



**AISIYAH AND THE PROBLEM OF WOMEN'S
SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN INDONESIA:
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the social movements that Aisyiyah performed to improve people's lives by consolidating family institutions. Since its establishment in 1917, Aisyiyah emphasizes the big idea of making the family a primary purpose to engage in an organization. In Indonesian historiography, there is no women's social organization with firm power on the grassroots, focusing on the family as what Aisyiyah has done. With that power, Aisyiyah was swiftly expedient in responding to family issues and accumulating more strength in overcoming future problems. The establishment of kindergarten in large numbers in such a short time was one way for Aisyiyah to solve social issues. It was not a surprise that in 10 years (1917-1927), Aisyiyah gained 11,000 members scattered across various regions of Indonesia and increased continually throughout different political periods. Indeed, this is a significant social movement, because as an organization catered for Muslim women, Aisyiyah can fundamentally life-changing for many people. Unfortunately, Aisyiyah, as a social movement, has not yet received complete attention within the Indonesian historiography. With this in mind, this paper then attempts to observe the social movement projected by Aisyiyah and identify the loss of the narrative of Muslim women in Indonesian history.

Key Words:

Aisyiyah, family, kindergarten, Social Movement, women

In Indonesian historiography, Aisyiyah is known as the oldest Muslim women's organization in Indonesia that can prevail for a long time. Aisyiyah was founded in 1917 and continues to grow to this present-day. Aisyiyah emphasizes in consolidating the lives of women and families. At the beginning of its early days of this organization, women encountered genuinely various complex problems in aspects such as education, marriage, and reproduction. Due to the inexistence of women's organization with the capacity to provide solutions for

Muslim women and their families, it ultimately encouraged the establishment of Aisyiyah as an organization.¹

In a short time, Aisyiyah went through a swift development that was recorded in various historical documents. They mentioned that what contributed to the rapid growth of Aisyiyah could not be separated from the assortments of charitable enterprises that they chose to perform. The decision to select education and protection of women and families became their primary target of charity action within Aisyiyah was considered relevant to society's needs in all conditions. Another reason that encouraged the rapid development of Aisyiyah was due to the support that they received from Muhammadiyah, especially in 1922, when Muhammadiyah instructed all leaders of their branches to endorse Aisyiyah movement. The suggestion had a positive impact that resulted in the surge in the numbers among Aisyiyah sympathizers. This was where Aisyiyah's core social movement truly began, in which, over time, remained steady in its mission. The dominant presence of Aisyiyah proves that not many organizations catered to Muslim women who could survive and consistently advance like such organization.

As a social movement, it ought to be absolute that what Aisyiyah performed throughout history deserves to be fully narrated in the Indonesian historiography. Yet, its narrative is often never wholly intact and materialized. Indeed, various factors influence such circumstances. Based on that background, this paper aims explicitly to discuss the Aisyiyah as a social movement from its early time until the

¹Ro'fah, "A Study of 'Aisyiyah: An Indonesian Women's Organization (1917-1998)", Thesis to Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, 2000; Ahmad Adaby Darban dkk., *Aisyiyah dan Sejarah Pergerakan Perempuan Indonesia: Sebuah Tinjauan Awal*, Yogyakarta: Jurusan Sejarah UGM dan Eja Publisher, 2010; Chusnul Hayati, "Sejarah Perkembangan 'Aisyiyah Tahun 1917-1975 Suatu Studi Terhadap Organisasi Islam di Indonesia", Bachelor Thesis History Department. Yogyakarta: Universitas Gadjah Mada

present day and the loss of the narrative about this movement in historiography in Indonesia by utilizing a variety of historical data.

AISYIYAH AS AN INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION

The development of Aisyiyah as an independent organizational institution occurred over a long period from 1917 to 1936. At first, Muhammadiyah gave its full support to establishing Aisyiyah as a Muslim women's organization, prior to being an independent institution. It started with the proposal of Haji Mochtar, one of the founders of Muhammadiyah, when he first witnessed the number of female participants in the study organized by K.H.A. Dahlan in Kauman, in which he brought forth the idea to expand the study group into a Muslim women's organization. It should be noted that in the 1917s, there was no record of the establishment of Muslim women's organization. There were some notable women's organizations that had been established such as Poetri Mardika – Budi Utomo (Jakarta, 1912); Keoetamaan Isteri (Jakarta, 1913); Wanito Hadi (Jepara, 1915); Pawiyatan Wanito (Magelang, 1915); Jong Java Meisjeskring – Jong Java (Jakarta, 1915), Poerborini (Tegal, 1917); and PIKAT /Pertjintaan Ibu Kepada Anak Temurun (Manado, 1917).² Yet, those four organizations conclusively did not represent the Muslim community.

It was all started from a regular afternoon study organized by KHA Dahlan in Kauman village, then what became the inspirational idea to establish Aisyiyah. In terms of ideas, the study certainly became significant and plausible considering that the colonial government became interested in promoting the importance of providing formal education for women that unfortunately based on the European curriculum and did not accommodate a place for religious learning. As

²Atas Hendartini Koesoemo Oetoyo-Bahsjah, "Kata Pengantar", in Susan Blackburn, *Konggres Perempuan Pertama, Tinjauan Ulang*, Jakarta: Obor dan KITLV Jakarta, p. xxvi.

a result, women who attended formal European education experienced a deficiency in religious knowledge. Therefore, an in-depth study of Islam in the afternoon served as the solution to the problem, then emerged in Aisyiyah.

That initial idea of education as the complementary key in educating women then continued to be developed. Firm support from Muhammadiyah with their own idealism for education became more stimulated. Evidently, the 11th Muhammadiyah Congress in 1922 in Yogyakarta announced to all of their Muhammadiyah branches to establish Aisyiyah in each of their designated regions. This appeal fortified its existing ideal and enormously influential in developing women's education that became the basis of Aisyiyah. In addition to that, in 1922, the number of Muhammadiyah branches underwent rapid development. Historical data recorded that the fastest growth of Muhammadiyah occurred in this period, where education became the basic idea of developing organizations, as it was considered ideal in this period. The curriculum developed by Muhammadiyah through the assimilation of Islamic religious learning into the European curriculum was considered the answer to educational problems. Therefore, it was not surprising that since its establishment in 1912 with only one branch managed by Muhammadiyah, it grew exponentially within the span of 10 years with 25 branches in 1922, and in 1939 with 1,000 branches.³The instruction to establish Aisyiyah throughout the branches became evident in accelerating the process that eventually advanced Aisyiyah further during this period.

In addition to obtaining reliable support from Muhammadiyah, women activists in Aisyiyah then progressively prepared their organization to develop independently. Some Aisyiyah figures such as

³Jahdan Ibnu Human Saleh. 1991. "Perkembangan Pendidikan Muhammadiyah pada Pemukiman Santri di Kota Yogyakarta 1912-1942." Master's Thesis. History Department. Yogyakarta: Universitas Gadjah Mada, p. 110

Mundjiah, Hajinah, and Soekaptinah became the key figures behind the first Women's Congress in Yogyakarta in 1928.⁴ Some Aisiyiah figures entered the committee, even assumed the position as speakers in the Congress. Reflecting on their basic organizational idea, the significant concepts they conveyed in Congress were pertinent to education and the advancement of thought for women.

After their rapid development and regarded as capable of being independent, Aisiyiah was officially recognized as a distinct organization with their own complete authority as decided by the 25th Muhammadiyah Congress committee in Jakarta in 1936. They assumed the duties shortly after becoming independent, ranging from managing schools and women's madrasahs, supervising *wakaf* and *musholla* for women, campaigning Islam among women, and nurturing young women to be bright Muslim women and honorable mothers.⁵ It appears that after observing all the crucial tasks in which the Aisiyiah laid its foundation upon, the role of women became the significant keyword that would be suitable in portraying where the process of solidification of Muslim families essentially started

ORGANIZATIONAL NETWORK DEVELOPMENT

Since its revitalization as an independent organization in 1936, the number of Aisiyiah branches also grew exponentially. The true beginning of this exponential growth is attributed to the initial call to adhere to the spirit of Aisiyiah in all branches of Muhammadiyah in 1922. If in 1927 they had 67 branches, then by the year 1940, the branches rose upward to 546 as seen in table 1 below.

⁴Mutiah Amini, "Sukaptinah and Hajinah's Roles in the Nationalist Movement in Indonesia", in *Patrawidya*, Vol. 18, No. 3, December 2017: 273 - 282.

⁵Chusnul Hayati, "History of The Development of 'Aisiyiah 1917-1975 A Study of Islamic Organizations in Indonesia", *Thesis History of UGM*, 1975, pp. 47-54.

Table 1

Number of Aisyiyah Branches in Various Regions in Indonesia in 1940

No.	City	Amount	No.	City	Amount
1.	Yogyakarta	49	13.	Lampung-Palembang	52
2.	Surakarta	21	14.	Bengkulu	16
3.	Semarang	14	15.	Minangkabau	134
4.	Madiun	7	16.	Riau Indragiri	10
5.	Kediri	5	17.	Tapanuli	18
6.	Surabaya	16	18.	East Pesisir	19
7.	Pasuruan	7	19.	Aceh	11
8.	Besuki	8	20.	South Borneo	14
9.	Madura	4	21.	South Celebes	34
10.	Pekalongan	8	22.	North Celebes	26
11.	Banyumas	14	23.	Outer Location	22
12.	Jawa Barat	24	24.	Additional Location	6
				Total	546

Source: Chusnul Hayati, "Sejarah Perkembangan 'Aisyiyah Tahun 1917-1975 Suatu Studi Terhadap Organisasi Islam di Indonesia", Skripsi Sejarah UGM, 1975 pp. 56-57.

Based on that table, the largest number of Aisyiyah branches was located in Minangkabau with 134 branches, even more extensive than those based in Yogyakarta. It was followed locations such as Lampung-Palembang, South Borneo, North Celebes, and West Java. The largest number of branches in Minangkabau was justifiably due to the robust influence and development of Muhammadiyah there. Given the strong presence of Aisyiyah in Minangkabau, Bukittinggi was subsequently assigned as the venue for the Aisyiyah Congress in 1930.



Figure 1: Muhammadiyah Congress in Bukittinggi

The rapid and undeviating growth of Aisiyiah across Indonesia was consequent to the orderly structure of the organization. Since its establishment, Aisiyiah adapted the existing system as Muhammadiyah, with its chief leadership at the very top, followed by branches and sub-branches at the very bottom. Through this form of division structure, the organization's work would be much more effective, even in assuring managerial maintenance and regeneration at each branch. The chief leadership of Aisiyiah also periodically exercised inspection every time there was a renewal of managers at the branch/sub-branch level. This tradition began in 1953; when Indonesia transformed into a new country, which simultaneously gave rises to novel challenges and problem that needed a complete revitalization

from the bottom level. The recommendations for such action as illustrated below:

*“By the end of March 1953, this instruction ought to be prudently authorized in all branches and sub-branches. Thenceforth, shall our union in all branches and sub-branches regain new strength and renewal of spirit through perpetual progress that ensues advancement.”*⁶

In addition to being systematically organized, the Aisyiah network also became prominent with the support of publications. Since October 1926, Aisyiah has regularly issued a magazine called *Soeara Aisijjah* as their medium of communication.⁷ The magazine was published monthly until 1940 when they stopped abruptly until they resumed publication in 1951. For Aisyiah, the magazine did not only facilitate the transmission of womanly ideals in Islam and aspirations for women regarding organization, religion, health, family, education, and inspirational latest news; it was also a means of communication among Aisyiah circle. It was confidently asserted by Siti Baroroh Baried, the chief of Aisyiah (1965-1985).⁸

The voice of Aisyiah is one of the family magazines from and for Aisyiah, in which its implementation mandated by the Aisyiah Congress to the central leadership of Aisyiah. This magazine is the

⁶Instructions 'Aisijjah' Leadership Center, in *Voice of 'Aisijjah*, March 1953, Year xviii, pp. 4-6.

⁷Purwaningsih, “Kehidupan Majalah Suara ‘Aisyiah di Yogyakarta Tahun 1970-1980”, *Skripsi*, Fakultas Sastra UGM, 1990. Whereas, Suara Aisyiah retains publication license since 1969, yaitu sejak keluarga Surat Ijin Terbit (SIT) No. 0210/Pers/SK/Dir/Pk/SIT/1969.

⁸<http://www.aisyiah.or.id/id/page/tokoh/hal/7.html>, Accessed Date September 28th, 2020, 10: 12.00.

*tool to communicate between the chief down to the regional leaders and its members to channel the ways of leadership. In addition, this magazine can hopefully increase the awareness of each Aisiyyah member in organization and religious life. The voice of Aisiyyah is a grassroots media that is vital to the lives of Aisiyyah organization.*⁹

APPROACHING THE IDEA OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT BY ESTABLISHING KINDERGARTEN

The structured and orderly network of Aisiyyah became their main principle in executing a significant social movement. Chronologically, several social movements that they performed were manifested in various activity from education, the institutionalization of orphans, and amenity of the maternity ward. From all of those activities, education seemed to be the dominant vigor that drove Aisiyyah into a such vivacious social movement.

The education in question meant to target the pre-primary education. For Aisiyyah, it was their primary drive in making social change through social movement. This is natural because education was its core value in which the organization was born and allowed Aisiyyah to advance in the first place. When education was already at its resolute position, some Bupati (regent) and other officials unanimously sent their daughters to Yogyakarta. Those who were recorded as having attended Aisiyyah education, among others, were R. Ayu Satariyah (the daughter of regent Bondowowo), R.A. Kalimah Sakrowi (the wife of Tegal station chief), Khatijah (the daughter of the regent Temanggung).¹⁰ In general, regents and bureaucrats entrusted education for their daughters to Kauman due to being known for its austerity upon integrating women to their education system.

⁹Siti Baroroh Baried, "Kata Sambutan: Nun, Demi Kalam dan Apa Jg. Mereka Tulis" dalam majalah *Suara Aisjijah* No. 1 Tahun ke-45 1970, p. 9.

¹⁰ Sejarah Aisiyyah, p. 29.

Furthermore, at the beginning of the 20th century, an idea emerged to establish the *Lembaga Sjarikat Iboe* (Mother's Union), an institution delegated to discussing and managing children's education.¹¹As a result of its establishment, *Froebel School* which was established in 1919, was renamed into *Aisyiyah Bustanul Athfal Kindergarten* (ABA Kindergarten) in 1926. During this period, the establishment of kindergarten was significant because there was a substantial emphasis directed towards children's education, both at the end of colonial times and at the dawn of independence, that was addressed only from women's organizations or private schools. Aisyiyah, as a social organization that had branches in various regions in the country certainly contributed and dispersed the importance of education for children, noteworthy for being an influential social movement that fundamentally changed the lives of Muslim families. The development of kindergarten remained at its prime by the time of the second Aisyiyah proceeding (Sidang Tanwir) took place in 1971 on April 23-26 in Yogyakarta, with the final decision that all kindergartens which in that year were still under the custody of Muhammadiyah, to be immediately handed over to Aisyiyah.¹²

Aside from kindergarten, the establishment of a school for female teachers with a career prospect to teach at kindergarten or any level provided by the Muhammadiyah became another central scrutiny. For that reason, the *Kweekschool Muhammadiyah Perempuan* was established in 1923. However, by 1932, the *kweekschool* became obsolete and then replaced with *Madrasah Muallimaat*

¹¹Congres Besar Moehammadijah ke 16, dalam Soeara 'Aisjijah, Tahun I, 1927, pp. 62-64.

¹²The decisions of the of the second 'Aisjijah Tanwir proceeding in 1971 on 23rd to 26th of April which coincided with 1 Robi'ulawal 1391 in Yogyakarta.

Muhammadiyah which is still existing today.¹³ Furthermore, Aisyiyah established various educational institutions catered for girls, such as the Midwife School, Nursing School, Vocational School for girls, Kindergarten teaching school, and even a tertiary education institute.

In addition to education, Aisyiyah also opened BKIA (Balai Kesejahteraan Ibu dan Anak) or Maternal and Child Welfare Center and orphanage. But compared to other enterprises, it seems that kindergarten is the apex of Aisyiyah social movements. This movement is confident and highly competent in educating nation's future generations of nations through pre-primary education.

THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Pre-primary education, as administered by Aisyiyah, was also implemented by some women's organizations. Those who are noted as founding kindergarten institutions in various areas are Lembaga Pendidikan Taman Siswa (Taman Siswa Educational Institute), Missie and Zending Schools, various law enforcement agencies several other women's organizations. However, compared to others, the Aisyiyah-run kindergartens appear to be more consistent and systematized in terms of organizational matters when performing as the leading institution of pre-primary education.

Suppose it is currently assumed that Indonesia's sub-districts are listed as having 5,226 in numbers, and there are 3.221 Aisyiyah branches all over Indonesia. In that case, they are considered the largest in terms of kindergarten under their custody with their numerous sub-branches. The next rhetorical question is: how much has the Aisyiyah contributed to the educational development of the nation's generations? This was undoubtedly a very strategic and

¹³Mutiah Amini, "To be an Islamic Female Leader: The Education System at the Madrasah Muallimaat Muhammadiyah", *proceeding of the International Conference on Social Studies, Globalisation and Technology (ICSGT 2019)*.

profound reflection considering that a women's organization became the forerunner of pre-primary education in Indonesia. Unfortunately, what Aisyiyah has achieved has not been justly recorded in its entirety within the Indonesian historiography. Therefore, recording and bringing into existence a full narration in Muhammadiyah and Aisyiyah's curricula is one of the strategic steps to better narrate women's social movement, in this case, what Aisyiyah had done throughout the history. The absence of narration can be explained for several reasons.

In the Indonesian historiography tradition, Androcentrism remains prevalent whereby historical documentations are dominated by men's perspective of history.¹⁴ It is not surprising that even until now, the Indonesian historical narrative is still rampant with gender-bias narrative, which put the presence of women in history as of secondary importance. It then results in the narrative that never seem to be about women at all. It also profoundly correlates with the persistent rearing of male domination within Indonesian culture male domination. Therefore, presenting Aisyiyah as an independent organization, responsive to issues concerning women and family are of primary importance for Aisyiyah in the future.

Furthermore, in the political perspective, this loss of narrative regarding women's social movement was motivated by the state of turmoil in the 1960s when political polarization was at its apex. The condition continued to worsen up until the New Order period when the government enforced a more repressive treatment towards women's activities. The resolution of that situation can only be realized if the conscious manifests the desire for growth by contemplating its past potential, as what Aisyiyah successfully obtained. History reveals that learning to understand the past better will bring enormous advantages

¹⁴ Kuntowijoyo, *Metodologi Sejarah*, Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 1984.

for the future. This an essential experience for Aisyiyah in understanding its entire history.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

As a mass organization, Aisyiyah managed to grow as a large organization and became a successful social movement that provides amenities for women and children. The structured service system makes this organization grow strong and entrenched in the community. The branch and sub-branch as the basis of Aisyiyah organization need to be preserved to continue their societal presence with the capacity to serve and meet the needs of their surrounding community, particularly women and children.

Since being established, the branch and sub-branch are vital because Aisyiyah was a grassroots organization with the vision to overcome real problems at the lower level. This is the critical key of Aisyiyah to sustain long-term development through activities carried out into a large and meaningful social movement in Indonesia. Aisyiyah exhibits its social sensitivity and desire for constant growth by actualizing its problem-solving approach through pre-primary education. And with that in mind, it keeps Aisyiyah improving even in the state of humility and modesty. The next challenge for Aisyiyah is to identify current problems that affected women and families today to maintain its significant presence amid globalization.

Another challenge that Aisyiyah encounters is to retain its complete narration concerning social movement within the Indonesian historiography. This can be done through maintaining, documenting, and preserving past fragments of Aisyiyah in its entirety.

¹⁵ Orwell, George. 1961. *1984 (Nineteen Eighty-Four)*. New York: Signet Classics by New American Library, a division of Penguin Group.

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