

## FROM SUBORDINATION TO AUTHORITY: WOMEN'S NEGOTIATION IN PESANTREN'S PATRIARCHAL ORDER

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### Abstract

This study begins with the reality that pesantren as traditional Islamic educational institutions often maintain patriarchal structures that place women in subordinate positions. The research addresses three main questions. First, how does women's subordination appear within the patriarchal system of the pesantren? Second, what negotiation strategies do women use to gain space and authority? Third, how do Islamic pesantren women produce authority within patriarchal domination? The study uses a qualitative approach with a multi-site case study method. Data were collected through structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis in several pesantren. The results show, first, that women's subordination appears in four forms: structural, normative, cultural, and linguistic. Second, women negotiate these conditions through subtle, ethical, and adaptive strategies. Third, women build their authority through everyday ethical practices, which gradually become cultural and symbolic capital. This process helps them gain cultural recognition that eventually leads to formal acknowledgment. These findings contribute to gender studies in Islamic education by highlighting the active role of pesantren women in challenging and reshaping unequal power relations.

**Keywords:** *Subordination; Authority; Negotiation; Pesantren Women; Patriarchal Structure.*

### Abstrak

*Penelitian ini berangkat dari realitas bahwa pesantren sebagai lembaga pendidikan Islam tradisional seringkali mereproduksi struktur patriarkal yang menempatkan perempuan pada posisi subordinat. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjawab tiga permasalahan utama, pertama, bagaimana bentuk subordinasi perempuan dalam struktur patriarkal pesantren? Kedua, bagaimana strategi negosiasi yang dilakukan perempuan pesantren untuk memperoleh ruang dan otoritas? Ketiga, bagaimana*



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*perempuan pesantren memproduksi otoritas di tengah dominasi patriarki? Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis metode studi kasus multi situs. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara terstruktur, observasi partisipatif, serta analisis dokumen pada pesantren yang menjadi lokasi penelitian. Data were analyzed thematically through the stages of reduction, presentation, and verification. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan, pertama, subordinasi perempuan berbentuk subordinasi structural, subordinasi normative, subordinasi kultural, dan subordinasi bahasa. Kedua, strategi negosiasi perempuan pesantren terbangun melalui negosiasi yang halus, etis, dan adaptif. Ketiga, perempuan pesantren memproduksi otoritas dengan praktik etis keseharian yang kemudian menghasilkan modal kultural dan simbolik, bergerak pada pengakuan kultural, sehingga sampai pada pengakuan formal. Temuan ini memperkaya kajian gender dalam pendidikan Islam dengan menegaskan adanya agensi perempuan pesantren dalam menggeser relasi kuasa yang timpang.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Subordinasi; Otoritas; Negosiasi; Perempuan Pesantren; Struktur Patriarkal.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Pesantren has been an important part of Islamic education in Indonesia for a long time. As traditional Islamic schools, pesantren does not only teach formal religious subjects such as classical texts, the Qur'an, hadith, and fiqh but also passes down moral values and religious traditions from one generation to the next (Sarwadi & Raihan, 2025). Thus, pesantren is not only a place for studying religious texts, but also environments where character, ethics, adab, and religious identity are formed (Mujahid, 2021; Zahroh, 2024). As society continues to develop, the transmission of religious knowledge through sanad or chains of scholarly authority remains highly valued (Mahfudloh, 2023). This tradition has a unique authenticity that needs to be protected, especially in the era of Society 5.0, where religious information spreads very quickly and is not always easy to verify (Huda, 2026).

Pesantren is also seen as a center for building moral and spiritual character. They shape students' moral development through daily religious activities such as regular study sessions, worship routines, discipline, and other cultural practices (Agus, 2024; Islamic et al., 2024). Many traditional pesantren still maintain classical learning methods, including morning and evening study, reading the kitab kuning, preserving the teacher and student relationship, and learning directly from the kiai or ustaz intensively (Andrianto et al., 2022). This moral function is very important in a time of rapid social change. Technology, globalization, and fast information flows often cause value conflicts that can weaken spiritual understanding or create confusion in interpreting religious texts (Huda, 2026). In this situation, pesantren continues to play a key role in guiding and teaching the students to develop moral

integrity, good character, and strong religious traditions, while also gaining an authentic understanding of Islam.

In many traditional pesantren, women who are santriwati, ustazah, or nyai are often placed in positions that are considered lower than men. In daily life, women are usually seen as supporters of the kiai. They manage domestic tasks such as the dormitory, kitchen, cleanliness, and take care of female students (Maulia et al., 2025). They also help with religious activities, but their leadership is often viewed as informal rather than part of the formal structure (K. M. Nisa et al., 2022). Even though many nyai and ustazah have important teaching roles and local leadership responsibilities, they often receive limited institutional recognition (Wahyuni et al., 2023). This includes limited access to formal positions, public authority, or involvement in decision making at the pesantren level (Labibah et al., 2022). This lower position is shaped by traditions and patriarchal culture that are deeply rooted in pesantren life. This can be seen in how girls are taught domestic roles from childhood, in interpretations of religious texts that emphasize gendered role division, and in institutional structures where the kiai holds the highest authority (Adibah et al., 2024). As a result, the division of work, space, and authority becomes unequal. Public roles and decision making are mostly given to men, while women spend more time on caregiving and daily maintenance work (Aziz, 2024). These roles are essential for the pesantren but are often not recognized as leadership. However, the perception of women as subordinate is not a fixed or unchanging reality. Many studies show that women in pesantren exercise agency through various strategies, including informal leadership, social networks such as alumni circles and women's communities, gender-sensitive educational initiatives, and the use of digital platforms for religious outreach (Muafiah et al., 2024). These strategies allow them to expand their space of authority even within structural limitations (Rusli & Mardiyah, 2023). Existing studies tend to discuss women's marginalization and agency as separate phenomena, thus limiting analysis of how women's authority is negotiated within the formal and informal power structures of pesantren. This gap is significant given the central role of pesantren in shaping religious authority and gender norms in Indonesian Muslim society. Therefore, this study aims to examine how pesantren women's negotiate and produce authority within pesantren.

Research on women in pesantren over the past five years has shown growing interest in women's leadership and roles. Yet most of these studies remain descriptive and do not fully explore how women negotiate authority within the patriarchal structure of the pesantren. For example, the study by Elisa and colleagues describes the presence of women in pesantren but does not examine the

social bargaining processes behind it (El Adibah et al., 2024). The research of (Murobbi & Mardiyah, 2024) as well as (W. Nisa & Yusuf, 2025) highlight the strategic roles of women in education, but they do not explain their negotiation strategies or how authority is produced. Therefore, Although previous studies have documented women's roles, participation, and strategic contributions in pesantren, they largely stop at describing outcomes and visible practices. These studies do not sufficiently explain the processes through which women negotiate power, gain legitimacy, and produce authority within patriarchal pesantren structures. As a result, women's authority tends to appear as incidental or informal rather than as a socially and religiously constructed phenomenon. This study positions itself within this analytical gap by examining authority not as a given status but as a negotiated and produced process shaped by symbolic, spiritual, and relational practices in everyday pesantren life. The novelty of this research lies in the systematic mapping of the mechanisms of negotiation and production of women's authority in pesantren. Based on this analytical shift, the study examines three interrelated dimensions: the forms of women's subordination embedded in pesantren structures, the negotiation strategies employed by women to gain space and recognition, and the ways in which women produce authority while operating within patriarchal dominance. By doing so, this article contributes not only to debates on women's leadership in pesantren but also to broader discussions on gender, authority, and Islamic education in Indonesia, offering a framework for understanding authority beyond formal institutional positions.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This research uses qualitative method by applying case study approach to explore in depth the dynamics of women's subordination and negotiation within the pesantren environment. This approach is appropriate for uncovering meanings, experiences, and social practices that cannot be captured through quantitative methods. It also allows the researcher to trace the everyday contexts in which women navigate life within a patriarchal pesantren structure (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Nasution, 2024). The study was conducted in two pesantren in Jember, East Java. Both pesantren share similar characteristics: they practice family-based leadership and maintain Islamic traditions with a salafiyah orientation. The selection of the two pesantren was based on the similarity of their gender relations and leadership patterns, both of them still reflect a patriarchal structure. It's relevant to the study's focus on women's positions and authority within the social space of the pesantren. To protect the confidentiality of the institutions and informants, the researcher does not mention the names of the pesantren or the

personal identities of the participants. Each pesantren is coded as P-1 and P-2, while informants are labeled N-1 to N-6 according to the interview order. The study involved six informants, consisting of a Ning, senior students, and members of the pesantren leadership board. All informants provided voluntary consent to participate. The principles of confidentiality and informed consent were upheld throughout the entire research process, including data collection, analysis, and publication. The research was conducted over approximately five weeks.

The data were collected through structured interviews, participant observation, and institutional document analysis to capture the symbolic and social relations that shape women's positions in the pesantren. The interviews aimed to explore women's experiences in negotiating their space of authority, while observations focused on religious activities, decision-making processes, and daily practices within the pesantren. Document analysis includes organizational structures, student regulations, and records of religious activities which were conducted to reinforce field findings and trace institutional patterns that reflect patriarchal norms as well as forms of resistance. Data were analyzed thematically through the stages of reduction, presentation, and verification, using Saba Mahmood's theory of agency and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus as analytical frameworks. The validity of the data was ensured through source and method triangulation (Ridder, 2014). With this approach, the study aims to present a clear picture of how women in pesantren move from positions of subordination toward recognized social and religious authority. This research is also expected to contribute to gender studies within pesantren based on Islamic education and support the development of a more inclusive and gender-equitable educational environment.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

#### **Forms of Women's Subordination in the Patriarchal Structure of Pesantren**

The findings of this study reveal newer and more subtle forms of subordination. In P-1, N-1 explains that women experience subordination through unequal access, restricted participation, and symbolic exclusion within the patriarchal leadership structure. In the same pesantren, N-2 and N-3 describe subordination as structural (limited access), cultural (domestic task assignments), and symbolic (lack of recognition in decision-making forums). In P-2, according to N-4, women's subordination is reinforced through moral regulations that control dress, behavior, and mobility. The narrative of "protecting moral conduct" becomes a justification for regulating women's bodies and limiting their participation in

public spaces. Here, patriarchy operates softly through moral discourse rather than direct structural force.

*“In pesantren, female students are subject to stricter rules, particularly regarding dress and behavior. This is said to uphold morals and prevent violations of Islamic law. Women are subject to more restrictions on their movements than male students, with the goal of instilling in them a sense of self-control and modesty from an early age.”*

Similarly, N-5 states that subordination appears through male dominance in formal structures, restricted female activities, and the labeling of women’s roles as merely supportive to institutional programs.

*“In pesantren, women’s positions are not equal to those of men. Men are still the primary leaders, while women are usually not in formal positions and often play supporting roles, making their presence less visible. I also experience these limitations in my daily life. As a senior student, I can supervise junior students, but I must still obey the guardian. The rules among female students are also stricter than those among male students, both regarding interactions with outsiders and regarding dress. In an educational context, women generally serve as female ustadzah (teacher) in all-female classes. During major celebrations like the Prophet’s Birthday, we are usually only tasked with decorating. However, senior female students like me and my friends are often given the responsibility of managing the female dormitory, including making decisions regarding conflict resolution and organizing daily schedules.”*

N-6 emphasizes that women in pesantren experience both structural and cultural subordination, particularly in terms of access to space, policy legitimacy, and managerial roles.

Data from the informants above indicate that the subordination of women in pesantren continues to persist, although it now appears in more subtle and hidden forms. Subordination does not only occur through patriarchal leadership structures that restrict women’s access to positions of authority, but also operates through value-laden language, moral rules, and cultural constructions of gender roles. In P-1, subordination is reflected in limited participation, symbolic exclusion, and the minimal recognition of women’s contributions in leadership. Other informants from the same location identify subordination at three levels: 1) Structural, where women face limited access and formal positions; 2) Cultural, where domestic tasks are labeled as women’s “natural” duties; 3) Symbolic, where women receive little legitimacy in decision-making forums. In P-2, subordination operates through moral

control over women's bodies and behavior. The narrative of "maintaining proper conduct" is used as a justification to restrict women's mobility and access to public spaces. Similar patterns also emerge through male dominance in formal structures and the construction of women as "supporters" rather than core decision-makers. Thus, the subordination of women in pesantren functions not only structurally, but also culturally and symbolically through mechanisms of soft domination that produce compliance without direct coercion.

**Table 1.** Pesantren Women's Subordination

Structural Subordination	Normative Subordination	Cultural Subordination	Language Subordination
The relation Kiai - nyai is unequal Formal leadership is monopolized by men Access is limited	Gender-biased religious interpretation Moral rules that regulate women's bodies and activities	The perspective that women's domestic role as natural Female students are expected to be more obedient and polite	The use of demeaning terms The portrayal of women as supporters rather than leaders

### Negotiation Strategies of Pesantren Women to Gain Space and Authority

The findings of this research show that pesantren women build authority through non-confrontational yet strategic negotiation processes rooted in pesantren values. In the first context (P-1), informant N-1 demonstrates that women rely on politeness, initiative, and competence as forms of social capital to widen their room for maneuver. Respect for traditional structures does not hinder their ambition to assume a greater role; instead, it becomes a form of symbolic diplomacy that allows their efforts to be perceived as aligned with the values upheld by the pesantren.

Furthermore, in P-1, as shown through informants N-2 and N-3, obedience is not always passive. Women interpret obedience as an ethical and elegant negotiation strategy. Professional ethics, diligence in carrying out their duties, and sincere dedication become sources of legitimacy that strengthen their moral authority. Through this approach, women demonstrate that their presence and contributions deserve recognition, it's not because they demand it, but because they display qualities that are difficult to marginalize.

*"I chose to obey the pesantren's rules, to be obedient and to demonstrate my faith through actions rather than words. From*

*there, I gradually gained trust, eventually becoming the head of the board. The pesantren's religious values and traditions were supportive, as female students were given access to participate. My knowledge was also very helpful; I taught the book Mukhtashor Jiddan, which earned me recognition."*

In the context of P-2, informant N-4 presents a more progressive form of negotiation that nonetheless remains within the framework of tradition. The strategy of *ibda' binafsi* (starting from oneself), exemplary conduct, and active participation in internal forums function as mechanisms for gaining social influence without directly challenging male dominance. This pattern illustrates the emergence of agency within tradition, namely the ability of women to act and foster change from within the pesantren's normative structure. Informant N-5 in P-2 further enriches this picture by demonstrating adaptive negotiation skills rooted in discussion, argumentation, and strengthened legitimacy through the authority of the *ustazah*. Women lead sectors that are culturally regarded as their domains, while ensuring that such leadership remains compatible with the pesantren's formal structure. Thus, the recognition of their authority is gained not by displacing male actors, but by proving the indispensability of women in the areas they oversee.

*"In meetings or discussions, I usually feel free to ask questions or express my opinion. But first, I discuss it with the female teacher to strengthen my position. In Islamic boarding schools, not all support or restrict women. Although leadership is largely held by men, we have full control over matters concerning female students. These restrictions usually apply to the outside world or interactions with non-mahram students. As a senior student, my knowledge gives me the right to speak, for example, when I'm asked to replace the female teacher teaching a lower class. This acknowledges that I'm considered capable and worthy of imparting knowledge."*

At a more advanced stage, informant N-6 shows that women are not only negotiating space but are also producing authority. Their success is built through four main forms of capital: work competence, religious knowledge and piety, strong social networks, and effective operational leadership. These four aspects make women's authority accepted not merely out of tolerance, but acknowledged because of their real contributions and undeniable leadership capacity.

*"Our strategy was simple: data first, then talk. We proved it through neat work and thorough reports, until the male administrators finally believed that we could manage the female division well. From there, we negotiated roles, not by demanding, but by demonstrating competence and responsibility. While there are restrictions in Islamic*

*boarding school traditions, particularly regarding physical movement and interaction rules, these restrictions were not intended to demean us, but rather based on the principle of caution and maintaining honor. Precisely because men were not allowed to freely enter the female dormitory, we were required to be leaders, educators, and full decision-makers in the female dormitory. In gaining recognition, knowledge was the primary asset, because in the Islamic boarding school, knowledge equated with authority. When we mastered the Quran and other religious texts, the students and leaders would trust our decisions. Piety and morals also strengthened our authority, while our social networks with alumni and the male administrators significantly facilitated the smooth running of fieldwork, logistics, and major events."*

### **The Process of How Pesantren Women Produce Authority Amid Patriarchal Dominance**

The research findings is the production of women's authority in pesantren develops gradually and does not always follow formal structural paths. In P-1, N-1 shows that authority results from negotiation between personal competence, cultural relations, and the symbolic structure of the pesantren which remains patriarchal. Women must manage their knowledge, experience, and emotional closeness with the community to be accepted as authoritative figures in a space shaped by male-centered values.

*"Nowadays, many women preach through social media. But authority isn't just about public appearances. In Islamic boarding schools, women play a significant role through their knowledge, responsibility, and piety, especially in managing female students and internal activities. While not always recognized structurally, their role is real and ongoing. I also see that women's space is more focused on nurturing and developing students. When it comes to the public, a woman's role can be beneficial, but it can also be detrimental, so we must be extremely careful."*

In P-1, testimonies from N-2 and N-3 reinforce that women's authority mostly emerges through daily teaching practice, mentoring, and providing care consistently. Their influence is not formally institutionalized but develops through moral presence and emotional connections experienced directly by students. This form of moral, affective, and social authority becomes a subtle resistance to patriarchy because women build influence without openly challenging the structure.

Meanwhile, in P-2, N-4 shows that women's authority is strongly supported by their religious knowledge, piety, and moral contributions to the community.

Through the accumulation of cultural and symbolic capital, women receive charismatic and cultural recognition even without holding formal positions. This type of authority is respected because of reputation and role modeling rather than structural rank.

*“In pesantren, what is seen is not position, but knowledge. If your knowledge is good, your piety is maintained, and your morals are good, people will respect themselves. Many women do not have official positions, but their influence is strong because they educate students, set an example, and maintain values. That's where his authority comes from.”*

However, N-5 in P-2 reveals that women's authority still tends to remain within segregated spaces, such as mentoring female students. Although respected for their knowledge and piety, this influence does not fully extend into broader institutional and cross-gender domains. This shows that patriarchal structural boundaries still shape which authority spaces women can access.

Finally, data from P-2, N-6 shows a significant shift in the role of women in pesantren. From previously being centered in domestic and informal spheres, women are now starting to gain clearer recognition within formal institutional structures. This formal acknowledgment reflects a transformation that opens greater opportunities for women to participate in decision-making and pesantren leadership.

*“In my opinion, the shift in Islamic boarding schools' attitudes toward female leadership is already very noticeable. While previously female leadership, particularly among female administrators, was often viewed as merely a complement to domestic affairs, this has shifted significantly. Women's roles are now being institutionalized and formalized within the structure, for example, with the establishment of the position of Director of Female Education. This demonstrates the official recognition of women's authority. Furthermore, there is recognition that women are the most expert in character and moral education for female students, leading the kiai to grant us full autonomy to make decisions within the female leadership area. Thus, female leadership, which previously worked largely behind the scenes, has now moved into the management realm and been given a more professional and clear leadership mandate.”*

## Discussion

### Forms of Women's Subordination in the Patriarchal Structure of Pesantren

Women's subordination in pesantren appears at several levels: structural, cultural, symbolic, and in everyday practices. These patterns are reproduced through institutional norms, religious interpretations, and power relations among actors such as the kiai, teachers, administrators, and students (Winarno et al., 2025). At the structural level, women have limited access to formal decision-making positions (Fuadi et al., 2023; Mahfudh, 2024). Even when leadership roles are held by women such as nyai or female administrators (Agustin, 2021), the strategic positions are still largely dominated by men, reflecting institutional subordination (Prihanto & Widaningrum, 2024). Culturally and in daily practice, subordination appears through gendered divisions of labor such as domestic work, caring for female students, and administrative tasks with limited authority. Women also face restricted social mobility, for example through separate learning spaces and activities that place them in more closed and protected environments (Hafidzi et al., 2023). These arrangements are often framed as "protection," but in practice reduce women's access to public roles and leadership opportunities (Wahyudin, 2020).

Vertical power relations, especially the authority of the kiai, also play a key role in reproducing subordination. This unequal power structure can create conditions where various forms of misconduct, including sexual violence, occur with limited accountability mechanisms for victims (Dahlia et al., 2025). Although these power gaps do not always appear in written policies, they operate through practices, local norms, and religious discourse that privilege certain authorities (Dewi & Hakim, 2025). As a result, women in pesantren often find it difficult to claim their rights or speak out openly (Fuadi et al., 2023).

The findings of this study confirm and extend previous scholarship on women's subordination in pesantren, which has consistently identified structural, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of inequality (Winarno et al., 2025). Similar to earlier studies, this research shows that women continue to face limited access to formal leadership and decision making positions, while strategic authority remains largely monopolized by men, particularly through the dominance of the kiai in institutional hierarchies (Fuadi et al., 2023; Mahfudh, 2024; Prihanto & Widaningrum, 2024). The unequal relationship between kiai and nyai identified in this study reinforces arguments that women's leadership presence does not automatically translate into substantive power, as women are often positioned as complementary or supportive actors rather than autonomous decision makers (Agustin, 2021).

However, this study advances previous research by demonstrating that subordination in pesantren is increasingly reproduced through soft and subtle mechanisms rather than overt exclusion. While earlier studies tend to emphasize visible structural barriers, such as restricted access to leadership positions or segregated institutional roles. This research highlights how normative language, moral discourses, and cultural constructions of femininity function as effective instruments of domination. In Pesantren P-1, for example, women's limited participation and symbolic exclusion in leadership forums illustrate how authority is exercised through recognition and legitimacy rather than formal rules alone. This finding supports (Dewi & Hakim, 2025) argument that power in pesantren often operates informally through norms and religious discourse, yet it adds empirical depth by showing how women internalize and comply with these norms.

At the cultural level, the study corroborates previous findings that gendered divisions of labor, such as domestic work, caregiving, and administrative tasks, are framed as women's "natural" responsibilities (Hafidzi et al., 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2023). Nevertheless, this research demonstrates that such cultural expectations are not merely traditional practices, but are actively maintained through religiously infused moral reasoning that legitimizes inequality. The labeling of domestic roles as women's innate duties, coupled with expectations of obedience and politeness among female students, illustrates how cultural subordination becomes normalized and rarely questioned.

Importantly, the findings from Pesantren P-2 reveal a dimension that has received limited attention in earlier studies, namely moral control over women's bodies and mobility. The discourse of "maintaining proper conduct" operates as a normative tool to restrict women's access to public spaces and leadership opportunities, echoing but also deepening previous analyses of gender segregation as a form of symbolic protection (Wahyudin, 2020). This study shows that such moral narratives function as a form of language based subordination, where women's compliance is produced without direct coercion, aligning with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic domination.

Overall, this research strengthens existing literature by showing that women's subordination in pesantren is not only sustained through formal structures and patriarchal authority, but also through normative, cultural, and linguistic mechanisms that render inequality socially acceptable and morally justified. By mapping subordination across structural, cultural, symbolic, and language based dimensions, this study contributes a more nuanced understanding of how power operates in contemporary pesantren settings, particularly in contexts where overt discrimination is increasingly replaced by subtle forms of control.

### **Negotiation Strategies of Pesantren Women to Gain Space and Authority**

This study substantiates and extends existing scholarship on women's authority in pesantren by demonstrating that women primarily negotiate power through non confrontational, value congruent strategies embedded within pesantren norms. Consistent with previous studies (Bahtiar et al., 2023; Maulia et al., 2025), the findings show that women build legitimacy through pedagogical competence, moral exemplarity, and sustained contributions to educational stability rather than through direct challenges to patriarchal leadership. In Pesantren P-1, women's reliance on politeness, initiative, and professional competence functions as symbolic capital, enabling them to expand their institutional influence while maintaining respect for traditional authority structures.

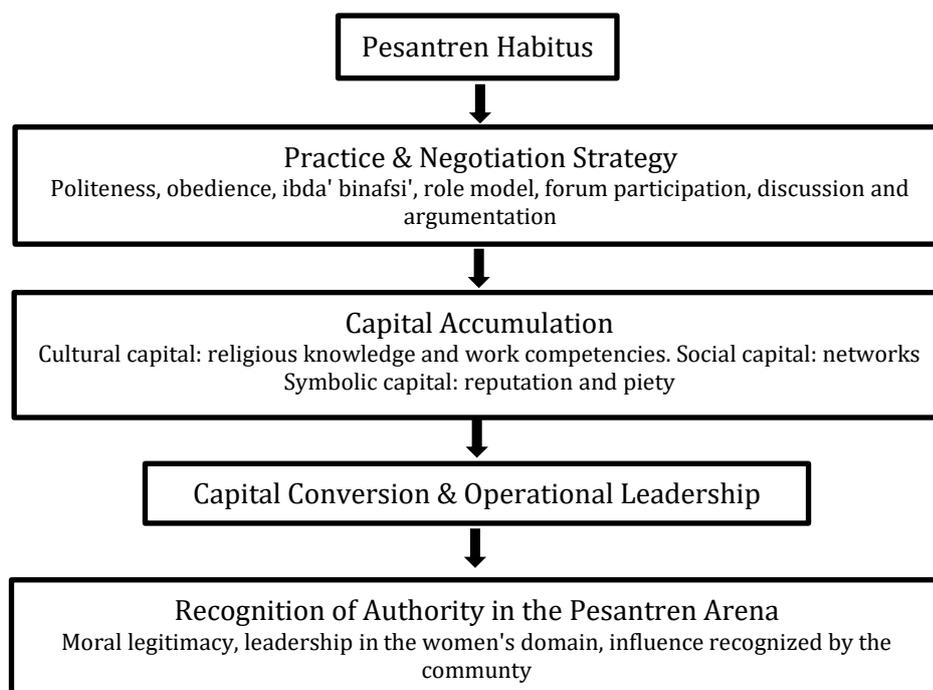
This research advances theoretical discussions by revealing that obedience operates as an active and strategic form of agency, rather than passive compliance. Informants interpret adherence to pesantren rules as an ethical and tactical choice that facilitates trust-building and recognition. Through disciplined practice, religious knowledge, and exemplary conduct, women transform normative expectations, such as *ibda' binafsi* and devotion into sources of moral authority. This finding refines earlier arguments on role-modeling and emotional labor by highlighting women's reflexive engagement with pesantren values as instruments of power negotiation.

Findings from Pesantren P-2 further illustrate the emergence of agency within tradition, where women expand their influence through participation in internal forums, discursive engagement, and collaboration with senior female religious authorities. Rather than displacing male leadership, women consolidate authority by demonstrating indispensability in domains culturally associated with female responsibility, particularly in the governance of female students. This pattern supports (Yaqin & Sholihah, 2025) argument that women's authority in pesantren grows incrementally through institutional contribution, yet it adds empirical depth by showing how knowledge based legitimacy enables women to enter decision-making spaces.

At a more advanced stage, women move beyond negotiating space to producing recognized authority. The accumulation of four interrelated forms of capital, professional competence, religious knowledge and piety, strong social networks, and effective operational leadership, renders women's authority not merely tolerated but institutionally acknowledged. This finding expands existing literature on *Nyai* leadership (Herlina & Munawara, 2025; K. M. Nisa et al., 2022) by demonstrating that spiritual exemplarity alone is insufficient without managerial and organizational capacity. This study contributes to gender and Islamic education

scholarship by theorizing women's authority in pesantren as a relational, incremental, and practice-based process. Authority is not achieved through structural rupture, but through sustained negotiation that converts conformity into influence. This reconceptualization challenges binary readings of subordination versus resistance and offers a more nuanced understanding of how women reshape patriarchal institutions from within.

Based on the research findings, the negotiation strategies of pesantren women can be understood through a combination of Saba Mahmood's idea of agency and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus. Women do not gain authority by directly opposing male dominance, but through practices that fit with pesantren values and norms. Politeness, obedience, work ethic, good example, and active involvement in pesantren activities become effective ways for women to build influence and moral legitimacy.



**Figure 1.** The Mechanism of Construction of Religious Authority in Pesantren

From Mahmood's perspective, actions that seem obedient are actually a form of agency within tradition. Women use religious ethics and pious practices to expand their room for action without creating conflict with existing norms. Meanwhile, Bourdieu helps explain why these strategies are accepted through the work of pesantren habitus, which shapes women's dispositions and ways of acting. Work competence, religious knowledge, social networks, and a reputation for piety

function as capital that can be converted into recognition and authority within the pesantren structure. Thus, this study concludes that the authority of pesantren women is built through a negotiation process that is subtle, ethical, and adaptive. They do not change tradition by challenging it, but by using traditional values as a space to demonstrate their capacity, contributions, and leadership, eventually gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the pesantren community.

### **The Process of How Pesantren Women Produce Authority Amid Patriarchal Dominance**

If negotiation strategies are the tactics used by pesantren women before gaining authority, then the production of authority refers to the process through which they build, strengthen, and maintain that authority. This process takes place after women are able to occupy certain social or institutional spaces (Pereira & Rebelo, 2024). Authority is produced through a combination of religious knowledge, moral example, and their skill in understanding the pesantren's patriarchal culture (Pereira & Rebelo, 2024). For example, female leaders such as Nyai Nihayatul Wafiroh gain legitimacy through long-term service, social capacity, and consistency in carrying out educational and community work (Mariyam & Aziz, 2023). This shows that authority is born from the community's recognition, not only from structural positions.

Social relationships between the nyai and female students also matter. These relationships create emotional closeness, spiritual guidance, and moral nurturing, which serve as effective capital that strengthens symbolic authority (Takdir et al., 2022). In addition, digital spaces now open new platforms for pesantren women to expand their influence (Jannah, 2019). Thus, pesantren women produce authority through four main forms of capital: cultural capital (knowledge), moral affective capital (role modeling), symbolic capital (recognition)(Hidayah et al., 2025), and digital capital (new media).

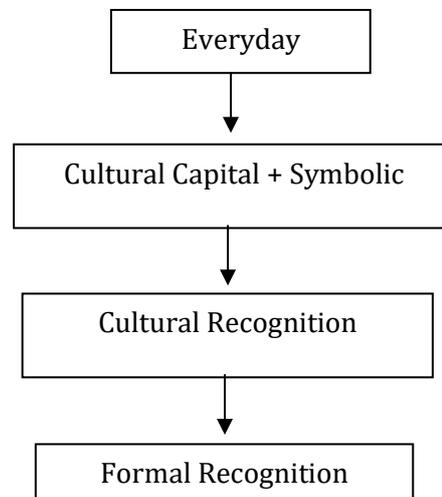
The research findings show that women's authority in pesantren is not only generated through formal placement, but is also the result of negotiations between personal capacities, daily practices, and symbolic structures shaped by patriarchal norms. From Saba Mahmood's perspective on agency, women's authority emerges through ethical and pedagogical practices that shape them into authoritative subjects within the community. Teaching, caregiving, and piety are not simply routines; they are embodied practices and moral dispositions that build credibility directly recognized by students and the community (Tohirin & Nurfuadi, 2024). In this sense, women's agency is not defined by open resistance to patriarchy but appears through their capacity to shape moral affective influence (role modeling)

(Ngardi et al., 2025). This leads to authority rooted in knowledge, piety, and moral contribution, as seen in P-2, N-4. This aligns with Mahmood's idea that religious practices can be sources of authority and social legitimacy.

Bourdieu's framework complements this by explaining how various forms of capital are converted into social legitimacy (Bourdieu, 2011). Religious knowledge, pedagogical experience, and moral reputation can be understood as cultural capital. When accumulated and recognized by the community, they become symbolic capital (a form of power that generates social recognition without relying on formal bureaucracy). However, the influence of women remains limited in segregated areas such as mentoring female students (Kurniawati & Muafiah, 2023). This shows that the structure of the pesantren creates clear boundaries. Capital that gives authority in one subfield does not automatically give access to the main institutional field. The combination of Mahmood and Bourdieu gives a clearer analysis. Daily practices help women build cultural and symbolic capital. Agency appears through these practices because they produce capital. The value of this capital depends on how the field is structured. This explains the paradox in the findings. Women develop strong moral and affective authority and sometimes even charismatic authority. Yet formal recognition across gender appears slowly and only in specific cases such as P-2 and N-6.

The findings show that both pesantren produce women's authority through daily practices, but differ in how they recognize it. In P-1, women's authority comes mainly from daily activities such as teaching, mentoring, and caring for students; their influence is moral and emotional, and not linked to formal positions. Meanwhile, in P-2, women's authority is rooted more in knowledge, piety, and strong reputations, making them highly respected even without formal roles. However, P-2 also shows signs of institutional change where women begin receiving more formal recognition. Thus, P-1 tends to maintain informal forms of authority, while P-2 shows movement toward formal acknowledgment. These findings are consistent with Smith-Hefner's study that shows Indonesian Muslim women build authority through teaching and emotional engagement even when patriarchy limits them (Feillard, 2021). Fuad's research on female religious authority in Indonesia also shows that women often gain moral and religious authority even when they do not hold formal leadership roles (Fuad, 2021). This is similar to what happens in P-1. The growing formal recognition in P-2 supports Fuad's point that women's preaching activities and networks can open access to wider authority. (Fuad, 2020) This study therefore confirms earlier patterns of gendered negotiation and also shows new institutional changes that create more opportunities for formal authority among pesantren women.

Theoretically, two implications arise. First, research on women's religious authority needs to balance analyses of embodied practices (ethics, pedagogy) with analyses of structure and capital (habitus, resources). Second, Mahmood's concept of non-confrontational agency should not be seen as political submission. Instead, it can be an accumulative strategy that, in the medium term, produces symbolic recognition and opens pathways toward institutionalization. Empirically, further studies are needed to trace how capital moves from daily practices to formal recognition. For example, by examining the duration of practice, social networks, and key moments of symbolic acknowledgment. Reading women's authority production in pesantren through Mahmood and Bourdieu helps show how everyday ethical practices serve as both a site of agency and a source of capital. Within the limits of the field, these practices can generate real legitimacy. This analysis highlights that changes in women's positions in pesantren are not only about formal shifts but also about the accumulation of habitus, practice, and symbolic capital that collectively reshape the cultural landscape of power in religious communities. Thus, the process of producing women's authority in pesantren moves from everyday ethical practices, to the accumulation of cultural and symbolic capital, to cultural recognition, and eventually to formal acknowledgment.



**Diagram 1.** Transformation of Cultural Practices Towards Formal Legitimacy

## CONCLUSION

The subordination of pesantren women operates not only at the structural level but also at the cultural and symbolic levels through mechanisms of *soft domination*, which create compliance without direct coercion. At the same time, women's authority in pesantren is built through subtle, ethical, and adaptive

negotiation processes. They do not challenge tradition openly; instead, they use traditional values as a space to demonstrate their capacity, contributions, and leadership. Through this approach, they eventually gain legitimacy within the pesantren community. Pesantren women then produce authority through everyday ethical practices, which generate cultural and symbolic capital. This capital first leads to cultural recognition and later develops into formal acknowledgment.

The limitations of this study lie in its narrow scope, as it examines only two pesantren with similar characteristics, making the findings difficult to generalize across all pesantren types. The limited number of informants also does not fully represent the diversity of women actors within pesantren. Moreover, some hidden forms of subordination and negotiation may not have been fully revealed due to restricted access to private spaces and core decision-making forums. This study also does not explore the historical development of women's authority. Thus, changes in authority patterns over time remain insufficiently examined. Future research may expand the fieldwork to modern pesantren or institutions with different leadership models to compare gender dynamics across institutional types. Including additional actors such as male ustaz, alumni, or the *kiai's* family networks would also help map power relations more comprehensively. Furthermore, investigating digital platforms as emerging spaces for women's authority is increasingly relevant for understanding the expansion of symbolic fields in contemporary pesantren contexts.

This study offers three main theoretical implications. First, it expands Saba Mahmood's concept of *agency within tradition* by demonstrating that practices of piety, obedience, and embodied ethics among pesantren women are not merely reproductions of patriarchal structures but serve as productive strategies for building moral legitimacy and expanding social presence. Second, it strengthens Bourdieu's theory of habitus by showing that the habitus of pesantren women is dynamic. They are able to convert cultural, moral, and symbolic capital into forms of authority recognized even within male-dominated fields. Third, it provides a new understanding of how women's authority is produced through moral-affective pathways before reaching formal recognition, highlighting that changes in women's positions in pesantren occur gradually through accumulated everyday ethical practices that later become symbolic capital.

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