

## The Role of Women's Organisations in the Struggle for Independence (Nationalist Movement) and the Struggle for Nation Building (Nationalism) in Indonesia

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### Abstract

In discussing the nation-state, Nira Yuval-Davis provides an overview of how gender relations influence and are influenced by national projects, and how women are positioned within them. The role and struggle of women's organisations before and at the beginning of Indonesia's independence can be seen from this analysis. This paper revisits the situation of the women's movement during Indonesia's independence. Does nationalism as an ideology domesticate or liberate women? Did the agenda of women's organisations during that period run parallel to the nationalist agenda, or did it merge with the priority agenda of achieving independence? This paper finds that gender influences and is influenced by Indonesia's national and nationalist projects, drawing on various women's organisations that existed at that time. This includes efforts to suppress and silence progressive and critical women's movements of the time, including *Gerwani*, to prevent them from disrupting the political power structures of the era.

Keywords: women's organisations, independence struggle, Indonesian nationalism, *Gerwani*

### Introduction

Any discussion of the women's movement must begin with a discussion of its history, the concept of nationhood, and the political situation that led to its inception. The history of the women's movement in Indonesia can essentially be traced back to well before independence. During the struggle for independence, youth organisations initially served as a forum for resistance against the colonisers. At that time, the women's movement focused on short-term projects as well as long-term advancement of women as a whole. The women's movement was critical of the state. The ideas of the women's movement were radical in the past, and it is important to revive them today (Gina 2018). Research by *Jurnal Perempuan*, which discusses women's or feminist conversations about nationality, reveals that women have always been a tool for national mobilisation, despite having their own interests in nationality. However, these interests are overlooked by the political actors who run the country (Dhewy 2018).

In explaining why women tend to be 'hidden' from the nationalist phenomenon, Yuval-Davis refers to the work of Carole Pateman (1988) and Grant (1991). Carole

Pateman studied the influential classical theories of the 'social contract', which formed the basis of our understanding of Western social and political order. According to these theories, civil society is divided into public and private domains. Women (and families) are placed in the private domain, which is deemed politically irrelevant. According to Yuval-Davis, nationalism and nationhood are discussed within the public political sphere. The exclusion of women from this arena has led to their exclusion from the discourse (Davis 1997).

The terms 'nation' and 'nationalism' are debatable. Nationalism involves identifying a people with a place and community, referred to as a nation, to which they feel a sense of belonging and loyalty, and which confers rights and obligations (Blackburn 2004). In the Third World, nationalism was not only a movement against colonialism, but also a political ideology. It reinvented itself after independence. According to Smith, it provides a basis and rationale for new social and political units and institutions. The anti-colonial nationalist struggle was based on the assumption and hope that national sovereignty would bring benefits and progress. Defending and developing the nation-state

and the ongoing process of nation-building represent a continuation of the nationalist struggle (Martyn 2005).

In most Southeast Asian countries in the first half of the 20th century, fighting to free their land and people from foreign colonial powers was a clear and worthy cause. In these countries, nationalism was a struggle to free the nation from foreign domination and to establish a nation-state. Indonesia has instilled a particular interpretation of the nationalist movement by carefully selecting national heroes. In this case, women were marginalised. This has been detrimental to the pluralism of most nationalist movements and the role of women within them (Blackburn 2004).

The women's movement in Indonesia cannot be separated from the process of colonialism that occurred in Indonesia, even after the country gained independence in 1945. The struggle against colonialism continued even after independence. Various resistance movements were carried out through both armed struggle and diplomacy. These two forms of resistance were part of a wave of nationalism opposing colonialism and imperialism that also occurred in other Asian countries. During the struggle for independence, various nationalist organisations emerged, including Boedi Oetomo in 1908, followed by the Islamic-oriented Muhammadiyah in 1917. Each organisation fought against the colonial government in its own way. Additionally, various other organisations with diverse ideologies, including communism and socialism, fought through guerrilla warfare and underground movements (Subono 2018).

To revisit the history of women's struggles in relation to national life, we can examine the outcomes of women's congresses. At these congresses, women campaigned on various issues, such as education, maternal and child welfare, and polygamy. In the 1930s, a movement within the women's movement argued that all women's issues should be incorporated into the nationalist struggle for independence (Gina 2018).

Conversely, the history of the Indonesian struggle lacks records of the role of women and women's movements that also fought against imperialism at that time. There are at least two reasons for this lack of literacy about women in the history of the Indonesian struggle. Firstly, women were not in a position to make decisions that would influence political processes. Secondly, women's associations tended to avoid appearing in male circles (Subono 2018, p. 147).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Indonesian Women's Movement (*Gerakan Wanita Indonesia/Gerwani*) was the only women's organisation to enter the national political arena. Other organisations believed that women's organisations should be confined to the social sphere. *Gerwani* women were vocal and militant, which was considered a threat to men, who were seen as the guardians of normative values. This fear gave rise to the myth that *Gerwani* women had tortured people during the 30 September Movement in 1965 (Rizal 2007).

This article seeks to answer the following questions: What was the role of women and women's organisations in the struggle for independence in Indonesia and the formation of the nation state (Indonesian nationalism)? Did nationalism as an ideology domesticate or liberate women? Could the agendas of women's organisations and Indonesian independence run in parallel, or was the women's agenda overshadowed by the priority of independence?

This article's novelty lies in its relevance to the government's efforts to rewrite Indonesian history. Currently, the Indonesian government is rewriting the country's history through the Ministry of Culture. The project is expected to be completed by August 2025. Civil society has criticised the draft framework for this rewriting as it omits a number of serious human rights violations. The situation has been further exacerbated by statements made by the Minister of Culture, Fadli Zon, who claims that there is no evidence of violence against women, including mass rape. According to him, this information is merely a rumour and has never been recorded in history books. This has sparked a strong reaction from civil society, particularly women's activists and organisations involved in writing the Joint Fact-Finding Team report commissioned by the government in 1998 (BBC News Indonesia 2025).

This situation cannot be allowed to pass without comment. In fact, this is not the first time the government has attempted to erase historical facts. The *Gerwani* case serves as a reminder of how those in power erase historical facts for their own interests. Until now, perhaps not many people fully understand what happened to *Gerwani*, or how this most progressive women's movement was subjugated and destroyed by those in power for their own interests. This is dangerous because history will ultimately be used only to legitimise the regime rather than to provide valuable lessons for the future. Historical knowledge is important for creating a better future.

## Research Methodology

This paper uses feminist research methods to analyse documents that serve as primary references for researchers and academics discussing women's organisations during the pre- and post-independence periods. The authors' main references in preparing this paper are important literature by Cora Vreede Stuers (1960), Saskia Wieringa (2002), Kumari Jayawardena (2016), Susan Blackburn (2004 & 2007), Elizabeth Martyn (2005), and Nira Yuval-Davis (1997). Reading various books and articles written by feminists reveals similarities in the definition of the feminist research process. Every feminist research is considered to have two main objectives: sensitivity to gender roles in society and the different experiences of men and women, as well as a critical approach to the research process regarding society, methodological structures, and epistemology in 'knowledge' placed in the public domain (Letherby 2003). Feminist literature was crucial in preparing this paper, as it helped to triangulate the various data presented.

## The Women's Movement Pre- and Post-Independence

To understand the movements and struggles of women's organisations in Indonesia, it is important to first examine the work of organisations that emerged from the beginning of the national awakening (post-1908) through the early days of independence and the collapse of the Old Order in 1965. Understanding the context of these periods helps us grasp the political dynamics and issues women were fighting for at the time. This article will highlight several women's organisations from such periods and provide a more in-depth discussion of Gerwani, the most progressive organisation in the early days of independence, and its journey until its destruction in 1965.

*Putri Mardika* Association was founded in Jakarta in 1912 with the assistance of the youth organisation Budi Oetomo, established earlier in 1908. Putri Mardika's main objectives were to provide financial assistance to intelligent girls so they could start or continue their education, to provide information and advice to young women who wanted to study, and to encourage shy women to participate in public life. In the following years, various regional and local women's organisations emerged, such as *Putri Boedi Sedjati (Gadis Sejati)* and *Kegiatan Wanita Setia*, both founded in 1914 to enhance women's roles through academic training. In Minangkabau, *Keutamaan Istri* even set up a school as part of these efforts. Generally,

women's organisations established between 1913 and 1915 had social objectives, focusing on enhancing women's roles through education, sewing classes, child welfare courses, and similar activities. This period was also marked by the establishment of religious-based organisations, such as *Aisyiyah* and *Sarekat Islam* (Stuers 1960).

The Indonesian women's movement initially emerged within the context of the nationalist movement. Its ideology was initially influenced by liberal democratic ideals and Islamic values (Jayawardena, 2016). Islamic women's organisation *Aisyiyah* was founded in 1917. *Aisyiyah* was considered to represent the middle class, positioned between the 'nobility' and the *marhaen* (proletariat) (Stuers 1960). At the first women's congress in 1928, participants from Islamic organisations, including *Aisyiyah*, were reluctant to promote marriage reform, as they defended Islamic marriage law. This issue created a divide in public discourse between secular and religious women and men. Islamic-based organisations adopted a defensive stance and rejected demands from secular groups for amendments to the Marriage Law to give women more/ fairer rights at that time (Blackburn 2007).

Socialism then became an increasingly important ideology in the nationalist movement. Initially, the women's movement focused on advocating for voting rights and opposing polygamy. The women's movement played an important role in Indonesia's struggle for independence. Although women gained the right to vote, they were unable to achieve the changes to the Marriage Law they sought. Polygamy was still permitted under certain conditions (Jayawardena 2016).

The Indonesian Women's Movements, which emerged in the 1930s, divided into two main factions, both dominated by middle-class women. The issues raised concerned legal issues, family matters, and education. Male nationalists supported both groups and tended to be cautious about polygamy and open political involvement in the nationalist movement. The First Women's Congress was held in Jakarta on 22 December 1928. Around 30 women's organisations attended this event (Jayawardena 2016). The most significant outcome of the congress was the establishment of the Indonesian Women's Association (*Perikatan Perempuan Indonesia/PPI*). The issues discussed were those important to middle-class women, namely, education and marriage law. The congress sent a text to the government containing three requests: first, an increase in the number of women-only schools; second,

information for women on applicable divorce practices; and third, assistance for female heads of orphaned families of Indonesian civil servants (Jayawardena 2016 & Stuers 1960).

In October 1929, a more radical movement emerged when Putri Indonesia, a division of the *Jong Java* organisation, together with other women's groups, held a meeting attended by 1,000 people, 600 of whom were women. This meeting was held in Bandung. A radical approach was taken to issues such as polygamy, prostitution, and women's education. Soekarno attended the meeting and encouraged women to join the nationalist struggle. Suwarni Pringgodigdo, who led the meeting, subsequently founded the *Istri Sedar* organisation in Bandung and started a journal called *Sedar* (Jayawardena 2016).

During the pre-independence period, the *Istri Sedar* organisation became an open political movement after the first women's congress in 1932. It encouraged Indonesian women to participate in politics, improve working conditions for women, and advocate for national education policies (Jayawardena 2016). Furthermore, women were encouraged to take an active interest in politics because, at that time, it was believed that the movement would only be strong enough to achieve equal rights for the Indonesian people if women and men united (Stuers 1960). Many *Istri Sedar* members were part of the Indonesian National Party (PNI), whose leaders were arrested in 1929. *Istri Sedar* was highly critical of Dutch colonialism. The organisation also participated in the Asian Women's Congress in Lahore and held its First Congress in Jakarta. The resolutions of the congress included a call to abolish polygamy (Jayawardena 2016).

The second general congress of women was held on 20-24 July 1935. Several matters were decided at the congress that still fell within the broad umbrella of nationalism. The only feminist issue raised was related to education, specifically the commitment to eradicating high illiteracy rates among women. Other follow-up actions from the congress included establishing a Women's Labour Investigation Agency to investigate employment opportunities for women. Furthermore, all associations present were affiliated with youth organisations and adopted nationalism, social activities, and religious neutrality as the congress's basic principles (Stuers 1960).

During the Japanese occupation of Indonesia (1942-1945), there were few opportunities for the women's movement to develop. Only one organisation was

permitted to exist: *Fudjinkai* (women's association). The association ran literacy programmes, set up public kitchens, and undertook other social work. Through these activities, women from the upper and middle classes formed strong bonds of friendship with women from the lower classes. In 1945, women stood ready to assist the guerrilla fighters. They organised themselves into teams of nurses and liaison officers. They ran soup kitchens and mobile clinics. The best-known women's association from this period was the *Perwari* (*Persatuan Wanita Negara Indonesia*) (Stuers 1960).

At the first Women's Congress after independence in December 1945, *Perwari* and various other women's associations united to form a large organisation called *Perwari*. The programme promoted was 'to be the rear guard defending the country's independence' (Stuers 1960). During this period, it is evident that women's organisations were unable to achieve much in the fight for feminist issues. Women's issues merged with nationalism in the context of resistance against Japanese colonialism.

The post-colonial Indonesian women's movement cannot be understood without appreciating its commitment to nationalism and nationalist projects. This is particularly important in the context of a developing country, where the state lacks the resources or influence to initiate social control or change gender relations. In such a context, women need to collaborate with the state to effect change, adopting a conceptualisation of citizenship that emphasises the responsibility to develop and improve the position of women in particular, and of society in general (Martyn 2005).

The Indonesian Women's Congress (*Kongres Wanita Indonesia/Kowani*) is an umbrella organisation comprising forty-five women's groups. During the struggle for independence, its members supported guerrilla fighters, formed nursing groups, and organised clinics and public kitchens. These groups included women's associations affiliated with political parties, independent women's groups, and women from various professions. *Kowani* campaigned for equal legal rights for women, and their efforts largely led to the 1949 Indonesian Constitution, which granted women equal voting rights (Jayawardena 2016). At that time, *Kowani's* activities aimed to unite and consolidate national strength and potential. Differences of opinion on religious and political issues were never raised. All efforts focused on helping the government achieve the country's independence.

Another large religious organisation was the Catholic Women (*Wanita Katolik*). Originally part of the Catholic Party, in December 1949, the Congress of the Indonesian Catholic Community reformed this organisation. In the 1950s, *Wanita Katolik* was at the forefront of efforts to introduce the monogamous Marriage Law. The organisation also focused on social work, primarily within the Catholic community. It established daycare centres, schools, and religious study groups for women (Wieringa 2002).

*Perwari*, a secular women's organisation based on *Pancasila*, was founded in 1945. Committed to social issues, *Perwari* was active in various fields in the 1950s. It had schools, consultation bureaux, mother-and-child clinics, and dormitories for female students and workers. The organisation's chairperson was not allowed to be a member of any political organisation. However, it was found that male members had advised some members of the political parties they belonged to (*PNI* and *Pesindo*) to join *Perwari*. After independence, *Perwari's* membership declined. Members moved to women's organisations affiliated with political parties, such as *Gerakan Wanita Indonesia Sedar (Gerwis)*. In 1953, women demonstrated, and *Perwari* once again became the most vocal and influential organisation. However, the organisation was actually weakening (Wieringa 2002).

The 1950s marked a dynamic and spirited period for women's activism in Indonesia. Indonesian women's organisations were actively involved with the new state due to the post-independence context. During this period, women's organisations fought for women's rights and promoted awareness of women's citizenship. The 1950s in Indonesia were a time of political change and transition. Despite being in the early days of independence, Indonesian women enjoyed full and equal rights under the 1945 and 1950 constitutions. At that time, the movement grappled with questions about how women should exercise these rights, how they should act as citizens, and how they should act internationally as members of a sovereign state. At the national level, the women's movement's agenda continued to align with nationalism, with an overlap between gender and national interests (Martyn 2005).

### ***Gerwani*: The Progressive Women's Organisation in the Early Days of Independence**

The establishment of *Gerwani* marked a new chapter in the women's movement in Indonesia post-independence. Initially founded as *Gerwis* on 4 June

1950 in Semarang, the organisation later changed its name to *Gerwani* at the 1954 Congress. This was part of efforts to expand the movement's base and reinforce its orientation. *Gerwani's* establishment cannot be separated from the political situation at the time, which was still influenced by communist ideology and Indonesia's lack of full independence from Dutch colonialism. The following six women's organisations formed *Gerwis*: *Rukun Putri Indonesia (Rupindo)* from Semarang; *Persatuan Wanita Sedar* from Surabaya; *Istri Sedar* from Bandung; *Gerakan Wanita Indonesia (Gerwindo)* from Kediri; *Wanita Madura* from Madura; and *Perjuangan Putri Republik Indonesia* from Pasuruan. The women who joined the organisation came from diverse social backgrounds; many came from lower *priyayi* families yet were heavily involved in the national movement. Some had fought in the guerrilla movement against Japan and the Netherlands, and several were involved in the communist underground movement (Wieringa 2002).

From its formation in 1950 until 1951, *Gerwis* continued to expand its organisational reach. In 1952, the Railway Workers' Wives organisation, a union of railway workers' wives with ten branches and 4,000 members, joined *Gerwis*. The final organisation to join in 1953 was *Perwin (Persatuan Wanita Indonesia)* in Manado. *Gerwis* had grown rapidly between the first and second congresses. In Surabaya alone, it had 40 branches and 6,000 members, a figure which increased to around 80,000 by 1954. The outcome of the 1954 *Gerwani* congress was to transform the organisation into a mass movement, aiming to reach one million members by the end of 1955. By April 1955, this figure had risen to 400,000. By mid-1956, this figure had risen to 640,460. By the time of the third congress in December 1957, *Gerwani* claimed to have 663,740 members (Wieringa 2002). Although this did not reach the target, it represented significant growth for the organisation.

At the first congress in 1951, it was decided that the name would change from *Gerwis* to *Gerwani*, to take effect at the next congress in 1954. The 1954 congress marked the organisation's official name change from *Gerwis* to *Gerwani*. At this congress, Umi Sardjono was elected chairperson. This signified that the feminist influence was stronger than that of the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia/PKI*). There was a fairly strong communist influence within *Gerwis* at that time. This was due to the Communist Party's strong desire to establish a women's organisation

under its influence. However, the founding members of *Gerwis* were primarily motivated by a desire for national independence and an end to the 'feudal' practices that had long been entrenched in society (Wieringa 2002).

Wieringa explained *Gerwani's* substantial growth in membership. *Gerwani* appealed to talented young women, offering them the opportunity to become leaders regardless of their social background. *Gerwis* was preferred to other women's organisations because the latter were reluctant to discuss political issues. They tended to limit themselves to social issues such as education. They were also less willing to fight against rape, polygamy, and child marriage on a daily basis. *Gerwani* membership was open to all Indonesian women aged 16 years and above (younger women could join if they were married). As many *Gerwani* members were illiterate, they did not need to sign or fill out forms. Members were also permitted to join other organisations, such as *SOBSI* and other women's organisations (Wieringa 2002).

The situation was different in other women's organisations. At *Perwari*, for example, one could only become an organisational leader if one came from a background of village leadership or had a good education, typically from the elite/*priyayi* class. *Gerwani*, on the other hand, needed many cadres, especially after deciding to become a mass organisation. *Gerwani* provided training to individuals with the potential to develop organisational skills. *Gerwani* recruited leaders from ordinary women. This strategy proved effective, with many women joining *Gerwani* because they felt it was the only organisation willing to help with their practical problems (Wieringa 2002).

Reaching out to the masses became an important activity. The main activities were carried out at the household level. These included social gatherings, helping with rice distribution, attending births, and supporting children with disabilities. In addition, organised daycare centres were established in villages. Everyone could contribute to these centres according to their abilities. Furthermore, in collaboration with the People's Youth (*Pemuda Rakyat*), they helped repair widows' homes, resolve marital disputes, support victims of domestic violence, and assist with divorce proceedings (Wieringa 2002).

### Women's issues

An important resolution resulting from the second *Gerwani* congress in 1954 was the demand for a more

democratic marriage law. Other resolutions covered general elections (1955), national security, and protests against nuclear testing (Wieringa 2003, p. 153). In addition to focusing on women's issues domestically, *Gerwani* also addressed strategic international issues, such as the elimination of imperialism and colonialism, and protests against nuclear testing. The organisation shifted its focus from marriage to the struggle for equal labour rights and equal responsibility in the fight for full national independence and socialism. In the process, they came to believe they had a superior analysis and strategy and could therefore be the main drivers of the women's movement (Wieringa 2002).

*Gerwani* was clearly committed to improving the situation of female workers. The organisation had a clear understanding of labour exploitation based on Marxism. In 1955, Umi Sardjono, the leader of *Gerwani*, explained that the organisation was fighting for women's labour rights. The organisation demanded social security, the implementation of the Labour Law, equal pay for equal work, childcare facilities, women's right to promotion and training, and the right to receive family allowances. *Gerwani* also campaigned for better wages for farmers and small traders, arguing that they needed access to land, government-backed loans, housing, and reduced taxes in order to make a living. *Gerwani* also identified that women experienced wage discrimination and often did not receive maternity and menstrual leave. They were also less likely to be promoted and were often dismissed because they stopped working after giving birth due to a lack of clinics and childcare facilities. According to *Gerwani*, women farmers were not protected by law either. They experienced wage discrimination and had no social security whatsoever (Blackburn 2004).

*Gerwis* activists were also involved in rural initiatives in support of the Indonesian Peasant Front (*Barisan Tani Indonesia/BTI*). Furthermore, *Gerwis'* movement was evident in regional collaboration between *Gerwis* and the Indonesian Plantation Workers Union (*Sarekat Buruh Perkebunan Republik Indonesia/Sarbupri*). This collaboration was particularly strong in Sumatra, where two-thirds of plantation workers were women. Together, they ran campaigns to educate women about their legal rights and assist them with labour and marriage issues. They also supported workers during violent confrontations with the government when it began evicting them from plantations (Wieringa 2002). This demonstrates the significant impact of Marxist-Socialist ideology on the *Gerwani* movement.

*Gerwis* also organised community activities and strengthened its internal organisation. It conducted literacy courses and established kindergartens. *Gerwis* also attempted to organise cadre training courses, but these were postponed due to financial reasons. Consequently, local branches had to train their own cadres without guidance from the centre. These financial difficulties also forced the organisation to stop publishing its internal bulletin (Wieringa 2002).

During preparations for the *Gerwis* conference in March 1954, women working on plantations faced the pressing issue of their rights not being enforced. These rights included the need for childcare facilities, women's rights, the revocation of PP-19, and peace. During this period, the Party increased pressure on *Gerwani* to become a women's mass organisation under its control. In its efforts to become a mass women's organisation, *Gerwani* emphasised issues of great concern to women, such as basic needs. This primarily distinguished *Gerwani* from most other women's organisations at that time (Wieringa 2002).

### **The Influence of Political Forces on Gerwani and Other Women's Organisations**

Since the first congress in 1951, *Gerwis's* leadership had strong ties to *PKI*. Those who wanted *Gerwis* to remain independent were pushed to the sidelines. Consequently, Trimurti lost the vote, and Suwarti became Chairperson. The resolution of the third *Gerwani* congress showed that *Gerwani* was becoming increasingly involved in national political interests in the context of Guided Democracy. This situation continued until the fourth and final congress. Socialist rhetoric began to dominate the organisation's publications, particularly those discussing the 'heroic struggle' against the Dutch in West Irian (Wieringa 2002).

*Gerwani's* political views were increasingly in line with Soekarno's populist rhetoric. In 1959, *Gerwani* promised to support *Manipol*. The organisation began to quote the president in its demands, including during the 1960s, when the highest priority during Mother's Day celebrations was given to supporting *Manipol*, followed by peace, international solidarity, and unity. By 1961, it was clear that the national political stance was calling for the women's movement to become truly revolutionary and for emancipation to be linked to the struggle against imperialism (Wieringa 2002).

*Perwari* and *Gerwani*, as two major organisations in the early days of independence, did not follow the same

path. Their relationship deteriorated further after the 1953 demonstrations concerning President Soekarno's marriage to Hartini. *Perwari* felt that *Gerwani* prioritised party politics over everything else, even though both organisations were equally progressive in their struggles (Wieringa 2002). This situation demonstrates that, post-independence and during the implementation of various nationalist projects, the direction of women's organisations' struggles was heavily influenced by the dominant political forces of the time. This resulted in the obstruction, or 'submergence', of women in relation to the project of nationalism, as Yuval-Davis describes it.

After 1959, Soekarno's hegemonic influence and Guided Democracy were strongly felt within the women's movement. *Gerwani* became the women's organisation closest to the president and exerted a significant influence on *KWI/Kowani*. At that time, other organisations felt compelled to incorporate terms such as *Nasakom* and *Manipol/Usdek* into their activities. This increased tensions between *Gerwani* and other women's organisations, although cooperation continued at the local level (Wieringa 2002).

Between 1961 and 1964, the Indonesian Women's Congress (*Kongres Wanita Indonesia/KWI*) moved closer to Soekarno's politics. *KWI* prioritised national political issues, thereby marginalising the increasingly specific interests of women. *KWI* strongly supported the struggle for the liberation of West Irian. In 1964, Congress shifted its focus to agrarian reform and working conditions. Previously, in 1961, the *KWI* congress had called for marriage legislation. Meanwhile, *KWI* continued to strengthen its relationship with local *GOW* groups by organising courses, forming cooperatives, establishing centres to support sex workers, and expanding legal aid activities (Wieringa 2002).

The fall of the Soekarno regime (Old Order) also resulted in a ban on *Gerwani*. On 1 October 1965, *Gerwani* was officially disbanded, with several members imprisoned. Under the New Order regime, only organisations that aligned with the government could remain in power (Blackburn 2004). The repression of *Gerwani* under the New Order regime ended any possibility of recruiting women from poor backgrounds into political organisations for decades to come (Blackburn, 2004). At that time, thousands of *Gerwani* members were killed or imprisoned without trial for years. The New Order regime identified *Gerwani* followers as deviants and accused them of being involved in the murder of generals in *Lubang Buaya* (Blackburn 2004).

Between 1955 and 1965, attempts were made to suppress women's organisations. One such effort was made by the military elite, who disapproved of organisations being established for the wives of the armed forces and police. Initially, organisations such as *Persit*, *Pia Ardhya Garini*, *Jalasenastri*, and *Bhayangkari* were autonomous, with structures separate from the armed forces. These organisations campaigned for women's interests, particularly those of the wives of army personnel. Issues raised by *Persit* included salary increases for military widows, anti-polygamy, and the prohibition of early marriage in the drafting of the Marriage Law. However, this situation did not last long as the army leadership at the time disapproved of *Persit*. Ultimately, the organisation was suspended and forced to adopt a political stance based on military doctrine. Following its integration into the army, *Persit* was renamed *Kartika Candra Kirana* (Rahayu 2017).

Other women's organisations were also forced to submit to the New Order government. For example, the Socialist Women's Movement, which was affiliated with the Indonesian Socialist Party (*Partai Sosialis Indonesia/PSI*), had to remove the word 'socialist' from its name and replace it with 'prosperous'. This was done so that the organisation could rejoin the Kowani congress in the early days of the New Order. Similarly, the women's organisation *Wanita Marhaen*, which was affiliated with the Indonesian Nationalist Party (*Partai Nasionalis Indonesia/PNI*), was only readmitted to the Kowani congress after it changed its name to the National Women's Union (*Persatuan Wanita Nasional/Perwanas*) (Rahayu 2017). These examples demonstrate that the women's movement was subjugated for the sake of the political powers in control at the time.

## Analysis

In her discussion of gender and nationalism, Nira Yuval-Davis argues that the two cannot be separated from issues concerning women and the biological reproduction of the nation. She argues that the main agenda of nationalist movements often centres on controlling women's marriage and reproduction because the struggle for reproductive rights has been central to the feminist movement since its inception. The right of women to choose whether to have children, how many, and when has been viewed by many feminists as a fundamental aspect of feminist politics. However, until recent decades, discussions about women's reproductive rights mostly focused on their impact on women as individuals, e.g., on health,

employment, and mobility opportunities, and family life. In fact, the pressure women experience to have or not have children is often related to their position as members of the national collective rather than as individuals, workers, or wives (Davis 1997).

This may help explain why one of the most controversial policies in the context of the Old Order's political power was the Marriage and Polygamy Law. The issue became a hot topic among women's organisations at the time, causing divisions over whether to support or reject the policy. Islamic women's organisations, for example, endorsed the legislation as it was deemed to align with Islamic principles. Meanwhile, other secular women's organisations, such as Gerwani, strongly rejected the regulation.

Yuval-Davis distinguishes three main dimensions of nationalist projects. One dimension of gender relations is the genealogical dimension, which is based on a person's or race's origins. Similar origin myths tend to construct a relatively homogeneous vision of the 'nation'. Another dimension is the cultural dimension, namely the symbolic heritage related to language, religion, customs, and traditions. This is constructed as the essence of the nation. The third dimension is population-related and focuses on citizenship as a means of determining national boundaries, thereby linking it directly to the concept of state sovereignty (Davis 1997).

The various dimensions revealed by Yuval-Davis are important to consider in the context of the women's movement in Indonesia. The struggle of women's organisations in Indonesia cannot be viewed as homogeneous and representative of all women in this nation. The struggle of the Indonesian women's movement is shaped by women with diverse identities, such as wives and mothers, as well as women from different educational and professional backgrounds. Women's organisations have formed in various regions of Indonesia, reflecting the country's cultural diversity. During the pre-independence period, there was a similar emphasis on improving women's lives, especially regarding educational equality. In this case, the spirit of nationalism aligned with the feminist issues raised by the women's movement at that time.

In terms of the relationship between nationalism, gender, and women's politics, Yuval-Davis also explains that, due to their feminist beliefs, women prefer to organise independently in anti-war and anti-militarism movements. This enables them to be more assertive

and to avoid being overshadowed by male intimidation in joint organisations with men. They tend to cooperate with male groups and organisations that share their political goals. Furthermore, some of these women's groups viewed their struggle as leading the fight against a patriarchal social system dominated by men and violence (Davis 1997).

Davis' description of the situation can also illustrate the struggles of women's organisations in Indonesia, pre- and post-independence. The women's movement, especially pre-independence, embodied the spirit of nationalism. From 1908 until independence, the women's movement demonstrated that women's organisations were more autonomous, fighting for greater roles for women to empower them socially. As Davis describes, these organisations' struggles were anti-militarist and involved civil and peace organisations. During this period, awareness of education increased, and many women's organisations were established to improve women's capabilities. This shows efforts to expand women's role beyond the private/domestic sphere into the public sphere, which Nuval-Davis claims was previously limited to reproduction. The spirit of nationalism was still considered to be in line with women's interests at that time, even though, in the 1930s, established women's organisations began to raise progressive issues, such as improving the conditions of female workers and encouraging women to become involved in politics.

The pre-independence women's movement is said to have had minimal intervention from the political elite and dominant political forces. This was because youth and community organisations were more focused on fighting Dutch colonial rule. The situation was not much different during the Japanese occupation, when women's organisations continued to fight for independence. During this period, women's organisations had limited room for manoeuvre, so they focused on supporting the guerrilla efforts of independence fighters by setting up public kitchens and serving as battlefield nurses. During this period, women prioritised nationalism in their struggle for independence and freedom from colonialism.

Further analysis of the situation of women's organisations at that time can be found in Elizabeth Martyn's work. According to Martyn, women's activism cannot be examined in isolation and must be considered in relation to the political, cultural, and institutional processes that govern society. The dominant political system and ideology of a country influence and limit

women's ability to organise, determine their interests, and often set the agenda. In turn, women's mobilisation influences these processes and contributes to the formation of identity (Martyn 2005).

Martyn's analysis can be used to explain what happened with *Gerwani*, for example. The activism carried out by *Gerwani* did not emerge spontaneously. Rather, it was an accumulation of the spirit of struggle for women's rights during the early days of independence.

*Gerwani's* formation, which began with the merger of six women's organisations, demonstrates the ongoing commitment of the women's movement to uniting in the fight for feminist causes such as equal pay, proper education for women, and childcare facilities to support women's participation in the public sphere. *Gerwani's* activities also reached rural areas and grassroots communities. In collaboration with local labour unions, they campaigned for equal pay and decent living conditions for women workers.

*Gerwani's* militancy is also evident in the organisation's rapid growth, with tens to hundreds of thousands of members recruited in just a few years since its formation. As the organisation developed from 1950 to the 1950s, the issues it fought for also began to change. This was partly influenced by the presence of the Communist Party at the time, as many *Gerwani* members and leaders were prominent figures within it. By 1965, *Gerwani's* political views had become more closely aligned with those of President Soekarno, who supported the Political Manifesto (*Manipol*). *Gerwani's* relationship with other organisations deteriorated due to its silence on Soekarno's polygamous practices. The dissolution of *Gerwani* and the cruel slander levelled at the organisation by the New Order government at the end of its activities in October 1965, as Martyn described, highlighted the influence of the dominant political system and ideology on women's ability to organise. This situation demonstrated that the agenda of the feminist women's movement was no longer aligned with, and was in fact contradictory to, the nationalist project of the nation.

The women's movement began to change its orientation at the beginning of independence. It should also be noted that Indonesia had not yet fully freed itself from imperialist influence at that time. Issues surrounding the liberation of West Irian remained, and were supported by large women's organisations such as *Gerwani*. Political forces greatly influenced women's organisations. In the early days of

independence, women's issues were not a priority for large organisations. In fact, *Perwari* grew stronger in the 1960s, while *Gerwis* moved closer to the government's dominant political forces in the late 1960s. This ultimately led to the dismantling of the women's movement in 1965 and throughout the New Order government. The political struggle for power among the country's political elites, especially at the beginning of the New Order, victimised women's organisations. This is evidenced by the destruction of *Gerwani* and the subjugation of *Perempuan Marhaen*, a PNI affiliate that was forced to change its name to *Perwanas*. The Socialist Women's Movement, which was affiliated with the PSI, removed the word 'socialist' from its name and replaced it with 'prosperous'. This was done to remove the critical and progressive fighting spirit from women's organisations in the fight for women's interests.

## Conclusion

Looking back at the struggles of women's organisations during the pre-independence and early independence periods can provide valuable insights. These organisations fought to create a better life for women. The pre-independence movement faced severe challenges due to the resistance against colonialism. At that time, women's organisations that raised feminist issues were in line with the nationalist interest of subjugating imperialism. Over time, women's organisations evolved, advancing feminist issues to improve women's lives, promote their participation in public life, and secure decent living conditions, education, and employment opportunities. Even in the early days of independence, the increasingly progressive struggle of women's organisations still had to contend with the interests of the political elites. Many of the elites at that time disapproved of women's organisations that criticised the government. The nationalist agenda was no longer aligned with the feminist issues previously championed by women's organisations. As the movement developed, the issues fought for by women's organisations were appropriated by the political elites. Consequently, women's organisations became divided in their focus and were used by the government as a tool of power.

This situation should serve as a reminder to all of us today that there were once very progressive struggles by the women's movement. Despite the obstacles they faced, they continued to fight for their rights in a very

limited space. The spirit of the women's organisations' struggle prior to and at the beginning of independence must be continuously echoed so that it can be recognised as part of the entire Indonesian nation's struggle. As Yuval-Davis says in relation to nation and nationalism, women do not just enter the national arena (nation-state); they become central to its formation and reproduction.

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