

The Romance of Empowerment: Revealing Conventions in Social Change

Annisa R. Betta

The University of Melbourne, AUSTRALIA

ABSTRACT

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The presentation critically discusses the contemporary discourse of empowerment in hypermediated Indonesia, questioning how it obscures and sustains existing power structures rather than subverting them. Drawing on Lila Abu-Lughod's 1990 seminal critique of resistance, I interrogate how resistance has been co-opted and repackaged as empowerment by dominant actors, particularly within the activism associated with youth and gender in Indonesia. Drawing on recent fieldwork with young women leaders across Indonesia, I reveal how digital feminism, celebrated for its democratizing potential, reflects regional and socio-cultural inequalities. I present a contrast in how Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Lombok frame empowerment strategies and shed light on the defects of current approaches that, though outwardly progressive, reproduce conventions of power imbalance. This presentation thus demands an incendiary and rootedly critical approach to empowerment, one that moves beyond the romanticized, abstracted, top-down narratives to uncover the complex ways in which power operates and is maintained.

INTRODUCTION

Within the realm of social change, especially in hypermediated societies like Indonesia, the language of empowerment has been everywhere over the past decades. The notion of empowerment can also be deceptively progressive, serving to obfuscate and maintain existing power structures rather than disrupt them. The authors are concerned in this paper to explore how the discourses and practices of empowerment-particularly in gender and youth activism-have been co-opted and repackaged by influential social actors as a way of sustaining existing hierarchies through the rhetoric of social betterment.

Empowerment is sometimes celebrated as an emancipatory force, especially in digital contexts. It brings to mind ideas of agency, voice, and the tearing down of barriers. As scholars like Abu-Lughod (1990) have noted, however, the discourse of resistance often devolves into forms that serve dominant power structures rather than dismantle them. It critically examines how recent empowerment discourses within Indonesia, especially those centering on young women and digital feminism, may serve to further entrench social inequalities despite overtly progressive rhetoric.

Drawing on fieldwork recently conducted with young women leaders across regions in Indonesia, this paper demonstrates that the nature of empowerment initiatives and strategies would differ in areas such as Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Lombok. By looking into these case studies, the tropes of many empowerment endeavors as reproduction of the very socio-economic and cultural inequalities they did proclaim to contest, at once become transparent. In this paper, I have attempted a far more critical, grounded analysis of empowerment-that which shuns abstracted, top-down narratives for a sensitivity to the ambiguous ways in which power is negotiated and policed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Empowerment and Its Discontents

Empowerment, as a concept, has gained huge traction in contemporary discourse, which very often lays claims to factors of social justice and personal agency. However, scholars argue that empowerment is often undercut by the structures it is meant to oppose, particularly when used as a policy tool. As Abu-Lughod says, "Resistance is a component of co-option by hegemonic forces, in that the meaning of resistance often gets re-imagined in ways that actually reinforce rather than tear down structures of dominance." Such a dynamic occurs within the Indonesian context concerning empowerment programs related to gender and youth, especially those based on digital activism.

Indonesian digital feminism, while celebrated for its democratizing potential, reflects a complex interaction between empowerment and socio-cultural inequalities. Online campaigns

and initiatives on young women and marginalized group empowerment have gained visibility and support, and the arguments and descriptions often situate the digital space as neutral or liberated. These run the risk of concealing inequalities that inhere within the digital landscape. Digital empowerment often privileges urban voices and educated middle-class women at the expense of rural and lower socio-economic backgrounds (Anderson, 2021).

Fieldwork Insights: The differences in regional strategies regarding Empowerment

Recent fieldwork with young women leaders from different parts of Indonesia has provided valuable insight into regional variations in strategies undertaken for their empowerment. These interviews have exposed the differences in young women's expectations, limitations, and socio-cultural constraints of young women in cities such as Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Lombok.

1. Jakarta

Jakarta is the capital and most urbanized city of Indonesia, housing a great number of digital activism and progressive movements. Indeed, global feminist movements primarily shape the narratives of women's empowerment in Jakarta and often focus on individual agency and rights concerns. The young women leaders in Jakarta tend to be more active in the digital spheres by using platforms like Instagram and Twitter for discussing everything from gender equality to body positivity. While progressive, these stories have nonetheless been set within a middle-class urban framework that does not truly enable it to connect with or respond to the calls of women from rural areas. The emphasis on individual agency in the Jakarta-based empowerment narrative obviates the socio-economic inequalities at the systemic level and makes access to, or relevance of, these initiatives rather low for women living outside of the capital.

2. Yogyakarta

The efforts at empowerment in Yogyakarta are more firmly rooted in the cultural and educational platforms of the province. Long considered one of Indonesia's cultural hubs, grassroots activism has long been a part of tradition here. Narratives of empowerment, here, more often than not, centre around themes of family likeness and cultural patrimony. But even within Yogyakarta, the impact of the digital space is beginning to make itself felt. Digital platforms in Yogyakarta have increasingly been adopted by young women, although there are still significant framing practices of online activism in regard to the local cultural context. This shows both the blending of digital feminism and regional identity, while disconnecting the local issues with the globalization of discourses of empowerment that dominate online spaces (Suparman, 2022).

3. Lombok

However, in the rural island of Lombok, where the Islamic cultural influence is strongly felt, the discourse of empowerment is way more articulated by traditional gender roles and economic

burdens. In Lombok, young women face restrictions that limit their participation in online and offline activism. Empowerment strategies at play in Lombok are often mediated by local customs and religious norms, reducing digital feminism's potential to be either accessible or relevant to many young women in this context. The stories of empowerment that resonate in Jakarta or Yogyakarta may seem very far removed and quite unworkable, thus really underlining a need for regionally sensitive approaches toward empowerment which may take socio-cultural realities on board.

The Digital Divide and Reproduction of Inequalities

The digital space is often credited with its democratizing potential, giving voices to the marginalized in discussions that otherwise would not have been heard; however, such an assumption of digital spaces as universally accessible overlooks socio-economic and technological divides across Indonesia. Income, location, and education are the most common barriers standing in the way of access to digital platforms, further excluding rural and low-income communities from online activism.

Digital feminism in Indonesia has done an excellent job of raising awareness regarding gender issues and mobilizing young women; however, it has also revealed several socio-economic disparities between urban and rural settings. The voices of urban middle-class people dominate the online narrative of empowerment, then used to marginalize the experiences of rural or economically poor sections. The risk in this is an one-dimensional romanticizing of empowerment in the digital realm, one that does not engage with the intersectionality of realities by young women across Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the empowerment strategies in Indonesia exhibits a tendency by which the empowering rhetoric masks power relations and, while doing so, perpetuates inequalities that the discourse of empowerment in fact intends to combat. Digital feminism creates important opportunities for visibility and voice but simultaneously reinforces the socio-cultural divides, thereby privileging an urban middle-class perspective at the expense of greater inclusivity.

This paper, therefore, calls for a more nuanced, critical approach to empowerment, beyond the digital platforms' seductive promise and toward the structural limits imposed by dominant models of empowerment. In place of top-down imposition of narratives that might further alienate the already marginalized voices, empowerment initiatives should acknowledge and respond to complex inequalities within diverse Indonesian contexts. Only by taking seriously how power operates within processes of empowerment can strategies be elaborated in ways that are authentically transformative for Indonesia's diverse communities and contextually relevant.

The paper therefore calls for reimagining of empowerment that does not merely reproduce the very relations of power which it would otherwise seek to dismantle but which actively works toward bringing down the structural and cultural barriers that block real social change.

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