



# Acehnese Women's Participation in Public Space: Navigating Identity, Challenges, and Social Transformation in the Contemporary Era

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## Abstract

This study aims to explore the relationship between women, Islamic law, and Acehnese society from various historical, social, and political perspectives using an analytical approach. The research method used is qualitative-descriptive to understand the social conditions that include thoughts, practices, understandings, perceptions, and cultures related to the issues of Acehnese women in the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh. The research findings indicate that women's involvement in the legislative and bureaucratic fields in Aceh has begun to increase, although their numbers remain limited compared to men. One notable example is Illiza Saaduddin, elected as Mayor of Banda Aceh for the 2025-2030 term. The conclusion indicates that the women's movement in Aceh is not merely opposing the implementation of Islamic Sharia law in Aceh but striving to promote interpretations and practices of Sharia law that are women-friendly, just, and based on the maqasid al-shari'ah. This research provides insights into the role of women in Acehnese society and their contributions to public policy and the implementation of Islamic Sharia law.

## Kata Kunci

Partisipasi Perempuan  
Aceh;  
Ruang Publik;  
Identitas;  
Tantangan dan  
Transformasi Sosial;  
Era Kontemporer

## Abstrak

Tujuan penelitian ini untuk mengeksplorasi hubungan antara perempuan, syariat Islam, dan masyarakat Aceh dari berbagai perspektif historis, sosial, dan politik dengan pendekatan analitis. Metode penelitian menggunakan kualitatif-deskriptif untuk memahami kondisi sosial kemasyarakatan yang mencakup pemikiran, praktik, pemahaman, persepsi, dan budaya yang berkaitan dengan masalah perempuan Aceh dalam implementasi syariat Islam di Aceh. Hasil penelitian menemukan bahwa keterlibatan perempuan di bidang legislatif dan birokrasi di Aceh mulai meningkat, meskipun jumlahnya masih terbatas dibandingkan dengan laki-laki. Salah satu contoh nyata adalah Illiza Saaduddin yang terpilih sebagai Walikota Banda Aceh pada periode 2025-2030. Kesimpulan menunjukkan bahwa gerakan perempuan Aceh tidak sekadar menentang penerapan syariat Islam di Aceh, melainkan berusaha mendorong tafsir dan praktik syariat yang ramah terhadap perempuan, berkeadilan, dan berbasis pada maqasid al-syari'ah. Penelitian ini memberikan wawasan mengenai peran perempuan dalam masyarakat Aceh dan kontribusinya terhadap kebijakan publik serta penerapan syariat Islam.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD), another name for the province of Aceh, is demographically located at the westernmost tip of the island of Sumatra, Indonesia, and is one of the regions with special features in the Indonesian government system. Aceh, the Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY) province, has special characteristics compared to Aceh. The difference is, in a democratic system that takes place every 5 (five) years, regional head elections in the DIY province are not held. At the same time, Aceh continues to follow the election agenda like other provinces in Indonesia. However, in terms of Aceh's special characteristics, it is also not owned by other provinces in Indonesia, including Yogyakarta. One of them is the most prominent special characteristic of the Aceh province, namely the implementation of Islamic law, which is formally part of the regional legal system. This special characteristic is given through the ratification of Undang-Undang Nomor 18 Tahun 2001 concerning Special Autonomy for the Special Region of Aceh province as the province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD), which was then strengthened by the Undang-Undang Pemerintah Aceh (UUPA) Nomor 11 Tahun 2006 concerning the Aceh government (Qanun Aceh, 2016). These two laws give Aceh the right to regulate and manage regional life politically, socially and culturally by incorporating Islamic principles into the government and legal systems (Bahri, 2012, 2013; Feener, 2016).

The implementation of Islamic law in Aceh was not born in a vacuum; it was born from a long process involving the Acehnese people's political dynamics, history, and social and cultural demands. The specialness of the Acehnese people in terms of religion has been deeply rooted since the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate when Islamic law became the main law in government and society (Muchsin, 2018). However, in the context of the Indonesian state system, the formalization of Islamic law has only gained legitimacy through Undang-Undang Nomor 18 Tahun 2001 and strengthened by Undang-Undang Pemerintah Aceh (UUPA) Nomor 11 Tahun 2006 with the authority of Aceh to form Regional Regulations (Perda) called Qanun, Sharia Police (wilayat hisbah) and Sharia courts (Mahkamah Syar'iah). Implementing Islamic law in Aceh is a legal instrument and forms social and cultural values in society (Anggriani, 2011). This will also directly impact women in various aspects of life, social, political and cultural, which have so far been considered patriarchal and very domestic in scope (Wahyuningroem, 2014).

In implementing Islamic law, individual norms and morals are the target objects and become a public legal framework that regulates community behaviour. One of the things that will be the discourse in the implementation of Islamic law is how the implementation of Islamic law affects the lives of women amid life between men and women so that there is no inequality as we know that Acehnese women who in historical records are known to be tough and brave, but now explicitly regulate their daily lives both in interacting, moving and living the wheel of life which is full of inequality (Wahyuningroem, 2014).

Scholars have discussed women's involvement and Islamic law in Aceh. In the global community's view, the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh has caused various dynamics in the social, political and cultural order. For example, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) report states that implementing Islamic law in Aceh violates Human Rights (HAM). Also, implementing Islamic law is blunt above and sharp below (Hasan & Firdaus, 2015). On the other hand, implementing Islamic law in Aceh will strengthen the Islamic identity of the Acehnese people from the lower to the upper and middle classes, including women (Kamal, 2019). The implementation of Islamic law will also emerge and reap criticism from various dimensions of society, including how the implementation of Islamic law will be referential and tend to be gender biased towards women who are often the objects of various moral rules whose enforcement do not take into account women's perspectives.

One example of the involvement of Acehnese women in the public space is Illiza Sa'aduddin, currently serving as Mayor of Banda Aceh for the 2025-2030 period. Illiza Sa'aduddin actively campaigns regarding the sustainability of life in Aceh and the Islamic rules that must be upheld. Recently, a release from Detik.com showed that Illiza Sa'aduddin carried out direct supervision at night

and secured several young people who were committing acts of violating Islamic law, such as consuming alcohol and free sex (Setyadi, 2025). The actions taken by Illiza Sa'aduddin triggered several reactions on social media. Quite a few netizens responded to the actions taken by the young people of Aceh.

Not only that action, Illiza Sa'aduddin is also active in using social media to provide information to the public. Until now, Illiza Sa'aduddin has uploaded approximately 9,905 contents on her Instagram feed, followed by around 226,000 followers. This shows that Illiza Sa'aduddin is active in using her social media. The contents uploaded to her Instagram account are diverse; for example, they relate to the call to uphold Islamic law in Aceh, her various activities as Mayor of Banda Aceh, collaboration with Aceh influencers, and other activities.



Figure 1. Illiza Sa'aduddin's Instagram Account

Based on the portrait of Illiza Sa'aduddin's involvement in the Aceh public space, the author uses it as a "window" to open a discussion about women and Islamic law in Aceh. This is done to show that this issue touches on fundamental aspects of people's lives and concerns the struggle for discourse on women's gender justice as an identity. Are women allowed to interpret and form policies that affect their lives? Moreover, how do Acehese women interpret their diversity amid a "legal" system that limits women's space for movement?

This article will explore the relationship between women, Islamic law and Acehese society from various historical, social and political records with an analytical approach. This article aims to understand how Acehese women experience, respond to and navigate their lives within the framework of implementing Islamic law in Aceh. In addition, this article also wants to encourage Acehese women so that Acehese women are not only objects of the legal system of implementing Islamic law but also subjects who have the capacity for agency and views in the context of implementing Islamic law in Aceh more openly and dynamically.

## METHOD

This type of research is qualitative descriptive research. This means the data was collected from several references, analyzed analytically, and explained in depth. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative research is to describe the empirical reality behind the phenomenon in depth, in detail and thoroughly and to understand the conditions of the social world of society which include thoughts, practices, understanding, perceptions and culture-related efforts to improve and develop human resources (Moleong, 2004).

The descriptive method, according to Whitney in Moh. Nazir is a search for facts with proper interpretation. Descriptive research studies problems in society, as well as the procedures that apply in

certain situations, including relationships, activities, attitudes, views, ongoing processes, and the influences of a phenomenon (Nazir, 2003). In this case, in more detail, Nazir describes the descriptive method as researching the status of a human group: an object, a condition, a system of thought or a class of events in the present. This descriptive research aims to create a description, picture or painting systematically, factually, and accurately regarding the facts, characteristics or relationships between the phenomena being investigated (Nazir, 2003).

In this article, several data were collected using virtual ethnography or ethnography conducted virtually (Nasrullah, 2017). The author collected online data, such as searching for literature reviews, observing case examples online, and collecting and comparing digital and print-based reference sources. Thus, this article is packaged based on contemporary events published online and developed based on bare Islamic references, such as implementing Islamic law in Qanun.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Result

Acehnese women cannot be seen as mere complements in the social order that is only considered patriarchal. The long and dynamic historical records of Aceh show that Aceh is very egalitarian in the social order, especially in terms of leadership and women's contributions to society and leadership. As evidence of the colonial era, Acehnese women who were egalitarian to maintain Aceh's sovereignty were Cut Meutia, Admiral Malahayati, Cut Nyak Dien, Pocut Baren, and Pocut Meurah Intan. Admiral Malahayati, for example, was the only female admiral in the maritime world of Islamic Nusantara who led the Aceh Sultanate's fleet in the 16th century and succeeded in repelling attacks from the Portuguese and Dutch fleets. Admiral Malahayati was also known as the founder of "Inong Balee", a combat force consisting of Acehnese widows at that time (Ulfah, 2022). Aceh was one of the areas most persistent in fighting against Dutch colonial rule; during this struggle, many Acehnese women appeared brave and mighty in fighting against the Dutch and were at the forefront.

If we go back as a flashback to the history of Acehnese women, not only appearing in the military world, in the 17th-century government, Queen Tajul Alam Shafiatuddin ruled Aceh under the Aceh Sultanate for almost three decades, approximately 35 years (1641-1675). She was a successful Acehnese female leader who maintained the kingdom's stability inherited from her father and husband. Likewise, the generation after Queen Shafiatuddin, namely Naqiatuddin (1675-1678), Zakiatuddin (1678-1688) and Keumalat Syah (1688-1699). These women have proven to be able to occupy leadership positions for a relatively long time (Nova, 2023). The leadership of the sultans during the Aceh Darussalam kingdom was supported by Islamic law and Acehnese customs. The first sultanah, Shafiatuddin, managed a peaceful transition of power and demonstrated high diplomatic skills, successfully maintaining internal stability and establishing diplomatic relations with foreign parties. The sultanahs also established complex relationships with Acehnese men and European envoys at that time by utilizing social and political structures to maintain Aceh's power and sovereignty amid external pressure. This female government ended in 1699 with the overthrow of the Sultanah Keumalayut Zainatuddin Syah (Khan, n.d.).

A glimpse of the history of Acehnese women's leadership in the past shows that Aceh, in its social structure, did not completely close off space for women in life, both in movement and leadership, appearing as respected public figures amid the diverse Acehnese society. This is a historical fact that some still consider that women's leadership is very contrary to the order of Islamic values. Therefore, some groups strongly oppose the conventional view that considers women's leadership as a deviation from the Islamic world.

The long history of women's struggle can be traced from the time of the Aceh Darussalam kingdom to the struggle against the colonialists. The figures mentioned above are symbols of women's courage and leadership in the struggle against colonialism. This spirit is still alive and developing in a new form in the modern era today. After the armed conflict between GAM and the Indonesian Government, civil

spaces began to grow in Aceh, including women's movements and organizations. However, many of them were born from the trauma of the conflict and the 2004 Tsunami and then developed into a significant social advocacy force (KontraS, 2021).

Therefore, in responding to the position of women and the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh by several groups from academia, women activists, Human Rights (HAM) activists and even progressive clerics, they offer one approach that supports women's involvement in the public sphere, namely by using the Feminist Islamic approach. In this concept, feminism began to be initiated because of the perception of the inequality of women's positions; as a result of this perception, various efforts arose to examine the causes of this inequality to eliminate and find a formula for equality between men's and women's rights in all fields by women's potential as human beings (Nova, 2023). This approach emphasizes that Islam carries a mission of justice, compassion, and fighting oppression, including women. The inequality that occurs does not originate from within Islam but rather from practical interpretations that have taken root in some Muslims. Several female Acehese clerics have begun to develop thematic gender interpretations to show that justice in Islam can be in line with and relevant to the role of women in the public sphere, not just domestic.

## Discussion

### 1. Women and Islamic Law in Aceh

In the culture of Acehese society, there is still a value system that is greatly influenced by customs and religion. Customary law in Aceh is also called sharia law (Customs and Islamic law in Aceh). Regarding Islamic law in Aceh, Takeshi Ito, in his dissertation on Acehese customs, namely "prevailing customs", means local legal practices that have become traditional (customs). While the law adopted refers to Islamic law (Hadi, 2010; Ito, 1984). In some areas of Aceh, the family kinship system is matrilineal bilateral, meaning that the lineage can come from the father or the mother; as in Aceh Besar and Aceh Barat, women have the right to remain in their parent's house after marriage. At the same time, married men must move to their wife's house. This culturally shows that women are not necessarily in a subordinate position. However, social changes in the last few decades have shifted this order. The process of "Islamization", which is getting stronger in Aceh after the prolonged conflict and the implementation of Islamic law formally legalized by the Indonesian Government, has caused relatively flexible values in gender issues to be replaced by more "conservative" religious interpretations.

However, Acehese society still maintains local wisdom values that place women as guardians of family honour, educators of children and managers of the family. Even in domestic life, women play an important role in the economic life of the household, such as being traders, gardeners, farmers, artisans, the private sector, and even in office bureaucracy.

The armed conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian Government that lasted almost three decades (1976-2005) had a significant impact on the social structure of Acehese society, including the position of women. After the Helsinki Peace Agreement in August 2005, the implementation of Islamic law was more systematic. New dynamics began to emerge, and various opinions from religious figures, academics, and other civilians emerged. One of them is in the implementation of Islamic law, positioning women as symbols of community morals, women's movements in public spaces, and women's interactions and involvement in social spaces become the focus of regulation and supervision that is practical (Basyar, 2008).

However, it should be noted that such changes are not all assumed to be negative. A new wave of awareness has emerged among Acehese women in various places. They have begun to form discussion communities, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and solidarity networks that discuss women's rights from the perspective of Islamic law and Acehese culture. These efforts are concrete steps taken by Acehese women actively in realizing gender justice under the auspices of Islamic law in Aceh, and even directly involved various elements, including political parties that can lead women

to become legislative members and even executive leaders/regional heads (Aceh, 2004; Tempo.co, 2022).

Although there is a small part of the Acehnese community's response that is diverse regarding the concept of implementing Islamic law in the land of Serambi Mekah, most of them welcome whatever the result because it is part of a strong form of identity and a symbol of local sovereignty of Aceh. Even for some women, the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh provides a sense of security and a form of obedience to religion. Religious authorities in Aceh consider Islamic law a just, dignified law protecting women. On the other hand, what is feared by women is that the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh can limit women's space in the public sphere; the space for expressing their voices becomes narrow because it is considered to deviate from dominant norms and a threat to public morality.

From this concern, several women's Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were formed to voice women's rights so that they can continue to participate and contribute actively both in public policy making and others related to women, such as Flower Aceh, which focuses on issues of violence against women, economic empowerment, legal education and reproductive health. Flower Aceh was founded on September 23, 1989, and is the first women's organization in Aceh to emerge when the conflict was still ongoing. The initial approach included environmental, economic and health issues. Over time, the scope of the issues raised began to expand, including assisting victims of violence. Over the past 35 years, Flower Aceh has been present to expand women's space, build critical awareness, and create a more equal ecosystem. This institution has conducted a lot of paralegal training in villages in Aceh, as well as advocacy against domestic violence (KDRT) and sexual violence. Then, the Puan Aceh Foundation is active in policy advocacy and education. This foundation actively encourages women's involvement in the legislative process and public decision-making and encourages the revision of Qanun to be more responsive to gender.

Then, in Aceh, RPUK (Women's House for Humanity) is also based in Lhokseumawe. RPUK empowers women in post-conflict coastal areas, focusing on trauma recovery, transitional justice and community-based microeconomic development. Then Balee Inong is a forum for Acehnese women to carry out various social and humanitarian movements to realize Acehnese women and prosperous society. Balee Inong has a different meaning from Inong Balee. Inong Balee is one of the wings of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) struggle during the armed conflict with the Indonesian Government, which focused on the political struggle to separate from the Republic of Indonesia. Balee Inong is post-earthquake and Tsunami Aceh and post-Aceh peace, which focuses on efforts to restore the socio-economic conditions of the Acehnese people to prosperous and profitable conditions (Masrizal, 2020; Nova, 2023). In addition, several universities (PT) in Aceh have also formed women's and children's study institutions whose primary focus is gender studies. Recently, several Acehnese women activists initiated the formation of the Aceh Women's Commission (KPA), which will voice and protect women's rights in policy-making under the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh, which should not violate the principles of justice and gender equality by encouraging an educational, non-referential approach in the implementation of religious law in Aceh.

## 2. Portrait of Acehnese Women's Involvement in the Contemporary Era

Based on the sub-discussion above shows that Acehnese women have begun to be empowered by being directly involved in several institutions or foundations. These institutions play an active role in gathering women and empowering them in all matters, although they were established for slightly different reasons. However, when viewed in the external scope of Government, the women in Aceh are actively involved in maintaining and voicing their voices, and they also participate in internal Government. Involvement in internal Government, such as being part of the organizers and supervising Government from within by becoming regional heads and legislative members starting at the regency/city, provincial to central levels. Illiza Sa'aduddin Djamal is currently the Mayor of Banda Aceh for the 2025-2030 period and a Former Member of the Indonesian House of Representatives for the 2019-

2024 period is proof that Acehese women can and can play a role amid male dominance as a manifestation of gender justice in Aceh after the implementation of Islamic law, likewise with programs and activities that have an Islamic nuance with the theme of the city of Banda Aceh as a Collaborative City.

Not only Illiza, Darwati A. Gani, who is currently a member of the Aceh Regional Representative Council (DPD) in the centre as a representative of the Acehese people, is a woman who is dedicated and upholds the values of Islamic law in Aceh, ready to maintain the dignity of Acehese women at the national and international levels. At the district level in Aceh, several women are executive/parliamentary chairmen; in West Aceh, there is an Acehese woman with Siti Ramazan, and many others are in legislative institutions at the district/city and provincial levels.

Seeing the active movement by several women in Aceh, the author takes one example of an Acehese female figure currently serving as Mayor of Banda Aceh, namely Illiza Sa'aduddin Djamal. The author sees that Illiza's activity in the public space is not limited to her role as Mayor, but she is also active in cyberspace. Some of her activities are widely displayed through the social media Instagram @illizasaaduddin. On her Instagram account page, she shows several contents containing the activities she does every day, related to her activities as Mayor of Banda Aceh, collaboration with several Acehese influencers, and other activities supporting enforcing Islamic law in Aceh. Her activity in the virtual public space is proven by the number of content uploads, reaching around 9,905 content and has been followed by around 226,000 followers. This shows that Illiza has been actively using social media for a long time, and not a few young people have become collaboration partners in every content uploaded.

Over time, women's involvement in the legislature and bureaucracy in Aceh has begun to increase, although their numbers are still minimal compared to men. Their roles have begun to be seen in pushing for policies more responsive to women's needs. Several women have also begun to be actively involved in local parliaments, becoming village heads (Keuchik), NGO leaders, academics and religious figures; they bring new perspectives that combine Islamic values and the principle of equality. The Aceh Women's Movement does not merely reject the presence of Islamic Sharia in Aceh. Instead, it encourages the practice and interpretation of Sharia that is friendly to women, just and based on *maqashid al-syari'a*.

## CONCLUSION

The implementation of Islamic law in Aceh creates social dynamics, on the one hand, becoming a symbol of pride and strong religious identity for the community and, on the other hand, becoming turmoil over a unilateral understanding of social justice, especially gender equality. Acehese women live in a tug-of-war between religious norms, local culture and the social structure of power, so women's "freedom and dignity" in conveying aspirations slightly limit their space to be passive. The courage, resilience and creativity possessed by Acehese women based on the understanding and long historical journey of the struggle and leadership of Acehese women in the past shows an attitude to advocate and negotiate identity, form a solidarity community and fight for spaces for expression and growth. The challenge ahead is building Islamic law that emphasizes legal and moral aspects alone and can position women as active and equal subjects. This can be achieved if there is a will, commitment, and consistent political support from scholars and the community to understand or reread Islamic heritage fairly and contextually. With this spirit, Aceh becomes a role model for implementing Islamic law, which is *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, bringing blessings to all human beings, men and women.

Gender equality in the context of Aceh cannot be equated with the models in the West or other regions in a raw manner. Understanding the concept of gender in Aceh in the system of implementing Islamic law must go through a contextual and cultural approach rooted in Islamic values and the local wisdom of the Acehese people by prioritizing the concept of justice and mercy (compassion). If these principles are applied consistently, Islamic law in Aceh can become a legal model that is religious,



socially just, and sensitive to women's rights. So far, the shackles in the souls of women's activism in Aceh have been answered, and the policies of the Aceh government are friendly to women, as evidenced by the space for women both in government and space for women outside the government.

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