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## **The Intersection of Queerness and Religion: A Look into the Islamic Transgender Boarding School in Yogyakarta**

Pesantren Waria Al-Fattah is almost the same as a traditional pesantren or Islamic boarding school. It has the same elements such as prayer room, meeting room, and kitchen to prepare meals. Like a traditional Islamic boarding school, Pesantren Waria Al-Fattah is mainly about reading Al-Quran, the presence of students (*santri*) and teacher (*ustadz*).

Unique to said pesantren is its being led by a waria (transgender), which many would argue that she is not qualified to take a role based on her sexuality, much less think her body could be the dwelling place of God. She is Shinta Ratri, 53 years old. She took over in leading the pesantren and was sharing her private house for waria as the *santri* to learn about reading Al-Quran and praying to God in a calm and safe environment. In the pesantren, *santri warias* gather, who commonly have no ability to read Al-Quran and speckled with doubts in choosing their performance in conducting *shalat*. Shinta, wearing veil, patiently guides the other *warias* to be confident in having a private relationship with God. Shinta teaches *warias* to keep learning Islam by reading Al-Quran and its tenets. In conducting the activities, the pesantren is open not only for *warias*, but also for the people around. They do *shalat* together, read Al-Quran, and discuss or listen to preaching together.

The pesantren's activities have positive impacts in the lives of the *warias*. Some of them stop engaging in prostitution, trying to have other works such as in beauty salon, selling food, or becoming a nurse for sick people. Furthermore, Shinta's frequent involvement in talks in universities across different Indonesia cities contributes to the integration of her community into wider communities. In Indonesia, people still consider the LGBTIQ+



community as a wired community. Minor communities oftentimes face discrimination by fundamentalist groups. Likewise, it is not hard to think that even government authorities would have the old inclination to look down upon them. To a great extent, this has to do with the existing law system, which is structured not to favour warias. This is why Pesantren Waria Al-Fattah is a safe space for them to pray and for them to be.

The pesantren was founded in July 2008, initially with 10 students in residence. Today, there are 25 students from numerous regions all over Indonesia. Through the pesantren, Shinta tries to educate and support warias to accept the lives they have to struggle and find joy for. Shinta says that being waria is not a life choice but a certainty. She adds that nobody is perfect in God's eyes. She says, "In this pesantren, we learn how to pray to find heaven and peace. Heaven is not bordered by sex, not felt by the dress we wear. God gives a guarantee to those who are pious to him".