

NAVIGATING COLONIAL POLITICS: DEWI SARTIKA'S SCHOOL FOR NATIVE GIRLS IN BANDUNG

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FIGURE 1
Sakola Kautamaan Isteri,
girls' school in Bandung.
Collectie Wereldmuseum
TM-FV-0507098.

In 1904, Raden Dewi Sartika opened the first school for native girls in Bandung, teaching 'domestic sciences', including crafts such as batik, sewing, and lacemaking. This essay explores the ways in which Sartika's efforts, knowingly or unknowingly, aligned with the ethical agenda of 'elevating' the native women. Authors Raistiwar Pratama and Marjolein van Pagee first look at the 'Mindere Welvaart Report' of 1914, to which Sartika contributed, after which her educational vision is explored. How did Sartika negotiate the ethical agenda? What are the ways in which her school became a tool of 'imperialist feminism'?

Under colonial rule in Dutch-occupied Indonesia, native* men and women were treated differently to one another. Men were often framed as savages, unattractive, not manly enough, and irresponsible, yet conservative and restrictive too. Women, on the other hand, were reduced to submissive, sexual beings that should serve the white master, both in the household and in bed. A woman named Mevrouw (Madame) Djarisah, who worked as a midwife in the West-Javanese town of Bandung, wrote in 1914:

I've often heard complaints in the villages from native women who are heartbroken because of European men, who, through their financial power, managed to seduce them and after a while threw them away as it were, without any means of subsistence, infected with venereal disease. Oh, how many children from European men and native women are running around in the villages without the benefit of any education. These poor creatures will never know the name of their biological fathers. After all, the mothers themselves don't know. Such examples are legion!¹

However, white Dutch liberal men concerned with the emancipation of native women in early 1900 rarely problematised their own sexist, colonial (mis)behaviour towards these women. Instead, they saw Indonesian women as mere victims of their male counterparts.

Of course, patriarchy is not an exclusively Western issue, yet, in the colonial context, the resistance against native patriarchal structures served a specific goal. The assumption that liberal, 'enlightened' people from Europe had to save native women also reinforced racial stereotypes of native men. And as most Western colonisers considered Islam a backward religion, European feminism was often rooted in Islamophobia as well. In his essay on Kartini,² Indonesian poet Saut Situmorang shows how this feminist figure was embraced by the Dutch colonial elite because of her admiration of European culture and her aversion to Islamic, Javanese traditions. Her criticism of her own culture and religion was instrumentalised by the Dutch as a form of 'imperialist feminism' that served to justify the Dutch occupation of Indonesian land. The message was clear: the expansion of colonial rule was acceptable because it could save native women from Islamic patriarchy.

Although Kartini is the most famous Indonesian feminist, she was far from being the only one. The first school for native girls was founded in 1904 by a Sundanese aristocrat woman named Dewi Sartika (1884-1947).³ This was three years before the first Kartini school in Jakarta (then called 'Batavia') opened its doors. Different from Kartini, Sartika is only remembered in her birth country, where she was granted the status of 'national hero' in 1966.

This essay aims to better understand the Dutch colonial interactions with female native educators and their involvement in setting up (crafts) schools for women in particular. In general, education was one of the main pillars of the Ethical Policy, which the Dutch government had officially implemented in 1901. Apart from reading and writing, the female students at Sartika's school were trained in cooking, drawing, batik art, and other handicrafts. The latter

1 Mevrouw Djarisah, 'Losse gedachten', in the appendix of: *Onderzoek naar de mindere welvaart der inlandse bevolking op Java en Madoera: IXb3. Verheffing van de Inlandsche vrouw - Deel VII, Batavia/Jakarta, Papyrus, 1914, p. 15, see: <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMATR08:014079000>.*

2 S. Situmorang, 'Decolonizing the Myth of Kartini', Recall/Recalibrate, 2025, recallrecalibrate.nl/decolonising-the-myth-of-kartini.

3 In Dutch sources, Sartika's name is sometimes spelled as 'Sartica'.

* In this text, we decided to use the term 'native' to translate the Indonesian word *pribumi* that describes all people ancestral to the Indonesian archipelago. We noticed that the term 'indigenous' has different connotations in various national contexts. In Indonesia, the term 'indigenous' generally refers to traditional-living tribes or certain ethnic groups only. To avoid confusion we agreed upon using 'native'.

FIGURE 2
Cover page from
'Verheffing van de
Inlandsche Vrouw', 1914.



focus on (home) crafts poses the question: what societal roles did Sartika envision for native women? Were they trained to become better housewives, or was the education aimed at enabling women to become more financially independent? In addition, in what ways did Sartika's ideas fit with the Dutch version of imperialist feminism? How did she navigate the colonial regime's political agenda?

A Twelve-Year Study: The Elevation of the Native Woman

To be able to understand Sartika's interactions with the Dutch colonial regime, we will first analyse the image that the Dutch had of native Indonesian women in general. As part of the Ethical Policy, the Mindere Welvaart Commissie (The Lesser Welfare Committee, MWC) was established on 15 October, 1902.⁴ In order to work out new guidelines for an improved colonial policy, the Committee, chaired by colonial civil servant Herman Eduard Steinmetz, was assigned to investigate the economic condition of the native people on Java and Madura. The research project took twelve years, and when the results were presented in 1914, most of the data was already outdated, its recommendations largely ignored.⁵

Yet, ideologically, the Ethical Policy did have a long-lasting effect, namely its contribution to a school of thought that aimed to justify colonialism under the banner of development and civilisation. One of the MWC's research publications was entitled *De Verheffing van de Inlandsche Vrouw* (*The Elevation of the Native Woman*).⁶ Throughout the report, the reoccurring message was that native people were in such poor condition not because of colonial exploitation, but because their culture lacked a moral standard that was comparable to Europe's. In terms of raising children, native Indonesians did everything wrong:

⁴ T. Tirta, 'Mindere Welvaart Commissie: Basa-basi Belanda Sejahterakan Pribumi', *Tirto*, 26 September, 2020, <https://tirto.id/mindere-welvaart-commissie-basa-basi-belanda-sejahterakan-pribumi-f4jX>. English translation: 'Mindere Welvaart Commissie: Dutch Pleasantry in Developing the Welfare of the Indigenous Indonesians', *Histori Bersama*, 6 October, 2021: <https://historibersama.com/mindere-welvaart-commissie-tirto/>.

⁵ Indonesian historian Tyson Tirta argues that because of the long duration of the research process, the

data had 'expired' when the results were finally presented in 1914. At that point, Dutch colonisers were more concerned with the outbreak of World War I. Tirta: 'The efforts of twelve years of research [...] did not have any effect on improving the welfare of the people in the colony.' See: Tirta, 2020.

⁶ *Onderzoek naar de mindere welvaart der inlandse bevolking op Java en Madoera: IXb3. Verheffing van de Inlandsche vrouw - Deel VII*, Batavia/Jakarta, Papyrus, 1914. Accessed through: <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMATRO8:014079000>.

'early marriage, polygamy, the easy rejection of women, are not favourable for the family cohesion'.⁷ Indonesian women needed schooling, not because it could benefit them personally, but because the way they traditionally raised their children was considered bad, causing problems for the entirety of native society. The Dutch solution was to expose native women to European-style education, which would show them the 'right' direction and teach them what a decent family should look like.⁸

Prostitution was identified as an acute problem, which, as already mentioned, was rarely linked to the practices of European men. In 1914, the Dutch colonial regime established the Regeeringsbureau tot bestrijding van den handel in vrouwen (Government Bureau for Combating the Trafficking in Women).⁹ Its director, F. M. G. van Walsem, maintained that:

Native women must no longer remain children; they must be developed morally and intellectually, so that they too can expect some cooperation in the efforts, both from the 'Government Bureau' as from the association. Through their own fault, many native women are handed over to recruiters or to prostitution, while the [Dutch colonial] authorities, though well-intentioned, cannot protect them.¹⁰

Van Walsem's conclusion was that, in order to achieve the desired goal, well-meaning Dutch men like himself had to teach the Indonesian masses about the wrongs of these immoral practices.

The MWC committee recognised that people in native society were also starting to question the ethics of traditional child marriage, polygamy, and prostitution. To encourage further change in this regard, native women had to be schooled to become 'more capable of the tasks that Western women fulfil: economic management of the household, raising the children, strengthening the family'.¹¹

The report, authored by Steinmetz, reflected the orientalist view on Islam as a backward religion in which men had multiple women, resulting in large, complex families. In their reasoning, the colonised people of Java and Madura were in poor condition not because of the exploitative *Cultuurstelsel* (Cultivation System) that had forced peasants to grow colonial export crops, but because a polygamist father could not take care of his countless children, both financially and socially. Even though the researchers admitted that polygamy was actually not such a widespread practice anymore, especially not among peasants, they continually highlighted it as a key issue.¹² From the report it is clear that the financial independence of native women was not their concern, as 'elevation' was understood as training them to become better managers of the family household.

The MWC report claims that Europe had faced similar societal problems

7 *Verheffing van de inlandsche vrouw*, p. 87.

8 See also: E. Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial State: Essays on Gender and Modernity in the Netherlands Indies 1900-1942*, Amsterdam University Press, 2000.

9 The establishment of the Government Bureau was linked to a development in Europe. On May 4, 1910, the Netherlands had signed an international agreement in Paris to combat prostitution. Among Europeans, prostitution and human trafficking were referred to as '*la traite des blanches*' (white slavery). The agreement resulted in new laws and policies regarding prostitution, which were implemented in the colonies as well. A Dutch newspaper article reads: 'The decision to establish this

official agency [the Government Bureau] was made when the Netherlands, along with Great Britain and Germany, signed the so-called Paris Protocol, in which it declared itself prepared to take repressive measures to combat, if possible, the trade in '*blanke ongekleurde slavinnen*' ('white uncoloured slaves') in the colonies as well.' See: 'Bestrijding van den vrouwenhandel', *Sumatra Post*, 16 juni, 1914. <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=KBDD02:000198038:mpeg21:p010>.

10 'Openbare vergadering "Madjoe Kamoelja"', *De Preanger-bode*, 1 May, 1914. See: <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB08:000127127:mpeg21:p001>.

11 *Verheffing van de inlandsche vrouw*, p. 21.

12 See above, p. 88.

in the past, yet, according to them, always on a much smaller scale. As Edward Said wrote in his famous book *Orientalism*:

The Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien. Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or – as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory – taken over.¹³

Steinmetz maintained that, in the European home country, sexual misbehaviour and prostitution had always been problems of a small minority, mainly the lower classes, whereas in Dutch-occupied Indonesia it was a problem of the average man: 'all that is considered doubtful in Europe is a much bigger problem here'.¹⁴

Native Women's Thoughts on 'Elevation'

Interestingly, the MWC report included a series of articles written by nine native women, mostly of aristocratic backgrounds, of which Dewi Sartika was one. As contemporary readers, we may expect too much of these contributions with regard to 'going against the grain'. After all, it seems likely that the women in question were carefully selected by the Dutch members of the committee. At the very least they must have been aware that they were writing for a colonial audience, the foreign rulers of their land.

In fact, Madame Djarisah's earlier cited comment, in which she highlighted the (mis)behaviour of white European men, turns out to be exceptionally critical. In the rest of her article, she maintained that Javanese women needed to be introduced to 'modern civilisation' because they were horrible at housekeeping. Especially among the wealthy, she observed how cleanliness and hygiene were completely neglected: 'many have shown themselves to be more concerned with adornment than with domestic duties'.¹⁵

Most contributions to the report confirm the stereotyping of native culture as inferior. Another aristocrat woman named Raden Ajeng Martini, for instance, called native men egoists, who 'can do everything they want to their women, since women are completely powerless economically'.¹⁶ According to her, young girls had to be trained in becoming better mothers and wives, so that a whole new generation of native children would be raised with 'improved' ethical standards. Therefore, girls had to be schooled in women's crafts, 'such as cooking, batik, and needlework', as well as medical training, including midwifery.

Dewi Sartika's contribution to the MWC report is one of the few texts of hers that remains. What were her thoughts regarding the 'women's question'?¹⁷ In line with the report and the other contributions, she argued that a 'decent upbringing' was necessary, as 'the expansion of knowledge will influence the moral of the native woman'.¹⁸ Sartika strongly believed that this knowledge could

13 E. W. Said, *Orientalism*, London, Penguin Classics, 2003, p. 207.

14 *Verheffing van de inlandsche vrouw*, p. 109.

15 Djarisah, p. 15.

16 Raden Adjeng Martini, 'Opinie omtrent de Kartini-school', in the appendix of: *De verheffing van de Inlandsche vrouw*, 1914, p. 12.

17 Raden Dewi Sartika, 'De Inlandsche Vrouw', in the appendix of: *De verheffing van de Inlandsche vrouw*, 1914, pp. 21-25.

only be obtained through schooling. This idea was also shared by the Sarekat Islam movement (Islamic Union, SI), a Javanese batik traders' cooperative founded in 1912 that would go on to become one of the first Indonesian mass organisations, with a membership of 2.5 million in 1916.¹⁹ The MWC report highlights how Sartika was invited by the SI in Surabaya to speak on education for native girls.²⁰

From 1918 onwards the SI was suppressed by the Dutch colonial regime, but, in its early years the SI was not threatening the status quo. Japanese scholar Takashi Shiraishi, in his book *An Age in Motion* (1990), explains that the reason the SI initially embraced the language of the Ethical Policy was rather because it was the only language available to them. Ideas about 'progress' and 'development' matched their emancipation efforts but, as Shiraishi adds, without SI-leaders really identifying with the ethical colonisers as such.²¹ Yet, similarly to Sartika, the SI did not challenge the colonial order either. SI-leader Tjokroaminoto even pleaded loyalty to the Dutch colonial power, about which Shiraishi writes:

In Tjokroaminoto's language, therefore, there was absolutely no contradiction between native progress and loyalty to the government. Progress was what the Indies government was working for, and sincere devotion to native progress would prove the loyalty of the SI to the government. In this spirit, Tjokroaminoto and other central SI leaders appealed to native progress and attacked whatever was against progress.²²

The SI criticised local customs and traditions as being in opposition to the modern age of progress. Like the colonial regime – which was also denouncing excessive *hormat* (respect) practices – the SI primarily attacked lower-ranking native officials for blocking the people's emancipation. In fact, the later suppression of the SI exposed the hypocrisy and selfishness of the Dutch Ethical Policy, which reduced Western-educated Indonesians like Tjokroaminoto to useful 'intermediaries'. But when the uneducated masses really started to choose their own path, the Dutch ethical colonisers were shocked and ordered mass arrests.

Interestingly, and this is where she differs from the report's general line of thinking, Sartika emphasised the ways in which a Sundanese traditional upbringing was in fact concerned with morality. While Dutch colonisers generally looked down upon native society, she believed that a traditional Sundanese upbringing, despite its limitations, was based on moral standards too. In defence of her culture, she argued that traditional Sundanese parents were also concerned with the physical and mental well-being of the child. What traditional parents wanted for their children was essentially not that different from the ideals of the 'enlightened people' (Europeans?). She explained that a young Sundanese girl was not only taught the usual household tasks like 'sweeping and scrubbing', but also the local customs and how to nurse the sick. Religious concepts were taught as well, including the recitation of the

18 Sartika, p. 21.

19 Sarekat Islam initially proclaimed loyalty to the Dutch, and Governor General Idenburg recognised SI in 1913. In later years it would grow into a national political party, increasingly resisting the Dutch occupation. By 1919, ethicists like Hazeu and Rinke, who played important roles advising on 'native affairs', would turn their backs on the Sarekat Islam. See: M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 204-205. And T. Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion. Popular Radicalism in Java 1912-1926*,

Cornell university Press, 1990, pp. 23-25, 41-43, 60-63 and 113-114.

20 *Verheffing van de Inlandsche vrouw*, p. 122.

Translated from Dutch: 'At the request of the board of Sarikat Islam (SI), Raden Dewi Sartika gave a well-attended lecture in Surabaya about a brochure she had compiled on education for native girls, while Raden Ajoë Siti Soendari recently gave a lecture on 'the same subject for the Boedi Oetomo department in Tegal'.

21 Shiraishi, p. 60.

22 See above, p. 62.

Qur'an. Sartika denies the assumption that native girls were neglected by their families: 'as many of my enlightened countrymen all too often claim'.²³

According to Sartika, one of the challenges was to convince the older generation of the necessity of schooling. Whereas white Dutch liberals thought that native society lacked morals, traditional native parents, for their part, also feared that European-style education would damage the virtues of their daughters:

Schooling arouses a certain confidence in the child. It is precisely this confidence that they fear, because they are afraid that it will encourage their child to commit evil deeds.²⁴

This is where Sartika's vision perfectly fits the overall message of the MWC report, which deemed traditional customs too restrictive and conservative. Quite cynically, she commented on the local habit of locking up girls before marriage:

It is quite telling, that [traditional Sundanese parents] believe that the moral of the girl deteriorates precisely because of schooling, meanwhile preferring to follow the habit of the Arabs by locking up the child in the house (*pingit*).²⁵

Sartika considered traditional upbringing too limited because of the sole focus on marriage and household tasks.

The MWC report cited and endorsed a list of six arguments from inspector of education Cornelis Lekkerkerker about the education of native girls, of which the last point reads: '[education] opens the road to participating in social life by by making varied employment possible'.²⁶ It's not surprising that this was the last of his arguments, given that jobs for women were considered of little importance. Lekkerkerker stated that there was a characteristic difference in the meaning of education for boys and girls: 'Education for men is more of direct visible and economic use; education for women is more aimed at educating the population'.²⁷

Whereas the report did not prioritise financial independence – as the goal was to create morally 'better' housewives – Sartika dreamt of native women becoming midwives, clerks, typists, accountants, flower growers, carrying out 'the jobs for which women are not born, according to native belief, jobs that were intended for men only until now'.²⁸ Yet her reasons for this wish, and which class she hoped it for, remains somewhat unclear.

Native women from the lower classes were already performing tasks similar to men, not because of any level of emancipation, but because of necessity: they simply had to take jobs or work on the field to make ends meet. Only vaguely did Sartika express some awareness regarding class difference when she pointed out that native women from the lower classes were extra vulnerable to ending up in prostitution because of the unequal pay and harsh working conditions that were the norm for the lower classes. She explained that these women earned less than men, while doing the same factory work:

23 Sartika, p. 21-25.

24 See above.

25 See above.

26 In reference to Lekkerkerker (1914), *Verheffing van de Inlandsche vrouw*, pp. 109-110.

27 See above

28 Sartika, p. 23.

As a woman, it cuts me to the core that these women, although performing just the same tasks as men, who equally lack professional training, receive less payment than them.²⁹

She reminded her Dutch audience that European society benefited from women as skilled labourers too: 'I do not see why we could not do the same for my sisters.' When native women would receive vocational training, she argued, it would be the beginning of a change in native society: 'men will value their women more'.³⁰

Unfortunately, Sartika did not further elaborate on the meaning of class difference. Which class did she have in mind when she spoke in general terms about the necessity of improving the dignity of and respect for native women, who were previously only a 'piece of furniture in the house'? Was dignity really the biggest challenge for the majority of native women in their daily struggle for survival? The confusing discussion on morality, which framed native society as the main obstacle to a better future, conveniently covered up the actual, material issue: that of colonial exploitation. Even though the MWC studied the 'women's question' as part of a larger study on economic welfare, they did not identify Dutch rule as the biggest obstacle to improvement.

Given the context, it should not come as a surprise that Sartika and the eight other women in the report did not address the exploitative nature of Dutch colonial rule either. Of course, it could be that they knew that colonial rule was the actual reason that the people lived in poverty but that they did not feel comfortable or confident enough to point that out. Another explanation could be that they genuinely believed that the morality and dignity of native women had to be improved. The question no one asked, though, was how exactly the 'moral elevation' of native women would improve the *economic* condition of the colonised people. Did Sartika think about this? Malaysian scholar Grace V. S. Chin, in her chapter in the essay collection *Appropriating Kartini* (2020), explains that:

[...] elite women have – whether directly or indirectly – contributed to the divisions among women of different social levels in Indonesia. In short, lower-class women who fight for Kartini's ideals have also been subverted by male and female elitist attitudes at the top.³¹

For aristocratic women, the dream of participating in society was about making their lives less boring and more fulfilling, whereas the days of women from the lower classes were already filled with hard work. In case a girl from a family of poor peasants learned to make batik, pottery, or other home crafts, she might be praised for it, but it would still be hard to make a living from it. Therefore, could education within a colonial structure ever result in a better life *financially* when the system was designed to keep the Indonesian masses poor?

Sartika's overall message was in line with the conclusions of the MWC report, that Indonesian women had to be taught ethics to become better mothers, housewives, and nurturers, which would result in more respect from

29 Sartika, p. 23.

30 See above.

31 G. V. S. Chin, 'Ambivalent Narration: Kartini's Silence and the Other Woman', in: Paul Bijl and Grace V. S. Chin, eds., *Appropriating Kartini: Colonial, National and Transnational Memories of an Indonesian Icon*, Singapore, ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020, p. 75.

their husbands as well. 'Child Marriage! Truly, a cancer in native society, which must be eradicated', she wrote. And regarding the mentality of native men:

His wife, who is actually only a cook to him, who, according to the teachings of Mohammed, should clean the soles of his feet seven times a day with her own hair! That woman must obey him, even if he thinks of looking for a second, third, yes fourth slave. Yes, that woman, the slave of the Mohammedan, will obey.³²

This was no doubt the message that Dutch ethicists wanted to hear. Although Sartika expressed a slightly different opinion regarding the value and ethics of a traditional Sundanese upbringing, she did not show awareness of how the Dutch colonisers could misuse her words for their own colonial and Islamophobic agenda. Comparable to Kartini, Sartika accepted the Dutch occupation of her land as a given.

The First School for Native Girls

In the next section we will dive deeper into Sartika's own life story, to better understand the context in which she set up the first school for native girls. Dewi Sartika was born in Bandung on 4 December, 1884, to a noble family. She only received limited primary Dutch education. In 1893, when she was just nine years old, her father and grandfather were involved in an assassination attempt against the newly appointed *Bupati*, the local ruler of Bandung. As punishment they were exiled to Ternate, and the colonial regime confiscated all the family assets and belongings.³³ As a consequence, since European schools were expensive, Sartika could not complete the *Europese Lagere School* (European primary school, ELS).³⁴ After the incident, she moved to her uncle's home in Cicalengka (another town in West-Java) where she was treated as a 'a foster child'. With pain in her heart, she witnessed her cousins and nephews enjoying education, including Dutch language lessons, while she was not allowed to attend any of the classes.

In the ten years that she stayed in Cicalengka, she developed a critical view regarding the treatment of women in her society. At that time, only a few noble Sundanese women could read and write, mostly in Malay or Arabic. The mastery of the coloniser's language was even more exceptional. Although Sartika did not attend secondary education herself, she was able to absorb the knowledge that her cousins and nephews were taught, including Dutch. Subsequently, she set up classes to share her knowledge with other Sundanese girls. Through letters, Sartika encouraged and motivated the students: 'listen girls, to be a woman you have to know how to do everything, so you are prepared for life', she once wrote.³⁵

When Sartika's father passed away in 1903, her mother returned to Bandung again, where she was joined by her daughter.³⁶ Sartika, upon arriving in her home town, immediately approached Bupati Raden Adipati Aria Martanegara

32 Sartika, p. 24.

33 R. Wiriaatmadja, *Dewi Sartika*, Jakarta, Direktorat Nilai Sejarah Direktorat Jenderal Sejarah dan Purbakala Departemen Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata, 2009, p. 49-57.

34 Between 1893 and 1894, there was some newspaper coverage about the incident. See for example: P. B., 'De benoeming te Bandoeng', *De Locomotief*, 16 August, 1893: <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010293216:mpeg21:p001>.

35 Wiriaatmadja, *Dewi Sartika*, pp. 60-61.

36 See above.

to ask his permission for the establishment of a school.³⁷ At first, he responded negatively, saying:

No, girls do not go to school. The things that matter are cooking rice, being able to sew, to do service to her husband, it is more than enough. If they are able to do so then paradise is their reward. Even if [the school] was used to learn the Dutch language.³⁸

But Sartika did not give up so easily, and after several rejections, the Bupati finally gave in and approved her plan.³⁹ On 16 January, 1904, in the main hall of the Bupati's residence in Bandung, Sartika's school was established. She started with twenty students, mostly from common backgrounds, with only three teachers: Uwit, Purma, and Sartika herself.⁴⁰ Apparently, Sartika knew Dutch people in high places too. A newspaper article from November 1904 refers to C. den Hamer, the Dutch inspector of native education, as the founder of the school. Uwit and Purma were his students.⁴¹ The article explains that the lessons were taught in Sundanese and Malay language, and included multiple other subjects:

The children learn to read and write, to calculate, some geography; speaking exercises are held, in which the things that are discussed are always present. The children are taught the correct, native customs, they learn how to draw, to create batik ornaments and other handicrafts.⁴²



FIGURE 3
Native girls' school
Kaetamaan Istri in
Bandung, Leiden University
Libraries, KITLV A34.

The author mentions the presence of a large piggy bank that was used to teach the children about saving money. More classes were planned for the following year:

37 It is unclear how the role of Sartika's father, one of the conspirators behind the 1893 assassination attempt against Raden Adipati Aria Martanegara, played a role in their contact when she approached him in 1903.

38 Wiriaatmadja, *Dewi Sartika*, p. 73.

39 See above.

40 See above.

41 'De inlandsche meisjesschool', *De Preanger Bode*, 7 November, 1904, See: <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB08:000125418:mpeg21:p002>.

42 See above.

With the next course, a class will be added, where they will learn batik, some bookkeeping, etc. Subsequently, the instruction in lacemaking, which has gradually become almost extinct here, will also be taken up, following the example of Palembang.⁴³

In Palembang, the lacemaking industry had been 'revived' under European supervision, and Dutch women there bought 'the lace in quantities for their Kebayas (jackets)'.⁴⁴ Ethical imperialists believed that they were instrumental in saving craft practices from extinction. Lacemaking however, was not native to Indonesian culture, but had originated in Flanders and Italy in the 1600s. It was most likely introduced in Indonesia by the wives of missionaries or by nuns, as was the case in many colonies,⁴⁵ but the practice of lacemaking merged with existing filigree wire techniques, and was so widespread that colonial servant J. E. Jasper even questioned whether it was European or a native industry. But according to him, the practice of lacemaking had clearly been improved according to European standards.⁴⁶ The idea was that lacemaking could instill housewifely virtues, teach hygiene, and was suitable as a cottage industry that would provide income for women.



FIGURE 4
Lacemaker from Palembang,
1915. N.V. Fotografisch
Atelier Kurkdjian.
Collectie Wereldmuseum
TM-FV-0452-140.

Sartika's initiatives received quite some media attention. Dutch filmmaker (and Aceh veteran) J. C. Lamster, for instance, filmed the school in Bandung (1912-1913) for his propaganda series on Java and Bali.⁴⁷ The film shows how students were being trained in handicrafts. According to Australian historian Jean Gelman Taylor, Lamster's films particularly focused on:

[...] an Indies of industrious native workers, not crazed by fanatic devotion to Islam and intent on killing, but natives hitching their fortunes to the Dutch, literally keeping the wheels of the colony oiled. [...] And there are girls, studying domestic science so they can run hygienic homes and

⁴³ See above.

⁴⁴ Mrs. Bland, 'Malacca Lace', *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*: 45, 1906, p. 275.

⁴⁵ There are many examples of missionary wives and nuns teaching lacemaking as a way to 'civilise' women and to provide them with an income. See for example the Sybil Carter Indian Lace Association, the lacemakers of Narsapur (described by sociologist Maria Mies), and the Belgian missionaries in DR Congo: <https://trc-leiden.nl/>

trc-leiden.nl/organisations-and-movements/charities/sybil-carter-indian-lace-association.

⁴⁶ See: B. A. Beech Jones, *Textual Worlds: Rethinking Self, Community, and Activism in Colonial-Era Sumatran Women's Newspaper Archives*, PhD diss., The University of Melbourne, 2023, pp. 82-85; J.E. Jasper, and Mas Pirngadi, *De Inlandsche Kunstnijverheid in Nederlandsch Indië, Deel 2. De Weefkunst*, 1912, p. 306.

⁴⁷ The film is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LxhGmhVPVgk>.

supervise servants in the right way to wash and iron.⁴⁸

In one shot, some students are shown using a sewing machine, while others are sewing by hand. In another shot, a woman is shown making bobbin lace on a pillow, confirming that indeed, lacemaking became part of the curriculum.

An article published in 1911 referred to Sartika as 'headmaster' only, while Den Hamer is mentioned again as the initiator of the school.⁴⁹ In 1906, Sartika married Raden Kanduruan Agah Suriawinata, a school principal, who wholeheartedly supported her. Together, they built nine schools throughout

FIGURE 5
Still from J.C. Lamster,
'Meisjesschool te
Bandoeng', 1913.



FIGURE 6
Still from J.C. Lamster,
'Meisjesschool te
Bandoeng', 1913.



⁴⁸ J. Gelman Taylor, 'Ethical policies in moving pictures: The films of J.C. Lamster', in: S. Protschky, *Photography, Modernity and the Governed in Late-Colonial Indonesia*, Amsterdam University Press, 2015, p. 67.

⁴⁹ 'Een propaganda-avond', *De Preanger-bode*, 7 January, 1911, see: <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB08:000123398:mpeg21:p001>.

FIGURE 7
Sakola Kautamaan Isteri,
girls' school in Bandung.
Collectie Wereldmuseum
RV-A428-19.



West-Java. They received support from friends and colleagues, both Indonesian and Dutch. In 1910, the school's name was changed to Sakola Kautamaan Isteri (Women Virtues School) and the institution became a 'Second Class School'.⁵⁰ In November of that year, a foundation was established under the same name, for 'the elevation of native girls'. Apart from native aristocratic women, various Dutch women were also included as the foundation's board members.⁵¹

In 1913, the famous Dutch feminist Aletta Jacobs paid a visit to Sartika's project. She expressed her enthusiasm but also described the very modest facilities. The walls in the school were made of bamboo. When she saw the girls bowing down while passing a superior, she disapproved of it as a 'backward' practice:

Even in the cooking department the children bowed down behind us. This was the *adat*, the local custom, I was told reassuringly, however it is a bad custom, which will only have a negative effect and which has to disappear as soon as possible.⁵²

In general, Sartika's efforts were appreciated by the Dutch colonisers; her work was not seen as a threat. 'Her' Bandung school seemed to have functioned as a sort of trial, soon followed by other initiatives such as the Van Deventer and Kartini schools. In 1922, in the same year that Sartika's husband passed away, the colonial regime awarded her a silver star.⁵³ In 1929, the colonial regime financially supported the construction of a new school building. At the opening, Sartika was honoured as the 'Sundanese Kartini'.⁵⁴ In 1939, when the school celebrated its 35th anniversary, she was even awarded with the prestigious Dutch Royal Order of Oranje-Nassau.⁵⁵

Elevation at a Snail's Pace

Despite successes like the schools founded by Sartika, the Ethical Policy never resulted in mass education, let alone the improvement of economic

50 First Class schools were for children of the native elite, Second Class schools for 'common' native children.

51 'Een propaganda-avond'.

52 A. Jacobs, *Reisbrieven uit Afrika en Azië benevens eenige brieven uit Zweden en Noorwegen*, 1913, p. 477.

53 Wiriaatmadja, *Dewi Sartika*, p. 101 and 107.
Or: 'Onderscheidingen', *De Preanger Bode*, 5 September, 1922, see: <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB08:000131372:mpeg21:p002>.

54 'De Soendaneesche Kartini', *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 17 January, 1929, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:011072221:mpeg21:a0014>.

55 'Kon. Onderscheidingen. Toegekend aan Ingezetenen van Ned.-Indië ter Gelegenheid van Harer Majesteits Verjaardag', *De Locomotief*, 30 August, 1939, see: <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=MMKB23:003468112:mpeg21:p00009>.

conditions. This was not necessarily a 'failure' of the policy: the design of the system was such that the colonised people were never meant to advance significantly. Even though the MWC report may have been completely meaningless for the colonised masses, for the Dutch colonisers it served a clear purpose. Throughout the colonised world, the professional study of the Orient (as a body of ideas, beliefs, clichés, or other learning about the East), such as that reinforced through the MWC report, became an instrument of policy with a mirroring function.⁵⁶ The idea of the enlightened 'West' could not exist without the idea of the backwardness of 'the East'. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said explains that Europeans interpreted both themselves and the Orient through these studies. In a way, the Dutch needed native society to be immoral and bad, to be able to present themselves as the saviours. In Said's words:

In fact, what took place was the very opposite of liberal: the hardening of doctrine and meaning, imparted by 'science', into 'truth'. For if such truth reserved for itself the right to judge the Orient as immutably Oriental in the ways I have indicated, then liberality was no more than a form of oppression and mentalistic prejudice.⁵⁷

Evidently, the Dutch support for Sartika and her students was not intended to 'elevate' native people into equals. On one hand, Dutch ethicists believed that the morality of native women could be improved by exposing them to European-style education, on the other hand, however, they wanted to limit this exposure in order to keep the barrier between coloniser and colonised intact. This is why native students were not allowed to become 'too Europeanised', and were encouraged to study and embrace their own customs and traditions as well, including the wearing of native clothes. The curriculum at Sartika's schools, in which girls were trained in local home crafts, was enthusiastically encouraged. During the Colonial Education Congress in 1916, Dutch officials recommended 'instruction in needlework' for female aristocrat women, but for non-elite girls it was considered 'doubtful in its usefulness'.⁵⁸ Here we see that also in the realm of crafts, the Dutch continuously worked to maintain distinctly separate boundaries through race and class.

Dutch historian Frances Gouda explains that the Dutch colonisers prioritised the education of native aristocrat women in particular, not only because they adhered to a classist 'trickle down' idea, but also because they saw them as the best representation of their culture. The Dutch regime supported female schools like those opened by Sartika and Kartini, based on the logic that 'their culture's pristine, "exotic" artistry for posterity' had to be protected.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, more common practices in native society were rejected, such as:

[...] child marriages, teeth filing, giving big parties, wearing jewellery often bought with borrowed money, eating with one's hands all sorts of food prepared and sold on the street, not to speak of other evils such as opium, alcohol, and gambling.⁶⁰

56 Said, pp. 253-254.

57 See above.

58 Beech Jones, p. 73.

59 F. Gouda, 'Teaching Indonesian girls in Java and Bali, 1900-1942: Dutch progressives, the infatuation with "oriental" refinement, and "western" ideas about proper womanhood', in: *Women's History Review* vol. 4, no. 1, 1995, p. 48.

60 See above, p. 39.

61 See above, p. 38.

62 E. Locher-Scholten, *Ethiek in fragmenten, vijf studies over koloniaal denken en doen van Nederlanders in de Indonesische Archipel 1877-1942*, Utrecht,

HES Publishers, 1981, p. 201 and p. 203; or: *Etika yang Berkeping-Keping: Lima Telaah Aliran Etis dalam Politik Kolonial 1877-1942*, Jakarta, Penerbit Djambatan, 1996, p. Xii.

Gouda concludes that native women were only elevated at a 'snail's pace', with the aim of extending the Dutch occupation by another three hundred years.⁶¹

Conclusion

In summary, based on the very limited partial and fragmented colonial archives that we could access, it seems that Sartika was not critical of the colonial thesis that native society was essentially broken and needed to be repaired under European guidance. She only thought that the lack of morality of native society was not as extreme as some 'enlightened people' maintained. She did not seem to question the Dutch use of female education as an instrument through which to impose their white liberal ideology, reinforcing already existing ideas of European superiority over the Indonesian masses. Therefore, Dewi Sartika could be seen as someone who was trying to improve the lives of native women *within* the existing colonial infrastructure. At the same time, however, Sartika's case raises many questions that beg for more speculation and study. What was her agency exactly within the given colonial reality? What are the ways in which Sartika perhaps *used* the ethicists for her own agenda of improving the position of women? Did she liaise with them actually in order to get funded? Knowingly or not, her initiative helped the Dutch colonisers in shaping the mindsets of native students 'towards a Western-European direction, albeit at a more gradual pace and more based on Indonesian roots'.⁶² The fact that the Dutch colonial regime co-opted Sartika's project, presenting the Dutch inspector of native education Den Hamer as the founder, is a clear example of appropriation.⁶³ Not only does it indicate that her initiative was considered acceptable, thus not really dangerous for the status quo, it also shows how easily Dutch colonisers side-lined native women about whom they pretended to care. As Said observed: 'Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined'.⁶⁴

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63 Marjolein van Pagee, in her essay on the establishment of craft schools in East-Java in 1900, also gives an example of a school in Ngawi that was co-opted by the colonial regime. See: M. van Pagee, "'Dangerous Competitors": The Dutch Ethical Policy (1901) and the Establishment of Craft Schools in East Java', *Recall/Recalibrate*, 2025.

64 Said, p. 207.