

Women in Aceh and Women's NGOs

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Nunuk is a member of the National Commission on Anti Violence Against Women, and the coordinator of a sub-commission tasked to monitor the situation of the Aceh women. She was in the area in August 2003. In this article, Nunuk shares her reflections on the role of women

NGOs in assisting the women in Aceh. Banda Aceh is the one of the oldest Islam city in South East Asia. This city is 798 years old, and is the capital of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD) Province. NAD is located in North West part of Indonesia. Most of Aceh people are moslem. That is why, Aceh is called "Serambi Mekkah" or "the Veranda of Mekkah". Now in Aceh, the local government applies "Syariat Islam" (Islam Laws) in NAD. Today, people all over the world know that NAD is the one of the areas with serious and intense armed conflict in Indonesia. It was only in August 1998 that Aceh was freed from the Military Operation Area (Daerah Operasi Militer = DOM).

Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam is a beautiful place with greens of plantation, most are rice fields, and blue of her seashore, full of fish. Unfortunately, the Aceh people are experiencing nightmare for a long time. With the failure of the peace negotiations between Indonesian Government and Aceh Freedom Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka=GAM) last February 2003, President Megawati decided to launch operation against GAM. The people of Aceh have not yet fully recovered from the military rule, and yet they have to face another armed conflict. The Indonesian military want to destroy GAM completely. They arrested GAM's leaders, including "Inong Bale", GAM women's military. Many GAM members surrendered to Indonesian government.

Since Aceh became an armed conflict area, violence against humanity painted the life of Aceh society. This is especially true for the women and children. They have to witness killings and blood every where, at any time. The GAM also recruited women to join them. These women are called "inongbale". GAM trained inong bale how to use gun and how to attack the Indonesian military. Inong bale live in the villages, mountain areas, and jungle. Even though they live in a military situation and act as soldiers, they still perform their reproductive function. The basic needs of women were not considered as priorities, even by themselves. They live in constant danger as soldiers, as they live under constant threat of rape and sexual harassment as women.



On the other side of people's life, the Aceh women suffer from social, economic, political and cultural life. Their lives have been destroyed by armed conflict. From this situation, women organizations emerged. Among these are Flower Aceh, RPuK (Women Volunteer for Humanity), SeIA (Inong = Mother Aceh Association), LBH Apik (Legal Institution

for Women), and PEKKA (Association for Aceh Widows). These organisations assist the women who are suffering from this violent situation. According to the report of Komnas Perempuan (Indonesian National Commission on Anti Violence Against Women), the fact-finding missions began when the survivors of violence against women during military operations gave their testimonies. The women in Aceh were raped, tortured, kidnapped, and made to disappear.

“Rumah geudong” (Geudong House) in Aceh is the symbol of violence against women. In that place, hundreds of women and children experienced to be killed, tortured and raped by the military. Almost all of the victims are women accused of being part of the family of GAM members. Their testimonies gave inspiration to uncover more facts. Finally, the Indonesian government revoked military operation area on August 1998. However, this did not mean the women’s suffering were over. The cycle of violence continued. The military arrested “inong bale”, GAM’s wives and their families.

But the violence against women came not only from Indonesian military. Violations are also committed by the GAM military. In an armed conflict situation, one could hear not only the guns banging, but even louder at times, is the cry of the people.

“..... One day, it was very early in the morning. Between 1.00 am and 4.00 am, people heard gun shots then came a group of military. It was not clear from which group.. They had guns, red cloth tied around their foreheads and faces covered with mask. They came from Cot Girek, north part of Aceh. They said that they want to arrest all of the GAM’s people. They rounded up all the people of the village, burned up their houses, robbed people’s things and then they tortured, sexually harassed and raped the women” (Document of Human Rights Commission, March 7, 2000)

The description above is only one of the many stories of women suffering in Aceh. In August 2003, I visited Banda Aceh to do my task. As a member of Komnas Perempuan and coordinator of monitoring subcommission, I have the task to strengthen our networking with our women organisation friends in Aceh. Nowadays, there is a court martial for rape cases in Banda Aceh and Lhoksumawe. Those cases were filed based on the findings from the investigations of the Human Rights Commission after August 1998. Today, Komnas Perempuan is monitoring the situation of women in Aceh and is in the process of trying out ways how to establish that violations against women committed in Aceh are crimes against humanity. This is one of the objectives of my visit to Aceh, to conduct consultation among our friends women organisations. I met with RPuK, PEKKA, SeIA and LBH “Apik”.



RPuK, Relawan Perempuan untuk Kemanusiaan (Women Volunteer for Humanity), is a group of women which has activities to assist the women and children victims. Azriana, a lawyer from RpuK who works in Lhoksumawe, told me that in Lhoksumawe, there is an

ongoing trial of a rape case in court martial. However, the process is not running well because rape cases are usually considered as a private crime. The court cannot prove that this case is a crime against humanity. Therefore, the judge handed down light punishment to the perpetrators.

Chaerani, also from RpuK, said that there are many women who have not yet been reached or contacted, so their experiences are not documented. But she is very sure that there are still many women who are victims of sexual crime against humanity in the villages and mountain area. Chaerani works with a team who visits the villages and mountain areas, and the jungle, to provide assistance to the women and children. According to the team, there is almost always a political motivation in every rape case. The perpetrator of a rape of a woman is not only because of his sexual hunger, but he has other objectives, that is to get to her husband/father, or her family, or her community. A soldier flatters a girl from a village, then he demands her to become his honey. Sexual harassment or rape usually happens during this love affair. When the girl becomes pregnant, he goes away, leaves this girl. Then another soldier will replace his position, live together with this girl, same thing will happen over and over again.

Ratna Fitri, Ida and Rosnaeni work in PEKKA, a Widows Association in Aceh. They said that the women situation is really miserable, especially for the widows who have lost their husbands to kidnappings, arrests, or killings during “military operations”. Their life, especially economic life, has been destroyed. They have lost their jobs, market, rice fields, plantation, houses, and other sources of livelihood. PEKKA assists them to start with small-scale productive activities. Many women and children suffer trauma, hysteria, and disturbance of their reproduction function. Hopelessness envelops them. The women have become absolutely dependent on these financial assistance that they are becoming powerless. This is especially true with the financial grants from the government. The government only gives money or material, without any programme for empowerment. This policy creates dependency from the people. Yet, through the women community development in the grassroots level, they find their hope for life, little by little.

Yanti from SeIA, Serikat Inong Aceh (Aceh Mother Association), told me that she works for women at the grassroots level. SeIA has more than 400 members. All members are concerned with their own social economic problems. Through home visits, Yanti gets to know about the women problems, then she with her group assist them to solve their problems. This women community organises cooperatives. Yanti’s group works together with regional government, particularly the social welfare department. The team work of SeIA also takes care of victims of domestic violence. Culture and religion are still big constraints for women’s freedom from violence against women in the family.

Sarifah, is a woman lawyer who works with Lembaga Bantuan Hukum (LBH) “Apik”, a Legal Institution for women. She told me that she has a client, an “inong bale”, arrested and detained in the police camp. She knows that this “inong bale” was not only tortured like the other men detainees, but also was raped. But, Sarifah said, she cannot do anything with this “additional sexual crime”, because there are no laws to support her. She said that this situation are also happening with other women detainees, like a woman

journalist, GAM's wives, and one of our friends, a woman activist, who was arrested by the police.

These stories of our friends from Aceh give us a description of the situation of women in Aceh. They told me, however, that they would like to tell more of their stories of how they are surviving, rather than suffering. They said that they are getting bored with telling sad stories. They also do not like it when people come and they only want to know the situation but do nothing for them. So they said: "If you want to know about us, please go with me to visit our sisters and her family in the village, in the mountain area, in the jungle, and assist them with what they need". They need to be accompanied to step back again on the path of life ahead.

From the consultation with some women organisations in Aceh, I concluded that :

- The sexual crimes against humanity are still happening, and women are the primary victims of these. We need to design a protocol for monitoring and documenting these.
- These crimes have physical, psychological, and social impacts on the victims. They first need to recover and be empowered to become survivors.
- Most of the time, these crimes are not reported, and are even covered up because people consider these incidents as source of humiliation. Therefore, we need to expose these violations and crimes.
- There are many people who have a gender-biased perspective, such that sexual crimes are considered to be common affairs only.
- The violent situation creates trauma and constant fear.
- To be raped is an experience that brings problems throughout a woman's life; an experience that will never be forgotten by her, and will never give her peace.
- The laws in Indonesia are not fair and sensitive to the victims. Most cases were processed and resolved with biases against the victims.
- To help the victims recover, it requires special and sensitive approach. When we apply inappropriate approaches, we only cause additional suffering. One-stop crisis center has been one of the approaches being applied.
- Unfortunately, the Women NGOs and other women organisations in Aceh have not worked together yet. They have not built synergies movement yet. On the other hand, women organisations outside Aceh have been trying to support women in Aceh. However, some of them have inappropriate approaches, making the women from Aceh feel more disempowered, even disturbed. According to them, these "inappropriate help" becomes more of a burden for the women. The Aceh's NGOs think that it is because the NGOs outside Aceh do not understand the real situation in Aceh and do not have the experience of living in Aceh.

Finally, I want to say, sometimes, our sincere desire to help does not always coincide with the results of what we are doing, if we start from our perspective. If we really want to empower women, our starting point should always be from theirs.

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