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Gender justice in Islamic classrooms: A phenomenological analysis of teachers' lived experiences

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ABSTRACT

Gender justice in Islamic education has frequently been examined through religious texts, institutional policies, and broader theological debates, while the everyday classroom experiences through which teachers interpret and enact gender justice remain less explored. This study examines how Islamic religious educators understand and construct gender justice in their everyday pedagogical practices. Using Clark Moustakas's descriptive phenomenological framework, the study involved five Islamic religious educators working in formal and non-formal educational institutions in Tasikmalaya and Ciamis, Indonesia. Data were generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in June 2025 and analyzed through epoché, horizonalization, clustering of invariant constituents into themes, and the construction of textural and structural descriptions followed by a composite synthesis. Five interrelated themes emerged: intuitive gender sensitivity, empathetic informal justice, the tension between uniformity and differentiation, institutional and environmental conditioning, and implicit gendered perceptions. The findings indicate that teachers generally enact gender justice through situational judgment, relational care, and responses to immediate classroom conditions rather than through explicitly articulated gender-responsive pedagogical frameworks. At the same time, gendered descriptions of student behavior may reproduce categorical expectations when they remain unexamined. Interpreted through critical pedagogy, the ethics of care, and gender performativity, the findings suggest that relational goodwill is an important foundation but requires structured critical reflection to prevent gendered assumptions from becoming normalized. The study contributes a localized empirical account of gender justice in Islamic classrooms and suggests that teacher development should incorporate reflective and gender-responsive pedagogical practices.

Keywords: Gender Justice; Islamic Boarding Schools; Islamic Pedagogy; Phenomenology.

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ABSTRAK

Kajian kesetaraan gender dalam pendidikan Islam masih didominasi analisis teks agama makro, sehingga menyisakan celah empiris pada dinamika mikro ruang kelas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana lima pendidik keagamaan Islam di lembaga formal dan non-formal di Tasikmalaya dan Ciamis memaknai serta mengonstruksi keadilan gender dalam praktik pedagogi sehari-hari. Menggunakan fenomenologi deskriptif Clark Moustakas, data kualitatif dari wawancara mendalam dianalisis melalui tahapan epoché, horizonalisasi, kluster tema, deskripsi tekstural dan struktural, serta sintesis komposit. Keabsahan data dijaga melalui member-checking dan audit trail. Penelitian mengristalisasi lima tema esensial: sensitivitas gender intuitif, keadilan informal empatik, ketegangan antara penyeragaman dan diferensiasi, determinisme institusional, serta persepsi gender implisit. Melalui kerangka pedagogi kritis, etika kepedulian, dan performativitas gender, esensi komposit mengungkap bahwa keadilan gender di kelas dihayati terutama sebagai praktik langsung yang terikat konteks, relasional, dan tidak tertulis demi kenyamanan kelas, bukan kesadaran pedagogis yang sistematis. Tanpa refleksi kritis, niat baik guru berisiko memperkuat kategorisasi gender implisit—seperti melabeli siswa laki-laki disruptif dan perempuan penurut—alih-alih memahaminya sebagai respons performatif hasil konstruksi sosial. Dalam perspektif pedagogi Islam, pengelolaan dinamika mikro ini sangat penting untuk menyelaraskan praktik kelas dengan Maqasid Syariah, khususnya perlindungan tumbuh kembang anak (himayat al-awlad) dan keadilan proporsional ('adl). Secara praktis, alih-alih melakukan generalisasi mutlak, penelitian ini memberikan rekomendasi kontekstual untuk mengintegrasikan kerangka responsif gender ke dalam pelatihan guru guna membangun kesadaran pedagogis kritis.

Kata Kunci: Keadilan Gender; Pesantren; Pedagogi Islam; Fenomenologi.

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender equality in Islamic education is not only a question of access, but also related to a more subtle aspect, namely how teachers as the main figures in the educational process, whether consciously or not, reproduce or challenge gender norms in their daily teaching activities. Behind every classroom interaction, whether it is the way teachers reprimand, praise, choose examples, or set a turn, therein lies a gender construct that has a long-lasting impact on students' learning experiences.

The psychological conditions of these diverse students often receive a biased response in the classroom. Gender discrimination often comes in implicit forms, such as unequal distribution of attention or expectations of compliance that are imposed on female students (Az-Zahra, Alfarizi, Novianto, & Najili, 2024) . In practice in the classroom, the way teachers teach helps create this gender identity. If teachers use learning models without considering the psychological differences and gender characteristics of students, then this not only triggers ineffective learning (Rosyida, Isnaini, Wulandari, Kariadinata, & Malik, 2024), but also has the potential to produce gender norms that limit student development.

Although the conceptual foundations of gender-responsive pedagogy are well established, a research gap exists in the current empirical literature. Previous studies are still stuck on macro and textual analysis. Gultom (2021) limited research to mapping general indicators and gender mapping in education. Meanwhile, research in the Islamic education ecosystem is dominated by literature review methods and text analysis. Pakarti, Hendriana, Farid, Ulpah, & Afifah (2023) and Sulistiana, Pertiwi, Saloom, Muhtar, & Ismailthoib (2026) examined theoretical gender constructions and reinterpretation of hadith theology, while Hajam, Solihah, Sudrajat, & Marzuki, (2024) focused on content analysis of PAI textbooks. In fact, contemporary studies such as Mubarok, Ridlo, & Yuliawati (2024) focused more on the aspect of the school's institutional policy response to identity issues.

Even the most recent studies conducted directly within the *pesantren* environment tend to remain at the institutional or discursive level rather than the classroom-pedagogical level. (Kurniawati & Muafiah, 2023) found that gender equality within *pesantren* life is generally understood as value-based, proportional fairness rather than as an operational classroom practice, while Munthe & Riza (2026) show that female students in a modern *pesantren* mainly negotiate gender equality through institutional opportunities for organizational and leadership participation rather than through the day-to-day pedagogical choices of their teachers. This indicates that although the *pesantren* context itself is increasingly studied, how individual teachers construct gender justice inside their own classrooms, the central concern of the present study remains empirically underexplored.

From this mapping, very few studies appear to have moved beyond text-based analysis to empirically capture micro-realities in the classroom. Based on the literature reviewed, it remains largely unexplored how teachers in Islamic educational institutions, both formal and non-formal such as Islamic boarding schools, concretely interpret, experience, and construct gender justice in daily pedagogical practice. Whether the manifestation of "gender sensitivity" in the classroom is a structured theoretical awareness or simply an intuitive response to the dynamics of student behavior remains a critical question. This gender-blind spot is not unique to gender-justice research; it recurs even in adjacent fields of Islamic education, where the pedagogical role of nyai remains marginalized in scholarship that privileges kiai as the primary religious authority (Arifin, Rohmaniyah, Mahmud, & Hanif, 2026).

Beyond the Islamic education context, a parallel gap emerges from the broader literature on teacher cognition. Marks & Amodei (2022) documented that preservice teachers continue to carry deeply embedded implicit gender biases inherited from their own K-12 schooling, biases that persist even when the teachers explicitly endorse egalitarian values. In a similar vein, Andersen (2023) demonstrated through a vignette-based study that teachers' unconscious gender stereotypes shape concrete pedagogical decisions, such as academic-track recommendations, independently of the teachers' conscious intentions. These findings suggest that the disconnect between teachers' professed beliefs and their actual classroom practice is not unique to the Islamic education setting, but is a structural feature of teaching itself, one that the Islamic education literature has yet to examine empirically at the level of lived classroom experience.

This gap is particularly relevant because teachers' explicit egalitarian beliefs do not necessarily eliminate gendered assumptions in pedagogical decision-making. Studies outside the Islamic education context indicate that teachers may retain implicit gender-related

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assumptions derived from previous educational experiences, even when they consciously endorse egalitarian values (Marks & Amodei, 2022). Andersen (2023) likewise demonstrated that gender stereotypes can influence teachers' pedagogical judgments. These findings suggest that the relationship between teachers' stated commitments and their everyday pedagogical practices deserves closer empirical attention.

The present study addresses this gap by shifting the analytical focus from macro-level theological and institutional discourse to teachers' lived experiences in the classroom. The study asks: How do Islamic religious educators experience and construct gender justice in their everyday pedagogical practices? More specifically, it examines how teachers interpret gender-related classroom situations, how they negotiate uniformity and differentiation in treatment, and how institutional contexts shape their pedagogical decisions.

Through a focus on study that rests on the depth of meaning and pure experience (lived experience) in Islamic religious education, this study uses Clark Moustakas's phenomenological approach as an epistemological umbrella. Through Epoche (suspension of researcher assumptions), this study seeks to capture the dynamics of pedagogical reality in a clear and in-depth manner.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Gender Impact on Student Learning and Islamic Perspective

Gender differences influence learning dynamics and educational experiences. In Islamic education, Kartika (2020) emphasized that the Qur'an does not teach discrimination between male and female students in the learning process; differences are the result of social and cultural constructions, not divine nature. Recent research in Islamic boarding schools further shows that gender equality tends to be interpreted through Islamic values rather than as absolute sameness of treatment. Kurniawati & Muafiah (2023) found that *pesantren* communities generally frame gender equality as proportional justice consistent with Islamic teachings, allowing certain role divisions to persist without being perceived as discriminatory. Similarly, Munthe & Riza (2026) reported that female students in a modern *pesantren* negotiate gender equality through everyday participation in academic, organizational, and leadership activities, even as some gender-based restrictions remain in place. These studies indicate that gender equality in Islamic educational settings is shaped through everyday interactions and contextual interpretations rather than solely through formal policy. This perspective is relevant to examining how educators understand and enact gender justice in classroom practice.

2.2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of Gender Pedagogy

Gender can be reproduced through repeated social interactions and expectations. Butler's concept of gender performativity provides a theoretical lens for examining how gendered identities and expectations are continuously constituted through repeated acts, language, and social practices (Fitroh, Srikandi, Maheswari, & Wardani, 2026). In educational settings, this perspective allows classroom behavior to be examined without assuming that characteristics such as obedience, assertiveness, or disruptiveness are inherently determined by biological sex.

The relevance of this perspective becomes clearer when teachers describe students using gendered categories. Statements such as "male students are more disruptive" or "female

students are more obedient" may reflect observations of particular classroom situations, but they may also become expectations that influence subsequent teacher responses. Gender performativity therefore provides a useful interpretive framework for examining how repeated classroom expectations can contribute to the reproduction of gender norms.

Within Islamic education, M. Quraish Shihab emphasizes that gender equality does not necessarily mean uniformity but proportional opportunities according to individual needs (Cahyawati, 2022). This perspective provides a basis for distinguishing between equal treatment and context-sensitive treatment in educational practice:

2.2.1. Henry Giroux

Henry Giroux conceptualizes teachers as transformative intellectuals who can challenge oppressive social structures and recognize schools as spaces of both social reproduction and potential resistance (Mariani, 2022). Giroux (2024) developed this idea through the notion of teachers as transformative intellectuals, arguing that pedagogical work is never ideologically neutral: schools function simultaneously as sites of social reproduction and as potential sites of resistance and emancipation (Flores, Vlach, & Lammert, 2019). Extending this framework, Giroux (2024) contended that critical pedagogy requires educators to treat the classroom as a democratic public sphere in which students are equipped with the analytic tools to question dominant ideologies, including patriarchal norms embedded in curricula, disciplinary practice, and everyday classroom interaction (Kozuska, 2020). In this study, Giroux's perspective is used to examine whether teachers' responses to gendered classroom situations merely reproduce existing patterns or create opportunities for more critical and equitable interaction.

2.2.2. Bell Hooks

Bell Hooks' concept of engaged pedagogy emphasizes teachers' presence and attentiveness to students' lived experiences, including their gender and social backgrounds (Tack, 2022). In Teaching to Transgress, Hooks (2014) connects intellectual engagement with emotional and embodied dimensions of classroom interaction. This perspective complements Giroux by emphasizing that gender-sensitive pedagogy requires not only awareness of structural inequality but also genuine attentiveness to students' experiences.

2.2.3. Nel Noddings

Nel Noddings' ethics of care provides a relational framework for understanding teacher–student interaction. Care requires attention to the particular needs of students rather than relying solely on abstract or uniform rules (Tzvetkova, 2025). Noddings (2013) originally formulated the ethics of care as a relational rather than principle-based ethic, arguing that moral action arises from the caring relation between the “one-caring” and the “cared-for,” in which the carer’s receptive attention to the particular needs of the other takes precedence over abstract, universal rules. Applying this theory to schooling, Noddings also argued that the primary aim of education should be to nurture caring, competent, and loving persons, and that a genuinely caring teacher continuously verifies whether care has actually been received by attending to how each student responds, rather than assuming good intentions automatically translate into being cared for (Chen & Shih, 2025). Applied to gender justice, Noddings’ framework cautions against pedagogical strategies that differentiate treatment by sex as a fixed biological category;

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responsiveness must instead be calibrated to each student's expressed needs, positioning the ethics of care as a relational counterweight to both rigid egalitarian sameness and essentialist gender differentiation.

These theoretical perspectives are complemented by empirical studies on implicit gender bias in education. Marks & Amodei (2022) identified a gap between teachers' egalitarian beliefs and experiences of gendered treatment in schooling, while Andersen (2023) demonstrated that implicit gender stereotypes can influence teachers' pedagogical judgments even when such biases are not consciously recognized. Together, these perspectives provide an analytical basis for examining how gendered expectations may emerge through everyday classroom interactions and how teachers' practices can either reproduce or challenge them.

3. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological design model Clark Moustakas to uncover the essence and meaning of life experiences (lived experience) Islamic religious educators regarding gender pedagogy. Phenomenology was chosen as the epistemological umbrella because it allows researchers to transcend macro-textual theology and capture how classroom gender justice is subjectively experienced, interpreted, and enacted by teachers in their daily micro-classroom encounters.

Through techniques purposive sampling, five informants were selected with the criteria of actively teaching in Islamic educational institutions, experienced in teaching cross-gender classes, and willing to be interviewed in depth. The composition of the informants consisted of two female teachers (G1P and G2P), and three male teachers (G3L, G4L, and G5L) who represented the ecosystem of Islamic boarding schools, tutoring institutions, and madrassas with a range of service periods ranging from 9 months to more than 20 years.

Table 1.
Demographic Profiles of the Informants.

No	Participant Code	Gender	Institutional Type	Teaching Experience
1	G1P	Female	Junior High School (SMP) & *Pesantren*	>20 Years
2	G2P	Female	Junior High School (SMP) & *Pesantren*	2 Years
3	G3L	Male	*Pesantren*	5 Years
4	G4L	Male	Tutoring Center (Bimbel)	9 Months
5	G5L	Male	Islamic Senior High School (MAN) & *Pesantren*	1 Years

Primary empirical data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with a duration of 30-60 minutes, conducted between 2-6 June 2025, covering four main corridors, namely teaching track record, classroom management and dynamics of pedagogical methods, patterns of student participation, and teachers' critical reflections on gender justice. All interviews were documented in the form of written notes and audio recordings which were then transcribed verbatim for qualitative processing.

The Data analysis rigorously followed the four sequential stages of Moustakas's descriptive phenomenological framework (Moustakas, 1994). First, epoché was undertaken through researcher reflexivity. The researchers identified their prior assumptions concerning

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gender, Islamic education, and *pesantren* culture and sought to bracket these assumptions during the initial engagement with participants' accounts. Second, horizonalization was conducted by identifying statements that directly described participants' experiences of gender-related pedagogical situations. Statements were initially treated as having equal value and were subsequently examined to identify non-repetitive and meaningful constituents.Third, related constituents were clustered into themes representing recurring experiential meanings across participants. Five themes were identified: (1) intuitive gender sensitivity, (2) empathetic informal justice, (3) tension between uniformity and differentiation, (4) institutional and environmental conditioning, and (5) implicit gendered perceptions. Fourth, textural descriptions were developed to describe what participants experienced, while structural descriptions examined the contextual conditions through which those experiences occurred. Finally, the textural and structural descriptions were synthesized into a composite essence describing the shared meaning of gender justice as experienced by the participants. The theoretical perspectives of critical pedagogy, ethics of care, and gender performativity were applied after the phenomenological synthesis as interpretive lenses rather than as predetermined coding categories.

Subsequently, in the clustering of themes stage, the identified units of meaning were clustered into thematic categories reflecting common experiential patterns reflecting recurring experiential patterns identified across the participants, yielding five core essential themes comprising intuitive gender sensitivity, empathetic informal justice, the tension between standardization (equality) and differentiation (equity), institutional determinism, and implicit gender bias. Following this, textural descriptions of what the teachers experienced, such as raising vocal volume or adapting seating arrangements and structural descriptions of how the institutional context and *pesantren* norms conditioned those experiences were constructed for each theme, before finally synthesizing these descriptions into a composite essence that captured the overarching psychological and pedagogical reality of classroom gender justice.

To maintain analytical credibility and confirmability, member-checking was conducted by returning transcript summaries and extracted themes to the informants for validation. Additionally, an audit trail documenting the step-by-step movement from raw transcript excerpts to the final thematic synthesis was meticulously maintained, ensuring methodological transparency and full alignment with qualitative research standards.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Intuitive and Unstructured Gender Sensitivity

All informants were aware of differences between male and female students, but this awareness was generally rooted in teaching experience rather than structured theoretical knowledge. Gender-related decisions were therefore described as spontaneous and situational rather than as the application of an explicit gender-responsive pedagogical strategy. G1P explained:

> *"... To men I tend to be more assertive, the voice is more volumed... In giving examples, make sure that male students can be greeted by all, used as an example so that they are more focused... But the male students asked more questions or continued to be asked before they understood."*

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G1P's experience illustrates how gender-related adjustments developed through practical classroom experience. Similarly, G3L stated:

> *"The difference in teacher treatment is important, because the teaching method must be different (between male and female students)."*

Together, these accounts indicate that gender sensitivity is primarily enacted as situational judgment. Teachers adjust vocal intensity, attention, or teaching methods in response to perceived differences in students' behavior and learning needs, without explicitly referring to a formal gender-responsive framework. G5L similarly reported, “For male students, the intonation is raised higher than for female students to enhance attentiveness.” The convergence of these accounts formed the meaning unit of intuitive and situational gender sensitivity, which was clustered into the theme of Intuitive and Unstructured Gender Sensitivity. This pattern is consistent with Jafari, Maghribi, & Salman (2024), who emphasize the role of practical judgment in educational interaction. This phronesis is born from continuous interactions and situational judgments made by the teachers on a daily basis.

“For male students, the intonation is raised higher than for female students to enhance attentiveness.” (G5L) a female teacher raising her volume for male students, and a male teacher independently raising his intonation for the same reason, is a convergent meaning unit, gender-responsive tone adjustment recurs across informants from different institutional settings (a *pesantren* junior high and a senior Islamic boarding school) rather than being one teacher's idiosyncrasy, and this convergence is what crystallized into the theme of Intuitive and Unstructured Gender Sensitivity. Texturally, what teachers actually do is concrete and observable: raising vocal volume, redirecting seating or eye contact toward male students, and varying instructional pacing. Structurally, these adjustments surface specifically under the pressure of immediate classroom management in mixed or male-heavy groups, and in the absence of any formal training in gender-responsive pedagogy, rather than as a deliberate, theory-informed strategy.

Unfortunately, because it is unscripted, this intuitive sensitivity remains highly fragmented and inconsistent across different educational settings. This condition is in line with the criticism of Gultom (2021) who stated that practitioners' understanding of gender equality indicators remains insufficiently systematized. Although teachers demonstrate engagement with students' concrete needs, as reflected in Hooks' engaged pedagogy Hooks' (2014) engaged pedagogy (Tack, 2022), intuitive practice requires critical reflection, institutional evaluation, and professional development if it is to develop into systematic gender-responsive competence (Kollmayer et al., 2020).

4.2. Empathetic Approach as A Form of Informal Pedagogical Justice

When institutional regulations do not explicitly provide gender-equality guidelines, teachers tend to create informal forms of fairness through empathetic interaction. G3L described this approach:

> *"Usually our approach is to embrace that, always understand what is in their situation. We have to feel like we're going to be like that, or be a student."*

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This statement reflects an attempt to understand students from their own circumstances rather than relying solely on formal rules. It corresponds with Noddings' ethics of care, which emphasizes receptive attention to individual needs (Tzvetkova, 2025). G5L, however, highlighted a difficulty arising from differentiated attention:

> *"Mostly, for example, if the learning motivation between male and female students is different, sometimes the woman feels why she is different... Even though we are under the same roof, we both study with the same person."*

The experience indicates that individualized care can create perceptions of favoritism when differences in treatment are not clearly understood by students. Across G3L, G5L, and G4L, teachers described relying on interpersonal understanding, attention to students' circumstances, and inclusive communication rather than on a formal gender-equality procedure. G4L, for example, emphasized “more inclusive two-way communication and making the classroom forum busier.” These accounts formed the meaning unit of relational and empathetic accommodation and were clustered into the theme of Empathetic Approach as a Form of Informal Pedagogical Justice.

Noddings' framework helps explain this pattern because caring requires responsiveness to individual conditions rather than mechanical uniformity (Chen & Shih, 2025), G5L’s narrative reveals a critical vulnerability: without an explicit framework of critical gender consciousness, well-intentioned relational care is prone to degrading into mere paternalistic care or superficial sympathy. When empathy operates in a critical vacuum, teachers risk accommodating gendered gaps in motivation or behavior as fixed realities rather than challenging the subtle patriarchal expectations that produce them in the first place.

To address this potential emotional imbalance, creating an active and inclusive classroom is a strategic approach. As confirmed by G4L, the main focus is: "more inclusive two-way communication and making the classroom forum busier." By shifting the classroom dynamic from passive absorption to collective engagement, teachers can diffuse individualized tensions and distribute attention more equitably. This pattern of warm and communicative relationships represents the application of the ethics of care presented by Nodding (Tzvetkova, 2025). A caring teacher strives to meet the specific needs of each student without being constrained by biological determinism based on gender. The ethics of care here serves as a relational safety net, allowing teachers to navigate individual differences constructively. The informal nature that emerges in these daily interactions proves that students' emotional comfort is often determined by the quality of the teacher's theological and humanist communication in the classroom, a microspace that is rarely explored in broader education policy analysis (Ririanti, Mahatri Awalia, & Herlini Puspika Sari, 2025). Consequently, formal metrics of educational equity often overlook these subtle, conversational micro-negotiations that directly dictate student well-being.

G3L's embrace of empathetic understanding, G5L's awareness of the jealousy that uneven attention can provoke, and G4L's push toward more inclusive two-way communication converge on a single meaning unit: in the absence of an explicit institutional mandate for gender equality, teachers independently improvise interpersonal, empathy-based mechanisms to keep the classroom fair. This shared improvisation, rather than any one informant's personal style, is

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what constitutes the theme of Empathetic Approach as a Form of Informal Pedagogical Justice. Texturally, this manifests as perspective-taking language, efforts to pre-empt perceived favoritism, and deliberate broadening of classroom participation. Structurally, it is conditioned by the absence of written gender-equality guidelines at the institutional level, which leaves teachers to resolve the tension between individualized care and the risk of perceived favoritism on their own, moment to moment.

4.3. The Tension Between Standardization and Differentiation of Treatment

The third theme concerns a recurring tension between treating students uniformly and differentiating treatment according to perceived needs. G5L emphasized uniformity in mixed-gender classrooms:

> *"This is not important (considering the gender aspect). Unless for example the teaching is separate, maybe we can treat girls with different guys. If you want to teach them to join... We have to treat all students the same way."*

G5L's statement indicates teachers' fear of being born so that it will only be if the treatment in the mixed classroom is differentiated. This view clashes with the perspective of G3L which is based on a homogeneous *pesantren* environment, where he emphasizes *"It is important, because the teaching method in order to be conveyed properly must be different (based on gender)."* For G3L, equity cannot be achieved through blind uniformity, as structural or cultural differences necessitate tailored delivery styles. G2P similarly described perceived behavioral differences:

> *"Usually to teach male students, we have to be more firm, we have to be more thorough because male students are usually lazy... If female students tend to be easier because they are easy to listen to."*

G5L's insistence on uniform treatment, G3L's insistence on differentiated method, and G2P's characterization of male students as needing firmer handling are, on the surface, contradictory positions, yet together they reveal one shared meaning unit: none of the informants held a settled, principled definition of what fair treatment means when applied across genders in a single classroom. Each instead anchored their answer to their own institutional setting, G5L to a genuinely mixed classroom, G3L to a gender-segregated *pesantren* tradition, and G2P to her lived observation of behavioral differences, which is precisely why this tension crystallized into a theme rather than a single finding: it recurs, unresolved, across informants regardless of institutional type. Texturally, the tension surfaces as teachers defaulting either to identical rules for all students or to openly differentiated instructions and expectations. Structurally, which default a teacher reaches for tracks the composition of their classroom, mixed or segregated, and the surrounding institutional culture, rather than a considered pedagogical judgment about equity.

Taken together, the accounts of G5L, G3L, and G2P reveal a recurring tension in how teachers understand fairness in mixed-gender classroom settings. G5L emphasizes identical treatment as a way of avoiding perceived favoritism, whereas G3L emphasizes differentiated teaching as a response to perceived differences in students' needs. G2P similarly describes

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differentiated treatment based on perceived differences in male and female students' classroom behavior. These accounts converge around two competing meanings of fairness: fairness as uniform treatment and fairness as context-sensitive differentiation. This convergence constituted the meaning unit that was clustered into the theme The Tension between Standardization and Differentiation of Treatment. It highlights a deep-seated ambiguity regarding whether justice implies identical treatment or proportional adaptation.

This tension can be understood through M. Quraish Shihab's conception of gender equality as proportional equity rather than mechanical uniformity (Cahyawati, 2022). Differentiation can therefore be pedagogically appropriate when it responds to actual individual needs. However, differentiation becomes problematic when it rests on generalized gender labels. G2P's characterization of male students as "lazy," for example, may turn an observation about some students into a generalized expectation. As Hajam et al. (2024) and Hakim (2023) suggest, such labeling may restrict students' developmental opportunities. Thus, the issue is not simply whether teachers differentiate treatment, but whether differentiation is based on individual pedagogical needs or on fixed assumptions about gender.

4.4. Determinism in Institutional and Environmental Contexts

Teachers' classroom practices are also shaped by institutional rules, surrounding culture, and established expectations of student behavior. G3L identified institutional rules and customs as important influences, while G5L explained:

> *"The environment is very influential for students. For example, the environment of an institution is close to the surrounding residents... It will affect the students' enthusiasm for learning and will also affect the students' discipline and morals especially."*

G2P similarly observed:

> *"Many male students violate the rules. If the female students are usually good, they don't violate the rules, they obey the existing rules."*

G5L's account of the surrounding neighborhood shaping student discipline, G3L's framing of *pesantren* rules as the main variable governing pedagogy, and G4L's identification of institutional rules and surrounding culture as the key factor behind differential treatment converge on one meaning unit: teachers experience their classroom choices as bounded by forces external to their own pedagogical judgment. This shared sense of constraint, rather than any single institution's policy, is what constitutes the theme of Determinism in Institutional and Environmental Contexts. Texturally, what recurs across accounts is teachers describing gendered behavioral expectations, obedience, discipline, good behavior, as something the institution and its surrounding culture already define, not something the teacher decides. Structurally, this determinism is conditioned by the physical and social closeness of *pesantren* life to its surrounding community, and by the informal but pervasive surveillance that communal boarding-school life makes possible.

The accounts of G3L, G5L, and G2P collectively indicate that teachers' classroom experiences are embedded within institutional rules, surrounding social environments, and

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established expectations concerning student conduct. Rather than experiencing gender-related classroom interaction as an entirely individual pedagogical choice, the informants described their practices in relation to the norms, discipline systems, and behavioral patterns of their respective educational environments. The convergence of these accounts formed a meaning unit of institutionally and environmentally conditioned pedagogical practice, which was clustered into the theme Determinism in Institutional and Environmental Contexts. This pattern constitutes the structural dimension of the teachers' lived experiences, showing how the context in which teaching occurs shapes the possibilities and boundaries of classroom interaction.

This finding can be interpreted through Giroux's conception of teachers as transformative intellectuals. Giroux views schools as spaces in which social norms can either be reproduced or questioned (Flores et al., 2019; Mariani, 2022). In the present study, however, teachers largely described working within established institutional expectations rather than explicitly challenging the gendered assumptions embedded in them. This suggests that institutional culture can limit the space available for teachers to develop alternative gender-responsive practices. The finding is consistent with studies emphasizing the influence of institutional and cultural contexts on gender-related educational practices (Az-Zahra et al., 2024; Mubarok et al., 2024).

4.5. Implicit Gender Bias in Class Interactions

The fifth construction concerns recurring gendered perceptions in teachers' descriptions of classroom behavior. Because the study relies on participants' narrated experiences rather than a direct psychological measure of implicit cognition, these accounts are interpreted as gendered perceptions and categorizations that may reflect or contribute to implicit gender bias, rather than as direct evidence of subconscious bias. G2P stated:

> *"Teaching male students they tend not to be silent and easy to joke. While female students are the opposite... more obedient and more willing to listen."*

G1P and G2P similarly associated male students with greater activity or disruption and female students with obedience or attentiveness. G4L also described differences in students' motivational orientations, while G5L associated female students with greater compliance. Taken together, these accounts indicate that teachers sometimes interpret classroom behavior through gender-linked categories. The empirical finding is therefore the presence of gendered categorization in teachers' narratives, rather than proof that male or female students objectively possess those characteristics.

Such categorization may nevertheless have pedagogical implications. When teachers expect boys to be disruptive or girls to be compliant, these expectations may influence how they anticipate and respond to student behavior. This interpretation is consistent with of Marks & Amodei (2022), who identified a gap between egalitarian beliefs and experiences of gendered treatment, and Andersen (2023) who found that implicit gender stereotypes can influence teachers' pedagogical judgments.

The finding can also be considered through Butler's concept of gender performativity, in which gendered behavior is shaped through repeated social expectations rather than understood as biologically predetermined (Fitroh et al., 2026). However, the present study does

not establish whether the informants' perceptions operate at a subconscious level. Therefore, the relationship between these gendered categorizations and implicit bias should be understood as a theoretically informed interpretation rather than a direct psychological measurement. The significance of the finding lies in showing how everyday descriptions of students may reproduce gendered expectations when they remain unexamined.

4.6. The Essence of Gender Justice Construction in the Pedagogical Practice of Islamic Education Teachers

When the five themes are considered together, a composite essence emerges: for these five informants, gender justice in Islamic education is experienced as an intuitive, relational, and context-dependent practice rather than as systematic pedagogical consciousness. Intuitive sensitivity (4.1) and empathetic improvisation (4.2) show how justice is enacted relationally and in the moment; the standardization-differentiation tension (4.3) and institutional determinism (4.4) show how that enactment bends to context rather than to principle; and implicit bias (4.5) shows the cost of leaving the practice unexamined.

None of the informants described gender justice as a formally trained or explicitly theorized pedagogical practice. Instead, their accounts show moment-to-moment judgments shaped by classroom demands, institutional expectations, and perceptions of student behavior. This extends findings by Kurniawati & Muafiah (2023) and Munthe & Riza (2026), which describe gender justice in Islamic educational settings as negotiated through institutional and social contexts. At the micro-classroom level, the present study shows that this negotiation is also embedded in teachers' everyday relational decisions.

Read through critical pedagogy and the ethics of care, the composite essence suggests that teachers' goodwill and relational attention constitute important foundations of gender-sensitive practice, but they do not by themselves provide a systematic framework for examining or transforming gendered assumptions. The implication is therefore not to reject teachers' existing practices, but to strengthen them through structured reflection, critical awareness, and pedagogical guidance so that intuitive and relational responses can develop into more consistent gender-responsive practice.

5. CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study reveals that gender justice construction among Islamic educators operates through five core dimensions: intuitive gender sensitivity, empathetic informal justice, the tension between standardization and differentiation, institutional determinism, and implicit gendered perceptions. Moving beyond macro-textual theology to micro-empirical classroom realities, the composite essence demonstrates that classroom gender justice is lived primarily as an unscripted, relational, and context-dependent practice aimed at immediate classroom harmony rather than a systematic, theory-informed pedagogical consciousness. While teachers' empathetic goodwill fosters emotional closeness, operating in a critical vacuum risks reinforcing subconscious gendered categorizations—such as perceiving male students as inherently disruptive and female students as compliant.

From an ethical and Islamic pedagogical perspective, addressing these unexamined micro-classroom dynamics is vital for aligning pedagogical practices with *Maqasid al-Shariah*, particularly the ethical mandate to protect children's holistic development (*himayat al-awlad*)

and ensure proportional equity (*'adl*). Recognizing gendered behaviors as socially constructed performative responses rather than immutable student traits underscores the necessity of moving from spontaneous goodwill to structured critical reflection.

Practically, rather than making sweeping generalizations across all Islamic boarding schools, these findings offer localized, contextual recommendations for educators, *pesantren* leadership, and educational policymakers. Islamic education stakeholders are encouraged to integrate gender-responsive pedagogical frameworks into teacher professional development programs, focusing specifically on surfacing implicit bias and developing inclusive classroom management strategies. Although bounded by its specific focus on five Islamic Education teachers in Tasikmalaya and Ciamis, this study establishes an empirical foundation for future research. Subsequent studies should utilize mixed-methods approaches across broader geographical regions, examine general-subject educators within religious ecosystems, and explore intersectional dimensions such as socio-economic background and disability inclusion.

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