



SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN EXPOSING SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN INDONESIAN ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms provide a vital space for individuals to express their opinions and mobilise mass support in the pursuit of justice. This research explores how social media contributes to exposing sexual violence cases through viral messaging and connective action. Drawing on a sexual violence case involving a female Islamic student in Bandung, Indonesia, this study employs a qualitative case study approach, collecting data from digital observations on two social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) and interviews with four informants. This study identifies six key findings. First, advocates and social media users play a vital role in exposing cases through connective action, enhancing victims' advocacy and viral messaging. Second, social media posts and messages imbued with emotional appeals are more effective in constructing connective action and attracting public attention. Third, the exposure of the cases reveals political cynicism and distrust in religious authorities. Fourth, both the sexual offender and his wife perpetuate patriarchal power and sexual violence against women within the Islamic boarding school. Furthermore, the social media users' digital activities are effective in raising public awareness of the case. Lastly, the digital activities demonstrate gender-specific responses and language. This study highlights the power of social media as an effective avenue to unravel sexual violence cases that have long been covered up by structural religious power and acts of silencing.

Keywords: Sexual violence against women, social media, message virality, connective action, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Women constitute the majority of victims in cases of sexual violence, both in domestic settings and public spaces, particularly in patriarchal societies like Indonesia. The National Commission on Violence Against Women (2022) reported that incidents of sexual violence against women rose during the pandemic. Survivors often silence themselves or lack the confidence to speak out about their experiences, resulting in many cases remaining unreported. Furthermore, pursuing justice can be fraught with challenges, as perpetrators frequently evade accountability due to their wealth or influence (Fisher et al. 2003; Reich et al. 2022).

The biased attitude of law enforcement towards victims contributes significantly to this injustice. Victims of rape or harassment often encounter themselves have to provide evidence and witnesses when filing a police report, which can be exceedingly difficult. Factors discouraging victims from speaking out include the fear of societal stigma, concerns about bringing shame to their families, and threats from the perpetrator. Very few women feel empowered to report such abuses, particularly when the offenders are their partners or individuals in positions of authority (Hammond and Calhoun 2007; Reich et al. 2022).

In various countries, female victims of sexual violence have begun to share their experiences and concerns on digital platforms (Alaggia and Wang 2020; Tan and Xu 2023), fostering supportive communities that combat sexual harassment (Tan and Xu 2023). This encouraging response has inspired other victims or survivors to voice their issues on social media, leading to the emergence of online movements such as the #MeToo movement in China, the United States (US), and elsewhere (Zeng 2020; Marzouk and Vanderveen 2022). In this context, social media acts as a vital platform for female victims of sexual violence to articulate their experiences and seek support (Armstrong and Mahone 2017; Zeng 2020) while also mobilising the public to protest against the social issues raised by these movements (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 2013). This phenomenon is known as connective action—a protest movement that emphasises digital networks over traditional organisations or institutions, allowing protest messages to spread rapidly through social media rather than established structures. Shared feelings of frustration and anger expressed online unify those involved in connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 2013).

Sexual violence in educational institutions is a grave issue that has attracted considerable global attention. This form of violence often stems from a power imbalance, with perpetrators typically being individuals in positions of authority, such as teachers, or administrators. Research into sexual violence in these environments aims to explore how connective action can help address the issue by analysing media messages. Studies have uncovered instances of such abuse across various religions, including Christianity and Protestantism (Denney et al. 2018), Buddhism (Engelhardt 2007), Judaism (Neustein and Leshner 2008), Hinduism and Islam (Chowdhury and Fileborn 2020; Pebriaisyah et al. 2022). In Indonesian Islamic boarding schools, known as *pesantren*, the *kiai* (religious leader) wields significant authority. The *kiai*'s thoughts, speech (*dawuh*), and behaviour are seen as exemplary, with students viewing him as a figure of absolute righteousness (Setiawan 2012). Furthermore, a strong hierarchy places the *ustadz*, *gus*, and *kiai* (religious teachers) above both the boarding school administrators and the other *santri* (students of Islamic schools). This rigid hierarchy further silences students, putting them at a disadvantage against religious teachers and limiting their ability to voice their concerns.

This research sheds light on the role of social media in fostering connective actions aimed at exposing sexual violence within an Islamic boarding school in Indonesia during 2021–2022. It highlights how the virality of social media can enable mobilisation and social support, as well as

calls for justice for victims. The study also reveals the challenges victims face when attempting to bring their cases to light on social media due to various structural obstacles, including patriarchal ideologies and the idolisation of religious authorities. The findings of this study contribute to the wealth of knowledge in relation to power relations and the silencing culture where sexual violence in Indonesia is concerned.

CONNECTIVE ACTION AND SOCIAL MEDIA EMPOWERMENT

Connective action represents a new way of engaging, where diverse individuals take on interdependent roles through various features of social media (Vaast et al. 2017). It highlights controversial political action in the digital age, encompassing new organisational elements and shared content (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 2013) which effectively promote messages and encourage mass mobilisation (Anduiza et al. 2014). Although it resembles collective actions in bringing people together, connective action uniquely leverages information systems and technology to manage communication and social media interactions (Vaast et al. 2017), along with personalised communication in political groups for disseminating messages (Bennet and Segerberg 2013; Young 2018). Personalisation plays a crucial role, enhanced by the targeting and framing techniques of advanced information systems.

Bestvater (2022) suggests that the features of social media promote connective behaviour (Dolata and Schrape 2016), allowing individuals to connect and form communities based on shared interests. This digital activism encompasses various elements, such as clicktivism, meta-voicing, assertion, political consumerism, digital petitions, botivism, electronic funding, data activism, exposure, and hacktivism (George and Leidner 2019). Notable examples of connective behaviour include the Arab Spring protests of 2010–2011, Euromaidan in Ukraine during 2013–2014, and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in the US. These actions, fuelled by mobilised resources and personal identity, illustrate the dynamics at play. Social media, thus, serves as a web-based technology that enables users to create, share, distribute, and comment on various types of content (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Kietzmann et al. 2011) including text messages, photos, podcasts, and video streams, connecting individuals and communities (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Hanna et al. 2011; Obar and Wildman 2015). In summary, social media transform traditional forms of collective action (Linders 2012) such as advocacy (Obar et al. 2012) and collective activism (Eltantawy and Wiest 2011; Tufekci and Wilson 2012).

Social media empowers users to create content and share it globally, promoting causes they deem important and making them viral. Al-Rawi (2019) defines viral news as network news that spreads through online social media at a much faster and wider rate than other forms. A content goes viral as it circulates through a network with a branching structure and multiple cascades (Goel et al. 2016). Once the content or news reaches certain internet users or platforms, they can share it through word of mouth, spreading it to a wide audience, much like a virus that infects individuals as it moves through the network. Social media platforms, such as X, enable users to retweet content from the original account or from second-degree, third-degree, and even more distant connections. When a tweet achieves exponential reach, it goes viral and can generate even more retweets. Additionally, sharing across different platforms further amplifies the virality of the content.

One of the viral topics on social media relates to sexual violence, where users come together to support victims and survivors, encouraging them to share their experiences and seek justice (Lokot 2018). However, victims often hesitate to come forward in real life due to fears of

judgement or retaliation from their offenders, often powerful or influential individuals. This is the case especially in patriarchal societies that often despise assertive women (Kennedy and Prock 2018; Garrett and Hassan 2019; Reich et al. 2022; Dolev-Cohen 2024) and regard discussions around sex and sexuality as inappropriate or even taboo. Anugrah and Elvany (2023) noted that victims of sexual harassment often opt to speak out on social media for various reasons. Recognising that their experiences qualify as sexual harassment serves as a key motivator for victims to seek social support to confront their perpetrators and attain personal peace of mind (Alaggia and Wang 2020). They brace themselves for potential backlash, including accusations and negative responses, that may arise once they choose to share their stories. Additionally, many victims desire an apology from the perpetrators and appropriate consequences for their actions, yet they may be uncertain about the correct steps to take. Victims also feel compelled to speak up, primarily on social media, to encourage others to confront their offenders and seek justice. Moreover, the anonymity offered by social media allows victims and survivors to share their narratives freely without the fear of being judged or having their identities exposed. This environment encourages support for victims through social media features such as hashtags and personal narratives (Anugrah and Elvany 2023). The #MeToo movement exemplifies a powerful sense of solidarity among survivors on these platforms (Keller et al. 2018; Rodino-Colocino 2018; Clark-Parsons 2021). Initiated by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 in response to her and her colleague's experiences with sexual harassment (Fahmy and Ibrahim 2021), the #MeToo movement gained global attention in 2017 after actress Alyssa Milano tweeted on X, urging people to share their stories of sexual violence using the #MeToo hashtag. This tweet empowered many victims to voice their experiences and take a stand against sexual violence.

In Indonesia, victims or survivors of sexual violence often find themselves sharing their experiences on digital platforms, seeking sympathy and support (Andalibi et al. 2018). However, many opt to remain silent due to fears of being blamed, disbelieved, or having their experiences dismissed. Additionally, recounting personal stories of sexual harassment on social media can lead to backlash, as perpetrators may resort to criminal defamation claims against victims. This risk has emerged with the recent enforcement of *Undang-Undang Informasi dan Transaksi Elektronik* (UU ITE; regulations governing electronic information and transactions) in Indonesia, which allows individuals to report any unverified accusations or misleading information against them. Consequently, victims who cannot substantiate their claims of harassment may find themselves facing defamation charges from their attackers (Anugrah and Elvany 2023). This situation illustrates a significant lack of support for victims of sexual harassment in Indonesia (Filia and Setiyono 2024). A notable case reported by Stephani and Sarwono (2020) involved a female dangdut singer who was sexually harassed by a well-known male football player via a direct message on Instagram. After sharing a screenshot of the message on social media to expose the harassment, the football player responded by claiming he was merely joking and subsequently threatened to sue her for defamation. Ultimately, the artist decided to remain silent and did not pursue any formal action against him. This incident highlights the power imbalance between the two public figures, where the female artist attempted to confront the sexual harassment but ended up facing adverse consequences. Furthermore, in Indonesia's patriarchal society, female dangdut singers are often stigmatised and objectified, which normalises sexual harassment and denies them access to justice. It is evident that online sexual harassment impacts women across all backgrounds, while men frequently perceive it as harmless banter that women should not take too seriously (Rochimah and Rahmawati 2021).

Sexual violence also permeates religious educational institutions in Indonesia, where religious leaders are viewed as role models and symbols of faith. Consequently, sexual violence perpetrated by these leaders has far-reaching and traumatic effects (Cashwell and Swindle 2018). Within an Islamic context, religious leaders, predominantly male and known as *ulama*, possess extensive

knowledge of Islam and are regarded as heirs to the Prophet Muhammad (Rohmaniyah et al. 2022). The ulama play a crucial role in disseminating Islamic teachings within the community, addressing religious issues, and serving as mediators, catalysts, and agents of change in society (Safei 2021). Due to the immense respect and glorification afforded to ulama, the community often finds it inconceivable for ulama to commit acts of sexual violence. As a result, it becomes exceedingly challenging to expose, investigate, and prosecute many sexual crimes committed by ulama within Islamic schools.

Previous studies on connective action on social media have concentrated on the role of digital platforms and personal message framing in mass rallies for social movements within political, environmental, and public policy contexts (Fuller 2018; Trott 2018; Leong et al. 2020; Kim et al. 2022; Lindqvist and Lindgren 2023; Lukito et al. 2024; Kasimov 2025). However, to the researchers' knowledge, there is a paucity of research on connective action addressing sexual violence in Islamic boarding schools as represented on social media. Drawing from the aforementioned studies, it is crucial to examine social media as an alternative platform for victims of sexual violence to share their experiences and attract public attention, especially when formal legal systems and educational institutions fail to provide justice. This study underscores the efficacy of social media as a powerful means to expose sexual violence cases that have long been obscured by entrenched religious authority and acts of silencing.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative approach, focusing on a case study of sexual violence at Madani Boarding School, which represents one of the most shocking instances of such abuse ever revealed. It involved 21 female students aged between 10 and 16 years old who were raped by the school leader. Some of these young victims became pregnant and gave birth. This horrific abuse occurred long before it gained widespread attention on Twitter (now known as X) and Facebook in 2021, becoming one of the most talked-about cases of sexual violence due to the involvement of religious authorities within a religious institution and the significant number of underage victims. The case ignited public outrage, prompting demands for a thorough and transparent investigation, as well as the maximum punishment for the perpetrator.

Data were collected through online observation and in-depth interviews. Two social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook, were analysed to gather posts and content related to the case using keywords such as “13 santriwati Bandung” (female students in Bandung), “Herry Wiriawan” (the leader of Madani Boarding School), “pesantren”, and “rudapaksa santriwati” (the rape of female students) to compile relevant and comprehensive data from November 2021 to April 2022. Additionally, the study traced posts from social media users who acted as opinion leaders and advocates for the victims, helping to raise awareness and make the case go viral. The data collected included comments, statements, and responses created, shared, and circulated by social media users. All data on the social media platforms were categorised and analysed using coding techniques, followed by thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns or themes in the content.

Data were analysed with a digital text analysis tool, supplemented by triangulation through in-depth interviews with four informants in May 2023 and December 2024. Informant 1 was the first individual to share content about the case on social media. Informant 2, a colleague of Informant 1, maintained communication with the victims' families and assisted in advocating for

their rights. Informant 3, a social media user and relative of Informant 1, helped raise awareness and increase the case's visibility through repeated posts. Informant 4 was the mother of one of the victims. Prior to the interviews, all informants signed consent forms, and Informant 4 was accompanied by representatives from the Komite Solidaritas Perlindungan Perempuan dan Anak (KSPPA; the Solidarity Committee for the Protection of Women and Children), who supported the victims' recovery process. The informants were informed that they could choose not to answer sensitive or risky questions to ensure their safety during the interviews.

RESULTS

Process of Disclosing Sexual Violence in an Islamic Boarding School

The sexual violence perpetrated against female students at Madani Islamic Boarding School was brought to light through the involvement of Informant 1, a social media activist and political figure from the Partai Solidaritas Indonesia (PSI; Indonesian Solidarity Party), who advocated for the victims. Informant 1 learnt about the case from Informant 2, a fellow PSI member who had received second-hand information from the victim's mother (Informant 4) and was approached by other victims' parents for assistance in seeking justice. Previously, the victims' parents had reported the case to the police and attempted to pursue legal action; however, the trial did not yield a favourable outcome, with the court imposing meagre restitution and what appeared to be an unjust sentence on the offenders. This motivated the victims' parents to turn to additional advocates, namely Informants 1 and 2. In an interview, Informant 4 recounted her connection with Informants 1 and 2:

My sister-in-law is a PSI cadre; she met the head of the foundation (Rumah Biru Foundation). A PSI (cadre)—the head of PSI Kiaracondong—happens to be there. I told him about my problem, and he listened to the case unfolding. PSI began to assist in advocating for the victims' rights, which ultimately gained widespread attention. (Informant 4, December 2024)

Informant 2 consulted the police regarding the case and collected signatures from the victims to secure a power of attorney as their advocate. Subsequently, Informant 2 assisted the victims in handling the case, by utilising his personal connections and PSI's influence. In response, PSI dispatched Informant 1 to collaborate with Informant 2 in the advocacy efforts. The interviews with the informants revealed that their advocacy aimed to achieve two goals: assist the victims and leverage the case as a platform to highlight issues affecting minorities and marginalised groups, thereby, enhancing the political party's electability.

After gathering information, Informants 1 and 2 discovered that 13 female students had been raped at the Islamic boarding school, resulting in nine births without adequate care or attention from the perpetrators. The advocates conducted further field investigations to seek justice but encountered multiple obstacles from the authorities, including resistance to providing pertinent information regarding the case. Additionally, during the advocacy process, Informant 2 noted that the challenges posed by procedures and legal processes in fighting for the victims' rights inspired the advocates to mobilise public support on social media, hoping to raise awareness for the victims. This strategy is prevalent in Indonesia, where cases involving marginalised groups can attract greater attention and quicker resolutions through public pressure on social media (often referred to as a viral-based policy).

Figure 1 illustrates how Informant 1 garnered public attention by sharing details of the case on her social media page after encountering difficulties in advocating for it through offline channels. Initially, her post was shared solely on Facebook, with limited reach due to Informant 1's small social network and reliance on just one social media account. Successful viral content requires expertise in message framing, strong network connections (Bennett and Segerberg 2013), and robust digital social capital (Barabasi 2002). An extensive social network enhances the dissemination of social media content and its underlying messages. Recognising her limitation, Informant 1 asked Informant 3, her social media activist friend with a broad network and influence, to help amplify the issue. This strategy aligns with Barabási's argument (2002) that effective connective action relies on active participation and updates from individuals on social media, which mobilises support. However, it slightly diverges from Bennett and Segerberg's view (2012) that connective action is crucial for mobilising participation and achieving objectives. In this instance, the pivotal factor is the role of individual actors as opinion leaders, alongside the social identity associated with these actors, which drives connective action when the case gains traction on social media.

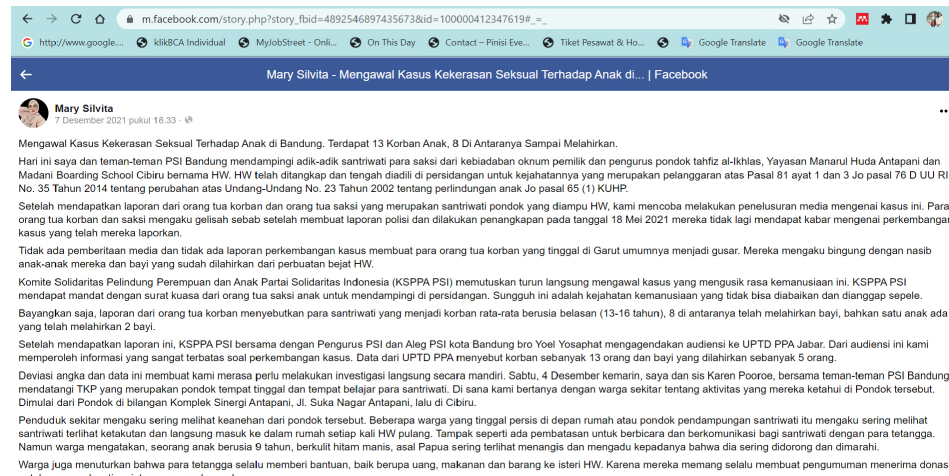


Figure 1: An actor's social media post about the sexual violence case.

Personal Action Frame of the Actor in Amplifying the Case in Social Media

The personal action frame of the actor plays a significant role in amplifying the case on social media. Content shared on these platforms captures public attention due to its emotional message framing and the narratives of distress it conveys. In this study, data from social media reveal that connective actions stem from considerable clicktivism and digital activism, particularly through resharing (or metavoicing). According to George and Leidner (2019), clicktivism is a form of digital activism that aids in constructing connective actions, such as liking content or posts, serving as a means of attention or support for the shared material. Resharing, in contrast, involves retweeting or forwarding posts from other users, enabling them to go viral (George and Leidner 2019). These posts interconnect through social media platforms and provoke public reactions, including emotional responses expressed through digital activism, such as “reply”, “retweet”, or the use of emoticons like “sad”, “crying”, and “angry” in response to accounts sharing the case.

Scholars contend that communication in the digital realm, especially when infused with emotional appeals, can effectively capture the attention of social media users (Cornacchione and Smith 2012; Holtgraves 2022). This study found that personalised messages framed emotionally tend to attract greater public attention, resulting in viral posts. These messages have stirred the already outraged public, who share a common concern that the rape of female students in a religious school is utterly barbaric. This emotional framing evokes a sense of connection among social media users.

In Figure 2, a Twitter user, @Nongandah, shared a post infused with emotional personal framing, born from her anger and sadness over the unfair treatment of a victim. She expressed her profound feelings of anger, sadness, and despair through powerful phrases such as “very sad story”, “trembling”, “I am angry and very sad”, and “I am so sad”, which had the potential to encourage other social media users to engage with the violence case and take action. Her post garnered over 4,000 likes and nearly 2,900 retweets, going viral and attracting significant public attention on social media. Research indicates that emotions and social networks play a crucial role in influencing political activism and social movements (Della Porta and Diani 2006; Roggeband and Klandermans 2007). Messages that evoke emotional appeal concerning social issues like sexual violence and economically marginalised groups tend to attract wider social support (Zollo et al. 2015; Leppert et al. 2022; Weismueller et al. 2022). Moreover, digital technology facilitates the easy and widespread formation, adaptation, and sharing of personal message framing across social media networks (Bennet and Segerberg 2012, 2013). Essentially, technology acts as a medium for organising messages, empowering personal communications like the @Nongandah account to foster trust and garner public support independently, without intervention from external individuals or organisations that might create a collective frame. In this context, technology plays a significant role in organisational dynamics.

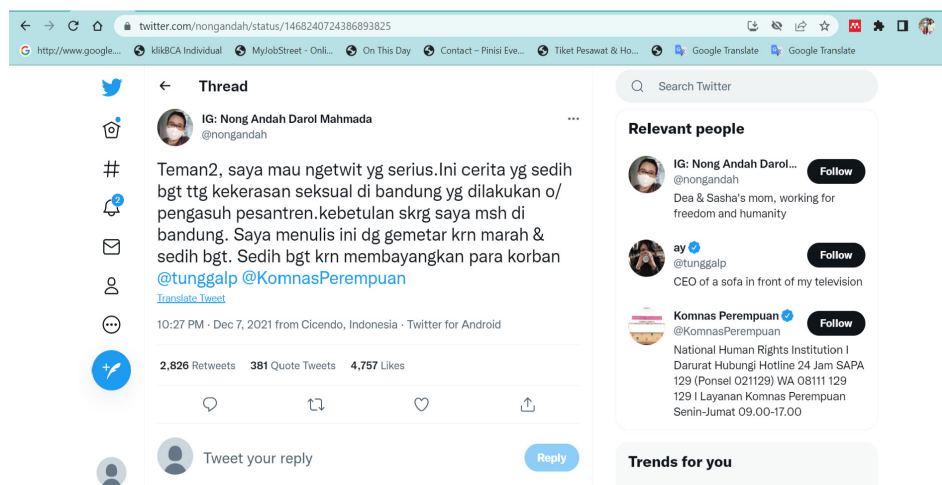


Figure 2: A tweet by an X user @nongandah.

The English translation of the tweet:

Guys, I want to retweet something serious. This is a very sad story about sexual violence in Bandung committed by a caretaker in a *pesantren* (Islamic Boarding school). I happen to be in Bandung now. As I am typing, I'm trembling, because I am angry and very sad. I'm so sad because I can only imagine what happened to the victims.

Political Cynicism and Distrust in Religious Authority

As noted by Dekker and Meijerink (2012) political cynicism manifests itself as a negative sentiment stemming from unfavourable perceptions of politics, including immorality and incompetence. Those who are cynical often view political leaders and the groups they represent as untrustworthy, even in the absence of compelling evidence (Cappella and Jamieson 1996). This study highlights how sexual violence against young female students has sparked public outrage, particularly against the perpetrator, who is regarded as a respected religious authority, a trusted guardian, and a protector of the people. Further examination revealed that social media discussions surrounding this case were complex, with political cynicism aimed at political parties, religious organisations, and religious authorities (as shown in Figure 3). One of the primary targets was the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS; Prosperous Justice Party), a party that champions religious values but staunchly opposes the ratification of the Undang-Undang Tindak Pidana Kekerasan Seksual (UU TPKS; anti-sexual violence bill) aimed at addressing the rising cases of sexual violence in Indonesia. The PKS contended that the UU TPKS would instead create opportunities for adultery and other forms of sexual misconduct that violate religious values and the principles of Pancasila (Silalahi 2023). Rather than proposing viable solutions, PKS insisted on incorporating legal provisions that contradict the justice and welfare of victims, reinforcing the public's long-standing belief that PKS consistently aligns itself with perpetrators of sexual violence while imposing its views. The PKS, the self-proclaimed da'wah political party, has shown that it turns a blind eye to the rampant sexual violence in Indonesia, thus, being subjected to public cynicism and labelled as a religious party that objectifies women.



Figure 3: Cynical response to politicians.

On social media, there is a significant amount of public criticism and cynicism directed at religious mass organisations and political figures who have failed to respond adequately to social issues affecting marginalised groups, particularly women. This situation may arise from patriarchal values that are perpetuated by political parties, including women politicians, leading to a lack of gender sensitivity.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the public has expressed their distrust of ulama (religious scholars) and religious organisations as traditional authorities within the community. Islamic ulama are regarded as respected scholars and moral leaders, often referred to as heirs of the Prophets (Fakhruroji 2019). Ulama play crucial roles in disseminating Islamic teachings, resolving religious disputes, and acting as mediators and catalysts for social change (Safei 2021). However, social media users, as shown in Figure 4, have voiced their concerns over the fact that, despite allegations of sexual violence, many parents continue to favour Islamic boarding schools for their children. These parents elevate ulama and *pesantren* to a position of reverence, often overlooking instances of sexual misconduct committed in the name of religion, as well as the distortion of religious teachings and the abuse of power.

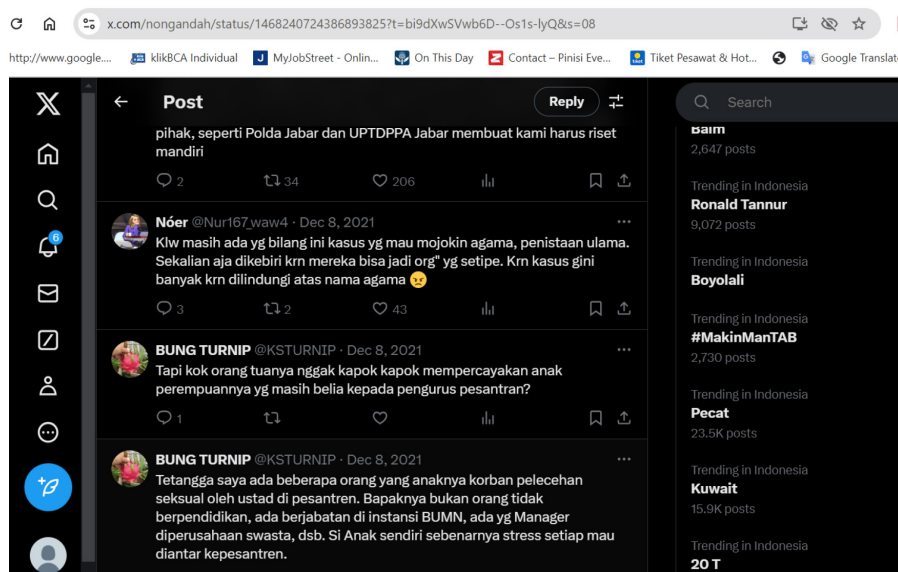


Figure 4: Distrust in religious authority.

Patriarchal Culture and Sexual Violence against Women in Islamic Boarding Schools' Domestic Spaces

Figure 4 reveals that public distrust also extends to ulama and religious organisations. While ulama are viewed as esteemed figures with profound Islamic knowledge, their roles in teaching and social mediation are increasingly being scrutinised. The figure reveals that social media users are concerned about parents who still entrust their children to ulama and *pesantren*, despite reports of sexual harassment and violence by religious leaders within these establishments. This distrust is a result of the betrayal of trust by ulama who have engaged in sexual misconduct, misrepresented religious teachings, and misused their authority for personal benefit.

There are only two female students who have mobile phones. They are not allowed to communicate with their parents. That's not allowed, those cell phones are for work. Umm, the two female students were told to make a proposal to raise funds. Look for donors like that. Then, they also keep their cell phones, no one is allowed to chat all the time. Calling is also restricted. They say they are afraid of social synchronisation. Then we meet the parents too, especially if we want to go to Eid. Just do it. (Informant 4, December 2024)

(The female students were) hit, pulled by the hair, kicked... Every time the wife (of Heri Wirawan) is upset, she will take it to the victims. (Informant 2, May 2023)

Some female students (*santriwati*) are sexually harassed by Heri but not getting pregnant. Some of them got pregnant, and some aborted the baby. (Informant 4, December 2024)

Informant 1 revealed that the perpetrator's wife enabled her husband's objectification of female students by allowing them to perform construction work for another Islamic boarding school. Another form of objectification included soliciting donations in the name of the female students. The perpetrator and his wife portrayed the victims as orphans to evoke public sympathy and encourage donations and support.

Warga mengaku tidak pernah berinteraksi dengan pihak pondok dan santriwati karena semua terlihat tertutup dan pendiam. Namun, sehari-hari para santriwati terlihat sibuk bekerja. Bahkan sampai bekerja mengangkat dan mengaduk semen serta membangun bangunan pondok. Padahal mereka adalah anak perempuan dan masih kecil. (Informant 1, May 2023)

[The local residents claimed they never interacted with the boarding school faculty and female students because all of them looked closed-off and quiet. However, every day, the female students seemed busy working, even lifting cement sacks, mixing cement, and building the main structure of the boarding school, although they are young girls.]

Warga juga menuturkan bahwa para tetangga selalu memberi bantuan, baik berupa uang, makanan dan barang ke isteri Heri. Karena mereka memang selalu membuat pengumuman menerima donasi untuk para anak yatim piatu yang mereka asuh. (Informant 4, 2024; Informant 2, 2023)

[Also, residents stated the surrounding neighbours always give aid, such as money, food, and products to Heri's wife. This is because they consistently organise donation drives for the orphans in their care.]

The victims faced discrimination in their education. Following the viral nature of the case, the police raided the Islamic boarding school and arrested the perpetrator. Upon learning about their experiences with sexual violence, public schools quickly expelled some victims who attempted to continue their studies there.

After they were sent home, they had to locate other schools themselves. Some received acceptance, while others faced rejection due to their child-rearing responsibilities. Some were expelled when the school discovered they were pregnant... Basically, it was all a mess... (Informant 1, May 2023).

The victims also faced gender injustice from a local government institution that was supposed to support them while they awaited the trial results. Authorities monitored the victims through a WhatsApp group chat, but instead of providing psychological assistance, they often ignored the victims and urged them to forgive the perpetrators, be patient, and accept their circumstances. Such actions only served to further stigmatise the victims rather than offer them the recovery and solutions they needed after leaving school.

Grup whatsapp itu dibikin, dinasihati...apa namanya, dinasehatkan sabar, memaafkan orang lain, memaafkan kesalahan orang, seperti itu. (Informant 2, May 2023)

[The WhatsApp group was created, and the victims were advised to be patient, to forgive others, and to overlook mistakes, and so forth.]

Research indicates that patriarchal culture is deeply ingrained in various social structures, including religious and governmental institutions (Rakoczy 2004; Perales and Bouma 2019). Masculine dominance is evident in social practices, especially through the sexual violence and objectification of female students, who are referred to as *santriwati*, and this behaviour is perpetrated by religious authorities. These authorities expect *santriwati* to comply with strict rules within *pesantren*. Interviews with informants revealed that the school leader frequently required *santriwati* to assist with construction projects or solicit donations for the *pesantren*. Instead of receiving proper education and moral guidance, these students often encounter severe misconduct, ranging from sexual harassment to child labour. Upon highlighting these issues, government officials did not provide full support or protection to the victims; instead, they urged them to forgive the offenders. This response underscores how government officials perpetuate and reinforce patriarchal power.

Digital Spectator Activities in Fighting Sexual Violence in Social Media

In the battle against sexual violence on social media, users have been vocal in demanding harsh punishments for offenders. Perpetrators are often portrayed as immoral and likened to animals. This discourse reflects society's outrage over the heinous acts committed under the guise of religion. Calls for justice and strict action against offenders are emerging from diverse segments of the community, including social media users, religious bodies such as Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI; Indonesian Council of Ulama), political parties, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Furthermore, there is mounting societal pressure for the establishment of regulations that impose penalties for sexual violence.

Sexual violence is fundamentally a crime against humanity, and its far-reaching negative impacts on victims' psychological, physical, economic, and health conditions are unacceptable. Survivors often find it difficult to escape their circumstances and may endure prolonged trauma. The viral content shared by social media users demonstrates collective resistance to sexual violence and demands accountability, emphasising the urgent need for victims to seek justice.

The use of social media to garner support to protest against sexual violence has become increasingly prevalent (Zeng 2020; Gundersen and Zaleski 2021; Marzouk and Vanderveen 2022; Armstrong and Mahone 2023). A notable example is the #MeToo movement on Twitter, which has gained traction in various countries as a form of resistance to sexual violence. The growing influence of social media (Statista 2024) enables a viral and ongoing fight against such issues. This study monitored the number of likes on posts from Facebook accounts that initially highlighted the incident at the Islamic boarding school, revealing 948 supportive interactions with a range of emotional tones, and around 834 accounts reshared the posts. As illustrated in Figure 2, one post garnered significant engagement, with 2,826 retweets, 4,757 likes, and 381 comments. Additionally, the @Nongandah account, particularly the @Catch Me Up account (as shown in Figure 5), strongly expressed a desire for the perpetrator to receive the death penalty. The high number of likes on these messages indicates widespread agreement among social media users.



Figure 5: Sample of content's post of social media user.

Gender-Bound Messages from Social Media User

Another interesting finding relates to metavoicing. Metavoicing or resharing refers to digital activism in response to social media posts, such as making comments or using emojis. In this study, the metavoicing of posts about sexual violence varies between male and female users. Figure 6 shows that male users generally post more rational, cognitive, and solution-orientated messages while still displaying bias towards victims of sexual violence. Male groups focus on urging the government, religious authorities, and politicians to address sexual violence and impose appropriate penalties for offenders. They often suggest solutions using phrases that advocate for punishment, such as "I agree with male castration. Let's finish him" and call for legal action against the perpetrators, including thorough investigations and the imposition of the death penalty. This aligns with previous findings that male-dominated discussion groups tend to use more impersonal and fact-focused language (Savicki and Kelley 2000).



Figure 6: Sample of social media user responses (male).

In contrast, female users of X tend to express their emotions more freely, sharing feelings of anger, sadness, and empathetic support (as shown in Figure 7). They may articulate their sentiments with phrases such as “my heart aches” and “*Masyaallah, nauzubillahmindzalik* [May Allah protect us from that]... what a pervert”. These expressions likely stem from their identities as women, daughters, or mothers who feel a connection to the victims. Such responses highlight a collective awareness among women who are vulnerable to sexual violence and may be reluctant to share their experiences unless encouraged by family and friends. Savicki et al. (1996) observed that discussions in female-dominated online groups often involve personal sharing and aim to relieve tension, emphasising that women typically adopt a more emotional communication style due to their frequent and explicit self-disclosure with fellow group members. Previous studies have indicated that men and women learn different norms regarding emotional expression, with boys and girls reacting to emotional cues differently from a young age (Fabes and Martin 1991).

This study found that more female than male social media users participate in discussions about cases involving Islamic boarding schools. Social media offers anonymity, allowing women to express themselves without the fear of being identified. Furthermore, feminist cyberactivism amplifies women’s voices as a form of resistance that may be difficult to articulate in the offline world. The shared emotions and aspirations among victims, survivors of sexual harassment, and female users raise awareness of the urgent issues surrounding sexual violence in religious educational institutions, impacting everyone—including friends, relatives, daughters, and those who courageously stand against such violence.

In patriarchal communities, it is often difficult for women to voice their struggles and concerns about sexual harassment due to negative stereotypes and societal stigma, which frequently silence them culturally, politically, and socially (Alaggia and Wang 2020; Eschliman et al. 2024). In this study, Informant 3 (a social media activist) and Informant 1 (a female politician) have managed to address this issue, at least to some extent, owing to their positions in media and politics, fields traditionally dominated by men. Familiar with the communication style of the dominant group, Informants 1 and 3 can effectively convey their messages in social media posts while downplaying emotional tones that might detract from their delivery. The activist’s posts, aimed at raising awareness and garnering support for the victimised *santriwati* (as shown in Figure 2), received immediate positive responses from netizens.



Figure 7: Sample of social media user responses (female).

DISCUSSION

The research findings highlighted suggest that victims of sexual harassment often face considerable challenges when attempting to come forward, largely due to the complex relationships that characterise the domestic environments of Islamic boarding schools. These institutions are deeply entwined with societal perceptions that regard religious figures as revered and powerful, fostering the belief that such individuals would not engage in misconduct towards their students. This situation provides religious authorities with what can be termed “access power”, enabling them to operate with a level of freedom that puts them beyond scrutiny. Consequently, this power imbalance not only heightens the risk of harassment by those in religious authority but also establishes significant barriers for victims—regardless of age—when it comes to reporting incidents. From a feminist viewpoint, it is posited that the root of sexual violence against women stems from the internalisation of patriarchy, which perpetuates masculine dominance across various social institutions, including religious ones.

The case gained public attention due to the personal connection between a victim witness and certain political figures, who possess social capital and influence, thus, facilitating their access to relevant institutions. Their ability to leverage social media platforms also proved vital in amplifying the case. The extensive networks of followers maintained by political actors enable messages to reach a broader audience, fostering viral activism (Goel et al. 2016). Furthermore, social media accounts, particularly those belonging to activists considered opinion leaders, play a significant role in making such cases go viral by disseminating messages that elicit strong emotions regarding sexual violence (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Cornacchione and Smith 2012; Leppert et al. 2022; Holtgraves 2022). The characteristics of the social media platforms used shape the effectiveness of exposing instances of sexual violence within religious educational settings. For example, Informant 3, a humanitarian activist, actively engages on X, where the platform’s algorithms favour digital activism, allowing posts on humanitarian issues to gain traction more swiftly than on other platforms.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Social media plays a vital role in bringing attention to cases of sexual violence and garnering support for victims. To effectively shed light on these incidents, the involvement of key individuals and opinion leaders is essential for promoting collective action. However, the advocacy of political figures for victims of sexual violence, particularly those cases involving religious authorities, is inadequate on its own. Therefore, rallying community support through social media is vital for ensuring these cases gain widespread attention. In this study, six main themes emerged from the analysis. First, advocates act as important offline networks and social media users, significantly contributing to the exposure of cases through collaborative victim advocacy and utilising social media to amplify this issue. Second, social media posts that feature a personal perspective from advocates are more successful in fostering connective action. Third, there is a marked sense of political cynicism and distrust towards religious authorities, particularly regarding a political party that opposes the ratification of a sexual violence bill and neglects to offer solutions to the problem. Fourth, the patriarchal culture and incidents of sexual violence against women within the domestic realms of Islamic boarding schools are perpetuated not only by the perpetrators but also by their spouses. Fifth, engaging in digital activism against sexual violence on social media effectively raises public awareness. Finally, the language used in social media posts often reflects gender-specific concerns for both male and female audiences.

Overall, this research has highlighted gender differences in digital activism related to sexual violence on social media. From a theoretical standpoint, social capital—such as digital networks, personal connections, and strong communication skills—is necessary to raise awareness about sexual harassment faced by marginalised groups in patriarchal societies. Furthermore, the role of gender is critical in bringing women’s issues, such as sexual harassment, to the forefront, as shared experiences and feelings among women—who often find themselves in subordinate positions in a male-dominated society—can inspire them to take action and advocate for their rights.

This research is not without its limitations. It focuses exclusively on sexual violence within one religion-based school, involving female students and a male religious leader. Further research could delve deeper into similar cases in other Islamic boarding schools or religious educational schools in Indonesia. The current study gathered data specific to one victim’s family; therefore, further investigation could analyse the experiences of other victims’ families to obtain more robust data and uncover additional insights.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

This research follows research ethics standards in Indonesia and has passed the test from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, University of Indonesia Ethics Commission and received ethical clearance with number KET 3/UN2.F9.KEP/PPM.00.02/2023.

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