



Cultural Negotiation: NGO Strategies in Handling Sexual Violence in Islamic Boarding Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the public relations strategies employed by the Women's Crisis Center (WCC) Jombang in navigating the complex socio-cultural landscape of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) to prevent and handle sexual abuse. Utilizing a qualitative single-case study design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with WCC's advocacy and counseling staff, as well as pesantren leaders, supplemented by documentation of strategic policies and safeguarding procedures. The findings reveal that WCC Jombang successfully implements a "cultural negotiation" model by reframing human rights advocacy into local religious principles and establishing participatory Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). This strategy successfully transforms initial institutional resistance into collaborative partnerships by adapting language, building relational trust, and respecting traditional hierarchical ethics. This study proposes cultural negotiation as a faith-based public relations mechanism for addressing sexual violence in religious educational institutions. It contributes to global strategic communication scholarship by demonstrating how non-governmental organizations can bridge universal human rights with conservative religious authorities to foster sustainable safeguarding environments.

Keywords: Cultural Negotiation, Islamic Boarding Schools, Public Relations Strategy, Safeguarding, Sexual Violence.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of sexual violence against women and children in Indonesia has reached an alarming level of urgency, making it a national emergency that requires collective attention from all levels of society (Ahsanul Hakim et al., 2023). Based on national data from the Online Information System for the Protection of Women and Children (SIMFONI PPA), thousands of reports of violence are recorded each year, reflecting the complexity of the problem, ranging from physical and psychological abuse to sexual exploitation (*SIMFONI PPA (Sistem Informasi Online Perlindungan Perempuan Dan Anak)*, 2023). In the regional distribution map, East Java Province consistently ranks second-highest in cases of violence

against women nationally, with Jombang Regency emerging as one of the hotspots with a significant trend in violence rates (Barron, 2019; Jones, 2025).

Sexual violence is not only a national issue but also a global public health concern affecting millions of women and children worldwide (Li et al., 2023; Sardinha et al., 2024; Stöckl & Sorenson, 2024). Efforts to prevent and respond to such violence require multi-level interventions that involve institutions, communities, and culturally embedded systems (Moreno & Boxer, 2025; Paat et al., 2025). This broader perspective reinforces the urgency of addressing sexual violence not only through legal frameworks but also through socially and culturally adaptive strategies (Kennedy et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023).

Based on case handling data from WCC Jombang, there has been an alarming trend of violence over recent years. Throughout 2022, 86 cases of gender-based violence were recorded. Of these, 38 cases were categorized as Domestic Violence (KDRT), predominantly perpetrated by biological fathers and husbands. Furthermore, there were 46 cases of sexual violence, which included 15 cases of rape, 9 cases of sexual harassment, and 21 cases of electronic-based sexual violence. Meanwhile, in 2023, WCC Jombang recorded 80 cases of violence, comprising 30 domestic violence cases, 2 general criminal cases, and 48 sexual violence cases. Strikingly, out of the total sexual violence cases in 2023, 33 of the victims were children or *santri*. The detailed statistics highlighting this urgency are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Statistics of Gender-Based and Sexual Violence in Jombang (2022-2024)

Violence Statistics in Jombang (2022-2024)	Frequency/Status Details	Source
Total Cases in 2022	86 Cases (46 Sexual Violence, 38 Domestic Violence/KDRT)	WCC Jombang (Annual Report)
Total Cases in 2023	80 Cases (48 Sexual Violence, 30 Domestic Violence/KDRT)	WCC Jombang (Annual Report)
Child Victims of Sexual Violence (2023)	33 Children (Out of 48 total sexual violence cases)	WCC Jombang
Electronic-Based Sexual Violence (2022)	21 Cases	WCC Jombang
Perpetrator Dominance	Immediate Environment (Boyfriend, Uncle, Teacher)	WCC Jombang

Jombang, which is geographically and culturally known as the “City of Santri,” has more than 232 Islamic boarding schools that serve as centers of Islamic education and moral fortresses for the community (Alvanico, 2022; Christiyanto & Astutik, 2018; Pertiwi & Mulyono, 2021). However, the high rate of violence involving santri and students in this region creates a painful sociological contradiction, where institutions that are supposed to be safe spaces often become locations for immoral acts (Reza Nur Alfiani Agustin & Akhmad Qomaru Zaman, 2023).

Sexual violence in Islamic boarding schools has different dimensions compared to other educational institutions. This is due to the strong power imbalance between caregivers

(Kiai/Ustadz) and students, where caregivers are seen as authoritative figures who have spiritual and social legitimacy (Maulanasyah & Ahmad, 2023). Major cases, such as those involving the son of a caretaker at the Shiddiqiyah Ploso Islamic boarding school or the head of an Islamic boarding school in Ngoro, show that perpetrators often use their position to silence victims through misinterpreted religious doctrine. The culture of silence and stigmatization of victims is often exacerbated by the desire of institutions to maintain their “good name” and the spirit of religious institutions, so that many cases are never revealed or resolved through internal channels that do not fulfill the rights of victims (De Welde et al., 2023).

In facing the complexity of these social and cultural dynamics, the role of the Women's Crisis Center (WCC) in Jombang has become crucial. Established in 1999 as a response to the crisis of gender-based violence, WCC Jombang has developed various strategies to break through the barriers of Islamic boarding schools, which tend to be closed. One of the main instruments used is a public relations (PR) strategy. However, PR in this context is not understood as a commercial publicity function, but rather as a strategic communication process that aims to build mutually beneficial relationships and facilitate “cultural negotiations.” The WCC Jombang must be able to navigate communication barriers that arise due to differences in paradigms between human rights activism and conservative religious traditions (Makrifatin, 2023).

Previous research on sexual violence in Islamic boarding schools has generally focused on legal protection or the psychological impact on victims. For example, Imamah (2020) examined the role of WCC in fulfilling children's rights, while Makrifatin (2023) focused on preventive efforts in the issue of domestic violence (KDRT). However, these studies are mostly centered on the Indonesian local context and legal-formal perspectives. To gain a broader understanding, this issue must be framed within global scholarship. Globally, research on NGO advocacy in faith-based institutions demonstrates that external intervention often faces structural barriers due to institutional insularity and sacred authority (Banyard, 2019). This ties closely into the intersection of public relations and social justice advocacy, where PR is increasingly recognized not merely as a corporate publicity tool, but as a strategic function to facilitate activist-public dialogue and social change (Heath, 2018). In the context of safeguarding in religious schools, international literature emphasizes that effective child protection requires culturally embedded frameworks rather than rigid secular mandates (UN Women, 2022). Furthermore, the dynamics between religious authority and sexual violence present a global challenge; perpetrators in sacred environments frequently weaponize internal hierarchies and dogmatic interpretations to silence victims, necessitating highly specialized strategic communication in conservative communities (De Welde et al., 2023). To overcome these communicative barriers, recent scholarship highlights the power of faith-based framing and human rights communication, proving that reframing universal rights through the lens of local religious tenets significantly lowers institutional defensiveness (Chukwu et al., 2023).

Despite these extensive global discussions, a significant research gap remains: there has been no in-depth analysis that integrates these dimensions to examine how NGO PR strategies are specifically designed to build long-term relational ties with deeply conservative religious institutions to dismantle sexual violence. This study attempts to fill this gap by using Relationship Management Theory to assess the dimensions of trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality built between WCC Jombang and Islamic boarding schools (Ki et al., 2023; Ledingham, 2018). The focus of this study is to describe the forms of PR strategies used by WCC Jombang in establishing relationships with Islamic

boarding schools as an effort to prevent and handle cases of sexual violence, as well as to analyze the implementation process in the field. The fundamental novelty of this article lies in its conceptualization of cultural negotiation as a public relations strategy that bridges human-rights advocacy and Islamic pesantren authority through theological framing, relational trust-building, and participatory safeguarding mechanisms.

METHODS

This research employed a qualitative single-case study design focusing on the Women's Crisis Center (WCC) Jombang as a strategic communication actor in preventing and handling sexual violence within Islamic boarding schools in Jombang. A case study approach is particularly appropriate for examining complex social phenomena within real-life contexts and allows for in-depth exploration of communication practices (Nasution, 2023). The case was selected as a single instrumental case because WCC Jombang represents a distinctive advocacy institution that operates within a socio-religious environment characterized by strong hierarchical authority, cultural sensitivity, and resistance toward external intervention.

The boundaries of the case are clearly defined to ensure analytical focus. The main unit of analysis is the public relations strategies of WCC Jombang and their implementation in building and maintaining relationships with Islamic boarding schools. The case context is limited to Islamic boarding schools in Jombang, East Java, which are socially recognized as part of a strong pesantren network with deeply embedded religious values. The observation period spans from 2022 to 2024, during which WCC Jombang actively implemented its "Pesantren Care" program as a strategic initiative for prevention and handling of sexual violence cases.

The research setting includes WCC Jombang as the primary institutional actor and selected partner Islamic boarding schools that have engaged with WCC's programs. The participants consisted of three key informants categorized into two groups: (1) internal actors of WCC Jombang, including the Advocacy Division Coordinator and the Assistance Division Coordinator, who were directly involved in designing and implementing communication strategies, and (2) an external stakeholder, namely a pesantren caregiver (Ibu Nyai), who provided an institutional perspective from within the pesantren environment.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria: (a) direct involvement in the formulation and execution of WCC's public relations strategies, (b) experience in handling or responding to cases of sexual violence within Islamic boarding schools, and (c) the ability to provide reflective and in-depth insights into the dynamics of communication and cultural negotiation. The number of informants was limited to three due to the focused nature of the case study; however, data collection was conducted until thematic saturation was achieved, indicated by the repetition of patterns and the absence of new significant insights across interviews.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which allow flexibility in exploring participants' perspectives while maintaining alignment with research objectives (Sugiyono, 2025). In addition, non-participant observation was conducted to capture the contextual dynamics of WCC's advocacy practices. Secondary data were obtained through document analysis, including annual reports (CATAHU), draft Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), program materials such as "Pesantren Care," and institutional publications.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach that integrates both inductive and deductive coding. In line with the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, data analysis involves processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2013). To provide greater analytical transparency, this study elaborates these processes through detailed coding stages.

First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to maintain the accuracy, completeness, and authenticity of the empirical data. Second, open coding was conducted by examining the transcripts line-by-line to identify significant statements, recurring patterns, key concepts, and meaningful units relevant to the research focus. Third, the initial codes were grouped into broader thematic categories representing key patterns in WCC Jombang's public relations strategies.

These themes were developed inductively from the data to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' perspectives. Fourth, the themes were then organized and interpreted according to the dimensions of Relationship Management Theory (Ki et al., 2023), namely trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality. In this stage, the theory served as a deductive analytical framework for structuring and interpreting the empirical findings.

Finally, interpretation was conducted across multiple data sources, including interviews, observations, and documents, to ensure analytical consistency and depth of understanding. This cross-source interpretation enabled the researcher to validate emerging themes and strengthen the credibility of the analysis. The integration of inductive and deductive thematic analysis allowed the study to balance empirical sensitivity with theoretical rigor. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applied source triangulation by comparing information obtained from different informants and data sources, as well as member checking to confirm the accuracy of interpretations with participants (Miles et al., 2013). To provide a clearer overview of the methodological process and analytical stages, the research procedures are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Research Methodology Stages and Expected Outputs

Methodological Steps	Main Activities	Output
Preparation Stage	Identification of sexual violence phenomena in Jombang & Literature Review	Research Proposal & Theoretical Framework
Implementation Stage	In-depth interviews & managerial observation	Primary Data Transcripts & Field Notes
Analysis Stage	Data reduction & thematic coding (Miles & Huberman)	Findings on Cultural Negotiation Strategy Patterns
Validation Stage	Triangulation of sources	Credible & Objective Data

This choice of a qualitative method allows researchers not only to report facts but also to interpret the dynamics of power and linguistic adaptation that are at the core of WCC Jombang's PR strategy. By positioning Islamic boarding schools not merely as objects, but as targets of relationships with strong authority, this study can describe the process of social intervention that is carried out carefully and sensitively in accordance with local religious norms (Fadilah Ghardina Nike, 2025).

To provide a clear and comprehensive overview of the methodological framework applied in this study, the systematic stages from problem identification to the formulation of the final strategy model are visually summarized in Figure 1 below.

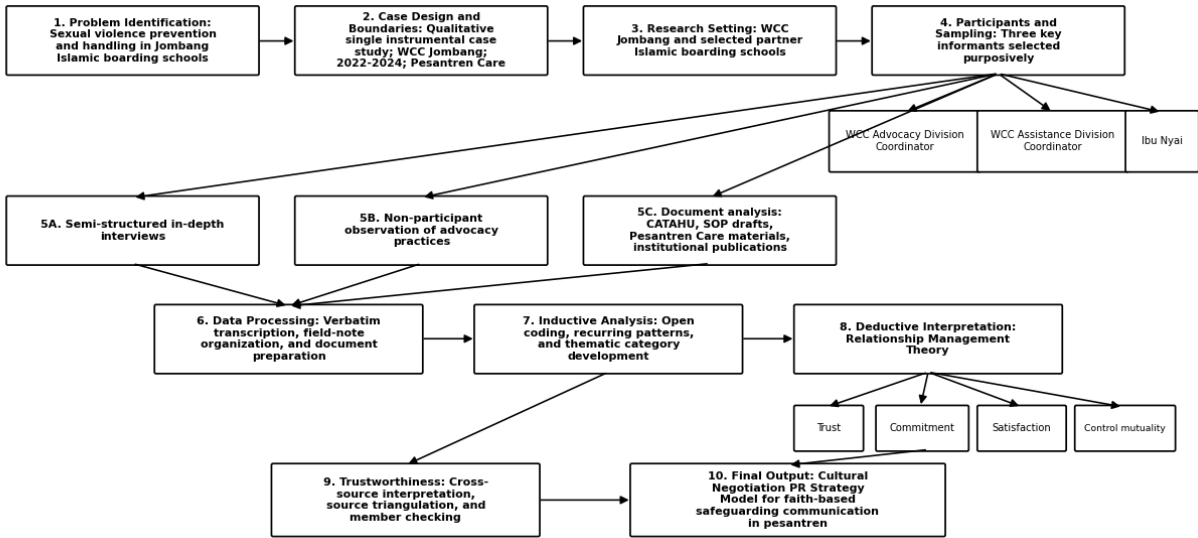


Figure 1. Methodological Framework of the Study

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The public relations strategy implemented by the Women's Crisis Center (WCC) Jombang in addressing the issue of sexual violence in Islamic boarding schools is not merely an effort at publicity or image management, but rather a form of long-term relationship management that focuses on the quality of interactions between organizations. Through the lens of Relationship Management Theory, this study found that WCC Jombang succeeded in changing the position of the institution from an unfamiliar outsider to a trusted strategic partner through a series of relational tactics that were highly sensitive to the cultural sensitivities of Islamic boarding schools (Andersson, 2024).

PR Strategy Form: Culturally Based Relationship Management

The success of PR in the context of non-profit organizations such as WCC Jombang is largely determined by four dimensions of relationship quality: trust, commitment, satisfaction, and shared control (Ki et al., 2023). Field findings show that WCC negotiates each of these dimensions to penetrate the defenses of Islamic boarding schools, which tend to be protective of their institutional spirit.

a. The Dimension of Trust as an Entry Point

Trust is a very important foundation because the issue of sexual violence in religious environments is considered sensitive. WCC Jombang realizes that entering the pesantren environment with an identity as a human rights activist often leads to rejection in the early stages. Therefore, WCC builds trust by forming an Inclusion Alliance that involves a number of organizations that already have legitimacy and cultural proximity to pesantren, such as Fatayat NU and IPPNU (Kurniawan, 2024).

In addition to external collaboration, trust is built through respect for the hierarchical ethics of Islamic boarding schools through the tradition of “sowan.” WCC prioritizes

interpersonal lobbying with caregivers (Kiai/Ibu Nyai) to obtain the blessing of the highest authority before approaching the santri level. This relational tactic is highly effective in bypassing initial rejections. As emphasized by the Advocacy Division Coordinator (PW): “Entering the pesantren cannot be done using the language of street activists. We must first pay our respects (*sowan*) to the Kiai or Ibu Nyai. Once the leadership gives the green light, the santri will automatically be open and trust our programs because of their deep obedience to their teachers.” (Informant PW, Interview 2024).

This is reinforced by the WCC's competence in providing free legal assistance, a technical expertise that adds value and makes pesantren leaders such as Ibu Nyai UC feel the need to involve the WCC in drafting internal protection regulations.

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However, initial resistance was still encountered, particularly in pesantren that were not familiar with external advocacy organizations. This indicates that trust-building is not an immediate outcome but rather a gradual and negotiated process. As expressed by one informant, “At the beginning, some pesantren were hesitant and even suspicious of our presence. They were worried that we would expose internal issues to the public” (Informant PW, Interview 2024). This finding suggests that trust is constructed through repeated interaction, cultural sensitivity, and institutional legitimacy, rather than assumed from the outset.

Table 3: Trust-Building Tactics, Mechanisms, and Relational Implications

Trust-building tactics	Implementation mechanisms	Relational implications
Inclusive Alliance Collaboration	Involving 18 community organizations, including Fatayat NU, IPPNU, and journalists (PWI)	Breaking down initial barriers in Islamic boarding schools
Sowan (social gathering) tradition	Interpersonal approach to Kiai/Ibu Nyai	Gaining moral legitimacy
Linguistic Adaptation	Avoiding taboo words, using diction that is friendly to santri	Creating a sense of security in dialogue
Use of “Good Practices”	Using testimonials from cooperative Islamic boarding schools	Reducing suspicion of resistant Islamic boarding schools

As detailed in Table 3, the trust-building mechanisms utilized by WCC Jombang reflect a highly adaptive public relations approach. Rather than forcing a progressive human rights narrative from the outside, WCC strategically employs structural collaboration (through the Inclusive Alliance) and interpersonal diplomacy (the *sowan* tradition) to gain initial access and moral legitimacy. Furthermore, linguistic adaptation and the use of "good practice" testimonials function to lower institutional defensiveness, creating a psychologically safe space for open dialogue. Ultimately, these four tactics synergize to transform WCC's identity from a suspected external entity into a culturally respectful and legitimate partner within the *pesantren* network.

b. Dimensions of Commitment and Knowledge Investment

WCC Jombang's commitment is evident in the continuity of the “Pesantren Care” program, which was initiated in 2017. WCC is not only present during times of crisis, but also demonstrates long-term dedication through non-material investments in the form of knowledge transfer regarding Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR). This sincerity is evidenced by the willingness of WCC staff to adjust their schedules to the busy rhythm of the pesantren, demonstrating flexibility in order to maintain the comfort of their partners. This investment of time and energy is far more appreciated by the pesantren than physical assistance, as it touches on a fundamental paradigm shift among pesantren residents (Eviningrum, 2023).

c. Dimensions of Satisfaction and Relationship Retention

Satisfaction in the WCC PR relationship is marked by a change in interaction patterns from passive to proactive. Pesantren that are satisfied with the WCC's performance no longer close themselves off, but instead take the initiative to invite the WCC back for other agendas or refer cases of violence they encounter. The pesantren's willingness to collaborate structurally demonstrates a high level of institutional trust. The Caretaker of As-Saidiyah 2 Bahrul Ulum validated this shift in perspective: “WCC does not come to dictate us. Their competence in legal assistance and their willingness to deeply understand our religious values made us realize that we actually needed their expertise to draft our internal protection regulations.” (Informant Ibu Nyai UC, Interview 2024) The highest validation of this satisfaction is the emergence of initiatives from Islamic boarding schools such as As-Saidiyah 2 to request special assistance in drafting SOPs. The WCC manages this satisfaction through egalitarian conflict management, where every difference of opinion is resolved through open dialogue in order to find mutual solutions without judging each other (Ki et al. 2023).

d. Dimension of Control Mutuality

In the hierarchical structure of Islamic boarding schools, the distribution of power is the most challenging aspect. WCC Jombang addresses this by positioning itself as an equal partner (egalitarian), rather than as an instructor who dictates rules. In developing SOPs, WCC gives students and administrators broad control to formulate their own policies, thereby creating a sense of ownership of the program. However, WCC maintains firm control over the principle of victim protection; they will draw the line if the pesantren proposes solutions that violate the human rights of victims, such as forced marriage with the perpetrator. It is this balance between technical flexibility and principled firmness that maintains WCC's credibility in the eyes of the public and the pesantren (Andersson, 2024).

The participatory process of drafting SOPs proves that effective PR strategies must be able to share power without losing control over principles. By placing students and administrators as rule drafters, WCC succeeded in dismantling the perception of being dictated to by outside parties and replacing it with strong internal commitment. The success of institutionalizing these rules shows that NGO PR strategies have evolved beyond momentary crisis management toward building permanent systemic resilience in religious institutions.

The transformation from a “culture of silence” to a “culture of reporting” in Islamic boarding schools is the result of consistent and sensitive persuasive communication that respects local norms. The WCC Jombang strategy proves that in order to create social change in traditional environments, communicators must be able to speak using the language of their audience, respect their authority, but remain steadfast in fighting for the human rights of vulnerable groups (Ki et al. 2023).

Nevertheless, the participatory development of SOPs was not uniformly implemented across all pesantren. In more hierarchical institutions, decision-making remains centralized, limiting the involvement of santri in the policy formulation process. One informant explained, “In some pesantren, decisions are fully controlled by the leadership, so involving students in drafting rules is still considered unusual” (Informant UC, Interview 2024). This indicates that while participatory strategies are ideal, their implementation is shaped by existing power structures within each institution

Implementation of Communication Strategies: Prevention and Management

The implementation of the WCC Jombang PR strategy in the field follows the stages of strategic communication management designed to respond to unique cultural challenges in Islamic boarding schools.

a. Planning Stage: Needs-Based Mapping

Program planning begins with a bottom-up analysis of the situation. WCC does not impose ready-made programs, but responds to the real concerns expressed by Islamic boarding schools through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Audience mapping is carried out meticulously to differentiate between the approaches used for “open” boarding schools (those that are already gender-aware) and “closed” boarding schools (those that are conservative and resistant to NGOs). For closed boarding schools, WCC uses third parties such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs as a bureaucratic bridge to gain access.

b. Message Formulation Stage: Theological Framing

Theological Framing is at the heart of the WCC's cultural negotiation strategy. The narrative of human rights, often considered secular, is reframed using authoritative Islamic terminology. The WCC frames the prevention of sexual violence not as a liberal agenda, but as a manifestation of Maqashid Sharia (the objectives of Sharia law), specifically the principles of Hifz an-Nafs (preserving life), Hifz an-Nasl (preserving offspring), and Hifz al-Aql (preserving reason). In addition, the concept of gender equality is translated into the principle of Mubadalah (reciprocity), which emphasizes cooperation between men and women without oppression. This strategy provides theological legitimacy for santri to dare to reject unwanted treatment and for caregivers to dare to be open in handling cases.

Despite its effectiveness, the theological framing approach also faces interpretive challenges. Some pesantren actors initially perceived concepts such as gender equality as potentially conflicting with traditional religious understandings. As noted by an informant, “We had to be very careful with the terms we used. If we used the wrong words, they would immediately reject the idea” (Informant AA, Interview 2024). This highlights that linguistic adaptation is not merely a technical strategy but a critical process that determines whether the message is accepted or resisted within religious contexts.

c. Implementation Stage: Participatory Methods and Media Mix

From a strategic communication perspective, this adaptive approach reflects the importance of aligning messages with audience values, situational contexts, and institutional characteristics in order to achieve effective communication outcomes (Coombs, 2021; Heath, 2018). This indicates that communication strategies in sensitive environments require flexibility, audience awareness, and contextual responsiveness rather than rigid message delivery.

WCC Jombang abandoned the one-way lecture method and adopted participatory methods such as simulations and role-plays that placed students as active subjects. Communication strategies were strengthened through the use of massive multi-channel media. In addition to face-to-face socialization, WCC produced educational films such as

“Pulih” and “Mimpi” and utilized digital campaigns through Instagram Live and YouTube to reach the younger generation. This step has succeeded in bringing the issue of sexual violence into the national public discourse, while also increasing the visibility of the institution as the main reference in crisis management.

d. Evaluation Stage: Challenges and Paradigm Shifts

The evaluation shows that cultural barriers, such as institutional fear of “exposing shame,” remain a major challenge. The WCC addresses this through a language reframing strategy; the term “trial,” which is frightening to students, is replaced with “counseling,” and the term ‘punishment’ is replaced with “non-repetition” efforts. A paradigm challenge was also found in the parameter of “Child-Friendly Islamic Boarding Schools,” where the WCC sought to deconstruct the understanding that the success of an institution is not measured by zero cases, but rather by how responsive the available handling system is when cases occur (Yanti, 2022).

Cultural Negotiation as a New Paradigm for Islamic Communication

This process can be understood as a form of intercultural communication, in which meaning is negotiated through culturally sensitive interaction, identity recognition, and adaptive communication strategies (Ting-Toomey, 2017). In this context, communication is not merely about delivering messages, but about aligning values, symbols, and meanings across different cultural and institutional frameworks.

The findings of this study indicate that the success of NGO PR strategies in religious environments requires the ability to engage in deep cultural negotiations. This is not merely a matter of changing words, but rather a matter of reclaiming symbolic meanings in the pesantren tradition in order to create sustainable social transformation (Kurniawan, 2024).

a. Utilizing Kinship Relations as Informal Communication Channels in Public Relations

The WCC Jombang demonstrates a deep understanding that Islamic boarding schools in Jombang do not exist as independent entities, but are bound together in a strong network of kinship relations. Researchers analyzed that the success of WCC in entering one large Islamic boarding school created a ripple effect of trust that spread to other boarding schools within the family network. This lineage serves as an “informal PR channel” that is far more effective than formal government channels in distributing social capital and institutional trust (Mughiroh, 2024).

b. Theological Framing as a Detoxification Strategy

The WCC's use of the concepts of Mubadalah and Maqashid Syariah acts as a “detoxification” strategy against the issue of sexual violence, which was originally considered taboo or vulgar. By framing the protection of the body as a religious obligation to safeguard God's trust, the WCC provides moral legitimacy for pesantren residents to dare to talk about and fight violence. This narrative changes the position of santri: rejecting abuse does not mean disobeying the teacher, but rather carrying out religious commands to maintain self-respect (Azmi, 2025).

c. Power Relations Management and System Independence

The participatory process of drafting SOPs proves that effective PR strategies must be able to share power without losing control over principles. By placing students and administrators as rule drafters, WCC succeeded in dismantling the perception of being dictated to by outside parties and replacing it with strong internal commitment. The success of institutionalizing these rules shows that NGO PR strategies have evolved beyond

momentary crisis management toward building permanent systemic resilience in religious institutions.

The transformation from a “culture of silence” to a “culture of reporting” in Islamic boarding schools is the result of consistent and sensitive persuasive communication that respects local norms. The WCC Jombang strategy proves that in order to create social change in traditional environments, communicators must be able to speak using the language of their audience, respect their authority, but remain steadfast in fighting for the human rights of vulnerable groups (Khan et al., 2022).

Preventing sexual violence requires not only legal and institutional responses, but also community-based and culturally embedded interventions that address underlying social norms and power relations (Banyard, 2019). In this context, WCC Jombang’s approach demonstrates that effective prevention strategies must engage with local cultural systems and involve collective awareness-building rather than relying solely on formal mechanisms (Rahman et al., 2025).

Despite the identified successes, this study also reveals several limitations and challenges in the implementation of WCC Jombang’s public relations strategies. Resistance from more conservative Islamic boarding schools remains a significant barrier, particularly among institutions that perceive external intervention as a threat to their authority and institutional autonomy. In such contexts, WCC’s relational and cultural approach is not always immediately effective and often requires prolonged negotiation or support from external actors (Parsons et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the effectiveness of the cultural negotiation model is highly dependent on the openness of pesantren leadership. In more closed and hierarchical institutions, limited space for dialogue and participation may constrain the implementation of strategies such as theological framing and participatory SOP development. This suggests that the success of WCC’s approach is context-specific and may not be directly applicable to all pesantren environments.

This study also acknowledges the potential for institutional bias, as much of the data was derived from WCC actors and cooperative partner pesantren (Waziroh et al., 2026). As a result, perspectives from more resistant or non-participating institutions may not be fully represented. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution, particularly when considering their broader generalization beyond the studied context.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the public relations strategy implemented by the Women’s Crisis Center (WCC) Jombang in preventing and handling sexual violence within Islamic boarding schools. The findings demonstrate that WCC applies a culturally adaptive public relations approach grounded in long-term relationship management and strategic cultural negotiation. Through interpersonal approaches such as *sowan*, collaboration with religious organizations via the Inclusion Alliance, and the utilization of pesantren relational networks, WCC successfully transformed initial institutional resistance into collaborative partnerships without weakening its humanitarian advocacy principles. This adaptive approach enables the organization to build trust, maintain relational legitimacy, and respect traditional hierarchical ethics embedded within pesantren culture.

Theoretically, this study transcends its local context by positioning Jombang not merely as an isolated case, but as a rich empirical foundation for developing the broader concept of faith-based safeguarding communication and religiously embedded public relations advocacy. This study introduces cultural negotiation as a faith-based public

relations mechanism through which NGOs translate human-rights advocacy into religiously legitimate, relationally acceptable, and institutionally actionable safeguarding practices within Islamic boarding schools. By bridging universal human rights discourse with local religious authority through concepts like Mubadalah and Maqashid Syariah, this model provides a novel framework that attracts global scholarship across communication studies, public relations, gender studies, religious studies, and Islamic education.

Practically, the implementation of this strategy drives a significant shift from reactive crisis management toward long-term systemic transformation and institutionalized prevention systems. The participatory development of internal protection mechanisms and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) empowers santri and administrators to break the culture of silence and actively foster a transparent reporting environment. These findings serve as a strategic guideline for international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and faith-based educational institutions worldwide in designing culturally embedded safeguarding frameworks that successfully navigate sensitive religious hierarchies.

Despite these insights, this study is limited to a qualitative single-case design focusing on WCC Jombang and its cooperative partner networks, which may not fully represent the diverse socio-cultural dynamics of all Islamic boarding schools across Indonesia. Future research is encouraged to explore similar advocacy and strategic communication practices in broader regional contexts, particularly in addressing emerging challenges such as electronic-based sexual violence and digital communication within conservative communities.

Declaration of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author used Gemini (by Google) to refine the language and improve the grammatical accuracy of the manuscript. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the integrity, accuracy, and originality of the publication's final version.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

- a. Desi Purnilasari: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing (Original Draft).
- b. Ainun Fitri Mughiroh: Supervision, Validation, Writing (Review & Editing).

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Interested parties may contact Desi Purnilasari at desinilasaari@gmail.com for further information regarding the data used in this research.

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Ethical Approval Statement

The authors confirm that this study adheres to ethical research standards and was conducted with the formal permission of the Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Hasyim Asy'ari, and WCC Jombang. All participants provided informed consent, and no identifying information was used to ensure the privacy and safety of the individuals involved.

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