

Chronicles of a Collective Claim to Religious Authority: KUPI's Women Ulama

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

This paper chronicles KUPI's collective claim to religious authority for women ulama in Indonesia, from the perspective of the initiators of this movement. It reveals some of the thought process behind key actions taken by KUPI during its first decade in making this collective claim, particularly on how KUPI locates itself in Indonesia's multiple histories of struggle towards social justice, how it constructs its broad-based and inclusive movement in order to make its bold claim, and how recognition of religious authority takes form at the community level and in the personal lives of KUPI's women ulama. This chronicle draws on the authors' engagements, analysis, and reflections as part of the initiators and leadership of KUPI.

KEYWORDS

Women ulama, religious authority, collective claim

Introduction

Throughout the history of Islam since the time of the Prophet, women ulama have prevailed and contributed to shaping Islamic civilization but our presence and role have been marginalized by a history unilaterally constructed over centuries.

The existence of women ulama with our roles and responsibilities throughout time is, essentially, the calling of our faith and a historical inevitability.

This statement was made as part of a pledge in front of around 600 women ulama¹ who came from various parts of the country at a traditional Muslim boarding school, Pesantren Kebon Jambu, located in a small town at the outskirts of Cirebon in West Java. On this occasion, the first convening of the Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama (known by its Indonesian acronym, KUPI), the women ulama committed to eliminating all forms of injustice by claiming the right to interpret Islamic texts as equal inheritors (alongside male ulama) of the Prophet's mission on Earth. This pledge, known as the Ikrar Kebon Jambu, closes with an added affirmation that the women ulama are also citizens who bear rights and the responsibility of achieving the nation's aspirations as stipulated in Indonesia's constitution, including to uphold equality and human rights for all.

The national convening on 27–29 April 2017 was a unique moment that witnessed the inaugural articulation of KUPI's autonomous voice representing a new community of Indonesian women ulama. While there have been other occasions in Indonesia's history when religiously-learned Muslim women have publicly expressed their collective voice, this occasion was distinct in two ways. First, KUPI was established outside existing, mainstream, religious mass organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah,² and is open to people coming from diverse Islamic organizations and traditions. Second, KUPI's definition of women ulama is inclusive of male ulama who commit themselves to the struggle for gender

¹ In Indonesian, the word 'ulama' is used both to indicate reference to the singular and plural.

² There is a multitude of Islamic mass organizations in Indonesia, however, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah are considered the largest, with memberships estimated to be around 95 million and 60 million people, respectively, in a country with a total population of 280 million.

equality. It also welcomes secular women's rights activists who constructively engage with religious communities. As a result of this unique amalgam, KUPI stands distinct from other spaces led by religiously-learned Muslim women who organize at massive levels in Indonesia.

Amidst the growing academic literature on KUPI's production of religious knowledge, this paper chronicles KUPI's collective claim to religious authority for women ulama in Indonesia. It draws on the authors' engagements, analysis, and reflections as some of the initiators and leadership of KUPI.

Indonesia's Women Ulama: Trajectories of a Public Life

Indonesia's women ulama have had a public role since the early 1900s when the country was still a colonized nation. To raise public awareness on the rich and bold public lives of Indonesian women ulama, the KUPI initiators published a book entitled *Journeys of Struggle: The Religious Leadership of Indonesia's Women Ulama*³ for its inaugural convening in 2017. The book provides the profiles of 18 women who utilize their religious knowledge to introduce new thinking, measures, and institutions in their respective communities based on the principle of equality between men and women in Islam. Some of the 18 women included were born in the late 1800s and occupied public roles that were recorded since the early 1900s. By including these women, KUPI established itself as part of, and a continuation of, a century-long history of the public role and leadership of women ulama in Indonesia. The book, along with a commitment to further document past and current journeys of women ulama, adds to the wealth of evidence backing KUPI's argument that the existence and role of women ulama in Islam, and in Indonesia specifically, is a historical inevitability borne out of a strong genealogy of women leaders in the region.

It is worth highlighting three women in the book who had prominent public roles during the first half of the 20th century. The profiles of these women illustrate the significance of a religious education within the family at a time

³ KH Helmi Ali Yafie, ed., *Jejak Perjuangan: Keulamaan Perempuan Indonesia*, (Jakarta, KUPI, 2017). Also see KUPI's digital encyclopedia (in Indonesian): <https://kupipedia.id/index.php/Ulama> *Perempuan Dalam Sejarah Islam Indonesia*.

when formal schooling for girls did not exist. Moreover, it shows how the public roles of women ulama were shaped by broader socio-political struggles of their time.

Siti Walidah (1872–1946), later known as Nyai Ahmad Dahlan, was the daughter of a prominent ulama in Yogyakarta and married Ahmad Dahlan, founder of Muhammadiyah, one of Indonesia's largest Islamic mass organizations. In 1914, two years after Muhammadiyah's founding, she led a women's initiative promoting literacy and Qur'anic studies.⁴ Five years later, Aisyiyah, Muhammadiyah's women's wing, opened a kindergarten and later a school for female teachers. A strong advocate for gender partnership in marriage and against forced marriage, Siti Walidah remained active in Muhammadiyah and Aisyiyah after her husband's death in 1923, even chairing a Muhammadiyah summit in 1926.⁵ Both organizations grew as part of the anti-colonial movement. Aisyiyah participated in Indonesia's first women's congress in 1928, which marked women as a united political force. In 1930, Muhammadiyah issued a fatwa allowing women to speak publicly before mixed audiences. During the Japanese occupation Aisyiyah was banned, though Siti Walidah continued her resistance through teaching.⁶

Rahmah El-Yunusiah (1900–1969) was born into a respected family of ulama in Minangkabau, West Sumatra.⁷ Her father was a qadi and scholar of astronomy, and her mother came from a lineage of prominent ulama. Her brother, a reformer fluent in several languages, founded an Islamic school in 1915 where Rahmah studied both Arabic and Latin script. Unsatisfied with the school's lack of focus on women's issues, she formed a study group with four other women to explore these concerns. Married at 16 to a progressive young ulama, she amicably divorced after six years. In 1923, she founded an Islamic school for women at a local mosque that offered courses in religious studies, Arabic grammar, and other life skills. She also opened a literacy school for housewives and trained in midwifery, first aid, and physical

⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵ Rohmatun Lukluk Isnaini (2016), "Ulama Perempuan dan Dedikasikan dalam Pendidikan Islam (Telaah Pemikiran Rahmah El-Yunusiah)," *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 4, no. 1 (2016): 13.

⁶ See <https://tirta.id/sejarah-3-januari-lahirnya-siti-walidah-atau-nyai-ahmad-dahlan-dda4> and <https://beritaalternatif.com/emansipasi-perempuan/>. Accessed 22 July 2024.

⁷ Yafie, ed., *Jejak Perjuangan*, 147.

education at a Dutch school, earning her a certification as a midwife. In 1933, Rahmah led a public protest against colonial policies targeting local schools and indigenous marriages and was fined 100 gulden for “speaking on politics”.⁸

Khoiriyah Hasyim (1906–1983), daughter of Nahdlatul Ulama founder Hasyim Asy’ari, was raised in the reformist environment of Pesantren Tebuireng in East Java. At 13, she married one of her father’s top students who later led the pesantren and introduced modern subjects like science and the Latin alphabet.⁹ Both her father and husband were key influences in her religious education. In 1933, Khoiriyah co-founded *Pesantren Seblak*, an institution that educated both male and female students. After her husband’s death, she remarried and moved to Mecca, where she opened the first women’s madrasah in 1942 and served pilgrims while engaging in trade. She stayed connected to Indonesia through articles in *Gema Insani*, encouraging critical thinking and a spirit of struggle among female students. Returning to Indonesia in 1969, she took over *Pesantren Seblak* and expanded its curriculum to include the sciences and current affairs, as well as setting up a library and newspaper subscriptions for students. She supported the government’s family planning program, believing that it was necessary to reduce maternal mortality and poverty and encouraged women to earn their own income as a means of achieving well-being in both this world and the hereafter.¹⁰

These life stories demonstrate how women’s religious knowledge in the early 1900s required progressive male family members and explains why their

⁸ Alfatikha Ainia Prihadi, “Kontribusi Rahmah El Yunusiyah dalam Pengembangan Pendidikan Islam Perempuan di Indonesia,” in *Sejarah Tokoh dan Pelaksanaan Pendidikan Perempuan di Indonesia*, Cornelius Bayu Astana, et al. (Klaten: Penerbit Lakeisha, 2023), 110.

⁹ Mahrus As’ad (2012), “Pembauran Pendidikan Islam Hasyim Asy’ari,” *Jurnal TSAQFAH* 8, no. 1 (2012): 105-134. See also Yafie, ed., *Jejak Perjuangan*, 239.

¹⁰ Wildan Ichzha Maulana, “Nyai Hj. Khoiriyah Hasyim 1908-1983: Putri Jombang Pelopor Pendidikan Perempuan dan Pejuang Emansipasi,” in *Sejarah Tokoh dan Pelaksanaan Pendidikan Perempuan di Indonesia*, Cornelius Bayu Astana, et al. (Klaten: Penerbit Lakeisha, 2023), 15–29.

pathways in public life started with the issue of girls' education.¹¹ When Islam was emerging as a socio-political force in the resistance against Dutch colonial rule,¹² educating girls was an emancipatory mission linked to the broader nationalist struggle for independence. As Islamic mass organizations, like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, grew in strength with the rise of Indonesia's nationalist movement, affiliated women actively organized to recruit other women from their respective religious communities. They formed the women's wings of their respective parent organizations, supporting the shared struggle by providing "cultural and social skills as mothers and wives".¹³ They also engaged with secular women's organizations from diverse political orientations by taking part in the struggle for a free and united Indonesia, beginning with Aisyiyah's participation in the first Women's Congress in December 1928.¹⁴

While the public life of women ulama was established early in Indonesia's history, the development of an autonomous voice evolved through a gradual progression under a sovereign Indonesia. After independence in 1945 and the first national elections in 1955, political factionalism ensued in the new sovereign country. Organized Muslim women in the women's wings of Islamic mass organizations fell in line with the position of their affiliated male-dominated parent bodies. When a bill on marriage was debated in the national parliament, these Islamic women's wings stood apart from secular women's groups by supporting the legalization of polygamy.¹⁵ For two decades, the country was in the grips of continuous power struggles amongst the political parties that culminated in mass violence in the mid-1960s. Subsequently, Indonesia suffered 32 years of authoritarianism under

¹¹ The noted women were contemporaries of Kartini (1879–1904), a prominent women's rights advocate from Central Java whose letters with European feminists are read internationally and is officially recognized as a national hero in Indonesia.

¹² As'ad, "Pembaruan Pendidikan Islam," 105–134.

¹³ Etin Anwar, *A Genealogy of Islamic Feminism: Pattern and Change in Indonesia*, (London: Routledge, 2018), 38.

¹⁴ The Women's Congress was convened following the Youth Congress in October 1928 which produced a pledge declaring a commitment to a unified nation of Indonesia and has been recognized as a key moment in Indonesia's independence movement.

¹⁵ Nina Nurmila, *Women, Islam and Everyday Life: Renegotiating polygamy in Indonesia* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 52–54. For a description of Muslim women's response to the issue of polygamy in a 1937 draft bill on marriage during the colonial period, see Anwar, *A Genealogy of Islamic Feminism*.

a military dictatorship, known as the “New Order”, in which any kind of independent political activism was non-existent, including for women. Independent organizing only began to emerge during the last decade of the New Order, during the late 1980s.

It was in 1984 when the seeds of what would eventually grow to be the autonomous movement of KUPI was planted, namely with Indonesia’s ratification of the international convention on eliminating discrimination against women, CEDAW. CEDAW’s ratification also opened the way for integration of women into the government’s national development agenda. Four years later, the New Order government required all state universities to set up centres for gender studies, though the first was only established in 1995 by a state Islamic university, in Yogyakarta.¹⁶ Other state Islamic universities around the country soon followed suit, enabling gendered perspectives to flourish from within the scholarship on Islam and the steady growth of young female graduates of the *pesantren* and Islamic secondary schools who were proficient in gender analysis after graduating from their tertiary education.

The autonomous voice of young women ulama further blossomed along with the growth of the pro-democracy movement during the final years of the authoritarian regime. During this period, leaders of Indonesia’s major Islamic mass organizations became prominent national figures in the push for democracy. Muslim youth, both male and female, who wanted to take part in the democratization process began to experiment with new ways of organizing within a nascent civil society. They joined secular non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that were advocating for social justice and human rights or set up their own NGOs to address issues of democracy and gender equality rooted within their own religious contexts and traditions. Among the latter was the organization Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat (Association for the Development of Pesantren and Society), better known as P3M, that convened study circles on urgent social issues of the time, including gender equality and women’s reproductive rights.¹⁷ The energy of “Reformasi”, this period of post-

¹⁶ See description by the Islamic State University Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta: <https://psw.uin-suka.ac.id/id/page/prodi/1134-Sejarah-Singkat>

¹⁷ P3M stands for See Lies Marcoes, “The Encounter of Two Streams of Feminism and Its Influence on the Development of the Progressive Muslim Women’s Movement in Indonesia,” KITLV, Leiden University, 2022.

authoritarian rebuilding of the Indonesian nation-state following the regime change in 1998, permeated all walks of life and invigorated social movements in both religious and secular spaces. Two of the three organizations that eventually became the initiators of KUPI, Rahima and Fahmina, were born out of engagements with and within P3M. The dynamic interweaving between the religious and secular spaces for women's rights activism continued to flourish during the Reformasi period.

The development of Islamic scholarship on gender in the various Islamic universities as well as the day-to-day experience of dealing with obstacles in male-dominated progressive Islamic contexts led the way for the further strengthening of an autonomous Islamic women's movement like KUPI. Critical Muslim feminist scholarship and discourse began to flourish, focusing on women's reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. In 2004, Maria Ulfah Anshor, a *pesantren* graduate, published a book entitled 'Fiqh on Abortion' bringing together her knowledge of Islamic text and feminist analysis on women's reproductive rights and applying this perspective in her leadership of the young women's wing of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Fatayat NU, during the first decade of the 2000s. In the Muhammadiyah community, Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin, a former director of the gender studies program at the Islamic State University Sunan Kalijaga, published 'Muhammadiyah's Gender Regime: The Contestation of Gender, Identity and Existence' (2015) based on her insights and experience in various leadership positions, including as one of only two female members of Muhammadiyah's council of religious opinion, Majelis Tarjih, for 1995-2002.¹⁸ Maria Ulfah Anshor is now a member of KUPI's Deliberative Assembly, while Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin is a member of its Advisory Council.

However, as autonomous gender-responsive religious thought grew, the initiators of KUPI were also made keenly aware of the limits of women ulama's capacity in influencing mainstream religious institutions. In 2004, Musdah Mulia,¹⁹ a prominent feminist Muslim scholar, led the drafting of a new regulatory framework for the Muslim family while she was senior advisor

¹⁸ See biographies of both women in [kupipedia.id: https://kupipedia.id/index.php/Maria_Ulfah_Anshor](https://kupipedia.id/index.php/Maria_Ulfah_Anshor) and https://kupipedia.id/index.php/Siti_Ruhaini_Dzuhayatin

¹⁹ See <https://muslimahreformis.co/musdah-mulia-indonesias-foremost-islamic-woman-scholar-and-the-influences-on-her-thinking-part-iii/>

to the Ministry of Religion. The document, notoriously called the “Counter Legal Draft on Islamic Family Law”,²⁰ was developed in the euphoria of Reformasi, inciting civil society’s progressive Muslim scholars, both male and female, to reform the existing state-sanctioned “Compilation of Islamic Family Law”. The new draft provided alternatives to the existing discriminatory provisions, based on the notion that equality between men and women is Islamic. The document was immediately attacked by conservative Muslims, and the project was closed by the ministry. Musdah Mulia, herself, received fierce public denunciations and even threats of violence. This was a traumatic lesson for progressives and feminists in the Muslim community; a warning of the fragility of bold reform efforts within Islam and the vulnerability of attempts to bring them into existence. The necessity of making the claim for religious authority a solidly collective endeavour became increasingly clear for those who eventually came together a decade later to declare KUPI as a new movement.

Constructing a Collective Claim to Religious Authority

KUPI is not an organization but a movement.

It is a meeting ground between [deliberative] thought and movement [building].

Such thinking is developed into beneficial knowledge

for education, dissemination, and advocacy so that it could lead to the social transformation we envision.²¹

Like their predecessors from the early 1900s, the initiators of KUPI were also responding to broader socio-political issues of the time. The sense of urgency for a national gathering to express the autonomous voice of women ulama arose as a response to a key political moment: the escalation of Islamist narratives into Indonesia’s mainstream politics as the country approached the elections for local governments in 2017. Campaigns

²⁰ See https://www.researchgate.net/publication/347222981_Counter_Legal_Drafting_of_the_Islamic_Law_Compilation_A_Gender_Perspective

²¹ Opening speech at the 2nd KUPI Congress in Jepara, 24 November 2022, by Chair of KUPI’s Deliberative Assembly, Badriyah Fayumi.

opposing religious minorities running for office used symbols of Islam and mobilized Islamist movements.²² A candidate for the governorship of Jakarta, Indonesia's capital city, was falsely accused of blasphemy and, in the face of popular pressure by Islamists, sentenced to imprisonment. This occurred after years of persecution of minorities in the name of Islam and the failure of government and law enforcers to provide protection.²³

The rise of supremacist narratives of Islam also had a strong gendered dimension. Local governments created policies enforcing Muslim dress codes and headcovers for women and girls. One province that had implemented sharia prohibited the close proximity of women and men who were not related by blood or marriage, and was sanctioned by public caning in 2003. Child marriage, female genital cutting, and polygamous marriages were on the rise and widely claimed to be standard Islamic practice.

The initiators of KUPI resolved to take on a leadership role in Indonesia's national scene by publicly voicing women ulama's distinct vision for Islam and the nation through a national congress. Following the first convening of the congress, KUPI's women ulama came together and firmly established itself as a movement. Movement-building was resolved to be one of the ways in which KUPI would make its claim to religious authority and be truly collective. This collective nature of the claim would also be manifested in two other ways: first, by the convening of a congress every five years in which timely Islamic legal opinions (fatwa) are produced and second, through the collective leadership of KUPI's Deliberative Assembly.

From there, KUPI's vision of its movement has been one that is simultaneously intellectual, social, cultural, and spiritual. As an intellectual movement, it produces knowledge; as a cultural movement, it creates space and expression; as a spiritual movement, it offers prayers and worship; and, as a social movement, it engages in activism, alongside women's and other social justice movements, pushing for transformative change.

²² See Marcus Meitzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi, "Explaining the 2016 Islamist Mobilization in Indonesia: Religious Intolerance, Militant Groups and the Politics of Accommodation," *Asian Studies Review* (2018): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2018.1473335>.

²³ See Rachael Diprose, Dave McRae and Vedi R. Hadiz, "Two Decades of Reformasi in Indonesia: Its Illiberal Turn," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 49, no. 5 (2019): 691–712. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2019.1637922>

For KUPI, the core of its movement lies in communities of women ulama working within five distinct areas of service: leaders of *pesantren*, academics in Islamic universities, preachers in community-based prayer groups (*majelis taklim*), community organizers engaging with local religious institutions, and Muslim youth. It considers the family, the community, the state, social movements, and the natural environment to be simultaneous arenas for its struggle. KUPI requires individuals or organizations in its movement to share common values and goals, including through the active application of three concepts: *ma'ruf*, that which is religiously, reasonably, and socially acceptable; *keadilan hakiki*, a substantive understanding of justice; and, *mubadalah*, the principle of reciprocity.²⁴ Additionally, it calls for the referencing of the Qur'an, Hadith, *Aqwāl al-'Ulamā* (views of religious scholars), the national constitution, and the lived realities of women in taking a position and formulating Islamic legal opinions on social issues relating to the relations between men and women.

KUPI's collective claim to religious authority is lodged primarily through its national convening, called a "congress" in the spirit of past significant congresses in Indonesia's history. By naming the convening the "Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama", the initiators of KUPI invoke two historic moments in Indonesian women's leadership in the national political scene. In 1928, the "Women's Congress" was a coming together of religious and secular women's organizations during the nascent years of Indonesia's anti-colonial independence movement to establish women's leadership in this struggle. In 1998, the year Indonesia ended 32 years of authoritarian rule, women and feminist activists from around the country gathered in what was called the "Indonesian Women's Congress" to ensure women's political participation in, and benefit from, the post-authoritarian democratization agenda. By adopting the format of a women's congress, the KUPI positioned itself as an integral part of the genealogy of Indonesian women's leadership during key historical moments.

KUPI's congress is convened every five years and held in a *pesantren* led by women who upholds the values and goals of KUPI. The congress functions as the summit in a collective process of producing Islamic legal opinions or fatwa on critical issues affecting women and the nation. Given

²⁴ See Nina Nurmila's paper in this issue.

the non-binding nature of the fatwa, KUPI facilitates a participatory process in its formulation which would, in turn, ensure that it is grounded in the lived realities of women and then adhered to by its supporters in the daily lives of communities. Decisions on which issues to address through the fatwa are made collectively, including through consultations with key stakeholders. To support the preliminary work in drafting the fatwa, KUPI convenes qualified teams of ulama, male and female, involving secular women's rights and social justice activists who are selected to enrich the deliberations based on their distinct experiences and analyses. During the congress, each draft fatwa is discussed in a session open to all participants for questions and inputs and then finalized by a team of KUPI's women ulama.

KUPI has produced three fatwas during its first convening: on sexual violence, child marriage and environmental degradation due to social inequality. While the first two issues reflected familiar issues faced by women, the fatwa on environmental degradation was also an act of solidarity to the struggles of the indigenous women of Kendeng village in Central Java who were protesting the encroachment of a mining company into their community. On the second convening, KUPI produced five fatwas: on forced marriage, abortion due to rape, female genital cutting, the marginalization of women in addressing violent extremism, and environmental sustainability and women's welfare through waste management.

During KUPI's three-day congress, multiple parallel thematic discussions are also held in the *pesantren* compound. They are carried out as collaborations with civil society organizations working on a diversity of issues relevant to KUPI's goals and agendas, such as on child marriage, migrant workers, religious radicalism. These thematic discussions lead to the drafting of policy recommendations for the government as another outcome of the KUPI convenings alongside the fatwa.

Other activities occupy the *pesantren* compound too: information booths by civil society organizations, a reproductive health clinic, and stalls selling books, crafts and food. The plurality of issues, concerns and constituencies addressed during the congress reflect KUPI's intention to provide a big umbrella for the social transformation agenda and is the outcome of a continuous engagement and dialogue between women ulama and activists in Indonesia's women's movement and other social justice movements.

To sustain its collective claim to religious authority, KUPI has constructed a model of collective leadership in the form of its Deliberative Assembly which is the movement's highest decision-making body. The KUPI Deliberative Assembly, or *Majelis Musyawarah KUPI*, is currently comprising of 14 individuals who were among the initiators of KUPI as well as representatives of the five organizations that function as the organizational pillars of the movement. The Assembly is led by a chairperson and a secretary and has areas of focus assigned to its remaining members: knowledge development, *syiar* (dissemination), movement building and networking. The five organizational pillars are Rahima, Fahmina and Alimat which were the first initiators of KUPI plus two others, GusDurian and AMAN Indonesia, which joined the KUPI leadership towards the second congress. As pillars of the movement, these five organizations reflect an alliance of diverse social forces in Indonesia's civil society, each with their own distinct histories.

Rahima had dedicated 15 years conducting an adult education program, called *Pendidikan Ulama Perempuan* (Education for Women Ulama), with a double focus: on understanding Islam from a gender perspective and on building skills for critical social analysis. The idea of a national convening of women ulama also answered Rahima's need to consolidate energy among the alumni of its education program which, at that time, had reached 300 women.

Fahmina, a key partner to Rahima, further deepened the knowledge base for such a convening with the rich Islamic scholarship that it had built on gender, pluralism and democracy over more than a decade. Under the leadership of Kyai Husein Muhammad, Fahmina also conducted its own capacity building program, called *Dawrah Kader Ulama Perempuan* (Learning Circle for Cadres of Women Ulama). It was clear to both organizations, whose work was oriented to the grassroots, that a strong and impactful autonomous voice of women ulama would not be possible without Alimat, a network of women ulama as well as scholars and activists with experience in advocating for legal reform and policy change at the national level.

Established upon the return of Indonesian delegates to the launching of Musawah, a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family,²⁵

²⁵ <https://www.musawah.org/>

Alimat saw itself as an integral part of an emerging transnational movement in the Muslim world. Its aim is to catalyze synergy among Muslim women's movements to ensure equality and justice in the Indonesian family from the perspective of Islam. Its membership reflects a cross-section of institutions within Indonesia's women's movement, with members from the more mainstream women's wing of Indonesia's largest Muslim mass organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama's Fatayat and Muhammadiyah's Aisyiyah, as well as leaders of feminist civil society organizations, such as PEKKA working with rural women heads of households, and feminist academics from Islamic and secular universities. Alimat's first chairperson was a politician-intellectual who had held a seat in the national parliament while leading a *pesantren*. The National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan)²⁶ which carries a presidential mandate on policy reform and public education for women's human rights played a key role in facilitating the establishment of Alimat and several of its commissioners joined as individual members.

By the second convening of KUPI, the core organizers of KUPI expanded to two other organizations. Gusdurian is a national network of interfaith leaders and activists advocating for a pluralistic and democratic Indonesia and led by the late President Abdurrahman Wahid's daughter, Alissa Wahid.²⁷ Gusdurian broadened KUPI's support system to frontline defenders of pluralism, human rights and democracy. AMAN Indonesia, which is the Indonesian chapter of the Asian Muslim Action Network, had built an international network focusing on the issue of women, peace and security in Muslim contexts and widened KUPI's reach abroad.

After two congresses over eight years, KUPI's collective claim to religious authority for women ulama continues to be a process in the making. The collective nature of this claim is constructed through the way the movement is imagined, by the narrative that its struggle is legitimized, and in the model of its collective leadership.

²⁶ <https://en.komnasperempuan.go.id/>

²⁷ The name 'GusDurian' is taken from the nickname of Abdurrahman Wahid, the late charismatic leader of Nahdlatul Ulama who played a critical role in Indonesia's prodemocracy movement in the 1980s and later became the President of Indonesia (1999–2001).

Recognizing Religious Authority: The Personal in the Collective

While KUPI's claim to religious authority for women ulama is made as a collective endeavour, recognition of such authority remains inseparable from the personal journeys and heritage of the individual ulama associated with it. As Rahima, Fahmina and Alimat worked to convene the first KUPI congress, the personal lineage of key persons in these organizations to long-standing and well-respected *pesantren* and ulama played a significant role in establishing the credibility of this initiative in the eyes of their peers and to the eventual support that it received. Husein Muhammad, the esteemed elder and guru among the KUPI initiators, comes from a prominent *pesantren*, *Pesantren* Arjawinangun, in Cirebon, West Java. He also has familial affiliations to the leadership of several historically significant boarding schools in East Java, such as *Pesantren* Lirboyo, *Pesantren* Jombang, *Pesantren* Langitan, and in Central Java, namely *Pesantren* Lasem. It is also notable that the site of KUPI's first convening, *Pesantren* Kebon Jambu, while a relatively small boarding school, it is affiliated with *Pesantren* Babakan Ciwaringin which is among the oldest Islamic boarding schools in the country (some say dating back to the 18th century). Badriyah Fayumi, who is the leading figure in KUPI, leads *Pesantren* Mahasina at the outskirts of Jakarta alongside her husband. Her family lineage is traced to a long line of prominent ulama from Pati, Central Java, including a former chair of the Indonesian Council of Ulama. The importance of such lineages in building social legitimacy and credibility reflects the cultural nature of Indonesia's community of *pesantren*-based ulama. But there was also a political dimension in KUPI's ability to garner support and protection during a volatile period when political mobilization of Islamist vigilante groups was rising around the local elections of 2016/2017. Prior to the convening, KUPI leaders approached national political figures to garner support, including through video recordings of the then Indonesian Vice President, the Chair of the Council of Muslim Ulama, the Grand Imam of Indonesia's national mosque, and a progressive senior ulama with a large national following.

At the community level, each woman ulama associated with KUPI navigates her newly emergent religious authority in different ways, shaped by her local contexts and personal journey. To some extent, these differences are also influenced by the five-year gap between the first and second KUPI

convening. In 2017, the initiative to gather women ulama from around the country and produce original *fatwa* was unprecedented and generated admiration and resistance. By the time of the second convening, there was more confidence among the KUPI organizers after gaining growing support and playing a decisive role towards the passage of a bill on sexual violence by the national parliament.²⁸

Interviews²⁹ with two women ulama who hosted the KUPI convenings of 2017 and 2022 illustrate how KUPI's collective claim to religious authority affected their lives and status in their respective communities. Masriyah Amva³⁰ (born 1961) and Hindun Anisah (born 1974) are both daughters of leaders of *pesantren* and come from long lineages of prominent local religious leaders. Masriyah's father was the head of a small traditional *pesantren* and her mother was a preacher in the community. She and her sisters received the same opportunity for education as their brother although she herself never completed higher education. Hindun grew up in a prominent *pesantren* for women led by her mother and grandmother. Her mother pursued higher education in the school on Qur'anic studies and used to send her letters describing the achievements of various women leaders. When her time came, Hindun decided to enroll in two universities at once: in an Islamic university studying Sharia Law and in a secular university studying political and social sciences, both in the second largest university town in the country, Yogyakarta. At this time, gender studies were growing steadfastly in Indonesia's universities. Hindun then went on to graduate school in the Netherlands where she focused on gender and medical anthropology.

Masriyah and Hindun came to lead their respective *pesantren* by marriage to the *pesantren* head or *kyai*. Their distinct personal journeys shaped their life trajectories during and after hosting the KUPI convenings. Masriyah became leader of *Pesantren Kebon Jambu* upon the death of her husband, the 'kyai'. Her decision to take over the role of her husband had not been well received by the community nor by her own students (called *santri*). Parents began to pull their children out of her *pesantren* in large numbers

²⁸ See Nor Ismah's paper in this issue.

²⁹ The authors thank Ikliyah Muzayyanah Dini Fajriyah, lecturer at the University of Indonesia and chair of Alimat, for her assistance in these interviews. The interviews were conducted on 6-7 May 2024 with Masriyah Amva and on 13 May 2024 with Hindun Anisah.

³⁰ *Nyai* is a title associated with the wife of the *kyai*, the male head of a *pesantren*.

and Masriyah felt unjustly treated as a woman. She reflected about the differential attitude towards men and women: "Why is it that when a man loses his wife, he will be OK but when a woman loses her husband, like me, her light diminishes. I contemplated why for women it is like that, and for men it is different." Masriyah began to put in writing her questions and contemplations in the form of poetry and subsequently produced 21 publications.³¹

Hindun came to her position of leadership in Pesantren Hasyim Asy'ari Bangsri, in Jepara, Central Java, through marriage to the son of the *pesantren* head, Nuruddin Amin, who eventually took over leadership from his father. As a newcomer to the *pesantren* and the community, Hindun had to acquaint herself with the local traditions and conventions. In the early years, she received criticism for being an outsider who was intent on reforming the *pesantren* learning curriculum. Aside from her scholarly achievements, her associations with the international world raised questions for some and, at one point, led to accusations of being heretical (in Indonesian, *sesat*).

Both Masriyah and Hindun stood their ground and made progress in their own ways. Masriyah continued to quietly lead, despite feeling bullied and unjustly compared to her late husband. She eventually succeeded in regaining the trust of her students and their parents and, after almost a decade, managed to increase the number of students tenfold by the time she hosted the first KUPI convening. She sees her turning point as the time she realized that women lean on men and men lean on Allah and decided that she must copy the men. She made a declaration to her students in a mosque insisting that they not leave her *pesantren* because "I have found someone to take the place of our deceased leader that is much smarter, much wealthier, greater and more honorable, more in every way, and this is Allah." She then positioned herself as the aide of the true leader of her *pesantren*, Allah, which she thought would be more acceptable to the students and the community.

Despite accusations of being a heretic, Hindun continued her activism on women's rights and became a defender of local women victims of domestic

³¹ For example, booklet titles such as 'Rising from Despair' (Kompas, 2010); 'Secrets of the Almighty' (Kompas, 2012); and, 'Tafakkur on Love' (Kebon Jambu, 2015).

violence, exploitation and human trafficking. She also expanded her engagements beyond the local community, joining national civil society organizations, such as Rahima and a Muslim legal aid foundation, as well as taking up a leadership position in a network of grassroots women leaders across diverse *pesantren*. In her *pesantren*, Hindun reformed the curriculum and introduced an innovation by creating and leading a space for dialogue between male and female students.

In April 2017, Masriyah hosted 600 people in her *pesantren* for the first KUPI convening. Her welcome speech reflects her frame of mind shaped by her personal journey as a female *pesantren* leader. She said: "I am a nobody. I am not a real ulama. But when I lean on Allah's light, then I too become full of light. I become someone that meets people's needs. And people call me an ulama. In truth, I am a nobody." She had used a similar narrative in responding to her detractors after taking over the *pesantren* leadership a decade before. She had said to them: "To those who compare me with the kyai, I say do not compare me to him. The kyai is the sky and I am the ground. The sky and the ground. Do not insist that I must be like the kyai." She closed her welcoming statement by declaring herself a feminist and her *pesantren* open to everyone in all their diversity.

When Hindun made her welcome speech, in November 2022, in front of 1600 participants of KUPI's second convening, she invoked female historical figures of Jepara to establish her adopted district as a compelling site of women's leadership in the national scene. These strong female figures were Princess Shima who led Jepara in the 7th century and known for her law enforcement achievements; Princess Kalinyamat who led Jepara in the 16th century and expanded its maritime trade; and, Kartini, a national hero in advocating for girls' education at the turn of the 20th century. "These three heroes are Jepara's icon," she said, "who inspired us as women in Jepara and whom we want to emulate ... [and] it is for this reason we nominated ourselves to be the host of KUPI." Hindun's long view back, including into Indonesia's pre-Islamic history, and claim for national standing reflect an eye set beyond the boundaries of the *pesantren* – a view shared with her husband who is also a member of the local parliament representing the political party established by Nahdlatul Ulama. Recalling Kartini, a hero of Indonesia's feminist movement, also expressed her close affinity to the secular women's movement.

Both Masriyah and Hindun recognize that, by hosting the KUPI convenings, they experienced changes in the way others relate to them. They were surprised to receive invitations addressing them as '*ulama perempuan KUPI*' or KUPI's women ulama and saw this as a new identity and status. Masriyah says, after hosting the KUPI convening, "Indonesia began to see me". Hindun describes it as such:

"Before KUPI, among the *pesantren* community, the '*nya*' was considered simply as the wife of the *kyai* ... Women's religious knowledge was recognized only in a limited way for memorizing the Qur'an and leading prayers but not for generating [Islamic] thought People who wanted to ask me a question would first go to my husband, even though he would then turn to me for the answer. They didn't feel confident if they did not go to the *kyai* first. For example, on the issue of menstruation, which is women's biological condition, they preferred to direct the question to my husband or his brother who is also a custodian of the *pesantren*."

Hindun now receives even more questions directly through her Instagram account. After KUPI, she adds, people inside and outside her *pesantren* see her in a new way: not only as the wife of the *kyai* and the custodian of the *pesantren* but also recognized as someone with capacity in her own right. She was surprised to receive invitations from traditional male religious leaders to speak in front of an audience of both men and women. A particularly notable development for Hindun was hearing from a female lecturer at Islamic university that, after attending the KUPI convening, she found courage to defy her husband's prohibition to pursue graduate studies and came to Hindun to seek her support in her scholarly pursuit.

Beyond the personal, the *pesantren* that Masriyah and Hindun lead also benefited specifically from being hosts of the KUPI convenings. Masriyah's *pesantren* received support from the Ministry of Religion to set up a *pesantren*-based Islamic school of higher education, *Ma'had Aly*. She also received an offer of collaboration from the University of Indonesia to teach English for the *pesantren* students and from a local bank to finance a laundry service for the *pesantren*. Her students now come from far-flung areas of Indonesia, not just locally. Hindun's *pesantren* now has more prominence in her district, researchers come to write about the *pesantren*, and artists

borrow the space for their performances. Her students, known to be Hindun's protégé, receive opportunities for scholarships abroad.

Through her wide network, Hindun also observes a shift among the broader *pesantren* community, particularly among young women.

“Sometimes, after the first KUPI convening, people considered this a momentary euphoria. But after the second convening, there was a realization that this is something serious by women ulama with undeniable capacity. For example, among the *nawaning* [young daughters of *kyai* and *nyai*], not many participated in the first convening and were skeptical of KUPI. But after attending KUPI's second convening, they took part and several of them shifted in their paradigm I was surprised that two years afterwards, the *nawaning* were addressing key thematic issues in their *tafsir* studies (Qur'anic text interpretation), such as on sexual violence, adopting KUPI's phrases.”

Despite all the encouraging changes, Masriyah and Hindun both recognize that resistance to the idea of women ulama with religious authority is still strong particularly at the centers of traditional religious authority. But even here, Hindun found that the open confrontation has been gradually replaced by backroom grumbling (*bisik-bisik*). She believes the evidence of wide support for KUPI is an influencing factor in this regard. Both women ulama continue to gain public recognition. Masriyah has since been a recipient of several awards recognizing her cultural contributions as a woman ulama, while Hindun now holds a seat at the national parliament after joining in the elections representing her political party in Central Java.

KUPI has shifted the structure of opportunities and constraints for Masriyah and Hindun as women ulama navigating their emergent religious authority. Public recognition of their personal achievements, in turn, also contributes to KUPI's collective stature. In KUPI's social media spaces, such personal accomplishments are celebrated as a collective gain affirming how these personal and collective journeys are directly interconnected.

The possibility of the collective claim by KUPI's autonomous Indonesian women ulama – at both the collective and individual levels – is generated from this dynamic context combined with an openness to new ideas, new

ways and new points of view from outside single Muslim traditions as well as from the secular world, including Indonesia's feminist movement. KUPI also benefits from Indonesia's large ecosystem of social networks among the *pesantren* community and the national system of Islamic education of which its women ulama are part. Even when there is resistance to KUPI's views, they are still able to find alternative spaces for dialogue due to such robust connections. Politically, it has also benefited from the Indonesian government's turn against radical Islamist movements and violent extremism and the subsequent openness to progressive and moderate Islam which began around the time of KUPI's first convening.

In closing, KUPI's experience in claiming and navigating religious authority illustrates the dynamic interplay across multiple social political forces, uniquely grounded in Indonesia's Islamic formation and shaped by specific historical moments.

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Interviews

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