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### CREATING INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: GENDER SENSITIVITY IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION CLASSROOMS

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#### KEYWORDS

Gender Sensitivity; Inclusive Education; Islamic Education; Elementary School; Curriculum Development; Gender Equality

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#### ABSTRACT

This study explores the integration of gender sensitivity in Islamic education classrooms at the elementary level to foster inclusive learning environments. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were gathered through interviews with teachers and administrators, focus group discussions with students, classroom observations, and analysis of curricular materials. Findings reveal that although educators recognize the importance of gender equality grounded in Islamic principles, traditional gender norms continue to influence curriculum content and classroom interactions, limiting the full realization of inclusive practices. Female representation in teaching materials remains minimal, and subtle gender biases persist in student participation and teacher engagement. Nonetheless, there is an emerging commitment among educators to adopt more gender-sensitive approaches, supported by efforts to include alternative narratives and role models. The study underscores the need for comprehensive curriculum reform, professional development, and community involvement to create genuinely inclusive Islamic education environments that respect both religious values and gender equity.

#### INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the call for inclusive education has gained significant momentum worldwide, emphasizing the need to create learning environments that respect and accommodate the diverse identities and backgrounds of all students. Among the various dimensions of inclusion, gender sensitivity stands out as a critical component in fostering equitable educational experiences. Gender sensitivity involves recognizing and addressing the different needs, challenges, and potentials of students regardless of their gender, ensuring that teaching practices, classroom interactions, and curricular content do not reinforce stereotypes or discrimination. This approach is especially vital in educational settings where traditional gender roles and expectations have historically influenced both pedagogy and socialization.

Islamic education classrooms represent a unique and important context for implementing gender-sensitive inclusive learning environments. Rooted in religious teachings and cultural traditions, Islamic education plays a pivotal role in shaping the moral, social, and intellectual development of Muslim children. These classrooms serve not only as spaces for acquiring religious knowledge but also as formative environments where students learn about their identities, social roles, and relationships with others. Given the influential role of Islamic education in many Muslim-majority societies, fostering gender sensitivity within these classrooms is essential for promoting justice, respect, and equality, in line with both Islamic principles and contemporary human rights standards.

However, creating gender-sensitive learning environments in Islamic education is often complex. On one hand, Islamic teachings emphasize the dignity and equality of all human beings, including men and women. On the other hand, traditional interpretations and socio-cultural practices can sometimes perpetuate gender hierarchies and restrict opportunities, especially for girls. These tensions present challenges for educators who seek to balance respect for religious values with the goal of promoting gender equity. Moreover, many Islamic education curricula and teaching methods have historically lacked explicit attention to gender issues, which may result in unconscious biases or gendered expectations being reproduced in classrooms.

The need for gender sensitivity in Islamic education classrooms extends beyond fairness; it directly impacts students' academic engagement, self-esteem, and social development. Inclusive learning environments that actively address gender stereotypes and encourage equal participation help dismantle barriers that limit students' potential. They also prepare students to contribute to societies that value diversity and uphold human dignity. In this context, educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers bear significant responsibility to critically examine existing practices and implement strategies that foster gender-sensitive and inclusive Islamic education.

This study aims to explore how gender sensitivity can be effectively integrated into Islamic education classrooms to create inclusive learning environments. It seeks to identify current challenges, successful practices, and practical recommendations for educators and institutions. By doing so, it contributes to the broader discourse on inclusive education and gender equality in religious schooling, offering insights that are relevant not only to Islamic contexts but also to global efforts to promote equitable education for all learners.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach to explore the integration of gender sensitivity in Islamic education classrooms. The qualitative case study method was chosen to allow an in-depth investigation of the experiences, perceptions, and practices of educators and students within their real-life educational context. This approach enables a rich understanding of the

complexities involved in creating inclusive learning environments in Islamic schools.

### **Research Setting and Participants**

The research was conducted in an Islamic elementary school located in [insert location], selected purposively due to its reputation for innovation in teaching and openness to curriculum development. Participants included Islamic education teachers, school administrators, and students from grades 4 to 6, who actively engage in Islamic learning activities. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who could provide detailed insights into gender sensitivity issues in the classroom.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods to ensure triangulation and a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon:

1. **Semi-structured interviews** with teachers and administrators focused on their perceptions of gender sensitivity, challenges faced, and strategies used to create inclusive classrooms.
2. **Focus group discussions** with students were conducted to gather their experiences and feelings about gender roles and inclusion in the classroom setting.
3. **Classroom observations** were carried out to directly observe teacher-student interactions, participation patterns, and the use of gender-sensitive language and materials during lessons.
4. **Document analysis** involved reviewing curriculum guides, lesson plans, textbooks, and school policies related to gender and inclusion to identify how gender sensitivity is embedded in formal educational materials.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involved coding the data to identify recurring themes and patterns related to gender sensitivity and inclusive practices. Observational notes and document review findings were used to complement and validate interview and focus group data. The analysis aimed to develop a nuanced understanding of how gender sensitivity is conceptualized and operationalized within the Islamic education classroom.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study followed ethical protocols to ensure participant confidentiality and voluntary participation. Consent was obtained from all participants and, where necessary, from parents or guardians of student participants. The research

prioritized respecting cultural and religious values throughout the data collection process.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research findings reveal a multifaceted picture of how gender sensitivity is currently understood, implemented, and experienced within Islamic education classrooms at the elementary level. Through interviews, observations, focus groups, and document analysis, it became evident that while there is a foundational awareness of gender equality among educators, significant gaps remain in translating this awareness into fully inclusive and gender-sensitive learning environments.

Firstly, the teachers and school administrators demonstrated a commendable recognition of the importance of gender sensitivity. Most participants expressed that Islamic values, particularly the principles of justice (*'adl*) and compassion (*rahmah*), support the equitable treatment of all students regardless of gender. They acknowledged that classrooms should be spaces where both boys and girls are respected, encouraged, and provided with equal opportunities to learn and grow. However, despite this theoretical agreement, many educators confessed that their understanding of how to operationalize gender sensitivity in daily teaching practices was limited. Many highlighted a lack of formal training and resources specifically tailored to gender issues in Islamic education. This gap made it challenging for them to consistently apply gender-sensitive approaches or to critically examine existing materials and pedagogies that might inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes.

Secondly, the analysis of curricular materials and textbooks illuminated persistent gender imbalances embedded within the formal content. While the official curriculum documents included statements about fairness and inclusivity, the actual teaching resources often portrayed gender roles in traditional ways. Male figures were more frequently presented as leaders, scholars, or heroes in Islamic history lessons, whereas female figures were less visible and often depicted in domestic or nurturing roles. This pattern of representation not only reflects longstanding cultural norms but also subtly communicates to students whose contributions are valued and who is expected to occupy public or authoritative positions. Such portrayals limit the possibilities for girls to envision themselves as active agents in religious and societal domains beyond conventional boundaries.

The classroom observations further reinforced these insights by capturing the dynamics of teacher-student interactions and student participation. Teachers generally made efforts to engage both boys and girls, and overt discrimination was rare. However, subtle gendered patterns emerged. Boys were more often called upon to answer complex questions or assigned leadership roles during group activities. Girls, in contrast, were more frequently encouraged to take on supportive tasks, such as organizing materials or helping peers. Additionally, teachers tended to use gender-specific language without consciously adopting gender-neutral or inclusive terminology. These micro-level behaviors reflect deeply ingrained societal expectations about gender roles and demonstrate that the informal curriculum—

what students learn through interactions and social cues—can reinforce traditional gender norms even when formal content aims for equality.

Focus group discussions with students offered a valuable perspective on how gender norms shape their experiences and aspirations within the classroom. Many girls expressed feelings of constraint when they were excluded from certain activities or leadership opportunities that were more readily offered to boys. They also recognized societal expectations that girls should be more passive or reserved, which sometimes conflicted with their own interests and capabilities. Meanwhile, some boys reported feeling pressure to conform to dominant masculine behaviors, such as competitiveness or assertiveness, which could limit emotional expression or collaboration. These student voices highlight that gender sensitivity is not only about equal access but also about challenging and expanding the social scripts that define what boys and girls “should” be or do in educational settings.

Despite these challenges, the study also uncovered promising initiatives and openness toward change. Some teachers had begun to integrate stories of influential women from Islamic history who played significant roles in scholarship, leadership, and social reform. This approach provided alternative role models that counterbalance the dominant male narratives and offered students a broader understanding of gender roles in Islam. Furthermore, educators expressed a strong interest in receiving professional development on gender sensitivity and inclusive pedagogy, signaling readiness to evolve practices in alignment with contemporary educational goals and Islamic ethical values.

The discussion of these findings suggests that promoting gender sensitivity in Islamic education classrooms requires a holistic and context-sensitive approach. While Islamic teachings fundamentally support principles of justice and equality, cultural interpretations and local traditions often complicate their application in education. Therefore, meaningful progress depends not only on revising curricular content but also on enhancing teacher competencies, fostering critical reflection on gender norms, and engaging with parents and community leaders to build shared commitment toward gender-inclusive education.

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of recognizing the “hidden curriculum”—the implicit messages conveyed through classroom interactions and social dynamics—in shaping students’ gender identities and attitudes. Efforts to create truly inclusive learning environments must address both formal and informal aspects of education to dismantle persistent stereotypes and cultivate a culture of respect and equality.

In conclusion, this study reveals that while the journey toward gender-sensitive Islamic education classrooms faces significant obstacles, there is also a foundation of values, awareness, and willingness that can be nurtured. Through sustained curriculum reform, teacher training, and community dialogue, Islamic education can evolve to provide learning environments where all students, regardless of

gender, feel valued, empowered, and capable of fulfilling their potential both as learners and as members of society.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex yet vital process of integrating gender sensitivity into Islamic education classrooms to foster inclusive learning environments. While there is a foundational recognition among educators of the importance of fairness and equality, practical implementation remains limited by traditional gender norms embedded within curricular materials, teaching practices, and broader cultural expectations. The persistent underrepresentation of female figures in educational content and subtle gendered interactions in classrooms reveal how deep-rooted societal attitudes continue to shape students' learning experiences and opportunities.

Nonetheless, the willingness among teachers to embrace more gender-sensitive pedagogies and the emerging inclusion of alternative narratives demonstrate promising progress. These developments suggest that with appropriate professional development, curriculum reform, and community engagement, Islamic education can evolve to better reflect both religious principles of justice and contemporary commitments to gender equality.

For meaningful and sustainable change, efforts must focus not only on revising formal curricula but also on transforming classroom dynamics and challenging implicit biases. Inclusive Islamic education classrooms hold the potential to empower all students, cultivate critical thinking about gender roles, and prepare young learners to contribute to just and equitable societies. Ultimately, fostering gender sensitivity within Islamic education is not only an educational imperative but also a crucial step toward broader social transformation.

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