

ROWING BETWEEN THE CURRENTS: 'AISYIYAH STRATEGIES FOR MIDDLE PATH FEMINISM

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Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas tentang tantangan yang dihadapi 'Aisyiyah, salah satu organisasi perempuan Islam tertua dan terbesar di Indonesia, ketika ia mengambil posisi tengahan dalam mengembangkan ideologi feminisnya. Ide feminisme yang berkembang di Indonesia berada diantara yang berdasarkan pemikiran sekuler dan agama yang konservatif, serta antara keperempuanan yang berorientasi pada nilai-nilai budaya lokal dan budaya cosmopolitan. Pertanyaan utama adalah, feminisme macam apa yang digagas oleh 'Aisyiyah, bagaimana wujud empiriknya, serta tantangan-tantangan apa yang dihadapinya. Paper ini merupakan hasil dari riset kepustakaan yang dilakukan penulis dengan pendekatan sejarah feminis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa 'Aisyiyah mendapat tantangan dari kelompok feminis sekuler, nasionalis, juga dari kelompok konservatif Islamis. Namun demikian, 'Aisyiyah tetap tegar, dan kiprahnya menunjukkan bahwa perempuan Muslim Indonesia berperan penting dalam kesejarahan pemberdayaan perempuan melalui berbagai cara, diantaranya berorganisasi untuk melangsungkan usaha-usahanya agar dapat tercapai lebih cepat dan berdampak lebih luas. Diantara usaha itu yang terpenting adalah menyelenggarakan pendidikan untuk kaumperempuan, mendirikan pusat-pusat kesehatan ibu dan anak, pemberdayaan ekonomi mereka, serta penerbitan buku-buku tuntutan dan majalah Suara 'Aisyiyah, yang telah terbit secara konsisten sejak tahun 1926 hingga hari ini.

Kata Kunci: 'Aisyiyah, feminisme Indonesia, gerakan perempuan

Abstract

This article discusses the challenges faced by 'Aisyiyah, one of Indonesia's oldest and largest Islamic women's organizations, when it takes a middle position in developing its feminist ideology. The idea of feminism developing in Indonesia is between those based on secular and conservative religious thoughts and between women who are oriented towards local cultural values and cosmopolitan culture. The main question is, what kind of feminism was initiated by 'Aisyiyah, what was its empirical form, and what challenges did it face? This paper results from my library research conducted using a feminist historical approach. The results of the study show that 'Aisyiyah received challenges from secular feminist groups, nationalists, as well as from conservative Islamic groups. However, 'Aisyiyah remains steadfast, and its work confirms that Indonesian Muslim women have played an important role in women's empowerment in various ways, including organizing to carry out their efforts so that they can be achieved more quickly and have a broader impact. Among these efforts, the most important is providing education for women, establishing maternal and child health centers, empowering their economy, and publishing necessary guiding books and the magazine Suara 'Aisyiyah, published consistently from 1926 until today.

Keyword: 'Aisyiyah, Indonesian feminism, women's movement

Introduction

Massive movements for women's empowerment across the globe in the 20th century until today cannot be separated from the emergence of feminism. Feminism, in its broader definition—a collective awareness of existing discrimination against women and systematic efforts to reduce and eliminate that discrimination through various ways to achieve better gender justice, equity, and equity in society.¹ Such actions as to eliminate gender-based discrimination undoubtedly had been done and spread by groups of people long before the term was scholarly coined. However, before the emergence of feminist awareness and more significant movements in the 20th century, the struggle for women's empowerment had been isolated and localized, such as those preached by Prophets, local leaders, and scholars.²

Indonesia has also witnessed numerous struggles raised by different actors at different times demanding community institutions and political sovereigns to adopt better ideas, treatment, and relations between men and women, as well as children. The status, roles and relationship among gendered people in communities have not been static; on the contrary, they are so dynamic and constantly changed for various reasons. There are many factors and agencies that influence the changes and variety of gender roles and relations, such as religious values, cultural traditions, political interest, education to international influences, and economics to the advancement of information technology. They all have shaped gender roles and relations among Indonesians.

Religion has been one of the most important agents that shape the models of expected gender

status, roles and relations in Indonesia.³ Even though more than 85% of Indonesians adhered to Islam, the State of Indonesia is not a theocratic state. However, it respects and considers religion to be important, and its reliance on religious norms is strongly apparent. Evidences for such respect to religions can be found in the philosophy of state—the Pancasila. All five precepts in Pancasila are in harmony in religious teachings existing in Indonesia. The first precept is *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* (Unity in Deity). Such is very strong with Islamic teaching. Other religious values can be found in the State Constitution, and several National Laws. Within such a country, secular and religious women's movements and organizations might compete and work together to achieve their visions.

Current research on Indonesian feminism or gender relations has been directed to small-scale non-government organizations (NGOs), such as Rifka Annisa, Fahmina, and Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia (KUPI).⁴ Little has been done on the mass-based Muslim organizations, such as 'Aisyiyah and Muslimat NU. These large-scale women's organizations have significantly shaped Muslim life in Indonesia.⁵ 'Aisyiyah,

¹ Alexandra Nowakowski, "Feminism As An Evolving Culture of Inclusion and Affirmation: A Review Of Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice," *The Qualitative Report*, October 7, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2019.4204>; Brooke A. Ackerly and Jacqui True, *Doing Feminist Research In Political and Social Science*, 2nd edition (London: Red Globe Press, 2020).

² Taufan Anggoro, "Konsep Kesetaraan Gender Dalam Islam," *Afkaruna* 15, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.18196/AIIJIS.2019.0098.129-134>; Alfitri Alfitri, "Protecting Women From Domestic Violence: Socio-Legal Approach To CEDAW Bill In Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 27, no. 2 (August 3, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v27i2.9408>.

³ Mutiah Amini, "Gender Bias In Historiography of Indonesia and The Writing of Women's History," *Jurnal Perempuan* 23, no. 3 (August 28, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.34309/jp.v23i3.245>; Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin, *Rezim Gender Muhammadiyah: Kontestasi Gender, Identitas, Dan Eksistensi*, Cetakan I (Yogyakarta: Suka Press : Pustaka Pelajar, 2015); Alimatul Qibtiyah, "Mapping of Muslims' Understandings On Gender Issues In Islam at Six Universities In Yogyakarta, Indonesia," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 56, no. 2 (May 21, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2018.562.305-340>.

⁴ Muhammad Rifa'at Adiakarti Farid, "Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan Dalam Ketimpangan Relasi Kuasa: Studi Kasus Di Rifka Annisa Women's Crisis Center," *Sawwa: Jurnal Studi Gender* 14, no. 2 (October 21, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.21580/sa.v14i2.4062>; Umma Farida and Abdurrohman Kasdi, "The 2017 KUPI Congress and Indonesian Female 'Ulama,'" *Journal Of Indonesian* 12, no. 2 (December 1, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2018.12.2.135-158>.

⁵ Anna M. Gade, "Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur'an by Pieterella van Doorn-Harder," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4, no. 3 (November 1, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.2979/MEW.2008.4.3.128>; Elizabeth Martyn, *The Women's Movement In Postcolonial Indonesia: Gender and Nation In A New Democracy ASAA Women In Asia Series*

for instance, is among the organizers of the first Indonesian Women Congress held on 22-25 December 1928 in Yogyakarta,⁶ Long before the birth of Indonesia as a modern sovereign state. The organization has survived the challenges of political trials of a different era, from late Colonial Dutch to this era of twentieth-century Indonesia.

The current paper seeks to investigate the struggles and strategies adopted by 'Aisyiyah, the long-standing Muslim women's organization, in maintaining the position of middle paths in promoting feminist ideas and praxis, as well as in facing various challenges from extreme secular or Islamist movements, from a domestic inward-looking to an international forward-looking womanhood. In so doing, I conduct library research on the documents produced by the organization and other research papers relevant to the topics. In presenting the findings, I employ the historical approach as promoted by Mutiah Amini, an Indonesian female scholar of history.⁷ She criticized the Indonesian historiography centered on the perspectives of males and those who hold power in the communities. Indonesian historiography has consisted of struggles over political power by male agents, and very little has been written on women's contributions to nation-building and cultivation. Amini has consistently tried to fill in the gap between women's stories and their perspectives in Indonesian historiography. This paper is going alongside that struggle to put forward women's experiences and efforts to make their lives matter and be meaningful.

The presentation of the findings will be organized as follows. First, the paper will address the gender relations in the colonial era and the birth of 'Aisyiyah. Here, 'Aisyiyah encountered extreme traditionalist Muslims who rejected any ideas from the 'West,' while 'Aisyiyah adopted what were seen as suitable and in accord with

Islamic teachings as they understood. Secondly, the paper will present the struggles of 'Aisyiyah during independent Indonesia in which it faced secular feminists and conservative Islamists competing for total obedience from their constituents, while 'Aisyiyah deliberately took the middle path, neither extreme secular nor extreme Islamist. It also encountered the pull of inward-looking womanhood and forward-looking one that accommodated the cosmopolitan praxis of womanhood. Thirdly, it will highlight the discussion over why 'Aisyiyah remains an autonomous organization within Muhammadiyah that maintains discursive womanhood instead of becoming a completely independent women's organization, which eliminates its relations with Muhammadiyah.

Gender Relations in the Colonial Era and the Birth of 'Aisyiyah

To begin my assessment of the birth of 'Aisyiyah in the late Dutch colonial era, I would like to present the anthem of 'Aisyiyah, created by Indonesian Muslim poets Muhammad Diponegoro and M. Irsyad.

Wahai warga Aisyiyah sejati
Sadarlah akan kewajiban suci
Membina harkat kaum wanita
Menjadi tiang utama negara
Di telapak kakimu terbentang surga
Di tanganmulah nasib bangsa

Mari beramal dan berdarma bakti
Membangun negara
Mencipta masyarakat Islam sejati
Penuh karunia

Berkibarlah panji matahari
Menghias langit ibu Pertiwi
Itu lambang perjuangan kita
Dalam menyebarluaskan agama
Islam pedoman hidup wahyu Illahi
Dasar kebahagiaan sejati

Mari beramal dan berdarma bakti
Membangun negara
Mencipta masyarakat Islam sejati
Penuh karunia

(Routledge, 2004); Siti Syamsiyatun, "Reclaiming the Right to Self-Determination: Aisyiyah Progressive Womanhood," *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 16, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.15642/islamica.2022.16.02>.

⁶ Susan Blackburn, *Kongres Perempuan Pertama: Tinjauan Ulang* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2007).

⁷ Mutiah Amini, "Gender Bias In Historiography"; Mutiah Amini, "Aisyiyah and The Problem of Women's Social Movement In Indonesia: A Historical Perspective," *Journal of 'Aisyiyah Studies* 1, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.31101/joas.v1i1.2079>.

The anthem clearly shows what kind of feminist ideas and women's roles have been aspired to by 'Aisyiyah and their role and relations regarding nation-building. 'Aisyiyah has seen women as important and must take responsibility alongside men to do good deeds to create a community and a nation that accords Islamic values.

During the early 20th century, when the Dutch colonial was ruling the archipelago, the education was mostly provided only for the families of the elite colonial families, local royal families, limited numbers of non-indigenous merchants. The ordinary indigenous population, especially women, were not given access to basic living needs, such as formal education, health services, and proper employment. There were, of course, some kind of traditional learning centers amongst indigenous people, such as *pesantran* (boarding schools for learning Islamic subject materials) from Muslims, and *ashram* for Hindus. These traditional learning facilities had focused mostly on religious teachings and accessible only for boys and men. Still, not much were available for girls and women.⁸ Even though women were not given access to formal, good education, they were developing skills in local farming and petty trading in local markets that make them excelled finance issues. Accordingly, women also have some sorts of power in areas different from men.⁹

Having seen the apprehensible conditions of indigenous people in the archipelago, which were far under the standard of the life of general colonial Dutch families, Kiai Haji Ahmad Dahlan, a learned man from Kauman in Yogyakarta, felt it was mandatory to improve the life conditions of the Indonesian people through education. He began to teach his families and neighbors. As for

Muslims Dahlan found that most Muslims living in his areas did not make much effort to implement the teachings of Islam. They observed religion as usually they found their parents practiced it. For creating a system by which his ideas and praxis of Islamic ways of life can be sustained, Kiai Dahlan founded an Islamic movement named Muhammadiyah on November 8, 1912. One of his priority steps was developing learning centers, schools for ordinary people, where boys and girls all could access to those newly found facilities. Kiai Dahlan was inspired by a Qur'anic verse that the faithful and knowledgeable Muslims are given the highest ranks. So, he began the organization by improving education for boys, girls, and women.

Young women who joined the Muhammadiyah learning centers created an association for building solidarity and mutual support in 1914, and they named it Sapa Tresna ([those] Who Love [learning]). After a few years changed to become 'Aisyiyah in 1917.¹⁰ A century later, in 2017, 'Aisyiyah became one of the most long-standing Muslim women's movements in Indonesia, if not worldwide.¹¹ 'Aisyiyah has successfully built thousands of social enterprises, especially in the education, health, and economic sectors. In the context of the absence of educational avenues for girls and women in the first part of twentieth-century Indonesia, we can find gender changes promoted by 'Aisyiyah as meaningful and significant, despite emerging debate whether such can be categorized as feminist ideas. It is argued that education for girls has become the catalyst and foundation for 'Aisyiyah's early development and further growth.

The anthem of 'Aisyiyah above shows the loyalty of the movement. 'Aisyiyah has been loyal to women's issues, to the cause of Islam, to the Indonesian nation as well as to humanity in general. Before and after independence, Indonesia has been home to many women's organizations, with a variety of ways of organizing, for

⁸ Muhammad Fuad, "Islam, Modernity and Muhammadiyah's Educational Programme," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (December 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1464937042000288697>; Mitsuo Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises Over the Banyan Tree: A Study of the Muhammadiyah Movement In A Central Javanese Town, c.1910s-2010 (Second Enlarged Edition)* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814311861>.

⁹ Susan Blackburn and Land- en Volkenkunde (Leiden) Koninklijk Instituut Voor Taal, "Women and The Household In Colonial Indonesia: Insights From the Women's Press" (Leiden, Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology, 1995).

¹⁰ Mu'arif and Hajar Nur Setyowati, *Srikandi-Srikandi 'Aisyiyah*, Cet. 1 (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2011).

¹¹ Mark Woodward, "Making Modern Muslim Women: The 'Aisyiyah-Muhammadiyah Madrasah Perempuan Berkemajuan Program," *Journal of 'Aisyiyah Studies* 1, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.31101/joas.v1i1.2078>.

different purposes and strategies for survival.¹² In terms of membership, some Indonesian women's organizations take special, exclusive membership to address specific issues, such as Yayayan Annisa Swasti (Yasanti), Rifka Annisa, Kalyana Mitra, Rahima, Fahmina; others have a wider membership and large-scale membership. 'Aisyiyah fits into the last category since it encourages active memberships and participation from the larger community, and it currently has millions of casual and active members throughout the country and abroad. Muslimat NU, Fatayat, Nasyiatul 'Aisyiyah, Puteri PERSIS all fall into large-scale membership organizations. Seen from the category of reference to religious values or secular reasoning, 'Aisyiyah clearly adheres to the religiously driven organization. However, in most cases, religion and social issues cannot be sharply separated.

'Aisyiyah Feminism: from Kauman to the World

Based on the definition of feminism stated at the beginning of the article, what has been done by Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah to empower women and systematically provide education and avenues for women to develop to their fullest life can be regarded as feminist actions even though the organizations do not claim so. 'Aisyiyah is one of the autonomous organizations within Muhammadiyah, alongside Nasyiatul 'Aisyiyah, Pemuda Muhammadiyah, Ikatan Pelajar Muhammadiyah, Ikatan Mahasiswa Muhammadiyah, Tapak Suci Putra Muhammadiyah, and others. Thus, the birth of 'Aisyiyah is one of the results of Muhammadiyah's ideas for renewing the interpretation of Islam on the status, rights, and roles of women in Islam, which can also be said to be a feminist endeavor.

It is necessary to highlight about Kiai Ahmad Dahlan's ideas in prioritizing education for boys and girls, men and women when he founded Muhammadiyah. According to Munir Mulkhan's research, Kiai Dahlan's strong and much efforts to

developing education because he understood that Islam values faith and knowledge highly as stated in Qur'anic verses. Yet, many Muslims of his time, did not care to implement such Islamic social ethics. Kiai Dahlan then created avenues whereby Muslims could treasure wisdom, sciences, and knowledge as expected by the Qur'an.¹³ Kiai Dahlan proposed what has been termed as *Islam berkemajuan* (progressive Islam), which was characterized by a creative understanding of Islam with practical implementations, adopting reasons and the development of sciences to improve people understanding of Qur'an, joy in worshipping God, and respecting women.¹⁴ As the concept of *Islam berkemajuan* in Muhammadiyah evolved to adopt the new challenges of time, naturally, 'Aisyiyah also developed further the idea by producing a guidebook called *Risalah Perempuan Berkemajuan* (Progressive Muslim Women) during the 48th Muktamar held in Solo in 2022.

Back to 'Aisyiyah's early history, the change of the name of the women's group from Sapa Tresna to 'Aisyiyah in the year of 1917, was itself showed that Muslim women have developed further and widen their perspectives, from a limited local outlook to a more universal, Islamic orientation. It has been also a proof of the change in social imaginaries of being good Muslim, Indonesian (then Nusantara) women. Characteristic of good womanhood has extended from only to include women's love of seeking knowledge as stipulated in its old name of the association Sapa Tresna, to include of having wider Islamic root and argumentation to their demand of economic access and control, engagement to public issues, yet to also having *sakinah* (peaceful, prosperous, happy) family. These 'Aisyiyah women have now a very strong foundation in Islamic historical and theology because the name is resembling the wife of the Prophet, Lady 'Aisyah. They have found the perfect example in the excellent women's

¹² Lies M. Marcoes-Natsir, *Peta Gerakan Perempuan Islam Pasca-Orde Baru*, ed. Nur Khalik Ridwan and Marzuki Wahid, Cetakan 1 (Cirebon, Jawa Barat: Institut Studi Islam Fahmina bekerja sama dengan Fahmina Institute, 2012); Sukanti Suryochondro, *Potret Perempuan Wanita Di Indonesia*, Cet 1 (Jakarta: Rajawali, 1984).

¹³ Robert W. Hefner, Sukidi Imawan, and Abdul Munir Mulkhan, *Api Pembaharuan Kiai Ahmad Dahlan*, Cet. 1 (Yogyakarta: Multi Pressindo, 2008); Abdul Munir Mulkhan, *Kiai Ahmad Dahlan: Jejak Pembaruan Sosial Dan Kemanusiaan: Kado Satu Abad Muhammadiyah* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2010).

¹⁴ Abdul Munir Mulkhan, *Warisan Intelektual KH. Ahmad Dahlan Dan Amal Muhammadiyah*, Cet 1 (Yogyakarta: Percetakan Persatuan, 1990).

personality in one of the Prophet Muhammad's wife, named 'Aisyah. These are some of the reason why the young women of Sapa Tresna changed their organization's name to 'Aisyiyah –which literally means followers and adopters of 'Aisyah's traits and personality.¹⁵ 'Aisyah, the Prophet's wife, is widely narrated by many respected Muslim scholars to be a loving, intelligent, knowledgeable, and socially engaged lady.¹⁶

The new forward-looking inspired by such international figures as Lady 'Aisyah made the movement more confident in spreading its wings for serving Indonesian women. In 1926, Aisyiyah published a monthly magazine called Suara 'Aisyiyah (then Soeara 'Aisijjah) to extend its idea of Muslim womanhood to reach as many more women as possible.¹⁷ Since then, 'Aisyiyah's programmatic activities have not been stoppable, they increase in quantity, variety and quality. From developing kindergarten, orphanages to hospital; from creating programs for women empowerment to educating female preachers (*muballighat*).¹⁸

Since the organization has spread across the countries with thousands of local branches, 'Aisyiyah created a structure of the organization at different levels of leadership, namely the Central Board (*Pimpinan Pusat*), the Provincial (*Pimpinan Wilayah*) and District Boards (*Pimpinan Daerah*) down to Subdistrict (*Pimpinan Cabang*) and Village leadership (*Pimpinan Ranting*). Every five years, 'Aisyiyah holds a national congress called Mukhtamar. It is the highest rank of confidence

within the organization, in which important policy, programs, and leadership decisions are deliberated.

'Aisyiyah renewed its loyalties to the cause of Islam, Indonesia, and women in its 47th Congress or Mukhtamar held in Makassar, South Sulawesi, in 2015. Hence, 'Aisyiyah develops feminism that combines nationality and religion. 'Aisyiyah put a particular effort to revitalize and reworked its identity as *Perempuan Islam Berkemajuan* (progressive Muslim women). In the Mukhtamar, 'Aisyiyah re-conceptualized what it meant to be a progressive Muslim woman in today's world. What are some of the most significant indicators of being a progressive Muslim woman? How should such vision of progressive womanhood can be implemented in its programs down to reach women in remote areas? These are among the questions 'Aisyiyah addressed during the Mukhtamar.¹⁹

The Mukhtamar approved the vision of 'Aisyiyah to work for Islam, to create the best possible Islamic community with strong faith, enjoin good deeds, and restrain evil deeds. 'Aisyiyah considers that the vision shall be achieved by adopting the following programmatic focuses:²⁰ 1.) To improve the harkat and martabat (destiny. and roles of women) in accordance to the teachings of Islam. 2) To motivate and guide women to increase their awareness of the Islamic faith and the importance of women learning and organizing. 3) To educate Muslim youth/young generation so that they can benefit and assume responsibility for advancing the message of Islam and for the welfare of the nation and country. 4) To strengthen faith, to love God worshiping, and to rectify the noble character. 5) To improve the quality of the work of dakwa, by enjoining charity, giving, and endowment (zakat, infaq, shadaqah, waqf) for building and maintaining houses of worship and learning facilities for the betterment of the community. 6) To advance and improve the quality of education, and teaching-learning, refine the culture and civilization, as well as widen the knowledge and the spirit of inquiry (research) following the teachings of Islam. 7) To educate young women and future

¹⁵ Siti Syamsiyatun, "Reclaiming The Right."

¹⁶ Nabia Abbott, *Aishah, The Beloved of Mohammed* (London: Saqi Books, 1998).

¹⁷ Silvy Dian Setiawan, "Suara Aisyiyah Cetak Rekor Muri, Majalah Perempuan Pertama," Okt 2021, <https://khazanah.republika.co.id/berita/r1u7st320/suara-aisyiyah%20a0cetak-rekor-muri-majalah-perempuan-pertama%20a0?>; David Kloos and Tika Ramadhini, "Visualizing Female Islamic Leadership in Indonesia: Suara Aisyiyah and Amanah," in *Voyage of Discovery: Exploring the Collections of the Asian Library at Leiden University*, ed. Alexander Reeuwijk (Leiden University Press, 2017).

¹⁸ Lelly Qodariah, "Aisyiyah Organization and Social Change For Women," *Journal Of Education And Practice* 7, no. 24 (2016); Ro'fah, "A Study of Aisyiyah : An Indonesian Women's Organization (1917-1998)" (Montreal, Canada, McGill University, 2003).

¹⁹ Mark Woodward, "Making Modern Muslim Women."

²⁰ Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, *Tanfidz Keputusan Mukhtamar Ke 47. Satu Abad 'Aisyiyah* (Yogyakarta: Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 2015).

generations of 'Aisyiyah so that they can sustain, improve and perfect the works of the movement. 8) To aim to improve the community's economic and social life and livelihood to accord the teachings of Islam. 9) To build, maintain and prosper houses of worship and other religious endowed facilities and properties for improving community health, welfare, and environment. 10) To improve legal awareness and law enforcement, create justice and adhere truth, and cultivate the spirit of national unity. 11) To foster and improve communication and sisterhood with organizations in Indonesia and abroad to cooperate in various activities for the common good. 12) To strengthen national solidarity and unity to ensure national development and prosperity. 13) To utilize other means that accord with the organization's purposes.

'Aisyiyah has opted to strategies to implement the program in order to achieve its mission; namely by maintaining and enlarging partnerships and networking with various agencies, elaborating bottom-up initiative and providing examples and guide from the top leadership. Because 'Aisyiyah has large membership that spread across the country, it allows rooms for differences and creativity to members living in different areas.

The 48th Muktamar 'Aisyiyah was held in Solo in 2022. The Muktamar should have been organized in 2020; however, due to the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic, the Muktamar was postponed until November 18-20 in 2022. The Muktamar also produced several important documents that show how 'Aisyiyah women have progressed in looking at social, and global issues and how to approach them.²¹ Amongst the most critical decisions, apart from the election for top national leadership, taken by 'Aisyiyah during its 48th Muktamar are the issuing of three documents addressing strategic issues in nationhood and universal humanity,²² as well as a treatise on progressive womanhood, called *Risalah Perempuan Berkemajuan*.

Throughout its history 'Aisyiyah has been

²¹ Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, *Tanfidz Keputusan Muktamar Ke 48 'Aisyiyah* (Yogyakarta: Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 2022).

²² Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, *Isu-Isu Strategis Keumatan, Kebangsaan Dan Kemanusiaan Universal* (Yogyakarta: Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 2022).

consistent in selecting cooperative strategy and cultural transformation instead of proposing social changes through revolution and confrontation. confrontation and revolutionary social changes. There are benefits and drawbacks for 'Aisyiyah because of adopting such approaches. People would accuse 'Aisyiyah to be dependent to the regimes, and did not have self-confidence to revolt. However, 'Aisyiyah takes the risks and continue to maintain the strategy of middle path during its course of history from the ear of late colonial to present day. Example of cooperative strategy during the Dutch ruling in the archipelago was that 'Aisyiyah –along with Muhammadiyah took the cooperative stand to strategize the sustainability of their early endeavor to build new educational institutions for boys and girls, health clinics, shelter houses for orphans and elders, and other economic initiatives for indigenous people and Muslims who were denied access to those belonging to the Dutch.²³

'Aisyiyah also worked along with other women's organizations operating during the colonial time, such as s Wanito Oetomo, Puteri Indonesia, Puteri Boedi Sedjati, Wanito Sedjati, Darmo Laksmi, Wanita Moelyo, and Wanita Taman Siswa. These organizations worked to empower women through different programs targeting women with specific characteristics. For instances Wanita Taman Siswa focused on education for Javanese women and girls in urban areas; while 'Aisyiyah worked in various fields from education to health and economy.

The historic event of *Sumpah Pemuda* (Youth Pledge) is considered a milestone in the Indonesian nation building. The Youth Pledge clearly steered up the sense and development of new Indonesian nationalism. Such a spirit of Indonesian nationalism evidently also grew amongst Indonesian women. This can be seen that only two month after the Youth Pledge, Indonesian women's organizations, including 'Aisyiyah initiated a historic event, called the first women's congress on 22-25 December 1928, and was held in Yogyakarta. The congress highlighted pressing issues experienced by most Indonesian women and girls, most importantly are lack of education, employment opportunity and equal pay, protection from child marriage, unrecorded

²³ Mitsuo Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises over the Banyan Tree*.

divorce and polygamy. They demanded new public policy affecting their lives.²⁴ To respect and sustain the spirit and legacy of the first Indonesian women congress, the date December 22 has been decreed by the government to be Mother's Day.

The gender issues that have been voiced by the first Women's Congress such as the making of public policy on marriage, equal opportunity for girls and women to attain better education, and decent work contract and wage for women workers, are still problematic in our current situation. In other words, what have been demanded by this first Indonesian Women's Congress in 1928 remains relevant to contemporary women's organizations' concerns. For instance, there still high number of child marriage, the proportion of women in top leadership are still far behind men. In contrast, the ratio between boys and girls is equal in primary and secondary schools. However, the ratio in higher education does not follow –the higher the degree, the smaller the participation of women. There are many reasons for these disparities; some are rooted in culture, derived from interpretations of religious texts, while others are from practical considerations.²⁵ Despite such a situation, Indonesian women have been able to utilize their agency outside those formal avenues.

After the independence, for the most part, 'Aisyiyah maintain its good relationship with different regimes, from the era of President Soekarno to President Soeharto's administration up to this Reformation era, from President B.J. Habibie, President Abdurahman Wahid to President Megawati Sukarnoputri, President Susilo Bambang Yudoyono to President Joko Widodo. There are always consequences for taking cooperative and middle-path positions. 'Aisyiyah has faced favorable and unfavorable consequences because of taking such a cooperative and middle path position' to advance its missionary works. For example, because of its cooperative approach to the Dutch colonial rule in the area of education and health, 'Aisyiyah's nationalism was questioned by many. In the area of Islamic religiosity, 'Aisyiyah was blamed and seen as not so Islamic because of its moderation in interpreting and implementing Islamic teachings.

²⁴ Susan Blackburn, *Kongres Perempuan Pertama*.

²⁵ Muhammad Fuad, "Islam, Modernity and Muhammadiyah's."

'Aisyiyah's cooperative relations with respective Indonesian governments or regimes have also been interpreted as un-Islamic by Islamist wings. Furthermore, for many 'secular'-based feminist movements in Indonesia, Aisyiyah has also been seen or labeled as not feminist enough, because 'Aisyiyah still maintains its organizational relationship with Muhammadiyah, which has large male membership. As such is accused to maintain a patriarchal structure and habitus in Indonesia.²⁶

'Aisyiyah has continued to uphold its moderation and cooperative positioning, and answered the criticism with many actions. Until today, 'Aisyiyah not only still exists but thrives, that some scholars, such as James Peacock and Mark Woodward name it as the largest, active, and long-standing Muslim women's movements across the country, or probably the world, while other organizations faded, fell apart and discontinued.²⁷ All these evidences show that 'Aisyiyah has been successful in imagining a far-reaching vision of progressive womanhood. Other women's organizations in Indonesia have taken different strategies and tactics than those taken by 'Aisyiyah, and they have their own course of history.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are usually founded with a very limited membership, and focused their works on specific issues. For instances there are NGOs that only focused on environment, or on legal aid women and children, for caring for issues encountered by migrant workers. Because of its limited scale, these kinds of NGOs usually have been able to address issues more sharply and act quickly. Such speed and sharpness are sometime absent in 'Aisyiyah. Because of the large span of organizational structures and more complicated modes of communication for decision-making in 'Aisyiyah, it is then labelled as slow and unresponsive. Never the less, many of small-scale NGOs types of organizations depend on their sustainability on the availability of funding from outside their resources and members. Consequently, when the funding

²⁶ Siti Syamsiyatun, "A Daughter In the Indonesian Muhammadiyah: Nasyiatul Aisyiyah Negotiates a New Status and Image," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etl044>.

²⁷ Mark Woodward, "Making Modern Muslim Women."

agencies' project priority changes, many NGOs experience financial challenges.²⁸ 'Aisyiyah, on the other hand, because of its culture of financial independent, and philanthropic value has not been affected by the availability of funding donors. 'Aisyiyah fund is from the members, they are the runners of the organization. Having said this does not mean that 'Aisyiyah did not want to cooperate with funding agencies. It will cooperate, only in areas where the interests of 'Aisyiyah and the funding agencies are in concordance. 'Aisyiyah will not submit its existence to foreign funding. Whether or not they receive financial assistance from funding agencies or from the government, 'Aisyiyah will still carry out its programmatic endeavors.

'Aisyiyah membership has reached almost all corners of the country, at least there 34 leadership of 'Aisyiyah in Indonesian provinces. This can be achieve partly because 'Aisyiyah cultivates relationships with government agencies or offices, such as the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Women Empowerment, the Ministry of State Enterprises, and non-government organizations, such as Muslimat NU, Sayap Ibu Foundation, Indonesian Ulama Council and many more others. 'Aisyiyah has been trusted by foreign, international foundations to carry out specific programs relevant to the issues of improving the lives of women, families, and children; among others are Overseas Education Fund (OEF), Mobil Oil, The Pathfinder Fund, UNICEF, UNESCO, WHO, John Hopkins University, USAID, AUSAID, NOVIB, The New Century Foundation, The Asia Foundation, Regional Islamic Consultation of South East Asia and Pacific, World Conference of Religion and Peace, UNFPA, UNDP, World Bank, Partnership for Governance Reform in Indonesia, and other foreign countries embassies in Jakarta.²⁹

From the explanation above, it is apparent that in 'Aisyiyah's social imaginary progressivity

of its members must remain connected to religious ideals and ethics, which correspond strongly with the cultivation of virtues and intellectual characters, as well as social activism and spirit of respect and cooperation with other institutions. 'Aisyiyah does not encourage women to adopt self-centered piety and achievement; rather, it fosters social piety and engagement.

Maintaining Middle Path in Discursive Gender Equality in Indonesia

Within centennial time period, 'Aisyiyah has encountered many changes within the organization. To provide readers with how much 'Aisyiyah has transformed since its beginning till today and how the movement has confirmed its devotion to maintain discursive space for *perempuan Islam berkemajuan* (progressive Islamic womanhood) in different periods, I will recall when it started. As mentioned previously, 'Aisyiyah was founded in 1917 in Yogyakarta, to empower Muslim women and girls from an ordinary population. Apart from the wife of Kiai Ahmad Dahlan, 'Aisyiyah members and leaders at that time aged 15 years or younger. Educating his daughters was taken by Kiai Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of Muhammadiyah, to convince his family and colleagues of the significant of education and learning for women and girls.³⁰

The first formal educational institution for girls opened by Muhammadiyah was attended by relatives and daughters of members of this newly founded movement. As more Muslim families understood the necessity of education, they supported the mission of Muhammadiyah to improve and widen the educational opportunity for girls and women, and the result was since then, there has been an increasing number of girls attending schools. Learning new subjects and life skills amused the pupils and young women, despite some suspicions shown by some segments of Muslim society who still believed that women did not need to study sciences.

Siti Bariyah, when she assumed the chair of the new Muslim women's movement, was only 15 years. Looking at the broader social condition of early twentieth-century Java, it was still very rare and exceptional that young women from ordinary families –outside the category of Dutch

28 Darmiyanti Muchtar, "The Rise of the Indonesian Women's Movement In the New Order State" (Murdoch University, 1999).

29 S M Zainal et al., "The Prevention of TB Using Promotive Aspect In Aisyiyah TB Care Program," *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 343, no. 1 (October 1, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/343/1/012151>.

30 Abdul Munir Mul Khan, *Kiai Ahmad Dahlan*.

colonial and Javanese royal families- could afford to go to schools. These young women from Kauman Quarter, who were born from batik traders among Muhammadiyah members and elites, against the odd began a movement to bring in with them Islamic values in addition to the Javanese culture they had inherited so far. After three years, the organization changed its name to 'Aisyiyah, as mentioned previously. Sally White commented that the foundation of 'Aisyiyah by these common young women signaled the emergence of women's movement outside the Javanese *priyayi* circles; this is because preceded women organizations had been enacted and aimed at women from royal and elite *priyayi* societies.³¹

During the late colonial period and Japanese occupation, 'Aisyiyah created many community-based learning centers in which mothers and girls from ordinary families who were denied education could learn to read and write Malay and Arabic and learn other sciences and accounting. 'Aisyiyah also provided training for improving their life skills, such as knitting, weaving, gardening, sewing, cooking, and others, which was very beneficial for their later life, especially during the wars for independence.

Aiming at improving girls' and women's devotional worship (*shalat*) in congregational manners as suggested by the Prophet Muhammad, which has been practiced by Muhammadiyah, in 1922 'Aisyiyah built-in Kauman Yogyakarta, a particular *masjid* (house for worship) special for women. The building of this house of worship for women opened further opportunities for Muslim women to do social engagement because they had to manage the daily running of the *masjid*, train the women leaders and preachers, maintain the building, and organize activities. Soon after that year, 'Aisyiyah women in other regions, such as Pekalongan Central Java and Garut West Jawa began building *masjid* for women. As a result, the number of women preachers from 'Aisyiyah has increased yearly.

It was reported that during a Muhammadiyah congress in Malang in 1938, there were 5516 *muballigh* (male preachers) and 2114 *muballighat* (female preachers) listed in the organization system. In 1926, 'Aisyiyah initiated a new venture for Indonesian women. It began publishing

a magazine called Suara 'Aisyiyah (Voice of 'Aisyiyah) to disseminate its missionary messages and organizational information to the increasing members and general public. What is quite special is that Suara 'Aisyiyah has been consistently in production until today. Again, Aisyiyah has shown another enduring intellectualization effort for the cause of its mission to educate women. To advance the culture of reading and learning among women and girls, 'Aisyiyah established a kind of library in 1938 by name Taman Bacaan 'Aisyiyah ('Aisyiyah Garden of Reading) in which they not only read but also learned how to write, compose songs, poetry, write short articles for Suara 'Aisyiyah and the likes.³²

As a women's movement, 'Aisyiyah has paid careful attention to the condition of women and children. Apart from providing learning centers for women, it also developed learning groups for girls of different ages. 'Aisyiyah divided their informal learning sessions for girls into groups based on age. Girls of aged 7-10 years were grouped in a class called Jamiatul Athfal (Association of Children). Jamiatul Athfal would meet every Monday and Thursday to learn how to read the Qur'an, memorize short chapters or certain verses of it, learn to write Arabic script, acquire simple life skills, and learn to sing songs and do sports. Girls aged 10-15 would gather in learning groups called Tajmilul Akhlak (Refining the Character). These girls have their learning session every Friday evening. They would study Islamic teachings about women's virtues, house management, and advanced life skills, such as cooking, sewing, and knitting. The most advanced group was called Thalabus Sa'adah (Seeking Happiness), consisting of young women aged between 15-18 years. They were given lessons deemed necessary for entering married life and having a family in the future, such as lessons on Islamic law on marriage, sexuality, on building a happy family. They also received training on starting small businesses, as well as for public speaking. This is because they were expected to become future women preachers in communities, as some of them would be expected to sustain the missionary works of 'Aisyiyah.³³ While 'Aisyiyah was very strong in its campaign for improving

³¹ Mutiah Amini, "Aisyiyah And The Problem."

³² Mutiah Amini.

³³ Siti Syamsiyatun, "A Daughter In The Indonesian Muhammadiyah."

women's education and economic empowerment, it also highly respects the institution of marriage and building a family that produces a guidebook on happy marriage, namely *Tuntunan Menuju Keluarga Sakinah*.³⁴

Since the independence of Indonesia in 1945, the Constitution mandated the new government to provide education for all, regardless of sex/gender, ethnicity, and religion. Access and participation for girls and women to have better formal education increased significantly. More women attained education beyond their primary schools, and many went further to secondary and higher education. This new opportunity of enjoying further formal education influences the composition and features of both membership and leadership of 'Aisyiyah.

Nowadays, 'Aisyiyah membership shows different features from one in the beginning; today's 'Aisyiyah women are mostly married, above thirty, and have minimum secondary education. Most of its members also have professional careers, own businesses, or working women in general. Because of the strong importance of attaining better education within 'Aisyiyah's social imaginary of progressive women, its members have been among the first women to participate and achieve a high level of education in Indonesia. Prof. Baroroh Baried, Prof. Chamamah Soeratno, Prof. Dawiesah, leaders of 'Aisyiyah in the 1980s to 2000s, are among the first female Professors in Universitas Gadjah Mada, the largest and oldest public university in Indonesia. In most cases, women's participation in higher learning is followed accordingly by involvement in the professional workforce, also delays women's marriage age. Such new features of Muslim women demand different strategies and programmatic endeavors for 'Aisyiyah to cater to their new gender interests.

Since the 1960s, Aisyiyah has paid broader attention to the need to build resilient families, as competing ideologies are flooding the young country to win the hearts and minds of the governments and populations. Religious-based ideologies –notably Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant- of womanhood and family- have been challenged by secular, communist ideology in

response. 'Aisyiyah began developing a concept of *Keluarga Sakinah* (peaceful, harmonious family), the ethics of which is derived from the spirit and views from the Qur'an in conversation/consideration with Indonesian ethics and current women's situations. The guidebook of *Keluarga Sakinah* itself is reviewed and revised at least every five years. The 2016 document highlights virtues that Islam is a merciful religion, recognizes gender equality, strengthens the protection of children's rights, as well as acknowledging the different types of family, e.g. a family with the father or/and mother as the source of family income or with neither.³⁵

Seeing the needs and importance of women's and mothers' health, in the late 1960s 'Aisyiyah encouraged its branches to develop community-based health centers to cater to women and children, which was later adopted by the New Order's *Posyandu* (post of integrated services). High schools for midwifery, nursing schools, and public health were developed by 'Aisyiyah in many branches, along with the foundation of clinics for mothers and children, which later became specialized hospitals for mothers and children. One of these health science academies in Yogyakarta has in 2015 transformed into a university, Universitas Aisyiyah Yogyakarta (shortened as UNISA); this is the first university in Indonesia founded solely by a Muslim women organization. Many more Aisyiyah universities were founded in Solo, Bandung, and other cities in Indonesia. It was unlikely that the founders of 'Aisyiyah had imagined that the movement they started would become like it is today, but certainly, they had laid strong ethical and theological foundations to convince women of the merit, virtues, and importance of attaining better education, of organizing and sustaining the organization over time and ages.

One of the results from 'Aisyiyah's work in education, since the Mukthamar in 1995, 'Aisyiyah's central board leadership has been assumed by women of university graduates, not by women from business and entrepreneurship backgrounds as before. The advantages of having highly educated women in leadership are literacy movements can be conceptualized and promoted, e.g. media and social-media literacy, political literacy, and intercultural literacy. In 2012,

³⁴ Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, *Tuntunan Menuju Keluarga Sakinah* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2016).

³⁵ Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah.

‘Aisyiyah received national recognition for its continuing attention to improving education for girls and children from the Indonesian Minister of National Education. In the same year, ‘Aisyiyah was awarded a token of appreciation from the Minister of Forestry for its contribution to planting one million trees by members with a motto of ‘green my earth, sustain my universe’, and an MDG’s award from the President’s special envoy.³⁶ The drawback of having too many state-employee women is, among others, the need for more time flexibility and funding sources to manage the movement. For many decades, ‘Aisyiyah members and leaders, including the founding women, had been traders in batiks, garments, silver, and others. ‘Aisyiyah needs to take advantage of its human resources and the advancement of information technology to develop creative economics, as they have the potential. Good and merchandise produced by ‘Aisyiyah members can be creatively wrapped and presented in ways attracting buyers, not only by selling their function.

The ‘Aisyiyah’s centennial Mukatamar 2015 produced several important decisions covering the five-year national program, strategic programs and issues, reflections of centennial services, and recommendations to the Indonesian governments and other corresponding agencies. The general program implemented includes ideological consolidation, leadership, movement management, empowering branches and members, and strengthening and improving the movement’s social enterprises. Divisional programs prioritized by the congress include building sakinah family, cadre training, tabligh/missionary work, education, health, social welfare, economic and workforce, law and human rights, environment, and culture.

Meanwhile, the 48th Mukatamar held in Solo in 2022 produced at least four significant documents that became the main guides for the organization to run for the next five years, namely The Decrees of the 48th Mukatamar of ‘Aisyiyah; The National Programs of ‘Aisyiyah 2022-2027; Ten Strategic Issues of the Nations and Humanity, and the document of *Risalah Perempuan Berkemajuan* as mentioned before.³⁷ The *Risalah* contains

³⁶ Pimpinan Pusat ‘Aisyiyah, *Tanfidz Keputusan Mukatamar Ke 47*.

³⁷ Pimpinan Pusat ‘Aisyiyah, *Pimpinan PusaTanfidz*

seven characters of progressive women, they are: 1) faith and piety (*iman dan taqwa*); 2) obedient in worship (*taat beribadah*); 3) Noble character (*akhlak karimah*); 4) Reformist thinking (*berpikir tajdid*); 5) be moderate/middle path (*bersikap wasathiyah*); 6) good deed (*amaliyah salihah*); 7) be inclusive (*bersikap inklusif*). Apart from the seven characters, the *Risalah* also gives mandates that progressive women of ‘Aisyiyah shall commit to acquire and advance in dealing with these 10 issues: 1) mastery of science and technology (*Penguasaan ilmu pengetahuan dan teknologi*); 2) Environmental Preservation (*Pelestarian Lingkungan*); 3) Strengthening Sakinah Family (*Penguatan Keluarga Sakinah*); 4) Community Empowerment (*Pemberdayaan Masyarakat*); 5) Progressive Philanthropy (*Filantropi Berkemajuan*); 6) Peace Actors (*Aktor Perdamaian*); 7) Public Participation (*Partisipasi Publik*); 8) Economic Independence (*Kemandirian Ekonomi*); 9) National Role (*Peran Kebangsaan*); 10) Universal Humanity (*Kemanusiaan Universal*).³⁸

The documents agreed in its 48th Mukatamar consistently show the middle path feminism taken by ‘Aisyiyah since the beginning of the movement’s formation. They take religious values and worldly orientations seriously; they do not see them as opposite but complement each other. While ‘Aisyiyah women are proud to be Indonesians and participate in all Indonesian political life in broader terms, they also recognize universal humanity so that their nationalism will not be chauvinistic. The issues they address, and programs they develop are combined of both practical and strategic gender interests. According to ‘Aisyiyah, women’s status, roles, capacity and capability to serve are seen as equal and meaningful as men. Women and men shall work together because gender-based discrimination is a complex problem and cannot be tackled by only one gender, so ‘Aisyiyah chooses to remain as an autonomous organization of Muhammadiyah rather than entirely independent and stops its relation with it whatsoever.

Conclusions

To conclude briefly, ‘Aisyiyah has

Keputusan Mukatamar Ke 48 ‘Aisyiyah.

³⁸ Pimpinan Pusat ‘Aisyiyah.

contributed to shaping Islamic womanhood that adapts Islamic values, Indonesian culture, and Western feminist ideas. Such conceptualization is coined organizationally as *Perempuan Islam Berkemajuan* (Progressive Muslim Women). Having said this, it does not mean that the empirical characteristic of *perempuan berkemajuan* has stayed the same over time. On the contrary, the idea's implementation has changed at different times. However, certain features remain faith, love of knowledge, economic empowerment, and high regard for Indonesian nationhood.

Taking middle paths of neither different extremes, from secular to conservative Islamism, from chauvinistic nationalism to cosmopolitanism, made 'Aisyiyah like rowing between the currents. It has been much easier for 'Aisyiyah to just submit to both extremes, but it is brave enough to keep the middle paths with all the consequences. 'Aisyiyah has worked at both levels of catering gender needs of Muslim women, which are practical and strategic gender interests. With its establishment of thousands of economic, health, and educational social enterprises, including universities, it is clear that 'Aisyiyah will remain among the major players in shaping Indonesian womanhood and feminism concerning Islam.

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