

# The Role of Rahmah El Yunusiyah in Educational Transformation: A Literature Review

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## Abstract

Rahmah El Yunusiyah was a visionary female figure in the history of Islamic education in Indonesia who made significant contributions to the transformation of the education system. This article aims to analyze in depth Rahmah El Yunusiyah's role in shifting traditional educational paradigms toward a more progressive and inclusive framework based on Islamic values. Through a systematic literature review, this study identifies Rahmah's educational innovations, including the establishment of Madrasah Diniyah Puteri, the first formal educational institution designed specifically for Muslim women in Indonesia. The findings reveal that Rahmah not only created learning opportunities for women but also formulated a holistic educational approach that encompassed spiritual, intellectual, and social development. Her impact extended to the reform of Islamic education curricula and the empowerment of women during the colonial period and post-independence era. This study concludes that Rahmah El Yunusiyah's contributions laid a crucial foundation for developing an education system rooted in local wisdom, which remains relevant to the challenges of educational globalization in the modern era.

**Keywords:** Rahmah El Yunusiyah, Educational Transformation, Islamic Education, Madrasah Diniyah Puteri, Women's Empowerment, Literature Review.



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## Introduction

The importance of women's roles in the history of Indonesian education cannot be overlooked. Since the early 20th century, women have played a crucial role in advancing education, both in formal and non-formal contexts. Female figures such as Rahmah El Yunusiyah, Nyai Ahmad Dahlan, and Kartini paved the way for Indonesian women to gain proper access to education. Women are not only beneficiaries of education but also agents of change in society, contributing to the advancement of national education and social emancipation. As Nurcholis Madjid (2003) stated, *"Women are a vital human resource in the development of education, both in their capacity as educators and as subjects needing education to fight for their rights."* This statement underscores the significance of women's roles in the educational world, and Rahmah El Yunusiyah stands as a concrete example of women's contributions to the history of Indonesian education.

Historically, women in Indonesia have often struggled to secure their rights to education, which eventually led to the establishment of various educational institutions aimed at providing equal opportunities for both women and men. On the other hand, women's roles in education have also contributed to the moral and spiritual development of the nation. For instance, Rahmah El Yunusiyah

established the *Madrasah Diniyah Puteri* as an educational institution that prioritized Islamic education for women, with the hope of shaping women to be knowledgeable, virtuous, and independent. Education for women also has a profound impact on creating social change, reducing poverty, and building a more empowered society. Rahmah El Yunusiyah was an educator and an educational reformer born in West Sumatra. She is renowned as a figure who courageously introduced new ideas in education, particularly by integrating religious education with general education. As the founder of *Madrasah Putri*, Rahmah El Yunusiyah paved the way for women to receive education equal to men, a groundbreaking achievement during her era. According to Ridwan (2014), "*Madrasah Putri established by Rahmah El Yunusiyah became the forerunner of modern education for women in West Sumatra and even in Indonesia.*" Through an inclusive educational approach, she successfully demonstrated that women have the same right to access quality education.

Examining Rahmah El Yunusiyah's contributions through a literature review is crucial for gaining a deeper understanding of her impact and role in the transformation of education in Indonesia. Her contributions were not limited to the educational theories she taught but also extended to the application of social and cultural values that emphasized gender equality and women's empowerment. This aligns with Mulyasa's (2013) view that "*Education is a tool to create equality and improve the quality of life, and the role of women as agents of change is crucial in achieving this goal.*" Through a systematic literature review, we can uncover more aspects of her struggle and gain broader insights into the relevance of her efforts in the context of contemporary education. Furthermore, Rahmah El Yunusiyah's contributions strengthen the narrative of the importance of women's education as a foundation for community empowerment. As Suryadi (2008) explains, inclusive education, as designed by Rahmah, serves not only to elevate the status of women but also to build a more egalitarian and just society. Therefore, an in-depth study of her legacy not only honors her contributions but also provides a foundation for developing educational policies that are more relevant and adaptive to the challenges of globalization.

## **Methods**

This study employs the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to provide an in-depth analysis of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's contributions to the transformation of education in Indonesia. This method was chosen for its ability to explore, evaluate, and synthesize information contained in various literature related to the history of education, her written works, and her contributions to advancing education for women. The primary data sources for this research include historical archives, scientific journals, biographical books, and other relevant documents, such as articles discussing women's education, the development of Islamic education, and the socio-cultural context of Indonesia during her era. These sources were selected based on their relevance, credibility, and the diversity of perspectives they offer in portraying Rahmah El Yunusiyah's struggles and contributions.

After collecting the data, a selection of the literature was carried out by considering the quality and quantity of relevant information and its relevance to the main theme of this study. The next steps involved analysis and synthesis, during which each piece of literature was examined to identify key themes related to Rahmah's role in education, the educational innovations she introduced, and their impact on women's empowerment. Through this systematic literature review, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact and relevance of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's efforts in the field of education, particularly in the context of education that is more inclusive and rooted in local wisdom.

## Results and Discussions

### 1. Results

#### a. Short Biography of Rahmah El Yunusiyah

Rahmah El Yunusiyah was born in 1900 in Nagari Kota Gadang, Bukittinggi, West Sumatra. She came from a Minangkabau family of Islamic scholars who placed great importance on education. Her religious and intellectual family environment greatly influenced her perspective on the importance of education, especially for women. Her father, Haji Muhammad Yunus, was a scholar and a successful merchant. Her mother, Hj. Rangkayo Halimah, was a broad-minded woman who supported the education of her children. This combination of parental upbringing shaped Rahmah into a resilient and visionary woman. Rahmah received her religious education traditionally in a surau—a typical Minangkabau learning system at the time. At a young age, she showed great interest in knowledge and often debated with religious figures to advocate for the idea that women should have access to education. After completing basic education, Rahmah did not continue formal schooling because, at that time, public schools were only for men. However, her passion for learning did not waver. She pursued self-directed learning and expanded her knowledge through discussions with prominent Islamic scholars.



**Figure 1.** Rahmah El Yunusiyah

At the age of 23, Rahmah established the Madrasah Diniyah Puteri in Padang Panjang. This was the first formal educational institution in Indonesia specifically designed for women. The primary goal of establishing this madrasah was to provide Muslim women with the opportunity to study both religious and general knowledge simultaneously. Rahmah not only focused on formal education but also championed women's rights in society. She believed that education was the primary pathway to empowering women and elevating their status.

According to Hamka (1982), Rahmah is a symbol of the struggle for women's education who succeeded in breaking the patriarchal traditions of her time, when women were often sidelined from access to formal education. Through the establishment of Madrasah Diniyah Puteri, she offered a holistic approach to education that combined spiritual, intellectual, and practical skills, making it the first model of women's education in Indonesia based on progressive Islamic values. A literature review of Rahmah's contributions is also important to preserve the historical legacy of Islamic education. According to Azra (2004), Rahmah's efforts in founding an educational institution specifically for women was a reformative step that integrated local values and religion into modern education. This thinking not only had an impact on the local context but also became an inspiration for global educational reforms, especially in discussions about gender-

based education. Furthermore, a study of Rahmah's ideas can fill the gap in literature that has long overlooked women's contributions to the history of Islamic education. As one of the visionary women during the colonial era, Rahmah was deeply motivated to fight for women's rights in education, which at that time was very limited. As Nurcholis Madjid (2003) stated, "Women's education is the key to unlocking equality and progress in society." Rahmah viewed education as the primary means to advance women and society as a whole. This awareness arose because she saw that women at that time had almost no access to broader education and were often confined to traditional roles as housewives or wives only.

Rahmah El Yunusiyah's journey in the world of education began with the belief that women have the right to the same opportunities in accessing education. This is in line with Mulyasa's (2013) view that "Education is not only to develop individual potential but also to fight for the rights and dignity of humans, especially women." By establishing Madrasah Putri as the first educational institution that integrated religious education with general education for women, Rahmah not only fought for formal education for women but also created opportunities for them to participate in intellectual and social development.

Rahmah's courage in founding Madrasah Putri was highly significant because, at the time, education for women was still considered taboo and seen as a matter for men. Ridwan (2014) in his research emphasized that "Rahmah's approach in establishing Madrasah Putri not only provided access to education for women but also created a paradigmatic shift that opened opportunities for more inclusive education." He highlighted that through her progressive approach based on moderate Islamic values, Rahmah El Yunusiyah succeeded in demonstrating that women's education is an investment for the future of the nation. According to Mariam Al-Mahdi (2018), "Figures like Rahmah El Yunusiyah prove that women can be agents of change in education and society." This shows that Rahmah's contribution lies not only in the establishment of an educational institution but also in her role in breaking down the barriers that confined women from obtaining education equal to that of men.

#### **b. Major Contributions in Education**

This madrasah was founded by Rahmah El Yunusiyah in 1923 in Padang Panjang, West Sumatra. She had a visionary perspective, aiming to provide equal educational opportunities for both men and women, which was very rare at the time. Rahmah's goal in establishing Diniyah Putri was not only to teach religious knowledge but also to provide general education that integrated religious knowledge and essential life skills, such as social skills and general knowledge. Rahmah sought to prove that women have the same right to access quality education and the potential to develop in various fields. Diniyah Putri not only taught Islamic religious education but also became a center for producing intelligent, skilled, and independent women, ready to contribute to the advancement of society.

The educational approach applied in this institution emphasized moderate Islamic values, combining spiritual and intellectual education with practical skills. Rahmah's courage in founding Diniyah Putri marked a historical milestone in the development of women's education in Indonesia. Before the establishment of this institution, education for women was very limited and often considered unnecessary. The madrasah founded by Rahmah El Yunusiyah opened opportunities for women to study religious knowledge, language, science, and other skills, which in turn helped them play a greater role in social and economic life. By establishing Diniyah Putri, Rahmah El Yunusiyah made a significant contribution to social change in Indonesia, particularly in advocating for women's rights to receive education equal to that of men. This institution became not only a place of learning but also a symbol of the struggle for gender equality through education.

### **c. Curriculum innovation that combines religious and general knowledge**

Education for women in Indonesia was very limited and generally focused only on teaching Islamic religious knowledge. However, Rahmah El Yunusiyah realized the importance of a more holistic education for women, one that not only taught religious knowledge but also prepared them to face the challenges of the outside world with general knowledge. This innovation is reflected in the curriculum of Diniyah Putri, which combines Islamic religious lessons with various general disciplines such as languages, mathematics, natural sciences, and practical skills.

According to Mulyasa (2013), "Education that integrates religious knowledge and general subjects is a highly effective approach to producing individuals who are not only strong in the spiritual realm but also competent in facing the challenges of the modern world." The approach taken by Rahmah is very relevant to the vision of education that combines aspects of spirituality and rationality, ultimately producing women who are not only religious but also skilled, intelligent, and ready to participate in social and economic development. The curriculum at Diniyah Putri is distinctly different from the educational institutions of that time, which were more focused solely on religious education. At Diniyah Putri, Rahmah taught that religion and general knowledge were not separate but complementary. With this approach, Rahmah aimed to shape women who were not only knowledgeable in religious matters but also able to contribute to daily life and actively participate in society. This curriculum innovation also provided space for women to develop intellectually without abandoning religious values. Ridwan (2014) emphasized in his research, "The curriculum innovation introduced by Rahmah El Yunusiyah at Diniyah Putri not only gave women the opportunity to learn, but also educated them to understand the world in its entirety." This shows that Rahmah successfully created a balance between religious education and general knowledge, which opened opportunities for women to explore their potential in various fields.

## **2. Discussions**

### **a. Its influence in reforming women's education in West Sumatra and the archipelago.**

Rahmah's influence was not limited to West Sumatra. The education concept she applied became an inspiration for many other female figures in Indonesia. Mulyasa (2013) states, "The education for women that combined religion and general knowledge introduced by Rahmah El Yunusiyah at Madrasah Diniyah Putri has become a model of modern education in Indonesia." This shows that Rahmah's impact was not only felt by the generations of women in West Sumatra but also across Indonesia, triggering a shift in the societal perspective on women's education. Furthermore, Rahmah El Yunusiyah played a role in raising awareness that education for women is crucial, both for their personal development and for the advancement of society as a whole. With equal education, women can contribute more significantly to social, economic, and cultural development.

In a broader context, Diniyah Putri became the first educational institution for women to break the barriers of its time. This education allowed women to excel in various fields, not just as housewives but also as educators, scientists, and social activists. Rahmah El Yunusiyah successfully laid the foundation for the struggle for gender equality in education, a cause that remains highly relevant today.

### **b. The Impact of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's Thoughts and Actions**

The thoughts and contributions of Rahmah El Yunusiyah have had a profound impact on the world of education, especially for women in Indonesia. As the founder of Madrasah Diniyah Putri in Padang Panjang, she introduced an educational concept that combined religious studies and general knowledge, which was revolutionary for her time. The madrasah not only provided religious education but also offered women the opportunity to master a broader scope of knowledge, including social and scientific skills, which were previously only available to men.

The inclusive educational concept she developed emphasized a balance between intellectual, social, and spiritual development. This paved the way for more equal education for women, giving them space to grow holistically and play an active role in society. According to Ridwan (2014), "Madrasah Diniyah Putri, founded by Rahmah El Yunusiyah, became the foundation for modern education for women in West Sumatra and Indonesia." Rahmah's innovation not only shaped the understanding of the importance of religious education but also empowered women through education. In the context of women's empowerment, Rahmah taught that education is the key to achieving gender equality. Mulyasa (2013) stated, "Education is a tool for creating equality," which aligns with Rahmah's struggle to ensure that women have equal access to quality education. Her contributions brought social change, enabling women to not only master religious knowledge but also acquire skills and knowledge useful in social and economic life.

Moreover, the impact of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's thoughts played a role in the modernization of women's education in Indonesia. She helped create a more inclusive and progressive educational system, where women were not only trained to be wives and mothers but also as individuals who play a role in building society. This opened the door for women to participate in the workforce and public activities, expanding their space in various aspects of life. Overall, Rahmah El Yunusiyah's contributions have left a valuable legacy in Indonesian education, especially in the fight for equality and the empowerment of women through education.

### **c. Critical Analysis**

#### **The Power of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's Ideas and Approach in the Context of Her Time**

Rahmah El Yunusiyah brought a groundbreaking innovation to the world of education in Indonesia, especially for women. During the colonial era, when women had almost no access to formal education, her ideas and approach to founding Madrasah Diniyah Putri, which combined religious education with general education, were visionary and progressive. At that time, this was a radical move because religious and general education were rarely integrated, and women were generally seen as not needing higher education. Rahmah's approach, which integrated religious and general knowledge, changed the educational paradigm that had previously been exclusive and gender-segregated. She realized that women had the potential to develop intellectually and spiritually, and thus, they deserved education equal to that of men. This educational concept became a powerful idea relevant to the goal of societal progress as, by providing equal access to education for women, Rahmah contributed to creating a more just and balanced society. As Ridwan (2014) stated, "Madrasah Diniyah Putri, founded by Rahmah El Yunusiyah, became the foundation for modern education for women in West Sumatra and Indonesia." This shows that, in her time, Rahmah's idea was not only strong but also had a significant impact on the development of women's education.

#### **Social, Cultural, and Political Barriers in Rahmah El Yunusiyah's Struggle and Challenges of Implementing Inclusive Education in the Modern Era**

Inclusive education is the right of every individual, yet there are still many social, cultural, and political challenges that hinder its implementation. Rahmah El Yunusiyah, by founding Madrasah Diniyah Puteri, fought to overcome patriarchal barriers and provide equal education for women during the colonial era. In the modern era, although technology and gender awareness have progressed, issues such as limited access to technology, gender inequality, and an exclusive curriculum still persist. Rahmah's struggle serves as an inspiration to overcome these challenges and realize a more just and equitable education. Below are some obstacles in El Yunusiyah's journey;

##### **1) Limited Access to Technology**

Although technology has advanced rapidly, there are still many areas in Indonesia that lack adequate access to technology, particularly in remote and rural regions. This exacerbates the educational gap between students who have access to technology and those who do not. The limited infrastructure, such as internet connectivity, availability of digital devices, and low digital

literacy among students and educators, presents significant barriers to effective learning and the implementation of inclusive education.

#### 2) Relevance of Rahmah El Yunusiyah

Rahmah El Yunusiyah exemplified how inclusive education can be implemented by utilizing available resources. During her time, she established Madrasah Diniyah Puteri as an innovative means to provide access to education for women amid the limited educational infrastructure of the colonial era. Her approach can serve as an inspiration in the modern era, where the government and society must collaborate to ensure equitable access to technology. Adopting Rahmah's spirit, schools in remote areas can combine conventional learning methods with simple technology to ensure they are not left behind in inclusive education.

#### 3) Gender Inequality in Education

Although awareness of gender equality is increasing, gender inequality in access to education remains a challenge, particularly in regions that maintain strong patriarchal traditions. Many girls are still hindered from continuing their education because they are expected to fulfill domestic roles. On the other hand, inclusive education policies have not fully addressed this inequality, both in terms of opportunity distribution and the development of women's potential

#### 4) Relevance of Rahmah El Yunusiyah

Rahmah El Yunusiyah was a pioneer in women's education in Indonesia, courageously challenging the patriarchal views of her time. By founding a school specifically for women, she succeeded in opening educational opportunities for women who were once deemed unnecessary to educate. Rahmah's belief that women have the same rights to intellectual, spiritual, and social development serves as a vital foundation for advocating inclusive education in the modern era. The application of gender equality values in education, as Rahmah fought for, must be a priority, including through curricula that encourage the active roles of women in various sectors.

#### 5) Role of the National Curriculum

The national curriculum plays a crucial role in realizing inclusive education. However, the curriculum often remains rigid and does not fully adapt to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, the integration of general knowledge with moral or spiritual values is still minimal, whereas a holistic approach is essential for building character and skills among students in the modern era.

The challenges of implementing inclusive education in the modern era remain highly relevant, despite significant progress in gender equality awareness and technology. Some of the key challenges faced include limited access to technology, gender inequality, and the role of the national curriculum, which has yet to fully support diversity and inclusivity. Limited access to technology, especially in remote or underdeveloped areas, hinders equal educational opportunities for all students, especially in today's digital age. Meanwhile, gender inequality still exists in many education sectors, where women are often marginalized or not given the same opportunities to access quality education. The role of the national curriculum is also a challenge, as there are still gaps in accommodating the needs of diverse students, especially those with special needs or from different backgrounds. Therefore, it is important to continue improving the curriculum and education system to be more inclusive and reach all layers of society without discrimination. Effective inclusive education requires attention and efforts to overcome these barriers, ensuring that every individual, regardless of background or ability, has equal access to quality education.

#### **The Relevance of His Ideas to Current Education**

The ideas and approach of Rahmah El Yunusiyah remain highly relevant in the context of modern education. Amid technological advancements and globalization, the inclusive education she championed—focused on gender equality and integrating various fields of knowledge—remains an important issue. Modern society continues to fight for gender equality in various sectors, especially in education, where women around the world are still often marginalized. Her

approach of integrating religious and general knowledge is also relevant in today's education system, where education not only teaches practical skills but also spiritual and moral values. In this fast-paced era, education that addresses intellectual, social, and spiritual aspects can shape holistic individuals, who are not only professionally competent but also possess deep character. This concept aligns well with the goals of 21st-century education, which emphasizes the importance of critical thinking, collaboration, and character development. As Mulyasa (2013) stated, "Education is a tool to create equality," highlighting that Rahmah's struggle to provide equal education for women is still highly relevant in the fight for social justice in education. Education for women has a significant impact on the socio-economic development of a nation. According to World Bank data (2021), each additional year of formal education for women can increase individual income by 10-20%, which in turn drives national GDP growth. However, gender disparities in access to education continue to result in a global income loss of up to USD 30 trillion annually, according to UNESCO (2020). Furthermore, women's education plays a crucial role in breaking the intergenerational poverty cycle. UNICEF reports that women with secondary education are twice as likely to avoid child marriage, which is often a factor in structural poverty. The National Socio-Economic Survey (SUSENAS) 2022 also shows that the unemployment rate for women with low education reaches 12.7%, much higher than for those with higher education, at 4.2%.

The impact of education on women is also reflected in the improvement of public health quality. Each additional year of education for a mother can reduce infant mortality by 5-10% (UNESCO, 2019). Additionally, children of educated mothers are more likely to receive complete immunizations and better caregiving. For example, the prevalence of stunting in regions with low female education, such as Papua, reaches 30%, much higher than in areas with better access to education. Women's education also contributes to improving gender equality across various sectors. UNDP data (2020) states that every 10% increase in female participation in education will raise their participation in politics by 3%. The close connection between Rahmah El Yunusiyah's thoughts and women's education is highly relevant in this context. Through the establishment of Madrasah Diniyah Puteri, Rahmah provided equal educational access for women amidst the social, cultural, and political barriers of the colonial era. She introduced the concept of holistic education that combines religious and general knowledge, preparing women to become independent, empowered individuals capable of contributing to society. This concept aligns with modern educational goals that emphasize the balance of intellectual, social, and spiritual aspects. Rahmah's efforts in creating opportunities for women to receive quality education serve as an inspiration in addressing today's inclusive education challenges, such as limited access to technology, gender inequality, and the lack of a curriculum that supports inclusive education.

Thus, education for women is not only a basic right but also a key to sustainable socio-economic transformation. Rahmah El Yunusiyah's thoughts remain an important model in the fight for advancing women's education in the modern era, where equal access to education can drive society toward a more just and equitable well-being.

## **Conclusion**

Rahmah El Yunusiyah made a significant contribution to education in Indonesia, particularly in women's education. As the founder of Madrasah Diniyah Putri, she introduced innovation by combining religious education with general knowledge, opening equal educational access for women during the colonial era. Her inclusive approach viewed women as subjects deserving of quality education and the opportunity to develop in various aspects of life—spiritual, intellectual, and social. This became the beginning of a major shift in women's education in Indonesia and laid the foundation for advocating for gender equality in education. Historically, Rahmah El Yunusiyah played an important role in breaking stereotypes and barriers that existed for women during the colonial era. By establishing Madrasah Diniyah Putri, she provided women with the opportunity to receive education

on par with men and introduced the concept of holistic and inclusive education. Her contribution sparked a social movement with a broad impact, not only in West Sumatra but also throughout the archipelago, advocating for women's right to access education.

Socially, her role opened opportunities for women to contribute to various sectors of life, including education, social affairs, and the economy. The application of gender equality values, women's empowerment, and education based on community needs continues to be a relevant legacy today. Rahmah's ideas and struggle in education have had a long-term impact that not only influenced women's education but also served as a pillar in the social transformation towards a more just and balanced society.

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