

Nyai leadership: The role of women in maintaining the tradition of santri literacy in islamic boarding schools

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Article information	Abstract
Submitted: 2024-11-12 Revised: 2025-06-13 Published: 2025-06-29	Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) have a strong literacy tradition, yet female leaders' roles in sustaining it are often overlooked. Recognizing their visionary, participatory leadership is essential to understanding how they foster student motivation, literacy practices, and integration of cultural, institutional, and pedagogical dimensions. This study aims to analyze the leadership role of Nyai (wife of the Kiai) in sustaining and developing the literacy culture of santri in pesantren through leadership transformation, the strengthening of literacy institutions, and the establishment of a santri literacy ecosystem. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, with data collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The data were analyzed thematically using triangulation of sources, methods, and time to ensure credibility, capture participants' subjective experiences, and connect the findings with theories of women's leadership. The study finds three key points. First, the Nyai's leadership transformed into competence-based institutional authority via mandatory reading programs and restructuring. Second, literacy reinforcement combined regulations with non-formal policies, expanding academic spaces and santri participation. Third, literacy success relied on synergy among visionary leadership, santri motivation, spiritual climate, institutional support, and trust in santri to manage literacy. The study concludes that Nyai's leadership transforms from domestic companion to competence-based institutional authority, synergizing visionary leadership, student motivation, and trust to make literacy an institutionalized and regenerated intellectual heritage. This study contributes to enriching transformational leadership and institutional work models, offering a practical literacy empowerment model for Islamic schools.

Keywords:

Leadership of Nyai,
Literacy tradition,
Boarding School of
Pesantren.



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INTRODUCTION

Strengthening literacy in pesantren is a strategic issue amid globalization and technological change, requiring Islamic education to remain relevant. Literacy preserves pesantren as centers of Islamic knowledge and values (Marmoah et al., 2022; Sari et al., 2024). However, literacy culture faces challenges including weak management, limited facilities, and suboptimal technology use (Hanafi et al., 2021). Nyai's leadership occupies a strategic position, not merely as a companion to the Kiai, but as an educator and role model (Aini et al., 2021) shaping students' character (Mustofa et al., 2023). Several pesantren show Nyai initiating writing workshops and book discussions, demonstrating adaptive leadership amid patriarchal challenges (Merino et al., 2024). Since literacy is a fundamental skill (Hadianto et al., 2022), strengthening literacy through Nyai's leadership represents a significant social context and research problem, particularly concerning the gap between literacy needs and implementation realities in contemporary Indonesian pesantren.

Based on previous studies, various research works have discussed women's leadership in educational institutions, which can be broadly divided into three main streams. First, strong and responsive female leadership as a central figure in policy-making (Arroyo et al., 2023; Munna, 2021; Acosta-Gonzaga & Ramirez-Arellano, 2022). Second, women's leadership is recognized for emotional intelligence, multitasking abilities, and spiritual foundations (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Aquino et al., 2011; Hilal et al., 2024; Riggio & Bass, 2005; Ragnarsson et al., 2018; Rusticus et al., 2024). Third, literacy in educational institutions as an indicator of institutional quality and structural-cultural challenges (Zaqiah et al., 2024; Hanafi et al., 2021; Cochrane et al., 2022; Marmoah et al., 2022). Thus, previous studies have not examined Nyai as an institutional authority in literacy. The novelty of this research lies in the transformation of Nyai's leadership, the restructuring of literacy institutions, and the development of a literacy ecosystem based on spirituality, student participation, and institutional support within the Islamic boarding school.

Based on the research gap identified above, this study aims to analyze the leadership role of Nyai in building, maintaining, and developing students' (santri) literacy culture in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) through leadership transformation, strengthening literacy institutions, and establishing a literacy ecosystem based on spirituality and student participation. Furthermore, this study addresses three research questions: (1) How does Nyai's leadership transform in developing student literacy in pesantren? (2) What is Nyai's strategy for strengthening student literacy in pesantren? (3) What factors support the success of the pesantren literacy program? Therefore, this study contributes to enriching the study of women's leadership in pesantren by integrating transformational leadership, competency-based leadership, and institutional work. Practically, this study offers a model for strengthening pesantren literacy based on visionary leadership, student participation, and sustainable institutional support. This study clarifies Nyai's role in transforming pesantren through competency-based leadership, strengthening academic spaces through institutional restructuring, and establishing a sustainable literacy ecosystem.

The main argument of this study is that the role of Nyai in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) is no longer limited to being a companion to the Kiai, but rather functions as a primary agent in building a sustainable literacy culture within the framework of transformational leadership. This reconceptualization reflects a fundamental shift in Nyai's position from a domestic figure to a strategic institutional actor who possesses moral, pedagogical, and cultural authority in shaping the pesantren literacy ecosystem. Furthermore, the role of women in pesantren increasingly gains legitimacy as religious authorities and educational agents. Thus, Nyai's leadership not only strengthens educational

legitimacy but also establishes literacy as a social and institutional practice within the pesantren context.

METHOD

Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to explore the meaning of individuals' lived experiences related to the social phenomena they encounter. This approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, consciousness, and subjective experiences (Dodgson, 2023; Lim, 2024), making it particularly relevant for examining leadership practices within the context of Islamic boarding school (pesantren) education. The phenomenon under investigation is the leadership of Nyai in fostering literacy at Pondok Pesantren Lubangsa Annuqayah Putri. A phenomenological approach is considered capable of uncovering the essence of social experiences between leaders and followers (Englander, 2016; Frechette et al., 2020). Furthermore, the literature indicates that women's leadership makes a strategic contribution to the formation of learning cultures (Hassan & Wright, 2023) and influences educational outcomes as well as literacy development (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023).

Participants and Informants

The research participants consist of Nyai as the primary informant and female students (santri putri) as supporting informants, with Nyai positioned as the key actor within the pesantren's leadership structure (Carter et al., 2014). Informants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure direct relevance to the phenomenon under study, complemented by snowball sampling to identify additional informants through recommendations from previous participants (Johnson, 2014). This strategy allowed the researcher to obtain rich data concerning leadership dynamics and students' responses to literacy initiatives.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation. The combination of these techniques was necessary to achieve a holistic understanding in qualitative research (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the subjective experiences of Nyai and female students regarding leadership processes and literacy practices (McGrath et al., 2018; Guo et al., 2024). Direct observation was undertaken to examine the learning environment, daily routines, and social interactions; the researchers' field engagement strengthened contextual understanding (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024). Documentation, including activity archives, internal policies, and pesantren records, was used as complementary data (Palinkas et al., 2015). Direct visits to the pesantren enhanced the empirical validity of the research context (Esmeli et al., 2022).

Data Validity and Credibility

Data validity was maintained through triangulation techniques encompassing source triangulation (Nyai, students, documents), methodological triangulation (interviews, observation, documentation), and time triangulation. This approach strengthened the findings by comparing data across perspectives (Valencia, 2022; Donkoh & Mensah, 2023), thereby enhancing credibility and interpretive rigor.

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed a thematic analysis approach as developed by Boyatzis (1998), emphasizing the identification of patterns, themes, and meanings within qualitative data.

The process included coding, theme categorization, and interpretation of relationships among themes (Naeem et al., 2023). These stages facilitated the identification of connections between policies, roles, and the impact of Nyai's leadership on students' literacy development (Bingham, 2023). The findings were subsequently linked to relevant theoretical frameworks to generate meaningful interpretations of women's leadership in pesantren education, aligned with the urgency of adaptive leadership in the contemporary era (Collins & Stockton, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Women's leadership (Nyai) in cultivating literacy culture in the pesantren

The role of the Nyai underwent a significant transformation from a domestic companion of the kiai to a holder of institutional authority in the pesantren. Her leadership was characterized by the restructuring of the literacy culture through the expansion of literacy units from two to eight, the implementation of compulsory reading and writing for santri, and direct involvement in the learning process. The literacy tradition inherited from *Kiai Syarqawi* was then reconstructed as a strategic instrument for intellectual empowerment and future capacity building of santri. The research findings can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Indicators of Nyai's Leadership in Strengthening Students' Literacy

Theme	Indicators	Evidence (Data Extract)	Interpretation (Analytical)
Transformation of Nyai's Leadership Role	Shift from companion to decision-maker- Institutional authority	"Initially, Nyai's role was as a companion to the Kyai..." "Since 2015 Nyai has been directly involved in institutional authority..."	Indicates a gendered leadership transition, where Nyai moves beyond traditional domestic roles to become a strategic actor with institutional power.
Competency-Based and Role-Model Leadership	Legitimacy through expertise- Direct teaching involvement	"Nyai teaches reviewing and writing practices..." "Students requested Nyai to teach literacy..."	Demonstrates competence-driven legitimacy, positioning Nyai as an epistemic authority whose expertise motivates students through role-modelling.
Institutional Restructuring for Literacy	Establishment of new literacy bodies- Formal literacy rules	"Before only 2 bodies existed... since 2018 there were 8 bodies." "All students are required to read and write..."	Reflects transformational leadership that restructures organizational culture, making literacy a formalized institutional norm.
Motivational Strategies Through Direct Engagement	Pedagogical interaction- Supportive-participatory style	"Since 2023 Nyai directly teaches students in the literacy body."	Builds intrinsic motivation and strengthens leader-follower relational trust, enhancing literacy participation and confidence.
Preservation of Pesantren Literacy Tradition	Historical continuity- Integration of cultural values	"Literacy tradition existed since Kiai Syarqawi... works such as Al-I'la..."	Shows that innovation is anchored in cultural continuity, positioning literacy as a heritage-based intellectual tradition, not merely technical skill.
Literacy as Essential Skill Formation	Literacy as mandatory competence- Future-oriented capability	"Literacy is a mandatory skill for everyone..."	Implies a future-oriented empowerment logic, where literacy is framed as social, cognitive, and professional capital.

Source: Data processed by the researchers, 2025

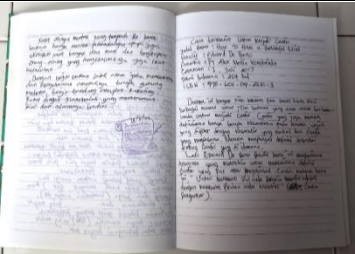

Table 1 shows that the Nyai's leadership in fostering literacy in the pesantren has transformed from a companion role to a decision-maker with institutional authority. The Nyai's leadership is based on competence and role modeling, whereby her expertise in teaching literacy is recognized and sought after by the santri. The Nyai also carried out institutional restructuring by establishing eight literacy bodies along with formal regulations. Motivational strategies were implemented through direct pedagogical involvement and building relational trust. The pesantren's literacy tradition is preserved as an intellectual heritage, while literacy is positioned as an essential skill and future socio-economic capital.


Based on the research findings, the Nyai's leadership reflects a significant gender transition from the domestic domain to the strategic-institutional domain. The legitimacy of her leadership does not derive solely from traditional authority, but rather from her epistemic competence, as she is recognized as an expert in literacy practices. This enables her to serve as a role model who intrinsically motivates the santri. Furthermore, the Nyai's approach is transformational, as she actively restructures the pesantren's organizational culture, making literacy an institutionalized norm. The strategy of direct involvement in teaching establishes a participatory and supportive power relation, rather than an authoritarian one. The innovations she introduced remain rooted in the continuity of tradition (Kiai Syarqawi), so that changes are accepted as strengthening the heritage rather than breaking it. By positioning literacy as a mandatory skill, the Nyai prepares santri to face future social, cognitive, and professional demands.

Nyai's efforts in maintaining and developing literacy traditions in the pesantren

Pesantren are no longer known merely as spaces for learning the *Kitab Kuning* (traditional Islamic scriptures), but have transformed into centers of literacy production and scientific publication for santri. A culture of reading is combined with the obligation to write and publish works continuously, so that santri are encouraged to become knowledge producers, not merely consumers of reading materials. This transformation signifies a major change in the pesantren tradition, where intellectual empowerment is built through an organized literacy institution system with an academic orientation. The research findings can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2
Forms of Nyai's Efforts in Preserving Literacy Culture

No	Figure	Results	Description
1		Obligation to Read Books and Review Them	Since 2017, Islamic boarding schools have required all students to read 25–30 books per year. MTs students summarize the readings, while MA students and students write reviews as a form of literacy implementation.
2		Creating a Literacy Program at the Islamic Boarding School	In 2018, the number of institutions in the Islamic boarding school grew from two to several, including book institutions, literacy, Arabic, English, agriculture, environmental love communities, and Al-Qur'an mudrasah jam'iyyah.

3		Supporting the Publication of Students' Written Works and Sharing Information	Nyai's support includes direct guidance, providing recommendations for quality reading material, motivating English learning, encouraging the writing of news about pondok activities, and activating a bulletin boarding house containing the students' works on a rotating basis.
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Source: Data processed by the researchers, 2025

Table 2 shows that since 2017, the pesantren has required every santri to read 25–30 books per year. Junior high school (MTs) santri write summaries, while senior high school (MA) santri and mahasantri (university-level santri) write reviews. In 2018, the number of institutions in the pesantren increased from two to eight, including institutions for books, literacy, Arabic language, English language, agriculture, environmental care, and madrasah Qur'an. The Bunyai's support includes direct guidance, recommendations for quality reading materials, motivation to learn English, encouragement to write news about pondok activities, and the activation of a bulletin that features santri's works on a rotating basis.

Based on the research findings, the Nyai's efforts to preserve the literacy tradition are systemic and structured. First, the mandatory reading requirement with a quantitative target (25–30 books/year) creates intellectual discipline, while the differentiated tasks of writing summaries versus reviews reflect differentiation based on educational level. Second, the expansion from two to eight institutions indicates a strategy of literacy institutionalization that is integrated with other fields (languages, agriculture, environment), so that literacy does not stand alone but rather becomes the essence of all pesantren activities. Third, the Bunyai's support is multidimensional: direct guidance, provision of resources, motivation, facilitation of publication, and bulletin management. Santri's works are published on a rotating basis, creating appreciation and healthy competition. This approach ensures that the literacy tradition is not only inherited but also regenerated and collectively revitalized.

Supporting factors for the success of literacy culture programs in the pesantren

The success of the pesantren program no longer depends solely on traditional teaching systems, but rather rests on female leadership capable of comprehensively transforming the learning culture. The Nyai emerges as the motor of academic change by simultaneously combining spirituality, literacy strengthening, and institutional governance. Furthermore, santri are not positioned passively but become active producers of knowledge who write, manage literacy, and build the intellectual tradition of the pesantren. The research findings can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3
Supporting Factors for the Success of the Pesantren Program

Theme	Operational Indicators	Empirical Evidence	Analytical Interpretation
Female Leadership of Nyai	Visionary guidance, managerial improvements, accountability practices, literacy-oriented directives	Nyai improves school management, encourages participation in interest-based competitions, and requires written activity reports for publication	Indicates transformational and instructional leadership that integrates moral authority with academic literacy goals
High Learner Motivation	Self-initiated learning activities, collaborative study groups, productive	Students proactively visit literacy caretakers, form discussion circles, request	Reflects strong intrinsic motivation and literacy engagement shaped by

	literacy outputs	academic mentoring, and publish anthology works	supportive female leadership and social learning environments
Student-Friendly Learning Climate	Safe environment, spiritual-nurturing setting, literacy-supportive norms	Dormitory environment designed to strengthen spirituality, knowledge, and literacy, contributing to increased student motivation	Shows that affective climate and contextual spirituality function as motivational drivers for literacy development
Institutional Support Ecosystem	Multi-actor collaboration (caretakers, administrators, guardians), structured communication, shared goals	Harmonious collaboration among caregivers, administrators, guardians, and students encourages holistic student development	Demonstrates that literacy outcomes are embedded within relational and cultural capital in pesantren organizational structure
Trust and Delegation to Learners	Opportunities for autonomy, confidence-building mechanisms, innovation space	Students receive trust and literacy platforms to develop writing skills, self-confidence, and innovation based on individual interests	Suggests empowerment-based leadership that aligns with servant leadership and gendered leadership frameworks
Active Student-Managed Library	Accessibility of resources, student governance, literacy events	Lubtara Library managed by students functions as an access hub for knowledge through book and scripture lending	Highlights the role of resource availability and peer governance in sustaining literacy engagement

Source: Data processed by the researchers, 2025

Table 3 shows that the success of Pesantren Lubangsa Utara is supported by six main factors. First, the visionary, accountable, and literacy-oriented female leadership of the Nyai. Second, the high learning motivation of santri, demonstrated through self-study initiatives, discussion groups, and the publication of anthologies. Third, a santri-friendly, safe, and spiritually nuanced learning climate. Fourth, an institutional support ecosystem through collaboration among caregivers, administrators, parents, and santri. Fifth, trust in and delegation to santri to innovate. Sixth, an active library managed by santri as a center for knowledge access.

Based on the research findings, the Nyai's leadership is transformational and instructional, integrating moral authority with academic literacy targets. The high motivation of santri is evidenced through productive activities such as publishing anthologies, which reflects the direct influence of supportive female leadership. A safe and spiritually nuanced learning climate serves as an affective trigger for literacy development. The institutional support ecosystem demonstrates that literacy success does not stand alone but is embedded within the relational and cultural capital typical of pesantren. Delegation of authority to santri reflects an empowerment-based leadership approach, aligning with the frameworks of servant leadership and gendered leadership. Finally, the library managed by santri underscores the role of resource availability and peer governance in sustaining ongoing literacy engagement.

Discussion

The study on Nyai's leadership in sustaining the santri literacy tradition in pesantren identifies three main findings. First, Nyai's leadership has transformed into a competence-based institutional authority, characterized by mandatory reading programs, the restructuring of eight literacy institutions, and her direct involvement in teaching santri. Second, literacy strengthening efforts are not only driven by formal regulations but also

through institutional restructuring that expands academic spaces and increases santri participation. Third, the success of literacy development is supported by the synergy of Nyai's visionary leadership, santri motivation, a conducive spiritual climate, institutional support, and santri trust in managing literacy activities. Thus, Nyai's leadership plays a transformational role in maintaining the santri literacy tradition through institutional strengthening, participatory academic culture, and active student engagement. Literacy is constructed through the synergy of visionary leadership, pesantren spirituality, and sustainable institutional support.

These findings are highly relevant to current social issues concerning low literacy levels among Indonesian youth, particularly within religious-based educational settings that often emphasize memorization over critical thinking and writing skills. Amid the national literacy crisis and the growing demand for analytical thinking abilities, female leadership in pesantren that promotes continuous written scholarly production offers an alternative model. This is also aligned with global efforts to enhance gender equality in educational leadership, where women frequently face structural barriers (Acker, 1990). In a social context that still predominantly views domestic roles as the primary expectation for women, these findings demonstrate that female leadership can serve as a significant agent of cultural and intellectual transformation, while also responding to the challenges of Islamic education in adapting to contemporary changes (Rahman, 2022; Sumanti et al., 2024).

Theoretically, these findings confirm that Nyai's leadership operates within the framework of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), as reflected in the systematic institutional restructuring and strengthening of literacy culture. The competence-based dimension (Boyatzis, 2008; Murray, 2003) is evident in Nyai's direct involvement as an educator, establishing legitimacy through expertise and exemplary practice. In addition, Nyai's actions represent institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), in which new rules and norms are created to normalize literacy as part of the pesantren identity. The transformation of Nyai's authority from a domestic companion to a decision-maker reflects the dynamics of gendered organization (Acker, 1990), where competence and performativity enable women to construct authority within the patriarchal structure of pesantren. The internalization of literacy as both social and cognitive capital aligns with the concepts of cultural capital (Reed & Johnson, 2023) and future capability (Anderson-Levitt, 2021).

This study provides an understanding that effective female leadership does not require direct confrontation with patriarchal structures, but can instead be enacted through a transformational strategy grounded in competence and exemplarity. Nyai Fadilah demonstrates that authority can be constructed through expertise (epistemic authority) and service, rather than merely formal positional power. The research process indicates that literacy success is not the result of a single policy, but rather an interconnected ecosystem involving regulatory policies, institutional structures, pedagogical practices, and community support (Coleman, 1988; Roaldsnes, 2024). Furthermore, preservation-through-innovation (Hojeij, 2024; Siddiqui et al., 2024) emerges as a key principle: pesantren traditions are not abandoned, but strengthened through structured modern approaches. Ultimately, cultural change requires long-term consistency and active leadership engagement as a role model, rather than merely as an authority figure issuing directives.

Previous studies have predominantly positioned female leadership in pesantren as domestic or complementary in nature (Hanafi et al., 2021; Fatmawati et al., 2024; Flechtner et al., 2024). In contrast, this study demonstrates that Nyai functions as both an institutional leader and an epistemic leader. Unlike prior research that continues to emphasize the supportive role of women to the kiai, this study reveals Nyai's full authority in strategic

decision-making processes. The similarity with Singh et al. (2023) on transformative female leadership lies in the emphasis on social and intellectual change. However, the novelty of this study is the integration of pesantren literacy traditions with a structured modern programmatic approach, which has not been widely explored in the literature on female leadership in traditional Islamic educational institutions. This study also extends the findings of Rahman (2022) on pesantren as a cultural system, as well as Sumanti et al. (2024) on the sustainability of Islamic education, by demonstrating how female leadership can act as an agent of change without abandoning traditional roots.

This study offers several practical recommendations. First, pesantren should implement mandatory reading and book review policies with clear annual targets and task differentiation across educational levels. Second, dedicated literacy institutions integrated with language centers, publication units, and student-managed libraries need to be established. Third, kiai and nyai should actively participate in literacy activities as role models to strengthen motivation. Fourth, parental involvement should be enhanced through regular communication and progress reports on students' writing outputs. Fifth, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and government are encouraged to provide small grants for publishing student works and training in library management. Sixth, inter-pesantren networks should be developed to share literacy practices, including regular writing competitions. These recommendations should be implemented within a coordinated multi-stakeholder action plan and monitored every semester to ensure sustainability, effectiveness, and continuous improvement of literacy culture in pesantren education systems.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Nyai's leadership in pesantren has undergone a fundamental transformation from a domestic role as a kiai's companion to a strategic, competence-based institutional authority. This transformation is not merely ceremonial but is realized through structured policies, such as a mandatory reading requirement of 25-30 books per year, the expansion of literacy institutions from two to eight units, and Nyai's direct involvement in teaching processes. The success of the literacy program is not solely driven by formal regulations but by the synergy between Nyai's visionary leadership, students' intrinsic motivation manifested in written productions (anthologies, reviews, and bulletins), a safe and spiritually grounded learning climate, and full trust in students to manage libraries and publications. Thus, Nyai functions as a cultural transformation agent who institutionalizes literacy as both a normative practice and a collectively regenerated intellectual heritage.

This study contributes to enriching the transformational leadership model by demonstrating that its effectiveness in the pesantren context does not require direct confrontation with patriarchal structures, but is instead built through epistemic competence, role modelling, and service-oriented leadership. The findings also extend the concept of institutional work by showing how female leaders create new norms and rules without abandoning tradition. From a practical perspective, this study proposes a literacy empowerment model for Islamic educational institutions: integrating quantitative reading targets, establishing integrated functional institutions (language and environmental units), implementing rotating publication of students' written works, and delegating learning resource management to students. This model can be replicated in other madrasahs and pesantren seeking to enhance students' critical thinking skills and academic productivity.

This study has limitations in that it is conducted within a single pesantren context with an established Nyai leadership structure; therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to pesantren with collegial leadership systems or those still operating under highly traditional

structures. In addition, this study focuses primarily on short-term literacy processes and outputs (e.g., number of readings and publications), without assessing long-term impacts on critical thinking skills, alumni social contributions, or the sustainability of the program after Nyai's leadership ends. Future research is recommended to conduct multi-case studies across pesantren in different regions using longitudinal and quantitative approaches. Further research directions may also explore how female leadership in pesantren responds to digital challenges, such as media literacy and artificial intelligence literacy.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Herlina: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project Administration; Writing Original Draft. **Munawara:** Conceptualization; Formal Analysis; Methodology; Writing Original Draft. **Irmak Sude Gurel:** Supervision; Visualization; Writing Review & Editing.

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