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The Portrayal of Women in *Unbelievable* Series by Lisa Cholodenko: A Social Feminist Perspective

(Representasi Perempuan dalam Serial Unbelievable Karya Lisa Cholodenko: Sebuah Perspektif Feminisme Sosial)

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the portrayal of women in the Netflix series Unbelievable (2019) directed by Lisa Cholodenko through the perspective of Nancy Fraser's social feminism. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method using feminist literary criticism as the research approach. The data consist of selected scenes, dialogues, and narrative events from the series that reflect women's experiences within social and institutional structures. Data were collected through documentation techniques and analyzed through identification, classification, categorization, and interpretation stages based on Fraser's theoretical framework. The findings reveal that the series portrays women as individuals who experience structural inequalities, institutional bias, and emotional trauma while simultaneously demonstrating resilience and agency. The dimension of economic justice is reflected in women's financial vulnerability and limited institutional support. Intersectionality appears through the influence of social background and class on women's credibility and treatment. Political representation is illustrated through women's leadership and decision-making roles within law enforcement institutions. Meanwhile, care and social reproduction are reflected in emotional support, caregiving practices.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis representasi perempuan dalam serial Netflix Unbelievable (2019) yang disutradarai oleh Lisa Cholodenko melalui perspektif feminisme sosial Nancy Fraser. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan pendekatan kritik sastra feminis. Data penelitian berupa adegan, dialog, dan peristiwa naratif terpilih dalam serial yang mencerminkan pengalaman perempuan dalam struktur sosial dan institusional. Data dikumpulkan melalui teknik dokumentasi dan dianalisis melalui tahap identifikasi, klasifikasi, kategorisasi, serta interpretasi berdasarkan kerangka teori Fraser. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa serial ini menggambarkan perempuan sebagai individu yang menghadapi ketidaksetaraan struktural, bias institusional, dan trauma emosional, sekaligus menunjukkan ketahanan serta agensi dalam menghadapi berbagai bentuk penindasan. Dimensi keadilan ekonomi tercermin dalam kerentanan finansial perempuan dan terbatasnya dukungan institusional. Interseksionalitas terlihat melalui pengaruh latar belakang sosial dan kelas terhadap kredibilitas serta perlakuan yang diterima perempuan. Representasi politik tampak melalui kepemimpinan dan keterlibatan perempuan dalam pengambilan keputusan di institusi penegak hukum. Sementara itu, kerja perawatan dan reproduksi sosial tercermin dalam dukungan emosional, praktik pengasuhan, dan kerja relasional.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in contemporary media has become a significant area of inquiry within feminist studies, as media texts shape public perceptions of gender roles, power relations, and social justice (Steeves, 1987). Television series, particularly those distributed through global streaming platforms, provide important spaces for examining gender-based violence, institutional discrimination, and social inequality (Pietarytė & Suzina, 2023). One notable example is Unbelievable (2019), directed by Lisa Cholodenko, which portrays female survivors of sexual violence and the institutional barriers they encounter when their credibility is questioned or dismissed. Darta and Kristina (2018) argue that women in film are represented in contrasting positions: as objects of male dominance and as subjects capable of expressing opinions and making independent decisions.

Previous studies indicate that women remain underrepresented and are frequently portrayed through stereotypical narratives. Pietarytė and Suzina (2023) found that women continue to experience limited representation in Netflix drama productions, both in narrative visibility and institutional participation. Dewi and Rustipa (2022) identify Unbelievable as an example of women's empowerment through its portrayal of female characters confronting institutional barriers in their pursuit of justice. Meanwhile, Moreira (2019) highlights the potential of contemporary television series to explore women's agency, identity construction, and resistance to patriarchal norms. Collectively, these studies demonstrate a shift toward more complex representations of women's struggles and resilience within unequal social structures.

Despite these contributions, research gaps remain in understanding how structural gender inequality operates within Unbelievable. Existing studies predominantly examine women's empowerment, gender roles, and general feminist interpretations, while the interconnected socioeconomic, political, and institutional dimensions of gender inequality receive less attention. In particular, the series has not been comprehensively examined through Nancy Fraser's (2013) social feminist framework, which provides a broader perspective on economic justice, intersectionality, political representation, and care and social reproduction. Consequently, the institutional mechanisms that perpetuate gender inequality and influence women's access to recognition, credibility, and justice require further investigation.

The novelty of this study lies in applying Nancy Fraser's social feminist theory as the primary analytical framework for examining women's representation in Unbelievable. Rather than focusing solely on individual experiences or empowerment, this research investigates how socioeconomic conditions, political structures, and institutional practices shape women's experiences of injustice and resistance. By examining the interconnected dimensions of gender inequality, the study contributes to feminist media scholarship by extending the discussion beyond representation toward the structural conditions influencing women's social recognition and access to justice.

Accordingly, this study aims to critically examine the portrayal of women in *Unbelievable* (2019) through the lens of social feminism. Female characters serve as the primary units of analysis, with particular attention to how their experiences reflect economic justice, intersectionality, political representation, and care and social reproduction. Through selected scenes and dialogues, the study seeks to reveal how the series depicts women's struggles against institutional bias and patriarchal structures while highlighting their resilience and agency.

This article consists of five sections. The first introduces the research background, literature review, research gap, novelty, and objectives. The second discusses the theoretical framework of social feminism and women's representation. The third outlines the research methodology. The fourth presents and discusses findings derived from selected scenes and dialogues in Unbelievable. The fifth concludes the article and provides recommendations for future research.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to analyze the portrayal of women in the Netflix series *Unbelievable* (2019) directed by Lisa Cholodenko. The study used feminist literary criticism as the research approach and applied Nancy Fraser's (2013) social feminist theory as the primary analytical framework. The researcher acted as the main instrument in collecting, selecting, and interpreting the data. The data source was the eight-episode miniseries *Unbelievable* (2019). The data consisted of selected scenes,

dialogues, and narrative events that reflected the dimensions of social feminism, namely economic justice, intersectionality, political representation, and care and social reproduction. The data were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research objectives and theoretical framework. Data were collected through documentation techniques. The researcher watched the series repeatedly, examined the transcripts, identified relevant scenes and dialogues, and documented them through screenshots and dialogue excerpts. The collected data were then classified according to the four dimensions of social feminism. Furthermore, data analysis was conducted through four stages: identification, classification, categorization, and interpretation. The selected data were first identified and grouped into thematic categories. Subsequently, the data were interpreted using Nancy Fraser's (2013) social feminist theory to explain how women are portrayed within social and institutional structures. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the researcher conducted repeated observations and data verification throughout the analytical process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Economic Justice

The findings reveal that economic vulnerability significantly shapes women's experiences in Unbelievable. One of the most notable examples appears when Marie is encouraged to correct her statement to the police, yet she prioritizes her employment obligations:

> BECCA: "If there is a rapist running around and you've told the police there isn't, you need to go back and clear that up, now."
>
> MARIE: "But I gotta go to work." (Episode 1, 00:49:26–00:49:34)

Marie's response demonstrates that economic survival becomes more urgent than addressing her own trauma. The phrase "I gotta go to work" reflects financial necessity rather than personal preference. Fraser (2013) argues that economic injustice occurs when institutional structures place disadvantaged groups in conditions that restrict their ability to participate equally in society. In Marie's case, the absence of adequate social support forces her to prioritize employment despite the psychological consequences of sexual violence. Furthermore, the scene exposes a contradiction within institutional responses. While authorities expect Marie to cooperate fully with legal procedures, they fail to provide the material support necessary for her recovery. This finding supports Kasimoglu and Celik's (2019) argument that female characters are frequently portrayed within unequal socio-economic structures that limit their autonomy. However, unlike conventional victim narratives, Unbelievable portrays Marie as a resilient individual who continues fulfilling her responsibilities despite systemic obstacles.

Beyond individual financial hardship, Marie's situation illustrates how inadequate social protection can reinforce gender-based economic inequality. Her obligation to continue working despite experiencing sexual violence suggests that employment does not necessarily guarantee economic independence when financial necessity limits an individual's ability to prioritize personal well-being. Pruce (2023), drawing on Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice, demonstrates how gendered expectations and institutional decisions concerning social assistance can produce material disadvantages for women. Similarly, Cookson et al. (2024) emphasize that gender-responsive social protection requires a comprehensive system capable of addressing women's vulnerabilities across different circumstances, rather than relying on isolated support programs. These perspectives deepen the interpretation of Marie's experience by highlighting the limitations of expecting survivors to remain economically self-sufficient without adequate institutional assistance.

3.2 Intersectionality

The findings indicate that women's experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by intersecting social identities and socioeconomic circumstances. Marie's background as a participant in a transitional housing program illustrates how social disadvantage can influence her position within broader institutional structures. Her association with the program suggests that her experiences must be understood in relation to the material conditions and social support systems that shape her everyday life. From Fraser's (2013) social feminist perspective, intersectional inequality highlights the ways different structures of disadvantage can interact and affect individuals' opportunities for recognition and participation. In Marie's case, gender intersects with socioeconomic vulnerability, potentially influencing how others perceive her credibility and social position. This perspective shifts the analysis beyond gender-based discrimination alone to examine how social class and institutional dependency may compound women's experiences of marginalization. By portraying Marie within this broader social context, Unbelievable illustrates the importance of considering women's diverse circumstances when examining inequality and access to justice. One example of this intersectional dimension appears when a news reporter discusses the residents of the Oakdale Apartments:

> NEWS REPORTER: "Many of the residents in these Oakdale Apartments are part of the Rise Up program, which helps young adults transition while..." (Episode 1, 00:02:28–00:02:34)

This statement highlights Marie's position within a socially vulnerable group through her association with the Rise Up transitional housing program. Her connection to this program indicates that her social circumstances are shaped by institutional support and potential socioeconomic insecurity. Rather than being recognized solely as a survivor of sexual violence, Marie is also situated within a broader social context that influences how others perceive her identity. From Fraser's (2013) social feminist perspective, inequality must be understood through the interaction of multiple structural conditions that affect individuals' opportunities for recognition and participation. In Marie's case, gender intersects with socioeconomic disadvantage and social status, potentially intensifying her vulnerability within institutional settings. This representation suggests that women's experiences of injustice cannot be separated from the material and social conditions in which they live. A similar pattern appears when a police officer discusses Marie's personal history:

OFFICER: "You've been through a lot. I mean, no dad, unreliable mom… then foster care, which wasn't always much better, I'm sure." (Episode 1, 00:38:42–00:39:02)

Although the officer's statement appears sympathetic, it shifts attention from Marie's reported assault toward her personal and family background. By emphasizing the absence of her father, her mother's unreliability, and her experience in foster care, the officer frames Marie's vulnerability through her previous life circumstances. This framing suggests that her social history may influence how institutional actors interpret her experiences and assess her credibility. From Fraser's (2013) social feminist perspective, this interaction illustrates how social inequalities can intersect with gender and affect an individual's recognition within institutional settings. The scene also demonstrates how seemingly compassionate language can reproduce stigmatizing assumptions when a person's background becomes more prominent than the harm she reports. This interpretation aligns with Nulman's (2014) argument that institutional systems may associate credibility with social status rather than objective evidence. Consequently, Marie's experience exposes how marginalized women can face additional barriers to recognition when their personal histories shape institutional perceptions of their trustworthiness. Through this portrayal, *Unbelievable* critiques the social judgments that undermine survivors' credibility and complicate their pursuit of justice.

Furthermore, Marie's experience demonstrates that intersectional inequality operates not only through the conditions individuals experience but also through the institutional assumptions that shape how they are perceived and treated. Her position as a young woman with a history of family instability and foster care places her at the intersection of gender-based vulnerability and social marginalization. Christoffersen (2023) argues that intersectional analysis must move beyond treating gender as an isolated category and instead examine how multiple structures of inequality interact to disadvantage marginalized groups. Similarly, Cole and Duncan (2023) emphasize that applying an intersectional framework requires institutions to consider how individuals' intersecting social positions shape their experiences, needs, and access to support. These perspectives help explain why Marie's personal history becomes significant in the series: rather than focusing exclusively on the evidence of sexual violence, institutional actors repeatedly interpret her circumstances through assumptions associated with her disadvantaged background.

3.3 Political Representation

The dimension of political representation is reflected through the leadership roles of Detectives Grace Rasmussen and Karen Duvall, who exercise authority within law enforcement institutions. Unlike traditional portrayals that associate leadership and decision-making primarily with male characters, Unbelievable presents women as active participants in determining investigative priorities and professional procedures. Their positions demonstrate that women can exercise institutional power and influence organizational decisions rather than merely occupy subordinate roles. From Fraser's (2013) perspective, political representation involves meaningful participation in decision-making processes, ensuring that individuals have the opportunity to influence matters affecting their lives and society. Through Rasmussen and Duvall, the series illustrates women's participation in institutional structures where their professional judgments shape investigative practices. Their representation also challenges gender stereotypes that question women's suitability for positions of authority and responsibility. However, their presence in leadership positions is significant not simply because they are women, but because they actively exercise their authority in pursuing justice. One example appears when Rasmussen establishes professional expectations for her investigative team:

GRACE RASMUSSEN: "I do expect everyone on my team to give me 100 percent of their effort 100 percent of the time." (Episode 2, 00:19:32–00:19:47)

This dialogue demonstrates Rasmussen's institutional authority through her explicit expectations of professional commitment and accountability. The phrase "my team" establishes her position as a leader responsible for supervising personnel and directing their work. By demanding consistent effort from every team member, Rasmussen emphasizes discipline, responsibility, and adherence to professional standards. From Fraser's (2013) perspective, this portrayal reflects political representation because women are presented as active participants in institutional leadership and decision-making rather than merely occupying positions for symbolic inclusion. Rasmussen's authority challenges traditional gender stereotypes that associate leadership

and organizational control primarily with men. Furthermore, her emphasis on collective responsibility suggests that effective investigations require coordinated efforts and clearly established professional expectations. However, the scene also indicates that women's representation in positions of authority involves exercising institutional power and fulfilling the responsibilities associated with leadership. Therefore, *Unbelievable* portrays Rasmussen as a capable female leader whose authority shapes workplace expectations and contributes to the broader representation of women in law enforcement institutions. Another significant example occurs when Rasmussen decides to coordinate multiple agencies:

> GRACE RASMUSSEN: "So, here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna merge our investigations. Today. Right now. We're gonna bring in the FBI. We're gonna bring in the CBI." (Episode 6, 00:48:00–00:48:14)

This dialogue highlights Rasmussen's ability to mobilize institutional resources and influence investigative strategies through decisive leadership. The repeated phrase "we're gonna" functions as a directive that communicates authority, determination, and control over the investigative process. In proposing the integration of multiple investigations, Rasmussen demonstrates her capacity to recognize the limitations of isolated efforts and pursue a more coordinated approach. Her decision to involve the FBI and the CBI also illustrates how women in leadership positions can initiate interagency collaboration to strengthen the pursuit of justice. According to Pietarytė and Suzina (2023), contemporary television increasingly portrays women in positions of authority, challenging traditional gender stereotypes. Rasmussen's leadership supports this perspective by presenting a female detective who actively determines investigative priorities rather than merely following decisions made by others. Furthermore, her actions demonstrate that women's participation in institutional decision-making can have practical consequences for investigative progress and the pursuit of accountability. Therefore, *Unbelievable* challenges conventional gender expectations by portraying Rasmussen as an authoritative decision-maker whose leadership contributes to addressing institutional failures and achieving justice for survivors.

> RASMUSSEN: "Engaging the FBI was our idea."
>
> DUVALL: "Most immediately, we need you to expedite a Y-STR analysis." (Episode 8, 00:05:30–00:05:34)

These statements demonstrate that both detectives possess the authority to establish institutional priorities and direct investigative procedures. Rasmussen's statement, "Engaging the FBI was our idea," emphasizes her initiative in expanding the investigation through interagency collaboration. Meanwhile, Duvall's request to expedite the Y-STR analysis reflects her ability to communicate investigative priorities and demand timely action. Their dialogue illustrates meaningful female participation in institutional decision-making rather than merely symbolic representation. This portrayal challenges traditional gender stereotypes that associate authority, leadership, and professional competence primarily with men. By exercising their respective roles, Rasmussen and Duvall influence investigative strategies and mobilize institutional resources to strengthen the pursuit of justice. Their collaboration also demonstrates that effective law enforcement depends on women's professional expertise and active involvement in organizational processes. Therefore, Unbelievable represents women not only as participants in law enforcement but also as influential decision-makers capable of shaping institutional practices and advancing justice for survivors.

Nevertheless, the series also invites a distinction between women's presence in positions of authority and their ability to produce meaningful institutional change. Pyo and Lee (2023) demonstrate that gender representation within police organizations can influence investigative outcomes, particularly when female officers occupy different hierarchical positions and their representation is considered collectively. Similarly, Matusiak and Frazier (2024) identify organizational structures and promotion practices as important factors associated with women's representation in supervisory positions within law enforcement agencies. These findings provide a useful context for interpreting Rasmussen and Duvall's leadership in Unbelievable. Their authority is demonstrated not merely through their professional titles but through their capacity to coordinate investigations, mobilize institutional resources, and prioritize evidence that might otherwise be overlooked. Their collaboration with federal investigators further illustrates how women can exercise institutional influence beyond the boundaries of their immediate departments.

3.4 Care and Social Reproduction

The findings also reveal the importance of care and emotional labor in supporting survivors of violence. One example occurs when Detective Duvall responds to Amber's emotional distress:

> DUVALL: "You sound like someone who's been through a trauma and is looking for a way to feel safe again and in control. And there is nothing crazy about that." (Episode 3, 00:18:12–00:18:28)

This dialogue illustrates Duvall's empathetic approach to supporting survivors by acknowledging Amber's emotional distress without questioning or dismissing her experience. By recognizing Amber's desire to feel safe and regain control, Duvall demonstrates an understanding of how trauma can affect an individual's

sense of security and emotional well-being. The phrase "there is nothing crazy about that" functions as emotional reassurance, challenging the tendency to perceive trauma-related responses as irrational or abnormal. From Fraser's (2013) perspective, this interaction reflects care and social reproduction because emotional support helps sustain individuals' psychological well-being and capacity to navigate difficult circumstances. Duvall's response also demonstrates emotional labor, as she must recognize Amber's distress and communicate understanding in a way that reduces feelings of shame and isolation. Rather than treating the interaction as a purely procedural aspect of police work, the scene emphasizes the importance of recognizing survivors' emotional needs. This portrayal suggests that meaningful support requires institutions to acknowledge the psychological consequences of violence alongside the pursuit of legal justice. Therefore, Unbelievable presents empathy and emotional validation as essential dimensions of care that can help survivors rebuild their sense of safety, dignity, and control.

REMY: "Hey, talk to me. I'm your friend, remember?" (Episode 1, 00:21:57–00:22:10)

This interaction demonstrates informal emotional labor, as Remy offers Marie emotional availability and social support through her willingness to listen. By reminding Marie of their friendship, Remy creates a sense of trust and encourages her to express her feelings without fear of judgment. Although Remy cannot directly resolve Marie's problems, her presence provides reassurance and helps alleviate Marie's feelings of isolation. From Fraser's (2013) perspective, this interaction reflects care and social reproduction because emotional support contributes to an individual's psychological well-being and ability to navigate difficult circumstances. However, the scene also highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships in addressing emotional needs that formal institutions may overlook. Therefore, Unbelievable portrays recovery as a process that depends not only on legal justice but also on informal networks of care that provide emotional stability and social connection.

JUDITH: "What do I want for Marie long-term? Security, stability, success."

(Episode 1, 00:12:55–00:13:13)

This dialogue highlights Judith's long-term caregiving priorities through her emphasis on "security, stability, success" as essential elements of Marie's future well-being. These three terms indicate that Judith's concern extends beyond addressing Marie's immediate circumstances to establishing conditions that support her continued development. By considering Marie's long-term needs, Judith demonstrates an understanding that recovery requires more than temporary assistance or the resolution of legal issues. From Fraser's (2013) perspective, this interaction reflects care and social reproduction because caregiving contributes to individuals' well-being and sustains the social relationships necessary for everyday life. Judith's concern also illustrates the importance of providing vulnerable individuals with consistent guidance and a stable environment in which they can rebuild their lives. Rather than defining support solely through emotional reassurance, the scene emphasizes the role of practical security and future-oriented planning in caregiving. This representation suggests that meaningful care involves recognizing an individual's long-term needs and supporting their ability to achieve greater independence. Therefore, *Unbelievable* portrays caregiving as an essential form of social support that contributes to Marie's long-term well-being, personal development, and prospects for a more secure future.

Furthermore, Unbelievable highlights that care should be understood not merely as an expression of personal compassion but also as relational work that enables survivors to regain a sense of safety, dignity, and social connection. Pugh (2024) conceptualizes "connective labor" as the emotional work involved in recognizing others' experiences and demonstrating understanding, emphasizing that care is shaped by interpersonal interactions as well as broader inequalities. This perspective is reflected in Duvall's validation of Amber's trauma and Remy's willingness to listen to Marie, as both characters acknowledge emotional suffering without dismissing the survivors' experiences. In addition, Jones et al. (2024) examine how emotional and embodied labor contributes to social reproduction while remaining undervalued within broader social and economic structures. Although their study focuses on hospitality workers rather than survivors of sexual violence, its analysis of the often-invisible labor required to sustain well-being provides a useful theoretical parallel.

3.5 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Unbelievable portrays women as individuals who confront interconnected forms of oppression while simultaneously exercising agency and resilience. Economic justice is reflected through women's financial vulnerability, intersectionality through overlapping social disadvantages, political representation through female leadership in law enforcement, and care and social reproduction through emotional support and caregiving practices. These findings confirm Fraser's (2013) argument that gender inequality cannot be understood through a single dimension but must be analyzed through the interaction of economic, political, and social structures. Furthermore, the series challenges traditional portrayals of women as passive victims by presenting female characters as survivors, leaders, caregivers, and agents of institutional change. Consequently, Unbelievable serves as a significant feminist text that exposes

structural inequalities while advocating greater recognition, representation, and justice for women in contemporary society.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the portrayal of women in Unbelievable (2019) reflects the four dimensions of Nancy Fraser's social feminism: economic justice, intersectionality, political representation, and care and social reproduction.

a. Economic justice is reflected through Marie's financial vulnerability, which forces her to prioritize employment over emotional recovery after experiencing sexual violence. This demonstrates how economic inequality can limit women's ability to access support and recovery.
b. Intersectionality is represented through Marie's experiences as a young woman from a foster-care and transitional-housing background. Her social status and class position influence how institutions perceive and evaluate her credibility, showing that women's oppression is shaped by multiple interconnected factors.
c. Political representation is illustrated through the leadership roles of Detectives Karen Duvall and Grace Rasmussen. Their authority in directing investigations and making institutional decisions demonstrates women's active participation in positions of power and decision-making.
d. Care and social reproduction are reflected through the emotional support, empathy, and caregiving provided by female characters. These forms of care contribute to survivors' well-being.

4.2 Suggestions/Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, future researchers are encouraged to examine Unbelievable or other feminist television series using different feminist perspectives, such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, or intersectional feminism, to provide broader insights into women's representation in media. Furthermore, future studies may compare the portrayal of women across different television series or streaming platforms to explore how contemporary media constructs gender, power, and social justice in diverse cultural contexts. Finally, media producers are encouraged to continue presenting complex and realistic female characters that challenge gender stereotypes and promote equality within society.

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