

WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN THE FRAMEWORK OF MODERNIST MUSLIMS IN INDONESIA: AISYIYAH AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract: As a women's wing organization of Muhammadiyah, Aisyiyah has been facing dilemma in reconciling its multiple identities as a woman, Muslim modernist and Indonesian organization. As part of the biggest Indonesian Muslim modernist movement with its ideology of progressive Islam, Aisyiyah has taken active parts in developing its socio-religious enterprises and economic empowerment of *ummat*/community at the grass-roots level. Aiming to critically analyze Aisyiyah's economic empowerment programs using gender perspective, this paper will address a question to some extent Aisyiyah's economic empowerment seek to accommodate and reconcile their multiple womanhood, modernist Muslim and Indonesian identities and interests. Using three indicators of women's empowerment of resources, agency and achievements, it is argued that 'Aisyiyah's women economic empowerment has benefited from its resources as the oldest Muslim women's organisations having vast networks and resulted in various economic empowerment institutions. Such great achievements cannot be detached from the ideological framework of modernist Muslims in Indonesia that is undergoing an evolution from the theology of *tajdid*/renewal movement with the emphasis on the development of socio-religious enterprises towards the theology of al-Ma'un seeking to make alignment and empowerment of the disadvantaged groups of the society, including the poor and women. However, in terms of agency, such Aisyiyah's economic empowerment has been forced to serve the gender ideology of modernist Muslims that subordinates gender interests of women under the interests of *ummat*/community. However, such option is taken by Aisyiyah as a strategy to strike a balance of its identities and interests as a woman, a modernist Muslim, and Indonesian organization and a strategy to respond to its surrounding political contexts in Indonesia.

Keywords: Aisyiyah, Women's movement, Modernist Muslims, Tajdid/renewal, Al-Ma'un, theology, Developmet of sosical-enterprise, Economic empowerment, Gender interests, Indonesia.

1. Introduction

Being a women's wing organization of an Indonesian Muslim modernist of Muhammadiyah, Aisyiyah has been often facing dilemmas when its multiple identities and interests: as a

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woman organization, as part of a Muslim modernist organization, and as part of Indonesia, come into conflict. This partly reflected in Aisyiyah's position on some issues such as polygamy, abortion and happy family (*keluarga sakinah*) where its gender interests are placed as secondary. It has taken positions that demonstrate its priority for its allegiance towards its parental organisation, Muhammadiyah and/or to national interest, sacrificing its gender interests to the subordinate level.

Previous studies on Aisyiyah have polarized into at least three streams. The first one comes from mostly internal researchers who often take apologetic position toward Aisyiyah, appreciating its achievement as the oldest women's organization with various women's empowerment programs within its vast network at the grass-roots level while often neglecting dilemma facing Aisyiyah when its multiple identities and interests come into conflict ([Handayani, 2016](#); [Firdaus, 2016](#); [Nikolaou et al, 2019](#)). The second one comes from some researchers using feminist perspectives who often take critical analysis over Aisyiyah as a women's wing organization of Muhammadiyah that has to follow the gender ideology of its parental organization ([Marcoes, 2002](#); [Salam, 2016](#)). The last one comes from scholars who take a gender perspective towards Aisyiyah and its daughter organization, Nasyiatul Aisyiyah, by acknowledging their dilemmas in reconciling their multiple identities and interests while putting them within their socio-political contexts forcing them to take positions sacrificing their gender interests ([Abualsaud, 2019](#); [Doorn-Harder 2006](#); [Syamsiyatun 2006](#); [It 2005](#); [White 2004](#)). While most of the existing literature study the overall movement of these women's wing organisations, there have been hardly any literature analysing Aisyiyah's economic empowerment program as part of its mission as a women's wing of Indonesia modernist Muslim organisation using gender perspective.

This paper seeks to fill such a gap in the literature. It will address a question of how Aisyiyah has being accommodated and reconciled its multiple, often being conflicting, identities and interests in its economic empowerment program. It will employ the indicators of women's economic empowerment: resources, agency and achievements ([Kabeer 1999](#); [Narayan 2005](#), [Golla et al. 2011](#), [Buvinic, 2017](#)). These three interrelated input, process and outcome of empowerment will then be assessed in terms of their transformatory significance, the extent to which the choices made have the potential for challenging and destabilizing social inequalities and the extent to which they merely express and reproduce those inequalities ([Kabeer 1999](#)). Therefore it will also draw on the work of [Molyneux \(1998\)](#) that distinguishes the agenda of women's movement between that supports strategic gender interests and that of practical gender interests based on the gender ideology that each purports. The former is based on the satisfaction of needs arising from women's placement within the sexual division of labour, and the latter involves claims to transform social relations in order to enhance women's position and to secure a more lasting re-positioning of women within the gender order and within society at large.

Using three indicators of women's empowerment of resources, agency and achievements, it is argued that Aisyiyah's women economic empowerment has benefited from its resources as the oldest Muslim women's organisations having vast networks and resulted in various economic empowerment institutions. Such great achievements cannot be detached from the ideological framework of modernist Muslims in Indonesia that is undergoing an evolution from the theology of *tajdid*/renewal movement with the emphasis on the development of socio-religious enterprises towards the theology of al-Ma`un seeking to make alignment and empowerment of the disadvantaged groups of the society, including the poor and women. However, in terms of agency, such Aisyiyah's economic empowerment has been forced to serve the gender ideology of modernist Muslims that subordinates gender interests of women under the interests of *ummat*/community. However, such option is taken by Aisyiyah as a strategy to respond to its surrounding political contexts in Indonesia.

To elaborate this argument, the paper will firstly briefly analyse Aisyiyah within the framework of women's wing of Indonesian modernist Muslim organization. It will then critically analyse Aisyiyah's women and economic empowerment programs using gender perspective. It will be followed by analyzing the strategy of Aisyiyah's economic empowerment within its religious-political contexts. It will then closed by conclusion.

2. Modernist Muslim Organisations and its Women's Wing: Muhammadiyah and Aisyiyah From Theology of Tajdid Toward Theology of Al-Ma`Un

In the colonial era, opposition against Dutch colonialism in the early twentieth century was strengthened by the influence of Islamic reformist ideas from the Middle East pioneered by Jamaluddin al-Afghani (1839-97), Muhammad `Abduh (1849-1905), and Rashid Ridha (1865-1935). These thinkers raised concerns over the reality that Muslim societies seemed to be lagging behind the scientific and technological advances of the West. They exhorted their fellow Muslims to refer directly to the religious sources of the Qur'an and Sunna, combined with the use of reason through *ijtihad*, to carve their own path to face the challenges of Western modernity. This idea has been further developed in Indonesia through the establishment of modernist Muslim mass organisations, including Muhammadiyah in 1912. Muhammadiyah was proclaimed as a *dakwah* movement based on the teaching of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (QS 3: 104). Muhammadiyah's reforms are reflected in the ideas disseminated through the establishment and proliferation of religious educational institutions, voluntary associations, and print culture. Such socio-religious enterprises are inspired by the spirit of al-Ma`un (QS 107: 1-7), developed by Kyai Ahmad Dahlan, that condemns Muslims who worship God but do not perform social worship for the sake of humanity. This Qur'anic Surah even labels those who do not care of orphans and do not seek to eradicate poverty from the society as 'denying the religion'. Muhammadiyah has developed its *dakwah* works on three field: healing (health services), schooling (education services), and feeding (social-

economic services). In 2003, Muhammadiyah has already had 161 universities, 5.500 schools, more than 300 hospitals, dan more than 300 orphanages.

With the advent of globalisation, some scholar-activists of Muhammadiyah, such as Moeslim [Abdurrahman \(2003\)](#), call for the contextualisation of the Al-Ma`un spirit by transforming charity works of Muhammadiyah into a theology of al-Ma`un, emphasising its liberative praxis. This comes from the awareness that people become poor not because they are lazy to work but rather as a result of unjust socio-economic-political structures that support the oppression and marginalisation of the poor and lead them into poverty. According to Abdurrahman, poor people are not limited to those who are economically poor, rather poor people are those who experience social subordination including minority groups. Furthermore, he recommended the application of the theology of al-Ma`un by combating factors causing poverty, such as global capitalism and the culture of poverty. With the theology of al-Ma`un, Muhammadiyah calls the *ummah* (Muslim community) to make alignment and empower the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. Empowerment has been perceived as integral part of dakwah. Dakwah is reinterpreted wider as a liberation movement. It is a movement to liberate the *ummah* from ignorance, marginalization, and powerlessness.

3. Aisiyiah and Women's Empowerment

Unders the supervision of Muhammadiyah's founder KH Achmad Dahlan and his wife Siti Walidah, Aisiyiah was established on May 19, 1917, being developed from Perkumpulan Sapa Tresno, a small group of educated girls in their teenage years and older women in Kauman, Yogyakarta, gathering to learn about Islam and literacy. Aisiyiah was ahead of its time by educating women at a time when women were confined by culture, colonial power and narrow understanding of religion ([Mul Khan 2007](#)). These ideas were considered progressive at a time when few Indonesians were sent to school, much less girls, and devout families often secluded daughters after puberty. During this national awakening, the traditionalist organisation of NU did not open membership to women. This was due not only to its assumption that women's primary roles were domestic, but also its concerns about the risks for women within the context of the Dutch repression of Muslim organisations.

At the time of Aisiyiah was founded, women were in a shackled position, secluded and had no access to education. The establishment of Aisiyiah can be seen as a resistance against colonial politics that limited access to education for Muslims and women ([Marcoes, 2015](#)). Furthermore, Muhammadiyah and Aisiyiah have offered a progressive perspective enabling Muslim women to have an option to participate in both private and public domains on the ground of the Syari`ah principles, serving their roles of fighters of *dakwah* and *tajdid*.

Aisiyiah played an important role in the modernisation of the life of Indonesian women. It primarily focused on the issue of dakwah (Islamic propagation), religious education, and social services. They made programs to extend the services to Muslim women such as social and medical programs for women, schools for girls, and majlis taklim (Qur'anic study

circles) for their Muslim women members. Nevertheless, the services provided by Aisyiyah were still limited to addressing women's practical gender interests, as they did not aim to challenge the unjust existing social order and women's subordination. Although individuals within Aisyiyah might have disagreed with injustice facing women, such as the subordinate women's position in the family and the practice of polygamy, the official organisation's stance often demonstrated conservative gender perspective in line with that of its parental organisation.

3. Aisyiyah and Economic Empowerment

Since its establishment until the end of New Order in 1998, under antagonistic political context against Islam and Muslim in the colonial period, Old Order, and New Order, Aisyiyah has been forced to have limited choice of pursuing only its practical gender interests, hardly being able to negotiate and change the unjust power relations subordinating women. Nevertheless, under such limited political context, Aisyiyah has successfully developed invaluable social capital all over the country. It has developed various socio-religious enterprises. By 1930 or only thirteen years of anniversary, for instance, Aisyiyah was running 32 schools with 75 teachers ([Wieringa 2002: 67](#)).

Along with the Muhammadiyah's shifting from the theology of Tadjid into the theology of al-Ma`un since the reform era in 1998, Aisyiyah has also gradually shifted its organizational discourse and activism. Aisyiyah has adopted the vision of *Islam Berkemajuan* (Progressivism) dan al-Ma`un theology in its movement.

In economic field, Aisyiyah perceives poverty as a complex and multi-dimensional problem of development ([Aisyiyah 2015](#)). It perceives poverty as mainly attributed to structural injustice due to public policies that do not make alignment with the interests of the poor. The policies have been mostly formulated to be more oriented to capital market and serve the interests of the corporates.

Due to such structural poverty, Aisyiyah also perceives the strategy to eradicate poverty is not sufficient by only formulating income generating activities. Rather it must be accompanied by series of raising collective awareness as well as a movement to transform public policies to end poverty and povertisation of the poor and women.

Aisyiyah also sees poverty in Indonesia as having gender dimension. Women tend to have higher rate of poverty than men. The poor women often experience and have to bear more burden of poverty, such as higher rate of maternal mortality, lower rate of schooling among girls at higher educational levels, more women's labour participation in informal sector, lower wage for women workers, and women's vulnerability to violence. Furthermore, Aisyiyah also concerns about the difficulty of poor women to access bank services, thus they tend to be prey of loan sharks. This lead poor women to be shackled with overburdened loans.

Therefore Aisyiyah recommends the government to make poverty eradication as priority. This is due to constitutional stipulation where the government has the constitutional task to leverage the living standards and create social welfare for its people. To supports its vision, up to 2015, Aisyiyah has had boards of leadership at 34 provinces, 370 districts, 2332 regencies, and 6924 villages all over Indonesia. Aisyiyah has also run various religio-social enterprises for the ummah empowerment. These have ranged from 4.560 educational institutions from childcare into universities, 280 hospitals, clinics, and medical centers, and 459 orphanages and shelter centers.

At the level of activism, Aisyiyah has undertaken several economic empowerment programs. In the field of economy, Aisyiyah has run around 400 cooperatives and pre-cooperatives to provide micro finance to micro enterprises. Aisyiyah also runs the Aisyiyah Family Economy Business Development program (BUEKA), to foster family economic activities by empowering housewives to generate income to augment the economic resources of their respective families. Housewives are grouped into BUEKA groups comprising 10 to 15 members to conduct income-generating activities. Through such BUEKA groups, they can help their families earn more income without ignoring their household routines while doing so. Up to now, Aisyiyah have had over 5,000 groups nationwide. Within the program, Aisyiyah also had BUEKA groups which produced soap products, well known as MELIN that were internally marketed among members through preaching or other activities. In Sidoarjo, East Java, a wholesale group has even been established and tasked with collecting the products of BUEKA groups to be further marketed nationwide. Furthermore, in Dukun district, Magelang regency, Central Java, for example, elderly housewives have been involved in an organic farming pilot project where they are encouraged to make use of their wasteland to grow vegetables, both for their own consumption and for generating additional income.

4. Aisyiyah's Economic Empowerment Strategy

Looking at Aisyiyah's economic empowerment from its inception to the end of New Order in 1998, it can be said that Aisyiyah's movement has been limited toward the pursuance of practical gender interests. There had been hardly any efforts to challenge the unjust structural relations that put women in subordinate positions.

Since the Reform era, however, along with the evolution of Muhammadiyah's theology from *tajdid* theology into *al-Maun* theology, Aisyiyah has also gradually shifted its discourse and activisms. Aisyiyah has adopted the vision of Islam *Berkemajuan* (Progressive Islam) dan *al-Ma'un* theology in its movement. This can be seen in the Aisyiyah's discourse on structural poverty that criticize unjust structural systems causing the poverty as discussed above.

In terms of resources of women's economic empowerment, Aisyiyah has benefited from its vast networks at the grass-roots levels. Being the oldest Muslim women's organization with more than 100 years of existence, up to 2015, Aisyiyah has had boards of leadership at 34 provinces, 370 districts, 2332 regencies, and 6924 villages all over Indonesia.

In terms of achievements, Aisiyiah has also run various religio-social enterprises for the ummah empowerment. These have ranged from 4,560 educational institutions from childcare into universities, 280 hospitals, clinics, and medical centers, and 459 orphanages and shelter centers.

However, in terms of agency, its progressive discourse addressing poverty and the need to challenge unjust socio-political structures, thus categorized as pursuing strategic interests, has been limited only to public issues. At the private level, being a women's wing organization, Aisiyiah has limited choice to challenge gender inequality. The notion of *keluarga sakinah* that Aisiyiah has purported has been based on the traditional gender division of labour where men become the head of family while women are positioned at the secondary level as housewives.

This can be exemplified in a statement by a vice head of economic boards of Muhammadiyah when he comments on Aisiyiah's Tanwir program that put economic empowerment as a central theme:

"However, it should be noted that women's economic independence does not mean that women (as housewives) decide everything without any consultation with husbands or other family members. Economic independence means that women do not rely their economic households only to their husbands. Women take active part in economic activities only to relieve their husbands' burden in meeting the needs of the family." ([Pakkanna, 2018](#))

His statement reflects and emphasis the conservative gender role of women in the household. Women's economic empowerment has been confined to serve the interests of men as main breadwinner in the family. It does not envision women's economic empowerment as a space where women gain access to economic resources to provide them wider opportunities to exercise their independent agency and change unequal gender relations in the private domains.

Some scholars have analysed factors causing such conservative gender ideology among modernist Muslims. Van Doorn-Harder has observed the gender ideology of Muhammadiyah as a modernist Muslim organisation that influenced its women's wing organisations. She identifies women's active involvement since the early formation of Muhammadiyah as part of its vision to build a Muslim society. She observes that the reformist ideology that Muhammadiyah embraces has 'envisioned a moral rebirth of Islamic society that moved them to reinterpret Qur'anic teachings about women and strengthen women's rights within the family' ([Doorn-Harder, 2006: 60](#)). Quoting Stowasser (1993: 8), who remarks that '[T]hese interpretations, however, were put forth not for the benefit of women in and of themselves' but rather to benefit Islamic society, [Doorn-Harder \(2006: 61\)](#) argues that although it encouraged women to participate in the movement, Muhammadiyah also tried to restrain them by imposing rigid gender roles. In a similar vein, Federspiel (1970, cited in Mudzakir 2005: 180-181) observes that while Muhammadiyah encouraged women's social involvement, it also promoted the view of different roles of women and men, and of limited

woman's role in society. The limited autonomy Aisyiyah had in its relation with Muhammadiyah as a parental organisation can be illustrated by a statement of a former Aisyiyah leader:

“He is our counsellor. If the counsellor is good, he will [let] Aisyah find its own way. But if the counsellor is bad he can restrict Aisyiyah. Muhammadiyah has the right to veto our decisions but that is very rarely applied. They also can fire members of the Aisyiyah Board, which they have done in the past. We cannot fire them and we don't have a veto in their organization. You see, it is rather like a husband-wife relationship ([Wieringa 2002: 123](#))”.

In a similar vein, the priority of Aisyiyah for the ummah/community interests can be seen from Nyai Walidah's message, as quoted by the general leader of `Aisyiyah ([2015](#))

“Do not let kitchen's issues hinder you to undertake dakwah and jihad (fighting in Allah's ways)!” ([Djohantini 2012, p. 23](#)).

The limited role of `Aisyiyah in its movement, however, should be understood in its surrounding political-religious contexts. In the colonial period, the context of rising nationalism and the struggle for independence strongly influenced the Indonesian women's movement that constituted part of the anti-colonial movement. Women were mobilised for the nationalist project of independence and struggle against colonial domination. However, for women, nationalism is a contested process since it provides women an active and expanded role but simultaneously reinforces female roles of motherhood and compliance to 'traditional values of femininity' ([Pettman 1996](#)). Within this context, the Indonesian women's movement often faced dilemmas between different, and sometimes conflicting, allegiances to their multiple identities of their nation, religion, gender, class, and ethnic (Hidayah, forthcoming).

For Aisyiyah, this double allegiance to nationalist and gender interests has been further compounded by the need to commit to religious teachings. This complexity was further exacerbated by hostile political and religious contexts that often not in favour of women. Antagonistic political attitudes to Islam during the colonial, Old Order, and early New Order periods often placed Muslims in a defensive position with regard to legislation concerning Muslim and gender issues. These defensive positions often negatively influenced, if not sacrificed, Muslim women's gender interests (Hidayah, forthcoming).

Such position had been continued in the consecutive period of the Old Order and New Order. Uhlin argues that, in addition to the New Order regime's domination of civil society, class structures, ethnic and religious-based compartmentalisation, supported by the global political-economic structure at that time, the New Order also exploited gender relations to underpin its regime. The regime exerted its control and hegemony by merging political parties and placed women's organisations under the single umbrella of Kowani (Kongres Wanita Indonesia/Indonesian Women's Congress). Robinson (1999) observed that the regime further tightened its control over women and homogenised views of female social roles by neglecting

the diversity of gender relations that existed in the archipelago, through the formulation of the ideal type of a woman as a mother.

The New Order introduced the ideology of 'State Ibuism'. Building on the earlier concept of Ibuism introduced by [Djajadiningrat \(1992: 43-51\)](#), [Suryakusuma \(1996: 98\)](#) defines State Ibuism as 'the domestication of Indonesian women as dependent wives who exist for their husbands, their families, and the state'.

The gender ideology of State Ibuism had a devastating influence not only on Indonesian women as individuals, but also on the Indonesian women's movement. At an individual level, it limited a woman's role to the domestic sphere by restricting women's functions to being only mothers and wives. It limited women to actualise their potential in the public or political spheres. At the level of women's activism, it also controlled women's movements by banning Gerwani and pressuring women to participate in state-controlled motherhood organisations, such as Dharma Wanita (the organisations of the wives of civil servants), Dharma Pertiwi (the organisations of the wives of military), PKK (Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga/Family Welfare Guidance), and other similar women's organisations, associated together under Kowani. [Wieringa \(1995\)](#) observes the limitation upon the freedom of women's organisations to organise at the grassroots level, except for socio-religious or charitable activities.

Generally only certain organisations whose ideologies were in line with the regime's gender ideology were permitted to be active at the village level to support the regime's developmentalist policies particularly family planning and building strong family unit as requirement for political stability to reach high economy growth. Muslim women's organisations such as Aisyiyah were also mobilised to facilitate the dissemination of the policies as they not only have branches at the village levels but also were perceived to have religious legitimacy to persuade Muslim grass-roots to participate in the regime's policies. Furthermore, the practical gender interests pursued by these Muslim women's organisations such as taking care of kindergartens, majlis taklim, orphanage, and charity activities were deemed as having no threat to the regime's agenda.

During the reform era, Aisyiyah has gradually taken al-Ma'un theology as liberative praxis of the organization. It responds to the proliferation of poverty following the financial crisis hit Indonesia in 1998. As discussed above, although 'Aisyiyah's discourse on economic issues has challenged the unjust economic-political structure, however, at the private issues, 'Aisyiyah still maintains its conservative gender ideology where women are put in the subordinate position under the men. Such position is taken by Aisyiyah as a 'middle path' amidst the harsh contestation between liberal and conservative Islam seeking to gain the hearts and minds of moderate Muslims in Indonesia. Being a mass Muslim women's wing organisations, Aisyiyah is difficult to formulate a discourse that transgress the gender ideology of its parental organization.

5. Conclusion

Aisyiyah as a women's wing organization of Muhammadiyah has played a vital role in advancing Indonesian Muslim women's causes in the fields of education, health, and social-economic services. However, Aisyiyah has been facing dilemma when their multiple identities and interests, as a woman, a modernist Muslim and an Indonesian organisation, come into conflict each other. However, being an auxiliary of modernist Muslim organization, Aisyiyah has often have to make allegiance to its parental organization and Indonesian interests as priority and subordinate its gender interests. `Aisyiyah's women economic empowerment has benefited from its resources as the oldest Muslim women's organisations having vast networks and resulted in various economic empowerment institutions. Such great achievements cannot be detached from the ideological framework of modernist Muslims in Indonesia that is undergoing an evolution from the theology of *tajdid*/renewal movement with the emphasis on the development of socio-religious enterprises towards the theology of al-Ma`un seeking to make alignment and empowerment of the disadvantaged groups of the society, including the poor and women. However, in terms of agency, such Aisyiyah's economic empowerment has been forced to serve the gender ideology of modernist Muslims that subordinates gender interests of women under the interests of *ummat*/community. Although in terms of public discourse, Aisyiyah has challenged unjust socio-political structures, its gender discourse at private level has positioned women as secondary being housewives who exist for husband and family. However, such option is taken by Aisyiyah as a strategy to strike a balance of its identities and interests as a woman, a modernist Muslim, and Indonesian organization and as a strategy to respond to its surrounding political contexts in Indonesia.

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