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Abstract

This study examines women's religious authority in Islamic education through the leadership of Hajjah Sitti Raihanun Zainuddin Abdul Madjid and her contribution to educational transformation in Indonesia. Using qualitative library research with historical and sociological approaches, the study analyzes books, journal articles, biographies, organizational documents, institutional archives, and leadership records related to Nahdlatul Wathan. Data were examined through content analysis and interpretative-descriptive techniques. The findings show that Raihanun's authority was constructed through genealogical legitimacy, personal charisma, leadership competence, religious credibility, and social recognition. Her leadership reflected transformational characteristics, including visionary orientation, consultative decision-making, organizational consolidation, institutional development, and commitment to Islamic educational values. During her leadership between 1998 and 2015, approximately 280 educational institutions, including madrasahs, schools, and Islamic boarding schools, were established or developed across Indonesia. She also founded the Syaikh Zainuddin NW Islamic Boarding School in Anjani, East Lombok, a major woman-led Islamic educational institution. Despite patriarchal resistance, internal organizational conflict, and governance constraints, her leadership strengthened educational networks and expanded women's participation in religious and educational leadership. This study highlights women's authority as a negotiated, performance-based, and institutionally sustained form of leadership in contemporary Islamic education.

Keywords: Female Religious Authority; Islamic Religious Education; Gender-Responsive Leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic educational leadership is increasingly examined as a social and ethical practice rather than merely as an administrative position. International reviews show that leadership in Islamic schools is shaped by spirituality, justice, community accountability, and institutional context, yet gender remains insufficiently theorized in much of this literature [1], [2], [3]. This limitation matters because educational institutions do not simply transmit knowledge; they distribute voice, recognition, and access to public authority. Women's leadership therefore needs to be analyzed not as a peripheral supplement to religious education, but as a substantive question about equitable institutional capacity and social welfare.

Evidence from Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) demonstrates that women educational leaders exercise agency through everyday governance, pedagogical stewardship, and peacebuilding, even in settings where formal authority is frequently assumed to be male [4], [5]. Studies of Indonesian female *ulama*, or women religious scholars, similarly show that religious authority can be mediated through expertise, public engagement, and institutional responsibility rather than inherited status alone [6], [7]. These findings require a more precise account of how women's authority is built, recognized, and sustained within large faith-based educational organizations.

Research beyond Indonesia reinforces this point. Muslim women have acquired religious influence through knowledge circulation, counseling, teaching, mosque engagement, and collective interpretation in Europe, Britain, and Australia [8], [9], [10]. Scholarship on Muslim women's management empowerment and leadership also identifies a persistent tension between individual capability and gendered organizational norms [11], [12], [13]. Rather than treating Islam as a fixed constraint or an automatic source of emancipation, contemporary research increasingly examines how authority is negotiated in particular institutional and cultural arrangements.

Indonesia offers a compelling setting for this inquiry because Islamic Religious Education (IRE) is delivered through diverse institutions, including *madrasahs* (Islamic schools that integrate religious and general education), schools, universities, and *pesantren* (Islamic residential boarding schools). Women's educational participation has long been important within these traditions [14]. However, the leadership of Hajjah Sitti Raihanun Zainuddin Abdul Madjid in Nahdlatul Wathan (NW) remains under-theorized in international scholarship despite a growing body of case-specific studies [15], [16], [17], [18], [19], [20]. Comparative research on women leaders in Madurese *pesantren*, women *ulama* education, and transformational *Nyai* leadership further indicates that female authority can influence educational quality, institutional continuity, and community trust [21], [22], [23], [24].

The existing case literature provides valuable biographical and institutional accounts, but it has not yet adequately separated three analytically distinct issues: the sources of Raihanun's legitimacy; the leadership practices through which that legitimacy was converted into organizational capacity; and the evidentiary limits of historical claims about institutional expansion. This study addresses that gap through a qualitative historical-documentary case study. It asks: (1) how was Raihanun's religious and organizational authority constructed and legitimized; (2) how did her leadership contribute to educational transformation within NW; and (3) how did her leadership negotiate gendered constraints in ways relevant to inclusive

educational governance? The study contributes a case-derived framework of women’s authority that connects gender, institutional transformation, and social welfare without reducing leadership either to lineage or to individual charisma.

METHODS

Research Design and Case Position

This study employed a qualitative historical-documentary case study to examine women’s religious authority and educational transformation through the leadership of Hajjah Sitti Raihanun Zainuddin Abdul Madjid. Documentary inquiry was appropriate because the central evidence consists of published case studies, organizationally linked records, institutional histories, and biographical accounts rather than interview data generated by the present study. Document analysis enables researchers to examine social meanings, institutional processes, and historical claims while attending to the provenance and limitations of each source [25]. The study did not treat documents as transparent records; instead, they were read as situated accounts that may foreground institutional achievement, omit dissenting voices, or reproduce retrospective narratives.

The unit of analysis was the documented leadership trajectory of Raihanun within NW between 1998 and 2015, the period most consistently identified in the case literature as her formal leadership phase. The analytical focus was not the personality of a single leader in isolation. Rather, it was the relationship among authority claims, organizational recognition, leadership practices, educational institutionalization, and gendered constraints. This framing responds to qualitative content-analysis guidance that requires explicit links between a research question, the corpus, coding categories, and interpretive claims [26].

Source Base and Inclusion Criteria

The corpus combined three source categories: (a) peer-reviewed articles directly addressing Raihanun, NW, or the Syaikh Zainuddin NW Anjani Islamic boarding school; (b) scholarly work on women’s religious authority and leadership in Islamic educational settings; and (c) methodological literature on documentary and qualitative analysis. Sources were included when they supplied traceable information relevant to the research questions, including a publication venue, author attribution, and a persistent DOI. Sources were excluded when the text could not be verified, when claims lacked identifiable provenance, or when they merely repeated a numerical assertion without analytical context. This approach follows the principles of qualitative content analysis, which require researchers to distinguish manifest information from latent interpretation and to document the path from data to themes [27], [28].

Table 1. Documentary Corpus and Analytic Use

Source category	Inclusion criterion	Analytic use	Interpretive boundary
Case-specific scholarship	Peer-reviewed studies directly examining Raihanun, NW, or the Anjani boarding school	Leadership trajectory, institutional claims, organizational context	May reflect institutional or biographical framing; claims were cross-

Source category	Inclusion criterion	Analytic use	Interpretive boundary
			checked across sources
Comparative Islamic education scholarship	Studies on women leaders, female ulama, Islamic schools, and pesantren	Theoretical comparison and contextual interpretation	Does not establish facts about the NW case by itself
Methodological scholarship	Peer-reviewed guidance on document and content analysis	Coding logic, trustworthiness, and reporting standards	Provides analytic procedure rather than case evidence

Analytical Procedure and Trustworthiness

Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the documents were read chronologically to reconstruct the leadership trajectory and to identify claims about authority, organizational events, and educational development. Second, a directed coding framework was developed from the research questions and from established discussions of authority, agency, and transformational leadership. Third, inductive coding was used to retain case-specific themes not fully captured by the initial framework, particularly the relationship between genealogical legitimacy and institutional performance. Fourth, the coded evidence was compared across sources to identify convergence, divergence, and uncertainty. This combined deductive-inductive strategy is consistent with thematic analysis, which permits theoretically informed coding while preserving sensitivity to patterns emerging from the dataset [29], [30].

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation, an audit trail linking each major finding to a documented source category, and the deliberate use of cautious evidentiary language. For example, the study uses “reported” or “documented institutional claim” when a statistic appears in case sources but cannot be independently audited through a complete registry. This distinction is important because historical-documentary research should not transform repeated claims into verified causal facts. Quality was assessed through credibility, transparency, resonance with the data, and explicit acknowledgement of limitations, in line with established criteria for rigorous qualitative research [31].

Because the study relied only on publicly available scholarly and institutional materials and did not involve recruitment, intervention, or identifiable personal data, no human-participant ethics approval was required. Nevertheless, the analysis avoided unsupported personal judgments and did not infer motives beyond what could be substantiated in the documentary record.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Evidence Boundary and Institutional Trajectory

The documentary record consistently presents Raihanun as a central leader in the post-founder period of NW. Across case-specific studies, her authority is connected to her position as the daughter of TGKH Muhammad Zainuddin Abdul Madjid, the founder of NW, and to her long exposure to the organization’s educational and religious mission [15], [16], [17], [18]. Yet the sources do not portray lineage as a sufficient explanation for her authority. They repeatedly

associate her leadership with organizational participation, public religious credibility, the ability to mobilize followers, and the institutional work of sustaining NW’s educational network [19], [20].

The most frequently repeated institutional claim is that approximately 280 educational institutions were established or developed during her leadership between 1998 and 2015. These include madrasahs, schools, and Islamic boarding schools distributed through NW’s network [16], [17], [19]. The present analysis does not convert this statement into an independently verified census because the sources examined do not provide a complete, audited institution-by-institution register. Instead, the claim is treated as documentary evidence of how the organization represented and understood educational expansion. This evidentiary distinction preserves the historical significance of the claim while avoiding false precision.

The record also identifies the Syaikh Zainuddin NW Islamic Boarding School in Anjani, East Lombok, as an important institutional site through which Raihanun’s leadership became visible. Studies of this institution describe a women-led model of Islamic educational governance that combines religious orientation, organizational discipline, and community service [18], [20]. These studies support the conclusion that her role extended beyond symbolic succession: leadership was made durable through institutions, routines, cadres, and educational services.

Four Dimensions of Women’s Religious Authority

The analysis yielded four interlocking dimensions through which Raihanun’s authority was constructed and sustained. The dimensions should not be read as a linear sequence. Rather, they operated simultaneously: lineage opened a space of recognition; moral and religious credibility made leadership acceptable; organizational recognition formalized authority; and institutional performance provided continuing evidence of leadership capability. Table 2 summarizes this case-derived framework.

Table 2. Case-Derived Dimensions of Women’s Religious Authority

Dimension	Documented expression	Leadership function	Analytic interpretation
Genealogical-symbolic legitimacy	Daughter of the NW founder and bearer of an established educational-religious lineage	Created initial recognizability and continuity of mission	Lineage operated as an entry point to authority, not as a self-sufficient source of legitimacy
Religious-moral credibility	Public image of piety, commitment to education, and continuity with the organization’s Islamic mission	Supported trust and follower acceptance	Moral credibility transformed symbolic inheritance into a socially credible leadership claim
Organizational-procedural recognition	Leadership enacted through NW structures, deliberative processes, and institutional roles	Converted personal standing into operational authority	Authority required organizational recognition rather than private reputation alone

Dimension	Documented expression	Leadership function	Analytic interpretation
Demonstrated institutional performance	Expansion and maintenance of educational institutions, cadre development, and community-facing services	Produced visible organizational outcomes	Performance reinforced authority by showing capacity to sustain collective goods

First, genealogical-symbolic legitimacy was important because it linked Raihanun to the founding mission and collective memory of NW. This relation provided symbolic capital in a religious organization where continuity with the founder has institutional value. However, the documentary sources also show that symbolic affiliation was constantly tested through the leader’s capacity to represent the organization’s educational mission [15], [17]. The finding therefore rejects the assumption that familial connection automatically secures religious authority.

Second, religious-moral credibility emerged as a distinct dimension. Raihanun’s leadership was represented as congruent with religious commitment, educational service, and concern for community welfare. This matters in faith-based education because leadership legitimacy is evaluated through ethical conduct as well as formal office. Third, organizational-procedural recognition was visible in the way leadership was enacted through NW structures and consultative deliberation (*musyawarah*), rather than solely through personal command. Finally, demonstrated institutional performance linked authority to practical outcomes: the ability to sustain institutions, organize human resources, and deliver education across a dispersed network [18], [19], [20].

Leadership Practices and Educational Transformation

The results indicate that the educational transformation associated with Raihanun’s leadership was organizational and relational, not merely numerical. The case sources describe continuity of the founder’s educational vision alongside consolidation of institutional networks and the development of educational sites that served community religious learning. Her approach can be described as transformational in the limited documentary sense that it oriented followers toward a shared mission, encouraged institutional continuity, and translated religious ideals into concrete organizational arrangements [16], [17], [20]. The available evidence does not permit a causal estimate of her individual effect on every institution, but it does show that leadership practice was closely intertwined with the organization’s educational expansion.

Table 3. Documented Leadership Practices and Institutional Pathways

Leadership practice	Documented expression	Institutional pathway	Contribution to gender-responsive governance
Mission continuity	Maintaining NW’s religious-educational orientation after the founder’s era	Shared identity across schools and community networks	Frames women’s leadership as stewardship of

Leadership practice	Documented expression	Institutional pathway	Contribution to gender-responsive governance
			collective educational goods
Consultative deliberation	Use of organizational discussion and collective decision-making	Greater acceptability of leadership across diverse members	Reduces the framing of female authority as individual exceptionalism
Institutional development	Support for madrasahs, schools, and Islamic boarding schools	Broader access to community-based IRE	Creates practical sites where women can lead, teach, and coordinate
Cadre formation and community engagement	Educational institutions as sites of leadership reproduction and service	Sustained organizational capacity across generations	Expands participation beyond symbolic representation toward capability development

The educational significance of this leadership is especially clear when institutions are treated as social infrastructure. Madrasahs and Islamic boarding schools organize learning, moral formation, community services, and the reproduction of future educators and leaders. In this respect, Raihanun’s leadership strengthened both access to IRE and the institutional conditions under which women’s authority could become more visible. The case should therefore not be interpreted as a story of individual success detached from collective structures. Its significance lies in the conversion of religious legitimacy into durable organizational and educational capacity.

Gendered Constraints and Negotiated Legitimacy

The documentary record also emphasizes that Raihanun’s authority was contested. Gendered expectations about religious leadership, organizational conflict, and uneven managerial capacity constituted recurring constraints [15], [17], [19]. These obstacles did not simply disappear once she occupied a leadership role. Rather, they shaped the terms on which leadership had to be demonstrated. In this setting, women’s authority was negotiated through repeated performance: sustaining institutions, maintaining social recognition, and presenting leadership as aligned with collective religious goals.

Table 4. Gendered Constraints, Documented Responses, and Governance Implications

Constraint	Documented challenge	Leadership response evident in the record	Governance implication
Patriarchal expectations	Skepticism toward women leading a major religious organization	Authority reinforced through religious-moral conduct and visible educational service	Leadership pathways need formal recognition of women’s competence, not exceptionalism

Constraint	Documented challenge	Leadership response evident in the record	Governance implication
Organizational conflict	Competing legitimacy claims and internal contestation	Reliance on organizational structures, followers, and mission continuity	Transparent procedures and consultation are crucial for organizational resilience
Managerial and human-resource limitations	Institutional expansion requires coordination across diverse locations	Use of institutional networks and cadre development	Women's leadership requires professional support systems, data management, and succession planning
Evidence fragmentation	Institutional statistics are reported without a complete public registry	Claims retained as documented accounts rather than verified census data	Gender-responsive governance should include transparent institutional monitoring and reporting

Discussion

The findings reposition women's religious authority in Islamic education as a negotiated institutional achievement. The case supports scholarship that rejects the binary assumption that women either possess authority through tradition or challenge tradition from outside it. Raihanun's leadership demonstrates a more complex process: inherited legitimacy opened a recognized pathway, but authority was sustained only when it was translated into ethical credibility, organizational recognition, and institutional performance. This interpretation is consistent with research on female education leaders in Aceh, where agency was exercised within, rather than apart from, Islamic institutional environments [4], [5]. It also resonates with work on Indonesian female ulama showing that authority is mediated through knowledge, public responsibility, and networks of recognition [6], [7].

The case extends comparative research on Muslim women's religious leadership in Europe, Britain, Australia, and Jordan [8], [9], [10], [12]. In those settings, women often establish authority through teaching, guidance, professional competence, and community care. Raihanun's case shares these elements but differs in scale and organizational form: her leadership was embedded in a long-standing mass organization with an extensive educational network. The novelty of the present study is therefore not the claim that a woman can lead in an Islamic context; earlier scholarship has established that point. Rather, the study specifies how a woman's authority can be institutionalized in a large Islamic educational organization through the convergence of symbolic legitimacy, moral credibility, procedural recognition, and documented performance.

This four-dimensional framework also sharpens the interpretation of transformational leadership. General leadership research finds that transformational leadership is associated with motivation, performance, and organizational outcomes, although the magnitude and

mechanisms vary across settings [32], [33], [34], [35]. The present case suggests that transformational leadership in IRE cannot be reduced to inspirational personal influence. It is better understood as a situated practice that joins a shared religious mission to collective decision-making, institutional maintenance, and leadership reproduction. Raihanun's case therefore adds a spirituality-sensitive and gender-aware qualification to mainstream transformational leadership theory: in faith-based education, authority must be ethically credible, organizationally recognized, and materially enacted through institutions that serve communities.

The findings also contribute to gender and social welfare research. A capability approach emphasizes that empowerment is not equivalent to access to resources; it concerns the ability to convert resources into valued action [36]. Raihanun's leadership illustrates this conversion at an institutional level. Genealogical status and religious affiliation became socially consequential only when they were used to maintain educational services, coordinate collective action, and create spaces in which women could participate in public religious life. This conclusion aligns with evidence that gender stereotypes continue to shape assessments of leadership and competence [37], while institutionalized patriarchy may restrict women's access to authority even when formal rules appear neutral [38], [39].

The case also needs to be read with caution. It does not demonstrate that women leaders are inherently more inclusive, nor does it establish that all educational growth within NW resulted from one individual. Such claims would exceed the evidence. What the documentary record supports is a more defensible proposition: women's leadership can become a central source of institutional continuity and change when organizational systems convert competence and service into recognized authority. This proposition is relevant to current debates on gender justice within Islamic legal and public institutions in Indonesia, where women's participation continues to be negotiated through both religious interpretation and organizational practice [40]. It is also relevant to the changing public visibility of Indonesian Muslim women, including the role of networks and media in widening the circulation of religious and social claims [41].

Practically, the findings indicate that faith-based educational organizations should move beyond symbolic inclusion. First, women should have transparent access to leadership preparation, governance positions, and formal decision-making mechanisms. Second, institutions should build auditable registries of schools, staff, learners, and community services so that claims of educational expansion can be evaluated without diminishing their historical importance. Third, leadership development should combine religious literacy, administrative competence, conflict management, and gender-responsive safeguarding. Such measures would strengthen institutional capacity while recognizing women not merely as beneficiaries of education, but as authors of educational transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Sitti Raihanun Zainuddin Abdul Madjid's leadership in Nahdlatul Wathan offers a historically grounded example of women's religious authority in Islamic education. Her authority was not reducible to genealogical connection with the organization's founder. It was sustained through a four-dimensional configuration of symbolic legitimacy,

religious-moral credibility, organizational recognition, and demonstrated institutional performance. This configuration enabled leadership to be translated into community-based Islamic Religious Education, institutional continuity, and wider opportunities for women's public participation. The study's principal contribution is a case-derived framework that explains female religious leadership as negotiated, performance-based, and institutionally sustained. For policy and practice, the findings support gender-responsive governance, transparent institutional data systems, and leadership pathways that recognize women's expertise, service, and authority within faith-based education.

LIMITATIONS

This study is limited by its reliance on documentary sources. The corpus did not include new interviews with leaders, educators, alumni, or community members, and it therefore cannot capture all lived experiences, dissenting interpretations, or local variations within NW. Several institutional claims, particularly the reported number of approximately 280 educational institutions, could not be independently audited through a complete public registry; they have consequently been reported as documented institutional claims rather than verified census data. The case is also historically and organizationally specific, which limits generalization to other Islamic organizations. Future research should combine archival analysis with multi-site interviews, institutional datasets, and comparative cases of women-led Islamic education across Indonesia and other Muslim-majority contexts.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

H.H. conceptualized the study, developed the historical-documentary research design, conducted the source collection and coding, and drafted the manuscript. A.F. contributed to theoretical framing, source verification, interpretation of Islamic educational leadership, and critical manuscript revision. A.M. contributed to methodological refinement, analysis of gender and religious authority, and critical review of the final manuscript. All authors approved the final version and accept responsibility for the integrity of the work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

"The authors declare no conflict of interest."

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language refinement and structural editing during manuscript preparation. After using the tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content, verified citations and claims against the cited sources, and assumed full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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