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## Accessibility of Higher Education for Women as a Means of Career Development: A Case Study of Students at the Kartini Rembang Open University Service Center

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**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze the accessibility of higher education for women as a means of career development, among students at the Kartini Open University Service Center (SALUT) in Rembang. This research is in line with the principles of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically goal 4 on quality education and goal 5 on gender equality, which emphasize the importance of learning opportunities for all without exception. The approach used is a qualitative case study method. Data were obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation, then analyzed descriptively through the process of reduction, presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results of the study indicate that a flexible learning system provides opportunities for women to continue their studies without neglecting family or work responsibilities. Internal factors such as motivation, awareness of the importance of education, self-confidence, and aspirations are the main drivers. Meanwhile, external factors such as family support, social environment, education policies, and workneeds also strengthen access to higher education. The results of this study are expected to be an academic and practical contribution in understanding and strengthening the role of higher education as a means of emancipation, career development, and empowerment of women through more inclusive and equitable access.

**Keywords:** Accessibility of Higher Education, Women, Career Development, Empowerment.

### INTRODUCTION

Education is a key pillar in sustainable human resource development and is a crucial part of the global commitment to realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) launched by the United Nations (UN). The SDGs encompass 17 interrelated goals, with the primary targets being to end poverty, protect the environment, and ensure prosperity and justice for all humanity. Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), education is placed as a top priority through Goal 4 on quality education and Goal 5 on gender equality,

which emphasizes the importance of access to education for women. These two goals serve as the basis for countries, including Indonesia, to strengthen equal opportunities for learning.

Higher education provides opportunities for women to improve their skills and knowledge, which in turn expands employment opportunities and improves their social status. Women are able to develop competencies and become useful individuals for themselves and the nation (Irianto & Febrianti, 2017). However, in the process, women often face structural and cultural barriers that limit their opportunities in education, such as traditional gender roles that relegate women to the domestic sphere and unequal access due to a strong patriarchal culture (Rokhmansyah, 2016).

As a state university that implements an open and distance learning system, Universitas Terbuka (UT) provides learning opportunities without limitations of age, space, and time. This system aligns with the spirit of lifelong learning, enabling every individual, including working or married women, to continue their higher education according to their abilities and living conditions. The flexible, technology-based, and affordable learning model makes Universitas Terbuka a concrete example of inclusive and equitable education, as emphasized in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through this system, women previously constrained by domestic responsibilities, economic factors, or geographic limitations now have the opportunity to develop their academic and professional potential.

The presence of female figures such as Raden Ajeng Kartini has brought about significant changes in society's perspective on the role and status of women. Kartini pioneered the emancipation of Indonesian women, championing their right to education at a time when access was largely restricted. Kartini's spirit remains relevant today, particularly in Rembang Regency, where some women still face limitations in accessing higher education due to social, economic, and geographic factors (Kurniawati, 2021). The Open University, through SALUT Kartini Rembang, has opened broader, easier, and more flexible higher education opportunities for the community, especially women. The distance learning system implemented provides a solution for women with limited time and mobility, particularly in rural areas (Hartanto, 2015).

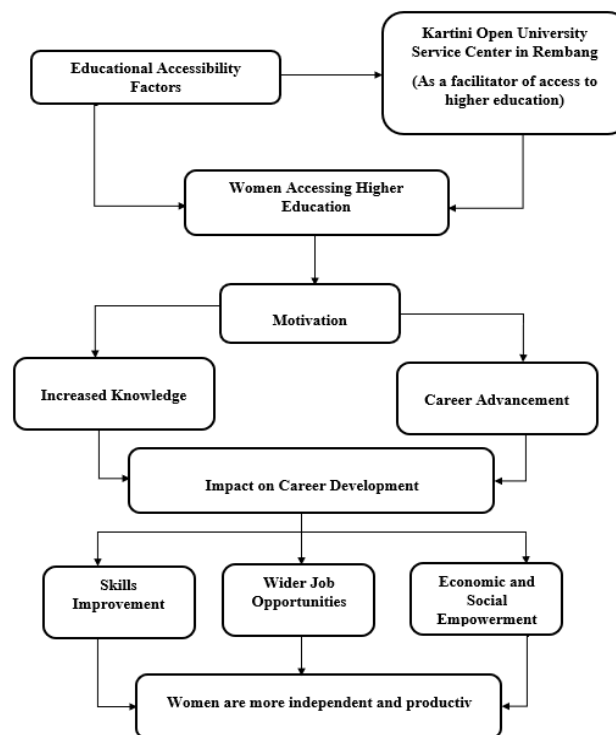
Based on new student registration data from the 2022 odd semester to the 2025 odd semester, the number of female students at SALUT Kartini Rembang consistently dominates. A significant increase occurred in the 2025 odd semester, with a total of 772 students, of which 579 were female. This data demonstrates the important role of the Open University (UTO) in expanding access to higher education for women who have dual responsibilities between work, family, and education. The data shows that 202 female students took leave and 77 others decided to drop out of college, a higher number than male students. This phenomenon indicates that even though access to education has been opened, there are still obstacles for women in maintaining their studies until completion. This confirms that inclusive access does not fully guarantee the success of women's participation and career development, as it is still influenced by various internal and external factors (Indrawati & Wulandari, 2020).

Theoretically, this research is based on three main frameworks: Martha Nussbaum's Theory of Education and Emancipation, Gary S. Becker's Theory of Human Capital, and Donald E. Super's Theory of Career Development. All three explain that education functions not only as an academic process but also as a means of emancipation, self-investment, and career development. In Nussbaum's view, education is a tool for liberation and strengthening women's capabilities to determine their own life direction. Becker emphasizes education as an investment that increases individual productivity and economic opportunities. Meanwhile, Super views higher education as a crucial stage in the lifelong process of identity formation and career development. Thus, these three theories collectively emphasize that higher education plays a strategic role in empowering women to achieve independence, equality, and professional advancement.

This research is expected to comprehensively describe the experiences of female students in accessing education, while identifying effective strategies and support to increase their participation. In addition to providing academic contributions, the results are also expected to provide practical input for policymakers and higher education providers to develop distance learning services that are more inclusive, responsive to gender needs, and supportive of women's career development, particularly at SALUT Kartini Rembang.

Adequate access to higher education enables women to enhance their personal and professional capacities, which in turn impacts career advancement. The open education system implemented by Universitas Terbuka (Open University), particularly at SALUT Kartini Rembang, serves as an important case study to determine the effectiveness of this system in opening access for women.

This research model was designed by considering several main problems, namely:



**Figure 1. Framework of Thinking**

Source: Data Processed by Researchers (2025)

This model demonstrates that women's access to higher education is influenced by geographic, economic, time, and technological factors. The Kartini Open University Service Center in Rembang acts as a facilitator, bridging these barriers, encouraging women to continue their studies to enhance their knowledge and careers. This access leads to increased skills, employment opportunities, and economic and social empowerment, making higher education a strategic tool for promoting women's independence and productivity.

## METHOD

### Types of Research

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to deeply understand the social phenomenon regarding the accessibility of higher education for women as a means of career development. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the subjective experiences, meanings, motivations, and challenges faced by women in the local social and cultural context in Rembang. In this context, the case study focuses on female

students at the Kartini Open University Service Center (SALUT) in Rembang to comprehensively understand how access to higher education affects their career development, as well as the factors that support and hinder this process.

### **Information Source**

The sources of information in this study include anything that can provide relevant data or knowledge to answer the research questions and support the analysis process, because the quality of the information sources greatly affects the validity and credibility of the research results. In this study, the main sources of information are students at the Open University Service Center (SALUT) Kartini Rembang, especially female students who during the active registration period of 2025 Odd Number numbered 1,929 out of a total of 2,607 students, as well as stakeholders involved in SALUT Kartini Rembang. The selection of female students as information sources is based on their relevance to the research objective, namely to understand how the accessibility of higher education plays a role as a means of career development for women.

### **Data Sources**

The data collection techniques used in this study included interviews, observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the experiences, motivations, and obstacles faced by female students in accessing higher education and developing their careers. Non-participatory observations were conducted within the SALUT Kartini Rembang environment to observe the physical conditions, social interactions, and support provided to female students. Meanwhile, documentation was conducted by collecting various documents such as institutional profiles, student data, academic policies, and photographs of relevant activities. These three techniques were used in a complementary manner to obtain in-depth, contextual, and valid data through a triangulation process.

### **Research Instrument**

Research instruments are tools used by researchers to collect relevant data to answer the problem formulation and achieve the research objectives. In qualitative research, the researcher acts as the primary instrument because he or she directly determines the research focus, selects informants, collects and analyzes data, and draws conclusions based on interpretations of the phenomena being studied. Furthermore, this study also utilizes supporting instruments in the form of interview guidelines, observation guidelines, and documentation guidelines to assist in the data collection process to be more systematic and focused. These three instruments serve as a guide in obtaining accurate and in-depth information regarding the accessibility of higher education for women at SALUT Kartini Rembang.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The data collection procedure in this study was carried out through several systematic stages to ensure the relevance and accuracy of the data. The first stage was the determination of informants, namely female students at SALUT Kartini who met the research criteria. Next, data collection was carried out using three main techniques: semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences and views of informants, direct observation of the service and learning process, and documentation in the form of archives and activity reports as supporting data. After the data was collected, the interview results were transcribed verbatim and observation notes were arranged in the form of descriptive narratives, then the data were reduced and grouped according to relevant themes. To maintain validity, triangulation was carried out between data sources and between informants, before finally being analyzed using thematic

analysis methods to find in-depth patterns, meanings, and relationships in accordance with the research objectives.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

Data analysis in this study was conducted using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, researchers select and simplify data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation to identify elements relevant to the research focus. The reduced data is then presented in narrative form, tables, or charts for easy understanding and further analysis. Next, researchers draw conclusions based on patterns, themes, and relationships emerging from the analyzed data. To strengthen the analysis results, this study also used NVivo software as an aid in the process of coding, organizing, and visualizing data. NVivo facilitates researchers in systematically discovering thematic patterns and increases the efficiency of qualitative data analysis, while also helping maintain the validity and objectivity of the research.

### **Data Validity**

Data validity testing was conducted to ensure that the research results were valid, reliable, and trustworthy. This study employed three main techniques: extended participation, persistent observation, and source triangulation. Extended participation was conducted with the researcher in the field until data saturation was reached to build trust with informants and gain a deeper understanding of the research context. Diligent observation was conducted carefully and continuously to ensure accurate and in-depth data collection. Meanwhile, source triangulation was applied by comparing information from various informants, such as employed and unemployed female students at SALUT Kartini Rembang, to obtain consistent and comprehensive data. Through this technique, the research results are expected to provide a comprehensive and credible description of how accessibility to higher education contributes to women's career development in Rembang Regency.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Description of Research Object**

The Open University Service Center (SALUT) Kartini Rembang is a service center for the Open University that plays a vital role in helping students access distance learning. SALUT began as a non-formal study group established in 2011 and has grown to include hundreds of active students. To improve service quality, an official partnership was established between the Open University Student Service Center (UPBJJ) of Semarang and SALUT Kartini Rembang on March 25, 2021, and was officially launched on December 19, 2021. SALUT Kartini Rembang facilitates the community, especially women in Rembang Regency, to pursue higher education without having to abandon family or work responsibilities. True to its name, "Kartini," SALUT reflects the spirit of women's struggle to obtain educational opportunities and develop themselves.

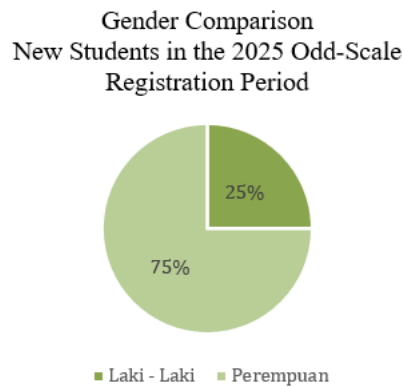
### **Research Results**

#### **1. Accessibility of Higher Education for Women at SALUT Kartini Rembang**

The accessibility of higher education for women at SALUT Kartini Rembang is evident in the ease of service, flexibility of schedule, and the opportunity for students to continue their studies without neglecting domestic or work responsibilities. Universitas Terbuka's distance learning system allows students to study independently and attend scheduled face-to-face tutorials, allowing many women to balance their study time with their daily activities. Ease of administration, friendly staff service, and SALUT's strategic

location contribute to the smooth running of students' studies. Furthermore, the year-on-year increase in student numbers, with approximately 75% female, demonstrates that SALUT Kartini Rembang is a top choice for women seeking self-development through higher education. System flexibility, affordable costs, and technological support make SALUT Kartini Rembang a vital tool in expanding access to education and empowering women in Rembang Regency.

Based on the 2025 Odd Semester registration period at SALUT Kartini Rembang, there is a fairly large comparison where the number of new student applicants is 772 with contributions from 193 men and 579 women. This can be seen in the following image:



**Figure 2. Gender Comparison of New Students in the 2025 Odd-Number Registration Period**

Source: Data Processed by Researchers (2025)

The figure shows the gender ratio of new student applicants for the 2025 odd-numbered registration period at the Kartini Open University Service Center (SALUT) in Rembang. Of the 772 applicants, 579 were female (75%) and 193 were male (25%). This proportion indicates that females significantly dominate the number of applicants, with a ratio of approximately 3:1 to males. This condition indicates that women's access to and interest in higher education at the Open University is increasing, particularly due to the flexible open and distance learning system that allows them to balance domestic, work, and educational roles.

The dominance of female applicants also illustrates that the Open University, especially SALUT Kartini Rembang, plays an important role in supporting gender equality in the field of higher education, in accordance with the spirit of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) numbers 4 and 5, namely quality education and gender equality.

## 2. Factors Influencing Women's Access to Higher Education

### a. Internal Factors

#### 1) Self-Motivation

Female students are motivated to attend college because they want to gain knowledge, improve their careers, and be role models for their children. They believe that higher education can improve job opportunities and improve their family's well-being. For example, some attend college to gain promotion at work, while others want to prove that women can achieve higher education even after having a family.

#### 2) Awareness of the Importance of Education

They recognize that higher education is an investment in their future. With a degree and the skill they acquire, they hope to improve their job positions, gain social respect, and boost their self-confidence as women. For some informants, attending

college also serves as a way to demonstrate that women deserve the same opportunities as men.

3) Self-Confidence

Continuing to college makes many female students more confident in their abilities. They want to prove that women can still succeed in their studies despite being busy working or taking care of a household. This confidence grows as they successfully balance multiple roles and challenges.

4) Ambition

For some students, college is the fulfillment of a long-held dream that was postponed due to financial or family reasons. Some want to be role models for their children, while others want to prove that women can also achieve higher education. These aspirations motivate them to persevere and complete their studies.

b. External Factors

1) Family Support

Families, especially husbands and parents, play a significant role in supporting women to attend college. This support can take the form of permission, encouragement, time, or financial assistance. Without family support, the struggle to attend college would be much more difficult.

2) Social Support

Friends, coworkers, and the surrounding community also provide significant support. The public's view of women attending college is now increasingly positive. They are seen as individuals who strive and deserve respect. This environmental support fosters additional motivation for students to complete their studies.

3) Educational Policies and Services

The Distance Learning (PJJ) system at Universitas Terbuka (Open University) is a solution for women with numerous responsibilities. Lectures can be taken from home at an affordable cost and with easy academic services. This flexibility allows many women to feel empowered to pursue higher education without neglecting their household responsibilities.

4) Employment Needs and Opportunities

Many students attend college due to work demands or a desire to advance their careers. Higher education is seen as an essential requirement for promotion and competition in the workforce. Studying at Universitas Terbuka (Open University) allows them to continue working while studying, thus ensuring they do not miss out on professional opportunities.

3. Challenges and Barriers Faced by Women in Accessing Higher Education

Although the distance learning system at the Open University provides extensive opportunities for women, their journey still faces various obstacles, including time, economic constraints, technological capabilities, and social and cultural pressures.

a. Time Constraints

Most female students have dual roles as mothers, wives, workers, and students. This situation makes it difficult for them to manage their study time due to the many domestic and work responsibilities. As a result, studying often takes place at night or in between work, easily leading to fatigue and lack of focus. Dilemmas also arise when study schedules conflict with family or work matters.

b. Economic Factors

Although tuition fees at the Open University are relatively affordable, many students still experience financial difficulties in paying tuition fees, purchasing internet data, and providing learning devices. Economic constraints also cause some students to study

with minimal facilities and worry about being unable to continue their studies if their family finances are disrupted.

c. Limited Technological Proficiency

Online learning systems require technological skills, and not all students are familiar with digital devices. Many have difficulty accessing online classes, uploading assignments, or taking online exams. This can lower self-confidence, especially for older students. However, with the help of family or friends, most are able to adapt.

d. Social and Cultural Pressur

There is still a prevailing view in society that women should not pursue higher education, especially those who are married. This stigma makes some students feel inferior or doubtful, even though they strive to prove that women are also capable of higher education and careers.

4. The Role of Higher Education as a Means of Career Development for Female Students

The higher education undertaken by female students at the Kartini Open University Service Center (SALUT) in Rembang is a complex process, encompassing academic, professional, and social dimensions simultaneously. Through an open and distance learning system, the Open University provides inclusive opportunities for women who must balance their roles as workers, housewives, and community members. In this context, higher education is not only a process of obtaining a degree, but also a multidimensional transformation process that shapes ways of thinking, enhances personal capacity, and expands socioeconomic opportunities. Female students experience increased analytical, managerial, and technological competencies relevant to the modern workplace, while also honing their independence, responsibility, and problem-solving skills in complex situations.

In addition to professional development, the Open University process also fosters gender awareness and a new social identity for women. They view education not only as a means of economic mobility but also as a form of liberation from traditional stereotypes that place women solely in the domestic sphere. The opportunity to pursue higher education opens up space for women to build professional networks, gain social recognition, and become agents of change in their communities. Thus, higher education at SALUT Kartini Rembang serves as a strategic vehicle for complex empowerment, combining intellectual, economic, psychological, and social aspects that collectively strengthen women's position and role in a more equal and just society.

## Discussion

Research on the accessibility of higher education for women at SALUT Kartini Rembang shows that education is not only a means to obtain an academic degree, but also a tool to improve competence, strengthen social roles, and improve family well-being. Female students utilize the flexible Open University system to balance domestic and professional roles. Based on Human Capital Theory, education is viewed as a long-term investment that provides economic and social benefits, as evidenced by increased employment opportunities and job promotions for female graduates.

Furthermore, this study also confirms the function of education as a means of emancipation as explained by Martha Nussbaum, where women can negotiate multiple roles and gain freedom in determining life choices. In the context of career development, this finding is in line with Donald Super's Theory which views career as a lifelong process, where education is a crucial stage for the exploration and consolidation of professional roles. Thus, higher education at SALUT Kartini Rembang has been proven to expand access and opportunities for rural women to become economically, socially, and intellectually empowered.

Overall, the Open University, through SALUT Kartini Rembang, serves as an effective model of inclusive education to empower women in rural areas. Its flexible distance learning system, affordable fees, and family and community support enable women to continue their studies while fulfilling their domestic responsibilities. The positive impact is felt not only in career advancement and family finances, but also in social change, as women become more confident, independent, and actively participate in community development.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that the accessibility of higher education for women at the Kartini Open University (SALUT) Service Center in Rembang provides ample opportunities for women, especially in rural areas, to continue their studies without neglecting domestic or work responsibilities. The flexibility of the distance learning system, ease of administration, and inclusive academic services make the Open University a friendly educational alternative for women. Higher education for female students at SALUT serves not only as a means of improving academic and professional competence, but also as a tool for emancipation, strengthening social roles, and recognizing women's capacity in the public sphere.

Access to higher education is influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. Internal factors include motivation, awareness of the importance of education, and the desire for independence and development. External factors include family support, the social environment, inclusive campus policies, and job demands and opportunities. Despite this, female students still face barriers such as time constraints due to dual roles, economic constraints, technological limitations, and the influence of cultural norms that still place women in a subordinate position. However, with adaptive strategies and support from their environment, many students are able to balance their roles as mothers, workers, and students, making higher education truly a means of self-improvement and career development.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that higher education at SALUT Kartini Rembang serves not only as an individual investment but also as an instrument of social transformation that strengthens women's independence, equality, and empowerment. From a policy perspective, the Open University is expected to continue strengthening academic services through digital mentoring, flexible tutorials, and financial assistance for female students. Family and community support are also needed to ensure women continue to have space to develop without cultural barriers. Thus, higher education serves as a crucial bridge for women towards economic independence, career advancement, and broader social recognition within the community.

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