

# THE CONVERSATION

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Indonesia's House of Representatives has repeatedly failed to pass the anti-sexual violence bill into law. Novrian Arbi/Antara Foto

## Freedom of choice: are Indonesian women caught in a policy trap?

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### Languages

Bahasa Indonesia

English

*This article is part of a series to commemorate Indonesian Independence Day on August 17.*

Women were central to the fall of Soeharto, and there is no doubt that women have continued to experience important gains since Reformasi began in 1998.

Indonesia has already had a female president, and currently has a female foreign minister in Retno Marsudi and a finance minister in Sri Mulyani.

They are, respectively, a world-class bureaucrat and an economic reformer.



Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi (left) and Finance Minister Sri Mulyani (right) accompany President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo at the virtual Group of 20 Summit earlier this year. Biro Pres Sekretariat President/Antara Foto

Women, young and old, in villages and cities, are actively contributing to their families, communities and nation.

They are sole heads of households, socially active, volunteering and organising in many fields of life.

However, 75 years after independence, Indonesia still has significant gaps in equality.

In areas from the economy to social justice, women remain disadvantaged. For example, their participation rate in the labour market has been largely unchanged (at only about 51% of women aged 15 and older) in the past 20 years.

There are also the well-documented and significant issues of underage marriage for girls and violence against women.

I examined the rise of public piety and its impact on policy reform for equality in Indonesia over the past two decades.

Despite the measurable disadvantage of women, there is a trend in policy advocacy to advance religiously inspired policy agendas – some led by Islamic women – to push back progress and limit women's freedom of choice.

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## **Religious conservatism and political Islam**

Pew research revealed in 2018 that Indonesians were highly religious. Some 93% of the population believe in religion and see it as an important aspect in their lives.

This is not necessarily in itself controversial.

However, what has become clear since Reformasi is a trend of politicians and diverse civil society actors – including faith-based and women’s organisations – exploiting public piety to advance a social agenda based on conservative religious norms.

As a result, there are many examples of the continuing encroachment of religion into public discourse, to the extent that it explains and indeed defines a whole social, economic, political and legal outlook.

Specifically, part of this agenda is the pursuit of a religiously inspired perspective founded upon the separation of social roles for men and women.

Women are, of course, implicated.

Prominent examples are the promotion of Muslim clothing, the growing popularity of the “Indonesia without dating” movement, the promotion of polygamy, and calls to denounce feminism due to Islamic values.

This is a social trend taking place in many Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia.

Where Islam is the hegemonic religion, women are clearly at risk of being forced to follow a singular form of Islam based on a patriarchal construction of the ideal Muslim woman.

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### **Activism against gender equality**

These examples of popular Islamic social movements show a voluntary commitment to a specific value set.

They signal a commitment to a total world view that entails particular roles and behaviours of women.

That some women have supported this shows that in Indonesia today women are seemingly capable of making choices about their roles in life and society.

The issue with this set of personal choices and collective action is that they have also formed the basis of efforts to influence society more broadly.

That is, it sits at the heart of challenges against policy initiatives intended to benefit women and to advance equality in political and legal forums.

A particular set of values identified with by one group is being imposed on Indonesian women as a whole.

The most thorough form of activism has been preaching for the state to regulate women’s bodies, including women’s reproductive rights, morality and sexuality.

The passing of the Anti-Pornography Law in 2008 was a prominent early example. It was followed by attempts to criminalise homosexuality, which affects the choices of women as much as men.

There has been persistent and highly organised opposition against bids to improve equality in the Constitutional Court.

The passing of Marriage Law revision by the House of Representatives, which raised the minimum age for marriage for females from 16 years old to 19 last year, faced similar opposition.

The opposing camp were heavily motivated by and promoted religious doctrine in defence of the indefensible.

Most recently, there has been concerted and vocal opposition to an anti-sexual violence bill. Again, the opposition case was built upon Islamic teaching.

Campaigns by not only politicians but also highly organised civil society groups, such as the Family Love Alliance, relentlessly promote conservative social values.

They rejected a policy framework that could benefit women and, in particular, women with disabilities.

The bill introduces a comprehensive criminal justice response to sexual violence, which includes sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, forced contraception, forced abortion, rape, forced marriage, forced prostitution, sexual slavery and abuse taking place in private and public domains.

Refusal to pass the bill means violence against women will continue to be normalised.

## **Whose choice?**

It is hard for many to oppose religious standards when the public highly embrace faith.

Advocates of equity-driven public policy are also derogatorily characterised as proponents of foreign or Western ideology and incompatible with Indonesian values.

The challenge is for public contestation in Indonesia to properly reflect the needs of all Indonesian women rather than the choices of a particular group.

Democracy ensures an open space for this kind of debate.

But there is a real danger that beneficial outcomes for struggling Indonesian women will be lost in the noise of the current gendered, religiously driven argument.