

THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IDENTITY IN INDONESIA: BETWEEN CULTURAL NORMS, ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS, AND STATE FORMATION*

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Abstrak

Tulisan ini membahas bagaimana identitas perempuan dan laki-laki dalam era transformasi di Indonesia telah dikonstruksi oleh norma-norma budaya dan sosial yang berkembang dalam masyarakat serta formasi negara dalam wacana penciptaan/pembentukan identitas-identitas warganya terutama konsep dan terminologi 'perempuan' sebagai ibu, istri, dan jati diri perempuan itu sendiri. Dalam tulisan ini disinggung pula bagaimana organisasi-organisasi perempuan Islam seperti Muslimat dan Aisyah telah berupaya melakukan diskusi publik tentang perlunya melakukan reinterpretasi terhadap penafsiran dalil-dalil agama tentang peran dan kedudukan perempuan.

Kata-kata Kunci: gender, Indonesia, norma-norma, budaya, sosial, formasi negara, Muslimat, Aisyah

The position of women in the transformation era of Indonesia is still considered problematic. Indonesia is in transition from being an agrarian society to becoming an industrial society or between traditional and modern. Consequently, women as members of the society are also in a similar crucial position. Women are facing a dilemma. The issue is whether they behave in a traditional manner or become modern women. 'Traditional women', seen by the so-

ciety, still follow and hold the ideal norms of traditional Javanese culture and the tenets of Islam. On the contrary, 'modern women' are perceived as having a modern lifestyle following the global movement and develop themselves in adapting to the movement of modernization according to the values of Western culture.

In reality, some urban middle class women are not one or the other, but are constantly negotiating

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the two extremes, filling a middle ground where they are both traditional and modern at the same time. They are usually affluent middle class, who have a modern life style, some of them having studied overseas, who sometimes shop in Singapore, Hong Kong, Paris, and casually travel overseas. These women have been considered as modern women who tend to be liberal in their attitude and beliefs and are viewed as having sufficient freedom to define their future. These women concentrate on their career and principally they also support women's emancipation, but in fact, it is hard for them to sympathize or feel any solidarity with the poor village women, many of whom are employed as domestic servants in these women's houses.

Meanwhile, there are also numbers of women who consider themselves primarily as mothers and wives, and only secondarily as the workers or as wage earners. These women are less likely to demand a wage, which provides them with more economic independence.

The work of a woman in this case is always regarded as supporting a husband. These women follow and hold the norms, role and behavior which are considered ideal by the society. They like being *Ibu* [mother] who is busy with children, cooking for her husband, and being a wife beside her husband [*istri pendamping suami*]. They are viewed as following the tenets of Islam and the norms prescribed by the Javanese culture for being the ideal woman.

They are the women who believe that a woman must obey her husband if he orders her to serve him, for example, or by accepting the right of the husband to determine their social life.

Thus, I argue, the transformation era, from traditional (agrarian society) to modern (industrialized society), has problematized the models available to Indonesian women, requiring them to negotiate between the extremes. This article explores and examines how the concepts of womanhood and gender identity have been constructed economically, politically, and culturally in Indonesia context.

The Construction of Womanhood in Indonesia

Historical Overview. The construction of womanhood in Indonesia is keenly adapted by the State government from the cultural values of Javanese and the values of Islam fundamentalism. The conception of womanhood has been influenced from the central Javanese Royal Palace both in Yogyakarta and Surakarta. Indonesian woman is identified as women of the Royal family. The role and the status of woman in society are defined and derived mirror to the role of women in the Royal family in which women should loyal to the husband [man] and supposed to be an ideal housewife and mother for her children.

Historically, from time to time Javanese King had wife and/or mistress more than one. Several Javanese Kings even did not have wife but only concubines. For example, Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX, a King of Yogyakarta Palace from 1940's to 1985, had five mistresses and twenty-two children. However, the ruling Sultan of Yogyakarta, Hamengkubuwono X, is modern and educated man has married only once and has five daughters. He has declared his wife as a Queen of Yogyakarta Palace; so that the Sultan's father's generation was the last of Yogyakarta's Royal polygamists. Meanwhile, the King of Surakarta Royal, named Susuhunan Pakualam XII, who is now still ruling the Surakarta Palace since the 1960s, has six wife and has 46 children. As in the past the Sultan and the Susuhunan had many wives so he would have as many children as possible. The women, both the wives and/or the mistresses, and daughters, were restricted within the Palace. There is a place in the Palace called '*Kaputren*', a place for women only. In this place, all the Royal's female should did woman's works and activities such as practice traditional Javanese dancing, making traditional medicines and cosmetics, painting Batik, and cooking for traditional ceremonies or events in the Palace. In the past, those women were allowed to go to school which was provided within the Palace complex. The situation was different from men. The Princes had more opportunity to study outside the

Palace wall, even to abroad, than the women.

Nowadays, in the transition era from the traditional practices to the modern, the role of the Royal wife is the same as a modern wife. She has more freedom to have activities outside the Palace than before. Similarly, the condition is also admitted for the Royal daughters in which they able to challenge to choose their own life.

However, since the Independence of Republic Indonesia in 1945 up to the Soeharto's era, women are still supposed to hold a traditional value as a Javanese whom also as a member of 'Eastern' society. As the first and the second Indonesian Presidents were Javanese men, they played an important role in defining the identity of woman in Indonesia. President Soekarno, the first President, was a polygamist and one of his ex-wives is used to be a Japanese Geisha.

On the contrary, the second President, Soeharto, is a monogamist and he has threat himself as "the Javanese King" since the Royal Family authority has long been taken over by the national government, and has put his family as if the Royal Family's member. With strongly hold the traditional Javanese way of life, Soeharto and his family then played an important role in determining the identity of Indonesian society.

The Conception of Womanhood

There are three concepts involved in the social construction of womanhood in Indonesia in which I examine here. These are formed particularly from the blend between Javanese cultural traditions and Islamic norms. The two first concepts are those of 'Istri' [housewife] and 'Ibu' [mother]. The third concept, there of 'state Ibuism', is a creation of the state, and symbolizes its position on women within the context of a patriarchal system.

The Indonesian New Order government has defined woman in terms of 'Istri' [housewife] and 'Ibu' [mother]. Woman as a housewife ('Istri') depends on her husband, has to take care of her husband and children, and is also busy with home duties. Meanwhile, the notion of 'Ibu' [mother] covers the range of roles from domestic to public worker. The state uses the term *Ibu* in its limited biological meaning (Suryakusumah, 1996: 101).

Housewifization is the first concept of Indonesian women discussed here, in terms of its economic aspect. This term was used for the first time by Maria Mies in her work *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (1986). Mies (in Suryakusumah, 1996: 101) defines *Housewifization* as:

A process by which women are socially defined as housewives, dependent for their sustenance on the income of their husbands, irrespec-

tive of whether they are de facto housewives or not. The social definition of housewives is the social definition of men as breadwinners, irrespective of their actual contribution to their families.

The concept of '*housewifization*' describes the ways in which women depend on the income of their husband for their sustenance. Women are not considered as wage earners in the family and are perceived as non-productive in society. As a housewife, a woman provides free domestic labor. Women are also viewed as isolated and lacking adequate political and economic power. Consequently, women are placed by the state in a subordinate position to men. According to Suryakusumah (1991: 47), the term was coined by Mies the ideology of '*housewifization*' was developed in relation to the growth of capitalism in Indonesia. In industrial development, '*housewifization*' is a strategy for the reproduction of the labor force in a domestic setting and for producing agents of consumption amongst domesticated housewives. Mies (1986:110) states, "housework is essential to the accumulation process and that *housewifization* means the "externalization" of costs which would be otherwise covered by capitalists" (cited in Suryakusumah, 1991: 47). Thus in this context, a woman is a person who spends most of her life and social activity around the house.

It is Madelon Djajadiningrat (1987) who coined the term '*Ibuism*', the second concept examined here, in relation to the creation of an ide-

ology of femininity in the Indonesia context. Djadjadiningrat (1987: 44) defines *Ibuism*:

As being an ideology which sanctions any action provided it is taken by the mother who looks after her family, a group, a class, company, or the state, without demanding any power or prestige in return.

Djadjadiningrat derives her concept from a Javanese cultural historical model of womanhood. The concept of *Ibuism* focuses more on the spread of the dominant Javanese ethnic value defining the ideal woman, as being a mother for her children and as the one supposed to do the domestic work for the family, throughout the Indonesian political sphere. According to Djadjadiningrat (1987: 44), the ideology of *Ibuism* developed in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. As Indonesia is still a class society in which status symbols are important, women as *Ibu* not only have to subsidize their income as before, but women have to ensure that the *priyayi* [Javanese bourgeois] class status symbol is maintained. She couples the ideology of *Ibuism* with the process of *priyayization* or elite class action among the Javanese groups. The process of *priyayization* in Djadjadiningrat's work is significant to the process of social transformation and the application of traditional values to support national development, modernisation, and the control of power in the New

Order regime (Suryakusumah, 1991:48).

Thus the role of *Ibu* became more than that of a mother who feeds and looks after her children. But also the new Indonesian society called upon the '*kaum Ibu*' to put their shoulders to the task of building a new national state; ... The honor they could gain was that of being a good *Ibu*. Power and prestige remained the privilege of men (Djadjadiningrat, 1987: 43).

Suryakusumah then attempts to combine the concept of 'housewifization' and '*Ibuism*' in relation to the process of domestication in Indonesia. She formulates the term '*State Ibuism*' to connect with the political construction of the Indonesian women by the New Order government. "*State Ibuism* defines women as appendages and companions to their husbands, as procreators of the nation, as mothers and educators of children, as a housekeepers, and as a member of Indonesian society" (Ibid). In other words, the Indonesian government still view and value woman not as the subject of social activity, but as the object of national development meant to fulfill domestic roles: women are expected not to forget their "natural" destiny (*kodrat*) as wife and mother.

The New Order government tended to employ the concept of women as wife or mother or both as the most convenient gender ideology. Consequently, there is a belief that a wife has to follow her hus-

band. As Sullivan (1991, p.70) states " Women are included in national development, not as fully fledged, responsible citizens, but as dependent assistants of males".

This formulation is crystallized by the state creation of the government official wives' organization, which is called *Dharma Wanita*¹ and of which all the wives of civil servants automatically became members. *Dharma Wanita* has a very specific agenda where:

There is the propagation of the nuclear family norm, the segregation of women into gender specific programs, as well as increasingly middle-class images of women in the media. There is the state creation of compulsory wives organizations which mirrors the hierarchy of the husbands, reflecting the notion that women are defined in their capacity for serving their husband, their family, and the state (Suryakusumah, 1991:50).

This organization is like the "umbrella" organization for women' and wives' organizations in all govern-

¹In fact the members of this women's organisation are not only the wives of civil servants, but some of the members are also female civil servants themselves. A similar wives organisation was also created for the military's wives, call *Dharma Pertiwi*. Its members consist of wives of the Army organisation (call *Persit Kartika Chandra Kirana*), wives of the Police organisation (call *Bhayangkari*), wives of the Air Force organisation (call *PIA Ardhya Garini*), and wives of the Navy organisation (call *Jalasenastri*).

ment departments. The structure of this organization parallels the structure of the husband's position in the hierarchy of the bureaucratic system. For example, the wife of a minister in one department automatically becomes the chairperson of this association and so on. *Dharma Wanita* is part of the state formation in that it determines the position of women in Indonesia.

It is quite obvious that by establishing this association, the New Order government aimed to encourage the wives of civil servants to support their husbands' careers and responsibilities, secure the loyalty of government employees, increase political stability, and to strengthen a national unity (Sunindyo, 1993, 135). It was rumored that the degree of attendance of the wives in this association was made as an indicator to secure the position of their husbands in the department. This, in turn, fosters a patriarchal power structure and class inequality, making this women's organization an extension of the bureaucratic apparatus. In addition, the state also disseminates the ideology of domesticity through the creation of the applied family welfare program, called *PKK: Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga*. According to this program, the role of women is designed to increase the welfare and health of family.

...But in early New Order autonomous women's organisations disappeared. Women's representative bodies became 'wives' organisations. Wives of civil servants were obliged to join *Dharma Wanita* (literally,

Women's Duty), and duty-bound to support their husbands' work. The PKK, the village level institution through which many of government's family welfare measures were implemented, was committed to the five duties of a woman, which started with her role as wife and mother... (Sen, 1999: 14)

Thus, the integration of the role of women into the national development in Indonesia is actually the encouragement of functionalist roles for functionaries' wives, like house-keeping, hygiene, children upbringing, and which promoted gender inequality within the existing sexual division of labor in the family and society. That is what the New Order government claimed as a distinguishing concept of womanhood in Indonesia, which differs to the Western's conception (Sunindyo, 1993: 136).

Hence, the concept of *Ibu* (mother) in Indonesia is related to the "essential nature" of women. With the "essential nature", *Ibu* is given a responsibility to bring all members of the family to a better life by preparing the children to be a good citizens in the future. These kinds of women's responsibilities have been promoted as crucial in the national development. That is why a housewife is called "a motor of development" by the New Order regime. The question then is how deeply this image of women penetrated Indonesian society.

The creation of a state concept of womanhood in Indonesia comes

into conflict with the idea of global modernization which has also affected the attitude and behavior of Indonesian women. This conflict has stimulated a set of dual portrayals of woman in Indonesia. On the one hand, it was the New Order state's policy that described a woman [*perempuan/wanita*²] as mother [*Ibu*]. On the other hand, modernity has created the concept of Indonesian women who seem to accept Islamic fundamentalism, are also active professional people and at the same time are urban women with a modern life style.

A woman in Indonesia is considered not a complete human being before she is married. All single women have to prepare themselves for the appropriate fulfillment of the role of wife. Consequently, a career woman who prefers to remain single is considered as deviant. Nowadays, however, there has been a shifting paradigm in which urban women tend to delay their marriage and choose to their career instead of having a family. Even, it has been

²The terms "*perempuan*" (woman) and "*wanita*" (lady) are still in dispute in Indonesia. Some feminists Indonesia like to use the term *perempuan* instead of *wanita*. They have argued that the term *perempuan* is seen more polite and more acceptable than *wanita*, according to its lexical meaning from the Sanskrit. However, politically, these feminists seem oppose to the State creation toward the term *wanita*. As it is written by Sen (1999: 15) in her reportage article on women's congress in Indonesia in December 1998, that the congress was "seeing a particular strength in term *perempuan* (woman) over *wanita* (lady, the common New Order term for women)".

rumored that many urban middle class women in Jakarta prefer to adopt and take care child by themselves. The phenomena of single parent for women have being popularized in Indonesia today.

Gender Relationship in Contemporary Indonesia

Industrialization and modernization led to increasing of numbers of women occupying fields that were traditionally dominated by men. The proportion of women in employment rose by 2.6 per cent (from 33.2 per cent in 1971 to 35.8 per cent in 1990) in the last twenty years of national development in Indonesia (Hill, 1994, p. 146). More and more women are occupying managerial positions both in government departments and in private businesses. In addition, for upper middle class women, jobs are part of social status. The wife's responsibility is not demanding in terms of hours because servants take over their domestic work. On the contrary, women from the lower classes value a job because it is essential as a part of their life's struggle. Moreover, the wife's domestic responsibility still places huge demands on them.

Industrialization has also brought a positive impact to a progression of the level of education among Indonesian women. In other words, there is a greater chance for women to complete their education

to a higher level than ever before. The proportion of women who completed junior high school and above increased rapidly from seven per cent in 1971 to 49.2 per cent in 1990 (Hill, 1994: 146). However, while many women work and bring income to the family, the social situation has not changed. Women still hold responsibility for doing the housework, which is demanded of women by Indonesia society and culture, even women with higher education. This is what the New Order Indonesia called the "dual role" of women [*peran ganda wanita*]. Women on the one hand are given the opportunity to enter occupations, on the other hand women are supposed to recognise their destiny [*kodrat*] as mother and wife.

Even many Indonesian Muslim women still have different interpretations in defining the role of woman as it has been prescribed by Islam. Many of them view, according to Islam, the role of wife as being to carry the responsibilities inside the house and to look after the husband and children. As a Muslim mother argues, "the role of the husband is as leader in the house and in society. In Islam a woman has no obligation to work for money, that is her husband's role" (in Williams, 1998: 272). This notion implies that a woman in Islam has to have the support of her husband for her to have a job outside the home, because a woman is not required to look for a job to earn money. The responsibility to bring an income for the family rests on a man's shoulder.

ders. As one Muslim woman says,

We are not superwomen... so if I want to work then I must compensate for my absence by providing a maid to do my work. Islam doesn't say that a wife has to do all the work herself.... The husband isn't actually doing any of the domestic work himself (Williams, 1998: 272).

The ideal of male-female relations in Indonesia can also be seen from the articulation of marriage between Islam and *adat* (custom) which are quite different in this respect. According to de Stuers (1960: 207), the Islamic marriage, as it is prescribed in the *fikh* (Islamic law), is in principle a contract between a man and a woman as two individuals who are obliged to give their consent. The husband obtains the rights over his wife; while the wife claims appropriate treatment from her husband. In contrast, marriage in Javanese culture means a ritual ceremony where both the man and the woman make a statement in which the two individuals assert they are couple.

However, some Muslim leaders and scholars have argued that Islam does not restrict the relationships between husband and wife in term of responsibility in bringing in the family income or in terms of role distribution in the household. Islam has also never prohibited women from looking for work outside the home or going out in the public sphere. Islam may even encourage women to have a career outside the

home. As Abdurrahman Wahid, one of the Indonesian's Muslim leaders and a present President, claims:

You have to look at the issue with wider sense of the meaning of Islam in Indonesia, ... We are conscious of the threat of being uprooted by modernisation and rapid social change ... Personally, I believe that the Prophet demands interpretation from us, not just blind following, and I think this illustrates the differences in the perceptions of women in the religion. But, also, I do have to say this frankly, many Muslim leaders still look at women with degrading attitudes, they still believe that the rights of women are not equal to the rights of men (Williams, 1998: 278-9).

Recently, there has been a movement from the activists of Moslem Women Associations, that is 'Aisiyah' [*Muhammadiyah*] and 'Muslimat' [NU] to deconstruct the system of board committee in the two major Moslem organizations, i.e. *Muhammadiyah* and *Nahdatul Ulama*³. In their Congress on June 2000, *Aisiyah*'s activists asked for equal opportunity for women to be appointed as one of the board members in those organizations. They tried to challenge the patriarchal status quo in which women have never been accounted in designing and making decisions for their fol-

³There are two mainstream Moslems organizations in Indonesia. They are *Muhammadiyah*, which is considered as modern Moslem organization, and *Nahdatul Ulama* (NU) which is considered hold traditional Islam manners.

lower.

The hierarchical order of the bureaucratic system of the state parallels the major features of male/female relations in Javanese culture. According to Sullivan (1991: 86), it is clear that in Javanese society there is a hierarchy which is applied in all areas of social life, including the relations between men and women and children, not only in families, but also in public political life. In Javanese society, women play a major role in dealing with household management and the nurturing, and socialization of children. They bear the responsibility of the physical and emotional needs of family members. Meanwhile, men are defined as the providers, protectors, heads and representatives of the household. As Sullivan (1991:74) argues:

The segregation of roles and spheres of work and influence by sex is not seen as a means by which men gain access to, and monopolize power in, formal structures and processes. Rather, it is acknowledged as a rational way to organize society according to the 'natural' order of things in the process of human reproduction.

This camouflage of the structural inequality which still pervades society arises from the assumption, as Sullivan points out, that as the 'natural' nurturers, women should be protected; while men, as the 'natural' protectors of women from the dangers 'outside', have to gain

the means to provide for their dependents. As a consequence, this is perceived to be a mutually supportive situation, and one in which men and women enjoy equal social status from their different positions and roles, as long they are dedicated to the ideal objective of secure and harmonious social life. This is what Sullivan (1991:74) calls "the consensus thesis: Javanese men and women separate but equal."

Furthermore, as in Indonesia women's work is classified according to social class, therefore, a job is an essential as a part of the life struggle for the lower class of women. Consequently, the relationship between wife and husband is egalitarian, but only in term of financial responsibility. Society still believes that the best place for women is at home.

By contrast, for the middle and upper class of women, a job is part of their social status. Many women from these classes are highly educated, and they tend to look for a job in private enterprises rather than in the civil services, mainly because of the image of the declining social status and economic condition of the civil servant. The civil servants in Indonesia still get paid lower than private employees.

The role of the state has also been indirectly involved in the determination of the dominant gender ideology currently in place in Indonesia. The identification of women with the domestic role by the ruling class apparatus has serious conse-

quences. As in most patriarchal systems, in Indonesia the relationships between gender and the state is far more complex and paradoxical than the functionalist accounts of a patriarchal state would indicate (Stivens, 1990, p.108). The role of women as mothers and wives is praised, especially under the New Order government for more than thirty years. As stated by Soeharto, the former President, in his biography, the women's organization (*Dharma Wanita*) in Indonesia is supposed to:

... to bring Indonesian women to their correct position and role, that is as the mother in a household [*Ibu rumah tangga*] and simultaneously as a motor of development ... We must not forget their essential nature [*kodrat*] as beings who must provide for the continuation of a life that is healthy, good and pleasurable (cited in Tiwon, 1996: 59).

All these aspects --state ideology, religious and customary laws-- complicate our understanding of the ideological construction of femininity in the Indonesian context. Islam, Javanese Hinduism, and Christianity have a different concept of femininity. As Hellwig (1991: 198) points out:

Religious convictions and the state are of major significance in the way gender patterns are determined. Islam, Christianity, and Hindu Javanese concepts supply the most fundamental ideas and beliefs about gender differences. Javanese Culture has a notable impact on present day Indonesian society as a

whole.

Indonesian society tends to emphasize the character of males more than females in many ways (Hellwig, 1991). This phenomenon is implemented in many contexts. However, the economic development strategy of the New Order regime has led to the changing of the sex role stereotypes in the lower classes in several significant ways. For example, women in lower middle class have to fight with men to get a job in the labor market. Many women from this class become the dominant income-earner for their family. As a result, the gender relationships are relatively balanced. The relationship of power between male and female, however, still operates strongly in an organized and structured way to the disadvantage of women. Mariyah (1995:18) says, in relation to Indonesia, "patriarchal power has been internalized in the structures of society and in cultural beliefs and values".

The unequal position of women in Indonesian society can be seen in the major political, economic and social institutions. Indonesian women are still in conflict with men in social, economic and political life. As the process of economic and technological development emerges and consolidates in Indonesia, the character of women's employment is changing. Cities have become the site of industrialization where new jobs are created. However, the kinds of jobs available for women are still

limited. According to Mariyah (1995: 18), 53.62 per cent of women workers are still concentrated in the agricultural sector although these numbers are now decreasing. In the public service only 6.3 per cent of women are in Echelon I in some government departments. On the other hand, in several fields of work, such as education and medicine, the ratio between male and female workers tends to be more balanced.

Due to the situation above, recently, the Minister of Women's Affairs has advised all governmental departments to occupy at least 30 per cent of women in Echelon positions. The policy is aimed at empowering women and increasing the potency of women in leadership environment. Moreover, this policy is also purposed to give more opportunity for women to have a high position and status in their workplace.

Conclusion

The creation of the state concept of womanhood in Indonesia comes into conflict with the idea of global modernization. This conflict has stimulated a set of dual roles and representations of woman in Indonesia. As it has been analyzed that it was the New Order regime's policy that described a woman as mother [*Ibu*] and wife [*Istri*] and as a working woman at the same time. Indeed, the state ideology --the official social construction of womanhood-- is significantly involved in the determina-

tion of the dominant gender ideology in Indonesia. As the society is in the transition situation, the role of woman, however, has shifted in today of Indonesia. Although in numbers women who take an active part in economic and political spheres are increasing, the situation is still problematic for women.

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