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Jurnal Perempuan
untuk pencerahan dan kesetaraan
Vol. 30 No. 1, 2025, 101—114
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DDC: 305

Resisting State Violence: The Role of Local Women's NGOs during the New Order Era

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Manuscript Chronology: accepted 25 June 2025, revised 13 July 2025, approved 21 September 2025

Abstract

Using a feminist methodological approach and focused group discussions (FGDs) with five local women's NGOs from *Yasanti*, *Flower Aceh*, *PIKUL*, *ALDP*, and *Fokupers*, this study explores seven characteristics of local women's NGOs in their resistance to authoritarian and militaristic state repression. The characteristics are: camouflage strategies, clandestine work, grassroots bases, solidarity and networks, alternative knowledge production, participatory approaches, and multilayered issue struggles. Empathy-based activism serves as a political force for local women's NGOs to underpin the fight for gender justice. The theoretical framework of postcolonial and decolonial feminism is employed to analyse how the state constructs women's bodies as objects of power. The research confirms that women's NGOs' work is not only resistive but also productive, creating alternative spaces and building a counter-memory to the country's history of violence and impunity. The findings enrich the discourse on justice in Indonesia that sustaining democracy depends on recognising the experiences and efforts of women's NGOs, which are often overlooked or erased from history.

Keywords: state violence, women's bodies, local women's NGOs, decolonial feminism, transitional justice

Introduction

The New Order (1966-1998) was a pivotal era in Indonesian history, characterised by authoritarian rule under President Suharto. Although the regime rhetorically promoted stability and development, it systematically used violence to maintain power and control society. This state violence went beyond political repression and suppression of opposition to encompass the private and gendered spheres, targeting women's bodies (Wieringa 2002).

Control over women's bodies was a key part of the New Order's strategy to create a uniform and obedient national identity. Policies often interfered with women's private space, regulating their roles in the family and society and limiting their autonomy over their own bodies and reproduction. This violence was rooted in the ideology of patriarchy and sexism institutionalised by the state (Suryakusuma 1996). State violence against women's bodies during the New Order manifested itself in various ways. One example was the extensive National Family Planning Programme (*Keluarga Berencana/KB*). The programme aimed to control population growth and was implemented in a coercive manner, which ignored women's reproductive rights. Women were often forced to use certain contraceptives without their full consent. For instance, women were subjected to forced sterilisation or pressured heavily by the military to participate in the programme (*Koalisi untuk Keadilan dan Pengungkapan Kebenaran/*Coalition for Justice and Revelation of Truth (*KKPK*) 2014, pp. 215-315). This is a form of structural violence that deprives women of agency over their own bodies. Furthermore, during times of conflict and military operations, sexual violence is used as a weapon of war and a tool of intimidation. For example, during military operations in regions such as Aceh, Papua, and East Timor (while under Indonesian occupation), numerous reports have emerged detailing the use of sexual violence against women as a strategy to undermine resistance and instil fear (Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission/KKR, 2023, pp. 125, 128).

The New Order government also promoted a patriarchal ideology that placed women in a subordinate position. Its policies emphasised women's domestic roles as housewives and companions to their husbands, limiting their access to professional education, employment, and meaningful political participation. This was not only about oppression, but also about the formation of specific gender identities and roles. The ideal image of women was that of a "mother" devoted to her family and country. This role was emphasised through propaganda and policies that directed women to focus on reproduction, childcare, and supporting their husbands. The concept of "female inherent nature" was often used to restrict women's mobility. It claimed that women had a "natural inclination" towards domestic and reproductive roles, thereby marginalising them from the public and political spheres. Moreover, there was the concept of "controlled sexuality", whereby women's sexuality is seen as something that needed to be controlled to maintain social order and morality. Examples of this included strict regulations on sexual behaviour, stigmatisation of unmarried women, and the oppression of sex workers (Suryakusuma 1991).

All of these efforts were part of the government's attempts to create a homogeneous and "cultured" national identity, in which women's bodies served as symbols whose purity had to be preserved. Violence, including sexual violence, became a means of "punishing" bodies deemed deviant or of demonstrating power over other groups. Thus, although not always in the form of physical violence, New Order discrimination has caused profound psychological, economic, and social harm, making it a form of structural violence that perpetuates inequality (Blackburn 2004).

Women activists who challenged the New Order's policies and ideology faced repression, intimidation, and even physical violence. Critical women's organisations were closely monitored, and individuals who spoke out often received threats. Throughout its 32 years in power, many stories and experiences of violence against women were silenced and denied a public platform. One of the most destructive aspects of New Order violence was the normalisation of violence. When violence became part of daily policy and practice, society became accustomed to it, making its impact increasingly difficult to overcome. The New Order regime actively sought to erase or distort the collective memory of violence, particularly with regard to the events of 1965/66. This included banning books, censoring the media, and indoctrinating the population through the education system (Robinson 1998).

The violence that occurred during the New Order era left deep collective trauma. This trauma affected not only those who experienced it but could also be passed down through generations, impacting family relationships and the psychology of subsequent generations. Fear and repression created a "vicious circle" that prevented victims and witnesses from speaking out, thereby exacerbating the trauma and hindering the healing process.

By analysing various testimonies from women during the New Order era, we can reveal and reconstruct experiences by giving a voice to the previously unheard. These testimonies become a powerful medium for expressing and processing trauma both individually and collectively. Furthermore, the "official" history taught by the state tends to overlook or minimise violence against women. This analysis offers an alternative perspective that challenges the dominant narrative and provides a more nuanced understanding of the period by filling in the gaps.

The impact of state violence against women during the New Order era was widespread and complex (Robinson 2000). Women's bodies were the direct targets of violence and the arena for state ideological coercion and control over gender identity. This violence left deep physical and psychological wounds and contributed to the normalisation of gender-based violence in wider society. Given the complexity of this issue and its ongoing impact, this research topic is of great importance and relevance.

It is hoped that this research will provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between state power, violence, and women's bodies in Indonesia during the New Order period. It will also explore how this legacy is reflected in narratives and stories about women's experiences, both past and present. Understanding how state violence affected women's bodies in the past can raise public awareness of women's vulnerability to gender-based violence. This knowledge is vital for preventing the recurrence of such patterns of violence and encouraging more inclusive, gender-equitable policies.

Research Methodology

Rather than being the result of conventional empirical research, this paper is a critical reflection on the experiences and practices of five regional women's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) during the New Order era. This reflection is discussed within the framework of postcolonial and decolonial feminism. Adopting a reflective, qualitative approach grounded in feminist methodology, this paper highlights the significance of women's life experiences as a primary source of knowledge. This reflection is enriched through a focus group discussion, field documentation, and studies of documents and literature. As members of a women's advocacy network, the authors' position influences their interpretation of the data and findings. Therefore, this paper attempts to combine the strengths of documentation and field experience from NGO activism with academic theoretical analysis. The data are analysed reflectively and critically to trace patterns of state violence against women, as well as the resistance strategies developed by these women's organisations in response to repressive power. This framework positions women's experiences as socio-political constructions closely linked to state power structures, militarism, and colonialism, rather than as neutral objects.

The main source of reflection in this paper was obtained through a single focus group discussion (FGD), which was held online on 11 June 2025. This discussion brought together female activists from various regional NGOs with experience in managing and assisting survivors of structural and military violence. These organisations included *Yayasan Annisa Swasti (*Annisa Swasti Foundation, *Yasanti), Aliansi Demokrasi untuk Papua (*Democratic Alliance for Papua, *ALDP), Yayasan Flower Aceh* (Flower Aceh Foundation)*, Forum Komunikasi Perempuan Lorosae (*Lorosae Women's Communication Forum*, Fokupers),* and *Yayasan Penguatan Lingkar Belajar Komunitas Lokal (*Foundation for Strengthening Local Community Learning Networks, *PIKUL)*. Although ALDP was established after the New Order era, it has played a significant role in documenting various forms of violence against women in Papua, and was therefore included in this reflection. Research staff from *Jurnal Perempuan* participated in the documentation process and facilitated the discussions. In addition to the FGD results, this paper draws on secondary data sources, including organisational documents, NGO reports, written testimonies, and relevant academic literature. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the historical context, organisational dynamics, and resistance strategies of women's NGOs.

The selection of FGD participants focused on women's organisations in regions under the New Order. As military violence primarily occurred in conflict zones like Aceh, Papua, and Timor-Leste, women's organisations in these areas played a significant role. In addition to militaristic violence, the researchers examined other forms of state violence that targeted women's reproductive rights and female workers. Thus, the researchers deemed it necessary to include *Yasanti*, a Yogyakarta-based organisation that empowers female workers. *Yayasan PIKUL*, meanwhile, played a pivotal role in coordinating and facilitating the initial formation of *Fokupers* and *ALDP*, and in providing both organisations with the necessary training.

FGD is a valid and strategic method in the tradition of feminist methodology traditions because it facilitates collective dialogue that supports the exchange of experiences, critical reflection, and the joint articulation of forms of violence experienced by women. As Madriz (2000) and Hesse-Biber (2007) explain, FGD provides a safe space for women to share experiences, build solidarity, and process trauma together. This method also encourages a non-hierarchical approach, in which researchers and participants are involved in an equal, participatory process of knowledge production rather than being strictly separated. Furthermore, Montell (1999) explains that FGD produces valuable data. Additionally, FGD can raise awareness and empower participants and researchers.

Data were collected through recordings of personal narratives, collective historical reflections, survivor testimonies, and descriptions of the advocacy strategies implemented by each organisation. The analysis was done thematically by tracing patterns of state violence, the relationship between militarism and control over women's bodies, and the forms of organisation and resistance that emerged from women's communities. In analysing the data, the researchers integrated post-colonial and decolonial feminist approaches to understand how state power shapes dominant narratives and how women construct counter-narratives from their marginalised positions. Using FGD as the main research method, this study aims to explore information while at the same time valuing women's knowledge as a basis for creating alternative narratives to the state's official history. This constitutes a form of political resistance and a collective recovery strategy against state-perpetuated violence.

To shed light on state violence against women during the New Order era, this paper adopts a post-colonial and decolonial feminist perspective informed by the insights of Global South feminists. This approach provides a critical lens through which to examine how the state exploits women's bodies to exert control over its nationalist, developmental, and security projects. This theoretical framework dissects oppressive power structures and highlights spaces of resistance that emerge from below. The researchers selected theories from Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988, 2003), Gayatri Spivak (1988), Françoise Vergès (2021), and Galuh Wandita (2006), as they provide perspectives rooted in colonial and post-colonial experiences that are relevant to the Indonesian context.

In her renowned essay "Under Western Eyes", Mohanty (1988) criticises the representation of Third World women as passive victims in mainstream feminist discourse. This criticism is considered highly relevant when examining the dynamics of power in Indonesia's peripheral regions, such as Papua, Aceh, and Timor-Leste, where the state uses militarism and development as means of dominating women's bodies and living spaces. Mohanty invites us to view women as active participants in their own historical and political contexts. In her later work, "Feminism Without Borders" (2003), she highlights the epistemic domination of the centre over local knowledge. This reflects the practice of internal colonialism, which continues to this day in the form of domination by the centre over the periphery, the erasure of local identities, and the exploitation of resources without fair distribution.

When examining cases of structural violence against women, Gayatri Spivak's (1988) approach to epistemic violence is particularly pertinent, especially in Papua. In this paper, the researchers question why the voices of women survivors, particularly from working-class and Indigenous communities, are excluded from national historical discourse. Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot truly speak because their voices are always misinterpreted and distorted by those in power. This is evident in reports by local NGOs such as *Flower Aceh* and *Fokupers*, which document survivors' experiences but are rarely acknowledged in official narratives. Similarly, female workers who speak out about harassment, dismissal due to pregnancy, or the prohibition of menstrual leave are often labelled subversive. This is an example of where symbolic and epistemic violence occur simultaneously.

Vergès (2021) offers a sharp critique of mainstream feminism, arguing that it has been hijacked by neoliberal ideology and state initiatives. In the Indonesian context, Vergès' ideas help us to understand how the "empowerment" of Papuan women in national projects actually serves to obscure an agenda of control and militarisation. Campaigns such as "Operation Koteka" during the New Order era, imposed on the Papuan people in the name of modernisation, are clear examples of gender coloniality. Vergès states that *"the modern state uses feminism not to empower, but to discipline. It turns racialised women into objects of care, surveillance, and control"* (2021, pp. 17-25). This reflection is reinforced by the writings of Marlina Flassy (2020) and Mecky Tebai (2021), which document cultural repression through clothing and modern norms as tools for controlling the bodies of Indigenous women.

Conversely, Galuh Wandita and her colleagues' approach in the reports "Gender and Reparations in Timor-Leste" (2006) and "Notes from the Field" (2020) demonstrates that achieving justice for women victims of conflict requires more than a legalistic approach. Wandita places women's testimonies at the centre of truth production rather than treating them as mere additions. In oral history and community remembrance projects, researchers observe efforts to reclaim narratives from those who have been silenced. Wandita's approach paves the way for transformative justice, where emotional and cultural memories carry as much weight as formal legal evidence.

Conceptually, this article frames state violence against women as not only physical, but also structural, epistemic, and symbolic. Women's bodies are used as tools to discipline society, control territory, and produce state legitimacy. In this context, women's NGOs play an important role in supporting victims and in developing counter-knowledge archives and liberation practices. Thus, this framework analyses repression while offering hope through community-based resistance and transnational solidarity.

State Violence and New Order Militarism

State violence is defined as the use of legitimate government power or authority that results in unnecessary harm or suffering to groups, individuals, or other states. It can manifest as direct actions, such as police brutality and state terrorism, or more covert forms, including excessive state surveillance, racial or ethnic discrimination, gender inequality, and economic inequality. These forms of state violence cause physical suffering and limit individual opportunities. State violence contravenes existing societal norms and often violates human rights.

Meanwhile, militarism is an ideology or political system that emphasises a country's heavy reliance on military strength for security and considers the development and maintenance of that strength to be society's primary goal. Militarism often involves a culture of violence where military methods and force are used to manage various aspects of socio-political life, including education, culture, arts, sport, government, law, the press, labour, and banking. It is not simply a matter of having a military for defence, but rather of military control and intervention in civil affairs. Civilians may lead a militaristic state, but it is characterised by a culture of violence nonetheless.

Therefore, when the connection between the two is recognised, militarism can become a primary tool for the state to carry out violence. When a country embraces militarism, its military apparatus is often used to consolidate state power and force the population to submit to centralised authority. This can be seen in the repression of popular movements, the dissolution of public activities, and the use of physical violence. Furthermore, militarism within a government system can lead to an authoritarian state, which in turn threatens the growth of civil society and democracy. Militarism in the civil sphere can have a serious impact on the marginalisation of the people, characterised by a decline in societal capacity and awareness. Due to the focus on military strength, the needs and basic rights of civilians are often overlooked. In short, militarism is an ideology that encourages the strengthening and use of military force, which can then be manifested in the form of state violence to achieve political goals or maintain power.

Referring to various sources, the power of the New Order (1966-1998) can be presented as a political model consisting of several layers: (a) Soeharto as president was the centre of power, who held complete control over all branches of government. Executive power was far more dominant than the legislative and judicial branches, which largely served as "rubber stamps" for government policy. The next layer (b) comprises the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) (now the Indonesian National Armed Forces, or Tentara Nasional Indonesia, or TNI), which were based on the Dual Function Doctrine. This doctrine gave ABRI two main functions: (1) maintaining the sovereignty and security of the state (defence and security functions), and (2) acting as a socio-political force. The latter function legitimised the military's active involvement in social and political life (the social and political function, also known as the working function). Unsurprisingly, ABRI members occupied key positions at every level of government, the bureaucracy, and the economic sector, ensuring military control over all aspects of state life. The next layer is the existence of restrictions on the powers of other institutions. For example, the legislative (DPR/MPR) and judicial (Supreme Court, Attorney General's Office) institutions were effectively controlled by the executive branch. The judicial system was often used to legitimise government policies and silence the opposition (Gultom 2003). The political structure of the New Order was based on claims of stability and economic development, as well as on the principles of the ideology of "Pancasila" (Aspinall & Fealy 2010).

The manifestation of New Order militarism became apparent when the military dominated the political stage. Many strategic government positions, including ministerial roles, governorships and regencies, and parliamentary seats, were occupied by retired or active military personnel. ABRI became an extension of the ruling power, meaning its policies often aligned with those of the government. Another manifestation of this was the strong military territorial command structure present down to the village level (*Babinsa*), which enabled the military to monitor and control every aspect of community life. This created a "militarisation of society", in which various civil organisations adopted military discipline and methods.

Furthermore, the perception that the military was the regime's main stabiliser reinforced militarism. Any threat to the New Order's power, whether from political groups, students, workers, or religious groups, was met with a repressive security response from the military. Meanwhile, the military (individuals, groups, and organisations such as foundations) was also heavily involved in the economic and business sectors, often benefiting personally and strengthening its grip on power.

State violence that characterised the New Order was a direct consequence of this strong militarism. This violence was physical, structural, and psychological. The New Order was responsible for a large number of serious human rights violations. For example, mass killings were carried out against people accused of being communists or PKI sympathisers, with estimates suggesting that hundreds of thousands to millions of lives were lost between 1965 and 1966.

Then, we also note, and this was even acknowledged by President Suharto himself, the extrajudicial killings of "thugs" or repeat offenders, which were carried out without trial. These were known as "Petrus" or the mysterious shootings (1981-1985). Additionally, military operations were carried out over a prolonged period in Military Operations Areas (DOM) in Aceh, Papua, and East Timor. These operations were characterised by violence, torture, forced disappearances, and the killing of civilians suspected of involvement in separatist movements. Sexual violence, especially against women, was also common in DOM areas (Subono 2000).

Other events, such as the attack on the PDI office, which was occupied by supporters of Megawati Soekarnoputri, also caused casualties and injuries, which became known as the *Kudatuli* tragedy (the events of 27 July 1996). Then, as the New Order was coming to an end, a number of activists were kidnapped and disappeared without a trace (1997-1998). This culminated in the Trisakti Tragedy and the May 1998 Riots, which were triggered when security forces shot students. This sparked mass riots involving violence and mass rape against ethnic Chinese women.

State violence and military domination created a culture of fear, making it very risky to criticise or resist the regime. Militarism fundamentally hindered the development of democracy and civil participation. Civil institutions became weak and increasingly powerless in the face of military force. Meanwhile, perpetrators of gross human rights violations during the New Order were often never brought to justice, creating a climate of impunity that remains a problem to this day. Widespread violence and repression also left deep psychological scars on individuals and communities, the effects of which are still being felt today.

Overall, state violence and militarism were two sides of the same coin used to secure and perpetuate Suharto's authoritarian rule during the New Order era in Indonesia. This period left behind a dark legacy of gross human rights violations that continue to impact Indonesia's political and social order to this day. However, it should be noted that the state's powerful authority did not mean it monopolised all instruments of violence. This is known as the concept of the "state of disorder", which describes a condition in which violence committed by non-state actors, such as paramilitary groups, thugs, or certain mass organisations, serves to maintain the existing socio-political order, uphold the interests of the elite, or facilitate capital accumulation (Mudhoffir 2022). Described as "privatised violence", this is not an anomaly or a failure of the state, but rather an integral and sometimes deliberate mechanism in the workings of the state. It is a strategy adopted by the state and its elites. It is used to achieve goals that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to attain through formal legal channels, such as suppressing political opposition, dispersing demonstrations, securing controversial development projects, or resolving land disputes. By delegating violence in this way, the state can maintain its "civilised" image while effectively enforcing its power (Mudhoffir 2022).

During this period of militaristic repression and violent authoritarianism, civil society organisations, particularly women's NGOs, played a crucial role as the last line of defence for women's rights under the New Order. When critical voices were silenced, women's NGOs such as *Yasanti, ALDP, Flower Aceh, Fokupers,* and *PIKUL* emerged as safe spaces for female victims of violence, raising collective awareness of the gender inequality caused by state power.

The Struggle, Role, and Experience of Women's NGOs

This reflective research is based on the work of five organisations that emerged from the context of repression under the New Order regime and complex socio-political dynamics in various regions, particularly in Eastern Indonesia and Papua. *Yasanti (Yayasan Annisa Swasti)* was founded on 28 September 1982 in Yogyakarta in response to the exploitation and marginalisation of female workers, particularly porters. Founded by female university student activists, *Yasanti* focused on empowering women in economic, social, and political spheres. *Flower Aceh* was founded on 23 September 1989 in Banda Aceh amidst state violence in the Military Operations Area (*DOM*). Its main mandate was to assist women affected by conflict, strengthen their economies, and fight for their rights. *PIKUL*, founded in 1998 in eastern Indonesia, was an organisation that strengthened community capacity and local leadership, particularly in post-conflict social development and democratisation contexts. Founded in 1997 in Timor-Leste, Fokupers (*Forum Komunikasi Perempuan Lorosae*/Lorosae Women's Communication Forum) emerged in response to the *Kraras* massacre and widespread humanitarian violence. The organisation advocated for the protection of women and children who were victims of gender-based violence after the war. Meanwhile, *Aliansi Demokrasi untuk Papua (ALDP)* was established in Papua in the early 2000s with the mission of documenting state violence, advocating for change, and providing public education on democracy and human rights. The historical context of the formation of these five organisations has significantly influenced their approach to women's empowerment, the protection of victims' rights, and the handling of violence and social injustice during the New Order era and in the post-conflict context of their respective regions.

Women's NGOs began their advocacy work during the New Order era by developing a "politically safe" strategy that addressed issues such as health and education. For instance, since the 1980s, *Yasanti* has used skills training to educate female workers about human rights, while *Flower Aceh* has directly assisted victims of sexual violence during DOM. By using health, education, and economic issues as entry points, women's NGOs built grassroots solidarity networks in conflict areas such as Aceh, Papua, and Timor-Leste. They documented human rights violations, such as those committed by the *ALDP*, and fought for justice. They also provided psychosocial support and encouraged legal advocacy and reparations. More broadly, in the history of Indonesia's social movements, the courage and consistency of these women's NGOs have become a crucial foundation for building a gender-just democracy.

The FGD results revealed seven characteristics of women's NGOs' resistance during the New Order regime: strategising camouflage; working quietly and secretly; operating at a grassroots level; fostering solidarity and networking; producing alternative knowledge; using a participatory approach; and addressing layered issues of struggle. These seven characteristics of resistance are summarised in the table below.

Table 1.
Characteristics of Women's NGO Resistance

Characteristics of Resistance	Explanation
Camouflage Strategy	Using neutral issues, such as training, health, or economics to avoid repression.
Working Quietly & Secretly	Organising discussions or training sessions in secret, moving locations, and disguising oneself to evade authorities.
Grassroots Base	Focusing on communities such as female workers, widows affected by conflict, and Indigenous women.
Solidarity & Networks	Building cross-regional and intergenerational networks to strengthen positions and advocacy.
Production of Alternative Knowledge	Publishing alternative media, books containing victims' testimonies, and documenting human rights violations.
Participatory Approach	Using victim-based organisational methods and collective decision-making.
Addressing Complex and Layered Issues	Layered resistance not only confronts state violence but also encompasses gender, political, economic, cultural, and humanitarian dimensions.

Source: Compiled from field experience and FGD results (2025)

Almost all organisations used tactical strategies, such as camouflage and covert operations. This was due to the repressive conditions at the time, which meant that NGOs had to be creative in order to advance gender issues. For instance, Yasanti used informal education to address topics such as menstrual leave, wage discrimination, and sexual harassment.

> "In every activity, we discussed their rights, what had been fulfilled, and cases that had occurred in the factory... But independent labour organisations were not permitted. If there were a labour organisation, the army or police would definitely spy on it. We used to be nervous during every discussion. What if someone was spying on us while we were discussing?" (Nadlrotussariroh, Yasanti 2025, FGD, 11 June).

Meanwhile, a representative from PIKUL shared that she and the women activists in her group started talking about human rights using the issue of women's health as a starting point.

> "At that time, we used the perspective of women's health. If we had started with the issue of violence directly, we wouldn't have gotten anywhere. With the issue of women's health, however, we examined how human rights impact women's health and how women's health can advance human rights issues" (Galuh Wandita, PIKUL 2025, FGD, 11 June).

Activist friends from *Fokupers* in Timor Leste shared that they sometimes disguised themselves as nuns or teachers to gain access to areas under military surveillance. This was certainly not an easy decision for the activists to take, and it often caused tension due to the high risk of being caught. The tactical strategies and camouflage employed by women's NGOs in conflict zones were prime examples of "underground feminism" that refused to submit to the dominant narrative of power. The same was true of Flower Aceh. They rejected not only the dominant narrative of power, but also the narrative of separatist movements that have caused civilian casualties. Therefore, they worked quietly but effectively by disguising themselves and diverting their activities.

> "When we conducted social analysis training, there was always a friend whose job was to guard the door and give the code. At that time, those of us in training would immediately start doing other things, laughing, and singing as though it were a birthday party. In the end, the training took place in a park so that it wouldn't appear to be serious training, but rather like a student study group" (Riswati, Flower Aceh 2025, Written Testimony for JP, 25 June).

Women's NGOs, especially those operating in Military Operations Areas (DOMs), were often caught in the middle and viewed with suspicion by both sides. For example, *Flower Aceh* was questioned when it reported violations committed by the Indonesian military and police, but it was also disliked by the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) when it reported GAM violence. GAM even issued an ultimatum that *Flower Aceh* and two of its activists, Faridah Hariani and Suraiya Kamaruzzaman, were not to enter the *Geumpang Pidie* base area, despite their assistance to civilians being required. Amidst the dichotomy of "independence or pro-authority", *Flower Aceh* transcended the partisan attitudes of both political poles by establishing an alternative movement centred on women's needs and justice for victims of violence, irrespective of the perpetrators' identities.

Women's NGOs also often faced accusations and stigmatisation. One example was the New Order's ban on the formation of independent trade unions. Any form of labour rights awareness was considered subversive, and Yasanti was accused of supporting illegal labour movements. Yasanti's activities were labelled as "inciting" workers to fight against companies, when in fact Yasanti was providing legal education to help workers understand their rights.

> "When discussions went on late into the night, there were many soldiers outside... Sometimes we hid our worker friends and took them out of Yasanti's rented accommodation so they wouldn't be followed" (Nadlrotussariroh, Yasanti 2025, FGD 11 June).

Women's NGOs in Papua also experienced stigmatisation. Those who actively advocated for the rights of Papuan women, particularly in the context of state violence, were often accused of being spies or informants for the OPM (Free Papua Organisation).

> "Women were one of the target groups. They were often accused of being spies or informants..." (Latifah Anum, ALDP 2025, FGD 11 June).

Women's NGOs in Papua were often considered "political" simply for supporting victims of sexual violence or displacement. Local NGOs were not allowed to move freely. Even when trying to access areas where they provided assistance, they were blocked on security grounds or accused of "joining the separatist movement". According to Latifah Anum, this labelling was dangerous because it could lead to arrests without evidence, as well as torture and rape. The social stigma attached to this could have long-term consequences for women activists and their families.

Furthermore, Papuan women's NGOs operated in a highly militarised environment. They had witnessed many men accused of being OPM members being forced to flee their homes and leave their families. This results in their wives being pressured, intimidated, and even violently attacked in an attempt to obtain information. Latifah Anum explained that *"when men left home to hide from the Indonesian military, women always became the targets"*.

Another characteristic identified in the FGD was the grassroots nature of women's NGOs' resistance movements. This formed the basis of their work, particularly in conflict-affected areas such as Aceh, Papua, Timor-Leste, and NTT. Women's NGOs built trust by establishing direct relationships with local communities, particularly marginalised women's groups. They started with issues close to everyday life, such as reproductive health, household economics, or informal education. Through these seemingly neutral activities, safe spaces were created where stories could be shared, violence could be identified, and resistance strategies could be developed in line with local needs. For example, *Flower Aceh* provided support to women's groups in *Geumpang*, while a Papuan women's NGO established the *Silimo group* in a mountainous area. Meanwhile, *Fokupers* in Timor-Leste worked with a community of widows who survived the massacre in the village of *Kraras*.

> "We identified the following groups: wives of political prisoners, former political prisoners, women who had experienced sexual violence at the hands of the Indonesian military, and widows of those killed in the *Kraras* massacre. The men, their husbands, had all been killed, massacred, or died, leaving only the women, so the village became known as the village of widows" (Rosi/Mika, *Fokupers* 2025, FGD 11 June).

In grassroots work, women's NGOs acted as facilitators and companions, as well as bridges between community voices and national and international advocacy networks. They promoted participatory methods, established local organisations such as the porters' union (*Yasanti*) and the widows' forum (*Fokupers*), and delivered critical education on women's rights (*Flower Aceh*). Personal relationships, consistency, and courage were key to building trust within communities. Using this approach, women's NGOs succeeded in fostering a collective sense of solidarity that could withstand violence, isolation, and slander. They demonstrated that social change and gender justice could grow from the bottom up, from voices that have long been silenced. Nurturing these voices fostered solidarity and networks, which became the main strength of women's NGOs during the New Order era.

Women's NGOs did not work alone. They built networks across regions, generations, and countries to strengthen advocacy, victim assistance, and collective strategy development. These networks included local organisations such as *Fokupers, Yasanti,* and *Flower Aceh* and received support from larger institutions such as *Komnas Perempuan*, AJAR, and the Global Survivor Fund. This cooperation expanded access to resources and provided moral legitimacy and protection from political pressure. The following quote illustrates how women's NGOs succeeded in maintaining their space and building collective courage and solid networks. Thus, another characteristic of women's NGO resistance was the solidarity and networking of activists across regions.

> "Fokupers was finally formed in 1997, and I think it was a product of the solidarity built between these regions of eastern Indonesia" (Galuh Wandita, PIKUL 2025, FGD 11 June).

Human rights violations during the New Order era were largely ignored by the media, making it necessary for women's NGOs to network in order to obtain accurate information. To this end, women's NGOs had to actively publish their own information so that accurate information could be conveyed. For instance, *Flower Aceh* recognised that numerous cases of violence against women in Aceh were either not reported or hidden by the mainstream media. To combat this, they developed an alternative publishing and documentation strategy based on the experiences of victims. A notable initiative was the creation of their own media outlet, Kabar *Dari Flower*, which provided a platform for humanitarian issues overlooked by larger outlets such as *Serambi Indonesia*.

> "That was when *Flower Aceh* began to consider pursuing another form of advocacy: publishing a media outlet called *Kabar Dari Flower*. This media outlet became an alternative source of news for humanitarian cases that were not covered by *Serambi* or other outlets" (Suraiya Kamaruzzaman, founder of *Flower Aceh*, written testimony for JP, 25 June).

Through *Kabar Dari Flower*, *Flower Aceh* produced counter-narratives to state and military domination and built an important archive on sexual violence, human rights violations, and women's struggles in Aceh. This established *Flower Aceh* as both a feminist knowledge agency producing feminist literature and a service organisation. Similarly, *Fokupers* published the book *Menyilam Kemarau*. This book was the result of the collective documentation of the experiences of women who were victims of sexual and political violence during the Indonesian military occupation of Timor-Leste.

> "We collected their stories, listened to them, and finally published a book: *Menyilam Kemarau*. It is a collection of stories from victims whom we supported" (Rosi/Mika, Fokupers, 2025, FGD, 11 June).

The book published by *Fokupers* is a collection of real stories about women who were victims of sexual violence, rape, forced marriage, and forced contraception at the hands of the Indonesian military. Pseudonyms are used to protect the safety of the survivors. The book was compiled in a participatory manner, with stories collected directly by *Fokupers* activists from wives, former political prisoners, women victims of raped, widows from the village of *Kraras* — also known as the "widow village" of coffee workers — and women in refugee camps. This participatory approach then became another characteristic of the resistance carried out by women's NGOs.

Women's NGOs fight not only against state oppression, but also against patriarchy and customs that treat women as second-class citizens. This reveals a multi-layered resistance encompassing gender, politics, and humanity. Papuan women live in extreme geographical and political isolation. Regions such as *Mamberamo, Sarmi,* and *Wamena* not only lack basic state services such as education and healthcare, but also experience state violence. Latifah Anum of ALDP emphasises that Papuan women are victims of economic, political, and traditional oppression. Similarly, during the DOM era (1989-1998) in Aceh, Acehnese women lost economic access as the conflict zone was closed off and filled with fear. Many men fled or went into hiding, leaving women to become the backbone of their families.

> "Women who have been victims of conflict have not received adequate physical, psychological, or economic remedies, to the extent that they remain impoverished to this day" (Riswati, Flower Aceh 2025, FGD 11 June).

Similarly, Fokupers stated:

> "We had to find food because our husbands had been killed... life was very, very difficult" (Judith, Fokupers 2025, FGD 11 June).

The study "Women Who Persist: Pathways to Power in Eastern Indonesia" reveals that NTT and Timor Leste have historically had the highest poverty rates (around 21 per cent), and that women are disproportionately affected by post-conflict economic dependency (Bayo 2021). However, the poverty rate cannot be confirmed, as during the New Order era, poverty data were limited, and only general poverty per province was recorded, without segregation by gender or conflict status. Nevertheless, field testimonies and NGO reports clearly show that women in Aceh, Papua, and Timor-Leste experienced structural and systemic impoverishment due to militarisation, exploitation, and state neglect. The issues they faced were not only economic, but also political and social injustices rooted in the violence of the New Order state. This illustrates the final characteristic of women's NGO resistance during the New Order era: intersectional struggles amid complex, layered issues.

Empathetic Reflection on Women Activists' Solidarity

In challenging environments and under authoritarian or militaristic regimes, women's activism emerged as a moral counterforce, characterised by significant emotional intensity. This activism focused on providing testimony, healing trauma, offering community-based care, and reclaiming narratives (taking control of the narrative). These efforts were rooted not only in political resistance but also in a profound emotional engagement with survivors. Research shows that women activists who empower survivors and their communities can challenge established narratives and create alternative political spaces grounded in trust.

Moss et al.'s (2025) paper, "Women's Resistance and Everyday Resilience", describes the activism of women's groups in Sudan during periods of political conflict. Moss provides an interesting exploration of how women's everyday experiences, shaped by marginalisation, gender-based violence, and domestic responsibilities, form the basis of political resistance. This analysis offers a fresh perspective on the fact that women activists do not start with experience in public spaces or formal leadership roles, but rather with personal and domestic struggles under an authoritarian regime. This means that women's activism always begins with life experiences that are then converted into political capital.

Moss emphasises that women's activism under repressive regimes such as Sudan's takes an approach that addresses the everyday issues women face. Women's activism in Sudan pays close attention to the needs of its people. Similar to the situation in Indonesia, particularly in Aceh, Papua, Timor-Leste, Yogyakarta, and NTT, women-led organisations navigate structural violence, militarism, and political silencing with strategic empathy. Empathy becomes the infrastructure through which women's organisations confront authoritarian regimes. They provide support, offer healing, organise, and resist simultaneously.

During an FGD discussion, Riswati from *Flower Aceh* said that Acehnese women often gathered at their office to discuss the protection of women and children, despite the tense situation and the fact that their office had been bombed. Similarly, in Papua, Latifah Anum stated that women were often burdened with protecting and fighting for the safety of their families because the men fled when the army arrived, leaving the women as targets. Drawing on Moss' (2025) work, the emotional burden and relational commitment demonstrated by women's NGOs can be seen as a political strategy that uses emotional intelligence, care networks, and the solidarity formed through empathy.

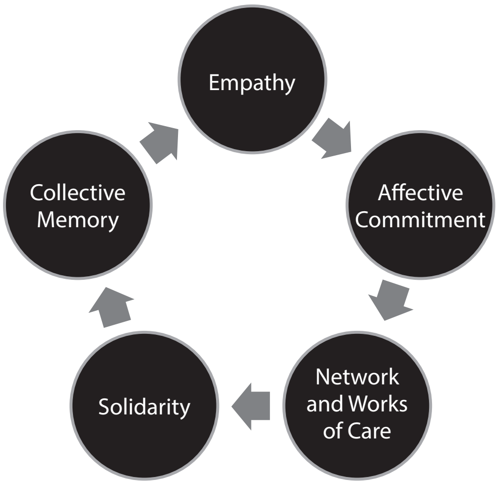

Figure 1. Foundations of Women's NGO Work Values

Source: Moss et al. (2025)

The activism of women's groups is evident not only on the streets and in the villages they explore, but also in the media, where stories collected as collective memories are used to advocate for justice. This effort aims to control and counter narratives, ensuring they support survivors and are not co-opted by those in power. One example is the narratives collected by AJAR (Asia Justice and Rights), an organisation led by Galuh Wandita. AJAR uses a participatory approach and the power of storytelling to reclaim the authority and ownership of stories. The AJAR project has empowered victims in Aceh and Timor-Leste through photography. Participants were asked to take photos and share their stories. One particularly poignant case was that of Beatriz Miranda, a former survivor of sexual slavery in Timor-Leste.

> "I remember the people who came to hear my story. They said they would pay attention, but until now I have not received any help" (AJAR, 2012).

During the conflicts in Aceh and Timor-Leste, many children were forcibly separated from their families, abducted, or born without recognition or protection. These stolen and forgotten children suffered in silence. They were taken by military forces to do odd jobs or be subjected to sexual slavery, and were often abandoned after being murdered or going missing. Sebastiana and Maria, for example, were abducted at a young age and became targets of abuse. Others, such as children who survived sexual violence, were born into a legal and social void. They were not recognised by the state and were stigmatised by society. AJAR report (2012) documents stories revealing the deep emotional trauma caused not only by violence, but also by the loss of identity, family, and future.

During the FGD, Wandita revealed how structural neglect can exacerbate intergenerational trauma. Children who survive abduction or are born as a result of rape often grow up without legal documentation, access to social services, or a place in the collective memory. As Angela dos Santos pointed out, remembering is an act of resistance: *"I tell my children about it... I don't want all this to just disappear"* (AJAR 2012). The lack of justice for these children symbolises state-sanctioned violence. Returning to the ideas of Moss et al. (2025), it is suggested that memory must replace accountability and that empathy is the only available solution for those left behind. Thus, empathy becomes the driving force that enables NGOs and women activists to carry out their work in extremely difficult situations.

Transitional Justice, Accountability, and Reparations: The Path to True Democracy

Following the violence that has occurred in the context of gender-based crimes against women and gross human rights violations against civil society in general, enforcing justice, accountability, and reparations has become a crucial reform agenda in the aftermath of the New Order in Indonesia. Despite many efforts having been made, the path to comprehensive justice still faces various obstacles and challenges. All FGD participants agreed that there has been no substantive justice for victims. This is evident from the fact that perpetrators of past violence and crimes still hold positions of political power. Thus, state accountability is virtually nonexistent.

In today's Reformation era, those who support democratisation tend to reject all the rules, values, and policies of the previous authorities. These are all considered to be products of an authoritarian, centralised, and corrupt regime. However, new rules and values considered more democratic have not yet been fully formed or established. Transitional justice is, therefore, an important potential solution to discuss at this point.

Transitional justice recognises that periods of mass violence or oppression against communities cannot simply be "forgotten" and left behind in order to move forward. Wounds must be healed, truths must be revealed, and responsibilities must be demanded. There are at least four main, intertwining principles that underpin transitional justice.

The first is the right to truth. This means that victims and the wider community have the right to know the truth about what happened during periods of conflict or oppression under authoritarian rule. Victims have the right to know not only who the perpetrators were, but also how and why the violations occurred, and what their wider impact was. In Indonesia, this principle is particularly important given the attempts to cover up facts or reverse the truth during the New Order regime. The National Human Rights Commission's (Komnas HAM) efforts to conduct pro justitia investigations into cases of gross human rights violations, such as the 1965 event, the Talangsari incident, the Semanggi incident, the May riots (which were marked by the mass rape of ethnic Chinese women), and the Wasior/Wamena incident, form part of this right. The establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, although unsuccessful at the national level, was achieved in Aceh, and is another mechanism for uncovering this truth. All of these measures must be pursued even though it has been acknowledged from the outset that there is often political resistance, difficulty in accessing archives, and trauma suffered by victims/witnesses, which makes uncovering the truth difficult and also frightening.

The second foundation is the right to justice. This means ensuring that perpetrators of human rights violations are held accountable under the law. The objective is not only to punish, but also to affirm legal norms and prevent impunity. In Indonesia, the right to justice can be enforced through ad hoc human rights courts, although the results are often disappointing, or through the ordinary criminal justice process, where possible. The biggest challenge here is the issue of impunity: the situation in which many perpetrators (especially those in command positions) have not faced legal proceedings. Civil society continues to urge the Attorney General's Office to follow up on *Komnas HAM's* recommendations. However, it was recognised from the outset that obstacles and challenges to implementing this right include political intervention, insufficient evidence due to the passage of time, and weaknesses in the judicial system.

The third pillar is the right to reparations. This is the right of victims to receive compensation for losses suffered as a result of human rights violations. Reparations can take various forms, including financial compensation, restitution (return of assets), rehabilitation (physical and psychological), and symbolic gestures such as a formal apology or public commemoration. The Indonesian government has taken some initial steps towards reparations in the form of policies to provide compensation and rehabilitation for victims of gross human rights violations recognised by the state, although these are still limited to certain cases. The Witness and Victim Protection Agency (LPSK) also plays a role in providing protection and assistance to witnesses and victims. However, the scope and speed of the implementation of reparations remain a focus and are not yet comprehensive. There are a number of obstacles and challenges, often related to incomplete victim data, complex verification processes, and limited financial resources.

Ultimately, the fourth foundation is the guarantee of non-recurrence. These measures are intended to prevent similar violations from occurring again. This involves institutional reform (e.g., the military, police, and judiciary), legal reform, human rights education, and the elimination of discriminatory policies and laws. Following the 1998 reform, for instance, TNI and the Indonesian National Police (*Polri*) were separated. Reform efforts within TNI included abolishing ABRI's dual function and improving the human rights capacity of security institutions. Human rights education has also been incorporated into the curriculum. These steps were intended to prevent the recurrence of the abuse of power witnessed during the New Order era. However, reform is ongoing and requires continuous monitoring. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that there are still obstacles and challenges within institutions, with some parties resisting reform, either directly or indirectly. For this reason, the public must ensure that the political commitment to carrying out comprehensive reform is maintained.

It is important to note that the four foundations of transitional justice cannot stand alone and should ideally be implemented simultaneously. Justice without disclosure of the truth may feel incomplete. Reparations without accountability may seem like "buying" the silence of victims. Without a guarantee of non-recurrence, there is a risk that patterns of human rights violations will be repeated.

Understanding how the principles of transitional justice relate to one another is key to seeing how justice, accountability, and reparations are being implemented more holistically in post-New Order Indonesia. Transitional justice is not merely a series of actions, but rather a comprehensive framework designed to help societies transition from periods of conflict, oppression, or authoritarian rule to sustainable democracy and peace.

In Indonesia, the implementation of post-New Order transitional justice has been an ongoing and winding process. There has been progress, but there have also been many obstacles. Discussions about transitional justice help us to understand that resolving past human rights issues is not only about punishing individuals, but also about building a stronger foundation for democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human dignity in the future. In the context of ongoing reform, we face the enormous task of overcoming the dark legacy of the New Order. This is where the framework of transitional justice becomes relevant.

Conclusion

The above discussion makes it clear that Suharto's power during the New Order era was a manifestation of a militaristic state. For example, the Armed Forces became the primary means of maintaining authoritarian power, and the dual function doctrine of ABRI legitimised military intervention in all aspects of civilian life. This led to widespread state violence, both directly, through military operations and crackdowns, and indirectly, through restrictions on civil liberties, strict surveillance, and structural violence. The "legacy" of this period, including human rights issues and impunity, continues to challenge Indonesia to this day. We also recognise that the violence of the New Order had a profound, traumatic impact, specifically in the form of gender-based violence against women in Indonesia, both directly and indirectly. This impact was multi-layered, ranging from physical and sexual violence to restrictions on women's roles and rights in society.

This research reveals structural, symbolic, and epistemic violence targeting women's bodies and identities. Through its apparatus, the state systematically used policies and military force to control women's roles and living spaces, particularly in peripheral regions such as Aceh, Papua, NTT, and Timor-Leste. In these repressive conditions, regional women's NGOs have emerged as key actors in providing safe spaces, documenting violence, and fostering grassroots solidarity.

The above description demonstrates the importance of resilience and adaptive strategies, and how women's NGOs develop them. These strategies, ranging from tactical camouflage and covert work to the production of alternative knowledge, demonstrate that women's activism does not always take a direct approach but is actually powerful in its quiet work, rooted in empathy and community relations. This study emphasises the importance of listening to women's voices as both subjects of knowledge and agents of change.

In patriarchal and masculine states, the strategies employed by women were highly effective because their actions were generally considered to be harmless and apolitical, and lacking in an understanding of political interests, actions, and policies. Sometimes, women's NGOs choose to focus on seemingly less politically sensitive or "safe" issues (e.g., women's health and education) as a gateway to discussing more critical and substantive issues. This shows how women's NGO activists were sophisticated and courageous in disseminating information and education to the public, an important tool for building awareness and support, even at personal risk.

There were at least three other strategies employed by women's NGOs that have empowered them, making them stronger and more influential, including among those in power who initially never considered them a threat or a political force. Firstly, their advocacy and educational work focused not only on women's issues but also linked them to broader issues such as poverty, social injustice, labour, and human rights. This cross-sectoral approach enabled women's NGOs to build broader alliances and gain support from various groups.

Secondly, it is worth considering how women's NGOs utilised support and pressure from international organisations and global feminist networks. This support came in the form of financial assistance, moral legitimacy, transnational solidarity, and diplomatic protection. This served as a buffer against domestic repression. Thirdly, in a repressive environment full of violence and surveillance, documenting human rights violations and women's experiences was crucial. This documentation served as evidence of crimes and as an advocacy tool for future generations and for preserving collective memory (memorialisation).

The experiences of women's NGOs during the New Order can inspire and teach valuable lessons to current social and advocacy movements facing similar or different challenges, and seeking transitional justice in today's reform landscape. The courage and effectiveness of the advocacy and educational work of women's NGOs during the New Order are recognised, as are the lessons to be learned from their struggles under extremely challenging conditions. Their experiences demonstrate that resistance strategies in advocacy and education can be highly diverse and adaptable, even in the most challenging of circumstances, and that perseverance and creativity are essential to sustaining the struggle. *A luta continua!*

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