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**FROM DOMESTIC TO INTELLECTUAL:  
TRANSFORMATION OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S  
EDUCATION THROUGH THE WIFE SCHOOL FOUNDED  
BY DEWI SARTIKA**

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**Abstract:** This research aims to analyze the role of Dewi Sartika in the transformation of indigenous women's education at the beginning of the 20th century through the establishment of Saolah Istri. The main focus of the research is to examine the background of the school's founding, its development, and its impact on society. The research method used is the historical method, including heuristics (source search), source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The sources used are mainly secondary sources, including writings about Dewi Sartika and the history of education in Indonesia. The research results show that Saolah Istri, which was founded by Dewi Sartika in 1904, faced initial challenges but developed rapidly into the Kautamaan Istri School. This school plays an important role in opening access to education for women from various social backgrounds. A curriculum that combines practical skills and academic knowledge prepares graduates to become independent individuals and contribute to society

**Keywords:** Dewi Sartika, Wife School, women's education, social transformation, gender gap, colonialism, early 20th century Indonesia.



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## Introduction

In the long history of the Indonesian nation's struggle, the role of women has often been neglected or marginalized. During the colonial period, both Dutch and Japanese, native women experienced enormous suffering. They not only have to face physical and mental violence, but also gender inequality that places them in a subordinate position in various aspects of life. Education, which should be the basic right of every individual, was actually something that was difficult for women to access at that time.

During the Dutch colonial period, formal education for girls took priority, which was available to European and upper class children. Meanwhile, indigenous children, especially girls, have very limited and exclusive access. The Dutch East Indies government refused to provide wider education for native women on the grounds that their position in society did not require higher education. They focused more on improving education for men, in the hope that changes in men's social position would have a positive impact on women in the future.

The gender inequality experienced by indigenous women during the colonial period was clearly visible in various aspects of their lives. Women are not only limited to the domestic sphere,

but are also burdened with very heavy responsibilities in the household without being given equal opportunities to develop intellectually and socially. They are considered not to need to get higher education because their main task is to take care of the household and serve their husbands. This assumption keeps many indigenous women trapped in a cycle of ignorance and dependency, which then reinforces harmful gender stereotypes.

At the beginning of the 20th century, this condition began to change with movements spearheaded by educated and brave women. One of the pioneers in this movement was Dewi Sartika, a woman from the Sundanese nobility. She founded Saolah Istri in 1904 in Bandung, which became the first school for native women in West Java. Sakolah Istri was founded with the aim of providing basic education to women so that they can be independent and have skills that are useful in everyday life.,

Dewi Sartika's struggle and contribution to the education of indigenous women not only had an impact on the generation that lived during her time, but also on subsequent generations. Sakolah Istri has become a symbol of courage and determination in fighting gender discrimination, as well as being an inspiration for many Indonesian women to continue fighting for their rights. The educational transformation initiated by Dewi Sartika shows that with good education, women can achieve independence and play a greater role in nation building.

## Methods

“This research method uses historical research methods to study and understand past events systematically. The process involves four main steps: (1) Heuristics, involving searching historical sources, such as archives, documents, books and other media. (2) Criticism, there are two types of criticism, namely external criticism which checks the authenticity of the source and internal criticism which assesses the content of the source to ensure its truth. This stage involves evaluating the sources that have been found. (3) Interpretation, researchers analyze and relate historical facts to provide an objective interpretation of the events studied. (4) Historiography, the final stage which involves compiling research results in the form of systematic and chronological historical writing.

The research sources used are secondary sources, namely writings about other people's research, reviews, summaries, criticisms, and similar writings regarding things that the author has not directly witnessed or experienced himself.

## Results

### Dewi Sartika's Life Journey

Dewi Sartika was born on December 4 1884 as the first daughter of R. Ranga Somanagara, Patih Bandung, and RA Rajapermas, daughter of the Regent of Bandung RAA Wiranatakusumah IV. He grew up in the kepatihan building, a large native-style building in the center of Bandung, surrounded by a large yard with many fruit trees. This is where Dewi Sartika lived a happy childhood with her siblings.

As the daughter of a Patih, Dewi Sartika enjoys a harmonious and full social family life. His father, R.Rg. Somanagara, had a big responsibility in government, but still paid attention to the education of her children. As a far-sighted parent, she provided a good basic education, even though at that time formal education for girls from the priyayi class was not yet common.

Dewi Sartika attended Eerste Klasse School, a school founded by the Dutch East Indies Government for children of aristocrats and wealthy people. At this school, he learned reading, writing, Dutch and other knowledge up to class 2B.

However, Dewi Sartika's happy life changed drastically in 1893 when her father was accused of being involved in the dynamite installation and was exiled to Ternate. His mother also went to exile, causing the family to lose their source of livelihood and being forced to leave the Kepatihan and other possessions.

Dewi Sartika was then raised by her uncle, Patih Aria Cicalengka. Here, she was treated like a servant and had to carry out daily tasks, learning feminine skills such as cooking, sewing and good manners. Even though she was treated harshly, Dewi Sartika did not give up. He learned a lot from his surroundings and developed a high curiosity and enthusiasm for learning.

In a difficult situation, Dewi Sartika began to show her concern for education for women. He often played school with the servants' children and began teaching them to read and write. This experience became the foundation for her future struggle to improve the fate of women through education.

### **The Beginning of the Establishment of the Wife School**

From the life she experienced in Cicalengka, Dewi Sartika observed that something was needed to complement the education of her peers, young women who were busy training themselves to prepare for their future. From her own direct experience, Dewi Sartika can say what needs to be improved the most, namely reading and writing skills, in addition to knowledge of femininity, health and other general matters. (Wiriaatmadja, 2009)

This does not only happen among the gentry, but also among the workers in their parents' homes. The daughters of servants, gardeners, and horse groomers seemed to be trapped in the fate of their parents, namely, becoming servants or housemaids. Dewi Sartika wants to provide educational opportunities for them so that they have better future choices. However, he realized that it would be difficult to realize his dreams if he lived at his old father's house in Cicalengka, therefore he wanted to return to Bandung. Bandung, with a more open atmosphere, could provide greater opportunities to receive new ideas, he thought.

Apart from that, RA Rajapermas' return from Ternate to Bandung added to Dewi Sartika's encouragement to return to the city because she missed her mother and wanted to be with her family. The feeling of discomfort in her old father's house was also caused by the attention given by her old father's son, which Dewi Sartika did not want because she wanted to focus on her goals.

Finally, in 1902, Dewi Sartika left Cicalengka and returned to Bandung to realize her dreams.

Upon Dewi Sartika's return to Bandung, her desire to open a school for teenage girls grew even greater. This was driven by his own family circumstances. Dewi Sartika witnessed her own mother's suffering as a result of being abandoned by her father, because she had to undergo exile in Ternate.

Seeing her mother's helplessness, Dewi Sartika became even more determined to fight for education for women. For him, a woman must have many skills to be able to live independently, as reflected in her slogan: "Ari to be aweve must do everything she can, ambeh can live!" (Being a woman requires many skills to be able to live). Her mother's bitter experience made Dewi Sartika determined to open a school for teenage girls so that they would not suffer the same fate.

Dewi Sartika's desire to establish a school faces big challenges. At first, the Regent of Bandung, RAA Martanegara, rejected his intention because he was worried that he would face strong resistance from people who still held strong customs. Schools for girls were considered incompatible

with the nobility code. According to him, women don't need to go to school, just being able to cook, sew and serve their husbands is enough to get the reward of heaven. However, Dewi Sartika did not give up. He continued to submit requests to the Regent until finally the Regent agreed on the condition that the school be held in the district hall first to see the community's response.

On January 16 1904, Dewi Sartika succeeded in establishing a "Wives School" in Paseban, West Bandung Regency. This school consists of two classes with twenty students, and three teachers, namely Dewi Sartika, Mrs. Purma, and Mrs. Uwit. This school accepts students from ordinary families, not just from priyayi circles. This shows Dewi Sartika's commitment to providing education for anyone who needs it.

Even though the reception towards this school from priyayi women was cold, and even tended to be hostile, Dewi Sartika remained firm in her principles. He faced criticism and ridicule who considered his actions to be contrary to noble customs. However, support from progressive figures such as the Regent of Martanegara and the inspector of indigenous education, CA den Hamer, helped strengthen this school's position. They even provided buildings in the district to be used as school premises, providing protection and legitimacy for the schools.

Recognition of Dewi Sartika's services came from various parties, including Mr. JH Abendanon, director of religious education and crafts at that time. At a women's exhibition in Batavia in 1913, Abendanon praised the initial steps taken by Dewi Sartika in establishing a school for native girls. He said that the existence of these schools was an important step forward, even though these schools were often simple and without complete equipment. Dewi Sartika's efforts are considered a brave act to advance women's education in Indonesia.

### **Development of Wife School**

The Istri School, founded by Dewi Sartika in 1904, became an important milestone in the history of women's education in Indonesia. This school was first opened in Paseban, Bandung, with the aim of providing household skills education to women so that they can become good wives and housewives. At the beginning of its establishment, the Istri School faced various challenges, including limited facilities. However, Dewi Sartika remained determined to continue her mission, and this school soon attracted the attention of many parents who wanted their daughters to receive a proper education.

In 1905, due to the increase in the number of students, the Wife School was moved to Jalan Ciguriang. Even though the school building is still simple, Dewi Sartika continues to strive to improve and develop existing facilities. In the curriculum taught, this school emphasizes practical skills such as sewing, mending, embroidering, crocheting, cooking, serving food, and looking after babies, as well as providing religious lessons. This curriculum is designed with the aim that students can manage their households well and fulfill their traditional roles in society.

The school further developed in 1906, when Dewi Sartika married R.Kd. Agah Suriawinata, a teacher who later became Principal at Eerste Klasse School, Karang Pamulang. Her husband provides full support in the educational activities carried out by Dewi Sartika, so that Dewi Sartika succeeds in expanding the reach of her education.

In 1910, the Istri School underwent significant changes by changing its name to the Kautamaan Istri School. This name change also reflects increased attention and support from the community and government for this school. This new name is used to strengthen the school's image and mission in educating women to become individuals who excel in household skills and social life.

Apart from that, the association of official ladies in Bandung also supports this school by forming an organization which aims to support women's education.

Then in 1912, Dewi Sartika succeeded in establishing nine schools for girls in Sunda. This achievement shows how great Dewi Sartika's influence and dedication is in the field of education. From existing reports, it is noted that 50% of all girls' schools in the area are Kautamaan Istri Schools. The number of students continues to increase, reflecting public confidence in the quality of education provided.

The number of students at Kautamaan Istri School reached 358 people in 1913 with the majority of students aged between 6 and 13 years. These students not only came from the gentry or aristocracy, but also from low-income families, showing that this school was truly inclusive and open to all levels of society. Dewi Sartika applies a very democratic approach in leading her school, by opening access to education for women from various social and economic backgrounds.

Kautamaan Istri School, even though it is not a status school or standenschool like HIS (Hollandsch-Inlandsche School), still makes a big contribution in opening up access to education for women from various levels of society. This school continued to grow, even in 1916 batik lessons were added to this school and the majority of students came from families with low incomes, showing that this school was really aimed at the common people.

The teaching staff at Kautamaan Istri School mostly consists of priyayi women who were educated traditionally and volunteered to help Dewi Sartika. In an effort to improve the quality of education, Dewi Sartika also invited experts from Immanuel Hospital to teach baby care skills and asked for help from Dutch teachers to teach Dutch, which at that time was very important for continuing education or finding work. This school's curriculum is adapted to the Tweede Klasse School lesson plan, while still emphasizing feminine skills lessons.

### **Impact of Education on Wife's School**

The fate of women studying at the Kautamaan Istri School, or what was then known as the Raden Dewi School, experienced significant changes compared to their previous situation. Education at this school directs women to be independent, have practical skills, and be able to face the challenges of the times.

Dewi Sartika, the founder of the school, wants female graduates of Kautamaan Istri School to be able to live independently. She rejected traditional education which made women completely dependent on men. By providing comprehensive education, both in terms of academics and daily living skills such as sewing, cooking and handicrafts, these women are equipped with the ability to stand on their own, both economically and socially.

The graduates of this school not only master household skills but are also able to continue their education to a higher level, such as becoming nurses, midwives or teachers. This school also opens up opportunities for them to get jobs and even become breadwinners for their families if necessary. This independence raises their status in the eyes of society and reduces their dependence on their father or husband.

Apart from that, the existence of this school accelerates changes in social values in society. The education that women receive at these schools allows them to play a more active role in society. This leads to a change in men's attitudes towards women, where they begin to appreciate and recognize women's abilities and contributions more.

Thus, the education provided at the Kautamaan Istri School not only changes the fate of individual women, but also has a positive impact on the wider community. The graduates of this

school become examples for broader social change, inspiring other women to pursue education and become independent, and changing society's view of the role and position of women.

This change is not only visible from the personal aspects of the graduates, but also in their contributions to their families and society. They are able to become better mothers, competent educators, and active and respected members of society. Through education at the Kautamaan Istri School, Dewi Sartika succeeded in initiating a movement for significant change in the lives of indigenous women and society as a whole.

## Conclusion

Dewi Sartika, who was born into a Sundanese noble family, experienced various life challenges which made her realize the importance of education for women. Driven by his personal experience and social conditions at that time, he founded the Istri School in 1904 in Bandung, which later developed into the Kautamaan Istri School.

This school is a pioneer in providing formal education to indigenous women, whose access was previously very limited. The school's curriculum combines practical household skills with academic knowledge, preparing women to become independent and contribute to society.

Despite facing initial resistance from traditional society, this school developed rapidly and received support from various parties. The impact is clearly visible in the transformation of women's roles, from being mere housekeepers to individuals who are educated, independent, and able to contribute more broadly to society.

Dewi Sartika's struggle through Sakolah Istri not only changed the fate of the women who studied there, but also triggered wider social change. This can be seen from changes in society's views on women's education and the increasing role of women in various aspects of life.

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