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Women's Leadership in Education: Driving Local and Global Cultural Revolution

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Article Information	Abstract
Received: 5 February 2025	<i>This study aims to analyse women's leadership in education as a form of cultural revolution both locally and globally. The formulation of the problem in this study is compiled using the PCC formula (Population, Concept, Context), where P (Population) refers to women leaders in education; C (Concept) is women's leadership as the main variable; and C (Context) is the social and educational conditions in the local environment (Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia) and globally (world educational activism). The approach used is the Systematic Literature Review (SLR), with a systematic search strategy through academic databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. Search results are reported using PRISMA diagrams. Nyai Hj. Masriyah Amva, the head of the Kebon Jambu Islamic Boarding School in Cirebon, West Java, as a concrete example of a local figure who promotes gender equality in the Islamic education system. At the global level, the figure studied is Malala Yousafzai, an activist from Pakistan and founder of the Malala Fund, who actively fights for women's education rights through policy advocacy and cooperation with international institutions. The results of the study show that women's leadership is able to increase inclusivity, fight for gender justice, and accelerate social transformation. Local leadership like Bu Nyai stands out in adapting cultural and religious values, while global leadership like Malala focuses on policy-based structural change. Integration between local and global approaches is believed to be a sustainable strategy to create a more equal and transformative education system.</i>
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Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kepemimpinan perempuan dalam bidang pendidikan sebagai bentuk revolusi budaya baik secara lokal maupun global. Rumusan masalah

dalam penelitian ini disusun menggunakan formula PCC (*Population; Concept; Context*), di mana *P (Population)* merujuk pada perempuan pemimpin dalam bidang pendidikan; *C (Concept)* adalah kepemimpinan perempuan sebagai variabel utama; dan *C (Context)* adalah kondisi sosial dan pendidikan di lingkungan lokal (pesantren di Indonesia) dan global (aktivisme pendidikan dunia). Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah *Systematic Literature Review (SLR)*, dengan strategi pencarian sistematis melalui database akademik seperti Scopus, Google Scholar, dan Web of Science. Hasil pencarian dilaporkan menggunakan diagram PRISMA. *Bu Nyai* Hj. Masriyah Amva, pimpinan Pondok Pesantren Kebon Jambu di Cirebon, Jawa Barat, sebagai contoh kongkret tokoh lokal yang mendorong kesetaraan gender dalam sistem pendidikan Islam. Pada tingkat global, tokoh yang dikaji adalah Malala Yousafzai, aktivis asal Pakistan dan pendiri *Malala Fund*, yang secara aktif memperjuangkan hak pendidikan perempuan melalui advokasi kebijakan dan kerja sama dengan lembaga internasional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan perempuan mampu meningkatkan inklusivitas, memperjuangkan keadilan gender, dan mempercepat transformasi sosial. Kepemimpinan lokal seperti *Bu Nyai* menonjol dalam penyesuaian nilai-nilai budaya dan keagamaan, sedangkan kepemimpinan global seperti Malala berfokus pada perubahan struktural berbasis kebijakan. Integrasi antara pendekatan lokal dan global diyakini menjadi strategi berkelanjutan untuk menciptakan sistem pendidikan yang lebih setara dan transformatif.

I. INTRODUCTION

Women's leadership in the field of education has become an increasingly relevant issue in various academic discourses and global policy discussions. Along with the growing awareness of the importance of gender equality, the role of women as leaders in various sectors, particularly education, has undergone significant transformation (Rika Widianita, 2023). Historically, the education sector has often been dominated by male leaders, especially in higher structural positions such as university rectors, school principals, or policymakers in ministries of education. However, social changes and more inclusive policies have opened up greater opportunities for women to take on strategic roles in educational management. This phenomenon reflects a cultural revolution that not only has a local impact but also carries global implications (Smith & Sinkford, 2022).

In the broader context of social change, women's leadership in education not only reflects gender equality but also brings new perspectives to the education

system itself. Women's leadership style is often associated with a more collaborative, empathetic, and community-oriented approach. This makes them agents of change capable of driving innovation in education, both on a local and global scale. However, many challenges remain, particularly in patriarchal cultures that are still deeply rooted in various regions. Therefore, a more in-depth study is needed on the role of women's leadership in education as part of a cultural revolution, both in local and global contexts.

Although there has been an increase in women's representation in educational leadership, various structural and cultural barriers still hinder women from fully assuming these roles. In many countries, including Indonesia, stereotypes persist that portray women as more suited for domestic roles rather than strategic positions in the education sector (Babaii, 2022). As a result, despite the significant number of women involved in education, only a small fraction manage to reach the highest leadership positions. Furthermore, women who have attained leadership roles often face numerous challenges, such as resistance from male colleagues, a lack of affirmative policy support, and strong societal pressure.

This phenomenon is not only occurring in Indonesia but also in various other countries, both in the Western world and in developing nations. In many developed countries, even though gender equality policies have been implemented, women still have to work harder than men to gain the same recognition (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022). This indicates that the cultural revolution in women's leadership in education is not merely a local movement but part of a broader structural transformation on a global scale. Therefore, further research is needed to explore how women's leadership can contribute to improving education systems worldwide and how these challenges can be addressed (Korotayev & Zinkina, 2022).

According to UNESCO data in 2022, approximately 70% of the world's teaching workforce were women, yet only 30% of them managed to attain leadership positions in educational institutions. In Indonesia, data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology indicates that although the number of female teachers is higher than that of male teachers, the proportion of women serving as school principals or university rectors remains significantly lower than

that of men (Liao & Luo, 2021). This highlights that while women play a substantial role in education quantitatively, they still face structural disparities in accessing leadership positions.

In the local context, one prominent example of women's leadership in education that reflects a cultural revolution is the role of *Bu Nyai* in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) (Maunah et al., 2024). *Bu Nyai* is not only the companion of the *Kyai* (Islamic scholar) but also plays a strategic role in education and the moral development of *santri* (students). *Bu Nyai* is a title given to women who are either the wives of *Kyai* (Islamic scholars) or female religious leaders who teach and lead within the Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) environment. She is not merely the companion of the *Kyai* but holds a strategic role in educating, guiding the moral development of students (*santri*), and managing education based on Islamic values. *Bu Nyai* often acts as a driving force in transforming *pesantren* education to become more inclusive, particularly in promoting gender equality. Although her role is highly significant, structurally she has not yet fully replaced the *Kyai* as the primary leader of the *pesantren*. Nevertheless, in practice, *Bu Nyai* can exercise leadership functions that are equal in educational, spiritual, and social domains, especially within the community of female students. In many cases, *Bu Nyai* serves as a driving force in transforming Islamic-based education, particularly in mainstreaming gender equality within the *pesantren* environment. Through her leadership, *Bu Nyai* exerts a strong influence in shaping an inclusive educational culture that emphasises holistic learning (Dewi & Wajdi, 2022).

One of the verses in the Qur'an that supports the importance of women's leadership in education is Surah Al-Mujadilah (58:11):

لَا تَجِدُ أُولَىٰ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ مِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ ۖ وَأَزْوَاجُهُ أُمَّهَاتُهُمْ

"O you who have believed! When you are told, "Make room in gatherings," then make room; Allah will make room for you. And when you are told, "Arise," then arise; Allah will raise those who have believed among you and those who were given knowledge by degrees. And Allah is All-Aware of what you do." (QS. Al-Mujadilah: 11)

The verse in Surah Al-Mujadilah (58:11) does not directly address women's leadership. However, it emphasises the virtue of knowledge and the elevation of the ranks of those who believe and possess knowledge, without specifying gender. Therefore, within the framework of inclusive interpretation and the spirit of gender equality in Islamic education, this verse can be understood as a recognition of all knowledgeable individuals—both men and women—as worthy of attaining honourable positions, including in education and leadership potential. In relation to women's leadership, it can be explained that when women are given equal opportunities to acquire knowledge, they are, by extension, equally deserving and entitled to hold strategic positions, including in the field of education. This aligns with the contextual interpretation approach (*tafsir kontekstual*), which adapts the meaning of the verse to current social developments.

At the global level, one of the most influential female figures in education is Malala Yousafzai. As an advocate for girls' education, Malala has become a symbol of the fight for women's rights to equal access to education (Ullah, 2023). Through her various initiatives, she has raised global awareness of the importance of education for girls, particularly in developing countries that still face social and economic barriers to providing educational opportunities for women. Whether in the local context with figures like *Bu Nyai* or on a global scale with leaders like Malala, women's leadership in education has demonstrated immense potential to drive a more progressive and inclusive cultural transformation.

This study aims to analyse the role of women's leadership in education as a form of cultural revolution on both local and global scales. Specifically, it seeks to identify the challenges faced by women in educational leadership, explore the strategies used to overcome these barriers and evaluate the impact of women's leadership in improving access, quality, and inclusivity in education. Thus, this research is expected to provide deeper insights into the significance of women's leadership in creating a more equitable and sustainable education system.

II. METHOD

The research method used in this study is a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). This type of research was chosen as it allows for an in-depth analysis of various studies that have been conducted on women's leadership in education, both locally and globally (J. W. Creswell & Creswell, 2018). SLR is used to identify patterns, challenges, and contributions of women's leadership in education based on credible academic sources. In this context, the research "location" refers to the scope of literature reviewed, including scientific journals, reports from international organisations such as UNESCO, and publications from ministries of education in different countries (J. Creswell, 2017).

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach with a focus on qualitative research. To formulate the review questions, the PCC (Population, Concept, Context) framework is used: *Population* refers to female leaders in the field of education; *Concept* is women's leadership; and *Context* refers to the social and institutional context of education, both locally and globally. This formula ensures a specific and relevant focus for the review. The literature search strategy was conducted systematically in several stages. The researcher established the inclusion criteria, which include: articles published between 2012 and 2024, articles that explicitly discuss women's leadership in education, those available in English or Indonesian, and sourced from accredited journals or official institutional reports. The exclusion criteria include articles not focused on women's leadership, opinions or editorial pieces without peer review, and documents not available in full-text.

Searches were conducted through academic databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and Web of Science, using combinations of keywords such as: "*women's leadership in education*," "*female educational leaders*," "*gender equality in schools*," "*Bu Nyai in pesantren*," "*Malala and girls' education advocacy*." Boolean operators such as AND, OR, and NOT were used to narrow the search results. Literature identification (screening) was carried out through two processes: (1) selecting titles and abstracts based on relevance to the research focus and (2) full-text screening to assess the eligibility of the articles for analysis. The search results

were documented and reported using the PRISMA flow diagram (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses).

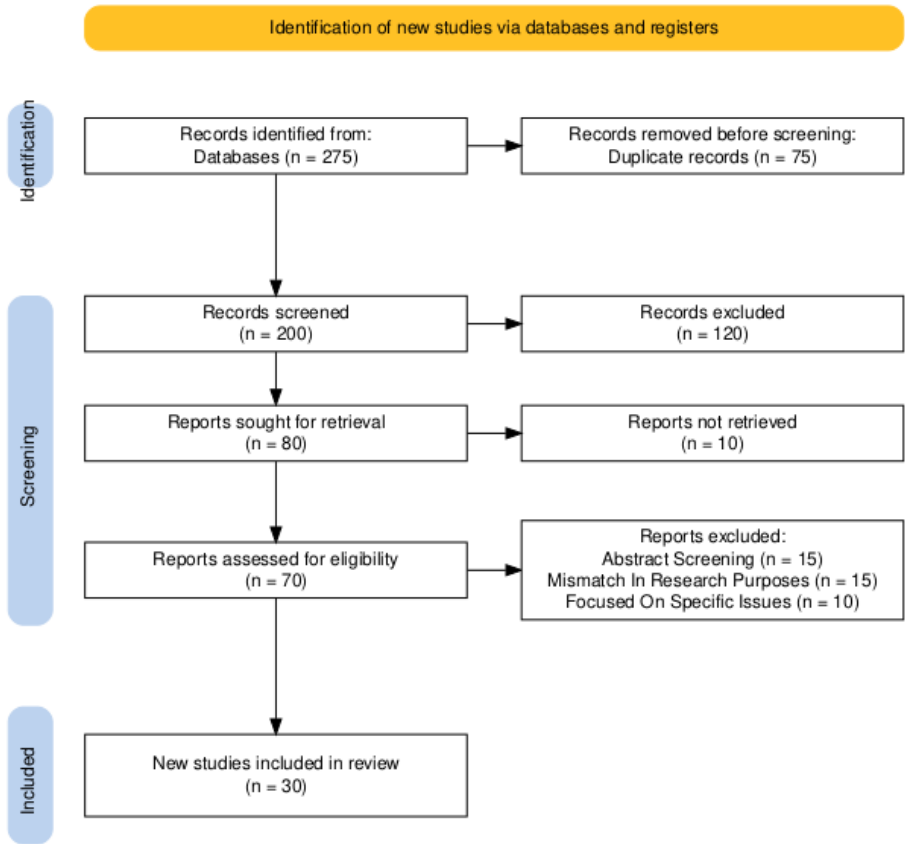


Figure 1. PRISMA Table
Source: PRISMA Database (2025)

Data extraction involved recording key information from each article, such as research context, methodology, key findings, and relevance to the study's focus. Critical appraisal was conducted to evaluate the methodological quality of the sources used, considering validity, source balance, and their contribution to the discourse on women's leadership. Thematic synthesis of the findings was carried out, where extracted data were grouped into key themes such as: strategies of women's leadership, structural and cultural barriers, and the impact of leadership on educational transformation. This synthesis was used to draw in-depth and comprehensive conclusions about the contributions of women's leadership in education across both local and global contexts.

Data analysis in this study is conducted using the thematic analysis method, where collected data is categorised into key themes such as structural challenges, leadership strategies, and the impact of women's leadership in education. Data

validation is ensured through source triangulation, comparing findings across multiple literature sources to ensure consistency and validity. With this approach, the study aims to provide deeper insights into women's leadership in education as part of a cultural revolution, both in local and global contexts.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Women's Leadership in Local Culture The Role of *Bu Nyai* in Islamic Boarding Schools

The selection of *Bu Nyai* in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) as a representation of women's leadership in local culture is based on the unique and strategic roles women play within traditional Islamic education. *Bu Nyai* is not merely the companion of the *Kyai*, but also serves as an educator, moral guide, *pesantren* administrator, and respected spiritual figure. Within the patriarchal culture of *pesantren*, the presence of *Bu Nyai* illustrates that women possess strong and influential leadership capacities, particularly in shaping the character and educational vision of female students. *Bu Nyai*'s leadership is rooted in strong local, religious, and cultural values, while also promoting renewal and gender equality in education. This makes *Bu Nyai* a concrete example of how women's leadership can flourish within cultural and religious frameworks without necessarily adopting Western leadership models.

Unlike national female figures such as R.A. Kartini, known as a pioneer of women's emancipation through education and her modernist writings, or Megawati Soekarnoputri, who led through formal political channels as Indonesia's president, *Bu Nyai* leads from a grassroots and informal socio-religious-space-. Her leadership does not rely on state structural positions but emerges from social recognition, religious knowledge, and community dedication. Thus, *Bu Nyai* represents a unique, community-based model of women's leadership embedded within *pesantren* tradition. This study seeks to demonstrate that, although local and traditional in nature, the role of *Bu Nyai* holds significant transformative value in advancing women's roles in education and social change, standing alongside nationally recognised female figures in Indonesia's historical narrative.

Women's leadership in education has become an increasingly significant topic, particularly within religious and cultural contexts. In Indonesia, Islamic boarding schools, known as *pesantren*, have long been recognised as centres of Islamic learning where both male and female students receive religious and moral education (Arifi & Fathurrohman, 2023). Traditionally, leadership in *pesantren* has been dominated by men, with the *Kyai* (male Islamic scholars) holding the highest decision-making authority. However, *Bu Nyai*—female religious leaders, often the wives of *Kyai* or independent scholars—have played a critical and often underappreciated role in shaping the educational, spiritual, and social dimensions of *pesantren* life.

Although historically viewed as supportive figures, the position of *Bu Nyai* has evolved beyond that limited perception. *Bu Nyai* are educators, mentors, role models, and change agents who significantly empower female students (*santri*). Their leadership not only challenges gender norms but also reflects women's capacity to engage in Islamic scholarly discourse and institutional leadership. In some *pesantren*, especially in the absence of a *Kyai* or in contexts where *Bu Nyai* possess strong religious authority, they assume full decision-making roles, including institutional management and educational leadership (Dewi & Wajdi, 2022; Nugroho, 2024). This indicates that *Bu Nyai* can hold leadership responsibilities equivalent to *Kyai*, particularly when their legitimacy is grounded in religious scholarship and community recognition.

This study focuses on *Nyai Hj. Masriyah Amva*, leader of Pondok Pesantren Kebon Jambu in Cirebon, as a case study to illustrate transformative and independent female leadership in Islamic education. Scientifically, this case is chosen due to its richness in demonstrating grassroots, community-based leadership within a religious institution—making it a critical example of how local, culturally embedded female leadership operates outside state-defined political structures. *Bu Nyai* Masriyah's leadership is not only recognised nationally but also contributes to progressive Islamic thought, gender equality, and inclusive educational practices (Adnani & Mahbub, 2021; Maunah et al., 2024). Her case is highly relevant to the study's objectives, which aim to explore how women's

leadership in local Islamic contexts contributes to broader cultural transformation in education.

One of *Bu Nyai's* primary roles in *pesantren* is that of educator. They are responsible for teaching Islamic subjects such as *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *tafsir* (Qur'anic interpretation), *akhlaq* (morality), and *hadith* (Prophetic traditions). Many *Bu Nyai* are well-versed in classical Islamic texts and contemporary issues, allowing them to bridge traditional Islamic education with modern societal needs. A key aspect of their leadership is their ability to mentor and inspire female students. In many *pesantren*, female *santri* rely on *Bu Nyai* not just for academic instruction but also for guidance in navigating their personal and spiritual lives. *Bu Nyai* provides a nurturing environment where female students can learn, grow, and aspire to become religious scholars themselves (Nugroho, 2024).

Beyond academic teaching, *Bu Nyai* plays a crucial role in instilling moral values in their students. In the *pesantren* system, education is not just about knowledge but also about character-building. *Bu Nyai* emphasises humility, modesty, discipline, and devotion to religious practice. Their influence extends beyond the classroom, as they often act as spiritual advisors to their students and the surrounding community. Many women seek their guidance on religious matters, marriage, family life, and personal struggles. This makes *Bu Nyai* not only educators but also social leaders who shape the ethical and spiritual fabric of their communities (Ningrum, 2022).

One of the most significant aspects of *Bu Nyai's* leadership is its role in advocating for women's empowerment within the Islamic education system. Historically, conservative interpretations of Islam have restricted women's roles in leadership and education. However, *Bu Nyai* challenges these norms by demonstrating that women can be both devout and influential leaders. By leading female *pesantren* and actively engaging in religious discourse, *Bu Nyai* provide a counter-narrative to patriarchal traditions. They show that women can be scholars, educators, and leaders within Islamic institutions while remaining faithful to Islamic principles.



Figure 1. Photo of Bu Nyai Hj. Masriyah Amva

Source: <https://shorturl.at/L5mwj>

One of the most prominent *Bu Nyai* in Indonesia is Hj. Masriyah Amva, the leader of Pondok Pesantren Kebon Jambu, Cirebon. She is widely recognised for her progressive approach to Islamic education and gender equality (Adnani & Mahbub, 2021). *Bu Nyai* Hj. Masriyah Amva is known for her efforts to promote gender inclusivity within Islamic education. Unlike traditional *pesantren* who maintain strict gender roles, she has worked to ensure that women have equal access to religious knowledge and leadership opportunities. Under her leadership, *Pesantren Kebon Jambu* has become a place where women can develop their intellectual and leadership skills.

She has also been vocal about women's rights within an Islamic framework. Her teachings emphasise that Islam values both men and women as equal before God, and that religious knowledge should not be limited by gender. Through her advocacy, she has encouraged many female *santri* to pursue higher education and become religious scholars, breaking long-standing societal barriers.

Bu Nyai Masriyah is also active in religious discussions and policy-making related to Islamic education and gender. She frequently speaks at national and international forums, advocating for greater recognition of women's roles in religious institutions. Her leadership has inspired many other female scholars and educators, demonstrating that women can take on religious leadership roles without compromising their faith. She is a strong believer that Islamic education should be

progressive and adapt to the needs of modern society while staying true to its core values.

Beyond her work in education, *Bu Nyai* Masriyah Amva is actively involved in social empowerment programs. She has initiated projects aimed at helping women in rural communities gain access to education and economic opportunities. Her initiatives include: providing scholarships for underprivileged female students, conducting leadership training programs for women in Islamic communities, and advocating against child marriage and promoting women's rights in family law (Mualimin et al., 2022).

Through these efforts, she has expanded the influence of *Bu Nyai* beyond *pesantren*, making an impact on society at large. Despite their significant contributions, *Bu Nyai* continues to face multiple challenges, including: *First*, limited Formal Recognition: Many *Bu Nyai* do not hold official leadership titles, as *pesantren* structures are traditionally male-dominated. *Second*, cultural Resistance: In conservative communities, women's leadership in religious education is still met with scepticism. *Third*, Access to Resources: Compared to their male counterparts, *Bu Nyai* has fewer opportunities for networking, funding, and scholarly collaboration.

Despite these barriers, leaders like *Bu Nyai* Hj. Masriyah Amva continues to pave the way for future generations of female scholars and religious educators. The role of *Bu Nyai* in *pesantren* represents a unique and powerful form of women's leadership within the context of Islamic education. While often operating behind the scenes, *Bu Nyai* has proven to be an influential educator, moral guide, and advocate for gender equality. Their leadership challenges traditional gender norms, showing that women can be both devout Muslims and strong leaders in education.

Despite these barriers, leaders like *Bu Nyai* Hj. Masriyah Amva continues to pave the way for future generations of female scholars and religious educators. The role of *Bu Nyai* in *pesantren* represents a unique and powerful form of women's leadership within the context of Islamic education. While often operating behind the scenes, *Bu Nyai* has proven to be an influential educator, moral guide, and advocate for gender equality. Their leadership challenges traditional gender norms, showing that women can be both devout Muslims and strong leaders in education. To

overcome structural and cultural challenges, *Bu Nyai* Masriyah Amva offers several key solutions, including expanding access to Islamic education for women, actively participating in public religious discourse, and integrating gender equality perspectives into *pesantren* curricula. She also emphasises the importance of building female leadership networks within *pesantren* communities. These efforts are supported by previous studies such as Nugroho (2024), who highlights the impact of spiritual mentoring in shaping female santri's leadership identity, and Maunah et al. (2024), who suggest that transformational leadership by *Bu Nyai* can enhance institutional credibility and gender inclusivity. Together, these approaches provide concrete pathways to address the gender imbalance in Islamic educational leadership.

The case of *Bu Nyai* Hj. Masriyah Amva highlights how *Bu Nyai* can drive transformative change within the *pesantren* system. Through her work, she has demonstrated that Islamic education can be both inclusive and empowering for women. As societal attitudes towards gender roles continue to evolve, *Bu Nyai's* contributions will become increasingly recognised. By fostering a more inclusive and progressive approach to Islamic education, they are not only shaping the future of their students but also influencing the broader cultural and religious landscape of Indonesia.

Women's Leadership in Education at the Global Level: Malala Yousafzai Case Study

Women's leadership in education has become an increasingly significant topic globally, particularly concerning gender equality and human rights. For centuries, women in various parts of the world have faced discrimination in accessing education due to cultural norms, government policies, and social or political conflicts. However, amidst these challenges, many women have emerged as leaders in the fight for education. One of the most prominent figures in this movement is Malala Yousafzai (Bunkar et al., 2024).

Malala Yousafzai is a Pakistani education activist who has become a global symbol of the struggle for girls' rights to education. She gained worldwide recognition after surviving an assassination attempt by the Taliban in 2012 due to

her outspoken advocacy for girls' education in Pakistan. Since then, Malala has not only continued her fight but has also inspired millions worldwide through her leadership and advocacy for equal educational opportunities.



Figure 2. Photo of Malala Yousafzai

Source: <https://www.greyandivy.ca/famous-people-back-end/malala-yousafzai>

Malala Yousafzai was born on July 12, 1997, in Mingora, a small town in the Swat Valley of Pakistan. Her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, was an educator and activist who ran his own school. From an early age, Malala was exposed to the importance of education and gender equality through her father's teachings. However, in Swat Valley, the situation for girls' education was deteriorating. By 2007, the Taliban had taken control of the region and imposed strict rules, including banning girls from attending school. They destroyed schools and issued threats to educators who continued to support female students (Gheli, 2020).

At just 11 years old Malala began writing an anonymous blog for BBC Urdu under the pseudonym *Gul Makai*. In her blog, she described her fear of losing access to education and her determination to continue learning despite the Taliban's threats. Her writings drew international attention, making her the voice of many girls experiencing similar oppression. On October 9, 2012, Malala was shot in the head by a Taliban gunman while riding a school bus home (Sri et al., 2024). The attack shocked the world and led to widespread condemnation of the Taliban's actions.

Despite suffering a severe injury Malala survived after undergoing emergency surgery in Pakistan and later receiving treatment in the United Kingdom. Rather than being silenced, she became even more determined to fight for girls' education, using her platform to bring international attention to the issue. As a young leader in global education advocacy.

One of Malala Yousafzai's greatest strengths lies in her remarkable ability to utilise media as a strategic tool for advocacy. Following the attack she experienced in 2012, Malala became the focus of international attention and skillfully transformed this global spotlight into a platform to amplify her message on girls' education and women's rights (Unterhalter, 2024). In 2013, she published her autobiography *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, which offered a profound account of her personal experiences and the systemic barriers faced by girls seeking education in Pakistan. That same year, she delivered a powerful and widely acclaimed speech at the United Nations, reinforcing her stance on the universal right to education. Alongside Malala and her father, also established the Malala Fund, an organisation aimed at supporting girls' education globally. The fund not only provides scholarships and financial assistance to underprivileged girls but also works in collaboration with governments and international institutions to advocate for more inclusive and equitable education policies. Additionally, the Malala Fund empowers grassroots activists within local communities who campaign for educational access, creating a ripple effect of advocacy that reaches far beyond national borders.

Malala has played a key role in shaping global education policies by engaging with world leaders. She has met with figures such as former U.S. President Barack Obama, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and UN Secretary-General António Guterres to discuss education reform. One of her most significant achievements was when the UN declared July 12 as "Malala Day," a day dedicated to raising awareness about girls' right to education.

Malala Yousafzai's leadership has significantly contributed to increasing global awareness of the crisis in girls' education. Her bold advocacy brought urgent attention to the barriers faced by girls in accessing education, particularly in conflict-

affected and conservative regions such as Pakistan and Afghanistan. Before Malala's activism, discussions on educational inequality were often limited to statistical reports and policy documents. Her personal story humanised the issue and mobilised public empathy across nations (Unterhalter, 2024). In relation to this research, Malala's approach demonstrates how female leadership can challenge systemic injustice through moral authority, public engagement, and global collaboration. This aligns with the leadership of local figures such as *Bu Nyai* in Indonesian *pesantren*, who similarly amplify the importance of girls' education within traditional settings. While Malala works at the global stage, *Bu Nyai* influences the grassroots level—yet both demonstrate that transformative change begins with women's courage to speak out and lead reform.

Through the Malala Fund, her advocacy has also facilitated tangible change in expanding access to education for girls in developing countries. Thousands of girls in Pakistan, Nigeria, Syria, and Afghanistan have returned to school as a result of direct intervention and policy engagement supported by her organisation. These efforts parallel findings from Nugroho (2024), who highlights the role of spiritual mentoring by *Bu Nyai* in re-integrating female students who were previously marginalised due to gender norms into Islamic education. While Malala's influence operates through institutional partnerships and international forums, *Bu Nyai's* leadership operates through religious legitimacy and daily interaction with female santri. Both approaches demonstrate that contextual leadership—whether local or global—can break systemic barriers to education when led by women grounded in community values and equipped with vision.

In addition, Malala's leadership has inspired a new generation of young female activists to champion education and human rights. Her example reinforces the idea that age and background do not limit the capacity for leadership, especially in education. This resonates with Indonesian efforts to foster female leadership from an early age through *pesantren* education led by *Bu Nyai*. Dewi & Wajdi (2022) emphasise that *Bu Nyai* serve not only as educators but also as role models who inspire female student (*santri perempuan*) to pursue higher education and community leadership roles. Just as Malala's visibility has created momentum

globally, the visibility of *Bu Nyai* within local communities has long-term implications for cultivating future women leaders in Islamic education. Therefore, this study positions Malala Yousafzai and *Bu Nyai* as complementary figures—one global, one local—whose leadership models exemplify the transformative impact of women in redefining educational structures across cultural and geographic contexts.

Despite Malala's efforts, several major challenges still hinder global access to education for girls: *First*, Conflict and Political Instability. In war-torn countries such as Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan, armed conflicts continue to prevent children—especially girls—from attending school (Priatna, 2025). *Second*, Cultural Norms That Restrict Girls' Education. In some societies, traditional beliefs still limit women's roles, suggesting that education is unnecessary for them. This cultural barrier remains a significant challenge in many parts of the world (Ercantan, 2025). *Third*, Lack of Educational Infrastructure. Many developing countries lack schools, trained teachers, and basic resources to support quality education. Without proper facilities, even when girls are allowed to attend school, they often receive a lower standard of education (Ullah, 2023).

Malala Yousafzai has proven that women's leadership in education can change the world. Through her courage and determination, she has inspired millions to support girls' education and fight for gender equality. Her impact extends beyond Pakistan, reaching communities worldwide where girls previously had no access to education. Thanks to her work, more young women now have opportunities to learn and shape their futures.

Although significant challenges remain in achieving fully inclusive education, Malala's leadership demonstrates that one voice can ignite global change. By continuing to advocate for policies and programs that promote girls' education, we can build a future where every child—regardless of gender—has the right to learn and succeed.

Comparison of Women's Leadership in Education Local and Global Perspectives

Women's leadership in education manifests in various forms across different cultural contexts, reflecting both local traditions and global movements. In local

educational settings, such as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia, female leaders like *Bu Nyai* play a crucial role in guiding students academically, spiritually, and socially. Their leadership is deeply rooted in religious and cultural traditions, where they serve not only as educators but also as moral and community leaders (Arwani & Hannase, 2024). *Bu Nyai*'s leadership often emphasises personal mentorship, character development, and religious education, ensuring that female students receive knowledge while adhering to local values. However, their influence remains somewhat confined within their communities, as they operate within a predominantly patriarchal system that still limits their formal recognition as top decision-makers in educational institutions (Faizah et al., 2024).

On a global scale, figures such as Malala Yousafzai represent a different approach to women's leadership in education. Unlike *Bu Nyai*, whose leadership is deeply embedded in religious institutions, Malala's advocacy is secular, policy-driven, and international in scope (Massouti et al., 2024). She has used platforms such as the United Nations, global media, and nonprofit organisations to advocate for girls' education worldwide, influencing policies and mobilising resources to support educational initiatives in developing countries. Malala's leadership highlights the importance of activism, political engagement, and media outreach, which contrasts with the more community-based leadership style of *Bu Nyai* (Alshdiefat et al., 2024). While *Bu Nyai* work within traditional educational structures, Malala challenges them, pushing for systemic change in educational access and gender equality at a global policy level.

Despite their differences, both forms of leadership share common objectives: empowering women through education and advocating for gender equality. Both *Bu Nyai* and Malala seek to ensure that girls have the opportunity to receive an education, challenge societal norms, and play active roles in their communities. However, the challenges they face differ significantly (Hilal et al., 2024). Local female leaders like *Bu Nyai* must navigate deeply ingrained cultural and religious expectations, which may restrict their authority despite their strong influence in shaping educational environments. In contrast, global leaders like Malala must contend with political resistance, funding constraints, and opposition from

conservative factions on an international scale, as they attempt to reform global education policies (Watterston & Ehrich, 2024).

Ultimately the integration of both local and global leadership models can create a more effective strategy for improving women's education (Reyes-García, 2024). While *Bu Nya*'s approach ensures that educational advancements respect local traditions and community values, Malala's activism fosters broader institutional change that can influence governments, international organisations, and global funding efforts. By bridging the gap between grassroots leadership and global advocacy, a more holistic and sustainable educational movement for women can emerge, ensuring that leadership in education is both culturally relevant and universally transformative (Stajkovic & Stajkovic, 2024).

IV. CONCLUSION

The role of women's leadership in education as a form of cultural revolution, both locally and globally, presents significant advantages in fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments. Leaders such as *Bu Nyai* in Islamic boarding schools demonstrate how culturally rooted educational leadership can empower women within traditional frameworks, while figures like Malala Yousafzai illustrate how global advocacy can drive systemic change in policy and access to education. However, limitations persist, including cultural and structural barriers that continue to restrict women's authority in educational institutions, as well as political and economic challenges that hinder the widespread implementation of gender-equitable education policies. Despite these challenges, the integration of localised leadership models with global advocacy strategies offers a promising pathway for sustainable educational transformation. Future efforts should focus on bridging the gap between grassroots leadership and international policy-making to ensure that women's leadership in education not only challenges existing limitations but also serves as a blueprint for broader social and cultural revolutions in learning systems worldwide.

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