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# Women, Faith, and Educational Leadership in Colonial Asia: The Case of Rahmah El Yunusiyah

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## Abstract

This article examines the educational leadership of Rahmah El Yunusiyah in colonial Indonesia, with particular attention to her contribution to Muslim women's education in Southeast Asia. Using a historical qualitative method based on published historical studies, documentary sources, and interpretive analysis, the study explores how Rahmah El Yunusiyah developed Diniyah Puteri as an alternative educational institution for girls under colonial rule. The findings show that her leadership was expressed through three main strategies: building an institution outside colonial educational priorities, legitimizing women's education through Islamic values, and combining religious instruction with modern pedagogical practices. These strategies enabled Rahmah not only to challenge colonial and patriarchal restrictions at the local level, but also to offer a model of Muslim women's education that gained wider recognition in the Malay-Indonesian world. Her contribution to Southeast Asia lies in demonstrating that Islamic schooling for girls could become a legitimate space for women's intellectual formation, social participation, and leadership development. The study argues that Rahmah El Yunusiyah represents a non-Western model of educational leadership rooted in faith, social reform, and women's empowerment. This case contributes to broader discussions on women's leadership, Islamic education, and the history of education in colonial Asia.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Education, Leadership Islam, Rahmah el Yunusiyah, Women

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## INTRODUCTION

Colonial Asia was shaped by overlapping structures of domination, including colonial governance, social stratification, and gender hierarchy. In this setting, education functioned not only as an instrument of colonial control, but also as a contested arena in which indigenous communities negotiated identity, faith, and social authority through alternative educational initiatives (Haque 2013). Within this broader context, women educators occupied a particularly important yet often overlooked position, because they worked at the intersection of colonial restriction, patriarchal norms, and religious debates over the legitimacy of women's learning (Jun and Aronson 2021) ; (Arar, Sawalhi, and Yilmaz 2022).

One of the most important figures in this context is Rahmah El Yunusiyah, a pioneering Muslim woman educator from Minangkabau, West Sumatra, and the founder of Diniyah Puteri in 1923, one of the earliest modern Islamic schools for girls in Southeast Asia (Sholahuddin, 2016; Bodden, 2016). Rahmah is historically significant not only because she established a school for girls, but also because she advanced an educational vision at a time when women's access to formal learning was constrained by both colonial educational policy and prevailing social expectations. Through her institution, women were no longer positioned merely as recipients of domestic instruction, but as subjects of intellectual formation, moral discipline, and social responsibility (Rodin & Huda, 2020; Dewi et al., 2024).

What makes Rahmah particularly important is that her reform did not emerge through opposition to religion or local culture. Instead, she drew upon Islamic principles and Minangkabau cultural resources to legitimize women's education as both socially necessary and religiously valid. By integrating faith, discipline, and modern pedagogical ideas, Diniyah Puteri became more than a school: it became an alternative educational model that challenged both colonial priorities and patriarchal limitations on women's learning (Rahmayanti, Kuswandi, and Wedi 2025); (Rodin and Huda 2020); (Dewi et al. 2024). In this sense, Rahmah's contribution deserves to be examined not only within Indonesian history, but also within the wider history of Muslim women's education in Southeast Asia.

Although Rahmah El Yunusiyah has been acknowledged in studies of Islamic education and women's history, existing discussions often remain descriptive and fragmented. Scholarship has recognized her as a pioneer of Muslim women's education, yet her educational leadership has not always been analyzed in a more integrated way within the broader framework of colonial education, indigenous reform, and women's agency (Rahmayanti, Kuswandi, and Wedi 2025); (Rodin and Huda 2020). As a result, her role is frequently celebrated, but not sufficiently interpreted as a historically grounded model of institution-building and educational thought.

This study therefore aims to examine Rahmah El Yunusiyah's educational leadership in colonial Indonesia within the wider context of colonial Asia. More specifically, it seeks to explain how Rahmah developed Diniyah Puteri as an alternative institution for Muslim girls, how she negotiated colonial power and gendered constraints, and how her leadership contributed to broader discussions of women's Islamic education and educational reform beyond Indonesia (Haque 2013); (Rahmayanti, Kuswandi, and Wedi 2025); (Rodin and Huda 2020).

To make the discussion more focused, this article is guided by three research questions: 1. How did colonial educational conditions shape the emergence of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's educational movement? 2. How did Rahmah El Yunusiyah negotiate Islamic values, gender norms, and colonial constraints through Diniyah Puteri? 3. What does her leadership contribute to the history of women's Islamic education and educational leadership in Southeast Asia?

Existing studies on educational leadership and colonial education have made important contributions, but the field remains uneven in several respects. First, educational leadership theory is still largely shaped by Western institutional experiences, limiting its explanatory power for colonial and non-Western contexts (Haque, 2013; Jun & Aronson, 2021). Second, women educators are often marginalized within broader narratives of educational reform, which tend to privilege state policy or male reformers (Franzke et al., 2022; Arar et al., 2022). Third, faith-based education is frequently framed as conservative, even though historical evidence suggests that it could also serve as a platform for empowerment and institutional innovation, especially when religious legitimacy was mobilized for women's educational advancement (Leung & Turner, 2023; Jun & Aronson, 2021).

In the Indonesian context, research on Rahmah El Yunusiyah and Diniyah Puteri has shown the importance of Islamic education for women, the role of Minangkabau society in shaping women's learning, and the transformative character of female-led educational reform (Rodin & Huda, 2020; Rahmayanti et al., 2025; Dermawan et al., 2024; Dewi et al., 2024). However, these studies are rarely connected to a broader analytical framework that combines colonial education, biography, intellectual history, and educational leadership. For that reason, this article positions Rahmah El Yunusiyah not only as an inspirational female figure, but as a subject of historical-biographical and intellectual analysis. Through this approach, the study examines both her institutional achievements and the educational ideas, moral claims, and social strategies that informed her leadership under colonial conditions (Furoidah, 2019; Rodin & Huda, 2020; Rahmayanti et al., 2025).

The contribution of this study lies in offering a more integrated interpretation of Rahmah El Yunusiyah across three dimensions that are often treated separately: colonial education, Muslim women's agency, and educational leadership. Rather than presenting Diniyah Puteri merely as a local girls' school, this article interprets it as an alternative institution that articulated a distinct model of Muslim women's education under colonial rule. In this way, the study applies discussions of educational leadership to a non-Western colonial context and demonstrates how faith-based leadership could function as a vehicle for gender reform, moral formation, and social transformation (Jun & Aronson, 2021; Leung & Turner, 2023; Rahmayanti et al., 2025).

Empirically, this article repositions Rahmah El Yunusiyah as a significant actor in the history of women's Islamic education in Southeast Asia. Analytically, it shows that educational leadership in colonial settings cannot be understood solely through Western administrative models, but must also be read through local faith traditions, cultural legitimacy, and women's struggles for educational access and authority (Haque, 2013; Arar et al., 2022; Rodin & Huda, 2020).

This study is a historical qualitative analysis focused on Rahmah El Yunusiyah's educational leadership in colonial Indonesia within the broader setting of colonial Asia. It is limited to interpreting leadership practices, institutional strategies, and educational ideas through available historical and scholarly sources. It does not seek to measure the present-day performance of Diniyah Puteri as an institution. As with historical inquiry more generally, the analysis is shaped by the availability of sources and by the need to critically assess possible bias in colonial and retrospective accounts; therefore, triangulation across historical and historiographical sources is used to strengthen interpretive validity (Bodden, 2016; Sholahuddin, 2016).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Colonial Education, Gender, and Indigenous Responses

Studies on colonial education show that schooling in colonized societies was never a neutral enterprise. It was closely connected to governance, social hierarchy, and the production of cultural legitimacy. In many colonial contexts, modern education was organized through systems that privileged Western epistemologies while marginalizing indigenous and religious forms of knowledge. This produced unequal access not only along racial and class lines, but also along gender lines, since women's education was often restricted by both colonial policy and local patriarchal expectations (Haque, 2013; Suriani et al., 2019; Rozza et al., 2023). Within this setting, indigenous educational initiatives emerged not merely as local adaptations, but also as responses to colonial domination. Such initiatives often combined reformist aspirations with efforts to preserve religious and cultural identity. In the Indonesian context, modernization in education did not always mean secularization; rather, modern schooling could also be articulated through Islamic values and local social traditions (Rodin & Huda, 2020; Nasution et al., 2022). This perspective is important for understanding the historical place of women educators such as Rahmah El Yunusiyah, whose educational project developed within colonial constraints while also challenging them through institution-building.

### Rahmah El Yunusiyah in Biographical and Intellectual Perspective

If this article is to be read as historical research, Rahmah El Yunusiyah should not be treated only as a symbolic figure in women's history, but also as a subject of biographical and intellectual analysis. Biographical analysis makes it possible to place her life and educational initiatives within the concrete social world of colonial Minangkabau, while intellectual analysis allows closer attention to the ideas, principles, and reform strategies that informed her institution-building. In this sense, Rahmah's leadership cannot be reduced to organizational practice alone; it also involved educational thought, moral claims, and a particular vision of Muslim women's social role (Furoidah, 2019; Rodin & Huda, 2020; Rahmayanti et al., 2025). Existing studies have shown Rahmah's importance in the history of Islamic education for women in Indonesia. Research has emphasized her dedication to women's Islamic schooling, her role in educational reform, and the significance of Diniyah Puteri as an institution that widened women's access to structured learning (Rodin & Huda, 2020; Dermawan et al., 2024; Dewi et al., 2024; Firmansyah, 2022). Other works also situate her within the broader history of educational renewal in Minangkabau and among Muslim reformers in Indonesia (Zulmuqim, 2015; Nasution et al., 2022; Zahra et al., 2024).

However, much of this literature remains descriptive. Rahmah is often presented as a pioneer or inspirational figure, but less often analyzed as an intellectual actor who formulated a coherent educational response to colonialism, gender inequality, and debates within Islamic reform. For that reason, this study reads Rahmah not only as a historical person, but as an educator whose ideas and institutional practices must be interpreted together.

### Women's Agency and Muslim Women's Education

Scholarship on gender and leadership has increasingly shown that women's leadership often develops through forms of negotiation rather than through formal authority alone. In patriarchal settings, women's influence may be exercised through education, institution-building, moral legitimacy, and socially resonant reform strategies (Franzke et al., 2022; Arar et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant in colonial contexts, where women faced layered constraints produced by both imperial structures and local gender norms.

In relation to Muslim women's education, existing studies suggest that women leaders often expanded educational opportunities not by rejecting religion, but by reinterpreting or mobilizing religious legitimacy in support of women's learning and public participation (Furoidah, 2019; Dewi et al., 2024; Hirahmah et al., 2024). Research on women's educational initiatives in Minangkabau also indicates that local cultural structures could provide important social resources for the advancement of women's learning, especially when educational reform was framed in morally and culturally acceptable terms (Rahmayanti et al., 2025; Rahmana et al., 2021; Adib, 2022).

This literature is useful for understanding Rahmah El Yunusiyah's agency. Her significance lies not simply in being a woman educator, but in demonstrating how a Muslim woman could formulate institutional and intellectual responses to colonial and patriarchal restriction. Through Diniyah Puteri, women's education was redefined as a legitimate sphere of discipline, knowledge, and community responsibility.

### **Educational Leadership beyond Western-Centric Assumptions**

A recurring critique in educational leadership scholarship is that the field has long been shaped by Western institutional assumptions, often emphasizing managerial effectiveness, administrative roles, and formal organizational structures. Such assumptions are not always sufficient for explaining leadership in colonial and non-Western settings, where authority had to be built through local legitimacy, moral credibility, and negotiation with unequal power relations (Haque, 2013; Jun & Aronson, 2021).

For this reason, leadership in colonial educational contexts should be understood not only as administration, but also as a moral and political practice. Leaders had to align reform with socially meaningful values while responding to structures of exclusion. This is particularly important in the case of women leaders, whose authority was often contested and therefore had to be grounded in culturally persuasive forms of legitimacy (Jun & Aronson, 2021; Arar et al., 2022).

In Rahmah El Yunusiyah's case, leadership can be seen in her ability to found, sustain, and develop an institution that combined religious instruction, modern pedagogy, and women's empowerment. Her leadership was therefore expressed not merely through administration, but through institution-building, value formation, and the creation of a durable educational alternative. This makes her case relevant for expanding leadership discussions beyond Western-centric models.

### **Faith-Based Institutions as Alternative Educational Spaces**

Another important debate in the literature concerns the role of faith-based institutions. Such institutions are often assumed to be conservative and to reproduce traditional gender hierarchies. Yet scholarship also shows that, in certain contexts, faith-based education can become a platform for empowerment and institutional innovation, particularly when religious legitimacy is mobilized in support of inclusion and reform (Jun & Aronson, 2021; Leung & Turner, 2023; Arar et al., 2022).

In the Indonesian and Minangkabau context, Islamic educational modernization often involved the integration of religious values with new pedagogical forms rather than a rejection of religion itself (Rodin & Huda, 2020; Nasution et al., 2022). Research on Diniyah Puteri suggests that the institution did not merely provide religious instruction for girls, but also cultivated discipline, character, knowledge, and broader social responsibility (Rahmayanti et al., 2025; Rahmana et al., 2021; Pratiwi et al., 2024). This indicates that faith-based institutions may function as alternative spaces in which women's intellectual agency can be developed, especially when guided by inclusive educational vision.

### **Research Gap and Analytical Framework**

Based on the literature above, at least three gaps remain. First, studies of educational leadership still tend to privilege Western institutional models and do not adequately explain how leadership operates under colonial constraint (Haque, 2013; Jun & Aronson, 2021). Second, research on women's education in colonial and Islamic contexts has identified important female actors, but often stops at descriptive recognition without fully interpreting their ideas and strategies through biography and intellectual history (Franzke et al., 2022; Arar et al., 2022; Furoidah, 2019). Third, existing studies on Rahmah El Yunusiyah, Islamic education, and women's empowerment are rarely brought together into a single analytical account that connects colonial power, institution-building, religious legitimacy, and women's agency (Rodin & Huda, 2020; Rahmayanti et al., 2025; Dewi et al., 2024).

Accordingly, this article is positioned at the intersection of historical biography, intellectual history, and educational leadership studies. It examines Rahmah El Yunusiyah as a historical actor who developed educational ideas and institutional strategies within colonial Indonesia, and it interprets Diniyah Puteri as an alternative educational project shaped by the interaction of colonial education, Islamic reform, and women's agency. Through this framework, the article seeks to show that Rahmah's leadership was not only locally important, but also significant for the wider history of Muslim women's education in Southeast Asia.

### **METHODS**

This study employs a historical qualitative approach to examine the educational leadership of Rahmah El Yunusiyah in colonial Indonesia. The method is appropriate because the object of this research is not a contemporary educational practice that can be directly observed, but a historical figure, her educational ideas, and the institutional development of Diniyah Puteri within a specific colonial context. Accordingly, this study combines historical inquiry, biographical analysis, and intellectual interpretation to explain how Rahmah El Yunusiyah formulated and enacted an educational response to colonial rule, gender inequality, and the needs of Muslim women's education (Rodin & Huda, 2020; Rahmayanti et al., 2025; Furoidah, 2019).

More specifically, this article is designed as a historical library research. The main data consist of published scholarly works, documented historical accounts, and relevant historical materials concerning Rahmah El Yunusiyah, Diniyah Puteri, colonial education, Islamic educational reform, and women's position in Minangkabau society. This design was chosen because the study aims to produce a historical interpretation of Rahmah's leadership through critical reading, comparison, and contextualization of available sources rather than through field observation or quantitative measurement (Dewi et al., 2024; Rodin & Huda, 2020; Nasution et al., 2022).

The sources used in this study are divided into two categories. First, primary historical materials in published form, such as documented writings, speeches, institutional records, and historical reports on Diniyah Puteri and Rahmah El Yunusiyah where accessible through books, articles, and documented references. Second, secondary sources, including studies on colonial education in Indonesia and Asia, Islamic educational reform, women's leadership, Minangkabau society, and previous studies specifically discussing Rahmah El Yunusiyah and Diniyah Puteri (Rodin & Huda, 2020; Rahmayanti et al., 2025; Dermawan et al., 2024; Dewi et al., 2024; Zulmuqim, 2015; Nasution et al., 2022; Suriani et al., 2019). In this way, previous studies are not treated merely as background references, but as part of the research material to

identify how Rahmah has been interpreted, what aspects have been emphasized, and what analytical gaps remain.

The focus of analysis is directed to three interrelated dimensions. First, the study examines the colonial educational context, especially how colonial educational structures shaped opportunities and limitations for indigenous and women's education (Haque, 2013; Suriani et al., 2019; Rozza et al., 2023). Second, it analyzes Rahmah El Yunusiyah's educational ideas and strategies, particularly her efforts to build Diniyah Puteri as an institution for Muslim girls' education grounded in Islamic values and social reform (Furoidah, 2019; Rodin & Huda, 2020; Rahmayanti et al., 2025). Third, it interprets the broader significance of her leadership for the history of women's education and educational leadership in Southeast Asia (Dewi et al., 2024; Pratiwi et al., 2024; Dermawan et al., 2024).

Data collection in this study follows the general procedures of historical research, namely heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. At the heuristics stage, the researcher collects books, journal articles, and documented historical references relevant to the topic. At the source criticism stage, the collected materials are assessed in terms of credibility, relevance, date, and interpretive limitations, especially because writings on colonial education and women's history often reflect selective representation or retrospective bias. At the interpretation stage, the data are read contextually in order to relate Rahmah's life, ideas, and institutional actions to broader colonial, religious, and gender structures. Finally, historiographical writing is used to present the findings in a coherent historical narrative and analytical form (Sholahuddin, 2016; Bodden, 2016; (Yuli, Maharika, and Eckardt 2023).

The analysis in this article applies a thematic historical analysis. This means that the collected sources are not simply arranged chronologically, but interpreted according to several key themes: colonial education, women's access to learning, Islamic legitimacy, institution-building, and educational leadership. Through this approach, the study seeks to identify patterns in how Rahmah El Yunusiyah responded to colonial and patriarchal constraints, and how Diniyah Puteri functioned as an alternative educational space for Muslim women (Rahmayanti et al., 2025; Rodin & Huda, 2020; Dewi et al., 2024). To strengthen the analysis, the study also uses comparative reading across sources so that claims about Rahmah's leadership are not based on a single celebratory narrative, but on recurring evidence and interpretation found across multiple studies and historical accounts (Bodden, 2016; Sholahuddin, 2016).

The analytical framework of this study combines three concepts. The first is educational leadership, used to understand how Rahmah exercised influence through institution-building, educational direction, and moral authority rather than through formal bureaucratic office alone (Jun & Aronson, 2021; Arar et al., 2022). The second is women's agency, which helps explain how Rahmah negotiated patriarchal norms and expanded women's access to knowledge through culturally legitimate strategies (Franzke et al., 2022; Dewi et al., 2024). The third is faith-based education as an alternative social space, which is used to interpret Diniyah Puteri as more than a religious school, namely as an institution through which women's intellectual and moral formation could be developed under colonial conditions (Leung & Turner, 2023; Rahmayanti et al., 2025; Pratiwi et al., 2024).

This study has several limitations. Because it is based on historical and published sources, the analysis depends on the availability and quality of documentation concerning Rahmah El Yunusiyah and Diniyah Puteri. In addition, many existing accounts tend to emphasize Rahmah's heroic status, which may overshadow historical complexity and internal tensions. Colonial and retrospective sources may also contain bias in the representation of women's roles and indigenous initiatives. For that reason, this study does not aim to produce a definitive reconstruction of all aspects of Rahmah's life, but rather a critical historical

interpretation of her educational leadership based on available evidence (Bodden, 2016; Sholahuddin, 2016; Rahmayanti et al., 2025; Rodin & Huda, 2020).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Findings

The findings of this study show that Rahmah El Yunusiyah's leadership is best understood through the intersection of colonial education, women's agency, and faith-based institution-building. First, the history of Diniyah Puteri confirms that colonial education created unequal conditions in which indigenous Muslim women had to build their own educational alternatives in order to gain meaningful access to learning. Rahmah's response was significant because she did not merely adapt to colonial structures; she founded an institution that offered an alternative vision of modern education for Muslim girls (Suriani et al., 2019; Rodin & Huda, 2020; Nasution et al., 2022).

Second, the study demonstrates that Islamic legitimacy played a central role in enabling women's educational reform. Rather than viewing religion as a fixed barrier, Rahmah mobilized it as a culturally persuasive and morally authoritative basis for expanding women's educational rights. This supports the argument that faith-based institutions should not automatically be treated as conservative spaces; under certain historical conditions, they can become vehicles of empowerment and institutional innovation (Furoidah, 2019; Dewi et al., 2024; Leung & Turner, 2023).

Third, Rahmah's case strengthens the argument that educational leadership in colonial and non-Western contexts cannot be fully explained through Western administrative models alone. Her leadership was rooted in moral legitimacy, institutional endurance, and the ability to negotiate between religion, local culture, and social reform. In this sense, educational leadership must be read not only as organizational management, but also as a historical practice of constructing authority under unequal conditions (Haque, 2013; Jun & Aronson, 2021; Arar et al., 2022).

Finally, this study suggests that Rahmah El Yunusiyah should be positioned more centrally in the history of women's Islamic education. She was not simply an inspirational female educator, but a historical actor who formulated and implemented an educational project with implications beyond her local environment. Even if the extent of her direct regional influence requires further archival study, her case already provides an important analytical entry point for understanding how Muslim women in colonial Southeast Asia used education as a medium of reform, agency, and social transformation (Rahmayanti et al., 2025; Pratiwi et al., 2024; Rodin & Huda, 2020).

### Discussion

#### Colonial Educational Conditions and the Emergence of Diniyah Puteri

The emergence of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's educational movement cannot be separated from the unequal structure of colonial education in the Dutch East Indies. Colonial schooling privileged Western-oriented institutions and created differentiated access based on race, class, and gender. Indigenous educational forms, including Islamic schooling, were often positioned as secondary or traditional, while women's access to formal education remained highly limited

by both colonial priorities and prevailing social expectations. In this setting, educational opportunity for Muslim girls was restricted not only by the absence of supportive institutional structures, but also by the broader colonial logic that regulated which forms of knowledge were considered modern, legitimate, and socially valuable (Haque, 2013; Suriani et al., 2019; Rozza et al., 2023).

Within this context, the establishment of Diniyah Puteri in 1923 represented more than the founding of a girls' school. It was a historically grounded response to a double exclusion: the marginalization of indigenous Islamic education within colonial systems and the marginalization of women within both colonial and local patriarchal educational arrangements. Rahmah El Yunusiyah identified that Muslim girls required an institution specifically designed for their intellectual, moral, and social formation. By establishing Diniyah Puteri, she did not merely provide access to instruction; she created an institutional alternative that challenged the assumption that serious education was primarily the domain of men or the colonial state (Rodin & Huda, 2020; Nasution et al., 2022; Rahmayanti et al., 2025).

This finding shows that Rahmah's leadership first operated through institution-building. Under colonial conditions, leadership was not reducible to office or administration; it involved the ability to imagine and sustain a viable educational structure outside dominant colonial priorities. Diniyah Puteri became important because it offered a model of girls' education that was at once Islamic, locally legitimate, and open to modern pedagogical development. In that sense, Rahmah's response to colonial education was constructive rather than merely oppositional: she developed an alternative institution that enabled Muslim women to enter the sphere of organized learning without being forced to abandon religious and cultural identity (Rodin & Huda, 2020; Zulmuqim, 2015; Dewi et al., 2024; Setiawan et al. 2024).

At the same time, the emergence of Diniyah Puteri should not be romanticized as a simple success story. Its significance lay precisely in the fact that it was created within a restrictive environment. Rahmah's educational movement was shaped by unequal structures of colonial governance, limited institutional support, and persistent gendered assumptions about women's social role. This makes the school historically important not only as an institution of education, but also as evidence that indigenous women could intervene actively in the educational reordering of colonial society (Bodden, 2016; Sholahuddin, 2016; Suriani et al., 2019).

### **Negotiating Islamic Values, Gender Norms, and Colonial Constraints**

A central finding of this study is that Rahmah El Yunusiyah did not confront patriarchal and colonial structures by rejecting religion or local culture. Instead, she worked through Islamic legitimacy as a basis for reform. This is crucial, because women's education in colonial Muslim society could not easily be advanced through arguments framed only in secular-modernist terms. To gain wider acceptance, reform needed to be articulated in morally persuasive language that resonated with community values. Rahmah's strategy therefore rested on demonstrating that women's education was not a deviation from Islam, but a necessary part of religious and social responsibility (Furoidah, 2019; Rodin & Huda, 2020; Dewi et al., 2024).

This strategy reveals an important pattern of women's agency. Rahmah did not simply seek inclusion within existing male-dominated structures; she reformulated the terms on which women's education could be recognized as legitimate. By grounding girls' education in Islamic principles, discipline, and moral formation, she made it difficult to dismiss women's schooling as foreign, morally suspect, or socially disruptive. Here, religion functioned not only as a normative framework, but also as a resource of authority through which gender-inclusive educational reform could be pursued (Furoidah, 2019; Dewi et al., 2024; Hirahmah et al., 2024).

Her negotiation with gender norms was equally significant. In many patriarchal contexts, women's education was tolerated only insofar as it reinforced domesticity. Rahmah's educational project moved beyond that limited expectation. Diniyah Puteri did not merely prepare girls for private domestic roles; it cultivated knowledge, self-discipline, confidence, and a sense of wider responsibility. In this regard, Rahmah's leadership worked through a subtle but important transformation of women's social meaning: women were positioned as moral subjects capable of learning, teaching, guiding, and contributing to society through education (Rahmayanti et al., 2025; Rahmana et al., 2021; Pratiwi et al., 2024).

This finding also clarifies that Rahmah's leadership should be understood as moral and values-based educational leadership. Her authority did not depend primarily on bureaucratic status, but on her ability to align institutional reform with ethical commitments that were recognizable to the community. Diniyah Puteri's educational design combined religious teaching, character formation, and structured learning in a way that strengthened the school's legitimacy and durability. In colonial settings, where education was closely tied to questions of authority and identity, such moral legitimacy was essential for sustaining reform. Rahmah's case therefore demonstrates that leadership in non-Western colonial contexts often emerges through the articulation of values, not merely through managerial competence (Jun & Aronson, 2021; Arar et al., 2022; Rahmayanti et al., 2025).

### **Rahmah El Yunusiyah's Contribution to Women's Islamic Education and Educational Leadership in Southeast Asia**

The third major finding concerns the broader significance of Rahmah El Yunusiyah's leadership. At the Indonesian level, her contribution is clear: she expanded the horizon of Muslim women's education by demonstrating that girls' schooling could be organized in a serious, disciplined, and institutionally durable manner. She helped redefine Islamic education for women as a legitimate sphere of intellectual development rather than as supplementary moral instruction alone. This contribution is important because it shifted women's access to education from a matter of limited charity or informal learning into the domain of structured institutional reform (Rodin & Huda, 2020; Dermawan et al., 2024; Dewi et al., 2024).

At the level of educational leadership, Rahmah's case challenges Western-centric assumptions that leadership must be understood mainly through formal administration, state-centered reform, or secular institutional models. Her leadership was exercised through founding an institution, defining its moral direction, shaping its educational purpose, and ensuring its social legitimacy. This suggests that leadership in colonial contexts may be more accurately understood as the capacity to create and sustain alternative institutions under unequal

conditions. In that sense, Rahmah's case broadens the conceptual discussion of educational leadership by showing that faith, culture, and gender negotiation can be constitutive elements of leadership rather than peripheral concerns (Haque, 2013; Jun & Aronson, 2021; Arar et al., 2022).

With regard to Southeast Asia, the contribution of Rahmah El Yunusiyah should be formulated carefully. The present study supports the view that her importance lies less in proving a direct and uniform regional institutional influence, and more in demonstrating a historically significant model of Muslim women's education within the Malay-Indonesian world and the wider Southeast Asian colonial context. Her experience shows that Islamic girls' education could be organized as a legitimate form of social reform under colonial rule. For regional history, this matters because it provides a non-Western, faith-based example of how women's education, religious authority, and institutional modernity could be brought together in one educational project (Pratiwi et al., 2024; Rahmayanti et al., 2025; Rodin & Huda, 2020).

Thus, Rahmah El Yunusiyah's broader contribution lies in offering a historical reference point for the study of Muslim women's educational leadership in Southeast Asia. Her case illustrates that women could act not only as participants in reform, but also as founders of educational institutions and producers of educational vision. Through Diniyah Puteri, Rahmah showed that faith-based schooling could become a site of empowerment, moral formation, and social transformation when guided by inclusive educational leadership (Leung & Turner, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2024; Dewi et al., 2024).

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that Rahmah El Yunusiyah's educational leadership emerged from the intersection of colonial inequality, gender restriction, and Islamic reform. Through Diniyah Puteri, she developed an alternative institution for Muslim girls' education that responded to the limitations of colonial schooling while remaining grounded in Islamic values and local social legitimacy. Her leadership was expressed not only through school administration, but more importantly through institution-building, moral authority, and the formulation of an educational vision that expanded women's access to knowledge and social participation

The findings further indicate that Rahmah's significance lies in her ability to negotiate colonial and patriarchal constraints without abandoning religion as a source of legitimacy. Instead, she mobilized Islamic principles as a foundation for women's education and social reform. In this way, Diniyah Puteri functioned as an alternative educational space in which Muslim women could be formed intellectually, ethically, and socially. This case therefore contributes to wider discussions on educational leadership by showing that, in colonial and non-Western settings, leadership may be rooted in faith, cultural legitimacy, and gender-conscious institution-building rather than in formal administrative structures alone

At the broader level, Rahmah El Yunusiyah's case contributes to the history of Muslim women's education in Southeast Asia by offering a historically important model of faith-based educational reform under colonial conditions. Her importance lies in demonstrating that women could act not only as participants in educational change, but also as founders of institutions and

formulators of educational vision. Although the extent of her direct regional influence still requires further historical investigation, her experience provides an important reference for understanding the relationship between women's agency, Islamic education, and educational leadership in the colonial Malay-Indonesian world and Southeast Asia more broadly.

Rahmah El Yunusiyah's recognition as a National Hero of Indonesia should also be understood in a broader historical sense. Such recognition was not based solely on her role as an educator, but also on her contribution to the nation and her support for the wider struggle of Indonesian independence. Nevertheless, her educational work remains one of the most enduring aspects of her historical legacy, because through education she helped shape women's intellectual development, religious consciousness, and social responsibility in modern Indonesian Muslim society.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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