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Ratih Sang loves being a mother and reading poetry*Features - December 17, 2006***Soeryo Winoto**, The Jakarta Post, Jakarta

Since quitting the catwalk almost 10 years ago, former top Indonesian model Ratih Sanggarwati has been spending much of her time taking care of her children and writing poetry.

And barring the unexpected, Ratih Sang, as she is affectionately called, will organize a poetry reading night themed *A Tribute to Mothers* at the Balai Sarbini building in South Jakarta on Dec. 20.

During an interview with *The Jakarta Post* at her house in South Jakarta, Ratih said that the event was held to commemorate National Women's Day, which falls on Dec. 22. It would be graced by local artists, including singer and song-writer Melly Guslaw.

Appreciating mothers is a must, she argues, recalling her own mother's never-ending struggle to bring her up.

"Being a mother is a noble thing. Taking care of children affectionately has given me pride that cannot be described by words," said Ratih, herself a mother to three daughters.

She laments that some mothers no longer breast-feed their children for simple and "unacceptable" reasons such as fashion.

"Health considerations are the only valid reasons for mothers to stop or not to breast-feed their children at all," Ratih said.

She is fed up with reports coming from Yogyakarta and Central Java that suggest that many earthquake victims want formula milk to feed their young babies.

"Why? What's wrong with these women? If one of the mothers was killed or seriously sick, other mothers could breast-feed the baby. That should be no problem at all," she said, citing a story about the Prophet Muhammad, who was cared for by a wet nurse.

More and more young mothers in the country, particularly in big cities, are opting to feed their children with manufactured milk instead of breast milk, depriving their children of the most nutrient-rich food at the early stages of their life, she said.

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Ratih believes that nature provides mothers with everything, a conviction that is clearly reflected in her poetry.

Of her many published works, her favorite is titled *Bila Ibu Boleh Memilih* (If Mother Has a Choice), which calls on women to enjoy what God gives them, from pregnancy to breast-feeding.

"The messages (of the poem) are clear; that God provides mothers with the best thing to feed their babies. Breast-feeding is the best choice and mothers must not avoid breast-feeding their babies simply because they are afraid to appear unattractive."

The poem also encourages woman to give birth in a natural way.

"Caesarean surgery should only be possible on a doctor's recommendation for the safety of both the mother and the baby. Naturally, women get pregnant and give birth. So why should they try to avoid this destiny. That's the consequence of being a woman."

For Ratih, having children was the greatest mercy she received from God. "When I was a model I was lanky. But I'm proud of my current shape because I am now a mother of three."

Raised in the Javanese tradition, Ratih believes mothers are the main pillars of a family.

Since she quit the catwalk, she has also changed her appearance. Since 1999, she has been wearing *jilbab* or headscarf, something unthinkable when she was working as a model.

"The only thing I've never planned and arranged in my life is wearing a *jilbab*," she said.

Prior to 1999, Ratih had never thought of wearing Muslim attire. She says her decision to wear the veil was part of her dedication to God, who has given her everything, including delightful days as a top Indonesian model.

For Ratih, who hails from the small town of Ngawi in East Java, it is hard trying to recall her achievements during her 11-year career on the catwalk.

"When I was a model I started to feel that my high-society lifestyle was making me sick. I just wondered what (people) were really looking for? There was a weariness upon seeing people only appreciate and judge others from their glamor. They were all into dissembling. I had no more time for that," she said.

She promised herself that one day she would allocate some of her time

to join a *pengajian*, or Koranic recital group. "And that was it. Things flew by until I decided to wear Muslim dress with a headscarf. I had never dreamed nor planned to appear like this," she said.

This was unlike her earlier much thought-out move to Singapore to work as a model, part of her "go-international" strategy.

"My departures to Singapore, and then New York were all well-planned and motivated by my ambition to become the first Indonesian working as a model abroad. I was determined to lift my grade as a professional model ... When I decided to get married, everything was also well-planned," Ratih said.

On the image change, Ratih admits that many public figures may have decided to wear the *jilbab* in a deliberate effort to seem more religious. But not her.

"I am of the opinion that these (women) would soon take their *jilbab* off once they fail to achieve their plan or maintain their new image."

But continuing to model wearing a scarf and more modest Muslim attire has not been easy, and Ratih was initially haunted by her move.

"As a top model at that time I was afraid of losing my job. I was afraid of losing popularity and my fashion-community friends and I was afraid of spoiling my husband's love for me with my new appearance," she said.

To her pleasant surprise, she found nothing changed upon donning the veil. "My popularity remains and people whom I love are still around me." She is now enjoying the reputation she has built.

"When I was afraid of losing my job as a model, because of my *jilbab*, a producer of cosmetics for Muslim women asked me to become their model. So I could pose with a *jilbab* on my head."

Less but better-paid work meant an easier life, she said.

"When I was a model, I had to practice from 6 a.m. to midnight three days in a row before the show. On the final day I joined the general rehearsal before appearing on the catwalk in the evening. "I got millions of rupiah for that tiring job. Now I get that much money only by speaking in public or reading poetry for half an hour."

"That's why I always tell my friends that I always find ways (to get what I want) when I follow Allah's way."

On her website, Ratih says that being a model was her destiny -- her luck.

She has also tried out acting, as soap opera star, and being a TV anchor but ended up settling for something she really loves -- writing and reading poetry.

"I have written three books of poems, one of the books was not for sale, and another one, the fourth book, was launched at my birthday celebration," she said. Ratih celebrated her birthday on Dec. 8.

Brought back to the subject of modeling, she sighs and pauses for a few seconds. "Did I love my job when I was a model," she says in a low voice, before finally confirming that reading poetry is her favorite occupation. "I can spread Islamic teachings through poems."

Poems have direct impact on those who read and listen to them, she argues. "Five of 10 people listening to a poetry reading usually fall into deep contemplation. Whatever the poetry is.

"Once when I read a poem titled *Aku Merindukanmu Oh Muhammadku* (I'm longing for You, My Muhammad) written by Gus Mus (Mustofa Bisri, a noted ulema from Central Java) almost all the audience burst into tears, even though I had not yet finished reading. That's amazing."

Another rare experience she had reading a poem was in Iran. The work, which she says was "nothing special", was titled *Jangan Panggil Dia Fatima* (Don't call her Fatima). "Many in the audience shed tears as I started to read the verses."

The poem declares that women named Fatima do not deserve the name if they fail to behave like their namesake; the saintly daughter of the Prophet Muhammad.

Despite her love for poetry, she has no academic background in the subject barring a high-school education.

"I can hardly understand poetry with complicated wording or verses. I can just understand narrative verse and I love Taufik Ismail," she said. She also likes reading the works of M.H. Ainun Najib, Jawawi Imron and Mustofa Bisri, all local writers.

Ratih recalls that she wrote her first poem in 1998, but her love affair with the medium began two years later, after she read *Bercermin Diri* (Self Reflection), eventually revealed as the work of the Islamic preacher Abdullah Gymnasiar.

"I was asked to read a poem at a *majlis taklim* (women's Islamic study group). Most of the audience shed tears as I began to read it out. The atmosphere brought me into a kind of melancholic mood and my tears

started to fall."

"That moment apparently emphasized in me an acceptance that poetry could move people. I have experienced it. It is amazing," she said.

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