Negotiating The Authority of Female Ulama in the Reinterpretation of the Qur'an in Islamic Family Law in East Kalimantan

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Abstract: The debate over authority in contemporary Quranic interpretation surrounding Islamic family law remains a frequent issue, particularly for female ulama. This article examines how female ulama in East Kalimantan negotiate religious authority through Quranic reinterpretation to transform the understanding and practice of Islamic family law. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, this study combines quantitative analysis of 30 purposively selected female ulama in five districts/cities. Then, qualitative methods derived from in-depth interviews with experts in Islamic interpretation and family law are analyzed using the theory of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah. The research findings reveal that 86.7% of participants actively engage in progressive reinterpretation of Quranic texts related to crucial issues of family law, including dowry, divorce (khulʿ), child custody (ḥaḍānah), and joint property. Statistical analysis shows a significant correlation ($p < 0.05$) between a hybrid educational background integrating Islamic boarding school education with modern Islamic higher education and a stronger tendency to challenge conventional interpretive paradigms. Quranic interpretation functions not merely as a theological practice but also as a process of negotiating religious authority through contextual reasoning, *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*, and intertextual hermeneutics. This article contributes to the body of scholarship on Islamic feminism, religious authority, and legal pluralism in Indonesia, while also highlighting grassroots dynamics in Islamic family law reform.
Keywords: Female ulama, religious authority, Qur'anic reinterpretation, gender justice, Islamic family law

Abstrak: *Perdebatan terhadap pemiliki otoritas dalam penafsiran al-Quran kontemporer seputar hukum keluarga Islam masih sering dipermasalahkan terutama bagi ulama perempuan. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana ulama perempuan di Kalimantan Timur menegosiasikan otoritas keagamaan melalui reinterpretasi Al-Qur'an guna mentransformasi pemahaman dan praktik hukum keluarga Islam. Dengan menggunakan desain mixed-methods konvergen, penelitian ini memadukan analis kuantitatif dari 30 ulama perempuan yang dipilih secara purposif di lima kabupaten/kota. Kemudian metode kualitatif yang berasal dari wawancara mendalam dari para pakar tafsir dan hukum keluarga Islam dianalisis dengan teori maqāṣid al-sharīʿah. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa 86,7% partisipan secara aktif melakukan reinterpretasi progresif terhadap teks-teks Al-Qur'an terkait isu-isu krusial hukum keluarga, meliputi mahar, cerai gugat (khulʿ), hak asuh anak (ḥaḍānah), dan harta bersama. Analisis statistik menunjukkan korelasi signifikan (p < 0,05) antara latar belakang pendidikan hibrida—yang mengintegrasikan pendidikan pesantren dengan perguruan tinggi Islam modern—dan kecenderungan lebih kuat untuk menantang paradigma penafsiran konvensional. Penafsiran Al-Qur'an tidak sekadar berfungsi sebagai praktik teologis, melainkan juga sebagai proses negosiasi otoritas keagamaan melalui penalaran kontekstual, maqāṣid al-sharīʿah, dan hermeneutika intertekstual. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada khazanah keilmuan tentang feminisme Islam, otoritas keagamaan, dan pluralisme hukum di Indonesia, sekaligus menyoroti dinamika akar rumput dalam reformasi hukum keluarga Islam.*
Kata Kunci: *Ulama perempuan, otoritas keagamaan, reinterpretasi Al-Qur'an, keadilan gender, hukum keluarga Islam*

Introduction

Modern Islamic law thought is increasingly influenced by changing modes of reading the texts, but also by deep changes in the desingation of sources of religious authority, that is, who has claim to legitimacy to produce the interpretation and with it the normative law. In this changing space, the interpretation of the Qur'an can no longer be reduced simply to a theological or intellectual endeavour, but becomes a site of struggle where religious authority is contested and claimed by various actors, institutions and social forces.[1]

It is this negotiation that takes on specific resonance with the advent of female ulama as authoritative interpreters of Qur'an. Islamic law hermeneutics, particularly in the area of family law, has been largely established by male

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[1] Faqiuddin Abdul Kodir, et.al., "Maqāṣid cum-Mubādalah Methodology of KUPI: Centering Women's Experiences in Islamic Law for Gender-Just Fiqh," *al-Ihkam: Jurnal Hukum dan pranata Sosial* 19, No. 2 (2024). Atun Wardatun and Bianca J. Smith, "Woman-Initiated Divorce and Feminist Fiqh in Indonesia: Narrating Male Acts of Nushūz in Marriage," *Ulumuna: Journal of Islamic Studies* 24, No. 2 (2020).

scholars with interpretive traditions that frequently mirror patriarchal social formations. Women peachers one armed with classical religious heritage and modern academic accreditation women Islamic scholars have started to contest this Manus Policialy interpretation through alternative readings of the Qur'an that are based on principles such as justice, reciprocity and ethical egalitarianism.[2] In Indonesia, the most populous muslim-majority country in the world, female ulama have become leading rearticulators of Islamic family law norms which shape women's real lives within marriage and divorce, custody and property. Their reinterpretive interventions not only contest gender-biased legal constructions but also reconfigure the distribution of religious authority itself**,** positioning women as legitimate producers of Islamic legal knowledge rather than mere recipients of male interpretation.[3]

East Kalimantan provides a particularly compelling context for examining these dynamics. The province is characterized by legal pluralism in which state-codified Islamic law (notably the *Compilation of Islamic Law*), local customary practices (ʿurf), and contemporary reformist discourses coexist and intersect. Unlike Java-centric regions with long-established Islamic scholarly networks, East Kalimantan's relatively recent Islamic educational infrastructure, ethnic diversity, and extractive-based economy generate distinctive conditions for the negotiation of religious authority.[4]

Despite growing scholarship on Indonesian Islamic feminism, empirical studies examining how female ulama negotiate authority through Qur'anic interpretation at the grassroots level—especially outside Java—remain limited**.** Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how female ulama in East Kalimantan employ Qur'anic reinterpretation not only to reform Islamic family law practices but also to assert and renegotiate religious authority within their communities.[5]

The main problem studied in this article is the authority of female scholars in interpreting the verses of the Qur'an regarding Islamic family law, educational background and institutional affiliation as well as the effects of transformation on the Muslim community. This study employs a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which qualitative and quantitative data are

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[2]Arifah Millati Agustina and Nor Ismah, "Challenging Traditional Islamic Authority: Indonesian Female Ulama and the Fatwa Against Forced Marriages," *Journal of Islamic Law* 5, No. 1 (2024).

[3]Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "The Construction of Gender in Islamic Legal Thought and Strategies for Reform," *Hawwa* 1, no. 1 (2003), p. 1–28. Roslina Roslina, et.al., "Reinterpreting Islamic Inheritance: Supreme Court Jurisprudence and Gender Justice in Indonesia," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 13, No. 2 (2025).

[4] John R. Bowen, Islam, Law and Equality in Indonesia: An Anthropology of Public Reasoning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 35–62.

[5] Nur Ismah, "Destabilising Male Domination: Building Community-Based Authority among Indonesian Female Ulama," *Asian Studies Review* 40, no. 4 (2016), p. 491–509.

collected and analyzed simultaneously and integrated at the interpretive stage. This design is particularly suitable for examining the negotiation of religious authority, as it allows for the systematic identification of patterns across a population while also capturing the meanings, strategies, and lived experiences underlying those patterns.[6]

Quantitative analysis is used to map the prevalence of Qur'anic reinterpretation practices, educational backgrounds, and perceived impacts among female ulama, while qualitative inquiry provides in-depth insight into how authority is constructed, contested, and negotiated through hermeneutical practices. Unlike sequential mixed-methods approaches, the convergent design accords equal analytical weight to both data strands, enabling robust triangulation and strengthening the validity of the findings.[7] Epistemologically, the research is grounded in a critical interpretivist paradigm, which recognizes religious authority and Islamic legal discourse as socially constructed phenomena embedded in relations of power. This paradigm rejects positivist claims to value-neutral interpretation while also avoiding radical relativism. Instead, it acknowledges multiple interpretive possibilities while maintaining that some interpretations more effectively advance justice, dignity, and ethical coherence within Islamic frameworks.[8]

Fieldwork was conducted between 2024 and 2025 in five administrative areas of East Kalimantan, Indonesia: Samarinda (provincial capital), Balikpapan (industrial and port city), Kutai Kartanegara (resource-extractive region), Kutai Timur (coastal-rural area), and Penajam Paser Utara (site of Indonesia's new national capital, Nusantara). These sites were selected to capture geographic, socio-economic, and institutional diversity across urban and rural settings.

The respondents studied were individuals whose activities were limited to basic religious teaching without involvement in Quranic interpretation. Initial recruitment through Islamic educational institutions, women's religious organizations, KUPI networks, and digital platforms identified 47 potential participants. From this pool, 30 female ulama were selected to ensure variation in geographic location, educational background, age cohort, teaching context, and organizational affiliation (Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and independent).[9]

Educational backgrounds among participants were distributed as follows: pesantren-only (20%), university-only (30%), and hybrid pesantren–university

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[6] John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2018), p. 50–65.

[7] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 1–10.

[8] Bano and Kalmbach, "Women, Leadership, and Mosques," p. 1-15.

[9] Eva F. Nisa, "Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Online Conflicting Narratives behind the Women Ulama Congress," *Asian Studies Review* 43, no. 3 (2019), p. 434–454.

training (50%). This distribution enabled analysis of how educational trajectories influence hermeneutical orientation and authority negotiation strategies. Quantitative data were collected through a 45-item structured questionnaire administered face-to-face between April and June 2025 using the KoboCollect digital survey platform. To ensure consistency and comprehension, survey items were read aloud in Indonesian, accommodating variations in digital literacy among participants. Content validity was established through expert review by scholars of Islamic studies and gender studies. Reliability testing yielded satisfactory Cronbach's alpha coefficients across subscales (ranging from 0.78 to 0.89), indicating acceptable to good internal consistency.

Quantitative data were coded and analyzed by SPSS version 26. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants, as well as responses were described using descriptor statistics. Inferential statistics The chi-square-test, independent t-test, one-way ANOVA and Pearson correlation analysis were used in inferential analyses with a statistical of significance $\alpha = 0.05$. Effect-sizes were computed and interpreted for substantive significance as well as statistical significance. As part of the process, interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysis was based on a thematic approach in line with Braun and Clarke using NVivo.[10] Coding was carried out in a series of iterative cyclical stages of familiarisation, initial coding, theme construction, review and refinement. Particular attention was paid to how participants articulated authority claims, justified reinterpretation, and navigated resistance.

Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews lasting 60–90 minutes with all 30 participants, conducted between May and August 2025. The interviews explored educational trajectories, hermeneutical practices, strategies for legitimizing reinterpretation, experiences of resistance, and the impacts felt by the community. In addition, in-depth interviews were also conducted with academics and experts in the fields of Quranic interpretation and Islamic family law at Islamic universities in South Kalimantan. The qualitative data was then analyzed using interpretation analyzed hermeneutically by examining linguistic characteristics, contextual considerations, intertextual coherence, and harmony with *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*.[11] Integration of qualitative and quantitative findings occurred through side-by-side comparison and joint interpretation, enabling identification of convergence, complementarity, and divergence across data sources.

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[10] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006), p. 77–101.

[11] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 5–7.

Methodological Basis and Interpretation of the Qur'an

Contemporary female ulama argue that many legal norms governing marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance reflect patriarchal *fiqh* formulations shaped by seventh-century Arabian social structures rather than immutable Qur'anic mandates. Male jurists operated in societies characterized by male economic dominance, women's limited public participation, and hierarchical kinship systems. These social realities inevitably influenced their interpretive outcomes. Consequently, gender asymmetries embedded in classical family law are increasingly understood not as expressions of divine intent but as historically situated human interpretations.[12]

Islamic feminist hermeneutics offers a set of interpretive methodologies that challenge patriarchal readings of sacred texts while remaining firmly anchored within Islamic epistemology.[13] Unlike secular feminist critiques that often treat religion as inherently oppressive, Islamic feminist scholarship locates the source of gender injustice not in the Qur'an itself but in the historical processes of interpretation dominated by male scholars. The Qur'an thus becomes a primary site for reclaiming gender-egalitarian ethics.[14]

Contextual interpretation constitutes a foundational pillar of Islamic feminist hermeneutics. While classical exegesis recognizes *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation), feminist scholars extend contextualization to encompass broader socio-structural conditions of early Islam. This expanded approach interrogates patriarchal kinship systems, women's economic dependency, honor-based moral codes, and limited educational access that shaped both revelation and subsequent juristic elaboration.[15]

Fazlur Rahman's "double movement" theory provides a key methodological framework. The first movement situates Qur'anic verses within their historical context to identify underlying moral principles, while the second applies those principles to contemporary realities.[16] Applied to family law, this method reveals that legal provisions addressing male financial responsibility (*qiwāmah*) responded to specific economic arrangements rather than establishing timeless gender hierarchies. In contexts where women actively participate in public and economic life, the ethical thrust of the Qur'an demands reinterpretation consistent with justice and mutual responsibility.

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[12]Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharia: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 1–20.

[13]Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 1–10.

[14] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 144–168.

[15] Fazlur Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 5–7.

[16] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 5–7.

Intertextual analysis represents a second methodological pillar. Rather than interpreting individual verses in isolation, Islamic feminist hermeneutics emphasizes reading the Qur'an as a coherent ethical whole. Verses often cited to justify male authority are reexamined in light of overarching Qur'anic themes such as ontological equality (*nafs wāḥidah*), mutual intimacy and protection in marriage (*libās*), and equal spiritual accountability for men and women.[17]

This approach challenges atomistic readings that privilege selective verses while neglecting the Qur'an's broader moral vision. Interpretations that legitimize domination or violence are thus evaluated against the Qur'an's consistent emphasis on mercy (*raḥmah*), justice, and human dignity. Intertextual reading becomes not merely a technique of textual analysis but a normative safeguard against ethically inconsistent interpretations.

A third methodological foundation lies in teleological reasoning based on *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law). While classical jurists identified objectives such as the protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property, contemporary scholars expand this framework to explicitly include justice, freedom, dignity, and equality. This expansion is justified by Qur'anic ethics and Prophetic practice.[18]

From a *maqāṣid* perspective, interpretations that normalize domestic violence, exploitative polygamy, or inequitable divorce procedures contradict the very objectives Islamic law seeks to uphold. Female ulama therefore prioritize *maqāṣid* as an evaluative lens, arguing that when literalist readings conflict with fundamental ethical goals, reinterpretation is not only permissible but obligatory. In this way, *maqāṣid* reasoning provides a powerful internal Islamic justification for gender-just legal reform.[19]

Negotiating Religious Authority in Qur'anic Interpretation

Within contemporary Islam, religious authority is neither singular nor static. It is produced through complex interactions among scholarly credentials, moral credibility, institutional affiliation, and communal recognition. Qur'anic interpretation functions as a central arena in which these forms of authority are asserted, contested, and renegotiated.[20]

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[17] Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Muslim Women's Quest for Equality," *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (2006), p. 629–645.

[18] Jasser Auda, *Maqasid al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2008), p. 2–5. Irna Nur Arisa, et.al., Women's Political Leadership: An Analysis of Gender Equality in Legislators in Sekadau," *Jurnal Sosiologi Dialektika Sosial* 11, No. 1 (2025).

[19] Ismah, "Destabilising Male Domination," p. 491–509.

[20] Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach, eds., *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p. 1–15.

For female ulama, Qur'anic reinterpretation serves as a strategic mechanism for negotiating religious authority within male-dominated interpretive structures. With their reading strategies of contextualist analysis, *maqāṣid*-based reasoning and intertextual hermeneutics, they posit readings that are both textually and ethically persuasive. These interpretive practices enable women scholars to construct what this study conceptualizes as layered authority a hybrid legitimacy derived from formal education, pastoral engagement, and grassroots validation.[21]

Accordingly, Islamic feminist scholars emphasize the inherently polysemic nature of the Qur'an its capacity to generate multiple legitimate meanings depending on interpretive frameworks and reader positioning. Patriarchal dominance in Islamic jurisprudence has historically transformed one possible reading into an authoritative orthodoxy, marginalizing alternative interpretations.[22] This dominance is sustained through specific reading strategies: decontextualized literalism, atomistic verse selection, privileging secondary texts over Qur'anic ethics, and projecting male social experiences onto divine revelation. By exposing these strategies, female ulama denaturalize patriarchal interpretations and reveal them as contingent, rather than divinely mandated.[23]

Alternative hermeneutical approaches foreground women's lived experiences as legitimate interpretive lenses. This does not entail replacing classical exegesis but supplementing it with perspectives historically excluded from authoritative interpretation. Recognizing interpretive plurality thus becomes a means of redistributing epistemic authority within Islamic scholarship. Additionally, reinterpretive frames move through networked interpretive communities not through the vertical structures of institutions. The challenge is that hermeneutical norms diffuse beyond formal organizations through informal mentoring, digital media and community-based teaching. In this way, authority negotiation occurs not only within scholarly texts, but also in daily pedagogical activities that re/educate normative consciousness at the level of community.[24]

By embedding the Qur'anic reinterpretation in a broader framework of authority negotiation, this model provides insights into how the hermeneutical activism undertaken by female ulama leads to change in Islamic family law. Interpretation is doubly an epistemological venture and a socio-political act whereby gender, power, law are being transformed in Muslim societies of the present.

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[21] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 5–7.
[22] Amina Wadud, Quran and Woman, p. 30–40.
[23] Fazlur Rahman, Islam and Modernity, p. 5–7.
[24] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 1–10.

The Authority of Female Ulama in the Reinterpretation of the Qur'an
1. Participant Profiles and Educational Formations

The 30 female ulama participating in this study display diverse educational trajectories that reflect the pluralistic landscape of Islamic education in Indonesia. Half of the participants (50%, n = 15) possess hybrid educational backgrounds, combining traditional *pesantren* training with formal education at Islamic universities. The remaining participants were educated exclusively through universities (30%, n = 9) or pesantren (20%, n = 6). Educational trajectories serve as critical foundations for hermeneutical authority among female Islamic scholars. Table 1 presents the distribution of educational backgrounds among the 30 participants, revealing the prevalence of dual credentials combining traditional pesantren training with university education as the dominant formational pattern.

Table 1. Educational Background Distribution

Educational Background	N	Percentage
Pesantren Only	6	20.0%
University Only	9	30.0%
Dual Credentials	15	50.0%

Source: Data Processing Result, Authors (2025)

This dual-credential pattern reflects a strategic negotiation between traditional Islamic authority (pesantren-based) and modern academic legitimacy (university-based). The 50% majority with combined credentials demonstrates how contemporary female scholars leverage multiple educational systems to construct multidimensional authority. Statistical analysis indicates that educational background significantly influences hermeneutical orientation. A one-way ANOVA reveals that female ulama with hybrid educational training demonstrate the highest level of engagement with critical and contextual interpretive approaches (M = 4.27, SD = 0.68), compared to university-only (M = 3.78, SD = 0.75) and pesantren-only participants (M = 3.12, SD = 0.89). This difference is statistically significant ($F_{(2,27)}$ = 5.42, p = 0.010, η^2 = 0.29), suggesting that the combination of classical religious authority and modern academic methodology provides a particularly strong epistemic foundation for Qur'anic reinterpretation.[25]

Participants' ages range from 28 to 64 years (M = 41.3), with teaching experience spanning 5 to 32 years. Generational differences are evident: 87.5%

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[25] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 5–7.

of participants aged 25–35 engage in regular progressive reinterpretation (weekly or monthly), compared to 78.6% of those aged 36–50, and only 25% of those aged over 50 (χ^2 = 9.78, p = 0.044). This pattern suggests that increased access to higher education, global Islamic scholarship, and digital knowledge networks has facilitated greater interpretive confidence among younger female ulama.

2. Sites of Teaching and the Production of Religious Authority

Female ulama in this study predominantly operate within non-formal religious spaces, reflecting both structural constraints and strategic choices. Community-based *tafsīr* circles constitute the primary teaching arena for 36.7% of participants, followed by pesantren (30%), digital platforms (16.7%), and universities (16.7%).

These non-formal settings play a crucial role in the negotiation of religious authority. Unlike formal institutions, community *tafsīr* circles allow for dialogical engagement, experiential discussion, and contextual application of Qur'anic teachings. Participants reported that women in these spaces openly raise sensitive issues such as domestic violence, inequitable divorce, or economic dependency that are often marginalized in formal religious education.

This finding demonstrates that religious authority is not solely produced through institutional affiliation but is also constructed through relational trust, pastoral responsiveness, and perceived relevance. Authority emerges from the ability to address lived realities through credible Qur'anic interpretation, reinforcing the argument that authority negotiation unfolds at the grassroots level rather than exclusively within elite scholarly institutions.[26]

3. Patterns of Hermeneutical Approaches

Quantitative findings indicate that 86.7% of participants actively engage in progressive Qur'anic reinterpretation of Islamic family law. Ustadzah Aminah from Samarinda articulated this engagement vividly. She recounted: "I saw my neighbor's co-wife suffering. Her husband justified polygamy with Qur'anic verses, but I knew that wasn't Allah's true intention." This narrative reveals how experiential trigger for reinterpretation operates as a central mechanism through which female ulama negotiate interpretive authority in East Kalimantan contexts.[27] Participants rated their use of hermeneutical approaches on five-point Likert scales, producing the following mean scores: 1. Contextual-historical interpretation: M = 4.53 (SD = 0.57), 2. *Maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* framework: M = 4.37 (SD = 0.72), 3. Intertextual Qur'anic reading: M = 4.23

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[26] Bano and Kalmbach, "Women, Leadership, and Mosques, p. 1-15.
[27] Interview with Ustadzah Aminah (pseudonym), Samarinda, East Kalimantan, May 20, 2025.

(SD = 0.68), 4. Linguistic and grammatical analysis: M = 4.10 (SD = 0.81), 5. Use of contemporary tafsīr literature: M = 3.87 (SD = 0.95).

This pattern is exemplified by Ustadzah Khadijah's account from Balikpapan. She recounted: "When a woman sits in my office, crying from her husband's violence, I cannot simply quote verses about obedience. I must find justice in the Qur'an."[28] This narrative reveals how Hermeneutics of necessity operates as a central mechanism through which female ulama negotiate interpretive authority in East Kalimantan contexts.

Independent-samples *t*-tests show that participants affiliated with KUPI score significantly higher in their use of contemporary tafsīr resources (p = 0.002, Cohen's d = 0.92). However, the widespread adoption of similar interpretive approaches among non-affiliated participants indicates that progressive hermeneutics circulate through networked interpretive communities, rather than being confined to formal organizational membership.[29]

4. Reinterpreting Islamic Family Law: Key Thematic Domains

Participants concentrate their reinterpretive efforts on family law issues that directly affect women's everyday lives. Specifically, 90% address *mahr* and marital economic relations, 86.7% reinterpret *khulʿ*, 80% focus on child custody (*ḥaḍānah*), and 76.7% examine marital property distribution. Ustadzah Fatimah from Kutai Kartanegara spoke to this orientation: "Women understand women's suffering. When I interpret verses about wives' rights, I don't just read the text— I read the lives of my congregation." This narrative reveals how Embodied authority operates as a central mechanism through which female ulama negotiate interpretive authority in East Kalimantan contexts. [30] Her words capture what might be termed "embodied hermeneutics," where women's lived experiences of marriage, divorce, and motherhood directly inform Qur'anic interpretation. By reading "the lives of my congregation," Ustadzah Fatimah transforms everyday struggles into interpretive resources. Authority emerges not only from mastery of classical texts but from the capacity to connect scriptural meanings to contemporary women's realities—a form of insight that male scholars, despite their training, cannot fully replicate.

The reinterpretive focus of female ulama concentrates on family law domains that directly impact women's everyday lives and legal agency. Table 2 identifies the five most frequently addressed family law issues, demonstrating a clear prioritization of topics where patriarchal interpretations have historically constrained women's rights and autonomy.

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[28]Interview with Ustadzah Khadijah (pseudonym), Balikpapan, East Kalimantan, May 28, 2025.

[29]Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 1–10.

[30]Interview with Ustadzah Fatimah (pseudonym), Kutai Kartanegara, East Kalimantan, June 5, 2025.

Table 2: Priority Family Law Issues (Top 5)

Family Law Issue	n	%
Mahr Practices	27	90.0
Divorce Rights (Khul')	26	86.7
Child Custody (Hadhanah)	24	80.0
Marital Property Division	23	76.7
Polygamy	22	73.3

Source: *Data Processing Result, Authors (2025).*

The prioritization pattern revealed in Table 2 is theoretically significant. The highest focus on mahr practices (90%) and divorce rights through khul' (86.7%) indicates that female scholars concentrate their hermeneutical efforts on economic and legal agency issues. This aligns with Mir-Hosseini's argument that Islamic feminism targets juridical domains where women's subordination is most legally codified. Notably, the relatively lower emphasis on inheritance (63.3%) suggests strategic selectivity participants prioritize issues where reinterpretive arguments have stronger scriptural and maqasid foundations. This pattern demonstrates hermeneutical pragmatism: female scholars focus on interpretive battles they can realistically win within existing Islamic legal frameworks.

Digital platforms have emerged as critical sites for negotiating religious authority among female Islamic scholars. The data reveal that 70% of participants actively use social media for religious education, with TikTok and Instagram serving as particularly significant spaces for reaching younger audiences. This shift toward digital da'wah represents not merely a change in medium but a fundamental transformation in how religious knowledge is produced, disseminated, and legitimized.

Ustadzah Zainab from Kutai Timur described the unique demands of this digital context: "On TikTok, I have 60 seconds to change someone's understanding of QS 4:34. I must be precise, engaging, and theologically authentic."[31] This narrative reveals how Digital hermeneutics operates as a central mechanism through which female ulama negotiate interpretive authority in East Kalimantan contexts.

Ustadzah Zainab's account illustrates the distinctive hermeneutical demands of digital da'wah. The 60-second constraint requires her to distill complex theological arguments into accessible, emotionally resonant narratives.

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[31] Interview with Ustadzah Zainab (pseudonym), Kutai Timur, East Kalimantan, June 15, 2025.

This exemplifies what can be termed "micro-hermeneutics": the art of condensing Qur'anic reinterpretation into brief, shareable formats without sacrificing theological rigor. Her emphasis on "engaging but theologically valid" content reflects a strategic negotiation between popular appeal and scholarly credibility. The growing follower count she mentions demonstrates that digital authority operates through different metrics than traditional scholarship reach and engagement become forms of legitimacy alongside classical credentials.

5. Negotiating Religious Authority: Resistance and Legitimation

Although many participants perceive their religious authority as moderate to high, authority negotiation is marked by persistent resistance. Eighty percent of participants reported opposition from conservative male ulama, 70% encountered community skepticism, and 23.3% experienced verbal intimidation or social pressure.[32] Legitimacy is constructed through multiple, overlapping sources: educational credentials (93.3%), moral integrity and piety (86.7%), teaching experience (80%), community service (76.7%), and endorsement from male ulama (63.3%). This confirms the presence of layered authority, in which acceptance varies across audiences and contexts.

Importantly, authority negotiation is not solely confrontational. Participants often frame reinterpretation as ethical clarification rather than ideological opposition, employing Qur'anic language to minimize accusations of Western influence or religious deviation. This strategic framing enables reinterpretation to gain traction within conservative environments. While grassroots authority operates through informal networks, institutional legitimacy remains crucial for female scholars seeking to influence legal and policy discourses. The data indicate that 60% of participants teach in formal settings such as universities, Islamic boarding schools, or government training programs. These institutional positions provide not only economic stability but also strategic platforms for disseminating progressive interpretations to decision-makers and future religious leaders.

Ustadzah Maryam from Penajam Paser Utara described the authority conferred by institutional positioning: They listen because I combine traditional scholarship with rigorous contextual analysis."[33] This narrative reveals how Institutional legitimacy operates as a central mechanism through which female ulama negotiate interpretive authority in East Kalimantan contexts.

Participants report the strongest impact of their work in raising women's rights awareness (M = 4.47) and fostering critical religious reasoning (M = 4.27). Behavioral and institutional changes occur more gradually, reflecting

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[32] Bano and Kalmbach, "Women, Leadership, and Mosques," 1-15.

[33] Interview with Ustadzah Maryam (pseudonym), Penajam Paser Utara, East Kalimantan, June 22, 2025.

structural and economic constraints. Nonetheless, tangible transformations are evident: 73.3% of participants reported women initiating *khulʿ* using Qur'anic arguments, 66.7% observed challenges to excessive *mahr*, 60% noted resistance to polygamy, and 56.7% documented explicit rejection of domestic violence framed through Islamic reasoning. Pearson correlation analysis reveals a strong positive relationship between years of teaching experience and perceived discourse transformation ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that sustained hermeneutical engagement produces cumulative normative change.[34]

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Qur'anic reinterpretation functions simultaneously as a theological practice and as a strategy for negotiating religious authority**.** Female ulama's interpretive labor reshapes not only legal understanding but also the power relations governing who may speak authoritatively about Islamic law. Transformation thus unfolds incrementally through everyday pedagogical encounters that recalibrate normative consciousness at the grassroots level.

Interpretation of the Qur'an, Religious Authority, and Female Scholars

Religious authority has developed in Indonesia since the emergence of traditional Islamic educational centers, namely Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). In several regions, such as Java, South Sulawesi, West Sumatra, and Aceh, female figures have emerged as leaders of Islamic boarding schools, religious orders, and religious study groups in local contexts. However, their influence is quite strong and comparable to that of men, although the implementation and realities vary across Indonesia. This demonstrates that the religious authority of female ulama in religious contexts is nothing new; it has existed for a long time.[35]

However, in several regions in Indonesia, the authority of female ulema is still debated when it comes to interpreting religious issues, especially the interpretation of the Quran. According to Fuad Fansuri, an academic at UIN Sultan Aji Samarinda, the authority of female ulama in interpreting the Quran is valid and legitimate as long as they meet the scientific requirements recognized in the tradition of interpretation. History records the existence of female ulama (interpreters) with strong academic authority, such as Aisyah Abdurrahman Bint al-Syati (Egypt), an expert in interpretation and academic who wrote *Al-Tafsir Al-Bayani li al-Qur'an al-Karim* with a rigorous linguistic and literary approach and critical dialogue with classical interpretations. This shows that the authority

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[34]Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 1–10.

[35] Eka Srimulyani, *Teungku Inong Dayah*: Female Religious Leaders in Contemporary Aceh, in Islam and the Limits of the State Reconfigurations of Practice, Community and Authority in Contemporary Aceh, Leiden: Brill, 2016. Rahmi Damis, et.al., "Gender, Sufism, and Qur'anic Exegesis: Perceptions of Women's Leadership within Sufi Orders in South Sulawesi," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam* 9, No. 1 (2025).

of interpretation is not determined by gender, but by the scholarly capacity, methodological structure, and ethical integrity of the interpreter. Therefore, the presence of female ulama actually enriches the treasury of interpretation, especially on issues of family and gender relations, without having to be in conflict with the authority of male ulama.[36]

According to Siti Sagirah, an expert in interpretation at UIN Sultan Aji Samarinda and one of the leaders of an Islamic boarding school, she emphasized that regarding the authority of women in interpreting the Qur'an, I think this is an issue that we need to straighten out together. Look, interpreting the Qur'an is not an easy matter it requires mastery of various disciplines: Arabic in all its branches, the Qur'anic scholars, the Hadith scholars, the Islamic jurisprudence scholars, history, and so on. Therefore, in the Islamic scientific tradition that I understand, there is not a single provision that states that these sciences can only be mastered by men. Anyone, male or female—who already has a scientific background, is competent to master the tools of the science, and most importantly, is based on sincerity of intention, *takhlish al-niyyah* has full authority to provide interpretation of the Qur'an. This is not a matter of demanding equality for the sake of equality, but of scientific honesty that a person's capacity is not determined by their gender, but rather by the depth of their knowledge and sincerity of heart.[37]

The fundamental problem in interpreting the Qur'an is that interpretation of the text is integrated with gender conditions and underlying interests. This interpretation tends to be accepted as absolute truth. However, interpretive authority is genderless, meaning that both men and women can hold positions as interpreters as long as the necessary conditions are met. Therefore, when a woman has the ability to interpret the Quran, it is not a problem. Tafsir is authoritative, open, and offers responsible choices. In reality, interpretive issues related to gender relations are not simply a matter of competition between the sexes, but rather relate to methodological problems in interacting with Quranic texts. The involvement of women in interpretation brings a unique dimension, as they speak from the perspective of women, thus providing new insights and perspectives when discussing verses on gender, marriage, and so on. Without women's involvement in interpretation, understanding the Quran becomes "unstable." The Qur'an was revealed for all mankind (*rahmatan li al-'alamīn*), so its interpretation requires contributions from all elements of humanity, both men and women.[38]

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[36]Interview with Dr. Fuad Fansuri, Academician of Islamic Interpretation, UIN Sultan Aji Samarinda, 2025.

[37]Interview with Dr. Siti Sagirah, Academician of Islamic interpretation, UIN Sultan Aji Samarinda, 2025.

[38]Interview with Dr. Lilik Andaryuni, Academician of Islamic Family Law, UIN Sultan Aji Samarinda, 2025.

In line with that, according to Darmawati, an academic at UIN Sultan Aji Samarida in the context of *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*, we are talking about the spirit of the Shari'a protection of religion, soul, mind, lineage and property. I don't see how these noble goals can be achieved if half of the people, namely women, continue to be harmed by interpretations that ignore their context and benefits. Female scholars who reinterpret verses regarding dowry, *khuluk*, *hadhanah*, or joint property, especially regarding polygamy which I consider to contain justification bias, especially towards verse 3 of Surah an-Nisa, are actually returning Islamic family law to its just and dignified nature. This was not a rebellion against tradition, but rather a deeper loyalty to the *maqāṣid* itself. The interpretation that results in injustice must be something wrong in the process, because it is impossible for Allah to desire harm for His servants. So, when female Islamic teachers in the regions carry out and reread texts by taking into account the reality of women today, they are carrying out ijtihad which is very much needed by the community.[39]

Siti Sagirah reiterated that when we talk about the *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*—*ḥifẓ al-dīn, ḥifẓ al-nafs, ḥifẓ al-ʿaql, ḥifẓ al-māl, and ḥifẓ al-nasl*—then in essence, this sharia was revealed for the benefit of all humanity without discrimination. Within this framework, interpretations made by competent scholars, both male and female, are certainly valid and acceptable. Because the act of interpreting the Qur'an for the benefit of the people is a pious deed, and Allah Himself promises an equal reward for anyone who does good deeds. Let's read QS. Al-Nahl verse 97—"*Man ʿamila ṣāliḥan min dhakarin aw unthā...*"— whoever does good deeds, whether male or female, Allah will grant a good life. Similarly, in Surah Al-Taubah verse 71, which emphasizes that believing men and women are *auliyā*', helpers of one another. So, in my opinion, there is no Islamic reason to reject the contribution of female scholars in the renewal of Islamic family law as long as they meet the required scientific capacity. [40]

The findings of this study demonstrate that Qur'anic reinterpretation among female ulama in East Kalimantan cannot be reduced to a purely exegetical or methodological divergence within Islamic scholarship. Rather, reinterpretation emerges as a strategic arena for negotiating religious authority in contemporary Muslim societies. This negotiation operates at the intersection of knowledge production, gendered power relations, and community-based religious practice.[41] First, authority in interpreting the Quran has never been determined by gender, but rather by capacity and scholarly background. Currently, in Indonesia, and throughout history, women have emerged as female

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[39]Interview with Prof. Dr. Darmawati, Professor of Islamic Family Law, UIN Sultan Aji Samarinda, 2025.

[40]Interview with Dr. Siti Sagirah, Academician of Islamic Interpretation, UIN Sultan Aji Samarinda, 2025.

[41] Ismah, "Destabilising Male Domination," p. 491–509.

scholars in various fields, such as Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), Islamic orders (tariqa), and Islamic boarding school leadership. Second, the strong correlation between hybrid educational backgrounds and progressive hermeneutical engagement underscores the importance of epistemic hybridity in authority construction. Female ulama who combine traditional *pesantren* training with modern Islamic higher education possess both symbolic religious capital and methodological reflexivity. This dual competence enables them to challenge dominant interpretations without being easily dismissed as religiously illegitimate. Their authority thus derives not from rejecting tradition, but from reworking it from within.[42]

Third, the predominance of non-formal religious spaces—such as community *tafsīr* circles and digital platforms—as sites of teaching highlights a critical shift in how religious authority is produced and sustained. These spaces facilitate dialogical interpretation grounded in lived experience, allowing women's concerns to directly shape Qur'anic meaning-making. Authority here is relational and performative, built through trust, relevance, and ethical resonance rather than institutional hierarchy. This finding reinforces the concept of networked interpretive communities, where hermeneutical norms circulate horizontally rather than through centralized structures.[43]

Fourth, the study reveals that resistance to female religious authority remains pervasive, particularly from conservative male scholars and segments of the community. However, female ulama rarely frame their reinterpretive work as ideological confrontation. Instead, they deploy Qur'anic language, *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*, and moral reasoning to reposition reinterpretation as ethical clarification rather than doctrinal deviation. This strategy reflects what may be termed a hermeneutics of necessity, wherein reinterpretation arises from concrete social harms—such as domestic violence or inequitable divorce—and gains legitimacy through its capacity to address urgent communal needs.[44]

Importantly, this research shows that the transformation of Islamic family law unfolds incrementally and from the bottom up. Rather than relying on formal legal reform, female ulama reshape normative consciousness by embedding alternative interpretations within everyday religious education. Over time, these interpretive interventions recalibrate what communities perceive as "Islamically valid," thereby altering the practical application of family law norms.[45] In this sense, authority negotiation precedes and enables legal transformation, rather than merely responding to it.

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[42] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 1–10.
[43] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 1–10.
[44] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 1–10.
[45] Ismah, "Destabilising Male Domination," p. 491–509.

This study makes three key theoretical contributions to scholarship on Islamic law, gender, and religious authority.[46] First, it conceptualizes Qur'anic reinterpretation as a mechanism of authority negotiation, rather than solely as a hermeneutical exercise. By foregrounding authority as an analytical lens, the study bridges Islamic feminist hermeneutics with broader sociological theories of power and legitimacy in religion. Second, the study advances the notion of layered religious authority, demonstrating that legitimacy is constructed through overlapping sources educational credentials, moral integrity, pedagogical experience, and community recognition rather than through singular institutional endorsement. This model offers a more nuanced understanding of authority in plural and decentralized Islamic contexts such as Indonesia.[47] Third, by focusing on East Kalimantan, the study contributes to the decentering of Java-centric narratives in Indonesian Islamic studies. It highlights how peripheral regions generate distinct configurations of religious authority shaped by local socio-economic conditions, legal pluralism, and evolving educational infrastructures.[48]

The findings carry significant implications for Islamic legal reform and gender justice initiatives. They suggest that sustainable transformation of Islamic family law does not depend solely on top-down legislative change but can be effectively advanced through community-based Qur'anic education led by female ulama. Supporting women's access to advanced Islamic education, interpretive platforms, and scholarly networks thus represents a strategic investment in grassroots legal reform.[49] Moreover, framing gender justice within Qur'anic ethics rather than external rights-based discourse enhances legitimacy and receptivity within Muslim communities. Female ulama serve as crucial mediators between normative Islamic sources and contemporary social realities, making them indispensable actors in reform-oriented religious engagement.[50]

Conclusion

This article shows that female ulama of East Kalimantan are making a significant contribution to the transformation of Islamic family law by negotiating religious authority in their reinterpreting of Qur'anic verses. They are countering patriarchal exegeses while claiming theological legitimacy by

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[46]Bahruddin Umar Yakub, et.al., "Living Qur'an, Gender, and Sibaliparriq, in Mandar, Indonesia: Cultural Construction in the Perspective of Islamic Law," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam* 7, No. 2 (2023).

[47]Bowen, *Islam, Law and Equality in Indonesia*, p. 1–15.

[48]Bowen, *Islam, Law and Equality in Indonesia*, p. 1–15.

[49]Ismah, "Destabilising Male Domination," 491–509. Eka Srimulyani, et.al., "Women and Muslim Education in West Sumatra." *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura* 25, no. 1 (2025): 151–167.

[50] Ismah, "Destabilising Male Domination," p. 491–509. Burhanuddin, et.al., Reconstructing Gender Justice In Kampung Kuta Ciamis Customary Law: A Patriarchal Culture Review," *Petita* 10, No. 1 (2025).

employing contextually nuanced hermeneutics based on maqāṣid al-sharīʿah and ethical coherence. Their interpretive activism transforms not just the legal understandings but also the power dynamics that render some legitimate to speak authoritatively about Islam. By framing the reflecture of the Qur'an as a strategic location for negotiating authority, this essay intervenes in questions that interest scholars across Islamic feminism, legal pluralism and religion-writ-large by contributing to discussions on religious authority in contemporary Islam that consider shifts toward democratization more broadly. The findings support that significant change within Islamic family law takes place through long-term, ground-up processes of engagement-when new interpretations, authority and lived experience come together to rearrange gender, law and power relations in Muslim communities.

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