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## **Muslim Feminists and Their Social Media Use on Understanding Feminism in Today's Contemporary Society**

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### **ABSTRACT**

With the digital era of social media, everyone is given the freedom of speech to voice their struggles and experiences online, especially feminists with the controversial problem of gender inequality. As powerful and impactful hashtags and captions are posted on the cyber world, the real fight for female equality has risen to another level. The use of social media varies in terms of its benefit and cost throughout the years as it constantly changes, but so does the meaning of feminism impacted by it. As the majority of believers in Indonesia are Muslims, and many of them condemn the idea of women being equal to men, this research will specifically focus on Indonesian Muslim Feminists who has contrasting beliefs of Feminism as opposed to the Islamic teaching. Therefore, in this embedded application of qualitative research study, the aim is to discuss regarding the Muslim feminists and their social media use on understanding feminism in today's contemporary society.

*Keywords:* Social media, feminism, muslim feminists, gender inequality, contemporary society

### **Introduction**

#### **Background of Study**

The Internet has become almost inevitable in today's modern society, as technology has only developed for the better from time to time. This does not exclude the use of social media; Youtube, Facebook, and Instagram have been some of the most used social media platforms to share and receive information as well as to exchange opinions in the form of videos, articles, and also pictures and captions. With the role of Internet and social media platforms as a significant source of information, it is often used as a tool to express and voice out social issues. One particular example of said issues, which is emphasized in this research is the fight for gender equality or often noted as Feminism.

Feminism has been a global topic for the past few decades all over the world, and has recently become a hot topic in Indonesia especially portrayed on many social media platforms specifically Instagram. Generally, feminism itself is a movement, which fights for women's empowerment and gender equality. The connotation of the term 'feminism' more often than not has been put in a negative spotlight; feminists are often associated with angry aggressive women who hate men. Despite the negative connotation of feminism, there has been a lack of discussion regarding the "controversial" topic in Indonesia. The view on feminism in Indonesia mostly revolves around the Western

history, mainly from the USA. However little do many people realize that Indonesia actually owns a local background and history of women empowerment and the fight for gender equality, which led to Indonesian feminists as they are today.

With that said, using a qualitative method of research, this paper will focus on debunking the perspective of feminists in Indonesia as conveyed through their Instagram account specifically observing the content created by @indonesiafemins ran by Ms. D since 2016. The decision to approach and interview the person behind @indonesiafemins is to better understand the presence and stance of feminists on Instagram. Hopefully by the end of this paper, readers will gain a better understanding regarding feminism, particularly in Indonesia.

**Objectives.** There are two objectives to be focused on, which are “To understand the meaning of feminism through the perspective of Indonesian feminists based on Indonesia’s history regarding gender inequality” and “To analyse how Indonesian feminists uses social media as their platform to fight for gender equality”.

**Research questions.** There are two research questions to be focused on, which are “How does @indonesianfemins on Instagram understand the meaning of feminism based on Indonesia’s history regarding gender inequality?” and “How does @indonesiafemins on Instagram fight for gender equality by conveying its views through its Instagram content?”

**Theory.** This research is focused on the evolving media from traditional to new media throughout the centuries. New Media itself, according to British communication theorist Denis McQuail, refers to digitalization as a result of the most fundamental aspect of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), which is a process where all texts can be reduced to a binary code and share the same process of production, distribution, and storage. He views the ‘new electronic media’ as simply an addition to the existing spectrum rather than as a replacement. In characterizing the new media itself as embodied in the Internet, it has been hindered by the diversity of uses, governance ability, and uncertainty about the future development of it.

Despite the new media and a new possibility of new theories are to be projected according to McQuail, the well-understood Agenda Setting theory has been implemented in processing the information before it is publicly posted through, in this case, social media such as Instagram. Agenda Setting theory is an objective communication theory created by Maxwell McCombs & Donald Shaw, interpreted in *A First Look At Communication Theory* book by Em Griffin. According to the book, agenda-setting hypothesis talks about the ability of mass media in transferring the salience of issues on their news agenda to the public agenda. The concept of ‘framing’ is emphasised in relation to this research, as framing refers to the process of selecting a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular issue is discussed, and this can only be done by ‘gatekeepers’, who are the agenda setters or those who select the content that is to be presented to the public.

### Methodology

The method used on collecting the data result for this qualitative research is through an interview with Ms. D, and content analysis on @indonesiafemins Instagram account. We chose Ms. D as our Subject of Study to better and improve our understanding of the presence of feminism on Instagram. Then we decided to have a depth interview with one of the well-known account with the total of 42.873 followers on Instagram, 3482 posts, 3.61% engagement rate, as well as a constantly rising statistics with a sudden spark of 1000+ followers on Tuesday, 13th August 2019. So we met Ms. D on Friday, 23rd August

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2019 at 15.00 WIB, at Plate and Shears Cafe in West Jakarta, specifically at Jalan Kyai Tapa No. 264. Correspondingly, another qualitative method of research was used by analysing @indonesiafeminis posts and content. Below are the top 3 posts that were screenshotted.



(Attachment #1)



(Attachment #2)



(Attachment #3)

The most liked photos from @indonesiafeminis 's Instagram account was posted on the 25th of August 2019 (Attachment #1). With 28.018 likes, the post itself shows a twitter thread regarding sexual harassment experience through cat calling that led to physical altercation. There are over 370 comments within this post, comments ranging from showing signs of support and sending prayers to the woman involved, expression of frustration and anger of which one account commented that the perpetrators should be arrested. The commentators are both men and women who expressed their disappointment with the perpetrators and a few of them also shared their own experiences and how they reacted when being cat called.

Then the second top post (Attachment #2), @indonesiafeminis posted a photo on the 19th of June, of a couple who follows the footsteps of Rasulullah SAW and the man would not remarry as long as his wife is still alive. The post has reached over 2.789 likes with the caption that question why opinions like him are not as exposed as polygamy. All the comments within the post showed positivity and some shared their own experience as well, the commentators within this post are mostly women.

Then the third top post (Attachment #3), @indonesiafeminis reposted an article from Voxpop on the 25th of June and has reached 1670 likes on Instagram. The article and caption explained how private video between couples are turned into revenge porn. This post has 17 comments, most of the comments are doubtful that this case will be brought to justice and a few shared their experiences with revenge porn.

## Literature Review

### Feminism

According to Maggie Humm (a Coordinator of Women's Studies at the Polytechnic of East London) and Rebecca Walker (an American writer and feminist), the history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The first feminist wave was in the 19th and early 20th centuries, this wave developed equal contract and property rights for women, against the ownership of married women by their husbands. The second feminist wave was in the 1960s and 1970, and this wave focused on arguments about equality and discrimination. The third feminist wave extends from 1990s until now, and this wave

views women's lives as interrelation, showing how race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, and nationality are all significant factors when discussing feminism.

According to an author named Kathy Caprino, "Feminism" basically is about equality of men and women, but not sameness. She then argues that the issue here is about equal rights and access to opportunities.

**Gender inequality.** According to European Institute for Gender Inequality, gender inequality refers to "legal, social and cultural situation in which sex and/or gender determine different rights and dignity for women and men, which are reflected in their unequal access to or enjoyment of rights, as well as the assumptions of stereotyped social and cultural roles".

**Social media.** According to (Boyd & Ellison, 2008), "Social Media has been defined as websites which allow profile creation and visibility of relationships between users". Also, according to (Kietzmann et al., 2011), social media refers to "Web-based applications which provide functionality for sharing, relationships, group, conversation and profiles".

**Instagram.** According to (Rainie, Brenner, and Purcell 2012), Instagram is a "mobile photo (and video) capturing and sharing service, has quickly emerged as a new medium in the spotlight in the recent years. It provides users and instantaneous way to capture and share their life moments with friends through a series of pictures and videos." And according to (Wnent, S. (2016)), Instagram is "about posting pictures and presenting oneself in a form of digital photo album to others, having contact with friends, getting attention and admiration, making a lot of likes and followers as well as making money through advertisements."

### Findings

Based on our interview with Ms. D and analyzing her content as created through her Instagram account @indonesiafeminis, we were able to receive the answers we needed and even beyond our listed questions.

The interview started with the denotative meaning question of the term 'feminism', which refers to the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes. According to Cambridge International AS and A Level Sociology Course book by Chris Livesey, there are 3 'types' to feminism, which include Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, and Marxist Feminism. This category was corrected by Ms. D, noting that all types of feminism is contextual. Different types of feminism exist for each different problems and oppression experienced by different groups of women. Afterwards, she asked us the difference between 'patriarchy' and 'matriarchy', where one gender is "in charge" of the other. Starting from this point, she begins explaining Indonesia's very own history regarding feminism.

Ms. D stated the fact that Padang was labelled to be matriarchy in the past, yet still subordinated by men. During Indonesia's reformation era in 1998, oppression was experienced by the people, leading Islamic Defenders Front voicing out their protest and becoming extremely dominant, demanding females to not be the leaders of the country. Megawati was strongly banned from being Indonesia's fifth President, despite her political intelligence. Since the majority of Indonesian citizens are muslim, the argument behind "no female presidents" relies simply on the tradition of the "Imam" or leader of every muslim household should be men, thus it would be better if the country is led by a man.

Since most of the textbooks used in Indonesian schools are written by male philosophers from Western culture, the information and views written by female scholars are barely considered as credible. Through this, we are able to observe gender inequality

even before the term existed. Women then attempted to fight back against the oppression they experienced, and society took this as a 'liberal' as in a rebellious movement, instead of an empowering one. Thus, the term feminism has always had a negative connotation. Arguments against feminism in Indonesia majorly states regarding how it is within women's nature (Kodrat) to be inferior to men. Ms. D highly disapproved of the term, which was often used against gender equality. In bahasa, 'Kodrat' itself refers to the given biological or physical nature that one receives at birth— an example of this is once a person is born with female genitalia it is natural that she will experience a monthly cycle of menstruation. This in fact has no relation to her ability or intelligence; it has no relation to the job descriptions often assigned to them based on societal ideas which involve the belief that a woman's place is only in the kitchen, is only to clean, and only to babysit.

During 1998, a protest occurred around 'Monumen Bundaran Hotel Indonesia', known as 'Bundaran HI' in Central Jakarta. The mastermind behind this protest was a courageous woman named Gadis Arifia, who slowly gathered a crowd of women who at first were only taking pictures and 'hanging out' and soon after in an unexpected way formed into a protest to overthrow President Soeharto at the time. Gadis Arifia was thrown into jail for being the leader of 'GERWANI' (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia), which translates to Indonesian Women's Movement since it was viewed as a rebellious act.

Throughout the interview with Ms. D, many interesting facts were pointed out every now and then. One of the points made was the fact that Indonesia's national maxim "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" was actually coined by Gayatri Rajapatni, the second wife of Raden Wijaya the first King of Majapahit in Java which was once Indonesia's most powerful kingdom from the period of the late 1200s to 1500. This contradicts with historical textbook knowledge, which states that the term of which is Sanskreet for "Unity in Diversity" was created by a poet named Mpu Tantular during that era as well. It became the general knowledge of 'Bhineka Tunggal Ika' that the term was first found in one Mpu Tantular's 'poem' titled 'Kakawin Sutasoma'. However, it was never really discussed who actually coined the term -- which was Rajapatni. Her idea of Bhineka Tunggal Ika arose once she realized that every child of hers are different people, and that difference should not cause separation; every child no matter the difference should be loved and cared for as equally as the other. This idea was the core of unity in diversity -- diverse yet one. The philosophy of the saying is that since Indonesia has thousands of diverse ethnic groups, cultures, as well as language, the nation should act as how a mother should loves all her children no matter the differences that exist between them.

Another uncommon fact Ms. D gave light on was regarding the current national date of Mother's Day is December 22 which was declared by ex-President Soeharto. December 22 was actually the date of the very first Women's Congress was held. In 1950, GERWANI was founded in Semarang. The movement was frowned upon society as they were affiliated with the communist party in Indonesia, they were accused by the government to have killed several generals in a very sadistic way. However, GERWANI was created to support and educate women all over Indonesia and also to help those who are oppressed by their families or husbands.

Referring back to the common misconception of the 'types' of feminism as pointed out by Ms. D, the term 'intersectional feminism' was discovered. The main argument is that feminism is contextual— there is no specific type for an individual to have, as social and political discrimination overlaps with gender's. The note that only a certain type of feminism is the best or most correct is highly invalid under the reason that different types of feminism exists for different women who face different types of oppressions.

An additional point refers to the patriarchal values and standards that have been publicized by gatekeepers--who are mostly men in power, of the information spread to the

public were directly brought up by, and colonized by the Europeans, resulting into the view regarding various topics including ‘feminism’ itself, are being strongly influenced by the Western culture— up until now. Even the term ‘feminist’ that came from France today are only seen as ‘dictating’, or simply uttering their biased opinions according to their own perspectives and experiences.

According to Ms. D herself, she demands gender equality and has created a Facebook community as a form of spreading awareness to the public about the discrimination towards women, named “Shaming Men That Talk Shit” back in 2016. Despite this, the phenomenon of “Dharma Wanita” where the wives of government employees formed an organization to support their husbands to carry out national duty. Nevertheless, Ms D stated from her personal experience that the Dharma Wanita did not have a choice to not get involved within the organization, she also added that the relationship within the organization is very toxic but they are obliged to take part.

Referring to the theory of agenda setting and concept of gatekeepers as the filter of information, we are able to view Ms. D as the gatekeeper of Instagram account @indonesiafeminis. In Maxwell McCombs & Donald Shaw’s agenda setting theory, we are introduced to the term ‘Media Agenda’, which is the pattern of news coverage across major print and broadcast media as measured by the prominence and length of stories. In this case, Ms. D’s media agenda conveyed through @indonesiafeminis is to educate feminism and gender equality to Instagram users who come across her account. Other than to educate the people on Instagram especially in Indonesia, she also uses her platform to share the stories of oppression experienced by Indonesian women. Ultimately, along with many other Instagram-active feminists, Ms.D wishes to deconstruct the dogma and stop oppression against women.

### Discussion

Throughout the process of planning this research, there were a number of limitations that were faced. Referring to said limitations, below are listed the possible suggestions for future researchers.

#### Limitations

1. Before achieving the final title, “Feminists and Their Social Media Use on Understanding Gender Inequality In Indonesia”, a few changes were made. The original title of this research paper was “Social Media Use and Its Impact on the Meaning of Feminism in Today’s Contemporary Society”, however after consulting with our advisor, we were directed to a different title which revolved around Islamic Feminism. Afterwards our title changed to “Muslim Feminists and Their Social Media Use on Understanding Feminism in Today’s Contemporary Society”
2. With the second title, we attempted to reach out to four potential sources, both of which are active as a social media feminist, and another who is an author of the book “Islam, Kepemimpinan Perempuan, dan Seksualitas”. However, out of four, only one responded to our approach -- Ms. D. the creator of @indonesiafeminis, agreed to our interview.
3. Because of the different schedules that each of us have, we had a difficult time to schedule meetings according to the time given to write this research.
4. After the interview with Ms. D, we discovered that we can no longer use the second title since the result of the interview was not particularly aligned with the

title. However, Ms. D did recommend us to go to other sources regarding the topic. We then decided to brainstorm the possible topics that fit most accurately with the interview results, thus our final title is “Feminists and Their Social Media Use on Understanding Gender Inequality In Indonesia”

5. It was also time consuming to decide on one communication theory to relate to our study, and also to converge many ideas from each member.

### Recommendations

1. For future research papers, what we can learn from the limitations that we experience in doing this research, we believe that making more time for discussions and plan making would provide significant help in maximising the research.
2. If more time is made available, the more time we have to research for theories, articles, journals, and so forth. Aside from that, more time also means more time to further explore a certain topic and explore a variety of people to interview in order to enrich the research paper.
3. For future research papers, we could make a proper timetable to set a neat schedule and to help boost out productivity in doing the research paper. Also, assigning each member directly would be much better in order to not waste any time, and members could not be that unproductive at some certain time.
4. Before doing future studies, make sure to do prior research on the topic of the study to know exactly what to expect and to find.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this research succeeds to better understand the presence and stance of feminists, particularly in Indonesia, with the use of qualitative method of research by interviewing the person behind the Instagram account @indonesiafeminis, ran by Ms. D as our Subject of Study, and content analysis on @indonesiafeminis Instagram account as our Object of Study. Then, with the conduct of New Media Theory by a British communication theorist Denis McQuail and Agenda Setting Theory created by Maxwell McCombs & Donald Shaw, it is understood that the feminism perspective starts to show up due to all the information that is being broadcast to the public. Since a long time ago, men have been the main gatekeepers for the public knowledge and insight, this can be seen from the majority of scholars are men. Consequently, the majority of people think and accept the fact that they are bias to men in relation to every topic and content, and that is the reason why the term feminism is expressed into a negative spotlight for having a poor coverage. Supposedly, Indonesia actually owns a local background and history of women empowerment and the fight for gender equality, which led to Indonesian feminists as they are today. Yet until today, feminism is still considered to be negative due to the lack of discussion regarding the “controversial” topic in Indonesia and feminism in Indonesia mostly revolves around the Western history, mainly from the USA.

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