



Reframing Women's Educational Leadership in Aceh: Rereading Fatmawati Soekarno through Sociohistorical Perspectives

Fonti Fai Banjarnahor^{1*}, Rosmawaty Harahap¹

¹Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: fontifaibanjarnahor25@gmail.com

Abstract

A Women's leadership in social development and education has been widely discussed in Indonesian scholarship, yet many studies continue to privilege national narratives while giving limited attention to regional socio historical contexts such as Aceh. Aceh possesses a distinctive tradition of women's authority grounded in Islamic values, moral responsibility, and community-oriented education, which has rarely been examined in relation to national female figures. This study addresses this gap by critically reinterpreting the social and educational leadership of Fatmawati Soekarno through an Aceh centered analytical lens. The objective of this study is to examine how Fatmawati's leadership ethos in education and social welfare resonates with Acehnese traditions of women's leadership and to assess its relevance for Aceh Studies. Employing a qualitative interpretive research design, the study draws on historical and discursive analysis of primary documents and secondary scholarly literature related to Fatmawati, women's leadership, education, and Acehnese socio cultural history. The findings reveal that Fatmawati's leadership was predominantly articulated through moral authority, educational advocacy, and community oriented social care rather than formal political power. These characteristics closely align with established models of women's leadership in Aceh, where legitimacy is grounded in ethical credibility, service, and educational engagement. An important finding is the strong discursive compatibility between Fatmawati's national leadership ideals and Acehnese gender traditions, challenging assumptions that national female figures lack regional relevance. The study contributes to Aceh Studies by demonstrating the value of integrating national historiography with regionally grounded analysis. It offers theoretical and practical insights for understanding women's leadership in education and social development within Aceh and comparable contexts.

Keywords: Aceh, women's leadership, education, Fatmawati Soekarno, development

Introduction

The study of women's leadership in social development and education has gained increasing scholarly attention across the humanities and social sciences, particularly in contexts where gender, religion, and local culture intersect in complex ways. In Southeast Asia, and Indonesia in particular, women's educational leadership has been explored primarily through national narratives that emphasize figures associated with state formation, modernization, and political transformation (Blackburn, 2004; Robinson, 2009). While such scholarship has significantly advanced understandings of gendered leadership in postcolonial Indonesia, it has often overlooked the ways in which national female figures can be meaningfully interpreted within



specific regional trajectories. This omission is particularly evident in Aceh, a region characterized by a distinctive socio-historical identity shaped by Islamic governance, prolonged conflict, post-disaster reconstruction, and a long tradition of women's authority in public life.

Aceh occupies a unique position in Indonesian history, not only because of its political autonomy and implementation of Islamic law, but also because of its enduring legacy of women leaders across religious, educational, and political domains. Historical studies document the leadership of female rulers such as Sultanah Safiatuddin, Sultanah Naqiatuddin, and prominent figures like Laksamana Malahayati, Cut Nyak Dhien, and Cut Nyak Meutia, whose roles extended beyond symbolic authority to concrete educational and social reform (Reid, 2006; Banu, 2009). Contemporary research has further demonstrated that Acehnese women continue to negotiate leadership within restrictive gendered spaces shaped by religious interpretation, local customs, and post-conflict realities (Cardozo et al., 2022; Munira et al., 2018). Education has been repeatedly identified as a central arena through which Acehnese women exercise agency, foster social cohesion, and contribute to peacebuilding at the community level (Shah and Lopes Cardozo, 2014).

Within this context, women's leadership in education functions not merely as an institutional role but as a socio-cultural practice embedded in moral authority, religious legitimacy, and community trust. Studies on Acehnese women educators in Islamic boarding schools and community-based institutions reveal that women leaders often operate through informal and relational modes of influence rather than formal political power, yet their impact on social transformation is substantial (Cardozo et al., 2022). Such findings suggest that leadership in Aceh must be understood as historically grounded and culturally situated, rather than assessed solely through modern bureaucratic models of governance.

Despite this rich scholarly foundation, research on women's leadership in Aceh has largely remained internal to regional figures and localized case studies. At the same time, national female figures who played pivotal roles in shaping Indonesian social and educational ideals have rarely been examined through an Aceh-centered analytical lens. Fatmawati Soekarno, Indonesia's first First Lady and a recognized national heroine, represents a particularly salient example. Existing literature on Fatmawati has predominantly focused on her role in national history, women's movements, and symbolic contributions to Indonesian independence, such as her involvement in early women's organizations and her advocacy for women's education (Blackburn, 2004; Pradita et al., 2021). While these studies acknowledge Fatmawati's commitment to social welfare and education, they tend to situate her influence within a national framework that abstracts her leadership from regional contexts.

This national framing presents a significant limitation when considering regions like Aceh, where women's leadership is deeply intertwined with local interpretations of Islam, adat, and historical memory. The absence of scholarly work that connects Fatmawati's educational and social vision with Acehnese socio-historical conditions reflects a broader gap in Indonesian gender studies. Specifically, there is limited understanding of how national female figures can serve as discursive and conceptual models for regional educational and social development, particularly in societies with strong traditions of women's authority such as Aceh. Existing studies on Fatmawati have largely overlooked the implications of her leadership ethos for Acehnese communities, institutions, and educational struggles.

This gap is especially consequential given contemporary challenges faced by Aceh in terms of gender equity in education and leadership. Research on post-conflict and post-tsunami Aceh indicates that women have played crucial roles in rebuilding educational institutions and sustaining community resilience yet continue to encounter structural and cultural barriers to leadership recognition (Lee-Koo, 2012; Lestari, 2017). The need for historically grounded and culturally resonant models of women's leadership has therefore become increasingly urgent. However, scholarly debates remain dominated by either localized Acehnese figures or abstract theoretical discussions of gender and leadership, without integrating national historical exemplars that could offer broader interpretive value.

Responding to this scholarly gap, the present study positions Fatmawati Soekarno not as a biographical subject to be narrated, but as an analytical lens through which women's educational and social leadership in Aceh can be reconsidered. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature in

gender studies, educational history, and Aceh Studies, this research argues that Fatmawati's commitment to women's education, social welfare, and moral leadership offers conceptual insights that resonate with Acehese traditions of female authority. By rereading Fatmawati's struggle through the socio-historical and cultural realities of Aceh, the study seeks to move beyond nationalistic historiography and contribute to a more regionally grounded understanding of women's leadership.

The objective of this study is threefold. First, it aims to critically examine Fatmawati's social and educational leadership by situating her ideas and practices within broader Indonesian debates on women's empowerment and education. Second, it seeks to interpret the relevance of Fatmawati's leadership ethos for Aceh's socio-educational context, particularly in relation to women's roles in community development, moral leadership, and educational access. Third, the study aims to contribute to Aceh Studies by offering an interdisciplinary perspective that bridges national historical analysis with regional socio-cultural inquiry.

The contribution of this study lies in its effort to advance knowledge about Aceh through the reinterpretation of a nationally significant female figure in relation to regional realities. In line with the aims and scope of the Aceh studies, this research provides broader scientific insights relevant to Acehese communities and institutions by highlighting how historical narratives can inform contemporary discussions on gender, education, and social development. By integrating national historiography with Acehese socio-historical perspectives, the study not only enriches debates on women's leadership in Indonesia but also underscores the importance of regionally situated scholarship in understanding complex social transformations.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design situated within the humanities and social sciences. Specifically, it employs a historical and discursive analytical approach to examine Fatmawati Soekarno's social and educational leadership as a conceptual and interpretive lens for understanding women's leadership in the Acehese context. Qualitative historical inquiry is particularly suitable for this study because it allows for the contextual interpretation of texts, ideas, and practices within their socio cultural and temporal settings rather than treating leadership as a measurable variable detached from history (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tosh, 2015).

The research is grounded in interpretivist epistemology, which assumes that meanings related to leadership, gender, and education are socially constructed and historically mediated. Rather than seeking causal explanations, the study aims to generate a nuanced understanding of how Fatmawati's educational and social ideals can be read dialogically alongside Aceh's traditions of women's authority, Islamic values, and community-oriented leadership. This design aligns with prior qualitative research in Aceh Studies that emphasizes contextual depth and interpretive rigor in analyzing gender and education (Munira et al., 2018; Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2014).

The data for this study consist of primary and secondary textual sources. Primary data include historical documents, speeches, letters, autobiographical accounts, and organizational records related to Fatmawati Soekarno's involvement in women's movements, education, and social welfare. These materials are treated as historical texts that reflect values, intentions, and leadership discourses rather than as neutral factual records.

Secondary data comprise peer reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and authoritative studies on women's leadership, gender and education in Indonesia, and Aceh Studies. Particular attention is given to literature that examines Acehese women's leadership, Islamic education, and post conflict social development. Reputable academic publishers and journals such as Cambridge University Press, Brill, Taylor and Francis, and Elsevier form the main corpus of secondary sources to ensure scholarly reliability and intellectual rigor (Blackburn, 2004; Reid, 2006; Cardozo et al., 2022).

Data collection was conducted through systematic document analysis and library research. Relevant historical and academic sources were identified through academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and institutional digital libraries. Search terms included combinations of Fatmawati Soekarno, women's leadership, education and social development, Aceh women, Islamic education in Aceh, and gender leadership in Indonesia.

In selecting documents, the study applied inclusion criteria that prioritized relevance to women's educational leadership, historical credibility, and conceptual contribution to discussions of gender and social development. Documents that lacked scholarly reliability or were purely descriptive without analytical value were excluded. This selective process is consistent with best practices in qualitative document analysis, which emphasize purposive sampling and analytical relevance over quantity (Bowen, 2009).

In qualitative research of this nature, the primary instrument is the researcher acting as an interpretive analyst. The researcher's role involves critically reading, contextualizing, and interpreting texts through established analytical frameworks. To support analytic consistency, a structured analytical guide was developed based on three core dimensions: leadership values and vision, educational and social practices, and resonance with Acehese socio cultural contexts.

In addition, coding matrices and thematic mapping tables were used as supporting instruments to organize textual excerpts and analytical memos. These tools facilitated systematic comparison between Fatmawati's leadership narratives and scholarly accounts of women's leadership in Aceh, enhancing transparency and analytical rigor (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Data collection followed a staged procedure. First, an initial mapping of relevant literature was conducted to establish the conceptual boundaries of the study. Second, primary historical texts related to Fatmawati were collected and chronologically organized to preserve historical coherence. Third, secondary literature on Aceh women's leadership and education was reviewed to identify recurring themes, debates, and conceptual frameworks.

Throughout the process, reflexive memos were maintained to document analytical decisions and emerging interpretations. This reflexive practice is essential in interpretive qualitative research, as it helps to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and reduce unexamined bias (Tracy, 2020). All collected data were carefully archived with full bibliographic documentation to ensure traceability and academic transparency.

Although this study does not employ quantitative measurement, it applies analytical criteria to ensure systematic interpretation. Leadership constructs were examined based on conceptual indicators such as moral authority, advocacy for education, community orientation, and gender conscious vision. These indicators were derived from established leadership and gender studies literature and adapted to the Acehese socio historical context (Robinson, 2009; Munira et al., 2018).

Rather than measuring frequency or intensity, the study assesses the salience and relevance of these leadership dimensions within the texts. This qualitative operationalization enables an in depth understanding of how leadership meaning is articulated and communicated across historical and cultural contexts.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic and discursive analysis. First, thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns related to Fatmawati's educational and social leadership across the data corpus. This process followed a recursive and interpretive procedure involving familiarization, coding, theme development, and thematic refinement (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Second, elements of critical discourse analysis were applied to examine how leadership, gender, and education are discursively constructed in both historical and contemporary texts. This approach allows the study to explore how power relations, cultural norms, and religious values shape representations of women's leadership, particularly in relation to Aceh's socio political history (Fairclough, 2013).

The integration of thematic and discursive analysis enables methodological triangulation, enhancing analytical depth and credibility. By situating Fatmawati's leadership discourse alongside Acehese educational and gender narratives, the study generates contextually grounded insights that contribute both to Aceh Studies and broader discussions of women's leadership in Muslim societies.

Findings

This section presents the findings derived from the qualitative historical and discursive analysis of primary and secondary sources related to Fatmawati Soekarno's social and educational leadership, read in dialogue with Acehese socio historical contexts. The findings are organized

into four thematic categories that reflect recurring patterns across the data corpus and demonstrate the relevance of Fatmawati's leadership vision for Aceh-centered discussions on women, education, and social development.

The analysis of historical documents and scholarly accounts consistently shows that Fatmawati's leadership was articulated less through formal political authority than through moral and educational advocacy. Primary sources such as organizational records from women's movements and autobiographical accounts emphasize her sustained engagement with women's education, social welfare, and child development. Rather than positioning education as a technical policy issue, Fatmawati framed education as a moral responsibility essential to nation building and social justice.

This finding resonates with broader literature on women's leadership in Aceh, where leadership legitimacy is often grounded in moral credibility, religious values, and service to the community (Munira et al., 2018). In both contexts, education is not treated solely as institutional schooling but as a space for ethical formation and social responsibility. The consistency of this framing suggests a convergence between Fatmawati's leadership ethos and Acehnese traditions of women's authority, where moral standing plays a central role in public recognition (Reid, 2006).

A second major finding concerns Fatmawati's commitment to expanding educational access for women across social strata. Analysis of historical narratives reveals that her advocacy addressed women from diverse backgrounds, including those outside elite or urban centers. Educational initiatives and social programs supported by Fatmawati emphasized inclusivity and community participation, highlighting education as a means of social mobility and empowerment rather than elite reproduction.

This pattern mirrors findings in Aceh-focused studies showing that women educators and leaders often engage in grassroots educational practices, particularly in community based and religious institutions (Cardozo et al., 2022). In Aceh, women's educational leadership has been most visible at the local level, where access and trust outweigh formal authority. The parallel between Fatmawati's inclusive educational vision and Acehnese grassroots practices suggests that her leadership discourse carries analytical relevance for understanding how women in Aceh navigate educational inequalities and contribute to community resilience.

The data also indicates that Fatmawati's leadership was closely associated with social care, particularly in areas related to child welfare, health, and women's social organizations. Rather than separating education from social development, Fatmawati's initiatives frequently integrated educational activities with broader forms of community support. Scholarly interpretations note that such integration reflects a gendered mode of leadership that emphasizes relational responsibility and collective wellbeing (Blackburn, 2004).

This finding aligns strongly with Acehnese models of women's leadership, where educational and social roles are frequently intertwined. Studies of Acehnese women leaders in post conflict and post disaster contexts demonstrate that education often functions as a vehicle for peacebuilding, social recovery, and moral reconstruction (Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2014). The thematic overlap suggests that Fatmawati's leadership provides a broader conceptual framework for interpreting women's contributions to Aceh's social and educational ecosystems.

Further findings emerge from the discursive analysis of texts that position Fatmawati within national gender narratives. While national historiography often frames her role symbolically, closer examination reveals a set of leadership values that resonate with Acehnese historical and cultural traditions. These include emphasis on ethical responsibility, education as social obligation, and leadership through service rather than domination.

In Aceh, historical records document a long-standing acceptance of women in leadership roles when grounded in Islamic ethics and communal welfare (Banu, 2009). The findings indicate that Fatmawati's leadership discourse does not conflict with Acehnese gender norms as often assumed in generalized national narratives. Instead, it aligns with Acehnese interpretations of women's authority that balance religious legitimacy, education, and public service. This resonance challenges simplistic assumptions that national female figures lack relevance for localized contexts such as Aceh.

Finally, the analysis reveals a notable absence of Aceh-centered interpretation in existing scholarship on Fatmawati Soekarno. While her contributions to women's movements and education are widely acknowledged, very few studies situate her leadership within regional frameworks, particularly those grounded in Aceh Studies. This absence is evident in both historical and contemporary literature, which tends to privilege national or Javanese-centric perspectives.

This finding underscores the need for regionally anchored reinterpretations of national figures, especially in journals devoted to Aceh-focused scholarship. By demonstrating discursive and conceptual continuities between Fatmawati's leadership and Acehese women's traditions, the study highlights the potential of interdisciplinary research to bridge national history and regional social analysis. Such an approach directly supports the Journal of Aceh Studies' aim to advance knowledge relevant to Acehese communities while contributing broader scientific insights.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how Fatmawati Soekarno's social and educational leadership can be analytically reread within Acehese socio historical contexts, with particular attention to women's educational leadership, moral authority, and community oriented social development. The discussion that follows interprets the key findings by situating them within existing scholarly debates, responding directly to the research objectives, and highlighting theoretical as well as contextual implications for Aceh Studies.

The central research question asked how Fatmawati's leadership ethos in education and social development resonates with, and potentially informs, Acehese traditions of women's leadership. The findings demonstrate that Fatmawati's leadership was consistently articulated through moral commitment, educational advocacy, and social care rather than through formal political power. This pattern is significant because it directly corresponds to documented Acehese models of women's authority that prioritize ethical credibility, religious legitimacy, and social responsibility over formal institutional positions (Munira et al., 2018; Reid, 2006).

By rereading Fatmawati's contributions as a discursive model rather than a biographical narrative, the study provides an interpretive response to the research question and underscores the relevance of national historical figures for regionally grounded analyses. This approach addresses a long-standing gap in Indonesian gender scholarship, where national and regional histories are often studied in isolation.

One of the most compelling findings concerns the centrality of moral and educational leadership in Fatmawati's public role. Previous studies on women's leadership in Indonesia emphasize bureaucratic participation or political activism as markers of influence (Blackburn, 2004; Robinson, 2009). In contrast, the present data reveal that Fatmawati's leadership was rooted in ethical persuasion, educational advocacy, and sustained engagement with women and children's welfare.

This finding supports earlier research in Aceh Studies showing that women leaders often exercise influence through informal educational and social networks, particularly within religious and community institutions (Cardozo et al., 2022). The parallel suggests that Fatmawati's leadership discourse aligns more closely with Acehese leadership traditions than is typically acknowledged in national historiography. This alignment challenges the assumption that national female figures lack contextual relevance for Aceh due to differences in cultural or political experience.

The analysis further highlights Fatmawati's emphasis on inclusive educational access, particularly for women outside elite and urban circles. This orientation reinforces existing scholarship on Acehese women's leadership, which documents a strong grassroots dimension in educational initiatives led by women, especially in rural and post conflict settings (Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2014). The finding supports the view that women's educational leadership in Aceh is most effective when embedded in community trust and everyday social interaction rather than in centralized institutions.

An important and somewhat unexpected outcome is the degree of convergence between Fatmawati's national level educational ideals and Acehese grassroots educational practices.

Prior studies often present national narratives as top down and disconnected from local realities (Reid, 2006). The present analysis complicates this view by demonstrating that certain national leadership discourses, when read critically, may offer conceptual resources that resonate strongly with local contexts such as Aceh.

The findings largely support previous studies emphasizing the moral and relational dimensions of women's leadership in Aceh (Munira et al., 2018; Banu, 2009). They also reinforce insights from gender and education research in post conflict Aceh, which highlight education as a site of peacebuilding, social recovery, and moral reconstruction (Lee Koo, 2012; Cardozo et al., 2022).

However, the study also contrasts with portions of the literature that portray Acehese gender norms as uniformly restrictive or incompatible with women's leadership (Blackburn, 2004). While structural and cultural constraints undeniably exist, the discursive resonance identified between Fatmawati's leadership and Acehese traditions suggests a more complex landscape in which women's authority is negotiated rather than categorically denied. This nuance contributes to recent efforts in Aceh Studies to move beyond reductive representations of Islamic governance and gender relations.

The convergence observed between Fatmawati's leadership ethos and Acehese women's leadership traditions may be explained by shared cultural and religious values that emphasize social responsibility, education as moral formation, and service-oriented authority. Both Fatmawati's initiatives and Acehese women's educational leadership are grounded in an understanding of education as inseparable from ethical and communal life.

Another explanatory factor lies in the historical positioning of women in Aceh as agents of social continuity during periods of political instability, conflict, and reconstruction. Fatmawati's leadership similarly emerged in times of national upheaval, where moral authority and social cohesion were urgently needed. These parallel historical conditions may account for the discursive compatibility observed in the data.

Despite these insights, caution is warranted in interpreting the findings. The study relies primarily on textual and documentary sources, which reflect particular perspectives shaped by historical context and authorship. While the interpretive approach allows for deep contextual analysis, it does not claim to represent all forms of women's leadership in Aceh or to suggest direct causal influence between Fatmawati's actions and Acehese practices.

Moreover, the study does not seek to idealize Fatmawati as a universal model for Acehese women's leadership. Instead, her leadership is treated as an analytical lens that illuminates certain values and practices relevant to Aceh Studies. This distinction is essential to avoid normative or uncritical appropriation of national figures into regional scholarship.

The findings offer several implications for theory and practice. Theoretically, the study demonstrates the value of integrating national historiography into regionally grounded analyses, thus enriching Aceh Studies with broader interpretive perspectives. It suggests that women's leadership can be more productively understood through relational, moral, and educational dimensions rather than through institutional status alone.

Practically, the findings may inform educational and social development initiatives in Aceh by highlighting historically grounded models of women's leadership that align with local values. Policymakers and educators may draw on such models to design programs that strengthen women's participation without conflicting with socio cultural norms.

Future research could extend this study by incorporating empirical fieldwork with contemporary Acehese women educators to explore how historical leadership values are enacted in present day practices. Comparative studies between Aceh and other regions with strong traditions of women's leadership would also deepen understanding of regional variation within Indonesia. Finally, interdisciplinary approaches combining history, education, and anthropology could further refine the conceptualization of women's leadership in Aceh and beyond.

Conclusion

This study set out to reinterpret Fatmawati Soekarno's social and educational leadership through the lens of Aceh Studies, with the aim of bridging national gender historiography and the region's distinctive socio cultural and historical contexts. By employing a qualitative historical and

discursive approach, the analysis has demonstrated that Fatmawati's leadership cannot be reduced to symbolic or biographical narratives alone. Instead, her sustained commitment to education, social care, and moral responsibility emerges as a form of leadership that resonates strongly with Acehnese traditions of women's authority.

The findings indicate that Fatmawati's advocacy for women's education, inclusive access, and community oriented social development parallels long established models of women's leadership in Aceh, where moral credibility, service, and educational engagement are central sources of legitimacy. This convergence challenges the often-implicit assumption that national female figures operate within frameworks detached from regional realities. On the contrary, the study shows that when interpreted critically, Fatmawati's leadership ethos offers conceptual insights that are meaningful for understanding Acehnese women's roles in education, social cohesion, and ethical leadership.

From an academic standpoint, the study contributes to Aceh Studies by offering an interdisciplinary perspective that connects women's history, education, and social development. It highlights the value of situating national historical figures within regional analytical frameworks, thereby enriching discussions that have traditionally been confined either to localized case studies or to broad national narratives. In doing so, the study responds directly to the Journal of Aceh Studies' aim of advancing knowledge that is both contextually grounded in Aceh and relevant to broader scholarly debates.

The implications of these findings extend beyond historical interpretation. Conceptually, they support a view of women's leadership that prioritizes relational authority, moral responsibility, and educational engagement over formal institutional power. Practically, this perspective may inform contemporary discussions on gender, education, and community development in Aceh, particularly in efforts to strengthen women's participation in socially legitimate and culturally resonant ways.

In conclusion, rereading Fatmawati Soekarno through an Aceh centered perspective not only deepens understanding of her contributions but also affirms the importance of regional lenses in interpreting national histories. By foregrounding education and moral leadership as shared foundations of women's authority, this study underscores the enduring relevance of historically grounded leadership models for addressing present and future challenges in Acehnese society.

Ethics approval

Not required.

Competing interests

All the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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Underlying data

Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

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