

For Indonesia's transgender community, faith can be a source of discrimination - but also tolerance and solace

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“In 2008, Indonesia passed the Pornography Law, which interprets being transgender as obscene. Since 2016, the hard line against gender and sexual diversity has become tougher. Many in Indonesia want to see harsher penalties not only around same-sex sexuality but any form of sexual activity outside heterosexual marriage. The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased discrimination against Indonesia's trans community. However, trans people are finding support in some trans-inclusive mosques and churches.”

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Shinta Ratri, an Indonesian transgender woman, [taught](#) transgender people at the Al-Fatah Islamic boarding school she founded in 2008 that God didn't care if you were gay or transgender.

Located in Yogyakarta, in southern Java, the school provided a safe space in a country where faith and transgender identities are often seen to be incompatible. Even though Indonesia transitioned to a secular democracy in 1998, all adults have to [carry an identity card](#) that clearly states their religion.

Indonesia is a [signatory](#) to the 1995 Beijing Declaration, which mandates the state's “responsibility to promote, protect and fulfill its citizens' rights to sexual and reproductive health rights.”

However, there are few legal protections available to the LGBTQI community. In a country with the world's largest Muslim population, fundamentalist religious views can often [promote discrimination](#) against the transgender community.

I have been tracking the relationship between the Indonesian state, gender, sexuality and religion [for over two decades](#). I have found that faith can be a source of comfort and support for many transgender people.

A long trans history

Many people in Indonesia, and indeed beyond, believe that the idea of gender and sexual diversity came to the archipelago only through Western influence. However, parts of Indonesia, such as the island of Sulawesi, have been home to transgender communities

[since at least the 1500s](#). During this time, missionaries and trade emissaries traveling to the region recorded in their personal journals what, to them, was an extraordinary aspect of society – that people with male bodies were acting like women.

The European traveler Antonio de Paiva [wrote](#) in a letter in 1544 that a group called the [bissu](#) played key roles in royal courts and that they “grow no hair on their beards, dress in a womanly fashion ... and adopt all of the female gestures and inclinations.” As high-ranking religious figures, bissu were advisers, wedding organizers, and mediated between the royal family and the gods.

Additionally, the Indonesian language has several words to describe transgender people, such as banci, bencong, wadam and [waria](#). Some of these words, such as wadam and waria, combine Indonesian words for woman and man. Wadam comes from wanita for woman and adam from man, and waria combines wanita with the word pria for man.

The first three words are now considered derogatory, and more neutral terms like transpuan or tranpria are emerging. However, the number of words demonstrates the historical role of transgender people as well as their central place in social life.

Discrimination and prosecutions

In present times, Indonesia does not criminalize same-sex sexuality, but LGBTQ people are often [at a risk of being harassed and detained by the police](#).

In 2008, Indonesia passed the Pornography Law, which [interprets being transgender as obscene](#). It states that pornography includes “pictures ... conversations, movements of the body ... in public which contain obscenity or sexual exploitation which violates the moral norms in society.”

Since 2016, the hard line against gender and sexual diversity [has become tougher](#). Many in Indonesia want to see harsher penalties not only around same-sex sexuality but any form of sexual activity outside heterosexual marriage.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further [increased discrimination](#) against Indonesia’s trans community. For instance, prior to COVID-19, trans people who needed to access medications, such as for HIV, were often able to do this through NGOs and some places of worship. During COVID-19, however, with medical resources being stretched, providing the trans community with HIV medications moved down the priority list.

Faith as a source of support

Many religions do not approve of LGBTQI identities. But some religions makes space for gender and sexual diversity. Indeed, there are numerous examples in contemporary Indonesia where faith is a source of comfort and support for trans people.

In his long-term ethnographic research, [Diego Rodríguez](#) analyzes the everyday practices of queer Muslims to argue that [Islam and queerness can be compatible](#). He found that Islam was sometimes more important in shaping notions of the self for trans people than ethnicity, sexuality or gender. For instance, trans people interpret Islam to say that the faith allows everyone to accept each other for who they are.

Al-Fatah mosque also engages with other faiths. For instance, in December 2021, Al-Fatah organized

a [Christmas celebration with Christian trans women](#).

Additionally, since 2019 transgender advocates such as the [Global Interfaith Network](#) have been fighting to make mosques and other places of worship more accepting of transgender people. Amar Alfikar, an Indonesian trans man and researcher with GIN, has worked tirelessly alongside trans men and queer feminist Muslims to establish the Indonesian Queer Muslims + Allies group, a virtual space where members meet weekly to recite the Quran and discuss Islamic theology.

Providing this virtual space is important because many mosques force worshippers [to enter dressed according to the biological sex](#) they were assigned at birth. Indeed, men and women have [different entrances](#) and spaces to pray.

Indonesia is also home to trans-inclusive churches. The Bethani Church in Yogyakarta welcomed transgender Christians after it recognized that they had difficulty finding a place to pray. As [activist Dede Oetomo said](#): “In Indonesian law, there is no verse that says that the right to worship belongs only to men or women.” Ledalero Catholic School of Philosophy in Maumere, the second-largest town on Indonesia’s Flores Island, is another example of a trans-inclusive church.

The road ahead

The transgender category has made religions think hard about who their adherents can and should be.

The bissu, who combine feminine and masculine energies, believe this identity is what helps them pray effectively. Indeed, bissu often give blessings to those about to go on the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. I found this puzzling when I started fieldwork in the 1990s, but it also helped me understand that for many in Indonesia there is no contradiction between Islam and being transgender. As one bissu [told me](#), “Allah is the one and only God, but there are many ways to be close to God.”

Indonesia recognizes six main religions. Of these, Hinduism is the [least likely to](#) reject or ostracize transgender individuals for religious reasons. Hinduism is based on a [principle of consciousness](#), or atma, a philosophy of “live and let live,” and doing good karma. Within this framework, transgender people can find solace. Bali, where over 90% of the population practices Hinduism, is often considered the most welcoming place for transgender Indonesians, but there is [still much transphobia](#).

Additionally, as anthropologist [Ben Hegarty](#) argued in his book “[The Made-Up State](#),” the transgender community in Indonesia is also defining what it means to be an Indonesian, including an Indonesian citizen of faith.

Publicly, and privately, reconciling faith and transgender is not an easy journey. Indonesia’s transgender community experiences religious trauma and transphobia but can also find its faith to be a source of empowerment and solace, as my research shows.

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P.S.

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