

Perempuan Berkisah: Creating an Online Safe Space for Indonesian Women



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インドネシアではCOVID-19のパンデミック中に、ロックダウンや在宅勤務の影響などで女性に対する暴力の事例が激増した。本稿では、逃げ場のない女性たちをネット経由で支援するオンライン「駆け込み寺」の活動を紹介する。

Abstract

As a country with the fourth-biggest worldwide internet users and a more than 69% penetration rate, social media plays an important role in the lives of millions of Indonesians. The covid-19 situation has accentuated the role of social media even more, with the increasing number of businesses, schools, and public services conducting their activities online due to the social distancing and limitations. However, this situation also gives rise to Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in general experienced by women across the country. A report released by the Indonesian Women's National Commission in 2021 showed a 300% increase in GBV-reported cases during the pandemic. As a case study, this paper then attempts to analyze Perempuan Berkisah—an online community that actively promotes women empowerment, creating a safe online environment for GBV survivors and sharing educational stories to avoid GBV. As a form of digital activism, Perempuan Berkisah's strategies reflect the role of the internet, especially social media, in transforming the victim's experience through storytelling and building solidarity to create a safe online space for Indonesian women free from victim-blaming.

Keywords gender-based violence, social media, Indonesia, digital feminist activism

Introduction

During the covid-19 pandemic that began in late 2019, there has been an increase in Gender-Based Violence (GBV) cases in many countries as women spend more time at home and on the internet. Reports from 8 Asian countries, including Indonesia, stated that the intensification of GBV occurred right after the lockdown regulations were imposed (UN Women, 2021).

The pandemic situation has turned more women into GBV victims. For one, social distancing and a shift to work-from-home forced women and men to spend more time inside their houses. This situation has made women even more vulnerable to GBV from their intimate partners, which can be seen from the increasing number of calls to domestic violence careline since the pandemic started (UN Women, n.d.). Also, there has been a

proliferation of Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) with the heightened global dependence on the internet, especially social media. A survey by Giving Compass (2021) showed that 51% of girls had experienced OGBV while they were on the internet.

Indonesia is one of the countries where violence against women has become more frequent compared to the pre-pandemic era. Women's National Commission's annual report (CATAHU) 2020 showed a 300% increase in GBV cases during the pandemic, reaching 940 occurrences in total. The Women's Association for Justice and Legal Aid (LBH-APIK) has compiled 97 cases of GBV reported between March to April 2020. The incidents ranged from domestic violence with as many as 33 cases (the most frequent), 30 OGBV cases, 8 cases of sexual harassment, and dating violence and rape with 7 and 3

cases, respectively (Jatmiko, Syukron, & Mekarsari, 2020).

Despite the prevalence of violence against women in the country, Indonesia has yet to have adequate instruments to deliver justice to GBV victims. The implementation of several laws and government regulations used in handling GBV are often ambiguous and perceptible to multiple interpretations. Law no. 35 of 2014 on child protection, Law no. 44 of 2008 on pornography, and Law no. 11 of 2008 on Information and Electronic Transaction (UU ITE), for instance, are heavily criticized for the lack of gender perspectives in protecting the victims of GBV (Catherine, Adi & Wahyu, 2022). Additionally, the sexual violence eradication bill (RUU PKS) draft aimed to accommodate justice for GBV victims was removed from the House of Representatives' priority agenda in 2020. In 2022, after protest from women's rights advocacy groups and a presidential directive urging to speed up the bill's ratification (name has been changed to RUU TPKS, emphasizing 'sexual violence crimes'), the House finally started processing the draft. However, there has been neither development of the bill nor any sign of it being passed soon (Kompas, 2022). Hence, it is apparent that the government has failed to see the urgency of this issue. (*Update: as of April 12, 2022, the draft has been officially passed as a sexual crimes law with only four out of previously nine sexual violence categories covered*).

Internet users in Indonesia reached 204.7 million in January 2022, and around 69% of the total population are active social media users (Kemp, 2022). Despite the advancement of internet usage, the digital divide based on gender remains persistent, which is proven through the disparity in terms of digital literacy between men and women. 51,43% of internet users in Indonesia are dominated by male, and female users are only 48.57% (APJII, 2017 in Marini, Hanum, & Sulisty, 2020) as the second lowest among 20 countries in global world (Accenture, 2016 in Marini, Hanum, & Sulisty, 2020)

Digital literacy does not limit its scope only to skills to operate and to use the information on technology devices but also includes individual ability to "... "read" and "understand" the contents of the information

presented as well as the process of "writing" and "giving birth" to a new knowledge" (Marini, Hanum, & Sulisty, 2020). The gap, moreover, has provided context to the emergence of gender-based violence in today's digital age. Marini, Hanum, and Sulisty (2020), citing Wahyuningtyas and Adi, mention that limitations in various aspects, such as mobility, education level, time, economy, and patriarchal culture, further enforce unequal access to the internet for men and women in Indonesia. With this situation in mind, the shift in women's activism on digital platforms might be necessary to provide a safe space for women.

With more Indonesians going online, women advocacy groups also strengthen their online presence to reach wider audiences and create a more significant impact. While the government is seemingly reluctant, feminist digital activism has flourished in the country. Women advocacy groups and independent organizations have increasingly utilized social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, to express concerns about gender-related issues, equality campaigns, and so on. The situation can be seen from research conducted by Parahita (2019) on the rise of digital feminist activism in Indonesia and the gender equality campaign of the New Men's Alliance on Instagram (Maryani, J, & Rahmawan, 2018).

This study aims to analyze the role of social media in creating an online safe space for GBV survivors and Indonesian women, in general, using a case study. We investigate an online-based women's community called Perempuan Berkisah (English translation: Women Telling Stories) on its unique approach to digital feminist activism utilizing social media platforms to share women's stories and experiences on GBV. We emphasize the community's Instagram account because it is the major platform used for their digital activism.

Perempuan Berkisah, or PB (abbreviation will be used from this point onwards), is unique in the way that it helps create an online safe space for Indonesian women through a community-based safe space concept. It means women's GBV stories are sent, curated, and distributed to other women, transforming their experience as victims into survivors while educating and

inspiring other women who follow the account. By paying attention to PB's Instagram posts and comments from its female followers, this paper shows that social media is a powerful means to transform GBV victims' storytelling into a political act that benefits them and other women.

Gender and Gender-Based Violence

Gender has been widely understood as a cultural and social construct that categorizes men and women and assigns them to different roles and responsibilities. Gender is distinguishable from sex, in which the latter is determined when one is born based on their biology. Russo and Pirlott (2006) describe gender as "...a package of many interconnected elements— including gendered traits, emotions, values, expectations, norms, roles, environments, and institutions—that change and evolve within and across cultures and over time." Gender categorization entails a hierarchy of power in which feminine attributes associated with femaleness are valued less than masculinities linked to men (Shepherd, 2009). This power relation confers women in subordinate positions over men in most contexts. Gender inequality positions women as submissive and powerless objects, making them prone to Gender-Based Violence.

Gender-based Violence (GBV) is defined as "harmful acts directed at individual based on their gender" (UNHCR, n.d.). According to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), GBV could affect women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms that are equal to men (Makinde et al., 2016). Specifically, violence against women includes verbal and physical attacks, coercion or life-threatening deprivation, physiological harm, humiliation, and deprivation of one's liberty (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottemoeller, 2002).

Gender-Based Violence is one of the most widespread human rights violations that happen to women and girls across the globe. The UN Women (2022) reported that around 30% (or one in three) of women aged 15 and older had been exposed to physical and or sexual violence. GBV could happen anywhere, from the public to the private sphere. As stereotyped-gender roles and status heavily shape GBV, the term 'gender-based'

is then used to differentiate the types of violence that belong to this category from the common threat to humankind, such as murder, robbery, etc. Diverse factors have helped preserve violence against women, such as gender roles and expectations, male privilege, sexual objectification, and diversity in power and status (Russo & Pirlott, 2006).

With the existence of rape culture, it becomes difficult for women to speak up about their GBV experiences or seek out justice because of society's common perception that women deserve such treatment as it has been "...tolerated and normalized" (Powell in Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2019).

In many countries, including Indonesia, GBV victims are also prone to victim-blaming and revictimization when they speak out about their experiences. This issue was also pointed out by the Minister of Women Empowerment and Child Protection (PPPA). Women are often blamed for GBV by their parents, society, and authorities such as the police, medical professionals, and lawyers who are supposed to help them (Wulandari & Krisnani, 2020). This situation makes them afraid to report their story and could potentially impact their mental health.

Focusing on the GBV issues, we contextualize PB's activism on social media as one of many ways to combat the GBV and how it provides a safe space free from victim-blaming and revictimization for the GBV survivors.

Digital Feminist Activism

A number of feminist scholars agree that we are living in the 4th wave of feminism characterized by its dependence on digital technology (Munro, 2013). Social media platforms are seen as providing a space where those who lack the power to speak up can have their voices heard and challenge the dominant discourse (Mitra in Antunovic, 2018). Feminists' use of social media is a form of social movement, where della Porta and Diani (cited in Cammaerts, 2015) explain it as

"... a social process through which collective actors articulate their interests, voice grievances and critiques, and proposed solutions to identified

problems by engaging in a variety of collective actions.” (Cammaerts, 2015, p.2)

Social media has transformed the ways in which social movements are conducted. Murthy (2018) mentions that women constitute the majority of social media users; thus, their involvement may significantly impact some of the social movements that are gendered structurally.

Feminist activists have used hashtag campaigns to mobilize the public on social media, and over the years, they have been proven to be impactful in putting the women’s struggle under the spotlight. Some examples of well-known hashtag campaigns include #EverydaySexism created in 2012 to document sexism experiences in public (Eagle, 2015), #CroptopDay which symbolized protests against policing women’s clothing in Canada (Keller, 2018), and the #MeToo Movement campaign to raise awareness on sexual assault experienced by women worldwide (Battacharyya, 2018).

However, the rife use of social media also poses a challenge for feminist activists. For one, the internet is a space where women are more exposed to cyber assaults (Antunovic, 2018). The reality of the real world that collides with the reality of virtual networks has elevated the pre-existing gender system, stereotypes, and discrimination that place women and other gender minorities susceptible to online GBV (OGBV). In this digital age, violence does not just happen on the ground but also on the web. They include internet trolling, misuse of female pictures, sexual harassment, and other misogynistic content/comments that have worsened during the pandemic. Sexist and often violent treatments addressed to women in the digital space show the persistence of online misogyny (Jane, 2016; 2017).

Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller in their book “*Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back against Rape Culture*” (2019) argue that the digital feminist activism—feminists’ engagement with digital technology, especially social media—has proved that: 1) social media is able to transform lives of the participants, through solidarity, connections, empowerment and so on, 2) social media activism is multifaceted, and each campaign, project, or community has their way of

mobilizing the web, 3) there are barriers that limit participation in digital feminist activism that come from internal and external factors, and 4) digital feminist activism is time-consuming and often requires more resources and energy to mobilize.

In this paper, we focus the discussion on the first and second arguments highlighting how social media has a transformative power and that digital feminist activism vary in strategies depending on their objectives. We pay attention to PB’s approach on their Instagram posts to illustrate that what happens on social media does not only show the “fantasy of changes” but an actual transformation that affects women’s daily—offline—lives regarding gender-based violence (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2019).

Perempuan Berkisah (Women Telling Stories)

Perempuan Berkisah, or PB, is an online, non-profit community for women that described itself as “Empowerment media, a catalyst for change, and a safe space based on feminist ethics.” (Perempuan berkisah, n.d). Its website provides a range of information about the community, including About Us, Opinion, Education, Stories, Tips, Photograph, People, Community, Information, Send Writing, and Donation for GBV victims. The website is only available in the Indonesian language. On the About Us page, visitors can access information about the community. It includes organizational structure, history, vision and mission, values, community principles, community-based safe space concept, funding source, national and regional-level programs and activities, and the list of PB’s social media accounts on Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter pages.

PB states that its vision is to become “a women empowerment media and a safe space to share and learn based on feminist ethics.” PB’s missions include developing media as a place for empowerment, sharing knowledge and inspiring stories for women, creating a safe space for women based on a feminist approach, and encouraging transformative critical awareness based on women’s experiences.

PB’s organizational structure is shaped like a

network, in which it consists of the Chief, Local Community leaders, Knowledge and Management Communication, Counselor Team, Psychologist, and members. The network is best represented by its sub-communities spread across six regions in Indonesia, namely Jabodetabek (Jakarta Metropolitan Areas), Central Java-Jogjakarta, East Java, West Java, Sumatera, and East Indonesia. Each area is led by one local community leader coordinating members in their respective domicile. The community has 414 members distributed across Indonesia, making it one of the most influential online-based women's communities in the country (Perempuan Berkisah, 2021).

Based on their interview that appeared in the popular Indonesian news portal *Kumparan.com* (Syamsiyah, 2020), PB's core team is an all-women team. The community was initiated in 2015 by Alimah Fauzan, a feminist activist who formerly created the website *perempuanberkisah.com* to share inspiring stories and empower women and marginalized groups. The current PB took shape in 2019 when they repurposed their Instagram account as a place to share stories and encouragement among their female followers. The account has started accepting stories from its followers to be shared publicly on PB's feed to let other women know about their experiences.

As an online-based community, PB's activities are primarily conducted via the internet. According to Fauzan (Syamsiah, 2020), the community frequently gathers for online discussions through WhatsApp groups, self-healing practices, and capacity buildings. Since the pandemic, they have had more online activities using their social media platforms. PB is not affected by the pandemic; it thrives as more women in Indonesia spend more time scrolling their social media feeds. The community has two levels of activities: nationwide and regional. Both nationwide and regional activities cover capacity building, GBV assistance, donation for GBV victims, and economic empowerment. PB's visions, missions, and activities are primarily concerned with GBV and creating a safe space for Indonesian women. Also, the GBV priority is explicitly stated in their online activism strategy: the community-based safe space concept.

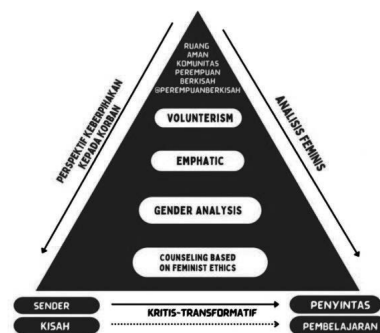


Figure 1. PB's community-based safe space concept

(source: <https://www.perempuanberkisah.id/konsep-ruang-aman-berbasis-komunitas-perempuan-berkisah/>)

The concept is drawn as a triangle with volunteerism, empathic, gender analysis, and counseling based on feminist ethics placed in the center. With these elements, they are hoping to create an online safe space for Indonesian women as a way of ending GBV. At the bottom of the triangle, there are “senders” (victims who send their stories) and “survivors” connected by “critical transformation.” The triangle's left and right sides are “perspective of taking side with the victims” and “feminist analysis.” From there, we see how PB conceptualizes its strategies in digital feminist activism concerning GBV cases in Indonesia. PB's concept emphasizes a transformative process from victimhood to survivor. At the same time, it also places importance on stories told from women's points of view for other women. It is also stated by the founder (translated from Indonesian):

“I named it Women Telling Stories because the women are the ones who tell their own subjective experiences about various problems, challenges, and strategies so that they can get out of their problems, both related to reproductive, domestic, public, and community roles,” (Syamsiah, 2020, p.7).

As mentioned before, PB is present on four social media platforms, namely Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. However, from our investigation, PB uses mainly Instagram as its storytelling account. Thus, the following subchapter will explore how this community-based safe space concept is imple-

mented on their Instagram posts.

Perempuan Berkisah's Instagram: Stories that Transform

PB's Instagram account is @perempuanberkisah, and up to this day has 90.8 thousand followers, 1,551 posts, and 2,875 followings. PB utilizes Instagram features such as putting a link on its bio, posting on feeds, stories, and reels, as well as highlighting FAQs and tips on its profile to help its new followers. We will focus on PB's Instagram feed posts to show its strategy against GBV.

PB's feed is dominated by carousel posts, where it is used to tell stories from GBV victims, posting educational content on self-love and women's issues. PB's posts are characterized by colorful images and illustrations showing figures of women in various settings and expressions.

Stories from GBV victims hashtagged as #Kisah are the center of PB's Instagram account and have the most engagements (number of likes and comments). These stories and how they are retold also represent PB's community-based safe space concept.

The #Kisah posts account for real stories sent by their followers who have become victims of GBV. The steps of getting their stories featured include 1) Clicking the link on PB's bio, 2) filling in the informed consent form where senders also need to disclose their identities, and 3) finally attaching their stories as a file. Although victims must disclose their personal data, the team ensures that their stories will be anonymous. Later, the editorial team will check the stories and change them into more digestible Instagram carousel posts before posting them on PB's Instagram feeds. Once posted, the stories are public, and followers will interact with them through comments, likes, shares, or saved.

We take one example from PB's recent Instagram post (March 15, 2022) to illustrate how social media, through real account stories, can transform victims into survivors, build collective solidarity, and improve the GBV situation in the country.



Figure 2. PB's Instagram post 1

(source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CbHTcSxvYYI/?utm_medium=copy_link)

This post is sent by a GBV victim who was abandoned by her husband while pregnant. While not treating her properly, the husband is also having sexual relationships with various women. She filed a divorce paper but just figured out that she was pregnant. She has run away from home but, at the same living in a difficult situation because she could not find a job and only survives on a bit of money that her husband leaves her.

PB writes the caption for the post by addressing the sender while encouraging her to be strong, offering support, and inviting the followers to do the same by leaving a comment. The post got 192 comments, and most of them were from women sending prayers and giving suggestions/solutions for the sender of the story. It is worth noting that other than sympathies for the victim, PB also informs the followers that they can give donations to the senders by visiting the link it provides. This use of link-to-donate shows how PB's post does not only act as a medium for online storytelling and gathering sympathy, but it also invites their followers to make a real change by donating.



Figure 3. PB's Instagram post 2

(source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbNNzhhPs1I/>)

Another example is PB's post posted on March 17, 2022. It tells a story of an Indonesian woman who lives in a foreign country and is physically and sexually abused by her ex-husband. She is depressed because her ex-husband gets custody of her children. While the post does not invite followers to donate, it encourages them to share their strength and empathy without judging the sender. At the same time, PB tells the audience that its people are doing their best to provide counseling for the sender and has suggested contacting support groups in the country where she lives.

The post got 64 comments from PB's followers who sympathize with the sender even though they live far away. The comments are primarily prayers and words of encouragement without any negative response.

Creating Online Safe Space without Victim-Blaming

Through the way PB shares the sender's stories and the positive comments they get from the audience, PB has managed to create a safe space for Indonesian women to talk about their GBV experience. PB's account has become a virtual space where victims of GBV do not have to fear people judging, blaming, or even discriminating them for sharing their stories. Intimate stories that show vulnerability also build solidarity amongst audiences and senders, uniting them as Indonesian women. Additionally, the senders' identity is kept anonymous, so they do not have to fear people finding out

about their identity.

PB's strategy in storytelling also transforms senders' victimhood into stories of survival. Because by sharing their experiences, they are no longer passive victims but able to take action and have their own agency. Their stories can also inspire other women in similar situations to try and get help. They also serve as life lessons and reminders for other women to avoid toxic and unhealthy relationships. Commenting and interacting with the post-build solidarity and donation can also help those who require economic assistance. From here, we can see that PB has successfully created an online safe space that transcends to offline space for Indonesian women.

PB's success in creating an online safe space for GBV victims can also be seen in their Instagram stories highlights. The admin posts screenshots from senders who have gotten their stories featured. All of the responses are positive and appreciative such as:

"Thank you so much for @perempuanberkisah. Because of this account, I could tell my private stories and make a decision from others who support me and give me advice. I hope whatever I decided would be the best for my life. I hope @perempuanberkisah becomes an inspiration for all women."

Senders' positive appreciation for PB also encourages other GBV victims to report and share their stories. The reports implied that PB had received more sexual harassment stories from women trying to communicate their experiences.

Conclusion

Due to the global pandemic, social distancing has increased our interdependence on digital technology. With the rise of GBV cases experienced by women worldwide, feminist activists have their own way of utilizing the digital space, especially social media, to change the situation.

This article mainly examined Perempuan Berkisah (Women Telling Stories) as a case study for successful digital feminist activism in tackling GBV issues in Indonesia through their Instagram account. With increasing dependence on digital technology and social media, especially during the pandemic, we see how

digital media is still as impactful for the feminist social movement as ever. PB's use of social media has enabled them to make a difference and help GBV victims. Their community-based safe space concept is proven to be an effective tool to organize against GBV issues.

Unlike most feminist activism conducted through #hashtag activism, PB uses a storytelling approach from the victim's point of view to build solidarity, gather donations, or simply invite the audience to sympathize. All PB activism is centered on its posts, which always contain the call for action through the comment section. Through these strategies employed by PB, feminist activism in digital media has proven that it could transform the lives of the participants, create solidarity and empowerment, and conduct various campaigns to mobilize audiences.

Finally, studying PB's unique approach to community-based online safe space free from victim-blaming can enrich the scholarship on digital feminist activism beyond hashtag feminism. Future research might consider exploring strategies and approaches used by feminist activists on other social media platforms, on TikTok, for instance, to give more insight into the topic of digital feminist activism.

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