



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Religion-Based Gender Mainstreaming and Cultural-Political Transformation: A Study of Nyai Aqidah Usymuni's Leadership in Sumenep

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Abstract

Gender mainstreaming in Indonesia, especially in rural areas, still faces serious challenges due to the dominance of patriarchal norms that limit women's access to education, health, and economic opportunities. This condition reinforces gender inequality and hinders women's welfare. This study aims to analyze the role of Nyai Aqidah Usymuni in gender mainstreaming in Sumenep, East Java, highlighting the significance of female actors in Islamic boarding schools in promoting religious-based social transformation. The study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through interviews, non-participatory observation, and document analysis. Findings show that Nyai Aqidah implements religion-based gender mainstreaming that operates in the cultural and political spheres, supported by an intersectional and institutional approach. Through Pesantren education, reinterpretation of gender-equitable Islamic teachings, and advocacy for women's protection, she is able to challenge patriarchal structures in a contextual manner. However, this study is limited to a single case study and has not measured the long-term impact on public policy changes and gender equality indicators quantitatively.

Keywords: Gender Mainstreaming, Nyai Aqidah Usymuni, Pesantren

Abstrak

Pengarusutamaan gender di Indonesia, khususnya di wilayah pedesaan, masih menghadapi tantangan serius akibat dominasi norma patriarkis yang membatasi akses perempuan terhadap pendidikan, kesehatan, dan kesempatan ekonomi. Kondisi ini memperkuat ketimpangan gender dan menghambat kesejahteraan perempuan. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis peran Nyai Aqidah Usymuni dalam pengarusutamaan gender di Sumenep, Jawa Timur, dengan menyoroti signifikansi aktor perempuan pesantren dalam mendorong transformasi sosial berbasis keagamaan. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi nonpartisipatif, serta analisis dokumen. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Nyai Aqidah menerapkan pengarusutamaan gender berbasis keagamaan yang beroperasi dalam ranah kultural dan politik, didukung oleh pendekatan interseksional dan kelembagaan. Melalui pendidikan pesantren, reinterpretasi ajaran Islam yang adil gender, serta advokasi perlindungan perempuan, ia mampu menantang struktur patriarki secara kontekstual. Namun, penelitian ini terbatas pada satu studi kasus dan belum mengukur dampak jangka panjang terhadap perubahan kebijakan publik dan indikator kesetaraan gender secara kuantitatif.

Kata kunci: Pengarusutamaan gender, Nyai Aqidah Usymuni, Pesantren

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Introduction

Gender mainstreaming (GM) in Indonesia faces challenges, especially in rural areas, due to patriarchal norms that hinder equality. Women often experience limitations in education, health, and employment, which exacerbate gender inequality and welfare (White et al., 2023). In addition, traditional roles limit women's potential in economic and social aspects (Khasanah, 2022; Saifullah et al., 2019), while social and economic pressures increase the risk of stress (Saifullah et al., 2019). Therefore, an approach that includes access to resources and mental health is required to effectively address these challenges (Allen et al., 2022).

Gender mainstreaming aims to create an environment that gives women equal access to education, health, and employment while empowering them as agents of change. Gender equality policies must be effectively implemented by involving women in decision-making (Mahsun et al., 2021) so that they can contribute to family development and welfare. Public awareness must also be raised through gender-based inclusive education to change perceptions and support equality (Purwanti et al., 2023). With a comprehensive approach, a more just and equal society can be created (Maesaroh et al., 2022).

In the 2023 Performance Report of the Government Agency (LKjIP) of the Social Service, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection Agency of Sumenep Regency, it was reported that the Sumenep Social Service faced challenges in mainstreaming gender due to suboptimal institutions, low gender-responsive planning, and the prevalence of violence against women and children. To overcome this, institutional strengthening, capacity building, and integration of a gender perspective into policies are required (Social Service, 2023). Many studies have been conducted on gender mainstreaming in Indonesia; however, most of them have focused on macro issues and national policies without considering the specific dynamics at the local level (Mahsun et al., 2021; White et al., 2023). Therefore, the role of local figures such as *Nyai* Aqidah Usymuni is important in promoting gender mainstreaming and overcoming the various obstacles faced by women in Sumenep (Junaidi et al., 2023; Purwanti et al., 2023).

Nyai Aqidah Usymuni's role represents a local female actor who has cultural and religious authority in the social structure of Sumenep society, enabling her to bridge the gender mainstreaming agenda with living religious values at the community level. In the context of Islamic boarding school communities, which are still dominated by male religious authority, the existence of *Nyai* Aqidah Usymuni shows how female leadership based on traditional legitimacy and religious charisma can function as an effective

agent of social change, particularly in responding to structural, cultural, and symbolic barriers that limit women's participation and access to their rights.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring *Nyai* Aqidah Usymuni's role in gender mainstreaming in Sumenep and her potential as a model for improving gender equality in other regions (Junaidi et al. 2023). Thus, this study not only provides new insights but also offers concrete recommendations for more effective policies and programs to support women in rural areas. This study is relevant to enriching the literature on gender and Islam by presenting the perspective of local actors (local agency), while filling the void in studies that have so far emphasized formal policies or state actors, by placing the figure of *Nyai* as a strategic subject in community-based social transformation and local contexts.

Literature Review

Gender Mainstreaming on a Religious Basis

The concept of gender equality in Islam remains debated among academics. Some argue that Islam supports gender equality, while others argue that the principle of justice in Islam differs from the concept of gender equality in the West (Mutawakkil, 2014; Fuad, 2011; Abdullah, 2009; Mutawakkil, 2014). The Qur'an and Hadith emphasize that men and women have the same position as servants of Allah and leaders on earth and are not differentiated in terms of faith, piety, and reward in the hereafter (Suhra, 2013; Fuad, 2011).

Islam also recognizes differences in roles based on the natural tendencies of each gender (Fuad, 2011; Mutawakkil, 2014). The implementation of this principle in Islamic law has brought about changes in legal interpretation, especially in gender relations and women's roles in the professional sphere, such as judges (Suhra 2013). Overall, Islam seeks to balance patriarchal and matriarchal cultures so that men and women can perform their roles harmoniously (Mutawakkil, 2014).

Religion-based gender mainstreaming is an approach that places religion as a key arena in efforts to achieve gender equality by integrating a gender perspective into religious values, norms, and practices. This approach operates primarily in the cultural and political spheres because religion has a strong social legitimizing function in shaping gender relations and influencing public policies. Several studies have shown a correlation between religiosity and gender equality, where certain religious teachings and practices tend to maintain traditional gender roles and shape regulations related to family, sexuality, and reproduction (Klingorová & Havlíček, 2015; Schnabel, 2016; Yeganeh, 2022). In this context, religion-based gender mainstreaming directly confronts power relations, especially when conservative religious authorities reject feminism and human rights agendas (Razavi & Jenichen, 2017).

In contrast, religion-based gender mainstreaming emphasizes the transformative potential of religion through intersectional and institutional approaches. Gender inequality results from the interconnections between religion, culture, law, and social structures. Therefore, the strategies developed include a gender-fair reinterpretation of religious texts and the integration of a gender perspective into religious institutions and state policies (Maponya 2021; Solanki 2013). This approach has been implemented in various policy reforms in Southeast Asian Islamic countries and gender-responsive religious institutional practices (Ahmad et al., 2024; Husaeni et al., 2023). Despite facing cultural resistance and institutional limitations, this approach opens up space for dialogue and consensus as a prerequisite for achieving contextual and sustainable gender equality (Mihrete & Bayu, 2021; Theobald et al., 2005).

Authority, Typology, and Hierarchy of *Nyai* in Madura

Nyai, like *Kiai*, is a title of honour for women with high religious knowledge who have contributed to community development, not just a profession (Kuntowijoyo 2002). This title is given to women who contribute to da'wah, including the wives and daughters of *Kiai*. In Madurese society, *Nyai* are respected as role models because of their knowledge and vital role in social life (Jannah 2020). In Madura, *Kiyai* and *Nyai* act as pillars of culture in the concept of *bhuppa'-babbhu'-guru-rato*, which emphasizes a hierarchy of obedience to parents, teachers (*Kiyai* /*Nyai*), and the state. The community, especially in rural areas, considers *Kiyai* /*Nyai* not only as spiritual leaders but also as worldly leaders, often positioning them as representatives of God on earth (Hefni, 2007).

In terms of age, *Nyai* in Madura can be divided into two categories: *Seppo* (old) and *Ngodha* (young). In terms of typology, they can be divided into three categories: *Nyai Gunung*, *Nyai Songai*, and *Nyai Lèkè*. In terms of hierarchy, there are three levels: *Nyai Rajha*, *Nyai Tengnga*, and *Nyai Langgharan*. Each type of *Nyai* has its own authority over the community in its own environment. The highest authority lies with *Nyai Seppo-Rajha-Gunong* or *Songay*, and the lowest is *Nyai Ngodha-Lèkè-Langgharan* (Jannah, 2020). The independence and involvement of women in religious social activities do not automatically create gender equality. Although the role of *Nyai* as agents of gender socialization in Islamic boarding schools is significant, efforts to achieve gender justice and equality are still being pursued. *Nyai* in Indonesia are trying to improve the position of women through a religion-based approach, especially in Islamic boarding schools (Jannah, 2020).

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study to explore the role and contribution of *Nyai Aqidah Usymni* in gender mainstreaming (Cresswel, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Neuman, 2014; Yin, 2014). The subjects of this study were determined purposively, with *Nyai Aqidah* and the Islamic Boarding School Management, the Social Services Agency, and the community. Data collection was conducted through interviews with the research subjects, non-participatory observation, and analysis of documents such as central and regional government policies on PUG, data on the Islamic boarding school managed by *Nyai Aqidah*, and other documentation from print media and the Statistics Agency (Moleong, 2017; Yin, 2014). Data analysis used the Interactive Model (Miles et al., 2014). Data validity was checked using triangulation (Cresswell, 2013; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Neuman, 2014; Yin, 2014).

Result

Short Biography of Nyai Aqidah Usymuni

Nyai Aqidah Usymuni was born in 1938 in Pandian Village, Sumenep, as the youngest of four siblings. She came from a family of scholars, and her father, KH. Usymuni and her mother, *Nyai Hj. Makkiyah* were known as religious figures. Since childhood, she had been called "*Qida*" and had a close relationship with her father. Her mother's hope that her fourth child would be a boy did not come true, and when she was five years old, she lost her mother, and was raised directly by her father (Usymuni, 2024).

Her closeness to her father shaped her personality, making her an independent and resilient person. She always accompanied her father, even though she was female. Her older brother, As'ad, also instilled independence in her. Although she did not inherit land from her father, she was able to buy land and establish the *Aqidah Usymuni Islamic Boarding School*. With her persistence, she continued to develop the boarding school to benefit the community, especially underprivileged students (Usymuni, 2024).

In terms of education, she enrolled in PGAN (State Religious Teacher Education) but did not complete it because her father and stepmother wanted her to get married. Nevertheless, the community still recognized her knowledge of the subject. She also studied English at an intermediate level. After marrying Abu Shofyan and having a child, Dewi Khalifah, she continued to fulfill her roles as a boarding school leader, housewife, and preacher. She was also active in *Muslimat NU Sumenep*, continuing her grandmother *Nyai Hj. Zainah* (Kholifah, 2024).

Nyai Aqidah Usymuni was widely known among the Madurese community, especially in Sumenep, as a preacher who actively preached

outside of Java, even in Malaysia and Singapore, so that her Islamic boarding school received a lot of support. She prefers to preach rather than get involved in politics, even though her daughter, *Nyai Dewi Khalifah*, became the Deputy Regent of Sumenep for the 2020-2024 term. With determination, she remains focused on spreading religious knowledge through Islamic boarding schools and regular recitations, making her an inspirational figure in the world of education and preaching (Usymuni 2024).

Nyai Aqidah's Role in Gender Mainstreaming

Gender Mainstreaming Activist from Islamic Boarding School

Nyai Aqidah is a strong, leaderly, and resilient woman in Sumenep Regency. Her resilience and persistence have been ingrained since childhood. Since elementary school, she has always been a leader among her friends, not because of her own desire but because of the circumstances that shaped her. She is known as a figure who actively fights for her group and has a strong spirit of leadership. *Nyai Aqidah's* desire to empower women in Sumenep has been evident since childhood, one of which was her dream of establishing an Islamic boarding school. She believes that the measure of a Pesantren's success lies not only in the size of the institution but also in its quality.

Therefore, she established a Pesantren that provides free education at the *Tsanawiyah*, *Aliyah*, and *Tahfidzul Qur'an* levels so that students are not constrained by financial factors in pursuing their studies (Usymuni, 2024). This was also confirmed by her daughter Dewi Kholifah, also known as *Nyai Eva*. According to her, since childhood, her mother aspired to establish an Islamic boarding school to motivate women to play a role in education (Kholifah, 2024).

Nyai Aqidah's independence and determination as a woman were shaped since childhood by her family, especially by her brother, *Kiyai As'ad*, who was very influential in shaping her character and thoughts about gender in Sumenep Regency. Since childhood, her brother has taught her not to depend on others. One of the valuable lessons she learned was when her brother taught her to climb coconut trees, which was not only a physical skill but also a symbol of independence and resilience in their culture. Her brother reminds her that the world is cruel, and if one does not fight, one will lose and become a slave to those who are stronger. This lesson left a deep impression on *Nyai Aqidah*, shaping her into an intelligent, strong, and independent figure, and instilling in her the principle that women should not depend on anyone except Allah SWT (Usymuni 2024).

Her brother's motivation and valuable lessons were even analogized to the situation of Dutch colonialism, where ignorant people became servants to intelligent people. Therefore, according to *Nyai Aqidah*, women must be intelligent and independent so that they are not easily oppressed (Usymuni

2024). In addition to her brother, *Nyai Aqidah*'s husband is very supportive of her struggle. Her husband always encouraged her and even supported her in using the name "Aqidah Usmuni" as an example for her children, grandchildren, and the community, showing that women can also fight for their rights. In addition, she received full support from her father, Kiai Asmuni, who always instilled in her the principle that women should not remain silent and must play an active role in life (Kholifah, 2024).

Nyai Aqidah also instilled her independent character in all members of her family, especially the women. She always emphasized that women must be intelligent, strong, and independent so that they would not be easily oppressed or weakened by men. Her belief in elevating the status of women was based on Islamic teachings, particularly the hadith, which states that heaven is under the feet of mothers. She believed that women should not continue to live in the shadow of men but should have the freedom and independence to determine their own lives (Usymuni, 2024).

Her daughter, *Nyai Eva*, confirmed that her mother had aspired to establish an Islamic boarding school and help women since childhood. *Nyai Aqidah* was born around 1942 and grew up in an Islamic boarding school environment that was still heavily influenced by patriarchal culture. However, she did not allow this situation to limit her opportunities. Since childhood, she has believed that if men can be active, then women should also have the same opportunities in education and social life (Kholifah, 2024).

In the context of the household, *Nyai Aqidah* has a wise perspective. She emphasized that women should not directly oppose their husbands but should prioritize compromise to create a family that is *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah*. She understood that men tend to want to win, so women must be wise in dealing with various household situations. According to her, intelligent women are those who can yield to win and create harmony in the family (Usymuni, 2024). With these principles, *Nyai Aqidah* has not only become a pioneer in empowering women in Sumenep but also a role model in building a harmonious and loving family.

Mentor and Defender of Women

Nyai Aqidah is a figure who cares deeply about women. This concern is a character trait instilled in her by her father, mentored by her brother, Kiai As'ad, and fully supported by her husband, Kiai Asmuni. "*My father wanted to advance women. Kiai Asmuni said that women should not remain silent*" (Usymuni, 2024). In guiding women, *Nyai Aqidah* engages in various activities, both in the community and at her boarding school. She is also active in guiding communities in villages, with some even accompanied by their parents.

"Their parents bring their children here, *Nyai*, to attend your religious lectures. If they do not, then when they are under my

guidance, by classifying themselves as Aqidah, those children will become smart because they will increase their *al-ilmu Nurun*, knowledge that is light. Knowledge is power. Knowledge is strength”(Usymuni, 2024)

Nyai Aqidah's determination to advance women is very strong. She instills the courage to appear and fight like a man, especially in her family, particularly her daughter, *Nyai* Eva.

“She even said that you must be brave and fight just like men because women are actually the same, only their gender is different. That is what my mother told me since I was little: I must not be afraid, and I must be smart and capable. If men can do it, so can you. That's what my mother told me at that time”(Kholifah, 2024)

The guidance provided by *Nyai* Aqidah was not only in religious and social aspects but also in the political realm, even though she herself did not directly participate in politics.

“In politics, I do not want to get involved in politics, but I can serve politics. I don't want to get involved in politics, for example, joining a party, because politics requires a home, and I don't want to be confined to a home” (Usymuni, 2024)

However, even though she was not directly involved, her political guidance bore fruit, one of which was the emergence of *Nyai* Eva as the elected Deputy Regent for the 2020-2024 term. *Nyai* Aqidah's stance of not getting involved in practical politics is motivated by her desire to be a unifier of the people.

“I just give guidance. For example, if a group approaches me with a request, I provide a solution. Therefore, I do not want to get involved with any group because we are Muslims. Therefore, I must be a unifier. If someone is weak, I advise them not to be trampled on. Right? After being colonized by the Dutch, do we want to be colonized by our people? That would be ridiculous, right?” (Usymuni, 2024)

In addition to mentoring women, *Nyai* Aqidah is active in defending and assisting women in the legal sphere. Together with her daughter, *Nyai* Eva, she founded the PUAN Amal Hayati Sumenep Women's Crisis Center, which collaborates with *Nyai* Sinta Nuria, the wife of Gus Dur.

“Mrs. Nuria has visited here twice to meet the women. There used to be many poor women there, but they are no longer so. We do have a partnership with PUAN Amal Hayati, which is owned by Mrs. Sinta Nuria Abdurrahman Wahid, for an institution that protects women victims of domestic violence and children.

Therefore, we have provided a lot of assistance, including collaborating with partners such as the regional general hospital, police, district court, and religious court. So, in essence, we also provide information to the community on how to build a harmonious, loving, and peaceful family without violence” (Usymuni, 2024)

One of the cases handled during the launch of the Wiraraja University Restorative Justice House was the mediation of a domestic issue, including a complaint from a wife regarding *bujha cabbi* (salt and chili) consumption. The Women Crisis Center PUAN Amal Hayati Sumenep, owned by the Aqidah Usymuni Islamic Boarding School, has become one of the institutions working for the protection of women. In addition, several other organizations in Sumenep have a similar mission of supporting and protecting women's rights (Wiraraja, 2022).

Nyai Aqidah's Contribution to Gender Mainstreaming Educating Women Formally and Informally

Nyai Aqidah educated women in two ways: formally and informally. She chose formal education for young people, while for the community, she was more active in the informal sphere through religious lectures and sermons. She even held free religious lectures and travelled from one place to another, although she avoided traveling to islands because of her fear of the sea. In the city, she was active as the chairwoman of Muslimat, following in the footsteps of her grandmother, *Nyai Hajah Zainah*, who was the founder of Muslimat and played a major role in the establishment of Nahdlatul Ulama together with *Kiyai Haji Abi Sujak*.

Her daughter *Nyai Eva* confirmed that her mother regularly held religious lectures, socialized, and helped the poor, especially widows. This habit was instilled in all her children and grandchildren as well. *Nyai Aqidah* was known as a figure who was very close to the community, always trying to be present in their lives, and happy to share her blessings. A similar sentiment was expressed by A. Waris, a community leader in Batu Putih Sumenep, who stated that *Nyai Aqidah* often held religious lectures with her Islamic boarding school alumni. In addition, Susmiyati, a member of the hajj association founded by *Nyai Aqidah*, said that she actively held meetings from house to house.

In addition to fostering the community informally, *Nyai Aqidah* also educated women formally through the educational institution she founded. She had dreamed of establishing an Islamic boarding school since childhood and had even told her father about it. In 1986, she founded the Aqidah Usymuni Islamic Boarding School. Unlike most Islamic boarding schools named after Kiai, this one is named after its founder, a woman. This decision

was fully supported by her husband, who wanted to show that women can also fight and be role models in the community.

In managing her boarding school, *Nyai Aqidah* always strives to ensure that the cost of education is not a burden for her students. Education at the *Tsanawiyah*, *Aliyah*, and *Tahfidzul Qur'an* levels is free. The boarding school's operational costs are largely covered by donors from various regions, including abroad. Her generosity attracted the attention of the police, who questioned the source of the boarding school's funds. However, she confidently replied that her sustenance came from Allah and her prayers alone.

In addition to providing free education, *Nyai Aqidah* also paid close attention to women's education. She provides scholarships for women who want to continue their education at the undergraduate and graduate levels. She created a special scholarship for husbands and wives so that women could still receive an education equal to that of men. This is based on the cultural conditions in Sumenep and Madura, where education is often prioritized for men over women. *Nyai Aqidah*'s family is committed to maintaining a boarding school education system that does not burden the community with high costs. *Nyai Aqidah*'s main goal is to empower women so that they are not colonized or belittled by men. She believes that women should have a high position, as explained in the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, which states that heaven is under the feet of mothers. Therefore, she fights so that women are not constantly overshadowed by men.

At her Pesantren, female students learn special skills such as sewing and cooking to prepare them for independent living. She even personally teaches the students these skills, including catering and doll-making. For *Nyai Aqidah*, education and skills must go hand in hand so that women are not only intellectually intelligent but also independent. In addition to teaching, she continues to develop herself, especially in the fields of science and social studies, to provide the best for her students and the community.

Driving the Community Economy

Nyai Aqidah was born into a well-off family. Since childhood, she has enjoyed better economic conditions than other children. Even though times were still difficult back then, she was considered to be economically well-off.

"It was still a time of poverty. I was born in 1944, so I still experienced a time when many people had no money, even to buy clothes for their children. However, my family was quite well-off. When other children were walking, I was already able to buy my own bicycle" (Usymuni, 2024)

Even though she came from a fairly well-off family, that did not make *Nyai Aqidah* relax without making an effort. Her entrepreneurial spirit had been evident since childhood. She was accustomed to using natural resources as a source of income.

"My father often went on pilgrimages until morning and led prayers at the old Islamic boarding school mosque. After reciting the Quran with my father, my friends and I would go to the forest in *Babbalan* to search for quail eggs. The forest was still wild, and tigers were present. However, I took advantage of this to collect the eggs laid in the grass. We would then cook the eggs and sell them at the *Lenteng* market. That is where I got my money. I even rode on a cattle truck to sell the eggs" (Usymuni, 2024)

Discipline and sacrifice were the hallmarks of *Nyai Aqidah* Usymuni, which she instilled in her children and grandchildren. "My mother was disciplined and hardworking, just like my father. They worked and studied almost 24 hours a day. I feel the same way now" (Kholifah, 2024). *Nyai Aqidah* also emphasized the importance of sacrifice in achieving one's goals. "If you want to achieve something, you have to make sacrifices. If you are not willing to sacrifice, you will not succeed in your endeavours. Sacrifice can take the form of money. How can we progress if we are too attached to money?" (Usymuni, 2024)

In addition to educating her family, *Nyai Aqidah* also equips her students with skills so that they can be economically independent and not depend on others.

"I used to teach sewing, even though clothes are easier to find now. However, uniforms are still being sewn. In addition, there are many other businesses, such as catering, that can generate a lot of money. I have also trained students to make various crafts, such as dolls, which can be sold for additional income" (Usymuni, 2024)

Not only does she encourage hard work, *Nyai Aqidah* also instills in her students the importance of prayer as a key to success.

"Sustenance is not sought only with effort, but with prayer. If we ask Allah, people who donate will come on their own. That is the power of Allah. Allah says, '*Ud'uni astajib lakum*'—Ask of Me, and I will grant it to you" (Usymuni, 2024).

Even so, she still emphasized the importance of respecting one's husband while earning a living. "In my teachings, I always advise women to seek halal sustenance and work together with their husbands. For example, without the husband's permission, attending a Muslimat event is not allowed. *Nyai Aqidah* is very serious about prayer, as expressed by Susmiyati, one of

her followers: We must respect our husbands (Usymuni, 2024). "Regarding sustenance, *Nyai* always reminds us to pray completely and sincerely" (Susmiyati, 2024)

Fatimah, a resident near the Islamic boarding school who sells rujak, also feels this. "I am a member of *Nyai* Aqidah's religious study group and have been selling in front of the boarding school for a long time. Students are allowed to buy here, so our business continues to run," (Fatimah, 2024) In front of the Aqidah Usymuni Islamic Boarding School, many street vendors use the sidewalk to sell their goods. Some even set up their stalls on boarding school walls. This shows how the boarding school has become part of the economic ecosystem of the surrounding community, as *Nyai* Aqidah taught her students to be economically independent.

Discussion

Nyai Aqidah Usymuni is an important figure in gender mainstreaming in Sumenep, East Java. Since childhood, she has demonstrated strong leadership and played a role in empowering women through Islamic boarding school education. For her, education is the key to raising gender awareness and encouraging women to play an active role in society (Kusmana 2019). In establishing her Islamic boarding school, *Nyai* Aqidah applied egalitarian principles to ensure that women had equal access to education. This was a strategic step to change the dominant patriarchal paradigm. Inclusive education can reduce gender gaps and increase women's participation in various sectors (Malihah et al., 2023; Psaki et al., 2018).

From a religious perspective, *Nyai* Aqidah emphasized that Islam supports gender equity. She referred to hadiths about the role of women in the family and society, teaching that women must fight for their rights in accordance with Islamic teachings (Mutawakkil 2014; Suhartini 2023). This principle is realized by placing women in strategic positions in Islamic boarding schools, such as caregivers and educational administrators (Muzayanah & Anggraeni, 2023). In addition to education, *Nyai* Aqidah is active in advocating for and assisting female victims of violence. Together with her daughter, she founded the PUAN Amal Hayati Sumenep Women's Crisis Center to provide legal and psychological protection to women in need (Fahmi, 2023; Furi & Indriyati, 2020). This step demonstrates her commitment to fighting for women's rights, not only in education but also in social protection issues.

Nyai Aqidah's leadership is also reflected in her support for women's participation in politics. Although she is not directly involved, she encourages her daughter to play an active role in the government. Women's involvement in politics is considered to bring different perspectives and enrich decision-making processes (Dewi, 2022; Lazuardi & Shamsu, 2024). In addition, she

instilled the value of cooperation in the family, emphasizing the importance of communication and harmony in the household (Dzuhayatin 2020).

As a *Nyai*, *Nyai* Aqidah had a great influence on Madurese society. This title signifies scholarship and dedication to community development (Jannah, 2020; Kuntowijoyo, 2002). Based on the typology and hierarchy of *Nyai* in Madura, *Nyai* Aqidah can be categorized as *Nyai* Seppo-Rajha-Gunong or Songay, given her role as a central female figure in Sumenep. Thus, she is not only a leader in Islamic boarding schools but also a pioneer in gender mainstreaming in her region.

Nyai Aqidah Usymuni has made a significant contribution to gender mainstreaming in Sumenep through education and women's empowerment. She applies two approaches: formal and non-formal education. Formal education is provided through the Aqidah Usymuni Islamic Boarding School, established in 1986, while non-formal education is conducted through regular recitation of the Quran in the community. Education is not merely a transfer of knowledge (Zaatut & Haj-Yahia, 2016) but also a tool for building social awareness and empowering women in patriarchal societies (Hardacre & Subašić, 2018).

In formal education, *Nyai* Aqidah provides free education to students at the *Tsanawiyah*, *Aliyah*, and *Tahfidz Al-Qur'an* levels. This step ensures access to education at all levels of society, especially for women, without financial constraints. The principle of social justice that she applies helps reduce gender gaps and increases women's participation in various sectors. She also provides scholarships for women who want to continue their education at a higher level, opening up opportunities for them to contribute more to society (Harbell et al., 2023).

In addition to academic education, *Nyai* Aqidah emphasized the importance of practical skills for female students, such as sewing and cooking. She believes that women's empowerment must include life skills that support economic independence (Mahdi Abaker et al., 2023). With this approach, she has created a generation of women who are not only educated but also financially independent (KILIÇ et al., 2022).

Nyai Aqidah faced challenges in managing the Pesantren in the middle of the city, which was initially unattractive to the urban community. However, she managed to overcome this by combining *salaf* and modern education, gaining greater trust from the community. This innovation in education proves that traditional institutions can remain relevant to the needs of the time (Muhr, 2011). A change in the perception of Islamic boarding schools can occur with a more adaptive approach to education (Atik & Şahin, 2012).

In the economic field, *Nyai* Aqidah encourages students and the community to be independent by teaching entrepreneurial skills to them. She believes that women should be able to earn a living and contribute to the

family economy without depending on their husbands. This economic empowerment can improve women's social status (Jung 2023) and reduce their dependence on men (Hamid et al. 2023). In addition, she helps poor women and widows engage in economic activities to improve their welfare (Waheed et al., 2023).

As a gender advocate, *Nyai Aqidah* strives to change society's views of women and encourages women to dare to fight for their rights. She believes that women have the same potential as men and should be given the opportunity to develop it (Ayferam, 2015). Through the Aqidah Usymuni Islamic Boarding School, she has created an inclusive and empowering educational model that can serve as an example for other Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia (Sarumi et al. 2019). This approach ensures that women empowered through education can make a real contribution to social and economic development (Khayru & Wisnujati, 2022).

Based on the data presented above, the gender mainstreaming approach used by *Nyai Aqidah* can be categorized as religious-based gender mainstreaming, which is primarily in the realm of cultural and political approaches to gender issues. This is due to the role of religion as a source of values, norms, and social legitimacy, which strongly influences the formation of gender roles. Several studies have shown a significant correlation between religiosity and gender equality, where certain religious teachings and practices tend to maintain traditional gender roles and influence public policies related to family, sexuality, and reproduction (Klingorová & Havlíček, 2015; Schnabel, 2016; Yeganeh, 2022). In *Nyai Aqidah*'s practice, religion-based gender mainstreaming faces not only cultural structures but also political dynamics, especially when conservative religious actors use religious legitimacy to reject feminism and human rights agendas (Razavi & Jenichen, 2017). Therefore, efforts to transform gender equality require a cultural-political paradigm shift through critical dialogue with the dominant religious interpretations.

Simultaneously, religion-based gender mainstreaming also contains intersectional and institutional dimensions. The intersectional approach is evident in the interconnection between gender, religion, culture, and plural legal systems, especially in multicultural societies and countries with religious-based family laws (Solanki 2013). Efforts to achieve gender equality have been carried out through the reinterpretation of religious texts and legal reforms that are sensitive to women's experiences (Maponya, 2021). At the implementation level, this approach is realized through institutional mechanisms, such as policy reform in Southeast Asian Islamic countries and the integration of a gender perspective in religious institutions and state policies (Ahmad et al., 2024; Husaeni et al., 2023). However, challenges in the form of cultural resistance, limited institutional capacity, and weak political commitment remain major obstacles, although opportunities for strengthening

alliances and consensus across actors remain (Mihrete & Bayu, 2021; Theobald et al., 2005).

Conclusion

Nyai Aqidah Usymuni is a key actor in gender mainstreaming in Sumenep through a religious-based approach integrated with education strategies, economic empowerment, social advocacy, and cultural leadership. Her practices confirm that Islamic boarding schools not only function as institutions for the transmission of Islamic knowledge but also as spaces for social transformation that can challenge patriarchal structures in a gradual and contextual manner. By placing religion as the source of legitimacy for values and norms, *Nyai Aqidah* has succeeded in articulating gender equality as an integral part of Islamic teachings, while also encouraging cultural and political paradigm shifts at the local level in West Java. These findings enrich the discourse on gender mainstreaming by showing that religious women can play a strategic role as agents of change in Muslim societies, particularly through a combination of formal-nonformal, cultural-institutional, and intersectional approaches to gender justice.

Based on these findings, this study recommends that religion-based gender mainstreaming practices, such as those carried out by *Nyai Aqidah*, be replicated and contextualized in Islamic boarding schools and other religious institutions in Indonesia. State and policymakers must strengthen partnerships with female actors in Islamic boarding schools through policy support, institutional capacity building, and the integration of a gender perspective in religious education. In addition, gender mainstreaming in religious environments needs to be directed towards the development of gender-equitable religious interpretations through critical and collaborative dialogue between scholars, academics, and women activists. Thus, religion is not positioned as an obstacle but as a normative resource to promote sustainable gender equality.

The limitations of this study lie in its focus on a single case study; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all Islamic boarding schools or other regions in Indonesia. In addition, this study emphasizes qualitative-descriptive analysis; therefore, it does not fully measure the long-term impact of *Nyai Aqidah's* gender mainstreaming practices on structural changes, such as public policy or measurable gender equality indicators. Therefore, further research is recommended to use a comparative approach between Islamic boarding schools, mixed methods, and longitudinal analysis to strengthen the understanding of the effectiveness and sustainability of religiously based gender mainstreaming in the context of a pluralistic Muslim society.

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Author Contribution Statement

AA and FR jointly designed the research framework and defined the study focus. AA carried out data collection through in-depth interviews and field observations. Both authors collaboratively conducted qualitative data analysis, including coding and theme development. AA prepared the initial draft of the findings, while FR was responsible for writing the discussion and conclusion sections. AA and FR jointly validated the findings, revised the manuscript, and approved the final version for publication.

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