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Female and single: negotiating personal and social boundaries in Indonesian society

Bennett, Linda. 2005. *Women, Islam and Modernity: Single Women, Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Contemporary Indonesia*. Singapore: Curzon Press. 183 pages, ISBN 0 415 32929 9

Muhammed Hassanali

Most people cherish individual rights. They also believe that certain rights should be granted to all regardless of gender or any other classification that denies human dignity and equality. But some societies withhold these very rights through a variety of tools (such as uneven distribution of state funds and law enforcement). Cultural norms, together with political and economic conditions sometimes convert rights into privileges for select persons.

It is often assumed that pious forms of Islam lead to political conditions that marginalise women's rights (as in Taliban Afghanistan). The Islamic revival in Indonesia has coincided with the rise of a middle class, an expansion of minority movements, and the growth and diversification of a women's movement. This revival has also witnessed a small fundamentalist movement that advocates a more domestic role for women. The relationship between pious Islam and women's rights is more complex than popularly portrayed.

Contemporary Indonesian society draws upon Islamic ideals, pre-Islamic customs and western models to form a complex web of social norms that are manifested to varying degrees by families and individuals. Linda Bennett artfully narrates how the young – especially young women – negotiate the boundaries of acceptable social behaviour in order to achieve greater personal autonomy, especially over their bodies.

Maidenhood

Most studies on Indonesian women concentrate on married women and family life. Some studies focus on sex workers, women at work, child labour, early marriage and women living in poverty. There are also demographic studies that are useful for drawing some conclusions, but that may not reliably discriminate attitudes arising from dif-

ferences in social standing. Bennett correctly states that women are at the pinnacle of their social standing when they attain motherhood. All life-stages prior to that are seen as journeys to motherhood. Bennett focuses on maidenhood, which she defines as the time between puberty and marriage. Since marriage defines the end of maidenhood, Bennett's work emphasises the attitudes of single women more fully than age-based demographic studies would.

Gender issues are social constructs, and one requires an understanding of societal norms to fully appreciate them. Bennett starts by providing a general background on Indonesian cultural ideals, then focuses on ideals of sexuality and gender. She discusses sexual double standards, the role of a woman's sexual reputation and its reflection on family honour, and the grave consequences for sexual transgression (real or perceived). As sexual purity is desirable and even erotic, young women dress modestly to enhance their sexual desirability and protect their sexual purity. Individuality is expressed through accessories (shoes, sunglasses, handbags and hair accessories), but make-up is rarely worn.

Bennett describes notions of love, desire and attraction in spiritual and profane realms as they are understood by young women. This lays the foundation for discussing premarital relationships and, in particular, courting practices. Indigenous gender ideals assume that women are passive actors in intimate relationships. Bennett shows that this is far from the lived reality and discusses the various ways women negotiate social boundaries to fulfil their desire for intimacy while maintaining their sexual reputation. She then presents examples of how youths use elopement and love magic – a sort of 'black magic' used to arouse another's amorous feelings – for manipulation and resistance. Both constructs are embedded in indigenous sexual scripts and sustained in contemporary ideology.

Intimacy and female sexual desire outside marriage are considered un-Indonesian or un-Muslim and those women who publicly express these feelings are labelled as promiscuous. Bennett narrates in detail a young woman's experience of undergoing an abortion, and the experience of another single woman seeking reproductive health treatment. Both experiences illustrate how being single and female at a reproductive health clinic immediately lead to assumptions of premarital sex (which is potentially devastating for women, as it diminishes their chances of finding a husband). The attitudes of others – especially health care workers – the potential for rumours and the fear of being seen by one who recognises the woman weigh heavily on the decision to seek these services. The lack of privacy when asked for personal data before examination, long wait times before seeing a doctor and the high cost of these services also influence women's decisions in seeking professional care. Indonesian law addresses women as wives or mothers – implicitly stripping them of their individual identities. Hence, while the government provides family planning services, it denies them to single women.

Sex education: one lesson for life

Bennett provides enough background details and narrates women's experiences without letting discussions on broader issues detract from their stories. This approach lets the reader understand the broader issues and empathise with the women as they bear the emotional consequences of their actions and decisions. The reader also gets a taste of the limited range of choices and the sense of helplessness and perhaps despair that these women feel.

While most Indonesian women want to protect their virginity (in keeping with cultural norms), their ideas of what constitutes virginity vary widely. For some, the entire female body is a site

of sexual purity, and hence all physical contact with men is avoided. For others, only the public persona of virginity needs to be maintained. Most women fall somewhere in between. Bennett points out that the level of knowledge of virginity, reproductive health concerns and 'sexual' diseases (such as AIDS and HIV) is very low. This observation is in line with notions of Indonesian society, where reproduction is not typically discussed with those outside one's (same-sex) peer group.

Government schools limit discussions about reproduction and sexuality to a single biology lesson that leaves virtually no room for discussion or for students to ask questions. The government claims that the conservative Indonesian society would not tolerate a more thorough discussion on sexuality. Bennett observes that youths attending religious schools tend to receive better education on reproduction and sexuality. NGOs, reproductive health professionals and religious organisations have organised seminars to educate youths on reproduction, sexuality and sexual diseases.

Bennett outlines a framework that uses Islamic principles to enshrine gender equality, and thus promotes reproductive rights of women – particularly those of single women. Her framework does not start with western ideals of human rights, but draws upon Islamic religious texts and outlines a gender-based equality of the sexes. She recommends discussing roles and responsibilities specifically in terms of gender rather than in the context of human rights. This approach would be sensitive to Indonesian culture and would draw inspiration from indigenous cultural ideals.

A new tolerance

Indonesian advocacy groups are already using variations of Bennett's framework to promote their vision of an ideal society. Fatayat (the women's division of Nahdlatul Ulama), for example, draws inspiration from religious texts to pro-

mote its ideals of political society and Islam – one of which includes gender equality. Other, more secular groups espouse notions of separation of religion and politics. These organisations draw inspiration for human rights from religious and western sources, fusing notions from both to create innovative notions of human rights and gender equality.

Indonesian activists, with their adherence to an interpretation of Islam that inspires political activism, embody a new tolerant Indonesia. For them, Islam is a crucial resource for political mobilisation and underpins their beliefs about democracy and gender equality. At the grassroots level, their views are beginning to be woven into the fabric of Indonesian society – but much work remains.

Bennett's work is unique in that it focuses specifically on single women. As Bennett resists demographic classifications, she fully explores maidenhood – its challenges and opportunities. We are prone to taking a simplistic view on culture, religion and other social constructs when studying a society that is different from our own. Bennett discusses the competing ideals, their complex interactions and their sway on Indonesian women. She presents her findings clearly and cogently discusses their implications within the broader framework of young women's lives. The examples peppered throughout the text serve not only to underpin generalisations, but also to personalise the issues. The individual choices, actions and consequences of her characters endear the reader, provoking both an intellectual and emotional response. ◀

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