

Women's right to the throne: A comparison between the Sultanates of Yogyakarta and Brunei Darussalam

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Abstract

Introduction to the Problem: This article examines the issue of gender inequality in royal succession by comparing women's right to ascend the throne in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta and in Brunei Darussalam. While Yogyakarta has begun to open up the discourse on women's succession through the King's Word and constitutional interpretation, Brunei explicitly restricts succession to male heirs under its constitution.

Purpose/Study Objectives: The purpose of this article is to analyze and compare the position and rights of women in royal succession within the Sultanate of Yogyakarta and Brunei Darussalam, to identify the cultural, historical, and religious factors that influence this practice, and to evaluate it in the light of international human rights principles, in particular CEDAW.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This research uses normative juridical research methods with a comparative approach, focusing on the analysis of legal texts, constitutional provisions, customary regulations, and international human rights instruments.

Findings: The study reveal that although both the Sultanate of Yogyakarta and Brunei Darussalam are rooted in patriarchal traditions of royal succession, they diverge significantly in their capacity for legal and normative adaptation. In Yogyakarta, the combination of *Sabda Raja*, *Dawuh Raja*, and Constitutional Court Decision No. 88/PUU-XIV/2016 has created a transformative opening that reinterprets customary law in line with constitutional principles and international human rights norms, thereby enabling the possibility of female succession through an evolving model of adaptive legal pluralism. By contrast, Brunei maintains a structurally closed system in which the constitutional requirement of a male ruler (reinforced by the Melayu Islam Beraja ideology and religious authority) institutionalizes gender exclusion and limits interpretive flexibility. This comparison demonstrates that restrictions on women's leadership are not inherently derived from Islamic doctrine but are shaped by differing configurations of political authority, legal flexibility, and engagement with international norms, with Yogyakarta illustrating the potential for reform and Brunei reflecting the persistence of entrenched patriarchal governance.

Paper Type: Research Article

Keywords: Female Sultan; Royal Succession; Sultanate of Yogyakarta; Brunei Darussalam; Human Rights



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Introduction

While historical precedents and cultural norms within the Yogyakarta Sultanate have traditionally restricted the throne to male heirs, the 2015 'Sabda Raja' marked a significant departure from these conventions. By altering dynastic titles and appointing GKR (Gusti Kanjeng Ratu) Mangkubumi as the crown princess, Sultan Hamengku Buwono X initiated an internal conflict among the royal family, who argue that such reforms undermine the fundamental *paugeran* (traditional customary laws) of the monarchy. However, through Constitutional Court Decision No. 88/PUU-XIV/2016, a legal pathway was established, affirming that women are eligible to serve as the Governor of Yogyakarta.

Issues of Muslim women's rights often involve politics, culture, religion, identity, and nationalism. A common feature in many Muslim-majority countries is the rise of Islam. Both Brunei and Indonesia are countries with complex Islamic histories ([Al-garawee et al., 2017](#)). As a result of the rise of Islam, various events occurred in the second half of the last century, such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and the Arab oil embargo. These events began to shape the political landscape of Muslim-majority countries in ASEAN. Religious organizations grew stronger, and their impact extended to the socio-economic level ([Alamgir, 2014](#)).

Women's groups in many Muslim-majority countries have been at the forefront of challenging religious authority and the legitimacy they claim to justify the subordination of women and discrimination against them in the name of religion ([Abdel-Hady, 2017](#)). Muslim women in modern and industrialized Muslim-majority countries, such as Brunei and Indonesia, face a patriarchal construct of the 'ideal Muslim woman', who is portrayed as submissive and obedient. The majority of progressive Muslim women do not believe that Islam promotes injustice or mistreatment of them ([Widjaja, 2023](#)).

It is perhaps not surprising that the intersection of Muslim women's rights with politics, gender identity, and the process of Islamization has motivated progressive women's groups to articulate a conception of Muslim women's rights that is consistent with universal human rights principles ([Yousuf et al., 2016](#)). Therefore, it is crucial to develop an interpretation of women's rights that is specifically involved with the interpretation of the Qur'an from a perspective that supports women.

In recent decades, women's rights issues in Southeast Asia's Muslim-majority countries have remained a constant and cyclical concern, largely due to ongoing debates in which religious leaders (ulama) continue to exert significant influence on government policy ([Elahi, 2025](#)). This has set a detrimental precedent for women, as historical patterns painfully show that the consolidation of fundamentalist power has consistently coincided with the decline of women's rights. There is hope that when civil society actors, especially women's rights advocates, get more space in advancing the full spectrum of rights, the advancement of women's rights can be more effectively realized ([Alamgir, 2014](#)).

The Yogyakarta Palace remains steadfast in the midst of the power of modernization, because of its rich history and timeless values that date back to the pre-independence period. Its extensive historical heritage has made Yogyakarta a special region within the Republic of Indonesia, functioning as an autonomous monarchy within a unitary state. To this day, the Palace continues to uphold its cultural traditions, including the practice of its leadership succession, with the exception of the era of Sultan Hamengkubuwana X ([Pradhani & Anggara, 2015](#)).

The family of Sultan HB X is absolutely dominated by 5 daughters. During his 55 years of marriage to Gusti Kanjeng Ratu (GKR) Hemas, not many people realized that Sultan HB X had such a deep romantic side as a king with his consort by not choosing to have other concubines or wives (polygamy) like his predecessors. Sultan HB X has sought to balance the position of women within the framework of respectable Javanese culture by renewing women's perspectives through the lens of gender equality. He further advanced these efforts by issuing royal decrees known as the "Sabda Raja" and the "Dawuh Raja" ([Hidayat, 2023](#)). The younger brothers of Sultan HB X, who were conservative, considered Sabda Raja and Dawuh Raja as the first step towards the erosion and decline of Javanese cultural traditions that had long been preserved by the Yogyakarta Palace ([Setyowati, 2020](#)). These two reforms and breakthroughs are intellectual innovations introduced by Sultan HB X to convey a message about changes in the internal realm of the Palace ([Ratnawati & Santoso, 2021](#)).

In Brunei Darussalam, although women are officially treated as equals as men, the proportion of women in leadership positions remains relatively low compared to men ([Fee & Carnegie, 2023](#)). According to Rahim (2021) shows that Brunei women are able to face various challenges in achieving and carrying out leadership roles, without framing these challenges through the lens of gender stereotypes. Two explanations can be offered: first, the absence of gender-based expectations means that female leaders are treated equally with men and enjoy the same opportunities; Second, it is possible that these women do not consider gender realities to be the initial source of the challenges they face. The study further identified that effective leadership is associated with certain personality traits or specific skills. In this context, female leaders demonstrate expertise in time management and perseverance. Despite demanding professional responsibilities, and in some cases raising children, they



consistently make a deliberate effort to spend quality time with their children. It seems that by balancing time between family and work commitments, these women are better able to dedicate meaningful attention to their children.

Previous studies have examined gender and monarchical succession from several perspectives, particularly the interaction between customary norms, religion, and legal modernization. Research on the Yogyakarta Palace shows that Javanese patriarchal traditions historically positioned men as the primary heirs to the throne, while recent reforms through *Sabda Raja* and *Dawuh Raja* under Sultan Hamengkubuwono X opened limited space for women's participation in succession debates (Ramadhan & Luthfi, 2020). In contrast, studies on Brunei Darussalam emphasize that its absolute monarchy, grounded in the Malay Islamic Monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*) ideology, preserves male-exclusive royal succession and restricts women's access to the throne (Black, 2022). More broadly, international legal scholarship highlights that gender-based exclusion from leadership positions may conflict with equality principles contained in instruments such as Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

However, prior research tends to examine these cases separately: studies on Yogyakarta mainly focus on internal palace reform and cultural reinterpretation, while studies on Brunei concentrate on state ideology and authoritarian monarchy. There remains limited comparative scholarship that systematically analyzes how two Southeast Asian monarchies with different constitutional structures negotiate the tension between traditional legitimacy and international gender equality norms. This absence creates an important research gap, particularly in understanding why reform becomes possible in one monarchy while remaining highly constrained in another. This study addresses that gap by comparatively examining women's leadership opportunities in the Yogyakarta Palace and Brunei Darussalam through the lens of legal pluralism and gender equality. Theoretically, it advances previous studies by showing that customary and religious norms are not static barriers; rather, their interpretation depends on political authority, institutional flexibility, and engagement with international human rights discourse. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on monarchy, legal transformation, and women's political inclusion in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Methodology

The research method used in this study is a normative juridical approach, which focuses on the analysis of applicable positive legal norms, including laws and regulations, official documents, and principles of international law (Peter Mahmud Marzuki, 2006). This approach emphasizes the systematic interpretation and analysis of legal texts (International Covenants, Law, and Constitutional Court Decisions) to address women's rights issues under the Yogyakarta sultanate system. In this study, a descriptive-qualitative method was applied by examining The Pugeran, Sabda and Dawuh of the Sultan of Hamengkubuwono I-X as the basis of the constitution in the

Sultanate of Ngayogyakarta Hadinigrat and the Constitution of Brunei Darussalam based on the Malay Islamic Monarchy both of which have rules of leadership succession in the Sultanates of Yogyakarta and Brunei Darussalam, as well as linking them to international legal instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

In addition, this study uses both legal and conceptual approaches, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the normative underpinnings of succession law and its philosophical underpinnings. Comparative dimensions are also included to highlight the similarities and differences between the two monarchies, thus providing a broader analytical perspective. This analysis is supported by secondary sources, including scientific articles, books, and legal commentary, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. As a result, the study not only outlines the legally applicable framework locally but also evaluates its alignment with international legal standards on gender equality, offering descriptive and critical insights into the dynamics of law, culture, and human rights.

Results and Discussion

Regulation of Women's Rights and Status in the Monarchical Structure of Yogyakarta and Brunei

The Special Region of Yogyakarta is unique because its office holders are not elected through general elections but through succession from the previous sultan's lineage, a characteristic that distinguishes its government from other regions ([Asmorojati, 2020](#)). The special status of government in the Special Region of Yogyakarta has been officially recognized by the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia. This recognition is based on the historical origins of Yogyakarta's leadership, which originated from the Sultanate that existed as an independent government before Indonesia's independence ([Pradhani & Anggara, 2015](#)). The appointment of the highest leadership position in the Yogyakarta Palace is regulated in national law, especially Article 18(1)(c) of Law No. 13 of 2012, which stipulates that the Governor of the Special Region of Yogyakarta concurrently holds the title of Sultan Hamengku Buwono ([Nugroho et al., 2024](#)). Although it does not explicitly state that the individual who holds the office of Governor and Sultan Hamengku Buwono must be male, the interpretation arises from a similar provision in Article 18(1)(m), which requires the Governor of the Special Region of Yogyakarta to submit a curriculum vitae that includes, among other things, education, employment history, siblings, spouse, and children. This has led to speculation that the Sultan of the Yogyakarta Palace must be a man. In response, Sultan HB X challenged and refuted this notion through an executive order by issuing the King's Word and the King's Dawuh. These measures were later legitimized by the Constitutional Court in Decision No. 88/PUU-XIV/2016, which ruled that the phrase "including education, employment history, siblings, spouse, and children" in Article 18(1)(m) of Law No. 13 of 2012 concerning the Special Region of Yogyakarta is unconstitutional and does not have binding legal force

([Nisvi et al., 2021](#)). A female sultan can be a new discourse in the field of law and government because it has far-reaching implications for gender, political, cultural, and religious discourse ([Asmorojati et al., 2022](#)).

The Constitutional Court's decision has created new opportunities for women to take leadership roles, including in the political and structural realms that were previously limited by socio-cultural constructions. Gender-based discrimination, which has long been considered an inevitable consequence of customary and traditional norms, is increasingly recognized as an obstacle to the realization of equality and justice. By affirming that gender is dynamic and can change according to the development of society, the ruling underlines that there is no structural or cultural basis for excluding women from leadership succession ([Farid, 2020](#)). This position is also consistent with the evolution of international legal discourse and human rights instruments that emphasize the elimination of discrimination against women in all its forms, as reflected in the spirit of Article 5(a) of the CEDAW, which establishes the obligation "to change the patterns of social and cultural behavior of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices, customary practices and all other practices based on the idea of inferiority or superiority of one of the gender or on stereotypical roles for men and women."

The publication of the King Word and Dawuh Raja by Sultan HB X not only brought cultural and legal dimensions but was also very imbued with political significance. As the king who also served as the Governor of the Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY), Sultan HB X faced a dilemma between preserving paugeran (traditional norms) and adhering to the constitutional and national political commitment to the principle of gender equality ([Dardias, 2016](#)). Internal reforms within the palace can be interpreted as a political maneuver by the Sultan to consolidate his legitimacy in the midst of social transformation, while responding to public criticism of gender-based discrimination ([Chen & Yang, 2017](#)). By paving the way for women to ascend the throne, Sultan HB X conveyed a political message that the Sultanate of Yogyakarta was not isolated from the currents of democracy and human rights, but rather participated in a broader process of national and global reform ([Pradhani & Anggara, 2015](#)). However, the decision has also drawn opposition from conservative groups within the palace and segments of the local political elite, who see the change as a threat to cultural stability and traditional legitimacy ([Fanani, 2016](#)). Thus, the change in the rules of succession illustrates the political contestation between modernity and tradition, as well as between the demands of gender equality and the political interests of the Sultanate and the state.

Javanese culture emphasizes the tradition of harmony between humans (microcosm) and nature (macrocosm), which is conveyed through terminology such as Hamemayu Hayuning Bawana and then internalized as a guiding principle in the daily life and actions of the Javanese people ([Moedjanto, 1993](#)). In a cultural context Yogyakarta Palace, men occupy positions closely related to the legal and cultural traditions of the

sultanate ([Pradhani & Anggara, 2015](#)), These socio-cultural practices provided hierarchical construction of gender roles. In other Javanese cultures, women are often known as *A Friend of Mine* or "*konco wingking*", which historically placed women in domestic positions and were considered to be under male authority, understanding *A Friend of Mine* This then gives rise to the view of inequality for Javanese women ([Pratisthita & Wardani, 2022](#)). Article 27 (1) of the 1945 Constitution represents the formalization of customary rules recognized by the state that further limit women's leadership opportunities. On this basis, the Constitutional Court Decision No. 88/PUU-XIV/2016 emerged as a challenge to discrimination in women's leadership.

The persistent unfair treatment of women remains a significant social concern in Indonesia. Gender is a socially and culturally constructed category that describes the roles, division of labor, and behavioral expectations between men and women, shaped by prevailing societal norms but constantly evolving in response to broader social and cultural transformations ([Widjaja, 2023](#)). Despite the existence of legal frameworks such as Law No. 13 of 2003 on Manpower and Law No. 7 of 1984 on the Ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), gender-based gaps in access to leadership, employment, and social opportunities remain, reflecting a gap between formal legal provisions and deep-rooted socio-cultural practices ([Rahmah & Yusdani, 2020](#)). Gender encompasses complementary roles, responsibilities, and opportunities associated with women and men. The conception of what it means to be a woman or a man is socially and culturally constructed, shaped by the norms and practices that prevail in Indonesian society, and subject to continuous transformation over time. This construct affects access to education, employment, leadership, and social participation, highlighting the persistent gap between formal legal provisions on gender equality and deep-rooted socio-cultural expectations ([Ramadhan & Luthfi, 2020](#)).

Brunei is the oldest Islamic monarchy in Southeast Asia, with a proud historical heritage of Islamic rule. As a kingdom and an independent state, Brunei has enshrined the "Malay Islamic Monarchy" (Melayu Islam Beraja, hereinafter: MIB) as the guiding principle of governance, led by the Sultan as the supreme leader. Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) is a state ideology inspired by the Kingdom of Brunei Darussalam and officially legitimized after the proclamation of Brunei Darussalam's independence on 1 January 1984 ([Hidayati & Fikriyah, 2022](#)).

In the principles of Malay tradition, the people have fully entrusted their rights to the Sultan to rule, lead, and rule. A Sultan is obliged to uphold the trust given by his people and is also responsible before Allah SWT to ensure the prosperity and welfare of his people. From this perspective, these principles are embodied in customary expressions such as "The king is never unjust, the people must not rebel against the king" and "The king must be just, the people must obey" ([Haque, 2020](#)).

The role of the ulama and the constitutional mandates in Brunei work in tandem to create a legal and religious "closed loop" that excludes women from the throne. This synergy between the State Mufti's office and the foundational law of the land creates a barrier to leadership that is both sacred and secular.

In Brunei, the requirement for a male leader is explicitly codified in Part I of the Brunei Constitution, which defines the very identity of the sovereign. The text specifies that "His Majesty" or "His Majesty the Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan" refers to a Sultan whose accession has been proclaimed, utilizing gender-specific language that inherently links the office to masculinity. When this constitutional mandate is read alongside the Succession and Regency Proclamation, which limits the throne to "male lawfully begotten descendants," the exclusion of women becomes a core legal pillar of the state. The ulama in Brunei reinforce this by interpreting these constitutional definitions as a reflection of divine order, arguing that the patriarchal language of the law is a manifestation of the Shafi'i school's traditionalist view on governance.

Since the establishment of the Kingdom of Brunei in 1365 AD, it has been ruled by 29 Sultans. The Kingdom of Brunei has never, and has no plans to do, by a woman. This is explicitly stated in its constitution, which is stipulated in the Part III of the Brunei constitution that "No person shall be considered a rightful heir or legitimate successor unless *he* adheres to the Islamic religion and is a lawfully born male descendant in the male line of the same ancestor", it is clear that the norm used in the Brunei constitution is *he* instead of using non-sexist language, it is then affirmed in the sharia of the Islamic religion which requires a man to be an imam (leader) so that from that interpretation it creates a narrowing of the space women in motion. Therefore, the constitutional interpretation in Brunei remains conservative for the context of leader in the nation.

While, in the Indonesian Constitutional Court ruling, it has created a new space for women to take leadership roles, including in the political and structural realms that were previously limited by socio-cultural constructions. Gender-based discrimination, which has long been considered a consequence of traditional customs and norms, is increasingly recognized as a barrier to the realization of equality and justice. By acknowledging that gender is dynamic and evolves as society evolves, this ruling underscores that there is no structural or cultural justification for limiting women's opportunities in leadership succession. This perspective is in line with the development of international legal discourse and human rights instruments, which emphasize the elimination of discrimination against women in all forms. In particular, Article 5(a) of CEDAW affirms the principle of equality, stating the need "to modify the social and cultural patterns of behavior of men and women with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary practices and all other practices based on the idea of inferiority or superiority of one sex or on stereotypical roles for men and women."

In contrast, Brunei adheres to a strictly patrilineal monarchical structure with conservative view. Since its establishment in 1365 AD, the Sultanate has been governed by a continuous succession of 29 male monarchs, a tradition now codified in its constitution, which explicitly stipulates that "No person shall be considered a rightful Heir or Successor unless he adheres to the Religion of Islam and is a lawfully offspring of a male descendant in the male line of a common ancestor." (Constitution of Brunei Darussalam, 1959). The succession system in Brunei is entirely rooted in the kingdom's interpretation of Islamic law, specifically the principle that leadership should be done by men and requires that an imam (leader) must be a man. While women contribute significantly in education, social affairs, and the economy, their formal participation in state leadership is severely limited ([Rahim, 2021](#)). The Constitution not only affirms male supremacy in the line of succession but also reflects the perception that the traditions of political and religious leadership are incompatible with women's leadership. As a result, Brunei stands as one of the Islamic monarchies that consistently maintains a patriarchal system in its country's power structure, illustrating a stark contrast to the growing legal and social recognition of women's leadership in Indonesia ([Black, 2020](#)).

Women in the Context of Monarchical Leadership and Its Supporting Factors

The study of women's rule in the Islamic world is still very limited, both in the form of articles and books, so their historical contributions receive little scientific attention ([Alamgir, 2014](#)). This situation is mainly due to the scarcity of historical sources that can be used as a reference for research. Nevertheless, this topic is important to explore, especially given the growing discourse on gender equality. It is very rare to find a Sharia-based empire led by a woman. As noted in an article by Umam (2013) Examples of women's leadership in such contexts are extraordinary and often depend on exceptional circumstances, such as the absence of a male heir or a political crisis that requires women to step into leadership roles. These cases reveal that although women's formal authority is generally limited, their informal influence through advisory roles, social networks, and economic control plays an important role in government and state affairs. Understanding these dynamics provides critical insight into the interactions between gender, power, and religious-political structures in historical Islamic societies.

Kloos (2018) explained that the historical experience of women's leadership in the Sultanate of Aceh provides a striking contrast to the contemporary practice of monarchy in Brunei and the evolving legal framework in Indonesia. In the 17th century in Aceh, sultanah (the leader was a woman) such as Sultanah Safiatuddin Tajul Alam (1641–1675) took over political authority after the death of a male ruler, demonstrating the potential for women to play an important role in the public and political spheres of Islamic kingdoms in Southeast Asia. Her peaceful style of government, shaped by external pressure from the Dutch, reflected the strategic adaptability of women rulers. Most importantly, the legitimacy of the sultanate's power was strengthened by structural and social factors, including the strong



influence of the nobility, the territorial division of Aceh into three divisions, and the support of the ulama. These elements illustrate that the presence of women's leadership is facilitated not only by dynastic succession but also by broader socio-political and religious structures that allow women to rule effectively.

Unlike more adaptive monarchies, Brunei adheres to a rigid patriarchal system of governance. Guided by both 14th-century tradition and modern constitutional law, the kingdom mandates an exclusively male line of succession, thereby barring women from the office of Sultan ([Fee & Carnegie, 2023](#)). This system, which is rooted in the state's interpretation of Islamic law, reflects the perception that the tradition of political and religious leadership is incompatible with women's authority. While women participate significantly in educational, social, and economic spheres, their opportunities for formal leadership remain strictly limited, highlighting the role of legal, cultural, and religious norms as barriers rather than drivers ([Febriyanti and Rafiqah, 2024](#)).

Meanwhile, Indonesia has shown a more progressive trajectory in recognizing women's political leadership, particularly through judicial and legal reforms. The Constitutional Court's ruling and the state's alignment with international human rights instruments, such as CEDAW, have opened up formal space for women to take leadership roles in the political and structural domains ([Farid, 2020](#)). These developments underscore that gender-based restrictions are not structurally or culturally mandated, and that legal recognition combined with socio-political advocacy can expand women's opportunities in leadership.

These cases illustrate that women's leadership in the Islamic context is shaped by the interaction of legal, cultural, religious, and socio-political factors. Aceh's historical sultanah exemplifies how social structure, elite support, and religious legitimacy can enable women's rule, Brunei illustrates the persistence of patriarchal legal frameworks that hinder formal leadership, and Indonesia highlights the potential for legal reform and international norms to create a pathway for women's leadership in contemporary society ([Kloos, 2018](#)).

The ascension of women to the throne of the Sultanate of Aceh in the 17th century was supported by a number of interrelated factors. The support of the political elite and the nobility was the main determinant, because, after the death of Sultan Iskandar Tsani, they were looking for a figure capable of maintaining internal political stability. The government of Sultanah Safiatuddin Tajul Alam also received legitimacy from the ulama, who at that time adhered to a moderate form of Islam that was more accepting of women's leadership, as long as Islamic law (sharia) was still obeyed ([Umam, 2013](#)). In addition, Aceh's political structure, which is divided into three main balances, strengthens the position of the sultanate, as each region has an interest in maintaining the balance of power and avoiding succession conflicts. External factors, such as increasing pressure from the Netherlands, also require leaders with a more

diplomatic and peaceful style of qualities often associated with female leadership. In addition, the Southeast Asian tradition that is relatively more accepting of women's roles in the public sphere provides a cultural foundation for the legitimacy of the sultanate. Thus, the ascension of women to the throne of Aceh is not solely a domestic political phenomenon but also reflects the interaction of internal and external factors, local customs, and adaptive religious interpretations (Yumru, 2024).

Furthermore, as discussed in Alazraki (2024) which states that the historical and modern experience of women's leadership in both Islamic and broader global contexts highlights the complex interplay of political, social, cultural, and religious factors that enable or limit women's authority. According to Umam (2013) paper in the 17th century in Aceh, sultans such as Sultanah Safiatuddin Tajul Alam (1641–1675) took over political power after the death of male rulers, demonstrating the capacity of women to lead in Islamic kingdoms in Southeast Asia. The legitimacy of their rule was supported by internal factors, including the support of political elites, nobility, and clerics, as well as the structure of Aceh's three main sagis, which encouraged the balance of power and prevented succession conflicts. External pressure, especially from the Netherlands, requires diplomatic and peaceful leadership, traits associated with women's governance, while Southeast Asia's relatively flexible cultural norms regarding women in public life further strengthen their authority. The rise of women in Aceh thus reflects the interaction between domestic political needs, cultural practices, and adaptive religious interpretations.

Brunei maintains a patriarchal succession model that officially excludes women from the throne. Guided by both 14th-century tradition and modern constitutional law, the Sultanate mandates an exclusively male lineage, reflecting a state-interpreted religious framework that maintains a structural barrier to female leadership. This exclusion remains absolute, despite the burgeoning roles and contributions of Bruneian women in the contemporary social and economic landscape (Chen & Yang, 2017).

Based on previous research of the early modern era further it underscores the strategic role of women in government. It also summarizes the interactions between Queen Elizabeth I of England and Sultana Safiye of the Ottoman Empire, showing that women, even in male-dominated political systems, can exert significant influence in cross-cultural diplomacy. Elizabeth I took advantage of her position to establish trade and political relations with major Islamic powers, while Sultana Safiye, first as haseki and then as sultan valide, held recognized authority over domestic and foreign affairs. Their epistolary exchanges and lavish gift exchanges created a distinctive network of women's diplomacy, illustrating that women's leadership was not only symbolic but strategically important to safeguard the political and economic interests of each country.

Taken together, these cases reveal that women's leadership is facilitated by a combination of internal legitimacy, elite and religious support, cultural acceptance, and strategic adaptability to external pressures. While some contexts, such as Brunei, continue to impose structural barriers rooted in the interpretation of religion-laws, others, such as Aceh and Indonesia, show how adaptive political, cultural, and legal frameworks can create meaningful opportunities for women to take positions of authority ([Chen & Yang, 2017](#)). The fact that Safiye was considered capable of "ruling the entire empire" at the height of her power underscores that women's leadership ([Alazraki, 2024](#)), even when not always formal, can play an important role in shaping the direction of the country's policy.

The factors that allow women to take power as queen or sultana essentially result from a combination of political legitimacy, elite support, and surrounding social and cultural conditions. For example, Queen Elizabeth 1st of England gained legitimacy through a monarchical system that allowed a woman to ascend the throne in the absence of a male heir this is because the constitutional framework of the British monarchy is symbolic-constitutional and has been regulated in the Act of Succession. The socio-political context factor also played a significant role, namely Britain's need for post-religious conflict stability during the reigns of Henry VIII and Mary I, which encouraged the political elite to accept women's leadership for the sake of the country's sustainability ([Stockwell, 2004](#)). In addition, the support of state institutions and political elites, including Parliament and royal advisers such as William Cecil, strengthened the effectiveness of his rule. Her success in defending English sovereignty from external threats, especially the victory over the Spanish Armada (1588), further cemented her leadership legitimacy and proved that women were capable of exercising the highest authority of the state effectively within the monarchical system. In contrast, Sultanah Safiye did not rule formally as a sultan, but gained political power through her structural position as Valide Sultan, the mother of Sultan Mehmed III, who in the Ottoman tradition provided informal but very strong authority. Meanwhile, Sultanah Aceh such as Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah received leadership legitimacy openly and formally as the supreme ruler, supported by Aceh's political tradition, the need for stability after the death of the sultan, and religious legitimacy through the support of scholars ([Alazraki, 2024](#)). The existence of Sultanah Aceh proves that in the context of Nusantara Islam (Islam that developed in the Nusantara region, especially in present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and nearby areas), women's leadership can be constitutionally and religiously accepted, thus emphasizing that women's opportunities to become leaders are highly determined by the prevailing cultural, legal, and social legitimacy configurations. Comparison between Queen Elizabeth I leading Britain through formal legal legitimacy of succession, Sultanah Safiye ruled informally through her position as Valide Sultan in the Ottoman court structure, while Sultanah Aceh ruled formally with political and religious support. All three show that women's leadership

can be realized through various mechanisms of legitimacy, depending on the prevailing legal and cultural systems.

Reflecting on the experiences of Queen Elizabeth I in England, Sultanah Safiye in the Ottomans, and Sultanah Aceh, the success of women's succession in Yogyakarta is highly determined by several key factors. First, legal and normative legitimacy through the reinterpretation of the Palace's rules that are in line with the constitution, as the United Kingdom provides a legal framework for women's succession. Second, the support of the court's political and internal elites, including the royal family and local government actors, which played an important role in affirming social and political acceptance, as seen in the support of the British Parliament and the Ottoman court network. Third, the socio-political conditions that demand stability, where women's leadership can be seen as a solution to the continuity of power, as happened in Britain and Aceh after the succession crisis. Fourth, cultural and religious legitimacy, which in Aceh has proven to be able to affirm women's leadership in the context of Islam.

Ultimately, these historical precedents reveal that the divergence between Yogyakarta and Brunei is determined by how each sultanate manages the intersection of tradition and adaptation. The case of Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah in Aceh proves that in the context of Nusantara Islam, women's leadership can be constitutionally and religiously accepted when the prevailing cultural and legal configurations allow for it. Yogyakarta is currently attempting to create an "Elizabethan" moment by using a formal legal break from the past to ensure the dynasty's future. Conversely, Brunei's lack of an adaptive "*Valide*" structure or a reformist legal mechanism means that its legitimacy remains tied to a static interpretation of the past ([Setyowati, 2020](#)). By viewing the cases of Elizabeth and Safiye as distinct "technologies of power," it becomes clear that Yogyakarta's path is one of legal evolution, while Brunei's resistance is a result of a socio-legal configuration that has intentionally excluded the female-led diplomatic and administrative successes seen in early modern history. With the fulfillment of these factors, women's succession in Yogyakarta is not only normatively possible, but also socially, culturally, and constitutionally acceptable.

The Islamic perspective regards women as possessing dignified roles, with acknowledged rights throughout various aspects of life. Jabeen & Akhter (2025) emphasizing that, through the example of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), women received respect and protection not commonly found in pre-Islamic societies. Women are not only considered mothers and wives but are also recognized as having legitimate social, political, and economic roles. The Prophet set a practical example by involving women in public affairs, respecting their opinions, and recognizing them as legal subjects entitled to inheritance, property rights, and access to education. Thus, the position of women in Islam is essentially equal in human dignity to that of men, although its implementation often varies in various cultural and historical contexts ([Al-qarawee et al., 2017](#)).



Although Islam essentially recognizes the dignity and rights of women, as exemplified in the life of the Prophet Muhammad, the practice of female leadership in the monarchy has varied across the region. In the Sultanate of Yogyakarta, the long-standing Javanese patriarchal custom has historically restricted women's access to the throne, although recent reform discussions have emerged through the King's Word and Dawuh Raja Sultan HB X (Farid, 2020). Meanwhile, in Brunei Darussalam, the royal constitution explicitly requires a male Sultan, leaving no room for female leadership (Rahim, 2021). This contradiction illustrates that, although women are fundamentally respected in Islam, their positions are often limited by conservative religious interpretations and deep-rooted patriarchal customs.

Reflecting on the historical existence of female leadership, the Sultanate of Yogyakarta has long maintained a strong patriarchal culture inherited from its founders, positioning male descendants as heirs to the throne (Haque, 2020). Nevertheless, the emergence of Sabda Raja and Dawuh Raja Sultan HB X offers a new perspective in integrating women into the respected palace traditions, serving as a reformative factor and supporting future women's leadership in the Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat Palace (Hidayat, 2023).

On the other hand, Brunei Darussalam, an absolute monarchy based on Malay-Islamic ideology, emphasizes a political culture centered on adherence to Islamic law and loyalty to the Sultan (Müller, 2022). Religious factors are explicitly enshrined in the constitution, which stipulates that only male descendants in the paternal lineage can ascend the throne. This legal and religious framework effectively closes the opportunity for women to take over leadership, despite historical evidence that female rulers in Islamic contexts have successfully ruled and, in some cases, achieved better results than their male counterparts. Brunei thus represents a modern monarchy whose interpretation of women's leadership remains firmly rooted in historical patriarchal norms.

As a result, both Yogyakarta and Brunei show that women's roles in succession are heavily influenced by historical constructions, cultural traditions, and patriarchal religious interpretations, although the levels of negotiation are different: Yogyakarta is beginning to open up a discourse on women's leadership, while Brunei continues to limit such opportunities.

Women's Leadership in the Postmodern Era

In the postmodern era, the concept of "Women" shifted from a stable biological category to a social construct (Aly, 2025). Postmodern feminists argued that gender is "performative", something we *do* rather than something we *are* (Alcoff, 1997). In that postmodern era, Yogyakarta faces a dynamic between renewal and tradition. Reform through *King's Words* and *Dawuh Raja* Sultan Hamengku Buwono X opened opportunities for women to access leadership in the Palace and local government, meanwhile the position of women in Brunei has been marked by the emergence of a

counter-discourse that challenges the nationalist construction of normative Malay femininity. Young women, especially college students, have begun to use creative spaces, such as writing literature in English, to renegotiate their identities (Özgüleş, 2017). They express perspectives that sometimes diverge from the state's masculine narrative, simultaneously presenting an alternative imagination of modern women whose engagement with modernity is shaped not only by local traditions but also by Westernization and globalization (Chin, 2018). This phenomenon shows that, in the postmodern era, women are no longer merely objects of dominant cultural values but have become active subjects in constructing their own self-representation and gender identity.

Within the framework of postmodernism, Islamic feminism emerged as an alternative discourse that challenged the dominance of a single interpretation of religious texts and opened up space for plural meanings. This allows Muslim women to reassert their right to leadership in a way that remains rooted in Islamic values while being in line with the universal principles of gender equality. Thus, women's leadership in the postmodern era is not just the adoption of Western ideals but the result of a negotiation process between tradition, religion, and the demands of modernity (Koburtay et al., 2023). The presence of women's voices in the public sphere shows that gender identity and roles can be reconstructed, and illustrates how Islam can be interpreted progressively to support women's leadership roles in society.

The position of women in Muslim societies has shifted, increasingly emphasizing public and private spaces as an arena for the struggle for equality. Orakzai (2014) argue that traditional restrictions, which assign women to the domestic realm and men to the public sphere, have become a source of structural inequality. However, through a hermeneutical-relativist approach, the reinterpretation of religious texts can open up space for women's empowerment in the social, political, and legal realms. Muslim reformists emphasized that the verses of the Qur'an provided the basis for spiritual equality, while the subordination of women arose largely from interpretations shaped by the 7th-century cultural context. In the postmodern era, such a reinterpretation is becoming increasingly important, as women are called not only to fulfill the role of wives or mothers but also to act as equal social and political agents to men in promoting justice, policy, and democratic society (van Es, 2019).

Islamic feminism positions women as equal subjects to men in both rights and responsibilities. She rejects the idea that women's subordination stems from religious teachings, instead asserting that gender injustice arises largely from culturally biased interpretations of religious patriarchy and constructions (Lazuardi & Shamsu, 2024). Through a reinterpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith, Islamic feminism seeks to reaffirm that Islam fundamentally upholds justice for men and women. This perspective positions women not only as male companions in the domestic sphere but also as active agents in the public domain, including in social, political, and religious leadership (Sechzer, 2004). Thus, the perspective of Islamic feminism serves



as a critique and corrective to restrictive cultural practices, while paving the way for a more substantive realization of gender equality.

An analysis from the perspective of Islamic feminism on women's leadership in Yogyakarta and Brunei reveals the clash between the values of equality taught in Islam and the cultural and constitutional interpretations of patriarchy. In Yogyakarta, although reformist discourse through the King's Word and Dawuh Raja Sultan HB X had the potential to pave the way for women to ascend the throne, resistance remained among those who adhered to the patriarchal tradition of the palace. Meanwhile, in Brunei Darussalam, the royal constitution explicitly closes the space for women to become Sultans, although Islam itself does not impose an explicit prohibition on women taking on public leadership roles. From an Islamic feminist perspective, this situation is the result of social and political constructions rather than religious commands, thus creating space to criticize systems that discriminate against women. As a result, in both Yogyakarta and Brunei, Islamic feminist discourse can be a basis for renegotiating women's positions in leadership to align with the principles of justice and equality that lie at the heart of Islamic teachings ([Ratnawati & Santoso, 2021](#)).

The story of Kösem Sultan in the Ottoman Empire serves as historical proof that women could play a significant political role in the structure of the Islamic empire, even in the midst of strict patriarchal domination. As Valide Sultan, Kösem effectively controlled the administration and policies of the state through her influence over the young sultan, demonstrating that female leadership was not an anomaly in the Islamic tradition ([Bozkurt, 2025](#)). This fact strengthens the argument that the obstacles to women's leadership in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta and Brunei are more a product of social, political, and cultural constructions than religious teachings themselves ([Dardias, 2016](#)).

The implementation of CEDAW requires countries to take concrete steps to ensure equal rights between women and men. This is not limited to the elimination of discrimination in written law but also includes changes in social norms, cultural practices, and customary traditions that limit women's mobility. In the context of monarchies such as Yogyakarta and Brunei, the implementation of CEDAW implies a moral and legal obligation to review rules and traditions that explicitly prohibit women from occupying leadership positions. States parties that have ratified CEDAW must ensure that women have equal access to education, political opportunities, and public office, including in the structure of the kingdom. Thus, the implementation of CEDAW serves not only as an international instrument but also as a normative framework to promote a more just and equitable social transformation for women.

Conclusion

The arrangement and status of women in the royal structures of Yogyakarta and Brunei Darussalam are both rooted in patriarchal traditions, albeit with different

dynamics. In Yogyakarta, the sultan's succession system, as recognized by the state under Law No. 13 of 2012, initially excluded women, although the interpretation of the related article sparked debate. The wisdom of Sultan HB X through Sabda Raja and Dawuh Raja then gained legal legitimacy through the Constitutional Court Decision No. 88/PUU-XIV/2016, opening opportunities for women's leadership. In contrast, Brunei Darussalam, with its Malay-Islamic monarchy ideology and constitution that explicitly stipulates that only male descendants can become Sultans, completely excludes the possibility of female rule. Thus, Yogyakarta shows the potential for reform towards equality, while Brunei continues to maintain the patriarchal system in the royal succession.

Studies of women's leadership in the Islamic world show that, although Islam gives women equal positions of dignity and rights, practices within the monarchy are heavily shaped by historical, cultural, and religious interpretations. History records of women's leadership in the Sultanate of Aceh, as well as influential figures such as Queen Elizabeth I and Sultana Safiye, showing that women were able to play a strategic role in politics and diplomacy. However, in contemporary Southeast Asia, Yogyakarta and Brunei follow different paths. Yogyakarta, through the King's Word and Dawuh Raja Sultan HB X and the recognition by the Constitutional Court, has opened up a new discourse on the possibility of women ascending the throne, even as patriarchal traditions persist. In contrast, Brunei strictly limits female leadership through its constitutional requirement that the Sultan must be male. Therefore, women's leadership in Islamic monarchies relies heavily on the interaction of political legitimacy, elite support, cultural context, and religious interpretation, with Yogyakarta showing potential for reform while Brunei maintains a rigid patriarchal system.

In the postmodern era, women's positions have shifted significantly, with the expansion of spaces to negotiate gender identity and roles, including through Islamic feminist discourses that challenge patriarchal interpretations. The historical record of women's leadership, both in the Sultanate of Aceh and through figures such as Kösem Sultan, shows that women's involvement in the politics of the Islamic kingdom was not unprecedented but part of a broader socio-political dynamic. However, in Yogyakarta and Brunei, opportunities for women's leadership remain limited by patriarchal cultural and legal structures even though Yogyakarta began to open up reformist discourse through the words of King Sultan HB X, while Brunei continues to close this path constitutionally. Islamic feminist perspectives, alongside international instruments such as CEDAW, emphasize that gender discrimination is not a religious mandate but a product of social and political interpretation, which requires re-evaluation to achieve true equality. Therefore, gender equality in leadership is not only a demand of modernity but also a principle of justice inherent in Islam and international law.



Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Indonesia, for granted support with contract number: PD-010/SP3/LPPM-UAD/XI/2024

Declarations

Author contribution : Author 1: initiated the research ideas, instrument construction, data collection, analysis, and draft writing; Author 2: revised the research ideas, literature review, data presentation and analysis, and the final draft; Author 3: proofread and finalize the script.
Funding statement : This research is funded under Research Project Number PD-010/SP3/LPPM-UAD/XI/2024
Conflict of interest : The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Additional information : No additional information is available for this paper.

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