PALASTREN
Jurnal Studi Gender
Volume 19, Number 2, 2026. (PP : 155-178)
https://journal.iainkudus.ac.id/index.php/Palastren/index
http://dx.doi.org/10.21043/palastren.v18i1.39333

Gendered Power Relations in Everyday Religious Life: Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Legitimating Language

Afifah Liana
Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, Indonesia
afifahliana@student.ub.ac.id

Harsuko Riniwati
Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, Indonesia
riniwatisepk@ub.ac.id

Fadillah Putra
Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, Indonesia
fadillahputra@ub.ac.id

Imam Arifa'illah Syaiful Huda
UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, Jambi, Indonesia
imam.arifaillah@uinjambi.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Religious authority provides moral and spiritual guidance, but in certain relationships, it can be used to judge and restrict women. This study examines how gendered moral-religious power is formed, legitimized, and negotiated in the experiences of young adult Muslim women in Indonesia. The study used an experiential qualitative design informed by a phenomenological sensibility and involved semi-

structured interviews with five informants aged 18–29. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Foucault's concepts of disciplinary and pastoral power, alongside Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic violence and doxa (common belief), were used to explain how regulation becomes normalized and difficult to resist. Findings show that authority develops through closeness and hierarchical relationships; language of protection and adab normalizes regulation; collective reputation turns objections into loyalty issues; and silencing operates through self-surveillance, though supportive relationships can reopen space for agency. The study contributes a relational model of religious authority, showing how everyday moral language facilitates reputational displacement and shifts the burden of institutional reputation onto women.

Keywords: Religious Power Relations; Foucault; Bourdieu; Religious Authority; Muslim Women.

A. Introduction

Religious authority plays a vital role in Muslim social life, providing guidance and evaluating conduct. It is better understood as a social relationship formed through recognition and trust rather than a quality that automatically follows from a formal title (Fuad, 2021). However, this recognition is not distributed equally. Women may become religious teachers, pesantren (Islamic boarding school) leaders, and knowledge producers, yet their legitimacy is still negotiated within institutions historically dominated by male leadership (Kloos & Ismah, 2023). Even when women gain opportunities to lead, organizational hierarchies and gendered standards of propriety often limit their authority (Malicha et al., 2026).

Power in this context rarely appears as open coercion; instead, it circulates through everyday practices of reprimands, guidance, and surveillance. In Islamic education, regulating female students is often presented as protection from moral risk while tied to institutional

honor (Hefner, 2022). Similarly, in digital spaces, women's piety is constantly judged by audiences through comments on their bodies and lifestyles (Beta, 2019). Thus, moral authority operates not only top-down but horizontally through social relationships and routines.

The scale of the problem extends far beyond isolated incidents; recent empirical investigations continually highlight educational environments, specifically pesantren, as critical sites where women face disproportionate risks of sexual and spiritual abuse (Pebriaisyah et al., 2022). Recent public discourse highlighting a series of abuses within these institutions prompted structural responses, such as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Regulation (Permendikbudristek) No. 30 of 2021. However, because this regulation primarily covers general higher education, it left a jurisdictional gap regarding pesantren under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag). This necessitated the subsequent issuance of the Kemenag Regulation (PMA) No. 73 of 2022 on the Prevention and Handling of Sexual Violence in Islamic Educational Units, alongside the broader Law on Sexual Violence Crimes (UU TPKS) in 2022 (Baihaqi et al., 2022; Pebriaisyah et al., 2022). These legal milestones underscore that moral authority in religious spaces is frequently weaponized to silence victims and protect institutional reputations.

Previous studies have provided important insights into the lives of Muslim women, yet they can generally be mapped into three distinct streams that approach these dimensions in isolation. The first stream focuses on women's religious authority and their structural positions. Studies by Fuad (2021) and Kloos and Ismah (2023), alongside recent scholarship on the Indonesian Congress of Women Islamic Scholars (KUPI) (Nurmila, 2021; Srimulyani & Ali, 2022), focus extensively on how women navigate formal leadership but place less emphasis on the informal, everyday mechanisms of moral surveillance. The second stream examines moral policing and digital piety. Research here highlights how digital spaces shape young Muslim women's commerce and

piety (Beta, 2019), but must be expanded to understand how digital audiences enact horizontal moral policing (Nisa, 2022).

The third stream addresses the severe psychological impacts of these power imbalances, focusing on spiritual abuse and institutional betrayal. While Chowdhury et al. (2022), Ellis et al. (2022) and recent scholarship on clergy abuse (Oakley et al., 2021) highlight the trauma caused by manipulative religious figures, they often overlook the everyday linguistic normalization that precedes the abuse. Consequently, a critical gap remains: while these three streams explain structural inequalities, digital surveillance, and the psychological impacts of abuse, they have yet to explain the linguistic mechanisms that fully connect them. Understanding how everyday moral language operates as the invisible thread tying structural authority to psychological silencing is essential.

To bridge this gap, this study employs a cohesive analytical framework divided into two intersecting dimensions. The first dimension utilizes instruments of power to analyze structural and informal hierarchies. Foucault's (1977, 2007) concepts of disciplinary and pastoral power are operationalized to examine how power operates through surveillance, normalizing judgment, and moral guidance aimed at individuals' supposed welfare, creating a dependency that makes resistance difficult. Complementing this, Bourdieu's (1991, 2001) concepts of symbolic capital, doxa (common belief), and symbolic violence are used to examine how a reputation for piety or institutional status legitimizes particular actors, making socially produced restrictions appear entirely natural.

The second dimension focuses on instruments of language and agency. Van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework is deployed to dissect patterns of justification in everyday language, showing how words like adab (etiquette) or protection moralize coercion. To ensure women are not viewed merely as passive victims, Mahmood's (2005) work ensures women's agency is

understood through negotiation and safe-space preservation. Crucially, distinguishing patriarchal abuse from Islamic teachings requires an Islamic feminist lens. Foundational critiques by Wadud (1999), alongside Indonesian formulations like mubadalah (reciprocity) framework (Kodir, 2019) and substantive justice for women (Rofiah, 2020), show that women's subordination in these settings stems from constructed social hierarchies, not the divine text itself.

This study employed an experiential qualitative design informed by a phenomenological sensibility, analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). The focus was on the meaning of experiences as narrated by the participants, rather than on seeking an eidetic reduction of the phenomenon. The sample size was guided by the concept of 'information power' (Malterud et al., 2016), fulfilling its five dimensions through: a narrow study aim focusing strictly on moral surveillance, high sample specificity, a strong established theoretical background, high-quality dialogue during in-depth interviews, and a cross-case analysis strategy. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020; Robinson, 2014). The recruitment flow began with observing public discussions on X (formerly Twitter) about religious pressure, then approaching potential participants via direct message to assess willingness and alignment with the inclusion criteria before obtaining formal consent.

The inclusion criteria targeted Indonesian Muslim women aged 18–29 who had experienced moral surveillance, digital policing, or symbolic violence in religious settings, between January and April 2026. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted via online video conferencing in Indonesian and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes per informant. The interview guide covered domains such as everyday religious restrictions, the language used by authority figures, emotional responses to surveillance, and strategies for navigating these pressures. Data from one initial participant was excluded as her narrative did not align with the specific dynamics of everyday moral

surveillance. The detailed profiles of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Informants Profile

Code	Age	Social Setting	Primary Experience of Moral Power
I1	22-24	Neighborhood / Local community	Surveillance of mobility and appearance (*doxa*)
I2	20-22	Digital public space / Social media	Horizontal moral policing by anonymous audiences
I3	18-20	*Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School)	Hierarchical discipline framed as "character education"
I4	22-24	Campus religious organization	Restriction of participation framed as "protection" and "*adab*"
I5	26-28	*Dakwah* (Islamic outreach) group	Pastoral boundary violation and institutional silencing

Note: Specific ages are presented in two-year brackets to protect the participants' identities and minimize the risk of deductive disclosure. Source: Primary Data, 2026

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines for human subject research. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, emphasizing voluntary participation and the right to withdraw. To ensure confidentiality and prevent deductive disclosure, pseudonyms (I1 to I5) were used, and specific identifiable details of institutions were altered. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, an active psychological referral protocol was established to provide participants access to professional counseling services if the interviews triggered distress.

Aligning with RTA, data analysis followed six phases: familiarization, generating initial codes, constructing themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report. For example, narratives describing scolding as "character building" were initially coded as "linguistic masking of discipline," which later became part of the theme of "legitimating language." Initial coding was conducted in Indonesian to preserve the semantic and cultural validity of socio-religious terms such as adab (etiquette), su'uzan (unjustified suspicion),

and fitnah (slander). Quotations were subsequently translated into English and cross-checked by the authors. To ensure trustworthiness and transferability, the researchers maintained reflexivity to prevent projecting personal assumptions onto the data, while also using peer debriefing, member checking, and an audit trail.

Furthermore, acknowledging researcher positionality is critical in this qualitative inquiry. The researchers position themselves as Indonesian Muslim scholars who are both insiders to the broader Islamic cultural context and outsiders to the specific local communities of the informants. This dual positionality facilitated initial access and rapport, allowing for a nuanced understanding of culturally loaded terms. However, it also required rigorous reflexivity to ensure that the researchers' own theological assumptions did not overshadow the participants' lived experiences, maintaining the focus strictly on how the informants themselves navigated and interpreted moral-religious power.

Based on this gap, the study asks: how is gendered moral-religious power formed, legitimized, and exercised in the experiences of young adult Muslim women, and how do these relationships constrain or open their voice and agency? This article conceptualizes everyday religious authority as a relational process, demonstrating how legitimating language facilitates a mechanism of reputational displacement—shifting the burden of institutional reputation onto women's bodies and behaviors. The subsequent discussion is organized into four main themes: (1) the operation of moral-religious power beyond formal structures; (2) the specific language of legitimation utilized; (3) the relational effects of this moral power, particularly institutional silencing; and (4) how supportive relationships serve as crucial openings for reclaiming agency.

B. Discussion

This section examines how gendered moral-

religious power forms, is legitimized, and is negotiated by tracing the interconnectedness of social arenas, actors, and regulatory actions. The analysis is structured into four main themes: (1) how moral authority operates beyond formal structures through everyday relationships, hierarchies, and horizontal policing; (2) the legitimating language used to normalize such regulation; (3) the relational effects of this moral power in constraining women's voices; and (4) how supportive relationships serve as crucial openings for women to reclaim their agency.

1. Moral-Religious Power Beyond Formal Structures: Closeness, Hierarchy, and Horizontal Policing

In everyday social settings, closeness often generates a sense of entitlement among community members to observe, judge, and correct women's behavior. Informant 1 (I1) described how the time women returned home and their clothing became subjects of neighborhood discussion.

> *"If a woman comes home even a little late, people immediately start gossiping. If her clothes are considered too conspicuous, that becomes a topic of conversation too. It is all framed as a way of reminding her, perhaps because people feel close to her." (I1)*

In Bourdieu's (2001) terms, this everyday surveillance operates as doxa, a set of unwritten, socially constructed rules that are perceived as common sense and therefore go unquestioned. The neighbors' assumption of the right to monitor women's mobility is not perceived as an intrusion or a violation of privacy, but as a normalized communal duty. This aligns with Rinaldo (2019), who notes that women's religious obedience and negotiation often occur within these informal, localized surveillance structures.

To further illustrate this localized surveillance, I1 noted how communal doxa extends beyond appearance into everyday social choices:

> *"Even deciding whether to join a local gathering or*

> *not becomes a moral issue. If you don't show up, they say you are alienating yourself from the congregation. You constantly feel watched." (I1)*

This constant feeling of being watched confirms that disciplinary power in neighborhoods operates through a panoptic logic. Women are compelled to regulate their own social participation to preempt communal gossip, blurring the line between voluntary community involvement and coercive moral surveillance.

In digital spaces, this moral judgment bypasses the need for any personal relationship. Visibility in a digital public space allowed strangers to position themselves as moral judges for I2.

> *"Most of them were not just ordinary hate comments. They were religious comments, like, 'Poor father,' 'She has no self-respect,' 'She is going to hell,' or 'She is proud to expose her [aurat].'" (I2)*

References to religion imbued these digital comments with a profound moral weight, treating women's bodies not merely as personal entities, but as public signs of piety and family honor. While Beta (2019) notes how digital spaces shape young Muslim women's commerce and piety, I2's experience highlights a darker dimension: digital audiences enact severe horizontal moral policing without possessing any formal authority. This finding aligns closely with Zaid et al. (2026), who argue that digital platforms create a 'liquid authority' in which public moral judgment extends beyond formal institutions, allowing anonymous audiences to enforce piety.

While moral authority is traditionally associated with male figures in structural positions, the data reveals that women also actively participate in practices of judgment. In community and organizational life, direct reprimands often came from female peers or seniors.

> *"Interestingly, it came more often from other women, female seniors, female friends, and so on. Men usually exercised it through sermons or organizational decisions." (I4)*

This pattern complicates rather than confirms the dominant framing in the literature. Studies of religious authority in Indonesia have largely traced moral regulation to male leadership and to the formal offices women are still negotiating their way into. The accounts examined here point elsewhere: the most immediate and most frequent regulation was administered by women who held no office at all, and whose only credential was proximity and seniority. Structural accounts therefore explain who may speak with institutional weight, but not who actually does the daily work of moral correction. This second question is that the present study takes up.

Rather than dismissing this dynamic as a mere coincidence, it reveals a critical mechanism of how gendered power is sustained. Drawing on Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the patriarchal bargain, women may police their peers as a strategic move to secure their own moral standing and safety within a patriarchal system. By enforcing modesty and behavioral rules on other women, female seniors reproduce what Bourdieu (2001) terms a gendered habitus—internalizing the dominant moral standards and actively projecting them onto others.

The capacity to regulate became exponentially stronger when an actor held a hierarchical position. In I3's pesantren experience, dormitory seniors judged juniors' cleanliness, discipline, and obedience through the seemingly benign language of kinship.

> *"The language sounded positive, older and younger sisters, family, guiding one another. But in practice, the relationship could be deeply unequal. Seniors had the power to decide whether a junior had adab, was obedient, or was polite. Even when a senior was in the wrong, it was very difficult for a junior to speak up." (I3)*

Seniority in this context functions precisely as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). It converts the length of residence into the practical, unquestionable authority to certify whether a junior possesses adab (etiquette). Because this moral certification runs strictly one way—

from senior to junior—any objection from the junior immediately becomes evidence of the very moral deficiency being alleged. This relational dynamic mirrors recent investigations into pesantren power structures by Baihaqi et al. (2022) and Pebriaisyah et al. (2022), which found that disciplinary hierarchies in dormitory settings are sustained less by formal theological rules than by the seniors' absolute discretionary power to define what constitutes proper behavior.

2. The Language of Legitimation

Moral-religious power depends heavily on the specific linguistic framing used to justify regulation. In the informants' experiences, restrictions were rarely presented as open coercion; instead, they were often cloaked in positive, morally loaded terms such as "educating," "protecting," or "maintaining adab". Such language became inherently controlling when it systematically reduced women's room to contextualize their actions, express discomfort, or maintain personal boundaries.

In I3's pesantren experience, practices that involved shouting, physical punishment, and public humiliation were institutionally framed as "character education."

> *"At the time, I did not immediately realize that it counted as violence, because in the pesantren everything was called 'character education' or 'discipline.' Sometimes I was insulted too. They said I had no morals, that I was spoiled and stupid, and that I did not deserve to be a pesantren student." (I3)*

Through Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary power, labeling harsh, degrading treatment as "education" masks coercion beneath it. Foucault argues that normalizing judgment compares individuals against a strict standard and punishes who deviate. When a junior's objection is treated not as a valid complaint but as a moral failing or a lack of character, normalizing judgment shifts the focus away from the senior's abusive conduct and onto the junior's alleged character deficit.

The language of "protection" similarly functioned to reduce women's access and mobility. I4 explained that restricting women's roles and opportunities within her campus organization was routinely justified as an effort to protect them from fitnah (slander).

> *"Sometimes it was framed as protection. They used gentle language, such as 'we are protecting the sisters' or 'this is for the common good.' But the effect was that women did not have the same opportunities." (I4)*

By framing exclusion as "protection," the organization effectively moralizes the restriction of women's rights. This perfectly demonstrates Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework of moral legitimation, where actions are justified by reference to value systems recognized by the community. Furthermore, the concept of adab and obedience dictated the very limits of critical thinking. Excessive questioning by women was swiftly interpreted as a lack of humility or excessive feminism (I4). Consequently, the language of adab was weaponized to frame legitimate intellectual objections as attitude problems, shutting down theological dialogue before it could begin.

In I5's experience, communication with a religious mentor gradually became uncomfortably personal and physically invasive. However, the language of mentoring and spiritual guidance led her to delay judging the situation severely.

> *"It was framed as care or religious mentoring. I was afraid that if I became suspicious, people would say I was committing su'uzan. That was why it took me so long to trust my own discomfort." (I5)*

This narrative illustrates a devastating intersection of pastoral power (Foucault, 2007) and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001). Pastoral power is exercised under the guise of guiding the individual towards salvation and moral welfare, granting the mentor unquestioned access to I5's personal boundaries. When I5 began to feel discomfort, she evaluated her own feelings using the dominant moral category su'uzan (unjustified suspicion)

provided by the very system that subjugated her. She internalized the external surveillance, viewing her legitimate discomfort as a personal moral failure. This confirms the findings of Ellis et al. (2022) regarding spiritual abuse, highlighting how theological concepts are routinely manipulated by authority figures to make victims doubt their own reality and silently participate in their own subjugation.

Read together, the four accounts display the full repertoire of legitimation strategies identified by Van Leeuwen (2007), each operating on a different register. The invocation of adab and seniority works as authorization: the restriction requires no argument because it issues from a position that is itself beyond question. Framing exclusion as protecting the sisters functions as moral evaluation, anchoring the restriction in a value—care—that no member of the community can openly reject. Recasting humiliation as character education works as rationalization, presenting coercion as a means to an institutionally endorsed end. Finally, warnings about fitnah work as mythopoesis, supplying a cautionary narrative in which the woman who does not comply becomes the origin of collective disgrace. What makes this repertoire effective is not any single strategy but their layering: an objection that survives one register is caught by the next, so that resistance is exhausted long before it reaches the conduct that prompted it.

3. The Relational Effects of Moral Power

When legitimating language is effectively deployed by authoritative figures, it goes beyond mere regulation; it fundamentally restricts women's choices, alters their behavior, and unjustly places the heavy burden of collective moral reputation squarely on their shoulders.

Women's room to speak narrowed significantly when they internalized the belief that their explanations would not be heard and would instead lead to further reprimands. In the pesantren hierarchy, silence became the most rational survival mechanism.

"Many eventually stayed silent, not because they agreed, but because they were exhausted. Even if they

spoke, there was no guarantee anyone would listen; they might only be treated worse." (I3)

Through Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary power, external surveillance has shifted into self-surveillance. I3 and her peers calculated the risks of speaking up against the entrenched senior authority and chose silence to mitigate further harm. Women also adjusted their behavior to avoid conflict, even when they recognized the situation's unreasonableness. I4 described apologizing repeatedly without actually understanding her fault:

> *"I apologized even though I honestly did not understand what I had done wrong. Because the culture in the community at the time was that if you were given religious advice, you just had to agree." (I4)*

Conforming to a community culture where nodding to religious advice is the only acceptable response indicates a calculated survival strategy, not necessarily agreement.

This silencing effect was not limited to physical spaces; it was profoundly felt in digital environments. Following the intense horizontal policing she experienced online, I2 drastically altered her digital presence:

> *"I ended up deleting the post and making my account private. I felt so ashamed, as if thousands of people were talking about my body like I was a criminal." (I2)*

This withdrawal from the digital public sphere demonstrates how anonymous moral judgments successfully restrict women's visibility. The consequence of digital surveillance is a forced retreat, effectively shrinking the spaces where young Muslim women feel safe to express themselves without facing relentless theological scrutiny.

The most severe relational effect observed in the data was the institutional silencing of women to protect collective reputation. When I5 attempted to disclose the boundary violations she experienced with her mentor, the

dakwah (Islamic outreach) organization immediately shifted the focus away from her safety toward the potential damage to its religious mission.

> *"When I finally spoke about it more seriously, I was told not to 'make it a big issue.' I still remember someone saying, 'If this gets out, it will damage the reputation of the dakwah organization.' I later realized that what made the trauma worse was not only what happened, but also being forced to stay silent." (I5)*

I3 similarly recalled explicit demands from pesantren administrators to keep disciplinary problems strictly internal. This destructive dynamic is best understood through Smith and Freyd's (2014) concept of institutional betrayal, but with a critical theoretical extension. In these religious contexts, what occurs is a mechanism of reputational displacement—where the burden of protecting the institution's collective moral image is forcibly shifted onto the bodies, behaviors, and silence of the women who have been harmed. Furthermore, unlike institutional betrayal in secular organizations, religious institutions function as arbiters of salvation. When the party committing the betrayal also defines morality, victims are stripped of the moral framework they need to name their own experiences. The demand for silence thus actively isolates victims and weaponizes their vulnerability, turning women's bodies into mere instruments for safeguarding patriarchal reputation.

4. Supportive Relationships as Openings for Voice and Choice

While moral-religious power severely constrains women, the data also highlights that supportive relationships serve as critical openings for them to reclaim their agency. Support began when individuals—whether peers, professionals, or alternative religious figures—listened actively, acknowledged women's lived experiences, and deliberately avoided placing moral or reputational blame back on them.

After being systematically silenced by her

organization, I5 found crucial refuge in close friends and psychological professionals.

> *"They did not immediately focus on the person's name or the organization's reputation. They asked how I felt, whether I was safe, and what I wanted." (I5)*

By asking what she wanted, these supportive actors restored the agency that the institution had stripped away. Being acknowledged and prioritized helped reopen the psychological space that institutional pressure had violently closed. Ailwood et al. (2023) emphasize the necessity of victim-survivor-centered listening, where the focus remains steadfastly on the harmed individual's safety rather than the institution's liability. Similarly, I2 received vital practical support during the digital attacks she faced. Her friends did not lecture her about the theological implications of her clothing; instead, they helped report the abusive content that exposed her identity, focusing entirely on her immediate safety and well-being rather than imposing further moral judgment.

Supportive relationships also existed within formal religious learning environments. During her studies, I4 met ustadzah (female religious teachers) who engaged intellectually with her questions rather than immediately treating them as acts of defiance.

> *"They did not immediately treat my questions as defiance. They invited me to look at the context, and women's experiences were also regarded as important... It helped me realize that I could remain faithful while still being critical." (I4)*

Crucially, the supportive relationships described by I4 and I5 conceptually embody the Islamic feminist framework of mubadalah (reciprocity) (Kodir, 2019), and substantive justice for women (Rofiah, 2020). These relationships were fundamentally reciprocal rather than hierarchical. When female teachers or psychological professionals engaged with the participants, they did not position themselves as absolute arbiters of salvation demanding unquestioning obedience. Instead, they

validated women's lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge. By utilizing a mubadalah approach, these actors demonstrated that gender-just religious environments are not external to Islamic tradition. They can be organically built through relationships that prioritize mutual respect over institutional supremacy.

These experiences place the participants' actions directly into the debate between Mahmood's (2005) concept of agency and Kandiyoti's (1988) patriarchal bargain. While some survival behaviors—such as apologizing to avoid conflict—closely resemble a patriarchal bargain, the active pursuit of supportive networks demonstrates Mahmood's agency. Women actively cultivate safe spaces within a pious framework, allowing them to remain faithful while maintaining critical boundaries against abusive figures. Supportive actors who listen without judging create the essential conditions that interrupt systemic silencing (Rinaldo, 2019). However, a critical boundary condition must be acknowledged: the supportive relationships identified in this data were entirely informal and personal. While they successfully interrupted the psychological silencing process for individuals like I2, I4, and I5, they did not alter the formal power structures themselves. This highlights that personal support networks, while vital for reclaiming voice, cannot substitute for robust structural protection mechanisms.

To synthesize these findings, this study proposes a relational model of gendered moral-religious power that operates across both formal and informal arenas, encompassing neighborhoods, digital spaces, pesantren, campus organizations, and dakwah groups. The model shows that control mechanisms remain consistent across settings. First, authority does not require a formal office; it is generated through social proximity, seniority, public visibility, or pastoral positioning. Second, this informal authority is operationalized through specific legitimating language, deploying culturally resonant concepts such as protection, adab, character education, and the prevention of fitnah or su'uzan. Third, when deployed in unequal relationships, this language produces severe relational

effects, most notably reputational displacement, where women engage in strategic silence, self-surveillance, and unmerited apologies to protect the institution's collective moral image. Crucially, the model is not entirely deterministic. It includes a feedback loop representing spaces of opening, where supportive actors interrupt the silencing mechanism by offering non-judgmental listening and practical support. This model maps how everyday language translates informal authority into systemic institutional betrayal, while simultaneously showing where supportive interventions can effectively break the cycle. This relational dynamic is visualized in Figure 1 below.

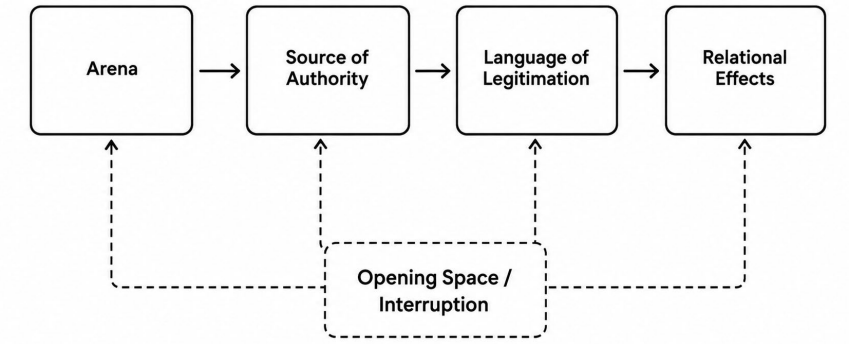


Figure 1. A relational model of gendered moral-religious power. Source: Authors' analysis, 2026

C. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that gendered moral-religious power operates beyond formal institutions through informal relations based on seniority, social closeness, and digital surveillance. This power is legitimized through positive-sounding language, such as "protection," "character education," and "adab," which, in unequal relationships, shifts the focus from abusive conduct to a woman's supposed moral deficit. Consequently, objections are framed as disobedience or threats to institutional reputation, leading to self-surveillance and silenced voices. Theoretically, this article contributes to the literature on gender and religion by

offering a relational model illustrating how everyday moral language and patriarchal habitus intersect to facilitate reputational displacement and institutional betrayal, while highlighting that supportive relationships are crucial for reclaiming agency.

While these qualitative findings offer in-depth insights, they are contextual and do not claim to represent all Indonesian Muslim women. Several methodological limitations must be acknowledged: recruitment through X inherently yielded participants who are digitally literate and tend to be urban; the study relied on a single-interview design without external triangulation; and potential self-selection bias exists, as participants represent women who had already chosen to articulate their experiences in public spaces. Despite these limitations, which highlight the need for future intersectional research, the findings underscore an urgent practical necessity. Pesantren and dakwah organizations must establish safe, independent reporting mechanisms that prioritize victims' safety over institutional reputation. Ultimately, the subordination of women in these settings stems from socially constructed gendered practices, not Islam as a belief system. To foster gender-just religious environments, communities must draw upon internal Islamic resources, such as the mubadalah framework, to support substantive justice and validate women's experiences as legitimate knowledge.

REFERENCE

Ailwood, S., Loney-Howes, R., Seuffert, N., & Sharp, C. (2023). Beyond women's voices: Towards a victim-survivor-centred theory of listening in law reform on violence against women. Feminist Legal Studies, 31(2), 217–241. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-022-09499-1

Baihaqi, M. R., Amaliyah, H., Awaliyah, Y. S., Khoerunnisa, S. P., & Laksono, B. A. (2022). Analisis SWOT kebijakan pemerintah dalam upaya mencegah kekerasan seksual di lingkungan pesantren. Attaqwa: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan Islam, 19(2), 181–191. https://doi.org/10.54069/attaqwa.v19i2.591

Beta, A. R. (2019). Commerce, piety and politics: Indonesian young Muslim women's groups as religious influencers. New Media and Society, 21(10), 2140–2159. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819838774

Bourdieu, P. (1991). Language and symbolic power. Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2001). Masculine domination. Stanford University Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 11(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., & Walker, K. (2020). Purposive sampling: Complex or simple? Research case examples. Journal of Research in Nursing, 25(8), 652–661. https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206

Chowdhury, R., Winder, B., Blagden, N., & Mulla, F. (2022). "I thought in order to get to God I had to win their approval": A qualitative analysis of the experiences of Muslim victims abused by religious authority figures. Journal of Sexual Aggression, 28(2), 196–217. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2021.1943023

Ellis, H. M., Hook, J. N., Zuniga, S., Hodge, A. S., Ford, K. M., Davis, D. E., & van Tongeren, D. R. (2022). Religious/spiritual abuse and trauma: A systematic review of the empirical literature. Spirituality in Clinical Practice, 9(4), 213–231. https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000301

Foucault, M. (1977). Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison. Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (2007). Security, Territory, Population (M. Senellart, F. Ewald, & A. Fontana (eds.)). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230245075

Fuad, A. (2021). Female religious authority among tarbiyah communities in contemporary Indonesia. Archipel, 101, 149–178. https://doi.org/10.4000/archipel.2657

Hefner, C.-M. (2022). Morality, religious authority, and the digital edge. American Ethnologist, 49(3), 359–373. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13088

Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with Patriarchy. Gender & Society, 2(3), 274–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004

Kloos, D., & Ismah, N. (2023). Siting Islamic feminism: The Indonesian Congress of Women Islamic Scholars and the challenge of challenging patriarchal authority. History and Anthropology, 34, 818–843. https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2023.2249495

Kodir, F. A. (2019). Qira'ah Mubadalah: Tafsir Progresif untuk Keadilan Gender dalam Islam. IRCiSoD.

Mahmood, S. (2005). Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject. Princeton University Press.

Malicha, I., Nugraini, E. D., Fadhil, M., & Azis, A. (2026). Negotiating religious authority in a masculine space: Gender regime and female leadership in an NU pesantren. KARSA Journal of Social and Islamic Culture. https://doi.org/10.19105/karsa.v34i1.23828

Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. Qualitative Health Research, 26(13), 1753–1760. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444

Nisa, E. F. (2022). Social media and the reconfiguration of Islamic authority in Indonesia. Journal of Contemporary Asia, 52(1), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2021.1883335

Nurmila, N. (2021). The spread of Muslim feminist ideas in Indonesia: Before and after the 2017 Indonesian Women Ulama Congress (KUPI). Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies, 59(2), 263–294. https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2021.592.263-294

Oakley, L. R., Kinmond, K. S., & Humphreys, J. (2021). Spiritual abuse in Christian faith settings: Definition, policy and practice guidance. Journal of Adult Protection, 23(2), 126–140. https://doi.org/10.1108/JAP-09-2020-0040

Pebriaisyah, B. F., Wilodati, W., & Komariah, S. (2022). Kekerasan seksual di lembaga pendidikan keagamaan: Relasi kuasa kyai terhadap santri perempuan di pesantren. Sosietas: Jurnal Pendidikan Sosiologi, 12(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.17509/sosietas.v12i1.48063

Rinaldo, R. (2019). Obedience and authority among Muslim women: Negotiating Islamic revivalism in Indonesia. Sociology of Religion, 80(3), 323–349. https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/sry041

Robinson, O. C. (2014). Sampling in interview-based qualitative research: A theoretical and practical guide. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 11(1), 25–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.801543

Rofiah, N. (2020). Nalar Kritis Muslimah: Refleksi Atas Ajaran Agama dan Realitas Sosial. Yayasan Afid.

Smith, C. P., & Freyd, J. J. (2014). Institutional betrayal. American Psychologist, 69(6), 575–587. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037564

Srimulyani, E., & Ali, M. (2022). Female religious authority in Indonesia: The role of Nyai in maintaining traditional Islamic education. Journal of Islamic Studies, 33(1), 54–76. https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etab048

Van Leeuwen, T. (2007). Legitimation in discourse and communication. Discourse & Communication, 1(1), 91–112. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481307071986

Wadud, A. (1999). Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective. Oxford University Press.

Zaid, B., Ibahrine, M., & Ben Moussa, M. (2026). Networked Islam and liquid authority: Everyday influencers and young Muslim practice. New Media & Society, 28(4), 14614448261436036. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448261436035