

Nadia and Rana- Surviving Indonesia's Antigay Clampdown

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They met, fell in love, and were nearly torn apart in a country where LGBTQ people are increasingly persecuted.



Nadia and Rana in Jakarta, Indonesia, October 2018. (Gabriela Bhaskar)

When Nadia met Rana at a 7-Eleven in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, it was love at first sight.

Nadia, who is now 23, had moved to the city from her hometown a couple of hours away to study at an Islamic university. She had recently broken up with a high school boyfriend, Imam, turned off by his abusive behavior. She had also started to act on her growing attraction to women, spending hours on the Internet conversing with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities that, while suppressed in real life, could flourish on social media.

One day in the spring of 2015, Nadia (a pseudonym used to protect her identity) started chatting online with Rana, now 25, who asked her to meet. The rest is history. “She is precious,” said Rana when we met the couple last year. “I put her needs, what is best for her, above my own needs. I always wish her the very best.”

“She is everything to me,” said Nadia.

At first glance, the women seem like nothing more than a young couple in love. However, their relationship is highly fraught: Indonesia, a Muslim-majority country, has grown increasingly intolerant of the LGBTQ community in recent years. Human Rights Watch [reports that since 2016](#), Indonesia has seen a rise in hateful rhetoric and violence against LGBTQ people—from [police raids](#) to threats by influential politicians and religious organizations.

According to experts and activists, the situation can be especially precarious for lesbians living in a patriarchal society, where [gender inequality](#) and [violence against women](#) are prevalent. “It’s very common for Indonesians of a certain age to be pushed to get married,” said Teguh Iman Affandi, a board member of the Jakarta-based LGBTQ organization [Suara Kita](#).

Rana said that she began to feel attracted to girls in junior high school. She was 16 when an uwa, or aunty, found her in her room with a girl she was dating. She immediately told Rana’s cousin, whom Rana lived with at the time and considered an adoptive mother. “I am so disappointed with you,” her

cousin told Rana.

Rana had never admitted to being gay before. But something inside her couldn't reject the notion. "I was in pain," she said about that encounter. "How come I dare to hurt her? I did feel guilty, but you know, I discovered my true identity—that I am lesbian—and whatever happens, I have to accept myself for who I am. And so does my [family]."

Nadia, on the other hand, was less sure about her sexuality while in high school. She was attracted to girls, but she felt that she needed to date boys. Although she publicly dated Imam (also a pseudonym)—much to the satisfaction of her mother—she secretly led another life online. She said social media was how she began to discover her sexual identity.

We asked Nadia what it was like to date a man while leading this secret life online. She paused to consider her words. "He knew that I was a lesbian," she said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "His reason [to date] was, he wanted to change me to be a better person. To be straight."

Nadia broke up with Imam during her first semester at the university. He was violent and often beat her. "I realized that was his true self," she said. "I was angry. We had just been dating, and he was abusive. What would happen if we got married?"

The next semester, she met Rana.

Indonesia has historically had a reputation for tolerance. Its 1945 Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and the state's secular ideology, Pancasila, encourages pluralism. The [transgender community](#), known as waria, existed harmoniously in this Southeast Asian archipelago for hundreds of years.

But the country is now in the grips of what Human Rights Watch describes as a [government-driven moral panic](#) that has targeted sexual and gender minorities and fueled fear in the community. While homosexuality is not criminalized—except in conservative Aceh province, which follows Sharia, or Islamic canonical law—there has been an [increase in bylaws targeting LGBTQ people](#). In November 2018, for example, a city in West Sumatra passed a regulation to fine gay or transgender people who engage in behavior considered immoral.

Government officials have made public comments attacking the community—from the mayor of Tangerang, who described homosexuality as a psychological illness, to former defense minister Ryamizard Ryacudu, who derided the struggle for LGBTQ rights as an outsiders' proxy war more dangerous than nuclear war. There has been a surge in raids on private LGBTQ gatherings and arrests under the country's anti-pornography laws. In 2017, Human Rights Watch [documented](#), at least 300 people were apprehended by police on suspicion of being LGBTQ.

"The biggest challenge is they've undergone a character assassination," said Kyle Knight, a Human Rights Watch researcher. "They're just walking on pins and needles, in a way, [instead of enjoying] the pluralism that Indonesia is known for."

The mounting antigay rhetoric comes [as religious conservatives continue to gain influence across the country](#), spreading their message with rallies and viral social media posts. Some [argued](#) that conservative politicians and Islamists were using the LGBTQ community as a [scapegoat](#) to amass votes heading into the country's presidential elections, which took place in April. According to a [survey](#) in Indonesia published in 2018, almost 88 percent of respondents said they viewed LGBTQ people as a threat, and more than 81 percent said that being LGBTQ was prohibited by religion.

To appeal to conservative voters and prove his bona fides, President Joko Widodo, a moderate who

was elected in 2014 on a platform that [emphasized human rights and democracy](#) but was [unable to fulfill many of those promises](#) in his first five-year term, chose [prominent Muslim cleric](#) Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate—despite the latter's [track record](#) of supporting female genital mutilation, issuing religious decrees condemning sexual and religious minorities, and supporting the criminalization of LGBTQ activities. Widodo's opponent, former military commander Prabowo Subianto, has [connections](#) to hard-line Islamist groups and has [been accused of having ties](#) to widespread human rights violations.

Indonesia's conservative movement is far-flung, ranging from the radical Islamist group Hizbut Tahrir—which supports the creation of a global caliphate and was [banned in the country in 2017](#) because it is considered a threat to national unity—to the [violent, vigilante-like Islamic Defenders Front \(FPI\)](#). Habib Muhsin Ahmad Alatas, the chairman of the FPI Syura Council, said in an interview that the biggest challenges facing the country are liberalism and secularism. He said the group's main goal was to bolster religion and described LGBTQ people as immoral and the enemy of Indonesia. (He even claimed their behavior caused the devastating [earthquake and tsunami that hit the eastern Indonesian city of Palu](#) in September 2018.)

"The Islamists are always looking for new issues to mobilize people on. Their biggest thing is informal activism in the form of forming organizations, mobilizing protests...so LGBT is offering them a platform," said Nava Nuraniyah, an analyst at the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict. "Even if you talk to so-called moderate Muslims, they will not tolerate LGBT."

Widodo won reelection, but the situation for the LGBTQ community hasn't improved. Dédé Oetomo, one of Indonesia's most prominent LGBTQ activists and the founder of the LGBTQ rights group Gaya Nusantara, wrote in an e-mail that most activists and allies don't think anything will change under Widodo's government. Oetomo pointed out that it recently revived plans for a new criminal code with many problematic articles, including a ban on sex outside marriage—effectively criminalizing same-sex relations.

After a few inseparable months spent dating, Nadia and Rana decided to move in together in Nadia's boarding house in the fall of 2015. Their landlord thought the girls were just good friends. "It was happy, comfortable. It was just the two of us," Rana said.

But a year and a half later, Nadia's mother discovered that her daughter liked girls and forced her to get back together with Imam, the abusive boyfriend. He was from a respected family and was now a police officer. For Nadia's parents, who were highly regarded in their town, social standing was everything. Nadia's mother was blunt. "Since you are a lesbian," she said, "no guys will want to have a relationship with you. No man will love you except [Imam]."

In September 2017, only months after they were pushed back together, Imam went to the home of Nadia's parents to formally propose. She desperately wanted to decline, but she felt she couldn't. "Culture says that women are property of the family. That's why Nadia was pushed to be married," said Wide Afriandy, an Indonesian attorney who has supported Nadia and Rana. "People still think that being straight is good. To make her straight is...showing the parents' love."

In October, Rana learned of her girlfriend's wedding. She said she was heartbroken when she found out.

Nadia and Imam moved in together. For a moment, she thought the marriage could work. She couldn't be with the woman she loved, but she could please her family and assume the role of Imam's wife.

Marital bliss didn't last long. Imam quickly resumed his abuse, forcing Nadia to have sex with him. Her parents saw the black and blue marks on her body, but they took his side. "Well, you can always get better," Nadia's parents once told her in response to the violence. When Nadia tried to reject Imam's sexual advances, he yelled that she had to submit to him. "The pain, the violence, yes, they were there," she said. "He forced me roughly."

Less than a month after the wedding, Nadia discovered she was pregnant. Soon after, she called Rana. "I'm running away," Nadia told her. "I was abused." Within minutes, Rana was on her way to meet Nadia. Their time together didn't last long: Nadia's parents found their daughter and came for her. Nadia's mother told her that she could divorce Imam as long as she returned home.

"We tried to believe in her parents," Rana said.

In December 2017, Nadia discovered messages to and from Imam on her mother's phone; the pair were plotting to get him back together with Nadia. She knew she had to escape. She reunited with Rana in Jakarta, and the two women found a place to stay. The room was tiny, with just a mattress on the floor and no bathroom, but it cost only 500,000 rupiah (about \$35) per month.

Nadia was a couple of months pregnant by then, and money was tight. Despite the challenges, she was determined to create a life for herself, Rana, and the baby. But Nadia's parents found her again. Her mother demanded that Nadia return with them, screaming to the landlady that she was allowing a lesbian couple to stay at her home. Nadia and Rana were trapped. Everyone in the house knew their secret, and they had nowhere else to go. "I felt mixed feelings—angry, sad, betrayed," Nadia said.

She went home that day, but this time she refused to go without Rana by her side. As they left the boarding house, their landlady advised Nadia, "It's better if you are still together with your husband. I was often beaten up by [my husband]. But I endured."

For Rana, life in Nadia's hometown was tough. She stayed with one of Nadia's relatives and wasn't allowed to leave the house because the family was so ashamed. Nadia's mother taunted her, and Rana was terrified of Imam's authority as a police officer. She felt like a prisoner.

In January 2018, Nadia's mother took the two women to an ustad, a religious leader in the community. There they were forced to undergo an Islamic exorcism, known as a ruqyah, to purge the evil spirits that they were told made them attracted to women. The use of exorcisms against LGBTQ people aligns with Indonesia's increased intolerance toward the community. This year the mayor of Padang [told the Indonesian news site Tirto](#) that he had ordered the arrest of LGBTQ people so religious authorities could conduct exorcisms on them. He said he believed they were possessed by demons. The TV show Ruqyah depicts exorcism as a form of "conversion therapy."

At the ustad, Rana went first. The ustad said they were possessed by evil spirits that were deeply in love and his duty was to eradicate those spirits so that Nadia's marriage with Imam could survive. He grabbed a thick wooden stick and began to beat Rana. She described the pain as torture, so excruciating that she later developed a fever.

Then it was Nadia's turn. She was three months pregnant at the time and screamed for help as her mother watched silently. Rana said all she could think about was whether Nadia and the baby would be all right.

Soon after, Imam returned and demanded that Nadia resume her role as his wife. She said no, telling him she wanted to be with Rana. In response, he threatened Rana, telling her to go back to Jakarta. Imam later attacked her, drenching her shirt in blood, and Rana recalled Nadia's mother

telling her that she deserved it.

Rana returned to Jakarta after the episode. Nadia was trapped with Imam, instructed to be a good wife. What she didn't know was that Rana hadn't given up on her. On Valentine's Day in 2018, Rana sent a desperate Facebook message to Suara Kita's Affandi. "My friend is a lesbian," the message begins. "She was forced to get married by her mom. She wants to divorce her husband, while her mom wants her to stay."

Affandi said he connected Rana with a lawyer to help Nadia file for divorce on the grounds of domestic violence. "Nadia's is the most complicated case I've seen. She is lesbian, Muslim. It really affects my feelings," he said. "In order to 'make' them heterosexual, lesbians get raped. There's no data, but it's common."



Nadia's, Rana's, and their son's hands as they hug in Jakarta in October 2018. The couple must pretend to be sisters in public. (Gabriela Bhaskar)

After a week of living in Imam's house, Nadia escaped once again, joining Rana in Jakarta.

On July 3, 2018, Nadia gave birth to a healthy boy. He is a happy child, spoiled by his two mothers. On the day we met, at the Suara Kita office, he playfully sucked on Rana's hand as she patted his behind. He didn't yet know that his parents' love is forbidden. He didn't yet know the challenges he'd face in Indonesia as a kid with two mothers. Nadia and Rana worry about his future in a country where homosexuality is taboo and hope that their son will accept them for who they are.

The time leading up to his birth was difficult. The two women sold accessories at a shop in Soekarno Hatta International Airport near Jakarta. For two months, after her family threatened to take away the child, Nadia lived in a safe house for domestic abuse survivors. Her sexual orientation remained a secret while she was there.

Rana said she still can't believe she's a parent. While she feels sad that her son has never met his biological father, she said she will protect him no matter what, that their bond is deeper than DNA.

"It is me who accompanied [Nadia] from the moment she was pregnant until she delivered the baby," Rana said. "I do experience all those things of being a father, being her husband, being her soul mate. I [feel] all the responsibilities to protect her."

For now, they live in a rented house with neighbors who think they're sisters. They try to ignore the local gossip that Nadia, as a single mother, must be a home-wrecker. They are afraid of what might happen if their true relationship is discovered. "As the LGBT community, we also have rights," Rana said. "We live in this country, and we have rights."

Rana and Nadia's dream is to one day get married and raise their son in the open as an acknowledged family. But they can't. They can't go on date nights or stroll hand in hand at the park. Behind closed doors, they are a family. Everywhere else, they are two sisters raising Nadia's baby.

As the interview came to a close, Nadia slowly began to layer up. During our hours of conversation, as she grew more comfortable, she had taken off her hijab to reveal a head of long, thick brown hair. She said that as a kid, before attending the Islamic university, she loved dressing like a tomboy. She hopes to finish her studies one day.

Now it was time to leave the protection of Suara Kita's four walls and go outside. Rana grabbed the diaper bag and toys, whispering in Nadia's ear and wrapping her arm around her waist. We called a taxi and stepped into Jakarta's tumultuous rain.

"I describe our relationship as strong women and strong mothers," Rana said. "We will do our best for him. We will do our best to make him a good person."

With that, they were off: two women fighting against all odds to be together in the country they love, in the country that grows increasingly intolerant of who they are.

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This article is by Nicole Einbinder, with photos by Gabriela Bhaskar. Additional reporting was contributed by Irine Wardhanie.

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