

RECLAIMING THE RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION: AISYIYAH PROGRESSIVE WOMANHOOD

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Abstract: The notion of womanhood has become a serious concern of most cultures, religions and states. As such can be seen in written documents they have produced to educate and discipline their female subjects. However, most of the documents are produced by male authority within their respective fields; and many propagated for submissive womanhood. Why these male authors do so? Why they tend to discipline women? Where are the voices of women? These are the questions that attracted me to do research. To start with, I do research on Aisyiyah's ideas on womanhood, because it is an Islamic organization for women that has survived more than a century. This is qualitative research with mixed methods in the data collection. The primary data comes from published documents and interviews. The research finds that these Aisyiyah women are strategic in developing their idea of womanhood; they take up the opportunity from learning to reclaim the right to self-identification as progressive woman, not submissive and inactive women as proposed in other books. Aisyiyah build its argumentation based on theological, scientific as well as cultural considerations. They also collaborate with other partners of similar minds to sustain their vision on womanhood.

Keywords: Aisyiyah; Islamic feminism; progressive womanhood.

Introduction

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

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

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

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

The lyrics quoted above is the organizational anthem of Aisyiyah, one of the leading Muslim women organizations that claims itself to become a progressive Islamic women group, known in Indonesian as *perempuan Islam berkembang*. What does progressivity of Islam mean for these women? How the concept is developed, and what argumentations are employed, theologically and scientifically? These are two fundamental questions that stimulate me to do the current research. Scholars have argued the progressive Muslim movement around the world is characterized by attempts to show and make Islam relevant to societies that look for foundational values for justice, equity, with a looking forward mindfulness.¹

The expressions of such progressive elements in various local Muslim movements, however, are differed; in a country where the tyrannical, patriarchal structure is in an ultimate power, progressive Muslim movements might have concentrated in criticizing the gender biased policy that discriminate women, and promoted new

¹ Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Transforming Feminism: Islam, women and gender justice," in Omid Safi (ed.), *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (Oxford: One World Publication, 2017), 147-162; Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, "Sexuality, Diversity and Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslims," in Omid Safi (ed.), *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (Oxford: One World Publication, 2017); Mark Woodward, "Making Modern Muslim Women: The Aisyiyah-Muhammadiyah Madrasah Perempuan Berkemajuan Program," *Journal of Aisyiyah Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2021), 1-34; Caroline Moreau et al., "Reconceptualizing Women's and Girls' Empowerment: A Cross-Cultural Index for Measuring Progress Toward Improved Sexual and Reproductive Health," *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, Vol. 46 (Guttmacher Institute, 2020), 187-198.

ones that are more gender inclusive.² Studies on progressive Islam have been heavily focus on male-led initiatives and organizations, this includes their fatwas or ideas of good womanhood, such ones done by Kecia Ali, Mitsuo Nakamura, Hasnan Bachtiar and Herman L. Beck.³ These studies do not go further to investigate the reactions of the women associated with the organization towards their respective ideas. The present paper is showcasing a Muslim women organization founded in 1917 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, called Aisyiyah, which claims to be a progressive women organization (*berkemajuan*) which also addresses gender relations in private and public spheres. What does progressivity mean in particular historical phases of the organization, and why it takes its particular forms?

Gender relations in society have been in no way statics, on the contrary, human relationships on the basis of gender have been dynamics and in constant changes due various reasons. Gender relations among Indonesians have been shaped by many factors and agencies, from religious precepts to ancestral traditions, from politics to education to international influences. Religion is undoubtedly one amongst the most significant factors in shaping

² Mutiah Amini, "Gender Bias in Historiography of Indonesia and the Writing of Women's History," *Jurnal Perempuan*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2018), 153; Hester Clarke, "Shaping Eyebrows and Moral Selves: Considering Islamic Discourse, Gender, and Ethnicity within the Muslim Pakistani Community of Sheffield (UK)," *Sociologus*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Duncker & Humblot GmbH, 2016), 53-72; Hilde Coffé and Selin Dilli, "The Gender Gap in Political Participation in Muslim-majority Countries," *International Political Science Review/Revue Internationale de Science Politique*, Vol. 36, No. 5 (Sage Publications, Ltd., 2015), 526-544.

³ Kecia Ali, "Progressive Muslims and Islamic Jurisprudence: The Necessity for Critical Engagement with Marriage and Divorce Law," in Omid Safi (ed.), *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (Oxford: One World Publication, 2017), 163-189; Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, "Are We up to the Challenge? The Need for a Radical Re-Ordering of the Islamic Discourse on Women," in Omid Safi (ed.), *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (Oxford: One World Publication, 2017); Mitsuo Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises over the Banyan Tree: A Study of the Muhammadiyah Movement in a Central Javanese Town, c.1910s-2010* (Second Enlarged Edition) (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012); Hasnan Bachtiar, "Dār Al-'Ahd Wa al-Shahādah: Muhammadiyah's Position and Thoughts on Negara Pancasila," *Studia Islamika*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (December 23, 2020), 485-513; Herman L. Beck, *Fenomenologi Islam Modernis: Kisah Perjumpaan Muhammadiyah dan Kebhinekaan Perilaku Beragama* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2019).

patterns of gender relations in Indonesia.⁴ Although Indonesia is neither a theocratic state nor fully secular state; it respects religion, and its reliance toward religious norms is strongly apparent. We can see them easily in the state legal documents, such as the state philosophy—Pancasila, of which the first precept is *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* (Unity in Deity), the State Constitution, and National Laws.

In Indonesia, where the greater percentage of its population is Muslim, the expression of progressivity among Muslims have been dynamic and pluralistic too. Although the core value of justice, and plurality are at the backbone, becoming progressive Muslims can take different forms and are not static; on the contrary there are always changes and renewals adapting to the challenges of time and space. It is also pluralistic in the sense that there are always varieties of expressions, of priority of lines of works to be done and many more, by individual or collective Muslim progressive movements.

Progressive Muslim movement sees that every tradition or social practice is always a tradition in the making, or a tradition in becoming; accordingly, they believe there are always rooms for improvements, for re-interpretation of religious texts, for recreating new social practices that ensure justice and respect humanity more fully.⁵ The emergence of Indonesian Muhammadiyah is partly a result of such a rationale. The founder, Kiai Haji Ahmad Dahlan, is reported to be very apprehensive with the performativity of Muslims in Java, especially around the municipality of Yogyakarta. In his view, many of Javanese Muslims of his time had practiced social life that is far from the spirit of Islam as announced in the Qur'ān. They lived in a tradition where learning and critical thinking was not encouraged. Religiosity as understood by most Muslims was to only concern individual life

⁴ Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin, *Reszim Gender Muhammadiyah: Kontestasi Gender, Identitas, dan Eksistensi* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2015); Saskia E. Wieringa, "Gender Harmony and the Happy Family: Islam, Gender and Sexuality in Post-Reformasi Indonesia," *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015), 27-44; Valentine M. Moghadam, *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective* (Milton: Routledge, 2019), available at <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=5836308>; accessed on November 4, 2020.

⁵ Ali, "Progressive Muslims," 163-189.

and formality in the public. The vitality of Islamic ethics in the spiritual, psychological and social life of Muslims was dimmed and weak. Kiai Dahlan was one of the few Javanese Muslims who had different views over the case, and he was ready to venture inducing progressivity in understanding Islamic teaching and living them accordingly.⁶

Having studied Islamic teachings to different kiais in Java for years, Kiai Dahlan went to perform the hajj in Mecca twice. One of the main cores of his revolutionary and remarkable programs is in the area of education. This entails renewals in the methods of learning, in the subject materials learned by students, as well as the subjects who could participate in the learning process. The schools founded by Kiai Dahlan are open to all people, including girls and women, from all social backgrounds who had been denied access to learning by the Dutch Colonial administrators and upper local rulings. Improved and widespread education stimulated changes in social practices of Muslim communities.⁷ His approach is certainly different from his other colleagues from Boedi Oetomo who advanced political aspiration by advancing Javanese renaissance, or Kiai Haji Samanhudi who began from economic empowerment for local traders.

Kiai Dahlan's vision of the organization was "*memadjoekan hal igama Islam*" or to make religious issues be taken care with progressive spirit of Islam. He was convinced that if Muslims live in accordance to Islamic *adab* they would have better life and opportunity to improve their spiritual, physical and psychological wellbeing and conditions. Kiai Dahlan began embarking on propagating renewals over many Islamic social practices, such as founding Islamic schools in which pupils learn not only Qur'anic scripts, but also on languages, mathematics, geography, history and

⁶ Abdul Munir Mulkhan and Hery Sucipto, *Islam Kultural Kiai Dahlan: Mengembangkan Dakwah dan Muhammadiyah Secara Cerdas dan Maju Bersama Kiai Ahmad Dahlan* (Jakarta: Grafindo Khazanah Ilmu, 2012); Robert W. Hefner et al., *Api Pembaharuan Kiai Ahmad Dahlan* (Yogyakarta: Multi Pressindo, 2008).

⁷ Siti Syamsiyatun, "A Daughter in the Indonesian Muhammadiyah: Nasyiatul Aisyiyah Negotiates a New Status and Images," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2007), 69-94; Ro'fah, *A Study of Aisyiyah: An Indonesian Women's Organization (1917-1998)* (Montreal, Canada: McGill University, 2003).

other ‘non-religious’ subject matters.⁸ Moreover, he also created space for girls and women to study, in the form of both formal schools and community learning circles, popularly known as *pengajian*. For his introduction of new social practices, he was against the long tradition, so he had to be patient with sacrifices, such as being called ‘fake kiai/kiai *palsu*,’ or ‘unfaithful Kiai/Kiai *kafir*.’⁹

The present research considers it important to investigate how Kiai Dahlan’s progressive ideas in propagating justice for women have been welcomed by Muslim women who then organized themselves through Aisiyiyah; how the women themselves cultivate further reclaiming their rights to advance women’s issues further. Why do I select Aisiyiyah as the institutional site of research? There are a number of arguments for this; first, Aisiyiyah is the oldest Muslim women organization in the country that still thrives. Second, it is one of the initiators, committee members as well as speakers in the first Indonesian Women’s Congress in 1928. Its long live and various services to Indonesian family and women through its thousands of kindergartens, schools, health clinics, orphanages, elderly homes, legal aids, economic and entrepreneurship classes and universities, from the Dutch Colonial era to the present days show that Aisiyiyah is living in the hearts of the community, and it still has influences to them. Thus, its idea of progressive womanhood in a sense has determined the kind of womanhood practices of Indonesia Muslim women in the past, present and years to come.

The present article argues that Aisiyiyah has contributed in providing alternative imaginaries of womanhood for Indonesian Muslims, which is termed as progressive womanhood. One of the key virtues characterizes progressivity in reliance to the scientific developments and socio-cultural adaptations in interpreting religious texts. By so doing Muslim woman could maintain their loyalties to Islamic ethics and teachings while at the same time making their social practices and works relevant to the current

⁸ Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises*; Qomari Anwar, *The Future of Muhammadiyah Education: A Curriculum Development Center for Better Quality* (Jakarta: Uhamka Press, 2005).

⁹ Abdul Munir Mulkhan, *Kisah dan Pesan Kiai Ahmad Dahlan* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka SP, 2005).

condition. As such enables Aisiyiah not only to still exist but thrive in its second centennial of history.

The research uses historical as well as feminist approach to frame the analysis of the research problem above. Historical approach encompasses data analysis about events, documents of the past. How they happened and were produced, in what contexts, for what purposes and by who. These are some elements must exist in an historical approach.¹⁰ In this present research I investigate relevant documents that address the concepts of progressive Islam and womanhood in Aisiyiah, and when these documents were produced. Such is to look at how the idea of progressivity and womanhood have changed over time. As for the feminist approach I adopt Brooke A. Ackerly's theory of feminist research to analyze Aisiyiah's constructions of progressive womanhood.¹¹

While the primary data for this research is taken mostly from the relevant documents, I also interview several informants from Muhammadiyah, Aisiyiah and other organizations to clarify, confirms and questions some information surrounding the statements documented in the written publications. Hence, it is a qualitative one in nature.

Muhammadiyah Introducing New Womanhood

Womanhood has become a central idea inhabited in the minds of people of different race, culture, nationality, and religion, including Islam. This can be seen how cultural tales, religious scriptures, constitutions and bylaws dedicate substantial amounts chapters or verses to deal with issues relevant womanhood, at least what should woman do and don't in their different status and

¹⁰ Sabiha Hussain, "A Socio-historical and Political Discourse on the Rights of Muslim Women: Concerns for Women's Rights or Community Identity (Special reference to 1937 and 1939 Acts)," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2015).

¹¹ Brooke A. Ackerly and Jacqui True, *Doing Feminist Research in Political and Social Science* (Red Globe Press, 2020); Alexandra CH Nowakowski, "Feminism as an Evolving Culture of Inclusion and Affirmation: A Review of Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice," *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 24, No. 10 (2019).

roles.¹² In Indonesia, where religion is still considered by people as very important, religion has its strong influence to shape visions and imaginaries of womanhood; what characters constitute good womanhood, and what oddities are considered bad for women. Apart from religion, local culture and the State are other major parties that actively participate in shaping the discourse of womanhood in the country.¹³

During the late nineteen and early twentieth centuries, when the archipelago was under the colonial Dutch rule, there emerged criticisms over the general conditions of the ordinary indigenous population, especially women, most of whom were denied to access to basic living needs, such as formal education, health services and proper employment.¹⁴ Colonial schools were only accessible for certain segments of the people, especially the Dutch families, high rank employees of the colonial enterprises, the royal families and limited numbers of non indigenous merchants. A number of Muslim learned families better known as *kiais* (learned men of Islamic knowledge) provided education for ordinary Muslim boys and men in the form of *pesantren* (boarding school for learning Islamic subject materials); but there was almost nothing for girls and women.¹⁵ Having said this does not mean that women

¹² Cassandra Chaney, "The Character of Womanhood: How African American Women's Perceptions of Womanhood Influence Marriage and Motherhood," *Ethnicities*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2011), 512-35; Raoul Mortley, *Womanhood: The Feminine in Ancient Hellenism, Gnosticism, Christianity, and Islam* (Sydney: Delacroix, 1984).

¹³ Saskia E. Wieringa, *The Birth of the New Order State in Indonesia: Sexual Politics and Nationalism* (The Hague: ISS, 2001); Dzuhayatin, *Rezim Gender Muhammadiyah*; Siti Syamsiyatun, *Pergolakan Putri Islam: Perkembangan Wacana Jender dalam Nasyiatul Aisyiyah 1965-2005* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2016).

¹⁴ Susan Blackburn, *Kongres Perempuan Pertama, Tinjauan Ulang* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia dan KITLV-Jakarta, 2007); Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial State: Essays on Gender and Modernity in the Netherlands Indies 1900-1942* (The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2000), 151-86, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n2p0.8>; accessed on October 11, 2020; Douglas Kammen, *Three Centuries of Conflict in East Timor* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 96-118, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt166grhp.11>; accessed on October 29, 2020.

¹⁵ Eka Srimulyani, *Women from Traditional Islamic Educational Institutions in Indonesia* (The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 37-62, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n2fm.7>; accessed on October 11, 2020; M.C.

had no power whatsoever for their lives, they instead were very active in market, trades and local farming.¹⁶

The era also witnessed the wind of modernity and progressivity that longed for justice and humanity. Social and political movements demand justice treatment to all society. In addition, new wave of progressive religiosity that promotes forward looking interpretation of the Qur'ān also emerged. One of the propagators of such progressive Islam is Kiai Haji Ahmad Dahlan. He believed that Islamic teachings are adaptive to new challenges, and therefore it is possible to reinvent new traditions that are relevance for Muslims in twentieth century archipelago.¹⁷

In order to implement his progressive understanding over some Qur'ānic interpretations and Islamic teachings in general, Kiai Dahlan founded an organization named Muhammadiyah on November 8, 1912. The establishment of the organization was also by recommendation of his colleagues who previously founded a Java-centric organization, called Boedi Oetomo that marked the birth of nationalism in the archipelago. Deeply concerned over the generally unfavorable life conditions of Muslims in the archipelago, and their little attention and practices of Qur'ānic spirit and values, Kiai Dahlan took priority steps by creating learning centers for ordinary Muslims, and opening formal schools for boys and girls.¹⁸

It was not an easy work for Kiai Dahlan to introduce new practices. Despite many oppositions from his fellow Muslims around Java that he encountered, nevertheless he also gained support from the Sultan Hamengkubuwono VIII, close friends and families. Kiai Dahlan did what he believed and preached, so he began giving formal education to his daughters and the daughters of his family and friends in the Kauman quarter to begin with.

Ricklefs, *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), 21-58, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1qv3fh.10>; accessed on October 11, 2020.

¹⁶ Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial State*; Pieterella Van Doorn-Harder, "Controlling the Body: Muslim Feminists Debating Women's Rights in Indonesia," *Religion Compass*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (2008), 1021-1043.

¹⁷ Bachtiar, "Dār al-'Ahd wa al-Shahādah"; Beck, *Fenomenologi Islam Modernis*; Syamsul Anwar, "Fatwā, Purification and Dynamization: A Study of Tarjih in Muhammadiyah," *Islamic Law and Society*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2005), 27-44.

¹⁸ Mulkhan and Sucipto, *Islam Kultural*; Hefner, Mulyadi, and Mulkhan, *Api Pembaharuan*; Woodward, "Making Modern Muslim Women."

Only after two years from the establishment of Muhammadiyah, there are more and more girls and young women who registered to Muhammadiyah schools, or joined the Muhammadiyah learning centers. Because it was uncommon for Muslim girls to go to formal schools, they were mocked by their neighbors, some even received label as ‘infidel’ or ‘black *Londo*/Dutch’ for so doing.¹⁹ To support and encourage these young girls in their new endeavor of having formal study, a Muhammadiyah teacher with the recommendation from Kiai Dahlan formed an association for building solidarity in 1914 by the name of Sapa Tresna ([those] Who Loves [learning]). Sapa Tresna can be said as the embryo of Aisyiyah, the organization that I am focusing for this current research.²⁰

Why Kiai Ahmad Dahlan, through Muhammadiyah, prioritized education for girls and women in the first place, and encouraged them to organize? Apart from the influence of the spirit of the age, Kiai Dahlan was moved by strong assertions of Qur’ānic verses that treasure wisdom, sciences and knowledge in high respect; and oblige Muslims to seek them. Kiai Dahlan and his colleague decided in the first place that the objective of the founding of Muhammadiyah was to spread Islamic teachings in the land of Java, to gladden or delight of performing religion as well as to progress religious issues. Hence the term of Islam *berkemajuan* (progressive Islam) was actually taken from the Muhammadiyah root.²¹ It is always characterized with productive understanding of Islam to justice with empirical implementations, adopting reasons and the development of sciences to enhance people understanding towards Qur’ān, joy in worshipping God, and respecting women.

The foundation of schools and organization for girls and young women in 1914 showed clearly how progressivity was implemented at that time, that is, to create justice in education and gender relations. Muhammadiyah creates mechanism and facilities

¹⁹ Interview with Mrs. DLCH, on August 17, 2004; and with Mrs. HDR on January 10, 2022.

²⁰ Syamsiyatun, “A Daughter in the Indonesian Muhammadiyah”; Ro’fah, “A study of Aisyiyah.”

²¹ Woodward, “Making Modern Muslim Women”; Abdul Munir Mulkhan, *Kiai Ahmad Dahlan: Jejak Pembaruan Sosial dan Kemanusiaan, Kado Satu Abad Muhammadiyah* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2010); Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises over the Banyan Tree*.

by which the rights of women to education, to make association, to pursue their dreams are granted. It is within such progressive spirit and actions that women of Aisyiyah were educated. In effect the spirit of progressivity has been internalized by these women from time to time. A century later, Aisyiyah find it necessary that the idea of gladness and progressivity in upholding religion must be refreshed, and promoted to members and other concerned parties through various media. Such idea and social practices indeed reflect some of the core vision in feminism, that is demanding justice for both men and women in public and private life if we are using Ackerly's feminist theory mentioned above.²² Without explicitly using the term 'feminism' in their religious-social movement, Muhammadiyah and Aisyiyah nurture gender justice and equality, at least in education and health during its early historical period. Such thoughts and actions can be classified as having some progressive characteristics.²³

Aisyiyah Continuing *Ijtihād*: Reclaiming Self-Determination

When Aisyiyah celebrated its centennial anniversary during its 37th *Muktamar* (national congress) in 2015 in Makassar, its chairwoman, Siti Noordjannah Djohantini, devoted a song titled *Seabad Aisyiyah* which reflects and strengthens the foundational characters of the movement of progressive Muslim women. The music was composed by Dwiki Dharmawan, and it can be listened in youtube channel.²⁴

Aisyiyah can be appreciated for its ability to survive and thrive in the past one hundred years serving Indonesian women without interruption, an achievement not many organizations can reach. Official birthdate of Aisyiyah is 27 Rajab 1335 Hijriyah or in 19 May 1917, when it was inaugurated during a big festival to celebrate the historical divine event of the *isrā'* and *mi'rāj* of Prophet Muhammad to replace the previous Java-centric name of Sapa Tresna.²⁵ The first chairwoman of Aisyiyah was on the hand

²² Ackerly and True, *Doing Feminist Research*.

²³ Shaikh, "Transforming Feminism."

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGB9EVXRjZ4>

²⁵ Siti Syamsiyatun, "Conflicts and Islah Strategy of Muslim Women Organization: Case Study of Aisyiyah in Intra and Inter-Organizational Divergence," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (2020), 355-90; Siti Syamsiyatun, "Muslim Women's Politics in Advancing Their Gender

of Siti Bariyah, not on that of Siti Walidah.²⁶ There are arguments why Aisyiyah leadership was not given to an elder member, i.e. Siti Walidah; it was said that Siti Walidah would encourage younger women to take on the leadership because she, as the wife of Muhammadiyah founder was very busy with other tasks, in addition to her lack of ability to speak and write Malay scripts. It was only in the 1923, after the death of her husband, Kiai Ahmad Dahlan, that she finally assumed the chair of the movement. That was also after years of her intensive learning of writing and reading Malay language and scripts.

Aisyiyah's membership profiles have changed and evolved over time; from young women aged teens in its early development to consist of mostly adult and married women in contemporary situation. Apart from its close affiliation to Muhammadiyah, through which Aisyiyah has undoubtedly contributed greatly in the survival and growth of Muhammadiyah, Aisyiyah as an autonomous organization has shown its own capacity not only to survive, but also to thrive in different political regimes or sovereigns ever govern Indonesia, from the Dutch colonial rule, Guided Democracy during President Soekarno, New Order Regime under President Soeharto, to current Reformasi era under different presidency. Aisyiyah's ability and capacity to adapt and navigate its way to promote its faith-based feminism is quite exceptional because there are not so many women's organizations have succeeded in so doing. James Peacock once commented in 1970s when he was doing research about Muhammadiyah that Aisyiyah was probably the largest, most active Muslim women organization in Indonesia,²⁷ and even in the world. Fifty years after his remark, Aisyiyah continues to grow and becomes the leading Muslim women organization in Indonesia, and most likely in the world.²⁸

During its early historical phase, Aisyiyah's growth followed the patterns of Muhammadiyah. The enactment of Muham-

Interests: A Case-Study of Nasyiatul Aisyiyah in Indonesia New Order Era," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2007), 57-89.

²⁶ "Sejarah Aisyiyah," available at <http://www.aisyiyah.or.id/en/page/sejarah.html>; accessed on September 11, 2020.

²⁷ James L. Peacock, *Purifying the Faith. The Muhammadiyah Movement in Indonesian Islam* (California: The Benjamin/Cummings Publishing Company, 1978).

²⁸ Woodward, "Making Modern Muslim Women."

madiyah branches in certain areas will be automatically followed by the foundation of Aisiyiah branches. The familial, cultural and organizational connection between the two remains strong until today. Thus, began in and from Kauman quarter Aisiyiah women developed it to reach all corners of the country; now Aisiyiah has 33 provincial leaderships and even few special branches aboard.

Entering its second century of services, Aisiyiah claims to have built thousands of facilities and enterprises to enhance the quality life of women, children and family in general in various aspects, from education, health, to economic empowerment. Just to give a glance picture of how far Aisiyiah has evolved as a women movement from the time it was started by nine young high school women in Yogyakarta in 1917, the followings are some notable enterprises until very recently. For instances in the area of education, until 2006 Aisiyiah alone—not to merge it with those bearing the name of Muhammadiyah, has built 1385 play groups, 1607 village-based, informal early childhood education centers, 8816 formal early childhood education facilities, 5717 Aisiyiah Kinder Garten or Children's Garden, 72 child care centers, 1579 gardens for learning to read the Qur'āni, 18 formal primary schools for learning general subject materials, 5 formal primary schools for learning Islamic subject material, 4 formal secondary schools for general subject materials, 8 formal secondary schools for Islamic subject materials, 5 vocational schools, 3 formal high school for general subjects, 5 formal high schools for Islamic subject materials, 229 informal learning classes for Islamic subjects, 3 Aisiyiah boarding schools, 18 special schools for children/pupils with special needs/diffable, 3 colleges and university, 8 colleges for health sciences, as well 3904 gardens or centers for eliminating illiteracy and improving the quality of literacy for adult women.²⁹

Apart from education, other focus areas prioritized by Aisiyiah to develop from time to time and in different places are health and economic improvement. Aisiyiah claims to have provided health services for women, children and general communities through its 7 specialized hospitals for mothers and children, 27 village-based general health care centers, 44 village-based health care centers for

²⁹ "Pimpinan dan Amal Usaha Seluruh Indonesia," available at <http://www.aisiyah.or.id/id/page/amal-usaha.html>; accessed on September 11, 2020.

mothers and children, 52 integrated care centers for elders, 185 centers for children welfare—mostly for orphan children and those in poverty, and 17 pharmacies and registered drug stores. To improve the quality of life and enhance the business skills of Indonesian women, Aisiyiah has built 568 cooperative enterprises, as well as 1426 family/home industry for its members through BUEKA/Bina Usaha Ekonomi Keluarga (family-based economic enterprises training or seeding).³⁰

The anthem of Aisiyiah quoted in the beginning, as well the 47th Muktamar theme song above show the movement's core identity and loyalty as a women's movement in Indonesia for the cause of Islam, woman and Indonesian nation in particular, and humanity in general. For the 48th Muktamar in 2022 in Solo, Aisiyiah and Muhammadiyah already create a theme song together, that also spread the core values and identity as progressive Muslim men and women. The lyrics is written by Kiai Haedar Nashir, the current Chairman of Muhammadiyah, while the music is done by Erros Chandra. The song and lyrics can be found in youtube.³¹

The songs reflect the kind of progressive womanhood envisioned by Aisiyiah. Indeed, Aisiyiah uses music and songs frequently to introduce and promote its ideological values concerning women. Research on the function of music in people's everyday life by David J. Hargreaves & Adrian C. North shows that music encompasses social functions to the life of people. These are manifested clearly in three primary ways, to be precise in the management of self-identity, interpersonal relationships, and mood.³² Based on this theory, Aisiyiah's strategy of using song and music to promote its vision on progressive Muslim womanhood can be cherished.

Why such a Progressive Muslim Womanhood?

This part addresses the argumentations of Aisiyiah in constructing such particular progressive womanhood. It also

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBmWjFXpnQg>

³² David Hargreaves and A. North, "The Functions of Music in Everyday Life: Redefining the Social in Music Psychology," *Psychology of Music*, Vol. 27 (1999), 71-83.

analyzes how the implementation of specific moral values can be different from time to time, such as in the clothe modesty, education, and forms of social services. I begin by discussing theological and historical argumentation. The adoption of the new name Aisyyah in 1917 to replace Sapa Tresna was itself showed the change in young women's social imaginaries of womanhood. From only to denote progressivity with women's love of seeking knowledge as stipulated in its old name of the association Sapa Tresna, young Muslim women extend their expectation to having leadership, knowledge development, economic empowerment of independent, social engagement, yet to also having *sakinah* (peaceful, prosperous, happy) family.

These Aisyyah women looked at historical and theological roots for their conceptualizing their new social imaginary of progressive womanhood, and found a suitable example in the personality of one of the Prophet Muḥammad's wives, named 'Ā'ishah. After lengthy consideration, these young women changed their organization's name into Aisyyah—which literally means followers of 'Ā'ishah, adopters of 'Ā'ishah's traits. 'Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife, is widely narrated by many respected Muslim scholars to be a loving lady, smart, knowledgeable, economically independent, and socially engaged.³³ By adopting the new name, it is clearly expected that Aisyyah women would follow the footstep and life of Lady 'Ā'ishah. Such imaginaries have been sustained from time to time; loyalties of Aisyyah towards womanhood, to Islam and the social life of the community remained unchanged; although the expression of such loyalty has changed over time.

During its 47th Mukhtar (National Congress) held in 2015 in Makassar, South Sulawesi, Aisyyah strengthened its loyalties for the cause of Islam, community and women. Aisyyah put certain effort to revitalize and reworked its identity as *Perempuan Islam Berkemajuan* (progressive Muslim women); what does it mean to be progressive Muslim women in today's world, what are some of the most significant indicators for being progressive Muslim women, how shall Aisyyah implement its educational projects that enhance the vision of progressive Muslim women to its members, and to

³³ Nabia Abbott, *Aishah: the beloved of Mohammed* (North Stratford, NH: Ayer, 2000); Syamsiyatun, "Conflicts and Islah Strategy."

reach those living at the villages? These are among the questions Aisiyiyah has to address.

While in its early history Aisiyiyah mostly concentrated in providing primary and secondary education to girls, as well as health care for children and mothers; nowadays it also develops higher education/universities, as well as general hospitals in addition to those of children and mothers' ones. The 47th Mukhtamar 2015 approved the vision of Aisiyiyah to work for Islam, to create best possible Islamic community who have strong faith, enjoin good deeds and restrain bad deeds. Aisiyiyah considers that the vision shall be achieved by adopting the following programmatic focuses:³⁴

1. To improve the honor and dignity (*harkat dan martabat*) of women in accordance to teachings of Islam.
2. To motivate and guide women to increase their awareness toward Islamic faith, and importance of women learning and organizing.
3. To educate Muslim youth/young generation so that they can benefit and assume responsibility for the advancement of the message of Islam, and for the welfare of the nation and country.
4. To strengthen faith, to love God worshiping, and to rectify the noble character.
5. To improve the quality of the work of *da'wah*, by enjoining charity, giving, endowment (*zakāh, infāq, s}adāqah, waqf*) for building, maintaining houses of worships, and learning and other facilities for betterment of community.
6. To advance and improve the quality of education, teaching-learning, refine the culture and civilization as well as widen the knowledge, and the spirit of inquiry (research) in accordance to the teachings of Islam.
7. To educate young women, future generations of Aisiyiyah so that they can sustain, improve and perfect the works of the movement.
8. To aim for improving the economic and social life and livelihood of the community to accord the teachings of Islam.

³⁴ Pimpinan Pusat Aisiyiyah, *Tanfidz Keputusan Mukhtamar ke-47; Satu Abad Aisyiyah* (Yogyakarta: Pimpinan Pusat Aisiyiyah, 2015).

9. To build, maintain and prosper houses of worships, and other religious endowed facilities and properties for improving community health and welfare, as well as environment.
10. To improve legal awareness and law enforcement, to create justice and adhere truth, as well as to cultivate the spirit of national unity.
11. To foster and improve the communication and sisterhood with organizations in Indonesia and abroad in order to cooperate in variety of activity for common good.
12. To strengthen the national solidarity and unity to ensure national development and prosperity.
13. To utilize other means that in accord to the purposes of organization.³⁵

To achieve its objectives mentioned above, and to sustain and thrive as a movement with large membership, Aisiyiah cannot work alone; instead, as it is mandated in the missions, Aisiyiah has to build partnerships and networking with various agencies for different purposes and areas of works. Aisiyiah, since its early development has chosen cooperative strategy and evolutionary transformation rather than confrontation and revolutionary social changes. There are certainly advantages and disadvantages for adopting such approaches to maintain the movement, in different political regimes. For instance, during the Dutch colonial rule, Aisiyiah—along with Muhammadiyah—took cooperative stand to strategize the sustainable of their early endeavor to build new schools, health centers, orphanages and other economic initiatives for indigenous people and Muslims who were denied access to those belong to the Dutch.

With regards to its strategies of cooperation, during the Dutch colonial rule Aisiyiah worked together with other existing women's organization of the time, such as Wanito Oetomo, Puteri Indonesia, Puteri Boedi Sedjati, Wanito Sedjati, Darmo Laksmi, Wanita Moelyo, and Wanita Taman Siswa. Together they worked to empower women within their own scope and capacity as organization with specific target audiences. Only two months after the historic event of Sumpah Pemuda (Youth Pledge) which steered up the spread and development of new Indonesian

³⁵ English translation of the document is done by the author.

nationalism, these women organizations and several more, including Aisiyiah, organized the first women's congress on 22-25 December 1928 in Yogyakarta. The congress voiced women and children's concerns and demanded new public policy affecting their lives.³⁶ Because of its significance for later women's movement in Indonesia, the date of 22 December has been commemorated as Mother's Day in the country.

The first Women's Congress in 1928 demanded rectification of many issues affecting the life of women and children in particular. Among the strongest demands are on the making of public policy on marriage, on better education for girls and women, as well as better condition, work contract, and wage for women workers. Indonesian women had deep concerned over child, under-aged, forced marriages taken place which had caused many social and health problems, such as divorce, missing better education, high mortality rates for infants and mothers, and unresolved disputes. It turns out that what have been demanded by this first Indonesian Women's Congress in 1928 remains relevant to contemporary women's organizations' concerns. In educational area the phenomena are quite the same; whereas the ratio between boys and girls are equal in primary and secondary schools, the ration in higher education does not follow—the higher the degree the smaller the participation of women. There are many reasons for these disparities; some of them are rooted in culture, derived from interpretations of religious texts, while others are from practical considerations.³⁷ Despite such situation, Indonesian women have been able to utilize their agency outside those formal avenues.

After the independence, for the most part Aisiyiah maintains its good relationship with different regimes, from the President Soekarno era, President Soeharto's administration up to this Reformation era. There are always consequences for taking position, and Aisiyiah has faced favorable and unfavorable consequences because of taking such cooperative and evolutionary approaches to advance its missionary works. Aisiyiah has been accused of not so nationalist because it worked with the Colonial

³⁶ Blackburn, *Kongres Perempuan Pertama*.

³⁷ Alimatul Qibtiyah, "Mapping of Muslims' Understandings on Gender Issues in Islam at Six Universities in Yogyakarta, Indonesia," *Al-Jami'ab: Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (2019), 305-40.

rules; and was accused as not so Islamic, because of its moderation in interpreting and implementing Islamic teachings, and in cooperative positions with respective Indonesian governments or regimes whom some Islamic organizations have seen as un-Islamic. On the other hand, for many 'secular'-based feminist movement in Indonesia, Aisiyah has also been seen or labeled as not feminist enough, of maintaining patriarchal structure and habitus in Indonesia, because of its relationship with Muhammadiyah.

However, with its confidence Aisiyah has continued to moderation and cooperative positioning; and it comes out to be beneficial in many ways. Until today, Aisiyah does not only still exist, but has shown that it is among the largest, active, and longstanding Muslim women movements across the country, or probably the world. Aisiyah has conceptualized a far-reaching vision, thus it shall maintain all its organizational modalities and energetic spirit to achieve that long vision, to negotiate with the situation, rather than being burnt out at certain stage of their struggles.

There are other women organizations in Indonesia which have taken different strategies and tactics than ones taken by Aisiyah. Small scale organizations without large membership and with limited focused works have been able to address issues more sharply and act quickly, because the span of organizational structure and modes of communication for decision making are usually shorter and less complicated. Many of these types of organizations depend their sustainability on the availability of funding from outside their own resources and members; so, when project priority of the funding agencies changes their financial sustainability is challenging.³⁸ Aisiyah on the other hand, because of its long philanthropic culture, does not depend on external funding to finance its programs. Whether or not they receive financial assistance from funding agencies or from the government, Aisiyah will still carry out its programmatic endeavor; members are the backbone for the movement to keep running.

³⁸ Darmiyanti Muchtar, "The Rise of the Indonesian Women's Movement in the New Order State" (M.A. Thesis—Murdoch University, 1999).

In recent years when Aisyiyah membership has reached almost all corners of the country, it cultivates relationships with government agencies or offices, such as with the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection, the Ministry of State Enterprises, and non-government organizations, such as Muslimat NU, Yayasan Sayap Ibu, Badan Musyawarah Organisasi Islam Wanita Indonesia, Majelis Ulama Indonesia, and others. Aisyiyah has been trusted by foreign, international foundation to carry out certain programs relevant to the issues of improving the life of women, family and children; among others are Overseas Education Fund (OEF), Mobil Oil, The Pathfinder Fund, UNICEF, UNESCO, WHO, John Hopkins University, USAID, AUSAID, NOVIB, The New Century Foundation, The Asia Foundation, Regional Islamic Consultation of South East Asia and Pacific, World Conference of Religion and Peace, UNFPA, UNDP, World Bank, Partnership for Governance Reform in Indonesia, and other foreign countries embassies in Jakarta.³⁹

From the explanation above it is apparent that in Aisyiyah's social imaginary progressivity of its members must remain connected to religious ideals and ethics. The Aisyiyah's way of thinking in conceptualizing Muslim progressive womanhood rooted in Islamic texts and prophetic history. Hence, using Muhammad 'Abd Al-Jabiri, such rationale can be categorized as *bayānī* and *burhānī*.⁴⁰ By adopting *burhānī* rationality Aisyiyah finds that Qur'ānic texts must be interpreted in correspond with human rationality and historical experiences. Consequently, the empirical cultivation of virtues and intellectual characters, and social activism have always been done with spirit of respect and cooperation with other institutions. Aisyiyah does not encourage women to adopt self-centered piety and achievement; rather it promotes integration of personal and social piety as well as community engagement.

³⁹ "Sejarah Aisyiyah."

⁴⁰ Ahmad Sugeng Riady, "Epistemology of Abd Al-Jabiri and Its Relevance in the Context of Islamic Studies in Indonesia," *Kontemplasi: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2020), 203-24; Jamhari, "Kontribusi Metodologis Muhammad Abd Al-Jabiri dalam Studi Islam," *EL-FIKR: Jurnal Aqidah dan Filsafat Islam*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2017), 15-28.

Continuity and Changes in the Discourse of Progressive Womanhood

As time changes, the situations and challenges faced by women and Aisyiyah also change. To provide readers with how much Aisyiyah has transformed since its beginning till today, and how the movement has shown its loyalty to maintain discursive space for progressive Islamic womanhood in different period, I will recall when it started. As mentioned previously, Aisyiyah was founded a century ago in Yogyakarta, to provide learning opportunity for Muslim women and girls from ordinary population. Apart from wife of Kiai Ahmad Dahlan, Aisyiyah members and leaders at that time aged 18 years or younger.

Educating his own daughters was taken by Kiai Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of Muhammadiyah, to convince his family and colleagues towards the importance of education and learning for women and girls. The first formal school for girls opened by Muhammadiyah was attended by relatives and daughters of members of this newly founded movement. As more Muslims families understood the necessity of education, they supported the mission of Muhammadiyah to improve and widen educational opportunity for girls and women, and the result was since then there were increasing number of girls attending schools.

Siti Bariyah was only 15 years when she assumed the chair of the new Muslim women's movement.⁴¹ Now Aisyiyah leadership is assumed by women who aged above 35 years. Looking at the broader social condition of the time in early twentieth century Java, it was still very rare and exceptional that young women coming from ordinary families—outside the category of Dutch colonial and Javanese royal families, can afford to go to schools. These young women from Kauman Quarter, who were born from batik traders among Muhammadiyah members and elites, against the odd began a movement bringing in with them Islamic values, in addition to Javanese culture they inherited so far. The establishment of Aisyiyah by these common young women signaled the emergence of women's movement outside the

⁴¹ "Tokoh Inspiratif Siti Bariyah binti Haji Hasyim Ismail," available at <https://aisyiyah.or.id/>; accessed on February 4, 2022.

Javanese *priyayi* circles;⁴² this is because preceded women organizations had been enacted and aimed for women from royal, and elite *priyayi* societies.⁴³

As an Islamic women movement, Aisiyiah has paid careful attention to the condition of women and children. Apart from providing learning centers for women, it also developed learning groups for girls of different ages to learn Islam and other general subjects. Aisiyiah divided their informal learning sessions for girls into groups based on age. Girls aged 7-10 years were put together in a group called Jam'iatul Athfal (Association of Children). Jam'iatul Athfal held meeting twice a week to learn different subjects and life skills. Girls learn how to read the Qur'an, memorize short chapters or certain verses of it, writing Arabic script, simple life skills, as well singing songs, and sporting.

Girls aged between 10-15, were gathered in learning circles called Tajmilul Akhlak (Refining the Character). These girls had their learning sessions every Friday evening when they studied Islamic teachings about women's virtues, house management, as well as advanced life skills, such as cooking, sewing, and knitting. The third group was called Thalabus Sa'adah (Seeking Happiness), and its members consisted of young women aged between 15-18 years. They were given lessons deemed important for building a new family in future, such as lessons on Islamic law on marriage, sexuality, and on building happy family. They also received training on starting small business, as well as for public speaking. This is because they were expected to become future women preachers in communities, as some of them would be expected to sustain the missionary works of Aisiyiah.⁴⁴ While Aisiyiah was very strong in its campaign for improving women's education and economic empowerment, it was also highly respecting the institution of marriage and building family.

⁴² Sukanti Suryochondro, *Potret Pergerakan Wanita di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Rajawali, 1984).

⁴³ Siti Baroroh Baried, "Islam and the Modernization of Indonesian Women," in Taufik Abdullah and Sharon Siddique (eds.), *Islam and Society in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), 139-54; Pieterella van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur'an* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), available at <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10593760>; accessed on January 8, 2020.

⁴⁴ Syamsiyatun, *Pergolakan Putri Islam*.

Since the independence of Indonesia in 1945 the Constitution mandated the new government to provide education for all, regardless of sex/gender, ethnicity and religions. Access and participation for girls and women to have better formal education increased significantly. More women attained education beyond their primary schools. Many of them went further to secondary and higher education. This new opportunity of enjoying further formal education influences the composition and features of both membership and leadership of Aisiyyah. Nowadays, Aisiyyah membership shows totally different feature from one in the beginning; today's Aisiyyah women are mostly married, aged above twentieth, and have minimum secondary education. Most of its members also have their professional careers, own businesses or working women in general.⁴⁵

Because of the strong importance of attaining better education within Aisiyyah's social imaginary of progressive women, its members have been among the first women to participate and achieve high level of education. Prof. Baroroh Baried, Prof. Chamamah Soeratno, Prof. Dawiesah, leaders of Aisiyyah, are among the first female Professors in Universitas Gadjah Mada, the largest and oldest public university in Indonesia. In recent years, more Aisiyyah women have achieved full professorships in Islamic universities and non-confessional universities. Women's participation in higher learning then followed by participation in the professional work force in most cases also delays women's marriage age. Such new features of Muslim women demand different strategy and programmatic endeavors for Aisiyyah to cater their new gender interests. Further research on this area is highly needed, as it is beyond the topic of this current paper.

One of results from Aisiyyah's work in education, Aisiyyah's central board leadership has shown a continuing change with women of university graduates becoming the majority in the board, and many of them are state employee. The advantages of having highly educated women in leadership are that literacy movements can be conceptualized and promoted, such as media and social-media literacy, political literacy and intercultural literacy. Aisiyyah has received many awards and recognitions from the Indonesian government. For example, in 2011 Aisiyyah received

⁴⁵ "Sejarah Aisiyyah."

national MDGs award for its continuing attention for improving women's health and eradicating tuberculosis in Indonesia.⁴⁶ In 2021 Aisiyiah received an award from the State Ministry for Women Empowerment and Child Protection for its roles in the first Women's Congress in 1928 and continuing services for Indonesian women.⁴⁷

The drawback of having too many state employee women in Aisiyiah board is that they lack of time and flexibility. For many decades of its early history, Aisiyiah members and leaders, including the founding women had been traders in batiks, garments, silver and others. They have time flexibility and more financial resources from members. To address the issues of profile changes and the availability of time and resources, Aisiyiah needs to take advantage of its human resources and the advancement of information technology to develop creative economics, as they have the potentiality. Good and merchandise produced by Aisiyiah members can be creatively wrapped and presented in ways attracting buyers, not only by selling their function.

The Aisiyiah's centennial 47th Mukatamar in 2015 produced a number important decisions that covers from five-year national program, strategic programs and issues, reflections of centennial services, recommendations to the Indonesian governments and other corresponding agencies. General program implemented includes ideological consolidation, leadership, movement management, empowering branches and members, as well as strengthening and improving the movement's social enterprises. Divisional programs prioritized by the congress are in the area of building *sakinah* family, cadre training, *tabligh*/missionary work, education, health, social welfare, economic and workforce, law and human rights, environment, and culture.

Conclusion

To conclude succinctly, Aisiyiah has contributed greatly in shaping Indonesian Muslim imaginaries on womanhood. Against

⁴⁶ "Atas Peran Sertanya dalam Penanggulangan Tb Aisiyiah Dianugrahi MDGs Award 2011," available at <http://dianovaanwar.blogspot.com/2012/06/atas-peran-sertanya-dalam.html>; accessed 4 February, 2022.

⁴⁷ "Aisiyiah Menerima Penghargaan dari Kementerian PPPA," available at <https://aisiyah.or.id/>; accessed 4 February 2022.

the prevailed idea of submissive womanhood in past century Indonesia, the organization propagated new Muslim womanhood that is knowledgeable, personally and socially pious, and engaging. With this ideal portrait of womanhood taken from Islamic teaching and history, Aisiyiah women show their capacity and capability to take lead in important endeavors, such as in providing education for children and girls, in organizing the first women's congress, in developing universities and many more.

Without explicitly claiming to be a feminist movement, Aisiyiah has proven itself to eliminate discrimination against women, and further respect and empower women. Aisiyiah has contributed in forming a kind of Islamic feminism, especially through its conceptualization of Perempuan Islam Berkemajuan (Progressive Muslim Women) which is rooted strongly in Islam and with the Indonesian culture. Aisiyiah has worked the both levels of catering gender needs of Muslim women, that is practical and strategic gender interests. With its establishments of thousands of economic, health and educational social enterprises, including universities, it is clear that Aisiyiah will remain one among the major players in shaping Indonesian womanhood, and feminism with a reference to Islam.

Throughout its historical course Aisiyiah's main loyalties to womanhood, religiosity and humanity do not change; however, empirical expressions of such loyalties have changed. While in the early era 'Aisiyiah members and leaders were women of teenage, with the familial background as traders, in current situation its leadership and membership have been more varied. It is noticeable however that most of women leaders in Aisiyiah hold higher degree from various universities, consequently Aisiyiah leaders have less flexibility in time management. The development of digital technology has in away provides new avenue to Aisiyiah, but challenges from digital world need to be anticipated in advance if Aisiyiah wishes to continue to be a relevant, leading women movement in Indonesia.

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