

Indonesia: From Statistics to Fighters against sexual violence

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Each day, twenty women were raped in Indonesia in the period 1998-2010, according to figures of the National Commission on Women (KOMNAS Perempuan). In the Jakarta region alone, 535 cases of sexual violence against children were reported this year and 2521 cases of sexual violence against adults last year. Victims vary from an eight months old baby to a 81 years old grandmother. The daily cases of sexual violence show it can hit people regardless of age, location or social background. The high numbers of sexual violence attracted a lot of attention this year but there's a lack of concrete initiatives against sexual violence.

Against this background, the socialist-feminist organization Perempuan Mahardhika (Free Women) held a conference for women in Jakarta on October 19. Under the motto 'against and free of sexual violence' over 150 people participated in the one-day conference. Around half of the participants came as representatives, and other half came as representatives of organizations that had been involved in preparatory discussions on the theme of sexual violence.

The aim of the process was to organize a grassroots struggle against sexual violence. During the two months before the conference, a series of meetings on sexual violence were organized at a grassroots level, involving housewives, women workers, students, youth, women with HIV and others. The women shared ideas and experiences, as victims but also as women who resist in any way they can. But the meetings also showed a shocking lack of awareness of the scale and nature of sexual violence.

From victim to fighter

Too often we are told that victims are just victims who need help. But that's only a part of the truth, it ignores women's potential to resist sexual violence. The meetings tried to highlight the capacities of victims and their family and friends to resist and become fighters. Many of the participants had themselves been forced to resist. A mother told she finally found out why her daughter had avoided being at home with her father: she despised how he touched and kissed her. The mother: 'I would just have divorced him if had known it.' Another woman told of how she had jumped in an open sewer to escape harassment; 'the guy wouldn't be crazy enough to rape such a dirty woman'.

The discussion meetings were important to educate women about sexual violence. Most women are not very familiar with different forms of sexual violence except from rape. Many women don't realize that other forms of force against them are also sexual violence. One woman told how her husband forced objects in her vagina, another of how her husband became sexually aroused by beating her.

Such things happen every day, not in movies but in the lives of ordinary women. These women never asked for help as they didn't really understand what happened or where they could turn to. The poorer, the more vulnerable the women are.

Jakarta women against sexual violence

The focus of the conference was what we can do together, what solutions are possible. Jakarta governor Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo and deputy-governor Basuki 'Ahok' Tjahaja Purnama have gained a lot of popularity with their reformist and populist image. A Jakarta wide initiative against sexual violence should force them to show what the value is of their promises. Jakarta has a center called P2TP2A (Integrated Service Center for Children and Women Empowerment) to deal with sexual and domestic violence. . But this center is almost unknown, there's next to no publicity about it. There's only a very basic introduction that can be found online. Many women have never heard of it. Originally, the center was an idea of women's rights NGO's but it turned into just another inefficient bureaucratic government project.

Many of the participants agreed there needs to be a grassroots movement against sexual violence. Such a movement should work on prevention, defend the interests of victims and organize women's self-help activities. Such a movement will be difficult to build and require a lot of work but women can do it. One of the reasons Jokowi was elected, was the hard work of female volunteers. Whether it is during cases of flood, in campaigns to educate people about dengue fever or to advocate for free health care, women - especially housewives - play a crucial role in volunteer work. Such strength is a resource in the fight against sexual violence.

Participants in the conference agreed to start the work and launch the initiative at the coming international day for the elimination of violence against women on November 25, 2013. Ten people were elected to organize the follow-ups and on 9 November the first planning meeting took place. In more places in Jakarta there will be new grass roots meetings on the issue of sexual violence.

One goal of these meetings is to find and then train more activists. The goal is not just providing women with facts and figures. We want to involve them in the struggle. That way, women's confidence can be strengthened and can they gain a sense of their potential. That's the most important thing.

When victims become activists they can resist a society that discriminates against them. When victims are no longer merely statistics, but stand up and fight, solidarity will easier to be built. For Perempuan Mahardhika, a network of volunteers would be a great step towards building a real movement to fight sexual violence. We need to start somewhere, 'Jakarta volunteers against sexual violence' would be an important step forward. It will inspire other's cities to do so. And when it happens, the victims are not merely data anymore, they will standing up and fight, and solidarity will easier to be built. Maybe Indonesia is still far from India in term of the movement and the gain, but we need to start somehow in any ways. Jakarta volunteers against sexual violence would be a great step forward.

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* <http://politikrakyat.com/2013/11/15/indonesia-from-statistics-to-fighters-against-sexual-violence/>

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