

Islamic Moral Paradigm as a Moral Basis for Achieving SDG 4: Toward Quality and Inclusive Education in Muslim-Majority Societies

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Keywords: Muslim majority societies; SDG 4; quality education; Islamic education; 2030 agenda	Despite the Sustainable Development Goal's call for quality, inclusive education, most Muslim majority countries continue to struggle with high dropout rates, gender disparities, and uneven teacher quality, raising the question of whether Islamic ethics can serve as a more contextually grounded moral foundation for achieving SDG 4. This study aims to identify relevant Islamic ethical principles, map their convergence with SDG 4's eight targets, examine their implementation in Muslim majority educational practice, and formulate corresponding policy implications. Employing a qualitative literature review design with a normative philosophical and comparative orientation, data were drawn from primary Islamic sources (The Qur'an, authentic hadith, and classical scholarly works) and secondary sources (UNESCO/UN documents and academic literature), analyzed through textual, comparative, and hermeneutic methods. The findings reveal that classical concepts such as <i>ta'lim</i>, <i>tarbiyah</i>, <i>ta'dib</i>, <i>fitrah</i>, and <i>rahmatan lil 'alamiin</i> align substantively with each SDG 4 target, while practices in pesantren and madrasah demonstrate empirical, if uneven, progress toward inclusivity and quality. The study concludes that Islamic ethics not only legitimizes SDG 4 but can enrich it with spiritual and moral dimensions, offering policymakers an integrative framework for advancing quality Islamic education.
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INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda, established by the United Nations in 2015, identifies education as one of seventeen priorities for global transformation. SDG 4 specifically calls for the realization of quality, inclusive, and equitable education for all humanity, as well as the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for everyone. This is an ideal that has, in fact, long been at the core of Islamic civilization.¹ However, the apparent irony is that empirical data shows that most countries with the largest Muslim populations are still struggling to meet the minimum standards of SDG 4, due to high school dropout rates, disparities in access between women and men, and uneven teacher quality.²

This situation raises a complex question like does a global agenda such as SDG 4 possess sufficient moral legitimacy to be accepted and implemented within the context of Muslim societies? Or maybe do Islamic values actually have the potential to serve as a more robust and contextually relevant moral foundation for the achievement of SDG 4? It is these questions that form the starting point for this research.

Existing academic literature tends to discuss the SDGs solely from the perspective of economic development or public policy analysis, whilst neglecting the ethical and normative dimensions of religious traditions. On the other hand, studies of Islamic education are often caught up in a dichotomous debate between traditional values and the demands of modernity, thereby failing to find a productive point of integration. Rather than viewing Islamic ethics and SDG 4 as two competing frameworks, this study argues that the two can engage in constructive dialogue and reinforce one another.

SDG 4 or Sustainable Development Goal 4, is one of the United Nation's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which is committed to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.³ This goal seeks to ensure that the education provided is not merely a formality, but produces learning outcomes that are relevant, meaningful and accessible to all sections of society without discrimination.⁴ The eight targets of SDG 4 cover a wide range of areas: from ensuring access to free, high quality primary education (4.1), access to early childhood education (4.2), access to vocational and higher education (4.3), the development of skills relevant to the world of work (4.4), the elimination of gender disparities and disparities affecting marginalised groups (4.5), universal literacy and numeracy for adults (4.6), education for sustainable development and global citizenship (4.7), as well as the provision of inclusive and equitable facilities and the improvement of teaching staff qualifications (4.8).⁵

¹ Ulrike Hanemann, "Examining the Application of the Lifelong Learning Principle to the Literacy Target in the Fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4)," *International Review of Education* 65, no. 2 (April 2019): 251–75, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-019-09771-8>.

² Desy Khumayroh dan Lismawati Lismawati, "Trends in Islamic Education Policy Research Based on Bibliometric Study and Network Analysis in Scopus Database: Tren Riset Kebijakan Pendidikan Islam Berdasarkan Kajian Bibliometrik dan Analisis Jaringan di Basis Data Scopus," *Halaqa: Islamic Education Journal* 9, no. 1 (Juni 2025): 99–125, <https://doi.org/10.21070/halaqa.v9i1.1715>.

³ Ellen Boeren, "Understanding Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on 'Quality Education' from Micro, Meso and Macro Perspectives," *International Review of Education* 65, no. 2 (April 2019): 277–94, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-019-09772-7>.

⁴ Salma Samputri dan Rifda Nurhikmawati Arif, *Literasi SDG 4 Terkait Pendidikan Berkualitas: Analisis Pengetahuan, Sikap, dan Tindakan*, t.t.

⁵ Boeren, "Understanding Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on 'Quality Education' from

In this process, UNESCO recognises that progress towards SDG 4 faces various systemic, technical and operational barriers that are slowing down progress towards quality education for all. A number of countries are reluctant to participate in cross national assessments for political or technical reasons, thereby risking being left behind in the SDG monitoring process. Many schools in developing countries, including Indonesia, face barriers to digitalization due to a lack of teacher training and limited access to technological equipment.⁶ UNESCO also notes a significant lack of investment in educational interventions, whilst policymakers often underestimate the scale and complexity of the task at hand.⁷ All of this reflects a gap that requires an approach going beyond mere administrative intervention.

In the Islamic scholarly tradition, the discourse on education has never been separate from the discourse on ethics and morality. Classical Islamic thinkers such as Al-Ghazali, Ibnu Khaldun, and Ibnu Maskawih formulated a philosophy of education that regarded character building (*tahẓīb al-akhlāq*) as the ultimate goal. Al-Ghazali in *Ihya' Ulumuddin* for example, regards education not merely as a process of transferring knowledge, but as a transformative means of purifying the soul (*taẓkiyat al-nafs*) and drawing closer to Allah SWT (*taqorrub*).⁸

Yusuf Al-Qardhawi, a renowned contemporary scholar, maintains that Islamic ethics are deeply rooted in prophetic value derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah. In his works, particularly the book *al-Rasul wa al-'Ilmu*, he emphasises that ethics are not merely a theory, but a practical foundation for life, particularly in the educational process. He also emphasised that Islamic values are universal and capable of adapting to the challenges of the times without losing their normative substance.⁹ This view is in line with research carried out by Fahim Khasani in his article, which argues that contemporary Muslims need to develop what he terms the 'Islamic ethics of reform', a conscious effort to restore harmony between humankind, God and the universe through tangible and sustainable remedial actions, as well as an approach that is not merely reactive to modernity, but actively articulates Islamic values in response to global challenges, including in the field of education.¹⁰

Amina Wadud's research, conducted from a feminist Islamic perspective, makes an important contribution by demonstrating that Islamic tradition possesses a wealth of normative resources to support gender equality in education, even though discussions of

Micro, Meso and Macro Perspectives.”

⁶ Ashilah Puti Salsabila Arfi, *Rekonstruksi Peran Pendidikan Formal dalam Dinamika Masyarakat Indonesia: Analisis Sistematis atas Arah, Tantangan, dan Strategi Penguatan*, 4, no. 11 (2025), <https://rivierapublishing.id/jii/index.php/>.

⁷ Hanemann, “Examining the Application of the Lifelong Learning Principle to the Literacy Target in the Fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4).”

⁸ Jemeela Jalaldeen dan Dawood Al-Hidabi, “AL-GHAZALI’S FRAMEWORK OF TEACHINGS PROFESSIONAL VALUES: ANALYZING THE PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION,” *AL-BURHĀN: JOURNAL OF QUR’ĀN AND SUNNAH STUDIES* 9, no. 1 (Februari 2025): 27–46, <https://doi.org/10.31436/alburhn.v9i1.363>.

⁹ Abdul Azis, Jannatul Husna, dan Waharjani Waharjani, “NILAI-NILAI PROFETIK SEPULANG ETIKA PENDIDIK DALAM PEMBELAJARAN MENURUT YUSUF AL-QARDHAWI: Indonesia,” *Ta’allum: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 10, no. 2 (Desember 2022): 220–48, <https://doi.org/10.21274/taalum.2022.10.2.220-248>.

¹⁰ Fahim Khasani, “Ecological Ethics of the Prophet: A Hadith-Based Framework for Islamic Environmental Thought,” *Journal of Modern Islamic Studies and Civilization* 3, no. 03 (September 2025): 310–23, <https://doi.org/10.59653/jmisc.v3i03.1845>.

patriarchy often obscure this potential.¹¹ These findings are directly relevant to SDG target 4.5 and constitute a key point of analysis in this study.

However, previous studies on the relationship between Islamic values and the SDGs remain limited and tend to be descriptive in nature. Research by Samputri and Arif (2025) analysed trainee teachers and found that their SDG 4 literacy fell into the 'good' category across three dimensions such as knowledge, attitudes and actions. Students who understand the concept of SDG 4 tend to demonstrate a strong commitment to the principles of inclusivity and equality. This study emphasises the importance of Teacher Training Institutions (LPTK) in equipping prospective teachers with a fundamental understanding of sustainable education in order to achieve the SDG 4 targets by 2030.¹²

In their study on inclusive education policy in Indonesia, Novrizal and Manaf (2024) explain that inclusive education policy in Indonesia is in line with religious teachings (such as Surah Al-Hajj: 5), which prohibit people from looking down on others' physical disabilities. The implementation of this policy is a concrete step towards creating a non-discriminatory and sustainable learning environment for all learners.¹³

Another study highlights the effectiveness of education based on Islamic values in shaping character in line with UNESCO's pillars of education. As stated by Nuhaliza et al. (2024), in an article written by Nirmala and Nurhamidah, it emphasises the importance of integrating the values of religious moderation into the curriculum to prevent radicalism, which is seen as a key contribution to achieving peaceful and inclusive quality education.¹⁴

Therefore, this study aims to: (1) identify relevant principles of Islamic ethics as the moral basis for achieving SDG 4, (2) analytically map the points of convergence between these principles and the specific targets of SDG 4, (3) examine the implementation of the integration of Islamic values into educational practice in predominantly Muslim societies, and (4) formulate educational policy implications rooted in Islamic ethics yet responsive to the global development agenda. Thus this article is expected to contribute to the development of contemporary Islamic educational theory whilst providing an analytical framework for education policy practitioners in countries with significant Muslim populations.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a literature review design, guided by a normative-philosophical and comparative orientation. The choice of this approach is based on the nature of the research problem, which is essentially conceptual and interpretative, this

¹¹ Janu Arbain, Nur Azizah, dan Ika Novita Sari, "PEMIKIRAN GENDER MENURUT PARA AHLI: Telaah atas Pemikiran Amina Wadud Muhsin, Asghar Ali Engineer, dan Mansour Fakih," *Sawwa: Jurnal Studi Gender* 11, no. 1 (Juni 2017): 75, <https://doi.org/10.21580/sa.v11i1.1447>.

¹² Samputri dan Arif, *Literasi SDG 4 Terkait Pendidikan Berkualitas: Analisis Pengetahuan, Sikap, dan Tindakan*.

¹³ Nesa Novrizal dan Sofwan Manaf, "The Policy of Inclusive Education in Indonesia," *Multicultural Islamic Education Review* 2, no. 1 (Maret 2024): 37–44, <https://doi.org/10.23917/mier.v2i1.4297>.

¹⁴ Nirmala Dwi Liesty Utomo dkk., "Peran Sosiologi Pendidikan Islam dalam Membentuk Karakter Peserta Didik : Tinjauan Literatur Review," *Reflection : Islamic Education Journal* 1, no. 4 (November 2024): 154–67, <https://doi.org/10.61132/reflection.v1i4.205>.

means that this study does not seek to identify statistically testable causal relationships, but rather seeks to understand the relationship of meaning between two value systems (Islamic ethics and SDG 4) through critical and analytical interpretation.

The research data sources are divided into two categories. Firstly, primary sources, which consist of the Qur'an, authentic hadith (particularly the collections of Al-Bukhari and Muslim), and classical works on Islamic ethics such as Al-Ghazali's *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*. Secondly, secondary sources, which include official SDG 4 documents from UNESCO and the UN, recent development reports (particularly from 2021 onwards), and academic literature in the form of international scientific journals and relevant academic books.

The data collection methodology involves three complementary procedures: (1) textual analysis of primary Islamic normative sources, with particular attention to the historical and hermeneutic contexts of the texts, (2) a review of policy documents relating to SDG 4 instruments, and (3) a systematic literature review of relevant academic publications using the Google Scholar, Scopus, and JSTOR databases with structured search terms.

Data analysis was carried out through three approaches operating simultaneously. Firstly, content analysis to identify dominant ethical themes in Islamic sources. Secondly, comparative analysis to map points of convergence and points of tension between Islamic ethical principles and the targets of SDG 4. Thirdly, hermeneutic interpretation to understand the meaning of normative texts within the context of contemporary educational issues. The main analytical framework used is a model mapping Islamic ethical values against the eight targets of SDG 4, developed inductively from the analysis process itself.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Convergence Framework

To provide immediate visual clarity, the conceptual framework mapping each SDG 4 target against corresponding Islamic ethical concepts is synthesized in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Summary Mapping of SDG 4 Targets and Core Islamic Ethical Concepts

SDG 4 Target Area	Core Islamic Ethical Concept	Substantive Alignment & Moral Focus
SDG 4.1: Quality Primary/Secondary Education	<i>Ta'lim, Tarbiyah, Ta'dib</i>	Integrates cognitive mastery, spiritual growth, and moral refinement into a coherent curriculum
SDG 4.2: Early Childhood Education	<i>Fitrah</i>	Nurtures the child's innate, pure potential through holistic early childhood upbringing
SDG 4.3: Technical, Vocational, & Higher Education	<i>Rihlah fii thalabil 'ilmi</i>	Democratizes access to advanced knowledge across geographical and sosio-economic borders
SDG 4.4: Skills for Quality Vocation	Ethical Entrepreneurship (<i>Shiddiq, amanah</i>)	Combines technical competence with absolute professional integrity and transparency

SDG 4.5: Equality and Inclusion	Care for the <i>Dhu'afa</i> or universal brotherhood	Eradicates gender biases and accommodates marginalized or disabled learners equitably
SDG 4.6: Universal Literacy & Numeracy	<i>Iqra'</i> (The sacred command to read)	Elevates basic functional literacy into a profound, non-negotiable spiritual obligation
SDG 4.7: Sustainable development & citizenship	<i>Rahmatan lil 'Alamiin</i> and <i>Khalifah</i>	Cultivates environmental stewardship, moral global citizenship, and cosmopolitan harmony
SDG 4.8: Safe and Non-violent facilities	<i>Rahmah</i> (Loving Kindness)	Guarantees absolute safety, psychological security, and the total eradication of corporal abuse

A. SDG 4.1: High Quality Primary and Secondary Education

SDG 4 Target 4.1 for 2030 sets a standard for the quality of learning that focuses on ensuring all boys and girls complete the full cycle of primary and secondary education.¹⁵ The main focus of this target is to ensure that the education provided is not merely a formality of participation, but rather produces relevant and effective learning outcomes.¹⁶ On closer inspection, this demand is in fact nothing new to the Islamic tradition. It actually reflects what has long been elaborated in detail within the Islamic scholarly tradition through three key concepts: *ta'lim*, *tarbiyah* and *ta'dib*. These three terms are sometimes used interchangeably in everyday life, even though each carries a distinct meaning and in fact, complements the others.

Ta'lim is a term in the Islamic educational tradition that refers to the process of teaching and learning about religion, specifically encompassing the study of the Qur'an, hadith and other Islamic sciences, which is usually carried out within the setting of a pesantren or Islamic educational institution to shape the religious and intellectual character of students. Conceptually, *ta'lim* encompasses not only the transfer of knowledge but also the cultivation of moral character and the development of critical thinking skills within the framework of syari'ah values, thereby playing a vital role in efforts to improve the quality of Islamic education geared towards the development of a sustainable civilisation.¹⁷ Thus, *ta'lim* is understood as the core of Islamic pedagogy, integrating cognitive, affective and social aspects to produce a generation grounded in Islamic values. It is this cognitive dimension that most closely aligns with what SDG 4.1 refers to when it speaks of relevant and effective learning outcomes. The extent to which the knowledge taught is genuinely internalized, rather than merely memorized.

Unlike *ta'lim*, the term *tarbiyah* generally refers to a holistic educational process within an Islamic framework that encompasses the development of an individual's moral, spiritual,

¹⁵ Boeren, "Understanding Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on 'Quality Education' from Micro, Meso and Macro Perspectives."

¹⁶ Hanemann, "Examining the Application of the Lifelong Learning Principle to the Literacy Target in the Fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4)."

¹⁷ Yayat Hidayat dkk., "Manajemen Pendidikan Islam," *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 6, no. 2 (2023).

intellectual and social aspects through the application of the values of the Qur'an and Sunnah, with the primary aim of fostering noble character and behavior grounded in etiquette and moral conduct. In the context of character education, *tarbiyah* is regarded as a strategic mechanism for fostering a sense of patriotism, tolerance and integrity amongst students. This definition emphasizes that *tarbiyah* is not merely the transfer of knowledge, but rather a comprehensive endeavor to shape individuals who are competitive, ethical and capable of making a positive contribution to society.¹⁸

As for *Ta'dib*, as understood by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al Attas, it is a holistic educational process that emphasizes the cultivation of a moral character, integrity and personality through the integration of knowledge with Islamic values, with the aim of developing individuals of noble character and critical thinking skills.¹⁹ This concept is in line with the objectives of Islamic education, which emphasizes the development of individuals who are intellectually outstanding, generous in their deeds, and exemplary in their morals and wisdom.²⁰ It is also consistent with what is referred to in the SDG 4 discourse as values based education, an approach that forms the foundation for the sustainability of learning quality, rather than merely serving as a superficial addition to the core curriculum.

The crucial question then is, why given that Islam's normative framework is so rich, do many education systems in Muslim-majority countries still grapple with serious quality issues? The answer lies in the separation of these three concepts in day to day curricular practice. *Ta'lim* often becomes focused on rote learning without understanding, *tarbiyah* loses its intellectual content and is reduced to mere normative moral guidance, whilst *ta'dib* neglected because it is deemed unmeasurable within a score oriented assessment system. This is also due to a lack of integration between religious studies and secular science, as well as weak collaborative synergy between schools, families and the community, causing the education system to lose its transcendental direction in the face of the challenges of globalization and digital disruption.²¹ Consequently, rather than reinforcing one another as intended in the original epistemology, these three dimensions operate in isolation and this explains why many Islamic educational institutions have not yet been able to meet the learning outcome standards required by SDG 4.1, not because Islamic values are irrelevant, but because these values have not yet been coherently integrated into curricular practice.

The common ground between Islamic ethics and SDG 4.1 is therefore not merely a shared ultimate goal, but a shared underlying philosophy that good education is education that simultaneously integrates the cognitive, affective and moral dimensions. Re-integrating

¹⁸ Shalahudin Ismail, Suhana Suhana, dan Qiqi Yuliati Zakiah, "ANALISIS KEBIJAKAN PENGUATAN PENDIDIKAN KARAKTER DALAM MEWUJUDKAN PELAJAR PANCASILA DI SEKOLAH," *JURNAL MANAJEMEN PENDIDIKAN DAN ILMU SOSIAL* 2, no. 1 (Februari 2021): 76–84, <https://doi.org/10.38035/jmpis.v2i1.388>.

¹⁹ Nurul Anifah dan Yunus Yunus, "Integrasi Konsep Ta'dib Al-Attas dalam Pembinaan Karakter Peserta Didik pada Masa Pandemi," *Dawuh Guru: Jurnal Pendidikan MI/SD* 2, no. 1 (Februari 2022): 13–30, <https://doi.org/10.35878/guru.v2i1.304>.

²⁰ Ahmad Ahmad, "Konsep Ta'dib Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas dan Implikasinya dalam Pendidikan Islam," *AN NUR: Jurnal Studi Islam* 13, no. 1 (Juni 2021): 32–50, <https://doi.org/10.37252/an-nur.v13i1.98>.

²¹ Puti Salsabila Arfi, *Rekonstruksi Peran Pendidikan Formal dalam Dinamika Masyarakat Indonesia: Analisis Sistematis atas Arah, Tantangan, dan Strategi Penguatan*.

ta'lim, *tarbiyah* and *ta'dib* into a single coherent curricular framework will not only meet the standards of SDG 4.1, but will in fact exceed them as it adds spiritual and ethical dimensions that are absent from the SDG 4.1 framework, which is more oriented towards measurable outcomes alone.

B. SDG 4.2: Early Childhood Education

SDG 4.2 calls for all boys and girls to have access to high quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education, so that they are ready to enter primary education.²² This objective is often viewed as a technical pedagogical issue, yet it conceals a profound philosophical question: at what age does human development actually begin, and who is responsible for it? Islam provides a clear answer that extends far beyond the scope of formal schooling.

In Islamic tradition, attention to a child's upbringing begins even before birth, through guidance on choosing a suitable partner, prayers during pregnancy, and the choice of a good name after birth. The concept of *fitrah* forms an important foundation here that every child is born in a state of purity and with the potential for goodness.²³ And the role of early childhood education is to maintain and develop that potential, rather than simply filling children with knowledge from zero.²⁴ This perspective differs fundamentally from educational models that treat children as passive recipients of information, and is in fact, consistent with contemporary early childhood pedagogical approaches that emphasize the child's active role in their own learning process.

The hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), which states that a child's education should ideally begin at an early age, with an emphasis on instilling moral values and religious practice before formal academic learning, underlines a relevant principle. *Tarbiyah* at this stage is holistic in nature, integrating cognitive, emotional and spiritual aspects, and must not be separated from emotional and spiritual nurturing. Within this framework, the family is not merely a supporting partner to early childhood education institutions, but rather the primary educational institution, the responsibility of which cannot be entirely delegated to the state or schools.²⁵

The challenge of implementation in many muslim majority countries is the significant gap in access to early childhood education, particularly in villages and among low-income families. This is ironic given islam's strong normative emphasis on early childhood education. This is where institutions such as TPA (Taman Pendidikan Al-Qur'an) and RA (Raudhatul

²² Boeren, "Understanding Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on 'Quality Education' from Micro, Meso and Macro Perspectives."

²³ Guntur Gunawan dan Ayunia Lestari, "Al-Ghazali's Thoughts on Education and Its Relevance to Islamic Education in the Millennial Era," *AJIS: Academic Journal of Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (Juni 2021): 103–16, <https://doi.org/10.29240/ajis.v6i1.2091>.

²⁴ Abdullah Abdullah, Muhajir Abd Rahman, dan Rustina N, "PERAN GURU PENDIDIKAN AGAMA ISLAM DALAM MENINGKATKAN KECERDASAN INTELEKTUAL, KECERDASAN EMOSIONAL DAN KECERDASAN SPIRITUAL PESERTA DIDIK," *Jurnal Studi Islam* 12, no. 1 (Juli 2023): 25–52, <https://doi.org/10.33477/jsi.v12i1.4480>.

²⁵ Madhar Madhar, "Pemikiran Pendidikan Imam Al-Ghazali dan Relevansinya dalam Sistem Pendidikan Islam Kontemporer," *Tarqiyatuna: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam dan Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* 3, no. 2 (Desember 2024): 115–26, <https://doi.org/10.36769/tarqiyatuna.v3i2.813>.

Athfal) which have grown up within the context of mosques and muslim communities, become a valuable form of social capital, as they have historically reached populations not always served by state-run formal early childhood education, although their quality and standards remain variable and require further strengthening.²⁶ Integrating these institutions into the national early childhood education (PAUD) quality assurance framework without removing their religious character is a strategic step that can accelerate progress towards SDG 4.2 whilst strengthening the foundations of *tarbiyah* from the very earliest years.

C. SDG 4.3: Technical, Vocational and Higher Education

SDG Target 4.3 calls for ensuring equal access for all women and men to affordable, high-quality technical, vocational and higher education, including universities.²⁷ When we examine this objective from the perspective of Islamic history, we discover a legacy that is often overlooked that Islamic higher education institutions, at the height of their glory, practised principles of inclusivity that were ahead of their time.

Furthermore, the tradition of *rihlah fi thalab al-'ilm* journeys in pursuit of knowledge across cities and countries is understood as a physical and intellectual dedication to deepening one's knowledge beyond the geographical boundaries of one's place of residence. This reflects an extraordinary appreciation for access to the finest sources of knowledge, regardless of geographical or social barriers. Scholars such as Imam al-Bukhari, Ibn Battutah and Ibn Khaldun travelled thousands of kilometers in order to learn from the finest teachers in various cities.²⁸ This ethos is directly relevant to SDG 4.3 that access to quality education is a right that must not be restricted by geographical boundaries, social status or economic means.

In the context of contemporary Indonesia, curriculum reconstruction based on the integration of knowledge (*'ulum al-din* and *'ulum al-dunya*) is a key step towards eliminating the dichotomy between religious knowledge (*'ulum al-din*) and secular knowledge (*'ulum al-dunya*) by developing a curriculum that holistically integrates the two.²⁹ Higher education must guide students to master science and technology without neglecting the moral and spiritual foundations of Islam.³⁰ Accelerating digitalization and Islamic digital literacy by utilizing information technology to expand accessibility, such as the use of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) to reach marginalized communities in order to teach advanced skills

²⁶ Nana Suyana, "Kebijakan Pendidikan Nasional Menghadapi Tantangan Global Sebuah Analisis Strategis dan Prioritas," *Journal of Education Research*, 2024.

²⁷ Boeren, "Understanding Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on 'Quality Education' from Micro, Meso and Macro Perspectives."

²⁸ Arnin Agung, Maragustam Maragustam, dan Usman Usman, "Filsafat Pendidikan dalam Pemikiran Religius-Konservatif Syekh Nawawi al-Bantani dan Relevansinya terhadap Dunia Pendidikan Islam Kontemporer," *Takuana: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sains, dan Humaniora* 4, no. 3 (Oktober 2025): 367–81, <https://doi.org/10.56113/takuana.v4i3.163>.

²⁹ Jalaldeen dan Dawood Al-Hidabi, "AL-GHAZALI'S FRAMEWORK OF TEACHINGS PROFESSIONAL VALUES."

³⁰ Agung, Maragustam, dan Usman, "Filsafat Pendidikan dalam Pemikiran Religius-Konservatif Syekh Nawawi al-Bantani dan Relevansinya terhadap Dunia Pendidikan Islam Kontemporer."

such as data science.³¹ This step must be accompanied by the teaching of digital ethics based on Islamic values to foster students' spiritual resilience in an era of disruption.³²

However, this great potential is still overshadowed by serious challenges regarding quality and relevance, which stem from a narrowing of the meaning of education one that tends to become trapped in purely administrative management, where the pursuit of knowledge is often focused solely on obtaining a qualification or social status, thereby losing its spiritual 'essence' and purpose. This is exacerbated by the unresolved dichotomy between religious and secular knowledge, as well as curriculum policies that are treated merely as 'annual projects' and appear unresponsive to the real needs of society in the era of digital disruption.³³ It is at this juncture that the SDG 4.3 framework can serve as an aspirational standard that provides more measurable and targeted guidance not as a foreign agenda imposed from outside, but as an instrument to revitalize the legacy of inclusivity in Islamic scholarship, which has been eroded by structural limitations.

D. SDG 4.4: Skills for Quality Jobs

SDG 4.4 calls for a substantial increase in the number of young people and adults with relevant skills including technical and vocational skills to secure quality jobs and engage in entrepreneurship.³⁴ This target is often narrowly understood as a labour market issue alone, whereas Islam possesses a far richer framework of work ethics that can lend new meaning to the achievement of this target.

Furthermore, the tradition of entrepreneurship in Islam has strong historical figures: the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) himself was a businessman before his prophetic period, and many prominent companions, such as Abdurrahman bin Auf, were known as successful entrepreneurs who used their wealth for the benefit of the community. Islamic business ethics, which emphasize honesty (*shiddiq*), fairness in transactions, and the prohibition of *riba* and corruption, provide a relevant moral framework for contemporary entrepreneurship education, a dimension that is often missing when vocational education focuses only on technical competencies without fostering ethical entrepreneurial character.³⁵

Pesantren entrepreneurship programs, which are flourishing in various regions across Indonesia such as those that integrate training in agriculture, fisheries or the creative industries into the religious curriculum provide empirical evidence that Islamic educational institutions are capable of addressing the challenges of SDG 4.4 in a contextually appropriate manner. This model does not separate the teaching of technical skills from character development; consequently, graduates are expected not only to be technically competent but

³¹ Carmen Del Rosario Navas-Bonilla dkk., "Inclusive Education through Technology: A Systematic Review of Types, Tools and Characteristics," *Frontiers in Education* 10 (Februari 2025): 1527851, <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1527851>.

³² U. Abdullah Mu'min, M. Renaldy Fadilah, dan Muhammad Haikal, *Enhancing Spiritual Resilience among Gen Z Muslims: The Role of Contextualized Islamic Curriculum Innovation*, t.t.

³³ Agung, Maragustam, dan Usman, "Filsafat Pendidikan dalam Pemikiran Religius-Konservatif Syekh Nawawi al-Bantani dan Relevansinya terhadap Dunia Pendidikan Islam Kontemporer."

³⁴ Boeren, "Understanding Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on 'Quality Education' from Micro, Meso and Macro Perspectives."

³⁵ Khasani, "Ecological Ethics of the Prophet."

also to demonstrate integrity in the practice of their profession.³⁶ However, the scalability of this model remains limited and requires more systematic policy support to enable wider replication, given that the majority of such initiatives are still self-funded and have not yet been integrated into the national vocational education framework.

E. SDG 4.5: Equality and Inclusion

SDG Target 4.5 calls for the elimination of gender disparities in education and the guarantee of equal access at all levels of education for vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.³⁷ This target is one of the most frequently debated within the context of Muslim societies, as it directly touches upon gender issues. A domain fraught with tension between literal interpretations, cultural traditions and the demands of contemporary justice.

From an Islamic perspective, there is no text that explicitly restricts women's access to education. On the contrary, the hadith most frequently cited in the context of the obligation to seek knowledge "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" (HR. Ibn Majah) makes no distinction between Muslim men and women. The term 'Muslim' in this hadith is generic and inclusive. The historical fact that 'Aisyah binti Abu Bakar, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), became one of the greatest narrators of hadith and a teacher to thousands of students including men provides a very powerful example of women's intellectual leadership in Islam.³⁸

Amina Wadud has demonstrated that many of the restrictions on women's education attributed to Islam are in fact the product of socio-cultural constructs reinforced by an incomplete interpretation of religion, rather than part of the normative and universal teachings of Islam. Consequently, a reconstruction of thought is required to restore Islam's original message of liberation and equality.³⁹

The inclusivity dimension of SDG 4.5 extends beyond gender issues to include other vulnerable groups, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in difficult circumstances. Here too, Islam offers a strong ethical foundation through the concept of care for the *dhul'afa* (the vulnerable) and the emphasis that a person's honour in the sight of Allah is not determined by physical perfection or social status, but by piety (Q.S. Al-Hujurat :13). The story of the Prophet's companion Abdullah bin Ummi Maktum, a blind companion who had full access to gatherings of knowledge serves as an important symbolic reference for inclusive education for people with disabilities within the Islamic tradition.⁴⁰

Empirically, Islamic educational institutions, particularly pesantren and madrasah, have long functioned as relatively inclusive educational spaces, although this inclusivity is often ignored in global educational narratives. Pesantren have traditionally admitted students from

³⁶ Agung, Maragustam, dan Usman, "Filsafat Pendidikan dalam Pemikiran Religius-Konservatif Syekh Nawawi al-Bantani dan Relevansinya terhadap Dunia Pendidikan Islam Kontemporer."

³⁷ Boeren, "Understanding Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on 'Quality Education' from Micro, Meso and Macro Perspectives."

³⁸ Arbain, Azizah, dan Sari, "PEMIKIRAN GENDER MENURUT PARA AHLI."

³⁹ Mu'min, Fadilah, dan Haikal, *Enhancing Spiritual Resilience among Gen Z Muslims: The Role of Contextualized Islamic Curriculum Innovation*.

⁴⁰ Novrizal dan Manaf, "The Policy of Inclusive Education in Indonesia."

diverse socio-economic backgrounds without discrimination, through a cross-subsidy system managed via community networks. This represents a significant achievement in terms of inclusivity, although further efforts are still required to ensure equality in the quality of education between female and male students, as well as to expand access for students with special needs, which remains far from sufficient in most pesantren.⁴¹

F. SDG 4.6: Literacy and Numeracy

SDG 4.6 calls for all young people and the vast majority of adults, both men and women, to achieve sufficient literacy and numeracy skills.⁴² When traced back to the epistemological roots of Islam, literacy actually occupies a very central position and is rich in theological significance.

The first revelation revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was the command *'Iqra'* (read), a word which became the name of the first surah of the Qur'an and marked the beginning of the prophetic mission with a command to read and write, rather than a ritual command. This verse (QS. Al-'Alaq: 1–5) emphasizes that the ability to read and write (*al-qalam*) is a gift that distinguishes humankind and is a requirement for understanding the revelation itself.⁴³ The implication is profound that literacy in Islam is not a neutral, secular skill, but rather a gateway to understanding both religion and the world simultaneously. A perspective that should provide a far stronger moral motivation for the elimination of illiteracy than purely pragmatic arguments alone.

G. SDG 4.7: Education and Sustainable Development

SDG 4.7 calls for all learners to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development, including sustainable lifestyles, human rights and gender equality.⁴⁴ This target is one of the most ambitious and, at the same time, one of the most frequently misunderstood in the context of Islamic education.

The concept of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* or Islam as a blessing for the entire universe (Q.S. Al-Anbiya: 107) is one of the most comprehensive expressions of cosmopolitanism in the history of human civilization. It speaks not merely of tolerance towards those who are different, but of an active responsibility to be a blessing to all creatures, transcending the boundaries of religion, ethnicity and nation. It is also a universal vision that positions the teachings of Islam as a source of compassion, peace and well-being for all creatures, without exception.⁴⁵ In the context of education, this value inspires a curriculum that is neither exclusive nor defensive, but rather open, dialogical, and oriented towards contributing to the

⁴¹ Ahmad Shiddiq dkk., "Developing Student Character Education Through Islamic Boarding School Culture In Islamic Elementary Schools," *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan* 16, no. 2 (Juni 2024), <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v16i2.5260>.

⁴² Hanemann, "Examining the Application of the Lifelong Learning Principle to the Literacy Target in the Fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4)."

⁴³ Agung, Maragustam, dan Usman, "Filsafat Pendidikan dalam Pemikiran Religius-Konservatif Syekh Nawawi al-Bantani dan Relevansinya terhadap Dunia Pendidikan Islam Kontemporer."

⁴⁴ Boeren, "Understanding Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on 'Quality Education' from Micro, Meso and Macro Perspectives."

⁴⁵ Khasani, "Ecological Ethics of the Prophet."

common good, this is an ethos that is deeply aligned with the concept of global citizenship, which lies at the center of SDG 4.7.

A concrete example of the integration of these values can be seen in the reconstruction of a contextual curriculum in the digital age, which integrates Islamic values into the technological landscape by linking the principle of *amanah* to ethical practices on social media. This is achieved through the use of modern media such as videos, podcasts, and digital infographics, which are highly relevant to Generation Z's learning styles, to ensure that the process of internalizing these values takes place in an emotional and reflective manner, motivating them to take positive action in the digital public space.⁴⁶ The greatest challenge lies in the systematisation of the values of *rahmatan lil 'alamin and khalifah*, which need to be translated into measurable curricular competencies and systematically integrated across all levels of Islamic education, rather than merely serving as lecture material or marginal and optional local content.

H. SDG 4.8: Reliable and Inclusive Educational Facilities

SDG Target 4.8 calls for the construction and improvement of educational facilities that are sensitive to the needs of children, people with disabilities and gender, as well as the provision of a safe, violence-free, inclusive and effective learning environment for all.⁴⁷ This target is often viewed as a purely infrastructural issue such as the construction of buildings, separate toilets or wheelchair access, yet behind it lies a fundamental ethical question, what makes a learning space truly safe, both physically and psychologically, for all learners?

Islam has a very clear principle regarding the prohibition of violence and abuse in educational relationships. The concept of *rahmah* (loving kindness) one of Allah's attributes most frequently mentioned in the Qur'an, and manifested in the *basmalah* recited at the start of almost every Muslim activity should be the guiding principle underpinning the relationship between educators and learners. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was known for his gentleness in teaching, even towards children and those who had made mistakes, as reflected in various accounts of his interactions with the children of his companions.⁴⁸ This principle is directly relevant to the requirements of SDG 4.8 regarding a violence-free learning environment, a standard which ironically, is still frequently violated in educational practice at a number of Islamic educational institutions that continue to apply physical punishment as a disciplinary methodology.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine whether Islamic ethics can serve as a credible and contextually grounded moral foundation for the achievement of SDG 4 in Muslim majority societies. Across all eight targets, the analysis shows a consistent pattern: Islamic normative principles, articulated through concepts such as *ta'lim, tarbiyah, ta'dib, fitrah, rihlah fii thalabil*

⁴⁶ Mu'min, Fadilah, dan Haikal, *Enhancing Spiritual Resilience among Gen Z Muslims: The Role of Contextualized Islamic Curriculum Innovation*.

⁴⁷ Boeren, "Understanding Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on 'Quality Education' from Micro, Meso and Macro Perspectives."

⁴⁸ Azis, Husna, dan Waharjani, "NILAI-NILAI PROFETIK SEPUTAR ETIKA PENDIDIK DALAM PEMBELAJARAN MENURUT YUSUF AL-QARDHAWI."

'ilmi, rahmatan lil 'alamiin and rahmah, its converge substantively with the spirit of SDG 4 rather than merely tolerating it as an externally imposed agenda. Islamic ethics is therefore not in competition with the SDG 4 framework but offers it a deeper ontological and spiritual grounding, while SDG 4 in turn provides Islamic education with a measurable, globally legible vehicle for articulating its classical aspirations. The persistent gap between Muslim majority countries SDG 4 performance and Islam's own normative ideals is best explained not by any deficiency in Islamic values themselves, but by their fragmented and inconsistent translation into curricular and institutional practice, a finding that recurs across the discussion of every target examined. Institutions such as pesantren, madrasah, TPA, RA emerge as significant, if uneven, sites where this integration is already partially realized, suggesting that the resources for reform exist within the tradition itself rather than requiring wholesale importation from outside.

This study is subject to several limitations. As a qualitative literature review grounded in normative philosophical and comparative analysis, its conclusions are interpretative rather than empirically tested. No field data, surveys, or case studies were employed to verify how the identified convergences manifest in actual classroom or institutional practice. The selection and interpretation of primary Islamic texts, while guided by established hermeneutic and historical methods, inevitably carries an element of authorial perspective that alternative reading could challenge. Additionally, the secondary literature consulted, though spanning several Muslim majority contexts, draws more heavily on the Indonesian case than on other regions, which may limit the generalizability of certain findings to the broader Muslim world.

Future research would therefore benefit from empirical and comparative follow up, including field based studies that assess how far the *ta'lim*, *tarbiyah* and *ta'dib* framework is actually operationalized within madrasah and pesantren curricula, cross country comparisons beyond the Indonesian context, and policy oriented research that translates the conceptual mapping developed here into measurable indicators usable by educational policymakers. Such studies would help bridge the distance between normative aspiration and institutional reality that this study has identified as the central obstacle to achieving SDG 4 in Muslim majority societies.

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