

Muslim Women's Movements and the Decolonization of Religious Authority in Indonesia

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Abstract

Muslim women's movements in Indonesia are central to the decolonization of religious authority, contesting narratives that have long excluded women's voices from interpretive and leadership roles. For centuries, Islamic legal interpretation has been shaped by male-centered scholarship, reinforcing patriarchal structures and limiting women's authority. This article examines how women Islamic scholars (*ulama perempuan*) contest these exclusions through fatwa-making (Islamic legal opinions) and Muslim women movements.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork and informed by gender and anthropological perspectives, the study analyzes practices at the 2017 and 2022 Congresses of Indonesian Women Ulama (Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia/KUPI). Women ulama reclaim the role of fatwa-giver, asserting interpretive authority in institutions, grassroots initiatives, social movements, and media platforms. Their participation demonstrates that fatwa-making can be inclusive and transformative, disrupting established power dynamics within Islamic authority.

They also challenge dominant methodologies by embedding women's lived experiences into textual interpretation. This contrasts with conventional approaches that privilege male-authored scholarship, encouraging critical engagement with sacred texts and exposing patriarchal bias. Fatwas thus become both theological interventions and tools for social change, empowering women to reclaim spiritual autonomy and advocate for justice. The 2017 fatwa against child marriage, which contributed to raising the legal marriage age for women in Indonesia, illustrates this capacity.

Equally significant is the cultivation of community-based authority. Rather than relying on institutional positions in mosques or madrasahs, women ulama gain legitimacy through long-standing grassroots engagement and recognition. This alternative model of authority highlights how localized Muslim women's movements mobilize Islamic traditions to advance gender justice and broader social transformation.

By foregrounding these decolonial practices, the article shows how Indonesian women ulama reconfigure Islamic authority and situate Southeast Asia at the center of global debates on Islam, gender, and religious leadership—challenging assumptions that privilege Middle Eastern frameworks.

Short Bio

Nor Ismah is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Religion and Globalisation Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. She also serves as Director of the Center for Islamic Law and Ethics of Mubadalah (CILEM), Siber Syekh Nurjati State Islamic University, Cirebon, Indonesia. Her research explores the intersection of gender studies, women's knowledge production, media, and Islam in the Indonesian context. Her forthcoming Edinburgh University Press book "Women Issuing Fatwas: Female Islamic Scholars and Community-Based Authority in Java, Indonesia", is anticipated to make a significant contribution to the field. At ARI, she is developing a research project titled Religious Networks and Gender Dynamics: A Study of Female Islamic Authority in Southeast Asia, which builds on her doctoral work.