



Rahmah El Yunusiyah and the Transformation of Muslim Women's Education in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study analyzes the educational thinking of Rahmah El Yunusiyah and her contribution to the transformation of Muslim women's education in Indonesia. Against the backdrop of limited access to education for Muslim women in the early 20th century due to patriarchal social and cultural constructs, Rahmah El Yunusiyah founded Diniyyah Puteri in 1923. She introduced an Islamic educational model that integrated religious knowledge, general knowledge, character building, and life skills, making her a significant pioneer. This study uses library methods with a historical and descriptive-critical approach. The findings show that Rahmah's thinking, shaped by the Minangkabau context, the Islamic renewal movement, and personal experience, focuses on women's empowerment through holistic and integrative education. Its implementation in Diniyyah Puteri includes a comprehensive curriculum, emphasizing character education, independence, and women's leadership. Rahmah's thinking has proven to be relevant both historically and contemporary, aligning with the challenges of the digital era, Society 5.0, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in realizing gender equality and sustainable development. Her intellectual legacy provides a crucial reference for the development of inclusive and progressive Islamic education.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a key instrument in the development of civilization and the improvement of human resources. Throughout Indonesian history, access to education for women has undergone a long and complex development. In the early 20th century, the educational status of indigenous women in the Dutch East Indies was extremely concerning, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

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Census data from 1930 recorded that only 2.2% of indigenous women could read and write, while the literacy rate for indigenous men was 10.8%. This gap was further exacerbated by gender-discriminatory colonial education policies: school enrollment figures for the period 1909–1922 indicate that girls represented only about 8% of the total student population, largely because the majority of indigenous parents refused to have their daughters study alongside boys in the same classroom. Meanwhile, the Dutch colonial government spent approximately 300,000 guilders on indigenous schools, while more than twice that 700,000 guilders was spent on the education of the children of the approximately 25,000 Europeans living in Java. This situation was exacerbated by patriarchal culture, as well as religious understandings that tended to limit women's educational opportunities (Hasibuan & others, 2023; Tarigan, Hasibuan, Irawan, & Nasution, 2022; van Nederveen Meerkerk, 2021).

Amidst this situation, Rahmah El Yunusiyah emerged as a prominent Islamic educational reformer, placing significant emphasis on women's education. By establishing Diniyyah Puteri in Padang Panjang in 1923, Rahmah introduced a model of Islamic education that combined religious knowledge, general knowledge, character building, and life skills for Muslim women. This innovation established Rahmah as a pioneer in Muslim women's education in Indonesia (Hasan, 2023).

Several previous studies have examined Rahmah El Yunusiyah from various perspectives, but each has a limited focus that leaves unfilled research areas. First, biographical and historical studies, such as those by Murni (2019) and Nata (2020), tend to focus on Rahmah's life journey and the socio-political context of the founding of Diniyyah Puteri, without delving deeply into the epistemological and philosophical constructs underlying her educational thinking. Second, studies that discuss the institution of Diniyyah Puteri, as reviewed by (Haq, Zahra, Zesilva, Aini, & Thobroni, 2026; Rauf, Wahyuni, & Umam, 2025) Most studies have focused on organizational management, formal curricula, and institutional development over time, but have paid less attention to how Rahmah's educational values and principles have transformed and adapted in response to changing social dynamics.

Third, studies linking Rahmah's thinking to gender issues, such as those by Sari (2020) and Rahayu (2022), while addressing the dimensions of women's equality and empowerment, remain partial and fail to integrate this analysis into a comprehensive framework for transforming Muslim women's education. Fourth, to date, no studies have specifically and comprehensively analyzed the relevance of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's educational thinking to contemporary educational challenges, such as strengthening character education, developing human resources based on Islamic values, and responding to the challenges of the digital era and globalization. These gaps constitute the research gaps that this research specifically aims to address.

This research is crucial because Rahmah's educational thinking and practices were not only influential in her time but also relevant to various educational issues in the digital era. By positioning itself as a study that specifically examines the dimensions of Rahmah's transformative thoughts and contributions that have not been widely studied in an integrated manner in the existing literature, this study aims to analyze Rahmah El Yunusiyah's educational thoughts and her contribution to the transformation of Muslim women's education in Indonesia.

METHODS

This research uses a library research method with a historical and descriptive-critical approach (Pasaribu et al., 2026). This method was chosen because the research focused on examining Rahmah El Yunusiyah's thoughts and contributions based on various relevant written sources. Data sources in this study are divided into primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include authentic documents directly

related to the research subject, namely original writings or statements by Rahmah El Yunusiyah (if available), archives and official documents of Diniyyah Puteri Padang Panjang, and contemporary historical records that directly record her educational activities and thoughts. Secondary sources include biographies and history books discussing Rahmah El Yunusiyah and Diniyyah Puteri, scientific journal articles, seminar proceedings, and academic literature related to Islamic education, women's education, and social transformation in Indonesia.

Literature selection was based on three criteria: (1) substantial relevance to the theme of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's educational thought; (2) source credibility, namely publication by an indexed journal or reputable academic publisher; and (3) source recency, with priority given to publications within the last twenty years, except for irreplaceable historical sources.

Data collection techniques were conducted through documentation studies, reviewing various academic references that met the above criteria. Next, the data were analyzed using content analysis techniques, which included data reduction, theme categorization, conceptual interpretation, and drawing conclusions (Hendry & Manongga, 2024). The analysis focuses on four main dimensions: the intellectual biography of Rahmah El Yunusiyah, the concept of women's education that she developed, the implementation of this thought through Diniyyah Puteri, and its relevance in the context of contemporary education.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Intellectual Biography of Rahmah El Yunusiyah. Social, Cultural, and Religious Conditions of Minangkabau in the Early 20th Century. The emergence of Rahmah El Yunusiyah as a reformer of women's education cannot be separated from the social, cultural, and religious conditions of Minangkabau society in the early 20th century. Minangkabau society adheres to a matrilineal kinship system that places women as the owners of the lineage, but this position is not accompanied by adequate access to formal education. Surau, despite its important role as a center for the transmission of Islamic knowledge, gives more space to men, so that women are relatively left behind in obtaining broader educational opportunities (Enhas, Zahara, & Basri, 2023; Furqan, 2019; Nasution, Lubis, & Tanjung, 2022). At the same time, a wave of Islamic renewal from the Middle East through figures such as Muhammad Abduh, Rasyid Ridha, and Jamaluddin al-Afghani began to enter Indonesia, emphasizing the importance of education, rationality, and mastery of modern science (Hafsoh, 2021). The Minangkabau situation, situated at the crossroads of tradition, religion, colonialism, and modernization, shaped Rahmah's view that societal progress would be impossible if women remained educationally disadvantaged.

Family Influence on the Formation of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's Thinking. Rahmah El Yunusiyah was born in Padang Panjang on December 29, 1900, into a family with a strong tradition of Islamic scholarship. Her father, Sheikh Muhammad Yunus, was a respected cleric, while her mother was known for her strong focus on children's education. This religious and intellectual environment provided the initial foundation for Rahmah's development (Jasmi, 2020). A significant influence came from her older brother, Zainuddin Labay El Yunusy, a pioneer in the modernization of Islamic education and founder of the Diniyah School in 1915 (Zahra, Romlah, Yakin, & others, 2024). Through her intense interaction with Zainuddin, Rahmah became acquainted with the idea of educational reform and at the same time realized the real gap between the education of men and women (Nasution et al., 2022; Rahma, 2024). This subsequently led to the birth of the idea of a women-only education system.

The Influence of the Islamic Reform Movement on Rahmah El Yunusiyah's Educational Thought. Rahmah's development of thought was also closely related to

the Islamic reform movement, which emphasized the importance of returning to authentic Islamic teachings through rational and contextual understanding, as well as the integration of religious and modern knowledge as a prerequisite for the advancement of the community (Hidayat, Mujibur Rohman, & others, 2025). Rahmah saw that the reform movement developing at that time was still primarily focused on the education of men, so she felt the need to create a movement that specifically focused on women. In her view, women held a strategic position as educators of the next generation and responsible members of society, so women's education should be an integral part of the Islamic reform agenda. This thinking demonstrates that Rahmah was not simply following the currents of modernization, but was making a distinctive contribution through her focus on women's empowerment (Adzkia, Fahreza, Nurhaliza, Hibatillah, & Fadhil, 2025; Susiana, Putri, Anli, & others, 2025).

Factors that Drive Rahmah El Yunusiyah to Choose Education. Rahmah's decision to use education as a means of struggle was driven by her awareness of the low level of education for women, which makes it difficult for them to actively participate in social life (Dewi, Khoir, Saudi, & Azizah, 2024). The religious belief that Islam requires every Muslim, male and female, to seek knowledge is also a strong foundation, so that their struggle is seen as part of da'wah and devotion to religion (Faqih, 2024). Her experiences interacting with various Islamic reformers further strengthened her belief that national progress depends heavily on the quality of education, particularly the education of women, who serve as the primary educators of children within the family.

Constructing Thoughts on Muslim Women's Education. These experiences shaped Rahmah's thinking, emphasizing that education should be a means of empowerment that improves the quality of women's lives without relinquishing their Islamic identity. She believes that women's education must encompass the development of all aspects of their personality, including spiritual, intellectual, moral, and social aspects, thus developing a holistic and integrative educational concept (Haq et al., 2026). Women are seen not only as potential housewives, but also as individuals with the potential to become leaders, educators, and agents of social change. This thinking demonstrates Rahmah's success in developing a progressive educational paradigm that remains rooted in Islamic values, believing that Islamic teachings provide a strong foundation for women's empowerment through education (Nasution et al., 2022; Robbany & Rifai, 2025)).

Her ideas were then concretely realized through the establishment of Diniyyah Puteri. **Rahmah El Yunusiyah's Educational Thoughts. The Concept of Women's Education from an Islamic Perspective.** One of Rahmah's greatest contributions is her idea of women's education that is based on Islamic values and responsive to social change. Rahmah emphasized that Islam gives equal rights and obligations to men and women to acquire knowledge, and that women's backwardness is not due to Islamic teachings, but rather to social constructions that limit their access to education (Dewi et al., 2024; Nasution et al., 2022).

Women are seen as holding a strategic position as the first educators in the family, so the quality of their education significantly determines the quality of the next generation. In contrast to traditional patterns that limit women to specific religious aspects, Rahmah developed a comprehensive educational concept, positioning women as intelligent, independent, critical learners capable of making a real contribution to society.

Integration of Religious and General Education. Rahmah observed that the dichotomy between religious and general education was inadequate to meet the needs of Muslim women facing social change. She argued that religious and general education are two complementary aspects of knowledge: religious education forms a

moral and spiritual foundation, while general education develops intellectual abilities and adaptability. This concept is embodied in the Diniyyah Puteri curriculum, which integrates the Quran, hadith, fiqh, monotheism, and morals with mathematics, science, history, foreign languages, and various other skills. This concept of integration reflects the Islamic view that recognizes no separation between worldly and afterlife affairs, and remains relevant today as one of the foundations of the integrative Islamic education paradigm in Indonesia.

Character Education and the Formation of the Personality of Muslim Women. Rahmah believes that educational success is measured not only by academic achievement but also by the quality of the student's morals and personality. She believes that the ideal Muslim woman is one who possesses a balance between intellectual intelligence and spiritual maturity, with values of honesty, discipline, responsibility, independence, and social awareness not only taught formally but also instilled through daily life activities. The boarding school system at Diniyyah Puteri serves as an important means of developing this character, training students to live independently, work collaboratively, and assume responsibility in a sustainable manner. This character education model is highly relevant in facing current challenges such as the moral crisis and ethical degradation.

The Concept of Women's Independence Through Education. Rahmah believes that education must produce women who are able to manage their lives independently, encompassing intellectual, social, moral, and spiritual dimensions, not just economic ones. To achieve this, the Diniyyah Puteri curriculum incorporates practical skills such as administration, family health, culinary arts, entrepreneurship, and organizational leadership. Interestingly, the independence Rahmah envisions remains within the framework of social responsibility and Islamic values. Therefore, women's empowerment is not an attempt to eliminate the role of the family or religious values, but rather to increase women's capacity to carry out their various social roles more effectively.

Analysis of Rahmah's Thoughts from the Perspective of Islamic Modernism and Islamic Feminism. Academically, Rahmah's thoughts can be analyzed through two perspectives: Islamic modernism and Islamic feminism. From an Islamic modernist perspective, she supports educational reform, the integration of knowledge, and the development of rationality as prerequisites for the advancement of the community, rejecting conservative attitudes that hinder women's access to knowledge. From an Islamic feminist perspective, her struggle to expand women's access to education and increase their participation in social life demonstrates a closeness to this paradigm. However, Rahmah's feminism differs from secular feminism because she uses Islamic teachings as the primary foundation for fighting for women's rights, rather than viewing religion as a source of gender inequality. Thus, her thoughts are better understood as a synthesis of Islamic modernism and Islamic feminism, each with its own unique characteristics, making her one of the most important figures in the history of Indonesian education.

Diniyyah Puteri as an Implementation of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's Educational Thoughts. History of the Establishment of Diniyyah Puteri. Diniyyah Puteri was founded in Padang Panjang on November 1, 1923, in response to the lagging educational conditions of Muslim women during the colonial era, when most Islamic educational institutions did not provide adequate space for women to study systematically and sustainably (Tarigan et al., 2022). Despite facing challenges such as social resistance, limited facilities, and funding, Rahmah succeeded in developing this institution into one of the most influential women's educational institutions in Indonesia. Diniyyah Puteri's success received international recognition when in 1955 Rahmah received an honorary award from Al-Azhar University in Cairo for her contributions to women's education.

Diniyyah Puteri's Educational Philosophy. Diniyyah Puteri is built on a holistic educational philosophy that views education as an effort to shape the whole person, encompassing the dimensions of spiritual, intellectual, moral, emotional, and social (Adzkia et al., 2025). The ultimate goal of education is to develop Muslim women with religious awareness, critical thinking skills, independence, and social responsibility. Rahmah places religious education as the primary foundation, not merely as a mastery of rituals, but as a source of values that guide all life activities. This philosophy demonstrates Rahmah's efforts to establish a balance between Islamic tradition and the demands of modernity.

Integrative Curriculum as an Educational Innovation. The Diniyyah Puteri curriculum is designed to integrate religious subjects such as the Quran, Hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, monotheism, interpretation, and morals with general subjects such as mathematics, history, science, and foreign languages, as well as practical skills such as family health, culinary arts, administration, household management, and entrepreneurship (Fatachil'Izza, 2025). This approach reflects Rahmah's view that there is no conflict between religion and science, as all knowledge essentially comes from God and can be used for the benefit of humanity. Thus, education not only prepares students for academic success but also equips them with the skills necessary for real life. **Women's Leadership Education.** Rahmah believes that women have the same leadership potential as men and should be given the opportunity to develop it through education, a highly progressive view at a time when leadership was still seen as a male domain (Humaira, Rahman, Ismail, Adhha, & Marwan, 2026). Through organizational activities, leadership training, and group discussions, students are trained to lead, communicate, collaborate, and make decisions. Rahmah's leadership concept is strongly oriented toward moral values and social service, emphasizing leadership as a form of responsibility to serve the community, not as a means of gaining power.

The boarding school system serves as a holistic educational medium. Rahmah believes that the formation of character and moral values requires a continuous educational environment (Rahmayanti, Kuswandi, & Wedi, 2025). Through the boarding system, all daily activities, from worship and study to group work and personal care, are designed as part of an educational process that fosters discipline, responsibility, independence, and social awareness. This approach demonstrates Rahmah's understanding that values cannot be taught theoretically but must be internalized through daily life practices (Setiawan, Hidayati, Hasanah, & Khairunnisa, 2024).

Diniyyah Puteri's Contribution to the Transformation of Muslim Women's Education. Diniyyah Puteri has had a significant impact, producing many women who have become educators, organizational leaders, social activists, and academics. Its integrative educational model has inspired the emergence of various women's educational institutions throughout Indonesia and represents an important legacy in the history of national Islamic education (Adzkia et al., 2025; Susiana et al., 2025). From the perspective of social transformation, Diniyyah Puteri has succeeded in shifting the paradigm of society from viewing women as limited to the domestic sphere to becoming important actors in social, cultural, and religious development, proving that inclusive education oriented towards the development of the whole human being is capable of becoming a force for transformation across generations (Atlis & Roza, 2024).

The Relevance of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's Thoughts in the Contemporary Era. **The Relevance of Women's Education in Achieving Equality and Human Development.** Although women's access to education in Indonesia has increased significantly, challenges such as disparities in remote areas, socio-economic inequality, early marriage, and gender stereotypes remain (Hidayat et al., 2025). In this

context, Rahmah's idea that education is the right of every woman and the main instrument of social empowerment remains an important foundation for national education development (Susiana et al., 2025). Various studies show that increasing women's education is positively correlated with decreasing poverty rates, increasing economic participation, and improving public health, proving the relevance of Rahmah's view that educated women are agents of change capable of transforming families and communities.

The Relevance of Character Education in Facing the Challenges of the Digital Era. Technological developments present new challenges such as hoaxes, digital radicalism, cyberbullying, and deviant behavior, demonstrating that education cannot simply focus on mastering knowledge but must also build strong character (Mighfaza & Huriani, 2023). Rahmah's thinking, which places moral development as the primary goal of education, is highly relevant in this context. The values of honesty, responsibility, discipline, social awareness, and integrity she emphasizes are crucial competencies in the digital age. Furthermore, the habit-based educational model at Diniyyah Puteri offers a relevant approach to character building in the modern era, which requires a generation that is both intellectually intelligent and ethically and socially mature (Yenti, 2022).

The Relevance of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's Thoughts in the Era of Society 5.0. The Era of Society 5.0, which integrates digital technology with human needs, demands human resources that are adaptive, creative, innovative, and have a strong moral foundation (Adika et al., 2024; Antoninis et al., 2023). Although he lived long before this concept was born, Rahmah's thinking strongly resonates with it. The principle of balance between mastery of knowledge and character building, as well as the integration of religious knowledge and general knowledge that he developed, is highly relevant in an era that requires individuals not only to master technology but also to possess ethical awareness and social responsibility (Robbany & Rifai, 2025). Its educational orientation toward developing life skills such as communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and critical thinking also aligns with the needs of 21st-century competencies.

Rahmah El Yunusiyah's Contribution to the Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a global development agenda formulated by the United Nations to achieve inclusive, sustainable, and equitable development (Pangestu, Rahmadiani, Hardiyanti, & Yusida, 2021). Although Rahmah El Yunusiyah lived long before the SDGs were introduced, her ideas are closely linked to these goals.

First, Rahmah's thinking is directly related to SDG 4 (Quality Education), which emphasizes the importance of quality education for all. Through Diniyyah Puteri, Rahmah strived to provide access to quality education for women who, at that time, still faced various limitations. The educational model she developed was oriented not only toward improving academic abilities but also toward character development and life skills.

Second, Rahmah's efforts are highly relevant to SDG 5 (Gender Equality), which aims to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment. Rahmah emphasized that women have equal rights to education and develop their full potential. Through education, women can increase their capacity and participate more actively in social and economic life.

Third, the education Rahmah developed contributes to SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Quality education provides opportunities for women to improve their skills, obtain better jobs, and improve their families' economic conditions. Thus, education is a crucial instrument in poverty alleviation.

Fourth, Rahmah's ideas on character education and social responsibility also relate to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Education that instills the values of honesty, responsibility, and social awareness contributes to the formation of a more peaceful, just, and integrated society.

The alignment between Rahmah's thoughts and the SDGs agenda demonstrates that her ideas have a universal dimension that transcends the historical context in which she lived. These thoughts remain relevant as a foundation for designing educational policies oriented toward human development and social sustainability. *The Relevance of Women's Leadership Education in the Contemporary Public Sphere*. One of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's most important legacies is her ideas on women's leadership. At a time when women still faced various social restrictions, Rahmah believed that women had the ability to become leaders and agents of change in society (Dewi et al., 2024). This perspective is realized through various educational programs at Diniyyah Puteri, which aim to develop women's leadership capacity. Students are not only taught science but also trained to think critically, make decisions, lead organizations, and participate in various social activities.

In the contemporary context, this idea is increasingly relevant because women now have greater opportunities to participate in various areas of public life. The presence of women as academics, politicians, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, social activists, and organizational leaders demonstrates that women's leadership capacity is increasingly being recognized. However, various challenges remain, such as gender stereotypes, structural discrimination, and disparities in women's representation in strategic positions. Therefore, the women's leadership education developed by Rahmah remains a relevant model for strengthening women's capacity to address these challenges. The leadership concept taught by Rahmah is also characterized by its emphasis on moral aspects, social responsibility, and service to the community. Leadership is not understood as domination of power, but rather as a mandate that must be carried out with integrity and commitment to the common good. This approach is highly suited to the needs of modern society, which requires leaders who are not only competent but also possess strong social and ethical sensitivity.

Overall, the relevance of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's thinking in the contemporary era demonstrates that her ideas not only hold historical value but also offer important perspectives for the development of Islamic education, women's empowerment, character building, and human resource development in the 21st century. Her thinking demonstrates that education oriented toward the integration of knowledge, values, and human empowerment has the capacity to address the challenges of our time while simultaneously building a more inclusive and equitable future.

CONCLUSION

Rahmah El Yunusiyah is a prominent Islamic education reformer who has made significant contributions to the transformation of Muslim women's education in Indonesia. Through her educational thoughts and practices, embodied in Diniyyah Puteri, Rahmah successfully developed an educational model that integrates religious knowledge, general knowledge, character education, life skills, and women's leadership development. Rahmah's thinking demonstrates that women's education is a strategic instrument in community development and national progress. Her ideas were not only relevant during the colonial era but also remain relevant in facing 21st-century educational challenges such as gender equality, digital transformation, character building, and sustainable development. Therefore, Rahmah El Yunusiyah's intellectual legacy can serve as an important reference for the development of inclusive, progressive, and empowering Islamic education.

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