

Women's Leadership and Progressive Islam: A Systematic Review of 'Aisyiyah's Contributions

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Abstract

This article systematically reviews the contribution of 'Aisyiyah to women's leadership and the development of Progressive Islam in Indonesia. Rather than treating leadership only as the occupation of formal office, the review conceptualizes it as the organized production of religious authority, social capability, institutional responsibility, and public voice. Following the Joanna Briggs Institute approach to qualitative and textual evidence synthesis, with PRISMA 2020 used as a reporting framework, the study analyzes eighteen academic and institutional sources published up to December 2020. The synthesis identifies six interrelated contributions: establishing women as autonomous religious and organizational actors; expanding education and cadre formation; institutionalizing health and social-welfare leadership; transforming family discourse into a platform for justice and resilience; cultivating female religious authority and gender-responsive interpretation; and connecting nonpartisan organizational independence with civic and political participation. The findings show that 'Aisyiyah's distinctive contribution lies less in adopting a single feminist label than in building durable institutions through which women interpret Islam, manage services, mobilize communities, and represent public interests. The article develops the concept of institutionalized progressive womanhood to describe this combination of faith-grounded agency, professional organization, and socially transformative practice. It also identifies persistent tensions involving maternalist language, uneven gender interpretation, organizational dependence, leadership succession, and the gap between service delivery and structural advocacy. The review concludes that 'Aisyiyah demonstrates how Progressive Islam becomes socially credible when normative claims are translated into women-led institutions, knowledge production, and accountable civic action.

Keywords: *'Aisyiyah; women's leadership; Progressive Islam; Muhammadiyah; gender justice; Islamic civil society; women's empowerment.*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Islam, women's leadership, and social change is often discussed through a narrow opposition. Religious organizations are portrayed either as guardians of patriarchal norms or as vehicles of emancipation. This opposition obscures the institutional work through which Muslim women negotiate authority in practice. Leadership may be exercised through schools, clinics, welfare agencies, study circles, professional associations, family programs, and public advocacy long before it is recognized in formal political language. Indonesia offers a particularly important setting because mass Islamic organizations have produced extensive female networks that combine religious learning with modern organizational forms. Among these networks, 'Aisyiyah occupies a distinctive position. Founded in 1917 within the Muhammadiyah movement, it developed a nationwide structure led by women and created sustained arenas for education, preaching, health, welfare, economic activity, and civic participation (Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 1992; van Doorn-Harder, 2006).

The significance of 'Aisyiyah is not adequately captured by describing it merely as a women's wing. Such terminology can imply administrative dependence and a secondary function. Historical and ethnographic studies instead show that women associated with Muhammadiyah developed their own organizational routines, interpretive communities, cadres, programs, and institutions. They taught religious texts, managed schools and social services, advised families, participated in national women's congresses, and built legitimacy within both religious and civic spheres (Blackburn, 2004; van Doorn-Harder, 2006). Their authority was neither simply borrowed from male scholars nor fully detached from Muhammadiyah. It emerged through negotiated autonomy: women worked inside a larger reformist movement while developing spaces in which female experience, competence, and public responsibility could acquire institutional form.

This pattern is closely related to the idea of Islam Berkemajuan, translated here as Progressive Islam. In Muhammadiyah discourse, progress does not mean abandoning revelation in favor of unrestricted modernism. It refers to the dynamic realization of Islamic values through *tajdid*, knowledge, social benefit, justice, and civilizational advancement. The concept therefore contains a test of practice: claims about the dignity and agency of women become progressive only when they influence access to education, health, livelihood, religious authority, and decision making. 'Aisyiyah provides an important case because it translated a theology of moral equality and social responsibility into organizations that women themselves administered. The link between leadership and Progressive Islam is consequently institutional rather than merely rhetorical.

The existing scholarship, however, is fragmented. Historical works discuss Siti Walidah, early girls' education, and the women's movement. Studies of Islamic feminism examine women's interpretation of the Qur'an and the negotiation of gender norms. Social-welfare research documents local programs, while organizational studies analyze attitudes toward female leadership. Other sources address family resilience, *da'wah*, political participation, or internal gender regimes (Dzuhayatin, 2015; Handayani et al., 2019; Qibtiyah, 2020; Sukmana, 2018). Each field illuminates part of the picture, but the literature rarely asks how these activities constitute a coherent model of women's leadership and how that model relates to Progressive Islam.

A systematic synthesis is necessary for three reasons. First, it prevents celebratory institutional narratives from being treated as equivalent to empirical evidence. Official documents reveal ideals, programs, and organizational self-understanding; they do not by themselves demonstrate consistent implementation. Second, synthesis can connect arenas that are often studied separately. A kindergarten, maternal-health program, women's study circle, cooperative, and policy workshop may appear unrelated, yet all can function as sites where women acquire knowledge, authority, managerial experience, and public voice. Third, a review can identify contradictions. The expansion of women-led services may coexist with maternalist expectations, uneven access to top decision-making, or interpretations of family responsibility that continue to burden women.

This article therefore asks four questions. What normative and historical foundations support women's leadership in 'Aisyiyah? Through which institutional mechanisms has the organization produced female agency and public authority? How does the literature

connect these contributions to Progressive Islam? What limitations and unresolved tensions remain? The article contributes by proposing institutionalized progressive womanhood as an analytical concept. The term refers to a form of Muslim women's agency that is rooted in faith, organized through durable institutions, oriented toward public benefit, and continuously negotiated within religious and social structures. This formulation neither assumes that all 'Aisyiyah practice is gender-transformative nor reduces the organization to conservative maternalism. It provides a framework for examining how progressive claims become credible, partial, contested, and renewable through women's collective action.

METHOD

The study used a qualitative systematic review with thematic synthesis. The methodological design was informed by the Joanna Briggs Institute guidance for qualitative and textual evidence because the research question required the integration of heterogeneous materials: peer-reviewed empirical articles, historical studies, scholarly books, and official organizational documents. PRISMA 2020 was used to structure transparent reporting of the search boundary, eligibility criteria, selection logic, and synthesis process. PRISMA was not treated as a substitute for the review method, and AMSTAR 2 was not applied because the corpus consisted mainly of primary studies, books, and institutional texts rather than systematic reviews of interventions.

Searches were conducted through combinations of the terms 'Aisyiyah, Muhammadiyah women, women's leadership, female religious authority, Islamic feminism, women's education, health, social welfare, family sakinah, political participation, and Islam Berkemajuan. English and Indonesian terms were used. Electronic discovery was supplemented by backward reference searching and targeted retrieval of official 'Aisyiyah and Muhammadiyah documents. The publication boundary was December 31, 2020, maintaining consistency with the related review series and avoiding retrospective incorporation of later formulations such as the post-2020 Risalah Perempuan Berkemajuan. The final analytical corpus comprised eighteen sources. Dynamic database result totals were not used as stable evidence because duplicated indexing, repository mirrors, and changing search interfaces made initial counts non-reproducible; the verified unit was the final full-text corpus.

Sources were eligible when they directly examined 'Aisyiyah, Muhammadiyah women, or an institutional arena in which 'Aisyiyah's leadership was substantively documented. Broader studies of Indonesian Muslim women were included only when they provided a clearly identifiable analysis of 'Aisyiyah or the Muhammadiyah gender regime. Official documents were included when they articulated organizational history, programs, or normative commitments relevant to leadership. Sources were excluded when 'Aisyiyah appeared only in passing, when the text could not be evaluated beyond an abstract, when it was published after 2020, or when it repeated institutional claims without analytical contribution.

Each source was coded for publication year, source type, empirical or normative status, geographical scale, institutional arena, form of leadership, conception of women,

relationship to Muhammadiyah, and evidence of progressive change or continuing constraint. The coding process moved through three stages. Descriptive codes identified activities such as schooling, preaching, health care, cooperatives, political education, and family counseling. Interpretive codes captured mechanisms such as cadre formation, professionalization, service-based legitimacy, collective interpretation, and negotiated autonomy. Analytical themes then connected these mechanisms to a broader model of Progressive Islam.

Quality appraisal was source-sensitive. Empirical studies were examined for clarity of research question, appropriateness of design, transparency of data collection, and correspondence between evidence and claims. Historical works were assessed for source use, chronology, contextualization, and distinction between primary evidence and retrospective interpretation. Books and conceptual works were assessed for argumentative coherence, engagement with relevant evidence, and analytical transparency. Official documents were evaluated for authority, provenance, specificity, and their status as normative self-representation. No numerical score was calculated, because a single scale would create false comparability among ethnography, historical analysis, survey research, and institutional policy texts.

The synthesis follows an interpretive rather than effect-size logic. Frequency was not treated as proof of importance. A theme was retained when it appeared across different source types, explained a significant institutional mechanism, or revealed a consequential contradiction. The review also maintained a distinction between contribution and outcome. The existence of a program demonstrates organizational activity; it does not automatically prove social impact. Accordingly, the findings use calibrated language such as institutionalized, enabled, expanded, or provided a platform unless a source offered direct evidence of outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Characteristics of the Analytical Corpus

The corpus spans institutional history, gender studies, religious authority, civil society, welfare, family, political participation, and organizational leadership. It is temporally concentrated after the democratic transition, but the inclusion of historical and institutional works makes it possible to connect contemporary debates with 'Aisyiyah's early organizational formation. The sources operate at different levels. Some analyze national ideology and movement history; others study local branches, specific programs, or attitudes in a single institution. This variation is analytically useful because it reveals the distance between central formulations and local practice.

The evidence base remains uneven. Education and social welfare are well represented, while economic leadership, environmental action, disability inclusion, and the experiences of women outside Java receive less systematic attention. Several empirical studies are descriptive and rely on small local samples. Conversely, broad books and official histories sometimes make national claims without comparable local evidence. The

synthesis therefore treats convergent findings across source types as stronger than isolated institutional assertions.

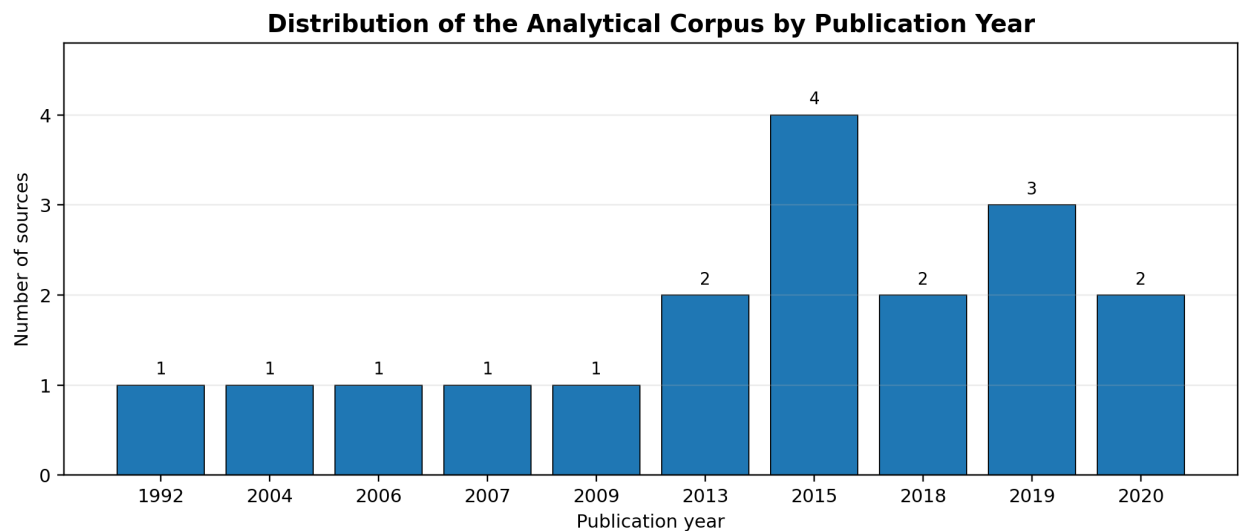


Figure 1. Distribution of the analytical corpus by publication year (n = 18).

Table 2. Composition and focus of the analytical corpus

Source	Type	Primary focus	Evidence status
Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisiyiyah (1992)	Institutional history	Formation, education, organizational growth	Normative-historical
Blackburn (2004)	Academic book	Women, state, and national movement	Historical-analytical
van Doorn-Harder (2006)	Academic book	Female religious authority and Qur'anic interpretation	Ethnographic-historical
Syamsiyatun (2007)	Journal article	Nasyiatul 'Aisiyiyah and negotiated status	Organizational analysis
Robinson (2009)	Academic book	Gender, Islam, and democratic citizenship	Comparative context
Fauzia (2013)	Academic book	Islamic philanthropy and organized welfare	Historical-institutional
Rinaldo (2013)	Academic book	Piety, activism, and women's public agency	Sociological context
Dzuhayatin (2015)	Academic book	Muhammadiyah gender regime	Critical institutional analysis
Dewi (2015)	Academic book	Women, local politics, and Islamic networks	Political context
Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisiyiyah (2015)	Official document	Program priorities and organizational strategy	Normative-institutional
Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah (2015)	Official document	Islam Berkemajuan and movement orientation	Normative-institutional
Rohana (2018)	Journal article	Women's da'wah and local religious education	Qualitative local study
Sukmana (2018)	Journal article	Welfare, health, education, and Al-Ma'un values	Qualitative local study
Handayani et al. (2019)	Journal article	Leadership and political participation	Qualitative regional study
Samsidar & Sormin (2019)	Journal article	Sakinah family program and Progressive Islam	Conceptual-programmatic

Source	Type	Primary focus	Evidence status
Qibtiyah (2020)	Journal article	Gender positions among Muhammadiyah/'Aisyiyah members	Empirical mapping
Setyawati et al. (2020)	Journal article	Attitudes toward women's leadership in higher education	Quantitative study
Qodir et al. (2020)	Journal article	Progressive Islam and social transformation	Conceptual context

2. From Women's Instruction to Autonomous Religious Agency

The first theme is the transformation of women from recipients of religious instruction into organized religious actors. Early 'Aisyiyah history is commonly narrated through Siti Walidah's teaching circles and the formation of Sapa Tresna before the organization was formally established. The importance of this history is not simply that women were allowed to learn. Education was connected to collective responsibility: women were expected to teach, organize, speak, and manage activities. The movement therefore challenged a division in which men represented religion publicly while women practiced it privately. It did so through the language of Islamic obligation rather than through a rejection of religion (Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 1992).

This religious agency was reinforced by organizational autonomy. 'Aisyiyah developed its own congresses, leadership structures, branches, cadres, publications, and charitable enterprises while remaining part of Muhammadiyah. The resulting arrangement was neither complete separation nor simple subordination. It created an institutional space in which women could accumulate administrative experience and define priorities. Syamsiyatun's (2007) study of Nasyyatul 'Aisyiyah shows that younger women similarly negotiated status through communication and internal persuasion rather than direct organizational rupture. Negotiated autonomy became a recurring strategy: women pressed for broader recognition while protecting access to the legitimacy, networks, and resources of the larger movement.

The literature suggests that this strategy produced a distinctive form of leadership. Authority was distributed across teachers, preachers, branch officers, health workers, school managers, and community organizers. It was not confined to charismatic figures. This distribution gave 'Aisyiyah resilience because leadership could be reproduced through routine organizational work. At the same time, integration into Muhammadiyah created boundaries. Women's priorities could be framed as supportive or sectoral, and questions of representation in joint institutions remained open. Dzuhayatin (2015) describes this broader pattern as a gender regime in which agency and hierarchy coexist.

Progressive Islam appears here as a reorganization of religious subjecthood. Women are not progressive merely because they enter public space; they become agents who connect piety with knowledge and responsibility. The early organizational form therefore matters conceptually. It established that Islamic reform required women capable of interpreting needs, directing institutions, and addressing society. Yet the evidence also warns against reading the founding moment as complete emancipation. The language of motherhood,

service, and complementary roles continued to structure legitimacy. The progressive dimension lay in expanding what those roles could authorize, while later generations continued to debate their limits.

3. Education and Cadre Formation as Leadership Infrastructure

Education is the most consistent mechanism in the corpus. 'Aisyiyah's educational contribution includes religious study circles, literacy, early-childhood education, schools, teacher formation, family education, and eventually higher education. These institutions expanded access for girls and women, but their leadership effect went further. Schools created occupations, managerial roles, public contact, and a continuous pipeline of cadres. Teaching positioned women as transmitters of legitimate knowledge. Managing an educational institution required budgeting, personnel supervision, curriculum interpretation, negotiation with government, and community representation. Education thus functioned simultaneously as service, professionalization, and political socialization.

The literature also shows that educational leadership was connected to reformist religious thought. Muhammadiyah's emphasis on organized schooling and useful knowledge allowed 'Aisyiyah to present female education as an Islamic necessity rather than a concession to Westernization. Progressive Islam was expressed through the conviction that revelation should generate intellectual development and social capability. Van Doorn-Harder (2006) documents how women in Muhammadiyah networks acquired interpretive confidence through study and teaching. Their authority often remained practical and pedagogical rather than formally juridical, yet it changed who could speak about Islam in homes, schools, associations, and communities.

Cadre formation converted educational opportunity into organizational continuity. Training programs taught meeting procedures, public speaking, religious communication, program planning, and leadership ethics. The multilevel structure of 'Aisyiyah created repeated opportunities to exercise responsibility before reaching senior office. This resembles an apprenticeship model: women learn leadership by organizing real services and solving concrete problems. Such processes help explain how the organization sustained a large geographic network without depending entirely on a small national elite.

Nevertheless, the educational arena also reveals tensions. Access to schooling does not automatically eliminate gender bias. Qibtiyah's (2020) mapping of gender views among Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah members indicates variation on contested issues such as public leadership, family authority, and religious interpretation. Setyawati et al. (2020) show that attitudes toward women's leadership are related to organizational commitment in a women's university context, but the existence of a positive association does not mean resistance has disappeared. The literature therefore supports a distinction between educational expansion and epistemic equality. Progressive education must include the authority to define problems and evaluate inherited interpretations, not only the opportunity to acquire credentials.

4. Health, Welfare, and the Transformation of Care into Public Leadership

A third theme concerns the conversion of care from a privatized female duty into organized public leadership. 'Aisyiyah's activities in maternal and child health, clinics, tuberculosis care, orphan services, social assistance, and community welfare enabled women to manage institutions that addressed urgent social needs. Sukmana's (2018) study in Malang identifies a cluster of welfare activities grounded in Al-Ma'un ethics, including health-related programs, education, philanthropy, and economic initiatives. The evidence is local, but it illustrates a broader institutional logic: compassion becomes socially transformative when it is organized, financed, professionally administered, and made accessible.

This logic is important for understanding Progressive Islam. The movement does not separate spiritual commitment from the technical requirements of service. Women leaders must combine religious motivation with health knowledge, administrative competence, partnerships, and accountability. Their legitimacy arises from the visible usefulness of institutions. The leadership model is therefore service-oriented but not passive. It requires agenda setting, resource mobilization, and engagement with public agencies. In this sense, welfare activity is a form of civic governance.

The philanthropic history of Indonesian Islam further clarifies this contribution. Fauzia (2013) shows that Islamic charity developed through changing relationships among religious organizations, communities, and the state. 'Aisyiyah's welfare work belongs to this field of organized social provision. By managing services, women become intermediaries between households, donors, professionals, government programs, and vulnerable groups. This intermediary position can create public authority even when women remain underrepresented in formal politics.

Yet care-based legitimacy contains a possible constraint. Women's leadership may be welcomed when it extends maternal responsibility into education or health, while more controversial claims to political, theological, or organizational authority receive greater resistance. Maternalist language can be strategically effective because it connects new activities to familiar virtues. It can also naturalize the expectation that women will perform unpaid or underrecognized care work. The progressive potential of welfare leadership therefore depends on whether care is treated as professional and civic labor, whether men share responsibility, and whether service institutions generate space for women to influence policy and resource allocation.

The reviewed sources rarely provide comparable outcome data on service quality, reach, or long-term empowerment. This gap should temper strong impact claims. The literature supports the conclusion that 'Aisyiyah institutionalized women-led welfare activity and created leadership opportunities. It does not establish that all services consistently transformed gender relations. Future research should distinguish beneficiary outcomes, organizational outcomes, and leadership outcomes.

5. Family Resilience, Gender Justice, and the Politics of the Domestic Sphere

The family is one of the most contested arenas in the literature. 'Aisyiyah's *sakinah* family programs frame the household as a spiritual, educational, economic, and social institution. Samsidar and Sormin (2019) connect family resilience to Progressive Islam by emphasizing justice, material and spiritual well-being, and the contribution of strong families to society. This formulation can expand family discourse beyond obedience and domestic order. Counseling, health education, economic training, and prevention of violence make the household a legitimate object of organized social intervention.

The progressive dimension lies in recognizing that problems categorized as private have public consequences. Maternal mortality, domestic violence, child development, unequal access to resources, and economic insecurity cannot be resolved through moral exhortation alone. They require knowledge, services, referral systems, and advocacy. When 'Aisyiyah leaders organize these responses, they exercise authority over issues that connect intimate life with social policy.

However, family discourse can reproduce asymmetry when harmony is prioritized over justice or when women are made responsible for maintaining family stability regardless of unequal power. The literature reveals no single 'Aisyiyah position. Qibtiyah (2020) finds diversity in understandings of gender issues, suggesting that modernist affiliation does not produce uniform egalitarian interpretation. Dzuhayatin (2015) similarly emphasizes contestation within Muhammadiyah's gender regime. Consequently, family programs should not be classified as either emancipatory or conservative in advance. Their effect depends on the allocation of authority, labor, decision making, and rights within the model they teach.

A more analytically useful interpretation is that the family program is a site of gender negotiation. It can normalize shared responsibility, encourage women's economic and educational agency, and identify violence as a social wrong. It can also preserve complementary role expectations. Progressive Islam in this arena should therefore be evaluated through substantive criteria: whether women possess bodily security, access to knowledge and income, participation in decisions, and the capacity to seek redress. The label *sakinah* cannot substitute for these indicators.

6. Religious Authority, Interpretation, and the Production of Female Knowledge

A fifth theme is the production of female religious authority. Van Doorn-Harder (2006) demonstrates that Indonesian Muslim women's organizations created networks in which women read the Qur'an, taught doctrine, debated social questions, and exercised influence over religious practice. Within 'Aisyiyah, authority is often collective and pedagogical. It is produced through repeated teaching, organizational recognition, publication, consultation, and service rather than through a single clerical office.

This form of authority is central to Progressive Islam because reform requires interpretive capacity. Women cannot be treated only as objects of rulings concerning dress, marriage, reproduction, or family. They must participate in defining the questions, evaluating social consequences, and articulating religious guidance. The reviewed literature shows that 'Aisyiyah has provided such participation, but not without boundaries. Formal structures of legal reasoning in Muhammadiyah have historically remained more male-dominated than women's educational and social institutions. This creates an epistemic division: women possess extensive experiential and programmatic knowledge, while final doctrinal authority may be located elsewhere.

Qibtiyah's (2020) research is particularly important because it demonstrates plurality within Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah on gender issues. This plurality should not be interpreted only as inconsistency. It also indicates an active interpretive field in which members negotiate scripture, modern knowledge, family experience, and organizational doctrine. Progressive Islam is strengthened when such disagreement can be discussed through reasoned, evidence-sensitive processes rather than suppressed by claims of uniformity.

The literature supports the concept of epistemic citizenship. Women exercise citizenship within a religious movement when they are recognized as producers of relevant knowledge, not merely implementers of centrally defined programs. Health workers contribute knowledge about maternal risk; teachers understand educational barriers; local leaders encounter violence and poverty; younger cadres identify new media and employment challenges. A progressive organization must create channels through which these forms of knowledge influence interpretation and policy. Without such channels, institutional expansion can coexist with epistemic marginalization.

7. Civic Leadership, Political Participation, and Organizational Nonpartisanship

The sixth theme concerns civic and political leadership. 'Aisyiyah formally shares Muhammadiyah's nonpartisan organizational orientation, but nonpartisanship does not mean withdrawal from public affairs. Handayani et al. (2019) document women's participation in government, electoral administration, political education, and community decision making in Central Kalimantan. The study is regionally specific and its percentage estimate should not be generalized nationally, yet it shows the channels through which organizational experience can support public leadership.

This pattern resembles a differentiated model of participation. The organization protects its collective independence from political parties, members retain individual political rights, and institutional engagement proceeds through advocacy, education, welfare, and policy dialogue. Such differentiation allows women to participate without converting 'Aisyiyah into an electoral vehicle. It also creates tension because the boundary between civic advocacy and partisan mobilization must be negotiated repeatedly.

Women's civic leadership extends beyond elected office. Branch meetings, school boards, health partnerships, village programs, interfaith cooperation, disaster response, and community education are arenas of public decision making. These practices cultivate what may be called everyday citizenship: the capacity to identify common problems, organize collective responses, communicate with authorities, and hold institutions accountable. Progressive Islam is visible when religious commitment enlarges this civic capacity rather than confining women to symbolic representation.

The literature also indicates barriers. Women leaders confront double workloads, expectations of domestic availability, uneven access to resources, and skepticism toward female authority. Political participation may depend on class, education, urban location, and family support. The national prominence of 'Aisiyiyah should therefore not be confused with equal opportunity for all members. Leadership pipelines need to address who advances, who performs invisible labor, and whose experiences are represented in organizational agendas.

Table 3. Thematic synthesis of 'Aisiyiyah's contributions

Theme	Institutional mechanisms	Progressive contribution	Persistent tension
Autonomous religious agency	Study circles, women-led structures, cadre succession	Women become organizers and interpreters, not only recipients	Autonomy remains negotiated within the wider movement
Education and cadre formation	Schools, teacher roles, training, higher education	Knowledge, professional identity, leadership pipeline	Credentials do not automatically produce epistemic equality
Health and welfare	Clinics, maternal-child programs, TB care, philanthropy	Care becomes public service and civic governance	Maternalism and unpaid care can limit recognition
Family resilience	Counseling, economic and health education, anti-violence potential	Domestic issues enter public ethics and policy	Harmony language can obscure unequal power
Religious authority	Teaching, interpretation, publication, consultation	Women produce Islamic knowledge from experience and scholarship	Formal doctrinal arenas may remain male dominated
Civic participation	Political education, public office, community decisions, advocacy	Nonpartisan organization supports active citizenship	Class, geography, and double burden shape access

Discussion

1. 'Aisiyiyah as Institutionalized Progressive Islam

The synthesis shows that 'Aisiyiyah's contribution is best understood as institutionalized Progressive Islam. Its importance does not rest on a single doctrinal statement or prominent leader. It rests on the creation of organizational forms through which women repeatedly convert faith into knowledge, service, and public responsibility. The

organization makes progress durable by embedding it in schools, clinics, welfare programs, cadre systems, publications, and multilevel leadership structures.

This finding refines common approaches to Muslim women's leadership. Leadership studies often focus on personal traits or formal positions, while Islamic feminism is frequently analyzed through texts and interpretive arguments. 'Aisyiyah connects these domains. Female authority is produced through interpretation, but it is stabilized through institutions. Institutions, in turn, are not ideologically neutral. They teach a conception of the Muslim woman as educated, socially responsible, organizationally competent, and capable of representing public interests.

The concept of institutionalized progressive womanhood captures this interaction. Womanhood is institutionalized when expectations, capabilities, and authorities are reproduced through organizational routines. It is progressive when these routines expand women's substantive agency and contribute to justice and social benefit. The concept does not imply a finished condition. Institutions can reproduce both empowerment and hierarchy. Their progressive quality must be assessed by examining decision rights, knowledge authority, resource control, safety, inclusion, and the ability to challenge harmful norms.

A Distributed and Service-Oriented Leadership Model

The evidence supports a distributed model of leadership. 'Aisyiyah's influence is not reducible to national office holders. Leadership is exercised by local teachers, preachers, managers, health workers, counselors, cooperative organizers, and volunteers. Distribution broadens participation and creates resilience. It also makes leadership less visible to scholarship that looks only for elected or clerical authority.

Service is the primary source of legitimacy in this model. Leaders gain trust by solving problems and maintaining institutions. This resembles the Muhammadiyah ethic of *dakwah bil-hal*, or preaching through action. Yet service should not be romanticized. Effective service requires technical competence, labor, finance, monitoring, and political negotiation. Recognizing these requirements reveals that women are not merely caring; they are governing complex civic organizations.

The model also explains how 'Aisyiyah can be progressive without consistently using the language of feminism. It advances women's agency through Islamic vocabulary, organizational practice, and public benefit. This middle path can build broad legitimacy, especially in communities where external ideological labels are contested. However, avoiding labels does not remove the need for explicit gender analysis. Without analysis, service expansion can leave unequal authority untouched.

Progress, Tension, and Uneven Institutional Change

The review identifies five tensions that prevent a celebratory conclusion. The first is autonomy versus integration. Connection to Muhammadiyah supplies legitimacy and networks but may constrain independent agenda setting. The second is maternalism versus citizenship. Maternal language can authorize public service while narrowing acceptable forms of leadership. The third is service versus structural change. Institutions alleviate suffering, but they may not address the distribution of power that produces vulnerability. The fourth is educational achievement versus epistemic authority. Women may become highly educated while remaining underrepresented in doctrinal decision making. The fifth is national scale versus local inequality. A large network does not guarantee equal resources or opportunities across regions.

These tensions are not evidence that the progressive project has failed. They are mechanisms through which its meaning is contested. Progressive Islam should be treated as a reflexive orientation rather than a certificate. An organization is progressive to the extent that it can examine the social consequences of its own norms, revise programs, broaden representation, and allow affected women to shape decisions. This interpretation is consistent with *tajdid* as continuing renewal.

The literature also suggests that organizational learning is essential. Local programs produce knowledge that should move upward, while national policies need mechanisms for adaptation and evaluation. The multilevel network can support such learning, but only if reporting is not limited to activity counts. Indicators should include leadership succession, beneficiary voice, prevention of violence, women's control over resources, inclusion of marginalized groups, and the participation of young women in agenda setting.

An Integrative Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 presents the review's conceptual model. Normative foundations provide moral direction but do not produce change automatically. Organizational mechanisms translate values into roles, rules, training, and deliberation. Institutional arenas give women repeated opportunities to exercise responsibility. Leadership practices then produce capabilities and public outcomes. The model includes a feedback loop because social experience should reshape organizational priorities and interpretation.

The model yields four propositions. First, faith-based commitments contribute to women's leadership when women possess autonomous organizational space and decision authority. Second, service institutions generate public leadership when women control knowledge, resources, and relationships rather than merely supplying volunteer labor. Third, Progressive Islam becomes socially credible when normative equality is translated into measurable capabilities and protections. Fourth, the long-term quality of women's leadership depends on feedback systems that connect local experience to institutional learning and religious interpretation.



Figure 2. Integrative model of 'Aisiyiyah's progressive women's leadership.

Table 4. Conceptual propositions derived from the synthesis

Proposition	Statement	Interpretation
P1	Normative equality requires organizational authority.	Religious affirmation will have limited effect unless women can set agendas, allocate resources, and represent institutions.
P2	Service becomes leadership through control and professionalization.	Care-related activity produces public authority when women possess technical competence, managerial responsibility, and accountability mechanisms.
P3	Progressive Islam is capability-producing.	Its credibility depends on expanded knowledge, health, safety, livelihood, interpretive voice, and civic participation.
P4	Institutional renewal depends on epistemic feedback.	Local experience and marginalized voices must influence policy, program design, and religious reasoning.

Implications

For 'Aisiyiyah and Muhammadiyah, the review suggests that leadership development should move beyond increasing the number of women in office. It should examine decision authority, access to budgets, representation in doctrinal forums, succession opportunities, and the distribution of invisible labor. Cadre systems should connect religious formation with gender analysis, policy literacy, data use, and safeguarding competence.

For universities and researchers, 'Aisyiyah should be studied as a producer of knowledge rather than only as a research site. Participatory research can involve branch leaders, teachers, health workers, and beneficiaries in defining questions and interpreting results. Comparative studies across regions are needed to avoid Java-centered conclusions. Research should also examine disability, class, rurality, age, and religious minority status within service delivery.

For policy makers and civil-society partners, women's faith-based organizations are not merely channels for program implementation. They are civic institutions with their own knowledge, constituencies, and normative commitments. Partnerships should therefore protect organizational autonomy and include women leaders in design and evaluation, not only in community mobilization.

Limitations and Future Research

This review is limited by the uneven quality and distribution of the available literature. Several local studies are descriptive, while national historical works may not capture contemporary variation. The publication boundary excludes important post-2020 developments and later formulations of progressive womanhood. The review also includes institutional documents whose purpose is normative rather than independent evaluation. These sources were necessary for understanding organizational self-definition but were not treated as proof of outcomes.

Future research should build a comparative dataset on leadership pathways across 'Aisyiyah regions and institutions. Longitudinal studies could examine how cadres move from local service roles to senior organizational or public leadership. Outcome studies should distinguish program reach from empowerment, and should include beneficiary perspectives. Further work is also required on female religious authority, women's participation in Muhammadiyah's formal legal reasoning, economic leadership, environmental justice, digital activism, and intergenerational change.

CONCLUSION

The reviewed literature portrays 'Aisyiyah as one of the most durable institutional expressions of Muslim women's public agency in Indonesia. Its contribution to Progressive Islam lies in connecting religious commitment with organized education, health, welfare, family support, knowledge production, and civic responsibility. Through these arenas, women have acted as teachers, preachers, managers, professionals, organizers, and public representatives. The resulting leadership model is distributed, service-oriented, and grounded in negotiated organizational autonomy.

The synthesis also shows that institutional expansion is not identical to gender justice. Maternalist expectations, unequal interpretive authority, regional disparities, double workloads, and the distance between service provision and structural reform remain consequential. Progressive Islam should therefore be understood as an ongoing institutional discipline: the continuous effort to test religious and organizational practices against justice, benefit, knowledge, and human dignity. 'Aisyiyah's historical

importance is not that it resolved every gender tension, but that it created enduring women-led institutions through which such tensions could be addressed collectively. Its experience demonstrates that women's leadership becomes transformative when faith-grounded agency is supported by authority, resources, professional capability, and mechanisms for institutional learning.

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