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Inclusive Islamic Boarding School: Advancing Gender Equality Through a Progressive Fiqh Curriculum in Mandailing Natal

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Abstract: Gender bias in fiqh curricula remains a challenge for efforts to promote gender equality in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), particularly where established religious interpretations intersect with local socio-cultural traditions. In Mandailing Natal, North Sumatra, the development of a more gender-inclusive fiqh curriculum requires consideration of both religious perspectives and the local cultural context. This study aims to analyze the potential for developing a progressive and gender-inclusive fiqh curriculum in pesantren in Mandailing Natal and to identify the opportunities and challenges associated with curriculum reform. Employing a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, the study collected data through in-depth interviews with kiai (Islamic scholars), ustaz/ustazah (religious teachers), santri (students), and pesantren administrators, as well as observation and analysis of fiqh curriculum documents. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes. The findings indicate that the existing fiqh curriculum remains predominantly androcentric, with gender representation that may reinforce conventional gender hierarchies. Nevertheless, opportunities for developing a more inclusive curriculum exist through the integration of gender perspectives, participatory learning methods, and collaboration with relevant institutions. Key challenges include resistance to reform, social and cultural pressures, and limited resources and educator training. The study also identifies indications of openness to change among some pesantren educators, including efforts to incorporate gender equality perspectives into teaching practices and institutional management. The study concludes that developing a progressive fiqh curriculum requires an approach that engages critically with religious interpretations while remaining sensitive to local socio-cultural contexts. It recommends strengthening educator training, developing gender-inclusive learning materials, and fostering context-sensitive dialogue to support more equitable and inclusive Islamic education.

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INTRODUCTION

Pesantren, as the epicenter of traditional Islamic education in Indonesia, have long served as guardians of religious and moral values.(Anam et al., 2019; S. Nasution et al., 2022) In Mandailing Natal, North Sumatra, pesantren not only function as religious hubs but also as social laboratories that shape the character and identity of the community.(Ikbal et al., 2021) However, in the era of post-modernity, marked by increasing awareness of gender rights, pesantren often face a paradox: on one hand, they are expected to preserve religious traditions passed down through generations, while on the other hand, they are pressured to respond to contemporary demands, including issues of gender equality.(Nuroniyah, 2023) This phenomenon occurs not only at the global level but also at the local level, including in Mandailing Natal, where pesantren serve as microcosms of the struggle between tradition and modernity (Nur & Nasution, 2022).

Social realities indicate that gender disparities in pesantren remain an endemic issue. Data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (2022) shows that only 30% of pesantren in Indonesia are led by women (Afiah et al., 2024; Athoillah et al., 2024; Fakhria et al., 2023; Nurish, 2010), and this figure is even lower in regions like Mandailing Natal, where patriarchal culture remains deeply entrenched (Rambe et al., 2022). Furthermore, within the organizational structure of pesantren, women's roles are often limited to positions considered "secondary", such as managing the kitchen or teaching female students (Amir et al., 2024). This reflects structural inequality that is not only evident in practice but also in the educational curriculum. Fiqh, as a core subject in pesantren, is often taught through an androcentric approach, where men are positioned as primary actors in various aspects of life, while women are relegated to subaltern roles (Burhanuddin et al., 2015; Sumadi, 2018). Yet, in the context of contemporary Islamic studies, fiqh should be understood as a living tradition capable of responding to social changes (Faisol, 2019; Rohayana & Muhtarom, 2021; Thabrani, 2018).

Recent scholarship has increasingly scrutinized gender equality and educational transformation within Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), albeit with divergent analytical foci and proposed interventions. For instance, Mala et al. analyzed gender mainstreaming in pesantren educational policy via a systematic literature review, identifying structural, cultural, and regulatory impediments to gender parity (Mala et al., n.d.) . These include patriarchal leadership paradigms and the marginalization of gender perspectives within institutional policies and curricula. Shifting the analytical lens to pedagogical frameworks, Mukminin et al. investigated the implementation of Sayyidah 'A'ishah's pedagogy in Madurese Islamic educational contexts, highlighting its emphasis on dialogical learning, intellectual agency, and gender justice (Mukminin et al., 2025) . Furthermore, recent inquiries into gender-responsive Islamic education curricula have explored strategies for integrating curricular reforms that advance educational equity without compromising the traditional religious ethos of the pesantren (Hasan et al., 2026) . Collectively, these studies underscore that achieving gender equality in pesantren extends beyond mere educational access; it is inextricably linked to institutional governance, pedagogical praxis, theological interpretation, and curricular architecture.

Despite these contributions, an important analytical gap remains regarding how a progressive fiqh curriculum can be developed and contextualized within the specific socio-cultural setting of Mandailing Natal, North Sumatra. Existing studies provide valuable insights into gender mainstreaming, emancipatory pedagogy, or gender-responsive Islamic education more broadly; however, these approaches do not necessarily explain how the teaching and interpretation of fiqh can be connected to local cultural norms, institutional traditions, and gender relations within Mandailing pesantren. The present study addresses this gap by focusing specifically on a progressive and gender-inclusive fiqh curriculum in Mandailing Natal. Rather than treating gender equality solely as a policy objective or a general pedagogical principle, the study examines the potential of fiqh curriculum development to connect Islamic legal reasoning, educational practice, and local socio-cultural realities. Its distinctive contribution therefore lies in contextualizing gender-inclusive fiqh education within the Mandailing setting and investigating how this approach may support more equitable and inclusive pesantren education.

The novelty of this study lies in its effort to develop a progressive and gender-inclusive fiqh curriculum for pesantren in Mandailing Natal. This curriculum aims not only to shift students' mindsets regarding gender roles but also to equip them with a more contextual and responsive understanding of fiqh in addressing contemporary challenges. A progressive approach to fiqh acknowledges that religious texts should not be read literally but must be understood within the historical and sociocultural contexts in which they were revealed. Thus, fiqh can become a tool for promoting social justice and gender equality, rather than reinforcing existing structural inequalities (Alfitri, 1970; Yumna, 2024).

The urgency of this research cannot be overlooked, especially in the context of pesantren as agents of change with significant influence in shaping societal worldviews. In Mandailing Natal, where pesantren remain among the most trusted educational institutions, changes in the fiqh curriculum could have a significant ripple effect (R. F. Nasution, 2022). If pesantren can integrate gender equality values into their curricula, this will not only transform students' paradigms but also influence the broader community. Pesantren can become change-makers, fostering the creation of a more egalitarian and inclusive society.

Moreover, the urgency of this research is also linked to the global challenges faced by Muslims today, where Islam is often stigmatized as a religion unfriendly to women (Akhmetova, 2020; Mohsen Sallam et al., 2024; Muhibbu-Din, 2019). By developing a progressive and gender-inclusive fiqh curriculum, pesantren can demonstrate that Islam possesses rich intellectual resources to support gender equality (Ahmad et al., 2019; Ginting et al., 2024; Munir, 2006; Rahmawati, 2020). This is not only important for building a positive image of Islam globally but also for strengthening the position of pesantren as educational institutions relevant to the needs of the times.

In the local context of Mandailing Natal, this research holds high urgency due to the region's unique socio-cultural dynamics (Aji et al., 2021; Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024; Widhi Nirwansyah et al., 2024). Mandailing culture, influenced by local customs and Islamic traditions, often places women in ambiguous positions (N. A. Nasution, 2020; Saragih et al., 2024). On one hand, women are valued for their roles in family and society, but on the other hand, they are constrained by normative structures that tend to be patriarchal. Pesantren, as institutions embedded within

the community, have the potential to mediate between tradition and modernity, between custom and religion, and between men and women. By developing a progressive fiqh curriculum, pesantren can help address these tensions and create safer, more inclusive spaces for all genders.

In response to these gaps, this study aims to examine how a progressive and gender-inclusive fiqh curriculum can advance gender equality within the context of Islamic boarding schools in Mandailing Natal, North Sumatra. Specifically, it seeks to analyze the relationship between existing fiqh teaching practices, gender-related understandings, and the socio-cultural norms that shape educational experiences within pesantren. By situating the analysis within the Mandailing cultural context, the study seeks to understand how local traditions and Islamic educational values interact in shaping perceptions of gender roles and equality.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach to examine gender equality and the development of a progressive fiqh curriculum within the context of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Mandailing Natal, North Sumatra, Indonesia. A qualitative approach was adopted to explore participants' perspectives, experiences, and educational practices concerning gender relations and fiqh instruction within their institutional and socio-cultural contexts (Briggs, 2024) .

Data collection was conducted from April to June 2025 using three complementary methods: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis (Herron & Roulston, 2021). These methods were used to obtain information about institutional perspectives, teaching practices, students' learning experiences, and the representation of gender-related issues in fiqh education. Combining these methods also enabled the researchers to compare information obtained from different sources and examine the relationship between participants' accounts and observed educational practices.

In-depth interviews were conducted with four categories of informants: a kiai (pesantren leader), an ustaz/ustazah (teacher responsible for fiqh instruction), seven santri (students), and a pesantren administrator. A total of 10 informants participated in the interviews. Informants were selected purposively based on their institutional roles and relevance to the research objectives. The kiai provided perspectives on institutional leadership and religious values, while the ustaz/ustazah contributed insights into fiqh teaching practices and curriculum implementation. The students were interviewed to explore their learning experiences and understandings of gender-related issues, while the administrator provided information about institutional management and educational practices (Healey-Etten & Sharp, 2010; Longhurst, 2009) .

The interviews employed open-ended questions to allow participants to express their perspectives and experiences in their own words (Longhurst, 2009). The questions addressed participants' understandings of gender equality, the teaching and learning of fiqh, the influence of local socio-cultural norms on gender relations, and opportunities for developing more inclusive educational practices within the pesantren. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes.

Participatory observation was conducted to examine relevant educational activities, classroom interactions, and social practices within the pesantren. The observations focused on aspects of teaching and learning, interactions between teachers and students, and practices relevant to gender relations and fiqh education. The specific activities observed and the number of observation sessions should be reported in accordance with the actual fieldwork records.

Document analysis was used to examine relevant educational and institutional materials, including such as fiqh textbooks, curriculum documents, lesson plans, or institutional regulations. The analysis focused on identifying how gender-related concepts and interpretations of fiqh were represented in the documents and how these representations related to the educational practices observed in the pesantren.

The interview data, observational field notes, and documentary materials were analyzed thematically. The analysis involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, the identification and development of themes, and the interpretation of patterns relevant to the research questions. The themes were examined in relation to gender equality, fiqh teaching practices, institutional dynamics, and the local socio-cultural context of Mandailing Natal. Information from interviews was compared with observational and documentary evidence to identify convergences, differences, and context-specific patterns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Gender Representation in the Fiqh Curriculum

The research findings on gender representation in the fiqh curriculum taught at Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Mandailing Natal reveal several critical insights that reflect the persistent gender biases embedded in the learning materials. Analysis of the textbooks, learning modules, and curriculum guidelines used in the pesantren indicates that gender representation in fiqh tends to be androcentric, where men are positioned as the primary subjects in various aspects of Islamic law, while women are often relegated to secondary or even marginal roles.

First, in the materials on worship (religious rituals), men are predominantly presented as the main examples. For instance, in discussions about Friday prayers, Hajj, or leading prayers, men are consistently portrayed as the primary actors, while the roles of women are often mentioned only briefly or in the context of limitations. For example, in the discussion of Friday prayers, the emphasis is placed on the obligation for men to attend, while women are considered not obligated and are even discouraged from attending the mosque. This reflects the view that public spaces, such as mosques, are male domains, while domestic spaces are deemed more "appropriate" for women (Baqir, 2020; Jenner, 2023).

> "Regarding leadership, Islam places this responsibility primarily in the hands of men, particularly within the family. Although leadership in other contexts may be subject to debate, such discussions do not negate the legitimacy of male leadership. The same applies to Friday prayers, as no explicit textual evidence (nass sarih) establishes an obligation for women to perform them. Therefore, this is understood as part of Islamic law (Sharia)." (Kiyai, Interview, May 2025).

Second, gender bias is also evident in discussions about muamalah (social interactions). For example, in the materials on marriage, men are positioned as having full authority in decision-making, such as in matters of polygamy or divorce. Women are often depicted as passive parties who are expected to obey their husbands' decisions (Shomad, 2022). For instance, the discussion on polygamy focuses more on men's rights to marry multiple wives without deeply addressing the psychological and social impacts on women. Additionally, in the discussion of inheritance, although the rules for distribution according to the Qur'an are explained, the historical and social contexts behind these rules are often overlooked, creating the impression that these rules are absolute and non-negotiable (Suryadi Nasution, Raja Ritonga, Muhammad Ikbal, Parulian Siregar, 2021). One female student explained:

> "We study the chapter on marriage (Bab Nikah) as part of the fiqh subject. In this chapter, we are taught that men play a significant role in determining matters related to marriage, including responsibilities, financial support, and divorce. When asked about women's roles in marriage, the explanation generally follows the framework used to explain men's roles, emphasizing that women should follow, obey, and be submissive to their husbands, among other expectations." (Female student, interview, May 2025).

Third, in the materials on aqidah (beliefs) and akhlak (morality), gender representation also tends to be biased. Women are often portrayed as individuals who need to be controlled or protected, particularly in the context of safeguarding family morality and honor. For example, in discussions about modesty and clothing, the emphasis is primarily on women's obligation to cover their aurat (modesty), while men's obligations to guard their gaze and behavior are often neglected (Al-Mannai, 2010; Cornell, 2007; Glapka, 2018; Štojs, 2012; vom Bruck, 2013). This reflects the view that women are sources of fitnah (temptation) that need to be controlled, while men are seen as morally stronger.

Fourth, in discussions about leadership and religious authority, men are consistently presented as the primary examples. For instance, in the materials on imamah (leadership), men are considered natural leaders, while women are deemed unfit for leadership roles, especially in religious contexts. This is evident in the discussion of the qualifications for becoming an imam or khatib, where men are considered the only eligible candidates (Akhmetova, 2020; Erwani & Siregar, 2025; Kloos, 2016; Lopes Cardozo & Srimulyani, 2021).

The findings above indicate that the fiqh curriculum in Mandailing Natal pesantren is not yet fully inclusive of gender perspectives. These biased representations of gender not only reflect inequality in the learning materials but also have the potential to reinforce existing patriarchal structures in society. Therefore, efforts are needed to revise the fiqh curriculum to make it more responsive to gender issues, taking into account broader socio-cultural contexts and the inherent values of justice in Islam.

B. Perceptions and Understanding of Islamic Boarding School Stakeholders on Gender Equality

The perceptions and understanding of pesantren stakeholders in Mandailing Natal regarding gender equality vary, reflecting the complex dynamics between religious values, local traditions, and the influence of modernization. Through in-depth interviews with kiai, ustaz/ustazah (teachers), santri (students), and pesantren administrators, this research reveals diverse perspectives that can be grouped into several main themes.

First, there is a group that views gender equality as a concept aligned with Islamic values, provided it is understood within the framework of sharia. For example, some kiai and ustazah argue that Islam inherently grants equal rights to men and women, albeit with different roles and responsibilities. They emphasize that equality does not mean uniformity but rather justice in treating men and women according to their respective natures and functions. This perspective is often supported by references to examples from Islamic history, such as Khadijah's role as a successful businesswoman or Aisha's contributions as a hadith scholar and political leader (Hilal, 2015; Ismah, 2023; Kloos & Künkler, 2016).

Interpretations of this kind are generally expressed by relatively young kiai or those familiar with the concept of socio-religious change. This perspective appears to be emerging among pesantren kiai in Mandailing Natal, particularly those who have previously pursued formal education at universities. One example is the statement made by Ustadz AZ, presented below:

> "Men and women were not created by Allah to compete over who is superior or more virtuous; rather, they were created with distinct roles. Women can become pregnant and give birth, whereas men cannot. Is that fair? Men do not menstruate, whereas women do, which allows them to refrain from performing prayers during menstruation. Is that fair? Men can become leaders, and women can also become leaders. The question that is often raised is, for example, what happens when women work in the public sphere, such as serving as leaders, while neglecting their responsibilities at home? Yet, the same question could also be directed at men. Therefore, the roles of men and women in life should not necessarily be judged solely through the concept of fairness." (Interview with Ustadz AZ, May 2025).

Second, there is a group that views gender equality with skepticism, considering it a "Western" concept that is not entirely compatible with Islamic values and local culture. Some kiai and ustaz express concerns that the radical application of gender equality could erode established traditions and social orders. They argue that pesantren must preserve religious values passed down through generations, including patriarchal structures they believe are part of Islamic teachings. This view is often supported by literal interpretations of religious texts, such as Qur'anic verses about male leadership in the family (Achmad, 2020; Himmah & Yaqien, 2017; Yanggo, 2016).

The second pattern of thought was generally identified among relatively older kiai who had limited exposure to newer conceptual frameworks. Their perspectives were largely grounded in classical fiqh texts, which tend to portray women as dignified and protected individuals under male guardianship. This perspective is also closely associated with the patriarchal

cultural traditions of the Mandailing community, in which men have traditionally exercised considerable authority over women's lives. For example, Mandailing culture recognizes the concept of marga (clan), which is inherited through the paternal line. This illustrates how gender relations are embedded in local cultural structures and traditions.

An important issue, however, concerns how these kiai conceptualize gender equality. Rather than simply accepting or rejecting the concept, they question its meaning and practical implications. Does gender equality require men and women to perform the same duties, assume the same responsibilities, or fulfill identical social roles? These questions are reflected in the following statement by Kiai MIN:

> "Gender equality is a misleading concept and is not part of Islam. In Islam, men and women are different and have different responsibilities; they should not be treated as identical. If their roles were made the same, men would not be able to fulfill women's responsibilities, just as women would not necessarily be able to undertake men's work. For example, construction work—is it really possible for women to do such work? Surely, they cannot. Ultimately, if the aim is to elevate women's status through the concept of gender equality, then this approach is outdated. Islam has already elevated the status of women to a level far beyond what proponents of gender equality intend." (Ustadz MIN, June 2025).

Third, there is also a group that holds ambivalent views, acknowledging the importance of gender equality but feeling constrained by existing socio-cultural contexts. For instance, some ustazah express support for gender equality in education and decision-making but feel that the surrounding community is not yet fully ready to accept such changes. They share personal experiences about how their efforts to take on more active roles in the pesantren often face resistance from male colleagues or the broader community. This perspective reflects the tension between idealism and the social realities faced by women in pesantren (Aziz, 2024; Kurniawati & Muafiah, 2023; Sanah et al., 2021).

Fourth, among santri, perceptions of gender equality also vary, often influenced by family background and exposure to modern discourse. Female santri tend to be more supportive of gender equality, particularly in the context of education and opportunities to contribute to public spaces. They express a desire for equal access to religious education and active roles in the pesantren, similar to their male counterparts. On the other hand, male santri tend to hold more traditional views, although some are beginning to open up to the idea of gender equality, especially after being exposed to modern discourses through social media or public lectures (Jayana & Hasna, 2021; Nurul Qolbi Kurniawati, 2024).

The perceptions and understanding of pesantren stakeholders regarding gender equality reflect the complex interplay between religious values, local traditions, and the influence of modernization. While there is resistance to the concept of gender equality, particularly from more conservative circles, there are also efforts to integrate equality within a framework that aligns with Islamic teachings. These findings suggest that efforts to promote gender equality in pesantren must be approached sensitively, taking into account the socio-cultural context and religious values upheld by the local community.

C. Gender Dynamics in the Structure and Practices of Islamic Boarding Schools

The gender dynamics within the structure and practices of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Mandailing Natal reflect a complex interplay between religious values, local traditions, and the influence of modernization. An analysis of the organizational structure, leadership patterns, and daily practices in pesantren reveals that, although efforts have been made to promote gender equality, patriarchal structures remain dominant and influence various aspects of life in the pesantren.

In the organizational structure of pesantren, men tend to dominate strategic positions, such as kiai (religious leaders), pesantren administrators, and fiqh instructors. Women, although playing important roles in the management of the pesantren, are often placed in positions considered "secondary," such as managing the kitchen, overseeing female student dormitories, or teaching female santri. This male dominance in leadership positions not only reflects gender bias in the organizational structure but also influences the policies and practices implemented in the pesantren (Neath, 2006; Pribadi, 2014; Smith, 2013). For example, in decision-making processes regarding curriculum or pesantren activities, women's voices are often less heard or considered less important than those of men.

In learning practices, gender dynamics are also evident. Male and female santri are often separated in classes or religious activities, with the rationale of maintaining morality and propriety. However, this separation is frequently accompanied by differences in the learning materials and opportunities provided. For instance, male santri are more often taught about leadership and religious authority, while female santri are more frequently taught about domestic roles and family responsibilities. Additionally, in religious activities such as Friday prayers or public lectures, male santri are more involved as imams or speakers, while female santri often remain passive participants.

Although women are often placed in positions considered "secondary," their roles in the management of the pesantren are actually crucial. For example, the wives of kiai or female teachers (ustazah) often hold key roles in managing female student dormitories, organizing daily activities, and providing emotional support to santri (Fahmi, 2017). However, these roles are often not formally recognized and are seen as part of domestic responsibilities. Furthermore, women frequently play a driving role in social and religious activities at the pesantren, such as organizing religious study sessions or charity events (Ningrum & Mursidi, 2021). Yet, their contributions are often undervalued and perceived as part of traditional female roles.

The gender dynamics within the structure and practices of pesantren are not without challenges and obstacles. One of the main challenges is resistance from conservative circles that view change as a threat to tradition and religious values. For example, efforts to promote gender equality in organizational structures or learning practices often face resistance from kiai or pesantren administrators who hold traditional views. Additionally, the lack of resources and training for women to take on more active roles also poses a significant barrier. For instance, although there are qualified female teachers (ustazah), their potential is often underutilized due to systemic constraints.

D. Challenges and Obstacles in Implementing Gender Equality

Efforts to implement gender equality in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Mandailing Natal face a number of complex challenges and obstacles, both internal and external. Internal challenges primarily stem from resistance to changes perceived as threatening established traditions and religious values. Many conservative kiai and pesantren administrators view gender equality as a "Western" concept that is incompatible with Islamic teachings (Ma'ruf et al., 2022). They argue that the existing patriarchal structures in pesantren are part of the religious heritage that must be preserved. This perspective is often supported by literal interpretations of religious texts, such as Qur'anic verses about male leadership in the family or hadiths that restrict women's roles in public spaces (Wahyudi & Fadilah, 2018). This resistance not only hinders efforts to integrate gender equality values into the pesantren curriculum and practices but also creates an unsupportive environment for women to take on more active roles.

In addition to internal resistance, external challenges also play a significant role in impeding efforts to promote gender equality. The surrounding community, which remains heavily influenced by patriarchal culture and strong traditional values, often views changes in the pesantren with skepticism. For example, efforts to involve women in leadership positions or religious activities frequently face criticism and rejection from the broader community. They argue that such changes could erode traditional values and lead to social instability. This societal pressure not only influences pesantren policies and practices but also limits the space for women to express themselves and take on more active roles (Ammar et al., 2023; Nur Hibbah & Desi Safitri, 2024).

A lack of resources and training also poses a significant barrier to efforts to implement gender equality in pesantren. Although there are qualified female teachers (ustazah) with the potential to take on more active roles, they often do not have the same access as men to career development or leadership positions. Additionally, the lack of training on gender equality for teachers and pesantren administrators hinders efforts to integrate equality values into the curriculum and daily practices. Without adequate understanding of gender issues, it is difficult for pesantren to develop inclusive and responsive approaches to the needs of female santri.

Power dynamics within pesantren also serve as an important inhibiting factor. The hierarchical and male-dominated organizational structure of pesantren often creates an unsupportive environment for women to take on more active roles. For example, in decision-making processes regarding the curriculum or pesantren activities, women's voices are often less heard or considered less important than those of men. Furthermore, the lack of female representation in strategic positions also affects the policies and practices implemented in pesantren. Without adequate representation, it is difficult for women to influence changes that support gender equality.

These challenges and obstacles not only hinder efforts to implement gender equality in pesantren but also create an environment that is less inclusive for female santri. For instance, female santri often feel undervalued and lack opportunities to fully develop their potential (Faridah & Pd, 2018). Additionally, the lack of support from the surrounding environment can affect the motivation and self-confidence of female santri to take on more active roles. In the long term, this can impede efforts to create a fair and equitable educational environment.

Despite these challenges and obstacles, there is potential for change and innovation in efforts to implement gender equality in pesantren. For example, some pesantren have begun adopting more inclusive approaches in teaching practices and organizational management. Some kiai and ustazah are also starting to promote gender equality values in sermons and religious lectures, referencing examples from Islamic history that support equality. Additionally, there are efforts to involve women in decision-making and religious activities, albeit on a limited scale. By addressing these challenges and obstacles, pesantren can become agents of change that foster the creation of a more just and inclusive society.

E. Potential for Developing a Progressive Fiqh Curriculum

The development of a progressive fiqh curriculum in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Mandailing Natal holds significant potential to create a transformative educational environment that is more inclusive and responsive to contemporary issues, including gender equality. A progressive fiqh curriculum not only aims to shift students' perspectives on gender roles but also equips them with a more contextual and relevant understanding of fiqh that addresses modern challenges. A progressive approach to fiqh acknowledges that religious texts should not be read literally but must be understood within the historical and social contexts in which they were revealed (Mufid, 2013). In this way, fiqh can become a tool for promoting justice and equality, rather than reinforcing existing inequalities.

One of the main potentials in developing a progressive fiqh curriculum is the integration of gender perspectives into learning materials (Rozi, 2023; Wardiana & Fadli, 2024). For example, in discussions about worship (ibadah), social interactions (muamalah), and beliefs (aqidah), the curriculum can incorporate critical analyses of how religious texts are understood and interpreted in different contexts. For instance, in the discussion of Friday prayers, the curriculum can include an exploration of why women are not obligated to attend Friday prayers and how this can be understood within the historical and social context of early Islam. Additionally, the curriculum can include case studies on the roles of women in Islamic history, such as Khadijah as a successful businesswoman or Aisha as a hadith scholar and political leader. This approach allows students to understand that Islam possesses rich intellectual resources to support gender equality (Abubakar, 2011; Zulfatun Ni'mah, 2025).

Another potential in developing a progressive fiqh curriculum is the use of participatory and dialogical teaching methods. These methods aim not only to shift students' perspectives on gender roles but also to equip them with the critical and analytical skills needed to understand religious texts within broader contexts. For example, in discussions about polygamy or divorce, students can engage in group discussions about how these rules can be understood and implemented in different contexts. Additionally, the curriculum can incorporate practical activities, such as simulations of decision-making in family or community contexts, to help students understand the complexities of gender issues and how fiqh can be used to promote justice (Sumadi & Lilis Nurteti, 2024).

Furthermore, the development of a progressive fiqh curriculum can leverage technology and digital resources to enhance the quality of learning. For instance, pesantren can develop online learning platforms that provide materials on progressive fiqh, including lecture videos, scholarly articles, and interactive discussions. These platforms can be used not only by students in the pesantren but also by the wider community, thereby expanding the impact of curriculum

development efforts. Additionally, pesantren can utilize social media to promote gender equality values and encourage public discussions on contemporary issues (Anggi Ayu Pratiwi, Bannan Naelin Najihah, 2022; Burhanudin et al., 2019).

The potential for developing a progressive fiqh curriculum is also linked to collaboration with other institutions, such as universities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local communities. For example, pesantren can collaborate with universities to develop inclusive and gender-responsive learning materials. Additionally, pesantren can partner with NGOs to organize training for teachers and administrators on gender equality and progressive fiqh. Such collaborations can not only improve the quality of the curriculum but also expand networks and support for curriculum development efforts.

Overall, the development of a progressive fiqh curriculum in pesantren in Mandailing Natal has significant potential to create a more inclusive and responsive educational transformation. By integrating gender perspectives, using participatory and dialogical teaching methods, leveraging technology and digital resources, and collaborating with other institutions, pesantren can become agents of change that promote the creation of a more just and equitable society. In the long term, these efforts will not only transform students' perspectives on gender roles but also influence society at large, creating a sustainable impact.

F. Responses and Readiness of Islamic Boarding Schools towards Change

The Response and Readiness of Islamic Boarding Schools (Pesantren) in Mandailing Natal to Change, Particularly in the Context of Gender Equality Mainstreaming and the Development of Progressive Fiqh Curriculum, Reveals Complex and Diverse Dynamics. Islamic boarding schools, as educational institutions rooted in religious traditions and local culture, often face dilemmas between preserving established values and responding to the demands of a changing era. Research findings reveal that the response of pesantren to issues of gender equality and curriculum reform is not uniform but varies depending on factors such as religious perspectives, openness to modernization, and pressures from the surrounding community and environment.

Some pesantren demonstrate positive and progressive responses to change, particularly those led by kiai (religious leaders) or administrators with broad insights and openness to contemporary discourse. These pesantren tend to view gender equality as an integral part of the values of justice and civility taught by Islam. They argue that Islam, in essence, is a religion that promotes justice and equality, and therefore, pesantren should be at the forefront of implementing these values. For example, some pesantren have begun integrating gender perspectives into their curricula by including materials on the role of women in Islamic history or organizing discussions on contemporary issues such as polygamy, divorce, and female leadership (Mayasari, 2023). Additionally, these pesantren are more open to collaboration with other institutions, such as universities or non-governmental organizations, to develop inclusive and gender-responsive learning materials.

However, not all pesantren respond to change in the same way. Many pesantren, particularly those led by more conservative kiai or administrators, tend to resist changes perceived as threatening established religious traditions and values. They argue that the patriarchal structures within pesantren are part of a religious heritage that must be preserved and that efforts to promote gender equality could erode these values. This resistance is often

supported by referencing religious texts interpreted literally, such as Qur'anic verses about male leadership in the family or hadiths that restrict women's roles in public spaces. Moreover, pressure from the surrounding community, which remains heavily influenced by patriarchal culture and strong traditional values, also shapes pesantren's responses to change. For instance, efforts to involve women in leadership positions or religious activities often face criticism and rejection from the broader community.

Despite resistance to change, this research also reveals potential for transformation and innovation in some pesantren. For example, some pesantren have begun adopting more inclusive approaches in teaching practices and organizational management. Some kiai and female religious teachers (ustazah) have also started promoting gender equality values in sermons and religious lectures by referencing examples from Islamic history that support equality. Additionally, there are efforts to involve women in decision-making and religious activities, albeit on a limited scale. These efforts indicate that, although challenges and obstacles remain, there is potential for change and innovation in implementing gender equality in pesantren.

The response and readiness of pesantren to change reflect the complex dynamics between religious values, local traditions, and the influence of modernization. Although resistance to change persists, particularly among conservative circles, there are also efforts to integrate gender equality values into curricula and daily practices. By addressing these challenges and obstacles, pesantren can become agents of change that promote the creation of a more just and inclusive society. In the long term, these efforts will not only transform students' perspectives on gender roles but may also influence society more broadly, creating sustainable impacts.

G. Recommendations for Implementing a Progressive Fiqh Curriculum

The implementation of a Progressive Fiqh curriculum in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Mandailing Natal requires practical recommendations that are not only visionary but also realistic and aligned with the local socio-cultural context. First, teacher training is a crucial initial step. Teachers or ustadz in pesantren are at the forefront of the learning process, so their capacity must be enhanced to understand and teach Progressive Fiqh (Arifin, 2013). This training should not merely provide theoretical knowledge but also include participatory and dialogical teaching methods (Selamet & Yusuf, 2023). For example, teachers could be trained to use case studies to explain concepts of Progressive Fiqh, such as applying the principle of maslahah (public benefit) to address contemporary issues like land conflicts or environmental concerns. Such training could be conducted periodically, either through workshops involving Progressive Fiqh experts from outside or through teacher exchange programs between pesantren.

Second, the development of inclusive and contextual learning materials is the next step. Learning materials should be designed to not only reference classical texts but also integrate current issues relevant to the lives of students (santri) and the Mandailing Natal community. For instance, when discussing zakat, the material could be enriched with case studies on productive zakat management to empower the local economy. Additionally, the materials should consider the diverse backgrounds of the santri, including social, economic, and religious understanding levels. To achieve this, a dedicated team should be established to develop

learning materials, consisting of Progressive Fiqh experts, pesantren teachers, and student representatives.

Third, involving all stakeholders in the change process is a strategy that cannot be overlooked. Pesantren cannot work alone in implementing the Progressive Fiqh curriculum. Collaboration with various parties, such as local governments, community leaders, pesantren alumni, and local religious organizations, is essential. For example, local governments could support by providing funding for teacher training or the development of learning facilities. Community leaders and pesantren alumni could be involved in socializing the new curriculum to the public to prevent resistance or misconceptions. Furthermore, religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) or Muhammadiyah could serve as strategic partners in disseminating understanding of Progressive Fiqh (Harisudin, 2021; Nuroniyah, 2023).

Fourth, the use of technology in learning should also be considered. Although pesantren in Mandailing Natal may not yet be fully technologically literate, small steps can be taken by utilizing simple devices such as projectors or laptops for material presentations. If feasible, pesantren could begin developing simple e-learning platforms accessible to students to support independent learning. However, it is important to note that the use of technology must be adapted to the conditions and capabilities of the pesantren and should not overlook the direct interaction between teachers and students, which is a hallmark of pesantren education (Budiharso et al., 2023; Hidayah, 2021; Winarko, 2007).

Fifth, regular evaluation and reflection should be an integral part of curriculum implementation. The evaluation process should not only occur at the end of the semester but also periodically throughout the learning process. This evaluation could cover cognitive aspects (students' understanding of the material), affective aspects (changes in attitudes and behavior), and psychomotor aspects (students' ability to apply Progressive Fiqh concepts in daily life). The results of these evaluations should then be used for reflection to improve and refine the curriculum. For example, if students are found to struggle with understanding a particular concept, teaching methods or materials could be adjusted accordingly.

Sixth, it is essential to build collective awareness about the urgency of Progressive Fiqh among the Mandailing Natal community. This can be achieved through various socialization activities, such as seminars, public discussions, or cultural events involving the broader community. Pesantren could take the initiative in such activities by inviting competent speakers to explain the importance of Progressive Fiqh in addressing contemporary challenges. Additionally, local media such as community radio or pesantren bulletins could be utilized to disseminate understanding of this new curriculum.

Finally, the implementation of the Progressive Fiqh curriculum should be viewed as a long-term process requiring patience and consistency. Change will not happen overnight, but with concrete steps and collective commitment, pesantren in Mandailing Natal can become pioneers in developing progressive and relevant religious education. In doing so, pesantren will not only produce knowledgeable santri but also a generation capable of addressing the challenges of the times with wisdom and responsibility. This is a grand vision that requires hard work, but its outcomes will yield broad positive impacts, not only for pesantren but also for the Mandailing Natal community as a whole.

DISCUSSION

Research on "Inclusive Pesantren: Building Gender Equality through a Progressive Fiqh Curriculum" in the context of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Mandailing Natal reveals complex dynamics between religious values, local traditions, and the demands of modernization (Ikbal et al., 2021). The findings of this study not only provide an in-depth picture of gender representation in the existing fiqh curriculum but also offer insights into the challenges, potential, and possible impacts of efforts to integrate gender equality into pesantren education. This discussion will elaborate on the key findings of the research, connect them to existing literature, and explore the theoretical and practical implications of building gender equality through a progressive fiqh curriculum.

First, the representation of gender in the existing fiqh curriculum shows that gender bias remains deeply ingrained in the learning materials used in pesantren. This aligns with the findings of several studies revealing that Islamic education curricula in Indonesia tend to maintain patriarchal structures by emphasizing the role of men as holders of religious authority (Ma'Arif, 2018; Smith, 2013, 2014; Zulmuqim et al., 2020). This biased gender representation not only reflects inequality in learning materials but also has the potential to reinforce existing social norms in society. In the context of Mandailing Natal, where patriarchal culture remains strong, a gender-biased fiqh curriculum can exacerbate existing injustices, particularly in terms of women's access to education and participation in public spaces (Setiadi 2024; Rangkuti and Abidin 2022).

Second, the perceptions and understanding of pesantren stakeholders regarding gender equality reveal a variety of views that reflect the dynamics between religious values and the influence of modernization. Some kiai (religious leaders) and female teachers (ustazah) view gender equality as a concept aligned with Islamic values, provided it is understood within a framework consistent with sharia. This perspective aligns with arguments emphasizing that Islam inherently promotes justice and equality, although interpretations of religious texts are often influenced by patriarchal social and cultural contexts (Jones-Pauly, 2016; Mir-Hosseini et al., 2013; Rahmawati, 2020). However, resistance to gender equality from conservative circles also indicates that efforts to integrate these values into the pesantren curriculum will not be easy, especially in contexts where tradition and religious values are still strongly upheld.

Third, gender dynamics in the structure and practices of pesantren reveal that although women play important roles in pesantren management, they are often placed in positions considered "secondary". This reflects a hierarchical organizational structure dominated by men, consistent with previous research findings on gender inequality in Islamic educational institutions. However, this study also reveals potential for change, particularly through efforts to involve women in leadership positions and religious activities. Such efforts can be an initial step toward creating a more inclusive environment responsive to the needs of female students (santri) (Khalil & DeCuir, 2018; Kull, 2009; Lopes Cardozo & Srimulyani, 2021; Wardiana & Fadli, 2024).

Fourth, challenges and obstacles in implementing gender equality reveal that resistance to change, both from within pesantren and the surrounding community, is a major inhibiting factor. This resistance is often based on literal interpretations of religious texts and concerns that change will erode traditional values. These findings appear to affirm the relevance of

previous research, which has shown that efforts to promote gender equality often face resistance from conservative groups (Athoillah et al., 2024; Flood et al., 2021; Smith, 2013). However, this study also demonstrates that there is potential for change, particularly through approaches sensitive to the socio-cultural context and religious values held by the local community.

Fifth, the potential for developing a progressive fiqh curriculum reveals that integrating gender perspectives into learning materials can be an initial step toward creating a more inclusive and contemporary-issue-responsive curriculum. A progressive approach to fiqh, which emphasizes the importance of understanding religious texts within their historical and social contexts, can serve as a tool for promoting justice and equality. This aligns with arguments stressing the importance of reinterpreting religious texts in a more modern and inclusive context (Pairay, 2016; Ragozina, 2017; Starodubrovskaya, 2017). Additionally, the use of participatory and dialogical teaching methods can help students develop the critical and analytical skills needed to understand gender issues in a broader context.

Sixth, the response and readiness of pesantren to change reveal that although resistance to change persists, particularly among conservative circles, there are also efforts to integrate gender equality values into curricula and daily practices. This indicates that pesantren have the potential to become agents of change that promote the creation of a more just and inclusive society. However, these efforts require support from various stakeholders, including the government, non-governmental organizations, and the broader community, to create an environment conducive to change.

Seventh, the potential impact on the local community reveals that efforts to implement gender equality and develop a progressive fiqh curriculum can have significant effects on the surrounding society. By shifting societal perspectives on gender roles, increasing women's participation in education and social activities, and addressing gender injustices and inequalities, pesantren can serve as catalysts for broader social change. Several studies have appreciated this, with relatively similar findings, indicating that pesantren have the potential to become agents of change that promote the creation of a more just and inclusive society (Towaf, 2008).

This study makes an important contribution to the literature on gender equality in Islamic education, particularly in the context of pesantren in Indonesia. The findings not only reveal the challenges and obstacles faced in efforts to implement gender equality but also offer insights into the potential and strategies to address these challenges. In a broader context, this study also demonstrates that pesantren, as educational institutions with significant influence in society, have the potential to become agents of change that promote the creation of a more just and inclusive society. However, these efforts require support from various stakeholders, including the government, non-governmental organizations, and the broader community, to create an environment conducive to change.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the fiqh curriculum currently implemented in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Mandailing Natal remains predominantly androcentric, with gender representation tending to be biased and non-inclusive. However, there is

significant potential for reform by integrating gender perspectives into the curriculum, employing participatory learning methods, and collaborating with various relevant institutions. Nevertheless, efforts to implement this progressive curriculum are not without challenges. These include resistance from conservative groups, societal pressures, and limitations in resources and adequate training.

Despite these obstacles, several pesantren have demonstrated positive responses to change. They have begun integrating gender equality values into teaching practices and organizational management, marking an initial step toward more inclusive transformation. This study concludes that the development of a progressive fiqh curriculum in Mandailing Natal's pesantren holds significant potential to drive a more gender-responsive educational transformation. Such transformation can not only alter students' perspectives on gender roles but also influence society more broadly, fostering a fairer and more equitable community.

To support these efforts, several recommendations can be implemented, including providing training for educators, developing inclusive learning materials, and adopting approaches sensitive to local socio-cultural contexts. Through these measures, it is hoped that the fiqh curriculum can become an effective tool in promoting gender equality and social justice within the pesantren environment and society at large.

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