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International Women's Day

International Women's Day in Indonesia: a struggle for liberation

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This year International Women's Day in Indonesia is marked by an increase of attacks on women. The increasing frequency of violence against women, particularly sexual violence, and the recent government plan to raise the fuel price threatens and burdens all women, especially poor women. Perempuan Mahardhika (Free Women) is a women's organization that has been trying to build a women's movement against all forms of oppression and exploitation caused by capitalism, patriarchy, and militarism. Fighting sexual harassment and economic policies which would further feminize poverty are parts of the important struggle for women's liberation in Indonesia.

Violence against women, particularly sexual violence, is not a new phenomenon. According to Vivi Widyawati, one of the leaders of National Committee of Perempuan Mahardhika, it is a "silent violence" that is rarely addressed by the Left and social movements in Indonesia – with the exception of women's organizations. It can happen every day, in every part and in every aspect of women's life: from home to the street to the workplace, including state institutions. Sexual violence is also used as a political instrument as happened many times in conflict-ridden areas such as Aceh [1] and Papua [2], the victimization and stigmatization of the (Communist Party aligned) Indonesian Women Movement (Gerwani) by the Indonesian military government since 1965 [3], and the sexual violence against ethnic Chinese women during the 1998 riots in Jakarta [4], and as a tool of war, like in the case of East Timor's independence struggle against the Indonesian state [5]

At the same time women benefit the least from the average 6 per cent growth rate of the Indonesian economy. This growth has little impact on the rate of maternal mortality of about 320 per 100.000 births (still the highest in Asia) which remains steady, or on the illiteracy of 10,5 million women below the age of 15 year. There are 118.048.783 women from 237.556.363 of Indonesian total population. In general, the economic growth had little impact on the participation of women in school which increased with a little over one fifth in 29 years. Eleven per cent of women above 10 years old have never been to school at all [6].

That is why women are the most trafficked in sex industry as "comfort women" and prostitutes and women also dominate the lowest skilled jobs, working in very precarious, insecure, and exploited circumstances, for instance as domestic helpers (inside and outside the country) or in manufacture industry (mostly garment, textile and electronic).

This article tries to locate a red thread connecting these two pressing issues of women's oppression in Indonesia, on the occasion of international women's day this year.

The politics of blaming the victims

Since 1998 to 2010 The National Commission on Violence against Women (KOMNAS PEREMPUAN) has documented rape as the most reported form of sexual violence. From 8784 verified reports, 4845 concern rape cases, and from 93.960 unverified reports, 70.115 are sexual violence cases committed by close family or acquaintances such as fathers, husbands, brothers, uncles, boyfriends, grandfathers, etc.

The rape cases have been highlighted recently since the number of rapes in public transportation has significantly increasing [7]. But those numbers seem 'small' compared with the total number of women. This is because violence against women remains poorly documented by the government. Nationwide figures are unavailable [8]. This it's

understandable since the only state supported institution for monitoring gender-based violence, KOMNNAS PEREMPUAN, has only one office, in the capital city, Jakarta. And we also know that under a patriarchal system and society gender based violence, particularly sexual, is often hidden, discussion of it suppressed.

Indonesia has no legal provision which criminalizes sexual harassment [9]. Until today no fair trials of the ones responsible or attempts to look into the politically motivated cases of rape and other sexual violence in conflict area, have taken place. This violence has not even been made a political issue. Instead of locating the cause of this violence in the patriarchal and capitalist structure of society, and issuing a new criminal code for sexual harassment cases that is free of gender bias, the state supported at least 154 regional bylaws in 2009, and an additional 35 by September 2010, that further give legitimacy for the patriarchal policy of blaming the victims. Examples of those laws are the Sharia Law in Aceh and several cities in West Java that tell women how to dress and how to behave [10] and the 'Anti Pornography Bill No 44' of 2008, and different 'Anti Prostitution' and 'Anti-Alcoholic' laws in different cities. These laws have put women into an even more precarious condition and made it easier for them to be blamed and become victims of sexual harassment.

That is why a political movement to resist rape and denounce the tendency of blaming the victims is very important. Perempuan Mahardhika is one of the leading organizations that specifically campaigns against the blaming of victims of rapes and other forms of sexual violence. We aim to uncover the true motives for these acts, rooted in a patriarchal culture that is maintained by capitalism. Sexual violence is rooted in patriarchal conditions that place women in the position of inferior, secondary people and as sexual objects. Capitalism maintains and even provokes these attitudes by the commodification of women's body. For example, sexist advertisements flood our mass media. It openly exploits women and brings more profit to industries like cosmetics, clothing, household goods, furniture, and electronics. The sex industry, which degrades women even more, is also a capitalist industry.

On Sunday, March 4th 2012, Perempuan Mahardhika held a campaign action to protest rape and other forms of sexual violence. The banners read: "From Home to the State women are raped; State ignores many sexual harassment cases; Don't Blame the victims, resist, arrest and jail the Rapists." This action was part of a series of activities in the run up International Women's Day March 8th 2012. Together with different groups of women and LGBT's, the 'Women Justice Forum' was established carry this campaign forward.

Perempuan Mahardhika recently printed a pocket book called "A-Z Sexual Harassment, Resist and Report" as a kind of guideline book to understand the definition and locus of sexual harassment, help build the confidence to resist it, and know the existing legal mechanism to make a report. It also organized a series of discussions on sexual harassment together with Across Factory Labor Forum (FBLP) union, which has a majority female membership, in the Cakung Industrial Zone. According to a survey made by FBLP and Mahardhika last year, many women workers experienced different forms of sexual harassment in the zone. This not something that comes from 'the outside'; Mahardhika members and supporters also experienced sexual violence by men in many social and political organizations.

Building the bridge

Some leftwing labor unions recently called for a political response toward 8 March International Women's Day. Initially they wanted to organize a mobilization to campaign for a wage raise, following strikes of thousands of workers in several economic zones in Bekasi, West Java [11] and Tangerang, Banten Province. But after the government announced its plan to raise the fuel price [12] on April 1st 2012, the alliance of workers agreed to prioritize this issue on the 8th of March.

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It seemed there was nothing wrong with the plan, until Jumisih, a member of Across Factory Labor Forum (FBLP) and a member of Perempuan Mahardhika, suggested to the alliance to emphasize the specific aspects of women within those issues – after all, the mobilization itself is set on International Women's Day. But this simple suggestion was not taken up - the importance of such an emphasis is so far not understood by most of the (male) leaders of the labor organizations who often remain ignorant of, or indifferent to other aspects of women's rights.

Of course, at least, 38 per cent of the labor force is female [13] and these women would also benefit from any wage raise. But this raise will not automatically be equal for men and women, nor will it contribute to a decrease of work for women at home. Until now, women are not considered the primary wage-earners in families since men are supposed 'the head of the family'. Seen as only secondary wage-earners, women are always paid less and laid off more easily than men. The fuel price hike will provoke inflation and put heavier burdens women because they are the ones who take care of the family and manage the household expenses. In many cases the husband don't really know or even care how women manage the family's economy and cope with inflation. Demands for wage raises and an affordable fuel price in themselves don't contain specific aspects of women's liberation. They only give a basis for women to struggle for more rights and liberate themselves. In the economic struggles specific women's demands should also be raised – otherwise, women's oppression, which takes specific forms, will be neglected.

In this context, what Jumisih was trying to put forward was a very important issue for the women's struggle, especially since it is their internationally acknowledged day. One hundred FBLP members is trying to give an example of how to combine the struggle for economic rights and against the specific oppression of women by organizing a protest in front of PT. Woojen Busana on 14th February 2012. The activists demanded a wage raise, overtime pay, a reduction of working hours, and called for a fight against verbal and physical sexual harassment in the factory [14].

It is still very small contribution in the struggle for the rights and liberation of the millions of women in Indonesia, but by doing this, at least, FBLP has contributed to the education of its members and giving a feminist color to the trade union struggle. Of course it's still a long way to a feminist revolution.... But, if revolution is a way to liberate people from all kinds of oppression and exploitation, ignoring or postponed the women's demand is the same like postponing the revolution.

Happy International Women's Day: more struggle, more equality, more happiness.

[1] <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/a...>

[2] <http://etan.org/issues/wpapua/2011/...>

[3] <http://komnasperempuan.or.id/publik...>

[4] <http://www.angelfire.com/space2/lig...> and http://www.peacewomen.org/portal_re...

[5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/01/w...>

[6] National Education Department, year 2005.

[7] <http://kprm-prd-english.blogspot.co...>

[8] <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrp...>

[9] Indonesia's Criminal Code applies a definition of rape which is outdated and does not meet current international standards on prosecution of rape cases. In it, rape is defined narrowly and exclusively in terms of forced penetration of the sexual organs. According to Indonesia's Code of Criminal Procedure (KUHP), the prosecution of rape requires evidence of semen through medical records (visum et repertum) and corroboration from two sources, including a witness. Such legal provisions make it practically impossible for women victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence to obtain justice through the courts. In effect, Indonesia does not have an effective legal framework which criminalizes this gender-specific form of torture"document submitted to the Committee Against Torture (CAT) by National Commission on Violence Against Women, April 2008.

[10] As part of the peace agreement in Aceh, Law No. 11/2006 on Aceh Governance stipulates that the Sharia Law is enforced in this province as recognition of its special autonomy status within the Indonesian Unitary state system. Local regulations produced in Aceh have their own Arabic term, qanun (cannon). Through the qanun, Muslim dress is obligatory for Muslim women and close proximity between an unmarried woman and a man who is not her guardian (khalwat) is a violation punishable by public flogging"document submitted to the Committee Against Torture (CAT) by National Commission on Violence Against Women, April 2008.

[11] <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/home...>

[12] <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/home...>

[13] <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/ind...>

[14] <http://www.tribunnews.com/2012/02/1...>