

# The rise and fall of Indonesia's women's movement

Thursday 6 May 2010, by [KUSWANDINI Dian](#) (Date first published: 21 April 2010).

**Dian Kuswandini, Jakarta** - Girls are made of sugar and spice, and everything nice. Boys are made of snips and snails, and puppy-dog tails.

The famous lines – made popular through an old nursery rhyme – might sound nothing but funny to us. But if we look beyond those amusing words, we will soon realize they are ridden with gender stereotypes.

Yes, like it or not, the rhyme assumes that women should possess loving, kind and sweet personalities – as opposed to the tough, rough and aggressive traits said to belong to men.

And poor Kartini. Although she has been hailed as Indonesia's first feminist, the Javanese aristocrat, who was born in 1879, was actually the "victim" of this kind of gender construction. Over the past decades, her image has been "remodeled" to reinforce the country's patriarchal culture, as revealed by feminist scholar Saskia Eleonora Wieringa.

As far back as Indonesia's colonial period, "Kartini was actually depicted as a brilliant and rebellious woman who fought for women's right to education," said Wieringa, who currently visited Jakarta to attend the April Festival, a celebration of women.

During the Old Order regime under former president Sukarno, she went on, Kartini symbolized the struggle against Dutch colonial arrogance, as her mother come from an oppressed working class background.

But then, "the New Order regime tamed [the image of] Kartini and narrowed her to a woman with a domestic role," said the professor at the University of Amsterdam. "Her spirit and fight against male domination were thus erased," she added.

So thanks to Soeharto's New Order regime, we have until today acknowledged Kartini as nothing but a graceful Javanese aristocrat, with decent manners. And because of that, every year when we celebrate Kartini Day on April 21, we witness children marching in colorful traditional costumes and women slaving over cooking contests, flower arrangements and fashion modeling. The essence of Kartini's struggle, thus, has shifted away to irrelevant issues.

So, what makes this changing image of Kartini important today? Well, realize it or not, it has marked the rise and fall of the women's emancipation movement in the country.

Mariana Amiruddin, director of Jurnal Perempuan Foundation, explained how powerful the image of Kartini created by Soeharto remains until today, with women still trapped in the New Order's "motherly" concept of "good women". Exacerbating this, she went on, were religious doctrines of fundamentalists reinforcing this perception of the role of women.

So today, the concept of the ideal woman has been reduced to the following: "Indonesian women are supposed to embrace Eastern and Islamic cultures, where they dress in appropriate clothing that

covers their aurat [parts of the body that are mustn't be showed], as well as become good mothers who serve their husbands, nurture their children and support the family," as stated by Mariana, also during the April Festival.

This kind of narrow perception on the role of women, Mariana said, has hampered the efforts of today's feminists to fight for women's rights. When these feminist groups fought against the recently passed Pornography Law, for example, they were accused of being immoral, while they actually tried to protect women from being criminalized by the law.

"Today, we [feminists] are no longer perceived as the guard of the Reform Era," Mariana lamented. "Instead, we're known as groups of girls who are out of control."

Feminism, on the other hand, she added, was seen as a doctrine preached by immoral liberal activists. "No matter how many times we told them about Kartini, they still think feminism came from the West," Mariana said.

Parallels can be drawn between today's Indonesian feminist movement and Gerwani, the Indonesian Women's Movement that was destroyed by former president Soeharto following the 1965 tragedy - which was blamed on the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).

"Although we haven't been jailed or murdered like Gerwani members, we feel the old New Order's practice of barring [women's] freedom has now been revived," Mariana argued. "While Gerwani was besmirched for being PKI's affiliate during that era, feminists today have been accused of being part of Western movements aiming to destroy Indonesia."

Gerwani - a mass women's movement with millions of members from the grassroots and global community - was known as group of young and brilliant women activists fighting for women's rights in the fields of ideology, education, politic and economy - all inspired by Kartini's progressive ideas.

An expert in Gerwani history, Wieringa, said the destruction of the organization marked the worst setback for the Indonesian women's movement. Yes, while there once was a progressive and influential women's movement, Indonesia today has turned into a breeding place for *kuntilanak wangi*, or perfumed female ghosts - a term Wieringa used to depict women groups carrying out Soeharto's patriarchal agenda.

These *kuntilanak wangi*, Wieringa explained, were groups of women wearing fashionable clothes and perfume. Instead of voicing women's rights like Gerwani did, these women worked on "diverting" women's focus on domestic issues such as "dapur-sumur-kasur" (kitchen, bathroom and bedroom).

Under government-controlled organizations like Dharma Wanita, Dharma Pertiwi and PKK (Family Empowerment and Welfare Movement), these *kuntilanak wangi* had buried women's critical thinking on violence and oppression.

And as mentioned before, we can see how successful they were from the way we narrowly celebrate Kartini Day.

April Festival's director Faiza Hidayati Mardzoeki said that a number of feminists like herself were concerned that Kartini's inspirational ideas had been lost along the way, and all she would be remembered for was her politeness and her dress sense.

"Kartini, thus, has lived among us only as a myth - a polite Javanese aristocrat, who finally had to accept the fact that she had to share her husband with other women - although she never agreed with polygamy," Faiza said. "No one will remember her as a rebellious figure with progressive

ideas.”

Of course, like the feminists have suggested, the Reform Era in 1998 has given women opportunities to revive the real spirit of Kartini. However, as Mariana suggested, the Reform Era was nothing but “a short-term honeymoon” moment for women’s movement.

When the late former president Abdurrahman Wahid changed the name of the ministry of women affairs into the ministry of women’s empowerment, for example, feminists felt very confident about their cause. In addition to that, the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) was given full support to continue its investigation into the May 1998 tragedy, where many Chinese women were sexually abused.

“During Megawati’s era, we were more enthusiastic because the first woman was finally installed as a president amid opposition from some religious leaders,” Mariana said. “Megawati then also succeeded in passing the law on domestic violence.”

Celebrating women’s achievement even more, she added, was the policy of granting women a 30 percent quota of seats in the Parliament. However, this celebration of women’s movement had to end in 2005, when Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono won his first presidential term.

“The year marked the introduction of the pornography bill, which was mentioned by President SBY during his first [presidential] speech,” said Mariana. “He even took the opportunity to comment about women’s belly buttons!”

And from that moment on, she went on, the women’s movement in Indonesia started to lose its ground. While battling against the criminalization of women, feminists have been labeled as “Western devilish agents”, gaining a bad reputation in society.

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## **Debunking myths on the Indonesian women’s movements**

**Dian Kuswandini, Jakarta** - Little Saskia Eleonora Wieringa felt tortured every time her parents asked her to dress up like a girl.

“I’ve always been a bit of a tomboy,” recalled the 60-year-old professor from the University of Amsterdam. “My parents were angry at me. They wanted me to dress up like a girl.”

So, Wieringa’s rejection of gender stereotypes started at an early age.

“The culture in the Netherlands was so patriarchal back then. It was torturing me,” she confessed. “Women were taught to be housewives. I couldn’t agree with that. I didn’t want to be a housewife. I wanted equality; I wanted freedom,” she added.

Wieringa then found her freedom during her university years in the mid 1970s, when she occupied herself with women issues. At that time, she founded several women’s organizations and published journals highlighting women issues.

Her interest in women issues led her to visit Indonesia in 1977. At the time, her goal was only to complete her academic research on women batik workers in Surakarta, Central Java. The supposedly

short-visit, however, became a lifetime attachment for her, as Wieringa spent years doing research on the outlawed Gerwani (the Indonesian Women's Movement).

"At first, when I started my research on the women batik workers, I found out these workers lived in very poor conditions," Wieringa said during her recent visit to Jakarta for the Festival April event. "At that time, I thought I should share this problem with local women groups." I met with women groups like Dharma Wanita, Dharma Pertiwi and PKK [Family Empowerment and Welfare Movement], but I was very surprised to learn that these groups only carried out activities like cooking and costume shows – things that looked silly to me. "Wieringa had her own reason to feel surprised. Back in the Netherlands, she said, she had heard about a very influential women's movement from Indonesia, called Gerwani. Gerwani members, she said, were known to be smart and prominent in defending women's and workers' rights at many international forums." So, at that time, I was wondering, what has happened to Gerwani? Where are its members?" she said. "I asked many locals about Gerwani, and their responses were: 'Ooow, yes we know Gerwani – they were all prostitutes.'" The responses surprised Wieringa, because she had heard that Gerwani was a socialist movement, and that socialism was against prostitution. In addition to that, she understood that Gerwani was totally against polygamy, making her believe that the rumor that Gerwani's members were involved in sex parties must be nothing but slander. "I sensed something wrong was going on and that was how I started to find more information on Gerwani for my research," said Wieringa of the movement banned by former president Soeharto following the alleged 1965 coup attempt by the subsequently outlawed Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). In the tragic events that followed, six military generals and an officer was killed, and Gerwani – said to be an affiliate of the PKI – was deemed responsible for torturing them to death.

But the more Wieringa studied Gerwani and the accusations made against it, the more she had questions dancing in her mind.

"There's no way girls aged 13 to 15 would mutilate the private parts of those 60-year-old something generals," she said. "It's illogical. Where would those very young girls get such an idea from?"

Such thoughts led her to dig deeper into countless documents to satisfy her curiosity. Luckily for Wieringa, she found a very important document, containing autopsy reports on the generals. The reports, part of scholar Benedict Anderson's papers, clearly stated that there was no trace of razors and penknives on the generals' bodies, and that their genitals were intact.

"So, those stories about Gerwani were all fabricated by Soeharto. Those women never tortured the generals and didn't cut off their genitals," Wieringa lamented.

Forensic evidence also confirmed Wieringa's previous interviews with some Gerwani members she met in the early 1980s. Under the highly traumatic conditions following their arrest by Soeharto's people, these women maintained that they were not involved in the massacre.

"At that time, I found many of them were in a traumatic state after surviving Soeharto's cruelty," said Wieringa, who co-founded the Kartini Asia Network. Following Soeharto's banning of Gerwani, she went on, thousands of its members were murdered, while many others were held in prison – tortured and sexually abused.

"It was difficult to talk to Gerwani members at that time," said Wieringa, who was once banned by Soeharto from entering Indonesia. "There were military officers who were always keeping their eyes on them." I secretly and carefully carried out my research because we [my sources and I] were in danger," she added.

Being trapped in such a dangerous situation also forced her to halt her research. It took years before she could return to Indonesia to continue and crosscheck her research in 1995.

At that time, although she managed to complete the research for her dissertation under the title *The Aborted Women's Movement in Indonesia*, she needed to hide many identities of her sources for safety reasons.

However, the research, which was later published in the form of a book, has been regarded as the most influential work on the Indonesian women's movement and inspired many Indonesian feminists and right activists.

Now, 30 years after she first deconstructed the myths about Gerwani, Wieringa took the chance to launch the revised version of her book, entitled *Penghancuran Gerakan Perempuan: Politik Seksual di Indonesia Pasca Kejatuhan PKI* (*The Destruction of the Women's Movement: Sexual Politics in Indonesia after the Downfall of the Indonesian Communist Party*).

"It took me a long time to publish this [revised version of my] book because my research was considered dangerous and I was blacklisted [by Soeharto]," she said. "I had to hide many facts in the previous version, but here [in the revised one], I revealed everything."

Although she finally had the chance to share her research with the Indonesian public, who has lived with Soeharto's lies about Gerwani for years, Wieringa said she wouldn't stop working on women issues in the country.

"I've become so attached to Indonesia and these Gerwani women," Wieringa said, referring to a number of older women, who attended her book launching that day. "I just couldn't come taking facts from them and [then simply] say good bye. I don't want to leave them."

That was why, Wieringa went on, she was planning to spend the rest of her life in Indonesia.

"My plan is to move to Indonesia after retiring from teaching at the University of Amsterdam," she smiled. "I'm also a mualaf [a convert to Islam] now. So I feel that Indonesia would be a perfect place for me to spend the rest of my life."

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\* Jakarta Post - April 21, 2010.