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Unlabelled Women's Movements: Finding the Subaltern Feminism of Pre-Reformation Indonesia

Titiek Kartika Hendrastiti[1] & Sulistyowati Irianto[2]

[1]Retired from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Bengkulu University, Bengkulu, Indonesia
[2]Faculty of Law, University of Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia

titiek_kartika@unib.ac.id

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Abstract

This article revisits the struggles of grassroots women during Indonesia's New Order regime to highlight forms of feminist agency that were never formally labelled as "feminist". Building on long-term fieldwork and reflections with rural women's communities, it challenges elite-centred feminist historiography that privileges urban, middle-class, donor-supported organisations. Instead, it foregrounds the lived practices of subaltern women - defending communal land, sustaining livelihoods, and navigating the state ideology of state *ibuism* through everyday strategies of survival and resistance. These often silent yet powerful acts demonstrate that feminism in Indonesia has always been broader than its official archives. By recovering and centring their narratives, this article offers a feminist historiography that is more inclusive, decolonial, and rooted in local agency - recognising "unlabelled feminisms" as foundational to both past struggles and future movements.

Keywords: subaltern feminism, Indonesia, New Order, feminist historiography, decolonial feminist analysis

Introduction

The history of the women's movement in Indonesia is often written from the perspective of the elite: educated women, NGO activists, and individuals connected to international networks. This dominant narrative creates the impression that only these women deserve to be called feminists. In contrast, the experiences of ordinary women — farmers, fisherwomen, small traders, and traditional guardians are often overlooked. Consequently, the contributions of grassroots women to the struggle for social and gender justice have been marginalised and even erased from Indonesian feminist historiography.

This article explores a simple yet important question: what is missing when the history of feminism is written solely from the perspective of urban, middle-class women and formal organisations? By revisiting the experiences of subaltern women - who resist eviction, defend their land, or build informal solidarity - I demonstrate that their actions, although not labelled as such, embody feminist values such as justice, autonomy, and collective resilience.

Methodologically, this paper draws on feminist historiography and decolonial feminist analysis to reinterpret silenced narratives. Data and reflections are sourced from fieldwork, conversations, and documentation of women's movements in various regions over more than three decades. Thus, this paper does not merely add to the "footnotes" of Indonesian feminist history; it offers an alternative perspective by demonstrating that Indonesian feminism also emerged from the daily resistance of subaltern women, who often remain unnamed yet support the continuity of their communities.

The resistance of ordinary women — such as those who worked in public kitchens or at Red Cross posts, or cared for the wounded during the war against the colonisers — is often undocumented. Records written by the educated often fail to capture the unpaid daily work of subaltern women that underpinned the resistance. While these activities were not publicly politicised, they were an important infrastructure for community resilience and the anti-colonial struggle, and they deserve recognition as a form of feminist resistance (Irianto & Hendrastiti 2020). Scott (1986), Mohanty (2003), Smith (2012), and Lugones (2010) have also criticised this phenomenon, emphasising the importance of dismantling colonial and elite bias through feminist historiography.

In the Indonesian context, women's involvement in nationalism is often erased from the nation's historical narrative (Wieringa 1999). During the revolution and the period of political consolidation, women's organisations prioritised national unity over women's rights. Gender-specific issues were absorbed into the broader political struggle, meaning the daily realities of women, especially those on the margins, were not recognised as humanitarian issues. The issues facing working-class women, Indigenous women, and rural communities were excluded from the grand narrative of the revolution and from feminist historiography (Wieringa 1999; Irianto & Hendrastiti 2020).

This reality continued during the New Order era. Records show that, despite their involvement in the *PKK*, *Dharma Wanita,* or *Dharma Pertiwi* structures, the involvement of ordinary women was never recognised in historical archives (Wardah Hafidz and Tati Krisnawaty 1989). Their support for elite programmes did not guarantee protection. Instead, their narratives were submerged in the stories of dominant women's organisations. Meanwhile, the state increasingly controlled the resonance of progressive women's movements through *Kowani*, an official instrument of development (Wieringa 1999; Blackburn 2010).

Criticism of this neglect continues to this day. Irawaty (2021) and Hyunanda et al. (2021), for example, emphasise that feminist activism exists not only within formal organisations, but also in silence, courage, and anonymity. A post-colonial feminist perspective reveals how hegemonic structures silence subaltern women's groups and dismisses their epistemology. Against this backdrop, the study focuses on a particular form of subaltern feminism: the resistance of women who are not part of mainstream feminist discourse or institutions, yet who demonstrate considerable agency in opposing structural injustice.

When epistemic justice is equated with words such as injustice or violence, it takes on a critical meaning: epistemic injustice occurs when someone is persecuted in their capacity as a producer of knowledge. Women, Indigenous Peoples, and subaltern communities, for instance, are often not trusted, and their knowledge is dismissed as irrational or "unscientific" (Fricker 2007). Spivak (1988) refers to this as "epistemic violence": the manner in which dominant systems, such as colonialism, patriarchy, and elite academia, erase, silence, or distort the voices and knowledge of marginalised individuals. This is not physical violence, but rather violence through erasure and misframing. Grassroots women who resist injustice by farming on forbidden land, performing rituals, and caring for their communities have produced valuable knowledge. However, they are often excluded from official archives of the feminist movement and national history. Calling for epistemic justice means recognising, valuing, and centring these "unlabelled" feminist practices as valid, political, and powerful forms of knowledge.

This article begins by discussing "state ibuism" and the domestication of women. It then examines two examples of grassroots resistance based on fieldwork in Sumba and Bengkulu. In one case, it examines the impact of mining on clean water in Sumba; in the other, it looks at iron sand mining in Bengkulu. The article concludes by offering a more inclusive, decolonial reflection on historiography.

Research Methodology

This article uses a feminist historiography framework as its main method to explore the history of subaltern women's movements within the main historical narrative. Joan W. Scott (1986) emphasises the importance of gender as a category of historical analysis to help us understand power relations in historical writing. Gerda Lerner (1997) adds that women's history is not merely an "addition" to the grand narrative; it must also reveal the forms of agency hidden by patriarchy and the state. In the Indonesian context, history is often written from the perspectives of the state, mainstream academics, and movement elites. This framework provides an opportunity to restore the voices of grassroots women as active subjects of history, yet these voices are often overlooked.

The framework is further enriched by decolonial feminist analysis, which reveals the colonial legacy in the production of knowledge and in feminist practice itself. In this study, I draw on the work of María Lugones (2010), who demonstrates how "gender coloniality" shapes the category of women through colonial power relations that marginalise Indigenous women. I also draw on the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), who cautions against the universalisation of Western feminism as this can obscure the diversity of women's experiences in the Global South. Furthermore, I draw on the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), who asserts that decolonising methodology requires the recognition of local epistemologies, collective experiences, and care work as legitimate sources of knowledge. Combining post-colonial and decolonial critiques, this article challenges the elitism of a feminism that only recognises

formal organisations, instead placing the everyday resistance practices of subaltern women at the centre of knowledge production and women's movements at the local level in Indonesia.

Alongside this theoretical framework, the data in this article is sourced from the authors' experience of over three decades of fieldwork, through informal interviews, reflective conversations, discussions (field talks), and documentation of women's movements in various regions. However, this article focuses on the Sumba region in East Nusa Tenggara and the Penago Baru region in Bengkulu. This approach resembles autoethnography (Méndez, 2013), storytelling (Pole, 2005), and community-based activist research (Naples, 2003), all of which emphasise the connection between personal experience and collective struggle. By positioning themselves as both researchers and participants in the movement, the authors aim to bridge the gap between personal and political knowledge and the collective efforts of women in constructing an alternative history.

The study also reviews in detail previous research on women's involvement in protests, including the work of Fatimah (2007), Blackburn (2010), and Hafidz and Krisnawaty (1989), among others. This is done to describe the situation in Indonesia during the New Order era. The article also uses media archives, such as Tempo, which documented events during this period.

State *Ibuism* and the Taming of Women

Historical archives rarely provide detailed official documentation of women's involvement in protests against land evictions during the New Order period. However, various studies demonstrate that women played an active role in the movement against unfair eviction policies, both individually and through civil society organisations (Fatimah 2007; Blackburn 2010; Hafidz & Krisnawaty 1989).

The New Order regime's approach to women's roles was ideological and systematically institutionalised. Central to this framework was the concept of "State *Ibuism*", a term coined by Julia Suryakusuma (1988 & 2011) to describe how the state defined women primarily in terms of their "family functions": loyal wives, obedient mothers, and guardians of household morality. The term refers not only to a normative idea, but also to the ideological, policy, and organisational tools used by the regime to control women. This model of femininity was closely intertwined with the New Order's vision of national development, in which the stability of the state depended on women's obedience and submissiveness (Eddyono et al. 2016; Irianto & Hendrastiti 2020).

The "State Ibuism" apparatus was enforced through women's mass organisations such as the *PKK, Dharma Wanita,* and *Dharma Pertiwi*. Although these organisations were presented as institutions for community welfare, they actually functioned as instruments of state control. Rather than being mobilised as autonomous political agents, women were encouraged to support male authority, with their primary responsibilities being childcare, moral education, and domestic harmony. They were only permitted to participate in the public sphere insofar as it supported the goals of their husbands, families, and the state.

The institutionalisation of femininity has stifled dissent. Women who act outside these norms, particularly those who organise collectively or oppose state policies, are often labelled as suspicious, immoral, or "unfeminine". The brutal suppression of *Gerwani* in the mid-1960s continued to cast a shadow over the following decades. As Wieringa (1988 & 1999) explains, the state exploited the collective memory of *Gerwani* to instil traumatic fear and limit women's political activism.

This climate of fear was ideological and enforced through violence. As Siti Fatimah (2007) documents, the New Order period saw the most severe state violence against women. In Aceh, Papua, and East Timor, the military committed sexual violence under the pretext of maintaining national security. Civil society groups such as Flower Aceh attempted to respond by setting up safe spaces and organising protests, but these efforts were severely suppressed.

Fatimah (2007) also demonstrates how the State Policy Guidelines (*Garis-Garis Besar Haluan Negara/ GBHN*) institutionalised gender discrimination. Women were defined by their "inherent nature" and subordinated through policies emphasising obedience, caregiving, and domestic service. The public sphere offers no protection or recognition, and women's lives outside the home are structurally ignored. This policy formulation ignores the intersectional realities of Indonesian society, while also revealing how state violence goes hand in hand with silence within the feminist movement itself.

Furthermore, cases of land eviction in major cities such as Jakarta and Surabaya often involved resistance from women. For example, *Kompas* reported in 1987

on the role of housewives in leading protests against evictions in North Jakarta (Kompas 1987), while a 1993 *Tempo* report documented how women in Surabaya blocked heavy equipment to protect their homes and traditional markets (Tempo 1993). While such documentation is rarely included in official archives, it is important to emphasise that women played a significant role as political actors in the history of resistance to the New Order.

Traces of Grassroots Resistance: Fragments from the Field

In the shadow of "state ibuism" and authoritarian power, a war against disappearance and eviction was waged. This war went unrecognised not because it was insignificant, but because its agents were subaltern women who were structurally denied a voice and visibility. They are rarely categorised as feminists because they do not speak the language of donors or feature in NGO reports. Nevertheless, they resist the loss of living space, evictions, hunger, and the greed of an exploitative regime. Their tangible and risky resistance is manifested through their bodies and daily actions.

Grassroots women experienced total oppression during the New Order. They were silenced not only by the state but also by the structures of feminist recognition itself. While middle-class feminist activists built careers through NGO frameworks, subaltern women were criminalised and stigmatised. They were often seen only as "cases", "beneficiaries", or "statistical data". Their refusal to leave their ancestral lands, their efforts to feed their families during evictions, and their performance of rituals of resistance were dismissed as cultural, not political, action. This is the cost of epistemic injustice: survival without recognition.

Their resistance also resonated in urban areas. Women played an active role in protests against land evictions during the New Order era, including the Tanjung *Priok* and *Semanggi* cases. These protests showed women's involvement in demonstrations, land protection, and civil resistance. They also provided moral, financial, and logistical support for the resistance movement. This was an expression of feminist agency in the face of violent state policies (Fatimah 2007).

In addition to highlighting everyday resistance, it is important to emphasise that grassroots women's resistance is not merely a form of survival; it is also a political praxis that challenges the state framework and mainstream feminism. By defending their living spaces, subaltern women deconstruct the state's claims to development and modernisation. Although their resistance is often considered spontaneous or "emotional", it is in fact a conscious strategy that combines the body, ritual, and local knowledge. This shows that feminist agency emerges not only in conference rooms or through legal advocacy, but also in communal kitchens, fields, and traditional rituals. If feminist historiography fails to recognise these forms of praxis, it perpetuates the epistemic hierarchy that marginalises the knowledge of rural women.

Sumba: Rituals, Customs, and Rejection of Mining

During a focus group discussion in Central Sumba in 2016, the room fell silent when Rambu Naihana started addressing the women and men from the Paponggu hamlet: *"I want to talk... I'll speak first, okay?"* Rambu Naihana is a key yet hidden figure in the gold mining conflict in Bukit Paletti Alira. Although her thoughts and role were not visible in the public sphere, it was she who sought the release of anti-mining movement leaders and peace (Field Note, June 2016). Rambu Naihana further emphasised:

> "We were never taught to be activists, but we know that the land, water, and savannah are vital for survival — for livestock, organic farming, megalithic culture, burial stones, and the perpetuity of Bukit Emas Paletti Alira — and we must protect them. This is where our ancestors lived."

Their vision was clear: *"We do not want to leave this land because this is where the spirits of our ancestors reside."* This story reveals the important role Indigenous women play in the anti-mining movement. They participated in traditional rituals to voice their concerns about the destruction of customary land and the depletion of water sources. However, Indigenous women were often seen merely as "supporters", not decision-makers. In reality, however, it was their voices that determined the sustainability of the movement. Media reports document this: in 2012, Tempo reported on the people of Sumba who rejected gold mining, highlighting women's involvement in collective action. Women's knowledge, rooted in their life experiences, gave them agency. Their knowledge of corporate gold mining went beyond what people expected. Issues such as environmental damage, the destruction of ancestral graves, and the impact of mining on residents' lives and public health have always been part of their struggles. A field talk (2016) revealed that women protected the Bukit Paletti Alira area from extraction because of its

water sources. For the women of Sumba, water is vital for people, agriculture, animals and livestock, and traditional customs.

The Sumba case illustrates the conflict between extractive capitalism and local wisdom. Traditional rituals led by women serve as political tools that assert collective rights to land and water, rather than merely being cultural symbols. Indigenous women such as Rambu Naihana transcend their assigned role as "supporters" and become pivotal mediators between social movements, customs, and the state. From a decolonial feminist perspective, this practice exemplifies *pluriversal politics* — a form of resistance that does not conform to modern legal language, yet is politically valid due to its foundation in local cosmology. Here, "unlabelled feminism" broadens the definition of feminism, shifting the focus from gender equality in liberal discourse to the survival of communities and the cosmos.

Bengkulu: Caring for Iron Sand

Another example comes from Mak Jk, a coastal woman from Penago Baru in Seluma. She witnessed the destruction of coastal forests first-hand due to iron sand mining (2009-2013). In an interview, she emphasised:

> "PT FN is destroying our village. We are determined to drive them out for the sake of truth... Dying... We don't mind dying for the sake of the struggle. If we die in the struggle, that is honourable... if we die by suicide, that is shameful. If we are injured in the struggle, that is an honour, not a misfortune" (Hendrastiti, 2014, p. 223).

This testimony illustrates how women perceive the loss of coastal forests as the collapse of their community's social and cultural space, as well as ecological degradation. In a follow-up conversation, Mak Jk bitterly asked:

> "…why are only villagers required to preserve the coastal forest while the government allows corporations to destroy conservation areas? If the forest is destroyed, villagers want something in return for their customary land too..." (Field Note, June 2016).

Kompas' 2013 coverage of the issue of coastal abrasion caused by iron sand mining in Seluma triggered resistance from residents, including women (Kompas 2013). *Kompas* reported that local NGOs, such as Walhi Bengkulu, had documented that women were at the forefront of rejecting ecological destruction and fighting for the community's right to life.

In Bengkulu, Mak Jk's testimony reveals the ethical dimension of coastal women's resistance. For her, dying in the struggle is a matter of honour, while surrendering to injustice is a disgrace. This narrative demonstrates how women express resistance in moral and spiritual terms, which are often overlooked by academic frameworks. While the state and corporations view mining as an economic project, coastal women see it as an existential threat. Their perspective challenges the logic of development's "cost-benefit calculations" by affirming the inestimable value of life. It is clear, therefore, that women's resistance is not only about ecology, but also about dignity, the right to life, and the ethics of justice.

Studies in Sumba and Bengkulu demonstrate that subaltern women's resistance is not an anomaly, but an integral part of Indonesia's social movement history. From traditional rituals to everyday testimonies, they generate knowledge and strategies of resistance. However, their narratives are rarely acknowledged in official feminist archives or national histories. By connecting field narratives with press and NGO reports, this article asserts that "unlabelled feminism" is a valid form of political agency that must be recognised in Indonesian feminist historiography.

Both cases of local resistance to mining demonstrate that subaltern women in Sumba asserted their authority through traditional rituals and water protection in order to reject relocation openly. Similarly, women on the southern coast of Bengkulu defended their living spaces, including their homes, gardens, and activities such as planting, harvesting, praying, and giving alms to the earth. These activities are, in fact, diverse forms of civil disobedience (Hendrastiti 2018; Hendrastiti & Kusujiarti 2023).

Examining the feminist movement during the New Order reveals that these partial protests did not constitute a single, unified bloc. Even within each movement, the communities were socio-culturally and politically stratified. This can be seen in how mainstream feminist organisations sometimes reproduce the exclusion of subaltern women. Wieringa (1999) shows how collective memories of *Gerwani* were exploited to instil fear and restrict women's activism. This fear paralysed women's political expression and narrowed the scope for cross-class solidarity. Therefore, to understand epistemic violence in feminism is also to question who has the authority to speak and determine political representation.

Examining various documentary sources reveals that movement communities with links to funders, universities, and international feminist networks tend to have the opportunity to become the narrators of feminism. Those without such links, such as communities of women resisting land grabbing, street vendors, and customary land defenders, become mere subjects of stories. This phenomenon creates a two-tiered movement, with one tier being archived and celebrated while the other is absent from our history books. This is not merely an omission. It is a form of historical theft.

In her writings, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) has long referred to this phenomenon as "epistemic violence"—the violence of knowledge that silences subaltern voices and reduces them to objects of discourse without authority. In her writing, she asks: "Can the subaltern speak?" This question challenges the claims of elite feminist representation, which often speaks on behalf of marginalised women yet fails to truly listen to them.[1]

Miranda Fricker (2007) builds on this argument, framing it within the concept of "epistemic injustice", whereby a person's knowledge is not trusted or recognised due to their social identity. In Indonesia, if this argument becomes the context for reflection, subaltern women often experience "testimonial injustice", whereby their voices are not trusted as they are not considered epistemically legitimate by either the state or some established dominant feminisms.

Inequality within movements is not a thing of the past because it continues to determine who can speak and on whose behalf. Even "empowerment" initiatives risk perpetuating dependence and denying the right to equal partnership. As Hyunanda et al. (2021) state, during the New Order era, empowerment was often a euphemism for moral discipline. The subaltern women I met were not waiting to be empowered. They were already organised through granaries, ritual circles, or land reclamation efforts, operating without permission or support. Their language of resistance did not conform to the ideals set out in human rights brochures, yet their narrative was no less political.

Tragic stories such as those in Sumba and Bengkulu are not nostalgic; they are an indictment of the situation. They demonstrate how resistance can persist without infrastructure or legitimacy, often in opposition to the state and elite feminism. Women who resisted during the New Order were not failed subjects of modern feminism; they were unrecognised ancestors. In order to reclaim the history of feminism, we must first confront the voices that have been erased and the reasons why.

To construct a radical, decolonial history of feminism, we must criticise not only the state but also the exclusions within our own movement. Feminist genealogy that overlooks subaltern groups is not an incomplete narrative, but a complicit one.

Strategic reflections on future feminism must consider the issue of epistemic violence, which involves silencing and misframing (see Spivak and Fricker above). Consider Suryakusuma's discourse on "State *Ibuism*" as a technology of gender control. Lorde's "Master's Tools" can be referenced as a critique of elite feminism that replicates power structures (Lorde 1984), a critique that can be supplemented by Wieringa's work on Gerwani, which considers historical trauma as a means of disciplining feminist dissent.

Conclusion

The two cases examined in this article, Sumba and Bengkulu, demonstrate that the resistance of subaltern women is an integral part of Indonesian feminist historiography. They are not merely marginal actors, but rather producers of political discourse that challenge the state, capitalism, and the boundaries of feminism itself within their cultural and social spaces. By interpreting their actions as an expression of feminist agency, we can broaden the scope of feminism to encompass decolonial, pluriversal, and community-based perspectives. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity to Indonesian feminism: will it remain confined to an elite narrative that perpetuates post-colonial values and patriarchy, or will it have the courage to rewrite history by acknowledging the long-suppressed voices of subaltern women and reinterpreting history from a feminist perspective?

This article, therefore, asserts that the history of Indonesian feminism is supported not only by urban elite movements and formal organisations, but also by the daily practices of subaltern women who protect their land, water, and communities. Their often unlabelled resistance, which lacks NGO infrastructure and public recognition, is an integral part of the Indonesian feminist movement. Ignoring these practices means continuing to reproduce erasure in feminist historiography, a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly prevalent in our country.

Through feminist historiography and decolonial analysis, this article demonstrates that these "nameless practices" constitute legitimate political agency. Subaltern women are not merely objects to be narrated; they are subjects of history who shape the language of resistance through rituals, kinship, and attachment to living spaces. As Fricker (2007) reminds us, ignoring their voices constitutes *epistemic injustice*. Spivak (1988) asks the pertinent question: "Can the subaltern speak?" The answer from Indonesia is clear: they speak; we just rarely hear them. They speak; we just have not seen them clearly.

If it is rooted in the experiences of these subaltern women, the future of Indonesian feminism will be strong. Rereading history means more than simply adding their stories; it means rewriting the archives themselves, placing the value of their daily solidarity, silence, and courage at the heart of the narrative. If our feminism only uses the tools and language of the elite, it will fail to become a liberation movement. We must now learn to listen differently and write as if those roots were important, because that is where Indonesian feminism comes from.

This article is not intended to discredit any particular group or generation. It is an internal reflection on the cracks we have inherited and sometimes perpetuate. By returning to the voices and strategies of subaltern women, we are not belittling the work of other feminists; rather, we are strengthening the foundations for a more inclusive and liberating future for feminism.

As a positional note, this piece is written by someone who has worked with both grassroots women and academic communities within the feminist movement. We are committed to inclusive feminism in both word and deed, grounded in the lived experiences and knowledge of women who are all too often talked about rather than talked to.

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Footnote

1 Epistemic justice recognises the right of every person or community to be acknowledged as a legitimate source of knowledge. This means acknowledging that individuals, especially those from marginalised groups, have valuable knowledge based on their life experiences. When their voices are ignored or distorted by dominant systems, such as the state, academia, or the media, they suffer epistemic injustice. Advocating for epistemic justice involves restoring dignity, actively listening, and creating space for alternative perspectives on the world. As Audre Lorde (1984) reflected, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house", highlighting that strategies formed within dominant structures often fail to bring about true transformation (see also Miranda Fricker 2007; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 1988; Lorde 1984; and decolonial feminist thought).