

# More than just victims: Women survivors in Indonesia

*Putri Kanesia*

## Introduction

Before the fall of Soeharto's authoritarian New Order regime in 1998, nearly every part of Indonesia saw large-scale demonstrations, mainly instigated by students demanding total governmental reform and better handling of the country's financial crisis. One of the worst tragedies that occurred during this time took place on May 12, 1998, when security officers shot dead four students from Trisakti University: Elang Mulia Lesmana, Heri Hertanto, Hafidin Royan and Hendriawan Sie during a demonstration in Jakarta.

In the same month, large-scale riots also occurred in Jakarta. Hundreds of shops owned by the country's Chinese population were destroyed by the masses, and many Chinese women were raped.[1] The financial crisis also led to looting in some Jakarta shopping malls, including at Yogya Plaza Klender. At that time, there were several unidentified persons[2] who provoked hundreds of people nearby to enter the Plaza for looting. After the building was filled with people, they locked the Plaza from the outside and set it on fire. The building and everyone inside it burned.

In 2005, the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) urged the Attorney General to follow up its investigation into gross human rights violations in May 1998, but the Attorney General refused because the Ad Hoc Human Rights Court had not been established yet; according to article 104 paragraph 1, Law No. 39 of 1999 concerning Human Rights, "To hear gross violations of human rights, a Human Rights Tribunal shall be set up in the domain of the District Court." Thirteen years have passed after the 1998 reforms, but human rights violations of the time have not been addressed by the government. The lack of political will and effort to resolve the cases allows human rights abuses to continue today, including torture cases by police and military officers against indigenous people in Papua, human rights abuses in Aceh, the murder of human rights activist Munir Said Thalib, violence against farmers, labourers and students by the police and military, amongst others. Most importantly, state officials and law enforcement officials, who are meant to protect citizens and maintain security, are instead involved in violating human rights, as in an eviction case by the military against land belonging to the Rumpin villagers in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia. The Air Force Military (TNI AU) claimed the land as their own and wanted to use it for a water training development project. During the 2007 dispute, several villagers were shot and injured by the military when they resisted occupation of their land.[3] Furthermore, the villagers' access to the waterway, a source of life, has been lost because of military activity there. Although the activity was meant to be suspended after the incident, it continues until today. As a result, the villagers live in fear and intimidation.

This article will discuss the lives of three women, Ruyati Darwin, Karsiah and Neneng, who lost either their family or their land in May 1998 and 2007. All three women were previously simple housewives, familiar with neither the law, nor politics. But after losing family members or having their land occupied by the military, their lives have changed. They have had to deal with their sorrows and take on the additional role of survivor together with that of mother and wife. This article shares the experiences of these three women, whose struggle for their cases have inspired many women in Indonesia.

## **The dual role of women survivors in Indonesia**

The loss of family members, especially the head and main income earner of the family is a key issue faced by many women. As wife and mother, women then have to replace the role of income earners to ensure the financial well being of their families.

This was the experience of Ruyati Darwin, mother of Eten Karyana, who died in the Yogya Plaza Klender fire in May 1998. According to the testimony of Eten's friend, Eten entered the mall to help a little girl in school uniform stuck in the building as it began to burn. After that, Eten's friend never saw Eten again. Eten was known as a smart and helpful person. As an English teacher, he often gave free lessons to his poor neighbors who could not pay the school fees. Eten always gave his salary to his family, and paid for the education of his brother and sister. After he died, Ruyati had to replace her son's role as the head of the family. She had to work until nightfall to support her family as her husband was unemployed and just spent his day at home. After Eten's death, Ruyati's husband had no enthusiasm to do anything. Ruyati would sell food at her house everyday, and sometimes help her neighbors to clean their houses and wash their clothes. She would get 30-40 thousand rupiah (USD 3.3/4.3) daily, which she uses to fulfill her family's needs.

Although she has to work hard and take care of her family, Ruyati still became a member of the Indonesian Association of Families of the Disappeared (Ikatan Keluarga Orang Hilang Indonesia/IKOHI). Through this group, Ruyati and many other victims' family members learned about human rights and got involved in various demonstrations to demand redress for the May riots or for other human rights violations. She has met the attorney general, parliamentarians and representatives of other institutions several times, to speak about her case. She is often invited by universities to speak about her case to the students, especially during the month of May.

Ruyati's civic participation and activity has led her husband to feel jealous and often seeking attention from her. He also accused Ruyati of having an affair. Although she gets no support from her husband, Ruyati is not discouraged. When interviewed, Ruyati said, "More than 13 years I have been struggling and will continue for the rights of my child. If I stop, all of this will be meaningless."

Another similar experience was also faced by Karsiah, mother of Hendriawan Sie, a student of Trisakti University who was shot dead by police during the demonstration on May 12, 1998 in Jakarta. Karsiah previously lived in Balikpapan, Kalimantan as a housewife; after Hendriawan's death, she decided to go to Jakarta to demand state responsibility. Three years after she moved to Jakarta and struggled with her son's case, her husband told her that he had married another woman, who was pregnant. Shocked by this news (and uninterested in polygamy), Karsiah divorced her husband. She stayed in Jakarta and has never returned to her hometown.

Losing her son and faced with her husband's remarriage made her sad and stressed. She even contemplated suicide, but then decided against it. She has consulted a psychiatrist on several occasions to deal with her grief and pain. Karsiah now is living alone in a boarding house near her son's former University in Grogol, West Jakarta. After her son's death, the University Rector gave her a chance to work there, allowing her to occupy herself and continue her life. In her free time, she likes to chat with students living in her boarding house, and telling them about the 1998 May tragedy, or simply watching football with them on the TV. Karsiah said she was happy to chat with the students, and felt they were like her

son. She continues to take part in the annual May 12 demonstration to commemorate the tragedy; if she stops, Karsiah said people will never remember the case.

More than 13 years of struggle has made her stronger. The first few years after her son's death, Karsiah often could not sleep at night during the month of May, recalling the tragedy that killed Hendriawan. Now however, she can speak loudly in front of people or journalists who ask about her son's case. While she previously knew nothing about law and politics, she is now well versed in human rights and why her son's case cannot be brought to the Ad Hoc Human Rights Court after parliamentarians decided that the Trisakti Tragedy and May Riots are not categorized as gross human rights violations.

A different experience was faced by Neneng, one of the villagers of Rumpin, Bogor, West Java. Neneng's days were spent in domestic activities as a housewife, and sometimes teaching her neighbors' children the Quran. In 2007, the land in her village was evicted by the Air Force Military (TNI AU) for their water training development project, which was part of a plan to move their airbase to Sukamulya Village, Rumpin. The move would require 449 hectares of land, 10 acres of which would be used to construct the water training project. During the dispute between the villagers and the Air Force, several villagers were shot and injured, including Neneng; she was beaten unconscious and her jewelry was taken.

After this incident, Neneng with other villagers, mostly men, went to Jakarta to take part in demonstrations and hearings with government officials about their case. She also participated in other activities and human rights campaigns, including discussions with other victims of past human rights violations. All this required her to leave early in the morning for Jakarta, and she would return home late at night sometimes, it being a three hour journey from Jakarta to her house. As a wife and mother of four children, she often found it difficult to divide her time between her family and her land case. Similarly, financial constraints made it difficult for her to take up her activities at times; at other times, she would walk home because she didn't have money for the bus fare. Her neighbors were curious and had negative thoughts about her outside activities, but Neneng ignored this. Her family knows well what she is doing, so she is not concerned by other people's talk of her, she says.

On 11 May 2011, Neneng joined a demonstration with villagers from Sukamulya Village, Rumpin, West Java in front of the House of Representative (DPR RI) to demand the government to stop the Air Force Military's claim to their land.[4] In front of more than 4000 demonstrators, Neneng and several orators spoke about their rights and affirmed that they will not fear to protect their land despite military intimidation.

Neneng loves writing. Oftentimes she writes in her journal about her daily activity and the progress of her cases on her way to Jakarta. One women's NGO in Jakarta is interested in her writing and will publish a book about Neneng and other women activists in Indonesia on Human Rights day, 10 December 2011.

## **The challenge of women survivors in Indonesia**

Becoming survivors is a challenge for women; moving on from loss and sadness, and continuing life is not simple. The experiences of the three women survivors above show the complexity of the problems they face. While not direct victims of violence, the impact of the violence is also felt by them. The loss of a loved one, of family land, forces women who previously spent their time in domestic activities to stand in front of people and speak of justice.

At the same time, in Indonesia's patriarchal culture, a woman's place is never equal to a man's. Discrimination against women also gives them very limited space to express themselves, to get involved in various organizations, or even take part in any activity outside the home. We can see the rejection of Ruyati's husband after he learns his wife is socially active and works to earn money after the death of their son. We also see how Karsiah left her hometown to struggle with her son's case, and subsequently was faced with her husband's remarriage. Moreover, she has to work to continue her life after her divorce. Neneng meanwhile has little time to spend with her family due to her struggle to protect her land from military occupation.

The general social perception, particularly in traditional communities, is that speaking in front of people, leading demonstrations or being active in organizations are male roles. The role of women is to take care of the home. They do not have the freedom to speak their mind or do as they wish.

Another challenge faced by women survivors is economic; required to work hard to fulfill their family needs, they cannot totally focus on their cases. At the same time, there may be instances when they do not enough money to actively take up their cases, such as not being able to pay for transportation and so forth.

### **Government and society efforts to address challenges faced by women**

It is unfortunate that the Indonesian government has done so little to address past human rights violations and bring the perpetrators to the Ad Hoc Human Rights Court, which is the demand of all victims and their families. The student shooting in Trisakti and the May 1998 riots, among others, are still delayed by the Attorney General, who refused to take up the National Commission on Human Rights' investigation of gross human rights violations in May 1998 because the Ad Hoc Human Rights Court is not established yet.[5] Although a military court was set up for the Trisakti case in 1998 and 2003, the court was only able to process low-level officers and failed to bring the intellectual actors of the human rights violations to court. As for the Rumpin case, the military continues to occupy the land today, and intimidate the villagers.

The lack of initiative by the government to provide redress for these human rights violation cases forces women to take up their struggle as best they can. Their efforts are hampered by their multiple responsibilities, as well as societal discrimination regarding their 'traditional' roles. Gender discrimination continues in Indonesia despite the country having ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on 13 September 1984.[6] Article 3 of CEDAW requires states to "take in all fields, in particular in the political, social, economic and cultural fields, all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men".

To this end, the government established the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) through Presidential Decree (Keppres) Number 181, 1998 to respond to the May tragedy of 1998. In 2004, the government also issued Law No. 23, 2004 concerning domestic violence.

Meanwhile, many women NGOs were established after 1998, working for women's rights. These groups not only investigated and advocated for cases of violence against women, but also provided human rights education and gender mainstreaming to women activists, victims and their community. Ten NGOs have come together to form the CEDAW Working Group Indonesia (CWGI), to campaign for the proper implementation of CEDAW. One of their initiatives was to arrange for an alternative report to be submitted to the CEDAW Committee, which is responsible for monitoring Indonesia's implementation of the treaty.[7] The group submits this report every four years, as required, regarding important women's rights issues in Indonesia that need attention from the government.

The laws and institutions set up by the government, as well as the efforts of NGOs and women's rights activists, cannot on their own lessen the difficulties faced by women. It is essential to work on concrete steps to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and to provide capacity building opportunities for women. The Indonesian government must also ensure that the rule of law is functioning effectively in the country, and human rights violations are addressed. To truly end discrimination against women and empower them, we must remember women's rights are human rights.

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Putri Kanesia is a woman activist and lawyer working at the Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS), Jakarta, Indonesia. At present she is also an intern with the Asian Human Rights Commission, Hong Kong.

[1] According to the investigation by the Volunteer Team of Humanity (TRK), the modus operandi of the May riots and the rape of Chinese women have the same motive, and thus were perpetrated by the same groups.

[2] According to the final report of The Joint Fact-Finding Team (TGPF) on May 13-15, 1998 Riots, a group of provocateurs with crew cuts provoked the public to loot, destroy traffic lights and so forth. This group also prepared several elements for destruction, such as gasoline, Molotov bombs and vehicles. They were not involved in the looting however, and left the place after the building burned.

[3] After the incident, Herman Prayitno, Air Force Chief of Staff (KASAU) apologized for the actions of his officers. The First Commission of House of Representatives in Indonesia (Komisi I DPR-RI) also recommended the military to stop the water training development project, but this was not followed-up by the military.

[4] See "Ribuan Warga Rumpin Demo di DPR", Kompas.com, 11 May 2011, <http://regional.kompas.com/read/2011/05/11/15274598/Ribuan.Warga.Rumpin.Demo.di.DPR>.

[5] The Human Rights Court can be established by a Presidential Decree based on the recommendation by the House of Representative (DPR RI).

[6] In preparation for its ratification, Indonesia enacted Law Number 7 of 1984 on the issue of discrimination on 24 July 1984.

[7] Profile of CEDAW Working Group Indonesia (CWGI), <http://cwgi.wordpress.com/2007/07/28/profil-cwgi/>