

Book Review

Women, Sexual Violence and the Indonesian Killings of 1965-66

Annie Pohlman. London: Routledge, 2015. 188 pages

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The book starts with a statement from Ibu Lia, a former Communist Party leader who survived the killings before languishing twenty years in jails. “It’s bitter to remember, very bitter. My memories taste bitter in my mouth. But, people must know what happened to us. They must know what happened.” The statement so aptly describes the desire and motivation of women survivors whose testimonies have been recorded in this book. The testimonies of sexual violence against women and girls and the systematic destruction of their basic dignity and human rights that followed the events of 30 September 1965, when millions of Indonesian communists, suspected communists, and sympathizers were effectively destroyed. A half century after the events, only a few studies have been conducted that provide in-depth analysis of gendered experiences and sexualized forms of violence perpetrated against women and girl victims during this period. The author pointed out that feminist perspectives on women’s roles and women’s bodies are a decisive factor for understanding sexualized forms of mass violence (p. 20). Yet I believe this book allows the voices of women to reveal a plethora of new facts and perspectives on the Indonesian killings of 1965-66. The author states in her introduction: “the aims not only to redress the lack of scholarly attention but also to provide significant new analysis on the gendered and gendering effects of sexual violence against women and girls in situations of genocidal violence”. Therefore, this book should be very useful for many that are interested in writing and doing research on women and sexual violence during conflict and mass violence in Indonesia.

The book is divided into two parts. The first three chapters of the book provide a background for the main analysis. The second part, chapters four through eight, consists of the main analysis which exam-

ines individual women's testimonies. Chapter one outlines and contextualizes the violence against women following the 1965 coup in recent Indonesian history as well as the absence of women's experiences and testimonies analyzing the mass violence. It explains how the research started with one essential question: "what happened to the women caught up in the violence after 1965?" It also explains the author's approach that was used in writing "what women were saying." The author put the women survivors' testimonies at the core of the research to analyze the violence of 1965-66. While the Indonesian regime skillfully managed to maneuver the memories of those women into silence, the chapter mentions that the women's testimonies highlight how women dealt with the problems and coped with the difficult situations and shows that they were not passive victims but acted with agency during the violence of 1965 (p. 13).

Chapter two examines about how women got caught up in the violence and were killed following the events. Many women testified about how and why they and their friends and relatives were arrested, killed, or persecuted. Although there are similarities, trends, and commonalities of experiences among the testimonies of individual women, this book draws attention to the individualities and differences of experiences of the mass killings and arrest, as covered in this chapter. The whole chapter examines the five distinct patterns amongst victims of the violence that characterized the testimonies of individual women: "those who were members and leaders of the PKI and its associated organizations; friends and relatives of members; those who were taken 'hostage' in place of fugitive relatives of members; cases of mistaken identity; and instances whereby existing local grievances gave rise to scapegoating of finger-pointing for the benefit of individuals in petty feuds."

Chapter three covers the violence in the detention camps, prisons, and interrogation centers. The fundamental part of the experience of detention was characterized by people being treated inhumanely and in an undignified manner. This chapter looks at the process of interrogation and tortures. The type of tortures and numbers of interrogations all depended on the circumstances in which victims were detained and the victims' perceived level of involvement in the Communist party (p. 48). Specific sexual assaults in detention and sexualized forms of mutilation during the killings are discussed in more detail in chapter five.

Chapters four through eight comprise the main analysis. These chapters are organized into thematic issues based on each individual woman's experiences of violence following the coup, with focus on different kinds of sexual violence. Chapter four and five examine how and why sexual violence was perpetrated extensively against women. Chapter four explains the four main reasons for the sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls: opportunism, perceived sexual excess on the part of the PKI, sexual violence as a way to mark the boundaries of groups, and sexual violence as a deliberate strategy to destroy the Left. It is clear that the sexual violence in Indonesia following the coup was the Indonesian military's strategy to eradicate the PKI and a direct result of misogynous propaganda and a mass campaign of sexual slander against Gerwani women who were accused of having castrated the generals at Lobang Buaya. In other words, the sexualized image of Gerwani at Lobang Buaya resulted in sexual violence on women and girls in detention.

Furthermore, chapter five assesses the different forms of sexual violence used against women during the killings and in detention. For many women, rape and sexual assaults were "inescapable realities" (p. 81). In this chapter the author focuses on rapes and sexual assaults perpetrated against women who were detained or killed. Therefore, the feminist discourse on that very distinctive and systematic sexual violence during conflict is very significant in assessing the forms of sexualized violence in detention and during the killings. Moreover, the feminist discourses can explain the ubiquitous rape and the sexual violence by the state during military conflict in Indonesia in 1990s (for instance in East Timor, Aceh, and West Papua and during the May 1998 riots). As the author states, one of her purposes was to examine "the role that gender plays in mass violence and offer some fundamental explanations for why sexualized forms of violence occurred during the massacres and in detention." And chapter six discusses the many forms of sexual mutilation during the killings.

Chapter seven looks at the sexual humiliation and the practice of strip-searching women and girls in detention. These practices were intended to humiliate detainees and make them suffer some physical pain or exertion and mental suffering. The sexualized forms of humiliation regularly combined forced nakedness, forced and coerced sexual acts,

and sexualized torture. One testimony of Ibu Astuti described an incident of her younger sister and eleven other young girls who were members of the Communist Party's youth association or *Pemuda Rakyat*. "Yes (they were) interrogated. They did whatever they wanted, shaved off their hair all of those girls... and yes, they were stripped naked (...) they were all raped, one by one, by all of them" (p. 137). Most of the women interviewed reported stories of forced nakedness and of dehumanization techniques, weighing heavily of sexualized acts of harm and humiliation, which conflated punishment and entertainment for those in charge of the detainees. The strip searches and other forms of sexualized violence were a way to disempower and terrify women and girls detainees in an intimate and sexualized way.

The last chapter, eight, examines the type of sexual enslavement under the title "Sexual slavery and *istri diambil* (wife-taking). These forms of violence against women were common and involved a wide range of sexual enslavement conditions, including forced marriage and enforced prostitution involving some form of coercion against the victims which tended to happen for prolonged periods in the prisons or camps. The victims of these types of violence come across as being the wives and other female relatives of men killed or detained as well as women detainees (p. 153). It argues that these crimes are "the clearest examples of the gendered effects of mass atrocities on women" and are stipulated as a crime against humanity and a war crime under international law. Therefore, the victims of these crimes deserve that these dreadful abuses be better understood, recognized, and redressed.

In summary, Pohlman presents a convincing account of "what women were saying" and provides critical understanding in relation to sexual violence in studies of conflict and mass social turbulence. The gendered and gendering effects of sexual violence against women and girls in 1965-66 is likely to have a continuing influence on Indonesia's contemporary history discourse regarding that period. Despite anti-communism in Indonesia still existing and being used as a general tool for the suppression of dissent, these women's testimonies and experiences can generate public recognition and acknowledgment about what has happened and been ignored or silenced. This is the kind of book that needs to be read by Indonesians and, therefore, needs to be translated into Bahasa Indonesia.

Biographical Note: **Dewi Ratnawulan** is an international consultant with Rapid Asia, Bangkok, Thailand, focused on gender and human rights, since 2010. She received her Master of Human Rights and Democratization at Sydney University, Australia, and her BA Hons in History and Politics at Wollongong University, Australia. The title of her thesis was “The Problems of Recording and Presenting Testimonies of Women’s experiences of the 1965 Killings.” E-mail: ratnawulan@rapid-asia.com