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Indonesian Women in the Media from Da`wah (Islamic Missionary) Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This article is about women in the media in Indonesia in general and Muslim women in particular from Islamic dakwah perspectives. Generally, the media images of women have strengthened their position as inferior beings. The media in general have portrayed the images of women as the objects in the world dominated by men in their advertisements, the soap opera, as well as the coverages by some journalists. The negative and inferior status and position of women in the media should be improved based on Islamic da`wah perspectives. Since Allah has created men and women to live on this world planet in peaceful conditions as demanded by Him. This article explores Islamic da`wah perspectives for Muslim women and non-Muslim women in Indonesian media. For Muslim women, they are to be portrayed and presented in the media by referring to some verses of the Holy Quran and based on the status and position of Muslim women in the Muslim early historical period.

Keywords: Indonesian women, Islamic dakwah, media, Muslim women.

The meanings of the Arabic noun “da`wah” are “call, appeal, invitation, request; calling upon, appealing to, inviting, requesting; mission, missionary work or activity, propaganda; prayer, invocation, supplication” (Al-Mawrid 1996). “Da`wah contains the meaning of an activity to invite people in a wise way to the right path for good, whether in oral, written, or deed, which is done consciously and planned in an effort to achieve welfare and happiness in this world and the hereafter.” (Saputra et al. 2021: 274). Islamic missionary efforts (da`wah) aim to guide Muslims to follow Allah’s commands and avoid His prohibitions, primarily through the five pillars of Islam.

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For non-Muslims, da'wah seeks to explain Islamic teachings without coercion, respecting Quranic principles that forbid forced conversion (Quran 2:256, 10:99–100). This article focuses on da'wah in the Indonesian media context, urging media professionals to align their work—news, films, ads, etc.—with Islamic values. It encourages promoting the dignity of Muslim women by advocating equality and ethical representation, aiming to elevate their status in society while adhering to Islamic teachings and ethics in all media activities.

For ages, the portrayals of women in the media advertisements and advertisings have been revolved around unrealistic body images, sexual objectification, physical beauty, and domestic roles such as wife or mother. Such representations have narrowed women's identities and natures and placed significant psychological pressures and stresses on some female viewers and readers. They are pushed to conform to the narrow and unrealistic beauty standards impacting the self-esteem and self-confidence of some women (Soni 2020).

One concrete example is the Lux soap advertisement depicting women as graceful, charming, and classy framed in a patriarchal view, where women's value is measured by their appearance and social acceptance in certain community circles. Although it seems to provide a space of equality with men, this representation still relies on aesthetic values determined by the construction of masculine culture. The novel entitled, *Gadis Pantai* written by Pramoedia Ananta Toer, describes its female figure as an enslaved person for her husband. In reality show biz in the homeland of Indonesia, women are often used as objects of jokes and the target of sexual harassment. It is compounded by viewing the audience's laughter of women caused by the jokes. This phenomenon can be seen on the *Bukan Empat Mata Show* in Trans 7, presented by Tukul Arwana (Gunawan et al. 2016). The phenomenon shows clearly that the media have helped in establishing and promoting women's status of inferiority in Indonesian society. Women, in the eyes of the media, have been highlighted as being beautiful to their beholders and viewers.

The media have played a significant role in reproducing male dominance by consistently placing women as objects in narratives that favor patriarchal culture. Women are exploited, and the media have failed to give a complete and balanced representation of the varied lives of women (Das & College 2016). This lopsided representation not only reinforces unequal social structures but also creates narrow and biased standards of femininity. In this context, an investigation into the depiction, erasure, objectification, and denigration of different types of women from different social, political, and economic backgrounds becomes important. This is important because in the early 2000s, there was a significant shift in the image of young women in the media. Stereotypes of femininity began to be mocked, and female characters that caught the attention of male leads were instead portrayed as tomboys or childish (Morales-Rodríguez & Lopez-Figueroa 2024). Therefore, there should be appropriate and fair for the media challenge the establishment of patriarchal culture. Women should no longer be described as inferior beings that hide behind the armpits of men. They are the important persons who are able to participate and contribute to human civilization. As in the research of Iqbal et al. (2023), women's position and role in rural communities have changed in several aspects, namely politics, education, economy, family, society, and culture. The position and role of rural women cannot be marginalized by men's power and dominance. Their research has shown about the abilities of rural women to contribute to themselves and their communities.

This article is planned to present women from Islamic missionary perspectives lead to a new direction for women's empowerment that the Indonesian media should consider when they present women in their media activities like news, reports, documentaries advertisements, stories, novels, films, operas, and dramas.

Research Methods

This study has used two methods of research for its data collection to substantiate the title and its subtitles. The first method is the content analysis. The second method is the semi-structured interviews distributed to ten informants at the Grand Mosque of West Sumatra in Indonesia to gather their views and opinions about women and Muslim women in the media. The ten informants are Muslim women. The data collected for this study took six months from April to September 2024. The content analysis is the primary method to examine various media platforms such as social media, television, and printed media to identify recurring themes, communication strategies, and visual representations of women in the media (Jayachandran et al. 2023).

The data obtained from content analysis and interviews are analyzed using a thematic approach with the help of NVivo software to identify narrative and visual patterns. In addition, feminist critical discourse analysis reveals how language and imagery support or challenge dominant gender norms campaign. Ethical considerations include obtaining informed consent from interview participants and maintaining confidentiality throughout the research process, particularly concerning cultural sensitivities around gender representation in diverse media contexts (Lafortune 2015).

Women in the Media

Media and women are the two lovebirds that always hold hands. Women are not only salt but the main dishes for many types of the media. The media require women to advertise something new and exciting to their readers, viewers, clients and consumers. Women used for the advertisements are paid by the media. The study by Zimmerman & Dahlberg (2008) examined young women's perceptions of sexually objectifying advertising. The results showed that despite awareness of objectification, many women were not bothered by the representations, indicating the normalization of women's roles as objects in advertising. So, there is a presumption that the media have exploited women symbolically and unconsciously. This was because women's appearance in the mass media has been packaged in such a way (Zikrallah, personal communication, January 19, 2024). This finding is in line with the research findings by Scharff (2024), which show that digital feminist activists face pressure to monetize their activism. In this context, monetization through social media such as Instagram is a means of survival and a legitimizing tool for the media to demand loyalty and silence criticism. This means that when activism begins to generate income, a narrative emerges that financial needs have been met, so criticism of exploitation or gender inequality is considered irrelevant or baseless.

According to Mochtar (2009), the discourse openly degrades women can be seen from the exploitation of the female body in a sexual context with a purpose of sensuality. There is the exploitation of women's body qualities, such as beauty, slenderness, and the appearance of white skin. Prihatini et al. revealed in their study that some advertisements display images of dignified women, but the representation of women's images in advertising media in Indonesia shows a significant tendency towards objectification. This study uses Stuart Hall's theory and the concept of Male Gaze to analyze this representation (Prihantini et al., 2024).

Television, for example, can define what constitutes normal and ideal women more clearly. Women's idealization is often displayed in soap operas through their roles, characters, and physical (Arnelia, personal communication, February 11, 2024). The soap operas main character is always described as good and weak. While other figures are evil and abusive women; they are directly reinforced by the results of Novarisa's research showing that soap operas often depict beautiful women to satisfy men's tastes and label women who cheat as home-wreckers and depict them negatively (Novarisa 2019). The soap operas here have offered the two opposite characterizes of women, the good women and the bad women from the male biased perceptions. In idealizing women's physical images for the advertisements by the media, the media themselves have established the concept of beauty through the interests in the advertised products. It becomes a problem when the formulation is done by the advertising media essentially by narrowing the concept of bodily beauty of women. Society then defines beauty or prettiness only for the female physical images and the same society ignores other aspects of female personalities.

The abused interpretations of the concept of women also have occurred in the comedy films in Indonesia. The main aim of comedy films or movies is to invite and incite their audience to feel happy and then laughing; their laughing cannot be separated from the abuses of women's issues. The movie of *Dono, Kasino, and Indro* is an example of an old comedy movie that exploits women's bodies. This is evidenced by the figures of the beautiful and sexy women in that movie. There was also a comedy starring Nikita Mirzani in 2013. These movie jokes collaborate with the sexy look of Nikita's abduction as Inspector of the case (Remotivi.com). Briefly, the images of women in the media in general can be categorized as follows: (1) The framed image of woman is an image of woman that accentuates a woman's biological side, such as shampoo ads, slimming tools, or skin-whitening products; (2) The pillar image of woman is the image of woman that accentuates women as the backbone of the family. The pillar woman has a great responsibility in terms of taking care of the family members like the women in the Super Pell advertisements; (3) The plate image of woman is the image of woman attached the kitchen as a woman's territory and will always be attached to it, and; (4) The associated image of woman is the image of woman that defines women as belonging to a specific class when they look beautiful and charming like the women in the Lux soap advertisements.

Carlsson (et al. 2024) empirically supports this narrative in her research by showing that exposure to sexually objectified images of women in the media triggers self-objectification in women. Women in the treatment group were significantly more likely to describe themselves in terms of body shape or size than the control group. This indicates that the media not only how women are viewed by society but also how they view themselves, an internalization process that reinforces submission to physical standards shaped by patriarchal culture. The position of men at the social level is getting stronger. Being strong and well-established is not a danger, but we must also realize that violence often occurs in the wake of their power (Hasyim 2015). The Indonesian media have reported some of the police reported cases of violence against women in Indonesia when men wrongly use their position and power over the weak and powerless women (Aghnia, personal communication, March 17, 2024).

It is not surprising to see about the violent cases against women in Indonesia (Aniek Rahmania et al. 2025). The violent cases are increasing according to some observers and researchers as reported by one of the female characters of West Sumatra. Padang Express released the exposure to commemorate *International Women's Day* on March 8th. The case of Angelin is an indisputable fact of increasing violence against women and children. Perhaps with the logic of power that the writer mentioned above, the passing of violence against women is one of the implications of the strengthening of men's grip in both the symbolic and actual world. There are three basic assumptions in the patriarchal structure of society: 1) the first is a man and a woman is created from him, so women are secondary beings. 2) Although she is a second creature, he is the first created man to sin. 3) Women are created for men. The third assumption has implications for the notion that women do not have the right to define their status, rights, and dignity (Mudzhar et al.= 2012).

The fundamental implication of these three assumptions is that the presence of women in the world is considered instrumental for men and not fundamental. Further, the danger of increasingly strong dominance of men is considered fair degrading treatment of women. The Indonesian media have portrayed the images of women as weak, pretty, graceful creatures, increasingly cornered by the harassment that they have experienced (Aghnia, personal communication, March 17, 2024). The study of film posters by Khan and Akhtar (2024) shows that women's bodies are fragmented, sexualized, and commoditized to be in line with the idea that the media represent women not as complete individual persons since their bodily parts are sold, displayed or valued, often to meet male expectations. This reinforces the images of women as accessories in a patriarchal system. In some cases, even women are not only hurt as victims but also as the cause of the violence (Remotivi.com). While men are also increasingly confirmed as the dominant and sassy ruling men over women; they increasingly harass women, both symbolically and actually.

The Indonesian society should redress and improve the situations of these women. As an

important framer of the ideological inferiority of women and the superiority of men, the Indonesian media must be corrected. It is probably not wrong to say that when the media do not dominate their shows indicating and depicting the inferiority of women, the media are able to present women positively and responsibly in their shows of women by portraying women as lovers of development and progress as well as women as development partners of men in Indonesian progress and development to become a rich and safe nation in near future. Women need to be displayed and characterized by the media in Indonesia as the pilots or the co-pilots of Indonesian progress and advancement. Indonesia media should not present women as passive and weak human beings that have no economic, social and security contribution to themselves, their societies and nation. Indonesia media have not exclusively focused and exposed women and their contributions in Indonesia (Hasanah, personal communication March 20, 2024).

Islamic Missionary for the Media, Women and Muslim Women

As the final revealed religion from Allah for all human beings, Islam is understood differently by Muslims and non-Muslims based on their understanding of the verses in the Holy Quran and the texts of the Prophetic traditions. Some Muslims have seen Islam as a religion promoting and legalizing the patriarchal custom and culture placing Muslim women inferior to Muslim men. Their interpretations and understanding of the verses of the Holy Quran and the texts of the Prophetic traditions have contributed to the media in spreading and promoting the patriarchal custom and culture. However, their interpretations of Islam are not supported by the verses of the Holy Quran that promoting the equality of rewards promised for Muslim men and Muslim women who do good deeds in their lifetimes in this temporal world. The verses of the Holy Quran promising the good rewards for Muslim men and Muslim women who do the good deeds are many like the verses of Quran (3: 195, 16: 97, and 40: 40) (Shihab 2010).

Barlas (2015) has presented the ways of the Holy Quran providing or granting the independence for Muslim women. Her book has challenged the interpretations of Muslims who have placed Muslim women to be the dependents on Muslim men. The book is good for Muslim women because she has provided the freedom or independence for Muslim women based on the Holy Quran. Muslim women have freedom of choice to do the good deeds or the evil deeds in their lifetimes in this temporal world. The good deeds of Muslim women are rewarded by Allah here and hereafter as affirmed by some verses of the Holy Quran (3:195; 16:97 and 40:40) (Shihab 2010). Muslim women have their freedom to do their good deeds independently like Muslim men who do their good deeds independently. The good deeds of Muslim women are rewarded by Allah as Allah rewards the good deeds of Muslim men.

According to reward system provided by Allah to human beings, the human good deeds or actions are rewarded by Allah if they are fulfilled the conditions described and explained by Allah. The conditions are four: (1) The doers of good deeds are not forced by other persons to do their good deeds. In other words, the doers of good deeds have freedom to do or not to do the good deeds; (2) The doers of good deeds are the Muslims and the believers of Islam or "*mu'minin*"; (3) The doers of good deeds have sincere intentions to obey the commands of Allah when they do the good deeds in their lifetimes, and; (4) The good deeds are based on Islamic law and Islamic ethics.

To become the believers of Islam, human beings should have strong faith in the six pillars of Islamic faiths according to the religious scholars of Muslim Sunnites or Sunnis. The six pillars of Islamic faiths or beliefs in Sunnism are the beliefs in Allah, His angels, His prophets and messengers, His books, His divine decrees of goodness and evilness, and the hereafter or the eschatology. The four pillars of Islamic faiths are mentioned in the Holy Quran (2:285) stating that the believers are those who have believed in Allah, His angels, His books and His messengers. The five pillars of Islamic faiths are mentioned in the Holy Quran (2: 177) stating that it is righteousness to believe in Allah, the last day, the angels, the book and the messengers. The book in this Quranic verse (2:177) refers to the Holy Quran (Shihab 2010). There are the verses in the Holy Quran explain about Allah who has decided about the goodness and badness or evilness of human deeds or human actions in their lifetimes on the planet of earth. Some of the bad or evil

deeds are mentioned in the chapter 113 and Chapter 114 of the Holy Quran. Some of the good deeds are mentioned in the Holy Quran (2:220 and 221) to do good deeds to orphans; it is good for a Muslim man to marry a female slave who is a "*mu'minah*" and it is good for a Muslim woman to marry a male slave who is a "*mu'min*" because Muslim men are prohibited by Allah from marrying female polytheists and Muslim women are prohibited from marrying male polytheists even though the male and female polytheists are attractive (Shihab 2010).

Historically, Muslim women in the early days of Islam were independent human beings. They were not only independent but also involved in social activism. For example, Aisyah, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, was running a significant political role in her time (Nisa et al. 2024). In economics, women at the time of the Apostle also played an important role, such as the Khadijah Binti Khuwailid (Muhammad 2021). In education, a few names were spared in history about his persistence in mastering science, like Sayyidah Sakinah bin Husein bin Ali. Some evidence on the history of the early Islamic era showed women's independence by contributing to life. However, after the Islamic territory extends and Muslims come into contact with other cultures, the position of women is increasingly marginalized, especially by patriarchal interpretations (Faisal 2013). Like getting the legitimacy of religious texts, the media moves similarly. Women are rumored to be in the interests of patriarchal culture. Women have achievements and a greater range of media portrayals in other aspects. It is just that women are not issued as being strong and empowered. However, women also have a stake and a significant contribution in life as men (Bühler et al. 2024).

Muslim women are able and capable of doing or performing the good deeds like Muslim men and the good deeds of Muslim women are rewarded by Allah like the good deeds of Muslim men as stated in the Holy Quran (3: 195) (Shihab 2010). This verse of the Holy Quran confirms that Allah has promised to reward Muslim women and Muslim men who do the good deeds recommended or commanded by Allah. By referring to particular verses of the Holy Quran, there are Islamic guides and Islamic ethical codes for the media and Muslim women. The first Islamic ethical code is the media should present their messages truly and wisely as stated in the Holy Quran (16: 125). The verse of the Holy Quran (16: 125) clearly explains the three methods of inviting people to the way of Allah namely the wise method, the good method and the gracious debates or discussions (Shihab 2010).

The wise and good media messages and reports about women in Indonesia are needed by Muslim men and women for the Presidential Order No. 9 in 2000. The real implication of the presidential order in 2000 is it will provide a 30% quota to women who hold regular parliamentary seats dominated by men. This is based on the 65th article of Constitution number 12 in 2003 concerning the election in Indonesia (Mulia, 2015). To realize the empowerment of Muslim women, and to achieve a good life of mutual respect and justice, the media should have good, intended goals or targets. This is because the media are the funnels of information for the formations of ideologies to their clients (Yenti, personal communication, April 10, 2024).

The media construction period against women is always asymmetric; it means that not all women are equaled in real-time with the media's formation. Not all women make beauty the primary purpose of their lives. Not all women take refuge under the men's armpit or cheer from afar. Today, not only do women sit together, but they have also been able to run as fast as men. Women today present themselves as beautiful creatures but are self-sufficient and able to stand upright with men (Assifa, personal communication, April 10, 2024).

The media should be able to act wisely and provide balanced information. This is in accordance with the explanation in the Holy Quran (16: 125) by urging Muslims to invite to the way of Allah with the wisdom, the good consultation and the best way of discussions or argumentations. The Quranic verse (16:125) also can be understood for the media methods and their media activities the media should wisely deliver their news and reports to their customers, clients, audiences or subscribers. The wise attitudes of the media in providing information about women are needed to see good and balanced images of women (Shihab 2010). Thus, women will also accept balanced treatment as the implications of balanced and good news and reports of them in the media.

Indonesian women today can idealize themselves more than the media portrayals or characterizations of them because the opportunities granted for women by the Indonesian government policies that make gender mainstreaming a national agenda. One of such government policies is the Presidential Order No. 9 in 2000. The real implication of the command issuance is that it will give a 30% quota to women who hold regular parliaments dominated by men. This is based on the 65th article of Constitution number 12 in 2003 concerning the election (Mulia 2015).

Globally the United Nations has introduced the global plans for women's equal participation and leadership in political and public life to achieve "the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030". As the data show that "As of 1 January 2025, there are 25 countries where 28 women serve as Heads of State and/or Government". At the current ratio of gender inequality between men and women in political ruling power, the world needs long years to go to achieve the equal gender participation in the highest positions of political life, (UNWoman 2025). In Indonesian highest political position is the president. The presidents of the independent Indonesia from the Dutch rule are men beginning with Sukarno to the present Indonesian president Prabowo Subianto and one woman named Megawati. If Indonesia had Megawati as her president for few years, Malaysia has all ten male prime ministers after her independence from the British rule in August 1957 until now 2025.

The existing data of women's unequal participation in the highest political life and public life in Indonesia dominated by men's power clearly indicate that women's equal participation in high and highest political life is far below Indonesian men. Hence Indonesian women should be able to empower themselves to be viewed as equals to men in doing something for society. To realize women's empowerment and achieve a life of mutual respect and justice, the media should be challenged and used as a vehicle to its intended destination. This is because, on the one side, the media is the funnel of information and can form public ideology through the shows. On the other hand, descriptions of inferiority against women come from the media. Thus, there must be a balancing doctrine to beat the old doctrine (Lestari, personal communication, May 11, 2024).

The media in Indonesia should persistently and convincingly voice and present the information about women's contribution. It is not without reason; it is based on the fact that women more often vocalize only the fair treatment of themselves. To be recognized in this patriarchal world, women should demand justice for women to do good and useful deeds for themselves and their societies. The media have idealized women through their physical qualities. This idealization process continues to give birth to the idea that the woman is considered normal. The idealized women can occur through advertising, jokes, events, soap operas, and books. This is in line with the findings in Robinson et al.'s (2017) study indicating that exposure to images of idealized bodies, both thin and athletic, significantly increased body dissatisfaction in women. However, it did not motivate healthier exercise behavior. These findings confirm that body idealization in the media, despite shifting forms, still maintains the logic of objectification, where women's bodies are used as objects of social comparison and as a primary source of self-esteem assessment. One evident and concrete example of the media's idealization of women is the regular holdings of Beauty Contest and Miss World locally, nationally and internationally.

Historically, the first occasion or event of Miss World itself was for the business venture for the bikini event. This event's main initiator was to promote her latest bikini design. However, for the media, this festival was politicized and renamed Miss World (Ike Junita Triwardhani 2021). It can be imagined how this commercial event could be massive, shaping people's views of women. The women are rushing flocking to follow the standards of beauty presented by Miss World. At a later stage, the new followers feel satisfied and confident after all the attributes of beauty that they possess the same beauty as well. At the most extreme level, some women are even willing to spend millions of rupiahs to be looked similar to the women who have won the beautiful images and shapes of the Miss World.

In order to become the winners of Miss World based on the standards of beautifulness imposed by the organizers of Miss World, some women are dared to do plastic surgery to their bodies to look beautiful as Miss World. Muslim women are not allowed by Islam to change their original created body forms and shapes. Islam, as a perfect religion, forbids Muslims from making changes to their original created bodies as explained by the Holy Quran (30:30) (Shihab 2010).

The Quranic verse (30:30) explains that making changes to Allah's creation is an act that is not justified. However, the reality today shows that the beautiful doctrinal pillars have led some women hypnotized to change Allah's created body shapes and forms granted by Allah to them. The article reminds the media in Indonesia not to inspire or to suggest to Muslim women to subscribe to the doctrinal pillars of beautifulness of Miss World since they are not in line with Islamic teachings and Islamic ethical codes (Yanti, personal communication, April 10, 2024). In addition, the dresses worn by the contestants of Miss World are not suitable for Muslim women.

Indonesian media should not promote Miss World to Muslim women because the purposes of the organizers of Miss World are not in line with the Islamic missions for the media activities. Indonesian media should promote Indonesian writers to write stories and novels about heroic Muslim women and their good and useful contributions locally, nationally or internationally. One of the novels to this direction is written by Andrea Hirata. Maryamah Karpov in the novel of Adrea Hirata is the main character who becomes a pillar of the family firm. Indonesia media should promote film and drama directors and producers to produce films and dramas based on Muslim historic and heroic women and their good and useful contributions locally, nationally or internationally.

Since Indonesian women including Muslim women are able and capable to contribute good deeds to themselves, their communities and societies, Indonesian media should support and promote institutions led by women in Indonesia. There have been women's movements and their associations and institutions in Indonesia, but they have not been echoed widely well by Indonesian media. One of the examples is P2TP2A, a national women's institution that engages women and mediates follow-up laws against violence against women in Indonesia. In this regard, Indonesia media should support and promote the voices of women's organizations and institutions (Syani, personal communication, May 15, 2024).

To conclude, there are urgent needs for Indonesian media not to promote or present women as the second-class human beings in comparison with men. The media in Indonesia have no needs to spread and promote the patriarchal culture placing the inferiority of women in comparison with men or the superiority of men in comparison with women. Indonesian media should promote and spread for Indonesia women in general and Muslim women in particular just and equal participations of women and men in political and public life in Indonesia to achieve the sustainable development goals for Indonesia in near future.

The media in Indonesia should have clear knowledge about Islamic missions for Muslim women and Islamic missions for non-Muslim women in Indonesia. If non-Muslim women in Indonesia have no limitations in their gatherings and socializing with men to do good deeds for themselves and their societies, there are certain limitations for Muslim women in their gatherings and socializing with me for the good deeds and purposes based on Islamic missionary perspectives.

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