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From “Hot Mommies” to Differently Abled Mothers: Diverse Portrayals of Mothering in an Indonesian Women’s Magazine

By A. Priyatna¹, L.M. Rahayu², M. Subekti³

Abstract

Mothering and motherhood are among two key components of the construction of femininity. This study examined how mothering is embodied and performed by various women in *Femina*, Indonesia’s most popular women’s magazine, which targets primarily middle- or upper-middle-class women in their twenties and thirties. The sample set consisted of 17 portrayals of women as mothers in *Femina* during the years 2015 and 2016. We found that *Femina* depicts various ways in which women can function as mothers while remaining contented and balancing their different roles; in doing so, the magazine encourages a feminine and feminist celebration of mothering. *Femina*’s representations allow for the bridging and embracing of differences while at the same time constructing an ideal notion of femininity that highlights women’s ability to be successful in each of the multiple domains they enter, including their role as a mother.

Keywords: feminist mothering, Indonesian celebrities, women’s magazines, representation, work-life balance

Women’s magazines and the discourse of motherhood

It is widely recognized that women’s magazines contribute significantly to the construction of women’s understanding of femininity and their sense of identity. Media sources aimed at female audiences present varied images of women, thereby defining gender construction across races, classes, geographic settings, and socio-cultural norms. The practice of reading magazines thus facilitates an ongoing interplay between publications and their readers’ everyday lives. Brita Ytre-Arne (2012) has shown that readers of women’s magazines superimpose their own experiences on their practice of magazine reading; her research found that women “formulated narratives about their own identities, and they drew on various discourses that placed women’s magazines in relation to their subjective experiences of ordinary everyday life” (2012, p. 237). Thus, the impact

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of reading a particular women's magazine is not simply passive but more reflective and dialogic.

In Indonesia, *Femina* is consistently considered the most influential women's magazine (Nusaresearch, 2013). Its parent company, the Femina Group (n.d.), has expanded into a major corporation that produces 14 magazines and also operates various other businesses such as a creative boutique, an event organizing business, and a radio station. Established in 1972, *Femina* was described by Rhenald Kasali (1998, p. 153) as "the best magazine in its class" due to its advertising turnover and high circulation. On its webpage, *Femina* boasts that it has "grown to become a trusted media group as the contents are on a par with Indonesian values" ("Femina Group,").

But that last phrase calls for further inquiry. What does it mean to be a woman with "Indonesian values" or to be a mother in the Indonesian context? This paper seeks to answer that question by examining motherhood as portrayed by *Femina* during the years 2015 and 2016.

Femina clearly targets adult women of reproductive age, as most of its readers are in their twenties and thirties (Nusaresearch, 2013). Nusaresearch found that eight of every ten middle- and upper-class Indonesian respondents were aware of *Femina*. Most of the magazine's readers appear to be middle- or upper-middle-class women juggling both mothering and a career.

Nusaresearch (2013) further found that 83% of the respondents identified "good articles" as the main reason why readers choose a magazine. Therefore, we can conclude that ideas about gender construction are disseminated across a society and produce social reactions through the articles contained in women's magazines. These publications have the potential to establish, stabilize, negotiate, or even resist and subvert normative gender construction patterns.

According to Ardaneshwari (2013), Indonesian women's magazines fall into three major categories with regard to how they portray the relationship between career and family roles. The first group of magazines positions women as "domestic goddesses" and full supporters of their husband's career. Second, some magazines depict women as subjects responsible for making their own life choices, including those pertaining to domestic and career roles. The third category describes an image of "superwomen" who can maintain a successful career and also perform flawlessly in caring for their family. In any case, it is impossible for a women's magazine to say nothing about the controversial issue of women's roles; on the contrary, how its articles portray the domestic sphere necessarily implies a particular set of values regarding women's position as wives and mothers.

Given these multiple categories of women's magazines, we realize that analyzing only the most influential one, *Femina*, does not provide a comprehensive representation of how women's magazines in Indonesia view mothering. However, since *Femina* is the flagship publication of an established women's media network that also produces other magazines for women, it is useful to consider how this magazine's feature articles depict mothering in everyday life. Not all the women highlighted in *Femina* are celebrities in the sense of having attained considerable fame in Indonesian popular culture, but all of them have accrued some public recognition. In this paper, we use a broad definition of celebrity, following Marshall (2000), who argued that "celebrity can be thought of as the general and encompassing term, whereas concepts of hero, star, and leader are more specific categories of the public individual that relate to specific functions in the public sphere" (2000, p. 7).

Portrayals of mothering in *Femina*

By reviewing selected issues of *Femina* from the years 2015 and 2016, we considered how the magazine portrayed female celebrities in their roles as mother, wife, and public figure. We focused on narratives that can be considered biographical or autobiographical, to ensure that they provided a relatively complete narrative of the lives portrayed and of the practice of mothering, regardless of the type of article. In *Femina*, life narratives, albeit ephemerally, are presented in several types of articles. For example, *Selebritas* (Celebrity) covers women who are making a name for themselves in the entertainment industry, while *Profil* (Profile) describes high-achieving women in other industries. The *Cerita Sampul* (Cover Story) generally features well-known Indonesian women. These narratives and even some advertorials (ANZ and Prasetiya Mulya) portray women's lives in inspiring ways, depicting them as both successful career women and (almost) perfect mothers and wives who can seamlessly navigate their multiple roles and still manage to look presentable.

Whereas the best-known celebrities covered in *Femina* are in various entertainment fields, the professionals are active in a wide range of careers such as stockbroker, architect, writer, banker, and activist. These responsibilities suggest time-consuming types of work that require mothers to be away from home. Thus, these women may not be able to attend consistently to their children and domestic chores, creating a critical tension between the public and the private parts of life, or between the mother and the career woman.

Our sample consists of 17 portrayals of female mothers, selected because their stories not only identify them as mothers but also discuss how they mother. *Femina*'s usual practice, as with most print and online tabloids, is to give each woman's age when first introducing her. As a result, we know that three of the women featured are in their twenties, six in their thirties, and four in their forties. The age of four other women is not given, but Internet research identified one of them as in her thirties. The women featured in *Profil* are mostly professional career women in their thirties (two cases) and forties (four cases). The celebrities featured in *Selebritas* are in their twenties (two women) and thirties (four women). Five female mothers are featured in three different advertisements, along with other women who are not included in the analysis because they are not portrayed as mothers. The only non-Indonesian mother is Marina Ivie, featured in *Kisah Sejati*. She is also the only differently abled mother portrayed in this selection of issues and one of the two single mothers along with Rita Padawangi, who appears in a *Profil*. All women except one have children of their own; the exception is Gista Putri, a celebrity who married a single father with four teenage to grown children. Gista is an interesting case because the age difference between her and her oldest stepchild is only seven years.

“Hot mommies” and the postfeminist ideal balance

In its edition issue No 37 published in September 2016, *Femina* placed on its cover three celebrities who were also mothers. The tag line read, “Mamah Muda Rules: *Anak, Karier, Eksis!*” *Mamah muda* literally means *young mother*. Often shortened to *Mahmud*, it refers to mothers of young children who maintain some physical attractiveness and beauty; thus, a suitable English equivalent is “Hot Mommies.” *Femina* actually uses that English-language term in the *Selebritas* feature in this edition, although it prefers the Indonesian term *mamah muda*⁴ in other articles.

⁴ We translated all quotations from Bahasa Indonesia into English. Words or phrases originally written in English in the magazine are noted in italics, as are words that we present in the original Bahasa Indonesia language.

To shed the light on the phenomenon of *mamah muda*, *Femina* also published a related article by a male standup comedian, Soleh Solihun. His article, entitled “*Mamah Muda: Matang dan Menggemaskan*” (*Mamah Muda: Mature and Adorable*), contends that the term is more correctly translated and understood as “yummy mummy” or “milf” than as a compliment for a capable mother. Solihun (2016, p. 79) stated as follows:

It’s true, the primary reason why a woman with children can be called *mamah muda* is physical attractiveness. What can I say? That’s life. Ha ha ha. [...] I am sorry for being Mr. Wise Man. Besides, we cannot really judge a person’s personality in a short time and in just one glance, unlike judging physicality [attraction]. We can easily decide whether a person is attractive with just one glance.

It was not easy to read this piece without feeling slightly offended. In many parts of the articles, although Solihun seemed to want to compliment the *mamah muda*, he does so at the expense of other women who do not qualify for this category. For example, he stated, “Women over forty, even if they have children under five, are no longer worthy to be called *mamah muda* ... simply because they are old” (Solihun, 2016, p. 79). He further emphasized that to be a *mamah muda*, one must be not only young and beautiful, but also ready to care for one’s children and husband. Solihun (2016, p. 79) wrote as follows:

While men are happy to see their wife being successful in her own respective work, they are happier to see her being successful and still also being a good mother for their children. Not only that, but men want to be cared for by their partner. Seeing a *mamah muda* who is capable of caring for the children makes men feel safe and comfortable, and that they will be well taken care of as well.

Solihun’s comments confirm Lawler’s (2000) argument that in essence, mothering is about meeting children’s needs, to the extent that “good mothers give children what they need (principally attention, unconditional love, communication, freedom), while bad mothers either fail to give their children these things or give them too much of them” (2000, p. 125). For Lawler, needs are constructed and socio-culturally bound. Following Woollett and Phoenix, Lawler (2000) contended that mothering, even when primarily understood in a relatively neutral way as meeting people’s needs, is a gendered position assigned to women. Mothers are expected to serve not only their children’s needs, but also those of their husbands. In this way, “wifing” is another form of mothering, as Solihun’s observations clearly indicate. Being a good wife and a good mother, dutifully caring for both husband and children, go together.

Within the same issue of *Femina*, the main feature, *Selebritas*, opens with a statement that three celebrities “can be considered a representation of the daily life of contemporary young mothers—busy with their career, capable in taking care of their children, and still looking awesome” (“Hot Mommies!,” 2016). The word *still* implies wonder or surprise that a woman can continue to appear attractive after giving birth. The implied message is that women naturally become fat, ugly, and boring after childbirth, or perhaps even simply after getting married. In celebrity culture, being a physically desirable and publicly active mother is a prerequisite for the construction of a woman’s celebrity status. Appealing appearance is also a key factor in what Jorie Lagerwey (2017) described as “Brand Mom.” In this case, almost without exception, celebrities

need to brand themselves as a different kind of mother, highlighting the distinctive features that distinguish them from other celebrities and other women generally. In their ability to juggle their domestic and public roles as well as maintaining their appearance, they present themselves as extraordinary, yet they are also ordinary as shown by their submission to the natural and normative role of being a mother. As Dyer (2001) and Redmond (2006) argued, the intertwining of ordinariness and extraordinariness is among the key factors by which celebrities can commodify their celebrity status.

In *Postfeminist Celebrity and Motherhood: Brand Mom*, Lagerwey (2017) discussed how the media increasingly portrays and constructs female celebrities in the context of motherhood and how those celebrities (minor and major) use motherhood as a way to brand themselves. Among the prominent examples, Lagerwey cited Jessica Alba, Gwyneth Paltrow, Kim Kardashian, and Kate Middleton. For these celebrities, motherhood does not simply refer to a reproductive moment; it is, more importantly for their careers, an “entrepreneurial opportunity” to reinvent themselves. They balance their image between the emancipated feminist subjects and the postfeminist women who embrace their wom(b)anhood, engendering what has been called a “mommy culture.”

Following Lagerwey (2017), we argue that this mommy culture has elevated a mother’s role into a certain formulation for the purposes of self-branding. Mothers can now recreate themselves as proponents of different political and/or commercial agendas, while continuing to be represented as an ideal mother. One example is the *Femina* narrative about Cathy Sharon, which introduces her with the following paragraph:

Her role as a mother has ignited Cathy Sharon’s (33) passion for a healthy lifestyle for her family. Not stopping there, she feels driven to develop her *Brassica oleracea ocephala* [Indonesian for kale] business and its other processed products to boost the campaign for healthy eating habits (Fausto, 2016b, p. 48).

Here, Cathy Sharon was using her motherhood to brand her business by establishing the idea that the business was based on her maternal love for her children. The healthy lifestyle she promotes is grounded in her role as a mother. This situates her public role within the domestic domain, thereby making her ambition and aspirations more acceptable.

The same can be said of Linda Lee, who is branded “Mama Trader” to underscore her success as a trader and as a mother. “Being a housewife does not hinder her from inspiring other people to obtain wealth through stock investments” (Fausto, 2016a, p. 56). Although the stock market is largely a male-dominated sphere, her work there is toned down by the brand name Mama Trader, making trading more women-friendly and her own work thereby feminized. Both Cathy Sharon and Linda Lee represent “Brand Mom” in the sense that “images of ‘real’ moms are used to create personal brands and sell lifestyles either via advertising or consumer products” (Lagerwey, 2017, p. 10).

The emphasis on the role of women as ever-present mothers has formed what Douglas and Michaels (2004) defined as the “new momism, [...] a highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet” (2004, p. 4). As Ardaneshwari (2013) pointed out, such an ideology that urges women to aspire for superwoman status, performing flawlessly in both the public and domestic domains, is oppressive. Still, just like the global media, the Indonesian media sell the idea of a “superwoman” or even a “super mom” who is not only successful in the public realm but also a very capable homemaker. All that is, of course, in addition to being “hot” as well. After all, our contemporary life is flooded with media images showing how celebrities can, seemingly with ease, develop “post-baby hot bods.”

Mothering and childrearing

In this section, we turn to depictions of childrearing arrangements and the household division of labor. In general, mothering is exclusively gendered and feminized, as shown by narratives that appear to glorify the still-flourishing mommy culture. We aim to show how portrayals of diverse ways of mothering contribute to a more egalitarian construction and understanding. Egalitarian mothering may replace the normative assignment of caring tasks solely to women with a more inclusive arrangement that takes into account the contributions of different members of the family as well as different structures of families. We argue that the portrayal of diverse ways of mothering can help to disrupt the normative ideal of mothering as suggested by mommy culture. As Lagerwey (2017, pp. 117-118) contended:

Mommy culture is one visible manifestation of the ways in which women's reproductive bodies are mobilized as a political battleground for unspoken and unspeakable ideological clashes about the future of the nation and what kinds of people are the most culturally valued citizens. ... Celebrity women's maternal bodies serve as instruction manuals of a sort for proper postfeminist citizenship.

Drawing from Lagerwey (2017), it can be argued that mommy culture provides a locus for ideological struggles to define what constitutes good women and good mothers. Celebrities who do not lose heart in their struggle to become pregnant, as well as those who celebrate their fertility, pregnancy, and motherhood, have become heroic role models in the struggle of the womb. At the same time, this obsession also reveals the public's preoccupation with maternal functions. Lagerwey (2017) further argued that this tendency to valorize maternity softens feminist achievements and makes them more acceptable through the performance of motherhood. It is thus not surprising that one of women's most important ideological struggles is their effort to negotiate and balance their successes in both the public and domestic domains, so that their mothering and childrearing can serve to reinforce their postfeminist self.

The negotiation regarding childrearing and domestic chores underlies the contestation between patriarchal ideologies and the (post)feminist stance. Childrearing and domestic work are normatively the predominant responsibilities of mothers. Such responsibilities and obligations not only take up much of women's time but also, more importantly from a socio-cultural perspective, define their femininity and motherhood. Although there have been debates about the appropriate sharing of domestic work, nowadays women are still doing the lion's share of this activity. For women, it is an obligation; for men, it is a form of support and assistance, often regarded as generosity if they participate at all.

In some of the depictions of house chores, husbands are completely absent from the narratives. Although the husbands are mentioned as being somewhat supportive of their wife and of the mother of their children, their role in domestic chores goes unmentioned. This pattern appears, for example, in the portrayals of Linda Lee, Gista Putri, and Cathy Sharon. Although all three contended that they have a supportive husband, they mentioned no specific domestic help provided to them (nor did they affirm that they do everything by themselves). How the domestic chores get done is completely out of the picture. This omission may be due to a perception that admitting that these superwomen resort to paid help could somehow contaminate the portrayal of an ideal, normative mother and wife. The absence of either domestic staff help or any mention of the husband's share of domestic chores confirms the normative expectation of ideal motherhood (and wifedom).

This norm can also be clearly seen in the sense of pride shown by the women in the “Hot Mommies” article. For example, in response to the question “You’re all very busy. Who is taking care of the little ones?” the three celebrities portrayed in “Hot Mommies” stated the following:

Nagitha: I still take care of Rafathar. Even though I can leave him at my mother’s place or my mother-in-law’s, in general I take care of him myself. I am used to taking care of my youngest brother because I never have any nannies.

Jenny: My firstborn, Keiko Matsui (6), is already in first grade, and her sibling is in kindergarten. To ease the situation, I arranged for them to be picked up and brought home by a school pickup service. But I still cook their meals myself. So, I wake up at 5:15 every day to prepare their meals, their lunches, and two snacks.

Shareefa: My activities now focus on taking care of my son and my husband, Ferry Icksan. So far, we haven’t used any help from babysitters or domestic helpers. We want to be by our son during his golden period (“Hot Mommies!”, 2016, p. 61).

The three celebrities viewed domestic work as their responsibility, and none of them mentioned any help extended by their husbands. They also took pride in explaining that they do it all without any help from either family members or domestic workers (the latter source of assistance is quite common in Indonesia). Their pride implies that these values are closely connected to their ability to carry out the normative ideal of motherhood.

In an otherwise rather downcast portrayal of single mothers, *Femina* depicts a more empowering and inspiring portrayal of motherhood through the lives of Marina Ivie and Rita Padawangi. Marina Ivie was abandoned by her husband only six months after the birth of their long-awaited baby, Jayson (Priandarini, 2015). Rita Padawangi split from her husband after eight years of marriage because “she is working full time and traveling a lot; she is often accused of having transgressed against her fate (*Kodrati*) of being a woman” (Smita, 2016, p. 59). This accusation targeted at career women like Rita Padawangi is not unusual; in fact, one of the present authors has also experienced it intensely. Feminist scholars have long identified the need to break the myth of women’s destiny to be housewives and the second sex. The norm of ideal motherhood positions women as the only caregivers, responsible for attending to the needs of their husband and children. A presumed failure to perform this responsibility fully is regarded as transgressive. The challenge for single mothers is to parent singlehandedly while also assuming the responsibilities of breadwinner and care provider at the same time. Both women were portrayed as coping well with the situation, balancing their mothering and their career.

The narrative on Rita Padawangi described her as having bonded well with her two children, who have strengthened her in their own simple way; “They are the ones who always keep her spirit high through simple words like ‘I love you, Mami’ or their hugs every day” (Smita, 2016, p. 59). We find her portrayal most appealing because it is more nuanced. It does not describe her as a postfeminist mother with flawless achievements in both the domestic and professional domains, but instead depicts her difficulties in maintaining a successful career as well as the personal risks to which a successful woman is often exposed. The article does not depict Rita as a perfect mother—rather, it illuminates the various “challenges” that leave her unable to fulfil her ideal obligations as a mother—yet she still feels “lucky” to have her children with her.

Mariana Ivie, in her article, radiated a similar positive attitude toward life, even though she is both a single mother and disabled. She was grateful that she could give birth to a healthy baby son, but her condition restricted her ability to perform fully as a mother; “Being a mother is an invaluable experience. But with only one leg, I have difficulty in doing even the simplest thing” (Priandarini, 2015, p. 80). Having a son pushed Mariana to improve herself and to pursue becoming equipped with a prosthetic leg, which she obtained through crowdfunding from GiveForward.com. The new leg enabled her to function more fully as a mother. The story quoted Mariana’s ecstatic post on her Facebook page: “A few days after I wore the prosthetic leg, my son, Jayson, and I watched Sesame Street on the television. When the music played, for the first time in our life, I could dance with him” (Priandarini, 2015, p. 80). Just as Rita Padawangi was portrayed positively despite being a single mother, so was Mariana, in spite of her disability. She is depicted as having the will power to overcome her disability, but in addition, the disability becomes a motivating force spurring her on to success. Furthermore, becoming a mother pushed Mariana to overcome rather than succumb to her physical limitations.

A more egalitarian portrayal of mothering appears in the narrative about Monika Indriasari. She can keep up with her busy schedule because of the help offered to her from many sources, including her husband. His contribution is explicitly described as “carrying out the domestic chores, from making breakfast to helping with their children’s schoolwork, from taking their children out to attending school meetings” (Larobu, 2016, p. 52).

We would suggest that sharing the role of mothering with the husband is a form of “feminist mothering” (Green, 2009) because it provides an alternative to the gender-based division of labor under which all the domestic tasks fall to the woman. Tjendera Widjaja, who is portrayed in an advertorial narrative, remembered how her mother always emphasized the importance of having a career or other public role, not just tasks at home. Now, having become married herself, Tjendera stressed that “it is important to have an equal position in a marriage, not only to respect each other but also to share the responsibilities” (“Perempuan Indonesia,” 2015). Though not stated explicitly, a similar desire for shared responsibilities is conveyed by Kamidia Radisti’s portrayal. She stated, “I always choose jobs that enable my husband and me to be directly involved with the rearing of our children” (“Cerita Sampul: Menyeimbangkan Peran sebagai Ibu dan Wanita Bekerja,” 2015, p. 18). In short, as Monika Indriasari indicated, mothering requires teamwork, and the husband and wife are a team who “complete each other” (Larobu, 2016, p. 52).

In her seminal work *Of Woman Born*, Rich (1995) declared that motherhood must be understood as an institution and an experience. In this case, whereas motherhood as an institution is largely patriarchal and “male-defined,” motherhood as experience can be considered a “source of power” (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 2). In other words, motherhood as experience is the equivalent of mothering as a form of feminine agency.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the different representations of mothering in *Femina*, Indonesia’s leading women’s magazine. In general, within their different contexts, all mothers are described as balancing and performing effectively their responsibilities in the public and private domains, with or without help from either their spouses or domestic assistants. All narratives suggest that women cherish their role as a mother, and mothering is seen as an empowering task and not simply a burden. In some cases, mothering has extended its meaning from a caring function to encompass empowering and inspiring functions as well. Being a mother has given these women

a place to manifest their interests and aspirations—“to make changes,” as Rita Padawangi asserted (Smita, 2016, p. 59). Despite the predominant portrayal of a perfectly balanced experience of motherhood, the magazine displays the different contexts entailed in mothering. Overall, however, the message is that the functions traditionally associated with mothering remain gendered, in that women continue to be the primary care provider not only for their children but also for their husband.

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