



SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVOR RESISTANCE: RECLAIMING SAFE SPACES FOR SANTRIWATI PESANTREN

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Abstract

The persistent issue of gender-based sexual violence, particularly within Indonesian pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), necessitates urgent scholarly attention due to its underreported nature and the unique power dynamics at play, often exacerbated by the exclusive and autonomous educational system. Existing research predominantly focuses on the causes and prevention of sexual violence in pesantren, largely overlooking the agency and resistance of survivors. This study addresses this gap by investigating how survivors of sexual violence in pesantren transform from perceived helpless victims into empowered subjects, the complexities they face, their methods of resistance, and the impact of their defiance. Utilizing a qualitative literature review approach, this research synthesized findings from 20 relevant studies (7 from Indonesia focusing on pesantren and 14 international studies on survivor resistance). Data analysis involved thematic categorization of findings related to female image in pesantren and survivor resistance, interpreted through radical feminist theory and agency theory. The study reveals that despite deeply entrenched patriarchal and feudal structures, survivors actively construct agency and engage in various forms of resistance, both individual and collective, significantly impacting public awareness and legal outcomes.

Keywords: Resistance; Survivors; Sexual Violence; Pesantren; Santriwati

Abstrak

Isu kekerasan seksual berbasis gender yang terus berlanjut, terutama di pesantren, membutuhkan perhatian ilmiah yang mendesak karena sifatnya yang jarang dilaporkan dan dinamika kekuasaan yang unik, yang sering kali diperparah oleh sistem pendidikan yang eksklusif dan otonom. Penelitian yang ada saat ini umumnya berfokus pada penyebab dan pencegahan kekerasan seksual di pesantren, yang sebagian besar mengabaikan agensi dan perlawanan para penyintas. Penelitian ini membahas kesenjangan ini dengan menyelidiki bagaimana para penyintas kekerasan seksual di pesantren bertransformasi dari korban yang dianggap tidak berdaya menjadi subjek yang berdaya, kompleksitas yang mereka hadapi, metode perlawanan mereka, dan dampak dari pembangkangan mereka. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan tinjauan literatur kualitatif, penelitian ini mensintesiskan temuan dari 20 studi yang relevan (7 dari Indonesia yang berfokus pada pesantren dan 14 studi internasional tentang perlawanan penyintas). Analisis data melibatkan kategorisasi tematik dari temuan-temuan yang berkaitan dengan citra perempuan di pesantren dan perlawanan penyintas, yang ditafsirkan melalui teori feminis radikal dan teori agensi. Penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa terlepas dari struktur patriarki dan feudal yang mengakar kuat, para penyintas secara aktif membangun agensi dan terlibat dalam berbagai bentuk perlawanan, baik individu maupun kolektif, yang secara signifikan berdampak pada kesadaran publik dan advokasi hukum.

Kata Kunci : Perlawanan; Penyintas; Kekerasan Seksual; Pesantren; Santriwati

INTRODUCTION

In 2025, the society was profoundly unsettled by a Malaysian series entitled Bidaah (also known as "Broken Heaven"). The series presents a complex narrative about the abuse of power within a religious context, focusing on the character Muhammad Mahdi Ilman, or Walid. Walid's self-proclaimed status as the Mahdi has enabled him to establish absolute authority, a position from which he has derived the capacity to manipulate his cult followers. His authority has even been used to exploit and sexually abuse women through the deviant practice of "nikah batin" (spiritual marriage). The narrative is further enriched by the presence of Baiduri, a young woman

who is coerced into joining the cult. Baiduri's role is pivotal in this context, as she embodies a form of resistance that challenges both patriarchal domination and the manipulation of religious beliefs. Despite her vulnerable position, Baiduri is able to recognize Walid's deviant practices and actively seeks to expose the truth behind the exploitation. The issues raised in this series, particularly regarding gender-based violence within a religious framework and the abuse of spiritual authority, provide important reflections on similar phenomena that sometimes occur in religious institutions, including Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools).

The phenomenon of gender-based sexual violence remains an unresolved problem to this day. According to reports of sexual violence cases from the National Commission on Violence Against Women's 2024 annual records, there has been a very significant increase, particularly in gender-based violence occurring in the public sphere. This indicates that even open spaces are unsafe for women (Komnas Perempuan, 2023). Educational institutions or schools are one of the various public sphere places that have experienced an increase in cases of sexual violence. Instead of school being a place to gain knowledge and shape children's morals to be better, in fact for some people school becomes a very scary thing and causes prolonged trauma.

As illustrated in the series "Bidaah," sexual violence can be perpetrated by any individual, including religious figures. A similar phenomenon is also frequently observed in Indonesia, particularly within the context of religious educational institutions, such as Pesantren. Between 2022 and 2025, the issue of sexual violence in pesantren institutions garnered significant public attention and increased media coverage. There have been at least 8 reported cases, including sexual violence at Pesantren Shiddiqiyah Jombang, perpetrated by the son of the kyai (religious leader) who owned the pesantren, using a "Metafakta" knowledge transfer modus to target female students (santriwati). Another case involved a teacher and leader of a boarding school in Bandung who committed sexual violence against 13 of his female students. Furthermore, an ustadz (religious teacher) in Aceh sexually abused his 16-year-old student. Other incidents include the rape of six female students in Semarang, the molestation of 41 female students across three Islamic boarding schools in West Nusa Tenggara, a sexual harassment case at the Karanganyar Islamic boarding school, a boarding school leader who molested his female santri in Sanggata, East Kalimantan, and 8 female santri who were victims of sexual abuse and intercourse in a Bandung Regency boarding school, among many others (Arnie, 2023; Febriyan, 2022; Hassani, 2025; IWS, 2024; Lestari, 2022; Puspitarini, 2024; Wardani, 2023). These cases underscore how educational institutions, long considered safe spaces for students to enhance knowledge and skills, have, in fact, become deeply traumatic environments for them.

Sexual violence cases occurring within pesantren environments remain an "iceberg phenomenon". This is because the highly exclusive pesantren education system often silences incidents of violence, and students often do not even realize they are victims of sexual violence due to the influence of power dynamics that can manipulate such behavior as something commonplace, especially when perpetrated by a kyai or religious leader (Rahmawati & Concilia, 2023). Moreover, even when cases of sexual violence in pesantren are exposed, the reaction from the community and pesantren followers often involves denying the reality of what has occurred. They assume that a religious leader or a kyai is a sacred individual with noble morals, making it impossible for them to commit deviant behaviors. If information regarding sexual violence cases committed by a kyai in a pesantren emerges, followers often assume it is a form of slander orchestrated by those seeking to destroy the pesantren or even

Islam itself. They refuse to believe that such incidents could occur within an institution comprised of individuals deemed pure and far from deviant acts (Kamilia, 2023).

Pesantren educational institutions are a defining characteristic of faith-based education in Indonesia. Pesantren serve as educational platforms that integrate local traditional cultural values with Islamic religious teachings, making their distinctiveness unique to Indonesia. Each pesantren throughout Indonesia possesses autonomy over its institutional management, which often makes them appear exclusive and prevents outsiders from understanding or interfering with their policies. Consequently, the relatively closed nature of pesantren means that external society rarely dares to intervene in problems that occur within them, particularly cases of gender-based sexual violence. In addition to the public's limited or difficult access to these institutions, they continue to believe that a religious leader is unlikely to commit reprehensible acts, let alone sexual abuse and violence against their students (Caputi, 2003; Tyson, 2020). In addition to the psychological impact that is clearly experienced, the impact of sexual violence on victims also occurs in the quality of education, spirituality, and the stigma they must face. For victims of sexual violence who are students, the impact of sexual violence affects their academic problems, such as being hampered in carrying out learning, to threats to their academic status (Bovill & Podpadec, 2023). Furthermore, the spiritual impact faced by victims of sexual violence within religious contexts can lead to a sense of disbelief in holy scriptures, and even in God, for some time (Pebriaisyah, Wilodati, & Komariah, 2022). The prevailing stigma that women as victims are mere objects or helpless individuals causes them to be positioned as subordinated and marginalized. Indeed, this stigma often prevents society from recognizing the potential of victims to become active subjects capable of resisting the system of violence they face.

Several researchers have examined that gender-based sexual violence in pesantren occurs due to a highly unequal power dynamic between the victim, who is predominantly a female santri or student, and the perpetrator, who is typically a kyai or an educator/supervisor within the pesantren. Their positions of power are utilized as tools to subdue and oppress the students. Moreover, the pesantren environment, which strongly upholds the concept of "sami'na wa atho'na" ("we hear and we obey"), instills a deep conviction that all thoughts, words, and behaviors carried out by the kyai are a role model considered truth that must be obeyed by their followers (Pebriaisyah et al., 2022). Consequently, the perpetuation of sexual violence within pesantren often goes unnoticed. Furthermore, the limited and often taboo nature of sexual education in pesantren contributes to the occurrence of sexual violence. Pesantren fundamentally possess their own knowledge and teachings regarding sexual education derived from hadith, fiqh, and other religious texts, but these primarily focus on matters of purification and marriage laws (Alfredo, Nugraha, & Putri, 2022). The restricted material and sources used mean that santri in pesantren remain oblivious to other issues comprehensively explained in sexual education, such as reproductive health, gender relations, and even sexual violence.

Based on some of these research findings, the perspective of victims struggling to become survivors has not been adequately explored, which has allowed cases of sexual violence within pesantren to surface in our society to date. Considering that, for a long time, sexual violence cases in pesantren have been an "iceberg phenomenon" that rarely comes to the surface due to the highly closed pesantren education system, existing research on sexual violence in pesantren has not sufficiently examined the agency and movement of female students within these institutions (Damayanti, 2022). Instead of being helpless victims due to the oppression inflicted by sexual perpetrators,

these santriwati have in fact strived to fight for justice for what they have endured. For example, the sexual violence case that occurred at the Shiddiqiyah Jombang pesantren, ongoing since 2014, only received judicial resolution in 2022 (Multatuli, 2022). Victims who fought to become survivors have, for years, championed justice for the harassment and violence perpetrated against them by educators and supervisors.

The experiences of victims and survivors in fighting to become resisting subjects and demanding justice for the events they faced serve as the focal point of this paper. It is imperative to understand the process of self-meaning-making by victims, initially perceived as helpless subjects, enabling them to become subjects who fight back. Therefore, this research will conduct a literature review to explore the complexities faced by victims of sexual violence in the pesantren environment, how they build agency, carry out resistance, and the impacts experienced by female survivors who resist. This study will then be analyzed using radical feminist theory, which originates from the issue of women's corporeality as sexual violence survivors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual Violence in Pesantren

The seven studies identified addressed seven subjects related to sexual violence in pesantren: causative factors of sexual violence, patriarchal and feudal culture, power relations, the culture of violence, santri resilience, and sexual education as a preventive measure against sexual violence in pesantren. Santri are vulnerable to becoming victims of sexual violence due to personal, situational, social, and economic factors. Personal factors include the santri's underage status, which diminishes their power to resist adult perpetrators. Situational factors involve santri being confined to boarding schools, permitted to return home only on specific days, prohibited from interacting with the community, and lacking telephone access. Social factors necessitate santri's obedience to their kyai's orders. Economic factors indicate that santri often come from underprivileged families, placing them in a vulnerable and helpless condition. All these factors interact, creating conditions that facilitate sexual violence (Harlen, 2022).

The modus operandi employed by sexual violence perpetrators in pesantren is inherently linked to the unequal power relations between perpetrators and victims. This includes tactics such as persuasion, promises of marriage, education financing, and coercion under the pretext of religious obedience or threats. Furthermore, the insular nature of pesantren, with limited public access and minimal supervision, is a factor exploited by perpetrators to carry out their actions. Additionally, the taboo surrounding sexual knowledge within pesantren significantly complicates the disclosure of cases, as victims may be unaware of their victimization or lack the courage or knowledge to report the incidents they experience (Jamaludin, 2023). Pesantren are educational institutions closely associated with patriarchal culture and feudal systems, as the majority of power holders and caregivers are men, and this cultural norm is deeply ingrained (Rahmawati & Concilia, 2023). The position of men as kyai and caregivers carries a high level of power. Their influence can create a hegemony over the knowledge and behavior of the pesantren community, ensuring obedience to their desires. An example is the case of Bechi, the son of a kyai who owned a pesantren in Jombang, who exploited his position to influence santri and commit sexual violence against them (Pebriaisyah et al., 2022).

Moreover, both male and female santri in pesantren are often disciplined by their kyai through the use of violence. Female santri are disciplined to behave according to the expectations of the kyai and patriarchal society through control and surveillance within pesantren spaces. They are supervised, directly or indirectly, and

subjected to specific sanctions for violations. This is believed to be effective in compelling women to regulate their behavior when in spaces that are sites of violence against women. Even female santri perceive this situation as commonplace in pesantren, thus accepting the "disciplinary" treatment administered by their kyai (Eriyanti, 2021). Other research indicates that female victims of sexual violence exhibit various forms of resilience, such as crying, confusion about how to act, reluctance to resist, and hesitation in confiding in their parents to leave the pesantren, among other factors related to being in their final year of school. Confusion is manifested through coping mechanisms like crying, daydreaming, and acting as if they have never experienced sexual violence. Additionally, some survivors express their anger and disappointment by removing their headscarves, smoking, and consuming alcoholic beverages. Sexual violence survivors demonstrate diverse forms of resilience; some ultimately manage to lead fulfilling lives with no fatal psychological impact, while others are perceived to lead negative lives. These differences arise from variations in the severity of violence faced by the survivors (Rahmawati & Concilia, 2023).

Furthermore, numerous studies addressing sexual violence in pesantren examine prevention efforts through sexual education within these institutions. Pebriansyah's research (2022) recommends integrating a sexual education curriculum in pesantren as a preventive measure against sexual violence. Similarly, Aprilia (2022) emphasized that sexual education can prevent cases of sexual violence in pesantren, even touching upon the influence of LGBTQ+ individuals in the pesantren environment. However, recommendations concerning LGBTQ+ individuals are not appropriate, as evidence shows that sexual violence cases in pesantren predominantly involve heterosexual perpetrators. This research also clarifies that the problem does not lie with the pesantren institution itself, but rather with individuals who have tarnished its good name.

The Image Of Women In Pesantren

According to Rogers (1951), as cited in Xie, Han, Emery, & Ng (2025), self-image—also known as self-concept, self-structure, or self-identity—is defined as an individual's existential mental representation shaped by internal needs, self-awareness, and one's sociopolitical position (such as in a marital relationship). Furthermore, women's self-image is not solely formed by biological components like their sex, but also by other intersecting social factors such as race, class, sexuality, and other social categories within a broader historical and global context (Brah & Phoenix, 2013). Such contexts include patriarchal belief systems and religious practices that shape power relations and societal expectations (Alnabilsy, Eshel, & Elias, 2023).

The image of women in pesantren is also influenced by social, customary, cultural, and religious conditions and the expectations placed upon them. These expectations are constructed through continuously produced narratives and religious interpretations, particularly through learning materials at the pesantren level. Thoriquttyas's research (2018) at least demonstrates how narratives and illustrations of women are presented in three Islamic religious subject materials in madrasahs or Islamic religious schools:

1. The Image of Women in the Narratives of Fiqh Books or Islamic Rules

Women are explicitly portrayed as having roles very different from men. This includes the domestication of women's roles in the division of social and religious activities. Women are characterized as individuals lacking the authority to possess adequate knowledge in religious matters, as men are considered more authoritative regarding religious understanding, exemplified by male Ulama and Fuqaha figures. Furthermore, women (wives) are believed not to have access to

issuing zakat, even if their economic position is equal to or higher than that of men (husbands). Additionally, the popular narrative directed at women is that their voices are connoted as aurat (intimate parts) and invite lust, whereas men are not restricted in their voices or even in reciting a single verse of the Quran.

2. The Image of Women in Quranic and Hadith Interpretations

Women are portrayed as having deficiencies in hadith narration, while men are depicted as having the opportunity to narrate and convey hadith due to their perceived superior intellectual abilities. Moreover, regarding access to religious rituals, women are considered more appropriate and noble to worship at home, whereas men are deemed to possess a higher level of faith as they are given space to worship more freely in the mosque.

3. Women's Image in the Book of Akidah and Akhlak

Some illustrations of women in the book of creed and morals portray them as less fair and authoritative, suggesting that positions such as a judge, whether materially, intellectually, or managerially, are considered more inherent to men. Furthermore, there are popular interpretations illustrating women as seductive creatures of men, which supposedly causes bloodshed accompanied by envy and resentment.

The portrayal of women in Islamic religious learning illustrations within madrasahs and pesantren reveals unequal expectations compared to men. This indicates that women's position and role are manifested within parameters of marginalization, subordination, and stereotypes that are continuously perpetuated structurally through knowledge.

Culturally, the image of women in pesantren is constructed to be a devout Muslim figure, specifically associated with the roles of child, wife, and santri. As a child, she is indoctrinated to obey all family rules, typically set by the male father or head of the family. Girls often receive different treatment from boys. They are more strictly controlled by other family members, as well as by the community and pesantren. Girls are also burdened with specific traits they are expected to embody, such as diligence, being accustomed to hard work, and being accustomed to yielding and sacrificing for those around them. This shapes a self-image for girls where they cannot prioritize themselves but will live their lives oriented toward their parents, brothers, and extended family. Conversely, as wives, women are expected to demonstrate obedience and submission to their husbands, with a particular emphasis on serving them. To some extent, to achieve the image of a good wife in society, obedient women are those who patiently accept and face violence from their husbands, rationalizing it as a path to earning rewards and blessings (Eriyanti, 2021). Furthermore, female santri are also expected to be submissive and obedient to their kyai, nyai, teachers, and caregivers. Patriarchal culture and unequal gender relations in pesantren lead santri to view kyai as individuals who must be respected, obeyed, and followed, adhering to the belief in the phrase sami'na wa atho'na ("we hear and we obey"), which causes followers to not dare to question the teachings or actions taken by their kyai (Pebriaisyah et al., 2022).

The construction of women's image in pesantren, both structurally and culturally, is continuously produced and socialized until the community and women themselves internalize these values, embracing an image of women in a marginal, subordinate, and stereotyped position. Pesantren becomes a space for the control and regulation of women so that they can fulfill their roles in accordance with the image constructed upon their bodies. They are supervised directly or indirectly, and controlled through the provision of specific sanctions for those who violate rules. This compels women to

control themselves while in spaces that have become sites of violence against women (Eriyanti, 2021).

The Image of Female Santri Victims of Sexual Violence

Seeing how the construction of women's self-image in pesantren places women in a marginalized, subordinate, and stereotyped position, it shows the extent to which pesantren spaces can perpetuate violence against women. When female santri become victims of violence committed by kyai or ustaz in pesantren, the community often refuses to believe the existence of the incident. In a society that adheres to patriarchal values, women are considered naturally prone to violence, such as abuse and sexual violence. Patriarchal culture views women's bodies as sexual objects; thus, when sexual violence occurs, the community believes the root of the problem is that women have seduced, leading men to succumb to their lust and commit violence. Furthermore, female victims who experience violence repeatedly are often not recognized as victims because they are perceived as enjoying the situation, frequently leading to victim-blaming as they are deemed to accept and not fight against the perpetrator's actions.

In the event of sexual violence in pesantren committed by kyai and their administrators, victims are in an increasingly oppressed position. For pesantren communities, they tend to refuse to believe that sexual violence can occur in an institution consisting of people who are considered holy and far from deviant acts. The cult carried out by the pesantren community towards a religious symbol attached to a religious leader or kyai leads to a denial of the reality of the deviations they have committed (Kamilia, 2023).

Meanwhile, the image of women as victims often receives a negative response to the situation they face. Victims who dare to report kyai as perpetrators of sexual violence are considered a narrative of lies or slander aimed at destroying pesantren and even Islam itself (Solihin, 2008). Additionally, the interpretation of the narrative of women as a source of slander causes women as victims to be increasingly cornered by the situation they face. Even the stigmas attached to women can contribute to the silencing of sexual violence cases and further exacerbate structural inequality in the political, economic, and social spheres within pesantren (Laxminarayan & Dürr, 2019). Furthermore, research by Listiana, et al. (2025), revealed that santri often internalize shame and guilt due to teachings to maintain the good name of kyai and pesantren as authority figures. This causes them to prefer to remain silent, in order to avoid potential responses of rejection and repression from external parties. In this context, many survivors who have disclosed cases are ignored or repressed by the pesantren. Moreover, the experience of witnessing the negative impact on other victims after disclosing cases of sexual violence further exacerbates the dilemma and fear of victims to report the incidents they experienced.

METHODS

The research in this paper employs a feminist perspective paradigm, recognizing that gender-based sexual violence against women necessitates deeper exploration and critique. This research will examine and demonstrate the perspective of women as victims, analyzing the relationship between men and women within the phenomenon of sexual violence experienced by female santri in pesantren (Fonow & Cook, 2005). The primary data source for this study will utilize literature review references pertaining to the complexities faced by sexual violence victims in pesantren environments, their process of building agency, their engagement in resistance, and the impacts experienced by female survivors who fight back. The literature review method assists researchers in collecting, evaluating, and synthesizing findings from various

previous studies to construct a robust and comprehensive theoretical framework (Watson & Webster, 2020).

In order to comprehend the issue of violence in pesantren and survivors' self-interpretation, a comprehensive review of the extant research was conducted using five main keywords: sexual violence, resistance, self-image, women's solidarity, and pesantren. The research identified 20 studies with diverse regional contexts through this search. Specifically, a review of the extant literature revealed seven studies related to sexual violence in pesantren within the Indonesian region. Concurrently, for the study of survivor resistance, insights were gathered from 14 studies originating from the UK, France, America, Canada, Germany, and Southeast Asian countries. A comprehensive analysis of the extant literature was conducted, encompassing 20 studies, which were then methodically processed and categorized into two overarching issues: the depiction of women in pesantren and the phenomenon of victims' resistance to sexual violence. The findings of this study will subsequently be analyzed using radical feminist theory, which addresses the issue of women's corporeality as sexual violence survivors, and agency theory, to highlight the self-capacity of santriwati as survivors of violence in enacting resistance amidst the oppression they have historically encountered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Victim Resistance To Sexual Violence

Women as victims of sexual violence in pesantren face various forms of oppression, thus becoming increasingly marginalized. Some studies indicate that women who are victims will continue to bear trauma throughout their lives, making them vulnerable to continuous psychological problems (Pemberton & Loeb, 2020). This then establishes a new identity for sexual violence victims, who are perceived as helpless individuals burdened by lifelong trauma. This stigma, in fact, places victims and survivors in a marginalized and subordinated position, as it prevents the community from recognizing the potential of victims and survivors to resist the violence they have faced.

Impetus for Resilience Building Efforts

The concept of resistance, or the resilience building efforts undertaken by sexual violence survivors, arises from various inherent motivations. The experience of sexual violence often leaves a residue of helplessness and fear that continues to haunt the victim. Consequently, the resistance initiated by survivors serves as an effort to break the silence and eradicate the feelings of "dirtiness" or shame that have been deeply ingrained within them (Caputi, 2003). Beyond breaking the silence that survivors have long endured and been burdened by, resistance is also a means to create awareness for others that sexual violence can indeed occur, even in seemingly safe spaces. The #MeToo movement, which emerged on social media, was developed to foster a sense of closeness and intimacy among women, uniting them against a common enemy: patriarchy. This movement aims to counter strong patriarchal structures and gradually dismantle them from various angles, whether through the removal of perpetrators, support for victims, or encouraging political actors to reform legal practices related to sexual violence (Ghadery, 2019). The #MeToo movement also provides a supportive space for victims to share their experiences of violence, thereby facilitating a healing process. Given the difficulty victims face in disclosing or reporting sexual violence due to fear of victim-blaming and community distrust, the #MeToo movement was initially utilized by Black women to cultivate solidarity and unite against the common enemy of perpetrators and patriarchy. Furthermore, the #MeToo

movement offers a supportive environment for victims to recount their experiences of violence, serving as a space for healing. Expressing one's personal experience as a victim is an active endeavor to break silence and alleviate negative emotions (Caputi, 2003). This individual awareness can profoundly influence other victims or groups, fostering the creation of collective movements that not only raise awareness but also strive to dismantle societal systems and cultural structures that perpetuate gender-based violence against women (Laxminarayan & Dürr, 2019).

Moreover, resistance is also enacted to leverage women's inherent potential as powerful storytellers, even after enduring traumatic experiences. As expressed by a survivor (anonyma) in the novel *A Woman in Berlin*, only her body was subjected to rape, yet she preserved her mental freedom through her writing (Wieden, 2016). This anonyma utilized writing as a form of resistance against her situation. This resonates with the impetus found in various campus communities, which aim not only to combat a culture of violence but also to challenge institutions that frequently protect sexual perpetrators, such as educational institutions or universities. The resistance undertaken by survivor communities on campuses stems from the harm caused by inadequate institutional responses to sexual violence complaints. So this collective resistance is considered stronger and safer in order to make the campus responsible for the dangerous behavior they do to the response to sexual violence cases on campus (Bovill & Podpadec, 2023). It is crucial to underscore that resistance movements led by women survivors not only articulate a collective identity but also assert a public voice, which is vital for sexual violence survivors who have long been silenced and whose needs often go unheard and unmet. Building a collective movement for these survivors can be a powerful force in fostering resistance (Aprilia et al., 2022).

Forms of Resistance for Women Victims of Sexual Violence

Survivors of sexual violence possess diverse motivations to resist and dismantle the pervasive cultural system of violence that has been detrimental to them. These motivations manifest as voicing their experiences through writing, including books or social media threads, and directly speaking out individually and in groups (Ghadery, 2019; Mitchell, 1996; Wieden, 2016). These various forms of resistance represent survivors' efforts to endure existing dangers, encompassing both personal harms from sexual violence experiences and risks arising from social institutions and organizations unaware of the reality of violence (Bovill & Podpadec, 2023). The survivor's courage to resist is at least able to construct an image of herself and other women as individuals who have the determination to use the narratives they use as a means of resistance (Wieden, 2016).

However, the resistance efforts undertaken by victims and survivors to escape the cycle of sexual violence often encounter obstacles that impede their ability to build agency. These hindrances begin with social stereotypes and cultural expectations that frequently cause women to conceal their resistance efforts (Chantler, 2006). Furthermore, stigma attached to sexual violence victims often leads to their ostracization from community groups, and even from social movements engaged in resistance. Such stigmas frequently influence the involvement of survivors in social movements, reducing their likelihood of occupying positions that could grant them power and decision-making authority over their resistance efforts (Laxminarayan & Dürr, 2019). Additionally, resisting a large institutional system, such as a campus or pesantren, presents a significant challenge. Campuses and schools wield immense power and can determine the status of students within their environment, including survivors and groups who resist these educational institutions. Consequently, if survivors face institutions lacking awareness of victims' rights, academic threats are

often a risk they must take to achieve justice (Alia Azmat, Yasmeen Khayr, Nadiah Mohajir, Monica Reyna, & Gina Spitz, 2022; Bovill & Podpadec, 2023).

In the context of sexual violence survivor resistance within Indonesian pesantren, this phenomenon is exemplified by the Formujeres organization and movement. Formujeres serves as a representation of sexual violence survivor resistance in the Indonesian pesantren environment. This organization was formed as a direct response to a series of sexual violence cases at Pesantren Shiddiqiyah Jombang, which involved the institution's authoritative leadership as the perpetrator. This survivor-led movement demonstrates their capacity and deep understanding to validate and credit survivor narratives, advocate for and educate on specific issues and needs of survivors, while concurrently creating an authentic safe space for the expression of voices that have historically been marginalized (Setyorini & Andini, Amalia Nur, 2023).

Finding a Safe Space: The Impact of Resistance of Santri Survivors of Sexual Violence

The various efforts and challenges faced by survivors to resist can, in fact, have a profound impact on themselves and on others who witness their resistance. Survivors come to realize that sexual violence is not merely an isolated incident affecting them personally, but rather a systematic effort to subjugate women and society; they therefore cease to blame themselves for the violent situation they have faced (Laxminarayan & Dürr, 2019). Furthermore, by perceiving their bodies as targets of abuse and psychologically distancing themselves from the objectification, they are able to maintain a level of agency (Wieden, 2016). There is also an emphasis that while initiated by individual survivors' efforts to convey their experiences, the ensuing resistance movement effectively exposes the pervasive nature of these crimes, which many may not realize or suspect can occur in various spheres of life (Ghadery, 2019). Moreover, when individuals listen, read, and empathize with a survivor's voice, it can, at the very least, alleviate the burden of trauma faced, and listeners can gain knowledge and empathy that strengthens their capacity to resist (Caputi, 2003).

A review of the literature reveals at least three documented cases of survivors of sexual violence in Indonesia who exhibited resistance behaviors. These cases began with the victims' efforts to fight back. A notable example is the case of the Pesantren Shiddiqiyah in Jombang, which had a significant impact on the community by raising awareness about the prevalence of sexual violence in such institutions. These survivors engaged in various forms of resistance, both direct and indirect. Directly, they reported the incidents they experienced to the police, and indirectly, they raised awareness of their experiences on social media. The utilization of social media campaigns had a tremendous impact, notably succeeding in leading to the perpetrator's prison sentence through a decision in the Surabaya court (Number 1361/PID.B/2022/PN.SBY).

In the course of further exploration, a consistent pattern was identified, indicating the victims' ability to directly report cases of sexual violence, despite the diversity of their respective contexts. For instance, at Pesantren in East Java in 2024, a female student who was a victim proactively reported the incident to the police after she could no longer endure the perpetrator's treatment. Despite facing pressure to maintain confidentiality, the victim and her family refused to report the incident, opting instead to seek justice and ensure that the perpetrator was prosecuted fairly (Hidayatullah, 2025). A similar pattern emerged at a boarding school in Jakarta in 2025, where a case of sexual violence came to light after a student victim courageously disclosed her experience to her family, leading to an official report with the police (Imam, 2025).

These cases underscore a small number of victims who have had the courage to report directly, but it is acknowledged that there are likely many other victims who may not be able or willing to come forward. Factors such as a culture of obedience and the cult-like status of religious leaders often contribute to victims' decisions to remain silent and not report. However, even for those who do report, the process is not straightforward. It is imperative that they confront their deeply ingrained fears. However, it is equally crucial that they receive support from their families and a strong determination to put an end to the perpetrator's actions. These factors serve as significant motivators in their decision to report the incident.

This phenomenon underscores the agency capacity of female victims in breaking through power structures and exposing gender-based violence within religious environments. The form of resistance exhibited by these students indicates that the self-image of female boarding school students and survivors of sexual violence can also possess agency and resist perpetrators who hold significant positions of power. Despite facing various forms of oppression and repression in their efforts to resist, survivors ultimately achieve justice. The resistance of survivors of sexual violence is not only demanding justice for the situations they have experienced, but also striving to create safe spaces, both for themselves and for other women, in order to prevent further sexual violence. According to Harpalani (2017), the impetus to create safe spaces in educational settings extends beyond mere protection from violence; such spaces also empower learners to feel secure in expressing their perspectives and voices. Through this process, it is hoped that a relevant discourse on sexual violence can be fostered, encouraging the deconstruction of historically marginalized women's gender roles, and reaffirming women's position as active subjects. Therefore, the resistance and agency demonstrated by survivors not only establish a sanctuary but also transform into a profound platform for cross-group learning and understanding.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of sexual violence victims in pesantren are often disregarded and disbelieved due to the assumption that pesantren are sacred institutions that instill polite Eastern/Indonesian cultural values and religious principles in their students, thereby implying that despicable acts cannot occur within such an environment. Moreover, the kyai and other teachers, who are often venerated by the community, are presumed to be incapable of committing the sexual violence alleged by the victims. These narratives impede the voices of sexual violence victims in the pesantren environment from being heard, causing them to endure continuous oppression without any effort to resist or defend themselves. The situation and experiences of santriwati as survivors demonstrate resistance in breaking down the self-image that has been imposed upon them. This begins with the santri's self-image as obedient, passive, dependent women, who are considered sources of slander and are subjected to other images that marginalize, subordinate, and stereotype female santri, to their detriment. Subsequently, after the santri successfully resisted, there was a shift in their image, both in negative and positive contexts. For the pesantren group, the image of female santri who resist is perceived as someone attempting to destroy the pesantren, kyai, and Islam itself. However, for other communities, santri who fight back become inspiring figures, as their courage to resist has served as an example for other victims to dare to report. Thus, resistance not only aims to alleviate trauma and shame but also dismantles patriarchal structures and creates a safe space that allows for the

deconstruction of gender roles and the affirmation of women's position as empowered subjects.

This research crucially enriches theories of gender and agency by demonstrating that the experiences of female victims of sexual violence in pesantren, initially considered powerless, became a catalyst for a transformative process of self-meaning towards an empowered and resisting subject. The complexity of oppression faced—ranging from unequal power relations and deep psychological-spiritual impacts to social stigma—does not eliminate, but rather triggers, their agency in various forms of resistance. The practical implications of this research underline the urgency for the community and government to recognize and ensure that the voices of pesantren women are heard, affirming that they are agents of change who are entitled to justice. Policy recommendations should therefore be directed at increasing gender-equitable awareness and practices, including reforming the comprehensive sexual education curriculum, eliminating the culture of cultism and victim-blaming, and strengthening reporting mechanisms and victim-centered psychosocial support, in order to create a safe and equal pesantren environment.

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