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## CASE SUMMARY

# 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 Extremisms<sup>1</sup>

## 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,<sup>2</sup> 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](mailto: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

- ▶ **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.
- ▶ **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.
- ▶ **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.
- ▶ **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.
- ▶ **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

### Gender, Identity, and Violent Extremist Narratives in Indonesia

Even with a strong national identity and a secular constitution, religion has often been a lightning rod for tensions in Indonesian society. Due to the powerful role religion plays in Indonesian society, violent extremist narratives in the country are grounded in simplified interpretations of Islamic texts. They are also heavily gendered, focusing on the role and condition of women, including gender equality, dress, polygamy, and child marriage. These narratives frame the progressive debate on these topics as persecution of Islamic values and disregard for women's traditional roles: Islam is “under threat” by Indonesia's modernization and pluralism.<sup>3</sup>

Through their dominance of media, Islamist groups have crowded the Indonesian public sphere. In recent years, 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.<sup>4</sup> In the third largest democracy in the world, this has given conservative Islamists the clear lead in the marketplace of ideas—until very recently.

Religious literacy, which can be a source of resilience to radicalization, is high in Indonesia thanks to the country's unique system of Islamic boarding schools called pesantren. Pesantren have been led by and produced female imams, intellectuals, expert Qur'an reciters and



In Indonesia, the social authority of women ulama is recognized by the population because they are embedded in society through the pesantren.

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

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



activists with expertise in Islamic studies, Islamic law and interpretation of Islamic texts.<sup>5</sup> 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

positions in the pesantren.

Women ulama's 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.<sup>6</sup>

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

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.<sup>7</sup> KUPI serves as a collective, gathering women ulama including scholars, educators, activists, and officials, from diverse institutions and organizations 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 fatwas<sup>9</sup> focused on priority issues for Indonesian women: Sexual Violence, Child Marriage, and the Destruction of Nature.<sup>10</sup> These first three fatwas also provide a testing ground for the acceptance and impact of this claim to religious authority by women ulama.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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

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.<sup>13</sup> The preparation for the 2017 convening of KUPI goes back around fifteen years, and included participatory dialogue and learning that bridged the grassroots and the academic spheres, and laid the groundwork for its decision-making structures.

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. However, due to the norms of consensus in Islamic scholarship, not all women ulama are comfortable directly and publicly countering violent extremist narratives.<sup>15</sup>

KUPI's members are increasingly active in their communities, helping people 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

14. Ibid.

15. Interview with AMAN Indonesia.