

A Ray of Hope for the Women of Indonesia: From Kartini's Remarkable Commitments to the Present Conditions of Women's Employment

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Raden Ajeng Kartini, Heroic Figure for Women

Long influencing many Indonesian women, Raden Ajeng Kartini (1879–1904) has been a heroic figure for the country's women. As the first woman to diffuse the spirit of a gender-equal society, she played a very important role in the history of Indonesia. In terms of gender equality, her thoughts greatly affected the country before it became independent. Today, April 21, the date of her birth, is designated as the national foundation day.

To celebrate Kartini's day, it is usual for the President, governors, and company presidents to prepare for their speeches about her to be delivered publicly at official events, such as ceremonies hosted by provinces. Women are busy selecting clothing to be worn at the ceremonies, such as kebaya, the country's traditional costume, and organizing events for women. The media are also busy conducting interviews with women who are active in society. In fact, on Kartini's day almost all news and magazine articles feature topics on women. School children wear traditional costumes. A wide variety of events, such as children's fashion shows and fathers' cooking competitions, are held in order to provide women with some time for relaxation. Thus, on April 21, the Kartini's influence is keenly felt across the country. There has been an increasing trend toward the belief that it is good to have at least one special day out of the year, like Kartini's day, to focus on women's issues. What is found on Kartini's day expresses that she is still loved by the people of Indonesia.

Present Conditions of Women's Employment

It is certain that the spirit of gender equality that Kartini spread among the public still affects the nation even after more than 100 years. There are also many women in rural areas who are still suffering from gender discrimination. This stems from an insufficiency of Indonesian society's approaches toward establishing a gender-equal society. It might not be surprising that somewhere in this country, there exists discrimination, alienation, exploitation and other forms of violence against women. Now, I would like to focus on the actual conditions of employment of women from poor families. If graduating from high school, vocational school or university, women can achieve as high a standard of living as men, by working for a company in an urban area

or running their own business. However, if they do not receive appropriate education, women cannot find employment in such companies. There is still no choice for them but to take up relatively low-paid occupations, such as maids and factory workers. It is difficult to raise children at such low pay, and many of them have little room for thinking about their children's education. Moreover, some women find it difficult to secure even such low-paid occupations. As a result, many Indonesian workers go overseas to obtain jobs. Such workers are called "Tenaga Kerja Indonesia (TKI)," meaning Indonesian worker, or "Tenaga Kerja Wanita (TKW)," meaning Indonesian women worker. The Indonesian government actively recommends working abroad as one of its employment measures. However, the reality is that a wide range of problems have arisen, such as an increase in illegal workers and troubles with migrant worker agents.

It is often reported in newspapers and other media that Indonesian women working outside the country are treated very inhumanely. The number of women victims is much larger than of men victims. There are even cases of such women victims dying, or of Indonesian women working not outside but inside the country becoming victims. Knowing such risks exist, however, Indonesian women still want to work as TKWs or maids in urban areas. Many problems remain to be solved regarding the situations of these poor women. They confront the reality that they cannot help taking up such risky occupations in order to support their life or family, or for other reasons. With the expansion of domestic and global job opportunities, it is necessary to promote policies that raise awareness of the need for a gender-equal society and of women workers in general. It is imperative for all of society to develop an attitude toward solving such women's problems.