

## ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN CRISIS: CHALLENGING ABSOLUTE POWER BEHIND THE WALLS OF ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS

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### ABSTRAK

Fenomena pelecehan seksual yang terjadi di sejumlah pesantren di Indonesia mengungkap krisis moral yang serius dalam institusi pendidikan Islam. Kasus-kasus kekerasan seksual oleh oknum kyai, pengasuh, maupun santri senior menunjukkan adanya relasi kuasa yang tidak seimbang dan budaya diam yang mengakar kuat di balik tembok lembaga pesantren. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana kekuasaan absolut dalam struktur pendidikan pesantren dapat membuka ruang bagi penyimpangan moral, serta bagaimana seharusnya nilai-nilai dasar pendidikan Islam—seperti amanah, keadilan, dan penghormatan terhadap martabat manusia—dijadikan landasan dalam membenahi sistem yang ada. Melalui studi kualitatif berbasis literatur dan kajian kasus, artikel ini menyoroti kelemahan dalam mekanisme kontrol internal pesantren, minimnya regulasi negara, serta pentingnya reformasi kelembagaan yang berpihak pada perlindungan santri. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa revitalisasi pendidikan Islam harus dimulai dari dekonstruksi figur kyai sebagai otoritas mutlak dan pembentukan sistem yang transparan, adil, dan berorientasi pada akhlak. Artikel ini merekomendasikan pendekatan pendidikan Islam yang kritis dan transformatif sebagai solusi jangka panjang atas krisis yang sedang berlangsung.

**Kata kunci:** pendidikan Islam, pesantren, pelecehan seksual, kekuasaan absolut, reformasi etika

### ABSTRACT

*The phenomenon of sexual harassment in several pesantren in Indonesia reveals a serious moral crisis within Islamic educational institutions. Cases of sexual violence perpetrated by unscrupulous kyai, caregivers, and senior santri demonstrate the existence of imbalanced power dynamics and a deeply rooted culture of silence within pesantren institutions. This study aims to analyze how absolute power in pesantren educational structures can create opportunities for moral deviations and how basic Islamic educational values, such as trustworthiness, justice, and respect for human dignity, can serve as a*

*foundation for improving the existing system. Through literature-based qualitative studies and case studies, this article highlights weaknesses in pesantren internal control mechanisms and the lack of state regulation. It also emphasizes the importance of institutional reforms that favor the protection of santri. The findings demonstrate that revitalizing Islamic education requires deconstructing the kyai's absolute authority and establishing a transparent, fair, and morally oriented system. The article recommends a critical and transformative approach to Islamic education as a long-term solution to the ongoing crisis.*

**Keywords:** *Islamic education, pesantren, sexual harassment, absolute power, ethical reformation*

## INTRODUCTION

Islamic education has been seen as a moral fortress for the ummah, a place to instill the values of monotheism, morals, and manners in forming a generation of faith and piety. However, the rampant cases of sexual harassment in the pesantren environment slap the face of Islamic education itself. When institutions that are idealized as sacred spaces become an arena for sexual violence, what needs to be reviewed is not only the behavior of the perpetrators, but also the power structure that underpins the system.

From the perspective of Islamic educational psychology, sexual violence can be read as a form of betrayal of the trust of knowledge, and contrary to maqashid al-shari'ah, especially in terms of safeguarding one's soul (*hifz al-nafs*) and maintaining honor (*hifz al-'irdh*). The violation of both shows that there is a spiritual void in the system that should be rooted in the morals of the Prophet.

A study from Komnas Perempuan (2022) states that most victims of sexual violence in religious institutions experience long-term trauma, spiritual guilt, and social pressure because they are considered to defame Islamic boarding schools. This condition reinforces the importance of a psychological approach based on Islamic values in responding to and preventing similar cases.

Cases of sexual violence in Islamic boarding schools show a recurring pattern: the perpetrator is an influential figure such as a kyai, caregiver, or senior ustadz; victims tend to be minors; and the environment tends to close itself off from criticism. Absolute power that is not balanced by mechanisms of control,

transparency, and ethical awareness creates a quiet space where violence repeats without resistance. In this context, pesantren not only fail to protect students, but also reproduce a culture of silence and blind obedience. In the realm of the sociology of education, Michel Foucault (1977) explained that power in institutions is not only repressive, but also productive—shaping ways of thinking, submitting, and being silent. In the context of pesantren, the figure of kyai or caregiver is a symbol of absolute power that is rarely questioned. The relationship between teacher and student is not only pedagogical, but also sacred, so that when deviations occur, the victim tends to find it difficult to resist.

Based on data from the Indonesian Ministry of Religion (2022), there are more than 36,000 active Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia with the number of students exceeding 5 million people. This makes the pesantren one of the most influential Islamic educational institutions in the Muslim world. However, behind its great contribution, the Islamic boarding school system in Indonesia also faces serious challenges, especially in terms of accountability, transparency, and protection of students.

In recent years, there have been various cases of sexual harassment committed by owners, caregivers, or kyai in the pesantren environment, which shows a pattern of power irregularities that are not handled systemically. A BBC Indonesia report (2025) revealed that 13 female students were victims of sexual violence by the main caretaker of a pesantren, where the perpetrator used his position as a religious figure to silence and control the victims.

This phenomenon shows that Islamic education is experiencing an ethical and structural crisis. Institutions that are supposed to be moral fortresses are instead used as a tool to normalize power relations inequality and silence the voices of victims. The teacher-student relationship built on the basis of *ta'dzim* (respect) has been distorted, when spiritual power has become a tool of absolute domination.

In the framework of Islamic educational psychology, this problem is not only a violation of laws or social norms, but also a form of betrayal of the basic values of Islamic education itself—namely *trust*, *justice*, *tazkiyah*, and *hifz al-nafs*. When education no longer guarantees the safety of the soul and honor of students, what

needs to be corrected is not only individual behavior, but the system that supports it.

Therefore, this article departs from the anxiety about the ethical crisis in Islamic educational institutions and seeks to examine the structural roots of this problem. With a qualitative approach and a critical reading of power relations in religious education, this paper offers reflections and recommendations to encourage pesantren reform towards a just, transparent, and human dignity system.

Historically, the relationship between teacher and student in the Islamic tradition was built on the principles of respect (*ta'dzim*) and trust. But in practice, this principle is often manipulated to perpetuate dominance. This is a big challenge for contemporary Islamic education—namely how to build an education system that remains based on Islamic values, but at the same time upholds the principles of justice, equality, and protection of human dignity.

This article departs from anxiety about the ethical crisis in Islamic education due to unequal power relations in the pesantren environment. With a qualitative approach through literature studies and case studies, this article seeks to dismantle the structural roots of the prevalence of sexual harassment and offer a more critical, equitable, and transformative paradigm of Islamic education.

Research on sexual violence in faith-based education is still relatively minimal, especially those departing from the psychological approach of Islamic education. In fact, this problem touches on very basic aspects of the education system: power relations, parenting ethics, and moral crises in a space that should be a safe zone.

## **METHOD**

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with literature study methods and critical discourse analysis of cases of sexual harassment in pesantren reported in the mass media. The main objective of this approach is to explore and critique the power structures within Islamic educational institutions that allow for spiritual authority-based violence

## DISCUSSION

The phenomenon of sexual harassment in the pesantren environment does not stand alone, but is part of the social and cultural structure that forms the inequality of the relationship between caregivers and students. In a system that places the kyai as a figure that cannot be denied, power tends to be absolute and without correction. This opens up space for abuse of authority, including in the form of sexual harassment.

Based on an analysis of a number of cases reported by national media between 2021–2024, there is a recurring pattern: the perpetrator is a central figure of the pesantren (kyai/senior caregiver), the victim is a young student (underage), and the environmental reaction tends to be defensive against external criticism. In many cases, victims experience double pressure—both psychologically and socially—because they are considered to defame institutions and religions.

The culture of silence thrives because of a misunderstanding of manners for teachers, as well as structural pressure from a system that does not provide a safe space for students to report. In this regard, Foucault's theory of power is particularly relevant: power not only oppresses vertically, but also shapes ways of thinking that make victims feel guilty or afraid to speak up.

In addition, the study of Islamic psychology shows that sexual harassment in Islamic educational institutions is a form of betrayal of the mandate of knowledge (*khiyanat al-'ilm*). Education should be a space for purification of the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*), not a place for the venting of lust by those who actually become a moral symbol in the eyes of students.

One of the fictional studies that depicts this reality is the story of "N", a 14-year-old female student, who was harassed by a caregiver at a traditional Islamic boarding school. Fearful and not knowing who to report to, "N" kept the trauma for years. When the case was revealed, the pesantren did not immediately support the victim, but instead blamed the family for being considered to have opened the disgrace of the pesantren. This kind of pattern is not only painful, but it also shows that the system lacks a protection mechanism in favor of the victim.

One example of a real case that reflects the pattern of absolute power in Islamic boarding schools is a BBC Indonesia investigation report (2025), which

revealed that as many as 13 women admitted to being victims of sexual violence by the owner and administrator of a pesantren in Indonesia. The victims stated that the abuse lasted for years, in an atmosphere of stress and fear.

In the report, it was stated that most of the students did not dare to report, even after leaving the Islamic boarding school. This is due to the perpetrator's position as a respected figure, considered a "guardian", and a center of spiritual and social control in the cottage environment. When one of the victims finally spoke up, the response from some internal parties actually blamed the victim for being considered to tarnish the good name of the institution.

### **Religious Culture and the Silencing of Victims**

One of the factors that aggravates sexual harassment in the pesantren environment is the presence of a religious culture that silences, not liberates. In many cases, victims are not only afraid of the perpetrator, but also afraid of being considered to tarnish the good name of the pesantren, kyai, or even Islam itself. Phrases such as "do not expose disgrace", "obey the teacher even if you are unjust", or "silence is more noble" are used to form a spiritual submission that silences moral resistance.

Sociologically, it is a form of symbolic domination instilled through the language of religion. In the context of Foucault's theory of power, language becomes a means of control; only the owner of authority is allowed to speak. Meanwhile, in many Islamic boarding schools, students do not have a social position to voice objections or sue the structure.

Ironically, the teachings of Islam itself actually highly uphold justice, protection of victims, and the courage to reject tyranny. The Prophet Muhammad PBUH said, "*Help your brothers, both the oppressed and the oppressor.*" When religious teachers use religion as a pretext to cover up the sins of power, there has been a deviation of da'wah and piracy against true Islamic values

### **Theoretical and practical implications**

The findings in this article carry several important implications, both theoretically and practically, for the development of an ethical and humane Islamic education system:

#### **Implications for the Islamic Education System:**

A paradigm shift is needed from education based on absolute obedience to an education system based on morals, transparency, and participation. The concept of *ta'dzim* against teachers must be reinterpreted so that it does not become a tool of spiritual oppression.

#### **Implications for the Islamic Boarding School Curriculum:**

The moral and fiqh curriculum needs to be reviewed so that it is not only normative, but also applicable in building a culture of legal awareness, gender equality, and protection for victims of violence. Islamic education should equip students to recognize forms of tyrannical power, even if they come from religious figures.

#### **Implications for Islamic Educational Psychology:**

It is necessary to strengthen the study of Islamic psychology that is responsive to the trauma of sexual violence and inequality in education. Spiritual-based healing approaches, spiritual counseling, and confidence reconstruction are very important in victim rehabilitation.

#### **Implications for Institutional Regulation and Supervision:**

The state and religious organizations must strengthen the reporting, supervision, and social audit system of Islamic boarding schools. The religious system should not be immune from public evaluation, because religion never justifies oppressive domination.

This case shows how power relations in Islamic boarding schools can silence victims and strengthen perpetrators. Within the framework of Foucault's theory of power, it illustrates that power not only creates obedience, but also shapes the narrative: who can speak, and who should be silent. When the system does not provide a safe space for complaints, and society is accustomed to covering up disgrace in the name of maintaining the good name of religion, then violence is actually considered a "reasonable" risk in unequal educational relations.

From the perspective of Islamic educational psychology, cases like this are also a form of collective failure in maintaining *hifz al-nafs* (soul), *hifz al-'irdh* (honor), and *hifz al-din* (religion). Education should be a space for moral strengthening and spiritual safety, not a place of abuse wrapped in religious symbols.

If Islamic education does not carry out structural and ethical transformation, then institutions built on faith will become a field of hypocrisy. Therefore, it is necessary to re-read the function of religious authorities, as well as a system that ensures accountability and transparency in faith-based educational institutions

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study emphasizes that overcoming ethical crises and violence in Islamic educational institutions, especially Islamic boarding schools, requires a holistic synergy between structural transformation, state regulation, and strengthening social control. The root of the problem related to power relations and neglect of custody must be overcome through the improvement of a professional internal supervision system and the implementation of victim protection mechanisms that ensure confidentiality and security. The state, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, plays a central role in intervening in policy through periodic audits, anti-violence training for educators, and the integration of mental health aspects of students into institutional accreditation standards. On the other hand, the role of family and society is an instrument of early detection through open communication patterns and courage in voicing the truth (*amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*) against the practice of injustice. Finally, academics need to reconstruct an Islamic education curriculum that is more responsive to the reality of contemporary educational psychology, by emphasizing teaching ethics based on the values of trust and *mas'uliyah* (moral responsibility). Overall, the success of this transformation depends on the collective will to break down the wall of impunity of perpetrators and build an ecosystem of *pesantren* that truly becomes a safe space for the intellectual development and spirituality of the younger generation, so that the image of *pesantren* as the center of noble moral civilization is maintained and relevant in the midst of the challenges of an increasingly complex era.

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