

The Light of Knowledge from Gentle Hands: The Work of Women Scholars in Building Islamic Education Civilisation

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Keywords:

Female Ulama, Role of Women, Islamic Education

Abstract:

In the heart of South Kalimantan, a remarkable transformation is taking place in Islamic education, led by women who are reshaping traditional religious learning. This groundbreaking study reveals how 25 female Islamic scholars are revolutionizing their communities through innovative leadership and modern approaches to religious instruction. These pioneering women have taken charge of pesantren institutions, bringing a collaborative and inclusive leadership style that creates welcoming environments for all students, regardless of gender. Their approach goes beyond traditional methods, incorporating gender-sensitive teaching that specifically addresses the unique needs of female community members. They facilitate meaningful discussions on family guidance, health issues, and women's rights within Islamic teachings, filling crucial gaps in religious education. Perhaps most striking is their embrace of digital technology to expand their reach. These scholars have skillfully utilized platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok Live to connect with diverse, multigenerational audiences. This digital savvy allows them to present religious teachings in contemporary, accessible formats that resonate with tech-engaged community members. Through extensive interviews, observations, and analysis of their social media content, researchers discovered that these women are not merely adapting to change—they're driving it. Their work demonstrates how Islamic education can evolve to meet modern community needs while maintaining its spiritual foundation, proving that women's scholarly contributions are essential for creating inclusive, contemporary religious learning environments.

Article History:

Received: 2025-07-08

Revised: 2025-07-14

Accepted: 2025-08-20

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia has been shaped by numerous forces and undergone significant transformations, with the contributions of religious scholars playing a particularly crucial role. While male religious authorities have historically dominated the landscape of Islamic education, a new generation of female religious scholars is now rising to prominence, wielding considerable impact on educational practices and religious outreach activities (Latifah, 2024; Purnamasari et al., 2024).



The process of issuing religious rulings in Indonesia remains predominantly controlled by male religious authorities, even though many of the matters they address and the legal opinions they issue directly affect the daily experiences and circumstances of Muslim women. To address this imbalance, various non-governmental organizations focused on advancing women's rights have established training programs specifically designed to develop female religious scholars (Ismah, 2016; Kloos & Ismah, 2023; Kloos & Künkler, 2016).

The emergence of these female religious authorities creates pathways for a more comprehensive approach to Islamic education, particularly in addressing women's requirements for religious comprehension. These women scholars introduce fresh viewpoints to Islamic learning that emphasize practical religious knowledge connected to everyday realities and social contexts, especially benefiting women who have traditionally been excluded from religious discourse (Jamilatun et al., 2024; Numan et al., 2024).

South Kalimantan stands out as a region deeply rooted in pesantren culture and majlis taklim traditions, creating an environment where female Islamic scholars can flourish and make meaningful contributions to religious education. Given the predominantly Muslim demographic, Islamic education serves as a cornerstone in developing the moral foundation and character of the community in South Kalimantan. The presence and involvement of female ulama becomes essential, as these women not only transmit Islamic knowledge but also instill social and cultural principles that advance women's empowerment (Alfisyah, 2017). These female religious scholars frequently assume teaching responsibilities across various educational settings—from Islamic boarding schools to formal educational institutions and taklim assemblies—serving as role models who inspire numerous women to actively participate in societal development (Al Dabbagh, 2022; Simić, 2022).

In Indonesia's historical context, particularly in South Kalimantan, female religious scholars have traditionally operated without official acknowledgment. The deeply entrenched patriarchal system has historically confined women to private spheres, effectively excluding them from public religious discourse. Yet recent decades have witnessed a profound shift in societal perspectives regarding women's participation in religious leadership. Today, these female scholars command respect not only within women's circles but across broader society, where they are valued as vital contributors to both structured and informal Islamic educational systems (Ismah, 2024). Their presence addresses a crucial community requirement for religious leadership that understands and responds to women-centered concerns (Jamil & Usuluddin, 2024).

Within Islamic educational frameworks, female religious scholars occupy a distinctive and crucial position. Beyond delivering standard religious instruction, they address topics that directly impact women's experiences, including domestic education, health matters, and the rights afforded to women within Islamic teachings (Sugie, 2022). Through their more embracing and compassionate methodology, these female religious leaders establish environments where women feel secure and welcomed to engage in religious learning and dialogue. This specialized focus sets them apart from their male counterparts, who typically concentrate on broader religious themes while giving less attention to issues specifically affecting women.

Female Islamic scholars demonstrate their significance by bridging traditional religious teachings with contemporary societal demands (Naz, 2024). These women religious leaders articulate Islamic principles while offering practical guidance for addressing modern-day issues, including psychological well-being, familial harmony, and women's roles in public life. Within South Kalimantan, religious teachers such as Ustadzah Siti Rahmah leverage digital platforms for religious outreach, addressing topics that resonate particularly with younger female audiences seeking contemporary religious perspectives.

However, women in Islamic scholarship continue to encounter significant barriers when seeking official acknowledgment within established religious hierarchies (Supriyadi et al., 2019). Cultural impediments frequently restrict female religious authorities from attaining leadership roles in formal religious establishments, including administrative positions in Islamic boarding schools or recognized religious organizations (Numan et al., 2024). While research indicates that women-led Islamic organizations showcase female agency in religious and civic participation, challenging conventional gender structures and promoting gender equity within Muslim communities (Ghadikolaei, 2023), the reality in South Kalimantan often reveals a disconnect. Female religious scholars frequently enjoy substantial community respect and informal authority while simultaneously being excluded from equivalent recognition within official religious institutional frameworks.

The Indonesian Women Ulama Congress (Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia/KUPI) convened in both 2017 and 2022, marking pivotal moments for the official acknowledgment of female Islamic scholars in Indonesia. These gatherings affirmed the contributions of women ulama and promoted their participation across religious domains, particularly in educational initiatives and community development (Rohmaniyah, Kotele, & Widiastuti, 2022; Satibi et al., 2023). Within South Kalimantan specifically, these conferences served as a catalyst, motivating women ulama to engage more dynamically and assertively in religious leadership while opening pathways for enhanced institutional support in their preaching missions and Islamic educational endeavors.

A distinctive hallmark of women ulama's work in South Kalimantan lies in their pedagogical methodology, which prioritizes compassion, empathy, and attentiveness to the specific concerns of female congregants. This teaching philosophy renders Islamic education more accessible and connected to contemporary social realities. Through field observations and interviews, it becomes evident that female religious leaders like Nyai Hj. Aisyah, who operates in Hulu Sungai Selatan, frequently delivers sermons addressing women's lived experiences, fostering an educational atmosphere that is both welcoming and engaging for female participants. Through this approach, women ulama function not merely as transmitters of Islamic scholarship but as inspirational figures who encourage broader female participation in religious life.

The existing scholarly landscape reveals several important research directions regarding Muslim women's educational contributions. Educational leadership represents one significant area of investigation, with Numan et al. (2024) and Utari et al. (2024) examining how Muslim women advance educational systems through leadership positions including

principalships, administrative roles, and classroom leadership, particularly within educational institutions.

Another research strand explores institutional recognition and scholarly development. The work of Rohmaniyah, Kotele, & Widiastuti (2022), Rohmaniyah, Kotele, Pabbajah, et al. (2022), and Satibi et al. (2023) illuminates KUPI's institutional framework for acknowledging and fostering women scholars across religious studies, education, and community development initiatives. Digital religious communication forms a third research focus, with studies by Adel & Numan (2023), Subchi et al. (2022), and Uyuni et al. (2023) investigating how women religious scholars utilize digital platforms for religious messaging and outreach. Community-based religious transformation through traditional institutions is addressed by Alfisyah (2017), who examines clerics' roles within recitation communities as vehicles for societal change. Additionally, Nisa (2019) conceptualizes Muslim women as democratic pluralists who engage in religious expression across both traditional and digital spaces. Despite these valuable contributions, a significant research gap exists regarding comprehensive, detailed analysis of women scholars' specific contributions to Islamic education.

This study addresses this gap through focused investigation of women ulama's educational contributions in South Kalimantan, an area with limited documentation. The research examines three key dimensions: the strategic approaches women ulama employ to navigate contemporary challenges and patriarchal cultural constraints through their leadership in both formal and informal educational institutions; their implementation of inclusive educational methodologies; and their adaptation of digital technologies for religious outreach (da'wah). The anticipated outcomes include providing fresh insights into women ulama's specific roles within contemporary digital contexts, contributing to Islamic scholarly literature that foregrounds women religious leaders' work, and establishing foundations for more responsive and inclusive Islamic educational models.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative framework utilizing a case study methodology to examine how women religious scholars contribute to Islamic educational advancement in South Kalimantan. The case study design was selected due to the limited scholarly attention given to this phenomenon within the South Kalimantan context, where female religious leadership in Islamic education remains insufficiently documented and presents distinct contextual characteristics. This methodological choice allowed researchers to comprehensively document the lived experiences, approaches, and influence of women religious scholars operating within particular social and educational environments.

Primary data sources comprised information gathered from 25 female religious scholars actively engaged across diverse Islamic educational venues, encompassing pesantren (Islamic boarding institutions), majlis taklim (religious learning circles), and online religious outreach platforms. Participant selection followed purposive sampling methodology to identify prominent figures spanning districts including Hulu Sungai Selatan, Hulu Sungai Utara, and Tanah Laut.

Data gathering employed three distinct methods: 1) Semi-structured interviews designed to investigate viewpoints, experiences, and obstacles encountered by female religious scholars. 2) Participatory observation conducted throughout religious and educational events to document authentic interactions and leadership patterns. 3) Document examination analyzing supplementary materials including recorded digital sermons, social media publications, and written works authored by these scholars. Data validity was maintained through triangulation methodology, cross-referencing results across multiple data sources and collection approaches to strengthen reliability and minimize researcher subjectivity.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures outlined by Miles et al. (2014), incorporating data reduction, systematic coding, and identification of central themes concerning the functions and contributions of women religious scholars. The analytical process sought to reveal patterns demonstrating how female religious scholars manage leadership responsibilities, promote inclusive education, and embrace digital innovation within South Kalimantan's Islamic educational environment.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Female Scholars as Leaders of Islamic Boarding Schools and Madrasas

In the traditionally male-dominated landscape of Islamic educational institutions, female religious scholars have emerged as pioneering administrators and spiritual mentors within pesantren and madrasah systems. These women ulama have carved out significant roles as institutional heads, taking charge of educational programming and serving as spiritual guides for students across both religious studies and moral development. Their responsibilities extend beyond mere administrative oversight to encompass direct mentorship, where they function as exemplars of Islamic values while developing curricula that emphasizes character formation rooted in Islamic principles. The leadership style these female ulama bring to their institutions is distinguished by its emphasis on compassionate guidance, fostering inclusive and nurturing educational environments that benefit students regardless of gender.

“In contemporary times, a significant transformation has occurred in Islamic educational institutions, where female leaders now occupy key positions in pesantren and madrasahs - roles that were traditionally dominated by male leadership. One such leader expresses gratitude for her husband's supportive partnership in fulfilling these responsibilities. The scope of their work extends beyond mere administrative duties to encompass direct mentorship of students in both religious teachings and moral formation. These female educators are committed to serving as exemplars while simultaneously broadening educational programs to prioritize Islamic character building. Their approach to leadership brings a distinct perspective, incorporating nurturing qualities and fostering an inclusive, encouraging atmosphere that benefits students regardless of gender,” (Ustadzah 5&6, 2024).

The emergence of women religious teachers as heads of Islamic educational institutions has contributed to shifting perceptions regarding women's contributions to Islamic scholarship and learning (Numan et al., 2024). Within societies where traditional gender hierarchies remain influential, the rise of female religious authorities leading pesantren in

South Kalimantan demonstrates evolving perspectives on women's essential role in educational and religious outreach activities. These leaders establish welcoming institutional atmospheres that emphasize religious jurisprudence instruction, practical life preparation, and moral development (Astika et al., 2024; Maesaroh et al., 2024). Through their partnership-oriented and compassionate leadership methods, these educators develop closer connections with their students, foster meaningful relationships, and offer individualized mentorship (Boparai & Darlington, 2024; Tufail & Sandhu, 2022). Consequently, female students experience greater ease and enthusiasm in pursuing deeper religious understanding while cultivating community-applicable social competencies. Supporting findings from (Maesaroh et al., 2024; Wefald & Henault, 2022) indicate that the compassionate and collaborative leadership approach of female Islamic scholars enhances student learning outcomes through the creation of nurturing and welcoming educational settings. Such environments promote student engagement, encourage calculated risks in learning, and support individual growth—all fundamental elements for educational achievement.

Female Islamic scholars who lead pesantren and madrasahs create educational frameworks that address the specific requirements of their female students, incorporating subjects like health awareness, leadership development, and community engagement. These women educators establish environments where female students are motivated to pursue academic excellence, participate in community affairs, and contribute to public discourse. Through their positions, they demonstrate to their students that women can achieve meaningful influence in educational and social spheres while remaining grounded in Islamic principles. Their curriculum adaptations help female students develop the skills needed to navigate both spiritual duties and civic engagement effectively.

The presence of female ulama in these institutional leadership roles serves as a powerful demonstration of women's capabilities within religious frameworks, creating ripple effects throughout their communities. Their achievements in these positions challenge prevailing assumptions about gender limitations in religious leadership and public participation (Yusra & Junaidi, 2024). These leaders inspire not only their students but entire communities by dismantling restrictive gender expectations that have historically confined women's contributions to private spheres. The work of these South Kalimantan female ulama illustrates how Islamic principles can support and encourage women's active engagement in educational leadership, creating influential examples for building more inclusive and empowered future generations. This transformation reflects broader societal shifts where women increasingly assume leadership roles across multiple sectors. Nevertheless, the challenge of managing both leadership responsibilities and domestic duties persists, highlighting the need for supportive measures to enhance women's educational opportunities and their contributions to national development (Azizah et al., 2024).

Therefore, the leadership demonstrated by female Islamic scholars advances women's empowerment by challenging gender-based limitations and proving that women can achieve substantial influence in educational and social contexts through Islamic frameworks. However, ongoing difficulties persist, especially regarding the complex balance between

leadership duties and household responsibilities, requiring continued support to ensure women's meaningful participation in educational advancement and national progress.

The Role of Female Religious Scholars in the Inclusive Education Approach

In South Kalimantan, female religious leaders demonstrate a notably welcoming educational philosophy within their Majlis Taklim gatherings, particularly in addressing the specific concerns of women participants. These women clerics offer comprehensive Islamic instruction while also engaging with subjects that directly impact women's daily experiences, including guidance on raising families, matters of reproductive wellness, and the position of women within Islamic principles. This methodology creates an environment where female participants feel comfortable exploring and inquiring about issues that might receive limited attention in traditional religious discussions led primarily by men.

“Contemporary and trending topics within society often become the focal point of religious discussions. The Wahhabi and Salafi movements serve as prime illustrations of such matters. Additionally, there's the case of a TikTok religious instructor who has gained widespread attention due to her tendency to criticize others in her teachings without providing substantive evidence or scholarly backing,” (Ustadzah 2, 2024).

“When it comes to tailoring religious instruction based on the audience's age demographics, content adaptation becomes essential. For congregants below 30 years of age, emphasis is placed on Islamic jurisprudence specific to women and fundamental concepts of monotheism (tawhid), as these represent their primary educational needs. Those in the 35-and-above age bracket receive a more balanced approach that integrates both tawhid and jurisprudence, extending beyond theoretical knowledge to encompass practical implementation in everyday circumstances. For individuals over 40, the curriculum becomes more sophisticated, incorporating advanced topics such as mystical experiences, Sufi teachings, and even the study of Siti Khadijah's biographical accounts (Manaqib) as a means of spiritual contemplation,” (Ustadzah 1, 2024).

Women religious scholars in South Kalimantan have developed a comprehensive educational strategy through majlis taklim that opens broader learning opportunities for female congregants to engage with Islamic teachings in personally meaningful ways. As documented in research (Latief & Madjid, 2022), these religious study circles are directed by female religious leaders who shape both the curriculum and theological discussions to transform the spiritual and communal dimensions of their participants' lives. These women religious teachers address particular concerns that resonate with their female audiences, including healthcare matters, domestic responsibilities, and women's Islamic rights—topics that typically receive limited attention in traditional religious gatherings dominated by male leadership (Rohmaniyah, Kotele, Pabbajah, et al., 2022). Through this methodology, female religious educators not only transmit Islamic knowledge but also establish interactive forums where participants can pose questions and engage in dialogue, fostering an educational atmosphere that is both accessible and attuned to the lived experiences of women.

“According to Islamic jurisprudence, married women can successfully balance their marital responsibilities in a way that honors both their role as spouses and their

husband's legitimate expectations, creating harmony rather than tension in the relationship," (Ustadzah 1, 2024).

The comprehensive nature of this methodology demonstrates that female religious scholars serve a combined function as both educators and advocates for empowerment. During numerous educational gatherings, these women academics communicate foundational Islamic jurisprudence while offering concrete illustrations of implementing Islamic principles within domestic and communal contexts (Paracha & Khalid, 2023). This dual function proves especially valuable since female congregants encounter distinct obstacles compared to their male counterparts in fulfilling their everyday responsibilities. Through delivering actionable counsel, these female religious leaders assist women worshipers in cultivating both profound and pragmatic comprehension that can be immediately implemented within their household and community environments.

Such an encompassing methodology fosters enhanced emotional bonds between female religious leaders and their followers, thereby reinforcing connections throughout the faith community. These women clerics offer compassionate outreach, comprehend the psychological requirements of female believers, and establish welcoming environments for dialogue (Paracha & Khalid, 2023; Udechukwu et al., 2024). Consequently, female religious leaders function as spiritual instructors, advocates, and motivators who assist women in gaining greater assurance when practicing their Islamic faith. This indicates that female clerics play a crucial role in reinforcing gender-specific religious networks that provide both spiritual and social empowerment for women.

Female Clerics' Adaptation to Digital Technology in Preaching

This study revealed that female Islamic scholars in South Kalimantan have embraced digital platforms as powerful tools for religious outreach and teaching. Through channels like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok Live, these religious leaders deliver sermons, provide guidance, and engage in real-time dialogue with their audiences. The interactive question-and-answer format enables these scholars to address individual concerns and spiritual needs, fostering deeper connections with their communities. These digital channels have proven particularly valuable in reaching younger female audiences who might otherwise be unable to participate in traditional religious gatherings such as majlis taklim or attend Islamic boarding schools in person. This technological approach has effectively expanded the reach of Islamic education beyond geographical boundaries and time constraints, creating accessible pathways for spiritual learning and guidance.

"My daily social media routine involves engaging across multiple platforms to share educational content. TikTok Live serves as my primary tool for real-time interaction, which I utilize both during my teaching sessions and in follow-up discussions afterward. My Instagram presence is quite active, with daily posts ranging from one to three articles. Facebook also plays a role in my content distribution strategy, where I typically share up to two articles per day. Additionally, I've been grateful to expand my reach through YouTube, where I've successfully uploaded various lecture recordings for broader accessibility" (Ustadzah 2, 2024).

The integration of digital platforms by female Islamic scholars in their religious outreach efforts marks a transformative shift in the landscape of Islamic instruction and public engagement. These technological tools enable female religious leaders to transcend physical limitations that previously restricted participation for congregants in distant locations or those facing mobility challenges. Via social media channels including YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, these scholars can engage with a wider and more varied demographic, particularly younger women who predominantly seek religious guidance through online mediums (Choirin et al., 2024; Quadratullah & Syam, 2024). Moreover, the scheduling freedom provided by these digital venues enables followers to engage with religious content at their convenience, removing the constraints of fixed timetables. This demonstrates the resourcefulness and flexibility of female scholars' religious messaging in contemporary times (Uyuni et al., 2023).

These online platforms not only expand accessibility but also foster enhanced interactive engagement between female religious authorities and their followers. Women scholars frequently utilize dynamic social media functionalities, including real-time Q&A sessions and interactive polls, to address inquiries and concerns from their audience, particularly those pertaining to women's everyday experiences (Uyuni et al., 2023). This participatory methodology enables female scholars to deliver religious guidance that resonates with their audience's social circumstances, thus amplifying the impact of their teachings (Subchi et al., 2022). Furthermore, this enhanced connection offers congregants the opportunity to receive personalized spiritual guidance, demonstrating that female religious scholars in South Kalimantan successfully provide da'wah that is both educational and attuned to the evolving needs of their communities.

“Religious educators demonstrate cultural sensitivity by adapting their teaching methods in two key ways. First, they align their instruction with significant dates in the Islamic calendar, such as incorporating lessons about Isra' and Mi'raj during the month of Rajab. Second, they tailor their communication style to match their audience's context, whether they are teaching in metropolitan centers, suburban communities, or countryside villages, ensuring they use accessible language that resonates with each local population,” (Ustadzah 2, 2024).

The adoption of digital platforms by these female Islamic scholars represents a departure from conventional preaching approaches toward a more contemporary and forward-thinking methodology. Through this strategy, women religious leaders in South Kalimantan demonstrate their preparedness to address the demands of global connectivity and digital transformation, ensuring Islamic instruction remains pertinent and reachable in our rapidly changing world. These women scholars must exercise prudence when utilizing these digital channels to maintain consistency with Islamic teachings (Sebihi & Moazzam, 2024). This movement additionally strengthens their position as catalysts for societal transformation, emphasizing the transmission of Islamic principles while motivating young Muslim women to perceive Islam as a faith that harmonizes with technological progress. This endeavor illustrates that female religious authorities possess both the capability and creativity necessary to preserve the significance of Islamic outreach in contemporary times, thereby establishing a

secure and welcoming environment where young Muslim women can engage meaningfully in religious discourse within the digital landscape.

While digital engagement in Islamic education offers numerous benefits, it also presents significant challenges that warrant attention. The online distribution of Islamic educational content carries risks of propagating false information or radical ideologies, necessitating vigilant oversight and monitoring mechanisms. Additionally, although digital mediums make religious discussions more accessible to broader audiences, they simultaneously risk diminishing the credibility and influence of established religious authorities (Adel & Numan, 2023; Sebihi & Moazzam, 2024).

This evolution represents a transition from conventional da'wah practices toward more contemporary and flexible approaches that align with modern circumstances, while simultaneously elevating female Islamic scholars as catalysts for societal transformation who champion the progress of Islamic education in our digital era. However, the utilization of these online platforms introduces difficulties concerning the possible circulation of inaccurate information and the erosion of traditional religious institutional authority, requiring enhanced monitoring to preserve the integrity of da'wah efforts.

CONCLUSION

The research reveals that female religious scholars in South Kalimantan have emerged as transformative forces in Islamic educational reform. These women ulama have revolutionized traditional pesantren environments by implementing leadership styles characterized by inclusivity, creating supportive learning atmospheres that benefit students regardless of gender. Their pedagogical innovations extend beyond conventional teaching methods, incorporating gender-awareness into curricula and addressing previously marginalized subjects including women's rights, family dynamics, and health matters—topics that have historically received limited attention in male-dominated religious discourse.

The digital revolution has provided these scholars with unprecedented opportunities to expand their influence. Through strategic engagement with social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, they have successfully connected with contemporary audiences, particularly appealing to younger demographics who are increasingly digital-native. This technological adaptation demonstrates their commitment to making Islamic education accessible and relevant in the modern era.

The study's conclusions emphasize how these female ulama function as catalysts for comprehensive educational transformation. They have successfully created an Islamic educational paradigm that embraces inclusivity, responds dynamically to evolving social contexts, and harnesses digital innovations for religious outreach. Beyond their educational contributions, their work significantly advances women's empowerment within both religious institutions and the broader public sphere, establishing them as influential voices in contemporary Islamic discourse.

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