

Observations from the Outside: The KUPI Factor

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

The second convening of the KUPI in November 2022 was attended by international participants who had firsthand opportunity to gauge its relevance beyond Indonesia. Many non-Indonesian scholars and religious activists who observed the developments related to the KUPI conferences in 2017 and 2022 agree that they represent a significant movement within the Muslim world, particularly in Indonesia, where female scholars are actively shaping the discourse on Islam and gender, promoting interpretations that support women's rights and social justice. The central questions in this article are: What makes the KUPI a distinct and promising movement? How can it establish a lasting presence in Indonesia? Not every Muslim community is ready to accept the ideas and methods of the KUPI. Issues that play out at the grassroots level or within women's circles escape the interest or attention of the mostly male interpreters. The KUPI questions and challenges the dominant patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an. This is bound to find resonance among Muslim women across the Muslim world and makes translating the KUPI materials into other languages more urgent than ever.

KEYWORDS

Female Muslim scholars; women's rights; religious interpretation; fatwa; religious authority

Introduction

Islam in Indonesia has often been said to be particularly unique. However, many consider it too far from the mainstream despite it being the largest Muslim-majority country in the world. Indeed, when learning about Islam's progressive developments in Indonesia, many focus on the non-replicability beyond its borders. At the same time, many observers who are interested in the KUPI wonder how important it is for those outside Indonesia to understand what is happening in this country regarding women's rights within Islam. In this article, I reflect on these questions from the perspective of a non-Indonesian scholar who has been studying the KUPI movement

from its establishment, with particular interest in one of the KUPI's overarching goal of strengthening women's universal basic rights.

The second convening of the KUPI in November 2022 was attended by international participants who had the opportunity to gauge its relevance beyond Indonesia firsthand. Many non-Indonesian scholars and religious activists who observed the developments of the KUPI conferences in 2017 and 2022 agree that they represent a significant movement within the Muslim world, particularly in Indonesia, where female scholars are actively shaping the discourse on Islam and gender and promoting interpretations that support and further women's rights and social justice.

The central questions of this article are: What makes KUPI a distinct and promising movement? How can it establish a lasting presence in Indonesia? To address these questions, I will present arguments for why the KUPI's ideas and teachings are likely to continue growing within Indonesian society, while also briefly exploring the potential for translating these approaches to Muslim communities beyond Indonesia's borders. To contextualize this analysis, I begin with a brief overview of how such a unique congress of women ulama and their supporters became possible.

Foundations

After attending the first congress, Zainah Anwar, the former chair of Sisters in Islam, the Malaysian organization for Muslim women's rights, wondered:

WHAT is it about the way Islam is taught and practised in Indonesia that over 500 women religious leaders could come together to issue fatwas declaring child marriage and sexual violence as haram? And to assert themselves as ulama with the authority and right to advance justice and equality as a common good for ALL?

Observing the extensive support the KUPI leaders received, for example from government authorities, Anwar and the other members of the Malaysian delegation were “gobsmacked” and “in tears” when:

The Minister of Religion himself, Lukman Hakim Saefuddin, closed the event together with Gusti Kanjeng Ratu Hemas, a Member of the Regional Representative Council (second chamber of

Parliament), and wife of the widely respected Sultan and Governor of Jogjakarta, both known as supporters of women's rights.

And to top it all, it was held in a *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) in a village in Cirebon that was led by a woman, Nyai Masriyah Amva, who declared on stage that she was a feminist and a pluralist who embraced all of God's creations in all their diversity – to the cheers of the crowd.¹

While moved to tears, the presence of high government officials and the reality that the host was a woman in charge of a *pesantren* with male and female students, begs the question of how the KUPI leaders had managed to muster this level of acceptance and support. The answer is that it was the fruit of several decades of careful planning and preparation. "KUPI is a culmination of small steps," Kamala Chandrakirana, one of the initiators, told me when explaining how the meeting started, stating "It is a platform, not an organization".² According to Dr. Nur Rofiah, "KUPI is the culmination of more than thirty years of effort to create space and mechanisms for the inclusion of female scholars in the production of religious knowledge in Indonesia".³ The KUPI started as a reaction to pressing social and religious changes within Indonesian society. After the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, Muslim extremist expressions grew, promoting misogynistic and anti-human rights ideas. They influenced many parts of society and set out to change mindsets about the status and role of Muslim women. In contrast to other Muslim countries, in Indonesia these extreme ideas were challenged by cohorts of women who were specialists in the study of the Qur'an and its related sciences. Moreover, many of them had intently studied the building blocks of patriarchy in religion as well as in local cultures, and its role in perpetuating gender inequalities. Paradoxically, they realized that the best way to challenge the existing social structures was to recruit the help of male religious authorities.

I came across the KUPI for the first time in Jakarta, 2016 when I ran into one of the main KUPI architects, Kiai Hussein Mohammed. Beaming with excitement, he told me about the first-ever international congress for women

¹ Zainah Anwar, "Grassroots Leaders Show the Way." .

² Interview, Jakarta, June 6, 2023.

³ Nur Rofiah, "Reading the Qur'an Through Women's Experiences." In: *Justice and Beauty in Muslim Marriage. Towards Egalitarian Ethics and Laws*, eds. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Mulki Al-Sharmani, Jana Rumminger & Sarah Marsso (Oneworld Academic, 2022), 59.

ulama that would be held in 2017 in Cirebon. Excitement about this event grew steadily. When the congress finally happened, national and international press, government officials, prominent Muslim leaders, and representatives of Muslim organizations traveled to Cirebon to be part of this historic event. Articles appeared in Indonesian press as well as internationally. After the congress, a steady stream of op-eds, blogs, scholarly articles, and talks about Indonesian Muslim feminists continued to appear.⁴ In Indonesia, the organizers and headliners created the *Kupipedia* site to store all written materials and media products related to the Congress. Many of them continued to spread the KUPI message via interviews, Qur'an study meetings, and other gatherings at the grassroots level and via digital platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube. For some, transmitting the KUPI message became a full-time job. Others connected it to their work as leaders of a *pesantren* (a Qur'anic boarding school), teaching the students and preaching to community members living in the vicinity of the school. Finally, with several of its leaders working in universities, the KUPI had many opportunities to spread its message at the academic level via teaching, research, and community engagement with professors operating as public intellectuals.

The KUPI became a phenomenon. In a special Ramadan edition (April 28-May 11, 2022), the journal *Gatra* discussed the accomplishments of the women Muslim leaders behind the KUPI. Their role could no longer be ignored or stopped, the journalist argued, because "women ulama exercise enormous influence. They are resilient and never stop debating the [dominant] discourse".⁵ KUPI activist, Ninik Rahayu, agreed with this assessment. According to her, the women who envisioned the KUPI inspired many new women ulama communities across Indonesia, such as "the Islamic Gender Justice *Ngaji* [preaching] Community, the *Mubadalah* [a form of women-inclusive interpretations of Islam's textual tradition]"⁶ and "the

⁴ Links to press releases, newspaper articles, and features in various popular journals, such as *Time Magazine*, written after the first congress can be found in *Kupipedia*: <https://kupipedia.id/index.php/Khazanah>.

⁵ S.W. Mukhlison, "Mukadimah. Memuja Perempuan tebal Ilmu, *Gatra*, April-May, (2022):19.

⁶ Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, "Qirā'a Mubādala: Reciprocal Reading of Hadith on Marital Relationships." In *Justice and Beauty in Muslim Marriage. Towards Egalitarian Ethics and Laws*, eds. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Mulki Al-Sharmani, Jana Rumminger & Sarah Marsso, 181-212, (Oneworld Academic, 2022)

female ulama and community of Rahima, the network of women in Islamic boarding schools and preachers, the archipelago's *ning-ning* [a social and media integration] network, and others".⁷

The extensive excitement calls into question whether and how the KUPI phenomenon has influenced Indonesian society, and if it could influence Muslim communities in other countries. Finding a satisfactory answer to these questions is challenging. For example, when examining various articles and documents about the KUPI, the impression one is left with is that it is well-received across Indonesian society. However, as Eva Nisa's research, done after the first congress, illustrates, conservative groups of Muslim women maintain their patriarchal views concerning a woman's position in society and the family. Nisa's analysis highlights how these ideas are "firmly embedded in Indonesian culture"⁸ due to the fact that these conservative groups have a much stronger digital footprint with many more followers than the KUPI women have. In comparison, the KUPI voices are lacking on social media.⁹

Muslim Women's Activism

Regardless of whether its ideas are fully embraced within Indonesia, we cannot deny that the KUPI is a powerful religious movement poised to have a significant impact, bringing about cultural and social change. Scholars of social change argue that such transformations are influenced by diverse and decentralized local forces, making them non-linear and unpredictable. In this context, it is essential to consider the unique role women play in transforming societies and religions. As many feminist scholars have argued, the patriarchal structures rest on the exclusion of women from decision-making processes. Sylvia Walby argues that women design alternative strategies to fight patriarchal forces perpetuating gender inequalities. Looking at what she calls the "intersecting complex inequalities" of gender, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation, and disability, she makes the case for rethinking

⁷ Luviana, "KUPI's Female Ulamas Face The Heavy Challenges of Religious Fundamentalism." *Konde.Co*, October 14, (2022). <https://www.konde.co/2022/10/kupis-female-ulamas-face-the-heavy-challenges-of-religious-fundamentalism/>

⁸ Eva Nisa, "Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Online. Conflicting Narratives behind the Women Ulama Congress," *Asian Studies Review* 43, no. 3 (2019): 447.

⁹ *Ibid*, 449.

the analysis of the contemporary world. Among others, she argues that incorporating women into economic and political life transforms gender relations and strengthens democratic structures.¹⁰

While the KUPI movement is unique, it is based on several principles that overlap with successful initiatives that aim to improve the lives of women and strengthen their rights across the world. In many cases, the principles of gender justice and education are intertwined. Often, local initiatives become national if the ideas are in line with the demands and opportunities of the time. In the United States of America (USA), for example, groups advocating for birth control, such as Planned Parenthood that was founded at the beginning of the twentieth century, gained influence in 1960 when anti-conception medicine made it possible to prevent or postpone having children. A decade later, these groups broadened their partnerships with women's groups worldwide, sharing their knowledge and strategies to strengthen women's reproductive rights globally.

Across the Muslim world, women, both individually and in groups, are working on re-interpreting the Islamic foundational texts, scrutinizing Islamic law, and creating movements of religious and social activism to further the rights of women. However, the reality is that fewer Muslim women trained to work on the texts and the law than there are who are trained as social activists. This reality is reflected in collections such as the *Oxford Handbook of Islam and Women* that features only five articles on women and the foundational texts and three on Islamic law in contrast to fourteen on religious and social activism.¹¹ At the same time, however, these articles show how Muslim women's socio-political activism spans a vast array of endeavors, including grassroots organizing, social media campaigns, legal advocacy, and involvement in political movements.

Muslim women's activism is diverse, reflecting the varied backgrounds and communities they represent. Their motivations range from secular ideals to deeply rooted religious convictions, often blending both to pursue numerous goals through different approaches. Additionally, Indonesian Muslim women have skillfully harnessed technological advancements to amplify their

¹⁰ Sylvia Walby, *Globalization and Inequalities: Complexity and Contested Modernities* (Sage Publications, 2009), 2.

¹¹ Asma Afsarrudin, *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Women* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

advocacy. Social media, in particular, has become a powerful tool, allowing them to connect, mobilize, and raise awareness on issues affecting their communities. These platforms enable Muslim women activists to voice their opinions, share personal stories, and challenge stereotypes or misinformation about Islam and Muslim women. These spaces are also used to engage in global movements, such as #MeToo, enhancing their influence and reach on a global scale.

The socio-political activism of Muslim women has far-reaching effects, resulting in significant changes in laws and policies in certain contexts, fostering solidarity across various social justice movements, and advancing the fight for gender equality within and beyond Muslim communities.

In the fields of education and legal reform, Muslim women have contributed to expanding educational access and reforming family laws that discriminate against women. For example, legal reformers such as Asma Jahangir, who co-founded and chaired the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, has challenged laws and practices that marginalize women.¹² Muslim women are also increasingly visible in environmental preservation efforts, both locally and globally. Individually, women such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Riffat Hassan have produced groundbreaking work on interpreting the Qur'an from a woman's point of view, work that has become foundational for many current initiatives. Another example is the work of Fatima Mernissi whose intellectual legacy has contributed to the revision of the Moroccan marriage law, particularly the reform of the Mudawana (Moroccan Family Code), in 2004. Her work provided the foundation for challenging traditional interpretations of Islamic law and encouraged the reinterpretation of religious texts. Arguing that gender equality was compatible with Islam, she pointed out the discriminatory aspects of the existing laws and raised awareness about the need for fundamental changes in family law. The 2004 version of the Mudawana incorporated several changes aligned to Mernissi's ideas, including raising the minimum age of marriage for women from 15 to 18, restricting polygamy, allowing women more rights in divorce proceedings, and allowing women's custody of children post-divorce.¹³

¹² Asma Jahangir, "Speech by Ms Asma Jahangir," *Religion and Human Rights* 2, no. 1–2 (2007): 37–43.

¹³ <https://timep.org/2023/07/07/the-moudawana-moroccos-nearly-20-year-old-family-code/>

In regard to the KUPI movement, it is clear that it in addition to covering many religious and social activities but also benefits from the work of individuals who suggest new approaches from which to interpret the Qur'an and the Hadith. Despite many of its actions having social, cultural, legal, and economic impacts, the movement is grounded in the education and training of a future generation of religious leaders whose mindset is attuned to women's basic rights. It has brought together different modes of study, interpretation, and activism that strengthens the rights of Muslim women. At the same time, its strength is not solely derived from the fact that several of its key leaders, such as Badriyah Fayumi, Dr. Nur Rofiah, Kiai Husain Muhammad, and Dr. Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, are well-respected feminist Qur'an scholars, but also due to the contribution the KUPI conferences have made to recognizing that women scholars can act with a degree of religious authority. One of the objectives of the KUPI II was "to recognize and affirm the presence of women *ulama* throughout the Islamic and Indonesian history".

This recognition of women's religious authority makes the KUPI movement unique and provides it with the strength necessary to serve as a force of religious and social change. A Pakistani observer acknowledged this reality when stating that "Indonesia is actively strengthening the role of women *ulama*, a concept that remains underdeveloped in many other countries, including Pakistan".¹⁴

In the Christian context, religious authority grounded in learning is reminiscent of initiatives historically taken by highly educated women and men to address patriarchal and suppressive structures within their churches. For example, during the 1990s, a group of Christian Coptic Orthodox nuns in Egypt set out to make the spiritual authority of women more visible.¹⁵ Their ideas emboldened Coptic groups to advocate for women's rights within Egyptian society. Teaming up with Muslim activists, they went on to translate novel ideas on women's agency and authority into projects such as those

¹⁴ Rubab Zainab, "Faith and gender equality: Lessons from Indonesia." Blog post, November 13, 2023, Accessible at: <https://ibcenglish.net/faith-and-gender-equality-lessons-from-indonesia-2/>

¹⁵ Nelly van Doorn-Harder, "Mother Irini's Visions of Leadership: Pachomian Rule and Teaching of the Fathers." In *Copts in Modernity*, eds. Agaiby, Swanson and van Doorn-Harder. (Brill Publishers, 2021), 270-294.

against female genital mutilation, which in Egypt is practiced by both Muslims and Christians.¹⁶

The Indonesian Struggle to Strengthen Women's Rights

In each country, the road to strengthening women's rights varies. The KUPI women arrived at their highly educated station in different ways to women who were involved in the movement elsewhere. I argue that it is precisely the unique local struggles and circumstances specific to Indonesia that allowed for the creation of the KUPI. It aligns with organizations that have been advocating for women's basic rights since the early twentieth century, resisting patriarchal forces and designing strategies for their voices to be heard. Consequently, the KUPI is able to rely on various networks to promote its specific teachings. Furthermore, across the Archipelago, the KUPI has inspired many new groups of Muslim women activists. The creation of such cohorts, can be traced back to the Muslim women's organizations that started over a century ago. Groups such as Muhammadiyah-related 'Aisyiyah (1917) and Nahdlatul Ulama-connected Muslimat NU (1946), focused on illiteracy and religious education. While promoting arguments that sought to increase respect for women, they lobbied for access to education (religious and non-religious), worship spaces for women, and the protection of women's rights within the family.

The structures of these organizations put in place a system that allowed Muslim women at all levels of society to engage in study of the Qur'an. These organizations operated at the national, provincial, county, and local levels, providing education, advocacy, and leadership opportunities to women across different segments of society. To spread the KUPI message, its organizers could rely on similar networks, as well as new virtual and non-virtual platforms.

Women Ulama

For the KUPI conferences and subsequent activities to occur, many feminist, women ulama were needed. Indonesia stands out in the Muslim world since

¹⁶ <https://medium.com/@copticvoiceus/female-genital-mutilation-d4badf58f62e>

its Muslim population can rely on a large cohort of women scholars who have had access to higher institutes of Islamic education since the 1960s. Their advanced understanding of Islamic teachings enables them to serve as spiritual, intellectual, and community leaders. Across society, they hold influential positions, such as leaders of Islamic boarding schools. They give sermons to their communities or teach in Islamic universities. Several are involved in local or national politics, translating their organizational and educational skills to a larger audience.

The current situation is founded on the launch of the Islamic Institutes for Higher Education by Abdul Wahid Hasyim, the first Minister of Religious Affairs (1949-1952), after Indonesia gained independence from the Dutch during the 1950s, and neither he nor the rest of the original committee specified gender restrictions in the initial policy documents. Consequently, when the first State Institute for Islamic Studies (IAIN) was established in 1960 (now known as Universitas Islam Negeri, or UIN), the institution could not legally exclude women students. This inclusive policy was significant as it allowed women to pursue higher education in Islamic studies, fostering a generation of female Islamic scholars (*ulama*) who would go on to play important roles in religious, educational, and social spheres. As early as 1994, IAIN Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta started offering courses on Gender and Contemporary Thought in Islam. The works of feminist scholars, such as Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi, were translated into Bahasa Indonesia and used in the curriculum.¹⁷ This policy also set a precedent for other Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia and resulted in the foundation of Women's Study Institutes that contributed to the broader movement for gender equality within Islamic contexts.

While it may seem logical for women to participate in the broader sphere of Islamic teaching, this cannot be taken for granted. As Nur Rofiah observed, “[d]espite years of activism on the ground and an increasing number of female religious scholars and preachers, Indonesian religious institutions and spaces remain dominated by men”.¹⁸ Women entering the field were met with fierce resistance. Even the NU, the organization that created Qur'an schools for women (*pesantren*) where many of the female *ulama* were given

¹⁷ Etin Anwar, *A Genealogy of Islamic Feminism. Pattern and Change in Indonesia* (Routledge, 2018), 214-215.

¹⁸ Nur Rofiah, “Reading the Qur'an,” 76.

religious training before entering an Islamic university, actively fought to keep women out of positions of leadership.

In her dissertation, *Women Issuing Fatwas*, Nor Ismah provides an example of the complicated battles women within the NU had to wage to have their voices heard and opinions taken seriously.¹⁹ She notes that fatwas that touch on women's issues yielded fierce resistance from conservative male scholars who felt they should be faithful to the teachings of the school of Islamic law they follow (*madhhab*). At the same time, those reading the Qur'an and its related sources with a lens focused on the well-being of women believe that the basic message of the Qur'an protects and promotes women's basic rights. In 2007, Hindun Anisah, who leads the *pesantren* for women in Jepara, which hosted the second KUPI conference, wanted the NU board to issue a fatwa on unregistered marriages (*nikah sirri*). In her capacity as a *pesantren* leader working at the grassroots level, and as one of the board members of the local branch of the *Lembaga Kemaslahatan Keluarga Nahdlatul Ulama* (LKGNU, the Nahdlatul Ulama Family Welfare Institute), she understood, firsthand, the difficult situations unregistered marriage can lead to.²⁰ For example, children born out of such a union are considered illegitimate. Growing up, these children cannot attend regular schools as they require official documents for registration. Consequently, their chances of finding well-paid jobs, opportunities to travel abroad, and participate in any activity that requires official registration are extremely limited. Moreover, when/if the couple breaks up, the woman has no recourse to any form of aid or support.

Since women did not have the authority to issue a fatwa, Hindun asked the local LKGNU forum, which focuses on issues related to family welfare, including women's empowerment, family education, and child welfare, to issue a legal opinion against unregistered marriages. The forum ultimately decided that it was forbidden:

¹⁹ Nor Ismah, "Women Issuing Fatwas. Female Islamic Scholars and Community-Based Authority in Java, Indonesia" (PhD Diss., Leiden University, 2023).

²⁰ LKGNU (Lembaga Kemaslahatan Keluarga, Family Welfare Institute) is a body within NU that promotes family welfare through reproductive health and family planning.

not because the marriage itself is not in line with Islamic rules but because of something else, namely its negative impact on women and children. When a marriage is unregistered, a wife is potentially in a weak position when the husband leaves her, and their children cannot obtain a birth certificate from the government.²¹

However, most male NU leaders in Jepara opposed this legal opinion on formal grounds and considered it invalid because the forum lacked the religious authority required by the NU.²² They agreed that the practice of unregistered marriage was detrimental to women, however, it did not then follow that it should be forbidden.²³

While honoring the sacred texts, just as male ulama do, the KUPI leaders ask: “How can we reshape Muslim norms on gender and family relations through an approach towards the Qur’an that is grounded in both lived realities and the Qur’anic trajectory towards real, actual justice – or *haqiqi* justice?”²⁴ By including women’s lived realities and the practice of real justice that takes into account women’s unique experiences and realities, the KUPI women were driven to advocate against practices such as unregistered marriages.

In this context, it is important to emphasize that one of the transformative moments of the first KUPI conference was the understanding that women can have a level of religious authority on par with men and the acknowledgment that women can reach the level of learning that places them within the ranks of the ulama, the scholars of Islam. Ulama devote themselves to the study of the Qur’an, the Hadith, and their related sciences. Their goal is to preserve, transmit, and interpret Islamic knowledge.²⁵ According to Gaffney, the ulama’s achievements in learning make them the agents of “the divine law whose task is to preserve, to codify, to interpret,

²¹ Nor Ismah, “Women Issuing Fatwas,” 76.

²² *Ibid*, 76.

²³ *Ibid*, 75-76.

²⁴ Nur Rofiah, “Reading the Qur’an,” 58.

²⁵ Muhammad Khalid Masud, Brinkley Messick and David S. Power. “Muftis, Fatwas, and Islamic Legal Interpretation.” In *Islamic Legal Interpretation. Muftis and their Fatwas*, eds. Masud, Messick and Powers (Harvard University Press, 1996), 7.

and to transmit the verbal charisma of the prophet".²⁶ Farida and Kasdi call them "the prophetic functional switchers", "servants of God" who lead "the *umma* in promoting virtue and preventing crime".²⁷ Allowing women a space in this lineage of prophetic learning is a watershed event in itself. It could only happen because so many Indonesian women have reached the required level of religious education.

The level of authority the Congress bestowed on the women ulama allows for their knowledge to impact society. Indeed, knowledge "must be converted into authority, and for authority to be established, it must be projected as knowledge".²⁸ According to Indonesian intellectual, Mansour Fakihi, social change "needs a collective process that combines study, investigation, social analysis, education, and action".²⁹ Examining the educational and activist backgrounds of some of the KUPI leaders reveals how the women ulama, along with their male collaborators, took this advice to heart as they set out to reinterpret religious texts in such ways that could influence society and strategized on how to spread the message to wider audiences. This audience might not be the millions of women following simplified conservative, patriarchal ideas. However, by changing the curriculum in the schools that train the future leaders of Indonesian Islam, they have the potential to reach an audience that will hold the same level of authority the KUPI women have.

The Network

In 2022, the journal *Gatra* issued a special Ramadan edition to celebrate female religious leaders and women ulama. Several women featured are the KUPI organizers: Nur Rofiah, Badriyah Fayumi, Hindun Anisah, Masriyah Amva, and Maria Ulfah Ansor. A separate section includes the male drivers behind the KUPI: Husein Muhammad and Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir. Their biographical sketches show how ulama activists are connected through educational lineage and NU-related activism. For example, Nur Rofiah, who currently teaches at the Higher Institute for Qur'anic Studies in Jakarta

²⁶ Patrick D. Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit. Islamic Preaching in Contemporary Egypt*. (University of California Press, 1994), 39.

²⁷ Umma Farida and Abdurrohman Kasdi. "The 2017 KUPI Congress and Indonesian Female 'Ulama," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 12, no. 2 (2018): 138.

²⁸ Gaffney, *The Prophet's Pulpit*, 35.

²⁹ Umma Farida and Kasdi, "The 2017 KUPI Congress," 139.

(PTIQ), was educated in the same *pesantren* as Hindun Anisah, Krapyak in Yogyakarta.

During the 1980s, NU activists collaborated with intellectuals from different Islamic organizations to launch various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that would focus on research and activism related to certain pressing societal issues. These included the Institute for Economic and Social Research, Education, and Information (LP3ES) and the Institute for Social Development Studies (LSP). After Abdurrahman Wahid (1984-1999) took over the National Chair of the NU, he encouraged the establishment of several community development projects that focused on educating *pesantren* leaders and students in non-religious disciplines.³⁰ The goal was to create community development that could transform the traditional educational models and train future leaders of social change.

One of the NU initiatives that trained several of the current KUPI leaders was the Association for the Development of Pesantren and Society (Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat, 1983), better known as P3M. One of its goals was to increase awareness of women's reproductive rights and gender among teachers and students in the *pesantren*. For the NU, these schools provide a rigorous spiritual, religious, and secular formation that had traditionally been the backbone of strong NU leadership.³¹

Several of the KUPI leaders were involved in the Fatayat NU organization, the NU branch for unmarried and younger women focused on women's rights and health and taught on issues of gender and feminism as conceptual tools for women to understand their circumstances. With its connection to one of the largest Muslim organizations in the world, the Fatayat NU came to serve as a large platform through which Muslim feminist ideas percolated down to the grassroots levels.³²

All the KUPI organizers were involved in either one or more of the organizations backing the two KUPI conferences. For example, Nur Rofiah was on the board of Rahima and Alimat.

³⁰ Pieterella van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam. Reading the Qur'an in Indonesia*. (University of Illinois Press, 2006), 34, 189.

³¹ Van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam*, 189-202.

³² Etin Anwar, *A Genealogy*, 189.

To cooperate closely with religious leaders, teachers, and government officials, activists had established Rahima, the Center for Education and Information on Islam and Women's Rights Issues (2000). Alimat is a network of organizations that advocates for the reform of Indonesian family law. The third organization that was involved in the development of the KUPI conference was Fahmina, a study center on Islam and gender issues that prominent religious leader and feminist, Kiai Husein Muhammad, launched in 2001 at his *pesantren* in Cirebon to empower women.³³

Several of the founding members serve on the boards of overlapping organizations that focus on strengthening the rights of Muslim women. They connect large and complex organizations, such as the NU, with their sprawling, nationwide programs to the NGOs. Sometimes, the two types overlap. For example, the Fatayat NU, the NU branch for younger women, became a type of NGO by focusing on issues of women's rights and health.³⁴

This description serves to highlight how the two KUPI conferences allowed for a shift in the patriarchal mindset about the role and potential of women ulama. After the influence of the first conference became noticeable, in March 2022, for the first time in the organization's 100-year history, the Nahdlatul Ulama finally appointed two women to top leadership positions.³⁵ Two women in an ocean of men seems a small step. However, as Hindun's struggle shows, the first step for women is to have their religious authority acknowledged and their voices heard.

The Indonesian government took notice as well. During the second conference, one of the ministers conveyed the government's intention to support a push for greater women's representation in local government across Indonesia, saying that women ulama can play a major role in leading villages and empowering women in areas beyond religion, like education.³⁶

³³ See the Fahmina website: <https://fahmina.or.id/>

³⁴ Rachel Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety. Islam and Feminism in Indonesia* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 63-111.

³⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/19/about-time-indonesias-nu-welcomes-women-to-top-leadership>

³⁶ <https://en.antaranews.com/news/262249/ministry-drives-30-pct-womens-representation-among-village-officials>

On March 22, 2025, during Ramadan, the KUPI leader Badriyah Fayumi was invited to deliver the day's sermon at the Istiqlal mosque in Jakarta, addressing thousands of worshippers, including numerous government officials. The invitation to lead this prestigious event signaled a clear acceptance of Badriyah's religious authority by Indonesia's top religious and political leaders.³⁷

The KUPI Approach

Years of experience have made it clear to the KUPI leaders that a shift in the patriarchal mindset can only happen when they include male religious authorities in their deliberations. Badriyah Fayumi explained to me that in preparation for the conferences, they discussed their ideas with Indonesia's most influential leaders, including the Minister of Religious Affairs, Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, and Vice President Yusuf Kalla.³⁸ It was vital to explain to these leaders that women across religions struggle with the disconnect between their daily lives, lived practices, and male-oriented interpretations of the holy scriptures. In Fayumi's eyes, informing male religious leaders about their hermeneutical methods was crucial for their suggestions to be accepted by the larger public. The philosophy was that these leaders would help them wield power in public if they could be part of the solutions to strengthen women's rights in private.

Furthermore, the KUPI hermeneutical method is groundbreaking in itself. Carefully designed, this method is built on three principles. First, men and women work together. This objective translates into forms of well-being for the nuclear family as well. According to Fayumi, the ideal relationship between husband and wife is based on the concept of "*ma'ruf*" which guarantees a harmonious and happy family.³⁹ Second, Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir proposes a hermeneutical methodology that is rooted within the concept of reciprocity called *Qirā'a Mubādala*. This method "unearths

³⁷ Fachrul Misbahudin, 03-24-2025, For the full text of this sermon in Indonesian, see: <https://mubadalah.id/teks-lengkap-ceramah-nyai-badriyah-fayumi-di-masjid-istiqlal-jakarta/>

³⁸ Interview with Ibu Badriyah Fayumi, Jakarta, July 6, 2024.

³⁹ Atun Wardatun and Abdul Wahid, "In Search of Autoethnography of Female Ulama: An Alternative Approach to the Study of Islamic Family Law," *Islamic Studies Review* 2, no. 1 (2023): 43.

principles which can lead to equal cooperative relationships between men and women in all spaces, both within the family and in society. The main premise of the *Qirā'a Mubādala* method is to ensure that men and women are equal subjects in the texts".⁴⁰ The method relies on two key Qur'anic principles that concern all: *Tawhid* (that God is one), "and the Qur'anic affirmation of reciprocal relationships between men and women".⁴¹ Both ideas align with the third and final principle, Nur Rofiah's concept of *haqīqī* justice. That is, justice for women that embraces "the full humanity of all people" whatever their location, position, social condition, or privilege.⁴²

Solidifying their stance, in 2017 the KUPI leaders issued a fatwa that linked the acceptance of women ulama with these principles. The advice in the fatwa concerning the role of female religious leaders (*Ulama Perempuan*) and their empowerment is explained as follows:

The fatwa supports the role of female religious leaders in advocating for gender justice and addressing issues like child marriage, sexual violence, and environmental protection.

Followed by the advice to honor,

Inclusivity in Religious Interpretation: It calls for a more inclusive interpretation of religious texts that takes into account the experiences and needs of women.

The three hermeneutical principles are the underlying forces that shape the famous KUPI fatwas. While applying traditional Islamic reasoning and textual interpretation, the principles make the fatwas relevant and applicable to Muslim women's lives globally. This is especially so given that the fatwas equally reflect the aspirations of international conventions such as the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Connection with such human rights instruments demonstrates that more than just Muslim women benefit from the fatwas. Child marriage, forced marriage, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, and environmental destruction concern women of all faiths as well. This reality

⁴⁰ Abdul Kodir, "Qirā'a Mubādala," 187.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 188.

⁴² Nur Rofiah, "Reading the Qur'an," 62.

makes the fatwas invaluable contributions, strengthening women's lives globally.

Giving a Fatwa Hands and Feet

To conclude this article, I will illustrate how the KUPI leaders have worked towards gaining broad support for their fatwas. The conception of a fatwa is initiated by a question from the community of believers. In the case of the KUPI fatwa, the questions were formulated by the KUPI leaders who discussed the precise wording with influential Muslim leaders. Below are some examples of those questions that the 2017 fatwa against child marriage sought to answer.

1. What is the legal ruling on preventing child marriage that causes harm in the context of establishing a harmonious and prosperous family (*sakinah*)?
2. Who are the parties responsible for preventing child marriage and similar practices?
3. What can be done for children who have experienced such marriages as a form of protection?⁴³

These carefully constructed questions allow for clear answers that align with the KUPI philosophy. The abridged version of the fatwa against child marriage is as follows:

Prohibition of Child Marriage: The fatwa strongly discourages and aims to prevent child marriage. It argues that child marriage can lead to significant harm (*mafsadat*) for the child, particularly concerning their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

Family Welfare (Kemaslahatan Keluarga Sakinah): The fatwa emphasizes the importance of family welfare and the establishment of a harmonious, peaceful family (*keluarga sakinah*). Child marriage

⁴³ KUPI, *Hasil Musyawarah Keagamaan. Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia (KUPI) Ke-1. Pondok Pesantren Kebon Jambu al-Islamy Babakan Ciwaringin Cirebon, Jawa Barat. 25-27 April, 2017 M/28-30 Rajab 1438 H.* (Umah Sinau Mubadalah, 2023), 23.

is seen as incompatible with these values, as it can disrupt the development and stability of the family.

A series of recommendations provide answers to the initial questions of who bears responsibility for preventing child marriage and what can be done to protect the girl-child who is married. The KUPI leaders, alongside others, address government authorities who can enact and enforce laws that prohibit child marriage and protect children's rights. Religious leaders are called to educate communities about the dangers of child marriage and to interpret religious texts in ways that support the well-being of children and reiterate to communities and families that they should avoid practices that harm children and support the development of healthy and stable families. The different authorities and communities must help these girls by providing legal and psychological support as well as educational opportunities.⁴⁴

The fatwa emphasizes the severe negative impacts of child marriage across various aspects, including health, education, social well-being, and economic stability. It advocates for the prevention of child marriage by stressing its violation of children's rights as outlined in both national and international laws, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Indonesia's Child Protection Act that promotes the well-being of all children, regardless of their socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. (Hidayatollah, Syifa, 2022, 136-138). And finally, the fatwa contributes to the 2019 revision of the Marriage Law that raised the minimum legal age of marriage to nineteen for both men and women.

The KUPI Factor

As this article has illustrated, the KUPI conference was only able to occur due to the specific religious education opportunities in Indonesia. Resultingly, it has succeeded in changing mindsets and lived realities, and several of the KUPI fatwas have influenced the enactment of national laws aimed at strengthening the position of women. The KUPI is a religious, educational, and interpretative movement that has already impacted Indonesian society. These movements take time to mature, especially given the time it takes to train a new generation of Muslim leaders. As a result, it

⁴⁴ *Congress of Indonesian Women Ulam. Official Documents on Process and Outcome, (Kupi Offices, 2017), 103-105.*

will also take time to translate the ideas of the KUPI into new interpretations of the Qur'an. However, the actions already taken have already demonstrated how the KUPI is built on knowledge and awareness building. The conservative majority of women that Eva Nisa's article discusses lack the level of religious knowledge the KUPI leaders can rely on to build their new programs.

Indeed, the KUPI is a movement that is here to stay. Among other organizations, the KUPI addresses issues that also concern the Indonesian government. For example, the authorities are keenly aware of the societal, medical, and psychological drawbacks of child, early, forced, and secret marriages. Statistics show that such unions often end in divorce. As a result, households headed by single mothers who lack of education will therefore find themselves in poorly paid jobs, risking the economic situation of the family. As argued earlier, a strength of the KUPI movement is that it has brought together different modes of study, interpretation, and activism to strengthen the rights of Muslim women.

However, not every Muslim community is ready to accept the KUPI ideas and methods. Issues that play out at the grassroots level or within women's circles tend to escape the interest or attention of the mostly male interpreters. The KUPI questions and challenges their dominant patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an. This is bound to find resonance among Muslim women across the Muslim world, meaning that translating the KUPI materials into other languages is more urgent than ever. Connecting their work with the aspirations of CEDAW, who created a crucial platform for advancing women's rights internationally and holding countries accountable to their commitments, establishes a bridge between Muslim and non-Muslim women activists.

Indeed, it will take time for the KUPI method to be applied at a wider scale, both in Indonesia and other countries. However, the KUPI leaders are taking the initiative to convey their inspiring message to religious leaders of other Muslim countries. For example, in October 2024, they invited a group of female and male Muslim leaders from the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, and Pakistan to a conference titled "Advancing Gender Equality Through Faith". This was a collaboration between the International NGO Forum on

Indonesian Development (INFID) and the KUPI.⁴⁵ The goal of this meeting was “to share knowledge and best practices.” (Zainab, 2024) One of the participants wrote that “[t]he experience was not only intellectually stimulating but also deeply inspiring, as it centered on empowering women ulama and their supporters to champion gender equality and social inclusion across the Muslim world”.⁴⁶

Clearly, there is a lot of room for specialized meetings involving high-level non-Indonesian women Muslim leaders. Such platforms allow for the exchange of ideas on how to apply the KUPI method outside Indonesia. In addition to targeted conferences, religious specialist courses, such as those provided by Rahima, for Indonesian and non-Indonesian women Muslim leaders could prove vital. Where it concerns activities outside Indonesia, it would follow that networks such as Musawah would be heavily involved in such initiatives. Moreover, we can expect the use of social media to speed up the impact and outcomes of these initiatives. The KUPI method shows that careful planning and deliberations are key to such initiatives and that it leads to long-lasting results.

However, the question remains if we can speak about a “KUPI factor” within and outside Indonesia. One of the questions the KUPI organizers have is whether their movement’s woman-focused, hermeneutical approach to the interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith has inspired individuals or groups in Muslim communities to follow their example. At this stage, it seems impossible to answer this question. I argue that the KUPI is still an evolving movement that needs to solidify its foundations within the Indonesian context before its ideas can be effectively translated and successfully adopted by other Islamic countries. Nevertheless, the KUPI’s impact within Indonesia is undeniable. Indonesians have shown great enthusiasm for what the KUPI conferences have accomplished so far. One Indonesian observer called it “a turning point” for the nation’s civil society, an event that created awareness about “the power of women clerics”, and “a major influence through the fatwas that have been formulated, even though these fatwas have no legal binding in the country, they are believed, trusted and practiced”.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Interview with Dr. Riri Khoiriyah, Jakarta, November 5, 2024.

⁴⁶ Rubab Zainab, “Faith and gender equality.”

⁴⁷ Hidayatulloh, Taufik and Bahro Syifa. “Analysis Study of the Movement of the Indonesian Women’s Ulama Congress (KUPI). *Journal of Sharia, Tradition, and Modernity* 2, No. 2 (2022): 136-137.

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