



Gender, violence, and power in Indonesia: across time and space

edited by Katharine McGregor, Ana Dragojlovic, and Hannah Loney, London, Routledge, 2020, 228 pp., £120.00 (hbk), ISBN 9780367901974

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BOOK REVIEW

Gender, violence, and power in Indonesia: across time and space, edited by Katharine McGregor, Ana Dragojlovic, and Hannah Loney, London, Routledge, 2020, 228 pp., £120.00 (hbk), ISBN 9780367901974

Several books have discussed the sexual violence experienced by women in Indonesia, examining factors of power and strength. For instance, Annie Pohlman's 2014 monograph, which describes the problems of sexual violence experienced by Indonesian women during the massacre by the government of the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI; Indonesian Communist Party) and its sympathizers in 1965–1966; and Pauline Stolz's 2020 volume, which examines incidents of sexual violence during three different conflict events under three different governments during the period 1942–1965: Japanese occupation, Dutch military aggression, and Indonesia's Old and New Order. These two books concluded that in power structures dominated by patriarchal interests and in areas of conflict, women are never free from sexual violence.

This edited volume, *Gender, Violence and Power in Indonesia: Across Time and Space*, presents a comprehensive and thorough account of incidents of violence against women in Indonesia, covering the Dutch colonial era, the Japanese occupation, the enactment of military operations in Aceh, the occupation of East Timor by the Indonesian Government, as well as internal violence, such as the 1965 PKI rebellion and the 1998 racial riots against ethnic Chinese. The book discusses the impact of power on the emergence of violence against women (sexual and non-sexual, physical and psychological) within various structures, including military, legal and political power, and power arising from the robust patriarchal system in Indonesia.

As stated by the editors, Katharine McGregor, Ana Dragojlovic and Hannah Loney, the contributors, who are gender researchers at doctoral and post-doctoral levels, provide their experiences to enrich and broaden our understanding of this issue. The book is of value not only to those interested in gender and Indonesia, but also for those interested in military, legal and political affairs, and patriotism in Indonesia.

My review is grouped into three main themes: military and gendered violence; politics, women and racism; and domestic violence and the patriarchal system in Indonesia.

The military theme dominates this book; four chapters discuss the violence experienced by women during the colonial period and under military rule. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss women and gender violence shortly before and after Indonesia's independence, highlighting how the Japanese and Dutch treated women for their sexual needs. There were different forms of sexual violence in these eras, including forced marriages, prostitution, sex slavery and domestic work, including sexual services of *babus* or housemaids. In Chapter 2, McGregor explores the hidden stories of women through archive records from the Japanese Occupation of the Netherlands East Indies and journalist reports in early 1990. In Chapter 3, Susie Protschky analyses imagery from personal photographs of Dutch soldiers who fought against Indonesia during the Indonesian National Revolution in 1945–1949. Child violence is also explored in both chapters.

The sexual pleasure of Dutch soldiers was not necessarily planned. They were not allowed access to prostitution, but they tried to turn their military barracks into places of comfort, like home, during the Indonesian national revolution. Women worked as *babus* in the barracks,

and pictures in this chapter show Dutch soldiers in romantic poses with their *babus*, including hugging their shoulder or holding hands. The writers highlight the occupiers' perceived need for sex while they were far away from their partners or family. Therefore *babus* could earn income to survive by performing domestic work, including sexual services, for the Dutch soldiers in barracks.

By contrast, during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia (Netherland Indies), the sexual needs of Japanese soldiers were planned and provided for by Japan. The term 'comfort women' was used to deceive the world that Indonesian and other women under Japanese occupation were adequately treated. The different missions of the two occupying forces may have impacted their treatment of Indonesian women: Japan aiming to capture Indonesia from the Dutch, while the Dutch colonized Indonesia for over three and a half centuries.

Chapter 4, by Hannah Loney and Annie Pohlman, presents a dramatic visual analysis of a series of photos of violence during the Indonesian Army's occupation of East Timor. They focus on three out of 200 extant photos representing the forms of violence experienced by women at the hands of those suspected of being Indonesian Government soldiers. The written descriptions of the three photos evoke the suffering of the victims. Two photos are of young women of similar age, and one is of a high school teenager wearing white and light blue clothes. As the authors write, recalling the Abu Ghraib photographs, the camera does not capture the full horror of such incidents. The three photos had different backgrounds but shared the same theme: a female figure who had suffered greatly under military intimidation. The victims were partially or fully undressed, and their bodies bore marks of physical violence as well as satirical slogans that had been added by soldiers, such as: '*Jagoan Bodoh* (Stupid Champion)', '*Hidup Hadiah Nobel* (Long Live the Nobel Prize)', written on their skin or on signs and labels. The authors quote Geoffrey Robinson's (2006) report to the United Nations:

Torture and ill-treatment, like unlawful killing, had for years been part of standard Indonesian counter-insurgency strategy in Timor-Leste [... and] were also used, as they had been for many years, as methods for extracting information about the pro-independence movement. (94)

Such a strategy of physical and sexual violence and then widespread exposure is commonly used by invaders during wars, whether or not the military are from strongly religious countries. Is this a mere strategy of war, or a deliberate attempt to strengthen solidarity among the male-dominated military, as a form of the patriarchal system's masculinity? The authors could have done more to address such questions.

The massacre of activists and people associated with the PKI has been widely studied in various media, from novels, dramas and dance to academic and scientific writings, inside and outside Indonesia. After successfully thwarting the rebellion, the Indonesian Military dominated the discourse to justify what later became known as the mass slaughter of the ex-PKI. The New Order military government succeeded in instilling a discourse hegemony in the subconscious of the Indonesian people: that the former PKI were the guilty ones, and that the Government had the right to punish them, including committing violence against former members of *Gerwani* (a women's organization under the PKI), legitimized in the name of moral and ideological assumptions that communists were common enemies.

In Chapter 5, Wulan Dirgantoro and Barbara Hatley provide an alternative perspective to this hegemonic discourse, analysing two plays that, in my opinion, elegantly give voice to victims of the mass slaughter. The first play, *Nyanyian sunyi kembang-kembang genjer* (*Silent Song of Genjer Flowers* by Faiza Mardzuki), depicts typical experiences of the oppressed, in this case, women who are powerless to fight back. A grandmother describes

the sadness she felt of being separated from her son when she was arrested by the military for associating with the G30S/PKI, and, even more tragically, the sexual harassment she suffered in captivity. In my opinion, the play portrays the anguish of survivors of the massacre: that they were also ordinary human beings who felt sad about defeat and had to endure the shame of sexual harassment. The military's actions towards such women, whatever their reasons, is unjustifiable and caused prolonged physical and psychological trauma.

The second drama, *Gejolak Makam Keramat* (*Turmoil at the Sacred Grave*, by Agung Kurniawan) depicts a typical defence that PKI activists offer about the philosophical and fundamental reasons that caused them to fight the government. That is a kind of general communist doctrine regarding the clash between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie; however, this ideological area is unfortunately not fully explored by the authors of this chapter.

This review now turns to the second theme: politics, women and racism. In Chapter 6, Monica Winarnita and Ken M.P. Setiawan explore one of the sensitive themes that, until now, have remained in the shadows. No one claims responsibility for the events that occurred during the transition of power in 1998; due to chaotic conditions, it remains unclear who was involved, whether from within or outside the government, or abroad. The sexual violence against Chinese women was a tragedy, described as 'the peak of the nation's savagery' by the fact-finding team of May 1998. Even President Habibie, the first president after Suharto, made a statement confirming this, as published in a report by the National Commission on Violence against Women.

After I heard the reports of the women from the Society against Violence towards Women, containing clear and authentic evidence, [I] express my deep regret that such violence occurred, which is not following the values and culture of the Indonesian people. (Komnas Perempuan 2006, 18)

This brutal incident can be examined from many angles, including politics, racism, economics and social jealousy. It caused the exodus of many Chinese citizens from Indonesia to neighbouring countries such as Singapore and Australia. Later, they became the spearhead to give testimony about their experiences to the Indonesian public, which triggered extensive research and publications by Chinese-Indonesian academics. As an example of such research, this chapter contributes much to our understanding of inter-ethnic conflicts in Indonesia. Further studies should explore the actions of Indonesia's neighbours to protect Chinese-Indonesians during the chaos in 1998 to reduce stigma surrounding the inter-ethnic conflicts.

In Chapter 9, Annemarie Samuels provides an in-depth explanation of gendered violence, structural violence and gendered care within a context of nonintervention, unequal access to health care, and the politics of HIV in Aceh. She depicts in detail the experiences of two HIV-positive women, both from low-income families, and highlights how two types of silence around healthcare and violence intersect within their lives. The first silence is 'an absence that shapes health care access in gendered ways, aggravating the socio-historical conditions through which gendered violence persists.' The second silence is 'the work of HIV-positive women and, sometimes, their families to make life liveable under the threat of serious illness and social death' (182). She provides a comprehensive explanation of intersecting factors to understand violence in Indonesia, focusing on these marginalized women, particularly in Sumatra.

Several chapters examine domestic violence and the patriarchal system in Indonesia. In Chapter 7, Ana Dragojlovic offers an interesting discussion about the feelings experienced by Dutch soldiers who remained behind in the Dutch East Indies (before independence). Some became foreigners in other countries, and many were treated inhumanely by Japanese soldiers as prisoners of war. Lyrics from Wouter Muller's song '*Indisch, maar dan anders*'

(Indisch, but otherwise), offer the main points of Dragojlovic's research discussion: 'Who knows anything about their frustrations? About their anger, about their pain to be a stranger here, without respect, without rights.' The chapter illustrates that whoever experiences it, war is still painful, especially for the losers, and that collective memory will be experienced throughout time as shameful.

Balawyn Jones in Chapter 8 discusses community understandings of domestic violence in Aceh. Based on the participants' voices in this research, Jones outlines three themes in the definition of domestic violence, including 'violence ignored, violence minimized, and violence justified.' This chapter also highlights notions of victimhood and domestic violence as 'private business' within a household, based on interpretation of local customs and Islamic teachings at the grass roots. Jones argues that applying grounded theory methodology helps readers understand domestic violence based on the Aceh context.

Chapter 9, as outlined above, provides another lens to understand domestic violence against women in Sumatra living with HIV. According to my own research, many intersected factors impact HIV-positive women's access to HIV services, including individual, family, community and policy spheres (Najmah 2020). There is the intersection of (1) the shame associated with HIV means no one talks about HIV openly, (2) poorly integrated health services mean there is little support for HIV-positive mothers as well as (3) if women are married, and there is an assumption that they are safe from contracting HIV (Davies and Najmah 2020; Najmah 2020).

Samuels's interpretations are based on the phenomenon of domestic violence in Aceh. Being an Indonesian woman, I am aware there is the silence about domestic violence within families and neighbourhoods. It may be considered shameful (*aib*), or a normal way for a husband to educate his wife. At the beginning of her chapter, Samuels emphasizes Sharia laws, as 99% of the Acehnese population is Muslim. This might create the impression that interpretation of Islamic values supports domestic violence. However, Samuels could more clearly explore the intersecting factors that impact domestic violence in Aceh, such as economic factors. Low income might have a strong correlation to mental health amongst men as the heads of households, who perform domestic violence to maintain their masculinity in the Indonesian context. In addition, patriarchal customs in Indonesia are not always related to religious values; more broadly, understanding intersectionality is urgently needed in feminist research.


It is said that in the patriarchal world 'the Law is "I"' (*Hukum itu adalah saya*). The texts examined by Bronwyn Anne Beech Jones in Chapter 1 were written by ethnic Minangkabau women in the early twentieth century for the Sumatran newspaper *Soenting Melajoe*, and bear witness to the effects of intimate violence. There are exciting findings here: the chapter reads like a folk tale, revealing an original, authentic Indonesia within an important new platform. In particular, we discover how women in Sumatra communicated in a coded language about a taboo topic, cleverly using poems and local wisdom to raise concerns and express their rights. We learn how patriarchal culture severely restricted women's rights in Sumatra at that time, so that women had to use various methods to describe their experiences, including intimate violence. What can be captured is that the life of a woman had no value in a patriarchal world and could be eliminated without any legal reckoning.

In conclusion, although the themes raised in this book are not new, there are some exciting contributions with analytical approaches that can enrich the field and stimulate new research. In Indonesia, it has not always been easy to be honest about sexual violence, due to women's subordinate position in a strong patriarchal culture, and a moral code constructed by religion and culture. This meant, for instance, that if Indonesian women revealed such experiences during the eras covered, they were considered adulterers, and therefore sinners. However,

moral values during war differ from peacetime; women have no power and no choice to survive or die. The outcome of research such as this book presents can not only be a new theory but also a movement to protect women from all forms of violence, wherever they are.

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