

Breaking Through Binaries: Islamic Education in the Vortex of Gender, Sexuality, and Human Rights

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Abstract

The issue of gender binary, sexuality, and human rights in Islamic education discourse in Indonesia is an area that is often neglected but crucial for the relevance of religious education in the contemporary era. Aiming to analyze the understanding of PAI teachers, school principals, and students regarding these issues and how PAI reflects or responds to them, this study identifies challenges and opportunities in integrating non-binary perspectives. Using a qualitative approach with a multiple case study design at SMAN 1 and SMAN 2 in Ciamis District, data were collected through in-depth interviews with four PAI teachers, two school principals, and several students, supplemented by document analysis. The research indicates that the majority of PAI teachers and school leaders also retain a binary understanding of gender and sexuality. Many of these teachers also report feeling inadequately prepared or unable to know where to start when it comes to teaching these issues. Although there is a general commitment to human rights, its implementation in these sensitive issues remains limited. On the other hand, students demonstrate ambiguity, accepting the binary narrative of PAI while also being exposed to diversity from other sources, creating a gap between formal teachings and their lived realities. As a result, PAI risks losing relevance and creating an environment that is less inclusive if it does not adapt to broader socio-cultural realities. This requires curriculum development, teacher training, and more progressive school policies to foster a more comprehensive understanding of religion, humanity, and diversity.

Keywords

Gender Binary; Human Rights; Islamic Religious Education; Sexuality

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1. INTRODUCTION

Across the world, debates around individual identity, expression, and rights relating to gender and sexuality are increasingly prominent (Gaydarska et al., 2023; O'Shaughnessy, 2023). It is no longer just a fringe issue but has become a major highlight in social, political, and religious discourse (Germain & Yong, 2023). In Indonesia, these issues often become hotspots, triggering intense discussions and, at times, deep societal polarization (Platt et al., 2018). Interestingly, although these issues feel very contemporary, their roots can be traced deep into the history of social thought and practice (Van Wichelen, 2010). The complexity of these issues is seen as important in relation to the realm of education.



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Why education? Because education is the crucial terrain where values are instilled, understandings are shaped, and, most importantly, young people are prepared to face an ever-changing world (Herbert, 2021). Therefore, it cannot be ignored that these issues of gender, sexuality, and human rights have enormous implications for how curricula are structured, how teachers teach, and how students understand themselves and others.

More specifically, this study turns to Islamic Religious Education (PAI). This is the core of the argument of this study. PAI is an integral part of the education system in Indonesia, which has a significant role in shaping students' worldview and morality. However, herein lies an interesting "intersection". Traditionally, and this is not an accusation but an honest observation, PAI often tends to reinforce binary views of gender, for example, men and women with highly dichotomous roles, and tends to under-accommodate the diversity of expressions of sexuality, often recognizing only one form as the norm (Azzahra et al., 2021; Kull, 2012). This, of course, has the potential to create tension with contemporary understandings of human rights that uphold individual dignity and diversity.

Therefore, we find it relevant to touch on the need to "challenge" the binary view. This does not mean rejecting or destroying the foundations of religion, but rather an invitation to review, dialogue, and seek more inclusive and responsive interpretations to evolving social realities. The goal is for PAI to remain contemporarily relevant, as a means of transmitting religious knowledge and as an instrument to foster critical understanding, empathy, and respect for diversity among students. There may be some trepidation in the reader's mind about how this "suing" is interpreted, but that is precisely where its appeal lies; it invites discussion, not rejection.

First, it is necessary to understand how the key actors in the field-i.e., Islamic Religious Education teachers, principals, and students-understand the issues studied: gender, sexuality, and human rights in the discourse of Islamic Religious Education. This is a fundamental starting point. It is necessary to know and explore what they understand, the assumptions they hold, and how these are formed. Is there a diversity of understanding among them? How far are their understandings in line with or conflict with contemporary discourses on these issues? This is not just to be curious, but also to map the initial conditions from an internal school perspective.

Theoretically, this research is expected to develop scholarship in several ways. First, it contributes to the literature on gender and sexuality studies in the context of religious education, particularly Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia. This area is often under-explored from an empirical perspective. This will enrich understanding of how religious and educational institutions interact with contemporary issues. Secondly, the findings can serve as a basis for developing new conceptual frameworks or modifications to existing ones regarding integrating human rights and non-binary perspectives in religious curricula. The hope is that it can serve as a springboard for further research in the future.

As for the practical benefits, we see some immediate potential. For policy makers at the national and local levels, the results of this study can provide valuable insights to formulate policies that are more inclusive and responsive to gender and sexuality diversity in the PAI curriculum. For example, the principals in both SMAN 1 and SMAN 2 admitted that they have no clear policies when facing students with different gender expressions and expect guidance from higher authorities. This research can be reflective for PAI teachers, encouraging them to reflect on their teaching practices and opening up space for a more sensitive and open approach in the classroom. In fact, several teachers openly acknowledged their confusion and lack of preparation when students asked about LGBT issues, showing the urgent need for training and pedagogical support. For students, a more nuanced understanding of gender, sexuality, and human rights in PAI can help them develop a fuller identity, build empathy, and become more critical and appreciative citizens. Finally, for the wider community, the results of this study are expected to spark a healthier and more constructive dialogue on how religion can be a driving force for inclusivity and human rights, rather than a source of discrimination.

2. METHODS

We used a qualitative approach, which allows us to explore the depth of experience, perception, and understanding of the research subjects. More specifically, this research utilizes a *multiple case study* design. By studying two schools-SMAN one and SMAN 2-we not only get an in-depth picture of one context, but also have the opportunity to compare findings between cases. This study is in two senior high schools (SMAN) in Ciamis Regency, SMAN 1 and SMAN 2. We chose Ciamis to represent a West Java region with strong socio-cultural and religious characteristics, but it is also open to modern dynamics. Meanwhile, the selection of SMAN 1 and SMAN 2 was specifically based on several considerations, such as adequate accessibility for researchers and, last but not least, the demographic characteristics of the students as well as the internal dynamics of the school, which we suspected could provide a diverse spectrum of data related to gender, sexuality, and PAI issues.

To extract rich data, we involved a variety of key subjects. We interviewed four Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers-two each from SMAN 1 and two from SMAN 2. They are the frontline in delivering PAI materials, so their understanding and experience are vital. In addition, the Principals of SMAN 1 and SMAN 2 were also interviewed, as they are the policy makers at the school level and have a broader view of the vision of education in their institutions. Finally, and this is very important, we also interviewed several students from both schools. The main data in this study were collected through in-depth interviews and document studies. The data collected was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This process involved several stages, starting with verbatim transcription of all recorded interviews. After that, we conducted data reduction, which is selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the raw data that emerged from the transcripts. This involved repeated readings to identify initial patterns and themes.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Islamic Religious Education, Gender, Sexuality, and Human Rights

The concept of gender is one that, despite its everyday use, has tremendous nuance and depth in academic discourse. It is important to emphasize from the outset that gender is not simply biological sex (Nissen, 2023). It is also important to explain that biological sex (often called *sex*) generally refers to the physical and biological characteristics that distinguish males and females, such as chromosomes, reproductive organs, and hormones (Forcinito, 2022; Marley, 2025). However, gender goes beyond that. It is a complex social and cultural construct, referring to the roles, behaviors, expressions, and identities that society assigns to individuals based on their sex (Gregoratto, 2017; Narasimhan et al., 2019). We can see how these gender roles vary significantly across cultures and over time, showing that they are not inherent or static.

Furthermore, and this is crucial for the argument about "challenging binaryity," it is necessary to explicitly introduce and discuss the concept of non-binary, as introduced by Richards et al. (2016) and Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder (2023). So far, the understanding of gender is often trapped in the binary dichotomy of male or female. However, non-binary understandings challenge this narrow view, recognizing that a person's gender identity can fall outside of these traditional categories. This could include identities such as *genderfluid* (Robinson, 2020; Sumerau et al., 2020), *agender* (Ketola et al., 2022; Morrison et al., 2021), *bigender* (Blechner, 2015; Pulice-Farrow et al., 2020), or a spectrum of other identities that do not fully fit the male or female labels. Being able to understand that gender identity is a spectrum, not a rigid binary, is key to deconstructing assumptions that may have been held in religious education.

Meanwhile, the concept of sexuality is also often oversimplified, even though it is a multidimensional aspect of human experience. It should be explained that sexuality includes sexual orientation, which refers to a person's pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction to others

(e.g., heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual (Walton et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2023). But sexuality is also much broader than just orientation; it includes sexual identity, sexual practices, and even understandings of the body and desire (Dubois, 2025). It is important to distinguish sexuality from gender, although the two often overlap in a person's lived experience. It is worth emphasizing that, just like gender, diversity in sexuality is a sociological fact that cannot be ignored.

The concept of human rights is the big umbrella under which discussions on gender and sexuality are organized. We should start with the universal definition of human rights as inherent rights for all human beings, without discrimination based on race, color, sex, language, religion, political opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status (Rollo-Koster et al., 2025). In the context of this research, the focus is on how human rights principles—particularly the rights to equality, non-discrimination, personal dignity, and freedom of expression—apply to issues of gender and sexuality (Kismödi et al., 2017). Why is this important? Because often, overly rigid religious interpretations can collide with these human rights principles, especially when it comes to the recognition and protection of individuals with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations.

In general, the main objective of PAI in Indonesia is to form students into individuals who believe and fear God Almighty, have noble character, and have a comprehensive understanding of Islamic teachings (Rizal, 2014). PAI is expected not only to convey ritual knowledge and doctrine, but also to foster attitudes of tolerance, harmony, and positive contributions to society (Husni et al., 2024). We can say that PAI aspires to produce individuals who are personally pious and socially concerned (Al-Attas, 1999). This is a noble ideal, of course, and a benchmark to measure the extent to which PAI succeeds or needs to adapt.

In Indonesia, the PAI curriculum, like other subjects, is regulated by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This curriculum usually covers various aspects of Islamic teachings, ranging from the Qur'an and Hadith, *Akidah*, *Akhlaq*, *Fiqh*, to the history of Islamic culture (Julaeha, 2019; Novianti, 2019). Generally, this curriculum structure is standardized across all levels of education, from primary to secondary education. However, herein lies one of the interesting points: how flexible is this curriculum in absorbing contemporary issues? Is there enough space to discuss sensitive issues such as gender and sexuality, or do they tend to be avoided? This standardized curriculum structure can be a double-edged sword; it ensures standardization, but can sometimes hinder adaptation to rapid social dynamics.

It cannot be ignored that PAI in Indonesia also faces various general challenges. First, there is the issue of teaching methodology. PAI is often dominated by the one-way lecture method, which may be less effective in encouraging critical thinking or open discussion on complex issues (Alfaizinun & Lilawati, 2023). Second, there are challenges related to teacher quality and capacity. Although many PAI teachers are dedicated, not all may be adequately equipped to discuss sensitive issues or deal with difficult questions from students related to gender and sexuality, especially if their own views are still embedded in traditional binary frameworks. Third, social pressures and societal expectations also pose a challenge. PAI is often under the public spotlight, and teachers and schools can feel pressured to maintain a "safe" narrative to avoid controversy. Finally, the issue of the interpretation of religious texts is also crucial. Different interpretations of verses or hadith related to gender and sexuality can affect how material is taught in the classroom.

It should be recognized that throughout history, religion, including Islam, has often been seen as a powerful source of norms and morals in regulating gender roles and expressions of sexuality (Darwin, 2020). Traditionally, many religious interpretations tend to reinforce binary gender structures—that is, men and women with clearly defined and separate roles—and often only recognize sexuality within a heteronormative framework for procreation (Nyhagen, 2021). In many cases, these views are internalized and taught in religious education, shaping how students view their own and others' identities. It is no wonder that we often find such powerful narratives of "nature" or "fitrah" as if divinely

ordained, without much room for diversity.

However, what is interesting is that religious discourse is not monolithic. It is important to highlight the debates, alternative interpretations, and progressive views within Islam on these issues. As understandings of human rights and equality evolve, a growing number of Muslim scholars, theologians, and activists have begun to revisit traditional interpretations (Muttaqin, 2008). They argue that many current interpretations result from specific socio-historical contexts and are not the only universal truths of Islamic teaching.

For example, in terms of gender, we could discuss how some alternative interpretations emphasize the principle of fundamental equality between men and women before God, as reflected in many Qur'anic verses that speak of human beings in general without gender discrimination (Wadud, 2004). They argue that role differences in history or society may be more of a cultural construct than an inevitable religious mandate. This opens space for women's broader roles in the public sphere and leadership.

When it comes to sexuality, this is perhaps the most challenging area. While the dominant view tends to forbid any expression of sexuality outside of heterosexuality within marriage, there have also been attempts to re-examine religious texts with a more inclusive lens. Some scholars have begun to explore the concept of God's universal love and mercy, questioning whether Islamic teachings are really meant to nullify the existence of individuals with diverse sexual orientations ("Reinterpreting Gender in the Qur'an: Realizing Inclusive Interpretation in the Modern Era," 2024). They may not always reach the same conclusions as LGBT+ rights activists, but at the very least, they initiate a critical dialog and search for more comprehensive Islamic ethical foundations.

And this is the intersection with human rights. Universal principles such as the dignity of every individual, the right not to be discriminated against, and freedom of belief often clash with exclusive religious interpretations. The debate arises: does Islamic law contradict human rights, or are human rights the embodiment of Islam's noble values? Progressive views on Islam often argue that universal human rights values, such as justice, equality, and compassion, are compatible with and even encouraged by authentic Islamic teachings (Mayer, 2018). They seek to show how Islam can be a source of inspiration for inclusivity and the protection of minority rights, including those with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations.

Inevitably, incorporating these perspectives in PAI discourse is a big challenge. It requires courage from teachers and institutions to get out of the comfort zone of standardized interpretations and open themselves to healthy dialectics. However, therein lies the potential to make PAI more relevant and inclusive for the younger generation living in an increasingly complex world.

PAI Teachers' Understanding of Gender, Sexuality, and Human Rights

It is important to remember that these PAI teachers are at the forefront of shaping students' religious views. What they understand and teach has a huge impact. From the in-depth interviews we conducted, there was quite an interesting spectrum of understanding among the four PAI teachers in the two schools. In general, we observed that their understanding of gender tends to remain firmly within the traditional binary framework. For most teachers, gender is still often equated with biological sex, with male and female roles that have been "outlined" naturally or divinely.

For example, one of the PAI teachers from SMAN 1, Par-1, casually explained to us, "Yes, gender is already clear, there are men and women. Their roles also have rules in Islam. Men are leaders, and women take care of the household. That's *fitrah*." This view, which attributes gender roles to biological destiny or *fitrah*, is very common and, we admit, quite dominant in the PAI curriculum. When asked how she addresses this issue in class, Par-2, a PAI teacher from SMAN 2, shared, "I always emphasize that Allah created the two sexes already with their respective duties. So there is no need to question it anymore. Just focus on how to be a good Muslim and Muslimah."

However, it cannot be ignored that some slight gaps or ambiguities sometimes appear. Some teachers, although still within a binary framework, show some flexibility when discussing women's roles in Islam, especially regarding career or higher education. They may not explicitly deny women's dual roles, but the emphasis remains on "husband's permission" or "not neglecting nature." This suggests a tug-of-war between tradition and modernity.

When it comes to sexuality, we find that discussions in PAI classes are very, very limited and tend to be very normative. Sexual orientations outside heterosexuality are rarely discussed directly or, if touched upon, tend to be in a condemning tone or as deviations. Another PAI teacher from SMAN 1, whom we'll call Par-3, explained rather cautiously, "*When it comes to... that one [referring to homosexuality], we never discuss it specifically. That is something that is prohibited by religion. So, we focus on the manners of relationships between men and women in accordance with Sharia.*" This suggests an approach that favors avoidance over inclusive education, which may feel more "safe" for teachers.

When the issue of human rights is discussed, it is often integrated with the concept of justice or mercy in Islam. Teachers generally agree on the general principles of human rights, such as justice, equality before God, and the prohibition of discrimination. However, their application becomes ambiguous when dealing with non-binary issues of gender and sexuality. They may say, "All human beings are equal in the eyes of God," but soon after will add, "as long as it does not violate the sharia." This is where the conflict begins, especially for students struggling with their identity. One PAI teacher from SMAN 2, let's call her Par-4, expressed her dilemma, "*We teach about justice, about mutual respect. But if there are students who ask about LGBT, frankly, we are confused about what to answer. The book does not exist, the curriculum does not regulate, and in the community, it is also sensitive.*" In our opinion, this confession is very honest and realistic about their position.

The challenges they face in addressing these issues are very real. First and foremost is the curriculum that has not accommodated these complex issues. PAI materials tend to focus on aspects of worship and morals in general, with little room for exploration of the nuances of gender and sexuality outside the binary framework. Secondly, there is a lack of training and resources. Teachers do not have sufficient knowledge or pedagogy to address these sensitive topics constructively and inclusively. They often feel they are walking on a thin wire. Thirdly, social pressure and community perceptions are a big challenge. Teachers worry about negative reactions from parents or the community if they discuss these issues too openly or with approaches that are perceived as "deviating" from the norm. "We are afraid that if we say the wrong thing, it could become a big problem at school," says Pak Budi with a worried tone.

Nonetheless, there are also small opportunities that emerge from this data. Some teachers, albeit reluctantly, showed a willingness to learn more or at least engage in dialogue if there were clear guidelines. Their reluctance is more about ignorance or fear, not absolute refusal. This suggests that with the right support-training, teaching modules, and institutional support, there is potential for these teachers to develop a more inclusive understanding and approach.

Principal's Views on Gender, Sexuality, and Human Rights

In general, we found that both principals have a fairly good understanding of the importance of human rights within the broader education framework. They tend to see human rights as a fundamental pillar that should be upheld in schools, linked to justice, equality, and non-discrimination values. Par-5, Principal of SMAN 1, stated, "*This school is a second home for students. We have to make sure everyone feels safe, feels valued. That's the basic principle of human rights, I think.*" This statement shows a general commitment to universal human values.

However, when the discussion turned to issues of gender and sexuality, their views began to show more complex nuances, even ambiguities, similar to those we found with PAI teachers. Regarding gender, they generally agreed that there should be no discrimination between men and women

regarding learning opportunities or participation in school. For example, Par-6, the Principal of SMAN 2, asserted, *"Male or female students, all have the same opportunity to excel. There is no difference. If there are student council activities or Olympics, we encourage all to participate."* This is a view that is in line with the spirit of gender equality in education.

However, the depth of understanding about non-binary gender or sexuality diversity is still very limited. It tends not to be part of the formal discourse at the school management level. This may not be due to explicit rejection, but rather ignorance or, more realistically, extreme caution given the sensitivity of the issue in society. We asked Par-5 if special policies were regarding students with different gender identities or sexual orientations. He was silent momentarily, then replied, *"Well, frankly, there is no such thing. We focus on general education only, which is in accordance with the norms. If there are cases like that... yes, we approach them in a family manner, advise them. The point is, we want them to be good children according to religious teachings."* In our opinion, this response illustrates how these issues are still outside the formal policy framework of the school, and are often dealt with on *an ad hoc* basis with a very cautious personal approach.

Regarding school support or policies, both principals stated that they fully support any efforts to create an inclusive and safe school environment. They would say that teachers have autonomy in teaching, as long as it aligns with the national curriculum. However, this support tends to be implicit and has not been translated into specific policies or structured training for PAI teachers on non-binary gender and sexuality issues. They rely on teachers' "local wisdom" or "discretion" in dealing with these sensitive issues.

For example, when we mentioned our findings from PAI teachers who felt they had not been equipped to discuss sexuality issues inclusively, Par-6 responded, *"That is indeed our homework. We know the issue is sensitive, but how can it be included in the curriculum? Maybe there needs to be special training from the ministry or agency. We at school are ready to support, as long as there are guidelines."* This statement is quite realistic; there is a willingness, but often a lack of formal guidance from above, and a fear of public backlash. They are aware of the gaps but feel they do not have the capacity or mandate to take major initiatives on their own.

In summary, the principals' views reflect a broader picture. There is a commitment to human rights values in general and gender equality to some extent. However, there are still significant gaps in understanding and policies regarding the broader spectrum of gender and sexuality. This suggests that despite good intentions at the leadership level, the bridge between noble values and practical implementation on sensitive issues still needs to be built with support from various parties.

Student Perspectives on Gender, Sexuality, and Human Rights

From the interviews we conducted with several students in both high schools, we found that their understanding of gender generally follows the binary framework taught in PAI classes and societal norms. Men and women are understood to have fundamentally different roles and characteristics. However, there was an interesting slight shift. Some students, especially female students, showed a more fluid understanding of women's roles, inspired by successful female figures on social media or in their neighborhood.

For example, when we asked a grade XI female student from SMAN 1, let's call her Par-7, about her gender. She answered innocently, *"Gender is the difference between men and women, ma'am. Men are strong, women are soft. That's what we were taught."* However, when we continued the question about her aspirations, Par-7 excitedly said, *"I want to be an engineer, Mom! So that women can also build buildings."* This subtly contradicts a theoretical understanding of the gender binary and a more progressive personal aspiration.

Regarding sexuality, as can be expected from the limited discussion in PAI classes, students' understanding tends to be very normative and limited to the definition of heterosexuality. The topic of

sexual orientation beyond heterosexuality is rarely discussed openly in class, and if it does come up, it is usually through the grapevine or rumors among fellow students. We observed a "taboo zone" that indirectly forms around this issue.

A male student from SMAN 2, whom we'll call Par-8, admitted, *"About that (LGBT), it was never discussed in religious studies. Yes, we know it from social media or friends. They say it's haram, right? So yeah, no need to discuss it."* Responses like Rio's show that although there is awareness of the issue, their understanding is often limited to the label "forbidden" or "haram" without further exploration of why or how. This indicates that schools, through PAI, have not succeeded in providing a safe space for more nuanced discussions about sexuality diversity.

Regarding human rights, students generally understand the basic concepts of justice, equality, and not oppressing others. They associate these with religious values such as "compassion" and "helping others." However, like teachers and principals, this understanding becomes blurred when faced with the rights of individuals whose gender identity or sexual orientation differs from the majority norm. There is a kind of ambiguity; they want to be inclusive and adhere to religious teachings as they understand them.

One of the most evocative moments was when we asked about their experiences of whether there were friends at school who might be different. A female student from SMAN 2, let's call her Par-9, cautiously shared, *"If there is a friend who is... different, for example, the way he dresses or his socialization is not like a normal boy.... Sometimes we become the subject of conversation. The PAI teacher himself never reprimanded us directly, but we felt that we should not be too close friends."* This kind of experience, in our opinion, is very important. While there may not be explicit discriminatory policies, an environment that does not openly discuss these issues can create social stigma and a sense of "different" that marginalizes some students.

In short, students' perspectives reflect the complexity of the field: they accept most of the binary narratives of PAI, yet there is a gap between the formal teachings and their social realities and personal aspirations. The issue of sexuality is often a "black" area that PAI has not touched upon, forcing students to seek information from other sources that may not always be accurate or inclusive. Their experiences at school indicate an urgent need for more open discussions, clearer guidance, and a truly safe environment for all individuals, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. This is a huge task that awaits education.

Cross-Source Analysis and Discussion of Findings

When we compared the data from the three groups-teachers, principals, and students patterns began to emerge. First, there was a general alignment in the binary understanding of gender and sexuality. Both teachers, principals, and students tended to fixate on the view that gender is a male/female dichotomy and sexuality is heteronormative. This is a very dominant view, and not surprising given how PAI has traditionally been constructed. The curriculum, textbooks, and social narratives around schools reinforce this view.

However, behind the alignment, an interesting gap emerges. PAI teachers, despite adhering to a binary view, express hesitancy and a sense of not being equipped to discuss more complex issues or student questions that challenge the norm. They acknowledge a "taboo zone" and difficulty responding to the diversity they may encounter. Conversely, principals show commitment to general human rights principles, such as equality and non-discrimination. Still, this understanding has not been concretely translated into specific policies or support for non-binary gender or diverse sexuality issues in their schools. There are good intentions, but a lack of guidance and fear of controversy prevent them from going further.

Meanwhile, students, especially Generation Z, show the most significant ambiguity. They receive binary PAI teachings, but at the same time, they are also exposed to information and diversity through

social media or peer experiences. They have personal aspirations that may contradict traditional gender norms (such as a schoolgirl's desire for a career in a "masculine" field). They are implicitly aware of the existence of diverse sexualities, though perhaps only as "forbidden." This creates a tension within them between the religious teachings they receive and the realities of the world they face. The most striking gap is between what is "not discussed" in PAI and what students "experience or want to know". PAI does not seem to touch the core of students' existential anxieties or questions about identity and relationships.

Our findings on the dominance of binary views in SMAN 1 and SMAN 2 Ciamis clearly support theories on how institutions, including religious education, often reinforce social constructions of gender and sexuality (Francis, 2006; Nightingale, 2006). Dichotomous and heteronormative concepts of gender and sexuality are not only taught but also normalized, in line with Van Wichelen's (2010) on how power and knowledge shape subjects. In this case, PAI serves as a mechanism that reinforces these norms, often referencing "fitrah" or "nature," which, as we have alluded to, is a debatable interpretation.

However, this study also challenges the assumption that PAI is a monolithic entity that is completely static. Although dominant, the presence of teachers' ambivalence and principals' desire to support if there is guidance and ambiguity in students' understanding suggests that there is potential for shift and negotiation. This is in line with the progressive thinking in Islam already reviewed, which emphasizes that religious interpretations can and should be continuously recontextualized (Wadud, 2004). This finding shows that "challenging the binary" is not impossible in PAI, although the road is full of challenges. Teachers and principals, while not yet fully at the forefront, do not completely reject the idea of inclusivity if there is adequate support and understanding.

The gap between the PAI curriculum and the reality of students' experiences of gender and sexuality significantly enriches the discussion on the relevance of contemporary PAI and its relationship with human rights. Suppose PAI fails to address or even suppress issues of identity that are crucial to students. In that case, it risks losing its relevance and failing to fulfill the purpose of religious education, which should be to foster individuals who are whole, noble, and respectful of human dignity. We see how the principle of non-discrimination in human rights has not been fully manifested in PAI practices related to non-binary gender and sexuality issues. This research implicitly calls for PAI to focus not only on "obligations" but also on the "rights" and "dignity" of each individual, in accordance with the spirit of universal human rights that are in line with the noble values of Islam itself, as believed by progressive scholars.

The findings of this Ciamis provide strong empirical evidence that PAI in Indonesia is indeed at a "crossroads." It is at the intersection between tradition and modernity, dogma and social reality, and binary and the spectrum of diversity. "Challenging the binary" in PAI is not just a theoretical concept, but a practical need that emerges from the real experiences of actors in the field. It paves the way for discussions on how PAI can evolve to become more inclusive and relevant for future generations.

4. CONCLUSION

This research clearly shows that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at the secondary school level is still dominated by binary understandings of gender and sexuality, with little room to accommodate a diversity of identities and expressions beyond traditional heteronormative norms. PAI teachers, though dedicated, often feel ill-equipped or even insecure in discussing these sensitive issues, choosing to avoid them for safety. On the other hand, while committed to general human rights principles, school principals have not translated this commitment into specific policies supporting broader gender and sexuality inclusivity. Most strikingly, students show a significant gap between what is taught in PAI and social realities and their personal questions about identity, which they often find answers to outside the realm of school. This creates a kind of "taboo zone" that is left untouched in the PAI curriculum,

even though it is highly relevant to the lives of the younger generation.

This finding has important implications. It confirms that the challenge to binaries in PAI is not just a theoretical debate, but an urgent need arising from real experiences. When PAI fails to address or accommodate gender and sexuality diversity, it risks losing its relevance to the lives of contemporary students, and more importantly, potentially creating a less inclusive environment for some students. It also points to the tension between rigid traditional religious interpretations and universal human rights principles, especially regarding non-discrimination and individual dignity. PAI, which is supposed to be a source of grace and compassion, can inadvertently marginalize individuals who do not conform to binary norms.

Based on these findings and implications, we recommend several steps. First, the need to develop a PAI curriculum that is more inclusive and responsive to issues of gender, sexuality, and human rights in a comprehensive manner, including an understanding of non-binary. Second, capacity building of PAI teachers through continuous training and workshops that equip them with the theoretical and pedagogical knowledge to discuss these sensitive issues constructively and empathetically. Third, school institutions, especially principals, need to be proactive in formulating policies that support a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Finally, further research is urgently needed to explore implementation strategies of inclusive curriculum in various school contexts and to test the effectiveness of teacher training programs oriented towards a more progressive understanding of PAI.

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