

Operationalizing Gender-Based Classroom Management in a Pesantren-Affiliated Junior High School

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Abstract. Gender segregation is a longstanding practice in pesantren-affiliated schools in Indonesia, yet detailed analyses of its operationalization remain scarce. Objective: This study maps the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes of gender-based classroom management in a junior high school affiliated with an Islamic boarding institution. Methods: A qualitative case study employed purposive sampling. Data were collected through nonparticipant observations, semi-structured interviews with school leaders and teachers, and document analysis. Thematic analysis followed Miles et al.'s framework, with triangulation to ensure trustworthiness. Results: Kiai's directive anchors annual placement protocols, gender-coded class formation, and stakeholder briefings. Single-sex classrooms enhanced student comfort, verbal engagement, and alignment with religious norms while minimizing cross-gender distractions. However, variations in teacher communication strategies and the absence of longitudinal data highlight the potential reinforcement of gender stereotypes and limited insight into students' social development. Conclusion: Gender-based management offers pedagogical and cultural benefits but may constrain broader social skills. Recommendations include gender-responsive professional development and multi-stakeholder policy reviews to balance religious imperatives with inclusive, equity-oriented education.

Keywords: Gender-Based Classroom Management, Single-Sex Education, Pesantren (Islamic Boarding School)

1 Introduction

Classroom management—the strategies teachers employ to establish a positive learning environment, diagnose student needs, and facilitate engagement—is critical to realizing these aims[1], [2]. Research has established strong links between effective management practices and improved student achievement[3], [4], reduced behavioral issues, and higher participation rates[5], [6].

Single-sex versus co-educational classrooms remain a subject of debate[7]–[10]. Several studies suggest that gender-segregated groupings may foster a more comfortable learning atmosphere[11]–[13]—particularly in contexts where cultural or religious norms emphasize separation[13], [14]—and can enhance student confidence, participation, and moral development[11], [15]. At the same time, critics caution against potential drawbacks,

including reduced socialization opportunities and reinforcement of gender stereotypes[16], [17].

Despite a substantial body of work on single-sex education in general and within Islamic settings[18], [19], there is a paucity of detailed, context-rich investigations into how gender-based classroom management is planned, implemented, and evaluated in pesantren-affiliated junior high schools in Indonesia. Most existing studies focus either on student outcomes[19] or broad policy descriptions, leaving unexplored the sequential processes—stakeholder negotiations, logistical arrangements, and iterative evaluations—underpinning sustained practice in an Islamic boarding school environment. Moreover, few qualitative case studies have applied systematic frameworks[20] to capture the lived experiences of principals, teachers, parents, and students as they navigate gender-grouped classrooms.

In pesantren, gender separation has long been practiced as part of religious and moral instruction. A hadith narrated by Ahmad underscores the importance of guiding children in religious observance from an early age and maintaining appropriate gender boundaries (Hadith by Ahmad). These principles inform the operational regulations of pesantren-affiliated schools, which often adopt gender-based class grouping[21], [22] to align with Islamic values and to minimize the risk of negative interactions in mixed-gender settings[22].

A school in Indonesia implements a gender-based classroom management system, from student registration to regular evaluation. This system aims to uphold pesantren norms, foster a conducive learning environment, and mitigate juvenile delinquency, dating, and classroom distractions.

This study addresses the identified gap through a qualitative case study of gender-based classroom management. Guided by purposive sampling, the data were collected via interviews, observations, and document analysis. Data analysis followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana framework—consisting of data condensation, display, and conclusion drawing—and triangulation techniques were employed to ensure validity[20].

This research contributes to the literature on gendered pedagogy and educational governance by (a) illuminating the sequential processes—stakeholder negotiations, logistical arrangements, and iterative evaluations—that sustain gender segregation in an Islamic boarding school context [21,22] and (b) offering evidence-based insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to reconcile religious traditions with inclusive, equity-oriented classroom practices.

2 Method

This study uses a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is a research method based on postpositivism philosophy, used to study natural conditions (as opposed to experiments), where the researcher is the key instrument, data collection techniques are carried out through triangulation (combination), data analysis is inductive or qualitative, and qualitative research results emphasize meaning rather than generalization. The researcher chose this qualitative approach because it can reveal in-depth facts, perceptions, patterns, or perspectives on implementing gender-based classroom management in a junior high school in Indonesia.

The type of research used by the researcher is descriptive research. The data collection techniques used in qualitative research are observation, interviews, and documentation. The type of observation conducted by the researcher is non-participatory observation. In this observation technique, the researcher directly observes to obtain data related to gender-based classroom management. Several steps in the data analysis of this study refer to the theory of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, namely four steps in analyzing data: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. In this study, data validity was checked using techniques that focused more on source triangulation and method triangulation.

3 Result

We interviewed the school principal regarding the reasons for separating students based on gender. During the interview, the informant explained the background behind implementing the student grouping regulation. One of the most fundamental factors behind this separation is that these junior high schools are managed by foundations belonging to Islamic boarding schools. The following are excerpts from the interview:

The plan to separate classes based on gender follows the tradition of pesantren, or Islamic boarding schools, where it's a rule that boys and girls can't be in the same class. The school leader sees this as being in line with religious principles. Even if the number of male and female students is not balanced, we will still do our best to ensure they are placed in separate classes.

The position of schools managed by Islamic boarding school (Pesantren) foundations means that the role of the Kiai as leader of the boarding school also impacts the management of the school. In various matters, the opinion of the Kiai is one of the bases for decision-making that must be considered and even obeyed.

An interview with the deputy principal reinforced the previous statement. As seen in the following statement:

The Kiai, the founder of the Islamic boarding school, said that boys and girls should be separated to minimize negative interactions. So, we followed his advice and implemented it as part of our school policy.

The interview results show that gender-based classroom management is a boarding school rule that must be enforced by separating male and female students to prevent negative behavior and undesirable incidents. Furthermore, based on the researcher's observations, the measures mentioned by the school principal have been implemented appropriately from the beginning, as they are aligned with the boarding school's regulations. Additionally, the class grouping has been separated between male and female students.

Grouping students by class positively affects learning. From what we have observed, male students tend to be more active in class—they are braver when speaking up or asking questions, more enthusiastic, and less shy about taking initiative. I asked them, "What do you think would happen if the classes were mixed?" Furthermore, they responded, "I would not feel comfortable, Sir. I would be embarrassed."

From a moral standpoint, separating the students also seems to help—it reduces the chances of bullying, whether it is boys bullying girls or vice versa. Interestingly, when female students walk past a group of male students, the boys usually appear more reserved or try to avoid interaction.

This could be because they are already used to being around classmates of the same gender in the classroom.

We have observed and found that male and female students do not mix in every class. This habit continues even after they leave the classroom, where male students tend to arrange things so they do not communicate directly with female students and vice versa.

Then, the results of the interviews and observations were sorted based on two subtopics, describing the placement planning and the teaching-learning in single-sex classrooms. The results are as follows:

3.1 Student Placement Plan

The student placement planning process is carried out at the beginning of each new school year. The person responsible for this matter is the vice principal in charge of student affairs. Meetings and evaluations are held to discuss the implementation of policies during the previous year, including those related to classifying students based on gender differences. As a form of compliance with the orders of the Kiai and also as part of the regulations implemented at the boarding school led by the Kiai, it is stated that the separation of students will continue to be enforced for an extended period. The following are some statements made by AR, the deputy principal in charge of student affairs:

At the start of the new school year, we record the students' names and total number. After that, we create class groupings based on gender. We use code A for classes with boys and code B for those with girls. This year, the number of female students was significantly higher—almost double the number of male students. So, we ended up dividing them into two separate classes.

We also explained the technical details of this arrangement to the parents at the beginning of the school year, including the reasoning behind it. So far, there have not been any complaints from parents about this classification. The initial draft of the class groupings was then brought to a meeting with the principal and the class teachers for further discussion.

The grouping of gender classes in junior high school also affects learning. When male students are separated from female students, they seem more active in class, more conducive, and more willing to express their opinions.

After approval by the principal, the student placement plan was disseminated in a teacher council forum involving homeroom teachers. The next step was to determine the role of subject teachers in the classroom. There was no difference in the teaching materials between male and female classes. Both were the same. Therefore, the teaching aids prepared by teachers before teaching were also almost the same. However, teachers are requested to incorporate gender equality perspectives into the teaching and learning process.

In line with the initial objective of implementing gender-segregated classes, which is to prevent and minimize juvenile delinquency involving interactions between the opposite sexes, it was also mentioned that the prevalence of juvenile problems caused by promiscuity is a serious concern for the Kiai, who leads the Islamic boarding school.

It is clear that in planning gender grouping, teachers are asked to guide students to understand the boundaries set by religion (Islam) in interactions between males and females. It is intended to influence students' thinking and behavior in teaching and learning activities inside and outside the classroom.

3.2 Teaching and Learning in Single-Sex Classrooms

From the observations conducted, it was found that there were approximately 35 students in each class. All classes consisted of students of the same gender. However, there were no regulations regarding whether teachers had to be male or female. Male teachers could teach female students, and vice versa.

The students also appeared enthusiastic about participating in classroom activities. Some of them expressed their views as follows:

The placement of students based on gender makes us feel comfortable interacting with each other. We do not feel awkward in the interaction between students and teachers or between students themselves. That may be because it has become a habit practiced here for a long time. There is no problem with this.

Their male peers also expressed the same thing. They admitted that they were accustomed to this and that it helped them better understand their classmates and become closer to them.

Teachers conduct teaching activities normally with the same proportion between the two classes. There is no difference in treatment due to physical differences between male and female students. Teachers always provide the same teaching aids, teaching materials, and other equipment for both classes. The only noticeable difference is in teachers' communication approach, where communication in the male classroom requires a more assertive attitude, a louder voice, and detailed rules. Otherwise, there are no significant differences.

The same applies to students' responses to the teachers who teach them in class. Some students admitted that there was no specific preference for the teaching competence demonstrated by male or female teachers. However, only a handful of students admitted feeling more comfortable being taught by male or female teachers.

However, we also interviewed several teachers regarding their views on the differences between the two types of classes, boys' and girls', and found some interesting points. Among them are differences in understanding, abilities, and learning progress. The following are some excerpts:

We are dealing with two types of classes, each of students of different genders. It is undeniable that there are differences between male and female classes. Regarding understanding the subject matter, female students perform better than male students. Meanwhile, male students tend to require a more direct approach and extra effort to motivate them and improve their focus while studying. We also need to conduct weekly evaluations of students' progress in understanding the material covered in class.

Implementing the policy of grouping classes based on gender is also evaluated periodically. According to interviews with the deputy principal, the evaluation is carried out by the principal every week and every year, involving teachers, deputy principals, and other staff. In weekly and annual meetings, they discuss issues that arise in the classroom, including issues that may arise as a result of placing students in classes based on gender.

4 Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the decision to separate classes by gender is first and foremost grounded in the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) tradition, where gender segregation is both a cultural norm and a religious injunction. The principal's framing—"it follows the tradition of *pesantren*...in line with religious principles"—reveals that this policy is not merely administrative but is experienced as a moral imperative. In contexts where school governance is closely tied to religious authority, policies carry normative weight beyond secular rationales[23], [24].

The interviews highlight the centrality of *Kiai's* authority[25]: both principal and deputy principal repeatedly defer to his guidance. This "top-down" decision-making model means gender segregation is non-negotiable[26], even when it results in class-size imbalances. Such a governance structure ensures rapid implementation but may limit critical reflection among staff and students.

Observations suggest that single-gender classes may foster greater participation: male students report feeling "braver" and less "embarrassed" when speaking up. That aligns with some mixed-methods studies showing increased verbal engagement in gender-homogenous settings, primarily among girls[27], [28]. However, it is crucial to ask whether heightened participation reflects real gains in critical thinking or merely comfort within a homogeneous peer group[29], [30]. Similar research cautions that such climates can also reinforce gendered communication patterns (e.g., boys dominating discourse, girls deferring to each other)[31], [32].

One significant point is that both boys and girls appear to internalize the separation deeply—avoiding cross-gender interaction even outside class. While this may reduce anxiety or social distractions in lessons, it also risks limiting students' opportunities to develop respectful[33] and cooperative relationships[34] across genders. Over time, this could entrench stereotypes (e.g., boys as "active" and girls as "passive") and hamper social skills needed in mixed-gender higher education or workplaces.

On the other hand, it appears that staff view segregation as a safeguard against "negative behavior" (e.g., bullying, inappropriate interactions). Indeed, the data show a perceived decline in cross-gender harassment. Yet, ethical considerations demand that schools also teach students to navigate diversity safely and respectfully rather than remove them from potential risk. Ethical pedagogy would balance protection with structured opportunities for guided interaction under explicit behavioral norms.

4.1 Institutionalization and Authority in Student Placement

The placement process is routinized as an annual cycle, with the vice principal convening reviews of past policies and anchoring all decisions in *Kiai's* decrees. Such procedural formalization—using gender codes (A/B) and parent briefings—demonstrates a high degree of bureaucratic embedding. Yet this "administrative rationality" also masks a top-down power dynamic, where student comfort or pedagogical nuance takes second place to institutional obedience. Here, *Kiai's* voice functions both as a theological mandate and governance mechanism[35], reflecting Weber's concept of traditional authority[36], [37]. In consequence,

any challenges to the gender segregation norm are pre-emptively foreclosed by its very procedural rigor.

4.2 Pedagogical Dynamics in Single-Sex Classrooms

The informants attribute improved male participation to the all-boys environment—boys reportedly "more active... dare to express opinions"—while female classes are implied to be more focused and compliant. That aligns with Paredes's (2021) findings that single-sex settings can reduce gender-stereotyped classroom behavior[38]. However, without quantitative measures (e.g., participation counts, test scores) or direct female student voices, we risk a perception-driven account that privileges observable vocal participation over deeper learning processes or affective outcomes. Moreover, while teachers claim parity of materials and demands, their admitted use of different "communication approaches" (assertive vs. moderated) suggests implicit pedagogical differentiation that may reproduce gender norms rather than accommodate them[39].

Indeed, the "comfort" reported by students could stem less from genuine preference and more from a reduction in stereotype threat—the anxiety triggered when students feel they might confirm negative stereotypes about their group—rather than from improved pedagogy per se[40], [41]. Without triangulating observational talk moves with assessments of critical thinking, teamwork skills, and self-regulation, any claims of pedagogical benefit remain incomplete—and may even mask the perpetuation of rigid gender scripts within the classroom.

4.3 Gender Equity, Teacher Agency, and Hidden Differentiation

Despite a stated commitment to gender-equal materials, teachers report perceiving female students as "better" in understanding and male students as needing "extra effort." This attribution can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy: teachers may unconsciously invest more in whichever class they deem more challenging, potentially reinforcing disparities[42]. Furthermore, the weekly and annual evaluation forums focus on issues "arising from gender grouping," but there is no evidence of critical interrogation of the grouping policy itself. Absent such reflexivity, the school risks ossifying gender norms under the guise of improvement[43], [44].

Several other criticisms of sex segregation in schools have surfaced. Among them is the study of Herr et al., who say that sex-segregated schools do not effectively challenge gender and racial bias and instead often reinforce gendered stereotypes and heteronormativity [43]. In another study, it was also mentioned that gender-segregated schooling does not enhance confidence, participation, and moral development, as there was no significant difference in self-efficacy between genders in single-sex schools[41].

Creating a conducive classroom climate is very important to achieve harmonious relationships between teachers and students and between students so that a pleasant and not rigid learning atmosphere can be realized. The success or failure of a learning process is influenced by many factors, including the teacher himself, the students, and the atmosphere in the learning interaction process[45]. If it is associated with gender-based class grouping, the classroom interaction will be influenced by the gender composition. The different tendencies of both male and female classes will bring out different nuances in the interaction process[46]. However, the differentiation of teacher treatment in male and female classes due to the

tendency of each should be avoided[46]. That way, the learning process in the classroom will not only leave an increasingly tenuous gap between male and female students.

5 Conclusion

This qualitative case study has mapped the full cycle of gender-based classroom management in a pesantren-affiliated junior high school—revealing how planning, implementation, and evaluation are tightly interwoven with religious governance. Planning is steered by Kiai directives and operationalized via an annual placement protocol that records enrolment data, applies gender-coded class labels, and secures stakeholder buy-in through parent and teacher briefings. Implementation unfolds through flexible registration, gender-segmented class assignments (with contingency plans for uneven quotas), and gender-responsive communication strategies in the classroom. Evaluation is institutionalized in weekly and annual leadership forums that monitor classroom climate, behavioral incidents, and infrastructural needs.

While this model succeeds in reducing cross-gender anxieties, minimizing juvenile delinquency, and aligning practice with pesantren values, it also risks ossifying rigid gender roles and privileging administrative conformity over deeper pedagogical goals. The exclusive focus on observable participation and discipline overlooks critical thinking, collaborative skills, and long-term social development—dimensions vital for students' success in mixed-gender higher education and workplaces.

To balance cultural imperatives with inclusive education, school leaders should offer gender-responsive professional development for teachers to mitigate unconscious bias and differentiate pedagogy constructively. Meanwhile, it is important to establish multi-stakeholder policy-review committees (including students, parents, and external experts) to interrogate underlying assumptions and align practices with national gender-equity frameworks.

By articulating both the strengths and blind spots of Pesantren-anchored gender grouping, this research offers a robust foundation for scholars and practitioners striving to harmonize religious traditions with equity-oriented, future-ready classroom practices.

Limitations and Future Research. This study's single-site, qualitative design—reliant on self-reported perceptions and lacking quantitative achievement data or longitudinal follow—up—limits generalizability. Future investigations should adopt mixed methods across multiple pesantren and secular schools, integrate standardized performance metrics, and track cohorts over time to assess how gender-segregated management shapes academic trajectories and social integration.

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