

INDONESIAN MUSLIM WOMEN AND THE GENDER EQUALITY MOVEMENT

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Abstract: Throughout the history of Indonesia, the concepts of gender and power-relations between men and women have been linked to a shifting and fluctuating idea of what constitutes good women, good men, and good gender relationships within the context of Indonesia and Islam. To analyse these changing attitudes to women's issues in Indonesia, we need to pay attention to several points: the character of the women's organizations, whether fully independent, semi autonomous, or subsidiaries of existing male organizations; the important issues rising within the movements, as well as the strategies to deal with them; and lastly the influential factor of government intervention in the women's movement. This paper tries to explore the Muslim women's movement and its strategy to accommodate or resist from the domination of Islam in terms of the nation state, the constitution and the dominant cultural norms in Indonesia.

Keywords: Indonesia, Muslim women's movement, gender equality movement.

Introduction

The opposition of Muslim women and gender equality activists to the dominant culture and state policy derives from a wide variety of positions.¹ These positions sometimes intersect or may even be

¹ C. Bunch, "Making Common Cause, Diversity and Coalitions," in L. Albrecht and R. M. Brewer (eds.), *Bridges of Power: Women's Multicultural Alliances* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990), pp. 49-58; D. J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991); S. G. Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, N.Y. Buckingham:

contradictory to one another, so that when talking about Muslim women's movements and gender equality processes and practices, one should be aware of the historical, cultural, ideological and political contexts. Throughout Indonesian history, the concepts of gender and the power relationship between men and women in Islam have been linked to the shifting and fluctuating idea of what good women, good men, and good gender relationship are in Indonesian and Islamic contexts. These contexts may not always be similar in different historical periods, and different cultural, political and ideological settings. As a result, the Islamic women's movement is a discursive process, a process of producing meaning about gender, identity, womanhood and collective selves.²

This ever-changing concept of certain women's issues, for example, can be seen from the discussion on polygamy in the national Indonesian Women's Congress in 1928. Delegates from Islamic groups like *'Aisyiyah* supported polygamy because it is mentioned in the Qur'an and prevents men from having *zina* (adultery) with other women or prostitutes. In contrast, other women's associations like *Istri Sedar* wanted to abolish it.³ Actually, the aims of the meeting were to bring together all women's organizations throughout Indonesia to discuss gender issues, to build a formal relationship, and to provide Indonesian women with a single voice with which to address policy makers.⁴ But because of their religious, cultural and political backgrounds, to have one voice representing all Indonesian women's opinion was not easy.

In order to examine in more detail the differing concepts of women's issues in Indonesia, several aspects warrant our attention; First, the character of the women's organizations, whether fully independent, semi autonomous or subsidiaries of existing male organizations. Second, the important issues that arose within the

Cornell University Press; Open University Press, 1991); S. Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave/Macmillan; ISS, Institute of Social Studies, 2002), p. 28.

² Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia*, p. 29.

³ Departemen Penerangan Indonesia, *The Indonesian Women Movement: A Chronological Survey of the Women Movement in Indonesia* (Jakarta: Dept. of Information, Republic of Indonesia, 1968); E. Martyn, *Women's Movement in Postcolonial Indonesia: Gender and Nation in a New Democracy* (New York, NY: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), p. v.

⁴ Martyn, *Women's Movement in Postcolonial Indonesia*, pp. 41-42.

movements and the strategy developed to deal with them, and; Third, the influential factor of government intervention in the women's movement.

Type of Establishment

When we consider the level of independence of women's organizations, there are three types, namely fully independent, semi autonomous and subsidiary/dependent. In this paper what I mean by fully independent is women's organizations which did not have any relation to men's organizations. Women tended to found those organizations because of their own interests, not because other actors wanted them to do so. Semi autonomous means that they were affiliated to men's organizations at the time of their establishment but, in the program, those women ran their own interests. They were not fully controlled by other actors. The last type, subsidiary, refers to organizations which from their establishment and throughout their existence acted in a supporting role to men's organizations. They did not have autonomy to decide their own vision and to run their own programs.

According to Wieringa⁵, women's organizations can be part of the women's movement if they strive to support women's interests. She classifies women's organization into organizations *of* and *for* women.

“Organizations of women (independent organizations) are formed through a process of self-mobilization in which women's emancipation may be the one of the aims. But [those] women may also organize themselves for other purposes, such as around class, ethnicity. Organizations for women (dependent organizations) are usually set up by other actors who want to mobilize women for purposes of their own.”⁶

Besides those types, women's organizations can also be classified, based on their ideological backgrounds, into religious and secular organizations. Doorn-Harder⁷ divides women's organizations during the early of twentieth century into two types: secular-nationalist and religious-nationalist. A religious organization is an organization based

⁵ Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia*, p. 39.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur'an* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 32.

on certain religious beliefs and thoughts, while a secular organization is an organization that has a neutral religious affiliation and states that it is separate from religion. However, this does not mean that the members of secular organizations are not religious. In fact, many of the members of secular organizations also practice religious belief.⁸

The different permutations of establishment-independence and ideological background create a variety of women's organization type. These combinations include (1) religious subsidiary, (2) religious semi-autonomous, (3) religious fully independent, (4) secular subsidiary, (5) secular semi-autonomous, and (6) secular fully independent. In Table 1 (below), I classify the different types/combinations and how these different types have predominated in different historical periods.

Table 1: Type of Women Organizations

Types of organization	Subsidiary/dependent	Semi-autonomous	Fully Independent
Religious	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 'Aisyiyah (Muhammadiyah) 2. Gerakan Pemuda Islam Indonesia Putri (GPII-putri) 3. Muslimat NU (NU) 4. Muslimat (Masjumi) 5. Siti Fatimah (Sarekat Islam in Garut) 6. Wanodyo Oetomo (SI Yogyakarta) 7. Wanita Katolik (Partai Katolik) 8. PWKI (Parkindo) 9. Damesadeeling Jong Islamieten Bond (jong Islamieten Bond) 10. Ina Toeni (Sarekat Ambon) 11. Nasyi'atul Aisyiyah (Muhammadiyah) 12. Putri Ahmadiyah (Ahmadiyah) 13. Annisa (Mujahidin) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 'Aisyiyah after 1966 2. Muslimat 3. Fatayat NU 4. PSW 5. YKF 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rifka Annisa 2. Rahima

⁸ Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia*.

Types of organization	Subsidiary/dependent	Semi-autonomous	Fully Independent
	14. Gerakan Wanita PSII (PSII)		
	15. Immawati (IMM)		
	16. Kohati (HMI)		
Secular	1. Putri Merdika (Budi Utomo)	1. Gerwani	1. Putri Sedar
	2. Wanita Taman Siswa (Taman Siswa)	2. Women's center	2. Pawijatan Wanito
	3. Gerwani (PKI)	3. PSW	3. Wanito hado
	4. Funjinkai (Japanese Gorvenment)		4. Wanito Susilo
	5. Darma Wanita (RI civil servants)		5. Keradjiman Amai Setia
	6. Darma Pertiwi (Pemda)		6. Pawiyatan Wanito
	7. PKK (Gov. Village)		7. PIKAT
	8. Bayangkari (police Wives)		8. Poetri Boedi Sedjati
	9. IKWA (Kereta Api)		9. Keutamaan Istri Minangkabau
	10. PIA (Auri)		10. Sarekat Kaouem Iboe Soematra
	11. Persit (Retired Army)		11. Poeteri Setia
	12. Wanita Nasional (Partai Rakyat Nasional)		12. Perwari
	13. Wanita Demokrat (PNI)		13. PPI
	14. Wanita Indonesia (Partai Indonesia Raya)		14. Partai Wanita Rakyat
	15. Perwamu (Partai Murba)		15. Rukun Ibu
	16. Parkiwa (Parki)		16. IBI
	17. GWS (PSI)		17. Perhimpunan Wanita Universitas Indonesia
	18. Persatuan Istri kaum teknik		18. Kalyanamitra
	19. Persatuan wanita keluarga UGM		19. Yasanti
	20. Perwali Djapel (Pelayaran)		20. IWAPI
			21. Indonesian Women's Association for Justice
			22. KOWANI
			23. Women's Solidarity for Human Rights

It can be seen from the table that there is a significant difference between the religious and secular groups in terms of their level of independence. Among secular groups there are more women's organizations that are fully independent than among religious-based groups. However, regarding the dependent/subsidiary and semi-autonomous groups, both religious and secular organizations have a similar number. This comparison is a revealing association since it shows that both religious and secular organizations still view women as supporters rather than as leaders. It means that the dominant cultural, political and ideological settings in Indonesia still see women as dependent humans and as the second sex.⁹ This phenomenon is most clearly seen among the religious groups. If we look at the data from secular groups, the fully independent women's groups are not small in number, even though the number is not much greater than dependent secular groups. In contrast, looking at religious based groups, the number of fully independent women's organisation is very small indeed.

The first women's organizations in Indonesia, whether religious or secular, were mostly related to existing men's organisations. For example, *Putri Merdeka* was founded by the secular nationalist organization, *Budi Utomo*, and some Islamic women's organizations were also part of men's organizations. For example, *'Aisyiyah* was a wing of *Muhammadiyah*, *Sarikat Perempuan Islam Indonesia* was the women's section of *Sarikat Islam*. Also, looking at the early women leaders, Kartini was supported by her father and grandfather, and Dewi Sartika was helped by her husband. This pattern was followed by most nationalist, religious and political organizations throughout the 1910s and 1920s.¹⁰

According to Martyn some important consequences of this subsidiary pattern¹¹ were that women's role tended to be that of supporter or assistant rather than leader. Women's organizations had multiple concerns which were often more focused on nationalist/religious ideology and ethnic identities rather than dealing with gender interests. This is a characteristic of the early Indonesian women's movement. It does not mean that women were not capable

⁹ S. D. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

¹⁰ Martyn, *Women's Movement in Postcolonial Indonesia*, p. 37.

¹¹ Ibid.

of solving their own problems, but they were felt to be more effective if their struggles were supported by and involved men as partners. Until today Indonesian women have worked closely with men to deal with gender issues.

Some Islamic women's organizations such as *'Aisyiyah* decided to be autonomous in 1966 after becoming semi-independent in 1951.¹² To be autonomous means that *'Aisyiyah* occupies the same level as *Muhammadiyah* and has the right to manage its own programs and budget. In this way, it acts as a leader, not as a mere supporter or assistant. The fully independent religious groups such as Rifka Annisa and Rahima were only established after the 1990s, and even in the current period the number of fully independent religious women's organisations has not risen significantly. Although the number of such organizations may be small, their members tend to be more numerous than in secular organizations. For instance, *'Aisyiyah* and *Muslimat NU* organization have national, provincial, district and subdistrict branches throughout Indonesia. Therefore, while they are the only prominent religious women's groups, *'Aisyiyah* and *Muslimat NU* have members throughout the nationwide of Indonesia. At Islamic university level semi-autonomous religious women's groups such as PSW (Center for Women's Studies) have also mushroomed. In 2008 the Indonesian government had 18 Islamic state universities (UIN and IAIN) across Indonesia. Each of these universities had a Center for Women's Studies. In addition, there are many PSWs belonging to Private Islamic Universities throughout Indonesia.

Secular subsidiary women's organizations from the early women's movement until the early post-independence period mostly related to nationalist, political, and 'husband's-occupation' organizations. Since the advent of the New Order, *Dharma Wanita* (the wives of civil servants) and PKK (Family Guidance Movement), under control of the Minister of Internal Affairs, have been dominant. Some wives' organizations such as *Dharma Wanita*, *Perwari*, *Bayangkari*, and IKWA have also remained stable over time, while some secular subsidiary women's organizations such as *Gerwani*, *Wanita Indonesia* and *Perwamu* have folded because of the demise of their founding fathers or for political reasons. Interestingly, the number of fully independent secular

¹² Pengurus Pusat *'Aisyiyah*, *Sejarah Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan 'Aisyiyah* (Yogyakarta: Penerbitan dan Publikasi Pimpinan Pusat *'Aisyiyah*, 1992), p. 44.

women's groups in the early women's movement was similar to the number in the current period. Compared to religious organizations, fully independent secular women's organizations have been more numerous over time.

Issues, Concerns, and Strategies of the Women's Movement

At the outset, based on Kartini's letter, Dewi Sartika's essay, the National Women's Congress recommendations, and articles that were published in women's organization's journals, women's movement was concerned with gender equality in education and suffrage, the rights of equal pay for equal work, child and women trafficking, marriage law, prostitution and child marriage. In the late colonial era, it focused more directly on education, suffrage and marriage law. From the birth of the movement until the 1970s the most controversial issues were marriage law, particularly polygamy, and a woman's right to get divorced. Since the 1980s there has been a new critical thinking on patriarchal culture as the root of gender equality. Some forms of gender inequality within patriarchal culture are subordination, marginalization, negative stereotypes, violence, and double burden.¹³

I shall explain in more detail the main issues that occupied the attention of the women's movement in certain periods.

Colonial Period

In the early women's movement the issues of child marriage, education and polygamy occupied center stage, followed at the end of colonial period by the issue of women's suffrage. Although child marriage and polygamy law was one of the main concerns, there was no significant response from the government. Therefore, the struggle by some women's organizations to propose an appropriate age of marriage and to ban polygamy continued until 1970s. This issue consumed a great deal of energy and time because it sparked significant controversy among women's organizations themselves. However, the government paid attention in education and political rights by opening schools for girls and implemented women's suffrage in 1941. These successes were achieved because all women's organizations spoke with one voice about the rights of education and vote for women.

¹³ M. Fakhri, *Analisis Gender dan Transformasi Sosial* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 1997).

Child Marriage

According to Boerenbeker, in De Stuers,¹⁴ at the beginning of feminist movement, there were four types of child marriage in Indonesia: “(1) a little girl is married to a minor boy; (2) a little girl is married to an adult male, and cohabitation is postponed; (3) a little girl is married to an adult male, and cohabitation is not postponed; and (4) a young girl who has reached the age of puberty marries a boy who has not.” Because of this, there were many “*kawin gantung*” which meant that the couple would not have a sexual relationship until the girl began menstruating.¹⁵ In the first National Women’s Congress, the issue of child marriage sparked controversy between the largest Islamic women’s organization, ‘*Aisyiyah*’ and the non religious groups. ‘*Aisyiyah*’ argued that the Prophet Muhammad married Aisyah at the age of nine.¹⁶

Education

The problem of education for women can be traced from the prominent feminist, Kartini, and her first letter to Stella, dated May 25, 1899.

“ ... ‘modern girl’ that I proud, independent girl who has all my sympathy she who ... working not only for her own well-being and happiness, but for the greater good of humanity as a whole. My late grandfather was the first regent of Middle Java... All of his children had a European education ... the highest institution ... We girls, so far as education goes, fettered by our ancient tradition and conventions, have profited but little by these advantages. It was a great crime against the custom of our land that we should be taught at all, and especially that we should leave the house to go to school. For the custom of our country forbade girls in the strongest manner ever to go outside of the house ... When I reached the age of twelve, I was kept at home – I must go into the “box.” I was locked up and

¹⁴ C. Vreede-de Stuers, *The Indonesian Woman: Struggles and Achievements* (s-Gravenhage: Mouton, 1960), p. 39

¹⁵ S. Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 63.

¹⁶ Ibid.

cut off from all communication with the outside world...”¹⁷

This letter tells us that in the late nineteenth century, it was impossible for women to have access to education in general. Initially, Kartini was fortunate because her father sent her to school, but then she was forced back into a patriarchal custom at age twelve. According to Kartini, a girl's right to go to school is the only effective way to achieve her true emancipation and to deal with the problem of the oppression of all women. If women were well educated, not only women themselves but the entire people would benefit because women were the mothers and the first educators at home, and constituted the moral bedrock of society.¹⁸

During the colonial era there were no government schools for Indonesian girls until 1913. However, in 1904 in Bandung the first school for Indonesian women, *Kentamaan Istri* (Women's Accomplishment), was founded by Dewi Sartika. After getting married, her husband helped her to expand other women's schools. By 1912 there were nine schools for women, representing 50% of Sundanese girls.¹⁹ In 1917 the number of female students was 4.900 from a total 24.800 (20%).²⁰

In 1912, Mr and Mrs C. Th Van Deventer founded the Kartini Foundation, in Kartini's memory, and in 1913, nine years after Dewi Sartika's first girl's school, the Kartini Foundation established a new school for women, the Kartini School in Semarang. This was then followed by the opening of schools in other cities.

Women's Suffrage

Ten years after the establishment of the *Badan Konggres Perempuan*, the women's movement added to their agenda the issue of women's suffrage. Suffrage for women first appeared at the third National Women's Congress in Bandung in 1938. This was a reaction against the colonial government policy that did not give Indonesian women the right to vote. In 1938 once more a Dutch woman, not an

¹⁷ Kartini & H. Geertz, *Letters of a Javanese Princess* (New York: Norton, 1964), pp. 31-33

¹⁸ Stuers, *The Indonesian Woman*, p. 54.

¹⁹ N. Suwondo, *Kedudukan Wanita Indonesia dalam Hukum dan Masyarakat*, 3rd edition (Jakarta: Ghalia Indonesia, 1981), p. 127.

²⁰ Stuers, *The Indonesian Woman*, p. 58.

Indonesian, was elected to the National Council. The Indonesian woman candidate was Maria Ulfah Santoso, a graduate of the Law school at the University of Leiden. She was supported not only by Javanese Women's Association but also by other Indonesian regions.²¹ Culturally, long before the third congress in 1918 when for the first time the People's Council was introduced by the colonial regime, according to *adat*, both men and women had had right to vote. Therefore this cultural belief impacted election of local councils. There were four women elected in the new municipal elections for their local councils at that time. Finally, after long protests and considerable discussion, the right to vote for Indonesian women was accorded on September 9, 1941.²² In 1945 the Women's Party, *Partai Wanita Rakjat*, was founded. This is the only political party run entirely by women. The leader was Mrs. Mangunsarkoro. In the general election 1955 sixteen women were elected.

Marriage law and Polygamy

Public protests against polygamy in Indonesia had occurred as early as the first Indonesian Women's congress in 1928, and there were street demonstrations against a law giving pensions to all civil servant polygamists' widows in 1952, protests against President Soekarno's polygamous marriages, and campaigns for marriage law from 1940 to the 1970s.²³ A statement from the review *El Fadjar*, written by Soepinah Isti Kasiati in 1927, asserted that polygamy was not an obligation but was permitted.²⁴ In *Aisyiyah's* congress in March 1932, Siti Moendjiyah argued that the practice of polygamy was to prevent the husband from having extra-marital affairs or frequenting prostitutes.²⁵ This speech provoked protests among secular women's organizations.

Mrs. Soewarni Pringgodigdo conducted research on the argument that lawful polygamy was better than illicit polygamy. She expressed her staunch belief that polygamy was an 'intolerable evil' for women: "The Indonesian woman has a right to justice and independence, and

²¹ Ibid., p. 95.

²² Ibid., p. 94.

²³ Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia*, p. 111.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Harder, *Women Shaping Islam*; Stuers, *The Indonesian Woman*.

polygamy is the very denial of justice and independence.”²⁶ A literal interpretation of the Qur’an about polygamy written by Jusuf Wibisono, a Muslim student, was published in response to Soewarni’s opinion. He wrote: “Polygamy is not only necessary in the case of an excess of women; it is also an active means of contending against the social evils rampant in Europe.” In terms of divorce he wrote that “It is a good thing that women have not the right of divorce, as women in general are guided by their sentiments rather than by their reason.”²⁷ This statement encapsulates the main arguments of those people who stand against feminist ideas by drawing a contrast between the West and the East, Muslim and non-Muslim, Islamic and un-Islamic. Thus, the terms ‘gender’ and ‘feminist’ have been associated with Western ideas or un-Islamic values. Because of this misrepresentation, some Indonesian people have discouraged gender and feminist movements in Islamic society.

The second National Women’s Congress, held in 1935 in Djakarta, decided to establish a commission on marriage law in Islam, *Komisi Penyelidik Hukum Perkawinan*, under the leadership of Maria Ulfah Santoso. In response to the congress, the government improved matrimonial legislation by introducing the “Marriage Ordinance Project”, which included the following points: “marriage must be registered,” “Monogamy is an absolute condition of marriage,” and “if a man wants to practice polygamy, the first wife can demand divorce through the courts” [legally, a husband’s adultery could also be grounds for divorce].

All Islamic associations again opposed this law, because it prohibited polygamy and proposed official registration of marriage. In the third National Women’s Congress (1935) the *Komisi Perkawinan*, a commission entrusted with the drafting of an Indonesian marriage regulation without attacking Islam, was established. Maria Ulfah, the president of the *Komisi Perkawinan*, presented the outcome of the discussion in the form of working paper. In her paper, she gave detailed information of women’s movements in other Muslim countries, such as how Turkey had adopted the Swiss Code, which distinguished between matrimonial and religious law. It did not mean that Turks had rejected their religion, rather they considered it as a

²⁶ Stuers, *The Indonesian Woman*, p. 107.

²⁷ Ibid.

personal matter.²⁸ However, the idea of keeping religious belief and practice separate from the nation is one that most Indonesian Muslims reject. This is because the first of the five basic principles of Indonesia, *Pancasila*, is belief in God.

The most controversial article in the Ordinance Project was Article 13, Chapter 17, about the prohibition of polygamy. Maria Ulfah said that the Qur'an, as the word of God, must meet the needs of all classes of society all times. She pointed out that a regulation from the seventh century, when Islam first appeared, needed certain adjustments to be implemented for the best in the twentieth century. One of the values of the Qur'an is to protect women not only physically but also psychologically. She realized that matrimonial legislation would be difficult because many Muslims did not seem to understand the value of the Qur'an sufficiently and because there were many interpretations of the Qur'an. She also believed that, if the reason for polygamy was an excess of women, that meant that a man married more than one woman out of pity. It was better to work hard than to be married through pity.²⁹ The way she understood the Qur'an demonstrated the hermeneutic method by asserting the basic values of the Qur'an not just the literal translation of the word. In Indonesia this hermeneutic method continues to influence most Islamic feminists today. It is interesting to note that the strategy of Islamic feminists is not something new from the 1990s but was already used even before Indonesia's independence. Although the colonial government withdrew the Marriage Ordinance, at least the women's movement had already taken an important stance on polygamy as early as the colonial period.

Early Independence

In the early-to mid-Independence periods the women's movement pursued two principal agendas. One related to socio-economic problems and the other to marriage law.

Socio-Economic Problems

In the aftermath of independence, a great deal of the country's infrastructure had been destroyed by war. In 1957 a Government survey of workers in Jakarta found that 96 per cent of their

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

expenditure went on basic survival needs and only 70 per cent of them could afford three meals a day. Indonesia did not have sufficient numbers of doctors, teachers or other professionals. Most Indonesians remained illiterate and schools and hospitals were found only in urban areas.³⁰

In response to these social and economical problems, in the early years of independence, women's organizations mobilized their activities to attain the national goals. In a speech, Vice-President Hatta asked women not to make demands on the state but instead to help build the nation.³¹ The women's movement realized that Indonesia was a new state that needed help to develop a stable society and economy. Thus, the movement viewed socio-economic progress as an important national concern and contributing towards women's gender interests. To improve women's lives, their basic needs for food and nutrition, health, education and shelter needed to be met. In their roles as mothers and wives, those basic needs were very important. In this era, all women's organizations, whether religious or secular, whether fully independent, semi-independent or dependent, worked hand-in-hand to overcome the socio-economic problems of the new nation.³² Some of them established schools, literacy courses and courses on the rights and responsibilities of women. Others set up maternity and child health centres, and gave assistance to the government in community development.³³

Marriage Law

As mentioned before, the problem of marriage laws concerning polygamy, a woman's right to get divorced, and the age of marriage constituted the hardest struggle of women's movement and occupied its attention for a considerable time. After independence, the Indonesian government realized that it needed a body to deal with religious issues, including the marital law. Therefore, on January 3rd 1946, the government established *Kementrian Agama*, the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Because of continuous requests from women's

³⁰ Martyn, *Women's Movement in Postcolonial Indonesia*, pp. 77-78.

³¹ Ibid., p. 78.

³² Ibid., p. 79.

³³ KOWANI, "Women and Citizenship in Indonesia" (Paper presented at the Asia Africa Women's Conference, 1958), p. 5.

associations and from female members of parliament, in 1950 the Indonesian government appointed a commission on marital law.³⁴ An early draft of a proposed act was sent to all women's associations in October 1952 to solicit their opinions on issues such as: the consent of both parties in a marriage; an age limit of fifteen years for girls and eighteen for men; equal divorce rights for husband and wife; health certificates for both parties before marriage; and permission to practice polygamy only after the first wife had given her consent and only if the husband could guarantee that he was able to provide for more than one family.³⁵ Again, Muslim women's associations disagreed with the draft act because it was imprecise. The same reaction came from Catholic associations, who disagreed because the draft act allowed polygamy and divorce. In 1954 and 1955 the two drafts were sent to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and in 1956 they were sent to the cabinet. After two years, the cabinet discussed the principal issues. In February 1959, again the draft act of marriage was rejected by the government and the Muslim parties in parliament, but the government promised to enact a marriage bill for the respective religious and neutral groups.³⁶

Finally, in 1974 the government issued Marriage Law No 1. In terms of polygamy, the law stated that, if he wanted to be a polygamist under the court, a husband must have permission from the prior wife/wives and must demonstrate an economic capability to support all wives and children. He also required the religious court's approval, which could be given in certain circumstances, such as if the wife/wives could not have bear children, were chronically sick or disabled, or if they could not fulfil their obligations as a wife, for example if they could not have sexual intercourse with the husband. This law also mentioned that polygamy could only be approved if the husband could treat all wives and children justly. The law seemed to protect women from discrimination in terms of polygamy, but it still had a gender bias and ignored women's rights because the law only considered polygamy as a possibility for men and looked at problems only in connection with the wife. The law did not mention what should happen if the husband were disabled, infertile, or could not

³⁴ Stuers, *The Indonesian Woman*, p. 124.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 126..

³⁶ Ibid., p. 139.

fulfil his obligations as a husband. According to the law, it seemed as if polygamy was only allowed because of women's faults.

Although the 1974 law mentions that polygamy can only be approved with the wife's consent, in practice it does not mean that the wife has real autonomy to do that. In Indonesian culture many women are economically dependent on their husbands. So, if they choose to get divorced they will suffer economically. In addition, divorce carries negative connotations in the society. As a result, the wife consents to her husband to have another wife because there is no real choice. This law represents a part of the effort of women's organisations to improve women's status. Although the law is still gender biased, it is better than having no law at all on polygamy. At least it could minimize the negative impact of practicing polygamy on women and children.

Although polygamy has never been banned in Indonesia, the popularity of the practice has declined. An obvious example of this case was the polygamous Islamic preacher, Aa Gym. In 2006, after he took a second wife, his popularity decreased significantly. His audience, which hitherto had been mostly made up of women, had less respect for him. Incidentally, one reason for the confused stance of some women's organizations on polygamy is the fact that they are still part of male organizations. This means that their autonomy is limited.

Recent Periods

After the ratification of *The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women* (NFSL) policy in 1985, issues of equality, development and peace were raised and needed further discussion in Indonesia. Women's NGOs were established, such as *Kalyanamitra*, *Yayasan Anisa Swasti* and *Yayasan Solidaritas Perempuan*. The common aim of these groups has been to challenge and abolish the patriarchal system. They have raised the profile of women's rights and issues like reproductive rights, gender equality, violence against women, the gender gap, and equal pay for equal work for men and women.³⁷ Other important concerns of the early twenty-first century are the terms "feminist" and "gender", the pornography bill, marriage law, trafficking of women and children, quotas of women in the political arena, and the practice of polygamy. Women's issues have been

³⁷ Ro'fah, "A Study of `Aisyiyah: An Indonesian Women's Organization (1917-1998)" (Unpublished M.A thesis, McGill University, Canada, 2000), p. 89.

articulated as gender issues in the Board State Guideline (GBHN) in 1993, 1998 and 1999.³⁸

Terminology: Feminist or Gender?

In terms of creating identity by using the term 'feminist', Indonesian women's organizations are still not of one voice. While there are many groups that use the term feminist, on the other hand there are many groups that don't use the feminist label but promote feminist ideas. One prominent women activist, Saparinah Sadli, says: "I am reluctant to use Indonesian feminism because I am not sure that we have developed an Indonesian theory of feminism." She further points out that:

"Since 1998, when Indonesia began its transition toward more a democratic society, many women's group have been working actively on women's rights issues within the context of feminism". Therefore, the ideas of feminism have become visible. At the beginning of the 21st century, feminism remains problematic for many Indonesians, especially those who are not directly concerned with the history of feminism either in North America or Asian countries such as India, Philippines or Malaysia. "The terms 'feminism', 'feminists' and even 'gender' are still questioned by the majority of Indonesian". There are some negative assumptions that these terms are irrelevant to Indonesian values, of Western origin, anti-male, promoting lesbianism and so forth...in Indonesia's transition toward democracy, the label 'feminism' can no longer be ignored because the voice of women has become a part of civil society and promoting women's rights, as part of their human rights."³⁹

The feminist label has been stigmatized as being associated with either leftist (communist) or liberal tendencies.⁴⁰ Because of that, some

³⁸ Khofifah Indar Parawansa, "Institution Building: An Effort to Improve Indonesian Women's Role and Status," in K. Robinson & S. Bessel (Eds.), *Women in Indonesia: Gender Equity and Development* (Pasir Panjang, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), pp. 68-77.

³⁹ S. Sadli, "Feminism in Indonesia in an International Context," in K. Robinson & S. Bessel (eds.), *Women in Indonesia: Gender Equity and Development* (Pasir Panjang, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), pp. 80-91.

⁴⁰ J. I. Suryakusuma, *Sex, Power, and Nation: An Anthology of Writings, 1979-2003* (Jakarta, Indonesia: Metafor Pub, 2004); Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia*, p. xxiii

women's organisations make the disclaimer that "even though we struggle for women's rights, we are not feminists."⁴¹ For instance, when it conducted gender sensitivity training, the Center for Women's Studies of the State Islamic University of Yogyakarta experienced this negative stereotype. On the first day, some participants assumed that the program promoted Western culture and was not based on Islamic values. However, at the end of the training most of them agreed with the concept of gender equality that was delivered during the training, and many of them become vocal proponents of gender equality in their own institutions. Because all participants were Indonesian Muslims, in the training we always started from the standpoint that basic Islamic values are for everybody, both men and women, and the most honourable person in front of God is a person with piety/*Taqwa*, be it a man or a woman. Therefore, it is not true that women's dignity is based on men's dignity. Besides, we always involve our men colleagues as part of our resource persons or trainers.

Marriage Law

Although the marriage law was passed in 1974, the women's movement has frequently criticized it and proposed an amendment. Some of their recommendations are about the relative positions and responsibilities of the husband and the wife. The existing law, No 1 1974, states that the husband is the head of family and the wife is the head of household. The new proposal says that both the husband and the wife are responsible for the family. Another important issue is about the consent of children if their father wants to be a polygamist. Until today this amendment is still under discussion in parliament.

The Pornography Bill

Pornography is also an important issue in the women's movement of the early twenty-first century. The Pornography Bill has sparked considerable controversy, particularly between religious fundamentalist groups on the one hand and people in entertainment and business sector, and some women's NGOs on the other. The bill has been revised many times. After drawing criticism from NGOs and sectors of Indonesian society the name of bill has changed from the *Pornography and Porno Action Bill* to the *Pornography Bill*. Controversy over the bill is mainly about the definition of sensuality and its

⁴¹ Suryakusuma, *Sex, Power, and Nation*, p. 271.

representation, as well as its supposed harmful effects on viewers. According to the philosopher Plato, in the work *Republic*, art is harmful, dangerous, destructive to the youth, and deceptive because fiction is often confused with reality.⁴²

The new bill that was proposed in 2008 focused more on the exploitation of children in the porn industry.

Political Quota

In Indonesia, women have had full rights in the political arena since 1941. But in reality, it is still difficult for women to attain a high position in this political arena. For example, Megawati, the fifth president of Indonesia encountered a great deal of opposition, particularly from certain religious groups which claimed that the leadership of women would damage the country.

There is a law (UU No. 10/2008) that every party in 2009 election should have a minimum 30% of quota for women, but in practice there is no fine or punishment if the party cannot fulfil that quota. In fact, the data reveal that not all political parties did achieve this quota; in at least 12 parties women failed to reach the minimum 30% share. As a result, in the 2009 election, women's representation in the parliament will be only around 28%⁴³, although this number can be adjusted using the open proportional (*proporsional terbuka*) mechanism for the candidates in parliament.

According to Parawansa,⁴⁴ there are several obstacles to recruiting women to the Indonesian legislature. First, the cultural context is still a heavily patriarchal society which says that the political arena is for men and women's involvement is inappropriate. Second, the selection process operates against a backdrop in which most leaders in political parties are men, and therefore women do not receive much support from men. Third, the media do not support the idea that women's representation in the parliament is important. Fourth, the links between political parties and women's organizations or women's

⁴² Plato & J. Adam, *The Republic of Plato: Edited with Critical Notes*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), pp. 360-397.

⁴³ S. Deni, "12 Parpol Tak Penuhi Kuota 30% Perempuan," in <http://www.elshinta.com/v2003a/pemilu/read.htm?id=60772>. Retrieved 16 November 2008.

⁴⁴ Khofifah Indar Parawansa, "Obstacles to Women's Political Participation in Indonesia," in http://www.idea.int/publications/wip/upload/CS_Indonesia_Parawansa.pdf. Retrieved November 15, 2008.

NGOs who fight for women's representation in parliament continue to be weak. Lastly, women's lack of education and the traditional gender roles within the family inhibit the advancement of women.

The Intervention of Indonesian Government

The history of the Indonesian Government can be divided into three periods: the Old Order, the New Order, and the Reformation era. Different periods have had different levels of government intervention in the women's movement, based on gender ideologies of the respective government. The Old Order, as the early period of independence, did not pay much attention to women's issues because the government was focused more on nation building. In contrast, during the New Order, the government paid more attention to women's organizations and used them to support government policy. Meanwhile, in the Reformation era, the government has been actively involved in women's issues through the Ministry of Women Empowerment.

During the New Order, the government addressed the issue of marriage law by passing the Islamic Marriage Law 1974. However, at the same time the government took control women's affairs in a very strict way. Some programs seemed to focus more on putting the women back into the domestic sphere and into a purely supporting role.⁴⁵ Take the *Dharma Wanita*, for example, of which all civil servants' wives were obligated to become members. One of the duties of every member of *Dharma Wanita* was to encourage their husbands' career. In contrast, there was no government program requiring a husband to support his wife's career. This policy seemed to reveal a government vision similar to that of the colonial regime⁴⁶, envisioning women as supporters, not as leaders. Julia J. Suryakusuma⁴⁷, in her depiction of "state *Ibnuism*", says that it is very important to understand state gender ideology in the New Order. The New Order promoted an *ikut suami* (follow the husband) culture and only provided one alternative model of family or womanhood that basically did not represent the majority of women in the rural areas which made up 80% of the country.

⁴⁵ Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia*; p. 25; Ro'fah, *A study of 'Aisyiyah*, p.73; Robinson & Bessell, *Women in Indonesia*, p.3; Suryakusuma, *Sex, Power, and Nation*; Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia*.

⁴⁶ Parawansa, "Institution Building," p. 71.

⁴⁷ Suryakusuma, *Sex, Power, and Nation*, pp. 161-188.

Therefore, according to her, PKK and *Dharma Wanita* programs were part of a government policy that

...fails to recognize many aspects of rural life. It does not acknowledge the large number of female-headed household, the autonomy of women as widows, divorcees and single mothers, but primarily sees women as dependents of men, when in fact the dependency is two-way. It does not acknowledge sufficiently that women need jobs, just as much as, and perhaps even more than, men.⁴⁸

To achieve national stability in the 1970s, the New Order government simplified political parties and strengthened mass organizations, including women's organizations.⁴⁹ In 1978, in response to the UN's declaration of the Decade for Women and to local feminist NGOs, the government established the Ministry for the Role for Women (*Mentri Peranan Wanita*), whose mission was to increase women's capacity to manage their double roles (*peran ganda*) in the domestic and public sphere.

Since the Reformation Era, from 1999 up to now, the Ministry for the Role for Women has been known as the Ministry of Women Empowerment (*Mentri Pemberdayaan Perempuan*). During this period there have been shifting paradigms and visions. By moving from a sole focus on the roles of women, to seeking women empowerment, it has been easier to achieve gender equality at home, work, and society. An example: the term '*wanita*' implies gender bias as a contraction of *wani di tata* (being ready to be controlled). Meanwhile, the word '*Perempuan*' (female) is more liberating for women and free of gender bias.⁵⁰ The word "women" was used in the 1978 Broad Guidelines on State Policy (GBHN) and the term "gender" introduced in 1999.⁵¹ A major outcome has been the National Plan of Action to Empower Women, running from 2000 to 2004. The plan covered five key areas: improving women's quality of life, raising awareness of justice and

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 186.

⁴⁹ Istiadah & Monash University, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, *Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Investigating Paths to Resist the Patriarchal System* (Clayton, Vic.: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1995), p. 9; Sears, *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 95.

⁵⁰ Ro'fah, *A Study of 'Aisyiyah*, p. 91.

⁵¹ Parawansa, "Institution Building," p. 71.

equity issues nationwide, eliminating violence against women, protecting the human rights of women, and strengthening women's institutions.⁵²

The most significant contribution of the government in the Reformation era is Presidential Instruction No 9/2000 on gender mainstreaming in national development. Gender mainstreaming is a major strategy to ensure that women and men gain equal access to, and participate equally in, the benefits of development.⁵³ This instruction applies to all ministries, armed forces, police forces, high courts, heads of local government and heads of all other governmental agencies. It aims to mainstream gender in the planning, formulating, implementing, monitoring and evaluating all national development programs.

Although the government change its vision from women's roles to women's empowerment, it does not mean that gender equality has been easily achievable. For example, in urban areas, women have a better chance become a village head (*lurah*) than in rural areas because they are appointed by the government.⁵⁴ This problem is derived from many rigid and unnegotiable religious teachings that have strongly influenced society's mind-set and the people's way of life.. To overcome this situation, and to foster the implementation of a gender perspective in all government programs, the Ministry of Women Empowerment has been collaborating actively with women organizations, religious organizations, NGOs, professional associations (including the Center for Women's Studies/PSW), political parties and other institutions that have an interest in women's issues.⁵⁵ PSW is a research center affiliated with universities, both public and private. Basically PSW helps expand methodologies and theoretical foundations for research into women's activism and the women's movement.⁵⁶ The roles of PSW are mediator, facilitator, and resource

⁵² Ibid., p. 73.

⁵³ S. Surbakti, "Gender Mainstreaming and Sex-disaggregated Data," in Robinson & Bessel (eds.), *Women in Indonesia*, pp. 209-218.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵⁵ Parawansa, "Institution Building," p. 73.

⁵⁶ Committee on Women's Studies in Asia, *Changing Lives: Life Stories of Asian Pioneers in Women's Studies* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1995), p. 2.

person in disseminating and advocating women's empowerment and child protection in their local areas.⁵⁷

Although Indonesia has ratified several international conventions and agreements on women, such as the UN Convention on the Political Rights of Women (under the Law No 68/1968) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Law No 7/1984), in fact most women remain firmly subordinate to men and still don't have any power to make decisions in their families.⁵⁸ One of the main causes of this unequal power is the way people interpret religious texts: which is still rigid, literal and misogynist.

Other Factors

Another important factor that has impacted the gender equality movement in Indonesia is the progressive Muslim movement, incorporating the modernist *santri* or neo modernist/*pembaharuan* movements. This movement is committed to the idea that 'the worth of a human being is measured by that person's character, not the oil under their soil and not their flag.'⁵⁹ Modernist *santri* argue that Muslims need to learn and adopt Western advances in education, science and politics to strengthen and modernize the Muslim community. There has been a discussion on what constitutes proper 'religion' for 'modern' people. It also requires an understanding of how the social changes from the mid-1970s that created a religiously committed new Muslim middle class have generated new demands in Indonesia's religious market. Neo-modernism combines knowledge and respect for classical learning with receptivity to modern, including Western, influences.⁶⁰ This *pembaharuan* movement has flourished not only in Indonesia but also in other parts of the Muslim world. Since the 1980s, from Egypt to Indonesia, diverse groups of Muslim intellectuals and activists have produced a growing body of literature

⁵⁷ Deputi bidang Pengembangan dan Informasi Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan, *Profil Pusat Studi Wanita se-Indonesia* (Jakarta: Deputi bidang Pengembangan dan Informasi Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan, 2002), p. 2.

⁵⁸ Parawansa, "Institution Building," p. 73.

⁵⁹ O. Safi, *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (Oxford, England: Oneworld, 2003), p. 3.

⁶⁰ G. Barton, "'Neo-Modernism': A vital Synthesis of Traditionalism and Modernism in Indonesian Islam," *Studi Islamika*, 2 (3) (1995): pp. 1-75.

that re-examines Islamic traditions and addresses issues of pluralism, on theoretical and practical level.⁶¹ The modernist, or reformist, argues that a fresh interpretation of Islamic sources and a reformulation of Islam is needed.⁶²

On the other hand, there has also been an increase in the number of literal interpretation groups who challenge the freedom and equality given to women.⁶³ One prominent external influence on Indonesian Islam today comes from the Middle East, specifically from Egypt with its Muslim brotherhood ideology.⁶⁴ In the 1990s, Islamic revivalist movements such as *Dakwah* began to spring up on university campuses in Indonesia. *Hizbut Tahrir*, *Darul Arqam*, and *Tarbiyah* movements were other popular groups that mushroomed on campuses, particularly at secular universities. They have called for Indonesians to be more Islamic by promoting Middle Eastern customs such as the way they dress, strict segregation between men and women, and the limitation of women's role. These revivalist groups stand mostly against feminist ideas, therefore they constitute a serious challenge for Islamic Indonesian feminists today.

The last factor is the international relationship, which through education and various programs, has developed among women activists globally. If we look at international networks from the time of Kartini up until today, the links have mostly been in the form of education. Education has long provided many opportunities for connections between women, both domestically and internationally. In terms of class and cultural backgrounds, however, the past and present are significantly different. In the early women's movement, women activists came mostly from the *priyayi* or middle to upper class society. The middle to upper class society refers to the people who were successful in trading (*saudagar*) and landlords (*tuan tanah*). Nowadays many women activists are from the new middle class, not *saudagar* or

⁶¹ J. L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, 4th edition (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1998).

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Sally White, "Gender and the Family," in Greg Fealy, Virginia Hooker & Sally White (eds), *Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia: A Contemporary Sourcebook* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), p. 540; p. 516

⁶⁴ Greg Fealy, Virginia Hooker, & Sally White, "Indonesia," in Fealy, Hooker & White (eds), *Voices of Islam*.

tuan tanah, but any member of society who is well educated and skilled, and seeks a better life with their knowledge and their skills.

In addition, the international network has become more intensive and effective by sending Muslim women's activists to study abroad, whether on MA or PhD programs, or for research. Many Muslim women's activists have graduated from American, European, Australian or Asian Universities, where they have researched women's or gender issues.

Conclusion

The history of the gender equality movement in Indonesian context cannot be separated from the establishment of women's organizations. The establishment of the first women organizations in Indonesia—be it religious or secular--was limited mostly to a subsidiary involvement in men's organizations. As a result, women's role was more as supporter or assistant rather than as a leader. However, as time has passed, many Indonesian women have gained more independence and have shown that involving males in their programs does not mean that women are not able to be leaders, but rather that their struggles are more likely to be effective if they are supported by men as partners. Until today Indonesian women have worked closely with men to deal with gender issues in Indonesia.

By paying attention to the history of women's organizations in Indonesia, we can conclude that dependent/subsidiary and semi-autonomous groups, both religious and secular organizations, have a similar number. This is a revealing association since it shows that both religious and secular organizations still tend to view women as supporters rather than as leaders. This also shows that the dominant cultural, political or ideological settings in Indonesia in the early nineteenth century still saw women as dependent human and as the second sex. However, in terms of independence there is a significant difference between the religious and secular groups in terms of the independence of women's organizations. The secular groups have had more fully independent women's organizations than religious based groups. This indicates that gender segregation is more problematic in the religious sphere than in Indonesian culture in general.

The gender equality movement in different periods has had different priorities, different levels of women's autonomy and different strategies. These facts are the result of the influence of the government's gender ideology, the *pembaharuan* movement and

international relationships among women activists globally. In the early days, the women's movement was concerned with gender equality, such as the right to education, suffrage, the right to equal pay for equal work, child and women trafficking, marriage law, prostitution and child marriage. In the late colonial era the issues focused more on education, suffrage and marriage law. The issue of marriage law, particularly concerning polygamy and the woman's right to get divorced has been the most controversial issue since the birth of the movement. Since the 1980s there have been criticisms of patriarchal culture as the root of gender equality.

The government's gender ideology has influenced the gender equality movement in Indonesia in different ways. The Old Order, in the immediate post-independence period, did not pay much attention to women's issues because the government focused more on nation building. In contrast, in the New Order, the government paid more attention to women's organizations and using them to support government policy. In the Reformation Era the government has become actively involved through the Ministry of Women's Empowerment.

Other factors, including the neo-modernist/*pembaharuan* movement, revivalist movements, as well as international links among women activists globally have also influenced the gender equality movement in Indonesia. The neo-modernist movement contributed to the way Muslim gender activists reread the religious texts, while the revivalist movements have provided new challenges for them. Meanwhile, the international network of women activists has only strengthened the progress of the gender equality movement in Indonesia.[]

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