



Bu Nyai's Multidimensional Leadership Model in Strengthening Islamic Education in Islamic Boarding Schools

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze Bu Nyai's multidimensional leadership model in strengthening Islamic education in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), specifically how the spiritual, social, managerial, and pedagogical dimensions are implemented simultaneously to shape the quality of student development and institutional governance. This research used a qualitative approach with a case study in a *pesantren*, involving key informants: caretakers, administrators, students, and guardians. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the Supervisors, Administrators, and alumni, as well as participant observation, documentation, and a thematic coding process to ensure the validity of the findings. The results indicate that Bu Nyai's leadership model is multidimensional, integrating spirituality with structured management. This is manifested through a pattern of senior student cadre development, the implementation of gender-sensitive leadership that empowers female students, strengthening environmental awareness, and strategic regional collaboration. This model has proven vital in ensuring the strengthening of the quality and sustainability of female Islamic education at Darussalam Islamic Boarding School. This research contributes to formulating the Bu Nyai Multidimensional Leadership Model that integrates spirituality and structural management in the context of female Islamic boarding schools, and has proven vital in cadre formation, empowerment of female students through the Gender-Sensitive Leadership approach, strengthening environmental awareness, and developing regional collaboration to ensure the quality and sustainability of Islamic education for women.

INTRODUCTION

A fundamental shift has occurred in the social role of Bu Nyai in Islamic boarding schools, moving from a passive role as a companion (*badirah*) to an active institutional leader in managing the institution. This change is driven by the complexity of contemporary educational demands that require structured leadership, particularly in curriculum development and the management of female students. The increasing formal educational background of Bu Nyai,

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many of whom hold bachelor's or master's degrees, has strengthened their managerial legitimacy (Bunnag, 2025; Chiu, 2025; Sangwa, 2025). Consequently, in many Islamic boarding schools, Bu Nyai now hold formal positions such as Director of the Girls' Madrasah or Chair of the Foundation, which are clearly stated in the organizational structure. This transformation underscores the institutionalization of women's roles within the leadership structure of Islamic boarding schools, making them key actors in administration and education.

Bu Nyai's leadership has resulted in significant increases in autonomy and specialization in educational management specifically for female students (Hemay et al., 2025; Imaniyati et al., 2024; Cardozo & Srimulyani, 2021). This autonomy is necessary because the curriculum and tarbiyah methods must be adapted to be relevant to the unique social challenges facing women in the modern era, including issues of equality and job literacy. While the Kyai focuses on religious affairs and male students, Bu Nyai leads the development of a special curriculum that emphasizes mastery of Islamic jurisprudence texts on women (*nisa*) and incorporates the study of contemporary issues. This fact confirms that Bu Nyai carries out a complex, multidimensional role, not only as a spiritual authority (*ustadzah*) but also as an adaptive curriculum development manager, ensuring that female graduates are prepared to face the challenges of the times without abandoning tradition.

The Bu Nyai performs a crucial function as a spiritual and psychosocial bridge, essential for the mental well-being and character of female students (Cui et al., 2023; Ofori & Mohangi, 2024). The need for an authority figure who can provide emotional support and in-depth personal guidance arises because female students, especially those far from their families, face various psychosocial challenges. Due to gender constraints and the Kyai's more distant formal role, the Bu Nyai naturally becomes both a mother figure and a spiritual authority in whom the students feel secure. Empirically, the Bu Nyai often holds informal counseling sessions to discuss personal issues, bullying, or sensitive fiqh issues (Wang, 2023). This humanistic and emotional role is vital in creating a supportive learning environment, which in turn provides a strong foundation for strengthening the students' Islamic character and spirituality.

Through Bu Nyai's leadership, the Islamic boarding school strategically promotes economic independence and financial literacy among female students. Awareness of the demands of the post-Islamic boarding school job market prompted Bu Nyai to initiate small business units managed entirely by female students. These practical skills are taught through hands-on practice in the Female Cooperative or catering/craft business units, where students learn not only management but also Islamic work ethics (Rasaq & Odinko, 2024). Thus, Bu Nyai integrates the spirituality of hard work (*muamalah*) with practical management. Profits from these business units are often reallocated to fund student activities or scholarships, signifying a strong entrepreneurial dimension to Bu Nyai's leadership, which simultaneously empowers female students and strengthens the Islamic boarding school's resources.

Overall, Bu Nyai act as change agents, leading the modernization of Islamic education, particularly in terms of technology adoption and curriculum adjustments. Their higher education backgrounds and direct involvement in daily affairs make Bu Nyai more sensitive to the digital divide and the need for contemporary curricula (such as intensive foreign language courses or computer training) to keep graduates competitive (Abitolkha et al., 2025; Rasaq & Odinko, 2024; Shih, 2024). In fact, many innovative programs, such as the digital academic information system or the certified tahfidz program

specifically for girls, are initiated and directly supervised by Bu Nyai. This role ensures that Islamic boarding schools not only maintain traditions but also proactively and intelligently adapt to changing times, placing Bu Nyai at the center of the ongoing strengthening of Islamic education.

The literature on the role of women in Islamic education has undergone significant development, with numerous studies highlighting the transformation of the role of Bu Nyai from a supportive presence to a strategic institutional leader (Kloos & Ismah, 2023; Nurhasanah & Van den Broeck, 2022; Shih, 2024). The existing literature demonstrates that Bu Nyai leadership is multidimensional, encompassing spiritual aspects (*tarbiyah*), educational management (female student curriculum autonomy), and economic empowerment (female student entrepreneurship). They act as agents bridging the traditions of Islamic scholarship with the demands of curriculum modernization, including technology adoption and life skills development. However, the literature still requires a more detailed conceptual model of how Bu Nyai integrate their charismatic spiritual authority with formal institutional management practices to directly strengthen the quality and sustainability of female student education.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to formulate a multidimensional Bu Nyai Leadership Model as a solution to strengthen Islamic education. Often, their role is underestimated only in the domestic aspect, even though Bu Nyai are key agents bridging the spirituality, management, and empowerment of female students. This research is crucial to fill the literature gap by providing a systematic framework on how Bu Nyai's spiritual authority is integrated with modern management to ensure the sustainability and relevance of Islamic education. Therefore, this study aims to analyze Bu Nyai's Multidimensional Leadership in Institutional Governance of Islamic Boarding Schools, specifically how the spiritual, social, managerial, and pedagogical dimensions are implemented simultaneously to shape the quality of student development and institutional governance.

METHODS

This research was conducted at the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School in Blokagung, Banyuwangi. This location was chosen purposively because the Islamic boarding school is known for its advanced female education system and is actively led by Bu Nyai, who plays a prominent role in the institution's development. This location selection was crucial for an in-depth observation of the multidimensional leadership model that is the main focus. The approach used was qualitative; this method was chosen because the research aims to understand the meaning, role, process, and interactions underlying Bu Nyai's leadership, which involves spirituality, psychosocial, and managerial aspects (Fatmawati et al., 2023; Kloos & Ismah, 2023). The qualitative approach allows researchers to obtain rich, in-depth, and descriptive data from the perspectives of informants.

The research method used is a case study. This study was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of Bu Nyai's leadership phenomenon within the specific context of the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School. The researcher will comprehensively explore how Bu Nyai integrates various dimensions of leadership as a spiritual educator (*tarbiyah*), curriculum manager, and entrepreneurial leader (Fadillah, 2022; Hidayat et al., 2025). This case study aims to provide a holistic picture of Bu Nyai's effective leadership mechanisms, the challenges faced in strengthening girls' education, and how this leadership is institutionalized within the Islamic boarding school structure.

Data collection will be conducted through three main techniques: In-depth Interviews, Participant Observation, and Document Analysis (Azad et al., 2021; Deterding & Waters, 2021; Eltoukhi et al., 2025; Engkizar et al., 2025; 2026; Jaafar et al., 2025; Opara et al., 2023; Thuwaiba & Salaeh, 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2025). In-depth interviews will be conducted with key informants such as the main Nyai, Kyai/Caregiver, the Head of the Female Madrasah, the female administrators, and senior students to explore their perspectives on leadership roles. Participatory observation will be conducted to directly observe the Nyai's activities in *tarbiyah* assemblies, management meetings, and student counseling. Meanwhile, document analysis includes an examination of the female Islamic boarding school curriculum, organizational guidebooks, and reports on female students' soft skills development programs.

The data analysis technique used follows the interactive model of (Huberman, 2014), which includes three continuous flow activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Karin & Abner, 2022; Monaro et al., 2022). The collected data will be reduced by focusing on patterns and themes related to Bu Nyai's leadership dimensions (spiritual, managerial, and psychosocial). The reduced data will then be presented in the form of a descriptive narrative and role matrix to facilitate understanding. Finally, conclusions will be drawn based on emerging themes and verified through cross-checking with field data to ensure the validity of the interpretation.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study will employ several techniques. First, Source Triangulation, which compares information regarding the role of Bu Nyai from various informants (e.g., Kyai, administrators, and students) to achieve consistency (Depari, 2022; Larassati et al., 2025). Second, Technical Triangulation, which compares data obtained through interviews, observations, and documents. Third, Prolonged Engagement, which ensures researchers spend sufficient time on-site to build trust and gain a deep understanding of leadership dynamics. Fourth, Peer Debriefing to obtain critical feedback on data interpretation and research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Bu Nyai's Leadership in Strengthening Environmental Awareness

Bu Nyai at the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School plays a key role in integrating environmental awareness as an integral part of the Islamic character education (*tarbiyah*) curriculum for female students. Bu Nyai leads the "Green Islamic Boarding School" movement by using her spiritual and managerial authority to establish binding internal policies, such as reducing plastic waste through the provision of refillable drinking water in dormitories, and initiating a waste bank managed by female students. These policies are based on Islamic teachings on cleanliness (*thaharah*) and the obligation to protect nature (*hifzhu'l bi'ah*), which are presented in special religious studies. Therefore, Bu Nyai's leadership has successfully transformed environmental issues from merely physical programs into internalized spiritual values (Cheronoh, 2024; Miao & Nduneseokwu, 2024; Sukatin et al., 2023), ensuring that cleanliness and waste management practices become the students' daily moral responsibility, not just incidental activities. The following is a statement from informant.

"Since Mrs. Nyai Masruroh Syafa'at emphasized the cleanliness rules, all the students have followed them more consciously. They obey not only because of the rules, but also because they feel that protecting the environment is part of their worship. Mrs. Nyai always sets a direct example, so we all feel obligated to follow suit" (informant 1)

The above explanation shows that Mrs. Nyai Masruroh Syafa'at's leadership has a very strong influence in shaping the behavior and environmental awareness of students. Mrs. Nyai's firmness in establishing cleanliness rules is not only accepted as formal instructions but also understood as moral and spiritual teachings. This is evident in the way students interpret compliance not merely as an administrative obligation, but as a form of worship and religious responsibility Mrs. Nyai's exemplary behavior, which always provides direct examples, strengthens the acceptance of these rules, because students feel they need to imitate their leader's behavior as a form of respect and obedience (Husniah, 2022; Lukens-Bull, 2005; Rusmana et al., 2024). Thus, the change in students' attitudes towards cleanliness is not only structural but also internal, formed from a combination of moral authority and exemplary practices demonstrated by Mrs. Nyai.

The Senior Santri Development Pattern as a Regeneration of Islamic Boarding School Leadership

Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Blokagung implements a structured leadership regeneration model through the Senior Santri (SS) system, known as the Tiered Cadre Model. Senior santri are delegated extensive managerial authority from managing security and dormitory cleanliness to serving as teaching assistants (young *ustadz/ustadzah*) for junior santri. This multidimensional model provides them not only with spiritual guidance (intensive *mujahadah* and *riyadhah*) but also with training in conflict management, public speaking, and organizational governance (modern management) (Ikhwan et al., 2025). This process ensures that future leaders possess not only spiritual depth (*tarbiyah*), but also the practical managerial and leadership competencies needed to maintain the sustainability and professionalism of Islamic boarding schools (Husniah, 2022; Karwadi et al., 2025; Rodliyah et al., 2024). The following table shows the roles of senior santri.

Table 1. Social Role of Senior Students in the Islamic Boarding School Hierarchy

No	Aspect	Description	Social Implications
1	Social Status of Students Social Seniority	Senior students are considered to be authoritative figures in guiding, supervising, and being role models for junior students	Their existence is accepted as part of the social hierarchical structure of the Islamic boarding school
2	Basic Authority	Senior students have more experience, broader knowledge, and a deeper understanding of Islamic boarding school culture	They are socially positioned as figures worthy of guidance and role models
3	Relationship with Junior Students	Junior students follow the direction of seniors in discipline, manners, and routine Islamic boarding school activities	Senior positions are recognized and respected, creating natural obedience

The table above demonstrates that senior students hold a strategic position within the social structure of Islamic boarding schools. Firstly, the position of senior students is not merely administrative but rooted in the social

legitimacy granted by the Islamic boarding school community. They are considered to have the authority to guide, supervise, and serve as role models for junior students, thus naturally integrating into the social hierarchy of the Islamic boarding school. Secondly, the basis for this authority is clarified: extensive experience, in-depth knowledge, and a strong understanding of Islamic boarding school culture. This social and cultural capital qualifies them for the role of guidance and mentoring, which is accepted without resistance by the Islamic boarding school community (Rohman et al., 2025; Wahono et al., 2023). Thirdly, the relationship between senior and junior students demonstrates a pattern of interaction that reflects respect and obedience. Junior students follow their seniors' directions regarding discipline, etiquette, and routine activities as a form of recognition of their seniors' position. This obedience is not forced, but rather grows naturally due to social acceptance of the authority of senior students. Overall, this table shows that the role and authority of senior students are crucial elements in maintaining order, culture, and the continuity of Islamic boarding school values.

Empowerment of Female Islamic Students Based on Gender-Sensitive Leadership

Bu Nyai's leadership at Darussalam Blokagung consciously implements a Gender-Sensitive Leadership Model in empowering female students. This model is evident in granting female student full autonomy to manage internal organizations (Al-Mamary & Alshallaqi, 2022; Puaca, 2021; Wang & Hu, 2022) (OSPI, female security coordinator) and women-only business units, ensuring they gain hands-on experience in decision-making and leadership. This empowerment is based on the understanding that women have specific development needs, so the *tarbiyah* program not only teaches women Islamic jurisprudence but also conflict management and public speaking in a safe, closed forum. As a result, female students have leadership capacity equal to that of male students within their internal sphere, proving that Bu Nyai's leadership successfully balances Islamic tradition with the principle of equal roles in leadership skill development.

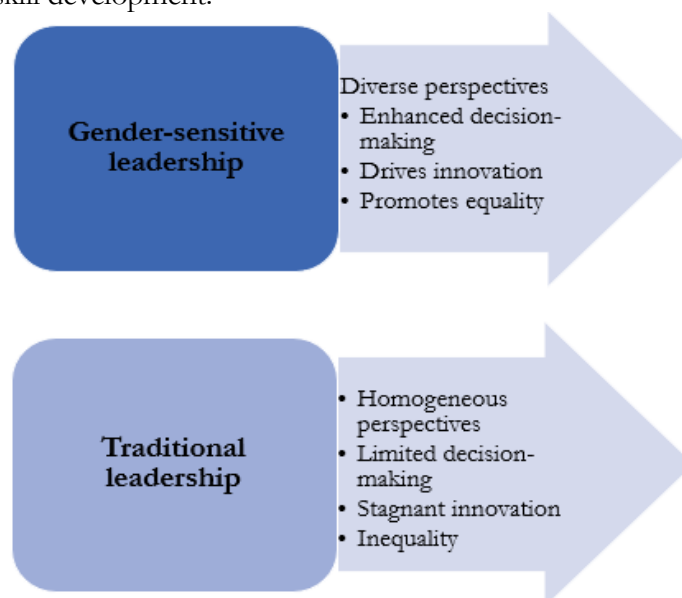


Fig 1. Gender-Sensitive Leadership Strategy

The figure above highlights four key strategies for implementing gender-sensitive leadership in Islamic boarding schools: outreach and education, involvement of religious leaders, resource acquisition, and program development. Outreach and education are conducted to increase the understanding of the importance of gender equality among all Islamic boarding

school residents (Altinyelken, 2022; Puaca, 2021; Wang & Hu, 2022). The involvement of religious leaders is key because they possess moral legitimacy and can strengthen community acceptance of the implementation of gender-sensitive leadership. Seeking resources from the government, non-governmental organizations, and donors is necessary to support the program's sustainability. Meanwhile, program development is directed at activities relevant to the needs of students, especially female students, and appropriate to the Islamic boarding school context. Overall, these four elements complement each other and demonstrate that implementing gender-sensitive leadership requires a collaborative, comprehensive, and sustainable approach.

Strengthening Regional Collaboration (Networking) for Benchmarking

The Bu Nyai leadership at the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School proactively builds a regional collaboration network as an external managerial strategy to improve educational quality. Bu Nyai leads the Regional Bu Nyai Meeting initiative, which aims to benchmark and share best practices in managing female Islamic boarding schools (Mubarok, 2021; Prasajo et al., 2025; Widianingsih et al., 2023). Its primary focus is on finding effective dormitory management models, addressing student health issues, and developing relevant curricula. This strategy demonstrates that the Bu Nyai utilize their managerial expertise and diplomatic authority to continuously seek innovation and strengthen the quality of female education (Hemay et al., 2025), making them key agents in the collective strengthening of Islamic education in the region.

"We focused on benchmarking, based on the initiative of Mrs. Nyai Masruroh Syafa'at. We sent a team to observe the innovative Islamic boarding school's educational system and administration firsthand. Mrs. Nyai acted as an educational diplomat; she used her network to ensure we consistently adopted best management practices from abroad for implementation here" (informant 2)

This statement emphasizes the external managerial dimension of Bu Nyai's Multidimensional Leadership. The statement that Bu Nyai Masruroh Syafa'at acts as an "educational diplomat" interprets that she uses her spiritual authority and regional network (social capital) for strategic management purposes, namely benchmarking initiatives. Sending a team to directly observe the *tarbiyah* system and administration of innovative Islamic boarding schools demonstrates a strong commitment to continuous quality improvement (Mahsusi et al., 2024; Sudir et al., 2025). This practice ensures that Islamic education in Islamic boarding schools not only maintains tradition but also proactively adopts best management practices from outside. Thus, Bu Nyai's leadership successfully ensures institutional relevance and competitiveness at the regional level through intelligent and structured collaboration strategies.

Furthermore, this communal gathering activity emphasizes Bu Nyai's role in creating psychosocial bonds and brotherhood among the students, which are the foundation of strong spirituality and *tarbiyah* (education) (Makmun & Huda, 2023; Shafie, 2024). The presence of a large number of female students in uniform demonstrates discipline and organized governance, proving that Bu Nyai's leadership successfully integrates socio-emotional aspects with managerial efficiency to strengthen female education.

CONCLUSION

Bu Nyai's Multidimensional Leadership in Institutional Governance of Islamic Boarding Schools comprehensively. This leadership model has proven effective and transformative, not only focusing on the spiritual dimension (*tarbiyah*) but also integrating managerial, psychosocial, and networking aspects. Bu Nyai has succeeded in becoming an agent of change by leading the Gender-

Sensitive Leadership initiative (empowering female students), managing leadership regeneration through a structured Senior Student Development Pattern, and implementing Environmental Awareness based on the value of *thaharah*. In addition, Bu Nyai is active in Regional Collaboration (benchmarking) to ensure that female education remains relevant and innovative. This multidimensional integration ensures the strengthening of the quality of Islamic education and the sustainability of the institution holistically. A limitation of this research is its single-case study of the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School, which may limit the generalizability of Bu Nyai's leadership model to other Islamic boarding schools with different traditions. Furthermore, time constraints limit the observation of the long-term impact of leadership. Therefore, it is recommended that future research conduct a multi-site comparative study to test the external validity of this multidimensional model. Longitudinal research is also important to capture the evolution and ongoing impact of Bu Nyai's leadership on the quality of girls' education over a longer period.

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