

Film as Medium for Struggling (Social Activism of Indonesian Women Film Producers in Post-Reformation Era)

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Abstract

This study analyzes the role of women film producers in Indonesia post-reformation in utilizing film as a medium for social activism, both directly and indirectly. This study examines how Indonesian women film producers create social impact by producing films that address social, educational, and human rights issues, using the impact dimension theory popularized by Diana Barrett and Sheila Leddy. Through a qualitative approach with literature review methods, this research identifies narrative strategies, themes from the films they explore, and the potential impact of their works on driving social change. This research provides a new perspective on the role of women producers in constructing narratives and influencing the impact of their films. The results reveal that films play several important roles: through compelling stories, films can touch emotions; awareness to raise information and stimulate discussion; dimensions engagement to create real interaction from the audience; then the stronger movement which inspires new institutional practices; and ultimately occurs social change, to encouraging tangible action. This is all due to the role of women producers, who are not only have function in technical and financial, but also artistic and social activists who bring new perspectives, promote inclusivity, and empower communities.

Keywords: Women Producers, Social Activism, Indonesian Films

INTRODUCTION

Film have an important role in daily life. Besides being a form of entertainment and education, film is also crucial for social change. Moreover, film contains educational and social control values and presents messages widely (Chandra et al., 2021). As a result, film has a significant impact on its audience, such as a change in attitude (Kubrak, 2020). The presence of film as an artistic medium is also able to convey messages to provide information and change the actions of the audience in soft selling ways without any coercion. This is because the two elements of the film, namely the narrative element and the cinematic element (mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing and sound) are able to interact with each other to provide a complete understanding of a film (Pratista, 2025). Ultimately, film has the power to be a massive medium for social activism, bringing social issues to light, criticizing injustice, and educating the public. This is what gives film its power as a shaper of mass culture (McQuail, 1992).

The strategic role of film in conveying these social, educational, and cultural messages found its momentum in the development of Indonesian cinema post-reformation. The freedom of expression that emerged after the collapse of the new order regime provided greater space for filmmakers to utilize the narrative and cinematic power of film as a medium for social critique, strengthening identity, and disseminating ideas. Thus, film's power as an agent of change is not merely theoretical, but also tangible in the dynamics of the industry and the works produced after the reforms.

Post-reformation marked a significant era in the history of Indonesian cinema, as it signaled a revival after a long period of dormancy. During this time, new filmmakers emerged, such as Mira Lesmana, Riri Riza, and Nia Dinata, who brought a fresh perspective and expanded the range of themes in national films. Indonesian cinema became increasingly diverse, no longer dominated

solely by men. It began to have diversity by the presence of women filmmakers who contributed new perspectives and enriched the narratives shown on the big screen.

The presence of women in various roles within the film industry as screenwriters, directors, cinematographers, and in producerial positions helps create equality in film production, allowing women to hold positions equal to men (Mumtaz et al., 2024) in the narratives and story ideas presented. This includes producing more inclusive narratives, improving the systemic quality of existing filmmaking practices, and encouraging social change in addressing contemporary issues (Jansson et al., 2021). In particular, women as film producers have greater control over funding, the creative process, and how a film will be distributed. This is because the depiction of women in film depends on the production team working behind the scenes (Kunsey, 2019).

The strength of women as generally portrayed in film emerges through various prominent roles. For instance, Disney has played a part in changing how society views gender (Mo Xu, 2021), with characters like Mulan as a warrior who needs no male companion, Belle who is depicted as intelligent and willing to sacrifice, and Moana as a leader and protector of her people. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the strength of characters is reflected in various representations, such as fighting sexual violence, seen in Sur from the film *Photocopier* (Awwalin and Jati, 2025), and the character Yuni, who has the courage to make her own life choices and stand by them (Dzulfikar, 2023).

In this context, the role of the producer becomes crucial, as they are the ones who can turn a film from a mere work of entertainment into a meaningful arena for struggle. A producer is required to possess the skills of a skilled negotiator capable of bridging various interests, from the funding party to the creative team. Furthermore, the producer is actively involved in script development, casting actors who align with the story's vision, and ensuring that every stage of production runs according to plan from preproduction, production, and post-production. Furthermore, the producer also holds the reins of distribution and promotional strategies to ensure the film reaches a wide audience while conveying its intended message. With such complex responsibilities, producers can be considered as key figures who ensure a film is created not only with artistic quality but also with a powerful capacity for social change (Kachka, 2021).

Previous research has extensively examined how post-reformation films are portrayed, such as analyzing the narrative and character representation shown, as well as the role of the director and women characters in the film to analyze and explain the perspective, subjectivity and imagery constructed. Therefore, this study seeks to fill the gap regarding the role of women producers, who mobilize funds to create a space for struggle in films, and to analyze the role of women producers in shaping narratives of women's struggles. This aligns with the goal of social activism to bring about change in society (Pitopili, 2024).

This study aims to provide a new perspective on social activism brought by women producers through film and to broaden the meaning of the producer's role in Indonesian film. This is because social activism can manifest itself in coordinated movements to support a cause, creating an impact on various issues such as gender equality, diversity, environmental and social issues, and governance (Siedschlag, 2024).

THEORY

This research will utilize the impact dimension theory popularized by Diana Barrett and Sheila Leddy. According to this theory, there are five key points (dimensions) used to analyze the extent of a film producer's role in their efforts to effect social change (Barrett & Leddy, 2008). The following is a breakdown:



Figure 1. Dimension of Impact Theory (Barrett & Leddy, 2008)

The first point is the quality of a film, this aspect emphasizes the importance of a strong story (compelling story) as the primary foundation for reaching the public. The quality of a solid film story will determine the extent to which a film can reach its audience and gain public recognition. The success of an engaging story can be measured through various indicators, such as its reception and awards at film festivals, theatrical release, and broadcast on television or the internet.

The second point highlights the importance of awareness as a crucial foundation for individual and social change. The level of success in building awareness can be measured through the diversity and response of audiences and media coverage. In other words, the wider, more diverse, and more widely exposed a film is, the greater its potential impact in driving social change.

The third point explains engagement to reflects changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behavior, as well as a shift from mere awareness to individual action. The level of engagement can be measured through audience participation or response to facilitated dialogue, social media activity, tangible action campaigns, and even public opinion or letters of response. Thus, engagement shows the extent to which the audience not only understands the issue, but is also actively involved in supporting and taking action.

The fourth point is stronger movement. This shows evidence that a film or media can drive individuals toward collective action and strengthen the capacity of advocacy organizations in their strategic work. This can be seen in the number of advocacy organizations using film, collaboration between organizations, audience engagement in the movement, film screenings with policymakers, and mentions in policy discussions and legislative media. This reflects the film's role as a crucial instrument in strengthening social movements and advocacy.

The fifth point is social change, the ultimate goal of film utilization. This change can be realized through policy or legislative transformations at the international, national, and local levels, changes in individual and group behavior, and shifts in public discourse. Thus, film serves as a strategic instrument that not only inspires awareness but also encourages concrete action, resulting in sustainable social impact.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a literature study approach to obtain various data and understand the social activism carried out by women producers in Indonesia post-reformation films. It is hoped that the research issues can be explored to gain more detailed understanding of the problems studied (Creswell, 2019). Meanwhile, the type of research used is descriptive to provide a direct explanation of what is being researched (Conny, 2010). Data for this

research was obtained from both primary sources, such as books and academic articles, and secondary sources, including news reports.

The first stage involves selecting films based on relevant criteria, namely from women producers in the Indonesia post-reformation era. This is followed by a literature search using keywords such as "women producers," "post-reformation films," and "women producers and activism in film," in a combination of Indonesian and English language. The literature was obtained from academic digital databases, such as Google Scholar, and was supported by publicly accessible published interviews with relevant filmmakers.

The findings from the literature will be subjected to a qualitative thematic analysis through a careful examination to identify factors such as the motivation of women producers, the types of social issues addressed in the films, production and distribution strategies, and their impact on the public. Thematic analysis facilitates the identification and exploration of patterns in the relevant data, organizing emerging themes to provide an in-depth understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To maintain the credibility and validity of the findings, the selected literature will be limited to works that discuss women producers and social activism through film, while less relevant works will be excluded. Additionally, the researcher will reflect on the data to avoid the possibility of publication bias. The results of the review will be presented in the form of a synoptic literature review.

This article analyzes several women producers in the post-reform era, such as Mira Lesmana, Yulia Evina Bhara, and Lola Amaria. These women producers were chosen because they were active in producing films that address social, political, and environmental issues following the political landscape changes that fostered freedom of expression in the post-reformation era. Thus, the presence of these women producers in Indonesian cinema means they are not only production figures (involved in funding, distribution, and selecting film themes) but can also act as cultural agents who change the representation of women in film and bring up social issues to shift public perspectives.

DISCUSSION

Mira Lesmana and Her Educational Film, *Laskar Pelangi*.

One of woman producer who has consistently produced work to this day is Mira Lesmana. She is known as a key figure in reviving the Indonesian film industry after a long period of decline. Through her production house, Miles Films, she has produced many works that address social themes, including educational issues that are close to people's lives. *Laskar Pelangi* is a film she produced with director Riri Riza, adapting Andrea Hirata's novel. The film tells the story of the struggles of children in Belitung who attend Muhammadiyah Elementary School, a small school on the verge of closure due to a lack of students. They struggle to achieve their dreams amidst economic constraints, facing various challenges with a spirit of friendship, optimism, and the belief that education can change their lives.

Laskar Pelangi was released in Indonesian cinemas in 2008 and attracted over 4.7 million viewers (filmindonesia.or.id). This achievement was one of the most brilliant of its time, as it managed to attract widespread public attention and demonstrate the enormous potential of national film. Given its success and widespread acceptance, it is important to examine how *Laskar Pelangi* emerged not only as a spectacle, but also as a social phenomenon that had a real impact on society.

Laskar Pelangi brought a significant social impact, particularly in empowering the economy of the Belitung community. Its presence established a new identity that fostered residents' self-confidence, with the community proudly calling themselves "*Laskar Pelangi*". The "*Laskar Pelangi*" identity has become increasingly ingrained, making Belitung known as the "*Land of the Laskar Pelangi*," reflected in the use of the name and slogan in various community efforts, public attributes, and even local government program campaigns (Sofia, 2015). The popularity of the novel and film, which successfully introduced Belitung to the national and international levels, also boosted the development of the tourism sector. The local government has become increasingly serious about managing local tourism potential, with Belitung's tourism sector experiencing a 1,800 percent increase within a year of the film's release (Badan Ekonomi Kreatif, 2017).

Apart from the economic sector, *Laskar Pelangi* also had a positive impact on education. The story of Ikal and his friends' struggles has inspired the people of Belitung to increasingly believe that higher education is a crucial path to changing their destiny. This awareness has encouraged the community to focus on improving the quality of human resources so that Belitung can develop better in the future. The influx of tourists following the film's popularity has further encouraged the local community to remain active by preparing a competitive generation, one way being through pursuing higher education, even beyond the region (Sofia, 2015).

Ultimately, Mira Lesmana, through the films she produced, indirectly succeeded in bringing about social change in a region by empowering the community and making them aware of the importance of education. Therefore, in terms of impact dimension analysis, *Laskar Pelangi* can be said to have successfully passed all stages of compelling story until social change, and serve as a concrete example of how film can serve as a tool for social change.

Yulia Evina Bhara and Her Films with Social, Political and Humanity Themes.

Yulia Evina Bhara is a producer and founder of KawanKawan Media, known for consistently presenting works based on humanity, social, and political issues, particularly those rooted in past events. Her courage in addressing often-overlooked historical themes has made her a key figure in the development of post-reformation Indonesian cinema.

This paper will focus on one of her produced works, the documentary film *You and I*, directed by Fanny Chotimah. The film represents how Yulia Evina Bhara functions not only as a producer but also as a figure committed to championing narratives about human experiences, especially those often marginalized in historical records and public discourse.

You and I tells the story of the friendship between Kaminah and Kusdalini, which began behind prison bars. During the political conflict of 1965, both were arrested without trial. Since then, they have been inseparable for over five decades. Amidst the ups and downs of life, the two display a warm embrace of aging, along with all its attendant consequences (Source: KawanKawan Media).

You and I film project originated from a photo book by Adrian Mulya, which inspired Fanny Chotimah to adapt it into a film. In the process, Fanny collaborated with Yulia Evina Bhara, who served as the producer. From the start, the film received funding support from sources including the DMZ Doc Fund 2017 and the Akatara Forum held by BEKRAF in 2018. In the same year, the project also secured a production partnership with the Super 8mm Studio Foundation. Upon completion, the film began its journey through various international festivals, bringing its central

issues to a broader public. At these events, *You and I* won the Asian Perspective Award at the DMZ International Documentary Film Festival in South Korea and was also honored with the Citra Award for Best Feature-Length Documentary at the Festival Film Indonesia 2020. These festivals served as a crucial medium, connecting the film with audiences both nationally and internationally.

After receiving appreciation at various festivals, this film was officially released to the Indonesian public through the Bioskop Online platform on April 9, 2021. According to Fanny Chotimah in an interview with In-Docs, one of the main goals of making this film was for it to be appreciated by a wide audience. For him, a film becomes meaningful when it can be read and viewed from multiple perspectives.

Based on the author's research, after the premiere at Bioskop Online, *You and I* was also screened independently in various communities. These screenings sparked public discussions that extended the film's humanitarian discourse. Reviews and news reports in various media outlets also widely discussed the film. This aligns with the filmmakers' goal to keep the issue alive and discussed.

Regarding the dimensions of the impact of this film, the author analyzes that Yulia Evina Bhara and Fanny Chotimah in this film have succeeded in reaching the stage of engagement with a significant impact on public awareness and community engagement in conversations about past human rights violations. Quoting Fanny Chotimah's statement in an interview with In-Docs, not all films are capable of directly bringing about social or policy change. The issue of past human rights violations has been widely addressed in films, but has not yet been resolved in the social or legal sphere. In response, she emphasized that the burden of social change cannot be placed on films alone; collective work beyond films and the involvement of many parties are needed to truly resolve the problem. Nevertheless, the filmmakers of *You and I* hopes that the film can foster empathy and solidarity in society. As more people align themselves with humanitarian values, it is hoped that stronger pressure will emerge to create just and permanent policies

Lola Amaria and the *Film Pesantren*

Lola Amaria is an Indonesian actress, director, and film producer. She is known not only as an actress but also as a filmmaker who consistently addresses social, political, and humanity issues. Through Lola Amaria Production, she distributes independent and documentary films, often presenting a critical perspective on social realities. This article will focus on one of the films she distributed, the documentary "*Pesantren*."

Directed by Shalahuddin Siregar, *Pesantren*, tells the story of the lives of students at the Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy Islamic Boarding School in Cirebon, West Java, focusing on the daily lives of two students and a young teacher. Through this approach, the film seeks to dismantle the negative stigma associated with Islamic boarding schools, which are often associated with radicalism and terrorism.

In terms of production, the film received international support from the early stages of development, including from In-Docs, Steps International, Talents Tokyo, and two global broadcasters, NHK and Al Jazeera Documentary Channel (Ningrum, 2022). This support indicates recognition of the significance of the theme raised.

Lola Amaria plays a key role in the distribution of documentary film *Pesantren* in his capacity as Associate Producer. Initially, the film was only distributed in a limited scope through community screenings, campus screenings, and international festivals. Until 2022 and 2023,

Pesantren Films was given the opportunity to be screened in a number of Indonesian cinemas with limited screenings. Lola Amaria's efforts to expand the film's reach signal a distribution strategy that is not only commercially oriented but also carries a cultural advocacy mission.

Various cities selected for limited screenings include Yogyakarta, Bandung, Semarang, Surabaya, and Malang (*Film Pesantren*, 2023). This is not simply a technical choice. The selection is closely related to these cities' position as centers of intellectual, cultural, and film community activity, thus enabling the creation of a broader public dialogue on the theme of Islamic boarding schools.

Interestingly, according to an official post on the *Pesantren* film's Instagram account, all profits from ticket sales were donated back to the Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy Islamic boarding school in Cirebon, West Java, as well as to the individuals featured in the film. This move not only demonstrates a social commitment but also affirms the position of a documentary as a medium capable of building a reciprocal relationship between a film, its subjects, and the audience.

Apart from relying on cinema distribution channels, Lola Amaria also took a community distribution approach by screening this film directly in ten Islamic boarding schools on the island of Java (Saputra, 2022). This strategy makes the *Pesantren* film brings the film closer to its primary audience, both its subject and audience. Through this direct interaction, the film is treated not only as entertainment but also as a medium for dialogue, raising awareness and opening up discussion. The positive response from Islamic boarding schools further strengthens the film's position as an effort to correct public perception and represent Islamic boarding schools in a more just and humane manner.

As a Documentary Film, *Pesantren* directed by Shalahuddin Siregar's work, with distribution support from Lola Amaria, can be analyzed through five dimensions of the film's social impact. First, in terms of its compelling story, the film successfully presents an alternative narrative that breaks down the negative stigma of Islamic boarding schools, which are often associated with radicalism, while also showcasing the humanistic side of the lives of students. Second, in terms of bring awareness, screenings in various intellectual and cultural hubs such as Yogyakarta, Bandung, Semarang, Surabaya, and Malang have encouraged a broader discussion about the meaning of Islamic boarding schools in contemporary Indonesian society. Third, regarding changes in individual and group behavior, or engagement, this film provides an opportunity for the Islamic boarding school community itself to see itself fairly represented, thus fostering pride in identity and critical awareness among students and the general public. Fourth, from a policy or institutional initiative perspective (stronger movement), the distribution step that returns ticket profits to the Kebon Jambu Al-Islamy Islamic Boarding School demonstrates a film distribution model that favors the community, so that it can inspire the practice of documentary film distribution governance in Indonesia. Fifth, regarding social change, the community distribution strategy that screens the film directly to ten Islamic boarding schools in Java makes film a medium of dialogue that strengthens the relationship between filmmakers, subjects, and audiences, thereby shifting the public's perspective on Islamic boarding schools to be more inclusive.

CONCLUSION

Based on the description above, it can be concluded that the three female producers, Mira Lesmana, Yulia Evina Bhara, and Lola Amaria, demonstrate how film can have more than just

entertainment. Mira Lesmana, through *Laskar Pelangi* shows that popular fiction films can have a real social and economic impact, from shaping the cultural identity of the Belitung people to boosting the tourism sector and raising awareness of the importance of education. Yulia Evina Bhara through *You and I* emphasizes the role of documentary films in preserving collective memory, presenting alternative narratives about history, and creating space for public empathy and solidarity regarding past human rights violations. Meanwhile, Lola Amaria, with the distribution of *Pesantren*, demonstrates a documentary film distribution strategy that favors the community, while also encouraging social dialogue and breaking down the negative stigma against Islamic boarding schools.

Thus, this analysis shows the role of films in bringing social impact: from the dimension *compelling story* that touches emotions, dimensions *awareness* which sparks discussion, dimensions *engagement* which builds engagement, *stronger movement* which inspires new institutional practices, to real social *change* in public. This demonstrates that by focusing on educational, social, political, and humanitarian issues, film can be an effective tool for transformation. In this context, film is not only a work of art, but also an instrument of social change, capable of bridging ideas, building awareness, and moving society toward a more inclusive and empowered future.

The role of the producer in film as a space of struggle is not only as a technical expert and financial manager, but also as an artistic and social activist to describe the struggle of life by the power of production and powerful narrative. Meanwhile, the role of women producers in raising social issues is they have a sensitivity to topics that are considered inclusive and rarely exposed. They also can bring deeper visual and stronger narratives portrayal, provide new perspectives to the public and build participation to make social change according to the topics raised in their films.

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