



## ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

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### Education: (Early through Late) Modern: Indonesia

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This entry discusses the education of women in Indonesia, focusing on the modern era (from the nineteenth century) and on education provided by the state. After a slow start, by the end of the twentieth century Indonesia, the largest Islamic society in the world, had succeeded in providing relatively equal and universal access to education at primary and lower secondary levels of schooling. Much remains to be done at higher levels in a country that is geographically dispersed and ethnically very diverse, and still predominantly rural and relatively poor. Moreover, concern is only just beginning to be focused on the content of education, including its gender bias.

#### Pre-modern education

When in the seventeenth century the Dutch began to colonize the territory now known as Indonesia, education of children there occurred mainly within the family and, for some boys, within religious institutions. Waves of world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity) reached the shores of the archipelago from about the fifth century onwards, bringing with them the teaching of sacred texts. Thus the Balinese taught the reading and writing of Hindu texts, while in most other regions Islam gradually displaced or overlaid earlier Hindu and Buddhist learning, and Christian missionaries spread their teachings in a few pockets of the archipelago. Because reliable data are lacking, the extent of literacy is not known. Although formal schooling was reserved for boys, it seems that many girls learned to read and write at home, mainly in local languages and for social and business purposes (many women were traders). Many Muslim parents considered it desirable for daughters to be taught to recite the Qur’ān in Arabic, but their main education was in skills such as weaving, cooking, childcare, trading, and farming, in preparation for an early marriage.

#### Colonial education

Modern-style schooling, providing secular instruction, did not really begin until the nineteenth century when the Dutch, having occupied most of the archipelago, introduced schools primarily to train men for colonial administration. The government funded a few schools in urban areas, mostly in Java, the main center of population, teaching in Dutch and in Malay, the lingua franca of the archipelago. Institutions were also opened to train men as doctors and women as midwives and nurses. In addition Western education was offered in some private schools, including those established by missions. Most children attending these modern schools were from European or Eurasian families, who wanted their children educated in the Dutch fashion. Few Indonesian parents considered it desirable to send their daughters to school, considering the cost, traditional objections to the mixing of the sexes, and the lack of employment opportunities for educated women. At the end of the nineteenth century there were only about 15,000 Indonesian girls in Western-style schools, about one-sixth of the total Indonesian pupils, in a population of some 30 million people at that time (van Bemmelen 1982, 27).

The real expansion of modern education dates from the early twentieth century, promoted by the official adoption of the so-called Ethical Policy in 1901, whereby the Dutch recognized an obligation to improve the standard of living of their colonial subjects. The number and range of government-funded schools were greatly increased, although they still offered

education to only a small minority of the population: the main beneficiaries remained Europeans. The introduction of vernacular language schools for Chinese- and Malay-speaking children, however, extended access at least to primary schooling. Under the influence of Western education, Islamic schools too were being transformed during the early twentieth century to take on more secular teaching such as basic mathematics and literacy in non-Arabic languages such as Malay.

During the early decades of the twentieth century the state school system was racially streamed, consisting of schools based on the Netherlands curriculum intended for European children, separate schools using the Dutch medium for Chinese and “Native” children, vernacular schools (teaching in, for example, Malay, Balinese, or Javanese) for village children, and linkage schools to enable Indonesian children to learn Dutch in preparation for attending secondary schools and tertiary institutions where all teaching was in that language. The colonial system of formal education was thus highly fragmented and not well articulated, so that it was difficult for a child who attended a village school, where the teaching medium was in the vernacular, to access higher levels of education. Not surprisingly, such schooling continued to be dominated by European and Eurasian offspring. The 1930 census showed that more than 92 percent of adult Indonesians were illiterate, including almost 98 percent of women. Little advanced education was available and some Indonesians, including a few women, attended universities in the Netherlands.

A major influence in colonial education policy at the beginning of the century was J. H. Abendanon (1852–1925), the colonial Director of Education. Both he and his wife, Rosa Abendanon (1857–1944), befriended the young aristocratic Javanese woman, Raden Ajeng Kartini whose educational ambitions they encouraged. Kartini (1879–1904) had benefited from Dutch elementary schooling but was unable to go further because of parental disapproval. Her impassioned plea for education for girls won wide sympathy when Dutch friends arranged for the posthumous publication of her letters in 1911. Like most other Indonesians of that period, Kartini's parents preferred separate rather than coeducational schooling for their daughters, but the Dutch authorities were reluctant to fund such schools. It took private initiatives by Dutch and Indonesian educationalists to establish schools for girls. Thus the Dutch founded schools named in honor of Kartini, and Indonesian women such as Rohana Kudus (1884–1972), Dewi Sartika (1884–1947) and Rahmah El Yunusiyah (1900–69) set up their own schools for girls. As more Indonesian parents, and those of immigrant ethnic minorities such as Arabs and Chinese, came increasingly to accept mixed primary schools, the numbers of girls at government-funded schools rose dramatically in the colonial period. In 1939, about 62,000 Indonesian girls attended schools and higher education institutions (most of them state-funded). However, this constituted less than a quarter of the total number of Indonesians enrolled, at a time when the colony's population stood at 60 million (van Bemmelen 1982, 185, 204).

Although access to modern education was very limited, it had a radical effect on many girls. The best-known example is undoubtedly Kartini, but the women who founded the new women's organizations of the early twentieth century are also evidence of the impact of the ideas imbibed in school. Teaching embodied Western middle-class notions about femininity that meshed with well-entrenched upper-class Javanese views that the inherent nature of women (*kodrat*) was different from that of men: in particular they were destined for motherhood. Yet Western schooling exposed Indonesian girls to a range of ideas that often challenged what they learnt at home, encouraging an independent, questioning attitude to life that inspired many women to take up non-traditional activities, such as joining modern social and nationalist organizations.

During the period of Japanese occupation (1942–5) funding for education shrank, but important changes were made affecting the future of the education system. Determined to erase the Dutch colonial influence, the Japanese abolished the teaching of the Dutch language and instead promoted Bahasa Indonesia, an extension of Malay that the Indonesian nationalist movement had adopted as the national, unifying language. Its continued universal use created uniformity and greater ease of access to higher levels of education than during Dutch rule.

#### Education since independence

The new republican government formed after the declaration of independence in August 1945 was strongly committed to mass education, at least at the primary level. At that time it was estimated that fewer than half the children of primary school age were enrolled (Oey-Gardiner 1997, 140). In line with the constitution, which rejected the notion of an Islamic state, governments since 1945 have also chosen a secular state education system, although the state does extensively subsidize religious schools that conform to its criteria.

For some years, as the republic struggled against Dutch efforts to re-establish their control, little could be done about education, but once the transfer of sovereignty took place in 1949 a rapid expansion of the schooling system occurred. The history of education since then has been one of increasing access to schooling and literacy more generally, for both sexes. The education system consists of six years of primary school for children from seven years of age and two secondary levels of three years each – junior and senior. Higher education is offered in universities, technical institutes, and a range of other award-granting institutions. Beyond the primary level, the demand for education has far outstripped the ability of the state system to meet it, with the result that in the 1990s there were more students at private secondary schools and universities than at public-funded ones, although many private establishments were state-subsidized. Many private educational institutions are religious-based, mostly Islamic.

Indonesian governments have been strongly committed to equality in education. The emphasis at first was on universal primary schooling, which was only achieved in practice by the end of the 1980s after the bounty of the oil boom in the 1970s expanded government resources. Until then it had not been possible for schools to be built and staffed in the many remote rural areas of Indonesia. Foreign aid, readily available since the inception of the New Order, has also helped to expand educational spending. By the mid-1990s, when the population of Indonesia had reached 200 million, 95 percent of children of primary school age were enrolled at school (UNDP 2001, 176). Although in 1990 the government adopted a policy of nine years compulsory universal education by the year 2005, the timetable will not be achieved; even when the new goal was announced, about a third of children did not complete primary school. Retention rates decline still further at secondary level and rapidly thereafter. Only about 10 percent of young people attended higher education in the early 1990s.

Apart from regular schooling, governments have attempted to encourage adult literacy by other means, including intensive campaigns and “packages” of teaching materials for people who cannot or choose not to attend schools. This is in recognition of the fact that child labor continues to be widespread in Indonesia and that poverty, distance, parental preference, and perceptions about the lack of relevance of schooling still keep many children out of school. Technology has extended the opportunities for people to learn outside the classroom. While consumption of the printed word remains low, first radio, then television, and now computers have increased access to new ideas and skills, although only the first two are as yet widespread. An Open University, making use of new technology, was started in 1995.

As far as gender differences in access to education are concerned, the point of divergence has been when primary school graduates have to transfer to junior secondary schools, a shift that for rural families may require sending their children by bus into town or even finding accommodation at a distance from home. At this stage some parents still consider this undesirable for their daughters, and the expense of schooling, although low, is an obstacle in what remains a poor country. Given the need to choose, sons get priority. It should be remembered that formal education supplements, but may also conflict with, instruction within the home, where girls are still taught to take a greater share of household chores than boys. Moreover, even with the same level of education, men earn more than women (Oey-Gardiner 1997, 151–2). At secondary and tertiary levels of education, where the proportion of children at school drops considerably, girls lag behind boys. The ratio of girls to boys at primary level in the 1990s was around 93 percent, dropping to 87 percent at lower secondary and 85 percent at higher secondary schools (Oey-Gardiner 1997, 147). The drop-out rate is highest among the poor and in rural areas. Although around 93 percent of girls are enrolled in primary school, still only 8 percent of girls reached the tertiary level in the 1990s compared with 15 percent of boys (UNDP 2001, 221).

Access to education has always been an important topic in Indonesia, including its gender aspects, particularly since the international attention fostered by the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–85). Less scrutiny has been given to the content or methods of education. The general quality of the education system has, however, frequently been criticized. In part this has been the result of low per capita expenditure on education, but it was also a consequence of tight control exerted by the New Order regime, involving prescribed textbooks, rote-learning and centralized examinations, and centralized appointment of teaching staff. Although at higher levels of the system increasingly students were taught in private institutions because government-funded schools could not meet demand, most private schools were also subject to strict government supervision. As a result, there was increased uniformity in the content and pedagogy of Indonesian education. Although justified in the name of equality and national unity, this system has been regressive in a number of ways. For instance, ethnic traditions have been suppressed as Chinese minorities and regional groups have been forced to comply with Jakarta's standards.

Until recently, the gendered content of educational policy was not subject to critical scrutiny, partly because of the priority given to making schooling more accessible for girls, partly because of the New Order government's well-known suppression of criticism, and partly because the gender bias built into the education system reflects conservative values endemic in Indonesian society. Gender bias had been built into the system first by the Dutch and subsequently by policymakers such as Ki Hajar Dewantara (1889–1959) who was the first minister of education in the independent Republic of Indonesia and a long-standing educational advisor. Other prominent educationists had also taught or been educated in Taman Siswa schools. From the 1920s Dewantara and his wife (Nyi Hajar Dewantara, 1890–1972) developed the Taman Siswa system of secular nationalist education, which has strongly influenced education thinking in Indonesia. The couple had received teacher training in the Netherlands when Dewantara was exiled from 1913 to 1919 for nationalist political activities. Incorporating Javanese, Islamic, Indian, and European educational ideas, Taman Siswa pedagogy encouraged the education of girls but retained some conservative assumptions about gender differences, justified by reference to kodrat and reflected in rules such as those pertaining to subjects, sports, and comportment deemed suitable for boys and girls. Girls were considered to have a stronger moral sensibility than boys and to be destined for motherhood. These ideas, already incorporated into the education system, were not challenged by the New Order regime. Hence textbooks tended to depict women and girls in stereotyped nurturing, child-rearing, and domestic roles while boys and men dominated the public sphere. Continuing a practice started in the colonial era, some secondary schools were also designated to specialize in home economics; they were attended exclusively by girls, just as the technical schools that taught trades were the preserve of boys. (The vast majority of secondary school pupils, however, have always attended schools with a general curriculum.) Amongst teaching staff, women are concentrated at the lower levels.

The fact that Indonesian governments have promoted secular education has caused little friction with devout Muslims, since Islam in Indonesia is tolerant and the values of state education have generally been acceptable to most Muslims. On gender issues, although the notion of kodrat accords with Indonesian Islam, there was conflict when the wearing of Islamic head-coverings by girls was forbidden in state schools in 1982. In this case opposition from Islamic organizations led to the withdrawal of that prohibition a decade later.

#### Current concerns

The Asian financial crisis of 1998 caused great concern about access to education in Indonesia, as government funding shrank and parents took their children out of school to reduce costs and contribute to family income. There is some evidence that girls were more affected than were boys by these events. More positively, the democratization of Indonesia since the end of the New Order in 1998 has enabled fresh approaches to thinking about education. The highly centralized, rote-learning system is being dismantled and more attention is being paid to the content of education. For instance, the National Human Rights Commission and women's organizations recently criticized sex-stereotyping in school texts and the tendency of girls to take up a limited range of subjects, particularly at higher levels, thus limiting their career options (National Human Rights Commission 2001). There is a clear connection between lower levels and kinds of education that girls receive and the fact that they are employed in less remunerative jobs.

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