Reclaiming religious authority

What Bangladesh can learn from Indonesia's women ulama movement

In 2017, the inaugural Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia (KUPI), or Indonesian Women Ulama Congress, brought together Islamic scholars and activists to challenge male-dominated religious authority and advance women's rights. Drawing on Islamic texts, human rights principles and women's lived experiences, the movement developed a new approach to religious interpretation, issuing landmark fatwas against child marriage and gender-based violence. Ruby Kholifah, a leading Indonesian human rights advocate, executive director of the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN) Indonesia and member of KUPI's steering committee, speaks to The Daily Star about the movement's emergence, its role in raising Indonesia's legal marriage age for girls from 16 to 19, and its efforts to reclaim religious authority. She also explores how Indonesia's religious, cultural and institutional traditions enabled the movement to flourish, and what Bangladesh and other South Asian countries can learn from its experience.



Schoolgirls applaud during a classroom gathering in Bangladesh. Despite the legal minimum marriage age of 18 for girls, child marriage remains a persistent challenge, threatening their education, well-being and future opportunities. PHOTO: **STAR**



Ruby Kholifah, a leading Indonesian human rights advocate, executive director of the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN) Indonesia and member of KUPI's steering committee. PHOTO: **COURTESY**

The Daily Star (TDS) : How did KUPI emerge as a collective movement in 2017, and how did Indonesia's distinctive history of women's activism, religious traditions and institutional landscape shape its approach?

Ruby Kholifah (RK): The roots go back long before 2017. Indonesia has a rich history of women's activism. At the first Indonesian Women's Congress in 1928, Indonesian mothers and activists were already discussing child marriage, polygamy, political participation and social welfare.

Crucially, in Indonesia's history, the feminist movement and faith-based groups have rarely been in opposition. Indonesian feminists realised early on that there is a structural reality: they cannot influence conservative or grassroots communities without actively engaging religious leaders. In our context, discussions on democracy, human rights and social justice have always intersected with religion. Since the 1980s, an extensive body of literature has been published on topics like Islam and Democracy, Islam and Human Rights and Women's Rights in Islam.

Before 2017, however, people worked in isolation: some focused on academic publishing and journal writing; some conducted critical Islamic studies workshops directly with religious leaders. Others worked with youth in Islamic boarding schools. Many engaged with Majlis Talim—grassroots religious gatherings led by women, which draw anywhere from a hundred to thousands of women. In progressive Majlis Talim, these circles are not one-way lectures; they are interactive spaces where women ask critical questions about their daily lives and faith.

What changed in 2017 was the realisation that working in isolation was ineffective against systemic patriarchy, which continuously eroded progressive interpretations. Activists and scholars came together to reclaim religious authority.

Why "reclaim"? Because our female scholars firmly believe that Islam protects and respects women's rights. Yet in practice, multiple interpretations exist—ranging from conservative to progressive. Because Indonesia is not an Islamic state and has never imposed a single official tafsir (exegesis), citizens enjoy the freedom to learn from diverse schools of thought. While the state takes a strict stance against violent extremism and terrorism, conservative views remain widespread. Recognising this diversity of interpretations, we knew we had to unite to assert a progressive, women-centred authority over religious texts.

This movement also needs to be understood within Indonesia's distinctive historical, cultural and religious context, which has shaped both its emergence and its approach to religious interpretation.

Islam arrived in Southeast Asia through a process of acculturation, embedding itself naturally into local customs. As a result, many life-cycle rituals surrounding birth, marriage and death share cultural similarities across Muslim, Hindu and indigenous traditions, even though the religious prayers differ. This creates a foundation of cultural safety and tolerance.

Furthermore, Indonesia has two massive Islamic mass organisations: Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which has approximately 50 million members, and Muhammadiyah, with roughly 25 million members. Both organisations extend down to the village level, operate independently of the state and actively promote religious moderation.

Another vital modality is the Islamic boarding school system. Islamic boarding schools are the primary incubators for religious scholarship in Indonesia. Boys and girls study classical texts here before progressing to public schools, madrasas or State Islamic Universities (UIN) for undergraduate, master's and doctoral degrees.

Crucially, the Islamic boarding school tradition does not rely on a single reference text. Students are taught to compare different interpretations and debate textual references under one roof.

So, there are many modalities, and such an environment fosters critical thinking and intellectual openness, creating the ideal ecosystem for a movement like KUPI to take root. This is one reason why we explore applying it to other countries. It is almost impossible without the necessary modalities, and that is why we are interested in helping people identify their own modalities rather than simply copying what Indonesia has.

Working in isolation for many years proved ineffective. But when we came together in 2017 to launch the first Indonesian Women Ulama Congress (KUPI), we immediately realised the power of our collective impact.

The scholars brought a clear, grounded understanding of women-friendly religious interpretations. They developed an accessible methodology that young scholars could easily learn and apply, documenting it in both print and digital formats for quick dissemination.

To amplify these progressive perspectives online, we established platforms like Mubadala.id, which publishes women's theological insights and their responses to contemporary public issues. It quickly grew into an essential resource for other online platforms and mainstream media seeking authoritative perspectives on women's rights in Islam. Today, media outlets across Indonesia frequently draw on Mubadala.id when covering major social debates—such as in 2017, when KUPI issued its landmark first fatwa declaring the prevention of child marriage an obligation for everyone.

TDS: How is the KUPI movement organised, and what roles do its different member organisations play?

RK: When talking about KUPI (Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia) as a movement, it is essential to emphasise that it belongs to many organisations. It is a collective network comprising over a hundred organisations across the country. AMAN Indonesia serves as part of a five-member steering committee supporting the implementation of the fatwas—or religious deliberations—issued during the congress. The following five core organisations work together to promote and implement KUPI's religious rulings:

Fahmina and Rahima: Focus on strengthening progressive religious perspectives among young ulama, both male and female. Their priority is generational renewal, ensuring that a new cohort of young scholars takes over the work being done by senior scholars, most of whom are over 50.

GUSDURian: Led by the daughter of former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid ("Gus Dur"), this group expands KUPI's methodology into broader faith communities. A core innovation of KUPI is placing women's lived experiences at the centre of religious interpretation, and GUSDURian helps adapt this approach across diverse faith traditions.

Alimat: Works directly with higher education institutions, engaging universities to transform Islamic studies curricula and introduce KUPI's methodological framework to students and academics.

AMAN Indonesia: My organisation connects KUPI with the international community, allowing global actors to learn from the Indonesian context while facilitating dialogue in other countries to explore how women ulama movements might emerge elsewhere. So when I share this story, it is the story of a broad collective working hand in hand.

TDS: How does KUPI's approach to addressing child marriage differ from that of traditional Islamic institutions?

RK: Preventing child marriage is essential because it safeguards the futures of so many young girls, who suffer deeply from the negative consequences of marrying at a very early age. The women ulama believe that listening directly to the stories of female victims and survivors of gender-based violence provides a vital foundation for issuing victim-friendly fatwas.

This approach marks a major departure from other Islamic institutions, such as traditional Muslim councils. Typically, those institutions issue fatwas solely through textual analysis—compiling theoretical arguments for and against child marriage, which inevitably bogs the question down in endless debates among Islamic thinkers.

KUPI introduced three foundational pillars for tafsir (interpretation):

1. Islamic sacred texts: The Qur'an and Hadith.
2. International human rights standards: Specifically CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), which KUPI scholars view as fully compatible with Islamic principles of justice and inclusion.
3. Women's lived experiences: Consulting directly with women who are victims and survivors of gender-based violence and child marriage.

When KUPI consulted survivors of child marriage, the devastating real-world harm—physical, psychological and socio-economic—became indisputable. KUPI scholars asked: Why are we debating abstract texts when the harm to real human lives is so clear? Why not stand beside the victim and issue a ruling that protects life?

Consequently, in 2017, KUPI issued a landmark fatwa declaring that preventing child marriage is obligatory for everyone. The logic was clear: preventing child marriage saves young girls' futures from systemic harm.

To disseminate these insights, KUPI utilises digital platforms like Mubadala.id, an online media platform dedicated to promoting progressive Islamic scholarship on women's rights.



Women religious scholars gather at the Indonesian Women Ulama Congress (KUPI). Launched in 2017, the movement challenges male-dominated religious authority and promotes women's rights through progressive interpretations of Islamic texts. PHOTO: **COLLECTED**

TDS: How did KUPI's intervention contribute to Indonesia's decision to raise the legal marriage age for girls from 16 to 19 in 2019, and what challenges remain?

RK: Female ulama in Indonesia do not sit isolated in corners; they are university professors, members of parliament, senior bureaucrats and high-ranking officials in the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education. For 16 years, the UN CEDAW Committee had urged Indonesia to raise its legal marriage age for girls. However, successive governments stalled because conservative groups threatened political opposition.

When KUPI issued its 2017 fatwa declaring child marriage prevention obligatory, it created decisive political momentum. It gave progressive government officials the religious justification they needed, while enabling civil society organisations to partner with parliamentarians. Together, we successfully advocated for the revision of the Marriage Law to raise the legal marriage age for girls from 16 to 19. So now we have the same age for boys and girls.

However, passing a law is only half the battle. While the legal framework is in place, the challenge now lies in changing deep-seated cultural practices. In several rural areas, traditional practices persist, with girls being married at the ages of 9, 12 or 15. Parents often use local customs or religious pretexts to justify these unions. However, with the new law, the government is trying to promote its implementation, with support from KUPI and other organisations.

When dealing with culture, Indonesia faces a distinct challenge that requires a different strategy. Cultural practices involve different key actors—many of whom support child marriage, enjoy deep respect from local populations and wield significant authority within their communities.

When KUPI introduced its new approach, it sought to reshape who holds authority over religious interpretation. KUPI has been quite successful in doing so, in part because Indonesia lacks a centralised or rigid Islamic institution governing Muslim society. Beyond official government structures, religious organisation in Indonesia is largely informal. While this decentralised landscape allows progressive movements like KUPI to take root, it also enables certain local figures to leverage informal authority to justify persistent practices like child marriage.

TDS: Religious authority has traditionally been dominated by men in many Muslim societies. How has Indonesian society responded to the emergence of women ulama, and how has KUPI established its religious legitimacy?

RK: Public reaction has been mixed. Many embraced it, noting that Indonesian history is full of celebrated female Islamic scholars (documented extensively on KUPIpedia.id, a digital archive of female ulama). However, some conservative figures felt threatened by the emergence of female religious authority. To protect activists and scholars from individual attacks, KUPI adopted a strategic approach: redefining Ulama Perempuan (women ulama) as a collective identity rather than an individual title.

Under KUPI's definition, an Ulama Perempuan is not defined by gender alone, nor is it an individual status. It refers to a collective of men and women possessing deep religious knowledge alongside interdisciplinary expertise, living with God-consciousness (taqwa), dedicated to helping victims of gender-based violence and committed to realising Islam as a mercy for all.

Furthermore, KUPI's leadership remains deeply anchored in the traditional pesantren network. This cultural grounding ensures that their authority is respected by traditional families, religious institutions and community elders. Movement leaders must be deeply trusted by the community. We need leaders who possess what you might call cultural power, combined with deep, authoritative knowledge of Islam. Ideally, a leader should have strong roots in the Islamic boarding school tradition because that traditional grounding enables them to command broad support among both families and the wider community.

KUPIpedia.id makes documents and resolutions from KUPI's first two congresses publicly available. KUPI's fatwas are widely consulted by government agencies, parliamentarians, civil society organisations and even conservative groups. Although critics may disagree, engaging with these fatwas encourages dialogue and broader study of Islamic texts beyond conservative interpretations. This culture of debate, alongside more than 16 years of advocacy, contributed to Indonesia's 2019 revision of the Marriage Law, which raised the legal marriage age for girls.

TDS: In many Muslim-majority societies, religious interpretations have been used to restrict women's participation and leadership. How does KUPI challenge these interpretations, and why does it consider women's lived experiences essential to understanding Islamic teachings?

RK: From my experience, the problem begins with who holds religious authority. Religious interpretation has historically been dominated by men, reinforcing the belief that religious leadership belongs to them. Women's biological experiences, including menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth, have often been treated as obstacles to leadership. Combined with patriarchal traditions, this has established men as the ideal religious authorities, despite women's equal knowledge and capacity to lead.

KUPI believes that relying exclusively on male scholars can perpetuate gender biases in religious interpretations and fatwas, sometimes serving the interests of those in authority rather than women, particularly survivors of gender-based violence.

KUPI's methodology begins with the belief that God created men and women as equals, with the same mandate to serve as Khalifah fil Ardh, or stewards of the Earth, and the same responsibility to promote good and prevent wrongdoing. God also entrusted women with the womb and the reproductive responsibilities associated with it. I do not believe a merciful God would create women this way and then reveal religious teachings intended to harm them. Instead, these experiences should be respected and recognised.

This is why KUPI insists that religious scholars consult women when interpreting teachings or issuing fatwas concerning women's bodies and reproductive lives. Men cannot directly experience menstruation, pregnancy or childbirth, so women's perspectives are essential to ensuring justice and equality.

Another challenge is distinguishing Islamic teachings from cultural traditions. Many practices associated with conservative communities, including those in Saudi Arabia, are sometimes treated as Islamic requirements when they are actually rooted in local customs. Such traditions often persist because they benefit those who hold religious authority, particularly men.

I believe religious authority should not be used to maintain power over others. Everyone who follows Islam should have the space to express their understanding of the religion. For KUPI, religious interpretation must be guided by justice, equality and maslahah, the principle of public good and human well-being.

Of course, challenging established interpretations can create tensions, including among male religious scholars in Bangladesh. We therefore need strategies for engaging religious authorities. But women's distinct reproductive experiences cannot be ignored. Their knowledge and lived experiences must be recognised as essential to religious interpretation, particularly on matters directly affecting their lives.

TDS: Child marriage and male-dominated religious authority remain significant challenges across South Asia, including Bangladesh. Drawing on Indonesia's experience, what conditions should countries like Bangladesh develop to strengthen women's religious leadership and advance social reform?

RK: This is a difficult question, but I always advise beginning by studying our own history, particularly the history of women's leadership and how communities accepted it. If these histories are not visible, we need to make them visible.

For example, Aceh, a province in Indonesia that experienced a long period of conflict, was once ruled by great queens. Many other women also demonstrated strong leadership in resisting colonialism while promoting education, social welfare and the protection of Islam. Yet younger generations may know little about their contributions.

Islamic history also offers important examples. Aisha (RA) was a respected authority on Hadith and an important source of knowledge about the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). When we started the women ulama movement, we documented the contributions of female Islamic scholars to demonstrate that women have always been credible religious authorities. There is no religious text stating that women cannot become ulama. Reserving this title exclusively for men is a human construction. Universities and educational institutions should help document and promote these histories.

Another important factor is equal access to religious education. In Indonesia, boys and girls can study Islamic teachings through boarding schools, where students are encouraged to explore different interpretations and debate religious texts rather than follow a single perspective. This educational environment has helped movements like KUPI develop.

Collaboration between feminist organisations and religious groups is equally important. When these groups work together, they create stronger foundations for advancing women's rights and religious leadership.

Political opportunities also matter. Changes in the political environment can either support or obstruct women's participation in leadership and decision-making.

From my experience working across different countries over the past ten years, I believe every society must identify its own modalities, or existing conditions that can support such movements. South Asian and Southeast Asian cultures differ significantly, and what works in Indonesia may not work in Bangladesh.

However, both countries can learn from each other by exchanging experiences, identifying local opportunities and promoting good practices. The goal should not be to copy KUPI but to understand the conditions that enabled its emergence and explore how similar opportunities can be developed within each country's own cultural, religious and political context.

The interview was taken by **Adrin Sarwar.**