
Views on sexuality among Indonesian Muslims tend to be conservative and patriarchal: husbands must serve as breadwinners and women as domestic players. Accordingly, husbands decide on marital matters and wives submit to their decisions. In terms of sexual roles, a wife has the duty to satisfy her husband. Against this backdrop, this book examines the sexual relationships of married Indonesian Muslim women and investigates how Islam influences discourses of sexuality in Indonesia. More specifically, it scrutinizes how Islamic teachings affect the perceptions of Muslim women and their sexual practices with their husbands. The book is clearly written, easy to understand, and is supported by rich data and relevant theories. This welcome addition in the study of Indonesian women, Islam, and sexuality discusses in detail sexual performance, reproduction (menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth), and sexual desire. In thoughtful dialogue with previous scholarship, it discusses the cultural, religious, and educational aspects informing the established finding that Indonesian Muslim women are subordinate to men and that their sexual desires and pleasures are considered taboo (Bennett, 2005; Jennaway, 2003; Munir, 2002: 193).

The book consists of seven chapters. It first discusses marriage and sexuality in general, followed by an overview of Islamic sexual norms, perceptions of women, and expectations of marriage and sexual relations. After discussing how marriage is perceived through the concept of compatibility (*jodoh*), how marital life is adjusted accordingly, and how the household is managed, the book investigates married women’s sexual experiences. It proceeds with an elaborate discussion on the interaction between Islamic texts and knowledge formation. The book concludes with some remarks on the influence of Islamic teachings and discourses on married women’s sexual behavior, distinguishing two attitudes, silent and spoken, with the former being the dominant one.

All chapters are interesting and important, but the sixth and seventh chapters contain the core of the discussion. Chapter Six discusses how sex is perceived by ordinary Muslims in West Java. As the author observes, sex is seen as a women’s duty and women perceive marriage as a social, cultural, and religious obligation. Culturally, sex is the prerogative of men, and it is therefore taboo (*pamali*) for women to talk about it, initiate it (to reveal or express their sexual desire comes with the fear of being labelled ‘naughty’ or a ‘bad woman’), or to complain about it. The author holds that this stigma is taken for gran-
ted and justified by religious doctrines which equate obedience to husbands with Islamic observation (ibadah). Qur’anic verses on male superiority and women’s function as libaas (garments) are often cited to support such thoughts. These notions of subservience are strengthened by Prophetic sayings: “many women believe that they have committed a sin (dosa) or broken a cultural taboo (pamali) if they refuse to have sex and they fear cultural and religious consequences, such as being cursed by angels” (p. 168).

Often, the fate of women considered as having failed to perform their sexual duties is to accept their husband’s decision to pursue polygamy. A husband may make similar decisions when his wife remains childless. While this is theologically justified, in practice men often interpret the rules loosely and register their intention to marry a second wife shortly after their first marriage. This resonates with my own research. I have come across a case in Banyumas in which a man asked permission from the Islamic court to marry another woman, arguing that his first wife was not able to get pregnant whereas his would-be wife had been pregnant for four months. His first marriage had only lasted two years when the husband decided to marry another woman (Nurlaelawati 2020: 208). Such legal dimensions of family affairs in relation to sexuality are given due attention in the book, albeit not through the lens of judicial practices. It does discuss programs offering legal education of familial affairs, organized by the Office of Religious Affairs (Kantor Urusan Agama), such as the ‘course for prospective couples’ (Suscatin/Kursus Calon Pengantin). These initiatives provide couples with knowledge of legal regulations of family affairs and of their roles in marriage.

Surprisingly, certain informants of the study saw and experienced sex as a woman’s right. In Chapter Seven, the author explores this idea and argues that it is closely related to notions of agency in the feminist ideology. This enables women to express their sexual desire and challenge cultural norms on sexuality. As a result, these women managed to express their sexuality and negotiate it with their husband by suggesting positions and scheduling sexual performance or intimacy. As these ideas of agency are embedded in feminist thought, the author argues that they only take root in women with relatively high education. The intimacy and length of the relation are significant additional factors contributing to the success of such negotiations. Therefore, the idea that sex is also a woman’s right is neither universally embraced nor generally exercised: ‘the perceptions and behavior of the women were still strongly shaped by cultural norms, legal regulations, and religious prescriptions’ (p. 184).

In its discussion of very sensitive and rarely discussed issues, the book has revealed hidden facts about sexuality. As such, it is a highly significant contribution to the wider literature. Nevertheless, a few points of criticism must be
addressed here. In terms of the selection of informants for the study, the author chose to predominantly interview spouses aged between forty and sixty who had married between twenty to forty years ago. While there may be good reasons for this choice, the author has not made clear how this cohort is relevant to the broader research question and how representative these informants, their views, their knowledge of sexuality, and their positions and perception of it are.

The book offers an anthropological exploration of human behavior, specifically of Muslim women, with regard to sexuality. Nevertheless, the author occasionally evaluates the attitudes of the informants in a rather normative way and from a gendered perspective. The idea that many husbands commit sexual violence against their wives (pp. 166–167) is a case in point. Such a statement may be relevant from a normative and gendered perspective, but perhaps problematic in an ethnographic setting (unless I have misunderstood the approach deployed). In one instance, the author recounts a husband’s statement that he compelled his wife to sexually serve him during the first nights of their marriage. His wife was initially reluctant and tried to avoid sexual intercourse. When the husband repeatedly approached her under the guise of educating and initiating her, they eventually had sexual intimacy (p. 141). This passage could be interpreted to the effect that the wife overcame her initial objections and never suffered from the experience, yet the author evaluates the husband’s attitude as violent.

Another point worth mentioning relates to the women’s ambiguous attitudes on whether sex is their duty or their right. It might be possible that both perceptions are embraced in equal measure by Indonesian Muslim women, but the study remains rather opaque about this. While the author makes clear that women who perceive sex as their right are the exception rather than the norm, to dedicate a whole chapter to them might be overstating the case in a book that concludes that sex is predominantly considered a wife’s duty and a husband’s right. In addition, the discussion of various specific cases in Chapter Six and Chapter Seven makes it hard to get a sense of how consistent or internally contradictory the attitudes of specific informants are.

Despite these points, the book is a high-quality contribution to the literature on women and sexuality in general and on the marital intimacies of Indonesian Muslim women in particular. Above all, it offers a very detailed and thorough description of very sensitive issue and paves the way to study and describe it in an open academic setting.

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References


