

Empowering Narratives: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Essays from *Magdalene*

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Abstract

Despite the recognition of gender equality within the Indonesian legal system, there remain various instances where women have disadvantages in domains including education, employment, and political representation. This study aims to highlight actions taken by women in fostering women's empowerment through essays by applying the framework of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). This study applied qualitative method to conduct a content analysis of essays that address topics relating to women. The data included in this study were taken from the essays featured in the book "The Feminist Minds". To determine gender-related issues and the actions taken to address them, the data was collected by reading and taking notes on the relevant passages of the essays. Following the collection of data, the analysis was carried out using the theoretical framework of FCDA. Several misconceptions regarding feminism and women-related issues, including street harassment, sexual abuse, and victim blaming, were discussed in the essays. Furthermore, the actions that must be taken to address them were also elaborated. The strategies included awareness campaigns, educational initiatives, legislative efforts, community support, and addressing negative stereotypes and attitudes. In conclusion, progress in addressing women-related issues can be achieved through collaborative efforts involving communities and affiliated organizations.

Keywords: *Feminism, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Gender Equality*

INTRODUCTION

Despite the acknowledgment of gender equality in Indonesian legal systems, there remain numerous instances of women being disadvantaged in areas such as education, health, employment, politics, and the economy (Larasati, 2021). One of the contributing factors is the patriarchal values that have been widely accepted within the Indonesian community. In societies with patriarchal cultures, men tend to hold more power, which can result in the marginalization and devaluation of women's roles and existence (Rapi et al., 2024).

The acceptance of male dominance in Indonesia is primarily due to the longstanding patriarchal values that exist within the community (Dewi, 2019). In patriarchal societies, men are given privileges through conventional gender roles that depict them as powerful, logical, protective, and decisive individuals. On the contrary, women in conventional gender roles are portrayed as weak, illogical, nurturing, and submissive (Baruna & Lestari, 2022). Moreover, a patriarchal society tends to create a clear distinction between the domains of masculinity and femininity (Lailawati et al., 2020). Patriarchy and gender stereotypes are established, regulated, and reinforced through various institutions that are integral to daily life, such as family, school,

community, media, workplace, religion, and state policy (Naufina, 2021). As a result, these values have been widely accepted and ingrained in Indonesian society for many generations up to the present day.

The patriarchal construction creates issues in society, resulting in gender marginalization and inequality (Fauzia & Rahayu, 2019). In order to address these issues, gender-focused movements such as feminism have been developed in society. Feminism is an ideology that strives for gender equality, specifically in regard to women's rights (Gustema & Sahayu, 2020). The principles of feminism have been conveyed and articulated through various means, such as literary works, digital campaigns, dialogue, and even street protests. These actions are taken to challenge patriarchal norms and foster gender equality and women's empowerment (Sakhiyya et al., 2023).

The topic of feminism has attracted significant attention within the fields of linguistics and gender studies. Numerous studies have conducted research on feminism and women-related issues by applying critical discourse analysis (CDA) as an analytical framework. These studies have been centered on issues such as patriarchy and gender inequality (Evianda et al., 2019; Nugroho et al., 2021), gender discrimination (Limerick, 2021; Tsani & Ratnadewi, 2022), women objectification and commodification (Hidayat et al., 2020; Rohmah & Suhardi, 2020). Prior studies on women have primarily centered on narratives of oppression, sexist and discriminatory discourses that promote gender inequality, as well as the preservation and continuation of power imbalance. As a result, there has been a lack of research related to women's expression of empowerment, encompassing their resistance strategies, collective efforts toward empowerment, and their strategies for constructing a positive self-image (Nartey, 2021). The current research attempts to fill the gap by investigating the compilation of essays in the book "The Feminist Minds" through the application of feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) proposed by Lazar (2018) as a theoretical framework. This study aims to highlight actions taken by women in fostering self-empowerment and the empowerment of their female counterparts, rather than only putting too much focus on gender discrimination and inequality. It is important to conduct such research in order to strengthen one of the significant objectives of FCDA, which is to emphasize emancipatory discourses and reconstruct resistance.

METHOD

This qualitative study focuses on content analysis of essays about women-related issues. The data for this research were obtained from a collection of essays featured on Magdalene, an online media platform with a focus on gender and feminism. The essays were compiled into a book entitled "The Feminist Minds," edited by Asmarani (2019) and published by PT Elex Media Komputindo. Magdalene aims to promote gender equality and forward-thinking within society by presenting narratives and principles viewpoints on various gender-related issues (Aditya, 2022). The text provides a comprehensive and insightful account of women's experiences, amplifying voices that have been marginalized and overlooked. This form of media also guides its readers and contributors on the refined approach to articulating their viewpoints on controversial matters, namely through well-structured essays and solid arguments.

The data was collected by reading and taking notes of the relevant sections from the essays in the book "The Feminist Minds" in order to determine gender-related problems and the actions taken to address them. After the data was collected, the analysis was conducted by applying the theoretical framework of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) proposed by Lazar (2018).

The FCDA aims to challenge and dismantle discourses that maintain gendered social hierarchies, hence limiting and constraining the advancement of socially progressive options for both individuals and communities. The primary objective of this initiative is to promote the principles of equality and facilitate the process of social transformation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The present study not only highlighted the challenges faced by women and the misunderstandings regarding feminism, but also examined the strategies and rebuttals employed by feminists to promote women’s empowerment and achieve gender equality. The findings of the study are summarized in table 1 as follows.

Table 1. Women-related Issues and Initiatives

No	Issues or Misconceptions	Actions or Counterarguments
1	Feminism undermines men	The objective of feminism is not to enhance the power or status of one gender while diminishing the other, but rather to improve gender relations.
2	Only women benefit from feminism	By dismantling the social norms that limit the roles that men and women can take on, feminism not only liberates women but also men.
3	Feminism is a Western ideology	Feminism has been present in non-Western regions for a significant period of time, adapting its emphasis to suit the specific cultural and societal circumstances of each region.
4	Feminism is no longer necessary because women and men are equal already	Gender inequality persists despite significant progress across the globe. Inequalities still exist for women regarding healthcare, education, and income.
5	Street Harassment	Encouraging community support and bystander intervention, spreading awareness through campaigns and education, supporting groups that oppose harassment, and advocating for legal actions.
6	Child Sexual Abuse	Governments, non-governmental organizations, and communities should collaborate to increase public awareness, improve reporting procedures, strengthen legal protections, and provide assistance for victims.
7	Victim Blaming	The focus needs to change from scrutinizing victims to making offenders responsible for their actions. It is necessary to challenge negative preconceptions and attitudes as well as raise awareness of the issue.

Table 1 shows the misconceptions related to feminism and women-related issues identified in the essays compiled in the book “The Feminist Minds”. However, the essay writers do not focus only on the problems, but also highlights their arguments and actions in the effort to solve the problems. The findings are described in more detail as follows.

1. Misconceptions about Feminism



Feminism encompasses a diverse range of individuals, both women and men, who express various perspectives and ideologies, all united by the shared objective of achieving gender equality throughout all aspects of women's lives (Biana, 2020). Unfortunately, a significant number of individuals persist in misunderstanding the subject matter, resulting in the continuation of misconceptions up to the present day. Several misunderstood concepts regarding feminism are presented as follows.

Data 1

Misconception: *“To achieve equality, feminism must emasculate men.”*

Counterargument: *“Achieving gender equality does require deconstructing masculinity, but it is not the same as cultivating the male sex. In its hundreds of years of history, the movement has cultivated a tradition of deep contemplation and rethinking of the social construct of genders as well as gender dynamics. It is supposed to actually improve gender relations, not strengthen one sex at the expense of the other.”* (Asmarani, 2019)

The misconception that feminism seeks to diminish men's masculinity or rights stems from misunderstandings of its true purpose. Feminism is not about devaluing men; rather, it advocates for equality, social justice, and the dismantling of restrictive gender roles that limit everyone. The movement aims to empower all individuals, challenging stereotypes that confine both men and women. It is an inclusive movement that envisions equality and respect for everyone, working toward a society where rights and opportunities are not dictated by gender.

Data 2

Misconception: *“Feminism only helps women.”*

Counterargument: *“Feminism doesn't just liberate women; it also liberates men by breaking down the standards put in place for women and men by the society. Feminism is about changing self-limiting gender roles, sexual norms and sexist practices. Men have the freedom to explore life beyond the rigid boundaries of traditional masculinity.”* (Asmarani, 2019)

Feminism encompasses a broad range of perspectives that serve as a comprehensive movement to promote gender equality. It actively addresses various social, political, and economic inequalities and injustices that impact women. Although the main objective of feminism is to address the issues that women experience, it is important to remember that this movement benefits society as a whole and has a positive impact on people of all genders.

Data 3

Misconception: *“Feminism is a western concept.”*

Counterargument: *“This has been one of the main self-criticisms within the feminist movement in the past: that feminism, the movement and ideology, is Eurocentric and dictated by white middle class women. However, feminism has long existed in non-western parts of the world, from South America, Asia to Africa, although with slightly adjusted focus according to the local contexts.”* (Asmarani, 2019)

There exists a common misconception that the ideology of feminism is only rooted in Western culture. However, this assertion is not accurate. Feminist movements and ideologies have been present in diverse cultural and geographical contexts over the course of history. Feminism is a socio-political movement that operates across national boundaries and recognizes the interconnected nature of various forms of discrimination and oppression. Its primary objective is to address gender-based inequalities.

Data 4

Misconception: *“There’s no need for feminism now because women are equal to men already.”*

Counterargument: *“According to a report by the UN’s International Labor Organization, women across the world earn only 77 percent of the amount paid to men. On top of that, many jobs are still not friendly to mothers, and top leadership posts in companies and governments are still overwhelmingly held by men. Second, in many developing countries, including Indonesia, the number of girls dropping out of school is higher than boys because they are seen by parents as not worth the economic investment. Third, many countries (including Indonesia) still allow child marriage, which perpetuates domestic violence and poverty.”* (Asmarani, 2019)

Despite significant progress in many parts of the world, gender inequality still exists. Women continue to face inequalities in areas such as income, representation in leadership roles, access to education, and healthcare. Therefore, feminism is still relevant and essential for addressing these problems and advancing gender equality.

2. Street Harassment

Catcalling or street harassment involves unsolicited and often sexualized comments or actions directed at individuals who have not consented to such attention. This violates their personal boundaries and can make them feel unsafe and uncomfortable. These actions objectify people, reducing them to their appearance and body parts. This dehumanizing behavior reinforces harmful gender stereotypes and perpetuates a culture of objectification and entitlement (Walton & Pedersen, 2022).

Data 5

Issue: *“Catcalls, at first sight, may pass like nothing more than petty annoyance. Which is why we tell our girls: ignore them, just keep walking. Catcalls exist only in the interests*

of their givers, a testament to their sexual desires or a vulgar instrument to pass the time. The worst thing is you can never predict if they will turn into something more dangerous – because they can, and they have.”

Action: *“No catcalls should ever be rationalized, and no women should ever be told to accept them. After all, if we are to have some peace, we must be able to maintain a “room” of our own; a space respected by all men and women around us. And this space must be fought for.”* (Asmarani, 2019)

Street harassment can have a profound impact on the mental health and well-being of those who experience it. It can lead to feelings of anxiety, fear, shame and powerlessness. Some instances of street harassment escalate into more serious forms of harassment or violence, such as rape (Hidayat et al., 2021). People who are called may fear for their physical safety, especially if the harasser becomes aggressive or follows them.

3. Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse refers to any sexual misconduct or exploitation involving a child who is not legally or emotionally capable of giving consent. It is a deeply harmful and illegal act that can have severe and long-lasting consequences for the victim’s physical and psychological well-being. Its effects can be devastating, including trauma, emotional and psychological scars, trust issues, and long-term mental health problems (Octaviana, 2019).

Data 6

Issue: *“One day during my university years, a TV program on child sexual abuse I happened to watch unleashed the flood of memories. It struck me that I had been sexually abused all those years ago.”*

Action: *“This is what I have been trying to do, raising awareness among people I know of how vulnerable children are to sexual abuse, so they educate their kids about the threat and make sure to keep them safe from sexual predators.”* (Asmarani, 2019)

According to the data provided by The Indonesian Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Child, there were a total of 25,052 reported cases of violence towards women in the year 2022. Specifically, around 50.3% of these cases involved acts of violence towards children, including sexual abuse (KemenPPPA, 2022). The high number of child sexual abuse in Indonesia is a serious concern that needs immediate action.

4. Victim Blaming

Victim blaming is the act of holding the victim of a crime, accidental, or harmful event responsible for the incident, either partially or entirely, instead of placing the primary responsibility on the perpetrator. It often occurs when individuals or society at large attribute the cause of the harm to the victim’s actions, choices, or behavior, rather than acknowledging the wrongfulness of the perpetrator’s actions or addressing broader systemic issues. The phenomenon

of victim blaming can manifest in various circumstances, including sexual assault, domestic violence, bullying, accidents, and other incidents. (Johnson et al., 2021).

Data 7

Issue: “Once at a weeklong retreat, the retreat director told me that I must’ve done something to encourage those men to abuse me. I was so angry. Isn’t it clear that I was the one abused here? Why does everyone seem to blame me? First, I was a victim of sexual abuse, then I became a victim of false accusations, and I had to take responsibility for someone else’s depravity.”

Action: “I started to fight back to seize my freedom, because I had been imprisoned by the accusations, and to begin my healing. Meeting the right people, feminists and humanists, I made my counter narrative. I started to tell my story, my side of the story-of the pain of being abused and being blamed for it. Women need to tell their side of the story to counter re-victimization.” (Asmarani, 2019)

In patriarchal societies, victim blaming can be used to maintain power imbalances by deflecting responsibility from perpetrators, many of whom may be men, and placing it on victims, particularly women. In cases of sexual assault, victim blaming frequently manifests as the victims being held accountable for the crime based on the assumption that they deviate from conventional ideas of modesty or sexual purity.

Discussions

Feminism seeks to challenge and dismantle the systemic inequalities and gender-based discrimination that have historically disadvantaged women. Unfortunately, many people still misunderstand the concept of feminism. The goal of feminism is to build a society where everyone, regardless of their gender, has opportunities and where harmful gender stereotypes and expectations are critically examined and confronted. It is not an assault on men but rather a call for a more equitable society where everyone can prosper while being treated with dignity and respect. It is crucial to engage in discussions about feminism that are grounded in accurate information in order to dispel misconceptions and foster a deeper understanding of its objectives and principles.

While the primary focus of feminism revolves around tackling the challenges faced by women, it is important to note that this movement brings about societal advantages and leads to positive effects for individuals of all genders. Certain forms of feminism, such as intersectional feminism, acknowledge and address matters that impact males, including toxic masculinity, the stigma surrounding mental health, and men’s experiences with patriarchy (D’Ignazio & Klein, 2020). By dismantling the expectations that society has set both for women and for men, feminism not only liberates women but also men. Men are given the opportunity to broaden their perspectives on life beyond the restrictive boundaries of conventional notions of masculinity (Tienari & Taylor, 2019).

Feminism is a transnational and intersectional movement that seeks to address issues related to gender inequality, discrimination, and oppression. Its forms and priorities vary in accordance with cultural, societal, and historical circumstances. Feminist groups have exhibited

longstanding engagement in non-Western nations over the course of centuries, supporting gender equality and women's rights while operating within specific cultural contexts. Feminist movements have emerged in several places, including Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and other areas, characterized by different objectives and challenges (Anderl, 2022; Khosroshahi & Saljoughi, 2023). Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge that feminism is not limited to any specific geographical or cultural boundaries. The movement is characterized by its diversity and inclusivity since it embraces a broad spectrum of viewpoints and strategies aimed at eliminating gender inequalities and promoting gender justice worldwide.

Gender inequality is a global issue, and it varies significantly from one region to another. In many parts of the world, women still lack basic rights and face severe discrimination and violence. While there have been legal advances in many countries to promote gender equality, the existence of laws does not guarantee full equality in practice. Discriminatory attitudes, stereotypes, and cultural norms still persist, affecting women's lives on a daily basis. Furthermore, new challenges and issues related to gender and equality continue to emerge, and feminism adapts to address these evolving concerns. For example, issues related to reproductive rights, online harassment, and workplace discrimination are contemporary feminist concerns (Blithe & Elliott, 2020; Gilby & Koivusalo, 2020; Wagner, 2022). Therefore, feminism remains relevant and necessary to address these issues and promote gender equality for all individuals, regardless of their gender.

One topic that has drawn attention in the feminism movement is street harassment. Street harassment is often rooted in gender-based power dynamics and reinforces the unequal treatment of women (DeGreco et al., 2021). It sends a message that women are not entitled to move through public spaces without being subjected to objectification and harassment. To address catcalling or street harassment, several actions can be taken, including raising awareness through campaigns and education, advocating for legal measures against harassment, fostering community support and bystander intervention, promoting education on consent and respect, and supporting organizations dedicated to combating harassment (Baptist & Coburn, 2019). These actions aim to create safer public spaces by challenging harmful behaviors and supporting a culture of respect and equality.

Another important issue that is addressed in the essay is child sexual abuse. In many cases, there is a lack of awareness among the public in Indonesia about child sexual abuse, its signs, and its consequences (Wismayanti et al., 2019). As a result, it could be challenging for victims to speak up and for authorities to respond effectively. Moreover, the stigma surrounding sexual abuse can discourage victims from reporting incidents or seeking help. Fear of social ostracization can keep victims silent (Sumampouw et al., 2020). Furthermore, law enforcement in some regions of Indonesia may face challenges in addressing child sexual abuse effectively. This can include issues related to reporting, investigation, and prosecution. To overcome the problem, the Indonesian government and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been working to raise awareness about child protection issues and provide support to victims (Wibowo, 2020). It is important to keep in mind that progress can be made in addressing child sexual abuse when governments, NGOs, communities, and individuals work together to raise awareness, improve reporting mechanisms, strengthen legal protections, and provide support to victims and their families.

Victim blaming frequently occurs in the case of sexual abuse. This harmful attitude is rooted in societal beliefs and stereotypes about how individuals, particularly women, should behave, dress, or interact with the opposite sex. When a sexual assault occurs, victim-blaming narratives can emerge, suggesting that the victim's behavior, clothing, or actions somehow provoked the assault. Blaming victims for not conforming to traditional notions of modesty reinforces harmful gender stereotypes and norms. It implies that women who do not conform to these ideals deserve or are more susceptible to sexual assault. It is important to emphasize that sexual assault is never the fault of the victim, regardless of their clothing, behavior, or choices. Blaming the victim for not adhering to conventional ideas reinforces negative stereotypes and excuses the behavior of perpetrators. Efforts to combat victim blaming should involve education, awareness-raising, and challenging harmful stereotypes and attitudes. Society must shift the focus from scrutinizing victims to holding perpetrators responsible for their actions.

CONCLUSION

Several misconceptions regarding feminism were discussed in the compilation of essays "The Feminist Minds". The common misconceptions were "feminism undermines men," "feminism only benefits women," "feminism is a Western ideology," and "feminism is no longer necessary because women and men are equal already". The essay writer clarifies these misconceptions by stating that feminism aims to create a society in which all people, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities and in which harmful gender norms and expectations are challenged. It is an effort for a more equal society where everyone can achieve their potential and be treated with respect and dignity. Over the span of centuries, feminist organizations have demonstrated longstanding engagement in non-Western nations, advocating women's rights and gender equality while acting within particular cultural contexts. Despite the progress made in terms of laws, discriminatory attitudes and cultural practices continue to persist. Therefore, feminism remains relevant and necessary in addressing these concerns. Several other women-related issues, such as street harassment, child sexual abuse, and victim blaming, were also addressed in the essays. The strategies employed to address the issue include several approaches, such as conducting awareness campaigns and educational initiatives, pushing for legislative measures, building community support, promoting education on consent and respect, and addressing negative stereotypes and attitudes. It is crucial to take into account that advancements can be achieved in tackling these concerns by collaborative efforts between communities and affiliated organizations, including initiatives to improve public awareness, strengthen legal protections, and provide support to individuals affected by these issues.

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