

Shifting the Paradigm

Rethinking Research on Indonesian Girls and Young Women

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Abstract: In this article we examine the discourse surrounding girlhood in Indonesia through a scoping review of research and gray literature from 2013 to 2022, alongside reference to a workshop with researchers and advocates. Themes related to sexuality and reproduction are dominant in our findings. We argue that the scholarly and civic engagements with knowledge about girls and young women in Indonesia limit the modality of knowledge production and change. We propose a shift towards critical approaches in the investigation of girlhood in Indonesia and the Global South that involves a commitment to epistemic gathering to develop methodologies that include interrogating our assumptions, contextualizing girlhood, and fostering interdisciplinary collaborations to better understand the diverse realities of girls and young women in Indonesia and beyond.

Keywords: advocacy, epistemic gathering, Global South, knowledge production, injustice, reproductive and sexual health, scoping review



What textual, rhetorical, exclusionary, inclusive or diversionary tactics are employed to secure this story and not that one, this present and past and not those ones? (Hemmings 2005: 119)

How do researchers tell the story of Indonesian girls and young women? Despite significant advocacy and critical approaches to improving the quality of their lives, a dominant narrative persists.¹ It focuses on their bodies (emphasizing reproductive and sexual health) and portrays them as constantly vulnerable, always enduring hardship, and adversarial. Even after decades of gender-focused empowerment projects, including Indonesia's long engagement with feminism from within and without, both in academia and advocacy, we contend that it still seems that "[w]henver girls and/or young women enter the frame, they are discussed as objects of a development project" (Saraswati and Beta 2021: 751). We take issue with this developmentalist logic that does not position them as the central "knowers



and narrators of their own encounters, challenges, and triumphs” (Omotoso and Ogbebor 2023: 9). Given the significant advancement of work on decolonizing knowledge production and feminism, and the fact that Indonesia is among the top ten recipients of the highest volumes of aid focused on gender equality from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2021), it is imperative to assess critically how knowledge about girls in Indonesia has been represented by knowledge producers, including academic sources and gray literature.

We present a case for a thorough examination of the knowledge generated about girls and young women in Indonesia. We argue that the scholarly and civic engagements, including governmental bodies and NGO initiatives, with knowledge about girls and young women in Indonesia—marked by a limited critical approach to challenging the dominant narrative of girlhood—constrict the modality of knowledge production and thus preclude more varied possibilities for change. The prevailing narrative departs typically from an external, adult-centric, and heteronormative understanding of who the girls and young women are while constructing assignments of what they can possibly do, and rarely interacts with the girls’ own understanding of, and aspirations for, themselves. In this study, therefore, we underscore the urgent need for change in how narratives surrounding girls in Indonesia in particular, and in the Global South in general, are framed. We hope that the discussion will help set novel pathways for scholarly and advocacy work to address the circumstances while centering the girls and young women in Indonesia as the subjects of their own narratives.

Critical Girlhood Studies

Informed by the recent work on the necessity of critical girlhood studies (Cox 2015; Hernandez 2020; Switzer et al. 2024), and Marion Brown’s exploration (2011) we understand this to be an emerging subfield of girlhood and youth studies that examines carefully “*all* the assumptions” (10, emphasis in original) made about girlhood, including the politics of knowledge behind them, while still acknowledging the intricacies of girlhood in different contexts. Michelle Bae-Dimitriadis (2017) further pushes for the significance of questioning the deficit model of girlhood so often regurgitated by researchers, thus encouraging us to develop possible new directions in which to rethink studies of girls living outside the Global North knowl-

edge centers. The work of Catherine Driscoll (2002), Anita Harris (2004a, 2008), Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (2006), and many others laid the groundwork for examining girlhood critically. Inspired by Chandra T. Mohanty's (2003) foundational work on the discursive domination of "third world difference" (19), we propose to extend this examination to studies of girls specifically in Indonesia and in the Global South generally, that are burdened with overgeneralization and rarely able to address the socio-cultural and class differences as well as the historical and political settings in which the girls and young women live (Khoja-Moolji 2018; Loh 2020; Saraswati and Beta 2021). In this study, we question the assumption that girls and young women can be represented conveniently as being only cisgender since this leads, inevitably, to a reduction in the representation of the diversity of girlhood experiences.

Here, we focus on the specific social and cultural contexts of girls and young women in Indonesia to highlight the urgent need for a comprehensive and transnational re-evaluation of current research on girls and young women in the Global South. The inception of Girlhood Studies, for example, has inspired a pivotal shift that has moved away from portraying girls as victims and adult researchers as saviors, and has, instead, recognized girls who offer, as sources of knowledge, vital contributions to public discourse. The special issue of *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* on girls in Africa edited by Marla L. Jaksch et al. (2023) exemplifies this timely and significant shift in recent years. We call for more similar work to be undertaken in this field.

To understand the extent to which the nuances of the complexities of girlhood have been denied in research on the lives of girls and young women in Indonesia, we found it urgently necessary to investigate how their lives have been studied. Therefore, we discuss the dominant knowledge discourse about them that we hope can be remedied by the principles of "epistemic gathering" introduced by Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (2017).

Exploring Boundaries: Synthesizing Evidence through Epistemic Gathering

Epistemic injustice, as described by Miranda Fricker (2017), refers to forms of injustice that occur when individuals are wronged in their capacity as knowers and when borders, assumed to ensure the quality and intelligibility of the knowledge circulated, are built on assumptions and prejudices, and

influenced by other conscious or unconscious tendencies of the knowers (Byskov 2021; Mohanty 2003). Such bounded knowledge is often generated, used, and regurgitated by those dominant in a society to examine, and advocate for, the lives of the marginalized (Pohlhaus Jr. 2017).

Informed by feminist epistemology (Alcoff and Potter 1993; Bacevic 2023), our scoping review project aims to explore the potential borders of knowledge in Indonesian scholarship by examining how different knowledge producers—such as scholars, activists, and NGO workers—create and circulate knowledge about Indonesian girlhood. Initially advocated by Hilary Arksey and Lisa O'Malley (2005), a scoping review is a technique for mapping and synthesizing evidence from various scholarly sources by systematically identifying and outlining the breadth of available evidence on a particular topic, concept, or issue (Munn et al. 2022). Such reviews are not intended to produce a synthesized answer to a specific question but aim, instead, to provide an overview of the evidence that can be used to assess research practices in a particular topic or field and identify knowledge gaps (Munn et al. 2018).

While labeling borders of knowledge as symptoms of existing epistemic injustice might be too assertive, considering them in the context of hermeneutical injustice—which occurs when a lack of shared interpretive frameworks prevents a social group from having their experiences studied and explored fairly (Fricker 2017)—can alert us to the detrimental consequences. By examining these dynamics, we seek to uncover whether and how these borders manifest in Indonesian scholarship, and how a more careful, caring, and critical approach to the ways in which knowledge about girls and young women in Indonesia can be generated and presented.

This is where we see epistemic gathering, as suggested by Pohlhaus Jr. (2017), to be a valuable guide for models of feminist research focused on Indonesian girls. It is a collective practice that encourages us as knowers to engage meaningfully with the subjects of our knowledge while considering the effects the knowledge production has on their subjectivities and material realities to help us to understand the nuances and complexities offered by scholarly discourses to Indonesian girls and young women, since they are still often understood as the “yet-to-be empowered” (Saraswati & Beta 2021: 769). In alignment with these principles, our team is comprised of women-identified researchers from different disciplines including cultural studies, criminology, economics, public health, and psychology. We employed our understanding of epistemic gathering through three key stages: a scoping review, memoing and reflective practices, and a workshop.

The scoping review we conducted included academic and gray literature written in English or Bahasa Indonesia and published between 2013 and 2022. Academic literature was comprised of research articles, commentaries, viewpoints, and opinion pieces, while gray literature included annual reports, policy papers, and research reports. Although the literature ranging over ten years might not fully explain the whole landscape and complexity of studies on girls and young women in Indonesia, we contend that it serves as a compelling starting point. This article cannot and should not be the only scoping review of these studies, and we encourage more work on investigating critically our assumptions about girlhood in Indonesia.

During the review process, we prioritized high-quality refereed academic articles published in journals in Indonesia and internationally. We conducted a Boolean search and retrieved 18,739 academic literature titles and 320 gray literature titles. The search was based on keywords such as girl, girls, girlchild, female youth, female adolescence, girlhood, young woman, and young women for English-language publications, and anak perempuan [girls], gadis [girls], remaja putri [teenage girls], and perempuan muda [young women] for Bahasa Indonesia sources. All terms were combined with Indonesia to provide the contextual framework for our study.

We excluded from the reading stage articles that did not focus on girls and young women or did not meet journal eligibility criteria. Evaluation of each title, abstract, and full text led to the final total of 283 texts, organized into a matrix for synthesis and analysis. We extracted information on how girls are positioned in the literature and analyzed their roles, representations, challenges, opportunities, and positioning as subjects of interventions or programs. Seven main topics emerged: sexuality and reproduction (115 texts); public participation (41 texts); violence and harassment (32 texts); health (28 texts); religion and culture (14 texts); migration (11 texts); and media and technology (9 texts). Literature on environmental disasters, criminal protection, poverty, and demographic reports that could not be categorized into these topics was sorted into the category of others (33 texts).

We acknowledge that in mapping a social research field, the scoping review procedure may be constrained by recognizing the biases of the reviewers and the settings of knowledge production. Hence, we made conscious and concerted efforts to record carefully our pathways of thinking and our reflections to make more transparent our positionality as researchers and our limits in knowing, and to anchor our analysis to social justice and equality commitments (see Kusumaningrum et al. 2024). We employed reflective

memos to document our interpretations and evaluate our positionalities and biases as part of our commitment to feminist epistemology. Memoing allowed us to record flexibly our thoughts and insights as they emerged so that they could be reviewed and revisited (see Joanna Crossman 2021). The initial memos encompassed ideas and questions addressed to ourselves and served as initial starting points before we conducted a more comprehensive analysis of the literature.

Once we had a preliminary understanding of the literature, we organized a workshop. We invited seven researcher-activists with experience in research and advocacy programs related to girls and young women in Indonesia, with qualifications in the fields of health, economics, and social sciences, as well as expertise in child and youth studies, including gender and sexual diversity. All the researchers and activists in our workshop were associated with NGOs in Indonesia. The workshop encouraged reflections on their experiences and expertise and offered interactive discussions to explore possibilities and pinpoint the obstacles and opportunities in involving girls and young women in research or programs that may explain the complexities in our preliminary findings and collect further input and suggestions to sharpen them.

Emphasizing Vulnerabilities: Insights from the Study

Our findings reveal that, although seven topics had been mapped from the scoping review of 283 texts, most of them remain anchored in themes of sexuality and reproduction, regardless of their disciplinary focus. Even in studies on cultural, religious, educational, and public participation, girls are often depicted from the perspective of maternal expectations and inherent vulnerabilities that they are expected to overcome through individual improvement. Hence, we position this as a focal point for exploration and critical examination throughout our analysis.

We go on to discuss the findings of our scoping review before moving on to a discussion of our workshop. To demonstrate how researchers perpetuate girlhood assumptions in Indonesia, we cite from a few texts, and we quote workshop participants. The latter serve as reminders of the multifaceted and often conflicting perspectives found among well-meaning advocates and activists in Indonesia. In offering these, we hope to encourage a shift away from these existing patterns and assumptions in future research.

One predominant pattern we observed is the overwhelming number of texts we reviewed that focus on the experiences of menstruation, sexual activities, and childbearing among girls. Most of the discussions surrounding menstruation are centered on health issues such as dysmenorrhea faced by girls during their menstrual cycle, and inadequate menstrual hygiene management. While one might expect researchers in public health to prioritize topics related to reproductive and sexual health, our findings reveal a persistent tendency to perpetuate assumptions regarding girls' lack of knowledge about their own bodies. Furthermore, the transfer of knowledge from mothers is often assumed to include inaccuracies (Garfias Royo et al. 2022; Hatmanti et al. 2022; Palupi et al. 2020).

The issue of anemia emerged as the most frequently discussed topic in conjunction with reproductive and sexual health. While most literature commonly attributes anemia to significant blood loss during menstruation, some literature suggests that girls' poor dietary habits contribute to this condition (Masthalina 2015; Puspitasari et al. 2022). The urgency of preventing and treating anemia is linked back to the concerns related to the condition in terms of its being a threat to girls' reproductive health, their future pregnancies, the health and nutritional status of their future children, and the girls' ability to care for themselves (Apranti et al. 2018; Putri et al. 2022; Wahyurin and Rahmah 2021; Yulaeka et al. 2017). The extract below exemplifies this tendency.

Young women are a human resource that will give birth to the future generations of the nation. A phenomenon occurs in Indonesia where there is a high prevalence of iron deficiency anaemia in adolescent girls, at 30 percent (WHO 2011). Anaemia is a problem that must be overcome in young women, because if it continues until pregnancy, labour and childbirth, then it can increase the risk of bleeding in maternal labour and postpartum women. (Apranti et al. 2018: 122)

This tendency reveals the still embedded developmentalist governmental imperatives informed by the gender regime of Indonesia's New Order period (1966–1998), most clearly exemplified by the regime's *Panca Dharma Wanita* [five duties of women]. Further, the literature we reviewed demonstrates what Chris Bobel (2019) has analyzed about menstrual health management (MHM) and the overwhelming focus on girls' and young women's bodies. Bobel claims that this focus on MHM especially in the Global South suggests an almost impossible standard of the good period (and consequently the ideal reproductive condition), that perpetuates the neocolonial imaginary of the backwards other girls who have bad periods. We note that the

studies and reports do not always demonstrate the problems of reproductive and sexual health. However, we second Bobel's warning that

[t]he most disturbing consequence of these representations is how they [MHM advocates] unwittingly yet insidiously tap into Western notions of what constitutes proper menstrual care and more generally, the care, or the 'management' of the body. MHM, then, becomes another neocolonial project [that further entrenches problematic narratives and standards]. (59)

Relatedly, we found that the vulnerabilities and adversities experienced by girls are also emphasized across other topics, underlining detrimental social pressure, discrimination, violence, and barriers to accessing resources and services. Girls in relation to adversities are often depicted in two ways, either as a group at risk of experiencing adversity or as a group that has already endured it. For instance, discussions on child marriage portray girls as particularly vulnerable to this practice because of prevailing religious and gender norms in Indonesia, compounded by their limited agency in decision-making (Aditya and Waddington 2021; Horii 2020). Those who experience child marriage are depicted as driven by cultural values that confine them to domestic and maternal roles (Bennett 2013; Horii 2020) and as facing severe consequences such as exclusion from education.

In proposing solutions, the policies and programs recommended in the literature usually prioritize girls as primary beneficiaries, and the recommendations are often centered on targeting behavioral changes in girls. Recommendations often include socialization efforts facilitated by stakeholders such as healthcare professionals, teachers, and peers, in response to girls' limited understanding of sexual and reproductive health (Azza and Susilo 2016; Pakasi and Kartikawati 2013; Ramadani et al. 2015). Some texts also place the responsibility on girls to address issues such as anemia, dysmenorrhea, and other health risks (Maharani et al. 2017; Ningsih et al. 2013). Recommendations for these health issues in girls typically include engaging in physical exercise and consuming specific foods or supplements (Indrayani et al. 2021; Rosyida et al. 2017; Sari et al. 2018). In addition, we identified a pattern of similar statements being replicated in two articles about Indonesian girls that underscore the necessity for solutions to alleviate experiences of menstrual pain among adolescent girls that is described as a form of torture that they must endure (Maharani et al. 2017; Ningsih et al. 2013).

A second pattern also emerged in texts discussing menstrual-related anemia among girls, in which authors of different articles attribute the girls'

anemia to their body-image issues and regurgitate the assumptions that girls have a universalized tendency to maintain an ideal figure.

This happens because adolescent girls desire to be slim to maintain their appearances, leading them to diets and reducing food intake. However, the diet they undertake is often unbalanced with the body's needs, resulting in a deficiency of essential nutrients such as iron). (Masthalina 2015: 81)

This kind of regurgitation is often presented without acknowledgement of the source of the claims; see, for instance, Yulaeka et al. (2017). While exploring why unsubstantiated claims are published in reputable academic journals is a valid avenue for inquiry, in this article we are more interested in the repeated tendency to position girls and young women as being either can-do or at risk, a binary that Anita Harris (2004b) identified over 20 years ago. We recognize that portraying girls in Indonesia as inherently vulnerable helped well-intentioned researchers and advocates to draw attention to existing issues and to campaign for interventions. However, we emphasize the importance of evaluating critically the implications of this perspective. It is essential to consider whether this approach perpetuates the view that Indonesian girls are consistently lacking, thereby denying them, at least potentially, the opportunity to develop the capacity for self-directed and youth-led change.

Furthermore, despite the predominant focus on girls' reproductive and sexual health, scant attention has been given to those who do not conform to the established standards of normative cisgender identity and heterosexuality; when they are discussed, they are often positioned as always already marginalized and vulnerable. Our scoping study found fifteen texts mentioning lesbian and transgender girls represented as part of LGBTQIA+ and youth groups. Some authors dedicate subsections or chapters to addressing the experiences of LBT young women, with a specific focus on their experiences of discrimination, violence, and health complications (Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan 2021; Wisaksana et al. 2019). However, the literature lacks comprehensive information about the circumstances of transgender girls and young women, thus raising concerns about the adequacy of existing works to address their needs. In response to this, a workshop participant explained,

In my case as a trans person, I see how people always narrate it [research and advocacy] through a non-trans perspective. Trans are positioned as people who constantly wish to be given help and assistance, without realizing that these people are the subjects of the research. In fact, trans people can be placed in positions

that are not merely as victims, but also as actors of the change. They are the ones who have been able to address or respond to their own problems.

This underscores the common misrepresentation of transgender individuals as passive recipients of assistance, rather than active agents capable of instigating change and addressing their own challenges. This perspective aligns with our observations and highlights the problematic nature of the prevailing focus on the bodies and experiences of heteronormative girls and young women.

Furthermore, during the workshop we captured the dilemma concerning varying perspectives among researchers and activists regarding the portrayal of adolescent girls and young women as a vulnerable group. Interestingly, some of the workshop participants agreed that girls and young women need to be discussed as victims, and that this positioning accurately portrays their condition in reality: girls are always at risk of and are experiencing inequalities, in spite of who or wherever they are. A participant noted,

Often, AGYW [Adolescent Girls and Young Women] that we have assisted, for example in villages, are also at risk of experiencing violence. They became victims of sexual violence. And it became a part of intervention programs. Apart from the programs, our partners also provided support to these victims. They [the victims] themselves are advocates, so to speak, in youth organizations in their village. Thus, it is still important because regardless of whether they are perceived as powerless or whether they already possess such agency, they are still susceptible to the same risks.

Other participants, however, attempted to offer alternatives by highlighting that the age and generational gap between researchers and the subjects of the study could possibly lead the former to overlook the new ways in which girls and young women assert their power and agency today. For instance,

People who—obviously, not all—feel that they are more senior and believe that the new wave of youth movement should be the same as others, as the previous ones that they once did, I think, becomes the root of why the gap exists. Sometimes [I wonder about]: ‘Who initiates that research? Is it from the youth themselves, the young women themselves? Or is the research conducted by those who are not young?’ So, they are doing the research, but the values [of the youth] are not reflected in their research.

The discussion in the workshop exemplified the significance of matters related to the meaningful engagement of girls and young women in research. It emphasized that the involvement of girls and young women in research and advocacy work should move beyond the persistent tropes of the passive research subjects or beneficiaries. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that there

are differing perspectives among advocates regarding the best approaches for such engagement. This divergence of views adds complexity to the conversation, emphasizing the need for nuanced and context-specific approaches that can more meaningfully engage girls and young women in research and advocacy efforts.

Towards a New Research Agenda on Girlhood in Indonesia

Our scoping review shows the persistence of neo myths in the literature. These include how teenage pregnancy and marriage are often portrayed as a nightmare for girls, leading to vulnerabilities, lost opportunities, and risks of complications and violence. They often position girls as vulnerable and always already suffering, with issues related to their sexuality and reproduction seen as potential torture. Furthermore, the literature often suggests that girls themselves contribute to their suffering, through self-imposed food restrictions leading to anemia, for example, or through sexual behavior leading to life-threatening pregnancies, or child marriage. This portrayal often depicts girls as innocent and lacking knowledge of their situation in emphasizing the need for interventions from adult scholars and advocates. In examining the treatment of Indonesian girls in scholarly discourse, we observe a phenomenon akin to what Mohanty (2003) terms “third-world difference” (19), which, interestingly, is also evident in the work of Indonesian scholars. This could imply that they internalize and propagate stereotypes or assumptions about their culture and its distinctions from Western norms.

Our review also reveals a concerning lack of quality control in some of the articles, stemming, potentially, from inadequate journal referee practices. We identified several articles that make seemingly strong claims that place disproportionate responsibility on girls. Additionally, these works were found to misrepresent evidence from other studies, leading to biased and unsupported claims about girls’ positions in their experiences. These issues highlight the importance of enhancing the review process to ensure the integrity and credibility of academic publications.

We propose, therefore, that investigating girlhood in Indonesia and the Global South requires a stronger commitment to critical approaches. These approaches should not only guide individual researchers but also foster collective, interdisciplinary collaboration. Drawing from our commitment to epistemic gathering, we propose an approach to studying Global South

girls that assesses critically field-based assumptions about them and pays close attention to the socio-political contexts and the existing community education and resources. For example, while studies in disciplines like nursing and public health often focus on girls' bodies and reproductive health, they tend to overlook other aspects of their lives. This is not to suggest reducing the funding of public health research but is, rather, to propose a broader approach that considers girls' relationships with their bodies and reproductive health in their social and ecological contexts.

Moreover, it is crucial to position girls and young women as active subjects capable of agency, without assuming they can single-handedly change their situations. This approach requires a critical examination of structural issues and avoiding conclusions that place responsibility solely on them. Polarizing views that portray girls and young women only as vulnerable or active and agentic should be avoided. Instead, in recognizing the complexity of their experiences and identities, a nuanced understanding of their lives should be sought. In addition, our discussion with our workshop participants revealed that heteronormative and adult-centered research and interventions often overlook girls' ideas, efforts, and agency, and, instead, interpret their issues through dominant adult perspectives. This can lead to research and advocacy outcomes that do not reflect the needs and perspectives expressed by the girls themselves. Therefore, it is imperative to involve girls directly in the research process and engage with their perspectives. Scholars who work on issues relevant to the Global South could contribute to creating practical guidelines on how girls can participate in research meaningfully in the context of their culture and region. Clara Siagian et al. (2021), for instance, have developed a set of guidelines for the Indonesian context. This approach not only enriches the research but also ensures that interventions are relevant to the girls' lives and more effective. Overall, we note that a critical approach to investigating girlhood in Indonesia and the Global South is essential. In short, we encourage researchers working on girls and young women in Indonesia specifically, and the Global South, generally, to develop more careful, caring, and critical approaches in their studies and advocacy work by: interrogating their own assumptions; contextualizing girlhood in the Global South to avoid overgeneralization and better understand the socio-cultural, class, historical, and political contexts in which girls and young women live; evaluating knowledge discourses in girlhood studies and related fields; and promoting interdisciplinary collaborations in meaningful ways to avoid regurgitating the same assumptions about girlhood.



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Notes

1. A keen reader of this opening paragraph will notice the similar rhetorical pattern in Clare Hemmings's opening paragraph of her germinal article, "Telling Feminist Stories" (2005), from which we derived inspiration for this article.

2. We selected SINTA 1 for journals in Bahasa Indonesia because it indexes peer-reviewed and respectable national journals.
3. Pusat Kajian dan Advokasi Perlindungan dan Kualitas Hidup Anak.

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