

Self-Awareness, Power Relations, and Strategies to Prevent Sexual Violence in Islamic Boarding Schools: A Literature Review

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Abstract: In Islamic boarding schools, students are typically nurtured within a hierarchical environment, making self-awareness crucial for distinguishing between healthy obedience and harmful submission. Unequal power relationships between caregivers and students often become the root cause of sexual violence cases, thus preventive efforts must carefully consider these power dynamics. This study aims to examine the role of self-awareness as a protective factor for students, understand the influence of power relations in the occurrence of violence, and review preventive strategies that have been implemented in Islamic boarding school settings. This review analyzed 15 national and international articles published between 2016 and 2025, using quantitative, qualitative, and literature review approaches. The findings indicate that self-awareness plays a significant role in enhancing students' ability to recognize the risks of sexual violence; however, its effectiveness is influenced by existing power imbalances that often silence victims. Effective preventive strategies identified include religiously grounded sex education, peer counselor training, parenting interventions, and the implementation of internal regulations within Islamic boarding schools.

Keywords: Islamic Boarding School, Power Relations, Preventive, Self Awareness, Sexual Violence

1 INTRODUCTION

Violence in Indonesian educational settings has increased significantly, with 573 cases recorded in 2024, nearly doubling the 285 cases in 2023, and sexual harassment accounting for 42% of these incidents (JPPI, 2024). This condition indicates that schools and Islamic boarding schools have not yet fully become safe spaces for students. In Islamic boarding schools, the unequal power relations between students and authoritative figures such as Kyai exacerbate the vulnerability of victims, making acts of violence difficult to recognize and even harder to report due to fear of stigma and community pressure (Nabila et al., 2023). The psychological impacts of sexual harassment are severe, ranging from cognitive disturbances (Barrera et al., 2013), increased risk of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress (Olafson, 2014), to suicidal ideation (Cashmore & Shackel, 2013), underscoring the urgent need for effective preventive measures.

Approaches to preventing sexual violence in Islamic boarding schools must be culturally sensitive while simultaneously empowering individuals, one of which is by enhancing students' self-awareness. Self-awareness helps students understand their rights over their bodies, recognize personal boundaries, and identify risky situations, enabling them to act firmly in protecting themselves (Goleman, 1995). However, relying solely on structural interventions without strengthening individual capacity risks failing to address the root of the problem. Therefore, this study aims to review the literature on the role of self-awareness, the influence of power relations, and preventive strategies to prevent sexual harassment in Islamic boarding schools, as a basis for developing more comprehensive, effective, and contextual interventions.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a systematic literature review method to examine the role of self-awareness, power relations, and preventive strategies in efforts to prevent sexual harassment in Islamic boarding schools. The literature analyzed consisted of national and international scholarly articles published between 2016 and 2025.

The process of collecting articles was carried out through online database searches such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Wiley Online Library, and national journal portals such as Garuda and Neliti. The keywords used included: “kekerasan seksual di pesantren” (sexual violence in pesantren), “self-awareness and sexual abuse prevention,” “relasi kuasa” (power relations), “sexual harassment in Islamic boarding schools,” and “santri protection.”

3 RESULTS

The results of the literature review indicate that the roles of self-awareness, power dynamics, and preventive strategies are closely interconnected in preventing sexual violence in Islamic boarding schools. Based on the analysis of 15 articles, three main themes emerged:

1. The Role of Self-Awareness in Students’ Self-Protection

Several studies emphasize that enhancing students’ self-awareness is effective in preventing sexual violence. Rizal et al. (2022) found a significant increase in students’ knowledge after self-awareness education interventions. Yuliasari (2020) demonstrated that peer counselor training improved students’ ability to recognize risky behaviors. Nenobesi et al. (2024) highlighted a significant relationship between parents’ self-awareness and efforts to prevent sexual violence against children in pesantren. Self-awareness helps students understand personal boundaries, identify risky situations, and develop the courage to refuse and report abusive acts. This aligns with Goleman’s (1995) concept that individuals with high self-awareness are better able to control emotional and behavioral responses adaptively.

2. The Influence of Power Relations on the Risk of Sexual Violence

Studies by Nabila et al. (2023), Nurmayani et al. (2025), and Fitri Pebriaisyah et al. (2022) revealed that unequal power relations between teachers/kyai and students in pesantren are a major root cause of sexual violence. The kyai’s authoritative position is often exploited to silence victims under the guise of religious teachings, cultural reverence, or excessive respect. This issue is worsened by the lack of independent reporting mechanisms. These findings reinforce those of Klein & Martin (2019) in higher education settings, which showed that victims frequently do not report incidents due to fear of stigma or social sanctions. This imbalance highlights the need for preventive strategies that address the structural and cultural aspects inherent in pesantren.

3. Preventive Strategies for Sexual Violence Prevention

The review also identified several preventive strategies implemented in pesantren, including religiously based sex education (Rofi’ah & Fawaidi, 2023), parenting interventions for students’ parents (Majid, 2023), and personal safety-based psychoeducation (Piara et al., 2025). These strategies have proven effective in increasing students’ understanding of bodily rights and reporting procedures for sexual violence. However, other studies stress the importance of social support from families, schools, and communities in strengthening the effectiveness of preventive programs (Goldstein et al., 2019).

These findings underscore that efforts to prevent sexual violence in pesantren must integrate individual empowerment through self-awareness, cultural transformation to reduce oppressive power dynamics, and contextually relevant education-based preventive strategies. Interventions focusing solely on structural change without strengthening individual capacity risk being ineffective, while individual empowerment without systemic reform may fail to achieve sustainable results.

Table 1. Literature Review

No	Authors, Year, Title, and Source	Goals	Method	Key Findings
1	Wulandari et al. (2020). <i>Children’s Knowledge and</i>	To examine elementary school students’	Quantitative	13% of children reported they would tell someone

	<i>Skills Related to Self-Protection from Sexual Abuse in Central Java Indonesia</i>	knowledge and personal self-protection skills regarding child sexual abuse in Surakarta, Indonesia.		about sexual abuse; 43% could identify appropriate sexual requests; 58% would not report incidents, highlighting limited self-protection skills.
2	Rizal et al. (2022). <i>Increasing Self-Awareness as a Preventive Measure Against Sexual Harassment at Yayasan Dareel Hidayah Al-Islamiyyah, Depok</i>	To develop and guide children and adolescents to have a healthy emotional attitude towards sexual issues.	Research and Development	Significant improvement in students' knowledge after self-awareness education during the community service program.
3	Yuliasari (2020). <i>Peer Counselor Training to Enhance Self-Awareness in Risky Adolescent Behavior</i>	To assess the effectiveness of peer counselor training in increasing adolescents' self-awareness of risky behaviors.	Experimental	Increased self-awareness after training, including recognition of emotions and self-assessment abilities.
4	Rahman & Primanita (2022). <i>Understanding Verbal Sexual Harassment Behavior Based on Self-Awareness Among Women in West Sumatra</i>	To investigate the contribution of self-awareness to women's understanding of verbal sexual harassment experiences.	Quantitative	Self-awareness significantly contributed to women's understanding of verbal sexual harassment.
5	Nenobesi et al. (2024). <i>Relationship Between Parents' Self-Awareness and Efforts to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse at TK Mutiara Bangsa, Probolinggo</i>	To examine whether parents' self-awareness relates to efforts to prevent sexual abuse of children.	Quantitative	Significant relationship found between parents' self-awareness and efforts to prevent sexual abuse of their children.
6	Rofi'ah & Fawaidi (2023). <i>Optimizing Early Childhood Sex Education to Prevent Sexual Abuse in PAUD Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiyah Jember</i>	To describe sex education implementation for early childhood to prevent sexual abuse.	Qualitative	Comprehensive program including toilet training, introduction of genital anatomy, parenting seminars, use of visual aids, and local regulations on Islamic dress.
7	Majid (2023). <i>Preventive Strategies for Sexual Harassment in Indonesian Islamic Boarding Schools: A Sociology of Religion Perspective</i>	To analyze preventive strategies and barriers to addressing sexual harassment in pesantren.	Qualitative	Strategies include providing counseling, education about prevention, enforcing fair regulations for perpetrators, and involving parents through parenting programs.
9	Goldstein et al. (2019). <i>Susceptibility to Peer Influence During Middle School: Links with Social Support, Peer Harassment, and Gender</i>	To explore relationships among social support, gender, susceptibility to peer influence, and peer-based sexual harassment.	Quantitative	Students with lower perceived family or school support were more vulnerable to peer influence and aggression.
10	Piara et al. (2025). <i>Effectiveness of Personal Safety Questionnaire-Based Psychoeducation in Increasing Adolescents' Knowledge of Personal</i>	To improve students' understanding of personal safety education in facing sexual violence.	Experimental	Psychoeducation significantly increased awareness and knowledge about sexual violence and self-protection.

	<i>Safety as a Sexual Violence Prevention Measure</i>			
11	Nurmayani et al. (2025). <i>Religious Power-Based Sexual Violence: Literature Study of Cases in Indonesian Islamic Boarding Schools</i>	To analyze cases of sexual violence in pesantren, focusing on power relations, patriarchy, victim awareness, and institutional protection gaps.	Literature Review	Offenders often included authoritative religious figures who abused symbolic power; cultural and legal weaknesses exacerbate risks.
12	Pebriaisyah et al. (2022). <i>Sexual Violence in Religious Educational Institutions: Power Relations of Kyai Towards Female Students in Pesantren</i>	To explore patterns used by kyai to perpetrate sexual violence, impacts on victims, and potential preventive measures.	Literature Review	Two main patterns identified in kyai's abusive behavior; victims suffered physically, psychologically, theologically, and socially.
13	Humaira et al. (2016). <i>Child Sexual Abuse: Examination of Perpetrator-Victim Relations and Children's Vulnerability</i>	To describe child sexual abuse incidents, perpetrator-victim relationships, and children's vulnerability.	Qualitative	Adults commonly perpetrate sexual abuse against young children, who are particularly vulnerable due to limited power and awareness.
14	Klein & Martin (2019). <i>Sexual Harassment of College and University Students: A Systematic Review</i>	To provide evidence-based recommendations for prevention and response policies in higher education.	Literature Review	Student victims rarely report incidents but often face serious mental and physical health consequences.
15	Bondestam & Lundqvist (2020). <i>Sexual Harassment in Higher Education – A Systematic Review</i>	To review scientific knowledge on sexual harassment in higher education.	Systematic Review	Found high prevalence among female students; lack of theoretical, longitudinal, and intersectional research; little evidence for preventive actions' effectiveness.

4 DISCUSSIONS

The results of this literature review indicate that self-awareness is a crucial internal protective factor in helping students recognize, avoid, and report sexual violence. This finding is consistent with Goleman's (1995) theory, which posits that individuals with strong self-awareness can better understand their emotions and personal values, equipping them to face risky situations more effectively. Training programs focused on enhancing self-awareness, such as peer counselor training (Yuliasari, 2020) and personal safety-based psychoeducation (Piara et al., 2025), have proven effective in strengthening students' self-protection capabilities.

However, these results also emphasize that individual empowerment alone is insufficient without addressing structural root causes, particularly the unequal power relations prevalent in pesantren. Studies by Nabila et al. (2023) and Nurmayani et al. (2025) reveal that kyai or caregivers with religious authority often abuse their positions. This situation is exacerbated by patriarchal cultural norms and absolute obedience, which discourage victims from reporting due to fear of stigma, social sanctions, or threats from the pesantren community. These findings align with those of Klein & Martin (2019) and Bondestam & Lundqvist (2020) in higher education contexts, which highlight power imbalances as a major risk factor for sexual violence in educational institutions.

Another important finding is the effectiveness of contextually relevant sexual education and parenting strategies for santri's parents. Educational interventions combined with religious values, such as those implemented at PAUD Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiah Jember (Rofi'ah & Fawaidi, 2023), and parental education programs (Majid, 2023) contribute to creating a safer educational environment. However, most studies indicate that these preventive strategies remain sporadic, limited to certain institutions, and have yet to be systematically integrated into pesantren policies.

These findings imply the need for comprehensive efforts that involve strengthening students' self-awareness, reforming pesantren education systems to be sensitive to sexual violence issues, and developing fair internal regulations that protect victims. Social support from families, teachers, and communities is also a crucial factor for the success of preventive efforts. Without synergy between individual empowerment and systemic improvement, the risk of sexual violence in pesantren will remain difficult to reduce sustainably.

5 CONCLUSION

This literature review confirms that self-awareness is an important protective factor that can help students in Islamic boarding schools recognize, avoid, and report sexual violence. Enhancing students' self-awareness has been proven effective through educational interventions such as peer counselor training and personal safety-focused psychoeducation. However, the high risk of sexual violence in pesantren cannot be separated from the imbalance of power relations, which often silences victims due to fear of stigma or cultural pressure. Therefore, strategies to prevent sexual violence in pesantren must be comprehensive, combining individual empowerment through self-awareness education, transforming the culture of excessive reverence, and developing internal regulations that support victim protection.

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