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CASE STUDY

HEIRESSES TO THE PROPHET: WOMEN RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS TRANSFORMING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN INDONESIA

A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms¹

SUMMARY



Indonesia has a well-established tradition of female religious leadership, with women ulama (religious scholars) playing significant roles in education, activism and religious legal discourse. The Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN) in Indonesia co-convened the Indonesian Congress of Women Scholars or Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia (KUPI) to amplify the Islamic narratives of women ulama and work with them to promote gender equality and counter extremist violence.




Taking a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,² this case study discusses the narratives promoting and countering violent extremism and terrorism. It focuses on how the women ulama movement's trust-based relationships, gender-sensitive Islamic perspective and consultative process enables them to deconstruct violent narratives as they pursue gender justice in Indonesia.

Violent extremism in Indonesia is framed by gendered narratives that draw on narrow interpretations of Islam and Qur'anic texts, which are further amplified by social media. This includes extremism among Indonesians who traveled to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. These narratives use conservative gender roles and familial power structures to promote violent extremist ideology among young men and women.

1. The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) was commissioned by Global Affairs Canada to produce this set of case studies on the role of gender and intersectional identities in countering violent extremism and counterterrorism. For more information or to contact the authors please email info@icanpeacework.org.

2. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. More info on the GBA+ approach is accessible [here](https://www24.international.gc.ca/gba/gba-plus/index.aspx?lang=eng).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

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Narratives are not merely messaging; they are societal responses that attempt to explain complex modern realities. Promoting the idea of multiple narratives, perspectives, or interpretations, and peaceful disagreements, is as important as the substantive deconstruction of specific narratives.
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Women religious leaders such as the women ulama can be authentic messengers who offer an important perspective vital to fully understanding and contesting the gendered narratives of violent extremist groups. Though they might be less visible, their rootedness in communities, and the related trust and influence they hold should not be overlooked.
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Social media has emerged as a new outlet for religious education, particularly for and by young people who use convincing visual and narrative strategies to spread their viewpoints. Beyond work in educational institutions, contesting violent extremist ideology requires operating in online spaces, and collaborating with the youth leaders and influencers who – due to their digital literacy and popularity – are critical messengers in these spaces.
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The process of arriving at new narratives is as important as the narratives themselves. Employing participatory, consultative methods for discussion and debate that consider a multitude of perspectives challenges the inflexible, binary nature of violent extremist ideology.
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The creation and preservation of open, safe, civic spaces for dialogue and debate, and the protection of women who play a visible role in these spaces, is key to transforming narratives at the nexus of gender and violence.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority nation in the world with 86.7% of Indonesians identifying as Muslim. However, it is also a deliberately pluralist state with a complex religious identity thanks to a history of Buddhist and Hindu rule, colonization by the Christian Dutch, and thousands of animist and syncretic communities spread out over many islands.³ Indonesian nationalism is a unique and deliberate project that grounds the unity of its geographically, ethnically, and religiously diverse population in a common language and shared set of values called *pancasila*.⁴

Even with this strong national identity and a secular constitution, religion has often been a lightning rod for tensions in Indonesian society. Suharto's three-decade dictatorship used religious rationales to instigate and justify the violent anti-communism campaign that led to the killing of more than a million people.⁵ After the Suharto regime fell in 1998, restrictions on establishing Islamist organizations were removed. Radical Indonesian Muslim activists were released from prison or returned from exile abroad.⁶ Through their dominance of media, Islamist groups crowded the Indonesian public sphere. The Islamic State and its Indonesian affiliates have used sophisticated communication networks to recruit Indonesian Muslims, including women and children, to travel to Syria and Iraq.⁷ In the third largest democracy in the world, this has given conservative Islamists the clear lead in the marketplace of ideas—until very recently.



The decentralized tradition of Islamic education emerged as an alternative educational institution accessible to the vast majority of the population – including women.

3. Amnesty International. (2017). Pluralism and the Struggle for Justice and Equality in Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

4. Pedersen, L. (2016). Religious Pluralism in Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

5. Ibid.

6. Indonesia Investments. (2020). Radical Islam in Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

7. Djelantik, S. (2019). Islamic State and the Social Media in Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

Despite this political trend toward conservative Islamism, support for violent extremism has generally remained low in the country.⁸ This is perhaps in part because of the core message of tolerance professed by Indonesia's two largest Islamic movements, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah.⁹ Indonesian civil society, however, may be the most significant factor in maintaining pluralism, human rights, and peace. The country's open democratic space enables transformation and advancement of progressive ideas by civil society, which faces no barriers to working directly with the people.¹⁰ In this environment, Indonesian civil society organizations are well-positioned to contribute to countering violent extremism (CVE) as they are highly trusted and often fill service gaps that the government has been unable to address.¹¹

While counterterrorism initiatives by security actors have been increasingly successful at preventing violence and deterring individuals from joining violent extremist groups, the threat has remained high.¹² This is in no small part due to the rise and fall of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and related upward trends in the return and domestic radicalization of Indonesians.¹³

Women as Recognized Sources of Religious Scholarship

Religious literacy, which can be a source of resilience to radicalization, is high in Indonesia thanks to its unique system of Islamic boarding schools called pesantren. During the colonial period, only the elite could attend the formal schools run by the Dutch government.¹⁴ The decentralized tradition of Islamic education, often delivered in teachers' homes in villages across the country, emerged as an alternative educational institution accessible to the vast majority of the population – including women.¹⁵ Expanded and formalized during the colonial era, there are now an estimated one million of these schools run by both independent foundations and the government.¹⁶

Hundreds of pesantren are run by women, placing them close to the people and making women's religious leadership a lived reality in many communities. Pesantren have been led by and produced female imams, intellectuals, expert Qur'an reciters and activists with expertise in Islamic studies, Islamic law and interpretation of Islamic texts.¹⁷ Over the past two decades, Indonesian women's rights activists have begun collaborating with these Muslim women clerics and educators – referred to as women ulama – to use Islamic tradition to improve the economic, social and psychological condition of women in Indonesian society. Since 2000, for instance, women ulama have been engaged in the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV). With support from the first lady of Indonesia at the time, an activist, women's crisis centers were set up in Islamic boarding schools to handle GBV cases.

Indonesian civil society may be the most significant factor in maintaining pluralism, human rights, and peace.

In contrast to other contexts where efforts to elevate female Islamic leadership have been more of an elite enterprise, in Indonesia the social authority of women ulama is recognized by the population because they are embedded in society through their position in the pesantren. Since ulama is a gender-neutral term designating religious scholars, experts or researchers, the idea of women ulama has faced less conceptual resistance and has been easier to reclaim as a label.¹⁸ Women ulama play an essential role in passing on knowledge of Qur'anic texts to the next generation of women, enabling them to engage men from a position of equal knowledge and use the (re-)interpretation of Islamic narratives as a tool for social activism.¹⁹

Gender, Identity, and Violent Extremist Narratives in Indonesia

While educational institutions such as the pesantren serve an important purpose as sites for promoting religious literacy in Indonesia, they must contend with another, more popular platform for spreading discourse and narratives: the internet. Conservative Islamic groups and activists in Indonesia have effectively used online spaces, including social media, to popularize narratives advancing a conservative approach to Islam that restricts gender equality and is grounded in violent extremist ideology.

Due to the powerful role religion plays in Indonesian society, violent extremist narratives in the country are grounded in simplified interpretations of Islamic texts. For instance, radical Islamic groups promote jihad as a core narrative to recruit supporters, using an incorrect translation and interpretation that emphasizes physical struggle rather than the more encompassing and authoritative definition of jihad as an internal spiritual and moral struggle for good. Another common narrative centers around the concept of hijra - meaning to go to a situation where you will do better – to encourage people to change the way they dress, embrace conservative Islamic ideology, and support extremist groups, for example by traveling to join the Islamic State. Violent extremist religious narratives are heavily gendered. They focus on the role and condition of women, including by promoting patriarchy, conservative dress, polygamy, and child marriage.

8. Rhoads, E. (2018). The Role of Women in Violent Extremism in Asia. ([access here](#)).

9. Interview with AMAN Indonesia

10. Interview with AMAN Indonesia

11. Sumpster, C. Countering violent extremism in Indonesia: priorities, practice and the role of civil society. ([access here](#)).

12. Rhoads, E. (2018). The Role of Women in Violent Extremism in Asia. ([access here](#)).

13. Global Center on Cooperative Security. (2018). A Closer Look: Gender Dynamics in Violent Extremism and Countering Violent Extremism in Southeast Asia ([access here](#)).

14. Interview with AMAN Indonesia

15. Interview with AMAN Indonesia

16. Interview with AMAN Indonesia

17. Oxford Islamic Studies. (2007). Women, Islam and the Twenty-first Century. ([access here](#)).

18. Interview with AMAN Indonesia

19. Oxford Islamic Studies. (2007). Women, Islam and the Twenty-first Century. ([access here](#)).

Violent extremist narratives frame the progressive debate on these topics, which challenges conservative, patriarchal interpretations, as attacks on Islamic values and disregard for women's traditional roles: Islam is "under threat" by Indonesia's modernization and pluralism.²⁰ Indonesia has the fourth largest population of young people, and youth unemployment is high (around 20-30%).²¹ For young, disempowered Indonesian men – particularly rural men who struggle with marginalization and resentment around the affluent lifestyles they see their urban peers participating in – Islam holds global significance as a symbol of resistance to Western hegemony.²² Violent extremist narratives promote Islam as not just a religion, but as a powerful, transnational identity in which they are invited to participate.²³

Conservative Islamic groups and activists in Indonesia have effectively used online spaces, including social media, to popularize narratives advancing a conservative approach to Islam that restricts gender equality.

In Indonesia, conservative women are active agents in disseminating violent extremist narratives in online spaces, making them attractive to a younger generation.²⁴ These women and their audience often do not come from pesantren or Islamic-studies backgrounds. Instead, they draw on ideologies and ideas popularized by conservative Islamist groups to promote simplified, patriarchal understandings of Islamic texts. Young Indonesian women use social media platforms such as Instagram as avenues for modern-day da'wa (proselytization), educating others on the best way to become pious Muslim women.²⁵ Recurring da'wa themes include encouraging women to cover their bodies through veiling and finding a marriage partner in an Islamic way by forgoing dating and getting married at a young age.²⁶

Conservative social media posts might display quotes from the Qur'an presented in a visually appealing way but lacking in context, highlighting passages that align with specific ideological objectives.²⁷ Narratives emphasize the importance of traditional gender roles in maintaining balance and complementarity, and reject gender equality as an imported Western concept.²⁸ The end goal of hijra is portrayed as the attainment of pious love, happiness and tranquility – attractive prospects for young Indonesian women in search of an identity. By using their graphic design skills, knowledge of social media and connection to



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their personal lives and stories, these young conservative women convincingly reproduce regressive narratives around Islam and gender that may leave them and their audience at risk of recruitment and participation in violent extremism.

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KUPI: Women's Religious Leadership for Gender Justice and Peace

Advocacy for gender equality through religious scholarship and education offers a powerful counter-discourse to extremist religious teachings, including the simplified conservative narratives popularized on Indonesia's social media platforms.²⁹ A profile of AMAN Indonesia by Move92 summarizes this well:

20. USAID. (2013). Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Indonesia: A Risk Assessment. ([access here](#)).

21. Indonesia Investments. (2018). Unemployment in Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

22. USAID. (2013). Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Indonesia: A Risk Assessment. ([access here](#)).

23. Ibid.

24. Nisa, E. F. (2019). Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Online Conflicting Narratives behind the Women Ulama Congress. Asian Studies Review, 1–21.

25. Nisa, E.F. (2018). Creative and Lucrative Da'wa: The Visual Culture of Instagram amongst Female Muslim Youth in Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Nisa, E. F. (2019). Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Online Conflicting Narratives behind the Women Ulama Congress. Asian Studies Review, 1–21.

29. Idris, I. (2019). Preventing/countering violent extremism programming on men, women, boys and girls. ([access here](#)).



KUPI gathers women ulama from diverse institutions and organizations to advocate for gender justice and social justice.

"In Indonesia, the conservative and radical groups tend to dominate Islamic teaching. They also dominate women's issues—early marriage, niqab, polygamy and the definition of a wife's obligations. Gender bias and discrimination of women are also shaped by a strong influence of the media, particularly social media and technology. However, women ulama offer an Islamic perspective that promotes gender equality and women empowerment, and their teachings are well-documented."³⁰

KUPI is a pioneering effort to organize women ulama, as defined by their interpretations of Islam proclaiming gender equality as a foundational basis of Islamic teachings, rather than by their gender identity as women alone.

The Indonesian Congress of Women Scholars or Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia (KUPI) is a pioneering effort to organize women ulama, defined by their interpretations of Islam proclaiming gender equality as a foundational basis of Islamic teachings, rather than by their gender identity as women alone.³¹ KUPI serves as a collective, gathering women ulama from diverse institutions and organizations including scholars, educators, activists, and officials, to advocate for gender justice and social justice. The Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN Indonesia) is a co-organizer of KUPI and aims to promote gender equality, advocate for the rights of women who have been targets of gender-based violence, and promote the role of women ulama in the prevention of violent extremism.³²

AMAN Indonesia uses a peacebuilding approach to preventing violent extremism, translating techniques such as Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) to create open space for dialogue and, for example, facilitate reintegration of returnees and deportees affiliated with violent extremism. KUPI was identified by AMAN Indonesia as a strategic partner due to their capabilities as transformational agents of change and key stakeholders in the effort to prevent of violent extremism. In collaboration with AMAN, women ulama have been trained to counter extremist narratives with their own peaceful and just interpretations of Islam, to recognize the signs of violent extremism, and to actively engage with the government in dialogue and advocacy at the provincial and national levels.

To date, KUPI's efforts to prevent violent extremism have focused on addressing the conditions conducive to violent extremism and terrorism. They do this by promoting tolerance using alternative narratives and engagement of the media, and detecting early warning signs.³³ For instance, KUPI is working "to reconstruct the concept of jihad as the work of civilization and humanity, while jihad with the meaning of warfare is only in the context of self-preservation."³⁴

Contesting Online Space

Contestation of violent extremist narratives on social media is risky and can very quickly turn into a trial-by-mob. Bullying and provocation by radical groups is rife, and conservative voices have successfully captured a wide swath of online spaces. These groups advance a single narrative, often based on narrow interpretations of Islamic texts, and do not allow for multiple perspectives. In online discussions, women's issues tend to generate a

30. Move92. (2021). Partner profile: AMAN Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

31. Robinson, K. (2017). Female Ulama voice a vision for Indonesia's future. ([access here](#)); Interview with AMAN Indonesia.

32. Women and Peacebuilding Blog. (2019). Amplifying Women Ulama's Voices: Training and Dialogue on Gender and Islam. ([access here](#)).

33. Interview with AMAN Indonesia.

34. Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome, p. 139.

lot of attention and passion. Zealous, conservative young people use sophisticated storytelling and visual tactics to get people on their side and dominate the Indonesian social media landscape.

Despite the risk of public backlash and retaliation, more and more women ulama feel they need to face the public and amplify their voices in online spaces. They recognize that the current battle is on social media, and that is where they need to win some space in order to educate people about Islamic teachings from their perspective. Rather than fighting in the comments section, they need to lay out their argumentation in articles and other platforms where they can fully explain their reasoning and interpretations. However,³⁵ due to the norms of consensus in Islamic scholarship, not all women ulama are comfortable directly and publicly countering violent extremist narratives.³⁶

Dialogue and Discourse

2017 saw a marked advance in public recognition of women ulama, as a result of their consolidation through the first official convening of KUPI. In a groundbreaking step, KUPI issued three fatwas³⁷ focused on priority issues for Indonesian women: Sexual Violence, Child Marriage, and the Destruction of Nature.³⁸ These first three fatwas also provide a testing ground for the acceptance and impact of this claim to religious authority by women ulama.³⁹ The Congress also produced extensive recommendations addressing religious radicalism, violence, and conflict. These recommendations emphasize pluralism, critical thinking, supporting the nation-state, minority rights, following the rule of laws against hate speech, support for women and child victims of radicalism through disengagement, and countering the stigmatization of returnees.⁴⁰

KUPI's process of consultation and argumentation is a powerful antidote to the inflexible and binary nature of violent extremist ideologies, and a deliberate rejection of hegemonic power structures that underpin—and are underpinned by—gender inequalities. KUPI's methodology recognizes the experience of victims alongside scientific evidence and Islamic scholarship.⁴¹ Furthermore, they have established the necessity of these three components in Islam, arguing that without a gender perspective relevant texts may not be found among the tomes of Islamic scholarship that the traditional ulama rely on exclusively. The preparation for the 2017 convening of KUPI began fifteen years ago. It included participatory dialogue and learning that bridged the grassroots and the academic spheres and laid the groundwork for its decision-making structures.⁴²

The incorporation of Reflective Structured Dialogue is thus a natural extension of KUPI's existing approach. Ruby Kholifah, Executive Director of AMAN Indonesia, explains,



Women ulama have been trained to counter extremist narratives with their own peaceful and just interpretations of Islam.

"The dialogue was aimed to create a safe space for women ulama from different ideologies (such as Sunni, Shia, Ahmadiyya, Salafi, and Wahhabi) to share their personal journey in dealing with controversial issues such as the Khilafah (Islamic State), living in co-existence with non-Muslims, polygamy, child marriage, girls' education, etc. We applied Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD), an approach that teaches women ulama how to conduct a dialogue that makes everyone comfortable to talk and contribute. In collaboration with Mediators Beyond Borders International (MBBI), we were trained on how to use RSD tools over five days including simulations of dialogue. After that, the alumni of the training hosted a series of dialogues to engage other women from different congregations. Nine dialogues engaged 44 selected women ulama from the cities of Malang, Solo and Tasikmalaya."⁴³

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KUPI's members have since been increasingly active in their communities, helping people to understand events and reject narratives justifying violence in the aftermath of attacks. By enhancing the capacity of local members with guidance on deradicalization initiatives, KUPI can enable local women ulama to aid in rehabilitation and reintegration.

35. Interview with AMAN Indonesia.

36. Interview with AMAN Indonesia.

37. Fatwas are a non-binding legal opinions or rulings on points of Islamic law, practice, or convention, issued by an Islamic scholar.

38. Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome.

39. AMAN Indonesia is assisting KUPI with a review to assess the adoption of these fatwa in advance of the next congress in 2022.

40. Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome, p. 138.

41. Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome.

42. Ibid.

43. Interview with AMAN Indonesia.