GENDERED ASSUMPTIONS AND WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES:

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

POLICY BRIEF

Young Women in Indonesia's Islamist Movements and Implications For Policy

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INTRODUCTION

One way in which Indonesia's contemporary Islamist movements are distinct from their older versions is in terms of the active participation of young women. Yet, neither the government nor civil society has addressed the full complexity of this fact. While there are a few reports and projects focusing on young women in the context of these movements, they have not led to a comprehensive vision of meaningful engagement.

This policy paper is written as part of a study looking into violent extremism and women's agency with a particular focus on young women. The study was a three-country collaboration with parallel research initiatives in Sri Lanka, India and Indonesia. Empirical research in Indonesia was conducted in three regions with distinct trajectories of Islamism, namely in West Java, Central Sulawesi and West Kalimantan.

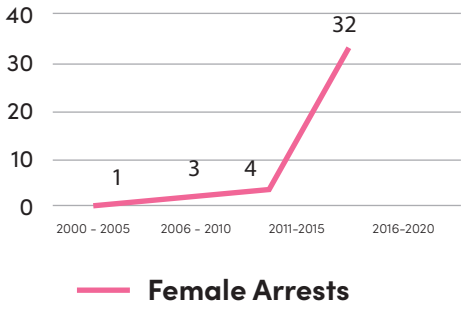
The Indonesian team refers to a definition of Islamism proposed by Mehdi Mozaffari who sees it as a totalitarian ideology comprising four elements: religious ideology; holistic interpretation of Islam; conquest of the world; and use of all means in achieving the final objective. He emphasizes that, as 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," (Mozaffari, 2017) which undoubtedly includes gender relations. Mozaffari's recognition of the multidimensionality of Islamism resonates with the Indonesian team's view that violent extremism is only one aspect of a totalitarian ideology and that it is not a prerequisite for achieving its goals.

The objective of this policy brief is to introduce a framework for policy making and collective action that builds on the emerging literature on young women's agency in Indonesia and on the findings of this research.

YOUNG WOMEN AND INDONESIA'S ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS

In her study on what she calls "social media religious influencers," Annisa Beta establishes the political agency of young Muslim women who are entrepreneurs in the Muslim fashion industry as well as social media influencers on "the good Muslim woman" (Beta, 2019). Her study provided insight on the political stance taken by these women following Islamist mobilization and narratives during a fiercely contested gubernatorial election in Jakarta in 2017. Beta's young Muslim women are merely one element in the mosaic of young women engaging with Islamist movements. Nava Nuraniyah documented the life journeys of 25 Indonesian women who joined ISIS, including 14 who were in their 20s (Nuraniyah, 2018). Reporting by the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) demonstrates young women's unique role in supporting Indonesian jihadis fighting for ISIS, including women migrants employed as domestic workers in Hong Kong who provide financial and logistical support online (IPAC, 2017).

Contemporary Islamist movements in Indonesia, those that espouse violence as well as those who denounce it, actively recruit women, including young women. Members of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), which is part of the transnational movement to establish a global caliphate through nonviolent means, have created massive campaigns on social media directed at young men and women. Felix Siauw, a HTI social media influencer with millions of followers, set up Instagram accounts with feminine colour schemes targeting young women (Hew, 2018). Experts on ISIS in Indonesia have also noted that the Islamic State envisions its state-building project to involve male combatants and professionals as well as women who prepare the future generation for jihad (Nuraniyah, 2018). As of 2020, a total of 39 women have been convicted or awaiting trial under Indonesia's anti-terrorism law (IPAC, 2020). IPAC's diagram below shows the sharp increase in number after ISIS declared its establishment in 2014.



But young women's engagement in the context of growing Islamism in Indonesia has not been limited to joining or supporting these movements. Alongside the spread of Islamist ideologies, counter movements also emerged, including among progressive and feminist Muslim women. As demonstrated in this study's social media paper, a new platform was established in the aftermath of the political mobilization of Islamist groups around the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial elections led by feminist Muslims in the form of a national convening of Indonesian women ulema, or popularly known as the Congress of Indonesian Women Ulema (KUPI). This convening aimed at establishing the religious authority of women ulama and proclaiming the birth of an invigorated rights-based movement of young ulama dedicated to gender justice. KUPI marked a new wave of activism from within traditional Islamic communities and education institutions, carving new spaces to advance a feminist vision of Islam, including through online media led by young women called Mubadalah.id.

In the meantime, the Indonesian government's policy framework designed to address radicalization and deradicalization is severely deficient in its recognition of women's roles and the gender perspective. Indonesia's 2018 law to combat terrorism, which is designed to criminalize acts of terror, and its 2021 national plan of action on violent extremism, with its protectionist approach, do not reflect the range and complexity of engagements with the Islamist ideology that exist among the diversity of Indonesian society. Political movements to transform state and society following Islamist ideology operate at all levels of society, manifest in multiple sectors of life and involve a diversity of individuals and communities. More understanding of variable empirical realities in society is needed in order to develop a robust and responsive framework for policy making and collective action.

FINDINGS ON YOUNG WOMEN'S AGENCY IN ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY

From the life journeys of 15 women interviewed in this study's empirical work in West Java, Central Sulawesi and West Kalimantan, as well as personal journals written by seven young women in various parts of the country who joined and then left their respective Islamist organizations, we have gained insight into young women's agency as they engage with these movements. Some of the key findings elaborated in the country report for this study illustrate young women's agency and the gendered dynamics in Islamist spaces. They are as follows:

- Young women start joining Islamist movements in their teens while they are at school. They are attracted simultaneously by the exposure to new ideas as well as by the deep companionship offered by their recruiters. These recruiters are themselves young women who are assigned to particular schools or communities and encouraged to build relations with whole families. Young women's entry into these movements fulfil their interest in learning about religion and the world and feed into their aspirations for personal growth and a public role of leadership.

- Once inside these movements, the spaces these women occupy and the roles they play demonstrate the seamless interconnection between the private and public spheres, between the personal and the political. Women who want to join jihadi networks, for example, seek out jihadi men to date online and to marry. Matchmaking and marriage are integral to Islamist systems of recruitment and expansion. Many Indonesian women who leave for Syria to join ISIS do so as wives and daughters in a family-wide mission to be part of the Islamist caliphate. Gendered restrictions among Islamist communities which limit women's role in public life have not prevented their women to engage as successful online entrepreneurs working from the home. While rarely fighting in the frontlines, women provide logistical and financial support, including managing safe houses.

- When young women decide to leave their Islamist movements, they do so after exposure to alternative paradigms accessed through engaged university lectures and civil society organizations. Their openness to alternative ways of thinking and living is a product of these young women's critical minds and, in some cases, associated with long-forgotten personal memories of a multicultural family and community life. As with their experience in entering into the Islamist movements, companionship in these new spaces is also as important as the ideas being offered.

- As young women from outside the Islamist movements attempt to make sense of what is happening around them, their perceptions vary, each shaped by the local manifestation of these movements within their respective contexts. For example, in Central Sulawesi, a post-conflict area, perceptions of the Islamists are closely linked to their understanding of the past inter-religious conflict two decades prior. This is in contrast to perceptions in West Kalimantan, which are closely linked to inter-ethnic identity politics that have prevailed for generations. Thus, despite the hegemonic nature of Islamist narratives and ideology, they have diverse local manifestations that respond to specific local power configurations and dynamics.

Building on existing literature on Islamism in Indonesia, this study also recognizes the larger socio-political and economic dynamics that shape the structure of opportunities and constraints available to these young women as they make their choices. The choice to join Islamist movements was made easy for young women due to the convergence of three factors: (i) the predominance of identity politics applied by political elites at national and local levels, inside and outside state institutions, that give credence to Islamist narratives in political discourse and policy making; (ii) the rise of the middle class in this Muslim majority country and consequent growth of Islamic consumerism as an expression of religious piety; and, (iii) the massive spread of social media which made Indonesia among the world's top users.

Given the micro- and macro-level dynamics above, the call by the United Nations Secretary General for governments to develop national plans of action on violent extremism that involves all-of-government and all-of-society is particularly relevant for Indonesia. As illustrated by young women's experiences with Islamism, the range of political movements that aim to transform state and society following Islamist ideology operate at all levels of society, manifest in multiple sectors of life and involve a diversity of individuals and communities. Indonesia's existing legal, policy and institutional framework, however, is framed around the narrow aim of anti-terrorism and ill-equipped to create a conducive environment for what is essentially an ideological battle for the nation. By equating Islamism with exclusively with terrorism and violent extremism, the full scope and impact of this movement in transforming daily life and social institutions could be lost. In this context, civil society, including young women, involved in efforts to combat violent extremism risk being instrumentalized under an approach that focuses on criminalization and securitization rather than being empowered to engaged fully and autonomously in the nation's broader ideological battle.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The experience of young women with Islamism in Indonesia point to the need to develop comprehensive and gender responsive policies and actions that:

- recognize the political nature of Islamist movements and the ideological dimension of efforts addressing them, including on the issue of gender equality

- guarantee democratic space and human rights for all

- promote the development of critical thinking in institutions of education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels

- enhance healthy multicultural communities and respect for all forms of diversity

- support the development of inclusive economic systems

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