

Promoting Religious Moderation, Focusing on Education to Strengthen  
Social Stability in Indonesia in the context of COVID-19 - **CONVEY Indonesia**

# Policy Brief Series

Issue 2 | Vol. 5 | 2022

This Policy Series is made as part of CONVEY Indonesia project conducted by PPIM UIN Jakarta and UNDP Indonesia.

Convey Indonesia is aimed to promote peace in Indonesia and prevent extremism with violence and radicalism through a set of research, surveys, policy advocacy and public interactions based on the potency of religious education. CONVEY Indonesia project covers issues on tolerance, diversity and nonviolence among youth.

## Improving the Resilience of Islamic Boarding Schools (*Pesantren*) during the Pandemic: Health, Education, Religion, and Social Perspectives

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## Key Findings:



1. The existence of clusters of COVID-19 transmission in Islamic boarding schools indicates that Islamic boarding schools are vulnerable institutions in the transmission of COVID-19. On the other hand, the existence of the pandemic has made the Islamic boarding school community aware of the importance of healthy lifestyle behavior along with the provision of facilities to support this behavior.
2. The Islamic boarding school's staffs and students have basic knowledge of the transmission and prevention of COVID-19. However, some of them were still not aware of the latest issues related to the transmission and prevention of COVID-19. There were students believing that they did not have a risk of being infected by COVID-19 so it can affect neglectful behavior in the COVID-19 prevention protocol. However, in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of the *Pesantren*' staffs and students supported and agreed with the various efforts made by the government and *Pesantren* managers in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Islamic boarding schools experienced various obstacles to performing online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in technological barriers such as poor internet networks, limited internet data package, and the limitations in operating information technology communication tools. These obstacles resulted the learning targets covering various aspects of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor could not be achieved as they only could be achieved through an intense caring and education process
4. From a religious perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic has polarized Muslims in Indonesia in their response. The spectrum stretches from a zone of fear that thinks this pandemic has prevented them from worshiping Allah as usual to a new zone that seeks to accept this pandemic as a test and requires efforts to prevent it. Differences of theological understanding might influence this polarization.
5. The *Pesantren* community, in general, has a crisis of trust in the government in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, so they did not rely on assistance from the government. Islamic boarding schools with online learning were also more at risk of being exposed to negative perceptions of the government and its system. This is linear with the finding that information sources from social media have a negative effect on these perceptions.
6. In general, the dominance of power in *Pesantren* was still in the hands of male leaders, but this research found that the role of Nyai or female leaders during the pandemic was getting stronger, especially when female leaders have higher education and health education backgrounds. The role of Nyai and female leaders in Islamic boarding schools during the pandemic included mothering activities, health promotion, countering hoaxes related to conspiracy issues, and building networking. This is possible for the open-minded attitude of the Kiyai/male leaders to share power in the management of the Islamic boarding school.
7. Islamic boarding schools can adapt quickly to their dynamic strategies and policies with limited resources. The values that the *Pesantren* firmly holds, such as independence, sincerity, togetherness to help each other, and not focusing on materialism, give the Islamic boarding school the strength to survive and innovate without waiting for help from any party, including the government.
8. The information technology media they have and the existing *infodemic* phenomenon create the condition in which staffs and students of Islamic boarding schools are very vulnerable to being exposed to misinformation related to various issues in terms of dealing with COVID-19.

## Background

Education is one of the sectors most affected by the pandemic. Islamic boarding school is the oldest educational institution in Indonesia, and one of the institutions that have been affected quite apprehensively by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, Islamic boarding schools lost the nature of their education system because their students had to learn from home. The essence of Islamic boarding schools includes training students' independence by living in dormitories far from their parents and providing religious education so that they become people of faith and piety through habituation of daily worship carried out in the boarding school environment. Therefore, many Islamic boarding schools still hold face-to-face education even in the midst of this pandemic.

Although the government has made efforts to establish various guidelines and protocols to prevent the spread of the virus in Islamic boarding schools, positive cases of COVID-19 in Islamic boarding schools cannot be avoided. The Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic Boarding School Association or *Rabithah Ma'ahid Islamiyah Nahdlatul Ulama* Executive Board (RMI PBNU) noted that 207 Kiyai who cared for Islamic boarding schools passed away due to exposure to COVID-19. In addition, the pandemic condition reflected by the *infodemic* phenomenon and the issue of conspiracy can trigger skepticism, distrust of the government to extremist behavior in the midst of this pandemic.

## Research methodology

This research was conducted at 15 Islamic boarding schools in Jakarta, Banten, and West Java province. The selected Islamic boarding schools represent six affiliated religious organizations. The *pesantren* was selected by purposive sampling using several criteria: having high school students/equivalents, performing online and/or offline learning, having Kiyai/Ustaz (male leaders/teacher), and Nyai/Ustazah (female leaders/teachers). Research respondents consisted of students and boarding school administrators. The research sample was selected by proportionate simple random sampling by measuring the proportionality of the number of male and female teachers and students. Data collection was performed offline (filling out questionnaires through the paper) and online (filling in via online forms). The number of respondents in this study was 658 respondents. In the qualitative method, the informants were selected by using expert sampling technique. The total number of informants in this study was 132 people consisting of 82 men and 50 women. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus

group discussions (FGD), document review, and observation.

## Knowledge, Attitudes, and Perceptions of Islamic Boarding Schools towards COVID-19 Handling

The Islamic boarding school staff and students' understanding of the latest insights in the transmission and prevention of COVID-19 is fairly enough. The majority of respondents agreed with the efforts to deal with COVID-19 in their Islamic boarding schools. However, negative attitudes in response to government policies occurred due to personal experiences and the surrounding environment, such as government institutional policies that are considered less professional in handling COVID-19 cases.

In terms of perception, half of the respondents thought that they were not susceptible to COVID-19. In this aspect of vulnerability to contracting COVID-19, 50% of students and 30% of teachers considered themselves not vulnerable to COVID-19. This can be the reason why they neglect implementing the COVID-19 prevention protocol, especially among students. However, the majority of respondents believed that COVID-19 is a dangerous disease and can cause death. The majority of respondents also believed in the benefits of various health protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, this study also looks at the Islamic boarding school's staff and students' perception of the COVID-19 vaccination. As many as 70% of respondents agreed that vaccination can reduce the chance of contracting COVID-19 and reduce the chance of transmitting it to other family members. Various misinformation and disinformation might influence respondents' perception, such as agreeing that vaccines can have bad side effects and even cause death. However, the majority of the respondents supported the government's efforts regarding COVID-19 vaccination. However, there were still 5% of the respondents that refuse vaccination for religious reasons.

## The Role of Islamic Boarding School Leaders and Networks in Increasing the Resilience of Islamic Boarding Schools in Responding to the Pandemic

The character of leadership that is open, moderate, willing to accept change, following applicable regulations, solutions, brave in decision making, collaborative, and able to take strategic policies can be an influential factor in increasing the resilience of Islamic boarding schools during the pandemic. In this case, the majority of the leaders in Islamic boarding schools have implemented an antigen swab test/PCR for students before entering the *Pesantren* area. *Pesantren*

leaders also seemed to follow the government applicable rules such as repatriating students and implementing online learning. However, when offline learning is urgently needed, most Islamic boarding school leaders should make a brave decision to bring students back to Islamic boarding schools with various health protocols. More than 99% of respondents agreed that the leadership of the Islamic Boarding School has called for the implementation of health protocols in the environment of their Islamic boarding schools.

Another factor that can strengthen the resilience of Islamic boarding schools in responding to the pandemic is the ability to build a network (cooperation) with parties outside the Islamic boarding schools. The majority of *Pesantren* have built networks with parties outside the *Pesantren* such as the government, alumni, affiliated organizations, and other community organizations. The network/cooperation with other parties was very useful to support the resilience capacity of Islamic boarding schools in the face of this pandemic. For example, cooperation between *Pesantren* and alumni, especially alumni with health education backgrounds such as doctors and nurses, has been done to support efforts to prevent COVID-19 in the *Pesantren*. In the education sector, Islamic boarding schools collaborate with the government and their affiliated organizations to increase teacher capacity to conduct online learning through various training activities. Affiliated organizations such as NU, Muhammadiyah, and PERSIS also assisted Islamic boarding schools by providing health equipment such as masks and so on, as well as providing guidelines in responding to the pandemic so that Islamic boarding schools are not confused in responding to these new conditions.

Resources for COVID-19 prevention, both primary and secondary, such as handwashing facilities, isolation areas, basic health facilities in Islamic boarding schools, educational information communication media resources, and screening and tracing facilities was important factor related to the resilience of *Pesantren* during the pandemic. In the field of education, Islamic boarding schools seek to increase the capacity of teachers in the use of technology, although there were still teachers who were technologically stuttering and still need to be assisted by technology-literate teachers. Furthermore, in the aspect of financial resources, there were Islamic boarding schools that have social business entities whose business profits can be used to meet operational needs during the pandemic. On the other hand, a large number of Islamic boarding schools were still very dependent on financing through tuition fees even

though the tolerance level of *pesantren* for late payment of tuition fees is high. Therefore, there are no cases of students being expelled from this institution due to tuition issues.

The majority of *Pesantren* already have a COVID-19 Task Force. However, the performance of the task force is highly dependent on the educational background of its officers. Task Force officers who do not have a background or experience in the health sector need to increase their capacity, especially in handling health crises so that they can function optimally. In addition, in the field of education, the majority of Islamic boarding schools have chosen leaders based on the principle of meritocracy. It implies the elected leader is a person who has the competence and has a social responsibility for the mandate he carries. Islamic boarding school leaders are still chosen based on heredity only.

### The impact of the pandemic on health and education in Islamic boarding schools

Although it was found that many students and administrators were infected with COVID-19, the pandemic did not always bring negative things. The *Pesantren* students and staff felt that the understanding and awareness of the *pesantren* community regarding health and healthy lifestyle behavior increased during this pandemic. In addition, institutionally, Islamic boarding schools have also sought various health facilities to support efforts to prevent COVID-19, such as handwashing stations, hand sanitizers, and masks. Islamic boarding schools also pay more attention to the nutritional intake of students to maintain immunity. In addition to the health impact, the impact of education can also be seen from the expansion of educational facilities such as technological devices and increasing teacher capacity in the use of online learning media. The impact of the pandemic can also be seen in the increasing role of women, especially those with health education backgrounds in an effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Islamic boarding schools.

### The Role of Nyai and Female Leaders

Modernization and globalization have opened up space for female leaders to attain higher levels of education and ultimately to high positions in Islamic boarding schools. This research found that most female leaders in Islamic boarding schools graduated with bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. Of the nine Nyais interviewed, only two had non-graduate backgrounds. Most of the female leaders in Islamic boarding schools are not graduates with religious studies backgrounds but

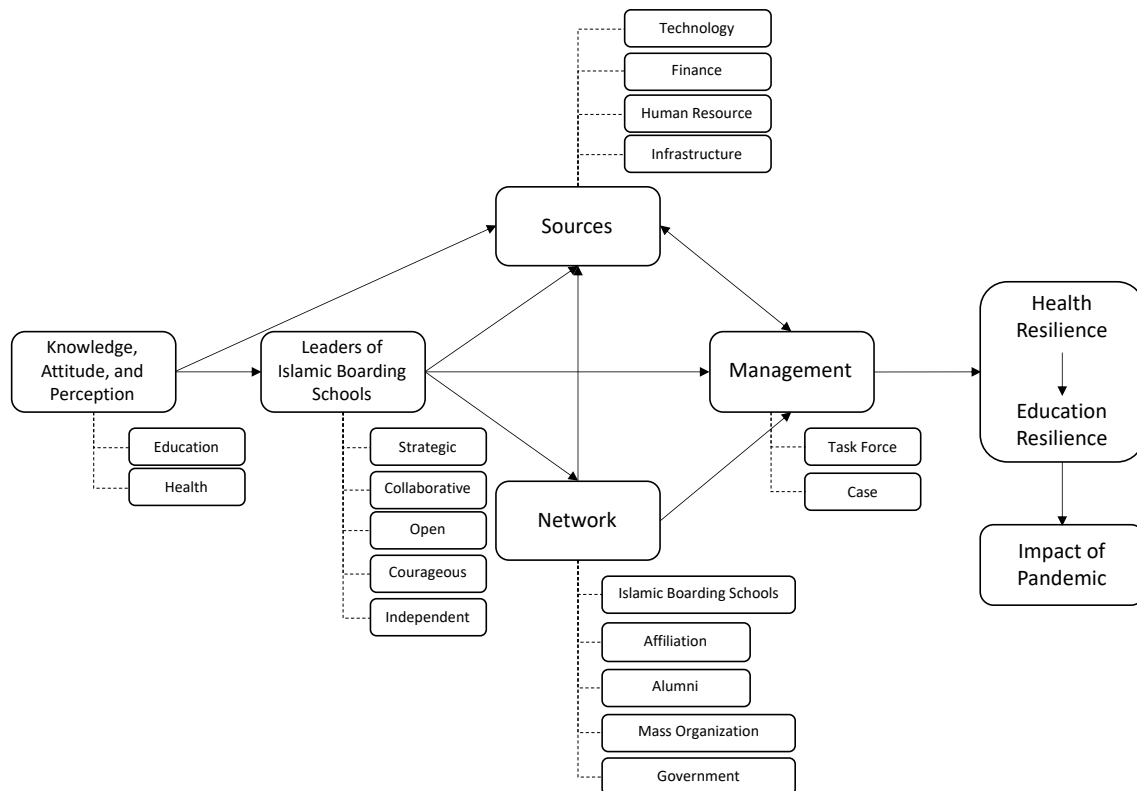


Figure 1. Factors Affecting the Resilience of Islamic Boarding Schools' Health and Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

are graduates from general studies such as Public Health, Communication, Education Management, Social Sciences, and others. Higher education background causes women to have critical thinking, which allows female leaders to play a more significant role in Islamic boarding schools because they have knowledge authority.

Men generally dominate the structure of both *Pesantren* with traditional and professional management. However, recently the involvement of women in Islamic boarding schools has increased. Women's positions and responsibilities have expanded, not only as companions for *Kiyai* or Islamic boarding school leaders but also in key positions in decision-making. Thus, the role of women is also increasingly meaningful in the world of Islamic boarding schools. This research found that female leaders occupied important positions in Islamic boarding schools, such as the Head of the Bureau of International Relations, Head of Education, Lecturers, Head of Human Resources, Trustees/Managers/the Leader of Female Students, Principals of Female Student Schools, and School Teachers of Islamic boarding schools, and others. This high structural position is not a gift solely from the *Kiyais* or foundation managements but is obtained by women through hard work. This applies not only to Islamic boarding schools with

a professional, institutional model but also to *Pesantren* with a family ownership model.

The research results also show that there are a large number of roles performed by *Nyai* in the field of student health, including mothering, educating about health, and minimizing hoaxes regarding COVID-19. *Nyai* and female leaders who work in the health sector and are activists in social organizations outside the *Pesantren* have a major role in efforts to build networks for the Islamic boarding school resilience. The head of the Task Force at one Islamic boarding school, who works as a doctor, for example, built a network with a public university in Indonesia to conduct PCR for free to minimize expenses for Islamic boarding schools. It was because the cost of PCR was prohibitive at that time.

### Religiosity and Tolerance of Islamic Boarding Schools during a Pandemic

The level of religiosity of the Islamic boarding school community was found to increase during the pandemic. Religiosity is indicated based on piety (obedience to religious orders), congregational worship rituals, and independent worship rituals. A person's diversity can bring inner peace, so he has more endurance in dealing with life's



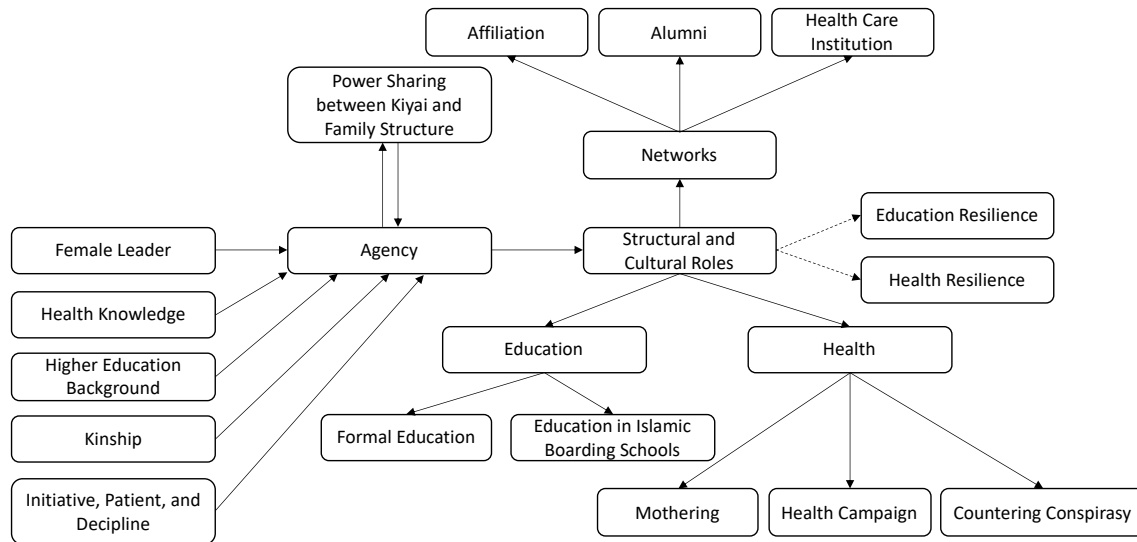


Figure 2. Schematic of the Role of Nyai and Women Leaders during the Pandemic

problems. This religious impact can also be seen in the respondents' high tolerance and openness to people of other religions. The majority of respondents are willing to help people of different religions; even Islamic boarding schools received assistance from other religious organizations during the pandemic.

### Issues of Conspiracy, Skepticism, and Trust in the Government during a Pandemic

The result shows 45.3% of respondents believe that the coronavirus is a biological weapon made by China/America to dominate the world. Furthermore, 48.6% of respondents stated that China/America actually had vaccines before the pandemic. Furthermore, 63% of respondents indicate that they agreed that Jews created the virus to destroy Muslims. From a religious perspective, 50.8% of respondents say that the restrictions on worship during the pandemic were attempting to weaken Muslims. About 63% of respondents stated that COVID-19 is part of a political conspiracy to keep Muslims away from Allah SWT. 61.1% of respondents believed pharmaceutical companies created viruses to profit from vaccines from a health perspective. Moreover, 43.3% of respondents agreed that the hospital intentionally claim many patients to be infected with COVID-19 to get incentives. However, the results of this study also show that more trust of COVID-19 is positively correlated with discipline to COVID-19 preventive actions. The respondents have the lowest trust in political parties to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. While the Regional Government and the Central Government are slightly more trusted in pandemic issues (60% of respondents trust

them in pandemic issues). Informants who have low trust in the government in handling COVID-19 do not rely on the government to overcome this pandemic. This research also shows that more than half of the total respondents considered the cause of the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic to be due to incompetent leaders. Even a quarter of respondents' support replacing the democratic system with the caliphate system because of the government's incompetence and its system. Moreover, this research also finds quite high skepticism of the respondent towards the government, although, on the other hand, the majority of respondents had a positive perception of the information provided by scientists, 84.5%.

Regarding the social cohesion of the Islamic boarding school community, this research indicates that the level of social cohesion of the respondents in the three sub-indices of social cohesion was not too weak. The social relations sub-index was the strongest among the other two sub-indices. Although the assessment of trust in society and diversity was very high, their shared priority rating is low. It means that they have a more diverse perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic (79.9%). On the other hand, the connectedness aspect was the lowest with the priority assessment of identity as an Indonesian citizen being the highest at 91.9%, compared to the perception of trust in the government of 71.9% and fair treatment of 71.9%. Meanwhile, in the area of focus on the common good, the perception of a corrupt state system was very low at 59% compared to respect for the law at 98.6% and the responsibility to help each other 98%.

## Recommendation

Several things are needed to increase the resilience of Islamic boarding schools in various perspectives during a pandemic:

1. There is a need for the development of comprehensive and applicable guidelines from the government as well as ongoing efforts to increase the resilience of Islamic boarding schools in responding to pandemics and other health threats.
2. The government, in particular, and other parties can seek to expand access to Islamic boarding schools by improving facilities/infrastructure/resources, both health and education.
3. It is necessary to conduct digital literacy training for teachers and students particularly related to technology use as a tool in selecting valid information and free from misinformation or disinformation.
4. Development of access to further education opportunities for women, prospective leaders in Islamic boarding schools to continue to higher education so that they are confident to have bargaining positions in decision-making with Kiyai and other policymakers.
5. There is a need for policies and mechanisms to encourage *Pesantren* to open up space for greater women's participation in policymaking.
6. Continuous efforts need to be made to strengthen gender sensitivity for Kiyai/chairpersons of foundations to be more open to gender issues, and women have better bargaining power.



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