FEMALE ULAMA AND ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN MANADO: PEDAGOGICAL AUTHORITY IN A MUSLIM MINORITY CONTEXT

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Abstract

This study examines how female ulama in Manado construct and negotiate religious authority through Islamic education within a Muslim-minority and multicultural context. Using a qualitative design grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study draws on in-depth interviews with seven female ulama actively engaged in community-based Islamic education in Manado, North Sulawesi. Interviews were conducted between March and July 2024 in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed through iterative coding, theme development, and cross-case interpretation following IPA procedures. The findings reveal that female ulama primarily exercise authority outside formal religious institutions. They construct legitimacy through sustained pedagogical engagement, moral credibility, and culturally adaptive teaching practices. Islamic teachings are transmitted largely through informal learning spaces such as majelis taklim, family-based instruction, and digital platforms. These spaces emphasize coexistence, civic ethics, and ethical modeling rather than doctrinal assertion. Religious authority in this context is therefore relational and pedagogically negotiated rather than institutionally granted. This study contributes to Islamic education scholarship by demonstrating how pedagogical authority emerges through relational teaching, ethical modeling, and cultural adaptation in Muslim-minority contexts. The findings offer practical insights for strengthening inclusive and community-responsive Islamic education.

Keywords: female ulama; Islamic education; Muslim-minority context; pedagogical authority; religious moderation.

Introduction

In post-reform Indonesia, religious authority has undergone significant transformation as new actors, discourses, and educational spaces increasingly contest established modes of Islamic interpretation and practice. The democratization of religious knowledge through formal education, community-based learning, digital media, and religious social movements has diversified Islamic voices and reshaped how religious knowledge is taught and transmitted. Within this evolving landscape, Islamic education has become a crucial arena in which religious authority is produced, negotiated, and recognized in everyday practice.

Previous studies have shown that religious authority in contemporary Islam is no longer confined to formally trained male scholars, but is increasingly shaped through social engagement, educational participation, and public recognition (Asad, 2018; Bennett, 2005; Feener, 2013). Research on female ulama in Indonesia has highlighted their expanding roles as educators, preachers, and community leaders, particularly following the establishment of the *Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia* (KUPI), which institutionalized the recognition of women's religious scholarship (Nisa, 2012; Rinaldo, 2020). These studies demonstrate that women actively contribute to Islamic knowledge production through teaching, curriculum engagement, and community-based educational initiatives.

However, much of the existing literature focuses on Muslim-majority regions especially in Java, where Islamic institutions, *pesantren* networks, and organizational infrastructures provide relatively strong platforms for women's participation. As a result, limited attention has been given to how female ulama operate in Muslim-minority contexts, where religious authority must be negotiated within plural social environments and where Islamic education often takes place outside formal institutional structures. This gap leaves insufficient understanding of how educational practices function as sites for constructing and legitimizing women's religious authority in regions where Muslims are not the dominant community.

The city of Manado, North Sulawesi, provides a significant context for addressing this gap. As a Christian-majority city with a long-standing tradition of interreligious coexistence, Manado presents a unique educational environment in which Islamic learning is frequently conducted through informal and community-based settings rather than institutionalized systems. Female ulama in this context serve as educators, mentors, and mediators of religious values while simultaneously navigating expectations of religious conservatism and multicultural coexistence. Their roles illustrate how Islamic education operates as a dialogical process shaped by cultural interaction, social trust, and ethical engagement.

Within such a setting, female ulama often exercise authority through study circles, family-based instruction, interfaith engagement, and digital platforms. These practices demonstrate that religious legitimacy is not solely derived from formal hierarchies, but is cultivated through pedagogical relationships and sustained community involvement. At the same time, they must negotiate patriarchal expectations and scripturalist interpretations that continue to influence perceptions of legitimate religious leadership, reflecting broader tensions between tradition, gender, and social change in Indonesian Islam (Duderija, 2014; Mir-Hosseini, 2000; Rinaldo, 2020; Wadud, 1999). This study therefore investigates how female ulama in Manado exercise and negotiate religious authority through Islamic education within a Muslim-minority and multicultural context. Rather than treating authority as an institutional status, the study approaches it as a lived pedagogical process shaped through teaching practices, cultural adaptation, and community engagement. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: *How do female ulama in Manado construct and negotiate religious authority through their educational practices in a Muslim-minority context?* By focusing on lived educational experiences, this study contributes to Islamic education scholarship by demonstrating how pedagogical authority can emerge through relational teaching, ethical modeling, and culturally responsive learning practices. The findings offer a contextual perspective on the intersection of gender, education, and religious authority.

Literature Review

This literature review examines four interrelated strands of scholarship relevant to this study: (1) the emergence of female religious authority in Islam, (2) gendered hermeneutics and educational agency, (3) religious authority as a socially negotiated process, and (4) Islamic moderation and digital mediation in contemporary Indonesia. These themes are essential for understanding how female ulama construct and exercise pedagogical authority, particularly within Muslim-minority and multicultural contexts. By reviewing these bodies of literature, this section establishes the theoretical and empirical foundations that frame the present study.

The emergence of female religious authority in Islam

The emergence of female ulama as recognized religious educators represents a significant shift in contemporary Islamic discourse. Although women have contributed to Islamic scholarship since the formative period of Islam, most notably figures such as 'Aisha bint Abu Bakr, historical

developments and patriarchal institutionalization gradually limited women's access to formal religious authority (Duderija, 2014; Mir-Hosseini, 2000; Wadud, 1999). Religious leadership became increasingly associated with male-dominated scholarly lineages and institutional control over religious education.

In recent decades, however, democratization, expanded access to higher education, and the proliferation of digital media have transformed the production and circulation of Islamic knowledge. Mahmood (2005) and Leila Ahmed (2021) argue that women's engagement in Islamic interpretation reflects not only intellectual participation but also moral agency within structures historically shaped by patriarchy. In Indonesia, this transformation gained particular momentum with the establishment of the *Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia* (KUPI), which institutionalized the recognition of female religious authority grounded in knowledge (*'ilm*), ethical integrity (*akhlaq*), and social service (*khidmah*) (Rohmaniyah et al., 2022). Rather than positioning ulama as a gendered title, contemporary discourse reframes religious authority as competence-based and socially recognized. Within this evolving framework, female ulama increasingly function as Islamic educators whose legitimacy emerges through teaching, community engagement, and moral credibility (Kusmana, 2019).

Gendered hermeneutics and educational agency

A central dimension of female religious authority lies in gender-sensitive hermeneutics the reinterpretation of Islamic texts through ethical and contextual lenses. Scholars such as (Duderija, 2014) and (Wadud, 1999) advocate for Qur'anic interpretation that foregrounds justice, reciprocity, and moral equality. In Indonesia, female ulama have re-examined concepts such as *qiwamah* (leadership), marriage roles, and testimony to challenge hierarchical readings and emphasize ethical mutuality (Rinaldo, 2020).

Importantly, this reinterpretation is not merely theological but pedagogical. Studies show that female ulama embed gender justice within educational settings through narrative preaching (*dakwah bil qissah*), participatory learning, and contextual dialogue (Jati et al., 2024). Their agency is therefore exercised not through confrontational activism but through educational practice, where religious meanings are negotiated in everyday learning spaces. In minority contexts such as Manado, gendered hermeneutics often intersects with intercultural coexistence. Female ulama frame Islamic teachings in ways that resonate with local cultural norms and plural social realities, emphasizing harmony, empathy, and civic ethics (Fanshurna & Isnadi, 2025; Ismah, 2017). Authority thus emerges less from doctrinal assertion and more from pedagogical mediation within multicultural environments.

Religious authority as a socially negotiated process

The concept of religious authority in Islam has long been debated between traditional scholars, reformist thinkers, and modern intellectuals. From a sociological perspective, authority is not merely inherited but socially constructed and recognized (Bush & Fealy, 2014; Sari et al., 2024). In contemporary Indonesia, authority is increasingly mediated through education, civil society networks, and digital platforms. Rinaldo (2020) describes female ulama's authority as relational constructed through knowledge production, moral exemplarity, and sustained engagement with communities. Particularly in minority Muslim settings such as Manado, legitimacy depends not only on scholarly credentials but also on trust-building, ethical consistency, and interreligious sensitivity. Religious authority, therefore, becomes a negotiated outcome of social interaction rather than a fixed institutional status.

This relational understanding is crucial for analyzing how female ulama in Manado navigate between religious conservatism and civic pluralism. Their authority is continuously shaped by demographic realities, cultural expectations, and educational engagement.

Islamic moderation and pedagogical practice

The discourse of Islamic moderation (*wasathiyyah*) has become central in Indonesia, especially amid concerns about exclusivism and radicalization (Syaikhu & Syaifudin, 2024). Government institutions and major Islamic organizations promote moderation as a framework emphasizing balance, tolerance, and justice. However, moderation is not merely a policy discourse; it is also a pedagogical practice.

Feener (2013) conceptualizes moderation as "lived" through everyday religious practice. In multicultural settings such as Manado, female ulama enact moderation through community-based education, interfaith dialogue, and moral instruction rather than formal institutional programs. Their authority is embedded in their ability to translate Islamic ethics into socially resonant practices aligned with local cultural values such as *mapalus* (collective solidarity) (Hoktaviandri et al., 2024). Moderation, therefore, becomes both a theological orientation and a pedagogical method. Female ulama embody this through dialogical teaching, cultural adaptation, and ethical engagement in plural communities.

Digital mediation of religious authority

Digital media have further transformed the articulation of religious authority. Platforms such as YouTube and Instagram enable female ulama to reach audiences beyond physical religious institutions (Campbell, 2012; Lwamba et al., 2022; Mujahiduddin, 2019). This digital expansion reshapes authority by combining visibility, accessibility, and moral performance. Slama (2018) describes this phenomenon as "networked piety," where religious learning occurs through mediated interaction (Bruinessen, 1990; Husein & Slama, 2018). In minority settings like Manado, digital platforms provide female ulama with alternative spaces to exercise authority beyond traditional male-dominated institutions. Authority becomes performative, relational, and continuously negotiated within digital publics. Existing scholarship has extensively examined female ulama within national movements such as KUPI and institutional contexts in Java. However, limited research explores how female ulama negotiate religious authority through Islamic education in Muslim-minority regions such as Manado.

This study addresses that gap by focusing specifically on Manado as a multicultural and minority setting. It investigates how female ulama construct legitimacy, articulate moderation, and exercise pedagogical authority within everyday educational spaces. By doing so, it contributes empirically grounded insight into the relational nature of religious authority in minority Muslim contexts. This study conceptualizes female ulama's authority in Manado through three interconnected dimensions: religious authority, gendered agency, and Islamic moderation. Rather than treating authority as a fixed institutional title, it is understood as a socially negotiated process grounded in recognition, knowledge, and moral credibility (Asad, 2018; Smith-Hefner, 2009).

Gendered agency refers to women's capacity to interpret, teach, and influence within religious structures through contextual hermeneutics and pedagogical engagement (Mahmood, 2005; Wadud, 1999). In Manado's minority setting, such agency is exercised primarily through community-based Islamic education and intercultural dialogue. Islamic moderation (*wasathiyyah*) functions as the ethical foundation of this authority. It is embodied not merely as doctrinal balance but as lived practice manifested in coexistence, empathy, and civic responsibility. Within this framework, female ulama are understood as pedagogical agents whose authority emerges relationally through educational practice in a multicultural environment (Rumadi, 2025).

The reviewed literature highlights three recurring dimensions religious authority as socially constructed, gendered agency as pedagogically enacted, and moderation as lived ethical practice yet these dimensions have rarely been examined together within minority educational contexts. This study builds upon these strands of scholarship by focusing on Manado as a multicultural Muslim-minority setting. It integrates insights from sociology of religion, gender studies, and Islamic education to conceptualize female ulama's authority as a relational and pedagogical process grounded in recognition, knowledge, and moral credibility. The following section outlines the theoretical framework that synthesizes these dimensions into an analytical model for examining pedagogical authority in minority contexts.

Methodology

Research design and approach of the study

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how female ulama in Manado experience and negotiate religious authority through Islamic education. IPA is appropriate because it focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and make meaning of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2021). Religious authority in this research is conceptualized as an experiential and socially negotiated phenomenon that emerges through teaching interactions, community engagement, and moral recognition. IPA allows the researcher to explore how participants interpret their roles as Islamic educators. It also examines how they perceive legitimacy within a Muslim-minority environment and how they articulate Islamic moderation in plural social settings. The approach is idiographic in nature, emphasizing detailed analysis of each participant's narrative before identifying shared themes across cases. Following Smith et al. (2021), data analysis involved a double hermeneutic process. Participants attempt to make sense of their experiences, and the researcher, in turn, interprets that sense-making. The analytic procedure included close reading of interview transcripts, initial exploratory coding, identification of emergent themes, and the development of superordinate themes that capture recurring patterns related to pedagogical authority, gendered agency, and moderation practices. This step-by-step analytic engagement ensures that findings remain grounded in participants' accounts while being theoretically informed.

The use of IPA is further justified by the relatively small and purposively selected sample, which enables depth rather than breadth of inquiry. By focusing on rich, reflective accounts from female ulama actively engaged in community-based Islamic education, the study seeks to illuminate how authority is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated within the specific sociocultural context of Manado.

Research site and participants

Data collection was conducted between March and July 2024 in Manado, North Sulawesi, Indonesia. Manado is a Christian-majority city where Muslims constitute a minority of the population. This makes it a significant context for examining how religious authority is constructed through Islamic education in a multicultural environment. Islamic learning in this setting often takes place in community-based and informal educational spaces rather than formal institutional structures.

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Initial participants were identified through local Islamic educational networks, including majelis taklim associations, mosque-based study circles, and women's Islamic community organizations. Personal referrals from senior Islamic educators, mosque administrators, and community religious leaders helped identify additional female ulama who were actively involved in teaching and mentoring.

Snowball sampling enabled the researcher to reach participants who held influential yet often informal pedagogical roles within community-based Islamic education.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) recognized within the local Muslim community as female ulama or influential Islamic educators; (2) actively engaged in teaching, preaching, mentoring, or facilitating Islamic learning activities; (3) having at least five years of experience in Islamic educational engagement; and (4) willing to participate in in-depth interviews and share reflective accounts of their experiences. A total of seven female ulama participated in this study, ranging in age from 32 to 69 years. They represented diverse educational and professional backgrounds, including leaders of *Majelis Taklim*, Quranic teachers, community-based Islamic educators, and digital preachers. Consistent with the idiographic orientation of IPA, this sample size enabled in-depth exploration of individual lived experiences and meaning-making processes rather than statistical generalization.

Table 1. *Participant Profile Summary*

Pseudonym	Age Range	Educational Background	Role	Years Teaching
Ustazah R	40	Islamic higher education	*Majelis taklim* leader	15
Ustazah L	50	*Pesantren* and university	Community educator	25
Ustazah D	30	Islamic education degree	Digital preacher	8
Ustazah H	60 – 65	Traditional Islamic training	Qur'an teacher	30
Ustazah M	40	Islamic university	Community mentor	12
Ustazah F	50	*Pesantren* graduate	Women's study leader	20
Ustazah S	30	Islamic education degree	Youth educator	7

Data collection

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between March and July 2024 in Manado, North Sulawesi. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in locations chosen by participants, including mosques, homes, and community learning spaces. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, which was the primary language shared by the researcher and all participants. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, and all identifying information was subsequently removed. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' confidentiality. Selected excerpts were later translated into English for reporting purposes while preserving the original meanings.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed following IPA procedures as outlined by Smith et al. (2021). Analysis involved repeated reading of transcripts to achieve immersion in participants' narratives, followed by initial noting to identify significant experiential statements, linguistic expressions, and interpretive insights. Emergent themes were then developed within each case before conducting cross-case comparisons to identify shared experiential patterns while preserving idiographic depth.

Coding was conducted manually by the researcher to allow close interpretive engagement with the data. Consistent with IPA's idiographic orientation, emphasis was placed on depth of interpretation rather than statistical inter-coder agreement. To enhance analytic rigor, a peer debriefing process was conducted in which a second qualitative researcher reviewed selected transcripts and thematic interpretations. This process helped refine thematic boundaries and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived experiences. Several strategies were employed to strengthen trustworthiness. First, triangulation was achieved by comparing interview narratives with field notes and publicly available teaching materials, including recorded

sermons and digital teaching content. Second, member reflection was conducted by sharing summarized interpretations with three participants to confirm the accuracy of representation. Third, an audit trail documenting analytic decisions, theme development, and reflexive notes was maintained throughout the research process. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants provided written informed consent. Participants' identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were securely stored in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines.

Trustworthiness

Ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research requires deliberate attention to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study employed several interconnected strategies to address each of these criteria throughout the research process. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with participants and their educational communities during the data collection period from March to July 2024. The researcher maintained sustained involvement in the field, attending community-based Islamic learning sessions and observing informal teaching interactions. This extended engagement deepened familiarity with participants' lived experiences and strengthened the interpretive validity of the findings. Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted with a second qualitative researcher who independently reviewed selected transcripts and thematic interpretations. This process helped identify potential interpretive blind spots and ensured that emerging themes were adequately grounded in participants' accounts.

Member reflection further strengthened credibility. Summarized thematic interpretations were shared with three participants, who were invited to verify the accuracy and resonance of the representations. Participants confirmed that the interpretations reflected their experiences, and their feedback was incorporated into the final thematic development. This process aligned with IPA's commitment to remaining close to participants' meaning-making rather than imposing external theoretical constructs.

Transferability was addressed through the provision of thick description. Detailed accounts of the research context, participant profiles, data collection procedures, and representative interview excerpts are provided throughout this study. Although the findings are specific to Manado's Muslim-minority context, the rich contextual information enables readers to assess the relevance and applicability of the findings to comparable settings.

Dependability was ensured through the maintenance of a comprehensive audit trail. The researcher documented all analytic decisions, including coding procedures, theme development stages, and reflexive notes, in a research journal maintained throughout the study. This transparent record of the analytic process allows for independent scrutiny and demonstrates the systematic and consistent application of IPA procedures.

Confirmability was supported through reflexivity. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal to monitor and document personal assumptions, positionality, and interpretive influences throughout the study. As a Muslim researcher working within an Indonesian Islamic educational context, the researcher's positionality carried potential for both interpretive sensitivity and bias. Conscious reflection on these influences helped ensure that findings represented participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's preconceptions. Triangulation further enhanced confirmability by cross-referencing interview data with field notes and publicly available teaching materials, including recorded sermons and digital content produced by participants. Together, these strategies ensured that the findings are credible, contextually grounded, and methodologically transparent, thereby meeting the standards of rigor appropriate for interpretive qualitative research.

Findings

This section presents findings in response to the research question: *How do female ulama in Manado construct and negotiate religious authority through their educational practices in a Muslim-minority context?* Phenomenological analysis revealed that participants construct and negotiate religious authority through four interrelated experiential dimensions: (1) relational recognition, (2) lived moderation as pedagogy, (3) negotiated gendered legitimacy, and (4) digitally mediated authority. Table 2 presents verbatim excerpts from interviews and illustrates the coding process that led to the development of sub-themes and overarching themes.

Table 2. *Coding structure of pedagogical religious authority*

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes	Verbatim Quotes
Relational authority	Trust-based legitimacy	Community recognition of authority	"Authority is not about titles here. It grows when people see how we live and how we teach." (Ustazah R, majelis taklim leader, 40s)
Lived moderation as pedagogy	Moderation as daily practice	Ethical consistency in coexistence	"Moderation is not a slogan for us. It is how we live with our neighbors every day." (Ustazah M, community educator, 40s)
Negotiated gendered legitimacy	Gendered skepticism and response	Legitimacy through service	"Sometimes people ask who stands behind us. They rarely ask that question to male preachers." (Ustazah H, senior Islamic advisor, 60–65)
Digitally mediated authority	Online religious teaching	Digital outreach beyond institutions	"Online platforms allow us to reach young people who never attend study circles." (Ustazah D, digital preacher, 30s)

Constructing authority through relational recognition

Participants consistently described religious authority not as a formally granted status but as a relational and gradually recognized pedagogical process. In the Christian-majority environment of Manado, authority emerges through trust, moral consistency, and sustained engagement in community learning spaces. Ustazah R (40s, leader of a long-standing majelis taklim) reflected: *"Authority is not about titles here. It grows when people see how we live, how we teach, and how we respond to differences."*

Similarly, Ustazah L (50s, Quranic study facilitator) explained: *"We don't teach Islam by arguing. We teach by showing that Islam brings peace to the neighborhood."* These accounts indicate that authority is constructed through everyday pedagogical interaction rather than institutional endorsement. Participants emphasized that overt theological assertiveness would be counterproductive in a minority context. Instead, they adopt what may be described as a pedagogy of coexistence, where Islamic teachings are conveyed through ethical conduct, civic respect, and dialogical engagement. Local cultural expressions such as *mapalus* (collective solidarity) and *torang samua basudara* ("we are all brothers and sisters") were frequently invoked as pedagogical bridges. Through these culturally embedded strategies, authority is negotiated as moral influence rather than doctrinal control.

Negotiating authority through lived moderation as pedagogy

Participants described Islamic moderation (*wasathiyyah*) not as an abstract theological doctrine but as a practical necessity for coexistence. Ustazah M (40s, community-based Islamic educator) stated: *"Moderation is not a slogan for us. It is how we survive and live together."*

Moderation was expressed through themes such as patience, respect, compassion (*rahmah*), and non-harm. Several participants reported intentionally avoiding sectarian debate in study

sessions, focusing instead on ethical topics such as family harmony, environmental responsibility, and neighborly conduct. Ustazah F (50s, mosque-based study leader) noted: *"Being firm in faith does not mean being harsh. We must show confidence without hostility."* Through such pedagogical choices, participants negotiate authority by modeling composure and inclusivity. Authority is thus constructed through ethical demeanor and consistency in teaching practice.

Experiencing gendered constraints and building legitimacy

Participants acknowledged encountering subtle forms of gendered skepticism. Several described being questioned about their scholarly lineage or asked whether male scholars endorsed their teaching. Ustazah H (60–65, senior Islamic advisor) explained: *"Sometimes people ask who stands behind us. They rarely ask that question to male preachers."*

Rather than confronting these dynamics directly, participants described constructing legitimacy through long-term service and pedagogical consistency. Ustazah S (30s, youth mentor) shared: *"When people come back again and again to seek advice, that is when I feel recognized."* Authority is therefore negotiated through educational credibility and relational continuity rather than formal hierarchy. Participants also avoided explicitly identifying as feminist, preferring the language of Islamic justice, which allowed them to advocate for equity within accepted religious discourse.

Extending pedagogical authority through digital media

Digital platforms emerged as supplementary spaces for negotiating authority. Ustazah D (30s, digital preacher) described: *"Online, we reach those who may never attend majelis. But we must be even more careful with our words."* Participants emphasized that digital engagement increases visibility but also scrutiny. Authority in digital spaces requires disciplined ethical presentation. For some participants, digital media compensate for limited institutional access, enabling independent pedagogical engagement while remaining grounded in community trust (Nisa, 2018).

Across participants' narratives, religious authority is constructed and negotiated through relational recognition, ethical modeling, cultural adaptation, and pedagogical consistency within a Muslim-minority environment. Rather than emerging from institutional hierarchy, authority develops through sustained educational practice embedded in everyday coexistence. These findings directly answer the research question by demonstrating that female ulama in Manado negotiate religious authority primarily through community-based Islamic education, where legitimacy is built relationally, ethically, and culturally rather than institutionally.

Discussion

Empirical contributions

This study makes several empirical contributions to scholarship on Islamic education in minority Muslim contexts. First, it demonstrates that religious authority among female ulama in Manado is constructed primarily through pedagogical interaction rather than institutional recognition. While previous studies have documented women's increasing participation in Islamic leadership within Muslim-majority regions, this research provides grounded evidence of how authority is negotiated specifically in a Christian-majority environment where formal religious hierarchies hold limited structural dominance.

Second, the findings highlight the centrality of community-based Islamic education as a site of authority formation. Rather than emerging from formal institutions such as pesantren or Islamic universities, authority in Manado is cultivated through relational trust, moral consistency, and sustained engagement in informal learning spaces such as majelis taklim, family-based instruction,

and digital platforms. This extends existing literature by demonstrating that minority contexts produce distinct pedagogical configurations of authority grounded in coexistence and cultural mediation.

Third, this study contributes to a contextualized understanding of Islamic moderation. Unlike institutionalized models of moderation often associated with national policy frameworks, moderation in Manado is experienced as a lived educational necessity embedded in everyday interreligious interaction. Participants did not describe moderation as a doctrinal position but as a daily practice expressed through patience, compassion (*rahmah*), and neighborly conduct. By situating moderation within pedagogical practice, this research adds nuance to discussions of *wasathiyyah* in multicultural settings. Fourth, the findings reveal how gendered constraints are navigated through pedagogical credibility rather than direct confrontation. Female ulama in Manado encountered skepticism about their scholarly authority, often being questioned about their scholarly lineage or male endorsement. Rather than challenging these dynamics overtly, they constructed legitimacy through sustained service, long-term community involvement, and the language of Islamic justice rather than feminist identity. This finding contributes to scholarship on gendered religious agency by illustrating how authority is built incrementally through relational continuity.

Comparison with other Muslim-minority contexts

The findings from Manado resonate with research conducted in other Muslim-minority contexts, such as Muslim communities in Southern Thailand, the Philippines, and Western Europe, where religious authority is often negotiated through community-based education and intercultural engagement rather than formal state-supported institutions. Similar studies have shown that minority Muslim leaders frequently emphasize coexistence, ethical modeling, and adaptive pedagogy to maintain legitimacy within plural societies.

However, the Manado context reveals a distinctive feature: the integration of local cultural idioms such as *mapalus* and *torang samua basudara* as pedagogical bridges. While minority Muslim communities elsewhere often rely on institutional protection or transnational networks, female ulama in Manado rely heavily on culturally embedded strategies to align Islamic teachings with communal values. This suggests that minority religious authority in Indonesia may be uniquely shaped by local cosmopolitan traditions and historical patterns of interreligious coexistence.

Compared to Muslim-minority settings in Western contexts, where authority may be influenced by immigration dynamics and identity politics, the Manado case demonstrates a model rooted more in cultural hybridity and civic integration than in defensive identity consolidation. Thus, the study expands comparative understandings of minority Islamic authority by highlighting how pedagogical adaptation and relational legitimacy function in Southeast Asian plural societies.

In Southern Thailand, Muslim communities in Pattani sustain religious authority through madrasah education and community-based teaching, allowing religious leaders to maintain legitimacy within a Buddhist-majority state (Azizah, 2021; Shavir et al., 2024). In the Philippines, Islamic educational institutions serve as critical spaces for transmitting religious knowledge and preserving communal identity among Muslim minorities facing sociopolitical marginalization (Fani & Mawardi, 2024; Rahman, 2023). Likewise, in Western Europe, Muslim minority communities increasingly negotiate religious authority through educational initiatives and community-based teaching. This includes the emergence of female religious scholars whose authority is grounded in pedagogical engagement and educational expertise rather than formal institutional hierarchy (Jouili & Amir-Moazami, 2006; Liberatore, 2019; Sahin, 2021). These comparative cases reinforce the argument that in minority contexts, religious authority is often constructed relationally through educational practice, moral credibility, and community engagement rather than inherited institutional power.

Practical implications for Islamic education

The findings carry several practical implications for Islamic educational institutions and policy. Islamic educational institutions, including madrasah, pesantren, and community-based learning centers, should recognize female ulama as strategic pedagogical partners in fostering inclusive Islamic education. Institutions may formalize mentorship roles for female religious educators, incorporate their experiential approaches into curriculum development, and create platforms for community-based female educators to share best practices in multicultural pedagogy.

The findings also suggest that female ulama would benefit from institutional support mechanisms such as professional development workshops, leadership training, digital literacy enhancement, and structured networking opportunities. Providing access to institutional recognition without undermining their community-based legitimacy can strengthen their pedagogical influence and sustainability. Support systems should also address subtle gender bias within religious organizations by normalizing women's leadership roles in Islamic education.

Teacher education programs in Islamic higher education institutions should integrate training on minority pedagogy, intercultural communication, and lived moderation practices. Future Islamic educators need preparation not only in theological knowledge but also in relational competence, ethical modeling, and culturally responsive teaching. Incorporating contextual cases such as Manado into teacher training curricula can enhance educators' readiness to navigate plural social environments.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on a relatively small number of participants, consistent with the idiographic orientation of IPA. While this approach allows for depth of insight, it limits broader generalization to other Muslim-minority contexts. Second, the research was conducted within a single geographic site, Manado, which possesses unique cultural and historical characteristics. The findings therefore reflect contextual specificity and may not fully represent minority Muslim experiences in other regions of Indonesia or Southeast Asia.

Third, data were collected primarily through interviews and selected public teaching materials within a limited research timeframe from March to July 2024. Extended longitudinal observation might reveal additional dimensions of authority negotiation over time. Fourth, while peer debriefing and triangulation were employed, coding and primary interpretation were conducted by a single researcher. Although consistent with IPA methodology, multi-researcher analytic teams may further enhance interpretive robustness in future studies.

Despite these limitations, the study provides rich empirical insight into how religious authority is pedagogically constructed within a Muslim-minority context and offers a foundation for further comparative research. The findings support a pedagogical model of religious authority in which legitimacy is constructed through relational teaching, ethical modeling, and cultural adaptation rather than institutional hierarchy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study addressed the research question of how female ulama in Manado construct and negotiate religious authority through Islamic education in a Muslim-minority context. The findings demonstrate that religious authority among female ulama in Manado is constructed primarily through pedagogical engagement within community-based Islamic education. Authority emerges relationally through sustained teaching, moral credibility, and culturally adaptive educational practices rather than formal institutional appointment.

Four interrelated dimensions characterize this process. First, relational recognition through trust-building and consistent pedagogical presence establishes legitimacy within the community. Second, lived moderation as pedagogy reflects how participants enact *wasathiyyah* not as doctrinal assertion but as a daily ethical practice expressed through coexistence, compassion, and civic responsibility. Third, negotiated gendered legitimacy illustrates how female ulama navigate patriarchal skepticism by constructing authority through long-term service and the language of Islamic justice. Fourth, digitally mediated authority demonstrates how online platforms extend pedagogical reach beyond physical learning spaces while requiring heightened ethical discipline.

Taken together, these dimensions support a relational and pedagogical model of religious authority that is grounded in recognition, moral credibility, and cultural adaptation rather than institutional hierarchy. This model is particularly significant in Muslim-minority contexts such as Manado, where formal religious structures are limited and authority must be continuously negotiated within plural social environments.

This study contributes to Islamic education scholarship by positioning pedagogy as a central site of religious authority formation in Muslim-minority contexts. It extends existing literature by demonstrating that female ulama's legitimacy is not simply an extension of national movements such as KUPI but is independently constructed through contextually grounded educational practices. The findings also contribute to gendered agency scholarship by illustrating how authority is incrementally built through relational continuity and ethical modeling rather than formal credentialing.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are offered for policy, practice, and future research. For Islamic educational institutions, female ulama should be recognized as strategic pedagogical partners in developing inclusive and community-responsive Islamic education. Institutions are encouraged to formalize mentorship and leadership roles for female religious educators and to incorporate their experiential approaches into curriculum development and teacher training programs. For policymakers and Islamic organizations, support mechanisms such as professional development workshops, digital literacy training, and structured networking opportunities should be made accessible to community-based female educators. Recognition frameworks should value relational and community-based forms of authority alongside formal scholarly credentials. For teacher education programs in Islamic higher education, training should integrate minority pedagogy, intercultural communication, and lived moderation practices. Contextual cases such as Manado can serve as valuable pedagogical resources for preparing future educators to navigate plural social environments with ethical competence and cultural sensitivity.

This study is limited by its focus on a single city and a small purposive sample, consistent with the phenomenological research design. Future research may examine female ulama in other Muslim-minority regions of Indonesia or Southeast Asia to enable comparative analysis. Longitudinal studies could capture how pedagogical authority evolves over time. Mixed-methods designs incorporating survey instruments or institutional document analysis could also complement the experiential insights provided by this study. Such investigations would further advance understanding of gendered religious authority in diverse educational and sociocultural contexts.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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