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## Katharine E. McGregor (2023), "Systemic silencing; Activism, memory, and sexual violence in Indonesia"

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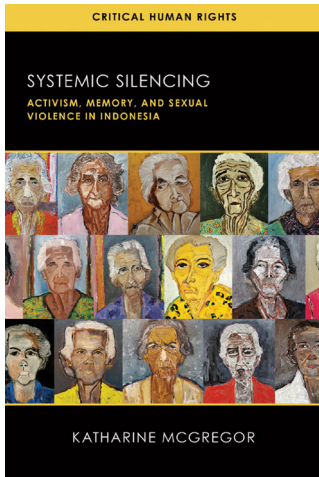
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Katharine E. McGregor, *Systemic silencing: Activism, memory, and sexual violence in Indonesia*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2023, 340 pp + 2 maps. ISBN 978-0-29934-420-7. Price: USD 79.95 (hardcover).



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Katharine E. McGregor, a professor of Southeast Asian history from the University of Melbourne, writes about the complexities of uncovering activism against sexual violence in Indonesia and the struggle advocating for justice for its victims. She specifically discusses advocacy for women victims of sexual violence during the Japanese military occupation of Indonesia. To provide a comprehensive picture of what happened in Indonesia, she begins from the study of sexual exploitation of women under Dutch colonialism (1900-1942) and during the Japanese occupation (1942-1945), continuing as activism into the late New Order and beyond (1990-2000).

Her writing is very important because it reveals and crucially provides some conceptual insights for academics and researchers in the fields of gender studies, history, international relations, and Southeast Asian studies, especially about Indonesia.

Why does advocacy for victims of sexual violence in general, particularly the sexual violence during the Japanese occupation in Indonesia, seem to have arrived so late and not as massively as in some other countries? The cultural construction in Indonesia strongly attaches shame and disgrace to victims of sexual violence, their families, and communities. This is deeply internalized by the victims, it also affects the way the family and community view the issue. At the same time, it is used by those in power to shut victims up. Even today, the term used is *jūgun ianfu*, or 'military comfort women', a euphemistic term to minimize the nuances of systemic violence exerted by the authorities and give the impression of women's own agency to choose.

Moreover, sexual violence by the state, in this case by Japanese soldiers against Indonesian women during the Second World War, is very difficult for national activists to uncover alone. It requires the support, perhaps even the initiation and hard work of transnational activists. This book explains the

intertwined works of transnational activists worldwide, especially Japanese, to help advocate for victims.

Methodologically, her writing explains in detail, the sources of her analysis and conclusions. As a historian, she reminds us that state archives often have a mission to legitimize the state, so there is also a need to find other archives which can better represent marginalized groups. After all, selective operation, censorship, and perhaps even evasion of facts are always present in the making of an archive, which is simultaneously an attempt to preserve as well as to forget, even destroy, knowledge.

Bearing this in mind, McGregor reminds us of the partiality and impartiality of each source in its own context. To provide a more reliable understanding, she uses anything which can be related to and accounted for. From state documents, writings which directly address the issue of sexual exploitation and violence, freelance reports on the presence of captive women referred to as nurses, reports on venereal disease to novels.

McGregor also conducted a series of interviews with activists from different organizations. Some activists who deserve special mention are Kimura Kōichi, Kawada Fumiko, Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, Eka Hindra, Budi Hartono, Dadang Juliantoro, and Kana Tomoko.

One important source is the confessions of the survivors themselves. The attachment of "shame" and "family pride" is an important reason it is difficult to find women victims in Indonesia who dare to tell their stories. This is because since revealing oneself as a victim opens oneself to blame by the environment, besmirching a good name, and even causes the family to feel a loss of dignity. In this regard, two important survivors, Tuminah and Mardiyem, should be mentioned.

Mardiyem benefits from being a woman who fulfils the ideal representation of a victim, that is, a pure and innocent woman. This seems to have made it easier for her to gain the acceptance of various parties, and to be able to give testimonies at prestigious events. In 1997, an important book was published, *Derita paksa perempuan; Kisah Jugun Ianfu pada masa pendudukan Jepang, 1942-1945*, written by A. Budi Hartono and Dadang Juliantoro, containing a long story detailing Mardiyem's life.

Meanwhile, Tuminah was less lucky. She was the first victim to testify, but the public was less interested in her. This was because she confessed that, before being recruited into the comfort system for Japanese soldiers, she was a street woman. This led the public to conclude that she was not entirely a victim. Somehow, activists advocating for women victims need a convincing story to present to the public. So Mardiyem is much better known and is featured more in movement events, both national and international.

Responding to the demands of various parties to take responsibility for the systemic sexual violence during the Japanese occupation, the Japanese government established the Asian Women's Fund (AWF) in 1995. Without consulting victims or the organization representing victims, YLBHI (the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation), the Indonesian government made an

agreement with AWF which prompted many protests from victims and activists. The deal was that there would be no individual compensation for victims, and the funds would be used to build an elderly care home on the grounds that it was important not to disclose and so preserve the honour of the women victims.

The reluctance of state representatives to acknowledge the systemic sexual violence under the Japanese military occupation, helps us understand why it is much easier to build a memorial to a single victim than to build a national monument to all victims. Also, to realize why compensation for women victims in Indonesia is not directly received by the victims, but goes to fund elderly care homes, which do not benefit the victims directly.

This book is important not only for academics or researchers but also for humanitarian activists. After all, the political and economic relationships and interconnections of the countries involved are complex. Moreover, many parties with various interests and perspectives are concerned. There are memories and framings of narratives which are impossible to disentangle from the awakened emotions. For example, the tendency to glorify a victim cannot be separated from her proximity to national and transnational activists. Meanwhile, the non-valorization of other victims, which might not represent the ideal image of the victim, can be influenced by the 'image' borne by the victim. The struggle to advocate for victims can also not entirely isolated from the various interests which exist.

Katharine E. McGregor also discusses the high point of the activist struggle in 1998. The May riots and the incidents of sexual violence against Chinese women in some parts of Indonesia opened eyes to patterns of sexual violence by the military. Collective pressure by activists led to significant result: the establishment of the National Commission on Violence Against Women, often abbreviated as Komnas Perempuan (the National Commission on Violence Against Women), on 15 October 1998, as an independent institution to handle cases of violence against women.

The book title, *Systemic silencing; Activism, memory, and sexual violence in Indonesia* is very appropriate. McGregor discusses the complex issue of advocating justice for victims of sexual violence, especially in Indonesia. She discusses systemic silencing and the complex personal-cultural-political-economic aspects of advocating justice for sexual violence cases involving the state.

The activism for women victims of sexual violence under the Japanese occupation has continued, although without much result. However, not entirely in vain, as this movement contributed to broader activities to challenge sexual violence with a more critical perspective in Indonesia and elsewhere.

## REFERENCE

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