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Reclaiming an Authority: Women's Ulama Congress Network (KUPI) and a New Trend of Religious Discourse in Indonesia

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Abstract

The struggle of the Indonesian Women Ulama Congress Network (KUPI) to reclaim the authority of female ulama in Indonesia has facilitated the emergence of a new trend in a religious domain that has traditionally been male-dominated and marginalized women. This paper aims to explore three methods of struggle adopted by the KUPI network to reclaim women's religious authority and socio-political recognition of being an ulama. These include reconstructing the concept of ulama, developing an alternative non-patriarchal and gender-inclusive epistemology, and issuing fatwas on strategic issues. Data for this study has resulted from observations, interviews with ten (10) leading activists and members of the KUPI network, and readings on the publications of the KUPI and its network. This study reveals that KUPI reinterprets the concept of ulama by giving new gender-inclusive meanings in terms of definition, agency, and roles. The KUPI network also criticizes the existing epistemology that has enabled masculine domination and patriarchal bias in producing religious knowledge. The network develops a new epistemology in interpreting religious texts contextually. It brings up the true-justice perspective and hermeneutics of reciprocity. KUPI issued fatwas related to three major issues, including sexual violence, child marriage, and ecological crisis. The fatwa also functions to establish KUPI's position of legitimacy on a par with the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) and symbolizes public recognition of Muslim women's clerical authority. The study recommends the need for a more massive-quantitative study to map social acceptance and recognition of women ulama's authority on a national and international level.

Keywords: Religious Authority, Female Ulama, Women Ulama Congress Network, KUPI, Fatwa

1. Introduction

The domination of men and marginalization of women in mainstream traditional religious discourse has prompted efforts to reclaim religious authority by women *ulama* in Indonesia. For centuries,

male-dominated norms have allowed men to exercise religious privilege and authority. The marginalization, oppression, and inequality of women are as old as Biblical history (Wood, 2019). In the context of Islam, the masculine discourse that is quite prominent in the verses of the Qur'an manifests itself in various levels (Darzi et al., 2021). Men dominate positions in religious spheres as becoming the prophets, exegetes, jurists, the leader of the mosques, the head of the religious mass organizations, and other strategic positions. In a more specific context, only a few women engage in the Indonesian *Ulama* Council (MUI) (Marzuki Wahid Documentation, 2017: 25). As a state-recognized clerical institution, MUI currently has 59 members, and only five women get involved there (MUI, 2021). Men are leading religious institutions, including the Ministry of Religious Affairs, from the central offices to the sub-district levels and impose their perspectives on religious affairs concerning women and men (Rofiah 2018). This marginalization has triggered the emergence of female *ulama* who seek to restore women's authority in the field of religion. KUPI is one of the most important representations of this trend.

Studies on KUPI have focused on mainly three aspects. First, studies outlining particular themes related to female clerics in general or themes that become KUPI's concern (Ali et al., 2017; Umar, 202; Kusmana, 2019; Syukur, 2018). Second, studies highlight the intellectual and religious roles played by individual female clerics at the local level or within an Islamic Boarding School, locally known as *Pesantren* (Mujib, 2019; Mundzir & Razak, 2020; Hasanuddin, 2018). According to Hasanuddin (2018), women's authority as *ulama* is not only related to their mastery of traditional Islamic sciences. It also relates to their religious power in public spaces - albeit limited - such as in *halaqah* (study circles), mosques, *da'wah* stages, and classrooms at various levels of educational institutions. Third, studies reveal the role of KUPI in producing a moderate understanding of Islam. These include their efforts to collaborate with male *ulama* in dealing with the domination of masculine authority (Farida & Kasdi, 2018; Ismah, 2016). None of these studies explored the most fundamental aspect of the KUPI struggle, namely their effort to reclaim the recognition of women's clerical authority and reconstruct a non-patriarchal understanding of religion.

This paper aims to explore the efforts of the KUPI network to regain socio-political recognition of female *ulama* religious authority. More specifically, this paper focuses on three forms of KUPI's comprehensive and systematic efforts to reclaim religious authority. The first is their efforts to reconstruct and reinterpret the concept of *ulama* and female clerical authority in Islam. The second is their endeavor to reconstruct non-patriarchal and gender-inclusive methods of Quranic interpretation. The third focuses on the KUPI's effort to issue fatwas and disseminate the fatwas. These fatwas function not only to be the guidelines for the members of the KUPI network but also to become alternatives besides MUI's fatwas. This study assumes that female *ulama*s as individuals are not passive. They have the power to build their communities and play a vital role in bringing about positive socio-religious changes. In other words, these women have clerical authority recognized by their respective communities. By networking with other female *ulama*, they could make broader and more massive changes.

2. Religious Authority and The Concept of *Ulama*

2.1 Authority, Power, and Controlling Others

Authority is a condition in which the authoritative figures manage to coerce, convince, or cajole others to behave, even to think, in particular ways (Migdal, 2021). Commands that come from 'authoritative' sources fall somewhere between persuasive and coercive: they do not allow for argumentation while also not requiring force to be effective (Kloeg & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2021). Meyer (2021) describes how social pressure from other people, especially those in power (authority), can change the behavior of other individuals. In contrast to Migdal, Lopes (2020) distinguishes authority from power, where the most significant characteristic of authority, according to him, involves a right to get something done. The effectiveness of authority depends on the acceptance,

acknowledgment, or approval of the rights. Meanwhile, power is the ability to get it done, regardless of opposition. Authority, therefore, means having control over others based on their acknowledgment, acceptance, and submission to the authoritative figures.

Authority includes traditional, rational, and charismatic authorities (Weber, 1994). The first authority refers to the leadership structure that derives its legitimacy from historically constructed customs and norms and specific contexts (Mustasilta, 2021). A scientific-rational worldview reinforces rational authority (Glassman RM (2021). This authority refers to power based on one's social title, role, or position (Dietsch et al., 2021). In contrast to traditional and rational authority, charismatic authority is based on a leader's particular charisma as defined and recognized by his followers (Gustafsson & Weinryb, 2020). According to David D. (2021), charismatic authority is an overpowering alternative but fragile and temporary. This type of authority gains power through a personality that is considered extraordinary. Hence, charismatic leaders need followers who acknowledge their exceptional and even supernatural gifts (Hammer & Swartz, 2020). Rational authority prevails in the modern era, while traditional authority is abandoned, and charismatic authority is a hybrid, being a synthetic authority type which at some points will lean towards traditionalism or legalism (Emanuel COPILAŞ, 2021).

2.2 Religious Authority

Religious authority is a form of traditional authority in the field of religion. The Catholic Church, for example, claims its authority and is based on the Bible and Catholic traditions that allow the leaders of the church to perform traditional roles such as leading religious congregations (Brian Altenhofenm, 2021). Yet, this authority is primarily charismatic, although it refers to other forms of legitimacy over time (Giorgi, 2019). It is also the power to determine the right way to interpret and practice religion, or in the context of Islam, to uphold the coherence and continuity of Islamic traditions (Yarosh, 2021). This type of authority can originate from various sources. Hence, it is more important to focus on the context wherein people convey rather than looking at its final manifestation (Campbell, 2010). However, the primary distinction of religious authority is that its authority is considered legitimate by reference to some supernatural entity. This entity might be considered a god, spirit, or a system of traditions that functions to support the "word of god" (Chaves, 1994).

The study of religious authority focuses on systems, roles, texts, and beliefs that serve as the sources or manifestations of authority (Chambell, 2010). This authority is identical to coercive power, male dominance, the prophet's access to the divine, as something that the clergy alone possesses (Kaunda Kaunda, 2020). In the context of Islam, the authoritative figures are the *ulama*, namely those who have a deep understanding of religion and are considered the heirs of the Prophets (Abdullah Walit, 2021; Fakhruroji, 2019). The primary role of the *ulama* is to spread Islamic teachings in society, solve religious problems, become mediators, catalysts, and agents and controllers of social change (Safei, 2021).

2.3 Ulama as the Holders of Religious Authority in Islam

In literature, authors sometimes translate the term *ulama* as the religious authority (Alatas, 2021; Ahmed, 2021; Campbell, 2010; Chaves, 1994; Giorgi, 2019), religious scholar (Scott, 2021), or use it in its Arabic form without translation (Bektaş, 2020; Hasyim, 2020; B. Ridwan et al., 2019). The institutionalization of this concept contributed to the marginalization of women from the religious realm and has thus left the term "ulama" to be connoted as a man's affair (Nur Rofiah, 2018)." Men also dominate the top leaders of Islamic religious institutions in Indonesia, including the Indonesian *Ulama* Council (MUI), the Ministry of Religious Affairs, as well as Islamic civil society organizations such as Nahdatul *Ulama* (NU), Muhammadiyah, and other Islamic organizations (Marzuki Wahid Documentation, 2017: 25). Religious texts, however, always use the term of *ulama* in its gender-

neutral term. The term, therefore, *ulama* can refer to both men or women without having to add the nature of "male" or "female" (Khariroh, 2011).

*Ulama*s play significant roles in almost all areas of life, especially in Muslim-majority countries. One of the most strategic roles of *ulama* is to issue fatwas that function to be guidelines for community members. *Ulama*s in Egypt, for example, have a strategic role in determining the political direction that has significant effects on Egyptian society. Many Egyptians, however, perceive that the *ulama* had reneged on its duty to protect Islam and ensure that the Egyptians uphold Islamic legal norms and the broader principle of Socio-economic justice in the public sphere (Scott, 2021). In Saudi Arabia, the *ulamas* have played a strategic role in politics since 1744 (Kechichian, 1986). The *ulamas* in Indonesia also have respective roles. They not only have to influence socio-religious affairs, but also economic affairs, even politics. They determine religious holidays in which dominant religious organizations use religious symbols to contest and confirm the existence of their respective interpretations, religious beliefs, positions, and social legitimacy (R. Ridwan & Zain, 2021). The Indonesian *Ulama* Council (MUI) is the most knowledgable fatwa-making institution in this Muslim-majority country. Yet many Indonesian experts and observers are skeptical of the positive impact of the Fatwa on the development of democracy in the country (Hasyim, 2020)

3. Method

This article is qualitative research on the Indonesian Women *Ulama* Congress network (KUPI) as a new collective movement in Indonesia. The informants of this study included ten (10) stakeholders and members of the KUPI network, consisting of seven (7) female scholars and three (3) male scholars who supported female *ulama*. They are the initiators, supporters, resource persons, and researchers of the movement. Primary data include the results of interviews with research informants, observation during the first congress in 2017, and engagement in other KUPI activities. Interviews were conducted both in-person and through the WhatsApp platform. Apart from interviews, data for this study is also based on four books officially published by KUPI following their first congress, namely: 1. Indonesian Women Religious Discourse (KUPI Team, 2017a); 2. Future Projects of Indonesian Women *Ulama* (TIM KUPI, 2017b); 3. Media Coverage of KUPI (KUPI TIM, 2017c); 4. Official Documents of the Process and Results of the First Female *Ulama* Congress (TEAM KUPI, 2017d).

Researchers participated in various KUPI activities conducted after the congress, including seminars, religious gatherings, and talk shows. We also documented KUPI's statements posted on their social media accounts. These included Instagram, Facebook, and books authored by KUPI stakeholders and networks. In addition, books and social media posts from the KUPI stakeholders and networks become our secondary data. We then transcribed the collected data and classified them based on the themes following the research questions. The researcher then analysed the classified data by building a coherent narrative and interpretation.

4. Reclaiming Female *Ulama*

4.1 Reconstructing and Reinterpreting the Concept of Ulama

KUPI network reconstructs the traditionally male-associated concept of *ulama* by reinterpreting Quranic verses related to this concept. In their new interpretation of the concept of *ulama*, KUPI proposes that the term *ulama* is the plural form of *'alim*, which means a knowledgeable person. Hence, *ulamas* include people who have qualified expertise in any field, regardless of their gender and sex (KUPI Team, 2017d: 18; Abdul Kodir, 2017a: 39). The *ulamas* term indicates someone who has high integrity for their sole fears of Allah and commitment to upholding justice (KUPI Team, 2017d: 18). An ulama to the KUPI network is someone, both male and female, who commits justice, and works for the better of the universe (Fahmina Document, 2017).

The reinterpretation of the concept of *ulama* is related to agencies attached to those eligible to be *ulama*. The members of the KUPI network understand *ulamas* as the inheritors of the Prophet Muhammad in terms of knowledge. The concept in society is associated with those who understand the normative sources of Islamic teachings, behave nobly, and engage in guiding their community in their daily lives. Under this interpretation, *ulamas* are no longer a privilege and exclusive status for men but include women who have knowledge and experience to play these roles (Rita Pranawati, 2017b: 79). The historical facts show that famous *ulamas* in Islamic intellectual history, namely Imam al-Shafi'i, Imam al-Bukhari, al-Hafidz Ibn Munzir, Ibn Qayyim al-Jauhziyyah, were students of female *ulama* (Swara Rahima, 2021). The KUPI network distinguishes between the concepts of *ulama perempuan* (woman *ulama*) and *Perempuan ulama* (female *ulama*) (KUPI Team, 1917d: 19). The female *ulama* refers to women whose mastery of Islamic teachings makes them qualified to become an *ulama*, regardless of their gender justice perspective. Meanwhile, women *ulama* include both female and male *ulama*s whose intellectual and social works refer to the principle of gender justice. Furthermore, they contribute to integrating the perspective of gender justice in contextualizing Islamic teachings to face contemporary challenges.

One of the methodological breakthroughs developed by KUPI in understanding Islam is the hermeneutics of *mubādalah*. The term *mubādalah* is an Arabic word that means reciprocity. In the hermeneutics of *mubādalah*, a text is understood based on the universal and cross-gender meanings it contains, even though the text is gender-specific (Kodir, 2016). The consequence of this approach is that the concept and role of *ulamas* refer to both men and women. The Indonesian *Ulama* Council has 18 chairmen and only one woman as one of the chairmen, namely Prof. Amany Lubis (https://mui.or.id/kepengurusan-mui). Husein Muhammad, a leading member of KUPI, argues that women's intellectual skills and capacities are relatively equal and, in some cases, surpass that of men (interview with Kyai Husein, 2017). Hence, the concept of *ulama* is understood inclusively and thus includes women who have the intellectual capacity, as the testimony of Nina Nurmila (2017b, 64), a female professor:

> *Do I deserve to be called an ulama? Why do I feel like the label is so great and still rarely assigned to women? I feel a little awkward and lack confidence, whether I deserve to be called an ulama. However, why not? I am a knowledgeable person. I have completed my study to the highest level (professor) that not all men can achieve. Then that self-confidence arises, yes, I am a woman, and I can be an ulama.*

Badriyah Fayumi (2017) also emphasizes that women have the same capacity and clerical authority as men (Fayumi, 2017). She and KUPI network uses historical data to argue that the concept of ulama has always been gender-neutral in the Indonesian context. They point out that the community in almost every region preserves stories about female ulama that last in the collective memory of their respective communities (Tim Kupi, 2017).

4.2 Epistemological Criticism and Reconstruction of a Gender-Inclusive Hermeneutic

KUPI members have criticized the dominant epistemology in the production of religious knowledge. They argue that the dominance of masculinity historically characterized knowledge production in classical Islamic theology (Swararahima, 2018). The epistemology has led scholars to produce patriarchal religious interpretations. These include the traditional view that, on the one hand, only men deserve to become *ulamas* only because they are male and the heirs of the Prophets (Napilah et al., 2021). On the other hand, they considered the women a source of temptation and, hence, must be controlled under strict boundaries in their individual and social lives (Rohmaniyah, 2020). KUPI network reconstructs an alternative epistemology based on the concept of absolute justice and locates it to be the logical implication of the principle of monotheism in Islamic teachings. Based on the teachings of monotheism, the members believe that Islam rejects all forms of exploitation against human beings and nature for any reason (Nur Rofiah, 2017).

KUPI intellectuals offer a model of interpretation of religious texts that would allow a gender-inclusive understanding. This model signifies their efforts to reconstruct an alternative to the masculine-dominated religious epistemology. Masruchah (2020), Nur Rofiah (2018), and Faqihudin (2013), the initiators of the KUPI network, have outlined this intellectual endeavor in their respective works.

> *True justice is our parameter in understanding religious texts and the reality of life (Masruchah, National Commission of Woman, 2020)*

> *True justice is a perspective that considers not only the general condition of human beings. It accommodates biological and social experiences specific to women (Nur Rofiah, Lecturer at Institute of Qur'anic Sciences [PTIQ] Jakarta, 2020).*

> *I offer a theory of interpretation which I call mafhum at-tabadul (reciprocal meaning) or hermeneutics of reciprocity. I also use another term, namely reciprocal reading of religious texts (Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, Fahmina Institute, 2013).*

Two essential components of gender-inclusive epistemology are a contextual approach with a true-justice perspective and reciprocal hermeneutics. This alternative epistemology enables the production of gender-inclusive religious knowledge and evades patriarchal interpretations. For example, is the interpretation of text concerning male leadership as in QS. An-Nisa: 34. Nur Rofiah argues that someone needs to understand this verse contextually because the textual reading leads to the emergence of a patriarchal understanding where women are considered weak, unable to protect, let alone become leaders (Kompas, 2021). Meanwhile, a text from reciprocity hermeneutics refers to both sexes, though it only mentions one gender (Kodir, 2013).

4.3 Fatwa and the Authority of Female Ulama

To establish their status as a network of *ulama,* the KUPI has issued fatwas concerning three challenging issues, namely sexual violence, child marriage, and ecological destruction. The network asserts that sexual violence in any form is *haram* (forbidden).

> *We believe that sexual violence inside and outside of marriage is haram (forbidden). Everyone is obliged to take prevention and must stand up against it. Hence, we issue recommendations regarding the prevention of sexual violence. We also assert that no one should sacrifice ecological sustainability for whatever reason. It is haram (forbidden) to destroy the ecology, and the state must be involved to prevent it (Badriyah Fayumi, a leader of pesantren, 2018).*

Fayumi, a leader of the Islamic Boarding School in West Java, argues that preventing child marriage is mandatory due to the degree of the psychological and social damages it causes compared with its benefits (KUPI TEAM, 2017c: 156, 239, 241).

All KUPI members, both female and male *ulama*s, acknowledge and fully support these fatwas. Likewise, religious organizations in Indonesia do not object to these fatwas, and many influential *ulamas* with large followers express their support for KUPI and the fatwas (KUPI Team, 2017b: 323 - 33). They even attended the Women's *Ulama* Congress in 2017 and provided support for the establishment of KUPI and the legitimacy of its fatwas. Not only the members of the KUPI network refer to the fatwas, but also other organizations such as the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs and other national and international government institutions (KUPI team, 2017c: 32, 140, 177).

> *(Regarding child marriage, I, myself, heard at the United Nations during the Universal Periodic Review that the government was proud of KUPI regarding the decision to prevent child marriage. Several times the KUPI's consideration has been requested in the House of Representatives regarding women's issues, the revision of the marriage law to increase the age of marriage to 19 years, and the Sexual Violence Bill*

[Yuniyati Chudzaifah, National Commission of woman, August 2020).

Moreover, according to Yuniyanti (interview in 2020), women *ulama* have more space in the larger public arena despite the rise of religious conservatism in Indonesia.

> *The KUPI Congress opens the space for recognition and acceptance of female clerics. Amid the rise of conservatism, there is almost no significant objection. It is an extraordinary achievement (Chudzaifah, 2020). Many researchers consider the rise of female ulama as a vital agent in fighting religious extremism (KUPI Team, 2017c: 237).*

The KUPI congress has also attracted media attention both nationally and internationally. KUPI media team documented 109 Indonesian media coverages and 24 reports from international media (KUPI team, 1971c). International Media includes Pakistani Newspapers, Asian Correspondent, the Jakarta Post, free Malaysia Today, BBC, and Aman Indonesia.

Nevertheless, KUPI members admit that women *ulama* face formidable challenges, both externally and internally. Hatoon al-Fassi, a Congress participant from Saudi Arabia, stated that one of the external challenges relates to many religious leaders whose religious views marginalize women (KUPI Team, 2017c: 195). Additionally, the gender-biased interpretations of Islamic teachings have resulted in the dominance of patriarchal culture that led to the spread of domestic violence in Indonesia (Nur Rofiah, TIM Kupi 2017c, 243). A member of The National Commission for Violence Against Women, Masruchah, argues that the domestic violence case in Indonesia remains high (KOMNAS CATAHU 2020). She contends that the patriarchal culture and ignorant behaviors toward misogynistic interpretations of Islamic texts, particularly that women must obey men, have increased the number of domestic violence in the country (KUPI Team, 2017c: 243). Meanwhile, the internal challenge faced by KUPI is that there are still many women who are not confident to acknowledge themselves as *ulama*. A female professor, for example, said that she felt awkward and lacked the confidence of being called an *ulama* (KUPI Team, 2017b: 64). Similarly, a lecturer of *tafsīr* (Quranic commentary) and a dean at an Islamic University remain questioned her eligibility to be an *ulama* (interview with NQ, 2020).

4.4 Fatwa As the Symbol of Religious Authority of Female Ulama

KUPI's reinterpretation of the term *ulama* has transformed this traditionally male-dominated term into a gender-inclusive one. KUPI members realize that Muslim society tends to associate the *ulama* term with masculinity. Therefore, despite the gender-inclusive origin of the term, the KUPI publications intentionally use the phrase *woman ulama* as a part of their strategy to reclaim the original meaning of the term (AD Kusumaningtyas 2017: 51). Furthermore, KUPI stakeholders also launch an epistemological critique of knowledge production in traditional Islamic scholarship. They argue that the perpetuated construction of conservative Islamic knowledge has been androcentric and masculine domination. They believe that the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teachings discords the fundamental concept of *tawhīd* that presupposes the principle of human equality (Nu Rofiah, 2021). Therefore, they developed a hermeneutic approach called *al-mubādalah* to reconstruct a gender-inclusive understanding of Islam. The epistemology that allows the production of gender-inclusive religious knowledge marks the emergence of the KUPI intellectual network in Indonesia. The issuance and acceptance of fatwas on challenging issues symbolize the public recognition of women *ulama*.

The aspiration of the KUPI network to reclaim the religious authority of women is an element of principal and normative beliefs all the members embrace as group norms and the motives behind their movements (Rosidin, 2017). This set of shared beliefs is the basis for redefining morality which is at the core of the KUPI's idealism. Hence, the KUPI network emerged as a form of resistance against religious discourses, practices, and movements that marginalized women. The members systematically argue and prove that many women possess all the requirements to be called *ulama*

(Scott, 1985; Farida & Kasdi, 2018). This effort is in line with Feminist projects that criticize the epistemological structure of modern knowledge that is, in fact, not neutral and socially constructed (Code, 2019; Harding, 2017). The concepts of objectivity, rationality and the scientific method have dominated modern science, which naturally cannot be separated from sexist assumptions and beliefs (Harding, 2017). By locating knowledge as a product of social construction and needing to be validated through critical dialogue, KUPI's network highlights what Code (2019) defines as the knower as subjectivity based on a personal relationship model.

One of the strategic roles of the *ulama* is to issue fatwas that will function to be religious guidance for the Muslim community. In Indonesia, almost all fatwas are issued exclusively by male *ulama*, while many fatwas cover areas closely related to women's affairs and experiences. The fatwa issued by KUPI indicates that the public has begun to recognize the religious authority of female *ulama*. There are indicators of public recognition of the existence of female *ulama*. First, there is no opposition from mainstream Islamic organizations in Indonesia against the fatwa. Influential *ulama*s whose positions as the leaders of Islamic boarding schools lead them to be community role models have supported KUPI and its activities. Second, the national and international media coverage about the KUPI congress and its fatwa shows the world's attention to this movement. Third, various religious organizations, governments, and international institutions refer to the KUPI's fatwa in directing their attitudes concerning sexual violence, ecological crises, and child marriage. However, the KUPI network faces various challenges, especially the internal challenge of the lack of self-confidence of female *ulama*s. Hence, this movement continues to strive to build the courage of female *ulama* to come forward and show their religious authority.

This paper differs from previous studies on female *ulama* in general and KUPI in particular in at least two aspects. First, previous studies have highlighted the movement of women *ulama* concerning specific themes such as education in the context of a country or region (Ali et al., 2017; Umar, 2020; Hasanuddin, 2018). This study focuses on exploring the struggle of female and male *ulama*s who fight for gender justice in the field of religion. It emphasizes the heart of the issue, namely the authority of being an *ulama* for women. This study also differs from previous studies on KUPI that partially focused on the capability of female *ulama* to derive alternative religious views from Quranic verses related to specific issues (Kusmana, 2019; Farida & Kasdi, 2018). This study demonstrates the KUPI's comprehensive and systematic efforts to reclaim the religious authority of women *ulama*. The network pioneers new trends in religious discourse and practice in Indonesia by developing new concepts, formulating alternative epistemologies, and issuing fatwas.

This study reveals that KUPI's attempt to reclaim the religious authority of female *ulama* is a systematic response to masculine domination of religious discourses and practices. Research on KUPI stakeholders shows the strengths and opportunities of the KUPI network to facilitate the emergence of trends in religious discourse in Indonesia that pays attention to women's experiences and recognize their authority in the field of religion. This trend might prompt negative responses from various groups who disagree with KUPI's inclusive religious views. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the main factors behind some of the most successful attempts to break masculine domination in religious discourse and practice throughout history. Insights from this study may also help the government to deal with various groups that justify gender-based discrimination on religious grounds. Finally, this study might become a reference for national or international NGOs whose programs include tackling discrimination and human rights violations in the name of religion, including Islam.

5. Conclusion

KUPI's struggle to reclaim female clerical authority in Indonesia has brought about a new trend in the discourse and practice of religion which has traditionally been male-dominated and overlooked the involvement of women. The epistemology that allows the production of gender-inclusive religious knowledge signifies the birth of KUPI. The KUPI network develops a systematic and comprehensive

struggle that includes three interrelated aspects. The network reconstructs the concept of *ulama*, employs gender-inclusive epistemology, and issues the fatwas. The KUPI members reinterpret and broaden the definition, agency, and role of *ulama* to be more gender-inclusive. They develop a new epistemology that accommodates women's experiences and voices. With a contextual approach based on a true-justice perspective and reciprocal hermeneutics, they designed the method to produce a gender-inclusive interpretation of the Qur'an. The KUPI network has also issued fatwas related to three major issues, including sexual violence, child marriage, and the ecological crisis, which are equivalent to the fatwa issued by the MUI. These fatwas and their acceptance symbolize the public recognition of women's religious authority.

This paper confirms the feminist theory that criticizes the epistemological construction of modern science, which turns out to be socially constructed, gender-biased, and marginalizes the voices and experiences of minority groups, including women. The dominant concept of *ulama* illustrates this situated-socially constructed knowledge: the term *ulama* was originally a gender-neutral terminology. It, however, has been interpreted as mainly men's authority and privilege. Redefinition of the concept of *ulama* and the efforts to reclaim women's religious authority illustrates the KUPI's efforts to deconstruct and reconstruct the gender-biased construction of the term. The reinterpretation also shows the authority and power of women in the religious domain to produce rational interpretations that fit with their context and interests.

The KUPI network and its intellectual capital allow this movement to get involved and contribute more to colouring the face of Islam in Indonesia. This study has several limitations, particularly the research subjects that only cover stakeholders and people who support this movement. This study recommends further research to map out more comprehensively the challenges the KUPI network deals with and involve wider informants, including grassroots and groups that reject or oppose KUPI, especially radical-conservative groups. This study has not delved into the dynamics and diversity of opinions among members and activists of the KUPI network. It is interesting to reveal the dynamic within the network to provide a comparative picture of support or resistance against similar movements in other countries. Finally, this is qualitative research that is unable to capture the general view of people at the local, national, and international levels concerning the authority of women as *ulama*. Hence, a more massive-quantitative study is needed to provide a map of social acceptance and recognition of women *ulama*.

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