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Negotiating Liminal Identity and Women's Empowerment in *Pesantren Salaf*

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Abstract

The modernization of *pesantren* in Indonesia has brought significant sociological impacts, particularly in reshaping female identity amid tensions between traditional norms and modern expectations. This transformation has created a liminal space for female students (*santriwati*), fostering identity negotiations between adherence to traditional pesantren values and emerging aspirations as educated Muslim women. This study aims to examine how modernization processes within *pesantren salaf*, particularly at Pondok Pesantren Tahfidzul Qur'an (PPTQ) Nurul Falah Magetan, shape santriwati identity and facilitate women's empowerment. Employing a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth and structured interviews with 15 informants, and reflective fieldnotes over more than two years. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic and interpretive approach based on case study methodology, supplemented by Spradley's domain analysis to capture cultural meanings embedded in everyday practices within the *pesantren*. The findings reveal that *santriwati* identities develop within a *complex* liminal space, enabling negotiations between traditional structures and modern aspirations, and fostering empowerment through negotiated agency rather than overt resistance. The study implies that social change within *pesantren salaf* should be understood through the dialectics of tradition and modernity as experienced in women's daily lives, and highlights the importance of developing Islamic education and gender transformation models grounded in local epistemologies.

Keywords: Liminal Identity; Pesantren Salaf; Women Empowerment; Educational Transformation

Modernisasi pesantren di Indonesia telah membawa dampak sosiologis yang signifikan, khususnya dalam membentuk kembali identitas perempuan di tengah ketegangan antara norma tradisional dan tuntutan modernitas. Perubahan ini menciptakan ruang liminal bagi santriwati, yang mendorong negosiasi identitas antara kepatuhan terhadap nilai-nilai pesantren tradisional dan aspirasi baru sebagai perempuan Muslim terdidik. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana proses modernisasi di pesantren salaf, khususnya di Pondok Pesantren Tahfidzul Qur'an (PPTQ) Nurul Falah Magetan, membentuk identitas santriwati dan memfasilitasi pemberdayaan perempuan. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan etnografi, mengumpulkan data melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam dan terstruktur terhadap 15 informan, serta pencatatan lapangan reflektif selama lebih dari dua tahun. Analisis data dilakukan melalui pendekatan tematik dan interpretatif berbasis studi kasus, dengan menggunakan analisis domain Spradley untuk menangkap makna budaya yang melekat dalam praktik sehari-hari di pesantren. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa identitas santriwati berkembang dalam ruang liminal yang kompleks, memungkinkan negosiasi antara struktur tradisional dan aspirasi modern, serta membuka peluang pemberdayaan yang bertumpu pada agen negosiasi daripada resistensi terbuka. Implikasi penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa perubahan sosial dalam pesantren salaf harus dipahami melalui dialektika tradisi dan modernitas dalam pengalaman keseharian perempuan, serta pentingnya mengembangkan model pendidikan Islam dan transformasi gender yang berbasis pada epistemologi lokal.

A. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of traditional *pesantren* toward modernity particularly in religious education has brought about significant sociological impacts (Yusuf and Taufiq 2020). One significant implication of this process is reconstructing female identity within a liminal context. *Pesantren*, initially known for its *Kitab Kuning*-based learning model and its strong emphasis on *adab* (ethics) and traditional values (Towaf 2008; Isbah 2020), now faces the challenges of modernization. This shift has prompted many *pesantren* to integrate formal education systems with modern curricula, as seen in the establishment of SMP and SMA Ali Maksum under Pesantren Krapyak, or the creation of exclusive dormitories at Pesantren Darul Ulum Peterongan (Detik News 2012). These forms of modernization not only reshape institutional structures but also create new spaces for women to negotiate their identities between tradition and the demands of modern life, thus generating complex identity dynamics within the *pesantren* environment.

A notable example can be found at Pondok Pesantren Tahfidzul Qur'an (PPTQ) Nurul Falah in Magetan. The transformation in this *pesantren* has allowed *santri* and *santriwati* to experience new identity dynamics previously limited by traditional gender roles within domestic spheres (Faizi 2023). The integration of modern curricula at PPTQ Nurul Falah has created a liminal space, positioning *santriwati* between the traditional Islamic values that characterize *pesantren* life and the broader competencies required by modern society, such as life skills and entrepreneurship (Hadinata et al. 2023). This situation encourages *santriwati* to participate more actively in social and economic life, while also enabling the emergence of transformational leadership that supports the empowerment of women within the *pesantren* context (Bashori et al. 2022; Shiddiq et al. 2021).

Pesantren salaf in Indonesia have traditionally focused on classical Islamic texts, while *pesantren khalaf* have begun integrating general education into their systems (Isbah 2020; Lukens-Bull 2001). Historically, until the 1930s, *pesantren* did not officially accept female students. However, this changed when *santriwati* were first accepted at Pesantren Denanyar Jombang, opening up wider access to education for women in *pesantren* settings (Srimulyani 2007). The wave of modernization has become even more pronounced after the *Reformasi* period, marked by the adoption of formal schooling systems and national curricula in many *pesantren*, including *salafiyah* institutions, to ensure their educational relevance (Isbah 2020). This development has led to a significant increase in the number of *santriwati* and provided them with opportunities to study both religious knowledge and general or vocational skills (Isbah 2020). Lukens-Bull (2010) found that some *pesantren* have even implemented integrated education systems that combine traditional Islamic curricula with national academic standards. Such institutional transformations have made *pesantren* more inclusive and adaptive, granting female *santri* formal diplomas and academic competencies to pursue higher education or engage professionally beyond *pesantren* life (Raihani 2012; Isbah 2020). On the other hand, modernization has also triggered internal tensions between traditionalist and modernist factions within *pesantren* (Isbah 2020). Nevertheless, many *pesantren* have managed to balance tradition and innovation, serving as centers of moderate Islam that retain classical values while responding to contemporary needs (Ni'am 2015; Isbah 2020). These structural reforms have significantly expanded *santri* and *santriwati's* access to comprehensive education and broader social and economic participation, which were once constrained by traditional frameworks (Srimulyani 2007; Isbah 2020).

Cultural changes in modern *pesantren* place *santriwati* in a liminal condition, caught between traditional gender norms and modern

expectations. The identity of female students in *pesantren* is now shaped through negotiations between demands for obedience to the patriarchal values of *pesantren* and new aspirations as educated Muslim women (Srimulyani 2007; Mustofa et al. 2023). Srimulyani (2007) reveals that *santriwati* still face restricted access to public spaces and are expected to adhere to 'ideal' domestic roles. At the same time, many aspire to be more active in society. The integration of general education in *pesantren* has encouraged the development of more critical perspectives among female students. Mustofa et al. (2023) show that the experience of pursuing higher education has led female *pesantren* graduates to reframe the meaning of piety and gender—some take a moderate path, maintaining religious values while being more open to gender equality, while others go further by critically challenging conservative *pesantren* doctrines.

In many *pesantren*, *santriwati* are now encouraged to study fields that were once dominated by men, such as science and entrepreneurship. However, obstacles to equal access and female leadership remain (Isbah 2020). Nonetheless, the increasing prominence of *nyai*—female *pesantren* leaders—in institutional management and education signals a shift toward a more gender-inclusive power structure. Samsu et al. (2021) highlight how charismatic and participatory leadership models developed by *nyai* have empowered *pesantren* communities and served as role models for *santriwati* to engage in broader social roles. With such internal agents of change—*nyai* and active *santriwati*—gender norms in *pesantren* are being reconstructed: *santriwati* are no longer solely prepared to become "pious housewives" but are also groomed as educated and independent social actors (Lopes Cardozo and Srimulyani 2018). While *pesantren* structures still emphasize discipline and gender segregation, *santriwati* have demonstrated their agency by negotiating these norms—through female student organizations, discussion forums, or academic achievements—forming a unique dual identity: pious and modest according to *pesantren* values, but also confident

and capable of engaging with the outside world (Mustofa et al. 2023; Raihani 2012). In this liminal condition, the identity of female *santri* is dynamic; the continuous interaction between *pesantren* structures (rules, curriculum, *kiai* authority) and *santriwati* agency (proactive responses, reinterpretations, negotiation of roles) has produced a new form of empowered Muslim femininity without abandoning its traditional Islamic roots (Lukens-Bull 2001; Srimulyani 2007).

While empirical literature has examined the modernization of *pesantren* and its implications for women's roles, there remains a research gap in understanding how this liminal experience is lived and interpreted by *santriwati*. Most studies focus either on structural institutional changes or individual female agency in isolation. For instance, Isbah (2020) highlights curriculum adaptation and policy reforms in *pesantren*, while Mustofa et al. (2023) and Lopes Cardozo et al. (2022) concentrate more on individual experiences and identity negotiation. Comprehensive studies integrating both perspectives, namely the reciprocal interaction between *pesantren* structures and female student agency in identity formation—are still limited. Furthermore, the specific context of liminality among *santriwati* (as a transitional space between commitment to tradition and openness to change) has not yet been deeply explored. Therefore, this research aims to fill that gap by investigating how modernization within *pesantren salaf-khalaf* influences the reconstruction of *santriwati* identity holistically. The study seeks to understand the internal dynamics in which conservative *pesantren* rules and values interact with *santriwati's* aspirations for education and autonomy. Ultimately, the findings of this research will contribute to the broader discourse on women's empowerment in Islamic education and provide recommendations on how *pesantren* can preserve religious values while fostering female agency—transforming liminality into a positive and empowering process for Muslim women within the *pesantren* world.

B. METHODOLOGY

This study examines changes in identity and women's empowerment within Pondok *Pesantren* Tahfidzul Qur'an (PPTQ) Nurul Falah Magetan using an ethnographic approach. Ethnography was selected to gain a deep understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of women in the *pesantren* who occupy a liminal identity — positioned between traditional roles and modern expectations. This liminal identity reflects the tensions and negotiations between conservative religious values and the contemporary challenges women in the *pesantren* face.

Data collection was conducted through participant observation, in-depth and structured interviews, and reflective fieldnotes gathered over more than two years. Participant observation allowed the researcher to directly observe the daily practices and norms followed by women in the *pesantren* in their natural social context. The interviews involved 15 informants, consisting of senior *santriwati* (who had been in the *pesantren* for at least five years), female dormitory managers, *ustadzah*, and a *nyai* (wife of the *kiai*), who played an active role in women's development programs within the *pesantren*. The in-depth interviews aimed to explore personal meanings and reflections regarding identity, shifting roles, and empowerment experiences, while the structured interviews sought to probe specific aspects of social structure and power relations within the *pesantren*.

The data analysis adopted a thematic and interpretive approach based on case study methodology. This involved open coding, the identification of key themes, and narrative readings of the experiences shared by the informants. The researcher also employed Spradley's domain analysis to interpret the cultural meanings embedded in the everyday terms and practices of *santriwati* and *pesantren* staff. Through this approach, the study seeks to uncover how women experience and construct the meaning of liminal identity, and participate in broader processes of social

transformation and empowerment within the *pesantren* (Flick 2022; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). An interdisciplinary perspective was also employed to interpret and analyze the field data, integrating relevant theoretical concepts from multiple disciplines.

Theoretical Framework

a. Liminal Identity's Concepts

This study uses the *liminal identity*, concept derived from Victor Turner's theory of liminality. Turner developed this idea based on the earlier work of Arnold van Gennep. In sociological and anthropological discourse, liminality is often used in ritual studies. Van Gennep, in his seminal work *The Rites of Passage*, described how ritual transitions involve shifts in place (Turner 1991), and changes in social status, age, or cultural condition. He proposed three phases of transition: *rites of separation* (preliminal), *transition rites* (liminal), and *rites of incorporation* (postliminal) (Gennep,1960). Turner expanded on van Gennep's model in his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, emphasizing the liminal phase as a space of ambiguity, transformation, and potentiality. This liminal stage is relevant for understanding how *salaf pesantren* experience ambivalence between tradition and modernity, while seeking a new balance.

In sociological studies of identity, by postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha also employs the concept of liminality. In his influential work *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha uses the term liminality to describe the ambiguity and hybridity of identity within colonized societies (Bhabha 2021a). Ontologically, Bhabha's version of liminality illustrates how the identity of colonized nations often emerges as a response to the dominant hegemony of the colonizer (Parry 1994). For Bhabha, national identity in colonial subjugation is frequently characterized by mimicry — where the

colonized subject resembles the colonizer, yet remains different (Bhabha 2021b).

In the context of the *pesantren*, however, *liminal identity* does not arise from colonial relations, but rather from responses to the disruptions brought by modernity. The traditional structure and worldview of the *pesantren*—centered on classical Islamic knowledge, hierarchy, and gender roles—has been increasingly challenged by contemporary demands such as formal education, economic participation, and the use of digital technologies. These disruptions place female actors—*santriwati*, *nyai*, and other women within the *pesantren*—at the heart of a tension-filled process of identity negotiation. As they navigate between preserving Islamic tradition and responding to new opportunities, their identities are shaped within this liminal space—emerging neither as fully modern nor purely traditional.

By situating *liminal identity* at the core of its analysis, this research seeks to explore how women in the *pesantren* experience ambiguity, negotiate boundaries, and generate new possibilities for agency and empowerment—while still remaining embedded within the religious and cultural frameworks of *pesantren* life. This conceptual lens allows us to capture both the structural constraints and the transformative potential within the lived realities of female actors in the *pesantren* world.

b. Agency and Structure

Anthony Giddens' structuration theory provides a crucial analytical framework for understanding the interplay between individual agency and social structure. Rather than viewing structure and agency as dichotomous, Giddens argues for their duality—structures are both the medium and the outcome of social practices (Giddens 1984). Structures consist of rules and resources that guide social interaction, and these are continually reproduced through the very practices they shape (Ritzer and Stepnisky

2017). In this view, structure does not rigidly determine action but provides the conditions under which action takes place.

Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act, reflect, and make choices within existing social contexts. Giddens emphasizes that actors are knowledgeable and capable of monitoring their actions, which makes them active participants in the production and reproduction of social systems (Giddens 1991). This recursive relationship between structure and agency enables both continuity and change. Through habitual and strategic conduct, individuals engage with social norms, sometimes reinforcing them and subtly transforming them (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2017).

In the context of *pesantren*, where authority, gender norms, and religious practices are deeply embedded, Giddens' theory helps explain how actors—particularly *santriwati*, *nyai*, and *pengasuh* —can negotiate and reconstruct their roles. Liminal identity, as experienced by *santriwati*, exemplifies this duality: it is formed through structural expectations rooted in tradition, yet continually reshaped through agency and reflexivity as they navigate new educational, technological, and leadership spaces (Giddens 1991; Ritzer and Stepnisky 2017).

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. *The Dynamics of Salaf Pesantren and Liminal Identity: The Actualization of Tradition in the Face of Modernity*

The reality of *pesantren salaf* in Indonesia illustrates an ongoing transformation within traditional Islamic education systems that continue to uphold classical teachings. Before these transformations occurred, *pesantren salaf* predominantly relied on textual approaches—prioritizing rote memorization of *kitab kuning* and deeply rooted traditions—often without considering shifting socio-cultural contexts (Rosyid 2020). One such example is Pondok Pesantren Tahfidzul Qur'an (PPTQ) Nurul Falah

in Magetan, which was officially established in 2006 CE/1427 AH by KH. Marhaban Al-Hafidz and inaugurated by KH. Nawawi Abdul Aziz.

The *pesantren* implements Qur'anic and classical Islamic learning through the *Amtsilati* method (pptqnurulfalahponcol.com), accelerating students' ability to read classical texts (Muhammad and Kurnia 2022). At PPTQ Nurul Falah, formal and non-formal education coexist: formal education includes *Raudhatul Athfal*/Islamic Kindergarten (RA), *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*/Islamic Elementary School (MI), Madrasah *Tsanaqiyah*/Islamic Junior High School (MTs), *Sekolah Menengah Atas*/Senior High School (SMA), and *Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Magetan*/Islamic Higher Education Institution (STAIM), all managed under Yayasan Pendidikan Muslim (YPM) Darul Ulum; while non-formal education encompasses Qur'an memorization for male and female santri, tafsir, ulumul Qur'an, Qur'anic recitation arts, TPQ (Qur'anic Learning Center for Children-non formal), and Madrasah Diniyah (Non-formal Islamic Religious School). This pedagogical approach emphasizes memorization of the Qur'an and classical texts, and broader religious understanding, producing *santri* who are disciplined, responsible, and socially adaptive (Fatimah and Ma'ruf 2021).

Initially, the *pesantren*'s religious instruction followed a conservative orientation in which *fiqh* and *syari'ah* were taught in highly normative frameworks. The cultural life at PPTQ Nurul Falah was deeply traditionalist, grounded in strong classical interpretations. This paradigm shaped both the educational system and the social norms within it. For instance, female santri were prohibited from wearing *gamis* because they were reserved for *nyai*, the wife of the *kiai*. If a *santri* dressed similarly to a *kiai* or *nyai*, it was perceived as *su'ul adab* (disrespectful behavior). Strict separation was enforced between male and female santri; they were prohibited from making eye contact and were expected to turn away when encountering each other on the same path. These rules reflect an education

model based on hierarchical authority—a hallmark of *pesantren salaf*. However, the increasing need for relevance in a modern context has prompted institutions like PPTQ Nurul Falah to adapt by gradually introducing innovations to their educational systems (Nurhayati and Hidayah 2019).

Field observations conducted from 2017 to 2024, show that internal and external factors have contributed to significant paradigm shifts within the *pesantren*. PPTQ Nurul Falah, despite its initial resistance to modernist pedagogies, began adopting more progressive views under growing pressure from an emerging Muslim middle class seeking high-quality Islamic education compatible with contemporary developments (Hidayati and Anwar 2023).

By 2021, the *pesantren* initiated structural innovation by establishing a new dormitory, Al-Mawarid, aimed at middle-class families. This dormitory offers modern amenities such as private rooms, 24-hour assistance, laundry services, a dining hall, and a school health unit (UKS). The opening of Al-Mawarid signaled a shift from a strictly traditional model to a more flexible and socially responsive education system. This innovation continued with the formation of Yayasan Nurul Falah, an independent foundation distinct from Yayasan Darul Ulum, reflecting a broader structural transformation in *pesantren* governance. In 2022, the foundation launched Madrasah Aliyah Nurul Falah, designed to integrate general science and technology curricula with Islamic teachings rooted in the *Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah An-Nahdliyah* tradition.

Although these developments reflect a modernization of *pesantren* education, traditional values continue to be respected. However, is the shift in educational philosophy is most notable—particularly in how fiqh and syari'ah are taught. Giddens (1991) offers a relevant framework through his structuration theory, explaining how actors (in this case, *pesantren* leaders) reshape longstanding practices in response to changing social structures.

This change has been gradual, involving a transformation in how religious knowledge is transmitted. One key driver has been national education policy, which has enabled *pesantren* to reform their curricula (Hasan and Mahmud 2022). Within Weber's (1978) theory of social change, this represents a process of rationalization, where *pesantren* are no longer viewed solely as religious institutions, but as educational spaces capable of producing competitive graduates in modern society. Over time, *pesantren* have begun to integrate general sciences and technology while retaining their classical Islamic foundations. This has created a new reality: *fiqh* and *syari'ah* are now interpreted more contextually, responding to contemporary dynamics while upholding core *pesantren* values (Jamil and Latifah 2021).

As a result, *santri* are no longer groomed only as religious scholars but also as individuals equipped to navigate broader social contexts. Therefore, the transformation observed at PPTQ *pesantren* Nurul Falah., is not merely about facilities or institutional expansion; it reflects an active negotiation of identity between traditionalism and modernity within the *pesantren*. This transformation introduces a new institutional identity where religious authority becomes more flexible — allowing *santri* to grow with the times without abandoning the *pesantren*'s core values.

Our research across several *pesantren* salaf, including PPTQ Nurul Falah, reveals that traditionalism and modernity often operate simultaneously and interdependently. Rather than existing in opposition, these values can be harmonized. In many *pesantren* we observed, this synergy has strengthened their position in today's educational and social challenges (Nurmahmudah 2023; Rohman et al. 2023). *Pesantren* salaf adapts to contemporary demands and holds firm to their traditional identities (Hirzulloh 2023). In our analysis, this adaptive-yet-rooted character results in what we identify as liminal identity.

Identity is not a fixed or rigid construct but dynamic, negotiable, diverse, and often contested (Edensor 2020). A community can hold multiple, even contradictory, characteristics simultaneously (Castelló et al. 2021). Although tradition and modernity are often portrayed as oppositional (Goddard 2021), the case of *pesantren salaf* demonstrates their potential for constructive collaboration. Many factors influence identity formation—chief among them being shifts in local social realities. As Bauman (2000) writes in Liquid Modernity, identity in the modern world is increasingly fluid, subject to rapid change and continuous renegotiation.

In the *pesantren* context, this shift stems from disruptions introduced by modernity. According to Bauman's thesis, such changes are not possible and expected. *Pesantren salaf* can maintain their traditional identities while accommodating modern developments. Tradition and modernity coexist not as dichotomies, but as interwoven elements in daily educational and social life. Our research confirms that these values, often contradictory, can be orchestrated in unison. This orchestration results in an identity that is neither purely traditional nor entirely modern. Instead, it reflects an ambiguous condition we define as liminal identity.

Liminal identity, in the context of *pesantren salaf*, is not the result of external domination, but a conscious, adaptive strategy exercised by the *pesantren* community itself. The active roles of *kiai* and *nyai* in these transformations indicate that identity shifts within the *pesantren* are not passive processes—but deliberate efforts to balance preservation with progress. In this light, liminal identity is not a sign of confusion, but a dynamic reconstruction of identity that enables *pesantren* to remain resilient in an ever-changing world.

2. *The Agency of Pesantren Salaf Leaders in Shaping Liminal Identity Among Women*

Within the environment of *pesantren salaf*, the role of leadership—or *pengasuh* (religious supervisor at *pesantren*) —is central. Figures such as the *kiai, nyai, gus*, and *ning* (the female children of *kiai*) hold near-absolute authority in determining institutional policies and systems (Faisal et al. 2022). Our data indicates that *pengasuh* play a pivotal role in guiding *pesantren salaf* to preserve their traditional foundations while also adapting to the challenges of modernity. This process, however, is neither linear nor without resistance. The social interactions among *pengasuh*, *santri*, *pesantren* families, and the surrounding community are crucial factors that shape this transformation. With their charismatic authority, *pengasuh* can direct *pesantren salaf* toward being more progressive and responsive, without relinquishing traditionalism as their core identity (Azro'i and Fuaidi 2020). Through their influence, *pesantren salaf*—as structured institutions—are guided into a space of liminal identity, caught between traditionalist and modernist orientations.

This involves a continuous power negotiation between *pengasuh* who advocate innovation and those within the *pesantren* community who seek to preserve the status quo. This friction sometimes leads to overt resistance, but more often results in gradual accommodations orchestrated by *pengasuh* to ensure the changes are accepted without undermining *pesantren* values. These developments cannot be separated from the strategic roles played by *pengasuh*. They have encouraged *pesantren* administrations to renegotiate the tension between traditional and modern values. This negotiation manifests adopting of hybrid curricula that combine *kitab kuning* with general education subjects, incorporating technology in teaching, and reforms in leadership structures to become more participatory. The *pengasuh* involved in this study consistently

expressed their commitment to ensuring that *pesantren salaf* remain relevant and do not become stagnant institutions.

Through the lens of Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, *pengasuh* function as agents capable of reshaping the structures in which they are embedded—in this case, the *pesantren salaf* they lead. Liminal identity in these *pesantren* is not a condition that emerges spontaneously; rather, it is the product of a dialectical relationship between agency and structure. In this dynamic, *santri* and the surrounding society also serve as part of the structural system that responds to institutional change. Some *santri*, for instance, experience identity dilemmas, particularly as educational systems and social norms within the *pesantren* begin to open toward modern values. Thus, new structures are formed through the influence of active agency (Giddens 1984). As exercised by individuals, agency has a direct and consequential role in shaping structural realities (Busco 2009). In the context of liminal identity discussed in this research, the *pengasuh* act as central agents, contributing significantly to the shift in character and culture of *pesantren salaf* toward more modern, accommodative models.

This condition illustrates what Giddens calls the structuration process (Giddens 2014), wherein institutional transformation occurs not through external imposition but through internal negotiation between structure and agent. However, such transitions are not without tension— particularly for women in the *pesantren*, whose roles and gender expectations are simultaneously being reshaped. In this study, liminal identity emerged within a relatively short timeframe. This is largely due to the strong charismatic authority held by *pengasuh*, which is firmly entrenched within the institutional structure of *pesantren salaf*. Additionally, these leaders possess considerable cultural capital within the *pesantren* domain (Bourdieu 1986). For instance, women in the *pesantren*, who were once confined to domestic roles, are now increasingly involved in

education, *pesantren* management, and social engagement. This shift is enabled by the capital and influence held by the *pengasuh*, which allows liminal identity to manifest more rapidly in the *pesantren* studied.

Nevertheless, these changes also introduce new challenges—particularly in negotiating traditional gender roles. As women become more visible in public and leadership roles, tensions emerge between their traditional function as guardians of *pesantren* values and the modern expectation for broader participation. As a result, the transformation process is not merely a matter of structural adaptation; but also a deeply dynamic identity negotiation, rather than passive recipients of change, *pengasuh* exercises strategic agency in guiding *pesantren* communities through complex transitions. Their ability to command respect, manage institutional capital, and balance the demands of tradition and modernity positions them as key figures in shaping new forms of religious identity. Liminal identity, therefore, should not be seen as a sign of instability. Instead, it represents an intentional reconstruction of institutional identity—one that allows *pesantren salaf* to remain relevant, resilient, and grounded in their historical roots while still responding to the evolving needs of society.

3. *Liminal Identity and the Empowerment of Women in Pesantren Salaf*

The concept of liminal identity—or the ambiguity of identity—within several *pesantren salaf* examined in this study has significantly shaped the everyday realities of both *santri* and administrators. One of the most visible impacts is the modernization of the educational system itself (Aimah et al. 2024). As these institutions increasingly accommodate change, many *pesantren salaf* have integrated traditional Islamic education with developments brought about by modernity. This adaptive process has also introduced technological advancements into *pesantren* life. Tools such as

computers, the internet, and other digital media have become commonplace within these spaces.

Santri has demonstrated notable digital proficiency in several *pesantren*—producing graphic designs, digital media content, and videography. These skills are evident in the active management of *pesantren*-based media platforms, where the content is entirely developed by *santri* (Makruf and Asrori 2022). Beyond technological integration, liminal identity has also fostered economic innovation. The evolving identities of *pesantren salaf* have driven them to pursue economic self-sufficiency. All *pesantren* involved in this study manage their economic enterprises (Jazil et al. 2021), reflecting a departure from static traditionalism toward a more dynamic, forward-looking institutional culture.

Among the many changes happening within *pesantren salaf* as they respond to contemporary demands, this study focuses on how liminal identity influences shifts in gender construction. We find that liminal identity has brought significant changes in the reconstruction of gender relations within the *pesantren* environment (Satibi and Supriadi 2023). The historically patriarchal nature of these institutions has begun to soften, allowing women to occupy new roles. In various areas of *pesantren* life, male authority's dominance is gradually replaced by more inclusive forms of engagement (Huda 2024).

This section oulines explicity how liminal identity has contributed to women's empowerment in *pesantren salaf*. In addition to fostering advancements in education, technology, and economic organization, liminal identity has generated progress in the social dimension—particularly about gender. The evolving identity of *pesantren salaf* has opened pathways for transforming gender roles (Ismah 2016). The new social dynamics emerging from this process promote gender equity, equal access to resources, and increased opportunities for female empowerment.

In contrast to previous decades, where *pesantren* environments were heavily male-dominated, today's *santriwati* have more opportunities to participate meaningfully. Previously, women were primarily relegated to domestic tasks—such as preparing meals for *santri*—and were often excluded from public or leadership roles. Religious instruction for *santriwati* also tended to differ in content and approach compared to their male counterparts. Access to public spaces and decision-making platforms was severely restricted. The prevailing assumption was that women taking on active roles in the public domain was socially inappropriate (Fuadi et al. 2024). In effect, these limitations curtailed the full development of women's potential, rendering them marginalized within institutions meant to liberate through education (Widiani et al. 2023).

With the emergence of liminal identity—prompted by *pesantren* leaders' accommodations to modern demands—gender hierarchies within the *pesantren* have shifted. The long-standing structure of gender roles is being reconfigured. First, liminal identity has created greater space for women—including *santriwati*, *pesantren* administrators, and *nyai*—to engage in the public sphere. The ambiguity of identity in these contexts has allowed women to participate in arenas traditionally reserved for men (Nisa 2019). These include *bahtsul masail*/Fiqh deliberation Council in NU[1] forums, organizational leadership, administrative councils, and institutional decision-making meetings.

Second, liminal identity has given women greater opportunities for self-actualization. Female members of the *pesantren* community—from *santri* to staff—have begun to access platforms for personal and professional development (Wulandari et al. 2023). This is evident in the rise of women-

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[1] *Bahtsul masail*, a traditional Islamic legal deliberation forum institutionalized by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), serves as a collective platform where *ulama* (Islamic scholars) examine and issue responses to contemporary socio-religious issues using classical *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). This forum exemplifies NU's commitment to maintaining intellectual continuity between traditional Islamic scholarship and modern societal challenges.

led initiatives focused on life skills, such as business development, creative media production, photography, graphic design, and fashion entrepreneurship. Rather than being confined to domesticity, women are now empowered to challenge conventional gender boundaries through education and creativity.

Third, liminal identity also reshapes the paradigm through which *pesantren* viewed women. With the broader aim of actualizing institutional progress, the perception of women within *pesantren* is undergoing a slow but steady transformation. Borrowing from Simone de Beauvoir's terminology, women are no longer viewed as the "second sex" (De Beauvoir 2014). Within many *pesantren salaf*, liminal identity has led to greater recognition of women as whole individuals—equal in dignity and humanity. The once rigid, patriarchal worldview that characterized *pesantren* institutions is gradually giving way to a more inclusive gender paradigm.

Fourth, this paradigm shift is impacting the curriculum and learning processes within *pesantren salaf*. Access to education is becoming increasingly inclusive for *santriwati*. The presence of liminal identity is steadily dismantling the historical inequities in previously disadvantaged women's learning opportunities (Sulistyati 2023). In addition to making curricula more accessible, liminal identity also contributes to the reinterpretation of misogynistic religious texts—particularly within Islamic studies related to gender. These changes suggest that liminal identity is not only a sociological condition within *pesantren*, but a powerful force in reshaping gender discourse from within.

The emergence of liminal identity in *pesantren salaf* is helping to cultivate a new ethos of empowering women. No longer alienated, stigmatized, or positioned as subordinate, women in *pesantren* are now asserting their agency. They are actively shaping institutional life, challenging outdated structures, and transforming educational spaces into

platforms of gender-inclusive empowerment. Unlike in earlier times—when modernity was seen as a threat to tradition—today's *pesantren* are increasingly recognizing that tradition and modernity can coexist. Within this coexistence, liminal identity serves as a transformative bridge, helping *pesantren* reimagine gender roles without abandoning their foundational Islamic values.

4. Liminal Identity as a Space for Social Negotiation and Women's Transformation in Pesantren Salaf

Liminal identity in the context of *pesantren salaf* reflects an in-between state—neither fully traditional nor entirely modern. This condition emerges as *pesantren* confront the pressures of modernity and begin adjusting accordingly, while still holding firmly to their traditional norms and values. Within this ambiguous space, *santriwati* navigates complex social experiences. They inhabit two parallel realities: on one side, they affirm the value of pious womanhood within domestic boundaries; on the other, they find growing opportunities to act as agents of social change in the public sphere.

The transformation of *pesantren salaf* does not merely occur through physical developments like the establishment of formal schools or the adoption of digital technologies; it also involves a shift in identity—particularly in gender constructions. Female identity in *pesantren salaf* is gradually being reconstructed as liminal identity takes shape. Within Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (1984), agents—in this case, *pesantren* leaders and the women within their communities—actively reshape structures through reflective social practices. As *santriwati* are given more opportunities to participate in student organizations, scholarly discussions, and *pesantren*-run enterprises, patriarchal structures are gradually replaced by more fluid and participatory systems.

Technology plays a critical role in this transformation. Many *pesantren salaf* now offer training in computer literacy, graphic design, photography, and digital content creation—fields that were once dominated by male *santri*. Today, *santriwati* contribute by creating digital *dakwah* content, designing Islamic publications, and producing video lectures for the *pesantren*'s social media channels (Makruf and Asrori 2022). These new roles give *santriwati* access to cultural capital enhancing their opportunities for post-*pesantren* engagement in education, society, and the economy (Bourdieu 1986).

In addition to cultural transformation, *pesantren* are also shifting their economic orientation. Nearly all the *pesantren* studied have established independent business units, with women playing essential roles in production. These include batik workshops, catering services, tailoring cooperatives, and online shops managed directly by *santrisantriwati*. Women in *pesantren* are no longer positioned solely as domestic laborers, but as productive economic actors contributing significantly to *pesantren* self-reliance (Jazil et al. 2021).

However, liminal identity also gives rise to tensions and negotiations. Not all members of the *pesantren* community readily embrace changes aimed at empowering women. Conservative circles often question the legitimacy of women's public roles, both religiously and socially. This is where identity becomes contested: *santriwati* are expected to be progressive actors, yet they must operate within a framework of piety that aligns with local religious norms. These changes can be viewed as a form of institutional reflexivity—the *pesantren*'s capacity to respond to social dynamics without abandoning its foundational identity (Giddens 2014). Rather than discarding traditional values, the *pesantren* reinterpret and adapt them to the demands of the times. When *santrisantriwati* actively engage in *bahtsul masail* or manage cooperatives, this does not signify a departure from *pesantren* ideals of female piety; instead, it represents a new

form of piety—one defined by competence, skill, and service to the community.

Liminal identity—a threshold state placing *pesantren salaf* between tradition and modernity—can be more sharply understood through Giddens' structuration theory. At its core, the theory posits a duality of structure: structure both enables and results from social practice (Giddens 1984). Rules and resources that shape *pesantren* life are constantly reproduced—or altered—through the actions of agents. When a *pesantren* enters a liminal phase, intense negotiation unfolds between traditional regulations—such as gender-based classroom segregation, *kitab kuning* curricula, and patriarchal leadership—and new resources like digital technology, national curricula, and demands for gender equality.

a. Pesantren Structures as Rules and Resources

In Giddensian terms, structure encompasses both rules and resources. Traditional rules in *pesantren*—such as *talaqqī*[2]-based learning, *kiai-santri* hierarchies, and rigid gender roles—safeguard cultural continuity (Faisal et al. 2022). Authoritative resources are centered in the hands of the *kiai* and *nyai*, while allocative resources include waqf land networks, donor funds, and *pesantren*-owned assets. Liminal identity arises when these traditional frameworks encounter modern resources: computer labs, internet connectivity, and formal education systems requiring standardized curricula (Aimah et al. 2024). The convergence of these two regimes creates institutional ambiguity—exactly the kind of "betwixt and between" terrain that Turner identified in liminal rituals.

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[2] *Talaqqī* is a traditional mode of Islamic learning characterized by face-to-face transmission of religious knowledge from teacher (*kiai*) to student (*santri*), involving oral recitation, memorization, and commentary on classical texts through an unbroken scholarly lineage (*sanad*).

b. The Agency of Pesantren Leaders: Continuity and Change

Kiai, *nyai*, *gus*, and *ning* act as principal agents operating and modifying the structure (Azro'i and Fuaidi 2020). Through distanciated reflexivity—the ability to connect local events to broader global dynamics (Giddens 1991)—they recognize the need to integrate general education, teacher certification, and even coding classes for *santri*. These decisions do not dismantle tradition; instead, they represent dialectical control: leaders use their symbolic authority to open space for innovation while reinforcing the centrality of *kitab kuning* to *pesantren* identity. Such choices exemplify transformational practice, where the *pesantren*'s core is reproduced even as it is reshaped into a more responsive form.

c. Santriwati Agency: Reflexivity, Technology, and New Capital

The introduction of ICT and multimedia classrooms allows *santriwati* to acquire new cultural capital: skills in graphic design, videography, and digital marketing (Makruf and Asrori, 2022). From a structuration standpoint, *santriwati* mobilize these resources to expand their agency—for instance, by managing *pesantren* social media, leading batik cooperatives, or initiating gender-focused tafsir classes. Giddens describes this actor reflexivity as the ongoing capacity to monitor and revise action based on new information. When *santriwati* negotiates for more practical dress codes or advocates for participation in *bahtsul masail*, they test traditional rules—and when their claims are accepted, those rules are modified, making the duality of structure and agency visible.

d. Reproduction and Transformation of Gender Orders

Historically, patriarchal gender orders in *pesantren* were legitimized by conventional *fiqh* interpretations (Widiani et al. 2023). However, liminal identity introduces new discursive frameworks: classical texts are reexamined through the lens of gender equity; stories of female

scholars gain traction as legitimizing narratives; and *bahtsul masail* forums begin to include *santriwati* (Nisa 2019). These developments reflect a shift in practical consciousness—implicit understandings of "how to be a female *santri*" are transformed through new routines, such as *santriwati* serving as moderators in *kitab* discussions. As these practices are repeated and normalized, they breach patriarchal "frozen structures," creating newly institutionalized, inclusive norms.

e. Pesantren Economy: Redistribution of Resources

The economic self-sufficiency of *pesantren*—via cooperatives, canteens, online shops—constitutes vital allocative resources (Jazil et al. 2021). Including *santrisantriwati* in business management redistributes institutional power: economic authority is no longer reserved solely for male *santri*. When women manage supply chains and oversee digital marketing, they use dialectical control—shaping decisions while relying on structural legitimacy. This affirms Giddens' argument that power is not monolithic; subordinate actors can reconfigure structures by mobilizing new resources.

f. Time–Space Distanciation and Reflexive Modernity

Traditional *pesantren* operated within localized rhythms of ritual and face-to-face interaction. The rise of internet connectivity has fractured these limits, producing *time-space distanciation*—social relations stretched across physical and temporal boundaries (Giddens 1990). *SantriSantriwati* now upload *dakwah* content to YouTube, reaching global audiences and receiving feedback that influences internal discourse. These transnational circuits accelerate identity transformation: local norms are increasingly negotiated within global conversations on gender equity. Liminal identity is not merely transitional—it is a contested space where hegemonic discourses clash between *pesantren* values and global gender narratives.

Tensions arise when conservative leaders worry that modernization may dilute the *barakah sanad*. From a structuration perspective, this is a structural contradiction: the sanctity of religious lineage collides with demands for social and economic relevance. Adaptation takes hybrid forms: the *sanad* remains obligatory, but classes may be delivered online for distant alums; *santriwati* may run online businesses as long as they observe dress codes. This 'hybrid but bounded' strategy exemplifies structural modulation—change packaged within familiar symbolic frames to minimize collective disorientation.

Through the lens of Giddens' structuration theory, liminal identity in *pesantren salaf* appears as a recursive cycle: innovative actions by leaders and *santriwati* reshape the rules of education, economy, and gender; those new rules then serve as frameworks for future practice, generating a *pesantren* identity that is more plural, adaptive, and inclusive. Structures are not 'collapsed' by modernity, but rearticulated—like a new weaving made with old threads in a different pattern. Empowering women in *pesantren* is not a deviation from tradition, but a creative interaction between reflective agency and ever-evolving structures. The structuration perspective reveals that gender transformation in *pesantren salaf* is endogenous—emerging from within the institution itself—and can potentially model a contextual, sustainable form of Islamic social change.

D. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the transformation of *santri* women's identities in *pesantren salaf* does not follow a linear trajectory; but unfolds within a complex liminal space. This liminal identity reflects the tension between traditional religious constructions of femininity and aspirations for gender role transformation in modernity. *Santriwati* are positioned in a continuous process of becoming—neither fully confined to the domestic,

traditional sphere nor entirely autonomous within religious social structures. This threshold space enables a more flexible and adaptive articulation of identity while simultaneously exposing the structural boundaries that still limit women's access to public space and religious authority.

Based on the findings above, we can reflect that *pesantren salaf* serve as dynamic socio-religious institutions where female empowerment does not always take the form of overt resistance. Instead, it often unfolds through negotiated agency embedded within *pesantren*'s normative frameworks. Daily practices, religious education, and informal roles within the *pesantren* provide spaces where *santriwati* develop agency gradually. This empowerment remains ambivalent: it reinforces certain traditional structures while simultaneously redefining them through symbolic and material cultural practices. In doing so, liminal identity becomes not merely a space of constraint, but also an opportunity—allowing women to inhabit and transform existing structures from within.

These findings imply that liminal identity and women's empowerment within *pesantren salaf* should not be interpreted through binary frameworks of tradition versus modernity or resistance versus conformity. Instead, they emerge through complex dialectics shaped by everyday negotiations. The study underscores the significance of reading social change from the ground up—through the lived experiences of women embedded in institutions that may appear stable but continuosly shif beneath the surface. It also highlights *pesantren salaf's* unique adaptive strategies to engage with modern challenges while retaining their traditional essence. Guided by the charismatic authority of *kiai* and *nyai*, and framed within Giddens' structuration theory, *pesantren salaf* demonstrates that tradition and modernity can coexist in a productive equilibrium—sustaining their relevance without relinquishing their foundational identity. Future research should continue to explore how this

hybrid positioning enables new models of Islamic education and gender transformation grounded in local epistemologies.

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