

How are women's rights being defended in Aceh, Indonesia?

An interview with Suraiya Kamaruzzaman, a human rights activist and one of the founders of Flower Aceh, the first women's group set up by Acehnese women to deal with the consequences of the Indonesian army's violent crackdown on the Aceh Freedom Movement (GAM).

AWID: Why did you start the organization Flower Aceh (FA)?

SK: I was lucky as I grew up enjoying gender equality where boys and girls are entitled to fundamental rights and equal opportunity. However, this was not the case in the society, for there were and still are gender questions; boys were the first to go to school while women were associated with domestic activities and other features of gender differentiation and inequality were common. While public activities such as village meetings exclude women, government-driven birth control compels women to use contraception regardless their physical constraints.

Inspired by deep concern, some friends and I started having regular discussion on these issues. In order to obtain a wider horizon, we volunteered for other organizations working on women's rights while participating in field visit and informal discussion with rural women about their daily problems.

Sad to say, there were only three female students who stuck around as the rest quit for some reasons. We, three female students of Syiah Kuala University, Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Province, eventually agreed to found a tiny organisation to address gender inequality and injustice in the domestic as well as the public sphere on September 23, 1989. We call our organisation Flower Aceh (FA)

Our main concern was empowering women on issues of economic and reproductive rights, we also started to collect and record data on violence against women in 1996. In the following years, we added organizing victims of state violence into our priority list.

AWID: What is the main focus of Flower Aceh's work? Has is Flower Aceh working to empower women and to strengthen women's organizations and networks?

SK: The mission of FA is to bring about fair relation, in terms of power relation within the society, particularly female-male relations in all dimensions, including: social life, democracy, environmental sustainability, justice, equality, solidarity, independence, transparency and participation.

FA main focus and agenda is as follows:

1. Empowering women to gain access to decision making and resource management and to protect them from state violence and fear.
2. Defending the victims of state violence, in terms of social, economic, cultural and political discrimination in Aceh Province and dedicating efforts towards women's rights-sensitive government policy.
3. Enhancing the performance of FA through capacity building and organizational development to achieve its strategic objectives.

To achieve the above mentioned goals, FA dedicates its resources to women through organizing activities at the grassroots level. Group discussions, meetings and critical education are the main features of the activities that develop their capabilities to widen their options and to make the best choice.

In 1989-1998, FA carried out group counselling to strengthen women's economic and bargaining positions before the state. Capital was established through business development, a microfinance strategy and a credit union. Furthermore, FA provided life skills training including alternative/traditional medication and acupuncture as the price of manufactured medicine and medical services (i.e. doctors and hospitals) were rising.

In defending the rights of women, FA conducted research on violence against women, policy analysis, seminars, workshops, and public campaigns through local radio, television and news papers.

Since Aceh was haunted by armed conflict - sad to say that such conflict is once again active in the province-- most of FA staff are actively involved in organizations working with women and children at refuges and shelters.

AWID: How has violence against women and rape been used as a weapon of war in Indonesia? How have you worked to address this issue? How has your fight against these violations been received by government leaders and society at large?

SK: Basically, the government and the military consider violence against women a consequence of armed conflict, the victims are considered collateral damage, and anyone could be a victim. In fact, the concept of a patriarch state has a great influence on the decision making mechanism which tends to victimize women.

Some findings reveal that rape and violence against women are not an accident but a part of warfare strategy (1). In every conflict, mass rape is frequently used as a weapon for different reasons. It is considered a weapon because rape causes serious harm to the victims and violates their rights. On the other side, systematic rape may shape and change the tradition, custom and culture in society and as well as undermine legal enforcement. Since there are few opportunities to prosecute rapists and because as a crime rape is not talked about openly, it is an effective weapon and warfare strategy to beat the enemy.

Findings from East Timor before its independence in 1999 and in Papua show that there are similarities in the pattern of systematic rape.

In this case, opinion building and a advocacy strategy were shared among women's organizations in conflict areas, with invaluable support from National Commission on Women's Rights. It was not an easy thing to do since we were dealing with the military and the government. To minimize the risk, mobilize support, and raise public awareness we disseminated information on the dimensions of rape as a weapon and warfare strategy.

The first step is the hardest one, and so was our efforts to mobilize support from the wider public and to get some attention from the government. Most people thought that the victims of rape got what they deserve for they were arbitrarily labelled as sex workers, prostitutes or dirty women. When rape is simply regarded as a moral issue it hampers the victim from telling the truth for safety and psychological Things get worse when government officers believe rape is a natural and justifiable human behaviour. They believe, "there is nothing wrong with soldiers who commit rape since they have been away from their wives for so long".

After years of hard work significant progress is yet to come, however, changes are coming little by little. Admission of guilt was made by the government. Nevertheless, rather than claiming that it was an institutional matter it blamed individuals who committed rape. Consequently, the trial was not for the military but for individual soldiers.

AWID: Do you feel that women have made any advances in Aceh since Flower Aceh started their work?

SK: Compared to the condition in 1989, Acehnese women today have much more courage to speak. When FA started to work with them, it took months before they dare to speak at community meetings and discussions. Today, some of those women are pioneering local grassroots and religious organization.

In the 90s, when FA was trying to bring a case of rape by a village leader against a housewife to court, support and solidarity was hard to obtain; a legal aid institute, families and formal coordinating bodies of women's organization (BKOW) in Jakarta reluctantly gave us a hand. Even families in the village blamed the victim and hid their heads in the sand instead of giving a hand and showing solidarity. It was this fact in that inspired FA to publish and distribute Kabar dari Flower Aceh, a bulletin containing information on women's rights. Changes eventually came to the village as public perception of the victim gradually shifted from prejudice to empathy.

Progress also came to the victims after intensive psychological healing and counselling with FA. As they managed to recover from trauma, the victims confidently gave testimony to the public. In addition, these women do productive and income generating activities while raising their children as single parents.

To be frank, it is now much easier than before as many organizations are now working on similar issues, including organizations facilitated by FA during its early days. However, it does not mean that hard work is no longer needed considering the number of rape victims is too large to count relative to FA's institutional capacity to tackle the problems. Consistent effort is required if we want to bring about justice to the victims. Forced implementation of Islamic laws, military operation, Independent Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM), three decades of armed conflict and domestic violence all contribute to the magnitude of problems and to the wounds Acehnese women are now suffering.

All those mentioned above are not solely thanks to the work of FA. Academics, religious leaders and NGOs in Aceh, particularly those who work on human rights issues, deserve credit. Their contribution to the progress is tremendous and apparently important.

AWID: Why was there a new wave of military operations by the Indonesian government in Aceh last year? What has been the impact of these operations on the lives of civilians and on the lives of women in particular? What is the current status of this situation?

SK: The biggest military operation since the aggression to East Timor in 1975 was commenced last year in Aceh after the Cessation of Hostilities Framework Agreement (CoHA) failed. Approximately 30,000 troops were dispatched to Aceh to fight against 5,000 armed personnel of the Independent Aceh Movement (<http://hrw.org/indonesian/docs/2003/12/17/indone6703.htm>).

According to National Human Rights Committee, in the first term of the military operation, 319 non-combatants died, 117 were wounded and another 108 people were reported missing. A local newspaper Serambi Indonesia (June 30, 2003) reported 514 schools were burnt down, 50 teachers were shot to death and another 118 seriously wounded. In addition, 76,700 children at school age could no longer attend schools while another 15,857 never had access to schooling at all.

These miserable facts are rooted in the long armed conflict causing death, job lost, persistent poverty, and the damage of housing and settlements. Up to July 16, 2003, Serambi Indonesia reported 42,937 people were displaced and left their houses and land for refuge and shelters. As the data was collected from refuges and shelters, the exact number is likely to be much more than that of one newspaper. Many displaced presumably moved to other provinces.

The data cited in the previous paragraph tells how bad the condition in Aceh was during the military operation, let alone abduction, arbitrary arrest, tortures, and battering against non-combatants by Indonesian military and GAM.

Under such circumstances, women are probably the most vulnerable group to suffer and to be sacrificed, while rape is probably the most prevalent case of violence against women. Sad to say that 4 victims whose cases were brought to the military court ended

up in disappointment for the defendants were sentenced too soft (Sinar Harapan, July 23, 2003). This reasonably discouraged other victims, thus they kept their cases hidden to avoid deeper trauma and disgrace.

In fact, the victims can also be the survivors. Amidst fear, intimidation and terror, they keep standing on their feet. Some reports and information from friends and relatives, in addition to what I saw during my recent short visit to Aceh last July, show that they never stop helping and comforting each other. They keenly work to earn their living and take care of their children. Some of them amazingly initiated alternative education for children.

In doing these activities, women often put their own life at risk. The next case perfectly exemplifies how they raise to the challenge. A young woman volunteering for a local hospital was shot twice for saving other woman from the military (www.acehkita.com, March 8, 2004).

The situation did not get any better before the general election. In remote areas, GAM intimidated the people to not vote while the military did the same thing for different reason. The military vowed to bring peace to the people and the village if they voted for opposition parties and legislative candidates.. Meanwhile, political mobilization was rampant calling for a extension of military operation. Furthermore, the military also formed and backed a resistance group against GAM. These patterns are quiet similar with that of in East Timor before the referendum in 1999.

AWID: You are now living in Hong Kong. Why did you leave Aceh? Are you continuing your work on women's human rights from Hong Kong? Do you hope to return to Aceh?

SK: Financially supported by The Asia Foundation, I left Aceh in September 2002 to pursue master degree in human rights at Hong Kong University. While taking classes and doing my academic works, I cannot abandon women issues so I keep working on women's rights in a different form. During my stay in Hong Kong, I was involved in campaigns, public speaking activities, peace rallies and giving testimony on the situation in Aceh. Surely there are difficulties I cannot deny, but I try as hard as I can to keep myself attached and contribute to human rights works.

I am also involved in mobilizing solidarity and distributing a call for urgent action towards abduction and disappearances during military operation, including fundraising and lobbying to European Parliament in October 2003 on peace building in Aceh. My works and experiences inspired me to compose my Master's thesis on Mass Rape in the Situation of Armed Conflict from 1989-1998 in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Province, Indonesia.

These days, whilst preparing my academic paper on women's rights in armed conflict areas, I volunteer with a migrant worker organization IMWU (Indonesian Migrant Worker Union) every Sunday by facilitating training, workshops and learning activities.

Back to Aceh? I certainly want to be back as soon as possible regardless if peace remains far from Aceh. There are women in my hometown struggling for life, facing the risk of death, being raped and tortured. They are my family, sisters and neighbours. I shall not abandon them, as they are now, by staying in foreign countries and enjoying a comfortable and peaceful life. I believe that I can contribute to the betterment of life in my society by providing trauma healing, counselling and education for children whose schools were burnt down even though fear, intimidation and terror will be the part of my days. Lastly, deep in my heart, I want to go on with my life, to help to raise, feed and take kids to schools.