

# WOMEN'S MAJELIS TAKLIM AND THE GRADUAL MOVE TOWARD GENDER EQUALITY A study in Jambi Province

**Nisaul Fadillah** | UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin, Jambi – Indonesia  
and Western Sydney University, Sidney – Australia  
Email: nisaulfadillah@uinjambi.ac.id

**Abstract:** This article traces the history of Majelis Taklim groups in Indonesia since their emergence and reviews the groups' dynamics in the local Jambi region. Alongside the rise of Majelis Taklim, it details the advancement of women's roles in the public sphere and their contributions to a functioning democracy. I argue that the role of Majelis Taklim groups has changed in recent decades, with the groups providing a vehicle for Muslim women's interests and voices to be heard. In particular, women in Majelis Taklim groups are showing much more awareness of political issues compared to the past. Changes have occurred in wider Indonesian society, most significantly their participation in education since the 1960s. This is reflected in the gradual improvement in the Gender Equality Index and Human Development Index of Jambi in 2019 when compared to nearly a decade earlier in 2010, however, gender inequality issues, mainly regarding labor and political participation, are still strong.

**Keywords:** Jambi, *Pengajian*, Female Majelis Taklim Prayer Groups, Women Participation, Women in Education.

## Introduction

Majelis Taklim (hereafter MT) is constituted from two Arabic words, *majelis*, which means a place, and *taklim or ta'lim*, which means study; thus MY literally translates as 'an assembly or council to study'. This term was initially introduced by the Hadhrami community (part of today's Republic of Yemen), who migrated to Indonesia during colonial period. MT is specific to Indonesia and can include Islamic study or reading groups, religious learning forums, religious meetings, public meetings for Islamic or Quranic studies, private sessions for

religious teaching, and salon-style religious groups. However, MT is not recognised in Muslim Middle Eastern societies.

*Pengajian*, which is widely used in Java, is another term Indonesian Muslims and use interchangeably to represent the activities of MT. *Pengajian* is the term used for small, informal learning groups led by a *kyai*, a religious teacher, and it has a long history of use among traditional Muslims in Javanese society. For larger groups, the *kyai* would establish *pesantren*, a boarding school system to accommodate the increase in students. Both *pengajian* and MT reflect the *da'wa* the Prophet Muhammad hosted to introduce to Islam.

Rosehan Anwar describes the role of MT groups in Indonesia as guiding the *ummah* (Muslim community).<sup>1</sup> Anwar traces the oldest such gathering to the At-Taqwa Mosque, located in the Cimalaya District of East Java. This gathering was established in 1837, during the Dutch colonial era. After evening prayers at the mosque, the male congregation asked questions and discussed the teachings after the *Iyya* prayer. In the colonial era, *pengajian* were banned several times due to restrictions imposed by the colonial authorities.<sup>2</sup> The Dutch were suspicious about the possibility of Islam-inspired rebellions and were concerned that *pengajian* might be used to organise one.

This study took place in Jambi, a province in Sumatera. Generally, research regarding MT takes place in Java. This may be because *pengajian*, as a regular practice of the MT groups, began as a study tradition among Javanese and was heavily impacted by *pesantren*, the Java-based Islamic traditional boarding schools. In Jambi, unlike Java, a madrasah-based education system without boarding is in place. This paper therefore expands the research on MT groups in urban areas where they are increasingly key actors for public religious services<sup>3</sup> and on political issues, especially in areas impacting women. This research on MT groups in the rural setting in Jambi collected data through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) among MT members and individual interviews with selected informants. It also enriches latest publication about women engaging in Fatayat and Muslimat of the Nahdlatul

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<sup>1</sup> Rosehan Anwar, *Majelis taklim & pembinaan umat* (Jakarta: Balitbang Agama dan Diklat Keagamaan, Departemen Agama RI, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Anwar, *Majelis taklim & pembinaan umat*.

<sup>3</sup> Umdatul Hasanah, "Konvergensi antara tradisi dan modernitas pada majlis taklim perempuan di Jakarta," *Jurnal Studi Gender dan Anak* 3, no. 02 (2017).

Ulama that can provide powerful political support to women candidates.<sup>4</sup>

### **The History of Contemporary Islamic Prayer Groups in Indonesia**

It is believed that the modern MT emerged in Indonesia within Jakarta's Hadhrami community. Habib Ali ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Habshi (d. 1968) regularly conducted a religious gathering that he called Majelis Taklim in Kramat Kwitang, Central Jakarta. Al-Habshi organised the *pengajian* for Hadhrami populations and broader audiences. The *pengajian* occurred regularly at Kwitang Mosque, with men and women sitting in different spaces.<sup>5</sup> Well-known MT leaders who emerged from this *pengajian* include Abdullah Syafei (d. 1985), who established the As-Syafi'iyah foundation in 1954, and Thahir Rahili (d. 1999), who founded Ath-Thahiriyyah in 1951. Abdullah Syafei later ran his own *pengajian* and used MT, the same brand as Habib Ali Al-Habshi. Following Abdullah Syafei's growing charisma and expanding career as a Muslim leader, the term MT became popular and is used othr MT in Jakarta and across the country.

MT groups usually join the association of Majelis Taklim known as *Badan Kontak Majelis Taklim*, or BKMT, which is a national network that claims to represent the MT. by 2021, BKMT spread and established in 33 out of 34 provinces and across 400 districts in Indonesia. Outside MT, many forms of *pengajian* spread in Indonesia. Thus, *pengajian* have become popular among Muslim classes and run across varied platforms. Religious rituals like attendance of *pengajian*, the observance of *halal* products and implementation of *sharia* are used as examples of an ideal lifestyle, particularly for the middle class, which perpetuates its growth.<sup>6</sup> For example, it is common for their *pengajian* to be organised in hotels and fancy restaurants.<sup>7</sup> With the increase of

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<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Mahsun, Misbah Zulfa Elizabeth, and Solkhah Mufrikhah, "Female candidates, Islamic women's organisations, and clientelism in the 2019 Indonesian elections," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 40, 1 (2021), pp. 73-92.

<sup>5</sup> Andi Faisal Bakti, n.d, [https://c3huria.wordpress.com/2015/01/30/as-syafiyyah-engagement-in-dakwah-and-the-development-of-bkmt-for-civil-society-in-indonesia/#\\_ftn10](https://c3huria.wordpress.com/2015/01/30/as-syafiyyah-engagement-in-dakwah-and-the-development-of-bkmt-for-civil-society-in-indonesia/#_ftn10).

<sup>6</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, "The making of public Islam: Piety, agency, and commodification on the landscape of the Indonesian public sphere," *Contemporary Islam* 3, 3 (2009).

<sup>7</sup> Hasan, "The making of public Islam."

media, *pengajian* are now broadcasted in television stations<sup>8</sup> as well as uploaded to online platforms.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Rise of BKMT and Female *Majelis Taklim***

The rise of the MT can be attributed to the personality of Abdullah Syafei. He regularly attended religious meetings of the Hadhrami community in Kwitang-Jakarta. The young Abdullah Syafei spent his time learning Islamic texts and many Islamic branches of study largely through non-formal education and from many teachers. Apart from mastering Islamic scripture, Abdullah Syafi'ie also mastered other skills, such as public speaking. He ran his first *pengajian* when he was 18 years of age, at his own site, and with great support from his family. He named it Majelis Taklim, likely inspired by his previous attendance at the Kwitang-Jakarta events, and this became a brand for his *pengajian*. The sessions continued and were publicly opened in Al-Barkah Mosque, in Tebet Jakarta. Due to his charisma the *pengajian* became increasingly popular and was often flooded by male and female congregations. In 1954, in the same area as the mosque, he established an Islamic learning centre that he renamed Perguruan As-Syafi'iyah with which Abdullah Syafei extended educational institutions to other social and religious activities, including MT As-Syafi'iyah.

A female *pengajian* of MT in Al-Barkah mosque was eventually introduced and conducted separately from the men. Abdullah Syafei's wife, Siti Rughayah, and his father-in-law, Ahmad Mukhtar bin Murtadha, ran this female *pengajian*. After their passing away, his eldest daughter, Muhibbah, and later Tutty Alawiyah, the second daughter, took over the *pengajian*. While many Islamic groups were suppressed by the New order regime, Tutty Alawiyah maintained good relation with the regime. At that time, the activities of MT were purposed to 'normalise' the changed situation and promote the regime's propaganda for ideal gender roles.<sup>10</sup> This ideology was promoted and controlled through many public institutions such as school curricula,

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<sup>8</sup> Dicky Sofjan, "Gender construction in dakwahtainment: A case study of hati ke hati bersama Mamah Dedeh," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 50, 1 (2012).

<sup>9</sup> Dindin Solahudin and Moch Fakhruroji, "Internet and Islamic learning practices in Indonesia: Social media, religious populism, and religious authority," *Religions* 11, 1 (2020).

<sup>10</sup> Suzanne April Brenner, "Domesticating the market: History, culture, and economy in a Javanese merchant community" (PhD, Cornell University, 1991).

health clinics, development agencies, and mass media.<sup>11</sup> While the role women were arguably more recognised, they were still limited in what they could legitimately express in their public roles. In combination, these forces nurtured the growth of female MT groups.

The MT groups for women became increasingly popular. The groups continued to expand due to the personality of Tutty who established BKMT in 1981. As a BKMT leader, Tutty was a popular educator and preacher for both female and male congregations. However, as the overwhelming majority of participants are women, the public assumes that MT is connotated with women. Tutty Alawiyah successfully managed her own MT and gave talks to many MT groups and broader audiences. At the height of her popularity and influence, she delivered a series of BKMT national activities which were supported by the regime. Some of the national events of BKMT, such as the institution's launch, were attended officially by President Soeharto and high rank officials, predominantly state ambassadors from Muslim countries.

### **The Wider Political Context of BKMT**

The establishment of BKMT in 1981 and its support to the New Order regime while many Islamic groups were suppressed made it the darling of the regime. Tutty Alawiyah was well-educated and active in many organisations and other bodies affiliated with the New Order regime,<sup>12</sup> such as the Indonesia Da'wa Council (MDI, Majelis Dakwah Indonesia) and the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI, Majelis Ulama Indonesia). They were recognised by Soeharto's government, arguably to bolster his political authority.<sup>13</sup> During this period, from 1992 to 2004, Tutty Alawiyah was appointed as a member of the Consultative Assembly (MPR, Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat) through the mechanism of appointed group faction (*utusan golongan*). This system

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<sup>11</sup> Brenner, "Domesticating the market." See also Anke Niehof and Firman Lubis, *Two is enough: Family planning in Indonesia under the New Order 1968-1998* (KITLV Press, 2003); Lyn Parker, "The Subjectification of Citizenship: Student Interpretations of School Teachings in Bali," *Asian Studies Review* 26, no. 1 (2002).

<sup>12</sup> Andi Faisal Bakti, n.d, [https://c3huria.wordpress.com/2015/01/30/as-syafiyah-engagement-in-dakwah-and-the-development-of-bkmt-for-civil-society-in-indonesia/#\\_ftn10](https://c3huria.wordpress.com/2015/01/30/as-syafiyah-engagement-in-dakwah-and-the-development-of-bkmt-for-civil-society-in-indonesia/#_ftn10).

<sup>13</sup> Nicolaus Teguh Budi Harjanto, "Political party survival: The Golongan Karya Party and electoral politics in Indonesia 1999–2009" (PhD, Northern Illinois University, 2010).

allowed the president to appoint certain people to a seat without competing in an election. In 1998, Tutty was also appointed as the Minister of Women's Empowerment in Soeharto's government; she held this role until early in BJ Habibie's presidency.

When Suharto's New Order came to power in 1966, he sought to control Muslim political activities and force Muslim groups to support the regime and Golkar, its ruling party. While keeping MT under BKMT, the ruling Golkar party also ran their own female MT, Al-Hidayah. To accommodate male participants, along with Al Hidayah, Golkar also established Majelis Dakwah Islamiyah (MDI), both of which had a national board. The four biggest MTs were supported by the New Order, namely, MT Kwitang, MT Al Hidayah, Koordinasi Da'wah Islam (KODI), and BKMT.<sup>14</sup> Many Muslim leaders chose to focus on *da'wa* activities at this time instead of engaging in politics without freedom. *Pengajian* that used to be conducted by *kyai*, began to be strictly controlled by the regime's executive leaders, or were cancelled many times due to the difficulties involved in securing permission from the government to meet.

Apart from being successful in rationalising the political parties with limited freedom, Soeharto also forbade politics on campuses and strictly controlled the press. Under Soeharto's New Order, financial support for BKMT and also MT-Al Hidayah slowly decreased. While MT Al- Hidayah used to facilitate many religious activities, it now serves only a routine *pengajian* with far fewer participants. However, Golkar elites still financially supported BKMT,<sup>15</sup> and MT Al-Hidayah continued facilitating regular *pengajian* and other social activities that were more political such as supporting Golkar's candidates in elections.<sup>16</sup>

The position of the New Order changed again during the late 1980s, and MT's activities and the institution received greater support from the New Order. At this time, MT was recognised by middle-class

<sup>14</sup> Zaini Dahlan, "Kebijakan Pemerintah Orde Baru terhadap majelis ta'lim," *Jurnal Al-Fatih* 1, 1 (2018).

<sup>15</sup> "Organisasi perempuan terbesar golkar menuntut peran lebih," *Tempo*, 15 April 2008 2020, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/121280/organisasi-perempuan-terbesar-golkar-tuntut-peran-lebih>.

<sup>16</sup> "Golkar mobilisasi kekuatan Islam menangkan Ahok-Djarot," *Tirto id.*, 30 March 2017 2020, <https://tirto.id/golkar-mobilisasi-kekuataan-islam-menangkan-ahok-djarot-clp5>.

Muslims due to the rise of modern Islam in Indonesia. MT and *pengajian* again became popular, with many new political actors attempting to approach and consolidate political support through personally or institutionally establishing or approaching an MT group. All religious and secular political parties sought to capitalise on groups such as MT to mobilise support and sympathy. Political players such as Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who elected as president succeeding Megawati Sukarnoputri in 2004,<sup>17</sup> for instance, established *Majelis Dzikir SBY-Nurussalam*, while Justice and Welfare Party (PKS, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera) founded Salimah and the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP, Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan) founded MT at almost every organisational level from the national to the lowest structure of the institution.<sup>18</sup>

In the Reformasi era, the government officially acknowledged MT as an alternative educational forum under law No. 20/2003 concerning national education system. Also, a derivative regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs was enacted to ensure MT activities were not threat to the nation. MT groups have again been recently urged to adhere new regulations when designing their activities to guard against inadvertently incorporating radical content.<sup>19</sup> This new regulation prompted many concerns regarding the government's intent to limit the rise of political Islam and has been criticised.<sup>20</sup> Despite this controversy, the regulation was enacted, although failing to obey the regulation does not necessarily result in sanctions or punishment.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> James W Endersby, "Collaborative research in the social sciences: Multiple authorship and publication credit," *Social Science Quarterly* (1996).

<sup>18</sup> Endang Turmudi, "Religion and politics: A study on political attitudes of devout Muslims and the role of the kyai in contemporary Java," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 23, no. 2 (1995).

<sup>19</sup> "Ma'ruf: Majelis Taklim Perlu Didata untuk Cegah Radikalisme," Cnn Indonesia, 02 December 2019, 2020, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20191202172642-32-453462/maruf-majelis-taklim-perlu-didata-untuk-cegah-radikalisme>.

<sup>20</sup> "Muslims baffled by government policies on Quran study groups," The Jakarta Post, 6 December 2019, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/12/06/why-is-the-government-so-obsessed-law-on-quran-study-groups-sparks-public-outcry.html>.

<sup>21</sup> "Majelis taklim, wajib daftar tapi tanpa sanksi," Detik News, 4 December 2019, 2019, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4808833/majelis-taklim-wajib-daftar-tapi-tanpa-sanksi>.

### ***Majelis Taklim*: Groups, Formats, Funding**

In general, membership of MT is open to female and male participants, as is membership of the BKMT.<sup>22</sup> However, female members are predominant, and MT is identifiable as a female group. An MT group may be founded or facilitated by a person, a foundation, or an organisation. It may have a different method from facilitating *pengajian*, and it may run without a speaker. If the *pengajian* has a speaker, it may be accompanied by a short speech and a general discussion, or it may comprise a long speech without discussion. The latter mode is normally facilitated when there are larger audiences and more often during special events such as Islamic festivals. Another method is to employ *halaqah* or a small study circle, a popular method among Muslim university students of the *tarbiyah* movement and Salafi groups in universities of Indonesia.<sup>23</sup>

Although all MT groups have the same purpose, to be a forum for participants to learn Islamic teachings and other skills, the agenda of activities often differ. Meetings may take the form of public speech given by prominent preachers from large urban mosques, attended by thousands of people, or be a private conversation attended by friends. The former type of MT is more likely to be considered a 'marketplace' for many transactions, particularly in politics. Depending on the group, the *pengajian* may be held in traditional venues or a prestigious venue. Another important role of MT is to raise social issues in public education campaigns, organise welfare and philanthropic activities, and even act as substitution of credit association (*arisan*) which is popular among Indonesian housewives.

The high flexibility in designing activities means MT members or leaders can develop their own curricula, teaching methods, and speakers for the sessions. In many groups under BKMT, the topics are prepared and discussed between leaders and MT members at least one year in advance. Some MT groups insert special material such as training on women's empowerment, women's leadership, and gender equality to raise public awareness and concern. The program can help MT members gain confidence to speak up with power holders and religious authorities about related public matters such as women's

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<sup>22</sup> "Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI) Online," Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, n.d, 2020, <https://kbbi.kemdikbud.go.id/entri/majelis%20taklim>.

<sup>23</sup> Hilman Latief, "Youth, mosques, and Islamic activism: Islamic source books in university-based halaqah," *Kultur: the Indonesian Journal for Muslim Culture* 5, 1 (2010).



health on behalf of their community.<sup>24</sup> This is the norm of MT strategies everywhere in Indonesia.

### **The Rise of Islamic Education in Jambi**

Historically, the native Islamic education institution in Jambi is *madrasa*. The first *madrasa* was founded in Seberang Kota Jambi (Sekoja, hereafter) in 1915. It is the Muslim community's oldest and most central activity centre in the Jambi region. The Muslim community in Sekoja lives by and rigidly practises the Islamic traditions,<sup>25</sup> The initial process of *madrasa* learning began in the 17th century and took place at a mosque or *langgar* (small prayer house) and was limited to male participants. *Langgar putih* was a popular Islamic centre founded by Abdul Qodir around 1948 in Sekoja. Women were completely unrepresented in early *madrasa* in the region. Women and girls were urged to study at home as the public place was considered 'haram' and 'taboo'. It was not until 1959 that the first female students attended a *madrasa*. At this time, females were absent from many social organisations. The girls were generally taught basic Islamic knowledge, primarily how to read the Qur'an, focusing on lessons about being good wives to serve their future husbands. As a result, females were not found in many established social organisations in the region.

Over time, the community's perceptions of education and women began to change. The participation of females in education was mandated in law from 1959. The presence of women became more common after local *madrasas* adjusted to the new government policy to follow the Indonesian Law of Education in 1989. The *madrasas* also increasingly followed the national education policy that provided grade recognition and included a more open curriculum with secular subjects. *Pesantren* had the option to maintain their previous curriculum or adopt a more inclusive curriculum. As a result, some *madrasas* in the region transformed into *pesantren*, to adapt to the national policy,<sup>26</sup> both

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<sup>24</sup> Dini Anitasari et al., *The role of religious public spaces in transforming private issues into community issues*, (Jakarta: Rahimah, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Sumatran sultanate and colonial state: Jambi and the rise of Dutch imperialism, 1830-1907* (Itacha: SEAP Publications, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Some *pesantren* in the regions adopted more inclusive syllabus running a mixed curriculum of religious teachings and general knowledge. Other *pesantren* decided to continue being *salafi*, so kept promoting the teachings only of classic Islamic scriptures.

nationally<sup>27</sup> and in Jambi.<sup>28</sup> Between 1975 and 1979, about 16% of females were enrolled in the state Islamic Institute for Islamic Studies ((IAIN, Institut Agama Islam Negeri) Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi. Most females continued to study at home however, with female scripture teachers invited to teach classical Islamic texts and traditional Islamic knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

Today in Sekoja, women in higher education outnumber men. Some women from these groups work in public, both government institutions or private sectors. There is now little difference in participation rates of females and males. Despite this progress, the public sphere in Jambi, in general, is still male-dominated, and many women are still forbidden to engage in public social activities by their husbands. However, women do seem to have more freedom to attend MT. This is largely because MT groups, unlike other social activities, have been publicly recognised to educate women to be more pious. It is also possible that husbands, by allowing their wives and female children to participate in public, could do so without losing face for not being Islamic in the eyes of other males and do not have to be concerned about the family's reputation. Husbands value the practices of MT groups as it is believed that families benefit from more pious wives who better educate their children and demonstrate more obedience to their husbands.<sup>30</sup> In this way, the MT movement has strengthened the piety of women and also increased their visibility and sociability.

### ***Majelis Taklim* Groups in Jambi**

The rise of MT has had profound impacts in Jambi. Over the past two decades can be traced to MT becoming part of urban religious

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<sup>27</sup> Azyumardi Azra, Dina Afrianty, and Robert W. Hefner, "Pesantren and madrasa: Muslim schools and national ideals in Indonesia," in *Schooling Islam: The culture and politics of modern Muslim education*, ed. R. W. Hefner and M. Q. Zaman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Siti Hazinah Barokah, "The relationship between Muslim women's access to formal education and their role alteration in public spheres in Seberang Kota Jambi," *Seloko* 1, no. 1 (2012).

<sup>29</sup> Maisah Maisah, Ahmad Husein Ritonga, and Sukarno Sukarno, "The influence of women education level toward community scientific literacy improvement in Seberang Kota Jambi," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 438 (2019).

<sup>30</sup> Barokah, "The relationship between Muslim women's access to formal education and their role alteration in public spheres in Seberang Kota Jambi."

activities.<sup>31</sup> This emerging public Islamisation in Indonesia raised the profile of MT groups and subsequently the profile of Muslim women as they participated more regularly in public life to serve society. These changes were particularly empowering for Muslim women in regional areas such as Jambi.

After establishing the national BKMT in 1981, organisations at the region, district, and village level continued to meet and grow in the following years. The national BKMT sent three delegations to Jambi in 1993 to nominate a regional leader. They contacted Mrs. Rahman Rahim Aisyiah, a prominent woman in Jambi, to discuss a potential MT leader. After the second visit to Jambi, they met Dahniar Wahab Nasution, a prominent local figure in the region who founded an Islamic school in the province and had a quite strong public profile through her husband and sons who were politicians. Nasution was appointed as the chairperson of BKMT of Jambi in 1993, and she retained this position until she passed away in July 2020.

Since the introduction of MT to Jambi, anecdotally, the number of MT and frequency of *pengajian* has been increasing. The official website of the Jambi religious affairs identifies 2,876 MT groups with 21,032 members.<sup>32</sup> Based on self-observation and compilation data from the local offices, this record has moved to 3,175 MT groups with 84,792 members in 2022. However, valid data regarding group numbers have never been well-recorded. *Pengajian* is the central activity that runs on a regular weekly basis. Larger *pengajian* also occur frequently, with the upper structure inviting members from the lower ranks to attend. These larger gatherings occur at different mosques across the district. They attract many women who often travel to various groups every day to participate. This active and regular participation reflects public Islam and women's piety. It also demonstrates the respect many husbands have for MT and the events they organise for women, which are increasingly influencing women's public profiles.

Besides facilitating and attending *pengajian*, the MT members in Jambi also engage in other activities, such as visiting the graves of prominent Muslims or *ziyara*, doing a workout, organising charity

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<sup>31</sup> Arif Zamhari and Julia Day Howell, "Taking sufism to the streets: 'majelis zikir' and 'majelis salawat' as new venues for popular Islamic piety in Indonesia," *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 46, 2 (2012).

<sup>32</sup> "Data majelis taklim Provinsi Jambi," n.d., <https://jambi2.kemenag.go.id/artikel/-21832/data-majelis-taklim-provinsi-jambi>.

events, and visiting holy places. These activities often require MT members to travel individually or in groups. Therefore, the women are in the public sphere and their public profile, and that of MT, is growing.

In Jambi, *pengajian* of provincial BKMT organised in Al-Falah Mosque in Jambi is quite formal and strict run-down event. Apart from organising regular weekly or fortnightly *pengajian*, the MT groups also organise and participate in community festival days and occasions such as *halal bil halal* (a post fasting-month gathering) Idul Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice), Muharram (Islamic New Year), Maulid (the Prophet's birthday), and Isra Mi'raj (the night journey taken by the Prophet). Dahniar Wahab, the Jambi provincial MT leader, expressed her pleasure to serve the group because MT members were happy to financially support their group and their social activities. The faith among members in the groups is common and helps to develop a social cohesion and social capital as commonly found in Islamic organisations.<sup>33</sup> These roles reflect the role of MT groups in Indonesia as guiding the *ummah* (Muslim community), as noted by Anwar.<sup>34</sup>

Some MT groups receive regular financial support from the local government, which helps cover the expenses. The regular official support may change at any time, which means leaders must be creative and seek new opportunities for financial resources. In some cases (when dealing with politicians or lobby groups for instance), receiving financial support entails providing support from the group in exchange. In addition, MT leaders also lobby state officials, local leaders, and MPs to support their institutional needs. Most of this networking is based on informal connections; thus, the leader needs to be quite strong and influential.

### Political Behavior of Women

In Indonesia, women's political representation is still primarily based on the support of their families and close family relatives who hold powerful positions of influence.<sup>35</sup> An earlier study of voting

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<sup>33</sup> Nanda Riska, "The nature of social capital developed in traditional Islamic boarding schools (*dayah*) and its effect on the employment of graduates from rural communities in Aceh, Indonesia" (PhD Dissertation, University of Canberra, 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Anwar, *Majelis taklim & pembinaan umat*.

<sup>35</sup> Ella S Prihatini, "Women who win in Indonesia: The impact of age, experience, and list position," *Women's Studies International Forum* 72 (2019).

behaviour in Indonesia, showed women voters 'habitually followed their husband's choice'.<sup>36</sup> Among the Muslim community in Sekoja, a recent survey showed that women have more of a voice in domestic decision making than in the past. Moreover, women also have greater freedom to attend the *pengajian* of MT and more authority and autonomy to support their voting behaviour compared to the past. Some MT members proudly state that they have autonomy in deciding their political choice in elections. Even if they had different candidates to their husbands, their husbands let them vote as they thought best. In some instances, MT members were also successful in persuading their husband to vote for their choice of candidate.<sup>37</sup> The MT members claimed that they voted for the sake of their conscience. These data reflect changes in women's voting behaviour, including in MT groups. MT leaders and other women from the MT groups now actively become electoral brokers campaigning in the group and their community.<sup>38</sup> This data confirms the emerging agentic practices of women in Indonesia.<sup>39</sup> Indonesian women, in general, now have greater opportunities to access their rights, particularly in the education and health sectors.

The public activities of Indonesian Muslim women can promote political agency and public action. By engaging in MT groups, the women have gained general knowledge and skills such as community leadership,<sup>40</sup> economic empowerment,<sup>41</sup> and environmental care.<sup>42</sup> This is alongside MT being a medium for women to study more about religion, learn proper rituals to enhance their lives and faith, and

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<sup>36</sup> Pieterella van Doorn-Harder, *Women shaping Islam: Indonesian women reading the Qur'an* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 262.

<sup>37</sup> FGD with MT members in Jambi city.

<sup>38</sup> Nisaul Fadillah, "Female Brokers: Mobilising Voters within Indonesia's Majelis Taklim Network," *Global Media Journal Australian* 14 (2020).

<sup>39</sup> Darwin, Rizkika Lhena. "The Power of Female Brokers: Local Elections in North Aceh," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* (2017): pp. 532-551.

<sup>40</sup> Anitasari et al., *The role of religious public spaces in transforming private issues into community issues*.

<sup>41</sup> Siti Rumilah and Ummiy Fauziyah Laili, "Women's economic empowerment based on majlis ta'lim through the crackers home industry marketing strategy" (paper presented at the University-community engagement Malang-Indonesia, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Sulkhan Chakim, "Community based on mosque in Banyumas" (International Conference of Moslem Society, 2016).

encourage participation in public roles.<sup>43</sup> Many Muslim women recognise the primary responsibility remains their family roles. There is consensus, however, that women need to raise their voices together whenever public policy does not stand for women, children, and family.

There are quite a few MT women from grass-root groups, including from *pengajian*, who have become critical citizens and have a greater awareness of ecology. They raise concerns, design programs to take care of the environment, and sometimes join with movements that oppose environmental degradation. Through the groups, they learn and apply for positive programs. They learn about recycling programs, organic composting, and growing plants. One interesting example is Sukinah from Rembang, Central Java who successfully opposed the construction of a cement factory.<sup>44</sup> Other women who have the spirit to lead an environmental movement include Aleta Baun in East Nusa Tenggara and Mariana in Kalimantan. In Jambi, a group of women in Sarolangun tried to blockade hundreds of trucks transporting coal that affected air quality and caused health severe problems.

In the long run, interactions of ordinary women in an institution like MT can encourage women's aspiration for social transformation and social movement. Women are believed to have more of a fundamental sensitivity towards environmental issues. In some countries, they lead the environmental movements.<sup>45</sup> The women attain their awareness through a process of learning and everyday interaction with other women in groups. MT groups can develop social cohesion, and enable the network to build social capital for the women to address concerns around the community. Many MT groups in the neighborhood serve as the community's base for future social and environmental projects at the grassroots level.

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<sup>43</sup> Umdatul Hasanah, "Konvergensi antara tradisi dan modernitas pada majlis taklim perempuan di Jakarta," *Jurnal Studi Gender dan Anak* 3, 2 (2017).

<sup>44</sup> "Ibu rumah tangga dan petani perempuan berperan vital dalam pergerakan lingkungan Indonesia," the conversation, 30 April 2020, <https://theconversation.com/ibu-rumah-tangga-dan-petani-perempuan-berperan-vital-dalam-pergerakan-lingkungan-indonesia-133522>.

<sup>45</sup> Lynnette Zelezny and Megan Bailey, "A Call for Women to Lead a Different Environmental Movement," *Organization & Environment* 19, 1 (2006).

Muslim women's groups in Indonesia continue to evolve; in both metropolitan and rural areas, many Muslim women now engage in MT.<sup>46</sup> Alongside public Islam, democracy and decentralisation have provided more opportunities for women to play a greater role in shaping public issues in Indonesia. Muslim women, including in MT groups, are increasingly negotiating and shaping the public sphere to help create the ideal community. They are facing and speaking up about issues in public that may threaten the woman's private domain. These wider societal shifts mean women now have more opportunities to organise candidates or run local election campaigns with Islamic parties. The Islamic network has a strong positive role in helping women candidates gain support from voters.<sup>47</sup> The development of MT groups aligns with the rise in a national atmosphere of Islamic piety and the phenomenon of 'public Islam'. Public Islam refers to symbols and activities of Islam in public areas. This atmosphere of Islamic piety also encourages politicians to engage with MT leaders, and this phenomenon is also captured in local contexts such as Jambi.<sup>48</sup>

### **Women in the Public Sphere and Gender Development in Indonesia**

This section contends that MT groups in Jambi have played a critical role in enhancing women's participation. The local Muslim women were forbidden from entering public venues until late 1959. Informal learning sessions *pengajian* or later known as MT groups were earlier recognised and more acceptable to educate women. MT groups, have been widely regarded as useful channels for women to continue learning and organising. Although not completely related, however, to comprehend the progress of women's political participation in local

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<sup>46</sup> Minako Sakai and Amelia Fauzia, "Islamic Orientations in Contemporary Indonesia: Islamism on the Rise?," *Asian Ethnicity* 15, 1 (2014).

<sup>47</sup> Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, *Indonesian women and local politics: Islam, gender and networks in post-Subarto Indonesia*, 14 (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015).

<sup>48</sup> "Majelis taklim bulat dukung FAS," Jambi Ekspres, 04 April 2013, <http://www.jambiexpres.co.id/read/2017/05/03/6399/majelis-taklim-bulat-dukung-fas>; "Dukungan terus mengalir, 150 BKMT Muaro Jambi pilih bergabung bersama IW muslimah," Metro Jambi, 2016, 2020, <https://metrojambi.com/read/2016-10/12/14461/dukungan-terus-mengalir-150-bkmt-muaro-jambi-pilih-bergabung-bersama-iw-muslimah>.

context, it is necessary to compare and contrast the human and gender development index with other areas.

Indonesia was one of the first Muslim-majority countries to implement far-reaching women's education programs in private religious schools.<sup>49</sup> By the 1990s, women were well-represented in universities. Women's participation in education in Indonesia continues to increase, and the labor-force rate of women in Indonesia is threefold that of the Arab Middle East.<sup>50</sup> To the Human Development Index (HDI), Gender Inequality Index (GII), and Gender Development from UNDP indicate women's participation in progressing Indonesia's democratic views. In 2019, Indonesia's performance on the HDI ranked 107 out of 189 countries, which was within the 'high' category of human development.<sup>51</sup> Indonesia's performance in that regard is the same as that of the Philippines and better than that of Egypt and Bangladesh. However, Indonesia is still far behind compared to neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei Darussalam.

**Table 1: Human Development Index, Gender Inequality Index, mean years of schooling, and labour force participation rate 2019**

HDI Rank (189 countries)	Country	GII Value	Mean years of schooling		Labour force participation rate	
			Female	Male	Female	Male
47	Brunai Darussalam	0.255	9.1	9.2	57.8	71.0
54	Turkey	0.306	7.3	9	34.0	72.6
62	Malaysia	0.253	10.3	10.5	50.7	77.1
79	Thailand	0.359	7.7	8.2	59.2	76.1
107	Indonesia	0.480	7.8	8.6	53.1	81.9

<sup>49</sup> Azra, Afrianty, and Hefner, "Pesantren and madrasa: Muslim schools and national ideals in Indonesia."

<sup>50</sup> Fida Adely, *Gendered paradoxes: Educating Jordanian women in nation, faith, and progress* (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>51</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) divides the human development index of the countries into four categories namely, very high human development, high human development, medium human development, and low human development. There were 189 countries indexed in 2019.



HDI Rank (189 countries)	Country	GII Value	Mean years of schooling		Labour force participation rate	
			Female	Male	Female	Male
107	Philippines	0.430	9.6	9.2	46.1	73.3
116	Egypt	0.449	6.8	8.1	21.9	70.9
117	Vietnam	0.296	8	8.6	72.7	82.4
133	Bangladesh	0.537	5.7	6.9	36.3	81.4
	Jambi	0.525	8.01	8.07	47.0	84.3
	Arab states	0.518	6.5	8.1	20.7	73.0
	Developing countries	0.463	6.9	8.3	45.6	75.7
	World	0.436	8.1	9.2	47.2	74.2

Sources: [www.hdr.undp.org/data](http://www.hdr.undp.org/data), Analisis Gender Propinsi Jambi 2019, and [www.bps.go.id](http://www.bps.go.id)

In terms of gender, Indonesia's biggest disparity is in inequality. In 2019, Indonesia's Gender Inequality Index (GII) was 0.480, ranking 121 out of 162 countries (see Table 1). This is made up of a composite measure reflecting inequality in achievement between women and men in three areas: reproductive health, empowerment, and labor market participation. The higher the score, the worse the performance of gender equality. In this case, Indonesia's performance was still poorer than the Philippines (0.430), average among developing countries (0.463) and average among countries indexed (0.436). It shows the disparity across genders in Indonesia is still significant; however, Indonesia's performance was considerably better than across Arab countries (0.518).

In the local region, Jambi has improved its performance even though it still faces some issues regarding the gender gap. In 2010, for instance, Jambi experienced an increase in the implementation of gender equality, along with other provinces such as West Sulawesi, Bangka Belitung, West Papua, Maluku, South Sulawesi, and Southeast Sulawesi. Five aspects of development are measured in assessing gender equality; namely reproductive health, education, economy, representation in public office, and violence. Jambi still has a problem with uneven and fluctuated gender-equality performance across the districts. More specifically, in the national profile, labour force

opportunities between males and females were only 2% different in 2019. 96.31% of males were in the workforce, as were 94.88% of females. In Jambi, however, the labour force participation rate is dominated by men; only 47.03% of women were employed while 84.34% of men were. Thus, in Jambi, the employment participation rate for women is half that of men. Possible causes for this include fewer opportunities to pursue education and fewer opportunities to participate in the labour force.

**Table 2: Gender Development Index of Jambi compared to the national average in 2010 and 2019**

	2010	2019	Difference
Kerinci	59.45	59.96	0.51
Merangin	53.49	54.25	0.76
Sarolangun	58.96	60.07	1.11
Batang Hari	67.52	75.56	8.04
Muaro Jambi	68.89	63.18	-5.71
East Tanjung Jabung	42.53	68.81	26.28
West Tanjung Jabung	55.54	68.31	12.77
Tebo	48.67	51.98	3.31
Bungo	46.62	59.18	12.56
Kota Jambi	53.55	68.48	14.93
Kota Sungai Penuh	52.46	52.87	0.41
Jambi Province	57.91	65.97	8.06
Indonesia	68.15	75.24	7.09

Sources: Pembangunan Manusia Berbasis Gender, 2020;  
<https://jambi.bps.go.id/indicator/26/31/4/indeks-pembangunan-manusia.html>

Despite the inequality between genders in Jambi, the Gender Empowerment Index of Jambi in 2019 increased to 65.97, moving 8.06 points or 12 per cent from 57.91 in 2010 (see Tabel 2). This was higher than that national average that moved 7.09 points from 68.15 in 2010 to 75.24 in 2019.

## Conclusion

The role of MT groups in Indonesia has changed in recent decades, influencing women's public and private roles. Previously, the participation of women in education and the public sphere was limited largely due to the influence of a patriarchal Muslim society, especially in Jambi, a rural region where this study took place. The public rise of MT groups in the community has increasingly enabled women to participate in public spaces and learn to voice public interests. These now include participating in and publicly raising and sharing their concerns around the community and social issues impacting women and families. MT groups thereby provide a vehicle for Muslim women's interests and voices to be heard. In these ways, MT groups are strongly perceived as beneficial avenues for women to continue to learn and organise. They also provide women with the potential to become a force for politicians to listen to and fight for their aspirations and concerns. The roles of women in public is reflected through the human and gender development index in the region compared to other areas.

Political actors in Indonesia increasingly recognize the potential influence of MT groups. Many actively approach and seek the support of MT groups. Within MT, some leaders are working to channel this opportunity to the greater good of MT and their local community. This suggests more research is required to examine the contribution of MT groups to the functioning of democracy in Indonesia. Moreover, changes in wider Indonesian society have improved the conditions of women, most significantly their participation in education since the 1960s. Today, there is almost no disparity in terms of participation in education. In addition, there have been changes in women's public political behaviors and involvement, this may be largely attributed to the rise and growth of MT groups. []

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