

Reframing the Spirit of Gender Equality: a Prototype of Woman Religious Leader in *Pesantren Nahdlatul Ulama*

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Abstract

Gender in *pesantren* is a unique socio-cultural phenomenon because the patriarchal culture is still strongly dominating. This culture is constructed by a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in leadership, authority, and social privilege. The role of the *Kyai* as a central figure is considered in participating in the practice of gender bias and patriarchal culture. Therefore, the figure of *Nyai* is often positioned as a companion who has no strong power in designing the education system in *pesantren*. This research exposes the role of a woman leader in internalizing the spirit of gender equality. Since 2015, *Nyai Latifah* has emerged as the leading *pesantren Nadhlatul Ulama Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga* with 404 students, which consist of 150 male and 254 female students. Her existence as the top authority in this *pesantren* shows woman empowerment who can change the tradition of social construction, which states that women are incapable of being a leader in *pesantren*. The results showed that *Nyai Latifah's* leadership pattern had reformed the *pesantren* system from a patriarchal leadership pattern to a gender mainstreaming leadership, viewed from Gender Analysis Pathway. The process of gender mainstreaming is realized through curriculum, learning activities, and organizational systems. In addition, the spirit of gender equality developed by *Nyai Latifah* in this *pesantren* is reflected in the principle of equality (*musawamah*), fairness (*al-'adalah*), moderation (*tawasut*), tolerance (*tasamuh*), balance (*tawazun*), plurality (*ta'addud*), and respect (*al ihtiram*).

Keywords: gender equality, woman, leader, *pesantren*

Abstrak

Gender di *pesantren* merupakan fenomena sosial budaya yang unik karena budaya patriarki masih sangat kuat mendominasi. Budaya ini dibangun oleh sistem sosial di mana laki-laki memegang kekuasaan utama dan mendominasi dalam kepemimpinan, otoritas, dan hak istimewa sosial. Peran *Kyai* sebagai figur sentral dinilai ikut serta dalam praktik bias gender dan budaya patriarki. Oleh karena itu, sosok *Nyai* sering diposisikan sebagai pendamping yang tidak memiliki

kekuatan kuat dalam merancang sistem pendidikan di pesantren. Penelitian ini memaparkan peran pemimpin perempuan dalam menginternalisasi semangat kesetaraan gender. Sejak tahun 2015, Nyai Latifah telah muncul memimpin pesantren Nadhlatul Ulama Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga dengan 404 santri yang terdiri dari 150 santri putra dan 254 santri putri. Keberadaannya sebagai otoritas tertinggi di pesantren ini menunjukkan pemberdayaan perempuan yang dapat mengubah tradisi konstruksi sosial, yang menyatakan bahwa perempuan tidak memiliki kapasitas untuk menjadi seorang pemimpin di pesantren. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pola kepemimpinan Nyai Latifah telah mereformasi sistem pesantren dari pola kepemimpinan patriarki menjadi kepemimpinan pengarusutamaan gender dilihat dari *Gender Analysis Pathway*. Proses pengarusutamaan gender diwujudkan melalui kurikulum, kegiatan pembelajaran, dan sistem organisasi. Selain itu, semangat kesetaraan gender yang dikembangkan oleh Nyai Latifah di pesantren ini tercermin dalam prinsip kesetaraan (*musawamah*), keadilan (*al-'adalah*), moderasi (*tawasut*), toleransi (*tasamuh*), keseimbangan (*tawazun*), pluralitas. (*ta'addud*), dan hormat (*al ihtiram*).

Kata kunci : *kesetaraan gender, perempuan, pemimpin, pesantren*

INTRODUCTION

The gender equality concept can be defined as the equal condition and roles between women and men to achieve their careers, full potential, human rights, and dignity in a society without discrimination. Therefore, this concept recognizes that all humans are free to explore, improve, and develop their abilities in giving contributing to economic, social, cultural, and political development without being restricted by stereotypes and prejudices of gender roles in society (Lainchaur et al., 2017; Eagly et al., 2020; Islam & Asadullah, 2018). As a perfect religion, Islam has regulated equality between men and women to gain equal access to their potential. Dealing with gender equality from the Islamic perspective, it goes without saying that this concept has become one of the basic principles in Islamic values. Men and women in Islam are spiritual equals (Kia, 2019; Patoari, 2019; Zarrouki, 2018). Islam teaches that all humans are equal in the sight of Allah Almighty, although they are not identical. They have differences anatomically and physiologically. Samier & Elkaleh (2021) argued that Islam encourages Muslim women to develop and empower their ability to play a significant role in advancing civilization. This assumption strengthens that Muslim women have equal access to reach the highest level in their profession and take responsibility as societal leaders.

Gender in *pesantren* is a unique socio-cultural phenomenon because the patriarchal culture is still strongly dominating. This culture is constructed by a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in leadership, authority, and social privilege (Kgatla, 2020; Jewkes et al., 2015; Ahmad & Nawaz Khan, 2020). *Kyai* is the most crucial figure responsible as a spiritual leader, educator, and guide in *pesantren* (Wahyudin, 2020; N. Ahmad & Alam, 2018, Arifin, 2017). The role of the *Kyai* as a central figure is considered in participating in the practice of gender bias and patriarchal culture. Meanwhile, the figure of *Nyai* is often positioned as a companion who has no strong power in designing the education system in *pesantren*. As *Kyai*'s wife, *Bu Nyai* has an essential role in managing the *pesantren*. However, her leadership role in *pesantren* is considered quite complicated. *Bu Nyai*'s leadership in the *pesantren* is analyzed as the result of negotiation. She is a prominent figure, but structurally her role is often not counted as the leadership of the *pesantren* (Srimulyani, 2012). Undoubtedly, women's leadership in *pesantren* has remained contentious in Indonesia as a Muslim-majority country. Nevertheless, in some *pesantren*, the leadership of *bu Nyai* could be negotiated in both the public and private domains. Her power in leading the *pesantren* has broken the patriarchal culture that has been attached to the *pesantren*.

Previous research has been conducted to shed light on the transformational leadership role of *Nyai* in *pesantren* (see, for instance, Ambarwati & Aida, 2014; Chusniyah & Alimi, 2015; Kusmana, 2019; Adisti, 2018; Aini et al., 2021; Khotimah, 2017). Those previous studies portray the phenomena of *Nyai* in leading *pesantren* viewed from the gender elasticity aspect in *pesantren*. However, Habibullah (2017) and Ulfatun (2020) argued that the most dominant role of *bu Nyai* in *pesantren* lies in the domestic sector. Meanwhile, the study from Munawwaroh et al. (2019) at Cirebon *pesantren* highlighted three patterns of *bu Nyai*'s leadership in *pesantren*; charismatic, collective, and democratic leadership styles. Furthermore, the study from Muna & Hamam (2020) at Kediri *pesantren* reported that *bu Nyai*'s leadership is categorized as an authority leadership pattern in educating her santri in *pesantren*. In addition, in terms of promoting gender equality, a study from Noorhayati (2017) at Probolinggo *pesantren* revealed that *bu Nyai*'s role was very effective in encouraging women's social, economic, and political empowerment aspects. Based on the previous literature review, this research has a novelty aspect compared to previous studies. This study aims to expose the leadership role of *bu Nyai* as a woman leader at *pesantren Nadhlatul Ulama Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga* in internalizing the spirit of gender

equality viewed from the Gender Analysis Pathway. Then this study also portrays the process of gender mainstreaming that is realized through the education system in this *pesantren*.

METHODS

This research is trying to portray the life of bu *Nyai* Latifah in leading *pesantren Nadhlatul Ulama* Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga. As mentioned in the introduction, this research aims to expose the leadership role of *bu Nyai* as a woman leader in internalizing the spirit of gender equality in *pesantren*. Henceforth, this research uses qualitative descriptive research with a case study. According to Baxter and Jack (2015), a case study aims to study complex phenomena through investigation and context. This research also applies a descriptive case study that describes a phenomenon in a real-life context. This study attempts to report a systematic inquiry about woman leadership in *pesantren Nadhlatul Ulama* Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga from the detailed contextual analysis on internalizing the spirit of gender equality in *pesantren* viewed from Gender Analysis Pathway. The data sources are from primary and secondary sources such as observation, interviews, document analysis, books, academic journals, research reports, and internet sources.

DISCUSSION

The Profile of Nyai Latifah

Pesantren Nadhlatul Ulama Tarbiyyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga was established by K.H M Zoemri RWS and his wife, *Nyai* Hj. Latifah in 1986. This *pesantren* stands on private land supported by government and society. In 2015, K.H. M Zoemri RWS passed away, so his wife, *Nyai* Hj Latifah Zoemri, replaced this *pesantren*'s leadership. In 2020, *Nyai* Latifah emerged as the leading Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga *pesantren* with 404 students, who consist of 150 male and 254 female *santri*. When leading *pesantren* Tarbiyatul Islam Al Falah Salatiga, *Nyai* Latifah is also supported by her older brother, KH. Maksum and her two daughters, Ning Siti Rofiah and Ning Siti Halimah. The authority possessed by *Nyai* Latifah is not because she is the wife of *Kyai*-the leader of this *pesantren*. Still, *Nyai* Latifah is seen as having qualified knowledge as a preacher. Her excellent knowledge background makes her religious authority recognized by *pesantren* and society. Through her leadership period, *Nyai* Latifah has transformed this *pesantren* into a gender-responsive one. She proved that a woman figure could lead a *pesantren*; usually, a *pesantren* is dominated by patriarchal culture.

Gender Mainstreaming Policies by Nyai Latifah

A systematic inquiry about Nyai Latifah's leadership can be seen from all the policies implemented in *pesantren* Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga. Those policies could be analyzed using the Gender Analysis Pathway, which consists of four factors as follows:

Access factor

Pesantren Nadhlatul Ulama Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga has implemented the principle of gender equality from the access factor. It is indicated by all communities in the *pesantren*, both males and females. They have received equal and non-discriminatory access, for instance, access to get knowledge at *pesantren*, access to attend recitations outside the *pesantren*, access to use all facilities at *pesantren*, and access of gender-unbiased admissions *santri*.

Benefit factor

Pesantren Nadhlatul Ulama Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga aims to educate *santri* to become qualified Islamic preachers in society. After *santri* have completed their education, they are expected to contribute to society based on their knowledge during learning in this *pesantren*. This vision applies to all *santri*, both males and females. This vision indicates that both males and females *santri* receive the maximum and equal educational benefits. All *santri* at *pesantren* Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga has gained access to benefits from the curriculum, compulsory activities, and extracurricular activities at *pesantren*.

Participation factor

Reviewing the participation factor, *pesantren Nadhlatul Ulama* Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga has implemented gender equality in all elements. For example, in terms of learning, *pesantren* Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga has a discussion forum named *batsul masail* (legal deliberation) to discuss the issues relating to Islamic laws. All *santri*, both males and females, can argue and express their opinion in that forum. In terms of skill activities, all *santri* can participate in these activities. There are no activities only for males except that females are allowed to participate. In addition, the selection of organizational management *santri* is transparent and democratic, which means that both males and females *santri* have the equal right to participate in *Badan Pengurus Harian* (Daily Management Board) management. Both male and female teachers are involved and synergized in constructing a curriculum. The curriculum construction is based on a gender-responsive curriculum reviewed from a *mufakat* (consensus) between male and female teachers.

Control factor

Reviewing the control factor, *pesantren Nadhlatul Ulama Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga* provides a fair proportion for women and men in every decision. *Nyai Latifah* decides every policy in this *pesantren* as the leader that has previously been discussed in the forum so that the decisions taken are considered the best policy and fair decisions that all elements, both men and women, can access.

Based on the Gender Analysis Pathway (Astuti, 2016), the policies made by *Nyai Latifah* at *pesantren Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga* have fulfilled the gender-responsive category. This analysis can be seen from the curriculum design, learning activities, and organizational system at *pesantren Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga*, which has implemented gender-fair programs in terms of four factors; access, benefit, participation, and control factors. The results of this analysis strengthen the study from Noorhayati (2017), Adisti (2018), and Khotimah (2017) that figure of *Nyai* can be a role model of a woman leader in *pesantren* in encouraging women's empowerment which is manifested in every gender-responsive policy in *pesantren* that she leads. Her existence as the top authority in this *pesantren* shows woman empowerment who can change the tradition of social construction, which states that women cannot be a leader in *pesantren*. This finding also strengthens the study from Munawwaroh et al. (2019) that revealed *bu Nyai's* leadership pattern; charismatic, collective, and democratic. This leadership pattern can be seen in how *bu Nyai* leads this *pesantren*.

Based on the observation, there are seven principles that *Nyai Latifah* has reflected in reframing the spirit of gender equality; (1) equality (*musawamah*), (2) fairness (*al-'adalah*), (3) moderation (*tawasut*), (4) tolerance (*tasamuh*), (5) balance (*tawazun*), (6) plurality (*ta'addud*), and (7) respect (*al ihtiram*). All of these principles were embodied by *Nyai Latifah* in leading this *pesantren*. The dominance of *Nyai Latifah* as a leader in this *pesantren* indicates the negotiation process (as quoted from Srimulyani, 2012). The negotiation process began when *Nyai Latifah* faced being a leader in the *pesantren* after the death of her husband. However, the negotiation process was successfully passed by *Nyai Latifah* after she decided to accept the position of leader in this *pesantren*. Not only that, *Nyai Latifah's* decision is considered the right decision because of her excellent background of knowledge and qualified skills in managerial and also supported by family factors. The skills shown by *Nyai* in leading *pesantren* give her significant experience in dealing with society. The increasing public trust in *pesantren Nadhlatul Ulama Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga* proves this. Thus, the leadership of *Nyai Latifah* can be a prototype of a woman religious leader in *pesantren*.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of *Nyai* as a woman religious leader in *pesantren* in this contemporary era is attractive to be analyzed since the position and role of *Nyai* are still contradictory in a patriarchal culture. In reality, the leadership role of *Nyai* has excellence dimensions as part of the negotiation process in society. The study from the leadership of *Nyai* Latifah, who leads *pesantren Nadhlatul Ulama Tarbiyatul Islam Al-Falah Salatiga*, can be a role model. This phenomenon has broken the assumption that women are incapable of being leaders in *pesantren*. Finally, *Nyai* Latifah's leadership pattern had reformed the *pesantren* system from a patriarchal leadership pattern to a gender mainstreaming leadership. The process of gender mainstreaming is realized by implementing policies in constructing curricula, learning activities, and organizational systems, which refers to principles and the spirit of gender equality.

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