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THE SPIRITUALITY CRISIS IN THE SDGS AND ITS RELATION TO EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY IN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This article discusses the crisis of spirituality in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly about efforts to achieve gender equality in Indonesia and Malaysia. The SDGs, as a global development agenda, do not include a spiritual or religious dimension in their framework, although spirituality plays an important role in people's lives in many countries, including Indonesia and Malaysia. By ignoring the role of religion, particularly in the context of gender equality, the SDGs face significant challenges in their implementation in countries with a strong religious base. This article reviews critiques from Islamic thinkers such as Sayyed Hossein Nasr and Ziauddin Sardar, who highlight the importance of integrating spiritual values into the sustainable development agenda. This article also highlights that in Indonesia and Malaysia, an approach to gender equality that involves spirituality and religion can result in policies that are more inclusive and accepted by the wider community. Integrating spirituality into SDGs policies has the potential to strengthen efforts to achieve sustainable gender equality in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Keywords: Gender Equality, SDGs, Spirituality Crisis

A. Introduction

This article is important because it examines the relationship between the spiritual crisis in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and efforts to achieve gender equality, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia. The SDGs, which consist of 17 goals, including the fifth goal on gender equality, do not mention religion or spirituality at all. Given that Indonesia and Malaysia are

predominantly Muslim countries, where religion plays a significant role in social life and policy, the absence of a spiritual element in the SDGs framework poses its challenges. Data from Pew Research shows that 93% of Indonesians and 61% of Malaysians

consider religion to be very important in their daily lives.¹ In addition, the 2022 UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) Report indicates that gender equality in both countries still faces many obstacles, especially those related to cultural and religious norms.² Therefore, ignoring the role of spirituality in global efforts to achieve gender equality can reduce the effectiveness of such policies in religious countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

A major gap identified in this article is the absence of spirituality and religion in discussions of the SDGs, despite religion playing a central role in people's lives in many developing countries, including Indonesia and Malaysia. Many previous studies have discussed the relationship between sustainable development and religion, but very few have specifically linked this spiritual crisis to efforts to achieve gender equality. This article offers a new perspective by drawing on critiques from two prominent Muslim thinkers, Sayyed Hossein Nasr and Ziauddin Sardar, who argue that modernity—including development frameworks such as the SDGs—has sidelined spirituality in various social issues.³ Thus, this article adds insight into how spiritual elements can be integrated into global development policies, particularly in the context of gender equality in Muslim-majority countries.

Various efforts have been made to resolve gender equality issues in Indonesia and Malaysia, including through government programs based on the SDGs. In Indonesia, Gender Mainstreaming (PUG) has been implemented since the early 2000s as part of a more inclusive development policy. Meanwhile, in Malaysia, programs such as the "Malaysia Gender Gap Index" and the active role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Sisters in Islam (SIS) have sought to promote gender equality within the framework of Islamic law.⁴ Both countries are also committed to achieving the SDGs targets by 2030, by integrating policies related to gender equality, education, and women's empowerment into their national strategies.

However, while these efforts are important, some shortcomings hinder their effectiveness. One of these shortcomings is the lack of integration of spiritual values in policies based on the SDGs. Because the SDGs were adopted from the paradigm of secular modernity, religious values are often not an integral part of development policies in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, which are highly religious. For example, although PUG in Indonesia has shown some success, many women in rural areas still face social barriers rooted in conservatively understood religious beliefs.⁵ This shows that the policies adopted are not always in line with local social and cultural realities.

This article argues that the SDGs, particularly the gender equality goal, need to consider spirituality as a key element in policy formulation and implementation. Nasr's critique of spiritual less

modernity and Sardar's critique of the hegemony of Western culture in the global development framework form the basis of the article's main argument. This spirituality-based approach is proposed as a way to bridge the gap between secular international policies and religious local contexts. Gender equality, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, cannot be effectively achieved without integrating religious values held by the majority of the population.⁶

Early research on the topic suggests that there is a significant gap between secular views on sustainable development and the needs of religious communities. Several studies, such as those conducted by UN Women and the National Commission on Violence Against Women in Indonesia, show that religion is often both a barrier and a tool for promoting gender equality, depending on how it is interpreted.⁷ However, very little research specifically links the spiritual crisis to the implementation of the SDGs in the context of Muslim-majority countries, particularly about gender equality.

Indonesia and Malaysia were chosen as the research loci in this article because both are countries with Muslim majorities, but have different social, cultural, and political characteristics. Indonesia, as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, offers complex dynamics about gender equality, where the influence of religion, culture, and government policy interact with each other. On the other hand, Malaysia has a more centralized government structure and implements Sharia law in several states, thus providing a unique context for understanding the relationship between religion and gender policy.⁸ These two countries provide interesting case studies to analyze how religion can play a positive role in achieving gender equality goals if wisely integrated into development policies.

B. Method

The research method in this article uses a qualitative approach with descriptive and interpretative analysis techniques. The qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of this study is on the exploration of the concept of spirituality and the role of religion in achieving gender equality in Indonesia and Malaysia. This research is descriptive because it aims to describe the actual situation in the field related to the interaction between spiritual values and the implementation of gender equality policies, especially in the context of two Muslim-majority countries. In addition, an interpretive approach is used to analyze how the thoughts of figures such as Sayyed Hossein Nasr and Ziauddin Sardar are related to modern problems faced by society in both countries.⁹

The research data was obtained through a literature study that included primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consisted of works by figures such as Sayyed Hossein Nasr and Ziauddin Sardar, as well as official documents from religious and government institutions in Indonesia and Malaysia. Secondary

¹ Pew Research Center, *Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe* (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2017), p. 45.

² United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2022* (New York: UNDP, 2022), p. 152.

³ Sayyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 1997), p. 102.

⁴ Sisters in Islam, *Understanding Islam through Women's Voices* (Kuala Lumpur: SIS Forum, 2015), p. 34.

⁵ Nur Syam, *Islam dan Pengarusutamaan Gender di Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2008), p. 87.

⁶ Ziauddin Sardar, *Islam, Postmodernism and Other Futures: A Ziauddin Sardar Reader* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), p. 145.

⁷ UN Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2019-2020: Families in a Changing World* (New York: UN Women, 2019), p. 204.

⁸ Pew Research Center, *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050* (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2015), p. 12.

⁹ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2014), p. 25.

sources included previous studies that discussed the relationship between religion and gender equality, as well as reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on gender in both countries.¹⁰ The literature reviewed includes books, journal articles, NGO reports, and fatwas issued by religious institutions in Indonesia and Malaysia.

This study also uses a comparative method to compare how Indonesia and Malaysia, as countries with similar cultural and religious backgrounds, implement gender equality in the context of spiritual values. Through this method, differences and similarities between the two countries can be identified, especially in terms of the influence of religion on gender policies. This comparative method also helps the author in revealing the political, social, and religious dynamics that influence the implementation of gender policies in both countries.¹¹

In addition, the hermeneutic method is used in interpreting religious texts related to the concept of gender equality. This interpretation is done by considering the socio-historical context in which the texts were written, as well as how modern interpretations can be adapted to support women's rights without ignoring spiritual values. Hermeneutics helps in understanding how religious teachings can support gender equality through more inclusive and progressive interpretations.¹²

C. Sayyed Hossein Nasr and Ziauddin Sardar's Criticism of Non-Spiritual SDGs

The theory underlying Sayyed Hossein Nasr and Ziauddin Sardar's critique of the non-spiritual Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is rooted in their views of modernity and global development. For Nasr and Sardar, Western modernity brings with it a secular, materialistic, and reductionist framework of thought that ignores the spiritual dimension of humans. Nasr, as a traditionalist Islamic thinker, believes that modernity has separated humans from their spiritual and natural roots so that development is no longer centered on the balance between the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of humans.¹³ On the other hand, Sardar sees modernity as a colonial project that perpetuates the dominance of Western culture and eliminates spiritual values from non-Western societies. Therefore, they both consider that the SDGs, which are a product of the modernity paradigm, lose the spiritual dimension that should be the core of holistic human development.¹⁴

Empirically, criticism of the non-spirituality of the SDGs can be seen from the structure of the SDGs themselves. The SDGs, adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2015, consist of 17 goals covering issues such as poverty, health, education, and gender equality. However, none of the 17 goals explicitly mention the importance of religion or spirituality as part of human

development. According to Nasr, this is a reflection of the materialistic Western worldview, where development is seen solely from an economic and social perspective, without taking into account the spiritual dimension of humans which is very important in religious traditions.¹⁵ In this context, the absence of spirituality in the SDGs reflects a secular approach that marginalizes religious experiences and spiritual values from the global development framework.

Sardar also highlighted that the SDGs reflect a new form of cultural colonialism, where Western values about development are imposed globally without taking into account local contexts, including the importance of spirituality in non-Western societies. For example, in Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, religion plays a very important role in everyday life and public policy. However, the secular framework of the SDGs fails to capture this complexity. According to Sardar, the SDGs are another example of what he calls the "hegemony of modernity," where values derived from Western historical experiences are imposed on the rest of the world without considering cultural and religious plurality.¹⁶ This creates tensions in highly religious countries, as global development policies often conflict with the spiritual values held by the majority of their societies.

In the context of gender equality, Nasr and Sardar's critique of the SDGs becomes even more relevant. Gender equality, as understood in the SDGs, is often viewed from a secular perspective that focuses on women's economic and political empowerment, without taking into account the role of spirituality in women's lives in many Muslim-majority countries. Nasr emphasizes that Islam has a concept of equality that is rooted in the principle of justice, which includes spiritual, social, and moral aspects.¹⁷ Therefore, any effort to promote gender equality in Muslim countries must involve Islamic spiritual values, not just the secular perspective promoted by the SDGs. This critique is relevant in the context of Indonesia and Malaysia, where religious norms often shape societal views on gender roles.

Critics of the SDGs from Sardar's perspective also emphasize that a secular approach to gender equality can alienate religious societies. Referring to Sardar's thinking, the SDGs risk ignoring local voices that speak about gender justice from a religious perspective. In Malaysia, for example, organizations such as Sisters in Islam (SIS) have developed arguments that gender equality can be promoted within the framework of Islamic law.¹⁸ However, the secular framework of the SDGs often leaves no room for this faith-based approach. Thus, Sardar's critique of the SDGs focuses on the lack of respect for cultural and religious pluralism in global development, resulting in the alienation of religious communities from international policy.

As a way out, both Nasr and Sardar proposed the integration of spirituality into global development frameworks such as the SDGs. Nasr emphasized the importance of restoring spiritual values in human life as an integral part of sustainable development.¹⁹ According to him, a development that does not take spirituality

¹⁰ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2017), p. 45.

¹¹ Charles C. Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 14.

¹² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 70.

¹³ Nasr, *Man and Nature*..., p. 23.

¹⁴ Sardar, *Islam, Postmodernism and Other Futures*..., p. 15.

¹⁵ United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (New York: United Nations, 2015), p. 3.

¹⁶ Sardar, *Islam, Postmodernism and Other Futures*..., p. 145.

¹⁷ Nasr, *Man and Nature*..., p. 102.

¹⁸ Sisters in Islam, *Understanding Islam through Women's Voices* (Kuala Lumpur: SIS Forum, 2015), p. 57.

¹⁹ Nasr, *Man and Nature*..., p. 108.

into account will result in imbalance and crisis in various aspects of human life. Sardar, on the other hand, emphasized that every development policy must be shaped by the local context, including the spiritual and religious traditions of the local community. In Sardar's perspective, gender equality and other development issues can only be achieved sustainably if local spiritual values are recognized and integrated into public policy.

D. The Role of Religion in Realizing Gender Equality in Indonesia and Malaysia

Religion plays a very important role in social and political life in Indonesia and Malaysia, especially in the context of gender equality issues. Both countries have a Muslim majority population, where Islam is not only considered a religion but also a moral guide and social framework that regulates various aspects of life, including gender relations. From an Islamic perspective, gender equality is often understood through the concept of justice ('adl) and respect for human dignity. This thinking is based on the teachings of the Qur'an which emphasizes the essential equality between men and women as creatures of God.²⁰ However, the application of this concept in social practice and public policy is heavily influenced by diverse cultural and local interpretations, which often give rise to debates about the role of religion in promoting or hindering gender equality.

In Indonesia and Malaysia, the relationship between religion and gender equality has become a central issue in public debate, particularly with the emergence of Islamic feminist movements that seek to reinterpret religious texts to support women's empowerment. These movements seek to challenge patriarchal interpretations of religion and demonstrate that Islam when understood progressively, can be a tool for promoting gender equality. For example, groups such as Musawah in Malaysia and Rahima in Indonesia emphasize that Islam provides equal rights for women in various aspects of life, including education, employment, and political participation.²¹ This approach attempts to reconcile religious values with contemporary needs for gender justice while avoiding conflicts between religious teachings and the demands of modernity.

Empirical data shows that religion plays a dual role in gender equality issues in both countries. On the one hand, many initiatives use religious frameworks to promote gender equality. In Indonesia, for example, the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) has issued fatwas supporting women's rights in some contexts, albeit limited, such as the prohibition of child marriage and the recognition of women's right to education.²² In Malaysia, religious institutions such as the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) have also promoted gender equality in the context of family and reproductive health. However, on the other hand, conservative interpretations of religion often act as obstacles to efforts to achieve greater gender equality, especially when patriarchal cultural norms interact with religious teachings.

²⁰ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 32.

²¹ Musawah, *Home Truths: A Global Report on Equality in the Muslim Family* (Kuala Lumpur: Musawah, 2016), p. 15.

²² Majelis Ulama Indonesia, *Fatwa tentang Perlindungan Hak Perempuan* (Jakarta: MUI, 2019), p. 3.

In addition, faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also play a significant role in achieving gender equality in both countries. In Malaysia, Sisters in Islam (SIS) is one of the leading NGOs using a faith-based approach to support women's rights. SIS emphasizes the importance of understanding Islam from a gender-just perspective and rejects interpretations of religion that limit women's roles in society.²³ In Indonesia, Rahima and KUPI (Indonesian Women's Ulama Congress) have been pioneers in promoting women's rights from a progressive Islamic perspective, including opposing practices that are detrimental to women such as polygamy and domestic violence. Data from these NGOs shows that faith-based approaches can be very effective in gaining support from religious communities.

However, despite these efforts, major challenges remain in integrating religious values with internationally recognized principles of gender equality. Many religious institutions, both in Indonesia and Malaysia, continue to maintain more conservative views on the role of women, often rooted in traditional interpretations of religious texts. For example, in Malaysia, the National Fatwa Council has issued several fatwas that reinforce women's traditional roles as wives and mothers, while limiting their participation in public life.²⁴ Likewise, in Indonesia, conservative interpretations of religion are often used to justify discriminatory practices against women, such as restrictions on women in certain fields of work or reproductive rights.

The role of religion in realizing gender equality in Indonesia and Malaysia cannot be separated from broader political and social dynamics. In both countries, religion is often used as a political tool, and gender equality issues are not immune to the pull of this politicization. In Malaysia, for example, gender issues are often framed in the context of identity politics, where political parties use religion as a tool to gain support from conservative voters. In Indonesia, although Pancasila as the state ideology emphasizes the importance of pluralism, local political dynamics often influence how gender and religious issues are discussed at the policy level.²⁵ Therefore, understanding the role of religion in gender equality requires a more complex analysis, which includes the interaction between religion, culture, and politics.

E. Way Out: Integration of Spirituality in Achieving Gender Equality

The theory of integrating spirituality in achieving gender equality is based on the view that sustainable development must include the spiritual dimensions of human beings, in addition to economic, political, and social aspects. In this context, spirituality is understood as a source of ethical and moral values that can serve as a guideline for creating fair relations between men and women. This concept emphasizes that gender equality cannot be fully achieved only through a secular approach that ignores religious and spiritual dimensions. On the contrary, by integrating spiritual values, the process of achieving gender equality can be more inclusive and in line with cultural and religious norms that apply in

²³ Sisters in Islam, *Are Muslim Women's Rights Human Rights?* (Kuala Lumpur: SIS Forum, 2015), p. 20.

²⁴ Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, *Kedudukan Wanita dalam Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: JAKIM, 2020), p. 7.

²⁵ Nurul Izzah Anwar, *Malaysia's New Dawn: The Role of Religion and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 65.

a particular society.²⁶ In the traditions of major religions, including Islam, spirituality teaches principles such as justice, compassion, and equality, which can be adapted in the context of gender equality.

This approach has received support from several contemporary thinkers who highlight the importance of spirituality in human life. Sayyed Hossein Nasr, for example, emphasizes that spirituality is a fundamental element in a balanced and meaningful life, including in gender relations.²⁷ According to Nasr, the crisis of spirituality in the modern world leads to the distortion of human values, including in the treatment of women. If spirituality is integrated into the development process, then efforts to achieve gender equality will reflect a deeper appreciation of the dignity and rights of women, following the moral principles contained in religious traditions. Thus, the integration of spirituality becomes an alternative solution that can bridge the demands of modernity and religious norms, especially in the context of Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

Empirical data shows that some initiatives have successfully integrated spiritual values into gender empowerment programs at the local level. In Indonesia, organizations such as Rahima and the Indonesian Women's Ulama Congress (KUPI) have used an Islamic-based approach to supporting women's rights, including on issues such as domestic violence and child marriage.²⁸ This approach seeks to reinterpret Islamic teachings that are often misunderstood or distorted to limit women's rights. By incorporating elements of spirituality into discussions about gender equality, these organizations have been able to gain support from religious communities, who may be skeptical of secular approaches. This suggests that the integration of spirituality can be a key to success in creating broader, sustainable social change.

In Malaysia, a similar approach has also begun to be adopted by organizations such as Sisters in Islam (SIS). SIS uses spiritual narratives to deconstruct patriarchal interpretations of religion and promote an understanding of Islam that supports gender equality.²⁹ Through an approach based on Islamic moral values, SIS has succeeded in drawing public and government attention to the importance of reforming laws that discriminate against women. For example, SIS has been involved in advocacy to revise Islamic family law in Malaysia which has tended to favor men in issues of divorce and child custody. This initiative shows that the integration of spirituality is not only theoretically relevant but also has practical implications in promoting fairer and more inclusive policies for women.

However, the biggest challenge in integrating spirituality is the resistance from conservative groups who see gender equality as a threat to traditional values. In the context of Indonesia and Malaysia, these groups often use conservative interpretations of religion to reject ideas about gender equality. This reflects the tension between progressive and conservative interpretations of

religion in understanding the role of women in society.³⁰ Therefore, it is necessary to create an open dialogue space between various stakeholders, including religious scholars, women activists, and the government, to discuss how spirituality can be integrated into public policy without neglecting the values of gender equality.

As a way forward, the integration of spirituality in achieving gender equality requires support from religious institutions and the government. The governments in Indonesia and Malaysia can play an important role by adopting a more inclusive approach in their gender policies, which take into account the spiritual values of the community. In addition, religious institutions need to be encouraged to be more active in supporting women's rights, whether through fatwas, religious education, or religious-based social programs. Thus, the integration of spirituality will not only strengthen efforts to achieve gender equality but also strengthen social cohesion by promoting the values of justice and balance in society.³¹

F. Concluding Remarks

The crisis of spirituality in the SDGs, especially in terms of gender equality, reflects the failure of the global development framework to take into account the role of religion and spirituality. Criticisms by Muslim thinkers such as Sayyed Hossein Nasr and Ziauddin Sardar show that development without spirituality will lose an important dimension in human life. In Indonesia and Malaysia, efforts to realize gender equality cannot be separated from the role of religion. Therefore, the integration of spiritual values in the SDGs is an important step to ensure that sustainable development also includes human spiritual development.

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²⁶ Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God: What Religion Really Means* (London: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 178.

²⁷ Sayyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 97.

²⁸ Rahima, *Laporan Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia* (Jakarta: Rahima, 2017), p. 35.

²⁹ Sisters in Islam, *Islam, Gender, and Reform* (Kuala Lumpur: SIS Forum, 2018), p. 14.

³⁰ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Gender and Equality in Muslim Family Law* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), p. 77.

³¹ Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. 156.

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