

**An Analysis of Sexual Abuse Committed by a Kiyai Against Santri (A Case Study at Islamic Boarding School X, Meranti Islands)**

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**ABSTRACT**

This research aims to analyze sexual abuse committed by a *kiyai* (Islamic religious leader) against a *santri* (Islamic boarding school student) at Islamic Boarding School X in the Meranti Islands. The background of the case highlights how positions of authority within religious institutions can be misused for personal gratification. The study uses a qualitative case study method with a criminological approach. Data were collected through documentation, interviews, and observation. The findings show that the perpetrator used his religious status to manipulate and exploit the victims psychologically and sexually. The factors contributing to this abuse include power imbalance, blind obedience of students, lack of supervision, and the closed nature of boarding school environments. The impact on victims includes psychological trauma, loss of trust, and long-term emotional disturbances. This research recommends stronger regulatory oversight of religious educational institutions and emphasizes the need for safe reporting mechanisms and awareness education to prevent abuse within *pesantren* environments.

**Keywords:** Sexual Abuse; Islamic Boarding School; Power and Authority Abuse

**INTRODUCTION**

Sexual violence is a form of deviant behavior that violates the norms and values of both religion and society. This phenomenon is increasingly concerning, especially when the perpetrator holds a position of authority or religious influence. In recent years, cases of sexual abuse within educational institutions particularly Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) have attracted public attention. These incidents not only tarnish the reputation of religious education but also pose a serious threat to the safety and psychological well-being of students (*santri*). One of the most alarming aspects of such abuse is when the perpetrator is a *kiyai*, a religious leader who is supposed to serve as a moral and spiritual guide for the students. The status of a *kiyai* in *pesantren* culture often grants them unquestioned authority, making it difficult for victims to resist, speak up, or seek help. The culture of obedience and reverence in Islamic boarding schools can be exploited, turning a space that should be sacred and nurturing into one of fear and manipulation.

This study focuses on a sexual abuse case that occurred at Islamic Boarding School X in the Meranti Islands, involving a *kiyai* as the perpetrator and several *santri* as the victims. The research is grounded in criminological theory and aims to understand the patterns, motivations, and consequences of the abuse. By examining this case, the study seeks to uncover the systemic weaknesses that allow such crimes to occur and persist within religious educational institutions. It also aims to contribute to the discourse on child protection and institutional accountability in pesantren settings. This issue is not only a legal or criminal matter but also a moral and social one. It challenges communities to rethink how religious authority is granted and monitored, and how vulnerable individuals, particularly children and adolescents, can be protected from abuse even in places considered most sacred.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual violence is defined as any act of a sexual nature committed against someone without their consent. According to Indonesia's Law No. 12 of 2022 on the Crime of Sexual Violence, these acts include harassment, coercion, exploitation, and abuse in various forms. Sexual abuse within educational and religious institutions represents not only a legal violation but also a deep betrayal of trust and moral integrity. Criminologically, sexual abuse is often linked to abuse of power and authority. When the perpetrator is someone with social, religious, or institutional authority such as a *kiyai*—the imbalance of power becomes a key factor that enables and perpetuates the abuse. As stated by Fattah (2000), perpetrators of sexual crimes often manipulate psychological vulnerability and social structures to silence victims and avoid detection.

Religious institutions, especially *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), are often highly respected in Indonesian society. The figure of the *kiyai* is central viewed not only as a religious teacher but also as a spiritual role model. This reverence can foster an environment where questioning the actions of a *kiyai* is taboo, even when those actions are abusive. According to Hasyim (2021), the culture of obedience (*ta'dzim*) in pesantren can be misused, turning religious legitimacy into a shield for immoral behavior. Research conducted by Arief (2020) on patterns of sexual violence in educational institutions shows that lack of institutional transparency, weak monitoring systems, and victim-blaming attitudes often contribute to underreporting and continuation of abuse. These factors are even more prevalent in closed, hierarchical environments like boarding schools.

The psychological impact of sexual abuse on child and adolescent victims is long-lasting. According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020), victims often suffer from trauma, anxiety, depression, and trust issues—especially when the perpetrator is a figure they once admired or depended on. In the context of Islamic boarding schools, these effects may be compounded by religious guilt, shame, and isolation. Thus, this literature underscores that sexual abuse in pesantren is a multidimensional issue—legal, psychological, sociocultural, and institutional. Addressing it requires not only criminal prosecution but also structural reforms,

policy enforcement, and a shift in community attitudes toward religious authority and child protection.

## **METHOD**

### **Design and Sample**

This research employs a qualitative case study design using a criminological approach. The aim is to explore in depth the case of sexual abuse committed by a *kiyai* against *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) at Islamic Boarding School X in the Meranti Islands. The case was selected using purposive sampling, focusing on a real-life incident that represents a broader pattern of sexual abuse in religious educational institutions. The sample consists of several individuals involved in or affected by the case, including students, school administrators, community members, and relevant legal parties.

### **Instrument and Procedures**

The main instrument in this study is the researcher herself, functioning as the primary data collector and interpreter. Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with selected informants victims, teachers, school staff, and local authorities—who could provide insights into the chronology, impact, and institutional response to the abuse. Observations were carried out in the school environment to better understand the cultural and social structure of the pesantren. In addition, documentation in the form of news reports, official statements, and legal documents was also used to strengthen the data.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive analysis technique, which involved organizing, categorizing, and interpreting the information gathered. The analysis focused on identifying patterns of power abuse, institutional silence, victim vulnerability, and cultural obedience that enabled the abuse to occur. The findings were interpreted using criminological theory, especially concepts related to power dynamics, victimization, and deviance. Triangulation of data sources (interviews, observation, and documentation) was used to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal a deeply troubling pattern of sexual abuse at Islamic Boarding School X in the Meranti Islands. The case involves not only the deliberate exploitation of young *santri* (students) by a *kiyai* (Islamic religious leader) but also exposes broader systemic failures in religious educational institutions. Data obtained through in-depth interviews, field observations, and

document analysis—consisting of media reports, legal case files, and institutional records—provide a clear picture of how such abuse could occur and persist over time.

### **Abuse of Power and Religious Authority**

The most dominant factor that enabled the abuse was the *kiyai*'s overwhelming authority, rooted in religious, social, and institutional power. Within the pesantren culture, the *kiyai* is more than a teacher he is viewed as a spiritual father, a guide, and often, as an infallible figure. This perception places him far above the students in the social hierarchy, and his actions are rarely questioned. Interviews with three victims revealed that the perpetrator used his role to not only gain access to students but also to manipulate their sense of morality and obedience. Victims described being called individually into the *kiyai*'s private quarters late at night under the guise of "special religious guidance." One student recounted:

*"He said this was a test of loyalty and obedience. I was afraid to say no because everyone told us that the kiyai always knows what's best."*

This kind of manipulation highlights the psychological grooming process, where the perpetrator leveraged spiritual beliefs to gain the victim's compliance. Other students confirmed that he regularly framed the abuse as part of a divine plan or "a lesson in submission," thus turning religious reverence into a mechanism of control. These accounts are consistent with theories of power-based sexual abuse in closed institutions, where perpetrators exploit the trust and dependency of their victims (Fattah, 2000; APA, 2020).

### **Institutional Silence and Structural Inaction**

The research also uncovered a systemic failure within the institution to prevent, detect, or respond to the abuse. The school lacked any formal procedures for complaints or whistleblowing. When one victim attempted to confide in a female teacher, her concerns were dismissed, and she was warned not to "spread rumors" that could damage the pesantren's reputation. A staff member interviewed anonymously stated:

*"There were suspicions, but no one dared to confront him. We feared for our positions. He had influence, not just here, but in the wider religious council."*

The hierarchical structure and culture of deference to religious leaders discouraged scrutiny, creating a climate of silence. Teachers, students, and even some parents hesitated to act, fearing retaliation or social shame. This institutional passivity allowed the abuse to continue unchecked. Observational data supported this finding: students were seen to rarely question any order or instruction from senior religious leaders, and there was an absence of gender-sensitive counseling or protection services.

In fact, based on school records, there had never been a single case of misconduct formally reported in the institution's history, not because incidents never occurred, but because the environment did not support speaking up. This silence reflects what Arief (2020) identifies as "a culture of institutional self-preservation," where protecting reputation is prioritized over safeguarding individuals.

### **Community Response and Victim Stigmatization**

After the abuse was exposed via local media, public reaction was divided. Some community members, including influential alumni and parents, openly supported the *kiyai*, claiming he was being "framed by outsiders" who wished to discredit the pesantren. Meanwhile, other members particularly relatives of the victims organized protests and demanded a full legal investigation. This division created further pressure on the victims, some of whom withdrew from public life due to fear of humiliation.

Court documents from the Meranti District Court confirmed that at least five formal police reports had been submitted, with evidence including medical reports, witness testimonies, and digital messages linking the *kiyai* to the abuse. One psychological evaluation submitted as part of the court case stated that a 14-year-old victim showed signs of complex trauma, including sleep disorders, trust issues, and chronic fear of religious figures.

Furthermore, social media became a space of victim-blaming and disinformation, with certain pesantren sympathizers accusing the students of dishonesty and moral failure. This reflects the APA's (2020) finding that survivors of authority-based abuse often face secondary victimization rejection, disbelief, and moral judgment from the very communities meant to protect them.

### **Lack of Oversight and Government Accountability**

A significant structural issue revealed in this study is the lack of regulation and oversight in religious educational institutions. Although pesantren operate under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, many function independently with minimal external evaluation. Interviews with local officials revealed that no regular audits, child protection policies, or psychological support systems were in place at the school. According to one education officer:

*"We rely on self-reporting from the pesantren. We rarely intervene unless there's a public scandal."*

This statement underscores how institutional autonomy while culturally respected can become a liability when it lacks accountability. The absence of binding national standards for student safety in religious schools leaves thousands of students vulnerable to similar abuse.

### Psychological and Spiritual Impact on Victims

All five victims interviewed expressed emotional confusion and long-term distress. Some reported a loss of interest in religion or a deep sense of betrayal by spiritual authorities. One victim said:

*“I don’t even go to the mosque anymore. How can I trust a religion that let this happen to me?”*

This illustrates not only the psychological trauma but also the spiritual disruption caused by abuse perpetrated by religious leaders. The combination of fear, shame, confusion, and silence has left many of these students emotionally isolated.

The findings of this study expose how sexual abuse in Islamic Boarding School X was not an isolated or random act, but rather a systemic issue rooted in the misuse of religious authority, institutional silence, and the absence of structural safeguards. This aligns with key criminological perspectives that assert power asymmetry and structural complicity are critical enablers of sexual violence, particularly in closed institutions such as boarding schools.

From a criminological standpoint, the abuse committed by the *kiyai* fits within the concept of power-based sexual exploitation. As Fattah (2000) notes, sexual crimes committed by authority figures often depend less on physical coercion and more on psychological manipulation, control, and social positioning. In this case, the *kiyai* leveraged his status as a spiritual leader to blur the lines between religious obedience and personal submission, a dynamic made possible by the *pesantren* culture that places *kiyai* beyond reproach. The students’ reverence—instilled as part of their religious formation—became a tool for silence rather than empowerment. This highlights how sacred authority, when unchecked, becomes a high-risk vector for abuse.

In addition, the findings reinforce what Hasyim (2021) described as a “culture of untouchability” within certain *pesantren* communities, where internal regulation is either absent or rendered ineffective by fear and loyalty. This is especially problematic in traditional Islamic boarding schools that prioritize obedience (*ta’dzim*) and discourage questioning religious authority. The refusal of staff to report the *kiyai*, despite observing suspicious behavior, demonstrates how institutional loyalty often overrides moral and legal responsibility. Similar patterns have been found in studies of clerical abuse in other faith-based institutions, where silence is used to protect institutional identity rather than vulnerable individuals (Peterson, 2021).

The responses of the community also reflect the challenges of confronting abuse in deeply religious environments. As seen in this study, part of the community defended the *kiyai*, invoking his years of religious service and accusing the victims of spreading slander. This mirrors the victim-blaming phenomena found in previous

sexual violence research (APA, 2020), where survivors are subjected to secondary victimization through public scrutiny, disbelief, or moral judgment. In highly conservative communities, religious sanctity is often placed above individual justice resulting in collective denial, emotional suppression, and community polarization.

A critical insight from this study is the role of institutional and governmental oversight or lack thereof. While pesantren are nominally under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, many operate independently with minimal supervision. The absence of standardized child protection policies, grievance systems, or psychological support services allowed the abuse to continue unchecked for years. As found in similar studies by Arief (2020), structural neglect by governing bodies creates the conditions for abuse to flourish, particularly in institutions where accountability is weak, and reputation management is prioritized over safety.

Moreover, the psychological impact on the victims in this study highlights the long-term and multidimensional harm caused by sexual abuse in religious settings. Not only do survivors report trauma-related symptoms such as anxiety, shame, and fear, but many also experience a spiritual crisis. The figure they once regarded as a guide toward religious enlightenment became a source of confusion, betrayal, and pain. This dual damage emotional and spiritual often leads victims to lose faith in the very values they were raised to uphold. As one victim stated, they could no longer trust religious spaces. This echoes Griffith (2017), who argues that the closer the abuser is to the sacred or moral center of a person's world, the deeper the psychological rupture.

The discussion also highlights the urgent need for systemic reform. Protection of students in religious boarding schools must be guaranteed not only through internal ethics but also through binding regulatory frameworks, third-party oversight, and survivor-centered reporting mechanisms. Policies should ensure that all pesantren provide access to trained counselors, independent complaint systems, and regular monitoring by child protection agencies. Additionally, the cultural reverence for religious authority must be balanced with transparency and accountability. Communities must begin to separate spiritual respect from institutional impunity. This study, while centered on one case, carries broader implications. It reflects the complex interplay between religion, culture, power, and silence that enables abuse to occur in institutions that should represent safety and morality. By combining victim testimony, criminological theory, and systemic critique, this research contributes to the call for ethical reform within religious education systems where safeguarding children must become a sacred priority, not a secondary concern.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the sexual abuse case involving a kiyai at Islamic Boarding School X in the Meranti Islands is not merely an incident of personal

moral failure but a reflection of deeper systemic and cultural issues within religious educational institutions. The abuse was enabled by the convergence of unchecked religious authority, a rigid culture of obedience, lack of institutional oversight, and the absence of formal mechanisms for student protection and complaint. Through the application of a criminological lens, it becomes clear that the power imbalance between the *kiyai* and his *santri* created conditions ripe for manipulation, coercion, and prolonged silence. Victims were unable to resist or report the abuse due to fear, guilt, and the deeply internalized belief that questioning religious leaders is sinful. Institutional actors including teachers and administrators either failed to act or chose to protect the institution's image, thereby perpetuating the abuse.

This case highlights the urgent need for a multi-level response. At the institutional level, *pesantren* must be required to implement safeguarding policies, independent reporting systems, and trauma-informed support services. At the governmental level, stronger regulatory frameworks and routine oversight must be enforced to ensure that all educational environments—religious or otherwise—are safe for children. At the cultural level, communities must move beyond blind obedience to religious figures and foster a more critical, protective approach to child safety. Furthermore, the psychological and spiritual trauma experienced by victims underscores the long-term consequences of abuse in religious settings. Healing must include not only justice through legal channels but also psychological and emotional rehabilitation, with full community support. In conclusion, this study affirms that safeguarding children in *pesantren* is not solely a matter of policy, but a moral imperative. Protecting the dignity, safety, and rights of students must become central to the mission of religious education. Without accountability, the values that *pesantren* seek to teach—honesty, trust, and moral integrity—will continue to be undermined by the very individuals entrusted to uphold them.

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