

The Phenomenon of Child Abuse in Islamic Boarding Schools: A Power Relations Perspective and Islamic Education Reform

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Received: 20 January 2025; Revised: 13 March 2025; Accepted: 1 May 2025

Abstract: *The phenomenon of violence against children in Islamic boarding schools has become an urgent issue to be addressed systematically. This article aims to explore cases of child abuse in pesantren through a descriptive qualitative approach with Michel Foucault's theoretical framework on power relations. In the context of pesantren, power relations between teachers and santri are often hierarchical and unbalanced, creating a situation that allows for the abuse of power. Violence, both physical and sexual, reflects not only individual violations but also systemic problems influenced by a culture of absolute obedience and lack of supervision. Based on data analysis and in-depth interviews, this article identifies the root causes and offers strategic recommendations, including reform of pesantren culture, strengthening of regulations, and provision of safe complaint mechanisms. The article emphasizes the need for collaborative measures between the government, pesantren, and communities to create a child-friendly educational environment and support their rights.*

Keywords: *Child Abuse; Islamic Boarding School; Power Relations; Indonesia.*

How to Cite:

Stiawati, T., & Sulisman, A. N. (2025). The Phenomenon of Child Abuse in Islamic Boarding Schools: A Power Relations Perspective and Islamic Education Reform. *Journal of Governance*, 10(2), 303–315.
<https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.62870/jog.v10i2.30979>



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Introduction

Cases of violence against children have become an urgent global issue that requires serious attention from all parties. (World Health Organization, 2020) According to a report from the World Health Organization (WHO) entitled *Global Status Report on Preventing Violence Against Children*, half of the world's total child population, or around one billion children worldwide, experience physical, psychological, or sexual violence in various forms (World Health Organization, 2020). Such violence not only impacts physical health but also causes long-term psychological trauma that inhibits optimal child development. Violence against children occurs because countries have not successfully implemented strategies and policies that have been designed to protect children. The report states that 88 percent of countries in the world have laws protecting children from violence, but only 47 percent of these countries report effective law enforcement.

Different countries have different approaches to defining violence against children, depending on their cultural, legal, and social contexts. Although there is an international agreement on the urgency of protecting children from violence in the form of the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), the understanding and implementation of this varies widely around the world. (UNICEF, 2023) Therefore, in 2023, UNICEF issued the *International Classification of Violence Against Children* (ICVAC), which aims to identify and categorize various forms of violence and abuse of children globally, as well as provide guidance for prevention and intervention.

In line with the ICVAC classification, the situation of violence against children in

Indonesia is also very concerning. Based on data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) and the Symphony system of the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (KPPPA), the number of reported cases of violence against children continues to increase every year, covering various forms of violence, such as physical and sexual exploitation. In 2024, there were 10,592 cases of child abuse with 11,000 victims, consisting of 3,376 boys and 8,329 girls. West Java recorded the highest number with 1,065 cases, followed by East Java with 902 cases and Central Java with 747 cases. When compared to previous years, the trend of violence against children continues to increase. In 2016, there were 1,478 male victims and 3,757 female victims. However, this number continues to rise, reaching more than 14,000 girls and 5,000 boys by 2023. (Kementerian PPPA, 2024b) Most of the cases in 2024, namely 6,280, were sexual violence, followed by physical violence with 6,472 cases and psychological violence with 4,054 cases.

Ironically, the data shows that the perpetrators of violence are often close people, such as boyfriends, friends, or even parents or caregivers, especially in families of young couples, and are carried out in various places, such as workplaces, households, public facilities, and educational institutions. In the context of educational institutions, Islamic boarding schools, which are traditional Islamic educational institutions, are also not spared from this problem. Several reports reveal the existence of various cases of violence in pesantren, ranging from physical violence committed by caregivers to discriminatory treatment of children. Character education that should be instilled as a hallmark of pesantren has

now been tarnished. This existence occurs because of the rampant cases of violence and bullying that continue to take lives in the pesantren environment.

Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia are one of the largest educational institutions in Indonesia and play an important role in the national education system. As stated in the report of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia for the odd semester of the 2023/2024 academic year, the number of Islamic boarding schools throughout Indonesia reached 39,551, with a total of 4.9 million students. This number does not include pesantren that have not been officially registered with the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Most of the santri (students studying in boarding schools) are under the age of 18, which places them under the auspices of child protection in accordance with the domain of the framework.

According to data obtained from the Indonesian Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, there have been 37 incidents of violence reported in the pesantren environment during the 2018-2019 period (Kementerian PPPA, 2024a). Of these, about 33% of the cases involved physical violence, and the rest were cases of sexual violence. Based on data from the SAPA 129 complaint service provided by the Ministry of PPPA, 49 cases of violence were recorded in the boarding school and school environment in 2023, with the number of victims reaching 63 people. (Fajar Nur, 2024) Meanwhile, in the period January to February 2024, there have been 3 cases of violence with 3 victims in the educational environment (Fajar Nur, 2024). Cases of violence that resulted in the death of students in pesantren must be prevented and handled systematically. It also shows the urgent need to create a safe

and supportive learning environment for children, especially in boarding schools.

Therefore, attention to this issue is an urgency that cannot be ignored. Efforts to protect children's rights in the pesantren environment must be seen as an integral part of the mission to improve the overall quality of education. Firmer policies, effective monitoring systems, and collaboration between various parties, including the government, pesantren, and the community, must be carried out immediately to ensure that every child has the right to learn in a safe, supportive, and dignified environment.

Method

This research aims to reveal facts, circumstances, phenomena, and circumstances that occur during the research by using descriptive qualitative research methods with a *critical ethnographic* approach as a primary source. *Critical ethnography* emphasizes the importance of understanding the social context and power dynamics that shape educational practices and policies. Critical ethnography serves as a bridge to overcome institutional divisions and encourage social transformation through collaborative inquiry (Beach & Arrazola, 2020; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). This perspective is important in assessing the implementation of child-friendly education guidelines in the context of pesantren, where traditional practices may intersect with modern education reforms.

The research will also involve multi-site ethnographic research by emphasizing the importance of understanding the role of pesantren in promoting religious harmony and tolerance in diverse communities (Aksa, 2023; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). By conducting interviews and focus group

discussions in various pesantren in Indonesia, this research will collect rich qualitative data, reflecting the various interpretations and adaptations of the guidelines in different educational environments.

To analyze the collected data, this research will employ thematic analysis to identify key patterns and recurring themes related to the implementation of child-friendly education guidelines in pesantren. The data from interviews, focus group discussions, and observations will be transcribed, coded, and categorized based on relevant theoretical frameworks. The critical ethnographic approach will be used to interpret the findings, emphasizing power relations, institutional structures, and sociocultural influences that shape educational practices. This analytical process will help reveal barriers, enablers, and contextual adaptations within pesantren, offering a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play. The insights derived will contribute to policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of child-friendly education initiatives in Indonesia.

This research is expected to contribute to the ongoing discourse on education reform in Indonesia by providing insights into the collaborative networks that facilitate or hinder the implementation of child-friendly education guidelines. By applying a critical ethnographic approach, this study seeks to uncover the complexity of educational practices in pesantren and offer recommendations to improve the effectiveness of such initiatives in promoting inclusive and equitable education for children in Indonesia, especially santri.

Islamic Boarding School: A Growing Pillar of Islamic Education in Indonesia

Islamic boarding schools have a vital role in the history and development of education in Indonesia. As an Islamic educational institution that has existed for centuries, pesantren is not only a place for academic learning but also functions as a place to build the character and morals of the students. In this context, Islamic boarding schools are an integral part of the life of Indonesian society, teaching not only religious knowledge but also life values that prioritize ethics, morality, and spirituality (Cathrin et al., 2021; Hidayat, 2023; Syafruddin et al., 2022).

The term "pondok pesantren" comes from two words: "pondok," which means a temporary residence or dormitory, and "pesantren," which refers to a place where Islamic teachings are taught. This duality illustrates how pesantren is not only an educational institution but also a community that supports the spiritual and intellectual growth of students. In a pesantren environment, education is not limited to theoretical learning but also includes character building based on the deep teachings of Islam. In their daily lives, santri are taught to live simply, be disciplined, and maintain good relationships with others, both fellow santri and the wider community. Although the term pondok pesantren is better known in Java, in fact, various regions in Indonesia have local terms that refer to similar Islamic educational institutions. In West Sumatra, for example, a similar institution is known as "surau," which not only serves as a small place of worship but also as a center of religious education. In Aceh, the terms "dayah" or "meunasah" are used to refer to Islamic educational institutions that also play an important role in the social life of the local

Result and Discussion

community (A'la & Rahman, 2022; Hasnadi, 2023; Mubarak et al., 2018). This diversity reflects how Islamic boarding schools have adapted to the local culture without compromising their main purpose: educating the younger generation in the light of Islamic teachings.

Over time, pesantren continue to develop and adapt to the challenges of the times. In the face of socio-political dynamics, pesantren not only maintain tradition but also innovate in their educational approach. Kiai, as a religious leader in pesantren, has a very crucial role in determining the direction of education and the morals taught. Each pesantren with its unique characteristics creates a different learning environment in accordance with the principles and values believed by its caregivers (A'la & Rahman, 2022; Baharun & Maryam, 2019; Hanafi et al., 2021; Oktari & Kosasih, 2019; Ruji, 2022).

In Indonesia, boarding schools can be divided into several categories based on the education system applied. One of them is the Salafi boarding school, which maintains the tradition of learning the yellow yellowclassical books. In Salafi pesantren, education emphasizes in-depth study of classical Arabic books, which are the main source of Islamic teachings. In this system, there is no formal curriculum set by the government, as the pesantren focuses more on teaching religious values taught by previous scholars (Ikhsan et al., 2021; Merliana, 2023).

On the other hand, there are Khalafi pesantren that are more modern and open to the times. Khalafi pesantren integrate Islamic religious education with the national curriculum so that santri not only get religious education but also general education, which includes subjects such as math, science, and languages. This type of pesantren is more adaptive to changing

times and prepares santri to face the challenges of an increasingly complex world, including in the aspects of technology and education management (Putro et al., 2019; Sutarja et al., 2022).

There are also pesantren that combine elements of these two systems, namely combination pesantren. This type of pesantren combines the teaching of the yellow book with the formal government curriculum. This approach allows pesantren to maintain a strong religious tradition while providing adequate general education for santri so that they can compete in the modern world without forgetting their religious roots.

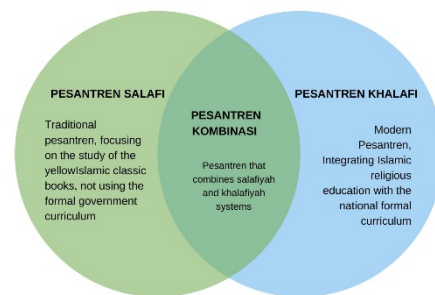


Figure 1. Classification of Types of Islamic Boarding Schools in Indonesia (Source: Republic of Indonesia Law No. 18 of 2019)

The diversity of educational approaches applied by these boarding schools has a huge positive impact on Indonesian society. Pesantren not only produce knowledgeable young people but also individuals who have a strong character and a high sense of social

responsibility. The santri who graduate from pesantren often become leaders in their communities, not only in the religious field but also in social, economic, and political life. They are expected to be good role models for their

communities, maintain traditions, and bring positive changes to the nation.

Islamic boarding schools, with all their dynamics and diversity, continue to play an important role in creating a society with character, knowledge, and noble character. In facing the challenges of globalization, pesantren remain relevant by providing education that not only prepares students to face the world of work but also teaches them to live according to strong religious and moral principles. As an educational institution that has existed for a long time, pesantren proves that strong traditions and continuous innovation can go hand in hand to create a generation that is resilient and has integrity.

The Phenomenon of Child Abuse in Islamic Boarding Schools

The phenomenon of violence against children in Islamic boarding schools has become an issue that has received increasing public attention in Indonesia. As religious-based educational

institutions, boarding schools are supposed to be safe and supportive places for children's moral and spiritual development. However, various reports indicate the existence of violent practices, both physical, verbal, and psychological, involving students and pesantren managers. This phenomenon does not only reflect individual problems but is also related to structural dynamics and power relations in the pesantren education system. Cases of child abuse in Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*) are difficult to obtain in their original form. Various institutions in Indonesia tend to shift responsibility for data collection, making it challenging to validate the actual number of cases. Additionally, the inherently closed nature of pesantren and their tendency to resolve issues internally further complicate external oversight. The available case data primarily come from local and national media reports, but many of these reports face pressure to be withheld or taken down.

Table 1. News Distribution of Child Abuse Cases in Islamic Boarding School

No	Date of Event	Pesantren Location	Type of Hardness	Victims	Perfor- mers	Brief Chronology
1	1/12/2024	Serang District, Banten	Sexual	Female Santri	Pinpinan Ponpes	Sexual abuse in a boarding school
News Source		Mob Destroys Islamic Boarding School in Serang, Triggered by Molestation Case				
2	2/8/2024	Agam District, West Sumatra	Sexual	43 Male Santri	Two teachers of Ponpes	The mode of asking for a massage in the teacher's room then sodomized
News Source		https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/articles/c0xjx7nd4vx0				
3	18/9/2024	Grogol, Sukoharjo	Physical	Male students	Kaka senior	Bullying and beating to death.
News Source		https://www.detik.com/jateng/berita/d-7546943/keluarga-eks-santri-ungkap-banyak-kasus-bullying-di-ponpes-grogol-sukoharjo				
4	14/5/2024	Bogor district, West Java	Physical	Male Santri	Senior Sister	Bullying and being carried unconscious
News Source		https://www.suara.com/news/2024/05/14/174339/kasus-kekerasan-berujung-pingsan-santri-di-pondok-pesantren-modern-sahid-diduga-dibully-kakak-kelas				
5	29/2/2024	Kediri, East Java	Physical	Male students	Senior Sister	Bullying and beating to death
News Source		https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/articles/c0vjeq20d8po				

The table above provides an overview of several cases of violence that occurred in pesantren, ranging from the type of violence and location to the news source that reported the incident. This table is not only a documentation but also a reminder that this phenomenon of violence requires greater attention from various parties, including the government, the community, and the pesantren managers themselves. The phenomenon of child abuse in pesantren has become a serious concern in recent years. The environment that is supposed to be a place of religious education and character building actually holds a number of cases of violence that tarnish the noble values of pesantren. This violence involves various types of offenses, ranging from physical to sexual violence, with the victims being mostly santri children. In the following table, several cases of violence that occurred in pesantren in Indonesia are summarized to provide a concrete picture of this phenomenon.

For example, in early January 2024 in Serang Regency, Banten, a female santri was a victim of sexual abuse by the

pesantren leader. This case not only harmed the victim physically and psychologically but also triggered the anger of the local community, who eventually vented their frustration by destroying the pesantren facilities. Not long after, in Agam Regency, West Sumatra, 43 male students became victims of sexual violence committed by two pesantren teachers with the mode of asking for a massage. This case reveals the dark side of power and trust abused by the perpetrators. Cases of physical violence are no less horrifying. In Grogol, Sukoharjo, a male santri died as a result of a beating by his senior brother. This incident raised a debate about the lack of supervision in the pesantren environment, especially in building healthy relationships between students. Similar incidents were also found in Bogor and Kediri Regencies, where victims experienced bullying and physical violence until they fainted or even died.

These cases reflect the fact that violence in the pesantren environment is not only incidental but also has a recurring pattern. The abuse of power, weak

supervision, and the culture of silence that often surrounds victims make this problem even more complex. More ironically, the cases recorded in this table are only a small part of the events exposed to the public. There are still many other cases that are not revealed due to various factors, such as the victim's fear of speaking out, social pressure from the pesantren environment, or even the lack of support from the family and community. In this context, it is important to understand that many victims face severe psychological pressure, so they choose not to report the events they experience. Fear of stigma, threats from perpetrators, and the often biased views of the community towards victims are the main factors why violence in pesantren is often hidden. In addition, many families of victims are reluctant to publicize these cases because they are worried about the social impact they will receive, such as loss of reputation or threats from certain groups.

The phenomenon of violence in pesantren is not only related to individual perpetrators but also systemic patterns that are influenced by the structure and culture of pesantren. In an interview with Mbak Ayun, a pesantren caregiver in Riau who often receives complaints from santri throughout Indonesia, it was revealed that violence in pesantren includes various forms, ranging from sexual violence to physical and psychological violence.

One of the root causes expressed was the doctrine of obedience to teachers. According to Mbak Ayun:

"In some pesantren, it is strongly emphasized that obeying the teacher is an obligation. Even when the teacher is wrong, we have no right to say it is wrong. Even when the teacher's orders don't make sense, we still have to do them."

This doctrine is often deeply rooted in pesantren culture, so santri feel trapped to obey orders, even if they violate moral and legal norms. For example, some santri were asked to perform inappropriate actions by their teachers, arguing that "the teacher's order is a blessing." This pattern not only creates an unsafe environment but also normalizes violent behavior.

In addition, Mbak Ayun's story also revealed a pattern of sexual violence that occurred systemically in several pesantren. In one of the cases, she recounted:

"There was one pesantren where the leader, his assistant, and the caretaker together committed sexual violence against the orphans who lived there. Worse, the children who were victims of this violence ended up imitating this behavior and doing it to other children because they thought it was something normal."

This case shows that violence committed by authority figures in pesantren can have a long-term impact on victims, both psychologically and behaviorally. Victimized children often feel worthless, guilty, or even powerless to report the violence they experience. Furthermore, these cases are also difficult to uncover due to the culture of "silence" that prevails in many pesantren. Victims are often afraid to report for fear of the impact on the reputation of the pesantren or even on their own safety. In some cases, attempts to report abuse end up in intimidation of the victim.

The interview revealed how complex and worrying the phenomenon of violence in pesantren is. This violence often occurs due to a combination of unequal power relations, weak supervision, and a culture that supports absolute obedience to teacher authority. In many cases, the doctrine of "obedience to

the teacher" is the root of the problem. The santri are taught that the blessing of knowledge can only be obtained by obeying all the teacher's orders, even if they violate moral or legal norms. This creates an environment that is not only prone to abuse of power but also makes victims feel they have no choice but to accept the treatment.

The phenomenon also shows how sexual violence can take place systemically in some pesantren. When violence is perpetrated by authority figures such as pesantren caregivers or leaders, victims are often powerless to resist. They not only feel ashamed or guilty but also experience deep trauma that is difficult to overcome. In some cases, there is even a normalization of violence where victims who do not get assistance end up imitating the perpetrator's behavior towards others, creating a cycle of violence that continues to repeat itself.

In addition, the prevailing culture of "silence" in many pesantren exacerbates the situation. Victims often feel afraid to report, not only because they are afraid of the perpetrators, but also because they are worried about the reaction of their environment. There is an assumption that reporting violence is equivalent to defaming the pesantren, which ultimately makes victims choose to remain silent. This situation creates an unsafe space for santri and allows violence to continue without adequate sanctions or prevention.

The experiences of victims told through these interviews are an important reminder that the issue of violence in pesantren needs serious attention. The pesantren environment, which is supposed to be a place of character building and religious learning, must be maintained in order to truly protect children's rights. This requires joint

efforts, including revamping the pesantren culture, strengthening supervision, and providing a safe and reliable complaint space for victims.

Power Relations in Pesantren: Michel Foucault's Perspective

The phenomenon of violence in pesantren can be analyzed through the lens of Michel Foucault's power theory, which sees power as something that is not only applied hierarchically but also internalized by individuals in social relations and institutional structures. In pesantren, the power relationship between teachers (ustadz) and santri tends to be absolute, where the position of the teacher is considered to have absolute authority, while the santri are placed as subjects who must fully submit. In this system, power is not only physical but also symbolic, creating a doctrine of absolute obedience that is deeply rooted in pesantren culture. This doctrine instills the belief that the blessing of knowledge can only be obtained by obeying all the teacher's orders without questioning their validity. This condition creates a space that is vulnerable to abuse of power, including in the form of physical and sexual violence (Fuadi, 2023; Khozin, 2024; Rahmati & Mubarak, 2023).

Foucault explains that power works through what he calls *disciplinary power*, where individuals are not only supervised by external authorities but also internalize rules and norms that make them supervise themselves. In the context of pesantren, santri often feel bound by the norm that any teacher's actions, however unreasonable or even violating moral values, must be accepted as a form of respect for authority. This creates a situation where victims of violence tend to remain silent and accept the treatment, feeling that to resist is to defame the

pesantren or jeopardize the blessings of the knowledge they seek. Furthermore, Foucault's *biopower* theory is also relevant to understanding how santri's bodies become objects of control in the pesantren environment. This power over the body is not only applied through physical punishment but also through strict rules that regulate the daily behavior of santri, ranging from worship activities to social interactions. When this power is abused, santri's bodies can become targets of violence, including sexual harassment, which often occurs behind cultural and religious norms that protect the perpetrators (Henki, 2024; Samsu et al., 2021).

This phenomenon does not only occur at the individual level but also at the systemic level. A culture of silence and norms that support absolute obedience strengthen the position of abusers, while victims feel they have no safe mechanism to report. In some cases, abusers even get justification from the surrounding environment because they are considered authority figures who cannot be questioned. It is understood that violence in pesantren is not only a deviant act of certain individuals but also the result of a power system that is internalized in the structure and culture of the institution (Churohman, 2023; Ramdani, 2024; Zulva, 2024). Through Foucault's perspective, it can. Therefore, efforts to prevent violence in pesantren require not only law enforcement against perpetrators but also fundamental changes in the power relations between teachers and students. These reforms include revamping the pesantren culture that encourages respect for individual rights, the provision of safe complaint mechanisms, and strict supervision of activities within the pesantren.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of violence against children in Islamic boarding schools reflects a major challenge in the Islamic education system in Indonesia. The hierarchical power relations between teachers and students, the culture of absolute obedience, and the lack of supervision mechanisms have created a space that allows systemic violence to occur. Analysis based on Michel Foucault's theory shows that violence in pesantren is not only an individual act but also part of the power structure that is internalized in the culture and practice of pesantren education.

To address this issue, comprehensive reforms are needed that involve revamping the pesantren culture, strengthening regulations, and providing safe and reliable complaint mechanisms. These measures should be complemented by collaboration between the government, pesantren, and communities to ensure that children's rights are protected in an educational environment that is welcoming and supportive of their development. Islamic education in pesantren must return to noble values that prioritize respect for human rights, social responsibility, and character building based on morality and spirituality.

Acknowledgments

The Author extends the gratitude towards every helpful and valuable input during the publication process

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