



SUFI FEMINISM IN ACTION:

Nahdliyah Women, Tarekat Authority, and Political Dynamics in Indonesia⁽¹⁾

Shinta Nurani^{1*}, Fatimah Husein², Najib Kailani²

¹UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid, Pekalongan, Indonesia

²UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*Correspondence email: shinta.nurani@uingusdur.ac.id

Abstract: Based on ethnographic fieldwork among Nahdliyah women involved in Sufi orders (tarekat) in Indonesia, this article explores how religious practice becomes a site for the formation of gendered political agency. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and observation of ritual spaces with ritual spaces such as dhikr gatherings and religious study circles, the study examines how women cultivate religious subjectivity and moral authority within Nahdlatul Ulama's spiritual networks. The findings reveal that women's political involvement emerges not through formal leadership positions but through everyday practices of piety, mediation, and relational influence that link spiritual authority to political interests. Acting as trusted intermediaries among religious leaders, followers, and political actors, Nahdliyah women translate Sufi-based moral legitimacy into culturally embedded, locally recognized forms of political participation. This ethnographic account challenges dominant assumptions that equate women's political agency with overt resistance to patriarchal norms. Instead, it highlights a practice-based form of Sufi feminism in which agency is enacted through negotiation, ethical self-cultivation, and social trust. By foregrounding lived religious experience, the article contributes to broader anthropological debates on Islam, gender, and politics, positioning Southeast Asian Muslim women as central to rethinking feminist and political agency in Muslim societies.

Keywords: Nahdliyah women, political practices, religious authority, Sufi feminism, tarekat.

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Introduction

OVER THE PAST two decades, the relationship between Islam, gender, and politics has become a central concern in global scholarship on Muslim societies. Much of this literature has focused on questions of women's rights, political participation, and resistance to patriarchal religious authority, often framed through liberal feminist paradigms that privilege visibility, formal leadership, and explicit contestation. While these approaches have produced important insights, they have also tended to marginalize forms of women's agency that operate through religious practice, moral authority, and culturally embedded modes of influence.¹ In this regard, Southeast Asian Islam and Indonesia in particular offers a critical site for rethinking how Muslim women engage politics through piety rather than despite it.

Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, presents a distinctive configuration of Islamic authority shaped by local traditions, mass religious organizations, and plural democratic practices. Among these organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) occupies a central position as both a religious and socio-political force. NU's influence extends beyond formal institutional structures into everyday religious life through pesantren, religious gatherings, and Sufi orders (tarekat).² While existing studies have examined NU's role in democratization, political Islam, and religious pluralism³, the gendered dynamics within its Sufi-based networks, particularly the role of women, remain underexplored.

The study of women, Islam, and politics has grown rapidly, particularly since the increased global attention to the rise of Islam

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¹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691217416> and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Press, 2013.

² Robin Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2009).

³ Robert W. Hefner, "Civil Islam and the Limits of Democratization," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70, no. 4 (2011): 1031–1037, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911811001500>.

and democratization in the Muslim world. Early studies tended to situate Muslim women in terms of the opposition between religious tradition and political modernity, often with the assumption that religious practices restricted women's agency.⁴ In this approach, women's political participation was understood primarily through formal indicators such as electoral representation, institutional leadership, and women's rights advocacy. However, critiques of the approach have emerged from feminist scholars and anthropologists who argue that the liberal-feminist model fails to capture the complexity of Muslim women's experiences. Mahmood fundamentally challenges the assumption that agency always manifests as resistance to patriarchal norms.⁵ Mahmood argues that piety, obedience, and religious discipline can be modes of active and meaningful subject formation. This perspective opens conceptual space to understand Muslim women's political engagement as a practice rooted in religious ethics, rather than a mere rejection of them. In the political context, Künkler and Stepan assert that democracy in Muslim societies is often mediated by moral authority and religious networks.⁶ However, while this literature recognizes the role of religion in politics, the gender dimension is often treated marginally. Women are more often positioned as constituents or objects of mobilization, rather than producers of meaning and strategic actors in faith-based politics.

Alongside critiques of the liberal paradigm, studies have emerged that highlight the relationship among feminism, piety, and religious practice. Abu-Lughod criticizes global narratives that simplify Muslim women as subjects who need to be "saved", while emphasizing the importance of local contexts and women's

⁴ Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (2nd ed.), Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003.

⁵ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691217416>.

⁶ Mirjam Kunkler and Alfred Stepan (eds), *Democracy and Islam in Indonesia*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

own ethical choices.⁷ In this framework, feminism does not always exist as an explicit movement, but can manifest in everyday practices that generate meaning and strengthen women's bargaining power. Rinaldo, in his study of Islamic feminism in Indonesia, shows how Muslim women mobilize piety as a source of legitimacy to participate in the public sphere.⁸ However, the focus of the study is mostly on women's organizations and discourse-based activism, while spiritual practices such as tarekat receive relatively less attention. Yet, as Bano and Kalmbach point out, women's leadership and authority in Islam often emerge in non-formal spaces rooted in religious practices.⁹ Islamic feminist literature also highlights internal change strategies within religious institutions. Wadud emphasizes that the reinterpretation of texts and the expansion of women's roles in Islam are not necessarily confrontational.¹⁰ However, these studies still tend to be normative-theological and have not fully linked the spiritual dimension with practical political dynamics.

The study of tarekat and politics has long been a concern in Indonesian Islamic studies. Van Bruinessen shows that tarekat cannot be separated from power relations, both during the colonial period and the contemporary era.¹¹ Howell and Bruinessen further assert that Sufism in Indonesia has revitalized and adapted to the modern context, including democracy and electoral politics.¹² Although this literature successfully dismantles the myth of

⁷ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Press, 2013.

⁸ Rachel Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety: Islam and Feminism in Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199758022.001.0001>.

⁹ M. Bano & H. Kalmbach, *Women, leadership and mosques: Changes in contemporary Islamic authority*, Brill, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004230500>.

¹⁰ Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

¹¹ Martin van Bruinessen, "Tarekat and Politics in Indonesia," *ISIM Newsletter* 1 (1998): 4–5.

¹² Julia Day Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (2001): 701–729, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700105>; Martin van Bruinessen, "Tarekat and Politics in Indonesia," *ISIM Newsletter* 1 (1998): 4–5.

tarekat as apolitical communities, most studies still focus on male figures—mursyid, kiai, and pesantren elites—as centers of spiritual and political authority..¹³ When women are mentioned, they often appear as passive followers or supporters. This creates an androcentric bias in understanding how Sufi authority operates at the grassroots level. Some anthropological studies are beginning to show that religious authority in Sufism is relational and performative.¹⁴ Ethnographic studies in various Muslim countries show that women in Sufi orders do not only play the role of students or passive followers, but also as agents of da'wah,

¹³ Martin van Bruinessen states that the dynamics of Sufi orders in the archipelago are closely related to the transmission of sanad, scientific legitimacy, and the role of the mursyid, who is usually a male kiai with an emphasis on ritual and theological dimensions (See Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren dan Tarekat*, Yogyakarta: Gading Publishing, 2012). In line with Woodward, Sufism practices in the Yogyakarta palace environment emphasize wirid rituals, zikir, and mystical teachings led by male kiai as spiritual authorities (See Mark R. Woodward, *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989). Ricklefs expresses a similar view, stating that Sufism played an important role in shaping Javanese Islamic syncretism, with the central figures being the wali and male kiai, whose leadership in the tarekat was understood as part of the scholarly authority inherited through the teacher-student lineage (See M.C. Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth-the Early Nineteenth Centuries*, Norwalk: EastBridge, 2006).

¹⁴ A study conducted by Fatimah Husein found that although Sufi practices are generally considered a male-dominated heritage and space, Ba 'Alawi women in Indonesia—particularly three female religious teachers in Jakarta, Surabaya, and Solo—have succeeded in becoming preservers and transmitters teachings of the 'Alawiyyah Sufi order through their intellectual heritage, spiritual involvement, and genealogical connections. Thus, the role of these women has changed the dynamics of religious transmission, which has long been controlled by male authorities in the Hadhrami community in Indonesia (See Fatimah Husein, "[Preserving and Transmitting the Teachings of the Thariqah 'Alawiyyah: Diasporic Ba'Alawi Female Preachers in Contemporary Indonesia](#)", *The Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*, 4(2):165-187, <https://doi.org/10.26443/jiows.v4i2.82>, 2021); Julia Day Howell also shows that women in Sufi communities and orders now play an active role in teaching, organizing order activities, and even in the production of religious discourse that combines spirituality and social activism (See Julia Day Howell, *Sufism and the "Modern" in Islam*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007); Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

spiritual educators, and even guardians of tradition.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the gender implications of these findings have not been systematically explored. As such, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the role of women in the production, distribution, and transformation of Sufi authority into social and political power.

As the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama has been widely studied from the perspective of politics, pluralism, and democracy.¹⁶ These studies highlight NU as a key actor in national and local politics, with flexible and often fragmented networks. However, gender analysis in NU studies remains relatively limited. Research on NU women's autonomous organizations, such as Muslimat and Fatayat, has made important contributions to understanding Nahdliyah women's activism. However, these studies have generally focused on formal organizational structures and social programs rather than on the spiritual practices that underpin NU's cultural basis. In fact, tarekat is one of the most powerful sources of religious legitimacy and social solidarity in the Nahdliyah community. By ignoring the tarekat dimension, the literature on NU and gender misses the opportunity to understand how politics works through the ethics of piety, religious attachment, and interpersonal relationships, areas in which women play a central role.

Based on the literature review above, there are three main gaps. First, studies on Muslim women and politics are still dominated by liberal and institutional paradigms that are less sensitive to religious practice and spirituality. Second, studies on tarekat and politics in Indonesia are androcentric and have not paid serious attention to women's experiences and agency. Third, literature on NU and gender tends to separate women's activism and Sufi practices, even though both are intertwined in Nahdliyah social life. This article fills the gap by presenting an ethnographic

¹⁵ P. Werbner, *Pilgrims of Love: The Anthropology of a Global Sufi Cult*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

¹⁶ Robin Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2009); Greg Fealy, "Islamic Politics: A Rising or Declining Force?" *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 2 (2007): 104–118, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2007.0023>.

approach that focuses on the experiences of Nahdliyah women in tarekat as religio-political actors. By developing the concept of Sufi feminism as a contextual practice, this study contributes to global debates on Islam, gender, and politics, while enriching the understanding of Southeast Asian Islam as an important space for the production of social theory.

Methodologically, this study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Nahdliyah women affiliated with Sufi orders in Indonesia. Ethnography, as Bowen argues, is particularly well suited to capturing the moral reasoning and practical negotiations that shape Muslim social life.¹⁷ Data were collected through participant observation in ritual settings, in-depth interviews with women practitioners and religious leaders, and document analysis of religious and organizational texts. This approach enables close attention to lived experience and local meanings, foregrounding voices that are often absent from macro-level analyses of Islam, Sufi orders, and politics.

Women and Nahdliyah Tarekat

The Nahdliyah tarekat tradition constitutes for the formation of women's religious subjectivity within Indonesia's Islamic landscape. Embedded in Nahdlatul Ulama's theological orientation of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, these Sufi orders (tarekat) offer women structured yet flexible spaces for cultivating ethical selves through ritual practice, discipline, and collective devotion.¹⁸ Rather than occupying marginal positions, women actively sustain and reproduce the moral life of tarekat communities at the grassroots level. Women's engagement with Nahdliyah tarekat is marked by regular participation in *dhikr* gatherings, recitation of *wirid* and *ratib*, and involvement in devotional study circles often organized in domestic or semi-

¹⁷ J. R. Bowen, *Islam, Law, and Equality in Indonesia: An Anthropology of Public Reasoning*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2003, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511615122>.

¹⁸ Julia Day Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (2001): 701–729, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700105>; Martin van Bruinessen, "Tarekat and Politics in Indonesia," *ISIM Newsletter* 1 (1998): 4–5.

public spaces. Following Orsi's notion of lived religion, these practices should not be understood merely as symbolic expressions of belief, but as formative activities through which religious meaning and ethical dispositions are produced.¹⁹ Through repetition and discipline, women cultivate embodied forms of piety that become socially legible and morally authoritative.

The formation of religious subjectivity in this context is deeply relational and collective. Women frequently articulate their spiritual journeys using idioms such as *ngalap berkah* (seeking blessings) and *manut guru* (obedience to spiritual guides), emphasizing moral submission and relational ethics rather than individual autonomy. This resonates with Mahmood's argument that agency in religious contexts cannot be reduced to resistance against norms but may emerge through the inhabitation of ethical frameworks that discipline the self.²⁰ Drawing on Foucault's concept of "technologies of the self"²¹, Nahdliyah tarekat practices function as mechanisms through which women fashion themselves as morally accountable subjects. Practices such as *tirakat* (spiritual discipline) and continuous remembrance of God cultivate virtues of patience, humility, and self-restraint. These virtues are central to how women's credibility and trustworthiness are evaluated within the community, underscoring the ethical basis of religious authority.

Unlike men's institutional authority, which is often institutionalized through pesantren leadership or formal religious credentials, women's authority within tarekat is largely informal and practice-based. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, women's devotional labor can be understood as generating moral legitimacy that confers influence without explicit claims to

¹⁹ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁰ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691217416>.

²¹ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16–49.

power.²² Senior women practitioners, often recognized informally rather than officially, are consulted for guidance on familial, spiritual, and communal matters, demonstrating how authority circulates beyond formal hierarchies.

This religious subjectivity is not politically neutral. As studies on Indonesian Islam have shown, Nahdliyah networks are deeply intertwined with local political processes.²³ The ethical dispositions cultivated through Sufi practice—trustworthiness, moderation, and commitment to communal harmony—position women as credible mediators between religious elites, grassroots followers, and political actors. Religious subjectivity thus becomes a precondition for political agency rather than an obstacle to it.

Moral legitimacy occupies a pivotal mediating position in the transformation of religious subjectivity into political agency. If religious subjectivity refers to the formation of ethical selves through embodied practices of piety, discipline, and moral reflection, then moral legitimacy is the intersubjective recognition that these ethical dispositions are worthy of trust, authority, and emulation in the public sphere. In this sense, religious subjectivity becomes politically consequential only when it is acknowledged as morally credible by a wider community. Although the cultivation of pious selves produces forms of agency grounded in ethical self-formation, moral legitimacy enables these forms of agency to extend beyond the individual and operate as a socially effective form of influence. Thus, moral legitimacy bridges internalized piety and publicly recognized authority, enabling religious actors to shape norms, articulate critiques, and guide collective behavior.

At the same time, moral legitimacy operates as a form of symbolic power that sustains and amplifies political agency, particularly in contexts where formal authority is limited or

²² Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–258.

²³ Robin Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2009); Greg Fealy and Sally White, eds., *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2008).

contested. Moral legitimacy can be understood as a type of symbolic capital accumulated through consistent ethical conduct, recognized by others, and mobilized within specific social fields. This is especially evident in cases of women's participation in Islamic movements, where moral authority derived from religious subjectivity enables them to act as educators, mediators, and ethical guides in "everyday politics," even without occupying formal political office. As noted by Asef Bayat, such forms of agency often emerge through dispersed, informal practices that reshape power relations from below.²⁴ Therefore, moral legitimacy is not simply an outcome of religious subjectivity but a necessary condition for its political efficacy: it authorizes actors to intervene in public life while framing their actions as ethically grounded rather than merely strategic, thereby enhancing both their credibility and their influence.

Women's subject formation within the Nahdliyah tarekat remains shaped by patriarchal norms that emphasize modesty, obedience, and service. Rather than viewing these norms as simply oppressive, this study aligns with feminist anthropological approaches that emphasize negotiation and incremental transformation within religious traditions.²⁵ By conforming to normative expectations of piety, women gain moral authority that allows them to subtly expand the boundaries of legitimate participation. This analysis challenges binary representations of Sufi spaces as either emancipatory or restrictive for women. Instead, Nahdliyah tarekat emerges as an ambivalent yet productive arena in which women's religious subjectivities are continuously formed and mobilized. Through everyday devotional practices, women craft ethical selves that enable them to navigate and shape the intersections of religion, gender, and politics in contemporary Indonesia.

²⁴ Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

²⁵ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Press, 2013; M. Bano & H. Kalmbach, *Women, leadership and mosques: Changes in contemporary Islamic authority*, Brill, (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004230500>.

Women as Mediators of Spiritual and Political Authority in Nahdliyah Tarekat

Sufi orders affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (Nahdliyah tarekat) have historically functioned as spaces for spiritual discipline, moral cultivation, and social cohesion. Scholars such as van Bruinessen and Howell have demonstrated that Sufi orders (tarekat) in Indonesia are not isolated mystical communities but are deeply embedded in social and political life.²⁶ They serve as networks through which authority circulates, loyalties are formed, and collective action becomes possible. Yet, analyses of tarekat have largely centered on male religious leaders, such as kiai and mursyid,²⁷ reinforcing the assumption that spiritual and political authority in Sufism is overwhelmingly masculine. This article challenges that assumption by foregrounding the lived experiences of Nahdliyah women whose religious practices position them as influential actors within both spiritual and political domains.

Ethnographic encounters with women involved in tarekat reveal forms of agency that are subtle, relational, and grounded in everyday religious practice. Through participation in dhikr assemblies, religious study circles, and informal networks of care

²⁶ Julia Day Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (2001): 701–729, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700105>; Martin van Bruinessen, "Tarekat and Politics in Indonesia," *ISIM Newsletter* 1 (1998): 4–5.

²⁷ Martin van Bruinessen states that the dynamics of Sufi orders in the archipelago are closely related to the transmission of sanad, scientific legitimacy, and the role of the mursyid, who is usually a male kiai with an emphasis on ritual and theological dimensions (See Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren dan Tarekat*, Yogyakarta: Gading Publishing, 2012). In line with Woodward, Sufism practices in the Yogyakarta palace environment emphasize wirid rituals, zikir, and mystical teachings led by male kiai as spiritual authorities (See Mark R. Woodward, *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989). Ricklefs expresses a similar view, stating that Sufism played an important role in shaping Javanese Islamic syncretism, with the central figures being the wali and male kiai, whose leadership in the tarekat was understood as part of the scholarly authority inherited through the teacher-student lineage (See M.C. Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth-the Early Nineteenth Centuries*, Norwalk: EastBridge, 2006).

and mediation, women cultivate moral authority that is widely recognized within their communities. This authority does not derive from formal leadership roles but from trust, ethical practice, and proximity to sacred knowledge. As Bourdieu suggests, symbolic capital operates most effectively when it is misrecognized as disinterested piety rather than power.²⁸ In the Nahdliyah context, women's piety becomes a crucial resource through which religious legitimacy is transformed into social and political influence.

The political significance of these practices becomes particularly visible during moments of contestation, such as electoral campaigns, local power struggles, and negotiations between religious leaders and political elites. Rather than acting as passive recipients of political directives, Nahdliyah women often function as mediators who translate spiritual authority into political support. They mobilize networks of trust, interpret religious messages for broader audiences, and negotiate competing interests within NU's fragmented political landscape. This mediation role complicates dominant narratives that portray Muslim women either as victims of patriarchal control or as emancipated subjects who resist religious norms.²⁹ Instead, it points to a form of agency that operates through accommodation, negotiation, and ethical self-cultivation.

To conceptualize these dynamics, this article advances the notion of Sufi feminism as a practice-based and contextually grounded mode of feminist engagement. Unlike liberal or secular feminist frameworks, Sufi feminism does not necessarily articulate itself through rights-based discourse or oppositional politics. Rather, it emerges from embodied religious practices that enable women to inhabit and subtly reconfigure existing structures of authority. Drawing on Mahmood's critique of liberal feminist assumptions about agency, this study understands agency not as

²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–258.

²⁹ Rachel Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety: Islam and Feminism in Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199758022.001.0001>.

resistance per se, but as the capacity to act meaningfully within historically specific discursive and institutional constraints.³⁰ In the Nahdliyah case, women's agency is enacted through devotion, ethical discipline, and relational power, rather than overt challenges to male dominance. At the same time, this article does not romanticize women's participation in tarekat or NU networks. The spaces women inhabit remain shaped by patriarchal norms that limit access to formal leadership and theological authority. However, as feminist scholars of Islam have argued, change within religious institutions often occurs incrementally and through culturally legitimate means.³¹ By working within rather than against tradition, Nahdliyah women expand the boundaries of acceptable female participation, reshaping the meanings of leadership, authority, and political engagement from within Islamic frameworks.

Within Nahdliyah and tarekat networks, women occupy mediating position that links spiritual authority with political processes. Although they rarely hold formal leadership roles within religious institutions, ethnographic findings demonstrate that women function as trusted intermediaries who translate moral legitimacy into political influence. Moral legitimacy refers to the recognition that an action or institution is ethically appropriate and consistent with a community's shared moral values. Legitimacy emerges when actions or forms of authority are regarded as justified and worthy of acceptance by those they govern.³² By contrast, moral authority is the socially recognized capacity of individuals or groups to guide others because they are perceived as morally credible, pious, and trustworthy. Rather than deriving solely from formal institutions, such authority is

³⁰ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691217416>.

³¹ M. Bano & H. Kalmbach, *Women, leadership and mosques: Changes in contemporary Islamic authority*, Brill, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004230500>; Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

³² Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

cultivated through ethical conduct, religious knowledge, and spiritual discipline. In sociological terms, this authority may be understood as a form of symbolic capital, through which actors accumulate prestige and credibility that enable them to influence others within a particular social field.³³

Political participation is understood in a broader sense than merely the act of voting in elections. In classical political science, political participation refers to the activities of ordinary citizens intended to influence political decisions, public policies, or the selection of political leaders.³⁴ Such participation may include electoral behaviour, political discussion, community mobilization, and other forms of civic engagement. In the context of Indonesia, where religion plays a significant role in shaping public life, political participation often occurs through informal social and religious networks. Within communities affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama, religious gatherings such as *pengajian*, *majelis dhikr*, and *tarekat* meetings frequently serve as spaces where political ideas and civic responsibilities are discussed. In these contexts, participation in politics does not only refer to institutional engagement with electoral processes but also to the ways religious actors interpret and communicate political issues to their communities.

For Nahdliyyah women involved in Sufi networks, political participation often takes the form of grassroots civic engagement and ethical guidance within their religious communities. Women who are active in *pengajian* circles or *tarekat* gatherings may encourage fellow members to exercise their voting rights responsibly, provide informal political education, and promote ethical standards in political behavior. For example, they may advise community members to avoid practices such as vote-buying (*politik uang*), to prioritize candidates who demonstrate moral integrity, and to maintain social harmony during electoral contests. Through these activities, Nahdliyyah women contribute

³³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

³⁴ Verba, Sidney, and Norman H, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

to shaping the moral framework within which political decisions are made. Rather than acting primarily as formal political elites, their influence often operates through everyday social interactions and moral persuasion, reflecting the broader role of Islamic civil society networks in mediating political engagement in Indonesia.

In the context of women's participation in traditionalist Islamic networks such as Nahdlatul Ulama, these two concepts intersect in important ways. Nahdliyyah women who are active in pengajian circles, devotional gatherings, and Sufi orders often cultivate moral authority through embodied practices of piety, religious learning, and community service. As shown in studies of Muslim women's religious agency, ethical self-formation and everyday devotional practices can generate forms of influence that operate outside formal institutional leadership. Through these processes, women who are respected within local religious networks may become trusted mediators of religious interpretation and moral guidance. When such actors frame civic engagement, such as voting, supporting particular candidates, or participating in public debates, as consistent with Islamic ethical commitments and communal welfare, they help construct moral legitimacy for these actions within their communities. In this sense, moral authority functions as the social foundation through which moral legitimacy is articulated and disseminated, enabling Nahdliyyah women within Sufi networks to translate religious ethics into socially and politically meaningful forms of participation.

This mediating role emerges from women's embeddedness in everyday religious practices and social relations, positioning them at the intersection of devotional life and political negotiation. Previous studies on Islamic authority in Indonesia have emphasized the centrality of *kiai* and male religious elites in shaping political alignments.³⁵ However, such analyses often overlook the informal actors who facilitate the circulation of authority at the grassroots level. This study shows that Nahdliyyah women play a crucial role in sustaining these networks by

³⁵ Robin Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2009).

maintaining relational ties between religious leaders, followers, and political actors. Their mediation work operates through trust, proximity, and moral credibility rather than institutional mandate.

Women's mediating capacity is grounded in the symbolic capital they accumulate through sustained devotional labor. Drawing on Bourdieu's framework, women's piety functions as a form of moral legitimacy that authorizes them to speak, persuade, and advise without appearing to challenge established hierarchies.³⁶ Senior women practitioners are frequently consulted to interpret religious guidance in relation to political choices, particularly during moments of political contestation such as local elections. Their advice is perceived as ethically grounded and therefore politically trustworthy. This mediating role aligns with Foucault's conception of power as relational and circulating through networks rather than concentrated in formal positions.³⁷ Women's political influence is exercised through everyday interactions, informal conversations after *dhikr* gatherings, domestic visits, and kinship-based networks where political messages are framed in moral and communal terms. Such spaces blur the boundaries between the religious and the political, revealing how authority is enacted through practice rather than proclamation. Women's mediation does not merely transmit male authority but actively reshapes it. By contextualizing religious directives within local moral concerns, women adapt elite discourses to the lived realities of the community. This process of translation reflects what anthropologists describe as the *vernacularization* of authority, whereby abstract religious or political ideals are rendered socially meaningful through localized practices.³⁸ Women thus participate in the production of political meaning, not simply its dissemination.

³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–258.

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

³⁸ Sally Engle Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226520752.001.0001>.

Gender norms play a paradoxical role in enabling women's mediation. Expectations of women as caregivers, moral guardians, and community anchors³⁹ provide legitimacy for their involvement in relational work. While these norms limit access to formal power, they also create spaces where women's voices are heard and valued. As Abu-Lughod argues, such gendered roles should not be dismissed as apolitical, as they often constitute key sites of influence within religious societies.⁴⁰ The mediating role of Nahdliyah women complicates dominant models of political participation that privilege visibility, confrontation, and institutional authority. Instead, women's political agency is enacted through ethical persuasion, affective labor, and relational trust. This form of mediation reflects a practice-based mode of Sufi feminism, in which spiritual discipline and moral exemplarity enable women to navigate and shape political processes without overtly transgressing gendered boundaries. By foregrounding women as mediators of spiritual and political authority, this analysis underscores the importance of informal actors in religious politics. It calls for a reorientation of analytical focus toward the everyday practices through which authority is negotiated, translated, and mobilized. In doing so, it positions Nahdliyah women as central figures in understanding the entanglement of Sufism, gender, and politics in contemporary Indonesia.

Political Contestation within Nahdlatul Ulama Networks

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has long been characterized by a dynamic and pluralistic relationship with politics, shaped by historical shifts, internal diversity, and localized negotiations of authority. Rather than functioning as a monolithic political actor, NU operates through layered networks in which religious authority, organizational loyalty, and political interests intersect and sometimes compete.⁴¹ Political contestation within NU,

³⁹ P. Werbner, *Pilgrims of Love: The Anthropology of a Global Sufi Cult*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

⁴⁰ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Press, 2013.

⁴¹ Robin Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2009).

therefore, unfolds not only at the national level but, crucially, within local religious and social networks where everyday practices of authority are enacted.

Ethnographic observations indicate that moments of political contestation frequently emerge in religious settings that are not explicitly political. During a *dhikr* gathering observed in Central Java, for example, political preferences surfaced in informal conversations following the ritual. One woman participant explained that “If the kiai has not made his position clear, we usually wait. But in this group, things are discussed slowly, over coffee. From there, we see who is considered most trustworthy.”

Such interactions illustrate how political deliberation is embedded in moral evaluation rather than ideological debate. As Fealy and White note, political choices within NU are often framed through ethical considerations, a dynamic that becomes especially visible at the grassroots level.⁴²

Women play a central role in sustaining these deliberative spaces. While male religious elites may provide symbolic endorsement, women’s everyday presence within religious gatherings enables them to shape how such endorsements are interpreted and received. In an interview, a senior woman involved in a Nahdliyah tarekat reflected on her role during a local election that “We don’t tell people whom to vote for. But the congregation often asks, ‘What do you think about this person?’ So we talk about their character, not their party.”

This form of mediation demonstrates how political contestation within NU networks is negotiated through moral language and relational trust rather than explicit campaigning. Women’s influence lies precisely in their ability to frame political judgment as an extension of religious ethics, reinforcing what Aspinall describes as the moralization of local politics in Indonesia.⁴³ Political contestation also reflects competing claims to religious authority within NU. Ethnographic data reveal instances

⁴² Greg Fealy and Sally White, eds., *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2008).

⁴³ Edward Aspinall, *Democracy for Sale: Elections, Clientelism, and the State in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9780801454175.001.0001>.

in which different *kiai* or tarekat leaders supported different political candidates, producing uncertainty at the grassroots level. In such contexts, women often act as stabilizing figures. As one participant noted, “When the *kiai* disagree, we at the grassroots have to be careful. We don’t want the congregation to split. Usually, we choose a middle path.”

This emphasis on cohesion underscores the relational nature of political engagement within NU. Women’s mediation prioritizes communal harmony over partisan alignment, reflecting a pragmatic and ethically grounded approach to political contestation.

These findings complicate macro-level analyses that frame NU’s political role primarily in terms of elite bargaining or organizational strategy. Instead, they highlight how political contestation is shaped through everyday practices, gendered labor, and moral negotiation within religious networks. By foregrounding women’s voices and experiences, this study reveals the subtle yet significant ways in which political outcomes are shaped at the intersection of spirituality, gender, and social relations.

Scholars have noted that NU’s engagement with politics has oscillated between formal institutional involvement and strategic withdrawal, particularly since the post–New Order era.⁴⁴ While NU officially maintains a nonpartisan stance, its leaders, *pesantren* networks, and affiliated organizations remain deeply entangled in electoral politics. This ambiguity creates spaces of contestation in which political allegiances are negotiated through informal channels rather than centralized directives. Within these networks, tarekat communities play a significant yet often underexplored role. As van Bruinessen⁴⁵ and Howell⁴⁶ argue, Sufi orders affiliated with NU provide dense social infrastructures that can be mobilized for political purposes. Ethnographic evidence from this

⁴⁴ Greg Fealy and Sally White, eds., *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2008).

⁴⁵ Martin van Bruinessen, *Tarekat Naqsyabandiyah di Indonesia: Survei Historis, Geografis, dan Sosiologis* (Bandung: Mizan, 1998).

⁴⁶ Julia Day Howell, “Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (2001): 701–729, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700105>.

study shows that political contestation frequently surfaces during religious gatherings, where discussions of candidates and political programs are framed in moral and communal terms rather than ideological language. These discussions reflect what Aspinall describes as the personalization and moralization of politics in Indonesia's local electoral contexts.⁴⁷

Nahdliyah women emerge as key actors in these contestations. Although they rarely participate in formal political decision-making, women influence political outcomes by sustaining and activating grassroots networks. Their involvement challenges assumptions that political agency within NU is dominated exclusively by male elites. Instead, women help shape political preferences by endorsing, questioning, or withholding support for particular candidates within religious and familial circles.

Political contestation within NU is also shaped by competing interpretations of religious authority. Different *kiai* and tarekat leaders may support different political actors, leading to fragmented loyalties at the grassroots level.⁴⁸ Women's mediation becomes particularly salient in these moments of fragmentation, as they navigate competing moral claims and help maintain communal cohesion. Their ability to balance loyalty and pragmatism reflects a relational form of political engagement that prioritizes harmony over confrontation.

This study further demonstrates that political contestation within NU networks is not simply a struggle for power but a negotiation of moral legitimacy. Candidates seek endorsement not only from prominent religious leaders but also from respected women figures whose moral credibility resonates with everyday religious practitioners. Such dynamics illustrate how political authority is co-produced through multiple layers of religious and social validation. By foregrounding localized practices of contestation, this analysis complicates macro-level narratives that depict NU's political role in terms of elite bargaining or

⁴⁷ Edward Aspinall, *Democracy for Sale: Elections, Clientelism, and the State in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9780801454175.001.0001>.

⁴⁸ Robin Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2009).

organizational strategy alone. Instead, it highlights how political alignments are shaped through everyday interactions, ethical considerations, and relational trust embedded in religious networks. This perspective underscores the need to incorporate gendered and grassroots dimensions into analyses of Islamic political engagement in Indonesia.

Challenges to Patriarchal Structures in Islamic Institutions

Rather than articulating explicit feminist critiques, women engage in what Abu-Lughod describes as forms of “embedded critique,” working within accepted religious norms to expand their scope of influence.⁴⁹ Women’s conformity to ideals of piety, modesty, and obedience—values often associated with patriarchal expectations—becomes a strategic resource. By embodying these virtues, women gain moral authority that enables them to speak, advise, and mediate without being perceived as threatening established hierarchies.

One key mode through which women challenge patriarchal structures is by redefining the meaning of religious authority itself. While formal authority remains male-dominated, women increasingly occupy positions of informal moral leadership. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital, women’s devotional labor generates legitimacy that competes with institutional credentials.⁵⁰ This redefinition subtly shifts communal perceptions of who can be considered an authoritative religious actor. Ethnographic interviews indicate that women are acutely aware of the gendered boundaries they navigate. A senior woman in a Nahdliyah tarekat remarked, “If women move too far ahead, we will be accused of overstepping. So we move slowly, but we keep moving.”

This statement captures how women consciously adopt gradualist strategies that prioritize continuity and acceptance over

⁴⁹ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Press, 2013.

⁵⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–258.

confrontation. Such strategies resonate with feminist analyses that emphasize incremental change within religious traditions.⁵¹

Challenges to patriarchy also manifest in women's increasing visibility as mediators and educators within Islamic institutions. Although women rarely deliver sermons in formal mosque settings, they often lead study circles, organize devotional gatherings, and provide religious instruction to other women and children. These roles, while often framed as extensions of domestic responsibility, create parallel spaces of authority that operate alongside male-dominated institutions.⁵² These challenges do not dismantle patriarchal structures outright but produce what can be described as a *reconfigured patriarchy*, in which gendered hierarchies are softened and renegotiated through everyday practice. Women's influence reshapes institutional culture by normalizing women's authority in certain domains, thereby altering expectations about gender roles over time.

This study, therefore, cautions against evaluating gender transformation in Islamic institutions solely through the presence or absence of women in formal leadership positions. Instead, it calls for attention to informal, ethical, and relational practices through which patriarchal norms are contested and reworked. In the Nahdliyah context, women's challenges to patriarchy are neither silent nor revolutionary; they are strategic, cumulative, and deeply embedded in religious life.

Southeast Asian Islam and the Global Discourse on Muslim Women

Southeast Asian Islam occupies a distinctive yet often underrepresented position within global discourses on Muslim women. Dominant narratives in Islamic studies and feminist scholarship have historically privileged Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) contexts as the normative reference points for

⁵¹ M. Bano & H. Kalmbach, *Women, leadership and mosques: Changes in contemporary Islamic authority*, Brill, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004230500>; Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

⁵² Julia Day Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (2001): 701–729, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700105>.

understanding Islam, gender, and authority.⁵³ As a result, experiences of Muslim women in regions such as Indonesia are frequently marginalized or treated as peripheral, despite their demographic and sociopolitical significance. This study contributes to ongoing efforts to decenter MENA centric frameworks by foregrounding Nahdliyah women's religious and political practices as sites of theoretical production. As scholars of Southeast Asian Islam have long argued, the region's Islamic traditions are characterized by pluralism, accommodation of local cultures, and the prominence of mass-based religious organizations rather than centralized clerical institutions.⁵⁴ These features shape distinctive modalities of women's agency that differ markedly from those emphasized in Middle Eastern contexts.

In Southeast Asia, women's religious authority often emerges through participation in devotional practices, community education, and organizational labor rather than through formal juridical or doctrinal leadership. Studies of Indonesian Muslim women have shown that ethical self-cultivation and community service function as key pathways to legitimacy and influence.⁵⁵ This practice-based orientation resonates with the form of Sufi feminism identified in this article, where agency is enacted through embodied piety and relational authority.

Global feminist discourses have frequently framed Muslim women's agency in terms of resistance to patriarchy or emancipation from religious norms. While such frameworks have been productive in certain contexts, they risk obscuring alternative modes of agency grounded in religious ethics and communal belonging. The Nahdliyah case demonstrates that women's

⁵³ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

⁵⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Robert W. Hefner, "Civil Islam and the Limits of Democratization," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70, no. 4 (2011): 1031–1037, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911811001500>.

⁵⁵ Julia Day Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (2001): 701–729, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700105>; Rachel Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety: Islam and Feminism in Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199758022.001.0001>.

engagement with Islam need not be oppositional to be transformative. Instead, ethical conformity can serve as a strategic and empowering resource within specific socioreligious configurations.

Southeast Asian Islam challenges assumptions about the incompatibility of piety and political participation. As Hefner, Fealy, and White note, Indonesia's democratic landscape is deeply intertwined with Islamic organizations that mobilize moral authority rather than doctrinal rigidity.⁵⁶ Women's roles within these organizations reveal how religious legitimacy can underpin inclusive forms of political engagement, complicating secular-liberal models of democracy. By situating Southeast Asian Islam within global debates on Muslim women, this study contributes to a more pluralistic understanding of Islamic feminisms. It underscores the importance of attending to localized practices and ethical frameworks rather than imposing universalized models of gender emancipation. In doing so, the article aligns with calls to recognize Muslim women as producers of knowledge and theory, not merely objects of analysis. Ultimately, this study argues that Southeast Asian Muslim women particularly those embedded in Nahdliyah and Tarekat networks offer critical insights into the relationship between piety, authority, and political agency. Their experiences invite scholars to rethink dominant paradigms and to acknowledge the diversity of pathways through which Muslim women negotiate power in a globalized world.

Conclusion

This article has examined how Nahdliyah women involved in tarekat negotiate religious authority and political engagement within Indonesia's Islamic landscape. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, the study demonstrates that women's political agency is embedded in everyday practices of piety, ethical self-cultivation, and relational mediation rather than in formal leadership positions

⁵⁶ Robert W. Hefner, "Civil Islam and the Limits of Democratization," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70, no. 4 (2011): 1031–1037, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911811001500>; Greg Fealy and Sally White, eds., *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2008).

or overt political activism. Through sustained participation in tarekat rituals and Nahdliyah networks, women accumulate symbolic capital that enables them to function as moral authorities and influential intermediaries linking spiritual legitimacy with political processes. The findings reveal that Sufi orders operate as gendered spaces of power where authority is produced through practice and recognition, not merely institutional hierarchy. Within these spaces, Nahdliyah women actively shape political contestation by mobilizing trust, moral credibility, and affective ties. Their engagement challenges binary representations of Muslim women as either oppressed subjects or emancipatory actors, highlighting instead a practice-based form of agency grounded in religious ethics. By conceptualizing these dynamics through the lens of Sufi feminism, this study demonstrates that feminist engagement in Muslim contexts can emerge from within religious traditions rather than in opposition to them. The Indonesian case underscores that piety and politics are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive, particularly in societies where religious legitimacy remains central to social and political life.

This article makes three key contributions on Islam, gender, and politics. First, it provides an ethnographically grounded understanding of women's agency within tarekat, challenging androcentric analyses that marginalize women's roles in the production and circulation of religious authority. By centering Nahdliyah women's lived experiences, the study reconfigures understandings of Sufi authority as relational, gendered, and practice-based. Second, the article advances Sufi feminism as an analytical framework that broadens feminist theory beyond liberal and resistance-centered models. It demonstrates how ethical self-cultivation, piety, and symbolic capital function as sources of political agency, offering a context-sensitive approach to analyzing Muslim women's engagement with power. Third, by situating Southeast Asian Islam at the center of theoretical discussion, this study contributes to the global discourse on Muslim women by decentering Middle Eastern-centric narratives. The Indonesian case highlights the plurality of Islamic feminisms and underscores the importance of localized religious practices in shaping

gendered political participation. These contributions suggest that future research on religion and politics must take seriously the ethical, spiritual, and relational dimensions of power. In doing so, this article positions Nahdliyah women not at the margins of political life but as critical actors whose practices offer new insights into the intersections of piety, authority, and gendered agency in Muslim societies.

This study has several implications at the intersection of religion, gender, and politics. First, the findings suggest that analyses of political participation in Muslim societies must move beyond formal institutions and elite actors to account for informal, relational, and ethically grounded forms of influence. Recognizing women's mediation roles within tarekat and Nahdliyah networks expands prevailing understandings of political agency and highlights the centrality of moral authority in shaping political processes. Second, this study contributes to feminist and gender theory by demonstrating that religious piety can function as a resource for empowerment rather than merely a constraint. The concept of Sufi feminism offers a framework for analyzing how women negotiate power through ethical self-cultivation and spiritual practice, thereby enriching global feminist debates with perspectives grounded in lived religion. Third, the findings have implications for policymakers, religious institutions, and civil society organizations working in Muslim-majority contexts. Acknowledging women's informal leadership and moral influence may encourage more inclusive engagement strategies that respect culturally embedded forms of participation, rather than imposing external models of empowerment that may lack local legitimacy. Finally, by centering Southeast Asian Islam, this study underscores the importance of regional diversity in theorizing Islam and gender. It invites comparative research that examines how similar dynamics operate in other Muslim societies, contributing to a more plural and globally representative body of scholarship.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in specific Nahdliyah and tarekat contexts, which may limit the generalizability of the

findings. While the analysis offers conceptual insights applicable beyond Indonesia, the conclusions are grounded in localized practices and should be interpreted accordingly. Second, as with all ethnographic research, the findings are shaped by the researcher's positionality and the depth of access to particular networks. Certain forms of political negotiation—especially those involving elite actors—may remain partially obscured due to their informal or sensitive nature. Third, the study focuses primarily on women's practices within Nahdliyah tarekat circles and does not provide a systematic comparison with male actors or non-Sufi Muslim women. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating comparative perspectives to further illuminate gendered dynamics of authority and agency. Finally, the emphasis on piety-based agency may risk underrepresenting moments of overt resistance or contestation. While this focus is theoretically deliberate, subsequent studies could explore how different modes of agency, ethical, resistant, and institutional, intersect and coexist within the same communities.

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