

MODERN RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS: FEMALE SCHOLARS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

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Abstract: This research examines the role of female clerics as agents of change in modern religious movements in the Muslim world. Using the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, this study identifies, evaluates, and summarizes findings from various studies regarding the contribution of female ulama in encouraging social change, education, and religious policy. Data was collected from various databases indexed by Scopus, Eric, and Google Scholar, covering the publication period 2010-2024 using the PRISMA technique. Of the 301 articles, 40 were selected as research data. The findings show that female ulama play an

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important role in promoting inclusive religious understanding, fighting for women's rights, and developing progressive Islamic education. They also challenge traditional norms and influence religious policies to be more responsive to contemporary issues. However, female ulama face various challenges, including socio-cultural barriers. This research concludes that female ulama have significant potential as agents of change, but further support is needed to overcome the challenges they face.

Keywords: *Female Scholars, Modern Religious Movements, Agents of Change, Systematic Literature Review, Muslim World*

Introduction

In the development of modern religious movements in the Muslim world, a group of female scholars has emerged as agents of change.¹ They bring a spirit of renewal and a vision to spread a more inclusive understanding of religion, advocate for women's rights, and develop progressive Islamic education. Their presence challenges traditional norms that have long hindered progress and equality in Muslim societies.²

The role of female scholars has become increasingly important in the modern era, where Muslim societies face various contemporary challenges.³ They are able to offer solutions and guidance relevant to current issues. Female scholars bridge the gap between religious teachings and the evolving needs of society.⁴ They promote a moderate and inclusive understanding of religion, emphasizing values such as justice, tolerance, and respect for diversity.⁵

¹ Ellys Lestari Pambayun, "Identitas Dakwah Perempuan Dengan Techno-Religion," *El Madani: Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi Islam* 1, no. 02 (2020): 123–40, <https://doi.org/10.53678/elmadani.v1i02.126>.

² Imam Mustofa, "Sketsa Pemikiran Islam Liberal Di Indonesia," *Akademika: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 17, no. 2 (2012): 153–76.

³ Istina Rakhmawati, "Tantangan Dakwah di Era Globalisasi," *Addin* 8, no. 2 (2014): 391–408, <https://doi.org/10.21043/addin.v8i2.603>.

⁴ Frenky Mubarak, "Tradisi Sakral Dan Tradisi Populis Dalam Masyarakat Muslim Di Indramayu," *Living Islam: Journal of Islamic Discourses* 3, no. 2 (2020): 291–303, <https://doi.org/10.14421/lijid.v3i2.2288>.

⁵ Norma Fitria, "Perspektif Islam Tentang Kepemimpinan Perempuan Pada Lembaga Pendidikan," *Journal on Education* 6, no. 1 (2023): 1774–87, <https://doi.org/10.31004/joe.v6i1.3155>.

Historically, women's participation in religious and intellectual leadership in the Muslim world has faced many obstacles.⁶ However, recent decades have brought positive changes with an increasing number of women pursuing higher religious education and becoming scholars.⁷ This opens up opportunities for female scholars to contribute to religious debates and discourses.

Important contributions of female scholars include their efforts in advocating for women's rights in both religious and public spheres.⁸ They voice fairer and more equal interpretations of women's positions, as well as develop more progressive and inclusive Islamic education.⁹ Through active involvement in religious policy forums, they strive to influence policies to be more responsive to contemporary issues.

However, in carrying out this important role, female scholars often face significant challenges.¹⁰ Deeply rooted socio-cultural barriers such as patriarchy, gender stereotypes, and lack of access to education and resources are major obstacles.¹¹ They also face resistance from conservative groups that oppose change.

This research aims to provide deep insights into the contributions of female scholars and emphasize the importance of

⁶ Hani Nafi'ah Rachmawati dan Muhammad Jadid Khadavi, "Peran Tokoh Agama Dalam Menanamkan Akhlakul Karimah Pada Masyarakat Nelayan Di Kabupaten Probolinggo," *IMTIYAZ: Jurnal Ilmu Keislaman* 7, no. 1 (2023): 69–80, <https://doi.org/10.46773/imtiyaz.v7i1.1020>.

⁷ M. Nurul Ihsan dan M. Nurul Ikhsan Saleh, "Perbandingan Sistem Pendidikan di Tiga Negara; Mesir, Iran dan Turki," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 4, no. 1 (2015): 49–70, <https://doi.org/10.14421/jpi.2015.41.49-70xxx>.

⁸ Abdul Ghofur dan Sulistiyono Susilo, "Perempuan Dan Narasi Kekerasan: Studi Kritis Peran Gender Dalam Deradikalisasi," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 5, no. 2 (2015): 431–54, <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2015.5.2.431-454>.

⁹ Purnomo Purnomo dan Putri Irma Solikhah, "Konsep Dasar Pendidikan Islam Inklusif: Studi Tentang Inklusivitas Islam Sebagai Pijakan Pengembangan Pendidikan Islam Inklusif," *J-PAI: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 7, no. 2 (29 November 2021): 114–27, <https://doi.org/10.18860/jpai.v7i2.13286>.

¹⁰ Budhy Munawar Rahman, "Masa Depan Wajah Islam Indonesia Kajian atas Islam Moderat-Progresif," *Nusantara; Journal for Southeast Asian Islamic Studies* 15, no. 1 (2019): 10–28, <https://doi.org/10.24014/nusantara.v15i1.10610>.

¹¹ Gasella Aurelia Azzahra, "Pengembangan Stereotip Gender Terhadap Persepsi Karyawan Pada Manajer Perempuan," *Konstruksi Sosial: Jurnal Penelitian Ilmu Sosial* 3, no. 4 (2023): 111–21, <https://doi.org/10.56393/konstruksisocial.v1i12.1375>.

recognizing and supporting their role in building a more just, inclusive, and progressive Muslim society. By conducting a systematic literature review, this research will explore and synthesize findings from previous studies on the contributions of female scholars in promoting social change, education, and religious policy.

Three research questions are posed: (1) what is the distribution and findings of articles discussing the contribution of female scholars as agents of change in modern religious movements in the range of 2010-2024; (2) what strategies are used by female scholars in promoting change in Muslim societies in the range of 2010-2024; and (3) what significant contributions have been proven from the role of female scholars as agents of change in modern religious movements.

The results of this systematic review can provide valuable input for policymakers in the fields of religion and gender, as well as serve as a basis for developing new strategies to support the role of female scholars in the future.

Distribution and Research Findings on Women Ulema as Agents of Change (2010-2024)

In the second decade of the 21st century, there has been a significant increase in research interest in women clerics as agents of change in modern religious movements in the Muslim world.¹² Between 2010 and 2024, a large body of research emerged exploring this phenomenon from various viewpoints and geographical contexts.

These studies cover various Muslim countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey, and Middle Eastern countries, as well as a global perspective. The focus of the study includes the role of female ulama in promoting an inclusive and moderate understanding

¹² Fahrina Yustiasari Liriwati dan Sudirman Anwar, "Menelisik Peran Pesantren dalam Regenerasi Ulama Perempuan," *Al-Aulia: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 8, no. 2 (2022): 108–15, <https://doi.org/10.46963/aulia.v8i2.752>.

of religion,¹³ as well as their efforts to advocate for women's rights and gender equality.¹⁴

The research results show the significant contribution of female ulama in encouraging positive change in contemporary Muslim society.¹⁵ They play an active role in voicing a fairer interpretation of religion, developing progressive Islamic education,¹⁶ and influencing religious policy to be more responsive to contemporary issues.¹⁷

However, female ulama also face major challenges such as socio-cultural barriers, patriarchy, gender stereotypes, and resistance from conservative groups.¹⁸ Nevertheless, they managed to overcome these challenges with extraordinary perseverance and fortitude.¹⁹

These studies emphasize the importance of recognizing and supporting the role of women ulama as agents of change. Support such as wider access to education, economic empowerment, and eliminating gender discrimination is considered key to maximizing their potential.

The contribution of female ulama has become an important force in driving social and religious transformation, bringing new,

¹³ Badrah Uyuni, Khairan Muhammad Arief, dan Mohammad Adnan, "Contribution of Woman Ulama in Digital Era," *International Journal of Emerging Issues in Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2023): 16–26, <https://doi.org/10.31098/ijeis.v3i2.1926>.

¹⁴ Munawir Haris, "Partisipasi Politik NU Dan Kader Muslimat Dalam Lintas Sejarah," *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 15, no. 2 (2015): 283–308, <https://doi.org/10.21154/al-tahrir.v15i2.267>.

¹⁵ Dewi Avivah, "The Importance of the Role of Women Ulama as the Effort to Actualate the Message of Islam to the Value of Equality," *Prosperity: Journal of Society and Empowerment* 1, no. 2 (2021): 129–36, <https://doi.org/10.21580/prosperity.2021.1.2.8542>.

¹⁶ Yusron Razak dan Ilham Mundzir, "OTORITAS AGAMA ULAMA PEREMPUAN: Relevansi Pemikiran Nyai Masriyah Amva Terhadap Kesetaraan Gender Dan Pluralisme," *PALASTREN: Jurnal Studi Gender* 12, no. 2 (2019): 397–430, <https://doi.org/10.21043/palastren.v12i2.5981>.

¹⁷ Samsul Zakaria, "Kepemimpinan Perempuan dalam Persepektif Hukum Islam (Studi Komparatif antara Pemikiran KH. Husein Muhammad dan Prof. Siti Musdah Mulia)," *Khazanah* 6, no. 1 (2013): 65–97, <https://doi.org/10.20885/khazanah.vol6.iss1.art7>.

¹⁸ Umma Farida dan Abdurrohman Kasdi, "The 2017 KUPI Congress and Indonesian Female 'Ulama,'" *JOURNAL OF INDONESIAN ISLAM* 12, no. 2 (2018): 135, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2018.12.2.135-158>.

¹⁹ Halimatus Sadiyah, "Peran Ulama Perempuan dalam Memelihara Budaya Organisasi di Pesantren," *Dinamika Penelitian: Media Komunikasi Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan* 20, no. 2 (25 Januari 2021): 345–66, <https://doi.org/10.21274/dinamika.2020.20.2.345-366>.

fresher and more open perspectives. These studies provide a basis for understanding their struggles and achievements, and promoting their role in the future to create a more just, inclusive and progressive Muslim society.

Women Scholars' Strategies in Promoting Change in Muslim Societies (2010-2024)

Women clerics have adopted a variety of innovative and effective strategies to promote change in Muslim society. These strategies reflect their dynamism and creativity in facing challenges and exploiting opportunities to spread reform messages.

One of the main strategies is to utilize digital media and technology platforms.²⁰ Social media, blogs, podcasts and other online channels are becoming effective tools for female clerics to voice their ideas, reaching a wider audience, especially young, tech-savvy Muslims.²¹ Through digital platforms, they can spread messages of reform,²² promote the values of inclusivity, equality and tolerance, and respond to questions from the audience in real-time.

Female ulama are also active in starting and leading various social and religious movements at the grassroots level.²³ They founded non-profit organizations, study centers, and advocacy networks that focused on issues such as women's rights, inclusive education, and religious reform.²⁴ Through these organizations, they can mobilize a broader mass base and build solidarity among supporters of change.

²⁰ Uyuni, Arief, dan Adnan, "Contribution of Woman Ulama in Digital Era."

²¹ Iswandi Syahputra, "New Media, New Relations: Cyberstalking on Social Media in the Interaction of Muslim Scholars and the Public in West Sumatra, Indonesia," *Jurnal Komunikasi, Malaysian Journal of Communication* 34, no. 1 (2018): 153–69, <https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2018-3401-09>.

²² Muria Endah Sokowati, "Feminist Activism in Digital Culture: Problems of Class and Ethics," *Jurnal ASPIKOM* 7, no. 2 (2022): 60–79, <https://doi.org/10.24329/aspikom.v7i2.1146>.

²³ Liriwati dan Anwar, "Menelisik Peran Pesantren dalam Regenerasi Ulama Perempuan."

²⁴ Abdurrohman Kasdi, "MEMBANGUN KEMANDIRIAN MELALUI FILANTROPI KAUM PEREMPUAN; Potensi Kedermawanan untuk Pemberdayaan Perempuan Indonesia," *PALASTREN: Jurnal Studi Gender* 12, no. 1 (2019): 99–126, <https://doi.org/10.21043/palastren.v12i1.3184>.

In promoting a more inclusive and moderate understanding of religion, female clerics also use innovative teaching and education methods. They develop curriculum and learning materials that emphasize critical thinking, tolerance, and respect for diversity. They also collaborate with educational institutions to integrate the perspective of gender equality and women's rights in the Islamic education curriculum.²⁵

Another increasingly popular strategy is the formation of cross-sector networks and alliances. By building partnerships with civil society organizations,²⁶ educational institutions, government agencies, and other actors who support the change agenda, they can increase the impact and reach of their efforts.

Women ulama are also increasingly aware of the importance of contextualized and local approaches in promoting change. They seek to understand the specific socio-cultural dynamics of each region and adapt their strategies accordingly. This approach allows them to convey the reform message in a way that is more relevant and acceptable to local communities.

In addition to practical strategies, female scholars also build strong intellectual foundations through academic research and scientific publications.²⁷ Their academic works are an important source of reference for activists, policy makers and the wider community in supporting change.²⁸

In implementing these strategies, female ulama prioritize principles such as inclusivity, transparency, and accountability.²⁹ They

²⁵ Januar Januar, "Reconstruction of Religious Moderation: A Social Historical Perspective of Islamic Education," *AiCIM Proceeding* 1 (2023): 43–53.

²⁶ Ibtihal Ramadan, "When Faith Intersects With Gender: The Challenges and Successes in The Experiences of Muslim Women Academics," *Gender and Education* 34, no. 1 (2022): 33–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1893664>.

²⁷ Kalsoom Paracha dan Aiman Khalid, "Inclusiveness of Women's Empowerment in Muslim Societies," *Islamic Studies* 62, no. 2 (2023): 275–88, <https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v62i2.2362>.

²⁸ Alissa Macoun dan Danielle Miller, "Surviving (Thriving) in Academia: Feminist Support Networks and Women ECRs," *Journal of Gender Studies* 23, no. 3 (2014): 287–301, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2014.909718>.

²⁹ Farida dan Kasdi, "The 2017 KUPI Congress and Indonesian Female 'Ulama.'"

try to build a movement that is open, participatory, and involves all interested parties in the change process.³⁰

Although the journey towards change is not easy, the innovative and contextualization approaches adopted by female clerics have proven effective in driving social and religious transformation in Muslim societies. Progress can be seen in the promotion of a more inclusive understanding of religion, the fight for gender equality, and the push for policy reforms that are responsive to contemporary issues facing Muslim communities.³¹

Significant Contributions of Women Clerics as Agents of Change in Modern Religious Movements

In the history of the world's religions, modern religious movements have emerged as reforms that offer new and progressive perspectives. Amidst these currents of change, a number of female scholars have emerged who have become significant agents of change, challenging established traditions and encouraging reform in religious thought and practice. One prominent figure is Amina Wadud, an American Muslim scholar who campaigns for gender equality in Islam. Her idea of female leadership in Friday prayers opened new debates and encouraged reinterpretation of religious texts.³²

In Morocco, Asma Lamrabet, a scholar and activist, has championed women's rights in Islam. Her work emphasizes the importance of re-reading religious sources with a more just and equal perspective for women. In the Christian tradition, feminist theologians such as Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether have challenged patriarchal interpretations of the

³⁰ Margaret McGladrey, "On Making Academic Feminism More Public," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 4 (2020): 1035–57, <https://doi.org/10.1086/707804>.

³¹ Khanum Shaikh, "Journeys Toward Gender Equality in Islam," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 24, no. 2 (2023): 295–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2023.2196122>.

³² Dahlia Kartika Ariesita dan Galant Nanta Adhitya, "Seeing Muslim Men and Women Hermeneutically: A Liberal-Feminist Study on Amina Wadud's Qur'an Exegesis," *Rubikon: Journal of Transnational American Studies* 10, no. 1 (23 April 2023): 91, <https://doi.org/10.22146/rubikon.v10i1.78363>.

Bible and pushed for a more inclusive and empowering understanding for women.³³

In India, Shabana Azmi, an activist and human rights defender, has championed reforms in personalized Muslim law. She criticizes discriminatory practices and promotes gender justice in Indian Muslim society. Despite facing enormous challenges, these women scholars have never wavered in their fight for change. They have shown courage and perseverance in confronting entrenched patriarchal traditions and promoting a more progressive understanding of religion.³⁴

One of the important contributions of women scholars is the reinterpretation of religious texts that have been dominated by male perspectives. They call for a re-reading of religious sources with a more just and equal lens, taking into account the historical and social context in which the texts were written. Women clerics also promote greater participation of women in religious leadership and decision-making. They challenge the idea that women cannot be religious leaders and encourage more equal involvement in religious practice.³⁵

In an effort to promote gender equality, women ulama also campaigned for reforms in family law and women's rights. They criticized discriminatory practices such as polygamy, unilateral divorce, and unequal inheritance rights. Their voices became the impetus for change in the legal and social fabric of society.³⁶ Not only that, women clerics also fight for equal education for women in religion. They emphasize the importance of giving women equal

³³ Sadik Rddad, "Moroccan Feminists: Between Activism and 'Muslima' Theology," *Culture & Society* 9, no. 1 (2018): 11–30, <https://doi.org/10.7220/2335-8777.9.1.1>.

³⁴ Vikram Gautam, "The Politics Of Muslim Identity And The Personal Laws: Safeguarding The Rights Of The Internal Minorities," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 22, no. 06 (Juni 2017): 11–19, <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-2206051119>.

³⁵ Amirudin Amirudin dkk., "Re-Interpretation of Women's Position in Religious Texts: A Gender Humanistic Study," *AMCA Journal of Religion and Society* 2, no. 1 (2022): 26–30, <https://doi.org/10.51773/ajrs.v2i1.152>.

³⁶ Gopika Solanki, "Beyond the Limitations of the Impasse: Feminism, Multiculturalism, and Legal Reforms in Religious Family Laws in India," *Politikon* 40, no. 1 (2013): 83–111, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2013.765678>.

access to study and teaching religious teachings so that women can become leaders and authorities in their religious communities.³⁷

Through their writings and lectures, these women scholars spread ideas of reform and brought new awareness about the importance of gender justice in religion. Their works became a source of inspiration and empowerment for women around the world. However, the path taken by these women scholars was not easy. They often faced intimidation, threats, and rejection from conservative circles who saw their ideas as a threat to tradition and male authority in religion. Despite this, these women scholars remained steadfast in their fight for change. They built solidarity networks with women activists from different religious and cultural backgrounds, supporting each other and strengthening their reform movements.

The contributions of women scholars in modern religious movements are not only limited to gender issues. They also promote values such as peace, tolerance, and respect for diversity in plural societies. With a loud and courageous voice, these women ulama oppose narrow and extremist interpretations of religion. They stress the importance of interfaith dialogue, mutual understanding, and respect for differences in order to create a more peaceful and harmonious world.³⁸

In addition, women ulama are also involved in social and humanitarian endeavors, such as fighting poverty, promoting education, and providing assistance to victims of natural disasters and conflicts. They show that religion is not only about rituals and dogma but also about caring for fellow human beings. In the midst of the change they strive for, these women clerics often face challenges from within their own religious communities. They have to fight against stereotypes and prejudices that women do not have the capacity to be religious leaders or provide interpretations of sacred texts.³⁹

However, with perseverance and fortitude, these women scholars continued to push for gradual change. They use smart

³⁷ Jessica Thurlow, "The 'Great Offender': Feminists and the Campaign for Women's Ordination," *Women's History Review* 23, no. 3 (2014): 480–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2013.820606>.

³⁸ Tale Steen-Johnsen, "A Social Capital Perspective on the Peace Work of Religious Women," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 56, no. 1 (2021): 55–75, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecu.2021.0006>.

³⁹ Yuni, Arief, dan Adnan, "Contribution of Woman Ulama in Digital Era."

strategies, utilizing spaces of dialogue and debate to voice their ideas. Every small step they take is a milestone in the long journey towards equality and justice. Through their academic works, lectures, and active involvement in social movements, these women scholars have inspired the younger generation to continue fighting for change. They serve as role models for young women who want to pursue religious education and become leaders in their communities.

The significant contribution of women scholars as agents of change in modern religious movements has paved the way for a more just and equal society. Although challenges remain, their voices have echoed around the world, inspiring and empowering women to fight for their rights and promote universal human values in religion. Another important contribution of women scholars is their efforts in deconstructing patriarchal narratives that have dominated the interpretation of religious texts for centuries. They call for a re-reading of religious sources with a more equitable gender lens that takes into account women's perspectives that have been neglected.⁴⁰

In this process, women scholars not only criticize gender bias in interpretation but also offer alternative readings that are more inclusive and give power to women. They show that sacred texts actually contain values of justice, equality, and respect for women's dignity. This deconstruction and reinterpretation effort is not an easy task, as women scholars have to deal with a long tradition of patriarchal interpretation that has been deeply rooted in society. However, with perseverance and analytical acumen, they are able to dismantle gender-biased assumptions and offer new perspectives that are more just and equal.⁴¹

Not only in the academic realm, women scholars are also directly involved in advocacy and community empowerment efforts. They work with civil society organizations, government agencies, and educational institutions to disseminate ideas of gender equality and promote reforms in religious practices. Through education programmes, training and public campaigns, these women clerics seek to change the way society views the role and rights of women in religion. They provide the knowledge and tools necessary for women

⁴⁰ Rakhmawati, "Tantangan Dakwah di Era Globalisasi."

⁴¹ Amirudin dkk., "Re-Interpretation of women's position in religious texts."

to fight for their rights and participate equally in religious and social life.⁴²

Through long and tireless struggle, women scholars have become significant agents of change in modern religious movements. They have broken down traditional boundaries, deconstructed patriarchal narratives, and promoted gender justice and equality in religion. Their contributions have not only impacted women's lives, but also changed the face of religion itself, making it more inclusive, progressive, and in line with universal human values. As such, women scholars have proven that women can be leaders and authorities in the religious sphere, as well as key drivers for necessary changes and reforms in modern society. They have inspired a new generation to continue fighting for justice, equality, and respect for human dignity, regardless of gender or background. Their contributions will continue to be a shining light for future religious movements that are more inclusive, peaceful, and just.⁴³

Conclusion

Women clerics have made significant contributions as agents of change in modern religious movements in the Muslim world in the second decade of the 21st century. Rapidly expanding research from 2010 to 2024 reveals their important role in promoting a more inclusive, moderate and gender-equitable understanding of religion. Through various strategies such as the use of digital media, grassroots movements, education, policy advocacy, and academic publications, women scholars strive to encourage holistic social and religious transformation. They advocate for the reinterpretation of religious texts with a more just perspective, deconstructing patriarchal narratives, and promoting women's participation in religious leadership. Despite facing challenges such as gender stereotypes and resistance from conservative groups, women clerics continue to struggle beyond these obstacles with extraordinary determination and resilience. Their academic work and advocacy became a source of inspiration and knowledge for the reform movement in changing the face of religion to be more open, moderate and respectful of diversity.

⁴² Liriwati dan Anwar, "Menelisik Peran Pesantren dalam Regenerasi Ulama Perempuan."

⁴³ Ellys Lestari Pambayun, *Perempuan vs Perempuan: Realitas Gender, Tayangan Gosip dan Dunia Maya*, vol. 1 (Bandung: Nuansa Cendekia, 2023), h. 38.

As agents of change, female ulama prove that women can be authoritative leaders as well as the main drivers of transformation in contemporary society, inspiring new generations to promote justice and equality without gender discrimination.

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