Pillars of Women in the Scientific Tradition: Tracing the Role of Muslim Scholars in Islamic Education

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ABSTRACT

In South Kalimantan's interior, a significant shift is unfolding within the realm of Islamic religious instruction, spearheaded by female educators who are redefining conventional theological education. Research examining 25 women religious teachers demonstrates their transformative impact on local communities through progressive leadership methods and contemporary approaches to spiritual teaching. These trailblazing educators have assumed leadership roles within pesantren educational institutions, implementing participatory and welcoming management practices that foster supportive learning spaces for students of all genders. Moving beyond conventional pedagogical frameworks, they have integrated instruction that recognizes gender-specific considerations, particularly focusing on the distinct requirements of women in their communities. They organize substantive conversations covering marriage counseling, healthcare matters, and the interpretation of women's rights through Islamic jurisprudence, addressing important educational voids. What stands out particularly is their adoption of online technologies to broaden their educational influence. These religious teachers have effectively leveraged social media platforms including YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok Live to engage with varied audiences spanning multiple generations. Their technological proficiency enables them to deliver spiritual instruction in modern, relatable formats that appeal to digitally-connected community members. Drawing from comprehensive interview data, field observations, and examination of their digital platform activities, scholars found that these educators are doing more than simply responding to transformation—they are catalyzing it. Their contributions illustrate how Islamic theological education can modernize to address current community requirements while preserving its religious core, establishing that women's academic leadership plays a vital role in developing accessible, forward-thinking religious educational settings.

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1.   INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's Islamic educational landscape has experienced substantial changes driven by multiple influences, with religious scholars contributing fundamentally to these developments. Although men have conventionally held dominant positions in Islamic education, female religious authorities are increasingly emerging as influential figures, significantly shaping educational methodologies and religious communication efforts (Latifah, 2024; Purnamasari et al., 2024).

Male religious figures continue to maintain primary control over the process of developing religious legal opinions in Indonesia, despite the fact that these rulings frequently have direct implications for Muslim women's lived realities and daily situations. Women's rights organizations have responded by creating specialized training initiatives aimed at cultivating female religious leadership to counterbalance this disparity (Ismah, 2016; Kloos & Ismah, 2023; Kloos & Künkler, 2016).

The growing presence of female religious leaders enables more holistic Islamic educational approaches, particularly regarding women's needs for religious understanding. These scholars bring innovative perspectives to Islamic learning that connect practical religious instruction with contemporary life and societal circumstances, especially serving women who have historically remained marginalized from religious conversations (Jamilatun et al., 2024; Numan et al., 2024).

With its strong pesantren heritage and majlis taklim customs, South Kalimantan provides fertile ground for female Islamic scholars to develop and contribute substantially to religious instruction. Islamic education functions as a fundamental pillar for building moral character within South Kalimantan's overwhelmingly Muslim population. Female ulama play an indispensable role here, as they communicate Islamic teachings while simultaneously promoting social and cultural values that strengthen women's agency (Alfisyah, 2017). These religious leaders often take on instructional duties in diverse educational contexts—including Islamic boarding schools, mainstream schools, and taklim gatherings—acting as exemplars who motivate other women toward active community engagement (Al Dabbagh, 2022; Simić, 2022).

Historically in Indonesia, especially within South Kalimantan, female religious authorities have functioned largely without formal recognition. Patriarchal structures have conventionally relegated women to domestic domains, preventing their involvement in public religious conversations. However, recent years have brought remarkable changes in how society views women's religious leadership roles. Contemporary female scholars now receive recognition not just among women but throughout society generally, where they are acknowledged as essential participants in both organized and grassroots Islamic education (Ismah, 2024). They fulfill critical community needs by providing religious guidance attuned to women-specific issues (Jamil & Usuluddin, 2024).

Female religious scholars hold a unique and essential place within Islamic education. They go beyond conventional religious teaching to engage with subjects directly relevant to women's lives, such as family education, healthcare, and women's rights according to Islamic law (Sugie, 2022). By adopting more inclusive and caring approaches, these religious leaders create safe spaces where women feel comfortable participating in religious study and conversation. This particular emphasis distinguishes them from male scholars, who generally focus on universal religious matters with less emphasis on women-specific concerns.

The importance of female Islamic scholars lies in their ability to connect traditional religious wisdom with modern social needs (Naz, 2024). They interpret Islamic teachings while providing actionable advice for contemporary challenges, including mental health, family relationships, and women's public participation. In South Kalimantan, educators like Ustadzah Siti Rahmah use online platforms for religious education, discussing topics that appeal especially to young women searching for modern religious guidance.

Nevertheless, women in Islamic scholarship face substantial obstacles in securing formal recognition within established religious structures (Supriyadi et al., 2019). Cultural barriers often prevent female religious authorities from accessing leadership positions in formal religious institutions, such as administrative roles in Islamic boarding schools or recognized religious bodies (Numan et al., 2024). Although research shows that women-led Islamic organizations demonstrate female agency in religious and civic engagement, challenging traditional gender patterns and advancing gender equality in Muslim societies (Ghadikolaei, 2023), South Kalimantan's situation frequently shows contradictions. Female religious scholars often possess considerable community respect and informal influence while being denied comparable recognition in official religious institutional settings.

The Indonesian Women Ulama Congress (Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia/KUPI) held in 2017 and 2022 represented watershed moments for formally recognizing female Islamic scholars nationally. These events validated women ulama's work and encouraged their involvement in religious spheres, especially educational and community development activities (Rohmaniyah, Kotele, & Widiastuti, 2022; Satibi et al., 2023). For South Kalimantan particularly, these congresses acted as a stimulus, inspiring women ulama toward more active and confident religious leadership while creating opportunities for greater institutional backing of their preaching work and Islamic educational activities.

A defining characteristic of women ulama's work in South Kalimantan involves their teaching approach, which emphasizes compassion, empathy, and responsiveness to female congregants' particular needs. This educational philosophy makes Islamic learning more approachable and relevant to modern social contexts. Field research and conversations demonstrate that female religious leaders such as Nyai Hj. Aisyah, active in Hulu Sungai Selatan, regularly delivers teachings addressing women's actual experiences, creating learning environments that feel welcoming and meaningful for female audiences. Through this method, women ulama serve not just as conveyors of Islamic knowledge but as motivational figures who stimulate greater female involvement in religious activities.

Current academic research reveals several important directions regarding Muslim women's educational involvement. One significant area examines educational leadership, with Numan et al. (2024) and Utari et al. (2024) analyzing how Muslim women strengthen educational systems through leadership capacities such as school administration, management positions, and teaching leadership, particularly in educational settings.

Another research direction investigates institutional validation and scholarly cultivation. Research by Rohmaniyah, Kotele, & Widiastuti (2022), Rohmaniyah, Kotele, Pabbajah, et al. (2022), and Satibi et al. (2023) examines KUPI's institutional mechanisms for recognizing and developing women scholars in religious scholarship, education, and community engagement. Digital religious outreach represents a third research area, with investigations by Adel & Numan (2023), Subchi et al. (2022), and Uyuni et al. (2023) exploring how women religious authorities employ digital media for religious communication and education. Community-level religious change through traditional structures is examined by Alfisyah (2017), who studies clerics' functions in recitation groups as mechanisms for social transformation. Furthermore, Nisa (2019) frames Muslim women as democratic pluralists who practice religious participation in both conventional and online environments. However, current scholarship lacks thorough, in-depth examination of women scholars' particular educational contributions.

This research fills this void by concentrating on women ulama's educational work in South Kalimantan, a region with insufficient documentation. The investigation explores three core areas: the strategic methods women ulama use to address modern challenges and patriarchal cultural limitations through their positions in formal and informal educational settings; their use of inclusive teaching practices; and their adoption of digital tools for religious communication (da'wah). Expected results include generating new understanding of women ulama's particular functions in today's digital environment, enriching Islamic academic literature that centers women religious leaders' contributions, and building groundwork for more adaptive and inclusive Islamic educational frameworks.

2. METHODS

This research adopted a qualitative descriptive approach through case study methods to investigate the roles of female Islamic teachers in advancing religious education throughout South Kalimantan. Researchers chose the case study format because this topic has received minimal academic exploration in South Kalimantan, where women's leadership roles in Islamic teaching contexts lack adequate documentation and exhibit unique regional features. This approach enabled the research team to thoroughly capture the practical experiences, pedagogical methods, and impact of female religious educators working within specific cultural and institutional settings.

The primary information came from 25 female Islamic educators actively teaching across various educational settings, including pesantren (traditional Islamic boarding schools), majlis taklim (community study groups), and digital da'wah platforms. Researchers used purposive sampling techniques to select influential participants from regions such as Hulu Sungai Selatan, Hulu Sungai Utara, and Tanah Laut.

The research team collected information through three key techniques: 1) Semi-structured interview sessions aimed at exploring the perspectives, backgrounds, and challenges facing female Islamic educators. 2) Direct observation during religious gatherings and teaching sessions to capture genuine interaction dynamics and leadership behaviors. 3) Analysis of supplementary documentation, including recorded online lectures, social media content, and published materials produced by participants. Researchers ensured data credibility through triangulation techniques, comparing findings from various sources and collection strategies to enhance dependability and reduce investigator bias.

The analytical framework followed thematic analysis protocols as described by Miles et al. (2014), involving data condensation, systematic categorization, and extraction of key themes regarding the roles and impacts of female religious educators. The analysis aimed to uncover behavioral patterns showing how these women navigate teaching responsibilities, foster educational inclusivity, and integrate technological innovations within South Kalimantan's Islamic educational landscape.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Women Religious Scholars Leading Pesantren and Islamic Educational Institutions

Within Islamic education systems that have historically been under male authority, women religious experts have pioneered new pathways as administrators and spiritual educators in pesantren and madrasah networks. These female ulama have established themselves in positions of institutional authority, overseeing educational initiatives while providing spiritual counsel to learners in both theological instruction and ethical development. Their duties transcend simple management tasks to include hands-on mentoring, where they serve as living models of Islamic teachings while designing educational programs centered on moral character grounded in Islamic tradition. The administrative approach these women scholars introduce to their schools is marked by an emphasis on caring mentorship, creating welcoming and supportive learning spaces that serve all students irrespective of their gender.

"Recent decades have witnessed a notable shift within Islamic educational settings, with women now holding prominent leadership positions in pesantren and madrasahs—positions once exclusively held by men. One female leader acknowledges her husband's collaborative support in carrying out these duties. Their responsibilities go well beyond organizational tasks to include personal guidance of learners in religious instruction and ethical development. These women educators dedicate themselves to modeling exemplary behavior while expanding educational offerings to emphasize Islamic moral formation. Their leadership methodology introduces a distinctive viewpoint, integrating compassionate qualities and cultivating a welcoming, supportive environment that serves all students equally," (Ustadzah 5&6, 2024).

The rise of women religious educators as institutional leaders has helped transform societal views about women's involvement in Islamic education and religious scholarship (Numan et al., 2024). In

communities where conventional gender structures maintain significant influence, the ascendance of female religious leaders heading pesantren in South Kalimantan reflects changing attitudes toward women's vital function in educational and religious community work. These administrators create supportive institutional cultures that prioritize Islamic jurisprudence education, practical skills development, and ethical formation (Astika et al., 2024; Maesaroh et al., 2024). Through their collaborative and empathetic leadership practices, these educators build stronger bonds with learners, develop significant relationships, and provide personalized guidance (Boparai & Darlington, 2024; Tufail & Sandhu, 2022). As a result, female learners find greater comfort and motivation in seeking advanced religious knowledge while building socially applicable competencies for their communities. Research evidence from (Maesaroh et al., 2024; Wefald & Henault, 2022) confirms that the empathetic and cooperative leadership style of female Islamic educators improves student achievement by establishing supportive and inviting learning environments. These settings boost student participation, facilitate intellectual risk-taking, and nurture personal development—critical components of educational success.

Women Islamic educators leading pesantren and madrassas design educational structures tailored to meet the distinct needs of their female learners, integrating topics such as wellness education, leadership training, and civic participation. These women teachers build settings where female learners are encouraged to excel academically, engage in community activities, and contribute to public conversations. In their roles, they show their learners that women can exercise significant authority in educational and communal domains while upholding Islamic values. Their curricular modifications equip female learners with competencies necessary for balancing religious obligations with active citizenship.

The existence of female ulama in such leadership capacities functions as a compelling illustration of women's potential within religious contexts, generating transformative impacts across their communities. Their success in these roles contests dominant beliefs about gender restrictions in religious authority and civic involvement (Yusra & Junaidi, 2024). These leaders motivate not just their learners but whole communities by breaking down limiting gender norms that have traditionally restricted women's activities to domestic realms. The accomplishments of these South Kalimantan female ulama demonstrate how Islamic teachings can promote and facilitate women's dynamic involvement in educational leadership, establishing powerful models for developing more equitable and empowered coming generations. This evolution mirrors wider social changes where women progressively take on leadership positions throughout various sectors. Yet, the difficulty of balancing leadership obligations with family responsibilities remains, underscoring the necessity for supportive mechanisms to strengthen women's educational access and their contributions to national advancement (Azizah et al., 2024).

Consequently, the leadership exhibited by female Islamic educators promotes women's empowerment by confronting gender-based restrictions and demonstrating that women can wield considerable influence in educational and communal spheres within Islamic paradigms. Nonetheless, persistent challenges remain, particularly concerning the intricate balancing act between leadership functions and domestic obligations, necessitating sustained support to guarantee women's substantive participation in educational development and national prosperity.

The Contribution of Women Islamic Teachers to Accessible Religious Learning

Female Islamic educators in South Kalimantan exhibit a remarkably inclusive teaching approach through their Majlis Taklim sessions, especially when responding to the distinct needs of their women attendees. These instructors provide thorough Islamic education while simultaneously tackling subjects closely connected to women's everyday realities, such as child-rearing practices, health issues related to reproduction, and women's status according to Islamic teachings. This approach establishes a safe space where women participants can freely discuss and ask about topics that often go underexplored in conventional male-dominated religious forums.

"Current issues and viral phenomena in the community frequently become central themes in religious discourse. The Wahhabi and Salafi ideologies exemplify such contemporary concerns. There's also the example of a religious teacher on TikTok who has attracted significant public notice because she habitually denounces others in her lessons without offering solid proof or academic foundation," (Ustadzah 2, 2024).

"Regarding the customization of religious teaching according to participants' age groups, content modification is crucial. For members under 30, the focus centers on women-specific Islamic law and basic monotheistic principles (tawhid), which constitute their foundational learning requirements. Participants aged 35 and older experience a more integrated curriculum combining both tawhid and jurisprudence, moving beyond mere theory to include real-world application in daily life. For those beyond 40, the syllabus becomes more advanced, introducing complex subjects like spiritual mysticism, Sufi philosophy, and biographical studies of Siti Khadijah (Manaqib) for deeper spiritual reflection," (Ustadzah 1, 2024).

Female Islamic instructors in South Kalimantan have created an all-encompassing teaching framework via majlis taklim that expands educational possibilities for women congregants to connect with Islamic scholarship in ways that hold personal significance. Research evidence (Latief & Madjid, 2022) shows these religious learning groups are guided by women religious authorities who design both content and theological conversations to reshape the spiritual and social aspects of attendees' lives. These educators concentrate on specific issues relevant to their female participants, such as medical concerns, household duties, and women's Islamic entitlements—subjects often marginalized in conventional male-led religious assemblies (Rohmaniyah, Kotele, Pabbajah, et al., 2022). With this approach, women Islamic teachers don't merely convey religious information but also create participatory spaces where attendees can ask questions and exchange ideas, building a learning environment that is both approachable and responsive to women's actual experiences.

"Based on Islamic law, wives can effectively manage their marital duties in ways that respect both their position as partners and their husband's rightful needs, producing equilibrium instead of conflict within the marriage," (Ustadzah 1, 2024).

The holistic character of this approach reveals that women religious instructors fulfill a dual role as both knowledge transmitters and champions of empowerment. Throughout many teaching sessions, these women scholars convey essential Islamic law while providing practical examples of applying Islamic teachings in home and social settings (Paracha & Khalid, 2023). This combined role becomes particularly important because female participants face unique challenges compared to men in managing their daily obligations. By providing practical guidance, these women educators help female worshipers develop both deep and functional understanding that can be readily applied in their family and community life.

This holistic approach cultivates stronger emotional connections between women religious teachers and their participants, thus strengthening ties across the religious community. These educators provide empathetic support, recognize the emotional needs of women believers, and create inclusive spaces for conversation (Paracha & Khalid, 2023; Udechukwu et al., 2024). As a result, women religious authorities serve as spiritual guides, champions, and encouragers who help women develop increased confidence in practicing their Islamic faith. This demonstrates that female educators occupy an essential position in building gender-focused religious communities that deliver both spiritual and social empowerment for women.

How Women Islamic Teachers in South Kalimantan Have Integrated Online Tools into Their Religious Work

Research findings demonstrate that women religious educators in South Kalimantan have successfully incorporated internet-based technologies into their mission of spreading Islamic knowledge and providing spiritual counsel. Using social media applications such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok Live, these teachers conduct virtual lessons, offer religious advice, and maintain

active communication with those who follow their teachings. The conversational nature of these platforms—particularly through live question-and-answer sessions—allows these educators to respond to specific spiritual questions and personal concerns, building stronger relationships within their communities. Digital communication has been especially effective for connecting with younger women who may face barriers attending conventional religious study circles (majlis taklim) or visiting Islamic educational institutions physically. This modern approach has successfully overcome limitations of distance and scheduling, opening up new opportunities for religious education and mentorship.

"I maintain a consistent presence across several social media platforms to distribute religious teachings. TikTok Live represents my main channel for direct interaction with followers, which I use both while teaching and during subsequent discussion periods. On Instagram, I post actively every day, typically sharing between one and three educational pieces. I also distribute content on Facebook, usually posting up to two articles daily. Beyond this, I've been fortunate to extend my influence through YouTube, where I've posted numerous recordings of my lectures to make them available to more people" (Ustadzah 2, 2024).

The way female Islamic educators have woven digital technologies into their outreach activities signifies a significant evolution in how Islamic teaching and community connection occur. These online resources allow women religious teachers to overcome geographical barriers that once prevented many followers—whether living far away or experiencing physical limitations—from accessing their guidance. Through platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, these educators can reach larger and more diverse groups, especially younger female audiences who primarily turn to internet sources for religious instruction (Choirin et al., 2024; Qudratullah & Syam, 2024). Additionally, the on-demand nature of digital content allows followers to learn according to their own schedules, eliminating the restrictions of set meeting times. This reflects how women scholars have adapted their religious communication methods to suit contemporary life (Uyuni et al., 2023).

Beyond simply making content more available, digital platforms create opportunities for richer two-way communication between women religious teachers and their audiences. Female educators regularly employ interactive social media features—such as live question sessions and audience polls—to respond to questions and address concerns, especially those relating to women's daily lives (Uyuni et al., 2023). This engagement-focused approach helps female scholars deliver religious instruction that connects with their followers' actual circumstances, making their teaching more effective (Subchi et al., 2022). Additionally, this closer connection provides community members with individualized spiritual support, showing that female religious educators in South Kalimantan successfully deliver outreach that is both informative and responsive to contemporary community needs.

"Women religious teachers show awareness of cultural context by adjusting their pedagogical approach in two primary ways. First, they coordinate their lessons with important Islamic observances, for example teaching about Isra' and Mi'raj during Rajab. Second, they modify their delivery style based on their audience's environment—whether teaching in urban areas, suburbs, or rural regions—making sure to use language that each local community can easily understand," (Ustadzah 2, 2024).

The way these female Islamic educators have embraced digital tools marks a shift away from traditional outreach methods toward a more modern and innovative approach. This strategy shows that women religious leaders in South Kalimantan are equipped to meet the challenges of our interconnected, technology-driven world, keeping Islamic education relevant and accessible amid rapid societal changes. These women scholars must remain careful when using digital platforms to ensure alignment with Islamic principles (Sebihi & Moazzam, 2024). This development also reinforces their role as agents of positive change, focused on sharing Islamic values while encouraging young Muslim women to see Islam as compatible with modern technology. This work shows that female religious leaders have both the skills and innovation required to keep Islamic outreach meaningful today, creating a safe and inclusive space where young Muslim women can participate in religious learning through digital channels.

Despite its many advantages, digital Islamic education also brings substantial challenges that deserve consideration. Online dissemination of Islamic teaching materials creates potential for spreading misinformation or extremist viewpoints, requiring careful moderation and quality control. Furthermore, while digital platforms make religious conversations available to wider audiences, they may simultaneously undermine the authority and influence of traditional religious scholars (Adel & Numan, 2023; Sebihi & Moazzam, 2024).

This development represents a movement from traditional outreach methods toward more modern and adaptable strategies suited to current realities, while also positioning female Islamic scholars as agents of positive change who advance Islamic education in the digital age. Nevertheless, the use of these digital platforms brings challenges related to potential misinformation and the weakening of conventional religious authority structures, necessitating improved oversight to maintain the quality of religious outreach.

4. CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that women Islamic scholars in South Kalimantan have become powerful agents of change within Islamic educational institutions. These female religious leaders have transformed conventional pesantren settings through participatory leadership approaches, fostering welcoming educational environments that serve all students equally. Their teaching innovations go beyond traditional instruction, integrating gender-sensitive perspectives into educational content and tackling subjects often overlooked—such as women's issues, household relationships, and healthcare topics—areas that have traditionally been underexplored in male-centered religious teachings.

The advent of digital technology has opened new avenues for these educators to broaden their reach. By effectively utilizing online platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, they have built connections with modern audiences, especially resonating with younger, technology-oriented generations. This embrace of digital tools reflects their dedication to ensuring Islamic education remains both accessible and pertinent in today's world.

The research findings highlight how these women scholars serve as drivers of wide-ranging educational change. They have established an Islamic educational model that promotes inclusiveness, adapts fluidly to changing societal circumstances, and leverages technological advances for spiritual outreach. Their contributions extend beyond pedagogy, substantially furthering women's agency within religious frameworks and wider society, positioning them as significant contributors to modern Islamic thought.

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