

# Creative ways to help believers

## Indonesian female Islamic leaders offer COVID-19 relief to families under pressure

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As global infection levels continue to rise (total deaths approximated 2.4 million by February this year), societies have been hard hit by mounting economic, political and social costs. In Indonesia, while President Jokowi and his government were criticised for their slow initial response to the crisis, many have applauded the more efficient responses by local leaders, who quickly imposed distancing measures and encouraged mask-wearing. Unfortunately, the economic hardship, faced by many Indonesians even before the crisis, has limited people's capacity to confine themselves to the home, minimise human contact, and purchase recommended medical supplies.

Civil society actors have stepped in to complement public sector programmes, and have offered life-saving services in areas where the state has been largely absent. The country's multi-million member Islamic organisations have also put in their share, hoping to cushion some of the economic fallout. Such efforts mirror similar engagements by Islamic organisations elsewhere in the Muslim world, aiming to deliver the kind of relief and support not provided by the public sector.

### Addressing the gendered impact of COVID-19

Indonesia has stood out for the overwhelming response of *ulama perempuan* [female Islamic authorities] and women's religious organisations in addressing the gendered dimension of the pandemic. Female Islamic leaders have seized the opportunity to step in and offer their services to the broader public by issuing fatwas against domestic violence,<sup>1</sup> giving lectures on how to preserve and strengthen mental health, and offering practical support to alleviate financial hardship.

UN Women has collected data from various countries that documents the extent to which violence against women and girls has intensified during the pandemic. In addition, in April-May 2020, Indonesia's National Commission on Violence against Women (KOMNAS) conducted a survey to map the impact of the pandemic on household dynamics in 34 provinces.<sup>2</sup> The results reveal that women aged 31-40 years, especially those from lower classes, are particularly vulnerable. The survey also found that only 10% of the respondents who indicated that they had experienced domestic violence had contacted the relevant service providers.<sup>3</sup>

*Ulama perempuan*, such as those from Alimat, the Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama, and young ulama of the women's subdivisions of the nation's biggest Islamic organisations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, have organised webinars and workshops on how to contain the rise of gender-based violence and reduce violence against children.<sup>4</sup> Alimatul Qibtiyah, a KOMNAS commissioner and member of the fatwa-issuing board of Muhammadiyah, commented on the precarious situation in which "sometimes a house is not a safe place for both wives and daughters".<sup>5</sup> Khofifah Indar Parawansa, governor of East Java and chairwoman of Muslimat, reinforced this statement during a webinar in which she confirmed that close to 59% of violence against women and

Female Islamic leaders in Indonesia have been devising new and creative ways to help believers cope with the COVID-19 pandemic and the myriad crises arising from it. The authors, Mirjam Künkler and Eva Nisa, interviewed some of these leaders about their various initiatives that address the gendered dimension of the social and economic consequences of the pandemic.

children occur in the household. Problems in dealing with domestic violence during the pandemic have stemmed from human mobility restrictions, which have impeded victims from reporting their cases and have kept service providers from handling cases effectively. In response, Fatayat, the young women's wing of Nahdlatul Ulama, launched a telephone hotline for complaints and consultation on domestic violence. According to Fatayat's chairwomen Anggia Ermarini, the organisation mobilises resources from its central, provincial and district levels, in order to address the crisis.<sup>6</sup>

### Spiritual, mental, and physical resilience

Digital media has become a key communication tool between religious leaders and constituents in Indonesia. What scholars and local activists call 'digital religion' has become more visible and accessible, and Muslim female activists have embraced the new technology. Fatayat organises virtual Islamic study gatherings, called *Ngaji Virtual*, for its constituents, during which topics are presented through the lens of Islamic gender justice, for example, 'Building Immunity through the Improvement of Spiritual Quality within a Family'. In the same vein, Rahima, an organisation that trains *ulama perempuan*, produces YouTube videos of its female preachers addressing issues faced by Muslim women and educating the larger public during lockdown.

Other organisations are using digital media to emphasise mental health issues during the crisis. Muslimat actively advocates handling COVID-19 through a combination of scientific and spiritual approaches. Moreover, it highlights the importance of *shalawāt* and *dhikr* [prayer and meditation] during lockdown, which aligns well with the rising popularity in Indonesia of Muslim groups campaigning to revive inward-looking spiritual approaches and practices.<sup>7</sup> Muslimat published videos of *shalawāt li khamsatun* and *ṭibbil qulūb*, recited by its chairwoman Khofifah Indar Parawansa. The *shalawāt* aims to boost people's confidence in facing the pandemic by heeding medical protocols and maintaining spirituality through the recitation of prayers. Khofifah received an award from the Ministry of Religious Affairs in recognition of the impact made by her *shalawāt* campaign.

The organisations also focus on disseminating sound information and countering false claims about the disease. In remote areas, *jamu* [herbal medicine] sellers have been mobilised to publicise information on maintaining hygiene, and to distribute hand sanitisers and herbs, particularly to groups for whom commercial medicine is too costly. Some have established online portals to circulate traditional recipes and to reduce reliance on instant ingredients. To address rising food

costs, women leaders in Islamic boarding schools have initiated local seed-sharing programmes. As many men are currently forced into isolation in their workplace, thereby separated from their families, these organisations encourage them to cook, and to do so with vegetables and herbs that they can easily grow on a small patch of land. Home-grown greens, which can be cultivated even in urban settings, are emphasised for their potency in alleviating the effects of depression and psychiatric disorders.

Some organisations, such as the Alliance of Theologically Educated Women (PERUATI), organise fundraisers to financially help those most in need, while others, such as *Libu Perempuan Palu* [Learning Circle for Women] focus on people stranded far from home due to the pandemic and who are often living in temporary shelters. At the Islamic State University Jakarta, an organisation led by women religious leaders has raised funds for students who can no longer rely on their families for financial support.

On the epidemiological level, women activists have urged the authorities to include gender-sensitive medical data at all administrative levels, from the national down to the village. Women from many of the aforementioned organisations serve as representatives on the national COVID-19 task force. In that role, they have consistently stressed the ways in which women are particularly burdened by the COVID-19 crisis, and how policies must respond accordingly. In most cases, women have been the key link between civil society organisations and families, collecting data on health (including infection levels and treatments) and other problems faced by families, disseminating scientific information, and communicating economic opportunities.

### Conclusion

Women and girls have been particularly vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rising levels of domestic violence have accompanied increasing economic hardship in households, worsened by women's financial dependence and unemployment. *Ulama perempuan* and Muslim women's organisations have been on the frontline supporting women through various initiatives: reaching out online to provide spiritual guidance, creating scientific information programmes, supplying face masks and hand sanitiser, and generating more sustainable aid through empowerment programmes rooted in religious practices. Spiritual, mental and physical resilience comprises the foundation of these women's initiatives, while 'digital religion' enables the execution of such activities.

In the face of myriad of crises, women's Islamic organisations and the *ulama perempuan* of Indonesia practice what they preach. As Pera Sopariyanti, head of Rahima,



Above: Promotional flyer for a Ngaji Virtual event organised by Fatayat

noted: "*ulama perempuan* have proven the agents of change in their communities. During the pandemic, they have shown their initiatives to synergise with various parties to serve their communities: young and old, women and men".<sup>8</sup> As the Indonesian saying goes, 'Berakit-rakit ke hulu, berenang-renang ke tepian. Bersakit-sakit dahulu, bersenang-senang kemudian'. Directly translated as 'Raft upstream, swim to the shore. Pain will come first, joy will come later', we can take this to mean that hard work will eventually be rewarded by rescue and salvation. In the pandemic, women religious leaders have been able to demonstrate that it is not only male *ulama* who can provide the raft.

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### Notes

- 1 The phenomenon of women issuing fatwas is extremely rare in the Muslim world and a relatively recent development in Indonesia that we have written about previously in: Künkler, M. & Nisa, E.F. 2018. 'Re-Establishing Juristic Expertise. A historic congress of female Islamic scholars', *The Newsletter #79*, p.7; <https://tinyurl.com/NL79-Kunkler-Nisa>
- 2 Bayhaqi, A. 2020. 'Survei Indikator: Kinerja Pemerintah Pusat di Bawah Daerah dalam Menangani COVID-19', *Merdeka*, 20 August; <http://tiny.cc/BayhaqiSurveiIndikator>
- 3 The survey had 2285 respondents. It needs to be noted that this survey was conducted online and thus excluded people without internet access. Even in normal times fewer than 40% of women experiencing violence seek help. See <http://tiny.cc/UNWomenFandF>.
- 4 Interview with Ala'i Nadjib, lecturer at State Islamic University Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta and board member of Nahdlatul Ulama's Institute for Research and Human Resource Development, 1 October 2020.
- 5 <http://tiny.cc/webinarAlimatul>
- 6 Interview with Anggia Ermarini, general chairwoman of the central board of Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama, 1 October 2020.
- 7 Howell, J.D. 2014. 'Revitalised Sufism and the New Piety Movements in Islamic Southeast Asia', in B.S. Turner & O. Saleemink (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia*. Routledge, pp.276-292.
- 8 Interview with Pera Sopariyanti and Andi Faizah, 1 October 2020.