

The Role of Women in the History of Islamic Education (Examining Educational Concepts from a Montessori Perspective)

Siti Rahayu N.M ^{a,1,*}, Defi Fefdianti^{b,2}

^a STAI Alif Laam Miim Surabaya, Indonesia;

^b STAI Alif Laam Miim Surabaya, Indonesia;

¹ sitirahayunm@gmail.com; ² defi.fefdi@stai-aliflaammiiim.ac.id

* Siti Rahayu N.M

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine the role of women in the history of Islamic education and analyze its conformity with the principles of Montessori education. The research approach used is descriptive qualitative with a literature study method, which focuses on reviewing literature on the history of Islamic education, biographies of Muslim women figures, and Montessori pedagogical theory. The research results show that women have actively contributed to the development of Islamic education since the beginning, both as students, teachers and founders of educational institutions. Figures such as Aisyah RA, Fatimah al-Fihri, and Zainab bint al-Kamal show that women play a strategic role in the transmission of Islamic knowledge. Furthermore, it was found that the educational values applied by women in Islamic history—such as experience-based learning, character formation, and a humanistic approach—were closely related to Montessori principles. This research concludes that integrating the values of Islamic women's education with the Montessori approach can be an important strategy in designing an Islamic education system that is inclusive, spiritual and gender equitable. This article recommends the need to revitalize the role of women in Islamic education as part of an educational system update that is relevant to the challenges of the times.

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peran perempuan dalam sejarah pendidikan Islam dan menganalisis kesesuaiannya dengan prinsip-prinsip pendidikan Montessori. Pendekatan penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif dengan metode studi pustaka, yang memfokuskan pada telaah literatur sejarah pendidikan Islam, biografi tokoh perempuan Muslim, dan teori pedagogi Montessori. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perempuan telah berkontribusi secara aktif dalam pengembangan pendidikan Islam sejak masa awal, baik sebagai murid, guru, maupun pendiri institusi pendidikan. Tokoh-tokoh seperti Aisyah RA, Fatimah al-Fihri, dan Zainab bint al-Kamal menunjukkan bahwa perempuan memainkan peran strategis dalam transmisi ilmu pengetahuan Islam. Lebih lanjut, ditemukan bahwa nilai-nilai pendidikan yang diterapkan oleh perempuan dalam sejarah Islam—seperti pembelajaran berbasis pengalaman, pembentukan karakter, dan pendekatan humanistik—memiliki keterkaitan erat dengan prinsip Montessori. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa integrasi nilai-nilai pendidikan perempuan Islam dengan pendekatan Montessori dapat menjadi strategi penting dalam merancang sistem pendidikan Islam yang inklusif, spiritual, dan berkeadilan gender. Artikel ini merekomendasikan perlunya revitalisasi peran perempuan dalam pendidikan Islam sebagai bagian dari pembaruan sistem pendidikan yang relevan dengan tantangan zaman.

Kata Kunci: *Perempuan, Pendidikan Islam, Montessori, Sejarah Islam.*

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Introduction

Education is a fundamental aspect in the formation of human character and civilization. In Islam, education is not only directed at intellectual development, but also spiritual and moral development (Azra, 1999). The first commandment in Islam is *iqra'* (read it), which indicates how important the learning process is for every individual, both men and women. However, in the development of Islamic education historiography, the role of women is often left out of the main spotlight. Dominant narratives often present male figures as the main actors in the development of science and education, while the role of women is only mentioned in a limited way.

Historical facts actually show that women have an important role in the spread of knowledge and the establishment of educational institutions. Figures such as Aisyah RA, wife of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, are known as one of the great scholars who narrated more than two thousand hadiths and are the main reference in the field of *fiqh* and Islamic science (Sayeed, 2013). In addition, Fatimah al-Fihri founded al-Qarawiyyin University in the 9th century in Morocco, which is considered the oldest university in the world and is still operating today (Makdisi, 1981). These facts show that women are not only recipients of education, but also the main movers in the classical Islamic education system.

The existing literature on the history of Islamic education is still minimal in exploring in depth the contribution of women in the world of education. This inequality creates the impression that Islamic education is an exclusive space for men, which of course is not in accordance with Islamic values which are inclusive and gender fair. In this context, modern pedagogical approaches such as Montessori can be used as an alternative lens to reread women's contributions to Islamic education. Montessori is an educational method that emphasizes the natural development of children, a supportive learning environment, and the role of the teacher as a facilitator (Montessori, 1967).

Maria Montessori, an Italian doctor and educator, developed her approach based on direct observation of children. He believes that education must follow the rhythm of a child's natural development and provide space for children to explore the environment independently. Principles like freedom within limits, active learning, and respect for children's individual potential are at the core of this method (Lillard, 2005). If examined more deeply, this approach turns out to have similar values to educational practices carried out by women in Islamic history, such as dialogue-based teaching, spiritual formation, and a gentle approach.

Many *halaqahs* or science assemblies led by women use an approach very similar to Montessori principles, although born out of a different cultural and religious context. For example, Aisyah RA is known for her empathetic and patient way of teaching, as well as her ability to understand the character of her students (Sayeed, 2013). Similar things were also found in the teaching practices of other female figures such as Sutayta al-Mahamali, Zainab bint al-Kamal, and Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah, who emphasized spiritual and moral aspects in the educational process (Badran, 2009).

An examination of the role of women in the history of Islamic education through a Montessori perspective opens up space for the reconstruction of a more just and balanced historical narrative. This is important not only to provide proper appreciation for the contributions of women in the past, but also as a basis for formulating more humanistic and inclusive educational strategies in the present. By juxtaposing the values of Islamic education and Montessori principles, we can find common ground that strengthens the vision of education that is not only based on knowledge, but also based on values and love.

Thus, this research aims to review the contribution of women in the history of Islamic education and analyze the educational values they bring through a Montessori perspective. It is hoped that this approach will not only provide a new understanding of the history of women in Islamic education, but also contribute to the discourse on developing a contemporary education system that is rooted in the values of justice, spirituality and humanity.

Methods

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature study method (library research). This method is used to examine in depth the role of women in the history of Islamic education and examine its suitability with the principles of Montessori education. A qualitative approach was chosen because the main focus of this research is to explore the meaning, values and educational practices carried out by Muslim female figures throughout history, not to quantitatively measure a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In this literature study, researchers analyzed various Islamic historical literature, biographies of female figures, Montessori pedagogical texts, as well as relevant scientific journals as the main data sources.

The data analysis technique was carried out descriptively-comparatively, namely by describing the educational practices carried out by female figures in Islam, then comparing them with the principles of Montessori education. Researchers identified main themes that reflect educational values such as independence, freedom, experience-based learning, and fostering spirituality. The main references used include the works of Maria Montessori such as *The Absorbent Mind* (Montessori, 1967), as well as historical literature such as *The Rise of Colleges* by Makdisi (1981) and *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam* by Sayeed (2013). Data validity is maintained through source triangulation, namely by comparing various perspectives from different literature to obtain a complete and credible picture.

Result

1. *The Central Role of Women in the History of Islamic Education*

This research found that since the early days of Islam, women have played an important role in the development and dissemination of knowledge, especially in the field of education. Women not only act as recipients of knowledge, but also as teachers, educators, narrators of hadith, and even founders of educational institutions. Figures such as Aisyah RA, wife of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, are the most prominent examples. He was not only the main teacher for his friends, but also the main source in the transmission of hadith and fiqh. Aisyah narrated more than 2200 hadiths and is often used as a reference in various Islamic legal and ethical issues (Sayeed, 2013).

Apart from Aisyah, there are also other figures such as Fatimah al-Fihri, founder of al-Qarawiyyin University in Fez, Morocco in the 9th century. This university is recognized as the oldest university in the world that is still operating today (Makdisi, 1981). Fatimah al-Fihri built this institution with an open educational orientation for men and women, which reflects the spirit of Islamic inclusiveness towards education. Apart from that, women such as Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah, Zainab bint al-Kamal, and Sutayta al-Mahamali also show active involvement in education, both as teachers and students in various fields of science such as mathematics, hadith, and tafsir.

This research also highlights that during the golden age of Islamic civilization (8th to 13th centuries), women's participation in education was relatively high. In various scientific centers such as Baghdad, Cairo and Damascus, many scientific halaqahs are found led by women. Unfortunately, subsequent developments experienced regression, especially when the social structure began to be controlled by patriarchal institutions and colonialism, which changed the face of Islamic education to become more rigid and masculine-oriented (Badran, 2009).

2. *Values of Women's Education in Line with Montessori*

One of the important findings in this research is that there is a gap between the educational values practiced by women in Islamic history and the principles of Montessori education. Maria Montessori developed an educational approach that emphasizes children's freedom in a structured environment, experience-based learning (learning by doing), moral development, and the role of teachers as facilitators, not as absolute centers of authority (Lillard, 2005).

These values are apparently in line with the teaching approach applied by female figures in Islamic history. For example, Aisyah RA is known for her dialogical and empathetic teaching methods. He not only provides answers to questions, but also encourages his students to think critically, explore context, and understand the moral values behind Islamic laws. This is very much in line with the Montessori approach which emphasizes understanding, not mere memorization (Montessori, 1967).

Apart from that, Muslim women in the classical period also placed great emphasis on developing spirituality and morals. In many histories, science assemblies led by women not only contain cognitive material, but also moral and spiritual formation. This is similar to the Montessori approach which views education as a process of forming a whole person (holistic education), not just filling in knowledge.

3. *Inclusive and Humanistic Learning Space*

The Montessori method emphasizes the importance of a learning environment that supports children's natural growth and development. The learning environment must be clean, neat, full of stimulation, but still provide space for freedom and a sense of security for children. In the history of Islamic education, women have also created inclusive, informal but very effective learning spaces. For example, the halaqah led by Zainab bint al-Kamal in Damascus in the 13th century was attended by male and female students from various parts of the country, demonstrating that female-run learning environments were not limited by gender bias or social status.

These spaces reflect the prepared environment philosophy in Montessori, where the learning environment is carefully prepared to encourage interest in learning and active participation from students. In the context of classical Islamic education, learning spaces led by women are often more flexible and open to discussion, not just one-way transfer of knowledge. This shows that women at that time had implemented a learning approach that was very advanced for their time.

4. *Women as Learning Facilitators*

In the Montessori approach, the teacher is not the sole authority who forces the child to learn, but a facilitator who helps the child discover his or her own potential. Teachers accompany, not dictate. This is also seen in the way classical Muslim women teach. They do not position themselves as masters of knowledge, but rather as dialogue partners in the process of searching for truth.

Sutayta al-Mahamali, for example, is known as a female cleric in the 10th century who taught mathematics and fiqh to her students. He is not only renowned for his scholarship, but also for his gentle and in-depth teaching approach. In historical records, many of his students felt inspired by the way he taught, not just by the content of his lessons. This reflects the teacher's role as a companion to child development as emphasized in Montessori pedagogy.

5. *Relevance of Findings to Contemporary Educational Challenges*

This research shows that the educational approach applied by Muslim women in the past is still very relevant for today's educational context, especially in facing increasingly complex educational challenges. The moral crisis, lack of interest in learning, and an education system that is too rigid can be overcome with a more humanistic, participatory, and value-based approach such as that found in the Montessori method and women's education practices in Islam.

We can learn the lesson that education does not belong to one gender or one single method. Women have a significant historical role in creating a progressive, spiritual and liberating model of Islamic education. By rereading history from the perspective of modern pedagogy, we can build an education system that is more inclusive and gender equitable, and relevant to current developments.

Discussion

1. *Reinterpretation of the Role of Women in the History of Islamic Education*

Women in the history of Islamic education have played an important role that is often overlooked in dominant, masculine narratives. This research highlights how women not only contribute as recipients of knowledge, but also as teachers, pioneers of educational institutions, and guardians of scientific authority. Figures such as Aisyah RA, Fatimah al-Fihri, and Zainab bint al-Kamal are clear examples of women's active involvement in the classical Islamic education system.

Patriarchal historical narratives often obscure women's contributions by narrowing the educational space to only the domestic or informal domain. However, historical data shows the opposite—that women are involved in open scientific halaqahs, become teachers for both men and women, and even play a role in the institutionalization of education (Sayeed, 2013). This shows that Islam from the start opened a wide space for women's involvement in the world of education, and this spirit needs to be revitalized in the context of modern education.

2. *Matching Islamic Female Education Values with Montessori*

When the principles of Montessori education are examined in more depth, a number of strong intersections are found between the values of classical Muslim women's education and Montessori pedagogy. Montessori prioritizes aspects of learning that are natural, free but directed, and full of respect for the child's individual development (Montessori, 1967). This has apparently been practiced by Muslim women leaders long before the Montessori theory was formulated systematically.

Aisyah RA, for example, is known for her non-patronizing teaching approach. He cultivates his students with patience, using questioning and dialogue methods to encourage deep understanding. This is very similar to the discovery learning method in the Montessori approach, where children (or students) are encouraged to learn independently, assisted by the right environment and teacher guidance (Lillard, 2005). Thus, it can be said that the humanistic pedagogical values initiated by Montessori have roots in the Islamic educational tradition which was brought to life by female ulama in the past.

3. *Spirituality as the Core of Education*

One important aspect that is the meeting point between Islamic education and the Montessori approach is the emphasis on spirituality and character formation. Montessori stated that true education is that which forms the child's personality as a whole, not just his intellect (Montessori, 1967). This is very in line with the goals of education in Islam which prioritizes tarbiyah ruhiyah (spiritual education).

Many women in Islamic history prioritized spiritual education in their teaching. Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah, for example, is not only known as a great Sufi woman, but also as an educator who emphasized the importance of a sincere relationship between humans and God in the educational process. Education according to Rabi'ah is not just a cognitive process, but an inner experience that forms morals and spiritual awareness. This shows that in Islamic history, especially through the role of women, education has integrated intellectual and spiritual aspects in harmony.

4. *Teachers as Facilitators: The Antithesis of Authoritarian Systems*

The concept of a teacher in Montessori is very different from the traditional, authoritative concept. Teachers are not the center of all knowledge, but facilitators who accompany children to discover their own potential. Maria Montessori called the teacher a "careful observer", who provides stimulation but allows the child to develop according to his natural tendencies (Montessori, 1967).

This model has long been applied by Muslim women figures. For example, Zainab bint

al-Kamal is known for her teaching method which provides space for students to explore their own understanding and does not impose a single interpretation. He often discusses with his students in an open question and answer format. This shows that the concept of the teacher as a facilitator is not new in Islamic education, and has actually been brought to life by women since the Middle Ages.

This context is important to review, considering that contemporary education systems in various Muslim countries are still very rigid, teacher-centered, and emphasize memorization rather than understanding. By bringing back the historical practice of women's education, especially in a format that is in line with Montessori, the Islamic education system can be directed in a more dialogical, participatory and meaningful direction.

5. *Inclusive Education: Breaking Social and Gender Divides*

The Montessori approach really respects the diversity and individuality of children. The learning environment must be inclusive, non-discriminatory, and allow every child to develop according to his or her potential. This is in line with the history of Islamic education which was pioneered by women, which often opened up educational space for various groups regardless of social class or gender.

For example, Zainab bint al-Kamal's halaqah in Damascus was attended by students from various backgrounds, including men from noble circles and ordinary people. This is a real manifestation of fair and inclusive education, long before the concept of democratic and non-discriminatory education became the jargon of modern education. So, it can be concluded that an inclusive educational approach is inherent in Islamic history, and the main perpetrators are women.

In the current context, where the issue of unequal access to education is still a serious problem, especially for women and marginalized groups, an inclusive approach like this needs to be revived. Through Montessori studies and the history of Islamic education, we can restructure an education system that is not only structurally fair, but also fair in practice.

6. *Revitalizing the Values and Practices of Gender-Based Islamic Education*

One important implication of these findings is the need to revitalize the values of Islamic education which are rooted in women's experiences. So far, the history of Islamic education has mostly been written and interpreted by men, thus providing less space for women's narratives. In fact, women's contributions are not only historical, but also epistemological—they pass on the values of nurturing, spiritual formation, gentle learning methods, and empathy-based pedagogy.

By using the Montessori perspective as an analytical tool, we can see that values such as respect for children's freedom, an individual approach, and learner-centered education are part of the legacy of women in Islamic education. So, it is not only relevant for the past, but also very important for the renewal of Islamic education in the present.

This revitalization can be done in two ways. First, strengthening historical research on female figures in the world of Islamic education so that it becomes part of the contemporary Islamic education curriculum. Second, the application of pedagogical principles that are in line with the Montessori method in the Islamic education system, both in schools, madrasas and Islamic boarding schools, with a more inclusive, reflective and humanistic approach.

Conclusion

This research shows that women have a very significant role in the history of Islamic education, both as participants and as the main movers of the educational process. Figures such as Aisyah RA, Fatimah al-Fihri, Zainab bint al-Kamal, and Sutayta al-Mahamali are proof that women have been active from the start in teaching, transmitting knowledge, and even in establishing educational institutions. These roles are often missing from the grand narrative of

Islamic history, even though they have made a major contribution to the development of classical Islamic science and education.

When viewed from the perspective of Montessori education, it was found that the basic principles of education promoted by classical Muslim female figures were in line with the Montessori approach, such as respect for students' freedom, experience-based learning, emphasis on spirituality and character, and the role of teachers as facilitators, not as centers of authority. These findings show that Islamic educational traditions, especially those inherited by women, have the potential to be integrated with modern educational approaches that are more humanistic and progressive.

Thus, re-involving the role of women in Islamic education and applying pedagogical principles such as Montessori is a strategic step to build an Islamic education system that is inclusive, reflective and gender equitable. History is not only to be remembered, but also becomes a basis for designing a more just, open and transformative future for Islamic education.

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