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**Research project: Re-defining gender in contemporary Indonesia. Empowerment strategies of Muslim and secular women activists**

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Since the end of the dictatorship Indonesian women activists have achieved remarkable successes (Bianpoen 2000; Robinson/Bessel 2002). Women’s study centres have been established at universities and Islamic institutes, women’s empowerment programmes have been launched in state and non-state institutions (Witoelar 2002), presidential decrees for the abolition of violence against women and implementing “gender mainstreaming” have been issued (Cf. Darmawan 2004), and gender relations have been questioned (Hatley 2005). Women’s organizations have established advocacy units and women’s shelters all over the country and have promoted a nation-wide campaign against domestic violence. In May 2004 they urged the government to implement a law against domestic violence and they have intensified efforts to implement CEDAW (The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), as formulated in the 1995 Beijing Declaration passed at the Fourth World Conference on Women (Cf. Oey-Gardiner 2002: 110; Sadli 2002: 91; Arivia 2006: 310-314). The matter of female political leadership became an issue when Suharto appeared to prepare his eldest daughter Tutut to be his successor, and again, when Megawati Sukarnoputri tried to secure the country’s top political position, the presidency, even if later she was regarded as having been weak and indecisive in carrying out that role (Sen 2002; Suryakusuma 2003). Women’s organizations are now actively trying to increase women’s political participation and representation by making efforts to change the position of women in decision-making institutions (Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia 2006, Fatayat NU 2002). They challenge conservative Islamic doctrine and the ideology of *kodrat wanita*, the prevalent stereotype that confined women to the domestic sphere and defined their role on the basis their biological (especially reproductive) capacities, expecting them to tend the hearth, care for the children and to be chaste and submissive. (Cf. Arivia 2006; Dzuhayatin 2001; Hatley 1999; Robinson 2002; Sastramidjaja 2001; Stivens 1991: 5; Subhan 2001).

“Gender mainstreaming” is recognized as part of the current transformation process away from the established order circumscribed by Islam and the *kodrat wanita* and thus, connects women’s activism to democratization, liberalism and pluralism.

However, ideas of “women’s empowerment” and of “gender mainstreaming” have not gone unchallenged. Many religious leaders have perceived them as transgressions of Islamic rules and values and argue for a return conservative gender models. Their increasing influence is due to Islamic revivalism which emerged in the 1980s when it was promoted by the former President Suharto (Hefner 1980a/b, Schwarz 1994: 285) and has since the late 1990s in particular taken a strong foothold in Indonesian society (Schröter 2003). A survey carried out by the “Indonesian Survey Circle” in 2006 shows

that more than one third of the Muslim population desires an Islamic state. *Shari'a* law has been implemented in several parts of Indonesia, Islamic dress and veiling are now popular among young intellectual women (Brenner 2004), while restrictions for women in public have increased and continue to do so (Feillard 1999; Kamaruzzaman 2004; Munir 2004, 2005). Women who had been accused of having sex before marriage have been judged by Islamic courts and caned in public, female workers have been arrested for returning home from work in the factory after sunset, and others have been physically attacked and injured by young Islamists, because they were not properly veiled. Sexuality and the female body emerged as prominent themes and were used in tipping the balance of existing power relations back in favour of the previous dominantly male order. Examples include the recent controversy over Indonesian "Playboy", various attempts to censor art and the media, as well as the proposed anti-pornography bill (RUU APP), based on a fatwa against pornography and the so-called "porno-action" issued by the Council of Islamic Scholars in August 2001, that considers any depictions of erotic behaviour *haram* (Sam 2003).

Nevertheless, most Indonesian activists do not consider religion and women's empowerment to be contradictions. On the contrary, young women's Islamic groups are becoming increasingly influential within the Indonesian women's movement. The goal of many Indonesian Muslim activists is to advocate women's rights, gender equality, civil society and pluralism, pleading for reform in their respective social movements and aiming for women's empowerment (Doorn-Harder 2005; Dzuhayatin 1998, 2001, 2002; Mulia 2005a, b; Munir 1999; 2002a, b).

Recently, interest in the study of gender relationships in Indonesia has increased the number of publications (Cf. among others: Adeney 2003; Andriyani 1999; Arrivia 2003, 2006; Atkinson and Errington 1990; Bennett 2005; Biapoen 1999, 2000; Hisyam 2004; Grijn 1994; Jennaway 2002; de Jong 1998; Niehof 1998; Oey-Gardiner/Bianpoen 2000; Ong and Peletz 1995; Rinaldo 2006; Robinson/Bessell 2002; Schlehe 1999; Sears 1996; Siapno 2002; Wieringa 2002, 2003). However, there is neither a coherent study of the Muslim women's organizations in Indonesia (Muslimat, Fatayat, Aisyiyah, Nasyyatul Asyyiyah) that are linked to Muslim mass organizations Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah nor one on contemporary secular associations.

With the exception of Affiah's M.A.-thesis on Fatayat (2005) and some smaller papers (Chuzaiyah 2004, Istiadah 1995; Marcoes-Natsir 2000; Rahman 2000), in the studies on modern Indonesian women which had a considerable influence on understanding the status of women in Indonesia Islam does not appear as a major focus of analysis. Several authors have also pointed out that the study of Muslim women's organizations is underdeveloped (Blackburn 2004: 225; Robinson 2004: 184; Horvatic 1995). They assert that they require further investigation, particularly with respect to questions regarding what these groups reveal about changes within Islam on gender issues and how women have developed a more independent voice. As Blackburn has argued, women's Muslim organizations have great potential for representing and influencing the millions of women who identify themselves as predominantly Muslim (Blackburn 2004: 226). While much of the Muslim world excludes women from the domain of religious authority, the

country's two leading Muslim organizations - Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) - have created enormous networks led by women who interpret sacred texts and exercise powerful religious influence. They have started to deconstruct concepts subordinating women to men, partly in response to conservative Muslim forces which frequently assert male-biased interpretations of Islamic sources such as the Qur'an and Hadith (Zenrif 2002: 46-47). Re-interpreting religious teachings so that a space is opened in which women's rights can be advocated within the context of Islam is an important strategy of Muslim feminists. Several authors have recently written on that topic (Cf. Anshor 2005; Doorn-Harder 2006; Feillard 1997, 1999; Mulia 2005; Mulyati 2003; Munir, 2002, 2005; Rahman 2000), however, there is no reliable data on whether the Muslim activists indeed use hermeneutics as a strategy in their striving for women's empowerment. This project closes this gap by looking at the way Islamic texts are interpreted in Muslim feminist associations.

A similar lack of knowledge can be observed for secular women's organizations. Blackburn, Martyn and Wieringa are among the few scholars that have given attention to these associations in Indonesia. Blackburn (1999, 2004) has analysed their relations to the Indonesian state, Martyn (2005) and Wieringa (2002, 2003) have focused on the social conditions of the women's movement in its historical development. Other works, such as Hendaradi (2002) and Witoelar (2002) examine the role of civil society and mention the women's movement as one player among others, Arivia (2006) and Suryakusuma (2004) criticize Indonesian politics from a feminist perspective. To sum up, it can be said that a coherent study is lacking that looks at how secular women's organizations operate and how their intellectual leaders influence discourses promoting women's empowerment in the media and in various institution at the governmental and non-government levels.

Starting out from the academic works referred to below, the project will specifically look at how women's organizations convey their views about gender relationships, women's roles in society and morality, how they root them in society and how Muslim women's organizations use re-interpretations of Islamic sources to further women's empowerment. Additional points of interest are the ways in which women's associations position themselves towards the efforts of Muslim conservatives to control the female body and towards outdated gender roles as reflected in the ideology of *kodrat wanita*. This project is breaking new ground in so far as the discourses and social practices of Indonesian women's associations have not yet been the focus of any scholarly work.

Although, both secular and Muslim women's organizations generally strive for the ideal of "gender mainstreaming" and "liberalization", they have clear differences with respect to specific issues such as the anti-pornography bill. Several secular women's organizations, including Komnas Perempuan, Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan and Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia, have vehemently rejected the bill, arguing that it constrains women (Wadrianto 2006), and have joined to launch a movement against it called Aliansi Mawar Putih (White Rose Alliance). In contrast to the secular women's associations, the Muslim women's mass organizations have been more careful in formulating their standpoint vis-à-vis the anti-pornography bill. For instance, Fatayat NU has issued a statement that

their organization supports the intention of forbidding ‘pornographic material’ but that it does not support the anti-pornography law in its current form. An important point of criticism mentioned was that the bill does not ensure gender equality and that it does not give enough consideration to the pluralism of Indonesian culture (PP Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama 2006).

In order to assess the influence of women’s organisations on the current transformation process in Indonesia, it would be necessary to also examine the similarities and differences, as well as the alliances between Muslim and secular associations and/or the individual activists as well as the links between women’s organisations and other institutions and personalities active in pushing for a democratic and pluralist state.

### Goals

Theoretically the project takes as its point of departure the concept of multiple but interconnected modernities (Appadurai 1997; Eisenstadt 2003; Friedman 2000; Kahn 2001; Leppenies 2003) and will take the perspective that regards women as agents of transformation (cf. Moghadam 1990, 1994a and b, 1996, 2005; Ng 2000; Ng/Mohamad/Tan 2006, Ruppert 2002, 2004, 2005). It seeks to understand the particularities of envisioning and realising a democratic Indonesian modernity, at the heart of which lie constructions of gender and morality that constitute the power relationships between men and women as well as between conservatives and liberals in decisive ways. Power here is understood as a relational, multifocal, dynamic phenomenon that is produced through both discourses and social practices (cf. Foucault 1980a, b; Bourdieu 1990). The proposed project also aims to contribute to the discussion regarding gender in Muslim societies (cf. Abu-Lughod 1998; Ahmed 1992; Bennett 2005; Klein-Hessling 1999; Mahmood 2004; Mernissi 1987, 1991, 1993, 2002; Nagata 1995; Peletz 1996; Othman 1995, 1998a, b; Werner 1997; Zuhur 1992), i.e. to the issue of women’s liberation and Islam (cf. Ali 2000; Afkhami 1995; Afkhami/Friedl 1997; Ahmed/Hastings 1994; Ali 2000; Ask/Tjomsland 1998; Badran 1995; Barlas 2002; Engineer 1999, 2003; Esposito/Haddad 1997; Karam 1998; Kazemzadeh 2002; Mir-Hosseini 1999; Mulia 2005; Syed 2004, Wadud 1999).

Generally, the project contributes to

- the interdisciplinary debate on gender in the Muslim world
- the analysis of contemporary developments in the Indonesian society, where re-negotiating gender-roles and morality plays a major role
- the understanding of women as agents of social and political transformations

In detail we examine:

- how women’s organizations in Indonesia define “gender mainstreaming”, “gender justice” and “women’s empowerment”
- the social practices (including life style practices) of women’s organizations and female activists and identify the instruments serving to empower women
- the networking of women’s organizations

- the influence Indonesian women's organizations exercise on current discourses about gender, sexuality and politics

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