



Empowering Elderly Women through Education

Optimizing Traditional Leather Puppet Shows and Hadrah as a Creative Learning Medium

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the innovative educational efforts undertaken by 'Aisiyiah, the women's wing of Muhammadiyah, to empower elderly women through special educational programs. 'Aisiyiah use traditional leather puppet shows (Wayang Kulit) and Hadrah Music as an innovative and culturally relevant medium to educate elderly women. By integrating local wisdom and interactive performance art, the project aims to enhance lifelong learning, health awareness, and social inclusion among older women. The findings affirm that education, even later in life, can be a powerful tool for dignity, empowerment, and intergenerational solidarity. The optimization of Wayang Kulit and Hadrah in this context not only preserves intangible cultural heritage but also serves as a powerful tool for participatory education, promoting active aging and community engagement.

Keywords

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Introduction

Elderly women in Indonesia face a range of intersecting challenges stemming from gender inequality, poverty, limited access to education, and social exclusion. These issues are often compounded by inadequate policy attention to their specific needs [1]. Some of those issues are

economic Insecurity, Illiteracy, low Educational Attainment, Social Isolation and Loneliness, Gender-Based Discrimination, Cultural and Religious Expectations, Lack of Targeted Public Policy, and Faith-Based and Community-Based Empowerment [2].

Elderly women in Indonesia face a complex web of interrelated challenges that stem from longstanding structural and cultural inequalities. One of the most pressing issues is economic insecurity. Many elderly women did not participate in the formal workforce and therefore lack pensions or social security benefits, leaving them highly vulnerable to poverty [1]. As a result, they are often financially dependent on their children or other relatives. This dependency can lead to feelings of burden or even neglect within the family. Additionally, their limited education and skill sets make it difficult to engage in productive economic activities in later life, further compounding their financial instability.

Healthcare access is another major concern. Many elderly women suffer from untreated chronic conditions such as hypertension, arthritis, and osteoporosis due to a lack of access to affordable and age-appropriate health services, particularly in rural areas [1]. The scarcity of geriatric care options and the absence of healthcare professionals trained in elderly care exacerbate these problems. Moreover, cultural and religious beliefs sometimes discourage elderly women from seeking medical attention, as they may prioritize family obligations or feel hesitant due to traditional norms [2].

Illiteracy and low educational attainment add another layer of vulnerability. In many parts of rural Indonesia, older women never attended school because of past gender norms that prioritized boys' education. This educational gap contributes to their exclusion from modern forms of communication, particularly digital platforms that are increasingly used for accessing healthcare and financial services [2]. Consequently, these women face a significant digital divide, which hinders their participation in society and prevents them from accessing vital information.

Social isolation is also a growing issue. Changing family structures driven by urban migration and the shift toward nuclear families have reduced intergenerational living arrangements. Many elderly women, particularly widows, now live alone and experience deep loneliness without sufficient community or familial support. Gender-based discrimination further limits their opportunities. As elderly women, they face a double marginalization: often viewed as both “unproductive” due to age and undervalued due to gender. Their voices are rarely included in community decision-making or development planning, leaving their specific needs unaddressed.

Cultural and religious expectations can be both supportive and restrictive. While religion often serves as a source of comfort, elderly women may lack the religious education needed to fully engage in community religious life. Additionally, cultural norms tend to confine them to passive domestic roles, limiting their opportunities for leadership or personal development.

These expectations, combined with policy gaps, leave elderly women particularly underserved. Most national programs on aging are not gender-sensitive and lack initiatives that specifically address the realities of elderly women in rural and marginalized communities.

Despite these challenges, elderly education holds transformative potential. It can play a vital role in promoting dignity, independence, and overall well-being. Providing educational opportunities focused on health, nutrition, and mental stimulation can significantly improve elderly women's quality of life. Such programs not only reduce the risks of chronic illness and social isolation but also enhance self-confidence and empower women to participate more actively in family and community life.

Moreover, education enables elderly women to preserve and pass on local wisdom and cultural traditions, strengthening intergenerational bonds. It can also promote economic and social inclusion by equipping them with skills for small-scale entrepreneurship, especially in rural areas where job opportunities are scarce. Lifelong learning supports cognitive health, delaying the onset of dementia and enhancing memory and creativity. By focusing on elderly women, educational programs help reduce gender disparities and correct historical imbalances. Community-based and faith-based educational initiatives offer culturally relevant spaces for empowerment, allowing elderly women to regain their voice and role in society [3].

This study focuses on the efforts of 'Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah using traditional media: Puppet (*Wayang Kulit*) and Hadrah Music, to play a strategic role in elderly education by integrating Islamic values with health, social, and civic education. This approach not only respects religious identity but also strengthens the social fabric. This initiative aims to promote lifelong learning among elderly women by utilizing culturally rooted methods that resonate with their experiences and values. Central to this approach is the adaptation of traditional performance arts, particularly *Wayang Kulit* and *Hadrah*, as innovative educational tools. By integrating themes such as health, women's rights, financial literacy, and gender equality into these performances, the program seeks to deliver relevant knowledge in an engaging and accessible format. Beyond education, the project aspires to foster cultural appreciation and intergenerational learning, encouraging interaction between older and younger generations through shared cultural experiences. Additionally, the initiative includes a systematic evaluation of how creative traditional media can improve both the knowledge and overall quality of life of elderly women, ensuring that the methods employed are both impactful and sustainable.

Theoretical Framework

A. Theological Reform and Gender Discourse

'Aisyiyah plays a significant role in the reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) of Islamic texts concerning gender, family, and social roles. This approach promotes a gender-just Islamic theology that

affirms women's rights in areas such as marriage, inheritance, and leadership without deviating from the core principles of the Qur'an and Hadith. Scholars highlight how 'Aisiyiah's religious teachings challenge traditionalist interpretations while remaining rooted in Islamic sources, making them influential among moderate Muslim communities [4]-[6]. Two key mechanisms for this theological engagement and empowerment are the movement of *female ulama* and *Pengajian* (Islamic study groups), which foster community learning and critical religious discourse among women.

B. Political and Social Engagement

Although 'Aisiyiah is a non-partisan organization, it is actively involved in civic and political advocacy. It contributes to peacebuilding, anti-corruption efforts, and policy dialogue, particularly in promoting gender-responsive governance. Following Indonesia's Reformasi era, 'Aisiyiah supported women's participation in democratic processes and engaged in the development of laws concerning domestic violence and child protection. Woodward [4] conceptualizes 'Aisiyiah's model as a form of *pious activism*, where religious commitment harmonizes with civic engagement to advocate for social justice and gender equity. Through such initiatives, 'Aisiyiah demonstrates that religious identity can coexist with progressive activism in the public sphere.

Methods

This research adopts a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, utilizing a community-based methodology to engage 30 elderly women aged 60 years and above. The participants are enrolled in *Sekolah Lansia Pro Simbah* (Special Course for the Elderly), organized by the *Majelis Kesejahteraan Sosial* (MKS) of the *Pengurus Cabang 'Aisiyiah* Sedayu, Bantul. These women reside in semi-urban areas approximately nine kilometers west of Yogyakarta City, Indonesia.

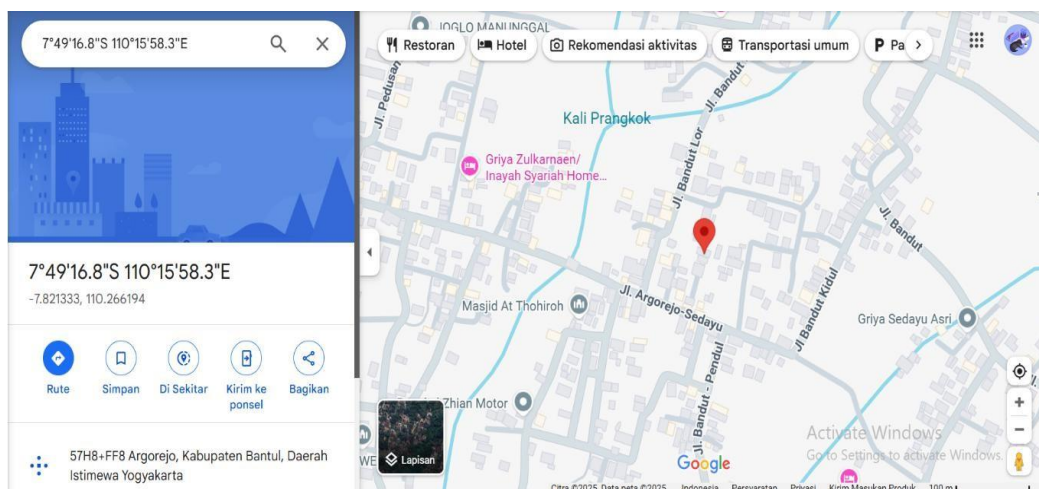


Fig. 1. Location of Sedayu, Bantul, DI. Yogyakarta

The research activities commenced on May 11, 2025, with a location survey, pre-assessment, and program design. During this initial phase, learning modules were developed and tailored to integrate with culturally resonant media, including thematic puppet narratives. This involved adapting *Wayang Kulit* and *Hadrah* scripts to address relevant issues such as mental and physical health. The pre-assessment phase was critical for establishing baseline data on participants' knowledge, interests, needs, and levels of engagement in existing 'Aisyiyah community education programs. It aimed to assess participants' understanding of health, religious, social, and vocational topics, evaluate their involvement in formal and non-formal learning activities, and identify both obstacles and motivators influencing their participation. These insights informed the development of contextually appropriate educational content and delivery strategies.

The second phase, held on May 25, 2025, consisted of a collaborative workshop and cultural performance. This included a *Wayang Kulit* presentation led by researcher Sidik Jatmika and an interactive *Hadrah* performance involving the elderly participants. The final stage took place on June 6, 2025, and featured a post-performance evaluation, including a post-test and group discussions. This concluding session facilitated reflection on the learning outcomes and assessed the educational impact of the culturally integrated program. The instruments for pre- and post-assessment are as follows.

Table 1. Instrument Rubrics

No	Indicators	Questions
1	New things learned	What new things have you learned through 'Aisyiyah's program?
2	Practice differently	Do you now practice anything differently in your daily life (e.g., health habits, prayer routines)?
3	Attend sessions	How often do you attend community or religious learning sessions now?
4	Shared knowledge	Have you shared your new knowledge or skills with others?
5	Confident in a group	Do you feel more confident when speaking or leading in a group?
6	Cultural involvement	Are you more involved in traditional or cultural education activities?
7	Observed by others	What changes have your family or neighbors noticed in you?

Results and Discussion

'Aisyiyah is the women's wing of Muhammadiyah, founded in 1917 by Nyai Ahmad Dahlan in Yogyakarta. As part of one of the largest Islamic reformist organizations in Indonesia, 'Aisyiyah promotes modernist Islam, emphasizing rationality, education, and women's active role in public life. Nakamura [7] highlight that 'Aisyiyah was among the first Muslim women's organizations in Southeast Asia that actively challenged patriarchal cultural norms while remaining rooted in Islamic teachings. It positioned women as key agents in social reform and community development from an early phase of Indonesia's national awakening [8].

'Aisyiyah is instrumental in establishing educational institutions, from early childhood education (TK ABA) to higher education, especially for girls and women. Fatmawati et al. [9]

explains that 'Aisiyiah runs thousands of kindergartens and women-focused schools. These initiatives are often grassroots, combining religious instruction with practical skills. Rachmawati [10] notes how 'Aisiyiah adapts modern educational principles within a framework of Islamic morality, reinforcing women's intellectual roles in society. Rohana [11] document how 'Aisiyiah's empowerment programs enhance women's literacy, leadership, and socio-political awareness in both urban and rural areas.

A. Role of Traditional Arts in Community Education of 'Aisiyiah

Traditional arts serve as powerful tools for community education, and within 'Aisiyiah, they have been creatively used to promote social values, religious teachings, and empowerment, particularly among women and the elderly.

1. Cultural Relevance and Accessibility.

Traditional art forms, such as wayang kulit (shadow puppetry) and hadrah music, are deeply rooted in local Indonesian culture. 'Aisiyiah utilizes these forms because they are culturally familiar and emotionally resonant, especially for older generations. They bridge generational gaps, allowing elders to participate actively and feel valued. They make complex ideas more understandable through metaphor and narrative [12]-[15].



Fig. 2. *Wayang* (left) and *Hadrah* music (right) Performance

2. Islamic Da'wah and Moral Education

Traditional arts are adapted to convey Islamic teachings, such as: Ethical living, Women's rights in Islam. The importance of education and community service. 'Aisiyiah often integrates religious messages into performances or creative workshops, aligning traditional culture with Islamic values in a way that is not confrontational or alienating [16].

3. Empowerment and Skill Development

Art-based activities provide practical skills for women and elderly participants: Performing or organizing art events builds self-confidence and leadership.. Elderly women can teach traditional arts to the younger generation, reversing the typical role of being passive recipients of aid.

4. Social Cohesion and Mental Well-being. Community art activities organized by 'Aisyiyah Foster togetherness, belonging, and intergenerational connection. Help prevent social isolation, especially among elderly women. Promote mental health and emotional expression through creative outlets.

5. Non-Formal Education Strategy

For populations with low literacy, traditional arts are an effective non-formal education method: Easy to absorb and remember. Encourages interactive learning through performance, music, and storytelling [14].



Fig. 3. Cultural Team during Community Engagement

B. Post-Assessment of Knowledge and Engagement of Elderly Women

This assessment evaluates the outcomes and effectiveness of educational or empowerment programs targeted at elderly women. The Purpose of the Post-Assessment is to measure knowledge gained and skills acquired by elderly women after participating in 'Aisyiyah's programs. To assess changes in attitudes, behavior, and participation levels. To evaluate the impact of educational content and delivery methods. To identify areas for improvement and ensure the sustainability of engagement. The Methods of Post-Assessment were structured Interviews or questionnaires using simplified language or oral administration. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to collect qualitative data on perceptions and experiences. Before-and-After Comparisons using baseline (pre-assessment) data. Storytelling/Testimonies from participants as narrative evidence of change. The Expected Outcomes were a documentation of knowledge retention and application. Evidence of increased confidence and participation in religious and social life. Identification of role models or peer educators among the elderly. Data to improve or scale up future 'Aisyiyah elderly empowerment programs. Fig. 1 shows the comparison of pre- and Post-Assessment Questions and results using such questions for 30 participants.

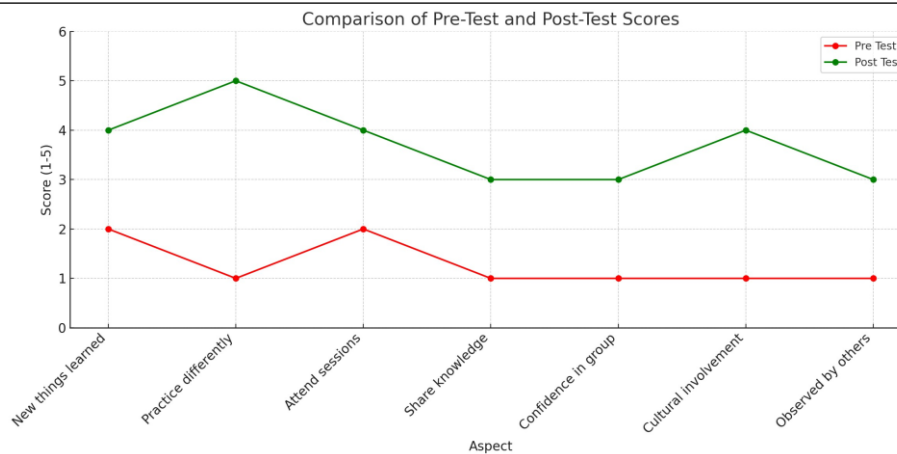


Fig. 4. Location of Sedayu, Bantul, DI. Yogyakarta

Conclusion

The educational programs initiated by 'Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah for elderly women demonstrate a transformative approach that integrates empowerment, health awareness, and faith-based learning. These programs address the multidimensional challenges faced by elderly women—particularly those related to social exclusion, economic vulnerability, and limited access to education—by employing culturally relevant and non-formal methods. Central to the success of this initiative is its strong foundation in Islamic values, its respect for local cultural traditions, and its community-based delivery model. However, the full potential of these efforts can only be realized by addressing structural, cultural, and logistical barriers that limit participation and sustainability. The programs show promising outcomes in promoting active aging, enhancing social participation, and achieving gender justice, and they present a replicable model for similar contexts both in Indonesia and globally.

Recommendation

To ensure long-term impact and wider adoption, several recommendations are proposed. First, sustainability efforts should involve the formation of peer-led learning circles or support groups, empowering elderly participants to become facilitators and community advocates. Alumni of the program should be engaged in mentoring and outreach activities, thereby creating a self-sustaining learning ecosystem. Second, findings from program evaluations should be leveraged to advocate for broader institutional and financial support, both from Muhammadiyah leadership and local government agencies.

From a policy perspective, the integration of traditional arts (such as *Wayang Kulit*, *batik*, and *rebana*) should be formally recognized as powerful tools for education and cultural transmission, particularly for older populations. Funding mechanisms should be established to support community-based, arts-integrated learning programs, ideally delivered in mosques,

community centers, or *Pusat Kegiatan Belajar Mengajar* (Community Learning Centers). Furthermore, adult education curricula should formally include art-based methods to enhance learning engagement and expression. Lastly, specific policies should be introduced to train elderly women as local cultural educators, thereby affirming their roles as knowledge bearers and promoting both intergenerational learning and personal dignity. With strategic planning and supportive frameworks, 'Aisyiyah's elderly education model can evolve into a powerful force for inclusive, culturally grounded, and gender-equitable education.

Conflict of Interest

All authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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