



THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN BUILDING GENDER IDENTITY AND EQUALITY IN INTEGRATED ISLAMIC KINDERGARTENS IN BANDA ACEH

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the construction of gender identity and roles, as well as the practice of socializing gender equality values by teachers in three Integrated Islamic Kindergartens (TKIT) in Banda Aceh. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through participatory observation and in-depth interviews with teachers at TKIT Al-Fatih, Permata Sunnah, and Khalifah 3. The findings reveal that teachers adopt thematic and contextual approaches to introduce gender identity and encourage cross-gender interactions through play, discussions, and exemplary behavior. The pedagogical practices reflect transformative efforts toward inclusive education responsive to equality. However, subtle biases in communication patterns indicate the need to strengthen gender literacy among educators. These findings confirm that Islamic educational institutions can serve as strategic spaces to instill gender equality values through reflective, critical, and contextual approaches.

Keywords: *gender identity, equality, early childhood education, integrated Islamic kindergarten, Banda Aceh*

A. Introduction

Education and gender are two crucial and interrelated dimensions that shape the social structure of Indonesian society. In a multicultural nation such as Indonesia, efforts to achieve gender equality in education continue to face numerous structural and cultural challenges. Ideally, education should serve as a strategic instrument to open access to social equality; however, disparities in treatment and opportunities between males and females still persist across family, school, and broader social contexts. This situation reflects the significant role social norms and cultural constructions play in shaping gendered educational experiences (Abdoellah, 2016).

Gender inequality, especially in the form of violence against women and girls, remains a serious problem in Indonesia. The National Commission on Violence against Women (Komnas Perempuan, 2023) reports a steady increase in gender-based violence each year, which not only threatens individual safety but also indicates weaknesses in protective systems and gender-responsive education. In Aceh Province, this issue

becomes even more complex due to prevailing patriarchal social norms. Although female participation in formal education is relatively high, many still face obstacles such as gender role stereotypes, early marriage, and limited support for pursuing higher education (UNESCO, 2019; Bappenas, 2020; Hasyim, 2024). Within this context, early childhood education holds a highly strategic role. Preschool-aged children experience rapid cognitive and social development stages, during which values, norms, and identity concepts begin to form and acquire meaning. Jean Piaget described this as the preoperational phase, a period when children start to use symbols and understand the world through direct experience. Therefore, applying a fair and inclusive approach to gender education from an early age is essential to prevent the internalization of limiting stereotypes that may hinder children's development (Rofiah & Diana, 2022).

Several previous studies have highlighted the importance of introducing gender identity and roles in early childhood education. For example, Jannah and Bramastia (2022) emphasize that a healthy understanding of gender in children encourages behaviors aligned with values of equality and social responsibility. Sadiah et al. (2023) demonstrate that teachers play a significant role in shaping children's perceptions of masculinity and femininity through choices of play, stories, and communication patterns within the classroom. Nevertheless, many educational practices in the field still reflect traditional gender norms that lack critical reflection on the diversity of identities and social roles.

To address these challenges, the Aceh Government, through the Education Office, launched a Gender Education Program in Schools in 2020 as part of mainstreaming gender into the basic education system. This program includes teacher training, the development of gender-responsive curricula, and the creation of learning guidelines that emphasize equality in educational interactions (Aceh Education Office, 2023). However, the program's effectiveness has not been deeply evaluated, particularly within integrated Islamic educational settings that strongly embody religious values. This article aims to analyze how teachers in Integrated Islamic Kindergartens (TKIT) in Banda Aceh construct gender identity and roles during daily learning activities. Specifically, this study addresses two main questions: (1) How do teachers introduce the concept of gender identity to early childhood learners? and (2) What approaches and practices are used to socialize gender equality values in the TKIT environment? By closely examining the pedagogical practices of teachers in three TKITs in Banda Aceh, this article aims to contribute to the development of more equitable, reflective, and responsive education that supports children's needs without gender bias.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using the case study method to gain an in-depth understanding of the construction of gender identity and roles within Integrated Islamic Kindergartens (TKIT) in Banda Aceh. This approach was chosen because it is well-suited for exploring complex social meanings, experiences, and practices in early childhood education contexts. The research sites were purposively

selected, comprising three TKITs located in Banda Aceh: TKIT Al-Fatih, TKIT Permata Sunnah, and TKIT Khalifah 3 Aceh. These locations were chosen based on the researcher's accessibility and the schools' characteristics of integrating Islamic values with an inclusive curriculum. The study participants consisted of three teachers from each TKIT who were directly involved in the teaching and character education of children.

Data collection employed two primary techniques: participatory observation and structured interviews. Observations were conducted by following classroom activities directly to capture the dynamics of interaction between teachers and students, as well as teaching practices related to gender identity and roles. In-depth interviews were carried out with each teacher to obtain their perspectives on methods and challenges in delivering gender equality values. Data analysis was performed through thematic analysis, which involved grouping data into main themes such as gender teaching strategies, interaction patterns with boys and girls, and efforts to create an inclusive learning environment. Each theme was analyzed with reference to gender theory and early childhood education to ensure accurate interpretation of the findings. To ensure data validity, method and source triangulation were employed. Validation was conducted by comparing observational and interview data and confirming findings with informants to ensure accuracy and consistency. This approach aimed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced depiction of how teachers construct gender identity and roles within TKIT educational practices in Banda Aceh.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Overview of TKITs in the Study

This study was conducted in three integrated Islamic early childhood institutions (TKIT) located in Banda Aceh: TKIT Al-Fatih, TKIT Permata Sunnah, and TKIT Khalifah 3 Aceh. These schools were purposively selected for their focus on character development and integration of Islamic values into early learning. Additionally, all three actively implement a thematic curriculum that facilitates exploration of social values, including gender differences and strengthening of self-identity. TKIT Al-Fatih, situated at Jalan Nuri No. 21 A, Keuramat, Kuta Alam District, was officially established on November 2, 2021. Led by Bunda Irma Julita, the school is known for a child-friendly and conducive learning environment fostering spiritual and social values. One of the key informants, teacher Bunda Riva Ulva Devi, explained that gender education is integrated through the thematic unit "Myself," introduced from the first day of school. Using simple and concrete examples such as parental roles, children are guided to understand their own identity and that certain traits or roles are not exclusive to one gender.

TKIT Permata Sunnah, located in Syiah Kuala District and established on November 10, 2014, is headed by Bunda Anna Fauza Jailani. The school follows an interactive learning tradition oriented towards child independence. Informant Najla Syafira (known as Ibu Lala), with five years of teaching experience, employs a progressive approach encouraging children to recognize biological differences naturally, while also being free to express interests and talents beyond stereotypical gender roles.

Physical activities such as soccer are even permitted for girls as a way to build inclusive and confident identities.

Meanwhile, TKIT Khalifah 3 Aceh, also located in Syiah Kuala and operational since January 13, 2022, is led by Bunda Desi Dwi Sianda. The primary informant, teacher Bunda Era, emphasizes a reflective and deep approach to children's learning dynamics. She highlights the importance of children understanding that gender differences are not limitations but part of diversity to be respected. In practice, teachers encourage open discussions, collaborative cross-gender play, and foster a safe classroom atmosphere for self-expression. Media such as songs and stories are also used to convey messages about appreciating differences and building empathy. These three schools represent diverse learning strategies in constructing children's gender identity and roles from an early age. Although each has unique characteristics in terms of methods, institutional age, and teacher background, they share a common commitment to creating learning spaces that are equal, inclusive, and respectful of every child's potential without gender bias. This context is crucial for understanding gender education dynamics within TKIT environments in Banda Aceh.

2. Construction of Gender Identity by TKIT Teachers in Banda Aceh

The findings indicate that the construction of gender identity among early childhood children in the three TKITs in Banda Aceh was conducted thematically and based on concrete experiences appropriate to their cognitive development stage. Observations were carried out during the odd semester of the 2023/2024 academic year, focusing primarily on initial learning themes such as "Myself," which served as a strategic medium to introduce self-concept and biological as well as social differences to the children. At TKIT Al-Fatih, the introduction of gender identity began in the first week through the "Myself" theme. Teacher Riva Ulva Devi explained that the initial approach involved introducing the roles of father and mother within the family. Although conventional examples were used as initial bridges, teachers actively emphasized that traits and roles need not be fixed to one gender. "We explain that a mother usually has caring and gentle traits, while a father might be firmer. However, we stress that this is not an absolute rule. Children can be anything without gender limitations" (Personal Communication, Riva Ulva Devi, March 2024). This approach was supported by the school principal, Bunda Irma Julita, who openly encouraged teachers to embed equality values in classroom activities and provide space for reflection during weekly teacher meetings.

At TKIT Permata Sunnah, a more progressive approach was implemented through self-exploration and habituation to non-stereotypical roles. Teacher Najla Syafira (Ibu Lala) conveyed that the learning design aimed to encourage children to understand that identity is not merely biological sex but also about choices and values. "We want children to realize they can like and play with anything without fear of being considered strange simply because they are girls or boys" (Personal Communication, Najla Syafira, March

2024). The teachers also actively documented these processes through photos of cross-gender play activities, which were displayed on the school information board for parents.

TKIT Khalifah 3 Aceh stood out with its reflective approach empowering children to articulate their own views about identity. Teacher Bunda Era created open discussion spaces with children about what it means to be male or female, often reading stories or singing songs themed around diversity. "Children need to know that being a girl does not mean they must be gentle, and being a boy does not mean they must be tough. Everyone can choose their own way to express themselves" (Personal Communication, Erawati, March 2024). The principal, Bunda Desi Dwi Sianda, supported this approach by allocating time in the school agenda for teacher training related to gender-based education.

All three schools demonstrated consistency in introducing gender identity openly yet sensitively, using approaches suitable for the preoperational stage described by Jean Piaget. At this stage, children understand the world more through symbols and direct experiences rather than abstract logic. Therefore, methods such as light discussions, role-playing, visual media, and personal narratives proved effective in fostering flexible gender awareness. However, field observations also noted subtle communicative biases. For instance, differentiated voice intonation between boys and girls at TKIT Al-Fatih, though intended as affectionate, still carries the risk of reinforcing social role stereotypes. Visual documentation also revealed that in some collaborative activities, boys were more often assigned physical roles, while girls tended to take on supporting roles. Although these occurrences were not systematic, they indicate that implicit gender biases remain a challenge for teachers. Overall, the teachers' approaches to constructing gender identity reflected transformative efforts institutionally supported by the principals and reinforced through pedagogical reflection. Emphasis on concrete experiences, dialogue, and thematic learning indicates that gender education from an early age is not only possible but also socioculturally relevant within the integrated Islamic education context.

3. Socialization Practices of Gender Equality Values in the TKIT Environment of Banda Aceh

The socialization of gender equality values in the TKIT environment is reflected in various daily learning activities designed to encourage children to understand and practice justice and equality in their social interactions. Based on observations and interviews, teachers in the three TKITs convey gender equality not only through verbal instruction but also by designing classroom activities, role assignments, and consistent modeling of equitable behavior. At TKIT Al-Fatih, teachers actively ensure that every child, regardless of gender, receives equal opportunities to participate in all classroom activities. Teacher Riva emphasized that during tasks such as organizing toys, cleaning the classroom, or leading prayers, boys and girls are chosen in rotation. "We provide equal opportunities; there is no difference in playing or learning," she stated (Personal Communication, Riva Ulva Devi, March 2024). Classroom observations showed no

gender-based grouping, and responsibilities were assigned based on children's readiness and interests rather than stereotypical gender roles.

At TKIT Permata Sunnah, the learning environment strongly supports inclusivity. Teacher Najla Syafira employs an open learning model that allows children to explore their interests without the constraints of traditional roles. For example, girls are encouraged to play soccer and participate in activities commonly associated with boys, while boys freely engage in pretend kitchen play or beadwork without being labeled as feminine. "We want children to feel free to explore their interests without pressure," asserted Ibu Lala (Personal Communication, Najla Syafira, March 2024). Documentation showed that such interaction patterns foster children's courage and confidence to express themselves beyond rigid social norms.

Meanwhile, at TKIT Khalifah 3, gender equality socialization is implemented through reflective and affective approaches. Teacher Bunda Era provides space for children to discuss, ask questions, and express opinions about who may lead a game, help a friend, or choose certain activities. Children are encouraged to recognize differences as part of natural diversity. "When children play together, they learn to respect and appreciate differences," she explained (Personal Communication, Erawati, March 2024). Visual documentation obtained by the researcher showed enthusiastic cross-gender group work, indicating that such interactions foster equitable social awareness. These practices demonstrate that all three schools consistently apply principles of equality in daily activities. This applies not only to physical play but also to the distribution of responsibilities and respect for each child. Teachers do not hesitate to reprimand children when gender-based derogatory behaviors occur and actively nurture mutual respect. This aligns with UNESCO's (2019) guidelines for inclusive education, emphasizing the importance of removing social barriers from early childhood.

The approaches at TKIT Al-Fatih and Permata Sunnah further strengthen the affective dimension of gender education. Allowing girls to play soccer and boys to participate in domestic role play directly challenges the masculine-feminine dichotomy still prevalent in the surrounding culture. Sadiah et al. (2023) affirm that teacher control over play activities significantly influences how masculinity and femininity are constructed within early childhood education environments. Nevertheless, subtle challenges remain. The study also noted the use of softer tones with girls compared to boys and differential praise based on roles performed. Although intended as expressions of affection, these practices may inadvertently reinforce social expectations that limit children's gender expressions. Therefore, teachers must engage in critical reflection of their pedagogical practices and receive continuous gender literacy training.

Locally, the gender education practices in these three TKITs illustrate that gender equality values can be effectively internalized within integrated Islamic educational institutions, provided that the approaches are contextual and reflective. The Gender Education Program initiated by the Aceh Education Office (2023) appears to have provided an effective preliminary framework, though it is not yet systematically implemented across all institutions. In this context, teachers serve not only as academic

facilitators but also as agents of social transformation. Through everyday interactions that promote equality and supportive learning environments, they equip children with foundational awareness to appreciate diversity and reject discrimination.

The gender equality socialization practices found in this study indicate that the pedagogical approach has moved towards more inclusive and reflective education. Teachers do not merely provide equal access to learning activities but actively shape children's perceptions that boys and girls have equal potential in various aspects of life. Strategies such as eliminating gender-based grouping, equitable distribution of tasks, and encouraging cross-gender exploration reflect pedagogical methods that nurture social awareness from an early age. This is consistent with UNESCO's (2019) principle that inclusive education must start at the earliest levels through experience-based learning and equal interaction. At TKIT Al-Fatih and Permata Sunnah, girls' involvement in non-traditional activities like soccer and boys' opportunities to take leadership roles in class represent concrete efforts to dismantle gender stereotypes. These efforts support Sadiah et al.'s (2023) findings that teacher control over social interactions in classrooms significantly determines the formation of gender roles. When teachers open up equal participation spaces, children grow without internalizing conventional gender limitations.

The reflective and collaborative approach at TKIT Khalifah enriches the affective dimension of gender education. Children are not only taught to recognize differences but also to appreciate and collaborate with those who are different. This aligns with Jannah and Bramastia's (2022) idea that strengthening gender equality values through empathy and social collaboration fosters a more open and resilient generation against discriminatory patterns. However, challenges persist. Some teachers still unconsciously apply differential communication, such as using softer tones with girls. Although seemingly simple, such practices may subtly reinforce gender stereotypes. Therefore, critical gender education must be strengthened, not only in activities but also in teachers' daily language and gestures.

The context of Aceh, with its strong religious values, makes gender education practices in TKIT even more significant. This study shows that integrated Islamic education can provide a conducive space for instilling equality values, as long as it is accompanied by reflective and contextual pedagogical approaches. Supported by formal programs such as the Aceh Education Office's Gender Education Program (2023), such practices can be replicated and expanded to other institutions. This study also highlights the strategic role of teachers as social transformation agents in shaping children's gender awareness. Through daily interactions, they not only teach social norms but also reconstruct the meaning of gender roles in society. Thus, the efforts of teachers in the three TKITs in Banda Aceh are not merely technical-pedagogical but contribute to a more just and civilized educational movement.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that early childhood educators in three Integrated Islamic Kindergartens (TKIT) in Banda Aceh play a crucial role in shaping children's gender

identity and socializing gender equality values through contextual, thematic, and experience-based approaches. Teachers actively foster the understanding that gender identity is not fixed but a social construct that should support the holistic development of each child's potential. Practices such as inclusive play, flexible role distribution, and non-stereotypical interaction patterns reflect the implementation of progressive gender-responsive pedagogy at the early childhood education level. Furthermore, the socialization of gender equality values is not conveyed solely through verbal instruction but is embodied in everyday classroom interactions, teacher modeling, and the creation of safe and respectful learning environments. These findings confirm that gender-responsive education is not only feasible within Islamic-based institutions but can also flourish positively when supported by critical reflection and inclusive pedagogical approaches. This challenges common assumptions that Islamic educational institutions are inherently conservative regarding gender roles by revealing a strong transformative potential within this domain.

Moreover, the study reveals alignment between teacher practices and local policies, particularly the Gender Education Program launched by the Aceh Education Office. Nevertheless, subtle gender biases remain, such as the differentiated use of communication tones between boys and girls, indicating a need to enhance gender literacy among teachers comprehensively. Academically, this research contributes significantly to the literature on gender and early childhood education within culturally and religiously specific contexts such as Aceh. Practically, the findings provide valuable insights for curriculum development and learning strategies that integrate gender equality values without compromising Islamic and local cultural identities. Future research may explore deeper the role of school leadership and parental involvement in sustaining and expanding equitable and transformative educational practices.

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