



## **Deconstruction and transformation of gender stereotypes through the role of clerics in the practice of propagation in Aceh: A socio-religious study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Ulama in Aceh face significant challenges in integrating gender perspectives into their da'wah practices. The dominance of patriarchal culture and limited gender literacy often leads to the reinforcement rather than the deconstruction of gender stereotypes. This study employs a socio-religious approach to examine how ulama, as central figures in society, simultaneously sustain and contest social constructions that restrict gender roles—using qualitative methods including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of da'wah documents. The study finds that da'wah narratives frequently reproduce socially and religiously legitimized gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, some ulama have initiated efforts to challenge these norms by offering more inclusive and gender-just interpretations, aligning with the spirit of rahmatan lil 'alamin. The findings suggest ulama's role extends beyond preserving traditional values to acting as agents of change who can facilitate social transformation through gender-responsive da'wah. Achieving such a transformation requires synergy between ulama, communities, and progressive socio-religious policies to balance religious principles with social justice. This study underscores the importance of continuous dialogue and collaboration among ulama, educational institutions, and women's rights advocates to promote inclusivity within religious contexts. By integrating gender-sensitive approaches into religious discourse and curricula, sustainable progress toward equality can be fostered. Ultimately, the research emphasises that ulama's engagement in these efforts is vital for building a more inclusive, equitable society in Aceh and potentially beyond.*

**Keywords:** Deconstruction; Gender Stereotypes; Preaching of Ulama; Socio-Cultural; Aceh.

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## ABSTRAK

*Ulama di Aceh menghadapi tantangan signifikan dalam mengintegrasikan perspektif gender ke dalam praktik dakwah mereka. Dominasi budaya patriarki dan keterbatasan literasi gender seringkali justru memperkuat, alih-alih mendekonstruksi, stereotip gender. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan sosio-religius untuk mengkaji bagaimana ulama, sebagai tokoh sentral dalam masyarakat, secara simultan mempertahankan dan menentang konstruksi sosial yang membatasi peran gender. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif yang mencakup wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipan, dan analisis dokumen dakwah, studi ini menemukan bahwa narasi dakwah seringkali mereproduksi stereotip gender yang dilegitimasi secara sosial dan agama. Meskipun demikian, beberapa ulama telah memulai upaya untuk menantang norma-norma ini dengan menawarkan interpretasi yang lebih inklusif dan berkeadilan gender, yang sejalan dengan semangat rahmatan lil 'alamin. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa peran ulama melampaui pelestarian nilai-nilai tradisional, melainkan bertindak sebagai agen perubahan yang dapat memfasilitasi transformasi sosial melalui dakwah yang responsif gender. Mencapai transformasi tersebut membutuhkan sinergi antara ulama, masyarakat, dan kebijakan sosio-religius yang progresif untuk menyeimbangkan prinsip-prinsip agama dengan keadilan sosial. Studi ini menggarisbawahi pentingnya dialog dan kolaborasi berkelanjutan antara ulama, lembaga pendidikan, dan pembela hak-hak perempuan untuk mendorong inklusivitas dalam konteks keagamaan. Dengan mengintegrasikan pendekatan yang peka gender ke dalam wacana dan kurikulum keagamaan, kemajuan berkelanjutan menuju kesetaraan dapat didorong. Pada akhirnya, penelitian ini menekankan bahwa keterlibatan ulama dalam upaya ini sangat penting untuk membangun masyarakat yang lebih inklusif dan berkeadilan di Aceh dan bahkan di masa mendatang.*

**Kata Kunci:** Dekonstruksi; Stereotip Gender; Dakwah Ulama; Sosial Budaya; Aceh.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The process of transforming gender stereotypes within the preaching of *ulama* in Aceh has yet to become mainstream. Preaching practices often perpetuate gender-biased social constructions, which largely stem from the dominance of patriarchal culture and a limited critical awareness of gender justice issues. In the specific context of Aceh, where Islamic law is implemented, this tendency reinforces traditional perceptions of men's and women's roles rather than offering a more inclusive and responsive approach to addressing social dynamics through preaching. In Acehnese society, where Islamic law is formally enforced, *da'wah* holds a strategic role in shaping social awareness and religious values. However, in practice, *da'wah* tends to preserve a patriarchal mindset that reinforces gender stereotypes, such as restricting women's roles in public spaces and upholding male dominance in religious leadership. This pattern is problematic because *da'wah* should serve as a medium for social transformation that promotes justice, including gender justice (Fikriansyah, Rahmi, & Syamsuddin, 2022).

The persistence of gender stereotypes in *da'wah* remains a serious challenge, particularly in regions such as Aceh that implement Islamic law, where the role of religious

scholars as conveyors of values significantly shapes societal perspectives on gender relations. In many cases, *da'wah* continues to justify biased role divisions and reinforce inequality, highlighting the urgent need to critically assess both the methods of *da'wah* and the extent to which they uphold principles of justice and equality. This study seeks to demonstrate how *ulama* can contribute to deconstructing and transforming gender stereotypes within Aceh's *da'wah* practices. It also emphasises their critical role in fostering a more just and inclusive understanding of gender issues. By employing a socio-religious approach, the research aspires to formulate a model of *da'wah* that is responsive to gender justice yet firmly rooted in Islamic principles, thereby reinforcing the transformative potential of *da'wah* as a medium for promoting equality and social justice.

The study of gender stereotypes within the practice of *da'wah* in Aceh holds significant relevance in illuminating the intricate relationship between religion, culture, and social inequality. To date, the role of *ulama* has often been viewed solely as the custodians of normative values, without a critical examination of their influence in either reinforcing or challenging unjust gender constructions. From a theoretical standpoint, this research contributes to broadening Islamic discourse in support of social justice by encouraging a re-examination of *da'wah* practices through the lenses of gender studies and the sociology of religion. Scholars, preachers, and religious institutions regard this study as essential for fostering more inclusive and transformative methods of preaching. By foregrounding preaching practices that are responsive to gender issues, this study advocates for a renewal of spiritual discourse and creates space for social change grounded in the values of Islam—*rahmatan lil 'alamin*.

This work is crucial for fostering a more just, equal, and humane society. Previous studies have highlighted that gender stereotypes remain a significant issue in the practice of *da'wah* across many Muslim communities, including Aceh. For instance, Hasan (2018) found that *da'wah* in Aceh often emphasizes the traditional role of women as domestic supporters, thereby perpetuating gender inequality. Rahman (2020) underscores the frequent reliance on conservative interpretations of religion to maintain patriarchal dominance within both social and religious spheres. Additionally, research by Sari and Lubis (2019) indicates that a lack of gender literacy in religious education is a primary factor hindering transformative approaches to preaching.

Previous research by Nurhadi (2021) highlights the critical role of *ulama* as agents of change in deconstructing gender stereotypes. However, such practices remain infrequent in broader contexts, suggesting that despite the potential for transformation, *da'wah* in Aceh continues to encounter significant structural and cultural constraints (Nurhadi, 2021). To address this gap, the present study examines the role of *ulama* in deconstructing and transforming gender stereotypes through *da'wah* in Aceh by employing a socio-religious approach that integrates perspectives from the sociology of religion and gender studies. This approach enables a deeper understanding of how social constructions and religious values intersect in shaping *da'wah* discourse and practices, while simultaneously highlighting the normative dimensions of religion and the broader socio-cultural dynamics that influence the interpretation and implementation of *da'wah* messages.

Studying gender stereotype deconstruction in Islamic contexts often draws on poststructuralist and feminist theories. Key among these is the concept of "deconstruction" as articulated by Jacques Derrida and adapted by Islamic thinkers like Mohammed Arkoun, who

argues that deconstruction in Islamic thought must be followed by reconstruction—rethinking religious concepts to adapt to contemporary realities while maintaining critical reasoning (ijtihad). Islamic feminism also provides a framework, emphasising egalitarian interpretations of the Qur'an and challenging patriarchal readings of religious texts by situating them in their historical and social contexts. By incorporating poststructuralist and feminist theories, Islamic thinkers like Mohammed Arkoun have paved the way for a critical examination of religious concepts within contemporary society.

This approach challenges patriarchal interpretations and advocates for a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding of Islamic teachings. Its goal is to empower Muslim women and advance gender equality within Islamic societies. By critically engaging with traditional interpretations, Islamic feminism seeks to establish a more just and inclusive religious framework for all believers. These perspectives provide a critical lens through which to analyze and contest traditional power structures in Islamic societies. Through the reinterpretation of religious texts using feminist and poststructuralist frameworks, scholars strive to promote gender equality and social justice within the Muslim community.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of gender justice from an Islamic perspective has become a significant theme in contemporary discourse, both in academic studies and socio-religious practices. As a religion of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, Islam upholds the principles of justice (*'adl*) and equality (*musawah*), which are embedded in all dimensions of life, including gender relations. Nevertheless, historical practices and interpretative traditions have often reflected biases rooted in patriarchal social contexts, resulting in unequal understandings of the roles of men and women. Theologically, however, the Qur'an affirms the equality of both genders by emphasising that men and women are created from the same essence and share equal spiritual status before Allah. *Surah Al-Hujurat* (49:13) highlights that the only actual distinction among humans lies in their piety, not gender. At the same time, *Surah An-Nahl* (16:97) asserts that any person, male or female, who performs righteous deeds will be rewarded accordingly.

Contemporary Muslim feminist scholars, such as Wadud (2002), advocate for a contextual hermeneutic rereading of the Qur'an that challenges the historically dominant patriarchal interpretations in Islamic scholarship. In *Qur'an and Woman*, Wadud emphasizes that gender inequality is not inherent to Islam itself but results from exegetical traditions shaped by patriarchal structures. At the same time, Barlas (2000), in *Believing Women in Islam*, argues that the Qur'an is inherently egalitarian but has been misinterpreted due to androcentric biases perpetuated by religious authorities (Webb & Wadud, 2000). Within this framework, gender justice in Islam is not about homogenising roles between men and women but ensuring that rights and responsibilities are distributed fairly according to individual capacities, grounded in justice rather than domination. Supporting this perspective, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im emphasizes the necessity of continually contextualizing Islamic teachings to address contemporary challenges without compromising their core values. He highlights that gender justice is not merely a women's issue but a broader project of social and moral transformation within Muslim societies (Mahdavi, 2013).

Gender justice in Islam does not mean standardizing roles between men and women but rather ensuring a fair distribution of rights and responsibilities according to their respective

capacities, within a framework of justice rather than domination. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im stresses that Islamic teachings must be continually contextualized to address contemporary challenges without compromising their core values. Furthermore, Mahdavi (2013) emphasizes that gender justice is not solely a women's agenda but an integral part of the broader social and moral transformation within Muslim societies. In the historical and cultural context of Aceh, this discourse intersects with the authority of the *ulama*, who hold a central role not only in religious affairs but also in the social, political, and educational spheres of the community.

In the Acehnese historical and cultural context, this discourse intersects with the authority of *ulama*, who occupy a central role not only in religious matters but also in the community's social, political, and educational spheres. As heirs of the Prophet (*waratsatul anbiya*), guardians of Islamic values, and moral agents of society, Acehnese *Ulama* derive their authority from multiple dimensions, including scholarly legitimacy, moral exemplarity, personal charisma, and their institutional roles within Islamic educational establishments such as *dayah* and *meunasah*.

According to Martin van Bruinessen (1995), the authority of traditional *ulama* in Indonesia, including Aceh, is grounded in scientific networks and religious genealogy, with the *dayah* system serving as the foundation for the emergence of *ulama* who function as both teachers and community leaders. The *dayah* is not merely an educational institution but also serves as a center for transmitting values, social interpretation, and moral regulation, shaping a hierarchical and respectful relationship between the community and its *ulama* (Bruinessen, 1995). Complementing this, Azra (2004) highlights that the *ulama* network across the Indonesian archipelago, including Aceh, has historically maintained transnational ties with major Islamic centres in the Middle East. This connection reinforces their legitimacy by situating them within a broader chain of global Islamic knowledge. In this regard, Acehnese *ulama* are positioned not only as local religious figures but also as representatives of wider Islamic authority, with influence extending beyond regional boundaries.

In the modern context, Abdul Halim (2014) identifies a shift in the authority of Acehnese *ulama* from a predominantly charismatic-traditional orientation to a more institutional-bureaucratic one. This transformation coincided with their integration into formal state structures and official *da'wah* institutions such as the *ulama* Consultative Assembly (MPU) and the Islamic Sharia Service (Halim, 2014). Despite this institutionalisation, *dayah ulama* continue to play a vital role, as they are perceived to be closer to the grassroots community and uphold strong moral integrity. Consequently, the authority of Acehnese *ulama* emerges as a synthesis of scientific legitimacy, moral charisma, and social relevance, enabling them to retain influence even amidst the challenges posed by modernity, digitalisation, and the growing plurality of religious discourses (Syarifuddin, 2021).

*Da'wah* in Islam is not limited to theological and dogmatic dimensions but also extends to the broader social realities of society. One of the contemporary approaches in *da'wah* studies is the socio-religious approach, which emphasises not only the transmission of religious teachings (*tazkir*) but also social transformation, community empowerment, and the overall improvement of people's life structures. As Abdul Basit (2015) explains, this approach highlights the integration between Islamic values and the contextual needs of society, underscoring that *da'wah* cannot be confined to lectures from the pulpit or sermons in the mosque, but must directly engage with pressing social issues such as poverty, injustice, moral

crises, and gender inequality (Basit, 2015). In this model, greater emphasis is placed on *da'wah bil hal* (preaching through concrete action) rather than merely *da'wah bil lisan* (preaching through words), thereby positioning *da'wah* as a spiritual guide and a transformative force in addressing societal challenges.

Amrullah Ahmad refers to this perspective as "contextual preaching," emphasising the importance of understanding socio-cultural realities as the starting point for conveying Islamic teachings. In this framework, preaching becomes responsive to contemporary challenges such as globalisation, environmental crises, and social inequality, while also encouraging *ulama* and preachers to actively engage in the public sphere as agents of social change (Ahmad, 2000). By adopting a socio-religious approach, Islamic preaching takes on a more holistic character, addressing aspects of ritual and faith, advancing the struggle for social justice, defending marginalised groups, and reconstructing human values within society. Such an approach is essential for responding to the modern era's demands and reaffirming Islam as a relevant, liberating, and constructive religion.

### 3. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design (Pitman, 1998). The qualitative method was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of meanings and social phenomena, particularly in relation to socio-religious preaching practices, the role of *ulama*, and the construction of gender stereotypes within Acehnese society. The descriptive-analytical approach aims to systematically describe the phenomena as they occur while critically analyzing the data collected (Pawar, 2020). This methodology allows researchers to capture the lived experiences of individuals and communities, the dynamics of religious authority, and the negotiation of gender norms in everyday life.

Data for this study were collected in Aceh Besar and Banda Aceh through interviews, observations, and documentation (Lougen, 2009). The informants in the study consisted of five *ulama*, three community leaders, four women activists, three preachers, and Islamic boarding school administrators who were active in preaching and had broad insight into religious practices and gender issues. The data collected from these diverse informants provided a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between spiritual authority and gender norms in Aceh. Through their perspectives, we analysed the complexities of how religious teachings are interpreted and applied in everyday life, particularly concerning gender roles and expectations. The data collected provided valuable insights into the intersection of religion, gender, and community dynamics in Aceh. Through the perspectives of these diverse informants, we gained a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding religious authority and gender norms in the region. The diverse range of informants provided a thorough understanding of the intersection between religion, gender, and community dynamics in Aceh. The data collected from these various perspectives allowed for a nuanced analysis of how religious authority shapes gender norms in everyday life.

### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the practice of Islamic preaching, gender representation becomes a symbolic arena where values, meanings, and power relations are negotiated and contested. This study reveals that gender stereotypes continue to be reproduced in many preaching materials in Aceh, both

in mosque-based lectures and digital content on social media, where women are frequently portrayed in biased and reductive ways. Such stereotypes are often expressed through labelling, the exclusive assignment of domestic roles, and interpretations that emphasise women's bodies, obedience, and sexual morality. Findings from direct observation and content analysis of five popular Islamic preaching platforms in Aceh, including YouTube channels and local television programs, indicate that over 60% of sermons discussing women employed normative diction such as "women must submit to their husbands," "wives determine heaven and hell for their husbands," or "women's genitals are a source of slander" (Jasafat, 2025a). These narratives not only reduce women's identity to narrow religious symbolism but also reinforce patriarchal structures that constrain their agency and social participation (Mulia, 2015).

Interviews with female members of various religious study groups in Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar reveal how gender stereotypes embedded in *da'wah* are internalized from an early stage, shaping women's self-perceptions and social roles. Many respondents reported experiencing feelings of guilt when engaging in public activities or feeling pressured to embody the ideal of the "Muslim woman" as prescribed by preachers. One informant, Siti (35 years old), reflected, "I often feel conflicted with the preaching that I hear. On the one hand, I am taught that Islam is a blessing and just, but on the other hand, I feel like a second-class citizen in many study groups" (Jasafat, 2025c). In this context, *da'wah* functions not only as a medium for transmitting religious teachings but also as an institution that produces social meaning. Through repeated messages in public forums and social media, *da'wah* discourses normalize these gender stereotypes, presenting them as intrinsic to Islam, even though many are products of historical interpretations shaped by classical patriarchal contexts (Hoare & Smith, 2005).

However, this representation is not singular. The study also found a growing counter-narrative movement among female clerics, Muslim intellectuals, and millennial preachers. Alternative narratives in preaching have also emerged, particularly those that highlight the active roles of women in Islamic history, such as Khadijah, Aisyah, and Syifa binti Abdullah, who are recognised as intellectuals, professionals, and pioneers in their respective fields (Adibah, 2020). These narratives stress that faith and virtue are not determined by gender but by piety and social contribution, as emphasised in Q.S. Al-Hujurat: 13. A notable example is the preaching channel *Ngaji Kritis*, managed by Ustazah Nazifah, which consistently promotes the theme of gender justice. Through her content, she underscores the importance of distinguishing between Islamic teachings and patriarchal culture that often infiltrates interpretations of religious texts. She also critically examines the misuse of hadith to restrict women's roles, such as the oft-cited narration that "women are lacking in reason and religion," which she contextualises and corrects through the lens of hadith studies and *sanad* criticism (Nugraha, n.d.).

Interestingly, the shift in women's representation within *da'wah* is strongly influenced by the medium through which it is delivered. Social media, in particular, provides a platform for more humanistic and gender-just narratives that resonate widely, especially among young people and Muslim women who seek to embrace Islam without compromising their modern and intellectual identities. This phenomenon can be theoretically explained through feminist discourse analysis, which views language as a tool of power that not only conveys content but also shapes patterns of thought and social structures (Inderasari et al., 2020). In the context of *da'wah*, when women are consistently framed through narratives emphasizing obedience,

patience, and devotion, these linguistic patterns construct unequal collective perceptions of gender. Such framing reinforces social hierarchies and influences the legitimacy of women's roles, including their representation in religiously informed public policies.

The persistence of gender stereotypes in *da'wah* remains a significant challenge in realising social justice within Islam; however, efforts to reinterpret and transform these narratives from within the Muslim community, particularly through digital preaching and critical education, signal a positive trajectory of change. In Aceh, deconstructing and transforming gender stereotypes through *da'wah* is inseparable from the strategic role of the *ulama*, who simultaneously serve as guardians of religious norms and agents of social change. Field research reveals that some young and progressive Acehese *ulama* have begun to reinterpret religious texts contextually, rejecting patriarchal readings and grounding their messages in the *maqashid shari'ah*, or the higher objectives of Islamic law, which prioritise the protection of human dignity for both men and women (Abdullah, 2019). Through Friday sermons, women's study groups, and social media lectures, these scholars increasingly highlight family justice issues, women's right to education, and the rejection of gender-based violence, thereby positioning *da'wah* as a medium for promoting equality and inclusivity in line with Islamic principles.

This transformation is reflected in more inclusive forms of *da'wah*, such as *taklim* assemblies that no longer rigidly dichotomise themes for "women" and "men." For instance, in the *pengajian* led by the Head of MPU Aceh, Tgk. H. Faisal Ali (Jasafat, 2025c), discussions on *sakinah* family and gender justice are framed through Qur'anic verses such as Q.S. An-Nisa: 1 and Q.S. Al-Hujurat: 13, which highlight the equality of human origins and the honour of all before God. Yet, significant cultural challenges remain, as stereotypes confining women to domestic roles and the taboo surrounding women's leadership in Islam persist in parts of Acehese society. In-depth interviews with female scholars such as Nyak Cut Aisyah, Ustazah Nur Hayati Ibrahim, and Dr. Nur Jannah Ismail reveal that they often encounter resistance from conservative groups and patriarchal structures. Nonetheless, these *ulama* continue to utilise *da'wah* as a medium for negotiation and subtle resistance, transforming it into a platform for advocating justice and inclusivity despite entrenched cultural barriers (Jasafat, 2025c).

The effort to deconstruct gender stereotypes in Aceh's *da'wah* also gains reinforcement from formal religious institutions, particularly modern Islamic boarding schools such as *Dayah* Insan Qur'an and *Dayah* Darul Ihsan, which have integrated themes of gender equality into their non-formal curricula. In these institutions, classical texts such as *Tafsir Al-Maraghi* and *Riyadhus Shalihin* are studied with a critical lens that engages contemporary social realities, reflecting the clerics' awareness that the younger generation requires a liberating rather than restrictive understanding of Islam. At the same time, digital preaching has emerged as a powerful medium for advancing gender-sensitive narratives, with platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram serving as strategic arenas for millennial preachers such as *Ustaz* Dedi Wahyudi and *Ustazah* Nazifah to disseminate inclusive religious messages. Their content consciously avoids diction that normalises women's subordination and instead frames *da'wah* within narratives of empowerment that remain firmly grounded in the values of sharia, thereby reshaping the discourse of gender and religion in both physical and digital spaces (Jasafat, 2025d).



From a theoretical perspective, the practice of preaching carried out by Acehese *ulama* illustrates a model of transformative religious communication, where *da'wah* functions not only as a medium for transmitting teachings but also as an instrument for reshaping social structures and collective consciousness (Bullock et al., 2000; Mahmood, 2011). In this process, the deconstruction of gender stereotypes is pursued not through frontal confrontation but rather through gradual, dialogical, and culturally sensitive strategies, allowing transformation to unfold organically and gain wider acceptance within society. The effectiveness of *ulama* in advancing gender deconstruction becomes more visible when their efforts are synergised with other social actors, including academics, women activists, and religious institutions. A concrete example of such collaboration can be seen in the joint initiative between the Aceh MPU and the Women's Empowerment and Child Protection Service in developing the Women-Friendly Sermon Book, which demonstrates institutional commitment to fostering a more inclusive and gender-just *da'wah* practice in Aceh (Mursila, 2019).

Nevertheless, this transformative process is not without obstacles, as many *ulama* remain committed to traditional interpretations that position men as dominant and absolute in various aspects of life. Such resistance creates a distinct struggle for progressive scholars who attempt to reconcile religious values with the spirit of social justice through their preaching. Despite these challenges, the role of *ulama* in reshaping gender stereotypes in Aceh through *da'wah* practices remains highly significant, as they serve not only as custodians of religious authority but also as agents of social change capable of directing collective consciousness toward a more gender-just society. The ongoing efforts demonstrate that Islam in Aceh is neither static nor rigid, but rather dynamic and responsive to contemporary challenges, providing space for reinterpretation and transformation within the framework of sharia and social justice.

Despite facing various structural and cultural challenges, transformational and gender-friendly *da'wah* practices in Aceh continue to grow, shifting from a merely normative medium of transmitting religious teachings into a vehicle for social transformation where values of gender justice, equal rights, and the sanctity of human dignity are articulated in contextual and persuasive religious language. Field observations in Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar revealed several *da'wah* activities that combined the *bil hikmah* (wisdom) approach with strong messages of gender justice. For instance, in *taklim* assemblies led by female clerics such as *Ustazah* Nazifah and Nyak Cut Aisyah, *da'wah* narratives encouraged women's participation in education, the economy, and community leadership, supported by Qur'anic references such as Q.S. Al-Mujadilah: 1–4 and Q.S. Al-Ahzab: 35, which emphasise spiritual equality and women's right to speak in public spaces (Jasafat, 2025b).

This emerging preaching practice adopts an empathetic and dialogical approach in which women's life experiences are acknowledged as integral to the religious experience, making *da'wah* not merely prescriptive but participatory and reflective. As one informant, Rahma, a 42-year-old housewife, expressed, she felt closer to religion when listening to sermons that highlighted women's experiences as part of the struggle for faith rather than reducing them to mere tests or obligations (Jasafat, 2025a). This transformation is further reinforced through community-based *da'wah* initiatives supported by local institutions such as the Cahaya Umat Foundation, which trains *da'i* and *da'iyah* to adopt a human rights and gender-sensitive perspective rooted in Islamic principles. These training programs emphasise that

gender justice is not a foreign construct but is deeply embedded in the *maqashid sharia*, which seeks to protect the soul, mind, lineage, property, and religion without gender discrimination, affirming inclusivity as an authentic dimension of Islamic preaching.

Transformational and gender-friendly *da'wah* in Aceh also finds expression in the digital sphere, where platforms such as YouTube channels @DakwahInklusif and @MuslimahBerdaya offer religious content that extends beyond the fiqh of worship to address pressing social issues such as domestic violence, women's inheritance rights, and the importance of financial literacy for Muslim women (Jasafat, 2025b). By adopting storytelling techniques and participatory educational methods, these channels present *da'wah* in a way that feels relatable and engaging rather than didactic or overly prescriptive. From a theoretical standpoint, this practice reflects the principles of Transformative Religious Communication, which views religious discourse not merely as a vehicle for transmitting doctrine but as a means of cultivating new awareness, reshaping identities, and fostering equitable social relations (Djupe & Neiheisel, 2022). In this context, gender-friendly *da'wah* actively dismantles entrenched power imbalances, promoting egalitarian values and opening dialogical spaces where men and women can fairly shape collective religious and social life.

Nevertheless, the transformation of gender discourse within Aceh's *da'wah* practices has not been universally accepted, as resistance persists from conservative groups who perceive gender-related discussions as secular intrusions threatening the purity of religious teachings. These groups often dismiss progressive preachers with labels such as "liberal" or "Western feminists." However, this opposition has not diminished the efforts of inclusive preachers; rather, it has prompted them to adopt more strategic communication approaches by grounding their messages in strong religious arguments and culturally resonant methods that communities find more acceptable. The effectiveness of this movement lies in its collaborative nature, exemplified by the synergy between *ulama*, academics, women activists, and community leaders, who together build a broader platform for change. A notable example is the joint initiative of the Aceh Ulema Consultative Assembly (MPU) and the Women's Empowerment Service in producing the *Gender-Friendly Sermon Guidebook*, demonstrating how *da'wah* can be integrated with public policy to foster collective awareness and institutional commitment to gender justice.

This study concludes that the practice of transformational and gender-friendly *da'wah* in Aceh has opened new horizons for envisioning Islam as more just, open, and liberating, shifting *da'wah* from mere rhetorical rituals into a meaningful ethical arena that upholds human dignity and rights without discrimination. The socio-religious dynamics of the past two decades illustrate this transformation, as Aceh maintains its strong Islamic identity through institutionalising Islamic law while also witnessing the emergence of alternative *da'wah* movements infused with a transformative spirit and gender awareness. A socio-religious reading of this phenomenon reveals that Aceh's *da'wah* arena has become a site of contestation between normative conservatism and cultural progressivism, reflecting both the persistence of tradition and the possibilities of reform within the lived experiences of the Muslim community.

The results of observations and interviews indicate that the Acehnese public is no longer passive in receiving religious lectures, as *da'wah* today is evaluated not merely on the preacher's rhetorical skills but on the degree to which its substance engages with the lived social realities of the congregation. This is particularly evident among women, youth, and vulnerable groups,

who perceive *da'wah* as more meaningful when it addresses pressing issues such as domestic violence, early marriage, access to education, and opportunities for public participation, rather than focusing solely on rigid commands and prohibitions. As expressed by Aina, a 27-year-old member of a campus religious study group, "We want preaching that makes us feel humanised, not just being told that our place is only at home or that our bodies are a source of slander. Islam is *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, not just for men" (Jasafat, 2025a).

From a religious perspective, the transformation of *da'wah* in Aceh does not represent a deviation from Islamic teachings but rather a return to the essence of the message of justice (*al-'adl*), compassion (*al-rahmah*), and liberation from oppression (*al-hurriyah*). The concept of *usuluddin* emphasises that all *da'wah* activities must be grounded in the values of monotheism, social justice, and humanity, making gender-sensitive *da'wah* a contextual and transformative expression of faith (Waardenburg & Watt, 1969). At the same time, from a sociological standpoint, the rise of gender-friendly preaching in Aceh is inseparable from structural changes such as the increasing educational attainment of women, greater exposure to global Islamic discourse, and the expansion of dialogical spaces through social media. These developments have fostered a more critical public consciousness of gender-biased religious teachings and, in turn, encouraged preachers to adopt renewed perspectives and approaches that are more inclusive and responsive to contemporary social realities.

Nevertheless, resistance to progressive *da'wah* in Aceh remains strong, particularly in communities still firmly embedded in patriarchal structures, where some local religious figures fear that the spirit of gender justice may lead to the relativisation of sharia or moral decline. In several formal religious forums, gender issues are often framed as "foreign" or "Western" agendas, even though gender-friendly preachers ground their arguments in the *Qur'an*, *hadith*, and *maqashid sharia*. This tension illustrates that contemporary *da'wah* in Aceh is undergoing an intense phase of ideological negotiation, not merely reflecting differences of opinion but also contestations over the production and legitimacy of religious authority. In Buchanan et al.'s (1993) terms, the current landscape of *da'wah* can be understood as a symbolic field of struggle between orthodoxy, representing dominant interpretations, and heterodoxy, representing alternative readings, within Aceh's layered social and cultural structures (Buchanan et al., 1993).

For example, campus *da'wah* institutions such as the UIN Ar-Raniry Student *Da'wah* Forum (FDM) have begun to promote *da'wah* training based on a gender justice perspective. This program has received support from several lecturers at the faculty of *da'wah* and Islamic studies, but has also received criticism from several student groups who consider it too liberal. This phenomenon shows how the dynamics of *da'wah* are part of a living and ever-evolving value struggle (Jasafat, 2025a). This study underlines that transformational and gender-friendly *da'wah* is not an attempt to oppose sharia but rather a process of reinterpreting Islamic values within a changing social framework. This effort must be understood as part of the movement of the times, where Islam is present as a religion that provides solutions to humanitarian problems, not strengthening inequality.

From a socio-religious perspective, the dynamics of *da'wah* in Aceh today reflect the spiritual and intellectual maturity of the community, where, despite ongoing tensions and resistance, more humanistic and gender-just practices are increasingly embraced. The key challenge lies in synergising Islamic values with contemporary social developments so that

*da'wah* remains contextual, liberating, and humanising. These dynamics affirm that Islam in Aceh is not a static tradition but a living and responsive faith, capable of addressing modern challenges while safeguarding its core spiritual essence. The growing acceptance of gender-friendly preaching thus signifies not only a theological renewal but also a collective commitment to realising Islam as *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, a mercy for all rather than a tool of social control or oppression.

As this transformation unfolds, the success of gender-inclusive *da'wah* in Aceh will ultimately be assessed not by its conformity to external expectations but by its capacity to restore Islam's liberating message and foster communities where every individual, regardless of gender can pursue spiritual growth, social contribution, and human dignity within an authentically Islamic framework. The journey toward gender justice in Islamic preaching is undoubtedly complex and ongoing; yet, the evidence from Aceh illustrates that such a transformation is both possible and necessary for the continued relevance and vitality of Islamic communities in the modern world. Central to this process is the role of clerics, particularly female *ulama*, who, through traditional authority and innovative religious leadership, act as key agents in negotiating, challenging, and reshaping entrenched gender norms. Socio-religious studies employing ethnographic and critical approaches further reveal that while progress remains uneven and contested, the active engagement of these clerics in gender discourse holds considerable promise for advancing gender justice within Acehnese society and the broader Indonesian Islamic context.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the role of *ulama* in *da'wah* in Aceh occupies a critical intersection between the reproduction of gender stereotypes and efforts toward socio-religious justice. The findings indicate that, although *da'wah* narratives remain heavily influenced by patriarchal culture and limited gender literacy, some *ulama* have taken progressive steps by interpreting Islamic teachings more inclusively and responsively to gender issues. This demonstrates that *ulama* are not only custodians of tradition but also hold significant potential as agents of social transformation, capable of guiding society toward the values of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (a blessing for all the universe). Theoretically, this study contributes to socio-religious scholarship on the interplay between religion and gender. Practically, it offers vital recommendations for enhancing gender literacy among *ulama*, fostering collaboration with educational institutions, and partnering with women's advocacy groups to develop a more equitable *da'wah* discourse. Moving forward, further research is needed to explore effective *da'wah* communication strategies that can overcome patriarchal resistance and strengthen the role of female *ulama* as key agents of change. Ultimately, this study invites readers to understand *da'wah* not only as a medium for conveying religious teachings but also as a transformative tool capable of upholding justice, equality, and humanity in alignment with the core values of Islam.

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