

# Policy Inaction on Sexuality Education in Indonesia: Cases of Aceh and Yogyakarta

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## ABSTRACT

*There has been a long silence in Indonesia's education system and policy on whether schools should establish clear sexuality education policies. Although there was an advancement of the brand-new Decree of Minister of Education named Permendikbud no 30/ 2021 on the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Educational Institution, it has been ambiguous whether the state urge schools to prevent such by establishing a sexuality education policy. I argue that this policy inaction leads to drawbacks for the state's policy on body and sexuality. This paper uses a literature review to structure some concepts on social policy and the complexity of sex-related issues. It conducts a literature review as a method as well, to serve some understanding of two cases in Aceh and Yogyakarta and explores similarities and differences across the cases. Finally, the discussions offer a few points on the intended and unintended effects of the policy inaction, which are seen through some perspectives on child protection, power struggle, and rights approach.*

**Keywords:** policy inaction, sexuality education, schools, Aceh, Yogyakarta

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines that policy inaction on sexuality education has a negative impact on youth sexuality and behavior. It draws upon Indonesia as a case study where there has been a silence on sexuality at schools and largely on its policy. Utomo and McDonald (2006: 135) state that schools have not established clear sexuality education policies in consultation with parents, local governments, and the wider community. It has left behind ambiguity on what is sexuality education, uncertainty on how it should be taught, and other policy challenges to implementing one. I argue this condition has led to several intended and unintended effects on young people's sexuality and everyday practice.

This paper consists of three parts. Firstly, I will elaborate on the concept of sexuality education and policy debates over it. Secondly, I will look at two cases in Aceh and Yogyakarta to explore the different approaches to youth sexuality. Both cases provide evidence that sexuality education is a crucial matter that should be addressed by the government. Finally, I will explore several intended and unintended effects on youth sexuality that occur from the current government's inaction on sexuality education at schools.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Social policy and sexuality education

For the past three decades, the study of sexuality education at school has extended far beyond standard principles of classroom

teaching and learning. It is because the dynamics of this subject can be examined through a multidimensional perspective, ranging from education, health, psychology, and social sciences. This paper is particularly interested to explore the interrelationship between social policy and sexuality education at schools. I use the term 'sexuality education' in this paper to represent a range of learning practices about "the emotional, social, and physical aspects of growing up; sex; sexual health; and human sexuality" (Emmerson, 2014) on primary and secondary school students.

Historically, sexuality education has played a role in helping students to learn about human sexuality since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bruess and Greenberg, 1994; McKay, 1962). In the United States, schools began to conduct a study on sexual transmitted diseases (STDs) in the classroom since 1905 (Strong and Devault, 1994: 216). While in the United Kingdom, the need to deliver sexuality education began later with a moral panic that centred on young people's sexuality to address AIDS (Clyde 2001, Martinez et al, 2009). Some parts of Canada started to introduce sexuality education, particularly the basics of reproduction by using the concept of nature study in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Sethna, 1994: 192 in McKay 1962). With various policy agendas and framing, sexuality education has been developing since then in many parts of the world.

From the policy-making perspective, there has been a constant battle over the policy process of establishing a sexuality education program at school. According to Grindle and Thomas (1990), there are three major components of the policy process: agenda setting, decision-making, and policy implementation. On the initial agenda setting, the debates would be on the

importance of sexuality education, the way the issue is framed, and whether it is a strategic issue to obtain a policy response. Once it requires a solution, policymakers should decide to tackle the issue. In this case, the debate would be on whose authority to mandate the subject or whether the subject should be made compulsory in all schools. Lately, more ongoing debates occur on the program implementation, the issues vary from the program content, target group, teacher's capacity, parent consent, the cost-effectiveness of the program, and other supporting factors that bring a sexuality education program could work. I argue that these controversies have led to a patchy implementation of sexuality education programs, excellent in some areas or schools and poor in too many. What lies beyond is that sexuality education remains unable to reach its full potential in helping young people protect and enhance their sexual health. An inconsistent and ineffective policy is problematic since the aim of sexuality education is closely related to young people's well-being (Department of Education and Employment, 2000; Sex Education Forum, 2015: 1; Epstein et al, 2003). Thus, social policy plays an important role to establish a framework to mediate these quarrels.

### **The complexity of sexuality education in Indonesia**

In the developing country context, especially in East Asia, policies on sexuality education are a contested arena where politics, cultural norms, and religions clash. Indonesia is a great example where sexuality is a 'taboo' public discourse and where young people's sexuality is exposed to conflicting moral values, both from the Western liberal values and Middle Eastern fundamentalist (Holzner and Oetomo, 2004; Utomo et al 2014).

Westernization came in a diffuse way in the form of westernized-education, entertainment industries, and peer pressure which led to the rise of sexual permissiveness, delayed marriage, and more freedom over young people's decisions in sexuality (Utomo and McDonald, 2009: 133-135). On the other hand, fundamentalist Islam was structurally promoted through religious schools (*pesantren*), Muslim social groups, and the enforcement of *sharia* law in several districts, which were characterized by illegal premarital sex and commonly arranged marriage. This has brought an intense debate to question the country's stand on sexuality, culture, and morality. The dynamics are even more complex on sexual diversity issue as can be seen in Boellstorff (2007), Blackwood (2007), and Wright-Webster (2008). As sexuality education teaches young people about human sexuality, the Indonesian government has retreated to a safer ground of policy inaction (Diarsvitri et al, 2011; Harding, 2008; Bennett 2005, 2007).

The policy's inaction has constructed a public debate on the significance of sexuality education for young people. Although the national government stands in an ambiguous position, decentralization has actually made it possible for the local authorities to act on their own local policies. I contend that local authorities should develop a suitable framework to address the need for sexuality education in their respective areas since there are different cultural approaches to sexuality between areas. This paper will provide examples of two different experiences from Aceh and Yogyakarta, which show the dire need for comprehensive sexuality education among Indonesian youth.

Aceh is a special autonomous province in Indonesia where its local government

imposes Islamic law or *sharia* law, on all its citizens (Simanjuntak, 2015). In *sharia* law, there is an Islamic notion called *zina*. In the dominant view, *zina* is understood as illicit sex, which one of the most common interpretations is used to describe premarital sex (Bennett, 2007: 372). Upholding a highly orthodox Islamic value, *zina* is sinful and could lead to administrative physical punishment. This has an impact on young people's view on sexuality in which there is a high concern towards prevention of premarital sex. There was a recent report in Aceh about three unmarried couples aged between 18 and 23 that were punished since they were caught spending time alone together (Jakarta Post, 2015b). They were caned by officials their actions were considered *haram* or religiously prohibited and could be led to *zina*.

On one hand, the notion of *zina* can assist young Muslim to abide by the religious ideal of premarital abstinence, which is not necessarily contradictory to the provision of sexuality education. As World Health Organization (1997) noted, evidence shows that sexuality education reduces unplanned premarital pregnancies, delays the age of sexual initiation, and STDs among youth. On the other hand, when an act is considered *zina*, it often leads to stigmatization and guilt, which is contradict how sexuality as a whole is represented in the Qur'an (Bennet, 2007: 375) Thus, young Muslims should be equipped with an appropriate content of sexuality education that suitable to the Islamic values so that they can relate sexuality with their rights and obligations as Muslims. In this case, there is an urgency for policy maker to develop a suitable 'Islamic sex education curriculum' to be implemented in *pesantren* or public schools in Aceh.

A different experience came from Yogyakarta, a province on Java island that is famous for its cultural diversity. In 2007, the name of the city has been placed after a human rights law consensus in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity, the Yogyakarta Principles (O'Flaherty and Fisher, 2008). Although the Indonesian government never officially legalize LGBT, this city is more confident in tolerating the existence of LGBT groups and movements. According to Singarimbun's study (in Utomo, 2002; Utomo and McDonald, 2009) young people in Yogyakarta, Jakarta, Bali, were observed to be more open and sexually permissive than in other cities in Indonesia. The increasing sexual permissiveness is arguably arising from sexual sensation offered by the media and entertainment industries. Another study in Yogyakarta conducted by Hanum (in Utomo and McDonald, 2009: 137-138) revealed that people aged 17-21 with higher levels of education have a greater permissiveness which is indirectly related to premarital sex actions.

Given those studies on youth and sexuality in Yogyakarta, an attempt at sexuality education is now in progress. As written by CNN-Indonesia (2016), Major of Kulon Progo, a district in Yogyakarta, has recently mandated a 'sexual and reproductive health' education throughout all secondary schools in the area. The policy will approximately take two years to be completely implemented. Meanwhile, there will be intensive training for the 'counsellor teachers'. The program itself does not exist as a stand-alone subject, but as an extra curriculum conducted every once a month. The major took the initiative to involve the local Department of Health and local NGO in family planning to design the content material. In general, the subject will include

materials on gender, relationship and communication, sexual health, puberty, and HIV/AIDS. In the article, National Commission on Child Protection (KomnasHAM) appreciated the effort taken by the major and proposed other districts to act similarly, as it hopes to reduce the sexual violence and sexual harassment cases among young people.

### **3. METHOD**

A literature review is used as the research method. This paper picked out some literature based on the case of Aceh and Yogyakarta to offer an analysis of a phenomenon in a specific regional context. This paper also explores similarities and differences across cases. It was useful to analyze the two provinces of Aceh and Yogyakarta cases, both of which address similar issues regarding sexuality education policy. Additionally, there were differences explored in both cases to provide some perspectives as well.

### **4. DISCUSSIONS**

#### **Intended and unintended effects**

At the national level, sexuality education in Indonesia is considered a disputed issue. I was searching for any evidence from the Ministry of Education and found that not a single sub-department accommodates this program. Even the newest 2016 curriculum for primary and secondary school contains only sexual reproduction material in the biology module, with no personal or social dimension mentioned in it. Additionally, a study by Utomo et al (2014: 95-100) reveals how Indonesian primary school students have a poor understanding of how pregnancy can occur since there is no connection made between the technical facts of ovulation and sexual intercourse in the

biology textbook. However, a little finding from National Anti-Narcotics Agency shows that it launches a forum for secondary school students that integrate reproductive health information and drug abuse issues. Unfortunately, the forum is only conducted once a year in several selected areas by the local boards (UNESCO, 2010, 2011). Overall, the national government still has a very minimal effort to put sexuality education on its bigger agenda.

I argue that the policy's inaction would effects youth sexuality and everyday lives, both intendedly and unintendedly. I will observe them by looking through several analytical frameworks. Starting from the intended effects, first, policy inaction put the family and communities to carry responsibilities for constructing ideal youth sexuality. From the child protection approach, Law No.23 / 2002 defines children as individuals younger than 18 in which the prevention of a child's early marriage is a parental responsibility by law. In society, it will be a burden for the parents if 'they fail to protect' their children from early marriage, or worse premarital sex. Therefore, sex and other sexual activities are often translated as dangerous acts that see youth as vulnerable beings. In contrast, Goldman (2008) expresses that overprotecting young people because of a belief that sexual knowledge is dangerous can manifest in silence on sex and sexual identity among youth.

Second, from a power approach, the government intendedly to pass the power over families, schools, and communities to control and set up their moral expectations about young people's sexuality and behaviour. Youth sexuality is very often described as morally devastating. Subsequently, government limits its extent to discussing conflicting morality and social

norms in society. Thus, the regulatory mechanism of society, as represented by parents, teachers, and religious leaders, is "seen as essential to suppress juvenile society" (Holzner and Oetomo, 2004: 40). On the other hand, young people in Indonesia face a confusing situation since most of the parents rarely educate their children concerning sex (Parini and Mudjajadi, 1995; Utomo 2003). The youth is often told about fear-based messages on sexuality, which made the young people powerless to give their voice. It affects minimum support for young people's learning and decision-making over their bodies and sexuality.

Third, from the rights approach, government inactivity in sexuality education intendedly to ignore youth rights to education and health. The UN Convention on the Rights of a Child (2009) on article 13 ascribes to children the right to freedom of expression and information. For the Indonesian government, to by abide the convention means that they need to provide comprehensive sexuality education. Although the Indonesian government is obligated to a compulsory nine years of education under Law No.23 / 2002 on Education (clause 48), it never mentions reproductive health and sexuality education. Additionally, the country upholds that education should be available for all, however, the information and access for those who may need different types of help, such as those who are not heterosexual is extremely inadequate. It goes back to the circle where the national government is not yet legalized LGBT (Dawson, 2014: 96-97), nor provide support for them. Besides, there is a legal barrier that restricts family planning services for an unmarried person (in the Health Law No.23 / 1ried person992). It is possible to result in a limited youth access to reproductive health information as well. All in all, young people's ability to learn, to

question their values, and act regarding their sexuality and health is not well accommodated.

I identify that there are also several unintended effects caused by policy inaction. First, from the public health approach, limited sexuality education unintentionally affects youth to engage in risky behaviour. It is very essential that good health should be promoted to every young people. If the government considered that sex is a risky business for youth, they need to ensure that their health is well supported. If being healthy is gained by avoiding HIV, Sexual Transmitted Infections (STIs), and teenage pregnancy, to be healthy means that they need to learn about those. If being healthy also means that they are having an enjoyable and happy relationship, youth also need to avoid a violent and abusive relationships (Lonsdale et al, 2009: 19). Thus, the government action to address this issue is still unclear. Studies from Oetomo and McDonald (2009) shows that there is an arising risky sexual behavior in different parts of Indonesia. Thus, the health of Indonesian youth is hanging in balance.

Second, from a pleasure approach, policy inaction has an unintended effect to restrain discussion over young people's desire for sexuality. Study shows that pleasure and desire remain absent in many contexts of sexuality education for two decades ago (Hirst, 2012; Alldred, 2012). On the other hand, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF, 2009) states, that young people must be able to have pleasure and confidence in relationships and all aspects of sexuality. In Indonesia, the social norm often tells youth to prevent premarital sex by avoiding sexual desire in the first place. This narrative ignores that young people are sexually active being, a sexual agency that

naturally feels and acts on their desire. The silence on desire also affects a minimum discussion on positive and emotional implications of sexual relations (Blake and Frances, 2001: 8; Ofsted, 2007: 11). Thus, it brings us to the previous thesis in which youth sexuality is considered dangerous.

Third, from a media perspective, a mixed message about sexuality information from teachers or parents has made youth likely to turn to their peers, mass media, or the internet to search for one. Lonsdale et al (2009: 18) note some of the misconceptions about sex and sexuality, such as 'AIDS kills', losing virginity before 16, or gender expectations and unwritten rules about being a man or a woman since birth. On one hand, if the youth is left to their own understandings of sexuality, it could bring unintended effects which put them at risky sexual activities. A study by Harding (2008) shows a causal relationship between the increasing unsafe sex practice in Indonesian youth with the way they retrieved access to sex-related information from the internet. Therefore, a comprehensive sexuality education delivered by a trained teacher should be the solution to this matter.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

There is an interrelationship between social policy and sexuality. In the case of youth sexuality, there has been a growing need for an effective policy on sexuality education for the past three decades (Whelan, 1995: 88, McKay, 1962). However, competing debates around it have put the government on safer grounds of inactivity. This paper examined that policy inaction on sexuality education in Indonesia brings disadvantages to youth sexuality and their lives. Policy inaction is described by a lack of national government

policy and actions towards the establishment of comprehensive sexuality education, for primary and secondary school students. There are several factors that have caused this government's inactivity. As sexuality always be considered a 'taboo' discourse, this is one of the least strategic issues that policymakers would like to discuss. On the cultural approach, young people's sexuality is exposed to a conflicting moral value from Western liberal and Middle Eastern fundamentalist (Holzner and Oetomo, 2004; Utomo et al 2013). On the political economy approach, the cost-effectiveness of such programs that address youth sexuality is also debatable (Kivela et al, 2013). There is also a policy debate over whose authority to mandate the sexuality education subject, whether the national government or the local one.

I offered two examples of Aceh and Yogyakarta to show that there is an urgency to establish a clear policy on sexuality education in Indonesia. Aceh, as evidence where *sharia* law is obligated, needs a suitable subject implemented for their youth. It is important to support Islamic sexuality education, in addition, to assisting young Muslims abiding in their religious concept of *zina* and their ideal of premarital abstinence. On one hand, evidence in Yogyakarta illustrates that a progressive political leader can set sexuality education on the public agenda. Despite the city's vibrant sexuality behaviors, there is a demand to provide a means of information for their young generation. As there is an inconsistent policy across the areas in Indonesia, the condition remains far from protecting and enhancing young people's sexual health and well-being.

Finally, I argue that this policy inaction has led to several intended and unintended effects on young people's sexuality in their

everyday practice. The intended effects are related to the government's intentional effort to put the family to bear responsibilities in constructing ideal youth sexuality. In the child protection approach, youth is seen as vulnerable beings who need to be protected from sexual activities. Second, from a power approach, the power over families and community has expected youth to act on certain moral values, which disempower youth to act in their own voice. Third, from the rights approach, government intendedly to ignore youth rights to education and health with several legal barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive information. In addition to that, there are unintended effects that derive from policy inaction. First, from public health approach, limited sexuality education has an unintended effect in increased youth risky behaviour. Second, from a pleasure approach, the silence on the desired topic affects youth lacking in sexual agency and limits the emotional implications of youth sexual relations. Third, from a media perspective, the unavailability of comprehensive education has left the youth with inaccurate information that could cause a misconception and practice on sexuality. All in all, I contend Indonesian government to establish a clear policy on comprehensive sexuality education, to create safe and healthy communities where youth can grow, learn, and develop positive behaviour in their life.

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