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Lopes Cardozo, M.T.A.; Srimulyani, E.

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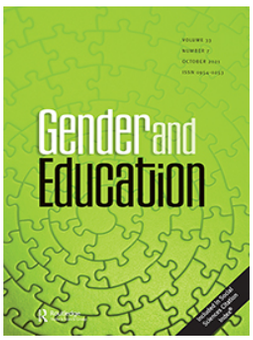

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Analysing the spectrum of female education leaders' agency in Islamic boarding schools in post-conflict Aceh, Indonesia

Mieke T. A. Lopes Cardozo[a] and Eka Srimulyani[b]

[a]International Development Studies, University of Amsterdam Amsterdam, The Netherlands; [b]Ar-Raniry State Islamic University, Banda Aceh, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Our research responds to a limited understanding of the agency of female leaders in a context of Islamic politics and society, in post-war and post-tsunami Aceh province in Indonesia. Drawing on empirical ethnographic data, we aim to provide a more nuanced perspective on the 'strategic space for manouevre' of women's agency in Islamic boarding schools in Aceh. Our paper focuses on female educational leaders and teachers at female *dayah*, or Islamic boarding schools [for girls] in Aceh. The study explores the grassroots roles and motivations of female education leaders, and analyses how a range of contextual (political, economic, socio-cultural and religious) factors play a role in their sense of agency and engagement in (re)producing or challenging societal inequalities and tensions. These factors include women's own experiences of the conflict and post-conflict period, the influences from their direct networks and kinship, and their opportunities to participate in 'outside' trainings and public life.

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Religious education; female leadership; agency; gender; Islam; social transformation

Introduction

Indonesia's Aceh bans women from nightspots after 11pm (Al Jazeera, 2015)

Military police target women in Indonesian Shariah Stronghold (Jakarta Globe, 2013)

Headlines in the media covering the position of women in Aceh province in Indonesia over the past few years portray an alarming, yet a partial picture of women's real situation in the region. While the enforcement of night curfews and abandoning of straddling of motorcycles for women is indeed a concern, the rather narrow media coverage of women's limited space for agency in Aceh under Shari'a law in our view is not doing justice to the complexities of women's agency, including its limitations and potentials. Therefore, this research attempts to contribute to a more nuanced, historically informed, and gender-aware portrayal of the positionality and (leadership) roles of women in contemporary Acehnese society.

This article aims to contribute to a gap of knowledge in three key fields of study. Firstly, there is a growing body of literature that develops how education can be an effective tool

CONTACT Mieke T. A. Lopes Cardozo t.a.lopescardozo@uva.nl; mlopescardozo@fmg.uva.nl International Development Studies, University of Amsterdam, PO BOX 15629, 1001 NC Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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for the empowerment of minorities or otherwise marginalized groups in society, while on the contrary, education systems and actors can also work to (re-)produce inequalities and foster societal tensions (Bush and Saltarelli 2000). Particularly in conflict-affected societies, education becomes a key site for political struggle and transformation. However, regardless of the growing evidence and acknowledgement of education's crucial role in (re-)building societies in a post-conflict and post-disaster moment, in which Aceh arguably finds itself (Shah and Lopes Cardozo 2014), there is still little understanding and actual implementation of the peacebuilding potential of education and grassroots education actors in practice (McCandless 2011; Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith 2017).

Secondly, our study focuses on another often-overlooked aspect, namely the recognition of women's varying roles in processes of social transformation and the building of peace. Although underlined by the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, there is still a lack of attention to (young) women within these conceptualizations and enactments of peacebuilding (Becker 2012). Hence, exclusion from or low levels of participation in social institutions and decision-making processes often remains a concern for women before and during periods of conflict (Denov and Maclure 2006).

Thirdly, and in connection to literature debates on gendered forms of agency in educational spaces, there is a limited understanding and evidence on the role of female teachers, and female educational leaders more specifically, in bottom-up processes of social transformation and peacebuilding (Kirk 2006; UNICEF 2016). Even more so, there is limited research on the connections of religion, and Islamic or Shari'a law, and its impacts on female education actors' agency that would enable them to negotiate and expand their roles and position beyond the mainstream ascribed space available for them. Islamic education is often uncritically linked to issues of gender (in)equality and (in)security, yet there is little nuanced debate on how islamic education can contribute to or hinder peace and social transformation (Novelli and Lopes Cardozo 2008).

This study applies a multiscalar 'politics of education approach', which understands education policy and practices within broader socio-political and economic structures, institutions and processes of reproduction or transformation (Dale 2005). Following from this is a research design that is inspired by an adapted version of the Strategic Relational Approach (Jessop 2005; Hay 2002 – further detailed below).

This research combines contemporary work on gender equality in education and feminist theory, and our respective diverse geographical backgrounds combined both an 'insider' – coming from one of us as Indonesian national (from Aceh) – and 'outsider' perspective – with one of us coming from the Netherlands. Considering its exploratory nature, this study draws on a mix of primarily qualitative collection methods, including: semi-structured, in-depth interviews (with some individual follow up interviews, when trust increased and to support life history narratives to be build); focus group discussions; participant observations of key meetings/events involving female educational leaders and teachers; document analysis; and a collection of photos taken during fieldwork visits to the *dayah*, other educational institutions or schools and communities. Data was collected during three fieldwork visits of a few weeks each, one in 2014 and two in 2015, with the support of two (locally-based) junior research assistants that were trained and supervised by both authors. The main respondents of this study include: 15 female religious Islamic leaders (*Ummi)* of *dayah*; 9 female and 1 male teacher in these schools; 2 focus group discussions with students, 2 community leaders, 3 policy-/decision-makers and finally 8

female and male academics and activists that work in the area of gender justice and peace in Aceh. All names have been replaced by psuedonyms to ensure anonimity of respondents.

The paper starts by outlining the research approach, and our methodology, and followed by an exploration of the theoretical understandings that underpin our analysis of *female education leaders' agency*. We continue by contextualizing the position of women and female leadership in Aceh historically. This is followed by an exploration of the complex and hierarchical nature of the *dayah* governance system, and the position of female teachers and educational leaders in those educational spaces and traditions. Then, we present our discussion on the various levels and forms of engagement of the female *dayah* leaders and educators along a continuum ranging from more conservative to more active and creative forms of agency.

Analytical approach to study female education leaders' agency

This paper uses a trans-disciplinary approach (Sum and Jessop 2013) to understand the agency of female educational leaders in Aceh, studying the links between the politics of education and religion in the *dayah*. We aim to discuss how an Islamic perception of *education's role* as well as *women's roles* in fostering social transformation and social justice is conceptualized and enacted, and what enabling and restricting factors influence their agency to be actors of change *or* reproduction in broader society.

Firstly, building on a critical realist stance, our analysis is informed by the Strategic Relational Approach (SRA, see Jessop 2005; Hay 2002) a theoretical perspective which focus on the analysis on the complex social relation. We build this on earlier applications of SRA to study education and education actors' *agency* specifically (Lopes Cardozo 2009, 2011; Shah and Lopes Cardozo 2014; Lopes Cardozo and Shah 2016b). The SRA is applied to understand of agency of female educational leaders in the context of Acehnese boarding schools. Through a critical ethnographic and multiscalar theoretical framework we analyse the roles, possibilities and the limits of female education leaders' agency in reproducing or transforming their own life trajectories, those of others close to them, as well as the broader community and political levels of engagement. In this research, we pay specific attention to the context-specific identities, motivations, and localized (non-western) conceptualisations of womanhood and gender (Bano 2009, 7) that inform women's strategies. Inspired by the SRA, our study recognizes how female education leaders face an uneven distribution of opportunities and constraints, which makes their environment a 'strategic selective context' (Hay 2002, 164–166). Hence, different access to strategic resources (funding, kinship relations, access to knowledge, various forms of – economic, political and socio-cultural – capital) may be a significant determinant of the capacity of actors to realize their strategies to enhance or obstruct processes of social inclusion and conflict mitigation. In this sense, we do not understand agency only as strategic, conscious actions towards progressive changes, as following from the SRA we also recognize that (un-)conscious actions that reproduce the status quo or prevent transformations need to be taken into account as being part of educator's agency.

Following a 'multiscalar politics of education' approach (Dale 2005) we aim to understand the work of female education leaders as being positioned in a complex and socio-political arena that extends beyond the education sector, and beyond the state

level only (Robertson and Dale 2015). Moving from a political economy to a *cultural* political economy analysis (Sum and Jessop 2013) enables a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between the socio-political, economic, Islamic-religious and patriarchic nature of Acehnese society. Exploring the 'cultural and semiotic dimension' of identities, motivations, beliefs and perceptions, in additional to more material and structural contextual factors, facilitates a deeper understanding of how female educational leaders' agency, and how they identify, believe, hope, strategize, and (re)act in a certain setting and for certain purposes. In doing so, we aim to provide a more nuanced picture of Acehnese women working and living in the very specific context of Islamic, traditional boarding schools – as not linear, rational or always consciously strategic in their behaviour. In our analysis, we aim to highlight that the strategic space for manoeuvre available to various female education leaders can result in both reproducing *or* transformative actions that have an impact at various levels of engagement: in the women's own lives; those of the staff and students around them in the *dayah*; interactions and power-plays in the surrounding community; and for some at the levels of local, regional and national politics.

Secondly, without being able to do full justice to the insights from feminist theory and the discussions on gender justice within the scope of this article, we do want to acknowledge their influence on our understanding of the key concepts of this text – gender and agency, or perhaps gendered forms of agency. Our reading on gender and feminist theory inspired us to employ combined elements of both critical theory and post-structuralism, as posited by Fraser (1995), as she reflects on the work of Butler and Benhabib. Thus, in order to analyse 'agency' of educators, we recognize the importance of teachers' identities, motivations/beliefs and roles as set out above, and hence we do *not* understand identity as a singular concept (Lopes Cardozo 2011), yet rather as an assemblage of obligations, authority and autonomy (originally the work of Archer, 1984 and as interpreted by Vongalis-Macrow 2007). Instead, inspired by Butler's notion of performativity, we consider 'gendered identities' as the enactment of norms, or the (discursive and material) behaviours according to certain societally established discursive standards. Gender, then, is culturally formed, while at the same time according to Butler (2011) it provides a domain of agency and (potential) freedom.

Among the most relevant understanding of (women's) agency for our study in Aceh is the work of Mahmood (2001). Based on her work on the Egyptian Islamic revival and women's religious movement and activities, she adopted the notion of performativity of Butler. From there she develops a view on agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create. She introduces the concept of docile agency in the context of her study on women's religious groups and activities (Mahmood 2001, 2013). Furthermore, we draw inspiration from a case study of Arab Muslim female school principals in Israel (Arar and Shapira 2016), we support the argument that governmental and organizational policies and initiatives should recognize the diversity in Muslim women's backgrounds and the dangers of privileging mainstream women's perspectives.

Finally, we aspire that our work contributes to what Connell (2011) has termed the need to 'rethink gender beyond the currently influential northern perspectives', by both drawing on epistemologies from the so-called 'Global south', while at the same time, also sharing the insights from our collaborative study with female education leaders in

Aceh. Without enforcing a western 'universalist' perspective of gender justice, we build on the idea that Acehnese women navigate as cultural brokers in a complex arena in which local and foreign/Western discourses (on gender, development, peacebuilding) interact and drive situated models of 'creative agency' (Srimulyani 2014, 2012) and context-relevant forms of women's grassroots activism through education (Maber 2016). Here, the concepts of achieved and derived power within the traditional Islamic education in Indonesia (see also Srimulyani 2010, 2014) are considered as locally embedded and useful in our understanding of the various levels of female educators' levels of agency, while acknowledging that analysing female leadership in education needs highly contextual approaches (McNae and Vali 2015).

Female (education) leaders' historical position in post-conflict and post-disaster Aceh

Aceh province has a long history of violent conflict and struggle, including a nearly 30 year separatist struggle against the Jakarta-based government (Aspinall 2006; Reid 2006; Riddell 2006). Major earthquakes and the tsunami in late 2004 dealt an additional blow to the region (Feener 2012). Aceh's 2008 Education Law (Qanun) emphasizes how education should serve a transformative role in Acehnese society by redressing past inequities caused by conflict, and working to (re-)build a peaceful future for the province (Bailey 2008).

Historically, Aceh has known prominent female political rulers. Including those that reigned kingdoms in Aceh before the twentieth century. This society is nowadays considered as a patriarchal society with matrilineal kinship systems and some matrifocal practices, where Shari'a law and cultural traditions are somehow also impacting women's agency in various ways. While gender equality in education has significantly improved over the past decades, this does not directly translate into improved political and economic empowerment for women . Yet, women's historical and present activism against violence through (secular and religious) social movements has gained more space since the *reformasi* after 1998 (Baso and Idrus 2002). Since 2005, the huge influence of international donors during the reconstruction period after the tsunami has opened new debates and spaces of action with regard to the contested, 'Western' concept of 'gender justice' in Aceh (Afrianty 2015). This emerged in the form of a 'gender allergy' (Jauhola 2013) reflecting some peoples' oppositional reaction towards the concept of gender that they considered as 'Western'. Nevertheless, the Indonesian government ratified the international UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and gender mainstreaming policies have been promoted at various levels of decision-making, yet few of the female leaders included in our study were exposed to trainings or organizations working on issues related to women empowerment.

Aceh's last conflict with the central government of Jakarta started since 1976 when Aceh's Independent movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) was declared by Hasan Tiro on December 4. This armed conflict, initially driven by social and economical injustices, lasted for three decades. In 2001, a decision was made by the Indonesian central government to enable Aceh to adopt *Sharia* law (Lopes Cardozo and Shah 2016a). By placing greater authority in the hands of the *Ulama* (traditional religious leadership), the government in Jakarta believed that it could usurp the dominance of GAM (McGibbon 2004).

Some scholars viewed this as a strategic attempt to label GAM as orthodox Islamists, despite the fact that GAM at that time sought to strengthen international ties that did not necessarily use this Islamic identity (Samuels 2012; Feener 2012). Miller (2010) writes how the *Ulama* themselves saw it as a way to emphasize a shared conviction for social welfare and justice, and a reinforcement of regional customs, traditions and cultural values based on Islam.

In December 2004, a massive earthquake and tsunami badly hit Aceh with a massive death toll and destruction of the Western coast areas of Aceh. This disaster and its impacts have been commonly understood as one of the catalysts that accelerated the initial peace talks, which resulted in the peace agreement signed in August 2005. Hence, the post-conflict recovery and post-tsunami phases occurred almost at the same time. A rapid inflow of a wide range of Indonesian and international organizations caused what is sometimes referred to as a 'second tsunami of aid', especially in the period of 2005–2008. The *Badan Rekonstruksi dan Rehabilitasi Aceh* (the Executing Agency for Aceh Rehabilitation and Reconstruction) sought to coordinate efforts during this immediate rehabilitation and reconstruction period. With regard to post-conflict reconstruction and transition, the *Badan Reintegrasi Aceh* (the Body for Aceh Reintegration) held responsibilities to deal with conflict related recovery programmes.

Especially during the 1990s women's movements in Aceh seemed to consolidate, especially in relation to the efforts to assist the victims of the armed conflict. These women's organizations were strongly committed to advocate for an end to the armed conflict, such as Flower Aceh. The most monumental of these efforts was the first Aceh Women's Congress (*Duek Pakat Ureung Inong Aceh*) in February 2000, discussing the role of women in peacebuilding in Aceh. The congress also resulted in the establishment of a hub women's organization in Aceh, namely Balee Syura Ureung Inong Aceh (BSUIA). Some women's organization – such as MiSPI (*Mitra Sejati untuk Perempuan Indonesia*, The True Partnership of Indonesian Women) – focused on women's rights and shari'a law, and engaged with female religious leaders (*teungku inong*), especially during the rehabilitation and reconstruction period. We want to acknowledge here that well before the flux of international aid for post-conflict and tsunami-related programmes reached the shores of Aceh (see for instance Jauhola 2013), several attempts to work on women's right issues, gender inequality and women empowerment already started, both in material ways through practical programmes or discursively through shaping agendas on those issues. An organization of female ex-combatants, named LINA (Liga Inong Aceh) which was established after the peace agreement, collaborated in some regions of Aceh with some of the female religious leaders from *dayah* schools, introducing discussions around the intersections between gender relations and Islam. In some areas, female religious leaders also formed their own organizations and networks, including most recently the network of KUPI (Konferensi Ulama Perempuan Indonesia). Several Acehnese female religious leaders (including those from *dayah*'s background) participated in this conference of Indonesian female religious leaders held in Cirebon in April, 2017. Having set out the role and position of female leadership more broadly, we now turn to focus on the education arena.

Mapping the strategic selective context of islamic girls' boarding schools in Aceh

In parts of Indonesia, Islamic boarding schools are known as *pesantren* or *pondok*. In Aceh, the *dayah* exist in parallel to a Ministry of Education coordinated public school (*sekolah*) system, as well as a Ministry of Religious Affairs coordinated Islamic school (*madrasah*) system. We have a specific interest in exploring the agency of female education leaders and teachers in these Acehnese *dayah* boarding schools because of the unique, and somewhat enclosed spaces they construe. To give a sense of the numbers and relative position within the education system in Aceh, we draw on the most recently available data, which estimate the total number of *dayah* boarding schools in Aceh roughly at 1054 (Badan Dayah 2016). Based on a publication by the Ministry of Religious Affairs Indonesia (2012), although Aceh is perceived historically as the onset of Islamic influence in Indonesia, the highest numbers of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia are actually located in Java (there called *pesantren* or *pondok*). According to this publication, the total number of students in *dayah* or *pesantren* nation-wide are 3.759.198, consisting of 1.886.748 male students (50,19%) and 1.872.450 female students (49,81%), almost in equal in proportion. More than half (53%) of Indonesia's Islamic boarding schools are part of *salafiyah* (or traditional) *dayah*, with 14.459 schools spread over the country, followed by *khalafiyah/ashriyah* (or modern) *dayah* with 7.727 schools (28,38%) and a final category of *dayah* are a combination (traditional and modern), consisting of 5.044 boarding schools (18,52%). Looking at Aceh specifically, most recent available data from 2014 (Badan Dayah 2016) shows over 1000 Islamic boarding schools, with about 60% (or 634 schools) that are considered *Dayah Salafiyah* (or traditional) and about 40% are referred to locally as *Integrated Dayah* (or modern). The total number of teachers in *dayah* is calculated at 17,569 (both male and female), with the highest concentration in north Aceh: 3,711. The total number of students is 167,791.

Below, we analyse our own qualitative data to construct an understanding of the 'strategic selective context' of these *dayah*, by exploring some issues of key contextual factors of the governance of the *dayah* that consequently influence the agency of *dayah* female education leaders in these contexts.

Funding mechanisms

Based on our data collection with a range of stakeholders involved in the *dayah* system, we found that most of the traditional *dayah* are owned by families, through a foundation (*yayasan*). These so-called traditional *dayahs* receive financial support from the community, complemented with a reasonable tuition fee for students (compared to regular schools). Generally, most *dayah* are largely self-funded by the tuition fees, added with income from daily business such as catering located in the *dayah's* compound (if any), and individual or organizational donations. Almost all of the *dayah* are founded by a figure, a family or an organization, which is different from *madrasah* and *sekolah* that are historically government funded (except few private schools).

More recently, a great number of *dayahs* also receive [additional] funding from the Aceh Government Agency of *dayah* Development and Education (*Badan Pengembangan dan Pendidikan Dayah*), which was established in 2008. This local government agency

provides block grants to the *dayahs*, for infrastructure development of the schooling environment, as well as (partial) financial support for teachers' salary. The *Badan Dayah* agency assesses the *dayah,* resulting in a particular category or grade, which consequently affects the amount of [financial] support those *dayah* receive. This governmental executing institution that is responsible for *dayah* education and development was established in 2008, and is unique, as Aceh is the only province that has a special *dayah* or *pesantren* specific agency outside of the ministry of religious affairs. Regardless of this system of financial support, the *dayah*s show and maintain their relative independency and autonomy compared to the modern schooling of either *madrasah* (public religious schools, following a religious curriculum and governed and financially supported by the Ministry of Religious Affairs) or the *sekolah* (public schools, governed and financed by the Ministry of Education).

Kinship determining the governance of dayah

The educational institutions that we focus on for this study, the *dayah,* have a paticular leadership and governance system in which [the immediate] families of the leader or owner of the *dayah* or *pesantren* are at the top of the decision-making hierarchy. Our recent data confirms that only those with direct family ties could become a leader, and male descendant receive priority to assume the leadership position over a female family member. This has not changed much until today, although the situation might slightly vary from a *dayah* in Aceh to a *pesantren* (similar Islamic boarding school) in Java (Srimulyani 2010).

As in *pesantren* and other traditional Islamic learning centres in the Indonesian archipelago, *dayah* have formed strong networks amongst each other. Compared to *pesantren* in Java, endogamous marriages among *dayah* leaders' families are not widely practised as previously in Java. In some cases, an *ulama dayah* will arrange a marriage between his daughter and a learned student, particularly if he has no sons who could be successor of the future leadership of the *dayah*. Sometimes, these kinds of arranged marriages do not require the groom to be of *dayah* descent, but rather, emphasis is placed on ensuring a qualified suitor to continue the roles in leadership or instructional duties in the *dayah*. To understand this further, in the Acehnese society, there is a term *teungku inong* (female *ulama*) and also *inong teungku* (wife of *ulama*). The socio-anthropological studies on customs and traditions in Acehnese communities showed that historically the role of *teungku inong* is relatively significant (Siegel 1969). Using the concepts of achieved and derivative power, we observe that these *teungku inong* figures received their position as a personal achievement (*'inong' meaning women or wife)*; while *inong teungku* obtained their position through *derivative power*, by marrying their husbands who are *teungku* or *ulama* in the community.

With regards to women's position within the *dayah*, it is thus apparent how *Ummis* (a descendent or a family of the owner) and *teungku* (a general term for teachers as well as operational leader in a *dayah*) working within a *dayah* seem to be in a different position, both socially and politically. While *Ummi* gained their privileged position because of being the daughter of a *dayah* owner, or by marrying the owner or his son/grandson, the *teungku* (teacher) has less decision-making power compared to *Ummis*, yet holds a more direct responsibility for the wellbeing and learning process of students and the broader staff. The particular social privilege of an *Ummi*, being part of the immediate family of the

dayah's male leader, can be understood in terms of a form of derived power, providing a certain amount of social status within the *dayah* and the surrounding community. For instance, one of the *Ummis* (Ummi Shafiyah) gained her position as a female *dayah* leader as she is a daughter of a *dayah* owner. She manages her *dayah* applying her own strategies and with decision-making authority to create the rules for the girls' section of the *dayah* that she manages:

> Waled [her father] is the leader of this *dayah*. But in terms of the girls *dayah*, we handle everything related to the female students and we have nothing to do with the male students. […] I don't really have any particular strategies in managing this *dayah*. I just let it flow naturally … for the sake of education. I just do what I think is the best (Ummi Shafiyah).

In comparison, several other female leaders experienced more limited strategic space for manoeuvre. In some cases, regulations developed in each specific *dayah* or community meant limited space for engagement outside of the institution for women, as women are not allowed to go out unless there is a wedding invitation in the village or when people died. In addition, when invitations for teacher training are received, female leaders reported that (male) *dayah* owners would often prefer to send male representatives to participate.

Connections to the community

While the teaching profession, most often dominated by female teachers, the leadership roles within the education system – including the *dayah* – are still generally taken up by men, a situation is not unique to Aceh (see for instance Mestry and Schmidt 2012 on South Africa) and also reflected in the tradition of *pesantren*s in Java (Husein 2002; Srimulyani 2008). While the introduction and more recent implementation of the Shari'a law since 2001 in Aceh has received rather skewed media attention, our data seems to suggest that it does not mean that there is no space within positions and educational governance more broadly available for women. Our data above already signals a rather limited space for agency due to dominant patriarchal systems of governance, yet there is also a recognition of women's potential leadership in communities, which is reflected in a somewhat colloquial way in the following quote:

> My brother in law who has a [*dayah*] told me that now in the city [area], there are a lot of women who become the village leader. When I asked why, he said it is because men tend to [be] corrupt, but most of the females do not want to do that (Ummi Rahmah).

Our data also showed how recognition and levels of authority, and hence autonomy, grew when women's active engagement extended into the community that surrounds the *dayah*. The *Teungku* that became female leaders without family ties, and hence achieved power, saw their status and authority being increased with more active participation in the community or broader society. These *Teungku* are usually former students of the *dayah*, and usually established their position of achieved power through their own or personal efforts, not the 'inherited' ones. In the eyes of the female students within the *dayah,* both the *Ummi* and the female teachers earned a particular respectful treatment, although an *Ummi* often receives more privileges compared to *teungku*. As a note on hierarchies of power due to elitism, in our sample of female education leaders we included women with varying socio-economic backgrounds, and coming from elite and non-elite families. Our

analysis above, and in what follows, suggest that the agency of female leaders is not determined by one single or dominant factor, but is often a mix of factors, including kinship ties, networks in the wider community, access to trainings, resulting in various degrees of derived or achieved forms of power. In summary, we observed how those female leaders with achieved power seemed to have more available spaces with regard to how they related to and functioned in the *dayah* as well as the broader community, than those female leaders with just derived power through kinship.

Analysing a spectrum of female leaders' agency

With this strategically selective context of the *dayah* in mind, we now turn to explore the various dimensions of what constitutes female teachers' and leaders' agency, discussing the interconnected concepts and processes of identity-formation, motivations, beliefs and roles. To see the leadership and position of women in *dayah* in the Acehnese context means to grasp their more subtle roles and motivations, ranging from more 'docile agency' (Mahmood 2001) to more creative forms of agency (Srimulyani 2014) that support societal transformations.

'Santri ibuism'

Djajadininggrat-Nieuwenhuis (1987, 44) states that the concept of *ibuism* relates to women who are looking after a family, a group, a class, a company or the state, without demanding any share in power or prestige in return. Julia Suryakusuma (1996, 102) introduced the concept of 'state *ibuism*' as 'part and parcel of the bureaucratic State's effort to exercise control over Indonesian society.' This New Order state ideology based on elite Javanese culture became the ideological macro-structure of Suharto's New Order regime, and coined a homogenous hegemonic image of womanhood and gender relations across Indonesia. In relation to educational institutions like the *dayah*, the term of *santri ibuism (santri motherism)* (Srimulyani 2012), is defined as the ways in which an Ummi (also referred to as *nyai* in Javanese *pesantren*) lives, and how she relates to others and thinks of herself and her own identity as a *dayah*/*pesantren* figure (see also Srimulyani 2012). Female leaders, like the *Ummi*, embody the concept of *santri ibuism* in two respects: first through derived power from the position of her husband or father when the kinship governance model applies (as discussed above) and second as a symbolic mother to the (female) pupils in the boarding school. Most of the female leaders included in our study are accepted by the community as co-leaders of the *dayah*, alongside their male counterparts (either husband, father or brother). Ummi Sarah, from a *dayah* in the Aceh Besar district, for instance recognized that she does not always have to consult with her husband when making decisions on the governance of the *dayah* and that being married to the leader of the *dayah* has provided her with particular tasks and responsibilities, as well as respect from the community.

Perspectives on female roles and leadership

In our conversations with various groups of respondents, we usually discussed interpretations and possible interrelations between Ummi's work and issues related to *social*

transformation and peacebuilding in Aceh, and women's roles and *leadership in their communities and broader society*. The existing gender discourse and relation that is directly and indirectly 'taught' in institutions like the *dayah* has been criticized for (re-) producing social and gendered inequalities (see for instance Muhammad 2002). Moreover, leadership was perceived here as a rather male sphere. For the majority of respondents in the *dayah*, women are viewed to be possible leaders as far as they still take care of the domestic duties and their motherhood roles, and lead other women in a world of teaching and motherhood. When we asked further about other roles for female leaders such as district head, legislative members, or other careers, either they showed disagreement and conformity with a rather dominant and traditional patriarchal value system, or in some cases the interviewee's expressed a more appreciative view, but then often with a lack of practical understanding of what this would entail. The following quote illustrates that many female teachers' perceptions navigate a tension between seeing and discussing the value of female leadership, while at the same time recognizing these roles are not necessarily accepted or seen as appropriate in their surroundings, and in some cases then also by themselves. They are showing what we would term a more 'docile' form of agency, which is situated in a rather restrained strategic selective context of the *dayah*.

> We are also taught in our tradition about the scope [of work] for women. Living in the current era, [we hear] that women must stay at home. [But] it's not like that, they are free to have activities, to be activist, in media, as teachers, doctors, go ahead … [It is] not that I have no respect, but I have no interest for a woman who wants a position in a more diverse system, let's say [to become a] state leader. But for her to increase her self-capacity and contribute more to the society, go ahead. That's justifiable. Although the fact is that in Banda Aceh the mayor is a woman, who often led the raids for anti-immorality at three a.m, so she is worth to be a leader. (Tgk. Sari)

In contrast, some *Ummis* and *teungku*s were quite moderate with regards to their religious interpretations of women's roles and leadership. We found that having more opportunities for external engagement and training, they were better able to relate their roles to the societal context, and moving from more micro-scale and docile forms of agency to strategic thinking and in some cases actions at broader scales of engagement. A reason to explain this is that some of these more 'moderate' female leaders, and teachers, have been exposed to trainings, seminars, and a wider interaction with more diverse communities through the network of women's organizations programmes particularly during the reconstruction phase. The organizations received funding from several sources, including international agencies, particularly over the year of reconstruction and rehabilitation Aceh (2005–2008). In the 2009 legislative general elections, some *Ummis* stood for the election, and other participants of these programmes became active through different community activities and services, such as working on domestic violence reduction. Such programmes most often received funding from international donor organizations that entered Aceh in the post-tsunami and post-war reconstruction period (see also Shah and Lopes Cardozo 2014).

We continue our analysis here by sharing two examples that sit on either side of the agency continuum, coincidentally both located in Aceh Besar. Firstly, Ummi Aisyah established a *dayah* together with her husband (Tgk. Husni). While the husband is the leader of the *dayah*, she replaces her husband's position when her husband is not available, away or

sick. In an interview, she shared her, rather conservative, view on women's leadership with us:

> Women can be a leader but they have a limitation, as according to Islam, women's IQ is low, they can teach but not to lead the country. It is not permitted in Islam. It is better for the men to be the leader … The woman [should] only teach other women and young boys. (Ummi Aisyah)

In contrast, a more progressive female leader, Ummi Nurlaila, at first sight represents a typical character that is ascribed to *dayah* female teachers; she appears as a very calm person and keeps a neutral political view. However, her view on women's roles in society and as potential leaders is radically different from the first example. She encourages female students and women in the community to participate in social and political life. She also encourages her students to also study in a public school, besides the Salafi inspired teaching she offers in the *dayah* she established herself, independently of her husband. She also shared the way she thinks about female leadership:

> Based on the hadith [prophetic tradition] 'each of you is a leader', I think my view is legitimate. If they lead, it means they are walking in front, guiding, [being] a role model. They deliver good messages. I think there is no prohibition for a woman to walk in front, if she delivers the message incurred to her, wise, smart, charismatic, if what she delivers would be guidance for others. So there's nothing in Islamic teaching, I think, that prohibits women to lead the way, to be a leader. (Ummi Nurlaila)

Contextual and relational factors influencing female leaders' agency

The variations of *dayah* female education leaders responses to processes of social change varied from rather passive to more active forms of engagement, and from more micro scale (personal or interpersonal motivations) to more meso (the broader *dayah* and surrounding community) and in some cases macro scale interactions as well. Firstly, our data suggest that specifically those who were affected personally by the conflict were more likely to employ a particular strategy of sustaining peace in their educational endeavours. In a few exceptional *dayah,* we spoke to women who used their power relations, religious knowledge and close connections to the community to actively disseminate their interpretation of how to support the Aceh peacebuilding. Two *Ummis* from the Aceh Barat district are among those rare figures who inhibit this far end of the more active and consciously strategic agency spectrum. Their active strategies in attempting to build peace cannot be seen as separated from their involvement in women's organizations, mostly working in the area of gender and religion, including women's rights NGOs in Aceh such as Flower Aceh, MisPi (*Mitra Sejati Perempuan Indonesia*), BSIA (*Balee Syura Ureung Inong Aceh*), or an international peace organization such as Interpeace that focused on reintegration issues and (women's roles in) the peace process.

Secondly, our analysis showed how especially the *Ummi*s who established a *dayah* by themselves (the achieved power model) have employed their agency to allow for more (yet often moderate) engagement to broaden their efforts, perspectives and interactions in relation to the post-conflict context. Although their conceptions on the relation between women and peacebuilding are not always elaborate, they usually had a clear conception of women's leadership in the *dayah*, and society in general. For those that

established a *dayah* themselves, we observed a stronger sense of striving and empowerment for their own positions and those of their colleagues and students. And while our data suggests that levels of exposure to the outside world can progressively influence the way they see their roles and enact consequent strategies for change within the *dayah* as well as the community, it did not mean that the female leaders located in a remote areas would automatically sit on the passive side of the agency continuum. Our relational analysis showed how additional factors also impacted on female leaders' perspectives and roles, as our data showed that those women with stronger leadership roles in their *dayah*, and in the surrounding community, were often the sole leaders of a *dayah*, or were related to a husband (or other male family member) with less outspoken leadership and social roles.

Thirdly, rather than a purely individual strategy, several women in leadership positions expressed how a sense of collectivity, or sisterhood, was established within the restricted spaces available to women in the *dayah*. Collective responses by women working (and sometimes also living) in the *dayah* to male dominance or lack of autonomy resulted in forms of silent resistance, for instance by only slightly compromising the ideals without significant contestations. Disagreement with those patriarchal realities are enacted by some exceptional female leaders through subtle forms of what we would call docile agency, as is illustrated in the quote below:

> For me, women should be educators. They should educate children at home. They should share their knowledge with those who need it, like in the majlis taklim [Islamic study group] or in schools. This is more appropriate to be conducted by women. It is because women are "madrasatul ula" [mothers being a first teacher] […]. So, at least women representatives should exist in parliament. Even, I myself have taken part in a local representative candidacy. If it is not the women [themselves] who stand up for the issues of women, who else can do it then? (Tgk. Hafni)

Finally, we want to highlight the limitations of 'docile agency', as some of the more vocal female *dayah* actors expressed how 'docility' might not establish much progress in terms of supporting women's potentials. Nevertheless, we want to recognize how a group of the female leaders included in our study that sit on the 'social change' part of the agentic continuum, act within, and in response to, a relatively restricted strategic selective contexts of the *dayah*. They adopt what we see as creative, and in some cases 'docile' agentic strategies. They move beyond engagement at the micro level, and they do so by promoting a more egalitarian narrative to challenge a hegemonic patriarchal discourse, and preach peaceful Islamic teachings. One example is a rather exceptional and activist female *dayah* leader from Aceh Barat, who shared how her students told her that they felt they were less easily provoked into conflict, and that criminal assaults were experienced less often because of her way of teaching. This was confirmed in a conversation with the village secretary in a focus group discussion with community members, who mentioned that '*our insight and religious knowledge has improved, and the criminal rates in our village have decreased*'. While such perceived impacts in the direct community would sit on the 'social change' end of the analytical agency-continuum, we do feel that further research would need to uncover in more detail in how far discourses and lived examples of female education leaders' emancipation are also impacting on the views of (female and male) students and teacher colleagues at these *dayah*.

Concluding discussion and closing thoughts

By employing the transdisciplinary theoretical framework to explore female education leaders' agency, the analysis of our data suggests that there is far from one single portrait of female education leaders' agency in Acehnese Islamic boarding schools. Rather, we found a wide spectrum that characterizes a continuum from more conservative – or pacifying – to more docile (Mahmood 2001) and finally to more creative forms of agency for social change.

Reflecting on the usefulness of the theoretical framings of our adapted version of the Strategic Relational Approach, we felt that this framing allowed us to see the dialectical connections between the multiscalar 'strategic selective contexts' and the often very limited space for manouvre available to female teachers. We also felt that this approach needed the complimentary views of feminist theory on gender justice and gendered analysis of agency. Further reflecting then on our application of insights on performativity (Butler 2011), our historical and ethnographic engagement with the unique context of Aceh, and the ways in which Islam is an integral part of the region's cultural political economy, allowed us to uncover the discursive standards (of women's limited leadership roles) vis-à-vis *Ummis* own performative interpretations and enactments of such gendered norms. Mahmood's historical understanding of women's docile agency as connected to Islamic contexts and patriarchal relations of subordination made it possible to look for the nuance, and explore a continuum of the enactment of agency of the Acehnese *Ummis* and *Teungkus*, rather than seeing them as part of either-or binaries. Finally, the locally-embedded conceptualizations of achieved and derived power (see also Srimulyani 2010, 2014) were helpful, yet when not applied in a nuanced way, may carry the potential danger of again creating these either-or binaries.

We also found that socio-cultural and state-driven understandings of gendered roles in society, for instance around the notion and enactment of an *Ibuism* (motherism) ideology has been a result of historical, religious and cultural contextual roots. In addition, impactful contextual changes, such as the introduction of Shari'a law, and a sudden international involvement brought about by the tsunami in 2004 and the Helsinki peace agreement in 2005, and the following reconstruction and rehabilitation period, have also affected the discourse and the public space for the agency of women in Aceh. Within the often-restricted spaces available to women in the *dayah*, strategies employed by female education leaders ranged from very little resistance, or rather compliance and pacification, to more strategically drawing on their kinship, forms of collective sisterhood, or external training modules – especially in the period directly after the conflict and the tsunami – to form their own agency and model of 'resistance' to the dominance mainstream patriarchal values and norms. Our data suggests that an explanation for the more active forms of female leaders engagement and higher levels of authority and autonomy (Vongalis-Macrow 2007) are mostly related to: (1) their exposure to the outside world (in the forms of trainings, especially between 2005–2008), (2) the forms of leadership of the *dayah* – with achieved power models providing more strategic space for manoeuvre, and (3) support/resistance from relational networks of close family, a sense of sisterhood amongst female staff and acceptance and engagement with the direct community.

Finally, we hope to contribute to emerging debates on the role of grassroots and female actors in peacebuilding processes (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015). Referring back to the

opening quotations, we would like to conclude by mentioning that counter-narratives to over simplified stories and media coverage is much needed in times of global distrust and misunderstanding between regions, religions and peoples, and we hope to humbly contribute towards that aim with our collaborative work.

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Notes on contributors

Mieke T. A. Lopes Cardozo, Assistant Professor in International Development Studies, University of Amsterdam, PO BOX 15629, 1001 NC Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Email: t.a.lopescardozo@uva.nl.

Eka Srimulyani, professor of sociology at the Ar-Raniry State Islamic University Banda Aceh, Indonesia, and a researcher at the International Centre for Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies (ICAIOS). Email: Ekasrimulyani@ar-raniry.ac.id, and Eka.Srimulyani@acehresearch.org.

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