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Negotiating Religious Authority in a Masculine Space: Gender Regime and Female Leadership in an NU *Pesantren*

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Abstract

This article examines the leadership of Nyai Hj. Masriyah Amva at *Pesantren* Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy as a negotiated reconstruction of religious authority within the patriarchal structure of traditional Nahdlatul Ulama *pesantren*. Drawing on Raewyn Connell's gender regime theory, the study conceptualizes *pesantren* not as rigid institutions but as social spaces in which gendered authority is continuously produced and contested. Based on a qualitative case study

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involving in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, this article shows that *sufi* spirituality, religious poetry, and symbolic practices function as key sources of legitimacy that enable Nyai Masriyah to exercise leadership without directly confronting established institutional norms. Her spiritual experience and ethical authority gradually reconfigure male-dominated leadership arrangements by opening space for women's participation within accepted religious frameworks. This study contributes to gender and Islamic studies by demonstrating how spiritual authority operates as a context-specific resource for institutional transformation, positioning *pesantren* as sites of negotiated gender change within traditional Muslim communities.

[Artikel ini mengkaji kepemimpinan Nyai Hj. Masriyah Amva di *Pesantren* Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy sebagai bentuk negosiasi dan rekonstruksi otoritas keagamaan dalam struktur patriarki *pesantren* tradisional Nahdlatul Ulama. Melalui penggunaan teori rezim gender Raewyn Connell, penelitian ini memandang *pesantren* bukan sebagai institusi yang statis, melainkan sebagai ruang sosial tempat otoritas gender diproduksi dan dinegosiasikan secara berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini merupakan studi kasus kualitatif yang melibatkan wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan telaah dokumentasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa spiritualitas sufistik, syair religius, dan praktik simbolik berfungsi sebagai sumber legitimasi utama yang memungkinkan Nyai Masriyah menjalankan kepemimpinan tanpa berhadapan langsung dengan norma institusional yang mapan. Melalui otoritas spiritual dan keteladanan etis, ia secara bertahap merespons dominasi kepemimpinan maskulin dan membuka ruang partisipasi perempuan dalam kerangka religius yang diterima. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada kajian gender dan Islam dengan menunjukkan bagaimana otoritas spiritual menjadi sumber daya kontekstual dalam transformasi institusi keagamaan serta menegaskan *pesantren* sebagai situs perubahan gender yang dinegosiasikan dalam komunitas Muslim tradisional.]

Keywords: gender regime; female religious leadership; *sufi* spirituality; Nahdlatul Ulama *pesantren*

Introduction

Pesantren, Islamic boarding schools, are the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, functioning as both centers of learning and social-religious spaces shaped by gender norms.¹ Within

¹ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi Tentang Pandangan Hidup Kyai* (LP3ES, 1985); E. Nurtawab and D. Wahyudi, 'Restructuring Traditional Islamic

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), *pesantren* hold a central ideological and cultural position in forming Indonesia's moderate Muslim tradition, making questions of leadership particularly significant.²

Within this leadership landscape, women's roles in NU are institutionally mediated through a hierarchical structure of autonomous organizations, including Muslimat NU, Fatayat NU, and the NU Women Students Association (IPPNU).³ These organizations provide spaces for women's leadership,⁴ although their authority remains structurally constrained by male-dominated decision-making processes, often limiting women's influence to specific communal domains.⁵

Education in Indonesia: Challenges for Pesantren Institution', *Studia Islamika* 29, no. 1 (2022), 55–81. <https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v29i1.17414>.

² Claire-Marie Hefner, 'Models of Achievement: Muslim Girls and Religious Authority in a Modernist Islamic Boarding School in Indonesia', *Asian Studies Review* 40, no. 4 (2016): 564–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2016.1229266>; Nur Hannan et al., 'Between Adherence to Madhhab and Adaptation to Context: Fatwās on Female Leadership in Nahdlatul Ulama-Affiliated Islamic Higher Education Institutions', *Journal of Islamic Law* 5, no. 2 (2024): 269–87, <https://doi.org/10.24260/jil.v5i2.2725>; E. Muafiah et al., 'Gendered Pesantren in Contemporary Indonesia: Female Agency, Institution, and Everyday Lives', *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies* 12, no. 1 (2024): 40–71, <https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v12i1.19859>; Yusro and Junaidi, 'Peran Pimpinan Pondok Pesantren dalam Meningkatkan Penyelenggaraan Mutu Pendidikan', *Jurnal Ilmiah Edukatif* 10, no. 1 (2024): 29–36. <https://doi.org/10.37567/jie.v10i1.2839>.

³ Musdah Mulia, 'Hukum Islam dan Dinamika Feminisme dalam Nahdlatul Ulama', *Al-Ahkam: Jurnal Pemikiran Hukum Islam* 23, no. 1 (2013): 37–56, <https://doi.org/10.21580/ahkam.2013.23.1.72>; Erni Isnaenyah, 'Partisipasi Politik Perempuan Islam Indonesia dalam Tradisi NU', *Religious: Jurnal Agama dan Lintas Budaya* 2, no. 1 (2017): 154–68; Yayah Huriyani, *Agama dan Gender Versi Ormas Islam Perempuan Indonesia* (Lekkas, 2021); Akhriyati Sundari, 'Isu Gender di Indonesia dalam Respon Nahdlatul Ulama', *Al-Maiyyah* 10, no. 1 (2017): 103–14. <https://doi.org/10.35905/almaiyyah.v10i1.451>.

⁴ Aprilian Ria Adisti, 'Reviving the Spirit of Gender Equality: Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama between Idealism and Realization', *Journal of Nahdlatul Ulama Studies* 2, no. 1 (2021): 17–33, <https://doi.org/10.35672/jnus.v2i1.24>; Huriyani, *Agama dan Gender Versi Ormas Islam Perempuan Indonesia*; Eva F. Nisa, 'Women and Islamic Movements.', in *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements* (Brill, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004435544_010.

⁵ D. Kloos, 'Studying Female Islamic Authority: From Top-Down to Bottom-Up Modes of Certification', *Asian Studies Review* 40, no. 4 (2016): 479–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2016.1227300>; Nurun Najwah et al., 'The Rejection of Women Imams in Indonesia: Between Religious and Socio-Cultural Texts', *Journal of International Women's Studies* 24, no. 5 (2022): 1–16; D. Kloos

Nevertheless, over the past three decades, NU has undergone a gradual yet significant shift in its leadership dynamics, marked by increasing recognition of women's roles beyond their immediate communities.⁶ This transformation is reflected not only in the growing legitimacy of women leading autonomous organizations but also in their expanding participation in the wider Islamic public sphere,⁷ alongside grassroots changes in *pesantren* that have increasingly opened access to education for women.

Despite advancements, structural and cultural barriers continue to limit female leadership in *pesantren*, where women are often seen as exceptions rather than the norm.⁸ *Pesantren* leadership, characterized by charisma, genealogy, and religious authority, centers on the *kiai*, the man who holds supreme influence over educational, spiritual, and socio-political domains.⁹ This hierarchical and patriarchal model, rooted in family lineage or scholarly recognition, positions the *kiai* as the core of power.¹⁰ Consequently, women face significant obstacles to accessing top leadership roles, as institutional gender regimes

and N. Ismah, 'Siting Islamic Feminism: The Indonesian Congress of Women Islamic Scholars and the Challenge of Challenging Patriarchal Authority', *History and Anthropology* 34, no. 5 (2023): 818–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2023.2249495>.

⁶ R. Gunawan et al., 'Gender Equality in Islamic Organizations: A Study on PBNU', *Muharrrik* 5, no. 2 (2022): 293–305, <https://doi.org/10.37680/muharrrik.v5i2.1608>.

⁷ Ibi Satibi et al., 'Women's Ulama Movement in Building Moderation of Islam Indonesia', *Musawa: Jurnal Studi Gender dan Islam* 22, no. 1 (2023): 25–39, <https://doi.org/10.14421/musawa.2023.2201.25-39>; Rosie Boparai and Michelle Darlington, "'Intersectional Collaboration": A New Form of Leadership from the WomenEd Movement', *School Leadership & Management* 44, no. 5 (2024): 648–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2024.2349033>; A. Naz, *Modern Muslim Women Scholars: Catalysts for Cross-Cultural Understanding*, 6, no. 3 (2024): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2024.v06i03.23086>; N. Ismah, 'Women's Fatwa-Making in Indonesia: Gender, Authority, and Everyday Legal Practice', *International Journal of Islam in Asia* 4, no. 2 (2024): 75–97, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25899996-20241073>.

⁸ Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur'an* (University of Illinois Press, 2006).

⁹ Mahfud Junaedi and Nurul Azizah, 'Karisma Kiai dalam Membentuk Karakter Toleransi Santri di Pondok Pesantren Al-Ishlah, Mangkang Kulon, Tugu, Kota Semarang', *Prosedding* 1 (2021): 167–73; Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Pesantren dan Pembaruan* (LKIS, 2001).

¹⁰ Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, dan Tarekat: Tradisi-Tradisi Islam di Indonesia* (Mizan, 1995).

systematically prioritize male authority.¹¹ Despite these developments, female leadership in *pesantren* remains structurally constrained,¹² as authority remains concentrated in the figure of the *kiai*, whose charisma, lineage, and religious legitimacy form the core of a male-centered leadership regime. Within this institutional gender regime, women's authority is systematically positioned as exceptional rather than normative, limiting their access to formal leadership succession.¹³

Amid these entrenched traditions, certain *pesantren* have begun to challenge the status quo, as seen in the case of *Pondok Pesantren Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy*, which has thrived under Nyai Hj. Masriyah Amva's leadership. She stands out as a key figure in redefining women's positions within spheres traditionally dominated by men. Her leadership marked a break from the long-established patriarchal succession patterns of NU *pesantren*. Her experience demonstrates that, despite her vital roles occupied within *pesantren* life, her positions are not automatically regarded as legitimate successors to the authority of the *kiai*.¹⁴ Instead, Nyai Masriyah's authority has been constructed through a continuous process of negotiation within a social order that

¹¹ Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur'an*; Rohmaniyah Inayah et al., 'Female Ulama's Authority: Deconstructing Masculine Domination in Islamic Norms and Practices', *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 21, no. 6 (2022): 54–61, <https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.21.2022.225>; Norlaila et al., 'The Role of Women Ulama in the Development of Islamic Education', *Al-Hayat: Journal of Islamic Education* 9, no. 2 (2025): 261–73, <https://doi.org/10.35723/ajie.v9i2.99>.

¹² Busyro et al., 'Female Imam and Khatib: The Shifting in Worship Traditions from Progressive to Conservative in Sungai Landia, West Sumatra, Indonesia', *JURIS (Jurnal Ilmiah Syariah)* 22, no. 1 (2023): 39–51, <https://doi.org/10.31958/juris.v22i1.8545>.

¹³ Emine Enise Yakar, 'Women's Political Leadership: One Question and Two Divergent Fatwā', *Journal of Law and Religion* 37, no. 2 (2022): 332–62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2022.15>; Sareh Larijani, 'Muṭahharī's Approach to the Right of Women to Issue Fatwas', *Contemporary Islam* 18, no. 1 (2024): 115–31, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-023-00541-w>; Muqtada et al., 'Fiqh Contestation on Women's Public Leadership in Indonesia and Malaysia: Reproducing Qur'anic and Hadith Interpretations', *AL-IHKAM: Jurnal Hukum & Pranata Sosial* 19, no. 1 (2024): 221–48, <https://doi.org/10.19105/al-lhkam.v19i1.13163>; Muhammad Numan et al., 'Exploring The Experience of Women Leaders in Breaking Gender Barriers on Islamic Boarding Schools Leadership in Indonesia', *Jurnal Riset Pendidikan dan Pengajaran* 3, no. 1 (2024): 88–106, <https://doi.org/10.55047/jrpp.v3i1>.

¹⁴ Masriyah Amva, 'Interview with Masriyah Amva', 17 June 2024.

privileges men as the primary bearers of religious authority. By mobilizing spiritual depth, intellectual engagement, and socially grounded strategies of religious interpretation, she has gradually built credibility and recognition among *santri*, local communities, and wider *pesantren* networks, demonstrating how women's leadership can be constituted from within, rather than against, a male-dominated institutional gender regime.¹⁵

Existing studies on Nyai Masriyah's leadership have highlighted the importance of piety, charisma, and ethical sensitivity in shaping women's religious authority,¹⁶ as well as her contributions to non-formal education and community resilience.¹⁷ While these works provide valuable insights into leadership styles and personal attributes,¹⁸ they tend to treat women's authority as an individual accomplishment rather than as a process embedded in broader social and institutional structures.¹⁹ As a result, there remains limited analytical attention to how female leaders in *pesantren* negotiate patriarchal norms and gendered power relations from within the institutional and religious frameworks that shape everyday *pesantren* life.

This study addresses a gap in the literature on *pesantren* leadership by applying Connell's²⁰ gender regime theory to analyze the symbolic, social, and structural negotiation processes that enabled Nyai Masriyah to establish her leadership legitimacy within a male-

¹⁵ Yusron Razak and Ilham Mundzir, 'Otoritas Agama Ulama Perempuan: Relevansi Pemikiran Nyai Masriyah Amva Terhadap Kesetaraan Gender dan Pluralisme', *Palastren: Jurnal Studi Gender* 12, no. 2 (2019): 397–430, <https://doi.org/10.21043/palastren.v12i2.5981>; Sulaiman Sulaiman, 'Pengalaman Spiritual dan Kebahagiaan Menurut Nyai Hajah Masriyah Amva', *Esoterik: Jurnal Akhlak dan Tasawuf* 7, no. 2 (2021): 211–30, <https://doi.org/10.21043/esoterik.v7i2.13143>.

¹⁶ Razak and Mundzir, 'Otoritas Agama Ulama Perempuan: Relevansi Pemikiran Nyai Masriyah Amva Terhadap Kesetaraan Gender dan Pluralisme'.

¹⁷ Karisma Amiyana, 'Kepemimpinan Perempuan Pesantren: Studi pada Nyai Hj. Masriyah Amva di Pesantren Kebon Jambu Ciwaringin' (Thesis, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga, 2022).

¹⁸ Sulaiman, *Transendensi Ilahiah Perspektif Tasawuf dalam Menemukan Tuhan dan Kebahagiaan Sejati* (SeAP, 2021).

¹⁹ Irma Anggraeni et al., 'Kepemimpinan Perempuan Pesantren di Masa Pandemi: Studi Terhadap Nyai Masriyah Amva di Pesantren Kebon Jambu', *Potensia: Jurnal Kepemimpinan Islam* 11, no. 2 (2023): 123–35, <https://doi.org/10.24014/potensia.v9i1.23265>

²⁰ Raewyn Connell, *Gender in World Perspective* (Polity Press, 2009).

dominated system. This theoretical lens approaches *pesantren* as a dynamic social space rather than a fixed institution. Connell's concept of gender regime provides a valuable tool for such analysis, as it examines how authority, division of labor, and organizational culture intersect to produce specific gendered outcomes. When applied to *pesantren*, this framework draws attention to the ways religious rituals, symbolic hierarchies, and everyday practices normalize male authority as legitimate, while positioning women's authority as an exception.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the leadership of Nyai Hj. Masriyah Amva at Pondok Pesantren Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy, Cirebon, West Java. A case study design was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of how female religious authority is constructed, negotiated, and legitimized within the gendered institutional structure of a traditional Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) pesantren. This case was selected because Nyai Masriyah represents one of the few women who successfully assumed leadership of a large traditional NU pesantren following the death of a male kiai, making her experience particularly significant for understanding the negotiation of religious authority within a patriarchal institutional setting. The study is informed by Raewyn Connell's gender regime theory, which conceptualizes institutions as social arenas in which power relations, divisions of labor, emotional relations, and symbolic meanings continuously shape and reproduce gendered authority.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with Nyai Masriyah Amva as the primary informant, Yayuk Awanillah as her daughter-in-law, four senior santri (both male and female) who had resided in the pesantren for more than five years and were actively involved in daily educational and religious activities, and two long-serving pesantren administrators responsible for managing institutional affairs. Participants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in pesantren life and their long-term interaction with Nyai Masriyah's leadership. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and pseudonyms were used where necessary to protect confidentiality.

To enrich the interview data, participant observation was conducted over two weeks from early to mid-June 2024. Although

limited in duration, the observation period was designed to capture routine interactions and leadership practices embedded in everyday pesantren life. Access to the field was facilitated through prior communication with pesantren leaders, allowing the researcher to participate in daily activities while maintaining reflexive awareness of their position as an observer. Particular attention was given to practices, interactions, and symbolic arrangements through which authority was gendered, negotiated, and legitimized. Observations focused on Nyai Masriyah's teaching activities, leadership in religious gatherings, interactions with guests, spiritual counseling sessions with santri, and her responses to concerns raised by parents regarding their children's educational and behavioral problems, as well as broader family economic difficulties.

In addition to interview and observational data, this study analyzed documentary materials of religious poems published in Nyai Masriyah's poetry collection. These texts were treated not merely as literary expressions but as representations of spiritual values, religious meanings, and symbolic resources through which authority is articulated and communicated within the pesantren community. The poems were coded thematically by identifying recurring themes, metaphors, and narratives related to spirituality, divine love, religious devotion, service, gender relations, and moral leadership. The resulting codes were subsequently grouped into broader analytical categories and interpreted through Connell's dimensions of gender regime, particularly symbolic representations, power relations, and emotional relations. This procedure enabled the study to examine how poetic discourse contributes to the construction of religious legitimacy and the negotiation of female authority within a male-dominated institutional setting.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary materials were coded and compared continuously to identify recurring patterns across different sources. The coding process combined inductive and deductive strategies. Initial codes emerged from the empirical data, while subsequent categorization was guided by Connell's dimensions of gender regime, including power relations, divisions of labor, emotional relations, and symbolic representations. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation by comparing interview narratives, observational records, and documentary materials. This

process enabled the identification of recurring themes and inconsistencies across data sources. It contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between spiritual authority, institutional leadership, and gender negotiation within the pesantren context.

Results

On 1 November, 2006, the death of Kiai Muhammad, the leader of Pondok *Pesantren* Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy, as well as Nyai Masriyah's husband, triggered an acute crisis of authority within the institution. In *pesantren* tradition, the passing of a kiai often signifies a decline in institutional legitimacy, as leadership is closely tied to personal charisma and genealogical continuity. This rupture was immediately evident in the withdrawal of *santri*, students in *pesantren*, as parents perceived the *pesantren* as having lost its authoritative center. The moment marked a critical juncture in which the survival of Kebon Jambu al-Islamy depended on how authority could be reconstituted in the absence of its male founder.

Amid the crisis of authority, Nyai Masriyah critically recognized the gendered social constructs within the *pesantren* tradition that position men as primary bearers of religious authority. At the same time, women are culturally conditioned to rely on male mediation. Drawing on tasawuf as an Islamic spiritual tradition, she developed a Sufi epistemological orientation grounded in *taslīm* (total surrender) and *tawakkul* (reliance on God), not merely as personal piety but as a framework for reconstituting legitimacy beyond patriarchal norms. Through sustained Sufi discipline, surrender to God functioned as a mode of knowing and ethical positioning that reframed suffering as a source of moral insight rather than weakness. As she articulated, Sufi practice became an epistemic strategy through which authority was anchored in divine reliance rather than male-centered genealogy. Building on these practices, Nyai Masriyah developed a profound spiritual perspective on suffering:

“Di dalam setiap penderitaan dan rasa sakit selalu ada harapan dan makna. Melalui ujian-ujian itu, Allah mengizinkan saya untuk lebih mengenal-Nya. Ketika saya pasrah kepada-Nya, hati saya menjadi lebih mudah membawa prasangka baik. Saya sekarang

*yakin, semakin pahit hidup saya, semakin besar pula keistimewaan yang akan Allah berikan kepada saya.”*²¹

(There is much hope and meaning in every suffering and pain. Through that pain, God allows me to know Him better. Surrender to God enables me to bring positive thinking, so that now I believe that the more bitter my life is, the more I am privileged.)

This spiritual perspective, rooted in Sufi principles, shaped Nyai Masriyah’s orientation toward transcendence, in which the human self (*insān*) is disciplined to align with the divine will (*irādah ilāhiyyah*) through *taslīm*, understood not as passive surrender but as a sustained ethical practice.²² For Masriyah, *taslīm* was enacted in everyday conduct, functioning as a form of moral training that transformed adversity into a source of ethical clarity rather than paralysis. Through this Sufi discipline, authority was cultivated through composure, moral consistency, and spiritual credibility, rather than through gendered or genealogical claims. Her leadership thus emerged from a disciplined spiritual consciousness that integrated personal faith with the collective responsibilities of the *pesantren*, providing a foundation from which her authority could be asserted and contested.²³

By grounding her leadership in Sufi discipline, Nyai Masriyah reconfigured the basis of authority within *pesantren* culture, shifting legitimacy away from genealogical succession toward what can be conceptualized,²⁴ following Pierre Bourdieu, as spiritual capital.²⁵ This form of capital was not inherited through bloodline or institutional position but accumulated through sustained Sufi discipline, visible devotion, and a publicly recognized closeness to the divine.²⁶ Through this process, authority was constituted as an ethical and spiritual achievement rather than a gendered entitlement, enabling her to claim

²¹ Amva, ‘Interview with Masriyah Amva’.

²² Sulaiman, *Transendensi Ilahiah Perspektif Tasawuf dalam Menemukan Tuhan dan Kebahagiaan Sejati*.

²³ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

²⁴ Eka Srimulyani, *Women from Traditional Islamic Educational Institutions in Indonesia: Negotiating Public Spaces* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Greenwood Press, 1986).

²⁶ Smith, ‘Re-Orienting Female Spiritual Power in Islam: Narrating Conflict between Warriors, Witches and Militias in Lombok’, *Indonesia and the Malay World* 40, no. 118 (2012): 249–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2012.710423>.

leadership without directly confronting *pesantren* norms. Spiritual capital thus functioned as an alternative route to legitimacy that patriarchal structures could not fully regulate, allowing Nyai Masriyah to negotiate power from within tradition while simultaneously unsettling assumptions about who may rightfully hold authority in religious institutions.²⁷

To solidify her leadership during this crisis, Nyai Masriyah took a bold step to assert her authority. During a moment of instability, she convened the *santri* in the mosque. She decided to speak from the pulpit, crossing a symbolic threshold rarely opened to women. She declared that authentic leadership of the *pesantren* belonged to Allah. Her declaration, which invoked divine sovereignty, reflected a theological current within Islam that locates authority in obedience to God, a principle long embedded in *pesantren* life.²⁸ Thus, her speech worked as an expression of faith and a careful negotiation with cultural norms surrounding gender and leadership.

Through the invocation of divine legitimacy, Nyai Masriyah negotiated gendered norms that traditionally render women unfit to lead *pesantren*, establishing authority that mitigated overt resistance while remaining embedded in religious idioms. Her leadership can be read through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, in which spiritual capital operates as a key resource in the absence of patriarchal institutional backing,²⁹ enabling trust and recognition to be cultivated through visible devotion and ethical consistency. At the same time, the resistance she encountered reveals the operation of what Connell conceptualizes as a gender regime, wherein institutional and cultural arrangements systematically align religious authority with masculine identity. Such episodes illustrate the social pressures faced by women leaders who must continually affirm their legitimacy amid delegitimizing rhetoric.³⁰ Nyai Masriyah's persistence amid these challenges demonstrates how spiritual capital can be mobilized not only to withstand marginalization but also to question and gradually reshape entrenched gendered hierarchies within a patriarchal religious order.

²⁷ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

²⁸ 'Interview with Santri 1', 11 June 2024.

²⁹ Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital'.

³⁰ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

Despite her success in reframing authority, Nyai Masriyah encountered persistent opposition from conservative ulama, whose resistance reflected a hegemonic masculine ideal that equates religious leadership with male authority. This opposition was expressed not only through doctrinal arguments but also through symbolic acts of delegitimation intended to police gendered boundaries of power. For instance, a religious figure publicly derided her as a “big zero,” a form of gendered disparagement that sought to erase her legitimacy and reassert masculine dominance over *pesantren* leadership.³¹ Such rhetoric illustrates how hegemonic masculinity operates to discipline women leaders by rendering their authority socially unintelligible, even as Nyai Masriyah continued to counter these challenges through spiritual credibility and sustained practice.

Despite ongoing resistance, Nyai Masriyah’s leadership also elicited support from segments within the religious community that articulated authority in terms of ethical competence rather than gender, drawing on alternative Islamic interpretive frameworks. The backlash directed at such positions reveals how struggles over women’s leadership extend beyond individual actors and mark a broader contestation of religious authority within a patriarchal gender order.³²

Beyond opposition from religious elites, Nyai Masriyah also confronted resistance from alumni and local community members,³³ shaped by a gender regime that normalizes masculine dominance and privileges male scholarly authority within *pesantren* life.³⁴ This resistance was less doctrinal than cultural, reflecting anxieties over the disruption of established sacred hierarchies. Through the mobilization of intellectual credibility and spiritual authority, Nyai Masriyah navigated these pressures, ensuring the institutional continuity of Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy and sustaining community trust during a period of uncertainty.³⁵ Her leadership thus functioned not only as a challenge to gendered assumptions but also as a stabilizing force that preserved the *pesantren*’s viability and facilitated gradual shifts in

³¹ ‘Interview with Pesantren Administrator 1’, 9 June 2024.

³² Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Simon & Schuster, 2013).

³³ ‘Interview with Pesantren Administrator 2’, 12 June 2024.

³⁴ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

³⁵ Srimulyani, *Women from Traditional Islamic Educational Institutions in Indonesia: Negotiating Public Spaces*.

community perception, evidenced by renewed confidence and growing enrollment.³⁶

Against a gender regime that privileges masculine traits as markers of legitimate authority, Nyai Masriyah asserted leadership through sustained practice and moral credibility rather than gendered entitlement.³⁷ By maintaining institutional competence and ethical consistency, she unsettled assumptions that authority in *pesantren* must be male-coded, demonstrating how legitimacy can be constructed through performance and recognition rather than inherited norms.³⁸

Building on growing public acceptance, Nyai Masriyah's leadership generated gradual yet significant institutional changes within the *pesantren*. Her presence expanded opportunities for women's leadership, particularly through the strengthening of women's education and more inclusive patterns of communal decision-making.³⁹ Importantly, these shifts did not arise from rejecting *pesantren* tradition but were enabled through moral legitimacy, scholarly credibility, and sustained spiritual authority that rendered change both acceptable and durable.⁴⁰

By grounding leadership in moral integrity and intellectual authority, Nyai Masriyah challenged gendered assumptions within *pesantren* life,⁴¹ demonstrating how principles of justice and ethical competence drawn from Islamic interpretive traditions can reconfigure legitimacy.⁴² In doing so, her experience contributes to broader debates

³⁶ E. Setiawati, 'Women's Resilience in Religious Leadership: A Case Study of Pesantren in Java', *Gender and Society* 14, no. 1 (2022): 15–22.

³⁷ 'Interview with Santri 2', 13 June 2024.

³⁸ 'Interview with Santri 3', 14 June 2024.

³⁹ 'Interview with Santri 1'.

⁴⁰ Hilmiyatul Latifah and Hasyim Asy'ari, 'Peran Kepemimpinan Perempuan dalam Pengembangan Manajemen Pendidikan Islam', *Thawalib: Jurnal Kependidikan Islam* 5, no. 2 (2024): 463–472, <https://doi.org/10.54150/thawalib.v5i2.486>; Siti Maesaroh et al., 'The Role of Women Leaders in Character Development of Santri (Leadership of Mrs. Nyai Umi Waheeda at the al Ashriyyah Nurul Iman Parung Islamic Boarding School, Bogor)', *EduLine: Journal of Education and Learning Innovation* 4, no. 1 (2024): 67–76, <https://doi.org/10.35877/454RI.eduline2406>.

⁴¹ Linda Firdawati et al., 'Husein Muhammad's Thoughts on Gender Equality in Islamic Inheritance Law', *Al-'Adalah* 19, no. 2 (2022): 233–244, <https://doi.org/10.24042/al-'adalah.v19i2.13123>.

⁴² Musdah Mulia, 'Feminisme Islam di Indonesia: Refleksi, Aksi, dan Praxis', *Jurnal Perempuan* 27, no. 2 (2022): 167–78, <https://doi.org/10.34309/jp.v27i2.689>; Nurdin Nurdin, "'Gender Equality' Revisited: Deconstruction of Islamic Thought towards

on how women negotiate authority and expand leadership possibilities within religious institutions.

Beyond challenging gender norms, Nyai Masriyah drew on local cultural principles to further strengthen her leadership. She reframed this social construct, transforming perceived weakness into a source of spiritual strength. Guided by the Javanese principle of *'nguripi urip'*, striving to sustain life and community,⁴³ her experience offers a grounded contribution to broader discussions on how patriarchal structures are negotiated from within Islamic institutions.⁴⁴

This approach, evident in her writings and actions, allowed her to navigate the patriarchal gender regime of the *pesantren*, reinforcing her legitimacy through resilience and spiritual conviction.⁴⁵ Her own poetry captures this spiritual approach vividly:

*Aku adalah kelemahan / dan kujadikan ia sebagai jubahku / yang selalu kupakai untuk mencari kekuatan.*⁴⁶

(I am weak / and I make it my cloak / which I always wear to seek strength.)

By grounding her credibility in religious depth, she navigates the limitations imposed by the gender regime of Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy. This approach embodies the Sufi concept of inversion, where structural disadvantages as a woman are transformed into spiritual strength through transcendental consciousness.⁴⁷

The impact of Nyai Masriyah's spiritual leadership extended to the revitalization of *Pesantren Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy*, where restored trust in her authority became visible through steadily increasing enrollment despite initial skepticism.⁴⁸ This recovery demonstrates her capacity to mobilize spiritual and ethical legitimacy, aligning with Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital in which recognition is grounded

Gender Equality', *FiTUA: Jurnal Studi Islam* 3, no. 1 (2022): 12–24, <https://doi.org/10.47625/fitua.v3i1.341>.

⁴³ Setiawati, 'Women's Resilience in Religious Leadership: A Case Study of Pesantren in Java'.

⁴⁴ Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*; Nurul Azizah, 'Gender Equality Challenges and Raising Awareness in the Patriarchal Cultural in Indonesia', *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies* 5, no. 1 (2023): 47–52, <https://doi.org/10.32996/jhsss.2023.5.1.7>.

⁴⁵ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

⁴⁶ Masriyah Amva, *Menggapai Impian* (PT. Kompas Media Nusantara, 2010).

⁴⁷ 'Interview with Masriyah Amva', 17 June 2024.

⁴⁸ 'Interview with Santri 3'.

in integrity, competence, and sustained performance rather than formal succession.⁴⁹ Over time, her leadership disrupted the assumption that women's authority in *pesantren* is merely transitional, showing that durable legitimacy can be achieved through organizational competence and moral credibility. As a result, Nyai Masriyah's case illustrates how patriarchal structures within Islamic institutions are not overturned abruptly but gradually renegotiated through practices that secure institutional continuity while expanding the boundaries of legitimate religious authority.

These structural constraints are clearly illustrated in the experience of Yayuk Awanillah, Nyai Masriyah's daughter-in-law, whose attempt to teach male santri exposed the gendered regulation of religious space. When she sought to teach in the mosque, local ulama prohibited her from standing at the pulpit, and required her to speak from an upper floor while the santri remained below.⁵⁰ This spatial arrangement symbolically positioned the pulpit as a masculine site of religious legitimacy, reflecting broader assumptions about the proper location of women's authority. However, the restriction proved temporary. Through negotiations led by Nyai Masriyah with local ulama, an agreement was eventually reached allowing both male and female teachers to instruct male santri within the same learning space. Such practices demonstrate how gender regimes are enacted through the control of space while simultaneously creating opportunities for their contestation and transformation.

In facing various forms of resistance, Nyai Masriyah adopted an adaptive leadership strategy that prioritized continuity and relational trust over direct confrontation. By emulating key aspects of Kiai Muhammad's leadership, particularly his emphasis on community engagement and spiritual guidance, and by cultivating an image of maternal closeness through informal encounters with santri, she gradually rebuilt public trust in the *pesantren*.⁵¹ This trust became a crucial source of legitimacy, enabling subtle shifts in institutional values and practices. Over time, Nyai Masriyah's leadership gained broader acceptance, evident in the willingness of male santri and community members to seek her guidance and prayers, not because she

⁴⁹ Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital'.

⁵⁰ 'Interview with Awanillah Amva', 16 June 2024.

⁵¹ 'Interview with Santri 2'.

openly defied tradition, but because she grounded her authority in recognized forms of spiritual knowledge and ethical credibility.⁵²

Nyai Masriyah's societal impact can be seen in her efforts to engage the community and draw on local wisdom. She reframed perceived weakness into a source of spiritual strength.⁵³ In this sense, her experience offers a grounded contribution to broader discussions on how patriarchal structures are negotiated from within Islamic institutions.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the negotiated character of gender relations within Pesantren Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy, demonstrating that the institution operates neither as a monolithic patriarchal order nor as a site of straightforward feminist transformation, but rather as what Connell terms a "gender regime", a configuration of gender practices, power relations, and symbolic hierarchies that is structurally patterned yet open to contestation from within.⁵⁴ Connell distinguishes between the macro-level "gender order" of society and the institution-specific "gender regime".⁵⁵ Applied to *pesantren*, this framework draws attention to how the institution's everyday practices, from the allocation of religious roles to the use of sacred space, to succession norms, together constitute a regime that has historically reproduced masculine dominance over religious authority. The results of this study confirm that the *pesantren* gender regime is not maintained through overt coercion alone, but through what Connell describes as "hegemonic practices" that naturalize male authority by embedding it in theological idioms, spatial conventions, and genealogical expectations.⁵⁶ This structural lens reframes Nyai Masriyah's leadership not as an individual exception but as a sustained negotiation with an institutionally embedded gender regime, revealing the conditions under which women may exercise leadership without dismantling the normative order that constrains them.⁵⁷

⁵² 'Interview with Santri 1'.

⁵³ 'Interview with Masriyah Amva'.

⁵⁴ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

⁵⁵ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

⁵⁶ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

⁵⁷ Srimulyani, *Women from Traditional Islamic Educational Institutions in Indonesia: Negotiating Public Spaces*.

Central to understanding the dynamics of this gender regime is, *first*, the role of Sufi spirituality as a resource through which Nyai Masriyah constructed an alternative basis of authority. The results show that following the death of Kiai Muhammad in 2006, the *pesantren* faced an acute crisis of legitimacy, as institutional succession norms in NU *pesantren* traditions presuppose a male heir possessing both genealogical and charismatic credentials.⁵⁸ According to Stead and Elliott,⁵⁹ limited access and networking opportunities result in fewer chances for women to shape their identities as leaders. Consequently, women often hesitate to acknowledge their struggles and achievements within patriarchal organizations. Identity regulation can serve as a significant form of organizational control. Holmer Nadesan⁶⁰ further states that the recognition of identity as a professional or leader requires a process that consumes a considerable amount of time and energy, in which women must make extraordinary efforts to seize the very small and limited opportunities available.

In this context, Nyai Masriyah drew on *tasawuf*, specifically the Sufi ethics of *taslīm* (total surrender) and *tawakkul* (trust in God), as a framework for repositioning herself as a legitimate leader. This spiritual orientation functioned epistemically, constituting a basis for authority that circumvented patrilineal succession logic.⁶¹ Mir-Hosseini has argued that Sufi frameworks provide women with interpretive resources that transcend patriarchal juridical structures precisely because Sufi epistemology prioritizes spiritual proximity to God over gender or genealogy.⁶² The findings align with the interpretive tradition that stated by publicly articulating suffering and surrender as divinely sanctioned moral credentials, Nyai Masriyah transformed the

⁵⁸ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, 'The Pesantren Tradition: A Study of the Role of the Kyai in the Maintenance of the Traditional Ideology of Islam in Java' (Thesis, The Australian National University, 1980); Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, dan Tarekat: Tradisi-Tradisi Islam di Indonesia*.

⁵⁹ Stead Valerie and Carol Elliott, 'Women Learning Leadership', in *Women's Leadership* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009).

⁶⁰ Majia Holmer Nadesan and Angela Trethewey, 'Performing the Enterprising Subject: Gendered Strategies for Success (?)', *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (2000): 223–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462930009366299>.

⁶¹ Sulaiman, *Transendensi Ilahiah Perspektif Tasawuf dalam Menemukan Tuhan dan Kebahagiaan Sejati*.

⁶² Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

conditions of adversity into spiritual capital. This process resonates with Bourdieu's understanding of capital conversion, in which social disadvantage may be alchemized into recognized value when the right contextual conditions are in place.⁶³ Critically, however, the deployment of spiritual capital in this context was not politically neutral; it operated within a gender regime that simultaneously accorded women limited access to formal religious roles while opening a narrow window through which exceptional piety could be recognized as authoritative.⁶⁴

The pulpit episode, when Nyai Masriyah mounted the mosque pulpit (*mimbar*) to address the congregation during the succession crisis, marks a critical moment of gender-regime contestation. In *pesantrén* culture, the pulpit functions as more than a physical location. It is a gendered site of enunciation from which religious authority is both performed and recognized.⁶⁵ By occupying this position, Nyai Masriyah enacted what Connell identifies as a “protest masculinity” dynamic in reverse.⁶⁶ Her declaration that leadership belongs solely to Allah invoked the theological principle of divine sovereignty, neutralizing gender-based objections by repositioning succession from the human to the divine plane. This rhetorical move corresponds to what Mernissi and later Wadud identified as “tawhidic paradigm” in Islamic feminist thought, invoking God's oneness to challenge socially constructed hierarchies that claim religious authorization.⁶⁷ The practical effect was to destabilize the immediate hierarchy without triggering direct doctrinal confrontation. From a Connellian perspective, this episode reveals a key dynamic of gender regime negotiation: change occurs through the appropriation and redeployment

⁶³ Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’.

⁶⁴ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

⁶⁵ Moh Sakir and Robingun Suyud El Syam, ‘Pendidikan Kepesantrenan : Negosiasi Ruang Kaum Santri dalam Mempertahankan Identitas Sosial Keagamaan di Universitas Sains al-Qur’an Wonosobo’, *Edukasia: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran* 5, no. 1 (2024): 337–48, <https://doi.org/10.62775/edukasia.v5i1.760>.

⁶⁶ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

⁶⁷ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam* (Addison-Wesley, 1991); Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

of legitimating resources already recognized within the institutional field, rather than through a frontal assault on hegemonic norms.⁶⁸

The hegemonic masculinity that structured resistance to Nyai Masriyah's leadership operated at multiple registers, and the results illuminate its simultaneously doctrinal, interpersonal, and symbolic dimensions. The dismissal of her authority as a "big zero" by a conservative ulama exemplifies what Connell describes as "delegitimation work", the active discursive labor through which those invested in the existing gender regime seek to discipline aspirants who exceed their allocated position.⁶⁹ This form of symbolic violence, to adopt Bourdieu's term, relies on the misrecognition of social norms as natural or divine, such that women who exceed gendered expectations are rendered not merely inappropriate but unintelligible as leaders.⁷⁰ Badran notes that doctrinal objections are frequently secondary rationalizations of prior cultural anxieties about gender transgression rather than primary theological arguments arrived at independently.⁷¹ The resistance from alumni and community members reflects that it is a regime-level anxiety about the disruption of what Connell terms the "cathexis" dimension of gender relations, the emotional investments, desires, and attachments that bind people to particular configurations of gender.⁷² Community members who had grown accustomed to the *kiai* figure as the sacred center of the *pesantren* were not simply defending male privilege but were also defending a world-picture that female leadership disrupted.

Shifting from power to the emotional dimension of the gender regime, Nyai Masriyah's strategy adapted key elements of Kiai Muhammad's leadership style while incorporating a maternal approach through the use of empathy⁷³ rather than a rival to male authority. She cultivated what Lopes Cardozo and Srimulyani term "*santri ibuism*", a

⁶⁸ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*; Muafiah et al., 'Gendered Pesantren in Contemporary Indonesia: Female Agency, Institution, and Everyday Lives'.

⁶⁹ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

⁷⁰ Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital'.

⁷¹ Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*; Carool Kersten, *Islam in Indonesia: The Contest for Society, Ideas and Values* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁷² Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

⁷³ Norlaila et al., 'The Role of Women Ulama in the Development of Islamic Education'.

form of female leadership that combines maternal care with religious authority.⁷⁴ The increase in santri enrollment (from 300 to over 1,700) suggests this emotional strategy was effective. Rinaldo's research on Muslim women activists in Indonesia demonstrates that enduring changes to gendered religious authority come not from secularist challenges to religious norms but from actors who work within Islamic interpretive frameworks to redefine what those frameworks authorize.⁷⁵ However, this strategy carries a limitation. Nyai Masriyah's authority remains partly dependent on her performance of traditional feminine virtues (patience, care, self-sacrifice) rather than on a fundamental restructuring of the gender regime.⁷⁶

Beyond the symbolic and emotional dimensions, Nyai Masriyah also reconfigured the pesantren's economic base, which Connell terms the "production" dimension of the gender regime. The result revealed that under her leadership, Pesantren Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy developed a range of entrepreneurial ventures, including a mini-market, a printing house, a cooperative, and a travel agency. These initiatives systematically reduced the pesantren's dependence on male-dominated patronage networks.⁷⁷ By generating independent income streams, Nyai Masriyah repositioned the institution's material base in ways that simultaneously expanded women's legitimate participation in institutional governance and created organizational roles that were neither exclusively domestic nor exclusively masculine in their cultural coding.⁷⁸ Several studies found that *nyai* leadership in *pesantren*

⁷⁴ Mieke Lopez Cardozo and Eka Srimulyani, 'Analysing the Spectrum of Female Education Leaders' Agency in Islamic Boarding Schools in Post-Conflict Aceh, Indonesia', *Gender and Education* 33, no. 7 (2021): 847–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1544361>; Norlaila et al., 'The Role of Women Ulama in the Development of Islamic Education'.

⁷⁵ Rachel Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety: Islam and Feminism in Indonesia* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁷⁶ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

⁷⁷ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

⁷⁸ Samsu Samsu et al., 'Community Empowerment in Leading Pesantren: A Research of Nyai's Leadership', *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education* 10, no. 4 (2021): 1237–44, <https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v10i4.21833>; Ahmad Fauzan et al., 'Success Strategy of Female Ulama Leadership to Advance Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School Amid Patriarchal Resistance', *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 15, no. 2 (2025): 201–25, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v15i2.201-225>.

significantly contributes to community empowerment through economic initiatives.⁷⁹

The results further demonstrate how the symbolic dimension of the gender regime is equally instructive. Connell's gender regime theory foregrounds the "division of labor" as one of four structural dimensions through which gender arrangements are organized and maintained, alongside power, emotion, and symbolism.⁸⁰ The episode involving Yayuk Awanillah, who was prohibited from standing at the pulpit and required to speak from an upper floor while male santri occupied the main floor, illustrates how spatial arrangements encode gendered hierarchies. The prohibition was framed not as a denial of women's religious knowledge but as a regulation of where that knowledge could be legitimately transmitted and from what bodily position. This is precisely the kind of spatial-symbolic arrangement that Connell identifies as an instrument of gender regime maintenance.⁸¹ The pulpit is coded as a masculine site of authoritative speech, and women's access to it is circumscribed not through explicit prohibition of their knowledge but through spatial arrangement. This demonstrates that, even in the context of spatial arrangement, no space exists as entirely neutral with respect to gender.⁸² Scholars working on gendered religious space across Islamic institutional contexts have similarly noted that spatial segregation in Islamic congregational and educational spaces is not merely functional but serves to encode hierarchical authority, making the built environment itself a text of gender ideology.⁸³ That the response was spatial rearrangement rather than outright prohibition reveals the limits and internal contradictions of the

⁷⁹ Samsu et al., 'Community Empowerment in Leading Pesantren: A Research of Nyai's Leadership'; Indah Piliyanti and Noor Alwiyah, 'Female Leadership of Islamic Philanthropic Institutions in Indonesia', *Ulmuna: Journal of Islamic Studies* 29, no. 2 (2025): 851–75, <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v29i2.1293>.

⁸⁰ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

⁸¹ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

⁸² Spark Ceridwen et al., 'We'Re Not Very Good at Soccer': Gender, Space and Competence in a Victorian Primary School', *Children's Geographies* 17, no. 2 (2019): 190–203, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2018.1479513>.

⁸³ Dunne Máiréad et al., 'Gender Symbolism and the Expression of Post-Colonial National and Religious Identities', *Social Identities* 26, no. 3 (2020): 376–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2020.1765765>.

gender regime, which could not entirely exclude Yayuk Awanilla's religious knowledge but sought to contain its institutional effects.⁸⁴

The gradual institutional transformation documented in the results reflects what Connell terms "incremental change" within gender regimes. Connell argues that gender regimes do not ordinarily undergo sudden transformation but are reshaped through the accumulation of micro-level practices that, over time, alter the distribution of authority, recognition, and access.⁸⁵ Nyai Masriyah's leadership generated a series of strategic openings that cumulatively expanded institutional space for women, consistent with Srimulyani's finding that durable change in pesantren gender arrangements tends to occur through legitimacy-building practices rather than formal rights claims.⁸⁶ Her poetry, "*I am weak / and I make it my cloak / which I always wear to seek strength*", encapsulates this strategy: the apparent capitulation to the logic of feminine weakness is simultaneously a reappropriation of weakness as spiritual virtue, enacting what can be read as an inversion of the symbolic hierarchy that constitutes the gender regime. It operates in the negotiated space between compliance and transformation that characterizes institutional gender change in conservative religious contexts.⁸⁷ Rinaldo's research on Muslim women activists in Indonesia similarly demonstrates that the most enduring changes to gendered religious authority come from actors who work within Islamic interpretive frameworks to redefine what those frameworks authorize.⁸⁸

The case of Nyai Masriyah further illustrates how spiritual capital intersects with local cultural resources in the negotiation of gender regimes.⁸⁹ The invocation of the Javanese principle of *nguripi*

⁸⁴ Srimulyani, *Women from Traditional Islamic Educational Institutions in Indonesia: Negotiating Public Spaces*; Kloos and Ismah, 'Siting Islamic Feminism: The Indonesian Congress of Women Islamic Scholars and the Challenge of Challenging Patriarchal Authority'.

⁸⁵ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*.

⁸⁶ Srimulyani, *Women from Traditional Islamic Educational Institutions in Indonesia: Negotiating Public Spaces*; Muafiah et al., 'Gendered Pesantren in Contemporary Indonesia: Female Agency, Institution, and Everyday Lives'.

⁸⁷ Sulaiman, 'Pengalaman Spiritual dan Kebahagiaan Menurut Nyai Hajah Masriyah Amva'.

⁸⁸ Rachel Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety: Islam and Feminism in Indonesia* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁸⁹ Nurdin, "'Gender Equality' Revisited: Deconstruction of Islamic Thought towards Gender Equality'.

urip, striving to sustain life and community, as a framework for her leadership orientation represents what Connell might describe as the mobilization of “complicit femininities” in a context-specific way: drawing on culturally recognized idioms of feminine care and communal responsibility to construct a form of leadership that is intelligible within the existing symbolic economy while simultaneously exceeding its prescribed limitations.⁹⁰ This finding resonates with Blackwood's broader argument that gender practices in Southeast Asian contexts are shaped by locally specific traditions that cannot be adequately captured by frameworks derived from Western or Middle Eastern contexts alone.⁹¹ The synthesis of Sufi ethics, Islamic jurisprudential knowledge, Javanese cultural principles, and relational pastoral practices in Nyai Masriyah's leadership thus reflects the plural and contextually embedded character of gender regime negotiation in Indonesian Islam. More broadly, this finding supports Mulia's contention that Islamic feminism in Indonesia draws its productive force precisely from this kind of integrative interpretive work, which neither abandons Islamic frameworks nor accepts their patriarchal configurations as fixed.⁹²

Conclusion

This study has examined the leadership of Nyai Hj. Masriyah Amva at Pesantren Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy through the lens of Connell's gender regime theory, demonstrating that her authority was neither simply inherited nor individually exceptional, but constituted through a sustained and multidimensional process of negotiation with an institutionally embedded patriarchal order. Across the four structural dimensions of the gender regime power relations, production relations, emotional relations, and symbolic-discursive structures Nyai Masriyah deployed context-specific strategies that gradually reconfigured the terms on which religious authority could be claimed and recognized. Sufi spirituality functioned as an alternative epistemic foundation for

⁹⁰ Connell, *Gender in World Perspective*; Gunawan et al., ‘Gender Equality in Islamic Organizations: A Study on PBNU’.

⁹¹ Evelyn Blackwood, ‘Representing Women: The Politics of Minangkabau Adat Writings’, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 1 (2001): 125–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2659507>.

⁹² Numan et al., ‘Exploring The Experience of Women Leaders in Breaking Gender Barriers on Islamic Boarding Schools Leadership in Indonesia’.

legitimacy; entrepreneurial initiatives restructured the pesantren's material base, and reduced dependence on male-dominated patronage networks; adaptive pastoral practices rebuilt community trust through the affective register; and the appropriation of sacred symbolic sites reframed the gendered boundaries of authoritative speech.

These findings contribute to gender and Islamic studies in two significant ways. First, they demonstrate that pesantren gender regimes, while structurally durable, are not impervious to transformation from within through the accumulation of legitimacy-building practices that work with rather than against established religious frameworks. Second, they position spiritual capital as a context-specific but analytically generative resource that enables women to negotiate patriarchal institutional arrangements without requiring direct doctrinal confrontation, a dynamic likely to resonate beyond the Indonesian pesantren context to other traditional religious institutions where women's leadership remains structurally constrained.

Future research might productively extend this analysis by examining whether similar patterns of gender regime negotiation are observable across other NU pesantren led by female figures, or by applying a longitudinal perspective to assess whether the incremental changes documented here consolidate into durable structural transformation over time. Comparative studies that bring the Indonesian case into dialogue with women's religious leadership in other Muslim-majority contexts would further illuminate the extent to which the strategies documented here are specific to the Javanese-Islamic cultural ecology or reflect broader dynamics of gendered institutional change.

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