

# Narratives of life-maneuvering in reshaping new living space during Covid-19: A case study of women activist in Manggarai Region, Eastern Indonesia

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## Abstract

At different levels, the COVID-19 pandemic affects private living spaces and social communities. The negative impacts affect women since the response models are an interesting and important issue. In Indonesia, the pandemic with its social distancing protocols depressed the daily lives of women activists. Therefore, this study aims to record women activists' life maneuvers narrative in reshaping new living spaces based on a case study in the Manggarai Region, Eastern Indonesia. Furthermore, this study consists of several essential parts; introduction, methodology, findings discussions, and conclusion.

## KEYWORDS

Indonesia, life-maneuvering, Manggarai, pandemic, the COVID-19, women-activist

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The world has been under the threat of the COVID-19 (Yang & Wang, 2020), and in 2020, there was a direct impact on all elements of a local, national, regional, and global society. It has currently caused economic destruction and deaths worldwide (Woolf et al., 2020). One of the evident issues is the response of individuals, families, communities, institutions, and countries in building rapid adjustments to respond to the spread (Zacher & Rudolph, 2020).

In this context, women are seen as one of the social elements that significantly face the direct impacts and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cousins, 2020; McLaren et al., 2020). They are considered or at least assumed to be part (elements) of the world community at serious risk from this pandemic (Gabster et al., 2020). In various activities and responsibilities, women are also challenged to reshape the new living space landscape under the impact and influence of the COVID-19 (Leal Filho et al., 2020).

This study is a narrative of the life-maneuvers conducted by six women activists in the Manggarai Region, Flores, Eastern Indonesia; Flores Island, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. Flores has long been known as a *majority Catholic* island. The Manggarai area has a population of 934,777 people (2016 data, latest data). The population of Catholics is 841,241 people (90.2%). Ruteng Diocese, with its center in the City (the capital of Manggarai Regency), is also known as the largest Catholic Diocese in Indonesia, with a population of almost one million. The Manggarai community is also known as a patriarchal society with “social privilege” owned by men. This is important when combined with the religious context of Manggarai area as a majority Catholic community (Dale, 2015; Steenbrink, 2015; Zurschmitten, 2019).

The category of women activists represents social, humanitarian, religious, and environmental activities at the study location (Dodds & Hess, 2020; Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020). They have a social movement base, including; antihuman trafficking, antiviolenace against women and children, young people's socio-political participation, the humanitarian movement for orphaned children, supporting environmental sustainability, and strengthening “social-preneurship” among young people. Thus, this narrative refers to the initiatives action and intervention conducted by women activists before and during the COVID-19 to restructure their new living space (Bao, 2020; Martinez Dy & Jayawarna, 2020).

Three crucial questions are raised to explore and elaborate on the “life-maneuvering” complexities of women activists in Manggarai, Indonesia, during the COVID-19 (Al-Ali, 2020; Pleyers, 2020). They depart from the contemporary discourse on the women's position in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. *First*, how to reflect and compare their lives as social activists in the phases before and during the COVID-19 pandemic? (Chang, 2020). *Second*, how are the maneuvers conducted and innovations made in reshaping the new living landscape? (Alon et al., 2020). *Third*, how they see religion (spirituality) concerning positions and maneuvers in reshaping the landscape of new living spaces during the pandemic? (Walsh, 2020).

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 | Method of data collection

In finding answers and narratives of “life-maneuvering” from the respondent as women activists, a qualitative approach was selected and applied as a method in this study (Conversano et al., 2020; Safdar & Yasmin, 2020). This method aims to reach the depth of information and understanding from the informants on the central issue. Furthermore, this approach is also supported by using the digital ethnography method, especially to trace digital information related to the respondent's scope of social attention and humanitarian activities (Rhodes et al., 2020).

The information collection was conducted by in-depth face-to-face structure and unstructured interviews and observation, while the data collection process was conducted for three months (July–September 2020). As previously informed, interviews were conducted with six key informants. Their ages ranged from 22 to 48 years, and the six informants, one was a Catholic nun, three were housewives, and two were unmarried.

The interview recording process was conducted through digital recording (*cellphone*) or recording by note-taking. The technique of collecting information through direct, in-depth interviews was also supported by data collection through digital ethnography. The two techniques used are tracking local media news related to the respondent activity (*Google-keep*) and through social media (*Facebook*) as well as the respondent's affiliate community (Roy & Uekusa, 2020).

### 2.2 | Justification and limitation

The COVID-19 pandemic is radically and rapidly changing the landscape of global social life (Stephens et al., 2020). Women also face the same condition. Many observations and studies show women's situation in various cases but

with the same issues regarding the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic for their lives (Power, 2020). As its purpose, this research is a provocative micro-observational research of Indonesian women's experiences to understand the changing and shifting social landscape and living space during and after the pandemic.

This study also contributes new information about the significance of the women's position amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Three main contributions are expected as a result of conducting this research: (1) a better understanding of how women activists perceive the pandemic experience; (2) a more comprehensive examination of the maneuvers of women activists in reshaping living spaces during the pandemic; (3) pragmatic framework that gave humanitarian workers in general and women activists, in particular, a new lens to place their efforts in social and humanitarian initiatives during the pandemic.

However, this study has limitations, especially concerning the following points. There is very little research on the relationship between women activists and social change in a pandemic context. In terms of scope, this particular study also has limitations in terms of research duration from previous scholars. This study also has a limitation, especially regarding the primary data collection process under social distancing (Lobe et al., 2020).

### 3 | DISCUSSION ABOUT THE THREE ASPECTS OF LIFE-MANEUVERING

The COVID-19 is considered a "boundary situation" of life (Mesbahian, 2020; Štivić, 2020). However, for a social and humanitarian worker and activist, it is an opportunity to clear commitments and find new strategies in activities for humanity. Women activists have their perspective in monitoring this pandemic since it provided a new context in reshaping the landscape of new daily living spaces (Castillo-Chavez et al., 2015; Lynteris, 2016; Qualls et al., 2017).

#### 3.1 | The understanding of pandemic and its impacts

The COVID-19 presents a unique situation since women activist's identities are closely linked to social mobility and face drastically crucial challenges. There were striking—and they narrated the COVID-19 pandemic as a multifacet reality. Therefore, the suffering experience under the threat of a pandemic always appears in many perspectives. There is no single perspective that can be used to narrate this experience.

These perspectives directly influence the mechanisms of self-maneuvering of women activists (Masiero et al., 2020; Trzebiński et al., 2020) even though the COVID-19 pandemic has been experienced and interpreted differently from various perspectives. Generally, there are two opposing perspectives in conducting this interpretation. Conversely, this pandemic has generated a pessimistic attitude and is evident as a source of difficulty and distress. However, it has revived optimism to re-examine the vocation of souls as activists and humanitarian workers (Akesson et al., 2020; Jovančević & Miliević, 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2020).

The informants understood the pandemic as momentum to "return and look inside themselves" and rethink social struggles as activists for the environment. The pandemic is seen as an important time for relearning. During this reflection period, the informant obtained the truth concerning commitment to humanity, and environmental sustainability would undoubtedly go beyond the "suffering" caused by the pandemic. Furthermore, the informants agreed with the same view that COVID-19 is a source of suffering for humans (Lal et al., 2020). However, they also emphasized that the experience is nothing new for women activists. They are always faced with stories of suffering from different people.

The pandemic has caused pressures, especially how the informants negotiated their status and identity as activists that are struggling with large social spaces (public spaces) as well as the living system of families, religious communities, monasteries, and congregation (domestic space) (Xiong et al., 2020). Women activists always feel an inner movement that urges them to move outside to help vulnerable families and social communities during the pandemic. Similarly, they are also required to pay attention to their families and their own lives.

As activists, all informants understood that social struggles and humanitarian action only changed in format, strategy, and challenges but not in substance (Krieger, 2020; Ventura-Alfaro, 2020). Furthermore, it demands social involvement from sources as social, humanitarian, and environmental activists. A pandemic can be considered an interruption of the history of the informants' social and humanitarian struggle. For them, it has "suppressed" (limited) their social mobility and presents another side in interpreting the fundamentals and main options of social struggle for humanity and the sustainability of life.

### 3.2 | Initiating and outlining new strategies

The COVID-19 demands informants not only to reflect on the "inner disposition" of social struggles but to rethink the new pathway of their social struggles (Pillay & Barnes, 2020). For them, a pandemic is a time to discover personal abilities in greater detail. It is also a time to learn more new things that are not important to their lives (Ahmad et al., 2020). The informants presented "narratives from the life maneuvering" amid this pandemic, and these things stated in this study.

New insights about life significantly influence the self-maneuvering of informants. The initial phase, which determines substantially, is to find and formulate new creative ideas in social movements. New and innovative ideas are considered as one of the essential steps in starting the change process. It determines these informants' success in forming alternative and adaptive mediums of their social activities and struggles (Ratten, 2020). For example, one informant narrated how the passion of social struggle as a "young" female activist utilizes innovation and creativity in social actions (Van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016). The social spirit in youngsters multiplies during the pandemic due to social injustice in society. Furthermore, the social struggle is focused on personal interest and self-development, which has rapidly become a tool to save lives during the pandemic (Kickbusch et al., 2020).

The self-maneuvering conducted by these informants moves in two points (domains) (Gibbs, 2020; Ward, 2020). First, they maneuvered in domestic affairs and struggled to sustain their own families and communities through various activities. For example, one of the informants, a Catholic Sister and leader of the "safe house" in Labuan Bajo, initiated a "household economy" to support the sustainability of community struggles for humanity. All members of the safe house are women that experience violence. Second, the informants maneuvered in the social realm and built a solidarity network with other social elements. Several new elements may be mentioned, including media, donors, and volunteers. One of the informants used a platform from an online activity called "ute dite" (local language means *our vegetables*) as a tool to trigger social change. Through this business platform, they fought against unfair market mechanisms, controlled by middlemen, and involved all men (a reflection of patriarchy).

The maneuver of life appears in building a new movement base under the existing conditions and has a more social perspective (wider reach). A new life strategy is also initiated by conducting a life transformation (Donovan, 2016; Saár, 2007). Furthermore, new mediums of activity (platforms of movement) are part of the strategy to reshape landscapes of new living spaces during the pandemic. Through these new platforms, resource persons "succeeded" in exploring the social and humanitarian concerns of social elements that were not interested in actions for humanity and the environment during the prepandemic period. One of the informants told about the involvement of young people groups in the antihuman trafficking movement—as a different situation compared to before the pandemic.

The maneuvers conducted by the speakers also require several prerequisites since the pandemic reinforces another truth that humanitarian action is determined by several things, including networks, social relations, and communication (digital media). The intensification of social network capital and the extension of other network aspects have determined the process of "reshaping space" and the new normal of the COVID-19. During and after a pandemic time, the informant agreed that social networks and digital media are potential assets for the prohumanitarian movement (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2020).

### 3.3 | Spiritualizing social and humanitarian action

In the narrative of these informants, religion and pandemic are important issues. As a Catholic majority, the question concerning the influence of faith in the whole process of maneuvering from these informants is fundamental. They agreed on the spiritualizing process of humanitarian and environmental actions as part of the pandemic's cell-maneuvering. Several perspectives on the religious position and status in the context of the informant's life narrative as social and humanitarian activists can be stated as follows (DeFranza et al., 2020).

First, informants did not talk much about the "institutional" religion during the interview since it is an important institution for most people in the research location. However, a few also agreed that it is not the most popular institution. Therefore, it has not shown a prominent role in supporting women's movement for change during this pandemic.

Second, although "institutional" religion was not discussed much during the interview, the commitment of the informants as activists may not be separated from the internalization of religious values (spirituality) (Ribeiro et al., 2020). Generally, the pandemic is also a critical phase to clear up the dialectical-constructive relationship between spirituality and the responsibility for humanity and the environment. This is because human activists may design new strategies to reshape the landscape of living space following their spirituality level. They understand that their involvement in a humanitarian intervention during a pandemic is the pinnacle of spirituality.

Third, the informants' maneuvers through prohumanitarian and environmental movements gave a new understanding of the way of religion. Religion experienced a transformation from mere ritualism to social piety and should not be stopped in itself. People should contain religion and need to discover the benefits of living as a religious person during a pandemic. Concerning religiosity, it needs to be more responsive to women, social, and humanitarian movements since there are no progressive steps in this aspect (Kranz et al., 2020).

## 4 | CONCLUSION

In this study, informants may not fully represent the central issues surrounding cell-maneuvering during the pandemic. Interview recording is not optimal when using a phone recording. Furthermore, the approaches and techniques of digital ethnography have not been explored much. A few digital ethnography tools were used, such as *Google-keep* and media tracking (only using Facebook) of the informant's activities.

The informants sometimes showed an attitude of "barrier" when discussing religion's role, although not significantly disturbing. The elaboration of the "religious" aspect in response to the pandemic is an essential issue for future studies.

There is a lot of exciting information obtained from the informants, especially their experience and design transformation (change) for the communities—and the impact on a larger scale (outside themselves and their families).

However, in its limitations, this study provides valuable information regarding Indonesian women's position during the COVID-19. It also offers a new meaning from a gender perspective and constructive practical implications regarding models and responses to future crises. For future studies, besides adding more samples, a comparative study between different communities of women in the pandemic context might enrich a discourse about women, living space, and the pandemic.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available in article supplementary material. The data that supports the findings of this study are available in the supplementary material of this article: Akesson, J., Ashworth-Hayes, S., Hahn, R., Metcalfe, R. D., & Rasooly, I. (2020). *Fatalism, Beliefs, and Behaviors During the COVID-19 Pandemic* (no. w27245). National Bureau of Economic Research.

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