

## Transforming Pesantren Management: The Role of Women's Leadership in Indonesia

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### Article Info

#### Article history:

Received 2026-03-09

Revised 2026-03-29

Accepted 2026-05-09

#### Keywords:

Female Leadership  
Islamic Education Management  
Pesantren Leadership  
Pesantren Management  
Women Leadership

### ABSTRACT

The leadership structure of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Indonesia has traditionally been dominated by male religious authorities, leaving the role of women in institutional leadership relatively underexplored in academic discourse. Although previous studies have discussed gender issues in Islamic education, limited attention has been given to how female leaders shape managerial practices and institutional development within pesantren. This study addresses this gap by examining the characteristics, strategies, and institutional impacts of female leadership in pesantren management. This research employs a qualitative design based on a systematic literature review combined with case-based analysis of selected pesantren led by women. Data were collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and institutional reports, and analysed using thematic analysis, including coding, categorisation, and interpretation of leadership patterns, decision-making processes, and management practices. The findings reveal that female leadership in pesantren is characterised by collaborative decision-making, participatory governance, and strong community engagement. Women leaders tend to adopt adaptive management strategies by integrating traditional Islamic values with contemporary educational practices. These approaches contribute to improving institutional governance, enhancing educational quality, and strengthening the sustainability of pesantren in responding to social and educational changes. This study contributes to the literature by providing a more nuanced understanding of how female leadership influences organisational transformation in Islamic educational institutions. It also offers a conceptual perspective on gender-inclusive leadership as a strategic factor in promoting innovation and sustainability in pesantren management while maintaining their religious identity.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) are among the oldest and most influential Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. These institutions play a vital role not only in transmitting religious knowledge but also in shaping social values and community development. Traditionally, *pesantren* leadership has been dominated by male religious figures, commonly referred to as *kyai*, who exercise central authority in educational, spiritual, and organisational decision-making. However, ongoing social transformation, the expansion of educational access, and increasing awareness of gender equality have gradually created opportunities for women to assume leadership roles within *pesantrens*. The emergence of female leadership reflects a broader shift in the governance and management of Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia [1].

In recent years, the involvement of women in Islamic educational leadership has attracted growing scholarly attention. Female leaders in *pesantren* are often associated with distinctive leadership approaches, such as collaborative decision-making, participatory governance, and stronger engagement with local communities. These approaches are considered relevant in addressing contemporary educational challenges, including institutional adaptability, social responsiveness, and the integration of traditional and modern educational values [2]. As a result, female leadership is increasingly viewed as a potential driver of innovation and inclusivity in *pesantren* management.

Despite these developments, a significant gap remains in the existing literature. Most prior studies have primarily focused on gender discourse in Islamic education or the historical evolution of *pesantren*, with limited attention given to the concrete managerial practices, leadership strategies, and institutional impacts associated with female leadership. In particular, there is a lack of systematic analysis linking leadership characteristics to organisational outcomes and sustainability in *pesantren* contexts. This limitation underscores the need for a more comprehensive examination of how female leadership operates in practice and contributes to institutional transformation in Islamic educational settings [3].

Understanding the dynamics of female leadership in *pesantren* is therefore essential not only from a gender perspective but also from an institutional development standpoint. Leadership significantly influences strategic planning, educational innovation, and community engagement. As *pesantren* continue to adapt to modern educational demands while maintaining their religious identity, leadership models become a key determinant of institutional resilience and long-term sustainability [4].

In response to these issues, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of female leadership in *pesantren*? (2) What management strategies are applied by female leaders in *pesantren* institutions? (3) What institutional impacts emerge from the implementation of female leadership?

Based on these questions, this study aims to examine the dynamics of *pesantren* management under female leadership in Indonesia by identifying leadership characteristics, managerial strategies, and institutional outcomes. Through this analysis, the study seeks to contribute to the development of knowledge on leadership in Islamic educational institutions

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and to highlight the strategic role of women in strengthening pesantren governance and institutional sustainability in contemporary Indonesian society.

## 2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design, combining a systematic literature review with case-based qualitative analysis, to examine the dynamics of pesantren management under female leadership in Indonesia. This design was selected to enable a structured and comprehensive exploration of existing scholarly works while also providing contextual insights from selected cases of pesantren led by women. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for analysing leadership practices, organisational behaviour, and institutional dynamics within their natural and socio-cultural context [5], [6].

The systematic literature review followed a structured procedure to identify, select, and analyse relevant academic sources. Data were collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, institutional reports, and policy documents related to Islamic education, leadership, and pesantren management. The literature search was conducted across academic databases such as Google Scholar and Scopus, as well as nationally accredited journals. In total, approximately 30–40 relevant publications were initially identified, from which 25 key sources were selected for in-depth analysis based on their relevance and quality. In addition, two representative pesantren cases led by female leaders were included to strengthen contextual interpretation of the findings [7].

To ensure rigour, this study applied clear inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria consisted of: (1) publications discussing pesantren or Islamic educational institutions, (2) studies focusing on leadership or management, (3) works addressing female or gender-inclusive leadership, and (4) publications from the last ten years to ensure relevance. Exclusion criteria included: (1) studies lacking a clear methodological explanation, (2) articles not directly related to pesantren or Islamic education, and (3) opinion-based writings without empirical or conceptual grounding.

The data collection process was conducted in three stages. First, relevant literature and documents were systematically identified and screened based on the established criteria. Second, selected sources were critically reviewed to extract key information regarding leadership characteristics, managerial strategies, and institutional outcomes. Third, the extracted data were organised into thematic categories, including leadership style, decision-making processes, organisational management, and institutional adaptation to contemporary challenges [8].

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis, involving coding, categorisation, and interpretation of recurring patterns across the selected sources. This process aimed to identify relationships between leadership characteristics and institutional practices, and to understand how female leadership contributes to organisational transformation in pesantren. The analysis also incorporated cross-case comparison to strengthen the interpretation of findings derived from the selected pesantren cases [9].

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed source triangulation by comparing evidence from multiple publication types and case

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studies. Consistency across different data sources was used as a basis for validating interpretations and minimising potential bias [10].

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the reliance on secondary data may limit the depth of contextual insight compared to field-based research. Second, the number of case examples is limited, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Third, variations in methodological approaches across the reviewed studies may influence the consistency of the analysis. Despite these limitations, the study provides a comprehensive overview of female leadership in pesantren and offers a foundation for future empirical research.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1. Results**

##### **3.1.1 Leadership Dynamics in Pesantren under Female Leadership**

The first finding of this study highlights the dynamics of leadership within pesantren institutions led by women, particularly in relation to the characteristics of female leadership. The results show that female leadership has become increasingly integral to institutional development and sustainability in pesantren. This shift occurs alongside broader social transformation, including increased access to education for women and growing recognition of gender-inclusive leadership in Islamic educational settings.

Female leaders in pesantren are not only responsible for preserving religious traditions but also play a strategic role in managing institutional development. Their leadership encompasses decision-making across curriculum design, organisational management, and community engagement. This indicates that female leadership in pesantren operates within a dual framework, maintaining religious authority while simultaneously adopting modern managerial practices. Such a dual role emerges as a response to the need for institutional adaptability to contemporary educational demands.

One of the most prominent characteristics identified is the emphasis on collaborative governance and participatory management. Decision-making processes often involve teachers, administrative staff, and, in some cases, community stakeholders. This suggests a shift toward more inclusive leadership models, where authority is not solely centralised but distributed across institutional actors. This pattern can be explained by the tendency of female leaders to prioritise relational approaches, which foster trust, communication, and collective responsibility within the organisation. As a result, pesantren institutions become more flexible and responsive to emerging challenges.

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## Nyai Masriyah Amva, Perempuan Progresif Pemimpin Pesantren Tradisional

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Figure 1. Female Leadership in Pesantren Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy, Cirebon

The case presented in Figure 1, which highlights the leadership of Nyai Masriyah Amva at Pesantren Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy in Cirebon [11], provides an empirical illustration of these dynamics. Her leadership demonstrates how female authority can be effectively exercised while introducing inclusive and adaptive management practices. The focus on strengthening religious scholarship alongside expanding educational opportunities, particularly for female students, indicates that female leadership contributes to both intellectual development and gender inclusivity within pesantren education.

Furthermore, the leadership approach observed in this case emphasises the creation of a supportive and respectful learning environment. This suggests that organisational culture under female leadership tends to prioritise interpersonal relationships and ethical values, such as mutual respect, cooperation, and social responsibility. These values influence not only daily interactions within the institution but also the implementation of broader institutional policies.

Another significant finding is the integration of religious authority with organisational management. Female leaders often assume dual roles as religious figures (*nyai*) and institutional managers. This indicates that leadership legitimacy in pesantren is increasingly shaped not only by religious authority but also by managerial competence. This pattern reflects a gradual transformation in leadership criteria within pesantren, where effectiveness and adaptability become as important as traditional authority.

In addition, female leadership encourages a dialogical relationship between traditional Islamic teachings and contemporary educational practices. This suggests a shift toward adaptive leadership, balancing the maintenance of religious identity with the need for innovation. Such an approach enables pesantren institutions to remain relevant without losing their foundational values.

These findings directly address the first research question by demonstrating that female leadership in pesantren is characterised by collaborative decision-making,

participatory governance, adaptive management, and value-based leadership. These characteristics not only redefine leadership practices within pesantren but also strengthen institutional governance and sustainability in a changing socio-educational context.

### 3.1.2 Management Strategies of Female Leaders in Pesantren Institutions

The second finding of this study focuses on the management strategies implemented by female leaders in pesantren and addresses the second research question. The results indicate that female leadership is associated with the adoption of adaptive and integrative management strategies to strengthen institutional sustainability. These strategies primarily emphasise three interconnected dimensions: institutional independence, educational quality, and community engagement.

Female leaders tend to develop structured management approaches, including the organisation of systematic learning programs, strengthening administrative coordination, and expanding collaborative networks with surrounding communities. This indicates that management practices under female leadership are not only oriented toward internal organisational efficiency but also toward external social relevance. Such an orientation emerges as a response to the growing demand for pesantren to function not only as religious institutions but also as agents of social development.

Another key strategy identified is integrating religious education with life skills and social empowerment programs. This suggests a shift toward holistic educational management, where cognitive, spiritual, and practical competencies are developed simultaneously. This pattern can be explained by the need to equip students with broader capabilities in facing contemporary socio-economic challenges. As a result, pesantren institutions can maintain their religious identity while adapting to modern educational expectations.

#### **Umi Waheeda, Sosok Perempuan *Socialpreneur* yang Sukses Memimpin Pesantren**



Figure 2. Educational and Community Activities in Pesantren Nurul Iman under Female Leadership

The case illustrated in Figure 2, namely Pesantren Al-Ashriyyah Nurul Iman in Bogor under the leadership of Umi Waheeda [12], provides a concrete example of these management strategies. The integration of religious education with socio-economic empowerment initiatives, such as entrepreneurship training, community service, and collaborative learning, suggests that female-led pesantren tend to adopt a sustainability-oriented management model. These programs are designed not only to enhance students' academic competencies but also to develop practical skills that support institutional and individual resilience.

Furthermore, strong community involvement is a central element of the management strategy. This suggests a shift toward community-based institutional governance, where pesantren actively engage with their social environment. Such engagement strengthens mutual relationships and creates a support system that contributes to institutional sustainability. This pattern occurs because female leadership often emphasises relational and inclusive approaches, which facilitate cooperation between the institution and the broader community.

In addition, the leadership strategy promotes institutional independence and collective responsibility. Students, teachers, and administrators are actively encouraged to participate in institutional activities and decision-making processes. This indicates that participatory management is used as a strategic tool to enhance organisational effectiveness and accountability. By distributing roles and responsibilities, pesantren institutions can operate more efficiently while fostering a sense of ownership among stakeholders.

The findings also show that values such as empathy, cooperation, and social solidarity are embedded in management practices. This suggests that management strategies under female leadership are strongly value-driven, influencing both organisational culture and program implementation. These values support the development of innovative educational initiatives and strengthen institutional cohesion. These findings demonstrate that female leaders in pesantren implement management strategies characterised by integration, participation, community orientation, and sustainability focus. These strategies directly respond to contemporary challenges and contribute to the long-term development of pesantren institutions. Thus, female leadership not only introduces alternative management approaches but also reshapes the strategic direction of pesantren management in a more adaptive and socially responsive manner.

### **3.1.3 Institutional Development Outcomes of Female Leadership**

The third finding of this study examines the institutional development outcomes generated by female leadership in pesantren, addressing the third research question. The results indicate that female leadership contributes significantly to transforming organisational structures, educational practices, and institutional sustainability. These outcomes are not merely administrative changes but reflect broader shifts in how pesantren operate and respond to contemporary challenges.

One of the primary outcomes is the development of more inclusive and participatory governance structures. Female leaders tend to implement management

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practices that involve multiple stakeholders in decision-making processes. This indicates that leadership under female authority promotes the decentralisation of power, allowing teachers and administrators to contribute to institutional planning and implementation actively. This pattern arises from relational leadership approaches that prioritise communication and collective responsibility. Consequently, organisational structures within pesantren become more adaptive and responsive to change.

Another important outcome is the transformation of educational programs toward integrative learning models. Female leaders frequently promote the combination of religious education with social awareness and practical skills. This suggests a shift toward context-based education, where learning is designed not only to transmit religious knowledge but also to prepare students for real-life social roles. This transformation is driven by the need for pesantren graduates to remain relevant in a rapidly changing socio-educational environment.

Community engagement also emerges as a significant institutional outcome. Female leadership often strengthens collaboration between pesantren and surrounding communities through social programs and educational initiatives. This indicates that pesantrens under female leadership increasingly function as community-centred institutions rather than isolated religious entities. Such engagement enhances institutional legitimacy and expands the social impact of pesantren.

Table 1. Institutional Development Outcomes in Pesantren under Female Leadership

No	Institutional Aspect	Development Outcome
1	Leadership Structure	Collaborative and participatory decision-making
2	Educational Programs	Integration of religious education with modern learning approaches
3	Organisational Governance	Strengthened administrative coordination
4	Community Engagement	Increased cooperation with surrounding communities
5	Institutional Sustainability	Development of socio-economic empowerment initiatives

The data presented in Table 1 further illustrate the key institutional outcomes associated with female leadership. The emergence of participatory decision-making processes demonstrates a move toward more transparent and accountable governance. This suggests that institutional effectiveness is enhanced when leadership practices are inclusive and collaborative. In addition, the integration of modern learning approaches into educational programs reflects the pesantren's capacity to adapt to contemporary educational demands without abandoning its core religious values.

Another notable outcome is the strengthening of administrative coordination. This indicates that female leadership not only influences leadership style but also improves internal organisational efficiency. Clearer coordination mechanisms enable pesantren institutions to manage resources, programs, and personnel more effectively.

Furthermore, the expansion of community engagement and socio-economic empowerment initiatives highlights the growing role of pesantren in social development. This suggests a shift toward sustainability-oriented institutional management, where financial independence and community collaboration become strategic priorities. Programs

such as entrepreneurship training and community-based projects help build institutional resilience and reduce dependence on external support.

These findings demonstrate that female leadership produces multidimensional institutional impacts, including improvements in governance, educational quality, social engagement, and sustainability. This indicates that the presence of female leaders is not only symbolic but also transformative, reshaping the strategic direction and operational practices of pesantren institutions. Therefore, female leadership plays a critical role in supporting the modernisation and long-term development of pesantren in Indonesia.

### **3.2. Discussion**

This study extends previous research by demonstrating that female leadership in pesantren not only challenges gender norms but also reshapes institutional governance models. The findings reveal that the presence of women in leadership positions represents a substantive transformation rather than a symbolic shift. In particular, the case of Nyai Masriyah Amva illustrates that leadership legitimacy in pesantren is increasingly determined by managerial competence and intellectual authority, rather than gender identity alone. This indicates a gradual redefinition of leadership criteria within Islamic educational institutions, where capability and adaptability become central elements of authority [13].

Furthermore, the study shows that female leadership introduces a more inclusive and participatory governance model. Unlike traditional hierarchical structures, leadership practices observed in this study emphasise collaboration and shared decision-making. This suggests a shift toward decentralised governance, where institutional actors actively contribute to organisational processes. Such a transformation does not weaken institutional authority; instead, it reinforces organisational stability through collective responsibility and stronger internal cohesion [14]. In this context, leadership diversity becomes a key factor in enhancing institutional resilience.

Another important contribution of this study lies in highlighting the integrative nature of management strategies under female leadership. The findings indicate that female leaders tend to combine educational functions with broader social and economic roles. This reflects an expanded understanding of pesantren as community-centred institutions rather than solely religious learning environments. By integrating educational programs with community empowerment initiatives, pesantrens can strengthen their social relevance and institutional legitimacy. This supports the argument that institutions with strong community engagement tend to achieve higher sustainability [15], [16].

In addition, this study provides new insight into the relationship between leadership style and institutional innovation. Female leadership is shown to promote adaptive management practices that balance tradition and modernity. This suggests that innovation in pesantren does not require abandoning religious values but can be achieved through contextual adaptation. Such findings reinforce the concept of adaptive leadership, where institutional continuity and change coexist in a dynamic equilibrium [17], [18]. The ability of female leaders to mediate between these two dimensions represents a significant contribution to the discourse on Islamic educational management.

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The findings also demonstrate that participatory governance has direct implications for institutional effectiveness. By involving multiple stakeholders in decision-making processes, pesantren institutions can improve transparency, accountability, and program implementation. This indicates that leadership style plays a crucial role in shaping organisational culture and performance. Moreover, the collaborative environment fostered by female leadership encourages the exchange of ideas, thereby stimulating innovation and institutional development [19], [20].

Another key insight from this study is the strengthening of relationships between pesantren and surrounding communities. Female leadership appears to emphasise relational approaches that prioritise social interaction and community engagement. This suggests that pesantren under female leadership are more likely to function as active agents of social transformation. Through community-based programs, these institutions expand their educational impact beyond formal learning spaces and contribute to broader societal development [21], [22], [23].

In terms of sustainability, this study highlights the importance of integrating socio-economic initiatives into institutional management. Female leaders tend to promote entrepreneurship programs and community collaboration as strategies for achieving financial independence. This indicates a shift toward sustainability-oriented management, where pesantren are encouraged to develop internal resources rather than rely on external funding. Such strategies not only support institutional continuity but also enhance organisational resilience in the face of changing socio-economic conditions [24], [25], [26].

The findings of this study provide a more comprehensive understanding of how female leadership influences the transformation of pesantren management. The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that female leadership is associated with governance innovation, institutional adaptability, and sustainability-oriented practices. At a broader level, these findings suggest that gender-inclusive leadership models can play a strategic role in shaping the future of Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. Future research may further explore the long-term impact of these leadership models across different pesantren contexts and examine their implications for educational outcomes and policy development.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study examined the dynamics of pesantren management under female leadership in Indonesia and found that female leadership plays a significant role in transforming institutional governance. The findings indicate that female leaders tend to promote collaborative decision-making, participatory management, and strong community engagement. These characteristics enable pesantren institutions to respond more effectively to contemporary educational challenges while maintaining their core religious values. In this context, female leadership is not merely complementary but represents a transformative force in shaping more adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable institutional models.

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Beyond its empirical findings, this study contributes to the broader discourse on Islamic educational leadership by demonstrating that gender-inclusive leadership can enhance institutional resilience and encourage innovation. The integration of educational development, community engagement, and socio-economic empowerment highlights how pesantren can evolve into dynamic institutions that combine religious, educational, and social functions. These findings reinforce the importance of leadership diversity as a strategic factor in modernising pesantren management.

This study offers several implications. For pesantren leaders and administrators, the findings suggest the importance of adopting participatory and collaborative governance models to improve institutional effectiveness. For policymakers, the study highlights the need to support gender-inclusive leadership policies within Islamic educational institutions. Additionally, educational practitioners may consider integrating community-based programs and socio-economic initiatives into sustainable pesantren management strategies.

This study is not without limitations. First, the reliance on secondary data through a systematic literature review limits direct empirical observation of leadership practices in the field. Second, the use of a limited number of case examples may not fully represent the diversity of pesantren contexts across Indonesia. Third, variations in the methodological approaches of the reviewed studies may influence the consistency of the analysis. These limitations suggest that future research should incorporate field-based studies, such as interviews or ethnographic approaches, to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of female leaders in pesantren.

Future research is encouraged to explore comparative leadership models across different types of pesantren and to examine the long-term impact of female leadership on educational outcomes and community development. Such studies will further strengthen the understanding of gender-inclusive leadership and its role in shaping the future of Islamic education in Indonesia.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to all individuals and institutions that contributed to the completion of this research. Special appreciation is extended to colleagues and academic reviewers who provided valuable feedback during the preparation of this manuscript. The author also acknowledges the support of academic resources and institutional references that enabled this research. Finally, the author expresses appreciation to the editorial team of the Journal of General Education and Humanities for providing the opportunity to submit and disseminate this research through their scholarly publication platform.

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