



## GENDER PERFORMATIVITY OF WOMEN IN RESPONDING TO GENDER CONSTRUCTS WITHIN THE STUDENT ACTIVITY UNIT OF PENCAK SILAT

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### Abstract

*This study examines the gender performativity of women in responding to patriarchal gender constructions within the Student Activity Unit (UKM) of Pencak Silat at Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia (Unusia). Using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this qualitative case study explores how female athletes negotiate and challenge masculine stereotypes embedded in martial arts. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving five female members of the UKM. The findings show that women perform gender through repetitive practices such as intensive training, mixed-gender sessions, and consistent athletic achievements, including competitive success that challenges assumptions of female physical inferiority. The supportive organizational environment of the UKM plays a crucial role in enabling these practices and strengthening women's agency. This study contributes novelty by situating gender performativity within a campus-based martial arts organization, highlighting sport as a site of gender negotiation. Practically, the findings suggest that inclusive training systems in student organizations can foster gender equality and empower women in traditionally masculine spaces.*

**Keywords:** Gender Performativity; Gender Construction; Pencak Silat

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji performativitas gender perempuan dalam merespons konstruksi gender patriarkal di Unit Kegiatan Mahasiswa (UKM) Pencak Silat Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia (Unusia). Dengan menggunakan teori performativitas gender Judith Butler, penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana perempuan menegosiasikan dan menantang stereotip maskulinitas dalam olahraga bela diri. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi terhadap lima anggota perempuan UKM. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perempuan melakukan performativitas gender melalui praktik berulang seperti latihan intensif, latihan bersama atlet laki-laki, serta pencapaian prestasi kompetitif yang konsisten. Lingkungan UKM yang relatif inklusif berperan penting dalam memperkuat agensi dan kepercayaan diri atlet perempuan. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada analisis performativitas gender dalam konteks organisasi mahasiswa berbasis olahraga bela diri. Secara praktis, temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa UKM dapat menjadi ruang strategis dalam mendorong kesetaraan gender di lingkungan kampus.

**Kata kunci:** Performativitas Gender; Konstruksi Gender; Pencak Silat

### INTRODUCTION

Gender construction in Indonesian society remains strongly shaped by patriarchal culture, which rigidly differentiates spaces, roles, and characteristics considered appropriate for men and women. Women are commonly associated with feminine traits such as gentleness, refinement, and passivity, while men are socially constructed as strong, aggressive, and dominant figures. These distinctions operate not only within the domestic sphere but also extend into public domains, including sports (Sulistiyarningsih, 2024).



Pencak silat, as a traditional martial art, is frequently perceived as a masculine activity due to its emphasis on physical strength, endurance, and bravery. Previous studies indicate that such perceptions contribute to the limited participation of women in martial arts. Pinem & Rosramadhana (2023), found that women are often considered physically less competent in combat sports, leading to doubts about their presence and capability. Similarly, Nadilah & Budiasa (2022), argue that Indonesia's socio-cultural environment continues to regard women's involvement in martial arts as taboo, as it is perceived to contradict normative ideals of femininity centered on gentleness, politeness, and grace.

These dominant views and stigmas not only restrict women's access to sports but also shape how women construct and interpret their self-identities. Apriliandra & Krisnani (2021), demonstrate that gender construction operates subtly through everyday social relations, encouraging women to conform to social expectations in order to maintain social acceptance. Within the context of sports, this condition places women in a dilemma between demonstrating physical competence and preserving socially acceptable feminine identities.

Such dynamics are also evident within the campus environment, including the Pencak Silat Student Activity Unit (UKM) at Nahdlatul Ulama University Indonesia (UNUSIA). While universities are often perceived as relatively progressive spaces that promote gender equality, patriarchal gender norms continue to shape social relations, organizational practices, and evaluations of women's bodies and abilities within student organizations. Therefore, women's participation in the Pencak Silat UKM cannot be understood merely as athletic involvement, but rather as a social arena in which gender constructions are produced, negotiated, and contested.

Although existing studies have examined gender construction and women's participation in sports, most focus on structural gender stereotypes or broader societal contexts. There remains limited research that specifically explores how women in campus-based martial arts organizations respond to gender constructions through performative practices embedded in everyday activities. Consequently, women's gender performativity as a form of social agency has received insufficient scholarly attention.

Addressing this gap, the present study offers a novel contribution by positioning women not as passive objects of gender construction, but as active subjects who construct and negotiate gender identities through performative actions. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this research examines how women in the Pencak Silat UKM at UNUSIA enact gender through training practices, social interactions, and organizational participation within a space culturally associated with masculinity.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study design (Creswell, 2017). This approach was selected to enable an in-depth exploration of women's experiences in responding to gender constructions within the Pencak Silat Student Activity Unit (UKM) at Nahdlatul Ulama University Indonesia (UNUSIA), Jakarta.

Research participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: female active members of the Pencak Silat UKM at UNUSIA; a minimum membership duration of one year; and experience in regular training sessions and/or participation in competitions. The study involved five informants, consisting of four female athletes and one core organizational committee member, to capture both athletic and organizational perspectives.



Data were collected through participatory observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participatory observation was conducted by attending training sessions and organizational activities to examine interactions and gendered practices within the UKM. Semi-structured interviews were carried out face-to-face and audio-recorded with participants' consent to explore their experiences, perceptions, and strategies in negotiating gender constructions within the pencak silat context. Documentation, including organizational records and activity archives, was used as supporting data to strengthen contextual understanding.

Data analysis was conducted systematically through an iterative process involving data reduction, categorization, and interpretation. Triangulation was applied to enhance the credibility and rigor of the findings by comparing data across sources (interviews, field notes, and documentation), methods, and theoretical perspectives. The analysis was guided by social constructionist and gender performativity frameworks to identify patterns in women's responses to gender norms and practices (Alfansyur & Mariyani, 2020).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### **The Pencak Silat Student Activity Unit as a Site of Gender Contestation**

The Pencak Silat Student Activity Unit (UKM) at Nahdlatul Ulama University Indonesia (UNUSIA) functions not only as a platform for developing students' athletic skills, but also as a social arena in which gender constructions are produced, negotiated, and contested. Within Indonesian society, which remains strongly shaped by patriarchal norms, pencak silat is commonly associated with masculinity due to its emphasis on physical strength, endurance, and courage (Qosyasih et al., 2023). Such perceptions create symbolic boundaries that implicitly marginalize women from participation in martial arts.

Previous studies indicate that women in combat sports are frequently perceived as physically less competent, leading to doubts about their legitimacy and capability (Pinem & Rosramadhana, 2023). This illustrates that pencak silat operates not merely as a sporting activity, but as a gendered social field structured by power relations. In this context, the Pencak Silat UKM at UNUSIA provides an alternative space that enables women to participate actively and visibly within a domain traditionally marked as masculine.

As a student organization, the Pencak Silat UKM aims to preserve traditional martial arts while fostering athletic achievement. Beyond technical skill development, participation in pencak silat cultivates discipline, solidarity, cooperation, and character formation (Maria, 2022). Attributes such as courage, resilience, and responsibility often socially coded as masculine are developed through training and competition, demonstrating that such qualities are not inherently tied to male bodies (Ishari et al., 2022). This finding reinforces the understanding that gendered divisions in sport are socially constructed rather than biologically determined.

The increasing participation of women in the UKM reflects a shift in perceptions regarding women's roles in martial arts. Ramadhan & Utami (2019), note that women engage in pencak silat as a means of self-affirmation, skill development, and social recognition. The relatively dominant presence and achievements of female athletes challenge the hegemony of masculinity that positions men as dominant subjects and women as subordinate actors within sport (Qosyasih et al., 2023). Women's involvement thus represents an articulation of identity that affirms physical capability while simultaneously disrupting traditional gender hierarchies (Kiswanto, 2017).

Training practices within the UKM are implemented with relatively equal standards for male and female athletes. According to Susanto et al., (2020), Intensive

physical training enhances both physical endurance and mental resilience, enabling women to demonstrate capacities commonly attributed to masculinity. The consistent achievements of female athletes in various competitions further reinforce the UKM as a tangible site of gender contestation (Mardiana et al., 2023). Moreover, participation in pencak silat contributes to the formation of self-concept and self-confidence among female athletes through repeated experiences of training, competition, and organizational support (Nandana, 2020). Social support within the UKM strengthens the negotiation of gender roles and expands opportunities for gender equality (Zaen, 2021).

Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the Pencak Silat UKM can be understood as a space in which gender is constituted through repeated actions embedded in everyday social practices. Gender, in this sense, is not a fixed attribute but is continuously produced through bodily performances, discipline, and interaction (Utami et al., 2022). Training approaches that acknowledge women's biological conditions while maintaining performance expectations illustrate how gender relations are negotiated contextually, without reinforcing exclusionary differences (Al-Faham et al., 2019). Consequently, the Pencak Silat UKM at UNUSIA functions not merely as a sporting arena, but as a social site that enables the transformation of gender relations toward greater equality (Suranti & Karsiwan, 2024).

### **Women's Gender Performance in Pencak Silat**

On Tuesday, 7 December 2024, the Pencak Silat Student Activity Unit (UKM) of Nahdlatul Ulama University Indonesia (UNUSIA) recorded a notable achievement at the West Java Provincial Pagar Nusa Championship held at the PWNU Building of West Java. Of the twelve athletes sent to the competition, ten were women, and they collectively secured twelve medals. This achievement demonstrates that women are capable of breaking through gender-based constraints in martial arts while also reflecting their high level of dedication and commitment.

This success can be understood through Judith Butler (1990), concept of gender performativity, which posits that gender is not a biological attribute but is constituted through repeated actions in everyday social practices. Within the context of the UNUSIA Pencak Silat UKM, women perform gender through training and competition that demand physical strength, mental resilience, and courage—qualities traditionally associated with masculinity. As expressed by Zizah:

“At first it was just a hobby... I started taking it seriously in junior high school because I didn't want to be considered weak by men. I wanted to prove that women can also be strong and resilient, just like men.”  
(*Interview, 1 November 2024*)

Zizah's statement illustrates that women's actions are not merely individual expressions, but rather repeated performances that challenge traditional gender stereotypes. The Pencak Silat UKM serves as a space in which these performances can be enacted consistently through routine training, social interaction among athletes, and participation in competitions. In this way, the UKM functions as a practical arena for women to assert a more egalitarian gender identity.

Furthermore, joint training sessions involving both male and female athletes reinforce gender equality, as women are able to demonstrate comparable technical skills and physical endurance. This finding aligns with Zaen (2021), which shows that women in martial arts not only resist stereotypes but also develop greater self-confidence. Such participation also contributes to the formation of discipline, courage,

and resilience (Suranti & Karsiwan, 2024). While motivating women to demonstrate their capabilities within the broader social context (Ramadhan & Utami, 2021).

Through their involvement in the Pencak Silat UKM, women construct new narratives of femininity that emphasize courage, resilience, and equality. Their bodies become instruments for negotiating strength and identity rather than symbols of weakness (Ishari et al., 2022). According to Rolijjah et al. (2025), female athletes' identities are shaped by struggles against gender stereotypes and experiences of structural inequality within sports environments still dominated by masculine narratives. Findings related to female athletes indicate that their bodies and achievements are shaped not only by physical capability, but also by internal motivation to prove competence without losing their identity as women, as well as through sporting practices that function as forms of resistance to patriarchal structures in sports. Achievements in competitive arenas simultaneously expand public perceptions of women's roles in martial arts, demonstrating that sport can serve as a medium for physical, mental, and social empowerment, in line with Judith Butler (1999) theory of gender performativity.

### **Strategies of Female Athletes in Responding to Gender Constructs**

Within the context of Pencak Silat, which is often socially constructed as a male-dominated domain, female athletes of the UNUSIA Pencak Silat Student Activity Unit have developed distinct strategies to respond to prevailing gender stereotypes. These strategies include demonstrating physical competence, achieving athletic success, cultivating mental resilience, and building sustainable social support networks. As articulated by Zizah:

"I have to be able to see this through. I don't want men to think that women are weak. People usually say, 'What can women really do?' But we can show that we have achievements." (*Interview with Zizah, 1 November 2024*)

This statement reflects how Zizah perceives Pencak Silat as a medium for challenging gender stereotypes. Aware of the widespread perception that undervalues women's capabilities in martial arts, she consciously chooses to counter such assumptions by demonstrating that women can achieve success and perform on par with male athletes.

Zaen (2021), notes that women participating in martial arts frequently encounter assumptions that their abilities are inferior to those of men. However, achievement-based validation plays a significant role in reshaping these perceptions. This argument is further supported by Berliana (2020), who highlights that sport is commonly associated with male dominance, where male participation is normalized and valued as a means of cultivating physical strength, mental toughness, and traits linked to the ideal of masculinity. In this context, the achievements of female athletes in the UNUSIA Pencak Silat UKM represent an active form of resistance against traditional norms that marginalize women's athletic competence.

Drawing on Butler (1990) theory, gender is understood not as a natural or fixed attribute, but as a social construct reproduced through everyday practices. Zizah challenges this construction by actively participating in competitions, engaging in rigorous training, and presenting herself confidently in athletic spaces thereby destabilizing traditional gender norms. These strategies operate across physical, psychological, and social dimensions. Psychologically, female athletes demonstrate courage and determination, aligning with Albert Bandura's concept of self-efficacy, which emphasizes belief in one's capacity to confront challenges effectively.

Mental resilience emerges as a central strategy among female athletes. Zizah explains that criticism and derogatory remarks often serve as motivation to train harder. This finding resonates with Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which underscores

the importance of confidence in overcoming obstacles (Mardiana et al., 2023). Such resilience is further reinforced through empowerment-oriented approaches, wherein women not only develop physical strength but also enhance self-confidence through positive experiences in sporting environments.

Nopiyanto et al. (2021), demonstrate that strong psychological characteristics in athletes are closely linked to their ability to manage pressure and maintain focus on goals. In this regard, the mental strategies adopted by female athletes in the UNUSIA Pencak Silat UKM reflect a sustained commitment to progress despite persistent social stigma. These athletes cultivate support networks involving coaches, peers, and family members, enabling joint training with male athletes to function not only as a means of physical development but also as a space for fostering equality and recognition of women's capabilities.

Community support within the Pencak Silat UKM plays a crucial role in creating an inclusive environment. Wahyu notes that mixed-gender training enhances physical performance while simultaneously promoting a sense of equality. Suranti & Karsiwan (2024), argue that Pencak Silat fosters character development, solidarity, and mutual respect. Solidarity among UKM members thus becomes a form of collective empowerment, while social support according to Nandana (2020), contributes significantly to the development of self-concept and confidence. Zizah's strategies exemplify empowerment not only at the individual level but also as inspiration for other female athletes, positioning Pencak Silat as a medium for social transformation and the redefinition of women's roles.

Institutionally, the UNUSIA Pencak Silat UKM supports female athletes by implementing training and competition systems that apply equal standards to both men and women. This approach aligns with principles of gender equality in sports, which emphasize equal opportunities for achievement and development (Ramadhan & Utami, 2021). Nevertheless, social stigma and heightened expectations for women to prove their competence persist, underscoring the need for continuous efforts by the UKM to embed inclusivity and support within its organizational and training structures.

Isyunanto (2014), observes that social constructions that demean women often constitute major barriers to their full participation. Accordingly, the inclusive strategies adopted by the UNUSIA Pencak Silat UKM represent a progressive step toward creating a more equitable space for female athletes.

Female athletes in the UNUSIA Pencak Silat UKM respond to gender constructs through determination, community support, and sustained achievement. Challenges are met with perseverance, while negative remarks according to Zizah are transformed into sources of motivation. These strategies expand women's participation, shift social perceptions, and lay the groundwork for future generations.

"When I'm insulted or underestimated, it actually motivates me to train harder and prove that I'm capable." (*Interview with Zizah, 1 November 2024*)

Female athletes also emphasize teamwork and solidarity, supported by both female and male peers to sustain training motivation impacting not only their personal development but also inspiring subsequent generations. This aligns with Ishari et al. (2022), who argue that Pencak Silat shapes character and opens opportunities for women to redefine their roles, as reflected in the experiences of Zizah and her peers.

Furthermore, Ramadan *et al.* (2025) highlight the importance of personal motivation in sustaining commitment and achieving goals, positioning Pencak Silat as a tool for social transformation that empowers women. These strategies can also be analyzed through Butler's concept of gender performativity, which emphasizes that



gender is constituted through repeated social practices, thereby allowing female athletes' actions to actively redefine prevailing gender norms.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the gender performativity of women in the Pencak Silat Student Activity Unit at Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia (Unusia) is concretely manifested through daily training practices, participation in competitions, and consistent athletic achievements. The prominent involvement of women in tournaments and their significant medal attainment affirm that physical capability, mental resilience, and discipline are not exclusively masculine attributes, but can be equally embodied and performed by women within the arena of martial arts.

Through such engagement, female athletes actively resist gender stereotypes that position Pencak Silat as a masculine sport and women as physically weak subjects. This resistance is expressed not merely through verbal narratives, but more importantly through repeated embodied practices such as intensive training, competitive courage, and sustained performance that symbolically challenge traditional norms of femininity. In this process, women's bodies function as primary sites for negotiating and redefining the meaning of femininity in public space.

The institutional environment of the Unusia Pencak Silat UKM plays a crucial role as a supportive space that enables the sustained enactment of gender performativity. Relatively egalitarian training systems, inclusive social relations, and continuous support from coaches and fellow members create social conditions that strengthen female athletes' confidence and agency. This organizational context underscores that transformations in gender relations depend not only on individual action but also on social structures that actively facilitate equality.

Within the framework of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the findings reaffirm that gender is not a fixed or natural identity, but is constituted through the repetition of everyday social practices. The martial arts practices undertaken by women in the Unusia Pencak Silat UKM illustrate how gender performativity operates concretely within campus life, while simultaneously opening possibilities for more egalitarian gender norms. By positioning women as active subjects in martial arts, this study contributes to the sociology of gender and sport, and affirms Pencak Silat as a strategic arena for negotiating and transforming gender constructions in the public sphere.

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