

Gender, Authority, and Islamic Education: Bu Nyai's Role in Shaping Feminist Thought in Indonesian Pesantren

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Abstract: *The role of Bu Nyai in Indonesian pesantren signifies an important but insufficiently examined aspect of Islamic education and gender dynamics. Historically positioned within male-dominated religious institutions, Bu Nyai have redefined their roles via faith-based leadership that combines theological inquiry with social activity. This paper investigates how Bu Nyai express Islamic feminism as a theological and practical response to patriarchal norms in pesantren, highlighting the reconfiguration of gender relations within an Islamic context. The research utilised a qualitative descriptive methodology and was carried out at Pesantren Nurul Qarnain in Jember. Data were gathered by field observations, comprehensive interviews with Bu Nyai and students, and textual examination of traditional Islamic literature (kitab kuning). The research utilises an interpretive framework that integrates feminist hermeneutics and socio-religious analysis to elucidate how Bu Nyai reinterprets gender justice in Islamic educational contexts. The findings indicate that Bu Nyai's leadership converts pesantren into inclusive environments where gender equality is grounded in Qur'anic principles such as musawamah (equality), 'adalah (justice), and tawazun (balance). Their educational power and ethical impact contest conventional gender hierarchies while maintaining adherence to Islamic faith. Despite enduring cultural obstacles, Bu Nyai exhibit pious agency – a confluence of devotion, intelligence, and social responsibility – that transforms the moral framework of Muslim societies. This study indicates that Bu Nyai's involvement in Islamic feminism exemplifies a localised and theologically rooted approach of gender transformation, stating that Islam inherently offers the moral and epistemological foundation for justice and equality.*

Keywords: *Islamic Feminism; Gender Equality; Bu Nyai; Pesantren; Religious Authority*

Abstrak: *Peran Bu Nyai dalam pesantren Indonesia menandakan aspek penting namun kurang dieksplorasi dalam pendidikan Islam dan dinamika gender. Secara historis, Bu Nyai berada dalam institusi keagamaan yang didominasi laki-laki, namun mereka telah mendefinisikan ulang peran mereka melalui kepemimpinan berbasis keyakinan yang menggabungkan penyelidikan teologis dengan aktivitas sosial. Artikel ini menyelidiki bagaimana Bu Nyai mengekspresikan feminisme Islam sebagai respons teologis dan praktis terhadap norma-norma patriarkal di pesantren, dengan menyoroti rekonfigurasi hubungan gender dalam konteks Islam. Penelitian ini menggunakan metodologi deskriptif kualitatif dan dilakukan di Pesantren Nurul Qarnain di Jember. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi lapangan, wawancara mendalam dengan Bu Nyai dan siswa, serta analisis teks*

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literatur Islam tradisional (kitab kuning). Penelitian ini menggunakan kerangka interpretatif yang menggabungkan hermeneutika feminis dan analisis sosiokultural untuk menjelaskan bagaimana Bu Nyai menafsirkan ulang keadilan gender dalam konteks pendidikan Islam. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan Bu Nyai mengubah pesantren menjadi lingkungan inklusif di mana kesetaraan gender didasarkan pada prinsip-prinsip Al-Qur'an seperti musawamah (kesetaraan), 'adalah (keadilan), dan tawazun (keseimbangan). Kekuatan pendidikan dan dampak etis mereka menantang hierarki gender konvensional sambil tetap memegang teguh keyakinan Islam. Meskipun menghadapi hambatan budaya, Bu Nyai menunjukkan agen keagamaan yang saleh – perpaduan antara ketekunan, kecerdasan, dan tanggung jawab sosial – yang mengubah kerangka moral masyarakat Muslim. Studi ini menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan Bu Nyai dalam feminisme Islam merupakan contoh pendekatan lokal dan berakar teologis dalam transformasi gender, dengan menegaskan bahwa Islam secara inheren menyediakan landasan moral dan epistemologis untuk keadilan dan kesetaraan.

Kata Kunci: *Feminisme Islam; Kesetaraan Gender; Bu Nyai; Pesantren; Otoritas Agama*

Introduction

The rise of feminist movements was a pivotal moment in the worldwide quest for gender justice. Emerging during the industrial age of the nineteenth century, early feminism focused on economic equality, namely advocating for equal pay for men and women. Over time, the movement transcended socioeconomic concerns to address broader issues including education, political representation, reproductive rights, and physical autonomy, which had long been restricted by patriarchal standards (Tamez, 2025). Feminism has evolved into a multifaceted intellectual and social endeavour that interrogates power dynamics, contests cultural hierarchies, and champions the complete acknowledgement of women's humanity and agency (Hooks, 2000).

In Indonesia, feminist consciousness began to develop in the early twentieth century, exemplified by pioneering figures like Raden Ajeng Kartini and Dewi Sartika. Both individuals expressed the entitlement of women to education and autonomy in a society governed by feudal and patriarchal customs (Suryakusuma, 2011). Kartini's writings, assembled in *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang*, served as a cornerstone for women's emancipation in Indonesia, embodying nascent expressions of what would subsequently be termed Islamic feminism a movement rooted in indigenous religious-cultural principles (Bijl & Chin, 2020). Modernisation, globalisation, and educational

access have broadened feminist discourses in Indonesia, connecting with social, cultural, and religious components (Azizah, 2023; Isro'iyah & Riinawati, 2025). These connections resulted in the emergence of what scholars refer to as "localized feminisms," groups that address universal concepts of gender equality through culturally specific frameworks.

Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority nation, has emerged as a significant platform for the expression of Islamic feminism. In contrast to Western feminism, which frequently arose in reaction to secular power dynamics, Islamic feminism aims to reinterpret religious scriptures to validate gender equality within the context of faith (Hardy, 2025). The movement asserts that Islam, when viewed through the principles of justice (*al-'adl*) and equality (*al-musāwah*), offers an ethical basis for women's empowerment in both public and private domains. This theological underpinning has motivated Muslim scholars and activists to undertake critical reinterpretations (*ijtihad*) of Qur'anic verses and hadiths that have historically been employed to rationalise gender hierarchies (Wijaya et al., 2025).

In this intellectual trajectory, Indonesia provides a distinctive contribution through the position of Bu Nyai female religious leaders in pesantren (Islamic boarding schools). The pesantren is among Indonesia's oldest educational institutions, traditionally serving as a hub for Islamic education and social change (Dhofier, 1982). Although the kiai (male cleric) has historically been viewed as the primary authority, the role of Bu Nyai his wife or female counterpart has been crucial in influencing the intellectual and moral growth of pupils, especially female santri (students) (Herlina & Munawara, 2025). Notwithstanding their significant contributions, the role of Bu Nyai has sometimes been neglected in academic and public discussions, eclipsed by male religious authority.

Bu Nyai's involvement in pesantren life illustrates a tangible manifestation of Islamic feminism. She conveys Islamic knowledge while exemplifying leadership, compassion, and ethical direction. Bu Nyai frequently oversees female education, social welfare initiatives, and community outreach programs that enhance women's spiritual and intellectual empowerment (Arifin, 2018). Her authority, however frequently informal, contests the patriarchal presuppositions that confine religious interpretation and decision-making to males. Bu Nyai reinterprets leadership in Islamic

education through pedagogy, religious guidance, and community involvement, effectively connecting faith and gender equity (Fitriyah & Muhid, 2025).

Bu Nyai's quest for acknowledgement does not transpire in isolation. The enduring presence of patriarchal culture in religious institutions constitutes a significant impediment. Numerous pesantren continue to maintain hierarchical gender norms that favour male authority over female perspectives (Nasution et al., 2025). In these situations, Bu Nyai's leadership must manoeuvre intricate cultural expectations reconciling her religious commitment with her promotion of women's autonomy. This tension, instead of reducing her influence, highlights Bu Nyai's transformative capacity as an agent of change. Through a reinterpretation of ta'lim (teaching) and tarbiyah (education), Bu Nyai formulates a style of faith-based leadership that integrates piety with progressivism.

Islamic feminism, as exemplified by Bu Nyai, asserts that faith and gender equality are not opposing forces but rather mutually reinforcing. Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas contend that the ethical framework of the Qur'an underscores moral equality between genders (Fidhayanti et al., 2024). Bu Nyai exemplifies these ideals in her daily interactions, demonstrating that commitment to God does not preclude the quest of intellectual autonomy or social engagement. This viewpoint aligns with the overarching Qur'anic message in Surah al-Hujurat (49:13) and al-Taubah (9:71), which endorses mutual collaboration between believing men and women in promoting virtue and prohibiting vice. Consequently, the Bu Nyai phenomena in Indonesia can be regarded as a contextual embodiment of this Qur'anic ethos.

In addition to her religious impact, Bu Nyai's function signifies a societal advancement within the pesantren framework. Modern Bu Nyai personalities are progressively engaged in legislation, curriculum creation, and community enhancement, establishing themselves as essential contributors to the reformation of Islamic education (Abdullah et al., 2025). They incorporate gender-sensitive viewpoints into religious education and promote the participation of female students in intellectual discussions typically led by men. This movement corresponds with the worldwide trend of acknowledging women's leadership within faith organisations, which has also gained momentum in other Muslim-majority countries, including Morocco, Iran, and Egypt (Hasan, 2023).

Notwithstanding advancements, the acknowledgement of Bu Nyai's authority continues to be inconsistent. Structural patriarchy, insufficient institutional recognition, and cultural prejudice persist in marginalising women's voices in religious leadership (Fatmawati et al., 2024). Bu Nyai continues to express what can be termed "faithful feminism" - a variant of Islamic feminism grounded in devotion, ethical integrity, and the quest for justice. In contrast to secular feminist frameworks that frequently exclude religion, faithful feminism include *taqwa* (God-consciousness) as a guiding principle for gender equality. This synthesis illustrates how local Islamic epistemologies might enhance global feminist theory by providing non-Western frames of liberation.

In this context, Bu Nyai exemplifies what Mernissi characterised as "women who inscribe their faith into history." Her action is not solely ideological but also pedagogical rooted in personal experience, education, and spiritual guidance (Bouras, 2024). Through education, institutional management, and community guidance, Bu Nyai exemplifies that women's power in Islam is not an aberration but a perpetuation of prophetic principles of justice and compassion. Her presence contests the dichotomy of modernity versus tradition and faith vs feminism, demonstrating that Islamic education can serve as a catalyst for gender transition rather than subjugation.

This study aims to examine the leadership and accomplishments of Bu Nyai in restoring women's religious authority within the context of Islamic feminism. This study specifically analyses how Bu Nyai reinterprets the concepts of faith, gender, and power to promote gender justice within the Indonesian pesantren environment. The study examines the socio-religious challenges faced, the techniques employed to negotiate authority, and the wider implications of their leadership for the reform of Islamic education. And enhances scholarly discourse on the confluence of religion and gender in Muslim communities by examining Bu Nyai's committed feminism. It presents an alternative framework to Western-centric feminist theories by emphasising faith as an empowering rather than a limiting force. This research contends that Bu Nyai's praxis exemplifies a transformative type of gendered piety, integrating devotion with emancipation and religious orthodoxy with social justice.

Research Method

This study utilised a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach to comprehend the lived experiences of Bu Nyai and the santri within the social and

educational context of Pesantren Nurul Qarnain Jember. The qualitative paradigm was chosen for its capacity to facilitate a comprehensive examination of meanings, interpretations, and values as perceived by participants within their social context. This study aims to elucidate Bu Nyai's perception of her leadership role, her negotiation of gender norms, and her embodiment of Islamic feminist values inside a conventional religious organisation. Creswell and Poth assert that qualitative inquiry allows researchers to grasp the social reality as experienced by participants, emphasising depth above generalization (Creswell, 2013). The fieldwork was conducted at Pesantren Nurul Qarnain Jember, a prominent pesantren in East Java renowned for its robust legacy of women's leadership exemplified by Bu Nyai. The pesantren was intentionally chosen for its importance as a hub of Islamic education, where gender dynamics and religious authority converge in everyday practice (Azra, 2019). In this context, Bu Nyai serves as an educator and spiritual mentor while also strategically influencing institutional policy and promoting women's empowerment among *santriwati* (female students). This framework offers a comprehensive explanation of the manifestation of feminist thought within Islam, rooted in both social and spiritual aspects.

The data gathering employed a synthesis of direct observation, comprehensive interviews, and document analysis executed concurrently during the research process. The researcher observed the cadence of pesantren life, the interactions between Bu Nyai and the santri, and the manifestation of leadership practices in daily routines, instructional sessions, and community activities. The comprehensive interviews with Bu Nyai and chosen santri yielded significant insights into personal experiences, perspectives of leadership, and interpretations of gender justice within the framework of Islamic beliefs (Maesaroh et al., 2024). These discussions were structured to be adaptable and conversational, allowing participants to articulate their opinions and feelings openly. Alongside observation and interviews, document analysis functioned as a crucial supplementary tool. A variety of textual sources, such as pesantren archives, biographies, religious instructional materials, and academic publications, were examined to enhance the empirical findings and offer historical and institutional context (Fahmi, 2024). This multi-method data collection facilitated a thorough

comprehension of Bu Nyai's leadership and its connection to the wider discourse on Islamic feminism.

The data analysis adhered to the theme interpretation standards established by Braun and Clarke. The researcher noticed reoccurring patterns and classified them into overarching themes that represented gendered leadership, religious authority, and the lived expression of loyal feminism within the pesantren environment. To augment credibility, triangulation was employed by cross-verifying information from many sources and viewpoints. Member verification was performed, enabling individuals to assess and confirm the conclusions derived from their experiences. Ethical considerations were paramount during the research, encompassing informed permission, confidentiality, and adherence to local religious conventions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This methodological approach guarantees that the findings accurately reflect the perspective of Bu Nyai as a faith-based feminist leader within the pesantren tradition— a perspective that not only contests patriarchal constraints but also reinterprets Islamic values to empower women in the sacred and educational realms of Indonesian Islam.

Result and Discussion

Islamic Feminism and the Theological Foundations of Gender Equality

Islamic feminism has arisen as a significant intellectual movement in modern Muslim nations, aiming to reconcile religious beliefs with gender equity. In opposition to the orientalist presumption that Islam intrinsically subjugates women, Islamic feminism reinterprets the sacred writings as foundations of egalitarian principles. It posits that inequality originates not from divine revelation but from its patriarchal interpretation (Nisar & Benedict, 2024). Islam, in its doctrinal core, affirms the equality of men and women as spiritual entities and societal participants, each with moral responsibility (*taklīf*) and equivalent access to divine mercy.

The Qur'an explicitly establishes a foundation for this equality. The passage states, "*O humankind, We have indeed created you from male and female and established you as nations and tribes for the purpose of mutual recognition.*" The verse "*Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you*" (Q.S. al-Hujurat:13) emphasises that piety (*taqwā*), rather than gender, forms the foundation of human value. Likewise,

Q.S. al-A'raf:189 and al-Qiyamah:37–39 underscore the common biological and ontological genesis of both men and women (Wadud, 2021). These books deconstruct the metaphysical order traditionally established through male-centered interpretations of scripture.

Feminist scholars like Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud contend that patriarchy in Muslim countries originated not from divine revelation but from centuries of male-centric interpretations. Barlas asserts that the Qur'an, when interpreted contextually and intertextually, advocates for tawhidic justice—the conviction in divine unity that inherently entails the moral equality of all individuals before God (Fidhayanti et al., 2024). Wadud advances this argument by asserting that *tafsir* (interpretation) should transition from hierarchical exegesis to participatory hermeneutics, enabling women to regain their agency as interpreters of divine intent (Wadud, 2021).

From a religious standpoint, Islamic feminism identifies as both reformative and restorative. It is reformist as it contests patriarchal authority in religious studies, and restorative as it aims to rejuvenate Islam's foundational moral essence of fairness and equilibrium (*mīzān*). Mir-Hosseini asserts that Islamic feminism is not a secular import but rather a "homegrown ethics of equality" originating from the Islamic heritage itself (Hasannia & Masoudian, 2021; Mir-Hosseini, 2013). This differentiates it from Western feminist paradigms, which frequently utilise secular epistemologies independent of divine revelation.

In the Indonesian context, the pesantren tradition one of the most ancient Islamic educational systems functions as a dynamic laboratory for this theological reconstruction. The pesantren system is intricately rooted in Qur'anic principles, traditional knowledge, and community involvement. It facilitates the integration of Islamic feminism via pedagogical and spiritual activities (Hasannia & Masoudian, 2021). In this context, Bu Nyai—female religious academics and leaders—are crucial in actualising theological equality in practice.

Bu Nyai's involvement in Islamic feminism is characterised not by explicit political activism but by what Mahmood describes as pious agency a mode of empowerment grounded in devotion and religious practice. Through the instruction of

classical texts with a gender-sensitive lens, Bu Nyai illustrates that gender justice can be realised within the parameters of orthodoxy rather than in contradiction to it (Munthali & Kirina, 2023; Zamin Abbas et al., 2012). This method aligns with the notion expressed in Q.S. al-Taubah:71, which characterises believing men and women as mutual allies (*awliyā'*), collectively accountable for fostering virtue and averting injustice. Islamic feminism consequently reinterprets the interplay of revelation, reason, and gender. It contends that God's message is intrinsically just and that any manifestation of gender inequity constitutes a divergence from divine purpose. In this context, reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) emerges as an ethical imperative. The Qur'an's declaration that *"whoever performs righteous deeds, whether male or female, while being a believer, We will undoubtedly bestow upon them a good life"* (Q.S. al-Nahl:97) expresses a universal principle of moral equality. The participation of both male and female adherents in heavenly reward undermines patriarchal notions of moral superiority and validates the gender-neutral essence of human value (Qazi, 2024). Historically, Islam has yielded many women who shown intellectual and spiritual authority, like Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, the Prophet's first wife and a prosperous entrepreneur, and Aisyah bint Abi Bakr, a distinguished hadith scholar. Their presence undermines the idea that Islam relegates women to domestic obscurity. Modern Islamic feminism draws upon this legacy, contending that these instances exemplify the normative ideal of Islam, whereas patriarchal constraints are socio-historical distortions (Shaikh & Seedat, 2022).

In pesantren environments, the redefinition of gender equality assumes a pedagogical aspect. Bu Nyai interprets religious literature not solely as doctrinal guidance but as a means of ethical development. By including gender-sensitive viewpoints into the curriculum, they allow santri (students) to recognise that moral greatness and intellectual ability are not dictated by gender (Nasution et al., 2025). This educational style exemplifies what Freire referred to as "critical pedagogy" learning as emancipation. In the pesantren setting, liberty is characterised not by secular emancipation but by spiritual empowerment, integrating faith, intellect, and social awareness (Okoli, 2024).

Moreover, the theological foundation of gender equality in Islam underscores the equal moral agency of men and women to seek knowledge, uphold human dignity, and contribute to the welfare of society (Agustin, 2020). This framework reflects the Islamic ethical vision that justice and equality are not gender-specific virtues but universal obligations rooted in faith. Within this context, Bu Nyai's leadership in the pesantren translates theological principles into inclusive educational practices, mentorship, and social engagement—transforming doctrinal ideals into tangible expressions of gender-responsive Islamic leadership. Islamic feminism, however, encounters opposition, especially from conservative factions that regard it as a challenge to religious validity. This contradiction illustrates a wider hermeneutical conflict between *taqlid* (unquestioning loyalty to historical readings) and *ijtihad* (contextual analysis). Wadud and Mir-Hosseini contend that re-engaging with the Qur'an through modern hermeneutics is not heretical but essential for preserving Islam's ethical vigour (Chirico, 2024). In this way, Bu Nyai function as mediators who bridge textual tradition and modern gender discourse, ensuring that reform proceeds within the confines of faith.

The theological underpinnings of gender equality in Islam are not foreign nor unprecedented. They are integrated within the Qur'an's intrinsic moral framework of justice, kindness, and reciprocity. Islamic feminism, as practiced by Bu Nyai in Indonesian pesantren, rejuvenates these ideals via instruction, leadership, and community involvement. It reconceptualises gender not as a hierarchy but as a partnership (*zawjiyyah*) a duality unified by a common ethical objective. The pesantren serves as a microcosm of Islam's egalitarian ethos, where knowledge, devotion, and justice converge to create a tangible representation of *rahmatan lil-'alamin* (Abdillah & Ali, 2020). From this perspective, Islamic feminism surpasses the dichotomy of faith and modernity. This constitutes an epistemic movement urging Muslims to approach the Qur'an with a revitalised awareness one that perceives the holy word as encompassing all believers, irrespective of gender. The theological expression of equality, as exemplified by personalities such as Bu Nyai, illustrates that the pursuit of gender justice transcends socioeconomic dimensions and is deeply rooted in

spirituality. It is really an act of worship—a commitment to God via the quest for justice and human dignity.

Pesantren and the Reconfiguration of Gender Relations: The Emergence of Bu Nyai's Agency

From this perspective, Islamic feminism surpasses the dichotomy of faith and modernity. This constitutes an epistemic shift urging Muslims to approach the Qur'an with a revitalised awareness—one that perceives the holy word as encompassing all believers, irrespective of gender. The theological expression of equality, as exemplified by personalities such as Bu Nyai, illustrates that the pursuit of gender justice transcends societal dimensions and is fundamentally spiritual. It is really an act of worship—a commitment to God via the quest for justice and human dignity. Pesantren, as conventional Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, are essential for maintaining the continuity of Islamic scholarship, social ethics, and the cultural-religious identity of the archipelago. Despite their devout and communal facade, pesantren also serve as dynamic social environments where gender relations are perpetually built, negotiated, and renewed (Ahmad et al., 2025). Abdurrahman Wahid characterised pesantren as the nucleus of Javanese subculture an environment for the interplay of religious texts, indigenous customs, and communal existence, unified by spiritual and social cohesion (Barton, 1997). In this context, the figure of Bu Nyai—a wife, daughter, or female leader within the pesantren has emerged as a pivotal agent in the restructuring of gender relations in a domain traditionally governed by male authority.

Traditionally, the social hierarchy of pesantren has been governed by the Kiai, who possesses supreme power in religious, educational, and social affairs (Azra, 2019). This patriarchal framework has historically assigned women, such as Bu Nyai, to the role of companions confined to the domestic sphere, offering moral and emotional support. Contemporary social dynamics and theological awareness indicate that Bu Nyai has transformed from a symbol of piety into an active participant in knowledge creation, decision-making, and community leadership (Srimulyani, 2012). Within the persistent patriarchal structure, Bu Nyai has reinterpreted her status through symbolic

negotiation, integrating devotion, study, and moral leadership as avenues of acknowledged societal legitimacy.

A notable evolution is apparent in Bu Nyai's dual role as a spiritual leader and an educator. She not only conveys Islamic teachings but also redefines notions of women's responsibilities in religious and educational situations (Azhari, 2024). Bu Nyai employs contextual and gender-sensitive hermeneutics to rethink passages and hadiths generally regarded as patriarchal through her instruction of classical Islamic books (*kitab kuning*) and participation in critical Islamic discourse. Instead of dismissing classical research, she reinterprets it to correspond with modern realities and the experiences of women. This interpretative approach aligns with the views of Amina Wadud (1999) and Asma Barlas (2002), who promote egalitarian interpretations of sacred texts grounded in the ideas of divine unity (*tawhid*) and justice. An illustrative instance of this transformation is evident at Pesantren Nurul Qarnain in Sukowono, Jember, where Bu Nyai functions as both a spiritual advisor to the Kiai and a strategic policymaker, particularly in curriculum development, guidance for female students, and the establishment of gender-sensitive educational initiatives. She has commenced leadership workshops, entrepreneurial training, and thematic Islamic studies designed to enhance the intellectual and social capabilities of female pupils (*santriwati*). Through these interactive events, Bu Nyai conveys that women in Islam are not alone recipients of religious knowledge but also interpreters, instructors, and catalysts for social development. Her leadership illustrates the transition from a nurturing, domestic position to a strategic and visionary one, where spirituality, intellect, and social involvement converge. Bu Nyai navigates gender dynamics not by directly confronting patriarchal norms, but by symbolically reinterpreting Islamic beliefs. The ethical framework for establishing egalitarian connections inside the pesantren is grounded in the moral concepts of *musāwāh* (equality), *‘adālah* (justice), *tawāzun* (balance), and *ta‘āwun* (mutual collaboration) (Auda, 2022). Bu Nyai illustrates that Islam does not contradict gender equality but rather contextualises it within a framework of mutual responsibility between men and women. This is manifested in the incorporation of female students into all aspects of pesantren life academic, social, and spiritual—without discriminating segregation.

Critics of Islamic feminism frequently contend that it is a Western fabrication that contradicts Islamic tenets. Within the pesantren framework, feminism is regarded not as an external ideology but as a manifestation of Islam's intrinsic dedication to justice and reciprocity between genders, as declared in the Qur'an (Q.S. al-Taubah: 71). According to Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan, feminism is essentially an awareness of gender-based inequity and a purposeful endeavour to rectify it (Acharya, 2024). Within pesantren, such awareness arises organically not from secular ideology but from theological contemplation and moral interaction with Islamic teachings. Consequently, pesantren feminism is indigenous, grounded on the lived experiences of Muslim communities, integrating tradition with the quest for justice. The relational dynamics between Kiai and Bu Nyai illustrate a flexible and responsive power model. Structurally, the Kiai typically serves as the formal leader of the institution; yet, in practice, Bu Nyai's moral and spiritual power often surpasses institutional confines. She serves as an intermediary between the pesantren and the wider community, directing students and acting as a public moral exemplar (Adnani & Mahbub, 2021). This relationship exemplifies Saba Mahmood's notion of pious agency, wherein women's religiosity serves as a source of empowerment rather than oppression (Adnani & Mahbub, 2021). Bu Nyai reinterprets leadership within a traditional Islamic context via dedication, intellectual involvement, and community service. In practice, Bu Nyai fulfils various roles: educator, administrator, and community leader. Her experience demonstrates that women may embody leadership, academic rigour, and social influence while preserving their Islamic identity. Her leadership fosters a model of equality based not on rivalry with males but on complementary partnership (*zawjiyyah*), characterised by collaboration and mutual respect in power dynamics. Bu Nyai instructs her students to become informed, autonomous, and socially aware women capable of making significant contributions to public life while upholding religious principles.

Beyond the pesantren, several Bu Nyai expand their influence into the wider community. They engage in social advocacy, women's empowerment initiatives, family economic education, and community-oriented religious outreach. These projects establish Bu Nyai as social reformers who amalgamate Islamic precepts with modern

societal requirements. Their efforts illustrate that Islamic feminism, as enacted within pesantren, is not merely a theoretical debate but a tangible manifestation of justice, compassion, and educational empowerment.

The growing participation of Bu Nyai in leadership and community engagement signifies a fundamental transformation in the culture of pesantren. Areas once designated solely for men have transformed into venues for collaboration and inclusivity (Nuryazidi, 2024). As a result, pesantren have evolved from centres of religious instruction into platforms for gender-aware education and social advancement. In this changing framework, Bu Nyai serves as a vital link between tradition and modernity, orthodoxy and emancipation, authority and equality. In conclusion, Bu Nyai represents not just a symbol of female piety but also a tangible embodiment of contextual Islamic feminism—a theology and practice originating from the Islamic intellectual and social legacy of Indonesia. Bu Nyai exemplifies through her knowledge, example, and leadership that gender equality is not a divergence from Islam but an embodiment of its fundamental ethical tenets: justice, dignity, and collective humanity. Her work illustrates Islam's revolutionary potential to emancipate women from systemic inequality while maintaining a strong connection to faith and cultural identity.

Challenges and Prospects of Islamic Feminism through Bu Nyai's Leadership in Pesantren

The emergence of Bu Nyai as a prominent person in Indonesia's pesantren milieu exemplifies a crucial stage in the development of Islamic feminism. Her leadership exemplifies the manner in which women recontextualise religious authority within a traditionally patriarchal framework. The pursuit of gender inclusion in pesantren is intricate, positioned between theological principles of equality and the persistent existence of cultural hierarchy. For ages, pesantren have been defined by male-dominated authority, with the Kiai holding the paramount role in religious, educational, and social matters (Fatmawati et al., 2024; Nuryazidi, 2024). This patriarchal structure has typically restricted women to auxiliary or household positions. The rise of Bu Nyai challenges this paradigm by presenting a style of female

leadership based on knowledge (*ilm*), spirituality (*taqwa*), and moral authority (*akhlaq*) (Huda et al., 2025). Her presence illustrates that Islamic feminism is not an alien doctrine but a reexamination of Islam's inherent principles of justice and equality.

In pesantren like Nurul Qarnain Sukowono, Jember, Bu Nyai serves as both the emotional support of the Kiai and an intellectual and administrative head. She oversees female students (*santriwati*), develops curricula, and implements leadership and entrepreneurial initiatives aimed at women's empowerment. In her instruction, she utilises contextual interpretations of kitab kuning (ancient Islamic writings), emphasising verses such as Q.S. al-Hujurat:13 and Q.S. al-Nahl:97, which endorse equality in religion and ethical value. Through the integration of these ideals, she embodies what Amina Wadud refers to as tawhidic consciousness the conviction that divine unity necessitates human equality and what Asma Barlas characterises as egalitarian hermeneutics of the Qur'an (Asman et al., 2023; Fidhayanti et al., 2024; Wadud, 2021). Notwithstanding these advancements, the institutional framework of pesantren continues to embody entrenched patriarchal norms. Numerous pesantren persist in favouring male perspectives in decision-making, although Bu Nyai's impact frequently remains informal or unacknowledged within administrative structures. This cultural inertia constrains women's involvement at the institutional level, despite their considerable social and moral significance (Azhari, 2024). Bu Nyai faces the problem of manoeuvring through these limits while preserving religious legitimacy and communal cohesion. To mitigate this contradiction, Bu Nyai utilises tactics of moral negotiation exercising leadership via devotion, knowledge, and compassion instead of confrontation. Her leadership style exemplifies what Saba Mahmood refers to as pious agency: empowerment derived not from opposition but from the innovative reinterpretation of faith-based behaviours. Through the integration of devotion and social involvement, Bu Nyai reformulates patriarchal frameworks from within, demonstrating that leadership in Islam can be inclusive of women while adhering to tradition.

Table1. The influence of Bu Nyai's leadership can be encapsulated in the subsequent analytical framework:

Dimension of Leadership	Traditional Pesantren Context	Transformative Role of Bu Nyai	Outcome on Gender Relations
Religious Authority	Centered on <i>Kiai</i> as sole interpreter of texts	Shared interpretative role through gender-sensitive <i>tafsir</i>	Recognition of women as theological actors
Educational Function	Women as assistants in domestic education	Designers of curriculum and trainers in leadership	Increased access of female students to intellectual empowerment
Social Engagement	Limited to internal community roles	Expansion to community activism and advocacy	Broader social recognition of women's agency
Decision-Making Power	Hierarchical, male-dominated	Collaborative leadership with consultative patterns	Integration of women's perspectives in institutional policy

This change signifies a slow yet significant restructuring of pesantren culture. Bu Nyai reframes masculine power as a collective moral obligation rather than rejecting it. Her programs prioritise *musawamah* (equality), *'adalah* (justice), and *ta'awun* (mutual collaboration) as fundamental ethical concepts in education and everyday life (Auda, 2022). The merger of ethical theology and practical teaching aligns pesantren with the worldwide discourse on Islamic gender reform while preserving their unique spiritual framework.

Nonetheless, obstacles persist. Numerous societies continue to perceive feminism as a Western concept that is incongruent with Islamic norms. This misconception frequently engenders scepticism towards gender-focused activities inside religious organisations. To address these preconceptions, Bu Nyai anchors her advocacy in scriptural authority, demonstrating that the Qur'an advocates for justice and collaboration between men and women (Q.S. al-Taubah:71). Her life example illustrates

that equality is not an act of revolt but a restoration—the rebirth of the moral underpinning of Islam.

Furthermore, Bu Nyai's leadership transcends educational practices. Her work in mentoring young women establishes her as both an educator and a reformer, cultivating a new generation of santri who embrace gender equity as an Islamic value rather than a political imperative. In the communities surrounding Jember, Bu Nyai has emerged as a mediator in social matters including family welfare, women's business, and child safety. These initiatives exemplify what Margot Badran refers to as practical Islamic feminism, wherein theology, education, and social reform converge organically (Abela, 2023).

The future of Islamic feminism in pesantren depends on institutional acknowledgement. If pesantren adopt inclusive governance by recognising Bu Nyai's intellectual and managerial abilities, they would not only augment women's participation but also rejuvenate the moral and educational objectives of Islamic institutions. The evolution of pesantren from male-dominated to gender-inclusive environments signifies a significant advancement in realising the Qur'anic principles of *'adl* (justice) and *rahmah* (mercy) (Abubakar & Hedayat, 2020). The leadership of Bu Nyai serves as a conduit between faith and gender equity. This paper comprises three sections: Islamic Feminism and the Theological Foundations of Gender Equality, Pesantren and the Reconfiguration of Gender Relations, and Challenges and Prospects of Islamic Feminism through Bu Nyai's Leadership, culminating in a singular conclusion. Islamic feminism is not an external ideology but a re-established truth grounded in revelation and practiced devotion. Bu Nyai illustrates that the pesantren of Indonesia demonstrate that justice and equality are not only theoretical concepts but divine mandates, poised for actualisation via faith, knowledge, and empathetic leadership.

Conclusion

The rise of Bu Nyai as a religious and intellectual authority in Indonesian pesantren signifies a pivotal advancement in the realm of Islamic education and gender

discourse in Southeast Asia. This study's findings indicate that Islamic feminism, anchored on Qur'anic theology of justice and equality, can reform entrenched patriarchal structures while preserving the spiritual framework of Islamic tradition. This variant of feminism does not contest orthodoxy; instead, it reappropriates it, reverting to the foundational principles of *taqwa* (piety), *'adl* (justice), and *musawamah* (equality).

The theological basis, as outlined in the initial section, asserts that Islam has never established a hierarchical opposition between men and women. The Qur'an consistently underscores moral and spiritual equality, as articulated in verses like al-Hujurat:13 and al-Nahl:97, where human value is determined by piety and virtuous deeds, rather than by gender. This egalitarian ethos serves as the theological foundation for reevaluating gender in Islamic education. Feminist scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas have demonstrated that a justice-oriented hermeneutic of sacred texts facilitates women's agency within the concept of *tawhid* the oneness of God, which signifies the unity of human dignity. The second portion demonstrated how the *pesantren*, traditionally characterised by a male-dominated hierarchy, has transformed into a more dynamic space for gender negotiation. The character of Bu Nyai represents this transformation. Her involvement in education, administration, and community leadership signifies a progressive transformation of gender dynamics, wherein women transcend traditional supportive roles to engage actively as knowledge interpreters and moral authorities. Her intellectual authority arises not from confrontation but from the steadfastness of her spiritual and educational commitment a manifestation of what Mahmood refers to as pious agency.

The third portion emphasised the ongoing problems associated with this shift. Cultural and institutional sexism persistently delineates the boundaries of women's involvement in *pesantren* governance. Bu Nyai's moral leadership and educational impact illustrate that transformation is achievable through faith-based discussion rather than insurrection. Her capacity to integrate devotion with reform demonstrates an indigenised vision of Islamic feminism—anchored in revelation, articulated through compassion, and manifested in social activity.

The study ultimately suggests that Bu Nyai's leadership offers an alternate framework for comprehending Islamic feminism in Indonesia. It reconceptualises gender equality not as a Western imposition but as an intrinsic revitalisation of Islamic principles. Through the integration of religion, education, and social participation, Bu Nyai converts the pesantren into a realm of inclusive spirituality and justice. This integration of tradition and transformation heralds a new epoch of religious authority, wherein the moral and intellectual contributions of women are acknowledged as essential to the perpetuation of Islam's message of mercy and equality.

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