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Gendered Lenses: Women in the News Photography of the 2019 Riau Forest Fires

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the visual representation of women in the news photography of the *Riau Pos* during the 2019 forest fires, addressing a gap in disaster media research on gendered imagery in Indonesia. Although environmental crises have received scholarly attention, the depiction of women in regional Indonesian newspapers remains underexplored. Using a qualitative methodology that combines visual semiotic analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis, the study explores how women are portrayed across four thematic roles: responders, victims, activists, and religious participants. Our findings demonstrate that while women are increasingly visible in disaster news, their portrayal is consistently shaped by traditional gender norms. Images that suggest female agency are frequently accompanied by captions or articles

that reframe this visibility within roles of caregiving, motherhood, or moral virtue. Even in politicized or public contexts, women's participation is legitimized only when aligned with culturally sanctioned femininity. As a result, their presence is symbolically acknowledged but not discursively empowered. By situating these localized visual practices within broader frameworks of representation and gender discourse, this study advances research in disaster communication, feminist media studies, and Indonesian journalism. It underscores the importance of analyzing how visual media not only reflects, but actively constructs socio-political boundaries of gendered participation in times of crisis, with implications for more equitable disaster risk communication.

Keywords: News Photography, Forest Fires, Gender and Disaster, Media Framing, Environmental Journalism.

A. Introduction

The 2019 forest fires in Riau, Indonesia, were part of the country's annual fire season but were widely recognized as human-made disasters, driven primarily by land clearing and peatland burning by both smallholders and agribusinesses (Saharjo, 2022). These fires reflect a broader pattern of environmentally destructive land-use changes, underpinned by weak regulatory enforcement and limited political accountability. Persistent forest and peatland degradation across Indonesia, including in regions such as Riau, signals deeper structural failures in governance and law enforcement (Tacconi, Rodrigues, and Maryudi, 2019).

The fires caused widespread environmental and public health crises, including transboundary haze, ecosystem damage, and respiratory illness. They also exposed broader socio-political tensions around responsibility and crisis management. In this context, media coverage, particularly by regional outlets such as *Riau Pos*, played a crucial role, not only in disseminating

information, but also in shaping public narratives around victimhood, resilience, and institutional accountability. Through both content and form, such coverage contributes to the production of meaning in times of disaster.

Visual media, particularly news photography, plays a central role in shaping public understanding during crises. In addition to documenting events, photographs serve as both emotive symbols and editorial instruments, influencing how crises are interpreted and remembered. News photography functions not only as a visual record but is also strategically used by media outlets to attract audiences through emotionally charged and visually dramatic imagery (Anis, 2022). Such images can also influence humanitarian responses and policy agendas by evoking empathy and embedding certain values or norms into public responses (Dahmen, Miller, & Walth, 2021). Importantly, media plays a critical role across all phases of disaster risk reduction; before, during, and after events, acting as both informers and framers of public action (Shaw et al., 2021).

Unlike textual reporting, photographs also construct narratives through visual framing, influencing what is selected, how it is contextualized, and whose experiences are prioritized. As Entman (1993, p. 52) defines it, "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." This clarifies how editorial choices in photojournalism can highlight certain actors or events while obscuring others, thereby shaping public interpretations of disaster and gender.

Within disaster photojournalism, gender representation remains comparatively underexamined, despite its power to reinforce or challenge socio-cultural norms. Women's roles in disaster contexts are often rendered invisible in media discourse, particularly when they do not align with masculine ideals of

heroism (Danielsson & Eriksson, 2020). Even when women participate actively in response and care work, their contributions are frequently framed as extensions of domestic responsibility rather than as public action. As Gill (2007) emphasizes, such representations are never neutral, but deeply implicated in sustaining patterns of inequality and social power. Similarly, Pacholok (2013, p. 35) observes that firefighting has historically been constructed as "symbolically and numerically a world of men," reinforcing a masculine heroism that continues to shape visual disaster narratives and marginalize women's roles.

While scholarly interest in gender and disaster communication has increased, most studies have focused on textual narratives. The visual dimension, specifically photojournalism, remains underexplored, despite its capacity to evoke immediate emotional and symbolic responses (Barthes, 1977; Hutchison, 2014; Rose, 2016). Visual gender framing in disaster reporting has gained attention globally, yet the Indonesian context remains significantly understudied. Research on the 2004 tsunami (Childs, 2006), the 2009 Padang earthquake (Noviani, 2009), the 2010 Pakistan floods (Ali, 2014), and the 2014 Serbian floods (Jankovic et al., 2017) reveals a recurring tendency to depict women as passive victims.

Existing research has explored gendered representations in major disasters, especially sudden-onset events, but there remains a significant gap in understanding how women are visually constructed during prolonged, human-made environmental crises. Moreover, most prior studies examined textual narratives, leaving the visual dimension of regional Indonesian news media under examined. In Indonesia, where patriarchal social norms and persistent gender inequalities continue to shape women's civic and institutional participation (Blackburn, 2004), these visual framings have important consequences for public perceptions of women's roles.

To address this research gap, the study critically analyses

the photojournalism of the *Riau Pos* during the 2019 Riau forest fires, with a focus on the visual representation of women's roles in the Indonesian regional media context. Its novelty lies in revealing that, contrary to dominant victim-centered portrayals common in disaster media scholarship, women in this context were depicted in a broader range of roles—including responders, activists, and religious participants. The *Riau Pos* was selected for its regional proximity to the fires and its prominence in Sumatran media, offering a critical lens into localized visual framing practices within the broader Indonesian journalism landscape. Accordingly, the research questions addressed in this study are as follows: first, what roles are assigned to women through visual representation in *Riau Pos* news photographs during the 2019 Riau forest fires? Second, how do these visualized roles reinforce, challenge, or reframe dominant socio-cultural and religious narratives about gender in the context of disaster?

This study adopts a qualitative approach that combines semiotic analysis (Barthes, 1977) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995), guided by Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which views media as central to the production of meaning and the construction of cultural identities (Hall, 2013). It examines 31 news photographs featuring women, published in the *Riau Pos* from August to October 2019. Using purposive sampling, one representative image was selected for each of the four roles: responder, victim, activist, and religious participant. The analysis proceeded through several steps. First, denotative elements were identified, describing the literal content of the images, including the individuals depicted, their actions, and their visible appearance (such as clothing and posture). Second, connotative codes were interpreted, focusing on cultural and emotional associations conveyed through setting, color, symbols, and embodied gestures. Finally, these interpretations were situated within broader myths, understood as ideological narratives about gender, heroism, patriotism, and civic identity.

Critical Discourse Analysis was then applied to examine how the language in captions and related articles shaped power relations and gender ideologies, proceeding through Fairclough's three levels: textual analysis, identifying word choices and grammatical structures that positioned women's roles, for example, terms such as *ibu* (mother) or *kodrat* (women's inherent role); analysis of discourse practice, exploring how these texts were produced and whose voices were emphasized or omitted; and analysis of social practice, situating these framings within broader Indonesian socio-cultural and religious contexts. This operational strategy supports a layered and systematic reading of how image-based and textual elements together shaped the construction of women's roles during the fires.

This study contributes to gender and media studies by critically examining how women were visually represented in the *Riau Pos* during the 2019 forest fires. The research advances disaster communication by showing how gendered visuals shape public perceptions of agency, vulnerability, and civic responsibility. It also offers a rare, localized perspective within Southeast Asian media studies, highlighting the intersection of journalistic practice, cultural values, and crisis representation.

B. Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study, structured around four thematic categories that emerged from a purposive sampling of *Riau Pos* photo coverage during the 2019 forest fires: women as responders, victims, activists, and religious participants. Each theme is examined through one representative image using visual semiotic analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to understand how gendered portrayals negotiate visibility, agency, and socio-cultural expectations. While each image tells a distinct story, the section concludes with a cross-thematic synthesis that identifies broader discursive patterns shaping women's symbolic inclusion in disaster narratives.

The analysis draws on van Dijk's (2011) perspective that ideologies are often embedded implicitly in media texts, influencing how social realities and gender roles are constructed and interpreted. Representations in photojournalism are not only about what is shown but also about what is omitted. Buikema's (2009) concept of gender as discursively and symbolically produced also informs the analysis, drawing attention to how even empowering portrayals of women may still operate within normative boundaries of femininity, care, and maternal virtue. Together, these frameworks support a critical reading of both what is shown and what is left unsaid in disaster photojournalism.

1. Reframing Heroism: From Masculine Risk to Feminized Duty


Riau Pos

BANGUN NEGERI BIJAKKAN BANGSA

RIAU BELUM

MERDEKA!

KABUT ASAP

AIGNER

KPK Dalami Tipikor di Riau

Proklamasi

187 Jamaah Sakit Bakal Di-*Tanazul*

Perjuangan sang Perempuan Api

Figure 1. Perjuangan Sang Perempuan Api ("The Struggle of the Fire Woman") – front-page image (*Riau Pos*, *17 August 2019, p.1)*

The front page of *Riau Pos* on 17 August 2019 features a striking image of a woman firefighter in full gear, actively confronting flames during the 2019 Riau forest fires. Positioned against a stylized red-and-black map of Sumatra, the image is paired with the bold headline "*Riau Belum Merdeka! Kabut Asap*" ("Riau Is Not Yet Free! Haze"), published on Indonesia's Independence Day. The symbolism of *merdeka* (freedom) is mobilized to signal both environmental crisis and unresolved governance failures. Within this framing, the woman is positioned as both a responder and a patriotic figure.

The news value of the image is heightened by its rarity. Women firefighters are seldom portrayed in Indonesian disaster media, and the woman featured, Masito Hasibuan, was the only female member of the Manggala Agni team that was regularly deployed to extinguish fires in Riau during the crisis. Notably, she had appeared on the *Riau Pos* front page just ten days earlier, on 7 August 2019. Her recurrence underscores both editorial recognition of her symbolic resonance and the scarcity of female representation in frontline disaster narratives. While she may be celebrated as a figure of inclusion, this visibility also risks functioning as tokenism rather than evidence of structural change.

From a semiotic perspective (Barthes, 1977), the image operates on three levels. Denotatively, it depicts a woman engaged in active crisis response. Connotatively, her stance, gear, and the dramatic color palette evoke bravery, public service, and national urgency, traits that are often coded as masculine. At the level of myth, the image contributes to a broader ideological narrative that expands the visual grammar of heroism to include women, subtly challenging dominant constructions of gender and national identity. As Hall (2013) argues, representation does not merely reflect meaning; it constructs and circulates it. Here, the image contributes to a reimagining of patriotic service.

However, the accompanying article tempers this visual disruption. The subject is described as "*tanpa rasa takut*" (fearless)

but also praised for not neglecting her *"tugas dan kodratnya sebagai istri dan ibu"* (duties and natural role as wife and mother). The invocation of *kodrat* (natural role) recenters the narrative within familiar scripts of domestic femininity. As Buikema (2009) notes, even empowering representations can reproduce normative constraints when agency is tethered to caregiving and moral duty. Here, female heroism is framed as acceptable only when it does not contradict with established gender norms.

Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis reveals how such dual framing shapes representation, identity, and relationship with the audience. The woman is visually constructed as brave but discursively positioned within traditional femininity. Her civic participation is authorized only when paired with private virtue—brave, but maternal; public, but deferential. This tension reflects Pacholok's (2013) analysis of firefighting culture as a masculinized occupational space, where women's presence is acknowledged, but still regulated through normative gender expectations.

These patterns reflect broader findings from Moreno et al. (2022) and Danielsson and Eriksson (2020), who show that women's contributions in disaster contexts are often symbolically acknowledged only when they align with masculinized ideals of heroism and public service. Even when women achieve visibility, their participation tends to be narrated through registers of domesticity or emotion, limiting the recognition of their structural and civic agency. In this case, Masito Hasibuan became a visual icon of crisis response, but her representation ultimately reinforces existing hierarchies. The image offers symbolic inclusion without fundamentally challenging the gendered logic of disaster media, including the deeply rooted assumptions that constrain women's recognition as legitimate civic actors.

2. *The Gendering of Suffering: Visualizing Women as Victims*


Korban Terus Berjatuhan

Sangat Berbahaya

PEKANBARU (RP) - Korban dampak dari kabut asap terus berjatuhan. Dua balita yang merupakan kakak adik di Pekanbaru sempat mengalami muntah hingga tiga kali pada Ahad (22/9). Dia pun terpaksa dilarikan ke Posko Penanganan Asap Dinas Sosial (Dinsos) Provinsi Riau di Jalan Diponegoro, untuk mendapatkan pertolongan medis.

Baca Korban Halaman 11

Laporan TIM RIAU POS, Pekanbaru

KABUT asap yang menyelimuti Kota Pekanbaru terasa semakin pekat. Hal itu menyebabkan kualitas udara di Kota Bertuah berada di level sangat berbahaya.

Pantauan *Riau Pos* pada aplikasi Air Visual, Ahad (22/9), konsentrasi partikulat PM 10 tertinggi berada pada pukul 17.00 WIB dengan angka 869.

Satu jam kemudian konsentrasi partikulat PM 10 berkurang sedikit di angka 816. Hingga pukul 22.00 WIB, konsentrasi partikulat PM 10 masih berada pada level berbahaya di angka 401. Untuk diketahui, berpatokan pada Pusat Data dan Informasi (Pusdatin) Kemenkes RI, angka 300-399 sudah masuk kategori bahaya. Sedangkan 400 ke atas sangat berbahaya.

Kondisi kabut aspa parah ini diprediksi berlangsung lama. Karena karhutla di Jambi semakin parah. Jumlah titik panas (*hot spot*) meningkat tajam bahkan sampai dua kali lipat, dari 499 menjadi 799.

Baca *Sangat* Halaman 11

SCAN QR CODE

EVAKUASI: Bu Sri (memakai masker) didampingi warga saat dievakuasi ketika kebakaran lahan tepat di belakang rumahnya di Jalan GKPN, Rimbo Panjang, Kampar, Ahad (22/9/2019). Kebakaran lahan yang terjadi mendekati permukiman warga.

Figure 2. Evacuation of Bu Sri (wearing a face mask), assisted by a community member during a peatland fire behind her home in Kampar, 12 September 2019. The image centers female vulnerability while contrasting it with the active roles of men, reinforcing gendered hierarchies in disaster representation. (Riau Pos 23 September 2019. p.1)

The second theme shifts the representational frame away from exceptional heroism to emotional vulnerability, marking a return to more familiar portrayals of women in disaster discourse. The front page of *Riau Pos* on 23 September 2019 features an image of two women walking through a haze-shrouded landscape. One, identified as Bu Sri in the caption, wears a surgical mask, while the other, a helmeted woman described only as a *warga* (community member), assists her evacuation. A blurred male

hand appears in the foreground, gesturing ahead. Although these women are central in the composition, they are portrayed less as agents navigating the crisis than as recipients of aid, guided through danger by others.

Semiotically, drawing on Barthes (1977), the image reinforces a visual grammar of passive suffering. The women's attire, modest dress and hijab, marks them within the cultural framework of Islamic tradition. However, their assisted movement, partially obscured faces, and spatial separation from male figures in the background encode a familiar gendered narrative: women appear vulnerable and emotionally resonant, while men, even blurred, signify institutional action. The blurred male hand that enters the foreground functions not only as a compositional device but also as a visual shorthand for masculine protection and direction.

This gendered framing is not only visual but also textual. The caption, *"Evakuasi: Bu Sri (memakai masker) didampingi warga saat dievakuasi…"* ("Evacuation: Bu Sri (wearing a mask) accompanied by a resident during evacuation…"), uses passive grammatical structure, obscuring both women's agency. The assisting woman is unnamed, but her role described in general terms.

Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model helps clarify how these discursive mechanisms operate. At the level of textual practice, the caption's use of passive voice and the omission of proper names diminish the women's visibility as active agents within the scene. Discursively, the editorial framing privileges institutional authority and foregrounds male-coded heroism, relegating the women to a role of moral support rather than civic engagement. At the level of social practice, this representation reproduces broader ideological structures that confine women's labor during crises to caregiving and emotional resilience, while excluding them from narratives of institutional decision-making or formal authority.

This pattern recurs elsewhere in the disaster coverage by the *Riau Pos*. Images of mothers adjusting children's masks during the haze align with what Hutchison (2014) describes as the use of women and children as visual symbols in humanitarian crises. Peterson and Spratt (2025) similarly note that emotionally charged images, especially those of women and children, are often prioritized because they are perceived as more empathetic and engaging for audiences. This editorial pattern privileges emotional visibility over structural participation, reinforcing what van Dijk (2011) calls the discursive power of absence, in which women may be shown but rarely heard or depicted as active agents.

Although the image gestures toward solidarity through one woman helping another, it ultimately reproduces the symbolic order that positions women as recipients of care rather than as agents of change. Buikema's (2009) concept of symbolic containment is particularly relevant, because even when women engage in evacuation or caregiving, their actions are narratively framed through dependence and emotional appeal rather than civic engagement or institutional value.

This theme illustrates how gendered suffering is not only represented through imagery but also constructed through linguistic and editorial choices. Women's symbolic visibility depends on their alignment with acceptable gender scripts, including maternal care, vulnerability, and passive endurance, while more active forms of resilience are marginalized or ignored.

In contrast to the firefighter image, where breaking gender roles is accepted only within a domestic narrative, the evacuation image normalizes gender conformity through its visual and textual framing. Women appear central in the composition but remain subordinate. In this sense, visibility does not equal narrative power; instead, it reflects editorial practices that anchor femininity in emotion rather than agency.

3. Domesticity as Disruption: The Politics of Care and Protest



UNJUK RASA: Sejumlah perempuan yang tergabung dalam Gerakan Perempuan Riau Melawan Asap menggelar aksi unjuk rasa di depan Kantor Gubernur Riau, Jalan Sudirman, Selasa (24/9/2019). Sejumlah peserta juga membawa alat kerja dan alat rumah tangga saat unjuk rasa. Aksi ini dimulai dengan *long march* dari kawasan Ruang Terbuka Hijau (RTH) Putri Kaca Mayang menuju Kantor Gubernur Riau.

Figure 3. Women protest in the demonstration "Gerakan Perempuan Riau Melawan Asap" (Riau Women Against the Smoke), 25 September 2019. Participants carry banners and household tools as visual symbols of disrupted domestic life, transforming maternal and caregiving identities into civic protest. (Riau Pos, 25 September 2019, p.17).

In an image published by the *Riau Pos* on 25 September 2019, a group of women is depicted participating in a public demonstration organized by *Gerakan Perempuan Riau Melawan Asap* (Riau Women Against the Smoke). Wearing hijab and face masks, they hold banners and handmade posters—one that reads, "*Kami Kehilangan Ruang Bermain #SuaraAnak*" ("We've lost our play space #Children'sVoices"). According to the caption, participants carried household tools, symbolizing the disruption of everyday domestic life. The march culminated at the Riau Governor's Office, marking an act of civic intervention in the context of environmental crisis.

While mass protests, particularly by university students, are a recurring activity in Riau during forest and land fires, this demonstration is notable for its disruption of conventional protest culture. Unlike student or male-dominated movements,

this protest was led by women, many of them mothers, who drew from familiar domestic roles to frame their dissent. Their presence in the public sphere subverted normative expectations of political engagement. As Buikema (2009) argues, acts of resistance can emerge through culturally legible roles, transforming symbolic scripts of femininity into platforms for critique.

From Barthes' (1977) semiotic lens, the image operates across multiple layers. Denotatively, it shows women marching with banners and domestic tools in hand. Connotatively, the image combines visual codes of femininity, modest clothing, caregiving references, household objects, with collective public presence, thereby collapsing the boundary between private labor and political critique. At the level of myth, the image repositions motherhood and domestic responsibility as vehicles for environmental accountability. The inclusion of children's voices, through signs and slogans, amplifies this moral register, casting maternal concern as a legitimate basis for political expression.

The accompanying caption, "*sejumlah perempuan… membawa alat rumah tangga saat unjuk rasa*" ("a number of women… carried household utensils during the protest"), linguistically redirects attention from protest to domestic symbolism. Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model helps explain this: at the textual level, the use of general nouns like *perempuan* (woman) and the focus on "household utensils" weakens the political message of the protest. At the level of discourse practice, the caption reflects an editorial choice to maintain cultural familiarity, thus reinforcing institutional comfort with symbolic rather than structural dissent. At the level of social practice, this narrative reproduces dominant gender ideologies that confine women's activism to culturally acceptable expressions of care and moral responsibility.

However, the image itself pushes back against this cultural constraint. The women stand upright, visually coordinated, and symbolically assertive, expressing agency through

embodied protest. As Hall (2013) states, representation is a site of contestation. These women mobilize a hybrid identity, simultaneously caregivers and citizens, disrupting gendered assumptions about who speaks in public and on what terms. Their presence complicates the visual grammar of protest, challenging binaries between activism and domesticity.

This local demonstration resonates with broader trends of recent women-led environmental actions across Indonesia. For example, the Power of Mama initiative in West Kalimantan empowers women to take the lead on fire prevention and environmental education (YIARI, 2023), while documentaries such as *Our Mothers' Land* (Jurriëns, 2023) document how women transform domestic knowledge and caregiving identities into powerful resistance against environmental harm. In Riau, women's grassroots movements have mobilized moral positions and community-based responsibilities to demand accountability for destructive land-use practices (Nease & Payne, 2017). These efforts show how women strategically reframe their traditional roles into platforms for civic advocacy, challenging their exclusion from formal decision-making and broadening definitions of legitimate agency. This pattern aligns with examples from the wider Global South, such as India's rural women's forest protests in the 1970s, which laid the groundwork for sustained female leadership in ecological governance (Valdés, 2009).

In this light, the Riau protest should be understood not as a symbolic performance but as an act of feminist re-signification. It shows how women strategically deploy familiar cultural roles to gain political traction in contexts where direct dissent may be delegitimized. The visibility of domesticity in this protest should not be seen as a limitation but as a tactic, one that challenges media narratives to rethink what constitutes legitimate agency in times of crisis.

4. The Limits of Representation: When Visibility Does Not Equal Agency



Figure 4. ISTISQA PRAYER: The Pekanbaru city government and Forkopimda held the Salat Istisqa (prayer for rain) in the courtyard of the Public Service Mall (MPP) Pekanbaru, Friday (13/9/2019). (Riau Pos, 14 September 2019, p.17)

In a front-page image published by the *Riau Pos* on 13 September 2019, a mass prayer ceremony is shown performing salat *Istisqa'* (a communal Islamic prayer for rain), held during the peak of land and forest fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan. The event took place in front of the Public Service Mall in Pekanbaru. As per Islamic norms, the male worshippers are positioned at the front while the women, modestly dressed and wearing masks, are in the back, yet visibly participating in the prayer. The image is captured from a high-angle perspective, which emphasizes the scale and institutional formality of the congregation. However, the accompanying article, titled "*Ya Allah, Turunkanlah Hujan*" ("Oh Allah, Send Down Rain"), highlights only the presence of civil servants and members of *Forkopimda* (the regional leadership coordination forum), omitting any reference to the women present.

To contextualize this event, *Istisqa'* prayer carries both religious and civic significance in Indonesia, especially in

provinces like Riau where Islamic identity deeply shapes local politics and public life. The ritual is often initiated by religious offices *(Kemenag),* Islamic Boarding Schools *(pesantren),* or provincial leaders. Within this context, women's participation is not a passive accompaniment but part of a broader collective moral response to environmental crisis. Their presence represents both religious piety and civic engagement, yet this dual role is not textually recognized.

While the spatial arrangement of the prayer aligns with Islamic conventions that position men at the front and women behind, the journalistic framing of the event reveals a selective recognition that reproduces gendered hierarchies of civic visibility. This editorial emphasis reflects what Danielsson and Eriksson (2022) describe as structural invisibility in disaster discourse, in which women's presence is acknowledged yet symbolically constrained. Despite their full participation in a culturally significant and highly public act of Islamic worship, women's roles are marginalized within institutional narratives that prioritize formal authority and male-coded expressions of agency.

In Indonesian media culture, the visual prominence of public figures is a common framing device used to signal authority, credibility, and leadership. During the Riau forest fires, most of the public figures featured in news coverage were men, reinforcing dominant associations between crisis response and masculinized civic action. This analysis does not critique Islamic prayer practices themselves, but rather interrogates how disaster media privilege dominant constructions of public religiosity while overlooking the moral and spiritual agency of women.

From the perspective of gender, the *Istisqa'* prayer image also highlights how spiritual participation can function as a subtle form of civic presence. While women engage in acts such as *dua* (supplication) and *istighfar* (repentance), their positioning

within the ritual reflects broader expectations that align female piety with modesty, restraint, and supportiveness. Rather than simply reiterating their marginalization, the image reveals how women assert moral agency within culturally accepted roles. Their collective presence complicates the dominant visual grammar of crisis, suggesting that religious devotion itself may serve as a gendered platform for public engagement, even when framed within traditional boundaries.

This gendered positioning can also be unpacked through a semiotic lens. Using Barthes' (1977) framework, the image communicates layered ideological messages. Denotatively, it depicts a public act of collective devotion in response to the forest fire disaster. Connotatively, the spatial arrangement, gendered division, and modest attire evoke civic duty, religious piety, and social order. At the level of myth, it recirculates a familiar cultural script: women as the spiritual backbone of the community, but not its institutional voice. Their visibility is acknowledged only within the visual grammar of support and humility, not of agency.

This phenomenon is further illustrated by another image published on 19 September 2019, in which a woman is depicted crying during the same prayer ritual. Although she is centered visually and described in the caption, her emotional expression is framed through an affective lens that reinforces a gendered trope of spiritual vulnerability rather than civic engagement. As Danielsson and Eriksson (2020) argue, such representations often recode women's presence into emotional or symbolic contributions while excluding them from the domain of political or institutional recognition.

Applying Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis, we can see how this omission operates across levels of discourse. At the textual level, not referencing the female worshippers silences their civic and religious contributions. At the level of discourse practice, the article foregrounds institutional actors,

civil servants, military officials, and political leaders, implying that formal power resides solely with men. At the level of social practice, these choices reproduce gendered hierarchies within public religious life, sustaining a symbolic order in which women are granted presence but denied a voice.

Despite this discursive exclusion, the image itself offers a quiet counter-narrative. The women's spatial arrangement, their posture, and their visible participation collectively convey a form of embodied agency. As Hall (2013) reminds us, representation is a dynamic process, open to negotiation and resistance. In this frame, the women are not absent, they are visually asserting their place in public religious activities, challenging the logic that assigns spiritual authority only to men.

This final theme reveals the broader argument of this study: visibility in disaster media is not equivalent to empowerment unless it is accompanied by narrative legitimacy and discursive recognition. The case of the *Istisqa'* prayer shows how women can be visually present in a moment of civic-religious crisis yet symbolically positioned in the background. Their inclusion is tolerated, even encouraged, but only on the condition that it remains within culturally sanctioned boundaries of femininity, humble, moral, and emotionally expressive, rather than authoritative, strategic, or institutional.

5. Cross theme synthesis

Taken together, the four visual themes reveal a consistent discursive pattern: while women are increasingly visible in disaster media, their portrayals remain constrained by gendered expectations. Whether framed as responders, victims, activists, or religious participants, women in the *Riau Pos* are granted representational space; however, this visibility is repeatedly circumscribed by dominant socio-cultural scripts. Across the dataset, images offer moments of visual recognition but

accompanying texts often re-anchor these portrayals within normative frameworks of femininity.

The depiction of the female firefighter initially suggests a disruption of gender norms, positioning a woman within a traditionally masculinized sphere of heroism. However, the accompanying article quickly re-domesticates her role by emphasizing her identity as a wife and mother. Similarly, the evacuation image centers women as key figures but frames them through tropes of dependency and vulnerability, with male figures depicted as protectors. The protest image appears more subversive, with women repurposing domestic tools in civic protest, although this is discursively softened by a caption underscoring their maternal identity. In the prayer image, women are visibly participating, but their presence is textually silenced, as only male state officials are acknowledged.

These patterns exemplify what Fairclough (1995) describes as the ideological function of discourse: regulating not only what is represented but whose identities are legitimized, and whose roles are granted institutional significance. Across all themes, female agency is permitted only within narrowly sanctioned spaces of caregiving, moral virtue, spiritual devotion, or emotional resilience. Even when women appear in public and civic domains, the symbolic boundaries of legitimate participation remain largely unchallenged.

From a semiotic perspective (Barthes, 1977), the images function at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotatively, women are shown engaging in labor, protest, or devotion. Connotatively, their portrayals evoke associations with care, sacrifice, and virtue. At the level of myth, these representations reinforce ideological narratives that naturalize women's subordinate status in disaster response, even where their contributions are vital to community survival.

Buikema's (2009) concept of gender as both symbolically and discursively regulated is instructive here. Female agency is not erased but narratively structured to align with familiar gender roles. Even apparent acts of resistance are recoded to affirm, rather than challenge, dominant expectations. These findings resonate with the observations of Danielsson and Eriksson (2020) and Moreno et al. (2022), who note that women's disaster contributions are often symbolically acknowledged but structurally marginalized, recognized only when expressed within culturally accepted frameworks.

In this sense, the *Riau Pos* coverage offers a compelling example of how local media participate in a global pattern of gendered disaster discourse. Although shaped by regional Islamic and patriarchal norms, these portrayals mirror broader tendencies of symbolic inclusion without structural transformation. It is also important to note that other intersecting factors, such as class, rural-urban divides, and local ethnic or religious differences, likely further mediate these gendered framings. However, these dimensions remain underexamined in this study.

Importantly, visual presence alone does not constitute substantive agency unless it is supported by narrative authority and institutional recognition. In the case of the *Riau Pos*, journalists reporting on the fires are themselves embedded within the affected community, experiencing the cyclical nature of the smoky haze and environmental crises in Riau. As Pantti (2020) observes, local journalists' proximity to disaster can foster a sense of solidarity and commitment to communal narratives, yet it may also reproduce dominant representational norms, including gendered framings. Such framing aligns with Enarson, Fothergill, and Peek's (2006) argument that gender functions as a core organizing principle in disaster vulnerability and response. Without critical and intersectional analysis, media representations risk reinforcing the very inequalities they seek to expose.

C. Conclusion

This study has examined how gendered roles were visually and discursively constructed in the photojournalism of the *Riau Pos* during the 2019 Riau forest fires. Through a combination of visual semiotic analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis, four recurrent portrayals emerged: responder, victim, activist, and religious participant. Across these themes, women's visibility was consistently framed through dominant socio-cultural narratives of care, moral virtue, and emotional expression, which limited their representation as civic agents. Among these, the analysis of protest images is particularly revealing, demonstrating how women's strategic use of domestic and maternal symbols can operate as an act of feminist re-signification, challenging restrictive gender norms and expanding possibilities for civic participation. In recent years, women's public activism in Indonesia has become increasingly visible, suggesting a gradual shift toward more politically grounded and publicly recognized forms of civic engagement that may reconfigure how women are framed in future disaster narratives.

The scope of this research is intentionally bounded by its focus on a single regional newspaper and a defined timeframe, aiming not at generalization but at uncovering the discursive logics through which gendered subjectivities are co-constructed. By providing an empirically grounded, context-specific analysis, this study underscores the importance of questioning not only what is made visible in disaster media, but also on how it is framed and whose agency is legitimized or marginalized. Building on these patterns, it offers a critical perspective on how local disaster media subtly regulates women's agency by aligning their visibility within the concepts of traditional ideals, thereby sustaining broader gendered hierarchies, even in moments of collective crisis. Future research could expand on this inquiry by comparing regional and national portrayals, exploring other media formats, or incorporating the perspectives of journalists

and audiences. As environment-related disasters intensify, understanding how gendered subjectivities are negotiated in the public sphere will remain essential to wider debates on justice, equity, and representation, highlighting the urgent need to transform not only what is visible, but on whose voices truly count.

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