

Indonesia approves regulation to chemically castrate paedophiles. The wrong strategy, say feminists

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Indonesian President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo recently signed off on chemically castrating and naming perpetrators of sexual violence against children.

It was announced this week Mr Widodo approved the law in December to “provide a deterrent effect on perpetrators, and prevent sexual violence against children”, according to a press release from the Indonesian Cabinet.

The idea was first proposed and ratified by the Parliament in 2016. The Indonesian Doctors Association [said at the time medical practitioners could not castrate people ethically](#) without proper guidelines.

Under the new law, those who inflict or threaten sexual violence against children — defined as those under the age of 18 — will be required to undergo chemical castration for a maximum period of two years.

The offender will also be publicly named and potentially subject to the insertion of an electronic device that detects sexual activity.

So, why does Indonesia want to implement chemical castration, and will it be effective in preventing sexual violence?

What is chemical castration?

Chemical castration involves the administering of an aphrodisiac drugs that suppress male sexual desire by lowering testosterone levels.

The drug Lupron, for example, is used to treat prostate cancer in men by suppressing the production of testosterone in the testicles.

Use of similar medications has increasingly been proposed by authorities around the world as a means to stop sexual offending.

South Korea began allowing judges to sentence rapists to compulsory chemical castration almost a decade ago.

The US state of Alabama in 2019 introduced a law whereby people convicted of sexual offences against minors under the age of 13 would be required to undergo the treatment upon release from prison.

The use of anti-libido drugs for serious sexual offenders has also been debated and implemented in a number of jurisdictions in Australia.

In 2017, New South Wales [introduced voluntary chemical castration for sex offenders seeking parole](#).

Then-police minister Troy Grant said: "If I had my way, I would take their nuts off, but this is the appropriate way".

"This is a step in the right direction to make sure that the kids in our community will be safe from those predators."

However, many medical practitioners and scholars have criticised the practice.

"Chemical castration isn't the answer to keeping children safe from sexual offenders," wrote Maggie Hall, a criminologist from Western Sydney University.

"Not only as its efficacy has been overstated, forcing people to take this medication breaches their human rights."

Why does Indonesia want to implement it?

President Widodo has consistently supported harsh punishments, including the death penalty for serious crimes.

He infamously presided over [the execution of Australians Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran](#) along with other, largely foreign, drug offenders — defending his decision to reject 64 applications for clemency.

The horrific gang rape and murder of a 14-year-old Sumatra schoolgirl in 2016 infuriated people across Indonesia, [leading the Jokowi administration to propose chemical castration and the death penalty](#) for sex offenders.

"I want to give a warning about sexual violence against children," Mr Widodo said at the time.

"I want this to be considered an extraordinary crime, so the handling of it would also be in an extraordinary way."

Mr Widodo's chief of staff this week said the decision to introduce the law was an attempt to address public anxiety over child abuse.

"This is a Government responding to anxiety, responding to various incidents in other countries as well as public views in Indonesia," said Moeldoko, who goes by one name.

"The Indonesian people actually greatly benefit from this [law]."

Indonesia's National Commission on Violence Against Women reported 38,059 cases of violence against women and children in 2020 — the highest on record.

How has the move been received in Indonesia?

Retno Listyarti, a commissioner from Indonesia's Child Protection Commission welcomed the introduction of the punishment, saying it would provide certainty regarding the implementation of national child protection laws.

"I think this is a very extraordinary moment," said Arist Merdeka Sirait, chairman of the National Commission for Child Protection.

"I think this is a gift for Indonesian children entering 2021," he said.

But Siti Aminah Tardi, a commissioner with the National Commission on Violence Against Women, said the body was against chemical castration and called for measures to address the fundamental causes of violence.

"Controlling sexual hormones does not solve sexual violence," she was quoted by local media as saying.

Mutiara Ika Pratiwi, head of the Indonesian women's NGO Perempuan Mahardhika told the ABC that she did not think chemical castration would be effective in combatting sexual violence.

"Violence and sexual crimes that occur to children also originate from unequal power relations, which in turn make children the target of violence themselves," she said.

"The castration policy demonstrates a way of thinking that is not oriented towards solving the root of the problem."

Likewise, director of the Centre on Child Protection and Wellbeing (PUSKAPA) at the University of Indonesia, Santi Kusumaningrum, questioned the efficacy of chemical castration and said its introduction without better policies to protect children was "like a joke".

"The evidence from other countries about the efficacy of chemical castration in preventing sexual violence against children is, at best, inconclusive," she told the ABC.

"Make sure our frontline health centres are equipped with rape kits and how to administer them.

"Triple the number of policewomen and social workers who are capable of responding to sensitive cases like sexual violence."

Is chemical castration likely to reduce sexual violence?

Yonsei University College of Medicine scholars Joo Yong Lee and Kang Su Cho [wrote in the Journal of Korean Medical Science in 2013 that](#) "as we have experienced in treating prostate cancer, chemical castration may have serious side effects ... including osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease, and impaired glucose and lipid metabolism."

Legal experts argue, however, that harsher punishments are generally ineffective as a deterrence against committing serious crimes.

And, as Dr Lee and Dr Cho wrote, "chemical castration is no longer effective after it is discontinued".

Ms Pratiwi of NGO Perempuan Mahardhika said the new law did not recognise that most reported violence was perpetrated by somebody close to the victim in the private sphere.

Chemical castration could even put victims back in danger because the perpetrator may be angered by the punishment, she said.

Indonesian doctors may also refuse to implement the policy on ethical grounds.

When the idea was first proposed by Mr Widodo in 2016, the Indonesian Doctors Association (IDI) [said medical practitioners could not castrate people in good conscience](#).

“First of all, chemical castration is violating human rights,” said IDI chairman Dr Daeng Mohammad Faqih.

“Secondly, according to medical science, chemical castration is not an effective solution.”

What other challenges are there?

Many women’s and children’s rights advocates argue that the causes of violence are structural, and are [calling for the passage of a landmark anti-sexual violence bill](#) long delayed by Indonesia’s legislature.

I Gusti Ayu Bintang Darmawati, Indonesia’s Minister for Women, this week called upon colleagues in the country’s legislature to “accelerate discussion and ratification” of the bill.

The bill would provide a “guarantee of freedom from sexual harassment and other violence” in schools and other public places, she was quoted as saying by local media.

The bill [has been met with resistance from religious conservatives](#), particularly due to sections that would outlaw marital rape.

“The Government needs to [introduce] a legal instrument that will comprehensively prevent, protect, handle and recover victims of sexual violence,” Ms Pratiwi said.

“To be able to talk about the problem of sexual violence, the Government must first acknowledge what sexual violence is, what causes it.

“If not, then the resulting policy is very likely to re-victimise or put the victim in a condition that endangers them.”

Indonesia raised [the legal age of marriage to 19 in September 2019](#).

The Indonesian Government has also committed to eliminating early and forced marriages by 2030.

Nevertheless, child marriage remains a widespread problem across the archipelago, and is socially accepted in many communities.

“We recommend that investment is made in ensuring that every child in need can access assistance to which they can disclose any incidents [of violence] safely and that they receive medical, psychological, and legal help immediately,” said Ms Kusumaningrum of PUSKAPA.

“Remember that perpetrators might be someone who live with them in the same house.

“This kind of complex situation cannot be resolved by this [law].”

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