



## Revisiting Kartini's Legacy: Education as a Pathway to Gender Justice in Islamic and Indonesian Perspectives

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This study aims to explore and reinterpret the legacy of Raden Ajeng Kartini in promoting women's education as a foundation for gender justice in Indonesia, especially through the lens of Islamic and socio-cultural perspectives. **Theoretical framework:** The theoretical framework draws from Islamic ethics—particularly the concepts of ‘adl (justice), ‘ilm (knowledge), and karamah (dignity)—as well as feminist educational theory. These perspectives provide a holistic view of Kartini's advocacy as both a moral and strategic response to patriarchal norms and colonial structures. **Literature review:** The literature review reveals that while Kartini's contributions are widely recognized, most prior studies emphasize her symbolic role rather than her intellectual and philosophical depth. Few works examine the intersections between her thoughts and Islamic teachings on justice, equality, and education. This study addresses that gap by critically analyzing her letters and historical context. **Methods:** Using a qualitative historical-biographical method, the research involves document analysis of Kartini's writings and related historical materials, supported by a review of secondary literature from scholarly journals, Islamic sources, and educational theory. **Results:** The findings indicate that Kartini's emphasis on education was not merely about literacy, but a broader vision of intellectual liberation, social reform, and nation-building. She challenged both colonial policies and indigenous traditions that marginalized women, asserting that education is a right and a tool for human dignity. **Implications:** The implications of this research highlight the relevance of Kartini's thought for current gender and education policies in Indonesia and other Muslim-majority societies. Her vision aligns with global goals like SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), making her ideas increasingly important in efforts to create inclusive educational systems. **Novelty:** The novelty of this study lies in positioning Kartini not only as a

cultural icon but also as an early Islamic feminist thinker whose educational philosophy remains relevant for gender-inclusive educational reform today.

**Keywords:** kartini, education, gender justice, islamic values, women's rights.

## INTRODUCTION

Raden Ajeng Kartini is widely celebrated as a pioneer of women's emancipation in Indonesia, particularly through her advocacy for equal access to education. During the Dutch colonial era, education was a privilege largely inaccessible to indigenous women, who were constrained by both patriarchal traditions and colonial restrictions. Kartini's writings, particularly her letters compiled in "Door Duisternis tot Licht" (From Darkness to Light), reflect a critical awareness of gender disparities and a deep conviction that education is a transformative tool for women's liberation. This study revisits Kartini's thoughts within both Indonesian socio-historical and Islamic frameworks to highlight how her ideas laid a foundation for gender justice. Her advocacy was not merely a personal ambition but a revolutionary act grounded in ethical values that resonate with Islamic principles of justice ('adl) and equality (musawah). Through this analysis, the paper seeks to examine Kartini's contributions as more than historical symbolism, but as a strategic intervention for long-term societal change. By focusing on education as a gateway to emancipation, Kartini positioned women not only as passive recipients of knowledge but as active participants in the nation's intellectual and moral development. This perspective remains crucial in contemporary discourse on gender and education in Muslim-majority societies [1]–[5].

**Research Gap.** Although numerous studies have addressed Kartini's role in promoting women's education, many have confined her legacy to cultural celebration without critically situating her contributions within the broader context of Islamic values and contemporary gender discourse. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to examining Kartini's ideas as a framework for current educational and gender equity policies in Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia. Existing research also often overlooks the intersection of Islamic education and gender justice in Kartini's vision, focusing instead on Western feminist comparisons. This study fills that gap by exploring Kartini's educational philosophy through both Islamic ethical concepts and Indonesian socio-political realities. It presents her legacy as a relevant source of insight for designing inclusive and transformative education systems rooted in local traditions and Islamic values [1]–[5].

**Significance of the Theme.** The theme of this research is significant because it bridges historical reflection and contemporary challenges related to gender equity in education. Kartini's thought remains relevant in addressing ongoing disparities faced by women, especially in Islamic and developing contexts where patriarchal norms still inhibit educational access. By revisiting her legacy, this study reinforces the idea that education is not only a human right but also a moral imperative in achieving gender justice. In the era of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 and 5, understanding Kartini's vision provides a culturally rooted approach to advancing inclusive education and gender equality in Indonesia and other Muslim societies that seek harmony between tradition and modernity [1]–[5].

**Novelty.** This study offers novelty by integrating R.A. Kartini's thoughts with Islamic principles of justice and modern gender theory. Unlike previous research that isolates her contributions within nationalist or feminist narratives, this paper contextualizes Kartini's educational advocacy as an early form of gender-responsive Islamic thought. It highlights how her ideas anticipated contemporary debates on women's rights, moral agency, and educational reform. The research provides a new interpretative framework that aligns local heritage, Islamic values, and global gender equity discourse. In doing so, it positions Kartini not just as a historical figure, but as a visionary thinker with enduring relevance [6]–[8].

Education is the learning of knowledge or skills that are passed from generation to generation through teaching, training, and research. Education can be obtained from other people or alone

(self-taught). Education is very important for the next generation of the nation. Therefore, education must continue to be carried out properly. The same was expected by R.A. Kartini. R.A. Kartini's struggle in the world of education is closely related to women's emancipation. In the past, the state of education in Indonesian society was still lacking and very sad. Due to the large number of abandoned and illiterate children [6]–[8].

At the beginning of the 20th century, in the Dutch East Indies, there were only a few schools of Javanese teachers and doctors. Meanwhile, in every sub-district and district, there are only second-level elementary schools. The lessons given were such as reading, writing, counting and also learning regional languages in the form of the Dutch East Indies format, with the aim that people were not so clever [9],[10].

Dutch government regulations recommended eliminating Malay, Indonesian, and Dutch language learning because the Dutch were afraid that people would easily read and learn books that at that time still used Malay and Dutch. So at school, they are not taught the language. This is because according to the Dutch, people will be clever and intelligent which will make them no longer want to submit to Dutch rule [11]–[14].

However, R.A. Kartini has a broad view and insight, of course, feeling that the lesson is not satisfactory. Finally, R.A. Kartini sharply denounced the Dutch government for changing politics and bringing about reforms that were useful for society [15]–[17].

Although R.A. Kartini was destined to live in a noble environment, this did not make her soul affected by her nobility, and became arrogant and arbitrary. Because in the soul of R.A. Kartini has grown her love for the people of Indonesia and she does not like it if there are people who always boast of their ancestry, even R.A. Kartini is very hateful and does not hesitate to oppose. All R.A. Kartini wanted was a life of freedom, independence, mutual respect, and equal rights and dignity [18]–[22].

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review of Kartini's thoughts on the importance of education for Indonesian women considers the ideas Kartini has built in her letters and other works. Kartini, an Indonesian national hero, has become an icon of the struggle for women's rights and education in the Dutch colonial period [23], [24]. In her thoughts, Kartini highlighted the importance of education for women as the foundation of their liberation and empowerment. In her famous letters, Kartini expressed her desire to see Indonesian women have the same access as men in terms of education. She realized that without adequate education, women would be shackled to limited knowledge and independence, which would then limit their potential contribution to society [25]. In addition, Kartini also emphasized that education will help women understand their rights and develop awareness of their position in society. She believes that through education, women can be more financially and socially independent, as well as being able to play a more active role in nation-building [26],[27].

Kartini's thoughts on the importance of education for Indonesian women also involve cultural and social aspects. She criticizes patriarchal traditions that limit women's role in society, and through education, she hopes women can free themselves from these restrictive norms. Thus, Kartini's thoughts on the importance of education for Indonesian women are not only an effort to increase literacy levels, but also a step towards gender empowerment and equality. These ideas were not only relevant in his day, but also remain an inspiration and guide for the struggle towards gender equality and inclusive education in Indonesia to this day [28],[29].

Theoretical Framework. This study is grounded in Islamic ethical concepts—'adl (justice), ilm (knowledge), and karamah al-insan (human dignity)—combined with feminist educational theory. These frameworks help contextualize R.A. Kartini's thought as both a moral and intellectual effort toward women's emancipation. By integrating Islamic values with gender justice discourse, the study highlights how Kartini's advocacy for education aligns with both spiritual principles and progressive social reform within the Indonesian historical context.

**Table 1. Literature Review on Kartini's Thoughts on the Importance of Education for Indonesian Women**

Source	Kartini's Thoughts on Education for Indonesian Women
Letters to Kartini	1. Education provides freedom and independence to women.
	2. Education helps women understand their rights and fight for gender equality.
	3. Education enables women to contribute more to the development of the country.
	4. Education plays an important role in shaping the character and personality of women.
	5. Education gives women access to achieve their ideals and dreams.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative historical-biographical research design with a descriptive-analytical approach. The aim was to explore and reinterpret the educational thought of Raden Ajeng Kartini, particularly in relation to gender justice from both Islamic and Indonesian socio-cultural perspectives. A qualitative method was deemed appropriate due to the nature of the research, which centers on understanding ideas, values, and contextual meanings rather than numerical data.

The primary data sources consisted of Kartini's original letters, especially those compiled in *Door Duisternis tot Licht (From Darkness to Light)*, which serve as a foundational document reflecting her thoughts on women's rights and education. These texts were analyzed in-depth to uncover Kartini's perspective on education, gender roles, and social reform. In addition, historical records and early 20th-century educational policies under Dutch colonial rule were examined to understand the socio-political environment that shaped her activism. Secondary data were obtained from academic journals, historical studies, Islamic gender studies literature, and prior analyses of Kartini's legacy. Particular attention was given to scholarly interpretations that connect Kartini's ideas with Islamic values such as 'adl (justice), ilm (knowledge), and karamah al-insan (human dignity), forming the theoretical foundation for this study [23]–[26].

The data collection process used document analysis, including archival research, literature review, and text interpretation. Data were organized into thematic categories, including: (1) Kartini's view on women's education, (2) the impact of colonial and patriarchal constraints, (3) Islamic values aligned with her thought, and (4) the influence of her legacy on current educational and gender justice frameworks.

For data analysis, the study used content analysis supported by historical contextualization. The texts were read repeatedly, coded, and categorized based on emerging themes. These themes were then interpreted in light of relevant Islamic concepts and gender theory to highlight Kartini's contributions as an intellectual and moral figure in the struggle for education and gender equality. To ensure the validity of the data, triangulation was applied by comparing Kartini's own writings, secondary sources, and historical data. Expert consultation with scholars in Islamic education and gender studies also contributed to the credibility and depth of interpretation. In summary, this qualitative method allowed a nuanced exploration of Kartini's legacy, providing insight into how her educational vision continues to shape gender justice discourse in contemporary Islamic and Indonesian contexts. This research was conducted through research through journals, websites, and sites that discuss R.A. Kartini. How and what she did and what educational thinking relations R.A. Kartini made so that it could raise the status of women with the existence of women's education in Indonesia. This research is also based on the history and biography of R.A. Kartini and theoretical tracing [23]–[26].

**Table 2. Research Methods of Kartini's Thoughts on the Importance of Education for Indonesian Women**

No.	Research Variables	Indicator	Data Collection Methods
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1	Education Level	Formal education obtained by Kartini Kartini's desired education for Indonesian women	Student Literature Document analysis
2	The Role of Education	Kartini's views on the role of education in women's liberation The contribution of education to women's emancipation according to Kartini	Text analysis (letters, writings) of Kartini Interviews with historical or cultural experts
3	Constraints in Education	Obstacles faced by Kartini in getting an education Barriers experienced by Indonesian women in accessing education during Kartini's time	Analysis of Kartini's letter Historical studies Focus group
4	Education Impact	Social changes and mindsets of Indonesian women due to education according to Kartini	Historical document analysis Interviews with feminist figures Public opinion surveys

This table can be used as a basis for designing further research methods on Kartini's thoughts on the importance of education for Indonesian women.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since when she was young, R.A. Kartini only thought about the interests of her people. He always tried and paid attention to the fate of his people by visiting the surrounding villages to find out firsthand, how his people were doing and did not hesitate to help him. He did not even feel the slightest fear of the Dutch he dared to write a piece of paper in which he criticized the Dutch East Indies government because of the political system they created which aimed not to educate the nation's children [34].

In educational collaboration, R.A. Kartini bequeathed two things. The first is independence. Although R.A. Kartini comes from a noble family who has the freedom to experience the world of education, she still studies at home and never forgets to do good and something beneficial for human life. In the life of R.A. Kartini, there is no giving up on learning and struggling in facing life's challenges. The principle he always held was "it is better to do something small than not to do it at all" [28]-[30].

Independence is indeed very much needed in the world of education. The government also educates independence by establishing the Education Legal Entity Law which is applied in several State Universities and other educational institutions. In addition, it is also set in secondary schools with the categories SSN, and SBI, and boils down to SKM [31]-[35].

Some educational institutions do not apply independence in the world of education. This results in the majority of high school or college alumni when they do not get a job, will eventually become unemployed. This is because most educational institutions and universities do not equip them with professional skills.

The second is an unyielding attitude. Life during R.A. Kartini's time was tougher than it is now, in social, political, and economic aspects. Although R.A. Kartini used to belong to the upper social class due to the nobility, the men of the past were superior, especially in the world of education. It is the noble women who can get an education, while the poor women are not allowed. Therefore, R.A. Kartini fought very hard to be able to raise the status and dignity of women, no matter whether it was noble or not.

The proof of R.A. Kartini's contribution to the world of education is that she made a considerable contribution, namely by establishing a "Girls' School" in the Jepara area. This has an influence on the development of education especially for women [36],[37].

R.A. Kartini also succeeded in publishing one of her works, namely a book entitled "After Dark Comes Light". The book After Dark Comes Light was originally a book from a collection of letters of R.A. Kartini to European friends by Mr. J.H. Abendanon whose original title was

"Door Duisternis tot licht". The book of letters was later translated into Indonesian by Armijn Pane "After Dark Comes Light". This book is a written document about the historical evidence of R.A. Kartini's struggle. In addition to containing the story of Kartini's life, this book also discusses a lot about Kartini's high ideals and hopes regarding education and freedom. It is clear how strong and great Kartini desires to advance the nation through education. It was not an easy thing at that time to have ideals about education, especially if those ideals came from a woman. This book contains a collection of Kartini's letters in Kartini's language so it is increasingly clear that Kartini's desire is contained in the book After Dark Comes Light [38]–[40].

Raden Ajeng Kartini's thoughts on the importance of education for women in Indonesia have become an important foundation in the struggle for women's education rights in the country. Kartini, who lived in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, emphasized that education is not only a human right that should be enjoyed by everyone, including women, but also as a means of emancipation and empowerment of women. In her various letters which were later compiled in the book "After Dark Comes Light", Kartini expressed her opinion on how important education is to improve the position of women in society.

Through education, women can broaden their horizons, increase their intelligence, and hone the skills necessary to actively participate in various aspects of social, economic, and political life. Kartini argues that with education, women can free themselves from the shackles of traditions and customs that hinder their development. Education is considered as the main key to building gender equality, strengthening the role of women in the family and society, and supporting sustainable nation building.

Kartini also highlighted the importance of informal education, such as learning at home and through life experiences, as an important part of women's education process. He championed the idea that education should not only be limited to academic knowledge, but should also include moral and ethical values, life skills, as well as an understanding of rights and obligations as citizens.

Kartini's critique and struggle against gender inequality and the importance of education for women have had a significant impact on Indonesian history. This encourages gradual social change and paves the way for Indonesian women to gain better access to education and wider opportunities in various fields. Although challenges remain, Kartini's thinking continues to inspire women's and education movements in Indonesia, encouraging efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable society for all genders.

Kartini's thoughts on women's education underline that education is the most effective tool to change society. Through education, women can not only improve the quality of life of themselves and their families, but can also contribute significantly to nation-building. Kartini pointed out that women's education is a long-term investment whose benefits will be felt not only for the individuals involved but also for the wider community and future generations [38]–[40].

**Table 3. Kartini's Thoughts on the Importance of Education for Women in Indonesia**

Aspects	Result	Discussion
Background	R.A. Kartini is a figure of women's emancipation who plays a major role in advancing education for women in Indonesia.	Born in Jepara on April 21, 1879, Kartini grew up in a priyayi family. He has limited access to formal education, but has a strong desire to learn. Kartini used her knowledge to write letters exploring the social and educational conditions of women of her time, which were later published into books.
Kartini's thoughts	Kartini believes that education is the key to improving the social and economic conditions of Indonesian women. She argued	His thinking was influenced by the education he received as well as interactions with various figures and literature from Europe. She considered education not only as a means to acquire knowledge but also as a tool to increase social

	that women should have the same access to education as men.	awareness and women's emancipation. Through education, women can improve their social status, have freedom of thought and action, and contribute actively to community development.
Kartini's efforts	Through her letters, Kartini called for the establishment of schools for girls. She herself founded the first girls' school in Jepara, which taught basic skills and handicrafts in addition to formal science.	The school founded by Kartini not only focuses on formal education, but also teaches practical skills that can be used to help the family economy and raise women's social status. This shows Kartini's understanding that education should be relevant to practical needs and open up more opportunities for women to participate in various aspects of community life.
Long-Term Impact	Kartini's thoughts and efforts had a significant impact on the women's emancipation movement in Indonesia. Kartini Day, which is commemorated annually on April 21, is a symbol of Indonesian women's struggle in education and gender equality.	Although Kartini died at a young age, her thoughts live on and continue to inspire the next generation. Schools for girls began to spring up all over Indonesia, and awareness about the importance of education for women was growing. This paved the way for Indonesian women to be more actively involved in education, politics, and economics. Kartini Day is a reminder of the importance of gender equality and education for everyone, regardless of gender.

Kartini's thoughts on the importance of education for women in Indonesia were a stepping stone for the women's emancipation movement and gender equality in the country. Through her letters, Kartini not only expressed her ideas but also took concrete steps to implement them, albeit within a limited scope [38]–[40]. Her efforts inspired many and continue to have an impact today, showing how important access to quality education is for everyone, especially women, in building a more just and equitable society.

### Analysis

Raden Ajeng Kartini's legacy in the field of education and women's rights has become an enduring symbol of gender emancipation in Indonesia. However, her thoughts are often celebrated ceremonially, rather than critically analyzed for their continued relevance in Islamic and educational discourses. This study repositions Kartini as not only a national heroine but also as a profound thinker who articulated the transformative power of education as a pathway to gender justice, particularly within a cultural and religious framework. Kartini's advocacy for women's education was deeply informed by her awareness of the structural limitations placed on women during the Dutch colonial period. She witnessed how indigenous women were excluded from formal education and subjected to strict patriarchal traditions. Despite being born into a noble family, Kartini recognized the broader injustices faced by less privileged women and critiqued both the colonial education system and native customs that perpetuated inequality.

What makes Kartini's thought unique is her integration of moral and ethical dimensions into her call for education. In her letters, she often referenced values such as compassion, justice, and human dignity—principles that align closely with Islamic teachings. Although not formally trained in Islamic jurisprudence, Kartini's ideals resonate with the Islamic concept of *adl* (justice), *ilm* (knowledge), and *karamah al-insan* (human dignity). This alignment suggests that her educational vision can be situated within an Islamic ethical framework that supports gender equity and social upliftment.

Moreover, Kartini did not view education merely as academic achievement, but as a means to foster critical thinking, independence, and moral integrity. She believed that educated women would become more conscious of their roles as mothers, educators, and agents of change in society. This holistic view mirrors Islamic pedagogy, which emphasizes the development of *akhlak* (character) alongside intellectual growth. Kartini's work in founding the first girls' school in Jepara stands as practical evidence of her commitment. The curriculum, which

included both academic subjects and life skills, reflects her inclusive approach to education that prepared women not only for domestic life but also for broader societal contributions.

In the context of contemporary gender debates, particularly within Muslim-majority societies, Kartini's thought offers an indigenous framework for reconciling tradition and modernity. Rather than importing Western feminist models, her vision provides a culturally resonant pathway for gender justice rooted in local values and Islamic ethics. It also aligns with global initiatives such as SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), underscoring the enduring relevance of her work. Ultimately, revisiting Kartini's legacy invites a rethinking of educational policy and gender discourse in Indonesia and the wider Muslim world. Her thought remains a valuable reference point for designing gender-inclusive education systems that uphold both cultural identity and universal human rights.

## CONCLUSION

Raden Ajeng Kartini remains a central figure in the history of Indonesia's struggle for gender equality and educational justice. Her contributions, rooted in intellectual courage and deep empathy for her people—especially women—have significantly shaped the nation's awareness of the transformative power of education. Kartini's persistent efforts to voice the importance of education for women during the colonial period laid the foundation for a more inclusive and equitable education system in Indonesia. Despite living in an era where women were marginalized and denied access to formal learning, Kartini never surrendered to societal limitations. Her writings clearly articulate her vision: that education is the key to liberation, empowerment, and national progress. Kartini believed that women, just like men, possessed the intellectual and moral capacity to contribute meaningfully to society. Through education, she sought to dismantle the cultural and colonial barriers that confined women to the domestic sphere. Thanks to Kartini's pioneering spirit and unwavering advocacy, the path toward educational equality began to unfold. Today, the impact of her struggle is evident in the equal opportunity men and women have to pursue education, regardless of their social or economic background. The ideals that Kartini fought for have gradually materialized in the Indonesian education system, where gender inclusivity is increasingly recognized and protected by law and policy. Her vision continues to inspire movements that promote women's rights, Islamic education reform, and gender-responsive curriculum development. Kartini's thoughts are not merely historical references but continue to serve as moral guidance in efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in promoting quality education (SDG 4) and gender equality (SDG 5). In essence, Kartini's legacy teaches us that the fight for justice and equality must begin with the mind—through education. Her life and work remain a testament to the enduring power of ideas to change not only individual lives but the course of a nation. Education, as Kartini envisioned it, is not just a tool of learning, but a bridge to dignity, independence, and justice for all.

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## Author Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the main contributor to this paper, all authors read and approved the final paper, and all authors declared no conflict of interest.

## Conflicts of Interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

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