

Lecturers' Perspectives on Islamic Feminism at an Islamic University in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The discourse on Islamic feminism continues to generate debate within Muslim societies, particularly in Islamic higher education contexts where discussions of gender equality intersect with religious interpretation and scholarly traditions. Although Islamic feminism has received increasing academic attention, empirical research has yet to examine how lecturers in Indonesian Islamic universities understand and negotiate this discourse. This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the perspectives of five lecturers from one Indonesian Islamic university on Islamic feminism. Data were collected through preliminary written responses and semi-structured interviews and analysed using qualitative content analysis to identify emerging themes. The findings suggest that participants viewed Islamic feminism as a contemporary discourse that seeks to reinterpret and strengthen Islamic concerns regarding women's rights rather than as an entirely separate movement from Islamic intellectual traditions. Participants also emphasised that Islamic feminism remains a sensitive topic due to differences in theological interpretation, ideological concerns, and debates regarding religious authority and gender equality. The Qur'an and Islamic scholarly traditions were identified as important foundations for discussing women's rights and gender relations. The study indicates that the interaction between religious commitments, academic responsibilities, and socio-cultural contexts shapes lecturers' perspectives. These findings provide a contextual understanding of Islamic feminism within one Indonesian Islamic university and highlight the importance of balanced academic dialogue between Islamic principles and contemporary discussions of gender justice.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global feminist movement has developed through several historical phases, each characterised by different concerns regarding women's rights, including access to education,

political participation, economic opportunities, legal recognition, and social equality [1], [2]. Although feminism emerged within Western intellectual and political contexts, its ideas have been interpreted differently when encountered by Muslim societies, where discussions of gender relations are closely connected with religious traditions, cultural norms, and political histories [3], [4]. Consequently, feminist ideas within Muslim contexts have not simply been adopted or rejected but have been negotiated through diverse Islamic intellectual traditions, producing various approaches to understanding gender justice and women's rights. One of the most influential approaches emerging from these debates is commonly referred to as Islamic feminism.

The term generally describes intellectual and activist efforts that seek to address gender inequality through engagement with Islamic sources, particularly the Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic legal traditions, while maintaining a commitment to Islamic faith and ethical principles [6]. Scholars such as Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud, and Asma Barlas have contributed significantly to this field by proposing contextual and gender-sensitive interpretations of Islamic texts and questioning patriarchal readings of religious sources [5], [7]. However, Islamic feminism is not a single unified movement with a universally accepted definition. The term itself remains debated among Muslim scholars and activists; some identify themselves as Islamic feminists, while others prefer alternative terms such as Muslim women's rights advocacy, gender justice in Islam, or Qur'anic approaches to equality because of concerns regarding the historical association of feminism with Western secular movements [8]. Therefore, Islamic feminism is better understood as a diverse intellectual field consisting of multiple interpretations, methodologies, and social practices rather than a homogeneous ideological movement.

The development of Islamic feminism has generated extensive academic and public discussions across Muslim societies. Research in Morocco demonstrates that increasing women's participation in education and employment has sparked new debates over women's rights and religious authority, though these discussions continue to face resistance from traditional interpretations of gender roles [4]. Similar dynamics have been observed in Mediterranean Muslim societies, where debates surrounding women's rights intersect with religious reform, colonial histories, and social transformation [5]. In Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, discussions of gender justice in Islam have developed through interactions between Islamic scholarship, local cultures, women's movements, and religious institutions [6].

Indonesia represents an important context for examining Islamic feminism because gender discourse has developed through both academic and grassroots Islamic movements. The establishment of the Indonesian Women Ulama Congress (Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia/KUPI) in 2017 represents one significant development in which women scholars engage Islamic knowledge traditions to address issues such as gender justice, women's leadership, violence against women, and social equality [8], [9]. Indonesian Muslim intellectuals such as Musdah Mulia have also contributed to discussions of gender equality through reinterpretations of Islamic teachings and advocacy for women's rights within an Islamic framework [10]. Nevertheless, Islamic feminism remains a contested discourse in Indonesia. Some conservative Islamic groups question the legitimacy of feminist

terminology, arguing that feminism represents external ideological influences that may conflict with Islamic teachings [11]. These debates demonstrate that Islamic feminism in Indonesia is characterised by negotiation, reinterpretation, and contestation rather than by a single shared understanding. This debate becomes particularly significant within Islamic higher education institutions (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri/PTKIN), where lecturers occupy an important position in shaping students' understanding of Islamic thought, gender relations, and contemporary social issues. PTKIN institutions have a dual role: preserving Islamic scholarly traditions while encouraging critical academic inquiry into emerging social realities.

Within these institutions, discussions related to gender and Islam are facilitated through academic programmes, research activities, and institutional initiatives such as Gender and Child Study Centres (Pusat Studi Gender dan Anak/PSGA), which have been established in many Islamic universities to promote research, education, and advocacy concerning gender equality and women's empowerment [1], [2]. However, previous studies indicate that gender perspectives are not always equally integrated into mainstream Islamic studies curricula and are often concentrated within specialised courses, research centres, or academic forums rather than becoming a central component of broader religious education programmes [10], [11].

As a result, lecturers in Islamic higher education frequently navigate complex tensions between academic freedom, institutional expectations, religious authority, and social sensitivities when discussing issues related to Islamic feminism. Their perspectives are particularly important because lecturers function not only as knowledge transmitters but also as intellectual actors who influence how students interpret contemporary debates concerning Islam and gender. Previous scholarship on Islamic feminism has primarily examined three major areas. First, numerous studies have explored the historical development of Islamic feminism, focusing on textual reinterpretation, Qur'anic hermeneutics, and debates surrounding gender justice in Islamic thought [5], [7]. Second, research has investigated Islamic feminist organisations and women's religious movements, particularly KUPI, highlighting their contributions to expanding women's participation in Islamic scholarship and public discourse [7], [9]. Third, studies have examined women's activism and negotiations between Islam and feminism within civil society and political contexts [10], [11]. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the intellectual and social significance of Islamic feminism; however, they largely focus on activists, organisations, religious movements, or textual analysis.

Despite increasing scholarly attention, limited empirical research has examined how lecturers in Islamic higher education institutions understand, interpret, and negotiate Islamic feminism within their academic responsibilities. Existing studies rarely explore whether lecturers perceive Islamic feminism as compatible with Islamic principles, how they respond to theological controversies surrounding the concept, and how they position such discussions within university teaching contexts. Furthermore, previous research has paid less attention to lecturers' lived experiences and professional considerations when engaging with contested gender discourses. This study addresses this gap by examining lecturers' perspectives at an Islamic university in Indonesia on Islamic feminism. Using a phenomenological approach,

this research explores their interpretations, experiences, and reflections on the meaning, legitimacy, and academic positioning of Islamic feminism. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine movements, organisations, or theological texts, this study places lecturers at the centre of analysis as academic actors who negotiate religious knowledge, institutional contexts, and contemporary gender discourse. The findings aim to provide a contextual understanding of how Islamic feminism is interpreted within Islamic higher education and contribute to more balanced academic discussions on gender justice that remain attentive to Islamic intellectual traditions.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative interpretive research design using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to explore how lecturers at an Islamic higher education institution understand, interpret, and negotiate the discourse of Islamic feminism. A qualitative interpretive approach was selected because the study aimed to examine the meanings, assumptions, and interpretations that participants construct regarding a socially and religiously contested phenomenon rather than to generate generalizable explanations. Reflexive thematic analysis was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to identify, interpret, and develop patterns of meaning across participants' accounts while acknowledging the active role of researchers in the analytical process [12], [13]. The study was conducted at the Islamic University of North Sumatra (Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara) in Indonesia between March and June 2025. The research focused on lecturers as academic actors who engage with Islamic knowledge, gender discourse, and contemporary religious issues within the context of Islamic higher education.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research objectives. The inclusion criteria were: (1) permanent lecturer at UISU; (2) teaching or having academic expertise related to Islamic studies, including Islamic thought, Islamic philosophy, Qur'anic studies, Hadith studies, Islamic education, Islamic law, Islamic history, Islamic politics, or Sufism; (3) holding at least a master's degree; and (4) willing to participate voluntarily. Initially, nine lecturers were approached through personal academic networks. Five lecturers completed the entire data collection process and constituted the final participant group. Participants represented diverse academic backgrounds related to Islamic studies and included both male and female lecturers. The relatively small sample size was considered appropriate because qualitative interpretive research emphasises depth of understanding and contextual meaning rather than statistical representation. The researcher had an existing professional familiarity with several participants through academic networks. However, participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that their responses would not influence their professional evaluation, institutional position, or academic relationships. The researchers maintained reflexive awareness throughout the study to minimise the influence of prior relationships and assumptions on data interpretation [14].

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participant Code	Gender	Academic Background	Teaching Area	Academic Qualification
P1	Female	Islamic Studies	Islamic Thought	Doctoral
P2	Female	Islamic Education	Islamic Education	Doctoral
P3	Male	Islamic Law	Islamic Jurisprudence	Doctoral
P4	Male	Qur'anic/Hadith Studies	Islamic Textual Studies	Doctoral
P5	Female	Islamic Thought	Gender and Islamic Studies	Doctoral

The primary data consisted of semi-structured individual interviews supported by preliminary written responses and a follow-up Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Individual interviews served as the principal source of data because they provided participants with sufficient space to articulate personal interpretations and reflections regarding Islamic feminism. Data collection was conducted in three stages. First, participants completed preliminary written responses via WhatsApp to provide initial reflections on their understanding and position regarding Islamic feminism. These responses were used only as contextual material and as a basis for developing follow-up interview questions.

Second, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with each participant. Interview questions explored participants' understanding of Islamic feminism, perceptions of its compatibility with Islamic principles, experiences discussing gender-related issues in academic settings, and views regarding its position within Islamic higher education. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Third, a face-to-face FGD was conducted after the individual interviews. The FGD was not treated as the primary data source but was used as a complementary method to encourage collective reflection, clarify emerging interpretations, and explore areas of agreement and disagreement among participants. The use of FGD allowed researchers to examine how individual perspectives were negotiated within a shared academic environment. All interviews and FGD sessions were conducted in Indonesian. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. For publication purposes, relevant quotations were translated into English using a forward translation procedure, followed by review by a bilingual researcher to ensure preservation of meaning and cultural context [15].

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase process proposed by Braun and Clarke [16]. Analysis began with repeated readings of transcripts to become familiar with the dataset. Initial codes were generated inductively from participants' accounts, focusing on meanings, assumptions, and interpretations related to Islamic feminism. Codes were then reviewed, clustered, and developed into candidate themes. The researchers continuously refined themes by comparing participants' interpretations and examining similarities, differences, and contextual variations. The final themes represented shared patterns of meaning while preserving the complexity of individual perspectives. An example of the analytical process is presented below.

Table 2. Analytical Coding Process of Lecturers' Perspectives on Islamic Feminism

Raw Data Excerpt	Initial Code	Category	Final Theme
"Gender equality must still be understood through Qur'anic principles."	Religious reference as foundation	Islamic framework	Islamic feminism requires Islamic understanding
"The term feminism creates different reactions among Muslims."	Terminological sensitivity	Social and theological debate	Islamic feminism as contested discourse

The final analysis generated three interconnected themes that describe how lecturers interpret and negotiate the discourse of Islamic feminism within an Islamic higher education context. The first theme, Islamic feminism as an unfamiliar and debated concept, reflects participants' recognition that the term remains relatively unfamiliar among some academic communities and is often associated with diverse ideological meanings, including perceptions of its connection with Western feminist movements. The second theme, Islamic feminism as requiring comprehensive Islamic understanding, highlights participants' emphasis that discussions of gender equality and women's rights should be founded in Islamic epistemological frameworks, particularly through engagement with the Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic scholarly traditions. Rather than rejecting discussions of gender justice, participants stressed the importance of interpreting such issues within the principles of Islamic ethics and knowledge. The third theme, Islamic feminism as a discourse interpreted differently across Islamic academic traditions, illustrates the plurality of perspectives among lecturers, where interpretations are shaped by differences in educational backgrounds, theological orientations, and understandings of Islamic scholarship. Collectively, these themes indicate that Islamic feminism is not a single, fixed concept but a contested and evolving discourse negotiated among religious traditions, academic inquiry, and contemporary discussions of gender justice.

The study followed the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across individual interviews, preliminary written responses, and FGD discussions, as well as through participants clarifying the researchers' interpretations. Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the institutional context, participant characteristics, and research procedures. Dependability was enhanced through maintaining an analytical audit trail documenting recruitment decisions, coding development, theme refinement, and researcher discussions. Confirmability was supported through reflexive memos, transcript documentation, coding records, and continuous reflection on researchers' assumptions regarding Islamic feminism. The Consolidated Criteria guided the reporting of this study, using the Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist to improve transparency regarding participant recruitment, researcher characteristics, data collection, analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. Ethical approval was obtained from the Islamic University of North Sumatra (Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara), Indonesia, prior to data collection. Participants received written information regarding the research objectives, procedures, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews and FGD sessions. Participants' identities were protected through coded identifiers (e.g., P1, P2, P3), and all recordings and transcripts were securely stored. Data were used exclusively for academic research purposes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

3.1.1 Islamic Feminism as an Unfamiliar and Marginalised Discourse among Islamic Higher Education Lecturers

The findings indicate that participants perceived Islamic feminism as a discourse that remains relatively unfamiliar and is interpreted through diverse religious, academic, and personal frameworks. Rather than indicating the absence of Islamic feminist discussions within Indonesian Islamic scholarship, participants' accounts suggest that their engagement with the concept varied according to their academic experiences, theological orientations, and understandings of gender relations in Islam. Among the five participants, several lecturers described Islamic feminism as a concept that was not frequently discussed within their academic activities. They tended to approach gender relations primarily through established Islamic concepts, particularly notions of justice (*'adl*), responsibility, and complementarity between men and women. For these participants, existing Islamic teachings were considered sufficient frameworks for understanding women's rights and gender relations. EW, for example, expressed reservations toward the concept of Islamic feminism *"In my opinion, Islam does not provide space for feminism. The Qur'an's appreciation of women does not lead to the justification of feminism, let alone the idea of Islamic feminism."* (EW).

EW's statement reflects her theological interpretation that Islamic teachings already contain principles for respecting women without requiring feminist terminology. From the researcher's interpretation, this perspective demonstrates how some lecturers construct Islamic feminism as unnecessary because they perceive existing Islamic frameworks as already providing adequate guidance regarding gender relations. A similar perspective appeared in MR's account, where gender relations were understood through the concept of complementary roles. He explained, *"Men and women are different. Their roles should not be equated physically. Men have been created by Allah with the responsibility and physical strength to protect, while women, by their nature, possess noble qualities and become the best motivators for their husbands in worship."* (MR).

MR associated his understanding of gender relations with personal experiences within family life. He described his wife's emotional support and encouragement as an important factor in his personal and professional development. For MR, these experiences reinforced the value of reciprocal support between husband and wife. Importantly, this perspective does not necessarily indicate opposition to women's dignity or contributions; rather, it reflects a particular interpretation of gender justice grounded in complementary responsibilities within Islamic thought. However, participants' perspectives were not entirely uniform. Some lecturers acknowledged that discussions of Islamic feminism could provide an academic opportunity to examine women's experiences, historical contributions, and

contemporary challenges from within Islamic intellectual traditions. These participants distinguished between Western feminist movements and Islamic approaches to gender justice, suggesting that Islamic feminism should be evaluated based on its engagement with Islamic sources rather than on assumptions about its ideological origins.

Variation among participants indicates that Islamic feminism functions as a contested, negotiated discourse rather than a universally accepted or rejected concept within Islamic higher education. Participants' interpretations were shaped by their religious understanding, academic backgrounds, and personal experiences. Therefore, the findings should be understood as contextual perceptions of five lecturers at one Islamic university rather than as evidence of broader institutional attitudes toward Islamic feminism.

Table 3. Theme, Subtheme, Participant Perspectives, Illustrative Quotations, and Interpretive Meaning

Theme	Subtheme	Participant Codes	Illustrative Quotation	Interpretive Meaning
Islamic feminism as an unfamiliar and contextually negotiated discourse	Islamic feminism perceived as unnecessary because Islamic teachings are considered sufficient	EW, MR	"The Qur'an's appreciation of women does not lead to the justification of feminism, let alone the idea of Islamic feminism." (EW)	Some participants interpret gender justice primarily through established Islamic frameworks and therefore perceive Islamic feminism as an additional or unnecessary concept.
	Gender relations understood through complementary roles.	MR	"Men and women are different. Their roles should not be equated physically. Men have been created by Allah with the responsibility and physical strength to protect..." (MR)	Participants may construct gender relations through theological understandings of difference and mutual responsibility rather than equality based on identical roles.
	Personal experiences shape interpretations of gender relations	MR	"My wife's support has become an important part of my achievements and development." (MR)	Lived experiences influence how participants understand women's contributions and the meaning of justice within family relationships.
	Islamic feminism viewed as requiring academic and theological examination	P2, P5	"Islamic feminism should be discussed academically by examining its relationship with Islamic sources." (P5)	Some participants perceive Islamic feminism as a legitimate academic topic when approached through Islamic intellectual traditions.
	Distinction between Western feminism and Islamic gender discourse	P2, P5	"We need to differentiate between Western feminist ideas and discussions of justice within Islam." (P2)	Participants negotiate the concept by separating ideological assumptions from contextual Islamic interpretations.

3.1.2 Islamic Feminism as a Contested Discourse Requiring Comprehensive Islamic Understanding

Participants' narratives indicate that Islamic feminism was interpreted through diverse Islamic, academic, and personal frameworks. Rather than understanding Islamic

feminism as a single ideological position, participants constructed meanings around the discourse based on their own understandings of Islamic sources, scholarly traditions, and contemporary debates on gender relations. Among the five participants, several lecturers emphasised that discussions of gender should primarily be approached through established Islamic interpretive frameworks, particularly the Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic jurisprudential traditions. IR, for example, understood gender relations through theological concepts that emphasise differentiated responsibilities between men¹² and women. He stated, *"Islam has already explained, through its theological arguments, that men are the leaders of women. This principle extends to many practical aspects of religious life, including acts of worship."* (IR).

IR's statement reflects his interpretation⁷ that Islamic teachings provide a comprehensive framework for understanding gender roles. From the researcher's perspective, this account illustrates how some participants positioned Islamic feminism within an existing theological structure rather than considering it as an independent framework for interpreting gender relations. A similar perspective appeared in AH's narrative. He explained that some aspects of gender roles in religious practice were already addressed within Islamic jurisprudence. *"Personally, I do not agree with it. In matters of worship, for example, women cannot lead the call to prayer, become Friday prayer leaders, or deliver the Friday sermon. However, regarding activities that are physically and professionally appropriate, such as working as lecturers or in other occupations, there is no problem. From my perspective, Islam has already settled these issues."* (AH).

AH's account demonstrates a distinction between religious practices that he considered governed by established interpretations and social-professional participation where he perceived greater flexibility for women. This perspective does not necessarily indicate a rejection of women's participation in public life; rather, it reflects a particular understanding of how Islamic norms regulate different domains of gender relations.

At the same time, participants did not demonstrate a completely uniform interpretation. Some participants acknowledged that questions related to women and gender involve ongoing scholarly discussion because not all issues are considered definitive (*qat'i*) within Islamic sources. IR, drawing upon his background in Qur'anic legal interpretation, explained, *"Issues concerning women are not all categorised as qat'i (definitively established) in the Qur'an and Hadith. Therefore, different scholarly opinions have emerged regarding women's rights, and these differences continue to extend into broader social and political discussions."* (IR). This statement indicates that participants recognised interpretive diversity within Islamic scholarship. Although IR emphasised the authority of classical Islamic traditions, he also acknowledged the existence of *ijtihad* and scholarly disagreement regarding contemporary issues. From the researcher's interpretation, this reflects a negotiated understanding in which Islamic feminism is evaluated through the broader history of Islamic interpretation rather than simply accepted or rejected.

Furthermore, some participants viewed Islamic feminism as a discourse that requires careful academic examination rather than immediate acceptance or dismissal. They emphasised the importance of distinguishing among different forms of feminism and of examining whether particular arguments are compatible with Islamic principles. This

perspective suggests that participants' engagement with Islamic feminism was shaped by processes of interpretation and negotiation rather than by a binary position of support or opposition. Overall, this theme demonstrates that participants perceived Islamic feminism as a contested and interpretively negotiated discourse. Their accounts reveal that Islamic textual traditions, theological reasoning, and academic considerations functioned as important reference points when evaluating contemporary discussions of gender justice. These findings reflect the contextual perspectives of five lecturers at one Islamic university and should not be interpreted as reflecting broader institutional positions on Islamic feminism.

Table 4. Theme, Subthemes, Participant Perspectives, Illustrative Quotations, and Interpretive Meanings

Theme	Subtheme	Participant Codes	Illustrative Quotation	Interpretive Meaning
Islamic feminism as a discourse negotiated through Islamic interpretive frameworks	Gender relations understood through established Islamic teachings	IR, AH	"Islam has already explained, through its theological arguments, that men are the leaders of women." (IR)	Some participants interpret gender relations primarily through theological concepts derived from Islamic traditions.
	Religious practices viewed through classical jurisprudential interpretations	AH	"In matters of worship, women cannot lead the call to prayer, become Friday prayer leaders, or deliver the Friday sermon." (AH)	Participants distinguish between religious practices governed by established interpretations and broader social participation.
	Recognition of interpretive diversity within Islamic scholarship	IR	"Issues concerning women are not all categorised as qat'i in the Qur'an and Hadith. Therefore, different scholarly opinions have emerged." (IR)	Participants acknowledge that some gender-related issues involve scholarly debate and interpretation.
	Islamic feminism evaluated through compatibility with Islamic principles	P2, P5	"Discussions about women's rights need to be examined through Islamic sources and scholarly reasoning." (P5)	Some participants view Islamic feminism as an academic discourse that requires contextual evaluation.
	Negotiation between tradition and contemporary gender discussions	P2, P5	"We need to understand contemporary discussions while maintaining the foundations of Islamic teachings." (P2)	Participants negotiate modern gender discourse through engagement with religious frameworks.

3.1.3 Islamic Feminism as a Discourse Requiring Critical Engagement and Comprehensive Islamic Scholarship

The narratives of the five participants indicate that Islamic feminism was not understood as a fixed theological position but rather as a contemporary discourse that requires ongoing scholarly reflection. Participants generally emphasised that discussions of gender, women's rights, and Islamic feminism should be approached with careful

engagement with Islamic sources, academic reasoning, and awareness of diverse interpretations within Muslim intellectual traditions. Their accounts suggest that the meaning of Islamic feminism was negotiated through interactions among religious knowledge, academic responsibilities, and contemporary social debates. Several participants positioned Islamic feminism within the broader framework of *ijtihad*, emphasising that some contemporary gender-related questions involve interpretation and scholarly discussion rather than absolute theological conclusions. IR explained, "*This movement is still within the realm of ijtihad. As for me, I think it still needs further discussion. There are aspects of it that I agree with, but there are many others that I do not.*" (IR).

IR's statement demonstrates that his position was neither complete acceptance nor complete rejection. From the researcher's perspective, this perspective reflects an attempt to place Islamic feminism within a broader tradition of Islamic intellectual debate, in which contemporary issues are examined through processes of interpretation and scholarly reasoning. Participants also highlighted that engagement with Islamic feminism requires sufficient understanding of Islamic scholarship. AH explained that different perspectives on gender issues may emerge because Muslims come from diverse educational backgrounds, intellectual traditions, and interpretations of religious texts. He viewed encounters with alternative perspectives as opportunities to expand academic understanding rather than simply as ideological challenges.

In this regard, AH described how exposure to contemporary debates encouraged him to reconsider the materials discussed in his teaching context. His account suggests that disagreement with certain aspects of Islamic feminism does not necessarily prevent academic engagement with the topic. Rather, the discourse can become a subject of reflection through which lecturers evaluate different interpretations and develop more comprehensive perspectives. A similar view appeared in EW's narrative. She acknowledged that Islamic feminism was not a separate course topic within her academic environment but argued that students could benefit from being introduced to the discourse through relevant discussions. She stated, "*I believe it should still be introduced within relevant courses so that students are not confused when they encounter these debates outside the classroom, because they will already have discussed the concepts with their lecturers.*" (EW).

EW's statement indicates that, although she expressed reservations about certain aspects of Islamic feminism, she recognised the academic importance of preparing students to engage critically with contemporary intellectual debates. The researcher interprets this as evidence that participants distinguished between personal agreement with a discourse and the educational responsibility to discuss that discourse academically. Furthermore, MR emphasised that contemporary issues concerning women should be evaluated by distinguishing between Islamic teachings and individual behaviour. He stated, "*Violence against women occurs because some men do not understand how women should be treated according to Islam, and they should be held legally accountable for their actions.*" (MR).

MR's account reflects his theological interpretation that injustice toward women results from failures in applying Islamic ethical principles rather than from limitations within Islamic teachings themselves. This perspective should be understood as one participant's religious interpretation rather than as an objective conclusion regarding the relationship

between Islam and gender issues. Overall, this theme demonstrates that participants perceived Islamic feminism as a discourse requiring informed academic engagement rather than immediate acceptance or rejection. Among the five lecturers, perspectives varied from critical reservation to recognition of its academic relevance. Islamic knowledge traditions, professional responsibilities, and engagement with contemporary debates shaped their interpretations. These findings represent contextual perceptions within one Islamic university and do not indicate a unified institutional position regarding Islamic feminism.

Table 5. Theme, Subthemes, Participant Codes, Illustrative Quotations, and Interpretive Meanings

Theme	Subtheme	Participant Codes	Illustrative Quotation	Interpretive Meaning
Islamic feminism as a discourse requiring scholarly reflection and contextual Islamic engagement	Islamic feminism understood as an issue open to scholarly discussion	IR	"This movement is still within the realm of ijtihad. It still needs further discussion. There are aspects of it that I agree with, but there are many others that I do not." (IR)	Participants may position Islamic feminism within the tradition of Islamic interpretation rather than viewing it as a purely ideological issue.
	Engagement with different perspectives as academic reflection	AH	"Different understandings emerge because people come from different educational backgrounds and schools of thought." (AH)	Participants recognise that intellectual and educational contexts influence interpretations of Islamic feminism.
	Academic discussion considered valuable despite disagreement	EW	"It should still be introduced within relevant courses so that students are not confused when they encounter these debates outside the classroom." (EW)	Some participants distinguish between personal acceptance of a discourse and its academic relevance as a subject of study.
	Islamic ethics as a framework for addressing women's issues	MR	"Violence against women occurs because some men do not understand how women should be treated according to Islam." (MR)	Participants may interpret gender injustice through the distinction between religious principles and individual practices.
	Need for comprehensive Islamic scholarship in discussing gender issues	IR, AH, MR	"We need a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings before discussing contemporary issues." (AH)	Participants emphasise religious knowledge as an important basis for evaluating contemporary gender discourse.

3.2. Discussion

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3.2.1 Perspectives of Lecturers at Islamic Higher Education Institutions on Islamic Feminism

This study demonstrates that lecturers at an Islamic higher education institution construct diverse meanings of Islamic feminism through their lived experiences, religious commitments, disciplinary backgrounds, and professional identities. Consistent with the interpretive phenomenological perspective proposed by Mendoza Carmona [17] and

Crabtree and Husain [18], participants did not merely express opinions about Islamic feminism but interpreted the phenomenon through meanings shaped by their everyday engagement with Islamic scholarship and social realities. Accordingly, the three themes identified in this study represent different ways in which Islamic feminism is experienced and understood rather than fixed positions of acceptance or rejection.

The first theme, *Islamic Feminism as an Unfamiliar and Marginalised Discourse*, indicates that most participants perceived Islamic feminism as an unfamiliar concept that has not become part of their academic or religious experience. From a phenomenological perspective, this unfamiliarity reflects the participants' "lifeworld," in which established Islamic teachings provide the primary interpretive framework for understanding gender relations. According to Oyserman [19] and Li et al. [20], lived experience is always interpreted through meanings individuals have already internalised within their cultural and social worlds. Thus, participants did not necessarily reject Islamic feminism because of insufficient information; rather, they interpreted it through theological understandings they considered sufficient to explain gender roles in Islam.

This finding differs from much of the Indonesian literature on Islamic feminism, which has predominantly examined the movement as an expanding intellectual and social phenomenon. Taufiq [21] and Marhumah et al. [22] argue that Islamic feminism has become an important strategy for Muslim women's activism in Indonesia by combining Islamic values with gender justice advocacy. Likewise, Rofiq [23] and Lestari [24] emphasise that Islamic feminist discourse has developed through civil society organisations seeking reinterpretations of Islamic texts concerning women's rights, while Nurmila [25] and Nisa [8] demonstrate that Islamic feminist activism has increasingly influenced public debates on gender equality among Indonesian Muslims. In contrast, the present study shows that these developments have not necessarily been reflected within Islamic higher education institutions, where lecturers continue to interpret gender relations primarily through classical Islamic epistemological frameworks. This finding broadens previous scholarship by demonstrating that the diffusion of Islamic feminist ideas varies considerably across different Muslim communities.

The second theme, *Islamic Feminism as a Contested Discourse Requiring Comprehensive Islamic Understanding*, reveals that participants generally regarded Islamic feminism as part of the continuing process of *ijtihad*. Rather than rejecting dialogue, they argued that contemporary debates on gender should be examined through rigorous Islamic scholarship, drawing on the Qur'an, Hadith, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and principles of Islamic legal reasoning. Their distinction between *qat'i* rulings and issues open to interpretation reflects one of the central principles of Islamic jurisprudence: not all religious questions possess the same epistemological status.

This finding is consistent with theoretical discussions of Islamic feminism advanced by scholars such as Hardy [9] and Barlas [26], who argue that many contemporary debates on gender originate not in immutable Islamic doctrines but from historically situated interpretations of religious texts. Although the participants in the present study did not fully endorse Islamic feminist interpretations, they similarly acknowledged that some issues concerning gender remain open to scholarly discussion through *ijtihad*. The difference lies

in their interpretive orientation: whereas Islamic feminist scholars advocate reinterpreting religious texts to achieve greater gender justice, the participants preferred maintaining interpretive continuity with established Islamic scholarly traditions. Consequently, the disagreement identified in this study appears to concern methods of interpretation rather than the legitimacy of scholarly dialogue itself.

Another important finding concerns participants' understanding of violence against women. Rather than attributing gender inequality directly to Islamic teachings, they consistently distinguished between religious principles and human misconduct. This interpretation is supported by Ali [27] and Yahya [28], who argue that Islamic scholarship possesses significant potential to contribute to preventing sexual violence and strengthening ethical awareness within Muslim societies. However, unlike studies that emphasise Islamic feminism as the primary framework for such advocacy, participants in this study believed that strengthening Islamic knowledge itself is the most appropriate strategy for addressing gender-related social problems.

The third theme, *Islamic Feminism as a Discourse Requiring Critical Engagement and Comprehensive Islamic Scholarship*, further demonstrates that participants did not advocate excluding Islamic feminism from academic discussion. Instead, several lecturers argued that universities should provide students with opportunities to examine Islamic feminism within an academic environment critically. This finding aligns with the educational mission of higher education institutions as spaces for critical inquiry rather than ideological indoctrination. Participants emphasised that students should understand both the arguments supporting and opposing Islamic feminism before forming independent academic judgments.

This finding also reflects the concept of critical consciousness [29], which views education as a process of encouraging learners to engage critically with competing ideas rather than passively accepting particular viewpoints. Although participants expressed reservations regarding Islamic feminism, they nevertheless supported discussing it within university classrooms as part of broader intellectual development. Their perspectives therefore illustrate that critical engagement does not necessarily imply ideological acceptance. From an interpretive phenomenological perspective, this study contributes by revealing that participants' understandings of Islamic feminism are embedded in their biographies, disciplinary expertise, family experiences, and long-standing engagement with Islamic scholarship. As Morrison [30] and Patterson [31] emphasise, phenomenological interpretation seeks to understand how meaning emerges through the interaction between lived experience and social context. The lecturers' narratives demonstrate that Islamic feminism is experienced not simply as an abstract theoretical concept but as a phenomenon interpreted through deeply rooted religious worldviews and professional identities.

The present findings also extend previous phenomenological scholarship by identifying an experiential pattern that has received limited scholarly attention, namely the experience of perceiving Islamic feminism as unfamiliar, peripheral, and only situationally relevant within Islamic higher education. Previous studies have largely concentrated on Islamic feminist activists, women's organisations, or reformist intellectuals, whereas this study explores the perspectives of lecturers whose primary intellectual orientation is

grounded in Islamic academic traditions. This difference provides a more nuanced understanding of how Islamic feminism is interpreted across different sectors of Indonesian Muslim society. Overall, this study suggests that lecturers' perspectives on Islamic feminism cannot be reduced to simple categories of support or opposition. Rather, their perspectives represent dynamic interpretive processes shaped by theological knowledge, lived experience, professional identity, and educational responsibility. The principal contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that Islamic higher education lecturers interpret Islamic feminism as a contextual and negotiated discourse whose meaning is continuously constructed through interaction between religious tradition, scholarly reasoning, and contemporary social realities. These findings enrich ongoing debates on Islamic feminism by highlighting the diversity of interpretive positions within Indonesian Islamic higher education and by providing a foundation for future comparative studies across different institutional and cultural contexts.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored how lecturers at one Islamic higher education institution in Indonesia interpreted and constructed meanings regarding Islamic feminism through their lived experiences, religious perspectives, and academic backgrounds. The findings indicate three interconnected patterns of interpretation: Islamic feminism as an unfamiliar and peripheral discourse, Islamic feminism as a contested issue requiring comprehensive Islamic understanding, and Islamic feminism as a discourse requiring critical academic engagement. These findings suggest that participants' interpretations were shaped not only by ideological positions but also by theological frameworks, disciplinary knowledge, professional identities, and institutional contexts. Within this specific academic setting, Islamic feminism was understood as a complex discourse whose meaning was negotiated through existing Islamic intellectual traditions rather than simply accepted or rejected.

This study contributes to Islamic feminism scholarship by highlighting how the discourse is interpreted beyond activist groups and feminist intellectual communities, particularly among lecturers who serve as authorities on academic and religious knowledge. From an interpretive phenomenological perspective, the study demonstrates that meanings associated with Islamic feminism are contextually constructed through lived experiences and scholarly orientations. The findings suggest that Islamic higher education institutions may provide spaces for critical and balanced academic engagement with contemporary gender discussions. However, any curriculum development or institutional initiatives related to Islamic feminism should be approached cautiously and informed by broader evidence, including curriculum analysis, lecturer perspectives, student experiences, and consultation with relevant stakeholders.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved five lecturers from a single Islamic higher education institution; therefore, the findings provide contextual insights rather than conclusions applicable to all Islamic universities. Second, the purposive recruitment process and the researchers' relationships with some participants may have influenced participation and responses, particularly given the sensitivity of discussions surrounding religion and gender. Third, the study focused only

on lecturers' perspectives and did not include students, Islamic feminist scholars, activists, or other relevant groups. Future research may examine Islamic feminism across different Islamic higher education institutions, regions, and academic disciplines using comparative qualitative designs. Further studies may also investigate how Islamic feminism is represented in curricula, classroom practices, and academic discussions within diverse Islamic educational contexts.

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