

# Taking big steps for reproductive health, teen rights

In a bid to educate the public about the importance of sexual and reproductive health and the rights of adolescents and young adults, NGO Rutgers WPF Indonesia has been holding media fellowships since July 2021. Ten national and local journalists have taken part in the program, including the author. The following article is the first of five produced under the initiative.

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Contributor/Jakarta

The year 2021, a dire time for women's rights activists, closed on a grim note for more reasons than one.

Earlier that year, the House of Representatives Legislation Body (Baleg) had decided to postpone the deliberation of the much-awaited sexual violence eradication bill, as one of the nine House political factions had rejected the word "sexual" in the title.

The deliberation of the bill, which is now called the criminal bill against sexual violence, started last week during a House plenary session.

Another reason was the wave of reports on sexual violence involving minors brought to the public's attention.

In December, a male teacher who worked at three Islamic boarding schools in West Java stood trial for allegedly raping at least 13 female students in their teens since 2016, some of which allegedly led to unwanted pregnancies. At least nine babies had been born out of the assaults, prosecutors contended.

In the same month, a university student committed suicide at the grave of her late father in Mojokerto, East Java. She had reportedly been pregnant twice, and each time the pregnancy was allegedly forcibly terminated by her boyfriend, who was on the po-

lice force. The latest abortion was allegedly in August 2021.

Investigative journalism platform Project Multatuli reported in October of last year on a case involving three underage sisters in South Sulawesi who had allegedly been raped by their biological father since 2019.

Throughout the year, a number of police reports were filed alleging sexual violence committed by religious boarding school teachers, an elementary school teacher, a mosque caretaker and Quran reading tutors in different cities.

These cases are believed to be the tip of the iceberg and have spurred discussions on social media about rape "culture" and children's right to safety, presenting a sliver of hope for the government, activists and educators to build a working prevention strategy in the country. Observers say providing knowledge, access to information and health care to young people can empower them significantly and help prevent sexual assault.

Rutgers WPF Indonesia director Amala Rahmah said Indonesia had been using the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) tool kit developed by UNESCO for over 20 years — a curriculum that covers the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality.

"CSE will be sure to empower children and teenagers to claim their rights, especially their rights to access to education and infor-



JP/Wendra Ajistyatama

**Hear me roar:** Activists from various women's organizations stage a rally on Jl. Thamrin in Central Jakarta on March 8, 2020. They demanded that the government do more to stop violence against women, cancel laws that are discriminatory against women and pass the bill on the eradication of sexual violence.

mation," she said at a webinar session of the Rutgers WPF Indonesia media fellowship program.

The tool kit has been available in the form of modular books called Setara since 2005, designed to match children's developmental stages starting from when they enter school.

Misconceptions about sex education, however, have been major stumbling blocks for the Setara system's use in schools and have made Rutgers' offices the target of raids and threats.

The opposition to the module prompted Rutgers to refine the content and use terms and narratives that were comfortable for children, parents and educators.

The organization also made the module flexible enough to be integrated into some school subjects, such as physical education, natural sciences and social sciences, as well as school counseling sessions and extracurricular activities.

"We no longer tried to convince the government to adopt comprehensive sexuality education as a standalone curriculum, learning that the school curriculum would likely be revised by the next education minister," said Amala.

Working closely with its partners, including the Indonesian Planned Parenthood Association (PKBI), which also focuses on family planning and sexuality education, the tool kit is now used

in schools in 250 regencies across the country.

The module, currently available online, was initially designed to target young adolescents about to or just starting puberty, hence the name of the module — meaning "equal" — shortened from Semangat Masa Remaja (Teen Aspirations).

A study for the Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS) in Indonesia over the past three years found that the targeted students aged 10 to 14 who had received comprehensive sexuality education at school had better understandings of themselves and their surroundings compared to others. The worldwide study partnered with Rutgers in Indonesia, along with researchers from the Reproductive Health Center of Gadjah Mada University (UGM-RHC) in Yogyakarta, implementing partner PKBI, as well as local administrations.

UGM researcher Anggriyani Wahyu Pinandari said the studies were held in the predominantly moderate society of Semarang, Central Java, the predominantly conservative society of Lampung, and in Denpasar, the predominantly Hindu capital of Bali, to identify the underlying factors influencing the realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights for students.

"The students who have been exposed to CSE have better knowledge about pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as gender roles and gender trait changes," she said.

"They have better interpersonal skills, which enhance two-way communication with their parents and encourage discussions among themselves related to re-

productive health issues."

Anggriyani said the young teens were also able to identify bullying and to refrain from it and had better self-acceptance, in which they felt comfortable with their bodily appearance.

"The result of the study is evidence that sexuality education is more about empowering our children during their second golden age in which they will develop into the country's potential assets to attain the demographic bonus by 2045," she added.

Education, Culture, Research and Technology Minister Nadiem Makarim has declared sexual violence on university campuses in Indonesia a critical emergency following media reports on such cases since 2019, prompting the issuance of a ministerial decree on the prevention and treatment of sexual violence in higher education, which became effective on Aug. 30 despite a backlash from religious conservative groups claiming the criminalization of nonconsensual sex would only encourage extramarital consensual sex.

The most recent sexual crime cases, too, have further encouraged the ministry, together with the Religious Affairs Ministry, which supervises *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), and the Health Ministry, to complement the existing 2015 ministerial decree on the prevention of sexual violence at schools.

"The ministries will work on a CSE tool kit compulsory for schools with Setara as reference," said Amala.

"It is time for us to let the government to take over, and we will work together to improve the quality of comprehensive sexuality education," she added.

## Rutgers creates safe space for teens finding own voices

School counselor Anita Rakhmi made up her mind to focus only on the first graders the day she started working at SMP 22 state junior high school on the outskirts of Semarang, Central Java.

"Back in 2009, when I started working at the school, the dropout rate was surprisingly high. At least two students quit school each year, either because of pregnancy or being involved in juvenile delinquency," she said.

"The students need counseling as soon as they reach adolescent age, before it's too late," added Anita in an interview session with other participants in her counseling fellowship.

The situation gradually improved after the school adopted the Setara tool kit of comprehensive sex education in 2017. Anita was appointed to lead the team of teachers promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights for students.

Her responsibility, mostly, is to break taboos surrounding the topic.

"Parents and teachers are inhibited when talking about issues related to sexuality and reproduction. Some parents at first filed protests but later understood that access to the correct information was key for their teenage children to empower themselves."

"At the same time, the implementation of sexuality education makes students feel safe and comfortable talking and sharing their stories," said Anita.

Initiated by Rutgers WPF Indonesia, comprehensive sex education in school was at the forefront of the organization's five-year programs, all designed to help create a healthy society free from sexual and gender-based violence.

The organization's standpoint was made clear at the launch of its 2021-2025 program on Oct. 28, 2021, in conjunction with Youth Pledge Day, under the umbrella theme "Speak the Unspoken".

"Through these programs, we expect people to beat the stigma surrounding sex education for



JP/Donny Fernando

**Get it done:** Activists stage a protest outside the House of Representatives in Jakarta on July 7, 2020, pressing their demand for the passage of the long-delayed sexual violence eradication bill.

our young generation, to claim their sexual and reproductive health and rights and for them to be free from sexual crime," said Amala Rahmah, country director of Rutgers WPF Indonesia.

At the launch, the organiza-

tion also introduced new identities and features that represented a familiar approach to aid the group's work with young people.

The organization, initially known as the World Population Foundation, had been pres-

ent in Indonesia since 1997. In 2010, it merged with the Netherlands-based Rutgers Nisso and changed its name to Rutgers WPF Indonesia.

The international organization is known to have supported at least 100 organizations in 18 low- and middle-income countries in the development of effective, evidence-based approaches and interventions in which sensitive issues can be addressed in a positive way.

For its new identity, the Indonesian organization made Rutgers an acronym for Ruang Temu Generasi Sehat Indonesia (Platform for a Healthy Indonesian Generation).

"The organization and its activities will be the vessel of ideas, expressions, studies and innovation to continue the work of human rights and gender equity defenders," Amala said.

The three main programs are Generation Gender (Gen G), which focuses on the prevention

of sexual and gender-based violence; Right Here Right Now 2 (RHRN2), which provides advocacy on sexual and reproductive health and rights; and Power to You(th), which aims to empower teenage girls and young women in rural areas as they are exposed to child marriage and unwanted pregnancy.

Rutgers partnered with many organizations to implement the programs, such as the Indonesian Women's Coalition (KPI), the Legal Aid Foundation of the Indonesian Women's Association for Justice (LBH APIK), the Women's Health Foundation (YKP), the Pamflet Foundation, YIFOS, Sanggar Swara, the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI), 2030 Youth Force Indonesia, the Semak Foundation and the Tanoker Foundation.

"We hope the young generation will be well-informed about their rights and, therefore, can plan their own future," said Amala.

— TERTIANI ZB SIMANJUNTAK