

The role of the young women's organization *Nasyiatul Aisyiyah* in Indonesia in interfaith collaborative action through environmental approaches

*Uswatun Hasanah*¹

Abstract

Young women have a huge role in society. *Nasyiatul Aisyiyah* is a young women's organization in Indonesia that has a major role in building community among diverse people. One of the ways used is to have environmental projects as this creates a safe meeting space to meet people from different religious backgrounds. The organization has undertaken activities such as opening a dialogue room, converting garbage into profitable products, conducting an anti-intolerance campaign in public spaces involving cross-religious figures. It's important to strengthen this movement so that it can be strong in spreading the value of inter-religious collaboration and environmental sustainability.

Keywords

Environmental approach, multicultural society, religious intolerance, women's rights, youth.

1. Contextualization

Indonesia is an island state with a wealth of tribes, races, cultures, and religions. This makes Indonesia a highly diverse, multicultural society. But this diversity makes Indonesia a country vulnerable to conflict and division.

One of the most frequent sources of conflict in Indonesia is intolerance due to differences in religion or sects within one religion (Rijaal 2021), as recorded in the history of Ambon, Poso, Sampang, and other Indonesian districts. Even though there is the principle of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which means that despite having

¹ Uswatun Hasanah is a Lecturer at Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto and FoRB Activist. Email: uhasanah1709@ump.ac.id.

various diversities, we remain united in our national identity as the Indonesian nation, it is not easy for Indonesia to be able to realize harmony in such vast diversity. Moreover, Indonesia officially recognizes the presence of six religions – Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism – as well as local religions or local beliefs of certain communities. Nevertheless, intolerance has always affected religious groups and minority beliefs.

Increasingly, cases of intolerance are being triggered not only by religious and belief differences but also by the presence of religious, cultural, and political unrest in Indonesia. Moreover, the problem of natural resource exploitation has produced conflict between religious groups in recent years (Asnawan 2018). This wide-ranging set of conflicts has had a negative impact on the general public, especially women and children.

Many women and children are victims of gender-based violence during conflict or war. Incidents of intolerance in Indonesia are increasing and often involve groups of women to be involved as perpetrators of intolerance, radical and extremist movements (Mupida & Mustolehudin 2020). As in the case of radicalism in 2018 where a woman and her child were ordered by her husband to carry out a suicide bombing in front of a church in Surabaya (Wahid Foundation 2018:24).

These things are triggered by the construction of a patriarchal society, where women are categorized as second-class creatures who must obey their husbands and follow the ideology and thoughts of their partners. Although biologically, women have the physical privilege of experiencing menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, these differences in physical function often lead to discriminatory attitudes towards women.

Furthermore, women have always been tied to domestic roles and childcare obligations, limiting their opportunities to participate in public affairs. Women are also often viewed as apolitical creatures, so there is no suspicion that women will carry out dangerous missions, let alone as perpetrators of violence. Although in the parliamentary realm as many as 21 percent of Indonesian women have participated, this figure is still not enough to meet the state's target regarding gender equality in the public realm of 30-50 percent full participation.

The involvement of certain groups of women in such acts of intolerance must be prevented and addressed. Women have tremendous potential in building and nurturing tolerance in Indonesia. Women have a unique role in the process of parenting which is applied not only to childcare but also to social and natural environmental parenting. The many domestic roles played by women make women the first actors to feel the impact of conflict and the damage that has occurred. One of the young women's movements that has addressed these problems by building inter-religious clusters using environmental approaches is the *Nasyiatul Aisyiyah*.

2. **The development of the Nasyiatul Aisyiyah**

Muhammadiyah is an Islamic organization in Indonesia founded on 18 November 1912 by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan in Yogyakarta. This organization aims to convey the teachings of Islam, as well as to advance Muslims through education, health, and social services. Muhammadiyah plays an important role in developing education by establishing various schools, universities, hospitals, and other social institutions throughout Indonesia. Muhammadiyah is a religious organization that has various autonomous organizations under its auspices, one of which is Nasyiatul Aisyiyah. Nasyiatul has a focus formation and empowerment of young women. Founded in 1931, this organization plays a role in the fields of education, social, health, and worship, as well as fighting for women's rights within the framework of Islamic teachings. The organization aims to develop Muslim women who are knowledgeable, faithful, noble, and active in society. It strives to create a safe and decent environment for women and children.

This organization has quite a strong influence in Indonesia, as evidenced by the number of its members and the distribution of regional leaders spread almost throughout the country. Nasyiatul Aisyiyah plays a role in educating women and the younger generation about the importance of peace through various educational programs. They hold training and seminars aimed at raising awareness about conflict, violence, and the importance of dialogue and peaceful resolution. They facilitate spaces for inclusive dialogue, with the aim of reducing tensions that may occur in diverse communities. NA focuses on protecting women and children from violence, which is often the root of social conflict. Through anti-violence campaigns, advocacy, and women's empowerment, they strive to prevent domestic and social violence, which contributes to the creation of peaceful conditions in society. In some cases, Nasyiatul Aisyiyah is also involved in advocacy and conflict resolution efforts, especially those related to social issues affecting women and children. They use an inclusive and participatory approach, involving women as agents of change in the peace process. Because its focus is on empowering women's groups, it is appropriate to make this organization a tool in carrying out a peace mission and preventing the intolerance that is happening in Indonesia. One of the important tasks of this organization is to pursue peace education at the level of primary education.

3. **Overcoming the turmoil by preserving the environment: a transformation of the "safe" approach to interreligious tolerance**

In the everyday sense, conflict and peace always exist in social relations between societies. Interreligious collaboration becomes a means of developing harmonious relations between different individuals in society. Interreligious relation-

ships also develop tolerance, mutual understanding, equality, and respect for differences.

Basically, every religion has the same concept and ideals about peace, unity, and happiness between religious communities. The ideal condition expected by religious communities is to live without conflict. However, due to conflicting interpretations between one religion and another, there is a lack of empathy and sympathy between religious communities. There is also exclusivity and prejudice between religious communities.

On this basis, Muhammadiyah initiated an idea known as *Eko Bhinneka*. The first word in this name is taken from the word ecology, which means interaction between humans and their environment, while *bhinneka* is a basic value of the Indonesian nation which means unity, even though different (Eko Bhinneka 2022).

Muhammadiyah specifically involves a group of young women from *Nasyiatul Aisyiyah* as agents of change by targeting other young women to participate in realizing a peaceful, just society that supports freedom of religion and belief. The aim of forming this association is also to create changes in knowledge, awareness and behavior towards the values of *Ta'awun* in Islam, namely helping each other regardless of background and together preventing environmental damage caused by conflict or intolerance.

The underlying strategy is to use environmental issues as a safe point where all parties can unite in implementing joint action. The problem of environmental damage concerns all parties. As parties who have great responsibility in maintaining the sustainability of life on earth, humans need to change their views and ways of life so as to be more sustainable regardless of ethnicity, religion, and race.

Based on the intergroup contact theory, a neutral space is needed that can reduce prejudice and discrimination between groups. This shared space can also bring together intergroup communities to discuss ideas and take action to maintain environmental sustainability. It can also enable various groups to get to know each other and interact in a favorable manner, because the key to these meetings is to cultivate adequate knowledge about other groups in reducing prejudice and increasing the interest to engage each other in an intergroup contact.

Eko Bhinneka, in its implementation, has used three approaches to achieving tolerance between religious groups: intra-religious, inter-religious, and extra-religious, including the government and other stakeholders. This idea refers to the four main things that will be achieved: increased knowledge, awareness, tolerant behaviour that is focused on interreligious interaction, and dialogue.

Nasyiatul Aisyiyah through the *Eko Bhinneka* program has succeeded in encouraging other faith communities to create collaborations and carry out joint environmental conservation actions. This influences the community, especially



religious actors, to care about the environmental crisis and also about intolerance and to work together to overcome these threats.

The best practices carried out in Eco Bhinneka have occurred in the Indonesian cities of Pontianak, Ternate, Surakarta, and Banyuwangi. Muhammadiyah directly supervises projects in the cities of Pontianak and Ternate. Meanwhile, Nasyyiatul Aisyiyah conducted pilot projects in Surakarta (in Central Java) and Banyuwangi (in East Java) involving young women in promoting activities that can bring multiple faith communities together. The project has been run in two pilot areas and will be replicated in 32 other provinces across Indonesia.

The forms of activities carried out have included:

(a) Household waste management involving interfaith actors as the main managers: this activity is carried out through meeting together and taking joint action by converting household waste into circular economic products. During the waste management process, interfaith actors exchange ideas and get to know each other. Contact is established between groups that can minimize stereotypes and negative prejudices. In addition, household waste in the form of used plastic bottles is used as a means of transaction for buying and selling wearable clothing. This campaign is carried out every month in public open spaces and interfaith actors work together to campaign for it.

(b) A system of food allowances: the name of this activity is a blessing allowance aimed at providing cross-subsidies to interfaith communities that do not have access to food. It is also a form of prevention of the presence of food residue produced by the production of excess food.

(c) A shared dialogue space called *srawung carito* (shared dialogue) that discusses environmental perspectives from an interfaith and belief perspective. This forum



provides an open and inclusive space for everyone, especially interfaith practitioners, to express their views without discrimination. The implementation of this event is always scheduled to commemorate major holidays of various religions in Indonesia such as Christmas, Eid al-Fitr, Waisak, Chinese New Year, Nyepi, and others.

d) Environmental campaigns led by interreligious actors: these activities are carried out in public spaces with religious diversity, and uses campaign tools from garbage.

(e) Cleaning neighborhood houses of worship and rivers: these activities are carried out with cross-faith actors of different religions. For example, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Konghucus will work together to clean a mosque.

f) Campaign actions published in the media. This activity is carried out as a way to raise awareness and promote activities to the general public.

An interesting example is when a Muslim woman who is a member of Nasyiatul Aisyiyah came to the church to bring cleaning supplies and handed them over to the pastor and spiritual teacher of the church. Not only that, the Muslim women of Nasyiatul also cleaned the church together with the Christians and helped the church in managing household waste.

The activity was initially very taboo because there were still negative views when Muslims befriended non-Muslims, but with this shared mission, it could dispel these negative prejudices. In the end, this activity could be something very positive and received appreciation and was able to involve the wider community in strengthening interfaith community relations by using environmental actions. Nasyiatul together with the interfaith community has made the Eco Bhinneka festival as a peak campaign action to further strengthen harmony between religious communities and efforts to continue to care for the environment

4. Conclusion

The Eco Bhinneka idea, run by the young women's organization Nasyiatul Aisyiyah, aims to encourage inclusive interfaith meetings while advocating for freedom of religion and belief through an environmental conservation approach. The involvement of young women is important in realizing interfaith community collaboration. Interfaith projects engaging environmental issues provide awareness of the importance of inclusion and diversity in the movement. Some beneficiaries feel that the issue of tolerance with an environmental approach can strengthen the impact of the movement. The major challenge ahead in this agenda is to maintain and develop interfaith action by strengthening the growing organic environmental movement that is more grassroots and more vital. It is important for women's religious organizations to be able to play a role in disseminating the values of peace because the impact can be felt in society, as done by Nasyiatul Aisyiyah.

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Kay Bascom

Overcomers

*God's deliverance through the
Ethiopian Revolution as witnessed
primarily by the Kale Heywet Church community*



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