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Praying on the Margins: A Theology of Dignity and Sacred Belonging at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Yogyakarta

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Abstract

This article examines the religious life of Muslim trans women at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Yogyakarta through a theological reading of dignity, worship, and sacred belonging. The research question guiding this study is how Muslim trans women at Al-Fatah sustain faith, preserve spaces of worship, and construct sacred belonging amid social stigma, legal vulnerability, and religious rejection. This question is significant because their religious life cannot be reduced to social marginality, but must be read as a theological struggle over human dignity, the right to worship, and communal recognition within the ummah. This study employs a qualitative library research approach by positioning the Qur'an as the primary normative source, brought into dialogue with theological literature, Qur'anic exegesis, and recent academic studies on Muslim trans women and Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah. The analysis was conducted through thematic reading, content analysis, and conceptual interpretation using Liberation Theology and the Theory of Belonging. The findings show that dignity within Al-Fatah is affirmed through worship, communal solidarity, and the struggle to preserve spaces of faith. Sacred belonging grows through shared memory, spiritual closeness, post-Shinta Ratri community continuity, and the collective effort to keep Al-Fatah as a spiritual home.

Keywords: Muslim trans women; dignity; sacred belonging; liberation theology; Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah

Introduction

The vulnerability experienced by trans women in Indonesia concerns not only social stigma, but also touches upon a far more theological question of whether every human being is truly regarded as a dignified subject before God (Etengoff & Rodriguez, 2022; Muhsin et al., 2024). This issue acquires serious weight when data show that 62.7% of waria experience stigma at a high level and 72.4% experience discrimination, so that the lives of trans women unfold under systemic social pressure rather than through isolated incidents (Septarini et al., 2024). This landscape confirms that discussion of trans women within the context of Indonesian Islam cannot be placed merely at the level of social identity, because what is truly at stake is the meaning of human dignity, the legitimacy of being present in spaces of worship, and the possibility of feeling part of the community of believers.

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This perspective becomes even more important when situated within a broader horizon of religious ethics. Islamic teaching recognises the human being as a creature endowed with dignity, breathed into with the spirit, and called to worship without first being screened by social status. The reality in Indonesia, by contrast, shows that legal protection for gender identity remains very weak, while the morality regime and the implementation of the new Criminal Code since 2 January 2026 continue to open space for indirect vulnerability for groups living outside dominant heteronormative norms. This condition reveals a sharp gulf between the ethical ideal of religion that honours humanity and the socio-legal structures that still allow some citizens to live in insecurity (Williamson, 2024).

It is this tension between divine calling and social rejection that makes alternative religious spaces profoundly important (Kumpasoğlu et al., 2022). In the context of Yogyakarta, Pondok Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah emerges not merely as a social institution, but as a spiritual response to experiences of being rejected, suspected, and pushed to the margins. Recent studies note that Al-Fatah was established in 2008 and is widely recognised as the first Islamic boarding school specifically dedicated to the trans women's community (Hajid & Husada, 2023). The presence of this pesantren signifies that the trans women's search for God does not cease because of stigma, but instead gives rise to a form of religious community that strives to nurture faith amid fragility (Jesuits, 2025).

The theological significance of Al-Fatah is clearly visible because this space is built upon concrete practices of worship, not merely upon symbolic claims of acceptance (Eliana, 2025). Activities such as Qur'anic recitation, congregational prayer, study sessions, and weekly almsgiving show that this pesantren functions as a place where marginalised bodies continue to perform devotion. Field testimony also describes that the students still gather regularly every Sunday afternoon to study and pray together, so that Al-Fatah may be read as a space where piety is sustained through a simple yet steadfast communal rhythm. This direction is important, because a theology of dignity cannot be separated from concrete bodies that read verses, utter prayers, and stand in the rows of congregational worship (Jesuits, 2025).

The depth of this meaning becomes even more apparent when religiosity is read through the everyday lived experiences of the students. The story of Rini Kaleng, who busks from morning until late afternoon and then deliberately stops early in order to attend religious study, shows that worship at Al-Fatah arises from a life that is economically and socially precarious. The desire to "draw closer to God" under such circumstances demonstrates that trans women's spirituality does not rest upon privilege, but upon perseverance in continuing to pray amid exhaustion, limitation, and social wounds. It is at this point that dignity acquires its most concrete theological meaning, namely the right of every human being to stand before God without losing their humanity (Hayati et al., 2026; Mir-Hosseini, 2025).

This religious strength becomes even more legible when Al-Fatah is situated within the history of rejection it has endured. Its temporary closure in 2016 due to pressure from conservative religious groups shows that the principal dispute surrounding this pesantren is not merely a social matter, but a question of who is regarded as legitimate to worship (Hajid & Husada, 2023). The management affirmed that their activities consisted of religious study, prayer, and efforts to draw closer to God, yet the very existence of trans women's bodies continued to be treated as a reason to suspect or even deny their spiritual legitimacy. This event reveals how pious bodies in the public space of Islam are often imagined narrowly, as though sincere worship must always submit to a normative and binary definition of the body.

This struggle brings the article into a more fundamental theological domain, namely the relationship between divine mercy and the hospitality of the community of believers. Islam normatively teaches compassion, repentance, and the openness of the path of guidance for humankind (Hayati et al., 2026). The experience of Al-Fatah reveals a harsher reality, since the path towards God for trans women is instead filled with moral surveillance, social threats, and the continual need to explain that their worship is not deviant. This condition demands a

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more serious theological reading, because what is at issue is not merely gender identity, but the extent to which religious communities are willing to acknowledge that God's mercy cannot be narrowed by the social boundaries fashioned by human beings themselves.

This question of recognition became even more complex after the death of Shinta Ratri on 1 February 2023. Shinta had long been not only an organisational leader, but also a guardian of memory, an interpreter of experience, and a figure who maintained the moral continuity of the community (Hajid & Husada, 2023). Recent studies indicate that her passing triggered changes in leadership while also opening new questions about the future of Al-Fatah. This dimension means that the issue of the pesantren no longer ends with the right to worship, but expands into questions of spiritual inheritance, moral authority, and the sustainability of a community that has long survived under pressure.

The uncertainty following Shinta's passing demonstrates that sacred belonging always requires a space that can be inhabited, cared for, and carried forward. Testimony that the community "does not yet know where to go" indicates that the loss of a leader also means the threat of losing a place to learn the Qur'an, perform prayer, and experience the presence of God collectively. The history of Al-Fatah's movement from Bu Maryani's house, then to Shinta's house, and then moving again in order to sustain its activities shows that sacred belonging in this pesantren is built not upon stability, but upon faithfulness in keeping the space of prayer alive even when the walls and addresses change. In this sense, place is not merely a physical location, but the vessel in which dignity and devotion acquire their communal form (Danugroho et al., 2025; Fadhlina, 2024).

This communal space also develops beyond ritual in the narrow sense. Cambridge research in 2024 shows that Al-Fatah has moved towards welfare through food security, a trans women's crisis centre, and alternative job training, while the latest field reports note the presence of financial literacy, basic computing, advocacy, free clinical services, and campus dialogue programmes (Fadhlina, 2024). This expansion is important to read theologically, because dignity in the religious tradition concerns not only the right to pray, but also the right to live, survive, work, and be treated as a whole human being. The presence of Al-Fatah thus shows that worship and welfare are not two separate domains, but two faces of the same struggle to restore the nobility of life.

The overall exposition shows that Pondok Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Yogyakarta constitutes a highly important locus for developing a theological reading of dignity, worship, and sacred belonging in contemporary Indonesian Islam. Data on stigma and discrimination reveal the depth of the social wounds surrounding the lives of trans women, the history of Al-Fatah shows the emergence of an alternative spiritual space, the 2016 closure exposes the narrowness of definitions of the pious body, and the post-Shinta phase reveals the fragility of the continuity of spaces of faith for marginalised communities. This direction confirms that the question of Al-Fatah is not located at the margins of theology, but at its very heart, because it is there that one tests whether religion is truly capable of becoming a home for wounded human beings, or whether it instead helps to harden the boundaries that prevent them from returning to God.

Literature Review

The theoretical framework of this article is grounded in Liberation Theology and the Theory of Belonging in order to read the religious experience of Muslim trans women as a struggle of faith unfolding from marginal spaces (Engineer, 1990; Esack, 1997; Widyantoro, 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Liberation Theology is relevant because it enables experiences of injury, rejection, and exclusion to be read not merely as social facts, but as a locus of theological reflection on dignity, justice, and solidarity with the oppressed. This direction is in line with the findings of Etengoff and Rodriguez, which show that some transgender Muslims understand Islam as a tradition that is fundamentally aligned with the oppressed, so that religious

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resilience emerges from a reading of faith that resists exclusion. The Theory of Belonging complements this horizon by placing belonging, communal attachment, and recognition as important elements in religious experience, so that worship is understood not only as a ritual act, but also as a practice of becoming part of a community of faith. The combination of both enables this article to read Al-Fatah not only as a space of survival, but also as a theological space in which dignity and sacred belonging are negotiated, nurtured, and sustained.

This interpretive direction has points of convergence with Fadhlina's study (2024), although its focus remains fundamentally different. Fadhlina's research employed a qualitative approach to examine the precarious condition of Muslim trans women in Yogyakarta after the 2016 attack and the COVID-19 pandemic, with primary attention to how waria constructed the idea of welfare as a strategy for claiming basic rights. The findings of that study show that the struggle of the Al-Fatah community moved from merely preserving a space of worship towards expanding the agenda of welfare, such as life security, material support, and community continuity. The contribution of that study is highly important because it places Al-Fatah within the concrete context of structural vulnerability. The difference in this article lies in its point of emphasis, because this writing does not proceed from the category of welfare as its principal axis, but from a theological reading of dignity and sacred belonging, so that practices of worship, social wounds, and the continuity of communal space are read as fields of reflection on faith, rather than primarily as strategies for articulating social rights.

The struggle between faith and vulnerability is also visible in the research of Etengoff and Rodriguez (2022), which provides an important foundation for a religious reading from the margins. This study used a mixed methods design to explore the religious experiences and mental health of 15 transgender Muslims. Its main findings show that the participants built religious resilience through a personal relationship with God, a reinterpretation of Islam as a tradition aligned with the oppressed, and the search for safe spaces that enabled them to sustain faith amid rejection. The relevance of this study lies in its success in affirming that trans Muslims do not always leave religion when they experience exclusion, but can instead build religious endurance through an emancipatory reading. The distinction of this article lies in its analytical focus, because the study by Etengoff and Rodriguez is stronger in the psychological dimension of individual resilience, whereas this article moves into the domain of communal theology by emphasising how dignity and sacred belonging are formed through spaces of worship, leadership, and community continuity at Al-Fatah.

The tense relationship between sexual identity and religious identity is further deepened by the research of Kumpasoğlu, Hasdemir, and Canel-Çınarbaş (2022). This study used semi-structured interviews with 12 religious LGBT individuals in Turkey, including one trans woman, in order to understand how they negotiated their relationship with Islam, the Muslim community, and the coping strategies they developed. The findings show that the participants lived "between two worlds", namely between attachment to religion and the experience of being rejected both by religious communities and by parts of the LGBT environment, so that they developed personal strategies to maintain their religious identity. The contribution of this study lies in its affirmation that LGBT Muslim religiosity unfolds within a complex and non-linear situation of negotiation. The difference in this article appears in its orientation and context, because Kumpasoğlu's study is situated within a framework of psychology and coping strategies in Turkey, whereas this article focuses on the Indonesian context and develops a theological reading of a Muslim trans women's community that has built a collective space of worship, so that belonging is read as a communal and sacred experience, not merely as a strategy of identity negotiation.

The need for a more explicit theological reading also becomes visible when compared with the study of Muhsin et al. (2024). This article is a normative-critical study that examines sex reassignment surgery, marriage, and the reproductive rights of intersex and transgender persons from the perspective of Sunni Islam. Its findings show that Sunni fiqh discourse demonstrates greater flexibility towards intersex persons than towards transgender persons,

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while issues of gender-affirming surgery, marriage, and reproduction remain debated within a strong binary gender horizon. The contribution of this study lies in its mapping of contemporary Islamic legal discourse concerning the body, status, and reproductive rights. The difference in this article becomes clear because the work of Muhsin et al. operates at the normative-juridical level and within legal debate, whereas this article centres attention on the lived theology of the Al-Fatah community, namely how subjects living under the shadow of such legal debates continue to pray, build belonging, and understand their dignity before God. This article therefore does not merely repeat discussions of halal-haram or valid-invalid, but shifts the focus towards the concrete theological experiences of those seeking a home within a community of faith.

Methods

This study employed a library-based qualitative theological design to construct an interpretative reading of dignity, worship, and sacred belonging within the religious life of Muslim trans women at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Yogyakarta (Weyant, 2022). The study is then a theological interpretation of documented experiences reported in existing scholarship.This design was selected because the study does not aim to measure social phenomena statistically, but to interpret the relationship between normative Islamic sources, theological concepts, documented religious experiences, and the marginalisation of Muslim trans women (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2020). Library research in this article is therefore treated as a structured inquiry that brings Qur'anic principles, Islamic theological literature, and recent academic studies into critical dialogue.

The primary normative sources consist of Qur'anic verses related to human dignity, justice, mercy, worship, divine nearness, ethical responsibility, and communal solidarity. These verses were read through thematic exegesis to connect dispersed Qur'anic meanings into a coherent theological horizon. Hadith, classical and contemporary Qur'anic exegesis, and Islamic theological works were used as supporting normative sources to clarify concepts such as karāmah, recognition, worship, the body, vulnerability, and solidarity.

Secondary academic sources were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and recent scholarly publications discussing Muslim trans women, marginal religiosity, social exclusion, Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah, Liberation Theology, and the Theory of Belonging.

Data collection was conducted through systematic documentation by identifying, selecting, classifying, and organising relevant normative and academic sources according to the themes of dignity, worship, marginalisation, religious space, communal continuity, and sacred belonging. The selection of literature was purposive, based on thematic relevance, academic credibility, direct connection to Muslim trans women or Al-Fatah, and conceptual relevance to Liberation Theology and the Theory of Belonging.

Sources that were merely polemical, non-academic, or unrelated to the theological focus were not used as the basis of analysis. This procedure ensured that the study remained grounded in credible literature and documented religious experience rather than unsupported speculation.

Data analysis was conducted through content analysis and conceptual interpretation (Gleeson, 2021; Krippendorff, 2022; Takona, 2024). Content analysis was used to identify recurring themes in normative and academic sources, while conceptual interpretation connected these themes with Liberation Theology and the Theory of Belonging.

Liberation Theology was employed to read marginal religious experience through dignity, justice, and restoration, while the Theory of Belonging was used to analyse communal attachment, memory, recognition, and sacred space. Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation, theoretical triangulation, and interpretative consistency, ensuring

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that every analytical claim remained connected to the research focus on dignity, worship, and sacred belonging.

Results and Analysis

Qur'anic Insights on Dignity and Belonging in the Religious Life of Muslim Trans Women

Discourse on dignity and belonging in the religious life of Muslim trans women must first be situated within the horizon of the Qur'an as a normative source that regards human beings not merely through the social categories attached to them, but through their position as creatures of God who are honoured, called to worship, and given the possibility of drawing near to Him (Haq, 2024; Hasan, 2025; Sarwar, 2025). Such a framework is important because religious experience within marginal communities is often read through narrow social boundaries, whereas the Qur'an in fact presents more fundamental principles concerning human dignity, divine nearness, ontological equality, and communal attachment within the life of faith. Through this foundation, Qur'anic verses may be read as a theological basis for examining the idea that dignity is not nullified by social stigma, while belonging is not determined solely by fragile social acceptance, but also by the spiritual recognition that every human being remains within the horizon of mercy, worship, and the moral community willed by God.

Table 1. Qur'anic Foundations in the Religious Life of Muslim Trans Women

No.	Surah and Verse	Translation	Relevance
1	Al-Isra' 17:70	"And indeed, We have honoured the children of Adam..."	Becomes the principal foundation for reading human dignity as a divine gift inherent in all human beings. The honour in this verse provides a theological foundation that dignity does not depend upon social acceptance, but upon God's recognition of humanity.
2	At-Tin 95:4	"Indeed, We created the human being in the best of forms."	Affirms the ontological value of the human being as a creature of God possessing honour. This verse is important in rejecting readings that degrade certain bodies as spiritually less worthy.
3	Al-Hujurat 49:13	"O humankind, indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes so that you may know one another..."	Becomes an ethical foundation for reading difference within the horizon of ta'aruf, not exclusion. This verse is relevant for constructing belonging as a relation of recognition, not marginalisation.
4	Al-Baqarah 2:186	"And when My servants ask you concerning Me, then indeed I am near..."	Shows that access to God is direct and not limited by social stigma. The divine nearness in this verse is highly important for reading every human being's right to pray and worship.
5	Qaf 50:16	"And indeed, We created the human being and know what his soul whispers to him, and We are nearer to him than his jugular vein."	Affirms the intimate dimension of God's relation with the human being. This verse supports a reading that spiritual experience cannot be invalidated by social judgement because God knows the human inner self directly.

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6	Az-Zariyat 51:56	"And I did not create jinn and humankind except that they may worship Me."	Provides the theological foundation that the existential purpose of humanity is worship. This verse is relevant in affirming that religious life must not be narrowed only to bodies recognised by certain social norms.
7	At-Taubah 9:71	"And the believing men and the believing women are allies of one another..."	Becomes a Qur'anic basis for a faith community that supports one another. This verse is relevant for reading belonging as communal attachment, moral support, and religious solidarity.

The verse on human honour in Surah al-Isra' [17]: 70 opens a very strong theological foundation for a reading of dignity. Hamka in Tafsir al-Azhar (2012) emphasises that the honour of the children of Adam is visible in the gift of reason, the capacity for endeavour, and the position of the human being as a creature given the means to live life with dignity. Al-Muyassar (2008) moves in a similar direction by affirming that this honour is visible in the human ability to traverse land and sea, enjoy good provision, and possess advantages over many other creatures. This reading is important because dignity in the Qur'an is not derived from social judgement, but is first placed by God as karāmah inherent in the human being. From here, theological reflection may begin by positioning the human being as a subject already honoured before being judged by social categories that are often shifting and exclusionary.

This line of interpretation is then deepened by Surah at-Tin [95]: 4, which affirms that the human being was created in the best of forms. Within the horizon of Quraish Shihab (2015), this verse does not stop at physical beauty, but points to the integrity of human creation as a being endowed with moral, intellectual, and spiritual potential. This emphasis makes "ahsani taqwim" more appropriately understood as an affirmation of the dignity of creation that enables human beings to bear trust and respond to God's call. Such a reading expands the theological basis of dignity, because the human body is not read as an object of reproach, but as part of a creation that fundamentally contains honour. Its relevance to this article lies in the affirmation that religious experience cannot begin from assumptions about a body deemed less worthy, but from the recognition that the human being has been created within the best horizon of divine creation.

This ontological foundation finds its social articulation in Surah al-Hujurat [49]: 13. Tafsir Ringkas Kementerian Agama (2016) reads this verse as a Qur'anic ethic for responding to the diversity of nations, tribes, and origins as a path towards mutual recognition and mutual assistance, not mutual degradation. Al-Razi (2012), along a more theological-philosophical line, emphasises that human honour is not determined by lineage, race, or outward identity, but by taqwa as the moral measure before Allah. The meeting of these two readings is highly important because belonging in the Qur'an is not built upon uniformity, but upon recognition of the same human origin and the same ethical orientation open towards taqwa. In this way, a sense of belonging within the community of believers ought not to be narrowed by social difference, because the Qur'an in fact shifts the centre of honour from outward identity to moral quality before God.

This principle of recognition acquires relational depth through Surah al-Baqarah [2]: 186, where the Qur'an does not speak of the human being from a distance, but of God's nearness to His servant. Ibn Kathir (2018) interprets this verse as an affirmation that Allah is near, hears supplication, and responds to the call of the servant who invokes Him with faith. Al-Maraghi (1910) moves in a similar tone by emphasising that this divine nearness demands a human response in the form of obedience and trust, so that supplication is not merely speech, but a reciprocal relation between servant and God. The significance of this verse is immense for a theological reading of Muslim trans women, because it shows that access to God is not determined by social approval, but by divine nearness that remains open to the servant who calls upon Him. From this point, belonging acquires a deeper spiritual meaning: becoming part

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of the horizon of God's mercy does not wait for social validation, because God Himself has declared His nearness.

That nearness then moves from the realm of supplication into the interior depth of the human being in Surah Qaf [50]: 16. Al-Zamakhsyari (1995), with his distinctive tendency towards linguistic analysis, reads this verse as an affirmation that nothing is hidden from Allah's knowledge, including the whispers of the inner self that are not even visible in speech. This verse shows that the relation between God and the human being reaches into the deepest domain of human subjectivity, so that social judgement which stops only at outward appearance loses its claim to absoluteness before divine knowledge. It is at this point that dignity receives a more intimate theological protection, because human dignity is not only affirmed through the status of creation, but also through the fact that the human inner self and its struggles are known directly by God. This framework is highly important for a theological article, because it opens space to understand the religious experience of marginal groups as valid within the horizon of Allah, even though it is often misunderstood by superficial social views.

The interweaving of dignity and divine nearness ultimately leads to the existential purpose of the human being as affirmed in Surah az-Zariyat [51]: 56. Thabathabai (1991) in al-Mizan reads worship not merely as formal ritual, but as an existential orientation that places the whole of human life in servitude to Allah. Al-Baydawi (2011), in his classical style, also understands this verse as an affirmation that the creation of jinn and humankind is directed towards devotion, not towards fulfilling any need of God, since Allah is utterly self-sufficient beyond all creatures. These two readings show that worship is the universal calling of the human being as a creature, so that the essence of religiosity must not be reduced to a privilege for certain bodies accepted by social norms. This direction provides a strong theological foundation for your article, because the religious life of Muslim trans women may be read as participation in the same purpose of creation, namely servitude, without first having to prove its worthiness before narrow social standards.

This horizon of servitude then finds its communal form in Surah at-Taubah [9]: 71, where the Qur'an describes believing men and believing women as helpers of one another. Al-Maraghi (1910) emphasises that this verse portrays the spirit of the believers as mutually supporting one another in goodness, enjoining what is right, and preventing what is wrong, so that the community of faith is built upon moral cooperation rather than unilateral domination. Jalalain (2015) presents a concise yet firm tone that this reciprocal assistance is realised through prayer, zakat, and obedience to Allah and His Messenger. This conclusion is important because belonging in the Qur'anic perspective does not stop at the feeling of being accepted, but is realised in the practice of guarding, supporting, and strengthening one another on the path of faith. In this way, the religious life of Muslim trans women may be read theologically as the search for a communal home within the ummah, namely a space where dignity is protected, worship is lived, and a person's existence is not invalidated, but upheld by an ethic of mutual assistance among fellow believers.

Dignity as a Theological Horizon: Re-reading Religious Life at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah

Dignity in theological interpretation cannot be reduced to mere moral esteem granted by society to individuals, because at a more fundamental level it points to the recognition of human nobility as creatures of God who possess the right to worship, to hope, and to live within the horizon of divine mercy (Hayati et al., 2026; Mir-Hosseini, 2025). This framework becomes especially important when religious life is read from the experience of the Muslim trans women's community at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Yogyakarta, because what is at stake there is not only social acceptance, but the continuity of dignity amid vulnerability, rejection, and the uncertainty of spaces of faith. In this context, dignity must be mapped not as an abstract concept, but as a theological horizon visible in social wounds, perseverance in

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worship, the expansion of the meaning of welfare, and the community's resilience in continuing to live as subjects of faith.

Table 2. Analytical Dimensions of Dignity as a Theological Horizon in Religious Life at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah -

No.	Dimension of Analysis	Empirical Description	Theological Meaning
1	Social vulnerability	The lives of trans women are overshadowed by stigma, discrimination, informal work, and a fragile social position.	Human dignity is tested precisely when society fails to grant recognition; dignity becomes a theological category affirming that human nobility is not nullified by social wounds.
2	Worship space as a place of restoration	Al-Fatah becomes a place for Qur'anic study, congregational prayer, religious discussion, and weekly almsgiving for Muslim trans women.	Worship becomes a means of restoring dignity because marginalised bodies remain present as legitimate subjects before God.
3	Rejection and the 2016 closure	The pesantren experienced pressure and temporary closure as a result of threats from conservative groups.	Dignity appears as a theological struggle against exclusion, namely when the right to draw near to God is questioned by socially constructed boundaries.
4	Religious perseverance amid limitation	Students continue to come for Qur'anic study and worship despite living under economic hardship and uncertainty.	Dignity acquires its spiritual form through faithfulness in worship; dignity appears as the resilience of faith, not merely as social status.
5	The death of Shinta Ratri and communal uncertainty	Shinta's passing generated anxiety concerning leadership, space, and the future of the pesantren.	Communal dignity is linked to the continuity of moral and spiritual space; dignity is not only individual, but also communal.
6	Expansion from worship to welfare	Al-Fatah developed towards food security, a crisis centre, job training, literacy, and social services.	Dignity within the theological horizon includes the right to live properly; worship and welfare are understood as parts of restoring human nobility.
7	Ethics of living together	The community emphasises good conduct, relations with local residents, and ethical social participation.	Dignity does not stop at self-recognition, but bears fruit in ethical praxis showing that life in faith is always tied to social responsibility.

The table shows that dignity in the context of Al-Fatah cannot be understood as social esteem coming from outside, but as a theological horizon that appears most clearly precisely when human life is in a vulnerable condition. Stigma, discrimination, informal work, and fragile social positioning show that the lives of trans women in Indonesia are often shaped by structural rejection (de Lind van Wijngaarden & Fongkaew, 2021; Suleman et al., 2026). This situation means that dignity does not appear as something automatically recognised by society, but as a value that must be reread from the relationship between human beings and God, namely from the conviction that human nobility does not vanish simply because one is placed at the margins of social space.

This vulnerability then acquires deeper meaning when Al-Fatah appears as a space of worship that enables the restoration of dignity to take place in a concrete manner. Activities of Qur'anic

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study, congregational prayer, religious discussion, and weekly almsgiving show that religious life in this pesantren does not rest on symbolism alone, but on spiritual practices that continue to be lived out. Bodies that are often questioned in social space are instead present here as bodies that read verses, offer prayers, and take part in the communal rhythm of devotion. This direction shows that dignity at Al-Fatah grows through worship, because the relationship with God becomes the deepest foundation for restoring a sense of worth and value.

This meaning becomes even sharper when seen through the religious perseverance of the students in everyday life. The story of Rini Kaleng, who still makes time for Qur'anic study after spending the whole day busking, shows that closeness to God emerges from a life burdened by economic hardship rather than from a settled and comfortable situation. Such faithfulness shows that religious dignity is not determined by readily available social honour, but by the human capacity to continue directing oneself towards God amid wounds and exhaustion. In this context, dignity appears as spiritual resilience that prevents human beings from losing the meaning of themselves even when the surrounding world continues to demean them (Chaudhry et al., 2026; Davies et al., 2023).

The wholeness of this horizon is in fact severely tested by the experience of rejection once endured by this pesantren. The pressure and temporary closure in 2016 revealed that the main struggle of Al-Fatah did not end with social acceptance, but touched upon the more fundamental question of who is regarded as legitimate to worship. When the right to study the Qur'an and perform prayer is challenged in the name of religious and social norms, dignity changes from an ethical category into a field of theological struggle. This experience shows that the religious life of trans women at Al-Fatah does not develop in a neutral space, but in a situation where human nobility must be defended against social efforts seeking to restrict access to God.

This struggle then entered a new phase after the death of Shinta Ratri. The loss of this central figure not only created personal grief, but also opened uncertainty regarding the direction of leadership, the continuity of space, and the future of the community. At this point, dignity no longer concerns only individual steadfastness, but also the dignity of the community to remain as a living space of faith. The anxiety about "where to go" shows that religious dignity requires a communal vessel in order to continue being sustained, because without shared space, worship risks losing the social place that has thus far supported safety, meaning, and continuity (Alcântara et al., 2022; Telang et al., 2025).

The scope of dignity ultimately expands beyond the right to pray towards the right to live properly as a whole human being. The development of Al-Fatah towards welfare, job training, literacy, advocacy, and social services shows that dignity in theological interpretation cannot be separated from the material conditions that enable human beings to survive and flourish. Ethical relations with surrounding residents, empowerment activities, and the courage to remain present as a community of faith confirm that dignity at Al-Fatah is not a passive dignity, but one that works, nurtures, and restores. The religious life at this pesantren therefore shows that a theological reading of dignity must move from spiritual recognition towards the restoration of life, because human nobility demands not only the right to utter the name of God, but also the right to live as His creation in a whole and complete manner.

Sacred Belonging and the Space of Faith: Community, Vulnerability, and Religiosity at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah

Sacred belonging in the context of Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah cannot be sufficiently understood as a sense of being accepted in a general social sense, because its meaning is directly tied to the experience of finding a space of faith that enables a person to pray, study religion, and be present as part of a community of believers without having continually to defend the legitimacy of their existence. This perspective becomes important because the religious life of

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trans women is burdened not only by stigma from outside, but also by the threat of losing the communal space that has thus far sustained closeness to God, the continuity of worship, and relations of mutual affirmation among one another. Within this horizon, sacred belonging must therefore be read as a spiritual and communal bond that grows from shared practice, collective memory, perseverance in faith, and the struggle to preserve space so that it may remain a religious home for those who are often placed at the margins of the community.

Table 3. Dimensions of Sacred Belonging and the Space of Faith at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah

No.	Dimension of Analysis	Empirical Description	Theological Meaning
1	Communal space of worship	Al-Fatah becomes a place for Qur'anic study, congregational prayer, religious discussion, and regular encounters among community members.	Belonging arises from togetherness in worship, so that space functions not only as a physical location, but as a spiritual home.
2	Memory and continuity after Shinta	Following the death of Shinta Ratri, the community faced anxiety concerning direction, leadership, and the continuity of the pesantren.	Sacred belonging is tied to collective memory and spiritual inheritance, not merely to a figure, but to the continuity of the community of faith.
3	Spatial vulnerability and relocation	Al-Fatah has moved locations several times in order to preserve its shared activities.	Belonging becomes an act of caring for the space of faith amid uncertainty, so that place is understood as a vessel of grace that must continually be struggled for.
4	Internal solidarity and an ethic of mutual care	Managers and students emphasise responsibility, good conduct, and commitment to preserving the good name of the community.	Belonging is not merely a feeling of being accepted, but a practice of mutual support that forms a moral and spiritual community.
5	Connection with the surrounding society	The community maintains relatively good relations with local residents, participates in social activities, and opens spaces for dialogue.	Sacred belonging expands from within the community towards an ethical presence in society, so that the space of faith is not closed, but relational.

The table shows that sacred belonging at Al-Fatah begins from a very fundamental need, namely the need for a space in which to stand before God without being severed from community. Activities of Qur'anic study, congregational prayer, religious discussion, and regular encounters do not merely demonstrate the continuity of religious activities, but also form a shared awareness that faith can be nurtured communally. Such an experience is important because belonging in religious life never emerges from abstraction, but from bodies sitting together, listening to the same verses, and living out the rhythm of devotion within a shared and recognised space.

The strength of this communal space becomes even more palpable when read alongside the experience of loss following the death of Shinta Ratri. Anxiety about the future of the pesantren shows that what is under threat is not only the existence of a place of activity, but also the continuity of the spiritual home that has long housed memory, moral leadership, and a sense of safety for the community. The meaning of belonging in this context does not stop at affection for a particular figure, because what is at stake is whether the trace of faith that has been built together can still be carried forward after the unifying figure is no longer present. Sacred belonging therefore possesses a dimension of inheritance, namely the ability of the community

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to ensure that the space of faith does not die along with the passing of its leader (Toomistu, 2022).

This tension becomes even clearer because Al-Fatah itself exists within conditions of space that have never been fully stable. The history of moving from Bu Maryani's house to Shinta's house, and then to another place after 2023, shows that belonging in this pesantren is not built upon strong institutional stability, but upon the struggle to preserve a shared space. This condition offers an important theological lesson that the space of faith is not merely a permanent building, but a place that becomes sacred because it is filled with prayer, learning, and solidarity. The sacredness of space at Al-Fatah therefore does not arise from physical grandeur, but from the faithfulness of the community in continually making it a home for devotion.

The binding force of belonging is also visible in the way the community sustains its internal relations. Testimony from the management shows that being part of Al-Fatah demands moral responsibility, good conduct, and an awareness not to make it easy for negative generalisations about trans women to arise. Such ethical demands show that belonging is not simply about being accepted as one is, but is also maintained through commitment to preserving the dignity of the community. Within a theological horizon, such relations demonstrate that the space of faith is built not only by the right to be within it, but also by the obligation to support one another so that the community may continue to live as a trustworthy moral body (Hodaie, 2025).

The sacred meaning of belonging then acquires greater depth because it grows amid the experience of being rejected by the wider public religious sphere. When the right to gather, study the Qur'an, and pray was once questioned, the continuity of Al-Fatah in fact showed that a community of faith can endure through strong internal solidarity. At this point, sacred belonging no longer means merely "feeling accepted", but becomes an existential experience of having a place to return to spiritually when other spaces close their doors. This experience is deeply important theologically because it shows that a marginal community of faith can in fact give rise to a more intense form of attachment, since their togetherness is born from a shared struggle against exclusion.

The space of faith that is nurtured internally does not, in fact, develop as an enclave closed off from the outside world. Relatively good relations with local residents, participation in social activities, and the involvement of some students in community activities show that belonging at Al-Fatah is not built through total separation, but through ethical negotiation with the surrounding environment. This dimension is important because sacred belonging concerns not only acceptance into the internal community, but also the possibility of being present with dignity in wider society. Such social presence shows that a healthy space of faith is not one that cuts off relations, but one that enables marginal subjects to be present ethically and to have their value recognised.

This direction ultimately shows that sacred belonging at Al-Fatah is the result of an encounter between vulnerability, memory, and communal perseverance. The fragility of space does not destroy belonging, but instead reveals how deep the human need is for a dependable spiritual home. The loss of a leadership figure does not automatically erase the sense of belonging, because collective memory and practices of worship continue to function as forces binding the community together. Internal relations sustained through an ethic of responsibility also make belonging move beyond affection into commitment to caring for one another before God and society (Danugroho et al., 2025; Mahajan et al., 2025).

The whole of this reading affirms that the space of faith at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah is not merely a place of refuge from stigma, but a theological site where a marginal community builds its own spiritual home. Sacred belonging arises through the encounter of worship together, the inheritance of memory, the struggle to preserve space, internal solidarity, and ethical openness towards the surrounding society. Religious life at Al-Fatah thus shows that belonging

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is not a gift simply bestowed by dominant social structures, but a communal work formed through the faithfulness to keep praying, keep gathering, and keep recognising one another as fellow seekers of God.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the religious life of trans women at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah cannot be read merely as the religious practice of a small community at the local level, but rather as part of a global struggle concerning religion, the body, vulnerability, and the right to exist as subjects of faith. In many contexts, transgender groups are often placed at the intersection of social exclusion and spiritual searching, so that their experiences demonstrate that religion may function in a dual manner as both a source of empowerment and a site of rejection. The position of Al-Fatah affirms that this dynamic also occurs within Indonesian Islam, but with a distinctive character, namely through the formation of an alternative religious space that not only preserves ritual, but also restores the sense of worthiness to pray, gather, and identify oneself as part of a community of faith. This direction shows that the question of Muslim trans women ultimately touches upon the global issue of who is recognised as a religious human being and how religious institutions respond to bodies that have long been placed at the margins of the norm (Makbul, 2023; Shakil & Cheema, 2024; Zainuddin et al., 2025).

The scope of this meaning becomes even broader when the results of this study are read within the context of increasing global attention to lived religion among marginal communities. The experience of Al-Fatah shows that devotion does not end at the level of personal ritual, but grows into a communal practice linking prayer, Qur'anic study, solidarity, and the maintenance of shared space. Such a pattern is in line with the development of contemporary religious studies, which increasingly attend to how vulnerable communities build concrete forms of religiosity outside official institutions or the mainstream. The global relevance of these findings lies in the affirmation that spaces of faith for marginal groups are not always formed by formal legitimacy, but often arise from the need to survive, preserve memory, and create a spiritual home that enables dignity to remain alive in fragile circumstances (Danugroho et al., 2025).

The reach of these findings also touches upon the broader question of the relationship between spirituality and welfare within vulnerable communities. The development of Al-Fatah from a space of worship into a space of empowerment shows that religious life cannot be separated from material needs, communal security, and the continuity of life. This phenomenon is consistent with a global tendency that sees religion not merely as a system of belief, but also as a social infrastructure that supports survival, healing, and collective resilience. The significance of these findings lies in the fact that dignity at Al-Fatah is not restored only through the right to pray, but through the formation of conditions that enable trans women to live more safely, more connectedly, and more meaningfully. At this point, the case of Al-Fatah enriches the global conversation on how marginal communities of faith combine spiritual care and social care within a single and integrated horizon of praxis.

This reading has an important intersection with the study by Fadhlina (2024), particularly in the recognition that Al-Fatah is a space that has grown from conditions of precarity and continues to move beyond ritual functions towards a welfare agenda. This similarity shows that this article does not stand outside previous findings, but rather strengthens the argument that the continuity of the Muslim trans women's community depends greatly upon their ability to connect worship and welfare. The difference lies in the more explicitly theological analytical focus, because while Fadhlina emphasises welfare as a strategy for confronting precarity, this article places dignity as the normative horizon that explains why welfare itself must be read as part of restoring human nobility before God. This shift allows the experience of Al-Fatah to be

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understood not only as a practice of survival, but as a field in which theological recognition of humanity is negotiated and sustained.

Another close point appears in the research of Etengoff and Rodriguez (2022), which shows that transgender Muslims can build religious resilience through a personal relationship with God and a reading of Islam as a tradition aligned with the oppressed. The findings of this study affirm that argument, especially in the finding that the students of Al-Fatah continue to study the Qur'an, pray, and maintain the rhythm of worship amid stigma and rejection. The important difference emerges at the level of locus and the form of resilience. Etengoff and Rodriguez place greater emphasis on individual-psychological resilience, whereas this article shows that religious endurance at Al-Fatah operates communally through space, memory, solidarity, and the continuity of shared practice. The implication of this difference is quite significant, because the experience of faith within marginal communities cannot always be explained solely through personal endurance, but also through communal infrastructures that enable a person to continue feeling part of a spiritual home.

The tension between religion and identity described by Kumpasoğlu et al. (2022), as well as the normative-juridical debates discussed by Muhsin et al. (2024), is further deepened by this article, while at the same time carried into a different domain. Kumpasoğlu et al. show that religious LGBT subjects live between two worlds and develop coping strategies to maintain their attachment to Islam, whereas Muhsin et al. map the boundaries of Sunni fiqh discourse concerning the body, status, marriage, and reproductive rights. This article intersects with both in recognising that Muslim transgender subjects indeed live under the pressure of strong binary norms. The difference lies in the point of emphasis, because this article does not stop at coping strategies or legal debates over validity and invalidity, but instead seeks to show how communities such as Al-Fatah form a concrete lived theology, namely how people living under the shadow of those debates continue to build worship, preserve space, and live out sacred belonging as a form of faith that continues to endure.

The findings of this study also show strong relevance to Liberation Theology. Dignity at Al-Fatah emerges not as an abstract normative concept, but as an affirmation that faith must be read from the experiences of those who are demeaned, rejected, and forced to defend their right to draw near to God. Within this horizon, the religious life of trans women can no longer be positioned merely as an object of moral judgement from outside, because it is precisely from the experience of marginalisation that theology is tested: whether it sides with human restoration or instead becomes a language of legitimation for exclusion. The findings of this study show that Al-Fatah presents a concrete form of liberative reading, because the space of worship there functions as a site for resisting dehumanisation through prayer, solidarity, and the recognition of nobility that is not annulled by social stigma.

The depth of this reading is strongly complemented by the Theory of Belonging, particularly because the findings show that belonging at Al-Fatah does not end with a feeling of emotional acceptance, but becomes a communal work sustained through memory, ritual, moral responsibility, and the struggle to preserve space. This theory helps explain why the death of Shinta Ratri is not read merely as the loss of a figure, but as a threat to the continuity of the community's spiritual home. The framework of belonging also makes it clear that the presence of Al-Fatah is not simply a form of social association, but a space in which people rejected by dominant boundaries find the possibility of continuing to dwell within the horizon of faith. Belonging in this article is therefore sacred because it is directly related to the continuity of worship, the inheritance of meaning, and mutual recognition as fellow seekers of God.

The novelty of this article lies in its attempt to shift the reading of Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah from social, psychological, or normative-juridical frameworks towards a theological horizon that simultaneously brings together dignity and sacred belonging. Many previous studies have discussed precarity, resilience, coping, or legal debates related to Muslim transgender subjects, but this article shows that the central question of Al-Fatah actually lies at the heart

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of the theological question of human dignity, the right to worship, and the possibility of building a spiritual home amid exclusion. Its principal contribution lies not only in the choice of object, but in the way that object is read: Al-Fatah is positioned as a locus of theological reflection in which liberation and belonging meet in concrete communal experience, so that this article offers a sharper approach for understanding the Muslim trans women's community not as a deviation from religion, but as a site that reveals the capacity of religion to become a space for the restoration of dignity and sacred attachment.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study shows that the religious life of Muslim trans women at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Yogyakarta reveals a theological dimension that goes far beyond a social reading of stigma and vulnerability. Dignity in this context does not emerge as recognition first granted by society, but as karāmah affirmed through worship, spiritual perseverance, and the courage of the community to remain present before God amid exclusion. The presence of Al-Fatah affirms that a space of faith for marginal groups can function as a locus of restoration, where dignity is nurtured through Qur'anic study, congregational prayer, communal solidarity, and the expansion of praxis towards welfare. The meaning of belonging also appears not to stop at a feeling of emotional acceptance, but to develop into sacred belonging, namely a sacred attachment built through shared memory, the continuity of space, and the commitment to preserve a spiritual home amid post-Shinta Ratri uncertainty. These findings affirm that the question of Muslim trans women is not at the margins of theology, but at the core of the question of human dignity, the right to worship, and the possibility of religion being present as a space of liberation.

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. Its library-based design relies on normative texts, theological literature, and documented academic studies, without direct fieldwork, interviews with members of Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah, or participant observation of religious activities within the community. Its focus on one pesantren in Yogyakarta also limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other Muslim trans women's communities or other marginal religious groups in different sociocultural contexts. Future studies should therefore conduct ethnographic fieldwork, involve in-depth interviews with community members, religious leaders, and surrounding residents, and examine how dignity, worship, and sacred belonging are experienced in everyday religious practice. Comparative studies across different marginal Muslim communities are also recommended to develop a broader theological understanding of how Islam can function as a space of liberation, recognition, and spiritual belonging.

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