's scientific thinking and work and are not derived from artificial intelligence.

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