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# Empowering Female *Santri* through Gender-Responsive Education for Marriage Readiness and Future Planning in *Pesantren*

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**Abstract**
Female *santri* in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) make important decisions about marriage, continuity of education and future aspirations in complex sociocultural contexts. Community service program was conducted to improve literacy on marriage readiness and motivation for further study through gender responsive education and future planning at Nurul Jadid Nangger Islamic Boarding School Sampang Indonesia using Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology: participatory needs assessment, collaborative action planning, marriage-readiness education with local Office of Religious Affairs, alumni led educational motivation sessions, life planning assistance and peer mentor training. The main participants were 41 female *santri* junior and senior secondary level while the other group was 35 male *santri*. Data were collected by observation, stakeholder interviews, life planning worksheets and a 30-item pretest-posttest instrument measuring marriage readiness and motivation for further study. Mean score of females improved from 21.09 to 24.63 (78.05%) with 32 women (participants) improving exceeding the target of 75%. Qualitative observations showed some participants developed more specific educational and career aspirations. The program produced a *pesantren* based peer mentoring guide as well as started peer support capacity building. These findings show short-term learning outcomes (marriage readiness education integrated with future planning). Long term outcomes cannot be verified yet but mentoring, institutional support and follow-up evaluation are needed to sustain the benefits of the program.

**Keywords:** *gender responsive education; female santri; marriage readiness; future planning; participatory action research*

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a time when young people learn who they are, what they can do and begin to make decisions about education, work, relationships and family life. Decisions aren't made in isolation: family expectations, economic conditions, community values, information available, opportunities that young people can realistically access all shape them. For adolescent girls these conditions may intersect with gendered expectations of roles appropriate for girls (and the timing of marriage). Education which supports girls' agency therefore needs to do more than transmit information it should help them identify options, consider consequences and articulate goals in ways that respect their developmental stage and social context. This is relevant to Indonesia's ongoing efforts to prevent child marriage and increase opportunities for girls to continue education. UNICEF Indonesia said national prevalence of child-marriage fell from 13.55% in 2024 to 5.90% in 2025 but "continued coordinated action is needed" (UNICEF, 2025). Indonesian Law No. 16 of 2019 sets the minimum legal age for marriage at 19 for women and men; it also links age requirement with children's rights and

opportunities for continued education. Legal standards are important but information about age requirements alone cannot ensure adolescents reflect on readiness, relationships, continuity of education and longer term aspirations.

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) are a meaningful setting for this kind of work. They help students learn religion and character through sustained interactions between students, teachers, caregivers and institutional leaders. Their educational culture can provide trusted relationships and channels to discuss responsibility and future choices. But gender-responsive education in *pesantren* must also engage with institutional authority, cultural expectations and realities of the family environments of students. Mala et al., (2025) found barriers to mainstreaming gender in *pesantren* include limited gender literacy and stronger institutional frameworks needed. Empowerment initiatives therefore need to be context-sensitive and collaborative rather than importing generic messages about equality from elsewhere.

The need for this prossgram was identified during coordination and field assessment at *Pondok Pesantren* Nurul Jadid Nangger (Ketapang Laok, Ketapang District, Sampang Regency, East Java) on 14 July 2026. Caregivers and *pesantren* administrators reported that some students married before finishing school, that family concerns about adolescent relationships influenced marriage decisions in some cases; that some female students' plans to continue their education needed more support. We take these accounts as information given by institutional stakeholders and not proof that all students had the same experience or that one factor explained every marriage or educational decision taken.

Marriage readiness should not be reduced to legal age, family approval or factual knowledge (psychological and emotional maturity, communication skills, social responsibility, health, financial issues and ability to make considered decisions). Stanley, (2001) says premarital education can create space for deliberation and help people think more carefully about relationship decisions but adds that evidence of outcomes varies by intervention and study design. Supono & Rohimah, (2026) also describe readiness as psychological, emotional, spiritual, social and economic dimensions from an Islamic educational psychology perspective. In this program these perspectives guided the educational approach which encouraged reflection and informed decision making rather than encouraging students to marry or reject marriage as a life choice.

Educational aspirations need to be considered alongside marriage readiness. Access to higher education and the ability to imagine a future beyond school environment are dependent on personal motivation, family support, social expectations and information. Women's higher-education aspirations in Plakpak Village Pamekasan shows how individual motivation interacts with family support and patriarchal cultural conditions (Mubarok et al., 2025). A rural community study cannot be assumed to represent *pesantren* students but it is a local reminder that encouragement may not be enough young people also need concrete information; role models; reflection on their strengths; steps for exploring education and career options. Alumni who have continued their studies can make these options more visible by linking aspiration with lived experience.

Community based initiatives can combine information, reflection and supportive relationships. UNICEF Indonesia documentation of Power4Girls program highlights adolescent girls' participation, voice and agency and mixed methods to understand program experiences and outcomes (UNICEF, 2025). These principles apply to *pesantren* based empowerment too (activities are adapted to local norms; participants not pressured into disclosing sensitive personal information); peer mentoring might also help continuity beyond a single educational session Burton et al., (2021) found positive average outcomes for cross age peer mentoring in meta analysis but stronger effects in programs with moderate to high levels of adult supervision so peer mentors need to be prepared to listen first then offer initial support but refer complex concerns to adults or professionals rather than assume counselling role for which they are not trained.

The practical gap of the program was not that marriage education or educational motivation were separate topics but rather that locally there was no coordinated and contextually grounded sequence linking multidimensional literacy about marriage-readiness with educational aspirations, future planning and a feasible peer-support mechanism. What we added to this was integration into a participatory partnership with *pesantren* leaders, local KUA and alumni so that educational content would be relevant to students' circumstances while respecting the religious and institutional context of the *pesantren*. PAR was selected because it focuses on collaborative inquiry and action informed by the knowledge and experience of community members. Keahey's work on participatory approaches shows how knowledge, power and representation need to be negotiated in development processes rather than communities being passive recipients (Keahey, 2019). Institutional stakeholders identified

needs and planning activities while engagement team coordinated educational content and evaluation in this program. The program had three objectives: (1) identify the needs of female *santri* about marriage readiness and further education; (2) provide participatory education that connected marriage readiness with educational motivation and life planning; (3) start a peer-mentoring mechanism after main educational activities.

## METHOD

The community engagement program was held at *Pondok Pesantren* Nurul Jadid Nangger, Ketapang Laok Village, Ketapang District, Sampang Regency, East Java, Indonesia from July to October 2026. The main target group were 41 female *santri* junior and senior secondary students (the ones who were enrolled at those levels at the site); a second group of 35 male *santri* participated in selected education activities and measurements but their data were treated as supplementary and not combined with the results of the primary female participants; institutional partners were *pesantren* caregivers and administrators, teachers, KUA of Ketapang District and *pesantren* alumni. Activities followed six connected stages to know, to understand, to plan, act and observe, reflect or evaluate and sustain; these stages were used as a practical organizing framework rather than as a claim that the program had completed a formal research cycle in every possible dimension. The to know stage was institutional coordination on 10 July 2026. The team discussed the purpose of the program, sought institutional agreement, shared expectations and asked about partner's initial needs. To understand took place on 14 July 2026 through observation of *pesantren* environment and in-depth interviews with caregivers and administrators regarding reported marriage related concerns; students' plans after *pesantren* education is completed; possible support needs.

In the to plan stage, the team and *pesantren* representatives used the initial information to identify participant groups, educational topics, facilitation methods and partner roles. The KUA of Ketapang was invited to participate in marriage-readiness education; alumni were involved in sessions about continuing education and future aspirations. To act and observe stage: pretest on 6 August 2026, marriage readiness education, alumni led motivation sessions and guided life planning activities (interactive presentation, discussion, question and answer session, individual reflection, worksheets), peer mentor training on 3 October 2026. Reflection & evaluation: review available assessment results and implementation issues; sustainability planning: use of peer-mentoring guide and *pesantren* supervision (continued).

Marriage-readiness session covered legal minimum age for marriage, risks of child marriage, psychological and emotional readiness, family communication, reproductive health, economic considerations and responsibilities in family life (session was delivered in partnership with KUA so developmental and relational aspects were connected to legal and institutional information). Educational motivation component involved alumni who could talk about their own paths after *pesantren* (further study or career exploration); students identified interests and strengths; considered education and career options; recorded aspirations and possible next steps on a life planning worksheet. The peer mentor component was a preliminary sustainability measure. Training on 3 October 2026 included role and boundaries of peer mentors, ethics, active listening, empathic communication, initial support and referral to responsible adults or professionals (if the issue went beyond the scope of the mentor). The team produced a book called *Buku Panduan Mentor Sebaya Berbasis Budaya Pesantren*. Peer mentors were not intended to replace *pesantren* caregivers, teachers, counsellors or qualified professionals.

Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews with institutional stakeholders, activity documentation, life planning worksheets and a 30-item pretest-posttest instrument (15 items on marriage readiness and 15 items on motivation for further study). The marriage-readiness domain included spiritual, psychological, emotional, communication, social-economic, reproductive-health and decision-making aspects; further-study motivation domain covered perceived educational benefits, future orientation, self-belief, educational planning, study choices and commitment to continued education. For this draft the manuscript materials do not specify response scale, score range, psychometric properties or validation procedure from the actual instrument so these should be added from the actual instrument before submission.

Qualitative information (observations, interviews, documentation and life-planning worksheets) was descriptively reviewed to describe the partner's needs, program implementation, responses of participants and signs of future orientation. Pretest and posttest scores were summarized

by comparing mean scores and counting participants whose scores increased, stayed the same or decreased; quantitative target set for the program was that at least 75% of female participants would show an increase in score after educational activities. Because there was no comparison group in the program and only one account describes pretest-posttest comparisons descriptively, the results are interpreted as short-term changes after participation rather than causal evidence.

Ethical and contextual considerations. Institutional coordination was done with *pesantren* caregivers and administrators before activities started. Marriage readiness and family expectations can be personal and sensitive matters so facilitators should use age-appropriate, respectful and non-judgmental language; participation in discussion should not require students to disclose private family circumstances. The draft materials do not list an ethics approval number (if formal), written participant consent procedure or parental consent or assent process for minors. Authors should insert the actual details of the consent and safeguarding procedures actually used; no approval or consent procedure should be claimed unless documented.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Needs Assessment and Sociocultural Context of Female *Santri*

The first phase of assessment produced two main themes from interviews with *pesantren* caregivers and administrators: some students were marrying before finishing school and there was a perceived need to orient students towards further study. Stakeholders described cases where family concerns about adolescent relationships were part of the context in which marriage was considered. These accounts show that decisions may be influenced by family interpretation of social circumstances as well as by young person's readiness; they do not establish that all marriages at the *pesantren* had the same cause or represent the views of every female student.

The second theme was about post-*pesantren* educational pathways. Stakeholders said some students would work after finishing their current education and that further study aspirations needed to be supported too. The first assessment did not measure prevalence of these options or why individual students chose work, further study or other pathways; they should not therefore be seen as evidence of low motivation (aspirations can be many; work may be personal preference or practical necessity); the program therefore wanted to increase students' understanding of pathways available rather than prescribing university attendance as the only acceptable outcome.

**Table 1.** Initial needs assessment and program responses

| Identified need | Available field evidence | Program response |
|---|---|---|
| Marriage-readiness literacy | Stakeholder accounts of some marriages occurring before completion of education and family concerns about adolescent relationships | Multidimensional education delivered with the KUA |
| Further-study aspirations | Stakeholders indicated that some students' plans for continuing education required strengthening; the assessment did not quantify individual aspirations | Alumni-led motivation sessions and discussion of educational options |
| Future planning | Need to connect reflection about marriage, education, work, and personal development was identified during planning. | Guided life-planning worksheet. |
| Continuity of support | The program identified a need for support beyond the main educational sessions | Peer-mentor training and development of a *pesantren*-based guide. |

The needs assessment supported a program that saw marriage readiness and future planning as linked but not interchangeable areas of development. Premarital education can provide opportunities for reflection and deliberation Stanley, (2001) but outcomes depend on design and context of intervention. For adolescent students the immediate educational purpose is not to prepare them to marry soon; it is to help understand readiness (what it means), rights and responsibilities (who has what); how major decisions may affect education, health and personal development (how?). The legal minimum age of 19 is an important standard but work must also attend to wider conditions which shape choices. The assessment also highlights how important it is to read stakeholder accounts

carefully. Institutional informants provided contextual information but they cannot be relied on as evidence of students' own perceptions. Future program cycles should therefore provide safe age-appropriate opportunities for students to express their needs voluntarily (anonymous questionnaires or facilitated discussions not revealing individual family circumstances) so that the participatory nature of the process is maintained and institutional concerns are distinguished from the experiences of students.

**Gender-Responsive Marriage-Readiness Education**

The program responded to the first assessment by organizing marriage readiness education in collaboration with KUA Ketapang (legal requirements; psychological and emotional readiness; communication; reproductive health; economic considerations; family responsibilities). The multidimensional structure was because readiness cannot be reduced to age or religious knowledge alone. Supono & Rohimah, (2026) also frame marriage readiness through psychological, emotional, spiritual, social and economic maturity. In a *pesantren* such content can be discussed in ways that recognize religious values but also support students' ability to think about health, relationships, education and their own development needs.

The partnership with the KUA connected educational messages to an institutional source of information about marriage regulations and family responsibilities. This collaboration was a practical strength of the program design because it brought together *pesantren*'s ongoing education role and local institution expertise on that topic. The manuscript does not provide attendance record, session-level observation data or participant feedback for the marriage-readiness session. So the current evidence only supports description of what was delivered in the program but not claims about which concepts were learned or attitudes changed as a result of the session.

A gender-responsive program also cannot send messages that make girls responsible for preventing early marriage or controlling family reputation. The program should support informed decision making, respectful communication, access to accurate information and recognition of girls' educational aspirations. Mala et al., (2025) point to structural and cultural barriers to gender mainstreaming in *pesantren* so why does institutional participation matter? In this program the involvement of *pesantren* leaders and KUA gave a basis for contextual collaboration but institutional change would require follow-up beyond what is documented here.




**Figure 1.** Marriage-Readiness Education Delivered by Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) Ketapang

**Educational Motivation and Future Planning**

Educational motivation sessions had *pesantren* alumni as speakers so they could talk about pathways after finishing their studies. Alumni participation was meant to make further education more concrete (linking general encouragement with personal experience). Students also did guided life planning activities where they identified aspirations, considered education and career options and listed possible next steps. These activities took the program beyond information transfer and gave structured opportunity for reflection.




**Figure 2.** Educational Motivation and Further-Study Aspirations among Female *Santri*

This component is relevant because there is local research on women's access to higher education as well. Mubarok et al., (2025) describe how educational aspirations among Plakpak, Pamekasan women are shaped by personal motivation, family support and patriarchal social conditions. While the population and setting of this study differ from that of this program it provides context for why aspirations need to be viewed in relation to social environments not just individual traits: alumni role models broaden students' perceived options but they cannot remove financial, family or institutional barriers to further education.

Life planning should also be thought of as a reflective process not as a promise that one pathway will be taken. A student may change her goal if circumstances change and an appropriate plan might include alternative routes (vocational education, employment or later study). The intended outcome is more explicit connection between interests, options and possible next steps for the student. In the program manuscript some students start to identify universities, fields of study and career orientations more concretely (but since the available document does not provide coding framework, counts or examples from worksheets this qualitative indication should be presented cautiously and anonymized examples or transparent summary of worksheet themes if these records are available).




**Figure 3.** Guided Life-Planning Activity for Female *Santri*

**Peer mentor development and program sustainability**

Peer mentor development was introduced as a means to support students beyond the main educational sessions. The training on 3 October 2026 covered role boundaries, ethical conduct, active listening, empathic communication, initial support and referral. The program also produced a *Buku*

*Panduan Mentor Sebaya Berbasis Budaya Pesantren* which together with the training are an initial capacity building output (they should not be taken as proof that peer mentoring service has already been sustained or that mentors competence has been independently assessed). The design is consistent with evidence that peer mentoring can have positive youth outcomes when structures and adult oversight are in place (Burton et al., 2021). In a meta-analysis of cross age peer-mentoring programs they found positive average effect and moderate to high supervision tended to yield stronger effects. This evidence supports inclusion of supervision and clear referral routes in the *pesantren* model but doesn't guarantee same effects here (because the present activity was initial training not a longitudinal evaluation of an existing program).

To implement this strategy peer mentors should be told explicitly that they are not counsellors, investigators or decision-makers for their peers; they listen respectfully; provide basic support; protect privacy (within safeguarding responsibilities) and connect peers with designated adults when a concern relates to safety (or coercion), mental health distress, abuse or other matters beyond training. The *pesantren* should identify a responsible supervisor, have a clear referral procedure and schedule supervision periods. These safeguards are necessary if peer support is to complement rather than replace institutional care.



**Figure 4.** Peer Mentor Training for Santri

**Program Evaluation and Critical Reflection**

The evaluation reported among 41 female *santri* showed an increase in mean score from 21.09 pretest to 24.63 posttest (32 of them increased; 78.05% exceeded program target at least 75%). This is a descriptive positive result against the program's own indicator but must be read within the evaluation design: no comparison group was used and the available manuscript does not report instrument score range, reliability, validity item-level results or statistical uncertainty. So one cannot know from the figures alone whether change was statistically significant, how large it was relative to possible score range or persisted over time.

The pretest-posttest results also combine two domains (marriage readiness and motivation for further study) into a 30-item instrument. Reporting only the total mean hides different patterns across the two constructs. If item-level data are available then the authors should report each domain separately, explain how they scored it and how many paired observations were included in their analysis. In future evaluations a documented instrument-development process could be used; reliability evidence appropriate to the scale reported; follow-up data after several months collected. Qualitative feedback from students might help explain which activities were useful and which barriers remained.

The participatory nature of the program was evident in the use of stakeholder consultation to identify needs and organize responses; but this first assessment used adult stakeholders only, and the current manuscript offers little direct evidence of students' own interpretations of the program. Future cycles should involve more student participation in prioritising what is needed, reviewing materials and whether activities feel relevant and safe (which would bring it closer to participatory principles) while preserving role of *pesantren* leaders in safeguarding and institutional coordination (Keahey, 2019). All in all the program shows that it is possible to combine marriage-readiness education, educational motivation, life planning and peer-support capacity building into a *pesantren* based engagement activity but its most defensible contribution is that these components were combined because of a local need. There is short term evidence that composite score reported was improved; a peer-mentoring guide produced; claims about lasting changes in educational choices, marriage decisions or peer mentoring effectiveness require further evidence and longer follow up.

## CONCLUSION

This community engagement program in Pondok *Pesantren* Nurul Jadid Nangger Sampang connected marriage-readiness education to educational motivation, life planning and the first steps of peer support. Participatory Action Research framework allowed team to use consultation with *pesantren* stakeholders as a basis for planning activities with KUA and alumni. The reported evaluation showed mean score increase from 21.09 to 24.63 among 41 female *santri*; 32 participants (78.05%) improved (above target of 75%); produced *pesantren* based peer mentoring guide and did initial mentor training. These results should be seen as descriptive short-term outcomes and not causal or sustained impact proof. The documentation does not show long term changes in students' decisions, educational participation or the functioning of the peer mentoring system. Domain specific analysis of the assessment instrument needs to be done; direct and ethically facilitated student feedback; follow up evaluation; regular adult supervision of peer mentors; referral pathway. More collaboration between *pesantren* leaders, KUA, alumni and students may help sustain a contextually responsive program that supports informed choices, educational aspirations and responsible future planning but doesn't prescribe one life pathway.

## DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

The authors declare that no generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used in the writing process of this manuscript.

## CONFLICTING INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors states that there is no conflict of interest in the publication of this article.

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