

Women's Agencies Addressing Gender Inequality at Various Levels: Three Narratives from Kalyanamitra

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Abstract

This article presents narratives from three members of Kalyanamitra about their strategies against sexual and class inequalities in the context of the New Order regime. These personal narratives illustrate individual strategies and subjectivities in the effort to combat the state's patriarchal hegemony, organisationally. Ratna Saptari's narrative shows her involvement with women workers' groups, which became the background for the formation of Kalyanamitra; Myra Diarsi's narrative illustrates the development of critical gender thinking within the existing power structures through gender training; while Ruth Indiah Rahayu's story provides an overview of Kalyanamitra's struggles in the Pro-Democracy social movement, through gender training and other social activities. These three narratives depict the interconnection between individual agency within a feminist organization and the existing authoritarian political context based on different social spaces and temporalities.

Keywords: subjectivity, patriarchal hegemony, sexual inequality

Introduction

This paper examines the experiences of three Kalyanamitra feminist activists in their efforts to build women's agency against the state's patriarchal ideology under the New Order regime. Through narratives grounded in personal experiences within a feminist organisation, particularly in the specific historical context (between the 1980s and 1990s), this paper reveals various forms of structural violence faced by women, whether in the workplace, the household, educational institutions, or the local and national political arena.¹ These three narratives not only document the personal histories of each individual but also show how feminist consciousness was formed through direct engagement with groups facing various forms of gender-based structural inequality.

Each story shows a different trajectory in the struggle and strategies used to oppose gender hegemony during the New Order era. Ratna Saptari describes the dynamics of the women's labour movement and how Kalyanamitra emerged from concerns about the inequality and violence experienced by women workers. Myra Diarsi illustrates how she developed gender training as a form of cultural and political intervention

against deeply rooted natural law ideology. Meanwhile, Ruth Indiah Rahayu reflects on her involvement in the pro-democracy movement, her work assisting victims of state violence, and on how women's movements responded to the political emergency after 1998. Although the specific themes and scope of each narrative differ, they all demonstrate individual agency or strategies (within an organisation) in dealing with various existing structural inequalities, especially those based on gender.

Research Methodology

In this paper, we take a feminist autoethnographic approach, in which the author's personal experiences are presented as politically engaged narratives that transcend the realm of individual stories. This methodology is considered an appropriate means of understanding and challenging the systemic injustices faced by women under Indonesia's New Order regime. Through feminist autoethnography, we can reflect on our experiences as women's rights activists while critically examining our roles in exposing and overcoming gender-based injustices, particularly those relating to reproductive rights and state control over

women's bodies. When recounting our experiences, we draw on the work of Griffin (2012) and Arisaka (2024).

State Politics in Controlling Civil Society and Female Labour during the New Order (Narrative by Ratna Saptari)

Engagement with Political Discussions

As Indonesian feminist researchers and historians have widely discussed, the New Order era (which appears to be re-emerging today) was a time when attempts were made to silence reflective thinking about existing social inequalities, as well as critical voices regarding the situation of women in Indonesia. The repression and stigmatisation of labour and social movements, as well as women's struggles, were strongly enforced at various levels of government during the New Order era. Following the Malari incident in 1974 and the army's occupation of the ITB campus in 1978, the New Order regime's role in silencing social movements became increasingly strict. The NKK (*Normalisasi Kehidupan Kampus/Campus Life Normalisation*) and BKK (*Badan Koordinasi*

Kemahasiswaan/Student Coordination Agency) policies issued by the Minister of Education and Culture, Daud Yusuf, in 1978 restricted campus activities. Activities considered political and likely to violate social peace and order were prohibited or monitored, directly or indirectly. This was particularly evident in my department, where the institution severely restricted lecture materials, required reading, and classroom discussions. While the process of depoliticising campuses continued, this did not mean that student groups had ceased to think critically. The government's implementation of the NKK/BKK policies also sparked protests among students in various cities, leading to the formation of discussion groups among activists and social activists working on issues outside the campus.

Student activist groups and community organisations concerned about the political situation at the time regularly held meetings to discuss it. While studying at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Indonesia's Faculty of Arts from 1974 to 1980, I witnessed these political events and tragedies become topics of discussion among various student groups, albeit only in spaces deemed safe. I became involved in discussions about New Order politics in Jakarta after being invited to join a discussion group composed of UI alumni and students, as well as members of Jakarta-based NGOs. Those who invited me included Fauzi

Abdullah and Santoso Suwandi, who were both alumni of the UI Faculty of Letters. As the youngest member of the group, I started participating in discussions about national and local politics.

Due to the strict control the New Order exercised over activities that threatened its power, meetings were held in places not open to the public, such as institutions that received little protection and were part of a network closely monitored by international human rights organisations. The military did not easily target these institutions for investigation and detention. One such relatively safe place to meet and discuss the political situation was the Jakarta Legal Aid Institute (LBH Jakarta) office on Jalan Diponegoro in Menteng. Various meetings to discuss the political situation were also often held in private homes under the pretext of 'social gatherings' or 'family meetings'.

At the time, Fauzi Abdullah² was working at LBH and regularly held secret meetings with factory workers in various locations. He listened to their stories about working in industrial factories, particularly during the period when the only recognised labour unions were those directly supervised by the New Order government. These activities aimed to gradually develop class consciousness and encourage workers to reject labour exploitation at the factory and village levels.

Among other things, Ministerial Regulation No. 342 of 1986 stipulates that security forces at various levels of government shall cooperate with local governments, company officials, and authorised "labour mediators" to resolve disputes and prevent strikes and physical destruction by workers. In many cases, security forces could intervene in labour disputes, even if they did not involve strikes or physical destruction. This "supervision" involves the presence of military personnel during negotiations between workers, management, and the Department of Labour (Rudiono 1992, p. 65).

From 1981 to 1983, I received a scholarship to study in the Netherlands (at Leiden University), primarily to prepare for my master's degree. However, I had already begun participating in discussions with Fauzi and other activists. Through cooperation between the Indonesian and Dutch Ministries of Education, several anthropology and history students were sent to the Netherlands for a number of years to study Indonesian archives held there. Leiden University was very conservative at the time, adopting a static, non-political, structural-functionalist approach to anthropology. This institutional cooperation lasted several years, with the research themes being directly or indirectly

incorporated into the institutional supervision system, particularly from educational institutions in Indonesia, including the University of Indonesia. However, during this period in the Netherlands, I had already established close links with lecturers and researchers at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague and the University of Amsterdam, both of which adopted a critical approach to Development Studies. I also became acquainted with members of the *INDOC* magazine staff who regularly reported on the political situation in Indonesia, as well as with the *Komite Indonesia* network, which organised activities involving Indonesian and non-Indonesian communities in Amsterdam concerning various serious human rights violations in Indonesia.

Upon my return from the Netherlands, during a discussion group meeting that I had previously attended regularly, Fauzi (or 'Oji'), who was heavily involved in the labour movement at the time, invited me to participate in discussions with female workers in the Jakarta-Bogor area. He realised that female workers experienced situations that male labour activists did not raise. They felt more comfortable speaking up when topics such as menstrual leave, maternity leave, and sexual harassment were not ridiculed or laughed at by male workers.

The first initiative to hold discussions with female workers about the issues they faced daily emerged at that time. These mainly included long working hours, sub-minimum wages, rude behaviour by company staff, and sexual violence. However, they also faced domestic issues. Previously, discussions between male and female workers took place in closed rooms or at the LBH office in Jakarta, but meetings with female workers were held separately.

As the network developed by Fauzi Abdullah already covered various areas, including Tangerang, Serpong, Ciputat, and Karawang, discussions were held in these locations through small, low-key meetings called 'arisan'.

Cases of Sexual Violence in Discussions with Female Workers

The cases that I documented in my diary at the time primarily concerned the challenges faced by factory workers in Greater Jakarta and West Java. One example was an 18-year-old female worker at a tyre factory in Tangerang³, who became pregnant by a supervisor. She had, in fact, been seduced by the supervisor, who initially promised to take responsibility. She demanded money from him to pay for an abortion, but he did not provide it. He claimed to have given IDR 80,000 to a

security guard, but she never received it. Her father had passed away, and her mother knew about the situation and had visited her while she was staying with a female labour activist. Her mother had only one concern: she basically did not want to accept her grandchild (once born) in her home, saying, 'What will the neighbours say?' The woman then stopped working and, at one point, contemplated suicide. Although she was later able to accept her situation, she still wanted to give her child up for adoption.

Another issue faced by women in villages was that organisations sought out village girls to work in the city. In Pacitan, for example, people arrived in nice cars looking for people who wanted to be taken to the city to work. "The ones who were taken were, of course, the pretty ones", said Inem. The girls usually agreed because it was an opportunity to earn money. Inem knew of four people who were taken to the city. It turned out that they were forced into prostitution against their will. Their parents found out through a letter and cried continuously, never having imagined that their children would be treated this way.⁴

Social Inequality in the Factory and in the Domestic Sphere

In factories, companies controlled workers in various ways. For example, they controlled the labour union (known as the 'base' in factories), gave wage increases to militant workers in an attempt to silence them, created tension among the workers themselves, and ensured that people from the same region were not placed in the same factory section (to prevent them from building solidarity). At one bicycle tyre factory, production was carried out using a piecework and target system. If workers did not meet their targets, they did not receive attendance bonuses. However, this situation was not uniform. In other sections, workers continued to receive bonuses even though the target system remained in place. According to one worker, the targets were not always met in that section.⁵

At a garment factory, a female worker was transferred to the security department for being often rebellious. In the security department, she was easier to supervise. Once, she wanted to go home to her village for three days, but she was not allowed to. She was not even allowed to take leave. She was finally granted three days' leave, but the letter stated that if she were late, she would be treated as a new employee. Due to health issues, she returned one day late, but the company did not accept her situation even though she had obtained a doctor's note. Her salary was paid weekly and decreased.

Compared to other workers in the security department, she also received less pay. These stories suggest that companies used a hierarchical structure among workers as a strategy to prevent them from forming a sense of solidarity.

Regular discussions held in various locations revealed the different problems faced by female workers, both at work and within their families. For example, their wages were handed over to their husbands or parents, meaning they could not benefit from their own labour. There were many similar stories, but this issue was not discussed among labour activist groups at that time.

Since the late 1970s, however, academics and feminist activists in the Western world have challenged the idea that the household and the workplace are separate spaces, arguing that they are closely related and influence each other's dynamics.

As Lamphere, Zavella, Gonzales, and Evans (1993) state, anthropologists and historians have both studied the role of female workers in the workplace, but have not considered its effect on family relationships. Married working women experience various role contradictions and conflicts that often arise from the intertwining of their roles as workers, mothers, and wives.

The Establishment of Kalyanamitra

Hearing the stories of women workers, including accounts of sexual violence in the home, at work, and in public spaces, as well as wage inequality, led to the idea of establishing an organisation that could address these issues in a more systematic and collective manner. During the New Order period, women's organisations formed under the Soeharto administration, such as *Dharma Wanita*, *Dharma Pertiwi*, *PKK*, and *Kowani*, were co-opted by the regime to 'tame' women. Another pressing issue was the role of the security forces in preventing workers from resisting. Even when workers gathered in rented houses, local figures would often monitor them and report them to the police.

Without a structured organisation, it would have been impossible to raise issues such as wage inequality or the suppression of workers' rights at that time. The idea arose to establish an organisation that could lay the groundwork for a broader women's movement at both the national and local levels. Various suggestions were made regarding who should be involved, and Myra Diarsi, Sita Aripurnami, Debra Yatim, Sjarifah Sabarudin, and I finally founded Kalyanamitra.

During this period, support from international organisations and the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) enabled various non-governmental organisations to be set up to fight for women's rights. *Annisa Swasti Foundation*, established in 1982, was the only women's organisation operating prior to Kalyanamitra, and it too focused its activities primarily on the conditions of women workers. The initial idea behind the establishment of Kalyanamitra was to raise awareness of the issues faced by women of all classes within the state's dominant ideology, in order to strengthen the women's movement. This began with collecting everyday stories about gender inequality and disseminating them in an accessible format, as well as strengthening advocacy activities against the repressive New Order regime. The involvement of the founders and other Kalyanamitra administrators in political issues affecting women across classes, ethnicities, and religions ensured the fight for women's justice could continue, whether through direct advocacy, gender training, or political and social support for victims of violence.

Although I am not currently based in my home country, I remain involved in gender issues both academically and as an activist. I am involved in the academic world (as a former lecturer) and the social network for Indonesian migrant workers in the Netherlands - the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU) - where I serve as Secretary General. I am also involved with the association Watch '65, which raises awareness of the 1965 genocide and the lives of Indonesian exiles in the Netherlands.

Gender Training: The Dynamics of Gender Discourse in the Effort to Counter Gender Hegemony Ideology (Narrative by Myra Diarsi)

Involvement with Gender Issues and the Women's Movement

After actively participating in Kalyanamitra for five years, from 1984 onwards, and focusing on education, knowledge development, and feminist praxis, I was encouraged by a Dutch embassy official to pursue a Master's degree in Development Studies at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, the Netherlands. The institute had recently introduced a specialisation in women and development. At that time, I was travelling extensively around the archipelago, visiting remote areas and villages, and learning about the social realities faced by women. I was also overcoming my own sense

of superiority, having been exposed to a wide range of theories and concepts at the University of Indonesia. I was not particularly enthusiastic about academia at the time. However, Jose convinced me that studying at the ISS was essential for “development practitioners” and that I would meet social movement activists from various countries.

After considering this persuasion and having sought information about the ISS, I applied and was accepted. This may have been thanks to lobbying by academic friends at the ISS and in the Netherlands more generally. The information I obtained from alumni about the ISS was indeed quite promising. I was eager to finally meet fellow activists from the “Third World”. How wonderful! Moreover, I was already familiar with the Netherlands, as I had followed my mother’s example of reading Dutch magazines, which relatives living in the land of cheese and windmills had been sending since 1966.

In short, my 20-month experience (September 1989–April 1990) was extraordinary. I grappled with papers and reading materials that were not commonly used in my own professional environment as a lecturer at the University of Indonesia, but which the activists were familiar with and aspired to understand. I discussed them with teachers, most of whom were also scholar-activists, both in class and outside. After struggling to write a paper assessing the absorption of development discourse — there were no exams or tests — at the end of the Master of Arts postgraduate programme in The Hague, I wrote a thesis to demonstrate that I had completed the course.

My thesis focused on “the construction of Indonesian female gender ideology” as manifested in primary school learning materials, particularly in the core subject of Moral Education (*Pendidikan Moral Pancasila/PMP*). Students had to obtain a minimum score in core subjects to be promoted to the next grade. Through content analysis, I found that primary school students learned about values, character, and the roles of women through textbooks. Gender identity was also likely to be actively socialised through classroom teaching, although this was not the focus of my research. The PMP textbook also revealed how socio-economic class and religion influenced the hierarchical relationships between women and men and between wives and husbands.

This demonstrates that, after the family, school is the main institution for gender construction from the moment a child is born. As children continue their

schooling and grow up, social and cultural norms, particularly those imposed on women, increasingly restrict their freedom of movement and ability to make life choices. Poor families are known to prioritise sending their sons to school over their daughters, assuming that sons will eventually provide for the family, whereas daughters will marry and become housewives. However, despite an increasing number of women now pursuing careers, their roles and positions in society remain strongly influenced by the “three M’s”: *masak* (cooking), *macak* (dressing up), and *manak* (giving birth). Women who are “unsuccessful” in these areas are often the target of sarcasm and ridicule, and are often advised not to take higher education too seriously in case it interferes with their “natural” duty of taking care of the household.

Nature as gender hegemony. Hegemony is a term developed by Antonio Gramsci (1935) to describe how the ruling class secures the consent of the oppressed to a system that oppresses and subordinates them. Rather than using repressive forces such as the army, the ruling elite exercises control through educational institutions, religion, and the media. This ensures that the hierarchical gender relationship between women and men is perceived as natural – “from the beginning” - and therefore cannot be changed. However, Gramsci also emphasises that such consent is not absolute, and therefore, there is always room for resistance and rejection through counter-hegemonic work. It is therefore necessary to raise awareness that challenges the idea of nature being used to justify gender hegemony. One strategy employed by the women’s movement is to cultivate a gender perspective.

Methods of Implementing Gender Training and Strategies for Developing Critical Gender Thinking

Upon returning to her homeland from school, she resumed her activities at Kalyanamitra, developing an educational programme based on her thesis findings. One strategy for rejecting the New Order’s hegemonic ideology was Gender Analysis training.

The programme consisted of two levels: 1) Basic-level Gender Sensitivity Training, which explained the concepts and techniques of gender analysis; and 2) Advanced-level Gender Analysis Training of Trainers (GAToT), which enabled participants to develop curricula according to the needs of their target groups. The aim was to disseminate gender ideas and understanding intensively.

Kalyanamitra's gender training programmes ran for between three and six full days. Since 1991, Kalyanamitra has delivered comprehensive training in various regions of Indonesia, from west to east. Participants in the training were generally activists from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including field workers, office staff, and decision makers. Participants from universities were usually individuals involved with the Women's Studies Centre (PSW), later renamed the Gender Studies Centre (PSG), as well as lecturers and social science students interested in gender and development issues. Each training session included both male and female participants, though there were generally more women than men. Interestingly, the male participants were usually managers or directors in decision-making positions. Compared to feminist activists working in NGOs, the PSW itself had only recently emerged. Gender Analysis training was developed in response to demands from specific sectors, such as teaching and journalism, as well as various other employment sectors, including farming, industry, plantations, transport, and services.

The training curriculum mainly explored development programmes from a pro-women perspective. In addition to learning about gender and why it is an issue in the context of development, participants were trained to assess NGO development programmes and activities, determining which were "gender-sensitive" using gender measurement. However, this did not include acquiring psychological communication skills, which were often an unintended consequence of the training, particularly for female participants, such as the courage to express opinions and argue.

Another important aspect of Gender Analysis training was the learning method. The methods and curriculum, which varied across training sessions, were tailored to the needs and nature of the work and activities, as well as the participants' cultural backgrounds. The time and place available were also taken into account. A variety of techniques were combined into a single training package, including case studies, face-to-face meetings with resource persons, large/plenary and small group discussions, simulations (games and role-plays), video screenings, and field trips. This structure enabled participants and trainers to examine the "development community" and how gender was interpreted, based on the assumption that gender was a crucial factor in the planning and implementation of development programmes.

Alongside the emergence of NGOs and community-based organisations opposing Suharto's authoritarian government in the early 1990s, critical thinking also developed among *Indonesianists*. This was widely discussed at seminars, workshops, and other events. Similarly, feminist activists criticised the New Order regime's domination and control of civil society in the form of gender ideology through *Dharma Wanita* and *Family Welfare Empowerment (PKK)*.

Interesting Findings in Group Discussions

A number of interesting findings emerged from the group discussions, revealing the dynamics of understanding and gender advocacy strategies at that time. One of the most widely debated topics was the murder of Marsinah, a female labourer from Sidoarjo who was killed in 1993 after leading a demonstration. As well as advocating for the perpetrators to be brought to justice, discussion of this case in the Gender Analysis Training used the "Power Spider Web" simulation to illustrate the structural gender-based violence that was ignored by the state. Participants easily understood this simulation as a web of various factors of oppression and violence, including underlying political interests. This "Spider Web" simulation is still used in training today with various cases of violence and discrimination against women.

Another interesting finding was that most participants were completely unfamiliar with the term "gender". Some participants from Java even confused it with the term as they knew it — either a type of gamelan musical instrument or "gendar", a type of cracker. Therefore, at the outset, the facilitators had to provide the correct definition. A number of anecdotes reflect this process of understanding.

In Maumere, for example, a weaver exclaimed with joy upon hearing the explanation: *"It's difficult to express, but we understand exactly what is meant. Because we experience it every day."*

In North Sumatra, a deputy director of an NGO, who was arrogant when he arrived late for the training, reprimanded me condescendingly: *"What are you talking about, young lady? What is this?"* I replied calmly, *"Yes, please sit down and listen first. Then you can respond, whether you agree or disagree. Is that okay?"* On the third day, early in the morning, after two days of discussions and simulations, he said, *"I understand gender now, and it's really good... but for my daughter, yes; for my wife, no!"*

This made us and all the other participants burst out laughing.

This story was not unique. On another occasion, in Lombok, a new father only “got it” when I asked him what he would do if his daughter experienced discrimination because she was a girl. I have learned that a genuine personal-interest approach in everyday life was quite effective in raising awareness of discrimination and oppression against women.

Building on this basic understanding, the training then moved to a broader level. In a broader context, challenging the assumption that women can have careers as long as they do not forget their maternal nature and responsibilities towards their families and households required us to present statistical data on female heads of households, as well as the results of research on the total number of hours women work each day, including domestic tasks. This has led to the popular saying that women's working hours last “from before sunrise to after sunset”, opening the eyes of many participants to the invisible burden of work.

However, this process of raising awareness faced unique challenges in eastern Indonesia, particularly in the provinces of Maluku and Papua, where local narratives about gender roles were often influenced by religious sermons promoting hegemonic views. Expressions such as “women are not the head, they are only the ribs” were often repeated uncritically. In this context, facilitators had to develop counter-narrative strategies that accounted for the local context. One such strategy was to respond with the simple yet powerful statement, “True, but without ribs, the head cannot stand upright”, to challenge understandings that normalise inequality.

Efforts to broaden participants' understanding did not stop at verbal discussions. To enrich participants' knowledge and deepen their critical awareness, Kalyanamitra prepared specific reading materials containing the work of several Indonesian and international activists and academics, with a focus on the Indonesian and/or Asian context. Dozens of these texts were compiled and distributed to all participants, covering topics such as studies of the New Order and its transformation in terms of ideology, hegemony, and resistance; a map of non-governmental organisations in Indonesia; gender and political studies; feminist thought and history, state *ibuisism*; patriarchy and sexuality; critical education studies; pedagogical philosophy; methods of raising awareness; women's organisations in Indonesia;

and tools for gender analysis. This combination of field experience, local counter-hegemonic strategies, and theoretical foundations strengthened the training process by making it more contextualised, reflective, and empowering, in line with Bell's thinking.

hooks (1994) emphasises the connection between concrete experience and theory as the basis for liberating learning in her work on critical pedagogy, as does Patricia Hill Collins (1990) in her idea of situated knowledge — namely, that women's experiences are an important source for the production of transformative feminist knowledge.

Kalyanamitra's pioneering Gender Analysis training demonstrates how critical awareness can develop through the interaction of women's life experiences, local counter-hegemonic strategies, and feminist theoretical frameworks. However, changes in awareness alone are insufficient without broader political articulation. This is where gender education meets a broader field of struggle: social movements that directly challenge the hegemony of the New Order state. The following experience of Ruth Indiah Rahayu illustrates this journey.

Facing State Violence Towards a Pro-Democracy Movement (Narrative by Ruth Indiah Rahayu)

The Development of Personal Subjectivity Towards Feminist Awareness

I joined Kalyanamitra in 1995, when I was assigned to administer gender training managed by Myra Diarsi and Lies Marcoes. Kalyanamitra's manager and director was Ita F. Nadia, who replaced Sita Aripurnami while she was studying for a Master's degree in the UK.

Prior to joining Kalyanamitra, I was actively involved in women's study and discussion groups, exploring capitalism, patriarchy, and militarism as a broader framework for understanding women's issues. As a child of the New Order, I was interested in two aspects of the “women's question”: the depoliticisation of women's organisations and the poverty experienced by female plantation workers. Above all, I was interested in the concept of an emancipatory movement. Why was that?

I will begin my story with three books that inspired my activism: *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang* (After Darkness Comes Light), a collection of Kartini's writings that I read in primary school; *Sarinah* by Soekarno; and *Max Havelaar* by Multatuli, which I read in junior high school. These three books played their respective roles in

shaping my imagination of “the issue of oppression” and emancipation. Kartini’s writings inspired me to become an emancipated writer. From Sarinah, despite my limited understanding at the time, I was deeply impressed by the stories of women involved in the emancipation movements in France and the Netherlands, and by the explanation of the origins of patriarchy. Meanwhile, Max Havelaar powerfully depicted the colonial exploitation of farmers—a story that touched me so deeply that I cried while reading it.

Additionally, two women in my family were women’s activists, namely my mother and grandmother, who remained silent during the period when Suharto was leading the New Order. It was only after the reformation era that I discovered that my mother had been an activist with *Wanita Demokrat Indonesia* (WDI), also known as *Wanita Marhaen*, which was affiliated with Soekarno’s PNI. I only met my grandmother after she had spent 14 years in a women’s prison in Plantungan, Kendal, Central Java. She was released in early 1980. I later discovered that she had been an administrator of the Surabaya branch of *Gerwani* and had been arrested by the military during the “Tragedy of 1965”. Both women, whom I respect greatly, as well as my extended family on both my father’s and mother’s sides, agreed to keep secret the fact that the New Order had persecuted our family. Our extended family was indeed a “red” family, with most of the men imprisoned or exiled abroad. For this reason, I was also asked to remain silent and not to write anything about any of them for the sake of our children and grandchildren, especially the men, who were pursuing careers in government departments at the time.

Returning to the spirit of emancipation from the three aforementioned books, I found a scientific explanation of the sexual division of labour referred to by Soekarno in Sarinah after reading “*Pembagian Kerja Secara Seksual: Sebuah Pembahasan Sosiologis*” (The Sexual Division of Labour: A Sociological Discussion) (1985) by Arief Budiman. Several years later, I read Friedrich Engels’ “*The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*” (1884), which was published by Kalyanamitra in 2004 after being neglected for some time.

At that time, obtaining reading materials from abroad was a luxury. However, during the New Order era, *Prisma Journal* published scientific and popular writings that served as critical references for emancipatory studies. I still remember *Prisma* publishing a special edition on women’s studies — not yet known as gender studies — following Indonesia’s participation in the First

World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975. Female writers such as Mely G. Tan, Mayling Oey, Kartini Sjahrir, Saparinah Sadli, Yulfita Rahardjo, and others presented the results of their research on women’s conditions in development, as well as cultural studies. At the same time, I studied the “indigenisation of the social sciences”, or the decolonisation efforts of social scientists such as Sartono Kartodirdjo in history and Mubyarto in economics. I also read the work of public intellectuals such as Daniel Dhakidae, Ignas Kleden, Soedjatmoko, Mochtar Pabottingi (LIPI), and others. These decolonisation efforts in the social sciences gave rise to the term “transformative social sciences”. As far as I can recall, a conference on transformative social sciences was held in Malang involving researchers from LIPI, public scholars — especially those who had recently completed master’s or doctoral degrees abroad — NGO activists, and students.

In my opinion, these emancipatory efforts in the social sciences are important for providing a basis for the movement to emancipate ourselves from the authoritarianism of the New Order. Kalyanamitra is a sufficiently radical tool for democratic emancipation, particularly with regard to women’s rights, which were oppressed under the New Order’s patriarchal regime.

The Formation of Feminist Agency Through Gender Training

When I first started working at Kalyanamitra on Jalan Sebret, Pasar Minggu, South Jakarta, I was delighted to see that the Kalyanamitra office had a library containing a variety of books, research documents, and other publications. At that time, Kalyanamitra had a media outlet called *Dongbret*, which was a comic book that depicted women’s issues. As I recall, topics included domestic workers and sex workers. Unfortunately, by the time I was there, *Dongbret*’s production had already stopped. Then there was *Mitra Media*, managed by Liza Hadiz. To be honest, I was interested in managing media because I also worked as a freelance reporter, but Kalyanamitra hired me as a staff member to administer gender training work.

It was the first time I had come across the term ‘gender’ alongside concepts such as ‘empowerment’ in a development context. As a beginner with a ‘regional flavour’, I tried to learn quickly in order to understand the gender training materials. I also learned how Myra and Lies became facilitators and developed training modules. There were three basic questions that I remember from the gender training, namely (a) What is gender? (b) How is gender constructed? and (c)

How does development create a gender ideology to perpetuate this social construction? The first material on the definition of gender remains standard today, clearly distinguishing between sex and gender. The material on how gender is constructed was based on the gender division of labour within the family, with 'women's work' being stereotypically associated with housework, and 'men's work' being stereotypically associated with breadwinning. Meanwhile, the material on development was linked to government programmes on family planning and empowerment programmes run by NGOs, which were advised to use gender analysis.

Gender analysis at that time used Caroline Moser's (1993) model, particularly regarding the three gender roles of productive, reproductive, and social, and women's empowerment planning based on practical and strategic gender needs. In addition, it used the Harvard framework of analysis of women's access to and control over resources in the productive and reproductive spheres, which remains popular today. An analytical framework relating to country variables and the bottom-up empowerment process was also employed, based on Sarah Longwe's (1995) work.

Thanks to gender training conducted by Kalyanamitra for general NGOs and women activists within these NGOs, a 'gender equality' network was established in Jakarta, Central Java, and East Java in the mid-1990s. The term 'gender equality' became the goal of all women's empowerment programmes. Through this gender training programme, I had the opportunity to 'travel' from city to city, and even across islands, to meet women activists in CSOs. Groups such as the Surakarta Gender Awareness Group, the East Gender Network Working Group, the Yogyakarta Gender Study Group, and the Aceh Gender Transformation Working Group emerged. In Jakarta, the fellow women activists of my generation, such as Yuni Chuzaifah (Commissioner of the National Commission on Violence Against Women), the late Yanti Muchtar (Kapal Perempuan), Titi Hartini, and Nani Zulminarni (PEKKA), formed *Forum Setara*. The group's activities included discussing and bridging the gap between income-generating activities for poor women, which were perceived as 'developmentalist', and campaigning and advocating for women's rights, which were considered radical.

I concluded that, when viewed outside the context of development, gender training was effective in empowering women as a force for change in the fight against the authoritarianism of the New Order. Kalyanamitra's position was very strategic in dismantling

women's awareness as citizens who did not obtain their rights.

The atmosphere at Kalyanamitra encouraged individual interests, although it was not without contestation. I observed the rise of women's movements against the New Order's *Koncowingking* ideology, such as Kalyanamitra. Julia Surjakusuma's writing on the 'New Order's state *ibuisim*' provided a useful framework for understanding the New Order's *Koncowingking* ideology. In an article entitled "Politik Gender Orde Baru: Tinjauan Organisasi Perempuan Sejak 1980" (New Order Gender Politics: A Review of Women's Organisations Since 1980) published in *Prisma* (1996), I wrote about my findings and proposed the establishment of a social movement that was not limited to the democratic demands of the educated class, but which also included workers, farmers, and the urban poor.

Having read Ron E. Roberts and Robert Marsh Kloss (1989), I became familiar with the terminology of social movements, which I believe is connected to the idea of transformative social science. I incorporated this idea into gender training to provide a perspective on the women's movement. Directly or indirectly, the discourse of the women's social movement to depoliticise New Order women's (organisations) became the framework for the movement at that time. In other words, this feminist agency had the political awareness and action to demand its rights as a citizen of a civil society in a democratic civilisation.

Kalyanamitra's interest in social movements led it to build friendships with male activists committed to putting ideas of social transformation into practice. Among these activists were Mansur Fakhri and others who later founded INSIST. They invited me to study women's NGO movements from the perspective of social movements originating in marginalised communities. Interestingly, gender analysis in relation to patriarchal capitalism in a militaristic state, as well as the agenda of the transformative social movement, became popular topics of discussion among student groups. Ultimately, Kalyanamitra's education extended beyond NGOs to include discussion groups and the journalists' movement within AJI.

The Face of Social Movements: Kalyanamitra in the Pro-Democracy Movement and the New Order Victims Movement

Following the banning of *Tempo*, *Editor*, and *Detik* in 1994, there was a widespread escalation of demonstrations by journalists, NGO activists, students,

and public scholars until 1996. Kalyanamitra activists were also active on the streets, distributing *Mitra Media* and forming the Pro-Democracy Women's Group (KPPD). At one point, a ban was announced on several alternative media outlets, including *Mitra Media*. I cannot remember which institution issued the ban, but Kalyanamitra has not produced *Mitra Media* since 1996.

During the same period, we indirectly supported the large-scale labour demonstrations by PT Mayora Indah and PT GRI in 1996. Subsequently, on 27 July 1996, there was an incident involving the takeover of the PDI office, which at that time was controlled by Megawati's supporters. This incident had indeed been planned, with the plan to take over the PDI office being approved by ABRI Kassospol Lieutenant General Syarwan Hamid. Implementation was handed over to Kodam Jaya, whose meeting was chaired by Kastaf Kodam Jaya, Brigadier General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and attended by Brigadier General Zacky Anwar Makarim, among others. Many of the victims of the PDI office raid turned out to be residents of the surrounding villages. At that time, Sandiyawan, the Director of the Jakarta Social Institute (ISJ), invited various institutions, including Kalyanamitra, to establish a support group for the victims called the Humanitarian Volunteer Team (*Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan/TRK*). Kalyanamitra's role was to provide counselling to traumatised housewives in the surrounding villages.

The issue escalated following the arrest of People's Democratic Party (PRD) activists, who had been accused of hijacking the free speech platform at the PDI office. On 25 July 1997, in front of the DPP PDI delegation led by Soeryadi, President Soeharto stated that the open forum at the PDI office had been infiltrated by 'bald devils'. TRK was concerned about the arrest and detention of PRD activists at that time. Why? The mothers of these students were terrified that their children had committed treason and were linked to PKI, which naturally caused shock, shame, and fear. Under the leadership of Ita F. Nadia, Kalyanamitra provided support to these mothers, as well as to PRD activists imprisoned in Salemba and Cipinang prisons.

It was during this period that Kalyanamitra shifted its focus to supporting the families of victims of the New Order and engaging directly with the military. We uncovered the true identities of intelligence officers from the BIA (ABRI Intelligence Agency) and the BIN (State Intelligence Agency). Kalyanamitra had previously provided extensive support to women experiencing domestic violence, so it had at least some experience of

supporting the families of victims of military violence in this repressive political climate.

At the same time, conditions in East Timor and Aceh required attention. Numerous gross violations of human rights were reported to have been committed by the military in both provinces, including against women. While Ita F. Nadia and Nugroho Katjasunganka focused on East Timor, I focused on providing human rights education to activists in Aceh. The gender training module shifted from a development context to a women's rights context and also included counselling for female victims of political violence.

The repressive atmosphere created by the military was felt everywhere at that time, while housewives complained about the severe economic crisis. In February 1998, *Suara Ibu Peduli* held a demonstration led by feminists from Jurnal Perempuan, including Gadis Arivia and Karlina Supelli. Symbolic resistance through the themes of "mother" and "baby milk" was intended as a protest against a regime that had failed to resolve the crisis, resorting instead to even stronger repression. Myra Diarsi was Kalyanamitra's 'representative', who was actively involved in this movement.

Kalyanamitra was also busy establishing *Koperasi Solidaritas* (Solidarity Cooperative) as part of TRK, to help poor households that were struggling to obtain basic foodstuffs. The cooperative's command post and food warehouse were located at the Kalyanamitra office. Thanks to the help of volunteers, both individuals and organisations, the Solidarity Cooperative was able to break the basic food distribution chain, which was monopolised by certain entrepreneurs, for several months. Every week, women in Rawajati village and the surrounding area received coupons to collect cooking oil, rice, salted fish, eggs, and other items from the Kalyanamitra office. Donations from philanthropists also came in at that time, including funds for purchasing bath and laundry soap. In collaboration with *Suara Ibu Peduli*, we sometimes obtained powdered milk for babies, which we distributed to housewives in Rawajati village.

Although Kalyanamitra's activities seemed reactive to unexpected situations, these partial reactions created valuable experience in dealing with emergencies. The political situation became increasingly urgent in 1998, marked by a student movement that successfully occupied the MPR/DPR building. The student movement needed logistical support, such as food and drink. The Solidarity Cooperative provided food to be cooked at

Kalyanamitra, which was then used to provide packaged rice and drinking water to the students. Remarkably, volunteers emerged to run the public kitchen, including elderly former *Gerwani* activists. Coordinated by Sita Aripurnami, the kitchen had to operate three times a day to prepare hundreds of rice packets. A system of cooking shifts was established, with several male volunteers willing to shop at the central market in Kramat Jati. Younger female activists were usually responsible for wrapping the rice and side dishes and securing them with rubber bands.

As the student demonstrations spread, feminist activists such as Nursyahbani Katjasungkana and Tati Krisnawaty gathered female activists to establish a women's brigade within the House of Representatives. I participated in various action meetings in support of the formation of the Indonesian Women's Coalition for Democracy and Justice (KPID). At that time, they were campaigning against Suharto's re-election as president in the sixth election, held in May 1997. At that time, legislative members were elected and then elected the president. One of KPID's demands was the establishment of a multi-party system to guarantee the democratisation process.

In fact, it was difficult for students to enter the DPR/MPR complex as Brimob and army troops had barricaded the streets and entrances. Packed rice and medicines were handed over to student contacts outside the building. Sometimes elderly women, or women dressed as *Dharma Wanita* members, were used to smuggle supplies and medicines into the parliament building. KPID also found a way to break through the barricades: not in rows, but in groups of two or three people dressed in a metropolitan style, as though they were spectators at a student demonstration. KPID held demonstrations with students at the parliament building almost every day until Suharto announced his resignation on 21 May 1998.

Reformation on Women's Tears

A state of emergency persisted. On 12 May 1998, Trisakti students were shot. I was conducting training with ELSAM in Puncak, Bogor, when I was stunned to see Jakarta engulfed in flames on the television news. It was 13 May, and we rushed back to Jakarta on 14 May. No one knew what had happened. We could not go anywhere because it was unsafe. We stayed at the Kalyanamitra office. Strangely, however, we did not see any military personnel in Jakarta, even though the situation was so chaotic.

Meanwhile, on 12 May, the military had been out in force to deal with student demonstrations. Why did the military seem to have disappeared without issuing a statement on television? It was not until the morning of 15 May that the television reported Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin leading the Kodam Jaya army morning roll call in an angry tone, as if reprimanding his subordinates. I did not know if this was a charade because, as Pangdam Jaya, he should have had his military forces on standby since 13 May. I felt that there was something odd about this incident. Asking around did not yield any definitive answers.

Then, the TRK central secretariat at the ISJ office called SOS. Ita F. Nadia was present at TRK meetings at that time. TRK sent an investigation and emergency assistance team. It turned out that there were quite a few burn victims at the Jatinegara mall and the mall in Klender, both of which are in East Jakarta. Motorcycle tyres on the road were set on fire to draw a crowd. When they arrived, some people who appeared to be students invited them to loot the malls. While the crowd was inside, the malls were set on fire.

Kalyanamitra was initially assigned to provide trauma counselling to women in these areas whose husbands and children had been burned. Between 18 and 19 May, the TRK investigation team made a shocking discovery: mass sexual violence had occurred in northern Jakarta, an area popularly known as Chinatown.

Information about mass sexual violence against Chinese women prompted Kalyanamitra to open a complaint centre at its office under the name TRKP (*Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan Perempuan/ Volunteer Team for Women's Human Rights*). Chinese women who had been victims of property damage and attacks flocked to the Kalyanamitra centre to volunteer. Some of them were church activists. They also provided us with information about areas where attacks by unidentified mobs and sexual violence had occurred. Information also came in by telephone. I recorded all of this information in a large book and verified it with volunteers living in the Chinatown area.

Generally, the pattern was as follows: in the densely populated, impoverished, non-Chinese neighbourhoods of East Jakarta, residents were encouraged to loot shopping centres and then burn them down. In densely populated Chinese neighbourhoods and shop houses in West and North Jakarta, mobs attacked homes, burning some of them down and committing sexual violence. I use the term 'mass sexual violence' because it encompasses a range of acts, including verbal abuse,

sexual harassment, physical violence, rape, and murder by arson. The variety of these violent acts shows that violence against Chinese women was systematic and widespread.

Kalyanamitra certainly experienced heavy pressure. We were in an ambiguous situation: Should we announce the number of victims immediately to satisfy the demands of the mass media and the military, as well as the needs of women's advocacy movements? Or should we remain silent for the time being to allow time for verification, which was certainly not easy at the time? There was never a best option. TRKP immediately spoke out about the number of victims, while I was busy verifying the information using an investigative method I called "Peeling the Onion".

I borrowed the term "Peeling the Onion" from a female journalist who investigated the experiences of female victims of war in Bosnia. In this context, I placed any information from various sources in the 'hearing' category in 'circle 5'. After that, it was verified up to 'circle 4', which was the 'seeing' category. This included helping the victims and taking them to see doctors, clergy, and psychologists. I placed doctors, clergy, and psychologists in 'circle 3'. Methodologically, statements in the 'circle 3' category were verified because the individuals in this category saw, felt, and treated the victims.

Furthermore, the 'circle 2' category comprised the victims' families, and the 'circle 1' category comprised the victims themselves. In my opinion, this methodological argument was important in countering the denials by military officials, including those within the Joint Fact-Finding Team (TGPF). We presented this argument to the TGPF. Palupi and I were part of the TRKP assistance team, responsible for reporting data to the team coordinator, Hermawan Sulistyono from LIPI. The assistance team's task was to collect data from various sources and then re-verify it. At that time, two of the TGPF members were feminist activists: Nursyahbani Katjasungkana and Saparinah Sadli. We accompanied them to meet victims suffering from amnesia and paranoia at a hospital in Jakarta.

Because of this situation, I did not join in the celebrations when Suharto announced his resignation. I was still feeling bitter and wondering what the reforms would be like.

The women's movement in Jakarta responded quickly. KPID and feminist academics approached Habibie, Suharto's successor as president. Led by Saparinah Sadli, they urged Habibie to acknowledge

and apologise for the mass sexual violence against Chinese women. Habibie was quite democratic in that he handed over responsibility for drafting the speech he was due to deliver on television to Saparinah Sadli and her team. However, the state secretariat then edited the draft speech, specifically the part concerning 'acknowledgement and apology', meaning that Habibie's speech only expressed 'regret' for the incident. Nevertheless, Habibie subsequently approved the establishment of the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) and handed the process over to Saparinah Sadli.

Even after that, the emergency work was still incomplete. Kalyanamitra continued to focus its attention on the widespread violence perpetrated by the New Order regime in East Timor, Indonesia, and the provinces of Aceh and Maluku. This is why Kalyanamitra did not participate in the Women's Congress committee following the reform in Yogyakarta in December 1998. Furthermore, the women's movement after the reformation concentrated on two issues: (a) women's human rights, an issue on which Kalyanamitra focused fully, and (b) affirmative action to secure a 30 per cent quota for women's representation in formal political institutions, a campaign led by the Indonesian Women's Coalition.

Following the reformation, Kalyanamitra's role remained centred on establishing a system to rehabilitate victims of state political violence while addressing personal issues. Personally, I only had the opportunity to contribute the article 'The Women's Movement in Reformasi Indonesia' to "Indonesia: The Uncertain Transition" (2001), at the invitation of Arief Budiman, the editor. However, I had my doubts about the power of transformative or emancipatory social science, which ultimately proved to be ineffective in the face of authority. Kalyanamitra, an organisation I had hoped would build a social movement for marginalised women, was, in practice, shackled by constant emergencies. This is not wrong. I consider it a cross that Kalyanamitra had to bear in ending the New Order regime.

Conclusion

The narratives of the three individuals, who were administrators of the feminist organisation Kalyanamitra during the Soeharto period, illustrate the relationship between individual political agency and the power structures that shape and limit it. Group discussions that highlighted issues of class and gender (when working with labour groups), gender and culture

(when conducting gender training in various regions), and gender and social movements (when forming pro-democracy networks) were essential forms of counter-hegemonic praxis. However, these activities were considered socially and politically dangerous at that time, as they were seen as a threat to the stability of power and the state's political ideology. It is precisely at this point that the strategies of each individual and their subjectivity — as reflected in the development of political views shaped by concrete experiences of facing repressive situations — become important considerations for the future. This reflection is relevant not only to the collective strategy of social movements but also to the position and role of individuals within them as subjects of embodied knowledge. This remains an important factor in confronting authoritarian dynamics today and in the future when signs of democratic decline show similarities to the anti-democratic period of the Suharto regime.

Consequently, the experiences recorded in these narratives invite us to revisit the strategies of past women's movements as a source of living political knowledge, rather than merely as historical records. This raises the question of how these historical lessons can be used to strengthen the strategies of today's women's movements, and to what extent the forms of counter-hegemonic praxis that were once effective against authoritarianism can be reinterpreted and adapted to confront the resurgence of repressive power.

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Footnotes

- 1 The narratives of Myra Diarsi and Ruth Indiah Rahayu are personal accounts resulting from reflective discussions with Ratna Saptari. Ratna Saptari's narrative is also a personal account and the product of her reflections on the stories provided by Myra and Ruth.
- 2 He passed away in 2009, and his biography can be found in the 25 May 2017 edition of Sedane Magazine.
- 3 Note dated 5 December 1983.
- 4 Note dated 4 September 1983.
- 5 Note dated 17 June 1984.

