This entry provides an overview of the sources and methodologies for the writing of history related to women, gender and sexuality. It deals primarily with the countries of Southeast Asia where Islam has a strong influence on women’s lives, namely Indonesia and Malaysia, in which Muslims form the majority of the population. Muslims also form a majority in Brunei Darussalam and Muslim minorities can also be found in Philippines and Thailand, but the bulk of new historical research and writing deals with Indonesia and Malaysia. This entry will explore how in the last decade historical research and writing about and in this region have taken shape. Since 1998, Indonesia has experienced the most significant changes politically and socially and therefore quite some attention will be devoted to discussing that part of Southeast Asia. Renewed interest in histories that deal with women and gender in the Southeast Asian region are guided by developments in the field of history, but also by how women’s lives are affected as a result of global changes affecting Muslims worldwide. The first disciplinary entry on the history of the region in the Encyclopedia of Women and Muslim Cultures was written by Virginia Hooker (2003) and covered the issues of sources and methodologies of women in Islamic cultures in East, South and Southeast Asia. This entry covers the period subsequent to that covered by Hooker, but focuses attention on Southeast Asia only.

The Premodern and Early Modern

In her entry of 2003, Virginia Hooker examined premodern and early modern Southeast Asia primarily through the work of Barbara Watson Andaya, which analyzes the role of women prior to the arrival of Islam as a dominant religion in these areas and the arrival of the nation-state. In the discussion below on premodern and early modern sources and approaches for the study of women and gender in Southeast Asia, this entry draws on Andaya’s (2006) study, the Flaming Womb, in which she argues that it is possible to conceive of women as a Southeast Asian category and
that women in Southeast Asia shared a similar set of circumstances, particularly in the early modern period and at the onset of capitalism. Islam began to be practiced in Southeast Asia from approximately the thirteenth century. In analyzing women’s lives during premodern and early modern Southeast Asia, it is possible, in Andaya’s view, to conceive of Southeast Asia as a region. In this region, women enjoyed a relatively important status in the political realm and as economic agents.

Access to sources in the writing of the history of women in Southeast Asia, particularly in the “early modern” period, the period from about 1400, is still a major constraint. For one, women occupied little historical space. Second, Southeast Asia occupies the zone between the Pacific’s high level of orality and the text-rich East and South Asia. It does not have the rich repositories of manuscripts and documents that China and India have for example. In Andaya’s view (2006, 42), the fifteenth century becomes the primary gateway for studying the history of women in Southeast Asia, due to the increase in source material, which occurred with growing trade and commerce, increasing “religious coherence” and political centralization in the region. Women are also still accorded little historical space in this early modern period because of problems in regard to sources. Access to a wide range of sources is still a constraint, particularly if a historian’s research approach was through privileging written documents in the archives. The region’s cultural and linguistic diversity pose a constraint for the historian. Visual resources unlike in East Asia are few. This is a result of the lack of technology, such as in woodblock printing, in the early modern period and the impact of restrictions under Islam on depictions of animate beings. In response, Andaya (2006, 43) suggests approaches using other sources that might at the same time also “transverse the boundaries of the contemporary nation-states.” As modern nation-states have come about, historical research and writing have shifted to a firm focus on each nation-state and its colonial experience, rather than a regional approach. In dealing with the period prior to the early modern in Southeast Asia, Andaya suggests the importance of “interdisciplinary conversations,” for example with archaeologists in reading historical sites and early inscriptions, which can shed some light on the role of women in society.

While there are more source materials from the early modern period, the fourteenth century onwards, many documents, such as royal edicts, codes, chronicles and texts derived from this period have not survived due to the tropical climate, natural disasters, the long years of conflict that afflicted the region, or through mismanagement. Priorities accorded by government to the preservation of historical sources have also varied. For