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Research Article

Equality in Islam: Contrary Version of Prophetic Traditions and Islamic Theories in Southeast Asia

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Abstract. In Southeast Asia, where Islam interacts with diverse cultures and plural societies, the interpretation of Hadith on equality has undergone significant contra version, reflecting ongoing debates between classical readings and contemporary understandings. This study aims to analyse how Prophetic traditions are employed within Islamic theories to frame equality in Muslim societies of Southeast Asia. Equality is one of the fundamental tenets of Islam, rooted in both Qur'anic guidance and Prophetic traditions that emphasise justice, brotherhood, and human dignity. The study uses a qualitative, field-based methodology that includes observations in places of worship, including madrasahs and pesantrens and interviews with Islamic scholars, educators, and community leaders.

Field research is supplemented by content analysis of a few chosen Hadith and academic publications to show how notions of equality are developed and used. According to a preliminary study, the most recent developments in Islamic thinking emphasise gender justice, economic fairness, and interreligious tolerance, whereas classical interpretations place more emphasis on spiritual and community equality. This suggests that Southeast Asian Muslims are redefining equality in their particular circumstances through a continuous interaction between tradition and modernity. By providing an integrative framework that blends Hadith analysis, Islamic theory, and firsthand Southeast Asian experiences, the research advances both Islamic studies and socio-religious scholarship scientifically.

Keywords: Contra Version, Equality, Hadith, Islamic Theories, Southeast Asia

INTRODUCTION

Islamic teachings place a strong emphasis on equality, which is highlighted in both the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions (Hadith). Islam maintains that all believers, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or status, are equal before Allah; this idea is amply demonstrated in several Hadith and the Prophet Muhammad's Farewell Sermon. However, in reality, there are frequently conflicts between these ideals and experienced realities in Muslim countries. The Hadith on equality is applied in a variety of ways in Southeast Asia, where Islam coexists with other cultures and religions. The fight for equal access to education and gender equity is still being discussed in public in Malaysia and Indonesia. In Brunei, the state's Islamic welfare policies are frequently used to frame economic equality. Interreligious coexistence in Singapore and Southern Thailand demonstrates how Muslims use Hadith interpretation to foster tolerance in heterogeneous communities. These facts highlight how urgent it is to revisit equality in Islam using Islamic theories and prophetic traditions (Bal 2003).

Prior research has examined various aspects of equality in Islam, frequently concentrating on particular topics. Others have emphasized the significance of zakat and waqf in tackling economic injustice, while others have examined gender relations and the roles of women in Muslim society. Others have looked into the Islamic concept of justice for non-Muslims and interfaith interactions. Even if these publications make significant contributions, the majority are still restricted to a single topic or country. There hasn't been enough development of a comparative and thorough approach that incorporates Hadith, Islamic doctrines, and the complex reality of Southeast Asian nations (Sajoo 2012).

This study closes that gap by taking a comprehensive approach to Islamic equality. It blends field-based knowledge from Southeast Asian contexts, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, and Singapore, with Islamic theoretical frameworks and prophetic traditions. The study demonstrates the dynamic interaction between traditional Islamic teachings and the difficulties of

contemporary societies by looking at how equality is understood, negotiated, and implemented in various cultural and political contexts. This study sheds insight on how Muslims in Southeast Asia construe equality in a variety of contexts, including social, economic, and interreligious, in contrast to earlier works that had a more limited focus (Kaundal and Thakur 2014).

This study's main contention is that equality in Islam, which has its roots in Prophetic traditions and is expanded upon by Islamic doctrines, is always being reinterpreted. Persistent contra version in Southeast Asia demonstrates the survival of conventional interpretations as well as the rise of fresh viewpoints that address modern realities. The study argues that, while staying rooted in the timeless authority of Hadith and Islamic theoretical underpinnings, the most recent developments in Muslim cultures in Southeast Asia are redefining discourses on equality by emphasising inclusivity, justice, and pluralism (Bakhshizadeh 2023).

Scholars from a wide range of fields, including sociology, anthropology, jurisprudence, and theology, have extensively examined the Islamic concept of equality. A large body of research highlights how the Qur'an and Hadith repeatedly emphasise humanity's unity and the need for justice in all interpersonal relationships. No Arab is superior to a non-Arab, and no white is superior to a black, unless they are pious and perform good deeds, according to the Prophet Muhammad's Farewell Sermon, which is sometimes recognised as the founding statement of equality. Generations of Muslim academics and reformers have been motivated by this teaching to emphasise the universality of Islamic equality (Lubben and Fawzi 2000).

In Muslim societies, gender equality has been the focus of a substantial amount of research. Research highlights that women's responsibilities, educational opportunities, and leadership involvement continue to be important markers of the practical application of Islamic teachings on equality. Feminist scholars have emphasised how Hadith-based interpretations are being reexamined in Indonesia and Malaysia to protect women's rights in the areas of family law, education, and employment. These discussions are still happening on, with conservative organisations supporting conventional gender hierarchies and reformist movements calling for more inclusive interpretations of prophetic traditions. The region is a crucial location for researching how equality is reinterpreted via religious and cultural negotiations because of these divergent viewpoints, which highlight the dynamic contestations among Muslim civilisations in Southeast Asia (Yahia 2019).

Another body of research examines economic equality, specifically as it relates to the Islamic zakat and waqf institutions. Scholars have demonstrated that these systems are intended to promote social justice and solidarity in addition to income redistribution. For example, state-run Islamic welfare programs in Brunei have been seen as an expression of the Hadith's emphasis on caring for the weak and sharing responsibility. The institutionalization of zakat in Malaysia and Indonesia has also been compared, and the results indicate that although formal mechanisms have

helped distribution, there are still issues with maintaining transparency and reaching underserved populations. These studies show that although Islamic economic principles provide a strong basis for equality, structural and political barriers frequently prevent them from being implemented in practice (Kholis, Rhain, and Mohamed 2025).

Scholarly interest has also been drawn to interfaith interactions and the issue of religious equality, particularly in the setting of multicultural Southeast Asian society. According to study, Muslims in Singapore, for instance, use prophetic traditions to encourage harmony with religious minorities and advance equality through interreligious discussion. Studies show that implementing Islamic principles on justice and equality toward non-Muslims presents both opportunities and obstacles in Southern Thailand, where Muslims live as a minority amid political unrest. These incidents highlight the fact that equality in Islam encompasses the more general idea of fairness across religious and cultural divides and goes beyond gender and economics (Faidin et al. 2025).

Notwithstanding these significant contributions, the literature now in publication frequently concentrates on a particular aspect, such as gender, the economy, or interfaith relations, without incorporating them into a comprehensive framework. Additionally, a large portion of the scholarship is still country-specific, which restricts the ability to draw comparisons across Southeast Asia. There is also a lack of a thorough methodology that links Islamic theoretical frameworks, Prophetic traditions, and the many realities of Southeast Asian countries. By placing the debate of equality within a more comprehensive analytical framework that recognises the interdependence of social, economic, and religious aspects, this study aims to close that gap (Abuabakar and Mohamed 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative field research methodology to examine how Southeast Asians understand and apply the Islamic concept of equality, which is expressed in the Hadith and Islamic ideas. The approach was selected because it enables a thorough examination of social realities, cultural interpretations, and lived experiences that are not possible with just textual analysis. The study seeks to close the gap between normative standards and modern actions by fusing field-based observations with classical Islamic literature (van Oost, Klein, and Yzerbyt 2024).

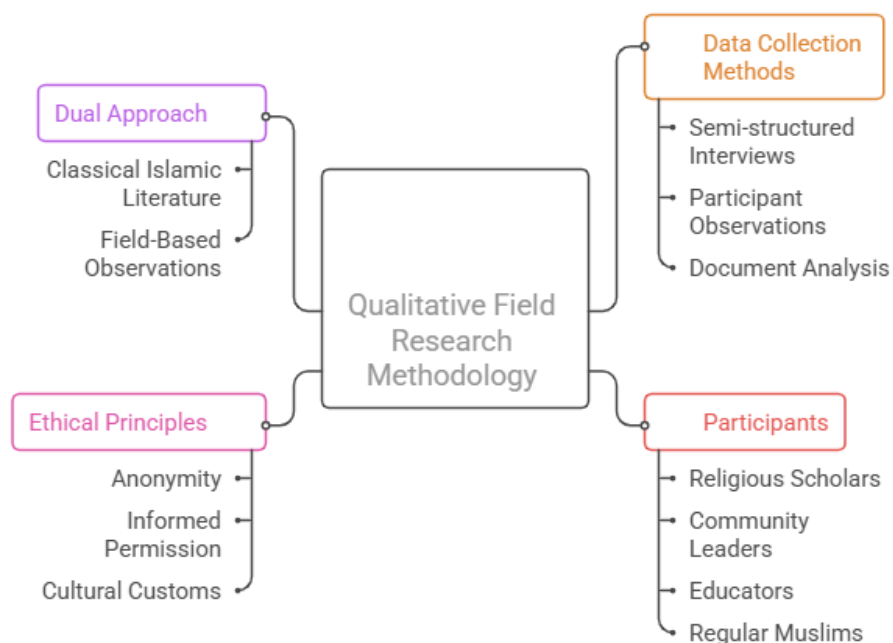
In a few Southeast Asian nations—Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, and Singapore—data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. Religious scholars, community leaders, educators, and regular Muslims who actively participate in equality-related conversations or activities were among the participants. Themes including interfaith

harmony, economic redistribution, and gender justice were discussed in the interviews. To document the contextual manifestations of equality in day-to-day life, observations were made in mosques, Islamic educational institutions, and community groups (Hudson 2014).

Textual examination of Hadith, Qur'anic commentary, and recent Islamic theoretical works that discuss the equality principle were also included in the study. By combining textual analysis with empirical data, this dual approach guarantees that the research covers both the theological underpinnings and the real-world applications of equality in Islam. To find recurring trends, parallels, and distinctions among the chosen nations, data were classified thematically (Jahroni 2003).

Participants' anonymity, informed permission, and observance of regional religious and cultural customs were all strictly adhered to as ethical principles. The methodology offers a thorough framework for comprehending how Muslims in Southeast Asia negotiate and reinterpret the principle of equality in various settings by firmly establishing the study in both traditional Islamic teachings and field realities (Yusdani 2019).

Figure 1: Qualitative Field Research Methodology for Understanding Islamic Equality



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Evolving Interpretations of Equality

According to field study conducted in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand,

and Singapore, Muslims generally acknowledge equality as a fundamental Islamic value that has its roots in both Prophetic traditions and Qur'anic principles. The well-known quote from the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that emphasizes the spiritual and moral equality of all people, "No Arab is superior to a non-Arab, nor is a non-Arab superior to an Arab," was often cited by participants from a variety of backgrounds. and "Adam was made of dust, and all of you are from Adam." Regardless of color, culture, or social standing, these customs served to uphold the fundamental dignity of every individual (Nielson 2020).

However, there were significant differences in how these Hadith were interpreted and applied in different institutions and situations, especially between reformist educators and traditional scholars. These Hadith are typically interpreted by traditional Islamic scholars using a classical framework based on Sufi teachings (tasawwuf) and jurisprudence (fiqh), particularly by those who teach in madrasahs and pesantrens in more conservative areas. Their understanding of equality is mainly spiritual, stressing that piety (taqwa) is the real test of a person's value and that all believers are equal before God. This interpretation frequently upholds the notions of religious hierarchy, brotherhood among Muslims, and social cohesion, where certain roles—particularly those pertaining to gender—are viewed as divinely mandated and therefore unchangeable (Rabab'a et al. 2022).

On the other hand, an increasing number of reformist academics and educators are creating more expansive and socially conscious readings of these same Hadith, especially younger generations who have been schooled in interdisciplinary Islamic studies such as gender studies and human rights. These people frequently use a contextual approach to reinterpret ancient texts, taking into account historical context, societal development, and the greater goals of Islamic law (maqāṣid al-sharī'ah). They contend that inclusive citizenship, economic redistribution, and gender fairness are all supported by the spirit of prophetic traditions. Reformist scholars, for example, stress the moral lesson of justice and respect for one another that is ingrained in the Prophet's general treatment of women and marginalized groups, as opposed to interpreting Hadith about women's responsibilities in ways that limit their agency (Ankit 2021).

In more urbanized and heterogeneous nations like Singapore and Malaysia, where Muslims must engage within multireligious frameworks, these reformist interpretations are especially prevalent. Hadith are frequently cited in similar situations to advocate for anti-discrimination legislation, interfaith cooperation, and civic inclusion. Similarly, reform-minded voices in Indonesia use Prophetic traditions as moral instruments to push for change, highlighting issues like gender-based injustice and economic disparity as issues that Islamic teachings must actively confront. Although institutional interpretations are still more conservative in countries like Brunei and parts of Malaysia, where Islam is the official state religion,

grassroots reformist initiatives are becoming more and more influential (Ankit 2021).

Despite the progressive momentum, the study also found evidence of tension between these newer interpretations and more conservative teachings. Reformist scholars often face resistance when challenging entrenched gender roles or addressing minority rights, especially in areas where religious authority is tightly regulated. Nonetheless, the trend suggests that the Hadith literature is not being rejected or sidelined, but rather actively engaged with, re-contextualized, and reinterpreted to align with present-day realities. This dynamic process reflects how Southeast Asian Muslims are creatively negotiating their religious traditions in a rapidly changing world while striving to uphold the core Islamic ideal of equality (Kersten 2019).

Table 1: Comparative Table: Traditional vs. Reformist Interpretations of Hadith on Equality in Southeast Asia

Aspect	Traditional Interpretation	Reformist Interpretation
Primary Emphasis	Spiritual and communal equality within the Muslim community	Social, gender, and economic justice in the broader society
Approach to Hadith	Literal, textual, or analogical (qiyās); grounded in classical jurisprudence	Contextual, ethical, and maqāṣid (purpose-based) approaches
View on Gender Roles	Complementary roles; men and women are equal spiritually but different in societal function	Equal rights and opportunities; traditional gender roles reinterpreted through justice lens
Economic Justice	Emphasis on personal charity (zakat, sadaqah) as moral obligation	Focus on structural reform, equitable distribution, and social welfare systems
Attitude toward Non-Muslims	Emphasis on intra-Muslim unity; tolerance encouraged but less central	Inclusive citizenship; emphasis on Hadith promoting justice and peaceful coexistence
Educational Institutions	Madrasahs, traditional Islamic schools, pesantrens, boarding	Urban Islamic universities, NGOs, interfaith forums
Dominant Locations	Rural pesantrens in Indonesia, religious institutions in Brunei and conservative areas	Urban centers in Malaysia, Indonesia, and multicultural societies like Singapore and Thailand
Role of Women	Restricted to traditional spaces	Expanding roles in public,

Aspect	Traditional Interpretation	Reformist Interpretation
in Religion	(education, family); leadership roles	few religious leadership, and scholarship
Commonly Quoted Hadith	"The most honorable of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous"	"Women are the twin halves of men" and "None of you truly believes until he loves for others..."
Resistance Faced	Minimal; state and institutional alignment in many areas	Significant; often challenged by religious councils or conservative scholars

Gender Justice as a Central Theme

Gender justice was one of the study's most important subjects, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia, where lively debates over the place and function of women in Islam are changing the way that people talk about religion. Both nations' participants often referenced Hadith literature while discussing the moral underpinnings of gender equality. But the interpretations they used frequently diverged greatly from conventional interpretations, indicating a growing desire for approaches to Islamic scriptures that are contextual and justice-focused (Temperman 2021).

Reinterpreting Hadith that have historically been used to support male authority or female subjugation was evident in numerous field locations, especially urban Islamic institutions, civil society organisations, and progressive pesantrens in Java. In particular, female academics and teachers were instrumental in this intellectual and societal change. In order to make the case that many limiting readings were the result of patriarchal culture rather than the Prophetic message itself, they critically examined Prophetic traditions using techniques including historical contextualization, thematic analysis, and comparison with Qur'anic verses (Asman 2021).

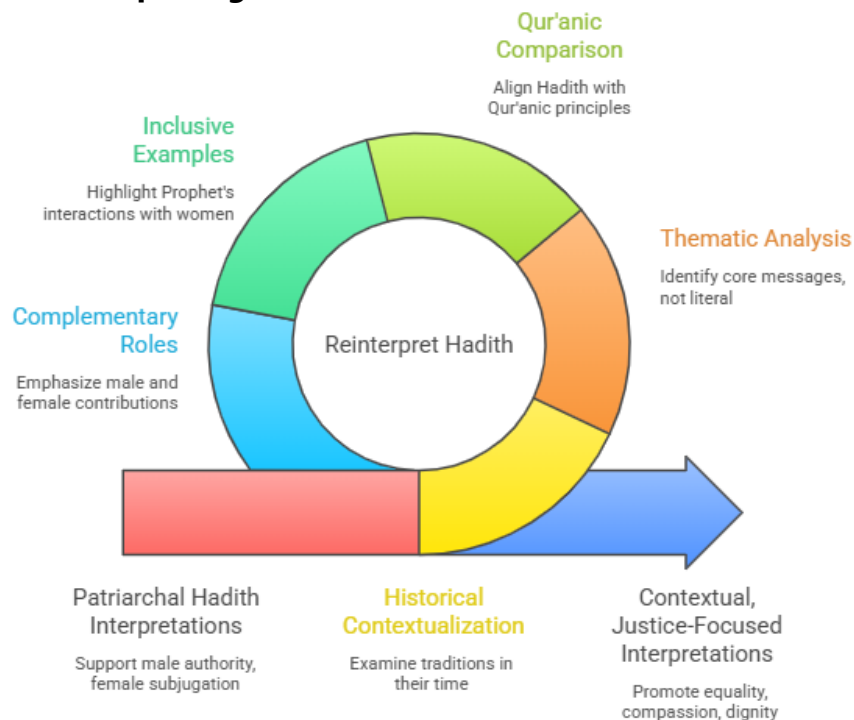
For instance, the Prophet's inclusive behavior toward women—such as consulting with female companions and recognizing their intelligence, agency, and moral integrity—was taken into consideration while reexamining Hadith that have been used to exclude women from positions of public or religious leadership. These academics stressed in both public lectures and classroom settings that the Prophet Muhammad exemplified an ideal of equality and respect, promoting women's active involvement in social service, education, religious life, and even politics (Tilak 1993).

Teachers were seen incorporating this changing conversation into their curricula in pesantrens throughout Java. They urged pupils to think on the complementary nature of male and female contributions to society rather than

restating traditionalist ideas of gender roles as rigid and hierarchical. This did not always result in a complete acceptance of Western feminist concepts, but rather in an Islamic understanding of gender-neutral rahmah (compassion) and adl (justice). In order to reconcile gender justice with the Prophetic objective of eradicating oppression and advancing dignity for all believers, regardless of sex, teachers often presented gender justice as a moral imperative inside Islam (Al-Kohlani 2021).

However, the movement is not without its challenges. In more conservative circles, especially in rural areas or institutions closely aligned with official state religious authorities, resistance to these reinterpretations remains strong. Some respondents expressed concerns that feminist readings of Hadith threaten to destabilize family values or introduce foreign ideologies into Islamic teaching. Despite this, the growing body of female-led scholarship and youth-led discussions suggests a significant cultural and theological shift underway, with Southeast Asian Muslim communities increasingly embracing gender justice not as an import, but as a legitimate and necessary expression of Islamic ethics (Hayes 2025).

Figure 2 : Reinterpreting Hadith for Gender Justice



Economic Equality and Zakat-Based Redistribution

In Brunei and Malaysia, participants strongly connected the institution of zakat and charitable giving with Islamic beliefs of equality, making economic justice a prominent issue. In order to demonstrate that Islam views wealth redistribution as a social and spiritual duty, many referenced Hadith that emphasize the wealthy's

moral need to help the poor, such as "He is not a believer who sleeps satisfied while his neighbor goes hungry."

Community leaders in Brunei, where zakat is centrally managed by the government, spoke of a system that is structured but dynamic. While conventional distribution concentrates on providing short-term assistance to the impoverished and destitute, there is a rising awareness of the need to move toward long-term empowerment through programs like vocational training, microenterprise finance, and education support. These modifications are motivated by both pragmatic concerns about reducing poverty and moral lessons from the Hadith (Raimi, Bello, and Mobolaji 2010).

Zakat institutions in Malaysia are progressively eschewing the charity model, especially in metropolitan areas. Reformist academics and young professionals favor development-focused initiatives financed by zakat. These include entrepreneurship for low-income families, job services, and skill development. Transparency and technology are also becoming more significant; some organizations are using online tools to track and improve the distribution and collection of zakat (Al Subhi and Smith 2019).

Participants did, however, identify difficulties like lengthy bureaucratic processes, low public awareness, and a propensity among certain Muslims to see zakat as a bare legal requirement rather than a more comprehensive moral commitment. Reform-minded voices are still working to reframe zakat as a vehicle for justice rather than merely charity by reeducating communities about Hadith and Islamic ethics.

All things considered, zakat in Southeast Asia is evolving from a ceremonial duty to a calculated tool for achieving economic equality, representing a contemporary interpretation of the teachings of the Prophet in accordance with the conditions of modern Muslim cultures (Ridwan 2013).

Interfaith Relations and Inclusive Citizenship

The function of Hadith in fostering interfaith harmony and inclusive citizenship is another important finding from the field study, particularly in religiously diverse areas like Singapore, Thailand, and portions of Indonesia. Participants emphasized prophetic sayings that emphasize justice, peace, and the dignity of every human being, regardless of faith, especially those involved in civil society activity and interfaith engagement. One Hadith that was often brought up in these conversations was:

"On the Day of Judgment, I am the enemy of whoever harms a dhimmi, a non-Muslim protected by Muslims."

Reformist academics and activists read this Hadith and others as proof of the Prophet's dedication to racial harmony and fair treatment of minorities. For

example, in Singapore, Muslim leaders engaged in state-sponsored interreligious forums applied these principles to promote mutual respect in public life and stronger legal protections for religious minorities (Kaser 2021).

On the other hand, the same Hadith are either minimized or interpreted in a more exclusive context in more conservative areas or where religious orthodoxy is upheld by state processes, as Brunei and some Malaysian states. Although there is typically tolerance in this place, non-Muslims' citizenship rights and legal safeguards are sometimes seen through the prism of Islamic legal systems that distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims (Tønnessen 2011).

However, the field study shows that there is a rising recognition of the need to recast Hadith-based discourses in order to promote pluralism, particularly among young people and interfaith activists. Such inclusive readings, according to reform-minded responders, are based on the moral and universalistic aspects of Prophetic teachings rather than deviating from Islam. In Southeast Asia, this developing conversation is assisting in bridging the gap between contemporary civic principles and Islamic ethics (Tonneau 2016).

Table 2: Comparative Approaches to Hadith on Interfaith Relations in Southeast Asia

Aspect	Traditional Interpretation	Reformist Interpretation
Core Emphasis	Protection and tolerance for non-Muslims under Islamic rule	Equality, mutual respect, and full civic inclusion of all religious groups
Interpretive Lens	Legalistic and hierarchical (e.g., dhimmi status in classical jurisprudence)	Ethical-universalist and maqāṣid-based (purposive interpretation)
Attitude Toward Non-Muslims	Coexistence is permitted but not always encouraged beyond legal frameworks	Interfaith cooperation is encouraged as part of Islamic ethics of justice and peace
Use of Hadith	Used to support hierarchical protection (e.g., rights of dhimmi, limited engagement)	Cited to promote equal dignity (e.g., "Whoever harms a dhimmi...") and active civic inclusion
Civic Participation	Muslims prioritized in governance and law; others included with limitations	All citizens viewed as equal stakeholders in society, regardless of religion
Common Platforms	State-endorsed councils,	religious Interfaith dialogue centers, civil society forums, inclusive

Aspect	Traditional Interpretation	Reformist Interpretation
	jurisprudence seminars	academic settings
Geographical Strongholds	Brunei, conservative regions of Malaysia and Indonesia	Singapore, urban Indonesia, and southern Thailand
Resistance to Change	Minimal; aligns with official religious doctrine in some states	Moderate to high; reformists often face accusations of diluting religious identity
Key Examples	Rarely highlighted Hadith interpreted narrowly (limiting scope of dhimmi protection)	or (e.g., "Whoever harms a dhimmi...", "Help your neighbor, even if he is not a Muslim")

Youth Engagement and Digital Hadith Literacy

The study's findings about how younger generations interact with Hadith, particularly in digital contexts, were particularly intriguing. There is growing evidence of "digital Hadith literacy" in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Some respondents used this word to characterize the phenomena of young people using social media, mobile apps, and online platforms to access, understand, and discuss Prophetic traditions (Johnson-Bashua 2018).

It has been noted that student associations, youth-led Islamic collectives, and influencers on social media sites like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok use Hadith to address current issues like gender roles, mental health, environmental ethics, and even political accountability in addition to promoting spiritual growth. These conversations frequently show how traditional respect for Hadith is combined with critical thinking and current relevance (Guessous 2016).

The widespread use of Hadith on compassion, humility, and reliability in mental health initiatives by Muslim youth organizations is one prominent example. In order to encourage discussions on emotional wellbeing, de-stigmatize mental illness, and foster empathy, hadith such as "God does not show mercy to those who do not show mercy to others" are being reinterpreted (Palizban 2019).

But there are drawbacks to this democratization of Hadith interpretation as well. Concerns regarding the selective or decontextualized use of Hadith online, which could result in misconceptions or cursory readings, were voiced by a few instructors. The dangers of avoiding scholarly vetting and ancient commentary were pointed out by traditional scholars. As a result, reformist educators are pushing media literacy more and more in tandem with Islamic education to give young people the skills they need to interact critically with digital religious information (Tang and Lui 2024).

Intergenerational Dialogue and Communal Identity

The study also shown how, in Muslim communities in Southeast Asia, Hadith involvement serves as a link between generations—or perhaps a source of conflict. Older generations continue to identify Hadith mostly with moral behavior, ritual instruction, and the transfer of religious authority through established intellectual structures. Hadith is widely viewed by younger Muslims, especially those who are surrounded by digital cultures, as a tool for navigating contemporary identities and tackling global issues(Mofidi 2022).

This has led to both peaceful and tense periods in family environments. Some parents were proud of their kids' use of Hadith to encourage compassion, fairness, and volunteerism. Some, however, were concerned that young people's readings lacked nuance, particularly when they were separated from traditional commentary. Thus, intergenerational discussions about Hadith reflect larger cultural debates between adaptation and preservation, continuity and change(Petersen 2018).

Remarkably, intergenerational study circles have been organized by community organizations in Malaysia and Singapore, where young people and seniors read Hadith together. Frequently, facilitators contextualize Prophetic traditions for both traditional and modern issues. These forums not only safeguard authenticity but also validate the voices of younger Muslims, affirming their role in shaping the future of Islamic discourse. The negotiation of Hadith across generations therefore highlights its dual role: as a transmitter of timeless values and as a living, dynamic resource that adapts to evolving social realities(Mustika and Warman 2025).

CONCLUSION

Through the interaction of classical scholarship, modern reformist ideas, and lived social realities, this study shows that the interpretation of Hadith on equality in Southeast Asia is dynamic and always changing. Recent developments emphasize gender justice, economic fairness, and interreligious harmony—issues that are highly relevant in the region's varied communities, whereas older readings place more emphasis on the spiritual and communal aspects of equality. According to the findings, Muslim communities in Southeast Asia are actively balancing tradition and modernity, using Prophetic traditions to both solve current issues and maintain continuity. The flexibility of Islamic teachings and the timeless value of Hadith as a moral and social code are highlighted by this dynamic process. By situating Hadith interpretation within the broader context of Southeast Asian experiences, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how Islamic principles are localized and reimagined. Ultimately, equality emerges not merely as a doctrinal ideal but as a lived and evolving practice, sustained by both classical foundations

and the creative agency of present-day Muslims.

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