# Negotiating Masculinity in Early Childhood Education: Relational Authority and Workforce Diversification among Male Teachers in Indonesia

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study examines how male teachers in Early Childhood Education (ECE) renegotiate masculine identity within a historically feminized profession in Indonesia. It demonstrates how authority is reorganized through relational pedagogy and emotional regulation, situating masculinity negotiation within debates on workforce diversification, teacher quality, and inclusive education under SDG 4.

**Design/methods/approach** – This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design to explore the lived experiences of six male Early Childhood Education teachers from three regions. Primary data were generated through in depth semi structured interviews, which formed the basis for idiographic thematic analysis and cross case interpretation. A national Focus Group Discussion involving 162 male teachers was observed as contextual support without contributing to theme development. Analysis was conducted through case by case interpretation informed by hegemonic masculinity theory, supported by audit trails and reflexive documentation to ensure trustworthiness.

**Findings** – The findings reveal a layered reconfiguration of masculinity across micro, meso, and macro contexts. At the classroom level, authority is stabilized through emotional self-regulation and co-regulative interaction rather than dominance. At the symbolic level, leadership and paternal imagery are recalibrated through dialogical engagement and professional competence, including STEM-based pedagogical practice. At the collective level, professional networks function as stabilizing infrastructures that reframe individual doubt as structural negotiation. Within Muslim-majority society, moral vocabulary operates as a contextual resource that reinforces professional legitimacy without displacing the central focus on educational quality.

**Research implications/limitations** – The study contributes to international scholarship by demonstrating how masculinity in ECE can be institutionally stabilized through relational practice and communal embedding in Global South contexts. Limitations include the qualitative and context-bound design, absence of cross-national comparison, and reliance on teachers who remain in the profession, suggesting directions for longitudinal and comparative research.

**Practical implications** – The findings inform teacher education and policy discussions on workforce diversification, highlighting how gender-sensitive pedagogy, emotional literacy, and professional community support can enhance retention and legitimacy of male teachers in ECE systems.

**Originality/value** – By identifying the micro-level mechanisms through which masculine authority is reconstructed in everyday ECE practice, this study advances understanding of gender negotiation within Muslim-majority societies.

**Keywords**: Early childhood education, Male teachers, Alternative masculinity, Workforce diversification

**Paper type** Phenomenological Qualitative Study

## 1. Introduction

Early childhood teachers play a formative role in shaping children's learning experiences during a developmental stage that is highly sensitive to the quality of social interaction. Sustained pedagogical engagement contributes not only to cognitive growth but also to emotional regulation and the development of social dispositions (Andreasen et al., 2019; Wijayanti, 2021). Within global education agendas, teacher quality and professionalism are closely tied to commitments to inclusive and equitable education, as articulated in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2015). Cross-national scholarship further suggests that diversity within the teaching workforce forms part of a sustainable educational ecosystem (McGrath et al., 2020; Warin, 2018). Yet the gender composition of early childhood education (ECE) teachers has not consistently been examined as a factor that may shape classroom dynamics and children's lived educational experiences (Lahelma, 2000).

In Indonesia, the ECE sector is marked by a pronounced gender imbalance. National statistics indicate that approximately 98.2 percent of kindergarten teachers are women, while men account for only about 1.8 percent (Damayanti & Asbari, 2024). This distribution reflects enduring social constructions that associate caregiving and early education with femininity and domestic labor (Licardo & Leite, 2022; Öner & Atsiz, 2022). Indonesian studies have documented that men's limited participation in kindergarten education remains socially and culturally contested, shaped by stereotypes that frame the profession as insufficiently masculine and by perceptions of limited professional recognition and economic attractiveness (Maulana et al., 2020; Mukhlis, 2019). Similar patterns have been observed internationally, particularly in Australia and South Africa, where male ECE teachers must negotiate professional legitimacy amid social suspicion and limited institutional recognition (McDonald et al., 2024; Moosa & Bhana, 2023). The limited participation of men in ECE, therefore, cannot be reduced to individual choice but must be understood within broader structures of social meaning.

Discussions of fatherlessness in Indonesia often surface in debates about the need for male figures in children's lives. An estimated 15.9 million children experience the absence of a father, whether structurally or functionally (Mada, 2023). Psychological research associates paternal involvement with emotional stability and identity formation in children (Ashari, 2018; Bullough, 2015). This study, however, does not assume that male teachers function as substitutes for fathers. Rather, fatherlessness is treated as a social backdrop that informs public discourse about gender representation in educational spaces. The analytical focus remains on teachers' everyday pedagogical practices rather than on measuring direct outcomes related to paternal absence.

Debates on masculinity in education provide an interpretive lens for examining these dynamics. The concept of hegemonic masculinity illuminates how particular configurations of gender practice gain social legitimacy through patterns of dominance, subordination, and institutionalized hierarchies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). At the same time, the notions of caring masculinities and hybrid masculinities suggest that care, empathy, and relational closeness can form part of masculine expression without being framed as deviation (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Elliott, 2016). Research across diverse ECE contexts indicates that male teachers often negotiate authority and emotional proximity simultaneously (Ljunggren & Eidevald, 2023; Mofokeng et al., 2024). Much of this scholarship, however, is grounded in Western settings and offers limited insight into how such negotiations unfold within Muslim-majority societies in the Global South.

The findings of this study indicate that such negotiations are enacted primarily through everyday classroom practice. Authority is not performed through distance or overt dominance, but through self-regulation, patience, and sustained relational engagement with children. This shift reflects a movement from reactive control toward a more reflective mode of classroom governance, conceptualized here as a reconfiguration of authority. At the same time, symbols of leadership and protection do not disappear; rather, they are rearticulated in dialogical forms consistent with hybrid masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Masculinity, in this context, emerges as an ongoing practice shaped through interaction rather than as a fixed identity.

Within Islamic educational settings, these practices intersect with the moral language teachers use to interpret their professional roles. Studies of Islamic schooling note that teaching

is frequently framed in terms of amanah, responsibility, and ethical commitment to children's moral formation (Fatmawati et al., 2023; Ihsan, 2020). In this research, references to amanah and responsibility arise in interviews and group discussions as interpretive resources rather than as abstract doctrinal claims. Such moral vocabularies situate pedagogical relationships within a broader ethical horizon, resonating with analyses of gender in Muslim societies where moral legitimacy functions as a key source of social recognition (Lahmar, 2024; Mulya & Sakhiyya, 2020). This religious dimension is therefore approached not as a marker of superiority but as a contextual factor shaping how male teachers articulate and sustain professional legitimacy.

Indonesia was selected as the research site because it presents a clearly documented gender imbalance within the ECE profession, where male teachers remain a small minority (Damayanti & Asbari, 2024). This institutional feminization creates a socially sensitive environment in which masculinity must be negotiated rather than assumed. At the same time, the extensive network of Islamic early childhood institutions enables an examination of how moral discourse and professional practice intersect in teachers' daily work (Ihsan, 2020). The inclusion of participants from multiple provinces through a national forum further provides empirical depth within a broadly shared socio-cultural framework. Taken together, these structural and cultural features make Indonesia a pertinent context for examining the negotiation of masculinity in ECE.

Against this backdrop, the study aims to analyze how male ECE teachers in Indonesia construct and negotiate masculine identities within everyday classroom practice, and how these negotiations shape patterns of authority and pedagogical relationships. The guiding question asks how masculinity is enacted, adjusted, and renegotiated within female-dominated early childhood settings. The contribution of this article lies in tracing the micro-level mechanisms through which masculinity is reworked in Islamic educational contexts and in linking masculinity discourse to concrete pedagogical practice. In doing so, the study positions early childhood education as an analytical site for examining the relationship between gender, authority, and educational practice without privileging or romanticizing any singular form of masculinity.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research Design and Approach

This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design to examine how male teachers construct and negotiate masculinity within Early Childhood Education settings. IPA was selected because the study aims to explore in depth the lived experiences of participants and interpret how they make sense of their professional roles in a feminized educational environment (Moustakas, 1994). The approach enables a double hermeneutic process in which participants interpret their experiences and the researcher subsequently interprets those interpretations analytically. Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity informed the interpretation of identity negotiation and moral authority in classroom and community contexts (Connell, 2005). Through this design, the study moves beyond description and seeks to articulate the situated meaning structure underlying alternative masculinity in ECE.

### 2.2. Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure direct experiential relevance to the phenomenon under investigation (Guest et al., 2020). The inclusion criteria required participants to be male teachers actively teaching in Early Childhood Education institutions for at least one year and to possess an educational background in ECE or a related field. This criterion ensured that participants had sufficient professional exposure to reflect critically on identity negotiation within pedagogical practice. Six male teachers from three different regions were recruited to capture contextual variation while maintaining idiographic depth consistent with phenomenological principles (Moustakas, 1994). Sample size was guided by IPA's idiographic commitment to case by case analysis, prioritizing analytic depth and interpretive sufficiency over numerical saturation. Each case was examined intensively before proceeding to cross case interpretation, ensuring that the experiential structure of each participant was adequately developed and conceptually articulated.

Table 1. Male Early Childhood Teachers as Research Resource Persons

| No | Name | Teaching Experience | Institution | Employment Status | Educational Background |
|----|------|---------------------|-------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | T1 | Since 2008 (17 Years) | TK Islam Plus Mutiara, Yogyakarta | Permanent Teacher | S1 Early Childhood Education |
| 2 | T2 | Since 2013 (12 Years) | RA Daarul Mutaalim, Kepulauan Riau | Permanent Teacher | S1 PIAUD |
| 3 | T3 | Since 2011 (14 Years) | TK Aisyah Pembina Banguntapan | Permanent Teacher | S1 Early Childhood Education |
| 4 | T4 | Since 2021 (4 Years) | TK iCAN, Kepulauan Riau | Permanent Teacher | S1 Indonesian Language Education |
| 5 | T5 | Since 2022 (3 Years) | TK Angkasa, Kepulauan Riau | Honorary Teacher | S1 PIAUD |
| 6 | T6 | Since 2019 (6 Years) | TK Pertiwi Kuwukan, Kudus | Permanent Teacher | S1 Early Childhood Education |

## 2.3. Data Collection

Primary data were generated through in depth semi structured interviews that enabled participants to narrate and interpret their lived experiences as male Early Childhood Education teachers (Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). Each interview lasted between sixty and ninety minutes and was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve experiential nuance and intentional meaning. Interview prompts explored professional motivation, classroom authority, emotional regulation, community reception, and identity negotiation within Islamic educational settings. In accordance with the idiographic orientation of phenomenological inquiry, each transcript was treated as a bounded experiential case, and meaning units were derived inductively from individual accounts prior to any cross-case comparison. Thematic development was grounded exclusively in these six interviews to maintain a case-intensive and depth focused analytic trajectory.

In addition to interviews, a national Focus Group Discussion attended by 162 male teachers from 15 provinces was observed as contextual data. Within this study, the FGD did not function as a phenomenological source of lived experience and did not contribute to the generation, modification, or validation of IPA themes. The idiographic analysis of interview transcripts was completed prior to the interpretation of FGD material, and FGD data were analytically bracketed from theme construction to preserve methodological coherence. Instead, the FGD served to illuminate the broader public visibility, shared professional vocabulary, and collective legitimacy dynamics surrounding male teachers in Early Childhood Education. Its role was therefore limited to contextual triangulation at the socio professional level, without displacing the primary focus on subjective experience and meaning making (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## 2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the core procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Moustakas, 1994). First, each transcript was read repeatedly to achieve immersion and to identify significant statements related to masculinity, authority, and professional legitimacy. Second, initial codes were developed inductively from participants' expressions before being clustered into emergent themes that reflected patterned meaning. Third, cross case analysis was conducted to identify convergences and divergences while preserving idiographic distinctiveness. The interpretation of themes was theoretically informed by Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity to explain processes of reconfiguration within Islamic ECE contexts (Connell, 2005). Analytical decisions were documented systematically, and an audit trail was maintained to demonstrate how raw data were transformed into thematic structures and conceptual synthesis.

## 2.5. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, contextual triangulation, reflexive practice, and an explicit researcher positionality statement in accordance with established qualitative criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants reviewed interview

summaries to confirm interpretive accuracy and clarify ambiguous statements. Peer debriefing sessions with qualitative research scholars were conducted to examine analytical coherence and theoretical consistency. Contextual triangulation was applied by relating interview findings to FGD observations and institutional documentation without altering the idiographic thematic structure derived from phenomenological analysis.

The researcher adopted a participant as observer stance during field engagement, particularly in the national Focus Group Discussion, remaining openly present as a researcher while refraining from directing discussion. The researcher's academic background in Islamic Early Childhood Education positioned her in epistemic proximity to participants, facilitating access, trust, and contextual sensitivity toward pedagogical practices and moral vocabulary such as amanah and responsibility. This proximity, however, also carried the potential for interpretive bias, especially in relation to normative assumptions embedded in Islamic educational discourse. To address this, a reflexive journal was systematically maintained to document analytic decisions, emerging assumptions, relational dynamics in the field, and evolving interpretations, thereby ensuring that the double hermeneutic process remained transparent and methodologically controlled (Moustakas, 1994).

### 2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided all stages of the research. Participants were informed about the study objectives, procedures, and confidentiality measures before data collection began. Ethical clearance was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of STAIN Sultan Abdurrahman Kepulauan Riau (Ref. No. 2024/Ethics/PAUD/09), and all participants provided written informed consent prior to data collection. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and institutional references were anonymized when necessary. All digital recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only for research purposes. Participation was voluntary, participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence, and no financial incentives were provided to avoid coercion.

## 3. Result

This study demonstrates that male early childhood teachers in Indonesia do not simply reject hegemonic masculinity; rather, they reconfigure masculine practice through a form of relational authority that gains moral legitimacy within Islamic educational settings. Drawing on Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity as the primary theoretical framework, the findings reveal how masculinity is renegotiated through everyday pedagogical practices, the enactment of symbolic paternal roles, and the legitimizing support of religiously grounded professional communities.

### 3.1. Reconfiguring Hegemonic Authority: From Dominance to Relational Control

The findings of this study do not simply indicate a shift from hegemonic masculinity to an entirely new formation. What emerges instead is a fluid space of negotiation between expectations of dominance and the pedagogical necessity of relational closeness. Authority is often imagined as operating through distance and firm control. However, within early childhood classrooms, distance tends to weaken the teacher's effectiveness. Children respond to warmth and presence rather than to hierarchical separation. Authority therefore cannot stand prior to relationship; it develops only after relational bonds are formed. In this context, authority grows out of consistent engagement rather than symbolic assertion alone.

T2 explains his disciplinary practice as follows:

"Yes, I treat them as if they were my own children. When a child has a problem, I pay attention, invite them to talk, and calm them down. If they misbehave, I respond firmly and say, 'No, you are not allowed,' and explain the consequences of such behavior. It depends on the child's condition. We have to remain calm in dealing with them. After years of experience, I have become accustomed to handling children with different characteristics." (T2-interview, 2024)

The expression "as if they were my own children" signals a subtle transformation in the enactment of authority. Structural boundaries remain, yet they operate through a more reflective and measured approach. T2 does not rush to assert power through raised voices; instead, he waits until the child's emotions have subsided. The decision to exercise self-restraint becomes a new source of authority, as control begins with the teacher's regulation of himself. In this dynamic, authority no longer precedes relationship but grows from consciously sustained relational engagement.

T5 describes a similar situation:

"When a child falls and cries, I carry them first and calm them down." (T5-interview, 2024)

He adds:

"Sometimes when they are having a tantrum, I let them release their emotions first. The next morning I remind them, 'Remember, Mister does not want you to hit others like last night. If you behave that way, you are not allowed to play.'" (T5-interview, 2024)

This postponement reveals a tension that enriches the practice of authority in the classroom. The teacher remains the figure who determines boundaries, yet decisions are not taken within a reactive logic but within a more reflective temporal rhythm. Discipline does not appear as an immediate outburst; rather, it is structured as a process shaped by situational awareness. Firmness works alongside patience, allowing authority to develop without being theatrically displayed. What shifts is not the teacher's position as an authority figure, but the manner in which authority acquires meaning.

T6 reflects on his personal experience:

"In kindergarten, a male teacher must be gentle." (T6-interview, 2024)

"Given that I am a man by disposition, I have learned that I can still be flexible with the children." (T6-interview, 2024)

T6's reflection demonstrates that flexibility is not perceived as a threat to masculine identity but as a conscious adaptation. He does not abandon his identity as a man; rather, he reworks it to align with the demands of the classroom. Rigidity, in his view, hinders relational closeness, while flexibility opens space for more effective interaction. In this experience, masculinity is not weakened but redirected through everyday pedagogical practice. What becomes visible is not a loss of authority, but a transformation in how authority is enacted and experienced.

This reconfiguration is also evident in T1's STEM learning activities at TK Islam Plus Mutiara Yogyakarta. Documentation shows how he introduces simple mechanical tools and basic automotive exploration as part of children's cognitive and motor stimulation. Although such activities are often associated with technical domains symbolically coded as masculine, their meaning in the classroom does not rest solely on technical symbolism. In T1's hands, these activities become a medium that integrates professional competence with pedagogical intimacy.

T1 does not position himself as the unquestionable center of technical authority. Instead, he is present as a facilitator who guides the process step by step. He explains procedures carefully, ensures safety, and provides children with space to experiment and ask questions. Technical competence remains visible, yet it is not translated into symbolic superiority over the children. Through close supervision and patient interaction, technical activities become structured spaces of collaboration. This dynamic is also visible in Figure 1, which captures T1 and the children engaged in dialogical exploration.

From an Islamic perspective on early childhood education, conversations about *rahmah* and *sabr* do not function as abstract slogans but as everyday vocabularies that frame interaction. Teachers refer to these values when explaining why they lower their voices or postpone reprimands. Such values do not eliminate boundaries; rather, they reshape how boundaries are enacted in practice. Firmness remains, but it is intertwined with a calmer and more composed mode of conduct. Authority thus gradually consolidates through consistency of disposition rather than through the display of overt power.

Figure 1. STEM Learning Activity Led by T1 at TK Islam Plus Mutiara Yogyakarta (Research Documentation, 2024).

### 3.2. Hybrid Masculinity and Symbolic Paternal Authority

Beyond shifts in how authority is enacted in the classroom, the findings indicate that symbols of masculine leadership do not entirely disappear from the practices of male early childhood teachers. What emerges is not a total abandonment but a reworking of protection, leadership, and caregiving within a more elastic configuration. Teachers continue to function as figures who establish boundaries, yet these boundaries are not necessarily conveyed through harsh expression or emotional distance. In classroom settings, leadership more often appears in the form of calm supervision and consistent presence. Masculinity, therefore, is not discarded but reassembled in ways that align with the pedagogical needs of young children.

T5 explains how he responds to aggressive behavior or tantrums in the classroom:

"There are usually two ways. I do not get angry. When a child is having a tantrum, I let them release their emotions first." (T5-interview, 2024)

This statement reveals a deliberate pause before boundaries are reaffirmed. He does not reject his protective function as a teacher, but he chooses a more measured timing and mode of intervention. By allowing the child to express emotion before intervening, what is preserved is not only classroom order but also the child's dignity as a subject who is heard. At the same time, he returns to the reinforcement of rules the following day, ensuring that boundaries do not dissolve. Protection and regulation thus operate in a more dialogical form without losing their structural function.

T4's experience within a broader social environment reflects a similar dynamic. He recounts how the community responds to his presence as a male kindergarten teacher:

"Sometimes they are surprised. 'Why is there a male kindergarten teacher?' Some of them address me as *Pak Guru* (a respectful Indonesian term for a male teacher)" (T4-interview, 2024)

This surprise simultaneously creates space for recognition. The title "*Pak Guru*" (a respectful Indonesian term for a male teacher) functions not merely as a greeting but as a marker that symbolic authority remains attached to him. Such recognition does not appear to rest solely on biological identity, but on the consistency with which he performs his role both in school and in the community. He is accepted not simply as a man in a feminized space, but as someone who demonstrates competence and social responsibility that are publicly legible.

Research documentation also shows male early childhood teachers serving as speakers in educational and child health forums. They address parents and fellow educators, discussing caregiving practices, stunting issues, and instructional strategies. This positioning indicates that leadership continues to be enacted in public arenas, yet not in a dominative tone. They share experiences rather than issue commands; they invite discussion rather than assert unilateral claims. Such representations suggest an effort to articulate leadership in a more dialogical and practice-based format, even though its effectiveness remains contingent upon audience reception and the surrounding social context.

Figure 2. Representation of Male Early Childhood Teachers as Speakers in Educational and Child Health Forums (Research Documentation, 2024).

Across various discussions, the terms responsibility and *amanah* are frequently invoked when they explain their reasons for remaining in this profession. These terms are not always interpreted in a rigid theological sense, but rather as a way of rationalizing a professional choice that is often questioned. The concept provides a moral footing when confronting the stigma that early childhood education is a women's domain. At the same time, reference to *amanah* does not automatically erase the gendered tensions experienced at the beginning of their careers. It functions more as an identity support that enables them to feel legitimate both as men and as caregivers.

When read as a whole, this configuration indicates that hybrid masculinity does not emerge from a frontal rejection of older models, but from gradual adjustments in everyday practice. Elements of leadership and protection are retained, yet they are no longer displayed in aggressive or emotionally distant forms. Caregiving is not necessarily positioned as a weakening domain; rather, it is reframed as part of professional responsibility, even though this reframing must still contend with entrenched gender expectations. The tension between masculine symbolism and pedagogical demands does not entirely disappear, but it is managed within a more balanced rhythm. At this point, hybrid masculinity can be understood as the outcome of an ongoing negotiation, whose stability remains situational and not necessarily final in every context.

### 3.3. Negotiating Masculinity within a Moral Community

The negotiation of masculinity identified in this study does not take place solely within classroom settings; it also unfolds within collective spaces that bring together comparable experiences. A national focus group discussion involving 162 male early childhood teachers revealed that feelings of being doubted at the beginning of their careers were not isolated incidents. Several participants described nearly uniform patterns: questions about competence, insinuations that early childhood education is women's work, and subtle suspicions from parents. These experiences generated a shared awareness that their positions were subject to stricter social scrutiny than those of their female colleagues. In this context, the community functions not merely as a forum for discussion but as a space for reinterpreting personal experiences as part of a broader structural condition.

One participant expressed his experience as follows:

"We are often doubted at the beginning. They say it is women's work and ask what we can actually do. But when we demonstrate our work, achievements, and the way we educate children, gradually those views begin to change." (FGD-participant, 2024)

This statement does not necessarily indicate symbolic triumph; rather, it depicts a repetitive process of proof. Changes in public perception are described as gradual and dependent upon consistent performance over time. Legitimacy, therefore, is not granted at the outset but

negotiated through work that is visible and subject to evaluation. The narrative also suggests that acceptance remains conditional rather than fully stabilized. Masculinity negotiation thus appears as an ongoing process rather than a completed phase.

Observations during the focus group discussion indicate that many participants emphasized the importance of maintaining a professional image and enhancing formal competence (FGD-observation, 2024). They referred to training programs, certification, creativity competitions, and publication of work as strategies for professional survival. These efforts demonstrate that alternative masculinity is not constructed by separating oneself from existing social structures, but by utilizing widely recognized logics of professionalism. On the one hand, this strategy opens pathways to legitimacy; on the other, it reveals that male teachers feel compelled to work harder to attain comparable levels of trust. The negotiation thus unfolds within a tension between the desire for acceptance and the ongoing need to prove oneself.

The community of male early childhood teachers formed through online forums subsequently becomes a crucial space for managing these experiences. In regular meetings, they share accounts of initial rejection, small successes, and ethical dilemmas encountered in schools. Experiences that initially felt personal and at times triggered self-doubt are reworked as part of a normal professional trajectory. At the same time, discussions reveal that collective support is necessary to prevent the negotiated identity from becoming fragile when members return to their respective local contexts. The community operates as a buffer, yet it is not entirely insulated from external pressures.
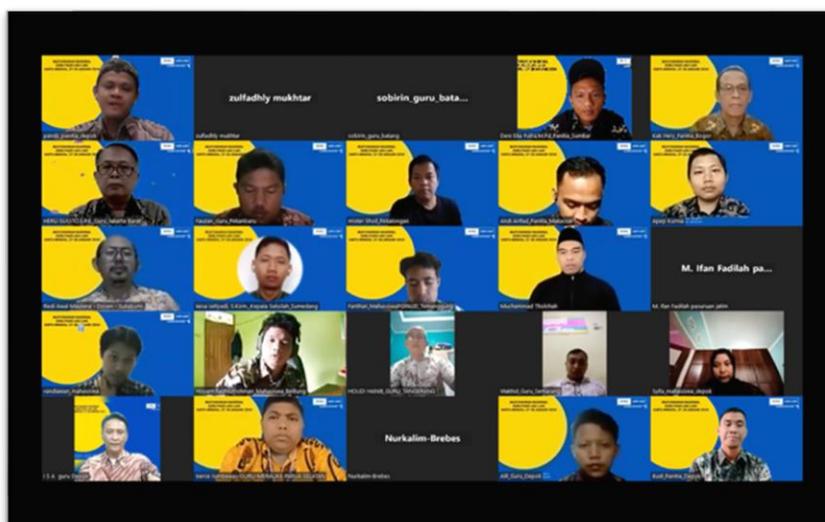


Figure 3. National Focus Group Discussion of Male Early Childhood Teachers as a Space for the Production of Collective Legitimacy (Research Documentation, 2024).

Documentation of the focus group discussion shows a relatively open atmosphere, with participants responding to and reinforcing one another's arguments. Not all experiences are framed as success stories; some explicitly express fatigue in confronting recurring stereotypes. Within these conversations, terms such as *amanah* and responsibility emerge as shared vocabularies that give meaning to their professional choices. Religious values are invoked not as claims of moral superiority, but as ways of affirming that this work carries ethical weight deserving serious commitment. The resulting moral community does not erase gender tensions; rather, it provides a space to articulate them without isolation.

Overall, the findings indicate that alternative masculinity within the context of Islamic early childhood education is shaped through layered interactions between individual experience and collective support. Masculine identity is not entirely relinquished, but adjusted so that it can function within an early childhood educational sphere long perceived as feminized. This process is neither seamless nor permanently resolved. There are moments when recognition is achieved through accomplishment, yet there are also situations in which doubt reemerges in new forms. Negotiating masculinity within this moral community is therefore best understood as a

continuously renewed practice, dependent upon social context, professional performance, and the solidarity cultivated among its members.

### 3.4. *Conceptual Reflection Moral Reconfiguration of Masculinity in ECE*

Drawing on the sequence of findings presented in the three preceding subsections, this section synthesizes recurring patterns in the practices of male early childhood teachers. What becomes visible is not a drastic rupture, but a reordering of how masculinity is enacted, interpreted, and sustained. Across classroom settings, public arenas, and professional communities, a common thread emerges: the effort to maintain authority without sacrificing relational closeness. This process does not unfold uniformly; rather, it proceeds through gradual and context-sensitive adjustments. The framework proposed here should therefore be read as an analytical reflection on observed dynamics rather than a normative prescription of an ideal masculine form.

At the first layer, transformation appears in everyday classroom practice. Teachers continue to establish boundaries and rules, yet the mode of enforcement increasingly relies on emotional regulation and awareness of professional responsibility. Lowering one's voice, allowing a pause when a child is experiencing a tantrum, or engaging in dialogue before imposing consequences indicates that control is no longer understood solely as direct domination. The moral vocabulary they employ provides interpretive grounding for these choices without erasing their position as authority figures. Authority, at this level, is constructed through consistency of disposition and sustained relational engagement.

The second layer reveals that symbols of masculine leadership remain present, albeit in more flexible forms. The title "*Pak Guru*" (a respectful Indonesian term for a male teacher), the role of public speaker, and the protective function exercised in classrooms demonstrate that the symbolic paternal figure is not entirely relinquished. However, this symbolism is enacted through proximity and stable presence rather than through distance or coercive pressure. It operates as a mediating bridge between social expectations of men and the concrete needs of young children. Masculinity here is not abandoned but recalibrated so that it remains functional within pedagogical space.

The third layer concerns the collective support that enables this reconfiguration to endure. Communities of male teachers provide a forum where experiences of doubt, proof, and reinterpretation can be shared. Through meetings and discussion forums, personal experiences are situated within broader structural narratives, preventing them from being internalized solely as individual shortcomings. Such support does not eliminate social pressure, but it creates reflective distance when teachers return to their respective local contexts. Legitimacy, in this sense, is constructed not only through individual performance but also through professional solidarity.

The figure 4 illustrates how masculinity is reshaped through three interconnected layers rather than through a linear progression. At the micro level, authority is reoriented through emotional regulation and relational engagement in everyday classroom practice. At the meso level, symbolic paternal roles mediate between social expectations of masculinity and pedagogical responsibilities. At the macro level, collective networks and professional communities provide situational stabilization that sustains alternative masculine identities.

Taken together, these layers demonstrate that the reconfiguration of masculinity unfolds through continuous interaction between ethical classroom practice, symbolic role performance, and collective reinforcement. Their relationship is reciprocal rather than sequential, and the stability they generate remains contingent upon social reception and the consistency of professional conduct. Alternative masculinity in early childhood education should therefore be understood as an ongoing negotiation, reproduced through repeated practice and shared reflection rather than established as a fixed or final form.
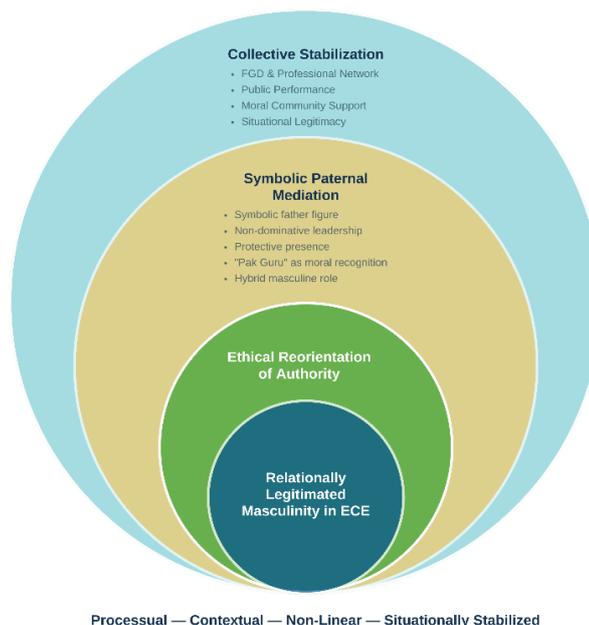
Figure 4. Conceptual Reflection on the Framework of Masculinity Reconfiguration in ECE (Author's Work, 2025)

## 4. Discussion

The findings of this study invite a reconsideration of how masculinity operates within early childhood education settings that are historically feminized, particularly within contemporary policy debates on workforce diversification, teacher quality, and the pursuit of inclusive and equitable education under SDG 4. Rather than positioning male teachers as marginal figures who must either assimilate or resist dominant gender norms, the data suggest a more dialogical process in which authority is reassembled through relational practice. In contrast to hegemonic masculinity, which has often been associated with dominance, distance, and emotional restraint (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), the male teachers in this study cultivate authority through emotional regulation and sustained presence. Their legitimacy does not precede interaction; it gradually emerges from repeated acts of patience, calm explanation, and reflective boundary-setting. This pattern resonates with research indicating that masculinity is enacted through everyday practices rather than fixed traits (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Elliott, 2016). However, the Indonesian context adds a layer of moral articulation that has been less visible in Western-centered scholarship.

At the micro level of classroom interaction, self-regulation becomes a pivotal mechanism in stabilizing masculine authority. Teachers who lower their voices, postpone reprimands, and first calm a crying child are not relinquishing control; they are transforming the temporal logic of discipline. Authority here unfolds through co-regulation, echoing studies that highlight the pedagogical importance of emotional attunement in early childhood settings (Andreasen et al., 2019; Bullough, 2015). Yet the findings move beyond caring masculinity as described by Elliott (2016), because empathy is not merely an ethical disposition but also a strategy for securing professional legitimacy in a context where men are numerically marginal. This aligns with Moosa and Bhana (2023), who observed that male teachers often mediate authority and care simultaneously, but the present study demonstrates more clearly how emotional composure becomes a source of recognition. The repeated linkage between calm conduct and children's trust illustrates a causal chain through which relational authority is consolidated over time.

The integration of STEM activities provides another arena where masculine symbolism is renegotiated rather than erased, with direct implications for children's cognitive engagement, gender perception, and patterns of classroom participation. Technical competence, often culturally coded as masculine, does not function as a vehicle for superiority in these classrooms. Instead, it is embedded within collaborative exploration and careful supervision, echoing findings

that men in early childhood education frequently negotiate expectations tied to physicality and technical skill (Ljunggren & Eideveld, 2023; McDonald et al., 2024). What differentiates the present study is the way such competence is relationalized; expertise is shared, not displayed as dominance. This nuance complicates assumptions that hybrid masculinities merely repackage privilege (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). In these classrooms, technical engagement becomes a medium for intimacy and cognitive stimulation rather than hierarchy. Such practice broadens the interpretive frame through which masculinity in ECE can be understood across diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Public reception and symbolic paternal authority further reveal the layered negotiation of masculinity when viewed through Islamic educational philosophy. Within classical and contemporary Islamic thought, concepts such as amanah and sabr frame teaching as moral stewardship grounded in patience, self-restraint, and disciplined character rather than domination. This ethical horizon, reflected in the concept of tarbiyah as holistic formation, situates relational authority within a recognized intellectual tradition. Being addressed as "*Pak Guru*" or invited to speak in community forums signals that masculine leadership is recalibrated through moral credibility, a pattern also marked by ambivalence in other contexts (Mofokeng et al., 2024; Moosa & Bhana, 2023). In the Indonesian setting, such recognition is closely tied to ethical vocabulary (Fatmawati et al., 2023; Ihsan, 2020), demonstrating that professional legitimacy is anchored as much in moral discourse as in institutional status.

The backdrop of fatherlessness intensifies, yet does not simplify, the significance of male presence in ECE. While some international scholarship has emphasized the compensatory function of male teachers as surrogate father figures (Bullough, 2015; Warin, 2018), the current findings resist a reductive substitution narrative. Male teachers do not claim paternal replacement; instead, they offer an expanded repertoire of gender representation within professional boundaries. This distinction is crucial because it shifts the emphasis from familial symbolism to pedagogical competence. In contexts where millions of children experience limited paternal involvement (Mada, 2023), the presence of nurturing men in classrooms contributes to diversified models of adulthood without collapsing professional roles into domestic ones. Such positioning also aligns with research showing that alternative masculinities can promote more egalitarian relational patterns (Martín Vidaña, 2023; Zubiri-Esnaola et al., 2021).

At the meso and macro levels, the formation of a national community of male early childhood teachers functions as a stabilizing infrastructure. Experiences shared during the focus group discussions reveal that legitimacy is rarely granted automatically; it must be demonstrated repeatedly through competence and ethical consistency. Comparable patterns of professional vulnerability have been identified across Europe, Africa, and Latin America (McGrath et al., 2020; Montecino et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). Yet this study highlights how collective solidarity reframes individual doubt as a structural condition rather than personal inadequacy. Through dialogue, certification efforts, and public engagement, male teachers construct a shared narrative of responsibility that counters isolation. Community, therefore, becomes a mediating layer that sustains alternative masculinity within a feminized profession.

Taken together, these dynamics expose a limitation within prevailing theories of hegemonic and hybrid masculinity, which insufficiently explain how moral-religious discourse can function as an institutional stabilizer of professional authority; the findings therefore point to a moral reconfiguration of masculinity that is deeply embedded within Muslim-majority society. In such settings, ethical discourse is not peripheral but central to professional identity formation (Ihsan, 2020; Lahmar, 2024). The intertwining of relational authority, symbolic leadership, and collective moral validation demonstrates that masculinity in early childhood education is neither fixed nor oppositional; it is continuously negotiated through practice and belief. This pattern expands the global literature by showing that alternative masculinity can be stabilized through ethical and communal embedding rather than solely through policy reform or identity resistance. In Muslim society, where moral legitimacy often precedes social acceptance, the redefinition of masculine authority within ECE signals broader possibilities for gender-inclusive educational transformation. The implications extend beyond teacher identity, pointing toward a more dialogical and ethically grounded model of gender relations in early education systems.

### 4.1. Research Contribution

This study refines hegemonic and hybrid masculinity frameworks by showing that moral-religious discourse can function as an institutional stabilizer of professional authority within Islamic early childhood education. It demonstrates that relational authority becomes embedded through ethical concepts such as amanah and sabr, rather than emerging solely from resistance or adaptation. Methodologically, the integration of phenomenological interviews with a national professional forum enables analysis across classroom practice and community negotiation. At the level of policy and practice, the study links masculinity negotiation to teacher professionalism, classroom climate, STEM pedagogy, and workforce diversification within core ECE quality debates.

### 4.2. Limitations

The qualitative design, based on six primary participants and a national focus group, limits transferability beyond comparable socio cultural contexts. Reliance on self reported narratives may privilege coherence and underrepresent contradiction or ambivalence in everyday practice, while the absence of systematic cross national comparison and perspectives from teachers who exited the profession further narrows the analytical scope. In addition, given the prominence of moral terms such as amanah, responsibility, and sabr in participants' accounts, the researcher adopted a deliberate reflexive stance toward moral vocabulary throughout the interpretive process. Rather than treating these terms as normative affirmations of professional legitimacy, they were analyzed as interpretive resources through which participants constructed meaning within Islamic educational settings, with continuous reflexive monitoring to prevent over identification with familiar ethical frameworks and to ensure that moral language was examined analytically rather than affirmed doctrinally.

### 4.3. Suggestions

Future research could employ longitudinal designs to examine how relational authority and moral legitimacy evolve across career stages. Comparative studies across Islamic and secular ECE contexts may clarify whether moral discourse operates similarly under different regulatory frameworks. Islamic ECE teacher education programs could pilot structured modules integrating gender-sensitive pedagogy with applied reflection on amanah, sabr, and emotional regulation, evaluated through supervised practicum observation. Further inquiry into children's and parents' perspectives would help assess whether such interventions influence classroom climate, retention, and professional recognition.

## 5. Conclusion

This study shows that male teachers in early childhood education do not enter a historically feminized profession as passive minorities nor as agents of overt resistance, but as practitioners who gradually reorganize authority through emotional regulation, pedagogical consistency, and professional accountability. Situated within contemporary debates on workforce diversification, teacher quality, and inclusive education under SDG 4, the findings indicate that authority in ECE is sustained less through positional power than through relational competence developed in everyday classroom interaction. Across interviews, classroom practices, and professional forums, legitimacy emerges from repeated acts of calm boundary setting, dialogic engagement, and curriculum participation, including STEM activities that participants described as supporting children's curiosity and engagement without reinforcing hierarchical distance. Masculinity in this setting is not portrayed by participants as dissolved nor asserted in overtly dominant form; rather, it is described as recalibrated through daily pedagogical work, which teachers perceive as contributing to classroom stability and child participation. Within Muslim majority society, where moral credibility often shapes public trust in educators, this relational mode of authority acquires additional social resonance without shifting the primary focus away from educational quality.

The broader picture that emerges is one in which legitimacy is negotiated simultaneously at classroom and professional levels within the ECE system, while remaining embedded in the

social expectations of Muslim-majority communities. Emotional composure in daily interaction, public recognition of competence, and peer solidarity together shape retention and professional confidence in a gender-imbalanced workforce. Ethical language appears in practice as part of teachers' professional reasoning and community engagement, reflecting the socio-cultural environment in which early childhood institutions operate. Tensions remain visible, including scrutiny and the need for repeated demonstration of competence, suggesting that diversification of the workforce is an ongoing process rather than a completed shift. In this intersection between educational reform and societal norms, the study highlights how gender diversity, professional standards, and community values interact in shaping more inclusive early childhood education systems.

## Declarations

### Author contribution statement

Issaura Dwi Selvi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Project administration.
Suyadi: Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing.
Ro'fah: Validation, Supervision, Writing - Review & Editing.
Sigit Purnama: Investigation, Data curation, Writing - Review & Editing.

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### Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study, including interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentation, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to ethical considerations and the involvement of children and community members, raw data is not publicly archived.

### Declaration of interests statement

All authors declare that they have no financial or personal interests that could influence the work presented in this manuscript.

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