

NEGOTIATING RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY: FEMALE ULAMA IN MANADO AND YOGYAKARTA

Arhanuddin Salim

*Institut Agama Islam Negeri Manado
Dr. S.H. Sarundajang Street, Manado, Indonesia
Email: arhanuddinsalim@gmail.com*

Rahman Mantu

*Institut Agama Islam Negeri Manado
Dr. S.H. Sarundajang Street, Manado, Indonesia
Email: rahmanmantu@iain-manado.ac.id*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how female ulama negotiate religious authority and articulate Islamic moderation within two contrasting socio-religious contexts in Indonesia: Manado, a Christian-majority city in North Sulawesi, and Yogyakarta, a Muslim-majority center of Islamic education and intellectualism. Employing a qualitative interpretive phenomenological approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews, literature review, digital content analysis, and comparative case studies involving female ulama, Islamic educators, and community leaders. The study finds that women's religious authority is not determined solely by demographic context, but is shaped through the interaction of educational background, organizational networks, cultural adaptation, digital engagement, and social legitimacy. In Manado, female ulama develop what this study terms moral-dialogical authority, emphasizing interfaith coexistence, cultural accommodation, and ethical engagement within a minority Muslim setting. In Yogyakarta, female ulama exercise scholarly-institutional authority through universities, pesantren, and Islamic organizations, enabling broader participation in gender discourse, public education, and religious moderation programs. The findings also reveal that digital media play a significant role in transforming women's religious visibility and legitimacy. In Manado, online platforms function as alternative spaces for expanding religious influence amid limited institutional access, while in Yogyakarta digital media amplifies already established scholarly authority. This study argues that female ulama represent a transformative model of Islamic leadership that integrates religious scholarship, civic ethics, and gendered agency. Their contributions demonstrate that Islamic moderation in Indonesia is a lived and contextually negotiated practice shaped by local culture, pluralism, and evolving forms of religious authority.

Keywords: Female Ulama, Religious Authority, Islamic Moderation, Gender and Religion, Manado, Yogyakarta

INTRODUCTION

In post-reform Indonesia, religious authority has undergone significant transformations as new actors, discourses, and media platforms have emerged to contest traditional modes of Islamic interpretation and practice. The democratization of religious knowledge—facilitated by education, digital media, and social movements—has challenged the male-dominated structures of Islamic leadership that historically governed religious interpretation and legitimacy. Within this evolving landscape, the rise of

female *ulama* who possess deep Islamic scholarship and are recognized for their authority in religious teaching, represents a remarkable shift in the epistemological and institutional dynamics of Indonesian Islam (Nisa, 2013; Rinaldo, 2020). Their participation is not merely symbolic but has reshaped public understandings of piety, gender, and civic responsibility.

Historically, Islamic scholarship in Indonesia has been centered on *kyai*, *ustadz*, and male jurists whose interpretations of *fiqh* and *sharia* shaped the religious and moral compass of Muslim communities (Ahmad, 2018; Al-Rasyid &

Ilyas 2022; Effendy, 2022). However, the post-1998 Reform era has opened new spaces for women to participate in religious discourse through formal education, social organizations, and media-based *dakwah*. The establishment of institutions such as the *Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia* (KUPI, the Indonesian Women Ulama Congress) in 2017 marked a turning point in the recognition of female religious authority at both national and local levels (Nadia & Faizah, 2024). KUPI and similar movements have redefined *ulama* not as a gendered title but as a moral and intellectual capacity grounded in knowledge (*'ilm*) and social responsibility (*da'wah*). Through this redefinition, female *ulama* have begun to articulate gender justice, pluralism, and human rights within an Islamic framework, often positioning themselves as advocates of moderation (*wasathiyyah*) and interreligious harmony.

The city of Manado in North Sulawesi provides a particularly compelling context for understanding the negotiation of female religious authority. As a Christian-majority city where Muslims constitute less than 40% of the population, Manado is widely regarded as a model of interreligious harmony in Indonesia's eastern region. Yet, within this plural environment, Muslim women leaders face distinct challenges in articulating their authority and negotiating between religious conservatism and civic pluralism. Female *ulama* in Manado often operate in socially constrained environments where religious conservatism coexists with civic tolerance, creating what may be described as a "paradox of moderation." They embrace the language of peaceful coexistence, human rights, and respect for diversity while simultaneously maintaining conservative theological views shaped by scriptural literalism and patriarchal cultural norms. This ambivalence reflects the broader dialectic of Islam in Indonesia,

one that oscillates between the ideals of inclusivity and the persistence of traditional gender hierarchies (Rinaldo, 2020).

In contrast, Yogyakarta represents a Muslim-majority context which female *ulama* enjoy greater institutional recognition and educational access. As a hub of Islamic scholarship and cultural pluralism, Yogyakarta has historically served as a laboratory for moderate Islam. It is home to progressive Islamic organizations such as *Muhammadiyah* and *Nahdlatul Ulama*, as well as universities and *pesantren* that promote gender equality and civic participation (Sumadi et al., 2019). Female *ulama* in Yogyakarta have capitalized on these institutions to engage in theological reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) and public advocacy, addressing issues such as gender-based violence, child marriage, and interfaith dialogue (Ismah, 2017). Their influence extends beyond traditional religious spaces to online platforms, community forums, and educational institutions, signaling a shift in how Islamic authority is performed and recognized in the digital era (Makin, 2018).

The comparative perspective between Manado and Yogyakarta thus reveals how local social configurations shape the modalities of religious authority among women scholars. In Manado, where Islam functions as a minority faith, female *ulama* often frame moderation as a strategy of coexistence and cultural negotiation. In Yogyakarta, where Islam constitutes the moral mainstream, moderation is institutionalized through education, intellectual discourse, and civic engagement. These contrasts highlight the fluidity and contextual nature of female religious authority in Indonesia. As argued by Bourdieu (2020), authority is not merely a possession but a relational construct that depends on recognition, legitimacy, and symbolic capital. In this sense, *female ulama* in both cities operate within overlapping fields of religious,

cultural, and gendered power, where their legitimacy must be continuously negotiated through practice, discourse, and social engagement.

Moreover, the intersection of gender and authority in Islamic contexts cannot be separated from broader discussions on the politics of knowledge production. Scholars such as (Mir-Hosseini, 2000) and (Wadud, 1999) argue that patriarchal interpretations of religious texts have historically excluded women from authoritative spaces, framing their piety as private rather than public. However, contemporary Muslim women scholars have begun to reclaim interpretive agency by rereading the Qur'an through gender-sensitive hermeneutics. In Indonesia, this hermeneutical shift is evident in the work of female *ulama* who reinterpret verses on leadership (*qiwamah*) and testimony to emphasize ethical equality rather than structural subordination. Their interpretive practices serve not only as theological interventions but also as social actions that reshape community norms.

This study situates itself within these evolving discourses by examining how female *ulama* in Manado and Yogyakarta articulate, negotiate, and exercise religious authority amid local socio-religious complexities. It explores how they respond to issues such as radicalism, pluralism, nationalism, and gender justice, as well as how their teachings influence both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. The study is particularly concerned with how minority contexts such as Manado compel female *ulama* to balance religious identity with civic pluralism, often through pragmatic adaptation rather than doctrinal innovation. Meanwhile, the comparison with Yogyakarta comparison provides insight into how institutionalized Islamic moderation (*Islam Wasathiyah*) enables the expansion of female religious leadership.

By combining perspectives from gender studies, sociology of religion, and Islamic thought, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how female religious authority operates in Indonesia's multicultural society. It argues that female *ulama* embody a transformative form of leadership that blends traditional *'ilmiyyah* (religious scholarship) with social engagement, thereby offering alternative models of Islamic authority that challenge both patriarchal and extremist paradigms. Their leadership not only contests the marginalization of women in religious interpretation but also reinforces Indonesia's commitment to pluralism and democracy.

In light of recent debates over religious conservatism and gender equality, this research holds broader implications for Islamic education, interfaith relations, and civic harmony. It highlights the potential of female *ulama* to act as mediators between textual orthodoxy and lived diversity, redefining what it means to be both pious and pluralist in the Indonesian context. The comparison between Manado and Yogyakarta demonstrates that moderation is not a static category but a lived negotiation shaped by demographic, cultural, and institutional factors. Thus, understanding female *ulama* as dynamic agents of moderation allows us to appreciate the complex ways in which religion, gender, and power interact in shaping Indonesia's plural Islamic future (Nisa 2018; Sumadi et al., 2019).

Literature Review

The Emergence of Female Religious Authority in Islam

The emergence of female *ulama* as authoritative voices within Islamic discourse marks a significant shift in the landscape of contemporary Muslim societies. Historically, women have contributed to Islamic scholarship since the formative period of Islam, as

exemplified by figures such as ‘Aisha bint Abu Bakr, a transmitter of hadiths and a jurist whose influence extended across early Islamic jurisprudence (Wadud, 1999). However, over time, patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts and institutional barriers marginalized women’s participation in public religious authority (Mir-Hosseini, 2000).

In recent decades, there has been a growing recognition of women’s religious scholarship across the Muslim world, especially in contexts where democratization, literacy, and media expansion have reconfigured access to religious knowledge. Mahmood (2005) and Ahmed (2021) observe that Muslim women’s engagement in Islamic interpretation reflects not only a claim to knowledge but also a moral and political assertion of agency within patriarchal systems. This reemergence of female *ulama* signifies what Sumadi et al. (2019) describe as “the feminization of authority” a process through which women scholars reinterpret religious texts and construct alternative epistemologies of piety, ethics, and social justice.

In the Indonesian context, this movement gained momentum through initiatives such as the *Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia* (KUPI). As Rohmaniyah, Kotele, & Widiastuti (2022) note, KUPI institutionalized the recognition of female religious authority by emphasizing that the legitimacy of an *ulama* derives not from gender, but from *‘ilm* (knowledge), *akhlaq* (ethics), and *khidmah* (service). This recognition challenges the male-centric structures of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) and formal religious organizations, while promoting a more inclusive model of Islamic leadership.

Female Ulama and Gendered Hermeneutics

Central to the discourse on female religious authority is the issue of gendered hermeneutics, namely the re-reading of

Islamic texts from women’s perspectives. Scholars such as (Wadud, 1999; Mir-Hosseini, 2000) advocate for *tafsir qawānīyah* (contextual and ethical exegesis) that foregrounds justice and equality as intrinsic Qur’anic values. In Indonesia, this interpretive movement is evident in the works of female *ulama* who reinterpret verses on leadership (*qiwāmah*), marriage, and testimony to emphasize mutuality rather than hierarchy (Rinaldo 2020).

Empirical studies demonstrate how female *ulama* employ contextual hermeneutics to address social issues such as domestic violence, child marriage, and reproductive rights (Kusmana, 2019). These reinterpretations serve as counter-narratives to patriarchal interpretations that restrict women’s agency. (Nadia & Faizah, 2024) further observe that Indonesian female *ulama* use *dakwah bil qissah* (narrative preaching) and participatory education to embed gender justice in Islamic discourse without alienating conservative audiences. By employing culturally resonant idioms, they sustain moral legitimacy while advancing reformist ideas.

In Manado, where Muslims are a minority, female preachers tend to employ hermeneutics of harmony and coexistence, framing Islamic teachings through moral and cultural integration rather than confrontation. This approach, as noted by Ilaihi, Zuhriyah, and Yusuf (2024), that female *ulama* to balance religious conviction with civic pluralism, embodying a distinctly Indonesian model of *Islam wasathiyyah* (moderate Islam). In contrast, in Yogyakarta, where female *ulama* operate within strong institutional networks interpretive practices often engage with academic debates and state-endorsed moderation programs, aligning with the broader agenda of religious reform and gender inclusivity (Sumadi et al., 2019).

Religious Authority and the Reconfiguration of Islamic Leadership

The concept of religious authority in Islam has long been contested among traditional *ulama*, reformist scholars, and modern intellectuals. Weberian sociology defines authority as legitimate domination recognized by followers, whereas Islamic authority traditionally stems from mastery of sacred texts, lineage, and moral integrity. However, as Feener (2013) notes, authority in contemporary Islam is increasingly decentralized and mediated through education, civil society, and digital communication.

In Indonesia, the authority of female *ulama* emerges within this decentralized framework. As Rinaldo (2020) argues that female *ulama* construct legitimacy through a combination of knowledge production, moral performance, and social engagement. Their authority is negotiated relationally through recognition from religious peers, communities, and the state. This relational dimension becomes particularly visible in plural societies such as Manado, where Muslim women leaders must constantly navigate between minority representation and interfaith diplomacy.

In Yogyakarta, where Islamic institutions are well established, religious authority takes on more formal and discursive forms. Female lecturers in Islamic universities, leaders of women's wings of *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah*, and *mubalighat* (female preachers) in *pesantren* networks have gained legitimacy through scholarly credentials and community service (Makin, 2018). These dynamics affirm Asad (2018) that authority in Islam is not a static inheritance but rather a continuous social construction shaped by power, discourse, and public negotiation. that authority in Islam is not a static inheritance, but rather a continuous social construction shaped by power, discourse, and public negotiation.

Female Ulama and Islamic Moderation (*Wasathiyah Islam*)

The rise of female *ulama* also intersects with the state's promotion of Islamic moderation (*Islam Wasathiyah*), particularly in the post-2010s period marked by the government's concern over radicalism. The Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs and organizations such as *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah* have institutionalized moderation as a national discourse emphasizing tolerance, justice, and balance (Mujiburrahman, 2018). Within this framework, female *ulama* serve as crucial agents of moderation, employing inclusive religious narratives to counter exclusivist interpretations and violent extremism.

In plural regions such as Manado, the role of female *ulama* is often mediated through interreligious dialogue, community education, and social welfare activities rather than direct theological contestation. Their authority is rooted in moral credibility and their ability to bridge Islamic teachings with local cultural values of *mapalus* (collective solidarity). This synthesis exemplifies what Ropi terms "local cosmopolitanism" a religious ethos that harmonizes Islamic identity with civic pluralism (Ropi, 2017).

By comparison, in Yogyakarta, female *ulama* play a more institutionalized role in promoting moderation through formal education and gender mainstreaming programs in Islamic universities and *pesantren*. As documented by Nisa (2013), these women often engage with state-endorsed initiatives such as *Gerakan Moderasi Beragama* (Religious Moderation Movement), contributing scholarly and pedagogical frameworks that integrate gender equity, tolerance, and nationalism. Such participation positions female *ulama* not merely as transmitters of moderation, but as intellectual architects of Indonesia's evolving Islamic discourse.

Digital Media and the Expansion of Female Religious Voices

The digitalization of religion has transformed how religious authority is articulated and disseminated. Social media platforms, YouTube, and podcasts have become key arenas which female *ulama* engage broader audiences and challenge traditional boundaries of religious authority (Lwamba et al., 2022). In Indonesia, digital *dakwah* allows women preachers to reach audiences beyond physical mosques or pesantren, creating what could be termed a “networked piety” (Slama, 2018).

Online engagement enables female *ulama* to exercise interpretive freedom while negotiating visibility within conservative settings (Rohmaniyah, 2023). In Manado, online preaching helps overcome spatial and institutional limitations, allowing Muslim women scholars to maintain influence within a Christian-majority society (Salim, 2026). In Yogyakarta, the digital realm amplifies their visibility as public intellectuals who merge Islamic learning with activism, gender justice, and civic engagement.

Summary and Analytical Gap

The reviewed literature demonstrates that the emergence of female *ulama* in Indonesia has reconfigured notions of authority, moderation, and gender within Islamic discourse. However, most studies have focused either on institutional contexts in Java or national movements such as KUPI. There remains limited empirical research on how female *ulama* operate in minority Muslim contexts such as Manado, where interfaith coexistence, cultural hybridity, and minority dynamics significantly shape religious authority.

This study addresses that gap by providing a comparative analysis of female *ulama* in Manado and Yogyakarta. It examines how women scholars negotiate legitimacy, articulate moderation, and engage with digital media to construct

moral and theological authority. By doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of how Islamic moderation is lived, interpreted, and embodied through gendered religious leadership in plural societies.

Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes the role of female *ulama* through three interrelated dimensions: religious authority, gendered agency, and Islamic moderation (*wasathiyyah*). Together, these dimensions form an analytical framework that explains how women religious leaders construct legitimacy and promote moderation in diverse Indonesian contexts, particularly in Manado and Yogyakarta.

First, religious authority is understood as a *socially constructed phenomenon* rather than a fixed institutional title (Asad, 2018; Feener, 2013). Authority emerges through recognition, knowledge, and moral credibility. For female *ulama*, legitimacy is achieved through what Rinaldo (2020) calls *relational authority*, a dynamic interplay between epistemic competence, ethical conduct, and community trust. In minority contexts such as Manado, this legitimacy depends on moral influence and cultural adaptation, whereas in Yogyakarta, it is institutionalized through scholarly and organizational credentials.

Second, gendered agency refers to women’s capacity to interpret, teach, and influence within religious structures (Mahmood, 2005; Wadud, 1999). Rather than opposing tradition, female *ulama* exercise agency through reinterpretation (*ijtihad kontekstual*), pedagogy, and civic engagement. This study identifies three expressions of agency: (1) *interpretive*—re-reading Islamic texts through gender-aware reasoning; (2) *pedagogical*—transmitting moderate Islamic values in education; and (3) *civic*—fostering interfaith dialogue and social harmony.

Third, Islamic moderation (*wasathiyyah*) serves as the ethical

foundation of women’s leadership. It promotes balance, tolerance, and justice (Rijal, 2016). Female *ulama* translate moderation from a theological ideal into social practice, what Feener (2013) terms *lived moderation*. In Manado, this manifests as *moral-dialogical authority* grounded in coexistence with Christian communities; in Yogyakarta, as *scholarly-institutional authority* embedded in education and activism.

The integrated model proposed here positions female *ulama* at the center of a triadic relationship between religious hermeneutics, ethical leadership, and contextual dynamics. These interactions produced gendered expressions of Islamic moderation that vary across local settings. Hence, female *ulama* are not merely transmitters of doctrine but active interpreters who embody moderation through empathy, knowledge, and civic engagement—reshaping the moral landscape of Indonesian Islam in both minority and majority contexts.

combining knowledge, moral credibility, and community trust.

The interaction among these domains generates two contextual expressions of women’s leadership:

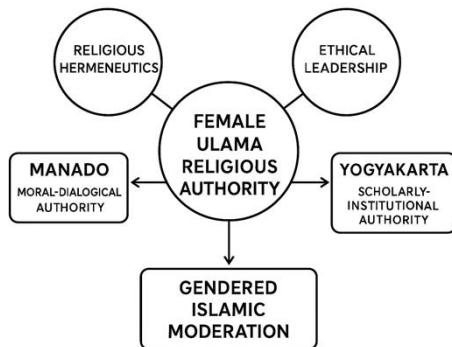
1. Manado: moral-dialogical Authority, emphasizing coexistence, empathy, and interfaith dialogue within a Christian-majority environment;
2. Yogyakarta: scholarly-institutional Authority, emphasizing pedagogy, intellectual engagement, and organizational influence in a Muslim-majority context.

Both forms converge toward Gendered Islamic moderation, where female *ulama* embody *wasathiyyah* (balance and justice) through education, civic engagement, and reinterpretation of Islamic values. This framework highlights that women’s religious authority is contextually negotiated, ethically grounded, and socially transformative.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the evolving role of female *ulama* in shaping local religious authority and promoting Islamic moderation within distinct socio-religious contexts. The use of a qualitative framework is appropriate because the focus lies not on quantifying religious influence but on understanding meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences within specific cultural and theological settings (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018). By situating the inquiry in Manado and Yogyakarta, the study seeks to uncover how female *ulama* negotiate their religious authority amid the intersections of gender, tradition, and pluralism.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Female Ulama Religious Authority and Islamic Moderation



Source: Data Analysis

This conceptual model illustrates the dynamic relationship among three domains that shape the authority of female *ulama* in Indonesia: religious hermeneutics, ethical leadership, and contextual dynamics. At the center lies *Female Religious Authority*, which emerges through relational legitimacy

Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This research is interpretive in orientation, recognizing that social realities especially religious ones are

constructed through human interaction, cultural narratives, and interpretive acts. The interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) enables the researcher to examine how female *ulama* experience and make sense of their religious authority in context. Phenomenology, as Manen and Manen (2020) emphasize, enables a deep engagement with lived experience, focusing on the meaning participants ascribe to their practices rather than abstract theorization.

In this study, IPA is combined with feminist epistemology to highlight the gendered dimensions of religious authority. Feminist phenomenology, as proposed by Ahmed (2021), provides a lens for understanding how women's embodied experiences of teaching, preaching, and community engagement intersect with structures of power and recognition. This theoretical combination allows for both a textual and contextual reading of women's roles in Islamic authority acknowledging their theological expertise while situating it within broader social realities.

Research Sites: Manado and Yogyakarta

The research focuses primarily on Manado, North Sulawesi, a city renowned for its interreligious harmony but characterized by a Christian-majority demographic. Muslims constitute approximately one-third of the population, forming a distinct minority. This religious composition provides a fertile context for examining how female *ulama* assert moral and theological authority within pluralistic environments. In Manado, female *ulama* often serve as community educators, mediators, and advocates of peaceful coexistence rather than institutional preachers. Their roles are frequently embedded in informal *majelis taklim* (religious gatherings), family-based learning spaces, and digital platforms.

Yogyakarta, by contrast, serves as a comparative site due to its historical

status as a center of Islamic learning and reformist thought. As a Muslim-majority city with strong traditions of pluralism and education, Yogyakarta hosts a vibrant network of female *ulama*, particularly those affiliated with *Nahdlatul Ulama*, *Muhammadiyah*, and Islamic universities. This comparison allows for the identification of differences in the formation of religious between minority and majority Muslim contexts, highlighting how geography, institutional structures, and cultural dynamics shape the moral economy of *female ulama* (Rinaldo, 2020).

Participants and Sampling

The study uses purposive sampling to select participants who are recognized as *female ulama* or influential Islamic educators within their communities. In total, twelve participants were included: seven from Manado and five from Yogyakarta. Selection criteria were based on (1) their recognized authority in religious teaching, (2) community involvement, (3) engagement with issues of gender and moderation, and (4) accessibility for in-depth interviews.

Participants included preachers affiliated with Islamic organizations, lecturers from Islamic universities, and leaders of women's *majelis taklim*. Snowball sampling was also employed used to identify additional figures who hold informal yet influential positions in local religious networks. The participants ranged in age from 30 to 65, representing both younger digital *da'iyah* (female preachers) and senior scholars with decades of experience.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through four primary methods:

1. Literature Review: A systematic review of books, journal articles, and institutional reports on female *ulama*, religious authority, and Islamic moderation in Indonesia provided the

theoretical foundation for the study. This helped situate empirical findings within broader scholarly debates (Nadia & Faizah, 2024; Nisa, 2012) 2012).

2. Semi-Structured Interviews; In-depth interviews were conducted with each participant between March and July 2024. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio with participants' consent. The questions focused on personal histories, perceptions of authority, approaches to moderation, and engagement with interfaith issues.
3. Content Analysis; The study examined selected sermons, online lectures, and digital posts by female *ulama* on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. These materials provided insights into how religious authority is performed and mediated in the digital public sphere (Lwamba et al., 2022).
4. Case Studies: Two detailed case studies were developed: one focusing on a female *ulama* in Manado who promotes interfaith harmony through local cultural idioms, and another in Yogyakarta who integrates gender justice in her Islamic teaching. These cases provide depth and illustrate the diversity of women's interpretive agency.

Data collection followed ethical research standards, ensuring confidentiality, informed consent, and participant validation of findings. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to interpret data from interviews, documents, and online content. The analysis followed the six-phase thematic analysis framework developed by (Braun & Clark, 2006), the researcher familiarized herself with the data, generated initial codes, searched for patterns, reviewed and refined themes, and synthesized interpretations. Three major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) the

negotiation of authority within patriarchal and plural contexts, (2) the articulation of moderation and civic ethics, and (3) the digital transformation of religious voice.

The analytical process was iterative, involving continuous movement between empirical data and theoretical reflection. NVivo 12 was used to organize transcripts and facilitate thematic coding; however, the interpretation relied primarily on reflexive engagement by the researcher. To ensure credibility, triangulation was applied across data sources comparing interview narratives with media content and observational notes. Addition, member checking was conducted by sharing summaries with participants to validate interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Reflexivity and Researcher's Position

As a Muslim academic engaged in Islamic education and interfaith dialogue in Indonesia, the researcher considered reflexivity to be central to the research process. Awareness of positionality gender, including religious affiliation, and academic background was necessary to minimize interpretive bias while maintaining cultural sensitivity. According to Berger (2021), reflexivity in qualitative research involves continuous negotiation between insider and outsider perspectives. In this study, reflexivity was practiced through journaling, peer debriefing, and open acknowledgment of the researcher's interpretive lens.

The dual positionality as both a scholar and participant in Indonesia's religious-educational landscape enabled deeper access to networks of female *ulama* while also requiring critical distance to avoid normative assumptions. This reflexive stance aligns with feminist qualitative methodology, which emphasizes empathy, collaboration, and ethical accountability in knowledge production (Ahmed, 2021).

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adhered to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement in the field and iterative validation with participants. Transferability was achieved by providing rich contextual descriptions that allow readers to assess relevance in other settings. Dependability and confirmability were strengthened through audit trails and documentation of analytic decisions.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of IAIN Manado prior to data collection. All participants were informed of their rights to confidentiality and withdrawal, and all digital materials used were publicly accessible or used with explicit consent.

DISCUSSION

Negotiating Authority in Minority and Majority Religious Contexts

The findings of this research reveal that the formation of female *ulama* authority is deeply shaped by local religious demography and socio-cultural dynamics. In Manado, where Muslims live as a minority within a predominantly Christian population, female *ulama* face a dual challenge: affirming Islamic identity while maintaining interreligious harmony. This context creates a distinct mode of leadership that emphasizes ethics of coexistence (*etika kebersamaan*) and civic harmony rather than theological dominance. One participant, identified as “Ustazah R,” described her approach as “dakwah through empathy,” explaining that “the goal is not to debate, but to live peacefully with others while showing Islam’s compassion through example.”

Such a narrative aligns with what Yusuf (2000) describes as *local Islamic moderation*, which emerges through daily interreligious encounters rather than state-

imposed programs. Female *ulama* in Manado often employ local idioms such as *mapalus* a Minahasan tradition of collective solidarity to frame Islamic ethics as compatible with local cultural values. In this sense, moderation becomes both a religious and cultural performance. By embedding *Islam wasathiyyah* within *mapalus* ethics, they redefine religious identity as an ethical contribution to communal life (Salim et al., 2026).

In contrast, female *ulama* in Yogyakarta exercise authority through more formalized and institutional channels. They are typically affiliated with universities, pesantren, or organizations such as *Aisyiyah* (the women’s wing of Muhammadiyah) and *Muslimat NU*. Their legitimacy derives from scholarly credentials, networks, and recognition from established Islamic institutions. As “Nyai H,” a Yogyakarta-based scholar, explained, “Our authority is built on academic credibility and social engagement; we must teach, write, and be active in community reform.” This mode of authority reflects what Rinaldo (2020) calls *scholarly performativity*: the articulation of knowledge and piety as interlinked practices that generate legitimacy in the public sphere.

Thus, while female *ulama* in Manado rely on moral proximity and interpersonal trust, those in Yogyakarta operate through structured institutions and intellectual discourse. Both demonstrate agency within different fields of religious power what (Bourdieu 2020) would describe as distinct “religious habitus” shaped by the interaction of gender, knowledge, and context.

Female Ulama as Agents of Islamic Moderation

Across both locations, female *ulama* consistently position themselves as mediators of *Islam wasathiyyah*, a moderate and balanced understanding of Islam. However, their interpretations and

practices of moderation vary according to local context.

In Manado, moderation manifests as *adaptive pluralism*. Female *ulama* construct moderation not primarily as theological neutrality but as pragmatic coexistence. They tend to avoid sectarian debates and focus on social solidarity, environmental care, and interfaith compassion. One *ulama*, “Sister M,” who leads a community Qur’an study group that includes non-Muslim participants, explained: “We live side by side with Christians every day; moderation for us means respect and cooperation, not only tolerance. The Prophet teaches *rahmah* (compassion), and that’s what we live by.”

This echoes Feener’s (2013) concept of “lived moderation,” in which Islamic moderation becomes a habitus of coexistence shaped by daily interaction rather than doctrinal assertion. Through informal educational spaces like *majelis taklim*, these women nurture both religious literacy and civic empathy.

In Yogyakarta, moderation is expressed through institutional pedagogy. Female *ulama* integrate moderation into curricula, teacher training programs, and campus seminars. For instance, Ustazah S, a lecturer at an Islamic university, has designed a course module titled “Gender and Moderation in Islam,” combining classical *fiqh* studies with contemporary ethical debates. Her pedagogy reflects Nisa’s (2018) argument that female preachers in Java employ “academic *dakwah*” a synthesis of scholarship and activism.

Moreover, many Yogyakarta female *ulama* collaborate with the Ministry of Religious Affairs through the *Gerakan Moderasi Beragama* (Religious Moderation Movement). They act as resource persons in workshops and training sessions, emphasizing gender justice, anti-radicalism, and interfaith tolerance. Through such institutional involvement, they anchor moderation within Indonesia’s state-endorsed

discourse of *Islam Rahmatan lil ‘Alamin* (Islam as a mercy to all creation).

The contrast between Manado’s *adaptive pluralism* and Yogyakarta’s *institutional pedagogy* highlights the contextual fluidity of Islamic moderation. In both cases, female *ulama* embody moderation through dialogical engagement and ethical example rather than polemic preaching. Their practices challenge the notion that religious moderation is a purely top-down political project, showing instead that it is a socially negotiated and gendered moral praxis.

Contesting Patriarchy: Gender, Knowledge, and Legitimacy

Despite their contributions, female *ulama* continue to encounter structural and cultural barriers that limit their religious authority. Several participants reported being perceived as “assistants” to male preachers rather than autonomous scholars. “Even when we lead study circles,” said Ustazah F from Manado, “people ask, ‘Who is your teacher?’ as if our words require a man’s validation.”

This reflects a broader pattern identified by Rohmaniyah et al. (2022), who argue that patriarchal notions of religious legitimacy persist in many *pesantren* and mosques, where interpretive authority remains gendered. Nonetheless, women respond to this limitation through creative negotiation rather than confrontation. In Manado, they cultivate legitimacy through community trust and moral reputation. As Ustazah L noted, “They may not call us *kyai*, but they come to us for advice, and that’s real authority.”

In Yogyakarta, where educational credentials are highly valued, female *ulama* leverage academic titles, publications, and institutional affiliations to assert parity with male scholars. This strategy resonates with Sumadi et al. (2019), who argue that female scholars create new pathways of legitimacy by professionalizing religious knowledge production. By occupying teaching and

leadership positions in Islamic universities, these women disrupt the masculine monopoly of scriptural interpretation while maintaining alignment with orthodoxy.

Interestingly, both groups resist the label “feminist,” preferring to describe their work as “Islamic justice” (*keadilan Islam*). This semantic choice underscores their effort to frame gender discourse within Islamic moral vocabulary, thereby maintaining credibility among conservative audiences. As Liberatore (2019) observes, Indonesian female preachers deploy “strategic piety,” a form of gender-conscious activism couched in devotional language to navigate conservative publics without alienation.

Hence, rather than opposing patriarchy head-on, female *ulama* transform it from within, redefining religious legitimacy as moral influence, intellectual contribution, and social service. Their approach exemplifies what Rinaldo (2020) calls *pious agency*: a mode of empowerment that operates through faithfulness rather than rebellion, reconfiguring religious authority without abandoning theological boundaries.

Digital Media and the Expansion of Women’s Religious Voice

The digital sphere has emerged as a transformative arena for female *ulama* in both Manado and Yogyakarta. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok enable them to reach audiences beyond their immediate communities, thereby democratizing access to religious discourse. For female *ulama* in Manado who often lack access to formal religious institutions, digital media provides a vital channel for visibility.

For instance, Ustazah D, a young preacher from Manado, uses Instagram Reels and short-form videos to discuss ethical topics like interfaith friendship, environmental stewardship, and patience in daily life. Her videos often receive engagement from both Muslim and

Christian viewers, reflecting how digital *dakwah* can foster cross-religious understanding. This aligns with Campbell (2012), who finds that digital media allows women preachers to transcend spatial and institutional constraints, creating what Husein and Slama (2018) term a “networked piety” a web of digitally mediated devotion and dialogue.

In Yogyakarta, the digital landscape amplifies already established networks of authority. Senior female *ulama* such as lecturers and *nyai pesantren* use online platforms to extend their pedagogical reach. Many integrate digital literacy into their *pengajian* (study groups), teaching younger audiences to engage critically with religious content. This blending of traditional *halaqah* methods with digital interactivity illustrates the adaptability of Islamic pedagogy to the 21st-century media environment.

Digital engagement also transforms the performative aspect of religious authority. Visual aesthetics—tone, dress, and body language—become part of the preacher’s credibility. As *Nyai H* noted, “When we appear online, we represent Islam not only by our words but by our manners.” This embodiment of ethics resonates with Mahmood (2005) notion of ethical subjectivity, where authority is grounded in disciplined moral comportment. Thus, digital platforms not only democratize but also re-ritualize Islamic authority, infusing it with both visibility and vulnerability.

The Interplay of Local Culture, Gender, and Religious Legitimacy

Cultural adaptation is central to how female *ulama* in Manado articulate moderation and legitimacy. Their use of local idioms such as *mapalus* (collective cooperation) and *torang samua basudara* (“we are all brothers and sisters”) bridges Islamic ethics with indigenous moral systems. This intercultural engagement allows them to present Islam as a religion

of social solidarity rather than separation (Salim, 2026).

Such cultural hybridity reflects what Ropi (2017) calls *local cosmopolitanism*, a plural ethos rooted in local identity but open to universal values. Through this framework, female *ulama* act as translators between Islamic teachings and local wisdom, reinforcing civic cohesion while preserving religious identity. Their authority thus derives not from institutional hierarchy but from their ability to embody Islam’s moral universality in a plural context.

In Yogyakarta, cultural engagement takes a more intellectualized form. Female scholars often integrate Javanese values of *tepa selira* (mutual respect) and *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) into their teaching of *wasathiyah*. By embedding Islamic moderation in cultural ethics, they contribute to the state’s narrative of *Islam Nusantara*—an Indonesian Islam characterized by tolerance and cultural accommodation. However, some critics argue that such state-endorsed moderation risks co-optation, reducing female *ulama*’s agency to instruments of government policy (Wahid Foundation, 2024). Nonetheless, most participants in this study maintain that moderation, for them, is an ethical commitment before it is a political slogan.

Table 1: Comparative Dynamics of Female Ulama in Manado and Yogyakarta

Aspect	Manado	Yogyakarta
Religious Context	Muslim minority within a Christian-majority society	Muslim-majority society with strong Islamic institutions
Basis of Religious Authority	Moral-dialogical authority rooted in interpersonal trust and coexistence	Scholarly-institutional authority based on academic and organizational legitimacy
Moderation Strategy	Adaptive pluralism and interfaith coexistence	Institutional pedagogy and public religious discourse

Aspect	Manado	Yogyakarta
Forms of Public Engagement	Community mediation, interfaith dialogue, and informal religious gatherings	Academic activism, pesantren education, seminars, and organizational programs
Role of Digital Media	Expanding visibility amid limited institutional access	Amplifying established scholarly and institutional authority
Gender Negotiation	Legitimacy through moral reputation and community acceptance	Legitimacy through academic credentials and institutional networks
Cultural Integration	Incorporation of local values such as <i>mapalus</i> and <i>torang samua basudara</i>	Integration of <i>Islam Nusantara</i> , <i>gotong royong</i> , and <i>tepa selira</i>
Challenges Faced	Minority positioning, limited institutional access, and conservative expectations	Balancing institutional authority with conservative religious expectations
Model of Leadership	Ethical-relational and coexistence-oriented leadership	Intellectual-pedagogical and reform-oriented leadership
Expression of Islamic Moderation	Lived moderation through daily interreligious interaction	Structured moderation through education and civic programs

Source: Developed by the authors based on field findings and thematic analysis

The comparative table above demonstrates that the authority of female *ulama* is shaped not merely by demographic differences between minority and majority Muslim contexts, but also by educational access, organizational networks, digital engagement, and local cultural dynamics. These distinctions highlight the contextual and relational character of women’s religious authority in contemporary Indonesian Islam.

Comparative Synthesis

Comparatively, the findings show that while both groups of female *ulama* engage in promoting moderation and social harmony, the modes and expressions

of authority differ substantially. In Manado, authority is relational, moral, and dialogical; it emerges from lived experience in a minority context where social coexistence is a daily practice. In Yogyakarta, authority is institutional, intellectual, and discursive; it is legitimized through scholarship and organizational structures.

Both, however, share a common ethical foundation: the belief that Islamic leadership must serve humanity (*khidmah*) and uphold justice (*'adl*). Their authority is therefore not only theological but also civic, contributing to Indonesia's plural democracy. As (Kusmana 2019) observes, female *ulama* represent "a gendered embodiment of moderation," linking spiritual leadership with social ethics.

This synthesis underscores that the negotiation of Islamic authority is contextually contingent but oriented toward moral inclusivity. Whether in the minority context of Manado or the academic corridors of Yogyakarta, female *ulama* redefine what it means to lead, teach, and represent Islam in contemporary Indonesia.

CLOSING

The findings of this study affirm that the emergence of female *ulama* in Indonesia represents not only a gendered reconfiguration of religious authority but also a dynamic reinterpretation of Islamic moderation within diverse sociocultural contexts. Through their teaching, preaching, and community engagement, female *ulama* embody a living expression of *Islam Wasathiyah*—a moderation that is both theological and ethical, rooted in compassion, justice, and civic responsibility. Their authority challenges patriarchal notions of religious legitimacy and offers new pathways for inclusive Islamic leadership grounded in knowledge, empathy, and moral service.

In Manado, where Muslims constitute a religious minority within a predominantly Christian society, the role of female *ulama* emerges as relational and dialogical. Their authority is cultivated through interpersonal trust, moral consistency, and cultural adaptation. By framing Islamic ethics within local values such as *mapalus* (collective solidarity) and *torang samua basudara* ("we are all brothers and sisters"), these women articulate a form of moderation that transcends doctrinal boundaries and situates Islam within a plural civic ethic. Their leadership is therefore performative rather than institutional, defined less by formal recognition than by moral influence and community acceptance. In this sense, female *ulama* in Manado embody what may be called lived moderation—a practice of coexistence that evolves through everyday interfaith interactions rather than abstract theology.

In Yogyakarta, by contrast, female *ulama* exercise authority through structured institutions of learning, religious organizations, and digital platforms. Their legitimacy rests on scholarly credentials, pedagogical contributions, and engagement with national discourses on religious moderation and gender justice. As lecturers, writers, and *nyai pesantren*, they integrate moderate Islamic principles into academic curricula and public education. Their engagement with state-led initiatives such as *Gerakan Moderasi Beragama* (Religious Moderation Movement) and organizations such as *Aisyiyah* and *Muslimat NU* demonstrates how gendered religious leadership can align with broader national frameworks of pluralism without losing theological depth. Through intellectual activism, these female *ulama* become both interpreters and implementers of Islamic moderation, transforming abstract ideals into pedagogical and civic realities.

The comparison between these two contexts underscores that religious

authority among female *ulama* is contextually negotiated rather than universally defined. In Manado, authority is moral, relational, and intercultural anchored in dialogue and coexistence. In Yogyakarta, it is institutional, discursive, and intellectual embedded in education and organized networks. Yet across both contexts, the defining feature of women's authority is its ethical orientation: a commitment to promote peace, justice, and inclusivity as integral to Islamic piety. This moral orientation affirms that gendered authority in Islam does not necessitate doctrinal confrontation but can emerge through reinterpretation, pedagogy, and service to the community.

Moreover, this study demonstrates that female *ulama* have become crucial agents in redefining the public face of Islam in Indonesia's plural democracy. Their presence in both offline and digital spheres reclaim interpretive space traditionally monopolized by male scholars. By embracing digital media, they democratize religious knowledge, making Islam accessible and dialogical, particularly for younger and more diverse audiences. This digital engagement complements their pedagogical and community roles, signaling a multidimensional transformation of Islamic authority in the 21st century.

From a broader perspective, the experiences of female *ulama* in Manado and Yogyakarta illuminate the intersection of gender, faith, and civic pluralism in Indonesia's evolving Islamic discourse. Their leadership offers an alternative model to both patriarchal conservatism and liberal secularism—a model grounded in faith yet open to diversity, rooted in tradition yet responsive to modern challenges. As Indonesia continues to navigate the tensions between religious conservatism and democratic pluralism, female *ulama* provide a moral and intellectual resource for sustaining balance between these forces.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the sociology of religion and gender studies by demonstrating that religious authority is relational, embodied, and performative. It is not simply conferred through institutional titles but earned through consistent moral practice and interpretive labor. Practically, the study offers valuable insights for Islamic education and policymaking. Institutions of higher learning, *pesantren*, and community organizations can draw upon the leadership models of female *ulama* to integrate gender equity and interfaith ethics into their curricula. This approach would not only empower women within Islamic scholarship but also strengthen Indonesia's national vision of *Islam Rahmatan lil 'Alamin* (Islam as a mercy to all creation).

In conclusion, female *ulama* in Indonesia, whether in minority contexts such as Manado or major Islamic centers such as Yogyakarta, represent a transformative moral force within contemporary Islam. They illustrate that the future of Islamic authority lies not in the preservation of patriarchal hierarchies but in the cultivation of ethical inclusivity, interpretive diversity, and civic compassion. Their voices reaffirm that moderation is not a compromise a conviction—a lived practice that bridges the sacred and the social. By rearticulating faith through empathy, education, and engagement, *female ulama* are not only redefining women's roles in Islam but also shaping the moral architecture of Indonesia's plural society.

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