

Article

Relegitimizing Religious Authority: Indonesian Gender-Just ‘*Ulamā*’ Amid COVID-19

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Abstract: Studies have highlighted the increased vulnerability of women during and after disasters. Thus, there has been a call for gender-aware disaster management—an approach which is certainly needed, especially when a patriarchal culture is embedded in a society. Unfortunately, studies on women as vulnerable agents are often not balanced against careful examinations of instances where women help women. Drawing on (digital) ethnography conducted between 2020 and 2022, this article focuses on analysing the voices and activities of gender-just ‘*ulamā*’ (Muslim scholars) in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected traditional religious gathering practices, has led to creative solutions to social proximity restrictions. Many ‘*ulamā*’ have been “forced” by the situation to adjust to digital religion. This article analyses how female religious authorities who colour the daily *da’wa* (proselytization) landscape in Indonesia deal with the uncertainties brought on by the pandemic. The *da’wa* scene in Indonesia has long been the site of contention among various competing ideological understandings. The pandemic and the proliferation of digital religion has led gender-just ‘*ulamā*’ to relegitimize their authority through an online presence so they can compete and counter the narratives of tech-savvy conservative Muslims.

Keywords: women; COVID-19; ‘*ulamā*’; religious authority; Islam; Muslim; Indonesia; YouTube; Rahima



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1. Introduction

There has been a significant amount of attention directed towards religion since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Wildman et al. 2020; Turner 2021; Schonthal and Jayatilake 2021). Governments worldwide have imposed restrictions in the name of public health, including the cessation of gatherings in places of worship. This is understandable, due to the role of some religious gatherings in spreading the virus, including a number of gatherings which were labelled “super-spreaders” or “infection amplifiers” (see Wildman et al. 2020, p. 115). One of the most famous incidents occurred in South Korea in February 2020, when the Shincheonji Church was blamed for contributing to South Korea’s COVID-19 outbreak (see Kim et al. 2020). Within the Muslim community, Tablighī Jamā‘at or Jama‘ah Tabligh, a transnational revivalist movement originating from the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent, was also named a super-spreader. In South Sulawesi, Indonesia, Tablighī Jamā‘at held their *ijtimā‘* (a big gathering) for three days in March. A total of 9000 Tablighi, including 478 foreign Tablighi, attended the gathering, which produced COVID-19 outbreaks in 22 of Indonesia’s 34 provinces (IPAC 2020, p. 1). The attempts of religious clergy to encourage congregants to stay home, including Muslim scholars (‘*ulamā*’ or [Ind.] *ulama*) and leaders from other religious traditions in Indonesia, are also evident. In some areas and Muslim organizations, ‘*ulamā*’ issued COVID-19 related *fatāwā* (Ar. plural of *fatwā*, or a non-binding legal-theological opinion issued by authoritative Muslim scholars) and *tausiyah* (lit. recommendation or order)¹ which served as guidance for Muslims within their localities or beyond.

Religious gathering prohibitions in Indonesia have affected Muslim women in significantly different ways from men, as women are more active in attending religious gatherings. Wilkins-Laflamme and Thiessen mention that “novel coronavirus will most likely hit actively religious populations harder than the nonreligious” (Wilkins-Laflamme and Thiessen 2020). Older adults are more vulnerable in this context because those who regularly attend religious gatherings are often older people (Wilkins-Laflamme and Thiessen 2020). In the Indonesian context, this argument can be expanded to include women, particularly older women, because they are more active in attending religious gatherings and services. Many studies have mentioned that women have higher levels of religious involvement and attachment to religious groups, although there is some discussion that this phenomenon is culture-specific (Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012; Nisa 2019a).

Religious gatherings serve many roles, not only religious and economic, but also as a support to women’s networks. During difficult times, believers often turn to religion and religious authorities for guidance and comfort. Many studies emphasize how religion serves as a magnet during and post-crisis, including natural disasters and terrorism (see Trevino and Pargament 2007; Gray and Wegner 2010; Sibley and Bulbulia 2012). In their study of the earthquake which hit Christchurch, New Zealand, in February 2011, Sibley and Bulbulia, argue, “Consistent with the Religious Comfort Hypothesis, religious faith increased among the earthquake-affected, despite an overall decline in religious faith elsewhere. This result offers the first population-level demonstration that secular people turn to religion at times of natural crisis” (Sibley and Bulbulia 2012, p. 1). Following the religious comfort theory, this article also highlights how believers return to ‘*ulamā*’, including female ‘*ulamā*’, to find comfort when facing anxiety and uncertainties brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Scholars have discussed female religious authority in public and the problems that have led to its scarcity (Reda 2004; Bano and Kalmbach 2012; El Haitami 2012). Some women have suffered from restrictions in accessing religious places in public due to the patriarchal interpretation of Islam. This, unfortunately, includes access to the houses of worship or mosques in this context (see Reda 2004). However, in many parts of Indonesia, some female ‘*ulamā*’ have been fortunate in not having to face this situation (see Nisa 2020). Domestication and domestic gender role divides, however, are still rampant in Indonesia. This has led to the inability of these female ‘*ulamā*’ to exercise their full agency on the Indonesian *da’wa* stage. COVID-19, however, has brought a different story. Through the proliferation of digital religion, the voices of female ‘*ulamā*’ have become more present in the online public sphere.

Drawing on (digital) ethnography conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022, this article focuses on analysing the voices and activities of female ‘*ulamā*’, who are also gender-just ‘*ulamā*’, because they use gender-just perspectives to interpret Islamic religious texts. As we will discuss below, certain circles of Indonesian Muslim women activists and Islamic feminists differentiate between *perempuan ulama* (female ‘*ulamā*’), referring to a woman who is an ‘*ulamā*’, and *ulama perempuan*, or gender-just ‘*ulamā*’, who promote a gender-just perspective and focus on a female-sensitive rereading of religious sources (see also Badran 2001 on Islamic feminism and progressive rereading of religious texts). This study focuses on the gender-just ‘*ulamā*’ of a Muslim women’s rights non-government organisation (NGO), Rahima (see also Rinaldo 2013). We conducted an in-depth analysis, particularly on three female ‘*ulamā*’ of Rahima—Nyai Nur Afiyah, Nyai Afwah Mumtazah, and Nyai Umdatul Baroroh (known as Nyai Umdah)—who come from different provinces in Indonesia. Each of the three gender-just ‘*ulamā*’ have *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) backgrounds and currently lead their own *pesantrens* and other Islamic institutions, as well as teach as lecturers in Islamic higher education institutions. They are all in their 40s and have strong qualifications in Islamic studies—Qur’anic science (Nyai Nur Afiyah), Islamic Education and Qur’anic science (Nyai Afwah), as well as Islamic law and jurisprudence (Nyai Umdah). Initially, the three women had to fight against the

patriarchal *pesantren* culture so that their existence and capacity as gender-just ‘*ulamā*’ were recognised in their *pesantrens*. In addition to the in-depth interview with these three female ‘*ulamā*’ of Rahima, we also interviewed Rahima staff and female and male ‘*ulamā*’ belonging to other Islamic institutions, as well as congregants of these ‘*ulamā*’.

Conducting research during the pandemic period is challenging. We need to be more accommodative and understanding of our research subjects’ situations. When we initially started this research, we thought we would use WhatsApp calls, but we found out that different people have different preferences, e.g., some prefer Zoom live interviews. There were also times that the interviews cut off in the middle because our research subjects’ phone battery was low. We conducted the online participant observations by attending meetings and activities of Rahima’s gender-just ‘*ulamā*’. When we had schedule conflicts or if the meeting lasted for more than 3 h, then we asked them to record the meeting so we could observe the recordings. Apart from these challenges, however, online research has enabled us to have a broader coverage without the necessity of traveling to distant places. Our research of gender-just ‘*ulamā*’ of Rahima, for example, involves the participation of religious authorities from various Indonesian provinces (DKI Jakarta, West Java, East Java, Central Java, and South Sulawesi). Early in 2022, we combined online and offline research.

Female ‘*ulamā*’ have a long historical trajectory in Indonesia. Many of them have successfully developed large, loyal congregants who depend on their religious guidelines. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected traditional religious gathering practices, has led to creative solutions to social proximity restrictions. Many ‘*ulamā*’ have been “forced” by the situation to adjust to digital religion. Rahima, one of the pioneers of the empowering effort of Indonesian gender-just ‘*ulamā*’ and the focus of this study, has been providing online platforms for gender-just ‘*ulamā*’ to interact with their constituents and a broader audience.

The phenomenon of the upsurge of digital religion during COVID-19 might tell us about the nature of believers and their capacity for navigating uncertainties. Some have mentioned that COVID-19 has transformed religion. Others have responded that religion is indeed “*always* transforming” (O’Brien 2020, p. 243). The believers, including the gender-just ‘*ulamā*’ in this study, are the agents that have actively navigated and interpreted how they can practice religion during fast changing conditions, including the digital age and the pandemic. The believers have made the birth of digital religion possible based on their belief that their religion is *sālih likulli zamān wa makān* (the religion transcends time and space).

The *da’wa* scene in Indonesia has long been the site of contestation among various competing ideological understandings. The pandemic and proliferation of digital religion has led gender-just ‘*ulamā*’ to relegitimize their authority through an online presence so they can compete and counter the narratives of tech-savvy conservative Muslims, including those affiliated with various Salafi movements and other Islamist movements, such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (the Indonesian Party of Liberation), which was banned in July 2017, and the Tarbiyah movement. The initiatives of Rahima and the three female religious authorities in this study is resonant with what Turner (2007) mentioned as the dialectic between localized struggles and a global network. Turner, using sociologist Manuel Castells’ network society, referring to how the network shapes society, argues that within the network society, we can see “a dialectic between localized struggles that employ networks to gain some control over their lives and paces, and global network power systems that seek to centralize and monopolize control employing the same technologies” (Turner 2007, p. 123).

2. Defining the Position of ‘Ālimāt-cum-Muftiyāt

The role of religious authority is important in containing the COVID-19 pandemic. The importance of engaging with religious communities and their leaders has also gained the World Health Organization’s attention. On 19 March 2020, the World Health Organization published interim guidance on “Risk communication and community engagement RCCE.”

The guidance states that based on previous outbreaks, including Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), Influenza A (H1N1), and Ebola, one of the major lessons learned was that “RCCE is an essential component of health emergency readiness and response activities” (WHO 2020, p. 1). Aligned with this, Indonesian faith-based organizations, especially community influencers, such as female religious authorities, have been expected to be at the forefront in helping the government contain the spread of the COVID-19 cases. In Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, conveying government messages with a religious frame is especially important, given that believers turn to religion and religious leaders when facing the overabundance of information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like their male counterparts, female Islamic authorities with religious and cultural capital—having strong Islamic studies backgrounds, talents in preaching, and large congregants, as well as being active preachers in the Indonesian public sphere—are vital community influencers in the context of facing uncertainties brought about by the pandemic. Female religious authorities are important because the country has long witnessed the feminization of the Muslim audience in the realm of religious gatherings, lessons, or *majelis taklim*, and other *da'wa* initiatives (Millie 2017; Nisa 2012, 2019a; Saenong 2016).

Female Islamic authority in Indonesia is referred to using various terms, including *da'iyah* (female preacher), *ustādha* (female teacher), *nyai* (female leader of an Islamic boarding school—the three *ulama perempuan* in this study are called *nyai*), *ālima* (female religious scholar), and *muftiyya* (a female *mufti* or an Islamic jurist who gives *fatwā* or legal opinion and advice, pl. *muftiyyāt*). However, across the Muslim world, the term and title *muftiyya* is rarely attached to a female Islamic authority, especially due to the patriarchal and conservative nature of most national *fatwā* committees in Muslim countries (see Makboul 2017, p. 314). In addition, this lack of female representation in *fatwā* committees is also evident in Muslim communities where Muslims are the minority (see, for example, Buckley 2019, pp. 63–64; Whyte 2021, p. 562). Majelis Ulama Indonesia, or MUI (Indonesian Council of Ulama), Indonesia’s top national Muslim clerical council established in 1975, has shown a “conservative turn,” to borrow van Bruinessen’s term (van Bruinessen 2011, 2013), which is evident in *fatāwā* and *tausiyyahs* issued from 2000 onward (Ichwan 2013, p. 63; Hasyim 2020, p. 30). The top commission under MUI is the Fatwa Commission, consisting of experts in Islamic teachings responsible for issuing *fatwā*. Although the Fatwa Commission consists of female and male *‘ulamā’*, the ratio is far from even. There are only 8 female *‘ulamā’* (*‘ālimāt*) of its 72 current members (2020–2025), with the previous commission (2015–2020) consisting of 7 *‘ālimāt* of 67 members (see Nisa 2019b, p. 439). Almost all of the eight *‘ālimāt* come from two of the largest Muslim mass organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, and four are graduates from Al-Azhar University in Egypt. Kaptein argued that women’s involvement in *fatwā* productions was a new phenomenon. He says, “One interesting newer development is that apart from men, nowadays women also participate in embodying and expressing religious authority” (Kaptein 2004, p. 124).

All-female *muftiyyāt* under the Fatwa Commission of MUI are considered *al-dā'iyāt al-muthaqqafāt*, to borrow Makboul’s term (Makboul 2017, p. 303).² They belong to the group of Islamic intellectuals who lecture at Indonesian universities. Unfortunately, despite their presence in the Fatwa Commission, their existence within MUI remains invisible in the public sphere. Siti Hanna, a female member of the MUI Fatwa Commission, says:

In the internal discussion within MUI, the portion [the voices] of male and female *‘ulamā’* is equal . . . However, the appearance in the public sphere still belongs to the male domain.³

This is striking, given the contribution of women’s voices in the Fatwa Commission. Indeed, throughout Islamic history, female Islamic authorities—including ‘Ā’ishah bint Abī Bakr and Umm Salama, the wives of the Prophet Muhammad—have contributed greatly to the transfer of Islamic religious knowledge (see also Nadwi 2007; Kloos and Künkler 2016; Künkler and Nisa 2018; Künkler and Stewart 2020).

In the period of COVID-19, the voices of female *muftiyyāt* are vital. However, not *muftiyyāt*, under the MUI Fatwa Commission, but *muftiyyāt* from other society segments, namely those who have grassroots-level followers and who are more active in the non-formal religious gathering, *majelis taklim*. Their congregants turn to them to find solace when facing uncertainties and problems accompanied by the COVID-19 pandemic. This expectation is indeed resonant with the theory of religious comfort. In times of crisis, religion can play a significant role in consoling suffering believers. Women are more inclined to believe that religion can offer consolation for their suffering and anxiety. For example, Sibley and Bulbulia mentioned that, in relation to the earthquake in New Zealand in 2011, religious conversion “was 1.1 % higher for women during the 2009 to 2011 period” (Sibley and Bulbulia 2012, p. 5).

The counsel issued by the *muftiyyāt* in this study can be regarded as “*fatwā*” or *tausiyah* (religious advice and guidance). MUI, as the national *fatwā* body, also issues *fatwā* and *tausiyah*. They are both the results of ‘*ulamā*’s *ijtihad* (independent reasoning and interpretation, referring to the process of deriving religious opinions). The difference lies in the length and intensity required for producing these two products of *ijtihad*. Issuing a *fatwā* holds stricter rules, which might require a long process, including intensive meetings among ‘*ulamā*’. *Tausiyah*, on the other hand, are more practical and can provide quick guidance to the Muslim community in the absence of *fatwā* due to the length of processing. During the pandemic, MUI and other *fatwā* boards from Indonesian Muslim mass organizations have been active in issuing *tausiyah* to answer questions regarding the unprecedented and fast-changing situations faced by Muslim communities. *Ulama perempuan-cum-muftiyyāt* in this study actively provide *tausiyah*⁴ as guidance and religious advice, mostly delivered orally.

The presence of these ‘*ālimāt-cum-muftiyyāt* within *majelis taklim* is important, especially due to the growth of *majelis taklim* in Indonesia. The term *majelis taklim* was popularized in 1930 by the well-respected ‘*ulamā*’ from Jakarta, KH. Abdullah Syafei (Hasanah 2016, p. 187). *Majelis taklim* in other countries are called by various terms, such as *halqa*, *halaqa*, *zawiya*, *ta’līm*, and *dars*. In Indonesia, there are different types of *majelis taklim*, such as male *majelis taklim*, mixed *majelis taklim*, youth *majelis taklim*, campus *majelis taklim*, and the like. The number of *majelis taklim* for women, also known as *majelis taklim perempuan*, *majelis taklim kaum ibu*, or *majelis taklim ibu-ibu*, however, far exceeds those of men. Additionally, in most mixed *majelis taklim*, the number of female congregants far exceeds male congregants. Indonesia has the two largest *majelis taklim* associations that focus on empowering *majelis taklim* for women, Badan Kontak Majelis Taklim, or BKMT (Council for Contact of the Majelis Taklim), founded in 1981, and Forum Komunikasi Majelis Taklim (Communication Forum of the Majelis Taklim). The women’s wings of the two biggest Muslim mass organizations, Muslimat and Fatayat of NU, and Aisyiyah and Nasyiatul Aisyiyah of Muhammadiyah, also have *majelis taklim* across Indonesia attached to them. The popularity of *majelis taklim* has led to some political parties initiating their own *majelis taklim*, such as al-Hidayah of Golkar and Salimah of the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, or PKS (The Prosperous Justice Party) (see Hasanah 2016). The significant presence of women in *majelis taklim* and other religious gatherings can also be seen in the issuance of *fatāwā* Bahtsul Masa’il NU, the *fatwā* board of the largest Muslim mass organization in Indonesia, NU. These *fatāwā* pertain to rulings about women attending religious activities in May 1933 and women performing religious preaching in April 1935 (Rofiah 2014, p. xxi). Both rulings emphasize that they are unlawful, or *haram*, if they can lead to *fitna*, referring to disorder resulting from sexual temptation, *makruh* (reprehensible) if there is potential to *fitna*, and permissible if there is no *fitna*. Unfortunately, the definition of *fitna* had been monopolized by male ‘*ulamā*’s interpretations, with their patriarchal perspectives (Rofiah 2014, p. xxvi). This reminds us that women are often regarded as the source of *fitna*, and their bodies are considered as the gateway to the doors of *zina* (adultery and fornication) (see Mernissi 1975, p. 4; Zuhur 1992, pp. 90–91).

3. Rahima and Ulama Perempuan during COVID-19

When President Joko Widodo, or Jokowi, announced the first two cases of COVID-19 on 2 March, we began to analyse religion and the pandemic, how believers deal with the pandemic and how Indonesia, often claimed as *negara beragama* (a country with religion) but not *negara Islam* (an Islamic state), deals with the pandemic and the religiosity of its population. During our research, we experienced difficulty finding the voices of local *ulama perempuan* who normally, before COVID-19, filled the Indonesian public sphere through *majelis taklim* in their neighbourhood areas. Our difficulty was short-lived once we met virtually with the director of Rahima, Pera Sopariyanti, and team member Andi Faizah. We were struck by how the local *ulama perempuan* were proactive in their endeavour to help their constituents facing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rahima was founded in 2000 as an NGO focusing on raising awareness about Islam, gender, and women's rights. It was founded during the political transition in the country after the demise of the authoritarian regime of Suharto (1966–1998). Between 1998 and 2004, the contention between Islamization and democratization in the country were particularly prominent (van Wichelen 2010, p. 1). In this climate, Islamic feminists and gender activists behind Rahima's establishment also struggled for recognition which would allow their voices and concerns could be heard. Since its establishment, Rahima has focused its attention on empowering *ulama perempuan* as their intermediary groups, since these *ulama perempuan* have followers. It can be said that the NGO that pioneers the empowering of *ulama perempuan* in Indonesia is Rahima. In 2005, Rahima initiated two programs: "Madrasah Rahima" (Rahima's Centre of Islamic learning) and Pengkaderan Ulama Perempuan, or PUP (Female Ulama Cadre) (Eridani 2014, p. viii; Ismah 2016, p. 492). The PUP program is dedicated to women who have a basis in the community, such as *pesantren*, *majelis taklim*, and other Islamic institutions, including lecturers aged between 20 and 55 years. Rahima has also been known as an NGO which pioneered the use of the term *ulama perempuan*. The three gender-just '*ulamā*' of Rahima in this study are an important figure (Nyai Umdah) and alumni (Nyai Afwah and Nyai Nur Afiyah) of the PUP program, which lasts for one year with three to five sessions. Graduates of PUP are called *simpul* Rahima (Rahima networks) or *ulama perempuan* Rahima. From 2005 to 2022, Rahima had 156 graduates of the PUP program.

Rahima's PUP or *ulama perempuan* kaderisation program has inspired many other '*ulamā*' kaderisation initiatives, including Dawrah Kader Ulama Pesantren or DKUP (Training for Islamic Boarding School '*Ulamā*' Cadre), which then transformed into Dawrah Kader Ulama Perempuan (Training for Women '*Ulamā*' Cadre) of Fahmina, which was launched in 2005. The most recent program is a master's degree program on Pendidikan Kader Ulama Perempuan (Education of Female '*Ulamā*' Cadre), which was launched in 2021 by Istiqlal Mosque, the largest mosque in Southeast Asia. Given Rahima's important position in introducing the discourse of empowering *ulama perempuan* in Indonesia, this study focuses on *ulama perempuan* within Rahima's network.

An issue that is discussed at length during the PUP workshop is the use of the term *ulama* and *perempuan*—whether it should be *perempuan ulama* or *ulama perempuan*. The workshop participants then define *perempuan ulama* as a woman who becomes an '*ulamā*' or a female '*ulamā*' ('*ālima*'). At the same time, *ulama perempuan*, or what we call gender-just '*ulamā*', refers to female and male '*ulamā*' who have concerns for women's issues. Nur Rofiah elaborates the characteristics of *ulama perempuan* initiated by Rahima as those who "... master classical and contemporary religious texts with the perspectives of Islamic gender justice; able to read social reality critically (inequality of relations, oppressive structures ...); able to argue and articulate ideas and values of justice with an Islamic perspective ...; have an appreciation for local wisdom traditions" (Rofiah 2014, p. xxxv).

Through this educational training, Rahima has given birth to hundreds of *ulama perempuan* in many provinces in Indonesia: West Java, Central Java, East Java, Yogyakarta, Banten, and South Sulawesi. The world's first congress of *ulama perempuan*, Kongres Ulama

Perempuan Indonesia, also known as KUPI, held in April 2017, was also heavily inspired by the focus on Rahima's work on *ulama perempuan* (Nisa 2019b). Pera shares her view on the growth of initiatives to produce *ulama perempuan* after the KUPI: "the term *ulama perempuan* post-KUPI is very sexy. Many people from various Islamic and Islamist organisations want to use this term. It's a very trendy term nowadays".⁵ Pera emphasised that Rahima's *ulama perempuan* has its own characteristics, as emphasised by Rahima since its onset; Rahima's version of *ulama perempuan* has to have the perspective of siding with the fate of women to realise fair relations with men, both in family life and social life (see Note 5).

Rahima trains its *ulama perempuan*, who are well-versed in reading and understanding classical Arabic books, to understand the gender-just perspective and to think critically in regards to diverse forms of injustice in society. Nyai Nur Afyah, a 46-year-old *nyai* (female *pesantren* leader) from Kediri, East Java, shares her experience of being part of Rahima's *ulama perempuan* program: "Since I have joined Rahima, my knowledge about gender and Islam has broadened. I gained a lot of knowledge and new things about gender and Islamic feminism".⁶ Nyai Afwah Mumtazah, a 49-year-old *nyai* in Kempek Cirebon, West Java, also says, "I gained access to gender issues through my attachment to Rahima".⁷ As a self-designated *nyai kampung* (village *nyai*), Nyai Afwah admitted that she has successfully coloured *da'wa* in her village with her sermons, which mostly focus on gender equality and Islam. As a female leader of the *pesantren* with 1500 students, it is not easy for her to introduce issues pertaining to gender equality in a traditional *pesantren*. Rahima has equipped her for this kind of opposition. Following Rahima's step, she bypasses this by avoiding using terms such as gender and feminism. She replaces these terms with Arabic terms which, within the *pesantren* milieu, sound less disruptive, such as *al-'adāla* (justice), *al-musāwā* (equality), and *mubādala* (reciprocity and mutual understanding). Her long struggle in introducing gender issues has paid off, with success evident from her acceptance by the surrounding community, who are willing to discuss issues that were previously considered taboo in the public sphere.

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed these *nyai kampung* to create an online presence for varied reasons. It is in this context that we see how users have become both producers and shapers of technology. The frustrations due to the economic and psychological conditions caused many congregants of these *ulama perempuan* to become victims of domestic violence or Kekerasan Dalam Rumah Tangga (KDRT). The pandemic has indeed impacted men/boys and women/girls differently (Wenham et al. 2020). For low-income families, food security is also often related to KDRT. All the problems faced by their congregants keep the *ulama perempuan* busy with questions concerning life's uncertainties. Some have to face fatalistic people who campaign using the slogan "*kalau mati urusan Tuhan kenapa takut COVID?*" (If we die, it's God's decision, why are you afraid of COVID?)⁸ This situation has led many '*ulamā*' to become more creative in utilizing online technology, adjusting to digital religion as a way to help their congregants. Indeed, around the globe during COVID-19, we can see the rise of digital religion and virtual religious communities (Parish 2020). Parish argues, "as COVID-19 became a global pandemic in 2020, nowhere was this symbiotic relationship between church and technology more evident than in the sudden and rapid proliferation of digital, online religious worship" (Parish 2020, p. 3). Online religious services, virtual worship, and live-streaming services are examples of digital religion.

4. Digital Female Religious Authorities

Studies have mentioned the growth of digital religion long before the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Heidi Campbell emphasized the presence of the study of religion and new media, as well as religious practices in the digital age since the 1990s (Campbell 2012, p. 2). Increasingly since, we have seen how the "online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated" (Campbell 2012, pp. 4–5). The bulk of studies regarding the internet and social media have emphasized how the internet and various social media platforms have been used for everyday religious, political, economic, and

security purposes, and for democratizing the birth of varied religious authorities (see also Campbell 2021; Bunt 2003; Weimann 2006; Hirschkind 2012).

Weber's (1947) concept of authority is often used to unpack role-based authority. Referring to Weber's types of authority—legal, traditional and charismatic authority—the *ulama perempuan* of the Rahima can be regarded as the mixed embodiment of charismatic, traditional, and legal authority. Besides being known as pious preachers and leaders of *pesantren*, they are mostly university lecturers. Within the study of digital religion, however, some scholars have introduced other approaches. Heidi Campbell, for example, highlights algorithmic-based authority (Campbell 2021). She contends, “an algorithmic-based authority is given based on numerical ranking—those who have the most followers, likes, friends or citations are seen as those with the most authoritative voices. This means we turn to search engines and other sorting systems to tell us who is considered an authority in a given area” (Campbell 2021, p. 31). In the Indonesian online public sphere, it is known that those who are more active in using social media platforms for *da'wa* are young conservative Muslims (Nisa 2018, 2019b), while the *nyais* in this study come from moderate and progressive Muslim backgrounds. Therefore, during the pandemic, if the *nyais* do not have an online presence, they cannot compete or counter the narratives of conservative Muslims, including new conservative tech-savvy interpreters. Turner mentions that “multimedia entertainment and communication systems challenge both the print-based authority of secular governments and the traditional authority of the world religions” (Turner 2007, p. 117). In the context of the pandemic, this challenge can be seen with more clarity. Many new young conservative interpreters are not from traditional *pesantren* like the *nyais*. They are the products of modern information technology producing new types of religious authority (Saenong 2020, p. 162; see also Saenong 2016). When the pandemic began, they did not feel significant threats to their algorithmic-based authority because they had gained prominence or influence online prior to the pandemic. This differs significantly from the *nyais* or *ulama perempuan* of Rahima.

5. YouTube

Who could have imagined that local *ulama perempuan* with villager congregants could record their sermons on YouTube? No one, but COVID-19 has pushed this to happen. Since it was launched in 2005, many believers have used YouTube for varied agendas. Its success has also been followed by other “tubes,” including the popular GodTube, launched in 2007. GodTube is a Christian alternative to YouTube as an online video sharing platform, free from “problematic moral content” (Campbell 2010, p. 191). Throughout human history, the relationship between technology and religion has often been in conflict (Campbell 2010, p. 4). In her explanation of how reporters of mass media see religion and GodTube, Campbell argues, “... a central question on many of the reporter's minds seemed to be ‘Why would a religious group want to create a religious version of a popular technology?’ My reply to this is that religious groups desire the social affordances a technology like GodTube has to offer, without the problematic content associated with many mainstream internet sites ...” (Campbell 2010, pp. 4–5).

Following global trends, the demand for YouTube channels by pop-preachers and well-established religious organizations is growing in Indonesia. Globally, Campbell recorded “the Catholic Church has long been an innovator in embracing new forms of media for religious purposes, though not without concern and thoughtful reflection about its potential impact on society” (Campbell 2010, p. 192). The Vatican launched its YouTube channel account in 2009 (Campbell 2010, p. 192), in contrast to Indonesia, where the use of YouTube for religious proselytization did not happen until later. In Indonesia, pop preachers were among the early users of YouTube. This includes Aa Gym, who started his channel in 2016, as well as Khalid Basalamah, Abdul Somad, Adi Hidayat, and Hanan Attaki.

Before Ramadan 2019, Rahima had activated their YouTube channel by featuring *ulama perempuan* to fill the online public sphere. Through its YouTube channel, Rahima wants to introduce its gender-just ‘*ulamā*’ and issues pertaining to Muslim women and Muslim

women's rights to the Indonesian online *da'wa* landscape. Rahima also aimed to counter the conservative voices and their intolerant understandings of Islam and gender inequalities. Pera says:

We have a YouTube channel already, and at that time, we were thinking about maximizing the use of the media. Also, as a medium to counter the right wing's (conservative Muslims) intolerant understandings of Islam and their biased understanding of gender.⁹

Rahima started to invite *ulama perempuan* to use the platform one day prior to Ramadan and were surprised to receive enthusiastic responses from them. Rahima's YouTube channel has provided these women a new space to actualize themselves during the pandemic. Many had been longing to share their religious knowledge and to reach their congregants, religitimizing their authority. Nyai Nur Afiyah, for example, shares her feelings about conducting religious activities before and during the COVID-19 period:

There is a huge difference between before and during the pandemic. I miss tremendously my in-person religious activities and my congregation. Offline *da'wa* cannot be replaced by online ones. Even if there is online *da'wa*, it will only slightly heal our disappointment, lest the *da'wa* that has taken root in this society stop because of unfavorable conditions. This is all also due to the encouragement of the congregation who miss my *da'wa* activity. (see Note 6)

What is interesting about Nyai Nur Afiyah's sermons is that one of the videos that she uploaded onto the Rahima YouTube channel is about sexting—a topic which is still considered taboo for traditional *pesantren*. When I asked her why she chose this topic, she responded, "The reason for choosing this theme is actually a personal reason. I was once sent a porn video to my Instagram and WhatsApp" (see Note 6). Indeed, this form of online sexual violence is currently on the rise. She recounts her positive experiences when recording her sermon for Rahima YouTube:

I have become bolder about being exposed because of my experience of shooting videos for Rahima's YouTube. Before that, *nuwun sewu* (I'm sorry, a Javanese polite expression), I was a bit shy and shut myself away because of my environment—a closed environment. I am a graduate of a *salaf pesantren* (a very traditional *pesantren*), so we are not used to going out of our environment. (see Note 6)

Aligned with this, Nyai Afwah also sees the COVID-19 pandemic as a blessing in disguise:

The pandemic period prevented the congregation from getting knowledge from us. But because of the pandemic we are also becoming more technologically literate, we can heal our longing for preaching and longing for meeting our congregation through online *da'wa*. We understand how to use YouTube and Zoom because of the pandemic.¹⁰

During our interviews and interactions with the *nyai kampung*, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach (Goffman 1990), especially the way he sees authority, provides a helpful metaphorical framing of their authority as a kind of performance. Goffman (1990) emphasizes humans as actors on a social stage. The *nyais* who used to perform on a social stage through their daily interactions with their congregation suddenly had to stop these activities, and social media platforms, like YouTube and Facebook, have enabled them to perform on a social stage. Goffman's (1990) theory of the front stage, when the actor is in performance mode, and backstage, when they are behind the stage set of the theatre, captured the way these *nyais* recounted the journey of their YouTube performances. Backstage, they recounted their complicated preparation for their front stage performance. This signifies how they have internalized that authority is something that needs to be exercised regularly. It is related to the idea of relegitimizing religious authorities during the pandemic time.

Rahima and their gender-just ‘*ulamā*’ understand the contention and possible negative comments that their ‘*ulamā*’ might receive, especially from conservative groups. However, Pera and her team believe:

The conservatives are not very smart. Our ‘*ulamā*’ [moderate ‘*ulamā*’ especially from NU tradition, because Rahima’s close relationship with NU] are a lot smarter than them. So we try to unite. We try to stick together. If someone is afraid of being bullied, we fight together. We have to power together. (see Note 9)

Hirschkind has elaborated on the online anxiety, arguing that “to enter the Internet can mean that one embarks on an adventure” which might involve some “unexpected discovery” (Hirschkind 2012, p. 5). Nyai Umdah El Baroroh, a 44-year-old *nyai* of the Rahima *ulama perempuan* network, from Pati, Central Java, recounted her first experience of conducting online *da’wa*:

My first online sermon was through live-stream Facebook in Ramadan 2020. It was viewed by 24 thousand viewers. I was scared at that time. How and why did this happen? I thought that maybe I would receive threats because the topic was on gender. I was scared because I wasn’t ready to receive threats.¹¹

It turned out she received positive comments from the viewers. Nyai Umdah began to upgrade her technical skills at the beginning of Ramadan 2020, when 300 students from her small *pesantren* had to return home because her *pesantren* was ill-prepared to handle the pandemic. To maintain the educational activities and her interaction with the students, Nyai Umdah and her husband organized online religious learning via Facebook on a daily basis. This initiative was created at the same time that she received an invitation from Rahima, asking her to record a sermon for YouTube.

Nyai Umdah, Nyai Nur Afiah, Nyai Afwah, and other *ulama perempuan* recorded the videos by themselves, with very minimalistic equipment, merely using their smart phones rather than sophisticated cameras and microphones. Andi Faizah recounted the story: “Initially, they [*ulama perempuan* of Rahima] were scared to make a video. But the pandemic pushed them to be brave.”¹² YouTube has transformed the way they communicate in the time of the pandemic. It is noteworthy, however, that their audience is still segmented. The number of Rahima’s subscribers to date is only 6.27K, which is relatively small compared to Indonesia’s male conservative pop-preacher subscribers, such as Abdus Somad (2.7M), Hanan Attaki (2.3M), Khalid Basalamah (2.26M), and Aa Gym (767k).¹³

Comments from Rahima’s *ulama perempuan* videos signify how the viewers position the YouTube video as their “devotional space,” and how they see the sermon as a *mu’aththir* sermon (an impactful sermon), to borrow Hirschkind’s term. The sexting video by Nyai Nur Afiah, for example, garnered 1614 views and 50 comments.¹⁴ The comments from viewers demonstrate how they position Nyai Nur Afiah and her speech. They thanked Nyai Nur Afiah for her insightful sermon. All of them benefitted from the sermon. Siti Khotimah, for example, comments, “. . . this will be a lesson for us to be better at fixing the ups and downs of our faith . . . very very useful.” This kind of comment is resonant with phenomena encountered by Hirschkind (2012). Hirschkind, focusing his study on internet *khutba* on YouTube in Egypt in 2008, argues that through these internet-based sermons, users fashion the internet as “a unique devotional space” and the audience sees the sermons as *mu’aththir*. *Mu’aththir*, in this context, refers to a sermon that “. . . brings those who listen to it close to God by instilling in them such ethical and devotional dispositions as humility (*khushū*’), regret (*nadm*), fear (*khawf* or *taqwā*), and hope (*rajā*’), states of the heart that, within Islamic ethical traditions, may lead one to the experience of pious tranquillity (*itmi’ nān*) and a stillness of the soul (*sakīna*)” (Hirschkind 2012, p. 6).

The comments and views shared by the audience of the Rahima *ulama perempuan*, however, demonstrate that the level of *ta’thir* (impact) provided by their sermons has not reached all of the ethical aspects mentioned by Hirschkind. All of the presenters are inexperienced in performing internet-based sermons, which require certain skills, such as a moving rhetorical style and the sharing of rich experiences to reach a breadth of impact

on the audience. In discussing *mu'aththir* sermons, Hirschkind focuses on the emotional impact of sermons delivered by a well-known Salafī preacher in Egypt, Muhammad Hassan (Hirschkind 2012, p. 8). In Indonesia, Aa Gym's sermons, with his gifted gentle rhetorical style, can be easily categorized as *mu'aththir* sermons for his followers (see Hoesterey 2016, p. 42). Although these *ulama perempuan's ta'thīr* sermons have not reached the Islamic ethical emotional aspects, including *khushū'*, *nadm*, *khawf*, and *rajā'*, at the very basic level, most of the viewers have thanked them for the *ta'thīr* of transferring religious knowledge during the pandemic, which allowed them to avoid attending face-to-face Islamist study circles. The topics discussed by these *ulama perempuan* are consistently appropriated with Rahima's agenda to demonstrate an Islam that is tolerant, non-violent, and friendly towards women. This agenda is needed amid the difficult conditions faced by women during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Conclusions

There has been a widespread tendency among Muslim communities for male '*ulamā*' to monopolize the traditions of '*ulamā*'-ship and Islamic knowledge. Indonesia is not immune from this tendency, despite the long-rooted presence of female '*ulamā*' in the archipelago. During the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, the country witnessed that the role of '*ālimāt-cum-muftiyyāt*' was especially crucial in providing *fatwā* and *tausiyah* to help their local-based constituents facing problems and uncertainties accompanying the pandemic.

This article demonstrates the online creativity of gender-just '*ulamā*' of Rahima to help their congregants navigate the unprecedented situation brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. The journeys of the three *nyais* in using YouTube for their *da'wa* during the pandemic illustrates how these village women are actors in localizing the global network for their own benefit. This form of digital religion has enabled the voices of local *ulama perempuan*, who are most often confined to engaging with their local female congregants, to reach a wider digital religious audience. The nature of digital religion, especially on YouTube, has enabled their voices to travel transnationally as well, reaching their loyal congregants, along with genderless and classless audiences. Although most of their topics deal with gender issues, the *ta'thīr* brought by the sermons of these *ulama perempuan* can be felt by male and female online audiences, signifying their important position in the transformation of gender-just religious knowledge. The presence of these *ulama perempuan* on YouTube also demonstrates the significant development in women's discourse and Islamic gender-just understanding in Indonesia, from the *fatwā* regulating women's presence in the public religious scene in the 1930s, to their daily presence in the offline and online public sphere.

All of the three *nyais* in this study are the embodiment of charismatic, traditional, and legal-rational authority, the three aspects of authority that coexist in each person. In the Indonesian online public sphere, it is known that those who are more active in using social media platforms for *da'wa* are conservative Muslims, while these *nyais* come from moderate and progressive Muslim backgrounds. Therefore, during the pandemic, if they do not have an online presence, they cannot compete or counter the narratives of conservative Muslims, including new conservative tech-savvy interpreters. These *nyais* become more pragmatic and view communication technologies as an important means to relegitimize their authority, particularly their charismatic and traditional authorities.

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Notes

- 1 *Tausiyah*, in this context, refers to advice, guidance, or a warning that is also issued by ‘*ulamā*’.
- 2 Azyumardi Azra mentioned five loose categories of *ulama perempuan* in Indonesia: *ulama kampus* (campus ‘*ulamā*’), *ulama pesantren* (Islamic boarding school ‘*ulamā*’), *ulama organisasi sosial-keagamaan* (socio-religious organisation ‘*ulamā*’), *ulama aktivis sosial politik* (socio-political activist ‘*ulamā*’), and *ulama tabligh* (preacher) (Azra 2002, p. xxxii).
- 3 Facebook messenger interview with Siti Hanna, 5 February 2021.
- 4 The term *tausiyah* is also used to refer to oral preaching. However, in this article, *tausiyah* refers to Islamic legal-theological advice and guidance, as is used by MUI.
- 5 In-person interview with Pera Sopariyanti, Rahima’s office in Jagakarsa, 25 April 2022.
- 6 WhatsApp interview with Nyai Nur Afiyah, 5 September 2021.
- 7 WhatsApp interview with Nyai Afwah Mumtazah, 6 September 2021.
- 8 Zoom interview with Pera Sopariyanti and Andi Faizah, 1 October 2020.
- 9 Zoom interview with Pera Sopariyanti, 1 October 2020.
- 10 WhatsApp interview with Nyai Afwah Mumtazah, 7 September 2021.
- 11 Zoom interview with Nyai Umdah El Baroroh, 5 September 2021.
- 12 Zoom interview with Andi Faizah, 1 October 2020.
- 13 This is per 18 May 2022, 8:39 p.m.
- 14 This is per 18 May 2022, 8:40 p.m.

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