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# Hijab, Mobility, and Religious Moderation: A Single Case Study of a Female Political Leader in Banda Aceh

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## *ABSTRACT*

Banda Aceh's sharia governance sparks global debates on gender equality. While existing studies focus on structural constraints, the negotiation of religious subjectivity by female executives remains underresearched. This study investigates how female leaders navigate authority, employing an interpretive single-case qualitative design. Empirical data were gathered via an in-depth interview with one informant (approximately 52 minutes) and analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The findings reveal four core themes: first, regional regulations enforce visible compliance; second, habituation transforms legal coercion into internalized subjectivity; third, the hijab serves as an embodied marker of agency, enabling public mobility; and fourth, from the perspective of a female executive, inclusive practices may alleviate minority apprehensions, suggesting Islamic governance can accommodate pluralism. This study concludes that state-enforced frameworks do not inherently subjugate women. These findings highlight the importance of religious moderation and interfaith tolerance, demonstrating how women's leadership promotes peaceful coexistence in pluralistic societies.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of religious expression, subjectivity, and female Muslim mobility in contemporary public spaces has become one of the most critical discourses in the sociology of religion, political anthropology, and gender studies (Safi'i et al., 2025; Skidmore & Lawrence, 2024). Across the Islamic world, the intersection of state regulations, religious identities, and civil autonomy is often reduced to a rigid binary framework: institutional coercion on one hand and absolute societal compliance on the other (Alkaf et al., 2022; Hakim et al., 2024). In Indonesia, home to the largest Muslim population globally, the phenomenon of women's religious devotion, particularly concerning Islamic dress practices and the hijab, experiences dynamic shifts in meaning (Haryani & Saputro, 2025). The hijab is no longer understood merely as a normative theological attribute; rather, it has transformed into a space for cultural identity negotiation, urban aesthetic market commodification, a marker of moral piety, and an instrument for articulating women's agency in the public sphere (Indarti & Peng, 2024; Maulana, 2025). Nevertheless, this theoretical complexity becomes uniquely pronounced when intersecting directly with regions possessing special autonomy and formal Islamic legal instruments, such as the Province of Aceh (Wahab et al., 2025).

The implementation of Islamic sharia in Aceh was formally strengthened through Law No. 44 of 1999 on the Implementation of the Special Status of the Special Region of Aceh (Undang-Undang Nomor 44 Tahun 1999 Tentang Penyelenggaraan Keistimewaan Provinsi Daerah Istimewa Aceh, 1999), Law No. 18 of 2001 on Special Autonomy for the Province of the Special Region of Aceh (Undang-Undang Nomor 18 Tahun 2001 Tentang Otonomi Khusus Bagi Provinsi Daerah Istimewa Aceh Sebagai Provinsi Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, 2001), and Qanun No. 11 of 2002 concerning the Implementation of Islamic Sharia in the Fields of Faith, Worship, and Islamic Symbols, which includes provisions on Islamic attire (Qanun Provinsi Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Nomor 11 Tahun 2002 Tentang Pelaksanaan Syariat Islam Bidang Aqidah, Ibadah, Dan Syiar Islam, 2003). Following the 2005 Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding, Law No. 11 of 2006 on the Governing of Aceh further established the legal framework for regional governance, including the implementation of Islamic law (Undang-Undang Nomor 11 Tahun 2006 Tentang Pemerintahan Aceh, 2006).

While human rights advocates and feminist scholars often critique these regulatory frameworks for potentially institutionalizing gendered spatial restrictions and top-down moral policing (Qodir et al., 2022), a complete understanding of Aceh's socio-legal landscape requires examining both its normative religious foundation and its statutory mechanisms. Theologians and local authorities anchor mandatory Islamic attire in scriptural imperatives regarding modesty, specifically Q.S. al-Nūr (24):31 and al-Aḥzāb (33):59. Legally, this mandate is codified through Law No. 11 of 2006 on the Governing of Aceh and operationalized via Qanun No. 11 of 2002 concerning Islamic faith, worship, and symbols. Rather than functioning solely as an instrument of blanket coercion, this

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legal structure accommodates jurisdictional nuance; for instance, Article 5 of Qanun Aceh No. 6 of 2014 on Jinayat Law explicitly permits non-Muslims to voluntarily choose Islamic legal jurisdiction under specific conditions, demonstrating an administrative pragmatism that challenges simplistic representations of unyielding legal compulsion.

A number of scholars over the past decade note that these formal policies frequently trigger sharp theoretical debates at both national and international levels (Chotidjah et al., 2025). Dominant narratives from external observers often label such regulations as structural restrictions on civil liberties, constraints on spatial movement, and the marginalization of women's social mobility and political participation rights (Fuad et al., 2025). Secular or orientalist perspectives frequently assume that Muslim women's compliance with religious attributes in sharia-governed regions is primarily driven by psychological fear of legal sanctions or moral pressures from public supervisory institutions such as the Wilayatul Hisbah (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Such approaches tend to overlook the dimension of autonomous faith internalization and the complexity of lived experiences among female subjects in interpreting their religious rituals.

Furthermore, academic discourse regarding the nexus between women, religion, and the public space in Indonesia has expanded rapidly through various empirical studies over the past eleven years (2016–2026) (Fariza et al., 2024; Fuad et al., 2025; Maulana, 2025). Cutting-edge research highlights the phenomenon of urban piety resurgences, the proliferation of hijrah movements among the younger generation, and the growth of female communities like majelis taklim acting as collective spaces for agency and moral solidarity (Almaki et al., 2016; Jati et al., 2024). As demonstrated in contemporary anthropological studies, women's experiences with Islamic law vary widely, cross-influenced by social class, urban spatial structures, age groups, and local customs (adat) rooted within society (Effendi et al., 2025; Fuad et al., 2025; Skidmore & Lawrence, 2024). Moreover, comprehensive inquiries into the global Muslim fashion industry illustrate how the hijab is harmoniously integrated with modern aesthetic trends and the middle class without reducing the wearer's spiritual substance (Indarti & Peng, 2024; Rifqi, 2025). Nonetheless, the bulk of this literature tends to dichotomize formal public-policy spheres—characterized as political-legal—and personal autonomous religious subjectivity, particularly concerning female figures positioned at the core of public political power (Alkaf et al., 2022; Maulana, 2025).

A crucial gap remains in the existing literature on women and the implementation of Islamic sharia in Aceh. Existing scholarship has extensively examined the gendered implications of sharia regulations on women's public roles and everyday practices (Afrianty, 2015; Fariza et al., 2024; Kloos, 2018). Furthermore, recent studies have begun to address women's political engagement in Aceh. For instance, Inayatillah (2023) examines the structural frameworks of women's political participation, while Afriandi and Abdillah (2023) analyze female regional heads, including prominent figures such as Illiza Sa'aduddin Djamal (Afriandi & Abdillah, 2023). However, these works focus

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predominantly on institutional dynamics, electoral representation, and policy administration. What remains underexplored is the micro-level religious subjectivity and embodied agency of female leaders themselves—specifically how they subjectively experience and navigate sharia mandates, such as the *hijab*, in their daily personal and professional lives. While prior research often frames religious compliance as either an institutional obligation or a constraint on mobility, it remains important to investigate how compliance may be reinterpreted by female leaders as a site of social recognition, self-confidence, and political legitimacy. By examining the lived experiences of an Acehnese female leader across her dual trajectory as a policymaker and a civil society actor, this study addresses this analytical gap and offers a more nuanced understanding of religious agency beyond the simplistic binary of coercion and compliance.

This study integrates Saba Mahmood's (2011) conceptualization of agency, enriched by Ahearn (2001), Brenner (1996), and Abu-Lughod (1990), with structural insights on Aceh's sharia governance (Feener, 2013; Kloos, 2018) and Indonesia's religious moderation discourse (Junaedi, 2019). Rejecting the liberal feminist binary that reduces religious compliance to mere submission or resistance, Mahmood frames agency as a situated process of ethical self-formation and piety. Applied to a female executive's hijab practices and public mobility spanning political, administrative, and civil society roles, this framework evaluates how formal sharia regulations interact with lived religious subjectivity, moral autonomy, and interfaith accommodation. Together, these theoretical threads guide the analysis across three core dimensions: religious subjectivity and hijab practices, agency and public mobility, and religious governance and moderation.

Accordingly, this study examines the relationship between religious subjectivity, hijab practices, and female leadership mobility through the lived experience of a prominent female executive in Aceh. Specifically, it addresses how a female political leader negotiates state regulations, social expectations, personal faith, and agency across four key dimensions: (1) how regional regulations enforce visible compliance; (2) how habituation transforms legal coercion into internalized subjectivity; (3) how the hijab serves as an embodied marker of agency that enables public mobility; and (4) how, from an executive perspective, inclusive practices alleviate minority apprehensions to accommodate pluralism. Employing an interpretive single-case qualitative design based on an in-depth biographical interview and Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Bartley & Brooks, 2023), this study argues that state-enforced frameworks do not inherently subjugate women. By connecting Indonesia's discourse on religious moderation with the lived reality of female executive leadership, this study offers a distinctive contribution, illustrating how religious commitment, moral autonomy, and inclusive public participation intersect to foster peaceful coexistence within a formal sharia governance framework.

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## 2. METHODS

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative single-case study design to examine how religious subjectivity, hijab, and women's mobility are constructed and negotiated within the socioreligious context of Aceh, Indonesia (Figure 1). A qualitative case study is appropriate for investigating complex social phenomena within their specific contextual settings (Rashid et al., 2019). The interpretive orientation emphasizes the meanings attributed to religious practice, bodily appearance, mobility, and public participation rather than treating them as predetermined or objectively measurable categories.

The case focuses on Illiza Sa'aduddin Djamal, a prominent female political leader whose experience intersects with Islamic religious practice, gender, political leadership, and public participation. She has served in local executive and national legislative positions, providing a relevant perspective on the relationship between religious regulations, public responsibilities, and women's mobility. The case was selected for its theoretical and empirical relevance rather than statistical representativeness. Its suitability is assessed through the concept of information power, which emphasizes the specificity of the research aim, participant relevance, theoretical framework, interview quality, and analytical strategy (Malterud et al., 2016). Accordingly, the study seeks analytical insight into the relationship between religious regulation, subjective commitment, and embodied agency rather than statistical generalization to women in Aceh.

### Informant Selection and Data Collection

The participant was purposively selected because of her direct experience at the intersection of female political leadership, Islamic religious practice, and public mobility in Aceh. Her political trajectory provides an information-rich case for exploring how religious expectations are negotiated in public life. The study therefore treats her account as situated experiential knowledge rather than as a representative account of all Acehnese women (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025).

Illiza Sa'aduddin Djamal represents a pioneering figure in the contemporary political landscape of Aceh, maintaining a consistent alignment with the United Development Party (PPP). Her political trajectory marks a historical milestone as she became the first woman to occupy an executive leadership position in the province of Aceh. Her political career commenced in the local legislature as a member of the Banda Aceh Regional Legislative Council (DPRK) from 2004 to 2006, prior to her election as the Vice Mayor of Banda Aceh for two consecutive terms (2007–2014). Following the demise of Mayor Mawardy Nurdin in 2014, she constitutionally assumed the office and was officially inaugurated as the Mayor of Banda Aceh for the 2014–2017 tenure. Her leadership subsequently expanded to the national arena upon her election as a member of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia (DPR-RI) for the 2019–2024 period representing the Aceh I constituency, where she actively advocated for education

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and women's political representation; it was during her tenure in this national legislative capacity that she was interviewed for this study in 2023. Reaffirming her local political legitimacy, Djamal later successfully contested the simultaneous regional elections and was officially inaugurated to resume office as the Mayor of Banda Aceh for the 2025–2030 term (Afriandi & Abdillah, 2023).

The primary empirical material consists of an in-depth semi-structured interview conducted in Hanifi Hotel, Banda Aceh, on 15 July 2023. The interview lasted approximately 52 minutes and addressed hijab, Islamic sharia, religious commitment, social expectations, women's mobility, political leadership, security, and public participation (Schuster et al., 2023). With the participant's permission, the interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcript was checked against the recording to correct omissions and preserve the meaning of the participant's statements. The original Indonesian transcript was translated into English by one of the researchers, and translated quotations were checked against the original transcript to retain culturally specific meanings. Relevant documentary materials, including Qanun regulations, media reports, and archived public speeches or official statements, were also examined to contextualize the interview within Aceh's regulatory and sociopolitical environment as an effort to triangulate data (Schlunegger et al., 2024). These materials were interpreted in relation to their purposes and contexts rather than treated as automatically confirming the participant's account. Member checking was also conducted for manuscript validation.

**Data Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Figure 1), following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). RTA was selected because it supports the interpretation of patterned meanings while recognizing the researchers' active role in knowledge production. The phases were treated as interconnected and recursive rather than as a rigid linear procedure.

First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading the transcript repeatedly and engaging with the participant's narrative. Second, initial codes were generated to identify relevant features of the account concerning religious regulation, personal commitment, bodily presentation, mobility, and public participation. Third, related codes were brought together to construct candidate themes. Fourth, these candidate themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the dataset to assess their coherence and relevance to the research questions. Fifth, the themes were refined, defined, and named to clarify their central organizing concepts and analytical distinctions. Sixth, the findings were developed into an analytical narrative connecting the themes with the study's conceptual framework.

The analysis developed four interconnected themes: (1) regulation and religious compliance, (2) internalization and religious subjectivity, (3) embodied agency and women's mobility, and (4) non-Muslim and foreign perceptions. These themes examine

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how religious practices are narrated in relation to external expectations, how religious commitments acquire personal meaning, and how hijab and religious practice intersect with political leadership, work, travel, security, and public participation. The themes are interpretive constructions developed through engagement with the data, not predetermined variables or generalizable findings. It should be explicitly noted that accounts regarding citizens' internalization of religious regulations reflect the interpretive perspective and situated narrative of the key informant as a policy implementer, rather than direct empirical data gathered from the general citizenry.

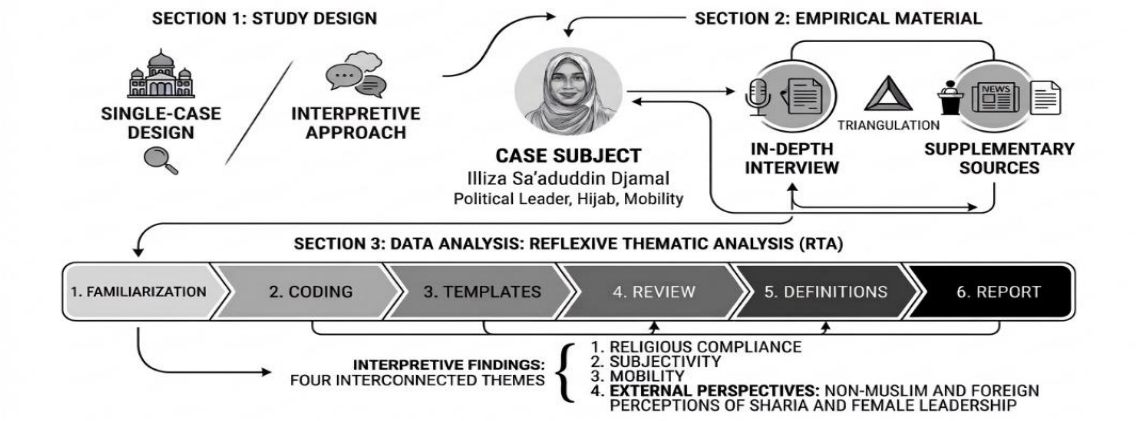



**Figure 1.** Methodological Framework of the Interpretive Case Study: Data Collection, Triangulation, and Reflexive Thematic Analysis. (Source: Authors' elaboration based on Braun & Clarke, 2021; Malterud et al., 2016)

## Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

In RTA, the researchers are active participants in the production of knowledge rather than a neutral observer. Interpretation is shaped by theoretical commitments, prior knowledge, social location, and assumptions concerning religion, gender, political authority, and women's mobility (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In this study, religious subjectivity and embodied agency provided sensitizing concepts for examining the relationship between external regulation and personal religious commitment. However, these concepts could also predispose the researchers to interpret the participant's account through a distinction between coercion and personal conviction.

Reflexivity was therefore important for considering whether the emerging interpretations adequately represented the complexity of the participant's narrative, including the possible intersections of personal faith, social expectations, institutional authority, and practical constraints. To ensure analytical rigor, the researchers maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process, documenting initial impressions, coding modifications, and decisions regarding theme development. Furthermore, peer debriefing was conducted with two qualitative researchers familiar with thematic analysis to challenge potential biases and refine the final thematic framework.

The researchers' positionality is explicitly acknowledged as an insider-outsider. Professionally trained in Islamic studies and gender sociology, the researcher possesses

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extensive academic familiarity with Aceh's socioreligious and political landscape but does not hold a political office in the region. Prior personal or professional relationships with the participant were absent, reducing potential interview bias, though social desirability naturally remains a factor when engaging with public figures. While this contextual familiarity facilitated a nuanced understanding of local nuances, the researcher consistently cross-referenced interpretations with raw interview excerpts to prevent unexamined assumptions. Given the participant's public prominence, her narrative was interpreted in relation to both personal experience and the responsibilities associated with political leadership, rather than as definitive evidence of the experiences of all women in Aceh.

### Ethical Considerations

This study adhered strictly to established qualitative research ethics. Prior to the interview, informed consent was obtained in writing from the participant. Given the participant's public prominence and the specific focus on her executive leadership, explicit permission was sought and granted to publish her administrative role, attribute direct quotations to her, and identify her within the manuscript.

Formal ethical approval from an institutional review board (IRB) was not administratively required under the institution's guidelines for single-case qualitative studies, as the investigation exclusively involved a public figure acting in her official administrative capacity. According to global research ethics frameworks, interviews with public officials regarding their professional roles fall under the "minimal risk" and exempt categories, since the data focus on public accountability rather than sensitive private vulnerabilities (Flick, 2023; Smith & Frey, 2016). Nevertheless, the study rigorously maintained the core ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence throughout the research process by obtaining explicit informed consent, conducting member checking for manuscript validation, and ensuring secure data encryption, thereby aligning with the universal standards outlined in the Belmont Report (National Commission, 1979; Wiles, 2012).

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative findings outlined in the thematic matrix systematically trace the evolutionary dynamic between formal state regulations and lived religious subjectivity in Aceh (Table 1), reflecting broader sociological frameworks on legal implementation and habituation (Alkaf et al., 2022). In its initial phase, state-enforced policies such as regional Qanun generated external behavioral constraints and localized social friction, as captured by the informant's observation regarding compliance under institutional duress. However, this institutionalized compulsion progressively underwent a psychological and spiritual transition, eventually transforming from superficial adherence into genuine inner conviction and sustained personal piety through continuous religious reinforcement.

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**Table 1.** Thematic Synthesis of the Informant's Perspectives on Sharia Implementation, Religious Internalization, and Public Agency in Banda Aceh (Source: Authors' elaboration based on data)

| Theme / Section | Core Analytical Focus | Informant Direct Quote (Translated) |
|---|---|---|
| 1. State Regulation & Initial Social Friction | The enforcement of Qanun and regional Islamic policies creating external behavioral constraints and initial public tension. | "When Aceh implemented Islamic sharia, whether willing or not, like it or not, everyone had an obligation... [and] when they leave Aceh, they take off their hijab." |
| 2. Internalized Religious Subjectivity | The gradual psychological and spiritual evolution from forced compliance to genuine inner conviction and personal piety. | "Over time, because it is continuously practiced and reinforced through religious teachings... it transforms into an inner awareness." |
| 3. Embodied Agency & Public Mobility | How female political leaders navigate public spaces, administrative duties, and executive authority without spatial restrictions. | "During my tenure as a leader, the implementation of Islamic sharia... [was] never a barrier to my mobility or my duties." |
| 4. Non-Muslim & Foreign Perceptions | Non-Muslim Perceived leniency and practical advantages of Islamic law. | "under Islamic law, at most I would be caned. I could still fulfil my obligations, retain my rights, and remain with my family, among other things." |

## State Regulation, Institutional Compliance, and Initial Social Friction

The implementation of Islamic sharia in Aceh operates not merely as a modern top-down legal-political apparatus, but within a deeply rooted sociocultural ecology where Islamic precepts and local custom (adat) historically converge. This fundamental synthesis is encapsulated in the classical Acehnese maxim: *"Adat bak Poteu Meureuhom, hukom bak Syiah Kuala, reusam bak Laksamana, adat ngon hukom lagee zat ngon sikeuet"* (Custom resides with the ruler, sharia law resides with the religious scholar, regulations reside with the admiral; custom and Islamic law are inseparable like matter and its attributes). In contemporary Aceh, formal regulatory frameworks—notably local legislative instruments known as Qanun—codify this long-standing cultural ethos into state law, governing various dimensions of public life, including public attire, bodily presentation, and social decorum (*sopan santun*) (Hariadi et al., 2025). Consequently, recent socio-legal scholarship emphasizes that state regulations in transitional societies often function as an external behavioral constraint, establishing a baseline of visible conformity where public comfort is tightly linked to institutional expectations (Franičević, 2019; Revkin et al., 2023).

Rather than treating the hijab solely as an administrative imposition, the regulation of Islamic dress in Aceh can be examined at the intersection of formal legal requirements, local understandings of modesty, and socioreligious identity. Aceh's regulatory framework, including Qanun No. 11/2002, provides an institutional context in which expectations concerning Muslim attire are articulated and implemented. Previous

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scholarship on the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh also highlights the importance of examining how regulatory arrangements interact with social expectations and individual responses (Aksa et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the meanings attached to hijab and modest dress should not be assumed to be uniform across Acehnese society. Compliance may reflect a combination of legal obligations, communal expectations, personal religious commitment, and individual negotiation (Zada et al., 2022). Accordingly, the extent to which social surveillance, reputational concerns, or feelings of shame shape women's experiences requires context-specific empirical evidence rather than being inferred from the existence of formal regulations alone.

This institutional and cultural reality is explicitly illustrated in the informant's experiential account regarding how the policy was operationalized during her leadership tenure. The participant noted the initial societal resistance and behavioral tension when the regional policy was first enforced:

> *"Ya. Ee kalau menyangkut tentang penggunaan hijab ee di sini yang pertama memang ee Aceh itu kan memang identik dengan Islam. Tapi bukan berarti masyarakat Aceh itu semuanya punya ee kesadaran untuk menggunakan hijab dengan baik dan benar sesuai syariat. Tapi kemudian ketika Aceh menerapkan syariat Islam, mau tidak mau, suka tidak suka, semua punya kewajiban karena ee apa namanya ee memang diatur di dalam aturan perundang-undangan yaitu kanun. Jadi masyarakat ee muslimah di Aceh harus berhijab."*
>
> "Yes. When it comes to the use of the hijab here, firstly, Aceh is indeed identical with Islam. However, this does not mean that all Acehnese people have the awareness to wear the hijab properly and correctly according to sharia. But when Aceh implemented Islamic sharia, whether willing or not, like it or not, everyone had an obligation because it is regulated within the statutory rules, namely the Qanun. Therefore, Muslim women in Aceh must wear hijab."

The narrative further highlights the superficiality of early compliance among certain groups, who conformed strictly due to the presence of local regulations rather than inner spiritual alignment or cultural internalization. The informant observed this phenomenon directly among younger demographics and visitors:

> *"Walaupun memang anak-anak muda kita ada juga yang masih berperilaku ini kan kita karena penelitian, saya harus ngomong, apa sih berperilaku ee berhijab disebabkan karena aturan bernegara, aturan syariat. Tapi keluar dari Aceh mereka membuka hijab. Nah, itu banyak saya temukan misalnya saya naik pesawat satu pesawat dia turun ya itu hijab pernah masuk masuk ke dalam tas..."*
>
> "There are still those whose behavior—and because this is a research, I must speak openly—whose behavior of wearing the hijab is caused by state regulations and sharia rules. Yet when they leave Aceh, they take off their hijab. I found this happening a lot; for example, when I took a flight, passengers would get off the plane, and the hijab had been packed away inside their bags."

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Furthermore, anthropological studies on regional legal implementation confirm that external mandates frequently produce surface-level compliance that fluctuates depending on spatial boundaries and social surveillance (Boossabong et al., 2025; Siddiki et al., 2018). When local leaders enforced these mandates strictly, non-compliant behaviors in public venues—such as cafes or public squares—were instantly met with reactive self-correction. The informant recounted a specific encounter post-tenure:

> *"Ketika saya tidak lagi menjabat sebagai pemimpin di kota... saya masuk ke dua kafe. Jadi, ada kumpulan anak muda yang duduk di sana, terutama perempuan. Mereka enggak berhijab awalnya. Tapi ketika lihat saya, mungkin kayak lihat apa ya agak takut, langsung di tasnya ambil hijab dan langsung menutup kepalanya."*
>
> "When I was no longer serving as the leader of the city, I entered two cafes. There was a group of young people sitting there, especially women. Initially, they were not wearing hijabs. But when they saw me, perhaps looking a bit startled or afraid, they immediately reached into their bags, took out their hijabs, and covered their heads."

Through these situated accounts, the findings demonstrate that initial compliance in Aceh is deeply intertwined with state-mandated legal frameworks and visible institutional monitoring. The enforcement of Qanun acts as a powerful external catalyst that compels immediate behavioral adaptation, creating an environment where public adherence is heavily mediated by the presence of regulatory authority before any deeper internal transformation takes place (Bastiar et al., 2025).

The empirical observation of young women rapidly retrieving and donning their hijabs upon recognizing a former civic leader in a local café underscores a form of compliance mediated primarily by public surveillance and political authority. Rather than reflecting a fully habituated religious interiority, this behavioral shift demonstrates a critical friction between institutional regulation and situational religious practice. Framed through Saba Mahmood's (2011) conceptualization of religious subjectivity, this dynamic offers a theoretical contribution by illustrating how external oversight produces a form of *conditional interiority*—where bodily compliance precedes or operates independently of deep ethical transformation (Mahmood, 2011). Other research suggests that Muslim dress obedience is tied to identity and environment, and is sometimes not caused by internal impulses (Salman Ahyani et al., 2026).

This dynamic directly intersects with issues of women's spatial mobility and religious governance in urban Aceh. Situated within the sociopolitical landscapes analyzed by Feener (2013), Kloos (2018), and the broader Indonesian discourse on religious moderation (Junaedi, 2019), public spaces function as moralized domains where female bodies are continually monitored by formal regulations, such as the Qanun, as well as informal social expectations. Consequently, the immediate act of covering one's head in the presence of an authority figure is not merely a manifestation of innate piety,

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but a tactical exercise of agency designed to navigate social reputation and maintain unhindered mobility within the public sphere (Feener, 2013; Junaedi, 2019; Kloos, 2018).

Ultimately, this analysis avoids generalizing a singular observational vignette into a universal claim about all Acehnese women. By synthesizing Mahmood's (2011) theoretical framework with contextual scholarship, this study contributes a nuanced conceptual distinction between superficial, surveillance-driven compliance and authentic internalisation. It demonstrates that under formal religious governance, the hijab operates as a highly fluid symbol—simultaneously functioning as an expression of personal devotion, a mechanism of political pragmatism, and a strategic mode of social adaptation.

## From External Compliance to Internalized Religious Subjectivity and Cultural Belonging

While initial adherence to Islamic dress codes in Aceh is heavily mediated by state regulation and institutional enforcement, empirical data reveal a profound psychological, spiritual, and cultural trajectory extending far beyond mere legal compliance (Fariza et al., 2024). In the Acehnese context, the practice of wearing the hijab cannot be reduced to administrative compliance; it represents a living cultural practice where bodily discipline aligns with customary ideals of female nobility (Inong Aceh), effectively intertwining personal piety with Keacehan (Silahuddin et al., 2026). Over time, routine habituation, ongoing religious outreach (dakwah), and continuous social interaction catalyze a transformative shift, turning outward obedience into deeply personal religious values and internalized faith (Qodir et al., 2022).

Individuals who initially adopted the hijab solely to satisfy regional ordinances or to avoid public scrutiny gradually experience an internal alignment where religious norms become an intrinsic component of their personal identity, cultural belonging, and emotional comfort (Glapka, 2018). Through continuous cultural and spiritual habituation, external legal structures function as an initial disciplinary scaffolding that eventually fosters genuine spiritual interiority, cultural pride, and a robust religious subjectivity (Mahmood, 2011).

This developmental trajectory from external constraint to inner conviction is explicitly reflected in the informant's reflections on how community members evolved over the years. The participant observed that what started as a forced administrative adaptation progressively matured into genuine spiritual and cultural awareness:

> *"Yang tadinya enggak punya kesadaran jadi kesadaran. yang awalnya kesadarannya karena enggak enak, enggak nyaman. Tapi dengan dia berhijab secara rutinitas akhirnya menjadi terbentuk kepribadian itu ada."*
>
> *"Jadi otomatis apa namanya? ada pengaruh besar yang tadinya mungkin niatnya ya sudah ini karena aturan aku pakai, tapi lama-kelamaan dia belajar dan akhirnya menjadi fashion... Besok dia itu berhijab karena Allah."*

**MIMBAR AGAMA DAN BUDAYA**
Vol. 43 No.2 – October 2026 (389-417)
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"Those who initially lacked awareness gradually developed it. What began as compliance out of feeling awkward or uncomfortable transformed through the routine of wearing the hijab, ultimately shaping their personality."

"So, automatically, there is a significant impact: what might have initially been a motive of simply obeying the rules eventually turned into a learning process, evolving into fashion... and ultimately, tomorrow, wearing the hijab for the sake of Allah."

The narrative further emphasizes that continuous religious education and grassroots dakwah played a pivotal role in bridging the gap between state law and personal piety (Skidmore & Lawrence, 2024). Rather than relying solely on the punitive oversight of monitoring bodies like Wilayatul Hisbah, the deepening of religious subjectivity was sustained through community-based religious engagement and traditional Acehnese educational spaces such as Meunasah and Dayah (Raya, 2021).

Traditional Islamic boarding schools (*dayah*) and clerics (*ulama*) serve as the bedrock of traditional moral authority, instilling ethical reasoning and scriptural literacy so that religious rules are understood as divine mandates rather than mere state decrees (Silahuddin et al., 2026). Furthermore, *majelis taklim* (religious learning assemblies) function as communal spaces and everyday pedagogical hubs for women to negotiate and reinforce their piety (Rosa et al., 2026). Through regular gatherings, shared religious reflection, and peer encouragement, these study groups bridge structural regulations and personal desires, transforming the obligation of wearing the hijab into an organic facet of sincere identity.

The interplay between institutional surveillance and cultural cultivation demonstrates that the surface compliance produced by formal regulations is ultimately refined through long-term habituation via religious education. This synergistic combination of public boundary enforcement by *Wilayatul Hisbah* (M. I. Muttaqin et al., 2025) and internal spiritual nurturing through *dayah* and *majelis taklim* fosters a religious ecosystem where state law and spiritual consciousness mutually reinforce the lived experiences of Acehnese women (Daniel et al., 2024). The informant highlighted how educational initiatives helped citizens reconcile legal mandates with personal spiritual growth:

*"Islam itu kan agama dakwah. Kita enggak bisa memaksakan seseorang, tapi yang bisa kita dakwahkan."*

*"Tadinya dia suka ikut dakwah, dengarin dakwah karena ustaz yang populer. Tapi ketika dia sudah dapat hidayah, dia udah suka ke halaqah itu."*

"Islam is a religion that calls people to faith. We cannot force someone, but we can invite them through dakwah."

"Initially, she enjoyed attending dakwah sessions and listening to religious talks because the preacher was popular. But when she experienced what she understood as divine guidance, she began to enjoy attending halaqah sessions."

**MIMBAR AGAMA DAN BUDAYA**
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Furthermore, recent anthropological literature on piety movements and local custom corroborates that state-mandated religious practices in Muslim-majority regions frequently trigger a reflexive turn toward spiritual self-cultivation (Maulana, 2025). As citizens navigate the daily realities of an Islamic legal framework, outward compliance stimulates deeper theological reflection, re-engagement with local adat traditions, and personal commitment (Joosub & Ebrahim, 2020). The informant summarized this internal shift within the broader populace:

> *"Enggak apa-apa hari ini dia salat karena syariah, karena aturan negara, karena qonun. Besok dia itu berhijab karena Allah."*
>
> "It is alright if today she prays because of sharia, because of state regulations, because of the Qanun. Tomorrow, she may wear the hijab for the sake of Allah."

Through these situated insights, the findings illustrate that state-enforced regulations do not necessarily result in superficial conformity. Instead, the institutional framework acts as a catalyst that initiates a broader process of habituation, cultural grounding (*Keacehan*), and spiritual reflection, culminating in a stable and internalized religious subjectivity among the populace.

**Embodied Agency, Leadership, and Women's Public Mobility**

The intersection of state-mandated religious governance and female political leadership challenges dominant orientalist paradigms that automatically equate Islamic legal frameworks with the absolute spatial restriction and oppression of women (F. Muttaqin, 2026). Empirical data from the informant's executive tenure in Banda Aceh demonstrate that the implementation of Qanun and the requirement to wear the hijab do not inhibit women from occupying top-tier political offices, exercising administrative authority, or navigating public spaces dynamically (Afriandi & Abdillah, 2023). Instead, the hijab functions as an embodied marker of confidence (Indarti & Peng, 2024), psychological protection, and empowered agency, enabling female leaders to command public respect while executing rigorous governance duties (Skidmore & Lawrence, 2024). Consequently, women's public mobility and professional leadership coexist robustly with strict religious regulations, reshaping how political agency is articulated in decentralized Muslim-majority contexts (Chakraborty, 2025).

This lived reality of unhindered public participation and leadership is explicitly articulated in the informant's account of managing her executive responsibilities across diverse hours and locations. The participant emphasized that local sharia ordinances never impeded her professional mobility or her capacity to govern effectively:

> *"Karena kalau di Aceh ini kan orang gini, syariat itu membatasi perempuan gitu ya. Padahal kan enggak, saya bisa jadi pemimpin sih, saya bisa begini, saya bisa begitu, saya bisa beraktivitas mau pagi, mau siang, mau malam."*
>
> "People in Aceh sometimes think that Islamic sharia restricts women. But that is not the case. I can be a leader, do various things, and carry out activities in the morning, afternoon, or evening."

**MIMBAR AGAMA DAN BUDAYA**
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The narrative further deconstructs external assumptions regarding nighttime safety and spatial freedom for women under Islamic governance (Wahab et al., 2025). Far from being confined to domestic spheres, the informant recounted experiencing high levels of personal security and public acceptance precisely because her attire and conduct aligned with local cultural and religious expectations (Alkaf et al., 2022). The participant noted:

> *"Karena karena mungkin mereka sudah merasa nyaman aja kali ya. enggak ada gangguan juga, enggak ada mungkin hal-hal yang buruk misalnya yang terjadi dan percaya gitu ya."*
>
> "Perhaps they feel comfortable; there are no disturbances, and they may not have experienced any adverse incidents, so they feel secure."

Despite the informant's assertion that Aceh remains secure for women at night under mandatory hijab regulations, this perspective contrasts with a controversial policy enacted during her prior mayoral tenure, which instituted a nighttime curfew restricting women from venturing out without a mahram (male relative) after 11:00 PM (Aljazeera, 2015). This directive sparked intense public debate, as critics argued that public mobility at night does not inherently correlate with immediate security risks. Consequently, the central government intervened, urging the Banda Aceh municipal administration to reconsider the curfew due to concerns that it unduly infringed upon citizens' freedom of movement and public participation (The Jakarta Post, 2015).

Furthermore, contemporary feminist anthropology highlights that agency must be understood through culturally situated practices rather than secular-liberal binaries of resistance (Subhani, 2025). Rather than viewing the hijab as an instrument of patriarchal subjugation, the findings reveal it as a vital tool of embodied confidence that facilitates active civic engagement and political authority (Safi'i et al., 2025). The informant reflected on this synthesis of religious commitment and political empowerment:

> *"Kalau kita melakukan semuanya sudah karena Allah, sudah enggak peduli lagi orang mau pikir apa pikir tapi ternyata banyak yang mengapresiate malah."*
>
> "When we do everything for the sake of Allah, we no longer worry about what other people may think; in fact, many people appreciate it."

Through these situated insights, the findings suggest that women's political leadership under Aceh's religious governance transcends simplistic narratives of oppression (Munira et al., 2018). The dynamic interplay between embodied religious practice and public mobility illustrates that female leaders actively harness the cultural legitimacy of the hijab to anchor their authority, successfully expanding the boundaries of women's public participation in contemporary governance (Skidmore & Lawrence, 2024).

## External Perspectives: Non-Muslim and Foreign Perceptions of Sharia and Female Leadership

Foreign perceptions of Aceh's sharia implementation and female leadership often suffer from deep-seated misconceptions, fueled primarily by external media narratives

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that portray the region through a lens of fear and excessive rigidity. Throughout the transcript, the informant highlights how international observers, diplomats, and visitors frequently approach Aceh with significant apprehension, expecting a hostile or oppressive environment. External media outlets heavily promote negative news—such as corporal punishment or strict behavioral codes—which creates a distorted global stigma that non-Muslims and outsiders will face constant danger and a lack of basic freedoms (Nurrahmi, 2022). The issue of freedom of dress is also a hot issue that spreads on social media not only abroad, but also in Indonesia. This is certainly contrary to the social and political conditions in Aceh (Naya Adisti Prameswari Putrie et al., 2026).

Despite these exaggerated global anxieties, actual on-the-ground experiences of foreign and non-Muslim visitors reveal a starkly contrasting reality marked by harmony, safety, and religious tolerance. The Informant recounts multiple instances where individuals from outside Aceh—including university researchers, international business delegations from America, and tourists—arrived with heavy reservations only to find a welcoming society. Visitors quickly realize that daily life in Banda Aceh accommodates diverse communities smoothly, noting that non-Muslims coexist peacefully alongside the majority Muslim population within a stable civic structure.

A compelling dimension of this cross-cultural dialogue involves non-Muslim business actors and residents navigating local regulations, who occasionally find the practical application of regional rules to be surprisingly pragmatic and lenient compared to national laws. The Informant specifically details how non-Muslim business owners involved in alcohol-related violations, who initially faced detention, actively requested to be judged under Islamic law (Qanun Aceh Nomor 6 Tahun 2014 Tentang Hukum Jinayat, 2014) rather than the national criminal code (KUHP) (Undang-Undang Nomor 1 Tahun 1946 Tentang Peraturan Hukum Pidana, 1946) once procedural options became available. As expressed in the transcript regarding their reasoning:

> *"Nah, ketika ada hukum acara nonmuslim apabila melakukan pelanggaran boleh memilih. Dia memilih hukum Islam. Ternyata ketika hukum acara ada hampir rata-rata semua nonmuslim, rasanya semuanya memilih hukum Islam. Alasannya lebih ringan.*
>
> *[...] 'Nah, kemudian kalau saya pakai KUHP saya ditahan berapa tahun, Bu? Tapi kalau pakai hukum islam paling saya dicambuk tapi kan kewajiban saya tetap dijalankan, hak saya juga bisa dapatkan. Saya bisa dengan keluarga segala macam."*
>
> "When procedural law was introduced, non-Muslims who committed an offense were allowed to choose. They chose Islamic law. It turned out that once the procedural rules were in place, almost all non-Muslims seemed to choose Islamic law. The reason was that they considered it less severe.
>
> 'Then they asked, "If I were prosecuted under the Indonesian Criminal Code (KUHP), how many years would I be imprisoned, Ma'am? But under Islamic law,

**MIMBAR AGAMA DAN BUDAYA**
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at most I would be caned. I could still fulfil my obligations, retain my rights, and remain with my family, among other things."

Leveraging her authority to articulate the pragmatic and non-violent realities of local religious governance, her leadership successfully reshaped external perceptions, as demonstrated by representatives from the US Embassy and international chambers of commerce, who ultimately transitioned from fear to active engagement after direct briefings with the female leader. The convergence of Islamic governance and female political authority further dismantles Western and foreign prejudice regarding the supposed incompatibility of women's leadership under sharia. Critics often argue that mandatory hijab laws or religious rules inherently stifle female mobility, athletic success, or professional progression. However, the informant demonstrates her own powerful trajectory as a female mayor navigating high-stakes politics, alongside international examples of female athletes and professionals achieving global success while maintaining Islamic dress codes. Her governance proves that local frameworks did not restrict her executive capabilities, but rather coexisted with a thriving public life where women operate freely across morning, day, and deep into the night.

Perhaps the most potent validation of this model comes from high-ranking religious imam from Saudi Arabia, Syekh Adel Al-Kalbani whose perspectives bridge traditional Islamic expectations with Acehnese administrative realities. During a visit to Aceh, this Imam of the Grand Mosque (Masjid al-Haram) engaged deeply with the Informant's leadership, listening to her policy addresses and observing her executive execution firsthand (Pemerintah Aceh, 2015). Overcoming conventional regional hesitations regarding female authority, according to the informant, the Imam was so profoundly moved that he published an article in one of Saudi Arabia's most prominent media outlets—later translated and featured in Serambi Indonesia—capturing his profound astonishment with the declaration: "I met with a woman in Aceh... a female leader... when can Saudi Arabia be like this...". as the informant said:

> *"Terus saya ngobrol-ngobrol terus dia dengerin ee pidato saya menterjemahkan akhirnya dia menulis tulisan di di media Arab Saudi paling terkenal yang diterjemahkan oleh Yusuf masuk serambi Indonesia. Dia tulis di Sabang pulang dari sini dia mengatakan saya bertemu dengan seorang perempuan gini gini gini pemimpin perempuan kapan Arab Saudi bisa seperti ini."*
>
> "Then we talked for a while, and he listened to my speech. Someone translated it for him. Eventually, he wrote an article in one of Saudi Arabia's most well-known media outlets, which was translated by Yusuf Mansur and published in Serambi Indonesia. He wrote that, after visiting Sabang, he had met a woman—a female leader—and wondered, 'When will Saudi Arabia be able to be like this?'"

In the interview, the informant recalled an encounter with a Saudi Arabian visitor who reportedly expressed admiration for women's political leadership in Aceh. Although we were unable to independently verify the media article associated with this encounter,

**MIMBAR AGAMA DAN BUDAYA**
Vol. 43 No. 2 – October 2026 (389-417)
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the recollection illustrates how the informant understood her leadership to be recognized beyond the local context. This statement from a senior Middle Eastern religious figure, known by the informant, illustrates an evolving perspective on gender roles in Islamic governance. Traditionally, patriarchal norms across several conservative Muslim-majority nations have systematically marginalized women from executive political spheres, often under the guise of religious compliance. By explicitly questioning when Saudi Arabia could replicate such dynamic leadership, the Saudi cleric acknowledges that effective, assertive female governance is not mutually exclusive with Islamic values. Instead, Bu Illiza's tenure as a female mayor in a strict sharia-implementing region serves as a powerful empirical counter-example, illustrating how structural adherence to faith can coexist with progressive and empowered female political leadership on the international stage.

*Discussion*

The first theme, *State Regulation and Initial Social Friction*, reveals the tension between the formal enforcement of religious norms and the ways in which people respond to them in everyday life. The informant's observation that people were obliged to comply with Islamic sharia in Aceh, while some women removed their hijab after leaving the region, points to a distinction between outward compliance and personal religious commitment. This distinction can be examined through Mahmood's (2011) critique of liberal assumptions that understand agency primarily as resistance to authority. For Mahmood, religious discipline does not necessarily negate agency; rather, it can become part of the process through which individuals cultivate particular moral dispositions. Yet the present data also caution against assuming that compliance necessarily reflects personal conviction. The reported removal of the hijab outside Aceh may indicate that religious practices are shaped by changing social settings, institutional expectations, and personal interpretations of religious obligation. Abu-Lughod (2002) similarly warns against reducing Muslim women's practices to a simple opposition between liberation and oppression, since women's choices emerge from specific historical, social, and political circumstances. Read through the lens of religious moderation, this theme raises a question that goes beyond whether a regulation is religiously justified: how is religious authority exercised, and to what extent does its implementation leave room for understanding, dialogue, and respect for individual circumstances? The data do not establish the motivations of the women described by the informant, but they reveal a meaningful tension between the public enforcement of religious norms and the personal processes through which those norms may be accepted, negotiated, or set aside.

The second theme, *Internalized Religious Subjectivity*, develops this tension by presenting the informant's understanding that repeated religious practice and instruction can gradually produce inner awareness. This account resonates with Mahmood's (2011) argument that piety is not simply an inner belief expressed through external behaviour; it may also be cultivated through bodily practices, repeated actions, and participation in a

Vol. 43 No.2 – October 2026 (389-417)
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DOI: https://doi.org/10.15408/mimbar.v43i2.54041

moral tradition. From this perspective, the relationship between practice and conviction is not necessarily linear: religious discipline may shape ethical dispositions over time, while personal understanding may also influence how practices are performed. The informant's explanation therefore offers a valuable account of how she understands the formation of religious subjectivity in Aceh. However, the distinction between externally required observance and internally cultivated piety must remain analytically open. The interview establishes that the informant perceives repeated practice as a means of developing religious awareness, but it does not independently demonstrate that those subject to the regulation undergo the same spiritual transformation. Some may internalize the practice, others may comply for social or institutional reasons, and still others may interpret it differently. This is where the Indonesian understanding of *moderasi beragama* becomes particularly relevant. Religious moderation does not require a choice between strong religious commitment and respect for difference; rather, it calls for the practice of religion to be accompanied by fairness, responsibility, and respect for the dignity of others. The analytical contribution of this theme is therefore not to claim that regulation necessarily produces piety, but to show how religious subjectivity is understood to develop through the interaction of practice, moral learning, and social context. This interpretation preserves the significance of religious formation without treating the inner beliefs of a diverse population as uniform or directly observable.

The third theme, *Embodied Agency and Public Mobility*, shifts attention from the regulation of religious conduct to the possibilities for women to exercise authority and participate in public life. The informant's statement that the implementation of sharia did not prevent her from carrying out her duties as a political leader offers a situated example of female agency within an Islamic governance context. Mahmood's (2011) framework is useful here because it allows agency to be examined without assuming that women's empowerment must take the form of rejecting religious norms. A woman may exercise agency through religious commitments, political participation, professional responsibility, and the ability to act within institutions shaped by religious values. At the same time, Abu-Lughod's (2002) critique of generalized representations of Muslim women cautions against treating the informant either as proof that sharia is inherently empowering or as an exception whose experience can be dismissed because of her political status. Her testimony establishes that she did not experience sharia implementation as a barrier to her own mobility and executive responsibilities; it does not establish that all women in Aceh enjoy the same opportunities or encounter no restrictions. This distinction is essential to a substantive analysis of religious moderation. Women's participation in public life is not demonstrated solely by the presence of a female leader, but also by the wider conditions that enable women with different social and economic backgrounds to access education, employment, public space, and political participation. The case thus challenges the assumption that religious identity and female political authority are necessarily incompatible, while leaving open the question of how

**MIMBAR AGAMA DAN BUDAYA**
Vol. 43 No. 2 – October 2026 (389-417)
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far this compatibility extends beyond the informant's own experience. Religious moderation, viewed in this light, involves creating space for religious commitments and women's public participation to coexist without making one dependent on the exclusion of the other.

The fourth theme, *Non-Muslim and Foreign Perceptions*, brings the discussion of religious moderation to the question of how Islamic governance is experienced by people who do not necessarily share its religious foundations. The informant's account of non-Muslim defendants who reportedly preferred the *Qanun Jinayat* because they anticipated a less disruptive punishment suggests that the relationship between religious law and minority communities cannot be understood through a simple opposition between acceptance and rejection. Halim's (2022) study of non-Muslim defendants in Aceh similarly found that the choice of the *Qanun Jinayat* could be shaped by practical considerations, efficiency, and sociocultural circumstances rather than by adherence to Islamic religious values. This finding provides an important empirical context for interpreting the present interview, although it does not independently verify the specific cases recounted by the informant. Analytically, the distinction between choosing a legal procedure and endorsing its religious basis is crucial: a pragmatic decision may demonstrate individual agency, but it does not by itself establish that the legal arrangement is fair, that all available choices are equally accessible, or that minority rights are adequately protected.

In the Indonesian context, religious moderation must therefore be assessed not only through the apparent willingness of non-Muslims to engage with Islamic institutions, but also through the fairness of legal procedures, respect for religious difference, and protection of equal citizenship. The informant's account of foreign visitors who reportedly revised their initial impressions of Aceh after direct engagement with local leaders further suggests that dialogue may help challenge assumptions formed at a distance. Nevertheless, neither these encounters nor the reported legal choices should be taken as proof that all minority residents experience Aceh in the same way. Taken together, the four themes suggest that religious moderation is best understood not as the absence of tension between religious authority, personal agency, and social diversity, but as an ongoing effort to negotiate these relationships fairly. The case's contribution lies in showing how religious discipline, the cultivation of piety, women's political participation, and minority engagement are interpreted within one local context, while recognizing that the extent to which these practices protect dignity and accommodate difference must ultimately be assessed through the experiences of the wider community.

This study establishes a significant empirical and theoretical contribution by examining the intricate intersection of female political leadership, religious subjectivity, and state-mandated sharia governance through an interpretive single-case framework situated in Banda Aceh. While prior academic literature predominantly evaluates regional decentralization and Islamic legal codes through macro-level legal analyzes, structural

Vol. 43 No.2 – October 2026 (389-417)
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DOI: https://doi.org/10.15408/mimbar.v43i2.54041

policy evaluations, or broad sociological surveys (Anwar et al., 2025; F. Muttaqin, 2026; Zada, 2023), this research offers a complementary perspective by providing granular, executive-level insights directly articulated by a former female political leader. By capturing the lived realities of governing under regional legislative instruments such as the Qanun, the findings move decisively beyond conventional orientalist binaries that position state Islamization as universally oppressive to women and detrimental to democratic participation (Glapka, 2018).

Instead, the data illuminates a complex, everyday socio-legal phenomenon in Indonesia where executive authority, legal compliance, and religious devotion dynamically reinforce one another (Smith-Hefner, 2025). This offers a fresh theoretical angle on how decentralized religious governance operates in contemporary Southeast Asia, demonstrating that female executives can successfully harness the cultural legitimacy of local religious frameworks to anchor their authority rather than being marginalized by them (Qodir et al., 2022). Furthermore, this research introduces an innovative analytical perspective on how executive-level decision-making navigates the friction between formal state regulations and individual autonomy, mapping out a sophisticated model of local governance that bridges traditional values with modern bureaucratic demands and pluralistic public administration.

By integrating verbatim empirical material with advanced academic analysis, this research bridges a critical gap in the existing literature concerning the psychological, spatial, and spiritual transition from external legal coercion to internalized religious subjectivity (Latifa & Aprison, 2023). Existing scholarship has frequently overlooked the nuanced, longitudinal mechanisms through which state-enforced ordinances stimulate grassroots spiritual self-cultivation, community dialogue, and public confidence among female officials and citizens alike (Anderson et al., 2024; Qodir et al., 2022). Much of the prior work on Aceh has focused heavily on the punitive aspects of morality policing or the structural rigidity of the Sharia Courts, leaving a major void regarding how leaders cultivate internal conviction and public trust from an executive vantage point (Anwar et al., 2025; Miswar & Camral, 2025).

Furthermore, current academic discourse rarely juxtaposes the firsthand administrative hurdles of female executives with the shifting perceptions of non-Muslim minorities and international visitors within a strictly sharia-regulated jurisdiction. Through the lived experiences of a female executive, this study contributes to the literature by illustrating how regional Islamic frameworks may be perceived to accommodate pluralism, administrative pragmatism, and female public mobility when mediated by inclusive leadership and a commitment to minority protection. Consequently, the findings expand contemporary feminist anthropology and legal sociology by providing illustration that religious laws can be interpreted and enforced in ways that foster social cohesion rather than alienation, offering a vital counternarrative to rigid secular-liberal critiques of Islamic governance (Lawler & Mir, 2021).

**MIMBAR AGAMA DAN BUDAYA**
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DOI: https://doi.org/10.15408/mimbar.v43i2.54041

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated the intricate relationship between state-mandated sharia governance, religious subjectivity, and female political leadership in Banda Aceh through an interpretive single-case qualitative framework. The empirical analysis yielded four primary findings. First, state regulations and municipal ordinances such as the Qanun function as powerful external catalysts that immediately shape public conformity and behavioral compliance among Muslim women, though initial adherence is frequently superficial and context-dependent. Second, through continuous habituation, grassroots religious outreach, and daily practice, this external legal pressure gradually transforms into internalized religious subjectivity and genuine spiritual conviction. Third, the empirical evidence demonstrates that wearing the hijab and adhering to local religious frameworks do not restrict women's public mobility or hinder executive authority; rather, they serve as embodied markers of confidence and social protection that enable female leaders to navigate governance duties. Finally, interactions with non-Muslim residents and international visitors reveal that inclusive administrative practices and transparent dialogue successfully mitigate external apprehensions, suggesting that regional Islamic governance may accommodate aspects of pluralism and that women's participation in public life may be possible within this context, although experiences and constraints may vary.

This study contributes to religious and cultural studies by illustrating how female political leadership, religious subjectivity, and state-regulated sharia intersect in the context of Aceh. The findings suggest that women's political agency can be negotiated through religious norms and practices, challenging interpretations that treat Islamic governance as uniformly oppressive or inherently empowering. From a policy perspective, the case highlights the potential value of persuasive *dakwah*, inclusive community dialogue, and meaningful female participation in promoting religious moderation. Regional policymakers and community leaders should encourage religious engagement that respects personal dignity, recognizes social and religious diversity, and safeguards minority rights. Such approaches may help foster social trust and broader participation in public life, although their effectiveness requires further investigation across different communities and regional contexts.

This study's reliance on a single-case design and retrospective interview with one former female political leader limits the transferability of its findings, highlighting the need for future research incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives and broader ethnographic fieldwork across different administrative contexts. Building upon the conceptual groundwork established here, subsequent research should pursue comparative cross-regional investigations across multiple decentralized jurisdictions implementing localized religious laws, both within Indonesia and across international Muslim-majority contexts. Longitudinal qualitative studies tracking the evolving perspectives of younger generations, minority communities, and foreign stakeholders over extended electoral

Vol. 43 No.2 – October 2026 (389-417)
P-ISSN: 0854-5138 (Print) | E-ISSN: 2715-7059 (Online)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15408/mimbar.v43i2.54041

cycles will also provide deeper clarity on the long-term sustainability and social acceptance of pluralistic governance under formal religious frameworks. Such scholarship will further enrich academic and policy dialogues surrounding gender, legal pluralism, and public leadership in contemporary societies.

## DECLARATIONS

**Author Contributions:** The first author conceptualized the study, developed the methodology, conducted the investigation, curated the data, performed the formal analysis, prepared the original draft, reviewed and edited the manuscript, created the visualizations, managed project administration, and secured funding. The second, fifth, and sixth authors contributed to the investigation. The third and fourth authors provided supervision for the study.

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**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Generative Artificial Intelligence Use Statement:** During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors utilized ChatGPT and Gemini to assist with language editing, stylistic refinement, and structural synthesis of text. After employing these tools, the author(s) thoroughly reviewed, edited, and validated the content as necessary and take(s) full responsibility for the integrity, accuracy, and overall content of the publication.

**Ethics Approval and Informed Consent:** Formal institutional ethical approval was not required for this study, as it involved a public official interviewed in her professional and public capacity regarding public policy, regional governance, and socio-religious dynamics. Nevertheless, the research strictly adhered to standard qualitative ethical guidelines. Prior to data collection, informed consent was formally secured from the participant. The informant was fully briefed on the study's scope, academic objectives, and publication context, and granted explicit permission, transcript verification (*member checking*), and the non-anonymous attribution of her statements under her public identity.

**Data Availability:** The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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