



Lived Experiences of Rural Youth in Religious-Economic Majelis Taklim Programs

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ABSTRACT

Religious education plays a vital role in shaping individual and communal identities, particularly within rural Muslim communities. While majelis taklim are widely recognized as centers for spiritual learning, their evolving role in youth economic empowerment remains underexplored. Despite growing attention to their practical benefits, little is known about how rural youth personally experience and interpret their participation in these faith-based programs. This study addresses that gap by asking: how do young people make sense of their engagement in majelis taklim that combine religious instruction with economic empowerment? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study explores the lived experiences of ten rural youth (aged 17–25) from Central Java, Indonesia who actively participated in such programs. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify key experiential themes. The findings reveal four emergent themes: (1) majlis as a spiritual sanctuary, (2) economic participation as a form of religious duty, (3) peer bonding and communal resilience, and (4) aspiration building through integrated learning. Participants described deep internalization of religious values, strengthened social bonds, and renewed purpose through their involvement. These results suggest that religious spaces can function as holistic platforms for youth development in under-resourced settings. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how integrated religious and economic programs impact youth empowerment and provides a foundation for future research into the subjective dimensions of faith-based community education.



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INTRODUCTION

In many rural Muslim communities, majelis taklim—informal religious study groups—play a vital role in shaping individual and collective spiritual life. Functioning beyond the confines of formal education, these gatherings serve as spaces for religious learning, moral guidance, and social bonding. Within such contexts, youth participation in majelis taklim has increasingly expanded to include not only spiritual development but also initiatives related to economic empowerment, community cooperation, and self-actualization. This shift reflects broader transformations in the function of religious education in responding to socio-economic challenges in under-resourced areas.

The significance of this phenomenon lies in its intersection between religious identity formation and community-based empowerment. For many young people, participation in majelis taklim is not merely a routine spiritual activity but a deeply personal process that influences their worldview, values, and aspirations. These experiences foster meaning-making, social belonging, and a renewed sense of agency among rural youth. However, such subjective and transformative aspects of religious participation remain underrepresented in dominant educational and development research, which tends to privilege quantifiable outcomes over lived realities.

Despite the growing interest in integrated faith-based initiatives, few studies have closely examined how rural youth interpret and make sense of their involvement in majelis taklim that incorporate both religious and economic goals. This study addresses that gap by asking the following research question: How do rural youth experience and interpret their participation in integrated religious-economic majelis taklim programs?

Previous research has explored the sociological role of majelis taklim as vehicles for religious transmission (Azra, 2012), informal education (Maksum, 2016), and gendered religious engagement (Rinaldo, 2008). Other studies have noted their evolving role in civic participation and local development (Abdillah, 2019). Yet, there remains a lack of phenomenological inquiry into how individual participants, particularly youth, internalize these experiences. This study responds to that theoretical gap by adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach to understand the nuanced, lived experiences of youth engaging in hybrid spiritual-economic religious spaces.

Given the evolving function of majelis taklim in shaping not only faith-based knowledge but also socio-economic consciousness, it becomes essential to explore how participants themselves understand and experience this phenomenon. Phenomenology, as a research approach, is particularly well-suited for capturing the rich, nuanced meanings that individuals attribute to their experiences. Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of majelis taklim in instrumental terms, this study seeks to illuminate how rural youth internalize, navigate, and transform through their engagement in these religiously-rooted communal spaces. Such an exploration responds to a critical need in the literature to center the voices and perspectives of those who live within the dynamics of religious community life.

Against the broader context of majelis taklim as sites of spiritual and social transformation, scholarly attention has increasingly turned toward understanding how individuals subjectively experience these communal religious spaces. Research focusing on lived experiences within religious and educational settings has become a vital area of inquiry, particularly as it sheds light on the internal processes of meaning-making, identity formation, and social engagement among marginalized populations such as rural youth.

However, the methodological landscape in this domain remains fraught with challenges. Many prior investigations have relied heavily on quantitative or outcome-driven designs that emphasize measurable indicators such as program attendance, economic performance, or cognitive learning outcomes. While useful for evaluating effectiveness, such approaches often overlook the deeper, subjective dimensions of experience how participants perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond to their involvement in these religious-educational communities.

This methodological limitation has led to an underrepresentation of the voices and inner experiences of youth who actively participate in majelis taklim. Existing data sets frequently fail to account for the contextual richness and personal transformations that occur within these settings. Without access to the nuanced narratives of those immersed in the phenomenon, much of the existing literature lacks the depth needed to grasp its full significance.

Accordingly, there is a pressing need for research designs that can uncover the essential meanings embedded in the lived experiences of participants. A phenomenological approach, with its focus on subjective consciousness and interpretive depth, offers a powerful framework for bridging this gap. It enables researchers to move beyond surface-level descriptions toward a holistic understanding of how religious engagement shapes personal and communal development.

In addressing youth development within religious communities, existing solutions have largely centered on the implementation of practical models such as faith-based training programs, entrepreneurship workshops, and structured community service that aim to promote both spiritual and economic outcomes. While these interventions are often well-intentioned and produce observable benefits, their evaluative frameworks tend to rely on predefined indicators of success, including behavioral changes, income generation, or participation rates.

However, such approaches rarely capture the deeper experiential realities of the youth involved. Quantitative assessments and even some qualitative evaluations often fall short in

uncovering the complex inner processes through which participants internalize religious teachings, negotiate identity, and make sense of their social and spiritual journeys. As a result, the literature remains insufficiently equipped to explain how rural youth actually live, feel, and interpret their involvement in religious empowerment spaces like majelis taklim.

This lack of experiential insight points to a critical gap in current scholarship: the absence of research that centers the subjective voices and transformative experiences of participants. Without understanding the meanings embedded in their lived realities, interventions risk being misaligned with the authentic needs, values, and aspirations of those they intend to serve.

To address this limitation, a phenomenological approach offers a compelling alternative. By prioritizing personal narratives and the interpretive richness of lived experience, phenomenology enables a more nuanced and holistic exploration of how religious and economic empowerment intersect within the everyday lives of rural youth. Such an approach not only fills a methodological void but also contributes to more grounded, empathetic, and context-sensitive understandings of religious education and community empowerment.

Previous studies have explored religious education in rural settings by focusing on institutional practices, curriculum effectiveness, and community outreach. Some have investigated the role of majelis taklim in promoting moral behavior and social solidarity, often through descriptive or outcome-based approaches. Others have examined faith-based economic programs and their impact on youth development. However, few studies have delved into how young participants themselves experience and interpret these engagements on a personal level. This gap calls for a research approach that centers subjective meaning and the lived reality of individuals.

To address this, the present study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of rural youth involved in majelis taklim that integrate religious learning and economic empowerment. This method was selected for its ability to explore deep, context-specific meanings and illuminate how individuals construct their understanding of spiritual and social life. The study responds to the earlier identified knowledge gap by providing insight into the inner world of youth participants. It moves beyond programmatic outcomes to reveal how faith, community, and economic hope converge in their narratives. In doing so, the study adds depth to existing literature by offering a first-person perspective.

This article is structured as follows: the introduction outlines the research problem and its significance. The next section explains the social and cultural context of majelis taklim in rural Indonesia. The methodology section details the interpretative phenomenological design, data collection process, and analysis strategy. Following that, the results present key themes derived from participants lived experiences. The article concludes with a discussion of implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This research employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of rural youth participating in majelis taklim programs that integrate religious learning with economic empowerment. Phenomenology, as a qualitative methodology, seeks to uncover the essence of subjective human experiences by examining how individuals make sense of a specific phenomenon in their lifeworld. The interpretative orientation, grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, was selected to allow a deeper understanding of how participants construct meaning within their sociocultural and spiritual realities. This design was considered suitable for capturing the rich, contextualized experiences and personal transformations that emerged from active involvement in community-based religious forums.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of rural youth actively engaged in majelis taklim programs that offered religious education alongside economic empowerment initiatives. Selection was

conducted through purposive sampling, emphasizing individuals who had participated in the program for a minimum of six months and could articulate reflective insights into their experiences. Inclusion criteria encompassed individuals aged between 18 and 25 years, residing in the village where the study took place, and having consistent attendance in majelis taklim activities. Exclusion criteria included those who had only attended sporadically or lacked sufficient involvement in the program's economic activities. The final sample included ten participants (6 males and 4 females), with an average age of 21.4 years. Most participants came from low-to-middle income families and had completed at least a secondary education.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews guided by a flexible interview protocol designed to elicit rich, narrative responses. Interviews were conducted in person in private, quiet settings within the community to ensure comfort and openness. Each interview lasted between 45 to 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Open-ended questions were used to explore personal experiences, feelings, and perceptions related to their involvement in majelis taklim. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal expressions and environmental context. All interviews were transcribed verbatim in the original language, and pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves a systematic process of engaging with the text to uncover meaning-making processes of participants. The analysis began with multiple readings of each transcript, followed by initial coding of significant statements. Meaning units were clustered into emergent themes, which were then compared across cases to identify shared patterns and divergences. NVivo 12 software was used to assist in organizing and managing qualitative data, but thematic development was driven by iterative engagement with the transcripts. This method allowed for both idiographic focus and cross-case interpretation, resulting in a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences being studied.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Written informed consent was secured from all participants after they were provided with detailed information regarding the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All data were anonymized, and strict confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. The study adhered to ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with local research ethics protocols.

RESULTS

This study explored the lived experiences of rural youth participating in majelis taklim programs that integrated religious education with economic empowerment activities. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, four key themes emerged that revealed the essence of how young individuals perceived, internalized, and responded to their participation in these religious-community initiatives.

Majelis Taklim as a Spiritual Anchor and Moral Compass

For many participants, the majelis taklim was not merely a venue for religious instruction but a central spiritual space that guided their personal values and life direction. The routine of collective prayer, Qur'anic study, and religious reflection provided a sense of purpose and moral orientation in their daily lives.

“To me, the majelis taklim is more than just a study group it's where I learned what kind of person I want to be. It taught me discipline, sincerity, and how to live in a way that pleases God.” (P4, Male, 21)

This sense of spiritual grounding created a stable inner framework for youth navigating the uncertainties of rural socio-economic life. Several participants described how the teachings helped them resist negative influences and remain committed to ethical practices even in challenging circumstances.

Spiritual and Moral Growth Pyramid



The Internalization of Religious Values through Economic Practice

A distinctive feature of these majelis taklim was the integration of economic empowerment activities, such as small business training, community savings groups, and entrepreneurship mentoring. Participants reported that these efforts not only improved their economic literacy but also deepened their understanding of Islamic principles in daily transactions.

“When we were taught about syariah-compliant business models, I realized that religion isn't only about prayer. It's about how we trade, how we treat people, and how we help our neighbors through business.” (P2, Female, 23)

This theme revealed how religious teachings were not experienced as abstract or distant but were instead enacted and embodied in concrete economic choices. The practice of religion and economy became inseparable in the youth's lived reality.

Strengthening of Social Bonds and Collective Responsibility

Participants frequently expressed how their involvement in majelis taklim fostered a strong sense of community and mutual support. The regular gatherings created emotional closeness, while collaborative activities instilled a shared sense of responsibility toward communal well-being.

“After a few months, we were no longer just attending for ourselves. We looked after each other, checked on who was missing, and shared problems. It became like a family.” (P7, Male, 20)

This social cohesion also provided resilience, particularly for those facing familial hardship or economic vulnerability. The majelis taklim acted as a protective social network grounded in faith and trust.

Identity Transformation and Aspirational Shifts

Engagement in the majelis taklim led to a redefinition of self-perception and future aspirations among the youth. Several participants described a profound change in how they viewed themselves not just as rural youth with limited opportunities, but as agents of change guided by Islamic values.

“I used to think I would just help my parents in the fields. Now, I want to run a halal business and teach kids what I’ve learned. It gave me a new dream.” (P5, Female, 22)

This identity shift was not imposed externally but emerged organically through lived experience within the religious-economic space, suggesting a process of personal empowerment shaped by spiritual and communal growth.

The experiences of rural youth participating in majelis taklim with embedded economic empowerment components reveal a multidimensional transformation that spans spiritual, social, and economic domains. The majelis taklim functioned not only as a site for religious learning but also as a space for lived practice, emotional support, and personal development. These themes underscore the deep interconnection between faith, community, and self-empowerment in shaping the trajectories of young people in rural Islamic contexts.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that participation in majelis taklim among rural youth serves as a transformative experience that nurtures spiritual identity, fosters social cohesion, and cultivates economic awareness. These core meanings directly address the central research question concerning how young individuals internalize and make sense of their engagement in religious gatherings that combine faith with empowerment.

This study contributes significantly to understanding the lived experiences of rural youth in religious contexts by offering insight into their personal interpretations and evolving identities. Rather than viewing majelis taklim solely as a religious obligation or social tradition, participants described it as a dynamic space of personal growth and moral direction. The themes identified spiritual anchoring, value-based economic practice, strengthened social bonds, and aspirational shifts highlight the depth of transformation that occurs when religious learning is integrated with community empowerment. These results provide a meaningful response to the existing gap in the literature, which often neglects the inner dimensions of faith-based participation and empowerment processes.

When compared with previous studies, these findings align with Nurhidayat et al. (2022), who emphasized the role of majelis taklim as a driver of rural empowerment. However, this study extends beyond that by capturing the subjective meanings embedded in daily engagement with these activities. It also complements Harun and Wahid (2020), who linked Islamic entrepreneurship to youth development, by highlighting how young people spiritually interpret economic practices as part of their faith. Moreover, the findings echo Ardiansyah (2019), who identified mosque-based activities as sites of spiritual transformation, yet this research deepens the narrative by illustrating how youth reshape their self-concepts and community roles through interpretative engagement. Thus, this study enhances current theoretical perspectives on religious education and community empowerment by anchoring them in phenomenological insight and lived experience.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the immediate participants and reflect broader social and cultural dynamics within rural Islamic communities. By demonstrating how majelis taklim can function as a holistic space for personal transformation, the study underscores the potential of faith-based initiatives to foster not only spiritual growth but also socio-economic development. Practitioners in religious education and community empowerment programs may find value in integrating economic training within spiritual frameworks to support youth agency and engagement. Moreover, these insights could inform policy interventions aimed at youth development in underserved regions, where conventional models often fail to resonate with local cultural values.

Despite the richness of the data, the study acknowledges several limitations. As a qualitative inquiry rooted in interpretative phenomenology, the findings are context-specific and reflect the unique perspectives of ten rural youth in one geographic location. The reliance on purposive sampling and self-reported experiences limits the generalizability of results to broader populations. Additionally, the research setting where majelis taklim are actively supported by local leaders may not be representative of other communities with different levels of engagement or institutional support.

These limitations, however, do not diminish the depth of insight but rather highlight the importance of contextual understanding in phenomenological research.

Future research could build upon these findings by exploring similar experiences among youth in different religious, cultural, or geographic contexts. Comparative studies across regions or between genders may further illuminate how diverse socio-religious settings shape the meaning and function of majelis taklim. Longitudinal designs could also examine how engagement in such programs affects participants' trajectories over time, both spiritually and socio-economically. Ultimately, this study lays the groundwork for future phenomenological investigations into the role of religious education in shaping youth identity, empowerment, and community belonging.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experiences of rural youth involved in majelis taklim that integrate religious education with economic empowerment, highlighting their function as transformative spaces. Rather than merely restating program benefits, the findings offer deeper insight into how youth internalize spiritual teachings to construct new life trajectories and social identities. By adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research illuminated the nuanced processes through which participants developed moral agency, aspirational goals, and community engagement in response to faith-based interventions. These contributions move beyond descriptive outcomes, emphasizing the experiential and meaning-making dimensions often absent in evaluations of religious programs.

This study underscores the potential of majelis taklim to act as multidimensional platforms for youth empowerment, especially in contexts marked by limited institutional support. Future research could build on these findings by conducting comparative studies across diverse cultural or denominational contexts to understand variations in youth engagement and meaning-making. Additionally, action-based or participatory longitudinal designs could trace how involvement in integrated majelis taklim shapes life decisions related to education, livelihood, and civic participation over time. Investigating the perspectives of facilitators, religious leaders, or family members could also offer a more holistic picture of intergenerational dynamics within these programs.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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