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## Women issuing fatwas: female Islamic scholars and community-based authority in Java, Indonesia

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## CHAPTER TWO



### **Contesting Religious Authority: Women and Fatwa-giving in the Traditionalist Fatwa Council**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the Indonesian social and political context in which Muslim women leaders have sought to assert themselves and strengthen their position as Islamic authorities and fatwa-givers. I focus on the nature of their juristic authority, what supports it and how it is exercised. How does juristic authority come about in Indonesian Muslim society? Who can decide when and how women take part? And how is this connected to local notions of *keulamaan* (ulama-ness), fatwas, and fatwa-making? Since my research focuses on women from traditionalist Muslim backgrounds, I specifically address the social and political context of traditionalist Muslim communities and their connection to *pesantren*, mass Muslim organizations, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), including Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and its women's wing organizations, Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU.

The chapter begins with a brief description of the social and political positioning of Islam since the establishment of NU in 1926, with a focus on the so-called "New Order" period, President Suharto's dictatorial regime. Suharto took power on 11 March 1966 and began serving as the head of government in the cabinet in 1967 when Sukarno was still the president. In 1968, Suharto was elected the second president of the Republic of Indonesia, replacing Sukarno (Mudzhar 1993, 57). Since the beginning of his rule, Suharto sought to control expressions

of political Islam. In particular Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, the Council of Indonesian Ulama), which was established at the national level in 1975, was one of the tools he used to do this. During this period the interpretations of the concepts of *keulamaan*, fatwa, and fatwa-making in Indonesia were strongly influenced by the state; this changed after 1998, when these interpretations became much more contested. After Suharto's fall in May 1998, some changes occurred in Indonesian Islamic society, especially an increase in freedom of speech and religious expression, which led to a fragmentation of Islamic authority that was further influenced by new media and mass education. This particular context, while ushering in a conservative turn, at the same time created opportunities for women to assume new roles as religious authorities.

Indonesian women have been struggling to get access to education and social activism for a long time. The famous efforts by Kartini (1879-1904) to promote women's right to an education were the first national model that inspired Indonesian women to claim more rights. Others followed, however, including many women who were active in the religious domain. This chapter introduces educational institutions and programmes, such as the *pesantren* and Islamic higher education in Indonesia, that have provided Muslim women with the advanced Islamic knowledge that allows them to become ulama and produce fatwas. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, these institutions increasingly intersected with social activism and (Islamic) feminism to produce new calls for women to be trained as ulama. With regard to social and religious activism among female ulama, I contend that the exercise of female Islamic authority among Indonesian female ulama is crucially dependent on the influence of Islamic feminism and women's rights activism, as well as the ulama's involvement with religious and social activism through Muslim women's organizations, such as Muslimat, Fatayat, and women's NGOs. Training programmes organized by NGOs, such as Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat

(P3M, the Centre for Pesantren and Community Development), that emerged in the 1980s have helped Muslim women learn critical thinking and possess a better understanding of Islamic knowledge from a gender and women's rights perspective.

The chapter will also pay attention to the position of women and gender activism within NU, the *pesantren*, and the traditionalist Muslim community more broadly. Muslimat and Fatayat are autonomous bodies of NU that, generally speaking, follow the direction of their mother organization; so when it comes to the issue of central leadership and authority, NU women are excluded from higher decision-making processes. In this environment, religious authority and fatwa-giving are gendered and predominantly male. Fatwas relating to women have been issued by the NU fatwa forum Bahtsul Masail, as this chapter will also look into, but women have remained largely subservient nonetheless (Wahyuni and Wafiroh 2013, 52-3; van Doorn-Harder 2006, 81). In the process of fatwa-making by the NU Bahtsul Masail, women play roles as "observers and participants". They are restricted by certain criteria for becoming ulama and the stereotypes that affect their subjectivities as women. Only a very few NU women have a seat on NU's board, mainly as experts (*a'wan*).<sup>19</sup> NU women from Muslimat and Fatayat struggle to get involved in the Bahtsul Masail, and therefore they have limited access even to fatwa-making in the forum on topics relating to women.

However, this limitation does not mean that NU women have no agency at all in terms of operating strategically or driving social and cultural changes within the organization. Therefore, this chapter also looks at the tensions between the central NU and its wing women's organizations, and to the ways in which women have found ways to participate in the NU fatwa forum. They lobby policymakers at the top level of NU, get involved actively

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19 *A'wan* is the plural form of the Arabic word *'awn*, which literally means "help". It is a part of Syuriah NU (Supreme Council) that provides support for the *ra'is* (the head of NU) and consists of a number of prominent ulama who have contributed to NU (Ahmad 2022).

in NU movements and activities, and develop women's capacity through education. I argue that this agency has had a basis in both internal factors, including the emergence of progressive male leaders within NU, such as Abdurrahman Wahid or Gus Dur, who was NU chairman (1984-1998), and in external factors, including political changes and the emergence of civil society movements at the national level. The NU environment has also allowed changes to happen by its very nature and has enabled women's mobilization within NU.

This chapter then provides a discussion of education and training programmes for Muslim women that have aimed to prepare women for becoming ulama and fatwa-givers. I will discuss one NGO-based programme, namely Pengkaderan Ulama Perempuan (PUP, Female Ulama Cadre Programme), which is organized by Rahima. The chapter covers the details of the programme, its goals, the participants, and the question as to what extent women have benefited from it. The discussion of this programme highlights challenges related to women's roles as fatwa-givers, which include the lack of Islamic textual understanding as required to play a role as a juristic authority. In response to these challenges, the *pesantren*-based education programmes are mostly focused on strengthening skills for Islamic textual interpretation, while the NGO-based education emphasizes training in employing a gender perspective and in establishing a network of and for the women.

### **Nahdlatul Ulama as a Traditionalist Muslim Mass Organization**

Nahdlatul Ulama can be labelled 'traditionalist' without many problems, for the concept of "tradition" constitutes "the essence of its self-perception and self-definition" (Van Bruinessen 1996, 164). NU's main goal is to preserve religious traditions in the face of the threat posed in this regard by Islamic reformists. There is no indigenous (Indonesian or Javanese) term that fully captures this self-conscious traditionalism. Instead, Indonesian

has two foreign loanwords, “tradisi” and “tradisional”, which are often applied to describe NU, for instance, “tradisi NU” and “Islam tradisional”.<sup>20</sup> Within Islam, the term “tradition” is usually broken down into parts, including hadith, *sunnah*, and *adat* (scholarly tradition). Hadith literally means “reports” but is often translated as “traditions”. These are the (eyewitness) reports on the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad handed down from generation to generation. There are countless hadith that are awarded different levels of credibility and that legitimize almost all Muslim practices, so it is no wonder to find allegations of fabricated hadith made for certain purposes. For example, there are hadith that deal with issues that did not occur during the lifetime of the Prophet, and hadith that deal with situations where other hadith contradict one another. Traditionalists recognize hadith with sound (*sahih*) qualities, but also argue that these need to be supported by arguments taken from great ulama in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), authoritative books, or doctrines taught in the *pesantren*. This is different from the attitude of reformists toward hadith. Their slogan of “return to the Qur’an and hadith” means that they see hadith *sahih* as a direct source for their arguments.<sup>21</sup> The difference between traditionalists and reformists with regard to hadith leads to their different positions in understanding and practicing *sunnah*.

The *sunnah* means “habitual practice”. It consists of the examples, including the customs, practices, words, and decisions, of the Prophet Muhammad for Muslims to follow. The hadith are the primary source of this knowledge. In other words, hadith are “recorded sayings of the Prophet Muhammad”, and they are the only reference for understanding the *sunnah* (Asfaruddin n.d.). *Sunnah* is considered the dominant element in “the self-conscious traditionalism” of the NU ulama. They refer to themselves as *ahlus sunnah wal jamaah* (abbreviated to *aswaja*), “people of the *sunnah*

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20 According to van Bruinessen (1996, 163-189), “The absence of an indigenous term suggests that the present awareness of the tradition as such is relatively recent.”

21 The books on reliable *hadith*, Bukhari and Muslim, were studied in the *pesantren* only in the early twentieth century (van Bruinessen 1996, 165-7).

and the (orthodox) community”. Through this self-identification, traditionalists make a distinction between themselves and other Muslim groups, including “rationalists” who place reason before the *sunnah*, Shi‘is who believe that *sunnah* is not only attributed to the Prophet but also to the twelve Imams who replaced him in leading the Muslim community, and reformist Muslims who deviate from the *sunnah* in their views. The reformists’ counter-argument is that many traditionalist principles and practices do not have Prophetic examples. Therefore, they themselves claim the right to be *ahlus sunnah wal jamaah* (van Bruinessen 1996, 167). Critique of the practices of traditionalists is mostly related to *adat*.

*Adat* refers to custom or repeated actions and is derived from the Arabic words ‘awd and *al-mu‘awadah*, meaning repetition. It is the whole of local practices in society which is repeated and passed down continuously from one generation to the next. Muslim reformists argue that Islamic practices should not be infiltrated by non-Islamic practices originated from *adat*, whereas the traditionalists place *adat* as an essential element of the dynamism of religious teachings by accepting new aspects of creativity and activity in *adat*. Due to this perception, NU recognizes traditions such as some rituals for dead Muslims through prayers for the deceased (*tahlilan*), communal feasts (*selametan*), remembering the deceased (*haul*), and pilgrimage to shrines (*ziarah kubur*). *Adat* can also be a legal basis based on the significant comprehensive legal maxims (*al-qawa‘id al-fiqhiyah*), namely *al-‘adah muhakkamah* (custom can be used as the rule of law) with provisions. If *adat* conflicts with shari‘a, shari‘a is chosen over *adat*. In my view, NU’s acceptance of Islamic teachings based on *adat* has made its religious practices more flexible and aligned with the changing context and times while still following the procedure of the *aswaja* tradition, that is, supporting the principle of Islamic jurisprudence (*ushul fiqh*) and *al-qawa‘id al-fiqhiyah* guidelines (Ridhwan 2019).

Three other concepts that have served as a basis for NU's Islamic practices are *fiqh*, *madhhab*, and *taqlid*. *Fiqh* is one of the religious sciences that provide Muslims with a guideline for deciding whether certain conducts are allowed or not. However, in formulating their guidance NU's ulama also consider the concepts of *taqlid* and *madhhab*, as opposed to only practicing *ijtihad*, the process of independent legal reasoning based on the Islamic sources, the Qur'an, and hadith. *Taqlid* means adhering to a certain person or *madhhab* (school of law) in all matters of religion. NU's ulama argue that this is not about "blindly" following someone, because they follow ulama and opinions that were shown to be successful in their knowledge and conduct and they perform a certain selection to determine who to follow and who not to follow. In their adherence to *fiqh*, NU's ulama and followers adhere to one of four *madhhab*—the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali—including their opinions (*qaul*) and methods of legal reasoning (*manhaj*), although in practice they often follow Imam Shafi'i. They also apply *taqlid* regarding Islamic doctrine (*'aqidah*) by following Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari (873–935) and Abu Manshur al-Maturidi (853–944), and Islamic mysticism (*tasawuf*) by adhering to Imam Junayd al-Baghdadi (830–910) and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111) (Ramdhan 2018, 166). According to the view of NU's ulama, it is risky to only rely on the interpretation of the Qur'an and hadith due to the risk of errors leading to sin, quite apart from their attitude of respecting *mujtahid* (*ijtihad* subject) ulama as the heirs of the Prophet (van Bruinessen 1996, 167). Thus it is not surprising to see the NU followers at the grassroots practice *taqlid* by regarding their local Islamic leaders with obedience and respect.

The practice of adhering to *madhhab* and *taqlid* can be observed also in the legal methodology of NU's fatwa forum, the Bahtsul Masail, which discusses ethical and other issues. The Bahtsul Masail was established formally in the same year that NU was founded, but Indonesian ulama had practised Bahtsul Masail



informally for much longer, even in very everyday situations such as coffee-shop conversations (Ramdhan 2018, 54). There are three methods of legal reasoning in the Bahtsul Masail. These are *qawli* (adhering to established opinions of *imam madhhab*), *manhaji* (following the means and the rule of law that have been compiled by *imam madhhab*), and *ilhaqi* (equating the legal judgement of new problems with problems that have been answered by great ulama in the *kitab kuning*). However, in applying these methods, NU's ulama use the particular principles of NU (*al-fikrah al-nahdhiyyah*). These are: firstly, moderation (*tawassutiyyah*), prescribing that NU's position should be balanced (*tawazun*) and fair (*i'tidal*) in addressing various issues; secondly, tolerance (*tasamuhhiyyah*), implying that NU accepts differences in faith, ways of thinking, and culture; thirdly, the mindset of reformation (*ishlahiyyah*), meaning an effort to make improvements in all aspect of life; fourthly, a dynamic mindset (*tathawwuriyyah*), implying that NU considers the context in response to various problems; and fifthly, a methodological mindset (*manhajiyyah*), meaning that NU always arrives at legal judgements by referring to a framework that has been set by the organization in advance (Ramdhan 2018, 165-8).

Taking these principles into consideration, in my view, *madhhab* and *taqlid* as employed within NU are culturally and intellectually dynamic concepts and open for exploration. This inherent dynamism in a traditionalist organization like NU suggests that traditionalism does not mean being hopelessly fixed in orthodoxy and stagnancy. The tradition as operated by NU is a "discursive tradition" (Asad 1986, 14). In the explanation by M. Qasim Zaman (2002, 6): "This discursive tradition is constituted and reconstituted not only by an ongoing interaction between the present and the past, however, but also by the manner in which relations of power and other forms of contestation and conflict impinge on any definition of what it is to be a Muslim." Another example of a discursive tradition in action is the interaction between Muslim tradition and feminist ideas, through which

Islamic feminist knowledge has been developed in critical conversation with the Islamic tradition (Ziba, Mulki, and Jana 2015, 20). A new method of interpreting hadith, *mubadalah* (reciprocal approach)—a term coined by Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, a traditionalist Muslim scholar from Cirebon, West Java—also takes a critical engagement of feminist ideas with tradition, especially the hadith, as its starting point (Duderija, Alak, and Hissong 2020, 85-7). I will further elaborate on this interaction in Chapter 4.

NU teaches and disseminates the doctrine of its teachings through educational institutions. One of the most established systems is *pesantren*. The institution of the *pesantren* is characterized by at least five elements. A *pesantren* usually consists, firstly, of a complex of houses for students to live in while they engage in their studies. The other elements that identify *pesantren* educational institutions are: the presence of a *kiai*, who serves as the leader of the *pesantren*; the mosque associated with the educational facility; the *kitab kuning* as a textbook used in *pesantren*, which provides a specific curriculum; and finally, the *santri*, or the students who attend the *pesantren* (Dhofier 1999, 25). *Santri* are a critical element of the *pesantren* education system. They are called *talib al-‘ilm*, which means “a searcher for knowledge”. *Pesantren* provide housing for *santri* to stay during their period of study under the instruction of a *kiai*. These students are called *santri mukim* (resident *santri*). They reside in the housing complexes, which are usually located in the same place as the *kiai*’s house, the mosque, and the classrooms. The compounds are surrounded by high walls, so that *santri* cannot go out without permission. If the *pesantren* is not single-sex, accommodation is segregated with separate quarters for male and female students (Dhofier 1999, xxix and 13).

Another category of students is that of *santri kalong*, who do not reside in the *pesantren* complex because they live in the village where the *pesantren* is located. *Santri kalong* attend the

*pesantren* only for class, and then they return to their homes (Dhofier 1999, 31-3). Usually, *santri* start learning at the *pesantren* when they reach the age of admission for junior high school, thirteen years old, although there are children who attend *pesantren* at an earlier age. Besides *pesantren*, traditionalists also learn Islam through *pengajian*, religious lessons or study groups that are typically organized at mosques, village prayer houses known as *langgar/mushala*, or at home as part of a family's daily activities (Zaini 1998, 39). Unlike *pesantren*, participants in *pengajian* or *jamaah* are mostly adult lay Muslims who live in the area.

Education methods in the *pesantren* are not static. They change, albeit slowly. In term of educational reform, Wahid Hasyim (1914–1953) is an important figure. He was the son of Hasyim Asy'ari, the founder of NU. After returning from Mecca in 1933, he changed the method of teaching and the purpose of the study in his own *pesantren* and introduced Western subjects. For example, he adopted a systematic tutorial method instead of a *bandongan* method.<sup>22</sup> The learning method changed from teacher centred to students being actively engaged in the learning; students were given a chance to ask questions. In this new system, ulama were no longer the only source of Islamic knowledge. Books written in the Latin script were included in the curriculum as well. Wahid was not supported by his father, but in 1935 he finally put his ideas into practice by establishing Madrasah Nizamiyah (Dhofier 1999, 54-55). Today, most traditional *pesantren* combine informal and formal Islamic education systems, in line with the national system of education (Hefner 2018, 10).

Another aspect of innovation concerns the space for female *santri*. They have more space today compared to what they had

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<sup>22</sup> *Bandongan* or *weton* teaching is the system in which a group of students (ranging from five to five hundred) listened to a teacher who read and translated the Arabic text word by word using the Javanese language, later explaining the meaning (Dhofier 1999, 11 and 54-5).

in the past, either as leaders or as students. This development can be seen from the data reported by Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS, the Central Bureau of Statistics) at the district level. For example, the 2014 data of BPS in District Blitar East Java, show that the number of female *santri* was 10,755 students, while male *santri* numbered 11,995 (BPS Kabupaten Blitar n.d.). The 2017 data of BPS in District Brebes, Central Java, showed that there were 4,273 female *santri* who studied and lived in *pesantren*. This number is no different from that for male *santri*, at 4,467 students (BPS Kabupaten Brebes n.d.). Nor is *pesantren* leadership monopolized by *kiais* only. The biographies of the four female ulama central to this dissertation show that female religious leaders also play a role in developing Islamic education institutions and programmes. They run *pesantren* and *pengajian*. They initiated *pengajian* for neighbouring women and children in their villages. Soon after, two of them followed this up by establishing *pesantren* for female students to study and reside in.

Administratively, NU's *pesantren* are connected through an organization under NU called Rabithah Ma'ahid Islamiyyah (RMI), the headquarters of which are in Jakarta. The organizational headquarters of NU are also located in Jakarta. Its structure consists of three boards, namely the legislative (Syuriah), executive (Tanfidziyah), and advisory (Mustasyar) bodies (Ahmad 2022). This structure exists in each provincial, district, sub-district, and village branch as well. NU has several wing organizations, which serve to implement the NU policy relating to specific community groups. Each wing organization has its own members. These are Muslimat for women, Fatayat for young women, Gerakan Pemuda Anshor (GP Anshor) for young men, Ikatan Putera NU (IPNU) for male students, Ikatan Putera Puteri NU (IPPNU) for female students, Pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia (PMII, the Islamic Student Movement of Indonesia) for students of NU, and eight other professional bodies (Syakir NF 2020). With these autonomous bodies, the NU attempts to

reach and involve members from different socio-demographic segments in terms of gender, age, profession, and place. The objective is to uphold the teachings of Islam amid people's lives according to the understanding of *Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah*, in the context of Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia (NKRI, the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia) (Ahmad 2021).

As an Islamic mass organization, NU continues to grow, but at the same time it has also struggled to deal with new challenges and problems, especially after the fall of Suharto. Law 8 of 1985 on Social Organizations was used by the government to control ulama by obliging them to be affiliated to a legal organization recognized by the state. To meet that objective, an organization had to adopt Pancasila (five basis of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia) as the only ideology. But after May 1998 this restriction was replaced by the less coercive Law 17 of 2013, which states that an organization must “not conflict” with Pancasila or the Constitution. On the one hand, this elevation of restriction gives more space to the propagation of religious teachings. On the other hand, it has allowed the increasing circulation in Indonesia of global Islamic teachings and ideas, especially teachings originating in the Middle East. Moderate Muslim organizations like NU and Muhammadiyah face tensions both internally and externally. For example, the emergence of the less moderate “true path of NU” (NU Garis Lurus or NUGL)<sup>23</sup> and the influence of the Tarbiyah movement among Muhammadiyah members and sympathisers have been seen as a threat, advancing ideas and interpretations that are more conservative and intolerant. It has also revived the old tension between NU and Muhammadiyah; for instance, the different notions regarding *bidah* (Islamic innovation) and Islamic

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23 The “True Path NU” (NU Garis Lurus or NUGL) is a group founded by young NU generations after the organization's 2015 national congress (*muktamar*). This group claims to be an alternative voice for the organization in opposition to the NU leadership led by chairman Said Aqil Siradj. These young generations mostly graduated in Islamic theology in the Middle East. See Arifianto (2018).

practices that have become fluid recently (Syechbubakr 2018).<sup>24</sup> Therefore, some efforts have been made by both organizations to counter the conservative and intolerant narrative spread by the new Muslim movements.<sup>25</sup> In NU in particular, even though a group such as NUGL exists, other young followers within NU play significant roles in preserving the moderate spirit of *al-fikrah al-nahdhiyyah* (the particular principles of NU) through socio-religious movements concerning various issues in Indonesia. This effort already started in the 1980s.

### **Intellectual and Social Activism within Nahdlatul Ulama**

Young followers of NU have adopted and are influenced by the particular principles of NU in their intellectual development and social involvement to achieve social change in Indonesia. In the 1990s, several new Islamic NGOs were established by mostly young Muslims who had ideological ties to NU, although these organizations were not necessarily formally affiliated with NU. These young people were born and raised in the culture of the NU family. Some of them were *pesantren* graduates, and/or active in organizations under NU. A study conducted by Pusat Penelitian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM, the Center for Islamic and Community Research) in 2002 reveals this influence. The research shows that if respondents identify with NU or Muhammadiyah, this influences their active involvement in issues of public interest through various non-religious civil

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24 *Bidah* means innovation related to Islamic practices and usually holds a negative connotation. Two books explaining the practices debated by NU and the Muhammadiyah were written by Aliy As'ad, *Ke-NU-an Buku Pertama* (Yogyakarta: Pengurus Wilayah Ma'arif NU Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, 1981) and KH. Ali Ma'shum, *Kebenaran Argumentasi Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah*, translated from the Arabic by KH Ahmad Subki Masyhadiy, (Pekalongan: Udin Putra, 1983). The issues described in the two books include *ziarah*, which is visiting and praying at a grave, *tahlilan*, which is reciting ritualized prayers for dead people, the experience of the soul after death and the other five concerns related to the dead, non-obligatory prayers, and the method of determining the beginning and end of Ramadhan (van Bruinessen 2013, 165 and 171).

25 There has been collaboration between the two institutions in recent years, especially since the massive political hoaxes and the rise of conservative and hardline Muslim groups such as HTI and FPI. They have made statements and expressed shared attitudes in response to several issues that occurred. This collaboration is seen not only among the respective leaders but also among the younger generation of these two organizations, for example between the Wahid Foundation and the Ma'arif Institute.

society activities, such as cultural groups, cooperatives, labour unions, and professional organizations. This correlation explains the importance of the role of community organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah as what van Bruinessen called “pillars of civil society” in cultivating citizenship values in their members (van Bruinessen 2013, 340-1).



FIGURE 1: A meeting called Musyawarah Kaum Muda NU (deliberation of NU Young Generation) was held at the 33rd NU Muktamar in Jombang in 2015. Photo by the author.

In 1983, the decision to “return to the guidelines (*khittah*) of 1926” was made in the NU National Meeting (Musyawarah Nasional or Munas) at Situbondo. This decision was influenced by political and internal factors. In 1973, President Suharto established a new Muslim party, the United Development Party (PPP), which was a blend of the four existing Muslim parties (NU, Parmusi, PSII, and Perti). Conflicts between NU and other groups within PPP began to emerge. For example, when determining candidates for the 1982 general election, the party decided not to give NU the requested proportion of seats and even placed its candidates at the bottom of the list. In addition, the

role of NU ulama, who dominated the party's Advisory Council (Majelis Syuro), was weakened as the council only functioned as a consultative body. This political situation had an impact on the leadership crisis and upheaval within the NU organization. For instance, NU leaders in the regions strongly criticized the leadership of Idham Chalid (1921-2010), general chairman of Pengurus Besar Nahdhatul Ulama (PBNU, the National Board of NU) from 1956 to 1984 and the first president of PPP, at the NU Semarang congress in 1979, because he did not advocate on behalf of NU in PPP (Bush 2009, 66-68; van Bruinessen 1996, 174).

The text of NU's *khittah* of 1926 is based on the two books entitled *Khitthah Nahdliyah* and *Islam, Pancasila, dan Ukhuwah Islamiyah*, which are a collection of speeches and interviews with Kiai Achmad Siddiq. The 1983 decision contains some guidelines. Firstly, returning to its 1926 *khittah* means that NU is essentially a socio-religious organization (*jam'iyah diniyyah*) i.e. not a political organization, or an organization that should involve itself in formal politics. Secondly, ulama are positioned as key actors who hold institutional authority within the organization and within the community through education. Thirdly, the characteristics of *ahlussunnah wal jamaah* are the essential elements of traditionalist thought, which employ the principles of *tawasuth* (moderation), *tawazun* (balance), *i'tidal* (fairness) and religious objectives such as *rahmatan li al-'alamin* (spreading compassion for all humankind). The last term means that "Islam can be applied anywhere, anytime, by anyone, to be the bearer of mercy to the whole of creation". Fourthly, the concepts of *taqlid* and *ijtihad* do not contradict each other, but can be applied together to obtain the pure teaching of Islam. Fifthly, NU accepts the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia based on Pancasila and affirms Pancasila as the sole principle of NU because it is not only harmonious, but its basic elements are also in line with Islamic principles. Sixthly, to create national unity, Muslim brotherhood is needed by respecting other differences,



including in backgrounds and characters, but holding the same vision of Islamic solidarity in Indonesia (Barton 1996, 110-128).

This NU *khittah* of 1926 has inspired the religious character of NU and became a guideline for the social and religious activism of the 1980s, both at the individual and organizational levels. Another change after this reorientation related to the composition of NU's Executive Board. At the 1984 NU National Congress (Muktamar), two progressive scholars were elected to the highest positions of the organization. Abdurrahman Wahid, affectionately known as Gus Dur, was elected General Chair of the Executive Board (Tanfidziyah). Kiai Achmad Siddiq was appointed as Rais Aam, the supreme leader of PBNU. Kiai Achmad Siddiq, born in Jember in 1926, was the son of the esteemed cleric Kiai Siddiq. Kiai Achmad Siddiq was a major proponent of reform in NU. He had once been the personal secretary of KH Wahid Hasyim, the Minister of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia from 1949 to 1952. Throughout his career, he worked for the ministry. Gus Dur, born in Jombang in 1940, was a grandchild of both Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari and Kiai Bisri Syansuri, the founding fathers of NU. Gus Dur attended Islamic boarding schools and universities in Cairo and Baghdad (Barton 1996, 110-28).

Gur Dur played an important role in building *pesantren* human resources and the capacity of the young generation of NU. Since the Suharto government, NGOs have carried out capacity-building programmes in Indonesia with the support of international donors. One of these NGOs is Lembaga Penelitian, Pendidikan, dan Penerangan Ekonomi dan Sosial (LP3ES, the Institute for Social, Economic, and Social Research, Education, and Information).<sup>26</sup> LP3ES, which focused on empowering rural society, worked with Gus Dur to gain access to the *pesantren* as these were seen as one of the most important actors of

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26 This NGO was founded in 1971. It was funded by Friedrich Naumann Stiftung in Germany and pioneered research programmes and pilot projects to develop the potential of *pesantren* as a bridge and an empowerment trigger for rural residents. See van Bruinessen (2013, 342) and (2014, 136).

community empowerment at the local level.<sup>27</sup> In around 1980, LP3ES conducted appropriate technology (*teknologi tepat guna*) projects in *pesantren* in collaboration with student activists of Institute Teknologi Bandung (ITB, Bandung Technology Institute). Later, the institute also carried out programmes concentrated on training *pesantren* youth and encouraging critical discussions about religion and society that helped them to become NGO activists. In 1983, a new NGO called Perhimpunan dan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat (P3M, the Centre for Pesantren and Community Development) continued the *pesantren*-based empowerment programme. The empowerment programme carried out by P3M made a distinct contribution to the development of Islamic thought among traditionalists. For seventeen years, P3M spearheaded important debates about issues of religion and society, including issues of land conflict, gender, and Islam, parliamentary democracy, and corruption (van Bruinessen 2013, 342-344). In the 1990s, new NGOs emerged which were established by beneficiaries of LP3ES or P3M empowerment programmes, such as Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Sosial (LKIS, the Institution of Islamic and Social Studies), Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat (YKF, Fatayat Welfare Foundation) in Yogyakarta, and Rahima in Jakarta. Their programmes were supported by foreign donors in need of programme partners in Indonesia, such as the Ford Foundation, the Asia Foundation, and USAID. These Islamic NGOs had personal or ideological ties with NU (van Doorn-Harder 2006, 237).

Gus Dur was a great inspiration for NU youth, especially with regard to their ideas about social movements and democracy. He published widely on these subjects in the media, besides giving lectures and contributing to discussion forums. In the heyday of NGOs in the 1990s, his intellectual influence was intense. For example, in 1991, a group of NU youth in Yogyakarta initiated

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27 *Pesantren* is the only non-state institution that functions at the grassroots level in accordance with the interests of activists who are interested in bottom-up development, not top-down programmes from government to community (van Bruinessen 2013, 383).

street discussions on democracy, Islamic studies, and human rights in addition to being involved with the student cultural movement. They were Imam Aziz, Ahmad Suaedy, Jadul Maula, and Akhmad Fikri. Later, in 1993, they established an NGO called Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Sosial (LKIS, Institute for Islamic and Social Studies). LKiS published its first book, titled *Kiri Islam* (“The Islamic Left”), to inaugurate its establishment. This book, translated from *Al-Islam al-Yasar* written by Kazhuo Shioyaki, discusses the philosophy of Hassan Hanafi, an Egyptian scholar. Subsequently, LKiS published other books which contained the spirit of pluralism and commitment to *pesantren* values and traditions, including *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), *ta’adul* (fairness), and *tawasuth* (moderation) (Ismah 2019, 364-365).

In 1999, LKiS published a book titled *Kultur Hibrida, Anak Muda NU di Jalur Kultural* (Hybrid Culture, Young NU Generation on the Cultural Road). This book is about the young generations of NU who brought about social change among the *pesantren* community and NU. It highlights what van Bruinessen (1994, 126) has identified as the new NU youth who, although they came from “a *pesantren* traditionalism and kiai authoritarianism”, turned out to be more progressive and active in community development compared to their peers in Islamic modernist groups such as Muhammadiyah. Activists from *pesantren* at the same time tended to be involved in non-NGO types of work, namely discussions and adult education, or charitable and cooperative work. *Kultur Hibrida* suggests four factors that influenced the emergence of the rising young NU generation. These elements are their access to higher education, the possession of deep intellectual traditions gained from *pesantren*, their experience of economic and political marginalization, and the influence of inspirational figures such as Gus Dur (Salim 1999).

That said, the NGOs founded by the younger generation of NU did not operate at the institutional level of NU and had very

little effect in terms of changes to the organization. Therefore, NU as such remained a conservative organization, especially with regard to issues related to women and gender justice. This situation posed a challenge to the women's organizations under the auspices of NU, such as Muslimat and Fatayat. For instance, when there were demands from NU women for NU to issue firm fatwas about the potential harm of child marriage and female circumcision, they did not get a positive response. Instead, NU responded to them with an assumption that their gender activism and progressive views on Islam and women were prompted by (Western) donor agencies. NU did not, in other words, affirm women's efforts within the NU tradition. Likewise, in the post-1998 Reformation era, while NU was getting closer to the state, the needs of women were not accommodated. Thus, NU women sought different approaches, both through the institutional channels of the Fatayat and Muslimat organizations, and through cultural cooperation between individuals outside the institution.<sup>28</sup> I will discuss these efforts, including the struggles and work of Fatayat and Muslimat, in more detail in the next section.

### **NU Women and Gender Activism**

NU women engage with social and gender activism through the organization's autonomous bodies, Fatayat and Muslimat. These two women's wing organizations of NU play an important part in social transformation in Indonesia related to the role and position of women from a religious perspective. However, women have gone through a long struggle to achieve a place and recognition in this traditionalist organization. They were hindered by the organization's patriarchal structure and the low level of women's education. During the first decades of its existence, NU did not accept the membership of women. NU women urged the establishment of organizations for women at

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<sup>28</sup> Author's interview with Lies Marcoes, 2 February 2018.

several NU congresses. They argued that the establishment of a women's organization was necessary not only because of the historical demands of the struggle for independence; they were also driven by a deep concern with the unequal conditions and treatment of women, and views towards women. In 1938, at the 13th congress in Menes, Banten, two female representatives were given the opportunity to speak. They were Nyai R. Djuaesih and Nyai Siti Sarah. One of the points they raised was that women also embraced Islam, and that their large numbers offered potential for developing the organization. If women did not get a place in NU, the organization would as a consequence be left behind. Nyai R. Djuaesih was not alone: 8,000 women joined her. Two thousand women were able to enter the congress venue, while the rest remained outside. They came at their own expense and by their own means from various parts of Indonesia (van Doorn-Harder 2006, 207).

Nyai R. Djuaesih and other women continued their struggle in the 14th NU Congress in Magelang in 1939. She even chaired one of the discussion forums. The following year, at the 15th NU Congress in Surabaya in 1940, the efforts of the women received support from K.H. Dahlan from Pasuruan and Kiai Aziz Dijar, who approached the headquarters of NU to advocate the acceptance of women in the organization. It was finally decided that NU would provide a non-autonomous wing organization for NU women called the Nahdloetul Oelama Muslimat (NOM). After the independence of Indonesia, NU held its 16th Congress in 1946 in Purwokerto. Kiai Dahlan managed to convince K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari and K.H. Wahab Chasbullah to sign the legalization of NOM as an autonomous body of NU with its own management. Ny Chadijah Dahlan, the wife of K.H. Dahlan, who was a member of the Komite Nasional Indonesia Pusat (KNPI, Central Indonesian National Committee), was elected as the first chairwoman of Muslimat NU (van Doorn-Harder 2006, 207). The initial establishment of NOM in Surabaya apparently met with an enthusiastic response among young NU women and this motivated Murthasiyah from

Surabaya, Khuzaimah Mansur from Gresik, and Aminah from Sidoarjo to also establish local branches.

During the Congress of NU in 1940, young women from various branches also held meetings and agreed to form Puteri Nahdloetul Oelama Muslimat (Puteri NOM). They asked the NU Congress to recognize it as an autonomous organization within NU, but the Congress only approved it as part of NOM. After two years, Puteri NOM again asked to have their central executive board recognized as separate from NOM because the Puteri NOM organization continued to grow at the local level. In February 1950, the headquarters of NU approved the formation of Puteri NOM's headquarters, which from then onwards was called the Central Board of Fatayat NU. Furthermore, the 18th NU Congress on 20 April-3 May 1950 in Jakarta officially accepted Fatayat NU as one of the autonomous bodies of NU. The first head of Fatayat NU was Nihayah Bakri of Surabaya as Chair I, and Aminah Mansur from Sidoarjo as Chair II (van Doorn-Harder 2006, 207).

Although Fatayat and Muslimat became part of NU institutionally, this does not mean that NU women had formal authority within NU. Instead, they were only "observers and participants" with limited authority, and had authority only within their own women's organization (van Doorn-Harder 2006, 82). Nevertheless, during the 1950s and 1960s, three women were appointed members of the highest body of NU, the Syuriah (Supreme Council): Nyai Choiriyah Hasyim (the sister of Hasyim Asy'ari), Nyai Fatimah, and Nyai Mahmudah Mawardi. The presence of women in this council means that any women who had the quality and knowledge to be recognized as ulama might have a seat. But, as Pieterella van Doorn-Harder has noted, during the 1960s, women were absent from the council since they tended to pursue secular studies supported by the government, rather than religious studies. Years later, in 2000, two new names appeared on the list of Syuriah NU: Mursyidah Thohir and Huzaemah T. Yanggo (van Doorn-Harder 2006, 81

and 208). More female names were listed among the NU board members during the 2015-2020 period as experts (*a'wan*), and thus part of Syuriah. These were Sinta Nuriyah, Mahfudhoh Ali Ubaid, Nafisah Sahal Mahfudh, Huzaemah T. Yanggo, Faizah Ali Sibromalisi, Ibtisyaroh, and Sri Mulyati (Ahmad 2015).<sup>29</sup>

Pieterella van Doorn-Harder (2006, 224-5) has argued that since the beginning of the establishment of Muslimat and Fatayat, NU women were concerned about equal rights and opportunities for women. They also played active roles during the independence struggle and after independence in political discussions. The goals of Muslimat and Fatayat have developed to focus on the education of Muslim women and allowing them to play a broader role in religion and the nation. Furthermore, they have committed to advocating for social justice, equal rights, and prosperity following Islam *ahlussunnah wal jamaah*. Since 1984, when NU returned to the *Khittah* as a religious and social mass organization, Muslimat has focused more on programmes to improve the quality of health and education for women and children by establishing birth clinics and kindergartens, as well as on women's economic empowerment programmes.

Likewise, Fatayat NU took part in social changes in Indonesia. In the 1980s, influenced by the educational programmes of P3M, they began to engage in critical dialogues, bringing together feminist agendas on sexual violence against women and polygyny, and their Islamic traditions.<sup>30</sup> The translation of books written by Muslim feminists has become an influencing factor in the emergence of the discourse on Islam and feminism. The writings of Muslim intellectuals from the Middle East, Pakistan, India, and

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29 Kiai Mujib Qulyubi, who chairs the Bahtsul Masail Council of NU, states that the presence of women in NU's organizational structure means that NU does not discriminate against women. It is also an appreciation due to women's long involvement with NU and their advanced knowledge. Author's interview on 31 January 2018.

30 It was Lily Zakiyah Munir, a female Muslim scholar and one of the national chairs of Muslimat, who inspired this NU women's organization to start discussing gender issues. In July 1998, for the first time, Muslimat conducted a seminar to discuss the sexual violence against Chinese women during the May 1998 riots in Jakarta. Following this programme, she led Muslimat NU to the discussion on how shari'ah law implicates women and to critique the discourse of polygyny (van Doorn-Harder 2006, 224-5).

Malaysia helped the NU women to deepen their understanding of these critical discourses and to adopt new critical analysis methods in reading and interpreting Islamic texts (van Doorn-Harder 2006, 238). These books included Fatima Mernissi's *Women and Islam: a Historical and Theological Inquiry* (1991), translated into *Wanita dalam Islam* (Bandung: Pustaka, 1994), and Amina Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman: Reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1992, 1999), translated into *Qur'an Menurut Perempuan: Meluruskan Bias Gender dalam Tradisi Tafsir* (Jakarta: Serambi Ilmu Semesta, 2001).<sup>31</sup>

In implementing women's empowerment programmes, Muslimat and Fatayat carried out collaborative work with international organizations and foreign donors, enabling them to execute programmes on a broader scale (Arnez 2010, 71). They maintained religious activities such as *pengajian* or *majelis taklim* as sites to educate NU women and a means to carry out and instigate intervention programmes, for instance, on health care and information for children and mothers that were funded by the United Nations. The topics of *pengajian* were not always related to religion, but also included secular issues such as birth control and sexual reproductive rights. In 1991, the Fatayat branch in Yogyakarta established Yayasan Kesejahteraan Fatayat (YKF, the Fatayat Welfare Foundation). After the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development, Fatayat formulated new programmes to promote women's reproductive rights. They thus played a pioneering role among NU women's organizations in addressing this issue (van Doorn-Harder 2006, 208). They also worked on reinterpreting classical Islamic texts including the *kitab kuning* as the basis of *fiqh* related to women and reproductive rights. They invited *pesantren* circles and networks to join a programme called "Badal (assistant of) Kiai and Nyai"

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31 Nur Rofiah, a female Islamic scholar of KUPI, talked about the influence of feminist Muslim scholars such as Fatima Mernissi and Amina Wadud. They have both contributed to the building of critical consciousness in religious discourse, which has inspired her to develop a new framework of studying Islam, namely the perspective of substantive justice. Author's interview with Nur Rofiah, 8 May 2017.



guided by *kiai*, *nyai*, and teachers of *pesantren* who had a deep understanding of classical Islamic texts. This programme was influential in improving the knowledge and self-esteem of female religious leaders from *pesantren*. Those NU women who were actively engaged in NGO activism and demanding changes in NU were not always relatives and descendants of important NU leaders, but they mostly had a *pesantren* and university education and were involved with gender training organized by NGOs such as P3M.

### **Women's Struggle for a Place in NU's Bahtsul Masail**

NU women have gained significant knowledge of, and experience in, social activism at the grassroots, but there are not many records of their role in issuing fatwas, either as individuals or as part of collective fatwa forums such as the Bahtsul Masail of NU. Although they lead *pengajian*, in which they answer questions from their *jamaah* related to ethical improvement, their role as fatwa-givers is not generally reported. But as Van Doorn-Harder reported, historical examples of women's influence can be found. Before a fatwa on birth control was issued by Syuriah in 1972, Ibu Muhammad Baidawi from Jombang thought that this issue was important to convey to her *jamaah*. Therefore, she asked her husband, the chairman of NU in his area, to issue a fatwa that allowed birth control and its methods. Finally, a fatwa on the oral contraceptive pill as a method of birth control was issued. Ibu Muhammad Baidawi and other NU women conveyed and explained this fatwa to their female *jamaah*. However, the *jamaah* did not use the method because they did not trust the clinic. Responding to this situation, the NU women built their own clinic for birth control services. Soon after, a fatwa on another method of birth control was issued by NU, which allowed coitus interruptus on condition that it is agreed by the husband and wife (van Doorn-Harder 2006, 218).



FIGURE 2: The Bahtsul Masail forum concerning legal rules (*qonuniyah*) in the 2017 NU Munas in Lombok. Photo by the author.

Wahyuni and Wafiroh (2014, 109 and 111) noted that in the period 1926-1999, the Bahtsul Masail of NU discussed forty-five issues related to women out of a total of 438 problems. Among the forty-five issues were questions of worship, marriage, and social issues, such as women leaving the house, giving speeches in public, riding bicycles, working at night, and occupying positions as legislative members and village heads. These fatwas showed significant gender bias, emphasizing gender stereotypes and advocating the domestication of women. Likewise, the result of the Bahtsul Masail in the 1997 NU Munas in Lombok regarding the position of women in Islam or *makanatul mar'ah fil Islam* was not very progressive at all with regard to gender equality. It said that women were allowed to play a role in the public sphere as long as they did not abandon the domestic role that was thought to be their natural duty (*kodrat*) (Mahbib 2017).

However, the 30<sup>th</sup> NU Mukhtamar in 1999 in Lirboyo, Kediri, East Java, indicated a shift in NU thinking related to gender equality. The Bahtsul Masail issued fatwas on Islam and gender equality in the religious field, culture, and politics as a response to the growth of the feminist and gender equality movement in Indonesia. The fatwas stated that gender inequalities are prevalent in religion, culture, and politics. In religion, for example, gender-insensitive interpretation of the Qur'an and hadith becomes the basis for practices that discriminate against women in society. Meanwhile,

discrimination and marginalization continue to be perpetuated by a patriarchal society, such as providing opportunities only to men and marginalizing women, and seeing the roles of men in the public area and women in the domestic area as the norm. Gender inequality is also perpetuated in political life; for instance, due to the low representation of women, they cannot take part in the political decision-making process. The NU fatwa forum then issued three recommendations. The first was to reinterpret the Qur'an and hadith in a way that is more sensitive toward gender equality. The second was to review cultural understandings critically. The third was to overhaul political practices that discriminated against women (Wahyuni and Wafiroh 2014, 97-8).

NU women are generally of the view that obtaining a formal position within the organization is important. They are particularly interested in the Administrative Council (Tanfidziyah), because this will involve them in the decision-making process. However, it seems that a lot of individual effort is needed to realize this hope. The most prominent leader of Muslimat in the late 1990s, Asmah Sjachruni, tried to gain a position in the Administrative Council at the 1999 NU Muktamar. But she was unsuccessful. In the Muktamar and Munas NU and also Bahtsul Masail held by the provincial branch of NU, NU women are usually only involved in open events where anyone is allowed to come.<sup>32</sup> The exceptions are a few women who serve as members of *a'wan* advising Syuriyah, or women envoys representing the NU autonomous bodies; they are also involved in the Bahtsul Masail of NU. In the Bahtsul Masail of the 2002 NU Munas in Hajj Dormitory, Jakarta, Laffan (2005) identified only one female participant,

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32 Umdatul Baroroh, a *nyai* from Pati, Central Java, shared her experience of being refused when she tried to join the Bahtsul Masail forum at the 2015 NU Muktamar in Jombang because all of the participants were men. So she was allowed to listen to the discussion only from outside the room in the neighbouring house terrace. Likewise, Umma Farida, a board member of the provincial branch of Muslimat in Semarang, said that NU women function as listeners only in the Bahtsul Masail conducted by the NU in her area. Therefore, she is reluctant to accept the invitation to attend the forum. Both Umdatul and Umma shared these experiences at the Bahtsul Masail forum conducted by Wahid Foundation in Jakarta that I participated in. Author's note, 1 February 2018.

Najichah Muchtarom of Kendal, Central Java, who participated in a discussion about the creation of Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB, the National Awakening Party) and the implication of the return to NU's 1926 *Khittah*. She also participated in the 1997 NU Munas in Lombok along with Safira Machrusah as delegates of NU women's wing organization for female students, Ikatan Putera Puteri NU (IPPNU) (PCINU Mesir n.d.). There are only a few examples like this.

Having limited access to the Bahtsul Masail has led women to work out and design alternative strategies for seeking support e.g. in the Administrative Council so that their voices can be heard. First, NU women hold a meeting or *halaqah* before or during the NU Munas or Mukhtamar concerning their issues and agenda. During the Munas or Mukhtamar, they may approach authoritative persons who share similar concerns. For instance, in the 33rd NU Mukhtamar in Jombang in 2015, a group of NU women called the NU Cultural Women's Movement held a meeting titled "Together with Ulama Combating Sexual Crimes against Women and Children". The *halaqah* discussed the results of a previous NU Bahtsul Masail concerning women's issues and the latest report from the National Commission on Violence against Women (Komisi Nasional Perempuan or Komnas Perempuan) about cases of violence against women. They urged the Mukhtamar committee in Jombang to open a plenary session on sexual crimes against women and children. This group was joined by Ruby Khalifah, director of the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN), Siti Masruchah, a commissioner of Komnas Perempuan, and Kiai Husein Muhammad.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, during the 2017 NU Munas in Lombok, Siti Masruchah handed over a booklet to a member of the House of Representatives who was also a member of NU, which included a description of the Draft Law on the Elimination of Sexual Violence.<sup>34</sup>

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33 I attended the 33<sup>rd</sup> NU Mukhtamar in Jombang in 2015 on a voluntary basis and joined the meeting of the NU Cultural Women's Movement. Author's note, 1-5 August 2015.

34 I did fieldwork at the 2017 NU Munas in Lombok and met some NU women including Masruchah. Author's note, 23-25 November 2017.



FIGURE 3: Halaqah Gerakan Perempuan NU Kultural (the Halaqah of NU Cultural Women's Movement) in the 33rd NU Mukhtamar in Jombang in 2015. Photo by the author.

Another type of effort concerns NU women joining the deliberation of the Bahtsul Masail at the NU Mukhtamar as ordinary participants, allowing them to get involved in the heated debates that often ensue between participants and the NU council members. As such, they can voice their opinions and ensure that their views will be taken into consideration by Bahtsul Masail. For example, the *maudhu'iyah* commission of the Bahtsul Masail at the 31st NU Mukhtamar in Makassar in 2010 discussed *sunat* (Indonesian circumcision).<sup>35</sup> The question was: "How can *sunat* for women be explained with the arguments that are obligated by shari'a (*masyru'iyah*, being ruled according to shari'a), its wisdom, legal judgement, methods, and the time for practising it?" Fatayat argued that *sunat* is not part of Islamic worship.

35 There are three different commissions in the Bahtsul Masail. *Firstly*, Bahtsul Masail *Diniyah Waqi'iyah* (related to daily religious questions) is oriented towards finding firmness in the legal status of "halal-haram". *Secondly*, Bahtsul Masail *Diniyah Maudhu'iyah* examines specific topics to be explained descriptively-narratively, for example, about the position of women in Islam (*makanatul mar'ah fil Islam*), which was discussed in the 1997 NU Munas in Lombok. *Thirdly*, Bahtsul Masail *Qonuniyyah* focuses on discussions of Indonesian regulations and legislations (Syakir NF 2021).

Therefore, it is better to abolish it as there is the possibility of endangering women, and the hadith that is used as the legal basis for *sunat* is *dhaif* (unreliable). Maria Ulfa, the chair of the National Board of Fatayat, had begun to publicize this view since the NU Pre-Muktamar in Cirebon in 2010. She was assisted by a doctor who explained that, according to medical research, *sunat* using traditional methods as it is practised outside Java causes infection. Therefore, Fatayat contended that *sunat* should be seen as harmful to women and should be avoided. Fatayat's view was not shared by the majority of NU ulama, however, including Kiai M. Aniq Muhammadun, the vice head of the provincial branch of NU in Central Java, and two women from the NU expert (*a'wan*) council, namely Huzaemah T. Yanggo and Faizah Ali Sibramalisi. In this Muktamar, Fatayat was not allowed a place to hold a *halaqah*, while in the discussion forum of the Bahtsul Masail, Fatayat only got five to ten minutes to convey their views, which was not enough for them to explain the matter in detail. The majority of ulama subsequently ruled that the *sunat* for women was supported by authoritative fatwas. According to Imam Shafi'i, they stated, *sunat* for women is lawful, similar to *sunat* for men being deemed lawful by Imam Nawawi (1233-1277), the well-known medieval Shafi'i scholar. The opinions that prohibit *sunat* for women, they argued, are not supported by arguments rooted in the shari'a (Ma'mur 2014, 66-69).

Hindun Anisah, one of the board members of Lembaga Kemaslahatan Keluarga Nahdlatul Ulama (LKKNU, the Nahdlatul Ulama Family Welfare Institute) of Jepara, Central Java, had also put an effort into issuing a gender-sensitive fatwa regarding unregistered marriage (*nikah sirri*) in 2007.<sup>36</sup> As women of NU did not have authority to do so, LKKNU invited *kiais* from Syuriah NU in Jepara to issue their legal opinion on *nikah sirri*, and also to discuss women's reproductive rights in relation to the concept of *ijbar* (the guardian's "coercive" authority). On the basis of

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36 LKKNU (Lembaga Kemaslahatan Keluarga, Family Welfare Institute) is a body within NU to promote family welfare through reproductive health and family planning.

this discussion, the forum decided that *nikah sirri* is considered *haram lighairihi* (unlawful for another reason). This means that *nikah sirri* is deemed forbidden, not because the marriage itself is not in line with Islamic rules but because of something else, namely its negative impact on women and children. When a marriage is unregistered, a wife is potentially in a weak position when the husband leaves her, and their children cannot obtain a birth certificate from the government.

However, this legal opinion was still opposed by the majority of NU *kiais* in Jepara. They said that the results of the Bahtsul Masail of LKKNU were invalid because the latter is not an authoritative council like the one that is conducted formally and affiliated to NU. These *kiais* then held a Bahtsul Masail discussing *nikah sirri*. Before the event was held, Hindun and the LKKNU committee approached all the *kiais* involved in the LKKNU programme, reminding them of the arguments reached before by distributing the agreed draft of the *nikah sirri* opinion reached within LKKNU. When the NU Bahtsul Masail was finally held in Jepara, women were relegated to being listeners again until a decision had been reached. The entire representative assembly of NU (Majelis Wakil Cabang Nahdlatul Ulama or MWC NU) except for one member turned out to be of the same opinion as the Bahtsul Masail of LKKNU. Still, the final decision taken by *mushahhah* (the final reviewer) upheld the permissibility of the *nikah sirri*. Hindun did not accept the result. She filed an objection because the person who was in charge as a final reviewer of the fatwa before it was declared did not respect the majority of the committee. After the discussion was postponed, it was finally decided that *nikah sirri* was *haram lighairihi*.<sup>37</sup>

The experiences of Fatayat and LKKNU show that producing fatwas on religious issues touching on women often raises a fierce debate between conservatives, who argue that they stand for consistency in the *fiqh* of the school of Islamic law

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37 Author's interview with Hindun Anisah, December 2014.

followed (*fiqh madhhab*), and progressives, who advance ideas they believe represent the basic message in Islamic teachings. That basic message, for example, is *tauhid* (monotheism), the oneness of God, which implies the need to oppose forms of power over humans other than God's power, and this would include patriarchy, a system that positions men as superior. The logical consequence of monotheism, in this argument, is to treat humans, both male and female, equally as humans. According to the Qur'an, *tauhid* emphasizes that women are perfectly human like men (QS. al-Hujurat, 49:13) so they must also be treated humanely (Kodir 2019, 11-13). But this message, progressives believe, has been neglected by conservative supporters as their only focus is on what is written on the *fiqh* text, without considering the context.

NU women are voicing a need for progressive fatwas that bring *maslaha* for women.<sup>38</sup> The problem, as the examples above make emphatically clear, is that they do not have a place in authoritative institutions such as the Bahtsul Masail of NU while at the same time that institution fails to accommodate the needs of these women. In response to this gap, Islamic NGOs have stepped in to provide educational programmes for women aimed at developing their classical Islamic knowledge. These programmes, such as Fiqhunnisa' (Arabic: *fiqh* on women's matters) of P3M and YKF's Badal Kiai and Nyai, have been able to extend the empowerment and capacity building of women. Although the programmes did not explicitly develop the capacity of women as ulama and their ability to issue fatwas, through the programmes NU women had the opportunity to develop their critical thinking when reading biased interpretations of the Qur'an and hadith. So, instead of following discriminative fatwas, they resorted to alternative ways by utilizing their scholarly capacity to make gender-sensitive fatwas at the local level.

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38 *Maṣlaḥa* that literally means "a source or cause of well-being and good, is sometimes translated as 'public interest' or 'social good.'" It is a principle that becomes the main consideration in achieving the purpose of shari'ah (*maqashid shari'ah*), namely "to attain the well-being (*maṣlaḥa*) of humanity in all their mundane and other worldly affairs" (Opwis 2010, 1-2).



In the 2000s, Rahima started its programme of empowering Muslim women as *ulama* by explicitly using the term *ulama perempuan*. Rahima not only provides a training programme for the women, it also creates a network through which women can build alliances and potentially issue fatwas on a broader scale.

### **Rahima and the PUP Programme**

Rahima was established in August 2000 by Muslim activists who were engaged with the Fiqhunnisa' programme of Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat (P3M, the Centre for Pesantren and Community Development). These activists included Lies Marcoes, Farha Ciciek, A.D. Eridani, and Syafiq Hasyim. P3M is generally considered the first NGO in Indonesia that raised the issue of Islam and democracy while explicitly addressing the Islamic traditionalist, *pesantren*-based community. It introduced gender analysis and the issue of reproductive rights to this community by holding training and discussion sessions that were attended by both male and female *pesantren* leaders. They used classical Islamic texts, *kitab kuning*, as resources to analyse issues, but they also criticized these texts and suggested new interpretations on key issues (Yafie 2010, 18). Fiqhunnisa' was one of the programmes of P3M that focused specifically on women, providing a series of discussions on Islam and reproductive health directed at women leaders of *pesantren* (*ibu nyai*).

Prior to the establishment of Rahima, the founder activists were disgruntled by the P3M's leadership regarding the issue of polygamy. They brought the issues initiated by Fiqhunnisa' of P3M and developed them further in line with women's rights in Rahima. For instance, Rahima has organized critical discussions of religious discourses regarding women and reproductive issues written in the *kitab kuning* to contextualize these texts and make interpretations more reliable. Rahima also proposes a new methodology for analysing texts and issuing fatwas

through the Bahtsul Masail forum (Yafie 2010, 19). Faqihuddin, one of Rahima's board members, has suggested a method called *mubadalah* (reciprocity) to interpret hadith that speak of gender relations to make sure that the interpretation addresses men and women equally.<sup>39</sup> In regard to the Bahtsul Masail, Rahima requires four pillars of consideration. They are, first, theological sources, including Al-Qur'an, hadith, the thoughts of classical ulama described in *kitab mu'tabarah* (credible resources of *kitab kuning*), and the thoughts of contemporary ulama written in their books. The second and the third pillars are national and international regulations, and the fourth is women's experiences.<sup>40</sup> Rahima has used this new method as the basis for its programmes, particularly Pengkaderan Ulama Perempuan (PUP, Female Ulama Cadre Programme).

PUP is one of the essential programmes of Rahima. It was started in 2001, with a *madrasah* Rahima held in a small *mushalla* attended by some students of State University for Islamic Studies (UIN) Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, most of them women. These women studied an advanced *kitab kuning* that was usually studied only by male *santri*. Kiai Husein Muhammad was the mentor in this programme. He is the *kiai* of Pesantren Dar al-Tauhid Arjawinangun and the founder of the Fahmina Institute foundation in Cirebon. He was born in Cirebon on 9 May 1953. He became acquainted with gender issues and the analysis of Mansour Fakhri, Lies Marcoes, and Masdar Farid Mas'udi through the Halaqah forum for ulama held by P3M in the early days of the programme. He then used gender analysis to examine classical Islamic texts in the fields of *fiqh*, *tafsir* (Qur'anic interpretation), hadith (Prophet tradition), and *tasawuf*.<sup>41</sup>

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39 *Mubadalah* is a method of interpreting hadith by finding a general value of the message and applying the value reciprocally to gender, men and women. Author's note from Tadarrus 4, 9-12 January 2014.

40 Author's note, Tadarrus 6 of PUP, 16-18 May 2014.

41 Author's interview with Kiai Husein Muhammad, 24 April 2017.



FIGURE 4: The tadarrus II of PUP cohort 4 on “Religion and Social Changes” held in Pesantren Krapyak, Yogyakarta, 5-8 September 2013. Photo by the author.

Rahima started the development of the small *madrasah* by conducting a workshop on formulating a PUP module on 23-25 January 2005, attended by its board members. After that, in August 2005, Rahima started the PUP programme. The goal of PUP is to prepare female ulama cadre by giving them expertise in classical Islamic knowledge sourced from Al-Qur’an, hadith, and *kitab kuning*, combined with the development of a gender perspective and critical thinking on injustice, the ability to organize and mobilize, and the cultivation of a legitimate position in society needed to issue fatwas authoritatively and with an eye on realizing social changes (Yafie 2011, xiii). Regarding financial support, Rahima received funds from international donors, such as Ford Foundation, Hivos, MM Netherlands, and Porticus Hongkong. This has enabled the PUP programme to be offered free of charge.<sup>42</sup>

Considering that PUP is an intensive and advanced programme for female Muslim leaders, the PUP participants have to meet some criteria. They should be aged between twenty and fifty-five years old, not be affiliated to any political parties, be able to read *kitab kuning*, be open-minded and have

42 Author’s interview with A.D. Eridani, 20 March 2016.

progressive ideas (which can be assessed during the admission test), and be capable of becoming a leader of a community. However, sometimes, Rahima cannot find the ideal participants who fulfil all the required criteria. There were cases, for example, of candidates who could read *kitab kuning* but who did not yet have a local following. This led to a serious discussion among the board members of Rahima regarding the preconditions that should be considered a priority. As a conclusion to this discussion, Rahima adopted an idea suggested by Abdullah Ahmad al-Naim in a seminar with Rahima.<sup>43</sup> He stated, “The recognized ulama are those who live in the society and are committed to its people.” (Eridani 2014, viii).<sup>44</sup> This, the Rahima board, decided, should be the key priority in selecting participants.

The first cohort of the PUP programme was divided into two groups of participants. The first group consisted of fifteen female Muslim leaders from West Java areas and Magelang, Central Java, while another fifteen female leaders from East Java participated in the second group. In subsequent cohorts, the group size was increased from 15 to 25 female leaders. The second cohort consisted of female leaders from West Java. The third: Central Java. The fourth: Yogyakarta and Central Java.<sup>45</sup> The PUP participants were recommended by Rahima’s network, which was also the network from the Fiqhunnisa’ programme. They were selected through an admission test procedure, including the reading of *kitab kuning* and an interview.

For the fourth cohort a slightly different method was applied because the board of Rahima thought that the participant candidates already had sufficient knowledge and skills in reading and understanding *kitab kuning*. Therefore, instead of conducting a one-on-one *kitab kuning* reading and

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43 Abdullah Ahmad al-Naim is a Sudanese-born Islamic scholar who lives in the United States and teaches at Emory University. He is known as an expert on Islam and human rights. *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Right, and International Law* is one of his books that was translated and published into Indonesian by LKiS in Yogyakarta in 1996 under the title *Dekonstruksi Syariat: Wacana Kebebasan Sipil, Hak Asasi Manusia dan Hubungan Internasional dalam Islam*.

44 Author’s interview with A.D. Eridani, 28 October 2014.

45 Ibid.

interview, on 21 May 2013 Rahima organized “Lokakarya Ulama Perempuan untuk Kemaslahatan Umat” (Workshop on Female Ulama for the Wellbeing of Umat) in Yogyakarta. Around seventy Muslim women from Central Java and Yogyakarta attended. They included members of Fatayat NU, Nasyyiatul Aisyiyah of Muhammadiyah, and Ahmadiyah, *nyais* of *pesantren*, as well as teachers and lecturers from Islamic schools and institutes. Rahima held the workshop to introduce PUP to the attendees and recruit participants for its fourth cohort by giving them a task: to write up their understanding of a passage of Qur’an exegesis. Finally, thirty-five of the attendees were selected as the PUP participants.<sup>46</sup>

The PUP meetings were divided into several *tadarrus* (learning classes) depending on the number of subjects that were developing from one cohort to the next. In the first PUP training, the participants attended five *tadarrus* (classes) focused on Gender Perspective, Social Change, Social Analysis, Islamic Discourse Methodology, and Organizing Community and Transformative Proselytization. For the next instalment, Rahima revised the subjects, particularly on *Tafsir*, Hadith, and *Fiqh* Studies. The subjects were expanded into eight *tadarrus* for the fourth cohort with the addition of topics on Reproductive Health, Bahtsul Masail and Methods of Issuing Fatwas, and Female Leadership (Eridani 2014, viii-x).

Participants in the PUP programme learn some guiding principles for the interpretation of Islamic texts. These are: 1) To consider the history and social situation during which a verse or a hadith was revealed; 2) To be aware of gender equality while interpreting the texts; 3) To cite and use the verses that textually support gender equality; 4) To consider gender equality as one of the acceptable parameters of interpretation; 5) To consider women’s voices while interpreting the texts (Yafie, 2011 79). They also apply the method of *mubadalah* (reciprocity). This

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46 I was one of the participants invited by Rahima as a delegate from the Provincial Board of Fatayat NU in Yogyakarta.

method deals with the gender-relationship message in the verses and hadith so that the interpretation addresses men and women equally.<sup>47</sup>

PUP applies Pendidikan Orang Dewasa (POD, adult learning method), which emphasizes action, reflection, and learning from the experiences of the participants. It is not merely based on theories but also on practices (Yafie 2011, xiv). This method of learning enables participants to share experiences and enrich their own practices as community leaders. One *tadarrus* on one subject in PUP takes four or six days. On the first day, the participants explore experiences in dealing with religious and social problems such as sexual violence and intolerance in the community, make some reflections on the problems and connect them with the *tadarrus* subject, for example on reproductive health (Yafie 2011, xv). There is a two-month period between one *tadarrus* and the next *tadarrus* in which they can apply their newly acquired knowledge and action plans, and find new cases to discuss and reflect on in the subsequent *tadarrus*.

A.D. Eridani, the director of Rahima from 2007 to 2018, understands that eight *tadarrus* are not sufficient to meet the PUP goals. However, most of the participants in PUP are *pesantren* graduates who already have basic classical Islamic knowledge. In the PUP programme, they recall and sharpen their knowledge with analytical methods including Islamic, gender, and social tool analysis. In the process of becoming female ulama, they have improved their skills in organizing communities and cultivating community-based authority. They have benefited from the network of female ulama created by Rahima in strengthening their role as religious leaders in the community.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed NU as a traditionalist Muslim mass organization that is followed by the majority of Muslims in

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47 I was one of the PUP participants from cohort four. Author's note from Tadarrus 4, 9-12 January 2014.

Indonesia and has a member base in rural areas. The philosophy of NU has been to maintain existing religious traditions in the face of pressure by reformists calling for the “purification” of Islamic teachings. The NU tradition is reflected, firstly, in the sources of religious ritual practices, with reference to hadith, *sunnah*, and *adat*. Secondly, it is reflected in determining the foundation and legal methodology of NU, namely *fiqh*, *madhhab*, and *taqlid*.

History shows that tradition within NU is something dynamic, accommodating, and flexible, allowing for changes on the basis of *al-fikrah al-nahdhiyah*. Principles of NU include moderatism (*tawassuttiyyah*), meaning that NU’s pathway is balanced (*tawazun*) and fair (*i’tidal*) in dealing with various issues; tolerance (*tasamuhiyyah*), which means accepting differences in faith, ways of thinking, and culture; and that NU should adopt the mindset of reformation (*ishlahiyyah*), a dynamic mindset (*tathawwuriyyah*), and a methodological mindset (*manhajiyyah*), meaning the use of a framework in producing legal judgement. The application of these principles has allowed gradual changes at the organizational and individual levels regarding religious thoughts and attitudes. The fatwas on gender equality and the emergence of a young NU generation called “Kultur Hibrida” are two examples of the changes within NU.

At the same time, NU is also a deeply conservative and patriarchal organization in which women are structurally relegated to a subordinate position. We see women are structurally in a subordinate position once we look at actual practices in the organization’s decision-making bodies and its Fatwa Council, the Bahtsul Masail. Some women have made it to these bodies but only after a long struggle for a place and recognition, and they remain a small minority. In this environment, religious authority and fatwa-giving are gendered, characterized by rigid gender boundaries, and controlled by men. In the context of fatwa-making, women are only “observers and participants” with limited involvement in its process. Muslim

women are constrained through gendered stereotypes, such as the idea that women are less “reasonable”, and the criteria for becoming ulama that are in place.

However, this limitation has not paralyzed the women of NU. Instead, it has triggered many of them to realize social and cultural changes through careful strategies. They have lobbied policymakers at the top level of NU, they have become involved actively in subsidiary NU movements and activities, and they have developed women’s capacity through educational programmes. The emergence of this NU women’s agency was influenced by internal factors, including the emergence of progressive male leaders, such as Gus Dur, and external factors, including regime change in 1998 and the emergence of civil society movements at the national level. The environment of NU by its nature has also allowed changes to happen and give rise to women’s mobilization within NU and its cultural affiliations.

One of the Islamic women’s NGOs that provide capacity-building programmes for women is Rahima. It was founded in August 2000 by a group of Muslim activists from the Fiqhunnisa’ programme in P3M who were disgruntled by the P3M’s leadership regarding the issue of polygamy. Rahima conducted a series of discussions and training courses on Islam, gender, and female leadership. One of its most important programmes is PUP, an intensive training programme for women religious leaders from *pesantran*, *majelis taklim*, and universities aiming at developing their capacity to become ulama. The women participants learn about classical Islamic knowledge such as *tafsir* and hadith, and methodology for interpreting Islamic texts and analysing social problems. Since 2005, PUP has produced four groups of alumni, and a total of 105 female ulama have graduated from the programme. These women return to their communities and play their roles as ulama with the knowledge and network gained from PUP. How they use their knowledge and strengthen community-based authority is the subject of the next chapter.



## Interlude

### **Bu Hanik: Breaking the Pattern, Devoting Life to the Community**

Born in Purwodadi on 1 June 1970, Bu Hanik, as she is called, was raised in a *pesantren* tradition. Her parents, Kiai Masyhuri and Nyai Musyarofah, ran up Pesantren Daruttaqwa in Gingsang, Gubug, Purwodadi, Central Java. Founded in the 1970s by Bu Hanik's grandfather, Kiai Abdullah Sajad, this *pesantren* was a typical *salaf pesantren* that provided classical Islamic learning and organized Majelis Tarekat (mystical brotherhood gatherings). The *salaf* tradition was also reflected in the daily life and rules that applied to the whole family. For instance, men were usually considered more important than women and had to be obeyed by women. Some rules restricted women from accessing and taking up roles in the public sphere. Bu Hanik remembers that she and other women in her family were forbidden to ride a bicycle, so they were not used to leaving home by themselves. They had an education, but most of them went to the *salaf pesantren* without enrolling in regular schools. In her extended family, only men appeared in the public sphere. In the schools, all the teachers were men. No woman was teaching. For women, being able to memorize the Qur'an was necessary because then they could get married.

However, Bu Hanik tried to break that pattern. She began to join Muslim women's mass organizations, such as IPPNU and Fatayat NU in the late 1980s when she was in senior high school. However, she became active only after she finished school. Her father was the one who encouraged her to do so. "He said, *ben nggawe gerak* (Javanese: to take action)," Bu Hanik explains. By becoming involving with those organizations, Bu Hanik experienced leadership and learned about women's empowerment. She taught women in a Quranic recitation programme and also coordinated an Aids program for people in poverty. She became the first woman in her extended family who was brave enough to lead and perform in public. She called her braveness *mendobrak* (Indonesian: to break in).

Bu Hanik is the fourth child of five siblings. She got her first lesson in caring and devotion to the community from her parents, who passionately played roles as religious and community leaders. "My father always reminded me:

life is the time that always goes ahead. Older adults will retreat in time. Then you all must step forward to take a turn. Therefore, you have to be capable and willing to do so. To me, the word ‘capable’ implies the demand of a lot of learning,” says Bu Hanik. Therefore, she was motivated to learn not only *salaf* Islamic education, but also modern education. She managed to convince her parents to let her attend formal education while she studied in the *pesantren*. After her primary education, she went to Pesantren Al-Muayyad in Solo, Central Java. She finished her study in Madrasah Aliyah Al-Muayyad in 1990. She also studied classical Islamic knowledge in other *salaf* and modern *pesantren* in East Java, such as Pesantren Bangil Gresik and Pesantren as-Shidiqiyyah Jember. She completed her memorizing of the Qur’an in 1998 at Pesantren Roudlotul Ulum, Cidahu, Cadasari, Pandeglang, Banten. Nevertheless, Bu Hanik realizes that the *salaf* upbringing has formed her toughness and strong religious foundation rooted in the *salaf* culture.

In 1998, Bu Hanik married Zubaidi Mansur and moved to her husband’s village in Brambang, Karangawen, Demak, Central Java. When she came, the condition in Brambang was different from Ginggang. In Brambang the people were less religious and mostly educated in secular schools. They did not go to *pesantren* for their Islamic learning. However, they were more open regarding women’s position and participation in public life. Like men, women also went to school. Therefore, at the time she arrived women had attained some positions and played roles in society. Bu Hanik benefited from this situation as she had more opportunities to interact and communicate quickly with the people and continue her activities in Islamic teaching. Bu Hanik began to participate in the local female *majelis taklim* (Islamic study group) while she also started her *pesantren* in 1999, with only two *santris* brought from her parents’ *pesantren*.

She held *pengajian sema’an* (listening to Qur’an recitation) every Monday night in her house with the two *santris*. She recited the Qur’an from memory while they listened to her recitation. Gradually, the neighbouring people heard about this, and they were interested in joining her *pengajian*. The numbers of participants were increasing, especially after Bu Hanik left the local female *majelis taklim* after the leader opposed her. Then around twenty-three members of the *majelis taklim* asked Bu Hanik to establish a *majelis taklim* of her own. She adds, “I also got support from my husband, a local *kiai*, and men from the village who wanted their wives to learn from

me.” Bu Hanik established a *majelis taklim*, namely *Sabilun Naja* (the Path of Fortune).

Bu Hanik’s work teaching in the *pesantren* and preaching in the *majelis taklim* did not stop her enthusiasm to learn and develop her knowledge. She started her Bachelor’s degree, majoring in Islamic education, in 2006 at Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Pendidikan Islam (STIPI, the Higher School for Islamic Education) in Yogyakarta. At the time, she enrolled for classes in Demak, but for some courses that were given in Yogyakarta, she had to travel back and forth from Demak to Yogyakarta. She graduated with an excellent grade point average (GPA) of 8.94. Besides completing her formal education, Bu Hanik also participated in other capacity-building programmes, the most important being the PUP programme organized by Rahima. She joined the third cohort of the programme, one of twenty-five female Muslim leaders from Central Java, from 2011 to 2012.

In PUP, Bu Hanik met and learned from Kiai Husein Muhammad about the *manaqib* (biography) of Muslim women leaders throughout history. The lessons learned in PUP were useful as resources to fulfil the demands and needs of the community and have helped her to improve her confidence. Before joining PUP, she always rejected any invitations to preach in front of mixed-gender audiences. But as she gained more knowledge and had better self-esteem thanks to PUP, she started to also teach in front of male *jamaah* and incorporate gender equality in her preaching as well. She joined some meeting forums attended by alumnae of the PUP programme organized by Rahima. However, she was not able to participate in KUPI, held in Cirebon in April 2017, due to her busy schedule.

While assisting around seventy *santris* in her *pesantren* and preaching in the *Sabilun Naja*, Bu Hanik continues her organizational activities in Fatayat NU and Muslimat NU from the village level to the district level in Demak. Through these two women’s mass organizations, she manages and preaches in different *majelis taklim* held by turn every day in different villages. She has also initiated a *selapanan* (every thirty-five days) Qur’anic recitation *pengajian* called Jam’iyyatul Quran, conducted by turn on Friday Legi (a name of Javanese daily calendar) in different villages in Karangawen. “I gather all the *hafizahs* (female Quranic reciters from memory) in the sub-district. They are around 180, and the listeners are around 2,000 women,” she said. With her leadership, the Karangawen sub-district branch of Fatayat NU has managed to establish pre-school and other education institutions

in some villages, namely four Taman Kanan-Kanan (secular kindergartens), two Raudhatul Athfal (Islamic kindergartens), one Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (Islamic primary school), and two Taman Pendidikan Qur'an (Qur'anic Education Institutions).

Reflecting on her achievements, Bu Hanik found out the importance of having Islamic knowledge, long-lasting engagement and devotion, and building a good relationship with the community for establishing Islamic authority. The authority that she has works not only among female *jamaah*, but also among male *jamaah* and in her social life in general. In 2015, she was elected as the first woman to sit as a member on the Badan Pertimbangan Desa (BPD, the Village Representative Board). Nevertheless, male members always rely on her input in the decision-making process. "It is perhaps because they consider me not just as a BPD member, but also a religious leader so that they are respectful," Bu Hanik said. Besides BPD, at the district level, the Demak government always involves Bu Hanik in any community empowerment programmes that relate to religious and educational affairs.

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