

INDONESIA ASSESSMENT SERIES

# *WOMEN* IN INDONESIA

Gender, Equity and Development



edited by

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## 8 GAY AND LESBI SUBJECTIVITIES, NATIONAL BELONGING AND THE NEW INDONESIA

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### SEXUAL AND GENDERED SUBJECT-POSITIONS IN INDONESIA

At a seminar held at the Australian National University in September 2001, Amien Rais stated that for democracy to work in Indonesia's *era reformasi* (era of reform), it must include all groups in society, even those that are ignored or hated. The underlying question of this chapter responds to this train of thought, asking: 'What will the place of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians be in the present *era reformasi*?'<sup>1</sup>

For the last ten years I have been studying *lesbi* and *gay* subject-positions in contemporary Indonesia, primarily but not solely in Java, Sulawesi and Bali. I define 'subject-positions' as the historically and culturally specific categories of selfhood through which persons come to know themselves as individuals and as members of communities and societies. 'Subjectivities' are the ways in which persons occupy one or more subject-positions in a variety of ways (for example, partially or completely, antagonistically or amicably). This theoretical language offers a more nuanced framework than the somewhat problematic term 'identity', which for many implies a kind of conscious alignment that does not square with the incompletely intentional ways that people understand their place in the world.

We find in contemporary Indonesia many other 'genres' of sexual/gendered subject-position in addition to *lesbi* and *gay*. For instance, there is *waria* (known popularly by a wide variety of terms, most notably *banci*); this is a nationwide, male-to-female, transvestite subject-position whose history is still poorly understood, but is most likely about 250 years old. There are what I call 'ethnolocalised homosexual and transgendered professional subject-positions' (ETPs), which include such things as *warok-gemblak* relations in eastern Java – that is, sexual relations between male actors (*warok*) and their younger male understud-

ies (*gemblak*) (see Wilson 1999) – or, to some extent, *bissu* (ritual Bugis priests, many of whom have historically been male transvestites; see Pelras 1996: 82) practitioners in southern Sulawesi. Many of these ETPs have histories going back several centuries. There are also female-to-male transgendered persons, known most often as *tomboi* or *hunter*, whose subjectivities are complexly linked to those of *lesbi* women. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there are those people called *normal*, that is, ‘heterosexual’ men and women. While the sexual subject-positions of these persons are often assumed to be natural or biological, they are in fact historically and culturally specific as well. For instance, what it means to be a *normal* man or woman in contemporary Indonesia is quite different from dominant notions of proper manhood or womanhood 300 years ago.

I do not have space in this article to discuss these other sexual/gendered subject-positions, but there are several general points to be made. Subject-positions, from ‘gay’ to ‘banker’ to ‘wife’ and so on, are always culturally constructed and as a result have a history. They come into being during a certain period of time, that period of formation shapes them, and then they continue to change. Subject-positions are also always linked to some idea of social scale – local, national, regional, global and so on. This raises important questions of methodology for the anthropological study of gender – since women are usually assumed to be more linked to locality and tradition than men, and at the same time the methods of anthropology are designed to look at locality, to the extent that you often find anthropologists talking about a very different ‘Indonesia’ to that of political scientists or psychologists.

## SEXUALITY AND NATIONAL CULTURE

One reason why *gay* and *lesbi* subject-positions are so interesting is that they are quite new: Indonesians do not appear to have started thinking of themselves as *lesbi* or *gay* until the 1970s, and the subject-positions really took shape in the 1980s and 1990s. These Indonesians are still largely ignored by the state. Nonetheless, I want to claim that *gay* and *lesbi* subject-positions have always been linked to national culture – not as the result of intentional state policy, but because national ideology has constituted an ‘at-hand’ way of thinking about selfhood not linked to locality or tradition.

Many *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians still remember the ‘wedding’ of Jossie and Bonnie in Jakarta in 1981 as the first time that they thought of themselves as sharing a kind of selfhood with other people in Indonesia. This event was important not just because it appeared in the mass media, but because of the way these women were staking a claim to national belonging. Indeed, one reporter who covered the event in the 6 July 1981 issue of *Liberty* magazine said:

This event is indeed unique, not least because it is the first time something like this has occurred in Jakarta, maybe in Indonesia, or even the whole world – that the marriage of two people of the same sex is formalized openly, without anything to cover it ... If the relationship between Jossie and Bonnie had been tied together ... with an ordinary reception in the presence of their peers, anyone could have done it. It would have been no different to a birthday party. What is unique ... is that this is a *lesbi* wedding formalized with a joyous ceremony, and thus constitutes a new ‘dilemma’ in Indonesia. Viewing the life of these two young lesbians, it is apparent that they have a different way of thinking about how to solve the problem of lesbianism in our Republic. In our estimation, both of them want to become pioneers for their people, who are not small in number. And with them both standing in front, their hopes openly revealed, who knows what will happen ...

Turning to the present, we find that while *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians are more visible in everyday life and in the mass media than they were in 1981, many ordinary Indonesians still do not know what *gay* and *lesbi* mean. They think they are English words for *waria*, or that they refer only to foreigners. Indonesians who do know what *lesbi* and *gay* mean often think of these people as ‘deviants’ (*orang yang menyimpang*), people who go outside the norms of society (*di luar norma-norma masyarakat*). Often it is incorrectly assumed that *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians are part of the *kelas eksekutif* or the rich, even though most of them make under Rp 500,000 per month, do not speak English and have never travelled outside Indonesia.

In fact, these Indonesians are not deviants; their ways of thinking actually reflect many central assumptions in contemporary Indonesian society. *Lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians inhabit *national* subject-positions borne from the time of the New Order but that now continue on without the New Order. If we look at the style of thinking of *lesbi* and *gay* people, we find it to be surprisingly compatible with an Indonesia in which civil society is rejuvenated and tolerance more valued.

I am reminded of something a *gay* man in Makassar once said to me:

Culture is something that is created by humans and then believed. There are people in Indonesia who have created [*menciptakan*] ‘*gay*’ here in Indonesia and believe in what they have created [*dipercayai*]. Thus, gayness [*kegayan*] is part of Indonesian culture.

Note how my friend refers not to Bugis or Makassar culture but to *Indonesian culture*. One of the most significant things about *gay* and *lesbi* subject-positions is that they are irreducible to ethnolocality.

I coin the term ‘ethnolocality’ to underscore how, in both scholarly work on Indonesia and many everyday Indonesian understandings, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘locality’ assume each other to the extent that they are, in essence, a single concept (see Boellstorff 2002). There are *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians from every ethno-

locality and religion. However, while *gay* and *lesbi* persons sometimes think of their lives in ethnolocal terms with regard to, say, kinship, in terms of sexuality they think of themselves as *Indonesians*. To date there has never been a specifically ethnolocal *gay* and *lesbi* subject-position or network. This does not mean that *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities are the same everywhere in Indonesia – far from it! But *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians say these differences are subsequent to a sense of belonging to the nation.

These subject-positions raise a number of important theoretical, methodological and political issues. A crucial question is how *gay* and *lesbi* subject-positions are irreducible to ethnolocality when they have never enjoyed institutional support. One factor is that they do not come from ‘tradition’. The national character of *lesbi* and *gay* subject-positions is thus linked to modernity and mass media. However, this still does not tell us how *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians understand their own subjectivities. Subject-positions are never ‘imported’ into Indonesia; they are always transformed to fit new circumstances. In the case of *gay* and *lesbi* subject-positions, one important aspect of this transformation is the use of ‘archipelago’ metaphors.

Sometimes this is explicit. For instance, the national network of *gay* and *lesbi* organisations is called GAYa Nusantara. *Gaya* means ‘style’, but when the first three letters are capitalised it can also mean *gay*. *Nusantara* means ‘archipelago’, but it can also mean ‘Indonesia’. Unlike English, in Indonesian nouns come before adjectives – since ‘GAYa’ is both English and Indonesian, ‘GAYa Nusantara’ can have four meanings: ‘archipelago style’, ‘Indonesia style’, ‘*gay* Indonesia’, and ‘*gay* archipelago’. The idea of a *gay* archipelago is also found in the fact that ‘local’ groups often retain the first word and then add a term with a local flavour, to give GAYa Dewata in Bali, GAYa Celebes in Makassar, GAYa Semarang in Semarang, GAYa Betawi in Jakarta, GAYa Priangan in Bandung, GAYa Siak in Pekanbaru and GAYa Khatulistiwa in Pontianak. (Note that not all members of these groups are *gay* or *lesbi*, and many of the groups undertake activities focused on public health or other goals.)

These names would not have much meaning if the thinking behind them was not also reflected *implicitly* in the daily lives of *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians. This appears in the way they often think of their homosexual lives as one ‘island’ in a self that is like an archipelago. It also appears in the way they believe their diversity is enclosed within a unity – that *gay* and *lesbi* are fundamentally Indonesian subject-positions, only secondarily linked to ethnolocality.

This reflects a larger issue: it is problematic to explain gender and sexuality in terms of tradition (*adat*) without taking into account the fact that most Indonesians have grown up with ‘local’ and ‘national’ cultures at the same time. In the life-worlds of Indonesians, those things learned from an ostensibly local tradition are not necessarily more culturally immediate than those things learned from school, a family planning brochure or a TV show. The ‘everyday life’

through which one becomes enculturated is, in contemporary Indonesia, always simultaneously ethnolocal and national; one does not start out as a 'local' person and then only later come to think of oneself as part of a national culture. This is the case even if one's stance towards the national culture (or an ethnolocal culture or cultures for that matter) is antagonistic; it is perfectly possible to reject a cultural logic in whole or in part and still be profoundly influenced by that logic through the very act of resistance to it.

Finally, the impact of the archipelago concept appears in how these Indonesians see their national community as one 'island' in a *global* archipelago that includes other 'islands' such as Holland, Thailand and the United States. What is clear is that this metaphor is not part of a timeless tradition, but is derived from a key structuring principle of the nation-building project. The archipelago concept dates from the early period of nationalism at the beginning of the 20th century but gained new force in December 1957 in the context of an international dispute over maritime boundaries. In 1973 a government resolution decreed that the archipelago concept 'gives life to national development in all its aspects' – political, educational and sociocultural. It continues to be used in *era reformasi*, as we saw last year when Megawati emphasised that Indonesia is an archipelagic state, not a continental one.

## HEGEMONY, NATIONAL SELFHOOD AND VIOLENCE

This transformation of the archipelago concept by *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians is an example of *hegemony*, a concept associated with the work of the Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971) and developed by Hall (1988), Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and many Indonesian intellectuals. Gramsci recognised that groups in modern societies hold power through the force of the state only in the last instance; they primarily use culture and mass media to convince most citizens to accept their way of thinking. This hegemonic way of thinking must constantly be renewed in civil society. It must always adapt itself, and for this reason is at risk of being transformed in unexpected ways. This is exactly what we see in the case of *gay* and *lesbi* subject-positions.

These Indonesians have taken a core element of state ideology, the archipelago concept, and transformed it so as to understand their own subjectivities. Most of the time this process is not conscious, but this is what they are doing, at the same time that they transform the concepts 'gay' and 'lesbian' from outside Indonesia. It is not hard to imagine that if *gay* and *lesbi* subject-positions had arisen in Sukarno's Old Order, in the context of the Non-Aligned Movement and a strongly antagonistic stance towards the West, their character would not have been what it is now. They would also differ if they were arising now in the era of regional autonomy (*otonomi daerah*).

It is with this concept of hegemony in mind that I can make the following statement: *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians are the New Order's greatest success story – the greatest example of a truly national culture irreducible to ethnocentricity – but a success the New Order never intended! They show us that we can take concepts, even if they come from forces we don't agree with, and transform them. (This is also a point made by the early nationalists, who noted that the greatest gift of the Dutch to Indonesia was the idea of 'Indonesia' itself.) *Gay* and *lesbi* people have created something new from old ways of thinking. They show that it is possible to create a new archipelago concept based on greater tolerance and social justice. We saw this as far back as 1981, when that *lesbi* wedding was seen as staking a claim to national belonging.

However, in the last three years we have seen a new kind of violent rejection of *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians that is also focused on staking a claim to national belonging. While most Indonesians think that *gay* or *lesbi* Indonesians are sick, sinful or deserving of pity, until recently this has rarely translated into a desire to hurt them.

In September 1999, a number of *gay* and *lesbi* groups decided to hold a national meeting to follow up on earlier meetings held in 1993, 1995 and 1997. Members from 21 organisations from Java and Bali arrived at the Dana Hotel in Solo to participate in a national working meeting (*rakernas*). By at least 7 September, several fundamentalist Muslim organisations in Solo had learned of the *rakernas* and, in sharp contrast to all previous public reactions to such meetings, declared that it was immoral and should not take place. They threatened to organise their followers to burn down the Dana Hotel and kill any *gay* men and *lesbi* women they found.

When these threats became known, the *lesbi* women and *gay* men who had gathered at the Dana Hotel cancelled the meeting and moved to other hotels for safety. However, the Muslim organisations soon learned of a back-up plan to hold a press conference at the local office of the Democratic People's Party (PRD), which includes *gay* and *lesbi* rights in its political platform. On 10 September a large group of youths went to the office. Some made death threats and threatened to burn down the office. An even more violent event took place on 11 November 2000 in the resort town of Kaliurang near Yogyakarta, when a group of 350 *lesbi* and *gay* persons holding an entertainment event were attacked and in some cases stabbed by about 150 Muslim youths; fortunately there were no deaths (Boellstorff 2002).

I do not want simply to blame these attacks on Islam: many Muslim groups are tolerant of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians, most of whom are Muslim themselves. While the recent breakdown of law and order and rise of militant Islam are perhaps necessary conditions for the violence, they cannot explain why the violence took the form that it did – instead of, say, a *fatwa* or finding of religious law. Hooliganism and fundamentalism do not explain why the reaction took the form

that it did. What is particularly significant about these attacks is that they are not targeting *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians in salons, parks or other places where they meet, which would be very easy to do. It is not simply a matter of public versus private, since parks and salons are public spaces too. Crucially, these attacks were linked to times when *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians *claimed national belonging* – the same issue we saw talked about after the *lesbi* wedding in 1981.

In this regard it bears noting that *heterosexuality* is also linked to national belonging. For instance, nationalist literature going back to the 1920s describes the shift to an idea of the modern Indonesian citizen in terms of a shift from arranged to chosen marriage (Rodgers 1995; Siegel 1998). While there are of course still many arranged marriages today, and many that fall between arrangement and choice, what is interesting here is the ideal of chosen marriage that we find in contemporary Indonesia. When marriage is arranged, sexual orientation is secondary – desire is not the motivating factor. However, when marriage hinges on a ‘choosing’ self animated by love, that self fails if not heterosexual. Choice, to be national and modern, must be heterosexual choice. It is through heterosexuality that gendered self and nation are articulated.

In recounting recent events of violence I am not trying to be alarmist; there have not been any major incidents of violence against *lesbi* and *gay* people to my knowledge since November of last year, and they may not be repeated. I bring them up to point out how not only *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians, but other Indonesians as well, are increasingly aware that *lesbi* and *gay* subject-positions are irreducible to ethnolocality and thus embody many key promises and contradictions of national belonging. The existence of *lesbi* and *gay* subject-positions holds the promise (and, in the eyes of some, danger) of redefining hegemonic notions of the proper national man or woman. Might we have something to learn from the life-worlds of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians? These men and women say that they did not choose to be this way. Many are very religious and believe that God intended them to be *lesbi* or *gay*. They try to live lives that are positive and good, and to contribute to society. Must they be rejected? If they are accepted, might that not be a sign that we can tolerate other kinds of difference as well?

*Gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians show us that it is always possible to invent new ways of living that are still *authentically Indonesian*. They show us that while hegemonies are powerful, there are ways to resist them that do not depend on the near-impossible task of total change. Hegemonies can be tweaked, twisted, reworked into new forms that offer greater possibilities for social justice. *Lesbi* and *gay* subject-positions illustrate the transformative processes by which ‘national culture’ has become not just state propaganda, but a deeply felt, imagined community for millions of Indonesians (Anderson 1983).

We can learn from *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians that authenticity is not a matter of who has the longest history or the most members, but a political struggle over belonging, and that it is possible to imagine new ways of determining authentic-



ity and belonging that include more inhabitants of the archipelago than the colonial or New Order post-colonial states ever did. In this time of uncertainty and new hope, looking at *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians in terms of belonging rather than 'deviance' offers clues about a new national culture that respects local variation and social change, where all persons have a voice, where all can say with confidence, 'this is my home'.

## NOTE

- 1 In this essay, as elsewhere in my work, I use the terms *gay* and *lesbi* in an insider or 'emic' sense. I define *lesbi* women as 'Indonesian women who think of themselves as *lesbi* in at least some contexts of their lives' and *gay* men as 'Indonesian men who think of themselves as *gay* in at least some contexts of their lives'. It may seem odd that I consistently italicise *gay* and *lesbi*. However, through this seemingly simple act of italicisation I mean to remind myself and the reader that these are Indonesian terms. Like better-known terms such as *adat* (customary law), the concepts *gay* and *lesbi* are part of contemporary Indonesian culture. They are not Western imports but concepts that have been reworked within Indonesia itself.



# WOMEN IN INDONESIA

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