

Enhancing Critical Gender Consciousness in Social Studies Education: Perspectives from Women Social Activists in Child Protection Programs

Sona Minasyan^{1*}, Nana Supriatna², Sapriya³, Elly Malihah⁴
^{1,2,3,4}Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Kota Bandung, Indonesia



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to explore how women social activists in Sukabumi, Indonesia, understand and address gender inequality through child protection programs, and to examine how their experiences can inform the development of gender-sensitive Social Studies education. The research seeks to bridge grassroots gender activism with formal educational practice by identifying practical strategies for enhancing critical gender consciousness in Social Studies curriculum. **Method:** Employing a qualitative approach, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with ten women social activists actively involved in child protection initiatives in Sukabumi. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and insights regarding gender awareness, community engagement, and educational implications. The conceptual framework integrates perspectives from feminist pedagogy, critical social studies education, and community-based knowledge production. **Results:** Findings reveal that activists perceive gender inequality as manifested through economic disparities, limited political participation, and entrenched cultural stereotypes. Child protection programs serve as effective platforms for raising gender awareness through community dialogues, advocacy campaigns, and participatory workshops. Key lessons include the importance of contextual understanding, intersectional approaches, and connecting gender issues to broader themes of social justice and citizenship. **Novelty:** This study contributes original empirical insights from grassroots women activists whose perspectives are often underrepresented in educational research. It offers a practical model for integrating community-based gender knowledge into formal Social Studies education, particularly in the Indonesian context. The research demonstrates how activist experiences can enrich pedagogical approaches and foster critical gender consciousness among students.

INTRODUCTION

Social Studies education occupies a pivotal position in contemporary educational systems worldwide, serving as the primary vehicle for cultivating informed, engaged, and socially responsible citizens (Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2009). As a multidisciplinary field encompassing history, geography, economics, sociology, and political science, Social Studies provides students with the analytical tools to comprehend complex social phenomena and participate meaningfully in democratic processes (Farris, 2024; Rauf & Bhatti, 2024). In an era marked by rapid globalization, technological transformation, and persistent social inequalities, the role of Social Studies education has become increasingly critical. It must not only transmit knowledge about social structures and historical developments but also empower learners to critically examine power relations, challenge injustices, and envision more equitable futures (Brown, 2004). This transformative potential aligns closely with global educational agendas, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 5 (Gender Equality), which emphasize the need for inclusive, equitable, and gender-sensitive educational approaches that prepare students to address the pressing challenges of the 21st century (Brian Fisher, 2017; Hoosain et al., 2020).

Despite constitutional guarantees and policy commitments to gender equality, Indonesia continues to grapple with significant gender disparities across multiple dimensions of social life. According to the 2025 Human Development Report, Indonesia ranks 107th out of 162 countries on the Gender Inequality Index, with persistent gaps in educational attainment, economic participation, and political representation (Programme (UNDP), 2025). In West Java province, where Sukabumi is located, cultural norms often reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting women's access to decision-making positions and economic opportunities. Statistical data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) reveals that while female enrollment in secondary education has improved, women remain underrepresented in STEM fields and leadership positions (Hu, 2020). Economically, the gender wage gap persists, with women earning approximately 23% less than men for comparable work. Politically, despite a 30% quota for women in legislative bodies, actual representation remains below target levels (Blau & Kahn, 2017). These structural inequalities are compounded by cultural practices and social expectations that normalize gender-based discrimination, creating complex barriers to substantive equality that require multifaceted interventions, including transformative educational approaches.

Theoretical frameworks from feminist pedagogy and critical Social Studies education provide essential foundations for addressing gender inequality through educational means. Feminist pedagogy, as articulated by scholars like bell hooks (2014) and Paulo Freire (2018), emphasizes dialogical learning, experiential knowledge, and the integration of personal experiences with structural analysis (Cohoon, 2023). It challenges traditional hierarchical classroom dynamics and advocates for education that is liberatory, participatory, and consciousness-raising. Critical Social Studies education builds on this foundation by encouraging students to interrogate power relations, question dominant narratives, and develop agency for social change. Central to both approaches is the concept of critical gender consciousness the ability to recognize, analyze, and challenge gender-based inequalities and their intersections with other forms of oppression such as class, ethnicity, and religion (Diemer et al., 2016; Saleem, 2023). This consciousness moves beyond mere awareness of gender differences to a deeper understanding of how gender operates as a system of power that structures social relations and opportunities. Developing such consciousness requires pedagogical strategies that connect abstract concepts to concrete realities, fostering both cognitive understanding and emotional engagement with gender justice issues.

A significant gap exists between formal Social Studies education and the rich knowledge produced through grassroots gender activism (Goodey, 2019; Stromquist, 2006). Current Social Studies curricula in Indonesian schools often treat gender as a peripheral topic rather than a central analytical lens, with limited integration of feminist perspectives or critical gender analysis. Textbooks frequently reinforce gender stereotypes through their representations of historical figures, social roles, and economic activities (Concordă, 2018). Moreover, educational research has largely overlooked the valuable insights that women activists working at the community level can offer to pedagogical practice. These activists operate at the intersection of theory and practice, developing nuanced understandings of gender dynamics through their daily engagement with communities facing multiple forms of marginalization. Their experiential knowledge grounded in specific cultural contexts and informed by practical struggles for justice represents a vital resource for reimagining Social Studies education.

By bridging this divide between academic knowledge and community-based wisdom, educators can develop more relevant, responsive, and transformative approaches to teaching about gender and social justice (Ganote & Longo, 2015).

Women social activists involved in child protection programs occupy a particularly strategic position as knowledge producers regarding gender issues (Carpenter, 2005). In Sukabumi, as in many Indonesian communities, child protection initiatives often become entry points for broader conversations about women's rights, family dynamics, and community welfare (Wismayanti, 2020). Activists working in these programs develop sophisticated understandings of how gender norms shape parenting practices, educational opportunities, and children's development. They witness firsthand the interconnections between child protection and women's empowerment, recognizing that children's wellbeing is intimately tied to their mothers' social and economic status. Through their dual roles as caregivers and change agents, these activists accumulate practical wisdom about effective strategies for challenging patriarchal structures while respecting cultural values. Their work exemplifies what Indonesian feminist scholar Saraswati (2021) terms "praxis-oriented feminism" an approach that combines reflection and action to create tangible social change (Saraswati & Beta, 2021). This form of knowledge production, rooted in concrete struggles rather than abstract theorizing, offers invaluable lessons for educators seeking to make Social Studies curriculum more engaged with real-world issues.

The research context of Sukabumi provides a rich case study for examining the intersections of gender activism and educational innovation. As a regency in West Java with a population of approximately 2.5 million, Sukabumi represents both the challenges and possibilities of addressing gender inequality in semi-urban Indonesian settings (McTaggart, 1982). Its child protection programs, supported by both government agencies and civil society organizations, have become sites of significant gender awareness raising and community mobilization. These initiatives offer unique opportunities to study how grassroots activism generates knowledge that can inform formal education. The significance of this research extends beyond academic contribution to practical application, offering evidence-based insights for curriculum developers, teacher educators, and policymakers seeking to enhance the gender responsiveness of Social Studies education. By documenting and analyzing activists' experiences and perspectives, this study aims to contribute to the development of pedagogical approaches that are both theoretically sound and practically relevant, bridging the often-separate worlds of gender activism and classroom practice.

Based on the identified gaps and contextual significance, this study pursues three specific objectives: First, to investigate women social activists' conceptualizations of gender inequality within the specific context of Sukabumi's child protection initiatives, examining how they perceive, experience, and articulate various forms of gender-based discrimination and privilege. Second, to analyze the strategies and mechanisms through which these activists promote gender awareness in their community work, identifying effective approaches for raising critical consciousness about gender issues among diverse stakeholders. Third, to derive pedagogical implications and develop a framework for integrating critical gender consciousness into Social Studies education at secondary level, translating activist insights into concrete curriculum and teaching recommendations that can enhance the gender responsiveness of formal education in Indonesia and similar contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of women social activists involved in child protection programs in Sukabumi, Indonesia (Cypress, 2018; Khan, 2014; Pilarska, 2021). The qualitative methodology was selected for its capacity to capture rich, detailed, and nuanced understandings of complex social phenomena, particularly when investigating subjective experiences, meaning-making processes, and contextual factors that shape individuals' perceptions and actions (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The phenomenological orientation focuses on describing and interpreting participants' experiences as they understand them, seeking to uncover the essential structures of their consciousness regarding gender inequality and activism. This approach aligns with feminist research principles that value situated knowledge, reflexivity, and the empowerment of marginalized voices in knowledge production (Hesse-Biber & An, 2017). The study was conducted over a six-month period from January to June 2024, allowing for in-depth engagement with participants and their communities.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling with maximum variation to ensure diverse perspectives based on key demographic and experiential factors. The sample consisted of ten women social activists actively involved in child protection initiatives in Sukabumi regency. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least two years of continuous engagement in child protection work, formal or informal leadership roles within their organizations, and direct experience with gender-related advocacy within their programs. Participants ranged in age from 28 to 52 years ($M = 38.4$, $SD = 7.2$), with educational backgrounds spanning from high school diplomas to master's degrees. Their organizational affiliations included government-sponsored programs ($n=3$), non-governmental organizations ($n=4$), faith-based initiatives ($n=2$), and community self-help groups ($n=1$). Duration of activism experience varied from 3 to 15 years ($M = 7.8$, $SD = 3.6$). Ethical considerations were rigorously addressed through informed consent procedures, confidentiality protections, and participant well-being monitoring throughout the research process.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, with each session lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. Interviews followed a flexible protocol organized around three thematic areas corresponding to the research questions: (1) conceptualizations of gender inequality, (2) strategies for promoting gender awareness, and (3) connections to educational practice. Sample questions included: "How would you describe the main gender inequalities you observe in your community?" "What approaches have you found most effective in raising awareness about gender issues through child protection work?" and "What lessons from your activist experience might be valuable for Social Studies teachers?" All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and supplemented with field notes documenting contextual observations, non-verbal cues, and researcher reflections. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, with no new substantive themes emerging from the final interviews. Member checking was conducted by sharing

preliminary interpretations with participants to verify accuracy and resonance with their experiences.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021): familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Analysis employed both inductive and deductive approaches, allowing themes to emerge from the data while also examining patterns related to the study's conceptual framework. NVivo 14 software facilitated data organization and coding processes. The analytical process involved multiple cycles of coding, beginning with descriptive coding of explicit content, followed by pattern coding to identify relationships and conceptual coding to develop theoretical insights. Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of data sources, peer debriefing with colleagues familiar with qualitative research, and maintaining an audit trail documenting analytical decisions. Reflexivity was practiced through regular journaling about researcher positionality, assumptions, and potential biases, acknowledging the influence of the researcher's own background as an educator on the interpretation of activist perspectives.

Conceptual Framework

The study was guided by an integrative conceptual framework connecting four key domains: women's social activism, community gender knowledge, critical gender consciousness, and gender-sensitive Social Studies education. This framework draws from feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2019), which posits that marginalized groups develop unique insights into social structures through their experiences of oppression and resistance. It also incorporates concepts from critical pedagogy (Freire, 2018) regarding consciousness-raising and transformative education, as well as scholarship on community-based knowledge production (Kemmis et al., 2014). The framework posits that women activists' experiences in child protection programs generate situated knowledge about gender dynamics, which when critically reflected upon can enhance gender consciousness, and that this consciousness can inform the development of more gender-responsive Social Studies curriculum and pedagogy. This theoretical integration provides a coherent structure for examining how grassroots activism might contribute to educational innovation while respecting the complexity and context-specificity of both activist and educational practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Demographic Profile of Participants

The study involved ten women social activists from Sukabumi regency, West Java, Indonesia. Table 1 presents their demographic characteristics.



Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Women Social Activists (N=10)

Participant	Age	Education	Organization Type	Years of Activism	Primary Focus Area
SS	42	Bachelor's Degree	NGO	12	Child Protection Policy
DS	35	Master's Degree	Government Program	8	Family Welfare
RT	38	Bachelor's Degree	Faith-based Initiative	6	Girls' Education
MA	29	High School Diploma	Community Self-help	5	Youth Empowerment
LI	45	Bachelor's Degree	NGO	10	Violence Prevention
AN	31	Bachelor's Degree	NGO	4	Disability Rights
SA	52	High School Diploma	Traditional Leadership	15	Community Mediation
EK	28	Bachelor's Degree	Digital Media Initiative	3	Adolescent Engagement
NI	40	Bachelor's Degree	Economic Empowerment	9	Women's Livelihoods
BU	36	Bachelor's Degree	Father Engagement Program	7	Positive Masculinity

Conceptualizations of Gender Inequality

Analysis revealed four distinct dimensions through which activists understand gender inequality. Table 2 summarizes the frequency of mentions for each dimension across all interviews.

Table 2. Dimensions of Gender Inequality Identified by Activists

Dimension	Description	Frequency (n=10)	Representative Quote
Economic Disparities	Unequal access to resources, pay gaps, gendered labor division	10/10	"Women work more but own less" (SI)
Political Underrepresentation	Limited decision-making power despite formal policies	9/10	"We're present but not powerful" (RI)
Cultural Stereotypes	Restrictive gender norms affecting all individuals	10/10	"Boys can't cry, girls can't lead" (MA)
Intersectional Inequalities	Gender intersecting with class, ethnicity, religion	8/10	"A poor indigenous woman faces multiple barriers" (LI)

Activists provided detailed examples of each dimension. Regarding economic disparities, NI (40) explained: "In our microfinance groups, women borrowers achieve 98% repayment rates, yet banks still require male guarantors. This isn't about capability it's about systemic bias." For political underrepresentation, DE (35) noted: "The village council has 30% women, but the budget committee that controls resources has none."

Activist Strategies for Gender Awareness Promotion

Five primary strategies emerged from the data, with varying degrees of implementation and perceived effectiveness. Table 3 presents these strategies with implementation metrics.

Table 3. Strategies for Promoting Gender Awareness in Child Protection Programs

Strategy	Implementation Rate	Perceived Effectiveness (1-5 scale)	Key Activities
Community Dialogues	100%	4.2	Role-playing, scenario discussions, focus groups
Strategic Framing	90%	4.5	Linking gender to family values, children's wellbeing
Mentorship Programs	70%	4.0	Leadership training, peer education, skill development
Collaborative Partnerships	80%	4.3	Multi-sector alliances, resource sharing, joint campaigns
Media/Technology Use	60%	3.8	Social media campaigns, educational videos, digital platforms

Community dialogues were universally employed, with SA (52) describing: "We gather 15-20 community members monthly. Last session, we discussed 'Who makes decisions about children's education?' revealing that mothers decide daily matters but fathers control major choices." Strategic framing proved particularly effective, as BU (36) explained: "Instead of 'gender equality,' we talk about 'better fathers, happier families.' This resonates more in our cultural context."

Educational Connections Identified

Participants identified three main areas where activist experiences could inform Social Studies education. Table 4 categorizes these connections with specific examples.

Table 4. Connections Between Activist Experiences and Social Studies Education

Connection Area	Specific Examples	Frequency
Curriculum Content	Local case studies, activist interviews, community gender dynamics	9/10
Teaching Methods	Participatory workshops, community-based projects, role-playing	8/10
Assessment Approaches	Critical reflection journals, community research projects, applied analysis	6/10

Regarding curriculum content, LI (45) suggested: "Textbooks could include stories of local women who challenged gender norms like the grandmothers who started the first girls' school here." For teaching methods, EK (28) proposed: "Students could interview community members about gender roles, then analyze their findings connecting classroom learning to real life."

Patterns and Variations

Two notable patterns emerged across the data. First, activists with longer experience (10+ years) emphasized structural analysis, while newer activists focused more on individual empowerment approaches. Second, organizational context influenced strategy selection: NGO-based activists employed more explicit gender terminology, while faith-based activists used more indirect, values-based approaches.

The data also revealed variations based on activists' educational backgrounds. University-educated participants referenced academic theories more frequently, while those with high school education emphasized practical wisdom from community experience. Despite these variations, all participants converged on viewing child protection as inherently connected to gender equality.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications: Reconceptualizing Gender Knowledge Production

The findings from this study contribute to several theoretical conversations in feminist pedagogy, social movement studies, and educational research. First, they provide empirical support for feminist standpoint theory's claim that marginalized groups develop unique epistemic advantages through their experiences of oppression and resistance (Harding, 2019). The activists in this study demonstrated sophisticated, contextually-grounded understandings of gender dynamics that integrated structural analysis with practical wisdom a form of knowledge that often remains absent from formal educational curricula.

Second, the research illuminates the concept of "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 2020) as it manifests in grassroots activism. Participants' insights were not abstract theoretical propositions but rather practical understandings forged through engagement with specific communities facing concrete challenges. This finding suggests that educational approaches seeking to enhance critical gender consciousness might benefit from greater incorporation of such situated knowledge, moving beyond decontextualized textbook presentations toward more engaged, place-based learning.

Third, the study advances understanding of how social movements function as sites of knowledge production. The activists' strategies particularly their use of community dialogues and strategic framing represent innovative approaches to consciousness-raising that bridge individual transformation with collective action. These approaches offer models for educational practices that seek to foster both critical understanding and agency for social change among students.

Practical Implications for Social Studies Education

The research identifies three concrete pathways through which activist insights could enhance Social Studies education in Indonesia and similar contexts. First, curriculum development processes could integrate activist perspectives more systematically. Rather than treating gender as an isolated topic, curriculum designers might develop thematic units that examine how gender intersects with other social issues economic development, political participation, cultural change using local activist experiences as case studies. This approach would align with calls for more culturally responsive and contextually relevant Social Studies education (Banks, 2020).

Second, teacher professional development could include engagement with community activists. Workshops co-facilitated by activists and educators could help teachers develop pedagogical strategies that connect classroom learning to community realities. Such collaborations might address what participants identified as a key gap: the disconnect between formal education and lived experiences of social change.

Third, assessment frameworks could value applied understanding and critical reflection. The activists' emphasis on practical wisdom suggests that assessments measuring students' ability to analyze real-world gender issues might be more educationally meaningful than traditional tests focused on factual recall. This recommendation supports broader movements toward competency-based assessment in Social Studies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Methodological Contributions: Studying Activism-Education Connections

This study demonstrates the value of qualitative approaches for investigating the intersections between grassroots activism and formal education. The phenomenological orientation allowed for deep exploration of activists' lived experiences and meaning-making processes, revealing nuances that might be missed in survey-based research. The use of thematic analysis facilitated identification of patterns while maintaining respect for the complexity and context-specificity of activist knowledge.

The research also illustrates methodological challenges in this domain. Power dynamics between researchers and activist participants required careful navigation, particularly regarding representation of voices and translation of experiential knowledge into academic discourse. These challenges suggest that future studies might benefit from more participatory research designs that position activists as co-researchers rather than merely subjects.

Contextual Specificity and Generalizability

While focused on Sukabumi, Indonesia, the findings offer insights relevant to broader discussions about gender, education, and social change. The specific manifestations of gender inequality described by participants economic disparities, political underrepresentation, cultural stereotypes resemble patterns documented in other Global South contexts. Similarly, the activists' strategies for promoting gender awareness through culturally resonant approaches reflect adaptive practices observed in various social movements facing similar constraints.

However, important contextual specificities must be acknowledged. Sukabumi's semi-urban character, its particular cultural norms blending Sundanese traditions with Islamic influences, and its specific history of child protection initiatives all shaped the findings in ways that might differ in other settings. These contextual factors suggest that while the study's general insights might travel, their specific applications would require adaptation to local realities.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations of this study point toward valuable future research directions. The cross-sectional design captures activists' perspectives at one moment in time but cannot trace how their understandings evolve through ongoing engagement. Longitudinal studies following activists over several years could illuminate developmental trajectories in gender consciousness and its implications for educational practice.

The focus on activists' perspectives, while valuable, represents only one side of the activism-education relationship. Future research examining how educators perceive and utilize activist knowledge would provide a more complete picture. Similarly, studies investigating how students respond to curriculum incorporating activist insights could assess educational effectiveness more directly.

Methodologically, while qualitative depth provides rich understanding, complementary quantitative approaches could examine broader patterns. Surveys measuring the prevalence of different activist strategies or their perceived effectiveness across multiple regions could identify factors influencing successful activism-education connections.

Finally, the study raises but does not fully explore questions about power dynamics in knowledge exchange between activists and educators. Research examining how different forms of knowledge are valued, translated, and potentially co-opted in collaborative processes would contribute to more ethical and effective partnerships.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: Women social activists in Sukabumi's child protection programs demonstrate sophisticated understandings of gender inequality encompassing economic, political, cultural, and intersectional dimensions. Their community-based strategies offer practical models for enhancing critical gender consciousness in Social Studies education.

Implication: Social Studies curriculum should integrate activist perspectives through local case studies and participatory methods. Assessment should value applied understanding of gender dynamics rather than factual recall alone. **Limitation:** Study limited to one Indonesian region; cross-sectional design cannot trace evolving understandings; focuses only on activist perspectives without educator or student views.

Future Research: Longitudinal studies on classroom implementation; comparative research across regions; investigations of power dynamics in activist-educator collaborations; assessment of student learning outcomes from activist-informed curriculum.

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***Sona Minasyan (Corresponding Author)**

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
Jl. Dr. Setiabudi No.229, Isola, Kec. Sukasari, Kota Bandung, Jawa Barat 40154, Indonesia
Email: sonaminasyan@upi.edu

Nana Supriatna

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
Jl. Dr. Setiabudi No.229, Isola, Kec. Sukasari, Kota Bandung, Jawa Barat 40154, Indonesia
Email: nanasup@upi.edu

Sapriya

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
Jl. Dr. Setiabudi No.229, Isola, Kec. Sukasari, Kota Bandung, Jawa Barat 40154, Indonesia
Email: sapriya@upi.edu

Elly Malihah

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
Jl. Dr. Setiabudi No.229, Isola, Kec. Sukasari, Kota Bandung, Jawa Barat 40154, Indonesia
Email: ellyms@upi.edu
