Windy Triana, Citra Dwikasari, Haula Noor, Dedy Ibmar, Savran Billahi, Narila Mutia Nasir, Aptiani Nur Jannah, Grace Sandra Pramesty Rachmanda

SILENCE BEHIND SACRED WALLS

RESEARCHING SEXUAL VIOLENCE
IN PESANTREN





Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren



SILENCE BEHIND SACRED WALLS Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

© 2025 All Rights Reserved

Authors:

Windy Triana, Citra Dwikasari, Haula Noor, Dedy Ibmar, Savran Billahi, Narila Mutia Nasir, Aptiani Nur Jannah, Grace Sandra Pramesty Rachmanda

Language Editor:

Arief Subhan

Translator:

Ummi Kultsum

Cover Design and Layout:

Oryza Rizgullah

First Printing: Juni 2025 ISBN: 978-623-8552-42-9 Size: 15,5x23 cm

Pages: x+120

Published by: A-empat in collaboration with PPIM UIN Jakarta

UIN Jakarta Campus 2 Building, Jalan Kertamukti No. 5, Cireundeu, District. East Ciputat, South Tangerang City, Banten 15419

Sanctions for Violating Article 113 Law No. 28 of 2014 on Copyright

- Any person who, without proper authorization, infringes upon economic rights as stipulated in Article 9 paragraph (1) letter i for commercial use shall be subject to imprisonment for up to 1 (one) year and/or a fine of up to IDR 100,000,000 (one hundred million rupiah).
- 2) Any person who, without the consent of the Creator or Copyright Holder, infringes upon the economic rights of the Creator as specified in Article 9 paragraph (1) letters c, f, and/or h for commercial use shall be subject to imprisonment for up to 3 (three) years and/or a fine of up to IDR 500,000,000 (five hundred million rupiah).
- 3) Any person who, without the consent of the Creator or Copyright Holder, infringes upon the economic rights of the Creator as outlined in Article 9 paragraph (1) letters a, b, e, and/or g for commercial use shall be subject to imprisonment for up to 4 (four) years and/or a fine of up to IDR 1,000,000,000 (one billion rupiah).
- 4) Any person who commits the offenses mentioned in paragraph (3) in the form of piracy shall be subject to imprisonment for up to 10 (ten) years and/or a fine of up to IDR 4,000,000,000 (four billion rupiah).

This book is dedicated to all those who contributed to the success of this research. It presents perspectives and reflections that go beyond what is documented in the official publication of the Child-Friendly Pesantren Research Report.



WHAT DO THEY SAY?

11

The authors offer a thoughtful contribution to the ongoing discourse on research involving children, while also shedding light on the complexities of resilience, strength, and vulnerability within Indonesia's pesantren education system. Beyond enriching readers' understanding of ethical research practices, this work encourages the development of other relevant and context-sensitive studies.

Moreover, it serves as a valuable source of inspiration for stakeholders seeking to advance advocacy efforts and strengthen a pesantren ecosystem that prioritizes children's rights in Indonesia.

Ni Luh Putu Maitra Agastya

(Director of PUSKAPA UI)

Pesantren, as the oldest educational institution in Indonesia, faces various challenges, including preserving the wisdom of kiai and bu nyai as leaders, caregivers, educators, and protectors. In an era that tends to be power-oriented, instead of being protective leaders, kiai and bu nyai can become trapped in manipulative power relations.

This book sheds light on the context of violence in pesantren through compelling storytelling. Although the number of cases remains relatively small in statistical terms compared to the 36,000 Islamic boarding schools and 4 million students residing there, changes must be made promptly to ensure that Islamic boarding schools continue to fulfill their noble role as religious-based educational institutions.

May this book contribute to fostering such transformation.

Alissa Wahid

(PBNU Task Force)

As a pesantren alumnus, I am deeply aware of the sensitivity surrounding the subject of this research, which makes it challenging to gather accurate data. However, as noted by the research coordinator, the study is not intended to expose the shortcomings of pesantren or to intrude into their internal affairs. Rather, its findings are aimed at offering constructive recommendations to enhance the boarding school system. so that parents can entrust their children's education to pesantren with confidence and peace of mind. A pesantren should be a safe, nurturing, and comfortable environment—one that fosters empathy and leaves students with meaningful, positive memories. This book captures a range of stories about how the research team gathered data from various pesantren. The narrative is both engaging and reflective. Congratulations to the entire research team. and PPIMI

Din Wahid

(Vice Rector for Cooperation and Institutional Development, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta)

FOREWORD

Is it easy to collect data on sexual violence in Islamic boarding schools? Certainly not. Yet, the PPIM Research Team managed to do so with commendable effectiveness. Why?

This book offers insight into how the researchers navigated the many challenges they faced. Most of the PPIM researchers are not only experienced in conducting fieldwork but are also alumni of pesantren. This dual background enabled them to approach their work with both cultural sensitivity and methodological rigor. As pesantren alumni, they are intimately familiar with the traditions and social dynamics of pesantren, such as the concept of *ta'zim* (reverence) and the nature of the relationship between *santri* (students) and *kiai/ustaz* (religious teachers). As experienced researchers, they are well-versed in techniques for accessing and handling sensitive data.

Another key factor in the success of this study was the strong support from pesantren families and alumni. Many of these individuals now serve in leadership roles across government ministries, legislative bodies, civil society organizations, and media institutions. As advocates for gender equality, human rights, and child protection, they have shown deep concern over incidents of sexual violence in some pesantren and have actively championed the cause of making pesantren safe spaces for children to learn and grow.

Since 2019, pesantren have been formally recognized as part of Indonesia's national education system. As such, they are now legally bound by national regulations—including the Child Protection Law and the Ministry of Religious Affairs' decree on the prevention of sexual violence—which

require educational institutions to uphold and protect children's rights. Moreover, with more middle-class, urban, and educated families choosing pesantren for their children's education, expectations around safety, accountability, and educational quality continue to rise.

PPIM expresses its sincere appreciation to the dedicated research team that brought this study to completion. We also extend our gratitude to the Directorate of Islamic Boarding Schools at the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, and the National Development Planning Agency (BAPPENAS) for their ongoing support. Special thanks to PUSKAPA for introducing the team to the child-focused research, an area that requires distinct methodological sensitivity and ethical treatment. Finally, we express our deepest gratitude to the INKLUSI Secretariat at the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for the invaluable support in this important work.

Didin Syafruddin, Ph.D.

Executive Director

PPIM UIN Jakarta

AFTER THE FACT: REFLECTIONS OF SANTRI RESEARCHERS

PREFACE FROM THE LANGUAGE EDITOR

Research on pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) in Indonesia has been widely conducted. As a traditional educational institution unique to Indonesia, pesantren have attracted the interest of many scholars, both domestic and international. They examined pesantren from various perspectives: institutional structure and origins, educational systems and teaching methods, the role of the *kiai* (religious leaders), processes of modernization, and their interactions with the modern education system offered by the state. In line with these studies, pesantren have undergone modernization and adapted to the modern education system. In 2019, the Indonesian government formally recognized pesantren by providing them with a legal foundation as educational institutions through Law No. 18 of 2019 on Pesantren.

The integration of pesantren into the national education system has led to their rapid development in both quality and quantity as well as their spread across the Indonesian archipelago. Some pesantren have emerged with modern learning systems while still maintaining their identity as traditional Islamic educational institutions. However, alongside this rapid development, certain problems have begun to surface. Cases of violence and sexual abuse against students (santri), which have been reported in the media, have called into question whether pesantren are truly child-friendly educational institutions.

Research on pesantren from the perspective of child-friendly educational environments is still relatively limited. Therefore, this study becomes important to seek answers to the question above. This study is presented in two reports publication. The first report is published and titled "Towards Child-Friendly Pesantren", which is based on field data, supported by theoretical frameworks and discussions, and describes the realities of the educational practices in pesantren. The second report, titled "Silence Behind Sacred Walls: Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren", presents the stories behind the field data collection conducted by the researchers. The second can be seen as after the fact, as it takes the form of researchers' reflections after completing their fieldwork.

It is important to note that most of the researchers are the alumni of pesantren who have maintained strong ties to the institutions where they once studied. These reflections are significant, as they reveal the researchers' emotional struggles when faced with new and, perhaps, previously unimaginable realities about pesantren. The researchers are still believe that pesantren as places where santri not only learned about Islam but also received education in discipline and obedience to rules—and, as is often emphasized, developed deep attachment and absolute obedience to the *kiai* who taught them. This bond and obedience are felt by these researchers.

The reflections written in this anthology aim to affirm that this research was conducted with the intention of preserving the dignity of pesantren and ensuring their sustainability as child-friendly educational institutions.

Dr. Arief Subhan M.Ag.

Researcher at PPIM UIN Jakarta; Lecturer at the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication Sciences, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION — 1 Windy Triana

BAGIAN 1 RESEARCHING WITH CARE: EXPLORING SENSITIVE TOPICS IN PESANTREN — 11

- 1 The Shadow of Authority, Independence, and the Production of Knowledge 12
 Windy Triana
- 2 Navigating a Winding Process 27
 Citra Dwikasari

BAGIAN 2 EVERYDAY SPACES AND INTERACTIONS IN PESANTREN — 40

- 3 Between Possession and Liberation: Reflections of a Santri Scholar — 41 Haula Noor
- 4 Interactions That Leave Traces 54 Dedy Ibmar
- 5 Stigma and Stories Within Pesantren Walls 67 Savran Billahi

BAGIAN 3 MORAL EMOTION AND ETHICAL JUDGEMENT — 81

- 6 Untold Experiences: Puberty Stories from Inside Pesantren — 82
 - Narila Mutia Nasir
- 7 Breaking Innocence, Building Resilience 94 Aptiani Nur Jannah
- 8 The Lingering Trauma: Researcher's Emotional Reflection — 109
 Grace Sandra Pramesty Rachmanda

CONCLUSION — 117
Windy Triana
AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY — 119

INTRODUCTION

9 Windy Triana

"Be careful—this is a sensitive issue!"

The words echo, not just in passing conversation, but in the quiet corners of our minds. Researching a sexual violence issue is inherently delicate, and it becomes even more so when making children and pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) the objects of research. Doubts and concerns often arise during the process, yet these challenges can be overcome with the belief that our work is grounded in rigorous scientific principles.

The issue of sexual violence began drawing widespread public attention when numerous cases surfaced in the media in 2022. These cases, emerging one after another, were seen as just the tip of the iceberg—a glimpse into the deeper, often hidden problem of violence within religious-based institutions. Inevitably, such revelations have impacted public trust in Pesantren.

It was never our intention to disparage, discredit, or harm these institutions. On the contrary, many of us, the researchers, are alumni of pesantren—places where we were raised, where our identity was shaped, and to which we feel a deep sense of love and responsibility. From this place of care and concern, our motivation arises: to uncover the truth objectively, using our ability as academics and researchers.

Through this work, we aim to contribute to the development of evidence-based policies that foster a child-friendly environment in pesantren, where safety, compassion, and learning can coexist and flourish.

The chapters in this book reflect each author's personal experiences conducting research in religious institutions, often involving unconventional and challenging issues

This book is a reflection of our two-year journey researching sexual violence in Pesantren. We believe that what is behind the scenes of the process is too valuable to be overlooked, forgotten, or left untold. While writing about the personal, often hidden dimensions of research is not uncommon, it remains essential for understanding the complexities of academic work. For instance, Alison L Black et al. (2023) explore the lived experiences of female academics as they navigate

their professional responsibilities alongside their roles as mothers, wives, of single women. In addition, although numerous studies have examined Pesantren, none have yet explored the research process itself, particularly when it involves crossing into sensitive and often "taboo" subjects, such as sexual violence.

The chapters in this book reflect each author's personal experiences conducting research in religious institutions, often involving unconventional and challenging issues. In fact, in the early stages of the literature review, we encountered significant difficulty in finding studies that addressed sexual violence within religious institutions. The few studies we did see often emphasized the considerable challenges involved in accessing and exploring this subject. The strong emphasis on institutional privacy, combined with the public's respect for those institutions, contributes to the complexity of this research, making it particularly difficult to undertake.

This research was made possible, though not without challenges, largely due to the researchers' backgrounds as alumni of pesantren and the strong institutional ties between PPIM UIN Jakarta and many of these schools. This research was conducted in 90 Pesantren spread across 90 regencies/cities in 34 provinces. In some locations, access to Pesantren remains an obstacle. Additionally, most of the researchers came with limited prior experience in conducting research involving children, particularly on sensitive and complex issues such as sexual violence.

We must acknowledge that we learned a great deal from our colleagues at PUSKAPA Universitas Indonesia about how research on children should be conducted. Conducting this research required not only specific methodological approaches but also adherence to ethical standards and the development of key researcher competencies. During the research design phase, we carefully studied the Handbook for Children's Participation in Research in Indonesia, compiled by our colleagues at PUSKAPA, reading it thoroughly, page by page. We also learned a great deal by listening attentively and reflecting on the feedback we received, particularly on our research instruments, from PUSKAPA colleagues, Hendro Prasetyo, and Iklilah Muzayyanah, who provided valuable insights as gender specialists. Additionally, our partners at the INKLUSI secretariat consistently reminded us of the importance of upholding Child Protection Protocols and GEDSI (Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion) principles. This entire process was deeply educational and an invaluable experience for our team.

During the design and development of the research instruments, we also benefited greatly from the insights and feedback of senior researchers at PPIM UIN Jakarta. We extend our sincere appreciation to Didin Syafruddin, Fuad Jabali, Hamid Nasuhi, Idris Thaha, Iim Halimatussa'diyah, Ismatu

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

Ropi, Jamhari Makruf, Saiful Umam, Testriono, and Yunita Faela Nisa for their valuable contributions. We are also deeply grateful to Arief Subhan, Lilik HS, and Oman Fathurrahman for their meticulous editing, which helped ensure both the clarity of our content and the sensitivity of meaning in every piece of writing produced.

Another important foundation of our research is the GEDSI principle, which encompasses Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion. Guided by this principle, we remain committed to ensuring that vulnerable and marginalized groups are neither overlooked nor excluded. We believe that every voice matters and every experience is meaningful. No one should be left behind. Each individual brings a unique perspective, especially those with diverse identities—be it in terms of gender, disability, ethnicity, or other social characteristics.

We also acknowledge that cultivating sensitivity to GEDSI is a continuous process, one that requires reflection and is far from simple. We are especially grateful to Endah Trista Agustiana, who consistently guided, reminded, and advised us on GEDSI-related matters. Her support encouraged us to think carefully and critically at every stage of decision-making. Throughout the research process, we made a conscious effort to integrate GEDSI considerations into our work. We also extend our heartfelt thanks to Paskal Kleden and Virlian Nurkristri from INKLUSI, who closely monitored and supported us at every step of the research journey.

In applying the GEDSI principle to the national survey, we ensured that enumerators were assigned in gender-matched pairs for each region. This strategy aimed to create a safe and comfortable environment for child respondents, especially when discussing sensitive issues with someone of the same gender. In our qualitative research, we also assigned research assistants of different genders to complement each principal researcher. This approach helped us anticipate and minimize

potential discomfort, particularly important when working with children, during interviews conducted by researchers of the opposite sex.

We also acknowledge the profound difficulty of exploring an issue as sensitive as sexual violence. One of our deepest concerns was the possibility that our questions might reopen wounds or trigger painful memories for the students. We were constantly reminded that trauma not only affects those who have directly experienced harm, but it can also deeply affect those who listen. As researchers, we, too, were not immune. Hearing these stories carries the weight of what is known as secondary trauma—a quiet, often unseen impact that lingers in those who bear witness. This was a heavy, but necessary part of the journey.

We are taking decisive action!

Grounded in the principles of GEDSI and the Child Protection Protocols, we understood that this research required more than just methodological rigour—it demanded emotional preparedness. That is why we made the conscious choice to provide every team member, whether a principal investigator, enumerator, or research assistant, with Psychological First Aid training. The two workshop sessions were designed to equip us with tools for care, not only for others, but also for ourselves. And yet, no training could have fully prepared us for what we would carry.

Several members of our research team encountered secondary trauma as they quietly internalized the emotional weight of the narratives they documented. I, too, was unprepared for the profound impact these stories would have on me personally. As the research coordinator, I had anticipated leading the process with structure and composure. However, I soon found myself grappling with anxiety—at times even experiencing panic attacks—merely from engaging with the data

and reading through the participants' accounts. The chapters in this book reflect each researcher's personal engagement with the issues they found most compelling to explore. Each chapter highlights aspects that are often overlooked or rarely discussed in conventional research publications. This book reveals that research is not merely a mechanical process—it is deeply human. As these pages demonstrate, the research journey can evoke strong emotions, challenge long-held assumptions, and even unsettle the researchers themselves. It reminds us that behind every inquiry is a person who is also being transformed.

This book is divided into three parts. The first part explores how sensitive research is conducted within Pesantren. It consists of two chapters. The opening chapter, titled "The Shadow of Authority, Independence, and the Production of Knowledge", discusses the theme of independence—an essential characteristic of Pesantren that we must carefully consider in our research.

As the oldest educational institutions in Indonesia, Pesantren have deep roots in local communities and are typically founded not by the state, but by respected religious leaders. This strong community foundation gives them a unique autonomy, making state intervention, especially on sensitive issues, such as violence or sexual violence, particularly challenging. This section illustrates how we developed a research strategy that respected and leveraged the independent nature of Pesantren. Rather than viewing this independence as a barrier, we saw it as a strength that could be used to build synergy with government efforts to promote a safer, more child-friendly environment within these institutions.

In Chapter 2, Citra Dwikasari shares the challenges we faced during the preparation phase of this research, particularly in gaining access to Pesantren and navigating communication with various stakeholders, often under challenging

circumstances. As a research assistant, Citra was a "gate-keeper" for the research team. In reality, her role was just as vital as that of the principal researchers. Her agility, responsiveness, and problem-solving skills were instrumental in ensuring the research process stayed on track and was manageable in the face of uncertainty. It is fitting that her chapter is titled "Navigating a Winding Process", capturing the complexity and perseverance required to move the work forward.

Part II consists of three chapters. The first, titled "Between Possession and Liberation: Reflections of a Santri Scholar", is written by Haula Noor. In this chapter, Haula critically reflects on the internal dilemmas she encountered in her dual role as both a researcher and a *santri*—a former member of the Pesantren community who has also engaged with broader intellectual and social spheres. She examines how the value of obedience, once deeply ingrained and unquestioningly upheld within the Pesantren context, acquires new and more complex meanings when subjected to intimate and critical scrutiny.

Haula reveals how the structure of obedience within the boarding school system is intertwined with gendered expectations and absolute authority, creating a space where power can be unevenly distributed. She raises a crucial question: how can obedience, a seemingly virtuous trait, become a loophole for the abuse of authority, especially in cases of sexual violence? Her reflections lead to a powerful realization: this is not just a matter of individual behavior, but a systemic issue rooted in longstanding power structures.

The second chapter, "Interactions That Leave Traces", written by Dedy Ibmar, offers a deeply personal reflection on the emotional and ethical complexity of the research process. Dedy shares how each encounter with respondents, especially the children, left a lasting impression, not just on the research but on him as a person. These interactions were not

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

one-sided; they subtly shifted his perspective, reminding him that research is never just about extracting information—it is about human connection.

Ibmar writes candidly about the importance of a more compassionate approach, particularly the need to engage with children and adults in ways that respect their different experiences and vulnerabilities. Along the way, he faced ethical dilemmas—moments that demanded more than academic judgment, but emotional sensitivity and moral clarity. These actions were not merely the result of individual decisions but rather reflected a shared responsibility within the research team—a collective commitment to upholding dignity, honoring trust, and ensuring that the research remained ethically grounded and centered in human values.

In the final chapter of this section, Savran Billahi explores the theme of "Stigma and Stories Within Pesantren Walls." As cases of sexual violence in Pesantren gain public attention, the negative stigma surrounding these institutions has become increasingly difficult to avoid. Savran invites us to look beyond the surface, arguing that the vulnerability to sexual violence is not solely a result of inadequate facilities. Other factors—like how the rooms are arranged, how the buildings are connected to each other, and the lack of open visibility—make supervision more difficult.

While many Pesantren operate without what might be considered "standard" infrastructure, they continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience, supported by their autonomy, strong community involvement, and flexible use of available space. Instead of allowing stigma to shape their identity, Savran encourages Pesantren to engage in open dialogue with their communities, strengthen internal systems, and commit to building a safe and supportive environment for every student.

The third section, titled "Emotions and Ethics", explores the emotional and ethical struggles researchers faced when addressing sensitive topics such as sexuality, sexual violence, and mental health. This section comprises three chapters. The first, Chapter Six, is written by Narila Mutia Nasir and is titled "The Untold Journey: Puberty Stories from inside Pesantren." In this chapter, Mutia shares the challenges of uncovering stories about puberty, a subject often taboo within the context of Pesantren, where strict norms and expectations can make such topics difficult to discuss. Mutia illustrates how empathetic interaction and an anthropological approach, grounded in careful observation, deep listening, and building trust, can help create safe spaces for students to open up. This method emphasizes engaging with participants in a way that respects their cultural context while encouraging honest dialogue. allowing conversations that have long been silenced to finally be heard.

In Chapter Seven, "Breaking Innocence, Building Resilience", Aptiani Nur Jannah offers a powerful reflection on the issue of sexual violence in Pesantren. She explores how the vulnerability of students often stems from their innocence, specifically, their lack of knowledge and awareness about sexual violence. Aptiani recounts how many students struggled to understand or respond to the researchers' questions, as the terms used to describe sexual violence were unfamiliar and absent from the Pesantren curriculum.

Aptiani reveals that students' understanding of sexual violence is often shaped by a confusing mix of moral judgment, myths, and, at times, rigid or imbalanced interpretations of religious teachings, such as the tendency to blame victims for their clothing or behavior. Compounding this is a prevailing culture of silence and denial, which not only discourages victims from speaking out but also allows cycles of violence to continue unchecked. Through her reflection,

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

Aptiani underscores the urgent need for comprehensive reproductive and sexuality education so that students are equipped to recognize, understand, and protect themselves from sexual violence.

The final chapter, "The Lingering Trauma: Researchers' Emotional Reflections", is written by Grace Rachmanda. In this deeply personal reflection, Grace explores the emotional toll of researching sexual violence in Pesantren. She reflects on the emotional toll researchers may experience when engaging with deeply painful and personal narratives, emphasizing the potential for emotional distress and secondary trauma. Her account challenges the notion that trauma is confined to survivors alone, illustrating how those who bear witness—who listen attentively, hold space, and carry the emotional weight of these stories—are also affected. This chapter underscores the critical role of empathy in ethical research, highlights the importance of peer support and accessible mental health care throughout the research process, and, above all, affirms the necessity of centering the voices, experiences, and needs of survivors.

We hope this book offers a different perspective that shows research is not only about data and methodology, but also about courage, empathy, and the mental resilience needed to confront the complex realities in the field. We dedicate this work to fellow researchers, thoughtful reviewers, brave survivors, and all those who continue to fight against sexual violence.

RESEARCHING WITH CARE: EXPLORING SENSITIVE TOPICS IN PESANTREN



THE SHADOW OF AUTHORITY, INDEPENDENCE, AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

9 Windy Triana

hen we were confronted with the results of our fieldwork, ideas for recommendations came pouring in—suggestions for what Pesantren should improve, what the government ought to provide, and how systems could be strengthened. In our enthusiasm to propose meaningful change, we found ourselves drafting lists of what needed to be done. But somewhere along the way, we realized we had overlooked something essential that defines Pesantren and sets them apart from other educational institutions in Indonesia: their independence. Unlike state-run schools, Pesantren are rooted in community initiative, often founded by respected religious leaders, and shaped by local values. This independence is not just structural; it is cultural. It informs how they operate, how they respond, and how they engage with the outside world.

RESEARCHING WITH CARE: EXPLORING SENSITIVE TOPICS IN PESANTREN

The Shadow of Authority, Independence, and the Production of Knowledge

So, we reminded ourselves that intervention here is not simple. Even when framed as a partnership—not controlled from above—it must be approached with humility and respect. We could not just come in with a list of "what should be done." We had to listen more deeply, understand more fully, and tread more carefully. Building meaningful change would require not only the right ideas but also the right approach—one that honors the autonomy at the heart of every Pesantren.

In 2022. Indonesia was with unsettling confronted news: cases of sexual violence had surfaced from within Pesantren, implicating respected and influential figures. What began as a single report soon unraveled into a series of revelations—not only of sexual abuse, but of other forms of violence that had long gone unspoken. As someone who once lived and learned in such an environment, I found myself uneasy. A quiet restless-

Pesantren's independence is not just structural; it is cultural. It informs how they operate, how they respond, and how they engage with the outside world.

ness grew into a storm of questions: What had been hidden behind those walls? What had we been taught to overlook? On social media, conversations erupted—some seeking answers, others rushing to defend, and many caught in between, unsure how to reconcile reverence with wrongdoing.

What makes this issue even more complex is the deeprooted respect society places on religious leaders, coupled with the closed nature of many Pesantren. These institutions value their autonomy, and that independence often leads to resistance against external intervention, whether from the state, law enforcement, or civil society. Change is anything but

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

simple, especially in areas as sensitive and sacred as religion. My personal concern centers on incidents of sexual violence occurring within institutions dedicated to moral and spiritual education. These cases are deeply troubling and inevitably raise questions about the integrity of Pesantren. While such incidents do not represent the reality of all Pesantren, their existence casts a shadow over the reputation of the entire system. I feel a strong responsibility to help restore the image of these institutions.

At the same time, I cannot turn away from the pain of survivors who are courageously seeking justice. Their stories stay with me, reminding me of the urgency of this work. Navigating the tension between my connection, as an alumnus of a pesantren, and the professional responsibility to maintain objectivity as a researcher and academic is a constant challenge for me and my team. Yet, we remain steadfast in our commitment to uphold the values of truth, integrity, and justice.

Together with fellow researchers at PPIM UIN Jakarta, we began to reflect deeply on how we could contribute more meaningfully to Pesantren. Through extended discussions and consultations with various stakeholders, we arrived at a shared vision: to broaden the conversation and advocate for Child-Friendly Pesantren. This approach allows us to address the issue systemically, promoting safety, accountability, and compassion within the very institutions that shape young lives.

Toward Child-Friendly Pesantren: Redefining Safety and Integrity

Child-Friendly Pesantren is a government-initiated program developed through collaboration between the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. We feel fortunate that one of the

RESEARCHING WITH CARE: EXPLORING SENSITIVE TOPICS IN PESANTREN

The Shadow of Authority, Independence, and the Production of Knowledge

researchers on our team contributed directly to the drafting of the program's guidelines, which have since been introduced to several Pesantren across the country.

In our research design discussions, we repeatedly returned to this initiative, not merely as a policy framework, but as a meaningful entry point for engaging with the public's growing concerns surrounding Pesantren. These concerns, especially around incidents of sexual violence reported in the media, have cast a shadow over institutions that are meant to nurture faith, discipline, and moral integrity.

Choosing this focus was not easy. It meant confronting uncomfortable truths about institutions many of us once regarded with deep respect. However, we felt it was necessary. Through this research, we hope not only to shed light on these complex realities but also to contribute to building environments where children are truly safe, valued, and protected. It is a step forward, however small, toward healing and change.

In essence, a Child-Friendly Pesantren refers to an institution that provides education in a safe, nurturing, and violence-free environment. In a conversation I had with Aris Adi Leksono, Commissioner of the Indonesian Child Protection Commission, he emphasized that the greatest challenge lies not in defining the concept, but in truly creating conditions within Pesantren free from all forms of violence.

Linguistically, the term Child-Friendly Pesantren carries a positive and aspirational tone, suggesting a space that supports children's holistic growth and development. Yet, in practice, the term is open to varied interpretations and is not always uniformly embraced by all stakeholders. For some, it may be seen as a critique of existing systems; for others, a call for much-needed reform. This diversity of response reflects the complexity of the issue and the delicate balance between preserving tradition and promoting transformation.

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

Even in the early stages of the discussion, we encountered assumptions that revealed a degree of scepticism toward the Child-Friendly Pesantren initiative. One common guestion was, "Have Pesantren not been child-friendly all along? Why, then, is such a program necessary?" Others viewed the initiative as an attempt to eliminate disciplinary practices, interpreting it as a ban on all forms of punishment, which many see as part of the long-standing tradition of instilling discipline in students. These misunderstandings highlight a deeper challenge: how to communicate the purpose and spirit of the program without it being perceived as a threat to tradition or institutional autonomy. This has become a kind of "homework" for all of us—for the government, which must engage with communities more effectively, and for our research team, which bears the responsibility of offering recommendations grounded in both evidence and cultural sensitivity.

Compounding these concerns is the perception that the Child-Friendly Pesantren initiative constitutes a form of government intrusion into religious institutions. For some stakeholders, this is perceived as a threat to the long-standing autonomy of Pesantren—an independence that has been carefully maintained since their inception. This tension is understandable, given the deep historical, cultural, and religious significance of these institutions and their role in shaping local and national identities. At the same time, the state carries a constitutional mandate to protect all children, a responsibility that extends to every educational setting, including religious ones. Balancing the state's duty to safeguard children's rights with respect for the autonomy of Pesantren remains a delicate and ongoing challenge that requires dialogue, trust-building, and mutual understanding.

One of the defining characteristics of Pesantren is their strong sense of independence. These institutions have the autonomy to shape the direction of Islamic education without relying on government support or external organizations. Financially, they are typically sustained through community self-help, donations from benefactors, and contributions from students and their families. This independence extends to the curriculum, which is often flexible and tailored to the values and vision of each school, rather than being bound by state-imposed standards. Central to this structure is the role of the kiai, who holds full and unquestioned authority over all major decisions, including curriculum design, teacher recruitment, the learning system, and the management of the dormitory. This deep-rooted autonomy is both a source of pride and a key consideration in any discussion of reform or policy engagement.

We are fully aware that our research will inevitably confront the long-standing independence of Pesantren—an autonomy that has the potential to influence every stage of our research journey, from data collection to the dissemination of findings. From the outset, we recognized the need to anticipate challenges, particularly regarding access to data and the sensitivity surrounding the publication of our results. In the early phases, we asked ourselves: could this independence foster openness and collaboration, or would it instead reinforce barriers to access?

In the early stages, we asked ourselves: could this independence encourage openness and dialogue, or would it lead to greater resistance to outside involvement instead? Several media reports of violence and sexual abuse within Pesantren have pointed to the difficulty of accessing these institutions and the reluctance to address such issues publicly. We view these challenges as a byproduct of the strong autonomy that these institutions have traditionally upheld.

The Child-Friendly Pesantren Guidelines, published by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection in collaboration with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, present

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

a vision of the ideal Pesantren—one that is exemplary both in its physical environment and in the quality of interactions among students and between students and adults.

From an environmental standpoint, the facilities described in the guidelines are often perceived as "too good to be true", evoking the image of a "heavenly boarding school." While such standards are not impossible to achieve, it is clear that realizing this vision would require substantial resources, both financial and institutional. The aspiration is noble, but the gap between ideal and reality highlights the need for practical, context-sensitive implementation strategies.

At the same time, driven by a strong spirit of independence, many Pesantren strive to stand independently, often operating with minimal or no external support from the government or other institutions. Those with highly developed, ideal facilities are typically accessible only to families with significant financial means. Yet, for many children from lower-middle-class backgrounds, Pesantren remain a vital alternative for education and moral development.

In this context, simplicity is not just a practical necessity—it becomes part of the character and identity of Pesantren. However, this simplicity should not be mistaken for a barrier to creating a child-friendly environment. A safe, nurturing, and respectful atmosphere does not depend solely on material resources; it can also be built through meaningful relationships, ethical leadership, and a commitment to the well-being of every student.

The experience of one of our researchers in Eastern Indonesia illustrates how the simplicity of a Pesantren does not necessarily make it unfriendly to children. At first glance, the bamboo structure of the school might suggest a lack of adequate facilities. The students sleep on thin mats, exposed to the chill of the night air seeping through the gaps in the

bamboo walls. From the outside, this setting may appear far from ideal. Yet, despite the modest conditions, the sense of care, community, and moral guidance fostered within the school reflects a learning environment that still prioritizes the well-being of its students.

Our researcher had the opportunity to spend time observing the area surrounding the Pesantren, including nearby homes and the broader community. What he discovered was both surprising and deeply meaningful for all of us. He shared how the Pesantren was the only place in the area with access to electricity and proper lighting. In contrast to the surrounding environment, the boarding school offered a sense of safety and comfort—however modest—making it a far better space for children in that community.

This experience revealed that Pesantren can serve as a refuge even within conditions of simplicity and scarcity. They can provide stability, protection, and a nurturing environment for children with limited options. It also shifted our understanding of what it means to be a Child-Friendly Pesantren. It is not always about ideal infrastructure—it is about creating a space where children feel safe, supported, and cared for, even in the humblest of settings.

Where Independence Meets Responsibility: Rethinking Child Protection in Pesantren

In responding to the issue of sexual violence, our aim is to remain fair and objective. While we use the Child-Friendly Pesantren framework as an entry point, our research goes beyond identifying potential vulnerabilities—we also seek to understand the resilience within these institutions. The surfaced cases undeniably reveal areas of concern, but they also highlight the importance of recognizing how some Pesantren have managed to build protective environments for their students.

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

Our goal is not only to examine where vulnerabilities lie, but also to explore the strengths and internal mechanisms that contribute to resilience against sexual violence. We want to identify and analyze the factors that can be strengthened—cultural, structural, and relational—to support the development of Pesantren that are truly child-friendly and safe for all students.

Recognizing that all Pesantren might not readily accept this research, we adopted a collaborative approach from the outset. We engaged in dialogue with a range of stakeholders, including members of the Pesantren community and representatives from the government, particularly the Ministry of Religious Affairs. In partnership with senior researchers from PPIM UIN Jakarta and Mr. Basnang Said, Director of Pesantren Education, we worked to identify effective strategies for fostering trust and approaching Pesantren with cultural sensitivity and mutual respect.

In response to the constructive intent behind this research, Mr. Basnang Said extended his support by issuing an official letter to all Regional Offices in the areas where our study would be conducted. This endorsement has been a source of encouragement—a vital boost to our motivation and confidence. We remain optimistic that this research is both timely and essential for informing the development of evidence-based policies that support child protection and the continued growth of Pesantren.

Armed with what we affectionately called our "magic letter" from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, we deployed 125 enumerators across 90 districts and cities to begin the national survey. This letter granted us formal access, but we knew genuine entry into Pesantren required more than official approval. It required trust, cultural sensitivity, and personal connection.

RESEARCHING WITH CARE: EXPLORING SENSITIVE TOPICS IN PESANTREN

The Shadow of Authority, Independence, and the Production of Knowledge

That is why we carefully selected local enumerators with two key qualities: familiarity with the area and a background as a Pesantren alumni. These shared experiences allowed them to connect more meaningfully with the communities. In their hands, the research became more than data collection—it became a conversation built on trust and respect.

Most Pesantren responded positively to our field researchers, though acceptance did not come instantly. Gaining trust took time—a gradual, sometimes winding process. Their caution was understandable. After all, who would not be careful with strangers arriving at their doorstep?

Yet, beyond our expectations, many welcomed us with openness and sincerity. The purpose of researching Child-Friendly Pesantren was met with curiosity and, often, support. Many schools agreed to participate and allowed our enumerators to engage directly with students—a gesture that spoke volumes about their willingness to be part of the conversation.

The independent nature of Pesantren means that, historically, any community leader could establish one at any time and place. This autonomy has been a defining feature and a challenge for ensuring consistent quality. Since 2019, the state has taken steps to be more present, introducing a legal framework to guide the establishment and governance of Pesantren. Through laws and regulations—such as Law No. 18 of 2019 and subsequent ministerial decrees—the government now plays a clearer role in oversight. Even earlier, with the 2019 policy allowing schools to receive operational assistance (BOS), the state's involvement signaled a growing commitment to support and standardize Pesantren education.

Still, in keeping with their principle of independence, Pesantren have the freedom to accept or decline government assistance. Some view programs like BOS (School Operational Assistance) as a form of state intervention, especially since receiving it requires registration in the Ministry of Religious Affairs database. Despite these concerns, many schools chose to register to access the support. However, in the field, we observed indications that the use of this assistance may not always align with its intended purpose, raising important questions about transparency and oversight.

In several areas, enumerators faced unexpected challenges—some Pesantren listed in the sample no longer existed or turned out to be only mosques. This tested their persistence. They had to search for replacement schools, navigate new permission processes, and build trust from scratch. One enumerator in a province in Sumatra, for instance, had to change research sites three times. One school declined to participate; another could not be located. Only after a long process was he finally welcomed to a boarding school. He stayed nearby for several nights, gradually building rapport. He even joined the school's religious study sessions—voluntarily—just to earn enough trust to meet and engage with the students.

The quantitative phase of our research was successfully completed, with a 98% response rate—an outcome that exceeded our expectations and provided a strong foundation for analysis. Unexpectedly, the Child-Friendly Pesantren study also yielded sensitive information that required careful handling. While upholding scientific integrity and objectivity, we approached the data with great care, selecting, reviewing, and processing it responsibly. Central to our approach was a strong commitment to ethical principles, particularly the protection of privacy for the Pesantren and the students and teachers who participated as respondents.

In the qualitative phase, the principal researchers went directly into the field, supported by research assistants. The Pesantren we visited received us warmly, with no instances of rejection. Even after the research was completed, many schools maintained open communication and expressed hope that our findings could contribute to the future development of Pesantren. During this process, we also had the valuable opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with the kiai and nyai. These key figures hold moral and institutional authority within the schools.

From personal experience, I felt a genuine openness from the kiai and nyai. This was unexpected, given their reputation for being highly selective toward outsiders. Yet, I encountered rich stories, diverse perspectives, and thoughtful reflections that went far beyond what I had anticipated. This research journey has taught us that the independence and authority of Pesantren are not necessarily obstacles to their development. In fact, during the qualitative phase, we came to see how this very independence can become a strength when approached with respect and clear communication. It allowed space for honest dialogue, even around sensitive issues.

These experiences have made us more hopeful about the next stage: communicating our research findings to Pesantren. And that, we believe, is not just a task—but a responsibility we are now better prepared to carry out.

In the Shadow of Faith and Honor: Addressing Sexual Violence

Undeniably, the independence and authority of Pesantren can pose significant challenges to openness. These institutions have the autonomy to decide with whom they engage and to what extent they are willing to be transparent. From our interviews with various stakeholders involved in the handling of sexual violence cases, one of the most frequently cited—and perhaps most difficult—barriers is this culture of closedness.

When cases arise, particularly those implicating individuals in positions of authority or their families, some Pesantren

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

respond by withdrawing and resisting external intervention. Even when the leadership is not directly involved, there remains a deep concern about damaging the institution's reputation or eroding public trust. In such cases, preserving the dignity and image of the school often takes precedence over transparency, making efforts toward accountability and justice all the more complex.

However, one of our researchers encountered a rare but powerful example of good practice in how a Pesantren handled a case of sexual violence. Contrary to the more common pattern of silence or denial, this school chose a path of openness. Rather than compromising their dignity, this transparency became a way to uphold it. In discussing our findings, the researcher described how the school welcomed intervention and actively sought consultation from various parties. This openness was rooted in a genuine commitment to justice and healing for the survivor. According to a local authority, the school's actions demonstrated not weakness, but a deep sense of care and responsibility. It showed that accountability can coexist with integrity—and that openness can, in fact, protect what is most honorable.

The tendency toward closedness in Pesantren is not merely a matter of individual attitude—it is shaped by the structure of power relations within the institutions themselves. A deeply rooted culture of respect often inhibits open criticism of authority, especially in the absence of clear reporting systems and support mechanisms.

As researchers who are also alumni of pesantren, hearing directly how these institutions grapple with cases of sexual violence has deeply tested our empathy and integrity. Our personal ties allow us to understand their fear of stigma and the long-term impact on their reputation. Yet, at the same time, we are responsible for upholding the values of child protection

RESEARCHING WITH CARE: EXPLORING SENSITIVE TOPICS IN PESANTREN

The Shadow of Authority, Independence, and the Production of Knowledge

and standing with survivors. Balancing these commitments is not easy, but it is necessary.

Personally, I have found it challenging to communicate these findings. This research has been unlike any I've done before—emotionally intense and psychologically demanding, especially when listening directly to survivors' stories of sexual violence. At the same time, I felt a deep sense of responsibility toward Pesantren, which made it difficult to fully detach my emotions. My subjectivity was inevitably challenged. Yet, together with my fellow researchers, we supported one another and remained committed to maintaining our integrity and objectivity as researchers and academics.

I was challenged to communicate our findings with care, without offending any party, especially the Pesantren that were the focus of our research. Given their independence, we understand the risk of rejection associated with sharing these findings. Yet at the same time, we feel a strong responsibility to present our discoveries truthfully and transparently to the public.

I felt a sense of relief upon reviewing the final results of our research. Our findings suggest that, while concerns over reported cases of sexual violence are valid, the resilience of many Pesantren in addressing such issues outweighs their vulnerabilities. Numerous institutions continue to uphold internal mechanisms, cultural values, and community practices that contribute to the prevention of and response to violence. This offers a hopeful indication that, with the right support and engagement, Pesantren have the potential to become genuinely safe and nurturing environments for children.

Yet, behind that sense of relief, I also carry a deep moral weight. Although the data shows that the vulnerability of Pesantren to sexual violence is relatively low—only 1.06%—this percentage becomes significant when set against the

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

8 million students across Indonesia. It means that around 40,000 children remain at risk. These are not just numbers—they represent real faces, real stories, and real futures. As a researcher, I cannot look away. I must find the courage to share this reality with the public and my fellow alumni from Pesantren. When it comes to violence, even a single case is one too many.

This is an important reminder that our work is far from over—that transparency is essential to building stronger protection systems. With the right approach, I believe that increasing awareness within Pesantren to realize Child-Friendly environments is entirely possible. Protecting children's safety and well-being is a shared responsibility; the saying "it takes a village to raise a child" holds true. For that reason, openness to synergy and collaboration is not just beneficial—it is necessary to strengthen the broader ecosystem of child protection.

Trust in Pesantren should be built not merely on image, but on a genuine commitment to protecting and promoting the well-being of children. When pesantren demonstrate openness and a willingness to grow, public trust is not only earned—it is strengthened in a more authentic and lasting manner.



NAVIGATING A WINDING PROCESS

Citra Dwikasari

onducting research safely and smoothly is never a straight path—it often involves a winding journey shaped by the complexity of the issues at hand. Each research process presents its own unique challenges and learning opportunities. This chapter shares my personal reflections as a research assistant involved in the Child-Friendly Pesantren study, from its initial preparation to the final stage of presenting the findings to stakeholders and the wider community.

Navigating Layers of Sensitivity

Child-Friendly Pesantren—this was the research topic we set out to explore. Although I had been involved in research during my undergraduate and master's studies, this was my first experience as part of a professional research team. From the outset, I was excited, thinking the topic sounded simple and familiar. But as the process unfolded, my perspective changed. The research revealed a level of complexity I had not anticipated and introduced me to many new insights. It

became a valuable learning experience—both challenging and deeply enriching.

The topic of sexual violence, the involvement of children as research subjects, and the socioreligious context of pesantren carry profound ethical, cultural, and methodological implications, as well as significant risks.

For me, this research underscored the deeply layered and complex sensitivities inherent in the study. The topic of sexual the involvement violence. children as research subjects, and the socio-religious context of pesantren, each carry profound ethical, cultural, and methodological implications, as well as significant risks. The first and perhaps most challenging layer is the topic of sexual violence itself. In Indonesia, it remains deeply taboo, difficult to speak about, let alone investigate. Yet, it is a persistent and painful reality. I realized that I grew up in an environment—both at home and among friends—where discussions about sexual violence were absent. We were never taught to understand or recognize it.

The frequent news reports of such cases have been jarring, a stark reminder that these incidents are not isolated. Even as I write this in April 2025, stories of sexual violence continue to emerge. It is a reality we can no longer afford to ignore.

The second layer of sensitivity lies in the involvement of child students as research participants. This study engaged male and female students aged 16–18, who, under Indonesian law, are still considered children. As such, their participation required parental or guardian consent, as well as the child's

own assent, with the right to withdraw at any time. This underscores the ethical responsibility of ensuring informed, voluntary participation. The study upheld the principles of child protection and social inclusion, ensuring all children—regardless of background or vulnerabilities—had equal rights to participate. Involving children fundamentally shaped the research process. I came to understand that working with child participants requires careful attention to language, the duration of engagement, emotional impact, and, above all, the principle of *do not harm*.

The third and perhaps most challenging layer was that this research took place in Pesantren. Coming from a public education background in Bengkulu, Sumatra, I am not a santri. I attended secular schools from elementary through high school, and my exposure to Pesantren was minimal, limited to what I had heard in passing. It was not until I pursued higher education at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta that I began to understand what a Pesantren truly was.

Many of my peers there were pesantren alumni, and through interactions with them, I began to learn more deeply about Islam, Islamic education, and its diverse schools of thought. I was surprised to discover the existence of the four major Sunni schools—Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali—something I had never encountered before. Only toward the end of my studies, I became aware of major Islamic organizations in Indonesia, such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama. For someone like me, unfamiliar with the world of pesantren, entering this research meant not only academic exploration but also cultural learning and personal transformation.

I realize that researching Child-Friendly Pesantren presents unique challenges, especially for someone like me, who does not come from a *santri* background. The complexity of this study lies not only in the sensitivity of the issues but also

in the layered affiliations and cultural nuances of the subjects involved.

Navigating the Depth and Breadth of the Study

Until now, my experience in research had been brief and mostly involved processing ready-to-use digital data. I was not familiar with navigating legal permits, expert consultations, or the meticulous preparation of research instruments. But this study was different. Every stage— from design to dissemination—was marked by careful revisions, attention to detail, and unexpected challenges. It was a complex journey that deepened my appreciation for what it takes to carry out impactful, real-world research.

This research spanned two years, from February 2023 to February 2025, and employed a mixed-methods approach. In 2023, a national survey was conducted across 34 provinces to map the potential vulnerabilities and resilience of Pesantren to sexual violence. In 2024, these findings were explored further through qualitative research, interviews, and observations in 13 provinces. By early 2025, the integrated results from both phases were successfully presented to stakeholders.

Our research carries a major goal: to inform and drive policy change. Stakeholders at all levels share a commitment to eliminating sexual violence in Pesantren—an issue that must be reduced to zero. These stakeholders include central and regional governments, Pesantren, community leaders, Islamic organizations, and institutions involved in prevention and response efforts. Real change requires collaboration across local and national levels, with every party playing a role in building a safer environment for students.

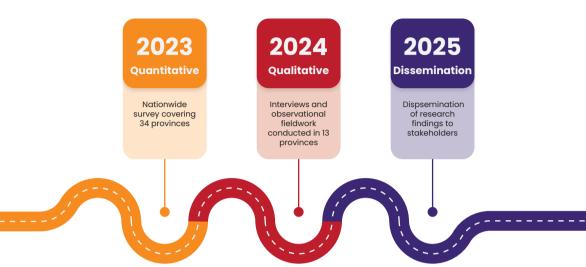


Figure 1. Three Stages of Child-Friendly Pesantren Research

As a research assistant, I worked diligently and stayed prepared to manage various needs before data collection could begin. One of the most fundamental responsibilities was securing legal permits. In Indonesia, any research activity must be authorized by a Research Certificate issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs (Kemendagri). This process requires submitting a range of documents, including the research proposal, application letter, consent and legality statements, institutional Tax ID (NPWP), personal NPWP, and ID card of the principal researcher, CVs, and COVID-19 vaccination certificates for all team members. Ensuring proper permits was crucial to avoid potential obstacles during the research process and to affirm that this work was legitimate and officially recognized.

This was my first experience handling a research permit application. Fortunately, in today's digital era, the process can be done online through ula.kemendagri.go.id. The digital system was a great help, and the list of required documents was

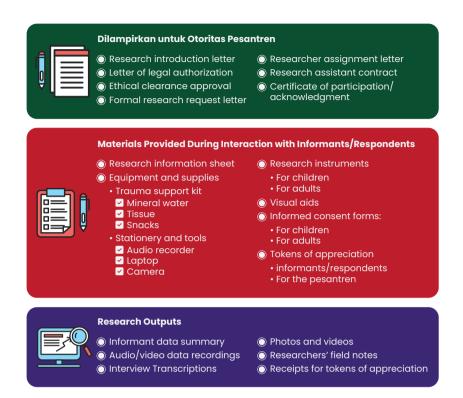
Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

clearly outlined. In theory, the approval process takes only 3–4 days. However, it took four submission attempts before ours was finally approved, resulting in a total processing time of two weeks. This experience taught me the importance of preparing all documents with precision—every detail must be accurate, complete, and free of typos, as errors are not tolerated. Such diligence is essential to ensure smooth, multi-level verification within the Ministry of Home Affairs.

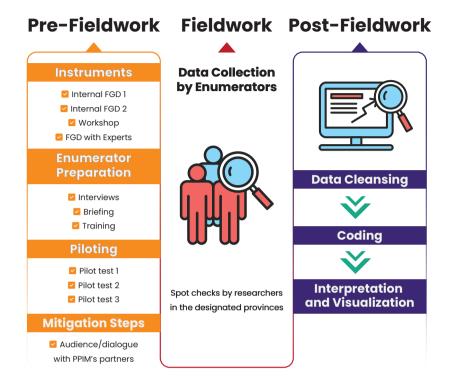
While waiting for the research certificate from the Ministry of Home Affairs to be issued, I also worked on securing the ethics approval letter. Both documents are essential before moving on to the next phase of research. Preparing the required materials for the ethics review proved to be particularly challenging. Questions on the ethics form—such as "What mitigation strategies will be implemented if research-related risks arise?"—prompted me to think more deeply and responsibly. What risks might arise? Who will be accountable? What mechanisms should be in place to respond if something goes wrong?

Compared to the administrative form for the Ministry of Home Affairs, the ethics application required more thoughtful discussion with the research team. This was especially important because the study involved children. The ethics committee prioritizes ensuring that the research poses no harm to child participants. As researchers, that ethical responsibility is ours to uphold.

In addition to the research permit and ethics approval—which require considerable time and attention—several other documents and requirements must also be prepared. A detailed list of these requirements can be seen in the following image.



Before reaching the data collection stage, a series of preparatory steps must be completed to ensure the research poses minimal risk and can be conducted safely. Instruments must be carefully designed to be appropriate and non-harmful, methods must be efficient and ethically sound, and mitigation strategies must be clearly outlined and ready to implement. These precautions are crucial, especially when dealing with sensitive topics and vulnerable subjects. Any misstep—in approach, data collection, or analysis—can jeopardize the entire research process.



During data collection in the field, my primary responsibility was facilitating communication between the enumerators, researchers, and the relevant stakeholders. Internally, I carried a sense of worry, concerned about potential risks that could disrupt the research. These included the possibility of primary trauma for respondents or secondary trauma for researchers. While we had carefully prepared preventive measures and mitigation protocols, the risk could never be entirely ruled out. Fortunately, none of these concerns materialized.

I was also prepared to step in as needed, and I did. During the quantitative phase, I participated in fieldwork to conduct spot checks, ensure data quality, manage risk, and assume a dual role as an enumerator. I directly engaged with

respondents, experiencing firsthand the realities of field data collection.

Institutional Capacity and Access: A Gap in Practical Reach

The research scheme had been carefully designed, and both legal and ethical permits were secured. But a critical question remained: how could we gain entry and be accepted by the Pesantren? The "main gate" to these institutions is not easily opened. We had to prepare multiple strategies to ensure access to the information. This challenge was closely tied to the diverse characteristics of Pesantren, which required equally diverse and context-sensitive approaches.

As the assistant responsible for coordinating the technical aspects of this research, I ensured that everything progressed within the designated timeline. The schemes we developed through long and detailed meetings needed to be implemented effectively. Along the way, we encountered various challenges. Initially, we gathered contact information for the targeted Pesantren by scouring the internet and social media platforms, including official websites, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and event flyers. However, reaching out using publicly listed phone numbers proved difficult. Responses were few, many numbers were inactive, and access remained a significant barrier. The key questions became: how do we establish contact, and more importantly, how do we gain the trust of these institutions to allow the research to be conducted within their environment?

Not everyone can easily access Pesantren. Rejection is a real risk that can hinder the research process. Even we—PPIM UIN Jakarta—despite being primarily composed of individuals from pesantren communities, faced significant access challenges. PPIM UIN Jakarta is a research institution rooted in Indonesia's Islamic community organizations, such

as Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, and Persis. Most of our researchers are also pesantren alumni; some are even actively involved in pesantren networks or administration. Yet, these affiliations alone were insufficient to guarantee entry into the schools selected for the study. To overcome this, we had to develop and apply a range of tailored approaches to navigate these access barriers successfully.

The first step we took to address the access challenge was to leverage the support of enumerators. From the outset, we carefully defined the criteria for enumerators, as they would serve as the extension of the PPIM research team in the field.

We had to develop and apply a range of tailored approaches to navigate these access barriers successfully. Key criteria included being from the same region as the targeted Pesantren, having a pesantren background, and possessing strong local networks to facilitate entry. These considerations were strategic efforts to increase the likelihood that Pesantren would be open to participating in our research.

When we successfully established contact with Pesantren, the responses we received varied. Many welcomed us with warmth and openness. However, some declined to participate. "Sorry, we cannot participate in this research", was a response we encountered, even after persistent efforts to gain access. One such case occurred at a boarding school in the Jakarta area, where our request was ultimately turned down, despite our approach to leaders at all levels, from grassroots to top.

Several Pesantren in Indonesia are affiliated with major organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and others. Our close network with key figures and core administrators within these organizations helped facilitate access. We began by reaching out to the central leadership of these Islamic organizations and received support in the form of introductory letters addressed to affiliated boarding schools. This formal endorsement helped foster greater openness and trust, making the schools more willing to participate in our research.

Another strategy we employed to overcome access barriers was involving the Ministry of Religious Affairs at the regional level. Each district or city's local office (Kantor Wilayah) played a key role in facilitating introductions and opening doors to Pesantren. We engaged in diplomatic efforts by involving representatives from these offices, recognizing that the success of this research required a multifaceted approach. Collaboration was essential—shared institutional identity alone was not enough.

Getting Everyone on Board was not so Easy

Looking back, one of the most challenging aspects of this research journey was not just accessing the field, but also navigating collaboration on such a large scale. This study involved hundreds of research subjects scattered across the Indonesian archipelago, while our core team consisted of just seven people. We needed to reach 1,800 respondents across 34 provinces during the quantitative phase. Realistically, our team could not handle this alone. We had to rely on a broad network of collaborators, and although we knew this from the start, I don't think I fully grasped the complexity of coordination until we were in the midst of it.

Quantitative data collection, in particular, had to happen simultaneously across regions to maintain consistency and reliability. That added pressure—not just to find capable enumerators—but to build trust, train effectively, and ensure everyone understood the research's objectives, methods, and

ethical considerations. Mass collaboration sounds promising in theory, but it tested our patience, flexibility, and commitment in unexpected ways.

Differences in
language, work
culture, knowledge
levels, and experience
were the kinds
of technical and
interpersonal
challenges I had to
navigate as one of the
"gatekeepers" of the
process, alongside the
rest of the principal
research team.

Beyond the challenge of the large number of respondents, we also had to navigate significant geographical hurdles. The PPIM research team is based in Ciputat, South Tangerang, Banten—far from many research locations. Reaching all of them by land alone was simply not possible. Some areas required air or water travel—planes, speedboats, and everything in between-because research spanned the vast and varied landscape of Indonesia, an archipelagic country with complex and

often remote terrains. The logistical planning alone reminded us just how diverse and expansive this nation truly is.

To address these two major challenges, we involved field researchers or enumerators (for the quantitative phase) and research assistants (for the qualitative phase) who came from local communities. Their role was crucial, especially in gaining access to Pesantren and collecting data on the ground. However, working collaboratively across such a wide network also came with its own set of difficulties. Differences in language, work culture, knowledge levels, and experience often surfaced. These were the kinds of technical and interpersonal

challenges I had to navigate as one of the "gatekeepers" of the process, alongside the rest of the principal research team.

Managing human resources—especially when working with enumerators and research assistants—presents its own set of challenges. One example that tested our resolve was when the data collected did not meet the required quality standards. Yet, the field researcher insisted on full payment as stipulated in the contract. Situations like this are difficult. We had to balance two responsibilities carefully: upholding the integrity of our data while still respecting and honoring the rights of our collaborators.

Despite these hurdles, all parties eventually fulfilled their roles with dedication. Their contributions extended far beyond data collection—they were involved in nearly every phase of the research. From the beginning, we brought in various stakeholders—government bodies, institutions, and organizations—to help shape the research instrument and ensure the study was grounded in shared goals and perspectives. Our collaboration with institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Bappenas, KemenPPPA, the PPKS Task Force, PUSKAPA, and others was both intensive and productive. These partnerships provided critical support and helped ensure the research ran according to plan.

The commitment we poured into this research was met with heartfelt appreciation. I still remember the warmth of one message delivered to me personally: "We also thank you for the presentation of the research results. God willing, the results are beneficial—especially if followed up, so every level of the institution can work together in handling the case." This message—from a Pesantren representative who attended the research findings presentation—felt like a love letter to our work. At that moment, my heart was whole.

EVERYDAY SPACES AND INTERACTIONS IN PESANTREN



BETWEEN POSSESSION AND LIBERATION: REFLECTIONS OF A SANTRI SCHOLAR

Haula Noor

his chapter emerged from a deep sense of inner conflict—an emotional mix of dilemma, sadness, and sorrow—that arose as I began my field research in Pesantren. The research itself was driven by a troubling reality: the emergence of violence cases within these institutions since 2022. For me—and for many others who once lived within the pesantren system—this was more than just data. It was a wake-up call.

I spent six years of my life in a Pesantren during my junior and senior high school years. It was not just a personal journey; it was a source of pride for my family. My father, especially, took great pride in having all his children attend pesantren. But as I became more involved in the academic world, I began to feel increasingly distanced from that past life. I started to view the pesantren world as one marked by strict obedience and, at times, a lack of critical space—a world I thought I had outgrown.

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

Now, I return as someone changed—no longer merely a former *santri*, but a researcher with a clear purpose: to understand what is truly unfolding within the walls of Pesantren. Although the institution I visited for this study was not the one I once called home, its atmosphere evoked a deep sense of familiarity, bridging past experience with present inquiry.

As I walked through the grounds, my memory gently wandered back to my own days of studying religion. Vague but vivid fragments surfaced: waking before dawn, lining up for the shower, queuing for breakfast, walking to class, joining communal prayers—an entire rhythm of life once lived with quiet devotion. Those routines were carried out with sincerity and still echoed in the present. I realized that life as a *santri*, basically, does not give much room for choice: whether to obey or not. Everything has been arranged in such a way. By design, life in a Pesantren requires us to live in obedience—following routines, following rules, living in harmony with others, and seeking blessings from the teachers. As a child and a student, I understand that obeying parents and teachers is the key to success in life. And the belief in that value, I feel, has led me to my academic life today.

This chapter is a reflection on my research journey across several Pesantren in Indonesia. Returning to these spaces, I now see the time and setting of pesantren life from a different perspective. The experience prompted unsettling questions: What did I overlook during my own years in the boarding school? Did I, too, witness or endure such incidents without fully grasping them? How could spaces meant to be sanctuaries for students become sites of harm?

This journey became more than just a professional undertaking—it evolved into a process of rereading my own past. It is a reflection shaped by a desire not to betray my own experiences and an attempt to finally hear the voices I may have once silenced or ignored—the voices of the students and, perhaps, my own.

Growing as a Santri: Foundations of Faith and Knowledge

Pesantren have long been known as religious educational institutions that go beyond teaching academic subjects—they also shape students' character and identity through discipline, independence, and the internalization of Islamic values. In scholarly literature, they are often described as spaces that reflect piety, simplicity, and spiritual blessing. Historically, pesantren have been respected for preserving classical Islamic knowledge and for nurturing generations committed to ethical and moral living. I used to embrace this image fully—until I began to hear about cases of abuse and misconduct by figures of authority within these institutions. That was when my belief was shaken, and I felt deeply troubled.

When I returned to the Pesantren environment—this time as a researcher, no longer as a student—I carried two things with me: nostalgia and unease. Nostalgia for those adolescent years filled with discipline, structure, and a sense of community. But also unease, now that I recognize how much of what I once accepted as "normal" is layered with complexities I had not been able to see before. As a *santri*, obedience was central. Obedience to teachers, to the rules, to deeply rooted traditions passed down within the pesantren. This obedience was not just taught—it was shaped systematically. Through tightly controlled daily routines, limited access to the outside world, and a rigid hierarchy of authority, obedience became more than a value; it became a way of life that was rarely, if ever, questioned.

My first visit to one of the Pesantren in Central Java left a lasting impression. Observing the way the students lived their daily lives in the pesantren, I could not help but whisper to myself, "They're incredible." Upon our arrival, the head of the boarding school immediately introduced us to a young female teacher, who then escorted my colleague and me to the accommodation they had prepared. We were placed in one of the students' rooms—no door, decaying walls, a thin carpet on the floor, and a fan to battle the stifling heat. It was basic and humble. And yet, I reminded myself, this modest facility was specially arranged for us. The students live with even less.

Not long after, I went to the bathroom to perform ablution. When I returned, I turned to my colleague and said, "The water is salty!" Silently, I thought to myself, if I had lived here, I'm not sure I would've made it.

That statement came out as if I had never experienced life in a boarding school. Yet I know very well that being a *santri* is not merely about getting through each day—it is about immersing oneself in life as part of the learning journey, along with all the challenges that come with it. Beneath the students' packed routines—waking up before dawn, lining up for showers, praying in congregation, memorizing, attending classes, and queuing for meals—lie deeply rooted values that shape obedience, commitment, and resilience. Through these daily rhythms, a subtle yet powerful interaction unfolds between students and teachers. It becomes a living classroom that instills manners, humility, sincerity, self-discipline, empathy toward peers from diverse backgrounds, and a relentless spirit in the pursuit of knowledge.

I remember vividly when exam season came around, my bed became the most comfortable place to memorize lessons. I would not get up until every word was firmly in my head. That same spirit is what I saw in these students. After the morning prayer, they gathered for sermons, their mouths struggling to hold back constant yawns. Then came the memorization sessions with their teachers. Some even chose to sit quietly in dim corners, seeking silence to focus. Watching

them, I knew exactly how it felt—because I had once been in their place.

I also recall a moment when my homeroom teacher, an ustaz, once asked me to wash his clothes. As a student, I naturally obeyed; he was my teacher and, in many ways, a second parent. And as a child, the task did not feel burdensome. At home, I had always been taught to help with household chores—washing clothes, doing the dishes, and handling other tasks. I never really considered how others might perceive what I was doing. But I never regretted it. I did it with sincerity, as a form of service to my teacher. At the time, it felt entirely normal.

What I experienced in the past also happens to students at the Pesantren I visited. One of the female students shared her daily routine with me. She helps the kyai's family by serving guests, cleaning the house, and washing clothes. Sometimes, she stays up until midnight waiting for guests to leave, even though she has to wake up early for school the next day. In addition to these tasks, she is responsible for supervising other students—waking them up in the morning, checking the tidiness of their rooms and the surrounding environment, ensuring that no one is late for activities, and making sure everyone receives their meals.

I also heard a similar story from a fellow researcher; one that left a deep mark on me. It was about a *santri* who agreed to be married to someone chosen by her kiai, even without her parents' involvement. What pained me even more were the troubling stories of students who, in the name of absolute obedience, allowed boundaries to be crossed by their kiai or teacher. Some of them believed that this attention was a privilege-a sign of being favoured—without realising the gravity of what they were experiencing.

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

The students never complained about what they went through. I believe they did it sincerely and even took pride in it. However, it is through stories like these that blind obedience takes root—and when that happens, it opens the door to the abuse of power. When these stories become public, people start to question the safety of Pesantren. Institutions once respected for nurturing character and spiritual values are now being seen in a different light. This does not just erode public trust—it also creates a genuine dilemma for those of us who were raised to value the obedience, discipline, and independence instilled in these schools.

A question the public often asks when hearing about rising cases of sexual violence in Pesantren is: "Why don't the students just say no?" The answer is—they can, but the real question is: are they able to? And the truth is, no, they're not. I say this with full awareness—because if someone had asked me the same question back then, I would not have been able to refuse either. Many students genuinely believe that every task or request from a teacher, if carried out with sincerity, brings spiritual reward. If not in the form of good grades or praise, then perhaps in the form of ease, blessings, or success in the life that lies ahead. That is the kind of belief system deeply rooted in many of us.

Pesantren play a significant role in shaping intellectual character, a tradition deeply rooted in their history. They are not just educational institutions, but vibrant communities of learning where classical texts (*kutub al-turats*), the continuity of scholarly teachings from one generation to the next, and the wisdom of the kiai become key elements in nurturing students' reasoning, character, and sense of purpose. The practice of studying classical *kitab* (*kitab kuning*) through *sorogan* or *bandongan*, the deep respect for the kiai's knowledge, and the emphasis on manners in learning reflect an approach to

education that goes beyond academic achievement, fostering both spiritual depth and ethical awareness.

I must admit that this distinctive way of thinking and sense of identity form a unique blend in the intellectual profile of Pesantren graduates, especially those who later pursue careers in academia. They carry with them a rich heritage of traditional scholarship, one that is not merely about mastering texts but also about embodying an intellectual ethos: a deep connection to the past, respect for scholarly authority, and patience in the pursuit of knowledge.

This legacy can be both a strength and a challenge. On the one hand, it instills a strong sense of responsibility to preserve the authenticity of tradition and uphold the values that have shaped their academic identity. On the other hand, stepping into the modern academic world demands something different—it calls for critical engagement with texts, a willingness to question inherited ideas, and the ability to offer fresh perspectives in response to today's complex issues.

Stepping Into Academia: A Shift in Perspective

I consider myself fortunate to have built a career in academia—a path that, in many ways, felt predictable from the start. My father is a teacher, my mother attended a teacher training school, and most of my extended family are also educators. Growing up, I often imagined myself one day standing in front of a classroom.

My upbringing reflected the structure of a typical family of the New Order era. My father embodied the traits of fatherism (Irawanto & Ramsey, 2011), where the father-child relationship was distinctly hierarchical, and the father was seen as the unquestioned leader of the household, deserving full obedience and respect. Meanwhile, my mother's role closely aligned with the concept of motherism (Suryakusuma, 2011)—she was fully dedicated to domestic responsibilities

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

and committed to meeting the needs of her husband and children.

Of course, my family was not entirely rigid. There were elements of democratic values, though they were quite limited. For example, when it came time to decide where I would continue my education after elementary school, my father said, "You can study anywhere, as long as it is at a Pesantren." That, to me, was a form of democracy—with boundaries.

My father carried the values of obedience into our home life: always listen to your parents, do not question too much, and trust that every instruction is for your own good. These values shaped how I navigated life at the boarding school—rarely questioning, simply following. "Just obey, go through it, and eventually, you will understand and be safe." That is the mindset I carried with me, deeply ingrained in my home.

Entering the academic world was not an easy task. Looking back, the boarding school environment that shaped me emphasized silence and obedience. In contrast, academia demands constant critical thinking, whether in teaching, research, or writing. Here, being essential means asking the right questions, clearly defining problems, analyzing information objectively, and evaluating facts logically. Furthermore, the academic world is founded on a strong collegial tradition—a culture rooted in equality and collaboration among faculty, staff, and students alike.

This kind of critical ability is nearly impossible to develop within the environment of a Pesantren. There, every gesture and way of speaking toward the kiai or teachers must be carefully observed and repeated until they become deeply ingrainedFor female students in particular, the value of obedience is shaped not only by institutional norms but also by socially constructed gender roles, introducing an additional

Between Possession and Liberation: Reflections of a Santri Scholar

layer of vulnerability to power imbalances and potential abuse.

A fellow researcher shared how students at one school would immediately stand and bow when a *kiai* or teacher passed by—an automatic show of respect. Refusing a request or instruction is simply not within the realm of consideration for many students. I recall the surprised expressions on their faces when I asked, "Is it possible to say no to your kiai or teacher?"—a question that seemed almost inconceivable to them, as though the possibility of refusal had never before been imagined.

However, some universities still retain forms of etiquette reminiscent of Pesantren traditions. This is not the case across all faculties. However, in departments where many students are alumni of pesantren—and where lecturers are hesitant to let go of these customs—these practices continue, consciously preserved. I experienced this firsthand during a visit to one such university. While sitting in the lecturers' lounge, a student entered to meet a faculty member for academic purposes. After offering a greeting, the student proceeded to kneel and pay respects to each lecturer in the room, including me. I was taken aback. I thought to myself, "Why does this kind of tradition still exist in a university setting?" Instinctively, I asked the student to stand.

This kind of scene does not happen at every campus for sure. However, the experience made me reflect: Do we really need these kinds of rituals to maintain respect between teachers and students? The academic world, ideally, is a space built on mutual respect and intellectual equality, not a place where hierarchy stifles critical thinking or academic freedom. I am not opposed to manners, but when respect begins to resemble submission, we must ask: Is it still meaningful, or is it merely fear disguised as reverence? Shifting from the world of Pesantren to academia is not just about changing physical

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

environments—it is about shifting the way we think about power, authority, and learning itself.

Entering the academic world made me revisit many things I once accepted as unquestionable truths. In the Pesantren, I was taught that silence and obedience were forms of respect—lessons that shaped how I approached both knowledge and authority. Nevertheless, in the university setting, I was encouraged to ask questions, engage in dialogue, and even disagree as part of the journey toward understanding. This shift did not mean abandoning the values I had learned; instead, I brought them with me into academic spaces and allowed them to be in conversation with new ways of thinking.

I came to realize that asking questions can also be an expression of respect—that critical thinking does not have to mean confrontation. The academic world broadened my view of what it means to seek knowledge. It is not just about memorizing or following—it is a living, evolving process that invites curiosity, attentiveness, and sincerity in the pursuit of truth.

Revealing What Went Wrong and What Can Be Done

Pesantren are often regarded as safe havens for children to learn about religion and develop strong moral foundations. However, like any other institution, they are also social environments where power dynamics naturally emerge. While their primary purpose is to provide a nurturing space for learning—producing graduates who embody religious knowledge and values—in reality, some Pesantren also cultivate systems of authority and obedience that, over time, can create vulnerabilities. In some instances, these structures become loopholes that allow abuse of power to occur.

As a former *santri*, I was raised to believe that everything a teacher says is a truth to be accepted without question. Obedience—understood as a form of piety—was the core value instilled in me and many others from a young age. However,

today, that belief is being put to the test. Cases of abuse involving figures of authority in Pesantren are increasingly coming to light and gaining attention in the media. One example is the head of a foundation in a Lombok boarding school, regarded by his students as a Tuan Guru, who was reported to have sexually abused ten female students—an appalling misuse of the trust and reverence placed in him (https://www.detik.com/bali/hukum-dan-kriminal/d-7883967/walid-lombok-cabuli-santriwati-berdalih-mengusir-jin).

This case illustrates how obedience—when practiced without critical thinking—can create space for serious vulnerability. Without clear boundaries or accountability, power can easily be misused, often unnoticed and unchallenged.

I want to emphasize that this reflection is not about blaming Pesantren as institutions, nor the students within them. Instead, it is a call for honest self-reflection—a chance for these institutions to strengthen themselves, so they can continue to be safe, supportive environments and remain trusted by parents who seek a meaningful education for their children.

A meaningful education should strike a balance between obedience and critical inquiry—between honoring authority and cultivating the courage to question it. Obedience without thought can slip into blind submission, while questioning without purpose can lead to unproductive resistance. Both are necessary to raise individuals who are not only faithful but also thoughtful and aware.

It was at this point that I began to see the importance of creating learning environments that not only emphasize obedience but also nurture the courage to think, question, and reflect. Education should be a liberating force, not one that abandons manners or respect, but one that builds a strong moral foundation while encouraging critical thinking. In such an environment, students can continue to honor their

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

teachers without sacrificing their right to ask questions; they can embrace values of goodness while staying grounded in common sense and a sense of justice.

What, then, can Pesantren do to foster improvement? A crucial step involves helping students reconceptualize obedience, not as the suppression of inquiry, but as a commitment to responsible engagement. Encouraging students to view questioning not as defiance but as an integral component of meaningful learning can cultivate critical awareness. Such an approach serves as a vital safeguard against the potential misuse of authority within these institutions.

Pesantren must instill substantive religious values in all members of the community—including caregivers, teachers, administrators, and students—so that there is a deeper, collective awareness that acts of violence can be committed by anyone and affect anyone. Fostering values of compassion and empathy is essential to nurturing a culture of self-awareness, a willingness to report wrongdoing, and genuine concern for victims when violations occur. In this way, the issue of violence is understood as a shared responsibility, not just a burden carried by the victim's family.

At the same time, Pesantren can reinforce safeguards through consistent internal oversight and transparent practices, ensuring a learning environment that is genuinely free from sexual violence and abuse of authority. Strengthening accessible and empathetic reporting mechanisms, providing awareness training on sexual violence for both caregivers and students, and building partnerships with external child and women protection agencies are all critical to developing a meaningful system of prevention and response. By doing so, Pesantren affirm their role not only as institutions of religious instruction but as communities that embody justice, safety, and the dignity of every individual, especially children.

Bridging the Gap Between Rationality and Moral Insight

Through this reflection, I came to realize that Pesantren played a formative role in shaping my religious beliefs and personal identity. Yet, entering the academic world compelled

me to revisit and re-examine experiences that had long been part of my life's journey. The tradition of deep respect from students toward teachers is a noble value in Pesantren—one that fosters strength and resilience. However, like a double-edged sword, this tradition can lead to harm when taken to extremes or left unquestioned. Confronted with the reality of sexual violence within these institutions, I found myself revisiting my past—not to

Religious
education must
create space for
the balanced
development of
critical reasoning
and moral
awareness.

reject the values I had received, but to confront, with honesty, the shadows that had too often been overlooked.

From this journey, I have come to understand that religious education must create space for the balanced development of critical reasoning and moral awareness. Pesantren need the courage to reflect, grow, and nurture a culture that encourages questioning, safeguards students' rights, and upholds the integrity of the learning environment. Only through such commitment can these institutions remain true beacons of religious education, forming not only devout individuals but also empowered ones who can think clearly, act justly, and uphold the dignity of others.

This reflection is not a conclusion, but an invitation to keep the dialogue open about obedience, the courage to think, and the need to build an education rooted in the principle of doing no harm and embracing inclusivity.



INTERACTIONS THAT LEAVE TRACES

9 Dedy Ibmar

ot everything meaningful can be captured, and not everything heard can be held in a recording. Some interactions stayed with me longer than I ever expected. They did not live in the recorder or show up in the transcript. Instead, they left quiet traces—settling into my body, my thoughts, and gently changing how I see, feel, and understand.

This section presents my reflections drawn from informal conversations with children, in-depth interviews—particularly with girls—and fieldwork conducted at a remote Pesantren characterized by strong traditional rituals. Staying at the pesantren for several days allowed for interactions that extended beyond structured interviews, blending into the everyday rhythms of the community. These encounters required careful attention to the students' comfort and ongoing consent, as well as coordination with the ustaz assigned to accompany and mediate my presence in the field.

These interactions did not end with the completion of the research process. They lingered quietly long after the interviews were over, long after the data had been stored.

Walking Through the Soul of the Pesantren

I moved forward almost on all fours, crawling carefully across the tilted suspension bridge, its balance betrayed by a broken rope. From the middle of the swaying structure, I could see tree trunks bending and weaving along the riverbanks, their shapes mirrored in the water. When a sudden gust of wind swept through, the leaves danced in its rhythm, as if drifting along the invisible current of the air.

I had been on this journey for nearly four hours, along a road too rough for four-wheeled vehicles. More than once, I had to get off the motorbike so my friend—who was driving—could better navigate the loose stones and uneven ground. Now, as the bridge wavered beneath us, I dismounted once more, placing my trust in my own steps rather than in the machine to carry me forward.

"After this bridge, it is just a little climb left", said the friend I had contacted long ago to assist me with my research in East Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur, NTT).

"So, where can we get white chicken?"

"All good, brother." He said.

He nodded slowly. I was not sure what he meant by it, but whatever it was, it made me happy.

Our motorbike ascended the hill and turned to the right, where the Pesantren came into view. Upon entering, we were immediately greeted by the ustaz and several other adults. Yet, it was the children who truly captured my attention—some carrying clothes as they passed by, others seated quietly

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

within the mosque, immersed in their own contemplative rhythms.

I entered the Pesantren, set down my bag—nearly 20 kilograms—and sat in the courtyard of the mosque to catch my breath. Not long after, my friend arrived with a traditional elder, who was carrying a white chicken. As it turned out, my friend had been in touch with local residents, quietly searching for one.

Now, before me sat the traditional elders, the leaders of the Pesantren, and several *ustaz*. I took my seat beside my friend, and the head of the boarding school invited me to speak first, to share the purpose and intentions behind my visit.

The traditional elder looked at me and nodded. After a brief pause, he began reciting a prayer in a local language I could not understand. His voice was gentle, sometimes barely audible, his lips moving in a quiet, rhythmic motion. In his hands, he held a white chicken that seemed, in its stillness, almost devout, listening alongside us. Behind him, eight to ten others sat quietly, joining him in prayer, their presence deepening the solemnity of the moment.

One of the conditions for me to be allowed to stay at the Pesantren was to seek permission and be formally received through a traditional ritual, in accordance with local customary law. I was told this ritual was important, not just as a formality, but to ensure that any unseen forces or negative energies that might have accompanied me on my journey would not remain in the boarding school. In this village, ritual is more than ceremony; it is the cultural thread that weaves the community together. When someone dies, the village pauses; people set aside their daily tasks to gather and honor the moment. This collective spirit also manifests during weddings and whenever outsiders like me arrive to take up temporary residence. Within

this community, presence is never purely individual; rather, it is collectively experienced, witnessed, and affirmed through ritual practices.

Traditional elders are the central figures in customary matters. They serve as advisors, guiding the performance of various rituals, from offerings for a smooth wedding to granting permission for guests from outside the village. Cultural practices are deeply woven into the fabric of daily life, with traditional elders held in high regard as sources of wisdom.

Within the Pesantren, traditional elders serve as important points of reference and authority. In some cases, they are involved in the school's operations, especially when mediating with students' guardians. In this setting, culture and religion have long coexisted, shaping the environment together.

Given that our research addresses sensitive issues such as sexual violence within Pesantren, some institutions were reluctant to grant us access. Some declined our request outright, while others did not respond to our messages or lettersNevertheless, several Pesantren were receptive to our presence, albeit often accompanied by specific conditions and tacit expectations that required our careful respect. Notably, the Pesantren in NTT were among those who welcomed us.

Conversations with the Boys

After shaking my hand and kissing it, he stood with a wavering and slightly anxious expression.

That afternoon, a boy dressed in a worn sarong and cap had just completed an in-depth interview session with me as the interviewer. His responses revealed occasional awkwardness and hesitation, suggesting he was not accustomed to being asked personal questions. Even so, with a small quantity Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

of patience, I was able to encourage him to open up and share his story gradually.

Through his story, told with doubt but honesty, he reveals many things about his life in the Pesantren. For him, the Pesantren is not a scary or dangerous place. Instead, he sees it as a healing space—a place that heals the wounds of the soul and heart. He put his trust in this institution, and also in figures called *ustaz*—respected figures who were considered knowledgeable and wise.

However, as several studies have also shown, Pesantren can become sites where power is exercised in problematic ways. These are spaces where children's behavior is closely monitored, regulated, and controlled—and in some cases, where they are subjected to sexual abuse. Figures of authority such as *kiai*, ustaz, seniors, or others who hold power may no longer function as spiritual guides, but instead act as enforcers, or even as those who violate the sanctity of the *santri*'s body. Our research indicates that approximately 1.06% of *santri* across Indonesia are exposed to such forms of vulnerability.

The boy then took five or six steps back with a slight bow, a gesture of respect deeply rooted in many pesantren traditions, meant to avoid turning one's back on a teacher.

However, on his final step, his expression shifted. There was a flicker in his eyes—something quiet, almost hidden. It was the kind of look that speaks not with words, but with a silent plea: that what he had shared remain safe.

Children do not always articulate much during interviews, a lesson we learned early in the research process. Therefore, effective engagement requires more than simply posing questions; it demands gentleness, patience, and the cultivation of trust. Only under such conditions can a child begin to open

up, particularly when burdened with experiences too heavy for their age.

Rather than jumping straight into formal interviews, I prefer to begin with informal interactions—getting to know the students first by spending time with them, playing together, or simply chatting during their free time. It is done with their consent and that of their teachers, and always with careful attention to the conditions and context.

This approach proved particularly meaningful in Lampung. There, students were more willing to open up, sharing at length their understanding of sexuality, reproductive health, and even the violence they had witnessed, such as public whippings.

These informal moments, both before and after interviews, are not only essential for building the courage to speak but also for gaining a deeper sense of each child's lived experience—their thoughts, feelings, and the quiet meanings behind their words.

In East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), initially, I struggled to understand how a child could describe life at a boarding school as "comfortable", given the school's modest conditions and limited resources. I saw—and even stayed in—rooms made of wooden planks and woven bamboo. The only building with solid walls was the mosque, which, according to the school's head, was built by an anonymous donor.

What I had not anticipated was that "comfortable" was not just a polite response or a way to protect the school's image. It was a genuine expression of what the school had come to mean. In a village where electricity is rare and water even rarer, the boarding school provided both, however limited. Even if the lights were only on for a few hours at night, they were still more than what many homes have. Villagers often came to the school to fetch water.

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

One afternoon, while I was with a young cleric and a boy collecting firewood—a routine task where male students gathered wood and female students prepared dinner—I asked the boy, as he sifted through a pile of branches, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I expected the usual answers: doctor, police officer, or pilot—dreams children often share without hesitation. But he only smiled faintly, then fell quiet, turning his attention back to the wood in his hands. Maybe he had one of those dreams, but knew better than to say it aloud. Perhaps he simply did not know what to hope for. He never gave an answer. At that moment, I realized how ambition can be a kind of privilege—something not all children can afford. I felt a quiet guilt for asking.

Delving into the subjective experiences of children through an adaptive approach is invaluable for any researcher. By adaptive, I mean a strategy that responds to the informants' conditions and needs. However, not all Pesantren permitted overnight stays, which required further adjustment in our approach. In Central Sulawesi, for instance, I was only granted access during scheduled interviews. This limited the time I had to build rapport with the students and gain a deeper understanding of the school environment.

Some informants spoke in hushed tones, as if testing whether I could be trusted. Others remained silent—not necessarily because they had nothing to share, but perhaps because there was too much they wished to forget. I learned not to force the conversation. I realized that being a researcher in this context means more than collecting data—it means being present as a fellow human being, knowing when to ask and when to sit alongside.

Even with these constraints, a few students were willing to speak openly about their lives at the boarding school. They shared candid stories about breaking the rules, dating, watching pornography, and even incidents of peeping on female students, all things largely hidden from the knowledge of school authorities.

Conversations with Girls

At first, I did not think the packets of tissues needed to be in my bag. They seemed unnecessary, taking up space already crowded with large souvenirs and other essentials for my visits to Pesantren across several provinces. After all, I assumed tissues were meant to wipe away tears, and I doubted they'd serve that purpose. Then, Citra Dwikasari, a research assistant in my team, had carefully packed them, anticipating moments when our informants might break down in tears.

Further, right in front of me, a girl had unexpectedly burst into tears in response to a question I had asked. I had tried to prepare myself for moments like this. Before entering the field, we received training in child protection and psychological first aid. Still, nothing could fully prepare me for the weight of this moment—trying to calm a crying girl was one of the hardest challenges in this research.

The question I asked seemed innocuous at the time: how often did her parents visit the boarding school? It felt safer than more sensitive, potentially triggering questions. We had placed it early in the interview to understand how boarding schools facilitated contact between students and their families. Nevertheless, almost instantly, her face tightened, her eyes welled up, and her voice caught in her throat. She lowered her head, partially covering her face with her veil.

"Dad has gone..." she whispered between sobs.

I was at a loss for words. The tissues I had once dismissed moved quietly from my bag to my hand. I offered them to her gently, saying nothing. This was not the time for data collection or to move on to the following item on the list. This was a moment for silence, for letting grief be heard without forcing it to speak.

Inside my head, I ran through all the protocols again: do no harm, active listening, psychological first aid. However, outside my head, all I could feel was my heart tightening, my body working to stay still, fighting the urge to apologize for pressing on a wound that perhaps had not yet begun to heal. From the corner of the room, the *ustaz* and my research assistant looked like they wanted to step in, but I gently motioned for them to hold back—to let her have this moment, uninterrupted.

We sat together in silence for several minutes. I waited as her sobs gradually quieted. Then, in a barely audible voice, she said, "Sorry."

I told her gently that it was okay. That she was allowed to cry. I even offered to stop the interview. During my training, I was taught that a strong emotional reaction is a cue to pause—to make space, rather than press further. However, before I could act on that, she wiped her eyes, took a breath, and said with surprising steadiness, "Let's continue."

Thus, we did, but the tone had shifted. It was no longer just an interview—it became a conversation. She spoke more slowly, more deliberately. About her friends at pesantren, the small joys and quiet challenges of her daily life, and about her mother, who always brought her favorite food during visits. She did not cry again, but I could feel the loss was still there, just beneath the surface, carried quietly.

From this girl, I did not collect much data related to the core focus of our study. However, I think I learned the most from her: about how easily a simple question can tap into deep grief, about how even the most carefully crafted prompts can land on something fragile. Moreover, about why, in fieldwork

like this, sometimes tissue paper matters more than the list of questions on a page. A few days after that encounter, I visited another Pesantren in a different province. This time, in Lampung, I felt more prepared—or at least, I hoped so. However, a new kind of challenge awaited me. Not grief, but silence.

I sat across from female student, trying ease into the conversation with light remarks about canteen food and afternoon routines. Her face friendly, but I could sense the invisible walls. When I gently began to explore more sensitive topics—girls' experiences in the boarding school, reproductive health, and how they manage hygiene—her posture changed. She grew tense.

How easily
a simple question
can tap into deep
grief, about how
even the most
carefully crafted
prompts can land
on something
fragile.

These questions were necessary. However, asking them, as a man, to a 17-year-old girl was never going to be simple. Every word, pause, and gesture mattered. I had rehearsed them all, choosing a neutral language, aiming for calm and natural tones, as though the subject was just part of an ordinary conversation between a researcher and a student. I avoided making it feel clinical or taboo, knowing that any hesitation or discomfort on my part would instantly close the door.

So, I chose words that were clear but gentle. I left behind the usual philosophical flourishes and academic jargon. In interviews like this, simplicity is a strategy. The appearance of "normal" becomes a bridge—an invitation for the student to feel safe enough to speak.

Conversations with My Self

The world of Pesantren is not merely an object of study. It was once my home—a place where I learned to read sacred texts, to quiet the ego, and to love in silence. That experience gave me the language and gestures to navigate my way. I did not arrive as a stranger. It was precisely for that reason that the burden I carried felt all the more complex and deeply personal.

My familiarity with the boarding school world opened many doors. Some informants were more willing to speak, sensing a shared background. I, too, adapted with ease—even in remote areas without electricity or communication networks—because I understood how this world operated: what could be voiced, and what had to remain unspoken. That closeness, however, was both a privilege and a burden.

For instance, when a student glanced at me with unease after speaking, I could hear more than just his words. There was fear in his voice, but also a quiet hope. Hope that I, an outsider who had once belonged, might be a safe place to land.

I nodded, as if to say, "You can trust me." And that, precisely, is where my anxiety began.

Elsewhere, a few days later, I interviewed a cleric. Our conversation remained casual—until he said, "If any of the students do something inappropriate, please report it, okay?" I smiled, but did not respond right away. Any answer I gave, I realized, would likely be the wrong one.

During interviews, students are usually accompanied by an ustaz. Yet I often saw them lower their voices or glance around, clearly trying to speak beyond the adults' earshot—an unspoken gesture that said more than words could.

If I reported what I heard, I would be breaching informed consent and violating the trust of someone who spoke only

because confidentiality had been assured. But if I remained silent, would that make me complicit in allowing harm to persist? I knew this story was not unique. And yet, doubts lingered—what if I had misunderstood the situation? What if speaking out caused more harm than it prevented?

At that moment, I did not feel like a researcher. I felt like a human being, uncertain of where to stand. The academy teaches that confidentiality is a moral duty. But my conscience kept asking: When does silence become complicity?

I thought of Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment—how he persuaded himself that a minor transgression, committed for a greater good, was justified. But the outcome was not liberation—it was isolation. His "reasonable" logic only deepened his suffering.

Thus, I asked myself:

"If I choose to speak, is that moral courage—or foolishness disguised as heroism?"

"If I choose silence, is that ethical discipline—or fear hidden behind procedure?"

I did not decide on the spot. I took notes, reflected on the findings, and consulted with fellow researchers. Ultimately, I chose to uphold the original agreement: I did not report directly to the school. Not because I wished to turn a blind eye to wrongdoing, nor because I distrusted the schools, many of which, as our research also showed, demonstrated resilience and genuine child-friendliness. This is because I understood that trust, once broken, is not easily mended. Furthermore, if I violated that trust, I might silence others who still hoped to be heard.

We documented our findings carefully, without naming anyone in the reports. We brought them into discussion forums with policymakers, relevant agencies, and advocacy

SILENCE BEHIND SACRED WALLS

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

groups, always preserving the confidentiality of those who had entrusted us with their stories.

Ultimately, this research is not only about gathering facts. It is an encounter between two worlds: the precision of method and the vulnerability of lived experience. I stand in the middle, holding a pen that sometimes trembles, with a heart that often does the same.



STIGMA AND STORIES WITHIN PESANTREN WALLS

Savran Billahi

he growing number of sexual violence cases emerging from Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) has deeply unsettled me. This raises difficult but necessary questions about what we often assume to be "safe spaces." Time and again, I hear people quietly, or sometimes bluntly, ask: Is a pesantren truly safe from sexual violence? Can we fully entrust our sons or daughters to live in shared rooms, bathrooms, and toilets with peers, far from our watchful eyes? How can we be sure of the relationships they build with fellow students and teachers when parents are not there to observe them daily?

In West Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Barat, NTB), where reports of sexual violence have become increasingly common, these questions are not theoretical. They are real concerns, often voiced to me directly during conversations with new acquaintances. As someone who once admired pesantren for their educational and spiritual contributions, I cannot deny that hearing these concerns has forced me to look at these institutions with fresh, more critical eyes. These

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

questions are not attacks; they should be viewed as a form of self-criticism or collective evaluation. I have come to see them as invitations for collective introspection and an opportunity for pesantren, as time-honored Indonesian institutions, to confront their vulnerabilities and grow stronger.

Cases of sexual violence within pesantren have opened a Pandora's box, revealing issues that could significantly alter the public perception of these institutions. People no longer confidently ask, "What kind of knowledge will you gain at pesantren X?" Instead, they seek reassurance by asking, "Is pesantren X safe for our son or daughter?"

One case in particular still echoes in my mind. In one pesantren, at least 20 female *santri* were subjected to abuse by their leader, the very person entrusted to guide and protect them. Cloaking his actions in spiritual manipulation, he convinced his victims that receiving his semen—what he deceitfully called *dzuriyat water*—was necessary to ensure they would one day bear pure offspring. These abuses took place inside the pesantren compound, in spaces that should have been safe.

I heard this story during a visit to a local organization that has been working actively to support survivors of sexual violence. In NTB, many of these cases have happened inside pesantren spaces. The tactics vary from case to case, but in this particular one, the perpetrator would call the students into his room one by one to satisfy his twisted desires. I found it ironic that these acts took place in his own home, while his wife was away. This story tells us how space and timing can be manipulated to enable abuse.

I heard these typical stories from all of my informants in Mataram. One day, while I was talking with an informant at the office of the Regional Technical Implementation Unit for the Protection of Women and Children (UPTD PPA) in NTB, a

teenage girl stepped out of a car. Dressed in *santri* attire and accompanied by several adults, she walked into the office with her head down, her face and body language showed quiet sadness, as if she had already given up.

"This is a new case. Our office is currently handling it", said my informant, who has been actively involved in handling sexual violence cases.

Seeing her blank stare, so many questions crossed my mind. But I reminded myself of my role as a researcher, someone who is guided by ethical boundaries. So I remained silent, trusting that the officers at UPTD PPA and the police, who have shown remarkable professionalism and sensitivity, would provide the care and protection she so desperately needed.

Viewing More Broadly

Having spent six years as a *santri* in two different pesant-ren—one in Madura and the other in Banten—I have developed a relatively deep understanding of pesantren environments and the complex ways interactions are shaped within them. I am also aware that, like any other boarding school, the dynamics inside pesantren can create conditions that heighten the risk of sexual harassment and abuse.

Although I am aware of these risks, questions still linger in my mind every time I hear of cases of sexual violence: Is the risk truly that high? For years, pesantren leaders (*kiai* and *nyai*) together with teachers (*ustaz* and *ustazah*), have educated *santri* and contributed to countless success stories. Pesantren have long stood as a source of pride for Indonesia. So, where did things go wrong?

In response to the growing number of reported cases, various efforts have been made to protect the public image of Pesantren by introducing formal standards for how these institutions should be organized, managed, and regulated. For

SILENCE BEHIND SACRED WALLS

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

example, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2015 has issued a set of recommendations for pesantren to meet specific standards, including providing facilities that support family-style care for students; ensuring that no child sleeps on the same mattress; offering spacious outdoor areas; and creating environments that are safe, comfortable, clean, healthy, inclusive, and conducive for learning. They also emphasize the importance of having dedicated spaces where students can freely express their aspirations (UNICEF, 2015).

The Ministry of Religion Affairs (MORA) is also actively involved in promoting a concept of Child-Friendly Pesantren (PRA—Pesantren Ramah Anak) by developing specific guidelines. According to these guidelines, a pesantren should, at least, provide the following facilities and infrastructure: pesantren buildings; dormitories; offices; classrooms; complaint rooms; prayer rooms or mosques; libraries; clinics; dining areas; kitchens; canteens; playgrounds and spaces for talent development; yards, gardens, or parks; access roads to the pesantren; sanitation facilities; electrical installations; fire prevention and control systems; toilets; clean water supply; proper air circulation; and communication facilities.

MORA also outlines several detailed requirements, including that pesantren buildings must not be located in disaster-prone areas and should be equipped with mitigation facilities. The pesantren should be easily accessible to the public, including via public transportation. Adequate facilities must be provided for security and the prevention of infectious diseases. Toilets should be gender-segregated with appropriate ratios, kept clean, well-lit, and ventilated (with ventilation covering at least 30% of the floor area). Hygiene standards must be maintained, including the use of separate trash bins, wastewater systems that do not pollute the environment, handwashing stations with clean water, and properly functioning rainwater drainage systems. Bedrooms should have

sufficient lighting and be furnished with essential items such as mattresses, pillows, blankets, chairs, study desks, room keys, and drawer locks. Emergency instructions should be clearly posted. Pesantren offices should be adequate, and classrooms must have proportional capacity to the number of students, with both indoor and outdoor spaces available for learning and play. Additionally, there should be facilities for education and health, such as medical posts, places of worship, and access to information.

In Search of the Ideal: A "Paradise Pesantren?"

During our research preparation meetings at the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM), UIN Jakarta, we generally agreed with the Child-Friendly Pesantren guidelines as a positive step toward the future of pesantren. However, questions continued to linger in my mind: "Are not pesantren traditionally designed to cultivate independence and resilience in students? And in that spirit, is it not natural for their spaces to resemble training grounds?"

Unlike formal schools, pesantren have historically been established through grassroots, community-driven efforts. Often, their development was done without a master plan, with construction progressing only as funding became available. When funds were sufficient, building would continue.

Quoting the Director of the Islamic Boarding School Directorate of the Directorate General of Islamic Education, Ministry of Religion, Basnang Said, it is indeed challenging for pesantren to meet all the spatial and infrastructure standards outlined by both UNICEF and MORA.

"If there were such a pesantren that followed those guidelines, it would be like a 'heavenly pesantren,'" Basnang explained. He emphasises how unlikely it is for pesantren to meet all criteria, a point he often makes when discussing the standards for child-friendly pesantren.

SILENCE BEHIND SACRED WALLS

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

This statement made me think. The two pesantren where I studied were initially created from converting old kitchens into combined classrooms and dormitories. By those guidelines, they would clearly be deemed "not child-friendly." They did not begin to grow significantly until about two decades after their establishment, thanks to community-driven efforts and support.

The pesantren where I studied for three years in Madura had very limited lighting in its early days. For several years, the lights had to be turned off immediately after Maghrib prayers. If students wanted to study, they had to rely on candlelight. According to alumni, Kiai Idris, the pesantren's leader, would routinely deliver baskets of rice to villagers' homes every week and collect them as food supplies for the *santri* in the coming week. Even now, although these pesantren have become two of the largest in Indonesia, they remain far from luxurious. They have not fully met, or perhaps have yet to meet, the child-friendly pesantren standards.

The spirit of self-reliance, as exemplified by the two pesantren where I studied, seems to be a defining characteristic of Islamic boarding schools. It is no surprise that numerous pesantren are built in a "just enough" or makeshift manner. Many of the pesantren we visited also fit this description. For instance, in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), we encountered a pesantren located far from urban centers and bustling areas. My fellow researcher, Dedy Ibmar, who was assigned to visit the pesantren, had to coordinate well in advance with local field researchers because the trip required careful planning. Upon arriving at the airport, he needed to stay overnight in the city before continuing the journey. The final leg required a fourhour motorcycle ride, as the road was not accessible by car.

He then rented two motorbikes, one for his research assistant and another for himself and a second assistant. At one point, they had to cross a narrow wooden suspension bridge,

which was so fragile that he had to guide his motorbike across carefully. He admitted the journey felt challenging, especially since he was carrying a large carrier bag pack typically used by mountain climbers.

When he finally reached the location, he was struck by the reality of how limited the pesantren's facilities and infrastructure were. The pesantren has only four bedrooms for students, two for male students and two for female students, constructed from woven wooden panels. At night, students can easily feel the wind passing through the gaps, making the rooms cold and drafty. This pesantren also accepts students of primary school (7-12 years old), which makes the condition even more challenging, especially with occasional incidents of bedwetting. The bathrooms and toilets were located separately from the bedrooms, adding to the inconvenience. Classroom was also scarce, with only two rooms designated for teaching, and even porches in front of the bedrooms had to be repurposed as learning areas.

By most standards, the pesantren in NTT falls short of meeting the ideal criteria outlined by UNICEF and MORA. Nevertheless, we cautiously categorized it as a "moderate" pesantren—meaning it demonstrates a basic level of protection against sexual harassment and violence. For example, the pesantren only occupies a small area, which makes all spaces relatively visible. These open spaces enable a form of informal surveillance, where the community can monitor daily activities. This suggests an apparent absence of both overstimulation and deprivation. We categorized this pesantren as "moderate" in part because, according to students and our follow-up discussions with local residents, its facilities are considered better than those found in the students' own homes. Despite its visible limitations, the pesantren is perceived by many in the community as relatively "luxurious."

SILENCE BEHIND SACRED WALLS

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

In making this assessment, we applied an intersectional lens, particularly attentive to the relative subjectivities and lived experiences of the students and community. Numerous gaps remain that need to be addressed before it can be fully recognized as a fully moderate pesantren. For instance, it lacks dedicated spaces for students to explore and express their talents and interests.

The pesantren above also embodies the cultural space of the local community, fostering a strong sense of collective ownership. It also serves as a communal hub, a central gathering point for the community. Many community members feel deeply connected to the pesantren. They view it as a vital institution that supports their children's education amid limited local options. To honor local tradition, my fellow researcher had to purchase a white chicken to take part in a customary ritual led by a traditional elder (tetua adat). This ritual functioned as a symbolic gesture of respect and a request for permission to enter the village and pesantren. In this context, traditional elders play an important role as mediators and conflict resolvers.

By visiting different pesantren in person, we learned that while UNICEF and MORA's child-friendly standards are achievable, they don't always fit every situation. This is because the tradition of self-reliance creates many unique differences between pesantren. Sometimes, a pesantren may seem to lack child-friendly facilities when judged by outside standards. However, it's important also to consider their own views on what feels comfortable and safe, as well as the specific circumstances each pesantren faces.

Determining a particular standard can feel somewhat unfair if it is done in a one-sided manner. The aspect of intersectionality, which involves considering the experiences and perspectives of our research subjects, must be taken into account. In this regard, PPIM UIN Jakarta holds a unique

advantage. This is not to pat ourselves on the back, but the researchers' backgrounds add significant value to the study. In addition to their strong academic credentials, almost all of the researchers have personal experience within the Islamic boarding school system. As such, they are able to approach the research both as outsiders and as insiders.

The issue of sexual violence often exists in a state of hypocognition or a lack of adequate ideas or concepts to frame and address the problem properly. This condition leads some communities, including Islamic boarding schools, to respond with indifference or even resistance. Before starting our research, we frequently heard that researching sexual violence within Islamic boarding schools would be highly challenging. Many were hesitant to conduct this particular research. However, due to our dual position as both outsiders and insiders, we were able to gain access to these institutions. This dual role allowed us to approach the issue with greater nuance, enriching our understanding and analysis, particularly in assessing the concept of safe spaces in pesantren.

We assessed this concept using the stimulation theory. According to this theory, excessive frequency and duration of stimulation within a given space can have negative effects. In some pesantren, the spatial arrangements provide moderate and positive levels of stimulation. However, in others, the spatial characteristics generate negative stimulation, creating environments that overwhelm students with more sensory input than they can process (overload), which leads to discomfort.

Negative stimulation can result from various factors, including overcrowded bedrooms, social and cultural pressures, and the absence of facilities that support emotional and physical well-being (deprivation). These conditions may lead to feelings of loneliness, isolation, or restriction.

SILENCE BEHIND SACRED WALLS

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

Overstimulation (overload) or deprivation (lack) can increase the vulnerability of pesantren to sexual harassment and violence. Conversely, a moderate level of stimulation can help build resilience against such risks.

In our direct observations and subsequent analysis, we paid close attention to how various forms of stimulation were used within the pesantren. We considered how these stimulations, whether consciously recognised by the community or not, influence students' feelings and interactions. Based on this condition, we categorized the pesantren into two groups: those with *moderate spaces*, which demonstrate resilience to sexual violence, and those with *less moderate spaces*, which are more vulnerable to such risks. The latter may experience either excessive stimulation (overload) or insufficient stimulation (deprivation).

Constraints That Do Not Breed Risk

Many assume that spaces in pesantren are inherently vulnerable due to their exclusivity. One of the characteristics of this exclusivity is that spaces or rooms in the pesantren are only accessible to the pesantren community. For instance, student dormitories are typically off-limits to outsiders, including parents, and access to the *kiai* or *nyai*'s residence is often restricted.

While this assumption is not entirely false, it is also not entirely accurate. Pesantren have the right to protect their private spaces. This spatial protection often reflects the pesantren' philosophy, which emphasizes cultivating students' independence and resilience. However, we cannot deny that in many instances, sexual violence has occurred precisely within these private spaces.

This raises several important questions: Can adequate facilities and infrastructure alone sufficiently prevent sexual harassment or violence? Are smaller pesantren inherently

more vulnerable? The reality is often more complex. Cases of sexual violence have occurred in large pesantren that, from the outside, seem to have adequate facilities. At the same time, such incidents also happen in pesantren with limited infrastructure.

Thus, from the perspective of spatial vulnerability and sexual violence, what determines whether a pesantren is resilient or vulnerable? We refrain from concluding that compliance with UNICEF or MORA standards alone will automatically ensure resilience. Beyond cultural factors and community perspectives, we believe the spatial connectivity between buildings and pathways within the pesantren also plays a critical role.

For example, the *kiai*'s residence can create vulnerability depending on its proximity to other pesantren spaces. The integration between the *kiai*'s house or other private areas and the pesantren's overall layout may reduce the vulnerability that can be created. Conversely, if these spaces are isolated, their risk of becoming sites of abuse increases.

During my visit to a pesantren in South Kalimantan, I initially assumed that it was vulnerable. Its location was relatively remote, though small villages surround it, and the facilities did not meet the ideal standards of UNICEF or MORA. However, my initial impression proved incorrect. Although the facilities were far from ideal, the pesantren's buildings and pathways were interconnected, and, based on this, we ultimately categorized this pesantren as "moderate."

Over several days of observation, I noted that almost all rooms, administrative offices, classrooms, the canteen, and even male dormitories, were arranged around the pesantren's central courtyard. This layout allows for natural surveillance, where members of the pesantren can directly observe one another's activities throughout the day. While private spaces

still exist, such as the bathrooms or female dormitories located behind the canteen, the current spatial arrangement provides students with places where they can seek safety in the event of harassment or violence.

In contrast, our fellow researcher, Narila Mutia, found a contrast condition with mine. The pesantren she visited in West Sumatra, despite having better facilities, we categorized it as "not moderate." This pesantren had recorded several cases of sexual harassment. One incident happened in a secluded school corridor that was often empty during the day and far from other facilities, making it hard for the community to monitor.

In another example, at a pesantren in Aceh, we found that the female students' dormitories and bathrooms were directly connected to areas where male teachers regularly passed. Whether intentional or not, this arrangement exposed students to situations where their privacy was compromised.

Even without
luxurious or ideal
facilities, with good
governance that
emphasizes spatial
connectivity, a
pesantren can
create natural
supervision and
resilience against
sexual violence.

Thus, when determining how visible and accessible particular spaces are, we pay close attention to the connectivity between buildings and pathways. In that sense, a pesantren that is still in its early stages of development does not automatically consider vulnerability. Likewise, large pesantren, such those encountered by our fellow researchers in other provinces, are not necessarily resilient to sexual violence simply because of their scale.

Even without luxurious or ideal facilities, with good governance that emphasizes spatial connectivity, a pesantren can create natural supervision and resilience against sexual violence. This connectivity factor is also linked to temporal vulnerabilities that are often overlooked. Pesantren may appear resilient during the day, but at night, their vulnerability may increase. For example, when we visited a pesantren in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), it initially seemed resilient. However, because we stayed nearby, we observed that at night, some areas were very dark, beyond the reach of surveillance, and without CCTV or natural monitoring. Thus, a pesantren that appears safe during the day may still face serious risks at night.

In several cases reported by activists who work closely with victims of sexual violence. incidents occurred at the house of the pesantren's leader when no one else was present. These residences were often located outside the pesantren's main compound and beyond natural oversight, contributing to their vulnerability. Even when pesantren appears to have adequate facilities, the physical isolation of certain residences often leads us to refrain from labeling them as "moderate."

While improving facilities is always important, it is not realistic to expect every institution to meet material standards that depend heavily on financial resources.

Overall, the exclusivity of pesantren spaces can become more vulnerable if factors of supervision and temporal variation are not adequately considered.

Shared Reflections, the Pursuit of Hope

At this point, we must acknowledge that many pesantren, whose history has long been tested, possess their sources of potential resilience against sexual violence. Community involvement, institutional self-reliance, and natural oversight emerging from their governance and spatial organization are among the strengths that should not be overlooked.

Through this research, I have come to believe that assessing both the vulnerabilities and strengths of an institution dealing with sexual violence requires careful judgment. While improving facilities is always important, especially in pesantren, it is not realistic to expect every institution to meet material standards that depend heavily on financial resources.

We must broaden our perspective to consider other crucial factors that may be overlooked in evaluating vulnerability or resilience, such as community ownership of the pesantren, relative subjectivity, and the connectivity between pathways and buildings. Equally important is the perspective of the pesantren community itself.

Ultimately, we should take an optimistic view when evaluating the condition of pesantren. While ongoing improvement is important, many pesantren have already shown remarkable resilience. This research also encourages the wider public to engage more closely and meaningfully with what has been happening in pesantren.

At the same time, pesantren themselves must remain open to wider public interaction. Such openness can serve as an important safeguard, helping to reduce their vulnerability to potential incidents of sexual harassment or violence in the future.

PART 3 MORAL EMOTION AND ETHICAL JUDGEMENT



UNTOLD EXPERIENCES: PUBERTY STORIES FROM INSIDE PESANTREN

Narila Mutia Nasir

dolescence marks one of the most crucial stages in a person's life. It is a period that shapes how one will face the long journey of adulthood. This phase begins with puberty, signalled by menarche (the first menstruation) for girls and nocturnal emissions (wet dreams) for boys. In Islamic teachings, these moments signify the beginning of *akil baligh*, when a person becomes religiously accountable for their actions.

Yet, conversations about puberty are often surrounded by silence. In many parts of Indonesian society, including pesantren, the topic remains taboo, shaped by cultural and religious norms that discourage open discussion. It is often assumed that adolescents will simply figure things out on their own. But understanding one's own body and sexuality is not something to be left to chance. It is a basic right. Every child deserves access to proper information and education about reproductive health, including the changes that come with puberty.

As someone who did not grow up within the pesantren tradition, I entered this research carrying many questions. Do santri experience puberty in the same silent confusion that so many adolescents outside the pesantren do? Do they receive the guidance and knowledge they need as they enter this unfamiliar stage of life?

Throughout this research, I listened closely to many *santri* share their stories of puberty. Stories are often kept quietly within themselves, though filled with questions that remain unspoken. Hearing these stories made me reflect deeply: what can be done so that puberty is not something to be hidden, but rather something that can be talked about openly, without crossing the moral boundaries that pesantren communities hold dearly?

This reflection is also deeply personal. Beyond my role as a researcher, I write this as a mother, as a woman, and as someone who believes that every child has the right to understand what is happening to their body. Puberty should not be something frightening or shameful. It is a natural, universal part of growing up.

As I tried to understand how santri navigate physical emotional and changes of puberty within a system that emphasizes purity, I realized how little space there is for open conversations about these experiences. And vet. pesantren, with their moral spiritual guidance, actually have the potential to create safe, holistic spaces where both the soul

Santri deserves to know that they have trusted adults they can turn to—without fear or shame— while navigating the often confusing and emotional journey of puberty.

SILENCE BEHIND SACRED WALLS

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

and body are nurtured in understanding this phase of life. This research journey has not only presented methodological and ethical challenges, but also touched me emotionally, as a woman, a mother, and a human being.

Through this chapter, I invite not only researchers but also pesantren caretakers and educators to pause and reflect: have we done enough to discuss puberty? Have we created safe spaces for *santri* to voice their questions and anxieties? Or have we allowed these experiences to remain locked away in silence, hoping they will somehow resolve themselves? *Santri* deserves to know that they have trusted adults they can turn to—without fear or shame—while navigating the often confusing and emotional journey of puberty.

Who Should I Tell?

"I did not tell anyone; I was too afraid to tell my father."

That simple yet deeply resigned statement came effort-lessly from a male student at the pesantren I visited for my research. I had asked him who he turned to when he first experienced a wet dream. His brief answer lingered with me for quite some time, leaving questions swirling in my mind about the absence of safe spaces to confide in, the possible lack of reproductive health knowledge, and the presence of fear that should never have existed. Puberty, an experience that ought to be shared, ended up being carried in silence.

As a researcher and lecturer with a background in reproductive health, terms like wet dreams and menstruation are topics I discuss openly with my students. These are natural stages of puberty that every adolescent experiences. Yet, what is ordinary in theory often becomes taboo in real life, especially within the pesantren environment. The fear of speaking about these signs of maturity, as expressed by that young student, may also be shared by many of his peers.

For boys, wet dreams signal the start of reproductive maturity. This moment often comes with confusion and many unanswered questions, but without the chance or courage to talk about it. Adolescents going through puberty experience emotional ups and downs, and most have to face these changes alone, without the explanations they need.

Puberty is a universal phase in every person's life. It is a transition from childhood to adulthood that brings physical and mental changes, often straining the emotional balance of teenagers. Yet, this stage is often marked by minimal communication. Many teens have no space to understand their own bodies or to ask questions about the changes they experience, such as breast development, voice changes, wet dreams, or menstruation. Confusion, fear, guilt, and shame often accompany these changes, though they remain unspoken.

In general, discussions surrounding puberty, like wet dreams and menstruation, are often avoided, deemed incompatible with Indonesian cultural norms. I could not help but wonder: would I encounter similar dynamics within pesantren? These are spaces where manners and modesty shape every word and movement, and where religious values are held in the highest regard.

Pesantren are places where strong character is built, but do *santri* have a safe and comfortable space to learn about and discuss their experiences of puberty? These questions stayed with me as I entered the pesantren world to conduct in-depth interviews. I wanted to explore puberty not just as a physical change, but also as an emotional, cultural, and spiritual journey, one that is often left unspoken.

The lack of understanding about puberty is not limited to male students; female students, too, often face this knowledge gap. One female santri I interviewed recounted her surprise at seeing blood stains in her underwear for the first time. Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

She had never received any prior information. She even had to learn how to use sanitary pads independently. This reflects the limited interaction and preparation provided to *santri* in facing puberty, both physically and mentally.

In another pesantren, a teacher shared how they only addressed menstruation and the purification rituals after finding a female student crying, embarrassed and confused by her first period, unsure of whom to turn to. These stories illustrate that essential information about puberty often arrives too late, leaving students unprepared and unsure whether they should even seek help or keep it all to themselves.

Aligning My Intention Before Entering the Space

When I was first invited to take part in this research, I felt a sense of hesitation, simply because I am not a pesantren

Essential
information about
puberty often arrives
too late, leaving
students unprepared
and unsure whether
they should even
seek help or keep it
all to themselves.

graduate. I was fully aware that entering the pesantren world as an outsider would be easy. Pesantren are known for their strong internal authority, guided by deeply rooted values. My presence as a "stranger" might create а distance, even resistance, especially because I was about to explore a sensitive subject often regarded as part of the private sphere, not easily discussed openly.

Still, there was also a sense of optimism. I would be entering the field under the banner of PPIM UIN Jakarta, an institution that had previously conducted research in pesantren. Yet, beyond these practicalities, I made a conscious effort

to align my intention before stepping into a space often said to be difficult to access. I chose to view pesantren as my own temporary home, even though I do not come from that world. I reminded myself that my presence there was not merely to "collect data" but to help make that home a safe and comfortable space for santri, who are navigating one of the most important transitions of their lives: puberty.

I adopted an anthropological approach. The approach that respects the cultural norms and values practiced within pesantren, opening myself to learning from their world, and welcoming any feedback or corrections along the way.

With the assistance of enumerators (research assistants), I was able to visit the pesantren selected for this study directly. Some pesantren welcomed me with ease, while others required a little more effort to gain access for interviews. But in general, pesantren were not as exclusive as I had initially imagined. Instead of feeling awkward, I was met with warmth and hospitality. The worries I had carried quickly dissolved in the face of such gracious acceptance. Nevertheless, I continued to invest in building trust with the pesantren leadership, the caretakers, the teachers (ustaz and ustazah), and most importantly, with the santri themselves.

I took every possible step to adjust myself to the pesantren environment, including my appearance. At one pesantren in Sumatra, I even altered my clothing entirely by modifying my hijab style and covering part of my face. I realized that male teachers and students might feel uncomfortable seeing a woman without a niqab. Initially, I felt a slight sense of foreignness as the only woman in an otherwise all-male environment, but I tried to remain calm so that those I interviewed would also feel at ease. In another pesantren, I made use of the local dialect that I was familiar with. This ability proved to be incredibly helpful in encouraging the *santri* to open up and share their stories more freely.

Stories of a Self That Is No Longer The Same

As I traveled from one interview to another, moving from one pesantren to the next, I discovered that the changes santri undergo during puberty are not always something they feel comfortable sharing with their teachers or ibu nyai, especially when their first wet dream or menstruation happens while they are living in the pesantren. Interestingly, there was a noticeable difference between the experiences of male and female santri. While male santri tended to remain silent about their experiences of puberty, the female santri displayed a wider range of responses. In several interviews, the girls were also more expressive in recounting their experiences compared to the boys, who often appeared indifferent.

The physical changes that accompany puberty are, of course, normal. Yet for many *santri*, these changes stirred confusion and anxiety. They asked questions about why these changes were happening, how to respond to them, and how to make sense of these transformations in their growing bodies. One female *santri* shared how she felt joyful upon experiencing her first menstruation at the pesantren, interpreting it as a sign that she had grown up. This positive outlook empowered her, making her feel stronger and more capable of managing her emotions than she had in her childhood years.

A different story emerged from another female santri who also experienced her first menstruation at the pesantren. She chose not to tell anyone and was too embarrassed even to ask for sanitary pads, resorting instead to layering multiple undergarments. She also noticed subtle social shifts, feeling different when interacting with boys, sensing a greater sense of responsibility, and recognizing her transition toward adulthood. Other girls described feeling frightened, anxious, or even embarrassed when they first menstruated. These varied emotional responses show that puberty remains an unsettling

and complex experience, regardless of whether the *santri* had prior knowledge about menstruation or not.

The experiences of male *santri* revealed a different pattern. Nearly all of them chose not to tell anyone about their first wet dream. They remained withdrawn, and when asked why they had not shared their experiences, they often said, "It is uncomfortable to talk about." Feelings of shame, fear, or simply the belief that it was too personal to discuss seemed to dominate. Still, once they recognized that these changes marked their transition into *akil balig*, some male *santri* viewed the process positively, feeling that they had become more mature in behavior. However, they also acknowledged the gap in their knowledge about puberty, which left many of them uncertain about how to navigate these physical and emotional changes. Much of what they knew had been pieced together on their own, often without open discussion or guidance.

Santri, like any adolescents, need sufficient knowledge to understand the signs of akil balig that their bodies present. This knowledge would better equip them to comprehend the changes they experience, manage their emotional responses effectively, and understand how their transformations may impact both themselves and others. It could also help reduce potential mental and physical struggles that often accompany the bewildering transitions of puberty. Yet in reality, many of them only receive explanations after they have already undergone these changes. This delay can leave them feeling alienated, embarrassed, and confused.

While some female *santri* are fortunate to have opportunities to discuss these changes with *Ibu Nyai or Ustazah*, who guide them, the male *santri* often face their transitions in silence. They are quietly carrying the stories of a self that is no longer the same.

Playing Roles to Reach Hidden Corners

It was never easy for our research team, including me, to explore questions about *santri*'s experiences of puberty. Topics such as first wet dreams or first menstruation are not matters that can be discussed openly with ease. Pesantren is an institution governed by its own distinct set of values. Coming into this institution quickly made me realize that lists of questions, recording devices, and methodological knowledge alone were not sufficient tools for eliciting stories from the *santri*. I learned that I had to play different roles. Sometimes as a friend, sometimes as an older sister, and at times even as a mother figure. I did this to earn their trust and create the kind of safety they needed to share their personal experiences.

Although I did not stay overnight at the pesantren, I made it a point to arrive early each morning and stay until almost Maghrib. I wanted to give myself enough time to talk and to build rapport with the *santri*. On one occasion, when a female *santri* began crying as she spoke of her feelings of loneliness and despair, I instinctively reached out and tightly held her hand, hoping my gesture would offer comfort and strength. Playing the role of an older sister helped break down her walls of fear. This gesture allowed her to finally open up and share what she had previously kept hidden.

When I returned the next day, she would always come over to greet me and chat briefly. On the last day of data collection, as I waited for my ride, she approached me with eyes that held a quiet sadness, as if she did not want me to leave. I hugged her gently and whispered, "Stay joyful and strong." She tried to smile and said, "Please come back again.."

A different experience unfolded when I interviewed another female *santri* who began calling me *Umi*, a term of endearment for mother. I interpreted this calling as both a sign of respect and a way of establishing trust between us.

She spoke openly, cheerfully sharing many aspects of her life, including her experiences of puberty, without hesitation or worry. As I listened, I could sense that she carried no fear about the changes her body was undergoing.

The task of drawing out stories from male *santri* was both fascinating and challenging. In the early stages, I struggled to ask questions about their puberty experiences. Their body language often betrayed their hesitation. I remember one male *santri* breaking into a nervous sweat when I asked about his first wet dream. I knew it was not the heat that made him perspire, but rather the internal effort he was making to search for the right words for an experience he had kept entirely to himself.

As a researcher, asking such sensitive questions of the santri was never an easy task. One of my fellow researchers shared how, from the very beginning, he chose to "switch off her emotions" and neutralize any sense of taboo from her mind. This approach helped ease the santri's discomfort, allowing conversations about puberty to be framed as ordinary, natural experiences. Nevertheless, gender differences between the researcher and the santri introduced their own set of dynamics. A high level of sensitivity was required to ensure that the santri felt safe and comfortable enough to open up. In instances where santri appeared uncomfortable, we decided to involve research assistants of the same gender as the santri to explore their experiences more deeply.

One significant experience came from a fellow researcher who had once been a *santri* herself. She positioned herself as though returning to her past, revisiting the inner struggles she once faced. Because of this, she approached her interviews with great care. She imagined herself in the place of the *santri* and chose her words thoughtfully, hoping they would feel safe enough to share their own unspoken stories.

It Does not End Here: Hopes and Reflections from the Field

Exploring stories of puberty in pesantren has been an invaluable journey. One filled with internal struggles, surprises, challenges, and deep reflection. The in-depth interviews I conducted with the santri were never confined solely to the realm of methodology; instead, they unfolded within a shared human encounter between researcher and santri. Though I came equipped with knowledge of reproductive health and a well-prepared research methodology, I eventually realized that instruments alone could never fully guide these conversations. When I listened to a male santri confess his fear of talking about his first wet dream, or heard a female santri describe her shock and confusion upon seeing menstrual blood for the first time, my response could not simply be drawn from textbooks or theory. What was truly needed was empathy, coming from my role as a fellow human being, not just as a researcher.

This experience of researching a sensitive topic like puberty within the pesantren has taught me that these young santri, who are also adolescents, urgently need safe spaces where they can ask questions and share their stories without fear or shame. Pesantren, with all its noble values and spiritual richness, holds great potential to become a space where santri can discuss subjects that have long been considered taboo.

I have learned to immerse myself, to listen, and to accept that this work is not about rigidly applying what "should" or "should not" be done. Instead, it is about nurturing hope that pesantren might one day openly integrate discussions of puberty and reproductive health while still upholding their moral and spiritual values.

As I returned home from the pesantren, I carried more than just field notes, interview transcripts, or meaningful

MORAL EMOTION AND ETHICAL JUDGEMENT

Untold Experiences: Puberty Stories from Inside Pesantren

photographs. I carried with me a more profound conviction that this research is not merely the production of knowledge. This research has created a small space for conversation and opened the door for transformation. In doing so, it allows pesantren to become a safe and nurturing place for *santri* to navigate each stage of puberty with meaning, confidence, and even joy, rather than with lingering questions and silent confusion. For in truth, it is not enough for *santri* to feel, but they also need a space where they can tell their stories when puberty arrives.



BREAKING INNOCENCE, BUILDING RESILIENCE

Aptiani Nur Jannah

e have often seen cases of sexual violence in pesantren exposed by the media. Although such reporting seems to portray a state of emergency regarding sexual violence in pesantren, many people, including those within pesantren circles, still doubt whether these incidents truly occur. The term *sexual violence* itself remains poorly understood in many pesantren communities. Yet, I remember that such incidents indeed occurred in pesantren. While conducting this research, memories from my own days as a *santri* became unexpectedly vivid.

In interviews that initially flowed lightly—discussing daily routines in pesantren—the atmosphere gradually shifted when I introduced the topic of sexual violence. Words seemed to evaporate, replaced by the silence and visible confusion of the *santri*. The topic seemed out of place amidst their innocence.

This chapter offers a deep reflection on my experience researching sexual violence in pesantren. From the preparation of both quantitative and qualitative research instruments to the report writing stage, I repeatedly found myself drawing on my own experience of having studied in a pesantren for seven years. For instance, when drafting survey and interview questions, I instinctively imagined my younger self responding to such inquiries—questions that would have seemed difficult or incomprehensible, and even facing an interviewer might have embarrassed me. I was a *santri* who, in many ways, was too innocent.

Even reading a multiple-choice list of sexual violence definitions on a questionnaire would have likely shocked me, perhaps even caused me to flee and refuse to respond. Participating in this research has made me realize that members of my pesantren community may have experienced sexual violence in the past. Some of what they endured could have constituted harassment, though they might never have recognized it as such. This realization led me to focus this chapter on the profound vulnerability of *santri*—a vulnerability that is shaped by their innocence, lack of knowledge, and silence.

This chapter reflects my qualitative research experience engaging with the issue of sexual violence in pesantren. At the outset, my objective was to explore the structural, social, and cultural challenges in addressing sexual violence within pesantren. Yet, as the research unfolded, I repeatedly arrived at a deeply unsettling awareness. The vulnerability of *santri* is not solely the result of power dynamics or the absence of justice frameworks. However, it is also rooted in their innocence and limited understanding of sexual violence. Their vulnerability is silent and hidden. It is often overlooked in discourses that focus narrowly on legal or structural reforms.

In this chapter, I share the lessons I have drawn from my fieldwork in pesantren. I focus on *santri*'s vulnerability to sexual violence, how their innocence shapes this vulnerability, and how the pesantren environment contributes to it. I also

explore how this vulnerability emerges not only through survey data and what informants verbalize, but also through what remains unspoken through the silences that reveal as much as the words.

Innocence, Ignorance, and the Vulnerability of Santri

Throughout my fieldwork, one of the most striking experiences I had while interviewing *santri* was when I raised the issue of sexual violence. Despite having reviewed extensive literature to formulate my interview questions, I had an early apprehension that obtaining answers from the *santri* would not be easy. This concern proved valid during the interviews. I could sense a palpable shift in the atmosphere.

What began as light, easy conversations about daily life in the pesantren quickly shifted when the topic of sexual violence came up. The atmosphere grew tense and quiet. Some *santri* avoided eye contact, while others became visibly uneasy, as if they wanted to end the interview. A few gave only brief, vague answers, words that barely formed a response.

This experience was not unique to me; other fellow researchers also encountered similar reactions. The silence of the *santri* when confronted with questions about sexual violence did not necessarily reflect refusal but rather hesitation. It was as if they sensed something was wrong but lacked the language to articulate it. They were not unwilling, but unable to respond. Their uncertainty and discomfort opened my eyes to how innocence itself can become a form of vulnerability to sexual violence. This innocence was not merely about a lack of experience but stemmed from limited exposure and the pesantren's restricted discourse on sexuality. Their silence reflected not safety, but a troubling absence of knowledge, leaving them more susceptible to harm rather than protected from it.

Having grown up in a pesantren myself, I was deeply familiar with its strict moral codes, boundaries, and rules. Thus, conducting this research felt deeply personal. In their silence and obedience, I saw my younger self, who was waiting for permission to speak, hesitating to answer, struggling to describe something I instinctively knew was wrong. Like them, I too had once lived within this bubble of innocence, much like a frog beneath a coconut shell—unaware of the world beyond, wholly dependent on rules and blind trust in the pesantren's authority.

Their lack of knowledge was not only evident in their hesitation but also in how they defined sexual violence. In the survey we conducted, several questions allowed open responses. Many *santri* associated sexual violence narrowly with physical assault or rape. As someone who had been a *santri*, I had anticipated such responses, but I was still unprepared for the depth of their limited understanding.

Most *santri* described sexual violence using terms like "rape", "forced", "touching private parts", or "not covering the aurat." A few wrote "harassing women" but offered no further details. Non-physical forms of sexual violence, such as verbal harassment or coercion by authority figures, were rarely mentioned. As I read through their responses, I found myself pausing, trying to imagine the faces behind the words. Faces still innocent, unaware that their bodies are valuable, and that violence isn't always physical.

This narrow understanding was not confined to the survey but became even more apparent during in-depth interviews. Across different regions, many *santri* admitted they did not know what sexual harassment or violence meant. Even more disheartening, some who claimed to understand sexual violence explained it through religious narratives that obscured the issue, such as equating dating (*pacaran*) with sexual violence.

SILENCE BEHIND SACRED WALLS

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

In pesantren, where morality is strongly emphasized, dating is seen as a major sin, often resulting in severe punishment. While *santri* recognized that sexual violence was wrong, they lacked the vocabulary to explain it, thus equating dating with sexual violence.

Rape myths also surfaced repeatedly in conversations with both male and female *santri* across various pesantren. Each time I heard them, I felt a pang in my heart. There were beliefs that sexual violence only happens to women who "expose" themselves or that men, as beings of uncontrollable desire, are inevitably tempted by women who dress "provocatively." Lessons on etiquette and gender interaction were often emphasized more than education about bodily autonomy and rights. As a result, their understanding of sexual violence became entangled with notions of sin and adultery.

Of course, I do not blame religious teachings themselves. Rather, I have come to realize that rigid interpretations and a lack of dialogical teaching approaches have closed doors to broader, more open knowledge.

What pains me most is how deeply ingrained the victim-blaming culture remains. Instead of standing by survivors, many people instinctively assign blame to them. The rape myths voiced by *santri* reflects this collective misunderstanding. Many believed that sexual violence occurs because of how women behave or dress. This belief places the entire burden of prevention on women while neglecting the need for systemic conversations around broader prevention and intervention strategies. In some pesantren, female students are required to wear long dresses, avoid interaction with males, and maintain strict distance in various activities. All aimed at ensuring women "protect themselves." I recorded these rules while trying to understand how they were intended to prevent what is referred to as "fitnah."

But when I asked *santri* what they would do if sexual violence happened to them or someone they knew, many fell silent. Their confusion exposed the glaring lack of comprehensive education on the issue. With limited access to relevant information, *santri* often fill these gaps with assumptions that inadvertently perpetuate violence.

These patterns reveal that the understanding of sexual violence among many *santri*—and even teachers—is alarmingly narrow. Sexual violence is imagined mainly as involving strangers, physical force, or extreme cases like rape. Scenarios involving emotional manipulation, abuse of power, or coercion rarely come to mind. When the perpetrator is familiar or respected, the possibility seems unthinkable.

The prevailing belief that women who dress modestly will automatically be safe further oversimplifies the complexity of sexual violence, shifting the entire burden of prevention onto victims. This narrow understanding not only silences survivors whose experiences do not fit these rigid definitions but also makes it harder for victims even to recognize their suffering as a form of violence, let alone feel entitled to speak up.

Another recurring pattern I encountered, both internal and external conversations, was denial. There remains a firm conviction that sexual violence cannot happen inside pesantren. While people may acknowledge its occurrence in the outside world, in morally unregulated spaces, they firmly believe it is impossible within the pesantren's controlled environment. I still recall the confused expression of one *santri* who firmly rejected the notion of sexual violence occurring in pesantren. To him, such violence only happens in places where boys and girls mix freely, not within the sacred confines of the pesantren, a place I once heard described as a "holy prison." This statement was delivered almost like a prayer, as if to protect the institution from confronting an uncomfortable truth. I did

not argue, but inwardly I wondered: do they honestly not know, or do they refuse to know?

I understand the desire within pesantren communities to protect the institution's image. After all, pesantren is not merely a place of learning; it is home, a place where religious and social identity is shaped for life. There is visible reluctance to admit that sexual violence happens here, as if acknowledging it would betray the pesantren's sanctity and expose its shame.

But I care deeply about pesantren. I long for it to become a safe, nurturing home for every child. This is why I cannot remain silent.

Silence offers comfort to perpetrators while leaving survivors burdened with guilt, doubt, and fear that silences them further. This silence is a form of neglect that makes it even harder for survivors to speak. When sexual violence occurs, victims are often blamed, or worse, their suffering is altogether denied. Denial is not simply a matter of ignorance; it becomes a collective effort to preserve reputation, inadvertently sacrificing those who are most vulnerable.

The Absence of Language Around Sexual Violence

The terms harassment and sexual violence feel foreign to many santri because these concepts are never introduced in the pesantren. During several interviews, santri would often pause, lower their gaze, or nervously clasp their hands before responding. It was not that they were unwilling to answer, but rather that these terms had never been part of their vocabulary, let alone normalized within the pesantren curriculum. I understood that, for many of them, silence was a way of staying "safe." What is unfamiliar is often easier to deny than to define, leaving them uncomfortable when confronted with such topics. Especially in pesantren, where sanctity and discipline are strongly upheld, discussing sexual violence feels

like a violation of prevailing social norms. This silence stems not only from ignorance but also from the consequences of growing up in an environment where conversations about the body, consent, and power are rarely permitted. These conversations are almost nonexistent. The absence of knowledge about sexual violence, which is never taught within pesantren, ultimately contributes to the *santri's* heightened vulnerability.

This lack of understanding is closely tied to broader structural gaps, namely the absence of formal education on sexuality, reproductive rights, and bodily autonomy within the pesantren curriculum. Most pesantren offer no form of reproductive health education. Topics like reproduction, bodily changes during pregnancy, or even basic biological processes are rarely addressed. Subjects such as puberty, menstruation, and physical changes are usually discussed only in the context of ritual purity (thaharah) within the fiqh texts. The body is primarily framed as aurat—something to be covered and controlled according to religious obligations, rather than something to be understood, cared for, or owned as part of one's rights.

As a result, *santri* enter puberty without proper guidance on their sexuality and often fail to understand their own bodies fully. For female *santri* in particular, the body is frequently discussed only as something that must be concealed, guarded, and controlled, not something to be understood or claimed as their own. Even intimate parts of the body become territories controlled by the pesantren. I am reminded of someone I know well. Writing about her experience brought tears to my eyes. She once attended a pesantren that required all new students, including girls, to undergo circumcision. At the time, she had just graduated from elementary school and followed the instructions announced over the dormitory loudspeaker. In a corner of her dorm room, behind a simple curtain, she was circumcised. All she remembers is the presence of the

traditional midwife, the slice of a razor blade, and a pain whose purpose she could not comprehend.

Years later, she studied female genital mutilation (FGM) as practiced in parts of Africa. She asked her mother whether she knew about the circumcision she had. Her mother replied that, in general, girls do not need to be circumcised, but if the pesantren required it, then it must be right. This made me think: even a mother who gave birth to her daughter deferred to the pesantren's authority over her child's body.

When they do
not understand
their own bodies
and reproductive
rights, they may
not even realize
when they are
being harassed or
violated. Reporting
or seeking help
becomes difficult
if they cannot even
recognize the abuse
occurring before
their eyes.

In the pesantren life, santri are required to live far from their parents. This separation is intended to cultivate independence, but it also creates a void: a lack of parental guidance on issues of sexuality. Without trusted adults to turn to, many santri often rely on their peers, who are also still young, for information. This results in limited and often misguided knowledge. This lack understanding can have serious consequences. When they do not understand their own bodies and reproductive rights, they may not even realize when they are being harassed or violated. Reporting or seeking help

becomes difficult if they cannot even recognize the abuse occurring before their eyes.

One of my fellow researchers shared an interview with a counselor who assists survivors of sexual violence in a pesantren in West Nusa Tenggara. He described cases of abuse involving teachers and *santri*, where the victims' lack of understanding about bodily autonomy and consent made them vulnerable to the manipulative narratives of the perpetrators. In one case, a cultural practice in the pesantren involved *santri* bowing their heads to be touched by their teachers as a sign of reverence and a request for blessings. The researcher was surprised when, at the start of the interview, a *santri* bowed their head, expecting to be touched. For the *santri*, this gesture embodied a deep respect for their teacher, demonstrating a noble intention.

Nevertheless, this culture of deference was exploited by some teachers to touch areas of the body that should not be seen, let alone touched. Some *santri* did not know the boundaries of their own bodies and thus could not recognize the abuse they were experiencing. In another case, a *santri* was manipulated into having sexual relations with the promise of extraordinary blessings: to bear children from a religious figure. For us, these are forms of sexual violence. But for *santri* with limited understanding, they may not perceive it as such. This lack of knowledge is not their failing, but the consequence of an education system that neglects discussions about the body and bodily rights.

In many pesantren, conversations about sexuality are not just rare, they are almost nonexistent. Discussing intimate matters, even among friends, is often taboo and unfamiliar, let alone as part of classroom instruction or religious study circles. I, too, learned about menstruation and bodily changes in whispered conversations with friends. At the time, I did not question it; silence seemed to be the norm. I now realize we were taught to be ashamed of our bodies, taught to cover, guard, and control them because of *aurat*. The norms of

modesty required us to see such topics as inappropriate and immoral to discuss.

Conducting this research compelled me to confront the heavy silences that shaped both my own upbringing and that of other *santri*. I was not simply hearing their stories; in their hesitation, their pauses, and their unease, I recognized echoes of my younger self. Even when sexual harassment occurs, it remains difficult to articulate, let alone report, because the language to name it is absent, and no safe space exists in which to speak of it.

Ethics, Emotions, and the Researcher's Dilemma

Throughout this research, I encountered numerous challenges, particularly the emotional burden and moments of internal conflict. I often found myself standing at the edge of a dilemma. I realized I occupied a unique position. On the one hand, I was once a *santri*. On the other hand, I was now a researcher studying sexual violence in pesantren.

My background as a former santri made it easier to access the pesantren I visited and helped me gain the trust of the people there. I often shared personal stories from my time as a santri to build rapport and create a more natural, open dialogue with informants. At the same time, this familiarity also brought emotional challenges, as I found myself re-engaging with a world that no longer fully aligned with my current perspectives.

Moreover, the sensitive nature of this research often made it difficult to manage my empathy. I had to carefully balance maintaining professional boundaries with building trust, ensuring that I upheld ethical standards while still creating a sense of safety and comfort during interviews, often through small but meaningful gestures. This balancing act became even more delicate when I was faced with the genuine innocence of many *santri*.

The word "innocent" often crossed my mind while interacting with the *santri*, especially those from remote areas. Many of them could not speak Indonesian fluently, and I had to rely on my local research assistant to translate into their regional languages. Even so, many *santri* responded to questions about sexual violence with visible shyness, often avoiding direct answers. Their body language reflected discomfort and hesitation. One male *santri*, for instance, blushed deeply and refused to meet my gaze throughout the interview. This shame, to me, was a reflection of both their innocence and the emotional burden of not knowing. They were embarrassed not only by the questions but also by their unfamiliarity with the topic itself.

Before each interview, I always tried to ensure all *santri* felt comfortable and safe. For example, I arrange the conversation in an informal setting. We sat informally in a hall—no tables or chairs, just prayer mats spread on the floor. I provided snacks and drinks for them to enjoy during the conversation. Before beginning, I explained the purpose of the study, the interview process, and assured them of their anonymity and right to withdraw at any point if they felt uncomfortable. I aimed to ease their tension before we even began.

The questions were carefully structured to allow the conversation to flow naturally, starting with introductions and daily life stories at the *pesantren*. I deliberately avoided an interrogative tone and chose instead to converse as a fellow former *santri*. They responded warmly, sharing anecdotes that often made us laugh together, evoking my own memories of life in the *pesantren*.

However, the atmosphere shifted when I introduced topics of reproductive health and sexual violence. We transitioned from discussions on the curriculum and learning methods to reproductive health using anatomical diagrams. I asked them to mark parts of the body that could be seen or touched.

Some *santri* approached this exercise casually, lying comfortably on their stomachs as they completed it. But, a few male *santri*, especially in Aceh, began to show signs of discomfort, perhaps because the diagrams, though only silhouettes, depicted naked bodies. Their embarrassment likely stemmed from this.

Afterwards, I asked them to explain their markings. The conversation progressed to their understanding of reproductive health, followed by questions about sexual violence. I started with their knowledge, the curriculum, and eventually inquired about their experiences and the mechanisms in place to address and prevent sexual violence in the *pesantren*. Both male and female *santri* described bodily boundaries strictly through the lens of religious teachings on *aurat* (modesty). Their definitions of sexual violence often contained misconceptions, failing to grasp the full scope of the definitions.

Their innocence and lack of knowledge left a deep impression on me. It revealed just how vulnerable they are to sexual violence. This vulnerability became even more apparent when I asked if they had ever heard of sexual violence occurring in their surroundings. My heart often raced as I asked these questions. Most respondents reported that they had never experienced or heard of any incidents directly, but had learned about them only from media reports. But some shared troubling experiences.

One male *santri* admitted to secretly watching female *santri* in their dormitory. Others spoke about power dynamics between senior and junior students that often resulted in sexual harassment, masked as bullying—a pattern I observed more frequently among male *santri*. These accounts echoed findings from our national survey, which showed that male *santri* are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence within the pesantren environment.

Listening to these stories of bullying and harassment filled me with a deep sense of unease. This research demanded more than methodological rigor; it required sensitivity, empathy, and careful emotional boundaries. While I sought to create a safe space for *santri* to share, I also had to protect myself from being overwhelmed. Of all the research I have conducted, this has been the most emotionally taxing. I often ended interviews with a heavy heart, exhausted not only physically but also emotionally drained. Their stories, though shared innocently, were profoundly painful.

I still remember one male *santri* in West Java who recounted jokes among peers that crossed into sexual harassment. He had witnessed friends playing with each other's genitals as a form of teasing. Another described seeing a junior student dragged behind the dormitory by seniors, his arms and legs held as his pants were pulled down, his genitals touched and displayed to others. As he told this story, he reenacted the scene with a slight laugh. There was no anger, no fear, no awareness that what he witnessed was, in fact, sexual violence. One *santri* even casually shared that while he was sleeping, someone had touched his genitals, leaving behind traces of semen by morning.

I sat in silent turmoil, torn between my role as a researcher collecting data and that of a human being who wished to intervene. Their innocence was most palpable in how they narrated harassment as if recounting harmless jokes. The vulnerability to sexual violence hides within this innocence. Comprehensive sexual education and safe spaces are not distant ideals for pesantren life; they are urgent and necessary foundations that must be put in place.

An Invitation to Dismantle Innocence

Innocence is not always a virtue. In the pesantren environment, it can become a doorway to vulnerability, especially

when silence is upheld as a mark of piety and obedience. When *santri* are not equipped with the knowledge to understand their bodily rights and boundaries, nor are they encouraged to voice discomfort, they become exposed to harm. As in the case I previously recounted, where a *santri* was persuaded by someone they deeply trusted and respected that the abuse they endured was, in fact, a form of blessing. This did not happen because the *santri* was reckless or naïve, but because they were never taught otherwise. They did not know. In the absence of knowledge, power speaks unopposed.

This research highlights the urgent need for comprehensive sexual education within pesantren as an essential part of child protection efforts. Education about the body, personal boundaries, and power dynamics must be taught contextually, aligning with Islamic values while being firmly grounded in the principles of human rights and the protection of children's dignity. Such education is not intended to distance *santri* from their faith, but to equip them with the awareness to safeguard themselves. If pesantren are to become truly safe spaces, it is time for these issues to be integrated into their educational discourse.

This writing is not meant as an accusation or an attempt to expose the faults of sacred religious institutions. Instead, it is an appeal for care. All *Santri* deserve safe and nurturing spaces in which to grow. Their innocence is a form of vulnerability. Therefore, education about sexual violence must be provided so that *santri* possess the knowledge to protect themselves. I hope to create a space where *santri* can ask questions without fear. Protecting them does not mean keeping them hidden in darkness but rather helping them see in the light.



THE LINGERING TRAUMA: RESEARCHER'S EMOTIONAL REFLECTION

Grace Sandra Pramesty Rachmanda

iscussing sexual violence often evokes discomfort for many people. When such violence occurs in one's immediate environment, or when the victim is someone familiar, the psychological impact can also be deeply felt by those around them. These individuals are at risk of experiencing what is known as secondary trauma. Secondary trauma affects those who witness traumatic events or support individuals dealing with trauma. It emerges when someone is confronted with another person's traumatic experience (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Secondary Traumatic Stress Committee, 2011). Figley (1995) describes secondary trauma as a natural consequence of caring, highlighting how common this condition is among professionals in the health and social fields.

In this chapter, I will reflect on my own experiences as a researcher throughout the research process, and how we prepared ourselves to navigate the possible emergence of secondary trauma or even direct trauma encountered by our informants. As a psychology graduate, I have a particular interest in the psychological aspects deeply intertwined with this issue. Yet from the outset, there were significant challenges that made me hesitate and feel uncertain. I do not come from a pesantren background.

Since childhood, I have attended public schools through secondary education. At one point, my parents considered sending me to a pesantren for middle school, but it never materialized. As a result, I lacked a clear understanding of pesantren life. The life that prevails culture, as well as the proper and respectful ways to communicate with kiai, nyai, ustaz, ustazah, and *santri*. Nonetheless, I tried to reassure myself that despite the challenges, I was not walking this path alone. The confidence of my teammates, as well as the support of various institutions, including the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, Bappenas, and numerous others who care deeply about this issue. All of these became my source of strength to keep moving forward.

The First Steps Toward Protection

From the outset, we were mindful of the potential psychological impacts that could arise throughout the research process. These effects were not limited to respondents alone but could also affect researchers and enumerators involved in the fieldwork. In the planning stages, we consulted with various experts and stakeholders who have long been concerned with issues of sexual violence, children's rights, and women's protection. As part of securing research permits and fulfilling ethical protocols, we were also required to prepare a range of supporting documents, including a response plan for addressing potential trauma that might arise among informants during data collection.

With these considerations in mind, we recognized the urgent need to establish a Psychological First Aid (PFA) mechanism to ensure that the data collection process would proceed smoothly while safeguarding the well-being and comfort of all participants. In developing this PFA strategy, we collaborated with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, involving local organizations such as P2TP2A (Integrated Service Center for Women and Children Empowerment) and UPTD PPA (Regional Technical Service Unit for Women and Children Protection), who could provide counseling services if follow-up support was needed.

As an additional safeguard, before entering the field for data collection, we conducted three trial runs in pesantren located in both urban and rural districts. These trials allowed us to assess whether the language and phrasing used in our instruments were comprehensible to the *santri* and to observe their responses while completing the survey. From these trials, we received valuable feedback that we used to revise and refine the research instruments.

Our preparation did not end there. To ensure that local research assistants were well-equipped, we organized a training to provide them with PFA skills. We also produced a video demonstration of the data collection process, serving as a visual guide. The training sessions were held online over a full day, divided into five sessions, each attended by approximately 30 participants.

This complex research process unfolded in ways I could not have fully anticipated. We navigated a labyrinth of permit requirements and carefully devised strategies to ensure the research could proceed responsibly. Compared to previous research I had participated in, this project demanded far greater emotional, logistical, and ethical labor.

When I first joined the research team and began exploring the issue of sexual violence within the pesantren context, many questions lingered in my mind: "Are there many cases of sexual violence in pesantren?"; "What motivates perpetrators to commit such acts?"; "Will we even be able to access pesantren and address this sensitive issue?" These questions surfaced repeatedly, often feeding my uncertainty and fear that we might not be able to gather the data we hoped for.

Developing research instruments demanded not only time but also a significant amount of emotional labor. Often, we found ourselves at a crossroads, grappling with the search for language that was both culturally sensitive and accessible. Terms that resonated within pesantren life were simple enough for *santri*, particularly those in remote areas, to grasp, yet did not oversimplify or explicitly name complex subjects like sexual violence.

This is the delicate dilemma that confronts many researchers working with sensitive topics. On one hand, we sought to investigate issues that are often shrouded in silence and taboo; on the other, we were compelled to adopt indirect, carefully chosen language. The danger was that our questions might remain on the surface, never fully reaching the heart of the matter.

To navigate these tensions, we employed projective questioning techniques. For example, we framed questions about sexual violence in hypothetical scenarios, as if these experiences had happened to others or occurred within the participants' surroundings. This approach allowed the *santri* to engage with difficult questions at a safer emotional distance. For inquiries related to body parts, for instance, we provided diagrams of male and female bodies, inviting respondents to mark the relevant areas. This method proved to be an effective way to maintain participants' comfort while still collecting the necessary information.

Triggers of Secondary Trauma Among Researchers

One common sign of secondary trauma is the profound discomfort an individual feels when discussing cases of violence. As our research team began to delve into discussions of sexual violence, particularly those occurring within pesantren, one of our researchers started to feel uncomfortable. In the early stages of designing this research, we reviewed existing literature and collected reports on sexual abuse cases in pesantren from prior years, going back to 2023.

One of the researchers, a mother of a young daughter, found herself emotionally entangled, unable to detach from the cases she was studying. She could not help but imagine what it would be like if such things were to happen to her child. The thought was so overwhelming that she could not even bring herself to read the court verdicts from the highly publicized pesantren sexual abuse cases circulating at the time. Waves of anxiety and panic would wash over her. Her hands trembled, her body turned cold, the fine hairs on her arms stood on end, and she struggled with sleepless nights. Even during public presentations of the research findings, panic attacks and trembling would still surface, lingering as a constant emotional burden.

This unsettling experience was not limited to one researcher. As we visited pesantren and institutions in selected areas, other researchers also faced emotionally disturbing situations.

One such moment occurred when a researcher conducting interviews in Java encountered a particularly distressing situation. During the interview, she felt deeply uncomfortable and shocked by the respondent's remarks, which showed a lack of sensitivity and empathy toward victims. The respondent even made several sexist jokes throughout the conversation. In that moment, the researcher wanted nothing more than to end the interview immediately. Yet, she consciously

restrained herself, carefully managing her emotions in order to complete the interview respectfully and professionally.

Shortly after finishing the interview, she immediately reached out to me through text and voice messages. Her voice was heavy, on the verge of tears, as she recounted what had just happened. Yet, despite this emotional weight, she still had to meet with another respondent shortly after. To regain her emotional balance, she first needed to release the feelings she was experiencing. When I received her message, I was taken aback by what she had just experienced. I did my best to comfort her, giving her space to express and release her emotions. Once she had calmed down, I checked on her well-being and encouraged her to take a break and have something to eat before continuing with the following interview.

In such moments, the first step is always to allow someone time to self-soothe. The second is to listen, without offering unsolicited interventions. Only after that should we ask what they need. Often, what a person longs for most is to be heard and to have their feelings validated.

Even when I revisited this incident with her more than six months later, the discomfort was still palpable. Her body language betrayed a deep reluctance to return to the memory. The experience had left a scar that may remain with her for years to come.

Another researcher assigned to Nusa Tenggara was equally shaken by the sheer volume and complexity of sexual abuse cases he encountered during interviews. Listening to his recounting of these stories afterwards, I too found myself drawn into a heavy emotional state. It felt as though I was being pulled into a dark and painful reality. I was imagining how individuals could find themselves trapped in such dangerous circumstances, often in the hands of those who were meant to protect and guide them.

On another occasion, he visited an institution that provides support for survivors of sexual violence. Unexpectedly, he witnessed the arrival of a new victim. Just a few meters away, he saw the girl's downcast face, tentative steps, and fragile state. Although he was not familiar with the specifics of the case, the scene left a deep and lasting impression. A strong impulse arose within him to approach and comfort the girl. Yet, he was also confronted by a wave of guilt and ethical uncertainty: was this genuine empathy or an overstepping of professional boundaries? In the end, he chose to hold back. This moment marked the beginning of his deeper awareness of the emotional toll that even indirect exposure to trauma can inflict.

He was also assigned to Kalimantan. That was his first time visiting the region. His assignment brought him not to a city, but to a remote village. In the days leading up to his departure, anxiety weighed heavily on him. Questions swirled in his mind: What would the pesantren community be like in Kalimantan? Would there be resistance, as we had encountered elsewhere? His worries were compounded by early reports suggesting the pesantren might refuse participation. Even a week before his scheduled departure, confirmation had not yet been secured. Though travel arrangements were already in place, final approval only arrived two days before the trip—an uncertainty that hung over him like a constant tension.

Upon arrival, he met with the pesantren leader and carefully navigated the cultural landscape, introducing himself as a pesantren alumna and a graduate of an Islamic university, UIN. He even joined the community's pilgrimage to the grave of the pesantren's founder as part of his trust-building efforts. Slowly, his approach began to open doors, and the pesantren leadership grew more willing to engage in open conversation. He fully understood their initial caution—outsiders probing

SILENCE BEHIND SACRED WALLS

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

into such sensitive matters naturally triggered concern. However, as mutual trust was established, his own worries began to ease.

These experiences reveal just how emotionally taxing this research has been for many of us. The weight of these encounters leaves a lasting impression. It is surfacing unexpectedly, at any moment, and affecting anyone involved. What

These
experiences
reveal just how
emotionally taxing
this research has
been for many of
us. The weight of
these encounters
leaves a lasting
impression.

sustained us throughout was not only our shared sense of responsibility but also the support we offered to one another. We were fortunate to have a coordinator who consistently checked in on both our emotional and physical well-being. always attuned to the risks secondary trauma. regularly asked how we were coping, both professionally and emotionally, and allowed us the flexibility to step back when needed, relieving some of the pressure.

Such gestures, though seemingly small, carried profound meaning for us, especially as we faced stories that were often heartbreaking and difficult to absorb. Mutual support within our team became equally vital, helping us to preserve our mental health and prevent emotional exhaustion from the repeated exposure to others' trauma.

CONCLUSION

Windy Triana

"It's too precious to discard!"

These were the thoughts that stayed with us as we reached the end of our research journey. In between formal discussions and casual conversations over lunch, we shared stories of what we had encountered in the field. Stories that could not be included in the final report. Either because they would make the report too lengthy, too scattered, or go off in too many directions. Yet, within the context of this research, we felt these stories held a particular significance. They deserve to be shared as part of a methodological reflection. To remind us that research is never merely a planned sequence of steps, but also a profound human experience shaped by emotions, uncertainties, surprises, and even the emotional fatigue that every researcher carries.

Entering pesantren spaces to research sensitive issues was not an easy endeavor. Resistance and the looming possibility of rejection were real challenges. However, we discovered that with careful approaches, genuine intentions, synergy with various stakeholders, and open dialogues with pesantren leaders, the research gradually became feasible. This was not merely a matter of communication strategy. It was about sincere purpose, building trust, and honoring the culture and norms of the pesantren. Ultimately, we found that patience and empathy were the keys that unlocked many previously closed spaces and doors.

Being both insiders of a pesantren and researchers at the same time was a unique challenge. Yet, it also became our

SILENCE BEHIND SACRED WALLS

Researching Sexual Violence in Pesantren

strength. These experiences allow us to view pesantren from within, to listen to every story with empathy, and to approach its culture without prejudice. We came not only as data collectors, but also as learners, with a full awareness of the complexity of the issues we sought to understand.

We are deeply grateful to all who made this research possible, especially to the pesantren leaders and *santri* who were willing to share their stories. For us, this was a research journey that demanded courage, not only the courage to inquire, but also to feel, to confront, and to give voice. Our initial fears of rejection, resistance, or even failure did not entirely materialize. Instead, we encountered spaces for open dialogue and a gracious openness to change. The success of this research has strengthened our optimism that a Child-Friendly Pesantren is not only a worthy aspiration, but something that can be possibly pursued and realized together.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Windy Triana

Windy earned her Doctorate in Law from the University of Melbourne in 2021. She obtained her Master's degree in Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies from UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta in 2008, following the completion of her undergraduate studies in the Faculty of Sharia and Law at the same university in 2004.

Haula Noor

Haula is a researcher at PPIM UIN Jakarta and also a lecturer at the International Islamic University of Indonesia (UIII), Depok. She began her education at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, where she earned her Bachelor's and Master's degrees. She then continued her doctoral education at the Department of Political and Social Change at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, Australia.

Narila Mutia Nasir

Mutia completed her doctoral education at the Graduate School of Human Sciences, Osaka University, Japan, in 2013. Previously, she took her master's and bachelor's degrees at the Faculty of Public Health, University of Indonesia (UI), Depok.

Aptiani Nur Jannah

Aptiani completed her Master's degree in International Relations at the Australian National University (ANU) in 2018 after previously completing her undergraduate

studies at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, in the same study program in 2015.

Savran Billahi

Savran took his Master's degree in the Department of History at Hacettepe University, Ankara, after previously completing his undergraduate education in the Department of History at the University of Indonesia. Taking his second Master's degree in the Political Science Study Program, FISIP UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta.

Grace Sandra Pramesty Rachmanda

Grace completed her undergraduate education at the Faculty of Psychology, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, in 2017.

Oedy Ibmar

Dedy completed his Master's degree in Modern Philosophy at Ural Federal University, Russia, in 2023. Previously, he completed his undergraduate education in the Islamic Faith and Philosophy Study Program at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta in 2019.

Citra Dwikasari

Citra completed her Master's degree in the International Relations Study Program at Paramadina University in 2024. Previously, she completed her undergraduate education at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta in the same study program in 2021.

SILENCE BEHIND SACRED WALLS

RESEARCHING SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN PESANTREN

This book is a collection of profound reflections on the experiences of researchers conducting sensitive studies on sexual violence within Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). Authored primarily by researchers who are themselves alumni of these institutions, it presents insights grounded in lived experience, offering an honest and authentic portrayal of the complex interplay between emotion, ethics, and religious authority. Through reflective narratives, the book provides a nuanced understanding of the realities within pesantren, recognizing both their institutional vulnerabilities and their deep capacity for resilience. Beyond contributing to the discourse on Pesantren Ramah Anak (child-friendly pesantren) within the broader framework of child protection, this work also serves as a practical guide for conducting ethically sound and sensitive research in community settings.





