

Pesanten and Gender Issues: The Role of Women's Students in Modern Leadership

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Article Information	Abstract
Keywords: <i>Pesanten</i>, Gender Issues, Role of Women's Students, Modern Leadership Sub. 9th, Dec 2025 Rev. 10th, Jan. 2026 Pub. 23rd, March. 2026 Vol. 1, No. 2, May 2026 DOI: JIISR 	Pesantren as the oldest Islamic educational institution in Indonesia faces the challenge of gender equality in the midst of the demands of modern leadership. This article aims to describe the construction of gender roles in pesantren, identify the form of leadership roles of female students, and analyze its supporting and inhibiting factors. This study uses a qualitative method with a literature study approach and critical discourse analysis of pesantren literature, the yellow book, and previous research. The results of the study show that the gender construction in pesantren still tends to be patriarchal, characterized by sex-based division of labor and the lack of representation of female students in the highest leadership structure. However, female students have shown leadership roles in various forms: as leaders of intra-pesantren organizations, driving women's empowerment programs, and actors in cross-pesantren forums. The main supporting factors include the support of female <i>nyai</i>/teachers, access to general education, and alumni networks. On the other hand, the inhibiting factors are in the form of textual interpretation of the yellow book (e.g., Q.S. An-Nisa: 34), gender stereotypes, and domestic-public dual role conflicts. This article recommends the integration of gender perspectives in pesantren curricula, affirmative policies for the regeneration of female students, and further longitudinal research.

1. Introduction

Pesantren is a typical Indonesian Islamic educational institution that has an important role in forming a cadre of ulama, intellectual figures, and community leaders. Since its establishment, pesantren has served as a center for the dissemination of Islamic religious knowledge, a protector of Islamic traditions, and a factor of social change that contributes to the progress of Indonesian society (Dhofier, 2011: 44–47). Religious schools such as pesantren not only teach religion, but also help shape the personality, moral values, and leadership skills of students.

Over time, pesantren continue to undergo various changes and adjustments to meet the needs of modern society. Various innovations are carried out, such as curriculum development, combining

general knowledge, utilizing technology, and improving leadership skills. Even so, in the modernization process, there are still several issues that need to be considered, one of which is the issue of equality between men and women in the pesantren environment. In some pesantren cultures, patriarchal traditions that are still strong often affect how the roles of men and women are divided, including in terms of access to leadership training, decision-making, and roles in student organizations (Marhumah, 2011: 65–70).

In fact, Islamic teachings basically make men and women as human beings who have an equal position before Allah SWT. These two genders are also given the same opportunity to develop their potential and contribute to the good of society (QS. Al-Hujurat [49]: 13; QS. An-Nahl [16]: 97). Islamic values such as justice, deliberation, trust, and responsibility are important foundations in forming leadership that accommodates all parties. In today's world full of global change and technological advances, the need for leaders who can adapt, work together, create new ideas, and bring everyone to participate is increasing. Today's leadership no longer depends on one's gender, but rather on one's ability to influence, guide, and cooperate with others to achieve common goals (Northouse, 2018: 5–9). In various areas of life, women have shown their ability to be well-performing leaders.

In the context of Islamic boarding schools, female students are a group that has intelligence, spiritual resilience, and good social skills, which makes them ready to become leaders in the future. According to data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, the number of female students now reaches more than half of the total number of all students in Indonesia (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022: 32–34). This figure shows that women play a very important role in the development of the Islamic boarding school world and the development of society as a whole. Even so, the number of women graduates of Islamic boarding schools who serve in public leadership positions is still limited. The presence of women from Islamic boarding schools who have occupied important positions is still not in accordance with the number of female students who exist. This condition shows that it is necessary to increase the development of female cadres in the Islamic boarding school environment in order to produce female leaders who have integrity, ability, and competitiveness in the midst of the demands of modern times (Dzuhayatin, 2015: 118–122).

1.1. Research Objective

This research aims to analyze the role of female students in building and developing modern leadership practices in the pesantren environment. In particular, this research is directed to identify forms of female students' involvement in the leadership space, both in pesantren organization,

education, social activities, and community activities. This focus is important because women's involvement in pesantren has historically taken place in various positions, but access to authority and decision-making is still often influenced by male-dominated leadership structures (Zakiyah, 2016).

This research also aims to analyze how female students acquire, build, and negotiate leadership authority in the midst of traditional pesantren values and the demands of social change. A number of studies show that women in pesantren not only play the role of educators, but also begin to carry out decision-making, motivation, institutional management, and institutional development functions (Wahyuni et al., 2024). In addition, this study explores various socio-cultural obstacles and strategies of female students in expanding the leadership space. Thus, the research is expected to explain the transformation of the position of female students from educational recipients to actors who have leadership capacity and agents of social change in the context of modern Islamic boarding schools.

2. Literature Review

Studies on pesantren and gender show that pesantren not only function as Islamic educational institutions, but also as a social arena where identity formation, power relations, and the construction of gender roles take place. Women have long had an important position in pesantren life, both as students, educators, managers, and leadership companions. However, women's access to authority and decision-making is still influenced by the social and cultural structure of pesantren which in many contexts places men as the main authoritative figures (Zakiyah, 2016).

Research developments show a change in this pattern. Women are beginning to gain a wider space in the management of education, institutional development, and social activities of Islamic boarding schools. Wardiana et al. (2024) show that women have a significant contribution to the management of pesantren education, including in leadership and decision-making functions. Meanwhile, Nugroho (2024) shows the emergence of women's spiritual leadership which is built through intellectual capacity, example, vision, and the ability to build social relationships.

The study shows that women's leadership in pesantren is not only related to formal positions, but also to the process of gaining legitimacy and building authority. However, previous research has focused more on nyai, ustazah, or women figures who have occupied leadership positions. Studies on female students as actors who are building leadership capacity are still relatively limited. Therefore, this study focuses on the experience, involvement, strategy, and negotiation process of female students in dealing with gender construction and the demands of modern leadership in the pesantren environment.

From an educational perspective, understanding wasatiyyah as a comprehensive ethical framework requires systematic integration into teaching materials and scholarly discourse. Students must be introduced to the historical diversity of Islamic jurisprudence, theological debates, and intellectual traditions that reflect moderation and tolerance. Such exposure reinforces the understanding that pluralism of thought has long been embedded within Islamic civilization, thereby countering exclusivist interpretations that may emerge in contemporary contexts.

3. Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative research method with the type of library research. Literature research is research that is carried out by collecting, studying, and analyzing various literature sources that are relevant to the research topic. The data sources in this study consist of secondary data obtained from books, scientific journals, research articles, official documents, as well as various references related to the leadership of female students, gender equality, and pesantren education.

The approach used is a qualitative descriptive approach. This approach aims to describe and systematically explain the position of female students in the pesantren environment, the leadership potential they have, the various challenges faced, and strategies to strengthen the leadership of female students in the modern era. Through this approach, the researcher seeks to understand the phenomenon studied based on information obtained from various literature sources.

Data collection techniques are carried out through documentation studies by identifying, reading, reviewing, and recording various relevant information from library sources. These sources include books on Islamic boarding schools, leadership, gender, Islamic education, and scientific journals that support research discussions.

The data that has been collected is then analyzed using content analysis techniques. The analysis is carried out by grouping data based on certain themes, then interpreting and connecting various information obtained to produce a comprehensive understanding of the leadership of female students in the pesantren environment. The results of the analysis are then presented descriptively to provide a clear picture of the problems being researched.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Position of Female Students in the Islamic Boarding School Environment

The results of the study show that female students are increasingly playing an important role in the growth and development of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. Changes in society have made people more aware that education for women is very important, including education provided through Islamic boarding schools. This can be seen from the increasing number of female students in various Islamic boarding schools throughout Indonesia. Female students are no longer considered just an

additional part of the Islamic boarding school education system, but are recognized as an important part of developing human resources who have intelligence, inner order, and social interaction skills. In addition to receiving the same religious education as male students, female students can also participate in various activities such as organizations, training, deliberations, da'wah activities, and community service programs. These activities aim to form character and train leadership skills (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022: 32–34)

In daily life in the pesantren environment, female students play an important role in maintaining the running of teaching and learning activities and character building. They are not only students who receive lessons, but also become an active part of various activities held by the pesantren. Female students are often given the task of managing student organizations, becoming dormitory administrators, coordinating religious events, managing learning programs, and guiding younger students. With these various activities, female students gain direct experience in leading, speaking, solving problems, and making decisions. These experiences form social capital that is very important in fostering effective leadership and responsibility (Dhofier, 2011: 44–47).

The participation of female students in various pesantren activities shows that pesantren has a great ability to become a place for the development of female leaders based on Islamic values. Values such as trust, responsibility, honesty, justice, and deliberation are always instilled continuously in the life of pesantren students. These values not only shape the spiritual qualities of pesantren students, but also help build leadership skills that are in accordance with the needs of today's society. In modern leadership, a leader must be able to communicate well, cooperate with others, have integrity, and be able to make wise decisions. These characters are actually part of the learning process at pesantren, so that female students have a high possibility of growing into reliable leaders and have integrity (Northouse, 2018: 5–9).

Even so, the results of the study also show that there are still many obstacles that affect the ability of female students to lead optimally. One of the most noticeable obstacles is the development of a strong patriarchal culture in some pesantren environments. Patriarchal culture often makes people think that men are more suitable to be leaders than women. This view arises because of the influence of the social structure that has been formed in society for a long time, which then influences the way of thinking of most managers and members of the pesantren community. As a result, in student organizations and pesantren activities, important positions are more often given to male students, while female students are usually given tasks related to administration, needs management, cleaning, or other household chores (Marhumah, 2011: 65–70)

Apart from the influence of patriarchal culture, female students also face other obstacles in the form of a lack of leadership cadre training programs specifically designed to improve women's abilities. In some Islamic boarding schools, training on leadership, public speaking, organizational management, and strategic skill development is more often given to male students. As a result, female students often have more limited space to develop in building their leadership skills. In fact, the ability to lead does not come by itself, but must be developed by learning, training, and living continuously. Therefore, a more inclusive policy is needed so that female students can get the same opportunities in participating in various self-development programs, as stated by Marhumah (2011: 68–70).

This condition shows that the opportunity for female students to develop the experience of becoming a leader is still not at all equal to that of male students. Even so, Islamic teachings actually provide equal opportunities for men and women to do charity, work, and contribute to the life of society according to their respective abilities. Islam considers that a person's honor does not depend on his gender, but on the level of faith, the quality of good deeds, and the contribution he makes to society (QS. Al-Hujurat [49]: 13; QS. An-Nahl [16]: 97). So that female students have a high sense of confidence and enthusiasm to develop their leadership skills (Northouse, 2018: 8–10).

With the same opportunity, female students can not only become leaders in the pesantren environment, but can also play an active role as leaders in the community and in various areas of life in the future. They can become teachers, researchers, social activists, organizational leaders, government officials, and even political leaders who are able to have a positive impact on society. Therefore, strengthening the leadership of female students is not only important for the progress of Islamic boarding schools, but also an important part of efforts to create more inclusive, just, and sustainable social development in Indonesia (Dzuhayatin, 2015: 118–122).

4.2. Leadership Potential of Women's Students

Female students have great potential in developing leadership skills. The pesantren environment that emphasizes character education plays an important role in forming individuals who are disciplined, independent, responsible, honest, and have concern for others. Since living in a pesantren, female students are accustomed to obeying rules, managing time well, and carrying out various responsibilities given. These habits gradually form the ability to control themselves, discipline, and a sense of responsibility which are the main foundations in leadership.

In addition, religious education obtained during their education at the pesantren also strengthens moral and ethical values so that female students are able to understand the importance of trust, justice, honesty, and deliberation in carrying out leadership roles (Dhofier, 2011: 44–47). The leadership abilities of female students are also reflected in their skills in establishing social relationships

with various parties, both fellow students, pesantren administrators, and the surrounding community. Living together in the pesantren environment teaches the importance of cooperation, tolerance, and problem solving through dialogue. This experience helps female students develop communication and social interaction skills that are indispensable in leadership. A leader is not only required to be able to provide direction, but must also be able to build harmonious relationships, create good cooperation, and maintain solidarity in a group or organization (Northouse, 2018: 5–9).

In addition, the participation of female students in various organizational activities, da'wah, deliberations, extracurricular activities, and community service is an effective means to hone their leadership skills. Through these various activities, female students learn to plan programs, organize activities, solve problems, and make decisions related to the common interest. The experience of direct involvement in the community also provides an opportunity for them to understand various social problems while practicing their skills in conveying ideas and finding the right solutions. This experience is an important capital in increasing the confidence and leadership capacity of female students (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022: 32–34). In the midst of technological developments and social changes that are taking place very quickly, the need for leaders who are innovative, adaptive, and able to face various challenges is increasing.

In this context, female students have a great opportunity to contribute because they are not only equipped with religious knowledge, but also acquire various skills that are relevant to the needs of the times. The ability to combine Islamic values with the development of science and technology is one of the advantages that can be possessed by female students. Therefore, the development of the leadership potential of female students needs to be continuously supported through various coaching and training programs so that they are able to become competent, integrity leaders, and able to make positive contributions to society (Dzuhayatin, 2015: 118–122).

4.3. Leadership Challenges of Women's Students

Some female students face challenges in building leadership skills. First, there is still an assumption that men are more deserving of being leaders than women. This view is part of the social habits that arise in society, and shifts women to less supportive positions than men. As a result, many women feel hesitant to show their abilities and talents in the field of leadership (Fakih, 2013: 15–18).

Second, access to training and development of leadership cadres specifically aimed at Islamic boarding school girls is still limited. Training on organization, decision-making, leadership management, and the development of public speaking skills is often not provided optimally. In fact, experience and training are very important in shaping a person's ability to become a leader, so if their

access to these programs is limited, the development of the leadership capacity of female students will be hampered (Azra, 2012: 121–124).

Third, cultural and social factors that are still developing in society often consider women to be closer to their roles at home than roles in the social or public environment. This view makes women face many obstacles in developing their own abilities outside the family environment. Even so, Islam provides equal opportunities for men and women to participate in social life according to their abilities. Therefore, it is necessary to change the perspective of society so that women can get wider opportunities to develop their leadership potential (Umar, 2014: 245–248).

These various challenges show that improving the leadership of female students requires assistance from Islamic boarding schools, families, and the community. With equal opportunities, increased access to education and training, and the elimination of gender prejudices, female students can develop their ability to lead optimally and contribute more deeply to community and religious life (Fakih, 2013: 25–27).

4.4. Strategies to Strengthen the Leadership of Female Students

To improve the leadership quality of female students, Islamic boarding schools must provide a wider space for them to participate in various organizational activities and decision-making processes. Involvement is important because leadership is not only obtained from learning theory, but also from direct experience in managing programs, solving problems, and interacting with various parties. Therefore, Islamic boarding schools must encourage the formation of a system that provides equal opportunities for female students to develop their leadership skills through various participatory and educational activities, as explained by Wahid (2001: 112–115).

In addition, improving the ability of female students can be done by providing training on communication skills, improving critical thinking skills, organizational management, and expanding insight into Islam and social life. These skills are important so that female students can face various difficulties that exist in today's society. With continuous coaching, female students not only understand religion well, but also have the ability to become leaders who can provide solutions to various social problems (Husein Muhammad, 2019: 85–89).

Support from the pesantren environment, family, and community also plays a very important role in helping the development of women's leadership skills. An environment that respects women's abilities and achievements will help increase the confidence and enthusiasm of female students to participate in the public sphere. Then, equal opportunities in education and organization can increase the possibility of the emergence of women leaders who are able to play a role in the progress of society

and the nation (Musdah Mulia, 2014: 156–160).

Islam teaches the principles of justice, equality, and social obligations to everyone, regardless of gender. Therefore, improving the leadership of female students is not contrary to Islamic teachings, but is part of an effort to maximize women's abilities in order to provide greater benefits to society. With good education and equal opportunities, pesantren can become a place for women leaders who are honest, knowledgeable, and caring about society (Husein Muhammad, 2019: 92–95).

4.5. The Relevance of Women's Student Leadership in the Modern Era

In the midst of globalization and rapid technological advances, the need for leaders who can adapt to change, think creatively, and be able to work together with others is increasingly important. Social change in various aspects of life requires human resources who not only understand many things, but can also solve various problems faced by society. In this situation, female students have a great opportunity to play an important role because they receive religious education, character building, and social experiences that help in building leadership skills. Through education in Islamic boarding schools, female students are formed into disciplined, responsible, and caring individuals who care about the surrounding social environment (Mastuhu, 1994: 55–58).

The development of Islamic education also shows that women are now increasingly getting opportunities to be involved in various aspects of life. Female students are not only prepared to have a good understanding of religion, but are also instilled as people who can be a driver of change and provide benefits to society. Understanding of science, interaction skills with others, and the ability to communicate effectively are important for female students to be involved in various leadership activities in the future. Therefore, improving women's leadership skills in the pesantren environment is important in an effort to improve the quality of Indonesian human resources (Muhaimin, 2009: 102–105).

By providing greater opportunities for women to be involved in leadership, pesantren can become an educational institution that is able to produce a generation of leaders who have good morals, have a broad understanding, and are ready to face today's challenges. The existence of women leaders from the pesantren environment shows that Islamic values are in line with the spirit of empowerment, justice, and social progress. Therefore, the strengthening of the leadership of female students must continue to be encouraged through various educational programs, training, and equal opportunities, so that they can contribute optimally to the life of society, nation, and state (Tilaar, 2012: 87–90).

5. Conclusion

Based on the results of the discussion, it can be concluded that female students have an increasingly important position in the development of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. Their involvement in education, organizations, da'wah, and community service shows that women have a significant contribution to the progress of Islamic boarding schools. Islamic boarding school life is also a space for the formation of leadership characters through experiences that foster discipline, responsibility, independence, communication skills, and social concern. These various capacities are important capital for female students to play a role as leaders in the future. However, the leadership development of female students still faces a number of challenges, especially gender stereotypes, limited access to training and regeneration, and social construction that still associates women with domestic roles. These conditions show that equality of opportunity in leadership still needs strengthening, both in the pesantren environment and in the community.

Therefore, a strategy is needed through inclusive regeneration, increased leadership training, strengthening communication and organizational management skills, and supporting Islamic boarding schools, families, and communities. Islamic values in the form of justice, trust, deliberation, and responsibility can be the foundation for gender justice leadership development. In the modern context, strengthening the capacity of female students is important to produce leaders with integrity, adaptiveness, and responsiveness to social change, while contributing to the development of an inclusive and sustainable society.

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