

'Aisiyiah and the Historical Expansion of Muslim Women's Public Agency in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article examines how 'Aisiyiah transformed Muslim women's public participation from a contested exception into an institutionalized religious and civic practice. Rather than treating empowerment as a recent program or measuring it only through individual attitudes, the study reconstructs the historical and conceptual architecture through which women's capabilities became durable public authority. It employs a historical-conceptual documentary design. The primary corpus comprises organizational histories, official biographies and archival narratives, *Adabul Mar'ah fil Islam*, *Pokok Pikiran 'Aisiyiah Abad Kedua*, *Tuntunan Menuju Keluarga Sakinah*, and *Risalah Perempuan Berkemajuan*. Academic studies are used for contextualization and critical triangulation. The findings identify six connected pathways: religious literacy and epistemic agency; education and cadre formation; the public institutionalization of care through schools, health, and welfare; women-controlled organizational leadership; economic and professional capacity; and civic advocacy within national and community arenas. Historically, family reform operated as an entry point rather than a terminal boundary. Maternal and domestic responsibilities supplied an accepted moral vocabulary, but 'Aisiyiah repeatedly converted that vocabulary into educational, professional, and civic infrastructures. Conceptually, the article calls this process faith-based infrastructural empowerment: the conversion of religious legitimation, women-centred learning, organizational autonomy, and service institutions into reproducible public agency. The model explains why 'Aisiyiah's contribution cannot be reduced either to liberal individual emancipation or to charitable maternalism. Its strengths lie in institutional continuity and grassroots reach, while its tensions include unequal care burdens, conditional recognition of leadership, and the gap between normative equality and local practice. The study contributes a historically grounded account of Muslim women's agency as institution-building and civic production.

Keywords: *'Aisiyiah; women's public agency; Muslim women's movement; civic leadership; documentary analysis; Indonesia.*

INTRODUCTION

The history of Muslim women's participation in Indonesia is frequently narrated through a binary opposition between domestic confinement and public emancipation. Within this narrative, women are presumed to enter the public sphere when they leave the household, acquire employment, join politics, or obtain formal leadership. The binary captures an important dimension of gender inequality, but it is too narrow for understanding movements whose public authority developed through religious education, family reform, social care, and institution building. 'Aisiyiah, founded in Yogyakarta in 1917, is a particularly important case because it did not simply demand women's admission to pre-existing public institutions. It created schools, prayer spaces, periodicals, welfare activities, professional education, health services, and organizational networks through which women became teachers, preachers, managers, experts, and civic representatives (Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisiyiah, 1992; van Doorn-Harder, 2006).

The organization's emergence was historically disruptive. Sapa Tresna, the women's study circle established before the formal organization, provided religious instruction and literacy to girls and women whose educational opportunities were constrained by colonial and patriarchal structures. When the association was formalized as 'Aisyiyah in 1917, leadership was assigned to trained women rather than retained as the informal extension of a male founder's household. Official histories emphasize that Siti Bariyah became the first chair, while Siti Walidah developed cadres, study circles, boarding arrangements, and preaching activities. This division of roles matters analytically. Women's empowerment was conceived not only as the appearance of an exceptional female figure, but as a reproducible organization capable of preparing and replacing leaders (Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 1992; Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, n.d.-a).

The institutional sequence that followed was equally significant. 'Aisyiyah pioneered early childhood education through the Froebel School established in 1919, developed women-centred prayer and learning spaces, promoted Arabic and Latin literacy, and published Suara 'Aisyiyah from 1926. In 1928, its representatives participated in the first Indonesian Women's Congress, where Siti Hayinah delivered a public argument on human unity. These activities linked women's religious formation to national association, public writing, and civic deliberation. The movement did not wait for a secular public sphere to become hospitable to Muslim women. It built a religiously authorized infrastructure through which women could speak and organize (Amini, 2021; Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, n.d.-b).

Later expansion into health, welfare, higher education, economic empowerment, legal advocacy, and humanitarian work deepened this public presence. Care for children, mothers, poor families, and vulnerable communities might be read as an extension of conventional femininity. Yet when care is organized through schools, clinics, professional training, budgets, leadership boards, and policy networks, its political meaning changes. It becomes a form of social citizenship and public authority. The women who manage such institutions do not merely perform unpaid domestic service on a larger scale. They define needs, allocate resources, produce expertise, negotiate with government, train professionals, and represent communities. Sukmana's (2018) study of 'Aisyiyah's social welfare activities and Fauzia's (2013) history of Islamic philanthropy both demonstrate how organized religious service can generate durable civic capacity.

Scholarship has illuminated many dimensions of this movement. Van Doorn-Harder (2006) emphasizes women's Qur'anic reading and religious authority; Syamsiyatun (2007) analyses generational negotiation within Muhammadiyah; Rinaldo (2013) places pious activism within Indonesian feminist politics; Dzuhayatin (2015) examines Muhammadiyah's gender regime; and Qibtiyah (2012, 2020) maps competing interpretations of gender equality among Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah elites. Historical work has also documented 'Aisyiyah's family-centred mobilization, educational networks, and participation in the national women's movement (Amini, 2021; Blackburn, 2004). However, these contributions are often organized by sector or period. Education, family, health, political participation, and religious authority are studied separately, leaving the mechanism connecting them underconceptualized.

A second limitation is the tendency to evaluate Muslim women's agency through imported oppositions: feminist versus conservative, public versus domestic, autonomous versus subordinate, or rights versus piety. These oppositions can reveal real tensions, but they may obscure the movement's institutional method. 'Aisyiyah often expands women's authority by entering culturally legitimate domains and then transforming their scale, organizational form, and public consequence. Family education becomes early childhood infrastructure. Concern for maternal health becomes professional nursing and midwifery education. Religious study becomes female preaching and interpretive authority. Charity becomes welfare administration and policy advocacy. The transformation is neither a simple abandonment of gendered roles nor passive accommodation to them.

This article asks three questions. First, how has 'Aisyiyah historically conceptualized women's relation to family, organization, and public life? Second, through which institutional pathways has it converted religious education and care into public authority? Third, what conceptual tensions limit or complicate this empowerment model? The article answers these questions through a historical-conceptual documentary analysis. It treats official organizational histories and normative documents as primary evidence of how 'Aisyiyah narrates, legitimizes, and revises women's agency. Secondary scholarship is used to contextualize those texts and to identify discrepancies between institutional aspiration and social practice.

The central argument is that 'Aisyiyah developed a model of faith-based infrastructural empowerment. Empowerment in this model is not primarily an individual psychological state. It is a cumulative process in which theological legitimacy, women-centred knowledge, organizational autonomy, and service institutions convert individual capabilities into collective and reproducible public agency. The concept highlights why a movement may transform women's public position even when it does not adopt the vocabulary of secular feminism. It also provides a critical standard: institutions are empowering only when they expand women's authority over knowledge, resources, decisions, and public representation, rather than merely increasing the volume of gendered labour assigned to them.

Public agency refers here to the socially recognized capacity to interpret collective problems, mobilize people and resources, make decisions, and act in institutions whose consequences extend beyond a private household. This definition includes formal politics but is not limited to it. Schools, clinics, charities, media, professional associations, and religious organizations are public institutions because they distribute knowledge, welfare, status, and voice. Women's activity in these sites can therefore be politically consequential even when it is described as education, service, or da'wah rather than activism. Blackburn (2004) shows that Indonesian women's organizations historically entered national politics through social reform, marriage debates, education, and welfare long before equal representation was secured in the state.

The public-domestic binary is also complicated by the family itself. Families are governed by law, economic distribution, religious norms, and public policy. They are locations where citizenship capacities are produced and inequalities are reproduced. 'Aisyiyah's enduring concern with family cannot consequently be dismissed as withdrawal from

politics. The analytical issue is whether family discourse confines women to service and obedience or equips them with knowledge, bargaining power, shared decision-making, and access to wider institutions. Amini (2021) argues that 'Aisyiyah's family orientation gave it unusual grassroots strength. The family became a platform for early childhood education, literacy, health, and organizational recruitment.

Religious legitimacy is equally central. In contexts where patriarchal authority is justified through Islam, expanding women's public roles requires more than administrative opportunity. It requires a credible account of why women may learn, interpret, lead, earn, organize, and represent the community. 'Aisyiyah developed this account through *tajdid*, Qur'anic learning, female preaching, and institutional practice. Religious argument did not merely decorate social programs. It authorized women as moral subjects and made their activity intelligible as worship and communal responsibility. Van Doorn-Harder's (2006) study demonstrates that women's engagement with the Qur'an is a source of institutional authority, while Qibtiyah (2020) shows that gender positions inside Muhammadiyah remain contested rather than monolithic.

Empowerment theory often distinguishes resources, agency, and achievements. The distinction is useful, but movements such as 'Aisyiyah require an additional emphasis on infrastructure. A trained woman may possess knowledge and confidence, yet her public agency remains fragile if she lacks an organization, meeting place, publication, budget, professional pathway, or recognized office. Infrastructure stabilizes capability. It enables leadership to outlive particular individuals, allows practices to be repeated across branches, and gives women an address from which to negotiate with other institutions.

This study uses infrastructure in a broad sense. Material infrastructure includes schools, clinics, universities, offices, prayer rooms, and economic enterprises. Organizational infrastructure includes branches, councils, cadre systems, procedures, periodicals, and collective leadership. Epistemic infrastructure includes curricula, study circles, religious guidance, archives, and women scholars. Relational infrastructure includes networks with Muhammadiyah, government agencies, civil society organizations, donors, and local communities. The interaction among these forms explains how an activity that begins as a study circle can develop into a nationwide civic movement.

The concept of faith-based infrastructural empowerment therefore combines four claims. First, religious interpretation can legitimate equality and public responsibility. Second, women-controlled educational spaces develop epistemic and communicative capacity. Third, organizational autonomy converts capacity into decision-making power. Fourth, public institutions reproduce authority by training new actors, delivering valued services, and generating social legitimacy. The model is recursive: institutions shape interpretation just as interpretation authorizes institutions. Encounters with maternal mortality, poverty, discrimination, environmental crisis, and political exclusion create new questions that push religious discourse toward contextual reform.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative historical-conceptual documentary design. It is not a systematic literature review. The object of analysis is not the aggregate findings of

previous studies but the changing language and institutional self-understanding through which 'Aisyiyah has defined women's responsibilities, authority, and public participation. Documentary research is appropriate because organizational texts do more than record events. They establish normative categories, authorize programs, preserve institutional memory, and communicate legitimate identities (Bowen, 2009).

The primary corpus comprised six documentary clusters. The first was Sejarah Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan 'Aisyiyah, the organization's published historical narrative (Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 1992). The second consisted of official biographical and heritage narratives concerning Siti Walidah, Siti Bariyah, Siti Hayinah, early schools, women-centred prayer spaces, and Suara 'Aisyiyah. The third was Adabul Mar'ah fil Islam, a Muhammadiyah Tarjih text that codified women's religious, family, and social roles (Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, Majelis Tarjih, 1982). The fourth was Pokok Pikiran 'Aisyiyah Abad Kedua, adopted in 2015. The fifth was Tuntunan Menuju Keluarga Sakinah, published in 2016. The sixth was Risalah Perempuan Berkemajuan, adopted in 2022. Together, the materials cover institutional origins, historical memory, family ethics, public participation, and contemporary reformulation.

Documents were selected purposively according to four criteria: official or institutionally authorized status; direct relevance to women's roles and public agency; representation of a distinct historical phase; and sufficient textual substance for conceptual analysis. Academic books and articles were not coded as equivalent primary documents. They served three functions: reconstructing political and social context, challenging celebratory organizational narratives, and triangulating the relationship between normative texts and observed practice. The secondary works included historical, anthropological, political, and gender scholarship on Indonesian Islam and 'Aisyiyah (Blackburn, 2004; Dzuhayatin, 2015; Qibtiyah, 2012; Rinaldo, 2013; Robinson, 2009; Syamsiyatun, 2007; van Doorn-Harder, 2006).

The unit of analysis was a passage or documentary episode that attributed capacity, duty, authority, limitation, or institutional role to women. Initial coding identified verbs and institutional nouns: learning, teaching, preaching, managing, earning, caring, deciding, leading, representing, advocating, school, family, organization, profession, state, and community. Codes were then grouped into six domains: epistemic agency, educational and cadre formation, institutionalized care, organizational authority, economic-professional capacity, and civic-political participation. A temporal code distinguished foundational, consolidation, professionalization, democratization, and second-century reformulations.

Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, each document was read within its production context and institutional purpose. Second, recurring concepts and changes in vocabulary were compared across time. Third, documentary claims were connected to concrete organizational forms described in historical sources. Fourth, negative cases and unresolved tensions were identified. Particular attention was given to passages that expanded women's public roles while preserving asymmetrical family obligations, and to

instances in which organizational participation did not necessarily translate into equal authority in mixed-gender arenas.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source differentiation, temporal comparison, and an audit trail. Official texts were treated as evidence of institutional normativity and self-representation, not as neutral proof of implementation. Historical and ethnographic scholarship was used to test whether the institutional narrative omitted conflict, hierarchy, or variation. The article avoids converting contemporary vocabulary into claims about early actors. For example, early programs are not described as feminist merely because they expanded women's education. Their historical significance is assessed through the capacities and institutions they produced.

The study has two boundaries. It analyses the national movement and selected emblematic institutions rather than every regional branch. It also prioritizes documents available in published or official digital form, which may privilege successful programs and national leadership. These limitations are addressed in the discussion and future research agenda.

Table 1. Primary documentary corpus and analytical use

Document cluster	Historical location	Primary analytical use
Official history and early biographies	1914-1992; retrospective narratives	Origins, cadre formation, schools, mushollas, publications, and organizational autonomy
Adabul Mar'ah fil Islam	Tarjih decision, 1972; published edition 1982	Religious codification of women's family, educational, economic, and social roles
Pokok Pikiran 'Aisyiyah Abad Kedua	Muktamar 2015	Substantive equality, public leadership, knowledge movement, and civilizational agenda
Tuntunan Menuju Keluarga Sakinah	Published 2016	Mutuality, family decision making, care, and the domestic-public relationship
Risalah Perempuan Berkemajuan	Muktamar 2022	Explicit critique of patriarchy, structural empowerment, inclusion, and public agency
Official archival and heritage narratives	Contemporary publication of historical materials	Triangulation of early education, women-led worship, congress participation, health, and media

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Religious Literacy as the First Form of Public Agency

The foundational documents locate women's advancement in learning. Sapa Tresna was not simply a piety circle in which women received moral instruction from male teachers. It created recurring collective study, produced female cadres, and normalized the idea that women required religious and general knowledge to act responsibly. Siti Walidah's educational practice connected learning to social observation: girls were encouraged to understand community problems rather than remain enclosed within personal devotion. The public consequence of literacy appeared quickly in female preaching, the preparation

of teachers, and the establishment of an organization managed by women (Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 1992; Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, n.d.-a).

This sequence challenges the assumption that religious education socializes women only into obedience. The effect of education depends on who controls it, what interpretive resources it supplies, and which roles it opens. In 'Aisyiyah, study circles became recruitment and leadership institutions. Women learned to read scripture, deliver speeches, organize meetings, and teach others. Religious literacy was therefore epistemic agency: the capacity to participate in defining what Islam required in changing social conditions. Van Doorn-Harder (2006) observes that Indonesian Muslim women's Qur'anic study can create interpretive authority even when formal clerical institutions remain male dominated.

The creation of a women-managed musholla reinforced this authority spatially. A dedicated religious place gave women recurring control over learning, worship, scheduling, and speech. The space trained women to lead collective activities and allowed competencies to circulate beyond ritual life. Likewise, Suara 'Aisyiyah gave women a periodical public. Writing transformed local study into a transregional conversation about religion, education, marriage, health, and national affairs. The publication also preserved women's arguments as institutional memory rather than ephemeral oral contribution.

The second-century documents generalize this early practice into a movement of knowledge. Pokok Pikiran 'Aisyiyah Abad Kedua connects women's progress with science, critical thought, and humanitarian responsibility. Risalah Perempuan Berkemajuan explicitly presents women as thinking subjects who undertake *tajdid* and respond to structural problems. The conceptual shift is from permission to learn toward responsibility to produce knowledge. This matters because public agency depends not only on participation in programs but on the authority to name problems and formulate solutions.

2. Education and Cadre Formation as Reproductive Infrastructure

Education became the first large-scale institutional translation of this epistemic project. The Froebel School established in 1919, later known as Taman Kanak-Kanak 'Aisyiyah Bustanul Athfal, did more than provide childcare. It placed women in the roles of founder, teacher, curriculum organizer, and community educator. Early childhood education also linked family transformation to national development: preparing children required trained women, organizational finance, buildings, and relations with parents and authorities. A domain associated with motherhood was converted into professional and civic infrastructure (Amini, 2021; Nisa, 2022).

This conversion can be described as reproductive infrastructure. Reproduction here means the social formation of persons, values, and future citizens, not only biological motherhood. 'Aisyiyah invested in the institutions through which children, young women, and families acquired literacy, health knowledge, religious orientation, and organizational discipline. The resulting schools expanded women's employment and leadership, but

their wider significance was the reproduction of a movement. Teachers and graduates entered branches, health services, higher education, and community programs. Institutions produced successors.

Cadre formation distinguished the movement from projects centred on exceptional heroines. Leadership was organized through courses, study circles, branch responsibilities, periodicals, and later formal training. Syamsiyatun's (2007) study of Nasyiatul 'Aisyiyah shows how younger women negotiated status and identity within the wider Muhammadiyah structure. That negotiation could be difficult, but the existence of a distinct organizational ladder gave women a place to develop voice before entering mixed or national arenas.

The educational pathway also reveals an important tension. Because teaching and child development are culturally feminized, women's entry may be welcomed without challenging male dominance in other fields. Yet the long-term trajectory from kindergarten to teacher education, health academies, and 'Aisyiyah universities demonstrates institutional escalation. Women did not remain confined to voluntary maternal instruction. They accumulated credentials, managed complex organizations, and claimed expertise across professional disciplines.

3. Institutionalizing Care: Health, Welfare, and Social Citizenship

Care is the second major pathway from domestic responsibility to public authority. Early attention to mothers, infants, orphans, poor families, and public hygiene arose from religious concern and the practical conditions of colonial society. These activities can be interpreted as maternal charity. However, the documentary record shows an organizational movement from episodic assistance to managed institutions. Health education, maternity services, nursing and midwifery schools, clinics, hospitals, orphan care, and community welfare required trained personnel, technical knowledge, finance, and long-term governance.

This transformation altered the political meaning of care. Care became social citizenship: a claim that the well-being of women, children, and vulnerable groups was a collective responsibility rather than a private family burden. 'Aisyiyah leaders translated intimate suffering into public problems. Maternal mortality required professional training and health institutions. Child development required schools. Poverty required welfare and economic organization. Domestic violence and child marriage required legal literacy and advocacy. The movement thereby crossed the boundary between compassion and policy.

Sukmana (2018) documents how local 'Aisyiyah welfare programs combine Islamic values with organized responses to poverty. Fauzia (2013) situates such activity in a wider Indonesian history of Islamic philanthropy in which voluntary giving interacts with state welfare and civil society. The distinctive feature of 'Aisyiyah is that women are not only beneficiaries or volunteer caregivers. They occupy managerial, professional, and representative roles within the welfare system.

Professionalization also created new models of Muslim womanhood. The development of nursing, midwifery, and health education allowed women to combine religious commitment with scientific expertise. The public figure was no longer only the preacher or charitable mother but the doctor, lecturer, hospital manager, and university leader. Such figures provide symbolic evidence that competence and piety are mutually reinforcing. Yet professionalization can also generate class distance. Institutions may empower educated managers while poor women remain primarily clients or unpaid community workers. This is one reason the contemporary documents emphasize inclusion and the empowerment of *dhuafa* and *mustadh'afin*.

4. Organizational Autonomy and Collective Leadership

'Aisyiyah's organizational position within Muhammadiyah has always involved both connection and negotiation. Its origin within a male-founded reform movement provided theological resources, networks, and legitimacy. At the same time, separate leadership enabled women to set programs, manage branches, and develop expertise. The organization therefore illustrates relational autonomy: it is neither institutionally isolated nor merely a women's department administered by men. Its authority is produced through the ability to deliberate and act collectively while remaining part of a larger movement.

Collective leadership is critical because public recognition often attaches to individual charismatic women while institutions remain patriarchal. 'Aisyiyah's history offers a different pattern. Chairs change, branches reproduce, and specialized councils manage education, health, welfare, economic development, legal advocacy, and cadre formation. Authority is distributed through offices and procedures. This arrangement does not eliminate hierarchy, but it makes women's governance ordinary rather than exceptional.

The normative documents increasingly articulate this organizational experience as a general principle. *Pokok Pikiran 'Aisyiyah Abad Kedua* presents women as agents of social transformation and explicitly links their advancement to leadership in the community, nation, and humanity. *Risalah Perempuan Berkemajuan* goes further by criticizing structures that restrict women's participation and by framing women as actors in science, economy, politics, peace, and ecological responsibility. Organizational practice thus becomes a source of theological reflection: a century of women managing institutions provides experiential evidence against claims that leadership is inherently male.

Nevertheless, relational autonomy has limits. Strategic decisions involving Muhammadiyah assets, mixed institutions, or public representation can reproduce unequal bargaining power. Dzuhayatin (2015) describes gender contestation inside Muhammadiyah as a regime rather than a single doctrine; organizational texts, leadership cultures, and local interpretations interact. Formal autonomy must therefore be assessed by control over budgets, appointments, property, and representation, not only by the existence of a women's structure.

5. Economic Capacity and Professional Presence

Economic empowerment appears in the documents as both household resilience and public independence. Early vocational skills, textile production, savings, and mutual assistance enabled women to contribute to family income and organizational finance. Contemporary programs expand this orientation through cooperatives, entrepreneurship, vocational training, and community groups. Economic activity is framed as productive worship and protection against exploitation rather than as individual accumulation alone.

The public significance of economic capacity lies in bargaining power. Income, professional credentials, and access to organizational resources make it easier for women to participate in decisions, resist harmful dependency, and sustain civic work. *Risalah Perempuan Berkemajuan* explicitly links women's progress to economic justice and structural transformation. This moves the discourse beyond the moral celebration of hardworking women toward the question of unequal access to assets, markets, technology, and decent work.

Yet the economic pathway is also vulnerable to the double burden. Programs may add productive labour without redistributing domestic care. *Tuntunan Menuju Keluarga Sakinah* provides corrective resources by emphasizing mutual respect, shared responsibility, and cooperation, but local practice may remain asymmetrical. Economic participation should therefore not be treated as empowerment when women gain income but lose time, health, or decision-making authority.

6. Religious Authority and the Communicative Public

The expansion of women's public agency also depended on authority over religious communication. Preaching, Qur'anic study, family guidance, and the publication of *Suara 'Aisyiyah* created channels through which women addressed audiences as knowledgeable Muslims. This authority differs from simple access to religious instruction. Women selected topics, interpreted social problems, and connected scriptural language to education, marriage, health, peace, and national responsibility. The communicative public generated by sermons, magazines, congress speeches, and cadre forums made women's reasoning visible and repeatable.

The organizational production of women scholars further weakens the assumption that religious authority belongs naturally to men. Van Doorn-Harder (2006) demonstrates that Indonesian Muslim women's Qur'anic reading is embedded in teaching and institutional service. Qibtiyah (2012, 2020) likewise shows that gender interpretation in Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah is contested by actors who combine religious training, organizational experience, and engagement with contemporary gender knowledge. In this setting, a woman's authority does not necessarily depend on holding a classical clerical title. It may be produced through sustained teaching, Tarjih participation, publication, professional expertise, and public trust.

This pathway is crucial because institutional services can otherwise remain technically effective but conceptually dependent on male interpreters. When women manage clinics or schools yet lack authority to formulate the religious meaning of their work, public leadership remains incomplete. The second-century documents address this problem by associating the progressive woman with *tajdid*, *wasatiyah*, knowledge, inclusion, and righteous action. The movement thereby frames women not only as implementers of decisions but as intellectual actors responsible for renewing religious understanding in response to violence, inequality, technological change, and environmental crisis.

7. Civic Voice, Advocacy, and National Participation

'Aisyiyah entered the national women's public early. Its participation in the 1928 Indonesian Women's Congress connected Islamic reform with debates on marriage, education, unity, and women's status. Siti Hayinah's speech on human unity is symbolically important because it positioned a Muslim woman as a producer of national political thought, not merely as a representative of a religious constituency. The organization also joined wider women's networks while retaining its religious identity (Blackburn, 2004; Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, n.d.-b).

This history helps explain 'Aisyiyah's contemporary model of civic participation. The organization is not a political party, yet it engages in voter education, policy advocacy, legal literacy, peace work, humanitarian action, and public discussion. Its legitimacy arises partly from service institutions and grassroots presence. Schools, health programs, and community groups provide information about problems that formal politics often overlooks. Service therefore becomes an observational infrastructure for advocacy.

The second-century texts conceptualize this role through liberation, empowerment, advancement, and civilizational responsibility. Women are called to address violence, poverty, health inequality, environmental damage, radicalism, and discrimination. Public agency is no longer justified only by women's special concern for family. It is grounded in equal human dignity and shared stewardship. This is a major conceptual development: women move from being protectors of a morally defined domestic sphere to co-responsible actors in national and global problems.

Civic participation remains differentiated from partisan capture. Organizational independence protects the movement's service institutions and moral authority, while individual members may pursue political careers. Dewi's (2015) analysis of Indonesian women's local political networks shows that religious and associational ties can support female politicians, but they can also produce patronage and elite dependency. 'Aisyiyah's challenge is to convert civic capital into accountable policy influence without becoming an instrument of parties or candidates.

The public sphere created by 'Aisyiyah is consequently multi-sited. It includes congress halls, classrooms, clinics, branch meetings, magazines, universities, village groups, and digital platforms. Women become public not only by holding state office but by creating arenas in which collective needs are named and acted upon. This broader view explains

the movement's historical durability. Its civic involvement is embedded in everyday institutions rather than activated only during elections.

Table 2. Historical phases in the expansion of public agency

Phase	Dominant institutional form	Public-agency effect	Persistent tension
Foundation, 1914-1928	Study circles, formal organization, Froebel School, musholla, periodical	Literacy, female teaching, organizational speech, and entry into national women's networks	Dependence on culturally accepted feminine roles for legitimacy
Consolidation, 1928-1950s	Congress participation, family guidance, branch expansion, welfare	Civic representation and diffusion of organized women's leadership	Public authority remains uneven outside women-centred arenas
Professionalization, 1950s-1990s	Schools, health education, clinics, hospitals, welfare institutions	Credentials, management, professional expertise, and institutional scale	Class stratification and possible feminization of care work
Democratization, 1998-2014	Gender discourse, advocacy networks, higher education, local participation	Rights language, policy engagement, and wider leadership pathways	Contestation within Muhammadiyah and uneven local interpretation
Second-century reformulation, 2015-2022	Knowledge movement, inclusion, structural advocacy, women scholars	Substantive equality and civilizational agency	Gap between progressive texts and redistribution of resources and care

Table 3. Dimensions of faith-based public agency

Dimension	Primary mechanism	Illustrative institutional expression	Criterion of genuine empowerment
Epistemic	Religious literacy, tajdid, science, publication	Study circles, Suara Aisiyyah, women scholars, universities	Women help define problems and authoritative interpretations
Organizational	Women-managed structures and cadre systems	Branches, councils, leadership training, collective deliberation	Control over agenda, appointments, budgets, and succession
Educational	Teaching and reproductive infrastructure	TK ABA, schools, teacher formation, higher education	Women are founders and decision makers, not only care workers
Health and welfare	Professionalization of care	Clinics, hospitals, nursing and midwifery education, community health	Care produces expertise, rights, and public accountability
Economic-professional	Skills, income, credentials, enterprises	Cooperatives, entrepreneurship, professional careers	Resources increase bargaining power without intensifying exploitation
Civic-political	Advocacy, networks, representation, humanitarian action	Women's congresses, voter education, policy advocacy, peace programs	Independent public voice and influence on collective decisions

Discussion

1. From Domestic Reform to Public Infrastructure

The findings show that the household was historically an entry point for 'Aisyiyah's public project, but it was not its endpoint. Early arguments could present educated women as better wives and mothers because this vocabulary was socially intelligible and religiously defensible. Such language should not be romanticized; it could preserve asymmetrical expectations. Yet the institutional consequences exceeded domestic improvement. Once women were educated to manage families rationally and religiously, the same competencies supported teaching, organizing, publishing, health work, and civic participation.

This pattern resembles maternalist politics, in which women claim public authority through their responsibilities as mothers and caregivers. Maternalism can expand welfare while reinforcing the idea that care is naturally women's work. 'Aisyiyah partly follows this path, but it also transforms it. The movement professionalized care, collectivized responsibility, and increasingly grounded public participation in equal dignity and stewardship rather than biological motherhood. The transition is visible in the difference between guidance focused on a meaningful Islamic wife and the broader structural agenda of *Risalah Perempuan Berkemajuan*.

The transition is not linear. Older and newer grammars coexist. A branch may promote women professionals while expecting them to carry disproportionate domestic work. A family guidance text may emphasize mutuality while sermons reproduce male guardianship. A university may be managed by women while senior mixed-gender forums remain male dominated. Historical-conceptual analysis therefore identifies a repertoire rather than a completed emancipation. Actors can select egalitarian or hierarchical elements from the same institutional tradition.

What distinguishes 'Aisyiyah is the density of the institutional repertoire. Education, religion, welfare, economy, and civic action are linked through a nationwide organization. This density enables gradual change. A woman who enters through a health group may encounter legal education, leadership training, religious study, and economic networks. Public agency develops through repeated participation across institutions rather than through a single moment of ideological conversion.

Faith-Based Infrastructural Empowerment

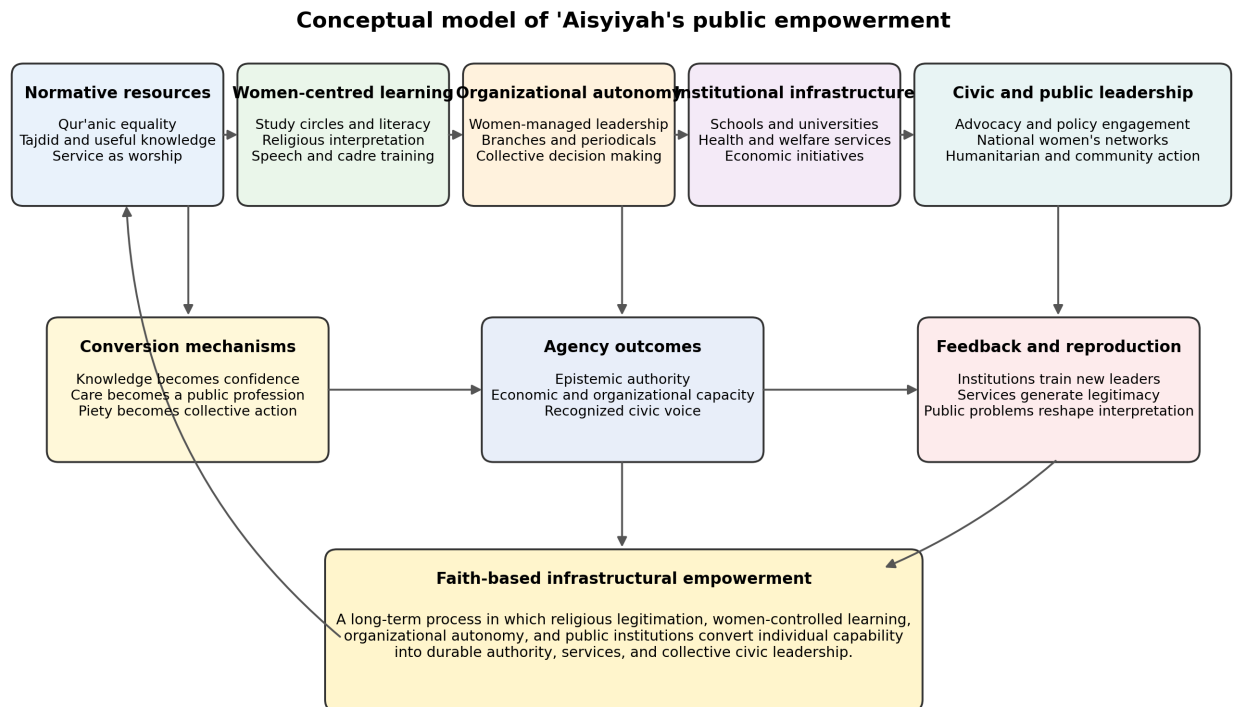


Figure 2. Faith-based infrastructural empowerment in 'Aisiyyah.

The concept of faith-based infrastructural empowerment synthesizes this pattern. Faith-based means that equality, learning, service, and leadership are justified through Islamic responsibility and *tajdid*. The term does not imply that religious language is automatically emancipatory. It identifies religion as an arena of contestation and legitimation. Patriarchal restrictions may also be religiously framed; empowerment requires women to participate in interpretation and institutional decision making.

Infrastructural means that empowerment is material and organizational. Schools, clinics, offices, publications, training systems, and budgets matter because they give continuity to rights and ideals. A progressive statement without infrastructure may change discourse but leave authority untouched. Conversely, an institution can employ many women while maintaining male control. Empowerment occurs when infrastructure is women-governed and expands control over knowledge, resources, and public representation.

The model also explains the movement's resilience. Religious legitimacy mobilizes voluntary commitment; education creates competence; organization coordinates action; services create public trust; and trust increases the capacity to advocate. Each component reinforces the others. Service without interpretation could reproduce gendered charity. Interpretation without organization could remain an elite debate. Organization without public institutions could become internally focused. The interaction converts pious association into civic power.

A final advantage of the concept is that it treats beneficiaries as potential agents. Grassroots programs are empowering when they create pathways from receiving services to joining groups, acquiring knowledge, managing activities, and influencing policy. Contemporary inclusion programs increasingly articulate this trajectory for poor women, women with disabilities, young women, and marginalized communities. The quality of empowerment should be evaluated through mobility across these roles.

2. Tensions, Exclusions, and Conditions of Transformation

Three tensions qualify the model. The first is the care paradox. 'Aisyiyah's public legitimacy was built through care, but care remains unequally distributed. When organizational programs rely on women's unpaid labour, the movement may socialize costs that families and the state should share. Family mutuality must therefore be translated into measurable redistribution of time and responsibility.

The second is the autonomy paradox. Women-centred institutions provide leadership opportunities and protection from male domination, yet they can be classified as secondary to mixed institutions. Separate authority is transformative when it controls substantial resources and influences common decisions. It is containing when women manage only feminized sectors or are consulted after strategic choices have been made.

The third is the representation paradox. A national organization can present an inclusive discourse while leadership and professional pathways favour educated urban women. Poor, rural, disabled, minority, and young women may participate primarily as recipients. *Risalah Perempuan Berkemajuan* supplies a normative basis for inclusion, but institutional practice must create accessible leadership ladders, compensation, and knowledge recognition.

These tensions do not invalidate the historical achievement. They clarify its unfinished character. 'Aisyiyah's institutional history provides resources for self-critique because its own principles connect religion with liberation, knowledge, justice, and social benefit. The movement's future contribution depends on applying those principles to its internal distribution of authority as rigorously as it applies them to society.

Table 4. Critical conditions for transforming participation into public agency

Risk	Why participation may remain non-transformative	Corrective condition
Unpaid care expansion	Women perform more community work without redistribution of domestic or organizational burdens	Shared care, compensation, time protection, and male institutional responsibility
Symbolic leadership	Women appear in programs but lack authority over budgets, assets, appointments, or policy	Decision rights, transparent governance, and control of strategic resources
Professional elitism	Credentials empower a minority while grassroots women remain clients or volunteers	Leadership mobility, recognition of local knowledge, and accessible training

Risk	Why participation may remain non-transformative	Corrective condition
Separate but secondary institutions	Women-centred spaces are treated as supplementary to male-controlled institutions	Equal resource status and formal influence on shared decisions
Norm-practice gap	Progressive documents do not change branch routines or family relations	Local indicators, monitoring, cadre education, and accountable implementation
Partisan capture	Civic networks become electoral instruments for candidates or elites	Organizational independence, issue-based advocacy, and public accountability

Theoretical Contributions

The article makes three contributions. First, it reconceptualizes Muslim women's public agency as institution building. Publicness is produced when women create durable arenas of knowledge, welfare, organization, and representation. This approach avoids measuring agency only through individual resistance or formal political office.

Second, it explains how religiously framed family and care roles can have divergent trajectories. They can naturalize women's subordination, or they can be collectivized, professionalized, and converted into social citizenship. The outcome depends on control over infrastructure and the redistribution of authority. This conditional formulation is more precise than describing 'Aisyiyah either as conservative maternalism or uncomplicated feminism.

Third, the concept of faith-based infrastructural empowerment links discourse and organization. Religious interpretation, material institutions, professional expertise, and civic legitimacy are analytically inseparable. The model may be useful for comparative research on Muslim women's organizations, churches, faith-based charities, and other movements in which service institutions are central to public participation.

Practical and Research Implications

For 'Aisyiyah, the analysis suggests that empowerment indicators should extend beyond program reach. They should measure women's movement from beneficiary to organizer, from organizer to decision maker, and from service provider to policy advocate. Institutions should also examine who controls budgets, how care work is distributed, and whether marginalized women enter leadership pipelines.

For universities and researchers, the article demonstrates the value of treating organizational texts as primary data. Future studies can compare successive editions of family guidance, code Suara 'Aisyiyah across historical periods, analyse branch archives, or combine documentary findings with interviews and institutional ethnography. Regional comparison is especially important because a national normative discourse may be interpreted differently in Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, eastern Indonesia, and migrant communities.

For public policy, 'Aisiyyah's history indicates that women's civic leadership is strengthened by long-term investment in education, health, organizational networks, and knowledge production. Short training projects cannot substitute for institutions that provide repeated practice, succession, and community legitimacy. Partnerships should therefore support women's organizational autonomy rather than treating faith-based organizations only as channels for delivering externally designed programs.

Limitations

This study is based on published national documents and selected official historical narratives. Such sources tend to foreground achievement, coherence, and central leadership. They cannot establish the frequency or effectiveness of programs across all branches. Some early texts are available through later editions or institutional summaries, which limits fine-grained philological comparison.

The conceptual model should therefore be tested through archival research, oral histories, organizational finance, observations, and comparative branch studies. Attention is also needed to women who left the organization, opposed its policies, or participated without obtaining leadership. Their experiences may reveal exclusions that institutional documents do not record.

CONCLUSION

'Aisiyyah's contribution to women's empowerment in Indonesia cannot be adequately understood as a movement from the home into a pre-existing public sphere. The movement helped build the institutions through which Muslim women became public actors. Religious study circles created epistemic confidence; schools and publications circulated knowledge; women-managed structures normalized leadership; health and welfare professionalized care; and civic networks connected local problems to national debate.

Historically, family reform provided a legitimate starting vocabulary, but institutional development repeatedly exceeded domestic boundaries. The most significant transformation was not simply that more women participated. It was that women acquired organizational offices, professional expertise, material institutions, and recognized authority to define collective needs. The second-century documents articulate this history in a more explicit language of substantive equality, anti-discrimination, inclusion, and civilizational responsibility.

The article describes this cumulative pattern as faith-based infrastructural empowerment. The concept highlights that empowerment becomes durable when religious legitimacy, women-centred knowledge, organizational autonomy, and public institutions reinforce one another. It also supplies a critical test: participation is not transformative when it merely increases women's unpaid labour, confines them to secondary sectors, or leaves strategic resources under male control.

'Aisiyyah's history is therefore both an achievement and an unfinished project. Its institutions demonstrate that Islamic commitment can authorize women as educators,

professionals, scholars, managers, and civic leaders. Its unresolved tensions show that progressive discourse must be continually translated into the redistribution of care, resources, and decision-making power.

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