

FIELDWORK EXPERIENCE IN UNRAVELING DAY-TO-DAY EXPERIENCES OF GENDER VIOLENCE

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ABSTRAK

Mengungkap pengalaman kekerasan gender, dalam konteks artikel ini adalah kekerasan yang menempatkan laki-laki sebagai pelaku dan perempuan sebagai korban, membutuhkan metode dan teknik pengumpulan data yang bersifat dua arah. Peneliti dituntut untuk mampu mengkomunikasikan dan menegosiasikan isu kekerasan ke dalam kesadaran perempuan yang merupakan subjek penelitian ini. Sementara itu, perempuan diberi kesempatan untuk mengungkapkan dan mempersepsikan pengalaman mereka. Komunikasi dan negosiasi ini sangat penting karena para perempuan pekerja perkebunan yang merupakan objek kekerasan pada prinsipnya tidak menyadari adanya hubungan kekerasan karena apa yang mereka alami dianggap sebagai sesuatu yang wajar dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Dengan metode dan teknik pengumpulan data yang bersifat dua arah, bukan hanya pengalaman kekerasan yang berhasil diungkap tetapi juga tumbuhnya kemampuan kritis para perempuan dalam memandang kehidupan sehari-hari mereka yang ditandai oleh hubungan kekerasan baik di dalam rumah tangga maupun di tempat kerja.

Kata kunci : gender, health, violence, human rights, plantation, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

As elsewhere, in Indonesia there is growing awareness of gender violence. International declarations and conferences have played an important role in the development of this awareness among Indonesian scholars and activists. Following the decisions taken and incentives formulated at several international meetings and debates, particularly the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, demands for equal rights and a better life for women have increased significantly, mainly through women activists' campaigns and active advocacy. In addition, the gang rape of Chinese women in Jakarta (1998) and the mass brutality known as the "May tragedy", prior to the fall of Indonesia's ex-president Suharto (in 1998), as

well as the violence against women perpetrated by the military in conflict areas, such as Aceh, Papua, Maluku, Poso, and former East Timor, have been crucial in inspiring greater public awareness and have resulted in official government responses to the issue of violence, particularly violence against women.

The growing recognition of gender-related violence and the need to overcome the problems associated with its occurrence illustrate clearly that this issue has entered the public discourse in Indonesia.

In the midst of the menace of gender violence, as a female anthropologist I was called to better understand gender violence, a social phenomenon that must be overcome by means of scientific inquiry. Given the newness and sensitivity of the topic, methodological

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issues arise in the process of unraveling experiences of violence among women plantation workers in Central Java, Indonesia. Innocence, silence and denial are at issue. These may be because the experience is unspeakable, too painful to tell, or culturally and/or politically silenced and these can be found at the individual level, within groups of people, or in governments who are responsible for atrocities or deny their responsibility to intervene (Richters 2004: 172). Consequently, this process very much enters into debate on how to hold an emic perspective while also trying to give women different views that will give them –at least according to my own perspective as a researcher- a chance at a better life.

The aim of this paper is to describe my field experiences in communicating and negotiating the issue of violence into women's consciousness, as to help them recognize their experience of violence amid their persistent denial and perception that such experiences are normal in their day-to-day lives. It is also to show how women gradually become more critical of their living circumstances and see that their day-to-day lives are considerably marked by violent relationships involving male counterparts both in the domestic and work spheres. Through their narratives, the research gathered evidence to link violence in their day-to-day lives with health and human rights abuses of women plantation workers.

THE SETTING

I carried out research on violence in the day-to-day lives of women plantation workers in Central Java, Indonesia as part of my PhD project (Wattie 2004). The community I came into contact with was relatively small characterized by a highly hierarchical and male-dominated plantation social structure. There are two local authorities in the community, the village and the plantation. These two different, yet closely linked authorities shape the plantation

social structure. My primary reason for selecting a plantation community in one of Central Java's rural areas as a study setting, was to closely examine and subsequently analyze the occurrence of gender violence, within the cultural, political, social, and economic context of the society. In this study, elements were sought to link this small-scale, well-defined plantation community with the larger environment of its Central Javanese setting, involving local values, norms and influences from an overall Javanese culture on the one hand, and the larger whole of the Indonesian state, with its permeating social, economic- and political structures on the other, and the factors which determine gender role expectations and gender inequality, both in the domestic sphere and the workplace.

By studying this type of community I hoped to gain insight into and understanding of women's experiences in surviving gender violence as a result of their positions and status in the community. In their daily lives as wives, mothers, community members, and plantation workers, women are members of their households, community, and the plantation, all spheres which potentially perpetuate violence. Thus, this research attempted specifically to trace the features of gender and social relations in the household and workplace to understand how these together act as risk factors for the occurrence of gender violence against women.

Since the very beginning I was aware of a number of situations that would force me to develop research strategies for dealing with the difficulties in conducting my field work and in obtaining information. Before I proceed to my field strategies I will discuss some concepts of gender violence in the context of non-Western societies in general and how these were applied to the community under study.

THE CONCEPTS

What is gender violence? During the course of the research, I received many questions from colleagues and friends concerning the forms

and areas of violence. Behind these curious questions were concerns about the focus of my research; was it on physical, sexual or psychological forms of violence? And who was involved in violent behavior? Most questions centered on evidence of spousal physical abuse and/or rape. Many thought that gender violence was associated with physical acts and their impacts. Further questions about who is involved in violent acts, referred to domestic or public relationship spheres. These and many other questions reflect the broadness of the concept providing itself to careful definitions.

The concepts of 'gender' and more specifically 'gender violence' are Western notions that should be used with caution within the context of non-Western societies. An ongoing debate concerning gender and violence involves feminist scholars and anthropologists (Harvey and Gow 1994). Anthropological studies have revealed that gender differences and unequal gender relations are not universally found to be the same as in Western societies. The division of labor and gender differences in non-Western societies do not always manifest themselves in the form of male domination over women. Feminist scholars, in contrast, argue that anthropological research fails to discern that gender relationships are a product of male supremacy, created by and persistently creating gender inequality. According to feminist scholars, acts of gender-related violence are still being 'overlooked', perhaps even misunderstood, or unrecognized as a result of male-female antagonism. Anthropologists, on the other hand, try hard to construct bodies of knowledge and understanding by describing the occurrence of gender violence practices from the point of view of those involved. But, as indicated by Suarez-Orozco (cited in Richters 2004: 161), ethnographic attention has always been directed more at the constitutive than the destructive dimension of human societies. Thus, its results tend to confirm harmonious living arrangements rather than present evidence of disharmony for fear of exposing potential threats to the social order.

Similarly, Hof and Richters (2000:56) argue that the concept of gender violence presents a classic example of the problem of universality versus cultural relativity of individual human rights taking into account the discrepancy between an outsider's judgment in this respect and the judgment of the women concerned. There might be some disagreement among the women themselves and researchers to perceive and name such phenomena as 'violence against women', which directly involves male perpetrators and female victims, even though the evidence is (physically) visible. By employing a comprehensive approach to gender violence in the lives of women, the researcher has to confront the issues of disqualification, denial, and normalness. This research perceives gender violence to be part and parcel of people's day-to-day lives on the plantation, assuming men as potential perpetrators of violence and women as its potential objects. Both genders, however, tend to disqualify and/or deny the acts of violence in which they are involved. Some of the studies presented in the book by Bennett and Manderson (2003) clearly show that in Asian communities cultural preoccupations with honor, shame and the sexual purity of women are central in sustaining gender differentiation and gender inequality while simultaneously justifying violence against women and depending upon such violence to reinforce hegemonic systems of gender inequality. In this way, gender violence is considered 'normal'. Kleinman (2000:236) states that, "hierarchy and inequality, which are so fundamental to social structures, normalize violence". Moreover, gender violence can also be seen as working naturally as symbolic violence to maintain masculine domination and feminine submissiveness (Bourdieu 2001).

The focus of a 'gender violence' study can vary, depending on its objectives. It may concern the sphere of violence, the various forms, and the relationship between the victim and perpetrator. My study concerns gender violence in the day-to-day lives of women workers. I am well aware that women as

members of a plantation community are generally in a disadvantaged position, occupying the bottom of the plantation labor structure, assuming gender role expectations, and suffering gender inequality, due to existing hierarchical relations, shaped by cultural, political, social and economic factors. Here I make no attempt to present a rigid definition of gender violence. Instead, I employ a relatively open and multi-dimensional definition of gender violence, which includes physical, psychological (verbal and non-verbal), and sexual and non-sexual violence in all spheres of gender relationships. In this case I tried to avoid the danger of many scientific approaches to violence which lies in making definitions of violence appear to be polished and finished—for the reality will never be (Richters 2004: 162). By simultaneously examining violence in the domestic and workplace spheres, it can be understood how women's creativity may be located in their everyday lives but also how real and mundane gender violence affect women's perceptions and responses to their experiences of gender violence (Das and Kleinman 2001:27). I examine risk factors related to gender violence such as gender role expectations pertaining in the community, women's status in the context of marital relationships, and household economic background, keeping in mind women's position at the bottom of the plantation's labor structure. Thus, gender violence is seen in two contexts. First, it includes any physical and psychological, verbal and non verbal, sexual and non-sexual acts committed and perpetuated by men directly or indirectly and experienced by women, either as wives or (co-) workers, in the form of threats, intimidation, and/or coercion and assault, which result in physical, psychological, sexual, economic, and/or social harm to or suffering by women. Second, gender violence includes structural violence, in the form of discrimination and exploitation in harmful working conditions.

In my research a clear stand is taken. Gender violence, regardless of the form in which it is committed, has a devastating effect on women's

health. Following Harvey and Gow (1994:21), violence - and hence gender related violence - is here considered as "... by definition unacceptable, out of control, beyond reason..." I pay attention primarily to recording the experiences of victims or survivors, in this case, women.

My goal was to gain a comprehensive picture of gender violence, and address the issues of women's rights violations within the context of the relatively small plantation community in rural Java as an integral part of the broader context of the Indonesian state and society. By employing gender and rights perspectives, gender violence is understood within the context of gender inequalities and violations of women's rights. Astbury (2003:160-161) argues that gender violence is an emblematic rights violation because it violates a number of absolute human rights: the right to life, to freedom from entrapment and coercive control, freedom from torture, freedom from fear, and freedom from movement. Addressing gender violence within the context of a broad human rights perspective will hopefully result in the protection of and promotion of women's human rights to dignity, privacy, safety, education, and information, which will substantially strengthen women's ability to exercise their rights over health and wellbeing. By studying the day-to-day experience of gender violence among women plantation workers, I hope to have come close to a holistic approach, which disclosed and offered deep insight into women's experiences of gender violence, to ultimately find solutions to prevent and protect women from acts of violence in the intertwining domestic and work spheres.

RESEARCH PROCESS AND STRATEGIES

How did I maintain my optimism to gather information about the day-to-day experience of gender violence among women plantation workers? In her background paper for the symposium, Richters (2004:172) argues that we need updated field strategies to conduct

field research in dangerous circumstances. I admit that my research experience was less threatening compared to many societies which suffer from the organized violence cited and discussed by Richters. However, I had to use what she calls a pragmatic strategy for dealing with threats to the safety, security, and well-being of anthropologists and informants who work amid the menace of violence.

Gender violence is a delicate and tough topic which requires tact and resourcefulness. Only after living in the community for a long time was I able to communicate with the people about this topic. The difficulties started at the very beginning of the research process. To obtain the necessary permits, I began by contacting the management staff. Then I faced introducing, explaining, and developing this sensitive topic, while at the same time building and maintaining relationships with the women and other informants, and eliciting core information from them. To enable this, I employed various methods of data collection, from surveys, to active participation in the community, to in-depth interviews and impromptu focus group discussions.

First I conducted a short survey to understand the characteristics of the households and of individual women workers. To give my informants a clear impression of my research topic, I introduced general questions about women's experiences of conflict with their husbands and others in their networks. I proceeded with in-depth interviews and observations. Here I could not just 'hit and run'; ask about their experiences and then leave them to themselves in bewilderment. I needed to get to the bottom of their feelings, perceptions and responses. Thus, active participation in the community and in-depth interviews were key tools in disclosing personal experiences and evidence of acts of violence.

INTRODUCING THE TOPIC AND FINDING THE CASES

Throughout the research I focused my interviews on 50 married women as my main

informants. Each have experienced various forms of gender violence. I also interviewed men: the husbands of my female informants, the administrator, *sinder*, *mandor*, village heads, village functionaries, and several other informants in the neighborhood and in the workplace. The selection of these 50 women was based on three considerations: results of the initial survey, information from a third party, and my direct endeavor to find cases. The questionnaire included a section that dealt with experiences of conflict between the respondent and her husband, *mandor* (work supervisor), male co-workers, female co-workers, and neighbors. From the start, I expected that interviewed women who confirmed that they had had experiences of conflicts would share more detailed information about their experiences. While the research progressed I discovered more cases through third parties, such as mothers, sisters, other relatives and women co-workers (snowball effect). Another way of obtaining cases was through careful direct observation of women's behavior during their encounters with me.

It is not easy to come straight to the point if one wants to broach the subject of gender violence. I tried as much as possible to elicit desired information by establishing and maintaining good rapport. I never forced women to speak if they felt uncomfortable. I usually started with broad and light conversation and tried to find a good way to ask more about their or others' experiences of gender violence both in the domestic and work spheres. The opportunity to convey my research objectives often came later after several encounters with the women. I used questions like "Is he a caring husband?", "Is he a nice *mandor*?", "Does he complain a lot?", "Is it true that you and your husband (or *mandor*) were quarreling the other day?", "What does he do if he gets angry?" as point of departure. If they refused to speak more or denied experiences I had heard of previously from others, I would give them more time. More challenging questions like "Are you satisfied with your marriage (or work) life?" or "If you

could, what would you change about your marriage (or work) life?” were used to negotiate with women who considered their violent experiences as normal and, thus, accepted their fate as women and/or low-status workers.

One tactic was to use media to begin the discussion. During my research I used *sinetron* (short for *sinema elektronik*, electronic cinema, referring to Indonesian soap opera serials) as well as song lyrics to facilitate the women to open up, speak and share their experiences of gender violence which were consciously and unconsciously suppressed. In my view, this method proved to be more effective than straightforward questions like “*Have you experienced cruel conflicts with your husband?*” which might embarrass or stifle them. Indonesian soap serials and serials from Taiwan, Mexico, Brazil, and India broadcast on many television channels in Indonesia are marked with similar characteristics of heart-stricken scenes of abandoned or abused women who barely survive their fate, except for the lucky few which have a happy ending. When my women informants watched these serials in the evening, I observed their facial expressions, their gestures, and remarks. On some occasions I also asked them to comment on scenes, which clearly exposed abusive husbands smacking, beating, shouting at and intimidating their wives.

For song lyrics, I chose newly released popular and modern songs as well as some old favorites and *dangdut* and *tarling* songs. These songs, with themes of happiness as well as sadness in marriage and dating were excellent tools to introduce the topic of violence. Both *dangdut* and *tarling* songs are popular among the plantation women, and have similar themes of love, betrayal, dishonesty, infidelity, sexual jokes, polygamy and abusive relationships. Before questioning the women, I was curious to find out how they liked the stories and the lyrics. The following questions served as a guide to my interviews: What do you think about this story/song? What do you think about a woman who remains with her abusive husband like in this story/song? Why do you think she puts up with

her situation? Do you know women in similar situations? How well informed are you about other women’s experiences of violence? What do you think you must do to avoid violence in a marital relationship? How about your marriage? Have you had the same experience as these women? I discovered that the women became enthusiastic when discussing songs and stories with me. They frankly admitted that situations presented in the stories and songs reflected daily occurrences in their marriages.

By the time the research was almost halfway through, most informants began to understand the underlying goals of my research. I was conscious that for many people, gender violence was a sensitive issue and that some women might resent my presence and therefore become aloof with me. No matter how hard I tried, some refused to cooperate and I was forced to give up for ethical considerations. They did not want to discuss their experiences of violence for various reasons which included fear and the need to maintain privacy. Perceiving acts of violence as ‘normal’ or as non-violent were also factors which made some women unwilling to act as informants. Others spontaneously welcomed me and shared their experiences. I was happy to gain the confidence of women who had experienced gender violence and who believed they had nothing to hide or worry about in releasing their pent-up feelings to me.

I discovered a general pattern of women’s reactions to my visits. When I came across women who were reluctant to speak up, I intuitively assumed that the woman in question had experience with violence. Even if these women allowed me to enter their houses out of politeness they were likely to leave me by myself under the pretence of being busy with household chores. This was because many women in the neighborhood gradually recognized that I, a stranger who had become a regular visitor to selected households, preferred to talk about family secrets. This gave me an advantage as I learned more effective ways of seeking information from such situations. I was almost always right with my prediction that when a

woman I approached reluctantly accepted my visit but left me waiting in the kitchen while she snuck out of her house and then returned with one or more relatives she had a problem with domestic violence. In such cases I did my utmost to help them open up by being interested in their daily worries and sharing my own experiences. This was rarely the case when they let me enter their houses and lively conversed, sometimes I even had to find reasons to make them stop talking. These chatty women, however, helped me to identify cases. Through their information I had a choice of women with whom I could hold in-depth interviews. What brought me to understand significant relations between the attitudes toward my visit and experiences of domestic violence was women's tendency to avoid people who were talking about their violent experiences. For most, violence is considered a family secret, which is *saru* (taboo) to share with others.

Male plantation workers' reactions were quite different from women's. In earlier encounters, most expressed their dissatisfaction with labor conditions. Some were evasive in their reactions for reasons I understood. Men who were conscious of my research purpose, and who believed that I was eager to disclose family secrets became provocative, teasing me with remarks like "*Watch out. Do not quarrel with your wife, Anna will surely make notes about it.*" or "*Ma'am, you should take notes about this man who often abuses his wife*" whenever they found me roaming around the neighborhood.

Many couldn't help making suggestive remarks and comments on sexual matters to intentionally insult my vulnerability as a woman. The rainy and cold weather in those areas often provoked them to harass me by saying "*Please stop by to warm your body, do not walk in the rain*" or "*Isn't it better to huddle and sleep together on this cold day?*" At such times, I tried hard not to lose my temper and remain cool and regard these experiences as enriching my understanding about these men's ideas and attitudes on sexuality and sexual harassment.

On some occasions, however, I would tell them off and criticize their behavior.

I was aware of the problems inherent in interviewing men on this topic. Fortunately, in my first field research I had gathered information about a middle manager who had an affair with his female employee in the processing factory. His case became a hot conversation topic and was still being discussed when I revisited the research site. The affair ended in a fight between the manager and the husband of the worker which led to intervention by the plantation management. The manager in question was demoted and the woman was transferred to the most remote picking area. I used this case as a starting point to ask men their opinions, launching questions such as: What did they learn from this case? What was their perception of the manager's and the woman's behavior? Why did some men put the blame on the manager and others on the woman? As a follow-up, I started asking about more general cases like: Have they heard about such relationships before? In their opinion, what are the causes and consequences of such cases? Then I turned to more specific cases about wife scolding, wife beating and other kinds of spousal maltreatment like intimidation, polygyny and abandonment. Finally, I confronted my male informants with their personal experiences of these forms of gender violence both in the domestic and work sphere.

NAMING AND NEGOTIATING VIOLENCE

In the community, gender violence is an integral part of daily life. It is taken so much for granted that it has become 'normal'. This research aimed to break through the silence and the normality surrounding gender violence in the community.

As an ethnographic researcher, by immersing myself in the community I was able to witness empirical evidence to enrich my understanding of the experiences and feelings of women. This also allowed me to analyze the differences and commonalities of women's

responses, useful in understanding women's problems by investigating psychological and physical impacts on their health through observations and questions.

During the course of the research, different perceptions between the women research subjects and myself on domestic and workplace gender issues, labor relations and gender violence arose. From my own point of view, women who consider their experiences with gender roles and gender violence as part and parcel of their ordinary lives are in fact subjects of a discriminative and patriarchal system.

Later, with a list of these violent experiences in hand, I again interviewed the women about their experiences by asking them about cases I had collected in previous interviews. For example, I confronted them with their experiences of quarrelling with their husbands and asked them about their feelings of those experiences. This approach was useful to gain more understanding of how women 'think' and 'feel' about violence. Most of my informants were surprised in subsequent interviews because they did not expect me to remember what we had previously discussed. I needed to explain to them again that I did not just talk with them but wanted to learn about their experiences and use their cases for my research. Their reactions did not just express astonishment over my concern for their stories, but also expressed confusion over why I spent most of my time talking about things they considered ordinary, which finally allowed them to think more critically about these matters.

In the third or fourth visit and in-depth interview, I negotiated and confirmed interview notes with the women and provided them with the space to present themselves as they wished (Bell 1993). After a series of meetings, most women recognized feelings of unfairness and even of depression as a result of the gender roles and expectations pertaining in the community. Many were able to relate consciously or unconsciously their feelings and experiences of gender inequality which underlie the complexities of their lives. In this way, as a

researcher, I was an instrument, exploring and using my subjectivity and ultimately opening the way to inter-subjectivity between the women and myself (Van der Geest 2002:5-6). It is true to say that I influenced their perceptions of life, which is not a revelation at all, but normal. It was only during my interviews and encounters with the women that a realization of their roles and burdens dawned on them. I helped open their eyes and minds to that realization. In this case, I was a female researcher who had no means of effectively escaping the socio-political conditions that shape my perceptions and academic practice (see Drews 1955: 15-16). In this process sensitivity, confidentiality, and respect were necessary (Macintyre 1993). Working on a topic that disturbs women's (un)awareness of their relationships with men as perpetrators of gender violence, I tried hard to be open, ethical, and responsive to women's interests. Thus, I tried as much as possible to maintain emic perspective by presenting women's experiences and acknowledging their voices. In the end, however, I had the moral obligation to give my own political views and contribute to 'human liberation', as promoted by Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004).

This approach yielded a number of cases representing women's experiences of gender violence in their daily lives as wives and mothers in the domestic sphere and as workers in the plantation industry. As indicated by Schrijvers (1998:25), using the perspective of women's experiences, including the researcher's, inspires a view from below and gives voice to those women's experiences which would otherwise remain in the dark.

Throughout the research and in engagement with the women, problems of naming violence remained. No local word was equivalent to my definition of violence. Both women and men mentioned *dugal* or *nesu* (getting angry or being in a bad mood) and *gegoh* or *ribut* or *bentrok* or *rame* (dispute or conflict) as the precursors for violent behavior. Women mentioned *diomehi* (verbal humiliation), *disalahke* (blame), *dilarani atine* (emotional pain) and *dilarani*

awake (physical pain) referring to the verbal and/or non-verbal manner of men during disputes, which resulted in *lara ati* or *ngenes* (emotional pain) and *lara awak* (physical pain). This imprecision in language is a result of the traditional Javanese harmonious outlook, which masks the reality of gender violence. In Javanese culture, one central characteristic is the ideal of establishing and maintaining a harmonious and peaceful way of life.

CONCLUSION

I have presented my field experiences in obtaining information of gender violence. By employing gender and rights perspectives, gender violence is understood within the context of gender inequalities and violations of women's rights. As a delicate and tough topic, appropriate strategies are required, involving communication and negotiation between the researcher and the women informants to give voice to these women's experiences. As an anthropologist, I combined my scientific observations, perspectives and women's narratives as evidence to link violence in the day-to-day lives and health and human rights of women plantation workers. These help to contextualize experienced violence and human rights abuses and their sufferings as a consequence of it, which, according to Richters (2004:163) belongs to the field of medical anthropology. Thus, this piece of work is meant to enrich themes in the area of violence, health and human rights that are or should be on the agenda of medical anthropology.

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