

SITI WALIDAH, GENDER EQUALITY AND MODERNIST ISLAMIC WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDONESIA: A CRITICAL HISTORY

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Abstract: This study delves into Siti Walidah's journey as a gender equality pioneer within the 'Aisyiyah movement, utilizing four research methods: heuristic research for source collection, source criticism for source validation, interpretation employing sociological and anthropological approaches, and historiography for systematic reporting. Findings reveal that Walidah's family and marriage to Ahmad Dahlan strongly influenced her commitment to gender equality. Dahlan played a significant role in forming views and experiences that gave birth to ideas and tangible actions in the gender equality movement. Walidah pioneered the gender equality movement by establishing places of education: launching the *Sapa Tresna* association (1914), 'Aisyiyah (1917), *Internaat* (1919), *Musholla* 'Aisyiyah (1922) which became tools for building gender equality by providing opportunities and programmes for women to obtain equal educational rights as men. She played a pioneering role in empowering women within 'Aisyiyah, leading its congresses, and departed from religious values to advocate for gender equality through the 'Aisyiyah organization formed in 1917, solidifying her legacy as Indonesia's first gender equality advocate.

Keywords: Siti Walidah; gender equality; 'Aisyiyah; modernist Islamic women's movement.

Introduction

Kampung Kauman is a significant Muslim community settlement that preserves age-old traditions dating back to the late 19th century. Kauman is a village with a strong connection to the Yog-

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yakarta palace, where traditional Islamic practices are upheld, including religious rituals based on scholarly texts. The teachings of traditional scholars are instrumental in preserving customs passed down through generations, such as the Craddha event marking the third, seventh, tenth, fortieth, hundredth, and thousandth days after a person's passing. Furthermore, the community tends to remain closed and isolated, distancing themselves from external developments beyond the boundaries of Kauman village.¹

By firmly adhering to the principles of their faith, the Muslims in Kauman rejected all forms of new cultural influences introduced by the Dutch colonialists. They regarded everything introduced by the colonialists as illegitimate. Wearing suits and trousers was also deemed as “*ḥarām*.” Women were subjected to domination, exploitation, and subordination as colonized citizens, alongside their male counterparts. Additionally, they experienced separate forms of subjugation and marginalization as colonized women.² Moreover, in Kauman, there exist distinct traditions and mottos that pertain to women's lives. One such motto is “*Suwargo Nunut Neroko Katut*,”³ which suggests that a wife's fortunes and misfortunes are reliant on her husband. This implies that women were generally seen as unable to function independently without a husband. Another motto prevalent among women at that time was “*Konco Wingking*,”⁴ signifying that women were responsible for household affairs, particularly the kitchen, and were considered companions solely if they fulfilled this role.

Amidst these circumstances, the Muhammadiyah and ‘Aisyiyah organizations were founded in Kampung Kauman, led by Ahmad Dahlan and Siti Walidah. Numerous studies and research projects have been conducted on these two individuals and organizations. However, there is a paucity of research on the efforts made by Walidah in promoting gender equality. As a national hero

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

² Oyeronki Oyewumi, “Colonising Bodies and Minds,” in *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*, eds. Gauraf Desai and Supriya Naira (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 340.

³ M. Yusron Asrofi, *Kyai Haji Ahmad: Pemikiran dan Kepemimpinannya* (Yogyakarta: Yogyakarta Offset, 1983), 57-59.

⁴ Suratmin, *Nyai Ahmad Dahlan dan Perjuangannya* (Yogyakarta: PT. Bayu Indra Graphic, 1990), 64.

and a pivotal figure in the Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah organizations, Walidah contributed to the establishment and active development of these organizations, with a particular focus on advancing Indonesian Muslims. This research centers on the ideas, initiatives, programs, and movements aimed at advancing Muslim women. These efforts to enhance the role of women and enable them to be equal partners with men are intricately linked to key figures such as Walidah. She dedicated herself to the cause of women's advancement, especially among Muslim women, in the early 20th century. While there is a wealth of research related to Walidah, no study explicitly delves into her struggle to pioneer gender equality for Islamic women in a modernist manner.

The research addresses the following questions: First, what was the condition of Kauman Village at that time, and what factors influenced the ideas and movements for gender equality in the modernist women's movement in Indonesia? The local environment can significantly impact an individual's thoughts and actions. Therefore, understanding the influence of the environment and context is crucial in comprehending how it shaped Walidah's beliefs and actions. Second, how did Walidah's family's educational background affect her husband's ideas and involvement in the gender equality movement within the modernist women's movement in Indonesia? Third, what were Walidah's perspectives on women, gender equality, and the modernization of Islamic women? Forth, how did Walidah's personal struggle for gender equality and the modernization of Islamic women evolve? Fifth, can Walidah truly be considered a pioneer in the pursuit of gender equality within the modernist Islamic women's movement in Indonesia?

In this research, four research methods are employed: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. Heuristics involves the search and acquisition of historical sources for writing history. Source criticism strengthens the objective historical value of sources through philosophical and logical thinking. The process of source criticism includes internal and external verification. Interpretation involves the analysis, description, or explanation of discussions based on the data results, which serve as sources for writing. Finally, historiography encompasses the writing of history in the form of a research report. It is systematically organized to

ensure interconnected discussions between its components and is written following standard grammatical conventions.

The Condition of Kauman Community

Greenberg believes that we can gain a deeper understanding of other human beings by examining their culturally constructed activities.⁵ Kauman is a village that maintains a connection with the Yogyakarta palace. The origin of Kauman village can be traced back to the placement of servants in the *pamethakan dalem*, who were responsible for religious matters, particularly those related to the mosque. Subsequently, some families of the royal courtiers came together to establish the Kauman community. The residential area of the Kauman people is known as Kauman village.⁶ The people of Kauman possess impressive skills in batik, creating exquisite handcrafted batik textiles. Initially, batik-making served as a leisure activity for the courtiers' wives. Eventually, it evolved into a significant source of household income, competing with the earnings from their husbands' positions. Another notable craft in the village is the production of *Songket* veils.

The Kauman people traditionally practice the Islamic religion by conducting their religious lives based on the teachings found in books written by scholars. In addition to preserving traditions passed down through generations, they maintain a somewhat closed and isolated community, distancing themselves from external developments beyond Kauman village.⁷ Most of the Kauman residents attend *pesantren*, where they engage in Qur'anic recitation at the mosque or within the village. Some individuals live close to the mosque and do not require boarding facilities. As for those coming from outside the immediate area, they reside in the Islamic boarding schools. Historically, these schools primarily catered to boys. The culture of the Kauman people, particularly their arts, crafts, and traditional ceremonies, is deeply intertwined with and serves the purposes of Islamic religious life. The Kauman community is known for an art form called *Shalawatan*, vocal art, and music accompanied by instruments like the tambourine, *gejrong*, and

⁵ Ahmad Adaby Darban, *Sejarah Kauman: Menguak Identitas Kampung Muhammadiyah* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2011), 23.

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Mu'arif and Setyowati, *Srikandis-Srikandi 'Aisyiya*, 1.

jedor. The vocals typically involve recitations of blessings attributed to the Prophet and passages from the book of Barzanjī. This art is employed during Islamic holidays, *walimahan*, and other special occasions (*hajaj*). However, in the 1930s, the prominence of this art began to diminish due to shifts in the religious life patterns within Kauman village.

The Muslims in Kauman steadfastly held onto their traditions, resisting the new cultural influences introduced by Dutch colonialists, which they considered unacceptable. The colonialists' offerings were viewed as illegitimate, including clothing such as suits and trousers, which were deemed haram. Girls were confined to indoor spaces, prohibited from participating in activities outside the home. As a result, disparities between men and women emerged in terms of education and leadership opportunities.

Siti Walidah and Family

Siti Walidah possessed a gentle, flexible, and friendly personality. She was known for her simplicity, calm demeanor, diligence, ability to get along with anyone, generosity, confidence, and courage in expressing her opinions. Her presence exuded tranquility, making those around her feel at ease in her company. Moreover, she was a capable individual with a deep interest in religious knowledge from a young age, frequently engaging in recitations.

Walidah was the daughter of *Kiai Penghulu* H. Muhammad Fadhil. She was born on January 3, 1872, in Kauman and passed away on May 31, 1946, in Yogyakarta. As the head of the Palace, *Kiai* Fadhil resided in Kauman Village, situated west of the Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat Sultanate Palace Grand Mosque.

Her education took place at her father's *pesantren*, where she received instruction known for its rigor. Even the design and structure of the worship house were strictly adhered to. This house, designed for prayer and the Qur'anic reading, served as a place for large family gatherings, fostering strong family bonds that had a significant influence on Walidah's personality. *Kiai* Fadhil, as a father, consistently instilled values of good moral character in his sons and daughters.

The atmosphere in the Kauman environment is conducive to the learning process and can have a significant impact on one's character. Activities in the Kauman neighborhood during Maghrib

and the pre-dawn hours often involve individuals reading the Qur'an and engaging in prayer.⁸ It is not surprising that Kauman is home to numerous ulema, and most residents place a strong emphasis on religious education, while also recognizing the need for a broader base of non-religious knowledge.⁹

Walidah's childhood was dedicated to reciting the Qur'an and religious books, often in Javanese or Pegon. From a young age, she did not receive a formal education in public schools due to the prevailing perspective in Kauman at the time, which deemed attending schools established by the Dutch as illegitimate. In the Kauman community, and more broadly in Java, there was a prevailing assumption that women should not venture outside their homes. At least around the 1900s, the belief persisted that formal education within schools had yet to be widely embraced, with many in the general public regarding it as diminishing a girl's modesty.

Since childhood, Walidah has consistently stood out from her peers, displaying a bold and articulate manner of speaking. Her skill in preaching was nurtured when *Kiai* Fadhil entrusted his daughter to assist in teaching at his *langgar*, commonly referred to as 'Langgar Kiai Fadhil.' This teaching experience not only helped Walidah in managing the women's recitation but also enabled her to assist Dahlan in educating female students who would become future 'Aisyiyah activists. She was known for her effective teaching style, captivating her students and motivating them to learn. This continued until Walidah's marriage, during which she initiated women's recitations, encouraged Dahlan's students to be active in the 'Aisyiyah movement, guided 'Aisyiyah activists during her involvement in 'Aisyiyah's management, and later, when she became an advisor to 'Aisyiyah, she continued to mentor female students in the *Internaat*, or girls' dormitory.¹⁰

Married to Ahmad Dahlan

In 1889, when Siti Walidah was 17 years old, she married Muhammad Darwis, who was the son of *Kiai* Abu Bakar, a *Khatib* of

⁸ Suratmin, *Nyai Ahmad Dahlan, Pahlawan Nasional: Amal dan Perjuangannya* (Yogyakarta: Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 1990), 20.

⁹ Mu'arif and Setyowati, *Srikandi-Srikandi 'Aisyiyah*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

the Great Mosque of the Yogyakarta Sultanate. Darwis himself was Walidah's cousin. Darwis was a man who advocated for gender equality. His ideas and actions concerning gender equality were groundbreaking at the time and were new to Walidah. Her active involvement in the Muhammadiyah organization and her frequent companionship with her husband in its management contributed to her development as a woman leader with broad perspectives and experiences.

Darwis performed the pilgrimage twice. The first pilgrimage took place in 1889. During his stay in the Holy Land, Darwis studied religion for eight months at Sayyid Bakri Syatta's establishment. The people of Kauman, when going on pilgrimage, often remained in the holy land for several months to pursue religious studies. Sayyid Bakri Syatta was a prominent scholar of the Shāfi'ī school of Mecca and was one of the students of Sayyid Ahmad Zaini, who, in turn, was one of Dahlan's mentors. While at this location, Darwis received certification to change his name to "Ahmad Dahlan."

After returning from the Holy Land, Dahlan taught religion at home and assisted his father in leading recitations on the Porch of the Yogyakarta Grand Mosque, leading to the public referring to him as a *Kiai* (Islamic leader). In 1896, he was appointed as *Khatib*, succeeding his father. The following year, in 1897, Dahlan proposed correcting the Qibla direction of the Yogyakarta Grand Mosque. According to him, the Qibla direction of the Grand Mosque had deviated 24 degrees north of the equator. He convened the palace scholars and the elders of Kauman in his surau to discuss this matter. A few days later, the Qibla direction of the Grand Mosque was adjusted by marking a prayer line extending five centimeters cm from the south to the north, slightly obliquing the Qibla direction to the northwest. This action faced strong criticism from *Kiai Penghulu*. Dahlan's Mosque was eventually demolished, and he was accused of apostasy.

During that time, the use of scientific tools such as the equator and world maps was novel. The Kauman community, especially the religious scholars, considered world maps and the equator to be Western creations, and all Western products were deemed *haram* to use. This incident underscores that Dahlan was one of the

kiai with a reformist and modernist perspective, willing to accept and study Western knowledge to enhance Islamic *da'wah*.

Dahlan embarked on his second pilgrimage in 1902, aiming to ease the tension prevailing in Kauman at that time. During his pilgrimage, he delved into the literature on Islamic reform, particularly works by Egyptian reformers like Muḥammad 'Abduh.¹¹ Dahlan also engaged with Rashīd Riḍā,¹² a student and comrade in arms of 'Abduh.¹³ The knowledge gleaned from Abduh's books and interactions with Riḍā had a profound impact on Dahlan's mindset and character. He shared these teachings with his students in Kauman.¹⁴ After comprehending the principles of the reformists, Dahlan's perspective broadened, motivating him to contribute to the advancement of the Muslim community. This endeavor necessitated the creation of an institution to support its mission,¹⁵ which would later become known as the Muhammadi-yah organization.

Dahlan also placed significant emphasis on the role of women. In his perspective, women possess the same rights as men in advancing both religion and society. In addition to their roles within the household, women can actively participate in community development.¹⁶ Dahlan's reformist ideas had a profound influence on Walidah, as she was consistently engaged in the struggle for Islamic reform, particularly in the advancement of women's rights.¹⁷ Her dedication to accompanying Dahlan and her efforts to champion women's rights led Walidah to closely observe societal dynamics. Together, they initiated a movement advocating for the equality of Islamic women through modern thinking and women's

¹¹ Muḥammad 'Abduh, b. Ḥasan Khayr, is one of the prominent figures in 20th century Islam. In his native Egypt, he is renowned as a distinguished scholar and a reformer in the Islamic world. Throughout his lifetime, he promoted Islamic modernism by harmonizing Islamic teachings with contemporary thought. He also served as the Grand Mufti of Egypt from 1899 to 1905.

¹² Rashīd Riḍā is a scholar of hadith and jurisprudence who has modernism in mind. He is a student of Muḥammad 'Abduh.

¹³ Mu'arif and Setyowati, *Srikandis-Srikandi 'Aisyiyah*, 6.

¹⁴ Darban, *Sejarah Kauman*, 34.

¹⁵ Ibid., 36-37.

¹⁶ Mu'arif and Setyowati, *Srikandi-Srikandi 'Aisyiyah*, 10.

¹⁷ Siti Walidah realises that her husband is a modernist reformer who invites people to purify the Islamic faith by restoring faith and devotion to the God. As a wife, Walidah supports and accompanies Dahlan carried out religious teachings by preaching Islam and actively building Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah.

activism. Walidah not only played the role of a supportive life partner behind the scenes but also positioned herself as a dedicated comrade of Dahlan, pioneering Islamic recitation sessions for women of various age groups and for women involved in batik work.¹⁸

Siti Walidah's Motivation in Fighting for Gender Equality

Walidah possesses a spirit of commitment to *da'wah* for *amr ma'rūf naby munkar* (commanding right and forbidding wrong), founded on the principles of religious teachings that fortify her inner strength. These teachings are encapsulated in the Qur'an, Āli 'Imrān [3]: 104, which reads: "And let there be among you a group of people who call to goodness, order (to do) what is good, and prevent what is wrong. And they are the lucky ones." Siti Walidah's understanding is that the call to preach *amr ma'rūf naby munkar* is not limited to men but applies equally to women. Her beliefs in advocating for gender equality were shaped by her upbringing in a religious family and her experiences within a *pesantren* environment. Additionally, her marriage to Dahlan, whose progressive ideas had a substantial impact, significantly contributed to her pivotal role in advancing women's rights in Indonesia during that era.

In addition to Āli 'Imrān [3]: 104, one of the fundamental pillars of the movement led by Walidah is Āli 'Imrān [3]: 110, which reads: "You are the best people who were born for humans. Command those who are good, prevent what is evil, and believe in God. If the People of the Book had believed, it would have been better for them; among them, there are those who believe, and most of them are wicked." Al-Mā'ūn [107]: 1-7 which reads: "Do you know people who reject religion? That is the one who rebukes orphans and does not recommend feeding poor people. So, woe to those who pray, (namely) those who are negligent from their prayers, those who do *riya*, and are reluctant (to help with) valuable things," is the source of motivation and the foundation of Walidah's beliefs. This *Sūrah* was also the first one taught when she initiated special recitations in Kauman.¹⁹

¹⁸ Mu'arif and Setyowati, *Srikandi-Srikandi 'Aisyiyah*, 21-22.

¹⁹ Ibid., 28.

In Islam, the principle of “equality” between men and women remains consistent, whether in matters of worship or *mu‘āmalah* (interpersonal conduct). This teaching is found in al-Nahl [16]: 97 which reads: “Whoever does good deeds, both men and women, in a state of faith, We will surely give him a good life, and indeed, We will reward them with a reward that is better than what they have done.” It is elucidated that the God has promised those who perform good deeds, following the guidance of the Qur’an and the tradition of the Prophet. Regardless of whether one is a man or a woman, as long as they are in a state of faith, they will be blessed with a good life in this world. In the hereafter, they will receive a reward far greater than their deeds. In addition to these two sources, al-Nisā’ [4]: 124 also serves as a foundation for Walidah’s beliefs: “And whoever does good deeds, both men and women while he believes, then they will enter heaven, and they will not be wronged in the slightest.”

In addition to following the Qur’an, one particular ḥadīth serves as a firm foundation for Walidah in her advocacy for the well-being of Muslim women in Indonesia. The ḥadīth is as follows: “Rasūl Allāh said, ‘Seeking knowledge is obligatory for Muslim men and women.’”

Siti Walidah’s Thoughts on Women, Gender Equality, and Modernization

Walidah firmly believes that women are the “primary educators,” signifying that the foundation of children’s education rests in the hands of women. Walidah’s ideas were documented in the magazine *Suara ‘Aisyiyah*, where she asserted, “Progress remains incomplete as long as women remain uninformed.” According to Walidah, it is not sufficient for mothers to solely raise children and tend to household matters; they need to come together to address spiritual, women, and societal needs.²⁰ A woman should receive an education and possess life skills, which elevate her status.

Siti Walidah formulated a theory to develop one’s personality known as the “Central Four Formula Theory.” This theory underpins Walidah’s argument that women have an equal right to education as men because they play a crucial role in shaping the charac-

²⁰ Ibid., 32.

ter of children within families, positioning them at the core of the central four components.²¹ The first component is the family environment, which functions as the smallest unit of society. The second component is education, where the primary function is to provide schooling. The influence of schools can be substantial, but sometimes, despite a good family environment, the impact of the school environment remains uncertain. The third component is the community environment. Even if one comes from a good family and receives quality education, an unfavorable community environment may hinder the development of good morals. The fourth component is the worship environment, which could be a mosque, a prayer room, or a place for Qur'an recitation. These four environments must consistently harmonize to contribute to the well-rounded development of an individual's character.

Walidah's thoughts were aligned with modernization, as her ideas encompassed fresh perspectives that challenged established notions. Foremost among her beliefs was gender equality and independence, emphasizing that women, like men, have a stake in worship and societal progress. Walidah directly practiced this notion during her life as a wife, successfully balancing her role as an excellent partner to her husband, Dahlan. Her views resonated with those of Dahlan, who urged women not to be confined to the kitchen and encouraged their active participation in the public sphere to contribute to societal betterment, worship, and the promotion of *amr ma'ruf naby mungkar*.²²

The second aspect is relationships. Walidah had numerous associations with prominent figures such as General Sudirman, Bung Tomo, Bung Karno, and Mas Mansyur. She never regarded herself as superior to others and consistently acted as a mentor, offering valuable advice to those she encountered.²³ The third aspect is mass communication. Walidah rejected the notion that women should be subservient (like *kanca wingking*, meaning 'friends behind women positioned behind men'). She denounced forced marriages, discarded outdated ideas, faced criticism from the older generation,

²¹ Difa Annida Utami and Hendra Afianto, "Siti Walidah Dahlan Pelita Pemberdayaan Perempuan Yogyakarta 1917-1946," *Asanka: Jurnal of Social Science and Education* 3, no. 2 (November 2022), 240-260.

²² Ardiyanti Dian, "Konsep Pendidikan Perempuan Siti Walidah," *Tajdid: Jurnal Pemikiran dan Gerakan Muhammadiyah* 15, no. 1 (Juni 2017), 12-20.

²³ Ibid.

and, notably, established hostels for women. Many of these women were young and from outside the city. These hostels primarily focused on enhancing communication skills and providing specialized education for girls.²⁴ The fourth aspect is leadership. When founding the 'Aisiyiyah organization, Walidah did not immediately assume the chairperson role. Instead, she closely monitored and guided the needs of 'Aisiyiyah from the outset. It was only after four years of 'Aisiyiyah's existence, specifically in 1921-1926 and 1930, that she assumed the leadership position. She consistently prioritized the welfare of her students, encouraged their progress, and dedicated herself to managing the Maghribi School.²⁵ The fifth aspect is empowerment and integrity. Towards the end of her life, Walidah continued to advocate for the Muhammadiyah-'Aisiyiyah, stressing the importance of advancing the lives of the Indonesian people based on noble ideals of independence. Her vision extended beyond understanding the status of women, effective communication with the masses, and building relationships. Walidah contemplated how to elevate the standard of living for the Indonesian people, transforming the nation into one with a distinct identity and self-reliance, free from dependence on other countries.²⁶

Siti Walidah's Pioneering Efforts for Gender Equality in Indonesia's Modernist Islamic Women's Movement

Walidah initiated the concept of equality for women in Islamic education and *da'wah* by advocating for women's education, including recitation, in Kauman. The primary resource for this initiative was a course aimed at teaching girls from Kauman to read the Qur'an, with the initial lesson focusing on al-Mā'ūn. The curriculum encouraged students to be mindful of the prevalent poverty within the Muslim community.

In 1912, Dahlan established *Persyarikatan* Muhammadiyah, Yogyakarta's first Islamic reform organization. Muhammadiyah's inception stemmed from the recognition of the vital role of education for native people, particularly Muslims. Walidah was fortunate to have a husband who, incidentally, was the founder of Muham-

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

madiyah, and he placed significant emphasis on women's rights. This allowed women to have equal opportunities for formal education and active involvement in public spaces, including participation in recitations and various organizations. Women were seen as complete individuals in their own right, rather than solely being defined by heaven and hell in relation to their husbands.²⁷

In 1913, Dahlan encouraged his neighbors to enroll their daughters in the *Neutraal Meisjes School* in Ngupasan (now SDN I Ngupasan). At that time, in Kauman, no girls attended public schools established by the Dutch colonial government. The first three Kauman girls to receive a Western education were Siti Bariyah, Siti Wadingah, and Siti Dawimah.²⁸ Following their successful entry into the *Neutraal Meisjes School*, the next generation of girls, including Siti Zaenab, Siti Aisyiyah, Siti Dauchah, Siti Daalah, Siti Busyro, Siti Hayinah, and Siti Badilah, also began attending. These public or neutral schools, established by the Dutch colonial government, did not include religious subjects in their curriculum; as a result, graduates lacked religious knowledge. To ensure they received a comprehensive education, religious courses were offered in the afternoons or evenings, without interfering with their regular school hours.²⁹

In 1914, Dahlan and Walidah organized special religious courses for women, later known as the *Wal 'Ashri* and *Maghribi* Schools. They also managed the *Madrasah Diniyah Ibitidaiyah* (Islamic elementary school), which was established in 1911 and located in front of their house. Two of the first female students to receive direct education were Siti Munjiyah and Siti Umniyah.³⁰ In the same year, all members of the religious course, students at the *Madrasah Diniyah*, and young girls attending the *Neutraal Meisjes School* formed the *Sapa Tresna* association.³¹

²⁷ Mu'arif and Setyowati, *Srikandi-Srikandi 'Aisyiyah*, 26-28.

²⁸ Ahmad Dahlan and Siti Walidah prepared young women to become Islamic leaders. They received a well-rounded education from neutral schools, supplemented by religious teachings directly from Ahmad Dahlan and Siti Walidah. These students later assumed leadership roles within 'Aisyiyah and actively participated in the movement alongside Ahmad Dahlan and Siti Walidah, contributing to the establishment of Indonesia's first Islamic women's organization.

²⁹ Darban, *Sejarah Kauman*, 47.

³⁰ Mu'arif and Setyowati, *Srikandi-Srikandi 'Aisyiyah*, 13.

³¹ Imron Mustofa, KH. *Ahmad Dahlan si Penyantun* (Yogyakarta: DIVA Press, 2018), 177.

The association “*Sapa Tresna*” is a Javanese term, where “*Sapa*” means ‘who’ and “*Tresna*” means ‘love.’ The *Sapa Tresna* courses, established in 1914, aimed to provide students with enjoyable and diverse women’s craft classes, including batik, reading, and writing.³² Mothers and young women were also gathered for recitation sessions, initially in Kauman and later expanding to other villages like Lempuyangan, Karangajen, and Pakualaman. The recitation sessions, led by Dahlan and Walidah, took place after ‘Aṣr (late afternoon prayer), earning them the name “*Wal ‘Ashri*.”³³ These sessions were designed to benefit female batik workers in Kauman, offering religious instruction, reading, and writing classes. This approach helped them gain confidence and avoid feeling discouraged, dispelling any notions of inadequacy. The recitation sessions held after Maghrib (evening prayer), after the workers had completed their day’s work, were known as the “Maghribi School.”³⁴

Walidah recognized the need for a broader platform to educate and empower women, understanding that this required collective strength rather than individual efforts. The solution came in the form of an exceptional women’s organization called ‘Aisyiyah. ‘Aisyiyah had its roots in the *Sapa Tresna* study group. On May 19, 1917 (27 Rajab 1335 AH), the *Sapa Tresna* association transformed into ‘Aisyiyah. In addition to this transformation, Walidah, in her role as a Muhammadiyah leader, established an educational institution for children under the age of 7 and an *internaat* (a specialized women’s boarding house) in 1919. It is important to note that the initial leader of ‘Aisyiyah was not Walidah, but rather Siti Bariyah, a student of both Walidah and Dahlan. In the first year of ‘Aisyiyah’s foundation, Walidah served as a protector and offered guidance in the management of ‘Aisyiyah alongside Dahlan. Siti Bariyah’s election as ‘Aisyiyah’s inaugural chairwoman can be seen as a testament to Walidah’s success in educating her students to become

³² 15 Tahoenan Soeara ‘Aisjah No. 9-10 (Yogyakarta, September-October 1940), 39.

³³ H. MH Mawardi, “Development College Muhammadiyah,” (II) Suara Muhammadiyah no 10 Year 58/1978 is also available in Mu’arif and Setyowati, *Srikandi- Srikandi ‘Aisyiyah*, 29.

³⁴ Mu’arif and Setyowati, *Srikandi- Srikandi ‘Aisyiyah*, 30.

female leaders.³⁵ The second interpretation is that Walidah prefers to prioritize her students and play a supportive role in advancing 'Aisyiyah from behind the scenes. Throughout her journey with 'Aisyiyah, Walidah consistently offered support and served as an exemplary figure for other 'Aisyiyah members. The idea of building a women's society that played a pivotal role in the birth of 'Aisyiyah is also indebted to Walidah's Islamic philosophy. In numerous aspects, 'Aisyiyah adopted Walidah's principles for empowering women.³⁶

In the fourth year following 'Aisyiyah's establishment, Walidah assumed the position of chairwoman, serving from 1921 to 1926, and later resuming her role in 1930. Walidah consistently encouraged women to actively engage with the 'Aisyiyah organization. She emphasized that women's roles extended beyond child-rearing and household responsibilities; women needed to come together to address their spiritual needs and extend their responsibilities to society. According to Walidah, this sense of community allowed women to build bonds akin to sisterhood.³⁷ Furthermore, Walidah contributed to various initiatives, including leading efforts to combat illiteracy among the elderly through 'Aisyiyah.

Walidah and her members published the magazine *Suara 'Aisyiyah*. This magazine, seen as a counterpart to the *Suara Muhammadiyah* magazine, was first launched in 1926. Initially, *Suara 'Aisyiyah* aimed to support the literacy eradication program. However, it was also used to communicate 'Aisyiyah's work program to the public.³⁸ Walidah also placed significant emphasis on empowering orphans by providing support. This initiative was later expanded to encompass assistance to victims of natural

³⁵ Her activism is the fruit of the renewal program that sent several women to public schools and religious schools such as *Wal-'Ashri* and Maghribi activities, which succeeded in producing women leaders. It can be said of her struggle that the reform activities of Dahlan and Walidah initially carried out for women were a form of regeneration of women's leaders, which was a scarce thing to do at that time. Most female leaders at that time were not born through a deliberate regeneration process, so this regeneration program was successful.

³⁶ Suratmin, *Nyai Ahmad Dahlan, Pahlawan Nasional*, 78.

³⁷ Mu'arif and Setyowati, *Srikandi-Srikandi 'Aisyiyah*.

³⁸ Lingga Wisma Cahyaningrum and Ma'arif Jamuin, "Contribution of Siti Walidah in the Nation Character Building through the 'Aisyiyah Movement," *Iseedu: Journal of Islamic Educational Thoughts and Practices* 2, no. 1 (May 2018), 68-93.

disasters and those in need.³⁹ In all their activities, Walidah instilled moral values in 'Aisiyyah members, emphasizing that helping others is an act of devotion and a manifestation of Islamic teachings.

Walidah's activities within the 'Aisiyyah organization encompassed not only a focus on social and community empowerment but also a significant presence in the religious sector. She encouraged women to observe one of the Islamic laws by wearing a headscarf to cover their modesty. In the realm of religion, 'Aisiyyah members took the initiative to construct a dedicated prayer room for women. This prayer room, or *mushalla*, was established to support 'Aisiyyah members' activities, enabling them to perform congregational prayers and engage in Qur'anic recitation sessions with children from the Kauman village in the afternoons. 'Aisiyyah, as an organization, wholeheartedly embraced Walidah's ideas regarding the empowerment of women. The contributions of 'Aisiyyah extended to the nation through the establishment of schools, kindergartens, orphanages, and more. Walidah advocated those mothers should not only be confined to raising children and managing household duties; they should also gather to address their spiritual needs and those of women and society.⁴⁰

According to Walidah, women have an obligation to stand alongside men in defending their country. They must actively prepare and contribute in any way possible to support the front lines, whether through running public kitchens, promoting public health, tending to the sick, maintaining order, demonstrating patience, comforting the community, and other responsibilities, all done with a sense of selflessness and sincerity for the sake of God. She repeatedly emphasized this message to her students, urging them to engage in the pursuit of *amr ma'ruf nahi munkar*.⁴¹

Education through 'Aisiyyah was pursued through diverse approaches. Walidah played a pivotal role in assembling Muslim women, providing religious instruction and skills that led to the creation of an *Internaat* (boarding house) specifically tailored for Muslim women. Here, they were taught reading and writing. The

³⁹ Seniwati and Tuti Dwi Lestari, "Sikap Wanita Muslim Kauman: Kajian Peranan 'Aisiyyah dalam Kebangkitan Wanita di Yogyakarta pada Tahun 1914-1928," *Walasaji: Journal of History and Culture* 10, no. 2 (December, 2019), 219-32.

⁴⁰ Mu'arif and Setyowati, *Srikandi-Srikandi 'Aisiyyah*, 29.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

education system was crafted with a blend of traditional and modern methods. Integrating Western school models with religious instruction in classrooms proved to be more effective in the teaching and learning process. Walidah was a trailblazer in establishing a unique boarding house for girls in Indonesia, a challenge as most traditional pondoks primarily accommodated men. However, through her persistence and determination, she managed to gain the community's trust, leading parents to entrust their daughters to her guidance. The training and education provided by Walidah encompassed various aspects: nurturing her students' faith, reinforcing prayer and worship practices, fostering congregational prayers and following the sunnah, imparting public speaking skills, and occasionally providing recreational activities for children, such as games and early morning walks.⁴² Walidah regarded discipline as the foundational pillar of success, with examples including returning to the hostel promptly after school, seeking permission before leaving the premises, punctual participation in congregational prayers, early rising, diligent completion of assignments, and other aspects.⁴³ These disciplines aimed to inculcate a strong sense of responsibility in girls' lives, with the understanding that what is beneficial should become a natural part of their routine, especially for their own good.⁴⁴ Another significant element of education, according to Walidah, was character development, which she considered an essential component in the realm of nurturing affection and interpersonal skills. She extended her endeavors into the social sector by founding institutions that managed hospitals, polyclinics, and orphanages. Her impactful work in the social sector culminated in the establishment of *Pertolongan Kesengsaraan Umat* (PKU) in 1923.⁴⁵

Walidah served as the president of the *Hoofdbestuur* (center or national board) of Muhammadiyah section of 'Aisyiyah from 1921. She held the position of chairman from 1921 to 1926 when 'Aisyi-

⁴² M. Yunus Anis, *Rivayat Hidup Nyai Ahmad Dahlan Ibu Muhammadiyah dan 'Aisyiyah Pelopor Pergerakan Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Mercusuar, 1968), 14.

⁴³ Suratmin, *Nyai Ahmad Dahlan, Pahlawan Nasional*, 46.

⁴⁴ Fahmi Riady, "Pemikiran Pendidikan Nyai Ahmad Dahlan dalam Memberdayakan Perempuan," *MASILE: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Keislaman* 1, no.1 (August, 2019), 65-79.

⁴⁵ Suhartono, *Sejarah Pergerakan Nasional: Dari Budi Utomo sampai Proklamasi 1908-1945* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2001), 45.

yah was actively expanding its reach to various regions. However, starting in 1927, Walidah assumed an advisory role. The chairperson changed to Siti Badriyah until 1929, and Walidah returned to lead from 1930 for one more year. In 1930, Walidah was one of the eight 'Aisyiyah Executive Board members in Minangkabau. In 1933, Walidah stepped down as the head of 'Aisyiyah. Nevertheless, from 1934 to 1938, she continued to attend the 'Aisyiyah Congress. Walidah passed away on May 31, 1946. The 'Aisyiyah Association was a pioneer in organizing women's congresses. Since the 11th Congress of Muhammadiyah in Yogyakarta in 1922, she had advocated and recommended that all Muhammadiyah branches and groups hold an 'Aisyiyah event alongside their own congresses.

The concept of 'Aisyiyah, aimed at advancing and elevating women's status, led to the formation of a united movement, known as *Perserikatan Perkumpulan Isteri Indonesia* (PPII), following the first congress held on December 22, 1928. Within the PPPI federation body, the purpose was to serve as a liaison between Indonesian women's associations, facilitating joint discussions on women's responsibilities, needs, and progress. 'Aisyiyah collaborated with other women's organizations such as Wanito Utomo, Women Taman Siswa, Putri Indonesia, and the women's section of *Jong Islaminten Bond* (Islamic Youth Association) to further women's empowerment. Siti Munjiyah, 'Aisyiyah's representative at the first PPPI congress, became the deputy chairman of PPPI.

Walidah's leadership played a crucial role in 'Aisyiyah's congresses and notably the 15th Muhammadiyah congress in Surabaya in 1926, which she chaired. This marked a significant milestone in women's emancipation as it was the first time that a Muhammadiyah Congress was presided over by a woman. This session for 'Aisyiyah was held in the grand Kranggan Building, where dozens of men sat beside the pulpit. This event further elevated Walidah's prominence in the eyes of the public.

She was the first woman to lead a Muhammadiyah congress and the first woman to preside over an Islamic organization's congress. Yunus Anis, a student of Dahlan, pointed out that Walidah chaired every 'Aisyiyah congress, including the 23rd congress in 1934 in Yogyakarta, the 24th congress in 1935 in Banjarmasin, the 27th in 1938 in Malang, the 28th in 1939 in Medan, and the 29th in

1940 in Yogyakarta. This movement exemplified that women can hold leadership positions equal to men.

Siti Walidah, the Pioneer of Gender Equality in the Modernist Islamic Women's Movement in Indonesia?

Since the second decade of the 20th century, women's organizations have emerged, such as the Amai Setia Craft Association (1911), Poetry Mardika (1912), Pawiyatan Wanito (1915), Wanito Hadi (1915), and Wanito Susilo (1918). Most of the women's organizations before 1920, and those that continued after, focused on improving women's positions in married families and enhancing their skills as mothers and household managers. 'Aisyiyah, while adhering to the framework of Islamic teachings, also stood out by emphasizing the importance of women and religion.⁴⁶

Before the West embraced equal rights for women, Walidah and Dahlan were pioneering gender equality in 1913 when they encouraged young women in Kauman to pursue education and equal opportunities alongside men. At that time, the emancipation movement in Europe was only beginning during World War I. The foundation of Walidah's struggle for gender equality in Islam is rooted in a modern approach to the religion, setting her apart from other figures in the gender equality movement. She passionately conveyed her message to female students: "*Wanita, jangan memiliki jiwa kerdil, tetapi berjiwa srikandi!*"⁴⁷ (Women, do not have feeble spirits but possess the spirit of a warrior!).

While Walidah was not the only woman fighting for gender equality in Indonesia, she pioneered the struggle for Muslim women's gender equality in Indonesia through her modernist beliefs and actions, as well as the various institutions and organizations she established. What sets her struggle apart is the utilization of the Islamic women's movement as a vehicle for fighting for gender equality. She incorporated the latest sciences, including Western knowledge and innovative interpretations of the Qur'an, to create a massive and rapidly growing movement.

⁴⁶ Mu'arif and Setyowati, *Srikandi-Srikandi 'Aisyiyah*, 30.

⁴⁷ Suratmin, *Nyai Ahmad Dahlan, Pahlawan Nasional*, 22.

‘Aisyiyah stands as one of the oldest and largest Muslim women’s organizations.⁴⁸ While communities focused on what is now commonly referred to as feminist issues emerged throughout the Muslim world in the early 20th century, ‘Aisyiyah became the first mass movement of its kind, effectively becoming the pioneering Islamic women’s organization in Indonesia.⁴⁹

Conclusion

In the historical context of Kauman, where women were considered inferior to men, Siti Walidah emerged as a catalyst for change. She championed a more progressive interpretation of Islam, advocating for gender equality by facilitating women’s access to education and societal roles. Walidah, a trailblazer within the ‘Aisyiyah Movement since 1917, spearheaded the struggle for modernist Muslim women’s rights, persistently advocating for their education and leadership roles. Recognizing the importance of a structured platform, she founded the ‘Aisyiyah organization, aligning with the philosophies of Dahlan and Walidah, where women held elevated positions. ‘Aisyiyah, dedicated to gender equality, symbolizes Walidah’s vision for empowering Indonesian women, embodying her commitment to modernizing Islamic women in the country. Thus, Walidah rightfully stands as a pioneer of gender equality within the Modernist Islamic Women’s Movement in Indonesia.

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⁴⁸ This research is based on studies conducted in Yogyakarta and various locations in Indonesia from 1978 to 2020, funded by grants from the United States Institute for International Education, the Social Science Research Council, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict at Arizona State University.

⁴⁹ Ahmad Adaby Darban, *Aisyiyah dan Sejarah Pergerakan Perempuan Indonesia: Sebuah Tinjauan Awal* (Yogyakarta: UGM History Department and Eja Publisher, 2010).

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