

Gender Bias and Religious Conservatism in Indonesia: An Analysis of the Shuniyya Ruhama Case on Social Media

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Suggested Citation:

Fitri, Susanti Ainul; Marzal, Novrizon; Mukhroman, Iman; Effendi, Dudy Imanuddin; Solahudin, Dindin. (2025). Gender Bias and Religious Conservatism in Indonesia: An Analysis of the Shuniyya Ruhama Case on Social Media. *Jurnal Iman dan Spiritualitas*. Volume 5, Number 4: 599–612. <https://doi.org/10.15575/jis.v5i4.48335>

Article's History:

Received July 2025; Revised November 2025; Accepted November 2025.
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Abstract:

This study analyzes how gender bias and religious conservatism are reproduced through social media in Indonesia, using the viral case study of Shuniyya Ruhama, a female religious teacher who was attacked online for expressing religious views that were considered incompatible with conservative interpretations. The objective of this study is to uncover the dynamics of the representation of female religious authority and resistance to it in the digital space. The methodology employed is Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), utilizing data from the platforms X (Twitter), Threads, and TikTok, using a purposive sampling technique. Findings indicate that women who deliver religious sermons often face delegitimization through misogynistic religious narratives that reinforce the hegemony of religious patriarchy. Symbolic representations in the form of labeling, hate speech, and the removal of women's religious authority status reveal unequal power dynamics. On the other hand, counter-narratives emerge from progressive communities advocating for equality in religious interpretation and women's religious authority. This study shows that social media is not neutral, but rather an ideological arena where conservative discourse is both perpetuated and challenged. The implications of this study include the need for a reformulation of gender-fair media representation and support for digital public spaces that are inclusive of women in religious discourse.

Keywords: gender bias; critical discourse analysis; religious conservatism; social media; gender representation.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has transformed the way Indonesians consume, distribute, and interpret religious messages. On the one hand, digital spaces offer broad access to open knowledge, even on religious matters, ostensibly opening up opportunities for more democratic and inclusive public discourse. However, in reality, these spaces are far from neutral (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019). Ideological struggles are taking place, raising questions about who has the right to speak on behalf of religion and how gender stereotypes are constructed and maintained. This wave is part of a growing religious conservatism in Indonesia's digital space in recent years. This conservatism relates not only to the content and meaning of religion but also to the way symbolic power is managed, including by marginalizing or silencing women's voices, especially if they express perspectives that deviate from dominant norms (Grigoropoulos, 2023).

Research (Nikmatullah & Emawati, 2024) shows that many religious sermons circulating on social media contain bias against women. This type of content not only fosters biased ideas about women but also commodifies the sermon itself and its accompanying identities, thus becoming something controlled by certain ideological-economic blocs. In this context, social media is not just a place or means of expression; it becomes a stage for battles over claims of religious authority, which often involve the rejection of women's voices or their very existence.

Furthermore, research (Rifai, 2021) shows that for Indonesian Muslim women, gender-biased ideologies persist through these narratives, particularly in the emphasis on female piety, reflecting the strong influence of conservative elements in shaping digital gender norms. This highlights that gender bias in digital religious discourse extends beyond women's participation to include ideological manipulation and the construction of digital religious narratives. However, the root causes of sexism in religion are embedded in male-dominated religious institutions.

In the digital realm, discrimination does not simply disappear; it evolves remotely and in more symbolic and grandiose ways. Discourse formation evolves rapidly on social media in the era of virality and algorithms. Women who express their opinions often face verbal harassment, stigmatization, and disbelief. This is the experience of Shuniyya Ruhama, the subject of this study. This issue is noteworthy because it highlights the symbolic role of power dynamics. As (Hall, 1997b), emphasizes, representation not only reflects and mirrors reality but also constructs the world according to codes of signs, language, and meaning. Therefore, women's participation in digital da'wah has become an arena of struggle between conservative and progressive ideologies.

Previous research has generally separated the analysis of gender bias in media from the analysis of religious discourse. Few have seriously examined how these three elements—religious conservatism, gender representation, and social media dynamics—influence the digital da'wah landscape in Indonesia. There are also many concerns about the potential for silencing women in an increasingly digital world, where religious content already dominates digital spaces, as this is where challenges to traditional forms of power, binary gender views, and exclusive ideological claims take concrete form. (Sirri, 2024) emphasizes the symbolic exclusion of female academics and intellectuals in the media and masculinized modes of production. However, resistance to this domination has received far less attention, particularly within progressive communities that use digital media to challenge and create new lines of authority for women.

This research makes a significant contribution by combining various theoretical and methodological approaches within an interdisciplinary framework. Its central theme lies in an underexplored area of research: gender, religion, digital media, and power, particularly in the context of digital da'wah (Islamic da'wah) dominated by conservative movements in Indonesia. Consequently, this research contributes substantially to the academic debate surrounding women's representation in religion in the digital public sphere, providing a critical lens for the ideological imperatives that shape and constrain women's authority in contemporary religious formation.

Conceptually, this research draws on the theory of representation (Hall, 1997a), which emphasizes that social meaning is not intrinsic, inherent, or fixed; rather, it is produced within a system of symbols and language that is always linked to power. Religious symbols, in this context, are not only used as markers of religious identity; they can also function as tools of domination, or conversely, as means of domination, depending on who uses them and how their contributions, once made available, are negotiated in the public sphere.

This research is also influenced by the theory of gender performativity (Butler & Trouble, 1990), or the idea that gender is always being performed. Indeed, the concept of gender identity becomes quite complex on social media. The perspectives influenced by users and platform algorithms here depend not only on conservative cultural forces but also on the status of marginalized digital communities. When speaking of religious authority, women's identities carry symbolic weight whose ultimate effect often serves to rewrite, promote, or accentuate patriarchal ideals.

Furthermore, this research also uses the conceptual framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013) to investigate how digital religious texts, such as the selected examples, are adopted and contested. This perspective views digital texts not simply as designed linguistic objects, but as elements of social practice that carry ideological and power dimensions. In this context, social media is seen as a vector of symbolic struggle, in which patriarchal ideology is maintained, contested, and transformed.

The Shuniyya Ruhama da'wah forum was chosen to demonstrate how female contributors establish alternative forms of authority within an environment dominated by conservative articulations. This provides a concrete illustration of how digital spaces can become dynamic battlegrounds, despite facing structural barriers. An intersectional, interdisciplinary, and poststructuralist feminist framework is used to emphasize the interconnectedness of gender, religion, media, and power. This conceptualization is important because it helps highlight that inequality is never isolated, but rather relational and reciprocal.

By integrating these perspectives, this study seeks to fill a gap in the previous literature: our analysis extends beyond women's participation as religious authorities in a conservative digital era to the ways in which religious meanings are produced, debated, and accommodated. The aim is to promote a more equitable and inclusive understanding of women's religious identities in contemporary digital spaces. The case of Shuniyya Ruhama, who faced backlash on social media because her religious views contradicted conservative norms, provides a critical opportunity to investigate how women's religious authority is shaped, challenged, and critiqued in the digital public sphere (Tribunnews, 2025).

Reactions to the Shuniyya Ruhama case, both supportive and anti-Muslim, illustrate how social media has evolved into a dynamic platform where diverse religious interpretations intersect, compete, and challenge one another, particularly on sensitive topics such as gender (Tribunnews, 2025). In this context, social media functions not only as a means of communication but also as a discursive space, facilitating exchanges between conservative and patriarchal perspectives and progressive and gender-inclusive interpretations (Trelohan & Zahid, 2025). On the one hand, digital spaces facilitate the reproduction of traditional values that limit women's roles in religious authority. On the other hand, these same spaces also become sites of resistance: symbolic resistance, alternative narratives, and communities advocating for more inclusive interpretations of religion.

Based on the aforementioned research questions, this study not only examines the debate between conservatism and progressivism in religion, but also explores the dynamics of women's religious authority within the contested social media landscape. When women like Shuniyya Ruhama emerge as voices for alternative religious interpretations, tensions arise between established patriarchal traditions and deconstructive efforts emerging from the margins. In this context, social media becomes not only a space for expression but also an arena for highly political discursive struggles. This study aims to unravel how women's religious authority is interpreted, shaped, and negotiated through representation, discourse, and power relations in the ever-evolving digital space.

Various previous studies have shown that gender bias in media representation remains a serious problem. Media, both conventional and digital, often portray women in reductive terms: weak, emotional, or merely complementary to men. In religious contexts, this is exacerbated by the tendency to position women's voices as deviants from the norm. A study (Rifai, 2021) emphasized that women who express divergent religious views are often positioned as "wild" or "heretics," rather than being considered part of a legitimate body of interpretation. This representation is not neutral, but rather operates within a patriarchal ideological framework that serves to maintain male dominance in religious authority.

Furthermore, religious conservatism in Indonesia plays a significant role in shaping dominant narratives about gender. Viral sermons on social media, couched in religious language, often contain teachings that diminish women's roles and maintain masculine social structures. As Muttaqin (Muttaqin, 2020), points out, conservatism operates not only in the theological realm but has also become a hegemonic project that determines which voices are authoritative and which are considered deviant. When women begin to interpret religious texts from a gender perspective, they face not only criticism but also symbolic and even real threats.

Thus, the digital da'wah arena becomes a dual space: on the one hand, it opens up opportunities for participation, while on the other, it intensifies social censorship of alternative expressions.

In representation theory (Hall, 1997a), media not only convey reality but also create social reality through the way it selects and constructs meaning. When female religious teachers appear in digital spaces, they are often judged not on their arguments or knowledge, but on their appearance, voice, or body language. This is not simply an aesthetic bias, but a subtle attempt to undermine authority. Social media algorithms then reinforce this bias by giving more space to conservative, provocative, and extreme content, rather than opening up a space for equal discussion. In this situation, women's voices in religion are not only excluded but also marginalized by the non-neutral algorithmic mechanisms.

Critical feminism provides essential tools for understanding these inequalities. This approach views gender as a power relation shaped by social, economic, and cultural structures. In the digital media landscape, the subordination of women manifests itself in hate speech, delegitimization, and the disregard for alternative authorities. (Salamon, 2024) asserts that media is not a value-free arena, but rather a place where dominant ideologies are reinforced and reproduced. When women attempt to present liberating interpretations of religion, they must confront narratives that vehemently question their right to speak in the name of God. Critical feminism exists not to challenge religion, but to critique how religion is used as a tool to legitimize structural oppression.

To understand the power of discourse in producing truth and authority, a discursive approach (Foucault, 1988) is highly relevant. For Foucault, discourse is a form of power that not only limits but also produces truth, norms, and even identity. In the context of religion, conservative discourse works by determining who has the right to speak and who must be silenced. This is not simply a debate over interpretation, but also a battle over who has the right to interpret. In social media, this power manifests itself in the labeling, silencing, and deletion of accounts deemed deviant from the mainstream, including accounts of women who discuss religion from a feminist or progressive perspective.

The concept of gender performativity (Butler & Trouble, 1990) complements this reading by emphasizing that gender identity is not something essential, but rather the result of repeated social actions. In this context, the female body that appears as a preacher—as in the case of Shuniyya Ruhama—is not merely a biological body, but a political one. Her actions, appearance, and speech become performative forms that challenge dominant norms. When she does not conform to the image of the “ideal female religious teacher,” her body and speech become subject to controversy. This is where the digital space becomes a tug-of-war between social regulation and individual resistance. The female body, in this dimension, becomes not only an object of judgment, but also a tool for dismantling the dominant patriarchal narrative.

Thus, this study combines various theoretical perspectives to understand how women's religious authority is shaped, challenged, and negotiated in the digital era. It not only discusses representation but also opens up a space for critique of social, cultural, and religious structures that have marginalized women's voices. In the complex and chaotic digital discourse, women's voices that bring alternative interpretations are not simply present as marginalized minorities, but as agents of change that break the boundaries between the normative and the subversive. Therefore, this research is important not only for understanding how women talk about religion, but also how they reclaim space to become a legitimate part of contemporary religious interpretation.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. *Critical Discourse Analysis* (AWK) from (Fairclough, 2013), to uncover how language and visual symbols in social media shape and reproduce power relations, ideology, and gender inequality, particularly regarding women's religious authority in the context of digital conservatism. AWK is used because it not only examines the content of the text, but also links it to broader social practices and power. Fairclough's model consists of three dimensions: (1) *text analysis* which highlights language structures such as diction, metaphors, and visual symbols; (2) *discursive practices* which looks at how texts are produced, distributed, and received by audiences; and (3) *social practices* which links discourse findings with ideological structures such as patriarchy and religious authority.

Data collection is done through *purposive sampling*, by selecting content from three main platforms: X (Twitter), TikTok, and Threads. Data in the form of videos, comments, hashtags, memes, and images highlighting or criticising Shuniyya Ruhama's figure were collected over 20 days, starting from May 30, 2025,

when the news went viral. From hundreds of posts, more than 100 pieces of content with high engagement were analyzed in depth.

The units of analysis include: (1) digital text (captions, comments, hashtags); and (2) linguistic and visual symbols (pejorative terms, emojis, sarcastic images). The analysis focuses on three things: the position of women in digital religious authority; how conservative discourse works to delegitimize them; and how counter-discourses emerge from progressive communities. Through the framework (Fairclough, 2013), this study reveals how social media becomes an arena for the tug-of-war between patriarchal domination and gender resistance, and how language plays a role as an instrument of power in shaping who has the right to speak and who is excluded from the public religious space.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following analysis uses the Critical Discourse Analysis model (Fairclough, 2013) to examine the Shuniyya Ruhama case, based on TribunNews reporting (30 Mei 2025) and the dynamics of discourse on social media.

Table 1
Analisis Wacana Kritis Fairclough: Kasus Shuniyya Ruhama

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Elements Analyzed</i>	<i>Thematic Findings</i>
1. Text (<i>Description</i>)	- Choice of words/diction- Labeling- Sentence structure- Quotation	- Framing identity through words: " <i>transvestite</i> ," " <i>transsexual</i> ," " <i>allegedly</i> " strengthening stigma.- Religious authority removed: not mentioned <i>teacher</i> , only " <i>transvestite preacher</i> ."
	- Actor representation	- Shuniyya is reduced to an object of controversy, not a subject of authority.
	- Intertextuality	- Netizen comments are inserted as part of the narrative without criticism, normalizing gender- and religion-based hate speech.
2. Discourse Practice (<i>Interpretation</i>)	- Text production (information source) - Text consumption (target readers)	- The article relies on viral sources on social media (X/Twitter) without direct clarification. - The audience is predominantly conservative, reinforcing readers' bias against transgenders.
	- Circulation of discourse	- Discourse from social media is reproduced in mainstream media without resistance or clarification.
3. Social Practices (<i>Explanation</i>)	- Social structure and ideology - Power relations - Representation of norms	- Dominance of conservative-religious ideology over gender norms. - Religious patriarchy is positioned as a universal public value. - Absence of counter-voices (feminist/progressive).
	- Ideological effects	- Legitimization of symbolic violence against women and transgender people in the space of preaching. - Strengthening the narrative that non-binary identities are not legitimate for religion in the public space.

An analysis of Shuniyya Ruhama's case using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach (Fairclough, 2013) shows that social media and mainstream media play an active role in shaping the dominant discourse that challenges the religious authority of transgender women. In the textual dimension, the use of terms such as "*transvestite*," "*transsexual*," and "*allegedly*" demonstrates a labeling strategy that reinforces stigma. The mention of her gender identity is repeatedly emphasized, while her religious authority is downplayed. In many reports, she is never referred to as a "*ustazah*" or religious leader, but only as a "*transvestite preacher*" or "*viral figure*," which positions her as an object of controversy rather than a knowledgeable subject.

The sentence structure of these texts tends to simplify the complexity of Shuniyya's identity and position her as sensational consumption material. Derogatory netizen comments are often quoted without any editorial filtering or critique. This practice demonstrates how intertextuality is used to normalize hate speech, allowing

hate speech originating from social media to become part of the official narrative amplified by mainstream media (Silva, 2023).

In terms of discursive practices, much content was found to originate from viral sources such as platform X (formerly Twitter), without thorough clarification or verification. The dissemination of these narratives is directed at ideologically conservative readers, thus reinforcing audience bias against transgender individuals in the religious sphere. Discourse from social media is not only taken at face value but also passively reproduced in mainstream media. The absence of critical media oversight allows this bias to flow freely, making the media a medium that expands the scope of stigmatization (Fox et al., 2025).

In social practice, it was found that the ideological construction underlying the reporting on Shuniyya was based on conservative norms that established religious patriarchy as the standard of public morality. Non-binary gender identities were positioned as deviations from legitimate religious norms, and this not only reflected the dominance of patriarchal ideology but also reinforced it as an accepted social order. There was no room for alternative voices, whether from progressives, Islamic feminists, or from Shuniyya herself. This created an unequal power relationship in which conservative-religious narratives were considered the only valid ones in determining the boundaries of religious legitimacy (Zion-Waldoks & Irshai, 2023).

The ideological effects of this entire practice are stark. The discourse constructed by the media actively legitimizes symbolic violence against women and transgender communities attempting to establish a presence in the preaching space (Tranfić, 2022). Religious identities become politicized through marginalizing visual and linguistic representations, reinforcing the discourse that those outside conventional gender categories are unworthy to speak on behalf of religion (Khan, 2021). Thus, the media not only reflects societal biases but also systematically reproduces and reinforces them through symbolic reproduction hidden behind seemingly neutral language.

Through a careful examination of the textual dimensions, discursive practices, and social practices, it becomes clear that the Shuniyya Ruhama case is not merely a matter of sensational reporting. It reflects how power operates within discourse, how identities are framed for exclusion, and how the digital public sphere becomes an arena for the reproduction of unequal ideologies. In this context, Critical Discourse Analysis provides a crucial tool for uncovering the structures of domination hidden within language practices and representation in the media.

Gender Representation Patterns in Digital Discourse

This research shows that representations of Shuniyya Ruhama in digital spaces are predominantly framed by patriarchal narratives that not only undermine her religious authority but also systematically attack her gender identity. This narrative is shaped by various negative statements such as "fake religious teacher," "know-it-all woman," and "divisive figure" that are commonly found on social media platforms like TikTok and X (formerly Twitter). These expressions do not appear by chance, but rather arise from a social construct that actively rejects the presence of women in positions of religious authority. Findings from 112 posts with high interaction rates indicate that 78 percent of them contain negative connotations directed at Shuniyya's gender, while approximately 64 percent focus more on her gender identity than on the substance and capacity of her scholarship (Tribunnews, 2025).

This phenomenon occurs not only on social media but is also amplified by mainstream media. One example is the news report published by TribunNews with the title "6 Facts About Shuniyya Ruhama: Viral, Allegedly Transvestite Becomes Preacher, Admits to Being Transsexual, UGM Graduate" (Tribunnews, 2025). This news framing places gender issues at the center of the narrative and ignores Shuniyya's religious content or contributions. The use of sensational and speculative terms in the title demonstrates that the media is not simply conveying information but also contributing to the formation of biased public opinion (Vanni et al., 2025). The narrative constructed not only portrays Shuniyya as a deviant in a religious context but also creates social boundaries that prevent non-normative women from being recognized as authorities in religious discourse.

When biological identity is made the primary requirement for religious legitimacy, women's participation in the da'wah tradition becomes severely limited. This becomes even more difficult for those outside the dominant heteronormative norms. This pattern of representation constitutes a systematic delegitimization of women attempting to enter the realm of religious authority. (Niklander et al., 2015) assert that digital media plays an active role in reproducing patriarchal structures through the use of symbolic language that maintains male

dominance in the religious public sphere. In this case, the media not only conveys information but also determines who has the right to speak and who is excluded from the pulpit.

Furthermore, the representation of Shuniyya Ruhama demonstrates that digital discourse often fails to provide fair space for women's voices, particularly those whose gender expressions deviate from dominant norms. Through memes, comments, hashtags, and other visual framing, social media has become an arena where women's authority in religion is questioned and even symbolically dismissed (Kumari, 2021). This representation is not simply a matter of public perception of a single individual, but rather reflects broader power dynamics shaping who is considered a legitimate religious voice (Senn et al., 2025). In this context, digital discourse must be understood as a space of ideological struggle, where social norms, symbolic power, and patriarchal interests intertwine to produce structures of exclusion against women in the religious sphere.

The language of digital text is also not neutral. It possesses a symbolic power that operates insidiously, seeping into everyday words that are initially loaded with meaning and then become imbued with purpose. In the case of Shuniyya Ruhama, several keywords that appear frequently in public posts reveal how women's bodies and voices are portrayed as disruptive to the organized religious order (Nas, 2022).

For example, there are 21 uses of the phrase "public aurat," which is deliberately designed to blur the line between self-expression and moral transgression. Meanwhile, the phrase "fitnah akhir zaman" (end-time fitnah), found in 39 comments, links women's visibility and voices to signs of moral and social decline. Even phrases like "unfit to preach," which appear in 16 TikTok videos accompanied by religious narratives, clearly aim to deprive women of their right to speak in religious public spaces.

Not only text, but visual forms also reinforce this message. Emojis like 🍆 (often used sarcastically to refer to women who are considered 'over the top'), 🙄 (symbolizing a reluctance to see sin), or even an illustration of hellfire with the word "LIBERAL" printed on it, are used as a means of stigmatization. These images and symbols are not merely decorative, but part of a deeper approach, conveying a moralistic message without explicitly stating it (Page, 2024).

The language and symbolism found on social media effectively shape a digital power regime. Virtual space, a space for freedom of expression, has become a space that determines who can speak and who must remain silent. This is not simply a matter of communication agency. It has become a weapon of power, used to monitor, restrict, and even exclude women from legitimate religious discourse. These findings support the assertion (Laskar, 2024) that the consumption of religious visual and symbolic content has implications far beyond simply educating the public or audience, but also serves to discipline women's bodies and behavior, and reinforce traditional gender role norms. Here, patriarchal power not only persists but thrives with the aid of visual technology and collective emotions shaped on digital platforms.

Of the 112 posts analyzed, only 3% featured direct quotes or responses from Shuniyya Ruhama. The remaining 97% consisted of short video clips, averaging between 7 and 15 seconds, widely shared without any clear context or explanation. None of the posts provided space for Shuniyya to defend herself, let alone verify the facts in more depth. This phenomenon reflects the practice of epistemic erasure—the removal of someone's right to be considered a legitimate source of knowledge.

In this case, Shuniyya was not only symbolically attacked but also systematically removed from digital discourse. She became a news subject, not a subject who could speak for herself. This situation was further exacerbated by mainstream media outlets like (Tribunnews, 2025). In their reporting, netizen comments were used as additional narratives, but without prior verification, clarification, or even space for Shuniyya to explain herself. This was not just a journalistic failure—it was a form of collusion in making us accept the erasure of women's voices from the public sphere as normal.

In this case, the concept *kekerasan epistemic* (Patil, 2011) becomes very relevant. Shuniyya's silence is not a sign of rejection, but silenced in the process of being excluded by a discourse system that determines who is worthy to speak and who is merely a source of pleasure. When narratives are shaped by short, context-free pieces and reinforced by collective emotions and biases, what emerges is not just information inequality, but real symbolic violence. In other words, power in today's digital space is not only visible in what is said, but also in who is denied the opportunity to speak.

Dominant Discourse: Religious Conservatism and Hegemonic Masculinity

The main narrative in the Shuniyya Ruhama case is based on three pillars, which form a uniformly repeated narrative. *First*, religious authority is discursively restricted to the cisgender male body, as if the legitimacy to speak about religion is only truly recognized when it comes from the male body and voice (Aguiar

Contreras, 2024). *Second*, religious truth is associated with literal reading and textualization of religion, with no room for cross-cultural or personal experience (Scholz & Vander Stichele, 2024). *Third*, women who cannot be incorporated into the dominant models of sex or gender must be immediately considered a threat to social order (Iraklis, 2024).

This trend is supported by an analysis of 112 pieces of digital content. Many of those spreading conservative narratives are far from anonymous and insignificant: they are well-screened accounts, have hundreds of thousands of followers, and also act as voluntary guardians of religious morality. They portray Shuniyya as part of the “*fitnah akhir zaman*” (end-of-days trials): she is a deviant and therefore represents the moral decline of Islam (Tribunnews, 2025).

These narratives are not merely reactive but strategic. They are an extension of hegemonic practices aimed at controlling religious narratives and meanings in digital media. In this context, hegemonic masculinity is not limited to Islamic pulpits and Islamic boarding schools, but is now reproduced through viral threads, short TikTok videos, and religio-psychological posts that circulate repeatedly daily on social media (Willenbrink, 2023). Digital media constitutes a kind of production pipeline for conservative values, not because it is ideologically neutral, but because it is committed to disseminating images and words that make you feel something (even if it is disgust, anger, or an insatiable desire for attention, above all). And in this context, fear of the “other woman” is a powerful fuel.

The idea of “symbolic competition” in (Katrina, 2020) is crucial for understanding this dynamic. Progressive femininity associated with female ulama, education (tafsir), and historical/cultural interpretation of the Quran has the potential to be labeled not only as deviant but also a threat to traditional feminine images, which are based on fear, obedience, and domestication. This means that phenomena like Shuniyya not only challenge religious authority but also undermine the symbols that underpin patriarchal ideology within religious communities.

Counter Discourse: Resistance from the Progressive Community

Voices of resistance emerged behind the dominant conservative narrative that portrayed Shuniyya as a negative figure. This resistance came from within the progressive Islamic community and Muslim feminists who refused to be forced into accepting a narrow interpretation of who should represent the religion. They told different stories, symbolically, discursively, and strategically.

One such strategy is the use of hashtags such as #FemaleUlama, #EqualDakwah, and #IslamRahmatan. These hashtags are not simply digital labels, but rather organized efforts to redefine religious authority, asserting that it does not belong exclusively to a particular gender, or even a particular gender presentation. Others also reference Quranic verses, such as Surah Al-Hujurat: 13—“Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most pious,” to highlight true equality among humans, regardless of gender or gender expression, within the realm of God (Hs et al., 2021).

There are also hadiths about Aisha, the Prophet's wife and one of the primary narrators of Islamic tradition, which are also cited to emphasize that women have been involved in the transmission and formation of religious knowledge since ancient times. There are also several stories that use didactic writings to demonstrate that the Shuniyyah way of conducting da'wah—which focuses on building a moderate society—is sharia-oriented (in accordance with the teachings of Islam). *maqashid sharia*) or the goals of Islam, namely justice, mercy, and benefit (Khodadadi, 2024).

Through this methodology, the false accusations leveled against her vanish in the face of evidence, consistent with the dictates of the sacred texts and the contextual and substantive values of Islam. This material remains qualitatively inferior to mainstream conservative content, but it exists, and it is important. This exemplifies that not all online content can be adopted by hegemonic powers. Beyond algorithms and virality, social media still provides opportunities for redefining meaning (Denisova, 2021). There, dominant interpretations can be questioned, challenged, and even publicly discussed by an informed and critical public.

According to (Popa & Gavrilu, 2015), this style of resistance highlights the fact that resistance is not always represented by physical actions or the struggle for political organization. Resistance can occur symbolically, through narratives, and culturally. This is what we call epistemic resistance: the act of asserting alternatives and knowledge about alternatives in resistance to dominant narratives or power structures.

In this way, this reading not only reveals the demeaning ways in which Shuniyya Ruhama is represented in digital spaces, but also demonstrates how patriarchal power functions—through words, images, and the silencing of women. However, the emergence of critical, educational, and justice-oriented narratives means

that the digital landscape is a place of hope. This paves the way for social change, leading to confrontation with existing powers, and allows for the regeneration of Jewish religious discourse in a spirit of equality (Oparnica & Hirsch, 2025).

Power Relations and Hegemony in Media Representation

The conservative language that pervades the responses to Shuniyya Ruhama is a good example of how hegemony operates in a Gramscian sense. Antonio Gramsci conceptualized this hegemony not as something coercive, but as an ideological hegemony that feels “natural” and “common sense” because it is continually produced and reproduced by diverse systems such as religion and the media (Carroll, 2024). In this regard, it is important to remember that the belief that women are unfit to interpret religion is not something that simply arises, but stems from the power relations inherent in patriarchal systems.

This view is perceived as representing an undeniable social consensus, when in reality, it is an ideological construct that maintains the gender status quo. Conservative religious rhetoric plays a significant role in maintaining this order by portraying religious values as tools to justify inequality, rather than simply as spiritual or ethical principles (Goshu & Ridwan, 2024).

In the digital world, the enforcement of this hegemony has found a highly efficient technology. Social media has become a channel for the reproduction of symbolic domination in all its subtlety, almost invisible as oppression. In this space, patriarchal authority is not displayed openly, but rather hidden within seemingly natural and reasonable religious discourse. This aligns with Kenway's (1987) concept that symbolic power is most effective when it appears to lack a defining context, such as popular culture, education, or, in this case, digital communication (Kenway & Howard, 2022).

Much like discursive practices like word choice, video editing, and repetitive visual frames, social media doesn't just communicate; it also establishes who has the right to speak and who must be silenced. Dominant discourses not only express views but also define the parameters of what is acceptable and authoritative, particularly in matters of religion and gender identity (Edenborg, 2023).

Therefore, the reaction to Shuniyya Ruhama is not simply spontaneous social behavior, but a manifestation of hegemonic work that has been ongoing for decades and is now emerging in a new form, namely digital (Tribunnews, 2025). This serves as a reminder that the struggle over meaning, including who has the authority to speak for God, is never truly over and can never be neutral.

Through an intersectional lens, Shuniyya Ruhama's experience is far more complex than simply gender. She faces oppression not only because of her identity as a woman, but also because of her position as someone trying to occupy a space of religious authority, a field historically and structurally dominated by men. This inequality is not isolated. It is reinforced by religiously based social norms that often enforce the ideal model of the “virtuous woman,” a woman who is submissive, silent, and does not challenge dominant interpretations (Brady, 2024).

In practice, digital discourse only exacerbates Shuniyya's situation. She stands at the intersection of overlapping and interconnected identities: as a woman, as a religious figure, and as a media consumer. Each of these identities carries its own vulnerabilities and risks, but they converge at the same point of tension: patriarchal public life (Myrntinen & Schulz, 2023). As intersectional feminists have long recognized, power does not operate in a linear or one-dimensional manner.

Power operates through the intersection of multiple axes of oppression: gender, religion, class—and in this case, even digital media algorithms that often push controversial messages rather than contextual narratives. As emphasized by (Dhawan & do Mar Castro Varela, 2016), in a digital age dominated by hypermodernity, power imbalances are embedded in the technological landscape and the way it shapes the terrain where power and resistance interact. Therefore, Shuniyya's experience cannot be adequately analyzed from a single aspect of identity. It is an intersectional experience that needs to be read to understand how power shifts and flows across diverse domains, symbolic, religious, and digital.

Religious conservatism is not simply the result of literal interpretation, but rather part of a discursive system imbued with internal power structures (Yang & Li, 2021). It goes beyond commenting on the meaning of ancient texts to determining who is authorized to speak on behalf of God and how this can be done in a way that is recognized and accepted. Interpretation, in this sense, is a tool of control, not simply understanding.

Of course, one can easily see how social media facilitates but also becomes part of the process, rather than a neutral entity. Far from being a democratic space that allows all voices equal access, the web actually reinforces existing power by strengthening the already powerful (Helbing et al., 2023).

Algorithms operate on the logic of virality, and in many cases, sensational, provocative, or even misogynistic content spreads more easily because it aligns with deeply held conservative values within society. As a result, narratives that remove women from religious authority gain greater prominence and reach a wider audience more quickly (Oloba & Blankenship, 2024).

Within Gramsci's (Gramsci, 1999), framework, this kind of domination constitutes hegemony—domination that operates through consensus, not coercion, because it is so deeply embedded in the collective consciousness. This hegemony not only maintains the status quo but also forecloses the possibility of alternative narratives that challenge the dominant order. We need alternative narratives that credibly portray women as learners/interpreters/leaders, as a way to unsettle the scriptural roles that not only silence women but also inhibit our collective imagination of religious figures.

In an environment where there is intense disagreement about what is meaningful, especially in digital spaces, alternative discourses are not only possible but also necessary. Only through this can symbolic justice be fought for, and religious spaces become inclusive of all, not just the majority who adhere to dominant norms.

Poststructural Feminism: Deconstructing the Meaning of Gender in Religious Discourse

Post-structural feminism has critical relevance in understanding how language itself can shape and control identities (Hussain et al., 2021). Gender and power, as Judith Butler and Michel Foucault have shown, are not natural or static, but rather performative—produced through the repetition of behaviors, utterances, and representations governed by dominant norms and discourses.

In the case of Shuniyya Ruhama, the attacks directed at her stemmed not only from what she said, but also from the way she presented herself, as a “female cleric.” This performativity directly destabilized the symbolic order traditionally associated with male religious authority (Cohen & Oreg, 2025). In other words, her existence as a gendered body uttering the words of God challenged the coherence of the patriarchal symbolic order that had long stood.

A poststructural approach can show us that gender is not a bodily identity that cannot be traversed through language, but rather a discursive position, something that can be negotiated, constructed, and even questioned. As Diko (Diko, 2024), notes, in a linguistically and socially constructed world, identities such as “female researcher” are not only conceivable but can also become legitimate titles to be fought for and legitimized.

What is also interesting about the counter-discourse that Shuniyya advocates has been their assertion that religious learning need not be a male domain. They offer an alternative narrative to the patriarchal stereotype that only men can speak authoritatively on behalf of God, and open up space for a more inclusive view of religion that is open to gender diversity and variation (Jaber, 2025).

Furthermore, the narrative can transcend simplistic gender stereotypes and allow for flexibility in religious readings, a critical step in countering the rigidity of meanings imposed by religious conservatism. This is where the poststructuralist approach becomes “powerful,” not in establishing new meanings, but in continually disrupting certainties and opening up spaces for negotiation for identities silenced by dominant discourses.

Amidst the overwhelming dominance of conservatives in the digital landscape, social media has not been entirely closed to emancipatory voices. In fact, this pressure has given rise to alternative spaces utilized by progressive Islamic communities and religious feminists to construct counter-narratives, disseminate contextual religious literacy, and strengthen solidarity networks across geographical and institutional boundaries. The actions of these communities reflect what (Harp & Bachmann, 2018) call counter-hegemonic discourse, namely the production of discourse that consciously challenges the symbolic power of patriarchy in the media space. Through the use of hashtags, educational videos, content based on the principles of sharia, and open discussions, these communities actively seek to dismantle the monopoly of religious interpretation that has long locked women in subordinate positions (Golan & Martini, 2019).

The digital spaces created by these communities have become important channels for the restoration of women's religious identity and strengthening of their authority. These efforts do not rely on institutional legitimacy or formal religious structures, but rather grow from open and dialogical digital participation. Every post, comment, or response to dominant discourse is not only an expression of freedom of opinion but also carries symbolic value as a form of resistance to the hegemony of masculine and exclusive interpretations. In a digital ecosystem controlled by algorithms, even simple interactions have political potential because

they can expand the reach of alternative narratives and strengthen women's positions in religious discourse (Calloni, 2025).

More than just content production, this movement represents an initial step towards the democratization of religious knowledge. In this space, religious interpretation is no longer determined hierarchically, but rather opened to diverse and contextual interpretations. The symbolic actions that emerge in the form of digital content, while seemingly small, have transformative power because they enable the emergence of a broader collective awareness of the importance of gender equity in the religious sphere. It is true that this resistance has not yet fully shifted established authority structures. However, the digital space still holds hope for the emergence of a more equal arena, a place where women are not only imagined as possessors of religious authority but also championed for their existence through discursive practices that are continually renewed and maintained.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that social media in Indonesia, rather than being an open, participatory space, actually reinforces gender bias through the reproduction of conservative religious discourse. The case of Shuniyya Ruhama demonstrates how women's gender identities, particularly those outside dominant norms, are subjected to systematic delegitimization. The derogatory representation is not only directed at the content of the religious message, but also at the person delivering it. In this case, religious authority is at stake not by the quality of knowledge, but by the identity of the person delivering it.

Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, it was found that this process occurs through stigmatizing language, biased information reproduction practices, and social structures that marginalize alternative voices. However, spaces for resistance have also emerged. Progressive and feminist Muslim communities have begun using social media as an arena to champion counter-narratives that are inclusive, dialogical, and gender-just.

Theoretically, the results of this study reinforce Stuart Hall's thinking on the construction of meaning through language, as well as Gramsci's notion of ideological hegemony. Butler's performativity theory and Foucault's concept of discourse explain that religious and gender authority are not fixed, but rather shaped through complex social processes. Intersectionality is key to understanding that the inequality Shuniyya experiences is not only because she is a woman, but also because she stands at the intersection of various marginalized identities.

Important implications of these findings include the need to improve gender-sensitive media and religious literacy, protect female digital actors, and strengthen alternative interpretation communities in digital spaces. Media and digital platforms also need to take ethical and policy responsibilities that encourage diverse representation and prevent symbolic violence.

In conclusion, this study confirms that the struggle for equality in religious discourse requires intervention at multiple levels: language, media, ideology, and policy. Women's voices in religion should be seen not as a threat, but as a legitimate part of the diversity of interpretations that enrich the religious realm and strengthen human values. Digital space, when used critically and reflectively, can be a transformative tool for broadening the horizons of religious authority to be more just and inclusive.

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