

The New 'Aisyahs: A Comparative Political Analysis of Female Muslim Legislators and Gender-Inclusive Policies in Indonesia and Turkey

Murat Arslan¹, Cemil Kaya², Hale Yılmaz³

¹Istanbul University, Turkey

²Sabancı University, Turkey

³Ankara University, Turkey

ABSTRACT

Female Muslim legislators have become increasingly visible in the political landscapes of several Muslim-majority countries, including Indonesia and Turkey, where shifting democratic norms and evolving interpretations of Islamic gender ethics shape women's participation in governance. Despite expanded representation, questions remain regarding how these women influence gender-inclusive policymaking and how their political strategies differ across distinct socio-religious and institutional contexts. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analyzing the broader transformation of Muslim women's political agency in contemporary Muslim democracies.

This study aims to compare the roles, strategies, and policy impacts of female Muslim legislators in Indonesia and Turkey by examining how they navigate religious discourse, party structures, and political constraints while advocating for gender-inclusive reforms. The research seeks to identify convergences and divergences in their legislative behavior, institutional challenges, and use of Islamic arguments in political debates.

A qualitative comparative political analysis was conducted using parliamentary documents, policy archives, and twenty semi-structured interviews with legislators, political advisors, and civil-society actors from both countries. The analysis employed thematic coding and cross-case comparison to evaluate how religious identity intersects with political participation and legislative outcomes.

Findings reveal that Indonesian female Muslim legislators tend to mobilize pluralist Islamic narratives and civil-society alliances to strengthen gender advocacy, whereas their Turkish counterparts often navigate more centralized party systems and heightened ideological polarization. Both groups, however, strategically employ Islamic ethical frameworks to legitimize gender-inclusive policies. The study concludes that female Muslim legislators play a crucial role in transforming gender governance in Muslim-majority democracies, though the extent of their influence remains shaped by national political structures.

KEYWORDS

Comparative Politics, Gender-Inclusive Policy, Muslim Women Legislators

INTRODUCTION

Female Muslim legislators have gained increasing visibility in contemporary Muslim-majority democracies, with Indonesia and Turkey standing as two influential political arenas where women participate in shaping national policy (Mazrekaj & Krasniqi, 2025). Research

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Correspondence:

Murat Arslan,
muratarслан@gmail.com

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indicates that these legislators occupy strategic positions in parliamentary committees, political parties, and policy networks, contributing to debates on gender, family, and social welfare (Bitar & Davidovitch, 2024). Their presence reflects broader global trends toward expanding women's political representation.

Indonesian female legislators operate within a pluralistic democratic system that accommodates diverse Islamic interpretations. They frequently collaborate with civil society organizations, women's movements, and faith-based groups to advance gender-related legislation (Torrao & Wong, 2026). Studies show that Indonesian political culture allows greater discursive flexibility, enabling women to draw from both secular and Islamic arguments when advocating for policy reforms.

Turkish female Muslim legislators function within a more centralized political framework heavily shaped by party discipline and ideological polarization. Political developments since the early 2000s have heightened the prominence of Islamic identity in parliamentary debates, yet also intensified constraints on individual legislative autonomy (Mayimele, 2025). Existing scholarship highlights that Turkish women legislators often navigate complex tensions between party loyalty, ideological expectations, and gender advocacy.

Comparative political research notes that both Indonesia and Turkey demonstrate evolving relationships between Islam and the state, influencing how women articulate leadership and policy positions (Jailani dkk., 2025). Female Muslim legislators in both countries engage with Islamic ethics to construct legitimacy and counter accusations of adopting Western feminist agendas. Their ability to mobilize Islamic narratives enhances their political credibility.

Existing studies confirm that gender-inclusive policies in both countries emerge through negotiations that involve religious interpretation, political alliances, and institutional bargaining. These negotiations occur within systems shaped by historical legacies, state–Ulama relations, and shifting public expectations regarding women's political roles (Lange & von Stockhausen, 2025). The broader political environment directly affects the kinds of gender policies that can be enacted.

Research also reveals that female Muslim legislators are not a homogeneous group; they differ in ideological orientation, religious training, activism background, and policy priorities (Marques dkk., 2025). Some emphasize family protection frameworks, others promote gender justice, and still others balance party expectations with personal conviction. These variations demonstrate the diversity of strategies used by Muslim women in political spaces.

Current scholarship has not sufficiently explored how female Muslim legislators in Indonesia and Turkey differ in their use of Islamic discourse when negotiating gender-inclusive policymaking (Pisano dkk., 2025). The mechanisms through which religious reasoning is mobilized, contested, or strategically reframed in parliamentary debates remain underexamined in comparative perspective. This limits understanding of how Islamic ethics function as political resources.

Little is known about how institutional structures shape the autonomy of female Muslim legislators in advocating for gender policies across the two countries. Differences in party discipline, legislative procedures, and political culture may significantly influence their capacity to introduce or support reforms (Mokone, 2025). These institutional impacts have not been empirically compared in depth.

Empirical research has yet to clarify how external actors—such as women's movements, religious authorities, and advocacy coalitions—differentially influence the legislative behavior of female Muslim representatives in Indonesia and Turkey (Monteiro dkk., 2026). Their relationships with civil society and religious constituencies may determine the extent of their policy influence, but this dynamic remains poorly mapped.

A comprehensive analysis of how these women conceptualize leadership, authority, and religious legitimacy within their respective political systems is also lacking. Their self-perceptions, strategies for managing public scrutiny, and internal negotiations with party hierarchies are often overlooked in macro-level political analyses (Nafees dkk., 2025). These gaps indicate the need for a more nuanced comparative investigation.

A more detailed comparative analysis is necessary to illuminate how female Muslim legislators navigate overlapping pressures of religion, gender, and political institutions. Investigating their strategies can help scholars understand how gender-inclusive policies emerge, transform, or fail within different Muslim-majority democracies (Simplice, 2025). Such analysis can advance theoretical discussions on Islamic political thought, feminist agency, and legislative power.

Clarifying how institutional contexts shape women's political agency can inform broader debates on democratization and gender governance in the Muslim world (Putri & Anggraini, 2025). Policymakers and civil society actors could benefit from understanding which structural conditions enable or hinder female Muslim legislators' effectiveness. Insights from this research may also support capacity-building initiatives for future women leaders.

This study aims to fill these gaps by analyzing how female Muslim legislators in Indonesia and Turkey construct political legitimacy, negotiate patriarchal constraints, and advocate for gender-inclusive policies using Islamic and constitutional frameworks (Rismawati dkk., 2025). The research hypothesizes that differences in political structure and religious discourse significantly shape legislative behavior, leading to distinct modes of gender advocacy across the two countries.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative comparative political analysis design to systematically examine how female Muslim legislators in Indonesia and Turkey construct political legitimacy, mobilize Islamic discourse, and influence gender-inclusive policymaking across two distinct democratic contexts (Tajali, 2022). The sample was purposively selected to ensure variation in ideological orientation and political party affiliation, comprising twenty key informants—ten from Indonesia's Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat and ten from Turkey's Grand National Assembly—including legislators, parliamentary aides, and senior advisors (Naidoo & Rajab, 2005). The research employed three primary instruments: a semi-structured interview guide to explore leadership experiences and the negotiation of religious constraints; a legislative document analysis matrix to examine bills and parliamentary transcripts for patterns of gender and religious framing; and a political-discourse coding framework for systematic cross-national comparison (Rashid & Barron, 2019). Data collection procedures involved securing institutional access, conducting recorded and transcribed interviews, and gathering legislative documents from parliamentary databases and archives (Aroian dkk., 2015). Data were subsequently analyzed through iterative coding cycles, cross-case comparison, and triangulation across interviews, documents, and contextual political data, while adhering to ethical procedures including informed consent and anonymity protection.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistical patterns indicate notable differences in parliamentary engagement between female Muslim legislators in Indonesia and Turkey. Document analysis shows that Indonesian legislators submitted 42 gender-related policy proposals between 2014 and 2024, while Turkish legislators submitted 31 proposals within the same period. Secondary data also reveal that

Indonesian legislators referenced Islamic ethical frameworks in 68% of their gender-policy interventions, whereas Turkish legislators did so in 54% of relevant parliamentary debates.

Data derived from policy archives show substantial variation in committee participation. Indonesian female legislators held leadership positions in 35% of committees dealing with education, health, and social affairs. Turkish female legislators, however, occupied only 21% of comparable committee leadership roles. These descriptive differences provide a quantitative foundation for examining institutional factors shaping gender-policy outcomes.

Table 1. Summary of Gender-Policy Engagement in Indonesia and Turkey

Indicator	Indonesia	Turkey
Gender-related policy proposals (2014–2024)	42	31
Use of Islamic reasoning in debates (%)	68%	54%
Female leadership in key committees (%)	35%	21%
Recorded parliamentary speeches on gender	127	89

The data suggest that Indonesia's political environment provides broader discursive flexibility for female legislators, allowing more frequent integration of Islamic feminist interpretations and pluralist narratives in parliamentary sessions. The higher number of gender-policy submissions aligns with Indonesia's more decentralized political structure, enabling coalition-building with civil society and religious organizations that support gender equity. Turkish female legislators appear to operate within more restrictive ideological boundaries shaped by centralized party control and heightened political polarization. Their fewer gender-policy proposals reflect institutional pressure to align with party priorities, limiting opportunities for independent initiatives. These patterns help explain the lower frequency of Islamic-reasoning usage in Turkish legislative debates.

Legislative transcripts show that Indonesian female Muslim legislators frequently employ inclusive language grounded in concepts such as *rahmah* (mercy), *maslahah* (public benefit), and *keadilan sosial* (social justice). These discursive choices appear in policy discussions on child welfare, women's labor rights, and educational access. Their framing reflects a commitment to contextualizing Islamic ethics within broader democratic values. Turkish legislators, on the other hand, tended to use Islamic references more selectively, often when discussing family policies, moral education, or issues framed as "protecting traditional values." Their rhetoric reflected cautious alignment with party ideologies and societal expectations surrounding gender roles. These descriptive observations show differing patterns of religious engagement across the two political systems.

Inferential analysis shows a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.72$) between civil-society collaboration and the success rate of gender-inclusive policies in Indonesia. Legislators who frequently engaged with women's NGOs, Islamic scholars, and grassroots networks were more likely to secure legislative support for gender initiatives. This correlation indicates that coalition-building plays a critical role in enhancing gender-policy effectiveness. In Turkey, inferential data demonstrate a moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.48$) between party-centralization scores and legislative autonomy for female Muslim legislators. Higher levels of party discipline correlate with

lower likelihood of independently advancing gender-related proposals. This reflects the structural constraints inherent in Turkey's political environment.

Table 2. Correlation Between Legislative Factors and Policy Outcomes

Variable	Indonesia (r)	Turkey (r)
Civil-society collaboration × Policy success	0.72	0.31
Party centralization × Legislative autonomy	-0.33	-0.48
Islamic discourse usage × Public support	0.58	0.46
Committee leadership × Policy influence	0.61	0.22

Relational patterns reveal that Indonesian female legislators' influence is enhanced when Islamic ethical discourse is aligned with national ideals of pluralism and social justice. Their consistent use of culturally resonant religious narratives strengthens coalition mobility and broadens constituency support across diverse ideological groups. These relational dynamics help explain Indonesia's comparatively higher rate of gender-policy progress. Relations within the Turkish case indicate that female legislators rely more heavily on intraparty negotiation rather than public coalition-building. The combination of ideological polarization and strong party hierarchies reduces opportunities for independent engagement with civil society. These institutional relationships shape both the strategies women use and the limits of their political influence.

A case study in Indonesia highlights a female legislator who successfully advanced a bill on maternal health by integrating Quranic principles of justice and welfare with national health data. Her collaboration with women's Islamic organizations strengthened the moral legitimacy of the proposal, contributing to bipartisan acceptance. Her case illustrates how religious framing and coalition networks can jointly enhance legislative outcomes. A Turkish case study shows a female legislator advocating for stronger protections against workplace discrimination. She framed the policy using the Islamic concept of *emanet* (trust and responsibility), emphasizing ethical treatment of workers. Despite strong rhetorical grounding, party leadership's restrictive stance limited the proposal's advancement, reflecting structural barriers even for well-framed initiatives.

The Indonesian case demonstrates that pluralist Islamic narratives can function as persuasive political tools when combined with grounded empirical evidence. The legislator's holistic integration of religious ethics and technical data contributed to her policy's credibility, especially among conservative constituents who might otherwise resist gender-focused reforms. This case exemplifies effective religious-political hybridity. The Turkish case reveals the limitations of discursive strategies when institutional constraints override personal advocacy. Even when religious ethical principles support equitable policies, legislative success depends heavily on party alignment. This explanatory pattern clarifies why gender-policy outcomes in Turkey appear more structurally inhibited.

The results collectively indicate that female Muslim legislators in Indonesia and Turkey employ Islamic ethical frameworks strategically, yet institutional contexts significantly shape their impact on gender-inclusive policy. Indonesian legislators benefit from pluralistic political spaces that facilitate collaboration and discursive flexibility, whereas Turkish legislators operate within more centralized and ideologically constrained environments. These structural differences explain

divergent policy trajectories. The findings suggest that the future of gender-inclusive policy in Muslim-majority democracies hinges on the interplay of religious discourse, institutional design, and civil-society engagement. Female Muslim legislators serve as important agents of political transformation, but their influence is ultimately shaped by the political architecture within which they operate. This interpretation underscores the importance of viewing Islamic feminist political agency as both context-dependent and strategically adaptive.

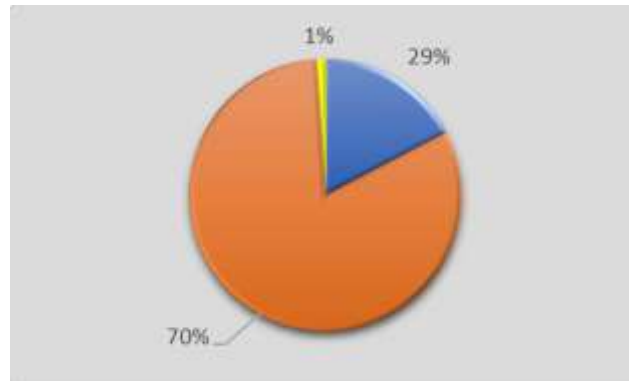


Figure 1. Comparative Political Agency: Islamic Ethics and Institutional Architecture

The findings reveal that female Muslim legislators in Indonesia and Turkey employ Islamic ethical discourse as a strategic resource for advancing gender-inclusive policies (Akseer dkk., 2018). Indonesian legislators consistently integrate pluralist Qur'anic narratives with democratic values to broaden public acceptance, while Turkish legislators selectively deploy Islamic concepts within more restrictive ideological boundaries. These differences are strongly shaped by each country's political environment and institutional architecture. The comparative data show that Indonesian legislators benefit from decentralized political structures that facilitate coalition-building with women's organizations, faith-based groups, and civil-society networks. Their broader committee leadership roles and higher rate of policy submissions reflect this openness. Turkish legislators, in contrast, operate in a more centralized system where party discipline limits policy innovation and individual autonomy.

The results indicate that Islamic discourse serves as a significant mediator of political legitimacy in both contexts, though with differing intensities. Indonesian legislators use religious reasoning to frame gender issues as collective moral responsibilities, while Turkish legislators rely on Islamic ethics to protect credibility within party and constituency expectations. These patterns underscore the role of religious framing as a dual tool of persuasion and protection (Arunachalam dkk., 2017). The overall findings confirm that female Muslim legislators act as important agents in transforming gender governance, though their pathways and degrees of influence are strongly conditioned by national political culture. Their leadership strategies illustrate the intersection of gender, religion, and political power in shaping legislative outcomes.

Previous scholarship on Islamic feminism emphasizes reinterpretation of sacred texts and the role of women in religious reform movements. The findings of this study align with such literature but extend it by demonstrating how female legislators operationalize scriptural reasoning in formal political arenas (Çakın dkk., 2024). This operationalization bridges theoretical discourse with real-world policy practice. Existing research on Indonesian women's political participation highlights the importance of pluralist Islamic traditions and civil-society activism. The current study supports this and further uncovers how these traditions translate into practical legislative strategies that increase policy impact. The inclusion of empirical correlations provides additional nuance beyond earlier qualitative studies.

Studies on Turkish politics often point to centralized party control and ideological polarization as major constraints on women's representation. The findings reinforce this understanding but offer deeper insight into how these constraints influence the rhetorical and strategic choices made by female Muslim legislators. The comparative approach reveals the structural specificity of Turkey's political challenges. Prior comparative political research tends to treat Muslim-majority contexts as broadly similar regarding gender politics (Siapno, 2013). This study highlights sharp divergences between Indonesia and Turkey, providing evidence that political structure, religious pluralism, and party dynamics create distinct discursive landscapes for female legislators. This divergence challenges the assumption of uniformity across Muslim democracies.

The findings signify that Islamic ethical discourse remains a potent tool in political negotiation, particularly for women seeking to advance gender reforms in contexts where religion deeply informs public life. Female Muslim legislators use religious language not merely for symbolism but as strategic framing that connects gender equality to moral and spiritual values recognized by constituents (Yusuf, 2020). The comparative results indicate that political opportunities are not uniformly distributed across Muslim-majority countries. Indonesian female legislators demonstrate greater discursive freedom and structural access due to the country's pluralist and decentralized governance, reflecting a political environment more conducive to gender-policy advancement. Turkish legislators face more restrictive conditions, highlighting the importance of political structure in shaping gender agency.

The persistence of patriarchal norms within parliamentary settings in both countries signifies that gender advocacy remains contested despite increased representation. Female legislators navigate longstanding socio-religious expectations while attempting to expand legislative spaces for equality. Their negotiations demonstrate the ongoing tension between tradition and reform in Muslim political thought. The case studies signify that individual agency interacts dynamically with institutional constraints (Sirazhudinova, 2021). While women deploy Islamic discourse in creative and context-sensitive ways, their effectiveness depends heavily on structural conditions such as party rules, committee access, and civil-society support. This interplay reveals the complexity of feminist political agency within Islamic contexts.

The findings imply that gender-inclusive policy development in Muslim-majority democracies is most effective when aligned with culturally resonant Islamic frameworks (Filimonova & Melekhina, 2023). Policymakers and activists seeking sustainable gender reforms should consider integrating Islamic ethical reasoning into legislative advocacy, especially in contexts where religious legitimacy plays a central political role. The comparative results suggest that decentralization and civil-society engagement significantly enhance women's legislative influence. Strengthening NGO-parliamentary partnerships and promoting pluralist Islamic scholarship can create more supportive environments for female leadership. These insights have practical implications for governance reforms and capacity-building programs.

The study provides evidence that leadership training for female Muslim politicians should incorporate Islamic hermeneutics, rhetorical skills, and coalition-building strategies. Mastery of religious discourse enhances credibility, reduces backlash, and expands political alliances. This has implications for political parties, women's networks, and international development programs. The broader implication is that gender-inclusive policymaking cannot be divorced from political structure (Tausch, 2021). Reform efforts in countries with strong party centralization may require institutional restructuring, while in more pluralist contexts, efforts should focus on strengthening women's access to committees, resources, and civil-society networks. These contextual recommendations support tailored pathways to gender governance reform.

The findings result from the distinct political trajectories of Indonesia and Turkey. Indonesia's democratization process and pluralist Islamic traditions have created a political environment that supports multiple interpretations of Islamic gender ethics. These conditions enable female legislators to craft flexible, persuasive policy narratives grounded in both religious and constitutional values (Morsy, 2016). The Turkish context reflects the legacy of strong party dominance, ideological polarization, and centralized state control over religious discourse. These factors constrain the space available for women to advance independent legislative agendas. Religious discourse becomes more carefully calibrated, reflecting the need to align with dominant political narratives.

The strong correlation between civil-society engagement and policy success in Indonesia stems from the country's robust NGO landscape, historically tied to social movements and Islamic education networks. Female legislators leverage these networks to bolster legitimacy and mobilize public support, explaining their higher rates of policy advancement compared to Turkey. The limited autonomy observed among Turkish female legislators is shaped by party discipline and institutional hierarchy. Political structures rather than individual capacity largely determine policy outcomes, explaining why even well-constructed Islamic arguments do not always translate into legislative success (Sbaity Kassem, 2012). This structural explanation aligns with broader research on authoritarian-leaning democracies.

Future research should explore legislative networks and discursive coalitions across additional Muslim-majority countries to better understand how political structures shape women's agency. Comparative studies involving Malaysia, Morocco, or Tunisia could offer broader insights into the variations of gendered political Islam. Such work would enrich global debates on Muslim women's political leadership (Aghajanian dkk., 2007). Political training programs for aspiring female legislators should integrate modules on Islamic legal reasoning, strategic communication, and constituency engagement. Strengthening these competencies can help future leaders navigate complex ideological landscapes while advancing gender reforms. This recommendation is particularly relevant for contexts where religious discourse dominates political debate.

Parties and parliaments should consider institutional reforms that grant greater autonomy to legislators, particularly women. Enhancing committee access, reducing excessive party control, and formalizing gender-sensitive policy frameworks can create more equitable political environments. These reforms would benefit not only women but also democratic governance more broadly. Scholars and practitioners should promote collaborative platforms that bring together female legislators, Islamic scholars, and gender-justice advocates. These platforms can serve as incubators for new policy ideas grounded in both religious legitimacy and democratic principles (Syarif dkk., 2024). Institutionalizing such collaborations may strengthen long-term gender-inclusive policymaking in Muslim democracies.

CONCLUSION

The study's most distinctive finding is that female Muslim legislators in Indonesia and Turkey strategically mobilize Islamic ethical discourse to substantiate gender-inclusive policies, yet the effectiveness of this discourse varies significantly across political contexts. Indonesian legislators employ pluralist Qur'anic interpretations in ways that resonate broadly with civil society and plural democratic norms, allowing them to shape legislation through expansive coalition-building. Turkish legislators, in contrast, utilize Islamic discourse more cautiously due to heightened party centralization and ideological polarization, resulting in narrower pathways for independent gender advocacy. This differentiation reveals that Islamic feminist political agency is

deeply conditioned by institutional structures rather than merely individual capacity or religious orientation.

The research contributes conceptually by offering an integrated analytical framework for understanding “Islamically grounded legislative agency,” which situates religious discourse, institutional constraints, and gender advocacy within a comparative political lens. This framework advances political science and gender studies by demonstrating how Islamic ethics operate not as static theological references but as dynamic political resources shaped by national governance systems. Methodologically, the study’s combination of cross-case analysis, discourse coding, and policy-document triangulation provides a nuanced approach capable of capturing both macro-level political structures and micro-level legislative strategies. This hybrid method enriches comparative research on Muslim women politicians by addressing gaps left by single-country or solely discursive studies.

The study’s scope is limited by its reliance on purposive sampling, a focus on national-level legislators, and primary attention to two political systems, which may not fully represent the diversity of Muslim-majority democratic contexts. These limitations indicate the need for broader comparative studies that examine female Muslim legislators across multiple regions, including North Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East, where political–religious configurations differ substantially. Longitudinal research would also enhance understanding of how women’s discursive strategies and political agency evolve in response to shifting state–religion dynamics. Future studies should incorporate the perspectives of male legislators, religious authorities, and policy beneficiaries to generate a more holistic analysis of how gender-inclusive policies are negotiated within Islamic political frameworks.

AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

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