

## ***Behind the Devotion: Structural Exploitation of Teachers in Private and Foundation Schools***

### **Dibalik Pengabdian: Eksploitasi Struktural terhadap Guru di Sekolah Swasta**

**Nining Winarsih<sup>1\*</sup>, Asih Rindi<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong

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#### **ABSTRAK**

Studi ini mengkaji paradoks antara pengabdian dan eksploitasi di kalangan guru di sekolah swasta dan yayasan di pedesaan Indonesia. Meskipun guru sering digambarkan dengan keteladanan yang mengabdikan diri pada profesinya, pengalaman hidup mereka menunjukkan realitas ketidakadilan ekonomi, ketimpangan struktural, dan pengabaian institusional. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana nilai-nilai agama dan moral membentuk motivasi dan ketahanan guru meskipun mengalami keterbatasan. Menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan observasi lapangan dengan guru honorer di sebuah yayasan Islam swasta di Krucil, Probolinggo. Temuan menunjukkan tiga temuan utama: (1) gaji rendah dan ketimpangan struktural, di mana guru menerima kompensasi jauh di bawah upah minimum regional; (2) motivasi agama dan moral, di mana nilai-nilai ikhlas (ketulusan) dan pengabdian (pengabdian)

berfungsi sebagai mekanisme yang mengubah ketidakadilan menjadi kebajikan moral; dan (3) keterbatasan infrastruktur, yang semakin mengintensifkan kerentanan guru sekaligus memperkuat narasi pengorbanan. Penelitian ini mengungkap bahwa pengabdian agama berfungsi sebagai ekonomi moral bermata dua, memberikan kekuatan psikologis sekaligus melegitimasi eksploitasi. Studi ini menunjukkan bagaimana pengabdian berfungsi sebagai alat ideologis yang menormalkan ketimpangan dan menekan perlawanan. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada bagaimana wacana moral dan agama menopang prekariat tenaga kerja dalam profesi guru. Penelitian ini berargumen bahwa kesejahteraan guru harus ditangani tidak hanya melalui reformasi materi tetapi juga melalui transformasi budaya dan ideologis. Pengabdian seharusnya tidak lagi menjadi pembenaran atas ketimpangan, melainkan sebagai landasan moral bagi keadilan, martabat, dan reformasi pendidikan.

#### **ABSTRACT**

*This study examines the paradox of devotion and exploitation among teachers in private and foundation schools in rural Indonesia. Although teachers are often portrayed as moral exemplars devoted to their profession, their lived experiences reveal a reality of economic precarity, structural inequality, and institutional neglect. The research aims to explore how religious and moral values intersect with structural exploitation and how such values shape teachers' motivation and endurance despite material deprivation. Using a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews and field observations with honorary teachers at a private Islamic foundation in Krucil, Probolinggo. The findings indicate three key patterns: (1) low salary and structural inequality, in which teachers receive compensation far below the regional minimum wage; (2) religious and moral motivation, where values of ikhlas (sincerity) and pengabdian (devotion) serve as coping mechanisms that transform injustice into moral virtue; and (3) infrastructural limitations, which further intensify teachers' vulnerability while reinforcing the narrative of sacrifice. This research reveals that religious devotion functions as a double-edged moral economy, providing psychological*

\*Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: [nining.winarsih.384615-2022@fisip.unair.ac.id](mailto:nining.winarsih.384615-2022@fisip.unair.ac.id)

*strength while simultaneously legitimizing exploitation. The study shows how devotion operates as an ideological tool that normalizes inequality and suppresses resistance. This research contributes to how moral and religious discourses sustain labor precarity in the teaching profession. It argues that teacher welfare must be addressed not only through material reform but also through cultural and ideological transformation. Devotion should no longer serve as a justification for inequality but as a moral foundation for justice, dignity, and educational reform*

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## INTRODUCTION

Serving tirelessly, where is justice for honorary teachers? When it comes to salary, being an honorary teacher is not a lucrative profession; rather, the amount they earn is hardly enough to be considered a primary source of income. The issue of honorary teachers' salaries makes the title "unsung heroes" even more fitting for them. The income received by these honorary teachers is not at all commensurate with the workload they bear. Regarding teacher salaries, particularly those of honorary teachers, a question arises about their wages (Apriliyani & Meilani, 2021; Mukhlisi et al., 2024). Is the salary sufficient to meet their living needs, both personal and family-related?

Teachers indeed play a crucial role in the learning process to ensure quality educational outcomes (Safrida et al., 2023). The importance of education is reflected in the global attention given to teacher productivity and the impact of salaries on their performance, which is a significant concern for governments worldwide (Britton & Propper, 2016). However, the reality is that many contract teachers in Indonesia only receive a monthly salary of around 300,000 rupiah, despite having to perform various tasks such as teaching, administration, accreditation, evaluation, training, and occasionally picking up students from their homes to take them to school, especially in remote areas, as well as engaging in various extracurricular activities such as serving as extracurricular activity advisors (Fauzan, 2021).

The salaries of honorary teachers are not commensurate with their performance. Teachers' salaries remain below standard, compromising their safety and health guarantees, including the lengthy process of appointing honorary teachers as civil servants (Rosmanida et al., 2022). Behind the low salaries received by honorary teachers, they also need motivation to continue to be enthusiastic in carrying out their duties, both from within (internal) and from outside (external), such as the environment or other people. In the teaching profession, work motivation is not solely about salary, but is driven by a commitment to continue educating the nation's children. Such motivation, which provides enthusiasm and courage, is crucial in initiating and sustaining an activity, thereby maximizing performance. For teachers in Indonesia, despite facing numerous financial challenges, their sense of responsibility and dedication to their students remain the primary driving force in fulfilling their duties (Merdja & Seto, 2020).

The difference in teachers' salaries in Indonesia, especially for honorary teachers, is significantly lower than in other countries, such as China, Japan, and Malaysia. In fact, regular salary and wage increases can improve teacher performance and school performance (Emmanuel et al., 2021). Additionally, good teacher performance is expected to create efficiency and effectiveness in learning and help establish student discipline (Maharani et al., 2022).

However, in Indonesia, many honorary teachers receive salaries below the minimum wage. Although there are allowances for certified teachers, their salaries are generally insufficient to meet their basic needs. For example, there is a contract teacher at a Madrasah

Ibtidaiyah (MI) who is only paid around Rp 288,000 per month, or Rp 12,000 per day. With such a salary, it is impossible to meet daily needs for an entire month. As a result, many teachers and educational staff work part-time outside of school (rise.smeru.or.id, 2020). We can imagine that teachers' salaries in China tend to be higher than in Indonesia, especially in big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. The Chinese government places a high priority on education, and teachers' salaries are among the highest in Asia. Teachers' salaries in China range from 3,000 yuan to 5,000 yuan per month. At an exchange rate of 1 yuan = Rp 1,200, teachers in China earn an average of Rp 3.6 million to Rp 6 million per month (Syakhrani et al., 2022).

The same applies to teachers' salaries in Japan. The teaching profession in Japan is highly respected, and teachers' salaries in Japan reflect the responsibility and dedication required of them. In addition to their salaries, teachers in Japan also receive various allowances from the government. In Japan, the average teacher's salary is approximately Rp 38 million per month, and newly appointed teachers receive a salary of ¥900,000, which is around Rp 17 million per month. Teacher salaries in Japan can be high because Japan views teachers as the key to development, so the Japanese government rewards them with a decent salary (Mansir, 2020). Meanwhile, teachers' salaries in Malaysia are higher than in Indonesia. Additionally, the Malaysian government offers various allowances and incentives to enhance teachers' welfare. The minimum salary for a teacher in Malaysia is RM 1,200 per month, while the average salary for a teacher in Malaysia can reach RM 6,982 or approximately Rp 22,460,047 per month (Veirissa, 2021).

Education plays a vital role in shaping human resources and national development. Teachers, as the main agents of education, are expected to perform not only as instructors but also as moral role models who cultivate students' intellectual and ethical capacities (Hamsah et al., 2025). However, in many private and foundation schools in Indonesia, the teaching profession especially among honorary teachers, faces structural challenges that undermine their welfare and professional dignity. The discrepancy between the high social expectations placed on teachers and the economic reality they experience has become a persistent issue in Indonesia's education system (Chu-Chang et al., 2013; Tilaar, 2003).

In the context of private and foundation schools, teachers' welfare depends heavily on institutional financial capacity. Many of these schools, particularly those in rural areas, pay teachers salaries far below the regional minimum wage (Akiba et al., 2012). Despite these conditions, many teachers continue to serve with dedication, often invoking religious values such as sincerity (*ikhlas*) and devotion. These moral discourses, while reflecting deep commitment, can also function as ideological mechanisms that normalize economic inequality within the teaching profession (Deeming, 2013; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009).

Previous studies on teacher motivation have generally focused on factors such as salary satisfaction, work environment, and intrinsic motivation (Han & Yin, 2016; Juwaini et al., 2021). Some have explored how religious beliefs influence teacher commitment (Babaei et al., 2020; D. Maculada & S. Guanzon, 2023), and others have examined teacher exploitation in public education systems (Elshafei, 2022; Stacey et al., 2022). However, few studies have examined how structural exploitation operates within private and foundation schools through moral and religious discourses that encourage teachers to accept inequality as devotion. Moreover, research on teachers in rural and underfunded schools is still limited, leading to a lack of understanding of how inequality is reproduced in peripheral educational institutions.

This study aims to fill that gap by exploring how structural exploitation shapes the lived experiences of teachers in private and foundation schools, and how religious and moral values intersect with economic injustice. This research investigates how teachers negotiate the tension between devotion and deprivation, revealing the subtle mechanisms of exploitation that persist behind narratives of sincerity and moral calling. The study, therefore, positions itself within the sociology of education by highlighting the intersection between moral ideology, structural inequality, and teachers' agency in the Indonesian educational context.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach, with a case study method, without relying on statistical data. The research subjects consist of three honorary teachers at the Miftahul Islam Foundation in Krobungan Village, Krucil District, Probolinggo Regency, East Java, namely an MTS teacher, an MA teacher, and an MI teacher. In this case, the researcher used purposive sampling, where the informants were considered to have a thorough understanding of the issue (Creswell et al., 2006). The interviews were conducted in a formal, structured manner with open-ended questions covering topics such as salary, motivation to teach, and expectations of the government.

The reason researchers chose the Miftahul Islam Foundation as the research location is because here researchers have strong reasons. Researchers here see firsthand how access to the location is a challenge for honorary teachers in carrying out their duties. Additionally, the researcher has a personal connection as a teacher at the Miftahul Islam Foundation. The research was conducted from November 6 to December 11, every Wednesday, to gain a deeper understanding of the conditions and challenges faced by honorary teachers.

In terms of ethical guidelines, the researchers obtained a letter from the university, signed by the dean or department head. After receiving the letter, the researchers requested permission from the institution or research location. Once permission was granted, the researchers explained the title and objectives of the research in detail to the school, honestly describing what would be studied. The school then granted permission. then the researcher meets with the informants to be interviewed (contract teachers). If the research results are to be published, ensure that no personal information or sensitive data is disclosed without permission.

## RESULT

Indonesia is a country with a large population and a rich cultural diversity. As the largest archipelagic country in the world, Indonesia undoubtedly has extensive educational needs. Education can pose significant challenges that require substantial contributions from educators. One such role is that of a teacher, who serves as a cornerstone in shaping the nation's children's future. There are various types of teachers in Indonesia, such as civil servant teachers, certified teachers, non-certified teachers, and contract teachers. However, not all teachers in Indonesia enjoy equal status and welfare.

For example, honorary teachers often play a leading role in education in various regions, but often receive limited attention and appreciation compared to teachers who are civil servants or certified. The struggles of honorary teachers in Indonesia, particularly in remote villages, are a clear indication of their extraordinary dedication.

The results of direct interviews in the field regarding the wages they receive, the first informant, Mrs. Yati (34 years old), stated the following:

*"Well, no, if the salary from the school is not enough, it is definitely not enough. The salary I receive is insufficient for my daily needs, and it is also uncertain when the salary will be paid, as we are still waiting for the BOS funds to be released. However, for me, it does not matter at all because my intention and determination are not about the money or the salary," she said, shaking her head. He then added, "In my mind, there is no intention to work elsewhere, let alone stop teaching. As for the issue of living expenses, I have already entrusted that to my husband...", he said, laughing heartily, "My job is simply to educate the nation's children."*

Based on the interview with Mrs. Yati, it is known that teachers never question their salaries. With sincere intentions, they believe that their work is a form of applying their knowledge and advocating for the education of Indonesia's younger generation. However, it is the government's responsibility to resolve issues related to teachers' salaries, especially those of honorary teachers.

Figure 1. Photo of the researcher with the informant, a teacher at Mts Yayasan Miftahul



Source: researcher documentation on November 6, 2024

As stated by Mrs. Yati, the salaries of honorary teachers are often insufficient to meet their daily needs. This is reinforced by Mr. Abdul Fatah's statement that the wages he receives are far from adequate. This situation highlights the imbalance between input (time and effort) and outcome (salary), which can reduce work motivation. In reality, the Indonesian government aspires to produce a generation of golden leaders capable of guiding the nation toward a brilliant future. However, behind this grand vision lies a bitter reality that is often overlooked: the struggles of a contract teacher fighting alone amidst their limitations.

The results of the second informant's interview regarding the wages he receives, Mr. Abdul Fatah, 20 years old, in reality:

*"The salary I receive, when viewed from an economic perspective to meet my living needs, is certainly not enough to meet my living needs, but teaching cannot be thought of rationally because our minds are limited, just like charity. If we give charity, our wealth will decrease, but in reality, many people who are skilled at giving charity find that their livelihood becomes more prosperous, and the same is true for teaching. God will certainly provide the best path if we are truly sincere in teaching."*



Figure 2. Photo of the researcher with the informant, a teacher at the Miftahul Islam



Source: researcher documentation on December 14, 2024

Based on the results of the interviews above, it is clear that although the motivation of honorary teachers is based on sincerity and dedication, the government needs to pay more attention to their welfare. If they were to ask, what is the Indonesian government's policy to advocate for honorary teachers? It is not just about their salaries, but also the condition of the roads they travel on, which sometimes require extra effort and courage to reach the school. Nevertheless, they remain steadfast in fulfilling their noble duty as educators.

Figure 3. Photo of Access Road for Temporary Teachers in Remote Village



Source: researcher documentation on November 20, 2024

These honorary teachers never tire of their enthusiasm to educate the nation's children, especially those in remote villages. Their stories illustrate the strength of their determination to continue serving, even when they must overcome obstacles to ensure that every child in the nation receives a proper education. The results of the third informant interview regarding access to travel to school, Mr. Suryadi, 50, as the principal of MI, stated:

*"Nothing affects my enthusiasm for teaching children, even though the road is damaged. It is not as bad as it used to be, especially during the rainy season like this, but I still go to work without any obstacles, and there is no reason not to teach. Yes, I feel sorry for the children who are eager to go to school."*

Figure 4. Photo of the researcher with the teacher informant at MI Yayasan Miftahul Islam.



Source: researcher documentation on November 6, 2024

Based on the results of the interviews above, it is clear that teachers remain enthusiastic about teaching despite facing infrastructure challenges such as damaged roads, which demonstrates their extraordinary dedication to education. The government should pay more attention to the infrastructure conditions in these areas, especially access to schools, so that teachers and students remain enthusiastic and are not distracted by environmental obstacles. Additionally, the government needs to ensure that honorary teachers like these are correctly recognized by providing support, whether in the form of improved welfare or adequate facilities.

Mrs. Yati emphasized this in her statement:

*"It would be very influential if our salaries were higher because the previous salary was already motivating, let alone if it were increased even more. Alhamdulillah, we would be even more motivated and become the best for the children of this nation."*

From this excerpt, the author suggests that this fact should be a serious concern for the government, as it should improve the welfare of honorary teachers as a form of appreciation for their dedication to educating the younger generation, the future leaders of the nation. The government needs to reconsider its policies to be more fair and supportive, such as increasing the salaries of honorary teachers, providing additional incentives, and ensuring more decent working conditions. With these steps, the government not only helps to boost the morale and teaching quality of honorary teachers but also directly contributes to improving the quality of education in Indonesia, which serves as the Foundation for the nation's progress in the future. In an interview with Mr. Suryadi, he stated:

*"With this higher salary, it will certainly increase my motivation to teach, which will first improve the quality of the students and also provide everything we need, both inside and outside the classroom. Then Mr. Suryadi sighed briefly while staring blankly at the door, wondering how the students' needs could be met, considering that my salary alone is not enough to meet my daily needs. Well, things are already like this; what else can we do?"*

Based on the results of the interviews above, it reflects a bitter reality faced by honorary teachers, where low salaries not only affect personal welfare but also impact the quality of education. Although there is hope that higher wages will increase teaching motivation and learning quality, what is the reality? Many honorary teachers still feel that they are not

sufficiently compensated financially to support their living expenses or the education of their students.

Mrs. Yati conveyed this in her statement:

*"I persevere because I want to nurture children who will achieve great things, because dedication is tough to find, especially in this advanced age."*

From this excerpt, the author suggests that many teachers in the modern era are reluctant to continue teaching in remote villages. One of the main reasons is the often significant obstacle they face in performing their duties: the difficulty of accessing roads. Additionally, the challenge they encounter is that students tend to be difficult to manage, requiring patience in the learning process. Thus, this situation makes many teachers feel burdened to dedicate themselves, especially in remote areas, despite their role being greatly needed by the students.

The motivation that drives honorary teachers is not only based on material needs, but also on a calling and a noble desire to make a genuine contribution to the nation's children's future. Despite often facing financial constraints and a lack of adequate recognition, they remain steadfast in their duties, carrying them out with enthusiasm and dedication. Despite the many challenges they have faced, including low salaries and limited access to schools, honorary teachers continue to hope for greater attention, particularly regarding salary increases. They also seek the creation of true justice for honorary teachers so that their sacrifices in the field of education can be more appropriately recognized. Results of the interview with Mrs. Yati and Mr. Suryadi in their statements:

*"Hope is definitely there, and all honorary teachers are eagerly awaiting it. However, we do not place too much hope in it. If it happens, Alhamdulillah; if not, we, honorary teachers, are grateful that Allah SWT has given us good health. If there are institutions or foundations like the government that are willing to consider this, I am very ready to move forward."*

Based on the results of the interviews above, it reflects a sincere yet straightforward hope from honorary teachers, including Mr. Suryadi, who long for more attention to be given to the conditions of the institutions or foundations where they serve/teach. Although this hope exists, they tend not to be overly dependent, as they have grown accustomed to the reality of minimal government support. Gratitude for health and the opportunity to serve remains their guiding principle, even though the struggle to make ends meet remains a daily challenge.

## DISCUSSION

This study reveals a complex interplay between economic deprivation, moral devotion, and institutional neglect among teachers in private and foundation schools in rural Indonesia. Despite receiving extremely low salaries, often below the regional minimum wage, teachers continue to demonstrate strong motivation and commitment to their profession. This commitment is primarily sustained by religious and moral values, such as sincerity (*ikhlas*) and devotion, which frame teaching as a sacred duty rather than a formal occupation. However, behind this moral dedication lies a structural form of exploitation legitimized through cultural and religious narratives. The phenomenon must be understood within the broader context of Indonesia's educational labor structure, where privatization and decentralization have widened the welfare gap between public and



private school teachers. While state-employed teachers benefit from government-funded salaries and certification programs, those in foundation and private schools rely heavily on institutional budgets that are often unstable (Chu-Chang et al., 2013). Consequently, private teachers occupy what (Deeming, 2013) calls a “precariat class,” characterized by low income, job insecurity, and weak social protection. At the same time, Indonesia’s religious culture reinforces moral narratives of sacrifice and service in the teaching profession. The idea that teaching is a form of ibadah (worship) creates a moral economy where devotion replaces material compensation. This socio-religious framing situates teachers’ endurance not as a response to injustice, but as evidence of spiritual strength, masking more profound structural inequalities within the education system.

The imbalance between teachers’ high effort (input) and their extremely low rewards (output) constitutes a clear form of distributive injustice. However, rather than expressing dissatisfaction or protest, teachers reinterpret inequality through religious discourse, constructing a moral justification that transforms economic exploitation into spiritual virtue. This aligns with Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of symbolic violence, where dominated groups internalize the values that sustain their subordination. In this case, religious devotion operates as a symbolic mechanism that converts structural oppression into moral duty. Teachers are thus positioned as both victims and agents simultaneously exploited and valorized within a moral economy that sanctifies suffering and humility. The persistence of inequality is therefore not merely economic but ideological. The institution and society at large reinforce the belief that being a “devoted teacher” is a moral achievement, even when material justice is denied. Such ideology depoliticizes teachers’ struggles, turning structural injustice into individual piety.

Understanding this dynamic requires acknowledging that religion and morality function as cultural technologies of governance in Indonesia’s education system. As shown by (Elshafei, 2022; Stacey et al., 2022), discourses of “service” and “devotion” are strategically mobilized to maintain institutional stability without addressing systemic inequities. Teachers’ resilience becomes the moral capital that sustains an underfunded educational structure. The findings reveal the intersection between class, geography, and morality. Teachers in rural and peripheral regions, such as those in Krucil, Probolinggo, face additional structural disadvantages due to poor infrastructure, difficult access, and lack of State intervention. However, their endurance is celebrated as moral virtue rather than systemic failure. This underscores (Bernard & Keim-Klärner, 2023; Li et al., 2020), notion of “uneven geography of teacher reform,” where peripherality itself becomes a moral marker of sacrifice.

This study thus contributes to the sociology of education by illustrating how religion and morality intersect with labor inequality. The study aligns with (Asif et al., 2020; Febriana et al., 2018; Grümme, 2021) in identifying the moralization of exploitation; however, it advances their work by demonstrating the specific mechanisms through which *ikhlas* and *pengabdian* are internalized as moral imperatives within private religious institutions. It challenges the romanticized image of teachers as “heroes without reward” and exposes the structural mechanisms that exploit their devotion for the sake of institutional sustainability. Such duality underscores the necessity for a critical reevaluation of “devotion” as both an ethical commitment and an ideological constraint within neoliberal educational systems.

## CONCLUSION

This study exposes the structural contradictions that underpin the teaching profession in Indonesia's private and foundation schools. Teachers who are often celebrated as moral exemplars and symbols of devotion are, in reality, situated within an unequal labor structure that systematically undervalues their work. Despite their central role in education, they receive salaries far below the minimum standard, face infrastructural limitations, and operate within institutions that lack financial and administrative support.

However, the persistence of these teachers in continuing their duties with commitment and sincerity is not merely an individual choice but a socially and culturally mediated response. Religious and moral values, particularly sincerity (*ikhlas*) and devotion, serve as ideological frameworks that transform material deprivation into moral virtue. These values provide psychological resilience but simultaneously function as instruments of symbolic control, legitimizing structural inequality by reframing economic exploitation as a spiritual calling. This condition reveals a profound imbalance between teachers' input and rewards. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence helps explain how moral and religious discourses sustain such inequality. The findings suggest that exploitation in education does not only occur through financial mechanisms but also through cultural and ideological processes that redefine injustice as moral worthiness.

The study contributes to the sociology of education by demonstrating how religion and morality intersect with labor precarity, producing a moral economy that both empowers and constrains teachers. It challenges the dominant narrative of "devoted teachers" by revealing how devotion, when institutionalized, can obscure structural exploitation. Addressing teacher welfare in Indonesia requires more than salary reform. It demands a critical reevaluation of the cultural ideologies that normalize inequality within the educational system. Empowering teachers means recognizing their professional dignity not merely as moral actors but as rightful workers entitled to fair compensation and institutional support. Only by reconciling moral devotion with structural justice can the teaching profession truly embody the values it seeks to impart.

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