

GENDERED ASSUMPTIONS - AND - WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES:

*Interrogating 'Violent Extremism'
and political violence from
the standpoint of women*

INDONESIA CASE STUDY



Women and Media Collective
Established 1984

Women and Islamism in Indonesia: Navigating the Ideological Battlegrounds

by **KAMALA CHANDRAKIRANA**

Women and Islamism in Indonesia:
Navigating the Ideological Battlegrounds
by Kamala Chandrakirana
November 2022

Supported by: The International Development Research Centre (IDRC)
This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from International Development Research Centre,
Ottawa, Canada.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.

Published by:
Women and Media Collective
56/1, Sarasavi Lane, Castle Street,
Colombo 8, Sri Lanka.
Email: wmcslanka@womenandmedia.org
Web: womenandmedia.org
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/womenandmediacollective>
Twitter: <https://twitter.com/womenandmedia>

SECTION CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	04
Methodology	05
Research as engagement	07
Research as collective learning	07
Framing extremism as political ideology	08
PATHWAYS OF ISLAMIST EXTREMISM	10
West Java: Education as Site for Politicization	12
Central Sulawesi: Politics of Security	14
West Kalimantan: Local Capture	15
WOMEN NAVIGATING ISLAMIST EXTREMISM	17
YOUNG WOMEN'S EVOLVING ENGAGEMENTS IN ISLAMISM	19
Discovery of internal contradictions	28
Irreconcilable discrepancies with lived reality	29
Exposure to communities with alternative paradigm	30
Gendered journeys and transformations:	32
THE STATE'S ROLE: DISJOINTED AND HALF-HEARTED	35
CONCLUSION	37
REFERENCES	37

INTRODUCTION

THIS REPORT BRINGS TOGETHER the findings of empirical research in three localities in Indonesia as part of a three-country study on violent extremism and women's agency. The research is designed to achieve the following outcomes: (1) understanding of violent extremism transformed, particularly of young women from the nine sites of research in the three countries under study; (2) developing pathways out of violent extremism to inform a shift in policy intervention, based on and reflecting young/women's experiences as victims, participants, and resisters of violent extremism; and, (3) increasing the effectiveness of young/women-led community-based strategies to combat violent extremism beyond a state/security-centred approach, applying feminist analysis to social and cultural engagement processes. The overarching question guiding the research is as follows: How have young women experienced and navigated the forces of violent extremism in their lives, personally and in relation to marriage, family, community, and nation? It is also designed to answer these four specific questions:

1. *What are the pathways in which violent extremism developed and spread? What are its means and milestones at the national and local levels? How are they linked to previous or existing conflicts?*
2. *What are young women's perceptions of violent extremism, and what do they consider its drivers? What is the impact of violent extremism on their lives, including how they have borne its effects? What are their sources of vulnerability and strength, including the social movements they have accessed?*
3. *How have young women participated, resisted, or mobilised against violent extremism? Are there inter-generational and inter-sectional connections and/or disconnects that influence their sense of options?*
4. *In what ways has the state empowered and/or disempowered these women who are dealing with violent extremism in their daily lives?*

This country report is organized into four parts. It starts with a description of the approach taken by the country team and the methodology applied in the empirical study. This is followed by a section that provides an explanation of the larger socio-political context, at the national and local levels, on which the empirical work was conducted. This section is written primarily based on the study's papers on radicalization and social media as well as on the descriptions of local context by the local researchers. The third part presents highlights from interviews with nine women whose life stories were documented for this research. The final section examines the role of the state in addressing Indonesia's Islamist political movements and their impact on women.

The three sites in which the research is conducted have distinct histories, demography and ecology. They are: East Bandung in the province of West Java; Poso in the province of Central Sulawesi; and, Pontianak in the province of Central Kalimantan. West Java is the largest province in the country in

terms of population, at almost 50 million people with a strong Muslim majority, and East Bandung is a peri-urban centre of its capital city. The province was selected for this research due to its role historically as the birthplace of a political movement to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia, called *Darul Islam* or *Negara Islam Indonesia* (Indonesian Islamic State). This movement came into being during the early years of Indonesia's post-colonial independence when the nature of the newly sovereign state was being negotiated. Consequent Islamist movements since then often trace their genealogy to *Darul Islam*. The second research location is the district of Poso (population of almost 250,000 people), in the province of Central Sulawesi (population of approximately three million people), which was the site of inter-religious conflict in the early years of Indonesia's post-authoritarian reform at the beginning of the 21st century. Poso's post-conflict landscape was selected for this research as it was once used as a training site for Al-Qaeda in Southeast Asia and, when the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was declared, an Islamist group there announced their allegiance to it. The third location for the empirical research is the city of Pontianak (population approaching 650,000 people) in the province of West Kalimantan (population approximately five million people), which has a long history of political mobilization along ethnic lines in a multicultural society. It was included in this research because of an incident of mass violence instigated by a nationwide Islamist political campaign in Jakarta, 800 kilometers away across the sea, in which local ethnic identities were redefined in religious terms. It is expected that this incident would show how the intertwining of political mobilization along ethnic and religious lines is shaped by the Islamist political agenda at the national level. All three sites of the research are intended to demonstrate the wide diversity in the local articulation of extremist political movements in Indonesia.

The women whose life stories inform this report come from the three locations above as well as from women who joined Islamist movements during their university years in Yogyakarta and Jakarta.

Methodology

Engagement is a core element of this research project. The focus is on violent extremism as the research topic is itself intended as a means of engaging in the global discourse on the subject matter. In Indonesia, the research project is grounded in a mission of engagement with researchers and activists navigating the rise of Islamist ideologies in their respective contexts, particularly at the local level. It is also a knowledge-building project that is positioned within a feminist agenda for social justice and pluralism. Such positioning has, in turn, confronted the research team with questions regarding the framing and naming of the phenomenon globally discussed as "violent extremism." As part of a three-country study on this issue, it became clear from the outset that each country has its own distinct relationship with the term, shaped by its specific social and political histories. In international discourse, the term also emerged in a particular context for specific interests. For the Indonesian context, the term is mostly used among experts, academics, and civil society organizations engaging with the issue but does not much enter into policy-making or public discourse at the community level. The term itself is used either in its original English language or in various forms of a literal translation into Indonesian that sounds awkward.

Research as engagement

The Indonesian empirical research team consists of eight local activist researchers who are deeply engaged in their respective communities on issues of women's rights, social justice and peace. They are central to ensuring that all the intended aims of this research would be achieved, including the effectiveness of young/women-led community-based strategies to combat violent extremism beyond a state/security-centred approach. All the local researchers work in the community in which the fieldwork was conducted. Rahima, an association that works on women's rights within Islam, coordinated the fieldwork in West Java; Mosintuwu Institute, a civil society organization based in Poso, Central Sulawesi, works on women's rights, peacebuilding and ecological justice; and, Suar Asa Khatulistiwa (SAKA), a local foundation based in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, supports youth and women in advocating for pluralism and tolerance. Each partner organization has deep networks in these communities and has brought young researchers into the team. Their active networks and engagements enabled them to find the women for the interviews and to gain their trust in the process, and their respective mission on women's rights and social justice ensures the active use of the research results.

Each local partner organization set up its own research team. In West Java, the team consisted of four women, while in Central Sulawesi and West Kalimantan the teams consisted of two persons each. All local teams had to interview five women from different age groups, backgrounds, and positions vis-à-vis the Islamist movements. Beyond the basic criteria in selecting the women to interview, they were given leeway to include additional considerations according to their organization's specific needs and interests. This step was taken to ensure that the research was meaningful to each organization's mission in their respective contexts and not simply an initiative that exclusively meets aims at the national or global level. In light of this, Rahima in West Java interviewed women who joined Islamist movements as well as those from minority communities who were victimized by them. Meanwhile, the Mosintuwu Institute in Central Sulawesi found it necessary to include women combatants from among the Muslim and Christian communities to show the interconnection between Islamist extremism and past conflict. Each research team were also asked to produce a paper that describes the broader socio-political context of their respective localities. To gain access to women in the Islamist movements, each team conducted focus group discussions and meetings with key people in their networks who would be able to provide assistance in identifying and connecting them with the right women. In one case, our researcher was surprised to learn that the woman she was to interview was, in fact, a close friend who had never disclosed having been part of a movement to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia.

The pandemic posed real challenges during the fieldwork as the timing coincided with Indonesia being one of the worst-hit countries in the world by the Delta variant of Covid-19. Delays occurred multiple times as the country went into lockdown several times.

Aside from the interviews in the three localities, the Indonesian team also initiated another form of documentation of women's life stories. Through a member of its Advisory Group, the team invited seven women to write about their experience joining and then leaving Islamist organizations.

These women had all been students in universities in Yogyakarta and Jakarta. All welcomed the opportunity to share their stories. Their life stories provided valuable insight into the inner workings of Islamist recruitment systems into schools and communities as well as into the inner thought process that the young women went through as they navigated through their Islamist involvements. After writing these “unlearning diaries,” a few of the women shared that the process had a healing impact on them.

The fact that the research is carried out by activist researchers provided both advantages and limits. While the advantages have been mentioned above in terms of opening access and gaining trust, its limits have to do with the fact that all the women interviewed had some degree of association with progressive movements in Indonesia’s civil society. Only one woman had no association with the local research partner and was still inside the Islamist movement during the time of the interview. Contact was initiated through her social media platform. Unsurprisingly, the interview with her was brief, but it provided sufficient insight nevertheless.

This report profiles women whose life stories were documented for this research. While a total of 22 women shared their stories in this study, only several have been selected for this report to maintain a holistic focus on their life journeys and also to reflect the diversity of women’s life experiences and the variance of the Islamist political movements they joined. From the three districts where the empirical research was conducted, there are four women whose lives are profiled and another two whose views are recorded in this report. This report includes the life journeys of another five women which were taken from their own autobiographical writings submitted to the research team. The latter was called ‘unlearning diaries’ as they tell the story of how they entered and then exited these movements.

Research as collective learning

The empirical research process was conducted in three stages: preparation, the interview process, and post-interview. In the preparation stage, the local research teams participated in a three-day “reframing workshop” that was intended to provide information on the research aims and methods as well as to build a shared understanding of key social-political phenomena in the Indonesian context by bringing together experts on a range of relevant topics, such as the history of Islamist extremism in Indonesia, gender and identity politics, young Muslim women’s agency in social media, and the Indonesian government’s policy framework on terrorism. Preliminary discussions were also conducted on methodological issues, such as virtual ethnography and on writing life stories. The local researchers were also required to share background on their respective local contexts to start building the comparative perspective. For most of the local researchers, this workshop was also the first time they ever met as they are separated by significant distances across different islands in the archipelago. Ultimately, this initial workshop was also a means to open a collective space for the researchers.

The collective space for the empirical research commenced in May 2021 with the reframing workshop and continued to occur regularly – every two weeks or, as needed, weekly – up till January 2022 when the local researchers were finalizing their writings. The Covid-19 pandemic meant that this collective space existed virtually throughout the research. This space was used by the local researchers to consult on the research as well as to learn from each other as they navigate challenges in the field. All conversations in this collective space were facilitated by the country lead researcher. As we learned about the specific dynamics in the three local research sites through our regular virtual meetings, we agreed that each locality would highlight its unique contexts. For West Java, it was the centrality of social institutions, such as the family and education, as the spaces in which Islamist political agendas and recruitment occurred; for Central Sulawesi, it was its past of inter-religious conflict and the current post-conflict situation; while for West Kalimantan, it was the intersections of Islamist agendas with historically deep-seated inter-ethnic identity politics. Each team’s selection of women to interview was guided by this outlook.

During the interview process, the collective space was used to share the challenges in finding women who met the research criteria and were willing to speak with the researchers. The challenge came from the reality of a highly polarized and fragile society throughout the country. In West Kalimantan, a few women declined to be interviewed by our local research partner organization known for its work on tolerance and pluralism. In Central Sulawesi, a careful step-by-step effort to reach out to the wife of a leader in the armed jihadi community failed due to an attack by the Indonesian security forces that ended in the death of her husband. As the interviews commenced in each of the research sites, the researchers started sharing the stories they heard in our virtual space.

To assist the writing process, the country lead researcher was accompanied by an expert on cultural studies with experience conducting writing workshops on life stories. The post-interview stage of the research began with a writing workshop in November 2021. This workshop was followed by bi-weekly virtual meetings, including for each local team separately, which were conducted over the months of December 2021 to January 2022 in which comments were made to the first drafts. Revised write-ups from the local researchers were submitted in batches between February and March 2022.

Framing extremism as political ideology

In conducting the empirical research in Indonesia, the term “violent extremism” required reconsideration. This was raised as an issue among the local researchers when they started seeking out women to interview who had experience engaging in Islamist movements. They found the term politically charged, particularly for those who are not aligned with government policy, and risked *a priori* judgmental labelling that would discourage open conversation with their resource persons. In contrast, women who were participating in internationally-sponsored programmes on countering violent extremism were familiar with the term and had no problem engaging with it. Earlier that year, in January 2021, the Indonesian government took up the term as part of its international engagement, particularly with regard to the push for national action plans on violent extremism. The presidential regulation outlining Indonesia’s National Action Plan

for Preventing and Overcoming Violent Extremism that Leads to Terrorism 2022-2024¹ defines this phenomenon as “a belief and/or action that uses violent means or threats of extreme violence with the aim of supporting or committing acts of terrorism.” This research team ultimately agreed not to use the term “violent extremism” when introducing the study at the community level and in the individual interviews unless its acceptability is ensured. As a result, the research question on women’s perceptions on violent extremism was obtained from some of the resource persons but from not all.

While the term “violent extremism” opens doors to engage in the international discourse on the matter, it is too generic to be empirically meaningful for conversations at the local and community levels in Indonesia. In the largest nation of Muslims that is not, as a matter of political settlement upon post-colonial national independence, an Islamic state, the form that extremism takes is mainly one shaped by Islamism. In this context, Indonesia’s version of extremism is understood in terms of the goal to radically transform state and society through movements that aim to establish a religious autocracy, dismantle political, social, and economic institutions, and deny the cultural pluralism of the nation. Such transformative political agendas are waged through violent and non-violent means in Indonesia. Establishing Indonesia as an Islamic state and part of a larger trans-national Islamic caliphate are political goals advanced also by organizations that denounce violence and take on persuasive tactics through social organizing, online and offline. Breaking away from the violent vs non-violent binary in addressing extremism is especially relevant for this study that seeks to understand how women navigate in, through, or against these movements. For both violent and non-violent Islamist extremists, the idea of transforming state and society stands on the principle of male authority and control over women.

In framing extremism beyond the violent/non-violent binary, the research team turns to a definition of Islamism proposed by Mehdi Mozaffari. He understands Islamism as a totalitarian ideology comprising four elements: religious ideology: holistic interpretation of Islam; conquest of the world; and use of all means in achieving the final objective (Mozaffari, 2017). Such recognition of the multidimensionality of Islamism is useful for this study as it means recognizing that violent extremism is only one aspect of a totalitarian ideology and that it is not a prerequisite for achieving its goals. Women’s experiences within Islamist movements are defined not only by their violent projects but also by a belief system on the Islamist way of life. Mozaffari emphasizes that, as a religious ideology, Islamism believes in the indivisibility of religion, way of life, and government and provides guidance for “a total way of life with guidance for political, economic, and social behaviour,” which undoubtedly includes gender relations. Mozaffari’s conception of Islamism is also particularly relevant for the Indonesian context, in which a multitude of Islamist movements co-exist, in that he views Islamism as a “divided movement” with no single source of global leadership and with global as well as national formations.

In terms of political mobilization, Mozaffari recognizes that Islamism applies a whole spectrum of means to achieve its goals: propagation, peaceful indoctrination, and political struggle to violent methods. This view aligns with the findings of Charlie Winter after his review of propaganda media

1. See <https://setkab.go.id/en/govt-issues-regulation-on-action-plan-to-tackle-violent-extremism/>

products by the Islamic State after its declaration in 2014, in which violence was only part of a 6-pronged “taxonomy of Islamic State propaganda,” comprising brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging, and utopianism (Winter, 2015). Recognition of Islamism as a complex entity beyond its violent projects is crucial for understanding the breadth of Indonesian women’s interest and engagement in the political movements that aim at the transformation of both state and society following the Islamist ideology.

The women whose lives are profiled in this report had had different degrees and forms of engagement with several different Islamist movements: the Indonesian Islamic State, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, Jemaah Islamiyah, Jamaat Tabligh, Laskar Jihad of Poso, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and a range of student organizations following Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated with the Indonesian political party, Prosperous Justice Party. Of all these organizations, the ones that justify the use of violence to achieve their goals are the Indonesian Islamic State, Jemaah Islamiyah, Laskar Jihad of Poso and ISIS. Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia specifically denounces the use of violence but takes on a non-cooperative position vis-à-vis the Indonesian state. Meanwhile, organizations emulating the Muslim Brotherhood place themselves within the formal system of political organizing, both on campus as well as in the electoral system. Despite their varying political strategies, all these Islamist organizations have the goal of transforming the state and society and actively pursuing women for their movements.

PATHWAYS OF ISLAMIST EXTREMISM

Islamist movements have existed throughout Indonesia’s modern history, in diverse forms and agendas, espousing violence and non-violence, expanding and contracting in reaction to political changes nationally, locally, and globally.

In 1948, only three years after Indonesia declared its national independence, the Indonesian Islamic State was established in defiance of the young sovereign secular state. The centre of this movement was in West Java. This movement was crushed by the newly independent nation and stayed underground for fifty years, particularly during the 32-year authoritarian New Order regime. As this regime ended, communal conflicts erupted in various parts of the archipelago and mass violence spread along religious and ethnic lines. This re-energized the long-dormant Islamist ambitions and triggered the mobilization of Muslim men around the country to go to the conflict areas as jihadi fighters. The internet, which had just become publicly accessible at that time, expanded the reach of narratives on Islam’s victimization in Indonesia and the world with images of mutilated bodies in conflict zones. The most prominent images came from two conflict sites, in Maluku and Central Sulawesi. The latter is one of the empirical research sites in this study.

There are three main milestones in the rise of Islamist extremism in Indonesia’s national political landscape: the inter-religious communal conflicts at the start of the Reformasi era in the early 2000s; the declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2014; and the political mobilization

around local elections in Jakarta in 2017.

The political opening after the end of Indonesia's authoritarian New Order regime, in 1998, became fertile ground for the growth of Islamist movements as much as for the country's progressive rights-based movements. Homegrown Islamist movements, such as the Indonesian Islamic State (IIS) from 1948, and newer ones with transnational affiliations, such as Jamaah Islamiyah, Al Qaeda, and Hizbut Tahrir, all expanded their followings during this period. The inter-religious communal conflicts in Maluku and Central Sulawesi proved to be fertile ground for mass recruitment. The internet, which had just entered Indonesia, became the crucial means in the expansion of Islamist movements at this time. Most Islamist groups had set up their own communications team that relied heavily on the emerging virtual world.² In 2000, as many as 28 churches were bombed in Jakarta and other cities in Sumatra and Java, killing 19 people and injuring more than 120. Two years later, the bombings of two popular bars in Bali killed more than 200 people and injured another 200. The Jamaah Islamiyah, a homegrown Islamist movement operating in alliance with Al-Qaeda to establish an Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia, claimed responsibility for these attacks and continued to carry out bombings targeting international hotels, embassies and restaurants in 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2009.³ The leaders of these attacks were Indonesian Islamists who had been in self-exile under the authoritarian Soeharto regime and trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan for combat. Upon the end of this regime, they returned to Indonesia as part of a transnational Islamist movement.

Meanwhile, the political opening marked the beginning of an era of electoral democracy, often called "Reformasi," when the decades-long restrictions on forming political parties were abandoned. One of the most high-profile new political parties was the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party, established in the image of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey's Justice and Development Party. In contrast, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia chose not to take part in formal political processes and established itself as a non-violent social organization despite its political goal of building a global caliphate. Other Islamist organizations flourished during this time, including those that actively recruited in university campuses as well as in high schools.

The next big milestone for extremism in Indonesia was the declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014. ISIS specifically targeted Indonesians for recruitment and Indonesian Islamists responded enthusiastically. Among the recruiters were Indonesian women who shared online their experience of moving to Syria. One estimate puts between 1,000 and 2,000 Indonesians having pledged allegiance to ISIS by early 2016 (Countering Extremism Project, 2018). The targets of extremist attacks shifted after the presence of ISIS in Indonesia, from symbols of Western power (e.g., international hotels, clubs, restaurants) to that of the Indonesian state (e.g., police stations, presidential palace, detention centre). It is also during this time that women migrant workers abroad began to be active supporters of jihadis seeking ways to join ISIS in Syria and even financing bombing plans. This period demonstrated how closely connected Indonesian Islamists are to global Islamist movements.

2. See this study's paper on social media.

3. See report by Counter Extremism Project, 2018, at <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/indonesia-extremism-and-terrorism>

But aside from the global connections, the pathway of Islamists in Indonesia is also determined by local politics. In 2017, during a period of local elections, the Jakarta gubernatorial elections became a centre point for political mobilization among diverse Islamist groups to defeat the incumbent governor who was a Christian of Chinese descent. On the eve of the election year, on December 2, 2016, Islamist groups that do not espouse violence made a show of force through what has been called the largest political demonstration in Indonesia's history. Among the leadership of this demonstration was a Salafi-inspired movement whose long-term objectives include: a greater public role for ulama, shari'a-inspired public policies, Muslim majority rule and Muslim control of the economy. Their politics have been described as follows:

They are careful to stay within accepted political bounds, and avoid calling for the formal application of Islamic law or an Islamic state. Strongly influenced by the so-called Sahwa movement from the early 1990s in Saudi Arabia, a fusion of Muslim Brotherhood activism and Salafi-wahabi religious tenets, they aim to transform state and society from the bottom up along more puritan lines. Their instruments of choice are not political parties but educational institutions, religious outreach (*dakwah*) groups, the media and civil society through which they hope to shape public opinion. (IPAC 44, 2018)

This event was a milestone also because a few months after the completion of this gubernatorial election, the government took an unprecedented step of banning an Islamist organization. A ministerial decree repealed the legal status of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia on the grounds of its goals being in contradiction with the Constitution and its activities undermining the integrity of the nation. Three years later, in 2020, another Islamist organization that was involved in the 212 Movement, Islamic Defence Front, was unilaterally dissolved by the government. These steps marked a shift in the Indonesian government's stance with regard to Islamist social organizations, from accommodation to outright repression.

Meanwhile, Islamist extremism has distinct features and dynamics at the local level. The three districts in this empirical research illustrate the varying ways in which Islamist movements take hold given the unique histories, demographics, and ecology of a locality. Interests and actions of the national government, including the national policy framework to address terrorism and violent extremism, generate varying outcomes in different local contexts.

West Java: education as site for politicization

West Java is Indonesia's largest province, at almost 50 million people, with a strong Muslim majority at 97% of the population. People from West Java identify themselves culturally as Sundanese, and most consider Sundanese as synonymous with being Muslim. The capital city of West Java is Bandung, with a population of almost 2.4 million people, where the interviews for this study were conducted. Majoritarian politics predominate in this province and religious minorities there face discrimination, persecution, and violence. Data on violations of freedom of religion/belief

collected annually by the Setara Institute⁴ since 2016 show West Java as having the highest number of incidences, at 755 cases, more than double that of the province with the second most cases. Vigilante groups bearing the name of Islam were responsible for many of these incidents, including those associated with the Islamic Defence Front. West Java was also among the top provinces in the country producing local regulations which were discriminatory against women and minorities, according to data collected by Komnas Perempuan in 2016. Many of these regulations were framed in terms of district governments enforcing Sharia law.

Bandung is also a university city, with several top national universities located there. One of them, the top university on technology and urban development, was the first site of the Islamist *dakwah* (religious preaching) movements among Indonesia's youth. In the 1980s, student organizations with affiliation to Egypt's *Ikhwanul Muslimin* (Muslim Brotherhood) began recruiting in the campuses using a mentoring system organized into small cells and set up Islamic centres on campus. Other Islamist movements, such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia and the Saudi-oriented salafis, also recruited massively on campuses, in Bandung and other main cities like Yogyakarta and Jakarta. They mobilized to take over key positions in student bodies to influence decision-making not just in Islamic universities but also in secular ones. Students in these Islamist organizations then set up recruitment systems directed at high schools, utilizing alumni networks and engaging with high school student religious groups, called the *rohisi*.⁵ During the height of mobilization by Islamist groups in 2016, in relation to the Jakarta gubernatorial elections, Bandung became the headquarters of the notorious "Muslim Cyber Army," a collection of trained young hackers whose role was to spread provocation and hoaxes on social media. For them, having their Instagram site closed down by the government was considered martyrdom.⁶

Most genealogies of Islamist movements in Indonesia point to West Java where the Indonesian Islamic State (IIS) was declared in 1948 by the *Darul Islam* movement. The movement was soon crushed by the Indonesian state but then re-emerged under new leadership by the 1970s. In the 1990s, the IIS set up its own Islamic education institute which covered kindergarten to high school. Students from Bandung's top universities taught here. This was led by a branch of the IIS, called *Negara Islam Indonesia Zakaria* (NII Zakaria), which specifically focused on social and economic programs. It further set up health clinics, orphanages and businesses, including for the sale of *kurban*, sacrificial goats or cows during one of the Muslim holy days. This was the means to manifest the Islamic state. One of the women interviewed for this research, Alana, was a member of NII Zakaria. Other Islamist organizations also prospered in West Java, including the *Jamaah Anshorul Daulah* (JAD) which became the largest and most virulent pro-ISIS groups in Indonesia between 2014 to 2017.⁷

West Java also has an active progressive movement which take on the role of countering Islamist extremist narratives. A local interfaith organization, Jakatarub, was set up in 2000 to facilitate communication and exchanges between Muslim youths and those from minority religions and

4. See database at <https://bebasberagama.id/data/distribution-province-act>

5. See paper on context in West Java by the local research team.

6. Ibid.

7. IPAC, *Extremists in Bandung: Darul Islam to ISIS—and Back Again?*, Report No. 42, 12 February 2018.

beliefs. Other groups adopt a cultural approach at the community level, introducing films that give a message on tolerance. There are advocacy networks that focus on addressing the discriminatory local regulations in West Java and those that work on “violent extremism” as part of a national network of women’s organizations. The outreach of such groups has impacted on some to leave their Islamist movements.

The five women interviewed for this study reflect the dynamics of West Java. Two of them come from minority communities which have been the targets of Islamist vigilante groups, namely West Java’s indigenous religion and the Shiite Ahmadiyah community. Two other women are those who have taken up the path of resistance against Islamist encroachment of the education institution and against the growing culture of intolerance. Last but not least, one woman was interviewed for her experience as a cadre of the Indonesian Islamic State movement for more than 15 years from the age of 17.

Central Sulawesi: politics of security

Central Sulawesi is a much smaller province than West Java with a population of approximately three million people. It was the site of inter-religious conflict between 1998 and 2001 when several parts of the country broke out in communal conflicts just at the start of Indonesia’s post-authoritarian “Reformasi” era. The conflict was concentrated in the district of Poso, which has a population of nearly 250,000 people, and where this empirical research was conducted. There are equal numbers of Muslims and Christians in Poso, the former living mostly in the lowlands and the latter in the highlands, with pockets of Balinese Hindu communities who settled in Poso as part of the government’s transmigration program in the 1970s. Central Sulawesi is also a resource-rich province with significant forest cover, much of which are under large forest concessions. There is a long-standing political settlement in Poso in which the Muslim and Christian communities would take turns, within the framework of the electoral process, filling the positions of district head and deputy. The inter-religious conflict erupted when this political settlement was seen to be violated amidst accusations of corruption.

Over the three-year open conflict, armed groups from the Muslim and Christian communities destroyed approximately 8,000 houses and 150 public facilities, caused displacement of around 90,000 people, and resulted in the death of almost 600 people. The open conflict ended after a peacemaking effort led by a prominent Indonesian senior politician with the signing of the Malino Declaration at the end of 2001. Meanwhile, in 2000, the national government deployed military police as peacekeepers, marking the beginning of a series of special operations by the country’s national security forces (from the police and army) that continue till today.

After the open conflict ended, incidents of violence continued to occur, including the beheading of three schoolgirls and bombing of a market in 2005 (Komnas Perempuan, 2009). In 2010, Poso became a training ground for the armed Islamist Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (Eastern Indonesia Mujahiddin) or MIT. In 2012, two police officers were found dead in the hamlet of Tamanjeka, Poso, after being kidnapped by the MIT. This was followed by gun attacks directed at a police patrol crew which killed four among them. When ISIS was declared in 2014, MIT announced its allegiance to them.

MIT's violent attacks triggered more deployment of security forces by the national government, up to more than a thousand personnel from the police force and more than a hundred from the military under the framework of special operations specifically designed for Poso. An estimated 11 distinct security operations have been established for Poso by the Indonesian government to date.⁸ Meanwhile, the number of MIT fugitives hiding in the forest had been reported as in less than twenty. The security forces killed the MIT leader in 2016 and his successor in 2021.

The large and extended presence of security forces deployed by the national government has brought about concerns among many in Poso. The security operations have encroached into Poso's forest in the mountains where the MIT were said to be in hiding. This has made it difficult for local communities to access their fields and harvest their tree products. Local communities have reported illegal logging involving security forces as well as sexual exploitation targeting young local women, violence against civilian populations, and corruption.⁹

Civil society organizations in the district of Poso and more broadly in the province of Central Sulawesi have existed prior to the conflict, mostly working on natural resource management and women's rights. During the conflict, many of these organizations took up roles in human rights monitoring and peacebuilding. At the height of the conflict, international humanitarian organizations entered the area, financing and shaping much of the activities of local organizations. In the post-conflict context, and living with the continued presence of security forces, local civil society organizations have constructed new understandings of their situation, recognizing the powerful political and economic interests shaping the future of their communities.

The five people interviewed for this study illustrate women's experiences in Poso's evolving conflict and post-conflict situations. Two of the women were combatants during the inter-religious conflict, each fighting for their respective religious communities. One woman shares her experience living in a community of jihadis, another provides a picture of life in an Islamic boarding school linked to the inter-religious conflict. Lastly, a 26-year old woman tells her story of joining an Islamist youth group and deciding to leave it for a feminist local organization.

West Kalimantan: local capture

West Kalimantan, a province that shares a border with Malaysia on the resource-rich island of Borneo or Kalimantan, has a population of approximately five million people in a multicultural society. Kalimantan's dense tropical forest is known as second only to the Amazon but equally faces severe deforestation due to logging and extractive industries. As many as 26 ethnic groups¹⁰ reportedly reside in the province, including the indigenous Dayak people and several ethnicities who had been migrants into the region several generations ago. Four main ethnic groups predominantly shape the contours of local politics in West Kalimantan: the indigenous Dayak,

8. See Poso context paper by local researcher.

9. Ibid.

10. See the West Kalimantan context paper by local researcher.

Malays, Chinese and Madurese. The capital city of this province is Pontianak, with a population approaching 650,000, which is the site for this empirical research.

West Kalimantan has a long history of inter-ethnic conflicts. According to one analyst, there have been 12 violent inter-ethnic conflicts in the four decades between 1966 and 2008, involving Dayak vs Madurese, Malays vs Madurese, and Dayak vs the Chinese.¹¹ The triggering factors for these conflicts have been varied – land disputes, youth brawls, local elections, etc. – but underlying this all is the hierarchy of power and access to resources which overlaps with ethnic divisions in West Kalimantan. The indigenous Dayak, having been forcibly moved by the New Order government from the depths of the forest to settlements closer to the administrative centres are displaced from their traditional sources of livelihood. Meanwhile, the Madurese, who had left their poor villages in the island of Madura and migrated to the region in search of employment, mostly occupy the bottom stratum of West Kalimantan society and often targeted as scapegoats of social discord. The Madurese share their Muslim faith with the landed elites of the area who are descendants of the Malay sultanate. While the Chinese have been an integral part of the West Kalimantan society since the 18th century, they continue to be vulnerable to discrimination and violence. During Indonesia's anti-communist pogrom in 1965, the Chinese in West Kalimantan were persecuted for being communist with ties to mainland China.

Given the long-standing identity politics in West Kalimantan, there is fluidity in the way people declare their social identities. According to the census data of 2000, 34% of the population were Malay, 30% Dayak, 9.5% Chinese and 5.5% Madurese. The remaining 20% of the population were a mix of Javanese, Buginese (South Sulawesi) and Sundanese. A decade later, the 2010 census identified two dominant ethnic groups: 48% Dayak and 18.5% Malay. Some observers explain this shift in terms of changes in the way the people of West Kalimantan self-identify. According to the Dayak Muslim Family Association, by the time the 2010 census was conducted, West Kalimantan's Muslim Dayak had become more willing to be identified by their ethnicity rather than by their religion.¹² In the meantime, the dominant ethnic Malays are vested in their religious identity as Muslims, particularly due to historical fact that their sultanate was founded by Hadrami traders from Yemen. This connection to an Arabian identity would eventually play a key role in the way Islamist movements from Jakarta found an interested political constituency in West Kalimantan for their political agenda.

Identity politics in West Kalimantan heighten around local elections. The 2018 local elections had two candidates running against each other: a Dayak Catholic vs a Muslim of Javanese-Chinese-Tamil descent. The former is a woman from a local elite political family and the latter a seasoned politician. Meanwhile, in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial elections, the two candidates also had an almost parallel mix of identities: a Chinese Christian incumbent vs. a Muslim candidate of Arab descent. Leading up to the Jakarta elections, massive mobilization was carried out through a convergence of multiple Islamist organizations based on the idea that a Muslim majority society cannot be led by a non-Muslim. This mobilization was carried out under the banner of the "212

11. Ibid.

12. IPAC, *The West Kalimantan Election and the Impact of the Anti-Ahok Campaign*, Report No. 43, 21 February 2018.

Movement,” denoting the date of its massive show of force at the centre of the nation’s capital on December 2, 2016. One of the leaders of this movement was the *Front Pembela Islam* (Islam Defence Front) or FPI whose leader, Habib Rizieq, was an Indonesian of Hadrami descent. He had made a visit to West Kalimantan in early 2000 and found strong support from the Malay-Hadrami sultanate and its descendants. Some Dayak observers noted that the Malay political elites built alliances with national Islamist organizations and garnered support locally from non-Dayak migrant Muslim populations.¹³

The Islamist political mobilization for the 2017 Jakarta elections and that for the 2018 West Kalimantan elections were intertwined. A local politician facilitated a delegation from West Kalimantan to Jakarta in support of the “212 Movement” during its rally, while one member of the Malay sultanate attended on his own accord. In January 2017, a group of conservative Muslim clerics from Jakarta flew to Pontianak in a period of heightened tensions as the local election campaigns were gaining momentum. Their arrival triggered massive mobilization by the indigenous Dayak community who entered the airport tarmac area in traditional warrior dress, calling for the banning of the FPI. At this point, through the process of local Malay’s alliance-building with national-level Islamist, ethnic-based political mobilization took the form of religious-based oppositional politics. By June 2018, as the local elections came closer, public narratives among Muslim voters came to resemble more and more the Islamist narratives of the “212 Movement” during the Jakarta elections, namely that Islam forbids Muslim societies to be led by non-Muslims.¹⁴

The final outcome of West Kalimantan’s local elections was victory for the Muslim candidate. Tensions were high and many anticipated inter-religious violence to erupt. In the end, this did not happen due to the efforts of civil society, including by setting up a Hoax Crisis Centre, and by increased security measures by the government.

The five women interviewed for this study are all located differently in the ethnic landscape of West Kalimantan: a young Malay Islamist; a young Chinese Muslim; a Madurese journalist; a mixed Dayak-Melayu-Javanese who represents Muslims in the provincial inter-faith body; and a journalist immigrant from West Java.

WOMEN NAVIGATING ISLAMIST EXTREMISM

How do women perceive extremism? Interestingly, the women in this study have different ways of understanding the phenomenon. Their views are shaped by the specific realities of their local contexts and by their unique personal experiences. The perceptions documented here are from women who had never been part of any Islamist movements or those who have distanced themselves from them.

In West Java, where Islamists had set up massive recruitment systems among students and faculty, a campaign was waged by alumni against the pending appointment of a leader of Hizbut Tahrir

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

Indonesia as deputy dean in one of the university departments. Dahlia was one of the leaders who initiated this campaign. In her view, Islamist extremists are engaged in a transnational ideology that carries out indoctrination overturning conventional views on society and the state. She sees them weakening the values of the nation, undermining the love of the motherland, and encouraging social discord. In her view, the campus environment needs reclaiming through counter-narratives against radicalism and religious extremism. Dahlia's campaign was successful after mobilizing other like-minded alumni and receiving significant media attention. This view reflects the intense battle by civil society in West Java to recapture education institutions from the grip of Islamists.

In Central Sulawesi, where violent extremist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and ISIS were part of the post-conflict landscape, women's perceptions of extremism were inseparable from their experience in the inter-religious conflict that had erupted in the early years of the 2000s. Mala, who was a combatant from the Muslim community during the inter-religious conflict, believes that a recent incident of bombing and shooting by violent Islamists was not a sign of continuing animosity between the Muslim and Christian communities in Poso. In her view, these were the acts of Islamists from outside the region who wanted to keep Poso's inter-religious tensions alive and those who wanted to guarantee the continued flow of funding for programmes on anti-terrorism. Rima, who lived in a hamlet identified in public as a home ground for the East Indonesian Mujahaddin (MIT), believed that this was an act of labelling that benefited the national security forces posted in post-conflict Poso. In her mind, every time they capture a jihadi hiding in the mountains, someone in the security forces gets promoted. She believes that by now the number of remaining jihadis is so small that it should not be insurmountable to defeat them. Both Mala and Rima have grown cynical over the outsized role of the national security forces in post-conflict Poso and saw the issue of Islamist extremism in this light.

In West Kalimantan, where inter-ethnic tensions have historically fed into violent conflicts, perceptions on Islamist extremism did not veer far from women's understanding of their local context. Murni, who is a young journalist of Madurese ethnic background, saw the Islamists as part of the identity politics that have been the common practice by local elites all along. She believes that behind the mass mobilization using Islamist narratives is the old-age competition for resources among West Kalimantan's ethnic groups.

Some of the perceptions on Islamist extremism are derived from the personal experiences of women in this study. One woman who had experienced discrimination at school due to her indigenous religion in the majoritarian Muslim community of West Java believes that intolerance is more dangerous than terrorism. She believes that the state has criminalized terrorism and therefore clearly addressed it. In contrast, intolerance is societal behaviour that is often encouraged by influential Islamists with little sanction from the government. An Ahmadiyah woman who has been many times victimized by Islamist vigilante groups sees the state as being complicit in their prosecution due to restrictive government decrees against their religious community. In a different context, a Christian ex-combatant in Central Sulawesi notes that the existence of Islamist extremists in her area has perpetuated hatred in her son who believed that violence was the only way to respond to them. In her view, Islamist extremists are nurturing a culture of violence that is being

passed to Poso's young generation. Two women who were directly involved in Islamist movements – one in West Java and another in Central Sulawesi – demonstrated an evolution of their personal views. Upon departure from these communities, as a choice (West Java) or as a reality forced upon her (Central Sulawesi), they adopted the position of the state and viewed these movements as “prohibited” or “against the law.”

What are the sources of strength for these women? Most point to their families and many mentioned the important role of their religion and religious leaders. While many of the women in this study recognized the political nature of extremist movements, they also consider this a matter of (problematic) religious understanding. They see this as simultaneously a matter of political ideology and religious ideology. For the women who joined collective actions against extremism, the central role of civil society groups and supportive lecturers on campus have been identified. Many saw their vulnerability linked to their ethnic or religious identities as well as to their personhood as women.

YOUNG WOMEN'S EVOLVING ENGAGEMENTS IN ISLAMISM

This section follows the life journeys of nine young women who joined and then left Islamist political movements in their local community. Three of the women had joined organizations whose aim is to establish an Islamic state. Alana (born in 1978) and Amanda (born in 1976) had been active members of *Negara Islam Indonesia* (Indonesian Islamic State). The former in West Java and the latter in Jakarta. Latifah (born in 1996) had made the journey with her family from Jakarta to Syria to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Mala (born in 1971) was a combatant fighting for the Muslims during the time of inter-religious conflict in Poso, Central Sulawesi. Henny (born 2001), a young entrepreneur based in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, is a staunch believer in the goal of a transnational Islamic civilization. Two women writing their own stories share their experiences joining non-violent Islamist political movements in Central Java. Nur (born in 1995) joined the Indonesian chapter of a transnational Islamist movement, while Yuni (born in 1981) joined a homegrown Indonesian one that is linked to an Islamist political party. Two other women, Rima (born in 1987) in Poso, Central Sulawesi, and Dewi (born in 1984) in West Sumatera, became part of these movements by being the wives of their Islamist husbands. All but one of these women, Henny, have ended up disengaging with these Islamist political movements, for one reason or another, which made it possible for them to be part in this research.

The life journeys of these nine women provide insights into the dynamics of how young women enter into these Islamist political movements, their experience in engaging from within them, and the circumstances that move them to exit. The Islamist political movements with which they were associated are varied but all have the similar goal of transforming society following Islamist ideology and replacing the secular state with an Islamic state or caliphate.

Entry

That night, I was picked up in a car [and driven] with my eyes covered in cloth. I was brought to a place with an auditorium where many people had already convened for a ceremony to celebrate the independence day of the Indonesian Islamic State (IIS). I joined the ceremony and sang the independence anthem of the IIS. Seventh of August 1949, that is the day when the Indonesian Islamic State was born.¹⁵

This is how Alana described the day her membership in the Indonesian Islamic State, an underground movement, was officially recognized. Her recruitment had occurred three years earlier, when she was 17 years old, when she declared her allegiance and loyalty to the IIS. She was recruited by someone who had lived with her and her aunt and who she considered an older sister and mentor. Alana was an avid reader of books who excelled in her studies and aspired to travel abroad, accessing higher education in Egypt to eventually becoming a diplomat. But, during her high school years, Alana found herself more attracted to the ideas shared by her mentor who spoke about the hardship of Muslims in Iraq and Bosnia. In her second year in high school, Alana started dressing the same way as her mentor, namely a long veil, layered gown, and socks, which made her stand out in school and become the target of bullying. Nevertheless, she stayed steadfast in her choices and faithful to her mentor and her teachings. In retrospect, Alana believed that her mentor's effectiveness had to do with the fact that her ideas were shared alongside love and care (*kasih sayang*) and she felt safe with her.

As Alana approached her 17th birthday, the minimum age for recruitment according to IIS regulations, her mentor started talking to her about the inadequacies of the country's *Pancasila*¹⁶ ideology which did not comply with the Holy Qur'an. Two days after her 17th birthday, Alana proclaimed her allegiance to the IIS to an official of the Islamic state – whom she said acted like “a motivator” – who made clear to her that she was joining an Islamic revolution. While he was attentive to her needs and interests, including her love of books, she also emphasized that she must be “strong in her conviction, shrewd in her strategies, and abundant in her knowledge” and that this meant she must know how to “hide in plain sight” as the revolution was underground. Her task as a member of the IIS was to recruit people in her closest circle. According to Alana, her first recruit to the IIS was the person who had bullied her in school.

Amanda's recruitment into the IIS occurred also during her teenage years, after being approached by a young man who eventually became recruited her into the IIS. She noted that, interestingly, he did not dress in the conventional Islamist style (read: bearded, white robe or loose pants, sandals) but in the more Western-style jeans and short-sleeved shirt. Having won a national essay competition for high school students, Amanda was recognized as a high-performer and gained access to a politically-connected Islamic think tank in Jakarta where she was exposed to intellectuals, activists, and business people connected to this think tank. Like Alana, Amanda excelled in school and had

15. Interview with Alana.

16. Pancasila is the official state ideology that recognizes the notion of God without specific reference to Islam as the state religion.

an ample thirst for knowledge. She began her religious activism in high school having selected an extracurricular activity in this field based on her observation that the students in this group seemed more serious, studious, polite, and respectful than those in other fields who often targeted her and her female schoolmates with catcalls. Amanda had had previous experiences witnessing sexual harassment of women in public spaces and felt deep anger about it. In her religious group, Amanda quickly rose through the ranks, becoming the leader of its *dakwah* (preaching) program, feeling safe in the sexually-segregated spaces that were put in place. Amanda noted that, at times, her activism brought about critique from her male peers whom she saw as feeling threatened by her strong leadership as a woman. She started wearing a hijab to school, which gradually became longer and bigger in size as her activism heightened and soon came to confront a government decree prohibiting hijab in schools. In response, she organized 200 Muslim students from various schools in Jakarta to campaign against this prohibition, including by protesting to the national parliament and approaching national political elites to gain their support. She believes that her campaign benefitted from the outcry among Muslims against atrocities that were happening in Bosnia Herzegovina at that time.

Amanda remembers that she became particularly intrigued by her IIS recruiter because he spoke about state-building (*bagaimana kita bernegara*) and made a compelling critique of the corrupt New Order regime. She then agreed to convene a “*hijrah* forum”¹⁷ in her home in which the IIS’s version of the history of Islam and that of Islam in Indonesia were conveyed, including the ill-fated *Darul Islam*/IIS movement which was banned by the newly-independent secular government. When she declared allegiance to the IIS, Amanda changed her name to a more Islamic one and, by that time, had already recruited her two older brothers. As she got more and more involved in the IIS, she started changing her dress to a smaller-sized headcover with jeans and finally simply disappeared from school activities.

Latifah decided to move to the territory of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) when she was 19 years old. The decision was seen as her only choice as her whole family, plus her maternal aunts and uncles, had decided to go and she would be left behind on her own if she did not join them. The instigator of the move was her sister who was two years younger than Latifah. When ISIS was declared in 2014, she was moved by its promises, especially regarding free healthcare for her family that was struggling to pay bills and repay debts due to an aunt with cancer, a cousin with schizophrenia and another requiring physical therapy for weak leg muscles. After selling one of their houses to pay for the trip, Latifah’s family departed for Syria as a company of 25 people.

Mala joined Laskar Jihad, a national jihadi militant group, having fought in an inter-religious conflict in Central Sulawesi. When Mala was 29 years old, in 2000, her home and land were burned down in an attack by enemy combatants whom she recognized to be Christians from outside the region. There was a call for the community to take up arms to fight back. While most of the women fled with their children, Mala decided to join the men in arms. She was the only woman to do so, using the spear as her weapon. She came to lead a squad of male combatants and noted how her role

17. ‘*Darul Islam*’ refers to Prophet Muhammad’s historic move from Mecca to Medina to free Muslims from persecution and build a new society was built based on Islam.

as a female combatant was used to motivate the male fighters. So, when the Laskar Jihad arrived from the island of Java to Central Sulawesi, Mala volunteered to join. She was initially assigned to be the cook but insisted to be made a fighter. She was eventually trained to distribute ammunition, carry out intelligence, disassemble arms, and make bombs. Every night for three months, they were made to watch films on the war in Afghanistan and indoctrinated with jihad doctrine. One day she was brought, blindfolded, to a special training ground where she and others were to be trained to become suicide bombers.

The four women above joined Islamist organizations/movements for which violence, and in the case of the IIS also theft, are considered legitimate strategies to achieve their goals. But, as mentioned before, the Islamist ideology and goal of creating a state and society replicating the institutions and traditions during the life of the Prophet Mohammad are equally upheld by political movements that do not espouse violence. The gendered dimensions and implications in this latter context are also relevant to a transformative understanding of extremism. The experiences of Nur, Yuni and Henny are insightful here.

Nur joined Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), the national chapter of a non-violent transnational movement to create a global caliphate, when she was 16 years old during her second year in high school. In her first year of high school, she had been approached by a schoolmate who invited her to join an after-school religious discussion group every Friday. This friend had intrigued her not just because she dressed differently from everyone else with her wide veil and socks, but also because she was asking an interesting question that made her think about what it meant to wear the veil. With seven other students from her school, Nur finally joined the after-school sessions where she met two older women wearing a wide veil and loose robe who were there to be their mentors. They provided the students with reading materials which Nur remembers to be political in nature, mentioning the idea of the caliphate. The subject matter of these readings was too difficult in Nur's view but she continued to engage because the mentors were kind and made a strong emotional connection with them. Eventually, she became more interested in the weekly Friday discussions and started to share the views and ideas she gained from them with others, inside and outside the classroom. She felt proud of distinguishing herself from others by her capacity to speak on political and socio-economic issues, including regarding the state.

After a few months, Nur also started wearing the wide veil and loose robe (by sewing together the top shirt and bottom skirt of her school uniform to form a gown-like dress) and abiding with the social code required by her mentors: no dating, no interacting with the opposite sex except for education, health and social purposes, no shaking hands with men, no revealing the face or hands (*aurat*) to men who are not connected to you by blood. The weekly Friday discussions then turned into something more purposeful, with more specific reading materials and a syllabus that prepared the ground for recruitment into the HTI. During this time, Nur and her schoolmates were asked to spread the ideas of the caliphate to their peers and distribute the HTI bulletin, *Al-Islam*, in the school. It was only after reaching this stage that Nur realized she was being recruited into a transnational organization. In retrospect, Nur thinks that she joined HTI because she really believed in the ideas of HTI and had no other reference that countered these views. At that time, she had a

high level of curiosity and interest in improving herself. Her emotional connection with her mentors was also a significant factor in her view.

Yuni joined an Indonesian affiliate of Egypt's *Ikhwanul Muslimin* (Muslim Brotherhood) during her first year of university in Yogyakarta. As a Muslim raised by her Catholic grandmother in a Javanese village, Yuni has memories of going to church every Sunday until the village authorities intervened to put a stop to it. But her upbringing remained multicultural in her young years, reading the Mahabharata and Ramayana and learning about life's values from a diversity of sources, including old Javanese rituals practised by her grandmother. One day, the government's program of creating Qur'an education centres for children came to Yuni's village and required all Muslim kids to take part. Four different religious groups were taught in four different days, including those affiliated with conservative *salafi* groups and the HTI, propagating their respective views of Islam to the village children after school or in the evenings. Consistent with the Javanese syncretic mindset, Yuni and her peers agreed that these different ideas of Islam were all good and no single one can claim to be the best or true. But once Yuni reached university, she had to make a choice on which Islamic student organization to join and decided on KAMMI, a follower of the global Muslim Brotherhood movement, as she knew people in them from their home village. Once in, Yuni rose through the ranks of the organization quickly and became a recruiter for the movement.

Henny considers herself to have carried out the *hijrah* from an unenlightened life to one that serves the Almighty. She grew up in a wealthy family in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, supported by her father's business in shipping. When she was 18 years old, life started to turn badly for her family, when her father married a second wife and then got sentenced to prison due to his business dealings. Aside from feeling let down by her father, the family's financial standing also took a hit. Under these circumstances, Henny decided to commence her *hijrah* mission. This was made possible by her existing engagement with an Islamic humanitarian organization, *Pasukan Amal Soleh Indonesia* (Virtuous Troops of Indonesia) that mobilizes funds and support for orphans in the madrasahs who are being trained to be Qur'an reciters. At 20 years old, Henny herself is a shrewd businesswoman who uses social media extensively. She sees herself as a writer and content creator, an influencer and a founder of online business ventures. She dedicates the three online businesses that she manages to support the work of the humanitarian organization. As part of her *hijrah* journey, Henny decided to become a Qur'an reciter herself in association with a local Islamist mosque. In this phase of her life, she is inspired by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II (1432-1481), whom she read about in the madrasah's library, and was commonly known as "Mehmed the Conqueror" after achieving victory against the crusades, conquering Constantinople and bringing to an end the Byzantine Empire. According to Henny, Mehmed II (she refers to him as al-Fatih) left behind a prophetic mission still unmet, which is to conquer Rome. In this light, as a single 20-year-old, Henny describes her aspiration in this way:

The Prophet said "Muslims conquer" and so this is the struggle that Muslims must take on. My descendants shall, God willing, be groomed to be the next al-Fatih. [They will be] the next Conqueror. Because Rome has not been conquered.

It is clear from the lives of Nur, Yuni, and Henny that young women have been moved to join Islamist movements whose goals are to transform the world and do so with conviction.

The experiences of Alana, Amanda, Latifah as well as Nur and Yuni provide insight into the high sophistication and deep penetration of the recruitment systems put in place by a range of Islamist organizations and movements. These systems have accessed young girls in high schools in small and large cities. Some have even reached rural communities through government programmes on Qur'an education for children. They have deployed women recruiters who not only bring Islamist ideas to these girls but also befriend them to build strong emotional bonding. As the stories above demonstrate, the girls who were recruited were bright, thirsty for new knowledge and experience, and trusting of those who show interest in their lives and aspirations. Most of these young women felt excited and proud to be engaging in political agendas and linked to global struggles.

Two more women, Dewi and Rima, show yet another way in which women become involved with these movements, namely through marriage.

Dewi, who had spent her years after elementary school in *pesantren* (madrasah) communities, sought out student organizations to join upon being admitted to one of the top Islamic universities in the country. After observing almost ten different options, she finally made her choice, *Lembaga Dakwah Kampus* (Campus Da'wah Organization), because it was, in her words, very contemporary, promoting Islamic viewpoints while staying modern and contextual, with a cool and youthful image. She considered those who joined this organization to be young preachers of Islam with high spirituality, integrity and a professional ethos. She continued on to join other Islamist organizations, such as KAMMI (affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood), and later became a cadre of the Islamist political party, *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* or PKS (Prosperous Justice Party). As part of the convention in these Islamist communities, the business of marriage is arranged by the officials of the movement. So, when she was ready to marry, Dewi asked the assistance of her mentor or *murabby* to find a husband. She received the CV of a candidate and met him via cellphone, and after six months and with the approval of his *murabby*, they set out to marry. It was months after their marriage that Dewi found out her husband was a member of *Jamaat Tabligh*, which is a militant Islamist organization originating from South Asia to recreate the society in accordance to the era of the Prophet Mohammad. As his wife, Dewi was required to wear the *niqab* (head and face covering), read the *Jamaat's* publications and socialize with other *Jamaat Tabligh* wives.

Rima grew up in Tamanjeka, a hamlet at the foot of Poso's mountain range which is renowned in the Indonesian national imagination as the home ground of Central Sulawesi's jihadi terrorists. The label stuck after an incident in 2012 in which two policemen were kidnapped and killed in this hamlet by the *Mujahiddin Indonesia Timur* (Eastern Indonesia Mujahiddin) or also known as MIT, an armed Islamist group that declared its allegiance to ISIS in 2014. Rima, who lived with her parents in Tamanjeka, was married off at 15 years of age to a local religious preacher (*ustad*) and community leader. One day, when asked to choose between marriage or education, she chose marriage as she did not see any real prospect in further education given that her schooling thus far had been too disrupted by inter-religious conflict. Once married, Rima was required to wear a

cadar (face cover) in addition to her long veil when leaving the house, and not allowed to meet any of her husband's male guests at the house. She was also no longer allowed to wear her usual pants when working in the field as this was considered un-Islamic. In her 20 years of marriage, with six children, Rima served as an obedient wife to her husband. One day in August 2021, on his way to Poso from their village, Rima's husband was arrested by the national police's special forces on terrorism, named *Detasemen 88*. She found out later that he had confessed to being a member of the *Jemaah Islamiyah*, an Islamist group that claimed responsibility to several bombings, including the Bali Bombing of 2002, and is noted to be an affiliate of Al-Qaeda to establish an Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia. She never knew.

The two women whose husbands were active members of Islamist movements didn't know about their respective husbands' political activities. Dewi found out after several months of marriage, while Rima did not know even after two decades of marriage. Both had to change the way they dressed and interacted in society as a requirement from their husbands and built a family life following the ideological precepts of their husbands.

Inside

The experiences of these young women who joined Islamist movements provide a glimpse of the internal systems used by these various organizations.

Through the stories shared by Alana and Amanda, the Indonesian Islamic State (IIS) held monthly gatherings with its members. Alana was put in a group of six peers under the leadership of a mentor. These monthly gatherings were organized geographically by zones, generationally by age, and segregated by gender. When Alana married, she was moved from a group of single women to one among married women. There is a hierarchy of command in the IIS that is seven layers deep, according to Amanda, and no one knew their leaders beyond their particular group or cell. Over time, Alana learned that there were two branches of the IIS movement. One branch supports violence as a strategy along the same line as ISIS. The other branch is "softer" and operates in the field of education and social welfare to prepare its members to join the government civil service and rise up the policy-making levels.

As part of the monthly gatherings among IIS members, there would be lectures by different leaders in the movement, followed by discussions, in each monthly gathering. They were given required readings on the history of Islam and of the IIS. According to Amanda's telling, those who came to give these lectures came from a wide variety of backgrounds, including a religious preacher (*ustad*), a businessman, a driver, and a repairman.

Each IIS member was expected to bring in recruits. Alana received guidance from her mentor about how to obtain recruits. She was told that before inviting people into the movement, she must first befriend the person and get to know her parents and family members. Each step in the process was to be reported back to her mentor. In the case of Amanda, she was such a high-

performing recruiter, at one point bringing in 11 new members within a month, that she was named “Fatimah The General.”

Aside from getting new recruits, IIS members were required to pay dues and make other financial contributions to the Islamic State. For Alana, this meant selling calendars and halal meat. Male members were in charge of these income-generating activities while female members were tasked with selling these products. Sales targets had to be met, which created a competitive atmosphere across the different groups. For Alana, meeting the sales target meant going door-to-door and even travelling to another city while leaving her young children behind with a heavy heart. She saw how other young mothers locked their children at home while they went out to meet the sales target set by their mentors. Meanwhile, Amanda was tasked with collecting dues from IIS members who were factory labourers and workers living in poor, flood-prone urban settlements.

There were other actions the Islamic state required of the members, as Alana explained, namely spreading hoaxes, inciting riots and theft. Alana recounted her experience spreading news of an impending attack against sellers in a market. She described how she and her peers had to overcome their doubts and convince each other that these acts, including stealing, were justified for the cause of the IIS.

While the IIS is an underground political movement, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI)¹⁸ operated above ground through *dakwah* (proselytizing) to build support for the global Islamic caliphate. As noted above, Nur joined HTI during her second year of high school. When she graduated and entered university, she received what was effectively a transfer letter from her old HTI chapter to the new one, as the university was located in a different city. She was welcomed by the HTI members in the university city and invited to join them in their all-female rented house. Yuni learned that different from the system in her hometown, HTI here had two distinct *dakwah* groups, one for HTI members and mentees from the community at large, such as housewives, doctors, teachers, and students, and another *dakwah* group for university lecturers and student on campus. Within these groups, there is segregation by gender so that a female member is never in the same group as a male member.

For each gathering session, there are weekly targets to be met: the number of people who have been reached through *dakwah*, the progress in reading the required books, and new verses in the Qur’an memorized. Members were also divided into groups of three to four and assigned distinct tasks. The media team was tasked with distributing HTI bulletins, the faculty team was assigned to carry out *dakwah* targeting lecturers, and the opinion team was tasked with attending seminars and other public forums to raise counter-arguments in line with HTI’s viewpoint. These function-based teams had to report their activities in the weekly sessions as a basis for the group to develop their *dakwah* strategy.

Yuni joined KAMMI, a student group affiliated with Egypt’s Ikhwanul Muslimin, during her university years. She quickly rose to the upper echelons of her campus-based organization to become a

18. Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia was banned by the government in 2017 for being contradictory to the state ideology of Indonesia. At that time, the organization reportedly had a membership of five million people.

member of its governing board. As part of this board, Yuni took part in mapping the development of dakwah activities on campus, identifying potential cadres and those for its blacklist, determining their dakwah strategy on campus and planning events. As part of this student organization, Yuni joined political demonstrations organized by the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) on a variety of issues, such as protesting the banning of the veil for school children, supporting the anti-pornography bill in opposition to women's groups, mobilizing against Presidents Megawati and Abdurrahman Wahid, and campaigning in solidarity for Palestine. Upon Yuni's graduation, she was assigned as a campaigner for the PKS party during the national parliamentary elections. A consistent picture was drawn by Dewi who joined a different student organization in her university but one that is also affiliated with the PKS political party. She witnessed how the party had a chain of command to all levels of education, not just at the university level but down to high school and even pre-kindergarten levels as well.

Henny embraced her notion of an expansionary Islam through her role as a social media influencer. As a woman whose ambition is to have her descendants conquer Rome, she sees women as the pillar of civilization and, as such, must hold a big vision for humanity while supporting their husbands. Having been a lost soul herself, she believes that prayer is her link to God and that consuming *haram* food would risk rejection of her prayers. It is in this light that Henny has initiated the "Indonesian Muslim Culinary" movement which educates the public on *halal* food through online media as well as offline through a network of mosques.

The Islamist movements in which these young women engage, ones which condone violence and those that do not, make high demands for the militancy of their members. However, it does not necessarily mean there was no room for the women to negotiate their personal interests or to deviate from the required norm.

Alana had a personal aspiration of going to the university in Al-Azhar, Egypt, to study Islamic philosophy. While she was directed to enter the field of mathematics by her IIS mentor, she still held on to her own goal. Alana had been enrolled in an intensive course that helped IIS members to get accepted at the top secular universities in the country. She purposely failed her test here to avoid going to IIS's chosen university for her and secretly applied to an Islamic university to which she was accepted. Alana also managed to avoid entering into an arranged marriage by IIS. She did so by convincing her partner to join IIS with her and arranging things so that the IIS then would marry her to her chosen partner.

Mala, who joined the jihad combatants during the inter-religious conflict in Poso, had her own moment of negotiation. After being trained to be the first female suicide bomber in Indonesia, Mala went through three days of intense discussion with the leader on the doctrine of martyrdom (*mati syahid*). The night before the scheduled date for her suicide bomb, after inspecting the vest she was to wear and knowing that the bomb could kill more than 30 people, she asked what was the target. When she found out that a church was her target, she raised a question for which she felt did not provide a satisfactory answer. She had asked for a verse in the Qur'an that supported her killing people in church. She was remembering her adopted mother who was a Christian

and treated her well. She had memories as a young girl helping with Sunday church activities in the community. Finally, at 4 a.m., after three nights of intensive discussion with her leader, she concluded that she was not convinced and decided to decline from executing her suicide bombing. Alternatively, she joined a battle as a combatant, using large ammunition (20 kilograms in weight), to win back a village from their enemy.

Exit

All except one, Henny in West Kalimantan, of the women who shared their stories eventually decided to leave the Islamist movement they had joined. There are three circumstances under which these decisions were made: the discovery of internal contradictions, irreconcilable discrepancies with empirical reality, and exposure to alternative paradigms. These circumstances are not mutually exclusive and, in certain cases, present themselves in combination.

Discovery of internal contradictions

Amanda, who earned the title of “Fatimah The General” in the Indonesian Islamic State (IIS), reached a state of anger upon carrying out her task of collecting member dues among the urban poor. She spent nights sleeping on the floor in homes without furniture and witnessed the hungry and malnourished children of the IIS members who had given up whatever money they had to the Islamic State. She came to believe that something was wrong with the movement. On campus, she found other IIS members who disclosed more problems from within the movement and who shared their doubts and misgivings. After five years in the IIS, Amanda finally decided that she must leave the movement.

For Alana, it took 17 years before she decided to leave the IIS. The higher she got in the hierarchy, the deeper her engagement with its theological groundings. As a student of Islamic philosophy herself, Alana found shortcomings and contradictions in the IIS’ theology. Her understanding of Islam had been developing independently also in relation to her engagement with a progressive civil society organization that exposed her to notions of pluralism and gender equality within Islamic thought. Prior to this, she did receive lectures in her university on gender equality, but she merely considered this information, not conviction. Her difficulty in leaving the movement was fear of losing her social support system and long friendship with her original mentor. Finding community among the progressive movement and convincing her husband to leave the IIS with her made it possible for Alana to take that final step to leave.

Both Amanda and Alana described going through their own versions of self-therapy after leaving IIS. Amanda did so by spending months going hiking in the mountains, joining theatre groups and sleeping in the streets, while Alana adopted a method called the “spiritual emotional freedom technique.”

Nur, who joined Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) after three years of being in-training, made her decision to leave only two months into being a full-fledged member. She had disagreement with

its strategy as well as personal reasons. Being a full-fledged member of HTI, Nur was required to lead weekly dakwah activities of her own as well as to serve as a speaker in public prayer sessions. She felt ill-prepared for this role and was concerned that she was asked to speak on an issue on which she had no expertise (i.e., the economy). She came to see HTI's dakwah activities to have an undue element of force as it imposed targets of new recruits that she had to obtain. She also began to question the HTI credibility seeing how members were required to speak on issues with no real expertise in the field. She felt constricted by the behavioural requirements made on her, such as the prohibition to wear short pants and short-sleeved t-shirts even at home in an all-female house, or to ride on motorcycle taxis with male drivers even in emergency situations. On a personal level, Nur felt she had lost her sense of freedom and was not happy. She found that she did not own her own life as it was claimed so fully by HTI. She was concerned that she had no time to explore her hobbies or even to concentrate on her studies. Meanwhile, her chosen field of study, sociology, was giving her access to different ways of understanding the world which, in turn, raised questions about the HTI's ideology.

Irreconcilable discrepancies with lived reality

Latifah, who left Indonesia with her extended family to build a life in ISIS territory in Syria, returned to her home country after two years in total disillusionment. Having entered the territory in a smuggler's car without headlights, the men and women in the group were separated upon arrival. The men were to go to the education centre while the women were led to a dormitory. In Raqqa, Latifah adjusted to the dirty dormitory where fights among tenants occurred frequently. Their reason for going to Syria was to experience the promises made by ISIS but the realities of life proved to be starkly different. Latifah was shocked to receive marriage proposals from ISIS fighters who wanted an answer within a day. Despite pressures from the dorm tenants that, for women, marriage was jihad, Latifah and her sister refused all the marriage proposals. Accessing free healthcare, the main pull for Latifah's extended family, involved a harrowing trip overland to Mosul in Iraq and an incident of sexual harassment experienced by her aunt. When they were reunited with the male members of the family, Latifah learned that they were forced to go through military training. When they refused, they were imprisoned and declared ineligible for all the free services ISIS provided. Latifah and her family decided to write a letter to the authorities regarding their situation but were advised to stop making requests. They decided to find a way back to Indonesia and, after two failed efforts with fraudulent smugglers, 17 out of the 20 family members who made the trip were finally able to leave the territory. Along the way, the men were put in prison and the women in a refugee camp for two months before they finally made it home.

For Rima, whose husband had admitted to being a long-time member of the Al-Qaeda affiliated *Jemaah Islamiyah*, his imprisonment was a turning point. Since his arrest, Rima was approached by government security forces questioning her on her husband's activities. She found the behaviour of the security forces coming to their hamlet to be overly aggressive. They would search people's homes without advance notice, force her neighbours to squat from morning to sundown, and treat everyone harshly. Rima remembers the head of her hamlet saying that this kind of treatment

would only result in new seeds of radicalism in the community five to ten years down the line. Rima ultimately decided to leave the hamlet so she could begin a new life as a single mother to her six children in a different village where she would grow mushrooms for an income. Since then, she refused to be called “umi,” the Arab equivalent to the Indonesian “ibu” for mother or ma’am, and preferred to identify herself as “Ibu Rima” in her new life.

Yuni’s decision to leave Indonesia’s version of the Muslim Brotherhood student organization (KAMMI) and then political party (Prosperous Justice Party or PKS) had to do with years of questioning that arose from Yuni’s experience growing up in a multi-religious and multi-cultural family and village life. She played around the church on Sundays, read the Mahabharata and Ramayana for pleasure, and took part in the government’s after-school Islamic education programme for children. The village authorities had arranged four different Islamic sects to teach the children in four different days of the week. This memory of diversity planted a seed of constant questioning that followed Yuni throughout her time with KAMMI and PKS. Aware of the multiple Islamist organizations on campus, she was uneasy with each of these organizations’ requirement of total acceptance and obedience from their members. She questioned the view that only one’s organization’s notion of Islam is right and those of others are all wrong and deviant. When she successfully campaigned in support of a PKS parliamentary candidate, she questioned the genuineness of the promises made to the voters. She was disturbed to witness dishonesty in the raw ambition for power. It was in the midst of PKS’ celebration of reaching the top five political parties winning seats in the parliament that Yuni decided to leave the movement altogether and return to her home village.

Exposure to communities with alternative paradigms

For Nur, Mala, Dewi and Alana, exposure to alternative paradigms played a key role in making their ultimate decision to leave their respective Islamist movements. In Nur’s case, it was her exposure to the field of sociology at the university that opened her eyes to a different way of knowing. Her readings in class made her rethink the concepts introduced to her by Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI). It made her become aware that the HTI did not give her the freedom to explore ideas and think outside the organization. Ultimately, when she became more and more resolute to leave, her professors and classmates helped her find the way out.

In Mala’s case, the post-conflict context in Central Sulawesi brought in a stream of peacebuilding organizations that helped shift her understanding of the inter-religious conflict in her community. As a former combatant who lost her home during the conflict and had to live in an IDP camp, Mala received various trainings on conflict management. In one of these trainings, a speaker presented a political economy perspective on the conflict in Poso. Mala found the data and viewpoint to be consistent with her own observations, including the growing business interests of the security forces, such as illegal logging land grabbing, widespread corruption across the rank and file, and sexual violence against women. She also began to see the outsized influence of jihadis from outside Central Sulawesi and the country, and questioned that some local jihadis may be nurtured by particular elements in the security forces. This total transformation in her way of thinking led

Mala to set up her own organization working on peace and reconciliation at the grassroots level. Dewi, who before her marriage was active in an Islamist student organization affiliated with the Prosperous Justice Party, had early exposure to a Muslim women's rights NGOs since a feminist Muslim activist was as a speaker at her high school. Her connection with these activists continued throughout her life in the Islamist community. She was invited by a Muslim women's rights NGO to participate in a training on reproductive health, for instance, and also joined a research project on Islamic student movements with one Muslim feminist researcher. The frame of thinking originating from these engagements continued to shape her life choices to some degree and at certain moments. When she was a teacher in a *salafi* Islamic boarding school, Dewi applied her knowledge of women's reproductive health with her students by giving a session on sex education and was reprimanded by the school principal for engaging in pornography. Once married to a husband who turned out to be part of Jamaat Tabligh, she initiated some pushback. She successfully gained the support of her father-in-law in convincing his son to move the family to a different city with the intent to disrupt her husband's active engagement with the Jamaat Tabligh. In their new home, she then requested permission from her husband to no longer wear the *niqab* and to start working again to help with the household finances. He agreed to both these requests, though he then rejoined the Jamaat Tabligh. Dewi's capacity to negotiate and navigate her self-interest vis-a-vis her husband still ended with her ultimate exit from the relationship. One day she was asked to give signed permission for her husband to marry a second wife, along with demands to wear the *niqab* again, to limit her work time outside the house from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. only, and to leave the house only when accompanied by a male guardian. She refused to sign this letter and was raped by her husband that same night. He then sued for divorce in court based on a made-up charge and was granted custody over their two children. Dewi's exit from being part of an Islamist movement ended with the dissolution of her marriage.

In Alana's case, she exited the Indonesian Islamic State (IIS) after 17 years of having been a member since she was 17 years old. Even though she had been exposed to progressive ideas about pluralism and gender equality in her course work on campus and in training sessions with local civil society organizations that work within the framework of Islam, she did not leave the IIS because she had a fear of losing her friendships. When she finally left, over her theological and philosophical disagreement with the IIS ideologues, she had to confront her feeling of deep loneliness and fear of abandonment as well as a sense of "spiritual emptiness," in her words. At times she even reacted physically when reminded of her involvement in the movement, her stomach tightening and then vomiting. As she became more involved with the progressive Muslims in the local civil society organizations, she found herself a new community that was so important to her.

For all the women who decided to leave their Islamist communities, the experience was deeply traumatic but also led to a sense of liberation, both of which manifested physically as well as psychologically.

Gendered journeys and transformations: Navigating power in the political and personal

The life journeys of these nine women illustrate how they fit into the machinations of varying Islamist political movements in Indonesia. The long arm of their recruitment systems reaches out to rural communities and small towns through schools and after-school religious education programs for children. But their main investment has been on campuses among university students. While each woman's story is unique, almost all were moved to follow these movements as an expression of their personal ambition to learn and/or engage with a political cause. Several of the women mentioned the excitement of being able to advance their knowledge of Islam by accessing readings and speakers – something that was not available to them otherwise. Some described feeling pride in being able to speak about contemporary political and economic issues and having the confidence to criticise the secular state. Many were moved by narratives on the victimization of Muslims at the global level, referring to Palestine and Bosnia Herzegovina, and, on this basis, found reason to be part of global Islamist movements. All this was consistently and systematically couched within the fabric of friendship and sisterhood. No other alternative opportunities for engagement with a similar level of cognitive and emotional bonding seem to have existed for these women. For all these empowering benefits, they were willing to accept the terms of engagement, including by accepting that their bodies are a source of ill and thus must be fully covered from head to toe, by following a segregated public life with men, and by accepting that marriage serves the political cause which means relinquishing individual choice in one's marriage partner.

Local context also shapes women's distinct trajectory in their engagements with Islamist movements. In the context of Central Sulawesi, Mala joined armed jihadis as a conscious choice to be an active combatant during a time of inter-religious conflict, while Rima came to follow Islamist social norms as the consequence of the choice of marriage and obedience to her Islamist husband in a social milieu shared with armed Islamists after the inter-religious conflict had died down. Both had consequences for their social positions in society but in the opposite direction.

The militancy of these women in carrying out their Islamist missions, such as in expanding and managing recruits and in implementing acts of political disruption, was empowering but peppered with questioning and doubt, as their telling of their journeys shows. In some cases, the sense of doubt emerged through growing interaction with Muslim progressive movements at the local level whose aim was to contest and counter the Islamist narrative and agenda. These progressive movements present an alternative paradigm within Islam, particularly on gender equality, pluralism and the argument for a secular state. This was experienced by Alana, among others. For Yuni and Mala, the questioning came about from personal memories of living with pluralism, namely of life in multi-religious families and communities during childhood. These doubts and questions shaped the way these women navigated and negotiated their interests within their respective Islamist organizations as well as in their marital and family lives.

Ultimately, except for one who has remained faithful to the Islamist agenda, all these women went through a transformation that was triggered and shaped by events reflecting the interplay of political developments and power dynamics in public and private spheres. For Amanda, for example, the process of transformation occurred as part of her response to Indonesia's moment of political opening and reform in 1998. At this time, Amanda was seeking new readings and found Nawal El-Sadawi's memoir, an icon among feminist Muslims, which impacted her profoundly. In her words,

I found a book with the title "Memoir of a Female Doctor" by Nawal El-Sadawi. This opened a new door for me. The book spoke about women's body [and it resonated with] my own body that had experienced subordination due to the patriarchal culture and even religion. I began to remember that this was in fact my initial line of questioning when I was young and a teenager [which was triggered by] an incident of sexual harassment first experienced by me and my friends.

Reading El-Sadawi's book led her to seeking out more readings from feminists in the Muslim world which brought her to a realization that her main issue was about patriarchy's power over women's bodies, including through religion. She then joined a feminist organization upon completion of her studies. For Yuni, her transformation was in reaction to her critique of electoral politics during the 2004 national parliamentary elections having been an integral part of it at the local level. In seeking an alternative cause for herself, she turned to a cultural reference that was distinctively Indonesian rather than Islamic, namely Kartini, an historical figure from Java who advocated for women's rights in the late 19th century. Upon this orientation, Yuni decided to return to the pluralist community in rural Java and work for the empowerment of women in her village.

Alongside their reconstruction of thought and perception, the transformation of these women also manifested in the way they relate to their bodies and social identity. Dewi marked her departure from her life with her Islamist husband and the start of her new identity by wearing jeans and a top shirt, sports shoes, choosing a simple pashmina as her headscarf and putting on light make-up. She donated all her sharia-compliant clothes as seeing them in her room traumatized her. Rima marked her transformation by refusing the Arabic prefix of "umi" in calling her name. While she criticized the government security forces for taking economic advantage of their operation in Poso, she also expressed her disagreement with the Islamists' movement:

When the law is applied to them, we cannot refuse. Islam can govern but it can also be governed. It can exist under any circumstances. If it is governed, it must obey [the law]. That's the way it is. If it governs, it means non-Muslims need to be safe. Their possessions need to be protected as the property of Muslims. Their blood needs to be protected just like that of Muslims When we live in a state with the rule of law, we should follow the law.

All this demonstrates the dynamic interlinking of structural and intimate relations in women's lives and in the choices they make. To return to the research questions, the life stories of the nine women provide some preliminary insights.

What are these young women's perceptions of violent extremism, and what do they consider are its drivers? Upon entry, as young women from rural communities or small towns or cities, those who proceeded to join Islamist movements had no preconceived notions about extremism. They were driven by the simple ambition to learn and engage and empowered by a newly found capacity to speak and act politically. As they went deeper into the movements, and as they rose in their respective segregated hierarchies, they began questioning the movement's ideological constructs and expansionist strategies. It is only after exiting that they may adopt the framing regarding these political movements as extremist.

What is the impact of violent extremism on their lives, including how they have borne its effects? The first impact experienced by these young women was in the relationship with own bodies, given that the way the dress was a primary signal or symbol of their ideology and political standing. They also speak about how their choice of engaging with Islamist ideology influenced their relationships in the family and in social life in general, as this ideology is all-encompassing and requires total obedience. Several women describe how they made compromises as they relinquished autonomy in determining their personhood and social relationships for the sake of gaining a strong sense of belonging in the community and confidence in taking a leadership role in a political movement. What are their sources of vulnerability and strength, including the social movements they have accessed? How have young women participated, resisted, or mobilised against violent extremism? Among the significant insights from the life stories of these women is that, at their first point of entry into Islamist movements, they disclosed an absence of any alternative social or political movements with differing or opposing views that were available to them in their respective hometowns. This absence betrays a weakness in progressive movements and can be seen structurally as a source of vulnerability for young women in rural communities and small towns. Many of the women interviewed described the centrality of the emotional bonding provided by their Islamist sisters/mentors as part of their ideological recruitment. Their interaction with rights-based civil society organizations, which exposed them to an alternative ideology, mostly emerged when they moved to urban centres to obtain higher education. This defining exposure, which would lead to an ideological turnaround, was possible because civil society organizations conduct outreach and engage in relationship-building among conservative and even Islamist communities.

In terms of inter-generational and inter-sectional connections and/or disconnects that influence young women's sense of options, several of the women's stories indicate the importance of their multidirectional connections, both inter-generational and inter-sectional. Speaking to their mothers or even remembering their relationship with their parents or grandparents contributed to their decision to exit their respective Islamist movements. The support systems they build to help them leave these totalitarian organizations include also their professors, classmates, and activists. Despite the restrictive systems and sanctions put in place to preserve the militancy of their members, the intersecting networks and social fabric in a pluralist society were able to continuously challenge the way these young women understood the diversity of options for a meaningful life.

THE STATE'S ROLE: DISJOINTED AND HALF-HEARTED

Women experience Islamist extremism as mothers and wives in the family, as members of communities and citizens of the nation. In what ways has the state empowered or disempowered women as they navigate their lives and interests in the face of extremism?

Indonesia's law on anti-terrorism, which covers deradicalization efforts, has no specific recognition of women's specific roles nor the gender dimensions in radicalization and deradicalization. The national body established to address terrorism also has no particular mandate to adopt a gender perspective in its work. The more recent National Action Plan on violent extremism, published in 2021, also does not give recognition to women's role nor to the gendered aspects of countering violent extremism in its main text. The plan's attachment, which lists institutions responsible for particular actions, however, includes the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection as well as the National Commission on Violence Against Women (hereafter, Komnas Perempuan). No elaboration is provided on why and how these two women-focused state institutions are in the plan of action.

In Central Sulawesi, where there has been a continuous deployment of national security forces to maintain peace and combat terrorism, complaints have been made about sexual exploitation and assault against local women by members of these forces. This is a pattern already reported by Komnas Perempuan, a national institution for women's human rights, in 2008. However, no steps have been taken to hold these officers accountable nor to provide meaningful support for the victims are in place. Despite many reports by Komnas Perempuan on the matter, the gendered impacts from incidents of attacks against minority communities around the country by Islamist groups have also not been addressed in any comprehensive manner by state agencies.

Meanwhile, for women who were arrested under the anti-terrorism law, the government has no specific guidelines for handling them as women in detention. An estimate from 2020 by a policy institute on violent extremism¹⁹ notes that there was a total of 39 women who have been convicted or awaiting trial since 2004 (see graphic below).

Figure 1: Indonesia's Terrorist Arrests 2000-2020

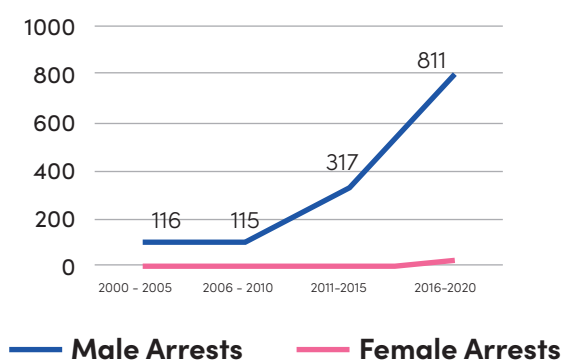
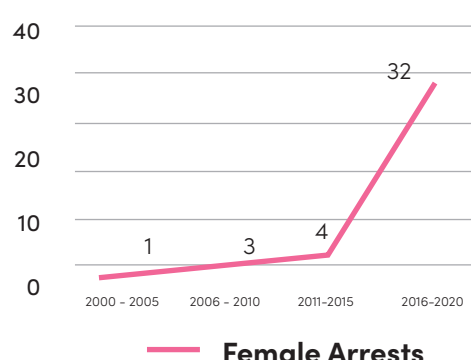


Figure 2: Female Terrorist Arrests 2000-2020



19. See IPAC, *Extremist Women Behind Bars in Indonesia*, Report No. 68, 21 September 2020.

The basic procedure applied for both male and female inmates includes an orientation session, evaluation at various stages of detention, disciplinary measures, access to visitors, cell phone communications, medical care, and searches.²⁰ As the number of women arrested jumped around the time of intensive ISIS recruitment, the government was not prepared and simply applied its standard system to them. This included gender-stereotypical approaches to skills development, such as in sewing and cooking, during their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Islamists whose aim is to penetrate the system of mainstream social and political institutions have benefitted from government policies framed within the Islamic narrative. The government's promotion of the Sharia economy, for example, benefits those who manifest their hijrah into Islamism in economic terms by moving out from mainstream secular jobs to Islamic entrepreneurship. The national government's unwillingness to repeal local regulations which impose night curfews and Muslim dress for women,²¹ despite having the authority and obligation to do so, creates a permissive political environment for Islamist narratives that discriminate against women.

Despite the lack of substantive recognition and comprehensive special measures that address the gender dynamics and impacts of Islamist extremism, there are legal breakthroughs that benefit women in navigating their interests in the face of Islamism. The laws criminalizing domestic violence (2004) and sexual violence (2022), while limited in the conviction record of these cases, raised public awareness of these issues and provided a standard for women within Islamist communities and families in making their respective life decisions. Such is the case with Yuni (see above) whose resolute decision to leave her husband and the Islamist community was finally made after experiencing marital rape. The public debate on the sexual violence bill was very heated, with those for and against conducting their respective political mobilization. As most of the opposition to the bill was framed in religious terms, this gave way to the emergence of a public voice from among feminist Muslims who held some degree of religious authority regarding Islam. As the unique stance of feminist Muslims became a political force, Muslim women in conservative and Islamist contexts were presented with an alternative viewpoint within the Islamic paradigm.

The law on village governance (2014) is another legal product that has been used, mainly by women's rights groups, to secure women's participation in decision-making at the village level, including in villages where the Islamist influence is significant. This is possible due to specific clauses in the law that guarantee women's equal participation in governance processes at the village level. All these laws were products of advocacy efforts by women's rights organizations. While they were not specifically directed at the issue of extremism, they have created new possibilities for women navigating their interests within Islamist families and communities.

The state's enabling impact on women's capacity to navigate their interests in the face of Islamist extremism comes from a patchwork of different and separate policy frameworks, not necessarily focused on the specific issue of violent extremism. On the contrary, straddling the political interests of the security approach and security forces, on one hand, and the economic interests of growth, including through the Sharia economy, the state's response to Islamist extremism has further entrenched women in stereotypical roles, in both Islamist and secular contexts.

20. Ibid.

21. See Komnas Perempuan, <https://komnasperempuan.go.id/siaran-pers-detail/siaran-pers-komnas-perempuan-kasus-pemakaian-busana-dengan-identitas-agama-27-januari-2021>

CLOSING

In addressing Islamist extremism, Indonesian women populated the ideological battlegrounds in which at stake was the identity and purpose of the Indonesian nation: pluralist or Islamist. As demonstrated by the life journeys of the women in this study, these battlegrounds are multiple, exist in parallel, and perpetually evolving. The battlegrounds exist within state bodies as well as in society. Also, they exist not only in the public domain but also in the private sphere: at homes and in the lives of families and decisions about marriage. Even as women comply with public positions of their respective Islamist communities, they do not stop exploring and negotiating their interests even when it diverges or are in opposition to the accepted Islamist conventions. For many whose piety is central to their personhood, the ideological battle is simultaneously political as well as religious. As demonstrated by Alana's journey, the latter involves transforming the way Islam is understood and lived. The state, with its own political and economic interests, is generally not an enabler of women's agency in the context of its project of countering violent extremism and terrorism. The exception derives from legal frameworks established through the demands of the women's movement.

REFERENCES

Counter Extremism Project (2021). Indonesia: Extremism and Terrorism.

<https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/indonesia-extremism-and-terrorism>

IPAC (2018, February 12). Extremists in Bandung: Darul Islam to ISIS – and Back Again? Report No. 42.

(2018, April 6). After Ahok: The Islamist Agenda in Indonesia. Report No. 44.

(2018, February 21). The West Kalimantan Election and the Impact of the Anti-Ahok Campaign. Report. No. 43.

(2020, September 21). Extremist Women Behind Bars in Indonesia. Report No. 68.

Perempuan, K. (2009). *Perempuan dalam Jeratan Impunitas. Laporan Pelapor Khusus Komnas Perempuan untuk Poso.*

Mozaffari, M. (2007). What Is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 8(1), 17-33.

Winter, C. (2015). *The Virtual Caliphate: Understanding the Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy.* Quilliam.