

# Carving Spaces for Engagement in Indonesia: An Interview with Hendrika Mayora Victoria Kelan

By Eki Ramadhan

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*The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerability of transgender individuals in Indonesia as measures to slow the spread of the virus have jeopardized industries that provide regular income for many in the community, such as salons, street performance, and sex work. At the same time, the transgender community has continued to suffer from an “epidemic of violence,” evidenced by the unrelenting bouts of violence and harassment, including the immolation of Mira, a trans woman who was accused of theft by a mob of men in Jakarta in April 2020.<sup>1</sup>*

*Despite these dismal developments, in March 2020, a village in the province of East Nusa Tenggara, one of Indonesia's poorest, elected the first openly transgender public official in the country, Hendrika Mayora Victoria Kelan, popularly known as Bunda Mayora (Indonesian for “Mother Mayora”). Bunda Mayora was born in Maumere, a small town on the island of Flores in the southeastern part of Indonesia. She was raised in the easternmost province of Papua before moving to Yogyakarta in Java. In 2018, she returned to her birthplace and founded a trans rights group, Fajar Sikka. In this interview, Bunda Mayora reflects on her journey into activism and politics, recounts how Indonesia's transgender community is making a difference amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and shares her views on recent developments regarding transgender rights in Indonesia.*

**Eki Ramadhan (ER): In addition to being a public official, you have been actively involved in activism in Indonesia. What motivated you to become an activist?**

Bunda Mayora (BM): It is a culmination of my long struggle to accept my own identity as a trans woman. Growing up in an extremely patriarchal and heteronormative environment, I was convinced that it would be sinful and wrong to embrace this identity. I ultimately realized that it is a will of and a gift from God for me to be who I truly am. I finally came in—arrived at a place of acceptance of my gender identity and stopped deceiving myself—and came out when I was 32 years old.

As a Catholic trans woman, I experienced multiple forms of discrimination when I was living in Yogyakarta. As I came to Java from Papua, I was already subject to constant racist abuse: people told me I smelled horrible and hurled racial epithets at me.<sup>2</sup> In predominantly Muslim Java, my freedom to exercise my Catholic faith was also constrained. And on top of all these, as a trans woman, I experienced even more malicious attitudes from those who refused to accept my existence. I could not find work because nobody seemed to want to hire a transgender individual. Like many other transgender individuals, I lived on the streets. I had to busk and even work as a streetwalker to get by. I saw how my transgender friends who lived at an Islamic boarding school

suffered after a hardline Islamist organization forced the school to close. Transgender individuals constantly became victims of the violence of law enforcement officials who would arrest and harass us.<sup>3</sup> You can still see some of the bruises from these bouts of violence on my arm.

Nonetheless, in my suffering and deprivation, I found strength. I found strength in my *warianness*.<sup>4</sup> Before my transition, I had been a religious brother in the Catholic Church, and the injustices I experienced and saw after coming out led me to a path for rediscovering my faith. All of these shaped my passion for humanity. I learned to step up and protect my transgender friends.

My work in Yogyakarta also extended beyond transgender activism. I wanted to show that there is nothing wrong with being a transgender person. I wanted to show that transgender individuals are capable of doing good. I volunteered at a nursing home. I worked with other activists who worked on other causes. I worked with progressive religious groups. These other activists gave me further inspiration and strength to move forward in my struggle against injustices.

**ER: After living in Papua and then Yogyakarta, you decided to return to Maumere—your birthplace—and continue your activism work. How was your experience coming back to this town as a trans woman?**

BM: In November 2018, I decided to return to Maumere. I could not go back to Papua, where my family was, because I knew they would not accept me. I had to hide my transgender identity at first because, after all, the predominantly Catholic Maumere is a deeply conservative society. Indeed, I faced some rejections at first. People would threaten me and express their anger at me for embracing my true self.

However, I understood they were angry because they did not understand. I never gave up. I refused to be caught in anger. Over time, I leveraged my interpersonal skills to slowly come out and educate others about my sexual orientation and gender identity.

In Maumere, people used to associate transgender women with a lack of intelligence. They thought we could only work at a hair salon. They thought we could only care about men. My experience in Yogyakarta taught me to strive and show others that I could still serve my community and contribute positively. I wanted to show others that transgender individuals are as talented as cisgender people. I did not want my Maumere to be another site of injustices like what I saw in Yogyakarta.

I tapped into my church experience to teach children and mothers in the community how to sing in a choir. I volunteered as a community health worker. I provided peer counseling to parents. I joined a women-led community empowerment group. I reached out to other transgender women who struggled with their identity, those who were constantly told by others that they were full of sins. They eventually became involved in community service too.

I was surprised by how open the clergy at the Catholic Church in Maumere [was] with having transgender individuals involved in church activities. We trained their chorus. I worked as an emcee for their events. They even opened their classrooms to those of us who want to learn. I got to meet with the district head and his wife, who are so progressive and accepting.

I ultimately saw how these acts of love tore down negative stereotypes against transgender individuals. They created spaces for interactions with community members who would otherwise never know about the diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity. These spaces eventually fostered the acceptance of transgender individuals.

**ER: In March 2020, you made history as the first transgender public official in Indonesia after getting elected to lead the consultative body in Habi Village, Sikka District, East Nusa Tenggara Province. Could you tell us about how you became involved in electoral politics?**

BM: When I became elected to the village consultative body, I had been here only for one and a half years. However, people trusted me. I did not initially campaign to get elected, but people reached out to me and encouraged me to run. I first had to learn about the village governance system. Village consultative bodies are very powerful as they have budget control and legislative authorities. Each village receives close to one billion rupiahs from the central government. I saw this as an opportunity to promote regulations that would benefit everyone. Considering that transgender voices are almost always ignored, I thought this would be an opportunity to work from within the system and get my transgender voice heard.

People knew I was capable, and I was always present in community activities. People in other parts of the village knew me from times when I led prayers in their neighborhoods and when I participated in the Parish's catechism program. I gained much support especially from the mothers across the village. Out of six candidates, including other community leaders, I garnered the most votes.

**ER: What can people from other parts of Indonesia learn from your experience advancing equality and inclusion in Maumere?**

BM: Wherever you are, the most important first step is to come in and accept yourself for who you truly are. We are not wrong. Our being is a gift from God. Our life is a grace from God. Without accepting your identity, it would be impossible to explore your capabilities and capacities. Next, we can actualize our capabilities and capacities. This process may take time.

When I first returned to Maumere, people here lacked an understanding of the diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity. I took the time to understand the people around me first. It is important to understand the context. I saw how important familial connections are here. Here, people are not afraid to defend the rights of their family members who identify as transgender. "No matter how sinful they are, they are still our family," people told me. This is when I realized that people who are initially apprehensive about my identity would grow more accepting as I built stronger connections with them.

When people get aggressive, I learned to turn the other cheek. It is also important to keep an open mind when engaging with others. By doing so, I discovered some strange bedfellows in this struggle. For example, local media have been active in publishing stories about the work of the transgender community here in Maumere. And of course, progressive leaders from different faith traditions—Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam—have been supportive here. In 2019, we once organized a seminar on sexual orientation and gender identity in collaboration with a national LGBTQ rights organization. These religious leaders attended the seminar. When religious leaders respect us, that sets an example for the rest of society.

There is also a stereotype in Indonesia that the transgender community is exclusive. To challenge this, it is important for us to work with other organizations, such as youth organizations. Therefore, it is important not only to carve out spaces for engagement but also to ensure that those spaces are inclusive of others beyond the community. This is also the value of the organization I am leading, Fajar Sikka. We want to make sure that Maumere can be a safe and peaceful home for all, including all minority and marginalized groups, including senior citizens and widows.

By focusing our work in Maumere, we want to set an example for other parts of Indonesia that they can also champion diversity, respect minority rights, and provide opportunities for transgender individuals to thrive. This is in line with our country's motto: *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*—out of many, one. We do not only have cultural and linguistic diversity, but we also have gender diversity.

**ER: Can you tell us more about what Fajar Sikka has been working on during this ongoing COVID-19 pandemic?**

BM: We always believe that the presence of Fajar Sikka in Maumere must benefit everyone, especially those from marginalized groups. We now enjoy the privilege of being accepted and respected by a large portion of society, so we now must use this privilege to help others.

In Maumere, this pandemic, combined with a recent drought, an armyworm outbreak, and a malaria outbreak, has exposed the vulnerability of many marginalized individuals, such as widows, to deprivations. These people tend to lack identification documents needed to be able to access social protection and social security programs from the government. We have been working to make sure that they can access the emergency cash transfer program. We have also been supporting micro and small enterprises to access aid programs.

We have also seen how the informal economy, on which many transgender individuals depend, has been hit the hardest by all these shocks. To help people who have lost their job and income, we have carried out fundraising campaigns. We have also been receiving in-kind donations, mostly rice. I have also been donating a portion of my salary. These donations have been distributed to many beneficiaries, including transgender individuals, widows, households with children who suffer from stunting, senior citizens, and Muslim minorities. We also offer counseling services to these people.

Of course, there are always those who try to spread false information about our work. We have heard those who suggest that our organization is tied to the Indonesian Communist Party, but that has not stopped us from channeling aid to those who need it the most. Our primary goal remains the same: to foster solidarity between marginalized groups.<sup>5</sup>

**ER: How important do you think having more transgender individuals in public service is?**

BM: We see that in some regions in the country, there have been new local regulations that explicitly discriminate against transgender individuals. We need to work from within the system to get our voices heard and stop this continued proliferation of discriminatory regulations. Working in public service would allow us to engage with others. There are people out there who respect and accept us—those who are ready to be our allies. For example, I see in Maumere how cisgender and heterosexual individuals have been supporting my initiatives.

**ER: What advice do you have for those from outside the transgender community who would like to be involved in promoting transgender rights in Indonesia?**

BM: It is important to educate the general public about diversity and inclusion. We would need the help of these progressive individuals to be able to do this. Progressive cisgender individuals, especially those in positions of power, have an important role in setting an example for other

cisgender individuals. For example, I saw when the Bishop accepted me for who I am, other people followed.

From my experience, some people want to help, but they are worried that they might do something wrong. I saw journalists who were interested in writing about transgender issues, but they did not know what the correct terminology to use. Some of them reached out to us and asked for our advice. We told them, for example, instead of using the term *LGBT*, which tends to have negative connotations in the Indonesian context, they might want to consider *keberagaman gender dan seksualitas* in their Indonesian writings.<sup>6</sup>

It is important for cisgender and heterosexual individuals to learn about issues around sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics, or SOGIESC. There are modules about these issues which people can easily access, including those designed for children.

**ER: In recent months, we have been confronted by disheartening news regarding violence and harassment against trans women in Indonesia. For example, a YouTuber recently provided donation boxes that turned out to contain trash to trans women in Bandung. Earlier this year, a mob of men in Jakarta burned Mira, a transgender woman accused of theft, to death. What do these incidents tell us about the state of transgender rights in this country?**

BM: When thinking about these cases, there seem to be many reasons to be pessimistic. The way these cases have been handled only further suggests state ignorance of our right to exist. Moreover, while many Indonesian cultures traditionally recognize gender diversity beyond binarism, such as the five genders in the Bugis society, radical movements have threatened our respect for diversity. How can we contribute to society if the state does not protect us from violence? How can we love Indonesia if Indonesia does not seem to accept us? The queer community has so much potential, and failing to recognize our dignity would result in foregone opportunities for our nation.

However, we need to acknowledge the progress we have made in other parts of the country, such as in Lembata and Larantuka, where both the local governments and community members have been particularly receptive of advocacy related to transgender rights.<sup>7</sup> In Maumere, our interfaith coalition has been promoting diversity and inclusion.

We also need to continue our struggle. Our law must uphold equality for all. Members of the LGBTQ community must continue to be involved in activism to fight against discrimination. We must educate ourselves. Our trans children must attend school. Our friends who live on the streets should be provided with a safe shelter. We must be open to working from within the system. We must continue working in our context, but we must also continue collaborating and coordinating with others. We are not alone in this struggle.

***This interview has been translated from Indonesian to English and edited for length and clarity.***

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<sup>1</sup> Firmansyah Sarbini and Naila Rizqi Zakiah, "Epidemic of Violence against Transgender Women in Indonesia: When the Government Fails to Protect Its Vulnerable Citizens," *Australian Human Rights Institute*, 3 December 2018, <https://www.humanrights.unsw.edu.au/news/epidemic-violence-against-transgender-women-indonesia-when-government-fails-protect-its>.

<sup>2</sup> Indigenous Papuans are dark-skinned Melanesian, ethnically distinct from the majority of Indonesians. Papua is also home to an active secessionist movement.

<sup>3</sup> In Yogyakarta, Provincial Regulation No. 1/2014 effectively criminalizes homelessness and panhandling. This regulation is often used to arrest transgender individuals who often live on the streets.

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<sup>4</sup> This term could be translated as “transgenderness”. *Warianess* derives from *waria*, a traditional third gender role in modern Indonesia. The term is a portmanteau of *wanita* (woman) and *pria* (man).

<sup>5</sup> While communism is illegal in Indonesia and the Indonesian Communist Party was disbanded in 1966, the fear of communist revival has continued to grip Indonesia, especially since the 2014 presidential election.

<sup>6</sup> Indonesian for “gender and sexuality diversity.”

<sup>7</sup> Another notable example is Makassar, the largest city in eastern Indonesia, where the city government routinely runs programs aimed to improve the welfare of trans women, including a vocational training and counseling program as well as special clinics for transgender individuals to help them access health care.