



INVISIBLE PEOPLE

POVERTY AND EMPOWERMENT
IN INDONESIA

presented by PNPM Mandiri —
Indonesia's National Program for Community Empowerment

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Text by Irfan Kortschak
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with an introduction by Scott Guggenheim

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Surabaya and Madura, East Java

WARIA: STANDING OUT, FITTING IN

In Indonesia, some biological males dress, act, and behave like women. They are known as *waria*, a term derived from a combination of the Indonesian words *wanita* (woman) and *pria* (man). Sometimes, during brief interactions, they may be mistaken for women. However, they are usually recognized as being *waria* rather than women. Often, they consider themselves to be part of a distinct group or even of a separate gender. They feel they are not quite men and not quite women: they are *waria*.

At best, the position of *waria* in Indonesian society is ambiguous. In some local traditions, *waria* play a prestigious role in society. One example is the Bissu priests, who originated as ritual specialists and advisors at the courts of the Bugis kingdoms of South Sulawesi. These priests adopt a number of feminine manners and styles and consider themselves to be neither men nor women.

However, when most Indonesians see or notice *waria*, they regard them as flamboyant low-rent sex workers soliciting from the sides of the street, or as lowbrow comedians and entertainers.

In East Java, *ludruk* is a coarse, improvised, traditional music-hall style genre. It is popular mainly with poorer, working class Indonesians. Until recently, *waria* were employed almost exclusively to play the female parts in this theater form. Irama Budaya is one of the few remaining *ludruk* theater groups with a permanent base in the city of Surabaya. It is also one of the few groups that continue to use *waria* to play female roles.

When *ludruk* is performed elsewhere, it has been made respectable by eliminating the *waria*. When it is performed by government-owned radio stations, the female roles are now almost always played by women, not *waria*. These female actors are often graduates from dance academies. In these performances, the crude sexual innuendos of more traditional *ludruk* performances are removed, and the biting social commentary is toned down.

Irama Budaya is part of a fading tradition. It operates from a small, grubby theater near Surabaya's main bus station and next to a filthy, polluted river. In the cigarette smoke-filled hall, thickly made-up performers wearing padded bras flirt brazenly with the mostly male audience. Many of the *waria* who perform

***Waria* are biologically male but dress, act, and behave like women. They form a group of their own, with their own highly visible subculture. *Waria* who own beauty salons and other small businesses act as patrons, mentors, and protectors to younger *waria* trying to find a place in the community.**



Waria performers preparing for a show at the Irama Budaya Theater. Many *waria* are employed at beauty salons, both in the country and the city.



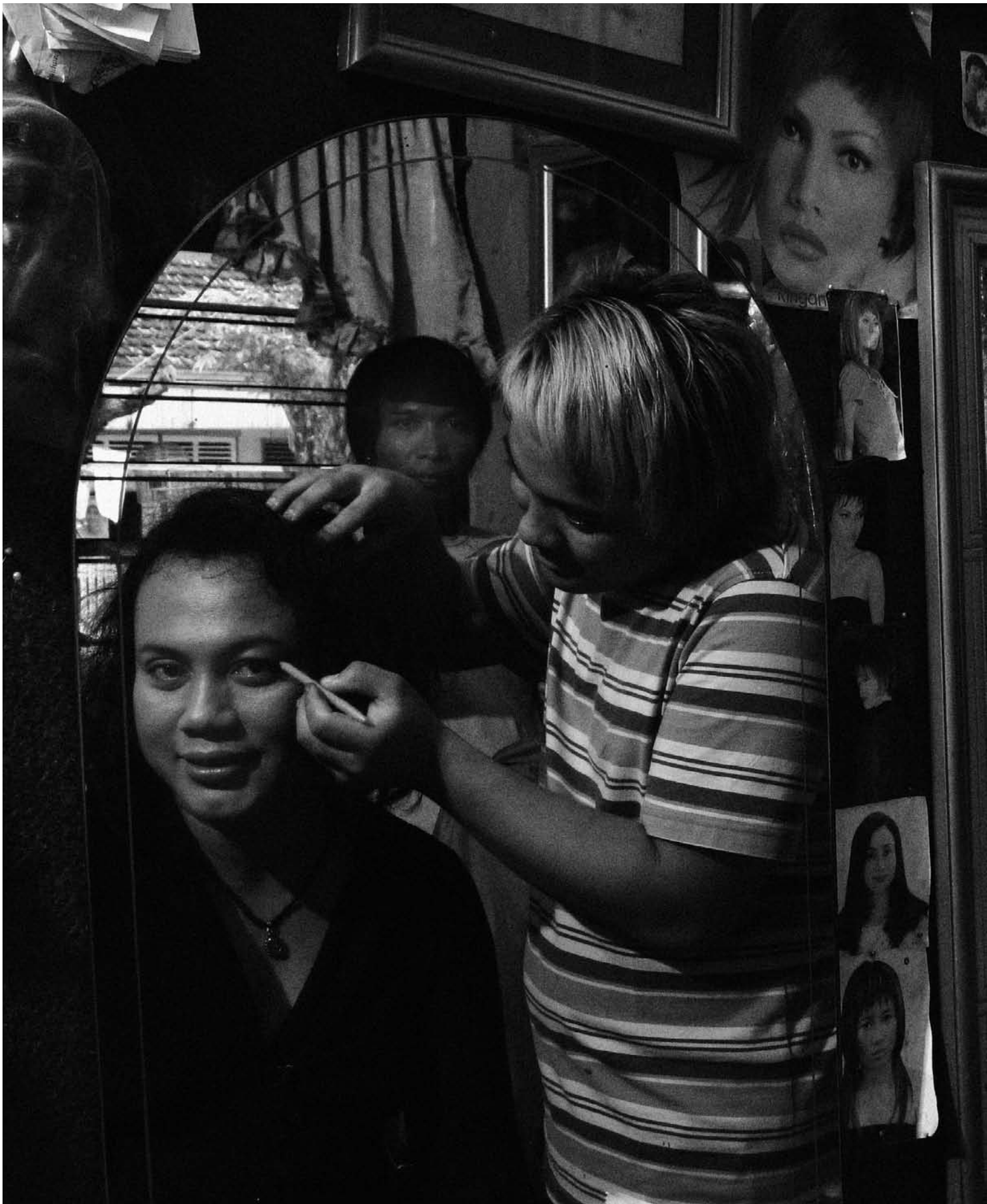
here have sex with favored patrons, often in exchange for cash. As marginal, low-status entertainers who engage in sex work, the *waria* of Irama Budaya are what most Indonesians imagine all *waria* to be.

However, many *waria* live respectable lives. Some, such as Sofa (see profile), manage to overcome the negative stereotypes to achieve acceptance, even prominence, in the community in which they live. As a certified primary school teacher, Sofa occupies a highly respected position in a conservative Madurese community. As the owner of a successful beauty salon, she is also a highly respected figure in the small community of *waria* in the surrounding area.

In large cities, *waria* often operate formal peer support groups, information and counseling services, and vocational training programs for members of that subculture. One example of such a group is Surabaya's *waria* organization, Perwakos, which is headed by Irma Soebechi. Such organizations are rarely found outside large cities or towns.

Waria often work in the beauty industry. Even in relatively remote rural areas, many hair and beauty salons and bridal costume rental services are owned and operated by *waria*. In these rural areas, hair salons and beauty parlors operated by successful and established *waria* perform many of the roles of the formal support organizations in larger cities.

Waria are a marginalized group with a distinct identity. They have a cohesive subculture with strong social links between members. Through the small businesses owned and operated by successful and established *waria*, these *waria* become patrons, mentors, and protectors to other members of their subculture. Through this social network, young, insecure *waria* from the villages can find a path to acceptance and prosperity.





Mbak Sofa

I always knew I wasn't a boy, even in my earliest years at primary school. I always played with girls and girls' toys. While my brothers liked flying kites and playing football, I preferred playing with dolls. I always liked dressing up. So I don't think anyone in my family was shocked that I became a *waria*. It wasn't something that happened suddenly. I was always a *waria*.

I don't think I've ever really experienced much discrimination. People always say that Madurese society is extremely conservative and fanatically Islamic. In some ways, that's true. It's true that the Islamic religious schools and communities, and the teachers and preachers are very powerful here. But at the same time, the community is very tolerant. If you don't interfere with other people, they don't interfere with you. People here don't judge you badly just because you are a *waria*. They judge you by how you behave and what you achieve. If a *waria* behaves properly, then nobody minds the fact that she dresses up in women's clothes and puts on makeup. If a *waria* does sex work on the streets, of course people are going to judge her negatively. But that's not because she's a *waria*, it's because she's selling sex.

I'm a teacher at the local primary school. I've completed the full primary teacher certification process. I'm a permanent member of the civil service corps. Out of 300 primary school teachers in this subdistrict, only twenty have completed the full certification process. It's quite an achievement. Completing the certification process is not just a matter of passing exams. You need a testimonial from the school principal and the school board. The school board includes community representatives. I couldn't have done it if the community didn't support me. Everybody knows I'm a *waria*. Nobody holds that against me.

When I teach at school, I wear a male teacher's uniform. The children call me "Pak" (Sir). I don't mind wearing a man's uniform. That's the regulation. I'm prepared to accept that. I don't go looking for confrontations. I don't feel I have to prove a point by wearing a woman's dress or makeup. But this is a small community. Everyone here knows that I'm a *waria*. They've all seen me in woman's clothes wearing makeup. No one at school ever makes any negative comments about that. At the most, some of the other teachers laugh and joke about a dress they saw me wearing. They tease me about how pretty I look. I don't care. I take it as a compliment.

There aren't any other schoolteachers in the district who are publicly known as *waria*. But even so, there are a lot of very effeminate men who are teachers. It's not like being a policeman or a soldier. The kind of person who becomes a teacher is a softer, more caring sort of person. Those are feminine characteristics. The people around me are not judgmental.

I also run a hair and beauty salon in the village. I set it up twelve years ago. It's doing quite well now. We also offer makeup and bridal costume rental services for wedding ceremonies. That's very profitable. I've got two full-time staff. They are both *waria*. But all the young *waria* in the district hang out here. There is usually a group hanging out here until late at night. Some of them spend the night here if they need a place to sleep.

Some of the *waria* in the village are very young, only fourteen or fifteen. Some of them have never left the village. They don't have access to any of the *waria* support groups in the city. They come here to talk to older *waria*. We are like older sisters to them. We can set a good example for them. They see that it's possible for a *waria* to be successful and get a good job. Often the young ones help out around the salon, tidying up and such. If they are talented, they can learn how to do haircuts. They can learn skills to earn a living later on.

"I don't think I've ever really experienced much discrimination. People here don't judge you badly just because you are a *waria*. They judge you by how you behave and what you achieve."

Mbak Sofa dresses as a man when she teaches at the local primary school.



I've been involved in providing outreach and counseling services for Perwakos, the *waria* advocacy organization in Surabaya. I have pamphlets and condoms at the salon. If I know that young *waria* are having sex, I tell them to use condoms. I warn them about HIV and AIDS. Some people might be shocked at the idea of fourteen- or fifteen-year-old boys having sex. I reckon that if they have sex, then they should do it safely. You can't just pretend that it doesn't happen.

It is true that a lot of *waria* hang out on the streets, looking for sex. Sometimes they do it for money. But it's not always about money. *Waria* go to their beats on the streets to hang out with other *waria*. It's where they go to show off and have fun. Part of the fun is looking as sexy and gorgeous as you can. It's part of the process of coming out as a *waria*. Of course, *waria* can't hit on men in public like that in the village. In the city, there are areas where it's acceptable. In Surabaya, the city has several tolerance zones, such as the beat on Jalan Irian Barat. In those places, *waria* aren't usually bothered by the police or the security officials.

There are other places for *waria* to socialize and act out in public. The Miss Waria beauty pageant is a socially acceptable way for *waria* to dress up and express themselves. The pageant changes the way people look at us. It changes the way we see ourselves. We want to put on a spectacle that proves that *waria* aren't low class. I was on the selection committee for the East Java pageant. I took some of the young *waria* from my salon to see the event. It's good for them to see high-achieving *waria*.

Opposite page

Mbak Sofa is dressed in full drag, which she wears on special occasions or when going out.

Below

Sofa is a certified and respected primary school teacher. She teaches at a school in Bangkalan, Madura.





Reza

I always liked to play with girls, even when I was at primary school. But it wasn't until I was in junior high school that I realized that I was different. When I was thirteen, one of the older boys at school took me into the toilets. He told me that I wasn't a boy. He said I was beautiful and soft as a girl. Then he kissed me and touched me. I became his girlfriend. He looked after me and protected me. He made sure that the boys at school treated me with respect.

I let my hair grow long. I shaved my eyebrows. I started wearing makeup. My family was shocked. They didn't understand what I was going through. My mother wouldn't speak to me. Neither would my brothers and sisters. My father hit me and shouted at me. He told me to act like a normal boy. I told him I couldn't. I said it's not that I want to be like this. It's who I am. I don't have any choice.

My father and my brother kept on beating me and shouting at me. Living at home was impossible. I couldn't keep going to school. I dropped out before I finished junior high school. My parents sent me to an Islamic boarding school, a *pesantren*. They thought that religious education would make me normal. It didn't work. The boys at the *pesantren* saw what I was. They treated me like a girl.

My family refused to accept who I was. I remember once I was with my mother at the market. We saw an ugly old *waria* with big, pumped-up tits. She was begging and demanding money. My mother told me that that's how I was going to end up. She thought all *waria* were hookers or beggars.

I ran away from home. I made friends with Agung. I started hanging out at his beauty salon. He looked after me. I used to help out around the salon. I learned how to apply makeup for weddings and how to cut hair. I started taking jobs at weddings. I started earning good money.

My family was shocked to see how much money I was making. It changed the way they thought about me. I moved back home. I don't have my own salon yet, but I go out to wedding ceremonies and parties. I'm making more money now than my brother does. I'm helping to send my little sister to school. I'm proud to help out the family. They show me some respect now.

"My father hit me and shouted at me. He told me to act like a normal boy. I told him I couldn't. I said it's not that I want to be like this. It's who I am. I don't have any choice."



Opposite page

Reza is sitting outside Agung's Salon, operated by another *waria*, a friend and mentor who trained her in haircutting and other skills.



Susanto

I was always a woman in my heart, but I didn't dress up as a girl until I started to perform in *ludruk*. That was in 1997. I was 55 years old. Before that, I always dressed like a man. I was slim and pretty, but I dressed in men's clothes. When I was a young man, you couldn't dress in girls' clothes in public. You wouldn't have gotten away with it.

When I was a young boy, I lived in a *pesantren*. Of course there weren't any girls there. I was the most popular boy in the dorm. Sometimes I used to have sex with four different boys in one night. When one boy was finished, I'd go to the next one.

I've been married six times now. I'm not a good Muslim, but I am still a Muslim. As a man, I'm meant to get married and have children. I never did have any children. None of my marriages lasted very long. I wasn't comfortable being a husband.

I'm 67 years old. Men still want to have sex with me. They give me money. I don't go out onto the streets looking for men anymore. Usually, men from the audience come looking for me backstage. They see us on stage with our makeup on. I still look good when I'm dressed up.

"I'm old and bald now. I used to be beautiful. When I was young, real men wanted me, young women wanted me, older married women wanted me, and gay men wanted me."

The Irama Budaya Theater is located in a decrepit building next to a heavily polluted river near Surabaya's major bus station.





Like the other *waria* performers, Susanto lives in the theater in cramped quarters under the stage. "Male" performers usually live elsewhere, with their families.

I've got a young boyfriend. He's seventeen years old. He's a handsome guy, big and strong. With me, he likes to be the girl. I take the active role. With him, there's no money involved. I have sex with him because I like him. *Waria* don't always play a passive role. Even some of the older men who come to me behind the stage want me to take the active role.

I still know how to make men want me. I use some tricks. In the 1970s, I visited a *dukun* [traditional healer] in Banyuwangi. He put gold needles under my skin on my shoulders, elbows, and hips. He put three tiny diamonds under the skin on my face. The needles and the diamonds make men want me. A *dukun* also puts a spell on my makeup. I don't let anyone else use my makeup. I've never had any surgery done. On stage, I wear a padded bra. That's enough. Being a *waria* is something that comes from within. If you have a woman's soul, then you'll look like a beautiful woman when you appear on stage. It doesn't matter what you look like in real life.

Ani

I've been performing since I was fourteen years old. I've always earned my own living. For a few years, I worked as a *dangdut* singer. Then I joined a *ludruk* troupe. Back in the 1970s and '80s, all the women's roles were played by *waria*. Men played the men's roles and *waria* played the women's roles. Now, real women usually play the women's roles. On television and radio, women always play women's roles. They never use *waria*.

Irama Budaya is the only group that still has *waria* performers. There aren't any women actors in the group. There are sixteen *waria* and ten real men. The show only goes on if enough people turn up. We usually perform on Saturday nights. On a Saturday night, a couple of hundred people turn up. The other nights are very irregular. Each ticket costs Rp 5,000. Actors get paid Rp 10,000 each time they perform. And we get one meal a day. We all need to do something on the side to make some extra money.

I'm the prima donna of the group. I'm the most popular. On Saturday nights, I always have at least three regular admirers who want to see me. I don't let them spend the night. I just spend an hour or two with each one. They all give

"I'm the prima donna of the group. I'm the most popular. On Saturday nights, I always have at least three regular admirers who want to see me. I don't let them spend the night. I just spend an hour or two with each one."





Ani is applying makeup before a show. As the prima donna of the group, she has the best dressing-room.

me money. I often get called to do performances at weddings and circumcisions. I charge at least Rp 150,000 for that. This month, I've gone to six weddings. With the extra income, I make enough to survive.

I live in the theater. The *waria* in the troupe live under the stage. It's hot and cramped, but it's somewhere to sleep. The men in the group are mostly married. They live at home with their wives and kids. Only the *waria* sleep under the stage. My regular boyfriend performs here. He's married. I don't take money from him. Sometimes I give him money. It's hard for him with a wife and children. His wife isn't jealous. We get on well. She knows that I'm helping her family.

I'm 49 years old now. I sometimes wish I'd done things differently. I wish I'd stayed at school. I wish I'd become a civil servant. I'd be eligible for a pension by now. I sometimes wonder why God didn't make me a real man or a real woman instead of a *waria*. When I get older, I'd like to set up some kind of business. Perhaps I could set up a tailor's shop. But when you're an artist, it's very hard to give it up. You can't make much money, but you have a home. The *waria* at the theater are my family. I don't think I'll ever be able to leave them.

Irma Soebachi

There's still a lot of prejudice and discrimination against *waria*. It is true that it's easy for a *waria* to find work in certain fields. The beauty industry is certainly one of them.

Back in 1983, I received a high school diploma in primary education. Back then, that was enough to work as a primary school teacher. I started teaching as a temporary teacher. I enjoyed teaching and got on well with my students, but I had a lot of trouble with the school establishment, particularly the headmaster. I didn't wear a dress, but I wore my hair long. I wore brightly colored, feminine clothing. When I came up for consideration for appointment as a civil servant, the headmaster took me aside. He said that he'd had some complaints from the parents. He said that the parents were worried that I might influence their children. He said if I wanted to be appointed, I'd have to change the way I dressed and cut my hair. He wanted me to get a crewcut, like a soldier! I don't know why he singled me out like that. Why should I be the only teacher at school who had to have a crewcut? He didn't tell the other male teachers how to wear their hair. So I decided that being a teacher wasn't for me.

In 1990, I started working at Perwakos, Surabaya's *waria* organization. At first I was a volunteer. Later, I got a salary. At the moment, we are concentrating on prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS. We used to run a skills development program for *waria* so that they could earn a living. We ran programs to teach them salon and beauty skills, cooking and sewing. It's always been acceptable for a *waria* to work in a beauty salon, so programs to teach *waria* skills in that area were quite successful. I still think it's very important to teach *waria* skills that make them employable and allow them to earn a living. It's a way of helping them to raise their status in society. It's a way for them to be accepted. At the moment, it's hard to get funding for anything except HIV and AIDS programs. I think that's a shame. Actually, the two issues are related to each other. If *waria* have skills that make them employable and respectable, they are less likely to sell sex. That also reduces their risk of contracting HIV and AIDS. You can't separate the two issues.

"If *waria* have skills that make them employable and respectable, they are less likely to sell sex. That also reduces their risk of contracting HIV and AIDS. You can't separate the two issues."





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This book was sponsored by the PNPM Mandiri program. The goal of PNPM Mandiri, Indonesia's National Program for Community Empowerment, is to reduce poverty. PNPM Mandiri was established by the Indonesian government in 2007 to act as an umbrella for a number of pre-existing community-driven development programs, including the Urban Poverty Program and the Kecamatan Development Program, as well as a number of other community-based programs that were managed by nineteen technical ministries. By 2009, PNPM Mandiri was operating in every subdistrict in Indonesia.

PNPM Mandiri is committed to increasing the participation of all community members in the development process, including the poor, women's groups, indigenous communities, and other groups that have not been fully involved in the development process. *Invisible People* is one way that PNPM Mandiri can reflect on ways to better include marginalized and excluded groups in development.

Bilateral and multilateral assistance for the PNPM Mandiri program has been forthcoming from a number of donor agencies. The PNPM Support Facility (PSF) was established by the Indonesian government as a means of facilitating the contributions of international donors that support PNPM Mandiri. Contributors to the PSF currently include Australia, Denmark, the European Community, Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. PSF provided financial and other support for the publication of *Invisible People*, in order to raise awareness of the special needs and aspirations of marginalized and excluded groups.

We would like to thank the people who sat down to tell their stories and put their lives on public display for the publication of this book. Across the country, the people who were approached were amazingly open about the most personal details of their lives, their problems, their hopes, and their aspirations.

When they collected these stories, Irfan Kortschak and Poriaman Sitanggang explained the purpose of the project and sought the consent of all subjects. The subjects told their stories, often over several days and during several meetings, after which Irfan attempted to recreate their words in a first-person account that conveyed the individual's ideas, feelings, and voice. In a few cases, subjects wrote their own stories in their own words, which were then edited with the subject and translated. When possible, Irfan provided a written account to the subject so that he or she could check and reconfirm that the account was an accurate representation. Otherwise, he discussed it with them. Subjects were reminded that their accounts would be published and asked to be certain that they had no objection to this. Irfan apologizes if despite this process, inaccuracies or misrepresentations have slipped into the text.

A vast array of people helped facilitate interviews and

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and *Picturing Indonesia, Village Views of Development* (2005).

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Irfan Kortschak studied Indonesian Area Studies at the University of Melbourne, and International and Community Development at Deakin University in Australia. He is a writer, translator, photographer, and long-term resident of Jakarta. His previous publications include *Nineteen: The Lives of Jakarta Street Vendors* (2008) and *In a Jakarta Prison: Life Stories of Women Inmates* (2000). He is currently engaged in writing assignments and consultancy work for NGO's and development agencies in Indonesia.

Poriaman Sitanggang has worked as a freelance photographer since 1985. He has held a number of photo exhibits, including *Indonesia - Famous People* (1993), *Batak Faces* (1994), *Dani: The Forgotten People* (1997), *Manila: The City of Contrasts* (1999), *The Song of Arini: The Eastern Indonesia People* (2001), and *Burning Borneo* (1998-1999). His work has appeared in a number of magazines and books, including *Kain untuk Suami* (A Cloth for My Husband) (2004),

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