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artist letter

Since around 2020, when I was actively producing children's songs, I started following some mothers' support groups on Facebook. Scrolling here and there as an observant, I was looking for insight about children, parenting, and parenthood. That's when I found out there are similar support groups on Whatsapp and decided to join one of them.

The one I joined has several groups already and the main purpose of this group is to provide a place where moms can share their problems, knowledge, and information about parenting in order to fight misinformations (especially on child health/care). In Indonesia the older generation have their own traditional way of childcare which is sometimes harmful, so this group tries to support mothers with young children by providing the more modern-pro science way. This group appears to be professional, they have admins, and in order to join you have to fill some google form that asks for your name, age, number of children etc. I don't remember the details, but they clearly asked my reason to join the group. I was being honest that I'm a songwriter who was there to observe, and that I am childless. Surprisingly, they let me in.

Being new, I was a little bit shocked when the admin posted in the group that there's a new member and asked me to introduce myself. I then realized that the group is different from the facebook one that is full of totally random strangers who can come and go. Despite how little these women know about each other, there's an effort from the admin to act as a host. I guess it is what makes their members feel welcomed and connected to each other. I ended up being interviewed by the admins and other members in a 30 minutes introduction, answering many kinds of questions from them. It's definitely not an anonymous chat group or internet forum.

While assuming I was there only to find some insight about parenting and children, I never imagined what I later found in this group would be quite diverse. It's not like they talk about politics, but the daily life story is inevitable. The kind of stories about housewife's exhaustion, the drama of living with in-laws, crazy neighbors, or even the loneliness they feel to live away from home after marriage. The members of this group sharing their stories openly, they seemingly feel safe to talk and feel connected to each other. Despite my purpose to find insight for children's songs, I ended up finding something beyond, that is the reality of life of some gen z mothers in Indonesia.

Until today, there were 166 women from all over Indonesia including me in this group. I may not be so intense to follow every single conversation they're having there. But as much as what I gather from it, I understand that these mothers are young, mostly under 30 even under 25, with a toddler/baby or two. Most of them are housewives who got married not long after finishing high school and have no personal income, while some others run small businesses from home. Only a small number of them went to university/college. Ironically, I somehow feel lost in their conversation not because I'm pretty much older than them, but because they almost never talk and act like young people in their twenties. The way they view the world, the way they talk and think seems to be older than their age, with domestic walls molding their perspective.

I came to realize that the majority of these women are conservative moslem, just like most Indonesians that think religion is the answer to everything, except the part that they are pro-science in matters of childcare. But still I can't help wondering why they seem to be having this kind of characteristic. I don't know if it's because they're conservative or because they're already settled, married and having children. Well, it can be both factors. The fact is, I didn't find the vibes of young women in their twenties in most of them. As if they don't mention their age, I'd probably think they are in their late thirties. Sometimes I wonder, do they think they aren't allowed to have some fun, to explore their interests, or to talk about their personal dreams?

Apparently, most of them seem to be very domesticated in every single way. Even though I have different life choices, it doesn't mean I want to push other women to do so. It would be great if women can have more options: to get married early, later, stay single, or to have a couple outside marriage; to go to uni or learn some skill outside formal education; to have child now, later, adopting, or to be childless. It's good to have many choices. So I try my best not to judge their choice to get married and have children at quite a young age. But to see young women viewing the world so shallow as if there's nothing left behind the walls of their house is something else.

For example, not so long ago, one of them asked for opinion about her health problems in the group. She's been bleeding from her vagina for two months non-stop and hasn't gone to the doctor yet because apparently her husband is very busy with work. Then when people asked why she didn't go by herself, she said she has two toddlers and it's going to be difficult to bring them along, and she also doesn't have anyone to look after them. Honestly, I just don't get it. In Indonesia we have super cheap health facilities in every subdistrict, and midwives nearby in every village/neighborhood. So it just doesn't make sense and is truly devastating to witness how this woman didn't have an effort for the sake of her own wellness. How can her husband be so ignorant? Doesn't that mean she also never leaves her house at all during that two month period? I decided to join the convo and told her to go to the nearest midwife to have a check, and look for a medical recommendation.

In another conversation, the other young mom told everyone how she's often feeling so sad and empty with nobody to talk to. That she's been praying everyday but still feeling the same. This was followed with some others telling how they actually feel the same. Busy husband, baby blues, exhausted, no friends, can't talk with family etc. It's miserable to read. Later on in another conversation, one of them pointed out how this group actually helps them cope with their loneliness, knowing that there are some other women like them that they can share things with. Other member then add how grateful she actually is to have friends in this group, and others agree with her. I think I agree too,

because whatever their initial purpose to join the group was, it clearly has become their new safe place.

Apparently, most of these young moms might have to be the product of religious society, conservative social construction, culture, and maybe even social-economic gap. I don't really understand how they can randomly be in the same group. Maybe it's the fact that they are Facebook users despite being gen Z, or maybe it's something else. It might be more complex and it's too early to conclude. What is clear to me is that the group chat has the power to provide them a safe place where they can meet and share their voices with other young moms without worrying to feel embarrassed or being judged, which is actually very important. They have rules here, no rude comments allowed. Beside that, it's also having economical value, with marketplace day once a week (where they can sell anything without being charged) and sharing-asking advice for small business, for example. At some point, it reminds me of 'arisan,.

Arisan is a form of social activity in Indonesia where people, usually adult women, meet in some kind of frequent gathering where they make a lucky draw to win an amount of money. The money is actually their own money they collect from every member of the arisan, those who already win cannot join the draw anymore but are still obligated to submit their money in every Arisan until everyone wins. So it's like saving money, but done in a collective way. At arisan, women can discuss and share many kinds of topics, life problems, gossip, and information, almost similar to the Whatsapp group chat but in different kinds of space. In my opinion, both provide safe spaces where women can gather, connect to each other, and benefit from the activity.

Arisan is not new and has been part of Indonesian culture from decades ago until now. As early as the 60's era, the biggest Indonesian women organization at that time, Gerwani, had adopted arisan as one of their regular activities in the grassroots. Through arisan, they provide safe space to distribute knowledge and information to the women in the grassroots. I found this information while recording the voice over for animated documentary Coded Feminism in Indonesia that told the history of feminist movement in

Indonesia. I think it's amazing to know that our first feminist movement in Indonesia is pretty grounded and culturally contextual. At the same time, this is a reminder that the need for safe space for women is real, even from decades ago.

If only I didn't join this group chat, I think I will forever look past them as only a parenting group without realizing what is really going on inside of it. This group chat may be small, but it can empower the women who joined them in its own way. It's not simply a parenting group anymore, but a safe space for young moms. Hopefully, it could also help these young moms to view the world bigger than their house walls.