

# Women in the History of Islamic Education: Roles, Contributions, and Contemporary Challenges

Muhammad Ridwan<sup>1</sup>, Tamrin Kamal<sup>1</sup>, Riki Saputra<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Muhammdiyah Sumatera Barat, Indonesia

✉ [muhammadridwanagustus1994@gmail.com](mailto:muhammadridwanagustus1994@gmail.com)\*

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## Abstract

Studies on the role of women in Islamic education have often remained marginalized within the predominantly androcentric narratives of Islamic intellectual history. In fact, since the earliest period of Islam, women have played significant roles as learners, educators, transmitters of knowledge, and drivers of educational institutions. This disparity between historical realities and their academic representation constitutes the background of this study. This research aims to comprehensively examine the roles and contributions of women in the history of Islamic education, identify the various forms of their contributions from historical to contemporary perspectives, and analyze the challenges and opportunities faced by women in the context of Islamic education today. This study employs a qualitative approach using library research. Data were obtained from primary sources, including classical Islamic literature, biographies of female scholars, and works on the history of Islamic education, as well as secondary sources such as academic books, journal articles, and relevant scholarly publications from the last five years. Data collection was conducted through document analysis, while data analysis utilized content analysis and historical-critical analysis, with source triangulation applied to ensure data validity. The findings indicate that women have made significant and sustained contributions to Islamic education in intellectual, pedagogical, institutional, and socio-cultural domains. However, these roles have often been marginalized due to patriarchal social, cultural, and political factors. This study underscores the importance of reconstructing a more inclusive narrative of the history of Islamic education and strengthening gender-just policies and practices that are responsive to contemporary social dynamics.

## INTRODUCTION

Islamic education has a strategic role in shaping religious insight, moral character formation, and social skills of Muslims from the early days of Islamic civilization until today (Arlina et al., 2024; Fauzan et al., 2025; Fitriani et al., 2022; Sabrifha, 2025; Syaputra et al., 2024). In Islamic tradition, education is seen as a right and obligation for every individual without distinction of gender, because Islam

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places knowledge as the main path to God's pleasure and the progress of the people (Nugroho et al., 2023). However, in studies of traditional Islamic education, narratives about women's contributions are often marginalized or given less attention, even though historical evidence shows that women have been actively involved in the learning process, the dissemination of knowledge, and the establishment of Islamic educational institutions (Kafidhoh, 2019; Kholifah et al., 2025). Figures such as Aisha bint Abu Bakr are known for their contributions to hadith and Islamic pedagogy, while Fatimah al-Fihri is noted as the founder of the oldest educational institution still operating today. Recent historical research confirms that women in the early Islamic period were not only students but also played a role as educators, bearers of the tradition of knowledge, and founders of educational institutions that were significant in the development of Islamic scholarship (Bukhari, 2012). However, the contribution of women in the history of Islamic education is often less systematically recorded due to the dominance of patriarchal narratives in the historiography of Islamic education (Zohriah et al., 2023).

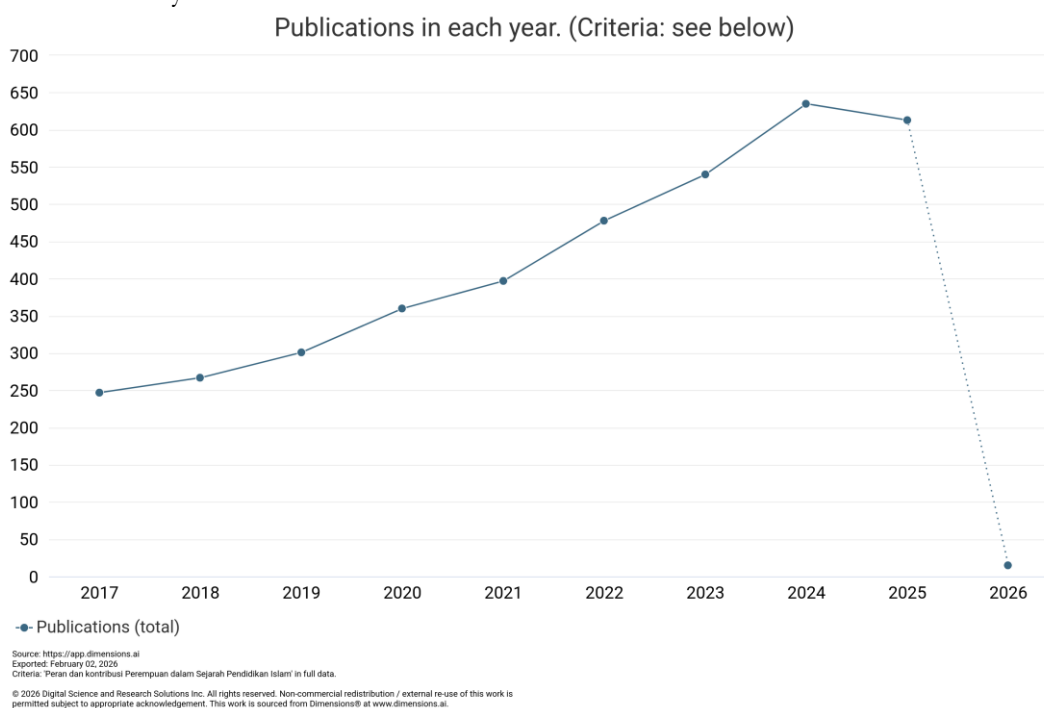
Contemporary reality shows that there is an imbalance between the normative ideals of Islam which guarantee the right to education for women and social practices in a number of Muslim communities (Kurniawan, 2021; Rahman, 2017). The phenomena of patriarchy, gender stereotypes, and limited access to higher education indicate that women still face structural challenges in accessing and fully contributing to formal Islamic education. This is demonstrated by several studies reporting that women are often hindered in their roles in Islamic educational leadership and access to strategic positions in Islamic educational institutions (Banin, 2025). On the other hand, globalization and the development of digital technology are opening up new opportunities for women to expand their role in Islamic education through the use of digital media, teaching innovations, and virtual da'wah. Research shows that women are able to utilize digital platforms such as social media to optimize the learning process, expand access to Islamic education, and strengthen da'wah networks relevant to the contemporary Muslim youth (Karimullah, 2023; Sartika, 2019).

Within the framework of women's empowerment, other research also shows that Islamic education plays a crucial role in increasing gender awareness and capacity in society. Islamic values-based education not only strengthens religious understanding but also serves as a means of social empowerment, supporting women's participation in various public spaces and decision-making (Maisaroh et al., 2025). However, empirical studies integrating historical, contemporary, and structural perspectives on the role of women in Islamic education are still relatively limited. Most studies focus on specific aspects such as history, digital leadership, or social empowerment separately, without establishing the linkages between all these dimensions within a comprehensive framework.

Based on these conditions, this research focuses on several main issues: first, how women play a role in the history of Islamic education; second, the forms of women's contributions to contemporary Islamic education; and third, the challenges and opportunities faced by women in Islamic education today. This research aims to systematically describe the role of women in Islamic education from historical to contemporary perspectives, analyze their actual contributions to the realm of modern Islamic education, and identify structural challenges and strategic opportunities that can be maximized for women's empowerment in the realm of Islamic education in the future.

Studies on the role of women in Islamic education in the last five years have shown increasing academic attention to the historical, social, and empowerment dimensions of gender. Study Kholifah et al., (2025) emphasizes that women have played a role as educators and intellectuals since the early days of Islam, but these

contributions have often been marginalized due to the dominance of patriarchal constructions in the historiography of Islamic education. In line with these findings, Ratnasari, (2016) reveals the gap between normative Islamic teachings that guarantee the right to education for women and social practices that still limit women's access and participation in formal Islamic education, so that a more gender-sensitive curriculum approach is needed. Meanwhile, Aminah et al., (2024) through a study of Siti Walidah's thinking, it is shown that discrimination against women in Islamic education does not stem from Islamic teachings, but rather from gender-biased socio-cultural interpretations, which result in women's intellectual potential being under-optimized. From a critical thinking perspective, Ahmad et al., (2024) who analyzed the ideas of Fatima Mernissi found that Islamic education has great potential as a means of liberating women from the shackles of patriarchal culture, as well as a tool for social transformation that encourages scientific awareness and gender equality. Additionally, research Ratnasari, (2016) highlight the role of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) as strategic Islamic educational institutions in empowering women, particularly when they are able to integrate a gender perspective into their curriculum and institutional leadership. Overall, these studies confirm that women have a significant role in Islamic education, both historically and contemporary, but there is still a need for comprehensive studies that integrate historical dimensions, actual contributions, and structural challenges within a coherent analytical framework.



**Fig 1. Results of Publication Searches Using Dimensions**

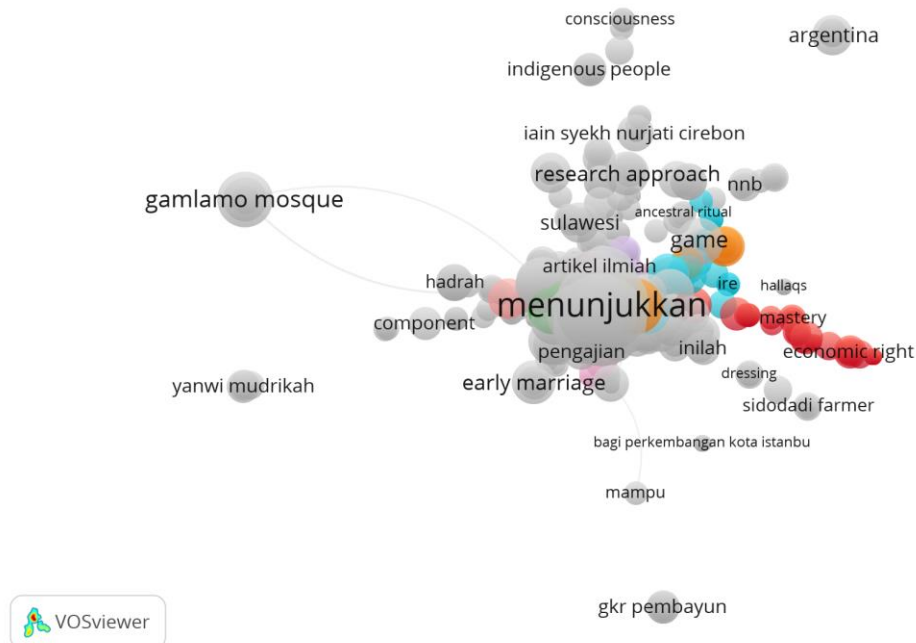
Based on the publication trend graph obtained from a search on the Dimensions website using the keyword “*the roles and contributions of women in the history of Islamic education,*” a significant upward trend in the number of scholarly publications can be observed over the period 2017–2024. In 2017, approximately 245 publications were recorded, followed by a gradual increase each year, reaching more than 360 publications in 2020 and continuing to rise to around 635 publications in 2024. This increase indicates that the issue of women’s roles and contributions in the history of Islamic education has received growing and serious attention in academic studies, from the perspectives of history, education, Islamic studies, and gender studies.

The sharp rise in publications from 2020 to 2024 can be interpreted as the impact of the strengthening discourse on gender justice, educational inclusivity, and the reconstruction of Islamic history that more fairly acknowledges women’s roles.

Scholars have increasingly sought to reintroduce figures of female scholars, educators, and women's contributions to the transmission and development of Islamic knowledge that were previously underrepresented in classical historiography. In addition, improved access to digital sources, manuscripts, and scholarly databases has further stimulated research productivity in this field.

In 2025, there is a slight decline in the number of publications compared to 2024, yet the figure remains relatively high (around 610 publications). Meanwhile, the very low number recorded in 2026 (approximately 15 publications) does not indicate a decline in research interest, but rather reflects incomplete data, as indicated by the dashed line in the graph. This suggests that 2026 is still ongoing and that the indexing process in Dimensions has not yet fully captured all publications for that year.

Overall, the graph confirms that studies on the roles and contributions of women in the history of Islamic education constitute a continuously developing and relevant field of research. This trend further reinforces the argument that women have held an important historical and intellectual position in Islamic education, and that efforts to reconstruct a more inclusive scholarly narrative have become a major concern in global academic discourse. Meanwhile, when viewed from the thematic analysis of topics discussed in previous publications, the findings can be presented as follows:



**Fig 2. Mapping Research Themes with VosViewers**

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using library research, as the focus of the inquiry is directed toward tracing, analyzing, and interpreting scholarly sources relevant to the role of women in Islamic education from historical to contemporary perspectives. The qualitative approach is chosen to enable an in-depth understanding of the meanings, contexts, and socio-religious dynamics surrounding women's contributions to Islamic education, whether in the form of ideas, educational practices, or institutional policies. Through this approach, the study seeks to explore conceptual and historical realities comprehensively and to relate them to the challenges and opportunities faced by women in the context of contemporary Islamic education.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include classical Islamic literature such as hadith collections, biographies of female scholars, and works on the history of Islamic education that

discuss women's roles in the transmission of knowledge. Secondary sources comprise scholarly journal articles, academic books, research reports, and other scientific publications published within the last five years that are relevant to the themes of women, Islamic education, and gender issues. The selection of sources is carried out purposively, taking into account their credibility, relevance, and academic contribution to the research topic.

Data collection is conducted through document analysis by identifying, classifying, and examining written documents related to the object of study. The data obtained are then analyzed using content analysis and historical-critical analysis. Content analysis is employed to reveal patterns, themes, and trends of thought regarding the roles and contributions of women in Islamic education, while historical-critical analysis aims to understand the social, cultural, and political contexts that have influenced women's positions in the history of Islamic education as well as the changes that have occurred in the contemporary era (Aryasutha et al., 2025; Az-Zahra et al., 2025; Engkizar et al., 2022, 2025, 2026; Hamdi & Desvia, 2025; Oktavia et al., 2024).

To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the data, this study applies source triangulation by comparing various types of literature from different disciplinary backgrounds and perspectives. This step is taken to minimize interpretive bias and to ensure that the conclusions drawn are objective and academically accountable. In addition, the analysis is conducted reflectively by linking historical and theoretical findings with contemporary realities of Islamic education, so that the results are not merely descriptive but also analytical and contextual (Ahmad et al., 2024; Banin, 2025; Bano, 2021; Thubatussalamah et al., 2024; Zohriah et al., 2023).

Through this research methodology, it is expected that a comprehensive picture will be obtained of women's roles in the history of Islamic education, the forms of their contributions in the modern context, and the challenges and opportunities they face in the contemporary era. This methodological approach is also expected to provide a strong academic foundation for the development of Islamic education that is more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to gender issues and ongoing social dynamics.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The Role of Women in the History of Islamic Education

In the history of Islamic education, women have a significant role and are inseparable from the development of Islamic scientific traditions (Fitriani et al., 2022; Iris, 2025; Lubis, 2020). Since the early days of Islam, women have not only been positioned as recipients of knowledge, but also as active actors in the process of transmitting, developing and preserving Islamic knowledge (Mutamimah, 2023). Islam normatively places the pursuit of knowledge as an obligation for every Muslim, regardless of gender, thus opening up broad opportunities for women's participation in education. This historical fact is reflected in various classical sources that demonstrate women's involvement in learning, teaching, and transmitting knowledge (Ahmed, 2021).

One of the most prominent figures in the history of Islamic education is Aisha bint Abu Bakr. She is known as one of the greatest narrators of hadith and a primary reference in the fields of fiqh, tafsir, and Islamic education during the time of the Companions. Many of the Companions and successors studied directly with Aisha, demonstrating that women possessed widely recognized scholarly authority in early Islamic society. Aisha's role affirms the inclusive nature of early Islamic education, providing equal opportunity for women to contribute to the development of knowledge (Bukhari, 2012).

In addition to serving as scholarly authorities, women are also noted as founders and administrators of Islamic educational institutions. Fatimah al-Fihri, for example, founded the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Fez in the 9th century CE, which is still recognized as one of the oldest educational institutions in the world. The existence of this institution is evidence that women played a role not only in the domestic sphere but also actively developed a broadly influential Islamic educational infrastructure (Lapidus, 2014). In this context, women contribute directly to the continuity and advancement of Islamic educational traditions across generations.

However, as Islamic history progressed, women's roles in education were narrowed due to social, political, and cultural factors. The dominance of patriarchal culture in the post-classical period led to a reduced visibility of women in the narrative of Islamic educational history. Many women's contributions remain undocumented systematically, giving the impression that Islamic education was dominated by men. However, contemporary historical research indicates that the marginalization of women's roles was more due to social construction than to Islamic teachings themselves (Surianti, 2021).

Therefore, reexamining the role of women in the history of Islamic education is a crucial step in reconstructing a more just and inclusive scientific narrative. A comprehensive understanding of women's contributions in the past not only enriches the historical record of Islamic education but also provides historical legitimacy for strengthening women's roles in contemporary Islamic education. Thus, history can serve as a normative and empirical foundation for promoting Islamic education that is gender-equitable and responsive to the challenges of the times (Al-Jumhuri, 2023).

#### **Forms of Women's Contributions in Islamic Education**

Women's contributions to Islamic education encompass various intellectual, institutional, pedagogical, and cultural dimensions. Since the early days of Islam, women have been actively involved in the transmission of Islamic knowledge, both through formal and informal channels. This involvement demonstrates that Islamic education is not built solely by men, but rather is the result of collective work, also supported by the significant contributions of women. Islam itself positions women as subjects of education with intellectual rights and responsibilities equal to those of men (Ahmed, 2021).

One of the main forms of contribution of women in Islamic education is as educators and transmitters of knowledge. In the hadith tradition, many women act as transmitters and teachers of hadith, such as Aisyah bint Abu Bakar, Umm Salamah, and Hafshah bint Umar. They not only narrated hadith, but also provided explanations, corrections and interpretations of the religious understanding of their friends and subsequent generations. Several contemporary studies record hundreds of female clerics who became teachers for prominent male clerics, especially in the fields of hadith and fiqh (Nadwi, 2007).

In addition to serving as educators, women also contribute to the development and establishment of Islamic educational institutions. Fatimah al-Fihri, the founder of al-Qarawiyyin University, is a clear example of women's contributions to building sustainable and globally influential educational institutions. In various regions of the Islamic world, women also play a role as donors of educational endowments, managers of madrasas, and supporters of the continuity of scientific activities. These contributions demonstrate that women play a strategic role in ensuring access to and sustainability of Islamic education (Lapidus, 2014).

Another form of contribution is seen in family and social education. Women play a central role as the first educators in the family, instilling Islamic values, ethics, and a culture of literacy in the younger generation. In this context, women serve as primary agents in shaping children's character and religious awareness, which lays the

foundation for subsequent formal education. This role is often unrecorded in formal history, yet it has had a long-term impact on the development of Muslim societies.

In the contemporary era, women's contributions to Islamic education have grown through their involvement as academics, researchers, educational institution administrators, and activists in gender-based education and social justice. Muslim women now play an active role in curriculum reform, strengthening gender equity perspectives in Islamic education, and utilizing digital technology as a learning tool. Thus, women's contributions to Islamic education are not merely historical but also continually transforming in line with the demands of the times (Bano, 2021).

### **Challenges and Opportunities for Women in Islamic Education**

Women in Islamic education face a complex dynamic between structural challenges and evolving transformative opportunities. Although Islam normatively affirms the equal right to education for men and women, social and institutional practices in various Muslim communities still demonstrate gender inequality. These challenges stem not only from misunderstood theological factors but are more dominantly influenced by patriarchal socio-cultural constructs that limit women's participation in Islamic education (Ahmed, 2021).

One of the main challenges is gender bias in Islamic education structures and policies. Women often experience limited access to higher education, leadership positions in Islamic educational institutions, and formal scholarly authority. In some Islamic educational institutions, strategic positions such as Islamic boarding school leaders, rectors, or policymakers are still dominated by men. This creates unequal representation and limits women's role in determining the direction and policies of Islamic education (Hafez, 2011). In addition, gender stereotypes that position women solely as domestic educators also contribute to narrowing recognition of women's intellectual and leadership capacities.

Another challenge is the limited integration of a gender justice perspective into Islamic education curricula. Many learning materials still reproduce androcentric religious understandings, thus providing little space for women's experiences and contributions. As a result, Islamic education has the potential to perpetuate gender inequality rather than serve as a means of emancipation and empowerment (Masruroh, 2022; Webb & Wadud, 2000). This condition demands a curriculum reformulation that is more inclusive and responsive to gender issues without ignoring the principles of Islamic teachings.

Despite these challenges, there are significant opportunities for women in contemporary Islamic education. The era of globalization and digitalization has opened up new opportunities for women to access education, disseminate knowledge, and contribute to Islamic discourse through online platforms, social media, and global academic communities (Huda et al., 2025). Muslim women are increasingly playing roles as academics, researchers, digital preachers, and community-based education activists (Andine & Selamet, 2025; Kholifah et al., 2025). Recent research shows that the use of digital technology has helped women transcend the limitations of traditional spaces and expand their influence in Islamic education (Bano, 2021).

Furthermore, growing global awareness of gender equity issues has contributed to the strengthening of women's roles in Islamic education. Many Islamic educational institutions have begun adopting more inclusive educational approaches, providing leadership opportunities for women and encouraging their active participation in decision-making. Islamic education, oriented toward the values of justice, equality, and humanity, has great potential to become an instrument of social transformation that empowers women (Hefner & H., 2019). Thus, the challenges faced by women in Islamic education can be responded to as strategic opportunities to realize a more just, inclusive, and sustainable Islamic education.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that women have played a fundamental and continuous role in the history of Islamic education, both as learners, educators, transmitters of knowledge, and drivers of educational institutions from the earliest period of Islam to the contemporary era. These contributions demonstrate that women's participation in Islamic education has strong normative and historical foundations within Islamic teachings, even though in social practice it has often been marginalized due to patriarchal socio-cultural constructions that restrict women's access, authority, and representation in the educational sphere. Such marginalization does not originate from Islamic values themselves, but rather from interpretations and social structures that developed within specific historical contexts. Amid these structural and cultural challenges, the development of gender justice discourse, reforms in Islamic education, and advances in information technology have opened strategic opportunities to strengthen the role of women in contemporary Islamic education. Women now have increasingly broad opportunities to participate as educators, academics, researchers, administrators of educational institutions, and agents of social change within Muslim societies. Therefore, recognizing and strengthening women's contributions is a crucial step in reconstructing a more just and inclusive narrative of the history of Islamic education. Furthermore, Islamic education is expected to serve as an instrument of social transformation by developing policies, curricula, and educational practices that are responsive to issues of gender justice. In this way, Islamic education is not only oriented toward the transmission of religious knowledge, but also plays a vital role in building an Islamic civilization that is humanistic, just, and relevant to the dynamics of the times.

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