

Reflections on the Protest of the Voice of Concerned Mothers: The Struggle of Women Activists to Achieve Reformasi and Resist the New Order

Gadis Arivia¹, Karlina Supelli², & Wilasih Nophiana Kunta Adjie³

¹Montgomery College, Takoma Silver Spring, Maryland, USA

²STF Driyarkara, Central Jakarta, Indonesia

³Yayasan Peduli Proyek, Gianyar, Indonesia

gadis.effendi@montgomerycollege.edu

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Abstract

The demonstration by the Voice of Concerned Mothers (SIP) on February 23, 1998, is often reduced in the public narrative to a spontaneous action by “housewives” demanding affordable milk prices. However, these narratives obscure the political complexity, strategy, and courage of the feminist activists who initiated the action amid the repression of the New Order. The history of the SIP demonstration is not just a story about rising milk prices, but an organized effort to “break the silence,” create space for political intervention in the context of the economic crisis, and reject the authoritarian Soeharto regime. The authors agree that the SIP action of February 23, 1998, was the first openly feminist political action to be carried out to overthrow Soeharto. The strategy of using the symbol “mother” and the “milk” issue is not a coincidence, but rather a clever camouflage to protect the movement from subversive accusations and to build a bridge of empathy with society. This paper traces the history through a collaborative autoethnographic approach, utilizing the personal experiences and narratives of the SIP demonstrators who were arrested as the primary data. This study examines the layers of strategy, emotion, and dynamics that shape the collective meaning of the SIP movement.

Keywords: demonstration of the voice of concerned mothers, feminist activism, collaborative autoethnography, milk politics, New Order

Introduction

This paper stems from the recognition that the history of women’s movements is often overlooked in broader national political narratives. It is important to explore and reflect on the *Suara Ibu Peduli* (SIP) demonstration on 23 February 1998, as it played a role in establishing the Reformation. This history is undoubtedly related to women’s politics, the representation of female activists, and feminist strategies for opposing authoritarian rule.

There are five reasons why this demonstration is significant in the context of Indonesia’s political history. Firstly, SIP was the first public demonstration organised by women’s rights activists at the *Jurnal Perempuan* office. The location of the demonstration was significant because the *Jurnal Perempuan* office was a prominent feminist organisation located in Megaria, Central Jakarta. Secondly, the demonstration attracted widespread public attention, including from women activists, at a time when most people, including students, were still afraid to take action due to state repression and the kidnapping of activists. In these circumstances, the SIP protest became an early sign of open, strategic civil

resistance, inspiring a larger movement later. Thirdly, this was a widely publicised feminist action covered by national and international media outlets, including the Associated Press. The demonstration was designed in layers and used camouflage strategies. For instance, the symbol of “mothers” and the issue of milk prices were employed as tactics to avoid state targeting. This semiotic approach offered hidden messages, such as “lower milk prices”, which could be interpreted as “remove Su-Su-(Harto)”. This shows that women were present as intelligent and strategic political actors. Fourth, this action demonstrated a critique of, and a reimagining of, gender representation politics. The authors recognise that using the word “mother” challenged the logic of the New Order state that women should only be domestic guardians (*Dharma Wanita*, *PKK*, etc.). By consciously and strategically embracing the identity of “mother”, activists subverted this logic. On the one hand, it referred to the New Order’s ideology of *ibuisim*, while on the other, it exploited gender stereotypes to seize political space, while simultaneously disrupting that logic and steering it towards subversive political representation. Fifthly, this

demonstration was a meeting point between feminist political strategy and symbolic performativity. As Gadis Arivia explains, referring to “mother” and “milk” was a deliberate political strategy to evade state repression while articulating democracy demands acceptable to the public. This strategy demonstrated how feminist activists utilise feminist representation politics as a tactic and critique of repressive authoritarian regimes (Arivia 2018).

In analysing the SIP demonstration on 23 February 1998, we, the authors, employ a collaborative autoethnographic approach that enables us to bridge the gap between personal experience and cultural analysis. This approach allows us to reconstruct political events from the subjective perspective of those involved — in this case, the arrested demonstrators. Furthermore, we seek to deconstruct the dominant structures of meaning that marginalise women’s experiences. Through narrative reflections, this paper explores how women’s bodies, manipulative maternal roles, and emotional expressions serve as means and arenas of tactical struggle. This paper does not merely record history; it also offers a reinterpretation of the relationship between the state, women, and public narratives. We aim to build and reinforce feminist archives whose role has been reduced or erased. By combining autoethnographic methods and feminist perspectives, the paper demonstrates that SIP demonstrations were strategic, reflective, and risky political actions—a form of women’s activism that transcended domestic romanticisation and affirmed women’s position as agents of social change.

Research Methodology

We opted for the collaborative autoethnography method in an attempt to revive the body archives and collective memories of the SIP demonstration on 23

February 1998. This qualitative approach combines personal narratives with cultural analysis to reveal the close intertwining of subjective experiences and broader socio-political structures. Before this approach emerged, autoethnography was familiar to the academic world as a methodological approach born from the intersection of self-writing (autobiography) and ethnography. This approach allows researchers to compile personal narratives as material for cultural and political reflection. Chang (2008) explains that autoethnography is not merely the recounting of personal experiences, but an analytical and interpretative project that links subjective experiences to social structures and collective meanings within a society. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2000, 2016) emphasise that autoethnography is emotional, reflective, and political, and is capable of exploring sensitive areas of personal life, such as trauma, courage, and bias, as sources of knowledge.

Developed by Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernández (2013), collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is a qualitative approach that combines personal narrative reflection with collective analysis. Researchers who are also historical actors or part of the community being studied write, share, and analyse their experiences together. The difference between autoethnography (AE) and CAE lies only in the reflection process. AE involves self-interrogation, but not collaborative and cooperative group work among fellow researchers. In her book, Chang mentions that this method has been used by various researchers, such as duo-ethnography research by Norris, Sawyer & Lund (2011), Sawyer & Norris (2004 & 2009); co-ethnography research by Ellis & Bochner (1992); and CAE by Kalmbach, Phillips et al. (2009). CAE is a pragmatic approach used to examine social phenomena.

The following chart, written by Chang and her colleagues, provides a general explanation.

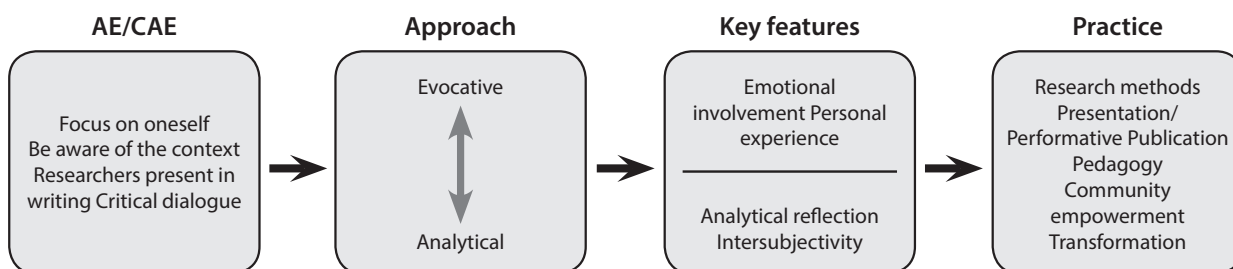


Figure 1. AE and CAE Understanding Chart

Source: Diagram taken from Chang et al. (2013)

As Chang et al. (2013) explain, both AE and CAE emphasise the importance of self-focus. This means that the researcher's experiences and opinions are part of the investigation, with the researcher acting as both an instrument and a source of data. Critical reflection is also required in order to examine personal opinions collectively. This collaborative thinking process is transparent and open to the reader. Researchers are also aware of the context and may experience it first-hand. Therefore, researchers are present in their writing. This presence can be felt in cultural and social aspects, connecting researchers to their personal lives and sometimes rendering them vulnerable. The interplay between the "self" and the "social context" is a key feature of both autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography. Another important feature of AE and CAE is critical dialogue. AE and CAE enable researchers to actively construct meaning (Chang, citing Anderson 2006; Lapadat 2009). The researcher's position is interesting here because they are both researcher and participant. Consequently, internal dialogue is abundant. This dialogue, particularly in CAE, gives rise to profound meanings and provides ample space for joint interpretation.

Linda Hutcheon's (1989) theory of the politics of representation is among several theoretical frameworks that can strengthen this methodology. She views representation not as a reflection of reality, but as a discursive process that creates meaning and power. In SIP actions, symbolic games such as "mothers", "milk", and "children" were not symbols of domestic innocence; rather, they were discursive tactics that dismantled the hegemonic narrative of the New Order state, while simultaneously reclaiming public space for women as political subjects. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon states that representation is never neutral but always political: "Representation does not directly reflect reality, but shapes the way we understand and experience it" (Hutcheon 1989, p. 3). Representation is a battlefield of meaning, a place where dominant ideologies are both confirmed and challenged.

This aligns with Trinh T. Minh-ha's (1991) critique of Western feminism's tendency to objectify Third World women in narrative representations. This obscures the complexity of their experiences and contexts. Trinh's analysis can be used to examine how Western feminists and the mainstream media covered the SIP case at the time. The female SIP activists who demonstrated were either dismissed as "good mothers" concerned about rising milk prices, or dismissed as middle class

(Blackburn, 2004 pp. 163–164). SIP action was not recognised as a feminist protest. The intelligence of the female activists who devised the strategy was erased from the broader narrative. The public was led to view SIP "action" as spontaneous and driven by "mothers", allowing it to be dismissed as a concern only of mothers. Strategic feminist activism was removed from the narrative. Strategic and courageous feminist activism is dismissed as having no impact on the discourse of freedom, democracy, and women's rights.

This paper's collaborative autoethnography reconstructs the history of SIP demonstration as a political event involving not only "mothers" but also the marginalised experiences relating to women's bodies, emotions, and memories that were absent from the mainstream narrative of reform. As participants and direct witnesses, we present ourselves as both subjects and narrators. This allows us to construct an insider narrative based on our life experiences and involvement in the women's movement that initiated SIP action. This method is thus not only descriptive but also critical and reflective, tracing the traces of resistance conveyed through the bodies, symbols, and political tactics. Through its methodology and theoretical foundation, this paper unveils an untold history and challenges how we — as feminists, citizens, and writers — perceive, recount, and reinterpret the history of women and Indonesia's political history.

The data in this paper were collected through the following methods:

1. Reflections and discussions with three arrested SIP figures — Karlina Supelli, Gadis Arivia, and Wilasih Nophiana Kunta Adjie — were conducted on 9 June 2025 via an online platform, followed by WhatsApp and telephone conversations.
2. Written reflections by Wilasih Nophiana Kunta Adjie (24 June 2025), which enrich the dimensions of personal experience, family, and courage as an ethnic Chinese women's activist¹.
3. Historical documents and previous writings, particularly Gadis Arivia's 2018 essay "*Politik Representasi Suara Ibu Peduli*" (Politics of Representation: Voice of Concerned Mothers), which unpacks symbolic strategies of action and practical feminism.
4. The third plea of the arrested demonstrators, read out before the judge: Gadis Arivia, "*Hak untuk Menyatakan Pendapat: Sebuah Pembelaan*" (The

Right to Express Opinions: A Defence); Karlina Supelli, “Untuk Masa Depan yang Lebih Baik” (For a Better Future); and Wilasih Nophiana, “Saya Seorang Ibu”. (I Am a Mother).

5. The book, edited by Nur Iman Subono and published by YJP Press in 1999, is titled *Catatan Perjalanan Suara Ibu Peduli* (Notes from the Journey of *Suara Ibu Peduli*). It is the first book about SIP written by female activists who participated in the SIP demonstration on 23 February 1998.
6. Personal memories, artefacts of activism, and the emotional atmosphere recorded during and after the events form an integral part of the writing process, breathing new life into the “archives of women’s bodies”.

During the analysis process, we conducted thematic and narrative readings of the collected discussions and documents while applying feminist ethical principles. These principles included caring for past emotions and trauma, considering the impact of narratives on personal relationships, and maintaining sensitivity towards those mentioned. Reflection was carried out continuously on both the events themselves and the authors’ chosen narratives. The three authors elaborated on the discussion by reflecting on their respective experiences and how they interpreted the SIP demonstration on 23 February 1998.

It should be noted that, although feminist autoethnography and collaborative ethnography provide valuable spaces for personal and collective experiences as sources of knowledge, both approaches have limitations. Autoethnography is often criticised for its subjective nature and risk of bias, given that the author acts as researcher, participant, and narrator. Therefore, the validity of the findings must be supported by archival data, interviews, or other supporting evidence (Ellis & Bochner 2000). Conversely, collaborative ethnography presents its own challenges due to the complex negotiations between researchers and participants, and the differences in their activist experiences (Lassiter 2005). Therefore, while the AE and CAE approaches are effective in exploring feminist perspectives and highlighting silenced experiences, these limitations must be acknowledged to ensure research remains reflective, ethical, and contextual.

Motivation, Context, and Background of the Demonstrators

To understand who they were, we need to reveal the motivation, context, and background of the SIP demonstrators who were arrested on 23 February 1998. All three of those arrested had previously been involved in activism for women’s and human rights before deciding to take part in the demonstration. Two of them worked at *Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan* (YJP): Gadis Arivia was a director, and Karlina Supelli was a member of the *Jurnal Perempuan* editorial board. YJP’s activities included advocacy, research, and publishing *Jurnal Perempuan*. Wilasih was the only demonstrator not affiliated with YJP; initially, she and the others did not know each other. She was also arrested and deliberately got into the truck with Karlina and Gadis when they were taken to the Metro Jaya Regional Police Headquarters. She was an activist who had long been involved in political activities in Salatiga. Wilasih recounted:

“Before returning to Jakarta, I studied in Salatiga, where I was involved in Yayasan Geni (Geni Foundation). This organisation ran discussion groups on various political issues and social theories. Fortunately, there were resource persons in Salatiga at that time, such as Arief Budiman, Ariel Heryanto, and George Yunus Aditjondro. Many students from other cities came to discuss and share news about the inequality caused by the authorities’ repressive actions. We said that every city had a pocket of democracy. We (students from different cities) responded to many socio-political situations, such as the Marsinah case, the Kedung Ombo incident, and bloody events in Yogyakarta. We also demonstrated in support of friends who had been arrested for participating in the *Golongan Putih* and Land for the People protests. We took part in many demonstrations. However, looking back further, it was actually the movement opposing the Salatiga city government’s ban on street vendors in order to win the Adipura city award that first motivated me to care about socio-political issues. I felt compelled to take action because I could see the human impact of the situation firsthand. The social inequality that left the poor unable to provide for their families’ basic needs or their children’s education was devastating” (Wilasih Nophiana Kunta Adjie 2025, Written Testimony, 24 June).

In the run-up to the SIP demonstration on 23 February 1998, Karlina Supelli had just completed her dissertation examination at the end of 1997. Prof. Toeti Heraty introduced her to Gadis Arivia in the Philosophy Department at the University of Indonesia, and she has been actively involved in feminist and political discussions at the *Jurnal Perempuan* office ever since. Karlina officially joined as an editor in August 1997.

"I remember *Ibu Toeti* introducing her: 'This is Gadis, a new staff member who has just returned from France after completing her master's degree. We started greeting each other and chatting, and Gadis invited me to join *Jurnal Perempuan*. At that time, I was still working on my PhD dissertation. I was new to philosophy, yet I was asked to teach. Oh my goodness, *Bu Toeti!*' (Karlina Supelli, Joint Discussion, 9 June 2025).

Correcting the history of the "*Suara Ibu Peduli*" movement

Suara Ibu Peduli (SIP) movement emerged in a highly critical socio-political context at the end of the New Order regime, characterised by an economic crisis, surging prices of basic needs, and the stagnation of the student movement due to state repression. Karlina explained the urgency of the situation at that time.

"During a small discussion at *Jurnal Perempuan*, we agreed that the socio-political situation was extremely tense. Household goods prices rose due to the economic crisis that began in late 1997 and early 1998. Prices rose, and then we heard stories of people looting. People were queuing, and it was difficult to buy everyday items like *tempeh* and tofu because prices had increased. People began to struggle, and we concluded that the socio-political economic situation was not just a matter of economic crisis, but also of incompetent, flawed politics" (Karlina Supelli, Joint Discussion, 9 June 2025).

This quote shows that we viewed the economic crisis as a symptom of deeper political failure, prompting us to act. SIP action was not only a response to the rise in the prices of basic necessities, but also a conscious strategy grounded in concerns about the state's repressive and corrupt structures. This is what the mass media and academics researching SIP failed to grasp. Most research on SIP assumes that this action was merely the anxiety of "middle-class mothers" concerned about the rising price of milk and other basic needs. Widespread media coverage of SIP at that time also confined female SIP activists to the role of "middle-class mothers". There was a public reluctance to view the demonstrations as being led by women who were in opposition to the Soeharto regime.

Gadis explained that the SIP demonstration had been planned entirely by women activists. Karlina shared this view, believing that the SIP demonstration marked the beginning of the Reformation.

"This demonstration was planned by women activists at the *Jurnal Perempuan* office... It was not a spontaneous demonstration by "mothers". We are feminist activists, and our target was not just the price of milk, but to overthrow

Suharto. We wanted to take action because we saw that students were finding it difficult to do so, and that the public had not yet taken action either. At that time, we coined the term "breaking the silence" (Gadis Arivia, 2025, Joint Discussion, 9 June).

"We felt that the socio-political situation was very tense... Prices were rising due to the economic crisis... We concluded that this was not just about the economic crisis, but also about incompetent and unjust politics. I realised that the *Suara Ibu Peduli* demonstration on 23 February 1998 was a political strategy initiated by women that started the Reformation movement. This realisation came to me when I was recently invited to speak at Tempo" (Karlina Supelli 2025, Joint Discussion, 9 June).

Gadis and Karlina both felt the need to correct the misconceptions surrounding the 23 February 1998 SIP demonstration. Articles in the media and academic circles revealed that the demonstration was a spontaneous movement by "mothers" concerned about basic needs. However, the demonstration had actually been planned and discussed in August 1997, both at Gadis' house and at *Jurnal Perempuan* office, involving internal staff, Karlina, and Eunsook (an international student interning at *Jurnal Perempuan*). Karlina recalled the initial discussion at Gadis' house.

"I still remember us sitting on the third floor. I remember it very well... We often talked about this when we were at *Jurnal Perempuan*: 'Why is it like this? It's annoying, right?' At that time, the name Soeharto felt inappropriate... The situation was tense. Then Eunsook commented... 'If the children haven't made a move, why hasn't their mother?' I remember Gadis saying, 'In that case, let's make a move immediately. Let's invite our fellow women activists'" (Karlina Supelli 2025, Joint Discussion, 9 June).

Leading Up to the Action: Strategy, Planning, and Tactics

Preparations for SIP action on 23 February 1998 began long before the demonstration and were the result of critical discussions, strategic considerations, and the collective courage of women activists. In the context of New Order repression, the initiators of SIP realised that they could not openly voice political demands such as "Bring Suharto Down" without facing serious risks. Therefore, their main strategy was to symbolically camouflage the narrative of motherhood, developed through intensive meetings and collective planning. In her article, Gadis Arivia (2018) wrote that:

"We realised that we could not plan to carry banners saying "Bring Suharto Down", so we needed to think about what

issues might attract public sympathy... While finalising the themes for *Jurnal Perempuan* edition and editing the JP articles, we also discussed the possibility of successfully using the idea of milk for a subversive effort.”

Karlina Supelli elaborated on the strategy of using the word ‘milk’ and its double meaning.

“I remember Gadis saying that we had to strategise so as not to attract attention, especially from intelligence agencies. Then we came up with two terms: ‘pure milk’ and ‘political milk’. Ibu Toeti gave them those names” (Karlina Supelli, Joint Discussion, 9 June 2025).

She further explained that the terms ‘pure milk’ and ‘political milk’, coined by Toeti Heraty at a meeting at the *Jurnal Perempuan* office, demonstrated that discussions about the word ‘milk’ were tactical, conducted with political and semiotic awareness. ‘Pure milk’ represented mothers’ concern for their children’s needs, while ‘political milk’ was a coded message used to oppose the Soeharto regime.

Internal discussions at *Jurnal Perempuan* examined case studies that explored the influence of international women’s movement literature on the concept of “motherhood”. One such study was the story of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, presented by Nur Iman Subono, who was a *Jurnal Perempuan* staff member and a lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the University of Indonesia at the time. This model of peaceful action based on maternal identity inspired the creation of a strong local narrative. At a meeting with women activists, this idea was discussed in earnest. Myra Diarsi, a feminist activist from Kalyanamitra, together with Gadis, explored the use of the word

“mother”. They opted for the name “Suara Ibu Peduli” (Voice of Concerned Mothers) over “Suara Perempuan Peduli” (Voice of Concerned Women) because “mother” was considered more acceptable and less controversial. The name “Suara Ibu Peduli” was therefore intended to represent the action to be held on 23 February 1998, rather than an organisation.

Meetings held at the *Jurnal Perempuan* office with various women’s activists were often scheduled for the evening, as the office was busy with its routine research and publishing activities during the day. The first recorded meeting took place on 13 February 1998. Around 15 women activists from organisations such as Solidaritas Perempuan, LBH APIK, WALHI, and ELSAM were in attendance, along with several academics from the University of Indonesia. Apart from *Jurnal Perempuan* staff, key figures at this meeting included Julia Suryakusuma, Myra Diarsi, Robin Bush (an international student working on her dissertation), Yuniyanti Chuzaifah, Tati Krisnawaty, and Salma Safitri. Friends of the *Jurnal Perempuan* editorial board also facilitated the meeting, including Liza Hadiz and Umi Lasmina. Follow-up strategic meetings were held on 16, 20, and 22 February to plan the formation of the group, the meeting location, the action code (e.g., opening an umbrella to signal the start of the action), and simulations in case of arrests. Subsequent meetings were attended by figures such as Dina (Walhi), Agung Putri (ELSAM), Riga Adiwongso (FE UI), Toeti Heraty (one of the founders of YJP and a UI philosophy lecturer), Gayatri, Nursjahbani Katjasungkana, Ita F. Nadia, and Kartini Sjahrir (Arivia 2007 & 2018).

Table 1.
Preparatory Meeting & Leading Up to the SIP Action on 23 February 1998 at YJP

| Date | Activity |
|------------------|--|
| Aug/Sep 1997 | Initial discussion at Gadis Arivia’s house with Karlina Supelli and Eunsook. |
| 27 November 1997 | Initial discussion of action ideas within YJP: Discussion of the Plaza de Mayo case in Argentina with Nur Iman Subono. |
| 13 February 1998 | The first meeting at YJP office was attended by approximately 15 women activists from various organisations. |
| 16 February 1998 | Strategy meeting on action, fundraising, and discussion of the use of the terms “pure milk” and “political milk”. |
| 20 February 1998 | Meeting on the sale of cheap milk as a form of “cover up” or camouflage strategy. |
| 21 February 1998 | Distribution of cheap milk to the community, building legitimacy for the moral movement. |
| 22 February 1998 | Final meeting and action simulation; some activists withdrew due to the “Alert One” status in Jakarta. |
| 23 February 1998 | SIP demonstration at HI Roundabout, 3 activists arrested. |

As shown in the table above, the female activists made thorough preparations for the SIP demonstration on 23 February 1998. They also considered selling cheap milk at the YJP office two days prior to the demonstration as a “cover-up”. Gadis recounted how persistent Himah Sholihah was in searching for cheap milk at factories in Pulogadung.

“On 20 February, I asked Ima to find milk for us to sell cheaply at the *Jurnal Perempuan* office the following day. This way, if we were caught, we could argue that our activities were not “political”, but that we were actually helping the community by providing cheap milk. I would also like to acknowledge the efforts of Ima and my driver, Pak Natsir, who travelled to Pulogadung to source the milk. Despite not knowing where to find it, they solved the problem themselves” (Gadis Arivia 2025, Joint Discussion, 9 June).

Himah Sholihah successfully obtained affordable milk from a factory at a negotiated price. The funds collected were limited to IDR 5.950.000. These initial funds were obtained from Toeti Heraty, Gadis Arivia, and Andrea (Gadis Arivia 2007, 2018). Himah lobbied the milk factory and explained the need for cheap milk. According to Himah, even the female factory employees contributed because they wanted to help, too. The cheap milk sale at the YJP office was entirely managed by Himah and supported by YJP staff, including Ani, Nazar, Supri, Robin, and others. The night before the sale, Ibu Sri from Kalyanamitra helped to fill plastic bags with powdered milk. Instead of editorial papers, the editorial desk of *J* was filled with powdered milk.

On Saturday, 21 February 2025, a long queue of people interested in buying cheap milk had formed outside the YJP office early in the morning. By noon, the queue had become so long that people were pushing and shoving, resulting in broken office windows. The atmosphere was chaotic, with mothers and fathers scrambling for milk. Due to security concerns, the cheap milk sale did not last long. YJP rented the Megaria office

from Ibu Toeti Heraty, who was very concerned about the damage to her property.

That evening, Karlina and Gadis decided to report on what had happened with the cheap milk campaign at the YJP office. The women activists gathered and discussed the matter. In addition to reporting on the events of that morning, they also wanted to discuss the detailed plans for the demonstration. It was decided that the demonstration would take place at the HI Roundabout because it is in an office area and the city centre, and protesters would blend in easily while dressed in office attire. However, a meeting to plan the demonstration in detail did not take place, as most of the women activists felt that conditions for demonstrating were not conducive. The atmosphere in Jakarta was becoming increasingly tense, and eventually, some of our friends withdrew from the demonstration due to the “Alert One” status that had been declared.

In their reflection discussion, Karlina and Gadis acknowledged that the reasons given by some of their fellow activists for withdrawing were valid. Ultimately, our primary concern was the demonstrators’ safety, and we did not want any casualties. However, we also reflected on our decision to remain steadfast in our intention to demonstrate. Karlina said:

“Even though fewer people were willing to participate and many withdrew, leaving only 12=14 demonstrators, we finally agreed to take to the streets” (Karlina Supelli, Joint Discussion, 9 June 2025).

Gadis also felt it was her “duty” to participate in the demonstration, despite her concerns about leaving her two young children, aged two and eight months, at home.

The meeting on Sunday, 22 February 1998, planned the final preparations. Julia Suryakusuma, Gayatri, and Myra Diarsi helped to prepare everything needed for the demonstration the following day.

Table 2.
Items Prepared

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Banners and Posters | Used symbolic language and double meanings, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Lower the price of milk” • “We mothers care about the future of our children” • “Milk for life, not power” The hidden meaning was “Bring Su-su-Harto Down”. |
| Flowers | Brought by demonstrators to be distributed to road users and authorities. <p>They were symbols of empathy, peace, and “motherhood”.</p> |

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Bags and Clothing | Dressed like ordinary office workers. Disguised as office workers to cross to HI Roundabout without arousing police suspicion (the police post is right in the demonstration area). |
| Umbrella | Used as a signal code to start the action (when the umbrella was opened, participants began to move into the HI Roundabout). |
| Contact List | Be prepared for possible arrests. Contacts with lawyers and journalists have been prepared, including coordination with LBH and national and international journalists. |

Implementation of the Action, Arrest, and Family Reaction

Monday finally arrived, bringing with it a mixture of hope and anxiety. As usual, the Hotel Indonesia (HI) Roundabout was filled with office workers and passers-by. However, that day, the HI roundabout became a symbolic stage for feminist activists. Around 12 to 14 female activists were present, ready to demonstrate. The large number of police officers on duty created a palpable sense of high alert. As agreed, the activists wore office attire and carried bags containing posters and flowers. They pretended to be office workers to infiltrate the HI Roundabout and bypass the authorities. In addition to all Jurnal Perempuan staff, the activist friends present included Julia Suryakusuma, Yuniyanti Chuzaifah, Myra Diarsi, Gayatri, Nori Andriyani, Tati Krisnawaty, Tinneke Arif, and Wilasih. In a joint reflection discussion, Karlina explained the presence of the sisters:

“On the day itself, we were surprised when Sister Francisco suddenly arrived with two or three other sisters. I had contacted Father Ismartono, who then called Sister Francisco to inform her that Karlina, Gadis, and their friends were going to stage a protest. Sister Francisco was very proud of SIP’s action on 23 February and told everyone that she had learned a lot from the Suara Ibu Peduli campaign. She joined the march. It was very meaningful to me because, when many people backed out of the demonstration, the sisters said they wanted to join.” (Karlina Supelli 2025, Joint Discussion 9 June).

The protest began with a pre-arranged code: when the umbrellas were opened, the demonstrators crossed the road and formed a circle. Dressed in office attire and an orange blazer, Karlina became the coordinator and opened her umbrella to signal to all the demonstrators to cross into the HI Roundabout simultaneously. Inside the roundabout, they read poems, said prayers, and sang songs of peace. The police approached, but the activists remained calm and invited the officers to pray with them. In the tense atmosphere of the threat of violence from the authorities, we chose to demonstrate

our courage through prayer, empathy, and symbols of peace, such as holding flowers, rather than aggressive slogans. This demonstrates that feminist politics does not always have to be expressed through shouting; it can also be conveyed through small gestures that are rich in symbolic meaning and resistance. This tactic was successful.

The action did not last long — only about 30 minutes. We were arrested and herded into police trucks. For Wilasih, who had not participated in the preparatory meetings, this action was a spontaneous response to her conscience, prompted by information from Stanley, a member of the SIP action planning team who was liaising with journalists. Initially, Wilasih was worried that the two women in the truck with her would think she was an intruder. However, she found a sense of mutual support and admiration for her colleagues’ moral fortitude. Gadis and Karlina were surprised to see her when they were loaded into the truck.

“I sat in the truck with two women I didn’t even know... But I felt I could support them because I was used to dealing with the authorities” (Wilasih Nophiana Kunta Adjie 2025, Written Testimony, 24 June).

Wilasih was not the only person to ensure that Karlina and Gadis received full support, given their lack of experience in dealing with the authorities. Another activist who appeared was Soendjati, who was eagerly awaiting our arrival at the Provincial Police Headquarters. Soendjati was an activist with the Indonesian Legal Aid Association (PBHI) at that time, and Karlina and Gadis did not know her. When we were escorted inside, Soendjati immediately took Gadis by the arm and explained that her fellow activists had asked her to protect us. We were grateful for the swift action of our human rights activist friends, who had devised a strategy and a plan to protect us without our knowledge. Our arrest became the focus of media attention. Stanley Adi Prasetyo had informed the journalists in advance. They responded quickly and spread the news. Julia Suryakusuma acted

as the media contact, drafting press releases in English and Indonesian. She also handled all the questions and interviews that flooded in while Gadis and Karlina were detained. The initially expected small-scale feminist action became a national event.

We also reflected on family reactions and the importance of families in this paper's discussion. It is important to reveal family reactions to women's involvement in feminist demonstrations such as SIP action. In feminist studies, issues such as conflict, negotiation, and the reproduction of power dynamics within the domestic sphere are often considered apolitical. However, it is precisely these issues that provide the foundation on which women's consciousness and resistance are formed. For instance, Patricia Collins (2000) explains in her study of black feminists that the family is not merely a passive backdrop, but rather a battleground where traditional gender norms clash with an emerging political awareness. She states that "Individual biographies are situated within family, community, and institutional settings. This relational context shapes Black women's knowledge and actions" (Collins 2000, p. 273).

In the context of SIP and our identity as feminists, we recognise that we must negotiate our identities as daughters, mothers, and wives while taking actions we deem ethical and politically responsible. Karlina, for instance, had to fulfil her duty of taking her child to school in the morning before joining the demonstration. She recounts how her child, Arma, then in secondary school, reacted.

"On the morning of the 23rd, Arma suddenly locked my room from the outside. The children knew that what their mother was doing was dangerous, but they didn't know exactly what it was. They knew it was risky because they could see their father's attitude; he immediately refused to discuss it further. So Arma was very afraid that something would happen to his mother. When Karlina woke up, she found her room locked. Her mother finally persuaded Arma to give her the key." (Karlina Supelli, Joint Discussion, 9 June 2025).

Both Karlina and Gadis had to ensure that household matters were taken care of, and they both asked their mothers to look after their children. Gadis did not give her mother the real reason, merely informing her that there was a UI Philosophy Department meeting in Puncak and that she needed her mother to look after her young children, as her husband was on duty out of town. Both Gadis and Karlina felt very lucky that their mothers understood their activities and gave them

encouragement and support. One thing Gadis regretted was that, when she was released from the police station the next day, her eight-month-old baby no longer wanted to breastfeed. The expressed milk stored in the refrigerator had run out, so her mother had to feed her child formula milk while Gadis was away. Wilasih's story was interesting because her situation was different from those of Gadis and Karlina. She faced multiple social burdens and had to negotiate various identities.

"As a woman born into an ethnic Chinese family, I have often experienced things that are deeply offensive to my humanity. However, national consciousness will diminish such discrimination because siding with the most oppressed is my choice. Indonesia is my homeland." (Wilasih Nophiana Kunta Adjie, 2025, Written Testimony, 24 June).

We find Wilasih's statement interesting. Not only does she feel the need to emphasise that Indonesia is her homeland, but her ethnicity is also embedded in her consciousness and informs her decision to demonstrate. The intersection between ethnicity, political attitudes, and family power structures illustrates the importance of intersectionality and the epistemology of experience in understanding how women develop a political consciousness in areas that are traditionally considered to be private domains, as Collins (2000) describes. Wilasih further reveals in her reflection:

"My friends supported me in demonstrating, but my family did not. They were very frightened when they found out I had been arrested. This fear increased even more after the trial, as it was as if my house was under surveillance. Intelligence officers would come to my house when I was out, approach my mother, and tell her that my activities were dangerous and treasonous. They entered my house and searched my books, taking some of them. I decided to leave Jakarta so that my mother would no longer be terrorised by fear." (Wilasih Nophiana Kunta Adjie, 2025, written testimony, 24 June).

Trial and Pleas

The trial took place at the Central Jakarta District Court on 4 March 1998. We were charged with disturbing the peace in the area around the Hotel Indonesia Roundabout, in violation of Article 510 of the Criminal Code. The courtroom was filled with supporters, with hundreds of people attending to show their support for the three of us. They welcomed us with songs such as "*Kasih Ibu*" and "*Ibu Pertiwi*," and presented us with flowers. Among those present were Prof. Dr. Emil Salim and Prof. Dr. Saporinah Sadli (Kompas, 4 March 1998). Our lawyers, Apong Herlina and Nursjahbani

Katjasungkana from LBH APIK, accompanied us. Karlina described the atmosphere at the District Court:

“What I found interesting at the trial was that women wearing headscarves came with the nuns to support us, holding hands and bringing us flowers. It turned out that we had so much support. The trial itself was pitiful because of the judge. We felt she was just doing her job. I did not know how much pressure she was under, but she felt she had to punish us. However, I remember her saying that she understood the issue and the reasons behind it. Yet we were still breaking the law” (Karlina Supelli, Joint Discussion, 9 June 2025).

During the trial, along with our legal counsel, we delivered an “opening statement” in response to the charges. We stated that our actions were not a violation of the law, but rather a form of peaceful dialogue in response to socio-economic conditions. We were aware that, in authoritarian regimes, the courtroom was often used to silence dissenting voices and create an intimidating atmosphere. However, in the SIP trial, we transformed the courtroom into a platform for women to express their moral and political views. Our plea was affirmative rather than defensive, combining emotion and civil logic in our language. Karlina spoke as a mother, educator, and thinker:

“I do not want my children, or the children of this nation, to grow up in silence and fear. I want them to know that women have a voice, and that the state should hear it” (Karlina 1998, cited in Subono, YJP, 1999).

Gadis emphasised that protest is a human right. In her statement, she shifted the legal framework from criminality to constitutionality and citizens’ rights. She presented women as legitimate political subjects, not merely as mothers concerned with the needs of their children, but as citizens concerned with the direction of the nation.

“I came to the Hotel Indonesia Roundabout not to disrupt public order, but to voice the concerns and suffering of ordinary people... Protest is a citizen’s right” (Gadis Arivia 1998, in Subono, YJP, 1999).

Wilasih’s plea was interesting because she drafted it with the awareness that she had to play the role of a “mother” demonstrator, as she had said at the police headquarters during her interrogation. Her plea had to be convincing, and she succeeded in combining the emotional aspect of “motherhood” with civil logic.

“I am angry because the state is afraid when a mother stands up and speaks out. I did not bring weapons; I only

brought a caring heart” (Wilasih Nophiana 1998, in Subono, YJP, 1999).

We were found guilty and decided to appeal. Meanwhile, students began to mobilise from 19 to 23 May 1998. Jurnal Perempuan office became a distribution point for packed meals and a place for students to stay. In total, 70.576 packed meals were distributed, along with 1.947 boxes of Aqua water and 2.811 boxes of snacks. IDR 120.541.865 (YJP financial report, 1998-99) was also donated in cash for the students’ demonstrations. Donations were also used to produce “*Bergerak*” newsletter and “*Reformasi Total*” (Total Reform) T-shirts, which were distributed to students and the general public (Gadis Arivia 2007, 2018).

On 21 May 1998, Soeharto stepped down and was replaced by B. J. Habibie, who had been serving as vice president. Habibie served for one year. According to Karlina, after Habibie became president, there were attempts to erase our legal records, which he eventually abolished, including those of Prof. Dr. Muchtar Pakpahan, a labour leader.

Conclusion

The SIP demonstration on 23 February 1998 was a pivotal moment in both the history of the women’s movement and Indonesian political history. It marked a significant milestone in the country’s reform and democratic processes. It was not merely a reaction to the economic crisis or rising milk prices; it was a carefully considered political intervention and a display of strategic awareness. The identities of “mother” and “milk” were manipulated to get public sympathy and to criticise the repressive Soeharto regime. Women activists presented a new perspective, grounded in empathy yet laden with political significance. In the context of SIP, the representation of motherhood was not a conservative stance but rather a form of feminist political praxis, as it transformed consciousness, power relations, and social structures through women’s experiences. SIP demonstration showcased strategic feminist politics.

Through a collaborative autoethnographic approach, this reflection reveals that personal relationships are inextricably linked to politics and can be a source of courage and awareness. Court hearings, pleas, and even family conversations are all part of a feminist political landscape that is often overlooked. SIP activists demonstrate that the struggle takes place not only on

the public stage, but also in the meaningful everyday actions of choosing words, clothes, or flowers as tools of resistance.

The actions of female activists in the SIP movement prove that feminist politics can be highly effective. By writing this article, we honour the courage of female activists during the New Order era and affirm that Indonesian feminism emerged from tangible, intelligent, and transformative experiences.

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Footnote

- 1 The Chinese terms used in this text appear as they do in the original source, and refer to the ethnic Chinese identity in Indonesia.

