

Performing Piety and Power: The Dramaturgy of Female Leadership and Religious Authority in the Islamic Student Organization (IPPNU)

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Abstract. This study examines how female leaders in Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdlatul Ulama (IPPNU) actively construct and negotiate religious authority through everyday dramaturgical practices. Drawing on the dramaturgical perspective of Erving Goffman, this article argues that leadership in religious organizations is not merely a formal or administrative role but a performative process shaped by interaction, normative expectations, and gendered structures. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study explores the lived experiences of ten female leaders at the Pimpinan Anak Cabang and Pimpinan Ranting levels in Sekaran District, Lamongan Regency. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that female leaders strategically engage in impression management by performing religious, communicative, assertive, and exemplary identities in public settings (front stage) to gain and sustain legitimacy. At the same time, in private settings (backstage), they express emotional fatigue, vulnerability, and more spontaneous personal identities. The study demonstrates that religious authority is collectively produced through the interaction of impression management, emotional labor, and symbolic recognition rather than merely institutional position. This study contributes to the sociology of religion and leadership by integrating dramaturgy, emotional labor, and symbolic capital to explain the production of young women's religious authority in local Islamic organizations. It demonstrates that female leadership operates as a reflexive and negotiated social practice situated within broader gendered and socio-religious power relations.

Keywords: dramaturgy; female leadership; religious authority; Islamic organizations; gender

Abstrak. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana para pemimpin perempuan dalam organisasi Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdlatul Ulama (IPPNU) secara aktif membangun dan menegosiasikan otoritas keagamaan melalui praktik-praktik dramaturgis sehari-hari mereka. Dengan mengacu pada perspektif dramaturgis Erving Goffman, artikel ini berpendapat bahwa kepemimpinan dalam organisasi keagamaan merupakan proses performatif yang dibentuk oleh interaksi, ekspektasi normatif, dan struktur gender, bukan sekadar peran formal atau administratif. Dengan mengadopsi pendekatan fenomenologis kualitatif, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman hidup sepuluh pemimpin perempuan di tingkat Pimpinan Anak Cabang dan Pimpinan Ranting di Kecamatan Sekaran, Kabupaten Lamongan. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi, serta dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa para pemimpin perempuan terlibat dalam manajemen kesan secara strategis dengan menampilkan identitas yang religius, komunikatif, tegas, dan teladan di ruang publik (panggung depan) untuk memperoleh dan mempertahankan legitimasi. Sebaliknya, di ruang privat (belakang panggung), mereka mengekspresikan kelelahan emosional, kerentanan, dan identitas pribadi yang lebih spontan. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa otoritas keagamaan diproduksi secara kolektif melalui interaksi antara manajemen kesan, kerja emosional, dan pengakuan simbolik, alih-alih semata-mata berasal dari posisi institusional. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi bagi sosiologi agama dan kepemimpinan dengan mengintegrasikan dramaturgi, kerja emosional, dan modal simbolik untuk menjelaskan pembentukan otoritas keagamaan perempuan muda dalam organisasi Islam lokal. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan perempuan merupakan praktik sosial yang reflektif dan terus dinegosiasikan dalam relasi kuasa berbasis gender dan sosio-religius yang lebih luas.

Kata kunci: dramaturgi; kepemimpinan perempuan; otoritas keagamaan;

1. INTRODUCTION

Female leadership within religious organizations constitutes a complex social arena in which gender, religiosity, and social legitimacy are intricately intertwined (Fitriana & Cenni, 2021; Manembu, 2018; Abraham, 2019). Studies of women's leadership in religious settings have increasingly highlighted how authority is negotiated through gendered expectations, moral legitimacy, and institutional structures rather than being derived solely from formal positions (Avishai, 2008; Mahmood, 2005). In societies still shaped by traditional gender constructions, women who occupy leadership positions are not only responsible for administrative functions but also bear symbolic burdens as representations of morality and piety (Abraham, 2019; Suriani, 2017). Consequently, their leadership is evaluated not only in terms of organizational effectiveness but also in relation to their ability to project a self-image aligned with religious norms and collective expectations. This dynamic becomes particularly salient within Islamic organizations with strong cultural and religious foundations, such as Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdlatul Ulama (IPPNU).

As an autonomous body of Nahdlatul Ulama that accommodates female students, IPPNU plays a strategic role in the formation and development of young women's leadership (Hilmiyah, 2019; Firgiyani, 2021; Solikhah, 2023). At the local level, the organization is actively engaged in religious and social activities, including Qur'anic study gatherings, Islamic holiday commemorations, and community-based initiatives (Ismiati, 2019; Khusnan & Syaifullah, 2021; Wardah, 2020). In carrying out these roles, IPPNU leaders interact intensively with members, local NU administrators, and community figures, positioning them within a social space that requires not only leadership competence but also the continuous maintenance of a credible religious image (Khoirotunnisa & Pujianto, 2024; Ghoffar, 2019). As a result, female leadership in IPPNU is embedded in a dense web of normative, symbolic, and gendered expectations.

Existing studies on female leadership in religious contexts have primarily focused on normative roles, such as contributions to character education, the reinforcement of religious values, or general organizational dynamics (Rahmah, 2021; Solehah et al., 2025). Similar tendencies can be found in international scholarship, which has largely examined women's religious leadership through

questions of participation, representation, and institutional inclusion, while paying less attention to the micro-processes through which authority is performed and negotiated in everyday interactions (Avishai, 2008; Mahmood, 2005).

At the same time, dramaturgical approaches have been more widely applied to political leadership, bureaucratic settings, or formal professions (Rorong, 2018; Thadi, 2020; Sari, 2016; Chofsho & Hidayat, 2024), leaving the domain of young women's leadership in local Islamic organizations underexplored. This gap is significant, given that organizations such as IPPNU constitute important sites where young women actively construct and negotiate their socio-religious authority within communities shaped by patriarchal values and religious traditions (Abraham, 2019; Suriani, 2017; Hidayati & Hidayat, 2021).

This study argues that female leadership in Islamic organizations should not be understood merely as a formal position, but as a performative and interactional process through which religious authority is continuously constructed and negotiated. Despite growing attention to gender and leadership, there remains limited analysis of how young women actively produce religious authority through everyday practices of impression management, emotional regulation, and social interaction (Cahyono, 2019; Prasetya, 2019). In many cases, religious authority is implicitly assumed to derive from institutional position; however, in practice, it emerges through ongoing processes of recognition, performance, and social validation (Ritzer, 2012; Poloma, 2010).

To address this gap, this study aims to examine the construction of religious authority among young women leaders in IPPNU through Goffman's dramaturgical perspective (Goffman, 1956; Suneki & Haryono, 2012). The concepts of front stage and backstage provide an analytical lens to examine how female leaders manage their self-presentation in public settings while simultaneously negotiating more personal and spontaneous identities in private spaces. This perspective allows leadership to be understood not as a fixed attribute, but as a dynamic and reflexive process shaped through interaction.

This study extends dramaturgical theory by integrating emotional labor and symbolic capital to explain the construction of religious authority among young Muslim women leaders. While previous dramaturgical studies have primarily focused on impression management and self-presentation

(Goffman, 1956; Rorong, 2018; Thadi, 2020), this research demonstrates that religious authority is also shaped by emotional work and processes of symbolic recognition. By bringing these perspectives together, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how legitimacy is constructed, maintained, and negotiated within local Islamic organizations.

Furthermore, this study positions female leadership as an arena of negotiation between personal identity, organizational expectations, and broader gender structures. Within many religious contexts, women's leadership is often perceived as an extension of domestic or supportive roles rather than as a site of authority (Rachim et al., 2022; Nursalim et al., 2023). In contrast, this research demonstrates that female leaders actively construct legitimacy through strategic self-presentation, emotional management, and the cultivation of exemplary conduct. In doing so, they do not merely conform to normative expectations but also participate in redefining the meanings of leadership and piety within their socio-religious context.

This research is guided by the central question: how do female leaders in IPPNU negotiate their identity and religious authority in everyday interactions? This question is further elaborated into several sub-questions: how do they construct their public self-image within the organization? How do they manage emotions, communication styles, and bodily expressions to sustain legitimacy? And how do the distinctions between public (front stage) and private (back stage) spaces shape their leadership identities?

The study focuses on IPPNU leaders at the Pimpinan Anak Cabang and Pimpinan Ranting levels in Sekaran District, Lamongan Regency, an area characterized by a strong Nahdlatul Ulama cultural base (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Lamongan, 2024). Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research explores the lived experiences of female leaders in performing their roles, with particular attention to interactional practices, impression management strategies, and the negotiation of identity within normative socio-religious contexts.

This study contributes to the sociology of religion and leadership in two significant ways. Empirically, it provides insights into the relatively underexplored context of young women's leadership in a local Islamic student organization. Theoretically, it demonstrates how religious authority is produced

through the interaction of impression management, emotional labor, and symbolic recognition, rather than being derived solely from formal organizational position. It shows that authority is continuously produced, negotiated, and reproduced through everyday social practices (Goffman, 1956; Rorong, 2018).

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to understand the subjective experiences of female leaders in Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdlatul Ulama. A phenomenological approach was chosen because the research focused on how individuals interpreted their leadership roles and reflected upon their practices of negotiating identity and religious authority in everyday social interactions (Rofiah, 2023; Martono, 2015). Within this framework, social reality was understood as a construction of meaning derived from the lived experiences of the research subjects, rather than as an objective fact detached from social actors (Sugiyono, 2011; Ratna, 2010).

The study was conducted in Sekaran District, Lamongan Regency, East Java Province, an area characterized by a strong Nahdlatul Ulama socio-religious tradition and an active presence of IPPNU at both the Pimpinan Anak Cabang (PAC) and Pimpinan Ranting (PR) levels (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Lamongan, 2024; Ghozali et al., 2022). The researcher engaged directly with organizational activities, including Qur'anic study gatherings, Islamic holiday commemorations, leadership meetings, and training sessions, in order to capture the interactional context in which female leadership was performed (Khusnan & Syaifullah, 2021; Wardah, 2020). This setting provided a rich empirical context for observing how leadership, religiosity, and gender expectations intersected in everyday practices.

Fieldwork was conducted from May 14, 2024, and continued in stages until the completion of data analysis in 2025. During this period, the researcher maintained sustained engagement with the field, allowing for prolonged observation, repeated interactions with informants, and iterative refinement of emerging interpretations. This prolonged engagement contributed to achieving data saturation and enhancing the depth of understanding of the informants lived experiences (Sugiyono, 2011).

The research involved ten female IPPNU leaders selected through purposive sampling. This technique was employed because the researcher had prior

knowledge of the characteristics relevant to the research focus, enabling the selection of informants who were directly involved in leadership practices (Sugiyono, 2011; Martono, 2015). The informants consisted of one chairperson at the PAC level and nine chairpersons at the PR level across several villages in Sekaran District. This composition allowed the researcher to capture variations in leadership experiences across different organizational levels and local contexts.

The criteria for selecting informants included: (1) women serving as IPPNU chairpersons at the PAC or PR level; (2) a minimum of one year of leadership experience to ensure sufficient exposure to organizational dynamics; and (3) a minimum age of 18 years to ensure the capacity for reflective articulation of experiences. These criteria were applied to ensure that the data collected reflected both the structural and experiential dimensions of leadership.

Data were collected through three primary techniques: participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation (Sugiyono, 2011; Budiyantri, 2022). In participant observation, the researcher was actively present in organizational settings, observing interactions, communication patterns, emotional expressions, and self-presentation practices of female leaders. Field notes were taken during and immediately after activities to capture both observable behavior and contextual nuances.

In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to explore the subjective meanings attached to leadership experiences (Rofiah, 2023). Each informant participated in one to two interview sessions, with durations ranging from approximately 45 to 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in settings comfortable for the informants, such as their homes or organizational spaces, to facilitate openness and reflexivity. The interview guide covered themes such as leadership roles, experiences of managing expectations, emotional challenges, strategies of self-presentation, and distinctions between public (front stage) and private (backstage) experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Documentation served as complementary data, including organizational structures, work programs, activity reports, and visual materials such as photographs of events. These materials were used to triangulate observational and interview data,

particularly in understanding how leadership roles were formally structured and publicly represented.

Data analysis was conducted iteratively by integrating the interactive model of Miles and Huberman with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Martono, 2015; Rofiah, 2023). The process began with repeated reading of transcripts and field notes to identify significant statements and meanings. Initial coding was then conducted to categorize data into themes such as impression management, construction of religious image, emotional regulation, team dynamics, and front stage-backstage distinctions. These codes were subsequently refined into broader thematic patterns through constant comparison across cases.

Within the IPA framework, the researcher engaged in a double hermeneutic process: interpreting how informants made sense of their experiences while simultaneously developing a sociological interpretation of those meanings. This interpretative process was conducted reflexively by linking empirical findings with dramaturgical concepts such as front stage, backstage, performance teams, and impression management (Goffman, 1956). The analysis was carried out continuously until no new significant themes emerged, indicating analytical saturation (Sugiyono, 2011).

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed methodological triangulation by comparing data from observation, interviews, and documentation (Sugiyono, 2011; Ratna, 2010). In addition, member checking was conducted by returning selected interpretations to informants for confirmation, ensuring that the analytical conclusions accurately reflected their intended meanings. The researcher also maintained reflexive notes throughout the research process to critically examine positionality, assumptions, and potential biases in interpreting the data.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Construction of Religious Image on the Front Stage

The study found that female leaders of *Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdlatul Ulama* consciously constructed a religious image when operating in the organization's public sphere. The front stage was not only understood as formal settings such as meetings and religious events but also encompassed everyday interactions involving members, advisors, alumni, and the broader community. Within this space, female leaders were aware that they were constantly being

seen, evaluated, and represented as figures of the organization. This awareness was not abstract but experienced directly in interaction, as reflected in one informant's account:

"There were alumni and advisors who introduced me to people who did not yet know who I was, saying, 'this is the PAC chair.' Although it felt a bit uncomfortable, I think they were proud... even though they knew my struggles, I was still presented as someone to be proud of as a chair in Sekaran District."

This moment illustrates how leadership identity is not only formally assigned but also socially performed and publicly affirmed. The act of introduction by advisors and alumni did not simply convey information but functioned as a symbolic staging of authority, positioning the informant within a particular moral and organizational hierarchy. In such situations, female leaders were not merely acting; they were being presented as embodiments of the organization's values.

In everyday practice, this awareness translated into careful regulation of speech, appearance, and demeanor. Informants described how they adjusted their communication styles to remain polite and persuasive, controlled emotional expressions to avoid appearing unstable, and demonstrated commitment through consistent participation in organizational activities. Even when experiencing fatigue or internal challenges, they sought to maintain composure in front of members. These practices indicate that leadership was enacted not only through decision-making but through continuous self-presentation aligned with expectations rooted in Ahlussunah wal Jama'ah values.

From a dramaturgical perspective, the front stage represents the space where actors perform roles in accordance with audience expectations (Goffman, 1956; Suneki & Haryono, 2012). In this study, such performance was not incidental but reflexively managed. Female leaders organized their "setting" through participation in religious and organizational activities, shaped their "appearance" through modest and appropriate dress, and regulated their "manner" through controlled communication and emotional expression (Ritzer, 2012; Rorong, 2018; Jannah & Hidayat, 2024). These elements worked together to produce a coherent situational definition in which they were recognized as legitimate religious leaders.

What emerges from these findings is not simply a story of compliance with norms, but a more complex process of negotiation. The construction of a religious image was not entirely imposed from outside, nor was it purely self-directed. Instead, it took shape in the interaction between organizational expectations, community perceptions, and the leaders' own reflexive efforts to sustain credibility. Within this process, legitimacy was continuously at stake, requiring ongoing alignment between performed roles and social expectations (Abraham, 2019; Khusnan & Syaifullah, 2021).

This dynamic can be further understood through the notion of symbolic capital, where recognition and legitimacy are accumulated through socially valued attributes (Ritzer, 2012; Poloma, 2010). In the context of IPPNU, religious appearance, composure, and exemplarity became key resources that strengthened the position of female leaders. When advisors and alumni publicly affirmed the chairperson's role, they were not only acknowledging her position but also reinforcing her symbolic standing within the organizational field. At the same time, this process also implied vulnerability: any inconsistency between performance and expectation could potentially undermine the legitimacy that had been built.

Unlike dramaturgical studies in political contexts that often emphasize strategic image manipulation, the findings here point to a different orientation. The performances observed in IPPNU were less about instrumental power and more about sustaining moral credibility within a religious community (Thadi, 2020; Sari, 2016). Leadership, in this sense, unfolded as an ongoing effort to remain consistent with values that were collectively recognized, rather than as a calculated attempt to dominate others. It is within this tension—between expectation, performance, and self-awareness—that the religious authority of female leaders was gradually formed and maintained.

3.2 Emotional Management and Exemplarity as Strategies of Legitimacy

The findings indicate that emotional management is not a peripheral aspect of leadership but a central element (Syahputra, 2022) in how female leaders in Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdlatul Ulama sustain their legitimacy. Informants consistently described the need to regulate their emotions in public settings, particularly when dealing with undisciplined members, organizational conflicts, or personal fatigue. Emotional expressions

such as anger, frustration, or disappointment were not eliminated, but carefully controlled and selectively displayed. As one informant explained, maintaining composure was essential because "If the leader becomes emotional, members will lose respect." This suggests that emotional restraint was not merely a personal choice but a practical necessity tied to maintaining authority.

At the same time, emotional regulation was closely intertwined with the expectation of exemplarity. Female leaders were expected to act as role models, not only in formal decision-making but also in everyday conduct. Informants emphasized the importance of being punctual, actively participating in religious activities, and consistently demonstrating attitudes aligned with organizational values. In this sense, leadership was performed through visible consistency between words and actions. Members did not simply follow instructions; they observed and evaluated the leader's conduct as a reference point. One informant described this expectation as follows:

"As a leader, I cannot simply tell members what to do. If I ask them to attend activities, I have to attend as well. If I expect them to be active, I must show that I am active first. Otherwise, it becomes difficult for members to respect or follow the directions that I give."

This statement illustrates how leadership legitimacy was closely linked to visible examples of commitment and participation. As a result, emotional control and exemplarity became inseparable dimensions of leadership practice.

These processes were not carried out individually in isolation. Informants highlighted the importance of organizational dynamics in sustaining both emotional stability and leadership image. Advisors, for instance, often played a protective role by defending the chairperson in public situations while offering criticism in private. This pattern allowed leaders to maintain composure in front-stage settings while still receiving corrective feedback. It also suggests that emotional management was embedded within collective arrangements rather than being solely an individual burden.

From a dramaturgical perspective, emotional regulation can be understood as part of "manner," referring to the expressive dimension of performance that shapes how an actor is perceived (Goffman, 1956; Suneki & Haryono, 2012). In this

study, manner was carefully managed to sustain an image of calmness, patience, and moral authority. The leaders' ability to control their emotional expressions contributed to a stable definition of the situation in which they were recognized as legitimate figures (Ritzer, 2012; Rorong, 2018). What is notable here is that emotional control was not simply about suppressing feelings but about aligning emotional expression with expected social roles.

This process becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of emotional labor. Emotional labor involves managing feelings and expressions to fulfill role expectations (Suneki & Haryono, 2012; Thadi, 2020). In the context of IPPNU, female leaders engaged in ongoing emotional work to display patience, gentleness, and composure, even in situations that were internally challenging. This was not merely a matter of surface acting; several informants described efforts to internalize these expectations, convincing themselves that such behavior was part of their moral and religious responsibility. However, this internalization did not eliminate emotional strain. Instead, it often intensified the effort required to maintain consistency between internal feelings and external expressions.

The gender dimension further complicates this dynamic. Within a social context where women are expected to embody patience, empathy, and moral refinement, emotional missteps carry heavier consequences (Suriani, 2017; Manembu, 2018). Female leaders are not only evaluated as organizational actors but also as representations of ideal femininity within a religious framework. As a result, emotional labor becomes a double burden: sustaining leadership authority while simultaneously conforming to gendered expectations of behavior (Fitriana & Cenni, 2021; Abraham, 2019).

Over time, these practices contribute to the formation of symbolic legitimacy. Consistent displays of emotional control and exemplary conduct are recognized and valued within the organizational environment, gradually strengthening the leader's position (Ritzer, 2012; Poloma, 2010). However, this legitimacy is not fixed; it must be continuously reproduced through everyday interactions. What appears as "natural authority" is, in fact, the outcome of sustained emotional and behavioral discipline.

Rather than portraying leadership as a purely rational or administrative function, these findings highlight its deeply moral and affective dimensions. Authority is not only built through decisions and

organizational outcomes (Rahmi & Jarkawi, 2023) but also through the ability to embody values that are collectively recognized. In this sense, emotional management and exemplarity are not supplementary qualities but integral to how leadership is practiced and sustained within a religious organizational context.

3.3 Team, Advisors, and Partners as Supporting Cast in the Dramaturgy of Leadership

The findings show that female leadership in Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdlatul Ulama is not enacted in isolation but is sustained through collective work involving advisors, members, partners, and alumni. Rather than functioning as a purely individual role, leadership emerges within a network of relationships that continuously shapes how authority is constructed and perceived. Informants consistently emphasized that their ability to lead effectively depended not only on personal capacity but also on the support and coordination of those around them.

This relational dimension becomes particularly visible in moments of public recognition. One informant described how advisors and alumni introduced her to others as the chairperson, often expressing pride in her position:

"There were alumni and advisors who introduced me to people who did not yet know who I was, saying, 'this is the PAC chair'... even though they knew my struggles, I was still presented as someone to be proud of as a chair."

Such moments are significant not merely because they acknowledge formal roles, but because they actively construct and reinforce leadership identity in front of an audience. The act of introduction functions as a form of symbolic endorsement, situating the leader within a recognized hierarchy of respect and legitimacy. In this sense, authority is not simply claimed by the leader but is collectively affirmed through interaction.

A similar dynamic appears in how advisors manage public and private communication. Informants explained that advisors tended to defend the chairperson in public situations to maintain her image, while feedback and criticism were delivered in private. This division suggests an implicit awareness of the importance of maintaining a consistent front-stage performance. By protecting the leader's image in public while addressing shortcomings backstage, advisors contribute to the stability of the overall performance.

Beyond advisors, members and organizational partners also play an essential role in shaping leadership outcomes. Informants noted that the success of organizational activities depended heavily on member participation. When activities ran smoothly, this success was often attributed to the leadership of the chairperson, reinforcing her public image. Conversely, when participation was weak, leaders could feel that they were "leading alone," highlighting the fragility of leadership performance when collective support is limited. These experiences indicate that authority is closely tied to the dynamics of cooperation within the organization.

From a dramaturgical perspective, these patterns reflect what Goffman describes as a "performance team," a group of individuals who collaborate to sustain a shared definition of the situation before an audience (Goffman, 1956; Rorong, 2018). In the context of IPPNU, female leaders occupy the central role on the front stage, but the coherence of their performance depends on coordinated support from others. Advisors, members, and partners collectively contribute to maintaining the credibility of the performance by reinforcing, protecting, and enacting the same situational definition (Suneki & Haryono, 2012; Ritzer, 2012).

At the same time, these findings reveal that such collaboration is not neutral but embedded in existing structures of authority. Advisors and alumni, as more senior figures, possess greater symbolic resources within the organizational field. Their public endorsement of the chairperson does not merely support her role but also reflects a transfer of legitimacy (Ritzer, 2012; Poloma, 2010). Through these interactions, authority is both enabled and conditioned by pre-existing hierarchies, indicating that female leadership operates within a structured field rather than a fully egalitarian space.

This dynamic creates a subtle tension. On one hand, collective support strengthens leadership performance and enhances legitimacy. On the other hand, dependence on recognition from senior figures suggests that authority is partially contingent upon external validation. In this sense, female leadership in IPPNU is simultaneously empowered and constrained by relational networks and symbolic structures (Abraham, 2019; Suriani, 2017).

Compared to approaches that frame leadership primarily in terms of individual competence or style, these findings point to a more relational understanding of authority. Leadership is not only what the leader does, but also how others participate

in sustaining the meaning of that leadership. Authority, therefore, is distributed, negotiated, and reproduced through ongoing interaction rather than being solely located in the individual leader (Fitriana & Cenni, 2021; Nursalim et al., 2023).

Within this relational context, leadership appears less as a fixed position and more as a collective accomplishment—one that depends on coordination, recognition, and shared commitment to maintaining a credible public image.

3.4 Back Stage: Fatigue, Complaints, and the Negotiation of Personal Identity

The findings reveal a clear distinction between the leadership identity performed in public settings and the personal experiences lived in private spaces. While on the front stage female leaders of Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdlatul Ulama sought to maintain an image of composure, religiosity, and control, the back stage provided a space where these expectations could be temporarily set aside. In private contexts, informants described experiencing fatigue, emotional pressure, and moments of doubt that were not visible in their public roles.

Several informants reflected on the contrast between how they appeared during organizational activities and how they felt afterward. One of them noted that she was expected to remain strong and composed in front of members, yet once she returned home, she often felt exhausted and overwhelmed. She emphasized that she was “not always as strong as she appeared in front of members,” pointing to a gap between performed identity and lived experience. This gap did not indicate inconsistency, but rather highlighted the effort required to sustain a stable public image. One informant described this experience in the following way:

“When I am with members, I try to appear calm and confident because I do not want them to think that I am struggling. However, after returning home, I often feel exhausted. Sometimes I complain to close friends or advisors because there are pressures that cannot be shown in front of members. As a leader, I feel that I have to remain strong even when I am actually tired.”

This account illustrates the emotional gap between public performance and private experience. The effort to maintain a stable leadership image often required the suppression or postponement of personal feelings until a safer backstage environment became available.

In dealing with these pressures, informants developed strategies for managing emotions that could not be expressed openly. Frustration, disappointment, and fatigue were often redirected to private conversations with trusted figures such as advisors or close colleagues. These backstage interactions became important spaces for releasing tension and reflecting on their roles without the risk of undermining their public image. Rather than being sites of withdrawal, these spaces functioned as moments of recalibration, allowing leaders to regain emotional balance before returning to the front stage.

This distinction between front stage and back stage is central to Goffman’s dramaturgical framework, where the back stage is understood as a region in which individuals can step out of their roles and suspend performance demands (Goffman, 1956; Suneki & Haryono, 2012). In this study, the back stage did not simply represent a hidden space, but an essential condition for sustaining the performance itself. Without such spaces, the continuous demands of front-stage presentation would likely become unsustainable.

The notion of role distance is particularly relevant in this context. Female leaders demonstrated the ability to momentarily distance themselves from their formal roles, allowing for a more spontaneous and personal expression of identity (Ritzer, 2012; Rorong, 2018). This distancing did not weaken their leadership; instead, it enabled them to maintain it over time. By stepping back from the role, they were able to return to it with renewed emotional capacity.

When viewed through the lens of emotional labor, these experiences take on an additional layer of meaning. Emotional labor involves not only managing outward expressions but also negotiating internal feelings in relation to role expectations (Suneki & Haryono, 2012; Thadi, 2020). Informants described efforts to remain patient and composed even when facing challenging situations, often convincing themselves that such behavior was part of their moral responsibility as leaders. However, this internalization did not eliminate emotional strain. Instead, it required ongoing effort to align personal feelings with expected forms of conduct.

Unlike contexts where emotional labor is tied to economic exchange, the emotional work observed in this study is closely linked to moral and religious expectations. Female leaders are not only expected to perform tasks but also to embody values associated with piety and self-control (Abraham, 2019; Fitriana & Cenni, 2021). As a result, expressions of

vulnerability in public settings may be interpreted as a failure to meet these expectations. This makes the back stage particularly important as a space where such vulnerabilities can be acknowledged without jeopardizing social standing.

The gender dimension further intensifies this dynamic. Within a social context that associates femininity with patience, gentleness, and emotional restraint, female leaders face additional pressure to regulate their behavior (Suriani, 2017; Manembu, 2018). The need to maintain both leadership authority and gendered expectations creates a layered form of emotional work that is not always visible from the outside.

Seen from this perspective, the back stage is not merely a place of retreat, but a crucial part of the broader process through which leadership is sustained. It is here that tensions are managed, identities are negotiated, and the capacity to continue performing in the front stage is quietly rebuilt.

3.5 Dramaturgy as a Mechanism for the Production and Reproduction of Religious Authority

If the findings are read together, a broader pattern begins to emerge regarding how female leadership in Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdlatul Ulama takes shape in practice. Leadership does not appear as something that simply follows from formal position. Rather, it is gradually formed through a series of interactions in which image, emotion, and relationships are continuously managed and negotiated.

On the front stage, female leaders work to present themselves as figures who embody religious values and organizational expectations. This involves not only visible elements such as dress and participation in activities, but also more subtle aspects such as tone of voice, emotional restraint, and ways of engaging with others. These performances are not static; they require ongoing adjustment in response to different audiences and situations. What is recognized as “authority” in this context is therefore closely tied to the ability to sustain a convincing and consistent presence in public interaction (Goffman, 1956; Ritzer, 2012).

At the same time, these performances do not stand on their own. They are supported—and sometimes shaped—by the presence of others who participate in maintaining the leader’s image. Advisors, members, and alumni contribute to how

leadership is perceived, whether through public endorsement, coordinated interaction, or the collective success of organizational activities. In this sense, authority is not produced individually but emerges within a network of relationships that distributes recognition and responsibility (Rorong, 2018; Ritzer, 2012). One informant reflected on this collective dimension of leadership:

“Being a chairperson is not something I can do alone. Members, advisors, and alumni all influence how people see me. When activities run well, people often appreciate the chairperson, but behind that there are many people who support and guide us. Without them, it would be difficult to maintain trust and carry out our responsibilities.”

This statement illustrates that leadership authority was experienced not as an individual possession but as something constructed through ongoing interaction, support, and recognition from others within the organization.

Behind these visible interactions lies another layer that is less apparent but equally important. The demands of maintaining composure, patience, and moral consistency require sustained emotional effort. Female leaders are not only expected to act appropriately, but to feel and express emotions in ways that align with religious and gendered expectations. This ongoing adjustment between internal feelings and external expression reflects a form of emotional work that is embedded in everyday leadership practice (Suneki & Haryono, 2012; Thadi, 2020).

The presence of backstage spaces further highlights that this process is neither seamless nor effortless. It is in these private settings that tensions are acknowledged, fatigue is expressed, and personal reflections take place. Rather than being separate from leadership, these moments are part of what makes sustained performance possible. Without opportunities to step back from public roles, the continuity of front-stage performance would be difficult to maintain.

When these dimensions are considered together, religious authority appears less as a fixed attribute and more as something that is continually brought into being. It takes shape through performance, gains strength through recognition, and is sustained through ongoing emotional adjustment (Poloma, 2010; Ritzer, 2012). What appears externally as stable authority is, in practice, the

outcome of repeated and coordinated efforts across different situations.

Theoretically, these findings extend Goffman's dramaturgical perspective beyond its conventional focus on the presentation of self. While dramaturgy provides a useful framework for understanding how leaders manage impressions in public interactions, the findings of this study suggest that, within women's Islamic organizations, dramaturgical processes also operate through emotional labor and collective recognition. Religious authority is therefore not produced solely through successful self-presentation, but also through the capacity to manage emotional demands and to secure recognition from advisors, members, and other organizational actors. These interconnected processes contribute to the ongoing production and reproduction of religious authority in everyday organizational life.

At the same time, this process does not occur in a neutral space. It unfolds within a social environment shaped by gendered expectations and hierarchical relations. Female leaders navigate expectations to be both authoritative and modest, both assertive and emotionally controlled. Recognition from senior figures, such as advisors and alumni, plays an important role in reinforcing legitimacy, but it also indicates that authority is partly dependent on existing structures of recognition (Abraham, 2019; Suriani, 2017).

Seen from this perspective, dramaturgy offers more than a way of describing how leaders present themselves. It provides a lens for understanding how authority is gradually assembled through interaction, how it is stabilized through collective recognition, and how it remains open to negotiation over time. Leadership, in this context, is not a finished condition but an ongoing process—one that is shaped as much by everyday encounters as by formal structures

4. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that female leadership in Ikatan Pelajar Putri Nahdlatul Ulama cannot be adequately understood as a fixed position within an organizational structure. Rather, it takes shape through ongoing social processes in which identity, emotion, and recognition are continuously negotiated in everyday interactions. What appears outwardly as stable leadership is, in practice, the result of sustained efforts to align personal conduct, organizational expectations, and broader socio-

religious norms.

In public settings, female leaders actively cultivate a credible image through the management of appearance, communication, and emotional expression. These practices are not merely symbolic displays but are closely tied to how legitimacy is established and maintained within a religious organizational environment. At the same time, such performances are supported by collective dynamics, where advisors, members, and alumni contribute to sustaining a consistent definition of leadership in the eyes of the community.

Equally important are the less visible processes that unfold in private spaces. It is in these moments that fatigue, vulnerability, and personal reflections are expressed, allowing leaders to recalibrate their roles and sustain their capacity to perform in public. The distinction between front stage and back stage thus reflects not a contradiction, but a necessary rhythm through which leadership is maintained over time.

From this perspective, religious authority among young women in IPPNU does not simply stem from formal position or institutional recognition. It develops gradually through performance, is strengthened through social recognition, and is sustained through continuous emotional work. Leadership, therefore, appears as a negotiated practice situated within a social environment shaped by gendered expectations and existing structures of legitimacy.

By foregrounding these dynamics, this study draws attention to leadership as a lived and relational process rather than a purely structural role. Focusing on everyday interactions, emotional dynamics, and collective participation makes it possible to see how authority is continuously formed, adjusted, and maintained in practice.

These findings also carry practical implications for the development of female leadership within Islamic youth organizations. Since religious authority is shaped not only by formal position but also by emotional management, social recognition, and everyday interaction, leadership development programs should extend beyond administrative and organizational skills. Greater attention should be given to mentoring systems, emotional support mechanisms, and opportunities for reflective learning that enable young women leaders to navigate public expectations while maintaining personal well-being. Strengthening these dimensions

may contribute to more sustainable and inclusive forms of leadership within organizations such as IPPNU.

This study is limited by its focus on a single district and by its emphasis on leaders occupying formal positions. Future research could extend this analysis by exploring different regional contexts, comparing organizational settings, or examining how leadership is perceived by members and external audiences. Such perspectives may offer further insight into how religious authority is negotiated across diverse socio-religious environments

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