Negotiating Masculinity in Muslim Families: A Study of the Fathers Collecting Report Cards Movement

Dian Novita Sari
Universitas Islam Negeri K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, Indonesia
Email: diansaripkl1@gmail.com

Fiqih Zeem
Universitas Islam Negeri K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, Indonesia
Email: diansaripkl1@gmail.com

Abstract

In patriarchal family structures, fathers have traditionally been positioned primarily as breadwinners and economic providers, while childcare and children's education have largely been associated with mothers. This construction is increasingly being renegotiated through the Gerakan Ayah Mengambil Rapor (GEMAR), or the "Fathers Collecting Report Cards" Movement, which encourages fathers to participate directly in their children's educational activities. GEMAR transforms collecting report cards from a routine administrative activity into a space where traditional constructions of masculinity encounter emerging expectations of paternal involvement in parenting. This study aims to analyze how GEMAR functions as an arena for negotiating masculinity and transforming gender relations within Muslim families. Employing a sociological approach and qualitative method, this study draws on R.W. Connell's theory of masculinity, particularly the concept of hegemonic masculinity, to examine changing meanings and divisions of paternal roles within the family. The findings indicate that fathers' participation in GEMAR broadens the meaning of masculinity by incorporating greater involvement in children's education and caregiving. Such involvement creates opportunities for more collaborative relationships between fathers and mothers. However, this shift does not automatically eliminate traditional masculine constructions or lead to an equal redistribution of domestic responsibilities. Therefore, GEMAR illustrates that masculinity is negotiated through changing practices and social discourse, while the transformation of gender relations within Muslim families remains gradual and closely connected to existing family structures.

Keywords: negotiation of masculinity, gender relations, muslim families.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the discourse on masculinity has shifted from a conception that emphasized dominance, strength, authority, and control toward a more open understanding of men's expressions of affection, care, and emotional involvement in social life (Steve AJ & Preetha R, 2026). Whereas masculinity was previously constructed primarily through men's

roles as leaders, breadwinners, and figures of authority within the family, it is now increasingly understood through men's ability to show affection, build emotional closeness, and actively participate in child-rearing. This shift indicates that masculinity is not a fixed identity but rather a social construct that is continually negotiated in line with changing values, gender relations, and the dynamics of family life (Li Y, et al., 2022).

Darwin (1999) argues that patriarchy is a form of hegemonic ideology that justifies the domination of one group over another. In this social order, the interests of the dominant group—namely men—are often regarded as representing the common good and are taken for granted as the norm. Masculinity and femininity are not fixed, singular biological categories, but rather social stereotypes constructed based on the level of civilization, social class, and the qualitative structure of intergender relationships. In patriarchal societies, the masculine position is reinforced through domination over women, both in the domestic and public spheres. Nevertheless, this system also creates unique challenges for men themselves; therefore, it is important to understand how masculinity is socially and relationally constructed so that the gender discourse can proceed in a more balanced manner.

The Fathers Collecting Report Cards Movement (GEMAR) serves as a crucial space for social transformation aimed at challenging the long-entrenched patriarchal family structure, in which fathers have traditionally been confined to the role of breadwinners while child-rearing and oversight of children's education have been entirely entrusted to mothers (Ilyasa et al., 2025). Within the sociocultural and religious context of Pekalongan society, this rigid gender division of labor has long been normalized, making interactions with the school, such as Collecting report cards tasks that are naturally assumed to belong to mothers. GEMAR directly challenges these conventional boundaries by transforming routine administrative activities into spaces for active fatherly involvement. By encouraging fathers to be physically present in the educational sphere, this movement breaks down traditional notions of fathers' social roles while creating a dynamic arena where masculine identities are tested, negotiated, and reinterpreted within Muslim households.

The social urgency of this movement is clearly reinforced by national empirical data showing that 25.8% of families in Indonesia experience "fatherlessness" a condition characterized by a lack of emotional and physical involvement by a father figure in domestic life (BKKBN, 2024). In response to this systemic issue, the government has provided official support through Circular Letter No. 14 of 2025 issued by the Minister of Population and Family Development / Head of BKKBN. This regulation explicitly urges fathers at all educational levels to collect their children's report cards in person, supported by recommendations for flexible work schedules from their employers. At the local level, such as in Pekalongan, this state-backed initiative serves as a vital empirical foundation for observing how regulatory incentives intersect with local patriarchal norms, while also acting as a catalyst for the transformation of gender relations and collaborative parenting. This study analyzes how GEMAR functions as an arena for negotiating masculinity and transforming gender relations in Muslim families. It addresses four key research questions: (RQ1) How are typologies of paternal involvement constructed in the domestic division of labor? (RQ2) How do fathers interpret and negotiate cultural awkwardness and masculinity expectations at school? (RQ3) How do public validation and regulatory support (BKKBN Circular No. 14/2025) influence gender relations? (RQ4) How does Islamic family law assess this practice, and what are its practical implications for parenting policies?

Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach from a sociology-of-gender perspective, using an exploratory case study design. This design was chosen to explore in depth how public policy discourse (the Fathers Collect Report Cards Movement, or GEMAR) interacts with the socio-religious realities of Muslim families in Pekalongan as they negotiate masculine identity. The analysis focuses on the interpretation of meaning (verstehen) regarding the subjective experiences of fathers, the responses of school institutions, and the dynamics of gender relations within the family.

Source Identification and Selection

The selection of literature sources for this study was conducted using a purposive approach by grouping search keywords in reputable journal databases (such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and SINTA) into three main clusters, namely: (1) the Father Involvement Cluster, with the keywords paternal involvement, fathering in education, and school engagement; (2) The Masculinity Theory Cluster, with the keywords: hegemonic masculinity, caring masculinities, and negotiating masculinity; and (3) The Socio-Religious Context Cluster, with the keywords: Indonesian Muslim family, qawwamah reinterpretation, and family policy. The inclusion criteria for sources emphasize journal articles published within the last ten years (2019–2026) to ensure novelty and theoretical relevance.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through thematic grouping of the results of depth interviews and document analysis. The data were analyzed deductively using R.W. Connell's theoretical framework of masculinity *(hegemonic, transitional, and caring masculinities)* as well as the concept of mutuality *(mubadalah),* and inductively to capture specific phenomena in the field, such as fathers' social awkwardness at school and their expressions on social media. These findings were then synthesized (Thomas & Harden, 2008) into three main themes: a typology of father involvement, spaces for negotiating masculinity in the school environment, and forms of public validation and regulation. The theoretical framework is presented in depth in the Discussion section, while the Results section focuses on presenting the empirical findings.

Credibility and Ethics

The credibility of the research was maintained through data triangulation by cross-checking the fathers' interview narratives with explanations from school officials and the official document, BKKBN Circular Letter No. 14 Year 2025. From an ethical standpoint, all participants provided informed consent before the data collection process began. To ensure confidentiality and privacy, the fathers' identities were disguised using the anonymous codes Informant 1 through Informant 4, while the school representative was referred to as the "Education Practitioner." All data obtained was fully utilized for the purpose of developing this article.

Results

Typologies of Father Involvement in the Division of Domestic Roles

Field findings reveal variations in patterns of daily role division within families. Active father involvement has been shown to fulfill three basic psychological Needs for autonomy, competence, and emotional connection, which enhance motivation, emotional regulation, and family well-being (Song et al., 2025). However, this involvement is not homogeneous; rather, it forms a spectrum of typologies influenced by the negotiation of gender norms and perceptions of domestic leadership (Gebresilasi BM et al., 2025).

In the traditional strict group, differences in the typology of fatherly involvement are clearly evident in the contrast between Informant 1 and Informant 2. In the traditional strict group, Informant 1 (Noyontaan) adheres to a non-negotiable division of roles, focusing entirely on being the breadwinner. At the same time, child-rearing and school-related matters are left entirely to his wife. Informant 1 considers this strict pattern normal, so he has never collected report cards or been aware of the GEMAR program. In contrast, in the egalitarian participatory pattern, Informant 2 agreed on the division of domestic roles from the start of the marriage. Informant 2 consistently collected report cards and was actively involved in his children's education even before the GEMAR program was introduced, viewing a father's presence at school as a commitment to co-parenting.

Realities of Fathers' Presence at School

Transitional dynamics were evident in the experiences of Informant 3 and Informant 4, who were motivated to attend school following the launch of the GEMAR program. Both informants began adjusting their work schedules to attend their children's school activities in person. Empirically, Informant 3 and Informant 4 reported experiencing cultural awkwardness and anxiety when they first attended school. They found the report card pickup area dominated by mothers, which made them feel out of place and awkward as they were part of a *"minority of fathers"* in that setting. Despite this initial awkwardness, their presence received a very positive and enthusiastic response from their children, teachers, and immediate families which ultimately became a strong motivating factor for them to continue their involvement in subsequent events.

Table 1. *Matrix of Father Involvement, Negotiations of Masculinity, and Gender Relations*

Informants	Patterns of Involvement	Constructs of Masculinity (R.W. Connell)	Interpretation of Gender Relations (Mubadalah)	Cultural Responses
Informant 1	Minimal (School matters are entirely left to my wife)	Hegemonic Masculinity (An absolute focus on being the breadwinner; enjoying the patriarchal dividend)	Traditional Hierarchical (Earning a living is viewed as the father's sole responsibility)	Never present at school; didn't know about the GEMAR program.
Informant 2	Active and consistent (Used to picking up report cards before the GEMAR program)	Egalitarian/Caring Masculinity (Openly sharing domestic and caregiving roles)	Parent-Child Partnership (Mubadalah) (Parenting and education are shared responsibilities)	Viewing a father's presence at school as normal and a sign of commitment.

Informant 3	Traditional/Situational (Attending school because of the GEMAR initiative)	Negotiating Masculinity (Moving Beyond the Hegemonic Framework Toward Caring Masculinities)	The Process of Deconstruction (Beginning to realize the importance of a father's role beyond providing financial support)	Feeling awkward and anxious about being the "only dad" among all the moms.
Informant 4	Transitional / Situational (Driven by school regulations and the child's response)	Aligning public expectations with children's needs	Understanding physical presence at school as a form of trust	It felt a bit strange at first, but encouraged by the positive responses from the students and teachers.

Institutional Setting and Public Policy Support

From an institutional perspective, education practitioners *(school officials/teachers)* acting as facilitators actively encourage fathers' attendance at report card distribution events to break down gender barriers in school activities. School officials have confirmed an increase in fathers' participation, as well as the positive impact of a father's presence on students' development and motivation to learn. This initiative is formally supported by BKKBN Circular Letter No. 14 of 2025, which positions paternal involvement as a strategy for building family resilience within the formal education system.

Discussion

Paternal Involvement and Space for Participation at School

Paternal involvement is understood as the manifestation of a father's role through concrete actions to support his child's growth and development (DeMartini SE et al., 2022). In the traditional perspective, fathers are positioned as breadwinners and protectors, however, psychological research indicates that a father's role is far broader (McAdoo, 1993; Lamb et al., 1987). Asy'ari and Ariyanto have articulated this in the six dimensions of CRITSM (communication, responsibility, interaction, teaching, social competence, and supervision).

Fathers are no longer just complementary figures but co-parents who contribute directly to children's well-being, academic achievement, and the development of their moral character and self-identity (Nursyahbani et al., 2025; Forehand, 1987). In the realm of formal education, parental involvement, such as asking teachers about a child's progress and picking up report cards, has been shown to have a positive impact on a child's readiness for school (Fauziah, Hastuti, & Yuliati, 2020), which aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory regarding the importance of synergy within a child's immediate environment.

The spectrum of paternal involvement observed in the field ranges from a complete lack of involvement in Informant 1, to independent initiative in Informant 2, to situational involvement in Informants 3 and 4, confirming theoretical perspectives on the dimensions of paternal involvement (Lamb et al., 1987; Asy'ari & Ariyanto, n.d.). The physical presence of fathers at school to collect report cards is not simply an administrative matter but a manifestation of psychological accessibility that has a positive impact on children's readiness to learn (Fauziah et al., 2020). However, the continued lack of initiative among some fathers

demonstrates that cultural barriers and structural economic demands require strong institutional intervention.

Negotiations of Masculinity and Theoretical Reflections from R.W. Connell

The Fathers Collecting Report Cards Movement (GEMAR) serves as a vital space for negotiating masculinity and transforming gender relations within Muslim families in Pekalongan. Conventionally, traditional hegemonic masculinity rigidly positions men solely as breadwinners and economic providers, while domestic affairs and children's education are left entirely to wives. In reality, substantive paternal involvement encompasses three main dimensions: direct interaction, accessibility, and full responsibility for children's development. Involvement in the domestic-educational sphere—such as attending school events and collecting report cards—has a proven positive impact on children's academic readiness as well as their cognitive and emotional development (Lamb et al., 1987; Fauziah et al., 2020; Asy'ari & Ariyanto, n.d.).

Within this framework, GEMAR acts not merely as an administrative activity, but as an arena that shifts the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity. As emphasized by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), masculinity hegemony is dynamic rather than static; thus, the physical presence of fathers in schools challenges the long-standing stereotype that education is exclusively a feminine domain (Kumari et al., 2024). This dynamic is clearly reflected in Informant 2, where school involvement stems from a shared awareness, with GEMAR reinforcing egalitarian practices already established within the household.

These dynamics can be further elaborated through several core aspects. First, Darwin (1999) explains that masculinity is a dynamic social construct, demonstrating that both masculinity and femininity are not fixed, singular biological categories. Instead, they are social stereotypes constructed and valued by society based on the level of civilization, social class, and qualitative intergender relationships. From this perspective, gender forms a graded spectrum ranging from hyper-masculine to hyper-feminine, covering personality traits, behavioral patterns, occupational choices, physical criteria, and sexual orientation (Love NS et al., 2020), which proves that masculinity is flexible and continuously open to deconstruction and reconstruction alongside social change. Second, the relational nature of masculinity in patriarchal societies is tied closely to power and the subordination of women.

As described by Darwin (1999), patriarchal social structures reinforce the masculine position through the domination of women in both domestic and public spheres. This construct legitimizes male hegemony as something *taken for granted*, creating a bias that equates masculinity with aggressiveness, rationality, physical strength, and primary decision-making authority. Aligned with this relational and cultural nature, egalitarian thought calls for a redefinition through the deconstruction and reconstruction of gender roles in two primary areas. On one hand, drawing on Darwin (1999), the redefinition of fatherhood argues that child care—long categorized rigidly as feminine—must be reconstructed as an integral component of modern masculinity (*masculine domesticity*) to achieve a balanced division of labor (Makusha T, 2024). On the other hand, a value shift from violence toward civility (*anti-violence*) demands transforming traditional stereotypes that equate strength with physical dominance or militarism, measuring male courage instead by a commitment to peace and respectful relationships.

Nevertheless, in social reality, the clash between expectations and structural conditions frequently triggers complex issues. Safa et al. (2023) explain the presence of a gap between

idealized masculinity and *lived masculinity*. Society traditionally defines ideal masculinity through primary breadwinning and financial independence; however, when structural constraints—such as statelessness or mobility restrictions—deprive men of these roles, a divide emerges, triggering a "masculinity crisis" or a state of depleted/vulnerable masculinity (Hudson S, 2024). Furthermore, this crisis relates closely to the escalation of gender-based violence (GBV). As Safa et al. (2023) note, when men lose authority in public spaces, they often respond by reasserting patriarchal dominance privately, escalating domestic violence due to an inability to meet traditional expectations. Safa et al. (2023) also highlight that these constructions of masculinity are often exploited by hegemonic institutions like the military or state apparatus; the stereotype linking men to threats renders marginalized groups more vulnerable to discrimination and physical violence. Domestically, rigid gender roles exacerbate this situation, as blind adherence to traditional norms makes men reluctant to handle household chores viewed as feminine, thereby increasing women's double burden and fueling family conflicts (Safa et al., 2023).

Ultimately, masculinity is not an absolute biological destiny, but rather a product of social and relational constructs deeply influenced by unequal power structures in patriarchal societies. When these stereotypical norms confront structural limitations, the impact not only subordinates and harms women through domestic violence, but also traps men in an identity crisis that undermines overall social harmony (Wojnicka, K., 2025).

Beyond these structural tensions, GEMAR successfully bridges the gap between *idealized masculinity* and *lived reality* (Safa et al., 2023) by fostering *caring masculinities* (Moura T, 2024), making compassion and caregiving core elements of masculine identity. The emotional experiences of Informant 3 and Informant 4—who felt awkward and perceived themselves as "minorities" among mothers while picking up report cards—are clearly understood through R.W. Connell's (1995) framework. This awkwardness illustrates a psychological-cultural clash between traditional norms and lived practice. While Informant 1 reflects the resilience of hegemonic masculinity reaping the *patriarchal dividend*, Informants 2, 3, and 4 demonstrate the process of masculinity negotiation (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) toward *caring masculinity* (Moura T, 2024). Supported by GEMAR and BKKBN Circular Letter No. 14/2025, the public sphere of the school serves as a catalyst dissolving rigid gender boundaries. Meanwhile, Informant 1 highlights a gap between normative verbal agreement on children's education and concrete action, showing how a lack of negotiation and strong traditional norms obstruct practical execution, which establishes GEMAR as an essential public policy instrument for dismantling cultural barriers.

Reconstructing Gender Relations in Muslim Families (*Mubadalah*)

In the sociological context of Muslim families in Pekalongan, this role shift finds its legitimacy through a renewal of religious understanding. In Islamic tradition, the father's role does not end with providing financial support. The Qur'an does indeed affirm the father's obligation to provide for his family's needs appropriately (QS Al-Baqarah: 233), but it also commands believers to protect themselves and their families from the fire of Hell (QS At-Tahrim: 6) and portrays the father as an educator through Luqman's counsel to his son (QS Luqman: 13–19). The hadith regarding the responsibility of every leader toward those under his leadership, including that of a man toward his family (HR. al-Bukhari no. 893; Muslim no.

1829), reinforces this dimension of responsibility. The role model of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also exemplifies warm parenting, ranging from participating in household chores (HR. al-Bukhari no. 676) to show affection toward his children and grandchildren (HR. al-Bukhari no. 5997).

Table 2. Normative Materials, Islamic Family Law, and Public Policy Frameworks on the Fathers Collect Report Cards Movement (GEMAR)

Aspect / Foundation	Legal / Textual Source	Relevance to Father Involvement (GEMAR) Practice
Primary Educator Responsibility	Q.S. At-Tahrim [66]: 6 Q.S. Luqman [31]: 13–19	Affirms that the father is the primary moral and educational pillar of the family, not merely an economic provider.
Collaborative Leadership (Qawwamun)	Q.S. An-Nisa [4]: 34; Mubadalah Principle (Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir)	Redefines qawwamun from absolute patriarchal dominance into a participatory, collaborative, and mutual leadership.
Prophetic Domestic Involvement	H.R. al-Bukhari No. 676 & No. 5997	Demonstrates that Prophet Muhammad SAW actively engaged in household chores and child-rearing, justifying caring masculinity.
Trust & Leadership Accountability	H.R. al-Bukhari No. 893 & H.R. Muslim No. 1829	Every husband/father is a leader accountable for the development and welfare of his family.
Public Policy & Family Resilience	BKKBN Head Circular Letter No. 14 of 2025	Provides formal legitimacy and guidelines for workplace flexible hours so fathers can attend school events directly.

Although the concept of q*awwamun* (QS. An-Nisa: 34) is often reduced to perpetuating the husband's absolute dominance in the public sphere, a progressive interpretation based on reciprocity *(mubadalah)* emphasizes that family leadership is collaborative and participatory (Wadud, 1999; Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, 2019). The prophetic example that breaks down domestic barriers (HR. al-Bukhari) reinforces the argument that GEMAR is a form of putting into practice the father's moral responsibility as the primary educator. Thus, this movement has succeeded in restoring harmony in gender relations by positioning fathers and mothers as equal partners in child-rearing.

Therefore, the active involvement of fathers in Pekalongan in the report card pickup process has successfully deconstructed the public-domestic role dichotomy, reduced the double burden on mothers, and strengthened the principle of reciprocity *(mubadalah)*. This shift aligns with Islamic teachings that view child-rearing as a shared responsibility. Through these dynamics, the GEMAR program has proven to be a crucial catalyst in restoring harmony in gender relations, where fathers and mothers are positioned as equal partners in raising children.

Based on the data presented above, fathers' involvement in the GEMAR program in Pekalongan reflects a dialectic between social structures, cultural constructions of masculinity, and religious values. A comparative mapping of the four informants is summarized in Table 1 below:

Based on the data mapping in Table 1 above, there are very clear gradations and typological variations in how fathers in Pekalongan respond to the dynamics of masculinity negotiations and the transformation of gender relations. These findings indicate that the transition from patriarchal patterns toward collaborative parenting is not a uniform process, but rather proceeds dialectically and is influenced by levels of awareness, external regulatory pressures, and cultural barriers at the local level.

The findings recommend the establishment of a sustainable parenting guidance module named the 'Co-Parenting & Caring Masculinity Module' for prospective couples and Muslim families. This module comprises five key components: (1) Gender literacy and deconstruction of patriarchal roles based on *mubadalah*; (2) Family communication and domestic role-sharing training; (3) Cultivating *caring masculinities* to alleviate fathers' cultural awkwardness at school; (4) Internalizing prophetic parenting values; and (5) Advocating for family-friendly workplace policies.

Conclusion

This study confirms that the construction of masculinity in Muslim families is fluid and continuously negotiated (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Consistent paternal involvement exemplifies *caring masculinities* (Moura T, 2024), whereas structural barriers and the *patriarchal dividend* continue to constrain certain groups (Informant 1). The "cultural awkwardness" experienced by fathers at school highlights the gap between *idealized masculinity* and *lived reality* (Safa et al., 2023), which is effectively bridged by public policy support through BKKBN Circular Letter No. 14 of 2025. From an Islamic family law perspective, this shift gains theological legitimacy through the reinterpretation of *qawwamun* based on *mubadalah* (Wadud, 1999; Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, 2019) and prophetic traditions (HR. al-Bukhari). Despite methodological limitations—such as a localized sample and potential *social desirability bias*—the Fathers Collect Report Cards Movement (GEMAR) demonstrates that masculinity negotiation is a gradual process. Practically, this study recommends integrating collaborative parenting (*co-parenting*) modules into premarital guidance programs to reduce the double burden on mothers and strengthen family resilience.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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