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## **Feminist Knowledge, Self-Empowerment and Sisterhood, and Safe Space: How the “Perempuan Berkisah” Community Group Empowers Indonesian Women in the Pandemic Era**

By Rouli Esther Pasaribu<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This research aims to understand how the Perempuan Berkisah community group empowers women during the pandemic in Indonesia and how to critically interpret the phenomenon of women's empowerment. The research employed a content analysis method investigating Perempuan Berkisah's Instagram account and interviewing and distributing a questionnaire to the community's founder, committees, and general members. This study analyzed the kinds of empowerment narratives offered, identified the dynamic narratives on the Instagram account since its first establishment in 2019, and critically read the results of Instagram feed content analysis and interviews about women's empowerment. This research revealed three elements to build a women's empowerment narrative: feminist knowledge, selfhood and sisterhood, and a safe space. The concept of empowerment offered is empowerment focusing on efforts to help, strengthen, and support other women instead of empowering alone and leaving other women behind. This research also analyzed missing or absent elements in women's empowerment narratives of Perempuan Berkisah's Instagram account. The findings discovered insufficient narratives of men, formal structure statements, and dialogues with groups with different points of view. This insufficiency interprets the internalization of neoliberal values emphasizing individual responsibility to accelerate or develop oneself as an individual or part of a community; consequently, it neglects the state responsibility to create gender equality in society. This research contributes to a study on online feminist activism, women's community, and women and the pandemic, especially in Indonesia.

*Keywords:* Digital feminist activism, Feminist perspectives, Women's community, Women's empowerment

### **Introduction**

Women are one of the most vulnerable groups whose lives have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. This vulnerability is apparent in various aspects, including formal and informal employment (Hewamanne, 2021; Deshai, et. al., 2021; Craig, et. al., 2020; Power, 2020), physical and mental well-being (Obinna, 2020; Seck, et. al., 2021), and increasing domestic violence (UN 2020; Kabeer, et. al., 2021).

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The situations described above also occur in Indonesia. Sigiro (2020, p iv) stated, “(...) the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia has brought more burden and vulnerabilities for women. The inequalities between gender identity, class position, social status, and the pandemic woven together have caused multiple vulnerability of women and other marginalized groups.” For example, the number of violent assaults against women has increased (Krismantari, 2020). The data of the National Commission on Violence against Women in Indonesia reported that “violence against women has increased almost eight times over the past 12 years, and during the Covid-19 pandemic, this violence has further increased by 63%” (Puspa, 2020).

Women’s vulnerability during Covid-19 has led many online and offline community groups of women’s empowerment to get more active. They support women, especially during the pandemic. One of the communities advocating women’s empowerment is Perempuan Berkisah, which means “women tell the stories.” (This article will abbreviate Perempuan Berkisah to “PB”.)

The PB community group was founded by Alimah Fauzan, a gender equality activist based in Yogyakarta. The community was established in 2015 by launching its official website providing learning resources and stories of women’s empowerment processes by Alimah Fauzan and other women. In 2015, Alimah Fauzan solely managed PB without any members. Then, PB created an Instagram account in 2019, namely @perempuanberkisah. Initially, the Instagram account only functioned as a knowledge-sharing media. However, it has gradually expanded into a platform to share stories and strengthen fellow women.

As PB’s Instagram followers have grown to 77,800 followers, the editorial team of PB Instagram has held several face-to-face meetings with the followers in some cities. These meetings founded the PB community at the end of 2019. PB has grown in recent years, and currently has 414 members across Indonesia. The PB community has positioned itself as a “media of empowerment, catalysator of change, and safe space following feminist ethics” (PB website). Furthermore, the vision of this community is to “be women’s empowerment media and a safe space to share knowledge and studies of feminist approaches.” Meanwhile, its mission is to “1. Develop the media to be a forum to empower and share knowledge, studies, and inspirational woman stories; 2. create a safe space for women under feminist approaches; and 3. promote critical-transformative awareness based on women’s experiences.” (PB website).

This community had been established shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic occurred. Therefore, almost all of its activities are adjusted to follow the physical and social distancing policies to face the pandemic. The knowledge is mostly distributed online by utilizing various platforms, especially Instagram, conducting joint discussions, and sharing content of feminist knowledge. The PB community also provides its supports on WhatsApp or collaboration with other institutions for bullying and violence victims. In addition, PB promotes their community members’ business during the pandemic.

After observing and following the development of the PB community, I am interested in studying this community further, especially its relation to the condition of Indonesian women during the Covid-19 pandemic. I analyzed the role of the PB community as a women’s empowerment space during the pandemic. This research formulized two research questions:

1. How does the PB community build the empowerment narrations on its Instagram account?
2. How can we critically read the PB community’s effort to empower women?

This research contributes to feminism studies, particularly in women empowerment and feminism in Indonesia. Since social media is used as a platform to promote social activism, many studies have investigated social media and activism. However, only a few have explored social media and activism in Indonesia. Therefore, this study will focus on exploring digital feminist activism in Indonesia, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. To position this study in a broader context, this study initially mapped social media and the women's empowerment movement through literature reviews. The next sections were conducting research methods, findings, and discussion. The data were collected from the Instagram account of the PB group community. Meanwhile, the supporting data were collected by interview 13 respondents, consisting of the PB founder, committee, and members in direct and written forms. The result and discussion sections are divided into four sub-sections: feminist knowledge, selfhood dan sisterhood, safe space, and absent elements: how we critically read PB. This article will end with a conclusion and potential topics for further research.

## Literature Review

Feminist movements in each wave have their characteristics, depending on the historical period of its occurrence. Recently, the feminist movements have entered the fourth wave, starting in 2008. One of the most observable characteristics of this movement is the awareness of intersexuality and the use of ICT (information and communications technology) for their activities (Looft, 2017). Unlike the previous generations, this fourth wave "is known for its savvy use of social media and technology to tackle many similar issues previously articulated by the third, second, and first feminist wave (Looft 2017: 893). Baumgardner (2011) in Looft (2017, p. 893) defines the fourth feminist movement as "a predominantly online presence to create community, connect across national lines, and reach far larger audiences than before."

The explanation above shows that ICT has become a normality for feminist activism in this era. Before the beginning of the fourth wave, women's empowerment had utilized technology. Activism called "cyberfeminism" has started in the middle of 1990s (Tuscu, 2016; Wilding, 1998 in Loney-Howes, et. al., 2021). The feminists in this era optimistically using ICT to raise the awareness of global feminism and reach beyond time, place, and space (Hawthorne & Klein 1999, Spender 1995 in Loney-Howes, et. al., 2021). Since the beginning of the 2000s, feminist movements have widely used online spaces. The emergence of various social media platforms, such as blogger (2003), WordPress (2004), Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006), and Instagram (2010) enables activism to more develop the use of technology, spread news or information, and mobilize the mass (Loney-Howes, et. al., 2021). Online feminist movements use several hashtags, such as #YesAllWomen, #WhyIStayed (2014), #RapeCultureIsWhen (2015), #EndRapeCulture (2016), #MeToo (2017), #WeToo (2018). These examples have raised women's awareness of issues on social media.

Digital media literacy for Indonesian women remains low because of inadequate education, lack of opportunities, and the patriarchal system (Suwana, et. al., 2017). Nevertheless, the digital feminist movements have spread in Indonesia. Previous studies on digital feminist activism in Indonesia were conducted by Maryani, et. al., (2018), Parahita (2019), and Winarnita, et al. (2020). Maryani, et. al. observed closely the community of male feminists, "Aliansi Laki-laki Baru" (a new alliance of men). Meanwhile, Winarnita, et.al., investigated the digital feminist activism by journalists of two online feminist media in Indonesia. Finally, Parahita focused more on mapping the rise of digital feminist activism initiated by a younger generation of feminists. The three studies

have a similar main argument that the digital feminist movement in Indonesia gives positive impacts on creating a space to talk about gender issues, responding to views against feminism, and providing a safe digital space to share private stories and develop ideas against patriarchal discourses.

Previous case studies in various countries by Puente (2011), Clark (2016), Guillard (2016), Flores et al. (2020), Eslen-Ziya (2013), and Nas (2021) deploy that digital feminist movements have brought changes and positive impacts. Puente (2011, p. 344) investigated how the practice of online feminist activism in Spain raised the issues of sexual violence and argued that "...online collectives and networks served as one of the most expressive forms of contemporary political articulation by feminist praxis online." Eslen-Ziya (2013, p. 868) studied online feminist activism in Turkey and concluded that "social media were a forceful tool facilitating easy receipt and dissemination of information, building and strengthening activists' ties, and increasing communication." Meanwhile, Nas (2021) examined the use of social media in Turkey to advocate spaces for women in mosques dominated by men. He argues that digital space allows female activists in Turkey to produce alternative narration of using mosques.

Clark (2016, p. 801) focused her research on the hashtag #WhyIStayed on Twitter and discovered that "in the social media era, hashtag protests, such as #WhyIStayed, have overshadowed offline demonstrations and formal movement organizations in the US. This condition results in more intersectional and open feminist movements. The participants of these movements are not restricted into the potentially exclusionary membership practices of organizations, and their voices are not filtered through institutional gatekeepers." In other words, digital feminist activism has destroyed the walls of exclusivity. Therefore, more people can participate without any limitation from the formal bureaucracy.

Guillard (2016) and Flores et al. (2020) examined the utilization of social media to evoke younger generation's awareness of women's issues. They conducted experiments by designing classes for university students and involving women students using social media for activism. They revealed that social media could function as an effective tool to invite younger generations to actively participate in feminist movements and raise their awareness of women's issues in society. However, these online activities must be balanced with offline activities to achieve maximal goals. Although these previous studies proved that social media was an effective tool to voice women's issues, the following studies observed the relationship between social media and women empowerment more critically.

Saraswati (2021) wrote a book, entitled *Pain Generation: Social Media, Feminist Activism, and Neoliberal Selfie* and observed the complex relationship between digital platforms and women's movements by observing three female activists on social media. Saraswati argued that although these accounts showed strong women's empowerment, there was a layer of neoliberalism that shifted women's movements to social media. Besides, she argued that neoliberal values structured and governed social media, emphasize individual success, and tended to neglect structural problems, which are keys to significant changes.

Some other researches revealed negative sides of the feminism campaign on social media. Like Saraswati, Baer (2012), and Jane (2016) revealed that social media likely converted structural problems into individual problems, which only resulted in individual changes. Therefore, social media did not significantly change a bigger structure. Looft (2017), Trott (2020), and Loney-Howes et al. (2021) posit that there are hierarchy and power relations of online women's movements on social media, and the position of certain persons or groups of people affects the most viral voices. The most observable example is the #MeToo movement against sexual

harassment. This movement became viral after a white Hollywood actress, Allysya Milano, posted the harassment in 2017. Whereas in reality, this hashtag was created by a Black woman activist, Tarana Burke, in 2006.

These two following studies convey other negative sides of using media social for activism. Lim (2013) highlighted Indonesian social media movements, especially Facebook. Lim did not focus on online feminist movements; she contended that the natures of social media, such as instant, entertainment, rapidness, and focuses on individual expression, did not allow significant changes in a wider scope of society. Schuster (2013) conveys that the younger generation has utilized technology and social media to participate in the feminist movements. On the other hand, the women's empowerment movements on social media have created a generation gap between the younger generation with high digital literacy and the older generation without utilizing ICT for feminist activism. This difference polarizes the two generations.

From the previous studies on the relation between social media and women's empowerment movements, we observed two categories. The first is optimistic parties who argue that women's empowerment movements on social media can change society. This group believes that social media mobilizes a mass of people, spreads information, and globalizes scope. The second is non-optimistic parties, who argue that activism on social media is not effective and will not result in structural changes. Even if there are some changes, they will be restricted to individual scopes. Although the previous studies criticized the use of social media for women's empowerment activism in Spain, Turkey, the US, New Zealand, and Indonesia, none of them investigated the women's empowerment movement in the PB community. Moreover, there are only a few studies examining the online feminist movement during the Covid-19 pandemic. Investigations on Covid-19 and its relation with Indonesian women's life were conducted by Qibtiyah (2020), Robert et al. (2020), Yo et al. (2020), Faizah (2020), and Elfira et al. (2021). However, there is no discussion of the online feminist movement during the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia. By closely studying the feminist movement in the PB community, this research fills this gap.

## **Research Methods**

This research employed a feminist method. This method prioritizes women's experience to build knowledge. Research with the feminist framework "is attentive to diversity issues, questions social power, resists to scientific oppressions, and commits to political activism and social justice" (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004, p.3). Fonow et al. (2005) propose five principles of the feminist method:

1. Putting women and gender as the analysis focus.
2. Realizing the importance of building awareness.
3. Questioning objectivity norms on knowledge because it is built by specific historical contexts.
4. Concerning ethical implications along with the research process and utilizing research results.
5. Emphasizing women's empowerment and social transformation of patriarchal institutions through the research.

This research employed a mixed-qualitative method, combined a content analysis on PB's Instagram account, interviewed two committee representatives, and distributed a questionnaire to the founder, two committee representatives, and eight members of the PB community. The primary data were collected from the Instagram feed, while the supporting data were gained from the interviews and questionnaire to analyze the Instagram feed.

The research analysis was limited to 1,156 posts on PB's Instagram feeds. The feeds started from February 2, 2019, to June 17, 2021. I used a content analysis to analyze these feeds. Krippendorff (1980) in Rose (2001: 55) defines "a content analysis as a way to understand symbolic qualities of texts, and the elements of a text always refer to its wider cultural context." Conducting a content analysis on images and texts on PB's Instagram account means reading the symbolism behind them and connecting them to a broader cultural context.

In practice, the data of the Instagram feed were observed from three aspects: theme of the feed and captions, feed's illustrations, and feed's color composition. I traced PB's Instagram feed and made a table of categories to present the recurring structures on its Instagram feed.

Interviews were conducted on the Zoom application and questionnaires were distributed through Google Form. I contacted the founder of the PB community and asked her permission to research their community. I received names and contacts of the community administrators from the founder. Then, I reached out to them to schedule the interview or questionnaire answer. Two respondents were interviewed on Zoom, and three respondents answered questions uploaded on Google Form. Furthermore, I conducted a questionnaire distribution with community members with the help of the community founder. The questionnaire link was distributed on the community's WhatsApp Group. Eight members filled the questionnaire on the Google Form.

This study gained 13 respondents aged 22-38 years old. Thus, the average age was 29.7 years old. Their occupational backgrounds were private company employees, doctors, librarians, students, women activists, and research assistants. Meanwhile, their educational backgrounds varied. One participant was taking a bachelor's degree, seven participants earned a bachelor's degree, one participant graduated from a professional medical doctor, and four participants earned a master's degree. They were from several big cities: Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Semarang, and Medan. Moreover, one respondent was from a small city in Central Java.

The interview and questionnaire questioned their motivations for joining the community, knowledge of feminist perspectives before joining the community, problems during the pandemic, and the merits of joining the community. These data were collected from early to mid-June 2021. The interview and questionnaire results were then processed by examining recurring keywords and patterns of the respondents' narration.

## **Results and Discussion**

To understand how the empowerment narration is built by PB, I conducted a content analysis by focusing on three components: visual signs, verbal signs, and color compositions. The following table explains each component.

**Table 1: General Information of Instagram Feeds**

No	Component Analysis	Explanation
1.	Visual signs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Illustrating women’s activities, such as reading, cooking, thinking, crying, and hugging with another woman.</li> <li>2. Illustrating women’s emotions, such as smiles, laughing, anger, and crying.</li> <li>3. Illustrating real lives of female public figures who are confident and become icons for women’s empowerment</li> <li>4. Picturing speakers on the community’s IG live events or Zoom webinar</li> </ol>
2.	Verbal signs	<p>Captions each illustration on the feeds, including:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Stories of successful women in local and global contexts</li> <li>2. Stories of sexual harassment sent by various people to PB’s Instagram account</li> <li>3. Self-empowerment and community’s empowerment to create motivational sentences</li> <li>4. Description of events by the PB community</li> <li>5. Holiday greetings, such as Eid, Christmas, and Waisak</li> </ol>
3.	Color compositions	<p>There were several color compositions in this platform. However, the most dominant color was purple. These compositions were:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. White-based illustrations with women wearing purple cloth</li> <li>2. Purple-based illustrations with women wearing other colors</li> <li>3. White-based illustration with women wearing other colors, such as yellow, green, and pink</li> <li>4. Yellow-based illustration with women wearing purple</li> <li>5. Pastel-based illustration with women wearing pastel colors</li> </ol>

The content analysis on Instagram feeds revealed that the recurring narratives were feminist knowledge, selfhood and sisterhood, and a safe space. In this sub-chapter, I will discuss these themes in more detail.

*Feminist Knowledge*

Before the digital world became an essential part of everyday life and especially before the huge growth of social media in the 2010s, the spread of knowledge and information was limited to only a few privileged groups with access. Such a condition also happened to feminist knowledge. Feminist knowledge was exclusive because only a specific group of people, such as students or scholars of gender and feminism studies, could access it. The terms patriarchy, power relations, gender roles, masculinity, and femininity were only found at university, and the discussion about feminist issues was limited. However, the thriving of social media in daily life has made the space to obtain and distribute knowledge wider. Knowledge, which used to belong to a specific group, is no longer exclusive and becomes more accessible. Social media functions as a tool to spread knowledge, including feminist perspectives.

Feminism in the digital space is also known as “cyberfeminism.” Millar (1998, p. 200) defines cyberfeminism as “a women-centered perspective that advocates women’s use of new information and communication technologies for empowerment.” It is also apparent in PB’s

Instagram feed which prioritizes the distribution of feminist perspective knowledge. The analysis shows knowledge is distributed in two ways: online discussions and Instagram feed posts. When the pandemic hit, all activities were converted into digital platforms. The PB community's discussion events were also shifted to online. They started their first online discussion on Instagram's "live feature" on April 26, 2020, a month after Indonesia had declared a state of emergency due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

PB has conducted 56 online discussions, the three most frequently mentioned topics are self-empowerment (14 discussions), mental health (12 discussions), and sexual violence (11 discussions). I also analyzed the least discussed theme and found that the theme of women's leadership in government structures was only discussed twice. The discussion titles with this theme were "women's leadership toward democracy and elections with integrity" and "supporting female villagers to lower the number of child marriage and other social problems in the village." It can be concluded that the most frequently discussed theme of the online discussions was useful knowledge for self-empowerment or women's empowerment in informal structures. Meanwhile, the theme of women in formal power structures was less discussed.

Besides online discussions, knowledge on feminist perspectives and topics, such as gender equality, sexual violence, women, and marriage are also posted on PB's Instagram. These feed posts can be an initial step to gain further feminist perspective knowledge.

Interestingly, an interview and questionnaires on the source of feminist perspective knowledge, the respondents conveyed that they obtained information from social media, books, and online seminars. Only two respondents answered that they studied the subject on a university level. This phenomenon indicated that they had access and a chance to learn feminist perspective knowledge. Another finding showed that no respondents identified the family as their source of knowledge. It can be interpreted that formal structures in the society, such as family and compulsory education, do not distribute feminist perspective knowledge as a part of daily life. The emergence of social media makes access to knowledge more open and fluid. On one hand, this is encouraging because people are free to access feminist perspective knowledge. However, this is also concerning since this distribution is limited to informal structures, while formal structures, such as family and educational institutions expected to change significantly, still do not show significant efforts to distribute the feminist perspective knowledge.

### *Self-Empowerment and Sisterhood*

The prominent narrative of women's empowerment on PB's Instagram account is self-empowerment with the sisterhood narrative. PB posted self-empowerment narratives by quoting independent female figures or various posts that encourage readers to be more confident, love themselves, dare to decide, and become independent. These narratives are described in the following posts.

Figure 1 is a quote from Najwa Shihab, a famous Indonesian journalist and known as an intelligent, strong, and independent female public figure. The quote is her answer to the choice to be a housewife or a journalist. This question was delivered to her when becoming a guest star on a television talk show. She answered, "Why are women obliged to choose? Can't we get both? From the very beginning, that question has put women in a helpless position." Posting this quote implies that PB attempts to focus on women's empowerment by inviting women to be mentally empowered. The illustration of Najwa wearing a purple blouse while looking up confidently implies that she is a female role model with the courage to take action, confidence, and awareness to question patriarchal norms. Purple is a dominant color on PB's feeds because this color is also

a color of women’s movement in America since the beginning of the 1900s (<https://www.purplecampaign.org/why-purple>). The color composition always includes purple for female figures’ illustrations, backgrounds, and clothing. These signify that this choice of color conveys PB’s message about women’s empowerment.

Figure 1: November 19, 2019 (<https://www.instagram.com/p/B5M6HkBgKYF>)



Figure 2: November 23, 2020 (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CIKRKNaDDxi>)



Figure 2 presents several illustrations in one post. This article shows its first page. The post is titled “Love yourself and believe you are not alone” and provides eight steps to love, appreciate, and forgive yourself. Other posts teach readers the existence of an independent self from others. For example, a post explains that women’s getting dressed up is not for men but themselves.

Another post describes that the women are not obligated to marry early and allowed to get higher education, despite having married.

The interesting point from reading PB's Instagram account is that the account shifts its posts from talking about self-empowerment (for example, quoting or sharing stories of famous figures, emphasizing independence) to emphasizing more women's empowerment and creating an environment to help each other. In other words, this post indicates that the PB community builds sisterhood values. These values have become more apparent after the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic may change PB's direction to make people more aware that they need to help each other and cannot live alone.

Sisterhood is not a new concept in feminist studies, but a keyword on the second wave of the feminist movement. This concept offers a feeling of togetherness and collectivity and displays the solidarity of the women's movement (Morgan, 1970 in Evans, 2015). Sisterhood also emphasizes women's horizontal relationship, not vertical one (Henry, 2004 in Evans, 2015). In other words, these concepts create an equal relationship.

Figure 3 is the first post which contains the word "solidaritas" or solidarity and depicts women with and without headscarves (hijab) and diverse skin color, hair, and appearance.

**Figure 3: April 1, 2020** (<https://www.instagram.com/p/B-cMOEdgzsv/>)



The post entitled "Limitless Solidarity" informed various communal actions initiated by women to support vulnerable people who could not provide themselves with personal protective equipment, such as masks and hand sanitizers in the early pandemic due to rising prices and shortages in the market. The illustration of diverse women indicates no segregation of ethnicity, religion, race, or class to make solidarity.

The successive posts of sisterhood, solidarity, and mutual assistance become more visible. This was observable from the visual signs of the feeds before the "Limitless Solidarity" feed. This study found that 14 of 351 feeds (3.98%) depict many women are interacting, holding hands, or hugging. Meanwhile, after "Limitless Solidarity", the feeds with the same signs increased by 138 of 805 feeds (17.14%).

Several programs of the PB community denote their effort to help each other—for example,

“women support women’s business” and “shopping for love” programs. “Women support women’s business” is a program to promote women’s food, beverage, and other business on PB’s Instagram account. Meanwhile, “Shopping for Love” is a program that sells secondhand items or products sold by the community via Instagram live platform. A portion of the profits will be donated to empower the economy and fulfill the primary needs of women survivors, including widows and the elderly.

Unlike before the pandemic, PB’s Instagram posts are recently showing more than just one female figure in one post and gesture to show solidarity or sisterhood—for example, the image of two women hugging each other or several women holding hands, as shown below.

**Figure 4: October 17, 2020** (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CGbI1AKj-OK/>)



**Figure 5: August 30, 2020** (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CEhBIWzDfAB/>)



Figure 4 shows two hugging women; one is wearing a hijab with a face covered in a veil, while the other is not. This diversity depicts that PB wants to share the message of tolerance, understanding, sisterhood, and acceptance to diversity in the text. Figure 4 shows an interesting point of religious diversity and love as mentioned by religions' holy books. This post consists of three pages. The first page is a quote from the Bible, "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud." This quote represents Christianity. The second page shows a verse about love from the holy Qur'an that represents Islam, and the third page is a quote from Dalai Lama that represents Buddhism. These narratives are very interesting because they were posted when religious conflicts between Islam and Christianity emerged in Indonesia due to the 2014 presidential election, 2017 Jakarta governor election, and the 2019 presidential election. This post emphasizes the sisterhood of women with different beliefs.

Figure 5 shows several women forming a circle, their hands combining in the center of the circle, and their gestures show solidarity and togetherness. The text comes with the words "Community is not about the existence of one soul, but it is the actualization from one soul with another soul. We are not in a competition, but in collaboration. Supporting, empowering, and strengthening each other." This text shows the nature of the PB community which prioritizes the values of togetherness, solidarity, and mutual support, not individualistic values.

PB's vision as a community with the principles of women's empowerment has become more visible when it replaced its logo on its Instagram account on March 30, 2020. Figure 6 (old logo) and Figure 7 (new logo) show clear differences in PB's message.

**Figure 6: Old Logo**



**Figure 7: New Logo**



PB had used the old from the beginning of 2019 until the end of March 2020. The old logo in Figure 6 shows a woman looking ahead with a white face and purple lips, hair, and background. Meanwhile, the new logo was officially used on March 30, 2021, and shows a significant difference from the old one. The new logo has seven women standing closely and smiling. Three of them wear hijab with different models and colors, while four of them do not wear hijab with different colors of clothes. Their skin colors and hairstyles are also different. The new logo is made in a circle with different colors of the word “komunitas” (community) written above. Meanwhile, the words “Perempuan Berkisah” are written below in purple. These differences interpret that the new logo clearly expresses the goal of PB as a community that prioritizes women’s solidarity and sisterhood, diversity, and mutual supports. On the other hand, the old logo displays one woman probably expressing the existence of women with worthy stories to share. This was PB’s initial idea to share stories with women.

The interview and questionnaire results show that 13 respondents received mental supports from joining the PB community, especially during the pandemic. The following are some of their answers.

- “I was inspired to do self-healing through journaling and consultation in PB’s safe space.”
- “Uncertain activities at home make me more confused than before. Therefore, I joined the PB community’s online activities. Besides relieving the fatigue, I work creatively with my friends.”
- “I have received a lot of supports during the pandemic.”
- “My psychological conditions got better.”
- Mental health issues have become the main issue in this community. Fortunately, women’s sisterhood in this community enables them to relieve mental fatigue due to the pandemic.

### *A Safe Space*

The PB community creates a safe place for women to share their stories. The PB website mentions four important pillars which are the base of a safe space. They are working voluntarily,

prioritizing empathy, analyzing gender, and applying counseling-based feminist ethics (<http://www.perempuanberkisah.id/konsep-ruang-aman-berbasis-komunitas-perempuan-berkisah/>). These pillars indicate that counselors in a safe space work voluntarily and prioritize counseling using a victim-oriented perspective. There are two steps to access this counseling. Firstly, women who need the counseling must fill out a Google Form to state their consent to feminist counseling. Then, the counseling begins. The stories of the counseled women may be shared on PB's Instagram account only after they gave their consent. Furthermore, PB ensures confidentiality by rewriting the story by the editorial team. This feminist counseling aims to empower the sender of the stories to be a "survivor" after they realize their problems. PB describes this stage as transformative critical awareness.

The most dominant theme of the stories is sexual violence perpetrated by the boyfriend or husband. This study found 170 sexual violence stories of 269 stories (63.19%). PB has collaborated with various communities to provide assistance for cases that requires an immediate solution. The safe space is created by considering that women experiencing sexual assault will reluctantly tell their problems or feel ostracized and shamed when openly sharing their stories. The patriarchal culture in Indonesia hampers a sexual violence victim to easily speak out since a premarital sexual relationship is considered taboo and goes against religious norms. The culture also considers that sharing marriage problems means publishing private problems to the public when they should be hidden.

During the pandemic, the number of stories has increased. According to the PB editorial team, around 30 to 40 cases occur in one day. In contrast, there were only 5-6 cases per day before the pandemic. The significantly increasing cases are the result of the increasing sexual violence since the pandemic. Therefore, the PB community recruited more women to work voluntarily as a feminist counselor. To date, PB has 25 counselors. They receive training on counseling to assist violence victims.

Social media posts often generate a lot of comments, for example, when PB's team uploaded a story from an anonymous sender as content. The PB team explained that PB's followers on Instagram always maintain positive comments to prevent any hate comments. They counter uncomfortable comments and indirectly protect PB's posts from negative comments. Consequently, PB's account can continuously become a safe space to share stories, especially of sexual violence.

Like PB's followers on Instagram, PB's editorial team also maintain posting positive ideas, as presented in Figure 8.

Figure 8: July 21, 2020 (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CC56jMFghDZ/>)



This post says, “Our policy will not permit temper and hatred comments on our posts for a while.” Therefore, the editorial team always removes hateful comments on their posts. Their action keeps the safe space free from hate speech, judgment, and accusations toward women. The editorial team will delete comments expressing hate speech, disagreement with the contents of PB’s Instagram feed, harassment, and violent words against women. In other words, if the comment possibly triggers a conflict, it will be deleted. On one hand, this action can be seen as an effort to create a safe space to express women’s ideas. On the other hand, it prevents potential dialogue with different beliefs from the visions and missions of the PB community.

#### *What is Absent: Critically Reading the Phenomenon of PB Community?*

The discussion above infers how the PB community builds women’s empowerment narratives through feminist knowledge, selfhood and sisterhood, and a safe space. The need for women’s solidarity and a safe space for sharing stories have become critical especially during the pandemic because women are one of the most vulnerable groups affected by the pandemic (Hewamanne, 2021; Obinna, 2020; Kabeer, et. al., 2021; Sigiros 2021).

The PB’s activity plan shows that the PB community in central and regional areas palpably has a lot of activities to promote women’s empowerment. These activities include training for victim assistance following feminist ethics, entrepreneurship training, self-empowerment sharing sessions, and the recording or documentation of sexual violence cases. This study discovered that the PB community has consistently empowered its 414 members and reaches the public as non-members.

This grassroots initiative is encouraging because it proves the existence of strong solidarity, togetherness, and mutual support, although this era is dominated by capitalism which prioritizes productivity, profit, and individualistic progress. This is of course worth continuing. However, I critically investigated the PB community by identifying its absent elements, and thus, we can understand how far the discourse of women’s empowerment is discussed. After identifying the absent elements, I interpreted and related them to the condition of Indonesia’s patriarchal society.

After observing each post of stories from senders, feminist perspective knowledge, or an event's information and interviewing the participants, this study revealed three important elements missing from the PB's Instagram account. They are the lack of discussions involving men, the lack of narratives involving formal structures, such as government and school, and the lack of dialogues with other groups with different points of view. This exposition is not to find the "flaws" of the PB community, but to point out a constructive phenomenon of women's community during the pandemic in Indonesia.

The posts of PB's Instagram account show insufficient involvement of men. They only conducted one dialogue counterpart entitling "The Stigma on Male Feminist" on an online Instagram live on June 26, 2020. The speaker on this discussion was a male feminist activist from the Instagram account @pikiranlelaki\_movement. Involving more male speakers with feminist perspectives in dialogues will bring more openness and comprehensive direction because both men and women need to sit together to formulate a more comfortable and safe society to live in. Moreover, since men are the main perpetrators of violence against women, it seems that they are a pivotal target audience or group for engagement. Marcal (2020:69) wrote in her essay, "Women have entered the labor market, but men have not entered the domestic sector to the same extent. Our idea of the boundary between the world of work and family has not fundamentally changed." Although the context of this quote is about the role division between males and females in public and domestic spaces, the basic idea of her statement is applicable to build a dialogue on feminist perspectives as a public discussion.

The PB's Instagram posts narrate several posts about the importance of structural awareness in social progress. For example, the first post on February 2, 2019, narrates Sulastri, a female village head, and her fight against poverty in a village in East Java. Meanwhile, a post on February 6, 2019, describes a woman who tried to seize her political space in her village. The discussion about poverty as a structural problem instead of an individual problem was posted on February 3, 2019. An online discussion about women and leadership in government was conducted on June 15, 2020. This discussion entitled "Women leadership toward democracy and elections with integrity" and invited a member of the commission of Central Java Election Supervisory Agency. Another similar theme of the online discussion was also held on July 3, 2020, with the theme of "Supporting female villagers to lower the number of child marriage and other social problems in the village." This discussion invited a village secretary in Central Java.

However, the narration about involving formal structures as agents of change slowly shifted into the narration of self and fellow women as agents of change. This shift is proven by a high number of posts and online discussions about self-empowerment and self-healing. The indirect consequence of this shift will make readers or members forget the fact that social and individual progress cannot emerge individually or with only the community. Therefore, the role of formal structures is necessary to accelerate such progress and equality. Unless involving formal structures, the issues of women's empowerment, progress, and gender equality will always become individual problems, not structural problems (Mohanty, 2013; Baer, 2016; Saraswati, 2021).

Emphasizing individual responsibility for self-development or one's communal development can be interpreted within the framework of neoliberal values internalized in our daily life. Leve in Saraswati (2021, p. 3) defines neoliberalism as "a political-economic ideology and practice that promotes individualism, consumerism, deregulation, and transfers state power and responsibility to the individual." By quoting this definition, this article does not claim that the PB is a community that emphasizes individualistic values because PB regards that women's empowerment means empowerment by prioritizing women's solidarity practices and mutual

support. However, if we put the community within the social life context in one country, we can see that this community is a gathering of individuals who are trying their best to fulfill their responsibility in self and communal development. Moreover, social media has also perpetuated the internalization of these neoliberal values, as stated by Saraswati (2021, p. 2): “the underlying structure of their social media campaign is governed by, and therefore projects and perpetuates, neoliberal values such as “self-improvement/investment in the self/entrepreneurship”, “personal responsibility”, and the term “sharing economy”-hence the term “neoliberal self(ie) are visible”. In other words, the nature of social media is based on neoliberalism values, which emphasize individual responsibility to have self-progression. Social media users will unconsciously internalize these neoliberal values that affect them to overlook the formal structures, such as the government as an authority with responsibility and power to create a fair and prosperous society.

One of the PB committee members also understands the significance of structural changes. Based on the interview on June 17, 2021, she said “the regulations of sexual violence increasingly suffered by women must be changed. Without legal changes, the root of the problems will remain because there is no strong lawful support to guarantee the rights of sexual violence victims though the movement organizations at the grassroots level have fought hard.” This statement refers to the unratified “The Elimination of Sexual Violence Bill” (Rancangan Undang-undang Penghapusan Kekerasan Seksual). To date, a proposed bill aims to tackle sexual violence in Indonesia and focuses on preventing sexual violence and more rights for victims. This bill was proposed in January 2016, but the People Representative dropped this bill in July 2020, and stated that it was difficult to discuss this bill (Amindoni 2020, Nathaniel 2020, Yahya 2020). Consequently, the bill is still not ratified.

In the digital era, people can choose the information they want to consume. Just by one click on their smartphone or computer, they can go to any online news portal desired and follow any social media account suitable to their view. This phenomenon shows that technology offers people freedom of choice to gain any expected information. However, it can become a trap that puts people in one environment they created. Consequently, the lack of contacts or dialogues among people with different views will be further polarized.

Vivienne (2016) states that vulnerability encourages the formation of intimacy between authors and readers; thus, the collective identity can be created and is useful to initiate a social movement, or at least, to push readers to think more critically. This description confirms that the PB community has provided a space to sound marginalized voices rarely heard by posting the sender’s stories. Therefore, they can gain support from PB’s followers or members. However, their voices will only resonate within the same group of people because the nature of current media allows people to choose their willingness to consume the certain thing. This implicates the perpetuation of echo-chamber.

According to Jamieson and Capella (2008), the term echo-chamber refers to instances to “repeat, strengthen, and channel” an idea continuously. This metaphor depicts a condition that repeats one idea several times in a closed room or space. Therefore, other different ideas tend to be unheard and have no room for discussion.

The same phenomenon is visible in the formation of the women’s empowerment narrative on PB’s Instagram account. The followers attack provocative or uncomfortable comments, and the editorial team’s policy deletes hostile comments. On one hand, these actions keep the distribution of women’s empowerment discourse on PB’s Instagram account sterile and free from opposing views against women’s empowerment discourse. On the other hand, it indirectly abolishes dialogues with people from different views. As a result, the discourse about social changes in

gender equality will only be an exclusive discourse for certain groups of people because these changes will not resonate strong enough and are heard by people with a different point of view. These changes indirectly perpetuate the patriarchal discourse as a dominant discourse.

## **Conclusion**

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused the rapid development of online platforms, including platforms for online feminist movements. This study observed how the PB community has empowered women during the pandemic by using its online platforms, especially its Instagram account. Besides, this research analyzed further how PB's narration can be read critically by using interview data. This study revealed three main themes of narration on PB's Instagram feed. The first theme is distributing feminist knowledge not widely available in formal education systems for community members and Instagram followers. The second is constructing selfhood and sisterhood in which PB's members and followers are encouraged to have awareness of their self-empowerment while at the same time empowering others. The third is creating a safe space to share taboo or sensitive stories, such as sexual harassment or a spouse's infidelity, without any dangerous judgment.

This liberated space to discuss feminism, on the one hand, allows feminist perspective knowledge to grow. Women who are always oppressed by patriarchal systems may find themselves empowered as they gain more supports from an online space, namely the PB community. In the past, the dissemination of information was constricted to a certain area, but today, it can reach wider areas.

A close observation of PB's efforts to empower women during the pandemic revealed that women's solidarity plays an important role in women's empowerment. The pandemic has brought awareness that the women necessarily support and help each other, and strengthen vulnerable women during the pandemic, though they do not know each other. In this case, social media performs an important role to encourage connectivity.

Furthermore, the increasing distribution of feminist perspective knowledge in non-formal institutions, such as social media, the pressure of selfhood and sisterhood, and the creation of a safe space to discuss sensitive gender-related issues might signify that the society's patriarchal structures have not changed significantly. The mutual support on grassroots levels in the PB community reflects the internalization of neoliberalism values which emphasize individual responsibility to accelerate or develop themselves as an individual or community. Therefore, PB neglects the presence of the government that is responsible to ensure their citizen's well-being. In addition, the phenomenon of women's solidarity on the PB community reflects dominant patriarchy values in Indonesia. Consequently, women who do not know each other chose to unite and fight against patriarchal domination. Moreover, social media accessibility also caused an exclusivity problem. Since not all women can access social media, this condition may contribute to clustering the women's empowerment movements. Meanwhile, people without social media access will, indirectly, be marginalized.

Every movement, including women's online empowerment movements, has flaws. Our job is to support each effort to empower women and fight for justice. At the same time, we criticize and question some problems that may perpetuate patriarchal structures and oppress women.

This research only employed one case study, which is the PB community. Therefore, the results of this study can be improved by observing other women's empowerment communities in Indonesia and studying their connection. In-depth interviews with more respondents is also needed

to understand the effective efforts of women's empowerment communities in Indonesia during the pandemic.

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