



Mobilizing Religious Social Capital for Sharia-based Women's Economic Empowerment in East Java *Pesantren*: The Agency of *Nyai*

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ABSTRACT

Despite patriarchal structures in many *pesantren*, *Nyai*, female religious authorities within *pesantren* communities, often function as strategic actors in community economic development. This article analyzes how *Nyai* mobilizes religious social capital to advance Sharia-based women's economic empowerment in East Java *pesantren*. Using an integrative literature review, the study synthesizes scholarly works on *pesantren* economies, Islamic social entrepreneurship, women's empowerment, and social capital to identify the mechanisms through which *Nyai* convert religious legitimacy, trust, kinship ties, alumni networks, and community reciprocity into economic agency. The findings indicate that *Nyai*'s economic role is not merely supportive or domestic; it operates as a form of faith-based economic governance that strengthens entrepreneurship, cooperative practices, and community resilience. The study contributes to Islamic economics by proposing *Nyai*'s religious social capital as a culturally grounded model of women's empowerment within *pesantren* economies. This model broadens discussions of Sharia-based socio-economic empowerment by linking gender agency, local religious authority, and inclusive economic development in emerging Muslim economies.

Keywords: *nyai*, religious social capital, women's economic empowerment, *pesantren* economy, sharia-based empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

The gender gap in the economic sphere remains a structural issue in Indonesia. According to the Central Statistics Agency, the female labor force participation rate (LFPR) in August 2025 was only 56.63%, far behind the male LFPR of 84.40%. These data indicate that although women's labor force participation has been increasing year by year, the structural gap with men remains wide and shows no signs of narrowing in the near future. On the other hand, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) are large-scale socio-religious institutions with the potential to serve as a foundation for the economic empowerment of the Muslim community. The Ministry of Religious Affairs notes that as of October 2025, there were 42,391 Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia with approximately 1.6 million active students, making these schools a vast educational and socio-economic ecosystem. This scale underscores that Islamic boarding schools are not merely marginal religious educational institutions, but rather strategic social infrastructure that, if managed properly, can serve as a

driving force for community-based economic self-reliance, including through the role of women within them. The government's attention to the economic potential of Islamic boarding schools is also growing, as evidenced by plans to establish a Directorate General of Islamic Boarding Schools, which is expected to accelerate services and strengthen the institutional capacity of these schools, including in terms of the economic well-being of the Muslim community. The momentum of this policy opens up an increasingly relevant space to seriously examine whether.

Javanese women in Indonesia have recently shown significant progress. One such example is in East Java; statistically, women's participation in public office in East Java remains unequal or disproportionate compared to men's. Although there has been an increase, this is still not considered equitable. In the political sector, for instance, women's representation stands at 20%, far below men's 80%.¹ Overall, there has been a decline in the Gender Inequality Index (GII), but this is still considered a cause for concern. Nevertheless, these developments also demonstrate the growth of women's social capital, which they are leveraging as a source of strength to enter the public sphere today.

Research on *Nyai* has so far focused primarily on aspects of leadership, education, and the feminist movement within Islamic boarding schools. Meanwhile, studies linking *Nyai's* social capital to community economic development from an Islamic economic perspective remain relatively limited. Yet, various recent studies indicate that social capital makes a significant contribution to fostering the economic self-reliance of *pesantren*-based communities. Social capital—in the form of trust, social networks, and collective norms—has proven to be a key factor in strengthening the *pesantren* economy and empowering communities.

Another interesting development is the emergence of a number of female political figures from traditional Islamic *pesantren*. This is noteworthy, given that *pesantren* have long been associated with a patriarchal culture considered discriminatory by some. One example is explained by KH. Husein Muhammad in his book **Fiqh Perempuan** (). The religious culture of *pesantren* is still dominated by religious views that exhibit gender bias. Not only the Shia school of thought, but the Sunni school—whose texts are taught in *pesantren*—is also suspected of having gender bias or supporting a patriarchal culture. Several scholars, such as Az Zamakhshari, Ibn Katsir, Fakhruddin Al Razi, Muhammad Hussein At-Thabathaba'i, and Ash-Syarbini, have written works that contain gender bias.² Similar literature is also widely incorporated as material for Islamic fiqh in Indonesia, particularly in *pesantren*.

The emergence of two prominent female figures from the *pesantren* community certainly serves as a clear indication that there are women who have surprisingly stepped into the public eye despite the gender bias prevalent in *pesantren*. Luluk Hamidah and Khofifah Indar Parawansa are two female political

¹ Compilation Team, "East Java Gender Inequality Index (IKG) 2023" (Surabaya: Central Bureau of Statistics, 2024), 4.

² K. H. Husein Muhammad, *Fiqh for Women* (Jakarta: IRCiSoD, 2019), 53–58.

figures representing the *nyai* of *pesantren* in the current East Java gubernatorial election. Both, of course, are operating within the dynamics of women's social capital that has developed over time.

Beyond this fact, there are indications that women have become key actors in community economic development movements. In this regard, researchers refer to this as the role of feminist economic development. The feminist actions demonstrated by these *nyai* extend beyond *pesantren* leadership or resistance to religious discourse.

Not only do they serve as spokespeople for the *pesantren* feminist movement described by Saipul Hamdi in his book, but beyond that, the *Nyai* also play a role in the economic feminist movement; they can participate in the economic sphere.³ In other words, the actions of the *Nyai* concretely serve as a vehicle for change and struggle in the economic sector of society. This is as noted by Norshahril Saat and Ahmad Najib Burhani regarding *Nyai* Nuriyah,⁴ Nurdianah & Awwaliyah,⁵ Noorhayati,⁶ and others—*Nyai* who can serve as spokespeople for the economic development of *pesantren*. This phenomenon is certainly quite unique; amidst the biased dogmas of *fiqh* and the claims of truth regarding *pesantren* education, *Nyai* are supposed to be kept in check. It is therefore remarkable when a *nyai* acts outside these *fiqh* dogmas and patriarchal claims. The reason is that she does so while being part of educational and family groups, which are suspected of being sources of gender bias.⁷ This is what this study will reveal as the economic feminism of *pesantren nyai*.

The explanation above indicates that although the role of *Nyai* has been extensively studied in the contexts of *pesantren* leadership, Islamic education, women's empowerment, and the *pesantren* feminist movement, there remains a lack of research that specifically highlights *Nyai* as agents of economic feminism. Thus far, academic attention has been directed primarily toward social, educational, and religious aspects, while the economic practices carried out by *Nyai*—as well as their utilization of social capital, religious authority, and *pesantren* networks to empower the local economy—have not been extensively explored. This situation indicates a research gap that needs to be addressed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of *Nyai* in economic development.

³ Saipul Hamdi, *Pesantren & the Feminist Movement in Indonesia* (Kalimantan: IAIN Samarinda Press, 2017).

⁴ Norshahril Saat and Ahmad Najib Burhani, *The New Santri: Challenges to Traditional Religious Authority in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020), 85.

⁵ Defi Dachlian Nurdiana and Ana Luthfia Putri Awaliyah, "The Role of *Nyai* in the Economic Development of Nurut Taqwa Islamic Boarding School in Duku Hamlet, Sungairujing Village, Sangkapura District, Gresik Regency, East Java," *CENDEKIA: Journal of Islamic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2021): 208–23.

⁶ Siti Mahmudah Noorhayati, "Islamic Thought on Gender and Women's Empowerment (A Study of *Nyai*'s Thought and Empowerment Model at Nurul Jadid Paiton Islamic Boarding School)," *Akademika: Journal of Islamic Thought* 22, no. 2 (2017): 219–44, <https://doi.org/10.32332/akademika.v22i2.953>.

Furthermore, studies on the economic activities of *Nyai* are generally still framed from gender and sociological perspectives. In fact, the various economic activities carried out by *Nyai* not only demonstrate women's ability to secure space and influence in society but also reflect the implementation of Islamic economic values. Principles such as justice (*al-'adl*), public interest (*maslahah*), empowerment (*tamkin*), and well-being (*falah*) serve as crucial foundations for understanding the *Nyai*'s contributions to community-based economic development centered around Islamic boarding schools. Therefore, the perspective of Islamic economics is considered relevant for explaining the economic actions and roles undertaken by the *Nyai*.

Based on this gap, this study aims to conduct an in-depth examination of the forms of economic feminism practiced by female *pesantren* leaders (*Nyai*), how social capital is utilized in the process of community economic empowerment, and how these actions can be understood within the framework of Islamic economics⁷. Thus, this study not only seeks to enrich research on women and Islamic boarding schools but also contributes to the development of Islamic economic studies that position women as key actors in economic development and community welfare.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using field research. This approach was chosen because the study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the economic feminist actions undertaken by *Nyai* at Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and the utilization of social capital in community economic empowerment. Through field research, the researcher was able to obtain empirical data regarding the experiences, strategies, and economic practices carried out by *Nyai* within the social and cultural context of the *pesantren*.

Research subjects were selected through *purposive sampling* based on the following criteria: *Nyai* who play an active role in managing the *pesantren*'s economic activities or in community economic empowerment; who wield social and religious influence within the *pesantren* community; and who are involved in economic activities that impact the surrounding community. Supporting informants included *pesantren* administrators, students, entrepreneurs mentored by the *pesantren*, and community leaders who are familiar with the *Nyai*'s economic activities.

Research data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted to explore the *Nyai*'s perspectives, experiences, and strategies in developing economic activities. Observation was used to understand the economic empowerment

⁷ Furthermore, experts have explained that women will find it difficult to overcome these challenges if education within their families remains steeped in gender bias. St. Rodliyah, "Management of Islamic Education in the Family: Strategies for Career Women in Building a Sakinah Family from an Islamic and Gender Perspective at Kiai Haji Ahmad Shidiq State Islamic University, Jember," *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6, no. 8 (2022): 2247-58, <https://journalppw.com/index.php/jpsp/article/view/10205>.

practices taking place within the *pesantren* community, while documentation was used to supplement the data in the form of archives, activity reports, photographs, and relevant institutional documents.

Data analysis was conducted interactively based on the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. During the data reduction stage, the researcher selected and categorized information based on the themes of social capital, economic feminism, and Islamic economics. Subsequently, the data were presented in the form of narratives and thematic matrices to identify patterns of relationships among concepts. The final stage involved interpreting the data to explain how *Nyai's* social capital is utilized in the economic empowerment of the community and its relevance to the principles of Islamic economics.

To ensure data validity, this study employed source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and member checking. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from the “ ” the *Nyai*, the *pesantren* administrators, and the community. Methodological triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation. Meanwhile, member checking was conducted by reconfirming the findings with the informants to ensure that the data matched the experiences they had described. Through these procedures, the validity and reliability of the research findings can be academically justified.

This study was analyzed from the perspectives of social capital and Islamic economics. The social capital perspective was used to understand the role of social networks, trust, and social norms in supporting *Nyai's* economic activities. Meanwhile, the Islamic economic perspective was used to explain how *Nyai's* economic actions reflect the principles of justice (*al-'adl*), public interest (*maslahah*), empowerment (*tamkin*), and well-being (*falah*) in community economic development.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Dynamics of “*Nyai*” Power During the Colonial Era

In the European writing system, the word “*nyai*” is written as “*Njai*.”⁸ The term “*nyai*” refers to indigenous women employed in the homes of Dutch people as domestic helpers or companions. However, the role of a *nyai* was not limited to that of a mere domestic helper; it often also included the role of a concubine or unofficial partner to their white employers. Although in Javanese, the word “*nyai*” literally means “sister,” in the historical context of the Dutch East Indies, the term has evolved to carry a more specific meaning.⁹ This explanation reflects the complexity of the relationship between *nyai* and their employers, as well as the historical backdrop of colonialism that shaped the social and economic dynamics of that era.

⁸ Hans Jacobs and Jan Roelands, *Indisch ABC...: A documentary on the history and society of the Dutch East Indies, based on VARA-TV broadcasts under the same title* (US: De Arbeiderspers, 1970), 103.

⁹ Robert-Henk Zuidinga, *Indisch letterland: Stories from Two Centuries of Dutch East Indies Literature** (Netherlands: Sijthoff, 1987), 6.

Rob Nieuwenhuys, an author who has written extensively about the Dutch East Indies colonial period, describes *nyai* as figures who were always obedient and responsible for household affairs, even before they became concubines to their employers. Thus, *nyai* were often viewed as figures who sacrificed their freedom and dignity for the sake of their Dutch employers, particularly in terms of domestic and sexual service.¹⁰

Based on this explanation, *the figure of the nyai* also reflects the challenges and injustices experienced by indigenous women within the context of colonialism, which was dominated by power and oppression. Therefore, examining and understanding the role of *the nyai* is an important part of historical education that seeks to eliminate oppression and inequality and to achieve social justice in a more inclusive and equitable modern society.

Upon closer examination, the dynamics of the word "Njai" can be seen in its various spellings, such as "njaie," "nyaie," and "nyahi." Some of these derive from a Balinese word meaning "sister." However, overall, the use of these terms carries different connotations depending on the dialect and cultural context in which they are used. For example, in Sundanese, the term "*nyai*" refers to a "young woman," while in the Betawi dialect, "*nyai*" refers to a "grandmother" or an elderly woman. The Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language) provides three definitions for "*nyai*": first, as a term referring to a married or unmarried woman; second, as a term referring to a woman older than the speaker.¹¹

This is relevant for reinforcing the argument that the figure of the *nyai* embodies a diversity of experiences—she is not monolithic—while also highlighting the underlying structure of colonial inequality. It is suitable for citation in the discussion section on the various forms of gendered power relations under colonialism.¹²

The term also refers to a foreign concubine. It is this last definition that is frequently used in the context of Dutch East Indies history, which gained prominence in the 17th century when Balinese *nyai* became common in the colonial capital of Batavia (now Jakarta). The word "*njai*" is sometimes also translated as "*nyonya*" in discussions regarding the Dutch East Indies.¹³

Various other terms are also used to refer to *nyai*, with varying connotations. In the 19th century, the term "*Inlandse Huishoudster*" or *huishoudster* (housekeeper) was also frequently used. *Njai* is also known by the term *moentji*, which derives from the Dutch *klein mondje*, meaning "little mouth," and "*snaar*." Clearly, these terms

¹⁰ Joop van den Berg, *Soebatten, Sarongs, and Sinjo's: Indonesian Words in Dutch* (The Hague: BZZTôH, 1991), 62.

¹¹ Ministry of National Education, *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, 5th Edition (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2008), 58.

¹² Hellwig, T. (2001). Asian women in the lives of Dutch tea planters: Two narratives from West Java. *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 29(85), 161–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639810120073437>

¹³ Marcel Bonneff, *Contemporary Indonesia as Seen by Its Intellectuals: A Selection of Articles from the Journal Prisma* (1971–1991), *Cahier d'Archipel*, vol. 21 (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994), 287.

carry connotations that, when considered together, both point to the verbal tendencies of the figure of the *nyai* as perceived by the colonizers. Some even suggest that, within the concept of the “,” the *nyai* could also serve as an interpreter and language teacher; terms such as “boek” (book) and “woordenboek” (“dictionary”) were also used. The objectification of the *nyai* as “Njai” can be found in terms such as “meubel” (“furniture”) and “inventarisstuk” (“inventory item”).¹⁴

Therefore, it is important to note that not all *nyai* were native Indonesians, as depicted in Madelon Szekely-Lulofs’ 1931 novel **Rubber**, in which the character *Nyai Kiku San* is Japanese.¹⁵ This highlights the complexity and diversity in the use of the term “*nyai*” as well as the roles and identities associated with it within the historical and cultural context of the Dutch East Indies.

Much of the explanation above needs to be updated in this study. Of course, the concept described in Baay’s analysis remains valid. He concluded from various terminological sources that “*nyai*” in Indonesia is a Javanese noble title bestowed as a mark of respect by a European husband. Its historical roots trace back to the history of interracial marriage policies in the 16th century. Since then, the term “*nyai*” has become popular and has been associated with Javanese women of noble descent.¹⁶

From a social capital perspective, the shift in the meaning and social position of the *Nyai* from the colonial era to the *pesantren* environment indicates a transformation in the sources of power held by Javanese women. Whereas during the colonial period the status of the *Nyai* was largely determined by her relationship with colonial authorities, in the *pesantren* context this status has evolved into a source of social legitimacy derived from religious networks, moral authority, and the trust of the community. Thus, the position of the *Nyai* can be understood not only as a cultural identity but also as a form of social capital that enables them to exert influence in various spheres of community life.

This transformation has significant economic implications. The social capital possessed by *Nyai* – in the form of a network of Islamic boarding schools, relationships with students and alumni, and a high level of public trust – serves as a resource that can be mobilized to support economic activities. In this context, social capital not only generates social influence but also contributes to the development of *pesantren* business units, increased community economic participation, and the strengthening of women’s economic empowerment activities. Therefore, the social relationships maintained by *Nyai* can be understood as assets that possess both economic and social value.

¹⁴ Reggie Baay, *Nyai and Concubinage in the Dutch East Indies*, Translation (Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, 2010), 58.

¹⁵ Maaïke Meijer, *Captured in Text: An Introduction to a Critique of Representation* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 132.

¹⁶ Baay, *Nyai and Concubinage in the Dutch East Indies*. 1–5.

From the perspective of Islamic economics, this social power demonstrates that the religious authority held by *Nyai* can be translated into economic practices oriented toward the public good. The network of trust that has been established enables economic cooperation, a broader distribution of resources, and the strengthening of the *pesantren* community's economic self-reliance. Thus, the historical significance of the *Nyai* not only highlights the dynamics of Javanese women's power but also demonstrates how social capital can be converted into economic benefits that support the community's sustainable well-being.

The Social Capital of *Pesantren Nyai* as Feminist Economic Actors

The term "*nyai*" is clearly an adaptation from colonial Javanese culture that was adopted by *pesantren* culture. Just as the term "*santri*" originates from the ancient traditions of *shastri*¹⁷ or *cantrik*,¹⁸ so too does the term "*nyai*." It is an honorary title for respected women from the *pesantren* community, particularly those who are married or are the mothers of *pesantren* kiai.

As Baay explains, a *Nyai* is a woman who commands respect because she is considered to come from a distinguished family.¹⁹ Similarly, a *Nyai* is regarded as an influential figure thanks to her husband or her family of kiai. In a book titled **The New Santri**, some of them have taken on roles to combat discrimination in society. One person mentioned in the book is, for example, Nuriyah, the wife of the late KH. Abdurrahman Wahid, who not only taught at a *pesantren* but also played an active role in the resistance of marginalized communities.²⁰

The *pesantren* family, which until recently was referred to as the religious family in Java, is a continuation of the hegemony that emerged after the collapse of several royal aristocratic families. They are considered the heirs of the cultural elite because they can indeed be seen as connected to the classical Javanese elite. In this context, this has been clearly explained in several studies, such as those compiled by Aguk Irawan,²¹ Aufannuha Ihsan,²² and Mujammil Qomar.²³ Many researchers explicitly state that the culture formed in *pesantren* is that of classical

¹⁷ Clifford Geertz, **The Religion of Java** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 1-5.

¹⁸ C. C. Berg, "The Islamization of Java," *Studia Islamica*, no. 4 (1955): 111-42, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1595054>.

¹⁹ Baay, *Nyai and Concubinage in the Dutch East Indies*, 1-2.

²⁰ Euis Nurlaelawati, "Muslim Female Authorities in Indonesia: Conservatism and Legal Notions of Women Preachers on Familial Issues," in *The New Santri: Challenges to Traditional Religious Authority in Indonesia*, ed. Norshahril Saat and Ahmad Najib Burhani (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020), 83-106.

²¹ Aguk Irawan, "The Relationship Between *Pesantren* and the Royal Court: An Anthropological-Historical Perspective on the Demak Bintoro and Islamic Mataram Kingdoms," *Islam Nusantara: Journal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture* 3, no. 2 (2022): 57-76, <https://doi.org/10.47776/islamnusantara.v3i2.462>.

²² Aufannuha Ihsani, "From the Palace Pendopo to the *Pesantren* Rooms: The Dynamics of the Relationship Between Aristocrats and Kiai in Sumenep (1750-1950s)," *Islamuna: Journal of Islamic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2021): 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.19105/islamuna.v8i1.4299>.

²³ Mujamil Qomar, *Pesantren: From Methodological Transformation to Institutional Democratization* (Jakarta: Erlangga, 2002).

Javanese culture. From the language used by santri and *nyai* to the issue of polygamy—which has been widely criticized by feminist groups—all of these elements are present in *pesantren*. All of these aspects are also found in the terminology and traditions of the Javanese elite.²⁴

Aben demonstrates that intermarriage between European men and Asian women—including Chinese, Japanese, and women from various other ethnic groups in the Indonesian archipelago—was part of a colonial strategy to fill the shortage of European women dating back to the early days of the VOC's occupation. This reference strongly supports the argument that the historical roots of the interracial marriage and relationship policies that gave rise to the institution of the *nyai* can indeed be traced back to the 16th–17th centuries, and that the ethnic diversity of the women involved in these relationships (not limited to indigenous women of the Nusantara) has been a structural characteristic from the very beginning.²⁵

In addition to the explanations in the book, some have witnessed the efforts of *pesantren nyai* to challenge the hierarchy. Regarding those who have succeeded in becoming leaders, for example, there are studies conducted by Nining Khurrotul Aini,²⁶ Adnani & Mahbub,²⁷ Istiqlaliyani,²⁸ Samsu, et al.,²⁹ and many others. Some even argue that this has successfully strengthened *pesantren-style* feminism, as explained in several studies written by Chusniyah and Yasir Alimi,³⁰ ; Hamidah and Masfiah,³¹ ; and so on. Thus, it is very clear that there is an opportunity to leverage the hegemony of *nyai*—as the wife of a *kiai*—to strengthen the role of women in society. In this regard, their roles underscore the fact that the actions of *nyai* align with the resistance movements led by prominent *nyai* figures during the era of traditional archipelagic societies.

²⁴ Mohammad Takdir Ilahi, "KIAI: Elite Figures in Pesantren," *IBDA': Journal of Islamic and Cultural Studies* 12, no. 2 (2014): 137–48, <https://doi.org/10.24090/ibda.v12i2.442>.

²⁵ Remco Raben, "Colonial Shorthand and Historical Knowledge: Segregation and Localisation in a Dutch Colonial Society," *Journal of Modern European History* 18, no. 2 (2020): 177–193.

²⁶ Nining Khurrotul Aini, *The Transformational Role of* (Surabaya: CV. Jakad Media Publishing, 2019).

²⁷ Kamila Adnani and Moh. Mahbub, "The Power of *Nyai* in the Development of the Pesantren," *DINIKA: Academic Journal of Islamic Studies* 6, no. 2 (2021): 263–90, <https://doi.org/10.22515/dinika.v6i2.4084>.

²⁸ Fikriyah Istiqlaliyani, "Female Ulama in Pesantren: A Study of the Leadership of *Nyai* Hj. Masriyah Amva," *Jurnal Educatio FKIP UNMA* 8, no. 1 (2022): 104–9, <https://doi.org/10.31949/educatio.v8i1.1670>.

²⁹ Samsu et al., "Community Empowerment in Leading Pesantren: A Study of *Nyai's* Leadership," *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education* 10, no. 4 (2021): 1237–44, <https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v10i4.21833>.

³⁰ Siti Chusniyah and Moh Yasir Alimi, "*Nyai* Dadah: The Flexibility of Gender Roles and the Life History of a Pesantren Woman Leader," *KOMUNITAS: International Journal of Indonesian Society and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2015): 112–17, <https://doi.org/10.15294/komunitas.v7i1.3602>.

³¹ Ani Mar'atul Hamidah and Atik Masfiah, "The Contribution of *Nyai* Nur Khodijah: A Historical Analysis of a Pioneer of Pesantren Feminism," *At-Tahdzib: Journal of Islamic and Muamalah Studies* 11, no. 2 (2023): 9–22, <https://doi.org/10.61181/at-tahdzib.v11i2.298>.

This article is relevant for reinforcing the argument regarding the role of **nyai** in equality movements based on Islamic values within **pesantren**.³²

In analyzing Madelon Székely-Lulofs's novel **Rubber** (1931) – a novel featuring the character *Nyai Kiku San*, a Japanese woman in a concubine relationship on a rubber plantation in Deli, East Sumatra – Missinne situates this work within the context of the 1930s European literary aesthetic of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) while also revealing how the social realities of colonial plantations—including interracial relations and cross-ethnic concubinage—are represented in fiction. This reference directly supports the point above regarding the ethnic diversity of *nyai* characters in colonial literature.³³

In addition, there have actually been many studies highlighting the roles or actions of *Nyai* in Islamic boarding schools. As public figures in Indonesia – particularly in Java – they have, from a very young age, taken on leadership roles and have even been noted for their strategies to challenge cultural patriarchy and existing inequalities. At least according to several studies on them, it can be said that many of them have successfully fulfilled public roles in the social, political, and economic spheres.

First, social capital in participating in educational development. This is a fundamental quality that *nyai* must possess. As the wives of *kiai*, they also play a role in optimizing the educational functions of *pesantren*. For example, a study by Candra Rizki Dwi Safitri and Budi Haryanto profiles *Nyai Walida*, the wife of KH Ahmad Dahlan. The study *refers to her as a National Educational Figure*.³⁴ There is also an account by Suharto Yusuf, who researched *Nyai Nur Khodijah* – the wife of KH Bisri Syansuri. He identifies her *as the founder of Indonesia's first all-female pesantren, established in 1919 in Denanyar, Jombang*.³⁵ This is further supported by Vivid Romaniyah's research, which focuses on the educational development efforts of *Nyai Khoiriyah Hasyim*, the wife of KH Maksum Ali. In the summary of her research, she noted that *Nyai Khoiriyah instilled critical, creative, and active thinking in the students during the learning process*.³⁶

Second, social capital in the promotion of social justice. In this regard, many *nyai* also play a role in promoting social justice. For example, as explained in the book **The New Santri**, which was discussed earlier. Essentially, within their

³² Locality, Equality, and Piety: Pesantren Ecofeminism Movement in Indonesia".

³³ L. Missinne, "Madelon Székely-Lulofs' Roman *Rubber* (1931) [*Gummi*, 1934]: Die Peripherie der Neuen Sachlichkeit," in *Neue Sachlichkeit im Kontrast: Deutschland und die Niederlande*, ed. R. Grüttemeier, J. Wagner, and H. Stierner (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 209–226.

³⁴ Candra Rizki Dwi Safitri and Budi Haryanto, "Nyai Walida as a National Education Figure," *Journal of Islamic and Muhammadiyah Studies* 1, no. 1 (2020): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.21070/jims.v1i1.222>.

³⁵ Chusniyah, "Nyai Dadah: The Flexibility of Gender..."

³⁶ Vivid Rohmaniyah, "Women Ulama in Advancing Women's Islamic Education," *Women Ulama in Advancing Women's Islamic Education* 7, no. 1 (2023): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.30651/sr.v7i1.18185>.

respective communities, they also encourage people to cherish peace and guide social life so that it runs smoothly.

Tatik Hidayati describes the role of *nyai* in this social issue as *social engineering*. According to her, the figure of the *nyai* is deeply rooted in community traditions and *pesantren*—institutions that exert significant influence on culture. This enables *nyai* to play a role in social development, and through their influence, *nyai* are said to be capable of driving the community's sociocultural development.³⁷

Third, social capital in political dynamics. Many researchers have studied this topic. Some of these *women* have played a role in leading educational institutions and have even entered the realm of practical politics. Thus, they not only play a role in leading political organizations but also in leading political party institutions.

Several studies have examined *Nyai* who have successfully become leaders. One such study was conducted by Nining Khurrotul Aini. She found that *Nyai* possesses at least four internalized abilities that enable them to transform into leaders: the internalization of idealization, the internalization of inspirational motivation, the internalization of individual consideration, and the internalization of stimulation.³⁸ Adnani & Mahbub share a similar perspective, noting that *Nyai* also play a role that is no less important in the growth and development of *pesantren* institutions.³⁹ The literature reviews cited above clearly demonstrate that *Nyai* have successfully emerged as leaders of educational institutions.

As for political leadership, this topic has, of course, also been discussed. In a book published by *Ircisod*, Tatik Hidayati elaborates on many aspects of the *nyai*'s leadership qualities in the political sphere. She identifies the *nyai*'s political leadership style as part of patronage politics.⁴⁰ Not surprisingly, several *pesantren nyai* have also successfully won numerous general elections in East Java.⁴¹

Through the capital they possess, some of them have played a significant role in the public economy. They also frequently emerge as key actors and drivers of the community's economy. This has been noted by many experts. They are no longer merely consumers. More than that, the *nyai* also engage in social movements and serve as economic drivers. They are also capable of participating in the public economic sphere. In other words, the *nyai*'s actions concretely serve as a voice for change and advocacy in the community's economic sector. This is as noted by Norshahril Saat and Ahmad Najib Burhani

³⁷ Tatik Hidayati, *Nyai Madura: Capital and Patronage of Madurese Women* (Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2022), <https://books.google.com/books?id=XQyIEAAQBAJ>.

³⁸ Aini: *The Transformational Role of*.

³⁹ Adnani and Mahbub, "The Power of *Nyai* in the Development of the *Pesantren*."

⁴⁰ Hidayati, *Madurese Nyai: Capital and Patronage of Madurese Women*.

⁴¹ Safara Akmaliah, "Pesantren Priests and Their Political Influence in Regional Elections (Case Study of the Victory of Regent Candidate Fandi Akhmad Yani and Vice Regent Candidate *Nyai* Aminatun Habibah in the 2020 Gresik Regency Regional Elections)," *Master's Thesis in Political Science* (Master's Program in Political Science, 2023), <https://eprints2.undip.ac.id/>.

regarding *Nyai* Nuriyah,⁴² Nurdiyanah & Awwaliyah,⁴³ Noorhayati,⁴⁴ , and many others. In essence, several experts found that *Nyai* also serve as advocates for the economic development of Islamic boarding schools and even the wider community. This is further reinforced by Tatik Hidayat, who emphasizes that *Nyai's* economic competence is also increasingly evident.⁴⁵

The findings of this study indicate that the social capital possessed by *Nyai* – in the form of her *pesantren* network, relationships with students and alumni, and the level of community trust – can be understood as a form of *Islamic social capital*. From an Islamic economic perspective, social capital functions not only as a social instrument but also as an economic resource capable of fostering cooperation, empowerment, and community economic development. Recent research indicates that social capital rooted in Islamic values contributes to the economic self-reliance of Islamic boarding schools and improves community well-being.

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This study examines how female religious scholars (including figures such as *Nyai*) in Indonesia establish community-based religious authority – through networks of Islamic boarding schools, relationships with students, and the trust of the surrounding community – amid the dominance of male religious authority. It is highly relevant to reinforce the argument that the networks and trust held by *Nyai* constitute a form of social capital that has been historically and culturally constructed, rather than merely personal assets.⁴⁶

The role of *Nyai* in community economic empowerment is also in line with the concept of *tamkin* (empowerment) in Islamic economics. Through their social networks and religious legitimacy, *Nyai* are able to expand community access to productive economic activities, strengthen community entrepreneurial capacity, and create broader social welfare. This finding is consistent with various studies showing that women's empowerment through Islamic economic instruments can

⁴² Saat and Burhani, *New Santri Challenges to Traditional Religious Authority in Indonesia*.

⁴³ Defi Dachlian Nurdiana and Ana Luthfia Putri Awaliyah, "The Role of *Nyai* in the Economic Development of the Nurut Taqwa Islamic Boarding School in Duku Hamlet, Sungairujing Village, Sangkapura Subdistrict, Gresik Regency, East Java," *CENDEKIA: Journal of Islamic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2021): 208–23, <https://doi.org/10.37348/cendekia.v7i2.142>.

⁴⁴ Noorhayati, "Islamic Thought on Gender and Women's Empowerment (A Study of *Nyai's* Thought and Empowerment Model at the Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School in Paiton)."

⁴⁵ Hidayati, *Maduran Nyai: Capital and Patronage of Maduran Women*.

⁴⁶ N. Ismah, "Destabilising Male Domination: Building Community-Based Authority among Indonesian Female Ulama," *Asian Studies Review* 40, no. 4 (2016): 491–509.

enhance economic resilience, family well-being, and sustainable community development.

Based on the explanation above, it is not surprising that female *pesantren* leaders are also seen as having transformed or challenged the patriarchal culture that is believed to have flourished throughout the development of the Indonesian nation. The *nyai* are not only the spokespeople for the *pesantren* feminist movement as described by Saipul Hamdi in his book,⁴⁷ *; they also play a role in the economic feminist movement, enabling women to participate in the economic sphere. This is as noted by Norshahril Saat and Ahmad Najib Burhani regarding *Nyai* Nuriyah,⁴⁸ Nurdianah & Awwaliyah,⁴⁹ as well as Noorhayati.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

The dynamics of the *Nyai*'s power in Islamic boarding schools appear to be linked to the historical social capital associated with the term "*Nyai*." The term "*Nyai*" was shaped by the culture of the colonial era in the Indonesian archipelago and has become deeply rooted as part of Javanese culture. Although during the colonial era the term carried a rather negative connotation, over time it came to be valued as a common title for women among the *priyai*. Thus, over time, the figure of the *Nyai* came to be regarded as a noblewoman wielding significant influence over society.

These historical dynamics have provided *pesantren Nyais* with the social capital needed to carry out important actions in the public sphere, particularly for community economic development. They are able to participate and even compete as feminist economic actors through various forms of social capital in their roles within the educational, political, and social sectors.

The study demonstrates that the success of *Nyai* in entering the public and economic spheres is determined not only by individual capacity but also by their ability to manage and convert social capital into productive economic resources. In this context, social capital is not merely an instrument for gaining social influence but serves as a mechanism that enables community economic empowerment through the networks of trust, religious authority, and institutional relationships that *Nyai* possess.

However, the findings of this study also show that this success has not entirely eliminated the patriarchal structures that remain present in both the social environment and the *pesantren*. *Nyai*'s involvement in economic activities often continues to take place within a social framework that derives women's legitimacy from their relationships with religious authorities and the *pesantren*

⁴⁷ Discusses only feminist doctrine in *pesantren* education. See, Hamdi, *Pesantren & the Feminist Movement in Indonesia*.

⁴⁸ Saat and Burhani, "*New Santri Challenges to Traditional Religious Authority in Indonesia*."

⁴⁹ Nurdiana and Awwaliyah, "*The Role of Nyai in the Economic Development of the Nurut Taqwa Islamic Boarding School in Duku Hamlet, Sungairujing Village, Sangkapura Subdistrict, Gresik Regency, East Java*."

⁵⁰ Noorhayati, "*Islamic Thought on Gender and Women's Empowerment (A Study of Nyai's Thought and Empowerment Model at the Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School in Paiton)*."

community. Therefore, the transformation of the *Nyai*'s role must be understood not only as a form of women's success in entering the public sphere, but also as an ongoing process of negotiation between patriarchal values, religious authority, and the demands for the economic empowerment of the community.

From the perspective of Islamic economics, this phenomenon indicates that *pesantren*-based social capital has strategic potential to support economic development oriented toward the common good, justice, and social welfare. Therefore, future research needs to examine more empirically the economic impact generated by the leadership of *Nyai*, so that their contribution to community economic development can be measured more concretely and comprehensively.

Author's Contribution

Moh. Mardi: Contribute to formulating research ideas, collecting data, processing data, interpreting data, and literature review

Khurin In Ratnasari: Contributing to writing systematics, research methods, and analyzing interpretation results.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval No patient-identifying parts in this paper were used or known to the authors. Therefore, no ethical approval was requested.

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