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# Reproducing and negotiating gender norms: A critical ethnographic study of curriculum and institutional constraints in Indonesian pesantren

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**Abstract:**

In the pesantren studied, the reproduction of gender norms in the curriculum and institutional constraints raise concerns about restrictions on women's participation and opportunities for negotiation toward gender-responsive education. This study examines the reproduction of gender inequality, internal resistance, and barriers to the development of gender-responsive curricula. This qualitative study employed an instrumental case study design informed by a critical ethnographic perspective at Pesantren Nurul Huda Situbondo. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven purposively selected informants. Thematic analysis was supported by source triangulation and critical reflexivity. Three findings emerged. First, the reproduction of gender inequality was evident in the naturalization of women's domestic roles, the normative legitimation of wives' obedience, and the dominance of male authority in pesantren governance. Second, internal resistance and the negotiation of gender relations emerged through alternative religious interpretations, female students' classroom discussions, and informal study groups, alongside administrators' initial openness to dialogue and the reconsideration of teaching materials. Third, gender-responsive curriculum development faced challenges, including limited representation of women in teaching materials, difficulties adapting content, unequal authority in curriculum decision-making, and limited training in gender-responsive teaching. The study concludes that women's agency emerges through the negotiation of meaning within restrictive structures. Openness to dialogue suggests opportunities for reform but does not establish changes in curriculum policy or institutional structures. The study advances a conceptual proposition linking gender norm negotiation to institutional conditions and provides a basis for reviewing teaching materials, strengthening women's representation, training educators, and expanding women's participation in curriculum decision-making.

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## INTRODUCTION

The pesantren curriculum provides a framework for examining how gender norms are maintained, interpreted, and negotiated through educational practices and institutional life. As Islamic boarding schools integrating formal and nonformal education, pesantren shape character, religious values, and understandings of women's and men's social roles. Salim (2020) documented the persistence of traditional gender structures in several pesantren, while Sanah et al. (2021) identified efforts to promote gender justice through women's participation. Nasution et al. (2025) examined reinterpretations of classical Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in response to gender equality, whereas Nadhifah and Pramono (2025) highlighted identity negotiations among female students. Wahyono (2023) reported 39,043 pesantren in Indonesia, with the highest concentrations in West Java (12,121) and East Java (6,744). This extensive institutional distribution and diversity of gender practices underscore the need for contextual research into the relationship between persistent norms and opportunities for negotiation, considering teaching materials, educational actors' experiences, and the distribution of institutional authority.

Previous research on gender in pesantren education encompasses three interrelated areas. First, studies have examined gender bias in teaching and leadership structures, including female Islamic scholars' efforts to negotiate religious authority and access to religious knowledge (Srimulyani, 2007; Nurish, 2010; Smith, 2014; Ismah, 2016; Kurniawati & Muafiah, 2023). Second, research has explored women's educational experiences and capacity development through gender-sensitive education, digital literacy, leadership, and gender-specific learning needs (Fauzi & Zebua, 2020; Fitriyah et al., 2024; Lopes Cardozo & Srimulyani, 2021; Muafiah et al., 2024; Nawas et al., 2024). Third, studies have addressed female students' empowerment, *nyai* leadership, and women's participation in pesantren governance and educational reform (Akmaliyah & Ratnasih, 2017; Labibah et al., 2022; Malihah et al., 2023; Wardiana et al., 2024). Building on this scholarship, the present study examines how gender interpretations are contested, and women's aspirations encounter institutional authority over curriculum decisions. Its novelty lies in analyzing the interconnections among the reproduction of gender inequality, internal resistance, and barriers to curriculum reform within a single pesantren, while distinguishing opportunities to express aspirations from authority to implement change. Through a critical ethnographic examination of informants' interpretations and experiences, the study investigates the opportunities and constraints of gender negotiation in teaching, governance, and educator capacity development.

This study aims to analyze the reproduction of gender inequality, internal resistance, and barriers to developing a gender-responsive curriculum in a pesantren. It addresses three research questions: (1) How is gender inequality reproduced through the pesantren curriculum? (2) How do internal resistance and the negotiation of gender relations unfold within pesantren educational practices? and (3) What barriers hinder the development of a gender-responsive curriculum in pesantren? Theoretically, the study contributes to understanding the relationships among interpretations of religious norms, women's participation, and institutional power relations in the reproduction and negotiation of gender norms. Practically, it provides a contextual basis for reviewing women's representation in teaching materials, strengthening gender-responsive pedagogical training, and expanding women's participation in curriculum decision-making.

This study argues that gender issues within the pesantren curriculum are closely linked to the content of teaching, its interpretation, educational experiences, and the distribution of institutional authority. The curriculum encompasses teaching materials and their

interpretation, as well as the hidden curriculum, examined through informants' accounts of leadership and opportunities for participation. The naturalization of women's domestic roles as inherent, normative legitimization of wives' obedience, and concentration of authority among men are examined as potential mechanisms reproducing gender inequality. Carspecken's (1996) critical ethnographic approach guides the analysis of meaning construction, validity claims, and power relations within informants' accounts. Alternative religious interpretations and discussions among female students are examined as spaces for negotiation in relation to institutional administrators' responses and conditions. The analysis is limited to reported experiences within a single pesantren; openness to dialogue and reconsideration of teaching materials are interpreted as indications of negotiation rather than evidence of changes in institutional policies or structures.

## METHOD

### *Research Approach*

This study employed a qualitative approach using an instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995) at Pesantren Nurul Huda, Situbondo, and was informed by Carspecken's (1996) critical ethnographic perspective to interpret the construction and negotiation of gender norms and power relations within informants' educational experiences. The study focused on three areas: the reproduction of gender inequality through the curriculum, internal resistance and negotiation of gender relations, and barriers to developing a gender-responsive curriculum. Given the limited field observations, the research primarily relied on informants' experiences and interpretations, obtained through interviews, regarding *fiqh* instruction, *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts), Islamic Religious Education modules, and pesantren governance. These accounts were interpreted through a critical ethnographic perspective to examine the legitimization of norms, distribution of authority, and opportunities for women's participation within the pesantren's institutional context.

### *Data Sources and Data Collection*

Primary data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in 2025 at Pesantren Nurul Huda, Situbondo, with seven informants: three pesantren administrators (NF, SU, MZ), two female Islamic teachers (*ustadzah*) (SA, ANH), and two students (*santri*) (SRW, SF). Informants were purposively selected based on their involvement in institutional management, teaching practices, or educational experiences to capture diverse perspectives. The interviews explored informants' experiences and interpretations (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019) concerning women's domestic roles, wives' obedience in religious instruction, institutional authority, alternative religious interpretations, discussions among female students, and barriers to gender-responsive curriculum development. Follow-up questions clarified the contexts, experiences, and reasoning underlying their perspectives. Accounts of *kitab kuning*, instructional modules, and curriculum development were interpreted based on informants' descriptions of their content, use, and relevance to teaching. These interview data provided the basis for the study's three groups of findings.

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed thematically by adapting principles of meaning identification, coding, theme development, and interpretation (Naeem et al., 2023). The process involved repeated readings of interview data, coding relevant statements, grouping codes into categories, and developing themes based on the research focus and patterns of meaning that emerged from informants' accounts. Themes were reviewed against supporting quotations and compared across informants to clarify interpretive boundaries. Three themes were

identified: the reproduction of gender inequality through the pesantren curriculum, internal resistance and negotiation of gender relations, and barriers to gender-responsive curriculum development. Carspecken's (1996) critical ethnographic perspective guided the interpretation of how gender norms were legitimized, questioned, and negotiated through educational experiences and institutional power relations. Conclusions were restricted to interview evidence without establishing causal relationships or assuming unverified changes in institutional policies or structures.

*Triangulation and Trustworthiness*

Trustworthiness was addressed through source triangulation and critical reflexivity. Accounts from three pesantren administrators, two female Islamic teachers, and two students were compared regarding gender norms, teaching materials and policies, and institutional authority, considering convergences and divergences associated with informants' positions, experiences, and involvement. The credibility of thematic interpretations was strengthened by tracing connections among interview quotations, categories, themes, and analytical conclusions, as well as by reviewing supporting evidence (Nowell et al., 2017). Critical reflexivity involved examining how researchers' assumptions and positionality influenced interpretations of religious meanings and power relations while considering alternative interpretations grounded in the data (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Findings were context-specific to a single pesantren and were not intended for statistical generalization. Their relevance to other contexts depends on similarities in institutional characteristics, teaching materials, and social relations.

*Research Ethics*

The study upheld voluntary participation, informed consent, and data confidentiality. Before the interviews, informants were informed of the research objectives, discussion topics, the academic use of the data, and their right to decline questions or withdraw without consequences to their institutional standing. Identities were anonymized with codes, and interview quotations were presented in context while protecting personal information. Reporting on religious norms, gender, and institutional authority was conducted cautiously and proportionately. Interpretations of experiential patterns and social relations remained grounded in the data while respecting informants' dignity and the pesantren's institutional context.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

### Reproduction of gender inequality through the pesantren curriculum

Interviews with pesantren administrators, female Islamic teachers (*ustadzah*), and students identified three patterns that were interpreted as mechanisms reproducing gender inequality: the naturalization of women's domestic roles, the normative legitimization of wives' obedience, and male dominance in pesantren governance. The curriculum is understood to encompass both teaching content and its interpretation, as well as the hidden curriculum, as examined through informants' accounts of institutional authority and participation. Drawing on Carspecken's (1996) critical ethnographic perspective on meaning construction, validity claims, and power relations, the findings illustrate how gender norms are taught and experienced within the pesantren while revealing female students' aspirations for more equitable participation.

The naturalization of women's domestic roles emerged in accounts of *fiqh* instruction. NF, a pesantren administrator involved in teaching *fiqh*, explained, "In fiqh lessons, women are positioned as household managers. This is part of what we teach because it is considered

consistent with women's inherent nature (*kodrat*)" (Interview, 2025). Similarly, SRW, a student, stated, "We are taught that women's primary responsibility is managing the household and serving their husbands. Women who want to work outside the home are considered to be acting against their inherent nature" (Interview, 2025). Both accounts demonstrate how *kodrat* is invoked to justify women's domestic roles and restrict their social choices. These findings reflect informants' interpretations of *fiqh* instruction and remain limited to their reported learning experiences.

Normative legitimization of wives' obedience was evident in accounts of Islamic Religious Education instruction. SU, a pesantren administrator involved in developing instructional modules, stated, "The Islamic Religious Education modules emphasize wives' obligation to obey their husbands. This is part of religious teaching that female students must understand" (Interview, 2025). Meanwhile, SF, a student, explained, "We are taught that wives who disobey their husbands commit a sin. Therefore, women must obey their husbands, including when their husbands prohibit them from participating in activities outside the home" (Interview, 2025). These accounts illustrate how religious justification for wives' obedience, as understood by SF, extends to the acceptance of restrictions on activities outside the home. This pattern indicates the normative legitimization of husbands' authority over women's participation.

Male dominance in pesantren governance emerged in the experiences of SA, a female Islamic teacher, who stated, "Within the pesantren structure, men are always the leaders and primary educators. Women are more often treated as objects rather than subjects involved in decision-making" (Interview, 2025). Similarly, ANH expressed, "We want to be involved in decision-making within the pesantren, rather than merely following existing rules" (Interview, 2025). SA's account reflects perceived inequalities in institutional authority that may reinforce gender hierarchies through the hidden curriculum. ANH's statement indicates aspirations for greater women's participation, although it does not establish that institutional change has occurred.

**Table 1**
*Findings on the Reproduction of Gender Inequality in the Pesantren Curriculum*

| Finding | Curriculum Component | Mechanism Interpreted from Interviews | Critical Analysis |
|---|---|---|---|
| Naturalization of women's domestic roles | Interpretations of *fiqh* in *kitab kuning* instruction | The concept of *kodrat* is invoked to justify assigning women domestic roles. | The division of social roles is presented as inherent to women, positioning alternative roles as deviations. |
| Normative legitimization of wives' obedience | Islamic Religious Education modules, as described by informants | Obedience is emphasized as a religious obligation, which students understand as including acceptance of restrictions on activities outside the home. | Husbands' authority receives moral justification, potentially restricting women's decision-making autonomy. |
| Male dominance in pesantren governance | Hidden curriculum reflected in leadership and decision-making | The perceived distribution of authority privileges men and limits women's involvement. | Institutional experiences may reinforce gender hierarchies, while female students' aspirations indicate that these restrictions are contested. |

Source: Compiled from research interviews, 2025.

Table 1 illustrates the analytical connections among the assignment of women's roles, justification of restrictions on their activities, and distribution of institutional authority. Administrators' accounts reveal the normative reasoning underlying instruction, while students' and female teachers' narratives demonstrate how these restrictions are understood and experienced. Gender inequality thus concerns both instructional messages and opportunities for participation in pesantren life. However, convergence across accounts does not establish causal relationships between teaching materials and broader institutional practices.

Carspecken's (1996) concepts of meaning reconstruction and validity claims help explain the justifications expressed by informants. Statements concerning *kodrat* and obligatory obedience can be interpreted as normative-evaluative claims about appropriate roles and conduct for women. In NF's and SRW's accounts, domestic responsibilities are legitimized as inherent to women, whereas SU's and SF's statements justify obedience through religious obligations and moral consequences. These interpretations highlight how religious meanings are invoked in educational settings to legitimize gendered roles and authority. Their connection to broader patriarchal power relations remains interpretive and requires further contextual evidence.

ANH's statement offers an alternative perspective on restricted participation. Her aspiration to participate in decision-making indicates that at least some informants challenge women's positioning as passive recipients of institutional rules. This aspiration reflects a demand for recognition and participation but does not demonstrate actual authority to influence decisions. Analytically, the findings reveal tensions between the legitimization of gender hierarchies and demands for women's involvement. Accordingly, the reproduction of gender inequality in the pesantren must be understood alongside voices questioning these restrictions, while distinguishing aspirations for change from demonstrated institutional transformation.

**Internal resistance and gender negotiation in pesantren educational practices**

Interview analysis identified three processes associated with internal resistance and the negotiation of gender relations in pesantren education: alternative religious interpretations, negotiation of meaning through discussions among female students, and administrators' initial responses to aspirations for change. These processes were interpreted using Carspecken's (1996) critical ethnographic perspective on meaning reconstruction, validity claims, and power relations. Resistance refers to efforts to question gender interpretations perceived as restricting women, while negotiation occurs through contextual explanations, exchanges of perspectives, and expressions of aspirations. Informants' accounts indicate opportunities to challenge gender norms within educational practices, although changes in institutional policies and structures remain unconfirmed.

Alternative religious interpretations emerged in female teachers' perspectives and reported learning experiences. SA, a female Islamic teacher (*ustadzah*), stated, "I believe it is important to incorporate gender-equitable interpretations so that female students do not feel that Islam belongs exclusively to men" (Interview, 2025). NF, a pesantren administrator involved in *fiqh* instruction, also described experiencing contextual explanations: "The classical texts we study sometimes make me feel that I have no place in public life. However, when the female teacher explains them contextually, I realize that Islam does not exclude women" (Interview, 2025). SA's statement demonstrates support for gender-equitable interpretations, while NF's account describes a shift in understanding following contextual

explanations. Both suggest that alternative interpretations offer opportunities to negotiate religious meanings perceived as restrictive toward women.

Negotiation of meaning through discussion was evident in the experiences of SRW, a student actively involved in classroom discussions. SRW explained, "Initially, I felt that classical texts positioned women as inferior to men. However, after discussing them in groups, I began to recognize other, more equitable interpretations" (Interview, 2025). SRW also described establishing an informal study group: "We formed a small discussion circle to explore women and Islam. There, we felt confident asking questions and seeking interpretations that do not exclude women" (Interview, 2025). In SRW's experience, classroom discussions and informal groups provided spaces to question gender interpretations and explore alternatives. These initiatives indicate female students' intellectual participation, as reported by the informant, but do not establish that similar experiences extend to all female students.

Initial institutional responses to female students' discussions were described by SU, a pesantren administrator involved in the development of instructional modules. SU stated, "I see that female students are now more confident in asking questions and engaging in discussions. Although the overall structure has not changed, opportunities for dialogue have begun to emerge" (Interview, 2025). SU further linked these discussions to reconsideration of teaching materials: "Changing the curriculum is not easy, but the group discussions initiated by female students have prompted us to reconsider some teaching materials" (Interview, 2025). These accounts indicate openness to dialogue and reconsideration of instructional content, as reported by an administrator. Such responses suggest initial receptiveness to female students' aspirations but do not establish that curriculum revisions or formal institutional decisions have occurred.

**Table 2**

*Pesantren Education: Internal Resistance, Gender Negotiation, and Administrative Responses*

| Identified Process | Informants and Contexts | Interview Evidence | Critical Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Alternative religious interpretations | SA, female Islamic teacher; NF, pesantren administrator involved in *fiqh* instruction | SA supported gender-equitable interpretations, while NF described a shift in understanding through contextual explanations. | Contextual interpretations create opportunities to question religious meanings perceived as restricting women's positions. |
| Negotiation of meaning through discussion | SRW, student; classroom discussions and informal study groups | SRW described exploring alternative interpretations and establishing discussion circles on women and Islam. | Questioning and exchanging perspectives constitute intellectual participation through which gender meanings can be negotiated. |
| Initial responses to aspirations for change | SU, pesantren administrator involved in developing instructional modules | SU reported increasing openness to dialogue and reconsideration of selected teaching materials. | Administrative responses suggest possibilities for reviewing teaching materials but do not establish changes in institutional policies or structures. |

Source: Compiled from research interviews, 2025.

Table 2 illustrates how the negotiation of gender relations encompasses textual interpretation, participation in learning, and administrative responses. SA's perspective and NF's experience highlight opportunities for alternative interpretations, while SRW's account demonstrates initiatives to establish spaces for the exchange of views. SU's statements further illustrate how administrators respond to female students' discussions. The evidence indicates that questioning gender norms occurs through educational interactions and dialogue within

the pesantren. Although these accounts collectively illuminate negotiation processes, they do not establish a sequence of changes or causal relationships among the activities.

Drawing on Carspecken (1996), these patterns can be understood through meaning reconstruction and normative-evaluative claims concerning women's appropriate and equitable positions. SA's perspective supports religious interpretations that recognize women, while NF's and SRW's experiences illustrate how initially restrictive understandings can be reconsidered. Resistance is thus interpreted as questioning the legitimacy of gender interpretations through contextual explanations and exchanges of perspectives. Educational settings become spaces for negotiating meaning, with informants' accounts providing insight into how those involved understand these processes.

SU's responses suggest a possible connection between classroom discussions and administrators' reconsideration of teaching materials. However, reported openness to dialogue and material review does not establish that female students' aspirations have translated into institutional policies. Similarly, asking questions and forming discussion groups indicate initiatives reported by informants, while their influence on institutional decisions remains unknown. The analytical contribution lies in identifying the interconnections among alternative interpretations, female students' intellectual participation, and administrative responses as processes of negotiating gender relations. These conclusions remain limited to the experiences and perspectives documented in the interviews.

**Barriers to developing a gender-responsive curriculum in pesantren**

Interview analysis identified three barriers to developing a gender-responsive curriculum in pesantren: limited representation of women's roles and difficulties adapting teaching materials, unequal authority in curriculum decision-making, and insufficient training in gender-responsive pedagogy. These barriers were interpreted through Carspecken's (1996) critical ethnographic perspective on meaning reconstruction, validity claims, and power relations. Informants' accounts indicate that curriculum reform faces challenges involving instructional content, institutional governance, and educator capacity development. Although openness to reviewing teaching materials was reported, translating aspirations for change into curriculum reform remains challenging within the informants' experiences.

Limited representation of women's roles in teaching materials emerged in MZ's statement: "Teaching materials remain too rigid in portraying women's roles, even though students are beginning to question why women are confined to the kitchen or home" (Interview, 2025). Meanwhile, SU, a pesantren administrator involved in developing instructional modules, explained, "Changing the curriculum is not easy, but the group discussions initiated by female students have prompted us to reconsider some teaching materials" (Interview, 2025). MZ's account highlights the perceived restriction of women's representation to domestic roles, while SU acknowledges difficulties in curriculum adaptation alongside openness to reviewing instructional content. Both statements indicate a need for reform, although the specific reasons for the difficulties reported by SU remain unclear.

Unequal authority in curriculum decision-making was evident in SU's account: "In curriculum development, almost everyone participating in the main decision-making forum is male. Women are usually asked only to provide technical input rather than determine policy direction" (Interview, 2025). Similarly, NF, a pesantren administrator involved in *fiqh* instruction, stated, "Structurally, final decisions remain with the pesantren leaders and senior administrators, all of whom are men. Therefore, even when female teachers propose changes, their voices often do not reach the decision-making level" (Interview, 2025). These accounts illustrate the distinction between opportunities to provide input and authority to determine

policy. Within curriculum development, the reported distribution of authority may restrict women's influence over decisions concerning educational direction and instructional content.

Limited training in gender-responsive pedagogy also emerged in administrators' accounts. SU stated, "Most male and female teachers here have never received specialized training in gender-responsive teaching. They teach directly from existing texts without discussing their social contexts" (Interview, 2025). NF further emphasized the importance of contextual understanding: "Without an understanding of gender-equitable interpretations, these texts are taught as they are. Consequently, gender-biased interpretations continue to be passed down from generation to generation" (Interview, 2025). SU reported limited training experience, while NF associated interpretive understanding with the potential persistence of gender bias. These accounts suggest a need to strengthen pedagogical training and contextual interpretation, but do not provide sufficient evidence to assess individual educators' competencies.

**Table 3**
*Barriers to Gender-Responsive Curriculum Development in Pesantren*

| Identified Barriers | Educational Aspects | Interview Evidence | Critical Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Limited representation of women's roles and difficulties adapting teaching materials | Teaching materials and curriculum reform | MZ perceived women's representation as restricted to domestic roles; SU reported difficulties implementing changes alongside reconsideration of teaching materials. | Expanding women's representation requires curriculum adaptation, although the underlying causes of these difficulties need further clarification. |
| Unequal authority in curriculum decision-making | Governance and participation in policy formulation | SU and NF reported male dominance in decision-making forums and final decisions, while women's involvement was largely limited to providing input. | Participation and opportunities to express opinions do not necessarily ensure women's influence over curriculum decisions. |
| Limited training in gender-responsive pedagogy | Educator capacity development and teaching practices | SU reported limited training experience; NF emphasized the importance of understanding gender-equitable interpretations. | Interviews indicate a need for stronger training and contextual understanding, while individual competencies remain unassessed. |

Source: Compiled from research interviews, 2025.

Table 3 demonstrates that barriers to curriculum development include instructional content requiring review, authority to make changes, and opportunities for educators to strengthen their pedagogical understanding. These dimensions position curriculum reform as a process involving both educational content and institutional implementation. Openness to reconsidering teaching materials does not necessarily ensure that women's proposals influence decisions or that educators receive relevant training. The relationships among these dimensions represent interpretations of informants' accounts rather than established causal relationships or estimates of their relative influence.

Drawing on Carspecken (1996), the analysis examines interpretations of women's roles, the distribution of authority, and teaching practices reported by informants. MZ's account challenges interpretations that primarily position women within domestic roles, while SU's and NF's statements distinguish opportunities to propose changes from authority to approve them. From this perspective, recognition of women's voices is linked to their positions within

decision-making processes. Accounts of training further highlight the conditions enabling educators to develop contextual interpretations, without assuming that insufficient training necessarily indicates limited competence.

SU's openness to reviewing teaching materials suggests opportunities for negotiation despite the reported barriers. However, such consideration does not establish that curriculum changes have been implemented. The findings highlight three conditions constraining reform: contested teaching materials, limited decision-making authority for women, and the need for strengthened pedagogical training. Their interconnections help explain why aspirations for gender-responsive education require support at both instructional and governance levels. These conclusions remain limited to informants' perspectives and experiences and do not establish the effectiveness of curriculum reform or institutional transformation.

**Discussion**

This study identified three main findings. First, gender inequality was reproduced through the naturalization of women's domestic roles, normative legitimization of wives' obedience, and male dominance in pesantren governance. Second, internal resistance and the negotiation of gender relations emerged through alternative religious interpretations and discussions among female students in classrooms and informal study groups, accompanied by administrators' initial openness to dialogue and reconsideration of teaching materials. Third, gender-responsive curriculum development was characterized by limited representation of women's roles in teaching materials, difficulties adapting instructional content, unequal authority in curriculum decision-making, and insufficient training in gender-responsive pedagogy. Collectively, these findings reveal tensions between the reproduction of gender hierarchies and efforts to negotiate religious meanings and women's participation in pesantren education. Despite administrators' initial openness to dialogue and reviewing teaching materials, the evidence remains insufficient to establish changes in curriculum policies or institutional structures.

Gender equality in pesantren education concerns women's access to knowledge, recognition, and decision-making authority. Mala et al. (2025) highlighted barriers to gender mainstreaming in pesantren policies, while Batmang et al. (2023) identified gender stereotypes in textbooks. Consistent with these studies, the first finding indicates that the naturalization of women's domestic roles, normative legitimization of wives' obedience, and male dominance continue to shape female students' educational experiences. The second finding reveals alternative interpretations, discussions among female students, and administrators' initial openness to dialogue, reflecting broader debates on women's authority in Islamic education (Stack, 2020; Fatmawati, 2024; Prasmiwardana et al., 2025). However, the curricular and institutional barriers identified in the third finding suggest that aspirations for inclusive education do not necessarily translate into policy changes, consistent with concerns in institutional change research (Kuteesa et al., 2024; Walsh et al., 2025). These issues are also relevant to recognizing women as role models and expanding their leadership opportunities in social and institutional settings (Hora, 2014; Arquisola & Rentschler, 2023).

Drawing on Carspecken's (1996) critical ethnographic approach, the three findings were interpreted in terms of meanings, normative claims, interactions, and power relations within educational practices. The first finding indicates that women's domestic roles, wives' obedience, and male authority are normalized through the curriculum and governance in everyday pesantren practices. These processes can be understood through habitus and masculine domination (Bourdieu, 2001), the construction of gender discourse (Lazar, 2007), and power relations in leadership (Kark & Buengeler, 2024). The second finding suggests that

alternative interpretations and female students' discussions represent forms of micro-level resistance (Haugaard, 2022) and negotiated agency (Kabeer, 1999). Administrators' initial openness creates opportunities for dialogue, but limited representation of women, difficulties adapting teaching materials, unequal authority over the curriculum, and insufficient educator training constrain potential follow-up actions. These institutional barriers can be interpreted through the lens of organizational inequality theory (Acker, 2006). Pesantren can therefore be understood as arenas of contested meanings and power relations (Nisa'u & Karsidi, 2025). Nevertheless, alternative interpretations and initial openness to dialogue do not establish structural transformation.

A central lesson of this study is that changes in understanding do not necessarily produce structural change. Female students' discussions and alternative religious interpretations demonstrate a capacity for reflection in questioning inherited norms, consistent with research on micro-level resistance (Vu & Pham, 2022). However, the identified curricular and institutional barriers highlight the importance of institutional support in enabling such agency to influence decision-making. Critical perspectives on knowledge authority in Islamic education (Rahman, 2017; Srimulyani, 2007) emphasize the need to distinguish religious teachings from socially constructed interpretations that may change over time. These insights underscore the importance of dialogical engagement with classical Islamic texts (Nasution et al., 2025), stronger representation of women in learning resources (Fitriyah & Rahman, 2024), and critical pedagogy training (Martínez-Valdivia et al., 2024). For pesantren administrators, initial openness to dialogue should translate into collaborative evaluation mechanisms that support sustained follow-up actions.

Compared with previous studies, this research reveals both similarities and differences in analytical focus. Batmang et al. (2023) and Farida and Kasdi (2021) examined representations or interpretations of women's roles in teaching materials and classical texts, whereas this study connects these issues to the distribution of authority in curriculum decision-making. Akbar (2023) highlighted the normalization of gender-biased regulations, while Nawangsari (2007) examined educational segregation. Both provide institutional context, although spatial segregation was not examined in this study. Bella et al. (2026) explored women's negotiation within patriarchal structures, intersecting with the present findings on female students' discussions as spaces for negotiating gender relations. This study contributes by integrating the reproduction of gender norms, negotiated agency, and administrators' initial responses within a single analytical framework. Drawing on research into barriers to women's leadership (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023), habitus reproduction (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014), and gender contestation (Nurfai, 2022), this framework is proposed as a conceptual proposition requiring further empirical examination.

Based on the three findings, policy recommendations focus on strengthening pesantren curricula and governance. First, religious teaching materials that naturalize women's domestic roles or justify gender inequality should be reviewed while incorporating women's contributions and intellectual perspectives in Islamic history and scholarship. Second, continuous training should be provided to male and female educators in gender-responsive pedagogy, dialogical teaching, and the development of inclusive instructional materials. Third, female teachers' and students' participation in educational evaluation and curriculum decision-making should be expanded to reduce unequal authority. Fourth, dialogue forums should facilitate exchanges of perspectives, alternative religious interpretations, and more equitable access to knowledge, potentially supported by digital learning platforms. Fifth, participatory evaluation mechanisms involving female students, educators, and administrators should be established to follow up on initial openness to dialogue and material

review. These measures are expected to connect negotiated agency with sustained improvements in curriculum and governance, guided by implementation indicators jointly agreed upon by female students, educators, and administrators.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that gender relations in pesantren education are shaped by tensions between the reproduction of gender hierarchies and internal efforts to negotiate them. Restrictions on women's roles are legitimized through teaching materials, norms of wives' obedience, and male dominance in institutional governance. Meanwhile, alternative religious interpretations and discussions among female students create opportunities to question these restrictions, and administrators' initial openness to dialogue accompanies them. However, such negotiation faces barriers including limited representation of women, difficulties adapting teaching materials, unequal authority in curriculum decision-making, and insufficient educator training. The central pattern reveals women's agency operating within institutional structures that constrain their participation. Thus, shifts in interpretation and openness to dialogue indicate possibilities for reform but do not establish changes in curriculum policies or institutional structures. These findings underscore the importance of distinguishing emerging critical awareness from institutional changes that enable more equitable participation for women.

Theoretically, this study advances understanding of the reproduction of gender inequality and agency by connecting the normalization of gender norms, the negotiation of meaning, and the distribution of authority in pesantren education. Its contribution lies in the conceptual proposition that opportunities for negotiation must be examined alongside institutional conditions that enable or constrain subsequent action. This proposition extends existing theoretical perspectives to the pesantren context and requires further empirical examination. In practice, the findings provide a basis for reviewing teaching materials, strengthening women's representation, enhancing gender-responsive pedagogical training, and expanding the involvement of female teachers and students in curriculum evaluation and decision-making. Dialogue forums and participatory evaluation can support follow-up actions arising from administrators' initial openness through jointly agreed-upon, implemented, and continuously reviewed improvement measures.

This study is limited to a single pesantren; therefore, its findings cannot be directly generalized to all pesantren. The evidence is also insufficient to establish whether alternative interpretations, female students' discussions, and administrators' openness lead to sustained changes in institutional policies, the distribution of authority, or teaching practices. Future research could adopt longitudinal approaches to examine follow-up dialogue, curriculum revisions, and changes in women's participation. Comparative studies across pesantren are needed to explore contextual variations and assess the transferability of findings to institutions with different characteristics. Furthermore, participatory evaluations of educator training and teaching material development could assess the implementation of recommendations and examine the conceptual proposition concerning the relationships among negotiated agency, institutional support, and educational reform in pesantren.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no financial, professional, or personal interests that could give rise to conflicts of interest in this study.

## DECLARATION OF AI USE

No artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used at any stage of the research process or manuscript preparation. Accordingly, all findings, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions are entirely the authors' own work and responsibility.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

**Ach Barocky Zaimina**: Conceptualization; Formal Analysis; Methodology, Investigation, Project Administration; Writing-original draft. **Asnawan**: Conceptualization; Formal Analysis; Resources and Investigation. **Anuwat Sohwang**: Formal Analysis; Visualization and Writing-review & editing.

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