

# The Representation of Women as Folk Devils in Indonesian Online Media: Mother Killers

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The Representation of Women as Folk Devils in Indonesian Online Media:  
Mother Killers

by

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**Abstract:**

This paper aims to discuss the ways the Indonesian online media present some groups of women as 'folk devils', people who are labeled as deviant to the social norms and convention. With the ongoing popularity of online media in Indonesia, it has a great role in identifying and creating women as 'folk devils', such as mother killers, women in relationships with younger or married men, girl gangs, and sexy dangdut singers. The conventional assumption that media is objective and apolitical in its journalism is challenged as in fact the media is bias and political in the ways it selects news that are presented to its readers. The criteria used to select news are in line with the operating ideologies that are designed to hegemonize, using the trivial and common sense to create truth. The increasing number of online media readership, makes online media a perfect means to create a particular 'truth' about women who are deemed to be 'folk devils'. Using Stanley Cohen's concept on 'folk devils', this paper analyzes online news reports on the phenomena of 'mother killers' in Indonesia to identify the media bias in creating the 'truth' about mother killers. In a way, the online media in Indonesia has elected itself as social guardian and controller over the 'folk devils' to maintain the existing structure of the Indonesian society.

**Keywords:** mother killers, online media, 'folk devils', social control, hegemony, truth

**1. Introduction**

There are major changes in many aspects of living as a result of reform era in Indonesia. This includes the freedom of media and journalism. In line with the freedom of the media and the development of technology, the number of media in Indonesia is significantly increasing either in printed or online media. This condition also gives more opportunity for the people to access information faster and easier. The development of communication gadgets that can be connected to internet enables the Indonesians to follow the social phenomena happened in Indonesia easily and possibly in the real time. Competition among news providers to embrace as many readers as possible cannot be avoided. Many ways are used to grab the attention of the reader. Writing style, especially in online media, depends on the aspect of sensation. The title of the news is formatted in a form of sensational tabloid to catch the readers' attention.

The news that are reported in online media is stealing our attention, especially news that portray women. We are able to identify groups of women that are recurrently portrayed negatively by the media and they are mother killers, girl gangs, sexy *dangdut* singers, and women in relationship with younger or married men. But due to the space and time constraint, we would only discuss news reports on mother killers. In some cases that are controversial and disturbing, like mothers who kill their own child/ren either in the form of child homicide, infanticide or neonaticide, the media has a tendency to over dramatizing the news. In general, the reports are bias, partial and judgmental, without providing a comprehensive context on the event and without giving the women a space to explain themselves. The news reports directly "jump" to a conclusion where the mothers are accused as folk devils because they have defied the social definition, norms and values of being a mother. In another word, this phenomenon highlights patriarchal ideas on inappropriate.

Stanley Cohen in his seminal book on a study of the 'Mods' and 'Rockers' subcultures in England during the 1940s, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002) <sup>[1]</sup>, coins the term 'folk devils' for individuals or groups seen as deviant and of which society disapproves. Folk

Devils are persons or groups of people in the society that defy the social norms and or values. Media has been identified as the most responsible agent in labelling and popularize the folk devils in the news. The media is actively constructing the meaning of women as folk devils. Thus, this is how the media appointed themselves as the guardian of the social and norms.

Donson et al (2004)<sup>[2]</sup> describes that the label of folk devils is usually applied to people who are already marginalized.

The typical folk devil is therefore someone on the edge of or even outside of society . . . . These people do not have a voice; they are already effectively silent within civil society and are therefore an easy target for demonization (6-7) 'Normal' folk devils are marginalized by their pre-existing marginal position in society and are therefore an easy and often convenient target (26).

Both Cohen and Donson et al suggest that the label 'folk devils' is an image that is processed and constructed. The media is accused as the institution that is responsible of the labeling. Becker (quoted in Cohen 2002) <sup>[3]</sup> explains the connection of deviance to labeling that

deviance is created by society. I do not mean that this in the way that it is ordinarily understood, in which the causes of deviance are located in the social situation of the deviant or in 'social factors' which prompt his action. I mean, rather that *social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance* and by applying those rules to particular persons and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is *not* a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'. The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label (p.4).

Becker makes it very clear that deviance is a label given to individuals or groups that break the rules made by other social groups. The individuals or groups, who are accused of deviant actions, commonly belong to the marginalized, the subordinate who do not share the values or ideologies of the dominant groups. As a consequence, they are deemed as deviant, the folk devils of that society. It is not the actions of the person that make her/him labeled as a folk devil, but more of the punishment given to the person for her/his deviance against the shared norms and values of the dominant groups. Thus, it is more because of the exercise of the mechanism of social control to protect the dominant ideologies that leads to deviance. The media draws on the opinions of the 'moral guardians' of the nation moral values, such as the representatives of religious, social and political institutions to condemn the deviant behavior of the folk devil. In this instance, the media has appointed itself to be the moral guardian of the nation by indignantly condemned the folk devil and suggesting that this one act of deviance may lead to the disintegrations of the moral life of the whole nation, as described in this quotation.

The media have long operated as agents of moral indignation in their own right: . . . their very reporting of certain 'facts' can be sufficient to generate concern, anxiety, indignation or panic. When such feelings coincide with a perception that particular values need to be protected, the preconditions for new rule creation or social problem definition are present (p. 7).

Ignorant audience, who accept the media's version of the story, might go along with this suggestion and readily take the story as representing the truth and react resentfully against the folk devil. Cohen explains that this is the phenomenon in most industrial societies.

In industrial societies, the body of information from which such ideas are built, is invariably received at second hand. That is, it arrives already processed by the mass media and this means that the information has been subject to alternative definitions of what constitutes 'news' and how should it be gathered and presented. The information is further structured by the various commercial and political constraints in which newspapers, radio and television operate (p.7).

What is kept hidden from the audience is the ideology on which the media operates when it 'processed' a story. It means that the story has been reconstructed based on the ideology the media operates, so that the audience always receives a fragmented story; using a certain version of a story that gives no space for the story owner to tell her/his own story. Ignorant audience would receive this fragmented story as the 'truth', and the only version, never suspecting that there might be some other 'hidden truth' kept from them. The media is actively constructing meanings, rather than merely 'reflecting' some supposedly shared reality. When the audience also share the same ideology, the effectiveness of the media's reporting of the supposedly 'folk devils' is complete as it draws from the audience's support.

Byerly and Ross mention in their book *Women & Media* <sup>[4]</sup> also support the idea how media news is active in "perform[ing] an important affirmatory role in reinforcing dominant gendered norms", because

news stories are everything and nothing at once, providing information about the social world but often without the necessary context that would make the events described fully meaningful. . . they are not value free. There are particular interpretation of and ways of seeing the world that are entirely partial and that preserve the male-ordered status quo. . . The ways in which women are represented in newsmedia send important messages to the . . . reading publics about women's place, women's role and women's lives (p. 39-40).

The researchers did not saying that killing is something acceptable, but as cases of mothers who commit infanticide are recurring, these cases should be taken more seriously and not just as another case that can be 'sold'. Media as news provider should also gives space for the mother's voices to understand their motives and not to judge. Bias and side-taking are two obvious strategies used in news reports in online media; contrary to the accepted belief that journalistic writing is bound by journalism ethics and standard of truthfulness, accuracy and objectivity.

## 2. Mother Killers

The numbers of mothers who killed their babies and children exposed by the media in 2007 – 2012 are twenty- six (26) cases. Quoting the terms described by the news report, one mother poisoned her child; others sunk their babies in the toilet, covered their baby's face with cloth, cut their baby's neck with blade, and many other unthinkable ways that the society has never imagined mothers are capable of doing.

References on the word 'mother' refer to positive qualities, attributing her to the ability to love, protect, nurture and selfless sacrifice for her children. The dictionary definitions on the word 'mother' is having the characteristics of 'maternal love, tenderness, affection'. Famous Indonesian sayings like "*cinta anak sepanjang galah, cinta ibu sepanjang hayat*" (the immeasurable love a mother has for her children) and "*surga ada di bawah telapak kaki Ibu*" (reminding children to respect mothers as the heaven is under a mother's feet), are a form of respect to mothers and acknowledging her capacity to love. Indonesian songs written by famous Indonesian singers are full of praises for a mother's love and her great sacrifices for her children like Iwan Fals's *Ibu*,<sup>[5]</sup> Melly Goeslaw's *Bunda* <sup>[6]</sup> and the popular religious song *Di Doa Ibuku Namaku Disebut* <sup>[7]</sup>. Quotations from contemporary Indonesian writers such as in Abdurahman Faiz's popular novel *Nadya: Kisah dari Negeri yang Menggigit* <sup>[8]</sup>: "Bunda adalah yang terhebat di dunia sebab ia melahirkan kehidupan dan memberi nyawa pada

kata cinta" or in Helvy Tiana Rosa's *Tanah Perempuan*<sup>[9]</sup>: "Para ibu selalu mempunyai tempat untuk menampung duka, lalu mengecupnya dan bangkit." These are just the few references, not to mention folk tales, stories, poems that represent the romantic ideals of a mother as a woman who is soft, tender, generous, kind, self-sacrificing and affectionate.

When the media repeatedly reported on stories of mother killers, the reader is shocked as the doers defy the very definition of a mother. They are considered as deviant to the social norms and morality, that they are labeled as the devil incarnated as opposed to the pure angelic saint a mother is believed to be. Below are some quotations taken from articles from on-line newspapers, reporting on four different cases of mothers who killed their own children.

Sungguh sadis, seorang ibu tega membunuh anak kandungnya yang masih berusia 9 tahun dengan cara disilet. Usai menyilet anaknya, pelaku berusaha bunuh diri dengan cara serupa namun berhasil diselamatkan (Tega Nian, Ibu Tega Habisi Anaknya Sendiri)<sup>[10]</sup>.

Sementara itu, tersangka Yusini dihadapan penyidik mengaku nekat melakukan perbuatan keji karena malu. Sebelumnya, setelah melahirkan anak berjenis kelamin laki-laki tanpa bantuan bidan pada tanggal 20 Maret lalu sekitar pukul 17.00 WIB. Karena malu pelaku langsung membekap wajah bayi tersebut dengan bantal. Usai melihat anaknya telah mati, pelaku langsung membungkusnya dengan kain sarung dan memasukkannya ke dalam tas plastik. (Sadis..! Yusini Tega Bunuh Bayi Hasil Hubungan Gelap)<sup>[11]</sup>.

Seorang janda berinisial Am (40), warga Desa Cikalong, Kecamatan Sodonghilir, Kabupaten Tasikmalaya, tega membunuh anak kandungnya sendiri yang baru berusia satu hari. Pelaku membunuh bayinya dengan cara dibekap pakai sarung seusai dilahirkan. (Malu, Ibu Ini Bunuh Bayi Hasil Hubungan Gelap)<sup>[12]</sup>

Pepatah sebuas-buasnya harimau tak akan memakan anaknya sendiri, tak berlaku bagi Bendelina Kause (36), warga RT 8/RW 4, Kelurahan Cendana, Kota SoE, Kabupaten Timor Tengah Selatan (TTS). . . . Para warga tak menyangka ibu lima anak itu tega membuang bayinya ke WC cemplung milik saudaranya (Ibu Kandung Buang Bayinya ke WC).<sup>[13]</sup>

Tega! Itulah yang bisa dikatakan untuk menyebut tindakan nekat yang dilakukan oleh Sunari. Ia tega membunuh darah dagingnya sendiri, Minggu (1/8) siang. Aulia (2 minggu), putri bungsunya harus kehabisan darah karena luka robek yang ada di lehernya (Tega! Ibu Bunuh Bayi Umur Dua Minggu).<sup>[14]</sup>

The word "tega", "keji", "biadab", "sadis" appears as the articles' headlines as well as in the articles, reflecting the disbelief of the news writer over the phenomena and making the incidents as sensational events. Cohen describes that the "mass media, in fact, devote a great deal of space to deviance: sensational crimes, scandals, bizarre happenings and strange goings on" (p. 8)<sup>[15]</sup>. The problem is in the absence of the mothers' voice in telling their side of the stories and the absence of the father in all the scenes. The tone of the articles is judging the mothers as deviant characters and the mother's action is even degraded to that of below an animal's status. In the study by Global Media Monitoring Project (1995), the popular roles of women who were featured in news stories as victims, mothers and wives. Byerly and Ross (2008, p.39)<sup>[16]</sup> refers to this strategy as "lie of authenticity". Since this happens globally then the readers accept the news reports description about these mothers as truth without even questioning the authenticity of the news stories.

The mothers' explanations are regarded as lame excuses and the fathers of the babies that might be the mother's source of anxieties are mentioned but excluded from the scenes as reflected from these quotations:

Belum diketahui secara pasti motif perbuatan Ktn yang tega membunuh anak kedua yang baru dilahirkannya tersebut. Namun berdasar pengakuan Ktn di depan polisi, perbuatan itu dilatarbelakangi faktor ekonomi. "Suami saya tidak tahu kalau saya hamil," katanya (Ibu di Pacitan Bunuh Bayi Baru Dilahirkan).<sup>[17]</sup>

Kejadian ini baru diketahui oleh aparat karena ada laporan dari warga yang curiga dengan adanya kematian bayi yang tidak wajar. Karena khawatir tidak bisa menghidupinya, sang ibu (Ngantini) lantas membunuh bayi tersebut (Ibu Tiga Anak Tega Bunuh Bayi yang Dilahirkan, Duh..).<sup>[18]</sup>

Tujuh Tahun Ditinggal Suami . . . . Setelah ditinggal pacar gelapnya ke Kalimantan, Bendelina mulai semakin tak tahan hidup sendirian. Meski sedang berbadan dua, Bendelina ingin menyusul suaminya, Herman Benu yang berada di Malaysia. Keinginan Bendelina menyusul suaminya sontak ditolak keluarganya (Ibu Kandung Buang Bayinya ke WC).<sup>[19]</sup>

Veronika beralasan tidak tahan atas perlakuan jahat dan penghianatan suami yang diduga selingkuh dengan wanita lain. Dalam surat itu juga tertulis, dirinya tertekan hingga merasa depresi berat. Surat satunya lagi diketik pada bagian bawahnya terdapat nama Malanton sebagai penulis surat. Surat itu berisi pengakuan Malanton yang mengaku telah tiga kali berselingkuh dengan wanita lain sebelum sang anak lahir (Tega Nian, Ibu Tega Habisi Anaknya Sendiri).<sup>[20]</sup>

"Pak Sugino itu orangnya sabar banget. Biar pun ada kejadian kayak gini, dia enggak mukul istrinya atau *gimana*," kata Sulton, Kepala Bidang Pemuda dan Olahraga RW 01 . . . . "Satu hal yang perlu dicatat, saya sangat salut dengan ketaatan Pak Sugino dalam beribadah. (shalat) subuhnya itu rajin banget," imbuhnya (Sunari Cuma Bilang, "Anakmu Tak Bunuh").<sup>[21]</sup>

In the first two quotations, the mothers mentioned economic factor and the second two mention the absence of the fathers to be their source of anxieties that lead them to kill their babies, but these factors are treated more as secondary aspects rather than the main cause of the mothers' actions. Although the women are seemingly given a voice to tell their side of the stories, but their voice is already 'silenced' by the sensational and judgmental tone in the headlines and the first paragraphs of the articles that describe the mothers' actions. The fifth quotation even focuses on the husband's benevolence that is considered to be uncommon, whereas what is considered common is for the husband to beat the wife. The absence of the fathers from the scenes of crime and the disregard of the mothers' voice reflect the gender ideology as represented in the normative structure of the Indonesian society.

The women's voice in telling their stories are not deemed to be important as the reports focus more on the horrible details that describe the ways how a murder is done. The reports focus more on the sensational aspects of the action rather than looking into the root or the motives that trigger the murder. When mother killers become a phenomenon, there must be something wrong, more serious problems that lie deep in the structure of our society that should be investigated. By listening and focusing on the mothers' stories, the main problem might be identified. The position taken by the media in its disregard over the mothers' stories and keep the fathers from the scene, reflects position of women and men in the structure of hierarchy in the Indonesian society. All the praises and admirations echoed in saying, songs, stories et cetera that seem to position mother higher than life itself is but an empty discourse. Mothers, because they are 'just' women are still in the second place.

### 3. Conclusion

The social control is working through the news that the media create to inform the others "about right and wrong, about the boundaries beyond which one should not venture by publicizing "[t]he gallery of folk types – heroes and saints, as well as fools, villain and devils" " (Cohen 2002, p. 8).<sup>[22]</sup> The larger audiences are warned not to defy the rules and regulations that have been set as the foundation of the Indonesian social structure. The negative reports on the deviance are the attempt for social control exercised by the media that has "long operated as agents of moral indignation in their own right" (ibid., p.7)<sup>[23]</sup>.

'Folk devils', based on Cohen's definition, "was after all, how they appeared to society: as processed authentic lies. But the images and the way they were reacted to were socially created and – without making any metaphysical assumptions about the 'true' reality – we must look for the real social contexts of this creation" (p.149) <sup>[24]</sup>. Based on the definition of folk devils, these women, the mother killers are positioned as the marginalized group, no matter what they do, because they are women. They are not regarded as women per se, but always in relation to their status as mothers or widows that they have to behave accordingly with this status. When they act as a human being and take on actions that defy the social norms that govern them in line with their status, they are punished with the labeling. Men's actions are not related to their status, because their weaknesses are already forgiven and it is taken for granted that it is in men's inherent nature to be weak and irresponsible in their relationships with women as fathers, husbands or lovers. Even though men seemed to be given more liberty of action and are not objects of social control, it is the women who are most feared that they become the objects of the rigid social control.

Why are the women feared? The patriarchal ideology that seems to be unchallenged in its strong grip is but a façade for its vulnerable position. The silencing of the women's voice and the absence of the men as a participating party, says much about the possible transformation that is disturbing the existing structure of the Indonesian society. The attempts for social control would always be exercised on groups of women labeled as folk devils to ensure that the patriarchal system and ideology that lies as the foundation of the Indonesian society goes unchallenged.

### Acknowledgement

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23. ditto
24. ditto

#### Appendix:

##### 1. Ibu (by Iwan Fals)

3  
 Ribuan kilo jalan yang kau tempuh  
 Lewati rintang untuk aku anakmu  
 Ibuku sayang masih terus berjalan  
 Walau tapak kaki penuh darah penuh nanah  
 Seperti udara kasih yang engkau berikan  
 Tak mampu ku membalas .....  
 Ibu ..... ibu .....  
 2  
 from: <http://www.elyrics.net/read/i/iwan-fals-lyrics/ibu-lyrics.html>  
 Ingin kudekap dan menangis dipangkuamu  
 Sampai aku tertidur bagai masa kecil dulu  
 Lalu do'a-do'a baluri sekujur tubuhku  
 Dengan apa membalas .....  
 Ibu ..... ibu .....

##### 2. Bunda (Melly Goeslaw)

Kubuka Album Biru  
 Penuh Debu dan Usang  
 ku Pandangi Semua Gambar Diri  
 Kecil Bersih Belum Ternoda



Pikirkupun Melayang  
Dahulu Penuh Kasih  
Teringat Semua Cerita Orang  
Tentang Riwayatku

Kata Mereka Diriku Slalu Dimanja  
Kata Mereka Diriku Slalu Dtimang

Nada Nada Yang Indah  
Slalu Terurai Darinya  
Tangisan Nakal Dari Bibirku  
Takkan Jadi Deritanya

Tangan Halus dan Suci

Tlah Mengangkat Diri Ini  
Jiwa Raga dan Seluruh Hidup  
Rela Dia Berikan

Oh *Bunda* Ada dan Tiada Dirimu  
Kan Slalu Ada Di Dalam Hatiku

1  
3. Di Doa Ibuku Namaku Disebut  
Di waktu ku masih kecil, gembira dan senang  
Tiada duka kukenal, tak kunjung mengerang  
Di sore hari nan sepi....ibuku bertelut  
Sujud berdoa ku dengar namaku disebut

Di doa ibuku, namaku disebut  
Di doa ibuku ku dengar, ada namaku disebut

Sering ini kukenang, di masa yang berat  
Di kala hidup mendesak dan nyaris ku sesat  
Melintas gambar ibuku, sewaktu bertelut  
Kembali sayup kudengar.... Namaku disebut

Di sore hari nan sepi... ibuku bertelut  
Sujud berdoa ku dengar namaku disebut  
Di doa ibuku, namaku disebut  
Di doa ibuku dengar ada namaku disebut....  
Ada namaku di sebut

Sekarang dia telah pergi ke rumah yang tenang  
Namun kasihnya padaku selalu ku kenang  
Terlintas gambar ibuku sewaktu berteduh  
Kembali sayup kudengar ... namaku disebut..

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