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Knowing responsibly: decolonizing knowledge production of Indonesian girlhood

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ABSTRACT

Despite increasing scholarship on Indonesian women, issues on girlhood, continues to be unrecognized. When they enter the frame of discussion, Indonesian girls are discussed as targets of development projects or at-risk subjects. This article asks: Why are girlhood studies overlooked in Indonesia? What potentials do the Indonesian girls have for the feminist scholarship and girlhood studies? How can we be mindful of making knowledge about Indonesian girls? It pays attention to the kind of knowledge girls make and their representations in media, while taking into account the power dynamics shaping the knowledge. We propose a new framework of knowledge production about girls. Through three case studies of Awkarin, Voice of Baceprot, and Peduli Jilbab, the article demonstrates that the female youth in Indonesia are contradictory yet prolific and influential socio-political actors. We propose the idea of “knowing responsibly” as a step towards decolonizing knowledge production of these girls. This paper aims to critique and contribute to the growing but often Western-centric Girls’ Studies and Indonesian feminist studies. It also serves as a refusal to the ignorant, protective, and controlling way of knowing about girls and a commitment to applying decolonial frameworks which allow us to alter our way of knowing.

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Indonesia’s social and political conditions today are the products of President Suharto’s 32-year long New Order authoritarian regime (1966–1998), which systematically marginalized and erased oppositions to its developmentalist project. The regime was adept in maintaining a form of “sexual politics” (Saskia E. Wieringa 2002), framing female political interests as dangerous and promoting an idealized Indonesian womanhood that was soft, meek, and obedient through state-controlled programs and organizations (Susan Blackburn 2004). The end of Suharto’s regime in 1998 allowed increasing freedom in the economy as well as political and social expressions. At the same time, it was followed the rise of economic (neo)liberalization (Tania Murray Li 2007; Daromir Rudnyckyj 2011) and Islamist politics, adding modesty to the reconfiguration of womanhood in Indonesia (Julia Suryakusuma 2011; Saskia E. Wieringa 2009, 2015).
Today, despite the increasing number of scholarly works, gender issues—especially those focusing on girls—continues to be undervalued and overshadowed by other important issues, such as poverty, human rights violations, effects of globalization and neoliberalism, and the “turn” to Islamic conservatism. Until recently, there are three areas of focus of current scholarship on Indonesian women: 1) gender and the nation-state; 2) Muslim women’s politics; and 3) the representation of Indonesian women through cultural narratives (e.g., Blackburn 2004; Carla Jones 2010; Rachel Rinaldo 2013). Whenever girls and/or young women enter the frame, they are discussed as objects of a development project. Most studies focus on the age at menarche or reproductive health (e.g., J. R. Batubara, Frida Soesanti and Hendriette Delemarre van de Waal 2010; Linda Rae Bennett 2005). Despite a number of studies discussing the representation of Indonesian girls in the media (Pam Nilan 2003), very few focus on gender or use a feminist lens. In youth studies, Indonesian girls and young women also remain unnoticed. Suzanne Naafs and Ben White (2012) argue that the field follows the general pattern of youth studies and has the tendency to “focus largely on urban youth, and particularly in the capital and larger metropolitan cities; they have been interested overwhelmingly in male youth -sometimes implicitly equating ‘youth’ with ‘young men’-except in certain limited fields of study like sexuality” (4). As a result, Indonesian girls are “out of space,” located at the peripheral of Indonesian feminist studies.

Although girls are overlooked in Indonesian feminist studies, the invitation to pay attention to girls and include girls in the feminist agenda has long been proposed by Girlhood Studies. The field officially emerged in the 1990s (Mary Celeste Kearney 2009) as a critique of the privileging of boyhood in youth research with a few scholars, particularly Angela McRobbie, committed to doing research on girlhood and girls’ culture which have inspired other researchers which have inspired other researchers. As an emerging field, Girlhood Studies have created its own tradition: Issues such as feminism, sexuality, popular culture, and school are central in the field (Anita Harris 2004a). However, it has been critiqued as Western-centric. The centering of Western girls have led to the marginalization of other girls, particularly girls of color (Michelle Bae-Dimitriadis 2017). In response, some attempts have been made by shifting attention toward girls of color and underprivileged girls. The field increasingly recognizes that girls are now living in a precarious time under neoliberal and global political economy, creating a greater gap between the “have” and “have-not” girls (Harris 2004a).

Nevertheless, too often the Third World girls and Global South girls are still glossed over, and Indonesian girls are once again nowhere to be found. If in Indonesian feminist studies the girls are seen as “out of space” or peripheral, in Girlhood Studies they are considered “out of time,” meaning that while periodization and categorization of girlhood studies in the Western context or Global North have changed, the dearth of studies on Indonesian girls position them in supposedly universal timeline of girlhood studies. Girlhood Studies proclaims that girls now live in a post-feminist and post-girl power era, referring to the era in popular cultural landscape after “girlpower” discourses proliferated, opening spaces for girls to be “newly agentic, active and also both ‘powerful’ and ‘sexual’ in some significant ways” (Amy Shields Dobson and Anita Harris 2015, 143) and a time when girls “are now expected/demanded to be fully self-actualized neo-liberal subjects’ (Marnina Gonick, Emma Ronald, Jessica Ringrose and Lisa Weems 2009, 2). The claim raises important questions: Whose standards are used to say that the girls are in post-
girlpower era? Which girls are they referring to? Are Indonesian girls really in the same era? To answer those questions, we choose to see this invisibility of Indonesian girls in the Girls’ Studies landscape as a possibility. Once made “visible,” what can Indonesian girls do in (re-)landscaping Girls’ Studies in Indonesia and other non-Western, Global South, Third World countries?

Methods

As a key site of girls’ technologically enabled narratives, media plays an important role in active participation of girls in making sense of the world. Feminist media studies scholars have shown the potentials of social media in forming the identities of youth and girls (e.g., Sydney Calkin 2015; Della V. Mosley, Robert L. Abreu, Ashley Ruderman and Candice Crowell 2017) and role in social justice movement (e.g., Rosemary Clark 2016; Sophie Sills, Chelsea Pickens, Karishma Beach, Lloyd Jones, Octavia Calder-Dawe, Paulette Benton-Greig and Nicola Gavey 2016). To show the significance of social media in girls identity formation and representing Indonesian girls in women and gender studies and girlhood studies, this article draws on two studies done by the authors (Annisa R. Beta 2018; Marissa Saraswati 2018) and presents three narratives of Indonesian girls on Instagram and locate them within Indonesia’s contemporary socio-political landscape. Instagram was founded in 2010, acquired by Facebook in 2012 for 1 USD billion, and by 2017, it had 700 million active users (Farhad Manjoo 2017). As a visual social media, Instagram emphasizes manipulation of images or videos and cater to particular aesthetic display and sharing capacities popular amongst youth, facilitating “status-seeking self-presentation tactics” for presenting individual identities or activism (A.E. Marwick 2015). What makes Instagram such an important site is the high number of users from Indonesia: 45 million as of July 2017. This makes Indonesia its largest market in Asia Pacific (Amal Ganesha 2017), and as of September 2019, more than half of Instagram users in Indonesia were women (NapoleonCat 2019). The large number of users in Indonesia and its emphasis on visual media is what make Instagram an ideal site for stories of Indonesian girls. Further, as Magdalena Olszanowski (2015) has argued, Instagram allows for the creation of a sense of community amongst its users, making it a popular medium for girls, and youth generally, to craft and be inspired by narratives of identity exploration and even change (Mosley et al. 2017).

This paper looks into the discourses of girls in Indonesia, particularly how meanings are produced, circulated, and regulated. We are interested to see how they take active roles in redefining the meanings of being Indonesian girls whilst reconfiguring their positions in the society. We will start with the story of the “can-do” Indonesian Muslim girls, through the narrative of Voice of Baceprot. By “can-do” girls we refer to the idea that girls are agentic, free, and have the potential to be successful (Anita Harris 2004b). Next, Awkarin’s narrative shows the love/hate of Indonesians for a “Westernized” girl clashing with gendered state ideology of the “future” Indonesian women. The third case of Peduli Jilbab urges a more critical and nuanced understanding of Indonesian girls’ political participation and expression in relation to Islamic identity politics. We analyze these narrative using critical discourse analysis to examine how they are embedded within Indonesia’s sociocultural practices, particularly addressing inequality and dominance (Teun A. van Dijk 1993). We studied the texts produced by and about the girls as part of
a discursive formation, by looking at their Instagram posts and did a constant comparison with news articles to understand how they create and respond to discourses.

The three narratives function as examples of how post-Suharto and post-feminist politics are played out through narratives about Indonesian girls. They highlight attempts to control the girls to maintain the neoliberal promise of Third World girls and “future” Indonesian women and to deny the role of these girls as ambivalent yet influential actors in contemporary sociocultural dynamics. By looking at these three narratives, which are made hypervisible to the public eye with the help of social media, in the last section, we show what may happen if we center Indonesian girls in feminist discussions. Our objective is to not merely analyze the case studies but most importantly to provide a conceptual push and framework for future studies on girlhood. Therefore, in the last section, we propose “knowing responsibly” to address the damaging epistemic effects of our knowing, especially in doing research about Third World girls.

**Contextualising girlhood in Indonesia**

How do we define girls? In global girlhood studies, the idea of girls continues to be redefined and challenged. “The girl,” Catherin Driscoll asserts, “is an assemblage of social and cultural issues and questions rather than a field of physical facts, however much the girl’s empirical materiality is crucial to that assemblage” (Catherine Driscoll 2008, pp. 13–14). In development projects, girls are often defined as young females aged 15–24 years old (Naafs and White 2012, 4). Although such a definition can be useful, without spatial and temporal specificities, girls tend to be understood as a flat, universalized, and generalized category, obscuring varieties and distinctions of girlhoods. Girlhood studies, nonetheless, should be understood as “multi-sited and transnational,” requiring a particular and historical definition of girls in specific location(s) which therefore attends to the localized material production of the idea of girls and girlhood (Carrie Rentschler and Claudia Mitchell 2016, 1–2).

In Indonesia, girls are often inserted in and conflated with the idea of youth, aged 16–30 years old according to Law on Youth (UU no 40/2009) (Naafs and White 2012, 5). In Indonesian, “anak perempuan,” “gadis,” “perempuan muda” and “remaja putri” refer to girls or teenage girls. The gender-neutral term “remaja” refers to those aged 13 to 18 years old while the gender-neutral word for youth, “anak muda,” expands the category up to 30 years old (Lyn Parker and Pam Nilan 2013, 10). This article understands the idea of girlhood as a consumer category, rather than the rigid category used in the development or legal discourses. The media landscape positions “girl” as fluid, an assemblage produced by the obsession with youthfulness. On social media, Instagram specifically, young female influencers dominates the market and constantly reproducing the notion of girlhood, transcending the conventional distinction between girlhood and young womanhood. In this article, we use the term girls and young women interchangeably since they have similarities in exerting influence in creating this idea of “girlhood” in Indonesia. For instance, Awkarin, one of the Instagram influencers we study here, started her online career when she was 16 years old. Yet, at the age of 21 years old, today she continues to play the role of “girl” to maintain her following, as we will in one of the sections below. By not relying
on a fixed definition of girlhood, we continue to encourage an active redefinition of Indonesian girls and young women.

**Voice of Baceprot and convenient subjects of development**

The first narrative we analyze is the band Voice of Baceprot, a metal band from rural Indonesia consisting of three teenage Muslim girls, all donning the hijab, who gained international coverage as they were celebrated for challenging the stereotype of the oppressed Third World Muslim women. The word “baceprot,” meaning “noise” in Sundanese, represents the genre of music Firda Kurnia, Widi Rahmawati, and Euis Siti Aisyah—the band members—were attracted to. The girls started the band when they were in Madrasah Tsanawiyah, an Islamic schooling equivalent of junior high school, in 2014 in Garut, a small town about 5-h southeast from Jakarta, Indonesia’s capital. After a few years, they began to gain popularity by writing their own music and brought up issues such as ageism, hate and racism, free sex, drug abuse, and the environment.

In the *New York Times*’ article, columnist Joe Cochrane wrote a story about how “In Indonesia, 3 Muslim Girls Fight for Their Right to Play Heavy Metal” (Joe Cochrane 2017). This article demonstrates that the band is not only welcomed but also celebrated in international media. For the media, the attractiveness of the band goes beyond its banging music. In contrast, their music received the least amount of attention in the article, and it focuses more on the way this band traverses preconceived cultural divides and social-political binaries. The stereotypes they “break” are the tropes of Third World girls.

Chandra T. Mohanty argues that the idea of the “Third World Woman” is often defined as a victim of oppression due to her gender and her “third-world difference”: the “stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries” (Chandra Talpade Mohanty 2003, 19). These differences are commonly associated with a traditional, conservative religious culture, lack of education, and poverty. This depiction shares similarities with the “at-risk girl” described by Harris (2004b), especially in thinking of how these girls are always already prepared to fail. These markers are placed in contrast with the tropes of Western girls: having freedom, choice, agency, and, therefore, they can succeed in life. They are the “can-do girl” (Harris 2004b) representing the future hope of the society. Seen as oppressed by their cultural and social constraints, the Third World girls, in this case Voice of Baceprot, are then celebrated since they are able to break free from those constraints by having the courage to choose to do their music despite the harsh reactions they received.

The contradiction between hijab and the heavy metal music is also in play in the narrative of Baceprot. The hijab is still largely known as a symbol of Islamic oppression despite numerous studies by many Muslim feminist scholars (e.g., Saba Mahmood 2005; Leila Ahmed 2011). Meanwhile, the music has been connected to Satanism and often makes references to black magic and centers the Devil (Andrew Perry 2010). With the hypervisibility of the veil, Voice of Baceprot’s oppression, modesty, and piety are then contrasted with their choice of playing heavy metal music.

The urban-rural binary also plays a role in highlighting the narrative of liberation of the Voice of Baceprot. In the *New York Times*’ article, the band’s ruralness is mentioned a couple of times to emphasize backwardness. The rural is considered to be a site where regressive issues are still happening: “in a country where
marriage are still prevalent, especially in rural areas like West Java” (Cochrane 2017). Moreover, the article also mentions the town where the band originates from, Singajaya, as a rural town where the girls not only live as observant Muslim but also where they have received threats and “endured criticism from their families, friends and neighbors, and have received hundreds of online death threats for supposedly blaspheming Islam and not acting like proper Muslim girls” (Cochrane 2017). This ruralness is also stressed by describing the girls as “daughters of rural farmers” which implies their class and their lack of education.

Highlighting the perceived contradictions of the conservative rural Muslim girls with the Western liberal masculine urban metal music, the article turns this narrative into a liberation story celebrating the band as successfully “challenging entrenched stereotypes about gender and religious norms in the world’s most-populous Muslim-majority nation” (Cochrane 2017). The Voice of Baceprot is pushed vigorously to change their status from “at-risk girls” to “can-do girls” (Harris 2004b). Even though the band has been celebrated as the liberated “can-do-girls,” their identity is solely understood through their religion and their “rural” location. The persistence of looking at Indonesian girls as “yet-to-be empowered” (Calkin 2015) works to keep the figure of Third World girl alive. By keeping them alive, the same racial and gender structural inequalities can be maintained. Indonesian girls are entrapped between the push of post-feminist and neoliberal regime (encouraging them to be self-actualized neoliberal subjects through the promise of “empowerment”) and the pull to constantly be these Third World girls in a hierarchical relationship with their Western peers. It is arguable that the burden to keep the “future” Indonesian women alive complicates the position of Indonesian girls even more.

Even though we only look into one article covering Voice of Baceprot, our focus on the discursive formation around the band reveals how Indonesian girls are often conveniently packaged as subjects of development who are deemed successful in changing their status from “at-risk girl” to “can-do girl” for the Western consumption. The persistence of looking at Indonesian girls as Muslim girls, as “yet-to-be-empowered,” maintains the figure of Third World girl. Meanwhile, the case of Awkarin, analyzed below, demonstrates how to love/hate for particular Indonesian girls are being played out in the national narratives.

**Awkarin: the Indonesian girl who need not be saved**

Awkarin or Karin Novilda was 20 years old when she became a controversial Instagram celebrity-cum-vlogger. Awkarin gained popularity due to her sexy clothes, sensual poses, public display of her love life, and her frankness. In one of her posts, for instance, Awkarin wears a dusty pink veil, daring red lipstick, and bold makeup (see Figure 1, image on the left). Her smile is tempting, and her eyes are seductive as they glance away from the camera. Sitting with her legs wide open, she is daring. Provocative. The caption says, “Ya habibi please take me to a Mosque date and make it halal.” The religious headscarf donned in the photograph is only one of her many looks on her Instagram account: the modest yet alluring Muslim woman, the swag hip hop girl, the cute feminine school girl, the sexy elegant woman.

Awkarin does not fit the description of Third World and a Muslim woman who needs saving by white women as portrayed by Western liberal feminists (Lila Abu-Lughod 2002; Mohanty 2003). She has drawn national attention, including from the state through the
involvement of Indonesia’s National Commission for Child Protection (KPAI) and the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT). The two government bodies issued a harsh warning to Awkarin to keep her social media content “appropriate.” They saw her social media content as containing a lot of negative elements considered bad for children’s development and morals (Rini Friastuti 2016). The organizations also mentioned that her inappropriate content can be considered as a violation of the Law No. 11/2008 on electronic information and transaction (UU ITE) and Law No. 44/2008 on pornography (Davit Setyawan 2016). Below, we analyze the responses to Awkarin following Sara Ahmed’s concepts of love and hate in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Sara Ahmed 2014).

The love of Awkarin is shared mostly by Indonesian youth idolizing her. Awkarin’s fashion style and stories on her Instagram account depict her as a brave girl with an amazing love life. Ahmed defines love as “how individuals become aligned with collectives through their identification with an ideal, an alignment that relies on the existence of others who have failed that ideal” (2014, 124). To her millions of followers on Instagram, the “Westernized” free spirit embodied by Awkarin resonates well to some Indonesian youth who identify themselves with this “ideal” figure. However, she has also received a lot of backlash from the patriarchal social institutions remaining in the bodies of the state, parents, and religious conservatives. This can be interpreted as hate or an investment “involved in the very negotiation of boundaries between selves and others, and between communities, where ‘others’ are brought into the sphere of my or our existence as a threat” (Ahmed 2014, 51). This hate is visible in many comments posted on her account. Her haters have even created Instagram accounts to bully her, and the older generation, mostly parents and the religious conservatives, reported her to KPAI and MCIT, accusing her of setting a bad example for Indonesian youth.

One of the most commented photos in Awkarin’s account is a photo of two holding hands pressed against a bed (see Figure 1, image on the right), a seemingly masculine hand pressing on a more feminine hand next to what appears to be Awkarin’s hair. The caption of the photo says, “I love you as Icarus loved the sun. Too close. Too much.” By February 2018, the post receives 83,600 likes and 3,600 comments. Most of the comments attacked her brutally: “No dignity . . .”; “You’re a disgrace for your family!”; “Next pornstar = AWKARIN (please make a sex tape, so you will get more famous.) Please support Awkarin make a sex tape”; “High class bitch . . .”; “You make me horny, babe . . . Let’s just do it.” Other comments reported the post to KPAI by tagging its Instagram account the comment section.

The hate expressed to Awkarin can be seen as part of a larger affective economy. Therefore, it is important to examine what signifiers stick to Awkarin as an individual which eventually allows the hate to circulate through the comments. The signifiers attached to Awkarin’s hated body are the signs of Western girl who “have control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the ‘freedom’ to make their own decisions” (Mohanty 2003, 22). Her sexual liberation is one of the most evident signs. Putting on a revealing dress or posing in a bikini, Awkarin fearlessly displays her freedom of sexuality despite of the constant hateful comments. The independent character of Awkarin is what makes her so similar to the tropes of Western girls. The similarities between the figure of Awkarin and Western (white straight) girl is what makes the hate circulates. It is then fair to ask the questions that Ahmed asks: “Why are some signs of hate repeated? Is it because such signs are over-determined; is it because they keep open a history which is already open insofar as it is affective?” (59). It is arguable that the circulation of hate around
Awkarin especially represented by the comments and the state through the KPAI is related to another emotion Ahmed interested in: fear. Like hatred, fear also circulates within an affective economy which travels between bodies and signs. Fear concerns the threat to one’s existence. Ahmed also argues that “the unpleasantness of fear also relates to the future. Fear involves an anticipation of hurt of injury” (Ahmed 2014, 65). In Awkarin’s case, the fear, projected by the state and the religious conservatives, is the fear of loss of the “future” Indonesian woman by the threat of Westernized girl, assumed to be ruining the ideal Indonesian woman, today imagined as pious and feminine. The hate that circulates around the figure of Awkarin, we contend, ties closely with the fear of the future Indonesian woman.

This could be seen in a statement made by the Head of Social Division of KPAI, Erlinda. She claimed that the organizations received a lot of complaints regarding Awkarin’s lifestyle, especially from parents. To maintain its function in keeping the nation’s identity, the state through the KPAI summoned Awkarin in September 2016 and warned her not to display content that might be inappropriate for children. The commission even claimed that Awkarin can be prosecuted since the content of her social media violated regulations about information and electronic transaction and pornography. These extreme measures by the KPAI rely on fear as the technology of governance (Ahmed 2014, 71), as the state imposes the fear back to Awkarin. Another attempt of surveilling Awkarin’s movement is seen through a few suspensions of her social media accounts and requiring her to report

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**Figure 1.** Two of the most commented photos in Awkarin’s Instagram account, @awkarin. Screen-captured on March 5 2018.
back to the commission a couple more times. Interestingly, despite the rigorous surveil-

lance against her, Awkarin responded by releasing a song called “Bad” in 2016. In her

song, it is apparent that she will not back down and instead she criticizes her haters

through her lyrics: “I’m a bad girl. If you have not sinned, go ahead and mock me all you

want. You are all holy, I am just a sinner.”

Awkarin is hypervisible as she takes advantage of the proliferating social media influencer/celebrity culture (Crystal Abidin 2016). Under the post-girlpower condition, girls are visibly spectacularized. This is evident on social media, especially Instagram. Awkarin’s Instagram posts have produced “sparkles” and “bright lights,” or luminosity, the main visual identifiers of post-girl power condition created by post-feminism as she gains attention and a massive following. Post-feminism refers to “a contradictory perspective on contemporary gender relations that takes feminist achievements for granted while repudiating feminism as a critical lens and social movement” (Mary Celeste Kearney 2015, 265). Neoliberalism is fundamental for the post-feminist condition as it allows girls to feel capable of creating themselves and imagining their futures. Of course, Awkarin’s success cannot be separated from the fact that she is a middle-class, tech-savvy female youth with the capacity to “look good” on Instagram with fashionable items and an urban lifestyle.

Postfeminism and neoliberalism successfully drive Awkarin to be a good neoliberal citizen who is economically empowered—according to Mojok.co (2018), by January 2018, she earned about 12,000 USD per month. However, the demand to be the “future” Indonesian woman required her to be in constant surveillance and moral policing as her “liberation” is deemed unfit for the national imaginary. If Awkarin demonstrates the limits of the imagined ideal girls, the next case of Peduli Jilbab reveals that even when the girls follow the “rules,” their influence in socio-political changes is undervalued.

**Politics of Muslim dominance in Peduli Jilbab**

Peduli Jilbab (care about jilbab or the veil) or PJ is an online young Muslim women’s group founded in 2012. By December 24 2018, PJ has 230,000 followers on Twitter, 320,000 followers on Instagram, and 44 chapters, called Solidaritas Peduli Jilbab (Solidarity for Peduli Jilbab) or SPJ, all over Indonesia. In 2015, it has independently published a book titled From Jilbab to Akhirat and organized an annual march promoting veiling and modest clothing called Gerakan Menutup Aurat or cover your aurat (body parts that may incite desire or shame). On its now deactivated website (http://www.peduli-jilbab.com/tentang), PJ states it would like to be “the benchmark of jilbab syari,” a veiling practice that requires the woman to don a long veil (khimar) with a long, oversized dresses (gamis). Their focus on promoting standards for a particular veiling practice and virtuous behaviors make them seem to be apolitical. Although PJ declares itself as a social move-

ment, they are rarely included in the discussions of political Islam in Indonesia.

Nevertheless, following Anita Harris (2008), we propose an expansion to our understanding of Third World, female youth practices to understand how they engage with society. We follow Harris’ prescription of finding what is political in how young women use technology, and not to “designate political uses of technology and look for young women . . . ” (Harris 2008, 482). PJ’s consistency in uploading posts on their social media accounts and their seemingly sporadic engagement with social and political issues exemplify the features of the narratives of Indonesian girls and their political participation. Below we discuss PJ’s Instagram account
feed as a form of “DIY online culture” and social networking (Harris 2008) through an instance of PJ’s narrative of the National Santri Day 2018. We argue that such practices are representative Indonesian girls’ political engagement.

DIY online culture can be defined as “technologically-enabled practices that are socially and politically aware, but not conventionally political” (Harris 2008, 485). Practices such as creating e-zines, blogs and websites, both personal and collective ones, are included in DIY online culture. Social networking here refers to how young people connect with their peers through technology (Harris 2008, 487).

PJ’s Instagram posts are demonstrative on how the group engage their followers with social issues. They used issues Muslim girls most concerned about: romantic relationship and how to look good donning the veil side by side with discussions of Islamic teachings. A smiling cartoon figure, usually donning the purple veil, is the icon of Peduli Jilbab and the same figure would usually accompany the posts. A quick glance of their social media page would not show that PJ responds actively to socio-political issues.

An event that can exemplify PJ’s political participation is the flag burning that happened on the National Santri Day in October 2018. Santri here refers to students of Islamic boarding school or pesantren. During a rally celebrating the day in West Java, a group of young men was video-recorded burning a black flag with shahada (two sentences that signify a person’s devotion to Islam) (Kharishar Kahfi 2018). They were members of Banser, a civilian security unit part of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), one of the oldest Muslim organizations in Indonesia. The flag itself is often associated with the recently banned organization, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI). While NU promotes more moderate Islam, HTI was popular for its criticism against the state and democracy. The flag burning could be seen as a protest by male youth against the more conservative interpretation of Islam in Indonesia represented by HTI, whose popularity in the past two decades has increased significantly (Mohamed Osman and Nawab Mohamed 2010; Martin van Bruinessen 2013). Despite being disbanded, HTI’s popularity amongst more conservative Muslim youth remains (Wai Weng Hew 2018). It was not surprising then that there were uproars in reaction to the flag-burning incident: Islamist groups sympathetic to HTI protested and called for a legal action against Banser (Marguerite Afra Sapiie, Ganug Nugroho and Sri Wahyuni 2018).

Although PJ never declared itself as affiliated with HTI, the group has been involved in causes supported by HTI and more conservative Islamist groups. In 2016, PJ actively promoted their support for the Aksi 411 and 212—rallies organized by Islamist groups to criminalize Basuki T. Purnama, a former governor of Jakarta (Merlyna Lim 2017). In reaction to the flag-burning event, PJ posted an image of a Muslim girl happily holding the black flag (see Figure 2).

Consistent with PJ’s visual language, the post depicted a Muslim girl smiling donning a red long veil with a red dress. While smiling, the girl proudly holds the black flag with the shahada sentences. Next to the girls is a text: “This is a sentence of the Tauhid (a creed in Islam that emphasizes the oneness of God, as expressed in the shahada), not a flag of a particular organization.” The caption discusses their concerns about the flag burning. “The National Santri Day should be commemorated with solemnity and modesty was tainted (dinodai) by the burning of the tauhid flag done by irresponsible actors. This has created anxiety among Muslims.” Different from anger expressed by their male counterparts in street politics and protests, the National Movement to Safeguard Ulema or GNPF (Marguerite Afra Sapiie 2018), the narrative of Peduli Jilbab is much “toned down.”
The extent of which Muslim girls in Indonesia participate or engage in politics may seem limited in the “real world,” unlike the louder and more visible male-led Islamist groups. We would argue, however, that such “extent” should be understood as a form of political participation, and that first inquiry should not be whether or not it manifests offline or in “real” life. Rather, we should see this practice as a form of “young women's styles of technology-enabled social and political engagement” (Harris 2008, 482) for at least two reasons. First, studies have shown how generally young women’s political engagement is undervalued when the conventional and gendered understanding of politics is imposed and when adults define what “good” or “proper” civic participation is (Anita Harris, Johanna Wyn and Salem Younes 2010). Second, historically in Indonesia, youth have led political changes since the anti-colonial movement peaked in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century up until the downfall of the authoritarian New Order regime in 1998. Nevertheless, it seems like the spotlight has stayed on male youth.

What PJ demonstrates follows and extends Harris’ (2008) argument on online DIY cultures and social networking as the practices of young women’s political participation. While Harris’ focuses on websites, blogs, and social networking practices that represents female youth anxieties and innovations of civic engagement usually done by more progressive, left-wing ideas, the example of PJ demonstrates how a group of conservative young Muslim women make use of online DIY cultures and social networking sites to further promote the already dominating Islamic lifestyle in Indonesia. PJ creates a space where young Muslim females could interpret current socio-political issues and discuss how those issues relate to their values. PJ combines artwork, commentaries on social and
personal issues, and promotions of their activities and of other similar Muslim groups, similar to the strategies used in the zines of young women’s movement in the 1990s in Western countries (Anita Harris 2003, 2008). Strategies used by marginalized girls to construct alternative public selves and civic engagement are now used by girls who accept dominating ideology. While the former seeks to create a space free from the controls of authorities and adults, the latter looks towards an opportunity to participate within the larger public discourse and to follow the mainstream, increasingly conservative, Islamic lifestyles. The case of PJ shows the complexity of Indonesian girls in what is claimed to be a post-feminism and post-girl power era. It encourages us to be more thoughtful in producing narratives of Indonesian girls, particularly their involvement in public life, to avoid the flattening out of the experience of female youth.

**Knowing responsibly: reimagining the politics of knowledge production of girls**

Even though post-feminism and post-girl power theories might have explained this hypervisibility of Indonesian girls, we propose an extension to help us understand the particular condition in which Indonesian girls are entangled in. Indonesian girls, as the cases demonstrate, are seen as the “yet-to-be empowered” girls but already inflicted by these discourses. Therefore, despite their agency to actively create their own identities and politics, this entanglement limits them. Thus, we should start imagining other trajectories in which failing or being underappreciated is not the only option. We also need to acknowledge the lack of translatability of these Western-centric Girlhood Studies theories in telling stories about Indonesian girls. We are not refusing these Western theories, instead we are making it more meaningful, especially in thinking about the issues of knowledge production in Asia which mostly center to its limitations to produce “universal” theories (Kuan-Hsing Chen 2010).

We propose the practice of “knowing responsibly,” meaning that in our practices of producing knowledge and exposing our subjects, we need to constantly raise questions to minimize the harmful epistemic effects of our knowing and be mindful of the questions of what cost or at whose expense is our knowing made possible. Knowing of Indonesian girls requires a decolonial and transnational approach to counter the neocolonial way of knowledge-making which is based on the subjugation and obliteration of other knowledge. By decolonial, we refer to the imperative to critique, deconstruct, and unlearn hegemonic, and often Euro-American-centric, knowledge production and to encourage new practices and forms of knowledge in local histories and subaltern knowledge (Leo Ching 2010). We define transnational by referring to Grewal and Kaplan who encourage us to look at different interrelationships between and among subjects across the globe, as a critique to global feminism that tries to fit the world into one feminist studies (1994). We seek to shed light on the possibility of making Indonesian girls “visible” by encouraging more research in the field. “Making visible” or “giving a voice” must go beyond mere representations, and instead must critically examine and question the conditions that make possible these representations.

The works of transnational and postcolonial feminists are essential in considering alternative approaches to doing research on Indonesian girls. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) has reminded us of the impossibility of truly representing the “realities” and “voices” of subaltern subjects. In addition, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2011) has proposed “matters of care” as a
research method, arguing that adding care to our concerns might open up to different ways of thinking that has the power to transform knowledge. The “matters of care” should include gathering neglected and marginalized things in which she sees as part of the history of feminist scholarship. Generating care should also not only be about critiquing the power structures but most importantly building relationships through the critique between the neglected things and the rest of the world.

Thinking about Indonesian girls as the ones who are marginalized and neglected, it is important that we, as knowledge producers, implement care in our studies of Indonesian girls. “Knowing responsibly” functions as a reminder to apply and generate care in doing research about girls as a way of decolonizing epistemologies. We are not suggesting that there is an ideal form of Indonesian Girls’ Studies or a perfect way to produce knowledge about these girls. Rather, we propose some reminders as a starting point to continue thinking about what Indonesian Girls’ Studies might look like if prioritize caring. We invite scholars to pay attention to three things crucial to our practices of decolonizing knowledge: our conditions of knowing, our intentions, and the material effects of our knowing. This framework can be considered for girlhood studies and other marginalized subject studies. We explain each component below.

**Conditions of knowing**

Our social positions in the world allow us to see and to know from the conditions of our knowing and therefore affects the knowledge produced (Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter 1993). Acknowledging our positionalities which enable our vision and therefore make our knowing possible are important parts of knowing responsibly. Knowing entails gaining power and having the privilege to produce knowledge and therefore create a hierarchical structure. The power dynamics in play between the knowers and subjects of knowledge are unavoidable despite one’s best intention to prevent it, especially in thinking about the agency subjects of knowledge have in producing knowledge. Bringing this into the context of Indonesian girls’ knowledge production, there is an urgency to be conscious of one’s conditions of knowing because of the intersection where Indonesian girls are located due to their age, gender, race, nationality, and religion. As Third World girls and Global South girls, the marginality of Indonesian girls give more epistemic privilege to the knowers since the girls’ vulnerability raises the chance that they will be harmed in the process of knowledge production. In the case of Voice of Baceprot, Indonesian girls are conveniently packaged as the victim by highlighting their status as the oppressed Third World Muslim girls for Western media consumption. Thus, it is significant to be aware of the conditions of our knowing in order not to push these girls to a more marginal spot and avoiding the temptations to “speak for” these girls.

**Intentions**

After realizing our conditions of knowing, the next thing we need to pay attention to producing knowledge is our intentions to know. Noticing our intentions to know is helpful for limiting the potential harm we might implicate on subjects of knowledge. This is because the benevolent intentions of our research objectives often blur our vision, raising the possibility of unintentionally harming the girls by exposing their brokenness as
victims and reinforcing the same oppressive system to the subjects of knowledge as we would do anything to reach the objectives. In knowing about Indonesian girls, it is particularly easy to be blinded by the kind intention to help the girls when in fact we end up regulating them and denouncing their agency. The intention to protect the notion of a bright optimistic feminist future often leads to knowers reducing the girls’ agency to make their own knowledge and instead making decisions for them. Moreover, the normative judgements about girls also shape the preferences to study certain types of girls and excluding other types which might not be fitting within social or political conventions such as Awkarin and Peduli Jilbab.

The material effects of knowing

The colonizing authoritative and patronizing way of knowing often dominates knowledge production about girls, especially Third World and Global South girls. Despite best intentions, the material effects which have the potentials to be harmful to these subjects are inevitable. We turn to Gaile Pohlhaus Jr.’s work “Knowing without Borders and the Work of Epistemic Gathering” (Gaile Pohlhaus 2017). She highlights Mohanty’s criticism of feminists with dominant social positions about the effects of their knowing. Answering Mohanty’s call to prevent colonizing knowledge and know better, Pohlhaus Jr. proposes two concepts: “knowing without borders” and “epistemic gathering.” Like Mohanty, she does not suggest that there are no borders in our knowing. Instead, she invites us to acknowledge those epistemic borders, our knowers’ situatedness and work to transform (and be transformed by) those borders as a way to respond more carefully in the world. Bringing attention to knowing as materialized practice with others in the world and its material effects helps to shape the practice of “knowing responsibly.” As we recognize our orientations and contributions as knowers to the world and therefore to others, we become more aware of the materiality of our knowing to hopefully decrease the harmful material effects which might emerge from it.

Conclusion

Rethinking our conditions of knowing, intentions, and the materials effects of knowing allows a renewed path to understand the seemingly “out of space” and “out of time” Indonesian (Third World) girls. The narratives of Voice of Baceprot, Awkarin, and Peduli Jilbab, as the article has shown, demands that we let go of “old” ways of knowing and deconstruct the Western-centred girlhood studies. Rather than proposing the ideal way of studying Third World girls, we put forward sensibilities that help us question our assumptions as knowledge producers. The cases reveal that girls diverge in their actions, reactions, and the representations of themselves. While (ageist and religious) patriarchal authority may limit their expressions, they have managed to reinterpret their own positions. The practice of “knowing responsibly,” then, may allow us to open up a space for and explore the ambivalence and influence the political, social, and cultural dynamics of Third World girls.

Disclosure statement

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