

Film launches debate on polygamy in Muslim Indonesia



AFP Photo: Nia Dinata(L), director of the movie titled "Berbagi Suami" (Share Your Husband), poses with one...

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JAKARTA (AFP) - A new Indonesian film has triggered a rare debate on the taboo subject of polygamy, a practice thought to be widespread in the world's most populous Muslim nation.

"Berbagi Suami," or literally Share Your Husband, a feature film with a slightly provocative title, presents three men from very different social circles who choose to take a second, third or fourth wife.

"It is a satirical drama," director Nia Dinata explains to AFP. "I show in my own way that these women are not happy. My film is about choice."

The film has been hailed by critics here for prying open the hushed topic.

"Polygamy, although commonly practised within Indonesian society, is not frequently discussed or even openly acknowledged in most circles," a critic in the English-language Jakarta Post wrote.

"For that reason alone, Berbagi Suami, which breaks ground socially, is one of the most significant as well as finely crafted films to emerge in recent years."

The film does not directly condemn polygamy, about which few statistics are available in Indonesia, but notoriously tough censors still shaved 17 seconds from its final cut, including a kiss that lingers too long and a hand caressing a thigh.

"I want my audience to think," asserts Dinata, who from her own research estimates that some 10 percent of Indonesian families are affected by polygamy, which is legally permissible in the archipelago nation.

Some 87 percent of Indonesia's 220 million inhabitants practice Islam but, the director says, polygamy draws its roots not only from this religion.

"Way before the Dutch (colonialists) came here, we had Buddhist or Hindu empires where the men used to have concubines. It's there in our history," she says.

Polygamy too was long-lived in the sultanates of Yogyakarta and Solo, dating from the 17th century up to recent years.

It shifted largely underground during the rule of former autocratic president Suharto. Under pressure from his wife Siti Hartinah, he adopted a 1970s law forbidding civil servants to marry a second time without the assent of his first wife and his superior.

The law remains in force.

Today Indonesian political leaders, fearing the possibility of being labelled a bad Muslim, try to avoid taking any vocal stance on polygamy at all.

The debate is not completely taboo though and the country has had its share of prominent polygamists, including traditionalist Muslim Hamzah Haz, a vice president under the former

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government of Megawati Sukarnoputri.

Puspo Wardoyo, a restaurateur who made his fortune selling grilled chicken and now owns a chain of more than 30 outlets, is another.

He appears frequently in the media surrounded by his big family and has often repeated that "more women are more resources" while his four wives insist they are happy.

Wardoyo asserts that polygamy is necessary to compensate for a demographic imbalance that slightly favours women, who live longer here, and argues that it dissuades men from conducting secret love affairs.

His restaurant menus boats "juice poligami," a concoction of papaya, soursop, avocado and mango, along with "cah poligami," a stir-fried vegetable dish. Wardoyo also sponsored the "Polygamy Awards," held at a luxurious hotel in Jakarta in 2003, which recognized the ability of a husband to provide for all his wives fairly and equally.

The restaurateur has become a bete noire of Indonesian feminists, among whom is respected Muslim scholar Siti Musdah Mulia, who acknowledges that polygamy is accepted by a majority of Indonesians despite its difficulties.

"My research has proved that polygamy has increased domestic violence and abuse against children and has increased unregistered marriages," Mulia tells AFP. Without marriages being registered, she says, women and children are not protected by the law.

The scholar is campaigning for a reform of the family code in the mould of Tunisia, which has abolished polygamy.

She also questions the verse of the Koran which authorizes a man to marry four women "provided that they are treated in a fair way."

"It is only an interpretation, it is not absolute," she maintains.

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