
The Making of Tablighi Female Ulama a Case Study of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah Sragen in Achieving SDGs

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Abstract

Objective: This study explores the process of forming and educating Tablighi female ulama at Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah, Sragen, and examines its contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The primary objective of this research is to analyze how an Islamic boarding school affiliated with the Tablighi Jamaat develops women religious scholars who are capable of engaging in da'wah and community leadership. **Theoretical framework:** The theoretical framework draws on gender studies in Islamic education, social reproduction theory, and religious authority, emphasizing women's access to knowledge and public religious roles. **Literature review:** The literature review indicates that previous studies on Tablighi Jamaat largely focus on male dominance in public preaching and highlight limited educational opportunities for women, often confining them to domestic or supportive roles. Research on Tablighi women's education generally suggests insufficient preparation for independent da'wah and scholarly authority. **Methods:** Addressing this gap, this study employs an ethnographic methodology, using participant observation and in-depth semi-structured and unstructured interviews with female santri, teachers, and pesantren leaders. **Results:** The findings reveal that Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah implements a systematic cadreization of female ulama through character-building programs, intensive mastery of classical Islamic texts (kutub turath), and structured training using Tablighi Jamaat manuals. Furthermore, the establishment of Rumah Qur'an (Ruqun) and Marhalah Ta'lim Aly strengthens pedagogical quality and enhances women's preaching skills and social engagement. These initiatives enable female santri to actively participate in religious dissemination and community interaction beyond the pesantren environment. **Implications:** The implications of this study demonstrate that faith-based educational institutions can significantly contribute to SDGs by promoting inclusive religious education and empowering women as agents of social and moral development. **Novelty:** The novelty of this research lies in highlighting an alternative model of Tablighi Jamaat education that successfully produces female ulama with scholarly legitimacy and public religious authority, challenging the prevailing male-centered narrative within the movement.

Keywords: tablighi jamaat, female ulama, islamic boarding school, sdgs, indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

The development of transnational Islamic movements such as Tablighi Jamaat in Indonesia can be characterized by several factors, including having educational institutions such as Pesantren. The existence of pesantren is an important element in the development and sustainability of a Muslim community [1]. In Indonesia, Tablighi Jamaat pesantrens are spreading in several regions and developing educational styles based on the values of Tablighi teachings to ensure the continuity of the movement's cadres in the future. Several Tablighi boarding schools in Indonesia mark the transformation of Islamic educational institutions as well as Tablighi Jamaat itself [2]. Two well-known Tablighi Jamaat pesantren are Pondok Pesantren Al-Fatah in Temboro, Magetan, and Pesantren Sunanul Husna al-Jaiyah in Banten, South Tangerang.

The study of Tablighi Jamaat pesantren has been explored by several scholars and researchers. Mareike Jule Winkelmann, for example, studied the all-female Tablighi pesantren Madarasatul Niswan in New Delhi [3]. Winkelmann observed how the curriculum of Madarasatul Niswan is structured by giving priority to the teaching of the values and attitudes contained in the books of the Tablighi Jamaat over the formal teaching of literature or other general knowledge. According to Winkelmann, the main perspective of Madarasatul Niswan's education prioritizes idealizing Muslim female role models of the Prophet's time, along with studying non-Islamic subjects. The education of the women there also serves as a preparation for their marriage to wealthy men, who usually settle in South Africa and the Gulf States [4].

At the level of the role of pesantren actors, Yon Machmudi and Putih Kusumah Ardhani went to Pesantren al-Fatah Temboro to conduct a study of nyai or female members of the pesantren family on their da'wah role in tabligh pesantren. They showed that the nyai of Pesantren al-Fatah was tasked with proselytizing among female santri and the community, both in the pesantren and in rural areas, to attract more followers to Tablighi Jamaat [5]. The research on the role of Tablighi pesantren in the transmission of Islamic knowledge for santri was conducted by Eva Fachrun Nisa at Pesantren Sunanul Husna Al-Jaiyah, South Tangerang. Nisa's study mainly highlighted the factor of the strong commitment of the female santri in their status as female Tablighi Jamaat due to the presence of foreign students from different countries in the Pesantren Sunanul Husna Al-Jaiyah. This condition is important because the feeling of being part of the global community has helped these students to achieve their aspirations as true Muslims both locally and globally [6].

Some of the studies I have described above have undoubtedly contributed significantly to the discourse of Tablighi Jamaat education, but there has been no discussion of the role of educational institutions in preparing cadres of ulama, especially female ulama. One of the factors triggering this condition is the restriction of researchers, especially men, to enter Tablighi Jamaat women's private sphere, which strictly regulates their social procedures [7]. Previous studies on Tablighi Jamaat pesantren have mostly focused on the type of educational institutions and certain steps for the further growth of Tablighi educational institutions. Including Winkelmann's earlier research on the function of Tablighi education for women such as Madarasatul Niswan, which is seen as having a civilizing mission. It is nothing more than a preparatory step for the acquisition of wealthy men in the future [8]. The education of Tablighi women in New Delhi offers young women the possibility of a prosperous, but patriarchal, marriage. They are respected not for their broad scholarly abilities, but for their ability to raise children with the same economic dependence on men as uneducated women [9].

In contrast to Tablighi Jamaat pesantren such as Madarasatul Niswan, the Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah makes a serious effort to educate female santri so that they can grow in the educational process of the maximum regeneration of the ulama. This is also a form of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah's responsibility in realizing the general assumption that they perceive pesantren institutions as producing future ulama cadres [10]. Pesantren Dar El-

Wihdah has implemented various programs aimed at female santri, including requirements to master tahfiz al-Quran and compulsory diniyah schools. On the practical level, which can also be categorized as Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah's excellence, they have a medium to train Tablighi's female ulama cadres in Rumah Quran (Ruqun). Ruqun is the center for Qur'anic studies [11]. It has members who come regularly according to a set schedule, which often presents female santris from Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah. The presence of santris as cadres of female tabligh ulama is a manifestation of the seriousness of the pesantren in training their talents in the field of ulema. Similarly, Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah's tabligh curriculum is also a factor that answers why the process of female ulama regeneration in this institution deserves serious study [12].

The term female ulama can evoke many reactions from different groups because several criteria have to be met, so a clear definition of the term ulama itself is needed. In the case of the Tablighi ulama female, I refer to M. Quraish Shihab's perspective that the genealogy of the ulama comes from the word 'alima, which means clear knowledge [13]. Furthermore, this clear knowledge is used in the aspect of natural social phenomena enshrined in the holy book to create fear (khassyah) of Allah. Initially, the meaning of ulama has changed specifically and narrowly from its original world through the influence of Islamic sciences, so the requirement of mastering disciplines such as fiqh becomes a requirement for someone to be categorized as an ulama [14]. Ultimately, some of the requirements of the ulama also restrict women from becoming ulama, such as a good understanding of the methodology of issuing fatwas, good moral integrity, and the ability to act as a religious leader in the community. However, there is one way in which women can be categorized as ulama [15]. This is through the use of the term 'female ulama', as used in the Jurnal Mimbar Ulama, published by the Indonesian Ulema Council, which is understood to mean having the expertise to deliver khutbahs, even to female audiences [16]. Furthermore, a book entitled Indonesian Women Ulema published by the Centre for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) in 2002, which examines the profile of elected women, defines ulama as women's participation in religious activities such as lecturers, clerics, Islamic political parties and preachers [17].

Referring to the definition of the term ulama, the educational program conducted by Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah can be categorized as part of the cadre of female ulama. This is because the role of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah is not only to carry out its educational role but also to carry out its function of producing Tablighi Jamaat ulama agents who carry out the mission of da'wah for the wider community. This can be traced back to the role of the pesantren, which provides for a strict selection of pesantren graduates who meet the criteria both in mastering certain books and foreign languages to become teachers and preachers in the pesantren environment as well as in the Sragen community area [18].

One of the measures taken by the pesantren authority to ensure that female alumni who are selected as teachers and preachers remain in the village of Kuwung Sari is to marry them off to fellow santri through the facility of the pesantren marriage bureau. The married couple is then provided with living facilities in the vicinity of the pesantren. Thus, looking at the educational patterns applied by Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah to female santri who choose to study there, and how the output of santri leads to the regeneration of ulama, I argue that more research is needed on how Tablighi pesantren educate and transmit knowledge to santri. In addition, it is interesting to study how Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah fosters the characteristics of female santri as cadres of ulama and the key to the continuity of the development of Tablighi Jamaat [18].

By linking the process of training Islamic scholars with the SDGs, this study seeks to demonstrate how sustainable development values such as quality education and solid institutions influence the success of the Tablighi Jamaat's programme to regenerate female Islamic ulama.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic studies on the Tablighi Jamaat have largely focused on its missionary character, spiritual discipline, and transnational da'wah networks. The movement is commonly portrayed as emphasizing personal piety, moral reform, and ritual observance through male-led preaching activities. Within this dominant narrative, religious authority is closely associated with men, while women are positioned primarily within domestic and supportive spheres. As a result, women's engagement in Tablighi Jamaat has often been analyzed in relation to family-oriented religious practices rather than formal scholarship or leadership in public religious spaces. Existing literature on Tablighi women consistently highlights structural limitations in access to advanced Islamic education. Female members are frequently described as recipients of informal religious instruction centered on ethical behavior, household responsibilities, and spiritual devotion. Such educational patterns have contributed to scholarly assumptions that women within the Tablighi Jamaat are not institutionally prepared to become ulama. Consequently, studies on the formation of female religious scholars in Tablighi contexts remain scarce, reinforcing the perception that religious authority within the movement is inherently male-dominated [19].

In contrast, research on Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Indonesia demonstrates their adaptive capacity and social relevance. Pesantren are widely recognized as institutions that contribute significantly to educational development, social mobility, and moral formation. More recent studies emphasize the growing participation of women in pesantren education, including access to classical Islamic texts, teaching roles, and community-based religious leadership. These developments align with global development agendas, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasize inclusive education and gender equality as key components of sustainable societies. Literature on gender and Islamic education further argues that women's religious authority is shaped not only by theological interpretations but also by institutional design and pedagogical strategies. When educational environments provide women with opportunities for textual mastery, leadership training, and public engagement, they contribute directly to SDG 4 (Quality Education) by ensuring equitable access to knowledge. Simultaneously, such models support SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by challenging traditional gender hierarchies and enabling women to participate as decision-makers and knowledge producers within religious communities [20].

Recent discussions on religion and development increasingly acknowledge faith-based institutions as strategic actors in achieving SDGs. Islamic educational institutions are viewed as capable of promoting social cohesion, ethical leadership, and peaceful community relations, corresponding with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). However, empirical studies that integrate women's religious leadership, pesantren education, and SDGs remain limited, particularly within conservative or revivalist movements such as the Tablighi Jamaat. Overall, the literature reveals a significant gap in understanding how Tablighi-affiliated pesantren can function as spaces for empowering women as ulama while contributing to sustainable development goals. There is limited exploration of educational models that simultaneously maintain religious orthodoxy and promote inclusive development. This study addresses this gap by examining Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah as a case that integrates female ulama formation with the broader objectives of education quality, gender equity, and social sustainability within the SDGs framework [21].

METHODOLOGY

This research uses the ethnographic method, a method for studying individual behavior in specific cultural and social settings. The research took approximately two months and included direct observation and remote interviews to supplement the primary data. I argue that the ethnographic method can provide a holistic picture of the research subjects by emphasizing the sharing of their everyday experiences. This view is echoed by J.W.

Creswell who states that the ethnographic method is a person's interpretation and description of a culture or social system that develops in a society [22].

Thus, my task as an ethnographer here is to explore the answers to each problem of why and how something can happen in the context of the social reality of the female santri of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah, Sragen. I also studied various patterns of behavior shown by all elements of the pesantren, including the way of life and habits, including the grammar used as a means of daily communication.

To create a simultaneous and logical data collection and analysis and to include a direct descriptive summary of the content of the data information, this type of research is descriptive-analytical. In this context, I tried to be sensitive to the language of the female santri of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah and to privilege their knowledge with observation and interview methods. I used the specific method of participant observation to learn about the routines, interactions and naturally occurring practices of a particular group of people in the social environment of the female santri of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah and to understand their culture. I conducted structured and unstructured interviews with research informants to coordinate the interview process. I also interviewed pesantren leaders and several female santri of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah as research subjects [21].

To create the naturalness of the primary data and to reveal the situations that need to be adequately researched and uncovered, I decided to live and be directly involved with the informants under study, namely the female santris and the entire teaching unit of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah. This method is commonly known among scholars as 'living the field'. I tried to come into contact with the research data by relying on the interpretation of the experience of the santri of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah through the regeneration process of the female ulama of Tablighi Jamaat. In my opinion, the connection between the researcher and the researched is always at the core of fieldwork, as emphasized by Martin Heidegger. In addition, I have participated in several daily activities of the santri of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah, both in formal and informal classroom activities that normally involve various out-of-school activities. I also physically immerse myself in some of the attributes of the Tablighi female santri, such as the use of the veil and clothing, which is generally long, closed, and of a distinctive dark color [23].

The main data of this research are Mrs. Nyai Fathurrohmah, the owner of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah, and two santri who are focused on undergoing the program of training female ulama of Tablighi Jamaat. The data is supported by secondary sources that I obtained from informants around Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah, such as village officials and Pesantren facility officers, who either directly or indirectly know how the process of forming female ulama of Tablighi works. The data can be obtained taking into account the strategic location of the pesantren, which is in the middle of residential areas so that locals and migrants can come and go. In addition, I obtained secondary data from journal articles, books, and other academic research works related to the research theme [24].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historicity of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah

"How do you practice your knowledge? Because the world is like an illusion. When the day is hot, from a distance it looks like a puddle. But when you go to touch it, it turns out that the puddle is not there. This is the world, it is endless".

When Kiai Abdul Halim Ad-Dimyathi was asked this question by a member of the Pakistani Tablighi Jamaat community, he was still a family businessman. He lived in Solo but controlled several family businesses, including a shoe and batik factory in Sragen. The Tablighi member's question referred to Kiai Halim's day-to-day involvement in his family business. It was feared that he was neglecting his religious duties. That year, towards the end of 1979 and into the 1980s, a group of Pakistani Tablighi Jamaat came to visit Sragen.

They were in the Kuwung Sari area [25]. During their visit, there was a group of Pakistani Tablighi Jamaat who were in search of an Arabic-to-Indonesian translator. Their search brought them together with Kiai Halim, who had a good command of Arabic. The era of Tablighi Jamaat's entry into Indonesia itself is reportedly from 1952, as is the case with its introduction into Malaysia. The main figures in the mission were Maulana Miaji Isa and a tabligh leader named Maulana Lutfiurrahman, who spent about 40 days preaching the teachings of Tablighi Jamaat in Indonesia [26]. One of the destinations of this mission was the Kebon Jeruk Mosque in Jakarta, where they were immediately welcomed by the Imam of the mosque at the time, H. Ahmad Zulfakar. Around the 1970s, the Tablighi Jamaat movement in Indonesia experienced massive growth and spread to various regions, including the regency of Sragen.

During Kiai Halim's meeting with members of the Pakistani Tablighi Jamaat in Sragen, they finally suggested that Kiai Halim go on a three-day trip. The Pakistani Tablighi Jamaat explained that the three-day outing, known as a *khuruj*, would be devoted to religion. *Khuruj* is a term that refers to Tablighi Jamaat groups traveling on missions for a certain number of days to preach to people they meet during the *khuruj* [27]. *Khuruj* activity has been a central tenet of Tablighi Jamaat's mission since its inception and remains a core feature of the organization. In addition to believing in the five pillars of Islam, *khuruj* marks Tablighi Jamaat members' commitment to going out 3 days a month, 40 days a year, and 4 months a lifetime. The locus of religious education has shifted from madrasas or religious schools to mosques because of *khuruj*.

Kiai Halim received an ultimatum from Tablighi Pakistan that he should not expect anything from people during the days of *khuruj*. According to Mrs Nyai Fathurrohmah, after returning from a three-day trip with Tablighi members, Kiai Halim said they had taught him to live simply while he acted as an Indonesian translator for them. After returning from the three-day trip, Kiai Halim reflected more and drastically distanced himself from the busyness of his family business because it was seen as materialistic. From Nyai Fathurrohmah's perspective, this phenomenon is rare because of Kiai Halim's sophisticated lifestyle before learning the teachings of Tablighi. Kiai Halim, who was previously more attached to the Manhattan style and not even interested in clothes other than the original corduroy, slowly began to abandon the materialistic aspect [24].

Kiai Halim's contact with Tablighi Jamaat sparked a new idea to establish a Tablighi educational institution. Between 1981 and 1983, Kiai Halim converted his house into a pesantren. At the beginning of the establishment of the Pesantren, which was then called Dar El-Wihdah, the building was intended for male students. Two years later, in 1985, Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah expanded by declaring its identity as an educational institution for young women as well. This progress came about naturally because the growth of the Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah was so dependent on the ability of the kiai figure, and the independence of the kiai figure became a crucial element in this growth [28]. In the early days, Kiai Halim's method of promoting the Pesantren did not involve putting up a sign outside the Pesantren, as other Pesantren used to do. Instead, as part of the promotion of his new pesantren, Kiai Halim used the means of behavior and scientific character of the santri, called *amaliyah*.

Kiai Halim has serious hopes that the students who enjoy the pesantren holidays will behave politely. In this way, many people will be interested in becoming part of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah. Kiai Halim believes this is more effective than trying to promote the pesantren by putting up signs, which he avoided doing when Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah started. The mechanism used by Kiai Halim's pesantren to promote the pesantren is similar to that of the Indian Tablighi Jamaat school, Madrasatul Niswan. Madrasatul Niswan relies on word of mouth to promote the pesantren. They argue: 'It is the quality of education that makes the madrasa popular'. Kiai Halim tried to use and maximize the function of household appliances to help meet the needs of the pesantren at the beginning of its existence. For example, the kitchen spice rack was converted into a bookshelf. In line with

SDGs, the development of educational institutions such as pesantren at the local level is indeed very important for the enhancement of partnerships among global communities.



Figure 1. This Is a Snapshot of One Corner of The Old Cottage. It Was the First Area of the Pesantren Dar-El-Wihdah

When Kiai Halim passed away in 2007, all of his sons who had the potential to continue his leadership were pursuing Islamic education in foreign institutions, including Yemen, Syria, and Egypt. Due to this condition, a consensus was reached based on deliberation, which determined that Kiai Adrian Juanan Raden, the son-in-law of Kiai Halim, should continue the leadership relay of the Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah. Kiai Adrian graduated from UIN Sunan Kalijaga and was already familiar with Tablighi Jamaat while he was studying. He came to know the name of Kiai Halim after he became a fan of Sastra magazine, which was initiated by Kiai Halim and which then made him his favorite character. Kiai Adrian also knew that Kiai Halim was a *faisalah* figure of Tablighi Jamaat Indonesia. *Faisalah* is a term used by the Tablighi Jamaat movement for the chosen decision-maker when there are parties in conflict or disagreement within their community [29]. A Tablighi Jamaat recitation event brought Kiai Halim and Kiai Adrian together, and then their relationship strengthened after Kiai Halim made Kiai Adrian one of the teachers at the men's section of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah.

Internalization of Akhlak as the Highest Pinnacle of Tablighi Ulama Women's Knowledge

The pesantren community is commonly known as part of a community group that has a concept of manners as well as dominant Islamic practices. The manifestation of the ethics is realized in the interaction of the santri with the ustazah, the seniors, the other santri of the same class, and especially with the kiai and the ibu nyai. The latter plays a major role. This is because the level of interaction between santri kiai and ibu nyai is very limited due to the status hierarchy within the pesantren [30]. The preservation of pesantren traditions such as obedience and respect for Santri is not necessarily just a symbolic articulation of Islamic teachings. It is also a strengthening of the identity that distinguishes traditional from modern pesantren. This is the function of SDGs: to strengthen educational goals that not only educate students academically but also in terms of responsibility and empathy. Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah itself takes a firm stance with clear arguments as to why it requires Santri to have good morals and behavior, as described by Mrs. Nyai Fathurrohmah. The firmness of this prescription can even take the form of the reduction of grades for students who have qualified knowledge, but who are not accompanied by the politeness of their behaviour in certain examinations. Ownership of morals is an absolute matter for Santri, who are the ones who are predicted to be female ulama at the end of their education later in life. In this regard, Ibu Nyai Fathurrohmah further said [31]:

"The most important requirement for female santri who will be involved in preaching is morality. For example, if a hafidzah student memorizes the Qur'an and all her book lessons are perfect, but her morals are bad, her score is zero. So pesantren education here requires every student to be a hafidzah who is resilient, agile, and above all has good morals. Even if there is a santri who reads fluently in the Qur'an memorization exam, but in his daily life his morals towards the nyai, ustazah, and his friends are not good and orderly, then his score will still be reduced by the examiner".

The tradition of loyalty and respect becomes an important material at the level of traditional pesantren residents who practice the Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah manhaj and claim to be followers of the Shafi'i school of thought, such as the Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah. At the level of practice, the tradition of obedience is extended to the Prophet Muhammad, his relatives, the Companions, the Saints, and Murshids, or anyone who is considered to have been endowed with karomah by Allah [32]. The actuality of such respect is then realized by the santri through the sending of prayers or gifts of compulsory readings at predetermined times, as is the practice of the female santri of the Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah. They routinely send prayers for the groups mentioned above every Friday before zuhur, which is then called istighasah activities. Besides respect, there is also a link between the tradition of obedience and the hope of guidance when Santri later goes into the community to spread the Tablighi Jamaat mission. This was elaborated by Ibu Nyai when she mentioned the correlation between the politeness of female ulama and guidance [33]:

"Why is morality positioned as the first measure of the quality of students? Because these students will preach after graduating from the pesantren. Even those who preach morality may not be able to lead, and what's going to happen to those who lack morality? We hope that the graduates of our pesantren will be able to spread the teachings of Tablighi Jamaat better through noble morals."



Fig. 2: The Santri Are Studying in One of the Rooms That Has Been Converted into A Classroom During the Day

The aim of teaching adab to students is not limited to formally planned didactic activities such as classroom or hall activities. In fact, in the daily activities and overall activities of the Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah, I see that the teaching of adab is widely practiced by the students. Moral education is more reproduced and practiced through non-formal curricula such as rules about behavior expectations, discipline, and control of the santri's body [34]. As a result, it is not long before new Santri have an understanding of the moral basis of their first contact with Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah. Alina, a senior santri, said that there is a valid correlation between manners and the guidance or awakening of a person's heart, as believed by Ibu Nyai Fathurrohman. The statement refers to the story of Alina's father, who visited Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah for the first time after years of Alina's enrolment. Alina's father, who was not familiar with the term Tablighi Jamaat, was amazed to find his sandals neatly arranged in front of the pesantren mosque after his prayers. He was so impressed by the respect shown by the santri in tidying up their sandals, rather than stealing them or using

them without permission, as had happened in several of the mosques Alina's father had visited when he lived [35]. The story of Alina's father illustrates how moral education embodies moral reform, especially in carrying out the mission of the pesantren in a broader sense. The subtlety of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah's internalization mechanism of manners is an indication of why the possession of morals is so important for the future cadres of Tablighi's female ulama. This is in line with one of the SDGs goals, which is to provide education that is accessible to all groups and relevant to the times.

Marhalah Ta'lim Aly: A Flagship Programme for the Making of Female Ulama of Tablighi Jamaat

The genealogy of the term Marhalah Ta'lim Aly can be traced in Arabic, which more or less means high institution. Marhalah Ta'lim Aly is a term for advanced educational levels in the pesantren environment. Three characteristics of Marhalah Ta'lim Aly distinguish it from other higher education institutions. First, the specification of Marhalah Ta'lim Aly's scientific studies is based on the main Islamic sciences, including Sufism, Hadith, Fiqh, al-Quran, tafsir, and similar Islamic knowledge. Second, Marhalah Ta'lim Aly is a form of development of madrasa diniyah or aliyah and is then popularly known as post-madrasa education. Third, the selection standards set by Marhalah Ta'lim Aly are usually so strict that not just any santri can pass the selection and attain mahasantri status at this level [36]. The three characteristics above are planned carefully to improve graduate quality in line with sustainable development goals (SDGs).



Figure 3. The Atmosphere at the Marhalah Taklim Aly, which is Located Separately from The Main Building of Pesantren.

The quota provided by the Marhalah Ta'lim Aly Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah is no more than ten people with excellent programs designed in the same way as the Marhalah curriculum. The first program relates to the training of the Santri's da'wah skills. This is important because the main focus of Marhalah Ta'lim Aly is to cadre future female ulama who will later be involved in the community. The next program is Tamkin wa tarsikh al-Quran, which focuses on ways to strengthen and consolidate the holy verse. Other Marhalah Ta'lim Aly programs include tahsin al-Quran sanad Hafsh, qiraat sab'ah studies, Arabic language, Shafi'i fiqh competency, daurah kutub al-shittah and guaranteed mastery of classical books within the first three months.

Strengthening the doctrine of tabligh is more emphasized in the curriculum of the Marhalah Ta'lim Aly program than in the Diniyah class program. The pesantren tries to rationalize the knowledge it teaches, which includes a higher percentage of tabligh than that taught in the regular classes. Erika, one of the students at Marhalah Ta'lim Aly, admitted that since she started studying at this level, she has been taught to be more active in practicing her scientific reasoning, such as in fiqh nisa (a law discussing the procedures for

Muslim women to worship). According to Erika, this ultimatum is based on the many needs in the community for people with qualified religious knowledge, so she is expected to be one of them [37]. Similarly, Urdu is only taught to the students of Marhalah Ta'lim Aly. They study Urdu every morning because it is the main language of the country where the teachings of Tablighi Jamaat were first initiated. Therefore, to facilitate their mission of da'wah at the national and international levels, the students of Marhalah Ta'lim Aly, as future Tablighi female ulama, must be proficient in Urdu.

Building Community-Based Islamic Competence at the Rumah Quran (Ruqun)

Rumah Quran El-Wihdah, commonly called Ruqun, is about two and a half kilometers away from Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah. Ruqun is not only meant to offer programs and studies for the students of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah, which was also initiated by this pesantren. On the contrary, Ruqun, as the name suggests, has launched many programs intended for the general public, such as the agenda of private Tahfidz classes for children and adults, reciting the Nisfu Sha'ban prayers, Tadarus-tahsin and Ngaji together [38]. A number of these agendas involve the wider community as an audience. Ruqun's existence as a supporter of the skills of the cadres of tabligh women ulama then appears in its role as a forum for santri to practice their da'wah skills in front of the public. As part of pesantren facilities, Ruqun shows that educators are responsible for more than just preparing plans. They also have to make sure that their students play a role in the SDGs. This is important because it helps students to engage directly with society. Ruqun then goes on to reject the common perception that the pesantren are a place where education is provided, often free of charge to underprivileged children. In reality, the role of the pesantren is more fundamental. According to Ruqun, they produce public goods in the form of 'educated ulama' who perform religious rituals and who are valued by all levels of society.

Several Ruqun programmes are needs that Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah sees as urgent, as part of a forum that supports the presence of cadres from the Tablighi ulama. The presence of the two programs reflects the pesantren's agenda to integrate students into the wider community in both theory and practice [39]. Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah sees the function of Tablighi education as training students to become ulama to promote Islamic knowledge and the identity of Tablighi Muslims. The establishment of Ruqun is a means of restoring 'useful' Islamic knowledge. This will quickly and measurably cultivate the authority of the Santri as spokespersons for Islam. The idea of 'useful' Islamic knowledge itself can be traced back to the colonial discourse of traditionalist ulama. They argued that Islamic knowledge should be used only for the pleasure of God and warned against the dangers of materialistic motives.

Throughout its existence, Ruqun has been making strides in its support of Santri so that they can hone their da'wah skills in front of the wider community. The connection between the Santri and their environment shows that Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah is an institution that is open to changes in the social environment. This is exemplified by the Ruqun recitation, which was held online during the pandemic. This was done to ensure that the pesantren's da'wah would continue to reach its audience even under different conditions. Ruqun and the training of female tabligh ulama also challenge the notion that pesantren in Indonesia can be static institutions under the control of certain groups. Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah is constantly improving its teaching methods to ensure that its cadre of female tabligh ulama receive a well-rounded education, including direct contact with the outside world through Ruqun [40].

Analysis

The findings from Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah Sragen demonstrate a structured and intentional process in forming Tablighi female ulama that challenges dominant assumptions about women's limited religious authority within the Tablighi Jamaat. The pesantren's

educational system reveals a deliberate effort to combine doctrinal conservatism with pedagogical innovation, enabling female santri to acquire scholarly legitimacy while remaining rooted in Tablighi ideological frameworks. This approach positions the pesantren as an adaptive religious institution capable of responding to contemporary social and developmental demands [40].

From an SDGs perspective, the educational practices at Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah directly contribute to SDG 4 (Quality Education). The data show that female santri receive systematic training in classical Islamic texts, Qur'anic memorization, and religious pedagogy. This structured curriculum moves beyond informal religious instruction and provides women with access to authoritative knowledge traditionally reserved for male scholars. The establishment of Rumah Quran (Ruqun) and Marhalah Ta'lim Aly further strengthens learning outcomes by integrating textual mastery with practical da'wah skills, ensuring educational continuity and depth.

The pesantren's cadre system also reflects a concrete realization of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) within a religious framework. While maintaining gender-segregated spaces and normative moral values, the institution redefines women's roles by legitimizing them as educators, preachers, and community guides. Rather than framing empowerment in secular terms, Dar El-Wihdah constructs gender equity through Islamic epistemology, allowing female ulama to emerge without disrupting doctrinal coherence. This model illustrates that gender equality in Islamic education can be pursued through internal reform mechanisms rather than external ideological pressures. In addition, the pesantren's emphasis on character formation, discipline, and communal ethics aligns with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Female ulama trained at Dar El-Wihdah are prepared to engage in community-based da'wah that promotes moral responsibility, social harmony, and non-confrontational religious outreach. Their involvement in women-centered religious spaces strengthens grassroots institutions by fostering trust, ethical leadership, and social cohesion at the local level [40].

The analysis also indicates that the success of female ulama formation at Dar El-Wihdah lies in its holistic educational design. Intellectual training, spiritual discipline, and social engagement are integrated rather than treated as separate domains. This holistic approach enhances the sustainability of women's religious leadership, as graduates are equipped not only with knowledge but also with practical skills for community interaction and moral guidance. Overall, the case of Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah illustrates how faith-based educational institutions can simultaneously preserve religious identity and advance sustainable development goals. By institutionalizing women's access to religious authority, the pesantren offers an alternative model of development rooted in Islamic values, demonstrating that the SDGs can be meaningfully localized within traditional religious settings.

CONCLUSION

In light of the Tablighi Jamaat community's strict interpretation of the role and association of women, as reflected in previous research, the formation of female ulama cadres at Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah is an interesting example of space being given to female ulama. Tablighi Jamaat's enforcement of gender segregation has had the effect of excluding women from many public spaces, including religious spaces. In contrast, the establishment of a female ulama training center initiated by Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah has increased the number of women with qualified religious competence. The capabilities of these Tablighi female ulama continue to develop in order to achieve the SDGs vision of students who have equal spiritual, character and moral qualities, who are inclusive and globally competitive. Programs such as Moral Development, Marhalah Ta'lim Aly, and Rumah Quran (Ruqun) are enriching the competence of the young women of the Tablighi to gain public recognition and the position of the ulama in the future. The existence of ulama training institutions in Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah can be considered a success in terms of the creation of new

practices that are supportive of the expansion of women's roles. Although at a different pace to other Muslim communities, particularly in Indonesia, there has been a change in understanding of the position of Tablighi women. The Pesantren Dar El-Wihdah has conceptualized the appropriate religious role for the women of the Tablighi Jamaat. Although not in the same proportion, the training of Tablighi female ulama has restored the egalitarian ideas latent in the Qur'an that are underemphasized by most patriarchal theologies today.

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Author Contribution

Syarifah Isnaini conceptualized the study, conducted fieldwork, led data analysis, and drafted the manuscript. Sekar Ayu Aryani contributed to theoretical framing, literature review development, and methodological refinement. Both authors jointly interpreted findings, revised the manuscript critically, approved the final version, and ensured alignment with academic standards and Sustainable Development Goals globally.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no commercial, financial, or personal relationships that could be construed as potential conflicts of interest in this research. This study was conducted independently, and all analyses, interpretations, and conclusions reflect the authors' scholarly judgment without external influence or competing interests whatsoever at any stage thereof.

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