



## EMBODIED FAITH: AGENCY OF POSTMENOPAUSAL MUSLIM WOMEN AND NARRATIVES OF PIETY IN RELIGIOUS PRACTICES



Nabillah Kurniati<sup>1</sup> , Livi Husnia Aidatul Fitroti<sup>2</sup>

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**\*Correspondence:**

Email: [nabillahk15@gmail.com](mailto:nabillahk15@gmail.com)

**Authors Affiliation:**

<sup>1,2</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Idris  
Samarinda, Indonesia

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### Abstract

This study aims to examine how postmenopausal Muslim women exercise pious agency through embodied religious practices and how they construct narratives of piety within socio-religious spaces. The cessation of menstruation places postmenopausal women under the same ritual obligations as men, creating distinctive religious experiences shaped by age, bodily transformation, and reproductive history. Drawing on a qualitative approach that combines phenomenology and narrative analysis, this research engages Saba Mahmood's concept of agency within the politics of piety to explore how religious devotion is lived, interpreted, and sustained by postmenopausal women. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations of women's participation in both domestic and public religious practices. The findings demonstrate that postmenopausal Muslim women exhibit strong commitment to daily worship and religious community activities, particularly in mosques and study circles. Piety is understood not merely as ritual compliance, but as a continuous ethical practice emerging from embodied experience, spiritual education, and acceptance of the postmenopausal body. This study argues that women's piety is shaped by the intersection of ritual habitus, reproductive experience, and social interaction, positioning postmenopausal women as active moral agents rather than passive subjects. Ultimately, the article contributes to gender-sensitive Islamic studies by highlighting embodied faith as a source of religious agency and socio-religious empowerment.

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji bagaimana perempuan Muslim pascamenopause mengekspresikan agensi kesalehan melalui praktik keagamaan yang berkelindan dengan pengalaman tubuh, serta bagaimana mereka membangun narasi kesalehan dalam ruang-ruang sosial-keagamaan. Berakhirnya siklus menstruasi menempatkan perempuan pascamenopause pada kewajiban ritual yang setara dengan laki-laki, sehingga membentuk pengalaman religius yang khas, dipengaruhi oleh usia, perubahan tubuh, dan riwayat reproduksi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan mengombinasikan fenomenologi dan analisis naratif, serta memanfaatkan kerangka teoretik Saba Mahmood tentang agensi dalam politik kesalehan. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam dan observasi terhadap praktik keagamaan perempuan pascamenopause, baik di ranah domestik maupun ruang ibadah publik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa perempuan Muslim pascamenopause memiliki komitmen tinggi terhadap praktik ibadah rutin dan keterlibatan aktif dalam komunitas keagamaan. Kesalehan dimaknai tidak semata sebagai kepatuhan ritual, melainkan sebagai praktik etis yang terus-menerus dibentuk oleh pengalaman tubuh, pendidikan spiritual, dan penerimaan terhadap tubuh pascamenopause. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa kesalehan perempuan dibentuk oleh pertautan antara habitus ritual, pengalaman reproduktif, dan interaksi sosial, yang menempatkan perempuan pascamenopause sebagai subjek moral aktif dalam kehidupan keagamaan.



## INTRODUCTION

Women generally experience menopausal symptoms in their lives, marked by the cessation of the menstrual cycle. This phase is typically experienced by women aged 40 to 50. Similar to menstruation, pregnancy, the postpartum period, and breastfeeding, menopause constitutes a significant reproductive experience for women (Rahmawati, 2020). Menopause is a natural phase that signifies the cessation of menstruation and the end of a woman's reproductive capacity for conception. The stigma surrounding menopause becomes a source of fear for some women. Such anxiety arises from the perception that they are no longer productive or sexually healthy (Hilda dkk., 2022).

The menopausal phase can give rise to feelings of anxiety among women, both consciously and unconsciously. In addition to concerns about no longer being productive, menopause is also perceived as an indicator that women are entering the stage of aging (Prasetya dkk., 2012). Negative stigma surrounding the female body frames the cessation of menstruation as a catastrophe. This perception is further exacerbated by intimidating views that regard older women as burdens due to reproductive stagnation and declining health. (Susanti & Indrajati, 2022). Such narratives subsequently trigger psychological distress among women undergoing the menopausal transition.

Prioritizing self-care can be a key factor in helping postmenopausal women cope with stress and negative thoughts. Family and social support for postmenopausal women plays a significant role in fostering positive self-acceptance (Prasetya dkk., 2012). Therefore, women need to be supported in breaking free from the weakening narratives of subordination. Priority forms of support may include social interaction, engagement in activities beyond the domestic sphere, and options that enable women to pursue what they find meaningful—measures that can improve their overall health. Unfortunately, discussions surrounding the discourse on postmenopausal women remain very limited or are even absent. This occurs because social constructions often prioritize men's needs over women's, positioning women between domestic demands and public expectations—resulting in women frequently bearing a double burden. Although advocacy for gender equality and justice has been widely voiced, in reality, understanding and fulfillment of women's bodily experiences remain profoundly unequal.

In existing discussions, women's bodily experiences of menopause are predominantly addressed within conversations on aging (older adulthood) or within the medical field. However, in-depth discussions remain limited, particularly those that examine menopause in relation to prevailing social and ethical values and norms (Palupi, 2004). Meanwhile, menopause is a female bodily experience closely connected to multiple aspects of life sustainability, including health, aging, psychological well-being, and social responses. It is therefore regrettable that discussions of menopause are often marginalized across various fields of inquiry—reproductive, psychological, social, and even religious studies.

Within the context of Islam, narratives of religious preaching (*dakwah*) that function as forms of religious agency addressing women—particularly issues related to the body, reproduction, and the postmenopausal phase—remain exceedingly rare. Moreover, to date, we have not identified literature that explicitly discusses postmenopausal women. Existing works tend to focus narrowly on the context of the '*iddah* period (*at-talaq:7*). Meanwhile, Prasetya found that religiosity in fact serves as a factor that contributes to psychological stability among menopausal women (Prasetya dkk., 2012). His finding aligns with the view of Zakiyah Daradjat, who argues that

awareness of religious needs may offer a solution to physical and psychological instability experienced by postmenopausal women (Daradjat, 1974).

Postmenopausal women are frequently found occupying public spaces of worship. This phenomenon indicates the emergence of a form of socio-religious piety shaped by women's embodied reproductive experiences. This reality also illustrates that the fulfillment of spiritual needs among postmenopausal women is not limited to domestic religious practices. Within public worship spaces, interactions occur that indirectly provide support among Muslim women. Religious practice-oriented traditions foster sustained interactions among women. This suggests that the embodiment of religiosity does not reside solely in the relationship between the individual and God; instead, harmonious relationships among fellow human beings are an integral part of socio-religious values (Muhanna, 2015). Essentially, piety for a Muslim lies in the ability to reflect the meaning of Islamic practice through one's actions and social relationships, both within the domestic and broader public spheres (Muhanna, 2015).

Saba Mahmood (2005), in *The Politics of Piety*, illustrates how women's piety can generate agency through their roles and positions within society (socio-religious). Although Mahmood does not directly address postmenopausal women, she demonstrates how Egypt has experienced increased opportunities for women's education and social mobility (Mahmood, 2005). These opportunities also provide avenues for other women to develop forms of pious agency shaped by their embodied experiences.

Mahmood (2005) argues that women are capable of discovering and creating spaces for critical discussion connected to personal experiences, which are then actualized as forms of piety, both in religious practice and in social interactions and behavior. This underscores that piety is not something restrictive; rather, it is open and allows room for freedom (Mahmood, 2005). Mahmood emphasizes that women's movements are not solely about resistance but also about the freedom of choice. Although this perspective has sparked debate, in the context of Egypt, women's pious practices are often pursued by embracing inherited norms and values rather than opposing them (Mahmood, 2005). For Mahmood, ethics is not about discovering freedom from one's valid will, but about striving to approximate the model of becoming a pious individual (Mahmood, 2005). While religious practices are often perceived as rigid and uniform, the lived experiences of Muslim women demonstrate that religious discipline can serve as a field for the formation of active subjects. In this context, women's agency is not limited to performing normatively prescribed ritual obligations but also involves cultivating forms of embodied piety.

Building on the discussion above, this paper aims to highlight the agency of postmenopausal women who choose to continue traditional religious practices. We employ a qualitative mixed-method approach, combining phenomenology and narrative analysis. Regarding data on the pious agency of postmenopausal women, we conducted interviews with three Muslim women, each with distinct menopausal (embodied) experiences, and also observed the religious practices they performed. The decision to maintain religious traditions is closely tied to narratives of piety; thus, this study aims to explore how postmenopausal women's agency expresses piety grounded in their bodily experiences. Accordingly, the research questions are: How do postmenopausal women experience their bodies, and how do they construct narratives of piety? How does the social environment serve as a space for expressing piety among

postmenopausal women? We argue that women's piety is shaped not only by ritual habitus but also by age and reproductive experiences.

## EMBODIED EXPERIENCES AND NARRATIVES OF PIETY

The embodied experiences of Muslim women create an interconnected interaction between the body, faith, and social life. Postmenopause does not signify the end of a woman's productivity. This phase is inevitably experienced by women after the cessation of menstruation (Prasetya dkk., 2012). Women's bodily experiences and reproductive journeys involve a complex and dynamic sequence of phases. Women face the need to develop adaptive capacities to cope with changes in their bodily phases. Such adjustments influence multiple dimensions of life, including family roles and religious practices.

The social and religious (spiritual) changes experienced by postmenopausal women have diverse backgrounds. A critical sensitivity is required when discussing the position of women's bodies within socio-religious life. Darajat asserts that awareness of religious needs can serve as an alternative solution for physical and psychological (mental/spiritual) distress arising from certain conditions (Darajat, 1974). This emphasizes that religious knowledge encourages believers to acknowledge and trust in God's power. Reflection on bodily existence and the soul is closely linked to the socio-religious dimension. Based on religious values, acceptance of physical changes in women is seen as a divine decree to be embraced with full submission and contentment.

Postmenopausal Muslim women who choose to be pious demonstrate the presence of agency. The awareness that they are agents of their option to be obedient does not arise suddenly. At a theoretical level, we observe an opportunity to discuss the option to be pious through Saba Mahmood's theory of pious agency (Mahmood, 2005). This approach serves as an effort to bridge women's emancipation with Islamism.

The willingness of postmenopausal Muslim women to be pious ideally does not negate their individual personal characteristics. This critical model of volition positions religious subjectivity as capable of transcending gendered structures and discourses<sup>1</sup>. The elaboration of humanistic religious values situates gender issues within a strategic framework of discussion. At this point, religious values reflected through women's reproductive experiences can reinforce the understanding that religiosity is not solely about worshiping God, but also about respecting His creation on an equal level. In contemporary times, the freedom to practice religion allows women to be recognized socially as fundamental subjects (Muhanna, 2015).

Women's bodily experiences are often treated as a subordinate topic. Why is this the case? Because the female body is still viewed as an object. Women must be included in multidimensional discussions of social, economic, religious, and political life, as they also have the right to define norms. Positioning the female body as a subject is a crucial first step toward challenging and reclaiming agency from structural pressures imposed by multiple normative frameworks (Benedicta, 2011).

Masculine-tinged narratives of piety often position women as subordinate to men. However, a woman's position within the realm of piety is not inherently beneath that of men, and vice versa. Placing principles of justice within discourses of piety

<sup>1</sup> Gender discourse concerning the body examines how social and religious frameworks construct roles, behaviors, and expectations for women's bodies. Religion provides detailed constructions regarding the female body. The movement of the body, bodily roles, and the concept of *aurat* (modesty) are among the most highlighted aspects in religious constructions of women's bodies.

serves as a counter to narratives that prioritize one gender over another, particularly women. Mahmood (2005) asserts that women occupy a position in every dialogue on piety. Women are agents who possess pious agency—the right to choose (Mahmood, 2005). In this context, the gendered construction of postmenopausal women's piety fosters agency driven by conscious choices to interpret and enact piety narratives themselves.

Postmenopausal women become subjects inseparable from discussions of social norms. Expectations related to propriety, behavior, and caregiving responsibilities are often imposed unilaterally on them. Yet women are not moral agents in the sense of being defined solely by these roles; they are human individuals who also have the right to make choices and set boundaries. The orientation of changing roles begins to manifest in social actions and responses toward postmenopausal women. Nonetheless, tensions in domestic and public dialogues continue to marginalize women's positions, even as they enter the postmenopausal phase.

Darajat (1974) asserts that from bodily experiences—particularly women's reproductive experiences—emerges a conscious determination of faith, realized through practical knowledge. Postmenopausal women have undergone a phase of extreme hormonal changes (Meilan and Huda, 2022). Beyond reproductive factors, reflection also encompasses the dimension of age as a means of self—evaluation (Nuraeni, Imas Kania Rahman, and Budi Handrianto, 2022). Therefore, religious obedience cannot be separated from bodily experience.

The transition of women's reproductive bodily experiences involves various conditions and tensions. For instance, Mbah Bunga stated that:

*"... Aku ra ngerti menopause, ya krungu-krungu sudah gak mens ... Wes ora mens itu toh ... Ra piye-piye, gak ada perubahan sama sekali, gak pernah keluar apa-apa. Pokok'e aku gak kedatangan haid mulai tahun 2010, sing bapak e Eko ninggal. Bapak e kan ninggal tahun 2010 bulan 1 tanggal 28, pas tanggal 28 itu sebetulnya waktu aku mens, tapi pas bapak e Eko ninggal tanggal 28 bulan 1 aku gak mens. Aku gini, waduh nanti ini aku gak bisa ikut mandiin aku ini waktunya aku mens, aku gitu. Lho, sekalinya gak mens" jelas Mbah Bunga (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>2</sup>*

From Mbah Bunga's account, we found that emotional and spiritual aspects are intertwined, even though stress pressure during the menopausal transition does not necessarily occur (Arnot, Emmott, and Mace, 2021). Mental burdens, pressures, and knowledge—whether consciously recognized or not—affect women's preparedness in facing this transitional phase (Susanti & Indrajati, 2022).

Table 1. Menopausal Women's Experiences

Name	Menopausal Reproductive Experiences
Mbah Bunga (fictitious name)	She experienced the menopausal phase following the death of her husband. She did not realize that her menstrual periods had already ceased when she was performing the

<sup>2</sup>"I didn't really understand menopause. I'd only heard people say that it means you stop menstruating—well, that you don't get your period anymore. For me, nothing happened, there were no changes at all, nothing came out. I simply stopped menstruating in 2010, the year Eko's father passed away. He died on January 28, 2010. Actually, that date should have been the time of my period, but when Eko's father died on January 28, I didn't menstruate. I even thought, *oh no, I won't be able to take part in bathing the body because it's supposed to be my period*. But it turned out—I didn't menstruate at all," explained Mbah Bunga (Interview, 2025).

		funeral rites for her husband, and this continues to the present.
Mbah Cinta (fictitious name)		She entered the menopausal stage while her husband was still alive, although he was already ill. However, at present, Mbah Cinta's husband has passed away. She is experiencing the postmenopausal phase without her husband's presence.
Ibu Cantik (fictitious name)		She has experienced the menopausal and postmenopausal phases (currently) accompanied by her husband. She and her husband continue to maintain an active sexual relationship to the present.

The representation of postmenopausal Muslim women who actively engage in various religious practices reflects a form of obedience. The interplay between spiritual journey and the body generates diverse understandings and experiences (Hoffman, 1995). The reality that 'life is worship' motivates postmenopausal women to pursue a spiritual path to fulfill their hearts' needs, attain inner peace, and achieve bodily acceptance.

The menopausal period requires a balance between health and well-being. Self-awareness becomes part of the adaptive capacity to facilitate the management of the postmenopausal woman's body (Wardani, 2019). This entails a conscious effort to practice self-care (Wilkinson & Whitehead, 2009). Such efforts should be carried out through monitoring, regulation, and appreciation of changes in the reproductive system—including adjustments in socio-religious practices (Agustin and Nursanti, 2020). A woman's ability to recognize herself is a response to the stigma imposed unilaterally on her body. Understanding that women have the freedom to choose and interpret piety in their own way emerges naturally from their experiences and the spiritual reflection unique to the female body.

The struggles of the body, emotions, and spirituality generate a collective emotional effort. For postmenopausal women, a sense of mutual trust within the community develops through shared bodily experiences. Gathering together and sharing reproductive experiences fosters sisterhood, providing mutual support (Schulz, 2008). Efforts to strengthen one another and engage in "the moral care" of Islam represent a way to maintain piety, ensuring it remains alive and relevant amid contemporary developments.

Women tend to be highly sensitive to matters related to their bodies. This sensitivity is driven by social expectations that view women as objects, motivating them to learn about bodily matters actively. For example, discussions about women's reproductive issues, such as menstruation, are often explored within religious community conversations. Well-developed knowledge and faith can facilitate an understanding of postmenopausal experiences. It has been shown that expertise level plays a role in explaining bodily sensations (Yusfar, Siti Solihat Holida, and Risa Suherti Octaviani, 2023). Therefore, women's physical literacy skills determine their sense of self-worth.

The body serves as a medium for expressing piety. Religious rituals such as prayer, reading the Qur'an, fasting, and performing the Hajj require a capable physical condition. These forms of worship demonstrate that piety is not abstract; it is enacted and visibly expressed. Piety becomes a priority for postmenopausal women. The peak of spiritual fulfillment for postmenopausal women occurs in advanced age. Generally, women enter the postmenopausal phase after reaching 50 years of age<sup>3</sup> (Suryonegoro, Elfa, and Noor, 2021).

Reproductive experiences and spiritual journeys position the agents (postmenopausal Muslim women) as willing and pious subjects. The dynamics of these experiences gradually shift, beginning with spiritual and moral aspects and eventually evolving into a sensitivity to religious beliefs and practices within social and political contexts. The movement of women's piety focuses on "moral reform"; religious practices carried out in public spaces (including mosques) demonstrate that ethical acts can be highly political—not in pursuit of power, but as a form of declaration and liberation (Mahmood, 2005).

The postmenopausal period often marks a turning point in developing spiritual closeness. The maturation of spiritual education cultivates greater awareness of religious practices. Education functions as a form of resistance against patriarchal pressures, as postmenopausal Muslim women negotiate their bodily and spiritual needs within the framework of Islamic teachings.

*"Dulu sebelum nikah itu, udah dijelasin sama guru ngaji masalah haid (kitab risalatul mahid) terus masalah kumpul sama suami... Mandinya, mandi besar... Ngaji sama gurunya itu kami kelas 5 ... Masalah aurot juga"* Ungkap Mbah Bunga (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>4</sup>

*"Ooo mulai bujang, udah mulai ikut diba'an, dari SMP. jaman dulu belum ada lampu. Masih pakek lampu petromak. Kalau mau diba'an jalan ke bukuhan sana dulu masih, jauh lagi. Jalan lagi belum ada motor, banyak orangnya. Dulu ya gurunya pak Pudin, Pak Marji, masih anak-anak kan seneng bareng-bareng ngaji. Rutinan di masjid juga sudah dari dulu."* Jelas Mbah Cinta (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>5</sup>

Adhering to religious norms is an expression of piety's agency. The context of a majority—religion region also influences agents' actions in maintaining religious practices. Maximizing interaction within places of worship as a space for expressing piety for postmenopausal Muslim women serves as a 'guarantee' of the right to practice religion, established and obtained politically. Religious study gatherings (pengajian) function as spaces for discussion, knowledge exchange, questioning issues, and collectively expressing concerns. The pattern of interaction—from individual to

<sup>3</sup>However, it is important to emphasize that there is a variety of reproductive changes. Age is not a fixed determinant of menopause; instead, it helps explain that bodily functions differ at certain stages. Discussions of women's reproduction are inseparable from stigma, including in postmenopausal issues—there are also cases of early menopause, which medically refers to women experiencing menopause at the age of 40 (Astikasari & Tuszahroh, 2019). This should not be seen as a 'punishment,' but rather as a natural journey of the female body.

<sup>4</sup>"Before getting married, we were already taught by our *ngaji* teacher about menstruation, using the *Risalatul Mahid*, and also about marital relations. We learned about ritual bathing, the *major ablution*. We studied these lessons with the teacher when we were in fifth grade. We were also taught about *awrah*," explained Mbah Bunga (Interview, 2025).

<sup>5</sup>"Oh, since I was still unmarried, I had already started participating in diba'an, since junior high school. Back then, there was no electricity yet. We still used petromaks lamps. If we wanted to attend diba'an, we had to walk all the way to Bukuan; it was quite far. There were no motorcycles then, and many people would come. Our teachers at the time were Pak Pudin and Pak Marji. We were still children, so we enjoyed studying together. Regular gatherings at the mosque have also existed since long ago," explained Mbah Cinta (Interview, 2025).

community, and from community to individual—constitutes a political effort to secure the very right to worship.

*"Kumpul teman kan jadi seneng. Kalau kita gak tau jadi tau, kan ngobrol-ngobrol"* ungkap Mbah Cinta (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>6</sup>

Empowerment built through networks of kinship and women's solidarity—manifested in providing spaces for sharing, listening, and nurturing faith—constitutes a form of strength constructed by Muslim women, grounded in their bodily and spiritual experiences.

The collective piety actions of postmenopausal women, which resist restrictions on socio-religious mobility, demonstrate that their bodies are present in the arena of devotion. Opposition to normative limitations on women is based on a collective awareness of choice (Schulz, 2017). Religious study groups (pengajian or majelis taklim) serve as a medium for collective piety. Participation in stigma-free gatherings promotes greater happiness, self-confidence, and adaptability to reproductive changes. Appreciation from the social environment positively impacts comfort and self-acceptance (Wulandari and Wahjuningtijas, 2023).

## SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT: THE RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL EXPRESSION OF PIETY

Postmenopausal women's piety becomes increasingly visible in social spaces. The traditional labeling of women's domestic spheres begins to be disrupted by their participation in religious activities in public spaces. Nevertheless, narratives of piety within the domestic sphere remain an integral part of their embodied spiritual experience, particularly in the context of sexuality with their partners,

*"Jauh. misalnya ya kalau berumah tangga, kalau belum menopause kalau berhubungan suami istri rasanya ya seperti biasa masih ada enaknya. Tapi kalau sudah menopause rasanya udah gak mau sama sekali, risih dan gak enak rasanya. Ya sekedar kalau punya suamikan kita melayani (ibadah) aja, padahal kita gak pengen sama sekali. Ya bilangnya kalau gak dilayani dosa, tapi ya gitu gak enak gitu lo, gak nyaman."* ungkap Mbah Cinta (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>7</sup>

The meaning of postmenopausal women's piety in the dimension of sexuality is expressed through the fulfillment of emotional and physical intimacy. Sexual interactions with their husbands are understood as part of worship and obedience to God. However, this study raises the question of how the meaning of piety within the domestic sphere should not be solely the responsibility of women. When women reach menopause, the uterus can no longer sustain conception, and the vagina experiences dryness due to tissue thinning (Rusdiana, Zubaidah, and Norfitri, 2024). This condition ultimately reduces vaginal lubrication<sup>8</sup>, which in turn decreases the duration of sexual activity (Palupi, 2004). One participant, Ibu Cantik, revealed that in fulfilling her marital sexual obligations, she and her husband agreed to use a lubricant—recognizing that her

<sup>6</sup>"Getting together with friends made it enjoyable. Things we didn't know before, we came to understand, just by talking and sharing," said Mbah Cinta (Interview, 2025).

<sup>7</sup>"It's very different. For example, in married life before menopause, when a husband and wife have sexual relations, it still feels normal, there is still some pleasure. But after menopause, it feels like you don't want it at all; it feels uncomfortable and unpleasant. So it becomes more a matter of obligation if you have a husband, you simply serve him, as a form of religious duty, even though you have no desire at all. People say that if you don't serve your husband, it's sinful, but it really doesn't feel good, it feels uncomfortable," said Mbah Cinta (Interview, 2025).

<sup>8</sup> In the sexual context, lubrication is a natural bodily fluid that functions as a lubricant, produced in response to friction or contact with the vaginal organs.

vagina no longer produced sufficient natural moisture. Establishing mutual agreements and engaging in dialogue represent forms of acceptance of the postmenopausal female body within the domestic relational space.

The stigma of "sumur, dapur, dan kasur" (well, kitchen, and bed) that haunts women negatively affects their quality of life. This stigmatization is reinforced by reproductive myths that constrain women's freedom and recognition of their bodily performance. The perception of being "expired" due to menopause generates negative sentiments toward women's reproductive functions and extends to caregiving roles, including tending to their husbands and children. Beyond bodily performance, unilateral judgments are also directed at postmenopausal women's sexual performance. The decline in sexual activity caused by drastic hormonal changes is often interpreted negatively, implying that a woman has lost her attractiveness (Marettih, 2012).

Patriarchy, deeply rooted in cultural and structural life, dictates women's bodily autonomy, sexuality, and faith according to masculinist powers that are often unaccountable. Discussions within religious discourse regarding women's positions in the family and society reveal that, although there has been considerable advocacy for equality and justice in principle, in practice women's positions continue to face significant challenges and resistance. Women's unique experiences remain difficult to create space for, particularly those tied to reproductive bodies and uterine experiences. Expressions of faith grounded in embodied experiences are not immune to marginalization and sexist humor, which is often framed as amusing, particularly targeting specific groups of women, such as widows, unmarried women, and even women in or beyond menopause.

Social reactions contribute to the construction of recognition of women's bodies. The capacity for acceptance impacts the dynamics of the life they will lead (Rusdiana, Zubaidah, and Norfitri, 2024). The social environment functions both as a space and a medium that connects women's bodies with various interactions, including those within the family. Family support constitutes a fundamental aspect of communication in domestic dialogue (Hilda, Hidayani, and Putri, 2022). In addition, public responses also reinforce spaces for recognition and acceptance of postmenopausal women's bodies.

In this context, knowledge of and acceptance toward women's bodies are not relevant only for women themselves. They are equally important for men and other social groups. Knowledge, recognition, and acceptance of postmenopausal women within interactive spaces should be regarded as natural—free from the stigmas of age, sexuality, and reproduction. Cultivating awareness can help reduce the "taboos" attached to women's bodies. Such efforts represent a form of social inclusivity (Munn dkk., 2022).

The recognition of women's participation in public expressions of piety impacts the social perceptions they receive. Women's performance of faith as autonomous individuals entails the right to choose and act. Public religious study groups and related activities attended by postmenopausal Muslim women emerge from the practices of the Muslim social environment. The decisions of postmenopausal Muslim women to transcend the boundaries of masculinist doctrines—such as the notion of "women's exclusive worship"—have successfully elicited social responses that acknowledge women as independent subjects of piety.

Positioning women as pioneers in matters of religiosity is an act of affirming recognition of their existence. Nevertheless, caution is needed in approaching this matter. Placing women at the forefront of religious issues does not imply imposing an obligation, but rather acknowledging women's space and piety. We observed that

traditional activities intertwined with spiritual values are maintained through interaction schemes that connect individual women, including groups of premenopausal, menopausal, and postmenopausal women. Interactions at this level carry a strong sense of solidarity (Jati dkk., 2024).

Socio-religious relationships elicit responses from other individuals to participate in religious practices. Within Islamic teachings, inviting and positively influencing others is regarded as an act of worship that carries spiritual reward. In this regard, postmenopausal Muslim women exhibit similar patterns of spiritual reflection, expressing gratitude for their age and contemplating their religious journey as it ultimately relates to death and the afterlife.

*"Perempuan yang telah menopause itu kayaknya lebih mendekatkan diri, taat untuk beribadah, karena apa ya, dengan usianya yang sudah tidak menstruasi lagi jadi tidak ada gangguan ibadah itu"* jelas Ibu Cantik (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>9</sup>

*"Tekun sekarang ibadahnya, setelah gak mens. Kalau dulu, tekun sih tekun, cuman kalau halangan kan gak bisa. Jadi punya utang sholat, kalau sekarang kan gak pernah punya utang sholatnya, malah bertambah, bertambah sholat sunnah gitu... Mbok de ini ngemis, ngemis tengah malam sama yang Maha kuasa..."* ungkap Mbah Bunga (Wawancara, 2025).

*"Dilancarkan kegiatan sholatnya. Kalau dulu, masih males-males ya sekarang coba tepat waktu."* Jelas Mbah Cinta (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>10</sup>

The faith and religious practices of postmenopausal Muslim women clearly demonstrate their earnestness in worship. Observations of mosque phenomena—public spaces of worship consistently attended by postmenopausal women—indicate that their reproductive experiences do not constitute a barrier to sincere religious devotion.

The dialectics of narratives on piety and religious culture reveal that expressions of faith are understood as both spiritual and moral obligations. Religious obedience is conceptualized through spiritual well-being, which serves as an affirmation of faithful piety. Expressions of piety are shaped by awareness and compliance grounded in personal choice. The interpretation of the dialectics between narratives of piety and the religious culture of postmenopausal women ultimately leads to reflections on an identity whose faith is valid and self-affirmed.

Postmenopausal Muslim women choose to participate in piety movements and religious communities for various reasons:

*"Yaa hati sendiri lah, ya dari pada ngapain di rumah. Hati mau ikut ya ikut. Kalau Mbah ni yang dorong ya hati sendiri"* jelas Mbah Cinta (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>11</sup>

*"Aku ikut itu senang, senang banget, aku kalau di rumah stres. Gara-garanya, aku semangat banget itu pas ditinggal bapaknya Eko itu. Karena anak-anak pada kerja, jadi kalau di rumah aku stress, jadi aku terjun, lebih banyak, sebelumnya ditinggal itu kan ada diantar ke sana ke sini (sama) bapaknya. Terus ditinggal bapaknya gak ada, aku pas 7 harinya itu kayak orang stress. Jadi daripada aku stress, mendingan*

<sup>9</sup>"Women who have gone through menopause seem to draw closer to God and become more devoted in their religious practices. At that stage of life, when they no longer menstruate, there are no longer interruptions to worship," explained Ibu Cantik (Interview, 2025).

<sup>10</sup>"I am more diligent in worship now, after I stopped menstruating. Before, I was diligent too, but when there were restrictions, I could not perform prayers. That meant having missed prayers to make up. Now, I never have any missed prayers. Instead, my worship has increased, including more sunnah prayers. At this age, it feels like pleading, pleading in the middle of the night to the Almighty," said Mbah Bunga (Interview, 2025).

<sup>11</sup>"It comes from my own heart. Rather than just staying at home, if my heart wants to join, then I join. No one pushes me. It is my own inner motivation," explained Mbah Cinta (Interview, 2025).

*aku keluar. Kan ini ada ustaz-nya... jadi kita enak, temannya banyak" ungkap Mbah Bunga (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>12</sup>*

*"Memilih (kegiatan rutinan) karena yang pertama dengan adanya sesuatu komunitas itu, mendukung kita untuk semangat belajar, belajar itu kan gak Mandang umur. Ikut itu biar semangat, silaturahmi terjaga" jelas Ibu Cantik (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>13</sup>*

These statements indicate that joining and actively participating in piety movements is not driven by women's status as victims of patriarchy. This aligns with Mahmood's (2005) argument that women engage in piety movements not merely as victims of patriarchy. However, it should be noted that patriarchy remains a silent yet potent force capable of constraining women's freedom. It is important to emphasize that piety movements, religious practices, and religious communities do not serve as sites of oppression for women; instead, they represent an alternative avenue for empowerment and liberation.

At this point, interactions within postmenopausal women's religious communities exhibit a productive social dynamic. This is grounded in religious study activities that stimulate women's spirituality in public spaces. In other words, the state of faith also plays a role in the journey of the female body (Tulus, Darmayasa, and Ariani, 2024). These study activities are built upon networks of partnership that operate within the framework of Islamic values. In this context, active participation, collective action, and the social environment's infrastructure support women as partners in religious activities (Fergita and Suherlis, 2023). As expressed, that

*"Yang ikut pengajian ya setengah tua rata-rata menuju menopause sampe yang tua-tua kayak Mbah Cinta gini. Ya untuk apalagi di rumah gini juga sepi, untuk ngisi waktu di rumah. Dari pada di rumah diam ajaa." ungkap Mbah Cinta (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>14</sup>*

*"Aku puasa nutup terus dari 2010. Yah bedalah, dulukan pas mens gak berani ke masjid. Kalau pas mens kan gak boleh ke masjid, kalau pas pengajian rutin di masjid jadi gak turun, gak berani turun, ya karena itu bedanya. Sekarang gak ada bolongnya(pengajian), Alhamdulillah" jelas Mbah Bunga (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>15</sup>*

*"Pola ibadah, ada, kan sudah selesai masa menopause berarti tidak ada (kita) yang dilarang untuk seperti kayak sholat, yah ibadah lah, yang sifatnya memang wajib. Nah dengan berhentinya itu kan otomatis kayak jalan tol tidak ada halangan apa-apa, ya sudah nyaman begitu" ungkap Ibu Cantik (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>16</sup>*

<sup>12</sup>"I feel happy when I take part in these activities, very happy. If I stay at home, I feel stressed. I became especially enthusiastic after Eko's father passed away. The children were all working, so being at home made me stressed. That is why I became more involved. Before he passed away, his father used to take me here and there. After he was gone, during the seven days after his death, I felt like I was losing control from stress. So rather than staying stressed, I chose to go out. There is a religious teacher there, and it feels comfortable. I have many friends," said Mbah Bunga (Interview, 2025).

<sup>13</sup>"I choose to participate in regular activities because, first of all, being part of a community encourages us to stay motivated to learn. Learning has no age limit. Joining these activities keeps our enthusiasm alive and helps maintain social ties," explained Ibu Cantik (Interview, 2025).

<sup>14</sup>"Most of those who attend the study gatherings are middle aged women, generally approaching menopause, up to older women like me. Otherwise, what would we do at home when it feels quiet and lonely. These activities help fill our time, rather than just staying at home doing nothing," said Mbah Cinta (Interview, 2025).

<sup>15</sup>"I have continued fasting since 2010. There is a clear difference. In the past, when I was menstruating, I did not dare to go to the mosque. During menstruation, we are not allowed to enter the mosque, so when there were regular study sessions held there, I would stay home and did not feel comfortable attending. That was the difference. Now there are no gaps in my participation in religious study, praise be to God," explained Mbah Bunga (Interview, 2025).

<sup>16</sup>"There is a change in patterns of worship. Once menopause is complete, it means there are no longer prohibitions related to practices such as prayer, or acts of worship that are obligatory. With menstruation coming to an end, it feels as if the path is completely open, with no obstacles at all. It becomes comfortable," said Ibu Cantik (Interview, 2025).

The arena of *taubah* (repentance) should not serve as a field for judgment. Unfortunately, the narrowing of space for women's expressions of faith is reinforced by misogynistic interpretations of Islamic texts. This is further compounded by cultural norms that regard women as secondary. Such conditions seemingly affirm that women's existence is not prioritized within the social, religious, and cultural spheres. In reality, however, postmenopausal women's involvement in practices of piety is characterized by maximal devotion and obedience.

*"Kenaikan yang jelas, tapi namanya iman itu kan naik turun. Contohnya yang sunnah-sunnah ditambahin, seperti ya puasa, sholat-sholat sunnah. Alhamdulillah aman (tidak ada perubahan tubuh yang mengganggu beribadah)" ungkap Ibu Cantik (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>17</sup>*

*"Sudah gak mens, jadi bebas. Mau ngerjakan apapun gak ada halangan apa-apa. Utang puasa itu gak ada aku, mulai dari tahun 2010, puasa ramadhan full terus"* jelas Mbah Bunga (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>18</sup>

*"Ya ikut yasinan di masjid, diba'an, kalau reoboan gak ikut"* ungkap Mbah Cinta (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>19</sup>

The performativity of postmenopausal women in religious practices demonstrates their sincerity in understanding piety in accordance with Islamic teachings, ethics, and gender. Implicitly, postmenopausal women have engaged in a dialogue between cultural and religious practices to interpret piety in their own terms. In reference to Mahmood's (2005) concept of agency, postmenopausal women directly engage in a modality of religious action. Although they do not entirely resist social norms, postmenopausal Muslim women integrate both resistance and care within a single practice. In other words, piety and spaces of worship also belong to postmenopausal women. Collectively, they inhabit and create spaces of prayer specifically for women.

Muslim women's communities commonly organize religious study sessions, sermons, Yasin recitations, and routine readings of devotional poetry. Previously, discussions on theological issues were reserved for male scholars. Today, such religious discussions can be conducted by women. From a cultural – religious perspective, these activities form part of the daily routines of Muslim women's communities in Indonesia. Mahmood (2005) argues that within the context of pious spaces, women increasingly use the mosque as a venue to discuss theological and doctrinal issues, as well as intimate aspects of their lives. This aligns with the participation of postmenopausal women in religious activities:

*"Dukungan (sebenarnya) diri sendiri, tapi harus seizin suami, izin dulu, kalau suami bolehkan barulah kita mengatur untuk jadwal-jadwal rutinitas (domestik, ibadah, & publik), belajar mengaji, tholabul 'ilmi. Saya ikut di yasinan, talqi, ini majelis ta'lim, tafsir (tapi saya masih istirahat dulu)... Sudah menjalaninya dari sebelum menopause. Kegiatan (keagamaan) rutinan itu sangat berpengaruh untuk menjaga kesalahan"* jelas Ibu Cantik (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup>"There has been a clear increase, although faith naturally rises and falls. For example, additional voluntary practices have been added, such as fasting and performing sunnah prayers. Praise be to God, everything feels stable, with no bodily changes that interfere with worship," said Ibu Cantik (Interview, 2025).

<sup>18</sup>"Since I no longer menstruate, I feel free. I can carry out any religious practice without any obstacles. I do not have any fasting debts. Since 2010, I have completed the full Ramadan fast every year," explained Mbah Bunga (Interview, 2025).

<sup>19</sup>"I take part in *yasinan* at the mosque and *diba'an*, but I do not join the Wednesday gathering," said Mbah Cinta (Interview, 2025).

<sup>20</sup>"The main support actually comes from oneself, but it still requires the husband's permission. One asks for permission first, and if the husband agrees, then we arrange our schedules for routine domestic responsibilities, worship, and public activities. I study the Qur'an and pursue religious learning. I participate

This dominance of piety is constructed through cultural and symbolic religious systems, continuously legitimized through interactions among Muslim women. Postmenopausal Muslim women consciously choose to act as agents who strengthen religious networks. This agency of piety exists within the social structure of a community that recognizes spaces for women's piety. Within this context, Muslim communities collectively express their piety, as community networks share common perceptions regarding the afterlife (Marsyanada et al., 2023).

Piety does not imply subordination. Nor is piety a demand; rather, it represents liberation through the conscious choices of postmenopausal women. Mahmood's (2005) concept of "the subject of freedom" redefines freedom through the lens of moral reform. Postmenopausal Muslim women embody this "subject of freedom," demonstrating that piety has no inherent limits. Another manifestation of this is the religious study (pengajian), which functions as a symbolic space for alternative agency within the socio-cultural dimension.

The internalization of religious norms and rules serves as a reference for the Muslim social environment. This refers to a system that functions as a structure organizing socio-religious life within the community. In other words, the representation and practice of piety by postmenopausal Muslim women are objectively adapted, resulting in the dominance of religious symbols in social reality. Naturally, the effective operation of this process requires supporting media to ensure that the representations of the Muslim community are politically realized (Hasan, 2014).

Culturally and religiously, the religious activities conducted by postmenopausal Muslim women are not confined to the mosque alone. These activities also take place in community members' homes, following a rotational schedule. We found that women's spaces in religious dialogue have merged with everyday social life. We observed the activities of Mbah Cinta and Mbah Bunga during the *diba'an* ritual, which was held at Ibu Tari's house at night. There, we witnessed Muslim women engaging in religious practices while simultaneously preserving the *rewangan* cultural tradition<sup>21</sup>. Another notable aspect is the provision of front-row seating for postmenopausal women. At this stage, we observed that the religious practices of the traditional Muslim women's community embody values of gender justice and inclusive social awareness. In fact, the prayer recitation during that night's *diba'an* ceremony was led by a postmenopausal woman, named Mbah Ratu.

We argue that postmenopausal Muslim women act as active moral agents who consciously reinforce both their personal and communal identities. The decision to become active moral agents is grounded in bodily experiences and the expectations imposed upon them. Essentially, the choice to cultivate piety, as made by postmenopausal Muslim women, originates from a desire to be liberated from traditions that restrict their freedom of worship. This capacity to "nurture" piety, in turn, further strengthens the meaning of piety within themselves—as servants devoted to God (Putri and Poerwandari, 2023).

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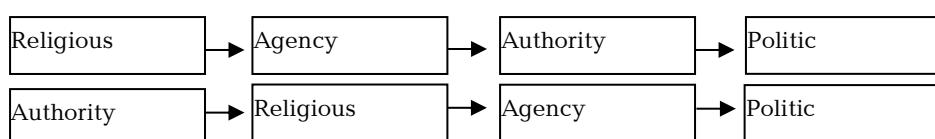
in *yasinan*, *talqi*, study circles, and Qur'anic exegesis, although I am currently taking a short break. I have been involved in these practices since before menopause. These regular religious activities have a strong influence in helping us avoid mistakes," explained Ibu Cantik (Interview, 2025).

<sup>21</sup>*Rewangan* is part of the tradition of mutual cooperation (gotong-royong) carried out at specific times, such as when relatives or neighbors organize an event or activity. *Rewangan* embodies values of solidarity and concern for social circumstances. In this context, *rewangan* is practiced during routine religious study gatherings (pengajian) or Maulid Diba' events to prepare food logistics, ensuring that the activities run smoothly. In this instance, *rewangan* is involved in maintaining traditions of religious devotion—demonstrating social sensitivity in response to issues of religious practice.

The series of repentance rituals, including devout prayer and the wearing of the hijab (in accordance with the concept of aurat), is not merely symbolic. The symbols of piety that are chosen and worn constitute the self-realization of a Muslim woman (Mahmood, 2005). Postmenopausal women interpret that performing religious practices to the fullest extent of their abilities represents an expression of faith originating from the heart. These religious rituals are enacted within both domestic and public ethical spaces—where women have the freedom to define piety according to their own understanding, rather than according to the standards of a repressive patriarchal system present in religious spaces.

*"Aku pengajiannya anu nduk, hari Minggu, hari Selasa, Rabu, Kemis, Jum'at, 5. Yang malam, malam minggunya 2, malam Jum'atnya 1, (jadinya) 3. Ene sing Yasin, Diba', ene seng Habsi. Setelah gak mens lebih aktif, hari kamis malah jauh itu (pengajiannya) di simpang pasir, kelurahan Handil bakti... Al Hikam, Al Falaq, Nurul dholam, riyadul ulum, itu, terus rebuan ini namanya Al hikmah"* Ungkap Mbah Bunga dengan penuh semangat sambil menghitung menggunakan jari tangan (Wawancara, 2025).<sup>22</sup>

The practice of embodying religious values in daily life is not merely a recreation of ethical norms; rather, it expresses personal faith within religious and political realities. The piety of both deeds and symbols involves political practices aimed at sustaining the values of faith. Religious authority is shaped by the women's own involvement, ranging from bodily experiences, reproduction, and domestic roles to traditional cultural practices. This creates a space for agency in piety within a tradition that encompasses diverse attitudes toward social issues and gender dialogue. The authority of postmenopausal Muslim women, as exercised in religious practices or study groups (*pengajian*), also plays a role in defining the meaning of feminism (Velji, 2024). Although it may not appear "resistant," postmenopausal women enact a form of "resistance" by freely expressing their faith. Piety movements involving Muslim women are highly likely to redefine the meaning of feminism. Feminist movements led primarily by postmenopausal Muslim women should be acknowledged and regarded as a form of political patterning. The purpose of the piety movements carried out by postmenopausal Muslim women is illustrated in (see Chart 1)



**Chart 1.**  
**The Political Pattern of Piety among Postmenopausal Muslim Women**

This opportunity illustrates that a woman's body is "not impaired," even after undergoing the reproductive changes associated with menopause.

Postmenopausal women do not merely repeat traditional roles. They assert their identities through religious movements, which serve as social spaces for expressing forms of piety that increasingly move toward gender equality. Here, postmenopausal

<sup>22</sup>"My religious study sessions are on Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, five in total. In the evenings, there are two sessions on Saturday night and one on Thursday night, so three altogether. These include *yasinan*, *diba'*, and *habsyi*. After I stopped menstruating, I became more active. On Thursdays, I even attend a study group that is quite far away, in Simpang Pasir, Handil Bakti area. The groups include Al Hikam, Al Falaq, Nurul Dholam, Riyadul Ulum, and the Wednesday gathering called Al Hikmah," said Mbah Bunga enthusiastically while counting on her fingers (Interview, 2025).

Muslim women do not simply follow established traditions; they also create and nurture spaces for women's participation in both religious and social life (Mahmood, 2006). Dialogue within these religious spaces offers a model of preaching (*dakwah*) that is inclusive and egalitarian. Sharing religious spaces without gender-based barriers is a practice of piety in social relations (*kesalehan muamalah*) <sup>23</sup>.

The rhetoric of worship is actualized in the relationship between women and religious authority. Adaptation to a dynamic identity is engaged in socio-political discussions to critique dominant interpretations of religious practice. Although at a basic level, the moral agency of postmenopausal Muslim women is oriented toward everyday domestic life, this does not justify confining expressions of their piety solely to the domestic sphere.

## CONCLUSION

Menopause represents a distinctive bodily experience. Women's reproductive experiences create meanings that open alternative paths to freedom and the celebration of religious practices. In the context of postmenopausal women, fulfilling religious responsibilities as Muslims is not confined solely to the domestic sphere. They are also actively involved in performing and maintaining religious traditions within public worship spaces. The embodiment of faith and religious practices manifests as narratives of piety, represented through women's bodily experiences.

Religious communities maintained by Muslim women serve as spaces for their piety. The recognition of women's piety in public spaces is realized through political action. Religious social culture supports the spaces in which postmenopausal women can express their piety. While this study has discussed the expression of piety among postmenopausal women, we acknowledge that many aspects remain beyond the scope of this research. This issue presents opportunities for further investigation using diverse methodological approaches.

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<sup>23</sup>Muamalah piety refers to human interactions in the context of religious devotion or acts of piety. Within this framework, spaces for dialogue characterized by equality and justice constitute a form of piety in muamalah.

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