

# The Stagnation of the Islamic Women's Organization Movement in the Swirl of Gender Stereotypes: Social Contribution in the Midst of Political Change

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## Abstract

*Examining Muslimat Nabdlatul Ulama (NU) in Banyumas Regency, this study looks at how Islamic women's organizations have stagnated in Indonesia in the face of shifting political environments and enduring gender norms. Although these groups make important societal contributions, they face challenges in extending their impact beyond conventional gender norms. The research seeks to examine the role of gender stereotypes on the activities and political involvement of Muslimat NU, with a focus on the conflict between their societal effects and their constrained political power. The study utilized a qualitative methodology, involving in-depth interviews with 20 leaders and members of Muslimat NU, three focus group discussions, and thorough review of relevant documents for a period of six months. The findings indicate that the programs of Muslimat NU primarily strengthen conventional gender norms, with a particular emphasis on education, healthcare, and social welfare. Although these programs fulfill important community needs, they unintentionally reinforce gender stereotypes, which restricts the organization's ability to challenge established power dynamics. Although Muslimat NU has a large number of members, their involvement in politics is limited due to internal hesitations and external patriarchal restrictions. This study enhances our comprehension of the intricate dynamics between religious identity, gender norms, and political engagement in countries where Muslims form the majority. It sheds light on the difficulties encountered by women's organizations in converting social connections into political power.*

**Keywords:** *Women's Social Activities, Religious Organization, Gender Stereotype.*

## INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, Islamic women's organizations have long been engaged in social and political movements, but due to enduring gender norms, their contemporary contributions are still limited (Rinaldo, 2008). Despite the democratic reforms that have taken place in Indonesia since 1998, these groups nevertheless encounter obstacles in extending their influence outside the conventional spheres connected with women's household responsibilities (Poerwandari et al., 2018). For example, Muslimat Nahdlatul Ulama (Muslimat NU), a prominent Islamic women's organization in Indonesia boasting a membership of over 32 million, continues to predominantly concentrate its efforts on education, healthcare, and social welfare initiatives (Ismail, 2011). This constraint is a result of wider social norms that restrict women's involvement to specific areas, hindering their complete involvement in political and economic decision-making processes (Bullough et al., 2012). The continuation of these gender stereotypes not only impedes the development of Islamic women's organizations but also affects Indonesia's advancement towards gender equality and the empowerment of women (Blackburn, 2008; Robinson, 2009).

The literature that has been produced on Islamic women's organizations in Indonesia has provided a thorough historical account of these organizations' growth and contributions to social welfare. Research has emphasized the significant role these groups play in delivering essential services in education, healthcare, and community development, particularly in places where government provisions are inadequate. Research conducted by Arnez (2010) and van Doorn-Harder (2006) has demonstrated the establishment of comprehensive networks of schools, hospitals, and orphanages throughout the country by Muslimat NU and Aisyiyah. Nevertheless, there is a significant deficiency in the existing body of research concerning how these organizations effectively manage the intricate interaction between their societal contributions and the wider political environment,

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specifically in relation to persistent gender stereotypes (Isnaeniyah, 2017). There is a lack of comprehensive research on the effects of these stereotypes on organizations' capacity to shape policy and engage in official political procedures (Rinaldo, 2013; White, 2006).

In the midst of political upheaval, this study seeks to investigate the social contributions made by Muslimat NU and explore the reasons behind the movements of Islamic women's organizations in Indonesia becoming stagnant (Machrusah, 2005; Mulia, 2013). This study aims to comprehend the impact of gender stereotypes on the role and influence of Muslimat NU in society and politics, focusing on the activities and issues faced by the organization at the regional level, particularly in Banyumas Regency, Central Java. We investigate the conflict between the substantial societal effect of Muslimat NU and its limited political sway by conducting thorough interviews, engaging in focus group discussions, and analyzing organizational records. This research enhances the overall discussion on the empowerment of women and their involvement in politics in countries where Islam is the dominant religion. It achieves this by offering a detailed comprehension of the intricate dynamics within Indonesia's largest Islamic women's organization.

We contend that Islamic women's groups such as Muslimat NU, in spite of their wide-ranging social contributions, are nevertheless caught in a "safe zone" of activities that serve to legitimize rather than to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes. This constraint is not solely a consequence of internal organizational decisions, but is fundamentally ingrained in wider societal and political systems that persistently marginalize the participation of women in public domains. By utilizing feminist political theory and social movement literature, we argue that the continuation of gender stereotypes functions as a means to uphold current power structures, so constraining the ability of these groups to bring about significant change. Through an analysis of the Muslimat NU example in Banyumas, we illustrate how the convergence of local political dynamics, cultural norms, and organizational hierarchy hinders women's complete engagement in political processes, despite their considerable social capital and grassroots impact. This analysis offers valuable insights into the obstacles and possibilities for Islamic women's organizations to surpass conventional roles and emerge as more prominent participants in Indonesia's developing democratic environment.

## Research Method

This study specifically examines the Muslimat Nahdlatul Ulama (Muslimat NU) organization in Banyumas Regency, located in Central Java, Indonesia, as the primary subject of examination. Muslimat NU, a self-governing entity under Nahdlatul Ulama, is among the most prominent Islamic women's associations in Indonesia, exerting considerable influence at the local level. The Banyumas branch was chosen because of its historical importance in the establishment of the organization and its current engaged membership. By focusing on the region, we can thoroughly analyze how the organization's activities and issues are influenced by local contexts. This will provide valuable insights on the larger dynamics of Islamic women's organizations in Indonesia.

A qualitative research design was used to examine the intricate relationship between gender stereotypes, social contributions, and political involvement among Muslimat NU. This methodology allows for a detailed comprehension of the participants' encounters, viewpoints, and the sociocultural environments that influence their actions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study embraces an interpretive paradigm, recognizing that the gender dynamics and organizational issues are socially produced and can be best comprehended by considering the viewpoints of individuals who are directly involved (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

This research involved key informants from the Banyumas Regency's Muslimat NU organization at different levels. We utilized purposive sampling to guarantee inclusivity across various organizational functions and degrees of seniority. The sample consisted of 20 participants, which included the chairperson and board members of the Banyumas branch, heads of sub-branches, and active members engaged in various initiatives. In addition, we have engaged five external stakeholders, including local government officials and community leaders, to gain contextual views regarding Muslimat NU's role and perception within the wider community.

Data collection was carried out for a duration of six months, employing several approaches to guarantee thorough and triangulated data. Comprehensive, partially organized interviews were carried out with all

participants, with a duration ranging from 60 to 90 minutes each. The interviews examined the participants' experiences within the organization, their opinions on gender roles, and the difficulties they encounter in broadening their activity beyond conventional areas. Additionally, three focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, with each FGD consisting of 6-8 participants. The purpose of these conversations was to gather collective narratives and examine the dynamics within the groups. In addition, we examined organizational papers like as annual reports, program descriptions, and internal communications to obtain a deeper understanding of the formal structures and stated objectives of Muslimat NU.

The process of analyzing the data adhered to the theme analysis guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). At the beginning, we thoroughly study all interview transcripts, FGD notes, and necessary papers to become comfortable with the data. Subsequently, open code was utilized to discern crucial principles and repeating patterns. The initial codes were further categorized into bigger topics that directly addressed the study questions. The themes were continuously improved through ongoing comparison inside and between data sources. In order to improve the credibility of our results, we utilized member checking, which involved sharing our initial analyses with important sources of information to obtain their feedback and clarification. In addition, the researchers employed the method of triangulation, where several team members independently coded and compared their interpretations to ensure consistency and minimize potential bias in the analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Early Development of the NU Muslimat Organization and Accompanying Political Dynamics**

The establishment of Muslimat NU as the women's division of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is a noteworthy achievement in the chronicles of Islamic women's associations in Indonesia. This phenomenon demonstrated the increasing recognition of women's involvement in religious and social domains within conventional Islamic communities (Niam, 2017). The organization was established in 1938 when Mrs. Djunaisih lobbied for women's religious education during the 13th NU Congress in Menes, Banten. This significant occasion established the foundation for the formal admission of women in NU's organizational structure, which challenged the dominant patriarchal standards within the Islamic community (Makhasin, 2017).

Women's participation within the larger NU framework gradually increased during the early years of Muslimat NU (Marwah et al., 2018). The necessity to reconcile conservative religious sentiments while advocating for women's involvement needed this gradual advancement. From 1938 to 1946, women's roles underwent a transformation, progressing from passive listeners and followers to being actively engaged participants with their own system of administration (Rahmawati, 2015). The transition observed here demonstrates the intricate equilibrium that Muslimat NU had to achieve in order to uphold traditional Islamic principles while also advocating for increased women's participation (Badi'ah, 2020).

One of the most significant moments in the history of Muslimat NU was its official founding in 1946 during the 16th NU Congress in Purwokerto (Marwah et al., 2018). The formalization of this process was achieved by the persistent advocacy of female leaders and the growing recognition of women's positions by the male leadership of NU. During the congress, the establishment of "Nahdlatul Ulama Muslimat (NUM)" took place, which has its own organizational framework and is responsible for dealing with matters concerning women. NU's acknowledgment of women's potential contributions to religious and social life is seen in this evolution, while it is still predominantly shaped by male leadership.

Indonesia's larger political environment was inextricably related to Muslimat NU's early beginnings. The organization's expansion occurred simultaneously with the country's fight for independence and the subsequent process of constructing a nation (Barton et al., 2021). From 1942 to 1945, throughout the period of Japanese occupation and the subsequent years of independence, members of Muslimat NU played a significant role in actively engaging in resistance activities and contributing to the establishment of the nation (Machrusah, 2005). The organization's participation showcased its capacity to harmonize its religious and social objectives with national priorities, thereby bolstering its credibility and significance.

Muslimat NU increased its organizational impact and reach in the years following independence. The expansion was motivated by the increasing acknowledgment of women's contributions to the progress of the nation and the necessity for Islamic organizations to adjust to evolving social dynamics (Arifianto, 2020). By the beginning of the 1950s, Muslimat NU had formed branches throughout Indonesia, particularly in Java. The organization's quick expansion was a result of its capacity to effectively engage women at the local level, utilizing NU's wide-reaching network and social influence (Menchik, 2019).

The relationship between Muslimat NU and formal politics saw substantial changes throughout its initial years. The evolution was shaped by NU's political involvement and the shifting political environment in Indonesia (Menchik, 2019). During the 1950s, when NU transformed into a political party, Muslimat NU played a pivotal role in organizing female voters and successfully obtained seats in the national parliament (Munhanif, 2012). The organization's political engagement showcased its capacity to exert influence over national policies, albeit within the limitations imposed by a political system predominantly controlled by men.

In particular, negotiating gender relations inside NU and larger society presented obstacles for the organization throughout its early beginnings. Muslimat NU consistently had to engage in negotiations to establish and maintain its position and independence within the broader NU framework (Saliba et al, 2004). Although Muslimat NU had official acknowledgment, their endeavors were frequently confined to domains considered suitable for women, such as education and social welfare. This constraint demonstrated the enduring influence of conventional gender norms, despite the increasing prominence of women in organizational hierarchies.

Muslimat NU experienced both advantages and disadvantages throughout the New Order era (1966–1998) (Asmar, 2020). The government's emphasis on growth created opportunities for the organization to broaden its social welfare initiatives. Nevertheless, the regime's authority over civil society organizations constrained Muslimat NU's capacity to participate in autonomous political advocacy. During this period, the organization prioritized its social and educational initiatives, in line with the government's development strategy, while still upholding its Islamic identity.

Muslimat NU showed incredible adaptation and durability during its early beginnings. The organization has expanded and sustained its significance despite shifts in political regimes and societal norms (Munhanif, 2019). Since its establishment in 1938, Muslimat NU has steadily grown in both membership and programs, eventually becoming a prominent societal influence by the end of the 20th century (Hefni, 2019). This history demonstrates the organization's ability to effectively manage religious principles, societal requirements, and political circumstances, which lays the foundation for its current tasks and problems.

### **Program Orientation and Organizational Activities: Deplorable Gender Stereotypes**

The activities and program direction of Muslimat NU demonstrate a steadfast commitment to gender norms and stereotypes (Dewi, 2015). This alignment arises from strongly entrenched societal norms regarding the duties of women in Indonesian Islamic communities (Mulia, 2013). The research of Muslimat NU's operations in Banyumas reveals a primary emphasis on education, healthcare, and social welfare programs that are typically linked to women's household duties. The orientation, although it tackles important community needs, unintentionally perpetuates gender stereotypes, so restricting the organization's ability to confront established power structures.

Another important aspect of Muslimat NU's work is its healthcare initiatives, which serve to further perpetuate gender norms. The organization's emphasis on health issues arises from the traditional expectation that women are the primary caretakers and accountable for the well-being of their families (Qibtiyah, 2009). Muslimat NU in Banyumas has launched a range of health initiatives, encompassing programs focused on maternity and child health, nutrition education, and family planning services. These activities, although crucial for the well-being of the community, unintentionally reinforce the idea that health and childcare are only the responsibility of women.

Muslimat NU's activity is largely focused on social welfare initiatives, which are consistent with conventional views of women's roles. This emphasis reflects the societal norms that dictate women should take a leading role in charitable and community support projects (Rahmawati, 2015). Our research indicates that Muslimat NU in Banyumas actively participates in activities aimed at reducing poverty, providing care for orphans, and

supporting the elderly. Although these activities tackle important societal needs, they also perpetuate preconceptions regarding women's duties as nurturers and caregivers in society.

Programs for economic empowerment offered by the organization are still restricted and based on gender stereotypes. This constraint arises from prevailing perceptions regarding suitable economic endeavors for women in strict Islamic environments. Muslimat NU's economic endeavors in Banyumas generally center around small-scale, home-based industries, namely in the areas of handicrafts and food production (Arifin et al., 2020). Although these initiatives do offer certain economic opportunities, they frequently do not address or rectify the existing gender gaps in the economy or encourage women's involvement in wider economic domains (Chakim, 2016).

The involvement of Muslimat NU in political and legal activism is limited, which reflects the prevailing gender biases in public domains. The low level of participation is a consequence of both internal factors inside the organization and external influences from society (Awwaliyah, 2020). Our interviews with leaders of Muslimat NU in Banyumas indicate a reluctance to participate in explicit political endeavors, as most advocacy initiatives are centered around "safe" topics such as family welfare and women's health. By adopting this approach, the organization not only avoids confrontation but also greatly restricts its ability to exert influence on legislation and advance women's rights in a more comprehensive manner.

The organization's religious activities, albeit broad, frequently uphold conventional gender roles within Islamic practice. This approach exemplifies the traditionalist understanding of women's duties in religious life that is widespread in numerous NU communities. The Muslimat NU in Banyumas arranges several religious study groups and Quranic recitation events, although these activities hardly tackle matters concerning gender equality in the interpretation of Islam. As a result, although these activities aim to enhance women's understanding of religion, they frequently do not question or criticize male-dominated religious stories and beliefs.

Though it exists, Muslimat NU's leadership development is still limited by gender stereotypes. This constraint is based on societal norms that confine women's leadership roles to particular, traditionally feminine areas. Our observations of Muslimat NU's leadership training programs in Banyumas indicate a concentration on developing abilities pertaining to the management of social and educational activities, while placing less emphasis on larger public leadership positions. Although this strategy enhances skills in specific domains, it does not adequately equip women for leadership roles that extend beyond the conventional boundaries of women's organizations.

Muslimat NU's actions create a dilemma because they continue to reinforce gender stereotypes. Although the organization offers essential services and possibilities for women's involvement, it also perpetuates the prejudices that restrict women's wider societal responsibilities. This is demonstrated by the organization's substantial societal influence in Banyumas, together with its restricted capacity to alter gender norms or policies. As a result, Muslimat NU faces a situation where its achievements in conventional areas may unintentionally impede its capacity to bring about more significant changes in gender dynamics and the empowerment of women.

## **NU Muslimat in the Middle of Political Change and Challenges**

Muslimat NU's participation in political processes has changed dramatically over time, mirroring more general shifts in Indonesian politics. This evolution is a result of changing political regimes and the organization's increasing recognition of its potential impact (Machrusah, 2005). Historical records indicate that Muslimat NU had an active role in the 1955 election, successfully obtaining five seats in parliament during the time when NU functioned as a political party. The organization's early political engagement showcases its ability to rally its enormous membership for political objectives, albeit within the limitations of NU's wider political goal (Arifianto, 2020).

The New Order era (1966-1998) imposed political limitations on Muslimat NU. This limitation arose as a result of the government's stringent regulation of civil society organizations and political endeavors (Asmar, 2020). During this time, the activities of Muslimat NU were mostly focused on social and religious programming, with

less direct involvement in politics. The organization's change in focus demonstrates its adaptive strategy to ensure its survival and significance inside an authoritarian state, although it comes at the expense of direct political power (Shobacha, 2012).

The period following the 1998 Reformasi era brought forth fresh prospects and difficulties for Muslimat NU's involvement in politics (Yunanto & Hamid, 2013). The process of democratization has created opportunities for increased involvement of civil society in political affairs (Febrina et al., 2016). Our research conducted in Banyumas indicates a growing inclination among Muslimat NU members towards political engagement, as seen by the participation of certain members in local legislative elections. Nevertheless, political engagement is nevertheless restricted and frequently hindered by enduring gender stereotypes and predominantly male-controlled political systems.

The relationship that exists between Muslimat NU and political parties, specifically the National Awakening Party (PKB), is nuanced (Jati, 2013). The complication stems from the organization's longstanding affiliation with NU and its intention to uphold political impartiality (Hamayotsu, 2011). Interviews with officials of Muslimat NU in Banyumas indicate a prudent stance towards party politics, as the organization officially maintains its non-partisan status while individual members actively participate in different political parties. This approach enables Muslimat NU to sustain its wide-ranging attractiveness while effectively navigating the potentially controversial realm of party politics.

Muslimat NU's political participation has been affected in many ways by the introduction of gender quotas in Indonesian politics (Menchik, 2019). Quotas offer chances for enhancing women's representation, but they also pose difficulties in terms of selecting and supporting candidates (Prihartini, 2019). Our findings in Banyumas indicate that although certain members of Muslimat NU have gained advantages from these quotas, the overall political participation of the organization has not experienced a substantial boost. This indicates that Muslimat NU has ongoing obstacles, both in terms of institutional and cultural factors, which hinder its capacity to effectively convert its social resources into political power.

A substantial potential political resource is the enormous membership base of Muslimat NU. Political parties and politicians frequently aim to utilize this network to get electoral backing (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020). Our study has uncovered multiple occurrences in Banyumas when political candidates sought endorsements or support from Muslimat NU during elections. This focus highlights the organization's significance in the political realm, but also prompts inquiries regarding its capacity to utilize this power to advance its own objectives.

The amount and kind of the organization's political activity are subject to internal dispute. These disputes exemplify the wider conflicts between upholding religious and societal priorities vs actively participating in political activities. The focus group talks conducted with members of Muslimat NU in Banyumas unveiled a wide range of perspectives, with certain individuals advocating for increased political involvement while others expressed a preference for concentrating on conventional social and religious endeavors. The organization faces both a difficulty and an opportunity due to its internal diversity while it adapts to its role in Indonesia's changing political environment.

Muslimat NU continues to have little involvement in policy advocacy, especially with regard to issues impacting women (Rahmawati, 2015). This constraint arises from a combination of organizational prudence and a deficiency in policy analysis and advocacy capabilities (marwah et al., 2018). Our examination of Muslimat NU's endeavors in Banyumas reveals little occurrences of direct involvement with the local government over policy matters, primarily focusing on conventional women's matters such as healthcare and education. The organization's low policy engagement hampers its capacity to exert influence on wider gender equality and women's empowerment objectives.

The organization has reacted cautiously to recent developments in politics, such as the emergence of Islamic conservatism and identity politics (Pribadi, 2021). This caution is motivated by the necessity to maintain a harmonious equilibrium between its moderate Islamic position and the varied perspectives held by its members (Roy, 2021). Interviews conducted with officials of Muslimat NU in Banyumas reveal a cautious approach to addressing these matters, frequently highlighting the importance of national cohesion and religious temperance.

Although this strategy contributes to the internal unity of Muslimat NU, it could restrict their capacity to adopt firm stances on contentious political matters that impact women's rights and gender equality.

## CONCLUSION

The study's most important finding is that, despite Indonesia's shifting political environment, gender stereotypes continue to have an impact on Muslimat NU's operations and its involvement in political processes. Our research conducted in Banyumas indicates that Muslimat NU has effectively increased its social and religious initiatives. However, it is still restricted by conventional gender norms, which restrict its participation in wider political and policy domains. The group primarily emphasizes education, healthcare, and social welfare, which are commonly connected with women's traditional household responsibilities. Although this strategy aims to meet important community needs, it unintentionally perpetuates gender stereotypes and limits the organization's ability to confront established power dynamics. In addition, Muslimat NU's participation in politics is constrained, despite its large membership and social influence. This is due to both internal reservations and external obstacles stemming from enduring patriarchal standards in Indonesian politics.

With its detailed explanation of the intricate interactions between gender norms, political participation, and religious identity, this study adds to the body of knowledge on women's organizations in nations with a majority of Muslims. This study builds upon the existing body of research on Islamic women's organizations by illustrating the enduring presence of gender stereotypes, despite the organizations' growth in social power and adaptation to evolving political environments. The results of our research question the oversimplified explanations of women's empowerment within religious settings, emphasizing the importance of a more thorough analysis of how religious women's groups can both empower and restrict women's societal roles. Furthermore, this study provides valuable understanding of the difficulties involved in converting social capital into political power, especially for organizations that are deeply connected to conventional religious frameworks.

The limits of this study must be acknowledged, despite the fact that it offers insightful information. While the emphasis on Muslimat NU in Banyumas enables thorough examination, it may restrict the applicability of the results to other areas or Islamic women's groups. Future study would be enhanced by doing comparative studies including other locations and organizations, in order to attain a more comprehensive comprehension of these dynamics. In addition, the qualitative methodology employed in the study provides valuable contextual information. However, incorporating quantitative analyses would enhance the ability to accurately evaluate the level of political engagement and policy influence. Longitudinal studies can offer useful insights into the evolution of Muslimat NU's involvement in political processes over time, especially in response to changing national and global circumstances.

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