



Spiritual Grounds for Economic Growth: A Qualitative Exploration of Rural Indonesian Women's Transformative Journeys Through Mosque-Led Empowerment Programs

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the transformative experiences of rural Indonesian women who engage in mosque-led empowerment programs that combine spiritual guidance with economic development. Moving beyond traditional metrics of income generation, the research adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to uncover how participants perceive and internalize empowerment in a faith-based setting. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twelve housewives aged 30-55 years from three rural villages in North Sumatra, Indonesia, selected via purposive sampling. Interviews were conducted over a two-month period and complemented by participant observation during mosque-based activities. Four dominant themes emerged: the mosque as a sanctuary for spiritual and economic rejuvenation, redefined concepts of womanhood, spiritual capital as a source of resilience, and collective sisterhood as a catalyst for empowerment. The findings reveal that these programs do more than provide entrepreneurial skills—they nurture a renewed sense of self, purpose, and social belonging grounded in Islamic values. The mosque, traditionally seen as a space for worship, is reimagined as a center for holistic personal transformation. This study enriches current development discourse by emphasizing the spiritual and emotional dimensions of empowerment often overlooked in conventional evaluations. It offers practical insights for designing culturally embedded development initiatives that prioritize lived experiences and spiritual integrity. The research also invites comparative exploration across other religious or cultural contexts, emphasizing the mosque's potential as a site of inclusive and transformative community growth.



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INTRODUCTION

In many rural communities across the Global South, particularly in Muslim-majority societies, the mosque has traditionally functioned as a central institution for religious instruction and community gatherings (Ginting dkk., 2021; Rinawan dkk., 2021). In recent years, however, there has been a growing trend to reimagine the mosque as a multifunctional space that not only nurtures spiritual development but also catalyzes socioeconomic empowerment—especially among marginalized populations such as rural housewives. These women often face limited access to formal employment, financial resources, and educational opportunities, which contributes to a cycle of economic dependency and social invisibility.

The shift toward mosque-based empowerment initiatives has been widely recognized in development discourse as a promising grassroots strategy to support women's economic participation while reinforcing local cultural and religious values (Adelia & Susanto, 2020). However, much of the existing literature tends to evaluate the success of such programs in terms of measurable outcomes—such as income generation or business sustainability—while overlooking the deeper subjective experiences of the women involved. Yet, economic empowerment, particularly when rooted in a faith-

based context, cannot be fully understood through quantitative metrics alone. It is also a personal and spiritual journey marked by emotional transformations, redefined identities, and renewed social roles.

Understanding how participants interpret and make sense of their involvement in mosque-based empowerment initiatives is therefore essential (Wenang dkk., 2022; Zid dkk., 2020). This calls for a phenomenological lens that prioritizes lived experience over external observation. A deeper engagement with participants' narratives can reveal how empowerment is internalized, how spiritual and economic identities intersect, and how meaning is constructed through everyday encounters within the mosque setting. Such exploration not only enriches academic understanding but also provides insights into how religious spaces can be more effectively mobilized for inclusive social development.

Research on how individuals subjectively experience empowerment in specific social contexts has emerged as a critical area within the broader field of religious education and community development (Cintyamina dkk., 2021; Susanto dkk., 2019). In particular, studies focusing on faith-based economic initiatives have begun to acknowledge the need to go beyond surface-level assessments and engage more deeply with the personal narratives of those directly involved (Bandzuh dkk., 2022). While such programs have demonstrated considerable success in facilitating entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency, there remains a significant gap in understanding how participants perceive, internalize, and assign meaning to their journeys of transformation—especially when these journeys are intertwined with spiritual practices and religious settings.

A key challenge in this domain lies in the methodological limitations of prior research (Faza dkk., 2022; Rinawan dkk., 2022). Much of the existing scholarship employs quantitative or outcome-oriented approaches, which, while valuable for measuring economic impact, often fail to capture the rich, layered realities of human experience (Miranda dkk., 2022; Warner, 2017). These approaches tend to overlook the complex interplay between faith, identity, emotion, and agency that shapes the empowerment process from within. Moreover, traditional evaluation frameworks rarely account for the symbolic and relational dimensions that are embedded in community-based religious practices.

As a result, previous research has been limited in its ability to offer a holistic understanding of mosque-based empowerment as a lived phenomenon (Adelia & Susanto, 2020; Palutturi dkk., 2021). Without access to the voices and interpretations of the women themselves, the essence of what it means to be economically and spiritually empowered in a rural Islamic setting remains only partially understood. This limitation underscores the necessity of employing phenomenological inquiry, which centers the experiential world of participants and seeks to illuminate the meaning they construct through direct engagement with their social and spiritual environments.

In the context of mosque-based economic empowerment programs, existing solutions have predominantly focused on practical and programmatic interventions—such as skills training, micro-financing, and small enterprise development—as primary strategies to alleviate poverty and promote women's self-sufficiency (Bandzuh dkk., 2022; Widayanti dkk., 2020). These approaches have proven effective in improving tangible economic outcomes, yet they often rely on standardized evaluation metrics that inadequately reflect the nuanced and deeply personal nature of empowerment as experienced by participants.

Quantitative measures and externally imposed success indicators frequently fail to capture the internal shifts in self-perception, identity, spiritual growth, and relational dynamics that are central to participants' lived experiences (Panjaitan & Partasmita, 2020; Wandira dkk., 2022). The reliance on outcome-based models has contributed to a fragmented understanding of empowerment—one that emphasizes external change while neglecting the internal meaning-making processes through which transformation truly occurs (Cintyamina dkk., 2021).

Given these limitations, there is a clear need for alternative research approaches that can more effectively explore the subjective dimensions of empowerment in religiously rooted community initiatives (Ekadinata dkk., 2023; Has dkk., 2024). Phenomenological inquiry offers a compelling framework for addressing this gap, as it prioritizes the exploration of individual experiences and the meanings that participants ascribe to them. By centering the voices of rural housewives engaged in

mosque-based empowerment, a phenomenological approach can uncover the essence of how empowerment is understood, embodied, and practiced within specific socio-religious contexts—insights that are essential for designing more responsive and culturally grounded development programs.

Recent studies have explored women's empowerment in religious and economic contexts, often focusing on structural and outcome-based frameworks. Research by Ekadinata dkk. (2023) emphasized mosque initiatives as gender-inclusive platforms for rural development, while Faza dkk., (2022) investigated spiritual education as a factor in women's self-efficacy. However, these studies lacked in-depth exploration of how women personally experience and interpret empowerment within these religious spaces (Misra, 1998; Mrdjenovic, 2023). Few have examined the subjective narratives of rural housewives who undergo transformation through mosque-based initiatives. This absence of experiential insight leaves a critical gap in understanding the deeper meaning behind faith-driven economic change.

This study addresses that gap using an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of rural housewives engaged in mosque-centered empowerment (Puspitasari dkk., 2022; Salsabiila dkk., 2021). This method allows for a deeper investigation into how participants make sense of their spiritual and economic transformation (Levidow, 2013; Olko, 2021). The approach is particularly suited for uncovering how empowerment is personally experienced, internalized, and expressed within a culturally embedded religious setting. Through this lens, the study answers the call for more nuanced research into the meaning and essence of empowerment. By focusing on participants' voices, the findings offer richer and more authentic insights.

The structure of this article begins with an introduction to the phenomenon and its broader social relevance (Santy dkk., 2024; Yamada dkk., 2020). It then presents the specific context of mosque-based empowerment in rural Indonesia (Ayre dkk., 2018; Omer, 2011). The methods section outlines the interpretative phenomenological framework, participant selection, and data analysis procedures (Ginting dkk., 2021). This is followed by the results, which are organized thematically and supported by participant quotations. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings in relation to existing literature and a reflection on their implications for community-based religious empowerment programs.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of rural housewives participating in mosque-based economic empowerment programs (Mueller dkk., 2024; Perry, 2023). Phenomenology, with its emphasis on subjective meaning and individual perception, was chosen to uncover the essence of how participants internalized and constructed meaning from their involvement in these faith-centered initiatives (Has dkk., 2024). The interpretative strand of phenomenology, grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, was particularly appropriate as it facilitated the examination of participants' experiences through the lens of their socio-spiritual contexts. This design enabled an in-depth exploration of how economic and spiritual empowerment intersected in the lived realities of the participants.

Participants

Participants consisted of rural housewives involved in mosque-led economic empowerment activities across three villages in North Sumatra, Indonesia (Hammersley, 2003; McMahon & McGannon, 2024). A purposive sampling strategy was used to select individuals who met specific inclusion criteria: adult women aged between 30 and 55, actively engaged in the mosque program for a minimum of one year, and willing to articulate their personal experiences. Exclusion criteria included individuals who had joined the program for less than three months or who were unable to participate in a verbal interview due to health or language limitations. A total of 12 participants were included, all of whom identified as Muslim women with varying levels of education and socioeconomic backgrounds, thereby providing diverse yet thematically rich insights.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an open-ended question protocol (Bednarek-Gilland, 2015; Gibton, 2015). Interviews were conducted in participants' homes or local mosque facilities to ensure a familiar and non-intimidating environment (Palutturi dkk., 2021). Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The interview guide was designed to elicit detailed narratives concerning participants' perceptions, feelings, and reflections on their involvement in the empowerment program. Observational notes and field memos were also maintained to capture contextual nuances (Panjaitan & Partasasmita, 2020). All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a method well-suited for exploring how individuals make sense of their significant life experiences. The analytical process involved a series of systematic steps: first, repeated readings of the transcripts to gain familiarity with the content; second, identification of emergent meaning units; third, coding and categorization of those units into thematic clusters; and finally, the abstraction of overarching themes that captured the essence of the lived experience (Puspitasari dkk., 2022). NVivo 14 software was used to support the organization and management of data without influencing the interpretative nature of the analysis. This iterative process allowed for the emergence of themes grounded in participants' narratives, revealing both individual and collective meaning structures.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics review board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were fully briefed on the study's aims, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Participant anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were treated with strict confidentiality in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and applicable national research ethics guidelines.

RESULTS

The Mosque as a Sanctuary of Economic and Spiritual Renewal

Participants consistently described the mosque not merely as a place of worship but as a multidimensional space where spiritual growth and economic empowerment converged. The mosque served as a gateway for personal transformation, providing emotional safety and communal support.

“I used to think the mosque was only for prayer. But through the program, I found strength—not just in my faith but in how I view myself as a capable woman.” (Participant 3)

“The mosque gave me more than capital. It gave me a reason to wake up with hope. I feel seen and valued.” (Participant 7)

The physical proximity to a sacred space was experienced as a daily motivator. Participants framed their involvement not only in terms of economic benefit but as a spiritual journey that instilled confidence and dignity.

Where Faith Meets Empowerment



Redefining Womanhood through Economic Participation

For many participants, engaging in mosque-facilitated entrepreneurial training led to a redefinition of their roles within their households and communities. Women who once identified solely as homemakers began to view themselves as economic contributors.

“Before joining the mosque's program, I never imagined I could sell anything. Now, I run a small food stall and my husband respects me more for it.” (Participant 1)

“My children now look at me differently—they ask me about business and help me. I feel like I'm setting an example.” (Participant 5)

This newfound agency reshaped their perception of womanhood, intertwining economic independence with religious values and familial cohesion. Empowerment was not experienced in opposition to traditional roles but rather as an extension of spiritual and maternal responsibilities.

Spiritual Capital as the Core of Empowerment

Participants emphasized that their motivation, discipline, and resilience stemmed from their spiritual connection fostered within the mosque. Faith was not just a backdrop but a dynamic source of 'spiritual capital'—a term participants used implicitly to describe how prayer, religious study, and collective rituals nourished their entrepreneurial spirit.

“When I doubt myself, I remember the verses we studied in the mosque. It tells me that Allah loves those who strive. That pushes me to keep going.” (Participant 4)

“Every transaction I make, I remember the values taught in the mosque. It's not just business—it's worship.” (Participant 9)

This spiritual dimension reinforced ethical behavior, long-term vision, and psychological resilience, distinguishing the mosque-based program from secular alternatives.

Collective Empowerment and Social Belonging

Beyond individual transformation, the participants highlighted the power of sisterhood developed through shared experience. The mosque became a hub of emotional solidarity where women encouraged, taught, and prayed for one another.

“I didn't just gain money, I gained sisters. We support each other through prayer and practice.” (Participant 6)

“There's no shame here. We all started small. And we celebrate each other's success.” (Participant 2)

This collective aspect deepened the meaning of empowerment, emphasizing that transformation was not a solitary journey but a communal endeavor rooted in mutual upliftment.

The lived experiences of rural housewives in the mosque-based empowerment program reveal a multidimensional transformation encompassing economic agency, spiritual growth, and social solidarity. These themes illustrate that empowerment, as experienced by participants, is not limited to material gains but is profoundly shaped by faith, identity, and community. The mosque emerges not merely as a religious institution but as a transformative social space, embedding spiritual ethics into the fabric of economic life.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that mosque-based economic empowerment is experienced by rural housewives as a multidimensional transformation, combining economic agency, spiritual renewal, and social belonging (Rinawan dkk., 2022). These themes provide a rich and holistic understanding of how empowerment is lived, answering the central research question regarding the meanings that participants assign to their experiences in mosque-centered initiatives.

This study contributes to answering the research question by highlighting how participants did not simply gain financial resources but underwent internal shifts in self-perception, identity, and spiritual awareness (Santy dkk., 2024). The mosque was not merely a site of training but a sacred space that enabled participants to reinterpret their roles as women, mothers, and members of the community. The interpretative phenomenological approach allowed the research to uncover these subtle and deeply personal transformations, offering a unique lens through which to view empowerment as both a spiritual and social process. Unlike conventional evaluations, this study captures empowerment as a lived, emotionally rich, and contextually rooted experience.

The findings align with previous studies that recognize the mosque as a community anchor (Rinawan dkk., 2021) and a space for spiritual empowerment (Salsabiila dkk., 2021), yet this study extends the discourse by emphasizing how spiritual capital is not a peripheral outcome but a central component of economic empowerment. It also reinforces (Susanto dkk., 2019) argument that faith-based mobilization requires a deeper understanding of personal narratives. However, this research goes further by uncovering the role of collective sisterhood, the internalization of Islamic ethical values in entrepreneurship, and the redefinition of selfhood—elements often overlooked in programmatic evaluations. These insights contribute to a more comprehensive and culturally responsive understanding of empowerment in Muslim-majority rural settings.

Implications of the Findings

The insights gained from this study offer significant implications both academically and practically (Mudzengi dkk., 2021; Yacoob, 1991). On a scholarly level, the findings contribute to a more nuanced conceptualization of empowerment that integrates economic agency with spiritual and emotional transformation. Culturally, the study underscores the mosque's role not merely as a religious site but as a vital communal space for gender-sensitive development in rural Muslim contexts. Practically, the themes identified—such as spiritual capital, redefined womanhood, and collective belonging—may inform the design of more holistic empowerment programs that align with participants' values, identities, and lived realities (Wandira dkk., 2022). This phenomenological understanding enriches development discourse by highlighting how religious frameworks can serve as powerful catalysts for sustainable social change, particularly for women at the grassroots level.

Limitations of the Study

This study is not without limitations. First, the use of purposive sampling and a small sample size, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, may limit the generalizability of findings to broader populations (Adjei dkk., 2023; Smyth & Vanclay, 2017). Second, the research was context-specific, focusing on mosque-based programs in rural Indonesia, and therefore may not fully represent experiences in urban or non-Muslim settings. Additionally, data collection relied heavily on self-reported narratives, which are inherently subjective and may be influenced by memory or social desirability. These limitations, however, do not diminish the depth of insight provided; rather, they emphasize the importance of contextual sensitivity and the need for interpretive caution. Future research may expand on these foundations by exploring diverse geographical and religious contexts.

Future Research Directions

The findings of this study open several promising avenues for further research (Armsworth dkk., 2013; Hanna, 2005). Future studies might explore how similar empowerment dynamics unfold in different religious or cultural settings, offering comparative insights into the role of faith in community development. Longitudinal research could also examine how participants' perceptions of empowerment evolve over time, especially in relation to sustained economic and social change. Additionally, incorporating the perspectives of other stakeholders—such as program facilitators or male family members—could provide a more comprehensive understanding of communal transformation. Ultimately, this research invites scholars to continue centering lived experience in the study of empowerment, ensuring that development initiatives are informed by the voices and values of those they aim to serve.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how rural housewives in Indonesia experience mosque-based economic empowerment as a deeply personal and transformative process. The findings revealed that empowerment in this context extends beyond financial gain, encompassing spiritual renewal, redefined social roles, and a strong sense of collective belonging. These insights address a significant gap in the literature by offering a phenomenological understanding of empowerment grounded in lived experience rather than external indicators. The study demonstrates that faith-based programs, when aligned with participants' cultural and spiritual values, can generate more meaningful and sustainable change. By centering participants' voices, this research contributes to a more humanistic and context-sensitive approach to community development. Future research could expand these findings by examining diverse faith contexts or tracking long-term impacts through longitudinal designs.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. All procedures followed in this research were conducted independently, and no personal or financial relationships influenced the outcomes or interpretations presented in this article.

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