JAKARTA, Indonesia — The transgender Muslim women gazed around the reception room with wonder. It was loaded with lavish tributes from foreign rulers: gold filigreed swords from Kuwait, elaborately painted Chinese urns and elegantly framed Quranic verses. Finally the host, Sinta Nuriyah, 69, breezed into the room in her wheelchair, passing by a giant bust of her husband, Abdurrahman Wahid, a former president and a powerful voice for moderate Islam.

The women, wearing head scarves and traditional gowns, had come to Ms. Sinta for advice. Their Islamic school for women had been shut down by a local hard-line organization amid a nationwide crackdown on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organizations, and they were at a loss as to how to reopen it.
Ms. Sinta, wearing a batik shawl and a veil that partly covered her hair, was in typical good cheer, listening intently and finding pauses in conversation to offer counsel. “Reach out to the regional district head,” she said. “All people have the right to worship God, not just some people. That’s the truth in Islam.”

She offered a beaming smile to the assembled women, clasping their hands and embracing them as they crowded around her wheelchair for selfies.

“There's nobody else in Indonesia like her, who cares this much about marginalized groups,” Shinta Ratri, the leader of the school, gushed.

Since her husband's death in 2009, Ms. Sinta, a women's studies major who was paralyzed from the waist down after a horrific car accident in the '90s, has carried forth the family's campaign for a feminist and tolerant Islam. “We live among different religions, ethnicities and cultures,” she said in an interview. “It’s necessary that we stand up to extremists.”

Tears have been appearing in Indonesia's pluralist fabric in recent years, as hard-line Islamic groups that were once at the margin of national politics exert ever greater influence. Jakarta’s first Christian governor in generations, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok, is facing prosecution for “insulting the Quran,” after a vigorous campaign by Muslim hard-liners to have him unseated.

Ms. Sinta was one of the few leading Muslim figures who stood up for Mr. Basuki after he was charged last year, praising him in a recent television appearance as “brave enough to step forward and take a position from the dominant group.”

Her activism on behalf of minorities frequently puts her in the cross hairs of the hard-liners. For the last 16 years, Ms. Sinta has made a point of touring Indonesian cities during Ramadan, holding interfaith breaking-the-fast ceremonies to promote tolerance.

Last year, at a Catholic church in Semarang, she was confronted by a hard-line Muslim group whose members accused her of promoting the mixing of two religious traditions. The dispute was widely reported in the national news media, with the leader of the regional division of Banser, a Muslim militia with a moderate orientation, announcing that it would mobilize to protect Ms. Sinta's events in the future.
“They have to be confronted,” Ms. Sinta said of the hard-liners, who tried to disrupt numerous interfaith events she headlined last year. “If they aren’t, they will take heart and become even bolder.”

Ms. Sinta is also in a struggle to promote women’s rights. On a talk show to be broadcast later this month, the host asked her why she was opposed to polygamy, saying he had heard about a man who was perfectly fair to all 12 of his wives.

“Who can be fair to multiple wives?” Ms. Sinta asked.

“There are some who can!” a few women in the audience shouted.

“There aren’t!” Ms. Sinta responded flatly.

Eventually the host, Andy Noya, had enough. “Rise up, men, we’re being attacked!” he said jokingly.

Later, Mr. Noya, noting that Ms. Sinta had become a provocative figure in Indonesia, asked why she insisted on breaking the fast with people of different faiths.

“Because we’re all siblings,” she said. “We have to always look out for one another.”

Nothing about Ms. Sinta’s early years predicted how high she would rise.
Born in 1948 in the rural East Javanese town of Jombang, she was the eldest daughter and one of 18 children of a calligrapher father who had one wife. She was educated at a local Islamic boarding school for girls, where she impressed teachers with her religiosity and academic ambition.

Mr. Wahid, a charismatic young teacher at the school whose father was the leader of Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia’s largest Muslim organization, fell in love with the outspoken and beautiful young woman, then only 13. He would visit her house after school to play chess with her father, eventually asking for permission to marry his daughter.

But Ms. Sinta told her father she was not interested. “I was too young, and love hadn’t blossomed yet,” she said. It was considered scandalous that a girl from an ordinary family would turn down Mr. Wahid, but her father left the decision to her.

It was the unlikely start of a great romance.

After Mr. Wahid moved to Cairo to study, and struggled in class, Ms. Sinta wrote him: “Mankind shouldn’t always fail in life. If right now you’re failing in your studies, then you shouldn’t also fail in love.”

He took the opening, writing then from Baghdad, where he had moved, to ask her to marry him. This time, she was ready, but because he would not come home from Iraq for three more years, his grandfather represented him at the marriage ceremony.
After Mr. Wahid returned to Indonesia in 1971, Ms. Sinta earned a degree in Shariah law and then left college to start a family, eventually having four children while making and selling candies and frozen treats to help support them.

In 1992 she returned to school, taking graduate courses at the University of Indonesia in the newly created women’s studies department. “I wanted to look into the extent to which religion shapes the lives of women, and also the extent to which women influenced religion,” she said.

That was also the year of the auto accident. Ms. Sinta, who was flung from the vehicle, found herself lying in the road, unable to move. She remembers it as a hellish, depressing time in the hospital surrounded by those who had had strokes and been in accidents. After a year of physical therapy, she was finally able to move her arms, but she remained paralyzed from the waist down.

Ms. Sinta, who had begun using a wheelchair, wanted to continue her studies, but the women’s studies classes were on the building’s fourth floor. When the elevator broke down, Ms. Sinta asked friends to build a stretcher out of bamboo and had campus security guards hoist her to classes every day. “I’m someone who if there’s something I want, then I’ve got to have it,” she said.

While she was carried on the stretcher, she would joke that she was General Sudirman, an anti-colonialist war hero who carried on the fight from a stretcher after being wounded. “Just like General Sudirman struggled for an independent Indonesia, I struggled for my own future,” she said, laughing.

For her senior thesis, she studied the health effects of pregnancy on child brides. That brought her into contact with an old school friend, and she got a glimpse of how differently her life could have turned out. “My friend had 16 kids, because her husband was a prominent preacher who wanted to have 25 children,” Sinta said, shaking her head.

In 1999, after the dictator Suharto stepped down, her husband became Indonesia’s first president to win a contested election. Whereas the notoriously corrupt Suharto family lived lavishly, Ms. Sinta urged her husband to project a democratic humility, one reason the family is still remembered fondly in Indonesia. “We didn’t need to act or wear clothes like we were kings,” she said.

Her husband was impeached after two years in office for failing to maintain order in the tumultuous early years of Indonesia’s democracy. But they both remained active in public affairs. Ms. Sinta established a network of progressive Islamic boarding schools for girls to promote gender equality in some of the most rural and conservative parts of the country.

“It isn’t easy erasing teachings that have already penetrated deeply,” she said, noting that while senior clerics objected to her revisions to the classic curriculum for girls Islamic boarding schools, others had embraced it.

She says she worries deeply about whether Indonesia’s moderate Muslim institutions were capable of turning back the tide of fundamentalist Islam.

“How our struggle is even weightier,” than earlier struggles against colonialist and imperialist powers, she said, “because the people we are facing down aren’t foreigners, but are from our own nation.”