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Agency Within Tradition: How Muslim Women Become Mediators in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces

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Abstract

In many Muslim societies, women's access to religious authority and formal dispute resolution roles remains constrained by patriarchal interpretations of Islamic tradition. This study examines how Muslim women in Thailand's southern border provinces assume mediation roles and exercise agency within these patriarchal religious structures. Drawing on Saba Mahmood's conceptualization of agency as inhabitation rather than resistance, the research employs a qualitative design based on in-depth interviews with fifteen mediators and related actors in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. The findings identify three primary pathways into mediation: civil society engagement shaped by experiences of conflict, community-based service grounded in religious and social capital, and formal legal professional development. Across these trajectories, women actively reinterpret the Islamic concept of *naṣīḥah* (advice) to encompass professional mediation, thereby constructing hybrid forms of religious-professional authority. In practice, mediators integrate *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), Thai civil law, and local Malay customary norms to resolve domestic violence and inheritance disputes. Despite confronting gender-based stereotypes, security risks in conflict-affected areas, and limited institutional support, they transform these constraints through strategic normative positioning and collective networks. The study argues that legal pluralism can serve as a strategic resource for expanding women's authority when mobilized through internally grounded religious reinterpretation. By demonstrating how religious authenticity functions as a source of empowerment rather than constraint, this research advances socio-legal scholarship on women's agency in Islamic contexts and offers policy-relevant insights for strengthening institutional support within plural legal systems.

[*Di banyak masyarakat Muslim, akses perempuan terhadap otoritas keagamaan dan peran formal dalam penyelesaian sengketa masih dibatasi oleh interpretasi patriarki terhadap tradisi Islam. Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana perempuan Muslim di provinsi perbatasan selatan Thailand memasuki peran mediasi dan menjalankan agensi dalam struktur keagamaan yang patriarki tersebut. Berlandaskan pada konseptualisasi Saba Mahmood mengenai agensi sebagai penghayatan* (inhabitation) *alih-alih resistensi, penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif melalui wawancara mendalam dengan lima belas mediator dan aktor terkait di Pattani, Yala, dan Narathiwat. Temuan penelitian mengidentifikasi tiga jalur utama menuju peran mediasi: keterlibatan masyarakat sipil yang dibentuk oleh pengalaman konflik, layanan berbasis komunitas yang bertumpu pada modal religius dan sosial, serta pengembangan profesional hukum formal. Di sepanjang jalur tersebut, perempuan secara aktif mereinterpretasi konsep Islam tentang nasihat menjadi praktik mediasi profesional, sehingga membangun bentuk otoritas religius-profesional yang hibrid. Dalam praktiknya,*

mediator mengintegrasikan fikih Islam, hukum perdata Thailand, dan norma adat Melayu lokal dalam penyelesaian kasus kekerasan dalam rumah tangga dan sengketa waris. Meskipun menghadapi stereotip berbasis gender, risiko keamanan di wilayah konflik, dan keterbatasan dukungan institusional, mereka mentransformasikan kendala tersebut melalui strategi posisi normatif dan jejaring kolektif. Studi ini berargumen bahwa pluralisme hukum dapat berfungsi sebagai sumber strategis bagi perluasan otoritas perempuan ketika dimobilisasi melalui reinterpretasi religius dari dalam. Dengan menunjukkan bahwa autentisitas keagamaan dapat menjadi sumber pemberdayaan alih-alih pembatasan, penelitian ini memperkaya kajian sosio-legal tentang agensi perempuan dalam konteks Islam serta menawarkan implikasi kebijakan bagi penguatan dukungan institusional dalam sistem hukum plural.]

Keywords: Islamic Family Law, Legal Pluralism, Mediation, Religious Authority, Southern Thailand, Women's Agency.

Introduction

Muslim women across diverse societies face persistent barriers to religious authority and public leadership roles, shaped by patriarchal interpretations of Islamic traditions that confine women primarily to domestic spheres.[1] Patriarchal gender norms in Muslim communities, deeply embedded in cultural beliefs and reinforced through family structures, prescribe specific gender roles characterized by subservience and obedience to male authority.[2] This patriarchal monopoly over religious interpretation has been sustained through continuous recontextualization of religious texts according to ideological needs, often marginalizing women from public and religious leadership.[3] However, recent global developments reveal significant shifts in this landscape. Following UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000, which recognized the importance of women's participation in peace processes, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on women's roles in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.[4] Studies demonstrate that women's inclusion significantly increases the prospects for sustainable peace, as conflict situations create transformative opportunities for women's empowerment by disrupting traditional gender roles.[5] Within this global context, Muslim women are increasingly challenging traditional religious authority structures, adopting what scholars term an "Islamic feminist worldview" that seeks to reclaim religious authority while maintaining religious authenticity.[6] This emerging phenomenon raises critical

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[1]   Mohd Anuar Ramli et al., "Muslim-Malay Women in Political Leadership: Navigating Challenges and Shaping the Future," *Mazahib* 23, no. 1 (June 2024): 305–50; Intan Erwani and Anisa Suryani Siregar, "The Role of Women in Islamic Sacred Texts: A Critical Study of Women's Narratives and Authority in Islamic Tradition," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 106, no. 1 (December 2024): 1–14.

[2]   Amir Masoud Sharifnia et al., "Muslim Women's Experiences of Domestic Violence and Abuse: A Meta-Ethnography of Global Evidence," *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 26, no. 4 (October 2025): 695.

[3]   Tamer Koburtay, Tala Abuhussein, and Yusuf M. Sidani, "Women Leadership, Culture, and Islam: Female Voices from Jordan," *Journal of Business Ethics* 183, no. 2 (March 2023): 348.

[4]   Ingrid Vik Bakken and Halvard Buhaug, "Civil War and Female Empowerment," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65, no. 5 (May 2021): 982–1009.

[5]   Maxwell Adjei, "Women's Participation in Peace Processes: A Review of Literature," *Journal of Peace Education* 16, no. 2 (May 2019): 133–54.

[6]   Arifah Millati Agustina and Nor Ismah, "Challenging Traditional Islamic Authority: Indonesian Female Ulama and the Fatwa Against Forced Marriages," *Journal of Islamic Law* 5, no. 1 (February 2024): 130.

questions about how women navigate pathways into mediation roles within patriarchal religious structures—questions that remain underexplored in existing research.

Thailand's southern border provinces—namely Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—provide a particularly significant context for analyzing Muslim women's pathways into mediation roles. This region presents a unique combination of factors rarely found elsewhere: a predominantly Malay-Muslim population living as a religious minority within a Buddhist-majority state,[7] in which Islamic legal principles coexist with the national legal framework amid an ongoing ethno-political conflict that has persisted for over two decades.[8] Unlike Muslim-majority countries, in which Islamic law may dominate, or Western contexts where Muslims constitute small minorities, southern Thailand represents a distinctive middle ground where Islamic family law is formally recognized in specific domains while operating alongside Thai civil law.[9] This legal pluralism creates complex navigational challenges for women seeking to exercise agency in dispute resolution. Furthermore, the protracted conflict has generated urgent needs for community-based mediation while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal structures that limit women's public participation.[10] Women in this region navigate intersecting forms of marginalization shaped by gender, ethnicity, and religion, with their roles traditionally confined to domestic spheres despite increasing economic contributions.[11] This convergence of legal pluralism, ongoing conflict, and deeply embedded patriarchal norms makes southern Thailand an analytically rich site for understanding how Muslim women construct pathways into public roles traditionally reserved for men.

The existing literature on women, Islam, and conflict resolution can be categorized into three distinct streams, each offering valuable insights while leaving critical gaps. The first stream examines women's participation in formal peace processes and demonstrates that their inclusion significantly enhances the prospects for sustainable peace.[12] However, this literature primarily focuses on post-civil war contexts and emphasizes outcomes rather than the mechanisms through which women gain access to these roles. Studies in Southeast Asia within this stream identify specific barriers women face: difficulty securing meaningful participation despite grassroots visibility, challenges in obtaining community support, and tensions between gender advocacy and peacebuilding, where feminist discourse is perceived

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7. Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Muslim Identity, Local Networks, and Transnational Islam in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 6 (November 2011): 1385.

8. Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Muslims as Thailand's Largest Religious Minority," in *Routledge Handbook of Islam in Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2022), 234.

9. Mahamatayuding Samah, Raihanah Abdullah, and Nahid Ferdousi, "Muslim Family Law in Southern Thailand: A Historical Overview," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 37, no. 3 (July 2017): 357–70; Anthin Lathifah et al., "Inheritance Law Politics: The Implementation in Muslim-Nonmuslim Families in Southern Thailand," *El-Mashlahah* 15, no. 1 (June 2025): 189–212.

10. Yasmin Sattar and Imron Sahoh, "Politics and Muslim Women in the Deep South of Thailand: Roles, Opportunities, and Challenges," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 51, no. 1 (January 2024): 55–79.

11. Tapakorn Phayayam, Muhammed Afsal Thekkuveettil, and Nasir Hassan Wani, "Cultural Traditions and Women's Empowerment: A Closer Look at Southern Thailand," *IJFMR - International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* 6, no. 1 (January 2024): 1–7.

12. Adjei, "Women's Participation in Peace Processes," 133–54; Sarah L. Bosha, "The Importance of Gender Equality and Women's Inclusion for Resolving Conflict and Sustaining Peace," in *Just Security in an Undergoverned World*, ed. William Durch, Joris Larik, and Richard Ponzio (Oxford University Press, 2018), 90–117.

as culturally disruptive.[13] The second stream focuses on Islamic legal reform and women's agency within religious frameworks. Research in this area documents how Muslim women challenge traditional religious authority through strategic knowledge production,[14] navigate multiple authority systems in seeking divorce and inheritance rights,[15] and develop "contextual Islamic feminism" adapted to specific socio-legal circumstances.[16] However, these studies concentrate primarily on women as recipients of legal processes rather than as mediators or dispute resolvers. The third stream examines women's civil society organizing in conflict zones, including Thailand's deep south, documenting how women mobilize cross-cultural collaboration for peace[17] and how conflict transforms gender roles.[18] While this literature acknowledges women's expanding public presence, it focuses on collective organizing rather than individual professional trajectories into mediation. Across all three streams, a consistent gap emerges: existing research documents barriers, outcomes, or collective movements, but limited attention has been given to the specific pathways through which individual Muslim women transition from traditional domestic roles to become recognized mediators within patriarchal religious structures.

This study addresses a critical gap by examining how Muslim women in Thailand's southern border provinces navigate pathways into mediation roles, how they integrate multiple normative frameworks in practice, and how they transform challenges into opportunities for expanded agency. The research pursues three specific objectives: first, to identify and analyze the various pathways through which Muslim women enter mediation roles, including civil society engagement, community-based service, and legal professional development; second, to explore how these women integrate Islamic principles, formal legal frameworks, and local cultural practices in their mediation work, particularly in cases involving domestic violence and inheritance dispute cases; and third, to understand the challenges they encounter and examine how they transform these obstacles through strategic reinterpretation of Islamic concepts. The central argument emerging from this research is that Muslim women exercise agency within patriarchal religious structures not by rejecting

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[13] Duanghathai Buranajaroenkij, "Challenges to Women's Inclusion in Peace Processes in Thailand and Myanmar," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22, no. 3 (May 2020): 403–22.

[14] Agustina and Ismah, "Challenging Traditional Islamic Authority," 125–46; Jamil Akhtar, "Reinterpreting Religious Authority: Women as Islamic Jurists for Addressing Gender Justice in Pakistan," *Women's Studies International Forum* 116 (May 2026): 103300; Masoumeh Rad Goudarzi, "Advancing Women's Social and Political Rights Through a Reinterpretation of Islamic Law: Ayatollah Jannaati's View of Female Political Authority in Shiite Islam," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 1 (January 2025): e12351.

[15] Sagnik Dutta, "Divorce, Kinship, and Errant Wives: Islamic Feminism in India, and the Everyday Life of Divorce and Maintenance," *Ethnicities* 21, no. 3 (June 2021): 454–76; Naheed Ghauri, "Muslim Women's Experiences of Islamic Evaluative Mediation within Shari'a Councils in England and Wales in Relation to Obtaining Divorce as Victims of Domestic Abuse," *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 46, no. 4 (October 2024): 534–55.

[16] Farah Shahin, "Islamic Feminism and Hegemonic Discourses on Faith and Gender in Islam," *International Journal of Islam in Asia* 1, no. 1 (December 2020): 27–48; Hidayatullah, "Feminist Interpretation of the Qur'an in a Comparative Feminist Setting," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no. 2 (2014): 115–29.

[17] Anna Christi Suwardi, "Women's Movement Towards Building Sustainable Peace in Cross-Cultural Society: The Case of Peace Agenda of Women in the Deep South of Thailand," in *Integrated Approaches to Peace and Sustainability*, ed. Ayyoob Sharifi, Dahlia Simangan, and Shinji Kaneko (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023), 148–50.

[18] Saowarot Pluemjai, and Utit Sungkharat, "Peace Development in Southern Border Provinces: The Women's Story," *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, Thaksin University* 10, no. 1 (2015): 12–3.

tradition, but by creatively reinterpreting it to expand possibilities within existing normative frameworks. Most significantly, the findings reveal that women mediators actively reinterpret the traditional Islamic concept of *naṣīḥah* (advice), historically understood as informal counsel, to encompass formal mediation and professional practice. Through this reinterpretation, they construct new forms of religious-professional authority that challenge gender stereotypes while maintaining religious authenticity. These findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of women's agency in Islamic contexts, demonstrating that religious authenticity can serve to expand rather than limit women's authority. The study also offers practical implications for policy development, professional training programs that integrate religious and legal knowledge, and institutional support mechanisms for women's mediation work in pluralistic legal contexts.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study employed in-depth interviews to explore the pathways and experiences of Muslim women mediators in Thailand's southern border provinces. The research was conducted from March 2022 to February 2023 in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—regions purposefully selected for their unique cultural context, where Islamic principles intersect with the national legal system, providing a rich environment to examine women's roles in dispute resolution. Using snowball sampling, the study recruited 15 key informants, comprising 13 females and 2 males (see Table 1). The sample included eight civil society representatives, three legal professionals, two professional mediators, and two religious leaders. Informants were selected based on specific criteria: direct experience in mediation activities, current residence in the southern border provinces, and willingness to share their experiences. Recruitment began with an initial female civil society representative and expanded through referral chains to ensure comprehensive representation of perspectives within the mediation community. Data analysis followed a rigorous six-step process: verifying the completeness of interview records, systematic categorization, thematic analysis, cross-referencing with existing literature, identifying patterns across participants' experiences, and synthesizing various data sources.

The analytical framework of this study draws on theories of women's agency within religious contexts, particularly the conceptualization developed by Saba Mahmood in her seminal work on the Islamic revival movement. Mahmood's framework challenges liberal feminist assumptions that equate agency exclusively with resistance to or subversion of patriarchal norms. Instead, she argues that agency can operate through the inhabitation and reinterpretation of religious traditions from within, where women actively engage with normative structures rather than simply rejecting them.[19] This theoretical lens is especially suited to examining Muslim women mediators in southern Thailand, who demonstrate agency not by abandoning Islamic frameworks but by creatively reinterpreting concepts such as *naṣīḥah* to encompass formal mediation practices. The study also draws on complementary perspectives from scholars examining women's agency in Islamic legal contexts, including

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[19] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 14–7.

work on "contextual Islamic feminism" that adapts universal principles to specific socio-legal circumstances,[20] as well as research demonstrating how Muslim women construct authority through strategic engagement with multiple normative systems.[21] This integrated framework enables an analysis of how women mediators navigate, negotiate, and transform patriarchal structures while maintaining religious authenticity, focusing on the pathways into mediation roles, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they employ to construct legitimate professional identities within their socio-religious context.

Table 1
List of Informants

Name (Pseudonym)	Age (Years)	Province	Professional Category	Mediation Experience
Fatimah	Not specified	Pattani	Legal Professional	Over 10 years
Asma	60	Pattani	Legal Professional	30 years
Aina	52	Narathiwat	Civil Society Representative	Over 10 years
Nurida	57	Pattani	Civil Society Representative	Over 10 years
Halwa	57	Pattani	Civil Society Representative	5 years
Nisreen	65	Yala	Civil Society Representative	4 years
Amal	Not specified	Yala	Civil Society Representative	Over 10 years
Laila	32	Narathiwat	Civil Society Representative	6 years
Mariam	54	Yala	Professional Mediator	2 years
Ali	60	Narathiwat	Religious Leader	6 years
Zainun	36	Pattani	Legal Professional	Over 10 years
Zinab	Not specified	Pattani	Civil Society Representative	Over 15 years
Aishah	57	Pattani	Civil Society Representative	Over 10 years
Muna	57	Pattani	Professional Mediator	15 years
Ibrahim	63	Pattani	Religious Leader	Not specified

The Social Structure of Muslim Communities in Thailand's Southern Provinces

Thailand's southern region extends along the Malay Peninsula from Chumphon province downward, encompassing numerous provinces with diverse cultural and religious compositions. This study focuses specifically on the southernmost tip of Thailand, comprising Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, often referred to collectively as the "deep south." These three provinces are geographically positioned at Thailand's border with Malaysia and are characterized by a predominantly Muslim population, presenting a stark contrast to Thailand's Buddhist-majority landscape.[22] This unique demographic composition reflects the area's historical ties to the former Patani Sultanate, a Malay-Muslim kingdom that existed before the region's incorporation into modern Thailand. The legacy of this distinct history continues to shape the social, cultural, and religious environment of these border provinces, creating a community deeply rooted in Islamic traditions and Malay heritage that sets them apart from the rest of the country.[23]

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20   Shahin, "Islamic Feminism and Hegemonic Discourses on Faith and Gender in Islam," 31; Hidayatullah, "Feminist Interpretation of the Qur'an in a Comparative Feminist Setting," 124.

21   Dutta, "Divorce, Kinship, and Errant Wives," 462; Qazi Sarah Rasheed, "Transcending Binaries through Self-Empowerment and Personal Development: Exploring the Role of Muslim Women Activists in Community Reforms," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, no. 30 (July 2023): 1–22.

22   Liow, "Muslim Identity, Local Networks, and Transnational Islam in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces," 1385.

23   Yusuf, "Muslims as Thailand's Largest Religious Minority," 197.

Figure 1
Research Location Map

Source: MapChart (2025).

The deep south provinces are home to a predominantly Malay-Muslim population that presents a stark contrast to Thailand's Buddhist majority. According to the Bureau of Registration Administration data from December 2024, the three provinces had a combined population of 2,117,874, with Muslims constituting approximately 76-86% of the population. [24] This demographic profile reflects deep-rooted Malay ethnic identity, widespread use of the Malay language, and strong adherence to Islamic traditions. The social and cultural fabric of these communities is anchored by religious institutions such as mosques, *pondok* (traditional Islamic schools), and madrasah, which serve as centers for religious education and social cohesion.[25] Local leadership, including imams and community elders, plays a crucial role in maintaining social order and mediating between the community and the state.[26] Cultural practices such as the use of the Malay language, traditional dress, and Islamic rituals remain central to identity preservation and resistance to cultural assimilation,[27] while transnational Islamic networks and local organizations further influence religious norms and community identity.[28] However, ongoing conflict and economic hardship have

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[24] Bureau of Registration Administration, "Official Statistics Registration Systems: Population Statistics 2024," (February 4, 2026 2024). https://stat.bora.dopa.go.th/stat/statnew/statMenu/newStat/sumyear.php.

[25] Chatthida Yukhong et al., "Socialization Concepts and Educational Management Development to Create Muslim Citizenship through Private Islamic Schools in the Southern Border Provinces of Thailand," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 15, no. 1 (June 2019): 27–34; Srawut Aree and Christopher M. Joll, "The Religious Geography of Thailand's Malay Southern Provinces: Revisiting the Impact of South Asian and Middle Eastern Transnational Islamic Movements," *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 35, no. 2 (July 2020): 343–63.

[26] Md Mahbubul Haque, "Chapter 4: Malay Muslim Integration in Upper Southern Provinces: Role of the Thai Government," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 45, no. 2 (April 2018): 110.

[27] Liow, "Muslim Identity, Local Networks, and Transnational Islam in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces," 1385.

[28] Aree and Joll, "The Religious Geography of Thailand's Malay Southern Provinces," 348–50.

contributed to outmigration from the region, further reinforcing its status as a distinct religious and ethnic minority within Thailand.[29] Despite these challenges, some communities have developed mechanisms for cultural negotiation and peaceful coexistence with Buddhist neighbors through trust-building and moderate values.[30]

The legal system in Thailand's southern border provinces operates under a distinctive framework of legal pluralism that combines secular Thai law with Islamic family law. While Thailand is predominantly governed by a secular legal system based on civil law traditions, the state formally recognizes the application of Islamic law in specific domains for Muslim citizens in the southern border provinces. This recognition dates back to the Act on the Application of Islamic Law in the Provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala, and Satun B.E. 2489 (1946), which permits the use of Islamic law in matters of family and inheritance among Muslims.[31] Under this framework, Islamic law applies specifically to cases involving marriage, divorce, inheritance, and family disputes, while all other legal matters, including criminal law, commercial law, and property law outside inheritance, remain under the jurisdiction of Thai civil law. The administration of Islamic family law is overseen by Provincial Islamic Committees,[32] while cases involving Muslim family and inheritance matters in Provincial Courts are referred to the Dato Yuttitham (a specialized Islamic judge position) for adjudication according to Islamic legal principles. Under this framework, Islamic law applies specifically to cases involving marriage, divorce, inheritance, and family disputes, while all other legal matters, including criminal law, commercial law, and property law outside inheritance, remain under the jurisdiction of Thai civil law. The administration of Islamic family law is overseen by Provincial Islamic Committees, while Provincial Courts adjudicating such cases include the Dato Yuttitham, who sits alongside Thai civil judges to apply Islamic legal principles. This dual legal structure creates a complex environment in which Muslim women mediators must navigate multiple normative systems, requiring fluency in both Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and Thai civil law to assist parties in dispute resolution effectively.

Muslim women's social position within this context is shaped by a complex interplay of Islamic tradition, patriarchal norms, and evolving socio-economic dynamics. Traditional gender roles typically emphasize women's responsibilities in household management and cultural preservation, limiting their public participation.[33] However, increased access to education and economic opportunities is gradually empowering women, promoting social mobility, and challenging established gender norms. Women's participation in religious and

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[29] Kim Korinek et al., "Migration Amidst Conflict and Cumulative Causation: An Analysis of International & Domestic Migration in Thailand's Southernmost Provinces," *Population Research and Policy Review* 44, no. 1 (February 2025): 2.

[30] Yaoping Liu, Chatchai Rakthin, and Langgeng Budianto, "Religious Moderation and Community Cohesion: Exploring Social Memory, Identity, and Solidarity in the Phu Khao Thong Muslim Community, Ayutthaya," *Millah: Journal of Religious Studies* 24, no. 1 (February 2025): 382.

[31] Application of Islamic Law in the Provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala, and Satun B.E. 2489, (1946).

[32] Application of Islamic Law in the Provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala, and Satun B.E. 2489, (1946).

[33] Kaltham Al-Ghanim, "Perceptions of Women's Roles between Traditionalism and Modernity in Qatar," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 9, no. 1 (January 2019): 52–74; Zhang Chuanchuan and Wang Jingwen, "Gender Roles and Women's Labor Market Outcomes," *China Economic Quarterly International* 1, no. 2 (June 2021): 97–108.

community life remains varied. While some engage actively in Islamic organizations and transnational networks, others continue to face persistent cultural and institutional barriers. The intersection of gender, ethnicity, and religion creates layered complexities in women's lived experiences, with ongoing tensions between aspirations for gender equality and pressures for cultural preservation.[34]

Muslim Women's Distinct Pathways to Mediation Authority

Mediation, as an alternative dispute resolution, involves a neutral third party who facilitates negotiation between disputing parties to reach a mutually acceptable agreement. Within the Thai legal system, mediators can be categorized into three main types based on their institutional affiliation and legal recognition. First, formal court-annexed mediators operate within the judicial system under the Civil Procedure Code and the Act on Establishment of and Procedure for Dispute Mediation Centers B.E. 2562 (2019) and must be certified through training programs approved by the Courts of Justice or the Ministry of Justice.[35] Second, administrative mediators work within government agencies such as the Department of Provincial Administration or the Department of Labour Protection and Welfare, handling specific types of disputes within their jurisdictional mandate. Third, informal or community-based mediators operate outside formal legal structures, drawing legitimacy from religious authority, social standing, or community trust rather than state certification.[36] The Muslim women mediators examined in this study span across these categories: some hold formal certification as court-annexed mediators or work within legal professional organizations such as the Muslim Attorney Center Foundation, while others operate as community-based mediators through civil society organizations or religious institutions. This diversity reflects the multiple pathways through which women enter mediation roles and the varied sources of legitimacy they draw upon in their practice.

The analysis revealed three distinct pathways through which Muslim women entered mediation roles in Thailand's southern border provinces: civil society engagement, community-based service, and legal professional development. This finding aligns with broader scholarship on women's entry into religious and legal authority roles in Muslim societies, which identifies multiple trajectories shaped by personal experience, institutional affiliation, and educational background.[37] The civil society pathway emerged from personal experiences with conflict and NGO support; the community-based pathway was built on existing religious and social roles; and formal academic qualifications and institutional positions characterized the legal professional pathway. Despite their different characteristics, all three pathways share common elements of continuous learning, community acceptance, and spiritual intention (*niyyah*), reflecting Mahmood's observation that women's agency in

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34 Phayayam, Thekkuveettil, and Wani, "Cultural Traditions and Women's Empowerment," 3.

35 Office of the Courts of Justice, "Guidelines for Dispute Resolution through Mediation under the Dispute Resolution Act B.E. 2562 (2019)," (2019).

36 Office of the Courts of Justice, "Guidelines for Dispute Resolution through Mediation under the Dispute Resolution Act B.E. 2562 (2019)," (2019).

37 Agustina and Ismah, "Challenging Traditional Islamic Authority," 6–9; Rasheed, "Transcending Binaries through Self-Empowerment and Personal Development," 10–14.

Islamic contexts often operates through engagement with rather than rejection of religious norms.[38] Table 2 summarizes these pathways and their key distinguishing features.

Table 2

Pathways to Becoming Muslim Women Mediators in Southern Thailand

Pathway	Key Characteristics	Motivation	Training/Development
Civil Society	- Initiated through personal experience with conflict - Strong community engagement - NGO/civil society network support	Personal experience with injustice or conflict	- NGO training programs - Peacebuilding workshops - Informal mentoring
Community-Based	- Connected to religious institutions - Built on existing social roles - Strong cultural legitimacy	Extension of traditional community roles	- Religious education - Community leadership experience - Learning from religious leaders
Legal Professional	- Formal academic qualifications - Professional credentials - Institutional position	Professional interest and academic pursuit	- University education - Legal training - Professional certification

Source: Authors summarize.

The civil society pathway emerged as the most common route, triggered by personal experiences with conflict or injustice during the unrest in southern border provinces. This pattern resonates with scholarship demonstrating that conflict situations create transformative opportunities for women's empowerment by disrupting traditional gender roles, pushing women into public spheres, whether of necessity or voluntarily, as active agents of peace rather than merely victims.[39] Women entering through this pathway typically experienced direct exposure to violence or witnessed others' suffering, which motivated them to pursue mediation work through civil society organizations such as the Network of Women Against Violence in Southern Thailand (N-Wave), the Network of Civic Women for Southern Border Peace (NCWP), and the Southern Border Provinces Children and Women Coordination Center. As Muna described, "Before *becoming a mediator, I was affected by the unrest about 15 years ago. Then I learned about the NCWP... They invited me to participate in mediation activities to bring peace to the area. I saw many conflicts affecting women, so I wanted to help.*"[40] Similarly, Aishah's experience illustrates this transformation: *"In 2007, my family faced a security case. At court, I saw elderly people struggling to communicate about their children's cases. They could not speak Thai, felt inferior, and were stressed. I thought if I could help translate and support them, I should."*[41] Training and development in this pathway emphasized capacity building through NGO programs, peacebuilding workshops, and informal mentoring relationships. Civil society networks provided both psychological support for trauma recovery and practical training in conflict resolution, legal knowledge, and community organizing. These networks enabled affected

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[38] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 15–8.

[39] Miriam J. Anderson, Elizabeth S. Corredor, and Julia Zulver, "Rethinking Failure: Feminist Peacebuilding and the Peace Continuum in Violent and Illiberal 'Post-Conflict' Settings," *Global Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (January 2025): 4.

[40] Muna, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 28, 2022.

[41] Aishah, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 28, 2022.

individuals to transform personal suffering into professional expertise, exemplifying what Suwardi identifies as women's movement toward building sustainable peace through cross-cultural civil society engagement.[42]

The community-based service pathway emerged through existing community roles, particularly among women connected to religious institutions, namely the Narathiwat Muslimah Leadership Club, the Yala Muslimah Welfare Association, and the Office of the Islamic Committee of Narathiwat Province. These women were often wives of religious leaders (*tok imam*) who leveraged their established social capital and religious credibility to address community disputes affecting women and families. This pattern reflects broader research demonstrating that Muslim women activists often use community trust, kinship ties, and reputations as pious women to access male and mixed spaces while advancing change.[43] The pathway demonstrated gradual evolution from informal advisory roles to formal mediation services. From 2004 to 2010, committee wives discussed women's problems in the area, leading them to establish formal women's help centers that became institutional bases for mediation work. Their training and development came primarily from religious education, community leadership experience, and learning from religious leaders. This foundation gave them strong credibility in addressing sensitive family and religious matters. This pathway's defining feature is the strategic use of social capital. Women's existing religious knowledge, community connections, and moral authority enabled them to extend their community service beyond traditional boundaries while maintaining cultural legitimacy, exemplifying what Tomaro identifies as women's agency operating through established community roles rather than formal institutional positions.[44]

The legal professional track represents the most structured pathway, characterized by formal education and professional training. Women entered as lawyers first, working in organizations such as the Muslim Attorney Center Foundation, the Yala Provincial Justice Office, and as Associate Judge of the Pattani Juvenile and Family Court. Zainun, a lawyer at the Muslim Attorney Center Foundation in Pattani Province, explained, *"I have been working here for over 10 years. Originally, I graduated with a bachelor's degree from the Faculty of Law... We have about 9-10 lawyers providing legal consultation and mediation work."*[45] Fatimah, an associate judge who serves as an academic at the Children and Family Court, exemplifies the integration of academic and community experience: *"I graduated in social work and was the first Muslim PhD in southern Thailand. Working with civil society networks and field experience with families gave me a deep understanding of Muslim family issues. I came to work at the Child and Family Court because I saw many Muslim families facing problems without proper support."*[46] Their training included university education, legal certification, and professional credentials, equipping mediators to bridge

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42 Suwardi, "Women's Movement Towards Building Sustainable Peace in Cross-Cultural Society," 6.

43 Rasheed, "Transcending Binaries through Self-Empowerment and Personal Development," 4, 17.

44 Queenie Pearl Tomaro, "Beyond Motherhood: Women's Agency as Mediators and Monitors in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Initiatives in the Philippines," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 20, no. 4 (October 2025): 434–51.

45 Zainun, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," May 11, 2022.

46 Fatimah, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," June 9, 2022.

multiple legal and cultural systems. This capacity to navigate plural legal orders is particularly significant in contexts where state, Islamic, and customary laws coexist, requiring mediators to possess fluency across different normative frameworks.[47] The spiritual dimension distinguishes this pathway from secular legal practice. Professional expertise is integrated with religious commitment, maintaining professional standards while preserving Islamic authenticity, reflecting patterns observed in other Muslim contexts where women combine religious discourse with professional competence to establish legitimate authority.[48]

Comparing these three pathways reveals how Muslim women strategically exercise agency in creating professional roles within religious and cultural constraints. Each pathway demonstrates women's active construction of legitimate spaces through different strategies. The civil society pathway emphasizes experiential knowledge and community solidarity; the community-based pathway leverages existing religious and social positions; and the legal professional pathway combines formal credentials with cultural sensitivity. Across all pathways, women share *niyyah* as their fundamental motivation, providing religious legitimacy for their expanded public roles. This finding aligns with Mahmood's conceptualization of agency as operating through the inhabitation and reinterpretation of religious norms rather than resistance against them.[49] Most significantly, these mediators have actively reinterpreted the traditional Islamic concept of *naṣīḥah*, which was historically understood as informal counsel, to encompass formal dispute resolution and professional practice. This reinterpretation allows women to claim religious legitimacy for public professional roles while constructing authority that challenges dominant gender stereotypes in their socio-religious context, paralleling patterns observed among Indonesian female ulama who challenge traditional authority through strategic knowledge production[50] and Indian Muslim women who navigate multiple authority systems in pursuing legal rights.[51] Women strategically navigate multiple sources of legitimacy, including religious knowledge, community trust, professional credentials, and lived experience. They demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of which forms of authority are recognized in different contexts. The interconnected nature of pathways, with some mediators drawing from multiple sources, further demonstrates women's agency through creative reinterpretation and strategic navigation rather than rejection of tradition. These pathways reveal how Muslim women actively construct new forms of religious-professional practice that expand women's public participation while maintaining community legitimacy, reflecting what Rasheed describes as "transcending binaries through self-empowerment."[52]

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[47] Misran Ramli et al., "State, Custom, and Islamic Law in Aceh: Minor Dispute Resolution in the Perspective of Legal Pluralism," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam* 8, no. 2 (May 2024): 872–90; Siti Zubaidah et al., "Integrating Tradition into Legal Reform: Reconstructing the Role of Reconciliatory Customary Judge in Diversion Processes," *Jurnal Ilmiah Mizani: Wacana Hukum, Ekonomi dan Keagamaan* 12, no. 2 (July 2025): 447–61.

[48] Koburtay, Abuhussein, and Sidani, "Women Leadership, Culture, and Islam," 357; Rasheed, "Transcending Binaries through Self-Empowerment and Personal Development," 14–5.

[49] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 28–32.

[50] Agustina and Ismah, "Challenging Traditional Islamic Authority," 125–46.

[51] Dutta, "Divorce, Kinship, and Errant Wives," 463.

[52] Rasheed, "Transcending Binaries through Self-Empowerment and Personal Development," 1–22.

Women Mediators Navigating Islamic, State, and Cultural Norms

The research revealed that Muslim women mediators have developed sophisticated approaches to dispute resolution that synthesize Islamic principles, formal legal requirements, and local cultural practices. This integration is not merely additive but a creative synthesis in which religious values enhance legal processes. In contrast, legal frameworks provide structure to religious principles, reflecting broader patterns of mediation in plural legal contexts where harmonization of state, Islamic, and customary norms strengthens both legitimacy and effectiveness.[53] Mediators employ three primary frameworks (theological, legal, and cultural), often simultaneously and in creative combination, demonstrating comprehensive knowledge that combines Islamic law, civil legislation, and local customs. Interview data revealed that domestic violence and inheritance disputes constitute the two most frequently mediated case types among women mediators in southern Thailand, as these matters fall within the domain of Islamic family law recognized by the state and directly affect women and families whom female mediators are particularly positioned to assist. This section examines how mediators employ theological, legal, and cultural arguments to resolve the two primary types of cases.

Domestic Violence Cases

In addressing domestic violence cases, mediators employ theological arguments by drawing extensively on Islamic principles that emphasize protection of human dignity, justice, and family harmony. They invoke Quranic principles of *muʿāsharah bi al-maʿrūf* (living together with kindness) as stated in Sūrat al-Nisāʾ verse 19, and the concept of marriage as a source of love and mercy (*mawaddah wa raḥmah*) in Sūrat al-Rūm verse 21. Mediators also cite prophetic traditions that prohibit harm and advocate for mutual respect between spouses, including the hadith narrated by Ibn Abbas and recorded in *Sunan Ibn Mājah*: *"The best among you are those who are best to their wives."* [54] Importantly, mediators challenge cultural interpretations that justify violence through religious authority, asserting that Islam fundamentally opposes harm to women. As one mediator explained, *"We tell men that the Prophet said the best among you are those who are best to their wives. Hitting your wife is not from Islam; it is from ignorance and anger."*[55] This theological reframing repositions violence not as religiously sanctioned but as un-Islamic behavior, aligning with contemporary literature demonstrating that Islamic core principles prohibit domestic abuse and that the Prophet's practice was non-violent toward wives.[56] Islamic principles are also adapted for the psychological healing of

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53 Ramli et al., "State, Custom, and Islamic Law in Aceh," 872–90; Hilman Syahrial Haq et al., "Community Mediation-Based Legal Culture in Resolving Social Conflicts of Communities Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia," *Studia Iuridica Lublinensia* 31, no. 2 (June 2022): 11–32.

54 Muḥammad ibn Yazīd Ibn Mājah, *English Translation of Sunan Ibn Mājah*, vol. 3, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007), Hadith 1977.

55 Aina, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022.

56 Anisia Kumala Masyhadi, Elizabeth Kristi Poerwandari, and Mirra Noor Milla, "Conservative, Pragmatic, and Progressive Ulama: Religion-Based Gender Ideology and Intimate Partner Violence in Indonesia (Study at Jakarta Province, Central Java Province and Jogjakarta Province)," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 15, no. 1 (July 2025): 189; Hawra Rabaan, Alyson L. Young, and Lynn Dombrowski, "Daughters of Men: Saudi Women's Sociotechnical Agency Practices in Addressing Domestic Abuse," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 4, no. CSCW3 (January 2021): 1–31.

violence victims. As Zainab explained: *"We use Islamic principles extensively... After experiencing trauma, myself, I used religious healing to recover. Now I apply these same principles to victims of domestic violence. We teach them* ṣabr *(patience) not as passive acceptance, but as active spiritual strength. We remind them of their value in Allah's eyes, that their suffering is not punishment but a test they can overcome with faith and support."*[57]

On the legal dimension, mediators must navigate both *fiqh* and Thai civil law, educating parties about the protections available under each system. In classical *fiqh*, harm (*ḍarar*) inflicted upon a wife constitutes valid grounds for judicial divorce (*al-ṭalāq bi al-ḍarar*). The Mālikī school, as recorded in Al-Dardīr's *Al-Sharḥ al-Ṣaghīr*, explicitly grants women the right to divorce on grounds of harm even without witnesses to repeated abuse.[58] Ibn Qudāmah in *Al-Mughnī* further elaborates that *khulʿ* (divorce initiated by the wife) is permissible precisely to end harm she suffers from bad treatment.[59] Contemporary Islamic legal scholarship classifies domestic violence as a *taʿzīr* offense (discretionary punishment), where judges may impose penalties to deter such conduct, as the International Islamic Fiqh Academy affirmed in its 2009 resolution that *"Shariah prohibits all forms of violence among family members."*[60] Alongside Islamic legal provisions, mediators inform parties of protections under Thai law.[61] This dual-system approach provides women with multiple avenues for protection and empowerment, paralleling patterns observed among Muslim women navigating religious and secular legal systems in England and Wales.[62]

Culturally, mediators leverage local values regarding family honor, community reputation, and social harmony to create pressure for behavioral change while simultaneously challenging harmful cultural norms that normalize violence or blame victims. They may invoke the shame that violence brings to families or remind perpetrators of their standing in the community.[63] However, mediators are careful to distinguish between authentic Islamic teachings and cultural practices that misuse religion to justify abuse. Research confirms that while religion can be misused to normalize male authority and violence through misinterpretation of Islamic texts, it also serves as a powerful resource for challenging abuse

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[57] Zainab, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 28, 2022.

[58] Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Dardīr, *Al-Sharḥ al-Ṣaghīr ʿalā Aqrab al-Masālik ilā Madhhab al-Imām Mālik,* ed. Muṣṭafā Kamāl Waṣfī, vol. 2 (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1995), 512–3.

[59] Muwaffaq al-Dīn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Aḥmad Ibn Qudāmah, *Al-Mughnī*, vol. 8 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhirah, 1968), 174.

[60] Analiansyah Analiansyah et al., "Polygamy and Women's Rights: An Examination of Divorce Litigation in Sharia Court Rulings Pertaining to Revisions in Indonesian Matrimonial Legislation," *Al-Istinbath: Jurnal Hukum Islam* 9, no. 2 (November 2024): 761–86.

[61] Protection of Domestic Violence Victims Act B.E. 2550, (2007). This legislation defines domestic violence as any act intended to cause physical, psychological, or health harm to family members (Section 3). It establishes mechanisms for filing complaints (Section 5) and empowers officials to issue protection orders, including prohibiting perpetrators from entering the family residence or approaching victims (Section 10). Additionally, mediators explain the grounds for divorce under the Civil and Commercial Code, particularly Section 1516(3), which permits divorce when one spouse causes serious harm to the body or mind of the other.

[62] Ghauri, "Muslim Women's Experiences of Islamic Evaluative Mediation within Shari'a Councils in England and Wales in Relation to Obtaining Divorce as Victims of Domestic Abuse," 551.

[63] Aina, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022; Laila, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022.

when grounded in authentic teachings.[64] As one mediator described, *"Sometimes culture tells women to stay quiet for family honor. We tell them that true honor comes from justice, not silence. We use cultural respect for religious leaders to make men listen. When we speak, we represent both Islamic values and community expectations for good behavior."*[65] This approach reflects established patterns in Muslim communities in southern Thailand, where mediators begin mediation processes with Qur'ānic recitation and conclude with *naṣīḥah* and prayers, demonstrating the centrality of religious frameworks in dispute resolution.

The integration of theological, legal, and cultural arguments in domestic violence mediation demonstrates how these frameworks function as mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory resources. Mediators strategically combine Quranic principles emphasizing marital kindness with Islamic jurisprudential provisions allowing divorce for harm, Thai legal protections offering restraining orders and formal grounds for divorce, and cultural values of family honor reframed toward justice rather than silence. Mediators described this integrated approach in practice: they typically establish Islamic principles of kindness and protection first, then explain the wife's legal rights to file police reports and seek divorce under both Islamic and Thai law, remind the husband of his reputation in the community and the shame his behavior brings to his family, and finally frame reconciliation not as submission but as mutual commitment to Islamic principles and legal responsibilities. This multi-layered argumentation reflects broader patterns in which women mediators in plural legal contexts must navigate multiple legal systems simultaneously, requiring the sophisticated integration of religious, legal, and cultural frameworks.[66] Most significantly, this practice demonstrates mediators' active reinterpretation of religious tradition: rather than accepting patriarchal readings that might minimize violence, they draw on authentic Islamic sources to construct arguments that protect women while maintaining religious legitimacy.

Inheritance Dispute Cases

Inheritance disputes represent another major category of cases in which mediators must navigate complex intersections among Islamic law, Thai civil law, and local customary practices. Theologically, mediators argue that Islamic inheritance laws (*farāʾiḍ*) constitute divine commands that must be respected, drawing on explicit Quranic provisions that guarantee women's inheritance rights.[67] The primary sources for Islamic inheritance are found in Sūrat al-Nisāʾ verse 7 establishes that women have a determined share in what parents and relatives leave behind; Sūrat al-Nisāʾ verses 11-12 specify the exact portions for daughters (half if alone, two-thirds if two or more), mothers (one-sixth if the deceased has children), and wives (one-fourth if no children, one-eighth if children exist); and verse 4:176 addresses inheritance of siblings.[68] Importantly, mediators address common misunderstandings about Islamic inheritance, such as the belief that women should receive

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64   Sharifnia et al., "Muslim Women's Experiences of Domestic Violence and Abuse," 694–711.

65   Aina, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022.

66   David Cohen et al., "Gender Norms in a Context of Legal Pluralism: Impacts on the Health of Women and Girls in Ethiopia," *Global Public Health* 19, no. 1 (December 2024): 11.

67   Muna, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 28, 2022.

68   Wahbah al-Zuḥaylī, *Al-Fiqh al-Islāmī wa Adillatuh*, vol. 10 (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2004), 7695–750.

nothing or that all property must go to sons. Fatimah, as one mediator explained, *"Many families do not know that Islam gives clear rights to daughters and widows. We teach them the* farā'iḍ *and explain that following Allah's commands brings blessings to the family. Denying women their shares is sinful, even if it is culturally accepted."*[69] This approach aligns with literature demonstrating that bilateral inheritance theory within Islamic law supports gender-equitable, context-sensitive distributions while remaining within textual limits.[70]

On the legal dimension, mediators must reconcile Islamic inheritance rules with Thai civil law, which operates under different principles. The Act governs the application of Islamic law in Thailand's southern border provinces, specifically the provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala, and Satun, under the Application of Islamic Law in the Provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala, and Satun B.E. 2489 (1946), which permits Islamic law to apply to matters of inheritance among Muslims.[71] Under this framework, the Dato Yuttitham works alongside Thai judges in provincial courts to adjudicate inheritance cases involving Muslims. However, Thai civil law under the Civil and Commercial Code, Book VI on Succession, provides alternative inheritance rules based on statutory heirs (Section 1629) with equal shares regardless of gender.[72] Mediators help families understand which legal system applies to different types of property: land registered under Thai law may follow civil code provisions, while moveable property and assets within Muslim communities typically follow *farā'iḍ* principles. This navigational complexity parallels patterns observed in Malaysia, where Muslims must obtain *farā'iḍ* certificates from Syariah Courts while also dealing with civil agencies, creating procedural challenges that mediators help simplify.[73] In cases where Islamic and Thai law conflict, mediators facilitate creative compromises, such as using lifetime gifts (*hibah*) or family agreements to achieve Islamic distribution while maintaining legal validity for registered property.[74]

Culturally, local customs in southern Thailand sometimes favor sons over daughters or exclude women from certain types of property, particularly ancestral land.[75] These customary practices often conflict with both *farā'iḍ* and Thai civil law, adding another layer of complexity for mediators. Research from Indonesia reveals similar tensions between Islamic inheritance rules and local custom (*adat*), where communities must negotiate whether

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[69] Fatimah, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," June 9, 2022.

[70] Reni Nur Aniroh, Khoiruddin Nasution, and Ali Sodiqin, "The Bilateral Inheritance System in Islamic Family Law: Fairness, Equality, and Mutual Exchange Perspectives," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam* 8, no. 2 (May 2024): 891–911; Roslina Roslina et al., "Reinterpreting Islamic Inheritance: Supreme Court Jurisprudence and Gender Justice in Indonesia," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 13, no. 3 (September 2025): 2339–64; Miftahul Huda and Tri Wahyu Hidayati, "The Concept of Muḥammad Shaḥrūr on Gender Parity in Inheritance Legislation," *El-Usrah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga* 6, no. 2 (December 2023): 262–80.

[71] Application of Islamic Law in the Provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala, and Satun B.E. 2489.

[72] Civil and Commercial Code, Book VI (Succession), Section 1629.

[73] Muhamad Helmi Md Said et al., "Muslim Estate Administration: The Locus of Malaysian Syariah Court in Malaysia," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 19, no. 1 (June 2021): 73–8.

[74] Aina, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022; Nurida, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022; Mariam, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," May 2, 2022.

[75] Nisakorn Klanarong, "Border Crossing of Muslim Women in Southern-Border Provinces of Thailand," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 50, no. 1 (April 2009): 74–87; Mahsoom Sateemae, Tarik Abdel-Monem, and Suhaimee Sateemae, "Investigating Preferences for Patriarchal Values among Muslim University Students in Southern Thailand," *Contemporary Islam* 11, no. 1 (April 2017): 81–101.

"high" ancestral property follows customary matrilineal rules while "low" acquired property follows *farāʾiḍ*.[76] Mediators in southern Thailand must carefully challenge customs that disadvantage women while respecting family sensitivities and maintaining their legitimacy as culturally embedded actors. They often frame Islamic inheritance rules as superior to mere custom, arguing that divine law should take precedence over cultural practice. As one mediator noted, *"Culture sometimes follows old Malay customs that are not fully Islamic. We explain that culture should follow Islam, not the other way around. When families resist giving daughters their shares, we remind them that culture changes, but Allah's commands do not."*[77] It demonstrates that inheritance disputes frequently arise at the intersection of Islamic law, local custom, and state procedures, intensified by documentation gaps and shifting expectations about justice and gender.[78]

The integration of theological, legal, and cultural arguments in inheritance mediation demonstrates sophisticated navigation of plural legal orders. Mediators employ what Indonesian scholars identify as negotiation patterns combining "tradition-theology" (balancing Islamic norms and custom) and "traditional wisdom" (emphasizing harmony and win-win solutions to preserve family ties).[79] Mediators described this complex integration through their case experiences. In one case where a deceased father left land and other assets, sons initially refused to give shares to their sisters, citing local custom. The mediator began by teaching the family specific Quranic verses on inheritance (Sūrat al-Nisāʾ, verses 11-12), establishing the Islamic obligation. She then explained that under Thai law, all children have equal rights, giving sisters legal standing to claim shares. She invoked cultural values of family harmony and honor, suggesting that public knowledge of denying sisters their rights would bring shame. After multiple sessions, the mediator facilitated a compromise in which the sisters received their Quranic shares from moveable property while accepting negotiated land shares, maintaining family relationships while approximating Islamic principles.[80] This approach reflects broader patterns in which mediation serves as a central mechanism for managing legal pluralism, enabling negotiated compromises among state, religious, and customary norms when designed with cultural legitimacy and procedural fairness.[81] The

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76 Ilyas Ilyas et al., "The Accommodation of Customary Law to Islamic Law: Distribution of Inheritance in Aceh from a Pluralism Perspectives," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam* 7, no. 2 (May 2023): 897–919; Arbanur Rasyid, Rayendriani Fahmei Lubis, and Idris Saleh, "Contestation of Customary Law and Islamic Law in Inheritance Distribution: A Sociology of Islamic Law Perspective," *Al-Ahkam* 34, no. 2 (October 2024): 419–48; Hafidz Taqiyuddin et al., "Habitus and Legal Behavior in Islamic Inheritance Practice: A Socio-Legal Analysis in Rural Serang Regency, Indonesia," *El-Usrah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga* 8, no. 1 (June 2025): 72–96.

77 Fatimah, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," June 9, 2022.

78 Wondale Temesgen Tedla and Kasahun Desyalew Mekonen, "Inheritance-Induced Familial Disputes in North-West Ethiopia: The Role of Legal-Policy Gaps and Aggravating Socio-Economic Dynamics," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10, no. 1 (March 2023): 92; Ahmad Sukris et al., "Restorative Justice Principles in Banjar Customary Inheritance Disputes: A Normative Analysis of Out-of-Court Settlement Institutions through Adat Badamai," *El-Mashlahah* 15, no. 2 (December 2025): 415–36.

79 Miftahul Huda et al., "Tradition, Wisdom and Negotiating Marriage and Inheritance Disputes on Javanese Muslim," *Al-Istinbath: Jurnal Hukum Islam* 9, no. 1 (May 2024): 25–44.

80 Fatimah, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," June 9, 2022; Aina, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022.

81 Ramli et al., "State, Custom, and Islamic Law in Aceh," 886–87; Teuku Muttaqin Mansur et al., "Mediating Tradition: The Role of Law Enforcement in Customary Law Disputes," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 13, no. 2 (May 2025): 1183–208.

mediators' practice demonstrates that effective dispute resolution in plural legal contexts requires not merely knowledge of multiple legal systems but creative synthesis that respects religious principles while accommodating practical realities.

From Constraint to Authority: Challenges and Opportunities in Women's Mediation

Muslim women mediators in Thailand's southern border provinces encounter three primary challenges in their work: cultural and social stereotypes regarding women's competence, security threats in conflict-affected areas, and financial constraints with limited institutional support. Each challenge requires distinct adaptive strategies, which these mediators have developed through experience and collective learning.

Cultural and Social Stereotypes Against Women's Competence

One of the primary challenges involves establishing credibility as female mediators in contexts where gender-based assumptions about women's capabilities persist. When parties see that the mediator is a woman, they may initially lack confidence, requiring women to prove their competence and knowledge constantly. This skepticism manifests in various forms: questioning women's understanding of Islamic law, doubting their ability to handle complex cases, or preferring male mediators for "serious" disputes. As Muna explained, *"When we go to mediate, we fear they will not accept our suggestions. Sometimes, when we propose something, will they accept it? Will they listen to us when we speak like this, or will they think women do not know enough?"* The impact extends beyond individual cases to affect women's professional identity and emotional well-being, with mediators reporting they must work harder than their male counterparts and that mistakes are interpreted as evidence of women's general incompetence rather than individual errors. These tensions parallel challenges documented in other Muslim societies, such as Sri Lanka, where similar struggles between traditional interpretations and contemporary gender equality concerns have emerged.[82] Asma, a female lawyer, confirmed, *"Most men think, 'Oh, a woman, weak like this,' or they think we cannot think as well as men. Men often do not trust women to help in important matters."*[83]

Mediators have developed multiple strategies to overcome gender-based skepticism. First, they invest heavily in continuous learning, ensuring their knowledge of Islamic law, civil legislation, and mediation techniques exceeds expectations. As Muna continued, *"So we prepare very carefully. We study each case thoroughly, consult with religious scholars when needed, and arrive with clear knowledge. When they see we understand the law better than they expected, their attitudes change."*[84] Second, mediators strategically leverage their identities as religious women, emphasizing piety and religious knowledge to gain trust within community frameworks. Third, they develop collaborative relationships with male religious leaders who can endorse their work and provide legitimacy.[85] Fourth, they reframe their role through Islamic concepts such as *naṣīḥah*, positioning their work within recognized religious frameworks rather than challenging

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82 Shamila Dawood, "Islamic Law and Gender Equality: Challenges and Reforms in Sri Lanka's Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act," *Journal of Islamic Law* 5, no. 2 (August 2024): 288–305.

83 Asma, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," May 11, 2022.

84 Muna, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 28, 2022.

85 Ali, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022; Ibrahim; "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 28, 2022.

gender norms directly. As Asma reflected, *"But when they work with us, when we show them our knowledge and our results, they start to change their minds. It takes time, but good work speaks for itself."*[86] These adaptive strategies demonstrate women's sophisticated navigation of gender barriers, gradually transforming skepticism into respect through demonstrated competence and strategic positioning.

Security Threats in Conflict-Affected Areas

Working as mediators in conflict situations carries inherent risks, particularly in Thailand's southern border provinces, where ongoing unrest creates persistent danger. Security challenges manifest in various forms: threats from violent spouses in domestic violence cases, intimidation from parties who feel mediators favor opponents, and general danger from operating in conflict-affected areas. As Aina recounted, *"Husbands are threatening our staff's main concern. When we care for their wives and advise them on separation and divorce options, some husbands get very angry. They may threaten us, follow us, or try to intimidate us into staying out of their family matters."*[87] The impact on mediators' psychological well-being and daily security is substantial, requiring difficult calculations about which cases to accept, which neighborhoods to enter, and how to balance commitment to helping victims with their own safety.

Mediators have developed both practical and spiritual strategies for managing security threats. On the practical level, they implement safety protocols, including traveling in groups, coordinating with local authorities for dangerous cases, conducting mediations in safe public spaces, and maintaining communication networks for rapid response. As Aina explained their systematic approach: *"We have learned never to go alone, to inform our network where we are going and when we expect to return, and to know when to back away if the situation becomes too dangerous. We also coordinate with local police when we know a case might involve violence, so they are aware and can respond quickly if needed."*[88] Beyond practical measures, mediators draw on spiritual resources, employing Islamic concepts of *tawakkul* (trust in God) to maintain psychological resilience. As Aishah reflected, *"When we work on security matters, we say our breath belongs to Allah. Every time we go down to meet cases in the field, we pray for protection. We accept that if something happens, it is Allah's plan. This spiritual preparation helps us continue working despite the fear."*[89] This combination of practical risk management and spiritual resilience enables mediators to continue serving vulnerable community members while managing reasonable risks.

Financial Constraints and Limited Institutional Support

The voluntary nature of much mediation work creates significant financial challenges that threaten the sustainability of women's mediation practice and limit the reach and quality of services they can provide. Most mediators work without regular budget support, requiring them to personally cover expenses, including transportation to meet clients, communication costs for coordinating with parties and networks, office space for mediations, and,

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[86] Asma, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," May 11, 2022.

[87] Aina, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022; Halwa, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," May 1, 2022.

[88] Aina, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022.

[89] Aishah, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 28, 2022.

sometimes, direct financial assistance to parties in desperate need. The lack of institutional funding reflects broader patterns of underinvestment in alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and insufficient recognition of women's contributions to peacebuilding and community welfare. As Aina described, *"During this period, when we do not have much budget, we face real difficulties. We need to travel to meet clients, we need phone credit to coordinate cases, and we need space to conduct mediations safely. These costs add up, and when we are working voluntarily, it comes from our own pockets or our families' resources."*[90] This financial precariousness affects mediators' ability to sustain their work, particularly for those from less privileged backgrounds. Without adequate resources, mediators cannot travel to distant areas, afford extended mediation processes, or provide support services that abuse victims may need, creating difficult choices between family financial needs and community service commitments.

Mediators have demonstrated remarkable creativity in adapting to financial constraints. First, they develop collaborative networks for resource sharing and cost distribution. As *Aina* explained their collective strategy: *"We still manage to work by helping each other. If one person has a little funding from a project, we share it among the network. If we need to travel to a distant area, we coordinate so we can go together and split transportation costs. We take turns hosting meetings in our homes to avoid rental fees. We use donated space from mosques or community centers when available. After the WOW project ended, we had no budget. However, fortunately, our network remained strong, and we found ways to continue."*[91] Second, mediators engage in "hybrid professionalism," combining voluntary mediation with paid employment that provides financial stability. Third, they actively seek project-based funding from NGOs and government programs, though such funding is often temporary. Fourth, they strategically reframe their volunteer status as evidence of pure *niyyah*, transforming financial limitations into spiritual capital in the community's perception. Finally, some mediators have begun advocating collectively for institutional recognition, arguing that their work provides essential public services that deserve state support.[92] These adaptive strategies enable continued operation while highlighting the need for systemic change in how women's mediation work is valued institutionally.

Despite these significant challenges, Muslim women mediators possess remarkable advantages stemming from their position as women and members of the religious community. Their roles as the wives of religious leaders or respected community figures establish trust and credibility. Their understanding of women's lived experiences enables empathetic engagement that male mediators may struggle to achieve. Their reputation for integrity and *niyyah* creates moral authority transcending formal credentials. As Aina noted, *"Our success comes partly from who we are: women who understand women's problems, religious people who are trusted in the community, and mothers who care about families. These identities that sometimes make our work harder also make us effective mediators."*[93] This capacity to create hybrid professional identities integrating religious, cultural, and legal competencies reflects broader patterns

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[90] Aina, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022.

[91] Aina, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022.

[92] Asma, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," May 11, 2022; Aishah, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 28, 2022; Aina, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022; Nisreen, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," May 2, 2022; Amal, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," May 2, 2022.

[93] Aina, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022.

among Muslim women professionals who transcend binary categorizations through self-empowerment.[94] The challenges have paradoxically created opportunities for innovation. Mediators demonstrate psychological resilience through emotional preparedness and self-care strategies. As Aina emphasized, *"If we are not ready or stressed with our own problems, do not accept cases because we cannot help others effectively. We need to care for ourselves through prayer, through support from our network, and through taking breaks when needed. This self-care is not selfish; it is necessary for sustainable service."*[95] These findings demonstrate how Muslim women mediators transform challenges into opportunities for expanding their roles while maintaining cultural authenticity and professional effectiveness.

Women's Agency and the Transformation of Religious Authority

The pathways, challenges, and integrative practices documented in this study reveal profound dimensions of Muslim women's agency and transformation in Thailand's southern border provinces, complicating binary narratives of either oppression or liberation found in previous scholarship. Viewed through Mahmood's theoretical framework, these women mediators demonstrate that agency operates not through resistance against religious norms but through inhabitation and creative reinterpretation of tradition from within.[96] Rather than rejecting patriarchal structures, they strategically engage with Islamic principles, legal frameworks, and cultural practices to construct new forms of religious-professional authority. These findings challenge assumptions that religious conservatism necessarily constrains women's participation, instead illustrating how women adopt an "Islamic feminist worldview" that reclaims religious authority while maintaining authenticity.[97]

The most significant finding of this research is the active reinterpretation of the traditional Islamic concept of *naṣīḥah* to encompass formal mediation and professional practice. Historically understood as informal moral counsel, *naṣīḥah* has been reimagined by these women as professional expertise integrating religious knowledge with legal competence. This reinterpretation represents a form of "contextual Islamic feminism" that adapts universal principles of gender equality to specific cultural, legal, and political circumstances.[98] By framing mediation as *naṣīḥah*, women claim religious legitimacy for public professional roles that might otherwise be challenged as inappropriate. This strategic reframing parallels patterns observed among Indonesian female ulama who challenge traditional authority through knowledge production[99] and Indian Muslim women who navigate multiple authority systems in pursuing legal rights.[100] The Thai case demonstrates that such reinterpretation is not merely individual adaptation but constitutes a broader pattern of women constructing authoritative positions within, rather than against, their religious traditions.

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94   Rasheed, "Transcending Binaries through Self-Empowerment and Personal Development," 1–22.
95   Aina, "Interview with Muslim Woman Mediator," April 29, 2022.
96   Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 15–8.
97   Shahin, "Islamic Feminism and Hegemonic Discourses on Faith and Gender in Islam"; Koburtay, Abuhussein, and Sidani, "Women Leadership, Culture, and Islam," 347–63.
98   Hidayatullah, "Feminist Interpretation of the Qur'an in a Comparative Feminist Setting," 122–24.
99   Agustina and Ismah, "Challenging Traditional Islamic Authority," 125–46.
100 Dutta, "Divorce, Kinship, and Errant Wives," 454–76.

The study reveals that effective mediation in plural legal contexts requires sophisticated integration of multiple normative frameworks rather than adherence to any single system. Women mediators in southern Thailand demonstrate fluency across *fiqh*, Thai civil law, and local Malay customs, strategically deploying different sources of authority depending on context and audience. This multi-layered competence reflects broader patterns documented in research on legal pluralism and mediation, where harmonization of state, religious, and customary norms strengthens both legitimacy and effectiveness.[101] However, unlike contexts where plural legal systems create barriers for women, as observed in Ethiopia, where gender-biased customary forums harm women's rights,[102] the Thai mediators actively leverage legal pluralism as a resource to protect women. By educating parties about protections available under both Islamic law (such as divorce for *darar*) and Thai law (such as the Protection of Domestic Violence Victims Act), they expand options for vulnerable women rather than constraining them. This finding suggests that legal pluralism's impact on gender equality depends significantly on how women actors navigate and interpret these systems.[103]

The research demonstrates that Muslim women mediators construct hybrid professional identities that transcend conventional binaries between religious and secular, traditional and modern, and private and public spheres. Their authority derives simultaneously from religious knowledge, community trust, professional credentials, and lived experience as women and mothers. This capacity to integrate multiple sources of legitimacy reflects what Rasheed describes as "transcending binaries through self-empowerment," where Muslim women activists create new possibilities by refusing categorization into either purely religious or purely secular roles.[104] The mediators' success in gaining community acceptance while expanding women's public participation suggests that transformation of gender norms in conservative religious contexts occurs most effectively through creative reinterpretation that expands possibilities from within existing normative frameworks, rather than through direct confrontation that risks rejection.[105] This insight has implications beyond Thailand, offering a model for understanding how women exercise agency within patriarchal religious structures across diverse Muslim societies.

This study contributes to scholarship on women's agency in Islamic contexts by documenting specific mechanisms through which Muslim women construct professional authority within patriarchal structures. Unlike studies emphasizing women's exclusion from

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[101] Ramli et al., "State, Custom, and Islamic Law in Aceh," 872–90; Haq et al., "Community Mediation-Based Legal Culture in Resolving Social Conflicts of Communities Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia," 11–32.

[102] Cohen et al., "Gender Norms in a Context of Legal Pluralism," 11.

[103] Natalie J. Bourdon, "Opening Pandora's Box: Human Rights, Customary Law and the 'Communal Liberal Self' in Tanzania," in *Gender Justice and Legal Pluralities* (Routledge, 2013), 20; Sawmya Ray, "Women's Lives Within Legal Pluralism," in *Mapping Gender*, 1st ed., by Nilima Srivastava and Sunita Dhal (London: Routledge India, 2025), 120–32.

[104] Rasyid, Lubis, and Saleh, "Contestation of Customary Law and Islamic Law in Inheritance Distribution," 419–48.

[105] See: Marella Bodur Ün, "Contesting Global Gender Equality Norms: The Case of Turkey," *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 5 (December 2019): 828–47; Jacob Eaton et al., "Gendered Social Norms Change in Water Governance Structures Through Community Facilitation: Evaluation of the UPWARD Intervention in Tanzania," *Frontiers in Sociology* 6 (July 2021): 672989.

formal peace processes or barriers they face in obtaining community support,[106] this research demonstrates that religious authenticity can become a resource for expanding rather than limiting women's authority. The findings also extend understanding of legal pluralism by showing how women mediators actively harmonize rather than merely navigate multiple legal systems. However, the study has limitations. The sample of 15 informants, while providing rich qualitative data, cannot represent the full diversity of women's mediation experiences in southern Thailand. Future research should explore comparative perspectives across different Muslim-majority regions, longitudinal trajectories of mediators' careers, and community perspectives on the effectiveness of women mediators. Despite these limitations, the documented patterns of creative reinterpretation, strategic navigation, and hybrid identity construction offer valuable insights for policy development, professional training, and institutional support for women's mediation work in pluralistic legal contexts.[107]

Conclusion

This study examined the emerging role of Muslim women as legal mediators in Thailand's southern border provinces, focusing on their pathways to becoming mediators, their integration of Islamic principles with formal legal frameworks, and the challenges and opportunities they encounter. The research identified three distinct pathways for Muslim women to enter mediation roles: civil society engagement, community-based service, and legal professional development. Across all pathways, women share a spiritual intention (*niyyah*) as a fundamental motivation and creatively reinterpret the traditional Islamic concept of *naṣīḥah* (advice) to encompass formal mediation practice. The central argument emerging from this research is that Muslim women exercise agency not through rejection of tradition but through strategic reinterpretation that expands possibilities from within existing normative frameworks. By constructing hybrid professional identities that integrate religious knowledge, legal competence, and community trust, these mediators challenge gender stereotypes while maintaining religious authenticity, creating new forms of religious-professional authority in pluralistic legal contexts.

These findings have important implications for policy and practice. Training programs for mediators in Muslim communities should integrate religious knowledge with professional legal expertise, recognizing that effective mediation in pluralistic contexts requires fluency in multiple normative systems. Such programs should accommodate diverse pathways and backgrounds, from grassroots organizers to legal professionals. Institutional recognition and sustainable funding mechanisms are essential for enhancing the viability and reach of women's mediation work. Security protocols are needed for mediators working in conflict-affected regions, particularly in sensitive cases involving violence. The demonstrated success of integrating religious and legal frameworks offers valuable lessons for other pluralistic legal

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106 Buranajaroenkij, "Challenges to Women's Inclusion in Peace Processes in Thailand and Myanmar," 403–22.

107 See: Rohmad Agus Solihin and Imron Fauzi, "Community, Court, and Conciliation: Designing a Hybrid Mediation Model for Islamic Divorce Adjudication," *Asy-Syir'ah: Jurnal Ilmu Syari'ah dan Hukum* 59, no. 2 (2025): 214–30; Shubhang Gomasta, Sushmita Das, and Sharia Anjum, "Sacred Settlements and Secular Law: A Comparative Evaluation of Religious ADR Mechanisms," *Manchester Journal of Transnational Islamic Law and Practice* 21, no. 4 (2025): 422–37.

contexts where multiple normative systems coexist. Future research should explore comparative studies across different Muslim-majority regions to identify enabling factors and assess the transferability of strategies observed here. Longitudinal studies tracking mediators' career trajectories would reveal how roles evolve and what factors contribute to sustained engagement. Research on the long-term impacts of women's mediation on gender norms, family dynamics, and community peacebuilding would assess whether individual-level transformations contribute to broader social change. Studies examining client and community perspectives on the effectiveness and legitimacy of women mediators would complement this mediator-centered study and provide a fuller understanding of how their work is received and evaluated within communities.

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