



# Exploring Women's Narratives on Conflict and Violent Histories

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the complexities of writing women's histories, particularly in the context of conflict and violence. The paper firstly describes the patriarchal structure that tends to marginalize and undermines women's narratives in history. The same structure also highly affected gender-based violence that occurred widely during conflict and violence in Indonesia. The second part of this chapter describes the complexities in exploring women's narratives. One of the reasons for this complexity is the distinct and specific ways that women take in telling their stories. Histories in the perspective of women are usually told in a private manner, sometimes trivial and anchored in objects. These distinctiveness should be seen as a way to give meaning of larger political events into everyday lives. Another reason for the complexity is the strong character of silence in women's stories. We agree with that silence is not absence and that it can also be analyze in certain ways. Finally, this article also describes several ways to explore and analyze historical sources in order to place women as agents and in the center of Indonesia's history.

**Keywords:** Women Narratives · Conflict · Violent Histories

## 1 Introduction

In a fieldwork interview in 2017 with victims of the anti-communist violence in East Java that occurred in 1965–66, I encountered a family of farmers who experienced the impact of that violence. This violence was executed by the Indonesian military, in collaboration with civilian groups to annihilate the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia/ PKI) and other leftists group, causing the death of approximately five hundred thousand to one million people. The reason behind this annihilation project was a movement called the September 30th Movement or Gerakan 30 September, in which six army generals and one middle-rank army officer were kidnapped and killed by a small group of military officers. Although there is still an ongoing debate regarding who was behind the movement and why, the Indonesian army accused the Indonesian Communist Party or PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia) of being the perpetrator behind this movement.

The family of victim that I encounter in 2017 was an ordinary farmer residing in a village in South Malang. The husband, Jarso, born in 1947 was a military officer

accused of being involved in an attempted coup in 1965, and therefore, was imprisoned for more than 10 years.<sup>1</sup> During the long interview, Jarso was accompanied by his wife, who remained mostly silent in the conversation. One question that I asked her, was whether or not she knew about Jarso's past imprisonment. She told us that she never knew that particular experience of her husband. Then, Jarso continued to take over the conversation, by emphasizing that her wife did not know anything about his experience in the late 1960s.

When conducting oral history interviews with communities, we often encounter situations where women are mostly silent, such as our experience with Jarso. Conversations are usually dominated by men, and their information became the centre of research data. Especially in studying violent histories, women's narratives are mostly marginalized. In extreme cases, information from male community members are perceived as more reliable and important, while female informants' validity are often questioned. This biased actually reflect the patriarchal structure that is entrenched in our society, to the extent that it affected our academic research. This perspective needs to be challenged, by arguing that women's narratives are also important in academic research. In other words, gender dimension should be incorporated in scholarly studies, particularly when studying histories of violence.

This article aims to examine the ways women's narratives are preserved, circulated, and expressed. Their mechanisms might be different from our usual understanding of 'telling stories' because their expressions are usually not straightforward. Using literature studies and oral history method, this article will first describe the challenges in exploring women's narratives in relation to research on histories of violence. The second part will propose some approaches that can assist in unravelling women's narratives.

## 2 Results and Discussion

### 2.1 Women in Violent Histories

Indonesia presents a peculiar case of women in relation to the state. While Indonesia has had a female president, and our female inhabitants acquired high status (for example in control of family finances), women are still difficult to enter the public political arena and articulate their needs (Blackburn, 2004: 6). In general, the patriarchal structure are still present in Indonesia's social political dynamics, leaving out women in crucial decision making processes. Patriarchy means the structure that perceive men as superior and women are undermined.

Patriarchy structure also affected how knowledge is produced. Indonesia's historiography has been very much dominated with masculine perspective of heroism and war, of the winners and losers (Mariana, 2021). One reason for this is because Indonesia's historiography is constructed by the military (K. McGregor, 2007). Only a few female figures are considered as national heroes, but this also raises another question: does women have to use weapon and win the war to be recorded in history? In other words, the same masculine perspective of heroism and winners are still used in writing women's history. There is no fundamental transformation in this approach, and it undermines the

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork notes, conversation with Jarso (pseudonym), Donomulyo, East Java, 26 July 2017.

fact that women are not homogenous. Ethnicity, class, or religion are some of the factors that constitute female identity and influence the diversity of experiences of a certain historical event.

Discussions on women histories become more complex when women experienced certain violent event that transforms societies. This can be a political upheaval which resulted in regime changes, such as the Revolution war, the anti-communist violence, the end of authoritarian regime or Indonesia's Reformasi, and also regional violence triggered by ethnic or religious differences and even land disputes. Roughly, in the transitional period after 1998, approximately 19.000 Indonesian citizens became the victims of conflict, where half of them were caused by communal conflict and the rest by separatism (Klinken, 2007). Until July 2002, 1.3 million Indonesians were displaced because of those two types of conflicts (Norwegian Refugee Council/ Global IDP Project, 2002). One of the examples of this conflict is the regional conflict in Poso, Central Sulawesi which was triggered by a clash between youth groups in the city on 28 December 1998. This incident escalated into a communal conflict between Christian and Moslem community in Poso and surrounding regencies. However, this violence is not merely a religious conflict, but also involves political economy factors (Klinken, 2007), radicalism, and adaptation to authoritarian politics to democracy. The conflict in Poso ends along with the Malino agreement in 2002.

Poso women witnessed how communal violence destroyed their lives. Moslem neighbours burnt and hunted their Christian fellows that they knew for quite a while. Many places of worship were destroyed and burnt. If the men were obliged to defend their villages, the women were assigned to take children and elderlies to migrate to a safer place (Subagya, 2009). In these contexts, such as Poso conflict, women are prone to practices of gender-based violence – violent acts that are executed towards certain gender groups. However, gender-based violence itself is often accentuated by structural inequalities of economic, political, legal, and social nature (K. E. McGregor editor. et al., 2020). Therefore, in order to understand women's experiences of violence, we need to comprehend the contexts where violence emerged.

Moreover, without denying the devastating effects of violence on women, discussions of violence often confined women merely as victims of atrocities. Again, in the case of Poso, women were the vanguard in reconciling the social network that was destroyed because of the conflict. Poso women became active in various humanitarian organizations who delivered emergency aids for implicated residents. They also became initiators and participants in various reconciliation meetings in the villages (Subagya, 2009). In domestic sphere, women also helped their children in recovering their trauma caused by the conflict. Moreover, women also appeared in public and economic spaces to overcome the decline and loss of men's role in the family economy. These new activities affected women's self confidence to take part in peace initiatives in the public sphere. Therefore, women should have a fair place as activist, peace builder and full participants in social, economic, and political structures which had transformed after a conflict (Nations, 2012). These layers that affected the position of women – intersecting between the structural and individual; victim and agency; conflict and post-conflict situation – raises the complexity in exploring their narratives.

## 2.2 Exploring Women's Narratives

Keeping in mind the patriarchal structure that affected the marginalization of women's narratives in history, it is also important to acknowledge that their narratives are expressed in distinct ways that may not be straightforward. Women's narratives are often considered trivial, 'not a history', or even irrelevant to develop a chronological reconstruction. However, we would argue that it is actually their trivialities that juxtapose historical events with society's everyday life. In other words, women's narratives humanize history. This is a point that Mary Steedly in her work on the experiences of Karo women in Sumatera during the revolution (1945–1949). Steedly describes how narratives about the war and national politics are coined in domestic objects (white handkerchiefs), personal stories of the political, or local songs about forced migration due to the war (Steedly, 2013). These Karo women's stories shows how the Indonesian revolution and the war against the Dutch were not merely a story of heroism and guerrillas. It is also a history filled with emotions, families, and uncertainties.

Zooming into women's narratives also enables us to understand the meaning of historical events for societies. A case in point is the experiences of women who had to struggle after their husbands were detained because of the anti-communist violence in 1965–66. In one oral history interview of a wife whose husband was detained because of the accusation as a leader of a leftist youth group, she described her experience as follows (Leksana, 2022).

My youngest child was just 29 days old. Then I went to Korem (Regional military command office) in Malang, with my baby. A military officer, his name was Pak Noto, gave the name for my baby, Trisula.<sup>2</sup> I asked him why my husband did not come home. He only said, "I'll take care of it". There were a lot of weapons in his room, terrifying. People said Pak Noto was vicious, tough, but to me, he was very soft. It was because one time, he slept in our place for seven days. Then I was informed that Mr Baharjo can return after 7 days. I picked him up from Koramil (District military command office) in Batu, and then we went to my niece's place in Malang, where she bathed Mr Baharjo. After that, we went home to Donomulyo. But my husband was stressed. He had asthma, and it recurred many times. He saw many things in the detention centre, people were beaten and tortured. We sacrificed a lot in one week. I mean, the guard should be given cigarettes... what do you call it? Incentives. "I want to see this person, sir", then [we should give him] money, food, cigarettes, although we already gave it to the front officer. In the examination desk, we should give another one. In the back, all of the officer's friends should get a portion. ... There were a lot of people in Koramil Batu. I don't know if they were PKI or not. They were taken there, and gone at night, nobody knows where. If I didn't fetch him, Mr Baharjo may have been gone too.

In this excerpt, the wife, Mrs. Baharjo was retelling her experience of releasing her husband from detention. From her narrative, she depicts the national upheaval of the

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<sup>2</sup> Trisula also refers to the Trisula operation in East Java that occurred in 1968 aimed at capturing the remains of the communist members in hiding. It is not clear why the name Trisula was given to the baby, but it illustrates the close relationship between the officer and the Baharjo family.

anti-communist violence in 1965–66 as a personal experience of finding her husband. History in this case is not in its grandeur state of political event but a human story of the event. In other words, women's narratives can give meaning of a distant past, connecting the past and the present.

Patriarchal structure and experiences of violence constitute a double pressure for women to narrate their own history of violence. They are often silenced because of structural forces, or of personal trauma. However, silence does not necessary means that there are no histories and silence should not be regarded as absence. Here, we elaborate the work of Carol Kidron and her research on the Canadian-Cambodian families. Descendants of in those families assert that their silence is not a form of repressed traumatic memory, but a cultural normative behaviour based on Buddhist values. Furthermore, it is actually these values that helps them through the aftermath of violence – “Buddhism tells us that suffering is part of life” (Kidron, 2012). In another case families of Holocaust survivors, Kidron pointed to the ‘silent traces’ where memories of the Holocaust are actually present without verbal communication between the first and second generations (Kidron, 2009). Her study shows that memories of violence, even in families, are not always easy to articulate. However, this does not mean silence are signs of pathological trauma, nor that the silence means an absence of memories of violence. Atrocities in the past can be what Ana Dragojlovic coined as *haunted speakabilities*, the acts of intergenerational aspirations to visibilize histories of personal and collective injuries (Dragojlovic, 2021: 1). She argues that it is the affective presence of historical violence that haunts verbal or even embodied articulations across generations (ibid).

Women's narratives of past violence do not only relate to the violence itself, but to the affective processes that relate to that particular history. Ismi Indriani's work on romantic relationship during Indonesia's revolution shows how personal relations are constructed and influenced by the spirit of Revolution (Indriani, 2021). Indriani's work uses an array of different sources, from newspaper to literature work to capture the spirit of the time, revolving around anti-colonialism, independent, and the interpretation of ‘freedom’. Her research brings us to the discussion of sources in exploring women's narratives. If conventional textual sources, such as state reports, government documents, newspapers, and so on, rarely recorded women's voices, then how do we study women histories? There can be several alternatives to answer this question about sources. Indriani's study which uses literature work is one of them. Although literary works are very different from archival documents, discourse analysis of literary works can still contribute to our examination of a certain historical past.

Another alternative to explore women's narratives is, of course, oral history. In brief, oral history is a method that uses oral sources, rather than textual ones in reconstructing a historical event. Its ideological basis serves another purpose; that oral history is a way to democratize history, because through the narratives of ‘ordinary’ people, we can understand how large events such as wars, disasters, regime change, and other social transformation affected the lives of societies (Thompson, 2000: 2–8). But as every research methods has its shortcomings, so does oral history. Historical subjects usually gave answers that they thought researchers wanted to hear (Grele, 1978). Therefore, oral history always faces the question of validity and reliability. But then again, are not textual sources influenced by the maker's subjectivity? Military reports, for example,

may be written by junior officers in a way that satisfied their commanders. Therefore, the question of validity and reliability is a question applied for every historical source, not limited to oral history alone. It is how the historian treat the sources that can tackle the problem of reliability, not the characteristic of the sources.

This brings us to the last strategy in dealing with historical sources related to women's histories. Archives, or textual sources, can point researchers to the logic behind its written information. Ann Stoler has argued on this point with her influential work on the Dutch colonial archives. Stoler stated that by looking at what is not written on the documents, researchers should not only read between the lines or look for hidden messages, but instead, looking 'along and against the grains' of colonial archives can "identify the pliable coordinates of what constituted colonial common sense in a changing imperial order in which social reform, questions of rights and representations, and liberal impulses and more explicit racism played an increasing role" (Stoler, 2010). In a more radical attempt, literary scholar Saidiya Hartman elaborated the writing practice of critical fabulation, where she rearrange the basic elements of a story, representing sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, and at the same time, throwing into crisis 'what happened when' and exploiting 'transparency of sources' as fictions of history (Hartman, 2008: 11–12). Critical fabulations enables writers to "make visible the production of disposable live (in Hartman case it was the Atlantic slave trade), and to describe 'the resistance of the object, if only by first imagining it, and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity'" (ibid). Hartman's approach might be criticize as not following the fundamentals of historical study, as it involves imagining events and extrapolating facts from historical sources. But her arguments drove historians and other social scientist to rethink about representations of the past.

### 3 Conclusion

Through this article, we have shown the complexity of exploring women's narratives, specifically in retelling difficult pasts such as violence. Indonesia's violent events, such as the 1965 anti-communist violence or post-authoritarian regional violence, had a devastating effect on societies, particularly women. The entrenched patriarchal structure in Indonesia have placed women to be prone subjects of gender-based violence during those large atrocities. However, in many cases, women are not only victims of past atrocities, but also peace agents in reconstruction and reconciliation in post-violence societies.

We have also discussed some of the complexities in writing women's historical narratives. The challenges rises firstly from the patriarchal structure that often marginalizes and undermines women's experiences in history. Thus, this is also the reason behind the lack of gender perspectives in Indonesia's historiography. The second challenge emerges from the fact that women does not always tell their stories in straightforward ways. Their narratives are usually personal, revolves in objects, trivial, and attached in their everyday lives. In relation to this, we have also argue that these narratives are still important to Indonesian history, because can show the effect of larger political events for societies. Exploring everyday life is also capable of relating the past to the present.

In facing the complexities that we have discussed above, we also discuss some of the strategies that can be undertake in writing women's histories, particularly in examining

the historical sources. Besides expanding into using different types of sources, such as literary works and oral history, it is also important to approach textual sources in a different way. Textual sources need to be examined critically and read in such a way that it can give us an understanding of the broader structure that constructs those archives. To conclude, writing women's histories will need a change of paradigm and approach in writing Indonesia's national history.

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