

## ***Women and Sharia Law in Northern Indonesia***

### ***Local women's NGOs and the reform of Islamic law in Aceh***

**Dina Afrianty, 2015**

**New York, Routledge**

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Dina Afrianty's book examines the lived experiences of women in Aceh, Indonesia's only province where the legal code is based on Islamic law. She shows that the adoption and implementation of Islamic law has subjected women's sexuality, bodies and religiosity to new norms and expectations. Against this backdrop, Afrianty's main interest lies in examining how Acehnese women respond to these new circumstances. Concretely, the research questions animating the book are "...how Acehnese women respond to the implementation of Islamic law...", "how women activists understand their status in Aceh's culture and how they perceive gender relations in Aceh's society," and, finally, how religious Acehnese women activists reconcile their understanding of gender equality and women's rights with those of Western and international values"(p.3).

After an introduction to the literature of women's movements in Muslim societies in chapter 1, the subsequent chapter examines how the enforcement of Islamic law affects women in Aceh province. This is followed by two substantive chapters on gender relations in Aceh from past to present and how local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have begun to talk about equality and rights in the province after 1998. Chapter 5 provides an in-depth account of MISPI (*Mitra Sejati Perempuan Indonesia*-The True Partners of Indonesian Women), an NGO that responds to the enforcement of *shari'a* law by "introducing Acehnese women to the notion of equality, rights in Islam through a wide range of programmes and activities." A conclusion summarizes the main findings of Afrianty's study.

Of the many interesting findings presented in the book under review here, four are worth pointing out in particular: One, rather than depicting women as merely passive subjects that need to be "freed" and "liberated" from Islamic law as foreign media often do, Afrianty's study shows that local women's movements have not only pro-actively shaped the new legal framework adopted in Aceh after 1998, they have also done so in ways that are not necessarily in line with strategies employed by women's movements in the West. For instance, local women's movements vehemently reject labels such as "feminism" or "gender." This is not only to fend off

criticism that local women's movements are driven by a "Western agenda" but also because Acehnese NGOs themselves think that *local* approaches will have most impact on the ground. For example, MISPI, one of the most visible and vocal women's organizations is deliberately collaborating with the local conservative establishment to slowly push for a re-interpretation of Islamic law and local *shari'a* regulations. Two, Afrianty's study shows that most local women's movements do not call for an outright abolishment of the local *shari'a* police (*Wilayatul Hisbah*) but rather fight for capacity building within the enforcement agency. Most of the negative headlines the *shari'a* police has created in local and global media are due to the fact that members of the *Wilayatul Hisbah* are poorly educated and receive a meagre salary, Afrianty argues. This leads to misunderstandings in the interpretation and application of local *shari'a* laws while making the force also susceptible to corruption. Three, the resentment of some Acehnese towards the application of Islamic law is not automatically to be understood as an outright reject of Islamic law. Rather, many Acehnese, men and women simply criticize the politicization of Islam in Aceh by politicians who adopt and enforce Islamic law out of expediency, not conviction. Four, despite the fact that women's movements are actively involved in shaping how Islamic law is adopted, enforced and interpreted in Aceh, women continue to be underrepresented in politics across the province. This, however, is common across both Indonesia and the world, and therefore not necessarily to be seen as a result of Aceh's legal code being based on Islamic law.

Overall, Afrianty's book is an important contribution to the growing literature on the Islamization of political and public life in Indonesia after 1998. Not only is it carefully researched and well-written but it also manages to bridge existing literatures that see the adoption and enforcement of *shari'a* law in Aceh either as a regressive foreign transplant indicative of "extremism"<sup>1</sup> or as a forward-looking project that aims at the social transformation of the province.<sup>2</sup> In Aceh, women's organizations may reject the narrow interpretation of Islamic law and its politicization. At the same time, however, they also defend their interpretation of Islamic law as an important part of local culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Onishi, Norimitsu. 2009. "Extremism Spreads Across Indonesian Penal Code," *New York Times*, 29 October. Available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/28/world/asia/28stoning.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/28/world/asia/28stoning.html?_r=0)

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Buehler. Review of Feener, Michael. 2013. *Shari'a and Social Engineering: The Implementation of Islamic Law in Contemporary Aceh, Indonesia*. *Indonesia*, 98 (2014), 148-52. Available at <http://michaelbuehler.asia/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/ReviewFeenerBuehler2014.pdf>

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