

# Sharia crackdowns in Aceh costing Indonesian transgender women their livelihoods

Tuesday 3 April 2018, by [BARKER Anne](#) (Date first published: 24 March 2018).

**Transgender women in Indonesia's conservative Aceh province are losing their jobs and incomes in the wake of police raids that saw several beauty salons shut down.**

Several salons in northern Aceh remain closed more than a month after the raids, and some trans women who worked there have fled to Jakarta in fear.

Other salons are still open but have virtually lost all their customers.

In Jakarta too, transgender women last week were reportedly rounded up and sent to rehabilitation centres to correct their "social dysfunctional traits".

Transgender people are known as "waria" in the Indonesian language, from the words wanita and pria — meaning man and woman.

One such waria, Adel, said she was beaten by police during the recent raids in Aceh, and feared for her safety if she returned to the salon she runs at Lhokseumawe.

"I don't think I can work in a salon just yet, because I'm still too scared," she said.

Aceh is the only Indonesian province where Sharia law is in place.

## **'We just want to live peacefully'**

At least five salons were raided in Lhokseumawe and Lhoksukon, and 12 waria were ordered to strip off their dresses and makeup and behave like men.

As the raids took place, a large crowd watched on.

Police later cut off the waria's hair and ordered them to speak with a male voice.

"We were told to roll over and be like men, to scream until a man's voice came out," said Rezal, a trans woman who goes by the name Bella.

Two salons at Lhoksukon remain open but the waria have been given strict orders to work as men.

But because Sharia law bans men from touching women who are not related, they have all but lost their customers.

"We haven't had any customers since the raids," Bella said.

"I am the only one supporting my family, but until now we have had no customers. I can no longer help my parents in the village." "We don't know what the future will bring. We just want to live peacefully in Aceh."

The policeman who led the raids brought four of the waria to his office when the ABC visited Aceh earlier this month. But they were too intimidated to speak freely.

Police superintendent Untung Sangaji Suryanata said hardline Muslim groups were threatening to harm the waria, so he acted.

"Islamic groups see them as enemies. They were threatening to burn them, kill them," he said.

"It was better that I took action, so they didn't have to."

### **'It is a great sin': Community sentiment hardening**

Conservative Muslim leaders say transgender behaviour is an offence punishable by God.

"It is forbidden in religion for a man to become a woman," said Zulfadli, head of Islamic organisation Al Aziziah.

"Just like me, if I become a woman, it is a great sin. Same with a woman who becomes a man."

There are an estimated 100 waria or trans women in northern Aceh regency alone. The vast majority work in beauty salons because they among the few places they can make a living.

Until recently they have been tolerated and largely left alone.

But community sentiment is hardening towards transgenders, gays and other minority groups.

The Indonesian Parliament is currently drafting laws that would ban sex between gay or even unmarried couples.

It is an issue certain to divide the country in the lead-up to next year's presidential election.

One of the warias' strongest supporters is the daughter of former moderate Muslim President Abdurrahman Wahid.

Inayah Wahid says her father — who died in 2009 — would be horrified at the direction Indonesia was heading.

"I always felt that there is going to be a war, a real war happening, there's going to be a lot of repression," Ms Wahid said.

"People always say, 'If only he was here, if only he was here, things would have been different'." "I'm sure he would be on the front line to defend them. I could picture him going to Aceh himself to defend them, to defend Adel and all her friends." "Adel is still lying low in Jakarta, unsure if or when she can return to Aceh or ever reopen her salon." "I can't go home yet, I'm too scared."

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