

Aisyiyah: 99 years of women's empowerment



By Laura Jean McKay

Ninety-nine years ago, **Aisyiyah** became Indonesia's first women's organisation, and since then it has supported the economic and social empowerment of women in a large variety of ways. In recent years it has formed a strong partnership with Australia to deliver programs aimed at reducing poverty. However, the bond between Aisyiyah and Australia runs even deeper - the organisation also provided support to the survivors of the 2004 bombing at the Australian Embassy in Jakarta.

Keep reading to find out more about Aisyiyah's work on empowering women, or jump ahead to Part 2 to learn how Aisyiyah and the embassy worked together to support survivors after the bombing.

'This is the first time I've held a piece of paper with information about me,' a woman tells Tri Hastuti Nur Rochimah during a village meeting in East Java, Indonesia. 'In my daily life I just go to the field with the paddy, with the sugar cane. So this is the first time for me.'

Tri is the Program Coordinator of a partnership between Aisyiyah, the most well-established women's organisation in Indonesia, and an Indonesian and Australian Government funded program, Empowering Indonesian Women for Poverty Reduction (MAMPU). Women often tell Tri that they have had profound new educational experiences through Aisyiyah. 'They say, "Meeting with Aisyiyah was the first time I've had access to information on women's health",' Tri says.



Women join a reproductive health training session led by Aisiyah. Photo: MAMPU

Aisiyah is an organisation built on firsts. It was the first women's organisation in Indonesia, acting as a conduit between people in need and governments and large organisations since 1917. It is the first port of call for many women and families needing access to education, economic and health resources, as well as the first contact point for national and local government agencies wanting to find and share information.

Aisiyah's staff and volunteers are often the first to try new information formats in order to reach more people - most recently, using social media to communicate with new audiences. Aisiyah's programming is innovative, but their ideas are built on age-old Muslim foundations of generosity and equality.

'The first principle of Aisiyah is an equal relationship,' explains Tri. 'We look at how to communicate with women in poverty. When we conduct training, we deconstruct our perspective of poverty and we sit together with the participants -

we are the same.’ Through Aisyiyah’s grassroots, empathetic attitude, women in poverty are getting their voices heard by local, national and international bodies.

Tri works closely with Siti Noordjanah Djohantini, a renowned women’s activist and economist who has been the Chairperson of the Central Executive of Aisyiyah for the past ten years. From their offices in Jakarta, both Tri and Noordjanah wear spectacles and expressions of patience as they explain Aisyiyah’s model – grassroots, all-encompassing and built on a vision of care for the people they work with.

‘Aisyiyah was the first organisation in Indonesia to work in women’s empowerment,’ Noordjana says. ‘We are a social justice organisation with a national structure. We work in provinces at district, sub-district and village levels, with women in every position: in economic social protection, education, health and women’s literacy. The founders of Aisyiyah had very good ideas and perspectives about women. This is why Aisyiyah is very important.’

A long history

In 2017, Aisyiyah will celebrate its one hundredth anniversary. The organisation was formed by Nyai Ahmad Dahlan and her husband, Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of the progressive Indonesian Islamic organisation, Muhammadiyah. In an attempt to counteract the destabilising effects of Dutch colonisation on Indonesian culture, the couple conducted readings of the Quran, eventually concentrating on sections of the text that focused on women and women’s issues. In 1917 they established Aisyiyah as the women’s arm of Muhammadiyah, and the organisation now works in 33 provinces and over 7500 villages across Indonesia. ‘Aisyiyah’ is named for Aisha, one of the wives of the prophet Muhammad. Aisha was renowned for promoting learning and knowledge.

Today, among some fifteen million members, these traditional ideas prevail in modern form. Aisyiyah staff and volunteers work to make sure that women have access to information and facilities in a swiftly changing society. Initially raising money through its members to establish small community health clinics, Aisyiyah eventually garnered support from local and national ministries. The organisation

now works with national and international donors, and has established thousands of schools, including early childhood, primary and secondary schools and universities. Aisyiyah also supports health facilities including maternal and community hospitals, health centres and healthcare posts all through Indonesia – for which Aisyiyah provides funds, research and sometimes operational assistance. Over 1000 family business ventures, such as cooperatives for women’s economic empowerment, also receive funding and facilitation through Aisyiyah.

Audio: Acha talks to Laura about Aisyiyah and its work

<http://devpolicy.org/aidprofiles/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Acha-talks-to-Laura-a-uphonic.mp3>



Acha (left) catches up with Ema, an Aisyiyah volunteer.

The Coordinator of the Social Management Division of Aisyiyah, Wa Ode Asmawati, known as ‘Acha’, describes Aisyiyah as a ‘social movement’ of progressive Islam, rather than merely an organisation. According to Acha,

Aisyiyah seeks to embrace modern principles and practices, including respect for women's rights, while maintaining Islamic values through community and religion.

'We talk about humanity, how to help others, how to care about injustice,' Acha says. 'I believe in these things. We have the same soul. Muhammadiyah founded Aisyiyah to care for social problems. That's the goal of Muhammadiyah, long-term. Our religion says, if you care for people, you have the faith, but if you don't care for people you are not included in the community.'

Despite a mandate of women's empowerment, it is unlikely that the word 'feminism' will come up in descriptions of Aisyiyah's work. The women's movement in Indonesia sometimes avoids the term, and in some circles the idea of feminism is met with horror, because it is associated with Western ideas. However, the suggestion that Indonesian women might not be empowered is equally rejected by Aisyiyah. Both Noordjana and Tri are passionate about the status of women's rights in their country.

'Are woman in Indonesia already empowered? Yes, this is in progress,' Tri explains. 'Since Aisyiyah was established, many women's organisations have started up, from Papua to Aceh. This is a sign that women's organisations are strong in civil society, and that women in Indonesia are empowered. But some women need assistance to get that power, and this needs to be explained to the local leaders.'



A village midwife explains how a test for cervical cancer works. Photo: Ng Swan Ti for MAMPU

Big dreams, big future

The economic and social empowerment of women is one of the most pressing concerns in Indonesia today. Despite a high rate of literacy and increasing levels of education, the rate of maternal mortality among Indonesian women is one of the highest in the region, with 228 women per 100,000 dying of complications related to childbearing (double the South-East Asian average of 110 women per 100,000), often because they lack access to resources and information about reproductive health. In some areas, like Papua (which shares a border with Papua New Guinea), the rate is closer to 1000 women per 100,000. Indonesia has increasingly effective health systems in place, but many women living in poverty either can't access these services, or don't know how to. Limited access to information and resources like doctors and clinics is one problem. The decentralisation of government in Indonesia is another - local governments are responsible for social services that they are often not resourced to deliver or capable of delivering. Added to this is the social stigma around discussing

women's reproductive health - something that is difficult to overcome. For women living in rural areas, often in cramped conditions and small communities, open conversations about childbirth, HIV and cervical and breast cancer often aren't an option.

'When people think of reproductive rights, we want them to think of Aisiyiah,' says Noordjana. 'Our dream is for Aisiyiah is to be a strong centre of reference to discuss health rights. Women are important people in the family, in the community, and nationally, so it's very important to provide information about reproductive health. But in Indonesia, most women don't have the proper information. If they had that, they would have the power to act. The problem is that sometimes local governments don't know that there are problems in the community.'

Aisiyiah promotes reproductive rights through many aspects of its work - including, in recent years, partnerships with international programs. Among the most successful of these partnerships is MAMPU, a project funded by the Indonesian and Australian Governments that seeks to empower women living in poverty that was launched in 2012. Aisiyiah is one of eleven MAMPU partners throughout Indonesia whose work spans social protection, employment, migrant worker protection, reducing gender-based violence, and maternal and reproductive health. With its national connections, grassroots approach, and long history of working with women, Aisiyiah was an obvious partner for the project, specialising in maternal and reproductive health.

MAMPU is the second time that Aisiyiah has partnered with Australia and the aid program - the first time was during the aftermath of the 2004 Australian embassy bombing, when Aisiyiah ran the Victim Assistance Program with the embassy (you can read more on this collaboration in Part 2).



Women get free health checks with Aisyiah in Central Java.



A test for cervical cancer in one of Aisyiah's clinics, supported by the MAMPU project.



Women join Aisyiyah's leadership training.



Women join one of Aisyiyah's reproductive health training sessions.

Marie 'Astrid' Wijaya is the Partner Engagement Officer at MAMPU. She works closely with Aisyiyah staff and volunteers. Astrid explains that the MAMPU model

encourages capable program partners like Aisiyah to take responsibility for design and decision-making, with guidance, monitoring and technical assistance, rather than direction, from MAMPU.

‘MAMPU is different from other programs,’ Astrid explains. ‘The relationship between donor and partners is not that of a client, where the donor has a blueprint that the client follows. [Instead,] our relations are equal. Aisiyah likes this method of work very much because they have space for creation.’

MAMPU, which draws on the strength of well-established community organisations like Aisiyah and also engages the authority and financial resources of the Indonesian and Australian Governments, is already making a big difference. In the last few years, Noordjana has noted real changes in the communities that Aisiyah works in.

‘Since the MAMPU program began, there has been a change in perspective about reproductive health,’ Noordjana says. ‘Local leaders, families and men now know about equal relations and women’s health.’

As part of the MAMPU program, Aisiyah encourages women to breastfeed, access health facilities and use contraceptives, and to get regular pap smears and breast cancer checks. In order to get information out, Aisiyah works directly with women, their families and local and national leaders. They produce books, pamphlets, web content and social media messages. They work in diverse areas, from tiny villages to the bustling city of Banda Aceh, where the spread of fundamentalist Islamic beliefs and practices poses new challenges for the progressive organisation. They draw from their existing foundations and contacts through their alignment with Muhammadiyah. Along with this, Aisiyah and other MAMPU partners navigate the often rewarding, sometimes difficult terrain of cross-cultural relationships with big international donors, such as the Australian Government, as well as local and national arms of the Indonesian Government. Despite these challenges, Aisiyah has reached 8580 women through the MAMPU program, and trained over 1000 local leaders.

Managing communication on so many levels and with so many people must be exhausting, but when asked, Tri exclaims with great energy:

‘We should be tired, but we’re strong! Because in our strategy we have big

dreams to collaborate with everyone. We have many resources from a national level through to villages, so we share the burden. We have a dream that, through progressive Islam, woman and men will be equal. When we work with women in our program, we say: "Poverty is our problem - not just your problem but our problem".'

As Aisyiyah looks to the future, it draws from structural lessons learned through collaborations such as the MAMPU program, and explores ways to make its successes sustainable. It won't be easy, but Aisyiyah has already weathered a tumultuous century, through colonisation, changing governments and shifting societal norms.

'As long as humans are alive, they will have problems,' Acha reflects. 'So, Aisyiyah should provide services, focus on empowerment, and provide assistance. We should make sure it will be sustained for the future. Not just one century but for two or even four.'

Aisyiyah has a lot to celebrate, with 99 years of women's empowerment behind it, and a bright future ahead.

Keep reading to hear how Aisyiyah and Australia worked together to support those injured in the 2004 bombing of the Australian embassy in Jakarta.

Part 2 - Aisyiyah and the Kuningan bombing