

## Faith-Based Leadership and Women's Empowerment in the Aisyiyah Organization

Ratna Nurdiana<sup>1</sup>, Fikry Z. Emeraldien<sup>2</sup> Huey-Rong Chen<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universitas PGRI Adi Buana Surabaya, Indonesia; ratnanurdiana@unipasby.ac.id

<sup>2</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia; fikry.zahria.emeraldien@uinsa.ac.id

<sup>3</sup> Chinese Culture University, Taiwan; hc8677@yahoo.com

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### Abstract

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#### Keywords:

Aisyiyah, faith-based leadership, women's empowerment, communication organization, Islamic organization

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This article discusses faith-based female leadership within Aisyiyah, a long-standing autonomous organization under Muhammadiyah actively engaged in religion, education, health, economy, environment, and social welfare. Aisyiyah practices a distinctive and contextually grounded leadership model firmly rooted in religious values, community participation, and grassroots empowerment. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with thematic analysis, drawing on data from internal documentation, activity reports, and findings from FGD and interviews with regional leaders. The results show that Aisyiyah has successfully integrated leadership structures from the central level to the village level, involving thematic councils in education, preaching, cadre development, economy, health, social welfare, law, culture, and environment, all of these led by women. This cross-council strategy fosters effective collaboration, addresses the challenge of leadership regeneration, and strengthens women's contributions to local development. The findings also affirm that organizational forums function as reporting platforms, deliberative spaces for vision strengthening, policy evaluation, sustainable cadre development, and participatory communication. By showcasing leadership practices rooted in Islamic values and women's empowerment within a modern organizational context, this article contributes significantly to the discourse on Islamic women's organizations, organizational communication, civil society governance, and gender mainstreaming at the community level.

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### Abstrak

Kata kunci:  
Aisyiyah,  
kepemimpinan  
berbasis iman,  
pemberdayaan  
perempuan,  
komunikasi  
organisasi, organisasi  
Islam Indonesia

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Artikel ini membahas kepemimpinan perempuan berbasis iman dalam Aisyiyah, sebuah organisasi otonom di bawah Muhammadiyah yang telah lama berdiri dan aktif di bidang agama, pendidikan, kesehatan, ekonomi, lingkungan, serta kesejahteraan sosial. Aisyiyah menerapkan model kepemimpinan yang khas dan kontekstual, berakar kuat pada nilai-nilai keagamaan, partisipasi masyarakat, dan pemberdayaan di tingkat akar rumput. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan analisis tematik, berdasarkan data dari dokumentasi internal, laporan kegiatan, serta temuan dari FGD dan wawancara dengan para pemimpin wilayah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Aisyiyah telah berhasil mengintegrasikan struktur kepemimpinan dari tingkat pusat hingga desa, dengan melibatkan majelis tematik di bidang pendidikan, dakwah, kaderisasi, ekonomi, kesehatan, kesejahteraan sosial, hukum, budaya, dan lingkungan semuanya dipimpin oleh perempuan. Strategi lintas-majelis ini mendorong kolaborasi yang efektif, mengatasi tantangan regenerasi kepemimpinan, dan memperkuat kontribusi perempuan dalam pembangunan lokal. Temuan ini juga menegaskan bahwa forum-forum organisasi berfungsi sebagai wadah pelaporan, ruang musyawarah untuk penguatan visi, evaluasi kebijakan, pengembangan kader berkelanjutan, serta komunikasi partisipatif. Dengan menampilkan praktik kepemimpinan yang berakar pada nilai-nilai Islam dan pemberdayaan perempuan dalam konteks organisasi modern, artikel ini memberikan kontribusi penting terhadap diskursus mengenai organisasi perempuan Islam, komunikasi organisasi, tata kelola masyarakat sipil, dan pengarusutamaan gender di tingkat komunitas.

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Corresponding Author:

Ratna Nurdiana: Universitas PGRI Adi Buana Surabaya, Indonesia; ratnanurdiana128@unipasby.ac.id

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## INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment is crucial for creating a just, equitable, and sustainable society. Globally, this issue has attracted the attention of policymakers, scholars, and activists who recognize that national progress depends on women's active participation. Women's empowerment has become a global development priority, with organizations such as UN Women and UNESCO emphasizing education, health, and socio-economic participation as both fundamental rights and strategic pathways toward sustainable and equitable growth. In this context, civil society organizations play a vital role in bridging the gap between public policy and the real needs of communities at the grassroots level (Salamon, 2004). One approach to ensuring women's active participation is through the establishment of women's organizations as a movement to liberate women from all forms of oppression and injustice. Women's organizations are generally defined as organizations run by women and for women (Kabeer & Huq, 2010; Mustikamah et al., 2025; Siswadi et al., 2025; Walsh, 2016; Wonuola et al., 2025), and they may be initiated and funded by both men and women (Afolabi, 2019; Sonkar, 2018). Membership in such organizations enables women to express collective interests, making these organizations more effective than non-women's organizations in reaching and empowering women (Walsh, 2016).

In Indonesia, women's organizations began to emerge in the early twentieth century in response to gender discrimination, with faith-based groups integrating local values and Islamic principles into community development initiatives. Over time, these organizations expanded their roles from social services to advocacy, policy influence, and humanitarian assistance, particularly since the mid-1980s (Khafagy, 2020). Key issues addressed include women's rights, sustainable social development, conflict resolution and peacebuilding, migration inequality, and freedom of religion (Berger, 2016). Historically, women's organizations have been important drivers of social change through policy advocacy and grassroots empowerment. This article examines Aisyiyah, one of the oldest and largest Islamic women's organizations in Indonesia, highlighting its faith-based leadership and cross-sector, cross-council collaboration strategies as a model of contextual women's empowerment.

As argued by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (Mohanty, 1991) in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, much early feminist scholarship tended to generalize women's experiences and overlook how empowerment is shaped by diverse cultural, religious, and grassroots contexts. Mohanty emphasizes that female scholars and activists from the Global South often reveal distinctive strengths and leadership practices rooted in their own communities. Building on this perspective, studies of organizations such as Aisyiyah are essential to demonstrate that women's empowerment does not merely stem from imported frameworks but emerges from faith-based values and local socio-cultural dynamics. Aisyiyah, an autonomous women's organization under Muhammadiyah established in 1917, exemplifies this model. It is not only the oldest Islamic women's organization in Indonesia but also one of the most structured and sustainable in implementing socio-religious programs.

Institutionally, Aisyiyah has a systematic and multi-layered organizational structure, ranging from the Central Leadership (Pimpinan Pusat/PP) to Provincial Leadership (Pimpinan Wilayah Aisyiyah/PWA), District or City Leadership (Pimpinan Daerah Aisyiyah/PDA), and grassroots branches (Pimpinan Ranting Aisyiyah/PRA). Each level is supported by integrated structural units, including Leadership Support Bodies (Badan Pembantu Pimpinan/BPP), which oversee various councils (majelis) and institutions responsible for implementing programs in education, health, economic

empowerment, cadre development, law, culture, and environmental issues. These units complement one another, encompassing early childhood education, leadership training, family economic empowerment, and disaster response. Through careful planning, cross-council synergy, and responsive leadership, Aisyiyah systematically implements empowerment programs that reflect (Kabeer, 1999) framework of resources, agency, and outcomes as drivers of social transformation. By establishing women's organizations across different regions, it is expected that women from diverse social backgrounds will become aware of the roots of their oppression and subsequently participate in advocating for their rights (Mursidah, 2012).

Although Aisyiyah's contributions to women's empowerment have been widely recognized, academic studies examining its internal leadership dynamics remain limited. For example, (Kholisatun et al., 2024) study, "Aisyiyah dan Pemberdayaan Perempuan dalam Upaya Kesetaraan Gender" (*Aisyiyah and Women's Empowerment in the Pursuit of Equality*), discusses Aisyiyah's role as an Islamic women's organization capable of integrating religious teachings with a contextual women's empowerment agenda. However, the study remains largely descriptive and does not deeply explore internal leadership practices or organizational strategies. Therefore, this research aims to analyze Aisyiyah's faith-based leadership strategies, focusing on the Regional Leadership of 'Aisyiyah Lamongan. Using a qualitative case study approach and internal document analysis, this study explores how Aisyiyah's leaders coordinate cross-council efforts to address community needs and design sustainable programs, while also confronting structural and cultural challenges such as limited resources and social resistance to women's leadership. As noted by (Fuad, 2002), the strength of Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Aisyiyah lies in their flexibility in responding to changing times without losing their ideological roots. Accordingly, this study reaffirms how Aisyiyah's faith-driven and adaptive leadership contributes to sustainable and gender-equitable women's empowerment in contemporary Muslim society.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research adopted a qualitative-descriptive method using a case study design, selected for its capacity to provide an in-depth examination of organizational processes, internal dynamics, leadership practices, and empowerment strategies within Aisyiyah as a faith-based Islamic organization (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The Regional Leadership of 'Aisyiyah Lamongan was selected as the research site because it is considered active in developing cross-council programs, has an organizational structure representative of Aisyiyah's national system, and demonstrates successful internal coordination worthy of further study as an example of good practice.

Data were collected using four main techniques: documentation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observation, as suggested by (Dewi, 2022). Who argues that combining techniques can enhance validity through source and method triangulation. The researcher accessed both strategic and operational organizational documents, such as annual activity reports, flagship program proposals, cross-council activity documentation, and the results of the Regional Leadership Consultation. These documents were used to trace policy directions, internal coordination patterns, and organizational achievements systematically over the past year. This documentation provided an essential foundation for understanding the structural context and programmatic dynamics of the organization.

Interviews were conducted with the Chairperson of PDA Lamongan, several Council Chairs, and Aisyiyah Branch Leadership (PCA) representatives using a semi-structured format, allowing key questions while enabling informants to elaborate based on their experiences and reflections. This approach captured in-depth narratives of institutional and leadership practices. The purpose of this interview is to identify problems in a more open manner, in which the interviewee is asked to share their opinions and ideas (Kamaria, 2021)

The group discussion took place naturally within the Regional Leadership Consultation PDA Lamongan forum on May 29 and June 1, 2025. In this context, the researcher acted both as a passive and active participant, taking notes on interactions among leaders, verbal responses, and the dynamics of discussions during commission and plenary sessions. Although not formally designed as an FGD, this forum was understood as a form of naturalistic FGD (Krueger, 2014) conducted in an authentic setting, reflecting cross-branch coordination practices and inter-council synergy. Observation was conducted throughout the Regional Leadership Consultation to directly capture interactions among leaders, decision-making processes in formal forums, and informal communication patterns between leaders across councils. These observations helped enrich and validate data obtained from interviews and documentation (Lince, 2022).

Data were analyzed thematically using the Thematic Analysis approach developed by Braun & Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All data from interview transcripts, observation notes, documents, and discussion minutes were manually coded and grouped into three main themes: (1) organizational structure and leadership practices, (2) cross-council empowerment strategies, and (3) coordination challenges and organizational sustainability. The analysis process was carried out in parallel with data collection to enable a reflective and dynamic understanding of the field context (Sulung & Muspawi, 2024).

The study followed ethical research principles: informants gave verbal consent, identities were kept confidential, and all documents were used responsibly with attention to sensitivity (Salsabila, 2025). The study's main limitation was the brief two-day observation of the Regional Leadership Consultation, though this was offset by triangulating data from a year's organizational documents, interviews, and FGDs. The research aims for an in-depth case study, not statistical generalization, to reflect regional Islamic women's leadership dynamics.

## **RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

#### **Leadership Struktur and Multilevel Coordination**

According to Mercadal 2021, there are many types of organizational structures, the most common being the hierarchical or vertical structure and the flat or horizontal structure (Mercadal Trudy M., 2021). A hierarchical structure is typically pyramid-shaped, with top positions holding the most power, middle managers in the center, and frontline operators at the base. In the 21st century, many organizations adapt this model to be flatter and more decentralized, promoting teamwork, autonomy, and open management.

The pyramidal organizational model is also applied by the Aisyiyah organization. Aisyiyah implements a five-tier integrated leadership system, starting from the Central Leadership, Regional Leadership, District Leadership, Branch Leadership, down to Sub-branch Leadership. The Central Leadership (PP) is the

highest leadership level in Aisyiyah, which formulates policies and decisions on a national scale. The Regional Leadership (PWA) is responsible for implementing PP policies at the regional or provincial level. Policies developed by the PWA are then executed by members at the district or municipal level, led by the PDA. At the sub-district level, the PCA implements PDA policies. Finally, the PRA is responsible for executing PCA policies. This study focuses on the policies and programs developed by PDA Lamongan, where the pyramidal structure is strongly evident. As in the classic model, membership increases toward the base: PDA Lamongan oversees 27 PCAs and 340 PRAs, with total PRA membership reaching 14,770 members.

In 2024, nearly all of PDA Lamongan's work programs were implemented successfully, including both daily leadership programs and initiatives from its nine councils and two institutions. One notable cross-council flagship program at PDA Lamongan is *Qoryah Thoyyibah*, which proceeded according to plan, marked by the establishment of the *Balai Sakinah Aisyiyah* (BSA) in seven branches. Another program, the *Gerakan Infaq Sayang Ibu* (GISI), was launched in 2023 in collaboration with the Lamongan branch of Bank Madinah. The bank provided infaq collection cans that were distributed to PCAs and PRAs, with funds allocated to programs related to mothers' roles.

All activities were led by women, reflecting Aisyiyah's commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment, despite lingering skepticism about women in leadership. However, women's representation in top positions has steadily increased. As Windsor note, female leaders tend to be more successful and trusted in solving complex problems (Windsor et al., 2020). Their compassionate and empathetic communication styles make people feel comfortable under their leadership (Windsor et al., 2020). The *Women in the Workplace 2021* report by McKinsey & Company also emphasizes that women in leadership, whether in business or the public sector, contribute to healthier organizational environments and make more comprehensive, inclusive decisions by considering diverse perspectives. Moreover, women's sensitivity is advantageous in designing strategies aligned with consumer needs while enhancing financial performance (Hamdani, 2020).

Women's leadership in Aisyiyah is supported by strong cadre development and forums like Regional Consultative Meetings. PDA Lamongan uses coordinators and HR systems to ensure accountable governance, while women promote food sovereignty and economic opportunities through local initiatives like Rumah Gizi.

Aisyiyah's strong cadre system is also evident in its regular leadership training and managerial strengthening programs conducted through *Baitul Arqom* (BA) to ensure the sustainability of the movement. As stated by PDA Lamongan Chairperson Diyana Mufidati during the Musypimda (May 29, 2025):

"All PCAs reported their progress with great enthusiasm. The commission sessions ran dynamically, with participants actively drafting and agreeing on flagship programs in their respective plenary sessions."



Figure 1. [Diyana Mufidati, leader of PDA, is giving a briefing at Musypimda.]

Aisyiyah's cadre development shapes character, religious awareness, and knowledge from an early age. For instance, the PRA in Parengan Village established a Community Reading Garden supporting PAUD units (kindergartens, playgroups, TPQ, TPA), nurturing capable future generations. Programs also enhance scientific capacity through "training of trainers" for PKBMs, preparing participants to implement policies, design community-relevant programs, and serve as competent facilitators.

Additionally, cadre processes develop practical skills by translating ideas into action. For example, the Zero Waste initiative encourages mindful use of disposable products, reduces waste sent to landfills, conserves resources, and includes eco-enzyme production. It also fosters self-discipline among members to prevent overconsumption and promote environmental responsibility.

### **Synergy Between Councils and Institutions in Empowerment**

Community empowerment involves strengthening citizens' capacity and independence to address social, economic, and political challenges. Aisyiyah's programs achieve this through cross-council and institutional collaboration, creating integrated initiatives that enhance women's and family well-being.

Empowerment strategies can begin with education and training. Education that equips communities with knowledge and skills enables them to better address daily challenges. Through training, people can acquire new skills that enhance their opportunities for employment or entrepreneurial development. For instance, the Early Childhood Education and Basic Education Council, the Economic Council, the Health Council, and the Social Welfare Council frequently collaborate across sectors. One example is the fun PAUD-to-primary school transition program developed by the PAUD Dasmien Council, supported by the Health Council through nutritious meal provision under the *Gerakan Aisyiyah Cinta Anak* (GACA), and complemented by the Economic Council's entrepreneurship training for mothers. Other activities include senior citizen health posts integrated with the *Balai Sakinah Aisyiyah* (BSA) program,

and the SADEL CEPAK initiative (Village Model for the Prevention of Child Marriage) for adolescents, both of which involve cross-council and sub-branch collaboration demonstrating a holistic approach to empowerment from early childhood to old age.



Figure 2. [The Social Welfare Council and the Law and Human Rights Council of PDA serve the community in the *Balai Sakinah Aisyiyah* (BSA) program. Private consultations will be conducted if there are further complaints from the community (January 2024)]

Source : Researcher's documentation

Active community participation strengthens ownership, responsibility, self-confidence, and collaboration. For example, the GACA program integrates multiple councils through awareness campaigns in schools, mosques, and communities. Similarly, the Environmental and Disaster Management Institute (*LLHPB*) together with the Economic Council developed the Zero Waste program, linking schools, mosques, community groups, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in waste management and eco-friendly product initiatives. Furthermore, this synergy creates space for participatory innovation at the local level. In some PRAs, nutrition education activities are held alongside family financial management training, integrating health and economic materials into a single, unified program. It reflects the organization's capacity to adopt a multisectoral approach to strengthening women's roles in society.

Another important step in community empowerment strategies is building networks and partnerships. Connecting communities with organizations, government institutions, and the private sector can help them access broader resources and opportunities. These findings are consistent with (Salamon, 2004) who emphasized that civil society organizations act as a bridge between grassroots needs and broader policy frameworks. Such partnerships include the PAUD Dasmien Council's membership in GOPTKI/PP PAUD (Association of Early Childhood Education Providers) in the district, which supports mutual exchanges of knowledge, experience, and resources. This also reflects what (Walsh, 2016) argued, that women's organizations are more effective than non-women's organizations in reaching women and enabling collective articulation of their concerns.



Figure 3. [Diyana Mufidati is implementing a program from PWA. She is mentoring kindergarten teachers to improve professionalism]

Source : Reasercher's documentation

Another example is Aisiyyah's collaboration with the Lamongan branch of Bank Madinah through the *Gerakan Infaq Sayang Ibu* (GISI), launched in 2015 and continued through the 2024 period. This program involves the bank providing infaq collection cans distributed to PCAs and PRAs, with the funds used for programs related to women's reproductive health. Such collaboration strengthens (Berger, 2016) point that faith-based organizations increasingly move beyond service delivery toward advocacy and institutional partnership-building.

Increasing access to economic resources is also a vital empowerment strategy. This can include providing microenterprise capital, financial management training, or better market access. By improving access to economic resources, communities can reduce poverty and enhance their welfare. These efforts resonate with (Kabeer, 1999) framework, which links empowerment not only to outcomes but also to access to resources and agency in decision-making. The Economic and Labor Council, in collaboration with Ahmad Dahlan Institute of Technology and Business and LA Mart, conducted an entrepreneurial digitalization training on August 9, 2023, in Solokuro and Kedungpring. The program trained local entrepreneurs in digital marketing, social media management, and online sales, boosting their competitiveness in the digital marketplace.

Unlike the findings in studies on Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU that emphasize political advocacy (Asri & Herniawati, 2023; Hafiz & Sungaidi, 2021), this study shows thAisiyyah's economic council focuses on grassroots entrepreneurial empowerment, combining faith-based values with practical digital skills.

### **Challenges and Adaptation Strategies**

Although the organizational structure and program synergy have proven strong, Aisiyyah still faces various challenges, particularly at the PCA (Branch Leadership) and PRA (Sub-branch Leadership) levels. The main challenges revolve around limited human resources (HR), leadership regeneration, and varying capacities among branches. Most PCAs in the Lamongan area experience a shortage of active cadres. For instance, the PCA Sarirejo report indicated that some leaders are inactive due to household responsibilities or formal employment. Operational challenges are a common barrier faced by nonprofit organizations in Indonesia. In developing

countries, they struggle to secure staff and resources to ensure success and maintain effectiveness (Aboramadan et al., 2021). Limited resources, increasingly complex community demands, and the pressure to deliver significant social benefits are also challenges for nonprofit organizations (Mella et al., 2025).

It is important to note that while PCAs like Babat and Laren are highlighted for notable achievements, other PCAs are not inactive. Each branch has unique strengths shaped by resources, leadership, and local context. Some focus on religious studies, spiritual development, or monthly community education, reinforcing cadres' attachment and sustaining grassroots movements. Branch capacity diversity should be seen as complementary, fostering collaboration rather than competition. Such an understanding aligns with (Creswell & Poth, 2016) view that organizational realities must be interpreted within their specific social and contextual settings.

In addition to HR limitations, there are also challenges in maintaining program sustainability. Not all branches are able to run programs regularly. Some branches are only active during seasonal moments, such as the month of Ramadan or Aisyiyah's anniversary, while in other months activities drop significantly. Program discontinuity may also result from unprofessional conduct by previous leaders. Work stress is one of the main causes of unprofessional behavior. Excessive workloads, tight deadlines, and insufficient resources often lead to frustration, lack of focus, and dishonesty. According to Karasek & Theorell's job strain model, the combination of high job demands and low job control can lead to stress that contributes to unprofessional conduct (Karasek, 1990). Moreover, ineffective communication is another significant factor. A lack of clarity in communication between leaders and members often leads to misunderstandings, which can escalate into conflict and unprofessional behavior.

Despite these challenges, this study also found numerous best practices from branches that have successfully managed difficulties with adaptive strategies. PCA Babat, for example, manages 15 inclusive early childhood education units and 19 active senior health posts, as well as systematically mentoring high school/vocational school youth cadres through the Cadre Development Council. Their strategy emphasizes youth involvement and routine training based on local needs. Meanwhile, PCA Laren stands out administratively 99% of PRAs in its area have completed membership data updates in the digital system. This demonstrates growing technological awareness and a strong commitment to organizational transparency.

These findings indicate that Aisyiyah's program success depends not only on a strong organizational structure but also on local adaptation capacity, collective collegial cross-council synergy, and continuous cadre development (Makalao et al., 2024). These three factors are crucial for sustaining Aisyiyah amid changing social dynamics. They enable the organization to remain relevant and effective by developing qualified leaders and members, optimizing resources through coordination and cooperation, and addressing operational challenges. Regular evaluation and targeted actions enhance efficiency, foster innovation, strengthen resilience, and ensure the organization fulfills its social responsibilities to the community and stakeholders. Additionally, ethical awareness programs for members are also essential for maintaining organizational stability. An effectively structured ethics program allows members to internalize the principles and norms valued by the organization. Through activities such as ethics workshops and training, employees can foster a healthier and more constructive organizational environment.

## Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that Aisiyiyah is a faith-based Islamic women's organization with a multilayered leadership system, extending from the national level down to the village level. This leadership structure functions not only administratively but also as a strategic vehicle for women's empowerment through sustainable social, educational, economic, and health initiatives. In terms of organizational governance, Aisiyiyah demonstrates a distinctive pattern of coordination, cadre development, and program synergy as a values-driven Islamic organization grounded in praxis. This finding is consistent with the empowerment framework formulated by (Kabeer, 1999) which emphasizes that social transformation is achieved through the utilization of resources, the strengthening of agency, and the attainment of tangible outcomes.

This resonates with (Mohanty, 1991) critique of early feminist scholarship that often treated "Third World women" as a homogeneous group lacking agency. By contrast, Aisiyiyah's model illustrates how women in non-Western, faith-based contexts actively shape empowerment through their own resources, religious values, and grassroots leadership. In this sense, the case of Aisiyiyah contributes to a broader feminist discourse that recognizes diverse pathways of agency and transformation beyond Western-centric frameworks.

Within the framework of Islamic civil society, Aisiyiyah can be categorized as an important actor that meets the characteristics of a faith-based civil society organization: autonomous from the state, community-based, and oriented toward public service (Santoso et al., 2025). Civil society is defined as a community or social institution characterized by independence, tolerance, self-reliance, mutual assistance, and adherence to commonly agreed norms and ethics (Syamsuddin, 2000). Civil society is also characterized by cooperation in rights and responsibilities for all citizens, access to state decision-making processes, and oversight of government administration to ensure high public accountability. In line with Hefner's view, religious organizations such as Aisiyiyah play a transformative role in strengthening social institutions and promoting democratization through cultural and spiritual channels (Hefner, 2011). Aisiyiyah does not operate solely in religious preaching or education but also addresses practical community needs such as access to health services, strengthening family economies, and advocacy for children and the elderly. This reinforces (Berger, 2016) argument that religious organizations today are not only involved in social services, but also contribute to advocacy and decision-making at the policy level.

From a communication perspective, these practices highlight the role of organizational communication and leadership communication within Aisiyiyah. As emphasized by (Salamon, 2004), civil society organizations function as a bridge between grassroots needs and public policy. Forums such as Regional Leadership Consultation serve not only as administrative mechanisms but also as participatory communication spaces where deliberation, consensus-building, and vision alignment take place. The empathetic and persuasive communication style of Aisiyiyah's women leaders helps strengthen trust, cohesion, and member engagement. Moreover, empowerment programs such as GACA or Zero Waste illustrate how communication functions as a tool for social mobilization translating Islamic values into messages that resonate with communities and stimulate active participation. In line with (Walsh, 2016) argument that women's organizations are more effective in reaching and mobilizing women, these programs demonstrate how communication is used to strengthen agency and collective action. In this sense, Aisiyiyah's leadership can also be interpreted through the lens of empowerment communication, where dialogue and

message dissemination are central to building agency and collective action (Miller & Barbour, 2009).

This approach shows that Aisyiyah is not merely a “mothers’ organization” of a domestic or charitable nature, but rather an integral part of Islamic civil society with strong institutional capacity and broad social impact (Berger, 2016). According to Nurcholish Madjid, civil society in Islam can be realized by adhering to six main principles enshrined in the Charter of Medina egalitarianism, merit-based recognition, openness, justice, tolerance and plurality, and deliberation (Madjid, 2019). Civil society is expected to be fair, equitable, and open, promoting values of tolerance and plurality. The Charter of Medina is considered a tangible example of these values in an Islamic society. Similarly, Aisyiyah’s practices such as holding the Regional Leadership Consultation, cadre training, and cross-council coordination are part of deliberative civil society, where discussion, deliberation, and consensus serve as decision-making methods and reinforce solidarity across organizational levels. This also reinforces (Fuad, 2002) observation that the strength of Muhammadiyah and Aisyiyah lies in their flexibility in facing contemporary challenges without abandoning their ideological roots.

Within the framework of social capital theory as proposed by Putnam, Aisyiyah demonstrates a significant contribution to building networks of social trust, collaborative norms, and active community participation (Putnam, 2000). Social capital involves member relationships, coordination quality, voluntary participation, and public trust. It includes norms, networks, and community engagement, combining cultural and social values. Rooted in Adam Smith and Max Weber, it gained prominence in social science research in the late 1980s. Social capital plays a vital role in strengthening social resilience and achieving organizational goals (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009).

Putnam distinguishes between two types of social capital: *bridging* and *bonding*. *Bridging social capital* refers to open and inclusive social networks that connect people from diverse backgrounds, promoting diversity and tolerance (Putnam, 2000). Aisyiyah’s Regional Leadership Consultation forum, held regularly, serves as a concrete example of bridging social capital, connecting branches and sub-branches in a deliberative space that not only develops work programs but also conducts joint evaluations. Both bridging and bonding social capital strengthen relationships among Aisyiyah’s women leaders and members, countering the historical view of women’s roles as merely supportive with limited strategic opportunities. Even today, there remain doubts and barriers that prevent many women from fully participating in organizational activities (Kertamukti et al., 2025, 2025; Nasdian, 2014; Partini, 2015). Societal views confining women to domestic roles and male dominance in leadership limit women’s organizational participation. To address this, some organizations establish special bodies granting women strategic positions for greater contribution. This phenomenon is in line with (Mursidah, 2012) observation that women’s organizations were initially established to raise awareness of oppression and to encourage women’s involvement in advocating for their rights.

The formation of women’s organizations shows that women are already familiar with organizational activities. Nevertheless, patterns of involvement often mirror broader societal conditions, where few women hold strategic positions such as chairperson, whether in student organizations or political parties. Most women serve as secretaries or treasurers positions considered “feminine” because they are associated with meticulousness, a trait often attributed to women (Wieringa, 1995). Aisyiyah’s

existence has created significant opportunities for women's empowerment. Its contribution can be analyzed through the *resources–agency–achievements* framework (Kabeer, 1999). In this context, empowerment is not only an outcome (*achievement*), but also the process of accessing resources and building the capacity to make autonomous life choices (*agency*). Aisiyiah provides access to various resources, such as formal and informal education, cadre training, and extensive social networks. Through the PAUD Dasmen Council and the Economic Council, for instance, women are trained as early childhood education managers and family-based micro-entrepreneurs. At the same time, women are given space to exercise agency in program policy formulation, activity implementation, and sustainability evaluation. Measurable achievements can be seen in the management of over 15 inclusive PAUD units by PCA Babat, senior health post activities in various sub-branches, and the successful digitalization of membership administration by PCA Laren. These accomplishments reflect empowerment that is not merely symbolic, but based on real capacities and tangible outcomes impacting women's and community life.

Moreover, Regional Leadership Consultations provide deliberative spaces that foster consultation, consensus, and leadership regeneration, involving branch leaders, young leaders, and cross-sector managers. These forums enable evaluation, program development, and vision alignment across levels, promoting transparent and inclusive leadership (Adeoye et al., 2025; Daulay et al., 2024; Hamdanah et al., 2025; Hariadi et al., 2024). They represent a democratization of faith-based women's leadership in a typically patriarchal context, highlighting that women are often defined as a group because of shared dependencies, but ultimately because of their gender. At the same time, women are produced through these very social relations while also actively shaping and participating in them (Mohanty, 2014).

Aisiyiah also demonstrates a progressive model of faith-based leadership, where Islamic values are articulated through social action rather than mere moral rhetoric. Women's leadership in Aisiyiah emphasizes the integration of spirituality and social praxis, as seen in initiatives such as the Zero Waste movement, engaging schools, mosques, small businesses, and community groups or the GACA program, which addresses child protection from an Islamic perspective. This shows that the Islamic values practiced in Aisiyiah are applicable and responsive to contemporary challenges, including ecological issues, health, and equal access. In line with Salamon's argument, religious organizations like Aisiyiah fill gaps left by the state through value-based work, solidarity, and volunteerism (Ahyani et al., 2024; Mukhoiyaroh et al., 2025; Salamon, 2004).

According to Spears, social service organizations are designed to serve and support humanity, creating humanistic values in society (Spears, 1996). Faith-based organizations such as Aisiyiah share this purpose but integrate an element of faith into their services, guided by the spiritual convictions of their leaders (Monsma, 2006). They provide services that help meet the basic needs of individuals and families while promoting spiritual, social, and emotional growth. Faith-based organizations act as valuable agents of change in society, providing social control and assisting communities in times of crisis (Brueggemann, 2006). They also bear a social responsibility to demonstrate professionalism, an ethical organizational culture, and honorable conduct (Patti, 2000).

Nevertheless, despite its successes and well-functioning organizational structure, not all Aisiyiah members across regions have equal capacity. Leadership regeneration remains a critical issue, especially in some PCAs with limited membership and inactive

leaders. The PCA Sarirejo report requesting "guidance" reflects the need for special attention to branches with weaker capacity. Such disparities result in uneven program implementation across regions. While PCAs such as Babat and Laren demonstrate excellent performance, others are active only during major Islamic holidays or Aisyiyah's anniversary. This imbalance calls for affirmative measures from PDA, such as targeted training, technical assistance, or community-based cadre recruitment to strengthen grassroots organizational foundations.

This research contributes empirically to the study of Islamic women's organizations at the district/city level, an area often underexplored compared to national-level history or ideology. By analyzing Regional Leadership Consultation forums, PCA reports, and interviews with PDA leaders, it provides insights into governance, cross-council synergy, cadre regeneration, and community-based programs that translate Islamic values into social practice for women. This also reinforces (Fuad, 2002) finding that the flexibility of Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Aisyiyah lies in their ability to respond to contemporary challenges without abandoning their ideological roots.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals a significant and unexpected finding: Aisyiyah, as a faith-based Islamic women's organization, demonstrates that its multilevel leadership system from central to grassroots serves not only as a governance structure but also as a powerful mechanism for women's empowerment. The research shows that the integration of Islamic values into practical domains such as education, health, literacy, and economy forms a sustainable model of empowerment that is both faith-driven and community-based. This finding, which became clear only after the field investigation, highlights Aisyiyah's unique ability to translate religious principles into real social transformation through synergy, coordination, and program continuity across leadership levels.

From an academic standpoint, this study contributes a new perspective to the scholarship on women's movements and faith-based organizations. Rather than confirming the common assumption that religious institutions perpetuate patriarchy, this research challenges that view by showing how Aisyiyah's Islamic framework can instead become a foundation for gender empowerment and social justice. By situating Aisyiyah within global feminist discourse, this research enriches theoretical debates on women's agency in the Global South, affirming that empowerment can emerge from culturally rooted and faith-informed movements thereby extending feminist theory with an Indonesian context.

However, this study has several limitations. The cases analyzed were limited in number and geographical scope, with variations in branch capacity and leadership resources that could not be fully examined. Future studies with broader and more diverse samples, using mixed methods, are needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Aisyiyah's empowerment model. Such deeper and wider research would allow the formulation of more accurate policy recommendations to strengthen young women's cadre development, ensure program sustainability, and enhance Aisyiyah's contribution to social transformation at the grassroots level.

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