

Perwiridan

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In almost every neighbourhood in Indonesia, there are women's religious gatherings. Despite the fact that most Indonesian women participate in these gatherings, they have received little attention in the study of women in Indonesia. In *kelurahan*¹, Melayu, Sumatra, *perwiridan* is a religious gathering in which Muslim women read the Quran together. In the midst of the limited public space available to women, *perwiridan* provides a strategic space for women to participate in local governance in their own way. Despite common perceptions that women are passive and do not have knowledge of – nor interest in – local governance, women involved in *perwiridan* analyse problems related to local governance, and actively participate in community development.

Malay Women in Religion and Adat

Islamic teaching has great influence in the Malay culture, providing the foundation for the Malay adat (customary law). Islam is considered inseparable from Malay culture and it forms part of the identity of being a Melayu (de-Steurs, 1960; Peacock, 1973; Marsden, 1996). According to many women in *kelurahan*, Melayu, adat has been implemented in deviation to Islamic teaching; posing a threat to equal gender relationships in Malay households. Despite the cooperative relationship between husband and wife suggested in Islam, there is a widespread perception among the community that it is sinful for a woman to share housework with her husband.

Women in *kelurahan*, Melayu have pointed out that adat (local custom), rather than religion, is the major factor behind the gendered division of work which contributed to gender inequalities in the household (FGD 2001). Many claim that contrary to Islamic teachings, which value and respect women, it is men's misinterpretation of the Quran that has denigrated women.

Perwiridan and Empowerment

As previously mentioned, there is limited public space for Malay women in *kelurahan*, Melayu to gather. *Perwiridan*, however, offers a way for women to leave their homes without being challenged by their husbands, because these gatherings are considered by community members – both male and female – and local government as a way for women to learn about the religious teachings which are fundamental to the Malay culture. In these gatherings, women also discuss their feelings, household economic issues, children's education, health, and other community issues.

In one particular *perwiridan* group (pictured below), women discussed an unproductive local government credit scheme. They pointed out that equity, transparency and justice should be the principles of government in implementing its

¹ *Kelurahan* is a village/ administrative urban region that includes several hamlets.

activities and programmes, and suggested that people would willingly contribute to – and participate in – local development schemes if they were certain that they would receive a fair share of the benefits.

Members of this perwiridan have also actively monitored the unjust treatment of other members of the community. They challenged the discriminatory treatment of a school that only contributed money to those students whose fathers died, giving nothing to those students who lost their mothers. The women from this perwiridan contributed money to a student whose mother died. They constantly reminded the teacher of his obligation to visit the family of the dead, and eventually, the teacher visited the mourning family.

Perwiridan also encourages solidarity among community members. In cases of misfortune or poverty, the perwiridan gives money to those affected, drawn from its members' monthly contribution. Women in perwiridan also take part in cultural and religious ceremonies regarding the misfortunes that other community members may have experienced. In the midst of the poverty in this community, voluntary assistance – carried out by women – is very important. The assistance enables all members of the community, especially the poor, to fulfil their cultural and religious obligations which are seen as central to the life of the Malay community.

Through studying and reading the Quran and relating it to daily life, women's religious gatherings such as perwiridan can empower women by extending their participation in the community. Women develop self confidence and pride; perwiridan enables a sense of participation and belonging in the most immediate sense, something which is unavailable to most women in other aspects of their lives. Perwiridan offers women a diversion from their daily routines. It enables psychological healing for women, providing a space in which they can share their feelings and experiences with other women. Through these interactions, women become cognizant of their identity and build solidarity with – and support for – one another, the benefits of which extend to their communities as a whole.

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