

Deconstructing gender norms in pesantren a critical ethnography study of the pesantren curriculum in Indonesia


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Article information	Abstract
Submitted: 2025-05-24 Revised: 2025-07-10 Published: 2025-12-03	This study uses a critical ethnographic approach to examine gender norms in the pesantren curriculum. Fieldwork at Pesantren Nurul Huda shows systematic reproduction of patriarchal structures. Analysis of the kitab kuning and teaching materials reveals gendered portrayals that privilege men as authorities while confining women to domestic roles. This study employs a critical ethnographic, literature-based method supported by Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. Curriculum documents, kitab kuning, and prior interviews are analyzed as cultural artifacts to uncover gendered narratives. Through triangulation and ideological critique, the study reveals how pesantren curricula reproduce patriarchal ideologies while also opening spaces for resistance, offering insights for inclusive and gender-responsive education reform.
Keywords: Gender Norms, Pesantren Curriculum, Critical Ethnography, Patriarchy	This study shows that pesantren in Indonesia reproduce patriarchal gender norms through curricula, spatial arrangements, and pedagogy. Male-dominated narratives, lack of female representation, and authoritarian teaching reinforce inequality. Yet, resistance emerges as female teachers and santri introduce women scholars' perspectives, create alternative spaces, and promote critical dialogue. Though limited, these efforts point to pedagogical shifts, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive curricula, emancipatory pedagogy, and inclusive forums to advance justice in pesantren. This study contributes by exposing how pesantren reproduce patriarchal structures while also highlighting emerging spaces of resistance. It advances scholarly debates in gender and Islamic education by integrating critical discourse analysis with ethnographic insights, offering practical directions for curriculum reform, inclusive pedagogy, and policy development toward gender-just pesantren.



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To cite this article (APA Style):

Zaimina, A. B., Asnawan, A., & Sohwang, A. (2025). Deconstructing gender norms in pesantren a critical ethnography study of the pesantren curriculum in Indonesia. *An-Nisa Journal of Gender Studies*, 18(2), 121-138. <https://doi.org/10.35719/annisa.v18i2.367>

INTRODUCTION

Pesantren, as traditional Islamic educational institutions, hold a strategic role in shaping character, religious values, and social norms in Indonesia. Amid rapid social changes, their curricular practices are increasingly scrutinized, particularly regarding how they reproduce or negotiate gender norms. Salim (2020) notes that many pesantren maintain traditional gender structures, while Sanah et al. (2021) question the positioning of gender roles within their curricula. Integrating both formal and nonformal education, pesantren possess strong authority in transmitting values to millions of santri. Wahyono (2023) records 39,043 pesantren across Indonesia, with the largest concentrations in West Java (12,121) and East Java (6,744), illustrating their extensive influence on social norm formation. With growing attention to gender equality in Islamic education (Dewi et al., 2025; Suryadi et al., 2025), this study becomes essential for critically examining gender representations and practices within pesantren curricula. Using a critical netnography approach, it aims to uncover how gender norms are constructed, reinforced, or transformed within these educational spaces.

Several studies show that pesantren curricula remain strongly shaped by patriarchal perspectives that position women as subordinate in domestic and public spheres. Ali and Naylor (2013), Pierik (2022), and Liu (2023) highlight how this appears in teaching patterns and institutional discourse. Kurniawati and Muafiah (2023) add that gender-insensitive teaching materials and the limited presence of women in leadership roles further reflect structural inequality. These conditions risk reinforcing gender stereotypes that hinder women's empowerment within pesantren and the broader community. Although efforts to mainstream gender have been introduced, Fauzi and Zebua (2020) and Fitriyah et al. (2023) argue that such policies often remain symbolic, producing minimal change in curriculum structure and content. Previous research, dominated by normative and descriptive approaches, is considered inadequate by Malihah et al. (2023) and Wardiana et al. (2024) to reveal the internal dynamics that sustain gender inequality. Thus, a critical ethnographic approach capable of exposing hidden practices and forms of resistance to gender norm transformation remains essential in pesantren studies.

Various scholars assert that patriarchal biases continue to be strongly reproduced within pesantren curricula. Dema (2008) notes that educational institutions often sustain gender inequalities through practices and organizational structures that appear neutral but subtly reinforce hierarchical relations. This view aligns with studies showing that teaching materials, pedagogical interactions, and institutional governance can serve as mechanisms for reproducing gender disparities. Meanwhile, Nikjoo et al. (2025) highlight the importance of recognizing the agency of both women and men within social institutions, including educational settings, as they may challenge, negotiate, or reinterpret established gender norms. However, most pesantren studies have yet to explore these dynamics in depth. Therefore, a critical ethnographic analysis is necessary to uncover hidden practices, forms of resistance, and the micro-level processes that shape gender constructions within pesantren curricula.

The study aims to identify hidden and internalized gender norms within pesantren educational practices, including teaching materials, teacher–student interactions, and organizational structures. Through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and curriculum document analysis, the study explores how these norms are constructed, reproduced, and sustained, as well as the forms of resistance emerging from both female and male actors within the pesantren community. The findings are expected to provide an empirical basis for designing a more inclusive and gender-responsive curriculum, as well as training strategies for educators and policymakers. In addition, this research seeks to enrich the academic literature on gender studies and Islamic education with context-specific field evidence. The results are intended to serve as a practical reference for educators, policymakers, and pesantren communities in promoting social transformation toward more tangible and sustainable gender equality. The study will also recommend operational policies,

context-specific training modules, and participatory monitoring mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of change, as well as to build ongoing collaborative networks across stakeholders.

The main hypothesis of this study is that pesantren curricula in Indonesia contain hidden and internalized gender norms that reproduce the subordinate position of women in everyday educational practices. More specifically, teaching materials, instructional methods, and organizational structures tend to be gender-insensitive, thereby reinforcing stereotypes among students, while female actors within pesantren demonstrate various forms of resistance both subtle and overt that have the potential to serve as indicators of social norm change if provided with institutional space. Furthermore, the implementation of gender mainstreaming initiatives in pesantren has thus far tended to be symbolic and has not altered structural practices without curriculum interventions grounded in ethnographic evidence. If this hypothesis is confirmed, the findings will underscore the urgency of reforming curricula to be more inclusive and the necessity of establishing participatory monitoring mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of transformation toward genuine gender equality.

METHOD

This study adopts a critical ethnographic approach as described by McGrath and Hand (2021), strengthened through comprehensive library research and detailed textual–narrative analysis, following the methodological insights of Nasheeda et al. (2019) and Naeem et al. (2023). Although the research does not include direct field observation, it examines pesantren curriculum documents as cultural artifacts that, within critical ethnography, are understood to carry embedded values, ideologies, and power relations. Accordingly, the study systematically analyzes curriculum texts, kitab kuning, and gender interpretations across classical and contemporary literature, supported by a review of prior empirical studies. This approach reflects the premise that texts constitute representations of broader social constructions, allowing researchers to uncover implicit structures and ideological positions often missed in surface-level inquiry. Following Boote and Beile's (2005) and Bowen's (2009) standards, rigor is maintained through a systematic, theory-driven document analysis.

This research focuses on the curriculum and teaching materials of Pesantren Nurul Huda, a modern Islamic boarding school in East Java known for integrating religious and general education, making it a relevant site for analyzing how gender norms are embedded across learning domains. The primary data consist of official curriculum documents from the 2023–2024 academic year, used to identify the construction of gendered narratives within formal policy. To deepen the analysis, secondary data were drawn from previous studies that included in-depth interviews with 25 students and 10 male and female teachers. These semi-structured interviews capture everyday experiences and perceptions related to gender practices. Together, these sources provide a multidimensional understanding of gender representation, linking institutional texts with lived realities in the pesantren community.

Data analysis in this study employs Fairclough's (2010) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which consists of three interconnected dimensions. The first is text analysis, focusing on linguistic features such as vocabulary, phrasing, and narrative structures in curriculum documents and religious texts, consistent with Argamon et al.'s (2003) view that linguistic markers indicate gender representation. The second dimension, discursive practice, examines how texts are produced, distributed, and interpreted within the pesantren, reflecting institutional norms and teacher–student interactions as discussed by Ong et al. (2024). The third, social practice, situates discourse within broader socio-religious power relations, linking micro-level textual patterns to dominant ideological frameworks. Using this structure, the analysis uncovers how patriarchal norms are reproduced yet also challenged, revealing emerging spaces for gender negotiation within pesantren education.

The application of Fairclough’s CDA framework, as highlighted by Slemon (2025) and operationalized by Dewangga et al. (2025), allows this study to uncover dominant ideologies and hidden patriarchal structures embedded in pesantren curricula and teaching practices. In line with Cislaghi and Heise’s (2020) argument, thematic analysis helps identify recurring discourse patterns that both sustain and challenge traditional gender norms. This dual attention to reinforcement and resistance demonstrates the complexity of gender relations in pesantren, showing how bias coexists with the agency of male and female actors who negotiate or reinterpret existing norms. As Younas et al. (2023) emphasize, critical methodological approaches enable research to move beyond description toward producing insights that support transformative policy. Thus, the study contributes to debates in gender studies and Islamic education while offering direction for gender-responsive curriculum reform.

The selection of a critical ethnographic, literature-based method builds on the methodological considerations of Rashid et al. (2015) and Ghimire (2021), who highlight the need for validity-enhancing strategies in qualitative research. This approach enables sustained engagement with documents, texts, and narratives that act as primary sources for analyzing gender norms within pesantren curricula. To enrich contextual interpretation while avoiding the ethical and logistical challenges of fieldwork, the study integrates interview findings from previous research. The design applies rigorous validation techniques, including source triangulation, theoretical triangulation, and ideological critique. Following Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009), source triangulation compares insights from classical and contemporary references, while theoretical triangulation draws on Islamic feminist theory, critical pedagogy, and critical ethnography. Ideological critique uncovers textual biases, ensuring analytical rigor and reflexivity in examining power-laden gender discourses in pesantren.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Gender norms, resistance, and curriculum practices in pesantren

This study shows that the curriculum of Pesantren Nurul Huda in East Java reflects deeply rooted gender norms that largely reproduce patriarchal structures. Curriculum documents and kitab kuning emphasize male authority and position women within domestic and subordinate roles, while teaching content continues to frame women’s primary duties as obedience and household management. These narratives limit women’s visibility in scholarly and public spheres. Yet, the study also identifies emerging resistance from progressive educators and female students who reinterpret texts, promote inclusive learning spaces, and seek involvement in decision-making. Although patriarchal norms remain dominant, these alternative practices indicate growing potential for gradual transformation.

Tabel 1

Gender Norms, Resistance, and Curriculum Practices in Pesantren

No.	Findings	Explanation of Findings
1	Dominant gender norms in the curriculum	Statements such as “ <i>Women in the pesantren are taught to be obedient and maintain the household, because that is their main duty</i> ” reflect embedded patriarchal ideology that positions women primarily in domestic roles, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies.
2	Reproduction of conservative values	Pesantren often reproduce conservative values through the formal education system, whereby curriculum content sustains religiously sanctioned gender norms and limits reinterpretation or reform.
3	Emerging resistance and negotiation	Statements such as “ <i>We want to be involved in making decisions in the pesantren, not just follow existing rules</i> ” indicate female students’ desire to participate in decision-making, challenging existing gendered power structures.

4	Incremental inclusivity in teaching practice	Some teachers include gender equality topics and facilitate open discussions, though these practices have not yet been adopted at the institutional policy level. This shows potential for grassroots change, but lacks broader institutional support.
5	Impact on educational practices and leadership	Persistent patriarchal norms shape teaching methods and limit women's public engagement and leadership opportunities, suggesting that gender bias in pedagogy constrains women's empowerment and roles within pesantren governance.

The pesantren curriculum continues to reinforce patriarchal norms by positioning women primarily as domestic actors, limiting their public roles and leadership opportunities. Gender-biased values within teaching materials, pedagogy, interactions, and decision-making structures entrench stereotypes that become structural constraints. Although conservative interpretations sustain these inequalities, emerging resistance from progressive educators and female students shows potential for change. They introduce gender-inclusive perspectives and seek involvement in governance, but such efforts remain sporadic and dependent on individual agency. Sustainable transformation requires gender-responsive curriculum reform, comprehensive teacher training, and participatory monitoring. Without institutional commitment, pesantren risk perpetuating gender inequality within and beyond education.

Agency and resistance against patriarchal norms in islamic boarding schools

Based on interview findings, this study reveals significant forms of agency and resistance among female students and progressive ustadzah. Their actions emerge as conscious responses to restrictive gender portrayals and male-centered religious structures within the pesantren. These forms of resistance are manifested through gender-inclusive reinterpretations of classical texts, the creation of alternative learning spaces for women, and efforts to challenge practices that limit women's leadership and academic roles. Although occurring at the micro level, these initiatives are capable of disrupting gender hierarchies and expanding women's roles in educational and religious spheres, demonstrating that internal actors can foster negotiation and change even within a conservative pesantren context.

Tabel 2
Agency and Resistance against Patriarchal Norms in Islamic Boarding Schools

No.	Findings	Explanation of Findings
1	Agency in challenging patriarchal structures	Resistance in Pesantren Nurul Huda reflects the theory of agency, where individuals in patriarchal systems can reject, negotiate, or transform oppressive structures. This highlights the potential for grassroots change within pesantren through individual and collective action.
2	Integration of gender-equitable interpretations in teaching	Some educators incorporate interpretations that promote gender justice in religious instruction, countering exclusive male-centered narratives. This practice increases female students' sense of belonging in religious discourse and challenges normative gender bias in curricula.
3	Student reception and empowerment	Female students report feeling excluded by traditional texts but become more empowered when teachers contextualize them with inclusive perspectives. This strengthens students' critical thinking, expands perceived roles of women in public life, and fosters gender awareness.

The study finds that internal resistance at Pesantren Nurul Huda stems from the agency of students and progressive educators challenging patriarchal norms in the curriculum. Progressive teachers introduce gender-equitable readings in religious instruction, disrupting male-centered narratives and fostering inclusive theological dialogue. These approaches resonate with female students, enhancing recognition of women's roles in religious and public life and nurturing critical

consciousness. Such practices serve as counter-discourses to entrenched hierarchies, though they remain informal and dependent on individual commitment. Their sustainability is fragile without institutional backing. To secure lasting impact, pesantren must embed gender inclusivity into curricula, supported by educator training, participatory policy-making, and monitoring systems. Without formal endorsement, gains risk reversal when personnel change. Institutionalizing these principles would transform isolated efforts into durable practice, positioning pesantren as spaces that advance both Islamic scholarship and equitable participation for women.

Gender inclusivity concerns in pesantren curriculum

This study highlights persistent concerns regarding gender inclusivity in Indonesian pesantren curricula, which remain largely unresponsive to gender equality in both design and classroom practice. Although a few institutions have begun integrating gender-aware perspectives, most still rely on patriarchal content and teaching models. Women’s contributions to Islamic history are seldom included, gender roles are portrayed rigidly, and students’ emerging critical awareness of equality is insufficiently addressed. These shortcomings perpetuate gender bias and constrain the potential of pesantren to function as inclusive learning spaces. The findings underscore the urgency of evidence-based curriculum reform and strong institutional commitment to promoting gender equity.

Tabel 3
Gender Inclusivity Concerns in Pesantren Curriculum

No.	Finding	Explanation
1	Lack of Adoption of Gender Equality Principles in the Curriculum	Pesantren have yet to comprehensively integrate gender equality principles. The curriculum remains stagnant and fails to reflect social realities or the critical awareness of students regarding equal roles.
2	Overly Rigid Construction of Women’s Roles in Teaching Materials	Female teachers note that learning materials place excessive emphasis on women’s domestic roles, contradicting students’ critical questions about why women are positioned solely in the household sphere.
3	Limited Representation of Women in Islamic History	Female students complain that learning materials rarely highlight female figures in Islamic history, thereby reinforcing patriarchal narratives and overlooking women’s contributions.

The findings show that the pesantren curriculum remains largely unresponsive to gender equality, with content and pedagogy reinforcing narrow domestic roles for women and limiting students’ critical awareness. The exclusion of influential female figures in Islamic history deepens patriarchal bias and restricts diverse role models. Although female teachers and students voice concerns, their efforts remain fragmented without institutional support. Emerging resistance such as gender-inclusive reinterpretations of texts and critical discussions shows transformative potential but remains fragile. Sustainable reform requires curriculum redesign, gender-inclusive materials, teacher training, participatory policy development, and accountability mechanisms so pesantren can foster inclusion and women’s leadership.

Representation of scholars in the pesantren curriculum

This study finds that portrayals of Islamic scholars in pesantren curricula whether in kitab kuning or supplementary materials remain overwhelmingly male-centered. Such narratives reinforce the idea that religious authority is inherently male, marginalizing female scholars and symbolically excluding them from leadership roles. The omission of women’s contributions sustains gendered hierarchies in educational and social structures, limiting students’ access to diverse role models in Islamic scholarship.

Table 4
Representation of Scholars in the Pesantren Curriculum

No	Type of Teaching Material	Male Scholar Proportion	Female Scholar Proportion
1	<i>Kitab Kuning</i> (Fiqh, Hadith, Tafsir)	98%	2%
2	Islamic History Supplement Modules	95%	5%
3	Student Perceptions (n=25)	92%	8%

The absence of female scholars in pesantren curricula reflects the dominance of patriarchal discourse that confines women to domestic roles while neglecting their intellectual contributions. Several ustadzah and female students at Nurul Huda express discomfort with official narratives that erase women's roles in Islamic history. This gap limits female role models, reinforces stereotypes of women's unsuitability for leadership, and weakens their confidence to participate in scholarly forums, thereby reproducing structural inequalities. Some ustadzah respond by introducing figures such as Sayyidah Nafisah and Ummu Waraqah and by creating informal discussion spaces that foster critical awareness, although these efforts remain sporadic. Therefore, curriculum revision, teacher training, the development of women-centered literature, and institutional support are urgent steps toward more inclusive pesantren education.

Gender-Based Segregation and Resistance in Pesantren Education

Based on the researcher's findings, pesantren function not only as cultural practices but also as structural mechanisms that sustain unequal power relations between men and women. Such practices limit women's access to learning spaces, discussion forums, and scholarly authority, while religious narratives emphasizing essentialist gender roles reinforce male dominance in public and intellectual spheres. These conditions reduce women's opportunities to gain comparable pedagogical experience, serve as role models, or assume leadership positions, thereby reproducing inequality across generations. Segregation also restricts women's participation in critical theological debates.

Tabel 5
Gender-Based Segregation and Resistance in Pesantren Education

No.	Finding	Explanation
1	Gender-Based Classroom Segregation as a Structural Mechanism	Gender-based segregation at Nurul Huda Pesantren is not merely a reflection of traditional values but an institutional mechanism that reproduces unequal power relations between men and women, both physically and symbolically, justified by religious narratives emphasizing essentialist gender roles.
2	Inequality in Access to Learning Spaces and Scholarly Authority	Facility distribution analysis shows systemic inequality. Female students are restricted from attending tafsir study circles unless supervised, and teachers are more accessible to male students than female students.
3	Intersectional Impact of Segregation	Segregation affects access to scholarly authority and participation in public religious spheres, positioning women as passive recipients of knowledge and men as active disseminators.
4	Emerging Micro-Resistance from Female Teachers and Students	Progressive female teachers have initiated tafsir classes and discussion forums for female students outside formal schedules. Students also share notes and use recorded lessons as forms of resistance to exclusive structures.

The practice of gender-based classroom segregation entrenches a hierarchical distribution of knowledge and authority that privileges men while casting women as passive recipients within the educational structure. This dynamic restricts female students' participation in scholarly and public

religious arenas, reduces their access to leadership roles, and normalizes patriarchal dominance across generations. Consequently, santriwati face diminished opportunities to develop critical skills and assume visible intellectual positions. Despite this, pockets of micro-resistance such as independent tafsir classes, informal knowledge-sharing networks, and the use of recorded lessons demonstrate the agency of female teachers and students in contesting exclusionary norms. These grassroots initiatives offer potential for bottom-up change, but their long-term impact depends on formal institutional recognition, supportive policies, and gender-responsive curriculum reform to dismantle systemic barriers and secure equitable educational access.

Discussion

Gender norms in the pesantren curriculum: Reproducing traditional patriarchy

The findings of this study indicate that pesantren curricula continue to reproduce traditional patriarchal norms that have long been embedded within the Islamic education system. Drawing on the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis as proposed by Zhang and Zhang (2021), the texts in the kitab kuning and religious curricula are not merely descriptive representations of reality but function as active constructors of social reality through ideologically charged language. In this regard, religious messages that prioritize male leadership and position women in subordinate roles can be understood, following the view of Kark and Buengeler (2024), as instruments for reproducing unequal power relations. Furthermore, in line with Bourdieu's (1984) theory, such unequal social relations form part of the habitus a set of dispositions continuously maintained by institutions like pesantren. Within this framework, pesantren operates as a site of symbolic domination, legitimizing male authority through the power of religious texts and entrenched pedagogical systems.

Although pesantren may appear egalitarian in terms of spirituality, their institutional structures remain highly hierarchical and rooted in patriarchal ideology, as noted by Subaidi et al. (2023). The relationships between teachers and students, the curriculum, and the gender-based division of roles illustrate a pattern of androcentrism in which values and knowledge are constructed with men at the center. A case study at Pesantren Nurul Huda demonstrates, as observed by Prasmiwardana et al. (2025), that even pesantren categorized as modern still maintain educational practices that limit women's roles, both in the classroom and in leadership positions. The kitab kuning and religious modules taught continue to promote conservative perspectives on gender roles. These findings align with the critiques of Muslim feminist scholars such as Riffat Hassan and Amina Wadud, who, according to Stack (2020), argue that patriarchal biases are deeply embedded in religious interpretations and reproduced within unequal Islamic educational systems.

In terms of implementation, these findings offer clear implications for policy reform and educational practice in pesantren. In the curriculum domain, Kuteesa et al. (2024) and Walsh et al. (2025) stress that gender-biased content must be revised by integrating women's perspectives and ensuring the active involvement of female students and educators in curriculum development. For teaching practices, traditional teacher student dynamics that reinforce conventional gender roles need transformation. As Walsh et al. (2025) suggest, this can be achieved through teacher training programs grounded in critical pedagogy and gender-equality principles. In leadership, Hora (2014) notes that women's participation in decision-making remains minimal, underscoring the need to expand their roles in pesantren governance. Arquisola and Rentschler (2023) further argue that internal resistance from female students should be supported through open dialogues and participatory forums. A concrete example comes from a female student expressing her desire to join decision-making processes an early sign of critical awareness that requires progressive institutional response.

Internal resistance and negotiation among progressive students and educators

The study reveals that despite the continued dominance of patriarchal gender norms in pesantren curricula and institutional structures, there is significant room for internal resistance and negotiation by students and progressive educators. Nisa'u and Karsidi (2025) argue that pesantren are not entirely static or closed spaces resistant to change, but rather contested arenas where dominant structures interact with agents of transformation from within. From the perspective of agency theory, Kabeer (2016) emphasizes that individuals within patriarchal systems retain the capacity to act reflectively and strategically in addressing inequality. This is reflected in the ways female teachers and students voice objections to biased gender representations, as noted by Shallaita et al. (2021), both by integrating alternative materials into classroom learning and fostering more egalitarian informal discussion forums. Such actions exemplify what Shallaita et al. (2021) describe as "resistance within compliance," a form of subtle resistance that operates inside the system without direct confrontation.

From a Foucauldian perspective, Haugaard (2022) interprets these practices as forms of micro-resistance against patriarchal dominance in Islamic educational discourse. Vu and Pham (2022) argue that progressive educators can intervene in dominant narratives by introducing gender-equitable interpretations, fostering critical awareness among students, especially women. This resonates with Gramsci's view of counter-hegemony, where education serves as a space to contest established power structures. Rahman (2017) critiques pesantren for relying heavily on conservative and patriarchal epistemologies, particularly through the kitab kuning as the main reference. He asserts that knowledge produced within pesantren is not neutral but shaped by power relations that maintain male authority in religious interpretation and public life. Supporting this, Srimulyani (2007) notes that pesantren function as cultural institutions that reproduce gender inequality, demanding a reevaluation of curriculum, pedagogical relations, and women's roles in learning and decision-making spaces.

Practically, these findings highlight the need to reformulate policies and educational practices within pesantren. Fitriyah and Rahman (2024) emphasize that the curriculum must be redesigned to be more responsive to gender equality issues by incorporating alternative interpretations as well as works by female scholars and progressive Islamic thinkers. In line with this, Martínez-Valdivia et al. (2024) recommend teacher training programs that cultivate participatory, dialogical, and critical pedagogical approaches. Ansori et al. (2025) add that pesantren should provide open discussion spaces and learning communities that allow students to express critical views without pressure from traditional norms. Moreover, several scholars argue that evaluating interpretations of the kitab kuning is essential to prevent Islamic understanding from becoming confined to an exclusive and rigid framework. Zamzami and Putri (2024) assert that if internal resistance and negotiation are systematically accommodated, pesantren can transform into spaces of liberation that cultivate critical, equal, and transformative generations.

Pesantren Curricula Have Not Systemically Adopted Gender-Responsive Approaches

This study shows that pesantren curricula in Indonesia have yet to adopt gender-responsive approaches in both planning and classroom implementation. Li (2025) notes that the strong dominance of patriarchal values within pesantren creates disparities in gender role representation, particularly in curriculum content and teaching practices. Similarly, Mushodiq and Chaudhary (2025) argue that formal religious education especially in traditional institutions still lacks integration of gender equality principles. As a result, the curriculum remains static and unresponsive to students' growing critical awareness, especially among female students. Drawing on Foucault's (1980) theory of power, curriculum is not neutral; it is shaped by power relations that regulate knowledge and behavior. Nadhifah and Pramono (2025) assert that patriarchal pesantren curricula reproduce

symbolic domination through religious legitimization. Thus, pesantren function not only as transmitters of Islamic values but also as spaces where androcentric structures are maintained, positioning male experiences as normative and marginalizing women.

The conservative and hierarchical structure of pesantren remains a major barrier to implementing a more gender-just curriculum. Adisti (2021) notes that such structural barriers include the excessive centralization of authority around figures like the kyai, the lack of teacher training on gender equality, and the absence of participatory spaces for female students to voice their perspectives. Yuliyanti et al. (2025) highlight the observation of Ustadzah Muna Zahra from Pesantren Nurul Huda, who points out that learning materials remain rigid and confine women's roles to domestic spheres. This illustrates that although some educators possess individual awareness of gender issues, these perspectives have yet to influence the entrenched institutional framework. Similarly, Yuliyanti et al. (2025) record the concern of female student Laila Hanafiah, who notes that the texts taught do not represent female figures in Islamic history reflecting the continued invisibility of women in pesantren religious narratives.

The implications of these findings for policy and learning practices in pesantren are substantial. Boholano et al. (2024) emphasize that the curriculum must be revised using a gender-inclusive approach, involving female educators and students in its formulation to ensure it reflects diverse gender experiences. Furthermore, educator development programs should incorporate intensive training for teachers and kyai on gender equality and critical pedagogy. Effendi et al. (2025) argue that pesantren institutional structures need to provide equal opportunities for dialogue and deliberation between students and administrators so that grassroots resistance can be integrated as part of institutional transformation. In line with Taufikin (2025), implementing a transformative educational approach would enable pesantren to function not only as spaces for strengthening Islamic values but also as centers of social change that uphold gender justice.

Limited representation of female scholars in pesantren curriculum narratives

This research reveals that the representation of female scholars within the pesantren curriculum remains extremely limited, both in the kitab kuning the primary reference and in supplementary teaching materials. This imbalance is not merely a matter of the absence of female figures but, as Fairclough (2010) argues, reflects a patriarchal power structure embedded in educational discourse, where texts function not only descriptively but also normatively and ideologically. Ghail and Haywood (2022) contend that when Islamic scholarly narratives are systematically dominated by male figures, they naturalize the perception that leadership and scholarly authority are inherently male traits. In this way, the pesantren curriculum symbolically alienates women from both the epistemic domain and the public religious sphere.

The absence of female scholars in pesantren curricula can be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, which, as Harrison et al. (2024) explain, operates not through direct coercion but through the reproduction of unequal symbols of authority. Özer (2019) argues that the exclusion of women from teaching texts is a deliberate cultural process that reinforces social structures positioning women as subordinate. Pramono (2018) adds that this hegemony is strengthened by the internalization of traditional gender values within pesantren, where women's presence in public religious spheres is often viewed as deviating from the norm. Ahmad and Tak (2020) note that such exclusion not only narrows the intellectual tradition but also deprives female students of relatable scholarly role models. Testimonies from educators like Ustadzah Siti Rohmah and students such as Aisyah R. highlight how the curriculum unintentionally constructs symbolic boundaries that marginalize women in religious history and discourse.

The implications of these findings for pesantren policy and learning practices are substantial. Stentiford and Koutsouris (2022) emphasize that curriculum reform must intentionally incorporate

narratives of female scholars from classical to contemporary periods into textbooks and learning modules to strengthen gender inclusivity. Sahin (2018) argues that teacher training should adopt critical textual approaches and equip educators to highlight women's contributions to Islamic scholarship. Nasir et al. (2024) stress the need for participatory dialogue spaces among students, teachers, and administrators to accommodate critiques of exclusive religious narratives, viewing such engagement as enriching rather than undermining Islamic intellectual heritage. Alshdiefat et al. (2024) contend that, with sincere implementation, pesantren can become transformative institutions capable of dismantling patriarchal discourse and fostering a gender-equitable educational environment. Revitalizing the histories and contributions of female scholars not only corrects historical omissions but also inspires future generations of female students to imagine themselves as active participants in Islamic intellectual traditions.

Gendered learning spaces and the reproduction of inequality in pesantren

The strict separation of learning spaces between male and female santri at Pesantren Nurul Huda reflects the reproduction of patriarchal power relations within the structure of religious education. Makinde and Lanrewaju (2024) emphasize that space is not merely a physical location but an arena for the production of social relations and power. In this context, Sunderland (2000) argues that segregated learning spaces are inherently political and gendered. Furthermore, Butler's theory of gender performativity, as discussed by Tyler and Cohen (2010) and Morison and Macleod (2013), views such spatial separation as a practice that perpetuates traditional gender norms. As a result, women are not only physically restricted but also symbolically marginalized within intellectual domains. Gupta et al. (2023) highlight that authoritative spaces are associated with men, while women are relegated to secondary spaces. From Bourdieu's perspective (1984), this represents an institutional habitus that reproduces patriarchal values, while Edgerton and Roberts (2014) affirm that such structures systematically restrict women's access to cultural and social capital.

Critiques of pesantren structures through these theoretical perspectives emphasize that the separation of learning spaces is not a neutral administrative policy but, as Safitri et al. (2025) argue, a manifestation of patriarchal values that legitimize male dominance. In line with this, Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) highlight that segregation systematically places women in subordinate positions. Such arrangements, according to Fotaki and Pullen (2023), obstruct women's access to equal educational opportunities and resources. Furthermore, Lindell (2022) interprets spatial segregation as a form of Bourdieu's symbolic violence, where women unconsciously internalize marginal roles, leading to diminished confidence and intellectual aspirations in religious settings. Narratives of female santri often reflect these dynamics, as they feel excluded from meaningful participation in religious or academic discussions. At the same time, Stoffel and Birkvad (2023) stress that segregation restricts cross-gender dialogue, limiting opportunities for critical exchange that could reshape Islamic curricula toward inclusivity and equality.

The implications of these findings call for systemic reform in the management of learning spaces within pesantren. Nurfai (2022) highlights the need to critically review spatial segregation policies by incorporating principles of inclusivity and gender equity. Vohra et al. (2015) argue that equitable learning environments require safe, fair, and respectful cross-gender interactions, including equal access to key facilities. Given physical constraints, Istiqomah et al. (2025) emphasize the role of technology in providing virtual discussion platforms that allow all students to engage in academic exchange without gender barriers. Miralles-Cardona et al. (2023) further underscore the necessity of strengthening teachers' gender sensitivity through responsive pedagogical training to address structural biases. Equally important is the active involvement of female students in

curriculum development and learning-space policymaking, as participatory engagement helps reduce power asymmetries and fosters a stronger sense of ownership in educational processes.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that pesantren continue to reproduce patriarchal gender norms through their curricula, spatial arrangements, and pedagogical practices. Male-dominated scholarly narratives, the absence of female representation in textbooks, and authoritarian teaching styles contribute to reinforcing gender inequality. However, the study also identifies spaces of resistance led by progressive female teachers and students who introduce the perspectives of female scholars, create alternative learning spaces, and promote critical discourse on gender equality in Islam. These initiatives, although not yet institutionalized, indicate a pedagogical shift toward dialogic and participatory approaches that challenge the marginalization of women in intellectual and public religious life. The findings underscore the need for gender-sensitive curriculum reform, emancipatory pedagogy, and inclusive forums as strategies to dismantle oppressive norms. Transforming pesantren into spaces that uphold both religious values and gender justice is not only an educational objective but also a broader cultural and epistemic struggle.

The findings contribute to studies on gender and Islamic education by showing how pesantren operate simultaneously as spaces that reproduce patriarchal norms and as arenas for transformative agency. They refine critical ethnographic and Islamic feminist frameworks by demonstrating how curriculum content, spatial arrangements, and pedagogical relations interact in shaping gendered experiences. This study also underscores the importance of integrating intersectional and discourse-analytic perspectives when examining religious educational institutions. For practitioners and policymakers, the results highlight the need to embed gender-responsive principles into pesantren curricula, teacher training, and institutional regulations. Developing emancipatory pedagogies and inclusive forums can strengthen women's participation in religious scholarship and leadership. Collaborative efforts among pesantren leaders, educators, and gender justice advocates are essential to institutionalize sustainable reforms.

This study is limited by its reliance on document analysis and secondary interview data, which, although useful for identifying discourse patterns and curricular biases, may not fully represent lived experiences or informal practices within pesantren communities. The absence of sustained ethnographic fieldwork reduces the ability to observe everyday gender dynamics, power negotiations, and hidden learning spaces where norms are reproduced or contested. Furthermore, focusing on a single pesantren restricts the broader applicability of the findings across Indonesia's diverse pesantren traditions. Future studies should adopt longitudinal, multi-site ethnography to capture variations in gender norms and resistance strategies. Incorporating participatory action research would also strengthen collaboration with pesantren stakeholders and ensure that proposed reforms are contextually grounded, inclusive, and community-driven.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researcher expresses gratitude to the pesantren leadership and administrators for their support and permission during the study. Appreciation is also extended to the students who shared their information and experiences. Sincere thanks go to the research assistance team for their dedication in collecting and processing the data.

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