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, this case study discusses the narratives promoting and countering violent extremism. 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 counterrorism. 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.
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.

In Indonesia, the social authority of women ulama is recognized by the population because they are embedded in society through the pesantren.
activists with expertise in Islamic studies, Islamic law and interpretation of Islamic texts. 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.

**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. 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.

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

Women ulama’s advocacy for gender equality through religious scholarship and education offers a powerful counter-discourse to extremist religious teachings.

**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 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.

---

9. Fatwas are non-binding legal opinions or rulings on points of Islamic law, practice, or convention, issued by an Islamic scholar.
11. AMAN Indonesia is assisting KUPI with a review to assess the adoption of these fatwa in advance of the next congress in 2022.
14. Ibid.
15. Interview with AMAN Indonesia.