

“IT’S ABOUT THE FEAR OF JUDGMENT”: TRANSNATIONAL INDONESIAN WOMEN AND THE SURVEILLANCE OF SEXUALITY

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Summary: Record numbers of young, unmarried Indonesian women are leaving the country to study overseas. While many Indonesian women feel empowered by opportunities to study abroad, they also continue to experience discrimination and stigma from afar. Families and community at home monitor mobile women closely, restricting their independence and autonomy even when they are thousands of miles away. This report summarizes research carried out in 2017 with a group of single Indonesian women living and studying overseas in Melbourne, Australia. The author conducted qualitative research with 16 women between the ages of 18 and 34, exploring themes of sexuality, identity, and mobility over the course of four months.

Results show that in Indonesia, sexuality is severely stigmatized and subject to intense surveillance¹ by family, communities and government. Strict gender roles and responsibilities disempower women and limit their ability to control their own lives in Indonesia. These expectations and restrictions around single women’s sexualities, responsibilities, and character continue to impact young women as they travel overseas. In interviews in Melbourne, women described being anxious about their reputations, shaming their families, their marriage prospects, social status, and overall well-being. While most respondents were not sexually active,² all respondents struggled with sexuality more broadly, captured in their changing romantic choices, social lives, fashion, self-identity and interests. Women employed many strategies to manage or cope with harmful judgments, gossip, and stigma, in order to protect their reputations at home for their eventual return. Primarily, they kept secrets. They hid their romantic lives, kept separate wardrobes for home and away, methodically and carefully managed their social media, and otherwise disguised many aspects of their personal and social lives overseas. Overseas Indonesian students, as with all women, are entitled to privacy, dignity, and the right to self-determination.

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What is the Problem?

Conservative expectations in Indonesia about women's roles in the household and society, as well as their virginity and sexualities, continue to threaten women's well-being and liberties. Many Indonesian women have experienced violence when stigmatized as "bad women," particularly when their perceived sexual piety and worth as women (and future wives and mothers) are called into question⁴. Recent media reports have called attention to this violence, describing women who were publicly caned for having sex with married men in front of a jeering crowd, or young couples assumed to be having sex outside of marriage who were paraded naked through the streets while neighbours harassed and physically assaulted them.⁵ Additionally, many national policies such as the restrictive Marriage Law marginalize or disempower women. When women travel overseas independently to study, they remain under surveillance, and are vulnerable to gossip and judgment about them from home. Given this violence and subordination, my research asked whether or not patterns of stigma and judgment around sexuality endured for women overseas. I documented some of the many ways women coped with these challenges while they struggled to negotiate some independence and control while studying overseas in Australia.



Figure 1. Observers film and photograph a woman as she is publicly caned for having sex outside of wedlock, 2018. Copyright, H. Juanda³

How was the Study Done?

This study used multiple qualitative research methodologies to explore how internationally mobile Indonesian women living and studying overseas in Melbourne, Australia, understood their sexuality and sexual experiences. This research focused in particular on women living independently abroad who were unmarried. In 2017, I conducted a number of in-depth interviews with 16 Indonesian women and students between the ages of 18 and 34, recruited through multiple universities in Melbourne. I also collected information during a series of social activities with respondents, known as "participant observation," and by analyzing ethnographic research on women and sexuality carried out by other researchers in Indonesia. The study focused on single women's experiences of sexuality and surveillance in the context of their transnational mobility. To maintain confidentiality and protect respondents from additional stigma, social challenges, or shame, this study adhered to strict ethical standards. This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Board at the University of Victoria in 2017.

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About the Program

The Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives' Migration and Mobility Program is a dynamic, interdisciplinary program housed at the University of Victoria, Canada. The program offers research, policy, and knowledge mobilization on themes pertaining to human migration and mobility within, from, and through the Asia-Pacific region: capi.uvic.ca

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What was Learned about Transnational Women's Sexualities?

Of the 16 Indonesian women who participated in this study, only five were sexually active while studying overseas. None were sexually active before they moved. Still, all respondents struggled with their own sexuality and with the consequences for them of being judged as violating sexual conventions or defying gender norms. Yet at the same time, many were dating, dressing differently, rethinking marriage expectations, and working hard to get their degrees and achieve forms of independence. All respondents kept secrets from their families and communities and manipulated resources available to them in order to achieve a degree of autonomy, independence and individuality while overseas. Four main themes emerged from the research results⁶:

1. Women's fears of being judged as "bad women" had a strong impact on how they lived their lives overseas: "it's hard to be yourself in that context... they will judge you."

Being judged as improper or morally compromised act as powerful shapers of women's sexualities, self-identities, and decisions more broadly. Women may be socially ostracized, shamed by their families, shunned by their friends, harassed or subject to violence, even politically and legally persecuted, if they are perceived as being sexually active prior to marriage. Women feared being judged for their choices or practices, be it delaying marriage to pursue studies (threatening their "marriageability"), wearing bright red lipstick, having boyfriends that did not share their family's religious or ethnic background, or for having sex. Many of women's unrelated actions, such as their fashion choices, were misinterpreted by others as reflections of their sexual piety or their "goodness" as women. As such, they were acutely aware of themselves, their decisions, and how others might perceive or interpret their behaviours and attitudes. They felt they must always be careful about how they portrayed themselves to the world, which restricted their freedom and threatened their overall well-being.

"They control us...we behave based on what people think about us. Because yeah, they will judge you. Anything you do, they will judge you."
- Sarah, 29

"'Bad' women, of course, are the ones who go out with their friends all the time, spend a lot of money on clothing or something, wear too much makeup, wear nail colours. If the colour is too bright, they will consider you as a whore. It doesn't make sense, but it happens."
- Sukma, 34

2. Surveillance endured as women travelled overseas to study: "I think all of the people talk about me back home."

Although their families and communities remained in Indonesia, women were constantly connected to home through the internet and mobile phones. Parents, kin and communities from home regularly scrutinized women's social media to track their activities and supervise or control their lives overseas. At the same time, respondents were part of a large Indonesian diaspora in Melbourne, which often replicated some of the social environments of home and monitored them just as their communities at home did. Young women remained fearful of their public visibility and being judged or gossiped about. Respondents that were sexually active were often so afraid of judgment or being caught that they did not access adequate sexual education or health care to support their sexual decision-making. This pattern was consistent with reports of women's experiences in Indonesia, where the shame and toxic morality that accompanies sexuality hinders women's access to sexual and reproductive health. Even though they were overseas, women spent a lot of time managing their reputations in anticipation of their return home. Despite feeling "more free" (Kade, 20), women also continued to feel vulnerable and afraid.

3. Women employ a number of strategies to manage and cope with surveillance and stigma: “I have different clothes for Australia and Indonesia.”

Respondents constantly and carefully managed each of their choices and how discreet they were in order to control their visibility to their parents, siblings, extended family, neighbours, and communities. They tinkered with privacy settings and content on their social media, kept separate wardrobes for Australia and Indonesia, secretly dated men they might not be allowed to date at home, and hid their sex lives from everyone. These strategies helped them make their own decisions about their lives, to an extent, while also allowing them to hide these practices from their communities at home and protect their reputations for their eventual return to Indonesia, where they were expected to marry (as virgins) as soon as possible. Women’s strategies for managing or coping with surveillance varied, but often they shared an underlying theme: secrecy.

“You can just be. Be yourself. Wear whatever you want and be whatever you want... I have more freedom to be who I am without being judged by people.”
- Emma, 32

4. Primarily, women used secrecy to protect themselves and their reputations: “you have to maintain a façade.”

Respondents’ most important strategy or ‘tactic’ for coping with surveillance was secrecy. They rarely lied directly, but were cautious and calculating, keeping many aspects of their lives overseas hidden from their communities. While many women felt “more free” in Melbourne to make decisions about their bodies, their romantic lives, their social circles, their future aspirations and more, they also recognized that their strategies illustrated the ways that the expectations of others continued to dictate their lives. Importantly, many women felt guilty for withholding so much from their families and friends, and wanted, more so, to be free to make their own choices, live their own lives, and share their experiences with their loved ones without fear of violence and isolation.

“Seeing that most of the females who are trailblazers get ostracized, get victimized, get—it’s not really worth the journey to be that public. I prefer to go about it very quietly, making small changes that matter, that might be invisible to others but then someday will culminate in something—will accumulate.”
- Maya, 24

In sum, surveillance, fear, and a sense of obligation challenged women’s abilities to freely make decisions for themselves and live their lives the way they choose. While many women defied expectations and norms in an effort to achieve some autonomy and independence, they also hid their actions, and were rarely able or comfortable to confront larger forces which restricted them, including parents, families, neighbours, communities, religious institutions, or government. Despite feeling they would be “more free” in Australia, and taking advantage of the opportunities the long distances provided, women’s rights to control their own sexualities were more difficult overseas than anticipated. Despite women’s efforts to push boundaries, the power of community to reduce their freedoms was nearly as impactful abroad as it was at home.

“For me, being ‘good’ or being ‘bad’ is not something black and white... but you have to think twice, or they will judge you. And it looks like they know you better than you know yourself.”
- Edith, 32

Notes

¹ I draw on Sharyn Graham Davies’s work (2015. *Surveillance Sexuality in Indonesia*. In *Sex and Sexualities in Contemporary Indonesia*, eds. L.R Bennett and S.G. Davies, 29-50. Routledge.) and use the term ‘surveillance’ to broadly capture the many ways that women, when it comes to sexuality, are policed, restricted, supervised and controlled by family, community, and society.

² For this report, “sexually active” and “sex” refer to penetrative vaginal intercourse.

³ Photo by Heri Juanda: Juanda, H. 2018. “Indonesia’s Aceh Lashes Unwed Couples and Prostitutes in What Could be the Province’s Last Public Caning.” *TIME Magazine*, April. <http://time.com/5247853/indonesia-aceh-caning-shariah-couples/>

⁴ For example, social exclusion, harassment and physical violence, family shame and condemnation, judgment and persecution, community policing, limited marriage prospects, and the overall inability to live a free and dignified life.

⁵ See for example: <https://coconuts.co/jakarta/news/tangerang-police-investigating-viral-video-couple-stripped-naked-paraded-street-carrying-immoral-act/> or: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5523769/Couple-accused-promiscuity-SEWAGE-WASTE-dumped-them.html>

⁶ All names used for respondents are pseudonyms.