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Interview with Kanti Pertiwi, Founder of PhD Mama Indonesia

Lily Yulianti Farid

Lily Yulianti Farid interviewed Dr. Kanti Pertiwi, founder of the PhD Mama Indonesia online forum (www.phdmamaindonesia.com). Dr. Pertiwi received her PhD from the Faculty of Business and Economics at the University of Melbourne in 2017. She is a mother of three daughters and a lecturer in the Faculty of Economics at the University of Indonesia. She defines a PhD Mama as a mother from Indonesia who is pursuing her doctoral degree overseas, accompanied by her husband and children.

Dr. Pertiwi created the PhD Mama Indonesia forum in 2016 as an online platform for Indonesian female doctoral students to share stories and ideas. As temporary migrants in Australia and elsewhere, these students discuss their shared problems and interests as mothers, wives, and foreign students. The site's web administrator interviews the members and invites them to write their own stories for the website. Success stories balancing doctoral studies with family life have become the main focus. The digital interaction and connection afforded by the PhD Mama forum highlight the challenges faced by middle-class Indonesian women when their culture, traditional values, and religion influence their perceptions of how to be a good mother and wife while spending four to seven years overseas to pursue an academic career.

Q: Where did you get the idea to start the PhD Mama Indonesia website?

A: I wanted to connect with other female PhD students who came to Australia accompanied by their families. That was the idea. When I arrived in Melbourne in 2012, I discovered there were several online groups that I needed to join to get tips and information about starting a new chapter in my life as a PhD student. In addition to online groups at the university, I also joined Indonesian and Islamic communities. I joined *Indomelb*, the largest Indonesian community mailing list and Facebook page, which enables users to buy and sell items and also features information about temporary accommodation and casual or part-time jobs. I also joined the Pengajian Aisyah WhatsApp group, a group of female Indonesian Muslims living in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. When I enrolled my first daughter into Moreland Primary School in Brunswick, I also joined the WhatsApp group for Indonesian families whose children go to this school. Through my interactions with other female students, I later found out that there were other female PhD students joining these online groups. Through attending Indonesian community gatherings, I found out that our shared identity as female PhD students was unique, and that we faced more challenges than male PhD students. We often discussed academic topics and our lives as PhD students in addition to other topics, such as the location of cheap grocery shops

in our neighbourhood, after-school activities for our children, easy-to-cook recipes, and information about part-time jobs for our husbands.

Before I launched the website, I joined other female Indonesian PhD students living in the northern suburbs of Melbourne—mainly in Brunswick and Coburg—in a WhatsApp group called *Srikandi Indonesia*. WhatsApp is an online platform for sharing and discussion. This group was the embryo of PhD Mama Indonesia. I wrote [an article](#) about my life as a PhD student that was published on the website of Australia Plus, an online international news service run by Australian Broadcasting Corporation. When I received positive comments from other female students and their families in response to the article, I came up with the idea to write stories about other female PhD students.

Q: Was there a particular moment that triggered you to start the website?

A: When my second daughter was born in 2015, friends from Indonesian communities visited our house in Coburg to welcome the newborn baby. I remember that occasion, when we talked about our family life and our experiences of giving birth while staying temporarily in Australia. Two or three of us spontaneously said that there was a small group of female PhD students in this neighbourhood who had also given birth while they were studying. Other students had to juggle between studying and looking after their homes and children as their husbands could not leave their jobs in Indonesia. I remember that for the first time I felt a strong solidarity among us, the PhD Mamas! We came to Melbourne to study while simultaneously looking after our children and negotiating our shared responsibilities with our husbands. At that moment, I felt a call from inside to collect the stories of PhD Mamas!

Q: I understand that to run a website you need to master some technical skills in addition to preparing the content, doing the interviews, and writing the articles. How do you organise these tasks?

A: I have learned about website creation and maintenance from scratch. After learning how to create a website using various sources, I bought a domain name and began using WordPress, a website-creation tool which I found very user friendly. The website is the main medium through which the articles are published. I see the website as a one-stop resource for women who have PhDs or are PhD candidates or prospective students. In addition to interviews and articles, the website also offers three other sections: Critical Research Corner, How To Apply To Do a PhD Degree, and PhD Mama Research Toolbox. I also created a Facebook page for PhD Mama, and it happens that the Facebook page is our main medium for online interaction, as people find Facebook to be a more convenient venue for commenting on the website's articles and sharing the articles that they think are interesting. A year after launching the website and the Facebook page, I received emails from female PhD candidates asking me to create a support circle on the Facebook page to facilitate closer interaction among women who have PhDs and female PhD candidates. In this support circle, women can share their experiences and ask for opinions or ideas about research, conferences, thesis writing, easy recipes, childcare, schools, and other stuff related to juggling motherhood and life as a PhD student.

As for my writing or journalism skills, I don't have any formal training. I decided to write the articles in a question-and-answer style because I think it is the easiest way to get the story published. One or two contributors wrote their own articles, but mostly I conducted the interviews and prepared the publication by myself. It is quite easy to do this kind of work nowadays because we are connected through social media channels. I just need to find time to write and to routinely maintain the website as I now have two little kids and a newborn baby.

Q: After two years of running the website, what are the highlights from this online project?

A: This website was created as a medium through which Mamas all over the world can exchange knowledge and share the ups and downs of pursuing a doctoral degree. Nevertheless, other menus on the website are nearly empty. The Critical Research Corner displays only one article, "Critical Social Research," which is about a research methodology. The other two menus, How To Apply To Do a PhD Degree and the PhD Mama Research Tool Box, remain empty. I am planning to upload more items on these pages; however, this plan has been repeatedly postponed due to my limited time and resources. Nevertheless, I am really glad that in the last two years I have published a dozen interviews. For me, PhD Mamas' stories are very inspiring and genuine, because in them female students share their ups and downs, the challenges and complexities of life as a PhD student when you are also fulfilling a role as a mother and wife. I have received emails and messages from readers, and I am glad that the website has become a resource for potential students when they are planning to apply for scholarships and to study overseas. These stories also function as a source of inspiration for current students. I have published articles about several extraordinary cases, including a PhD Mama who fought breast cancer, a PhD Mama with five children, and a PhD Mama who decided to bring her three children with her while studying in Australia while her husband had to stay in Indonesia. Recently, I have issued a call for contributors to a book project, and I hope that the book will be published by April 2019.