

## **In the Name Religion and Defending Women; Experiences of Three Pesantren Women in Indonesia Local Elections**

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### **Abstract**

The leadership of Indonesian Muslim women experienced a development, marked by the ever-extensive political roles. Some previous researches state that the factor of familial closeness (political dynasty), gender, collusion, sexism and piety marketing stimulate women's election in political contestations. But these reasons are not enough to explain the reason for women's roles in the public, especially women of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools). We suggest that women's courage in the struggle for the political position is due to their desires to strive for women's rights that are ignored and not comprehensively understood by male leaders. The existence of the thought that women can (only) 'understand women' becomes the reason why regional leaderships are also seized by women. The article also shows the ability to integrate spirituality towards public roles by utilizing their social capitals. This paper also counters some arguments that women always lose in public sectors in political sector fights as they are under the shadow of their husbands or men.

Kepemimpinan perempuan muslim Indonesia mengalami perkembangan, ditandai dengan peran politik yang semakin luas. Beberapa penelitian sebelumnya menyatakan bahwa faktor kedekatan keluarga (dinasti politik), gender, kolusi, keseksian dan pemasaran kesalehan merangsang pemilihan perempuan dalam kontestasi politik. Tetapi alasan-alasan ini tidak cukup untuk menjelaskan alasan peran perempuan di masyarakat, terutama perempuan pesantren. Kami berpendapat bahwa keberanian perempuan dalam memperjuangkan posisi politik adalah karena keinginan mereka untuk memperjuangkan hak-hak perempuan yang diabaikan dan tidak dipahami secara komprehensif oleh pemimpin laki-laki. Adanya pemikiran bahwa perempuan bisa (hanya) 'memahami perempuan' menjadi alasan mengapa kepemimpinan daerah juga direbut oleh perempuan. Artikel ini juga menunjukkan kemampuan untuk mengintegrasikan spiritualitas terhadap peran publik dengan memanfaatkan modal sosial mereka. Tulisan ini juga membantah beberapa argumen bahwa perempuan selalu kalah di sektor publik dalam pertarungan sektor politik karena mereka berada di bawah bayang-bayang suami atau laki-laki mereka.

**Keywords:** Pesantren Women/Nyai; Spiritual Capital; Politics; Local Elections

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## Introduction

The role of Muslim women in public spaces has experienced an increase in the last two decades, or after the political Reformation rollout in 1998 (Warouw, 2016; Dewi, 2017b ;Maula, 2019 ;Mahsun et al., 2021). Apart from the factors of the ever-extending access to quality high education that opens the views and insights of women on public responsibilities, there is also the governmental policy affirmation on the obligation to involve women (gender mainstreaming) in making public decisions. One of them is the obligation to insert 30% of women elements as candidate legislative members (*UU No. 10 Tahun 2008*, 2008). This role is in line with the increase of Islam's role to become an important power in political, social, and cultural sectors. "Islam has increasingly moved to the center and become part of political expressions, legal transactions, economic activities as well as social and cultural practices" (Hasan, 2009, p. 231). Islam arrives with greater roles than before (Fealy et al., 2008, p. 15).

In the last fifteen years, some women figures became People's Representative Assembly/Regional Representative Council/Regional People's Representative Assembly members,

Governors, Regents, and Mayors. At the legislative level, the results of the 2014 General Election, from 560 Legislative House members, 97 people were women. In the 2019 General Election, from 575 Legislative House members, 120 people were women. As a comparison, in the 1992 and 1997 General Election periods, from 500 Legislative House members, they were only represented by 62 and 58 women (Aspinall et al., 2021, p. 7). Meanwhile, in the regional leadership, women's roles have also advanced, for example in the 2005-2015 period, 26 women were chosen as heads of regions, 18 among them were in Java, during the periods of 2005-2010 and 2010-2015 (Dewi, 2014). In the 2018 Head of the Region Election period, 31 women were elected from 342 candidates (Anggraeni, 2018). Compare this to the previous period of 1974-1998, where there were only two female regional heads (Dewi, 2017b).

The political leadership role occurred to all social groups, *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) women are no exception. Many *pesantren* family circles, including wives and children of *Kyai*, work as politicians apart from becoming housewives and their husbands' companions in religion-teaching activities. Many aspects encourage the

participation of women politicians with *pesantren* family background. On one side, it is due to the ever high level of education and understanding of politics (Srimulyani, 2007 ;Malihah et al., 2020), on the other side, as a home and a place of study, *pesantren* opens itself to changes, including political ones (Isbah, 2020a). As an impact of that change, the *pesantren* women's political horizon widened by seeking experiences through women organizations that are based on their ideologies until they become party cadres and administrators (Kusmana, 2019). Even so, their public roles do not decrease the quality of their *pesantren* values and traditions that become their belief.

*Pesantren* women is a term for the wives, daughters, and family of the *pesantren*. In Javanese traditions, they are often called *Nyai* or *Nyi*—an honorary designation from society to *Kyai's* wives and their descendants. These terms are different from Muslim women, a term for all Muslims that tends to be more general. *Pesantren* women refer to *pesantren*, the oldest Islamic education institution in Indonesia with a boarding school system, consisting of educators, *santri*, dormitories, and the study of classic Islamic books (the yellow books/*kitab kuning*). The *santri*

(*pesantren* students) live and study in the *pesantren* for a rather long time according to their chosen educational levels (Dhofier, 1982). Initially, the *pesantren* system is traditional, but recently some has combined it with modern educational systems (Isbah, 2020b). The *pesantren* has strong patriarchic culture, as most are established and led by men (Fauzi, 2012). Women tend to serve and accompany their husbands, take care of children, and a small part of them teach. Meanwhile, the public space is very limited, especially in politics.

In the last one and a half-decade, especially after the 2005 direct election of regional leaders, some *pesantren* women entered the practical political activity. At the local level, they fought for strategic positions, such as legislative members, Regents/Mayors. What for and for whom do they work? These questions need to be expressed, as, in the Islamic concept, women are obliged to become a companion for their husbands. Women who undergo the task as wives are not burdened to work for a living, except if the husband is in a non-productive condition. Apart from accompanying their husbands, women's main jobs are to take care of children and maintain the family's unity. Women's

main jobs in Islam tend to be focused more on the households' domestic realms. Then, what if women work in public spaces such as becoming heads of the regions, what about their tasks as wives and as companions of their husbands who are *pesantren* leaders? How *pesantren* women maintain the *santri* tradition and counter political practices that have 'market' systems become the next question to occur, and how are the interactions, communications, and negotiations in the political wilderness?

This study used the social capital theory that assumes that everyone has social capitals and these capitals are exchanged with others to obtain something else. Social capital is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses the combination of social norms, values, beliefs, obligations, relationships, networks, friends, memberships, civil participation, information currents, and institutions that encourage cooperation and collective actions for mutual benefit and to contribute to the economic and social developments (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009, p. 7; Dubos, 2017, p. 26). I argue that *pesantren* women's courage to compete against men in the Head of the Region Election is purely due to the

encouragement and the persuasion of political parties when no male figures have the attractiveness to scrape votes. *Pesantren* women have enough spiritual capital to be exchanged with votes. They become political attractions due to the factors of their dependency and their strong relations with their husbands who are *pesantren* leaders. The birth of Law No. 2 of 2008 gives a mandate to political parties to obligatorily include 30% of women candidate representatives in the legislative strengthens that opinion, it also contributes to that role. This encourages women to become active in politics including in competing for the head of the region leadership.

The data of this paper was obtained from participant observation, interviews with key women figures, and review from several references. The interview was carried out head-to-head with *Nyai* Dewi Kholifah, the Vice Regent of Sumenep and the leader of Aqidah Usmuni *Pesantren* and *Nyai* Aminatun Habibah Vice Regent of Gresik daughter of *Kyai* Ahmad Muhammad (deceased) leader of Qomarudin *Pesantren*. The writer also interviewed *Nyai* Khaironi Vice Regent of Situbondo, wife of *Kyai* Muhaimin of Miftahul Ulum *Pesantren*, Besuki, Situbondo. These three women

were elected as Vice Regents in the 2020 Head of the Region Election. Apart from that, the author also interviewed some women figures who are affiliated with the Muslimat organization in these three areas. These three *pesantren* women come from East Java. As commonly known, East Java has 38 Regencies/Cities. Seventeen of them are led by female regional leaders or vice regional leaders. Among these 17 people, there are some *pesantren* women. Meanwhile, East Java has the largest amount of *pesantren* in Indonesia, which reached 5.121 institutions with the total *santri* that reach 970.541 (*Data Lembaga Provinsi Jawa Timur*, 2021).

This article consists of an introduction that explains the reason and the writing method. Then, it is followed up with a literature review on Muslim women and liberal democracy practices. Then, there is a description of the position of *pesantren* women as wives, *pesantren* leaders, and their involvement in public sectors, in social organizations or parties. In the analysis, this paper explains the reasons for *pesantren* women in practical politics using the social capital theory and the implication of the shift from spiritual capital to political capital.

### **The *Pesantren* Women and Social Capital in Liberal Democracy**

The political roles of women rather stand out in the last two decades, marked by the birth of female political, bureaucratic, and regional leaders (Rhoads, 2012 ;Aspinall et al., 2021). Many aspects may explain the birth of women's political leadership, starting from familial relations, political dynasty, and moral modality. Apart from that, there is a combination of 'piety' and 'sexiness' capitals, thus they can increase the political bargaining value (Dewi, 2017a). According to Dewi, the hijab does not only show modernity and Islamness, but at the same time, it makes them comfortable in taking part and in getting around public sectors, especially when facing men. The piety issue that is symbolized with the hijab becomes a trend among Muslima, both young and old (Beta, 2019). Hijab shows the transformation of Indonesian Muslim women towards the 'piety' that has existed since the 1990s and the 2000s (Brenner, 1996;Wieringa, 2015; Smith-Hefner, 2007).

Dewi's view on women's political roles corrects the previous thought that the political participation of women

depends on gender ideologies, family factors, and morality (Brenner, 2011). According to Dewi, gender is not the main point to deter women, but because there is a strong belief in embracing religion as exemplified by the Muslimat NU case that encourages all members to extensively participate in public sectors by becoming leaders (Dewi, 2017b). Even though she acknowledges that these roles cannot guarantee the representation of women's dignity and honor (Dewi, 2017a).

Different from Dewi, Aspinall et al. still place the gender issue as the main issue on the success of legislative candidates in the 2019 Legislative General Election. A survey carried out to 129 female legislative candidates place gender inequality, including in the form of funding sources, access to elites, leadership experiences, as obstacles to their success. One of the causes is the still-strong patriarchic behavior and some parties' exaggerating prejudice on women's capacities (Aspinall et al., 2021). But in certain cases, as explained by Mahsun et al. in Central Java—the lack of resources and political connections may be dealt with by appearing 'as is' or 'carrying on as a woman,' by utilizing women networks, in this case, the Muslimat and Fatayat NU networks, and

focusing on gender issues to target female voters. They were able to deal with cultural, institutional, and structural obstacles to achieving success in the General Election (Mahsun et al., 2021).

There is a breakthrough to deal with obstacles due to having adequate social capital, especially among *pesantren* women. Social capital is beliefs, networks, and norms that are managed for mutual benefit "features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). Social capital is linked to obligation and expectation, information channels and social norms (Coleman, 1988). If A does something to B, and believes that B will reciprocate in the future, that is called expectation and it simultaneously results in obligation. Both are based on belief and trust in one another. The relationship between A and B depends on the information network between them. This relationship is strengthened by the norms that bind each other. "A prescriptive norm within a collectivity that constitutes an especially important form of social capital is the norm that one should forgo self-interest and act in the interests of the collectivity. A norm of

this sort, reinforced by social support, status, honor, and other rewards, is the social capital that builds young nations (and then dissipates as they grow older), strengthens families by leading family members to act selflessly" (Coleman, 1988, p. 102).

Social capital and religion are relevant as they are sourced from beliefs (Kettell, 2019). In Indonesia, the success of the Islamic political party at the start of the Reformation is believed—one of them is due to the spiritual capital of political leaders that come from religious organizations such as NU and the derivative organizations that are converted into political capital (Candland, 2000, pp. 133–135). Apart from organizational networks, the social capital of *pesantren* women includes educational institutions, families, *santri*, and alumni that are traditionally attached to them as wives, daughters, or core family members of *pesantren*. There is an assumption that the success of *pesantren* women in regional head elections intersects with the capability to modify social capital in the form of spirituality into political capital.

The neoliberal-patterned political practices do not deter *pesantren* women's political desires. For instance,

in the results of previous research, since the direct regional head election in 2004, the indication of the 'great market' political practices spread in various regions. There were transactions between buyers (actors) and sellers (voters) that are practiced freely and even semi-legally (Aspinall, 2013; Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2018), that are marked by written statements or agreements. These practices result in a patronage relationship model where political actors give monetary compensations, aids, projects, or promises if elected (Fionna & Tomsa, 2020). The practice of buying votes happen almost all over Indonesia, both in legislative or head of the regional elections. "However, my study found empirical evidence that such practice, in general, is ubiquitous in Indonesian electoral politics" (Muhtadi, 2019, p. 77). According to Muhtadi, the buying of voters is between 50 thousand to 200 thousand, but the most are under 50 thousand with the highest occurrence percentage in Borneo (32 %), and the lowest in Java (12 %).

Neoliberalism is an economic concept that is carried into political practice models, where all resources are deployed to reach a goal. Market-patterned politics is where transactions



run freely according to consumer demands. "Within neoliberal doctrine, the market becomes the central organizing principle for political, economic, and social decision making" (Patrick, 2013, p. 3). The market-like political transactions give financiers room to buy and sell votes. The larger the capitals they have, the greater the chance to obtain desired votes. Even though it contradicts democratic principles (Ayers & Saad-Filho, 2015), these practices truly happened in society's lives.

The 'free market' political practices happen in almost all regions and it is difficult for any political groups to avoid, including *pesantren* women. Many methods are carried out by interest groups to buy votes, starting from door to door, religious activity aids, up to promises of aids, especially after being elected (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2018). How they manage social capital in the 'free market' political practices become an important issue that becomes the point of interest in this analysis, also how do *pesantren* women place their political interests among their obligations as wives, in managing family and teaching? There is no single reason for women's representation in politics, all of them are interrelated with various reasons (Aspinall et al., 2021). *Pesantren*

women's relational patterns and reasons are written in this article give perspectives on the various argumentations.

### **Family, Nyai, Muslimat and the Public Sphere**

It was 7 p.m. During this time, most Indonesian women are already at home, gathering with their families. But this does not apply to Dewi Khalifah (DK), Sumenep's Vice Regent. She was still busy welcoming guests, both for job requirements or to serve the society that require help. I was in the last queue that night, and I was received at 8 p.m. after she received several guests at her official house. I interviewed her for more than an hour. Her face did not show tiredness even after 9 p.m.

This short piece of the story describes bone from three regional heads I met while on duty. I met the other two regional heads at the official house after they finished their main job in the office. I was not the only one queuing to see them with various needs outside of work hours. Their faces do not show tiredness even though most were middle-aged and they were enthusiastic in meeting the coming guests. Their days passed with meetings, regional visits, and attending central and regional



invitations. There is no day without any activities, including in Saturday and Sunday holidays. Even, their work hours exceed the general standard of social services, who work for eight hours on average.

The three *pesantren* women are used to being occupied. Before becoming regional heads, they were active Muslimat administrators (a women's organization affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama/NU) at various levels, starting from the village level up to the provincial level. DK was the Muslimat NU Sumenep General Manager and the Regional Coordinator of Muslimat in Madura Island. Nyai Khaironi was also the Head of Muslimat Situbondo and she became a village-level, district-level, and regency-level leader. Aminatun Habibah (AH) was also the administrator and the head of Muslimat Gresik at all levels. This organization formed their character to be resilient to all challenges, both in the family and in the public sector. "Muslimat may become the entrance to become public figures, thus becoming known to society" (interview with DK, August 11th 2021). Apart from Muslimat, her daily activities include becoming a teacher and lecturer affiliated with the Ma'arif institution under the auspices of NU. DK is a lecturer

on the campus she manages. AH is a lecturer in the university under her *pesantren* as well as the headmaster of a vocational school. These two organs are under the auspices of the Ma'arif institution, where they are also administrators. "Muslimat and Ma'arif are not merely a place of devotion but it is an internalization space to enter politics" (interview with Khairani, September 22th 2021).

Muslimat and Ma'arif are not only spaces that promote potential and social skills, but they are also an entrance to the political process. DK has become a Regional Legislative House Member, and she has even become the General Manager of Hanura Party. Khaironi has also become a regional legislative member and she is still the regional head of PPP party. This public role cannot be separated from organization and *kyai* roles so that Muslimat can undergo real roles. Some encouragements are expressed formally, for example the results of NU *bahsul masa'il* (No. 004/MN-NU/11/1997) encouraged women to emerge as leaders up to the national level as a president (Dewi, 2017b, p. 68). This practice is based on the NU understanding that politics is an inseparable part of religion, or what is known as *siyasa shariyyah* (al-Mawardi,

1973;Haidar, 1994). This encourages Muslimat to participate in political activities—including practical politics. Even so, various activities in public sectors cannot disturb their main job as wives, *pesantren* leaders, and their teaching activities. The three are carried out flexibly by placing all obligations and responsibilities proportionally. “The obligation as a public officer does not disturb the main job as the head of the family, especially in educating children and in teaching in *pesantren*. Everything is carried out flexibly, by placing quality before quantity” (interview with DK, August 11th 2021). On Saturday and Sunday, when there is no official activity, it is used to return to *pesanten*, gather with family, and fill recitation activities. “For *Pesantren* women, the strength of the family as proof of women’s real work and the results of all the struggles of women’s education. The domestic sphere and family resilience are acknowledgment and appreciation for women, therefore no matter how much women become whatever women, the value of women is actually how the family is doing” (Malihah et al., 2020, p. 18). This perspective states that family is still key to *pesantren* women.

Muslimat becomes a very sexy political attraction as it consists of adult

women. This organization does not only manage religious and social activities, but also in the education sector such as preschool, early childhood, and kindergarten. In some provinces, there is a great number of people who are affiliated to NU and there is almost always preschool education institutions managed by Muslimat in every village. In General Election momentums, both in legislative or regional leader elections, this organization become the group that is often sought for by parties to recruit votes (Dewi, 2017b). Even, it is not seldom that they become political wings of parties whose ideologies intersect with NU (Prihatini, 2019, p. 5). The religious activities carried out by Muslimat, including routine recitation, *manaqib* (studying a religious leader’s biography), and *istighatsah* (asking for help to God) are often used by administrators and the members for practical political interests by recruiting as many members as possible (Ishomuddin, 2019).

Different from the public perception of the rise of women in politics that is identical with sensuality and marketing piety through hijab (Hasan, 2009;Beta, 2019), Muslimat performs more naturally and as is. Even though it cannot be denied that sensuality and piety

issues also become an inseparable part. Most members are married women of village or suburban communities who are over 40 years old. The public role of Muslimat has been carried out for a rather long time. Muslimat NU was established in 1946 or a year after the Indonesian independence. As an autonomous agency under NU, this organization has become an important part of modern Indonesian history, with social, educational, and Islamic missionary activities that go on until now (Ishomuddin, 2019). When NU became a political party and participated in the 1955 and 1971 general elections, Muslimat became an important part that helped NU enter the power of the great three in Indonesia's political map. This cannot be denied, even though Muslimat is not always identical with practical politics. "Muslimat's politics is a national politics for the glory of Islam and Indonesia, not for positions. If there are Muslimat that become officials, that is just a coincidence" (interview with Nyai Nafi (NN)/Head of Muslimat Gresik, September 18, 2021).

The Muslimat organization gives a great space for *pesantren* women to be involved in social, Islamic missionary, and political activities. As part of the *pesantren* family that has the job to teach

as well as becoming a mother and the wife of *Kyai*, it can be carried out in balance by proportionally positioning the three. These three jobs demand great responsibility as in reality, *pesantren* women lead hundreds to thousands of *santri*. They live in a dormitory that requires 24-hour supervision. Apart from that, they also lead one of the educational institutions, either at the high school or the university level. But, among their occupations, they still take part in political activities. How important is politics for them to lead a vast and challenging area? For what and for whom are they undergoing politics?

### **Defending Women, Keeping the Norms**

The needs of *pesantren* women have physically been fulfilled as *pesantren* families are generally middle class. Apart from managing educational institutions, *kyai* also have side businesses to fulfill family needs (Rozaki, 2021, p. 109). Meanwhile socially, *pesantren* women are an elite class in their environment. *Santri*, alumni, and the society surrounding the *pesantren* respect them due to their knowledge and as they are also social mentors (Machmudi, 2015; Pribadi, 2013). Respect happen naturally without manipulation. When physical

and social needs are fulfilled, what more do the *pesantren* women seek?

Apart from due to religious teachings, for *pesantren* women, participating in politics is part of a moral calling when women's needs are not fully understood by men. DK stated:

*"The leader's job is to understand all issues faced by the people. There is a tendency for male leaders to not fully understand the desires of the people, especially among women. For example, I see that governmental offices do not provide places specially for women, both as staff or guests, for example, a lactation room, a place to change the equipment of women's needs, up to the treatment to menstruating women. Those are just small examples. Men may understand but they don't care. Only women understand women," (interview with DK, (interview with DK, August 11th 2021).*

*Nyai Khaeroni* express women's needs that are always ignored by men. She said:

*"The basic needs of women regard child education and family. These needs are often ignored. Women are economically prone as they are always subordinate to men. It is the*

*job of policymakers, on how women can be empowered, quality, and independent so that they don't really depend on men. Some of these policies have been implemented but are not fully managed well. Women arrive as leaders to encourage women's independence" (interview with Khairani, September 22th 2021).*

Meanwhile, *Nyai Aminatun Habibah* highlight child education and family.

*"Not many think that the core issue of national resilience is placed in child education and family. Where this nation wants to be directed depends on children and their families. This aspect is not thought of by many people, except those who directly experience it, such as mothers. Why are women leaders important, because they understand child and family conditions. Families need supportive policies to maintain the creation of quality generations," (interview with Khairani, September 28th 2021).*

The reason for women leaders correlates with the fact that in terms of quality and quantity, Indonesian women are still under men. The Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection's report in 2020 showed that

in general, the average length of women's education reach 8,42 and men are at the average of 8,8. Meanwhile, in the sector of health complaints, men are higher, reaching 51,99, meanwhile, women are at the average of 48,8. Meanwhile, in the occupation sector, if there are 3 men, there are 2 women. In terms of wage, men obtain an average of IDR 3.167.092, while women obtain an average of IDR 2.451.057. This is in line with the access to knowledge and technology, where men are higher, reaching 50.55 while women are 44.85 (*Profil Perempuan Indonesia Tahun 2020*, 2020, pp. vii-x).

Even though there is an increase from the previous years, the women's position is still below men. In some things, there are discriminations due to intention or ignorance as a result of created policies that bring loss to women. The press release issued by the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection in 2016 described the discrimination against women that still require attention from all parties (*Perempuan Dan Anak Indonesia Masih Mengalami Diskriminasi*, 2016).

Many challenges are faced in the struggle for gender equality. Many formulated policies do not fully help

accelerate this equality as many do not care, do not understand gender, and are due to religious understandings that are different from one another. Post-1998 Reformation, there were at least six legal products on women protection that are issued as law, and four more drafts that are still strived for (Poerwandari et al., 2018). The emergence of the Jaringan Kerja Prolegnas ProPerempuan or JKP3 (the Network for Pro-Women National Legislation Programme) encourages the occurrence of changes to women affirmative policies. This shows that there is still hope as from time to time, women's bargaining improve in the policy realm. The strong struggle to strive for this policy becomes the concern of *pesantren* women in responding to the ignorance toward's women's fate.

*"Only a few understand women and the importance of policies through women affirmation both in the domestic and public sectors. This encourages pesantren women to take part in political positions, (interview with DK, August 11th 2021).*

*"There are fundamental issues from the upstream to the downstream. The upstream is in the form of policies and the downstream it is due to our rather*

*strong culture. Slowly, they can be scraped off through policies,” (interview with Khairani, September 22th 2021).*

There is a relationship between *pesantren* women's role with the narrow room of expression to make changes. Even though *nyai* is a symbol of social power, they have so far not been given roles in public spaces. In previous research (Geertz, 1960; Horikoshi, 1987; Alfirdaus, 2013) the roles of women or daughters are seldom mentioned or are “drowned” compared to the position of the *kyai* or the son who is called *Gus* in Javanese culture. In the *pesantren* tradition, there is somewhat a personification in a *kyai* as the center of authority in public spaces. The *nyai*'s position emerges if the husband died and only if there is no son or son-in-law as the successor. Only a few *pesantren* women automatically have the role as the central authority.

Even though *pesantren* women's room of authority is rather limited, it does not mean that there is no gap to contribute in public spaces. The reason that women work for women that is not fully understood by men becomes the reason to break through that gap. Also, the normative reason where women's

rights are not fully strived for, thus many of them become victims of ignorance and disadvantage both in the educational and economic aspects. Even though it is acknowledged that struggling for women's interests is not easy. The Vice Regent position is not as strong as the Regent's position. Based on Law No. 23 of 2014, Vice Regents have the position to help the Regents' job in the development supervision and control sectors. Meanwhile, the task of the highest policymaker is the Regents'. *Pesantren* women tend to obtain the vice position. In East Java, only *Nyai* Munjidah, Tambak Beras *pesantren* family, became Jombang's Regent after previously becoming Vice Regent. This happened because the previous Regent was fired due to corruption cases. Is the position as Vice Regent effective in encouraging the occurrence of policy changes?

Perceiving from the capital aspect, *pesantren* women as public officials are more advantaged compared to other Muslim women. The figure and religious leader capitals become one of the encouraging facilities to mobilize ideas to become policies. The real challenge is, how to convert that capital into political power, and how to display a genuine idea



that implies to the increase of policy quality truly require further testing.

### **Integrating Spiritual to Political Role**

Islam becomes one of the important parts of the nations' journey, including in politics, even though it experienced ups and downs in its journey in line with changing governmental regimes. In the last two decades, after the rollout of the Reformation in 1998, this struggle is even more visible on the surface, both represented by political parties with religious patterns or non-parties (Fealy et al., 2008). Islam starts to be comfortable in entering by taking part in making important decisions in the government (Hasan, 2009). This condition encourages socio-political strengths including the *pesantren* women group to enter public sectors and compete with other entities at the legislative or executive levels.

The *pesantren* women entity in the realm of practical politics is not a new thing. In the New Order Era (1966-1998) some of them were recruited to become vote-getters in campaigns and some of them became legislative members. But, recently, a new phenomenon emerged where they do not only become legislative members but also at the

executive levels, especially in regional leaderships. Some run smoothly but some others fail. One of the *pesantren* women's strengths is in the social capital, namely beliefs, norms, and networks they manage to become an advantage (Putnam, 1995). It means that one's social role is a reciprocal relationship, or in other words, social relationships are developed from norms to achieve collective goals (Irvani, 2010, p. 697). The *pesantren* women's social capital as educators, wives, or close families are managed like so through *santri*, alumni, and organization networks, thus becoming a political power (Kholifah, 2020, p. 54). This capital is converted into mass votes, thus some of them successfully become legislative members or regional leaders (Kusmana, 2019).

The emergence of *pesantren* women in spaces of practical politics is inseparable from religion-based politics, where *pesantren* elites become central elements in mobilizing religious issues in politics. For example, PKB (*Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa*/National Awakening Party) as a middle Islamic party cannot be separated from the support of *pesantren kyai* that are affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). PKB was established by Gus Dur (Kyai



Abdurahman Wahid, Indonesia's fourth president) with other *kyai* when he was still active in becoming NU's highest leader (Amir, 2003). NU's spiritual capital escorted Gus Dur to become president in 1999-2001 (Hefner, 2012). Through this NU network forms autonomous derivative institutions such as Muslimat, Fatayat, Ansor to IPNU/IPPNU (*Ikatan Pelajar Nahdlatul Ulama/Nahdlatul Ulama Student Association*). In some areas that have candidates with the same ideological intersection, this institution was quite active as vote-getters in legislative and head of the regional elections (Dewi, 2017b; Mahsun et al., 2021; Candland, 2000). This tendency is in line with the public's responses towards candidates that are deemed as religious, polite, and fluent in reciting the Holy Qur'an, even though these things tend to be symbolic (Beta, 2019; Dewi, 2017a). Religious issues still become an attraction in politics to be marketed and exchanged with votes. In the context of Indonesia, religion still becomes an important factor in contributing to socio-political changes as well as legitimizing power. "Religious tenets and institutions are seemingly best employed for social change in a political arena in which religion is not already used by

governments to legitimate arbitrary or dictatorial rule" (Candland, 2000, p. 145).

The spiritual-based social capital also happened to several countries. In the USA, the strength of religious belief determines the stability of the Republic (Putnam, 2017; Kettell, 2019). In Europe, the exclamation of socio-political involvement traditionally obtains support from Christian groups (Ferragina & Arrigoni, 2017). This perspective is strengthened by Max Weber's thought on the strong support of Protestant Calvinism to support economic and political changes to create social change (Jackman & Miller, 1998). Meanwhile, England is claimed to be the first country in Europe to use religious issues in political campaigns (Kettell, 2019). Some of the illustrations above show the capitalization of religion and spirituality in political life.

*Pesantren* women are an alternative to the public's fading trust in political actors that do not adequately reflect people's desires, such as corrupting and prioritizing personal and group affairs rather than public ones. Also, *Pesantren* women do not only voice women's interests that are deemed as not fully represented by men but also as a moral symbol of strength attached to them, such as honesty and accountability. In

this context, social and spiritual capitals are not only exchanged with constituent voices but may also become social movements – borrowing Putnam’s term (Putnam, 2017) – to make changes. Their social capital may be converted into social movements to encourage the formation of new patterns of change in the political participation of Muslim women in Indonesia. *Pesantren* women represent the interests of Muslim women that are still deemed as subordinate to men. The women’s stereotype that negates inner potentials may start from the courage to take part as a cooperative movement. This movement may encourage other entities outside of their community to take part. Even so, *pesantren* women are still women that are spiritually and culturally the main buffer of family harmony, just as other Muslim families in Indonesia (Wieringa, 2015b). Their public roles do not necessarily shift men’s domination both in domestic and public realms.

Even though there is a concern that *pesantren* women’s roles are momentary due to the heavy wave of neoliberal practical politics—but it can be countered by the strong social basis that becomes the foundation to their public role. Support from the family and social organizations, up to the spiritual

strength become new hopes that may change or at least balance the male-dominated chessboard of political games. The next job is not only to maintain a spiritual role into a political role but how to show uniquenesses and advantages through breakthrough ideas that differ from other leaders. A real challenge is how to bring the issue of spirituality that becomes the power to make changes according to their authorities.

### **Conclusion**

The birth of a new generation with the background of quality high education implies the shift of *pesantren* women’s choice of public spaces, from spiritual-based social roles to political roles. Women’s organizations become the entrance to extensively contribute in public sectors. This opportunity is simultaneously understood actively by political parties by recruiting them as members, administrators, candidate legislative members or regional heads. In the last two decades, the new generation of *pesantren* women color the political stage, both at the national and the regional levels, both in the legislative or executive levels. The ability to manage social capitals to be converted into one of the keys of success to be elected as legislative members or regional leaders.

The neo-liberal-patterned practical politics do not deter them from contributing and competing against men. On the contrary, the 'free market' political model may positively be managed through their own wisdom that does not bind one another.

The existence of the opinion that 'only women understand women' become another consideration on the reason why *pesantren* women enter the realm of practical politics. Some policies that are not fully understood by men become the core of national advancements, such as child education, family education, and affirmation of strengthening women's economy. There needs to be a balance between material-oriented policies to immaterial policies as they have long term impacts. Indeed, women's argumentation in politics is not singular.

The involvement of *pesantren* women's involvement in political spaces does not shift their natural roles as wives and mothers that are responsible for caring for and educating children, also their role as the husbands' support as spiritual mentors. Also, it does not shift the power relations in the *pesantren* families' patriarchy-patterned household where husbands and wives are responsible for all family affairs

while the husbands are the highest leader. The responsibility as educators does not change even with a different frequency.

Some policy changes and also the ever extensive thinking horizon of traditional Muslims give space for *pesantren* women to widely contribute. Even though their participation does not guarantee the crushing of society's new hope on absurd political promises, this situation is an entrance to decrease the dependency on men in formulating policies that are deemed as a lacking representation of 'women's interests'. Even though we acknowledge that women leadership is not a guarantee of all the fulfillment of all interests. The great challenge is not only to maintain power but how to give security to the public through real ideas and work that *pesantren* women have advantages and capabilities to answer to challenges outside of the *pesantren*. The next step is how to convert spirituality, not only as a political capital but as a spirit to give the best services according to their authority.

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