

## THE EDUCATIONAL FOOTSTEPS OF SULTANAH SAIFATUDDIN: WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND ITS ROLE IN ACEHNESE SOCIETY

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### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini membahas peran Sultanah Saifatuddin, Ratu di Kerajaan Aceh (1641-1675 M) dalam mengubah pendidikan dan pemberdayaan perempuan di Aceh. Sultanah Saifatuddin tidak hanya memperjuangkan akses pendidikan bagi perempuan, tetapi juga mempromosikan kesetaraan gender dan kemandirian ekonomi. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan *library research* (kajian kepustakaan), menggali sumber-sumber primer dan sekunder yang relevan untuk menganalisis peran Sultanah Saifatuddin dalam konteks pendidikan dan pemberdayaan perempuan. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa Sultanah Saifatuddin tidak hanya memperjuangkan akses pendidikan bagi perempuan, tetapi juga mempromosikan kesetaraan gender dan mendorong kemandirian ekonomi mereka melalui pendidikan. Kontribusi utama artikel ini adalah memberikan wawasan mendalam tentang bagaimana pendidikan dapat berperan sebagai alat yang efektif dalam merubah peran perempuan dan meningkatkan partisipasi mereka dalam membangun masyarakat. Melalui analisis yang diungkapkan, diharapkan dapat ditemukan pembelajaran yang berharga untuk konteks pendidikan dan pemberdayaan perempuan, tidak hanya di Aceh tetapi juga di daerah lain yang menghadapi tantangan serupa.

**Kata kunci** : Sultanah Saifatuddin, Pendidikan, Pemberdayaan Perempuan, Aceh

### ABSTRACT

*This research discusses the role of Sultanah Saifatuddin, Queen of the Kingdom of Aceh (1641-1675 M) in transforming education and women's empowerment in Aceh. In addition to advocating for women's access to education, Sultanah Saifatuddin also promoted gender equality and economic independence. This study employs a qualitative methodology with a library research approach, utilizing relevant primary and secondary sources to analyze the impact of Sultanah Saifatuddin's actions on the context of education and women's empowerment. The results demonstrate that Sultanah Saifatuddin not only advocated for women's access to education but also championed gender equality and economic empowerment through education. This article's primary contribution is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the role of education as a transformative tool for women's empowerment and their active engagement in societal development. The findings of this study are expected to provide insights that can inform the design of*

*educational policies and programs aimed at women's empowerment, not only in Aceh but also in other regions facing similar challenges.*

**Keywords:** *Sultanah Saifatuddin, Education, Women's Empowerment, Aceh*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Aceh is a city known for the glory of the Kingdom of Samudera Pasai, which played a key role in the spread of Islam in the region. Aceh, which at the time was an important center of trade and culture, became a gathering place for scholars, traders, and sailors from various parts of the world. The intellectual and spiritual legacy of the Samudera Pasai era is reflected in the culture and traditions of Banda Aceh, which reinforce the values of tolerance, fairness, and wisdom. These values are still upheld by the local community today (Solikah, 2013).

Aceh is also known as the birthplace of Indonesian national heroes, one of whom is Cut Nyak Dhien. As a courageous and tenacious warrior, Cut Nyak Dhien played a pivotal role in the resistance against the Dutch colonizers during the Aceh War in the 19th century. Her courageous leadership of the resistance against Dutch colonial oppression earned her the respect of not only the people of Aceh but also the entire Indonesian nation. The tale of her valiant resistance and unwavering patriotism has served as an inspiration to generations of individuals striving to safeguard the nation's sovereignty and honor (Fakhri, 2020).

However, Aceh did have queens who were notable for their courage and leadership abilities. They were emblematic of strength, sagacity, and fortitude, guiding Aceh through challenging and triumphant periods. With a discerning hand, they safeguarded the sovereignty and honor of the country, inspiring future generations to continue to honor and follow in their footsteps (Sa'adah, 2007).

From 1641 to 1699 AD, the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam was led by four consecutive queens or sultanahs, who collectively held control for almost 60 years. The four leaders who ruled during this period were Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah (1641-1675), Sultanah Nurul Alam Naqiatuddin Syah (1675-1678), Sultanah Inayat Zakiatuddin Syah (1678-1688), and Sultanah Kamalatuddin Syah (1688-1699) (Hasjmy, 1993).

A professor of ethnology and geography at Leiden University in the Netherlands, P.J. Veth, has identified Sultanah Taj'Alam Safiyyat al-Din as one of

the most admirable female leaders in Indonesia. Her leadership of the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam is considered a particularly noteworthy example. Sultanah Taj' Alam Safiyyat al-Din, the eldest daughter of Sultan Iskandar Muda, was born in 1612 and ruled the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam from 1059-1086 AH/1641-1675 AD (Merry, 2021).

Sultanah Safiatuddin, a woman of considerable charm, intelligence, and erudition, commenced her studies at the tender age of seven under the tutelage of Iskandar Tsani and other courtiers. At Jami's Baiturraman, she received instruction from renowned scholars such as Sheikh Hamzah Fansury, Sheikh Nuruddin Ar-Raniry, and Sheikh Kamaluddin. Upon completion of her education, Safiatuddin demonstrated expertise in a range of disciplines and was proficient in multiple languages, including Arabic, Persian, and Spanish. Furthermore, she was also proficient in the field of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), including constitutional law, history, logic, philosophy, Sufism, literature, and other related disciplines (Hasjmy, 1993)

The princess matured into a young woman of considerable erudition and an integrated personality. Upon reaching adulthood, she entered into a matrimonial union with the son of the Sultan of Pahang, a sultanate located on the Malay Peninsula. A few years after her marriage, her father died, and the royal power was transferred to her husband, Sultan Iskandar Tsani (Harun, 1982).

Following the demise of Sultan Iskandar Tsani, Princess Safiatuddin was designated Sultanah of the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam, bearing the title Sri Ratu Tajul Alam Safiatuddin. This appointment was made by the consensus of state officials and scholars. She presided over Aceh from 1050 to 1086 Hijri, which corresponds to the period between 1641 and 1675 AD (Hasjmy, 1993).

The appointment of Sultanah Safiatuddin as queen has been the subject of considerable controversy regarding the issue of Islamic law on women becoming heads of state. Nevertheless, Sultanah Safiatuddin's supporters were more numerous, thus enabling the coronation process to be carried out, as well as the coronation of the next sultanahs. Similarly, at the coronation of the fourth sultanah, opposition intensified, yet the opposing faction lacked sufficient strength to prevail. Consequently, the supporting faction emerged triumphant (Sa'adah, 2007).

The initial step taken by Sultanah Safiatuddin was to initiate a gradual process of transformation of the patriarchal structure that had long been entrenched in Aceh. The objective was to create a more inclusive and equal society for all individuals, in a patriarchal culture that emphasizes male dominance as the central authority in the social structure. Furthermore, it establishes men in a superior position to women in all aspects of social, cultural, and economic life (Hasan, 2018).

The prevailing perception of Acehnese society is that women are more susceptible to emotional influences than to rational considerations. This has led to a situation in which women's position in both the public and domestic spheres, particularly in the political context, is less powerful and less valued. Similarly, upon marriage and subsequent relocation to her husband's family home, the wife's position within the family and in domestic affairs is diminished. In the event of a divorce, the wife is likely to be evicted from her husband's home and forced to return to her parent's home if possible (Aswita, 2022).

Consequently, Sultanah Safiatuddin implemented policy measures that prioritized gender equality across various sectors, including education, politics, social, and military, to facilitate women's participation. Sultanah Safiatuddin underscored the pivotal role of education as a foundational step in advancing the participation of women in various sectors. One of her earliest actions was to order the opening of all educational institutions to men and women without distinction. This initiative was perceived by Sultanah Safiatuddin as a means of enhancing women's position and dignity in all aspects of life, with education being identified as a key area for improvement.

No research specifically discusses the success of Sultanah Saifatuddin's education policy to enable women to meet their economic needs independently. The research that discusses the policy of increasing natural resources in the field of education has been written by Maysarah, Hasan Basri M, and Nur in the title *Kiprah Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin in Advancing Education in the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam* published by the journal *Wathan: Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* Vol.1 No 1 Year 2024. This journal article describes Sultanah Saifatuddin's steps to improve human resources in the field of education, which

favors men, namely providing scholarships abroad, encouraging them to write scientific papers and others. It does not explain what steps have been taken to improve the educational aspect for women (Maysarah, dkk, 2024).

Consequently, it is imperative to conduct this research to ascertain the educational initiatives undertaken by Sultanah Saifatuddin during her tenure as Queen of Aceh between 1641 and 1675 AD. Furthermore, it is crucial to examine how Sultanah Saifatuddin empowered women in Aceh, enabling them to enhance their family's economic standing.

This research employs a qualitative methodology, with a library research approach. The library research method employs a variety of reading materials as data sources. The data set for this research comprises two distinct categories primary data and secondary data. The primary data for this research is 59 Years of Free Aceh Under the Queen's Rule by A. Hasjmy, while the secondary data is the book Aceh Women in Government and Warfare by A. In addition to the aforementioned sources, Hasjmy's book Aceh Throughout the Ages, and various other books and journals that discuss the role of Sultanah Saifatuddin in the context of education and women's empowerment in Aceh were consulted.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **A. Profile Sultanah Saifatuddin**

Sultanah Safiatuddin was born in 1612 in Banda Aceh. She was the eldest daughter of Sultan Iskandar Muda and his first wife, Puteri Sani Ratna Sendi Istana. Sultanah Safiatuddin is titled Paduka Sri Sultanah Ratu Safiatuddin Tajul Alam Syah Johan, which translates to "Sovereign *Illu Ilahi fi'il Alam.*" The name Safiatuddin Tajul Alam, which translates as "purity of faith and the crown of the world," is a reflection of the individual's commitment to spiritual purity and global authority (Khrisna, 2018).

Since the age of seven, Sultanah Saifatuddin has pursued her studies under the guidance of eminent scholars, including Sheikh Hamzah Fansury, Sheikh Nuruddin Ar-Raniry, and Sheikh Kamaluddin. She also acquired a comprehensive understanding of various scientific disciplines and languages, including Arabic, Persian, and Spanish. Furthermore, she studied fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence),

including constitutional law, and demonstrated a comprehensive grasp of history, logic, philosophy, Sufism, literature, and other disciplines (Hasjmy, 1993).

As an adult, Sultanah Safiatuddin entered into a marriage contract with the son of the Sultan of Pahang from the Malay Peninsula, Sultan Iskandar Tsani. A few years after her marriage, her father died. Consequently, the transfer of royal power occurred to her son-in-law, who was subsequently appointed Sultan (Harun, 1982).

After a reign of five years, Sultan Iskandar Tsani died in 1641 AD at the age of 30, leaving no children from his marriage with Ratu Safiatuddin. Following the demise of Sultan Iskandar Tsani, the state officials and scholars collectively resolved to enthrone Princess Safiatuddin as the Sultanah of the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam. She ruled with the title Sri Ratu Tajul Alam Safiatuddin from 1050 to 1086 H/1641 to 1675 AD (Rohmaniyah, 2013).

## **B. The Educational Footsteps at Sultanah Saifatuddin**

### **1. Social Conditions of the Acehnese People**

#### a) Women as Successors

In Islamic and Malay law, women are accorded a limited role, that of successor to offspring. Throughout history, women have been regarded as inherently weaker than men and in need of protection. A woman is considered to be perfect if she can fulfill the roles of a good mother and wife towards her children and husband (Hanapi, 2015).

#### b). Customary Law of Marriage

At that time, the people of Aceh lived according to the principles of the rule of law and custom, as established by the government, to achieve happiness in this world and the hereafter. The populace demonstrated deference to their leaders and placed the collective good above individual interests while upholding the principles of justice by Islamic values and Acehnese traditions.

##### a. Hanging Marriage

A girl who is young or in education may be married first and the marriage formalized a few years later. In other words, the marriage is postponed until the girl reaches adulthood, while the man goes out to trade or earn a living. Usually, such marriages are due to the poor condition of the

girl's family or because both parents have died. Such delayed marriages can also occur in arranged marriages, as in the past it was considered taboo for bachelors and virgins to find a partner on their own. Choosing a spouse was the sole responsibility of the parents, especially for a girl (Arby, 1989).

b. *Ta'lik* and Divorce Customs

In the customary law of divorce, the husband has the absolute right to divorce his wife under any circumstances, and in this context, the continuity of the household is organized under the control of the husband as a progressive right (Hoesin, 1970).

A married Acehnese woman is expected to always show complete obedience, submission, and loyalty to her husband as the head of the family. This is by the teachings of the Qur'an, Surah An-Nisa verse 34, which states, "Men are the leaders of women, for Allah has preferred some of them (men) over others...". Therefore, wives are expected to be obedient to their husbands and if they are not, divorce is considered a valid option (Murtiningsih, 2008).

### **C. Education Policy Implemented by Sultanah Saifatudin**

Education became the brightest element of civilization during the reign of Sultanah Safiatuddin in the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam. Here are some of the things Sultanah Saifatuddin did to improve the progress of education in Aceh:

1. Human resources development

a) Hiring Foreign Scientists as Experts

Sultanah Safiatuddin established international cooperation with countries such as England, India, Egypt, and others. This was due to the great influence that Aceh had in the eyes of the world, so foreign countries were interested in making it a key for various interests, including the spread of Islam (Amiruddin, 2006).

Aceh also attracted the attention of foreign experts such as Shaikh Abdul Qadir Ibn Hajar from Makkah, Shaikh Idrus Bayan from Baghdad, and Shaikh Muhammad Ar-Raniry from Gujarat, India, as well as experts from various other regions. They were not only qualified in the field of religion but also had expertise in various disciplines such as philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and

others. These experts and scientists were appointed as experts in various scientific fields during the reign of Sultanah Safiatuddin. In addition, the Aceh government was always accompanied by ulama as royal advisers, including Nuruddin Ar-Raniry from Gujarat, India (Matsyah, 2013).

b) Promoting Scientific Writing

Sultanah Safiatuddin asked scholars and scientists who played important roles in the government to write scientific works needed by the kingdom. It is therefore not surprising that during the reign of Sultanah Safiatuddin, scientists competed to conduct scientific research and document it in writing so that it could be accessed by the public. This is due to the understanding that scientific work is the result of original work that has been scientifically tested. This phenomenon underlines the importance and necessity of the modern age for the production of quality works (Azhari, M. dkk, 2023).

c) Providing Scholarships for Scholars to Study Abroad

Sultanah Safiatuddin provided financial support for scholars to study abroad. For example, Abdurrauf As-Singkili received financial support to study in various countries outside Aceh, such as Malaysia, India, Baghdad, Medina, and Makkah. As a result, when these scholars returned to Aceh after completing their studies, the knowledge they brought with them was highly valued and appreciated by Sultanah Safiatuddin as a step towards educational progress. (Hasjmy, 1997).

2. Progress in the development of educational infrastructure

a) *Meunasah* development as an education center

*Meunasah* is a public facility in Aceh, available in every village for the community to pray (Fikri, 2016). The *meunasah* can also be used as a madrasa or school for learning (S. Sukri, dkk, 2023) Each village has an Imam who is responsible for religious affairs, called *Imum Chiek*. As well as being a place of worship, the *meunasah* is also used for village community meetings and other social activities (Matsyah, 2013)

b) Popularizing dayah education institutions

Dayah is an official educational institution that reached its peak during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda and continued until the time of Sultanah

Safiatuddin. During this period, education in Aceh became a major destination for students in Southeast Asia. Many foreign students came to Aceh to study. They studied various religious subjects such as Tawhid, Fiqh, and Tasawwuf (Said, 1981).

c) Building a library

Sultanah Saifatuddin built the State Library as a source of knowledge to educate her people (Maysarah, dkk, 2024).

## **D. Empowering Women in the Acehnese Community**

### **1. Education**

Sultanah Safiatuddin instructed that women in the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam be allowed to study in the hope that they would improve their position and dignity in all aspects of life (Baqi, 2022). They were taught various skills such as agriculture, handicrafts, business, and others (Dhuhri, 2011). Efforts were also made to eradicate illiteracy. This illiteracy eradication started at home where mothers taught and educated their children by introducing them to letters, numbers, and reading. This is considered important because children spend more time at home with their mothers than with their fathers (Wirianto, 2020).

### **2. Military**

Before the reign of Sultanah Saifatuddin, the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam had a fleet called Inong Balee. Inong means woman and Balee means terrace. The members of this fleet were women who, after losing their husbands, had to support their children while replacing their husbands' roles by fighting on the battlefield. The women were used as a reserve force to guard the Aceh coast in the event of a Portuguese attack (H.M.Zainuddin, 1961).

### **3. Government**

Sultanah Safiatuddin opened up access for women to work in various government institutions and departments. For example, in the Mahkamah, or official body that functioned as a deliberative body, the Sultanah expanded the membership to include women and added 18 female members (H.M.Zainuddin, 1961).

These measures were taken to formulate laws that would improve the lot and position of women in Acehnese society. All these policies were discussed through the People's Court Assembly, led by Kadli Malikul Adil. This meant that measures to improve women's rights were backed by law and could not be easily changed by other parties (Hasjmy, 1997).

## CONCLUSION

In the Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam, Sultanah Safiatuddin has played an important role in improving education and empowering women. She gave women access to education and employment, supported the eradication of illiteracy, and involved women in government institutions. By formulating laws that protected and improved the status of women through official institutions, the Sultanah ensured that these measures were backed by law and could not be easily changed. Her actions demonstrated a strong commitment to improving the welfare and dignity of women in Acehnese society.

This research may be limited by the available historical sources, especially those that focus on the contribution of women during the reign of Sultanah Safiatuddin. There are potential biases in the interpretation of historical data, as well as a lack of detailed information on the long-term impact of the education and empowerment policies implemented by Sultanah Safiatuddin. However, this research provides important insights into the role and contribution of Sultanah Safiatuddin in improving women's education and empowerment in Aceh. Future research could look more closely at the long-term impact of Sultanah Safiatuddin's policies on women's education and empowerment in Aceh, and further explore the contributions of individual women who were educated and empowered during Sultanah Safiatuddin's reign.

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