

A Collective Battle for Space

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*True equality means holding everyone accountable in the same way, regardless of race, gender, faith, ethnicity—
or political ideology.*

Monica Crowley

Without true equality, it is impossible to make substantial democracy a reality.

The movement toward women's emancipation and gender equality is perhaps the longest, most significant and sustainable social movement in history. It does not only seek to annul the power relation inequality between men and women but also all kinds of power relation inequalities in society, thus taking the social movement out of the exclusive binary gender context of men and women to encompass gender diversity in general with the various problems of injustice happening within the framework of unequal power relations.²

That is the core of the struggles in promoting substantial democracy.

Historically speaking, women's ideal role in various nations is by no means that of a subordinate—it is quite the opposite. Until the end of the Java War (1825–1830), aristocratic women, especially those in the southern part of Central Java, enjoyed the privilege to take actions and personal initiatives unknown to their sisters who lived in the time of Raden Ajeng Kartini (1879–1904). Kartini's predecessors even penetrated two sectors typically considered as exclusively men's domain: military and political affairs.

A Quick Glance at Indonesia

Under Indonesia's authoritarian New Order regime (1968–1998), the role of women in society, as explicitly written in the regime's policy framework for long-term development plans, was limited to the exclusively domestic roles of being a mother and a supporting wife subject to the husband's authority.

The 1990s marked a very important turning point in the dissemination of discourse pertaining to women's rights. Two important international conferences on the issue were held during that era: the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, and the 1995

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² Further reading, R.W Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*, (CA: Stanford University Press; 1 edition 1987); Kathy Davis, Monique Leijenaar, and Jantine Oldersma, *The Gender of Power*, (New York: Sage Publications Ltd., 1991).

Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. Mainstream print media outlets had also started to publish more stories on women's rights issues than ever before.

A watershed moment for women's issues in Indonesia happened when the May 1998 riots occurred followed by reports of rape and sexual violence against Chinese-Indonesian women by the rioters, thus shocking the international public. Influenced by the spirit of the reform era, a number of mainstream media outlets began to expose what had actually happened to these women during the riots, albeit through only official sources, because several rape victims had disappeared while some witnesses refused to speak up out of fear for their own safety. The new government then responded by establishing the National Commission on Violence against Women (*Komisi Nasional Penghapusan Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan*—Komnas Perempuan). From then on, women's issues started to occupy more space in print media, entering the mainstream news reporting of these media outlets on a national level.

In the 2000s, violence against women became the main issue for the women's rights movement with the regional autonomy initiative freeing local officials to issue various regional bylaws that heavily discriminate against women. Up until November 2018, Komnas Perempuan had listed more than 421 bylaws that discriminate against women, including women-only curfews and prohibitions against transgenders to work in hairdressing salons.

Acts of violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals across Indonesia were happening, especially in the last few years. Apparently, the Indonesian society also subscribes to what the American writer Adrienne Rich (1980) refers to as compulsory heterosexuality, describing how society imposes heterosexuality as a singular absolute truth among its social subjects.³

Out of this attitude, the stigma against 'the others'—non-heterosexual individuals—was born and the resulting prejudiced categorization against them further reduces the value of 'the others' as human beings, especially those coming from lower socioeconomic brackets.

Indonesian media outlets still treat news stories on communities with different sexual preferences—namely, the non-heterosexual community—as a commodity that “sells” the news. They would sensationalize the communities' “different” lifestyles by illustrations of public order officers chasing transgenders down the streets, their engagement in criminal acts or telling their life stories without any critical perspectives whatsoever.

Ironically, historian Peter Carey recounts that there was a time when men and women in Java could fluidly shift their identities. Men could dress in women's attire while women also fought as soldiers under the banner of the celebrated national hero Prince Diponegoro in the Java War.⁴

³ Cynthia Carter, Gill Branston, and Stuart Allan, *News, Gender and Power*, (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁴ Peter Carey and Vincent Houben, *Perempuan-perempuan Perkasa di Jawa Abad XVIII-XIX* [Mighty women in Java in the XVIII-XIX centuries], (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2016).

Achmad Sunjayadi (2018) sums up the various stories related to sexuality in Indonesian society covering the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial eras. Chronicling the stories using various primary and secondary sources, these tales expose realities which are typically forbidden and concealed, both in the domestic and public spheres.⁵

Media, the Fourth Estate?

Indonesia's mass media has been rapidly evolving after the fall of the New Order regime and its repressive bureaucracy. At the same time, a new media power has become the new norm: a participatory one which comes out of the grassroots. Ross Tapsell (2017) writes that Indonesians are the most active social media users in the world.⁶

Social media makes it possible for us to disseminate news items directly and, therefore, the various forms of violence against women and children become apparent through various social media posts.

A social reform where the public calls for a rapid transformation has to be realized through our collective hard work and determination to annul discrimination and violence against women, along with many other marginalized groups. However, we have to answer this challenge on a practical level: whether there is a willingness among all the components of the society to collectively change our situations for the better, more equal and just. Indeed, mass media provides a forum to discuss and broadcast what is going on in our society right now and yet it does not have sufficient power to change our circumstances.

Amid a constantly changing world and technological innovations which run at the speed of light, the function of the free press should remain the same: to enlighten and elevate human dignity as all of us are created with various functions which complement each other, requiring us to mutually learn, grow and develop in our effort to create a substantially equal and just setting.

To cover issues related to violence due to power imbalances requires journalists to have specific understanding and perspective: other than requiring them to collaborate with feminist activists and scientists, this endeavor also requires them to have a militant spirit to battle for their rightful space.

Cynthia Carter, Gill Branston and Stuart Allan (1998) observe how various issues are interlinked when we talk about gender and media: ownership dynamics, media convergence, the importance of feminist studies in journalistic works, the feminization of news narration and a divided audience.⁷

Again, the mass media is still a very male-dominated sphere. Whoever sits at the decision-making positions—whether editorial or commercial—in these outlets is vulnerable to become swallowed

⁵ Achmad Sunjayadi, *(Bukan) Tabu di Nusantara* [(Not) a taboo in the archipelago], (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2018).

⁶ Ross Tapsell, *Media Power in Indonesia: Oligarchs, Citizens and the Digital Revolution*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd., 2017).

⁷ Cynthia Carter, Gill Branston, and Stuart Allan, *News, Gender and Power*, (London: Routledge, 1998).

whole by media capitalism which is very patriarchal in nature and is no different from everything else which occupies our public sphere.

The contents of this article reflect solely the opinions of the author.