

# Gender Education in Pesantren: A Study at Pesantren Al Asy'ariyyah

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## Abstract

*This study aims to analyze the practice of gender education at Pesantren Al-Asy'ariyyah and to examine how the authority of the kiai shapes santri perspectives on gender relations. This research employs a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews and participatory observation as data collection methods, and applies Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework for analysis. The findings indicate that gender education at Pesantren Al-Asy'ariyyah is not formally articulated through a structured curriculum or specific subjects. Nevertheless, values of gender equality and justice are embedded in the everyday practices of pesantren life, particularly through the role modeling demonstrated by the kiai and nyai and through daily social relations within the pesantren. These practices function as a form of cultural transmission that contributes to the formation of santri habitus and their understanding of gender relations.*

**Keywords:** gender, pesantren, education

## 1. Introduction

Gender issues remain a significant concern within Indonesian society. Women often do not receive the same opportunities as men, resulting in marginalization, subordination, and even gender-based violence (Fakih n.d.). Gender inequality in society is reinforced by local cultural norms and is reproduced through social institutions, including educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) (Burhanuddin 2015).

*Pesantren* are among the oldest educational institutions in Indonesia and have produced many influential social figures. Graduates of *pesantren* are commonly known as *kiai* or *nyai*, who are regarded as possessing high levels of religious knowledge and moral authority. Owing to this authority, the broader community often follows the guidance (*dawuh*) of *kiai* and *nyai* in various aspects of social and religious life (Prasetiawan and Lis 2019).

*Pesantren* have historically played a significant role in Indonesian society. Beyond their contribution to the struggle against colonialism and the preservation of national unity, *pesantren* continue to hold substantial influence in contemporary Indonesia. During political periods, for instance, *pesantren* are frequently visited by political actors seeking public support, indicating the strong social and symbolic power these institutions possess within society.

In addition, *pesantren* play a crucial role in shaping the character, moral values, and social perspectives of their students (*santri*). As educational spaces, *pesantren* function as arenas where cultural values and social relations are negotiated, including the construction of gender roles. Consequently, the perspectives of *kiai* and *nyai* regarding gender issues significantly influence how *santri* develop their understanding of gender relations, including notions of justice, equality, and

power relations within society.

Gender discourses that develop within *pesantren* often give rise to gender-biased understandings. These biases stem not only from patriarchal cultural contexts but also from traditional interpretive texts studied in *pesantren*. Gender-biased knowledge that contradicts the universal ethical values of Islam is transmitted through educational institutions such as schools, madrasas, and *pesantren* (Amin 2019).

Teaching in *pesantren* relies heavily on classical Islamic texts, commonly referred to as *kitab kuning*, which include works on Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and Hadith. Some interpretations found within these texts continue to reflect gender bias. Such interpretations are inconsistent with Islamic principles of justice, public welfare (*maslahah*), and respect for human dignity, both for men and women. Nevertheless, gender issues within *pesantren* are often treated as settled or final, and therefore not subject to critical re-examination, despite the growing body of contemporary Muslim scholarship that has highlighted methodological flaws and interpretive limitations within traditional gender understandings (Fauzi and Zebua 2020).

Within this context, gender education in *pesantren* does not always emerge in normative or formal forms, but rather through cultural and relational educational processes. As discourses on gender equality continue to develop, *pesantren* are increasingly challenged to transform their educational paradigms without losing their institutional identity. The absence of a formal gender education curriculum does not necessarily indicate the absence of gender education itself. Values of gender equality are often internalized through daily practices, attitudes, and the exemplary conduct demonstrated by *kiai* and *nyai*, which function as primary learning media for shaping ethical values and egalitarian human relations.

Research on gender issues in *pesantren*-based education has been widely conducted. A study by Farichatul Maftuchah et al. shows that the level of gender awareness and sensitivity among *pesantren* figures has a significant influence on the *pesantren* environment. The study also reveals that values of gender justice are often reflected in attitudes, language, and patterns of interaction between *pesantren* leaders and students (Maftuchah 2023). These findings resonate with the context of *Pesantren Al-Asy'ariyyah*, where gender education is not formulated through formal or structured programs, but is instead embedded in everyday values and interaction patterns between the *kiai* and the *santri*.

Research on gender in *pesantren* has also been conducted by Yuliatin, who examines gender relations in *Salafiyah pesantren*. The findings indicate that men tend to have broader social roles than women, and religious authority is more strongly attached to male figures. Patterns of relations between men and women are shaped by patriarchal social and cultural structures. As a social arena that reproduces religious knowledge, the *pesantren* plays an important role in sustaining and reinforcing these relational patterns. This study provides significant insight into how gender relations are constructed and practiced within *pesantren* life (Yuliatin 2019).

Studies on gender education have also been contributed by Mansour Fakhri, who argues that gender inequality is a social construction reproduced through culture and educational institutions (Fakhri n.d.). Meanwhile, in the context of *pesantren* studies, Zamakhsyari Dhofier shows that the *kiai* holds a central authority in transmitting religious and social values through everyday practices and exemplary conduct (Dhofier 2011).

Based on this background, this study aims to examine how gender education operates within

*pesantren* in the absence of formal conceptual frameworks. This qualitative research was conducted at Pesantren Al-Asy'ariyyah, focusing on how gender education is practiced through everyday interactions, social relations, and forms of role modeling that facilitate the internalization of gender equality values. Pesantren Al-Asy'ariyyah was selected due to its historical significance as one of the oldest *pesantren* in Indonesia, founded in 1831 by K.H. Muntaha bin Nida Muhammad. Under the leadership of K.H. Muntaha, Al-Asy'ariyyah has developed into a more transformative *pesantren*. This study is expected to contribute to scholarly discussions on *pesantren* as spaces for both the reproduction and transformation of gender knowledge within the tradition of Islamic education.

## 2. Conceptual Framework of gender in Pesantren

The term *gender* is often conflated with *sex*, although the two refer to distinct concepts (Echols and Shadily 2014). While *sex* denotes biological differences between men and women, *gender* refers to socially and culturally constructed distinctions. According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, gender concerns differences between men and women in terms of values and patterns of behavior. Similarly, the *Women's Studies Encyclopedia* defines gender as a cultural concept that differentiates men and women in relation to roles, behaviors, mentalities, and characteristics shaped within society (Suhra 2013). Hilary M. Lips, in *Sex and Gender: An Introduction*, describes gender as culturally constructed expectations imposed on men and women (Lips 2020). In line with this view, sociologist H.T. Wilson conceptualizes gender as a framework for understanding how cultural factors and collective social life shape distinctions between men and women (Suhra 2013).

From these perspectives, gender can be understood as a system of role differentiation between men and women that is formed through social and cultural structures. Gender is therefore not inherent or biologically determined, but rather produced and sustained by social norms, cultural values, and historical contexts. As such, gender emphasizes culturally defined notions of masculinity and femininity, which vary across societies. Gender differences are constructed, socialized, and continually reinforced through social and cultural processes (Suhra 2013).

Because gender roles are socially constructed, they cannot be regarded as divinely ordained or biologically fixed. This distinguishes gender from biological sex, which is commonly understood as a natural condition (Faridah 2018). Characteristics often associated with men and women—such as men being perceived as strong, rational, and emotionally restrained, and women as gentle, emotional, and nurturing—are not innate attributes but the result of long-standing social constructions. When gender roles are naturalized and treated as immutable, unequal relations between men and women tend to be normalized and accepted as legitimate.

In this context, gender education plays a crucial role. Gender education seeks to foster awareness of equitable and just relations between men and women by encouraging critical reflection on socially constructed roles and hierarchies. It aims not only to transmit knowledge but also to shape attitudes, values, and ethical orientations that support gender equality and justice. Through gender education, individuals are invited to recognize that culturally constructed gender roles are open to critique, reinterpretation, and transformation.

The implementation of gender education cannot be separated from the socio-cultural context in which it takes place. Each educational institution operates within particular intellectual traditions and employs specific modes of value transmission, including those related to gender relations. In Islamic educational institutions, especially pesantren, gender education is closely intertwined with

classical Islamic scholarly traditions such as Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), hadith, and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which function as primary references in shaping religious understanding and daily practices among members of the pesantren community.

Within the pesantren tradition, understandings of gender roles are largely influenced by classical Islamic texts used in teaching and learning activities. Some of these texts were produced in socio-historical contexts deeply shaped by patriarchal cultural structures, which may give rise to gender-biased interpretations (Faridah 2018). These classical texts are often regarded as authoritative and final, leaving limited space for critical engagement or reinterpretation. Consequently, gender bias in pesantren does not stem solely from the religious texts themselves, but also from the ways in which these texts are interpreted, taught, and reproduced within pesantren educational practices (Musarrofa 2019).

In this process, the *kiai* occupies a central role. The *kiai* holds significant authority in interpreting, teaching, and legitimizing the classical texts used in pesantren. Beyond functioning as a transmitter of religious knowledge, the *kiai* serves as a figure of moral and symbolic authority whose interpretations shape religious meaning and ethical norms within the pesantren community. As a result, the knowledge received by *santri* is often perceived as final and unquestionable. This condition allows gender-biased understandings of social relations to persist through the *kiai's* dominant role in reproducing and legitimizing particular interpretations within the pesantren educational system (Nauval 2024).

### **3. Transmission of Gender Values in Pesantren Life**

In pesantren life, the transmission of gender values is closely intertwined with authority and everyday social relations. The role of the *kiai* and *nyai* as central figures in pesantren shapes how values are practiced, observed, and internalized by *santri*. Therefore, discussions on gender transmission cannot be separated from questions of authority and *santri* perspectives within pesantren life.

Gender education at Pesantren Al-Asy'ariyyah is not implemented through a formal curriculum or general subjects that explicitly address gender issues (Bourdieu and Bourdieu 1977). Nevertheless, values of gender justice and equality are present and transmitted to *santri* through everyday practices within the pesantren, shaping the habitus of the *santri* themselves. In this sense, the pesantren functions as a space of cultural education, where values of equality are learned not only through formal texts, but also through daily habits, behaviors, and the shared awareness of pesantren actors (Muqarramah Sulaiman Kurdi 2023).

The transmission of gender equality values can be observed in various aspects of pesantren life, particularly in the availability of participatory spaces for both male and female *santri*. Several studies on Islamic education indicate that equal access for male and female *santri* to non-formal activities, such as extracurricular programs and student organizations, plays a significant role in shaping *santri* perspectives on the social roles of men and women. This is consistent with the author's findings, which show that the involvement of both male and female *santri* in pesantren activities and organizational structures creates a space for the everyday negotiation and practice of gender roles.

At Pesantren Al-Asy'ariyyah, the transmission of equality values takes place through participatory spaces that are open to both male and female *santri*. *Santri* are given equal opportunities to actively engage in non-formal and extracurricular activities. Extracurricular

programs are attended by both male and female santri, including tilawah, calligraphy, language activities, and pencak silat. In addition, gender equality is also reflected in the organizational structure of the pesantren, where male and female santri hold comparable roles and responsibilities in managing pesantren activities.

Furthermore, values of gender equality are transmitted through the everyday relationship between the kiai and the nyai. The relationships observed within the pesantren environment demonstrate a relatively egalitarian and mutually respectful division of roles between the kiai and the nyai, both in pesantren management and in decision-making processes. This relationship serves as an important form of role modeling for santri and becomes an effective medium of learning, as values of gender equality are not taught normatively but are embodied in daily practices that are continuously observed and experienced by santri.

This pattern of value transmission through role modeling is also evident in the empirical findings from Pesantren Al-Asy'ariyyah. Based on the findings of this study at Pesantren Al-Asy'ariyyah, gender education is not found in the form of a formal curriculum or structured learning program within the pesantren. Nevertheless, values of gender equality are present and learned by santri through everyday practices, particularly through the relationships and role modeling demonstrated by the kiai and the nyai in daily pesantren life.

In everyday pesantren activities, the relationship between the kiai and the nyai is reflected in a flexible and non-rigid division of roles. The nyai is not limited to the domestic sphere of the pesantren, but is actively involved in educational activities and decision-making processes. At Pesantren Al-Asy'ariyyah, the nyai not only teaches the Qur'an but also teaches classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*). This practice provides new perspectives for santri, both in terms of religious knowledge and lived experience.

One female santri stated that she never received specific lessons on gender education during her time at the pesantren. However, through daily interactions, she observed that the relationship between the kiai and the nyai was based on equality (Interview, 25 October 2025). A male santri expressed a similar view, noting that the nyai at Pesantren Al-Asy'ariyyah is actively involved in teaching, just as the kiai is (Interview, 10 November 2025). These experiences contribute to shaping santri perspectives that relationships between men and women are built upon mutual respect and appreciation.

Gender education practices at Pesantren Al-Asy'ariyyah are also evident in the organization of extracurricular activities and the structure of student governance. Extracurricular activities for male and female santri are generally the same, allowing all santri to have equal access to the development of their interests and talents, such as calligraphy, foreign languages, public speaking, and Qur'anic recitation. One santri explained that activities in the pesantren are not differentiated between male and female santri, both in extracurricular programs and student organizations, except for certain activities that follow pesantren policies, such as football.

Nevertheless, female santri continue to have access to physically demanding activities, such as pencak silat, which are open to both male and female santri (Interview, 10 November 2025). This practice indicates that the pesantren does not restrict participation in physical activities based solely on gender, but instead provides space for santri to develop according to their interests and capacities.

Within the student governance structure, both male and female santri have their own organizational bodies with relatively equal divisions of roles and responsibilities. One santri

emphasized that although male and female student organizations are administratively separate, both carry comparable responsibilities in managing pesantren activities. In addition, male and female santri are accustomed to engaging in joint discussions and deliberations, both in program planning and in evaluating pesantren activities. This demonstrates the pesantren's effort to create relational spaces that support gender equality.

The discussion above shows that gender education at Pesantren Al-Asy'ariyyah does not take the form of a formal curriculum, but is embedded in the everyday practices of pesantren life through social relations and the role modeling of the kiai and the nyai. These repeated practices of interaction and example function as a process of value education that is internalized by santri and shapes their habitus. (Harker 2009) In this context, the authority of the kiai as a central figure in the pesantren plays a crucial role in shaping santri learning experiences, whether through pesantren management, the division of roles and responsibilities, or the provision of relatively equal participatory spaces for male and female santri.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study shows that gender education in Al-Asy'ariyyah Islamic boarding school does not appear in the form of a formal curriculum or structured learning programs. Nevertheless, values of gender justice and equality are continuously present and transmitted through the daily practices of pesantren life, particularly through the relationships and role modeling demonstrated by the kiai and nyai. The authority of the kiai and nyai functions not only as a source of religious knowledge, but also as a moral and symbolic reference that shapes students' perspectives on relations between men and women.

These findings emphasize that the pesantren serves as a space of cultural education in which value learning takes place implicitly through shared life experiences and social relations. Gender education in this context does not necessarily require explicit conceptual formulations or standardized curricula, but rather grows through everyday practices that are fair, participatory, and based on mutual respect. Thus, the pesantren functions not only as a site for the reproduction of religious knowledge, but also holds significant potential as a space for the transformation of gender justice values within the tradition of Islamic education.

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