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

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Article information	Abstract
	The research problem addresses how gender norms are reflected in pesantren curricula, where analysis of kitab kuning and teaching materials reveals the reproduction of patriarchy: men are positioned as primary authorities, while women's roles are confined to domestic spheres, influencing pedagogical practices and the formation of students' habitus. This study aims to identify hidden gender norms in pesantren education, exploring how materials, teacher–student interactions, and organizational structures reproduce, construct, and are challenged by both female and male actors. Employing a critical ethnographic and case study approach, data were collected from curriculum documents, kitab kuning, and interviews with students and teachers across three pesantren in East Java. Data analysis utilized Critical Discourse Analysis and thematic approaches, supported by triangulation, to uncover the reproduction and negotiation of patriarchal norms. This study shows that the pesantren curriculum in Indonesia reproduces patriarchal norms through texts, pedagogical practices, teacher-student relationships, and institutional structures. Resistance emerges from female students and progressive educators through reinterpretation of texts, critical discussion, and alternative practices. Segregation of learning spaces reinforces patriarchy. Potential micro-transformations, however, require sustained policy support, teacher training, and gender-responsive curricula. The implications of the study emphasize the need for reforming the pesantren curriculum to be gender-responsive, training teachers for equality, and institutional policies that support women's participation. These steps are important to change patriarchal structures and encourage inclusive educational transformation.

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INTRODUCTION

Pesantren, as traditional Islamic educational institutions, play a strategic role in shaping character, religious values, and social norms in Indonesia. Amid rapid social changes, their curricular practices have increasingly drawn attention, particularly regarding how pesantren 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. By integrating formal and non-formal education, pesantren possess strong authority in transmitting values to millions of students. Wahyono (2023) reports 39,043 pesantren across Indonesia, with the highest concentrations in West Java (12,121) and East Java (6,744), highlighting their extensive influence on social norm formation.

Several studies indicate that pesantren curricula remain strongly shaped by patriarchal perspectives, positioning women as subordinate in both domestic and public spheres (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Pierik, 2022; Liu, 2023). Kurniawati and Muafiah (2023) further note that gender-insensitive teaching materials and the limited presence of women in leadership roles reflect structural inequality. These conditions risk reinforcing gender stereotypes that hinder women's empowerment within pesantren and the broader community. Although gender mainstreaming initiatives have been introduced (Fauzi & Zebua, 2020; Fitriyah et al., 2023), previous research dominated by normative and descriptive approaches is considered inadequate to uncover the internal dynamics sustaining gender inequality (Malihah et al., 2023; Wardiana et al., 2024).

Researchers have emphasized that patriarchal biases continue to be reproduced within pesantren curricula (Dema, 2008). Practices and organizational structures that appear neutral often subtly reinforce hierarchical relations, while teaching materials, pedagogical interactions, and institutional governance serve as mechanisms for reproducing gender disparities. Nikjoo et al. (2025) highlight the importance of recognizing the agency of both women and men, who may challenge, negotiate, or reinterpret established gender norms. However, most pesantren studies have yet to explore these dynamics in depth. Therefore, a critical ethnographic approach is necessary to uncover hidden practices, forms of resistance, and micro-level processes that shape gender constructions within pesantren curricula.

This 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, it explores how these norms are constructed, reproduced, and challenged by both female and male actors. The study is expected to provide theoretical contributions by enriching the literature on critical ethnography of gender in Islamic education, and practical contributions through recommendations for inclusive curricula, teacher training modules, and participatory monitoring mechanisms to support sustainable social transformation toward gender equality.

This study seeks to reveal that pesantren curricula in Indonesia contain hidden and internalized gender norms that reproduce the subordinate position of women in daily educational practices. Teaching materials, instructional methods, and organizational structures tend to be gender-insensitive, reinforcing stereotypes among students, while female actors exhibit various forms of resistance, both subtle and overt, which may indicate social norm changes if granted institutional space. Gender mainstreaming initiatives have so far been symbolic and have not altered structural practices without ethnography-based curriculum interventions. This study poses the question: How are gender norms constructed, reproduced, and challenged in pesantren practices, and what forms of resistance emerge from

female and male actors? The findings are expected to emphasize the urgency of inclusive curriculum reform and participatory monitoring to support sustainable gender equality.

METHOD

Research Approach

This study adopts a critical ethnographic approach as articulated by McGrath and Hand (2021), enriched through a comprehensive literature review and in-depth textual narrative analysis following the methodological insights of Nasheeda et al. (2019) and Naeem et al. (2023). Although field observation was conducted on a limited basis, pesantren curriculum documents are treated as cultural artifacts that embody values, ideologies, and power relations (Boote & Beile, 2005; Bowen, 2009). The study employs a case study approach focusing on three modern pesantren in East Java Pesantren Nurul Huda Situbondo, Pesantren Nurur Rahmah Probolinggo, and Pesantren At-Taqwa Jember which integrate religious and general education. This approach enables a critical analysis of documents alongside the interpretation of everyday practices and the lived experiences of pesantren actors, thereby revealing implicit structures and ideological positions often overlooked in surface-level research.

Data Sources

Data for this study were collected through interviews and document analysis to examine gender norms across various learning domains. Drawing on Guo et al. (2024), semi-structured qualitative interviews were employed to capture the experiences and meanings constructed by educational actors within the socio-cultural context of pesantren. Primary data consist of official pesantren curriculum documents, including kitab kuning taught to students, which were analyzed to identify constructions of gender narratives in formal policies. Secondary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with 15 students and 10 male and female teachers across the three pesantren. These interviews complement document analysis by incorporating lived experiences, thereby strengthening the understanding of gender dynamics in pesantren educational practices.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Fairclough's (2010) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), encompassing three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice. Textual analysis focused on vocabulary, phrases, and narrative structures within curriculum documents and kitab kuning, consistent with Argamon et al. (2003), who emphasize linguistic markers as indicators of gender representation. Discursive practice analysis examined how texts are produced, circulated, and interpreted within pesantren contexts, including teacher student interactions (Ong et al., 2024). Social practice analysis situated discourse within broader socio-religious power relations, linking micro-level patterns to dominant ideological frameworks and revealing both the reproduction of and resistance to patriarchal norms. Thematic analysis was subsequently employed to identify discursive patterns that reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Slemon, 2025; Dewangga et al., 2025).

Triangulation and Validity

Research rigor was ensured through source triangulation, theoretical triangulation, and ideological critique (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Source triangulation involved comparing curriculum documents, kitab kuning, and interview data, while theoretical triangulation drew on Islamic feminist theory, critical pedagogy, and critical ethnography. Ideological critique was applied to uncover textual biases and to ensure reflexive analysis of gendered discourses

embedded in power relations, emphasizing the interconnectedness between institutional documents and everyday social practices within pesantren.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Result
Reproduction and contestation of gender norms in pesantren curricula

Based on curriculum documents and interviews, this study finds that pesantren curricula predominantly reproduce patriarchal gender norms. Texts and kitab kuning reinforce male authority and confine women to domestic and subordinate roles, limiting their visibility in scholarly, leadership, and public domains. Pedagogical practices and teacher–student interactions further normalize gender hierarchies. However, emerging counter-discourses by progressive educators and female students include gender-equitable reinterpretations of religious texts, integration of gender equality in teaching, and creation of participatory learning spaces. While these efforts remain fragmented and reliant on individual initiative, growing female demands for decision-making participation indicate increasing gender awareness and potential for gradual change.

Tabel 1

Gender Norms, Resistance, and Curriculum Practices in Pesantren

No.	Analytical Theme	Level of Analysis (CDA)	Description of Findings
1	Patriarchal gender representations in curriculum texts	Text (Micro)	Curriculum documents and *kitab kuning* reinforce male authority and position women in domestic and obedient roles, reflecting a patriarchal ideology normalized within formal educational texts.
2	Institutional reproduction of conservative gender values	Social Practice (Macro)	Curriculum structures and religious legitimation reproduce hierarchical gender norms and restrict opportunities for reinterpretation and reform.
3	Resistance and negotiation by female students	Discursive Practice (Meso)	Female students express aspirations to participate in decision-making processes, indicating the emergence of counter-discourses challenging gendered power relations.
4	Incremental inclusivity in teaching practices	Discursive Practice (Meso)	Some teachers incorporate gender equality issues and encourage open discussion, reflecting grassroots potential for change despite limited institutional support.
5	Impact of patriarchal norms on women's leadership	Social Practice (Macro)	Patriarchal norms constrain women's participation in leadership and public roles within pesantren, creating structural barriers to women's empowerment.

Pesantren curricula continue to serve as a primary mechanism for reproducing patriarchal norms, shaping pedagogical practices, social interactions, and institutional structures. Gender bias embedded in teaching materials, instructional methods, and leadership systems creates structural barriers to women's agency and leadership. Although progressive educators and female students initiate resistance, fostering gender-inclusive perspectives and more equitable participation, these efforts remain fragmented and largely dependent on individual initiative. Without comprehensive gender-responsive curriculum reform, ongoing teacher training, and institutionalized participatory mechanisms, such initiatives risk remaining isolated, limiting their potential to achieve sustainable, systemic transformation within pesantren institutions.

Agency and resistance against patriarchal norms in islamic boarding schools

Based on interviews, this study identifies micro-level agency and resistance among female students and progressive ustadzah confronting male-centered structures in pesantren. Resistance takes negotiated forms, including gender-equitable reinterpretations of religious texts, alternative pedagogical strategies, and more inclusive learning spaces. Some ustadzah subtly challenge dominant masculine narratives within epistemic boundaries. Female students report greater participation, recognition, and confidence. However, these practices remain informal, limited, and reliant on individual initiative, with minimal institutional support, functioning primarily at symbolic and pedagogical levels and indicating potential for gradual change without structural transformation.

Tabel 2

Agency and Resistance to Patriarchal Norms in Pesantren

No.	Theme	Level of Analysis	Description of Findings
1	Agency in negotiating patriarchal structures	Social Practice (Macro–Micro)	Female students and *ustadzah* demonstrate the capacity to negotiate structural constraints through discursive and pedagogical practices, although these efforts have not yet translated into institutional policy change.
2	Gender-inclusive reinterpretation in teaching	Discursive Practice (Meso)	Some educators integrate gender-equitable readings of religious texts, challenging dominant male-centered narratives within the curriculum.
3	Female students' reception and empowerment	Discursive Practice (Meso)	Female students report increased recognition and critical awareness when religious texts are taught through contextualized and inclusive perspectives, expanding imaginaries of women's roles in public and religious spheres.

The study finds that internal resistance at Pesantren Nurul Huda, Pesantren Nurur Rahmah, and Pesantren At-Taqwa arises from students and progressive educators challenging patriarchal curricula. Teachers introduce gender-equitable interpretations, disrupting male-centered narratives and fostering inclusive dialogue, which enhances female students' recognition, critical awareness, and participation. However, these counter-discourses remain informal and reliant on individual initiative, making sustainability fragile. Without institutional support, gains risk reversal. Embedding gender inclusivity through curriculum reform, educator training, participatory policymaking, and monitoring is essential to convert isolated efforts into lasting institutional practices.

Representation of scholars in the pesantren curriculum

This study finds that representations of Islamic scholars in pesantren curricula are overwhelmingly male-centered, as evidenced by the systematic analysis of teaching materials summarized in Table 4. Curriculum documents, including kitab kuning (fiqh, hadith, and tafsir) and supplementary Islamic history modules, predominantly reference male scholars as authoritative sources of religious knowledge. Female scholars are rarely mentioned, indicating a patterned and structural exclusion rather than an incidental omission.

Table 3

Representation of Scholars in the Pesantren Curriculum

No.	Data Source	Unit of Analysis	Male References (%)	Female References (%)
1	*Kitab Kuning* (Fiqh, Hadith, Tafsir)	Named scholars explicitly cited in core texts	98	2

| 2 | Supplementary Islamic History Modules | Named historical and scholarly figures | 95 | 5 |
| 3 | Student Perceptions (n = 25) | Scholars recalled from learning materials | 92 | 8 |

Note: Percentages reflect the frequency of explicitly named scholars identified through systematic coding of curriculum documents and supported by santri interview data

Table 4 shows that male scholars dominate references in kitab kuning (98%) and Islamic history modules (95%), while female scholars comprise only 2–5%. Student perception data (n = 25) confirm this imbalance, with 92% identifying male scholars as the primary figures in learning materials. These findings indicate that curricular texts and pedagogical practices consistently construct religious authority as male, marginalizing women's intellectual contributions. Interviews reveal that ustadzah and female students feel discomfort with narratives that omit women, reinforcing assumptions about their unsuitability for scholarly leadership. In response, some educators introduce alternative female figures, such as Sayyidah Nafisah and Ummu Waraqah, through informal explanations and discussion forums, though these initiatives remain peripheral and reliant on individual effort, lacking formal curricular or institutional support.

Gender-based segregation and resistance in pesantren education

Based on classroom observations, curriculum analysis, and interviews with teachers and students, this study finds that gender-based segregation in pesantren operates as an institutionalized practice that structures unequal access to knowledge and religious authority. As summarized in Table 5, segregation is not merely a cultural preference but is embedded in daily pedagogical arrangements, spatial organization, and norms governing participation in religious learning.

Tabel 4
Gender-Based Segregation and Resistance in Pesantren Education

No.	Analytical Theme	CDA Level	Empirical Evidence	Interpretive Meaning
1	Gender-based classroom segregation	Social Practice (Macro)	Institutional rules and spatial arrangements separating male and female classes, legitimized by religious narratives on gender roles	Segregation operates as a structural mechanism that reproduces unequal gendered power relations and normalizes male dominance in educational authority
2	Unequal access to learning spaces and scholarly authority	Discursive Practice (Meso)	Restricted access of female students to *tafsir* study circles; limited interaction with authoritative teachers	Pedagogical practices regulate who may participate in knowledge production, positioning men as active transmitters and women as passive recipients
3	Gendered construction of knowledge roles	Text & Discursive Practice (Micro Meso)	Normative explanations emphasizing obedience and propriety for women in learning contexts	Gender roles are discursively constructed through everyday pedagogical interactions that legitimize hierarchical participation
4	Micro-level resistance and negotiation	Discursive Practice (Meso)	Informal *tafsir* classes, discussion forums, peer knowledge sharing, and use of recorded lessons	Female teachers and students enact agency by negotiating access to knowledge, challenging exclusionary structures within limited spaces

As shown in Table 5, gender segregation operates as a structural mechanism that restricts female students' access to key learning spaces, particularly advanced tafsir circles and direct interaction with authoritative teachers. Interview data indicate that male students enjoy greater physical and symbolic access to scholarly forums, while female students rely on supervised or mediated learning, positioning men as active knowledge producers and women as passive recipients. This unequal access limits women's participation in theological debate, pedagogical experience, and leadership pathways, thereby reproducing gendered authority across generations. At the same time, micro-level resistance emerges through alternative tafsir classes, informal discussion spaces, and peer-based knowledge sharing initiated by progressive ustadzah and female students. While these practices demonstrate agency, their impact remains constrained by the lack of institutional recognition and policy support.

Discussion
The reproduction of patriarchy in the pesantren curriculum: A critical discourse analysis

The findings of this study indicate that the pesantren curriculum consistently reproduces patriarchal norms that are deeply rooted in the Islamic education system. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis approach, the texts in the yellow books and religious curriculum not only represent reality but also function as discursive practices that actively shape social reality through ideologically charged language (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). Religious messages that emphasize male leadership and subordinate women operate as mechanisms for reproducing hierarchical power relations (Kark & Buengeler, 2024). These texts mediate pedagogical practices and shape the social dispositions of students. In line with Bourdieu (1984), this process produces a patriarchal habitus that continues to be maintained by Islamic boarding schools as an arena of symbolic domination.

The findings of this study reinforce and expand on previous studies showing that Islamic boarding schools, although often perceived as spiritually egalitarian institutions, still maintain hierarchical institutional structures rooted in patriarchal ideology (Subaidi et al., 2023). The study in this research shows that pesantren that claim to be modern still reproduce educational practices that limit women's roles in learning and leadership through androcentric-oriented religious curricula and modules (Prasmiwardana et al., 2025). In the socio-cultural context of pesantren, the relationship between teachers and students, gender-based role division, and the authority of classical texts shape the production of knowledge that positions men as the normative subject. These findings are in line with Muslim feminist critiques of patriarchal bias in Islamic education (Stack, 2020).

Within the institutional framework of Islamic boarding schools, the reproduction of patriarchy occurs not only through formal curricula, but also through leadership practices and everyday power relations. The literature emphasizes that gender-sensitive curriculum revision is a strategic step toward deconstructing structural biases, particularly through the integration of women's perspectives and the involvement of female students and educators in curriculum development (Kuteesa et al., 2024; Walsh et al., 2025). At the pedagogical level, hierarchical teacher-student relationships need to be transformed through training based on critical pedagogy and gender equality (Walsh et al., 2025). The low participation of women in decision-making reflects strong symbolic domination (Hora, 2014), although resistance is beginning to emerge from female santri who are demanding more inclusive participation spaces (Arquisola & Rentschler, 2023).

Resistance and agency in the patriarchal structure of islamic boarding schools

The findings of this study indicate that although the curriculum and institutional structure of Islamic boarding schools are still dominated by patriarchal norms, there is significant room for resistance and internal negotiation by progressive students and educators. Pesantren are not entirely static, but rather function as arenas of contestation between dominant structures and internal agents of change (Nisa'u & Karsidi, 2025). From the perspective of agency theory, individuals within patriarchal systems still have the reflective and strategic capacity to respond to inequality (Kabeer, 2016). The relationship between variables shows that patriarchal structures have a direct influence on educational practices, but this influence is mediated by the agency of female teachers and students through alternative pedagogical practices and more egalitarian informal discussions (Shallaita et al., 2021).

This finding expands the literature that has positioned Islamic boarding schools as institutions that reproduce gender inequality by emphasizing the existence of resistance at the micro level within them. Previous studies have tended to emphasize the dominance of patriarchal epistemology in Islamic texts and pesantren educational practices (Rahman, 2017; Srimulyani, 2007), while this study shows that this dominance is not entirely hegemonic. From a Foucauldian perspective, the integration of alternative materials and critical discussion forums can be understood as forms of micro-resistance to established patriarchal discourse (Haugaard, 2022). This is in line with the counter-hegemonic perspective on education, which views the learning space as an arena for challenging entrenched power relations (Vu & Pham, 2022).

In the social and cultural context of Islamic boarding schools, internal resistance arises as a response to the strong authority of tradition and gender-based scientific hierarchy. As cultural institutions, Islamic boarding schools not only transmit religious knowledge but also produce and normalize certain power relations (Srimulyani, 2007). Therefore, reforming educational policies and practices is crucial. The literature emphasizes the importance of redesigning gender-responsive curricula through the integration of the works of female scholars and progressive Islamic thinkers (Fitriyah & Rahman, 2024), accompanied by teacher training based on dialogical and critical pedagogy (Martínez-Valdivia et al., 2024). Providing open discussion spaces and critically evaluating interpretations of classical Islamic texts are seen as essential steps to transform Islamic boarding schools into more equitable and liberating educational environments (Ansori et al., 2025; Zamzami & Putri, 2024).

Towards an inclusive and gender-equitable learning environment in pesantren

The findings of this study indicate that the separation of learning spaces between male and female students at the Nurul Huda Islamic Boarding School, Nurur Rahmah Islamic Boarding School, and At-Taqwa Islamic Boarding School reflects the reproduction of patriarchal power relations in the structure of religious education. Learning spaces are not neutral, but rather function as arenas for the formation of social relations and power (Makinde & Lanrewaju, 2024). This spatial segregation is political and gendered, forming performative practices that reproduce traditional gender norms (Sunderland, 2000; Tyler & Cohen, 2010; Morison & Macleod, 2013). The relationship between the variables is direct and symbolic, where spatial segregation mediates access to intellectual authority. As a result, women are not only physically restricted but also symbolically marginalized from spaces of knowledge associated with male authority (Gupta et al., 2023).

This finding reinforces and expands the critical literature that views the segregation of learning spaces as a manifestation of patriarchal values in educational institutions. Safitri et

al. (2025) and Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi (2023) assert that systematic spatial separation positions women in subordinate roles. From Bourdieu's perspective, this practice reflects an institutional habitus that reproduces patriarchal values and limits women's access to social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Lindell (2022) interprets spatial segregation as a form of symbolic violence that is internalized by women and has a negative impact on their self-confidence and intellectual aspirations. In the hierarchical context of Islamic boarding schools, this practice is normalized as an administrative policy that appears unproblematic.

In the social and institutional context of Islamic boarding schools, the segregation of learning spaces limits female students' participation in academic and religious discourse. The literature emphasizes the need for systemic reform in the management of learning spaces by adopting the principles of inclusivity and gender equality (Nurfai, 2022). An equitable learning environment requires safe and fair cross-gender interactions, as well as equal access to educational facilities and resources (Vohra et al., 2015). When physical limitations become an obstacle, the use of digital technology and virtual discussion platforms can open up opportunities for participation without gender barriers (Istiqomah et al., 2025). In addition, strengthening educators' gender sensitivity through responsive pedagogy training (Miralles-Cardona et al., 2023) and involving female students in the formulation of learning space management policies are important steps to reduce power asymmetries and encourage institutional transformation.

This research finding expands the literature on Islamic education and gender studies by emphasizing that patriarchy in Islamic boarding schools is not entirely hegemonic. By integrating Critical Discourse Analysis, Bourdieu's habitus theory, Foucauldian power theory, and agency perspectives, this study maps the multilayered mechanisms of patriarchy reproduction through texts, pedagogical practices, institutions, and learning spaces, while highlighting the emergence of micro-resistance and counter-discourse as forms of internal negotiation. Practically, this research emphasizes the need for gender-responsive curriculum reform, critical pedagogy and gender equality training for teachers and kyai, inclusive learning space arrangement, use of digital technology, and active participation of female santri in policy and management. Pesantren transformation requires a combination of policy, pedagogical practice, and institutional cultural change for micro-resistance to develop into systemic reform.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample is limited to a number of specific Islamic boarding schools, so the findings cannot be generalized to all Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. Second, the focus of the study is qualitative and discursive, so it does not capture the quantitative impact of patriarchy on the academic achievement or aspirations of female students. The future research agenda includes comparative studies between Islamic boarding schools, including female Islamic boarding schools and urban communities, as well as longitudinal studies to explore the influence of micro-resistance practices and curriculum reform on the transformation of gender habitus. In addition, future research can assess the role of digital technology as an alternative space for the production of more inclusive Islamic knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the pesantren curriculum in Indonesia consistently reproduces patriarchal norms through classical Islamic texts, pedagogical practices, teacher-student relationships, and institutional structures. Pesantren are not entirely static; resistance and agency emerge from female students and progressive educators through reinterpretation of

texts, critical discussion, and alternative pedagogical practices that encourage inclusive participation. The separation of learning spaces across genders reinforces the reproduction of patriarchal power relations, limiting women's access to knowledge and leadership. These findings confirm Islamic boarding schools as arenas of both reproduction and contestation of gender, where change has the potential to emerge at the micro level, but the sustainability of transformation requires institutional policy support, teacher training, and gender-equality-based curriculum reform.

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Author Contribution Statement

Ach Barocky Zaimina: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Project administration and Writing – original draft. Asnawan: Resources and Investigation. Anuwat Sohwang: Visualization and Writing – review & editing.

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