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# Asia Pacific: *Perspectives*

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A stylized graphic of a suspension bridge, likely the Golden Gate Bridge, is positioned behind the text 'Pacific Rim'. The bridge's towers and cables are rendered in a simple, bold, black-and-white style, with the cables arching over the text.

# Asia Pacific: *Perspectives*

Volume 10, Number 1 ♦ May 2011

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## Gender and Moral Visions in Indonesia

Rachel Rinaldo, Ph.D., *University of Virginia*

*"I think the ideal Indonesian woman is intelligent, moral, and on the religious side she is pious. With her goodness and morality she can influence future generations, because from her womb will be born the next generation of the nation."*

Woman cadre from the Prosperous Justice Party, 2005 interview

It has been more than a decade since the collapse of Indonesia's authoritarian Suharto regime in 1998. The ensuing years have brought democratization, as well as divisive debates to Indonesia's emerging public sphere. In particular, Indonesians have been preoccupied by controversies over issues such as pornography, polygamy, veiling, Shariah law, abortion, and homosexuality. These debates play out in the mass media, on the internet, in parliament, and even on the streets of major cities. Democratization by its very nature produces political contestations and struggles. But why have these particular kinds of debates arisen? Why does gender play such a key role in these public debates? And what does examining them tell us about processes of globalization, religion, and politics?

What is striking about the Indonesian debates is that they entail competing ideas about how religion should be incorporated in the nation-state. Political positions on pornography, for example, revolve around whether the state should regulate the media to prevent it from disseminating images that offend Islamic norms of modesty. Debates such as these are moral debates, in that they involve notions of what constitutes the common good, and engage different conceptions of ethics, rights, and freedoms. An intriguing aspect of these debates is that they resemble controversies elsewhere. Debates over abortion and homosexuality are prominent features of American politics, while veiling and polygamy have become subjects of intense discussion in European countries with Muslim immigrant populations (Luker 1985, Göle 2002, Bowen 2006).

Yet another connection between these debates is their gendered character. In the U.S. and Indonesia, debates over issues like pornography are often framed as struggles over values, but such framings overlook the ways ideas about gender are profoundly implicated in these controversies (Stein 2002). Ideas about proper moral behavior entail bodily practices and dispositions, to which gender is central. For sociologists who have taken up the lens of practice theory, religion is understood in terms of actions rather than just beliefs. Turner, for example, argues that acts of religious piety involve bodily practices that may involve changes of habits and which create new forms of religious practice that challenge existing social arrangements, including secular forms of citizenship (Turner 2008). As I discuss in this paper, the Indonesian debates about polygamy and pornography render problematic women's bodies and behavior, but also instantiate notions of ethics, rights, and freedoms.

Discourses and practices of gender are therefore fundamental to moral debates. But increasingly in Indonesia, women activists from all sides of the political spectrum raise their voices in these controversies. In this paper, I examine



how women from two Muslim organizations, Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) engage in these public debates and express different moral visions of politics and gender. Investigating the public interventions of Indonesian women activists helps illuminate the complex ways in which these important debates are gendered.<sup>1</sup>

In the following discussion, I argue that global processes, especially the intersection of transnational Islam and feminism with democratization and the rise of religious civil society, are driving moral debates in the Indonesian public sphere. Feminist scholarship on gender and nation-states helps to explain why gender is a site of attempts in Indonesia to define or redefine the boundaries between religion and the state. Gender's centrality as an arena of broader social and political struggle therefore makes it critical for understanding the global Islamic revival. The moral debates discussed in this article are attempts to define norms of citizenship, to influence the relationship between religion and public life, and to secure the gender structure of public and private life.

I also propose that these moral debates provide insight into patterns of globalization more generally. Many scholars have focused on the question of how global discourses intersect with local subjectivities (Boellstorff 2005, Blackwood 2008, Davis 2007). Building on Sassen's (2008) work on assemblages of authority and rights, I suggest that moral debates can no longer be understood only within a national framework, but must be seen as related to normative orders that are not confined to the territory of the nation-state. Yet these normative frameworks such as Islam and feminism exist in the abstract – their meaning emerges as they manifest in public spheres such as that of Indonesia. It is precisely through national debates that many Indonesians adapt and negotiate global discourses. Yet while these global processes render women's bodies objects of debate, they also enable women to become participants in discussions about morality. As I show later in this article, the Indonesian women activists draw on and enact different global discourses to express their distinctive moral visions for Indonesia's future. Sassen suggests that the state is no longer the central source of moral authority, and these debates in Indonesia indeed demonstrate this point. Nevertheless, the debates also show that state power is very much a subject of contestation in Indonesia, and that gender is one of the main arenas where this struggle takes place.

### **INDONESIAN CONTEXT AND RESEARCH METHODS**

Indonesia's 237 million inhabitants, about 90% of whom are Muslim, make it the country with the world's largest Muslim population. Indonesia was ruled by an authoritarian and secular military regime, led by General Suharto, from 1965-1998. The Asian economic crisis helped to spur a popular democratic opposition movement, and Suharto stepped down in May 1998. Indonesia held democratic elections in 1999 and 2004. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Indonesia experienced outbreaks of religious and ethnic violence, as well as terrorist attacks linked to Muslim extremists. However, in the last few years stability and economic growth have returned, though some analysts argue that democratic reforms have stalled.

While Islam arrived in Indonesia in the 1400s, Islamic practice in Indonesia has been diverse and often localized. In the 1970s, transnational flows of Islam helped spur an Islamic revival. These flows came via students who studied in the Middle

East, where they were influenced by the ideas of organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood. The returnees helped to establish student groups and institutions dedicated to cultivating piety and infusing all aspects of life with Islam. Another related flow was news of the 1979 Iranian revolution, which some scholars argue was influential in Indonesia. By the 1980s, translated books and pamphlets by Middle Eastern Muslim thinkers were being circulated in Indonesia, as religious publications could sometimes circumvent the government's media censorship. The Islamic revival seems to have deepened with democratization, as increasing numbers of Indonesians are practicing Islam in a more visibly pious manner (Brenner 2005 and 1996, Doorn-Harder 2006).

This article draws on ethnographic research with women activists in Indonesia between 2002 and 2008. I compare women from the Jakarta headquarters of two organizations, Fatayat NU and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). The women in these organizations are demographically similar but express different views on gender, religion, and politics.<sup>2</sup>

Fatayat is the young women's division of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama which is estimated to have 45 million members. NU is considered to be one of the mainstays of Indonesian Islam, and Fatayat is characterized by an interpretive and often revisionist approach to Islamic texts. Most of the Fatayat staff and volunteers I met were university educated, and worked as teachers or lecturers. Fatayat originally functioned as something of a women's auxiliary within the NU, doing community service and charity work. But in the early 1990s, Fatayat leaders were influenced by international discourses of gender equality through participation in trainings and other events organized by international donors like the Ford Foundation as well as local NGOs inspired by discourses of Islamic liberalism that were circulating globally. Fatayat leaders now see women's rights and empowerment as a key part of their mission and consider themselves to be part of a broader women's movement.

The Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) was founded in 1998, and is one of Indonesia's most successful new political parties. While the party does not call for an Islamic state, it advocates making Islam the source of law and policy in a more general sense. PKS received about 7% of the national vote in the 2004 and close to 8% in the 2009 elections, with stronger showings in urban areas like Jakarta.<sup>3</sup> The PKS women I interviewed were university educated, married with children, and many worked as teachers or lecturers. However, most PKS women I met came from families who were not affiliated with the NU organization.

While the women of Fatayat and PKS emerged from somewhat different kinds of Islamic backgrounds, they share a location in the urbanizing middle classes and they have all been deeply influenced by the Islamic revival in Indonesia. They have in common a commitment to religious piety and practicing Islam in all aspects of their lives. Yet as we shall see, for these two groups of women, the notion of a more Islamic society holds different meanings and is associated with diverse political projects.

### ***CULTURE WARS, MORAL PANICS, AND PUBLIC CONTROVERSIES***

Scholars of Indonesian politics first drew attention to increasing public debates over gender and religion in the 1990s. Brenner (1999) and Sen (1998) analyzed how

the media coverage of “career women” and discussions of veiling reflected widespread tensions over economic changes that were drawing women into universities and the formal workforce. In these debates, women were often accused of neglecting their responsibilities and thereby risking the nation’s future.

Rather than dying down after the regime transition in 1998, these kinds of moral debates became an entrenched feature of Indonesia’s increasingly open public sphere. Pornography and polygamy, which I examine in this paper, have been two of the most contentious. The main participants in these public sphere activities are, as might be expected, mostly members of the urban middle classes. Nevertheless, these debates do arouse widespread interest and discussions, particularly in popular media, and women activists have been quite vocal about expressing their opinions.

The current moral debates in Indonesia should be understood as a manifestation of a broader cultural phenomenon – sometimes referred to as “culture wars” in the American context. Hunter’s (1991) original argument that differences of ideology or “values” increasingly trump social class or ethnic/racial status as a source of polarization has been much debated in American sociology. Nevertheless, the core of Hunter’s thesis, that differences around conceptions of morality are becoming sources of polarization, is worth considering in the Indonesian context.

A subset of culture wars is the phenomenon of moral panics, which also resonates with recent events in Indonesia. David Garland (2008) argues that, increasingly, moral panics are expressed in the form of culture wars, in which “specific social groups engage in moral politics in order to redistribute social status and declare one form of life superior to its rivals” (Garland, 17). Garland also suggests that an essential aspect of moral panics, and by extension culture wars, is the perception of the risks that modernity brings. Garland’s work reminds us that the debates and controversies in Indonesia are profoundly normative. The debates over polygamy, for example, reveal that family forms are an important way of defining group identity, and are closely connected with ideas about proper womanhood as well as the relationship between piety and the public sphere.

### **GENDER AND THE NATION-STATE**

Although moral panics and culture wars often revolve around gender and sexuality, the literature on culture wars often fails to make these elements explicit, emphasizing the broader rubric of “values” instead. But feminist scholars have made significant contributions to the study of nationalism and nation-states. They argue that not only do state policies constrain gender relations, but “ideas about the differences between men and women shape the ways in which states are imagined, constituted, and legitimated” (Gal & Kligman 2000: 4). Because of their reproductive capacities, women in many societies are seen as the embodiment of the community’s tradition and history. Their behavior and roles help to construct the symbolic boundaries of the community, whether that community is an ethnic group or a nation. In times of social change, as the boundaries of the community are threatened or identities are shifting, women’s bodies and behavior often become a focus of attention (Moghadam 1994, Yuval-Davis 1997).<sup>4</sup>

Since 1998, the Indonesian nation-state has been engaged in a process of redefinition. Control over state resources and power came up for grabs, new social actors

like pious Muslims have moved into the public sphere, religious organizations and figures have become fixtures of politics, processes like rural to urban migration have speeded up, gender roles and family forms continue to evolve, and Indonesia's national identity remains in flux. It is not surprising that in an era of great flux, many of the moral debates in Indonesia revolve around women's bodies and roles in the nation.

Gender, then, is a critical dimension of culture wars and moral debates. But what is also intriguing about gender in Indonesian public debates is how women activists are able to intervene in them. While feminist scholars who study gender and the nation-state often see women as symbols or victims of these processes, I suggest here that it is this very gendered nature of moral debates, somewhat surprisingly, which can facilitate women's participation in those debates. To understand how this happens, I turn to a discussion of how moral debates are shaped by globalization.

### **GLOBALIZATION**

In thinking about why gender is so central to moral debates in the public sphere, it is crucial to consider how these debates are shaped by structural forces, especially globalization. The Indonesian nation-state's process of redefinition has been driven in large part by the same global processes that are reshaping and transforming nation-states more generally. Democratization, transnational flows of culture and religion, as well as funding from international donors and NGOs, have helped to promote the rise of religious civil society in Indonesia since the late 1980s (Brenner 1996, Hefner 2000, Van Doorn-Harder 2006). At the same time, democratization, neo-liberal economic policies, and political decentralization have resulted in a situation in which the state, if not necessarily weakened, does not exert the same ideological control that it once did (Hadiz & Robison 2004, Sidel 2006). These developments have helped to foster a more open public sphere, which is constituted by a variety of publics. As these processes took off in the early 1990s, and as religious civil society emerged as the main avenue of opposition to the government, the door was opened for increasing moral debates.

Against this background, I argue that two global flows are crucial for understanding the Indonesian context: the Islamic revival and transnational feminism. Other scholars have also examined how these two flows have influenced Indonesian women activists (Brenner 2005). My argument furthers this work by proposing that these processes help to fuel gendered moral debates, as well as provide opportunities for women to engage in those debates.

Transnational feminism has been studied at great length, and many scholars have examined the ways feminist discourses are adapted, negotiated, or contested in local contexts (Desai & Naples 2002, Davis 2007).<sup>5</sup> Feminism has certainly been important for women's activism in Indonesia. Though Indonesian women activists rarely use the term to describe themselves, they have a long history of engagement with ideas of gender equality and some organizations view themselves as nodes in a transnational women's movement. This development has been facilitated by the emergence since the early 1990s of international NGOs who fund programs targeted toward women's empowerment and equality. Some women activists in Indonesia have used Islamic frameworks to argue for equality and rights (Rinaldo



2008). Feminism has also produced contestations in Indonesia, with opponents accusing it of being destructive to religious values and family structures. Whether or not activists espouse feminism, it is clear that this global framework is a reference point for discussions about women's rights, as well as for debates about religion's place in public life.

The global Islamic revival has also been the subject of intense scholarly scrutiny (Juergensmeyer 2000, Roy 2005, Mahmood 2005), though it is not often conceptualized as a global process in and of itself. As scholars have chronicled, the first major wave of the Islamic revival in Indonesia, beginning in the 1980s, was influenced by a new generation of Indonesians who had received scholarships to study in the Middle East. Many of these students brought back the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, which emphasized Islam as a way of life (Hefner 2000, Sidel 2006). Although many of these students were most interested in personal spiritual renewal, an important subset of this generation disavowed any separation between religion and politics. Increased funding from Middle Eastern sources helped bring Indonesians to study in the Middle East throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and also funded new Muslim schools within Indonesia. By the early 1990s, growing numbers of Indonesians were involved in religious study groups at school or in their neighborhoods, and young women were adopting the veil in large numbers. The early 1990s demonstrations demanding the right to wear the veil in schools and opposing the national lottery were among the first large-scale public displays of resistance to the Suharto regime since the mid-1970s.

The Islamic revival produced a series of debates in which women's behavior was often the central issue. There was resistance to veiling, both from the state and from older generations who saw it as foreign and fanatical. But the veil was as much of a symbol of renewed piety as it was a token of resistance to a government seen as authoritarian, secular, and overly Western (Brenner 1996). Nearly 20 years later, the success of the call to modesty is visible in the large numbers of women wearing Muslim clothing, particularly in urban areas. On many university campuses, for example, most female students are now veiled (Smith-Hefner 2007).

By facilitating moral debates in the public sphere, global processes have helped to shift the relationship between religion and state in Indonesia. The state is no longer able to fully manage religion, as it did during the Suharto era (Sidel 2005). Moreover, as Sassen (2008) argues, a vital aspect of global processes is the emergence of normative orders that are often specialized. While assemblages of territory, rights, and authority have up till now been congruent with the nation-state, Sassen contends that we are now seeing the rise of normative orders that do not line up neatly with the nation-state. This development results in growing challenges to the moral authority of the nation-state.

I build on Sassen's work to think about Islam and feminism as non-national normative frameworks. This concept is more useful analytically than the more nebulous 'global flows,' as it highlights the moral features of these discourses. Religion could probably be said to be one of the original globalizing forces, and Islam, with its vision of a global Muslim community, has often been in tension with the nation-state (Asad 2003). That is not to say that Islam cannot be harnessed to the nation-state, as religious nationalism attempts to do. But Islam does have a significant non-national aspect in Indonesia in the sense that Islamic ideas and practices

have increasingly flowed across borders, in ways the state has recently been unable or unwilling to control. For example, as in other majority Muslim countries, since the early 1990s, Saudi donors have helped to build educational institutions that promote more conservative interpretations of Islam. Similarly, feminism has long had a global imagination. In fact, feminism was one of the first social movements to mobilize in this global manner (Jayawardena 1986). But it was not until more recently that feminist institutions began to have the ability to fund local organizations, and that feminist ideas began to be incorporated in the development strategies of international donors. While the ideas that constitute feminism are variable and dependent on context, over the past thirty years we have seen the development of a global network of feminist institutions and organizations that seek to empower women (Davis 2007). So while neither Islam or feminism is new, it is only more recently that these discourses have been attached to global networks of institutions, a development that coincided with the opening of Indonesia's public sphere.

Gender is rather obviously implicated in both of these normative frameworks. While feminism is often studied as a social movement, it is also, as Davis (2007) writes, an epistemological project; that is, "a project that generates knowledge and knowledge practices" (Davis, 8) related to gender and bodies. In this way, Islam and feminism are both ethical orientations that may demand changes to social arrangements, especially those related to family and gender. While Islam and feminism are not at all monolithic, and like all normative frameworks are manifest through interpretation and practice, as guides for how to live and understand the world, they include prescriptions for how men and women should relate to each other, organize households, and reproduce. Their transnational circulation thereby often fuels moral debates over women's behavior and rights. Yet it is precisely in such public sphere debates that Indonesians adapt and negotiate global discourses. As we shall see in the next section, Indonesian Muslim women use Islam and feminism to participate in public debates and advocate their own moral visions for Indonesia's future.

### ***WOMEN ACTIVISTS AND MORAL DEBATES: PORNOGRAPHY AND POLYGAMY***

I now turn to the multifaceted interventions of women activists in public controversies over pornography and polygamy. The Anti-Pornography bill, passed in 2008, spurred angry demonstrations, myriad newspaper and magazine articles and op-eds, not to mention heated debates in parliament.

Concern about pornography became more widely expressed in Indonesia following the rise of a freewheeling popular media after 1998. While older laws providing some forms of censorship remained on the books, many television shows and magazines began to feature subject matter or images that some Indonesians considered indecent, such as women in very revealing clothing.<sup>6</sup> The furor that erupted over the popular singer Inul Daratista's dance style in 2002 and 2003 was an indication of a backlash from increasingly pious Muslims. Some Indonesians felt that Inul was merely the tip of the iceberg of a progressively more sexualized culture, one in which kids were watching pornography at internet cafes and buying counterfeit "blue" movies on the street. In an article published in the popular

newsweekly Tempo, for example, Syamsul Muarif, the Minister for Communications and Information, said that 60% of Indonesians were accessing porn on the internet and beyond. "So, because that's what they like, the shows are also being allowed on television," he warned (Tempo, May 14, 2003).

The momentum for new legislation on pornography seems to have come from the ranks of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). PKS cadres adhere to more textual approach to Islam, often arguing that Islamic values should be the source of national and local law. In 2003, I attended a seminar and demonstration against pornography held by the PKS women's division – the speakers included a representative from the Indonesian Council of Ulemas, a quasi-governmental body that rules on matters of Islamic law.

At the seminar, pornography was consistently depicted as a threat to the nation. The head of the party's women's division introduced the event with the statement, "We face the challenge of building an Indonesia which is moral." Later, a PKS legislator argued that Indonesia was under threat from "American cultural exports," including pornography. "We should not be afraid to express the desire of the majority," she said. "We have a responsibility to the next generation to make a better Indonesia."

Several of the speakers defined pornography very broadly, as showing a woman without covering her aurat (a term from Arabic meaning the parts of a woman's body that should be forbidden from public view – for many Indonesian Muslims, aurat stretches from a woman's upper chest to her ankles). At this time, although it was not discussed in the seminar, a bill to outlaw pornography was already being written.

In February 2006, PKS members introduced into parliament draft legislation, written in collaboration with MUI and other religious authorities. As originally written, the bill was extremely broad, and would have outlawed kissing in public and bikinis on beaches. Public outcry forced its return to parliament for revision and it remained stalled there for over a year. In November 2008, a somewhat revised version was passed which made exceptions for "sexual materials" as part of traditional culture and fine arts.<sup>7</sup>

PKS's interest in pornography reflects an agenda to reform Indonesia through a highly public form of morality. For many of the women in PKS, the organization is not merely a party, but a vehicle for instilling Islamic values in society. As one woman told me, "I hope that politics in Indonesia will be based on Islam, as the majority of the population is Muslim. Islam is believed to be rahmatan li-`alamîn, bringing goodness to the whole world. So, if it is implemented, I am sure Indonesia will progress."

Women activists in Indonesia's public sphere found themselves on very different sides of the pornography debate. While those who see themselves as part of the women's rights movement strongly opposed it,<sup>8</sup> women in Muslim political parties like PKS supported it. Yet both thought that they had the broader interests of Indonesian women in mind. Interestingly, while pornography was a divisive issue for the American and Australian feminist movements in the 1980s, this was not the case for women's rights proponents in Indonesia. Both religious and secular women's rights activists in Indonesia opposed the bill because of concerns about censorship and effects on gender equality. While few Indonesian women have

advanced the kind of “pro-pornography” or “sex positive” positions that emerged in the U.S. and Australian context, support for freedom of expression within women’s rights organizations led even those who have expressed concern about pornography and public morality in the past to oppose the bill.

Demonstrations against the pornography bill were initiated by women’s rights organizations, but it was at first unclear whether Muslim women’s organizations would oppose or support the legislation. In March 2006, however, Fatayat leaders weighed in with a carefully worded statement opposing the bill because it failed to provide protections for women and children victimized by the sex industry, and arguing that pre-existing legislation could be more effectively implemented. This statement was widely reprinted in the national media and especially on the blogs that sprang up as part of the opposition to the bill. One Fatayat activist explained the group’s stance, reiterating the importance of empowering women:

“As for Fatayat, we agree that pornography shouldn’t be allowed, but we also don’t think these laws should be passed soon. It’s not that we agree with pornography, but there are many paragraphs that harm women... For example, women if they go out after midnight must have an escort or they can be arrested. Now what’s that for? Meanwhile, it’s OK for men, and I think that’s unfair. So I think there are a number of items that really harm women, so we rejected it... Yes, there are things that I agree with, but these laws don’t empower women, in fact, it’s the opposite.”

At demonstrations and other events, individual Fatayat leaders expressed more scathing views on the bill. One activist linked it to recent attempts to pass legislation inspired by Islamic law, noting: “The phenomena of the anti-pornography bill started with the appearance of by-laws in some of the regions. Although not explicitly packaged as anti-pornography, they have put in place of anti-prostitution laws, morality laws and even Islamic Shariah laws. All these laws attempt to force women back into their homes” (Koesoemawiria 2006).

For many women in Fatayat, the debate over pornography was a distraction from more serious problems. When I asked Fatayat members about what they considered to be the most important problems facing women and the country as a whole, unlike women in PKS, they rarely mentioned morality. Instead, they tended to cite need for political and economic reforms. As one Fatayat volunteer explained, “The rich are getting richer, the poor are staying poor, the poor don’t have a strong bargaining position. Civil society in Indonesia is still weak... up till now government programs are always top-down, not bottom-up, they don’t channel the aspirations of the society.”

For most of 2007, the bill was being revised in a parliamentary committee. In early 2008, I asked women from PKS about their support for the bill, and why they thought it has proved so controversial. They did not think the bill was too extreme, but blamed the difficulties on the power of media interests as well as on supporters of the bill who hadn’t explained it well enough so that people would understand it. One woman cadre, who was confident that it would soon pass, explained:

“I think it’s maybe because of the communication factor, which isn’t always easy. Sometimes there are obstacles, debates on various sides, which are not clearly communicated and so we don’t understand each other, are not open with each other. But the main thing is that we supported it because it protects society from the bad effects of pornography and porno activity.... In terms of our position, we have already been very clear



that our support for it is related to how the next generation of children can be protected. So that our society will be morally better, because morality is very important to improve ourselves.”

The pornography example shows how globalization drives gendered moral debates. A public furor arose over media images, especially of women’s bodies, that were popularly felt to be a negative result of Indonesia’s increasing openness to the rest of the world. The expansion of the Islamic revival and the growing power of Muslim civil society organizations produced a growing concern over moral behavior in public spaces. The new interest in modesty was visible in the growing numbers of women adopting Muslim clothing in the early 2000s (Smith-Hefner 2007). In the pornography debate Islamic discourses of virtue, especially for women, were linked to concerns for national progress. Women in PKS used these global discourses of Islamic piety to argue that certain kinds of depictions of female bodies were a threat to the moral order of the nation. Meanwhile opponents of the bill drew on transnational feminism to argue that the bill would contravene progress toward women’s empowerment. In particular, women in Fatayat wielded liberal discourses of freedom, civil society, and rights to contend that greater state regulation of expression is not the way to achieve gender equality.

### **POLYGAMY**

While polygamy is not as closely attached to particular legislation as the pornography debate is, it has been a topic of increasing interest among Muslims in Indonesia since 2000 (Brenner 2006, Nurmila 2009). In fact, though the practice is not particularly common in Indonesia, polygamy was periodically a contentious moral issue throughout the 20th century. During the nationalist movement in the 1920s and 1930s, women activists were split along religious/secular lines, with Muslim women’s groups opposing restrictions on polygamy (Locher-Scholten 2000). According to Locher-Scholten, Muslim women’s groups did not embrace polygamous marriage, but rather, opposed the colonial state’s attempts to intervene in religious practice. In the 1970s, elite women’s organizations pushed for a ban on polygamy. The government responded to their concerns with the 1974 marriage law, which made it extremely difficult for civil servants to marry more than one wife. By the 1980s, Indonesia’s growing Muslim middle class generally saw polygamy as a sign of backwardness, although state attempts to ban it might have met with some resistance.

Yet in the wake of 1998, polygamy once again emerged as a moral debate. Much has already been written about the 2003 “polygamy contest” sponsored by the entrepreneur Puspo Wardoyo (Brenner 2006), which resulted in calls by women activists to boycott his restaurant chain.<sup>9</sup> The political figure Hamzah Haz, Megawati’s vice president from 2001-2004, has promoted his polygamous marriage as an ideal for Muslims. In 2006, the debate became even more polarized with the well-liked Muslim preacher Aa Gym’s announcement that he had married a second wife. His popularity immediately plummeted (Hoesterey 2008) and his commercial empire has shrunk. The polygamy debates generated an entire sub-category of books and pamphlets extolling the values of polygamous families or conversely, arguing that polygamy has no place in contemporary Islam. Aa Gym’s revelations inspired competing street demonstrations by women, as one article describes:

"The debate moved into the street, with opposing groups marching and carrying signs. 'Polygamy is *halal* (allowed in Islam). Extramarital affairs are *haram* (forbidden),' said one of the pro-polygamy posters. Moments later, another group of women marched at the same location, shouting anti-polygamy slogans. 'One, I love my mother. Two, I love my father. Three, I love my brothers and sisters. One, two, three, I reject polygamy,' they chanted to the tune of a well-known children's song."<sup>10</sup>

Polygamy has also become grist for Indonesia's pop culture mill. In 2008, millions of young Indonesians made the film "Ayat-Ayat Cinta" (Verses of Love) a smash hit. "Ayat-Ayat Cinta," which ends with the marriage of its romantic hero to a second wife, has apparently helped to spawn a new trend for Islamic romance stories and films. While the country's president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and leaders of Muslim organizations praised the film for presenting the story of a pious youth getting married in an Islamic manner, women's rights advocates were uncomfortable with what they saw as the film's gentle treatment of polygamy. And indeed, "Ayat-Ayat Cinta" followed on the heels of an earlier work, "Love for Share," by Nia Dinata, one of Indonesia's leading independent filmmakers. Dinata drew on her own experiences growing up in a polygamous family to make "Love for Share," which harshly condemned polygamy.

Since the 1970s, many Indonesian Muslim women's groups have come to oppose polygamy, Fatayat included. Fatayat leaders don't dispute the fact that the Quran allows men to marry four wives, but influenced by the work of Muslim reformists such as Fatima Mernissi, Ali Asghar Engineer, and others, they maintain that the verse about polygamy needs to be understood in its historical context (to be discussed below). Clearly this argument also derives from their hope to promote a more gender egalitarian way of practicing Islam. Fatayat leaders argue that the wording of the main verse on polygamy makes it clear that men are only permitted to marry more than one wife if they can support all the wives equally. To accomplish that is basically impossible in this day and age, they argue, especially when it comes to dealing with wives' emotional needs. Fatayat has published books and articles as an attempt to disseminate this view more widely.

For example, in an article in the national newspaper Kompas, Maria Ulfah Ansor, the head of Fatayat, contends that the Prophet Muhammad's practice of polygamy was a special circumstance because during his lifetime there were many widows due to tribal conflicts. She maintains that the "basic principle" of marriage in Islam is monogamy, and that the verses about polygamy should be seen in the context of a particular time and place. Nevertheless, Fatayat's position as the women's division of Nahdlatul Ulama makes advocacy for their views on polygamy rather complicated. Though many NU leaders discourage polygamy and reiterate the view that a husband must have the means to fully support his wives, they do not fully reject polygamy either. NU is a large and diverse organization, and there are some polygamous members. Fatayat activists must therefore be careful not to stray too deeply into the polygamy debates.

PKS women express a very different view of polygamy. In 2003, when I first met Nita, a founding member of the party, she told me that none of the leadership was polygamous. But when I returned for additional research in 2005, other party members mentioned that some leading PKS figures, including Anis Matta, the party's secretary general, had more than one wife. More recently, in 2008, the former head of the party, Hidayat Nurwahid, also married a second wife.

The PKS women I met held quite diverse opinions on the practice of polygamy, but nearly all argued against what they saw as efforts to ban it. The sentiments of one PKS women cadre whom I interviewed in 2003 were widely shared. Nita argued that polygamy should be seen as a provision for special cases.

“Islam, I think, represents rules from Allah. This is what we call Shariah. Allah knows the weaknesses of humanity and makes rules for this. Therefore, for humans for whom one wife is not enough, Islam opens the opportunity for polygamy...If a man really wants to have children, but his wife has been told by a doctor that it is not possible for her to have children, then Islam permits polygamy. Also for a man who has high sexual needs, Islam permits polygamy. Because it is not possible for a woman to serve the man all day long, so a man may take another wife...In practice, we have to pay attention to the context of the polygamy. If it is only to satisfy desire, it is in contradiction to Islam. Unfortunately in Indonesia, many people don't understand that.”

The concern about needing to make provisions for male sexual needs is a common feature of pro-polygamy discourse in Indonesia, as some proponents claim that it discourages adultery. Some PKS women acknowledged to me that they did not like the idea of polygamy, but felt that as Muslims they had to accept it (none of the women I interviewed admitted to being in polygamous relationships). And it is this view that is the key to understanding PKS women's stance on polygamy – they adhere to a strict textual approach to the Quran, which does not accept the historicized approach of Fatayat and many Muslim reformists.

For example, when asked about her opinion of polygamy, Susanti told me that Muslims cannot simply pick and choose what they like from the Quran. “The problem is that we can only place our trust in Allah. Certainly for a husband who wants to be polygamous, there must be many considerations. He must ask permission from his wife and his children, whether they are ready for it. Individually, as a Muslim I accept it. This is because I want my Islam to be full, comprehensive and not choosing just what is nice and leaving behind what is not so great. I want to be like that.”

A few PKS women were more willing to defend the practice. Yet given that even within PKS circles the prevalence of polygamy is probably low, polygamy is more of a symbolic commitment for PKS women. Some studies of gender norms and the division of labor within evangelical families in the U.S. have found a gap between ideals of male household headship and actual practices. Gallagher (2004) proposes that the commitment to male authority is a way of symbolically defining community boundaries around conservative gender norms. Similarly, I suggest that PKS women's espousal of polygamy represents a commitment to a particular approach to practicing Islam, one based on a rather literalist reading of the Quran, which defines the identity of PKS.

As with pornography, the debate over polygamy is driven by global processes. Global Islamic normative frameworks have helped to fuel an urge to return to what are seen as authentically Islamic practices, including polygamy, which embody particular conceptions of women's roles and family forms. Moreover, the growing legitimacy of more textually conservative approaches to Islam has empowered those Indonesians, such as members of PKS, who argue that the verses of the Quran should be questioned. Additionally, the polygamy debate also seems to respond to a perception of a national crisis in marriage and morality.

Until recently in Indonesia, most Muslims saw polygamy as inappropriate for a modern society. While few PKS women can be categorized as proponents of polygamy, their opposition to limitations on polygamy is couched in terms of a commitment to practicing Islam as fully as possible, which means accepting the text of the Quran for what it is. PKS's argument represents an emerging approach to practicing Islam "fully" that bears the marks of the global Islamic revival and the increasing emphasis on living an Islamic life. Yet other global Islamic discourses with a more liberal bent, as well transnational feminist frameworks, have helped to produce stronger challenges to polygamy that are expressed in Islamic terms. While Fatayat women draw on Indonesia's established traditions of interpretation in their approach to Islam, they use these traditions in support of explicitly egalitarian aims. Influenced by Middle Eastern Muslim feminists like Fatima Mernissi, the women of Fatayat interweave revisionist readings of Islamic texts with discourses of gender equality and women's rights to argue against polygamy.

### **GLOBALIZATION, MORAL DEBATES, AND GENDER IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

This paper has sought to understand the ways globalization intersects with local subjectivities through an examination of moral debates in Indonesia. Moral debates have become an entrenched feature of the Indonesian public sphere in recent years, and gender is central to these debates.

The debates over pornography and polygamy represent a kind of culture war in Indonesia, in which opposing sides argue for their own notion of the common good as superior to others. Supporters of the pornography bill argue that it is necessary to combat national moral degradation and promote more appropriately Islamic values, while opponents claim that it is detrimental to freedom of expression and does nothing to empower women. Proponents of polygamy, and those resistant to limitations on it, argue that polygamy is intrinsic to Islam and that the state cannot interfere in Islamic practice. Meanwhile, opponents of polygamy contest the view that it is inherent to Islam, and argue that it conflicts with equality and justice within the family.

The gendered aspects of these two debates are inescapable. The pornography bill allows the state to regulate the ways bodies are depicted in media, but also how they appear in public spaces. The concept of modesty inherent to this legislation is not gender-neutral, for it is nearly always the female body that is considered disruptive and must be covered. Similarly, polygamy, or more specifically, bigamy, enshrines a distinct hierarchy between the husband and his wives. Allowing or encouraging men to have multiple partners while women are forbidden to do so is predicated on the belief that gender difference is natural and inevitable, and that the role of a woman is to produce heirs.

Why are women such a subject of debate in contemporary Indonesia? Feminist scholarship provides a framework for understanding this issue. The events of 1998 and the decade since have been a period of tremendous social and political change in Indonesia. Islam has become a force in politics and public life, the state no longer provides many social programs, the ranks of the middle class continue to expand, and the country is rapidly urbanizing. Many of these shifts have direct consequences for gender relations. The rising age of marriage and growing numbers of women attending higher education and joining the formal workforce have



produced anxieties around family and reproduction, as well as resulted in some women seeking egalitarian marriages. And because of the way women symbolize tradition and community identity, it is no surprise that moral debates in the public sphere focus on them.

Yet examining these debates through the lens of globalization yields insights about patterns of globalization, as well as changing forms of power and domination in the contemporary world. Global processes have helped to shift the relationship between religion and state in many countries, including Indonesia. Democratization, neo-liberalism, and the rise of civil society mean that the state exerts less control over the moral order. In the early years of the New Order, from the late 1960s through the 1970s, there was a fairly clear division between religion and politics. The later years of the New Order, from the 1980s onwards, were characterized by the state's increasing attempts to manage and control religion, especially Islam (Sidel 2005). But since 1998, many Muslim groups have sought to re-forge this relationship in a variety of ways. Groups like PKS aim for the state to promote a more Islamic society, while Fatayat seeks a role for religion in the public sphere as a way to promote justice and equality.

Not only do national anxieties about social and political change occur on the terrain of gender, but moral debates about gender are also driven by global processes, especially the emergence of normative orders that are not contained within the nation-state. These normative orders, which may clash or intersect with the state, fuel debates about existing social arrangements, and especially, questions of what constitutes moral behavior and the public good.

In Indonesia, the Islamic revival has called into question norms of citizenship and the relationship between religion and state. Yet as we have seen, global discourses not only stimulate moral debates but also promote contestation in those debates. Gender, with its close relationship to sexuality and reproduction, is not surprisingly a key aspect of these globally driven moral debates. Islam and feminism present women activists with the means to engage in these debates, providing tools for arguments for a more Islamic society and a traditional gender order, or conversely, for gender equality and women's rights. Thus, it is precisely in these kinds of debates that Indonesian women activists such as those in PKS and Fatayat adapt global discourses to express their own moral visions for the future of Indonesia.

The Indonesian case sheds light not only on how global processes produce moral debates in the public sphere, but also the complex ways gender is implicated in such struggles. While the emergence of global normative frameworks may mean that the state is no longer the central moral authority, state power is more than ever an object of contestation in Indonesia. Examining recent Indonesian moral controversies demonstrates that ideas about gender are very much tied to broader visions of religion and the nation-state. While these processes are driven by global structures, these same global structures and processes are also helping to produce new subjectivities whose public interventions target the nation-state. Muslim women activists in Indonesia have begun to take advantage of these developments. Nevertheless, we should be cautious about equating women's agency with liberation, for Muslim women's activism is not necessarily oriented towards equality. While some activists seek equality and rights, others pursue stronger moral regulation.

The question that remains is not merely the eventual outcomes of such debates for women in Indonesia, but the broader consequences of competing moral orders for social change and power relations in the contemporary world.

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### **ENDNOTES**

1. I use a broad definition of women's activism to refer to women organizing other women for purposes thought to benefit women more generally. This includes activism by women oriented towards equality or rights (which I call women's rights activism), as well as activism by women more oriented toward the goal of building an Islamic society.
2. The organizations in this study have encouraged me to use their real names. However, all individual names have been changed.
3. For more information, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indonesian\\_legislative\\_election,\\_2009](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indonesian_legislative_election,_2009).
4. [www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/05/28/house-sees-record-number-women.html](http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/05/28/house-sees-record-number-women.html).
5. In her influential work, Yuval-Davis provides case studies of how states and nationalist movements have sought to regulate women's bodies. A classic example is Nazi Germany, where Hitler's regime exhorted women to remain in the house and bear children to reproduce the nation. More recently, scholars have argued that Muslim groups' demands for women to veil or to behave modestly represent attempts to reformulate the nation through control over women and reproduction (Ong 1996; Gole 1996). Similarly, scholars of South Asia have written about how Hindu nationalists seek to marginalize Muslims based on their alleged mistreatment of women. Here again, women are mobilized as a symbol of a community's status (Jeffery and Basu 1998).
6. Feminism here is used descriptively, to refer to a set of transnational discourses of women's equality in public and private spheres.
7. Allen (2007) writes that an early version of the bill was drawn up and shelved in the 1990s.
8. Pornography in the bill is defined as: coital acts, foreplay and sexual diversions pertaining to intercourse, sexual violence, masturbation or onanism, nudity or illusions/allusions to nudity, and genitalia. A further clarification in the bill's text defines nudity as: appearance or reference to nude bodies (<http://www.indonesiamatters.com/2474/porn-laws/>).
9. The bill was most strongly opposed by artists and by the Balinese, who argued that erotic and sensual expression is intrinsic to their traditional culture. Balinese politicians have said that they will not enforce the legislation in Bali.
10. Wardoyo, owner of a chain of chicken restaurants, announced an award to promote 'transparent polygamy,' in which a husband would inform his wife of his new marriage. At 2003 gala, Wardoyo honored 37 men and distributed pro-polygamy books. Protesters marched outside holding placards with slogans such as: "Monogamy yes, polygamy no" and "Polygamy transgresses human rights" (Robinson 2009; Brenner 2006).
11. [www.femalebeauty.info/2006/aa-gym-popular-indonesian-preacher-sparks-polygamy-debate.html](http://www.femalebeauty.info/2006/aa-gym-popular-indonesian-preacher-sparks-polygamy-debate.html).

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**Rachel Rinaldo** is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Virginia. Her interests include the sociology of gender, culture, religion, and social change. Rinaldo's Ph.D. dissertation was a study of Muslim and secular women activists, based on 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Jakarta, the Indonesian capital. Her article, "Envisioning the Nation: Women Activists, Religion, and the Public Sphere in Indonesia" (*Social Forces*, 2008) explored how Muslim women activists are increasingly legitimate participants in the ongoing re-imagining of the Indonesian nation-state. She is currently working on a book about women activists, Islam, and the public sphere in Indonesia.