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Learning Citizenship Differently: Feminist Schools and the Making of Political Subjects

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how feminist education reconfigures political subjectivity and citizenship in Indonesia through an ethnographic study of the Sekolah Kepemimpinan Feminis (SKF), a feminist leadership school run by Solidaritas Perempuan in Makassar. In contrast to state-led civic education, which reinforces moral obedience, nationalist duty, and gendered respectability, SKF cultivates a different civic imagination—one grounded in feminist critique, affective labour, and collective struggle. Drawing on participant observation and life history interviews with participants and organisers, this article explores how young women from diverse and marginalised backgrounds relearn their place in the world through shared reflection, storytelling, and political engagement. It argues that SKF functions as a citizenship laboratory: a pedagogical and political space where new forms of subjectivity are enacted through the rejection of normative gender roles and the development of feminist consciousness. Through informal, relational, and embodied practices, participants learn to link personal experience with structural injustice and build alternative modes of belonging. This study contributes to debates on feminist pedagogy, youth activism, and alternative education by demonstrating how feminist schools offer insurgent spaces for imagining citizenship beyond the boundaries of the state.

Keywords: *citizenship; political subjectivities; alternative education; feminism; activism; young people*

INTRODUCTION

It's quite difficult to find young people who are truly willing to learn about organisation, feminism, and related issues. Many young people do not see what is happening around them—what people in coastal areas experience, what landless farmers go through. These struggles are what we want to introduce to the younger generations. (Irna, a feminist educator)¹

This desire to introduce young people to the lived realities of injustice—across coastal villages, agrarian frontiers, and within gendered structures of power—raises a fundamental question: *what does it mean to learn citizenship outside the shadow of the state?* In Indonesia, as in many postcolonial



societies, citizenship has long been framed through normative scripts of moral discipline, gendered respectability, and nationalist duty. These frameworks are deeply embedded in state institutions and civic curricula, and have consistently positioned young women within hierarchical, patriarchal paradigms of civic virtue and familial duty (Blackburn, 2004; Suryakusuma, 2011; Saraswati and Beta, 2021). Women's roles in the nation were frequently acknowledged only in relation to their male counterparts—most notably as devoted wives whose primary function was to support their husbands as productive citizens serving the state (Robinson & Bessel, 2000). Under such conditions, citizenship is not simply a legal status or a set of formal rights, but a moralised and gendered identity to be inhabited through conformity, not critique.

In recent years, civic and moral identities in Indonesia have taken an increasingly conservative turn, shaped by the rise of authoritarian populism that hardens the boundaries of citizenship. In a striking echo of the New Order under Suharto, the current regime of Prabowo has reintroduced militarisation into many aspects of civic life. Military generals have once again been permitted to occupy civilian posts in ministries and state-owned enterprises, while the military also extends its reach into education. Programs have emerged in which 'wayward' youth are sent to military barracks to be disciplined, framed as "character building, discipline, and specialised national defence education" (Tempo, 2025a), while high-achieving students are similarly channelled into military schools to cultivate their 'leadership skills' (Tempo, 2025b). The controversial "TNI Masuk Kampus" programme further exemplifies these militarisation interventions, although it has met resistance from academics and student groups (BBC Indonesia, 2025). Together, these developments demonstrate how the state is actively reshaping and constraining narratives and practices of citizenship, reinforcing rigid civic identities through mechanisms of militarised education and discipline.

At the same time, youth protests dominate the grassroots political landscape in contemporary Indonesia. This demonstrates that citizenship is a contested and lived process – a space of negotiation over power, belonging, and recognition in everyday life (Lister, 2008; Staeheli and Hammet, 2010). It is shaped not only by the law, policy, or conventional civic education, but also by affect, memory, and embodied experiences. Feminist pedagogies make these dimensions visible. By connecting knowledge to lived realities, emotional encounters, and collective reflection, feminist education paves alternative pathways for political subjectivity that resist dominant narratives of civic obedience and reimagine the terms of belonging, inclusion, and the right to participate in social and political life.

This article explores the feminist reconfiguration of citizenship through the practices of *Sekolah Kepemimpinan Feminis* (Feminist Leadership School, or SKF), an initiative run by *Solidaritas Perempuan* (SP) Angin Mammiri, the Makassar chapter of a grassroots feminist organisation that has been operating in Indonesia since the New Order era. Drawing on participant observation and interviews with participants, alumni, facilitators, and coordinators of SP Angin Mammiri's SKF, we see the school as a site of alternative education that nurtures feminist political subjectivities. This article thus situates feminist education within the broader historical and ideological landscape of citizenship in Indonesia, where dominant moral values define national belonging and the gendered configurations of nation-building. It examines how participants—many of whom come from conservative households—relearn their place in the world through feminist frameworks that foreground critical consciousness, wellbeing, and political agency.

Unlike formal civic education, which historically serves those in power (Freire, 1974) and emphasises obedience, consensus, and depoliticised participation, SKF fosters a different kind of civic formation. Here, young women engage in storytelling, embodied reflection, and political analysis rooted in feminist and intersectional frameworks. Learning is not transmissive but dialogic; it begins from the subject's own position in relation to power, violence, and possibility. For many participants, the feminist school is their first exposure to frameworks that name their experiences of gendered control, forced marriage, or economic marginalisation as political issues, rather than personal failings. The participants' life histories and reflections reveal the transformative power of feminist pedagogies, not only in shaping individual trajectories, but also in building enduring solidarities and alternative infrastructures for civic and political life.

In tracing how they come to reorganise themselves as political agents, we also glimpse how feminist education constitutes a more radical citizenship-making. We argue that these pedagogical spaces function as *citizenship laboratories* which are experimental, collective, and affective arenas in which young women learn to claim political subjectivities that lie outside the dominant state narratives. These laboratories operate in at least two senses, they enable experimentation with new forms of political identity as well as relationality, and they cultivate practices of care, resistance, and knowledge-making that challenge the epistemic and moral boundaries of state-defined citizenship.

METHOD

This article proceeds as follows. We begin by reconceptualising citizenship education in Indonesia beyond dominant state narratives of women's and youth citizenship. This article continues by briefly introducing *Sekolah Kepemimpinan Feminis* or Feminist Leadership School and asks the question of *who is learning in this feminist school?*—centring the diverse subject positions and life stories of the participants. We then turn to the question of *where they learn*, examining the physical and relational alternative pedagogical spaces that constitute the feminist school. In the fourth section, *what they learn*, this article analyses the specific knowledge, skills, and affective sensitivity that are transmitted through the school's curriculum and informal practices. The fifth section situates these findings within a broader conceptual framework, advancing the notion of alternative education as citizenship laboratories that unsettle the normative civic scripts promoted by the Indonesian state. The article concludes by reflecting on the political stakes of feminist education and the futures it may help bring into being.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual Framework: Feminist Pedagogy and Citizenship-Making

This article is grounded in a feminist approach to pedagogy and citizenship, one that foregrounds how knowledge is produced through embodied experience, affective labour, and political engagement. As Moir and Crowther (2017) observe, conventional forms of citizenship education often rely on:

relationships [that] would be authoritarian or transmissive and focused on developing

attitudes and knowledge which fit people submissively into the status quo and prepare them for their role as workers and consumers in a market economy.

In contrast, feminist theorists have long argued that learning is not a neutral or disembodied process, but one that is situated, relational, and inherently political (hooks, 1994; Kabeer 2002). Feminist education insists on reciprocity, dialogue, and reflexivity. Knowledge, in this view, is not transmitted from above but co-created through collective inquiry and critical reflection.

This understanding of feminist pedagogy as relational, affective, and situated finds resonance in Peter Kraftl's (2014) analysis of alternative educational spaces. Drawing on affect theory and human geography, Kraftl conceptualises alternative education as a spatial and embodied practice that resists the neoliberal logics of standardisation and individualised achievement. He shows how pedagogical encounters within alternative education spaces are shaped by material environments, emotional atmosphere, and non-linear trajectory of learning. His insights contribute to a broader rethinking of education as a political process that constitutes subjectivities differently—through hope, refusal, and embodied practice—rather than through disciplinary mechanisms of schooling. In this sense, Kraftl's notion of “geographies of hope” offers a valuable complement to feminist theorisations of pedagogical citizenship as a mode of becoming, one that is always embedded in relations of power, space, and affect, as well as one that is necessarily situated, contested, and affectively charged.

This orientation is closely tied to feminist critiques of citizenship. Scholars have shown that citizenship is not simply a legal status or institutional relationship to the state, but a lived and contested practice shaped by gender, race, class, and sexuality (Lister, 2008; Staeheli and Hammet, 2013). Marston and Mitchell (2004) assert that citizenship must be understood as an ongoing process of political subjectivity-in-the-making, continuously shaped, challenged, and redefined by broader structural forces.

To expand this understanding of citizenship beyond its legal and territorial boundaries, this article draws on the work of political sociologist Engin F. Isin (2017), who conceptualises citizenship as a performative and political act—a set of practices through which individuals make claims, assert rights, and constitute themselves as citizens. Isin offers a compelling alternative to state-centred theories of citizenship by framing citizenship as a political and relational process. This framework helps us understand how new political subjects emerge, particularly in contexts of exclusion and precarity. Isin argues that citizenship is made through struggle, and marginalised actors enact citizenship not by receiving a formal status but through political engagement and disruption.

This notion resonates with Jacques Rancière's (1999; 2001) account of political subjectification, which he defines as the moment when individuals or groups interrupt an existing social order by asserting themselves as political subjects, particularly when they had previously been excluded from being recognised as such. Gert Biesta (2011), drawing on Rancière, argues that democratic education should not aim to integrate students into pre-existing civic roles or norms of citizenship. For Biesta, education must not only help individuals fit into society but also empower them to transform it by questioning, intervening, and reshaping the social order they are part of. He calls for pedagogical spaces that enable the emergence of new political subjectivities.

At the same time, critiques of civic education in the global South warn against narrowly moralistic and individualised approaches to “responsible citizenship”. Parker and Prabawa-

Sear (2020) in their study of environmental education in Indonesia, demonstrate how civic responsibility is often framed through top-down state ideologies that emphasise cleanliness, obedience, and moral rectitude over structural critique or political action. Within this framing, students are taught to manage their individual behaviour while remaining silent, for example, on extractive industries and political inequalities that underpin environmental degradation. Rather than fostering agency, this model of responsible citizenship reproduces a depoliticised, technocratic subjectivity aligned with neoliberal and developmentalist logics. In response, Parker and Prabawa-Sear call for a more critical, participatory form of environmental citizenship—one that enables learners to understand their embeddedness in systems of power and to act collectively to transform them. Their critique underscores the importance of grounding citizenship-making in pedagogies that are not merely behavioural but politically enabling.

Importantly, the responsabilisation of citizenship—where citizens are expected to internalise civic duties without questioning structural injustice—is not only depoliticising but also deeply gendered. In many contexts, including Indonesia, citizenship is historically embedded in normative ideals of womanhood and national duty, rendering women’s civic participation conditional on their moral respectability or reproductive roles (Blackwood, 2008; Robinson and Bessel, 2002). Against this backdrop, feminist and postcolonial scholars have called for a more expansive, practice-based understanding of citizenship, one rooted in performances, claims-making, and strategies enacted from below (Isin, 2017; Chatterjee, 2004). This approach invites us to rethink political agency not as a precondition of citizenship, but as a product of political and pedagogical engagement.

Understanding citizenship-making as a pedagogical process draws on this intersection between feminist education and political subjectivity. In particular, the idea of the feminist school as a citizenship laboratory builds on theories that understand education where political identities are not only formed but also contested (Biesta, 2011). As the article will show, feminist pedagogical spaces provide opportunities for individuals to inhabit new subject positions, develop critical vocabularies, and experiment with alternative ways of relating to power and community. Citizenship, in this sense, is not something one holds or performs according to state definitions, but something that is learned, felt, and practised through shared struggles, storytelling, and collective reflection.

Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* (2005) offers an important complement to this framework. Her critique of liberal feminist notions of agency—where agency is equated with resistance, autonomy, and freedom—invites us to recognise how political subjectivities emerge not necessarily through overt acts of resistance to patriarchal authority or authoritarian civic models, but also through sustained practices of reflection, storytelling, and collective care. She also highlights the need to take seriously the moral worlds and aspirations of women who may not articulate their struggles in terms of resistance or liberation.

By centring this framework, this article positions alternative feminist education not as a supplement to formal schooling or state civic education, but as a generative space to reimagine political belonging altogether. It foregrounds the formation of feminist political subjects not as an individual transformation, but as a collective and situated process—one that challenges the dominant moral economies of state-led citizenship and opens space for more plural, relational, and insurgent forms of political life. The section that follows introduces *Sekolah Kepemimpinan Feminist (SKF)* as a space where subjectivity-in-the-making unfolds through a feminist pedagogy.

Sekolah Kepemimpinan Feminis (Feminist Leadership School)

Sekolah Kepemimpinan Feminis (SKF) traces its origins to the history of *Solidaritas Perempuan* or Women's Solidarity for Human Rights, a feminist organisation established in December 1990. Since its founding, SP has worked in close collaboration with grassroots women to advance a vision of a democratic social order based on the principles of justice, ecological awareness, respect for pluralism, and non-violence. This vision rests on a system of equal relations between women and men, in which both can share access to and control over natural, social, cultural, economic, and political resources in a fair and just manner. Over the past three decades, SP has expanded into 11 community branches across nine provinces, directly engaging with thousands of grassroots women to build and consolidate collective movements aimed at reclaiming women's sovereignty over their lives and livelihoods.

SP's emergence must be understood in the political context of the New Order regime under Suharto, which from the late 1980s intensified authoritarian control through widespread land dispossession, forced evictions, and restrictions on political freedoms. At the same time, the regime imposed a rigid, gendered model of citizenship through the ideology of state *Ibuism*. This framework idealised women as wives and mothers, measuring their civic value through domesticity, morality, and reproductive responsibility, while denying them political agency (Suryakusuma, 2011; Robinson and Bessel, 2000).

Against this backdrop, grassroots solidarity groups began to emerge spontaneously to resist evictions and defend the rights of dispossessed communities. Yet these initiatives were often temporary, loosely organised, and constrained by the regime's suppression of collective organising. It was in this political and social climate that a group of women activists established SP in 1990. They sought not only to consolidate women's movements into a more systematic and durable form of resistance, but also to directly challenge the authoritarian structures of the New Order and its deeply gendered construction of civic identity. SP's formation thus marked a critical intervention, a feminist project of reclaiming space for women as political subjects in the face of authoritarian dispossession and patriarchal state control.

As part of its education and leadership development system, SP launched its first cohort of *Sekolah kepemimpinan Feminis (SKF)*, or the Feminist Leadership School in 2017. The Chair of SP's National Executive Board at the time emphasised that the school is "a space to nurture activists who struggle for feminist values and for justice in ending women's oppression. They will also become key organisers in their own regions, expanding the feminist movement for social change" (Solidaritas Perempuan, 2017). The initial cohort convened twenty-six participants representing diverse backgrounds—from activists to women leaders in their communities.

One of the participants, Irna, who is cited in the introduction of this article, is an organiser and member of *Solidaritas Perempuan Angin Mammiri* in Makassar, South Sulawesi. Concerned that the younger generations had limited interests in, or access to feminist activism, Irna and other active members of SP Angin Mammiri initiated a local duplicate of SKF in their communities in February 2019. According to Irna, the establishment of SKF Makassar emerged from a dual process of internal reflection within the organisation and the pressures of broader socio-political contexts. She explained:

As a feminist-oriented association, it is crucial to establish a systematic framework

for leadership development and education to ensure the sustainability of the organisation's leadership. Moreover, poverty in both rural and urban areas continues to bear a woman's face, stemming from the restrictions placed on women's access to and control over the sources of life. These include women farmers' access to and control over land, women fishers' access to coastal and marine food sources, violations of the rights of migrant women workers and their families, and the suppression of women's sexual rights. It is hoped that the Feminist Leadership School will nurture young activists with feminist perspectives to strive for their villages and communities, and who are committed to moving together with Solidaritas Perempuan and broader social movements in South Sulawesi to put an end to all forms of oppression against women (Solidaritas Perempuan, 2019).

The first SKF in Makassar convened twenty participants, selected from a pool of thirty-six applicants who underwent both written submissions and interview processes. A second SKF was initiated in 2023 with a smaller intake of participants. In the following section, we are turning to the narratives of participants in SKF Makassar, specifically those who remain working with the organisation, tracing their experiences and reflections on feminist organising and leadership training.

Who Is Learning?

The cohort of the *Sekolah Kepemimpinan Feminis* in Makassar brought together participants from diverse and often conservative family backgrounds. They vary from village-level grassroots organisers to campus journalists, and student groups from universities across Makassar. Most were young women between the ages of 20 and 30, many of whom were educated in *pesantren* (religious boarding schools), the daughter of farmers, children of migrant families, or first-generation university students. As their stories were revealed, their entry into activism was shaped by situated struggles: confronting poverty, negotiating parental authority, navigating campus hierarchies, or resisting everyday gender violence. What draws them to SKF is a desire for an alternative way of knowing and being—a means of making sense of the contradictions they live in and of articulating new forms of political subjectivity.

From the perspective of feminist pedagogy, these trajectories are significant. Conventional forms of civic education in Indonesia, particularly since the New Order, have sought to discipline women into narrowly moralised forms of citizenship, framed by state *Ibuism*. By contrast, SKF exemplifies what feminist theorists describe as a relational and situated pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Kabeer, 2002; Kraftl, 2014), where knowledge is co-produced through dialogue, storytelling, and embodied encounters. In SKF, the participants experiment with political subjectivities not defined by state prescriptions but by feminist practices of reflection, critique, and collective struggle.

In the section below, this article introduces several of SKF's participants. Their narratives reflect shared experiences of marginalisation—though in different forms—and the ways in which SKF has shaped them into feminist activists today, encouraging them to actively participate in the activities of SP Angin Mammiri. Together, these accounts demonstrate how SKF contributes to the reconfiguration of citizenship and the emergence of new feminist political subjectivities that enable them to move from positions of constraint to active engagement as feminist activists.

Irna

For Irna, a senior organiser at SP Angin Mammiri, the entry into activism was catalysed by personal experience. Her first encounter came in 2012, when SP facilitated a workshop on gender-based violence in her community that was held in her own family home. She was moved by the facilitators' message and her own experience of romantic partner violence. During a storytelling activity, she co-wrote and performed a play on dating violence with some of her friends—an experience that marked her first step into collective feminist expression. Soon after, she was invited to represent South Sulawesi at a national youth jamboree on violence against women where she gave a public testimony as a survivor. This experience encouraged her further into the world of activism. The experience of publicly re-narrating personal pain into collective testimony propelled her further into activism.

On campus, she took part in student organisations but quickly observed the 'seniority' and exclusionary practices embedded in their structures. "They forced new students to engage with internal campus politics... and seniors had total control over them", she recalled. Rejecting this hierarchical model of political engagement, she turned to feminist organising in search of more egalitarian spaces to politically express herself. Within SP, she found not only analytical tools but also an alignment between her lived experience and political commitments. Her commitment deepened through direct engagement with agrarian movements. Initially assigned as a treasurer for the organisation, she visited an area in South Sulawesi during a land conflict and was profoundly affected by the farmers' determination to resist land dispossession: "In my heart I kept thinking, what if I were in their position?" Moved by these encounters, she requested reassignment from treasurer to the team working on land rights and women's sovereignty.

Irna's journey exemplifies how feminist pedagogy operates through affective and embodied learning. Rather than receiving abstract lessons, she learned feminism through storytelling, solidarity, and visceral encounters with dispossession. In this sense, her trajectory reflects what Marston and Mitchell (2004) describe as citizenship-in-the-making, moments where individuals interrupt established orders—campus hierarchies, societal expectations—and begin to constitute themselves as political subjects. For Irna, feminism became not just an ideology, but a survival tool. "Learning to recognise myself... not just who I am, but the level of stress, burnout, and pressure I carry as an activist". Through SKF, she gained analytic capacities and affective resilience, which she now passes on by mentoring younger generations. Her story shows how SKF produces subjects that are able to sustain collective struggles while disrupting authoritarian modes of civic identity inherited from the New Order.

Indah

Indah is a young Bugis woman from Wajo, South Sulawesi. She came to feminist activism gradually, through a series of negotiations between familial expectation, campus encounters, and personal reflection. Raised in a *pasantren* and steered by her family to study Islamic education, Indah's early life was structured around a vision of respectable womanhood centred on religious discipline and a future as a village teacher. "My parents already had their own expectations, I'd graduate and become a religious teacher back home," she recalled. Like many of her peers, she chose her academic path not out of personal conviction but to fulfil her family's aspirations.

University offered the first cracks in this trajectory. Although initially prohibited from joining student organisations, Indah found inspiration in her classroom discussions about gender inequality which resonated deeply with her own observations of domestic life. “In my village,” she noted, “girls rarely go to school beyond the basics. Most of them marry early or work. That reality made the gender discussions in the class feel very real.”

Her involvement with Solidaritas Perempuan began in 2017, after seeing the organisation’s banner at an International Women’s Day protest. Intrigued, she connected with a member and later collaborated on a campus roadshow on migrant workers’ rights. From there, she became a volunteer, and eventually, a staff member and programme coordinator. Indah describes her participation in SKF as profoundly transformative. “Before joining SP, I never once made a life decision of my own. I always just followed what was expected of me,” she reflected. Through the school, she encountered feminist frameworks on sexuality, feminism, and globalisation, alongside the emotional and political tools to claim agency. A pivotal moment in her journey was SKF’s “outclass” in Kodingareng, where participants lived among fisherwomen resisting sand mining. The visceral experience grounded the theoretical lessons: “We were taught about oppression in the classroom—but there, we saw it with our own eyes: economic injustice, environmental degradation, social exclusion.”

Her reflections reveal how feminist pedagogy works not as a transmission of fixed knowledge but as a relational, embodied, and affective process (hooks, 1994; Kraftl, 2014). By linking classroom discussion with lived encounters, SKF enabled Indah to narrate her life not as one confined by parental or state expectations but as a site of political agency. She explained that to her, learning feminism was about understanding the structural contexts in which different strands of feminist thought emerged. “We don’t have to identify with just one feminist stream. Every stream was born from different oppressions, different women’s lives. The point is, there is injustice, and we fight it.” This refusal to adopt a singular feminist framework illustrates what Rancière (1999 & 2001) refers to as political subjectification: the moment where learners constitute themselves as political subjects capable of critique and intervention.

Today, as coordinator at SP Angin Mammiri, Indah continues to advocate for agrarian justice, reproductive rights, and youth engagement. Her trajectory demonstrates how feminist citizenship is made through struggle—not through formal recognition by the state but through situated practices of reflection, dialogue, and collective action. In this sense, SKF for Indah not only became a school but a space where she learned to inhabit new political subjectivities and reimagine herself as both an activist and a feminist citizen.

Asti

Asti is a young Bugis woman born in Ambon to a religious family of migrants and traders, traces her feminist political awakening to her life-long negotiation of familial expectations, religious discipline, and the experience of structural constraints. Raised in a conservative household and educated in Islamic boarding schools in Wajo, she was consistently steered into religious education—from *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* (MTs/junior high school) to *Aaliyah* (senior high school) to university—on the premise that daughters should embody religious virtue and limit their schooling. “In my family, we were told that girls don’t need to study too high,” she explained. “No one in my family had ever earned a degree. I was the first.” Yet this achievement quickly became a

source of conflict. In her final university semester, her family attempted to arrange her marriage without her consent. When she refused, not once but twice—citing her unfinished studies and unreadiness—she was cursed, shouted at, cut off financially, and left estranged for a month. “I received no allowance, was cut off from my family, and was even hospitalised three times. But no diagnosis was ever given—maybe it was mental.”

It was during this period of estrangement that Asti found refuge in other Solidaritas Perempuan members and in feminist texts. “Apart from my friends, books helped me survive that month,” she explained. “I read about women and Islam—it gave me arguments to challenge what my family said.” Her involvement with SP began earlier, during a campus roadshow in 2017 where she heard the story of a migrant worker. That encounter expanded her understanding of gender beyond sexual violence, prompting deeper questions about power, labour, and sexuality. She took part in SKF soon after, where an early exercise—the “river of life”, where participants were asked to reflect on their life journey thus far—moved her to tears. “I had never been asked to reflect on my own experiences before. When I tried to speak, I always cried.”

Asti’s trajectory illustrates how SKF did not offer abstract lessons alone but created a space where personal pain could be re-narrated as political knowledge. It was also a space for collective care, where participants listened to one another’s stories, held space for grief, and transformed vulnerability into solidarity. This practice of care exemplifies what feminist pedagogy understands as learning through affective and relational labour. For Asti, such moments of recognition and mutual support were crucial to unlearn the logics of domination she had internalised. By refusing arranged marriage and articulating her dissent, Asti interrupted both familial hierarchies and broader normative scripts of womanhood perpetuated since the New Order. Her act of refusal also had ripple effects. “What I did wasn’t just for me—it helped save my younger cousins too.”, she explained, as her defiance created precedent within her extended family to refuse similar pressures.

Today, Asti serves as treasurer of SP Makassar. She views this role—often overlooked in activist imaginaries—as central to sustaining the movement: “Activists aren’t just the ones who give speeches or participate in protests. Those who manage the finances—who ensure the movement can keep going—they’re part of the struggle too.” Her redefinition of feminist activism demonstrated how citizenship is made through everyday practices of care, management, and resistance, not solely through formal political acts (Biesta, 2011). For Asti, feminism is lived not in spite of her background in religious and financial work, but because of it. Her journey demonstrates how feminist education reconfigures selfhood, kinship, and a sense of one’s place in the world, enabling her to claim space as a feminist citizen in ways that contest the enduring legacies of authoritarian and patriarchal civic models.

Fitria

Fitria is the youngest among all current members of SP Angin Mammiri. She is a political science student at an Islamic university in Makassar who entered feminist organising through a mix of academic curiosity and emotional resonance. Born in Maros and raised in the Baru district, Fitria moved to Makassar for her studies, initially motivated by the desire to be close to her older sibling. She was drawn to SP Angin Mammiri while conducting her thesis research on coastal women’s resistance to the Makassar New Port reclamation. “I came to SP for an interview with Kak Mita, the head of SP Angin Mammiri, and that same day they were organising a protest action,” she

recalled. “I joined them and saw firsthand how the women were organising. It moved me.” Though she had no prior involvement in feminist activism at the time, she signed up for the Feminist Leadership School out of a desire to support “work that helps people”—what she described as *kerja-kerja kemanusiaan* (humanitarian work).

At the outset, Fitria felt intimidated: “I was scared, insecure. I didn’t think I had enough knowledge to join.” But the school’s relaxed and welcoming atmosphere changed her perspective. “The forum was comfortable, and the way people delivered the material made it easy to follow. Everyone made me feel accepted.” Over weeks of collective learning, her worldview expanded dramatically. “My perspective became more open. I used to feel uneasy around people who express different gender identities. Now I respect people’s choices.” The experience also gave her tools to understand grassroots women’s struggles, especially among fisherwomen and farmers which she admitted she had never truly considered before. “I had never learned about that before—what life is like for women at the grassroots. I didn’t realise how oppressed they were until I heard their stories.”

A turning point came during a group storytelling session led by Indah, when Fitria shared a painful family experience for the first time. “It felt like a huge relief. I never had a space to speak about it before.” This moment further illustrates the role of SKF as a space not only for political education but also for collective care. The recognition of her story by others transformed vulnerability into strength, underscoring how feminist pedagogy fosters belonging and solidarity through embodied and affective practices.

Fitria’s background in a fractured household—shaped by her parents’ separation and economic precarity—reinforced her conviction that “Women have to be independent, especially financially. You can’t rely on anyone.” “My mother used to sell second-hand clothes at the market,” she said. “And after a falling out with my brother who was paying my tuition, I had to rely on my father again.” Through SKF, this ethic of independence was politicised. She came to see structural connections between her personal experiences and broader struggles over land, labour, and state policy. This shift exemplifies what Isin (2017) calls citizenship as a performative and political act, in which marginalised actors constitute themselves as political subjects by making claims and assert rights.

Despite ongoing tensions with her family—particularly around her participation in activism—Fitria remains committed to feminist organising. “My parents don’t really accept that I’m involved in this kind of work,” she admitted. “They think it’s a distraction from my studies.” Still, she sees activism as a legitimate political path, more grounded in everyday realities than elite formal politics. “Politicians say they represent the people, but they don’t listen to voices from below,” she said. “Activism is about making those voices heard.” Her future aspirations include becoming a lecturer in public administration, a role she views not as a departure from activism, but as a continuation of it. “You can educate others and raise awareness through teaching,” she explained.

Fitria’s journey reflects the formation of feminist political subjectivity through layered forms of learning—academic, embodied, and affective. Her story emphasises how SKF is not only a training ground for activists but also a laboratory for feminist citizenship, a space where participants remake their lives, generate new vocabularies of justice, and practice collective care as a foundation for political engagement.

Dian

Dian, a 25-year-old Makassarese woman, entered feminist organising through a circuitous path shaped by family restrictions, campus politics, and her own search for meaningful political engagement. Born in Bantaeng and raised in Balikpapan, she returned to South Sulawesi for university, studying sharia economic law at an Islamic university in Makassar. While she had long been active in campus organisations, Dian's engagement with SP Angin Mammiri began in 2020, initially as a volunteer on climate issues.

Dian described her early political participation as constrained by parental authority. "I was an only child, and during my early years at university, I wasn't allowed to join organisations or stay out past 5 p.m.," she explained. Over time, however, she carved out space for activism, eventually becoming a staff member at SP Angin Mammiri. Balancing her family's expectations with her political commitments, she pursued a master's degree in law, which allowed her to remain in Makassar while continuing to work with SP. "It kept me close to SP, but it also satisfied my parents' demand for me to 'get a proper job.'"

Her feminist awakening was gradual, shaped by readings, discussions, and embodied encounters with grassroots women. While she had encountered gender discourse through student organisations, it was only at SP and through SKF that she developed a deeper understanding of structural oppression. "Before, I only learned about gender. At SP, I began to understand oppression—what it means for women to be structurally oppressed." Her thesis on the constitutional rights of Indonesian migrant women workers in Malaysia drew directly on the themes she encountered in SP and in SKF. Her participation in agrarian and environmental struggles made this knowledge visceral. "It's the stories from the grassroots that make it so hard to leave SP," she said. "When I think of the women in Takalar, or the coastal communities—there's a kind of emotional attachment there. Their struggles become your own."

Dian's reflections highlight the affective and creative dimensions of feminist pedagogy. She confessed, "I don't like writing much. I learn better by drawing." She often produces illustrations and visual notes to make sense of complex concepts, and her creative skills are channelled into SP's campaigns through poster designs and social media. For her, the fight is not only about demonstrations on the streets but also about art, communication, and everyday acts of care. She explained, "I realised that struggle isn't always about taking it to the streets—it can happen through art, like sculpting or singing." This resonates with Kraftl's (2014) account of alternative education as shaped by emotional atmospheres and material practices, and with feminist pedagogy's insistence on diverse ways of knowing and learning (hooks, 1994).

At the same time, Dian was sharply attuned to the constraints faced by youth activism under neoliberal pressures. "Many students today are just trying to survive," she said. "They're overworked, worried about money, and told not to protest if they are on scholarships. It's hard to organise things in that context." Despite these challenges, Dian remains committed to feminist education and sees her future in academia as a continuation of activism. "Becoming a lecturer doesn't mean leaving the movement," she said. "It means building a bridge—sharing feminist perspectives in the classroom, bringing students into the conversation, and showing that teaching can be a form of activism too."

Dian's trajectory demonstrates how feminist pedagogy fosters political subjectivities through recursive, embodied processes of learning and struggle. Her reflections highlight SKF as

both a site of collective care and a space where participants experiment with alternative forms of political belonging, shaped by material conditions, affective ties, and a refusal to separate intellectual labour from political struggle. Dian thus illustrates how feminist education reshapes not only what is known but also how citizenship is lived—through art, affect, and solidarity as much as through protest.

Taken together, these narratives show that participation in SKF is not only about organisational involvement but also about reclaiming political subjectivities long denied to women under the New Order, when the state constructed rigid civic identities through the ideology of state *ibuisim*. By providing spaces where young women can cultivate feminist perspectives, articulate their struggles, and connect personal experiences to structural inequalities, SKF functions as an alternative pedagogical model of citizenship. In doing so, it reconfigures women's place in public life, enabling them to imagine themselves not simply as daughters, wives, or moral guardians, but as political actors shaping movements for justice and liberation. At the same time, as Saba Mahmood (2005) reminds us, political agency is not only enacted through resistance or rupture but also through the cultivation of ethical dispositions and practices. The trajectories of SKF participants illustrate this duality: their feminist subjectivities are forged both through acts of disruption and through the slower, embodied labour of learning, reflection, and care. In dismantling authoritarian and patriarchal legacies of civic identity, SKF contributes to the formation of feminist political subjectivities attuned to the affective, relational, and structural complexities of contemporary Indonesia.

To fully understand how such transformations unfold, we now turn to the spaces and practices through which learning takes place. The pedagogical force of SKF lies not only in its curriculum but also in its spatial, affective, and organisational design—conditions that make possible alternative modes of learning, caring, and acting politically.

Where Do They Learn?

The transformative potential of SKF cannot be separated from the spaces in which it unfolds. More than a leadership development programme, SKF is deliberately situated within environments that are informal, affectively charged, and radically different from conventional educational settings. Conceived by SP as part of its broader strategy to nurture new generations of feminist activists and ensure the sustainability of its struggles, SKF functions as a feminist infrastructure—a living, collective, and deeply political space that draws on SP's long-standing commitment to feminist organising and movement-building. Since its first implementation in 2017, SKF has operated as a site of ideological formation and political experimentation, enabling participants to learn not only the content of feminism, but also its practices including solidarity, critique, and resistance.

Sessions are typically held on weekends, allowing participants to navigate their other responsibilities, such as work, study, or family care. The programs are spread over several months of in-class learning combined with field-based out-of-class activities. The physical environment is intentionally modest and communal. When I attended one of the sessions in April 2023, participants sat on the floor in small groups, surrounded by large sheets of paper documenting their discussions, drawings, and critical reflections. Some of these were taped to the walls, transforming the room into a living archive of shared inquiry. This grounded, collective setting exemplifies the school's ethos of learning that is horizontal, reflective, and embedded in everyday experience.

Participants described the school as a shared feminist space defined by a pedagogy of trust, mutual recognition, and slow transformation. “The forum was comfortable,” Fitria reflected. “[The facilitators] delivered the materials in a relaxed way, and I felt accepted even though I did not know much at first.” In this space, not-knowing is not stigmatised, but embraced as the beginning of political awakening.

Facilitators—often former SKF participants themselves—accompany participants through their political journeys. Exercises like “River of Life” invite them to reflect on past experiences of struggle, resistance, and survival. These sessions are often emotionally intense. Several participants admitted they cried for the first time while telling stories they had never dared to speak aloud of. For Asti, who had been hospitalised after refusing an arranged marriage, the act of drawing her own life path surfaced a lifetime of suppressed emotions. “When I was asked to reflect, I couldn’t hold it in. I wasn’t used to being asked those kinds of questions”.

The topics discussed in the in-class session range from discussions about gender inequality, globalisation, intersectionality, sexual and reproductive rights, as well legal and advocacy training, all grounded in a feminist lens. Mita, a facilitator of SKF, reiterates:

The goal of SKF is to shape the ideology and perspective of young peers, particularly in fostering their interest in social issues and women’s issues which are then further strengthened in terms of their feminist ideology. The hope is that after they complete their time with SKF, they can continue to *berproses* (transform) together and contribute to the women’s struggle.

Learning also extends beyond the classroom. Participants conduct field investigations in coastal and rural communities where SP carries out grassroots organising. These out-of-class activities are core components of SKF’s pedagogy, designed to collapse the distance between theory and lived experience. “In the classroom, we discussed about oppression,” said Indah. “But [when] we went to [the field], we saw it with our own eyes.” Through these encounters, whether listening to fisherwomen’s struggles, observing labour organising, or sitting with landless farmers, participants began to understand grounded, contextual, and embodied feminist politics. Mita explains:

Feminism is when you see or experience a situation of injustice, and you take action to change it, to transform what is unjust into justice for yourself and your community—that is feminism. This is what we convey in SKF and in our organisation, not only to young people, but also to other women engaged in our activities.

These relational dimensions of learning are central to SKF’s feminist pedagogy. Participants speak of the SKF as a community, a collective, even a family. They refer to each other as *teman seperjuangan*—comrades in struggle—who support each other emotionally and politically. For Dian, it was this collective that enabled her to stay when the workload and emotional labour of organising became overwhelming. “There’s an emotional bond that forms when you go through something difficult together,” she said. That bond is not only among peers but extends to grassroots women in the communities where they conduct field visits and whose issues they help to advocate. “The stories from the grassroots keep us going,” she explained, demonstrating how the collective and connections the participants make are on-going relationships.

These interconnections between local realities and feminist analysis, and between ideology and feminist practice, are central to the political subjectivities being reshaped through SKF. Unlike state civic education, which often naturalises hierarchy and obedience, SKF cultivates an alternative pedagogy that foregrounds critical consciousness, feminist care, and solidarity as the building blocks of citizenship from below. Moreover, as formal civic education in Indonesia often prioritises discipline, obedience, and rote memorisation of the Pancasila ideology, SKF nurtures reflection, slowness, and discomfort instead. Participants are not asked to memorise duties, but to interrogate who counts as a citizen, whose voices are heard, and whose lives are grievable. SKF asks: What does it mean to truly learn something? To unlearn who you are? To bear being a witness of oppression? In this space, learning is not just preparation for citizenship—it is already a form of political practice.

What Is Being Learned?

The spatial and organisational design of SKF creates conditions for a distinctive kind of feminist pedagogy—one that is rooted in informality, relationality, and collective care. Yet the infrastructure of learning alone does not explain the school’s transformative effects. The curriculum itself is crucial: it is what participants come to know, feel, and practise through their engagement in SKF. If the spaces of the school provide the grounds for alternative forms of education, the curriculum constitutes the substance of feminist citizenship-making, shaping how participants understand power, narrate their experiences, and imagine new political futures.

In SKF, learning extends beyond the acquisition of feminist concepts; it is an embodied, affective and political process of becoming. Participants learn to name power, to recognise violence not just in its spectacular forms—assault, eviction, displacement—but in the everyday routines of family, religion, bureaucracy, and economy. Through facilitated sessions, storytelling exercises, and direct engagement with grassroots communities, they begin to reframe personal experience as political condition. “Before joining SP,” Indah reflected, “I had never made a decision for myself. Every step I took followed what was expected of me. But through the feminist school, I saw that my story wasn’t just personal—it was structural”.

Participants are introduced to a range of critical concepts—patriarchy, intersectionality, structural oppression, reproductive labour—but the emphasis is not on mastering terminology. Rather, the pedagogy is dialogical and iterative. Concepts are woven through exercises like “River of Life”, critical reflections, and group discussions. For Asti, it was learning about intersectionality and sexuality that shifted her understanding of gender violence: “Before, I thought violence was only physical. But now I see how power works in many forms—emotional, economic, even spiritual.” The curriculum is not delivered didactically, but co-produced through collective reflection. Facilitators are often former students themselves, offering lived insights alongside theoretical framings. This horizontal approach allows participants to situate knowledge in their own contexts and forge analytic tools that are emotionally legible.

Equally central is the learning of affective and ethical practices. Feminist education here is not only about critique, it is also about cultivating capacities for care, listening, and emotional self-regulation. Dian recalled a session on well-being that offered strategies for recognising burnout and managing the emotional toll of organising. “We learned to listen to our bodies,” she said. “I now know when I need to pause, when I need to rest.” Participants learn to sustain themselves

not by detaching from the struggle but by acknowledging its weight. This emphasis on well-being departs significantly from mainstream activist cultures where burnout is valorised and from formal education settings that rarely attend to emotional labour.

Moreover, participants develop skills in writing, policy analysis, campaign design, and documentation. These are not merely technical competencies but are infused with political intent. Many noted that they had never written a reflective essay or advocacy document before joining SKF. Through assignments like testimonies, intersectional case analysis, and community investigation, participants learn to produce knowledge not as neutral observers, but as embedded political actors. “I didn’t realise that drawing could be part of political work,” Dian shared, referring to her visual notetaking and contributions to SP’s campaign materials. “Now I see that every skill can serve the action.”

What is being learned is not a fixed body of content but a way of seeing and acting in the world—a political literacy that links emotion with analysis, self with structure. It is a form of feminist consciousness that opens up new grammars for naming and resisting domination. Participants learn to question norms they had long accepted, that marriage is destiny, that activism is for men, that leadership means commanding others. As Irna put it, “Feminism taught me that knowledge can’t be separated from lived experience. It made me realise I was a survivor, not a victim—and that surviving is political.”

This feminist pedagogy stands in stark contrast to the state’s model of civic education, which remains rooted in moral conservatism, national loyalty, and top-down instructions. Whereas the national curriculum emphasises *tata krama* (etiquette), *kepatuhan* (obedience), and *pengabdian kepada negara* (service to the nation), SKF cultivates critical thinking, feminist ethics, and grounded solidarity. Participants are not taught what to think, but how to think critically and collectively. They are encouraged not to serve the state unquestioningly, but to hold it accountable—particularly when its policies harm the women and communities they work with. Through SKF, participants do not graduate as docile subjects of the nation but emerge as critical citizens-in-the-making. The ones who question, who connect, who care. In this sense, what is being learned is not only feminism—it is an alternative pedagogy of citizenship itself.

The feminist curriculum of SKF cannot be reduced to the transmission of concepts or the acquisition of activist skills. It is a deeply situated process through which participants learn to see themselves as political beings, to name the structures that shape their lives, and to experiment with new ways of relating to power, community, and selfhood. These practices extend beyond the remit of conventional civic education, positioning learning itself as a mode of political intervention.

At the same time, SKF’s curriculum and the commitment it demands are not always accessible or sustainable for all. This is evident in the declining number of participants between the first and second cohorts in Makassar, as well as in the dwindling attendance as each cohort progressed over several months. As Mita, the head of SP Angin Mammiri’s Board of Community, observed, participants often cited competing responsibilities—studies, family obligations, and work—as reasons for their withdrawal. Farouq, a senior facilitator and practising lawyer who led sessions on feminism from a legal perspective, reflected further: “Learning ‘how to become’ can be a painful process for these young people.” The challenge of unlearning deeply ingrained norms and confronting structural inequalities often left participants discouraged in their journey to become activist citizens.

To grasp the wider implication of this, the next section situates SKF within a broader theoretical frame, not only as an alternative educational initiative but as what we call a *citizenship laboratory*—a space in which political subjectivities are cultivated, disrupted, and reimagined through feminist pedagogy.

Alternative Education as Citizenship Laboratory

The *Sekolah Kepemimpinan Feminis (SKF)* is more than a site of alternative education. It operates as a citizenship laboratory. In contrast to the state's civic education programs, which aim to produce disciplined, governable citizens aligned with moralistic and nationalist ideals, SKF nurtures a different political imagination rooted in relationality, critique, and care. Feminist schools do not merely challenge what is taught, they disrupt the very terms of who counts as a political subject and how political agency is learned and enacted.

In Indonesia, citizenship (*kewarganegaraan*) remains historically embedded in moral, religious, and gendered expectations. State civic education and the *Pancasila* ideology foreground obedience, discipline, and service to the nation (*pengabdian*). As feminist scholars have shown, women's civic inclusion is often contingent on performances of respectable femininity, care labour and reproductive roles (Blackburn, 2004; Robinson, 2009; Sastramidjaja, 2019). Youth, too, are positioned as moral projects to be governed and improved—future leaders of the nation whose loyalty must be cultivated, not questioned, and whose *pengabdian* is valued primarily through their productivity in employment or entrepreneurship, rather than through their capacity to act politically.

SKF disrupts these frameworks by treating both women and youth not as economic units or moral subjects-in-training but as political actors-in-the-making that are capable of critique, resistance, and the remaking of civic life through activist citizenship (Isin, 2017). The school offers a counter-public space in which participants learn to analyse, narrate, and intervene in the structures that shape their lives. They do not merely receive civic knowledge, they produce feminist critiques of citizenship itself. "Before, I thought activism was only for men, or only about protests," said Fitria. "Now I know that caring for people, listening to their stories, resisting quietly—that's also political." These moments constitute what Rancière (1999, 2001) refer to as 'acts of political subjectification'—interruptions of the normative order which new subjects then emerge. Yet, as Saba Mahmood (2005) has shown, agency cannot be understood solely in terms of resistance or rupture; it also emerges through practices of cultivation, discipline, and ethical labour. This insight is vital for understanding SKF, where participants' feminist subjectivities are shaped not only through overt acts of protest but also through the slower, more painful work of self-reflection, learning and unlearning, as well as collective care.

This experimental quality is what renders SKF a laboratory, signalling its experimental and open-ended character. It is a place where participants can rehearse and test new ways of thinking, speaking, and relating. It is where one can say no to forced marriage, resist conformity, cry without shame, mourn environmental loss, and find strength in vulnerability. This is not a pedagogy of ideological coherence or activist heroism, but of critical attunement, emotional literacy, and feminist care. Feminist learning here is not about reaching a final truth. It is about creating conditions for political experimentation. As Dian put it, "We don't all have to be the same kind of feminist. The important thing is to be aware, to be present, to keep learning from each other."

In cultivating these dispositions, SKF does not simply challenge the content of state-led citizenship education, it subverts its very form. Where formal civic learning often privileges hierarchy, abstraction, and individual merit, SKF prioritises horizontality, contextual knowledge, and collective transformation. It is in the collective writing of life stories, the embodied witnessing of injustice, and the informal rituals of care that new political subjectivities are forged. As Biesta (2011) argues, democratic education must not aim to fit individuals into an existing political framework but empower them to transform it. SKF embodies this principle by enabling participants to become not merely “active citizens” who perform sanctioned roles, but what Isin (2017) calls “activist citizens” —those who constitute themselves as political through acts that challenge and exceed the normative order, beyond the state and beyond patriarchy.

This mode of citizenship-making includes a dual refusal: a refusal of the neoliberal logic that equates education with employability and a refusal of the activist imperative that demands visible, heroic forms of resistance. In doing so, SKF holds space for forms of feminist political labour that are often unrecognised including affective support, quiet persistence, relational leadership, and intergenerational solidarity. Political agency here does not depend on public recognition or formal status. It is learned through proximity, care, and the slow, situated work of building feminist futures from the ground up.

By theorising SKF as a citizenship laboratory, this article foregrounds alternative education as insurgent pedagogical spaces—where alternative political identities are not only imagined but enacted. They enable young women to unlearn the moral economies of respectability, to forge solidarities across differences, and to engage in political acts that defy the dominant scripts of national belonging. In a political moment marked by authoritarian retrenchment and intensified surveillance of dissent, such spaces do more than educate—they constitute resistance grounded politics in feminist pedagogy and transformative care.

CONCLUSION

In a context where civic education in Indonesia remains tethered to moral instruction and nationalist duty, the *Sekolah Kepemimpinan Feminis* offers a radically different vision of political pedagogy, one that is grounded in lived experience, affective solidarity, and feminist critique. Through its pedagogical practices, young women not only learn to analyse the structures that shape their lives, but more importantly, to reimagine their position within those structures—not as subjects to be governed by state ideology, but as political actors capable of critique, care, and collective action.

This article has shown how young women from diverse and often marginalised backgrounds come to SKF seeking something more than skills or credentials. They come seeking language, community, and practices to make sense of injustice—both personal and structural. What they encounter is not a rigid curriculum or fixed ideology, but a generative and open-ended process. One that enables them to unlearn shame, name violence or oppression, and experiment with new forms of subjectivity. Whether it is confronting early marriage, resisting economic marginalisation, or rethinking leadership on feminist terms, they are not only learning how to be feminist activists, but to become citizens otherwise—beyond the state’s moral economy and developmentalist logics.

By treating feminist education as a citizenship laboratory, this article has argued that SKF

cultivates a different grammar of belonging—one that is relational, embodied, and transformative. It departs from the state's disciplinary scripts, where young people are trained to perform civic obedience and respectability, and instead nurtures a feminist ethos of critical reflection, collective care, and grounded resistance. In doing so, it opens space for imagining new political futures—futures in which citizenship is not about loyalty to the state, but about commitment to justice, solidarity, and everyday acts of refusal and reimagination.

As authoritarian populism and moral conservatism tighten their grip on educational and political life in Indonesia, the existence of such feminist spaces is both increasingly urgent and precarious. They offer not only refuge but rehearsal—for new ways of learning, leading, and being in community. Their fragile, hopeful infrastructures remind us that the future of citizenship may be shaped less by institutions than by the everyday acts of feminist world-making taking place in classrooms, living rooms, and marginal spaces across the archipelago.

ENDNOTES

- 1) All names used in the article are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality and privacy of participants. While some identifying details have been altered or omitted where necessary, the author made a deliberate choice to keep the original name of the organisation.

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