

Islam without Domination: NU Women and Moderate Ethics at the Grassroots Level in Urban Muslim Society in Depok, Indonesia

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Abstract

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) women in Depok develop ethical resistance to the dominance of conservative Islamic politics, which is controlled by a certain political party. This study aims to examine how NU women articulate and engage in ethical resistance through organizational involvement, and how these actions advance religious moderation and the concept of the *maṣlahah* family in an urban Islamic context. Using an interdisciplinary framework that integrates social capital theory, counterpublics, and ethical agency, the research examines the symbolic, structural, and practical strategies employed by NU women across Muslimat NU, Fatayat NU, and IPPNU. The results reveal that NU women create a distinct social environment founded on justice, compassion, and inclusiveness. Their activism offers a counterbalance to conservative narratives in Depok and helps to revive Islamic traditions in modern and contextual ways. By contesting exclusivity in urban culture and opening up space for a more compassionate, inclusive, and transformative expression of Islam, this grassroots movement contributes to broader social change.

Perempuan Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) di Depok mengembangkan resistensi etis terhadap dominasi politik Islam konservatif, yang dikendalikan oleh partai politik tertentu. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menelaah bagaimana perempuan NU mengartikulasikan dan terlibat

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dalam resistensi etis melalui keterlibatan organisasi, serta bagaimana tindakan ini memajukan moderasi beragama dan konsep keluarga masalah dalam konteks Islam perkotaan. Dengan menggunakan kerangka interdisipliner yang mengintegrasikan teori modal sosial, counterpublics, dan agen etis, penelitian ini menelaah strategi simbolik, struktural, dan praktis yang digunakan oleh perempuan NU di Muslimat NU, Fatayat NU, dan IPPNU. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perempuan NU membangun lingkungan sosial alternatif yang berlandaskan keadilan, kasih sayang, dan inklusivitas. Aktivisme mereka menjadi penyeimbang terhadap narasi konservatif di Depok dan menghidupkan kembali tradisi Islam secara progresif dan kontekstual. Dengan menantang eksklusivitas dalam budaya perkotaan dan membuka ruang bagi ekspresi Islam yang lebih penuh kasih, inklusif, dan transformatif, gerakan akar rumput ini membantu mendorong terjadinya perubahan sosial yang lebih luas.

Keywords: Depok; *keluarga masalah*; *masalah family*; moderation; Nahdlatul Ulama; urban Islam

Introduction

Depok reflects a complex, dynamic, and ideologically tense urban socio-religious landscape as a city directly neighboring Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, and continually experiencing demographic expansion. While modernization and urban mobility have contributed to economic growth and expanded access to education, Depok remains one of Indonesia's cities with the lowest tolerance levels. The 2023 Tolerant Cities Index (*Indeks Kota Toleran - IKT*) report ranked Depok 94th out of 94 cities, indicating a serious crisis in the management of diversity and social inclusion in urban spaces (SETARA Institute, 2024). This low ranking does not merely reflect inadequate educational facilities or low religious literacy, but rather the influence of certain ideological forces that systematically shape religiously and symbolically exclusive public spaces.

The Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera - PKS), which has dominated the Depok government since 2005, is a central actor in this project of religious formalization. Branding itself as a *da'wah* party, PKS has developed a network of educational institutions, majelis taklim, digital platforms, and philanthropic initiatives—all integrated into a structured Islamic ecosystem that permeates citizens' social spaces (Fealy & White, 2008). This approach aligns with Robert D. Putnam's social capital theory, which suggests that a community's strength stems from its members being socially linked, trusting

one another, and actively participating in group activities (Putnam, 2020). However, this story is not without its counterarguments.

In the midst of strengthening conservatism, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) women in Depok appear as an alternative force that offers a more inclusive, ethical, and down-to-earth form of Islam. Through organizations such as Muslimat NU, Fatayat NU, and IPPNU (Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdlatul Ulama), they advance two main agendas that resonate with the social needs of urban communities: religious moderation and the concept of *maṣlaḥah* family. These two ideas are not merely present as normative discourse but are also realized through social praxis—such as family education, community engagement, gender-sensitive religious gatherings, and the promotion of maqāṣid al-syarī'ah values that emphasize justice, compassion, and public benefit.

This research contributes to the academic discourse on *maṣlaḥah* and religious moderation by empirically examining how NU women apply these concepts in practice under conditions of politico-religious domination. While *maṣlaḥah* family and religious moderation are widely discussed in theory, this study foregrounds these concepts' lived, ethical, and strategic dimensions, highlighting NU women as key cultural and theological agents who resist ideological exclusivism through grounded social action.

This study addresses a significant gap, often neglecting the gendered embodiment and everyday enactments of *maṣlaḥah*-oriented Islam within contested urban spaces. It seeks to understand how NU women construct ethical resistance in social arenas ideologically dominated by political Islam. This research asks: What symbolic, structural, and practical strategies do NU women employ to uphold a narrative of moderate Islam and *maṣlaḥah*-oriented family life in urban contexts such as Depok? To what extent do these forms of resistance function as viable alternatives to prevailing politico-religious domination?

To address this, an interdisciplinary theoretical approach is employed. Putnam's theory of social capital is used to examine the strength of community networks as a social resource that fosters solidarity and collective action (Putnam, 2020). Nancy Fraser's concept of counterpublics is helpful in

explaining how NU women's groups create alternative discursive spaces that challenge mainstream hegemonies without relying on formal political channels (Fraser, 1990). Meanwhile, the framework of ethical agency is applied to portray NU women as moral actors who renegotiate tradition in light of contemporary ethical demands—particularly concerning gender justice, family, and social inclusion.

Previous studies have explored the role of NU women in education and religion (Arnez, 2010) as well as the dynamics of political Islam in urban communities (Fealy & White, 2008; Smith-Hefner, 2021). However, few have specifically examined how NU women enact the ethics of moderation and *maṣlaḥah* under the symbolic and structural pressures of Islamist political forces, such as those present in Depok (Rinaldo, 2013; Smith-Hefner, 2021). This research aims to fill that gap by positioning NU women not merely as social objects, but as theological and cultural agents actively shaping an Islam that champions humanity.

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with leaders of NU autonomous bodies in Depok, participatory observation of the Maṣlaḥah Family Movement (Gerakan Keluarga Maṣlaḥah Nahdlatul Ulama/GKMNU) program, and documentation of religious study activities, social media content, and internal organizational documents. The analysis was conducted thematically by identifying patterns of resistance, symbolic constructions, and forms of ethical agency carried out by NU women in promoting an inclusive and beneficial Islam amid the increasingly exclusive religious landscape of the city.

Urban Islam in Depok

Depok City is situated on the outskirts of Indonesia's capital and serves as a significant mobility route to Jakarta. This access helps the community's economic growth independently. According to the 2021–2022 budget report, the utilization of Depok's regional budget (APBD) was considered effective (Sejati et al., 2024), and economic self-reliance was relatively high between 2016 and 2018 (Falach & Trisnawati, 2020). The city's strategic position along

the main route to Jakarta has enabled its residents to foster economic growth autonomously. However, this economic progress has not been accompanied by a corresponding level of interreligious tolerance.

The 212 Rally at Monas in 2016 triggered the strengthening of polarization among Indonesian Muslims, including in Depok. The event contributed to the fragmentation of the Muslim community, leading to the emergence of various groups, such as conservatives, traditionalists, moderates, and hardliners (Fakhrani, 2024). In Depok, intolerance has intensified as a domino effect of this incident. The central government sought to respond by launching public outreach initiatives and publishing the book *Religious Moderation*, issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. However, the diverse and dynamic urban Muslim community did not readily embrace the government's narrative of religious moderation.

The 2023 Tolerant City Index (IKT) report by the SETARA Institute ranked Depok 94th out of 94 cities in terms of tolerance, scoring 4,010 (SETARA Institute, 2024). According to the Institute, the criteria for a tolerant city include inclusive development, regulations that support diversity, and low tolerance toward differing beliefs. The city government was criticized for promoting favouritism and religious formalism, such as banning Ahmadiyya activities, encouraging Qur'anic recitation and completion (*tilawah* and *khataman*), and restricting the celebration of non-Islamic events like Valentine's Day.

In this context, the Depok City government, which has long been led by figures supported by the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) from 2005 to 2025, has significantly shaped local policies. It also reflects the party's socio-political dominance in the city. They declare their party as a *da'wah* party. Additionally, their political strategy involves establishing an emotional connection with the community (Salahuddin, 2021). This approach has proven to be a highly effective advantage for PKS, as their grassroots and people-centered strategy has received far more attention than candidates from other parties, who prioritize ceremonial engagements over meaningful emotional ties with the people of Depok.

Additionally, PKS has benefited from the socio-religious characteristics of Depok's urban population, which tends to rely on digital religious literacy in shaping its religious identity. It contrasts with rural communities, where people are more likely to refer to respected religious figures such as kyai or ulama as sources of religious narratives. Rural kyai typically emphasize multicultural values to foster harmony with all segments of society, whereas urban religious leaders tend to prioritize multimedia-based outreach (Mufida & Nurcholis, 2021). In addition to the reliance on multimedia to strengthen religious identity, urban communities also show a tendency to support political parties that prioritize the welfare of Muslim population (Federspiel, 1991). In the context of Depok, PKS has dominated this sphere for two decades (Salahuddin, 2021).

The limited number of state Islamic senior high schools (Madrasah Aliyah Negeri, or MAN) in Depok is also a matter of concern, as there is currently only one MAN in the Beji district. Ridho Firman Hakim, an IPNU Depok member, noted that the scarcity of state-run religious-based secondary schools has led to the dominance of private madrasahs, many of which are managed by groups affiliated with the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). Sekolah Terbuka Madani, for instance, operates in the same building as the PKS party office, where the ground floor is used for party activities, and the upper floor serves as the learning space (Hakim, interview, December 1, 2024). This phenomenon is sufficient evidence that the local government allows educational activities within party buildings. In contrast, Graha Gus Dur in Jombang, despite being the central office of PKB, is not used as a school. The case of Sekolah Terbuka Madani illustrates the direct involvement of political party institutions in the education sector. Moreover, between 2005 and 2020, the city government only built nine new public schools, while 25 new private schools were established, most of which are managed by PKS-affiliated networks (Kurnialam & Raharjo, 2023). These facts reinforce social capital theory, which emphasizes social networks, norms of trust, and civic participation as forms of capital that strengthen social cohesion and collective efficacy. PKS was able to govern Depok for two decades and dominate the city's social life because its cadres built strong social ties through majelis taklim, schools, religious gatherings, and institutions that directly addressed the needs of local residents.

On the other hand, *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) led by NU-affiliated *kiai* serve as a counterbalancing force—*Pesantren Al-Hikam*, founded by KH. Hasyim Muzadi, a prominent figure and former leader of the Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU)—integrates higher education with traditional religious learning in the *pesantren* setting. Through this model, *Al-Hikam* is committed to producing a generation that excels in academic knowledge and Islamic religious sciences. *Pesantren Al-Karimiyah*, located in the Sawangan district, also emphasizes the values of moderation, including *tawassuṭ* (moderation), *tawāzun* (balance), *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), *tabayyun* (verification), and *al-‘ādah* (local wisdom). Both *pesantren* adopt traditional NU methods, including classical Islamic text studies (*kitab kuning*), *baḥṭhul masā’il* (collective deliberation on religious issues), and the study of Islam Nusantara (Jamaludin, 2018).

In addition to the traditional *pesantren* institutions mentioned above, the emergence of internationally oriented schools, such as Lazuardi Global Islamic School (GIS)—founded by Haidar Bagir and Alwi Shihab in 1995—has also become a significant alternative in Depok's Islamic educational landscape. Its curriculum emphasizes tolerance, inclusivity toward people with disabilities, and a global Islamic outlook (Admin of Lazuardi, 2021). As part of the 2024, Gerakan Keluarga Maṣlaḥah Nahdlatul Ulama (GKMNU) program, Lazuardi students actively participated in community service initiatives. Audrey Nur Intan, one of the students, presented a solution to youth-related issues in Depok, demonstrating the integration of education with social engagement.

Even while PKS-affiliated institutions appear to wield considerable influence in shaping the religious landscape of Depok, the city remains a battleground. The fact that there are NU-affiliated *pesantren*, community-based programs, and inclusive schools like Lazuardi in Depok shows that urban Islam is not all the same. Within this fragmented field, NU—particularly its women’s organizations—emerges as a moral counterforce that offers an alternative vision of Islam rooted in moderation, compassion, and grassroots ethics. The following section explores how NU women, through

symbolic, structural, and practical strategies, reclaim public space and religious discourse in the face of ideological conservatism.

The Role of NU Women's Movements in Depok: From Religious Moderation to the Concept of *Keluarga Maṣlaḥah* (*Maṣlaḥah Family*)

The presence of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Depok can be traced back to the establishment of the Al-Hamidiyah Islamic Boarding School, founded by Kiai Ahmad Sjaichu in 1988. As a pioneer in preserving NU's values and principles in Depok, his efforts led to the formation of NU's official structure in the city through the NU Branch Board (Pengurus Cabang NU/PCNU) Depok, led by Djundan Suwarman in 1989 (A. M. Hasan & Gumelar, 2022). Following this development, and in response to the complex realities of urban life in Depok—especially the influence of political Islam ideologies—new dynamics emerged involving NU women's organizations, such as IPPNU, Fatayat, and Muslimat, groups that were later brought together in current setting through a hub called NU Women (TV NU, 2022).

While PKS has successfully constructed a structural Islamic ecosystem that infiltrated formal spaces such as schools, mosques, and public policies, NU women in Depok offer an alternative ecosystem grounded in community-based ethics. Their movement is not aimed at controlling state institutions, but rather at restoring social and spiritual relationships through parenting, family education, and gender-based Qur'anic studies. In this context, Muslimat and Fatayat can be understood as a form of moderate Islamic 'counterpublic'—a counter-discursive space that challenges the singular narrative of political Islam and opens room for inclusive interpretations.

The grassroots resistance practiced by NU women is not confrontational but transformational and participatory. They exercise ethical agency—the capacity to act morally and contextually within the constraints of dominant structures. Through initiatives such as the Maṣlaḥah Family Movement and the dissemination of raḥmah (compassionate) values, NU women foster social change without relying on electoral power. Amid the increasing symbolic exclusivism of urban Islam, NU presents a model grounded in social intimacy

rather than religious domination. This section, therefore, focuses on how NU women in Depok navigate the challenges of values and practices within a plural city, with diverse backgrounds and dynamics.

Tradition as Transformation: The Role of NU Women in Bridging Islam and Modernity

Indonesian and international scholars frequently describe Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as a traditionalist Islamic organization. This label refers to its religious orientation, grounded in the legacy of classical scholars in responding to religious, social, and political issues. However, NU in the contemporary era—particularly since the leadership of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), who served as Chairman of the NU Executive Board (*Tanfidziyah*) and later as President of Indonesia—has demonstrated a more progressive and open engagement with modern discourses, including those concerning women's rights and gender justice (Kersten, 2019).

Long before the discourse on gender transformation gained widespread attention, NU had already demonstrated a sensitivity to women's issues. Since its founding, NU has consistently engaged with contemporary concerns, reflecting a tradition that is neither static nor closed, but somewhat flexible and open to change. Monika Arnez (2010) notes that women have been actively involved in key NU events, such as the Mukhtar (congress) and national conferences, since the organization's inception in 1926. Although their early roles were mainly limited to that of observers or companions, their presence marked a crucial first step toward more substantive involvement. This limited formal participation of women in these official forums ultimately motivated the wives of NU leaders to advocate for a dedicated platform for women's activity (Arnez, 2010). This initiative led to the establishment of the Nahdlatul Ulama Moeslimat (NUM) organization, which later evolved into Muslimat NU.

NUM later evolved into an official autonomous body within NU, focusing on empowering adult women (Arnez, 2010; Machrusah, 2005; Nisa, 2021). This was followed by the establishment of Fatayat NU (Affiah & Khotima, 2005; Arnez, 2010; Dachlan, 1984; Nisa, 2021) for young women and IPPNU

(Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdlatul Ulama) for female students (Nisa, 2021; Romahurmuziy et al., 2000). Interestingly, the formation of these women's organizations tended to mirror the structure of pre-existing male autonomous bodies within NU (Bush & Qodim, 2008). This pattern reflects an internal awareness of the need for women to have equal space within religious institutions. Women are not merely complementary to the male-led movement but active agents with their own agendas and contributions to socio-religious development.

The NU women's movement has consistently exhibited substantial involvement with women's concerns from the beginning. They have not only been subjects of change but also active participants in shaping policies, ideologies, and socio-religious activities that promote women's rights. Although Muslimat and Fatayat NU have a long and complex history—marked by varying strategies and theological orientations—they share a common spirit: promoting *maṣlahah* (benefit), equal opportunities, and advancing women in social, economic, and educational spheres. In the social context, for instance, NU women have long addressed essential issues including reproductive health, domestic violence, and the protection of women and children (Arnez, 2010). In the field of education, Nyai Nur Chadijah's founding of the first female pesantren in Jombang, Indonesia, in 1919 stands as a monumental achievement at a time when women's access to education was profoundly restricted (N. Hasan, 2023; Isbah, 2020).

Interestingly, NU women's movement approach remains rooted in Islamic scholarly tradition. They refer to the classical treasures (*turāth*) and contextually interpret them to align with contemporary needs. NU women play a crucial role in bridging the gap between tradition and modernity in this context. They avoid sharp ideological confrontations, instead opting for a path of negotiation and reinterpretation as a strategy for change. As noted by Robin Bush, an American scholar who has studied NU in depth, women's issues have long been part of the intellectual discourse within the organization (Bush & Qodim, 2008).

In Depok, NU—through its three women’s organizations mentioned earlier—has carried out a transformation by using their Islamic traditions as a resource, rather than ignoring social realities. Based on interviews with key figures from each organization, NU demonstrates a strong concern for addressing social issues in society, on the one hand, while remaining committed to tradition on the other. The interviews reveal that their regular Islamic practices are often combined with programs aimed at addressing or preventing contemporary problems in Depok. For example, Muslimat and Fatayat use their weekly and monthly study religious gatherings (*pengajian*) as spaces to discuss issues that directly affect women, such as reproductive health, marriage challenges, and strengthening family life.

Two NU women leaders in Depok, Ade Rina Farida and Nurhasanah, explained in interviews that these concerns are urgent, especially because the high rate of divorce in Depok often comes from a lack of knowledge about how to build a “healthy” and functional family (Farida, interview, December 25 2024; Nurhasanah, interview, November 21, 2024). Similarly, IPPNU Depok focuses on guiding young NU women at the teenage level. Selvi Febriyanti Mulyadi, the chief of IPPNU Depok, noted that through study programs featuring NU scholars and religious figures, as well as introducing national leaders, IPPNU’s mission is to equip young Muslim women in Depok with the tools to navigate life as Muslims in the modern era (Mulyadi, interview, December 1, 2024).

In Nancy Fraser's terms, these activities function as alternative discursive arenas, or counterpublics that challenge hegemonic religious interpretations dominated by conservative Islamist groups. By organizing and managing these spaces, NU women demonstrate their role as ethical agents, actively re-narrating Islamic norms and promoting forms of religious moderation that are explicitly gendered and grounded in compassion (*rahmah*), particularly in building harmonious and *maṣlahah*-oriented families. It shows how religious moderation is negotiated at the most fundamental level, namely the family, not only as a form of active resistance against ideological exclusivism, but also as an effort to cultivate a morally upright generation and to foster solidarity and pluralism within urban Muslim communities.

This affirms that within NU, transformation can coexist with tradition, creating a meaningful space for women's participation in developing the ummah and the nation. Thus, the NU women's movement is not merely a response to modern emancipatory discourse, but also reflects the dynamic and progressive spirit of traditional Islam. They demonstrate that tradition can be a foundation for transformation rather than a barrier to change.

Gender and the Sacred: Between Islamic Tradition and Gender

NU women offer nuanced and progressive responses to contemporary issues, even though they remain deeply grounded in the Islamic tradition they uphold. For them, tradition is not a static or frozen construct, but a living legacy that can be reinterpreted in light of the values of justice and humanity. In this context, Muslimat NU and its younger generations actively engage in challenging the authority of classical fiqh texts that constrain women's roles. They are re-examining Qur'anic values and the fiqh tradition using new interpretive frameworks—ones that are more attuned to gender equality and women's empowerment—while still embracing the local cultural roots that form an integral part of their Islamic identity (Doorn-Harder, 2006).

One of the most significant responses has come from Fatayat NU, particularly through the intellectual contributions of prominent figures such as Siti Musdah Mulia and Maria Ulfah Anshor. These scholars advocated for the reinterpretation of QS. al-Nisā (4):34, which is frequently cited to legitimate gender hierarchies. In the spirit of justice, they argue that such verses must be reinterpreted to promote egalitarian relationships between spouses. They assert that no verses in the Qur'an prohibit women from becoming community leaders. Moreover, on polygamy, they reintroduce the historical and cultural contexts to emphasize that justice and women's welfare must remain central considerations (Arnez, 2010). Siti Musdah Mulia has called for a theological deconstruction of Islamic interpretations that have long been used to legitimize gender inequality (Mulia, 2018, 2022). She stresses that Islamic teachings on emancipation should be implemented and disseminated broadly across society, while remaining contextually sensitive to avoid triggering anxieties among men that their social dominance is under threat (Doorn-Harder, 2006).

In the context of violence against women, Nur Rofiah offers an approach that focuses on justice as the primary mission of religion. She emphasizes that the correct interpretation of religion can bring justice to those who are weak, including women victims of violence. Without siding with these weak groups, justice will always be determined by the dominant group (Rofiah, 2010).

Another important aspect addressed by NU women and progressive Islamic scholars is the question of sexuality and sexual rights, within the sub-discourse of Maslahat Sexuality, figures such as Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, Siti Musdah Mulia, and KH. Husein Muhammad has emphasized that Islam does not treat sexuality as a taboo subject. Classical fiqh literature discusses sexual matters openly, albeit within the ethical boundaries of dignity and mutual respect. These scholars argue that all Qur'anic verses and Prophetic traditions—when read holistically—are imbued with the values of justice (al-‘adl), benefit (al-*maṣlahah*), wisdom (al-ḥikmah), and compassion (al-rahmah), including in matters related to sexuality (Muhammad, 2011). Thus, women's sexual rights need to be understood as part of Islam's mission in realizing mercy and justice. This comprehensive response reflects how NU women integrate a tradition-based Islamic framework with contemporary challenges. Rather than discarding tradition, they engage with it critically and constructively—reinterpreting and enriching it—to build a society that upholds gender justice, human dignity, and inclusive moral values.

Religious Moderation in Depok: NU's Role between Doctrine and Practice

In terms of theology, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) not only emphasizes the importance of a gender-just reading of Islam, but also actively prevents radicalism that grows from transnational Islamic understanding. Through the concept of religious moderation, NU appears as the government's leading partner in disseminating the moderate Islamic narrative to all levels of society. As quoted from Burhani, Hefner mentions NU and Muhammadiyah as representations of moderate Muslim communities that refer to the concept of ummah wasaṭ as found in QS. al-Baqarah (2):143 (Burhani, 2012). However, this concept is contextualized, as explained by Nasikhin et al. (2022), that

moderation in the view of NU figures is a balance between *ukhuwwah Islāmiyyah* (Islamic brotherhood), *bashariyyah* (human fraternity), and *waṭaniyyah* (national brotherhood). Burhani added that NU moderation is a middle position between two extremes: liberalism and Islamism (Burhani, 2012). Burhani's observation is fascinating because it has relevant resonance in the context of Depok, as explained in the following paragraphs.

NU's role as the government's strategic partner in promoting religious moderation is not merely symbolic, but deeply operational. NU is a vital channel for spreading inclusive Islamic values at the local level due to a strong institutional framework that reaches from pesantren and autonomous bodies (banom) to branches at the village level. Its presence is not limited to public discourse; it manifests in education, religious gatherings, and socio-religious advocacy that directly engages with local communities. However, the institutional presence of these moderation-oriented actors does not automatically translate into the deep internalization of moderate values across society. For this reason, examining how religious moderation is practiced in lived social realities, particularly in urban contexts like Depok—a city shaped by a conservative religious legacy and undergoing rapid demographic transformation is crucial.

To what extent is religious moderation accepted and practiced by the community? This question is addressed through a triangulation of three primary sources: the 2023 Tolerant City Index (Indeks Kota Toleran) report by the Setara Institute, a field survey conducted among Nahdliyin residents in Depok, and an in-depth interview with Ade Rina Farida, head of Fatayat NU Depok. Setara Institute's 2024 Tolerant City Index (IKT) report ranked Depok 94th out of 94 cities in Indonesia, with a score of 4,010. Depok government is considered to prioritize favouritism and religious formalism, such as the prohibition of Ahmadiyah activities, the call for recitation and khataman Qur'an, and restrictions on non-Islamic celebrations such as Valentine's Day. These policies significantly narrow the space for a pluralistic civil society, undermining earlier efforts at fostering interfaith dialogue. Furthermore, the Depok municipal government has been found to violate the provisions of Joint

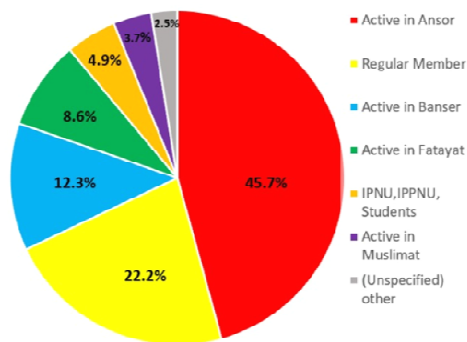
Ministerial Regulation (Peraturan Bersama Menteri) No. 9 and 8 of 2006 concerning the establishment of the Forum for Religious Harmony (Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama/FKUB). It also contributes to deepening social segregation through residential zoning policies and the lack of inclusive public education infrastructure. These systemic issues highlight the dissonance between state-led narratives of moderation and the actual governance practices on the ground (SETARA Institute, 2024).

A survey involving 81 members of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) autonomous bodies (*banom*) in Depok reveals a nuanced and, at times, ambivalent orientation toward religious moderation (see Figure 1). Respondents typically show a high degree of openness toward religious diversity in their neighborhood: 90.3% stated that they are willing to live next door to a community or family of a different religion, while only a small minority expressed discomfort or disagreement (see Figure 2).

Figure 1
Geographical Distribution of Respondents

Membership in Nahdlatul Ulama Organizations

82 Responses



Source: Religious Moderation survey, dissemination event at Pondok Al-Hikam, Depok, on December 24, 2024

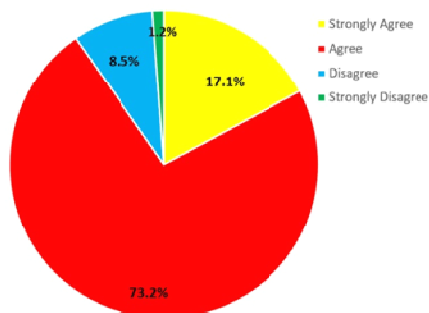
However, this openness becomes more contested when theological and doctrinal matters are considered. For instance, there were divided attitudes regarding financial support for building non-Muslim houses of worship: 46.3% expressed willingness to donate (either definitely or as much as possible), while 40.2% indicated they would not contribute and 13.4% would not give the donations at any cost (see Figure 3).

A similar division was also evident regarding the election of non-Muslim political leaders, where 47% favoured restrictions while 53% were opposed (see Figure 4). An example of what can be called a position of “pragmatic tolerance” is provided by Tri Bayu Laksono, a member of one of autonomous body of NU. As long as social cooperation and interfaith relations are not compromising religious orthodoxy, he supports them. He strongly opposes supporting the establishment of non-Muslim buildings of worship and the election of non-Muslim leaders, even though he is in support of some restricted types of interfaith greeting.

Figure 2
The Response of Nahdliyyin Participants regarding Living
as Neighbors with Non-Muslims

Do you agree (willing to accept) if you live next door to a community or family of a different religion?

82 Responses

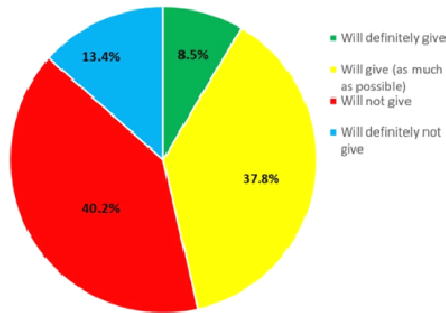


Source: Religious Moderation survey, dissemination event at
Pondok Al-Hikam, Depok, on December 24, 2024

Figure 3
Responses of participating Nahdliyyin regarding non-Muslim houses of worship in their neighborhood

Would you donate if followers of other religions needed financial assistance to build a place of worship in your area

82 Responses

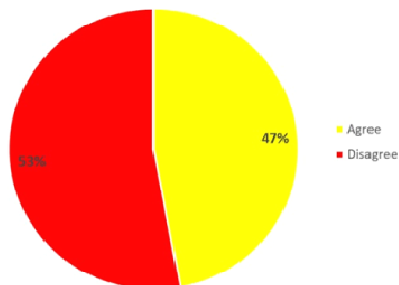


Source: Religious Moderation survey, dissemination event at Pondok Al-Hikam, Depok, on December 24, 2024

Figure 4
Responses of Participating Nahdliyyin Regarding Choosing a non-Muslim as Leader in a Muslim Majority Nation

Do you agree with the prohibition against choosing a non-Muslim leader in a Muslim-majority country?

82 Responses



Source: Religious Moderation survey, dissemination event at Pondok Al-Hikam, Depok, on December 24, 2024

This finding shows that the values of tolerance have entered the social consciousness of NU members in Depok, but have not been fully integrated into their theological foundations. The moderation observed reflects more of a practical coexistence strategy rather than a deep commitment to inclusiveness as a universal ethical value. The emerging tolerance is a functional choice aimed at maintaining social harmony, rather than a transformative reflection that reshapes perspectives on diversity. Thus, the project of religious moderation still faces a significant challenge: bridging the gap between social inclusion and theological inclusion, and building an understanding of diversity that is not only outwardly peaceful, but also inwardly spacious.

Ade Rina Farida, Chairperson of Fatayat NU Depok, emphasized that religious moderation in Depok has indeed progressed, but it is not entirely linear. According to her, the biggest challenge lies in the inconsistency between permissive public attitudes and internal doctrines that still produce exclusivism. She noted that many Fatayat and other banom members are willing to engage in interfaith dialogue and social work with different communities. However, when discussions enter the realm of belief or doctrine, resistance often emerges—mainly due to fears of “misguidance in faith” and perceived threats to Islamic identity (Farida, interview, December 25 2024). Thus, religious moderation in Depok has advanced, particularly in more open social relations. However, the central challenge is to make tolerance an inherent ethical value, not merely a functional response. This transformation requires education and dialogue forums and initiatives that deeply engage with the community’s theological consciousness.

This ambivalence shows religious moderation as more than a theory, but a daily experience constantly negotiated. Their understanding of the principle of *maṣlahah* makes them live in harmony, while dogmatic insecurities maintain boundaries. NU women perform a nuanced balancing act between ethics. On the one hand, they promote tolerance and social harmony, but they are critical of theological traditions that are resistant to more inclusive interpretations on the other. This reality underlines Robert Putnam’s view that social networks and trust norms can help cement community ties and facilitate social cooperation amid ideological differences. At the same time, Nancy Fraser’s

counterpublic theory also helps to tell us how NU women's communicative strategies create open and pluralized spaces. Thus, religious moderation does not manifest as conformity to doctrine, but as a delicate ethical bias that intervenes between social realities and spiritual ideals. That very fruitful tension is at the heart of Islamic renewal on the grassroots level.

Reviving Maṣlaḥah: NU's Theological Turn to the Maṣlaḥah Family

In addition to the religious moderation program, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has revived a theology-based initiative centered on the family institution, namely the *maṣlaḥah* family. Although NU's Family Welfare Institute (Lembaga Kesejahteraan Keluarga/LKK) has existed since the 1970s, the concept of the *maṣlaḥah* family gained renewed momentum in 2023 through a collaboration between the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia and the Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU), formalized under the Nahdlatul Ulama Maṣlaḥah Family Movement (Gerakan Keluarga Maṣlaḥah Nahdlatul Ulama, GKMNU).

The Chairperson of PBNU, Alissa Wahid, emphasized that the concept is the outcome of a five-year in-depth study (2013–2018) conducted by a research team under her leadership, and that it has historical and conceptual links to the earlier LKK framework. The theological foundation of this movement refers to Q.S al-Rūm (30):21, a verse frequently cited in religious narratives concerning the *sakīnah*, *mawaddah*, and *raḥmah* (*sama'awa*) family (Jannah, 2024).

In line with government programs, the Ministry of Religious Affairs issued guidelines on Religious Moderation in 2020, positioning religious moderation as a national priority agenda focused on developing the role of the family in building national character. Although the Ministry did not explicitly mention the concept of *maṣlaḥah* families, it emphasized the importance of family empowerment programs to cultivate a moderate national character.

Meanwhile, the Nahdlatul Ulama Maṣlaḥah Family Movement (GKMNU) has actively involved communities across Indonesia, collaborating with local LKK, community groups such as Muslimat, Fatayat, PKK, and majelis taklim to provide training based on three main pillars: Islam as a mercy to all worlds (*raḥmatan lil 'ālamīn*), NU values, and the concept of *maṣlaḥah* family.

Participants learn fundamental principles such as Islam's universal mercy, tauhid (monotheism), the responsibility of the caliph, maqashid shariah, and specific NU teachings including *khayra ummah* (the best community), *aswāja al-nahḍīyah* (the Nahdlatul Ulama approach to sunni Islam), and *ukhūwuh* (brotherhood). They also discuss the structure, relationships, child-rearing principles, and characteristics of the *maṣlahah* family, as well as the five pillars of marriage: *mithāqan ghalīẓan* (a strong covenant), *zawāj* (marriage), *mu'āsharah bil-ma'rūf* (living together in kindness), *mushāwarah* (consultation), and *tarāḍin* (mutual consent).

PBNU's efforts have involved more than 1 million participants in thousands of villages since the program began in October 2023, targeting key social issues such as stunting, weak family resilience, early marriage, and divorce, in cooperation with various government ministries. Thus, the *maṣlahah* family represents a theological, historical, and practical approach grounded in Islamic moderation and women's activism within Nahdlatul Ulama. This approach serves as a strategic initiative to build families that can advance social welfare and character development, deeply rooted in Indonesia's religious and cultural context. This ongoing effort demonstrates Nahdlatul Ulama and Muslimat NU's commitment to building a humanistic and just Islamic civilization, realized through active contributions by women and communal cooperation based on a theological vision of a moderate family.

Conceptually, the term *maṣlahah* has undergone significant development within the tradition of Islamic thought. The theory of *maṣlahah* was elaborated by classical Muslim scholars such as al-Juwaynī (d. 1085), al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī (d. 1316), and al-Shāṭibī (d. 1388), and continues to evolve in the works of contemporary thinkers such as Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī (d. 2013), Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (d. 2022), and Jasser Auda (al-Būṭī, 1973; al-Ghazālī, 1368; al-Juwaynī, 1997; al-Qaraḍāwī, 1990, 2006, 2009; al-Shāṭibī, 2019; al-Ṭūfī, 1954, 1998; Jasser Auda, 2007). Within the framework of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, which traditionally includes five primary objectives (*uṣūl al-khamsah*): the protection of religion, soul, intellect, progeny, and property, contemporary scholars have emphasized the necessity of further developing this concept in order to respond to modern social dynamics and emerging forms of

welfare. It is therefore essential to ensure that the principles of shari'ah remain responsive and relevant in addressing contemporary humanitarian concerns and public policy challenges.

The practical implementation of the concept of *maṣlahah* in the context of NU is reflected in the work of GKMNU, a relatively new institution. According to Alissa Wahid, GKMNU is NU's systematic strategy to strengthen family resilience as the main foundational pillar of society and the nation. Over the past two years, the movement has reached over 1,500,000 families across Indonesia, including 5,000 prospective brides, 30,000 young children, and 30,000 adolescents through nearly 300 formal educational institutions. Cross-sectoral collaboration involves various entities such as village governments, posyandu, local governments, and civil society organizations to deliver programs in family health, education, and child protection at the grassroots level (Jannah, 2025). This data underscores NU's commitment to responding to contemporary challenges by fostering a sustainable *maṣlahah* family ecosystem.

In the context of an urban society such as Depok, the concept of the *maṣlahah* family holds significant potential, particularly in addressing social issues such as high divorce rates, domestic violence, and challenges related to education and family-level economics. However, the dissemination of this concept remains relatively limited. Nurhasanah, the Chairperson of the Sub-District Executive Board (Pengurus Anak Cabang/PAC) of Muslimat NU in Pancoran Mas, Depok, noted that the understanding of the *maṣlahah* family concept among Muslimat members is still uneven. This contrasts with the more widely recognized concept of the *sakīnah mawaddah wa raḥmah* (samawa) family, which has been promoted by various religious institutions for several decades. For this reason, she expressed hope that future NU programs will prioritize the socialization and mainstreaming of the *maṣlahah* family concept, particularly in urban areas like Depok (Nurhasanah, interview, November 21, 2024).

Between Moderation and Maṣlahah: Navigating NU's Theological Crossroads

NU women in recent decades have played an active role in navigating Islamic tradition within the context of modern social dynamics. Two important

theological discourses that have marked the direction of this movement are religious moderation and the *maṣlaḥah* family movement. Religious moderation gained national prominence during the tenure of Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Hakim Saifuddin (2014–2019), through the mainstreaming of tolerance and anti-extremism programs. Meanwhile, the concept of the *maṣlaḥah* family—rooted in maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah principles and part of NU’s tradition since the 1970s—was revitalized through the Nahdlatul Ulama Maṣlaḥah Family Movement (GKMNU) under the leadership of KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf. More recently, the principle of *maṣlaḥah* has also been incorporated into Indonesia’s long-term national development plan (2025–2045). This evolving dynamic raises a critical question: how do Nahdliyyin, especially women, integrate these two agendas into their lived religious practices?

In the local context of Depok, these two major agendas take on a special form through the NU women’s movement. For example, Fatayat NU Depok not only carries out national programs, such as the dissemination of Keluarga Maṣlaḥah in 2023, but also adapts them to the needs of a complex urban city by holding programs on youth and marriage in 2022 and a talk show on Self-Love that highlights women’s mental and spiritual health (Admin of Nahdliyin.com, 2025). Fatayat Depok is also active in promoting religious moderation, both through study forums and social media campaigns, as emphasized by its chairwoman, Ade Rina (Farida, interview, December 25 2024). Muslimat NU Depok, although still in the process of consolidation, uses regular study circles and gatherings as a means to strengthen the role of families while instilling the principle of *maṣlaḥah* in diverse household dynamics in the city (Nurhasanah, interview, November 21 2024). Meanwhile, IPPNU Depok focuses on empowering young female cadres in schools and pesantren, including through youth leadership training in collaboration with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and GKMNU to prepare young facilitators (Gumelar, 2024). In these activities, IPPNU also spreads the values of religious moderation among young women through Islamic studies, the introduction of NU leaders, and the use of digital media.

The religious moderation movement and the *maṣlaḥah* family initiative are not two conflicting agendas, but rather complementary and parallel paths to

build a just and peaceful society. Both are rooted in the same source: a religious tradition grounded in the universal messages of the Qur'an. Through their various activities and contributions today, NU women demonstrate that this tradition is not only inherited but also revitalized and transformed to address contemporary challenges. Through initiatives such as GKMNU and the moderation movement, NU women become key actors in advancing religious interpretations that are compassionate, just and contextually relevant amid modern social realities.

As emphasized in Fazlur Rahman's thought, as cited by Ziba Mir-Hosseini, reviving the élan of the Qur'an in people's lives requires critical engagement with the Islamic intellectual tradition and a realistic understanding of the contemporary socio-political context (Mir-Hosseini, 2021). Rahman reminds us that legal reform—such as in issues concerning women—will only be effective if supported by broader social change (Rahman, 1984). This idea reinforces the position that religious moderation and *maṣlahah* family initiatives must be supported by systematic efforts from the community, including NU women, to realize social justice as a central objective of the Qur'an.

NU Women in Action: Progress and Prospects for the Future

In welcoming the second century of Nahdlatul Ulama, PBNU has demonstrated a strong commitment to humanitarian agendas and strengthening the role of women. The presence of NU Women is one of the important initiatives under the leadership of Yahya Cholil Staquf. During the commemoration of Nahdlatul Ulama's centennial anniversary, Zannuba Arifah Chafsoh (Yenny Wahid) emphasized that NU Women serves as a hub for NU's autonomous bodies and women cadres to synergize as agents of social, religious, and familial transformation (TV NU, 2022). PBNU also revitalized the Nahdlatul Ulama Maṣlahah Family Movement (GKMNU) as a concrete effort to build strong, healthy, and empowered families, while expanding NU's contribution to the development of civil society.

This topic reflects the real-life dynamics of how Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), particularly NU Women, can serve as agents of change in society, with the city of Depok as the focus of study. In previous sections, we have outlined the

challenges faced by the urban community in Depok, such as a high intolerance index, the penetration of exclusive Islamic values, a high divorce rate, unpreparedness in family building, and limited understanding of the nature of family. On the other hand, the data presented—supported by insights from NU women leaders such as Ade Rina Farida and Nurhasanah—reveal the great potential Depok holds in addressing these issues: a digitally literate population, its strategic position as a buffer city to the capital with highly competitive human resources, and the presence of major universities such as the University of Indonesia (UI), the Indonesian International Islamic University (UIII), Gunadarma University, and others. These strengths, combined with the dissemination of *maṣlaḥah* family values, religious moderation, and school-age youth guidance programs (BRUS), offer a strategic foundation for tackling the various social and economic challenges confronting the people of Depok (Nurhasanah, interview, November 21 2024; Farida, interview December 25 2024, Mulyadi, interview, December 1 2024).

This trend is expected to continue and expand. Religious moderation and the concept of the *maṣlaḥah* family are mutually reinforcing, with PBNU—through GKMNU—channeling various programs toward strengthening the family unit as the foundation of social development. The potential success of this trend is also reflected in the terminology used in the 2025-2045 National Long-Term Development Plan (RPJPN), namely “*maslahat* religion.” This term, as expressed by Aji Sofanudin, is anticipated to replace the policy of religious moderation, which some perceive as a state-led effort to promote certain religious understandings. However, a comparison between religious moderation and *maslahat* religion in an article published by the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) underscores a difference in emphasis rather than a conflict of objectives (Sofanudin, 2024). Both are grounded in similar core values—encouraging the practice of religion in ways that bring benefits to individuals, families, communities, the state, and the broader universe. This aligns with the vision of *Maṣlaḥah* Family through GKMNU, which aims to strengthen the family as the smallest social unit capable of generating broader societal benefit.

Maṣlaḥah Family reminds us that true moderation is only possible when it begins within the family—through the cultivation of justice, compassion, and

benefit. These two concepts are not meant to replace one another, but rather to complement and expand each other: moderation builds inclusive social spaces, while *maṣlaḥah* families nurture the individuals capable of bringing them to life. To ensure the sustainability of this movement, all elements must work in harmony: PBNU and GKMNU must maintain cohesion and a consistent vision; NU autonomy bodies (banom) and government officials at both central and regional levels must support the dissemination of this idea; and the grassroots of Nahdliyyin, especially NU women, must remain at the forefront of grounding religious moderation and *maṣlaḥah* families as integral parts of the long journey toward a just, prosperous, and maslahat society.

Conclusion

The contestation of Islamic discourse in urban cities like Depok shows that urban Islam is not a sterile space for ideological and identity struggles. On the contrary, it is a dynamic dialectical field, where various actors compete for space and legitimacy in shaping the way people understand, live and express their Islam. In Depok, religious-political forces such as the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) have successfully built a highly structured Islamic ecosystem—encompassing education, digital *da'wah*, public policy, and social services. However, this narrative is not the only view and understanding of Islam in Depok.

To counter the political and social hegemony of PKS, NU women's movement emerges as a counterforce that does not operate through formal political channels, but at the symbolic, cultural, and social levels. Through networks of religious study groups (*pengajian*), family education, and value-based advocacy, NU women develop an alternative ecosystem grounded in community ethics that promotes an inclusive, contextual, and justice-oriented interpretation of Islam. This movement is not merely reactive to the rise of conservatism, but proactive in constructing a healthy and civilized social structure.

These activities reflect not only grassroots empowerment but also a concrete embodiment of the Islamic principle of *maṣlaḥah*, an ethical framework that prioritizes social benefit and harm prevention. In this context,

Putnam's theory of social capital is highly relevant. It helps us understand how NU women's community networks serve as a crucial social resource. The strength of these networks fosters solidarity and collective action in addressing urban challenges such as rising intolerance and family disintegration. They operationalize Islamic law within the contemporary urban setting through pedagogy and advocacy.

The concepts of religious moderation and *maṣlaḥah* family championed by NU became the two main pillars of this ethical resistance. Both originate from the classical Islamic scholarly tradition, yet they are reinterpreted to address the challenges of contemporary urban society—such as increasing intolerance, gender-based violence, and the crisis of family institutions. The form of moderation advanced by NU women is not a neutral stance between extremes, but a firm theological and practical position: rejecting symbolic violence committed in the name of religion, embracing pluralism, and fostering social solidarity. Likewise, the idea of *maṣlaḥah* family is not merely a domestic moral narrative, but also a social strategy aimed at building a family structure capable of serving as the foundation for broader societal transformation.

This research makes a significant academic contribution by exploring how the concepts of *maṣlaḥah* family and religious moderation are realized in urban society. We consider these concepts not as rigid religious theories, but as living ideas that are gendered and ethically driven. Positioning NU women as ethical agents highlights their morally engaged capacity to read and act in intricate power dynamics. They navigate tradition and modernity along dynamically reinterpretive Islamic moral principles, where they center on *maṣlaḥah*, which they reinvent with reference to concerns of the contemporary agenda, such as gender justice and social inclusion. Nancy Fraser's counterpublics theory helps us outline how NU women's organizations create counter-discursive spaces that threaten hegemonic dominance, independent of formal political channels.

Furthermore, this theoretical extension reinforces the argument that true moderation is not merely a bureaucratic project of the state, but is born out of living social relations—relations that are nurtured, sustained, and defended by social actors with the moral courage to challenge dominant narratives. NU

women in Depok demonstrate that value-based social work can be an effective means of preserving diversity, building community resilience, and restoring religion's role as a healing and transformative force in society.

In an increasingly competitive and often exclusive urban Islamic landscape, the work of NU women in Depok offers an important lesson: that meaningful and moral Islam does not always originate from the centers of power, but instead grows from the grassroots—from those who work quietly, with perseverance and love, to nurture communal life. This is grassroots moderation as ethical resistance—not to dominate space, but to reopen it for all.[w]

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