

## Female Ulama's Authority: Deconstructing Masculine Domination in Islamic Norms and Practices

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### ABSTRACT

*The network of Indonesian Women's Ulema under KUPI has emerged to become a new reform in a religious landscape tinted with masculine domination. This paper aims to explain the KUPI's conceptual hermeneutical framework in producing religious interpretations and the implication of the approach on constructing inclusive gender norms and practices. This qualitative research is based on the results of interviews and literature studies as the primary data. This study demonstrates that the collective agency and power of KUPI network and its authoritative claim allowed the emergence of an inclusive production of religious interpretations and norm. As a result, it creates room for women's voice and contribution within the social and religious normative frame. The significance of this study shows that the authority of female as ulama and the hermeneutical approach in the one hand, and in the other hand inclusive gender paradigm is allowing the KUPI network to initiate a reform in both social and religion domains. This research recommends further studies to uncover the challenges and dynamics of the network in creating a new direction of Islam in Indonesia and Muslim World.*

**Keywords:** *Female ulama, authority, collective agency, hermeneutics, religious reform*

*"This Congress aims to consolidate the power of Female Ulema in Indonesia by creating a space in which the various parts of the women's movements come in synergy to solve issues regarding Islam, the nation, and kemanusiaan (humanity). Sketching out a new visage of religious social practices concerning woman condition, the launching of the first Indonesian Female Ulama Congress (KUPI-Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia) sought to become a new reform in a religious landscape tinted with masculine domination (Bourdieu 2001). Opposing the historical reclusion and marginalization of women in the religious field, this women cleric's network appears as a milestone in the history of Indonesian women. Heir to Qasim Amin, Tahar Haddad, and Fatima Mernissi's line of thought, this network intended not only to address gender issues but to produce and disseminate new hermeneutics in reading women's authority, role, and status within religious arena. Drawing a silent revolution, on the side lines of secular feminists, the first Indonesian Female Ulama Congress provided a stage for women ulema's voices to contest the standardized male-biased interpretations through hermeneutical and gender-based approach.*

*The religious *aggiornamento* initiated by female ulema key claim lies in the idea that women have always been viewed as the Other of men (Beauvoir 1949). Indeed, women's condition and*

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status in Islamic thought have been discussed and thought in relation to man perspective and power (Mir-Hosseini 2014). The process of Ijtihad understood by classical Muslim jurists as the exertion of mental energy in the quest for a legal opinion to unveil the meaning of God's law, is believed to have ended by consent from Muslim clerics in the ninth century. The belief in the "myth of the closure gate of ijtihad" (Hallaq 1984), was reperculated on the history of women's legal Islamic thought. Indeed, the claim for a holistic and didactic understanding of the sacred texts by female ulema comes in opposition with the common assumption that *ijtihad* ceased. KUPI emerges to criticize the sacralization of Islamic legal law that led to freezing legal thought on women's condition in time and space. Research on KUPI so far emphasized on female ulema individual agency and leadership in specific context of society (Cordaid 2013; Isnaini 2016), KUPI's concern on particular issues such as polygamy, child marriage, and sexual harassment, KUPI's references to the Qur'an (Ulfiyati 2019; Kusmana 2019), and its role in strengthening the voice of civil Islam (Nisa 2019).

This study aims to understand the KUPI's conceptual hermeneutical framework in producing inclusive gender religious interpretations, in a country in which religion plays a crucial role. Focus on KUPI's network approach on reading Islamic Texts and its implementation in the practices have been rarely found. Therefore, this study proposes to complete previous studies, to answer these following questions: *First*, how KUPI Network deconstruct the masculine domination in the field of religion? *Second*, what is the structure of hermeneutic in reading religious texts they propose; *third*, what is the implication of the approach on constructing inclusive gender norms and practices. These three questions, aside from guiding the structure of this study, also serve to map the social acceptance of the authority of female ulama in Indonesia.

Religion in the Indonesian context is an important factor for the implementation of any social reform. This KUPI network laying on the authority of female ulema brings questions on religious legitimacy and its correlation to symbolic power but also on how it might impact the set of legal interpretations of holy texts as well as the nature of the agents of change. The following parts of this paper move on to describe in greater detail this double countervailing power expressing itself both within the frame of clerical structures and in the political sphere. The rereading of sacred texts by this network of female ulema with a global perspective, therefore, aims by making essential distinctions between universal verses, situational verses, and specific ones to understand its context and its scope of application. In a deconstructive perspective, this differentiation allows a study of the significations of verses according to the contexts of revelation through different reading registers between the temporal, the universal.

## Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative study conducted on twelve female ulamas, members of KUPI network. These data have been linked by interviews conducted with three additional Kyais who have a prominent role in the movement. We conducted semi-structured interviews, in-depth life stories, and formal interviews. In addition, through the digital platforms. researchers tried to broadcast a set of data regarding the reception, the dissemination, and the activism from this network. Indeed, the investment of the digital sphere by females provided on the first hand a space for discussion for congress participants to extend the reflections initiated within the first Congress of 2017. The literature written by participants has been used as a backdrop in this research. All the data collected have been transcribed, classified into categories that we will expose within this article.

## Women Agency and the Budding Shadow of Indonesian Women Intellectual Movement

The literature tried in the first instance to "fill in the gaps" left by the prior male by writing down the existence of women or drawing attention to discriminatory practices. The rise of women's feminist consciousness in Indonesia has been closely related in early studies to the nascent culture of "modernity." In a time of deep social and political turmoil, women gave a voice and an

expression to their agency by developing a gender culture within the framework of a rethought Islam and a nation in construction. Rooted in the nineteenth-century transformative change, the scholarship on the emerging Indonesian women's movement focused first and foremost on the twentieth century and therefore remained grasped between the prism of colonial modernity and Islamic reformism projects. Both perspectives stifle women's individual agency (Anwar, 2018).

KUPI is contemporary to the first congress of Indonesian women, in which this constellation of women organizations came together on the 22nd December 1928 in Yogyakarta (Kongres Wanita Indonesia 1978). The congress became a milestone in history denoting the yearning for unity (Gunawan 1993:102) from Indonesian women during the pre-independence period (Hafidz 1993:95). The political agenda of the women's movement was initially focusing on the social field and became the backbone of the idea of progress in a nation under construction (Abby, 2019). This congress brought together more than a thousand participants and thirty women's organizations. Gathering women from the whole Archipelago, the successive meetings of the congress attempted to reaffirm women's unity despite the diversity of the nature of their revendications. The voices of women trying to make themselves heard between the echoes of *Gamelan* and Islamic *anasheed* were soon to be gagged by internal dissidents' thoughts. The polarisation of thoughts between secular and religious feminism and the urgent need for a newly independent nation to be built prevented the establishment of a strong united feminist movement focusing on women's condition.

The establishment of the New Order regime by Soeharto tightened the stranglehold of gender regulation based on Javanese values from the priyayi social class. This institutionalization of gender has been theorized by Julia Suryakusuma, through the notion of "state ibuism" (Suryakusuma 2011). The latter depoliticizes women by defining them primarily by their status as wives and mothers. Linking women's movement to sexual perversion the regime not only labeled the woman movement in a negative way but also developed a "biopolitics" in line with its ideology and freezes the vitality of an independent women's movement (Wieringa 2010). In response to this phenomenon women clerics involved in Islamic organizations moved away from the institutionalized movement in a pietist withdrawal. Religious women-based organizations, like Aisiyah, Fatayat, or Wanita Islam (PERSIS) have been studied under the spectrum of social activism (Roviana 2014; Ruhiani Dzuhayatin 2015; Siti Syamsiyatun 2007). However, little attention has been given by scholars to the inner life of these organizations which allowed women to develop the buds of an intellectual movement of thought. The launching of a women's press, the investment of religious spaces, their participation in joint congresses, consolidated a certain public legitimacy, allowing them to develop an independent thinking alongside the proliferation and modernization of educational institutions for them. The lack of attention to the inner life of these structures has put a veil on temporalities which allowed the epistemological revolution, laying in the heart of KUPI's movement.

### **The Silent Tradition of Women's Reformers**

The legacy of Rahma El- Joenesijjah (1900-1969) who fought for women's education in Islamic reformist circles propelled a tradition of inclusion for women in reformist projects (Wati 2021). Indeed, alongside nationalist projects the two biggest Islamic organizations in Indonesia the Muhammadiyah created in 1912, and Nahdatul Ulama in 1926, opened women's wings. Creating important networks to promote social and political activism for women across the archipelago, the sub-organization Aisiyah created in 1917 was the first organization of its kind in the Islamic world of women (Dzuhayatin 2009). The aim of these organizations to spread the idea of Islamic reformism throughout their established networks evolved in the direction of reform for woman's condition. Micro steps towards reform and women's autonomy within these structures can be read between the lines of debates around their participation in national congress that required traveling without a man tutor, or their participation in *Majlis Tardjih*. Their faith in the written word encouraged them to develop a press, which articles unveiled the range of public roles that they undertook as well as their engagement in political and religious debates.

The independence of the republic of Indonesia in 1945 brought about political equality, the right to education, and access to employment for middle-class women. The involvement of women in the anti-colonial struggle made the granting of these rights natural. However, this equality in political terms was hard to extend to areas of "kodrat," (natural difference), i. e: family relations. As discussed above the correlation between women's bodies and national identity is very strong. Motherhood gives to women the role of "biological reproducer of the nation," this conception, therefore, makes the woman's body the ultimate signifier and symbol of the nation. The first public election in 1955, integrated women's organizations such as *Wanita Demokrat*, or *Gerakan Wanita Indonesia* (Rahayu 1996:30-31). However, this involvement in politics has been made under the leadership of men who continued to inscribe their political projects by nurturing their ideology and defending a sacred and traditional conception of "kodrat". The importance attached to womanhood let some fundamental questions on the material lives of women fluctuate according to the color of political agendas. Women from Muslim organizations actively encouraged women to engage themselves within the parliament as it allowed better representations for women and their interests (Fadli 2017). They played an important role in the emergence of various polemics regarding Islam and politics protesting against polygamy which they considered as outdated for instance (-For example is the opposition of women's religious organizations against Soekarno who decided to marry a second wife in 1954. "*Poligami yang bikin wanita serupa perabot rumah*" was a slogan widely used to oppose this decision and defend Fatmawati (Soekarno's wife). Their engagement in social and political activism alongside the democratization of education allowed them in the meantime to develop informal hermeneutics to stand out against discriminations legitimated by some religious interpretations.

The political downfall of the Suharto "New Order" in Indonesia, may have played a vital role in bringing about the professionalization of women in the Islamic knowledge field. Women's organizations' reports witnessed a change in the nature of these discriminations triggering Indonesian Islam (Bruinessen 2013:1) with the emergence on its national territory of growing trends from radical Islamic groups targeting woman's condition (Wahid Foundation 2016). Indeed, it opened the way for democracy, but also the participation of political Islam previously banned under the authoritarian rule of the regime. Women consequently became the receptacle of the crystallization of tensions, from various political actors trying to project their ideology expressed in most visibly through behavior and body regulations. However, woman's agency should not be put to the margin of the progress of scripturalist Islam in Indonesian society. Indeed, some partisan women engaged themselves in the effort of *Dakwa* (Islamic missionary) launching programs in the public, private and digital sphere to defend a virtuous Islamic society (Rachel Rinaldo 2008). By way of illustration some interviews conducted with members of Muslimah Hizbut-Tahrir for instance, before its dismissal in 2017, revealed opposition to gender equality seen as "un-Islamic and contrary to the Islamic doxa regarding" (Inayah 2020). This case has shown that the activism of some female Islamist groups in the public sphere, led some female ulema to answer by developing an alternative Islamic gender theology opposing some growing discourses discriminating against women.

### **Female Ulama Protesting for Intellectual and Religious Authority on Religious Texts**

Attended by more than thousands of female ulema coming from all over Indonesia, KUPI was introduced by an international conference "Amplifying Women Ulema's Voice, Asserting Values of Islam, Nationhood, and Humanity" with speakers from Indonesia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Nigeria (Republika 2017). The name of KUPI is associated with the congress of scholars, specifically female ulema in 2017 and used by this network of female ulema to identify those who are involved with or support KUPI movement. The decision to launch this Congress with an international panel emphasizes the willingness of its agents to locate these issues on the Islamic world level. *Shalawat* (melodic prayers and salutations from the Quran) recomposed and sung with strong messages for gender justice paved the way for female voices to express themselves through talk shows, national seminars, and discussions in panels. Through

intellectual, cultural, and nationalist expressions KUPI initiated for the first time in the history of the Islamic world, an institutionalized religious aggiornamento regarding gender issues.

By relocating the role of female ulema in history, the congress aimed to recognize and to legitimate female's ulema contemporary intellectual initiatives. The opening speech delivered by Badriyah Fayumi underlined the historical marginalization of women: "*the role and place of a female ulema in Indonesian history are great and significant, however, history put aside their existence*" (Fayumi 2017). The rarity of their existence in sources, in historiography, and the reality of male domination in religious enterprise silences their voices and let their contribution to Islamic thought unrecorded (Fayumi 2017). Kyai Husein Muhammad underlines in his discourse the very on the ground investment of women:

"Female ulemas in pesantren (Quranic school) have taught Quran, Kitab Kuning (Yellow Book), Kitab Kuning ( Traditional set of texts in Arabic scripts studied in Pesantrens (Islamic boarding schools), some have led prayers and were imam, and others were active in philanthropy" (Muhammad 2017).

The highlighting of this history and social reality regarding the role that women played in the religious sphere by the eminent stakeholders of the congress is a way to express the *esprit de corps* of this movement aiming for religious reform. Evolving social uses of Islamic knowledge throughout the centuries impacted women's role in *keulamaan* (Religious Scholars).

The religious authority of women and the legitimacy to become "ulama" therefore not only constitute the pillar of the KUPI community but can also be considered as a "rational disposition" by the stakeholders of the congress (Fayumi 2017). Our fieldwork showed that from both historical and social perspectives, their intellectual engagement in theology aims to deconstruct the structure of religious authority by contesting the masculine domination and therefore the bias of legal authority. Indeed, the epistemic nature of authority (Watt 1982), embodies both concepts of change and continuity. Indeed, the inner dynamics of *taqlid* (loyalty to legal authority) didn't fully silence divergent opinions but it sustained particular understandings of concepts such as *qiwamah* (leadership) or *wilayah* (fields), mandating men's authority over women. The shared belief of KUPI members on religious discourse and social religious practices that are deemed to be the source of gender discrimination is therefore at the core of the thought of this reforming movement (Masruchah 2020). As a way of illustration Nur Rofiah historically and exegetically relocates the common understanding of a widespread concept in women's Islamic jurisprudence: *qiwamah* understood as guardianship and reinforcing masculine domination. The common belief shared by KUPI agents, therefore, counter the exegesis that women have been "created from a man's rib," which is at the source of the establishment and the legitimation of masculine domination in religion (Nur Rofiah 2017).

### **Deconstructing Masculine Domination in Islamic Norms and Practices: Hermeneutical Reading**

The female *ulama* network developed hermeneutics to produce a reformed *tafsir* (exegetical work) based on social justice. The *tawhidic* paradigm initially developed by Amina Wadud inspired them to construct an understanding of concepts that overcomes gender inequality within the spectre of religion. The essence of this paradigm disallows any kind of exploitation towards human beings, nature, on behalf of anything (Nur Rofiah 2017). By settling ultimate justice as the parameter to understand religious text, KUPI's members 'will is to develop a more inclusive tafsir (Masruchah 2020).

"Our perspective takes social justice and women's social and biological experience as the main lens and condition to interpret sacred texts. Because we were biologically born as women we have a different perspective, a perspective that we put in the service of social justice for women" (Rofiah 2020)

Various institutions created some spaces for reflection to develop hermeneutical tools at the service of the KUPI network. Faqihuddin, one of the founders of Fahmina Institute in 2000 along with Kyai Husein Muhammad, and Marzuki Wahid has developed the concept of *Mubadalah* (reciprocity, equality). This institute invited members from *pesantren* to initiate a tradition of critical awareness and thinking on social and religious issues.

The principle of *Mubadalah* is understood not as exclusive obligations for women but through reciprocal logic, and disseminated through literature, workshops, congress.

“In wife-husband relations, for example, a wife can serve the husband if the husband serves the wife as well. The term of that understanding is called *Mubadalah*. *Mubadalah* or reciprocity. Islam is available for both man and woman, so all of its texts must place both man and woman as subject. Equally, they will receive benefits from the Quran. Not seeing one as a subject (men) and the other as an object. Even if such verses exist, their nature is contextual. So it must be interpreted today in two directions, with a *Mubadalah*, to see it, understanding from the perspective of women also.”

This *mubadalah* paradigm would contribute to producing gender-equal narration in the religious realm and is located as the basis for KUPI's hermeneutical reading on religious texts.

Relying on female ulema's intellectuality and authority, KUPI's network employs new methods in understanding religious texts (Marcoes 2017) and promoting gender justice in the production of religious texts and practices. The Quranic concept of Justice (*al- 'adl*) and the salvation of the plight of the downtrodden on earth (*al-mustad'ifun fil-ard*) lay at the core of their perspective. The developed hermeneutic is based on a paradigm highlighting equally the importance of the text, empirical reality, and women's particular biological and social needs (Rofiah 2017: 49).

This KUPI network portrays how gender-based oppressions encourage female ulema's mobilization for social change (Crossley & Hurwitz 2013). Driven by intellectual figures and supported by religious institutions KUPI is challenging conservative and discriminative religious discourse and practices. Confronted with reactionary currents that have taken advantage of the instrumentalization of religion, this alternative non-patriarchal new theology, and discourse (Rofiah 2018), is drawing a new visage for Indonesian Islam. By way of illustration, Chuzaifah (2020), shows how the data for religious organizations as well as women organizations confluence in the set of values, both reclaiming themselves from nationalist, humanist and equality will.

The power of KUPI and its authoritative claim allowed the emergence of an inclusive perspective of religion and as a result, creates room for women's voice and contribution within the religious and political normative frame. The emission of a set of *fatwa* during the first congress was a major turning point regarding the recognition and acceptance of their religious authority in the context of religious conservatism in Indonesia. The significance of this study shows that the authority of female as ulama and the hermeneutical approach in the one hand, and in the other hand inclusive gender paradigm and collective agency are allowing the network to initiate a reform in both social and religion domains. Indeed, KUPI's movement has implemented changes both in terms of religious discourses and social practices. This study shows that the nature and the hermeneutical reading of KUPI's network complete the previous research that sees KUPI only as a civil Islamic movement that challenged other women's movements (Nisa 2019). This paper illustrated that conservative trends contesting the authority of KUPI gave the impetus to the launching of this network.

To conclude, one could say that the intellectual nature of this KUPI network raised the questions of established domination in religious authority. This study unveiled three important things, *first*, the female leadership and the evolving narrative developed by them led women's social movement to embrace an epistemic nature to achieve social and religious reform. *Second*, this study underlined the role of religious institutions and religious leaders as the guardians of Islamic traditions and possible change. Their authority in Islamic knowledge paired with their shared beliefs on gender equality and hermeneutics led to the creation of more inclusive religious norms and practice in the midst of masculine domination of religion in contemporary Indonesia.

Third, the acknowledgment and support from Kyais and male ulemas and the governmental and international institutions, such as the Ministry for Religious Affairs and the United Nations, show the social acceptance and significant of this network. Here, KUPI as collective agency is not only shaping Indonesian Islam but also directing the better future of women and society in the country.

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