



# JURNAL STUDI GENDER INDONESIA

Constructing Feminist Sexualities  
*AlimatulQibtiyah*

Fenomena Transgender Dalam Pandangan Islam  
*Eni Setyowati*

Kepala Desa Perempuan Di Madura  
(Studi Kasus Faktor Penentu Kemenangan Dan Kepemimpinan Kepala Desa Rahma Di  
Desa Masaran, Kecamatan Banyuates, Kabupaten Sampang)  
*Holilah*

Malala: Pejuang Kesetaraan Pendidikan Kaum Perempuan  
*Nasruddin*

Jalan Panjang Kesetaraan Gender Menuju Pembumih Keadilan:  
Perempuan Muslim dalam Jepitan Fundamentalisme dan Atribut Islam  
*Abd A'la*

Komunikasi Gender Fatayat NU  
[Studi Pada Program Keaksaraan Fungsional di Kabupaten Ngawi]  
*Wahyu ilahi*

"Keluarga Fenomenal":  
Memaksimalkan Peran Ibu Terhadap Keluarga dalam Mengantisipasi Radikalisme  
*Akh. Muzakki*

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# CONSTRUCTING FEMINIST SEXUALITIES

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## Abstract

*Seksualitas adalah salah aspek dalam kehidupan manusia, yang keberadaannya tidak hanya terkait dengan persoalan biologis, tetapi terkait dengan etika, keyakinan, budaya, relasi kekuasaan dan juga hukum. Artikel ini mengulas tentang bagaimana para feminis melakukan konstruksi seksualitasnya. Berdasarkan buku-buku literature yang ada tidak ada satu katagori seksualitas feminis, karena memang sebenarnya di masyarakat ditemukan berbagai macam bentuk feminis. Tetapi yang menjadi benang merah dari semua bentuk feminis terkait dengan seksualitasnya adalah bahwa apapun pilihan orientasi dan prilaku seksualnya harus berdasarkan dari pilihan bebas tanpa ada tekanan maupun ancaman serta keterbukaan untuk mendiskusikannya. Selain itu seorang feminis harus menghormati dan menghargai berbagai macam bentuk dan ekpresi seksual yang terjadi di masyarakat selama itu tidak bertentangan dengan kesetaraan dan kedilan gender. Di masyarakat masih tabu untuk membicarakan seksualitas, sehingga banyak perempuan yang menjadi korban karena ketabuan itu, karena itu para feminis harus banyak melakukan kegiatan yang berorientasi pada anggapan-anggapan negative akan seksualitas.*

**Key:** *feminism, sexuality*

## Introduction

Sexuality is always an interesting topic to discuss because it is a basic part of human culture. Sexuality has always been a significant part of human life. Sexuality has not only been related to reproduction but historically, it has also been prominent in human customs, religions, arts, moralities, and laws. Sexuality is a fundamental aspect of human life, encompassing the physical, psychological, social, emotional, spiritual, cultural, and ethical dimensions of the human experience (Bruess& Greenberg, 1994). This includes sexual development, human creation, sexual differences between males and females, desire, love, sexual expression, masturbation, sexual intimacy, pre-marital and extra-marital sex, sexual orientation, abortion, contraception, circumcision, polygamy, and contemporary marriage.

## Constructing Feminist Sexualities

Talking about sexuality was more taboo in the past than today. Although discussing about sexuality quite open today, sex hierarchy and sexual value system still appear in some cultures. These create the gap between idea of the “good, normal, natural, and blessed sexuality and bad, abnormal, unnatural, and damned sexuality” (p. 281). Rubin Gayle (1984) explains that there are ideological formations about sexuality such as sex is still considered to be a negative, “the fallacy of misplaced scale, the hierarchical valuation of sex acts, the domino theory of sexual peril, and the lack of concept of benign sexual variation” (p. 278).

These value and hierarchical systems of sexuality are different between in the past and today. For example, in the past, sexual behaviors such as masturbation and homosexuality were considered to be dirty and immoral, whereas today, particularly in some countries such as the United States, they are more acceptable. It does not mean that homosexuality and masturbation totally acceptable in the society. Rubin says that we still inherit the morality crusade in the nineteenth-century such as masturbation is unhealthy behavior (p. 268). In Indonesia, those issues are not acceptable by majority community.

Rubin (1984, p. 309) discusses the nature of sex and the political and cultural dimensions of defining its place in society. Within political dimensions, she defines the “charmed circle” of acceptable sexual behaviors as monogamous, procreative, in pairs, etcetera, with the “outer limits” including homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous sex. Rubin concluded that “like gender, sexuality is political. It is organized into systems of power, which reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others.” She stated that even the progressive-minded need to examine their assumptions and recognize the political nature of sexuality.

Feminism and Islam, in terms of the way to achieve equality between men and women, share similar ideas. In early Islamic history, the prophet Muhammad and some women, such as ‘Aisyah and Khadijah, focused on how to give women the same rights, status, and opportunities as men. Muslim women are directly involved in the process of self-naming and identity development by providing an “alternative exegesis of the Qur’an” (Wadud, 2000, p. 3). Thus, feminist movements are actually not something entirely new in the Islamic tradition. However, although the texts clearly state that men and women have the same rights in sexual satisfaction, in Islamic societies there are some misinterpretations of these ideas. Because patriarchal culture has been dominant throughout most of Islamic history, the interpretation of the sexuality texts also remains gender biased. Because of this, Islamic scholars need new

perspectives, including feminists' perspectives to support Islamic values while also supporting women's right to express their sexual needs and desires, and equal rights of sexual satisfaction between men and women in society.

The third wave of feminism is well suited to Islamic culture; it has been described as more pluralistic, realistic, multicultural, less rigid, and less likely to portray men as "the enemy" (Payette, 2002, p. 145). Hollibaugh (1983) asserted that feminists must say what they want based on where they are right now, from the real bodies they live in, and the real desires they feel. This theory could be applied to the Islamic culture because third wave feminists construct their own sexuality based on the culture in which they live.

Feminist scholars believe that the current social construction of sexuality is based on the power men have enjoyed over the centuries. Some sexual aggressions such as rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, pornography, and prostitution are a result of the excesses of patriarchal power (Carroll, 2004). Sexuality education should treat women and men equally and also use research from a feminist perspective, not exclusively from the patriarchal point of view (Klein, 1992). Promoting positive attitudes about sex and getting self-pleasure from good health are important goals of feminism.

### **Constructing Feminist Sexualities**

According to Butler (1993, p. 2), the body, including sexuality can be understood as a reaction to the inadequacies of social constructionism. She criticizes the idea that the body is passive matter and because of this there is no political intervention. She asserts that the body is something produced by regulatory practice, language/discourse, and as agency through the repetition or power of hegemonic norms. I quote from Butler states that there is a "process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface (of the body)" (1993, p.9). The compulsory of the heterosexual norm should be questioned and the diversity of sexual behavior should be recognized.

Every culture and every movement also has different standard to say that certain type of sexual behavior is considered to be good, natural and normal or bad, abnormal and unnatural. These values are also often used to look at the women sexuality. Women in the past were considered to be greatly inferior to men, including their sexual attitudes and behavior. In contrast, men and women are moving toward equality in terms of their sexuality today.

### Constructing Feminist Sexualities

Women's control of their own sexuality has been a key demand of the women's liberation movement since the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and '70s in the USA, including reproductive rights for women. Access to contraception and abortion at this time was difficult and reserved for only those who could afford the high cost. Furthermore, until the 1970s women in many parts of the work force were forced to resign when they married. Women fought hard battles for the right to use the contraceptive pill, choose abortion and be able to control their sexual lives. These freedoms are a precondition for women's participation in further struggles for liberation.

Interestingly, some feminist movements such as the lesbian and radical feminist movements promoted the politicisation of sex and sexuality. Lesbian feminists urge women not to sleep with the "enemy". They claimed that to love to other women included sexual love as well as for intellectual companionship and emotional support" (Lorber, 2001, p. 100). The lesbians' argument about heterosexuality implied power relations. Their experiences of being oppressed had produced them as lesbian feminists. However, many lesbian activists at the time welcomed heterosexual women in their work for women issues (Lorber, 2001, p. 105).

Radical feminists believe that women need to create spaces of their own, free from the dominance of men, and thus rejecting the patriarchy. Female sexuality must be re-envisioned outside of the realm of male patriarchy, but without complete societal segregation. These feminists express that women need "to keep themselves apart from men long enough to learn to defend their desires, especially through speech, to discover the love for other women while sheltered from men's imperious choices that put them in the position of rival commodities, to forge themselves a social status that compels recognition, to earn their living in order to escape from the condition of prostitute...these are certainly indispensable stages in the escape from their proletarianization on the exchange market." (Luce, 1997, pp. 368-369).

Both radical and lesbian feminists have tried to stress that "the personal is political." This slogan could be interpreted in many different ways. It could mean bringing things previously considered personal into political debate. On the other hand, this slogan could mean that in your personal life you must live out your political principles. The lesbian feminist concept of heterosexism has been an important part of the politicisation of relationships.

Therefore, sexuality debates at this time were more about whether or not feminists slept with men. Yet arguments over heterosexuality were most prominent and related to the

place of lesbians within the feminist movement. Lesbians also came to these conclusions from examining their own experiences including their experiences within the feminist movement that heterosexual feminists were not always sympathetic towards their lesbian sisters. Again, both lesbian and radical feminists state that all women must adopt lesbian relationships to make agency for opposing the patriarchal power.

This sexuality debates do not solve the women sexualities totally. There are still many women do not have right of sexual expression even they do not know that they are part of sexual being. Sometimes, they are not interested in sex anymore. They do not know how to find their sexual identity and also sexual pleasure. They only have sex with their husbands although they do not feel like it. Sex is something that makes them bored. This psychological situation could be due to the perception and knowledge of sexuality, and culture. Mostly they do not know the way to increase their desire. Based on situation, third wave feminists try to find and create their own theories of sexuality by giving the information, encouraging women to explore their own sexuality and understand how to fulfill their sexual needs.

Today in third wave feminism, according to Rubin's theory, feminists construct their own sexualities. Like Hollibaugh and Moraga say that "women must create sexual theory in the same way (feminists) created feminist theory" (1983, p.403). Feminists argue that sexuality should be discusses in open way. Women should not hesitate to talk their feeling when "pleasure is realizable and imminently available"...women can explore their own sexuality without wait for "a feminist or any other type of revolution" (Webster, 1984,p. 395). In other words, feminist should break the taboo ideas from women themselves about their own sexuality and encourage them not to be shame or hesitate to talk about their sexuality. As a result they can recognize the availability of their pleasure and understand how to get it.

After getting all negative stigmas or stereotype that feminism is anti-sex, anti-male, and anti-family, the third wave feminism find a new belief that feminism is diverse. Although a woman chooses to become a housewife, enjoys sexy lingerie, get married and has children, and becomes religious she is still feminist. *Jane Sexes it Up* is part of 3rd wave feminist writers that covers subjects ranging from penetration to pornography to gender. Feminists construct sexuality in this book very unique and complex. Today, feminists find the sexual varieties and the sexual dynamic that often ignored and brushed off by the first or second wave feminisms.



## Constructing Feminist Sexualities

Young feminist in *Jane Sexes It Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire* find new belief that feminists have sex in all kinds of ways. They have sex with boyfriends and husbands, as well as other women. Feminists do striptease; feminists like being spanked. The writers in this book speak honestly and reflectively about their pleasures. For example, Smith says that feminists should have new interpretation of “cultural symbols such as phallus” (2002, p.302). She argues that “the postmodern phallus, a phallus unlinked to biological sex. Because of that feminists must pay attention that the phallus has already changed (2002, pp. 308-309). Therefore, every woman is free to choose a dildo for their sexual pleasure because dildo is not a cultural symbol of phallus or power.

Feminist also should do political correctness on sexuality including in desire. Johnson notes, desire is both socially constructed and beyond social construction. Feminist cannot give a judgment to a woman who enjoys submissive in her sexual pleasure. There is no good girl feminist and a bad girl feminist regarding to the exploration of female sexuality. It means that when woman get pleasure from male penetration, it does not mean less feminist or bad feminist (Johnson, 2002, p. 2). The important thing how encourage women say the truth what they feel regarding their sexuality.

Another political correctness that feminists also focus on is the notion of sex-positive, particularly for female’s sexuality. One example of the program reclaiming women’s sexuality is through the performance of “vagina monolog.” This performance changes the negative ideas about female genital to the positive one. This also emphasizes that women should know and understand their own sexuality because in fact most women do not understand their own sexualities. Paradoxically, their partners know more than women themselves.

To change the negative image of sexuality feminists break the taboo on silence of sexuality. They totally devote all their attempts to rediscovery of the clitoris function as a pleasure. To explore and encourage the women awareness of their sexuality, Batty Dodson produced the *Viva La Vulva* video. This great performance not only explains about the wonderful and beautiful of vulva/female genitalia and changes the image of female sexuality positively, but also gives information that women can get their pleasure from their clitoris.

Therefore, whether they are lesbian, heterosexual or others, they should really understand what they want and what they need to get pleasure. This kind of information becomes very important because in fact, most women get difficulty to get orgasm during

intercourse. Therefore, the pleasure/ orgasm during intercourse/masturbation or other types of sexual behavior is something that women can get it. It is not a magic or mysterious. Women will get sexual pleasure easier if they know the knowledge of their own sexuality and think about female sexuality or sexuality in general is normal and healthy. Therefore, being a feminist is not about whether or not one likes sex or is married. Feminism is more about how one must accept herself and her own brand of sexuality, enjoying it, living it, and experiencing in whichever form she chooses.

The independence of female sexuality is part of the goal of feminist movements today (Johnson, 2002, p. 10). There are many types of sexual behaviours and sexual orientations that quite free chosen today. There is no regulation that feminist or/and women should choose one type sexual behaviour or one sexual orientation. Therefore, feminist could be lesbian, heterosexual, or bisexual. Also there are many strategies to get pleasure such as masturbation, intercourse, or others. Again there is no one pattern that feminists must do masturbation to get their own pleasure. The most important thing is they know and realize that their choices are free and independent. Their desires are not forbidden and also no force from others when they express their own sexual feelings. Nestle says that "women should be autonomous and self directed in defining their sexual desire" (1983, p.234).

The third wave feminist is more pluralistic, realistic, multiculturalistic, and less rigid. They use a different approach to reach their goal. For example, in terms of sexuality the younger generation in the third wave feminism state that they are free to choose the types of sexual orientation desire. It is not necessary to become lesbian or heterosexual, but one could be both or neither or another alternative sexual orientation. In the third "wave men are not enemy" (Payette, 2002, p. 145)

Jacob, in *Sexing the Political: A Journal of Third Wave Feminists on Sexuality*, describes the issues of sexuality in third wave feminism are to theorize, satirize, politicize and organize about issues related to sexuality from diverse cultural, sexual, and economic perspectives as mention in table bellow:

Table 1  
The diverse topics of sexuality in the third wave feminism

Gay/les/bi/trans (Queer) issues	Violence Against Women and Sexual Exploitation	Spirituality and Sexuality
Gender Expression	Erotica and Pornography	Sexual Coming of Age
Motherhood	Sex Industry	Female Sexual Rites of Passage
Pregnancy	Prostitution	Menstruation
Breastfeeding	Sexual Empowerment	Body Image and Body
Abortion	Masturbation	Awareness
Adoption	Female Sexual Pleasure	Monogamy
Birth Control	Sexuality and Popular Culture	&Polyamory
Reproductive Technology	Reclaiming Women's Bodies and Sexuality	Plural Marriage
Artificial Insemination	Infertility	Adolescent Women's Sexuality
Sexual and Reproductive Health	Artificial Insemination	Cultural Issues and Sexuality
Childlessness	Class Issues and Sexuality	Sexuality
Same Sex Marriage	disAbility and Sexuality	Virginity
Heterosexual Marriage		Sexuality and Pop Culture
Being Single		
Racism and Sexuality		

Source: A Journal of Third Wave Feminists on Sexualit. Volume One Number Two June, 2001 <http://www.sexingthepolitical.com/2001/>

Another aspect that feminist should recognize is that sexuality including desire is social construct. It means that when women explore their own feeling and decide the type of sexual behaviour or sexual orientation they want, it would be possible that their decisions are influenced by the family, culture, time, race, and expectation where they life. Hollibaugh says that “the idea that sexual variation, that difference, could be the key to analyzing sexuality and desire” (p. 404). Therefore, feminist theories on sexuality must not use a judgment that it is right and it is wrong.

Hollibaugh asserts that feminist must say what their want and set their own term based on where they are right not, from the real bodies they life, and the real desires they feel (1983, p. 408). She further redistributes that “power and knowledge” can be used for feminist and their partner because sometime sexual satisfaction can not deny the involving of power inside. According to Hollibaugh, there four prerequisites for understanding sexuality:

1. The right to discuss openly the shapes and images of our own desires, recognizing how class, race and sexual preference influence the scope of discussion and our conclusions.
2. The right to take sexual risks without also risking our right to a secure place within the feminist community.
3. The need to educate ourselves with the best available information about all aspects of human sexuality and have that material available in our own institutions, bookstores, and community centres.
4. The obligation to use, then go beyond, personal insights and histories to create a body of sexual theories as complex as each one of us. (p. 409)

### **Conclusion**

Finally, in conclusion there is no only one type of feminist sexualities because there are many varieties of feminist movements. But, feminist should construct their own sexualities are based the independence to explore their own sexual expression, the openness to talk about their own sexuality without feeling guilty, shame and dangerous. The assumption that sex is negative should be changed into sex is positive by conducting the diverse programs and producing the varieties performances.

Any kinds of sexual behaviour or sexual orientation women chosen, feminist can not directly give a judgment before understanding other aspects surrounding them. Feminist accept and respect the diversity of sexuality scopes, as long as they give equality for both men and women. Feminist emphasize more to justice and equality men and women (actions) rather than look at people or personal. Therefore, feminist must do a political correctness and sweep out the negative stigma from outside feminist that everyone can be feminist not depend on what kind of sexual orientation they have. In other words, feminist could be lesbians, heterosexuals, or people who have other sexual orientations.

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