

BECOMING A WARIA *SHALIHAH*: ASPIRATIONS OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOSITY AT PESANTREN AL-FATAH, YOGYAKARTA

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ABSTRACT

The movement to become a waria shalihah has gained significant momentum at Pesantren (Islamic Boarding School) Al-Fatah Yogyakarta. However, this rise in religious piety among waria has faced resistance from segments of the local Muslim community that hold anti-LGBTQ sentiments. In the Indonesian context, waria is a locally specific term combining wanita (woman) and pria (man) and refers to individuals assigned male at birth who embody a feminine gender identity. This study, based on a qualitative ethnographic approach and the sociology of knowledge framework, identified two key findings. First, the Islamic religiosity aspirations of the waria congregants at Pesantren Al-Fatah are expressed through contextual interpretations of Qur'anic verses such as Surah An-Nisa:124, Al-Hujurat:13, and An-Nur:31. These interpretations affirm their waria identity and serve as a response to ideological attacks from the Islamic Jihad Front (FJI), which draws on verses such as An-Nisa:1, Al-A'raf:81, and Ash-Shu'ara:173–174 to challenge their religious legitimacy. The FJI's actions are motivated by a desire to prevent the waria in Yogyakarta from achieving socio-political influence similar to transgender communities in Taiwan or Thailand. Second, the waria's pursuit of Islamic piety has led to new devotional practices, including performing umrah. For instance, YS aspires to become a Nyai, a respected religious woman within the waria Islamic tradition who can guide future generations of students at Pesantren Al-Fatah. These findings suggest that a fiqh waria (waria Islamic jurisprudence) approach could inform inclusive and contextualized Islamic education in contemporary Indonesia. The waria congregants at Pesantren Al-Fatah affirms that being a waria shalihah is both a human right and aligned with Islamic principles. Pesantren Al-Fatah Yogyakarta has become a symbol of the deconstruction, rationalization, and contextualization of waria civic and political futures in contemporary Indonesia.

Keywords: Human Rights, Islamic Religiosity, Pesantren Al-Fatah, Waria, Yogyakarta

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, discourses on sexuality in Indonesia have shifted from a humanistic approach to one increasingly dominated by religious frameworks. Although there is no law explicitly prohibiting LGBTQ individuals, particularly adults, under Article 292 of the Indonesian Penal Code, human rights activists continue to highlight widespread patterns of discrimination against *waria*. In the Indonesian context, *waria* is a locally specific term combining *wanita* (woman) and *pria* (man) and refers to individuals assigned male at birth who embody a feminine gender identity. The term *waria* generally refers to individuals with male biological characteristics who identify with feminine gender expressions. *Waria* often negotiate a spectrum of femininity and masculinity, situating their bodies differently depending on the social context (Blackwood, 2007). This community frequently faces barriers to expressing their subjectivity based on sexuality, as their social membership is marked by experiences of discrimination and violence (Rodríguez & Murtagh, 2022). In the post-*reformasi* era, Indonesian Muslim society has increasingly advocated for the strict implementation of Islamic law (*sharia*), inadvertently allowing the Islamization of sexuality and gender norms within national identity. Morality has thus become one of the most visible markers of Indonesia's post-reform transformation (Platt et al., 2018).

Living as a Muslim *waria* in Indonesia is far from easy. Their physical appearance often becomes the object of stigmatization by certain state actors and religious authorities. This reflects the logic of religious political psychology. Nonetheless, a *waria* community in Yogyakarta bravely established *Pesantren Al-Fatah* as a non-formal religious educational institution. Their interpretation of *pesantren* differs from mainstream definitions, which emphasize integration into the national education system and three core elements: a *kyai* and *santri* (Islamic teacher and students), a structured curriculum, and worship facilities such as a mosque, the *kyai*'s residence, and dormitories or schools (Isbah, 2020).

Instead, the Al-Fatah community adopts a broader legal interpretation of *pesantren* under Law No. 18 of 2019, Article 1, which describes such institutions as community-

based, founded to cultivate faith, strengthen noble character, and uphold Islamic teachings. This study on the aspirations of Islamic religiosity among *waria* at *Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School) Al-Fatah addresses two central concerns. First, from a bureaucratic-structural perspective, many *waria* interviewed acknowledged that the Ministry of Religious Affairs has not granted Al-Fatah operational status since its founding in 2008, citing legal and administrative complexities. Instead, the ministry advised seeking approval from local communities or joining formal *pesantren* affiliated with NU or Muhammadiyah.

This reluctance indicates that the civil rights of *waria* remain marginalized. Several participants recalled being mocked, slandered, or rejected when attempting to study religion at mainstream *pesantren*, due to their gender expression. Consequently, they established *Pesantren Al-Fatah* as a space of spiritual safety, where they can fulfill religious obligations such as prayer, Qur'anic recitation, and almsgiving. For them, Allah loves *waria*.

Most literature on sexuality in Indonesia focuses on heterosexual relations, rarely offering alternative narratives of *waria* identities within state-recognized institutions. In this context, a monocultural curriculum can systematically erode civil liberties (Davies, 2019). Indonesia's Muslim elite continues to dominate socio-religious discourse, with rising conservatism and intolerance in recent years (Raharjo Jati, 2022). In traditional performances, *waria* are often depicted as objects of ridicule (Kelly et al., 2024). Moreover, the state only recognizes two gender markers on identity cards (KTP), based on assigned sex at birth rather than gender reassignment surgery (Ewing, 2020).

From an organizational-cultural lens, the *waria* congregants reported negative responses from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and persecution by Islamist groups. On February 19, 2016, the Islamic Jihad Front (FJI) forcibly shut down Al-Fatah. Police and local authorities complied without dialogue. The Sultan of Yogyakarta remained silent. To the *waria* community, FJI's leader, Durahman, appeared politically connected. This incident reflects a broader sociopolitical climate marked by pious populism following the 212 movement. Intensified religiosity has sparked moral panic and vigilante actions that

disproportionately target LGBTQ communities. Even so, *waria* continue to seek alternative spaces and contest anti-*waria* discourses (Fadhlina, 2024).

Historically, sexual diversity has existed in Javanese society. In the 1600s, Prince Warok, as depicted in *Serat Centhini*, engaged in same-sex relations while identifying as bisexual, not gay (Kelly et al., 2024). Based on the above, this study poses two questions: (1) What Qur'anic verses are interpreted by the *waria* congregants to articulate their Islamic religiosity in Yogyakarta? (2) How do these aspirations manifest in their pious practices?

Theoretically, this study seeks to reconceptualize civil religion in Indonesia as a form of religiosity rooted in human reasoning and lived experience, rather than solely divine revelation. It accepts conventional theology when relevant and contextual. Dimensions of inclusion and piety offer a lens to reimagine the civic identity of Muslim *waria*. Practically, the study offers a framework for designing religious education curricula responsive to the lived experiences of *waria* communities in Indonesia.

Literature Review

Early studies on the *waria* congregants in Yogyakarta were conducted by Safri (2014), who noted that Kampung Notoyudan GT II/1294 RW 24 RT 85 was the site where aspirations of *waria* Islamic religiosity were first articulated. The *pesantren* was initially conceptualized by a senior *waria* figure alongside Maryani, with the assistance of Ustadz Hamroeli, Ustadz Murtedja, and Ustadz Mu'iz. The name Al-Fatah, meaning "the opener of divine guidance and mercy," was chosen to symbolize the opening of religious expression for *waria* in Indonesia. Their sacred vision was to foster a devout life for *waria* accountable to their families, communities, and the state. To realize this vision, this modest *pesantren* organized regular *pengajian* (Qur'anic study groups) every Monday and Thursday. Some *waria* students explicitly reject any association with the people of Prophet Lot. In their view, the people of Lot were condemned not for their homosexual orientation per se, but for acts involving violence, coercion, assault, sodomy, and harmful sexual exploitation. These are practices also found in heterosexual contexts (cf. Vaid, 2017; Wijaya, 2022).

Elsewhere, Toomistu (2022) demonstrated that *waria* exhibit a form of religious sensibility shaped by embodied experience. For them, body and subjectivity are inseparable. Their desire to align their bodies with a gender different from their assigned sex can be understood both biologically and culturally. The *waria* community at *Pesantren* Al-Fatah has begun to challenge genital-centric approaches to gender categorization. Toomistu further explains that *waria*'s religious subjectivity intensifies in response to social violence. Many Muslim *waria* identify as normal human beings created by God. Increasingly, they adopt Islamic dress and pious practices to avoid persecution. Following the 2016 backlash against LGBTQ+ communities, the *pesantren waria* in Yogyakarta has come to symbolize multicultural resilience. However, its survival remains precarious and dependent on local government policy. Despite advancements in surgical technologies, most *waria* refuse gender reassignment surgery due to health concerns and financial constraints. Many come from lower-middle-class backgrounds. The way *waria* express subjectivity through redefining gender and behavioral transformation contributes meaningfully to global transgender discourse (Toomistu, 2022; cf. Wijaya, 2022).

In addition to Toomistu's work, Kholid (2024) investigated the negative stigma faced by *waria* studying at Al-Fatah from elites within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. While NU adopted a rejectionist stance, often framing the issue within criminal discourse, Muhammadiyah took a more diplomatic approach, offering rehabilitative measures through its Aisyiyah women's program. Shinta Ratri, a leader of the *pesantren* whose given name is Tri Santoso Nugroho, recounted how prior to the forced closure by the Islamic Jihad Front (FJI), they had been verbally confronted by FJI members who claimed with anger that Allah only created males and females. If *waria* wished to pray or worship, they were told, they must repent. Shinta rejected this narrative, asserting that they possessed their own form of *fiqh* (Maghvira et al., 2020), and reported the incident to the police, although no action was taken.

Local leaders also appeared to tacitly approve of the closure. Since 2016, waves of

hatred toward gender and sexual minorities have continued to sweep across Indonesia. Scholars describe this phenomenon as a sexual moral panic (Rodríguez & Murtagh, 2022; Thajib, 2022). Non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, as embodied by *waria*, have been framed as threats to the state, the nation, and religion. A range of actors including politicians, religious leaders, academics, and journalists have played roles in fueling this wave of stigma and hatred.

Confirming these dynamics, Salsabila (2024) examines the conflict between the *pesantren waria* and FJI from socio-economic and religious perspectives. She argues that FJI's persecution was driven by a desire to control local resources in Yogyakarta. The lack of support from the Sultan of Yogyakarta has further prevented religious reconciliation. The death of Shinta Ratri in 2023 has heightened the potential for future conflict. These tensions may escalate if the regional government fails to address *waria*'s faith, health, and welfare, particularly as they support their nuclear families (Wolter et al., 2025; cf. Fadhlina, 2024). Wijaya (2022) also notes that the rise of digital homophobia has positioned *waria* as threats to religion, culture, and human identity itself.

Social media platforms have amplified the circulation of homophobic rhetoric. These technologies now allow the public to harass and shame LGBT communities both socially and virtually. Society frequently associates *waria* with pornography. In fact, patterns of *waria* marginalization date back to the New Order regime under Suharto. The state's imposition of a singular heterosexual moral order provoked emotional strain. This climate later emboldened the Family Love Alliance (AILA) to petition the Constitutional Court (Thajib, 2022).

This study departs from previous research. While past studies focused on historical, conflictual, security, health, and welfare aspects of the *waria* community, they tend to overlook key religious questions. Their contributions are critical to understanding socio-religious transformation in Yogyakarta, but fall short in exploring one central issue: what Qur'anic verses are employed by *waria* congregants to reinterpret their legal-religious status in Islam?

It is important to note that *Pesantren Al-Fatah* no longer operates at its former sites in

Kampung Notoyudan (Maryani's home) and Kampung Pondongan (Shinta's home). The community has relocated to Kampung Jetis, where it now gathers at the residence of YS.

This research aims to document the community's latest activities in this new setting, which remains largely unexplored in previous research. Additionally, it analyzes how aspirations of Islamic religiosity shape the pious practices of *waria* congregants in Yogyakarta. One phenomenon in particular has received little scholarly attention, namely the collective *umrah* to Mecca by members of the *waria* congregants in *Pesantren Al-Fatah*. This deeply spiritual event represents a critical aspect of their religious identity and deserves academic consideration. Accordingly, our study seeks to fill this significant gap in the literature.

Conceptual Framework

This study employs Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstructionist hermeneutics to examine the Qur'anic verses interpreted by *waria* congregants in articulating their aspirations for Islamic religiosity in Yogyakarta. Deconstructionist hermeneutics involves reading texts through a paradigm of equality and diversity. The interpretive process follows three key steps: identifying hierarchical oppositions in the text, reversing these oppositions by highlighting their interdependence, and introducing alternative terms or meanings that resist classification within fixed binaries. This approach reveals the instability of textual meaning and challenges any claim to singular or absolute interpretations. Deconstruction seeks to dismantle the structures that establish and maintain dominance within texts (Safruddin, 2023).

In analyzing how *waria* congregants' religious aspirations shape their pious practices, the study adopts Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*. *Habitus* refers to internalized dispositions and patterns of behavior shaped by an individual's social experiences. It is formed within cultural, social, and historical contexts, particularly through early socialization processes such as family, education, and class background. These dispositions influence how people perceive and act in ways that feel natural. The theory also explains how individuals mobilize different forms of capital, including cultural

(knowledge), economic (financial resources), and social (networks) to navigate their social realities. *Habitus* shapes how people adapt to or contest structures within society (Radogna, 2022).

At this intersection, hermeneutic interpretation and embodied disposition inform one another. Interpretation affects daily religious practices, while embodied practices influence how sacred texts are read and understood.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach (Ploder & Hamann, 2021) combined with the sociology of knowledge framework (Adler-Nissen & Kropp, 2015). Ethnographic inquiry was selected based on the premise that the aspirations for Islamic religiosity among the *waria* congregation in Yogyakarta constitute an outward phenomenon constructing collective identity through cultural activity. Culture is understood as a knowledge system acquired through learning, which individuals use to interpret the social world and devise behavioral strategies in response to lived realities. Ethnography enables the researcher to gain an insider's perspective by actively and creatively participating in the religious gatherings (*pengajian*) at *Pesantren* Al-Fatah in Yogyakarta.

The sociology of knowledge explores the reciprocal relationship between thought and society from an existential standpoint. Its core premise asserts that modes of thought cannot be fully understood without examining their social origins. Human knowledge is continuously shaped by behavior and meaning.

Fieldwork was conducted at *Pesantren* Al-Fatah, situated in a small neighborhood on Jetisharjo Street, JT II/402, Cokrodiningratan, Jetis District, Yogyakarta City, from January 10 to February 10, 2025. During this one-month period, researchers visited and engaged with the community on a daily basis. Emphasis was placed on observing specific details at the micro level rather than adopting a macrostructural perspective. This approach allowed for accurate and contextual recording of the lived realities and viewpoints of *waria* congregants within a limited timeframe.

Primary data were obtained from key figures such as the third-generation head of the *pesantren waria* (YS), religious caretaker (Arif

Nuh Safri), and several *waria* congregants (Lastri, Novi, Arini, Rulli, and Merlyn). Secondary data were drawn from scholarly journals and social media content.

Data collection utilized participant observation, in-depth unstructured interviews, and archival documentation of the *pesantren*. The analysis process involved four key stages: (a) domain analysis, (b) taxonomic analysis, (c) componential analysis, and (d) cultural theme analysis, following a coding pattern (Ploder & Hamann, 2021). Research rigor was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability checks.

DISCUSSION

Every Sunday from 3:00 to 6:00 PM, the *waria* congregants at *Pesantren* Al-Fatah in Yogyakarta conduct religious activities, including reciting the Qur'an, performing prayers, and collecting alms. Their prayer attire varies; some wear traditional male clothing, while others choose female prayer garments (*mukena*). At a glance, they appear graceful and *shalihah* (pious). The main subject of their study sessions is Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh al-'ibadah*), taught by *Ustadz* Arif Nuh Safri. This *pesantren* operates in a minimalist house rented annually from a local property owner for IDR 18,000,000. When asked about their donors, they declined to provide details.

Their religious activities have so far been tolerated by the surrounding community. No signs of persecution have appeared as in the past. The *pesantren*, painted white, consists of a terrace, a living room, two office spaces, a kitchen, and a bathroom. The clean and comfortable environment allows them to study religion with ease. However, during study sessions, they always cover the front entrance with bamboo curtains, suggesting lingering trauma from social stigma.

Up close, strong bonds of friendship are evident among the *waria* congregants. This *pesantren* also serves as a space for self-advocacy. Beyond religious rituals for spiritual peace, it becomes a platform for educating the public about *waria* identity in Islam. Their communal and social practices are persistently nurtured to maintain solidarity in a conservative Muslim society that often stigmatizes *waria* identities as threats to children.

Some *santri waria* (*waria* students) choose to manage and adjust their sexual expression in ways that align temporarily with established norms. In many cases, homophobia and heterosexism reinforce each other. Heterosexism cultivates fear and hatred toward *waria*, while homophobia maintains the dominance of heterosexuality. The belief that all Indonesians must love and marry in "normal" heterosexual ways remains widespread. Revising religious interpretations is one key agenda aimed at breaking this link between heterosexism and homophobia.

Awareness is high among them that exclusive religious interpretations are strategically used by anti-LGBTQ Muslim activists to justify discrimination and interventions into *waria* rights in Indonesia. Several religious texts are frequently cited by the Islamic Jihad Front (FJI) to challenge *waria* legitimacy and promote reintegration into mainstream Islamic norms. These include Surah An-Nisa (4:1), which emphasizes the creation of men and women from a single soul; Surah Al-A'raf (7:81), which condemns lustful acts between men; and Surah Ash-Shu'ara (26:173–174), which recounts divine punishment on those who ignored prophetic warnings.

FJI also supports its arguments by citing hadiths from the Prophet Muhammad: "The Messenger of Allah cursed men who imitate women and women who imitate men" (HR. Bukhari no. 5885), and "Allah has cursed men who imitate women and women who imitate men" (HR. Ahmad no. 3151, 5:243). Classical scholars such as Al-Tabari, Al-Qurtubi, and Hamka unanimously prohibit homosexual behavior. For FJI, rejecting one's natural physical and psychological disposition is considered a satanic deception. Their main goal is preventing the *waria* congregants in Yogyakarta from gaining the socio-political influence seen in Taiwan and Thailand, two nearby countries that have legalized same-sex marriage.

Islamic Religious Aspirations of *Waria* Congregants in Yogyakarta

In response to arguments posed by the Islamic Jihad Front (FJI), a group with substantial support in Yogyakarta, the *waria* congregants at *Pesantren Al-Fatah* draw upon Qur'anic verses to affirm their dignity as human beings created by God. One frequently

cited verse is Surah An-Nisa (4:124): "*And whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, while being a believer – those will enter Paradise and will not be wronged, [even as much as] the speck on a date seed.*" This is interpreted as a spiritual affirmation of all believers regardless of gender, provided they uphold faith and virtue. Another reference is QS. Āl-Hujurat [49] : 13 "*We created you from a single male and female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may come to know one another. Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Surely, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.*" For them, this verse proclaims universal human dignity and diversity, affirming the validity of varied identities within the human community.

They also interpret QS. An-Nur [24] : 31, which concerns female modesty and specifies those permitted to see a woman's adornments. Rather than focusing on strict legalism, the *waria* congregants emphasize a compassionate, context-sensitive understanding that prioritizes dignity and mutual respect. While the congregants do not identify as tafsir scholars, they consciously engage with the Qur'anic text, seeking its universal humanistic principles. Their approach favors substantive meaning over rigid formalism, aiming to reconcile religious devotion with lived experiences.

YS, one of the leaders at *Pesantren Al-Fatah*, shared her personal reflection:

"... I am confused by the current social atmosphere in Yogyakarta, which no longer feels welcoming. Our spaces for self-expression are increasingly restricted by religious arguments. We once appealed to GKR Hemas, a member of the Regional Representative Council (DPD RI), as well as to the Sultan and Kepatihan, regarding past persecution of our pesantren. However, the palace has never adopted a clear stance. Understanding of sexual and gender diversity in Yogyakarta remains limited. We often experience hate speech. To date, there is no regional regulation recognizing transgender persons. Since 2016, LGBT discourse has faced harsh criticism. As Javanese transgender women, we still uphold the values of politeness and cultural propriety. I once had a male partner, but we never pursued same-sex marriage like those happening in Taiwan or Thailand. Even a religiously informal union (nikah siri) was never our goal. We only committed to cohabitating and building a caring relationship for an agreed period. We are fully aware that Indonesian law does not permit transgender marriage. As Muslims, we understand how religious dogma can be a powerful tool used to delegitimize our

identity. Most of us here have no aspirations to formally marry our male partners. We live in a society where heterosexual morality is treated as sacred...” (Interview with YS Al-Buchory, 2025).

The legalization of same-sex marriage in Thailand on January 23, 2025, sparked discussion among the transgender students at Al-Fatah, particularly around how a state can affirm its citizens' sexual and gender diversity. Yet in Indonesia, even minimal engagement with transgender communities remains rare. Reports indicate that around 1,832 same-sex couples have legally married in Thailand, including celebrities such as actors Apiwat “Porsch” Apiwatsayree and Sappanyoo “Arm” Panatkool. The Equal Marriage Bill, passed by both houses of Parliament, amended Article 1448 of the Civil and Commercial Code, replacing gendered terms like “man-woman” and “husband-wife” with “individual” and “married couple.” The law ensures LGBTQ couples access to legal, financial, and medical rights. Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra proclaimed, “From now on, all love shall be legalized. Every couple will live in dignity and with honor in Thailand” (Chalida Ekvitthayavechnukul, 2025).

At *Pesantren* Al-Fatah, however, the pursuit of religious ideals remains more meaningful than formal participation in legalized same-sex marriage systems. The transgender community is committed to fostering an inclusive, participatory interpretation of Islam. After the passing of its founders Mariani and Shinta Ratri, leadership of the *pesantren* transferred to YS. Born in Yogyakarta in 1967, she began identifying as a *waria* in 1977. In addition to adopting feminine dress, she actively sought social and economic support within the *waria* congregants. By the late 1990s, she shifted her focus toward advocacy on sexuality and gender issues through the Yogyakarta branch of the Indonesian Planned Parenthood Association (PKBI).

Her chosen name, YS, short for Yuni Shara, represents a personal identity she prefers, deliberately distancing herself from her legal name on state-issued documents. Among *waria*, names are deeply symbolic. Addressing a person by their former name, often referred to as “deadnaming”, can be profoundly hurtful. Many *waria* face family rejection and leave home in search of

acceptance. As a result, some drop out of school or live without proper identification (Gigi Aditi Saraswati, 2022).

Another testimony comes from Lastri, a senior member of the *pesantren* community:

“..... I am originally from Temanggung, Central Java, born in 1961. I have been a santri here since the time of Mariani and Shinta. I have worked as a street musician since 1984. In this pesantren, I have come to understand waria identity as a legitimate form of religious self-expression, as long as it does not cause social harm. I worship according to male practices—in terms of intention, ablution, dress, and prayer rows. What YS expressed represents our collective thoughts and feelings. I moved to Yogyakarta because my family could not accept my identity. This hijrah was a spiritual decision, praying for blessings in this city. Through inner reflection, we engage with the Qur’an. I believe that Qur’anic law is only valid when it includes not just preservation and protection but also human rights and human development. Despite interpretations that condemn us, I choose not to respond with anger. I once had a male partner whom I deeply loved, but he has passed away. Since then, I have not entered another official relationship. I haven’t been able to move on. Occasionally, I work as a sex worker in bus terminals to release long-repressed desires” (Interview with Lastri, 2025).

Waria congregants at *Pesantren* Al-Fatah consistently emphasize that exclusive religious interpretations must be countered with inclusive ones. This conviction was especially clear during their weekly study sessions under the guidance of *Ustadz* Arif Nuh Safri, a male Islamic teacher born in Sipirok, South Tapanuli, North Sumatra, on August 19, 1983. For more than 15 years, he has devoted himself to improving religious literacy within the *waria* congregants. *Ustadz* Arif teaches Qur’anic recitation and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and although some religious figures in Yogyakarta view his work as unconventional, he remains committed to *waria* rights. His vision is best expressed through his book, *Understanding Gender and Sexual Diversity: A Contextual Interpretation of Islam*.

Alongside his academic duties at the An-Nur Institute of Qur’anic Sciences and the *Pesantren Tahfidz* Ibn Sina, *Ustadz* Arif continues to lead Sunday afternoon sessions at *Pesantren* Al-Fatah (Deden Gunawan, 2021). Drawing on the lens of deconstructionist hermeneutics, the intellectual contestation surrounding *waria* identity in the Qur’an may be illustrated as follows:

Table 1: The Contestation of Religious Thought on *Waria* Identity in the Qur'an

No.	Exclusive Interpretive Model of the Islamic Jihad Front (FJI)	Interpretive Foundations	Inclusive Interpretive Model of the <i>Waria</i> Congregation	Interpretive Foundations
1.	Allah never created or destined any human being to become a <i>waria</i> . The boundaries between biological sex and gender are clearly defined—male and female. These boundaries are absolute and must not be questioned.	QS An-Nisa:1	Every human being, including male, female, or <i>waria</i> , bears an equal obligation to worship Allah SWT	QS An-Nisa: 124
2.	The act of fulfilling biological lust with fellow men is a repulsive behavior and is considered a psychological illness that must be treated through either persuasive or confrontational approaches.	QS Al-A'raf:81	Allah does not judge human beings based on their gender or sexual orientation, but solely on the quality of their piety	QS Hujurat:13
3.	The punishment for <i>waria</i> was not limited to the time of Prophet Lot but also extends to the followers of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Allah's punishment is universal, not particular	QS Asy-Syu'ara : 173-174	When a man no longer feels sexual desire toward a woman's <i>aurat</i> , that is when the spirit of <i>waria</i> begins to emerge. Therefore, they have the right to be feminine and are considered religiously legitimate	QS An-Nur:31

Source: Data Analysis, 2025

The religious contestation surrounding *waria* identities in the Qur'an inevitably raises tensions related to both the legality and legitimacy of *waria* in the public sphere. While the Qur'an explicitly refers to only two gender categories—male and female—classical Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) acknowledges the existence of *al-khuntha*, *mukhannath*, or *mukhannis* to describe individuals with gender expressions that do not conform to binary classifications. According to Musdah Mulia, the people of Prophet Lot (Lut) were not condemned solely for their sexual orientation or gender diversity, but rather for engaging in acts of *al-fahishah* (outrageous obscenity), *al-sayyi'at* (wickedness), *al-khaba'is* (abominations), and *al-munkar* (immorality). These interpretations are based on various Qur'anic verses including QS al-Naml: 54–58, QS Hud: 77–83, QS al-A'raf: 80–81, and QS al-Syu'ara: 160–175 (Safri, 2014).

In *Al-Qamus al-Fiqhi: Lughat wa Isthilahan*, it is explained that *al-mukhannath* or *al-mukhannis* can be divided into two categories: those whose gender expression emerges naturally (genetically) and those who exhibit it artificially (non-genetically). If *waria* identity results from a natural disposition, it is not subject to divine punishment (Safri, 2014). Confirming this, members of the *waria* congregation at *Pesantren Al-Fatah* confessed that their gender and sexual orientation are not constructed or fabricated identities. While their assertions may appear subjective, such subjectivity reveals the existential dimension of *waria* life experiences.

The *waria* congregation's aspiration for an inclusive Islamic religiosity in Yogyakarta resonates with several contemporary reinterpretations of the Qur'an. Revisionist scholars argue that the Qur'an must be interpreted through socially objective parameters. Kugle, for instance, contends that no Muslim is superior to another based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, or sexual orientation—diversity is embedded in the essence of human personality (Alipour, 2017; Tidey, 2019). He proposes a layered understanding of human personality as reflected in the Qur'an, comprising four dimensions:

(1) *Ṣūra* (physical appearance), shaped in the womb as a result of biological development and awareness from infancy to adulthood; (2) *Shākila* (mental disposition),

referring to innate traits and characteristics beyond rational control; (3) *Ṭabī'a* (genetic pattern), encompassing the biological and psychological makeup of individuals, with references in the Qur'an to embryonic development and moral consciousness; (4) *Fiṭra* (conscience), the original nature of humanity, accessible only through shared lived experience.

Drawing on psychiatric, chemical, and biological research, Kugle concludes that homosexuality is rooted in early childhood genetic inheritance, and not a symptom of social pathology. He argues that homosexual individuals are part of God's intentional design to test the piety of those with diverse identities. Therefore, if homosexuality is not a conscious choice, then *waria* identities fall within the spectrum of sexual diversity embraced by the Qur'an. Believing that the Qur'an privileges only one type of sexual or gendered identity is, in his view, a grave theological and scientific error (Kugle, 2016).

This rigid stance may also stem from the academic failure of traditional scholars to explore the foundational elements of human personality through a scientific lens. Even classical Islamic texts hint at same-sex affection. For example, Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) acknowledged homoerotic love in the works of Abu Nuwas, a poet during the reign of Caliph Harun al-Rashid, while Imam Al-Ghazali himself composed romantic poetry addressed to male beloveds (Masthuriyah Sa'dan, 2017).

These sentiments are echoed by YS and Arini, who shared their personal stories:

"...Although we identify as waria, we do not aspire to undergo full medical transition to become women. I once asked all the waria students at the pesantren whether they wanted to change their sex through medical surgery, and the majority responded negatively. We are waria, not transsexual. On one hand, I respect the choices of others, but personally, I reject the idea of gender reassignment surgery. Even if I had the financial means, I would not choose it. After all, I will never possess a uterus, menstruate, or bear biological children. I believe such a large sum of money would be better donated to orphans. At the same time, not all waria students here have received acceptance from their biological families. Many are seen as a source of familial shame. As a result, they fled to Yogyakarta in search of a waria community where love and care can be shared. We also do not seek to change the names listed on our official identification cards. We continue to honor the names given by our families at birth. Most waria in our community work as street musicians, makeup artists at

salons, or vendors in traditional markets. Some have also worked as sex workers in the past, particularly in their younger years, driven by economic necessity and mutual consent—never involving coercion or violence. Besides, we have never engaged in heterosexual marriage in the first place....." (Interview with YS and Arini, 2025).

The *santri waria* (*waria* students) at *Pesantren Al-Fatah* have generally engaged in a process of identifying hierarchical oppositions within scriptural texts, distinguishing between normative and non-normative injunctions. These oppositions are then reversed by highlighting the interdependence between seemingly conflicting elements. Subsequently, they introduce a novel concept referred to as *waria religiosity*. In doing so, they lean toward *maqāṣidī* hermeneutics in order to apprehend the authentic representation of divine revelation, by systematically selecting the *original meaning*, *intended meaning*, and *real meaning* of scriptural messages. This hermeneutical method is rooted in the Islamic legal principle of *maqāṣid al-sharī'a* (higher objectives of Islamic law). According to Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āshūr, the Qur'an serves to foster the development of individual, communal, and civilizational ethics. The *maqāṣidī* method encompasses three layers of consciousness: historical consciousness (*al-wa'y al-tārīkhī*), theoretical consciousness (*al-wa'y al-naẓarī*), and practical consciousness (*al-wa'y al-'amalī*). This mode of interpretation promotes deconstruction, rationalization, and contextualization (Wijaya & Muzammil, 2021). Through this interpretive lens, *santri waria* are empowered to assert their belief and perspective as human beings, recognizing sexual and gender diversity as a historical inevitability.

The Umrah of Waria Congregants to Mecca

One significant implication of the Islamic religiosity espoused by *waria shalihah* is the formation of new ritual habits, such as YS's decision to perform the *umrah* in Mecca. For YS, *umrah* represents a pathway toward attaining social legitimacy as a devout Muslim within Yogyakarta's broader Muslim community. Upon completing *umrah*, individuals are typically accorded religious authority and social respect, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. This phenomenon mirrors the experience of *bissu* and *calabai*

communities in Segeri, who also frame pilgrimage to Mecca as a strategic model for seeking acceptance of their Islamic identity and expression (Syamsurijal et al., 2023).

Umrah is defined as a form of pilgrimage to the House of God (*Baytullāh*). According to Imam Mālik, the essential conditions for a valid *umrah* include being a Muslim, having reached maturity, freedom, physical and financial capability, appropriate timing, sincere intention, secure travel, the presence of a male guardian (for women and the blind), and proper guidance. Imam al-Shāfi‘ī emphasizes the *arkān* (pillars) of *umrah* which consist of entering the state of *ihrām*, performing *tawāf* around the Kaaba, running between the hills of *Ṣafā* and *Marwa* (*sa‘ī*), and omitting the ‘*Arafah* stay (unlike the *hajj*). Pilgrims must also trim their hair and maintain orderliness throughout the process. Traditionally, the procedures and validity of these rituals are framed around one’s biological sex (Fuad, 2022).

Between 2008 and 2017, a total of 52,832,376 pilgrims performed *umrah* in Mecca. In 2016, the highest number of *umrah* pilgrims came from Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia, with 699,612 Indonesians recorded. This number increased significantly in 2017, with 875,958 pilgrims, and surged to 1,050,000 in 2018, before peaking at 1,292,000 in 2019 (Nurohman, 2022). *Umrah* remains the most favored form of religious tourism for Indonesian Muslims.

For YS, *umrah* represents more than a pilgrimage. It is a means of becoming a respected *Nyai* (female Islamic leader) with spiritual charisma and intellectual authority in the context of transgender Islam. This spiritual leadership allows her to guide younger generations of *santri waria* at *Pesantren Al-Fatah*.

Religiously motivated travel such as pilgrimage exemplifies a form of global spirituality. In the era of advanced communication and transportation, religious tourism has evolved into a transnational phenomenon, serving as evidence of piety in a world where more people seek divine meaning in their lives. Religion, as a belief system in supernatural forces, is expressed through ritual practices. Religious tourism can also be interpreted as a journey focusing on the exploration of religious history, sacred sites, festivals or ceremonies, and both classical and

contemporary sanctuaries. It is part of a continuum encompassing a diverse range of activities and actors, from ‘*ulamā*’ to secular tourists. Pilgrimage draws believers to sacred locations where divine presence is perceived as manifest (Choe, 2024; Fuad, 2022; Syamsurijal et al., 2023).

In connection with her direct spiritual experience in the Holy Land, YS shared the following story:

“...Recently, I performed the umrah to the holy city of Mecca while consistently maintaining my waria identity. The total cost of the journey was approximately IDR 32,000,000. I traveled through a religious tour agency and witnessed many fellow Muslims making the journey accompanied by their families, whereas I traveled alone. At times, the solitude felt heavy, but I reminded myself to remain grateful. Following my return, members of the pesantren community raised questions about the validity of my religious observance during umrah. It is important to clarify that in matters of worship, such as intention (niyyah), ablution (wudhu), and prayer alignment (saḥf), I continued to follow the procedures prescribed for men. I also chose to wear male attire, such as a jubah, in accordance with the biological sex I was assigned at birth. For me, building a spiritual bond with God is an act of inner devotion. I believe that the Divine embodies qualities that are profoundly feminine. While my physical body is male, I identify as 90% female. The human body inherently contains both masculine and feminine dimensions—an ontological duality that, in my view, cannot be erased or denied, as it reflects the will of Allah. Many santri waria at the pesantren asked me to pray for them during my umrah. I sincerely asked Allah to grant them health, happiness, and prosperity. I wept when I first saw the Ka‘bah; a profound sense of longing to return washed over me. During my time performing umrah, I felt as if the burdens of life were lifted. I remain convinced that umrah is a calling of the heart. Interestingly, before this journey, some friends had invited me to travel to Thailand instead...” (Interview with YS, 2025)

The above narrative demonstrates that *waria* hold a deeply rooted belief in Islamic religiosity. Despite being delegitimized by segments of the Muslim community, their yearning for divine connection cannot be nullified by human prejudice or hate. What is particularly striking about YS’s *umrah* experience is her unwavering presentation as a woman from the time of departure until her return. This gendered embodiment during *umrah* reflects a developed sense of *fiqh* for *waria*, significantly shaped by the guidance of *Ustadz Arif Nuh Safri*, who has long promoted a moderate understanding of Islamic

jurisprudence, especially concerning the religious validity of *umrah* for *waria* congregants.

This theological framework can be illustrated through several key concepts. First, according to *Hāshiyat al-Sharwānī*, if a man alters his appearance to resemble a woman, his ablution (*wuḍūʿ*) is not invalidated by physical contact with another man. However, for those who have undergone gender reassignment surgery, religious rulings revert to their biological origin. Second, in *Fatāwā Nūr ʿalā al-Darb*, it is explained that a man, even if he exhibits feminine characteristics, does not require a male guardian (*maḥram*) during travel. Additionally, a hadith from *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* notes that the Prophet Muhammad did not forbid the wearing of garments such as shawls or sarongs unless they were perfumed with saffron (*zaʿfarān*), which leaves a lingering scent on the body (Fuad, 2022).

During her time in Mecca, YS described herself as a *waria shalihah* (a pious *waria*), having fulfilled a sacred aspiration by visiting the birthplace of Prophet Muhammad. She adhered to the ritual *fiqh* of *umrah* as prescribed for men, including *iḏṭibāʿ* (exposing the right shoulder), *raml* (walking briskly), performing *ṭawāf* around the Kaaba both day and night, and undertaking the *saʿī* between the hills of Ṣafā and Marwah, running energetically between the designated markers. YS believed her *umrah* was accepted by Allah, as she did not violate any *fiqh* rulings, unlike other *waria* such as Isa Zega.

Isa Zega was reported to the authorities and accused of religious blasphemy for performing *umrah* while dressed in women's attire, including a *mukena*, despite being biologically male. He was charged under Article 156 of the Indonesian Penal Code, which criminalizes public expressions of hostility, hatred, or contempt toward particular groups, with a maximum sentence of four years in prison or a fine of Rp 4,500,000. Gus Mufti Anam, a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives from the PDI-P faction, publicly condemned Isa Zega's actions as religious defamation. On his Instagram account, he wrote: "I am deeply disturbed by the actions of 'Mami Online' a.k.a. Isa Zega a.k.a. Sahrul. As a *waria*, he forcibly wore *sharʿī* hijab in the Holy Land, which clearly constitutes an act of religious desecration" (Dede Leni Mardianti, 2024).

After recounting her spiritual reflections in Mecca, YS reaffirmed her belief that the identity of *waria* does not inherently contradict the tenets of Islam:

"..... During the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the existence of individuals resembling what we now understand as *waria* was already acknowledged. What angered the Prophet was not their identity per se, but rather behavior that involved coercion, threats, or violence. In contrast, our experiences as *waria* in Yogyakarta reflect a consistent effort to maintain moral conduct and avoid causing social harm. We do not identify with the people of Prophet Lot, whose story in Islamic tradition is often interpreted in relation to transgression and societal decay. The romantic relationships we engage in are grounded in mutual consent and personal sincerity. Personally, I desire recognition as an ordinary human being. *Waria* do not tarnish the dignity of religion. In the Qur'an, Allah addresses all people as servants (*ʿibad*), not by their gender or socially constructed identity. Furthermore, women are honored in Islam, as evidenced by the famous hadith emphasizing the duty to serve and respect one's mother above all others. In terms of religious observance, I continue to worship while wearing male attire, and should I pass away, I wish to be treated according to Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) for men. Only Allah has the authority to determine the validity of my acts of worship—not fellow human beings. Human spirituality must be interpreted in a way that integrates lived experience. For me, embracing the identity of a *waria* represents one way for men to resist and dismantle patriarchal systems in tangible and embodied ways...." (Interview with YS 2025).

YS's *umrah* represents a concrete manifestation of *habitus* at work in the life of a *waria*. Her lived experiences, marked by struggle and stigmatization, compelled her and other *santri waria* to consistently embrace Islam as a source of spiritual resilience. This spiritual life cannot be sustained without support from families, religious authorities, and state institutions. The social structures experienced by *waria* congregants are eventually internalized into thought patterns, perceptions, and actions that feel authentic and organic within the microcosm of *Pesantren Al-Fatah Yogyakarta*. Through a deeply existential life trajectory, these *waria* deploy cultural capital (knowledge), economic capital (resources), and social capital (networks) to persist within a hostile reality.

YS disclosed that her decision to undertake *umrah* stemmed from a search for meaning, a direction for struggle, and an assertion of identity and imagination. She

emphasized that while most *waria* feel unsafe practicing Islam in public spaces, they nevertheless strive to express a body and emotional identity that embodies both masculine and feminine aspects. In other words, they modify behavior, not their bodies. This conceptual distinction enables a uniquely Indonesian articulation of *waria* religiosity. The body, as Mary Douglas theorized, is a natural symbol infused with cultural meaning; it functions simultaneously as biological and symbolic capital (Douglas, 2020).

The body must be treated as an object of critical sociological inquiry, encompassing elements of representation, regulation, and reproduction. Positioning the body as a social fact reveals the cultural roots of violence. The act of *umrah* signals a negotiation of *waria* embodiment, entangled in religious sensitivity and a demand for recognition by the state. These individuals are acutely aware that a singular, exclusionary interpretation of religious texts constitutes a direct threat to Indonesia's constitutional freedom of religion and belief.

Furthermore, research findings offer potential implications for developing an Islamic educational curriculum grounded in *waria*-centered social *fiqh*. Numerous *santri waria* face verbal and physical abuse in Indonesian schools, highlighting the urgency of constructing a *fiqh* framework that foregrounds rights, identity, and participation. This study proposes three foundational paradigms. First, the *waria* sexual experience does not stem from a monocultural source but emerges from multicultural realities, affirming their ideological right to differ. Social facts are inherently plural, allowing space for alternative truths beyond the boundaries of limited human experience. Second, the *waria* experience is cosmopolitan and deeply intertwined with religious spirituality, encompassing meaning, emotion, and empathy. Consequently, their identity is not merely theological, but also historical. Third, the *waria* experience is shaped across generations, carries a global diasporic character, and offers both material and psychological empowerment for their communities. Their participation in public spaces often reflects a strategy of compromise rather than confrontation.

Fiqh sosial waria is not a deviation from Islamic doctrine but a contemporary *ijtihad*

aimed at preserving religion (*hifz al-din*), life (*hifz al-nafs*), intellect (*hifz al-'aql*), lineage (*hifz al-nasl*), and property (*hifz al-mal*). That said, one key limitation of our fieldwork was our inability to reach a broader pool of *waria* informants across Yogyakarta, thereby constraining the depth of our understanding regarding the diverse, creative, yet precarious religious practices within this community. Many were difficult to contact or chose to withhold personal identities, carefully curating their social interactions. While this may appear as a methodological shortcoming, this study offers an initial glimpse into the *waria shalihah* revival movement, a struggle to assert Islamic religiosity within the sanctuary of *Pesantren Al-Fatah* Yogyakarta.

Future researchers may build upon this study by adopting *waria* religiosity as an analytical lens to enhance their civic status within Indonesia's religious education institutions.

CLOSING

Becoming a *waria shalihah* in Indonesia is a high-risk endeavor. From our analysis, two major conclusions emerge. The Islamic religiosity aspirations of the *waria* congregation at *Pesantren Al-Fatah* are articulated through their reinterpretation of the universalistic spirit found in QS An-Nisa:124, QS Al-Hujurat:13, and QS An-Nur:31. These reinterpretations serve as a theological defense of their *waria* status and as a rebuttal to accusations from the Islamic Jihad Front (FJI), which seeks to delegitimize *waria* rights and impose a re-Islamization of their lives in Yogyakarta. FJI draws on verses such as QS An-Nisa:1, QS Al-A'raf:81, and QS Ash-Shu'ara:173–174 to justify their stance, aiming to suppress the emergence of *waria* socio-political agency, as has been seen in Taiwan or Thailand. The aspirations of *waria* religiosity have also given rise to new devotional practices, including the performance of *umrah* in Mecca. Through this pilgrimage, YS envisions herself becoming a *Nyai*, a charismatic religious authority in transgender Islam, who can guide future generations of *santri waria* at *Pesantren Al-Fatah*. More broadly, these findings contribute to ongoing conversations on developing an inclusive Islamic educational curriculum that integrates *waria*-based jurisprudence in post-reform Indonesia.

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Interview :

Interview with Arif Nuh Safri (Ustad), 2025

Interview with Arini (Waria), 2025

Interview with Lastri (Waria), 2025

Interview with Merlyn (Waria), 2025

Interview with Novi (Waria), 2025

Interview with Rulli (Waria), 2025

Interview with YS (Waria), 2025