

## THE NISA'UL MA'HAD COACHING MODEL AS AN EFFORT TO EMPOWER FEMALE STUDENTS AT MODERN ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOL AL-ISTIQAMAH NGATABARU

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the Nisa'ul Ma'had coaching model at Modern Islamic Boarding School Al-Istiqamah Ngatabaru and examine its implications for enhancing the capacity and empowerment of female students (*santriwati*). Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation, then analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model with source and method triangulation for validation. The results show that the Nisa'ul Ma'had program was established through the organic initiative of female teachers (*ustadzah*), driven by social capital, namely trust, shared ownership, and women's solidarity, rather than formal bureaucratic planning. The program operates through three mutually reinforcing pillars: intergenerational gathering forums, domestic skill competitions, and thematic women's empowerment seminars, managed in a collegial, flexible, yet consistent manner. Empirical evidence demonstrates that the program significantly improved *santriwati*'s practical capacities, strengthened institutional cohesion, and cultivated collaborative leadership alongside value-based independence. This study concludes that women's empowerment grounded in social capital and *pesantren* cultural values is both effective and sustainable without requiring complex systemic prerequisites, thereby contributing theoretically to empowerment discourse and practically to the achievement of SDGs Goal 4 (quality education) and Goal 5 (gender equality and women's empowerment).

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### INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) has become an increasingly significant area of scholarly inquiry, particularly as female educators and students occupy central roles in the transmission of Islamic

knowledge and values. This phenomenon resonates with Cardozo and Srimulyani (2021), who found that female educators in Islamic boarding schools often operate as grassroots agents of change, carving out strategic spaces for women's agency within institutional and cultural constraints. Uyuni (2023) have similarly demonstrated that women scholars and educators who actively contribute through community-based formats are increasingly recognized as central, not peripheral, actors in the transmission of Islamic knowledge and values. At the same time, Alqudsi et al. (2023) demonstrate that transformational leadership within pesantren settings plays a decisive role in shaping institutional culture, particularly in strengthening the religious character and capacity of *santriwati* through sustained programmatic engagement.

Theoretically, the management of women's empowerment programs in Islamic educational institutions requires a mature systemic foundation to function effectively and generate broad impact. Kabeer (1999) formulated the triadic framework of resources, agency, and achievements as the foundation for understanding how women acquire the ability to make strategic life choices. Mala (2025) further argue that gender mainstreaming in pesantren education has largely been shaped by cultural, religious, and political factors, and that effective programs require structural policy support alongside gender-responsive institutional strategies. Alkouatli et al. (2023) emphasize that the success of female-led initiatives in Islamic educational institutions is largely determined by the presence of women who function as genuine architects of change, supported by enabling institutional environments that recognize their leadership roles. This finding aligns with Herlina and Munawara (2025), who show that the leadership of *nyai* is a determining factor in the sustainability of literacy traditions and the empowerment of *santri* through culturally grounded, community-driven strategies. Meanwhile, Uyuni et al. (2023) demonstrate that women scholars and teachers who operate through organic community-based initiatives are increasingly effective agents of Islamic education, even without the backing of formal bureaucratic planning. Utari and Sinaga (2024) reinforce the argument that Muslim women's leadership in education derives its sustainability not from structural prerequisites alone, but from a deep alignment between personal values, collective identity, and institutional mission. Regarding the social foundations of such programs, Coleman (1988) has shown that social capital in the form of trust, shared norms, and reciprocal obligations functions as a critical resource enabling collective action within communities, while Putnam (2000) further demonstrates that dense social networks grounded in mutual trust are the bedrock of sustainable civic and institutional engagement. Machio et al. (2024) more recently confirmed that social capital is a significant determinant of women's empowerment outcomes, particularly when programs are rooted in community solidarity rather than external mandates.

Research on women's empowerment in pesantren has been conducted by a considerable number of previous scholars, covering aspects of women's leadership (Alkouatli et al., 2023 ; Cardozo & Srimulyani, 2021), the role of female Islamic scholars in educational transformation (Uyuni, 2023), gender-based programs and curricula (Mala, 2025 ; Mukodi et al., 2025), models for strengthening *santriwati* capacity through organizational approaches (Herlina & Munawara, 2025 ; Alqudsi et al., 2023), and the social functions of women's communities within religious institutions (Jahan et al., 2023). Studies on institutional *silaturahmi* and social capital have also been addressed (Utari et al., 2024.), while Machio et al. (2024) have established the empirical link between social capital formation and women's empowerment outcomes, and Hossain, Islam, Hosen, and Mohd. Thas Thaker (2024) have examined how women's empowerment programs contribute to achieving SDG 5 in developing contexts.

Although these studies have made important contributions, three critical gaps remain unaddressed. First, no study has specifically examined a development model that emerged organically from *ustadzah* initiative, rather than from pesantren leadership policy, as an instrument of *santriwati* empowerment. Second, previous studies have generally positioned empowerment programs as variables conditioned in a top-down manner, whereas a bottom-up pattern driven by the *ustadzah* community has yet to be widely studied (Cardozo & Srimulyani, 2021 ; Mala, 2025). Third, no study has explicitly mapped a community-based *ustadzah* development model as a women's empowerment strategy in modern pesantren, which possess characteristics that differ from those of *salaf* pesantren. It is precisely this gap that becomes visible when examining the reality at Pondok Pesantren Modern Al-Istiqamah Ngatabaru, where the Nisa'ul Ma'had program, an organic initiative of *ustadzah* grounded in social capital rather than formal bureaucratic planning, has nonetheless managed to run effectively, sustain itself, and produce tangible impacts in the form of

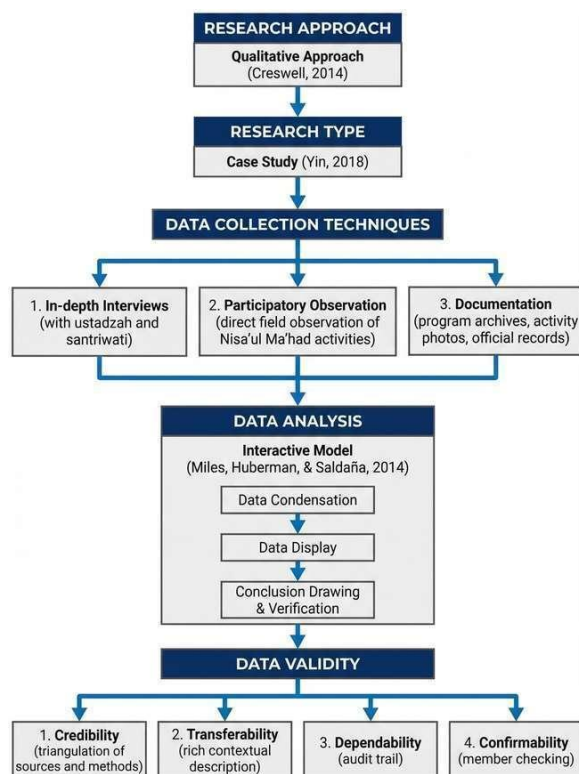
preserved *silaturahmi*, enhanced *santriwati* capacity, and strong institutional solidarity. Why is it that a program which theoretically should struggle without ideal prerequisites is instead able to function optimally in practice? What development model does Nisa'ul Ma'had employ that enables it to surpass its theoretical expectations?

This research is significant from both practical and academic dimensions. Practically, a deep understanding of the Nisa'ul Ma'had model is necessary so that the program can be documented, replicated, and developed more systematically by other pesantren facing similar challenges in empowering their female human resources. Academically, this research provides empirical evidence that interrogates the long-dominant theoretical assumption that program success can only be achieved through bureaucratic and systematically planned channels, thereby contributing to the development of more contextual theories of women's empowerment in Islamic educational institutions. The novelty of this research lies in three aspects: it explores a bottom-up development model where the *ustadzah* community serves as the primary agent of empowerment, consistent with Kabeer's (1999) foundational argument that genuine empowerment must be grounded in agency; it analyzes Nisa'ul Ma'had as an entity with a dual function as both a mechanism for institutional *silaturahmi* and an instrument of *santriwati* empowerment; and it situates the study within a modern pesantren in Central Sulawesi, enriching a body of literature long dominated by Javanese contexts. These contributions are directly relevant to the achievement of SDGs Goal 4 on quality education and Goal 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment (Jahan et al., 2023 ; Hossain et al., 2024).

Guided by a qualitative case study design, the methodological orientation Creswell and Poth (2018) advocate for understanding complex social phenomena in their natural setting and that Yin (2018) affirms is best served through a case study design for "how" and "why" questions, and employing the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) with source and method triangulation as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), this study addresses two research questions: (1) How is the Nisa'ul Ma'had development model designed and implemented as an effort to empower *santriwati* at Pondok Pesantren Modern Al-Istiqamah Ngatabaru, encompassing aspects of planning, organizing, implementation, and the factors that support its sustainability? (2) How does the Nisa'ul Ma'had program generate implications for the genuine enhancement of *santriwati* capacity and empowerment, both in terms of strengthening women's resources, reinforcing institutional *silaturahmi* networks, and contributing to the holistic development of *santriwati* character and competence?

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design (Yin, 2018) to investigate the Nisa'ul Ma'had program at Pondok Pesantren Modern Al-Istiqamah Ngatabaru, Central Sulawesi. This design was selected because the phenomenon under investigation is unique to a single institution and requires deep contextual understanding that quantitative methods cannot adequately capture (Creswell, 2014). The case study framework is particularly appropriate given that the research questions center on *how* and *why* the program operates as it does within its natural institutional setting.



*Figure 1. Research Framework*

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: in-depth interviews with *ustadzah* who initiated and managed the program as well as *santriwati* as direct participants; participatory observation of Nisa'ul Ma'had activities conducted directly in the field; and documentation of program archives, activity photographs, and official pesantren records. Informants were selected purposively to ensure that data sources possessed direct knowledge and experience relevant to the research focus.

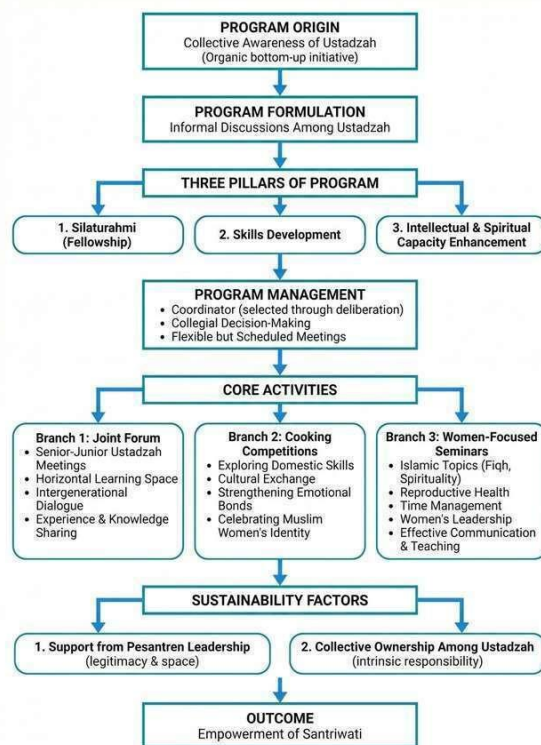
Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), encompassing three concurrent and iterative activities: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data condensation was carried out by selecting and focusing information relevant to the program's development model and empowerment outcomes; data display was presented in descriptive narratives organized chronologically and thematically; and conclusions were drawn progressively as data accumulation continued. Trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation, comparing data across *ustadzah*, *santriwati*, and institutional documents, and method triangulation across interviews, observation, and documentation, in accordance with the validity criteria established by Creswell and Miller (2000).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The Nisa'ul Ma'had Development Model: Design and Implementation as an Effort to Empower Santriwati

The Nisa'ul Ma'had program at Pondok Pesantren Modern Al-Istiqamah Ngatabaru was not born from a top-down decision made by the pesantren leadership, but rather grew organically from the collective awareness of the ustadzah who felt a genuine need for a forum capable of bridging communication and togetherness among themselves. The ustadzah residing within the pesantren compound recognized that as the number of female educators increased and the pesantren's daily routines became increasingly dense, the frequency of meaningful encounters among them

had gradually diminished. On the other hand, *ustadzah* living outside the pesantren often felt disconnected from the overall dynamics of pesantren life. It was from this shared sense of concern that the idea emerged to establish a forum, which was subsequently named Nisa'ul Ma'had, literally meaning "Women of the Pesantren", a name that in itself represents the identity and spirit of togetherness that its founders sought to build.



**Figure 2.** The Nisa'ul Ma'had Development Model: Design and Implementation

The Nisa'ul Ma'had program at Pondok Pesantren Modern Al-Istiqamah Ngatabaru did not emerge from a top-down institutional mandate, but grew organically from the collective awareness of *ustadzah* who recognized a genuine need for a forum capable of bridging communication and solidarity among themselves. *Ustadzah* residing within the pesantren compound observed that as the number of female educators increased and daily routines became increasingly dense, the frequency of meaningful encounters had gradually diminished, while *ustadzah* living outside the pesantren often felt disconnected from the broader dynamics of institutional life. The program took shape through informal discussions occurring naturally in the margins of teaching responsibilities, without formal planning documents or large institutional meetings, driven solely by the sincerity of senior *ustadzah* who invited their colleagues to think together about how to remain meaningfully connected despite their differing commitments. This organic formation is theoretically consistent with Coleman's (1998) argument that social capital, in the form of trust, shared norms, and reciprocal obligations, functions as a critical resource enabling collective action within communities, and with Putnam's (2000) demonstration that dense social networks grounded in mutual trust are the bedrock of sustainable institutional engagement. Machio et al. (2024) further confirmed that women's empowerment outcomes are most durable when programs are rooted in community solidarity rather than external mandates, a pattern precisely mirrored in the way *ustadzah* solidarity served as the primary generative force behind Nisa'ul Ma'had.

From these collective discussions, three mutually reinforcing pillars emerged as the programmatic architecture of the program: the pillar of *silaturahmi* (fellowship), the pillar of skills development, and the pillar of intellectual and

spiritual capacity enhancement. These pillars were not formulated in any official document but arose naturally as a reflection of what the women of the pesantren genuinely needed in their everyday lives. The program is managed through a collegial structure, a coordinator selected by deliberation from senior *ustadzah*, supported by colleagues who voluntarily assume responsibilities according to their expertise, with decisions reached by mutual consensus rather than hierarchical instruction. Meeting frequency is designed to be flexible yet scheduled, adjusted to the pesantren calendar and the rhythm of *ustadzah* commitments, a flexibility that has proven to be one of the critical factors enabling the program's longevity. The first and most foundational activity is the intergenerational joint forum between senior and junior *ustadzah*, which functions as a living learning ecosystem in which the wisdom of experience meets the spirit of innovation.

This cross-generational dynamic aligns with Cardozo and Srimulyani (2021), who demonstrated that female educators in pesantren operate as grassroots agents of change carving out strategic spaces for women's agency, and is further supported by Uyuni et al. (2023), who show that women scholars operating through organic community-based initiatives are increasingly effective agents of Islamic education even without formal bureaucratic backing. The second pillar consists of cooking competitions designed not as mere culinary events but as a medium for exploring and celebrating domestic skills as part of the identity of an empowered Muslim woman, creating moments of togetherness that strengthen emotional bonds among participants in ways that formal meetings cannot replicate. The third pillar consists of thematic women's seminars addressing topics ranging from Islamic jurisprudence and spirituality to reproductive health, women's leadership, and effective teaching skills, with speakers drawn from both within and outside the pesantren community. Taken together, these three pillars operationalize what Kabeer (1999) theorized as the triadic framework of resources, agency, and achievements: the seminars expand access to knowledge resources; the intergenerational forums create genuine spaces for women's agency; and the skills competitions generate measurable achievements in practical capacity.

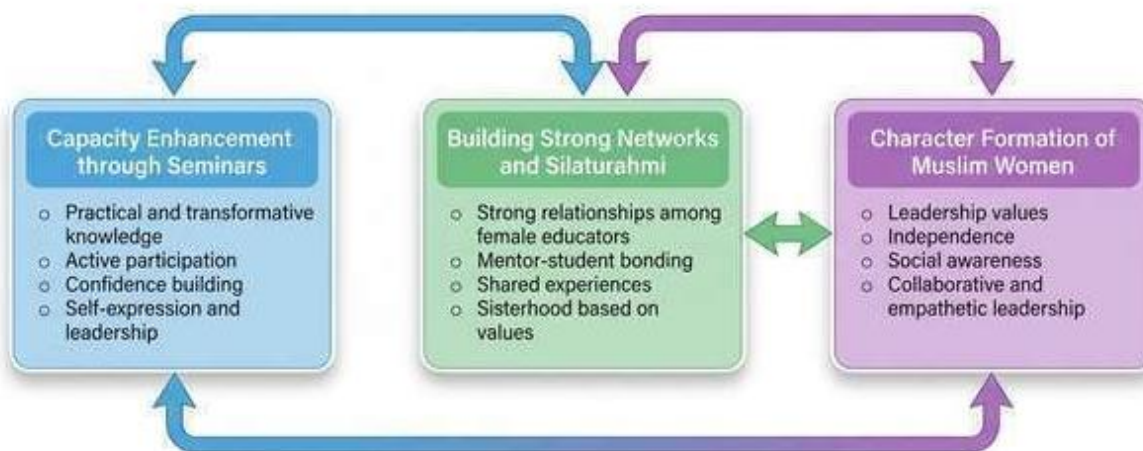
The sustainability of the program is underpinned by two mutually reinforcing factors: the legitimizing support of the pesantren leadership, which provides institutional space to operate, and the strong sense of shared ownership among the *ustadzah*, who regard Nisa'ul Ma'had as the fruit of their own initiative, generating intrinsic rather than externally compelled commitment to its continuity. The program's outcomes are demonstrably visible across three dimensions: the preservation and strengthening of *silaturahmi* bonds among all *ustadzah* regardless of residential status; measurable improvements in *santriwati* practical capacities including domestic skills, leadership competencies, and religious knowledge; and the cultivation of collaborative leadership and value-based independence among female members of the institution.

These outcomes resonate with Alqudsi et al. (2023), who demonstrate that transformational leadership within pesantren settings plays a decisive role in strengthening the religious character and capacity of *santriwati*, and with Herlina and Munawara (2025), who show that female-led, culturally grounded strategies are determinative factors in the sustainability of *santri* empowerment traditions. Sabarudin et al. (2024) further confirm that *silaturahmi*-based programs serve as the primary vehicle for building and sustaining institutional solidarity in contexts where physical and social distance would otherwise fragment the community. Most significantly, the program's capacity to produce genuine empowerment outcomes without complex bureaucratic prerequisites directly challenges the prevailing theoretical consensus documented by Mala et al. (2025) and Alkoutli et al. (2023), who positioned structural policy support as a necessary condition for program success. The Nisa'ul Ma'had experience demonstrates instead that when programs are grounded in authentic social capital and aligned with the cultural values of their institutional context, the absence of formal systemic prerequisites need not be an impediment to effectiveness or sustainability, a finding with broad implications for the advancement of SDGs Goal 4 on quality education and Goal 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment (Hossain et al., 2024; Jahan et al., 2023).

### The Implications of the Nisa'ul Ma'had Program for the Enhancement of Santriwati Capacity and Empowerment

The most direct implication of the Nisa'ul Ma'had program is the genuine and sustained enhancement of *santriwati* capacity. Through the specialized seminars organized within the program, *santriwati* gain access to knowledge on womanhood that far exceeds what the formal pesantren curriculum provides, covering practical and transformative dimensions of women's lives: becoming an independent Muslim woman, managing oneself amid complex social demands, understanding women's rights from a sound Islamic perspective, and developing one's potential within a norm-rich environment. Crucially, this capacity-building process does not unfold passively, *santriwati* are encouraged to participate actively, raise questions, and on several occasions share their own experiences as contributors rather than mere recipients. This active involvement carries profound psychological significance, as *santriwati* feel valued as subjects whose perspectives are worthy of being heard, gradually yet steadily building their confidence to speak, to lead, and to take initiative in their daily lives at the pesantren. This process directly reflects Kabeer's (1999) triadic framework, wherein access to knowledge resources, combined with the creation of genuine spaces for women's agency, generates measurable achievements in personal and social capacity. Utari and Sinaga (2024) reinforce this finding by demonstrating that Muslim women's leadership in education derives its sustainability from a deep alignment between personal values, collective identity, and institutional mission, precisely the alignment that the seminar activities of Nisa'ul Ma'had cultivate among *santriwati*.

The second dimension of implication concerns the program's success in building and sustaining a strong *silaturahmi* network, not only among the *ustadzah* themselves, but also between *ustadzah* and *santriwati*. Prior to the program's establishment, relationships between *ustadzah* residing within the pesantren and those living outside tended to be limited to formal interactions within the context of teaching alone, producing a social distance that, though unintentional, indirectly undermined the cohesiveness of the female educator team. The Nisa'ul Ma'had program fundamentally transformed this dynamic by providing a meeting space that was scheduled, thematic, and filled with enjoyable activities, thereby creating meaningful points of encounter among all female members of the institution.



**Figure 3.** The Implications of the Nisa'ul Ma'had Program

*Ustadzah* who had previously known one another only superficially now share stories, experiences, and memories that have deepened their relational bonds into a sisterhood grounded in common values, common struggles, and a common vision. This finding corroborates Sabarudin et al. (2024), who demonstrated that *silaturahmi*-based programs serve as the primary vehicle for building and sustaining institutional solidarity in contexts where physical and social distance would otherwise fragment the community. The impact of this *silaturahmi* is also felt directly by

the *santriwati*: when they witness the *ustadzah* united, mutually respectful, and collaborating with great enthusiasm, they receive a living example of how strong women can support one another without competition, an example far more influential than any verbal instruction, a dynamic consistent with the modeling-based learning processes documented by Alqudsi et al. (2023) in their study of transformational leadership in pesantren settings.

At its deepest dimension, the Nisa'ul Ma'had program makes a significant contribution to the character formation of *santriwati* as Muslim women of strong character, high competence, and broad social awareness. Through their involvement in the program's various activities, whether as active seminar participants, as spectators of the cooking competitions who are subsequently motivated to develop similar skills, or as witnesses to the organizational processes carried out by the *ustadzah*, *santriwati* absorb values of leadership, independence, cooperation, and responsibility in a manner that is both natural and experiential. The model of leadership cultivated is not hierarchical or authoritarian, but collaborative, empathetic, and service-based, a model highly relevant to the challenges *santriwati* will face when they enter society as pesantren alumni, and one that resonates with the female leadership patterns identified by Herlina and Munawara (2025) as determinative of sustainable *santri* empowerment traditions. The independence that is cultivated is similarly not individualistic, but rooted in the awareness that a Muslim woman possesses the potential to contribute meaningfully to her surroundings without waiting for external permission — an orientation that Cardozo and Srimulyani (2021) associate with the most transformative forms of women's agency in Islamic institutional contexts. From the totality of these findings, it is evident that the Nisa'ul Ma'had program constitutes a living ecosystem of women's empowerment operating simultaneously at the individual and institutional levels, demonstrating that genuine empowerment can grow from sincere intention and social capital alone without complex systemic prerequisites, and thereby contributing directly to the achievement of SDGs Goal 4 on quality education and Goal 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment (Hossain et al., 2024; Jahan et al., 2023).

## Discussion

### **The Nisa'ul Ma'had Development Model: Design and Implementation as an Effort to Empower Santriwati**

The research findings indicate that the Nisa'ul Ma'had program was born not from a systematically designed bureaucratic plan imposed from above, but from the organic initiative of *ustadzah* driven by a genuine need for a space of togetherness and empowerment. This factual condition appears to stand in contrast to the view of Hidayatullah and Mufidah (2023), who assert that women's empowerment programs in the pesantren environment should begin with a deep and structured needs assessment, supported by professional program management, and equipped with a continuous evaluation system.

If one were to follow this theoretical logic, a program that emerged from informal discussions without formal planning documents should be vulnerable to inconsistency and lack of sustainability. Yet the reality on the ground shows the opposite: precisely because this program grew from needs that were genuinely felt by its own participants, it possesses deep roots and a high degree of resilience. This constitutes a new finding that broadens the theoretical understanding of what constitutes a legitimate starting point for an empowerment program, that a bottom-up, genuine-needs-based initiative can serve as a foundation no less solid, and in certain contexts even more solid, than formally structured top-down planning.

### **The Implications of the Nisa'ul Ma'had Program for the Enhancement of Santriwati Capacity and Empowerment**

The research results reveal that the Nisa'ul Ma'had program has succeeded in enhancing the female resource capacity of *santriwati* through thematic seminars designed in a contextual and participatory manner. This finding, on one hand, reinforces the view of Rofiqoh and Syamsuddin (2024), who emphasize that the success of gender-based programs in religious institutions is largely determined by the active involvement of all stakeholders, from leadership to program participants.

The active involvement of *santriwati* as participants who are not merely listening but are also invited to reflect and share their experiences has proven to produce an impact far deeper than a one-way information delivery model. On the other hand, however, this finding also goes beyond the boundaries of that view, as Rofiqoh and Syamsuddin

(2024) still require the existence of a structured curriculum and explicit institutional policy support as prerequisites for success. In the case of Nisa'ul Ma'had, by contrast, the enhancement of santriwati capacity occurs precisely through a framework that is flexible and responsive to actual needs, rather than through a standardized curriculum established in advance. This reinforces the argument that the relevance and appropriateness of content to the genuine needs of participants is more determinative of success than the formality of the program structure itself.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Nisa'ul Ma'had program at Pondok Pesantren Modern Al-Istiqamah Ngatabaru was formed through the organic initiative of *ustadzah* driven by social capital, in the form of trust, shared ownership, and women's solidarity, rather than formal bureaucratic planning, and is implemented through three mutually reinforcing pillars: a cross-generational meeting forum, domestic skills competitions, and thematic women's seminars, managed in a collegial, flexible, yet consistent manner. The program demonstrably enhanced *santriwati* capacity across multiple dimensions, strengthened institutional cohesion through meaningful *silaturahmi* networks, and cultivated collaborative leadership and value-based independence among female members of the institution. The principal theoretical contribution of this study lies in its empirical demonstration that successful women's empowerment does not require complex systemic prerequisites, a program grounded in authentic social capital and pesantren cultural values is proven both effective and sustainable, thereby enriching and partially correcting the theoretical frameworks that have long dominated the discourse of women's empowerment in Islamic educational institutions, while extending Kabeer's (1999) triadic framework by demonstrating that its conditions can be fulfilled through bottom-up, culturally embedded means.

The practical implications of this research operate at three levels. At the institutional level, the Nisa'ul Ma'had model offers a replicable framework for other pesantren seeking to develop women's empowerment programs without complex bureaucratic requirements. At the policy level, the findings suggest that gender mainstreaming initiatives in Islamic educational institutions should prioritize nurturing existing organic social capital among female educators, rather than imposing externally designed systemic structures. At the broader development level, this research affirms the position of pesantren as strategic partners in realizing SDGs Goal 4 on quality education and Goal 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment, demonstrating that transformative empowerment spaces can be cultivated from within, through values, solidarity, and genuine collective agency.

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