

# The Struggle Over Women: Gender and Sexuality in Two Indonesian Islamic Organizations<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT:

Since the 1980s, Indonesia has experienced a tremendous resurgence of Islam. Islamic religious practice has become more orthodox, Muslim political parties have proliferated, and Muslim student groups were a crucial part of the 1998 reformasi movement that helped topple former president Suharto. But the Islamic movement in Indonesia is also exceedingly diverse, and many of the differences pivot on issues related to gender and women. This paper will discuss two organizations, a liberal Muslim NGO and a conservative Muslim political party, and examine their conflicting beliefs regarding gender and women. Although these two organizations draw their members from a similar milieu, mostly the urban middle class, their respective liberal and conservative positions represent two of the major strands of the Islamic movement in Indonesia. Moreover, gender is central to both of these organizations. The NGO was founded in order to disseminate a particular version of Islam that emphasizes gender parity and women's rights. The political party's crusade against corruption encompasses a fight against "hedonistic" lifestyles and "pornography," and for family values, all of which represent a broader concern with sexual morality and gender roles. This paper examines how these two organizations and the people who are involved with them are manoeuvring within Indonesia's unsettled and ever-shifting social and political context. The differences and similarities between their gender ideologies reveal how issues of women, gender, and sexuality are central to Indonesia's contemporary Islamic movement. This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted in Jakarta between 2002 and 2003, and is part of my broader dissertation on globalization, Islam, and women's organizations in Jakarta.

It is by now widely recognized that Indonesia has experienced a powerful revitalization of Islam over the past twenty years (Hefner 2000, Brenner 1996). Some scholars have framed current debates as a struggle between traditional Islam and a newer, more politicized, orthodox Islam. But Hefner and others have shown that the Indonesian Islamic resurgence itself is composed of multiple strands. Though many Indonesian Muslims are increasingly rejecting more traditionalist or Javanist versions of Islam, the growing commitment to modernist Islam includes major philosophical differences between groups. The two organizations I discuss here exemplify the liberal and conservative wings of this Islamic movement, and a comparison of the two reveals that ideas about gender and sexuality are key to understanding the differences between them.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out between August 2002 and August 2003 in Jakarta, Indonesia.



I focus on women's groups because I am interested in what their conceptions of proper womanhood reveal about their politics, and about their different relationships to Islam and the state. As Yuval-Davis has argued, central dimensions of the roles of women are constituted around the relationships of collectivities to the state, and on the other hand, constructions of nationhood also often involve specific notions of manhood and womanhood. (Yuval-Davis, 1997) Since the Indonesian nation-state is in the midst of a continuing transformation from an authoritarian state to something more democratic but not yet quite defined, it is an important moment to study changing notions of womanhood.

Moreover, many scholars of Islam agree that Indonesia is one of the most interesting places in the world to study contemporary Islam. Contemporary Islamic thought in Indonesia is dynamic and vibrant. Not only did Muslim scholars and activists contribute to a broad-based democratic movement to unseat the former dictator General Suharto, but many of these same thinkers are currently producing and disseminating interpretations of Islamic texts to emphasize democracy, equality, and pluralism. The Asia Foundation's Doug Ramage recently characterized this religious reform effort as a distinctive way of dealing with Islam that explicitly involves gender equality.<sup>2</sup>

One of the organizations I studied builds on Western-derived, liberal concepts such as gender equality to advocate for women's rights within Islam, while the other is most concerned about morality on an individual and national level.<sup>3</sup> By examining their demographic composition,

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<sup>2</sup> Doug Ramage spoke as part of a panel, "Blending Islam and Democracy: Southeast Asia's Unique Experience," May 19, 2005, Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>3</sup> The groups that I am comparing are an NGO and the women's division of a political party. While this may at first appear to be an odd comparison, I consider it worthwhile because they were formed around the same period of time, involve people from a similar class and educational status, and are both still emerging. Moreover, there are very few conservative Muslim activist or political groups that involve women in any substantial way, while this party has become well-known for having several female representative in parliament as well as numerous female followers.



as well as their positions on two major political debates that have deep gender dimensions, it is clear that these two organizations embody different conceptions of womanhood: women defined by conservative, modernizing Islam, and women as defined by liberal, modernizing Islam. These two conceptions of contemporary womanhood represent differences of principle on such core issues as democracy, choice, and individual autonomy. Thus, this research reveals that two groups with roots in the Muslim resurgence of the 1980s and 1990s, both seeking to modernize Indonesian Islam, have come to two very different philosophical positions. Finally, the fact that these are two of the fastest growing and widely imitated models of womanhood in Indonesia suggests that Indonesian womanhood may be becoming more deeply grounded in Islam.

Nevertheless the differences between these two conceptions of womanhood are at times subtle. But it is precisely the subtleties that are crucial to understanding them, for these apparently small variations in meaning point to deeper differences. As Errington has argued with regard to gender differences in island Southeast Asia, "...it could be that differences between men and women are not socially visible to us because they are not marked in ways we easily recognize...But within the societies themselves, subtle differences may be important as gender markets but may go unnoticed by observers" (Errington, 5) .

These two organizations, and the womanhoods they embody, are part of a globally driven, but nationally focused, struggle over religion, gender, and the state in Indonesia. They are grappling with deeply held values regarding proper family and household life, how men and women should relate to each other, and how Islam should be interpreted and practiced in everyday life and in the public sphere. These matters are very much at the core of what it means to be a modern

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Finally, and most important, the Morality Party represents a new and growing form of conservative Islam, and is one of the fastest growing political parties in Indonesia today.



Indonesian woman and a Muslim, and not surprisingly, highly contentious in the current environment.

But there are also wider implications for these conceptions of womanhood. The relationship between religion and the state is currently being re-negotiated in many countries, including the United States. A closer examination of the ideological underpinnings of conceptions of womanhood may shed light on what role gender plays both in the link between religion and the state and in the process of democratization.

### **Bijiah<sup>4</sup>**

Bijiah is a small non-governmental organization founded in Jakarta in 2000 with the stated purpose of working for women's rights within Islam. The charismatic co-directors are a well-known intellectual and a veteran feminist activist. Bijiah is especially concerned with promoting gender equality within the *pesantren* (traditional Muslim boarding schools) community, and to that end the organization mainly conducts trainings and workshops for students, teachers, and religious leaders on issues related to gender equality.

Bijiah emerged out of an earlier and larger organization which also promoted gender equality within pesantrens, as well as popularizing revisionist interpretations of Islamic texts that emphasized gender parity. However, the leader of this organization became a polygamist in the late 1990s. Many of the staff objected strenuously, and several left to form Bijiah. Thus, one of Bijiah's core tenets is opposition to polygamy.

Bijiah also has close connections to the Nadhlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest and more traditional Muslim organization, though they are not directly affiliated with it. However,

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<sup>4</sup> To protect the privacy of my research subjects, all names have been changed.



some of Bijiah's staff are active NU members, and some of the Muslim scholars it works with are also recognized NU *kyais* (Islamic teachers/scholars). These NU ties give Bijiah a link to the large NU base in Java—for example, most of the pesantren and kyais who participate in Bijiah's activities are NU affiliated.

Bijiah's highly educated staff are both male and female, and range from their mid-20s to 40s. Several are in their 30s, are married, and have children. Several staff members have or are working on advanced degrees, some of which involve study outside Indonesia. Others have specialized training in Islamic theology.

The ubiquity of higher education among Bijiah staff is an indicator of their middle class status in a country where less than 10% of the population attends university. Like almost all Indonesian NGO employees, they live very modestly, rarely going out to restaurants or movies or on vacations. Older members live in small houses in the sprawl outside the city limits, and a few drive cars to work. Several younger staff and volunteers live in dorm-like accommodations that cater to students and singles.

Not surprisingly, some Bijiah staff also have long histories of student activism, and were directly involved in the democracy movement of the 1990s. In a few cases, their colleagues and friends from that time are now involved in secular women's NGOs, so it is not surprising that Bijiah also has strong relationships with these groups.

Like other women's movement organizations in Jakarta, Bijiah's funding comes mainly from Western sources such as the Ford Foundation and the Asia Foundation. Along with such funding comes participation in seminars and workshops organized by these international donors. Indeed, the popularity of the term 'gender' in women's movement circles is directly traceable to a series of influential seminars organized by the Asia Foundation in the early 1990s.



As a Bijnah staff member one told me, Bijnah focuses on less on the form of Islam than on its substance. It would be inaccurate to say that their approach is non-textual, as they are working on revisionist interpretations of Islamic texts. Like the NU, they are sometimes characterized as “traditionalist” Muslims, because they look also to non-Koranic Islamic texts for guidance. However, many Bijnah staff also take a contextual view, arguing, for example, that headscarves are a part of ancient Arab culture, and therefore not intrinsic to Islam.

It would be a mistake to place Bijnah in the traditionalist category, as their primary concern is how to make sure that Islam responds to present-day needs. Hasan put it this way: “My religion is a living tradition. So I must care for it and undertake renovation and new interpretations, so that the religion is not left behind.” For Hasan and Bijnah, equality and justice are the core of Islam, and these concepts are supposed to underlie all human social relations.

Moreover, unlike traditional Javanists, Bijnah does not embrace local culture and traditions. In fact, they tend to see adat as patriarchal and parochial. This is not surprising, given that Brenner and other researchers who studied the growing Islamic movement in the early and mid-1990s found that discourses of modernity were a crucial part of Islam’s new appeal to young, educated women, and that these women consciously distanced themselves from Javanese tradition. According to Brenner, if modernity is characterized by a sense of rupture from the past, then “The past can no longer be relied on as a guide to the present....The notion that the Islamic movement will inaugurate a new, brighter era in Indonesia is central to its ideology as well as to its appeal: people are attracted to it precisely because it offers a vision of the future that promises to differ positively from the past. (Brenner, 681)

In keeping with the emphasis on modernity, it should not be a major surprise that Bijnah’s conception of women’s rights is not dissimilar to that of second-wave feminists in the U.S. Just



as second-wave feminists distinguished between sex as biological and gender as socially constructed, Bijiah and many other Indonesian women's rights advocates distinguish between gender as a social construction and the Indonesian term *kodrat* as biology. Participants in Bijiah's gender trainings learn about male and female social roles, and come to understand how the sexes are treated differently. They discuss the different forms of gender inequality and how they are perpetuated. Finally, they learn about the various interpretations of women's roles in Islam—with an emphasis on interpretations that stress parity and equal treatment.

Although Bijiah staff have become increasingly interested in issues of sexuality, it is not clear what they mean by the term. Sexuality tends to be discussed only in a general way, such as in an article from Bijiah's monthly journal entitled, "When Sexuality Becomes a Public Issue." The article begins with a discussion of essentialist and non-essentialist approaches to understanding sexuality, and goes on to explain the rise of regulation of sexuality in the modern state. But falling short of a call to disentangle sexuality from regulation, the piece ends with a lamentation of women's exploitation in the mass media.

The limits of Bijiah's liberalism are apparent when it comes to sexuality. Sex outside marriage is rarely discussed and always condemned as incompatible with Islamic beliefs. And although Bijiah was one of the first Muslim groups to speak openly about HIV and to feature an interview with an openly gay AIDS activist, Bijiah staff rarely mention the issue of homosexuality in their work.

When I studied the organization in 2002, Bijiah was particularly focused on the implementation of Islamic (Shariah) law in several provinces of Java and Sumatra; and women's rights education in pesantrens. During much of 2004, as a prelude to the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, they also focused on getting women involved in politics.



## **Women's Division of the Morality Party**

The Morality Party, a conservative Muslim political party, was founded in 1998 at the height of the democratic opposition movement. The founders were mostly graduates of the elite University of Indonesia, who were also veterans of Muslim student groups. Much of the all-volunteer party leadership and the leadership of the Women's Division (the group I studied) are in their 30s and 40s, with master's degrees and PhDs in some cases. The party leadership have studied abroad, in the Middle East and/or Europe, and have a solid middle-class careers, as well as large families. At the time I studied them, the party's followers were mainly urban and campus-based, including a substantial number of young women.

However, the party's base has broadened since then. The Morality Party was very successful in the 2004 parliamentary elections, winning many seats in the House of Representatives. They got an especially strong vote in the city of Jakarta, apparently from the urban poor, who were attracted by their strong anti-corruption and clean government platform. In the wake of the tsunami, the Morality Party was also one of the first organizations to send volunteers and relief supplies to Aceh, and have significantly boosted their image by doing so.

The Morality Party's aim is to have the Indonesian state run according to the principles of Islam. The organization's "Seven Principles for Political Action" are: Morality, Professionalism, Patriotism, Moderation, Democracy, Reform and Independence. Not surprisingly, they favor a conservative, literal interpretation of the Koran, and have little interest in the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence recognized by mainstream Indonesian Muslim scholars. However, since early 2004, they have downplayed the more Islamist aspects of their platform in favor of a focus on clean government and continuing the reform process that began in 1998.





Many of the founders and members of the Morality Party are veterans of *dakwah* groups—campus organizations to spread orthodox Islam that emerged in the 1980s. Many of these *dakwah* organizations were founded or led by students returning from studying in the Middle East, where they were influenced by new forms of Islam, which often emphasized its role in politics. The party maintains ties with *dakwah* organizations (which run the gamut from moderate to violently fundamentalist), especially with one well-known group that is rapidly becoming one of the most popular organizations on campuses nationwide.

As one might expect, the Morality Party Women’s Division also has a literal approach to Islam. Given the connection to the *dakwah* movement, the Morality Party’s literalist approach is probably closely related to the textual stance that was characteristic of the 1990s Islamic movement described by Brenner: “The truth that is embodied in the text is not considered to be derived solely from, or limited to, any period in history.” (Brenner, 682) Thus, the women of the Morality Party believe that the correct forms of religious practice are crucial. Proper attire and strict prayer times must be adhered to. They argue that society will improve if it takes on a more outwardly Islamic cast, and this may involve increased censorship of entertainment and regulation of people’s intimate lives. What is written in the Koran is law. Nevertheless, like Bijnah, these women are modernist in their outlook. The literalist approach to Islam, as many scholars have shown, is a quintessentially modern phenomenon. The women of the Morality Party, like other modernist Muslims, do not advocate a return to an Islamic caliphate, and do not idealize a mythic past. Like Bijnah, they are urban professionals seeking to have Islam better integrated into their lives. However, this project clearly takes on somewhat different forms in these two organizations.



The Morality Party women I spoke with were solidly middle-class, but did not appear to live lavishly. Like Bijiah staff, they live in the sprawl to the east and south of Jakarta. They have small houses and cars, and some have maids to help with childcare and cooking.

The people who work at the Morality Party headquarters do so on a volunteer basis. The party gets all its money from individual donations. As anti-corruption efforts are part of their platform, they are very scrupulous in their financial affairs and do not have lavish furniture or decorations in the offices.

The Women's Division is led by a woman in her 40s who is a lecturer at a prestigious university and one of the founders of the party. She claims to be friendly with a fair number of prominent women activists, even one or two who are rather left-wing. The Women's Division is involved in some national coalitions of women's organizations that emphasize women's political education.

The staff of the women's division are concerned about getting more women involved in politics, as well as the party, but they do not necessarily view gender bias as one of the more important forms of discrimination in the country. Instead, they see values and education (or lack thereof) as the most crucial problem facing Indonesian women. Moreover, some Morality Party women linked lack of education to what they view as the increasing national decline of morality. Nita explained, "Indonesian women must be helped to raise their dignity and standards. Because many women are becoming sex workers outside the country. This is very sad. Indonesia does not have rules to help develop women. I am sure that if Indonesia prioritizes this things will get better. Because Muhammad said that women are the backbone of the country. So if women are good, then the country will be good."



However, Nita and others also cautioned that problems such as education don't just affect women. While admitting that women may face some special challenges, they are more inclined to be concerned about economic and cultural issues such as unemployment, global competition, and the mass media's effects on lifestyles.

Although the Morality Party is hostile to the U.S. government, and members often speak in scathing tones about the evils of "Western" or American culture, they are not unfriendly to foreign visitors, and are clearly interested in presenting a good face to the country and to the world. They frequently appear at demonstrations against the war in Iraq, and are always highly visible because they march in sex-segregated fashion, with all the women wearing white tunics and large white prayer shawls. Moreover, the party leadership distinguished itself from some of the more radical Islamist groups by criticizing calls to conduct sweeps of Americans on the streets of Jakarta and by voicing opposition to terrorist acts such as the 2002 Bali bombing.

### **Shariah Law**

Two of the most important debates in contemporary Indonesia focus on the formalization of Shariah law and the practice of polygamy. The politics and contestations surrounding these two issues are also emblematic of the divergent strands within the Muslim community and the differences between Bijnah and the Morality Party.

Shariah law is one of the most pressing concerns for Bijnah, and the focus of much of the group's efforts in 2003 and 2004. In the course of my interviews, several staff members, identified it as one of the most important issues facing Indonesian women. When pressed, Bijnah staff often say that they don't have a particular position on Shariah. As Rini explained to me, "We try to give an alternative concept of women's rights in Islam." Since Islam is not supposed



to discriminate on the basis of gender, she continued, “The problem is how to socialize people about that in ways that don’t contradict local perspectives.”

As devout Muslims, Bijiah staff would never say they oppose Shariah. But to them, Shariah has a different kind of meaning than it does to those who would try to make it local law. Nadia told me that she feels the major division in Islam is between those who are interested in the substance of the religion and those who emphasize its form. I asked about competing interpretations of Shariah law, and she pointed out that the NU recognizes four distinct schools of Islamic law. So how can one school prevail if there is no central authority to decide what is right, I asked. Nadia replied that in her opinion, it is up to the individual to decide what is best for himself/herself, and this is a private decision. This is why no one religion can be the basis for state law in a plural state, she continued. The important thing, she added, is to decide what are the universal values that underlie Islam and other religions, and then to “socialize” them so that everyone internalizes them.

The women’s division of the Morality Party takes a very different view of Shariah, one that is consistent with their party’s goal of running the country on the basis of Islamic principles. When I asked about this issue, Nita, head of the women’s division, argued that since nearly 90% of Indonesia’s population is Muslim, it makes sense to have Islam be the basis of the state. “If we return to the teachings of Islam there will definitely be peace,” she said. “In Islam, it’s not allowed to take other people’s rights. Valuing the rights of other people, there is no force. That is the teaching of Islam. Even the rich help the poor. If this is implemented everything will be good. There will be no criminality.”

However, the women expressed some division on which local Shariah laws are appropriate. Nita opposed laws requiring women to wear headscarves (*jilbab*). “When it comes



to the jilbab, I think it's not necessary," Nita said. "Because in Islam, force is not allowed....So we can't make rules about wearing the jilbab."

Nita's colleagues disagreed. Both also felt that Islam requires women to wear headscarves, so they should be wearing them anyway. Moreover, laws such as those preventing women from going out alone at night are intended to protect women from harm, they believed. As Lia said, "Whatever they are looking for at night, certainly it is not an emergency, it would be better if they stayed in the house."

The Morality Party women often framed their views on Shariah in terms of regional autonomy, which they endorse. Lia argued that if people were voting for legislation requiring women to wear the jilbab, then they understood and agreed with the consequences. Moreover, some local cultures support or require such restrictions on women, she said.

Another staff member said that the Morality Party would not discriminate against women in regions where veils are not traditionally worn. "How can we explain to them how a woman should be? And our cadres have a lot of interaction with women who don't wear jilbabs and they have no problems. Like in the service posts we have set up, there is no problem with visitors who don't wear jilbabs, in NTT and NTB [regions in Eastern Indonesia where women traditionally don't wear headscarves] it's no problem."

Nita also acknowledged that such laws might not work in a place like Jakarta, where she herself often works long hours. She said that regions must be allowed to make the appropriate decisions, but using the Koran as a standard. "So certain regions will be different from others. For example in Padang, women must be prevented from going out at night, but certainly this is not valid for other regions."



So, although women at the Morality Party have strong convictions that wearing a jilbab is the correct way of being a Muslim woman, they are at times uneasy about forcing that belief on other women. They view the jilbab as an individual religious practice which cannot be compelled of a person, but they hesitate to use words such as choice because they see it as the only proper choice. Moreover, in the views I outlined, I also detect a concern for recruitment—Nita and others in this rapidly growing party know that they should welcome all comers, regardless of how they are dressed.

On the whole, Bijnah staff tended to take a much more individualist, even relativist view of Shariah. To them, Shariah is a personal guide for living, not to be made into state laws. This position is consistent with mainstream Muslim views in Indonesia. However, to the women of the Morality Party, Shariah is a public legal code, a manual for governing a community. Nevertheless, the women of the Morality Party make allowances for regional differences and variations. It remains unclear how regional differences would function if Shariah became the framework of the national state.

### **Polygamy**

Polygamy isn't particularly common in Indonesia. As in other cultures, it was once the perquisite of royalty—sultans kept dozens of wives in their palaces. In 1974, the Suharto regime passed a marriage law that outlawed polygamy for all government employees, and which also defined the roles of husbands and wives in a marriage as being, respectively, housewife and breadwinner. This controversial law was overturned in 2001, with the support of Muslim groups and the women's movement. Soon after, a few prominent wealthy men, including the man who was vice president under Megawati, became polygamists, and espoused the virtues of polygamy in public.



Although the actual numbers of polygamous marriages are probably low, polygamy has become a symbolic and highly contested issue. For Bijiah and other liberal Muslims, it is a sign of all that they consider regressive. Whereas for many conservative Muslims, even if they prefer not to practice it themselves, the legality of polygamy is something of a test for how Islamic the country is. They see polygamy as a right granted by God that cannot be taken away by the state.

For many Bijiah staff, polygamy is an emotionally charged issue. The organization was in fact founded after several staff members split off from another organization whose leader had taken on a second wife. Bijiah's female co-director, Vivita, had a tendentious relationship with her father while she was growing up, partly because of his polygamy. “

Bijiah staff also are concerned that polygamy is growing, especially among the middle-class. Thus, opposition to polygamy is one of their organization's core principles (along with the vague 'justice'), and although they don't necessarily rule out working with people who don't accept that, they definitely emphasize it a great deal.

Polygamy is a somewhat sensitive issue for the Morality Party's Women's Division. They would hesitate to call themselves supporters of polygamy. When asked, they say that they do not support the outlawing of polygamy because they believe that it is specifically authorized by the Koran. However, they also say that it is only meant to be done in certain circumstances, such as when a first wife is unable to give her husband a child. They feel it's only appropriate when the husband can financially support more than one wife. Nita told me that no one in the leadership of the party is polygamous. It was clear to me from the responses of the women I spoke with that they would not be happy if their husbands decided to take second wives (though none of them directly answered my question about that).



For example, when I asked Sita how she would feel if her husband took another wife, she answered, “We see the issue of polygamy as a casuistic case. Meaning individual by individual. For instance it’s like this, when a woman cannot give her husband a child, and he wants to have a child. Meanwhile they have a harmonious family. With his wife’s permission, the husband may marry again. And that is permitted and allowed. So there is family agreement, between the old wife and the new to form a prosperous family, peaceful. If it’s only to fulfill sexual needs, certainly it must be opposed.” If the wife doesn’t like it, Sita continued, she can get a divorce.

As was often the case with women from the Morality Party, Sita evaded my question by talking about the organization’s platform and making it sound moderate and pragmatic. But the omission revealed that she knows just how contested and emotional this issue can be.

An odd aspect of Sita’s explanation is that it doesn’t make that much sense. In Indonesia, it is rare for married couples to decide not to have children. Those who don’t want children generally don’t get married in the first place. If a wife is unable to bear children, why wouldn’t the couple just adopt? It is quite common, for instance, for childless couples to adopt an orphaned or an extra child from a member of their extended family network. So, it is clear from Sita’s explanation that for the Morality Party, polygamy is an ideological commitment rather than a true policy. Nevertheless, they feel it is necessary to try to justify it on seemingly practical grounds.

### **Contrasting Visions of Womanhood**

Bijiah and the women’s division of the Morality Party represent two emerging and divergent models of womanhood in Indonesia. While both are grounded in modernist Islam, the vision of





womanhood represented by Bijnah reaches out across the globe for inspiration, while that represented by the Morality Party foregrounds the unity of Indonesian Muslims.

While Bijnah is one of the most liberal Muslim organizations in Indonesia, with strong ties to the N.U., many of its staff were influenced by the Muslim student movement of the 1980s and 1990s. Nearly all of the women who work there wear the jilbab, the most visible and still-contested symbol of the Muslim resurgence. In addition, they also wear “Muslim clothing,” that covers the arms to the wrists and the legs to the ankles. This outfit is a contrast to more traditional styles of clothing for Indonesian women, as well as to Western clothing, which is still predominant in Jakarta’s government and corporate office. Nevertheless, many women at Bijnah consider this clothing a matter of choice and identity. And they express views on women’s rights that would not sound out of place at an American feminist organization.

In addition to women’s rights, however, Bijnah also places a great deal of emphasis on pluralism. In accordance with this, Bijnah often invites members of Christian organizations to its events, and Bijnah staff have appear at workshops or symposia with representatives from various religious groups to discuss religious tolerance and inter-faith activist efforts.

Bijnah is also quite interested in reaching out to the world. They are have informal relationships with other groups in the region. Staff frequently travel overseas for conferences or workshops. The group also has a website and is endeavoring to translate its journal articles into English so that non-Indonesians can read them. Staff at Bijnah were constantly eager to discuss foreign affairs, globalization, and the intricacies of American politics.

In my view, Bijnah represents a conception of womanhood that involves a strong sense of Muslim identity, yet in a way that is not narrow. Instead, it is a cosmopolitan womanhood, that incorporates liberal ideas about equality and rights with Islamic conceptions of modesty and



morality. The Bijnah woman is well-educated, pious, and middle-class, a global citizen who is concerned with human rights and democracy, and engages with colleagues from all kinds of religious and national backgrounds.

While the Morality Party's conception of womanhood shares Bijnah's emphasis on education, it is more grounded in a particular understanding of Islam. They envision women living pious lives, rejecting the secularism and hedonism of the West. Sita explained that her conception of the ideal woman has four characteristics: religion, prosperity, intelligence/empowerment, culture. "I think an Indonesian woman is religious. I don't compel her to be religious like a Muslim with the Morality Party platform... It's important for Indonesian women to be religious so that they can correlate their worldly and spiritual lives," she said.

The Morality Party's concern for virtuous lifestyles and critique of "hedonism" represents a broader concern with sexual morality and appropriate gender roles. Hedonism to them entails lavish spending and/or consumption, but also has a connotation of sexual depravity.

Additionally, for Sita, Indonesian women need to defend their national culture against global attack. "I am saddened by the conditions in Indonesia, it's as if the society doesn't have its own culture. Even though outside the country, many people are amazed at our culture. Our culture has faded with the global cultural scenario. This must be a characteristic of Indonesian woman."

The women of the Morality Party dress in a similar fashion to the women at Bijnah. However, they view such clothing as a religious requirement, not as a means of asserting Muslim identity, though as I noted in the previous section, many party members stress that it cannot be compelled of a person.



The Morality Party does not appear to have links with organizations outside the country (though founding members studied at universities in the Middle East, Europe, and North America). As a political party, its main concern is in broadening its base, and to that end it has actively set up posts and recruited new members across the archipelago.

Certainly, the Morality Party does not ignore international affairs. In 2003, for example, it was very active in attending and even organizing large demonstrations against U.S. involvement in Iraq. But national issues such as corruption and morality tend to be the party's chief focus.

Thus, the model of womanhood promoted by the Morality Party is strictly religious, with a strong moral convictions. Like Bijnah, its stress on education draws on middle-class ideals of self-improvement and professionalism. Where the Morality Party's model of womanhood differs most from Bijnah is that the Morality Party's vision perhaps draws from global Islam in its inspiration, but reaches out mainly across Indonesia to other Muslims. There is less of a sense of belonging to or striving for a global community of women, and more of an abiding interest in building and strengthening the Indonesian Muslim community.

### **Bijnah, the Morality Party, and the Mainstream of Indonesian Urban Life**

I have chosen to examine two groups that define the liberal and conservative wings of Islam in order to further understand what is happening within the mainstream of Indonesian urban life. Although Americans often perceive activists as marginal outsiders, and such an assumption probably is true for some left-wing activists in Indonesia, it is not the case for the women in the groups I analyze. They are neither part of oppositional subcultures, nor on the forefront of fashion. On the contrary, they are demographically very representative of the Indonesian lower



middle class, coming from modest backgrounds with parents who were civil servants, teachers, or small businessmen, and availing themselves of opportunities to enter higher education. Like their counterparts who are not involved in women's organizations, they live in small houses in the sprawl outside the city proper. They may have a car for the family, and certainly a television, and the children are well-fed and dressed, but they are cash poor compared to middle classes in more prosperous parts of the world, and compared to those above them on the Jakarta class ladder. They rarely shop at department stores or Western-style supermarkets, don't vacation to the nearby resort island of Bali, and have never eaten at Jakarta's myriad upscale restaurants.

But more importantly, unlike their non-activist counterparts, the women in these organizations are self-consciously addressing issues of womanhood. Because of their location in Jakarta, they have a national platform, a public profile, and their concerns are articulated on a national scale. This distinctive position means that they are something of a vanguard of the Indonesian middle class. What they say and do is often written about in the national media, and therefore has the possibility of influencing middle-class women in urban areas across the country. Indonesia's rapid urbanization and growing middle class means that the women I study are increasingly representative of a major segment of the population; moreover, as in many developing countries, the middle class tends to set the tone for the rest. Thus, the conceptions of womanhood emanating from Bijiah and the Morality Party have an influence far beyond Jakarta.

Obviously, these two conceptions of womanhood are not exhaustive of the competing notions of womanhood in Indonesia. Nonetheless, I consider them to be among the most significant emerging notions of proper womanhood. They are gaining ground within popular discourse and likely to have a great deal of national influence. Still, I would like to briefly



mention what I consider to be some of the other major ideas of womanhood currently operating in Indonesia.

These older, but still important conceptions of womanhood are: the Jakarta fashionista and the housewife. The rail-thin, sexily dressed fashionista is one of the most visible figures in the popular media, but the women following this ideal are also evident in Jakarta's upscale malls, boutique shops, and swanky nightclubs. This conception of womanhood represents hyper-consumption, and rather exaggerated femininity. She draws her inspiration from global consumer culture, particularly as viewed through foreign fashion magazines. Jakarta's large and dynamic celebrity-entertainment culture, with its myriad tabloids, soaps, celebrity gossip shows, promotes this particular conception of womanhood.

The housewife ideal was promoted by the Suharto regime as an essential aspect of its drive to control the restive masses. Women were exalted as mothers, who contributed to the nation by producing and educating the next generation of citizens. And as wives, they supported their husbands' work to build the nation. The housewife ideal was unattainable for most Indonesians, but was hegemonic until quite recently. It remains relatively common among the middle classes, who can survive on one income.

Not surprisingly, these other models of womanhood have a glaring class dimension. That is, although they appear to be rather widespread in parts of Jakarta, they are actually rather unachievable for many Indonesian women. Jakarta's spatial segregation highlights this fact, for the fashionista in particular, is frequently seen in the modern central business district, the luxury housing developments, and the malls, but rarely turns up in the myriad kampungs and alleys where most Jakartans live.



What makes the Bijnah and Morality Party models of womanhood new is their divergence from these other popular conceptions of womanhood. Against this background, the conceptions of womanhood represented by Bijnah and the Morality Party women's division embody a rather different ideal of female social and political participation. Significantly, women from both organizations, are highly critical of the older state-controlled women's groups. Rather than seeing women simply as tools to be mobilized and controlled, they all understand women as political actors involved in shaping national and local politics. Nevertheless, it remains unclear in the case of the Morality Party, to what extent their conception of womanhood emphasizes agency rather than viewing women as useful constituents and symbols of adherence to Islam.

Additionally, these organizations are also defining themselves against other contemporary conceptions of womanhood. In particular, the critiques of materialism, uneasiness with secular lifestyles, and fears about hedonism that were voiced by women in both groups are partially a reaction to images such as the fashionista,. Meanwhile, in their roles as activists, whether liberal or conservative, they counter the uncritical nationalist, depoliticized figure of the housewife.

Thus, while the two conceptions of womanhood I have described – the liberal, cosmopolitan Indonesian Muslim woman, and the pious, conservative Indonesian Muslim woman – are not necessarily fully representative of all of the conceptions of womanhood at work in Indonesia today, they are certainly emerging and significant ideals. Because they are embodied in activist women's organizations whose work is on a national scale and who are located in the national center, their influence is likely to expand.



## Conclusions

The differing conceptions of womanhood represented by Bijnah and the Women's Division of the Morality Party demonstrate that gender is an arena for the expression of divergent worldviews in contemporary Indonesia. The contrasts between them reveal that questions of gender and family are key to understanding how Indonesia's Islamic movement is evolving. Some of the most contested issues at present – such as Shariah law and polygamy – revolve around questions of gender and women's roles. As we have seen, Bijnah and the Morality Party take different positions on these issues because of their different understandings of Islam and gender. The two conceptions of womanhood embodied by Bijnah and the Women's Division of the Morality Party thus represent different views not only about women's rights, but more fundamentally, about how Islam should be interpreted, what democracy is, and the meaning of choice and autonomy . Nevertheless, with their similar emphases on progress and education, as well as their discomfort with tradition, they also reveal a similar orientation toward Muslim modernity. But the conceptions of modern womanhood represented by these two organizations also suggests some of the ways in which Indonesian national identity is currently being articulated with gender. In particular, the fact that Muslim women's organizations now represent two of the most important and influential conceptions of modern womanhood seems to indicate a growing tie between Islam and Indonesian national identity. These organizations, wittingly or unwittingly, have put a more Muslim face on the image of Indonesian womanhood.



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