

The Girl Child and Indonesian Television

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Sinetrons or drama series are reportedly the most frequently watched television programme in Indonesia. Adopting a telenovela format, their storylines typically revolve around the theme of complicated family drama and love triangles. At the centre of the turbulent romance and family intrigues is the main character, usually a young girl who faces multiple hardships before she finally attains happiness.

The most popular *sinetron* actresses in Indonesia today range from 14 to 18 years old, whom in the UN standard and Indonesian laws are considered as children. The girl child is therefore at the centre of the Indonesian electronic media discourse. With its pervasiveness in the local entertainment culture, *sinetrons'* representations of the girl child would strongly shape public perceptions of the girl child in Indonesia. Unfortunately, these representations have not been particularly positive.

The central character of any *sinetron* is typically a beautiful young girl who is kind-hearted, quiet, humble, and often religious. Despite the hardship in her 'life', the storyline portrays her as never harboring ill feelings towards those who have mistreated her. As she continues to endure her abuse in silence and tears, viewers are implicitly reminded that "good" girls should possess the virtues of being *sabar* (patient) and *pasrah* (submission or resignation) to their fate, while holding on to the belief that God will reward the virtuous. The moral of the story is consistent: that goodness would prevail over evil in the end, and good girls should patiently wait.

Portraying girls as weak, passive and subjected to abuse is disempowering and perpetuates the stereotypes of girls as the weaker sex in Asian societies. In many *sinetrons*, there are minimal, if at all, hints of the girl's initiative, strength or ability to defend herself. Instead, the girls are usually defended by the male lead which, again, perpetuates the male stereotype of masculine heroism. Most *sinetrons* portray the male characters as successful young professionals who fall in love with the female characters from lower class background. On the contrary, the girls are usually cast as belonging to the underclass of society, such as beggars, street peddlers, domestic workers, office cleaners, etc., who later becomes instantly successful through chance meeting with these powerful men.

Such portrayals are meant to reflect the social reality of Indonesians, the majority of which lives below the poverty line. However, the almost consistent portrayal of girls as weak—both in the physical and socioeconomic sense, as opposed to the more powerful men, is stereotypical. The girls' characters become "successful" not through their own hard work but through the men's interference in their lives. Such on-screen roles and characteristics that make girls dependent on men indicates a very subtle, yet pervasive, differential gender treatment and perception which forms the basis of discrimination.

Admittedly, recent *sinetrons* have somewhat varied their portrayals of the girl child by showing more lively, exuberant, independent and carefree girls. The morale of the story has shifted somewhat: that optimism could overcome hardship although values like kindness and honesty continue to be underscored. The girls are shown to be braver in speaking out and fighting (both figuratively and literally) for justice and their rights, competing and excelling with boys in school, play or work.

However, these main characters are usually younger in age, between 8 to 15 years of age, where their antics and enthusiasm are attributable to their childish naivety and

innocence. Upon reaching late teenage years, their spiritedness and strength to fight for their rights seem to mellow down as their on-screen characters become more demure with age. This is a regression in the portrayal of the girl child, pushing forth the message that she could and should be brave and competitive against boys. However, as she enters young adulthood, she should become more submissive.

The inconsistent portrayal of women and the desirable traits they must possess does little in alleviating the discrimination against women as a whole in Indonesia. Despite the overt efforts at the national and grassroots levels to fight discrimination against the girl child, the media portrayal of girls through *sinetrons* undermines these by perpetuating the message that girls should be subservient. The media, moreover, passively resigns her fate in the patriarchal society.

The media is a pervasive force in society, especially in urban Indonesia, and the discourse it advances would shape a nation's worldview. By portraying girls and women as generally weak and helpless, Indonesia has a long way to go to actualize its pledge to eliminate discrimination and exploitation against the girl child and women.