

# THE ROLE OF FATAYAT NU IN COUNTERING SEXTORTION AND PROTECTING WOMEN'S DIGNITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF URBAN MUSLIM SOCIETY

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## Abstract

This study examines sextortion as a form of gender-based sexual corruption within urban Muslim communities, particularly in educational and religious settings, and analyses the role of Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in addressing the culture of silence surrounding the issue. The research employed a qualitative design within an interpretive-critical paradigm. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten informants comprising educators, Fatayat NU cadres, urban community members, and students, as well as participant observation and document analysis. The data were analysed using thematic analysis informed by Feminist Standpoint Theory, the Spiral of Silence, social constructionism, and critical communication perspectives. The findings indicate three main themes. First, sextortion is frequently normalised through symbolic authority, moral legitimacy, and ambiguous social relations that obscure coercive practices. Second, fear of stigma, institutional reputation, and digital exposure reinforces a culture of silence, particularly among women in urban religious environments. Third, participatory communication spaces facilitated by Fatayat NU contribute to developing critical awareness and provide alternative forums for articulating women's experiences, although these initiatives remain limited by uneven institutional support and the absence of integrated protection mechanisms. This study contributes to discussions on gendered corruption and urban Muslim communication by highlighting the relationship between patriarchal power relations, silence, and participatory religious activism in the prevention of sextortion.

**Keywords:** Sextortion; Sexual Corruption; Fatayat NU; Feminist Communication; Urban Muslim Society

## A. Introduction

In recent years, discussions regarding gender-based violence and various forms of abuse of power over the body and sexuality have become increasingly prominent in

public discourse; as highlighted by Arni (2024) this is increasingly evident both in everyday life and in media coverage Salsabila et al., (2025) such as sexual crimes threatening adolescents in digital media (Idris et al., 2024), alongside the intensifying discourse on sexual violence across various sectors including bureaucracy, education, politics, and religious communities (Gunawan et al., 2024; Ray & Henry, 2025) it is explained that a form of abuse of power that is often overlooked in the category of corruption is 'sexual corruption'—that is, the practice whereby sexual relations (Arruda et al., 2020), sexually suggestive attention, or access to the body are used as a reward, a condition, or a 'price' within a power relationship.

Studies on corruption in Indonesia generally focus solely on the abuse of authority for financial gain (Amalia, 2024), whilst the sexual dimension of the abuse of power has not been widely discussed as a form of corruption from a gender perspective (Debski et al., 2018). Furthermore, studies on sexual violence tend to highlight the dynamics of victimhood and patterns of violence, without systematically linking them to the logic of institutionalised power corruption. In traditional academic discourse, corruption is generally understood as the abuse of authority for personal financial gain (financial-oriented corruption). However, contemporary global literature, as highlighted in Transparency International Indonesia (2023), is beginning to shift this paradigm by introducing the concept of sextortion as a form of gender-based corruption. Conceptually, the link between conventional corruption and sexual corruption lies in the element of 'exchange' (*quid pro quo*); whilst conventional corruption uses money as currency, sexual corruption positions the body and sexual services as an illegal 'currency' to gain access to public services, academic merit, or structural positions (Carnegie, 2019)

From a gendered perspective on corruption, the abuse of power is not always driven by economic gain, but can also take the form of sexual exploitation that capitalises on inequalities in social relations, positions of power, and moral authority. Consequently, sextortion cannot be understood merely as individual sexual harassment, but rather as a corrupt practice because it involves the abuse of authority to obtain non-financial benefits through sexual coercion. This perspective is important because it broadens the understanding of corruption from mere economic loss to a violation of women's integrity, dignity, and human rights within unequal power relations.

At the national level, this phenomenon has been identified as the abuse of unequal power relations. A study by the National Commission on Violence Against Women (2023) shows that within social and religious institutions, moral authority is often abused to perpetuate structured sexual violence. This confirms that sexual corruption is not merely ordinary harassment, but a corrupt act as it involves a breach of professional integrity and a betrayal of public trust for non-material gain. International research also indicates that sextortion occurs across sectors, such as education, healthcare, public administration, and religious organisations (Coleman et al., 2024; Bragagnolo & Lezama, 2025) Meanwhile, in the Indonesian context, similar practices have been identified within power dynamics in educational and religious institutions that exploit women's moral compliance towards figures of authority (Pebriaisyah et al., 2022; Winarno et al., 2025). Thus, understanding sextortion as gender-based corruption enables a sharper analysis of the structural barriers faced by women in urban spaces, where their vulnerability is often exploited under the guise of formal or religious authority.

The practice of sextortion, or sexual corruption, manifests in the form of 'sex-for-a-job', 'sex-for-a-grade' or 'sex-for-access'—terms often referred to in the global

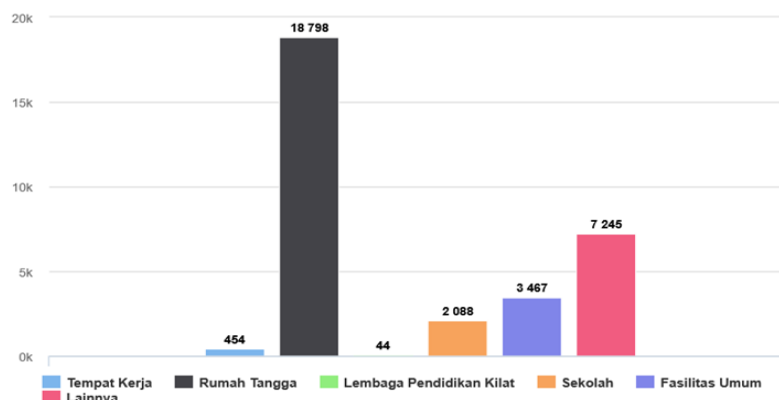
literature as ‘sextortion’ or, more commonly today, ‘sexual (Syauket et al., 2024)—a finding supported by research (Morley, 2011). Furthermore, in a study by Coleman et al., (2024), sex is chosen as a means of payment; sextortion or sexual corruption is a form of abuse of power that causes psychological, social, and even economic harm to the victim (Bragagnolo & Lezama, 2025). In Indonesia, Wijanarko (2024) explains that the dynamics of sextortion or sexual corruption are becoming increasingly complex. The presence of authorities, educational institutions, and socio-religious organisations means that power relations are not merely structural (Rachmadhani, 2021) but also symbolic and spiritual. On the one hand, according to Suhandia et al., (2025), educators should ideally foster a sense of safety, ethics, and dignity. On the other hand, power imbalances between religious figures (Pebriaisyah et al., 2022) or those in authority and congregants, students, pupils, or service recipients can create opportunities for the abuse of power (Winarno et al., 2025), including in the form of covert sexual extortion. Victims are often reluctant to disclose their experiences due to fear of social stigma, as well as—as explained by Andriyanti & Sumriyah (2024)—a lack of trust in reporting mechanisms and victim-centred handling procedures.

Level	Asia	%	Pacific	%
Lowest	Japan	2%	Tonga	5%
	Myanmar	3%	Samoa	10%
	South Korea	3%	Fiji	11%
Highest	Thailand	15%	Papua New Guinea	51%
	Indonesia	12%	FSM	46%
	India	10%	Solomon Island	33%

Source: GCB 2023

According to the 2023 GCB report (Peiffer, 2023) in the Asian region—particularly Indonesia—some 12% of people have experienced sextortion or know someone who has, and the table above shows the percentage of case related to sextortion or sexual corruption. These findings demonstrate that sextortion is no longer a hidden, individual issue, but has become a social problem linked to the abuse of power relations across various sectors of life. The high figures also indicate that gender-based corruption can manifest in non-financial forms through sexual pressure that exploits positions of authority, gender inequality, and weak protection for victims. The following data, obtained from the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection (Kemenppa), provides a detailed and analytical overview of this issue.

📊 Jumlah Korban berdasarkan Tempat Kejadian



Source : <https://kekerasan.kemenpppa.go.id/ringkasan>

Based on data regarding the number of victims by location—namely schools (2,088 victims) and short-term educational institutions (44 victims)—these remain spaces that are not entirely safe from sexual violence, this analytical data reflects the existence of unequal power dynamics within the educational environment, where perpetrators can exploit their positions as educators, supervisors, mentors or those holding academic and moral authority to exert pressure, make threats or manipulate victims, including through sextortion.

This unequal power dynamic cannot be separated from the patriarchal social structure (Rasani & Wardani, 2025), which places men in a dominant position in both the domestic and public spheres, whilst women are more often positioned as those who must be obedient, uphold honour, and avoid disgrace. Patriarchy operates not only through formal rules, but also through norms, religious interpretations, and cultural practices that normalise inequality between men and women. In such a situation, as highlighted in a Transparency International report (Peiffer, 2023), women become more vulnerable to sextortion or sexual corruption because they are dependent on the judgement and approval of powerful figures, whether as superiors, educators, officials, or religious leaders. When access to employment, academic grades, social assistance, or public services is conditional upon a willingness to comply with sexually suggestive demands, forms of sextortion or sexual corruption occur, even though they are often not described as such. This inequality reinforces the urgency of an analysis that explicitly links patriarchy, power relations, and the practice of sextortion or sexual corruption.

This study analyses the phenomenon of sextortion within urban Muslim communities and highlights the role of Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama as an active social actor in the prevention of sextortion and the protection of women's dignity. Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama, as a religious-based women's organisation affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama and possessing a strong grassroots network, was selected due to its strategic potential to develop critical education, campaigns, and advocacy for the prevention of sexual violence within religious spaces, whilst simultaneously negotiating more gender-just interpretations and religious practices. This research aims to fill a gap in the literature by critically examining how *sextortion* operates within educational and religious study environments whilst analysing the role of Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama in formulating and implementing prevention strategies *against* potential *sextortion* based on education, *da'wah*, and women's organising. This study aims to examine the reasons behind women's silence and how women are actively resisting *sextortion* within urban Muslim communities. Based on this description, the research is formulated into several more operational research questions. First, how is the 'culture of silence' regarding sextortion produced and maintained within urban Muslim communities? Second, how does Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama function as an alternative public sphere (counter-public) in building critical awareness and resistance against sextortion practices? Third, what social, cultural, and institutional factors enable or constrain women in articulating their experiences of sexual corruption within educational settings and religious communities? By seeking answers to these questions, this study is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the study of urban communication and gender advocacy in Indonesia.

This study employs a feminist communication perspective, specifically Nancy Hartsock's feminist standpoint theory (West & Turner, 2017) which is relevant in the context of sextortion within urban Muslim communities as it positions women at the centre of religious discourse to protect their dignity. This theory sets out five basic assumptions of Feminist Standpoint Theory. First, the structure of material life limits

the understanding of social relations; second, the dominant perspective tends to disadvantage oppressed groups; third, the dominant group shapes the structure of relations that other groups must follow; fourth, the experiences of oppressed groups reflect their struggles and achievements; fifth, the perspective of oppressed groups drives the creation of a more just world (Arfiani, 2021) This theory views women's perspectives as those of an oppressed group in analysing the social reality they face, positioning women's experiences as the starting point for understanding vulnerability to sexual extortion or sexual corruption and further interpretation within the subsequent context. This perspective is enriched by Critical Communication Theory, which views communication practices as an arena where patriarchal power relations (Yasinta et al., 2025) and religious authority are both reproduced and negotiated through education, da'wah, and the organisational practices of Fatayat NU. Furthermore, a constructionist approach in communication studies is employed to analyse how Fatayat NU cadres construct and disseminate meanings regarding sexual extortion or sexual corruption, as well as formulate strategies for its prevention and management. More specifically, the phenomenon of a culture of silence and the public's limited understanding of the issue of sextortion or sexual corruption can be explained in (Correia & Graca, 2020) through the spiral of silence theory, to understand why people are often reluctant or unable to discuss issues with sexual undertones within the community.

Consequently, this research is expected to offer theoretical novelty by establishing a more explicit link between the framework of sexual corruption, patriarchal power relations, and the Islamic women's movement, whilst also providing practical contributions in the form of recommendations for strengthening educational design, internal regulations, and prevention and response mechanisms for sextortion or sexual corruption that are more contextually appropriate and gender-sensitive, and which are relevant to the development of gender studies, corruption studies, and contemporary Islamic studies at the international level.

Through the Feminist Standpoint Theory approach, this study positions women's experiences not merely as objects of research, but as a source of critical knowledge for analysing the patriarchal power structures at work in sextortion practices. This perspective is combined with the Spiral of Silence theory to explain how social pressure, moral stigma, and threats to reputation shape a culture of silence within urban Muslim communities. Meanwhile, critical communication theory is used to analyse how religious authorities and institutional relations reproduce symbolic domination, whilst social constructionism helps explain how the meaning of sextortion is negotiated, normalised, or resisted through everyday communication practices. Thus, these four theoretical frameworks are used in an integrated manner to guide the analysis of power relations, the culture of silence, and women's resistance strategies within the context of urban Muslim society.

## **B. Methods**

This study employs a qualitative approach within an interpretative-critical paradigm to understand the practices and meanings of sextortion or sexual corruption within educational settings and religious communities, with a focus on prevention strategies and the advocacy role undertaken by Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama as a faith-based women's organisation. This study adopts the perspective of urban Muslim communities to examine how modernisation, digitalisation, and social heterogeneity shape religious practices, power relations, and moral communication in urban spaces.

As articulated by Eickelman & Salvatore (2006), attention is drawn to the transformation of religious authority and the production of Islamic meaning in the context of modernity ( see also Salvatore, 2016). In a similar vein, Bayat (2010) views the urban Muslim lifestyle as an arena of negotiation between religiosity, agency, and everyday social practices.

Furthermore, this study also draws on critical communication theory, rooted in the Frankfurt School tradition, to view communication as an arena for the reproduction and negotiation of power. This approach helps to explain how moral, symbolic, and institutional authority within religious communities can function as mechanisms of legitimation that maintain patriarchal power relations. In the context of this study, critical communication theory is used to analyse how communication practices in educational and religious settings can reproduce a culture of silence whilst simultaneously opening up possibilities for resistance through alternative spaces of communication. From this perspective, the research analysis aims to identify forms of symbolic domination, practices of power legitimisation, and mechanisms of social control that operate through communicative relations between educators, religious authorities, and women within urban religious spaces. A critical communication approach is also employed to examine how language, moral authority, and institutional structures play a role in perpetuating gender inequality and silencing the voices of victims.

The social constructionist approach is also used to understand that the meaning of sextortion or sexual corruption is shaped through social interaction, language and everyday cultural practices. This perspective helps to explain how acts involving sexual pressure are often normalised as forms of personal closeness, guidance, or pedagogical relationships that are considered acceptable within society. Consequently, this study views the reality of sextortion not as a natural fact, but as the result of a social construction that is continually negotiated within urban Muslim communities.

In the analytical process, social constructionism is used to interpret how narratives concerning "obedience", "institutional reputation", "guidance", and "respect for authority" are produced and reproduced in social interactions, with the result that the practice of sextortion is often not recognised as a form of sexual violence. This approach helps researchers understand how social meanings are collectively constructed and contribute to the normalisation of a culture of silence within educational settings and religious communities.

Meanwhile, the Spiral of Silence theory is used to explain why women tend to remain silent when faced with sexual violence or pressure. Fear of social stigma, moral isolation, reputational damage, and the threat of digital exposure are understood as factors that reinforce a culture of silence within urban religious communities. This theory serves as a crucial framework for understanding how social pressure limits victims' ability to articulate their experiences, whilst also examining how the participatory spaces established by Fatayat NU function as a counter-public, enabling women to voice their experiences more safely. In this study, the Spiral of Silence is used as an analytical tool to identify patterns of victim silence, the forms of social fear experienced by women, and the mechanisms of collective pressure that deter victims from reporting. This theory also helps explain how the alternative discussion spaces established by Fatayat NU function as a medium of resistance against the dominance of majority opinion and the culture of silencing within urban Muslim communities.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews with informants comprising educators and Fatayat NU cadres, as well as members of the urban community with varying levels of knowledge regarding the issue of sextortion or sexual corruption. The

identities of all informants were kept confidential to minimise social and symbolic risks. Furthermore, this research involved participatory observation of Fatayat NU's organisational activities in urban settings, as well as analysis of documents and campaign materials used in public education and advocacy activities, to enrich our understanding of how religious discourse is negotiated and rearticulated within the context of urban Muslim communities.

Data analysis was conducted thematically by integrating the feminist standpoint theory framework (Allen, 1996). The data were then interpreted contextually through the lens of urban Muslim society, which positions women's experiences as a source of critical knowledge in understanding power relations and gender inequality. This perspective is used to examine how women's experiences of facing sextortion or sexual corruption are understood not only as individual experiences, but also as a reflection of the patriarchal social and cultural structures at work within educational and religious spaces. Thus, women's experiences are positioned as the basis for analysis to understand practices of silencing, power imbalances, and strategies of resistance that have developed within urban Muslim society.

The framework of feminist standpoint theory in this study is used not only as a theoretical perspective but also as an analytical foundation for focusing on women's life experiences as a legitimate source of knowledge in interpreting structures of gender domination. Drawing on Allen (1996), this study regards women's experiences as the basis for identifying forms of communicative marginalisation, inequalities in access to the public voice, and symbolic practices that limit the articulation of victims' experiences. Thus, this theory guides the researcher in interpreting women's narratives not merely as personal experiences, but as representations of structural power relations within urban Muslim society.

The thematic analysis process in this study draws on the approach developed by Braun and Clarke (Naeem et al., 2023), which emphasises the identification, organisation, and interpretation of patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data reflectively and contextually. This approach was chosen as it enables the researcher to explore women's experiences, the dynamics of power relations, and the social construction of sextortion or sexual corruption in depth within the context of urban Muslim communities. Thematic analysis was conducted through several stages, namely data familiarisation, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme naming, and the formulation of thematic interpretations. In this process, critical communication theory, social constructionism, the Spiral of Silence, and feminist standpoint theory were used integratively to guide the process of data categorisation, the interpretation of informants' experiences, and the formulation of key themes relating to the culture of silence, the legitimisation of moral authority, women's resistance, and the communication strategies of Fatayat NU.

The analytical process involved transcription, open-coding and axial coding, as well as the development of themes drawn from women's experiences, their social positions within religious urban spaces, power relations based on moral and institutional authority, the construction of religious meaning, and strategies for discursive transformation emerging within urban Muslim communities. The validity of the research is ensured through triangulation of sources and methods, as well as peer debriefing to strengthen the rigour of the analysis. Ethical considerations are upheld through the application of informed consent, the protection of informants' identities, and sensitivity to the urban socio-religious context which may pose risks to participants.

## C. Findings and Discussion

### 1. Findings

Research findings indicate that, within the context of urban Muslim societies, modernisation and digitalisation do not automatically create a more open space for discussing issues of sexual violence. On the contrary, social heterogeneity and the intensification of religious morality actually reinforce normative ambiguities regarding sexuality. Issues of sextortion and sexual corruption are treated as private and taboo matters, particularly when they occur within educational settings and religious communities. This situation results in a social context where women recognise the social, symbolic and religious risks of speaking out about experiences of sexual violence, leading them to choose silence as a survival strategy. These findings expand the study of urban Muslim society by demonstrating that religious urban spaces also reproduce gender control through silence, rather than solely through formal prohibitions.

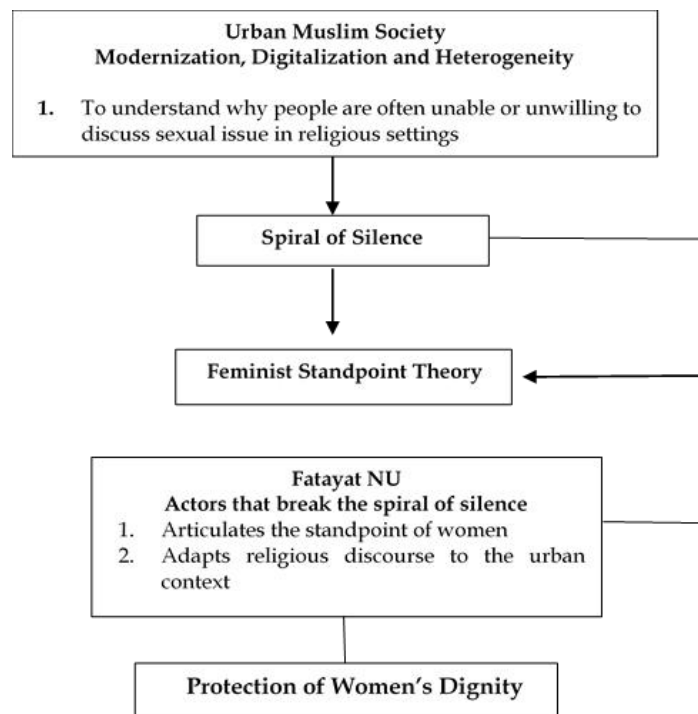
The findings were obtained from interviews with informants from urban areas in Tangerang City, comprising Fatayat NU cadres at branch and sub-district levels, secondary school teachers, instructors at non-formal religious educational institutions, as well as university students and members of urban women's communities. One of the Fatayat NU officials in the Tangerang region stated that "the issue of sexual violence is often considered a disgrace to the family and the organisation, so women prefer to remain silent rather than be seen as damaging the community's reputation." This finding expands the study of urban Muslim society by demonstrating that religious urban spaces also reproduce gender control through silence, not merely through formal prohibitions.

This study adopts an interpretative-critical paradigm as its philosophical foundation for analysing the phenomenon of sextortion. Through the lens of Social Constructionism developed by (Pfadenhauer & Berger, 2017)), this study interpretatively understands that social reality and the normalisation of sexual corruption are not natural phenomena, but rather the result of collective construction through interaction and the use of language. In urban Muslim societies, the construction of 'good reputation' is often misused to create moral standards that marginalise victims. A female teacher working at a religious secondary school in the Jakarta area revealed that "closeness between teachers and pupils is often seen as part of moral guidance, so the line between care and pressure is frequently not recognised." In line with this, the critical aspect is reinforced through Critical Communication Theory, rooted in the Frankfurt School of thought (Sholahudin, 2020) as exemplified by Jürgen Habermas or Max Horkheimer, which serves to expose power imbalances. The core of this theory is relevant in recognising that communication within religious institutions is not a neutral exchange of messages, but rather an arena of hegemony where authority is used as a tool of control to exploit subordinate groups through the practice of sexual corruption.

The mechanism underlying the emergence of a 'culture of silence' in this phenomenon is analysed using the Spiral of Silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) The core of this theory explains the socio-psychological dynamics whereby individuals tend to remain silent if they feel their views or experiences conflict with the majority opinion, out of fear of social isolation. In the context of a religious urban society, the fear of stigma causes the victims' voices to be drowned out in a spiral of silence, which

ironically provides a safe space for perpetrators to continue operating under the demands of social harmony, reinforced by a statement from a female activist who said that “if women speak out about sexual harassment or pressure, it is often seen as exposing their own shame, so many choose to remain silent. This statement illustrates how social pressure and institutional morality reinforce the mechanism of silence within urban religious communities.

A study by Umiarso & Muhith (2019) shows that organisational culture in religious institutions is shaped through religious legitimacy and symbolic leadership. This perspective is relevant for explaining how moral authority within educational settings and religious communities can foster social compliance and a culture of silence regarding the practice of sextortion or sexual corruption. The study also confirms that the values of preserving the institution’s reputation and social harmony can restrict women from speaking out about their experiences of sexual violence. As an attempt to deconstruct these oppressive structures, this study applies Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) as specifically developed within the framework of organisational communication by Allen (1996) which emphasises that the most honest and critical knowledge regarding power actually stems from the lived experiences of those who are marginalised. In this analysis, FST is used to examine how Fatayat NU acts as an agent that validates women’s experiences not merely as empirical data, but as an authoritative source of knowledge to challenge the dominant narrative. By elevating the women’s standpoint, Fatayat NU is able to transform isolated personal experiences into a collective consciousness (an alternative public sphere) capable of breaking down gender-based corruption structures in the urban public sphere.



Source: Image processed by the author, 2025

The image above visualises the conceptual framework of the research, illustrating the dynamics of urban Muslim society in shaping the ‘Spiral of Silence’ regarding sexual issues in religious spaces, as well as the role of Feminist Standpoint Theory in interpreting women’s experiences. This framework positions Fatayat NU as a key actor

in breaking the spiral of silence through the articulation of women's perspectives and the adaptation of religious discourse to an urban context, which ultimately leads to the protection of women's dignity.

This research has a number of limitations that must be borne in mind when interpreting the findings and their implications. The author summarises these in the discussion. Firstly, the scope of the research is still limited to the context of a specific urban Muslim community and to community-based women's organisations; consequently, the findings cannot yet be generalised to the entire urban religious context. Secondly, the research's focus on the role of Fatayat NU as an agent in breaking the Spiral of Silence has not fully captured the dynamics of power relations at higher institutional levels, particularly resistance from conservative religious authorities and formal decision-making structures. Thirdly, the lack of longitudinal data limits the study's ability to comprehensively assess the sustainability of changes in discourse and power relations over time.

Given these limitations, future research is advised to adopt a comparative and longitudinal design in order to explore the dynamics of gendered silence and women's agency across religious organisations and urban contexts. Future studies should also broaden the scope of analysis by involving male actors, formal religious authorities, and state institutions, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how power relations are negotiated in the prevention of sexual corruption. Furthermore, exploring the role of digital media and online platforms as new arenas for the production of religious discourse and feminist resistance will enrich our understanding of the transformation of gendered communication practices in urban Muslim communities.

#### **a. Sexual Corruption and Power Relations in Urban Muslim Communities**

Findings indicate that the practice of sextortion or sexual corruption within communities and short-term educational institutions is rarely explicitly recognised as a form of sexual violence or corruption; indeed, interviews with 10 informants—comprising members of the public, women's movement activists and secondary school pupils—revealed that most did not understand the practice of sextortion or sexual corruption, stating that sexually suggestive pressure is often framed as personal closeness, special guidance or a form of care between educators and pupils, particularly when the perpetrator holds a position as an educator, mentor or figure of moral authority, where the power dynamic is invariably linked to academic progression. The findings from informants 1 and 9 demonstrate that sexual extortion operates within a realm of semantic ambiguity, where sexual violence is disguised as a form of assistance or closeness, with a very fine line between the two.

Through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the first theme to emerge was "the normalisation of power relations through personal closeness and moral legitimacy." This theme emerged from patterns of code such as "care", "guidance", "closeness", and "obedience to the teacher", which demonstrate how sexual pressure is reproduced through everyday communication practices considered normal within an urban religious environment.

Other findings indicate that academic and moral power relations are the primary source of the victims' vulnerability. Informant 2 revealed that perpetrators often hold more than one form of authority considered to be socially and spiritually influential; Informant 2 emphasised:

*"Within the institution, an educator's voice is not just about grades, but also about right*

*and wrong. Accordingly, when there is pressure, it feels like going against the truth”.*

This confirms that sextortion or sexual corruption within a community cannot be understood merely as a breach of individual ethics, but rather as symbolic power corruption operating through moral and religious legitimacy. This statement is reinforced by Informant 5, who was unaware that the practice of sextortion or sexual corruption was cloaked in the guise of a threat to one’s grades. Informant 5 revealed that the pressure associated with academic assessment was not perceived as a form of violence. He stated that threats regarding grades or graduation were considered a natural consequence of the relationship. In his view:

*“If grades are questioned or threatened, I think that’s part of discipline or evaluation. It never occurred to me that it could constitute violence.”*

Furthermore, Informant 5 emphasised that a lack of knowledge regarding the concept of sextortion made it difficult to recognise such experiences as a violation. They stated,

*“We were never taught about boundaries or such forms of pressure, so if we felt uncomfortable, it was simply considered normal.”*

This statement indicates that conceptual ignorance regarding sextortion plays a significant role in normalising sexually charged pressure embedded within academic power dynamics, whilst simultaneously hindering the process of disclosure and reporting. In the thematic analysis process, this finding formed the second theme, namely “conceptual ignorance and the normalisation of sexual pressure.” This theme indicates that the absence of literacy regarding professional boundaries and sexual violence makes it difficult for victims to identify their experiences as a form of abuse of power.

In addition to patterns of covert power relations and a culture of silence, the research findings also reveal that the lack of clear professional boundaries in practice creates a significant loophole for the occurrence of sexual corruption. Several informants explained that the absence of clear ethical standards regarding personal interactions between educators and learners – particularly in short-term courses, non-formal classes and mentoring activities – creates a grey area that is prone to abuse. Informant 6 stated,

*“There have never been clear rules regarding personal communication. So when educators frequently contact students in the evening, it is considered normal because they say it is for mentoring purposes.”*

Meanwhile, informant 8, a Fatayat NU cadre from Depok who is active in women’s education forums, explained that:

*“women often find it difficult to distinguish between genuine concern and forms of control because the relationship is cloaked in religious language and emotional closeness.”*

These findings suggest that sextortion or sexual corruption is often not recognised as violence because it is cloaked in loose and relational pedagogical practices, making it difficult for victims to identify the boundary between guidance

and abuse of power.”

Based on the thematic analysis, the emerging finding from the interviews is “the blurring of professional boundaries in pedagogical and religious relationships.” These findings suggest that the lack of regulation governing personal interactions within educational and religious guidance settings creates a grey area that facilitates the abuse of authority.

Thus, the phenomenon of sextortion or sexual corruption in urban Muslim communities can be understood as a dynamic of symbolic power that operates through moral legitimisation and everyday social practices. This approach emphasises the importance of viewing sexual violence not merely as a violation of individual ethics, but as a structural issue that requires attention at the level of discourse, power relations, and institutional governance.

#### **b. The Spiral of Silence and the Production of a Culture of Silence**

Another finding by the author highlights the ‘culture of silence’, which acts as a key mechanism enabling the practice of sextortion or sexual corruption to continue; indeed, all informants, when confronted with such practices, believed that reporting it would cause them fear—such as the fear of being blamed, stigmatised, or seen as damaging the institution’s reputation. Informant 3, a student on a short-term course, stated that

*“If I report it, I’ll be seen as lying and cornered; why can’t I just look after myself? So, in my opinion, it’s better to just keep quiet”;*

this statement underscores how moral norms and the construction of silence are actually seen as safeguarding women’s morality. It is within this context that sexual extortion or sexual corruption operates not merely as individual violence, but as a structural practice underpinned by patriarchal norms and institutional morality.

In the thematic analysis process, as outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006) the researchers identified a key theme “fear of stigma and social isolation”—which emerged consistently in the participants’ interviews. This theme emerged from the coding process of narratives concerning shame, concerns about the family’s reputation, and social threats should victims speak openly about their experiences of sexual violence. This analysis indicates that a culture of silence is produced not only through interpersonal pressure, but also through the internalisation of social and religious norms that restrict women’s ability to articulate their experiences.

Further findings, based on interviews with Informants 4 and 7, reveal inequalities in access to safe and victim-centred reporting mechanisms. The majority of informants stated that they were unaware of any clear or reliable reporting procedures that genuinely protect victims’ reports without the risk of retaliation or threats. From several cases circulating in the media, it is evident that many institutions still encourage informal resolutions in order to safeguard the institution’s good name and reputation. This practice demonstrates how institutions often play a role in normalising sexual extortion or sexual corruption as a private matter or one based on mutual consent or momentary pleasure, rather than recognising it as a structural violation of women’s rights and dignity.

This finding is consistent with the Spiral of Silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), which explains that individuals tend to remain silent when they feel that their views or experiences conflict with the dominant opinion and may lead to social isolation. In the context of urban Muslim communities, the dominant views on

women's morality, family honour, and the image of religious institutions create social pressure that reinforces the victims' silence. It is this fear of social ostracism that leads victims to prefer silence rather than risk losing their social standing within their community.

The findings also indicate the emergence of seeds of resistance and critical awareness, particularly through alternative spaces facilitated by women's organisations. Several informants involved in discussions, training or women's leadership schools – including those organised by Fatayat NU explained that they had begun to realise that the potential for *sexual* extortion or *sexual corruption* could occur anywhere, including within the spheres of education and religion, which ultimately constitutes a form of structural injustice, not a personal fault. Informants 6, 8 and 10 stated that after attending a women's seminar, they only then realised that we can become victims of abuse of power. These findings indicate that feminist communication based on a participatory approach plays a crucial role in breaking the culture of silence and opening up spaces for articulation within society. Through the analysis, the researchers also identified the theme of "safe spaces and women's solidarity", which emerged from participants' experiences following women's discussion forums and critical education sessions. This theme demonstrates that the existence of alternative communication spaces can mitigate the pressure of the spiral of silence by providing collective support, validating victims' experiences, and fostering the courage to speak out against structural injustice.

Overall, these additional findings suggest that sextortion or *sexual corruption* in society is produced through configurations of power relations involving the blurring of ethical boundaries, the legitimisation of moral authority, the internalisation of patriarchal values, and the limitations of victim protection systems. However, these findings also highlight the existence of mediated spaces for transformation within society, whilst the research findings also reveal the ambivalence of the role of digital media. On the one hand, the digital space reinforces silence through the threat of stigma and exposure. On the other hand, digital media also provides an alternative space for the formation of critical awareness and solidarity.

In digitally connected urban Muslim communities, this threat becomes increasingly significant as personal, familial and institutional identities are intertwined within online networks. Overall, these findings suggest that the " of silence in cases of sextortion within urban Muslim communities is produced through configurations of power relations involving reputational pressure, the legitimacy of authority, and the threat of digital media. The Spiral of Silence operates not only through interpersonal fear, but also through the spectre of surveillance and virality in the online space. At the same time, this research confirms that interventions based on digital literacy and participatory feminist communication open up spaces of resistance against these mechanisms of silence. In this context, Fatayat NU's communication strategies can be understood as an effort to negotiate digital risks whilst simultaneously building safe spaces for the articulation of women's experiences.

### c. **Feminist Standpoint Theory and the Role of Fatayat NU in Protecting Women's Dignity.**

Research findings indicate that the communication strategies employed by Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in the prevention of sextortion or sexual corruption can be understood through the interplay between feminist standpoint theory and the spiral of silence, particularly within the context of urban Muslim communities characterised by dense social networks, intense moral surveillance, and symbolic hierarchies that

influence women's positions and voices. Within the framework of feminist standpoint theory, the experiences of women in subordinate social positions serve as a vital source of knowledge for discussing the prevention of sextortion – a form of sexual corruption that women in urban communities may potentially face, despite the expectation that their safety and dignity should be safeguarded. As expressed by Informant 3, who stated that “in the Fatayat study, it is explained that women are positioned as subjects who have a safe and protected space, in accordance with the principles of Islamic sharia which emphasise respect for women's dignity and honour”.

This perspective is reinforced by (Intemann, 2020) who asserts that the experiences of subordinate groups provide a more critical epistemological standpoint from which to interpret social power relations. In the context of this study, the experiences of urban Muslim women are understood not merely as individual experiences, but as a source of social knowledge for unravelling the mechanisms of patriarchy, moral legitimisation and symbolic domination within educational settings and religious communities.

In relation to the spiral of silence, the research findings indicate that fear of social isolation, negative labelling, and reputational damage are the main factors driving women to remain silent when faced with sextortion. This situation is reinforced by urban social structures that regard reputation as an important form of symbolic capital, both for individuals and for the community. The participatory approach implemented by Fatayat NU through small group discussions, women's community forums, and thematic studies are perceived by informants as relatively safe alternative spaces to break the spiral of silence mechanism, as they allow women to share experiences without direct pressure from dominant norms in public spaces; informants 1 and 5 view these as “relatively safe spaces to articulate experiences, share stories, and serve as a safe place for mutual discussion”. Through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), themes regarding “alternative safe spaces”, “the culture of silence”, and “the validation of women's experiences” emerged consistently in the informants' interviews. These themes indicate that women tend to be more willing to articulate experiences of violence when in non-judgmental participatory spaces that share common social and religious experiences. Braun, and Clarke's reflexive approach helped this study understand that women's experiences are linked to patriarchal structures, moral communication, and power relations operating within urban Muslim societies.

However, the findings also identified a number of limitations in this approach, including the fact that the activities remain accessible only to groups of women who already have close ties to the organisation; variations in facilitators' capacity to manage sensitive issues, which affect the depth and consistency of discussions; and the lack of clear referral and follow-up mechanisms when the experiences shared indicate a need for protection or further intervention. These conditions suggest that whilst the participatory approach is effective in reducing barriers to articulation and the culture of silence, the communication process that takes place still tends to stop at the level of the exchange of meaning and awareness, without being systematically linked to more formal institutional mechanisms.

Overall, these findings confirm that the protection of women's dignity in urban Muslim societies cannot be separated from efforts to dismantle the mechanisms that silence women's voices and to validate their experiences as a legitimate source of knowledge. Through the lens of feminist standpoint theory and the spiral of silence, Fatayat NU's communication strategies can be understood as social practices that contribute to the formation of critical consciousness and symbolic resistance, whilst

also revealing their limitations in intervening in more established structures. These findings reinforce the argument that preventing sextortion requires the integration of community-based spaces for articulation with broader protection systems, so that women's voices do not become entangled once again in the spiral of silence.

## 2. Discussion

In line with the research question outlined in the introduction, this study demonstrates that the dynamics of urban Muslim communities do not automatically create a more open and safe space for women to discuss issues of sexual violence. The findings confirm that modernisation, social heterogeneity and the intensified use of digital media have, in fact, given rise to normative ambiguity in the interpretation of gender relations, particularly when the practice of sextortion occurs within educational settings and religious communities. In this context, sextortion is not always recognised as a violation of human dignity, but is often understood as part of social relations that are considered normal and not worth questioning.

The dynamics of urban Muslim communities do not automatically create a more open and safe space for women to discuss issues of sexual violence. Empirical findings suggest that modernisation, social heterogeneity and the increased use of digital media actually give rise to normative ambiguity in the interpretation of gender relations, particularly when sextortion occurs within educational settings and religious communities. In this context, sextortion is often regarded as normal and uncontroversial because it is seen as part of social relations or compliance with religious authority.

Through the framework of the Spiral of Silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974)), the victims' silence is analysed not as ignorance, but as the result of a rational social calculation of the risks of stigma. In the field, this silence is found to be triggered by victims' fear of being labelled morally corrupt or of collective ostracism from the urban 'religious community. This concept aligns with a global study by Eldén et al., (2020) which confirms that sextortion thrives in patriarchal environments due to the 'double stigma' imposed on victims if they speak out. At the regional level in Southeast Asia, Sulistiawan & Adhari (2024) found that within religious educational institutions, "unconditional obedience" to moral authority figures constructs the victim's silence as a means of maintaining institutional harmony and avoiding social disgrace. Victims experiencing severe emotional distress, including extreme shame and low self-esteem, tend to be more vulnerable to suicidal thoughts. O'Malley (2023) also emphasises that a persistently low mood is a key trigger that significantly increases this risk.

This discussion reveals that the role of digital media in urban Muslim communities is ambivalent. On the one hand, the digital space reinforces the 'Spiral of Silence' mechanism through the threat of public exposure, social surveillance, and virality. On the other hand, digital media opens up opportunities for the distribution of knowledge and critical awareness. Sextortion generally begins and takes place in the digital realm, where perpetrators obtain victims' sexual content through sexting activities. Although initially carried out on a consensual basis, such material – in the form of photos or videos – is subsequently misused by perpetrators to carry out (Wang & Pei, 2026). From the perspective of Critical Communication Theory (Habermas/Frankfurt School), this distortion of communication occurs because the perpetrator exploits power relations and the threat of disseminating digital traces (such as the threat of sharing private messages or photos) to blackmail the victim.

Theoretically, this confirms the definition (Transparency International, 2020) of

sextortion as gender-based corruption, in which the body and sexual services are positioned as a 'currency of exchange' for obtaining academic or social rights. This pattern of digital oppression is similar to the findings (Tzani et al., 2024) regarding cyber-sextortion trends in urban areas of Indonesia, where perpetrators exploit victims' moral vulnerabilities in cyberspace. This phenomenon is further reinforced by a global analysis, which states that gender-based corruption often utilises communication technology as a new tool of repression to shield perpetrators' crimes from formal legal consequences (O'Malley & Smith, 2025).

Within the framework of Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST), as adapted to organisational communication by Allen (1996), this study emphasises the importance of women's life experiences as a source of knowledge for interpreting power imbalances. The standpoint of urban Muslim women is shaped by their direct experiences of symbolic pressure and social surveillance. It is here that the strategic role of Fatayat NU is put to the test. Empirical findings indicate that Fatayat NU functions as a relatively safe alternative public space (counter-public) for women through a participatory communication approach.

In line with Allen's (1996) argument that the knowledge of marginalised groups is gained through collective struggle, Fatayat NU has transformed the personal experiences of victims—which were previously regarded as individual shame—into a structural awareness that they are facing systemic oppression. In line with research (Bragagnolo & Lezama, 2025) although the impact of the harm caused by sextortion is immense, many victims choose not to report it or seek help. This is due to a strong sense of shame and fear, as well as a lack of trust in the police and digital platforms. When compared with a regional study (Rinaldo, 2019) on Muslim women's activism in Indonesia, Fatayat NU in this study demonstrates a more progressive role by daring to address sexual taboos through deconstructing the interpretation of victims without casting them as the guilty party. This strategy is similar to global grassroots movements such as the #MeToo movement analysed by Mona (2018) in which Muslim women use their religious agency to combat sexual violence. However, Fatayat NU possesses a local distinctiveness as they are able to navigate this sensitive issue without losing their legitimacy as a traditional religious organisation respected within urban communities.

Although Fatayat NU's participatory communication strategy has helped to break the culture of silence at the discursive level, field findings indicate the existence of significant structural limitations. Obstacles such as the uneven reach of interventions, variations in facilitators' capacities at the local level, and the lack of connection between these alternative discussion forums and formal legal protection mechanisms (such as the police or state legal aid institutions) limit the sustainability of the impact achieved.

Using the analysis of social constructionism (Berger, 2016) these limitations arise because formal legal institutions often still adopt gender-blind patriarchal social constructs, meaning that victims remain reluctant to report incidents through formal channels. This is consistent with a study by Ardiansyah (2025) which highlights that the advocacy efforts of autonomous women's organisations in Indonesia frequently encounter a legal bureaucracy that is unresponsive to gender issues. Therefore, as emphasised by Talan et al., (2025) on a global scale, resolving sextortion cases cannot rely solely on the courage of victims to speak out or assistance from local NGOs, but requires systemic integration between community safe spaces (counter-publics) and comprehensive reforms to formal legal protection policies.

#### D. Conclusion

This study concludes that the practice of sextortion within urban Muslim communities is a structural issue that operates through a culture of silence and social inequality, particularly within educational settings and communities. The urban context, characterised by intense social interaction and the use of digital media, actually reinforces social pressure on women to maintain their reputation and moral image, thereby encouraging them to remain silent when faced with sexual threats or violence.

Through the lens of the Spiral of Silence, this study demonstrates that women's silence is not a sign of ignorance, but rather a rational strategy in an environment that has yet to provide a safe space. Meanwhile, Feminist Standpoint Theory asserts that the experiences of urban Muslim women are a source of critical knowledge. When these experiences are articulated through participatory communication spaces such as Fatayat NU, a process of awareness emerges that challenges the normalisation of power relations. However, these spaces still have limited reach and are not yet fully connected to formal protection mechanisms.

Organisations such as Fatayat NU need to draw up Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for handling cases that guarantee confidentiality of identity, psychological support and legal assistance free from stigma. Furthermore, they should develop specialised training modules for facilitators on 'Gender-Based Corruption' so that they are able to detect practices of sextortion, which are often concealed behind the pretext of religious obedience or authority. Furthermore, this study recommends the establishment of referral mechanisms and reporting channels integrated with legal aid institutions, psychologists, and women's protection units at the local level, so that victims have safer and more responsive access to support services. Digital literacy and gender-sensitive communication training programmes also need to be developed on an ongoing basis for educators, women's organisation cadres, and religious communities to enhance their ability to recognise, prevent, and address sextortion practices in both physical and digital spaces. This research also emphasises that the effectiveness of sextortion prevention depends heavily on the ability of women's religious organisations to translate victims' experiences into structured and sustainable advocacy practices, rather than merely reflective discussion forums.

This study also puts forward several propositions that can be tested in future research, namely: (1) the stronger the patriarchal culture and symbolic authority within a religious community, the greater the tendency for women to become trapped in the Spiral of Silence; (2) participatory communication spaces based on women's communities contribute to an increase in victims' courage to articulate their experiences of sexual violence; and (3) levels of digital and gender literacy influence individuals' ability to recognise practices of sextortion or sexual corruption. These propositions can be tested through quantitative or mixed-methods approaches within broader social and organisational contexts. Furthermore, the integration of feminist communication approaches and critical communication theory in this study opens up opportunities for the development of community-based communication intervention models that are more adaptable to the context of urban Muslim society.

This study is limited to Fatayat NU cadres in urban areas; consequently, dynamics within organisations with different cultural backgrounds may exhibit different patterns. Furthermore, given the sensitivity of the issue, access to the direct experiences of victims outside the organisational structure remains limited, meaning

that the analysis focuses primarily on the perspectives of cadres in their roles as support workers and activists. Furthermore, this study has not yet covered the range of experiences in rural areas or non-urban Muslim communities, meaning that the generalisation of the findings remains limited. Future research is hoped to involve a more diverse range of participants, including victims directly, formal educational institutions, and policy-makers, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of sextortion and strategies for the protection of women within various socio-religious contexts.

Future research is therefore recommended to develop cross-institutional and cross-regional approaches to test the consistency of findings and strengthen the external validity of the concept of sextortion as a form of gender-based corruption in various socio-religious contexts.

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### F. Author Contributions Statement

I.I. formulated the research concept, designed the methodology, and carried out data collection and analysis. G.A.R. drafted the article and contributed to the interpretation of findings. K. supervised the research process and provided critical theoretical guidance. S.A. revised the manuscript based on feedback received during the drafting process, edited the language, and prepared the final version for submission. All authors guarantee the academic integrity of the entire content of the article and bear full responsibility for the overall substance of this scientific work

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