Sinta Nuriyah Wahid has a knack for picking difficult battles. Long before becoming the first lady of Indonesia, she was a social activist leading demonstration against the Suharto government. Nowadays, she could fill her days with cutting ribbons and attending ceremonial meetings. Instead she has chosen to focus on the handicapped and women. (She herself was paralyzed from the waist down after a car accident in 1993). She speaks up about violence against women, especially domestic violence. Supposedly, this does not exist in Indonesia and a heavy taboo rests on speaking about it.

The root of much discrimination against women rests in an incorrect interpretation of the Islamic teachings, she says. Three years ago, Mrs. Nuriyah set up a group of Islamic scholars and social activists to research gender bias in a religious text that is widely used in Indonesia Koran schools. The government has a Coordinating Ministry for Women's Affairs provides a nationwide platform to disseminate and implement her ideas. What remains to be overcome is the resistance from mainly conservative Muslims.

How did you become interested in women's issue?

I came late to awareness about women's issue. Until I took a graduate degree in women's studies, I took gender issue for granted. That study opened my eyes to the fact that women in general are kept down by the surrounding culture and by religious teachings. For example, many of the classical Islamic texts used in Indonesia are gender biased. There are even Islamic books that still consider women as slaves of their husbands and place them in a subordinate position. So I started to ask myself whether it is right for Islam to treat women like that.
Do you consider yourself a feminist in the same sense as feminism in the west?

No, I don't, because that might also mean I want to be a capitalist or a socialist. I am a feminist according to Indonesia state ideology of Pansasila. This means that I base my action on my belief as a Muslim, but also accept the other religion that are present in Indonesia. Furthermore, I strive for democracy and equal rights for all. My goal is equality between men and women, since it says in Koran that men and women are each others' helpers.

Did you parents treat their daughters differently from their sons?

My parents never made any difference between the boys and girls. We were all given equal chances to education. Concerning women's potential, we were especially influenced by the example of our maternal grandmother. She was the breadwinner of the family and worked as a butcher. She also influenced our views on charity by stressing that the poor can be charitable as well by donating time and energy instead of money. To me, she was a model of caring goodness.

How is the situation in Indonesia in general?

The condition of women is closely related to their social level. In the lower classes, all are poor, but there is some kind of equal division of tasks. Men and women are working together to make a living. They both take care of the children, and important decisions for the household are made together. There is, however, a trend to give preference to boys when it comes to schooling. Gender inequality is more prevalent in the middle classes and up. Here, husbands earn better incomes, which give them economic power over the women who become dependent on them.

Also on this level, we find a lot of psychological abuse, such as husbands having a mistress or secretly marrying a second wife.
What about Polygamy?

It still happens a lot in Indonesia, especially in circles that are financially well off. In principle the Koran allows a Muslims man to marry up to four women. This rule was revealed in the Arab society at a time when men married far more than four women. So the rule originally curtails the number of women allowed. Yet there is the injunction that the husbands have to be fair and just to all his wives. If a man fears that he cannot treat his wife equally, he is advised, just to take one wife. The teaching can be interpreted in a material and a spiritual sense. Traditionally, justice here is interpreted in a material sense. If you can provide a house and a car for all your wives, you are OK. But that interpretation ignores other verses in the Koran that call for harmonious living between spouses and their children. This includes giving love and affection. It is difficult to be fair in dividing one’s love, so here a man would be unjust. This creates great suffering for women and can be considered a form of psychological violence.

Do Muslim men in Indonesia agree with your point of view?

Many don’t. They say exists to help men not to commit the sin of adultery. But they forget that in this case they commit the sin of making a women suffer to the point of committing suicide. Apart from that, men who take a second wife cause great harm to their children. Many men, however are still upset by the fact that the former government introduce a law in 1983 that forbids civil servants to marry more than one wife. They don’t realize that this was to protect the well being of the civil servants so that they would not be forced to spread out their moderate income over two families. It is better if they devote energies to the nation and its people. Also I remind them of the fact that especially high public official would not give a good example if they keep changing wives.

It is difficult for Indonesians to discuss issues like violence against women and abuse un the family. Why is this and how can it be changed?
Many women think that their husbands are allowed to beat them. Talking about this is taboo, since it is considered a family secret. If a woman comes out and admits that her husband abuses her, she is dishonoring her whole family. I have observed that one of the few persons women trust in such cases are the leaders of Koran school both, both male and female. So I will open a center for battered women in one such schools here in Jakarta. This will be a pilot project that can lead to similar centers all over the country. In such places women will not stand too much, since many people visit the schools regularly. Apart from psychological counseling. At the same time, the children can continue to go to good school.

What about women in areas like the Maluku Islands who have witnessed violence between Muslims and Chritians?

Women and children are the first victims in times conflicts. Yet exactly these two groups have great potential in creating and maintaining peace. That is why we try to improve the economic conditions of all the women in the Malukus. So far relief agencies have only handed out food, clothes and medicines. This is not enough as a base for reconciliation. That is why we have started to set up alternative schools. In these schools Muslims and non-Muslims children will not only follow the regular curriculum, but they will also get special classes in ethics and values - and learn about each other's religion.

Can you tell us about your project to re-interpret one of the religious texts that is widely used in Koran schools?

The book that our project is currently working on is a text about the rights and duties of Muslims husbands and wives. This classical text was written at the end of the 19th century and generously quotes teaching from the Muslim tradition, the Hadith. The text is taught in Koran schools all over Indonesia and is extremely unfavourable toward women.

For example it states that a wife who steals from her husband is more than 70,000 thieves. In this case, a women is better off if she just becomes a
thief. Our project has investigated the tradition quoted in this text and found that over 50 percent of them are false and unacceptable as an authoritative source. We will publish these findings in a revised version of the book.

The goal is to make religious leaders aware of how gender bias often is constructed by religion.

Source: Christian Science Monitor, And Christin, Macnmaree, now a resident in Guwahati, Kamrup, who hails from Indonesia, got married to the chief of World bank branch, Assam, Tony Macnmaree.