

WOMEN AND DA'WAH IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAM: NEGOTIATING GENDER, RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY, AND DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERES

St. Muwaqqirah^{*1}, Mahmuddin², Firdaus Muhammad³

Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar^{*1,2,3}

Email: stmuwaqqirah84@guru.sma.belajar.id^{*1}, mahmuddin.dakwah@uin-alauddin.ac.id², firdaus.muhammad@uin-alauddin.ac.id³

Abstract

Women's participation in Islamic da'wah has expanded beyond conventional religious spaces into education, community work, public scholarship, and social media. Yet increased visibility does not automatically eliminate gendered hierarchies in religious authority. This article critically examines how women negotiate da'wah, gender, and religious authority in contemporary Muslim contexts, with particular attention to Indonesia's digital public sphere. Drawing on a qualitative interpretive literature-based approach, the article synthesizes scholarship on gender and Qur'anic interpretation, women's religious authority, digital religion, and Indonesian Muslim public culture. The analysis indicates three interconnected transformations. First, women are increasingly positioned as producers rather than merely recipients of religious knowledge. Second, digital platforms lower some institutional barriers to religious participation while simultaneously introducing new forms of visibility, commodification, algorithmic dependency, and gendered scrutiny. Third, women's agency in da'wah cannot be reduced to a binary opposition between emancipation and patriarchy; it is better understood as a negotiated form of religious agency shaped by theological commitments, social expectations, institutional structures, and platform affordances. The article proposes a conceptual framework of negotiated religious agency consisting of knowledge production, relational engagement, institutional participation, and digital mediation. The framework contributes to scholarship on Islamic communication by linking gender-sensitive Qur'anic interpretation with the changing ecology of religious authority in digital Indonesia.

Keywords: women and da'wah, gender, female religious authority, digital religion, Islamic communication, Indonesia

Abstrak

Partisipasi perempuan dalam da'wah Islam telah meluas melampaui ruang-ruang keagamaan konvensional ke bidang pendidikan, kerja komunitas, kajian keagamaan publik, dan media sosial. Namun, meningkatnya visibilitas tersebut tidak secara otomatis menghilangkan hierarki berbasis gender dalam otoritas keagamaan. Artikel ini mengkaji secara kritis bagaimana perempuan menavigasi hubungan antara da'wah, gender, dan otoritas keagamaan dalam konteks Muslim kontemporer, dengan fokus khusus pada ruang publik digital di Indonesia. Dengan mengacu pada pendekatan kualitatif

interpretatif berbasis literatur, artikel ini mensintesis kajian ilmiah mengenai gender dan tafsir Al-Qur'an, otoritas keagamaan perempuan, agama digital, serta budaya publik Muslim Indonesia. Analisis tersebut menunjukkan tiga transformasi yang saling terkait. Pertama, perempuan semakin diposisikan sebagai produsen, bukan sekadar penerima pengetahuan keagamaan. Kedua, platform digital meruntuhkan beberapa hambatan kelembagaan terhadap partisipasi keagamaan, sekaligus memperkenalkan bentuk-bentuk baru visibilitas, komodifikasi, ketergantungan pada algoritma, dan pengawasan berbasis gender. Ketiga, agensi perempuan dalam dakwah tidak dapat direduksi menjadi oposisi biner antara emansipasi dan patriarki; hal ini lebih baik dipahami sebagai bentuk agensi keagamaan yang dinegosiasikan, yang dibentuk oleh komitmen teologis, ekspektasi sosial, struktur kelembagaan, dan kemampuan platform. Artikel ini mengusulkan kerangka konseptual agen keagamaan yang dinegosiasikan, yang terdiri dari produksi pengetahuan, keterlibatan relasional, partisipasi kelembagaan, dan mediasi digital. Kerangka ini berkontribusi pada kajian komunikasi Islam dengan menghubungkan tafsir Al-Qur'an yang sensitif gender dengan ekologi otoritas keagamaan yang terus berubah di Indonesia digital.

Kata kunci: perempuan dan dakwah, gender, otoritas keagamaan perempuan, agama digital, komunikasi Islam, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Islamic da'wah is increasingly conducted across multiple social, educational, institutional, and digital spaces. The shift is important because da'wah is no longer adequately described as one-way transmission from a preacher to a passive audience. Contemporary communication environments allow audiences to comment, reinterpret, circulate, and contest religious messages. Digital religion scholarship similarly demonstrates that religious practices are increasingly constituted through interactions between religious actors, media technologies, audiences, and platform cultures (Campbell, 2013; Hjarvard, 2016). In Indonesia, this transformation has opened additional spaces for women to participate in religious communication and to negotiate forms of authority that were historically concentrated in male-dominated institutions.

The question of women's participation in da'wah, however, is not simply a question of visibility. It concerns who is recognized as a legitimate producer of Islamic knowledge, whose interpretation is considered authoritative, and under what institutional and cultural conditions women can speak in public religious spaces. Scholarship on Muslim women has repeatedly shown that gender roles in Muslim societies are shaped by complex interactions among scripture, interpretation, historical institutions, social norms, and political arrangements rather than by a single, uniform Islamic position (Ahmed, 2021; Barlas, 2002; Mernissi, 1991; Wadud, 1999). This distinction is particularly important because gender hierarchy may be reproduced through interpretations of religious texts even when the underlying theological vocabulary emphasizes moral responsibility and spiritual equality.

The Indonesian context provides a particularly productive setting for examining this issue. Research on female Islamic authority has documented women's participation in pesantren, educational institutions, preaching networks, and community organizations, while studies of digital religion show that social media can create alternative pathways through which religious authority is constructed and negotiated (Hasanuddin, 2018;

Kloos, 2016; Subchi et al., 2022). Recent scholarship also indicates that women preachers use Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and other platforms to develop religious identities, communicate with audiences, and establish credibility (Mutmainah et al., 2022; Mutia, 2026; Putri & Prianti, 2026). Yet digital visibility can coexist with gender bias, moral scrutiny, and the reproduction of patriarchal norms (Muttaqin, 2020; Falah & Riyanta, 2025).

The present article therefore moves beyond a celebratory account of women's increased visibility. It asks: (1) how has women's role in da'wah been transformed from recipients to producers of religious discourse; (2) how do women negotiate religious authority within gendered institutional and cultural structures; and (3) how do digital platforms simultaneously expand and constrain women's da'wah agency? The article argues that women's contemporary da'wah is best understood as negotiated religious agency: a process through which women mobilize religious knowledge, relational credibility, institutional participation, and digital affordances while navigating theological expectations and gendered power relations. This argument responds to a gap between scholarship that focuses on gender-sensitive Islamic interpretation and scholarship that examines digital religious authority, by bringing these strands into a single analytical framework.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Gender, Qur'anic Interpretation, and Religious Agency

A gender-sensitive approach to Islam requires distinguishing between the Qur'anic text, historical interpretation, and the social practices built around those interpretations. Wadud (1999) argues for a reading of the Qur'an that attends to its ethical coherence and the problem of interpretive androcentrism. Barlas (2002) similarly questions patriarchal readings that transform historically situated interpretations into timeless theological imperatives. Mernissi (1991) demonstrates how constructions of women's authority have been shaped by the historical politics of religious knowledge, while Ahmed (2021) situates contemporary debates about women within a longer history of social and intellectual transformation. Together, these works provide an important conceptual basis for examining women's participation in da'wah without assuming that all limitations on women originate directly from Islamic scripture.

The concept of agency also requires nuance. Mahmood (2005) demonstrates that women's religious agency cannot be understood only as resistance to patriarchal norms. Agency may also operate through practices of piety, ethical self-formation, and participation in religious traditions. This insight is relevant to women preachers who may simultaneously affirm religious norms and expand their public authority. Their participation should therefore not automatically be categorized as either emancipatory or conservative. Instead, it should be examined as a situated negotiation among religious commitments, social expectations, and available institutional resources.

Women's Religious Authority

Religious authority is not exclusively a product of formal credentials. In Indonesia, women have historically constructed authority through teaching, pesantren networks, family religious traditions, community relationships, and public preaching. Kloos (2016) shows that female Islamic authority in Aceh is strongly related to local social relations and community recognition. Hasanuddin (2018) similarly demonstrates that women's authority can develop through religious public spaces such as classrooms, mosques, preaching forums, and hybrid knowledge production. Recent studies of female ulama organizations further indicate that women are asserting authority through collective institutions, religious scholarship, and gender-responsive Islamic discourse (Nadia & Faizah, 2024; Mun'im et al., 2024).

This literature suggests that authority should be treated as relational and negotiated rather than as a fixed status. A woman preacher's authority may depend simultaneously on knowledge, moral reputation, communication competence, community trust, organizational affiliation, and digital visibility. Studies of social media show that online platforms can create new channels for female scholars to circulate interpretations and reach audiences beyond conventional institutions (Subchi et al., 2022). The transformation is therefore not simply a movement from offline to online authority; it is a reconfiguration of the mechanisms through which credibility is recognized.

Digital Religion and the Gendered Public Sphere

Digital religion provides a useful framework for understanding the interaction between religious practice and media environments. Campbell (2013) emphasizes that digital media do not merely transmit religion; they participate in reshaping how religious identities, communities, and practices are organized. Hjarvard (2016) further explains mediatization as a process in which media become increasingly integrated into the institutional and cultural conditions of religion. In Indonesia, social media has contributed to the fragmentation and diversification of religious authority, allowing popular preachers and emerging actors to compete for attention and legitimacy (Muthohirin, 2021; Slama, 2017).

For women, however, digital visibility is ambivalent. Nisa (2018a) shows how Instagram can facilitate creative and economically productive forms of Islamic self-presentation among Indonesian Muslim women. At the same time, Muttaqin (2020) demonstrates that digital religious discourse can reproduce gender-biased representations. Recent studies of Oki Setiana Dewi and other women preachers show that digital agency may involve careful negotiation between religious expectations, economic independence, public visibility, and socially approved femininity (Luthfia, 2024; Putri & Prianti, 2026). Thus, digital platforms may simultaneously widen women's access to public religious communication and intensify the surveillance of their bodies, speech, and moral identities.

METHOD

This article employs a qualitative interpretive literature-review approach. The analysis is based primarily on the conceptual and empirical literature concerning women, gender, Islamic interpretation, religious authority, da'wah, and digital religion, with particular attention to Indonesia. The source base combines foundational books and peer-reviewed journal articles with recent Indonesian scholarship published between 2016 and 2026. The review was organized thematically rather than as a systematic review intended to estimate effect sizes. The themes were: (1) gender and Qur'anic interpretation; (2) women's religious authority; (3) women's participation in da'wah; (4) digital religion and social media; and (5) gendered constraints and opportunities in contemporary religious communication.

The interpretive analysis followed three stages. First, concepts and recurring arguments were identified across the literature. Second, findings were compared across theoretical traditions, especially gender-sensitive Qur'anic interpretation, feminist anthropology of religious agency, and digital religion. Third, the themes were integrated into a conceptual framework explaining women's contemporary da'wah agency. Because the article is literature-based, it does not claim to provide primary empirical evidence about individual preachers. References to particular Indonesian women preachers are used only where existing studies have documented their practices. This methodological boundary is important for avoiding unsupported generalizations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From Objects of Da'wah to Producers of Religious Knowledge

The literature indicates a significant conceptual shift in the representation of Muslim women in religious communication. Women are increasingly visible as teachers, scholars, preachers, organizational leaders, content creators, and interpreters of religious discourse. This shift challenges a binary structure in which men are assumed to occupy the position of religious producers while women primarily receive religious instruction. Historical and contemporary scholarship demonstrates that women's religious authority has always existed in different forms, although its recognition has been uneven (Ahmed, 2021; Kloos, 2016).

The expansion of women's participation should therefore be understood not as the sudden creation of female religious authority, but as the increased visibility and institutional recognition of authority that has existed through community-based and relational practices. Kloos (2016) and Hasanuddin (2018) show that women can develop authority through local social relationships, teaching, and participation in religious spaces. Recent research on KUPI and JP3M likewise illustrates how collective organization enables female ulama to articulate religious positions and participate in public Islamic discourse (Nadia & Faizah, 2024; Mun'im et al., 2024).

Da'wah as Knowledge, Care, and Social Transformation

The original manuscript frames da'wah not merely as transmission but as a process of social and spiritual awareness. This argument can be strengthened by conceptualizing

da'wah as a form of knowledge practice. Women's da'wah frequently connects religious teachings with education, family life, social welfare, community relationships, and everyday ethical problems. Such practices broaden the meaning of religious communication because the preacher's authority is established not only through textual competence but also through relevance, relational trust, and responsiveness to lived experience.

This relational dimension should not, however, be essentialized as an inherent female communication style. Claims that women are naturally more empathetic or morally gentle risk reproducing another form of gender stereotyping. The more defensible argument is that women's social locations may provide particular experiences and networks through which they address issues that are salient to women and families. Mahmood's (2005) account of situated religious agency is useful here: religious actors exercise agency within specific ethical and institutional conditions rather than outside them.

In this sense, women's da'wah can contribute to social transformation when religious knowledge is connected with concrete forms of education, community participation, and protection from social harm. The transformation lies not simply in replacing male preachers with female preachers, but in broadening whose experiences are recognized as legitimate sources for interpreting and communicating religious values.

Digital Platforms as Enablers and Constraints

Digital platforms have substantially changed the communication ecology of da'wah. Women can now publish religious messages without depending entirely on access to conventional preaching stages, publishing houses, or male-dominated institutional networks. Studies of female religious authority on social media show that women use digital platforms to circulate Qur'anic interpretations, educational content, and religious guidance (Subchi et al., 2022). Research on Oki Setiana Dewi demonstrates how personal branding can be integrated with da'wah communication on Instagram (Mutmainah et al., 2022), while recent work on female preachers highlights the negotiation between popularity, religious substance, identity, and platform logic (Mutia, 2026).

Yet digitalization should not be equated with democratization. Visibility on platforms is shaped by algorithms, engagement metrics, visual conventions, audience expectations, and commercial incentives. Slama (2017) describes how social media contributes to a changing economy of Indonesian Islamic preaching. More recent research shows that religious authority online may increasingly depend on symbolic capital, emotional appeal, and algorithmic visibility rather than solely on institutional credentials (Zuhri et al., 2026; Lohlker & Wahid, 2026). For women, this can generate additional pressure because credibility is often negotiated through both religious knowledge and gendered expectations concerning appearance, modesty, speech, and moral conduct.

The result is a double movement. Social media can make women more visible as religious actors while simultaneously exposing them to intensified scrutiny and gender bias. Research on gender-biased religious discourse in Indonesia has shown that social media can reproduce patriarchal narratives and delegitimize women's religious voices

(Muttaqin, 2020; Falah & Riyanta, 2025). The digital public sphere should therefore be understood as contested rather than inherently emancipatory.

Negotiated Religious Agency: A Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature, this article proposes the concept of negotiated religious agency to explain women's contemporary participation in da'wah. The concept consists of four mutually connected dimensions.

1. Knowledge production. Women exercise agency by studying, interpreting, teaching, writing, and producing religious content. Authority is strengthened when religious claims are supported by credible scholarship and contextual reasoning.
2. Relational engagement. Authority is developed through interaction with audiences, students, families, communities, and religious networks. Trust and social recognition are important mechanisms through which women's religious authority becomes durable.
3. Institutional participation. Women negotiate access to pesantren, universities, mosques, organizations, media institutions, and religious networks. Collective organizations can strengthen women's ability to participate in public religious deliberation.
4. Digital mediation. Women use platform affordances to expand reach, cultivate communities, and develop public identities. At the same time, they negotiate algorithmic visibility, audience expectations, commercialization, and gendered surveillance.

The framework avoids treating women's agency as a simple transition from subordination to emancipation. Agency is produced through negotiation. A woman may affirm particular religious norms while simultaneously expanding her authority; she may use conventional symbols of piety to enter public spaces; and she may rely on digital platforms that broaden participation while also reproducing commercial and gendered constraints. This interpretation is consistent with Mahmood's (2005) critique of narrow definitions of agency and with scholarship on Muslim women's digital self-representation (Nisa, 2018a; Luthfia, 2024).

Gender Justice Without Simplistic Binary Oppositions

The literature also suggests that debates about women and da'wah should move beyond an opposition between "Islam" and "gender equality." Gender-sensitive Qur'anic scholarship demonstrates that interpretations of women's roles have historically been diverse and contested (Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 1999). The relevant analytical question is therefore not whether Islam supports or rejects women's participation in public religious life in the abstract, but how particular interpretations, institutions, and social practices construct the legitimate boundaries of participation.

This approach also requires attention to differences among Muslim women. Women's religious agency varies according to education, class, organizational affiliation, locality, theological orientation, age, and access to media. The experience of a university-based

female scholar cannot be assumed to represent that of a pesantren leader, community preacher, digital influencer, or local religious teacher. Recent studies of female ulama in different Indonesian settings reinforce the importance of contextual analysis (Salim & Mantu, 2026; Maulina et al., 2026).

Implications for Contemporary Islamic Communication

The findings have several implications for Islamic communication. First, da'wah institutions should treat women not merely as target audiences but as knowledge producers and communication professionals. Second, religious education should strengthen women's access to advanced Islamic scholarship, communication skills, media literacy, and leadership development. Third, digital da'wah requires ethical standards concerning accuracy, privacy, harassment, misinformation, and responsible engagement. Fourth, research on women preachers should examine audience reception rather than assuming that visibility equals social influence. Finally, scholarship should distinguish between increased reach, perceived credibility, and actual authority because these are analytically different outcomes.

For digital da'wah specifically, women's participation should be supported without reducing their legitimacy to popularity metrics. Recent research on digital authority suggests that platform visibility can become a substitute for institutional credibility if audiences equate engagement numbers with expertise (Zuhri et al., 2026; Sulfikar & Yasmine, 2026). A more sustainable model of digital religious authority requires transparent scholarly grounding, contextual interpretation, ethical communication, and accountability to audiences.

CONCLUSION

Women's contemporary participation in da'wah reflects a broader transformation in the production and circulation of Islamic knowledge. The evidence reviewed in this article shows that women are increasingly active as educators, scholars, community leaders, preachers, and digital content producers. However, this transformation should not be interpreted as a linear transition from patriarchal exclusion to complete equality. Women's religious authority remains negotiated through theological interpretation, social recognition, institutional structures, and digital platform logics.

The article's principal contribution is the concept of negotiated religious agency, which integrates four dimensions of women's da'wah participation: knowledge production, relational engagement, institutional participation, and digital mediation. The framework provides a way to understand how women can expand religious authority while operating within, negotiating, and sometimes challenging established gender norms. It also clarifies why digital platforms are simultaneously enabling and constraining: they lower some barriers to public participation while generating new forms of algorithmic visibility, commercialization, moral surveillance, and gender bias.

Future research should move beyond general discussions of women's visibility and examine specific cases using comparative digital ethnography, audience-reception studies, and longitudinal analysis. Research should also compare women's religious

authority across pesantren, universities, community organizations, and digital platforms. Such work would allow scholars to identify when digital participation produces durable changes in religious authority and when it merely produces temporary visibility.

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