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Women issuing fatwas: female Islamic scholars and community-based authority in Java, Indonesia

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WOMEN ISSUING FATWAS

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This dissertation deals with the legitimacy of Muslim women as Islamic scholars (ulama) and the right ascribed to them by society to interpret religious texts and issue fatwas in response both to the everyday concerns of their followers and to urgent social problems. The study is therefore primarily concerned with the concept of religious authority and how this is modulated through gender. Using a combined anthropological, religious studies, and gender lens, it examines how and why women issue fatwas in different spaces of interaction between the fatwa-giver and fatwa-asker. These spaces, which include women's branches of Islamic organizations and institutions, local communities, and women's magazines, are often and unduly considered as being of marginal importance in fatwa-making. The main argument of this dissertation is that, both at the grassroots and in the public sphere, Muslim women in Indonesia play an increasingly influential role as ulama, both sought by and responding to ordinary believers seeking religious opinions, and, as such, acting as agents of and advocates for change. Although their role is not often recognized by men, once we privilege the perspective of women a completely different picture emerges, one in which women are granted religious authority that turns out to be as strong as that of male ulama in issuing fatwas. Their authority is, on the one hand, a community-based authority contingent on local concerns and networks of knowledge. Yet on the other hand these women also contribute to a larger effort, namely the creation of a national network of Indonesian female ulama.