

INTRODUCTION

Susanne Schröter

The volume “Gender and Islam in Southeast Asia” is the first compilation of texts on gender constructions, normative gender orders and their religious legitimizations, as well as current gender policies in Islamic Southeast Asia, which besides the Islamic core countries of Malaysia and Indonesia also comprises southern Thailand and Mindanao. By including politically and geographically peripheral regions, countries where Muslims constitute minorities and ethnically and religiously charged conflicts have a major impact on the everyday life of the population, it was possible to employ a broad analytical framework; thus, the readers will gain comprehensive insight into the diversity of Islamic cultures in Southeast Asia. The interdisciplinary background of the authors—ethnologists, theologians, historians, and scholars of literature and religion—further contributes to achieving that objective. Almost without exception, they are experts in the field of Southeast Asian studies. Some of them have made a name for themselves as women’s rights activists and women politicians in their own countries, combining scholarship and social commitment. The texts by these authors represent insider perspectives into ongoing debates in Southeast Asia, and reflect activities at the level of civil society. Methodologically the contributions are also diverse, with some based on studies of normative and literary sources and others the product of long-term ethnographic fieldwork.

The volume opens with a comprehensive survey article by Susanne Schröter, who highlights the distinct historical and geographical features of the region that have earned Southeast Asia the reputation of being a comparatively gender-liberal part of the world. Schröter traces the impact of national development programmes, modernization, globalization, and political conflicts on the local and national gender regimes in the 20th century, and elaborates on the consequences of the revitalization of a conservative type of Islam—a phenomenon evident across all Islamic Southeast Asia. The contribution elucidates the boundary lines of cultural and political processes of negotiation in which the actors are developing concepts of new gender orders in the context of utopias related to state, society, and community. Furthermore, it is shown how transnational Islamic discourses are being appropriated on the local level.

Four authors address Indonesia, the nation with the largest Muslim population in the world—and a nation that has witnessed fundamental changes since the end of dictatorial rule in 1998. Religious studies scholar Nelly van Doorn-Harder gives an outline of the women's politics pursued by the Muhammadiyah, the country's second largest Muslim mass organization. Founded in 1912 as an organization of reformist Islam, the Muhammadiyah has always had a progressive wing that encouraged women to pursue education and employment. At the same time, however, there has always existed an influential conservative majority that referred to the Islamic traditions and the Qur'an as the foundations of a social order with gender inequality that dates back to the time of the Prophet. The conflicts between these two poles become particularly apparent in the women's organization 'Aisyiyah and the young women's organization Nasyyiat ul-'Aisyiyah. Using the example of the 'harmonious family model', van Doorn-Harder examines how female activists try to gradually expand women's scope of action. In that process, women face a dilemma: on the one hand, they wish to transcend the Indonesian gender role concepts that have been passed down; on the other, they cannot fundamentally challenge the dominance exerted by husbands.

Monika Arnez discusses same-sex relationships in literary texts written by female authors after the fall of the Suharto regime. The end of his rule spawned a flourishing literary scene, and women in particular seized the opportunity to present their ideas to a broad public. They broached issues of injustice in the existing gender regime, their frustration with the restrictions imposed upon them, and their reflections on erotic desires and religious values. In the latter context, the topic of homosexuality is particularly controversial. The writers whose novels Arnez analyses tell of ambivalences, of inner struggles and provocative decisions. While the novels reflect an awakening on the part of women, this spirit of optimism characterizing the attempt to transcend the boundaries of normative mainstream discourse goes along with an inner turmoil, and does not always result in a real break with the prevailing order.

Anthropologist Nurul Ilmi Idrus reflects on an older genre of texts. Her contribution focuses on the importance of traditional manuscripts of the Bugis—a Muslim ethnic group living on the island of Sulawesi—to the organization of relationships between men and women. These so-called *lontara*' texts narrate stories that have educational value and shed light on the central norms of the group. The *Lontara*' *Daramatasia* exemplarily analysed by Idrus relates how a woman named Daramatasia, even though innocent, arouses the wrath of her husband, is chased away from the house and uncomplainingly accepts her fate. She is rewarded for her complete