



ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

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Political Social Movements: Feminist: Indonesia

2005 EWIC Volume II

“Family, Law and Politics”

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Although over 90 percent of the population of Indonesia are Muslim, making it the world's largest Muslim country, varieties of Islam have mixed with local culture; this makes it difficult to study Islam and the women's movement in Indonesia. Critical questions include: What is the guarantee that the Muslim majority constitutes an Islamic culture? What do we call Islamic culture? Considering Indonesia has thousands of local cultures, which one best represents Islamic culture? Do we want to describe women's movements in an Islamic culture or do we want to focus on the Islamic women's movement in Indonesia? What do we define as a “movement”? Is a movement a public and collective resistance, or should we include the individual and personal as part of our definition of a movement?

Based on these questions, this entry explores the dynamics of women's movements of various kinds and their interactions with Islamic women's movements to negotiate their rights in regard to the state, religion, local culture, and other influential factors determining women's life in Indonesia. The entry examines different political periods that have significantly changed Indonesian people's lives in order to see whether such changes have significantly affected Indonesian women's lives.

Pre-independence and the Old Order movement

Indonesia was under Dutch colonial control for approximately 350 years and became independent on 17 August 1945. During the pre-independence era, Indonesian women's movements can be divided into two periods: traditional-local and modern-national. During the traditional-local era, women's movements concentrated on local interests and were not nationalist in spirit; they honored local tradition (for example the adat system), based on genealogical ties, and struggled individually rather than collectively. Modern-national movements were characterized by a rising spirit of nationalism, the use of rational organization not based on genealogical considerations, and an ideological mission (Chuzaifah 2001).

Traditional-local

Traditional-local elements can be seen in some Islamic kingdoms, for instance, Aceh in Sumatra and Bugis in Sulawesi. Aceh had four sultanas: Safiatuddin (1641–75), Naqiatuddin (1675–77), Zakiatuddin Inayat Syah (1677–88), and Seri Ratu Kemalat Syah (1688–99).

The most significant efforts of Sultana Safiatuddin, who replaced the Sultan Iskandar Muda, the famous ruler who expanded his kingdom by conquest in some regions, were to build a parliamentary system that included female members ('Abd Allāh 1983), send scholars and ulema to other kingdoms such as Thailand (Lombard 1986), build literary and intellectual centers, and recruit a female navy, inong bale (widows' fleet) (Sufi 1994).

As well as Aceh, there was the Bone kingdom in Sulawesi, which was the largest Buginese kingdom. It had one queen in the sixteenth century, one in the eighteenth, and three in the nineteenth century. The difference between Aceh and Bone was that female leadership was not as important an issue in Bone, since female succession was viewed as a legitimate part of the Buginese genealogical system of kingship (Abdullah 1994).

In Aceh, notable female figures who played a leading role in the struggle against the Dutch colonizer were Cut Nyak Dien (1850–1908), the commander of Acehnese army, Pocut Meurah (d. 1955), and Pocut Baren (d. 1933). They were traditional army leaders; the ideological motives for their struggle against the state colonizer and infidel “kafir” oppressor were strong, as noted by Zentgraaff (1983): “Acehnese heroines fought based on the way of god and they did not want to compromise with the enemy. They never betrayed their female dignity and only chose one alternative: kill or be killed.” Historians have assumed that many female leaders played second fiddle to their husbands. In fact, they were able to be independent leaders, accepted and respected by their society. This shows that woman's leadership is a matter of negotiating and winning legitimacy with strong capabilities and capacities.

Modern-nationalist

According to Cora Vreede-de Stuers (1960), the history of the Indonesian women's movement during the colonial and the Old Order periods held religion to be influential on women's position. She shows that Muslim women made a significant contribution to the struggle and achievement of the colonial period. She divides women activists into two groups: liberal nationalists and religious reformists. Pluvier (1953) divides women's movements into three groups: religious Islamic groups, such as Aisyiyah and Jong Islamieten Bond; non-Islamic groups such as Roman Catholic women; and a neutral group.

It is commonly held that most Muslim women's organizations were formed from parent organizations, for example Aisyiyah from Muhammadiyah, Muslimat from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Persistri from Persis. In fact, they developed as fully-fledged organizations in their own right and contributed significantly to the development of Indonesian women. Islamic women's movements had to work harder than other movements since they had to fight on at least two levels. First, they had to join the national agenda as part of the civil movement. Islamic women's political groups were involved in the national struggle. Aisyiyah and Jong Islamieten Bond Dames Afdeling were two of the seven initiators of the first Indonesian women's congress, on 28 December 1928. Women activists Rasuna Said and Rasimah Ismail were two important figures in the strongest Islamic party, PERMI, based in Sumatra. They were sent to prison, accused of planting seeds of hatred and hostility against the Dutch government (Medan Rakyat 1931). Second, as Islamic organizations, these groups had to work with religious movements to revitalize a religious interpretation of women's issues, and they had to encourage Islamic society to lead a better life based on religious teaching.

Other important tools used to strengthen women's movements were the many publications aimed at educating women on a variety of subjects, including: *Poetri Hindia* in Batavia (1909–11), *Soenting Melayu* in West Sumatra (1921–), *Soeara Aisjah* (1927–), *Poetri Mardika* in Batavia (1915–20), *Istri Soesila* in Solo (1924–6), *Isteri* in Jogjakarta (1929–), *Doenia Istri* in Surabaya (1928–30), *Soeara Kaoem Iboe* in Bukittinggi (1929–30), *Pedoman Istri* in Batavia (1935–9), *Pahesan* in Solo (1937–8), and *Kaoetamaan Istri* in Medan (1939–40). These publications had different perspectives on how to define women's roles. In general, they contributed strongly to educating women in a reading culture, encouraging nationalism and cross-cultural communication, and increasing fund raising for the organizations.

After independence in 1945, Indonesia became a republic under the presidency of Sukarno until 1965. Sukarno encouraged women to be part of the nationalist movement. Many women's movements therefore concentrated on the nationalist issues rather than women's agenda. According to one statement by a prominent women's activist, Maria Ulfa Subadio: “Our movement was not a feminist movement. We never became a feminist movement, especially during the colonial period. Because we believed that fighting against the colonizer was preferable to fighting against men. Because we needed men to be our comrades” (Doran 1994).

In fact, national freedom did not guarantee women's freedom, especially among Islamic women's organizations, which faced the difficulties of choosing between nationalist and Islamic interests. For instance, the issue of polygamy became a main issue of debate among Muslim women's organizations, and among Communist and nationalist organizations. Therefore, the women's organizations preferred to avoid discussing polygamy in order to maintain unity as a basis for nationalism. Interestingly, even though Muslim women's organizations could not rid themselves of polygamy, which was considered an Islamic teaching, they did manage to liberate themselves sufficiently to gain involvement in the political sphere. Of 272 members of parliament following the first election of the independence era in 1955, 17 were women, 8 of them representing the Islamic parties Masyumi and NU. NU issued a fatwa in 1997 in favor of giving women political rights, especially female leadership; Muhammadiyah had issued a similar fatwa in 1986.

The women's movement under the New Order era (1965–98) until today

The Suharto regime, which is popularly called the New Order, replaced the Old Order. The first policy undertaken by Suharto was to stabilize the political situation by banning Communism and controlling political freedom. All mass organizations were restrained and political parties were made ineffectual. In the middle of the political transition, woman's organizations were in a difficult situation. Suharto amalgamated political parties and placed woman's organizations under the one umbrella of Kowani (Kongres Wanita Indonesia, Indonesian women's congress)

According to Kathryn Robinson (1999), Suharto tried to control women and homogenized views of female social roles by attempting to obliterate the diversity of gender relations which existed in the archipelago. He did this by producing the ideology of the motherhood state. Modelon Djajadiningrat (1987) argues that “ibu or mother is a concept of ideology which sanctions any action provided it is taken as a mother who is looking after her family, a group, a class, a company or the state without demanding power or prestige in return.”

The public role of woman was based on the domestic role, since women's functions were simplified to being mothers and wives. The state erected barriers to prevent women from demonstrating their abilities in the public political space. The new political climate put an end to women's movements, and only allowed “motherhood” organizations such as Dharma Wanita, the PKK (Family Welfare Movement), and other similar woman's organizations, which were associated together under Kowani and which sustained Kowani. Kowani consisted of independent organizations such as Perwari (Persatuan Wanita Indonesia, Organization of Indonesian Women), Aisyiyah, and Wanita Katholik (Catholic Women), and organizations of the wives of Indonesian civil servants or military such as PKK, Dharma Wanita, and others. Inevitably, Kowani became politically and economically dependent on the government; the government provided support to Kowani in the form of transportation, office, finance, and so forth. In short, the government more or less occupied and controlled this organization. Woman's organizations no longer had freedom to organize at the grassroots level, except for socio-religious or charitable activities. Only organizations such as Aisyiyah, PKK, and Dharma Wanita were permitted to be active at the village level (Wieringa 1995).

The developmentalist policies of the New Order era, the regime's main ideology, were a deep disappointment to critical groups, including some women activists. From 1982 onwards women activists started small organizations to advocate over issues important to the most marginalized women. These independent women's organizations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) tried to address restrictions of woman's political involvement, especially at the grassroots level. The political pressure during the New Order era influenced the way the woman's movements defined their political platform, created organizational forms, and chose strategies, programs, and target groups.

In 1995 Solidaritas Perempuan (SP) conducted research mapping out women's movements under the New Order era among 34 women's organizations, including some members of Kowani and independent organizations that had been set up by NGO activists. SP found tremendous complexity and inconsistency among woman's organizations. Sometimes a group professed a radical paradigm, but were far from radical in their formal statutes and programs. Others chose a radical program even though they resisted being considered a radical movement or a feminist organization, because the words “politics” and “feminism” were considered dirty and dangerous under the New Order era (Mochtar and Chuzaifah 1995).

The characteristics of women's movements during the New Order era can be categorized in many ways, such as ideology, strategy, form of organization, or history of development. One perspective split Indonesian women's movements into two categories, wanita and perempuan. Both words mean “woman” in Indonesian, but differ politically and etymologically. Wanita was promoted by the New Order regime and used formally in the state policy documents. It represented the New Order ideology of gender politics, including the promotion of Indonesian women as wives and mothers who were destined to follow New Order notions of femininity. Thus wanita organizations were those women's groups that had no autonomy and independence, since they had fallen under the hegemony of New Order gender politics. Perempuan has been adopted by other Indonesian women's movements as a counter-hegemonic symbol against state authoritarianism. Perempuan has a more powerful meaning and symbolizes more independence. Already at the first Women's Congress in 1928, the word perempuan was being used. Perempuan organizations began to appear in the late 1980s in an attempt to revitalize the autonomous women's organizations struggling against the gender policies of the New Order. They were influenced to some extent by feminist discourse (Mochtar 2000).

At first, there were only a limited number of independent women's organizations that did not avoid being called feminist and used the term feminist in their programs. They were Kalyanamitra, Solidaritas Perempuan, and Yayasan Perempuan Mardika (Mochtar and Chuzaifah 1995). The independent organizations who were closely tied to Islamic systems and norms were the only mass-based Muslim woman's organizations aware of the need to challenge patriarchal social relations and inequalities inherent in capitalist modes of production, such as Yasanti in Jogjakarta. Yasanti focused on the most oppressed and the poorest women workers because they formed the most vulnerable group who were most at risk of being exploited and oppressed socially and economically. The genesis of Yasanti was partly an expression of its disappointment with, and criticism of, the development programs and its questioning of the oppressive system launched by the New Order (Istiadah 1995).

The 1990s marked an important era for Indonesian Muslim women; a whole host of Muslim women's forums and organizations were founded and progressive books dealing with Islam and women were published. The Islamic organizations were Lembaga Study Perempuan dan Anak (LSPPA, Institute of study and development of women and children) in Yogyakarta, Kelompok Kajian Perempuan Islam (KKPI, Muslim women's study group), and the Jakarta. The latter set up a forum on Islam and the advancement of women in 1994 and published various works about Islam and the advancement of women. Some influential books about women in Islam have been translated, especially those by famous international Muslim feminists such as Fatima Mernisi, Riffat Hasan, and Asghar Ali Engineer. These compete with translated "Islamic patriarchal" books from the Middle East.

The shift from the New Order to the Reformasi era has not shown promise for women. The percentage of women parliament members decreased from 12 to 9 percent. The raising of democratic issues, together with the beginnings of regional autonomy, opened a wider field for the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, which politicized religion at the local level through formalization of syariah law. Fortunately, some Islamic progressive movements originating in independent women's movements (such as Rahima, Fahmina, Puan Amal Hayati) or in mass organizations that were previously controlled by the New Order (such as Muslimat, Fatayat NU, Aisyiah) and some of the centers for women's studies at Islamic universities have built strong alliances and started to work at the local level. These institutions criticize Islamic teaching from a gendered perspective. They start by noting that tafsīr, ḥadīth, fiqh, and other classical resources of the ulema are gender biased. At the academic level, the State Institute for Islamic Studies already includes gender curricula, and will open postgraduate degree programs on gender and Islam. Many academic and popular publications question women's position in such fields as leadership, sexuality/reproductive rights, education, marital relationship, ownership/inheritance, and so forth.

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