

WOMEN'S NEWSPAPERS AS MINANGKABAU FEMINIST MOVEMENT AGAINST MARGINALIZATION IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

Minangkabau is one of the ethnic groups in Indonesia who inhabits the western part of Sumatra Island. During the years of 1900-1942, 209 types of newspapers were published by this ethnic group with various themes and writing styles, eight of which were about women. Women's newspapers were initiated by women. Substantially, the major themes of these newspapers were feminist movement against gender discrimination and inequality. Hence, the publication of these newspapers became the medium for feminist movement in Minangkabau. This movement influenced and contributed towards the emergence of the political, social, educational, cultural, and economic movement for women. Through this movement, women gained access to those respective aspects. Therefore, gender equality on the access to education, welfare, and justice was achieved. Women's newspapers act as the Minangkabau feminist movement against marginalization in Indonesia.

Keywords: Newspaper, Feminist, Marginalization, Minangkabau

Introduction

As a part of the Minangkabau region, West Sumatra has experienced remarkable progress in the press marked by the proliferating growth and development of large significant numbers of newspapers. Thus, Minangkabau can be considered as the pioneer for progress of the press in this country.

The history of newspapers in West Sumatra began in 1882 with the birth of *Pelita Kecil* led by Datuk Sutan Maharaja. This newspaper was later renamed *Warta Berita*. In 1890, Ja Endra Muda published *Perca Barat*. In 1897, *Cahaya Sumatera* was published spearheaded by Rajo Sampono (Safwan, et.1987: 60). This development did not stop there, but increased significantly during the year 1900.

Ahmad Adam (1212: 129-211) mentions that 209 newspapers were published from 1900-1942 in this region, 6 published outside the Minangkabau region. Among the 209 newspapers, 16 Islamic newspapers were published between 1920 and 1929. In 1920, two Islamic newspapers were published, *Al-Imam* in Padang Japang Payakumbuh and *Al-Basyir* in Sungayang, Batusangkar. In 1922, there were five published Islamic newspapers, *Attarbiyah* in Fort Van Der Cappelen in Batusangkar, *Al-Ittifaq wa Iftiraq* in Padang, *Pelita Muslimin* in Maninjau, *Al-I'laam* in Bukittinggi and *Adabiah* in Padang. Meanwhile in 1923, another two newspapers were published, *Dauharah* and *Pewart Islam* in Bukittinggi. In 1926, Islamic newspapers, *Signal* and *Iqbaloe Haq* in Padang Panjang and Padang were also published. In 1928, three Islamic newspapers published were published, *Noeroe'l Jaqin* and *El-Adab* in Batusangkar and *Kemaoean Zaman* in Padang Panjang. In 1929, two newspapers, *Perdamaijan* in Bukittinggi and *Noeroel YaqinB* in Batusangkar were published (Adam, 2012: 74).

Of the 209 newspapers published, seven of them brought the central theme of women as can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1

Women's Newspapers In Minangkabau 1900-1942

No	Title	Publication Year	Publisher	Editor	Publication Place
1	Soeara Perempoean	1918	Pergerakan Perempoean	Saadah Alim	Padang Panjang
2	Djauharah Oentok Bangsa Perempuan	1923	H.A Lathif Sjakoeah Biaro Empat Angkat	-	Ampek Angkat
3	Asjraq	1923-1925	De Volharding Padang	Roestam Effendi, M. Rashid Man	Padang
4	Soera Kaoem Iboe Soematra	1925-1929	Sarekat Koem Iboe Soematra	M. Djoesair	Padang Panjang
5	Medan Poetri	1933	Permi Poetri Bukittinggi	Sjamsidar Jahja atagak	Bukittinggi
6	Menara Poetri	1938-1939	Rasoena Said	A. Madid Oesman	Maninjau
7	Soera Kaoem Iboe Seoemoenja	1938	Padang Panjang	Djusa'ir	Padang Panjang
8	Soenting Melayoe	1911-1921		Rohana Kudus	Padang

Source: Ahmad Adam (2012)

Among the seven newspapers or magazines, one of them was *Soenting Melayoe* which was published between 1911 and 1921 and was pioneered by women with the central theme of women and their movement. The existence of this newspaper became an indicator of an intellectual advance in Minangkabau since almost all of these newspapers were managed and written by women. The newspaper, at least, showed women's struggle at that time to obtain equality in ways of thinking, acting, and being treated.

Women initiated their movement in those days through the newspapers published by the women themselves and through their writings for the newspapers. Among the researchers, the popular women's newspaper is *Soenting Melayoe* with its famous editor, Rohana Kuddus, who was crowned as a journalist in this archipelago for her movement through the world of journalism and newspapers. Women's writings in newspapers and the establishment of women affiliated newspapers were a form

of resistance to injustice received by women at that time. Through these newspapers, women channeled their aspirations and ideals.

Such injustice might be constructed by colonialism as well as by the unjust culture and worldview in understanding women as complete human beings, and not just as second-class beings. Therefore, newspapers and writings were some of the possible media with the potential to go against these unjust perspectives, acts and treatment as was proven in the movement of women between the years 1900-1942. The success of newspapers as the media to facilitate women's equality movement needs to be put forward and analyzed so that it can be a reference in the current movement for equality.

Methodology

Historical studies are greatly assisted by various literatures. At least, there are several major literatures that help to explain the

topic of this study which include the *Suara Minangkabau Sejarah dan Bibliografi Akhbar dan Majalah Di Sumatera Barat 1900-1942* written by Ahmad Adam, *Sengketa Tiada Putus Matriakat, Reformasi Agama dan Kolonialisme di Minangkabau* and research results from Jeffrey Hadler published in Indonesia, 2008. It is then followed by the analysis of several series of two women's newspapers namely *Soenting Melayoe* and *Djauharah Oentoek Bangsa Perempuan*. The literature becomes the main source and is assisted by some related data. They are helpful in obtaining information on women's movement in newspapers. The data obtained are interpreted by gender study approaches and feminism studies.

Discussion

Newspapers are a highly functional medium for transforming image, perspective, and behavior. It can be seen from various media studies. One of the benefits of newspapers is to adjust the social patterns developed in society into the expected goals. In fact, almost every newspaper from the colonial era until now has such mission and purpose, so each newspaper has its own icons and themes. It is evident in every development of the newspaper presentations from time to time. The locals' involvement in the colonial press influenced the development of newspapers in this country. Originally, newspapers were used as tools of colonial rule, then they became a political medium for the sake of independence and nationalism. In light of this matter, Harsono (2010) classified three developments of newspapers in Indonesia, the first phase was from 1744 to 1854 when the newspapers in Indonesia were dominated and controlled by Europeans. The years from 1854 to 1907 was the second stage when indigenous people started to engage with newspapers. This stage led to the birth of local journalists and inspired rapid development of newspapers in this country. The year 1907-1945 was the development of the third stage where the newspapers were developed as a political media to build the spirit of nationalism.

The development in the third stage also brought the emergence of newspapers with various themes in Indonesia including in Minangkabau. These newspapers did not only bring the topic of politics, religion, education, culture but also women's movement and struggle. Women's newspapers emerged with names that deliberately carried characteristic of womanhood, brave and unsymbolized. Several names of newspapers were named with women identities, for example, *Soera Perempuan*, *Oentoek Bangsa Perempuan*, *Soera Kaoem Iboe Soematra*, *Medan Poetri*, *Menara Poetri*, *Soera Kaoem Iboe Seoemoenja*, *Soenting Melayoe* and so on. These names were directly affiliated with women.

These names indicate that women began to construct their existence as an inseparable part of the public. They started to show themselves to be free from marginalization. In this context, the struggle for gender equality began to realize that women were no longer considered as second class but as an equal citizens. This goal was originally carried by women's newspapers, fighting for the rights of women who were colonized by culture and patriarchy (Hanani, 2011).

The presence of women's newspapers can be considered as a form of welfare movement inseparable from the marginalized condition of women illustrated by various stories told in the newspapers at that time in culture, politics and colonization (?). Under these conditions, there was a sense of discomfort and desire to escape from such situations. One of the ways to achieve it was to publize the writings about the sufferings.

One such writing was by a female writer with the pen name of *Gadis Doeseon* in *Asraq* newspaper. Her writing discussed the condition of women in marriage as practiced within the society, for example, the tradition of forcing 12 year old girls to get married by saying that they were actually 15 years old. In many cases,

these young girls might end up marrying men who already had a few wives. Tragically, it was mentioned in her article that the marriage was more like a trial and error experience rather than building a life together. Hence, it was not surprising that women aged 20-25 had married four to five men and sometimes had three to five children from different husbands (Hadler, 2008: 138).

In addition, women did not get economic support for children abandoned by their fathers. Meanwhile, it was legal for men to have up to four wives. If they still wanted to marry again, they simply had to divorce one of the four. Therefore, it was not surprising for Minangkabau children to be unfamiliar with their father at the time. Such situations continued to occur in Minangkabau society until the early 70s.

Hamka (1908-1981), a Minangkabau *ulama*, was furious with such polygamous practices, and vociferously voiced his disagreement with the attitude of Minangkabau men in his writings. These writings included *Agama dan Perempuan*, *Nasib Istri Islam Indonesia* and so forth. Hamka also revealed the details of women's misery such as forced marriage, polygamy, divorce, young marriage and economic marginalization. Hadler (2008: 231-232) provided in his writings a special study on the subject of lust and desire, which recommends that men should control and suppress their lust and desire to oppose their wishy washy practice on marriage and polygamy.

Women's image as a commodity in patriarchal system became central issues in women's newspapers. At least, it can be seen from the writings in *Asjraq* which criticized the situation faced by women at that time. The writings published in this newspaper attracted much attention not only from local men, but also from the colonialists. Women's newspaper, according to Sidharta (Ibrahim & Suranto, 1998), functioned as a source of information to address issues related to women. That was

what distinguished them from other newspapers. Besides, women's newspapers had an educational function to create an image accepted by women and to educate women about their rights and responsibilities in a male-dominated world. Women's newspapers also served as a movement to educate women in their idealism to fight for their independence and welfare. This movement placed the newspapers as media of the feminist movement by fighting against gender inequalities and injustices. Women's newspapers, in particular, were dominated by the issues and themes of women in different contexts and dimensions, including with regards to colonialism and patriarchal culture. However, women were not presented in the form of hedonist, socialite and consumerist but in the form of movements and struggles against injustice and impartiality toward women.

Media of Social Criticism

Injustice against women was the most common theme written by the women in the newspaper. Essentially, women wanted to escape from this situation and cultural pressures. Therefore, existence of women's newspapers in that era was a part of feminism movement to fight against the injustice of cultural construction. In this period, women did not experience equality with men in education, economics, politics and other fields, so they were marginalized in various aspects and were left far behind in terms of qualified human resources. This condition was constructed by both colonial attitudes and patriarchal cultures built by the community.

According to Adam (2015), during the colonial period, newspapers were controlled by colonial interests. However, such pressures brought the interest of ideal newspapers leading to the resistance to the colonial system. In other words, there was a fight over the control of the information behind this. Newspapers were born from the ideas and actions of locals who are usually resistant to colonial policy.

Regarding women's newspapers in West Sumatra, they were generally resistant to these practices especially unofficial private newspapers. According to Faber (Adam, 2015) there were two types of press in the colonial era, namely the official press and the unofficial (private). The official press belonged to the government, while the unofficial was owned by the private sector. The private newspapers became the stepping stone in voicing social critique against colonial policies.

Most of the women's newspapers were owned by activists and were created to criticize inhumane policies. Therefore, these newspapers became the agent of women's movement to escape from constructed marginalization. Most editions of *Jauharah Untuk Bangsa Perempuan*, for example, urged men and women not to mutually understate their respective roles in education, social, economy and culture. It can be seen from the writings with the theme of *azam perempuan* written by both men and women. *Jauharah Untuk Bangsa Perempuan* was founded by Abdul Latif Syakur (1882-1963) with other writers mostly dominated by women who were involved in women's education and equality.

Similarly, *Soenting Melajoe* also mobilized and motivated women to escape the underdevelopment and marginalization. Most of the articles published centered around women's effort to rise from the conditions that bind their freedom. One such writing was published on 28 September 1912.

*Wahai segala kita perempoean
Adik dan kakak moeda roepawan
Tetap tegehkan toejoe haloean
Ke taman soenting sanda goerawan*

These calls to freedom indicate that women began to move to determine their future in which they had to struggle to make progress for themselves. Rohana Kudus (1884-1972), one of the prolific female authors, is often associated with the women's struggle. She wrote not only in women's newspapers but also in several

newspapers in Sumatra at that time.

Rohana Kudus, who was active in authorship and the press, wrote many articles about women in several newspapers such as in *Suadara Hindia*, the first newspaper of Rohana Kudus (?) was published in Kayu Tanam, 1913. Rohana Kudus wrote an article in the newspaper entitled *Perempuan Hindia* which voiced women's struggle "...bangkitlah kami perempoean Hindia meoesahakan diri sendiri hendak menoentoet apa yang bergoena dan wajib bagi kami perempoean sebagai menjaga roemah tangga dan lain-lain ichtiar oentoek pentjari djalan penghodoepan, seperti sebelah desa ketjil yang ta'berapa jaoehnja dari For de Kock adalah kami mengadakan perkoempoelan perempoean-perempoean sadja, jakni oentoek mempelajari kepandaian tangan, memegang rumah tangga dan beladjar bermatjam-matjam kepandaian yang mana perkoempulan itoe kami namai Karadjinan Amai Setia..." (Hadler, 2008; 222).

This article was influenced by the parents' attitude and behavior at that time that differentiate the treatment between boys and girls in terms of education, economy and social standing. Girls were expected to engage in domestic duties and not given the opportunity to get the highest possible education as it was assumed that they would not require the education. The articles of Rohana Kudus (1912, 1913, 1918, 1920) related to women in *Soenting Melajoe* included *Setia Gerakan Perempuan Zaman Ini* (23 May 1913), *Perhiasan Pakaian* (7 August 1912), *Gerakan Kesoekaan Perempuan Zaman Ini* (4 July 1913), *Perempuan* (15 December 1918), *Mencari Istri* (19 December 1920).

In *Soenting Melajoe*, articles about women written by the writer other than Rohana Kudus were also published, for example, *Tertindas Bangsa Kita Perempuan* (7 August 1912), *Kebaikan Perempuan Bersekolah* (Sjamsiar, 19 October, 1912), *Nasib Perempuan A.M.K Yang Tidak Dihormati Laki-Laki* (Timoer, 6 June 1913), *Boeah Pikiran Bangsa Koe Perempuan*

(Timoer, 20 March 1913), *Gerakan Kaoem Moda Perempoean* (Hatidjah, 30 December 1913).

The existence of *Soenting Melajoe* can be considered as part of the movement as well as a media for women to break away from the social environment that discriminated against them, so this newspaper was the media for women to fight against being marginalized (Caniago, 2014).

In addition, women's writings that motivated them to engage in politics were also intensively published by *Asjraq*. This newspaper led the birth of the *Serikat Kaoem Iboes Soematra* (SKIS) which was founded in 1924. In the first Congress of SKIS dated 17 August 1929, the name *Asjraq* was changed into *Soeara Kaoem Iboe Soematera* with a very critical style of feminist writings. The articles voiced sharp criticism of the injustice toward women and urged them to free themselves from situations which were unfavourable to them. Therefore, the newspaper was mentioned as the one that encouraged women to engage in the public sphere and changed the social construction that had marginalized them. Therefore, not surprisingly, this newspaper was opposed by community leaders who were not prepared for such change.

SKIS also changed the way women viewed the domestic and public spheres and the way men viewed women. This organization was very active in writing the themes of women and their fate. They also strongly criticized men's unfair treatment toward women. Critical criticism made this organization challenged and opposed by various established societies with unjust, and unequal social constructions.

In addition, SKIS undoubtedly encouraged women to take part in the public domain and to be involved in various social and political organizations. Hence, the first congress of this women's organization echoed with the voices of women from various levels of society where

women participated to convey various views to the public about their movement. There were about 800 men participating in the opening of the congress which took place in Scala Theater Bukittinggi. Among these participants were local colonial officials and elites. One of the speakers present at the congress was Seri Kiam Azizi who described the Minangkabau feminist movement through newspaper analyses of *Soenting Melajoe*, *Soera Perempoean*, *Asjraq* and *Soeara Kaoem Iboe Soematera*. These analyses indicated that newspaper media had played a role in women's struggle for gender equality (Hadler, 2008: 279).

Thus, the newspapers at that time were the media for exponents of feminism to explain their conditions to the community. It had an impact on the change of perspective to women who were originally marginalized by cultural construction. The change allowed women to play a wide range of roles in various aspects of public life.

Women newspapers' were not only published by women but also men such as "*Djauharah Oentuk Bangsa Perempoean*" by Sheikh Abdullatif Syakur (1882-1963) in 1932. The goal was to fight for the rights of women and at the same time encourage women to actively write about various issues related to their struggle. Sheikh Abdulatif Syakur was well aware that newspapers can be a medium of *dakwah* with the potential to change the thinking, actions and deeds of society. "*Djauharah Oentuk Bangsa Perempoean*" was published periodically in a beautiful village of Balai Gurah Agam regency not far from the city of Bukittinggi and Koto Gadang where Rohan Kuddus movement had been crowned as the first female journalist in Indonesia. Sheikh Abdulatif Syakur also founded a women's school that was not continued by the family. The students were encouraged to write in the newspaper *Djauharah Oentuk Bangsa Perempoean* and some permanent writers were female alumni of the school founded by Sheikh Abdullatif Syakur.

There were some factors that prompted Sheikh Abdullatif to publish women's magazine. Among these were the conditions of women who were lagging behind and lacking of attention. There were not many scholars and *adat* elites at that time who cared about the fate of women who were marginalized. Accordingly, Syekh Abdullatif Syakur was struggling to free women from underdevelopment through education, newspapers and writings. One of the posts that was related to that social condition was *Addakwah wal Irsyad ila Sabilirr Rasyad* published in 1940 by Tsamratul Ikhwan, a prominent publisher in Bukittinggi.

Sheikh Abdullatif Syakur was a feminist *ulama* in Minangkabau who struggled through women's newspapers and often performed social *dakwah* combining textuality with contextuality. Before preaching, he first studied the social conditions of the surrounding community so that his *dakwah* was based on social reality. Such concepts and strategies were affirmed by female writers in the newspaper "*Djauharah Oentuk Bangsa Perempoean*". The writings in this newspaper always emphasized the social reality of women at that time and offered a variety of thoughts to examine such conditions.

Media of Women's Movement

Women's newspapers were one of the media that facilitated feminist movements in Minangkabau. The existence of the newspapers led to the emergence of modernist women in this region because they changed women's view of reality and existence. In addition, they also affected the way the public view women as being marginalized by various interests ?. Newspapers were also a practical means of movement by women because it was difficult for women to fight in colonial times. Therefore, the newspapers became a media propaganda to change the way of thinking toward women. The involvement of women in the mass media as writers, founders as well as managers, cannot be separated from the practical function of the newspapers to disseminate information,

knowledge and opinions broadly depending on their mission and ideology. In general, every newspaper must have a mission and ideology because it is very dependent on the readers, markets and objectives to be achieved.

Women's newspapers, in practice, clearly had a purpose for the benefit of women's progress especially in conditions where they were marginalized. The existence of such newspapers became one of the platforms for the women's movement to change unfavorable conditions and situations, especially in those situations where gender equality was not accepted by society due to the strong social construction, culture and texts. The newspapers were also a medium of negotiation with regards to the conditions and the health of women as God's creatures. Therefore newspapers could be best described as part of a feminist movement to create equality of male and female roles.

The feminist movement through newspapers could be seen from the topics written that sought to change the way of viewing and treating women. Almost all women's newspapers founded during the colonial period published such topics. Their articles were courageous and affirmative action, encouraging and motivating women to move and oppose injustice. It took courage for these women to write in the newspapers for they were often challenged and even imprisoned because they were provoking women to make changes and put up resistance against their oppression.

Rohana Kudus, for example, was once imprisoned due to her writing in the newspaper. She was accused of violating the Spreekdelict Act (provative in the media), so Rohana was arrested and imprisoned on 27 December 1932). In addition, Rasuna Said, a woman who persevered in media and politics, was also arrested and imprisoned for 15 months due to her writings in Raja (Raya) newspapers and heroic discussions in the organization of Persatuan Muslimin Indonesia (PERMI). Two members of the editorial board of *Medan Poetri*,

Djalina Djamil and Maimunah Ismail, were also imprisoned for allegedly violating the Spreekdelict Act (Adam, 2012: 117).

Women journalists and writers were referred to as a provocative group for boldly writing differently from the social construction that has become the habit of society. Hamka (Hadler, 2008; 231-237) disclosed the condition of women in social construction. They were seen as the object of men's lust both by the elites of *adat* and religion with their polygamous customs, abandoning their old wives for new ones, and marrying young girls. Therefore, polygamy became a trend that Hamka also criticized by writing a book, *Agama dan Perempuan* which aimed against such culture among men. Hamka also wrote *Nasib Istri Islam Indonesia*, telling about women's sufferings of forced marriage, polygamy, divorce, and early marriage.

There are some characteristics of the women's movement through newspapers. The first is thematic writing of criticism against unfair treatment toward women and gender disparity. Usually, these writings built information, knowledge, and propaganda. In this context, it is necessary to construct structured media because the media has the nature or purpose to educate, inform and persuade (Effendi, 2002: 27).

Critical media are usually very propagandist and have a special purpose to change situations and solve prevailing problems. The content sometimes does not care about the market but it is more dominant to change militantly. The target readers are also clear, and certain. The early days of the development of women's newspapers in Minangkabau had such purposes. The newspapers became a highly functional movement agent for women in establishing their existence in the midst of various hegemony.

Feminist movement is almost inseparable from the existence of the women's newspapers because the existence of the newspapers had a basic purpose to change the unfair attitude, perspectives, treatment toward women. As a

movement, these women's newspaper must receive pro and cons between established groups of anti-gender equality and pro-equality groups. It is almost inseparable because feminist movements of that period, and even today, are considered as feared movements for being opposed to nature. Thus, until the present time, such movements have not been completed.

Women's newspaper during colonization indicated a form of actualization of women's own idealism at that time. This idealism motivated them to get out of the patriarchal structure. Idealized women moved through the mass media and organization and built educational institutions. All of these movements were potential change agents in opposing various gender injustices experienced by women. This condition presented women to see themselves and how other fellow women were heeded either by community, society, individual or by state (Watie, 2010).

The writings published in women's newspapers, in general, brought such functions and tasks. It can be seen from various written themes published in the newspapers or selected themes in the text. For example, *Asjraq* published a special theme about women in the issue no 3 -5 *Soerat Boelan Dari Perhimpunan Pergerakan Perkoempulan Perempoean Soematra Oentoek Pentjapai Kemerdekaan Kaoem Iboe* (Adam, 2012: 221). These articles showed the idealism of the women who ran the newspapers to fight for the independence of women from the unjust patriarchal dilemma.

The existence of women's newspapers ensured that Minangkabau women had come to modernist realities with an open attitude because the characteristic of modernity is the development of literacy and information. It had evolved from the oral tradition to the tradition of reading. Therefore, the existence of newspapers is usually often associated with modern society.

Conclusion

The rapid development of newspapers in Minangkabau in 1900-1942 had many implications. One of these implications is the birth of women's newspapers specializing in its existence as a media of social movements and criticism related to the conditions and situations of women. Through the newspapers, women fight against their marginalization both by the colonials and the culture of patriarchy.

Women's newspapers obviously became one of the agents of the construction of the feminist movement at the time because of their criticism against injustice, their impartiality and their struggle for women's independence. Women became the central figure in the newspapers. It also proves that women's newspapers are able to build advocacy, even affirmative action for women to engage in the public sphere such as participation in organization, politics, economy, education and social affairs.

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