Gender discourse in Islamic online media, 2000-2021

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Abstract

The article examines the gender discourse channelled through *Suara Aisyiyah* magazine, which is part of Aisiyah, a women's organization, with a focus on the gender perspective discourse presented via online media. However, representations of gender discourse vary across different spaces, times, agents, and contexts, as well as in the ways ideas about gender are channelled in alignment with the organization's vision. To capture the evolution of gender discourse with online media, this study adopted a historical approach combined with discourse analysis. The discourse analysis method, which describes both text and context, was employed in data analysis. The research period begins in 2000 and extends to 2021 (the contemporary period). The digital platform is utilized to explore more broadly the progressive Islamic identity promoted by *Suara Aisyiyah* during this period. It is recognized that online media hosts numerous identities, allowing for both "crossing" and "collision" of ideas. The various discourses presented in the *Suara Aisyiyah* print newspaper vividly illustrate the visions of the Aisiyah and Muhammadiyah organizations, including women's positions in politics and their access to health and nutrition. Through social media preaching, Aisyiyah fosters a spirit of equality across all aspects of life, such as by advocating for the elimination of domestic violence.

Keyword: *Suara 'Aisyiyah*, Online Media, Gender Discourse, Woman's Organization

INTRODUCTION

Online media plays a significant role in representing gender equality. Numerous women's organizations, particularly feminist groups, utilize online platforms to articulate their roles and raise awareness about gender equality. These organizations leverage online media to convey and promote their organizational visions. As a gender technology, online media effectively underscores its ideological influence on culture and society.

The importance of online media in representing gender equality is elucidated in research conducted by Sofia P. Caldeira et al. in 2018, titled "Exploring the Politics of Gender Representation on Instagram: Self-

representations of Femininity." The study explains that social media platforms like Instagram play a significant role in shaping culturally accepted gender norms by portraying prevalent gender roles in contemporary society.

The widespread use of online media in society facilitates the dissemination and cultivation of gender awareness. One notable organization actively engaged in discussions surrounding gender ideology is the Aisiyah Organization. According to research conducted by Yuliantri (2018), the Aisiyah Organization is a women's group affiliated with Muhammadiyah. It gained recognition for its publication, the Soera Aisjijah magazine, which was first released in 1926. *Soera Aisjijah* holds the distinction of being the longest-running women's magazine, earning a place in the Indonesian Record Museum (MURI). Serving as a communication platform, it bridges various organizations dedicated to propagating Aisiyah's mission and activities (https://suaraaisiyah. id). In the 2020s, *Soera Aisjijah* transitioned into a hybrid format, being published both online and in print. Furthermore, the Aisiyah Organization officially launched its website, followed by active engagement on various online media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Broadcast, and YouTube (https://www.aisyiyah. or.id). Notably, Suara 'Aisyiyah established its presence on Instagram in January 2018 (https://www.instagram. com/suaraaisyiyah/), and its website was first indexed by Google in February 2020 (https://suaraaisyiyah.id/). Additionally, *Suara 'Aisyiyah* joined Twitter in October 2019 (https://twitter.com/SuaraAisyiyah).

Why is it significant to engage with the Suara Aisiyah online platform? During the period leading to Indonesia's independence, the Suara Aisiyah Magazine served as a vital medium for discussions among Indonesian intellectuals as the country transitioned from colonial rule to independence (1900–1942). Within this context, Islamism emerged as a crucial issue, drawing the involvement of diverse intellectuals in the Islamic struggle aimed at fostering an identity rooted in Islamic teachings (Yuliantri & Suwignyo, 2024). Aisiyah's role as a platform for advocating this identity remains pertinent today. The discussions on women's roles featured in the Aisiyah magazine take various forms, spanning from the traditional printed version to its online platforms.

While the concept of online media as a representation of ideology or gender has been explored extensively, this research focuses on material from religion-based women's organizations, particularly those rooted in Islam. It delves into the methods and content of gender discourse conducted by such organizations, such as Aisiyah (the Muslim Women's Organization under Muhammadiyah). Specifically, the research seeks to answer the question: How is gender discourse presented in online media, particularly in the representation of Aisiyah through the Suara 'Aisyiyah magazine? One initial assumption is that online media enables more diverse forms of gender representation and participation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several researchers, including Sofia P. Caldeira et al. (2018), have conducted analytical studies on gender politics as presented through online media platforms such as Instagram. Caldeira's work, titled "Exploring the Politics of Gender Representation on Instagram: Self-representations of Femininity," emphasizes the analysis of gender representation politics on Instagram, employing a broad understanding of politics encompassing "everyday politics" and "everyday activists". The research highlights that Instagram allows for a variety of gender representations. It begins with the assumption that Instagram can both perpetuate and challenge traditional gender norms, examining the affordances and limitations of the technologies that shape such representations. In a similar vein, other researchers, Biscop, Malliet, and Dhoest (2019), apply Gramsci's concept of counter-hegemonic subversion and Butler's theory of gender performativity to the realm of critical game studies, particularly in the examination of queer games.

The study of gender representation through online media has been extensively explored by various research groups, as evidenced by the work of the two aforementioned research groups. However, while the former emphasized Instagram content, the latter focused on video games. This research aims to concentrate on material from women's organizations rooted in religion, specifically Islam. It will examine the methods and content of gender discourse conducted by such organizations, drawing parallels with the approach taken by Aisiyah (the Organization of Muslim Women under Muhammadiyah).

Online Media and Gender Discourse

Online media plays an essential role in representing gender equality. Many women's organizations, particularly those advocating feminism, strive to articulate their roles and raise public awareness about gender equality through online platforms. The widespread use of online media in communities facilitates the dissemination and cultivation of gender awareness. It is imperative to scrutinize how gender is portrayed in the media, with a specific emphasis on avoiding the marginalization of any gender domain (Popa & Gavriliu, 2015).

Online media offers a convenient platform for people to interact and communicate effectively (Abraham, 2014) . The discourse surrounding gender equality remains a topic of ongoing debate in society. However, media platforms provide a means through which these debates can influence and shape discourse on gender equality, thereby contributing to increased awareness and understanding of gender issues.

Women's organizations advocate for equality to liberate women from the constraints of patriarchal norms. The focus has shifted from merely challenging domestication to emphasizing women's rights to self-determination, bodily autonomy, and the ability to speak out against injustices they face, among other freedoms. It is crucial for women's organizations to have an impactful and efficient role in empowering women and promoting gender equality. This entails avoiding activities that reinforce traditional gender roles, relegating women to domestic spaces and defining them solely as wives (Astuti, 2021). Instead, women's organizations should strive to provide women with platforms for expressing their opinions, showcasing their achievements, and highlighting their inherent worth, similar to how men are perceived in society.

The utilization of gender and media aspects in this study involves examining participation and representation, as outlined by Rozgonyi and Adams (2022). Participation aspects encompass opportunities for involvement and access to public forums and decision-making processes through various media, including new communication technologies. Representation aspects, on the other hand, pertain to how the media shapes gender perceptions and portrays representations (Rozgonyi & Adams, 2022).

Communication of Islamic Organizations

The research centers on women's organizations rooted in religion, particularly Islam, by examining the methods and content of gender discourse within the Aisiyah organization. While gender equality is a prevalent topic across social organizations, each organization, including those focused on specific issues, such as Aisiyah, has its own unique dynamics, especially in terms of communication among its members.

From the perspective of communication science, organizations undergo the dynamics of information dissemination. Everett M. Rogers (Silviani, 2020) explains that communication is the activity of two or more individuals who exchange information with each other, in the process they will reach the level of mutual knowing and understanding.

In the context of the gender struggle, social organizations, particularly within the Islamic community, continue to prioritize the immediate practical needs of women, such as clothing, shelter, and health. However, programs aimed at addressing strategic concerns, such as raising awareness, challenging social hierarchies, and improving the status of women, are not yet being optimally addressed (Asnawi, 2012).

Women's movement organizations typically comprise solely women who share a common vision and mission to advocate for equality. This shared goal serves as the driving force behind efforts to dismantle social hierarchies between men and women.

In Asnawi (2012), for example, it is asserted that the effectiveness of women's organizations as a social movement is contingent upon their social power. This power is derived from various sources, including the number of members within the organization, its structure, and the resources it possesses, such as financial assets, knowledge, skills, and education. However, to date, Islamic organizations are perceived to have had limited impact on addressing gender inequality, particularly in Indonesia. This underscores the importance of Islamic community organizations shifting their focus towards practical initiatives related to gender equality and feminism, rather than solely concentrating on theoretical discourse (Suhendra, 2012).

Women in the Shackles of Social Construction

Patriarchal culture continues to constrain women, subjecting them to social constructions that portray them as weak and powerless individuals. In the prevailing societal perspective, men hold significant roles in people's lives, while women are granted only limited rights in addressing broader societal issues encompassing economic, political, social, and psychological contexts, including within marriage (Sakina & A., 2017). Consequently, women find themselves relegated to subordinate positions and subjected to discrimination.

Women are perceived as lacking independence over their own bodies, a form of self-expression intentionally suppressed by patriarchal societies, which coerce women into submission (Ridjal, 1993). The resulting inequality deprives women of social access and diminishes their rights in various aspects of life, leading to social disintegration that reinforces the dominance of men in societal structures. Furthermore, women face stereotyping, being portrayed as incomplete compared to men's perceived perfection (Muhammad Chabibi, 2021). Their independence is viewed as limited, and their ability to fulfill their potential is constrained by societal perceptions that dictate men, particularly husbands, hold authority over their fates, determining their destinies in both earthly and spiritual realms.

Women are consistently linked to a value system imbued with specific cultural meanings, and it's crucial to acknowledge the discrimination and social constructions they face within organizations. This relates directly to the issue of gender equality, which is often mistakenly perceived solely as a women's problem. Gender issues are, in fact, social issues that require collective attention from both men and women. However, the majority of gender movement organizations are still led by women and amplify women's voices. Women take on active roles in articulating their struggles against the patriarchal norms that confine them, and some also engage in combating narratives of toxic masculinity that constrain men.

METHODS

The research in this study adopts a historical qualitative approach, focusing primarily on content analysis during its research stages. Qualitative research adheres to the philosophy of postpositivism and is employed to examine the condition of natural objects, with the researcher serving as the primary instrument. Sampling from data sources is conducted purposefully and through snowballing. The collection technique involves triangulation, combining various sources of data. Data analysis follows an inductive/qualitative approach, with the emphasis on deriving meaning rather than generalization (Murdiyanto, 2020). Historical qualitative research, in greater detail, involves implementing research through historical stages, including heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography.

The object of this research is Suara 'Aisyiyah (an online media platform) utilized by Aisiyah (located in Yogyakarta, Indonesia) to explore the discourse on gender equality. The research period spans from 2000 to 2021, categorized within the contemporary period in historical terms. The year 2000 serves as the starting point due to the widespread use of internet-based media for organizational communication. The year 2021 is chosen to examine the methods and content of gender discourse by women's organizations, particularly by Aisiyah in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

The research subject of this study is "Gender discourse in online media," encompassing discussions surrounding gender equality within social organizations. These organizations often prioritize addressing the immediate practical needs of women, such as clothing, shelter, and health, alongside strategic initiatives aimed at raising awareness, challenging social hierarchies, and improving the status of women. Data collection for this study involves gathering information from both primary and secondary sources, including photos, news articles, and discourse found on websites, Instagram, or Twitter.

This study adopted a historical approach coupled with descriptive discourse analysis, employing both textual and non-textual discourse analysis strategies. However, the data collected have not provided answers to the research problems and objectives due to the absence of a theoretical framework. Consequently, following data collection, historical verification or criticism was conducted, as suggested by Kuntowijoyo (Kuntowijoyo,

2013). Historical criticism, known as source criticism, was employed to assess the credibility and reliability of historical sources obtained previously. During source criticism, researchers searched for sources that can be justified, comparing and evaluating various sources to ensure accuracy and validity.

Furthermore, this paper adopted the perspective of gender equality discourse, employing both textual and non-textual discourse analysis methods. Discourse analysis was utilized to describe both the text and context in the data analysis process. Essentially, discourse refers to the delivery process from the communicator to the recipient (Badara, 2012). The descriptive method is employed to describe and analyze the results of this study, focusing on describing symptoms or events as well as interpreting and commenting on phenomena within the narrative. However, it is not utilized in compiling broader conclusions, especially those emphasized in the historiography process (Kuntowijoyo, 2013). Descriptive analysis played a crucial role in how researchers record, narrate, and interpret data in alignment with their understanding and supporting references(Daud, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

History of *Suara Aisyiyah*: From Printed to online magazines

'Aisyiyah is a women's organization affiliated with Muhammadiyah. It publishes a newspaper called *Suara 'Aisjijah*, which was first released on January 6, 1926. The name has since been modified to *Suara 'Aisyiyah*. As part of Muhammadiyah, *Suara 'Aisyiyah* serves to disseminate information and foster engagement within its organization(Yuliantri, 2018).

> ... the editorial team of Suara 'Aisyiyah hinted that this publication serves as 'Aisyiyah's radio and airplane, ready to propagate the mission and activities of 'Aisyiyah from the central organization to regional administrators. Additionally, this magazine serves as a platform for communication among regional administrators and between different regions...

Suara 'Aisyiyah newspaper holds the distinction of being the oldest magazine that has spanned three significant periods: the Dutch colonial era, the Japanese colonial era, and the independent Indonesian period. Throughout these periods, in addition to discussing the organization's vision, the newspaper also addressed gender discourse, including topics such as polygamy as early as 1926.

'Aisyiyah organisation has expanded its discussions on gender equality to include digital media platforms such as YouTube, websites, and Instagram. However, in terms of its adoption of digital platforms, the Suara 'Aisyiyah newspaper was relatively "late" compared to the emergence of online platforms in the 2010s. It wasn't until eight years later that Suara 'Aisyiyah established a presence on Instagram, starting in January 2018 (https://www.instagram.com/suaraaisyiyah/). The Suara 'Aisyiyah website was first indexed by Google in February 2020 (https:// suaraaisyiyah.id/), and it joined Twitter in October 2019 (https://twitter.com/SuaraAisyiyah).

As highlighted by Makroen Sanjaya, a TVMu journalist, Muhammadiyah has not fully utilized social media platforms, causing its da'wah efforts on social media to lag behind others (https://suaramuhammadiyah.id).

Interestingly, digital journalist of *Suara 'Aisyiyah* has garnered attention and encouragement from women within 'Aisyiyah to contribute to the digital journalism across various platforms. An article by Siti Syamsyiatun (October 2021) suggests that the 'Aisyiyah organization formulate strategies for implementing methods of wisdom (*hikmah*), good counsel (*mau'idhah hasanah*), and constructive discourse (*ahsanul jidal*) through digital platforms. Additionally, it is deemed essential for women journalists to acquire and refine new skills to effectively disseminate ideas and advance as progressive Islamic women. Siti Syamsyiatun also proposed ideas for proponents of a progressive Islamic identity, suggesting that their teachings can be adapted to the digital realm. According to her, further interpretation efforts are necessary for concepts used as references in preaching, such as the meanings of righteousness (*makruf*), evil (*munkar*), wisdom (*hikmah*), and others, within the context of the digital world (Syamsiyatun, 2020). This article shows how efforts to utilize digital platform are continuously being encouraged by *Suara 'Aisyiyah*.

As a women's organization rooted in Islam, 'Aisyiyah holds particular perspectives on the notion of gender

equality. Being the oldest magazine that has endured through three historical periods—the Dutch colonial era, the Japanese colonial era, and the Independent Indonesian period—it has consistently addressed the organizational vision alongside gender discourse, including discussions on polygamy dating back to 1926. Naturally, in its endeavor to advocate for women's equality, *Suara 'Aisyiyah* magazine doesn't solely concentrate on a singular issue but possesses its distinct characteristics, particularly as a component of an Islamic organization.

The discussion on gender discourse in the *Suara 'Aisyiyah* newspaper in this article is divided into two categories: Suara 'Aisyiyah in print and Suara 'Aisyiyah in digital platforms. Across these two platforms, spanning from 2000 to 2022, gender discourse has been developed. It is evident that the emancipation of women in 'Aisyiyah's discourse is rooted in *Suara 'Aisyiyah* magazine, which is imbued with religious values and carries the vision of the Progressive Muslim Women's Movement (Sirajuddin, 2020), across both print and online platforms.

Women journalists at 'Aisyiyah need to develop strategies for implementing the principles of wisdom (*hikmah*), good counsel (*mau'idhah hasanah*), and constructive dialogue (*ahsanul jidal*) through digital platforms. This requires mastering and refining new skills to effectively disseminate ideas and practices that promote progressive Islamic values. Ultimately, female journalists, particularly within the 'Aisyiyah community, can continue to contribute to the digital journalism landscape through various platforms, including citizen journalism. The progressive Islamic identity, which underpins our movement and teachings, must be adapted to the digital realm. Therefore, there's a need for further interpretation of key concepts such as *'makruf,' 'munkar,' 'hikmah,'* and others within the context of digital communication.

Gender equality in Suara 'Aisyiyah magazine is approached through various perspectives. Typically, Islamic mass organizations tend to prioritize discussions on practical aspects of gender equality, encompassing gender dynamics and feminism, rather than solely concentrating on theoretical concepts. (Suara Aisyiah 2012, 2012). In contrast to *Suara 'Aisyiyah*, which comprehensively addresses the discourse of women's equality across various topics, including discussions on women's roles in the public sphere, politics, the economy, patriarchy, and autonomy over their bodies.

The gender equality discourse promoted by Suara 'Aisyiyah is reinforced by the activities of the 'Aisyiyah organization. For instance, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic in October 2020, an international conference was held online, known as the International Conference on 'Aisyiyah Studies 2020 (ICAS). The conference focused on the issue of women's empowerment, a subject central to 'Aisyiyah's mission. The discussions revolved around women's empowerment in alignment with 'Aisyiyah's core values, rooted in religious principles. Additionally, 'Aisyiyah upholds the vision of the Progressive Muslim Women's Movement, which is reflected in its policies and programs. These initiatives are founded on a moderate interpretation of Islamic teachings, integrating textual understanding, scientific knowledge, and ethical considerations (Sirajuddin, 2020). This conference serves as evidence that 'Aisyiyah's discourse on women's emancipation is part of a tangible movement. Furthermore, the publication of conference issues and contents in *Suara 'Aisyiyah* indicates the broader reach of the discourse on women's emancipation. This, in turn, underscores that the women's emancipation issues addressed in *Suara 'Aisyiyah* represent the ethos of the 'Aisyiyah organization.

Gender Discourse in *Suara Aisyiyah* online media

Suara Aisyiyah maintains a presence across several social media platforms, utilizing their features to propagate narratives of equality. Online media platforms offer a convenient space for individuals to interact and communicate efficiently, fostering socialization and gender awareness (Abraham, 2014). Firstly, through the YouTube channel named Suara 'Aisyiyah, video content addressing themes such as gender equality, sexual violence, and education is featured. Secondly, the website https://suaraaisyiyah.id/ hosts a variety of articles discussing topics including domestication, gender equality, political rights, women's and Islamic issues, sexual violence, economic independence, bodily autonomy, patriarchy, the right to education, marriage, polygamy, and women's right to choose. Thirdly, the Instagram account @suaraaisyiyah presents content revolving around values of domestication, gender equality, political rights, women's and Islamic issues, sexual violence, economic independence, education, and women's right to choose.

The success of women's organizations as social movements is influenced by various factors, including organizational strength and social aspects such as the number of members, organizational structures, and modes of operation (Asnawi, 2012). In terms of education, Suara Aisyiyah demonstrates an inspirational role for women and promotes literacy as a means of empowering women within the Da'wah Movement. Furthermore, as a progressive movement, Suara Aisyiyah is instrumental in dismantling social stereotypes that often suppress women's self-expression due to patriarchal norms, compelling them to conform (Fauzie, 1993). Through its outreach on social media, Suara Aisyiyah fosters a spirit of equality across various aspects of life. However, this effort cannot ignore the prevalent phenomenon of online gender-based violence that disproportionately targets women. Despite these challenges, Suara Aisyiyah advocates for women's empowerment and active engagement, including their involvement in ecofeminist activities aimed at environmental preservation. Moreover, the dynamic between public and domestic spheres highlights the intertwined rights and responsibilities of women, necessitating collaborative efforts and synergy. The existing gender inequalities have resulted in limited social access and reduced rights for women in various spheres of life. The progressive women's movement underscores that women have the inherent right to succeed independently of men, and it showcases women's capacity to assume leadership roles, even in traditionally male-dominated domains such as religious leadership. In interpersonal relationships, fostering compromise, mutual understanding, and respect for all parties involved is essential, whether it's between men and women or among women themselves, to prevent acts of domination and ensure equitable interactions.

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Suara Aisyiyah, as an online da'wah magazine, emphasizes that all individuals in Islam, regardless of gender, have equal rights to promote goodness. Women's organizations can significantly contribute to the empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality by adopting activity patterns that do not seek to confine women to traditional roles (Astuti, 2021). Organizations experience the dynamics of information dissemination, as highlighted by Everett M. Rogers (Silviani, 2020), who defines communication as the exchange of information between two or more individuals leading to mutual understanding and knowledge. The active involvement of women in public life strengthens development initiatives by leveraging their full potential. Women, whether as wives or mothers, have the right to access and acquire knowledge, and it is essential for their partners to support and encourage their pursuit of knowledge. Moreover, Kartini's Day should not be reduced to mere identity politics associated with traditional attire and domestic activities. Instead, it should be interpreted more profoundly, particularly in terms of women's ongoing struggle for equal rights and opportunities.

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Interestingly, social media and digital platforms offer opportunities for the 'Aisyiyah organization to adapt and expand its reach. Platforms such as those managed by Suara 'Aisyiyah can serve as channels for promoting 'Aisyiyah's activities in a positive light, spanning from local branches to the central level. The utilization of new media and social platforms enables 'Aisyiyah to present itself comprehensively, facilitating a holistic understanding of its identity (Susilastuti, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Suara 'Aisyiyah is one of the women's newspapers has lasted from the colonial period until Indonesia's independence. As time has changed, the print magazine Suara 'Aisyiyah has also taken advantage of the digital platform starting in 2018. The digital platform is used to more broadly discuss the progressive Islamic identity that is carried by Suara 'Aisyiyah. As we understand, online media has carried many identities, thus allowing "crossing" and "collision". The various discourses raised by the Suara 'Aisyiyah print newspaper clearly show the vision of the 'Aisyiyah and Muhammadiyah organizations, such as the position of women in politics and women's access to health and nutrition. Through preaching on social media, the spirit of equality was built by 'Aisyiyah in all walks of life, such as by promoting the Elimination of Domestic Violence. The output of this study are the Journal Islamic Studies and International Seminars as a socialization process.

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