

Gender mainstreaming in the policy of islamic boarding school education: A systematic literature review

Asnal Mala¹*, Uswatun Chasanah², Siti Marpuah³

¹PGMI Study Program, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Sunan Giri University Surabaya, Indonesia

²Sharia Economics Study Program, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Sunan Giri University Surabaya, Inodnesia

³Islamic Studies Lecturer, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn, Malaysia

Article information	Abstract
Submitted: 2024-11-03	Pesantren education plays a crucial role in shaping religious understanding and mindsets, including issues related to gender mainstreaming. This study aims to explore how gender influences pesantren education policies, particularly concerning efforts to mainstream gender. Using a qualitative approach with a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, this study utilized literature sourced from Publish or Perish, ERIC, and Google Scholar. A total of 64 relevant articles, published between 2013 and 2023, were identified and analyzed. The review examined key issues related to gender mainstreaming within the political landscape of pesantren education policies. The literature reviewed revealed diverse perspectives, particularly from Islamic feminist scholars, who attempt to unravel the complexities surrounding gender roles in Islamic educational institutions. Findings indicate that gender mainstreaming in pesantren represents a multifaceted challenge shaped by cultural, religious, and political influences. These factors significantly affect policy formulation and practical implementation within pesantren. By synthesizing various viewpoints, this study offers a deeper understanding of the relationship between gender and pesantren education. The study also highlights strategies for more effective integration of gender perspectives into educational policies. This research contributes by providing a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, religious, and political influences on gender mainstreaming in pesantren. Its findings provide a strategic basis for formulating more gender-responsive education policies and identifying best practices for integrating gender perspectives within pesantren environments.
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*Corresponding author: Asnal Mala, Elementary Madrasah Teacher Education Study Program, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Sunan Giri University Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia email: malaasn12@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Pesantren is the oldest and most influential Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, shaping not only religious knowledge but also social and cultural values (Aşlamacı & Kaymakcan, 2016; Afwadzi et al., 2024). Verge (2021) and Kataeva et al. (2024) interpret gender mainstreaming as a critical strategy to integrate gender justice into educational policies and programs. Syukri (2023) emphasizes government support through policies like Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2000. However, Muhia and Abuya (2024) critically note that implementation often remains administrative and fails to alter institutional culture or power dynamics. Khalifa and Scarparo (2021) argue for internal gender audits, gender-based budgeting, staff capacity building, and grievance mechanisms as effective strategies. Despite these measures, Massouti et al. (2024) highlight that female leadership is minimal, and gender-integrated curricula are rare. Erwani and Siregar (2024) further analyze that reliance on classical texts, often interpreted patriarchally, reinforces gender-biased perspectives, perpetuating institutionalized inequality within pesantren.

Studies on gender mainstreaming have been conducted by previous researchers but with different focuses from this study. Rashdi (2024) and Mohd Nor et al. (2024) explored strategies to address gender disparities in access to education. Kusmana (2019) examined women's participation in Islamic education in Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, particularly in leadership roles. Muluk (2014) found gender disparities in educational participation between male and female students at the national level, including in Islamic higher education institutions (PTKI) and ma'had aly. Srimulyani (2007) noted that women still face challenges in accessing equal opportunities in schools and society, including in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). Guerrero and Puerta (2023) highlighted that gender mainstreaming efforts in education aim to expand educational access. However, this study focuses on how pesantren education continues to limit women's participation due to cultural norms and interpretations of classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning). Although existing studies are mostly descriptive and cultural, systematic reviews on policy formulation, actors, political dynamics, and challenges in implementing gender mainstreaming in pesantren remain scarce and underexplored.

Previous studies on gender mainstreaming in education have primarily focused on access, participation, and leadership disparities between men and women in Islamic education, both in Indonesia and other Muslim-majority countries. However, these studies tend to adopt descriptive or cultural approaches and rarely address the policy dimension within pesantren education. Moreover, existing research has not systematically analyzed how gender perspectives are integrated into policy formulation, nor how institutional actors and political dynamics influence the process. There is also a lack of comprehensive mapping of research gaps and policy challenges related to gender mainstreaming in pesantren. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by systematically examining the intersection between gender and policy development in Islamic boarding schools, identifying key actors and dynamics, and providing recommendations for more gender-equitable Islamic education policies.

This study offers both theoretical and practical contributions to the advancement of inclusive and gender-equitable Islamic education. Theoretically, it enriches the academic discourse on the intersection between gender and educational policy in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) by employing a systematic approach grounded in gender mainstreaming principles. It deepens understanding of how gender perspectives influence policy formulation and implementation within Islamic educational institutions. Practically, the findings of this study provide valuable insights for policymakers, pesantren leaders, and Islamic education stakeholders in developing policies that are more responsive to gender equality. Additionally, the research identifies key institutional actors and political dynamics shaping policy outcomes and proposes actionable recommendations to promote

justice, inclusivity, and accountability in Islamic educational governance, thereby strengthening the role of pesantren as agents of equitable social transformation.

This study hypothesizes that although formal gender mainstreaming frameworks exist within the educational landscape, their implementation in pesantren remains constrained by deeply rooted patriarchal norms, limited understanding of gender-sensitive policies, and inadequate institutional and policy support. As a result, the incorporation of gender equality principles into pesantren education policies tends to be inconsistent, symbolic, and lacking in transformative impact. Based on this hypothesis, the study seeks to address the following research questions, how are gender issues represented and addressed within pesantren education policies? What roles do key stakeholders, institutional actors, and political dynamics play in shaping the formulation and implementation of gender-related policies? And to what extent do existing gender mainstreaming frameworks influence actual policy practices within pesantren education?

METHOD

This study employs qualitative research using a systematic literature review (SLR) approach. Anam et al. (2019) interpret SLR as a systematic method to collect, critically evaluate, integrate, and present findings from diverse studies based on specific research questions. Popenoe et al. (2021) argue that this method is particularly suitable for studies requiring comprehensive and systematic data, including journal articles, theses, and dissertations discussing gender mainstreaming within pesantren education policies. Purssell and McCrae (2020) further emphasize that SLR provides an ideal framework for synthesizing complex literature. The data for this research were obtained from both primary and secondary sources, including research articles and books, as highlighted by Snyder (2019), ensuring relevance and credibility. The literature was selected from high-impact databases such as Publish or Perish, ERIC, and Google Scholar for the period 2013-2023, supplemented by textbooks. Key topics explored include gender mainstreaming, gender equality in policy politics, pesantren education, and the implementation of gender mainstreaming in pesantren education policies.

The data analysis process in this study follows several key steps. Bingham (2023) interprets the first step as formulating the research problem, specifically examining how gender influences Islamic boarding school (pesantren) education and the effective implementation of gender mainstreaming in educational policy. Chigbu et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of conducting a comprehensive search for relevant scholarly articles, while the subsequent screening of literature ensures alignment with the research topic. Xiao and Watson (2019) argue that developing categorization and coding instruments, followed by systematic analysis and interpretation, is essential for extracting meaningful insights. Finally, conclusions are drawn based on the synthesized findings. Page et al. (2021) further highlight the use of the PRISMA framework as a methodological tool to guarantee rigor and transparency in the systematic review process. Collectively, these approaches provide a structured and reliable method for analyzing gender mainstreaming in pesantren education.

In this study, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance and objectivity of the systematic review. Patino and Ferreira (2018) emphasize that clear criteria reduce selection bias and enhance methodological rigor. The inclusion criteria cover scholarly works discussing gender mainstreaming policies in pesantren education, published between 2013 and 2023 in peer-reviewed journals or indexed proceedings, and written in Indonesian or English. Conversely, Yazdani et al. (2020) note that exclusion criteria are crucial for maintaining research quality; thus, studies unrelated to gender mainstreaming or pesantren, lacking full access, irrelevant to the Indonesian context, or methodologically weak were excluded. Following selection, data extraction was conducted to collect information on methodology, findings, and key variables

(Varajão et al., 2022). Subsequently, data were coded into themes such as women's roles, policy implementation, and challenges, then analyzed through thematic or narrative qualitative approaches using NVivo or ATLAS.ti to identify core patterns and insights (Zamawe, 2015).

To ensure the validity and reliability of literature data in a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), several rigorous steps are followed. According to Park et al. (2022), maintaining transparency in the selection process is essential; therefore, this study employs the PRISMA flowchart to document each stage systematically. The quality of included studies is evaluated using standardized instruments such as the CASP or EPHPP checklist, ensuring methodological consistency. Frampton et al. (2017) emphasize that involving multiple assessors in both selection and quality appraisal helps minimize bias, while detailed documentation of inclusion and exclusion reasons strengthens research credibility. Furthermore, results are presented in two distinct sections to enhance clarity. The findings section outlines analytical trends, such as the implementation patterns of gender mainstreaming in pesantren and their educational implications. Meanwhile, the discussion interprets these findings, connects them with research questions, identifies implementation challenges, and formulates recommendations for policy and future research.

Figure 1

Flow diagram PRISMA Results of Gender Mainstreaming Publication 2013-2023

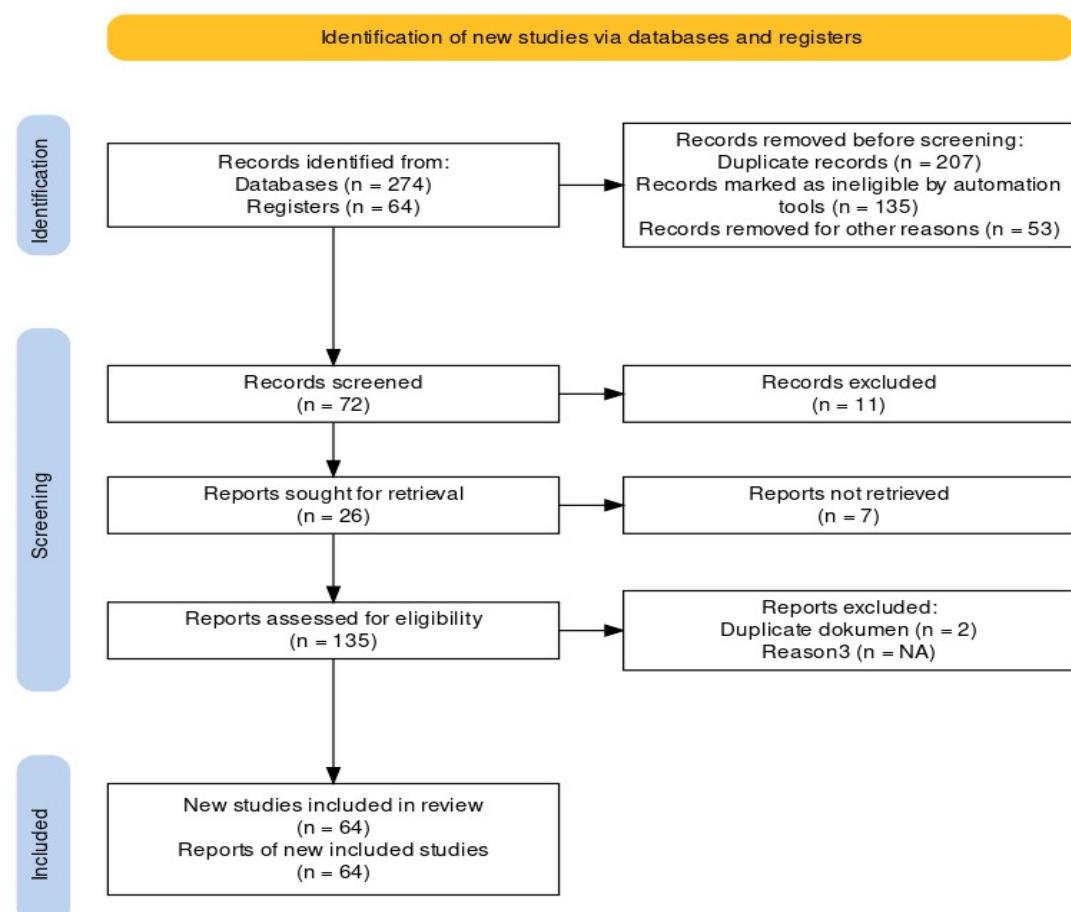


Figure 1 illustrates the PRISMA-guided selection process for this systematic review. The identification phase involved retrieving 274 documents from databases such as Publish or Perish, ERIC, and Google Scholar, focusing on gender mainstreaming in pesantren education. After removing 207 irrelevant or duplicate articles, 64 remained for further screening. In the filtering stage, these articles were reviewed based on titles and abstracts to assess relevance. Duplicate entries across databases were also eliminated. The eligibility stage followed, where the remaining

articles were evaluated against predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles that failed to meet these criteria were excluded. Ultimately, a final selection of eligible articles was included in the systematic review. These selected studies were then subjected to content analysis, and the results were interpreted in relation to the research questions, ensuring a thorough and methodical approach to data synthesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Gender mainstreaming in islamic boarding school education policy

Gender mainstreaming in Islamic boarding school education policy faces persistent structural and cultural barriers. Leadership and policy systems remain male-dominated, limiting women's participation in strategic and decision-making roles. Although gender policies often use inclusive language, they lack clear indicators, monitoring mechanisms, and accountability frameworks. Limited gender literacy among educators and students further weakens the integration of equality values in daily practices. Conservative interpretations of religious teachings continue to reinforce traditional gender roles, restricting women's leadership and representation.

Some Islamic boarding schools have initiated inclusive practices, yet these efforts remain fragmented and unsupported by coherent national regulation. The absence of binding policies and institutional commitment hampers effective implementation. Achieving genuine gender mainstreaming requires systemic reforms that strengthen regulatory structures, build institutional capacity, and promote gender awareness to ensure equal opportunities for women in education and community life. Some of the findings that need to be formulated are as follows:

Table 1

Findings on Gender Mainstreaming Issues in Islamic Boarding Schools

No	Findings	Description	References
1	Gender Inequality in Leadership Structures	Pesantren leadership remains male-dominated, with women largely occupying administrative roles. Gender mainstreaming has not significantly impacted formal structural levels.	Erviana (2021); Ardhanariswari & Haryanto (2021)
2	Gender Policies Remain Normative and Symbolic	Many pesantren policies mention inclusivity but lack technical steps, indicators, or evaluation tools. Without these elements, the policies remain merely symbolic.	Alfirdaus (2019)
3	Low Gender Literacy Among Caregivers and Students	Many pesantren leaders misunderstand gender equality, equating it with going against nature. They fail to distinguish between gender as a social construct and biological roles.	Erviana (2021); Azmy & Pertwi (2021)
4	Gender-Responsive Practices Depend on Individual Leaders	Some pesantren show good gender-responsive practices, but these rely heavily on progressive leaders. Sustainable transformation should be institutional, not personality-driven.	Arrizal et al. (2025); Nurhayati (2012)
5	Absence of Specific Regulations on Gender in Pesantren Education	The Islamic Boarding School Law No. 18 of 2019 does not explicitly address gender equality or protection for female students. Technical guidelines on gender mainstreaming are needed in religious education policies.	Kamila & Wahjono (2024)

This review highlights that gender mainstreaming in Islamic boarding school (pesantren) education in Indonesia continues to face structural, cultural, and regulatory challenges. Leadership structures remain predominantly male, and equality initiatives often lack substantive implementation. Institutional mechanisms for women's participation in decision-making are limited, and policy documents mentioning "gender equality" rarely include measurable strategies or evaluation frameworks. Historically, gender mainstreaming policies emerged after the 1997-98

monetary crisis amid the growing influence of conservative Islamic movements, which complicated gender advocacy efforts. The post-9/11 context further intensified anti-Western sentiment, shaping religious and political discourse that often framed gender equality as an external agenda. Consequently, integrating gender perspectives into pesantren education requires approaches that align with Islamic teachings and Indonesia's socio-religious values. By grounding gender equality within local traditions and moral frameworks, pesantren can promote inclusive education, empower women institutionally, and contribute to a more just and balanced national education system.

Islamic boarding school education policy in Indonesia

The formulation of Islamic boarding school education policy in Indonesia reflects a dynamic intersection between tradition, religion, and national education reform. Since the enactment of Law No. 18 of 2019, pesantren have gained formal recognition as part of the national education system, signifying state acknowledgment of their educational, religious, and social functions. However, the integration of gender perspectives within these policies remains limited and inconsistent. A systematic literature review indicates that gender equality initiatives are still fragmented, relying heavily on the commitment of progressive leaders rather than on a standardized regulatory framework. This situation mirrors broader challenges in applying gender mainstreaming (PUG) principles across Indonesia's educational institutions, where patriarchal norms continue to influence leadership and curriculum. National indicators, such as the Gender Inequality Index, further underscore the need for comprehensive, gender-responsive reforms. The following table outlines the main findings regarding pesantren education policy in Indonesia.

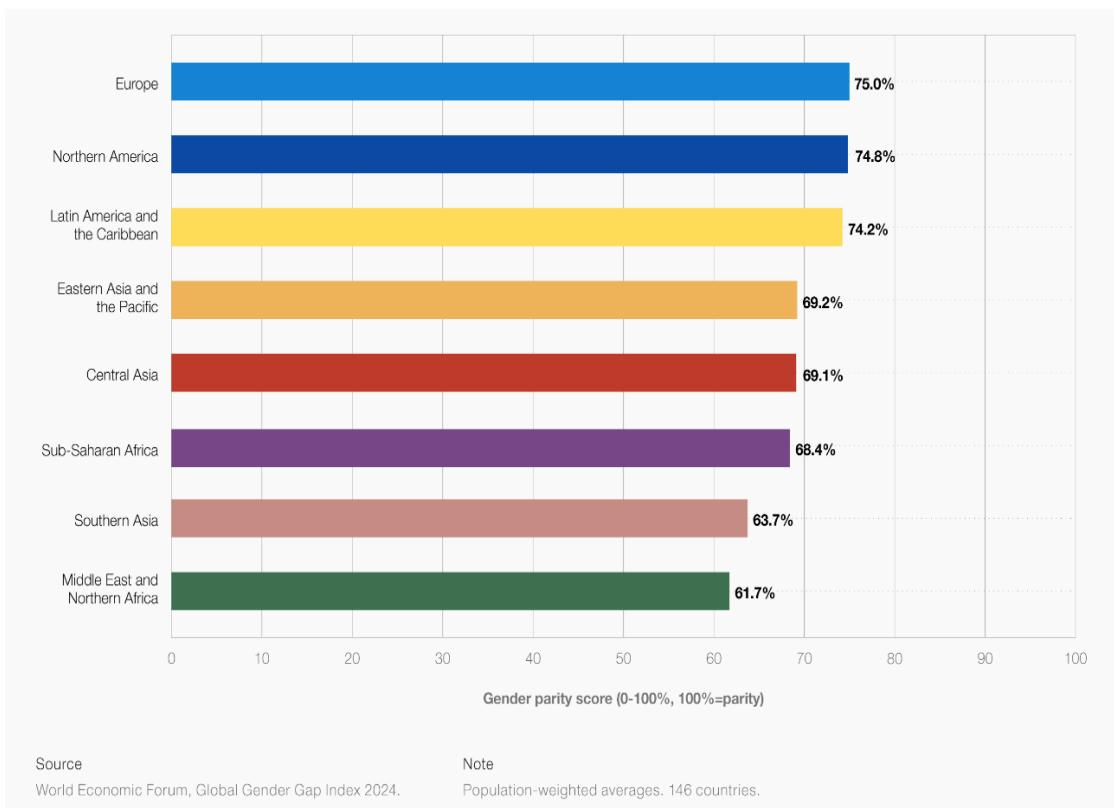
Table 2

Research Findings on Gender Mainstreaming in Pesantren Education Policy

No.	Finding	Narrative Explanation
1	Recognition of Pesantren in the National Education System	Law No. 18 of 2019 formally recognizes pesantren as part of Indonesia's national education system, granting them legitimacy and state funding while integrating them into the broader framework and preserving Islamic and local values.
2	Absence of Explicit Gender Mainstreaming Provisions	Despite its significance, the 2019 Law does not explicitly incorporate gender equality principles in its design or implementation. Gender considerations remain general, with no operational indicators or monitoring mechanisms to ensure inclusivity in policy execution.
3	Unequal Leadership and Curriculum Roles	Men continue to dominate pesantren leadership and curriculum formulation, while women's participation remains limited. Gender equality has not yet become a central agenda in institutional development or educational management.
4	Sporadic Gender Equality Initiatives	The advancement of gender mainstreaming within pesantren largely depends on the commitment of progressive leaders. Efforts are fragmented and lack a coherent national standard or regulatory framework.
6	Need for Holistic Policy Reform	To promote inclusivity, pesantren education policy should integrate gender perspectives through national legislation, curriculum reform, and inclusive leadership structures. Institutionalizing gender equality will allow pesantren to contribute more effectively to equitable Islamic education.
7	Broader Context of Gender Inequality in Indonesia	Indonesia's Gender Inequality Index (0.494) and the gap between men's (0.706) and women's (0.655) Human Development Index scores indicate that gender inequality persists nationally, underscoring the urgency of gender mainstreaming efforts.
8	Legal and Policy Foundation for Gender Equality	The Law No. 7 of 1984 on CEDAW ratification aligns with the 1945 Constitution, affirming equality before the law. Similarly, Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2000 mandates gender mainstreaming (PUG) in all stages of national development planning, implementation, and evaluation. These frameworks provide the legal basis for promoting gender equality in pesantren education.

The above legal umbrella is part of the strategic and systematic efforts made by the government to create gender equality and justice in all government sectors up to the hierarchy that is most demographically close to the community, namely the Regent/Mayor. The parameters of development success today are seen from the human development index (HDI) one of the indicators of which is the gender development index (IPG) which includes health, economic, educational and also political aspects, these developments are as shown in the following figure:

Figure 2
Gander Gap closed to date, by Region



Global Gender Gap Report 2024 published by the World Economic Forum. The report provides an overview of gender gaps in different countries based on four main dimensions: economic participation and opportunities, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment.

Table 3
Global Gender Gap Index 2024

Rank	Country	Gender Parity Score (%)
1	Iceland	90.8
2	Finland	86.3
3	Norway	85.9
4	New Zealand	85.6
5	Sweden	81.5
6	Germany	81.5
7	Namibia	80.2
8	Belgium	79.6
9	Lithuania	80.0
10	Ireland	79.5

Note: Global Gender Gap Report 2024, World Economic Forum

The data from the Global Gender Gap Index 2024 highlights that countries leading in gender parity such as Iceland, Finland, and Norway consistently achieve high scores above 85%, reflecting their strong institutional commitment to gender equality across sectors like education, health, economic participation, and political empowerment. Notably, the dominance of Nordic countries suggests that long-standing policies promoting welfare, inclusive governance, and equal opportunities significantly contribute to narrowing gender gaps. The presence of Namibia in the top 10 also indicates that high gender parity is not exclusive to high-income or Western countries, but is attainable with deliberate national strategies, even in different socio-economic contexts. However, despite these achievements, no country has yet reached full gender parity (100%), underscoring that even the most progressive nations still face challenges in achieving absolute equality. This data serves as a critical benchmark for countries like Indonesia, whose gender gap remains substantial, to learn from global best practices and intensify efforts toward structural and policy reforms that support gender equity.

Table 4
GII and GDI 2025

Rank	Country	GII 2025	GDI 2025	HDI 2025
1	Singapore	0.088	0.985	0.912
2	Malaysia	0.209	0.947	0.795
3	Thailand	0.380	1.000	0.726
4	Indonesia	0.421	0.927	0.706
5	Philippines	0.420	0.977	0.664

The Gender Inequality Index (GII) measures gender disparities across three main dimensions: reproductive health (e.g., maternal mortality and teen births), empowerment (such as women's representation in parliament and higher education), and labor force participation. A lower GII score indicates less gender inequality. For instance, Singapore scores impressively low at 0.088, reflecting strong female integration across education, employment, and politics. Meanwhile, Indonesia (0.421) and the Philippines (0.420) still grapple with significant challenges, particularly in political representation and reproductive health. Thailand (0.380) and Malaysia (0.209) occupy middle positions, with varying performance in political and strategic female leadership. The Gender Development Index (GDI) compares the Human Development Index (HDI) between men and women. A score close to 1 signifies greater gender parity. Thailand (1.000) shows complete parity, while Indonesia (0.927) and the Philippines (0.977) still exhibit gaps, particularly in income and higher education access. Singapore (0.985) approaches full parity. In terms of HDI, which evaluates health, education, and living standards, Singapore leads the region (0.912), followed by Malaysia (0.795), Thailand (0.726), Indonesia (0.706), and the Philippines (0.664), suggesting that Indonesia and the Philippines still face considerable development challenges.

The analysis shows that Singapore consistently excels across all indicators, serving as a regional model for gender equality and human development. Indonesia and the Philippines still experience significant gender disparities, particularly in women's empowerment and access to basic services. Thailand demonstrates high gender equality in GDI, yet HDI and GII indicate unequal opportunities in non-economic areas. Malaysia is progressing toward greater balance, especially in women's education and health. For Indonesia, this highlights the need to strengthen women's empowerment and equal access in education. Ongoing development efforts must refine policies and programs to promote genuine gender equality effectively.

Indonesia's human development and global competitiveness can advance through a strong government commitment to gender mainstreaming in education. This is reflected in the 2010 Regulation of the Minister of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection No. 11, which provides guidelines for gender mainstreaming in madrasah under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The policy

seeks to address gender disparities in learning and community participation. However, challenges persist, including cultural perceptions that prioritize boys' education and assign domestic roles to girls, as well as gender-neutral policies that overlook structural inequalities. Limited educational access in remote areas further exacerbates these gaps. Indonesia's ratification of CEDAW through Law No. 7 of 1984 and its support for the 1996 Beijing Declaration reaffirm its commitment to equality. To realize this vision, pesantren must integrate gender perspectives through curriculum reform, leadership support from kiai, and programs that raise gender awareness despite persistent resistance.

Discussion

Structural challenges in integrating gender mainstreaming into pesantren education policy

The integration of gender mainstreaming in pesantren education policy faces persistent structural barriers. Leadership and policy frameworks remain male-dominated, limiting women's participation in strategic roles (Widiastuti et al., 2024). Gender policies often appear normative, emphasizing inclusivity in discourse but lacking concrete indicators and monitoring systems (Faisal et al., 2024). Low gender literacy among educators and students further weakens internalization of equality values (Sharma et al., 2016), while conservative scriptural interpretations sustain gender stereotypes (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021). Although some progressive pesantren leaders have initiated inclusive practices (Susilo & Dalimunthe, 2019), these efforts remain fragmented and unsupported by binding regulations (Nawas et al., 2024; Khamzina et al., 2022). Sustainable gender mainstreaming, therefore, requires systemic reforms that strengthen regulatory frameworks, institutional commitment, and gender literacy across Islamic education (Parra-Martínez et al., 2021; Samarakoon & Parinduri, 2015).

The integration of gender mainstreaming into pesantren education policy in Indonesia remains structurally weak. Although Law No. 18 of 2019 formally incorporates pesantren into the national education framework, it lacks explicit provisions mandating gender equality in leadership, curriculum, and institutional governance. Rosa and Clavero (2021) interpret this legal gap as a structural weakness that enables persistent gender bias in educational institutions. Consistent with this, Ridwan and Susanti (2019) find that pesantren continue to reproduce patriarchal norms, with men occupying most strategic positions while women remain underrepresented in decision-making despite their numerical majority as students. O'Mullane (2021) describes this as the institutional embedding of gender inequality, where discriminatory norms are sustained through formal and informal mechanisms. Gupta et al. (2023) further argue that gender mainstreaming must be integrated across all policy stages planning, budgeting, and evaluation to avoid tokenistic implementation. As Adams et al (2007) asserts, only through structural reform can pesantren education challenge, rather than reinforce, gendered hierarchies.

Structural barriers to implementing gender mainstreaming in pesantren education primarily arise from the absence of clear operational guidelines and monitoring systems. Son Hing et al. (2023) interpret this as an institutional failure, noting that without formal frameworks, organizations tend to reproduce existing gender hierarchies rather than transform them. Although the Ministry of Religious Affairs holds regulatory authority, its lack of technical directives has left pesantren without practical mechanisms to translate gender goals into measurable action. The World Health Organization (2003) similarly emphasizes that the absence of standardized instruments often weakens policy execution. In this context, most pesantren lack gender-responsive tools, and educators receive limited training on gender awareness. Tabassum and Nayak (2021) observe that women's leadership participation remains largely symbolic, driven by individual commitment instead of institutional support. Comparatively, Schech and Mustafa (2010) highlight that Indonesia's broader gender mainstreaming efforts are often constrained by conservative religious

interpretations, which perceive gender equality as a Westernized agenda, thereby complicating reform within pesantren settings.

The broader socio-political context continues to shape structural resistance to gender reform in pesantren education. Syeed (2014) interprets the post-reformasi era as a paradox, in which the introduction of gender equality policies coincided with the growing influence of conservative Islamic movements that sought to reassert traditional gender hierarchies. These groups often frame gender discourse as incompatible with Islamic teachings, leading to selective and inconsistent implementation within pesantren (Van Oost et al., 2023). Öztürk (2023) further argues that this resistance is reinforced by weak institutional leadership, as state authorities have failed to promote gender-sensitive education within Islamic schools. Consequently, pesantren vary widely some adopting progressive interpretations, others preserving rigid patriarchal norms. Backman-Levy and Greene (2024) emphasize that genuine reform requires systemic change through gender-responsive curricula, the revision of biased materials, and the empowerment of female scholars. Similarly, Sadeh and Mair (2024) warn that without strong legal mandates and sustained stakeholder engagement, gender mainstreaming risks remaining symbolic, sustaining inequality under the guise of religious orthodoxy.

Strategic efforts to eliminate gender bias in Islamic education

Islam provides a strong theological and methodological foundation for promoting justice and equality, offering a transformative framework to address gender bias in Islamic education. Almugren et al. (2024) interpret this foundation as a moral imperative, asserting that education policies at both national and regional levels must explicitly uphold women's rights through equal access and learning opportunities. Alshdiefat et al. (2014) emphasize that structural reform in educational governance is vital, particularly by advancing women into leadership roles such as principals, administrators, and supervisors. Building on this, Nandi et al. (2024) argue that curriculum reform is necessary to challenge patriarchal narratives, as many textbooks continue to depict women in subordinate or domestic roles. They advocate materials portraying both genders as active agents in education. Likewise, Shah and Lashari (2023) stress the importance of enhancing educators' gender awareness and reforming the scholar cadre system to promote inclusive religious discourse.

A key strategy for advancing gender equality in Islamic education involves reconstructing religious interpretations, particularly those concerning Qur'anic verses and hadiths that have been historically interpreted in a gender-biased manner. Martuza (2024) views this as a theological imperative to reaffirm Islam's foundational principles of justice and equality. Varghese et al. (2019) argue that religious texts should be interpreted contextually and through a justice-oriented lens to prevent their misuse in legitimizing inequality. In this regard, pesantren play a central role; Bøe (2020) suggests they should function as centers for critical and gender-aware engagement with Islamic teachings. Vreuls et al. (2022) further emphasize the need for both national and local curricula to align with justice-based principles, eliminating gender dichotomies and reflecting regional contexts. Complementarily, Nganga and Kambutu (2024) highlight the importance of informal education such as literacy programs and lifelong learning initiatives to empower rural women, enhance their autonomy, and strengthen their participation in community and religious life.

Addressing structural gender inequality requires not only educational reform but also women's economic and political empowerment. Dahlum et al. (2022) interpret financial dependence as a fundamental barrier that sustains women's marginalization, suggesting that true empowerment begins with economic autonomy. Supporting this view, Balasubramanian et al. (2024) argue that initiatives such as home-based industries and vocational training must be integrated with access to markets, credit, and digital resources to ensure long-term sustainability.

Politically, women's participation remains constrained by cultural narratives that frame politics as a male domain (Jakimow et al., 2023). Bech-Pedersen and Carl (2024) emphasize the need to redefine politics as an inclusive and ethical sphere of deliberation rather than competition or dominance, enabling women's full engagement in governance. Similarly, Al-Qahtani et al. (2020) highlight that strengthening women's political literacy and leadership capacities is essential for transforming institutional agendas. When combined, these multidimensional strategies foster systemic gender equity within pesantren education and beyond.

Institutional barriers and patriarchal structures in pesantren education policy

One persistent challenge in educational policy implementation is the assumption that education is a value-neutral field. Mifsud (2024) argues that education is a social construct shaped by prevailing ideologies and power relations, suggesting that neutrality in education is an illusion. Expanding on this, Kark and Buengeler (2024) emphasize that dominant social constructions often position women as subordinate, influencing how educational systems are designed and practiced. Taber (2024) highlights that schools, as formal institutions, can either reproduce or transform these gendered hierarchies through curriculum and interactional norms. When educational institutions unconsciously perpetuate gender bias, they reinforce marginalization, stereotyping, and systemic inequality a condition that Batara et al. (2018) identify as deeply embedded in educational practice. Similarly, Ananga (2021) contends that education frequently sustains patriarchal structures unless deliberately challenged. Collectively, these perspectives underscore the need to integrate gender awareness into all levels of educational policy and practice to dismantle entrenched inequalities and promote transformative change.

The findings of this study reveal that pesantren education in Indonesia has not yet fully embraced the principles of gender mainstreaming in a systemic or transformative way. Salim et al. (2025) interpret this gap as a manifestation of persistent gender asymmetry, noting that leadership positions in Islamic boarding schools remain predominantly occupied by men, thereby limiting women's participation in institutional decision-making. This condition aligns with Dilli et al. (2018), who describe the pesantren's gender order as deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions that normalize male authority. Cardozo et al. (2022) extend this argument by suggesting that such institutions do not merely reflect existing inequalities but actively reproduce them through governance systems and internalized cultural norms. Conzon (2023) further critiques that policy references to gender equality often remain rhetorical, lacking measurable strategies for implementation. Echoing this concern, Morgan et al. (2022) emphasize that without structured monitoring and evaluation, gender initiatives rarely translate into substantive transformation, leaving women's leadership roles undervalued and marginalized.

From a policy perspective, the limited integration of gender perspectives in pesantren education reflects a governance gap that hinders systemic change. Rosa and Clavero (2021) view this as a sign of weak institutional commitment, while Baker and Clegg (2023) argue that traditional governance models remain resistant to inclusive reform. UN Women, as cited by Waal (2006), defines gender mainstreaming as a process that must be embedded across all policy stages planning, implementation, and evaluation. Yet, as Cairney et al. (2023) warn, without institutional support and actionable mechanisms, gender justice risks remaining rhetorical. In response, Akinola and Naidoo (2024) stress the need for stronger leadership from the Ministry of Religious Affairs to institutionalize gender-responsive governance. Complementing this, Mpuangnan (2024) and Wolbring and Nguyen (2023) propose practical measures such as technical guidelines, educator training, and consistent monitoring to achieve meaningful policy transformation.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that gender mainstreaming in pesantren education policies remains ineffective and lacks comprehensive implementation. The key findings highlight the dominance of men in leadership roles and the minimal integration of gender equality principles within formal regulations and daily educational practices. One of the primary obstacles is the absence of clear mechanisms for implementation and evaluation, which hinders the realization of systemic gender equity in Islamic boarding schools. This structural gap is further compounded by the limited understanding and insufficient gender training among pesantren caregivers and educators. As a result, gender mainstreaming efforts tend to be symbolic mentioned in documents but not translated into concrete institutional reforms. Without practical strategies and institutional commitment, these initiatives have yet to bring about meaningful change, leaving patriarchal norms intact and women's roles in pesantren marginalized. To achieve transformative outcomes, gender perspectives must be embedded structurally, supported by training, monitoring, and inclusive leadership development.

The theoretical implications of this research reinforce the relevance of Gendered Organization Theory in the context of pesantren education. Faith-based institutions like pesantren not only reflect but also perpetuate patriarchal structures through their internal policies and daily practices. The findings underscore the urgency of applying gender mainstreaming principles in a more contextual and systematic manner to address the cultural and social barriers embedded in Islamic boarding schools. This suggests that gender mainstreaming cannot adopt a one-size-fits-all model but must consider local religious and cultural dynamics. Consequently, this research contributes to the refinement of gender theories by promoting approaches that are more responsive to specific socio-religious settings. It opens pathways for developing a contextualized framework of gender mainstreaming in faith-based educational institutions, particularly within the pesantren system.

Further research is recommended for policy practitioners, particularly the Ministry of Religious Affairs and pesantren administrators, to formulate clear, measurable technical guidelines on gender mainstreaming, including success indicators and sustainable monitoring systems. Training and leadership programs for women in pesantren should also be strengthened to promote structural transformation. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct mixed-method studies to examine socio-cultural factors shaping the acceptance of gender mainstreaming in pesantren, enabling more contextual policy insights. This study is limited to a systematic literature review without field data, which may not fully reflect the complex social and cultural realities of gender dynamics in pesantren. Moreover, its reliance on accessible Indonesian and English sources potentially narrows analytical depth. Broader empirical research is thus needed to generate more comprehensive and grounded understandings.

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