

Healing Initiative among Acehnese Women in A Post-Conflict Area

Wariyatun Wariyatun^{1,2} Nurul Kodriati^{3*}

¹University of Muhammadiyah Madiun, Madiun, Indonesia

²University of Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

³Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*nurul.kodriati@ikm.uad.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Acehnese women have been traumatized for a very long time through prolonged military wars, the tsunami calamity, and domestic abuse experiences. The NGO Women's Volunteers for Humanity (RPuK)-an organized women's group engaged in several therapeutic activities. Those women employed social gatherings, communal cooking, and gardening as therapeutic activities. The emotional connection between women who have had the same experience, as well as sharing experiences in activities associated with women and the home, have been successful in helping women overcome the trauma they have endured for such a long time. This does not require a complex healing theory as taught by major theories. This study explored the healing initiatives implemented by RPUK for women in post-conflict communities in North Aceh. RPUK has regular meetings with the assistance of The Asia Foundation and DFAT funding. This study aims to investigate alternative healing approaches used for women in post-conflict settings through ethnographic investigations. The healing paradigm for victims in post-conflict areas has been examined in numerous studies. To the circumstances and culture of the women who are being helped, RPUK adapts the healing notion that is learnt theoretically. Recognizing the sociocultural circumstances of the Acehese people, who take great pride in maintaining their traditions and culture, as well as the practices of local women, RPUK uses meeting spaces, communal cooking, and the cultivation of medicinal plants. A powerful manifestation of this healing paradigm is the bravery of women to speak out about their experiences with domestic violence.

Keywords: Aceh, healing, post-conflict, volunteer, women.

Introduction

This paper will examine healing initiatives among Acehese Women in a post-conflict area conducted by Women Volunteer for Humanity (RPuK). RPUK is a woman's NGO in Aceh that focuses on the issue of human rights violations experienced by Acehese women during the military conflict. Most areas of Aceh, especially areas where had high-intensity conflict and severely damage, were intervened by RPUK. They were such as North Aceh, Bener Meriah, Aceh Besar.

¹ Universitas Muhammadiyah Madiun

² Universitas Gadjah Mada

³ Universitas Ahmad Dahlan



More than 20 years, Aceh were struggle with a military conflict. In addition to that, at the end of December 2004, Aceh was hit by a tsunami. Social dan natural disaster caused many casualties. People lost their lives and property. According to Indonesia's National Disaster Relief Coordination cited by Nazamudin and Alvisyahrin (2012: 3), 126.915 people were dead, , 37.065 missing, 500 resident loss their houses and 1500 children lost their schools. Acehnese people experienced multiplied trauma not only due to social disasters but also natural disasters. Aceh faced multi humanitarian crisis. Mental health was really a serious issue that needs attention. This paper focus on the healing strategy implemented by RPUK, a local NGO in Aceh. They worked in some areas to improve the mental health of women especially in post-conflict areas. Some of these areas were affected by the tsunami disaster. RPUK named this activity as a trauma healing.

Various healing methods were learned by RPUK activists. Those training were delivered by various NGOs or by donor agencies during post-tsunami recovery programs. The healing method was combined with some regular visits conducted by RPUK staff. They organized women's groups in the areas where they intervened. These visits are carried out formally and informally either in a group or individual. By engaging in the survivors' daily activities, RPUK staff and volunteers fully understand the socio-cultural of the community including their mental health condition. This paper will focus on healing methods carried out by RPUK which respect to the life of wisdom in the community. Its method also respects to the women experiences which very differs although they claimed they were a victim.

RPUK Working Areas. Aceh is one of the provinces in Indonesia located at the Westernmost of Indonesia. This province consists of 18 districts, 5 cities, 290 subdistricts and 6.515 *gampong* (villages) (BPS Kabupaten Aceh Utara, 2023:12). Aceh Province is located close to North Sumatra Province. Historically, Aceh experience long-term battle before and after Indonesian independence. On the hand, Aceh is well known by its glory period, on the other hand, Aceh had experienced a dark period during military conflict. Around 16 – 17th centuries, Aceh was famous as an international harbor for European, China and Middle Eastern traders. Aceh kingdoms was well known with its strong naval. Hurgroene (2019) documented the social, political, economic and cultural of the Acehnese people in the 16th-17th centuries in detailed. He documented that Aceh succeeded in establishing diplomatic cooperation with one of Middle East countries. The emergence of male and female war lords increasingly showed the glory of Aceh which distinguished Aceh from other regions in Indonesia at that time. Sixteenth to seventeenth centuries was a crucial period because Aceh was forming its identity (Riddel, 2005: 46)

After Indonesia independence was declared, military conflicts occurred for many years in Aceh. Starting from the conflicts between DI/TII and the Indonesian military and followed by the conflict between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) (Reid, 2006), Aceh people suffered nearly every day.

Some military operations were carried out by the Indonesian government to end GAM. These operations include *Operasi Jaring Merah* and *Daerah Operasi Militer (DOM)* (Miller, 2008). The operation caused many casualties among the civilians (Komnas Perempuan, 2019, 2021; KontraS, 2006). Women in Aceh, especially in the conflict areas, experienced gender-based violence against women (GBV). GBV put the victims who are mostly women and girls at the risk of powerless in many aspects. Trauma, physical and sexual injuries were the impacts GBV during the Aceh conflict. Had not been heal from traumatic of military conflicts, Aceh women impacted by the hit of tsunami. It occurred at the end of December 2004, when the military conflict was still happening. Many people flee as refugees, lost their families, lost their income. Women were among those refugees.

After tsunami and conflicts, it was found women were very traumatized. They were fear of strangers. They were afraid of seeing green color such as army uniform or brown color such as police uniform. To address this problem, RPUK decided to conduct healing activities. Healing program designed by RPUK was carried out through two ways; in collaboration with university and

professional psychologist and healing carried out by the RPuK staff. This paper will describe the healing strategy carried out by RPuK which a researcher found during the researcher conducted a PhD research in Aceh in 2021 and 2022.

Briefly: Women Volunteer for Humanity (RPuK). Women Volunteer for Humanity (RPuK) is a non-governmental organization established by some Aceh women activists from various backgrounds (Manalu, 2020). RPuK has a vision and mission to create gender equality in the society, as well as to facilitate women's economic recovery (Idris, 2011:13). This organization was established on 2 June 1999. Relawan Perempuan untuk Kemanusiaan (Women Volunteer for Humanity, called RPuK) is an NGO focusing on women's right especially women victim of military conflict and tsunami in Aceh. Its secretariat office located in Banda Aceh. However, RPuK intervenes some regions across Aceh province, especially the areas severely damaged by conflict and tsunami impact. Although RPuK was widely known to focus on the problem of human rights violations that afflict women at the beginning, in the course time RPuK also focused on women's human rights issues broadly including women who are victims of gender-based violence committed by individuals and groups at domestic as well as public sphere.

Method

This study is a part of my findings during I am conducting my PhD research thesis in Aceh. At the end of 2021, a researcher conducted a fieldwork in Aceh for two months. Researcher lived in the house of one of RPuK's staff in Muara Batu sub District, North Aceh District. The *gampong* where the researcher lived was one of the former conflict area and was severely affected by the tsunami. During living in North Aceh, a researcher had the opportunity to observe various activities carried out by RPuK staffs including their interactions with women in the former conflict and tsunami areas. Badriah Thalib, now she is a director of RPuK introduced me with some women living in former conflict areas. Abdullah (2015) said that the challenge of conducting a research in Aceh is the loss of trust. Acehnese people especially in the post-conflict areas can not trust easily with outsiders. As an outsider researcher, this problem must be mitigated prior the research. Without the help of RPuK staff, a researcher will find some difficulties to collect research data in former conflict areas. The difference of ethnicity between a researcher and research subjects is another challenge that I must pay attention to when collect the data. Acehnese people considered Javanese as colonizers during the conflict between GAM and the Indonesian military (Schulze, 2006). The stigma against a researcher who is a Javanese is inevitable. The language barrier is also an issue that I cannot avoid it. Acehnese people generally speak Malay. Although it is almost like Bahasa Indonesia, Malay is different from Bahasa Indonesia. For that reason, misunderstandings between a researcher and the informant sometimes occurred. This research was also greatly helped by RPuK's reports which were allowed to be accessed during the research.

Results and Discussion

Healing Training from Professionals

Before discussing the various healing types carried out by RPuK, it is very important to define the term healing in this article. Another issue which needed to explore more are how RPuK staffs and volunteers have capacities to conduct a healing to the survivors of post conflicts and post tsunami areas. Allen and Wozniak (2010) stated that healing is not just counseling. It means counseling is part of the healing. Healing is a comprehensive activities, it consists various methods to heal people individually or a group of people. Theoretically, healing is widely applied by

professionals or students who study psychology or social work. They are indeed equipped with many theories, various intervention models both for individual and groups intervention. Certain competencies are required for conducting healing. Sue et.al (2016) wrote a book about multicultural social work which highlighted some competencies for social workers who intervene multicultural communities. That book showed that any intervention including healing is a comprehensive activity which consider not only psychological aspect but also social and cultural aspects.

RPuK staffs and volunteers who conducted healing activities are from various educational backgrounds. Murniati (2019: 9) stated that counselors are not always a psychologist or have a formal psychology education background. Although healing is bigger than counseling, at least Murniati statement highlighted the important role of non psychologist into healing intervention. In GBV cases, the social workers or psychologists have to equipped by gender and feminist perspective in addition to professional healing theory and practices. By elaborating those skills and theories, healing for GBV victim will succeed. RPuK has proven that without having a background in psychology education or formal social work, their staffs and volunteers have been able to build the trust of the survivors and facilitated them to relief. These staffs and volunteers are partly from the paralegal community. Similarly to sociopsychology support, Ibreck (2023) mentioned that paralegal plays a very important role in defending victims of GBV even though they are not professional lawyers. This community consists of women who have been victims of gender-based violence against women and is organized by RPuK. They are involved in various RPuK activities, trained, and then volunteered to help provide services for other women in the community.

The broader of Aceh Province causes the presence of paralegal volunteers from RPuK very helpful. They deliver psychosocial assistance services closer to women in need. It can be said that the volunteers organized by RPuK plays important role to heal women at the grassroots level. Because they do not have a formal educational background as a psychologist or a social worker, RPuK volunteers and staffs received psychosocial training from other organization before they intervene a group or before providing psychosocial assistance to the women in post-conflict areas. The training is obtained from universities and NGOs that have psychological recovery services. After Aceh was hit by the tsunami disaster, many NGOs both at the national and international levels entered to Aceh and carried out psychosocial programs for disaster-affected communities. The Faculty of Psychology, Malikul Saleh University and the Pulih Foundation were two institution training RPuK to conduct healing activities (interview with RPuK companions, 23 June 2022). To fund the activities, RPuK received financial support from the donor. The PEDULI program funded by The Asia Foundation is one of the program that supports RPuK healing program.

One of the psychosocial trainings strategies carried out in RPuk was a healing class. Adult learning model was adapted to deliver the healing in a group. Because psychosocial assistance is related to women's human rights, in addition to material about psychosocial, gender material is also inserted in it. By elaborating the theory of Psychosocial gained from the professional and gender perspective, caused RPuK staffs and volunteers are better prepared for heal women victim of violence. RPuK's volunteers consisted of survivors of conflict, tsunami and domestic violence who have been empowered.

Experiencing violence, women required psychosocial assistants to understand what the needs of the women. All these efforts in fact equip the RPuK staff about healing skills that are suitable for women in post-conflict areas.

In addition to the mentors receiving training to improve their psychosocial assistance skills, the companions from RPuK are also involved in *care for giver* events. It is undeniable that these psychosocial assistants in addition to working on psychosocial assistance, some are also survivors of conflicts and / or tsunami disasters. Work to heal for a long time, and meet many people causes physical and mental fatigue. Realizing this, RPuK held a *care for givers* to maintain mental health for their mentors. One of the care for giver models carried out by companions in Aceh is by means of *meuramine*

Figure 1.
Meuramin



This *meuramin* is famous among the companions. The chaperones will go somewhere together, cook together, eat together with joint funds.

The reason RPuK collaborates in healing is not only to improve their healing skills, but also for other reasons. In the RPuK report (2017), it is stated that psychosocial assistance is prepared because women survivors of conflict will be asked for their testimonies about their experiences of violence that they have experienced during conflict. The testimony is used to uphold the truth and give a sense of justice to survivors. Psychosocial assistance prepared by RPuK in collaboration with several institutions is an anticipation of the impact of testimonials that will be carried out. In this section, it appears that the legal interest to get justice for survivors is contrary to the interest of their mental health to be free from trauma. Legal needs are essential to get justice for survivors, but replaying dark memories of the past will be a challenge to their mental health.

Healing for Women Victims of Violence in Post-Conflict Areas

Murniati (2019: 19) said that psychological therapy ignores the reality of systematic oppression of women. It has not been able to process the recovery of women victims of violence into survivors. Healing raised in this article is defined by the companion of the RPuK staff who carried out the healing process.

"At first, I want the women victim feels secure, safe and a sense of comfort because I noticed they were afraid of strangers coming in." (interview with Badriah, 17 June 2022)

Based on the interview with Badriah, healing refers to a series of activities carried out by RPuK to provide a sense of comfort and security to women victims of conflict. It aims to develop their confidence and trust. He said that at the beginning of his and his agency's entry into the post-conflict area, people were afraid that someone from outside the area would enter the area. This fear manifests in the form of hiding when you see new people entering the *gampong*. One woman was also terrified to see green. In other cases, women became heart-weak after seeing their family members slaughtered. Seeing these facts, building trust between escorts and local residents, especially women, became the main agenda at the beginning of RPuK activities in former conflict areas.

Equipped with training obtained on psychosocial assistance, RPuK applies several healing methods in groups. The healing uses relaxation and meditation methods. In between relaxations, the companion from RPuK asked participants to say *Istigfar*. Acehese people are indeed very thick with their religious nuances. Culture and Islam for the people of Aceh are two things that cannot be separated. This kind of condition affects the healing model carried out by RPuK. This finding confirms that the religion believed by survivors has a role in healing as said by Foreman (2017). In the context of Acehese society, the connection between religion and healing is very strong.

Although this healing program aims to create positive environment to implement women's empowerment program, several obstacles are found. Firstly, meditation technic designed by RPuK was rejected by several women who participated in healing program. Similarly, to other areas in Aceh, North Aceh is dominated by Moslem. Their daily activities residents are influenced by Islamic values and culture. When RPuK introduced meditation as a healing technique, some women rejected this method since they believed it derived from Hindu culture. To mitigate this contra, the RPuK staff implemented personal approach by visiting them regularly, joining their traditions such as *takziah*, celebrating *Islamic day*.

Another challenge faced during healing program carried out by RPuK was some women especially the elderly was illiterate. Neither they can speak Bahasa Indonesia nor write and read in Bahasa Indonesia. This prevented them to be able to express violence they experienced. To overcome this problem, RPuK used images, stones, flowers as media to express traumatized experienced by the survivors. This method have been applied by AJAR pada saat melakukan healing bagi survivor pelanggaran HAM berat di Indonesia. Dengan metode ini hampir peserta yang iletarate dapat mengungkapkan cerita masa lalu yang menyebabkan trauma.

Healing in large groups is quite effective in terms of time but on the other hand, there are survivors who are unable to express their feelings in such large groups. Different individual characters cause special handling according to these characters is also needed. In healing activities involving large groups, RPuK assistants observed passive participants in the group. Findings from RPuK companions show that survivors who have experienced sexual violence tend to take longer to trust new people and choose individual rather than group interventions. In the context of Aceh, this is very understandable. Sexual violence is a very taboo case revealed in public. Individuals who

are passive in groups, will be visited by individual companions to their homes. This process turned out to be quite effective to help the healing process carried out on a survivor.

The healing process carried out by RPuK is a process that applies the principle of survivor as a healing subject. Based on principles, the healing process carried out by RPuK is also not only with various healing techniques taught by professional trainers. Things that are considered normal and carried out daily by residents in former conflict areas, are carried out by assistants from RPuK as a healing medium. Activities carried out include cooking together, gardening together or coming to the place of the deceased, coming to residents who are *khanduri* is an important part of the healing process carried out on women survivors of conflict in Aceh. In carrying out these processes, the way of dressing and appearance of psychosocial companions also adapts to the culture of survivors. Veils, long cloths or gamis and local languages, practical languages are important media for the successful healing of women survivors in former conflict areas in Aceh.

Several years of healing processes that were carried out gradually and adapted, resulted in significant changes in women survivors in conflict areas. One of the significant changes from this is the courage of women to tell the experience of violence that has been experienced even though it is still in a limited context. Experiences of sexual violence rarely can be revealed to people they just know let alone meet. In a case, a woman the researcher had met was able to laugh at events when she was detained by soldiers or when she was interrogated by soldiers. These women are no longer afraid of the army. In some cases, women whose husbands were killed during the conflict have dared to marry and have new families.

Conclusion

Healing for Acehnese women who experienced trauma in post-conflict areas is not a specific disciplinary domain. Acehnese women not only experience trauma problems due to chronic conflicts. They are also in certain socio-cultural conditions that influence the success of healing to achieve the goal of healing itself. In addition to the external conditions of women, the issue of intersectionality in women as survivors is also an aspect that needs attention.

RPuK sees women as survivors of social and natural disasters having multiple traumas and identities. Unraveling these layers is certainly one stage that must be done in the healing process carried out. Inviting *istigfar* survivors in the healing process, using local languages and wearing religious clothes is a form of adaptation of healing practices carried out by RPuK companions. This condition states that what is meant by survivor-centered healing is not only centered on the trauma experienced but also centered on the external condition of the survivor growing, living daily life.

Healing applied by RPuK by applying various strategies turned out to produce significant changes in women as survivors. Women being able to talk about their dark life experiences is the biggest achievement of the healing process carried out by RPuK. This courage proves that the woman has overcome the fear in her; fear of being stigmatized, fear of losing a new family and even fear for her safety. However, women's reluctance to tell certain parts, especially related to sexual violence that has been experienced, can also be understood that the healing process for women in post-conflict areas is a process that does not stop and the goal can be achieved only within a certain period of time.

References

- Abdullah, I. (2015). Realitas Politik, Deteritorialisasi Sosial, dan Redefinisi Penelitian Budaya: Aceh sebagai Field of Study. In *Konstruksi dan Reproduksi Kebudayaan* (V, pp. 121–137).
- Allen, K. N., & Wozniak, D. F. (2010). The Language of Healing: Women's Voices in Healing and Recovering From Domestic Violence. *Social Work in Mental Health*, 9(1), 37–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332985.2010.494540>
- BPS Kabupaten Aceh Utara. (2023). *Aceh Utara dalam Angka 2023* (p. Iviii+552). Badan Pusat Statistik.
- Foreman, D. M. (2017). The role of faith in mental healthcare: Philosophy, psychology and practice. *BJPsych Advances*, 23(6), 419–425. <https://doi.org/10.1192/apt.bp.116.016345>
- Hurgrone, C. S. (2019). *Orang Aceh: Budaya, Masyarakat, dan Politik Kolonial* (Vol. 1). IRCiSoD.
- Ibreck, R. (2023). Protecting Women from Violence in the United Nations Protection of Civilians Sites, South Sudan? *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2023.2215604>
- Idris, M. (2011). Kesukarelawanan dalam Pencegahan Kekerasan Berbasis Gender di Aceh. UN Women.
- Komnas Perempuan. (2019). *National Commission on Violence against Women (Komnas Perempuan) National Human Rights Institution Independent Report on 25 Years of Implementing the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA+25) in Indonesia* (p. 99). <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://ngocsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Komnas-Perempuan-Independent-Report-BPFA25.pdf>
- Komnas Perempuan. (2021). *Lembar Fakta dan Poin Kunci Catatan Tahunan Komnas Perempuan Tahun 2022 Bayang-bayang Stagnansi: Daya Pencegahan dan Penanganan Berbanding Peningkatan Jumlah, Ragam dan Kompleksitas Kekerasan Berbasis Gender terhadap Perempuan* (p. 6). Komnas Perempuan.
- KontraS. (2006). *ACEH, DAMAI DENGAN KEADILAN? Mengungkap Kekerasan Masa Lalu* (Seri Aceh II, p. 156). KontraS.
- Manalu, A. (Director). (2020, August). *Jalan Panjang Menggapai dan Memaknai Perdamaian* [Documentary; Youtube]. RPUK. https://youtube/oaSJUIJ_chA
- Miller, M. A. (2008). *Rebellion and Reform in Indonesia* (0 ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203888193>
- Murniati, N. P. (2019). *Konseling Feminis (Relasi Antar Manusia Bercirikan Kesetaraan untuk Pemulihan Korban Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan)*. Padepokan Perempuan GAIA.
- Nazamudin, B. S., & Alvisyahrin, T. (2012). *Indian Ocean Tsunami 2004: Recovery in Banda Aceh*. Tsunami and Disaster Mitigation Research Center and International Recovery Platform. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.1.1563.0561
- Reid, A. (Ed.). (2006). *Verandah of violence: The background to the Aceh problem*. Singapore University Press in association with University of Washington Press.
- Riddel, P. G. (2005). Aceh in The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: “Serambi Mekah and Identity.” In *Verandah of Violence* (pp. 38–51). Singapore University Press in association with University of Washington Press.
- Sadli, S. (2019). Pengantar. In *Konseling Feminis Relasi Antar Manusia Bercirikan Kesetaraan untuk Pemulihan Korban Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan* (p. viii+295). Padepokan Perempuan GAIA.
- Schulze, K. E. (2006). Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency: Strategy and the Aceh Conflict, October 1976–May 2004. In *Verandah of Violence: Aceh's Contested Place in Indonesia* (pp. 225–271). University Press Singapura.
- Sue, D. W., Rasheed, M. N., & Rasheed, J. M. (2016). *Multicultural social work practice: A competency-based approach to diversity and social justice* (Second edition). Jossey-Bass.