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RESEARCH PAPER

**WOMEN IN POST-CONFLICT ACEH: PARTICIPATION IN SOCIO-
ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PROCESSES**

INTRODUCTION

Six years after the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding in Helsinki (Helsinki MoU) that ended the 30-year separatist movement in Aceh, Indonesia, there remain unresolved issues of the fairness, effectiveness and sustainability of post-conflict economic assistance programs, especially those concerning women. This paper explores the extent to which economic assistance since the Helsinki MoU was signed on August 15, 2005 between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Government of Indonesia, has helped or hindered the quality of life of the women in Aceh, specifically their economic and political status.

In this analysis, I draw upon my own observations and experiences in the field as President and Co-Founder of the Liga Inong Aceh (LINA- Aceh Women's League) and as an Acehnese woman directly involved in the conflict and the peace negotiations. These information sources include meetings, talks and interviews I conducted with various people relevant to this topic, and are supplemented with a literature review. I provide the necessary historical, cultural, and political context regarding women in Islamic Aceh to address the specifics of economic assistance and to review the current status of women in this unique province of Indonesia. Central to my analysis are the results of interviews conducted by the Aceh Women's League in the districts of

Bireuen¹ and Pidie² in 2010. The women in these interviews spoke about lost political opportunity since the conflict. They have a good understanding of the realities of life and what they could gain if economic programs targeted to them are designed to empower them economically in a sustainable way. Our interviewers used the house visit method to reach families who received assistance between the periods of 2007-2010 and who are still running their own businesses. The average age of the women interviewed is 20-45 years old. Most owned a medium scale business such as provision shops including, dry fish, fruit crackers, coffee shops and food stalls in the market area. Bireuen and Pidie are similar, both considered “hot spots” of the conflict where armed clashes between the government forces and GAM guerillas took place almost daily. Consequently, their civilians suffered the most brutalities from the military and police. This paper seeks to make recommendations to improve the lives of Acehese women who are still suffering the consequences of the 30-year war.

BACKGROUND OF THE CASE

The History of Conflicts in Aceh

The history of Aceh differs from the history of the 35 other provinces of Indonesia. Before the advance of European colonization to Southeast Asia, Aceh enjoyed sovereignty for more than a thousand years. The Dutch declared war on Aceh on March 26, 1873. The province has been fighting for independence ever since, including several rebellions against the Republic of Indonesia, which was established in 1945. When the Acehese invited the Japanese to enter Aceh and expel the Dutch in 1942, the Aceh-Dutch war was still ongoing. In 1945, when Japan surrendered to the Allied forces at the

¹ Bireuen, has the reputation of being the “*Kota Juang*” (the struggle city). Historically, this district has always been at the forefront in war and conflict. The people of Bireuen are perceived as more educated and outgoing as compared to other districts of Aceh, and its elites hold relatively high positions in the Indonesian civil service. Located at the crossroads between the hinterland and the coastal areas, Bireuen is the least parochial district in Aceh.

² . People of Pidie are known for their trading acumen; birthplace of several great Acehese religious leaders the district is more feodlistic.

end of World War II, the Dutch colonial administration tried to retake Aceh. Acehnese revolutionary forces not only defeated the Dutch, but also expelled all remaining Japanese occupational forces from Aceh. Between 1945 and 1949 not a single foreign official remained in Aceh, and the country thus achieved de facto independence. However, in 1949 Aceh was incorporated by the United Nations into the Republic of Indonesia. The Acehnese felt that the surrender of its sovereignty to Republic of Indonesia was illegal.

Upon becoming part of the Republic of Indonesia, the relationship between Aceh and the central government in Jakarta became problematic. The new Republic did not treat Aceh much better than the Dutch and the Japanese had done. Despite its being one of the richest provinces in the Republic in term of natural resources, the people of Aceh lived in such poverty it became the second poorest province in Indonesia after West Papua.³

These issues of historical claim, economic injustice and identity are unified in Aceh's struggle for the right to self-determination and independence. These ideas formed the basis of the 1976 Declaration of Independence by the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). The vast majority of people in Aceh believed in this cause and therefore willingly participated or at least contributed to the war effort. Despite Aceh's commitment to the ideological foundations for GAM, the Helsinki MoU⁴ peace accord does not address these core issues of the conflict. Rather, the MoU focuses on political, economic and social power arrangements acceptable to both parties and necessary to end the conflict immediately. This process occurred in the context of the urgent need to allow unhindered international assistance delivery to the victims of the earthquakes and tsunami that devastated Aceh and killed nearly 200,000 people on December 24, 2004.

³ The eastern half of the island is the Republic of Papua New Guinea that obtained its independence from Australia in 1975. Colonized by the Dutch western part was incorporated into Indonesia by the UN on 1 May 1963. Following the 1998 commencement of reforms across Indonesia, Papua and other Indonesian provinces received greater regional autonomy. In 2001, "Special Autonomy" status was granted to the region, although to date, implementation has been partial. The region was divided into the provinces of Papua and West Papua in 2003.

⁴ The Helsinki MoU grants Aceh self-government except over six authorities retained by the central government: foreign affairs, external defense, national security, monetary and fiscal matters, justice and freedom of religion.

As indicated by the recent complaint raised by the Free Aceh Movement leader to the president of the Republic, the mediator⁵ and to the European Union, that the Indonesian Government has failed to fully implement the clauses of the agreement, it is clear this peace agreement is facing many problems in its implementation. However, this paper will not look into these problems directly. Instead, I will focus on the position of Acehnese women in the post-conflict era, and how the economic empowerment contributes to the sociopolitical status of women in Islamic culture in Aceh.

Religion and Tradition as the Way of Life in Aceh

In this era of increasing uncertainty in the Islamic world, there is a growing trend in many Muslim communities to return to Islam. Implementing the Sharia law⁶ is one of the preferred answers, especially in post-conflict areas where people are overwhelmed by newly found peace, freedom and democracy, and by inadequacy to face the challenges of such a sudden and drastic change of situation. As in the case of the success of popular upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt to bring down dictatorships that is now known as the "Arab Spring", it is no surprise that the Islamic parties, albeit the moderate ones won the majority of the votes. These outcomes leave the initiators of the revolution, mostly young liberals, alienated. The people still feel the need for a comfort zone in which they don't have to think for themselves, their needs are provided for, as bad as they may have been under the tyranny of the regimes they have brought down. It is the same in Aceh. While in no way can the "return to Islam" in Aceh be described as a rise in conservatism or extremism, it is nevertheless stricter than the Acehnese had previously experienced in their long history of spreading and defending the faith in the region.⁷

⁵ Crisis Management Initiative based in Helsinki and chaired by the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and former President of Finland, the peace talks and the eventual agreement were backed by the European Union that stands as guarantor for its implementation.

⁶ *Sharia* or *shari'ah* is the moral and legal code of Islam. Sharia deals with many topics addressed by secular law, including crime, politics and economy. There are two primary sources of Islamic law: the precepts set forth in the Quran and the examples set by the Islamic prophet Muhammad in the Sunnah.

⁷ Evidence concerning the initial coming and subsequent establishment of Islam in Southeast Asia shows that it was through the Aceh region. When Venetian traveller Marco Polo passed by Sumatra on his way home from China in 1292 he found that Perlak was a Muslim town while nearby 'Basma(n)' and 'Samara' were not. 'Basma(n)' and 'Samara' are

In general, the rise of conservatism is often due to a desire to regain one's "lost identity" in the wake of an oppressive and lengthy military rule that destroyed the very fabric of one's way of life— a way of life based on the combination of traditional rules and religious tenets. A whole generation of people born during the conflict was deprived of education, both in religious knowledge and even more neglected in general/secular education. Very often this desire of regaining one's identity is translated into "quick fix" measures; the people are easily attracted to foreign influences delivered along with economic assistance when such influences help them realize this wish to find an instant solution to their identity confusion. Being religious is often embodied in dress and other demonstrative postures, rather than in adherence to higher ideas of justice or morals. This more superficial form of religiosity is especially notable as regards women. When confronted with the reality of how women are discriminated against, religious leaders in Aceh always point to how Islam has raised the dignity of women, how the Koranic verses praise and command the protection of women and how the Prophet Muhammad respected and cared for women. This situation leads many women in Aceh to fear that not adhering to the new Islamic conservatism would signify them as anti-Islam. Indeed, their fears are not unfounded, as in some sermons and local media many religious and social leaders have berated young activists as "westernized and un-Islamic."

Since the implementation of the Sharia law in Aceh in 2001⁸, many have found its regulations confusing, rather than finding it a source of solace for a people recovering from the trauma of conflict and natural disaster. The issue of Sharia law was not discussed during the negotiations in Helsinki and is not mentioned in the agreement. This law was introduced when Aceh was given the status of special province in 2001, as part of the strategy to boost the image of the central government in the eyes of the

often said to be Pasai and Samudra. The gravestone of Sultan Malik as-Salih, the first Muslim ruler of Samudra, has been found and is dated AH 696 (AD 1297). This is the earliest clear evidence of a Muslim dynasty in the Indonesia-Malay area and more gravestones from the thirteenth century show that this region continued under Muslim rule. Ibn Batutah, a Moroccan traveller, passing through on his way to China in 1345 and 1346, found that the ruler of Samudra was a follower of the Shafei school of Islam.

The Portuguese apothecary Tome Pires reported in his early sixteenth century book *Suma Oriental* that most of the kings of Sumatra from Aceh through to Palembang were Muslim. At Pasai, in what is now the North Aceh Regency, there was a thriving international port. Pires attributed the establishment of Islam in Pasai to the 'cunning' of the Muslim merchants.

⁸ Sharia Law in Aceh was introduced by President Abdurrahman Wahid in 2001 as part of the Special Autonomy.

Acehnese people and to give the Free Aceh Movement the image of being anti-Islam when the latter declared their opposition to this Jakarta style of Sharia. GAM insisted that its struggle was not religious based, but a national struggle for independence. President Abdul Rahman Wahid⁹ used his position as leader of the largest Islamic party in Indonesia, the Nahdatul Ulama (NU),¹⁰ with a reputation in Indonesia as promoting traditional but moderate Islam, to impose Jakarta's Sharia law. The introduction of this law (UU No.18/ 2001)¹¹ was not well publicized to the people but was propagated to the Islamic leaders and to religious schools and religious based civil society organizations. Free Aceh Movement (GAM) did not take this development very seriously, as it did not consider that it would have much effect on its struggle. Its relations with most of the religious leaders were not too close anyway, having often criticized most of them as cowards for not daring to stand up against the tyranny of the State. GAM's political wing, the SIRA,¹² still able to operate openly as an NGO and inspired by the breakaway East Timor,¹³ was too busy in promoting referendum as the best solution for the conflict to galvanize popular opposition against the introduction of this Sharia law. Most other Acehnese civil organizations at the time were also focused on more relevant issues of the day, such as the atrocities and grave violations of human rights perpetrated by the Indonesian military against civilians, the peace negotiation process being pursued by the Henry Dunant Center (HDC)¹⁴, and the implementation of the Cessation of Hostilities

⁹ Abdurrahman Wahid or known as Gus Dur is a well-known Indonesian moderate Muslim scholar and political leader who served as the President of Indonesia from 1999 to 2001. He was also the head of the largest Muslim Organization in Indonesia, NU. Wahid was the first elected president of Indonesia after the resignation of Soeharto in 1998.

¹⁰ **Nahdatul Ulama** is a traditionalist Sunni Islam group in Indonesia.

¹¹ Special Autonomy Law.

¹² SIRA (Sentral Informasi Referendum Aceh) is a movement for referendum to solve the conflict in Aceh, proposing options of remaining with the Republic of independence, founded by Acehnese students and youth congress in January 31, 1999.

¹³ East Timor, formerly a province of Indonesia, gained its independence in 1999 through Referendum backed by the United Nations.

¹⁴ Henry Dunant Center is a humanitarian NGO based in Geneva, Switzerland. The involvement of HDC in the peace process is very important because it marks the first time the Indonesian government was willing to accept international mediation. This decision infuriated the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) who openly maneuvered to wreck it. The TNI committed open violations of the agreement that the mediator could register but could not to prevent. As an NGO, it did not have any pressure capacity on the warring parties. The Indonesian military opposition culminated into the burning of HDC offices and physically attacking its officers by military supported militia in Central Aceh. The people of central Aceh highland are ethnically different from the majority who lives in the coastal area.

Agreement (CoHA).¹⁵ Today, Sharia law is the rallying flag of the conservative sector of the Acehese society, and GAM leadership is too fearful of losing popular support to oppose it as it did during the conflict.

While the strategy of using religion in order to alienate GAM from the people was not very successful during the conflict, it did manage to polarize the Acehese society into pro and contra Sharia, and by extension into pro and contra GAM. Pro government preachers used Friday sermons to drum up support for Sharia and to attack GAM as irreligious for opposing the Sharia. The *dayah*¹⁶ communities that form the backbone of the Acehese religiosity were also split into pro and anti GAM. Delegation after delegation from the pro-government *dayahs* went to Jakarta to meet with the Acehese members of Parliament between 1999-2002 to persuade them to push the approval of the Sharia bill proposed by the Government. The then governor, Syamsuddin Mahmud, stated, “if GAM refused to accept Shariah it would be too much, all it is the foundation of life on which Acehese communities live.” (Kompas, September 8, 1999) This campaign to strengthen Sharia resonates strongly in the Acehese community in Jakarta, where practically all pro-Jakarta Acehese leaders reside. The campaign was well funded by the government and its supporters were able to carry out large and frequent meetings in Jakarta as well as in Medan, the third largest city in Indonesia and capital of the province of North Sumatra that is adjacent to the province of Aceh. Medan is important for Aceh, for it is home to a large and influential Acehese community and serves as the traditional import-export gate for Aceh, whose own ports lack basic facilities. Meanwhile in Aceh, the military and police banned public meetings. Government propaganda started to dig up Hasan Tiro's¹⁷ personal background, presenting him to Acehese as untrustworthy. In his

¹⁵ CoHA (Cessation of Hostilities Agreement) between the Government of Indonesia and GAM held on December, 9th 2002 is the utmost achievement in terms of settling the disputes in Aceh. Besides controlling the armed conflict, the Agreement has also created an opportunity to build more democratic and transparent political, economical, social and cultural life. However, COHA failed in 2003.

¹⁶ According to American anthropologist James T. Siegel the traditional *dayah* is a religious school that inculcates boys with the understanding that becoming a man means following the rules of Islam (Siegel, 2010). Today besides Islamic education, nationally set curriculum is obligatory. While children in Aceh tend to be spoiled by their parents, in the *dayah* they are taught discipline and very simple life, cook their own food and wash their cloths, it is more a communal set up than a boarding school. Today more girls are sent to the dayahs than boys.

¹⁷ On December 4th 1976, Dr. Teungku Hasan Muhammad di Tiro declared the independence of Aceh and formed the Aceh/Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF) popularly known as Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) or Free Aceh Movement. Di Tiro was educated at Columbia University and later in his life became a Swedish national and lived in

younger days, Tiro was a fervent Indonesian nationalist, he married an American Jew, and he studied and lived for decades in the United States. These biographical facts were used to smear him as a westernized opportunist and anti-Islam, despite his descent from the most illustrious religious family of Aceh. Such revelations confuse ordinary Acehnese, who are mostly pious Muslim villagers. On one hand, they want to support GAM's struggle for independence, to rally behind the prodigious descendant of their most venerable religious leader, and on the other, they are confronted with the image of an organization portrayed as opposing Sharia with an “unholy” leader at its helm.

Islam is indeed deeply rooted in the mindset of the Acehnese, and this fact is not lost to those who want to exploit it for political purposes. Even the Dutch came to realize that the only way to defeat the Acehnese was to use their religion against them. Following the advice of its famous orientalist scholar, Snouck Hurgronje,¹⁸ who had the reputation of being sympathetic to oppressed Muslim societies in colonized countries, the Dutch government started to favor Acehnese aristocrats and alienated their religious leaders, thereby breaking the partnership that was the foundation of the Sultanate. The Acehnese governance system had always been based on the positive dichotomy of religion and tradition. “*Adat bak Po Teumeureuhom, Hukom bak Shah Kuala*” is the saying that places worldly power in the hand of the king, while that of the law is the purview of the great imam who interpreted the Koranic and Hadith verses. Even the Sultan had to obey the religious law, demonstrating how this separation was observed by the highest seat of power in the nation all the way down to the village chief and its imam.¹⁹ The Dutch *divide et impera*²⁰ policy was so successful that when Aceh became independent from de

Stockholm. One week before he died on June 3rd, 2010 the government of Indonesia presented his family the restoration of his Indonesian citizenship, it is not clear if he had applied for it.

¹⁸ Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (8 February 1857 – 26 June 1936) was a scholar of oriental cultures and languages and Advisor on Native Affairs to the colonial government of the Netherland East Indies. In 1889 he became professor of Malay at Leiden University and official advisor to the Dutch government on colonial affairs. He wrote more than 1,400 papers on the situation in Aceh and the position of Islam in the Dutch Indies colonies, as well as on the colonial civil service and nationalism. His success in the Aceh War earned him influence in shaping colonial administration policy throughout the rest of the Dutch East Indies, however deeming his advise insufficiently implemented he returned to the Netherlands in 1906. Back in the Netherlands Snouck continued a successful academic career.

¹⁹ *Imam* is a religious leader or preacher.

²⁰ *Divide et impera* (divide and conquer) is a combination of political, military and economic strategy of gaining and maintaining power by breaking up larger concentrations of power into chunks that individually have less power than

facto independent from 1945 to 1949, the Acehnese religious leaders launched the bloody “social revolution” in 1948 against the aristocrats, thus ending forever the partnership that earlier had made their nation one of the major world powers.

The Acehnese Family System

Traditionally for women in Aceh, children are the most important part of their life (Siegel, 2010). Children are treated with affection and leniency. Mothers tend to strive to fulfill the wishes of their children, particularly those of their sons. Such privileged treatment give boys in the family a sense of understanding of their role as a place of leadership—the men are fathers, brothers and elders bound to be leaders and protectors of their family. Of course this is probably a common natural feeling in many societies, especially in the Eastern cultures, but in Aceh the sentiment is stronger due to the religious and traditional practices that place the man as the leader of the household. In the absence of a father, a family tends to look for protection from the nearest male paternal relatives (“*wali*,”)²¹ though emotionally, children are very often closer to maternal relatives (“*karông*”). This situation creates balance in a fatherless family, in which in daily life uncles and auntis from the mother's side nurture children, while formal responsibilities and issues of authority fall on the father's side. These customs and traditions are the norms of life, which stem from Islamic teachings developed since the 13th century. Islamic tenets are deeply rooted in the heart of the people. To an Acehnese, being Acehnese and being Muslim are synonymous. Islam dictates how an Acehnese should behave and sets the measurement and barometer of his/her attitude, behavior, deeds, and performance in his/her daily interactions. It is his/her way of life. But now the trends are breaking from tradition, many girls are sent to Islamic boarding schools (*dayah*) because the parents think that is the best place for them in order to be “responsible and respected,” while the boys are more likely to go to the national schools.

the one implementing the strategy. The concept refers to a strategy that breaks up existing power structures and prevents smaller power groups from linking up.

²¹ Derived from Arabic meaning “guardian” of a minor or an unmarried woman; it also means “regent” of a State. While the *Wali* holds legal responsibility over his charge; the *karong* has only moral obligation.

If a mother is questioned about this choice the answer is usually that it is her husband's decision. Some mothers do say that the reason is that it is “safer” for the girls to learn religion from an early age. Besides, the *dayahs* nowadays are obliged by law to provide State curricula for their students in addition to the religious lessons, so sending girls to the religious schools is considered more advantageous.

The Aceh Women in Politics

The year of 2006 saw the first-ever free election to elect the governor and 23 district officers in Aceh. Aceh pioneered the participation of independent candidates²² in elections that later was adopted nationally. There is a national law obligating political parties to field 30% women candidates. However, since Aceh was considered “post-conflict” this rule was not applied during the last two elections (executive in 2006 and legislative in 2009.) There are only four women among the 69 members of Aceh legislative body, DPRA. Only one out of the 42 provincial executive agencies, that of the Board for Women’s Empowerment and the Protection of Children, is headed by a woman. Only one woman succeeded in winning an elected post: the deputy mayor of the capital city of Banda Aceh.²³ There is no lack of potential woman leaders in Aceh, but the male elite especially those who consider themselves “religious” set the “social ceiling” very low. There are two basic interrelated dimensions of democracy: the open competitive space for citizens to gain any political position and power, and adequate space for activities that guarantee political participation for all citizens. The basic mechanism to allow participation is to organize open, free, and equal elections. The formal procedures of elections are noted as one of the challenges for increasing women’s representation in politics, because both legislative and executive positions are the core policy makers, thus it is important for women to also participate in this process. However an election is a competition in which most men candidates have the advantage due to their social connections, economic resources and social status. (Affiat, 2011)

²² As their much fought for victory in the Helsinki peace negotiation and stipulated in the MoU.

²³ The feat that she repeated in this April 2012, indicating her first term was good enough for the people to reelect her.

The new autonomy powers of the district chiefs (*Bupati*) under the decentralization policy are often abused for introducing local regulations that are unfair to women. Even when a district chief is enlightened enough to try to affect a change, more often than not he will face “noisy” opposition. In a typical incident, Nurdin Abdul Rahman²⁴, who became a *Bupati*, appointed a woman as *Camat* (head of a sub-district). Six months in to her job, she became very popular with the people because of her accessibility to the ordinary people and to her honesty. These qualities are not very common in corruption-ridden civil service in Indonesia, especially in Aceh. Then, the head of the local parliament demanded her removal. The strange thing is that while this parliamentarian acknowledged that she is a good *Camat* who has managed to improve the livelihood of the people and the infrastructure conditions in her area, he claimed that it is against Islam for her to hold a leadership post. The *Camat* defended herself not on her right to hold the post, but rather that the post was not a leadership one, because there is the *Bupati* above her, showing her reluctance to challenge this religious interpretation into the secular government posting. It took a few noisy demonstrations by women’s associations to force the head of the local parliament to back down. In another district in West Aceh, the *Bupati*, Ramli Mansur, introduced a regulation banning women from wearing trousers. This is a very strange ruling, because the women’s traditional dresses in Aceh consist of trousers and blouses. He bought 4000 pairs of skirts to be distributed to women that the Sharia police would stop in the streets for wearing trousers, most of the time while riding motorcycles, the most common transport in Aceh. This action caused popular opposition. Such incidents demonstrate that the “radicalization” of Islam in Aceh is not rooted in the society but is introduced by overzealous and misguided officials.

One aspect of gender equality in Aceh is currently the most favored destination of educated citizens: to become civil servants. This is strange, because Acehnese traditionally prefer professions such as trade and agriculture where they can be self-employed rather than employed. The popularity of the civil service is a new phenomenon, which arose during the conflict when people sought stability and pensions. Most of the women interviewed by the Aceh Women’s League believe being a civil servant is the

²⁴ Nurdin Abdul Rahman is a former negotiator. He was imprisoned for 12 years during the conflict in the 80’s.

best solution to their economic problems and for improving their social status in the community. For young women, government service enhances their chances of getting better spouses and of continuing in their profession in a society where marriage is often the end game for many career minded women. Among all the branches of civil service, teaching at primary and secondary schools is the most preferred. However, this situation is drastically different among the elite, where receiving a university education is a given. Despite inequities in political power, increasing levels of education have permitted, more and more young Acehnese women have become doctors, pharmacists, and architects, professions that were traditionally the domain of men.

Women who receive “gender” training in programs provided by international assistance believe that education is the answer for the future of Aceh, while concurrently believing Islam is a matter of identity for Acehnese and should be given its rightful place.

Women who manage to work in the private sector, usually as petty traders or as the heads of small businesses, reveal that they often do not tell their husbands how much money they make, and many of them say that their husbands do not know that they have a bank account²⁵. Many of the husbands are busy with their political careers or businesses; the women take advantage of this situation to have their own small businesses. There is also a tradition in Acehnese culture for women to keep gold. It is a well-known fact in Aceh that most women have their “hiding spots” for gold jewelry, even if only a small piece that they will give to their daughters on their wedding day. Some jewelry has been passed on for generations and date back to the time of the Dutch gold coins currency.

However, there is little evidence that entrepreneurship in the private sector or being work as civil servant have led women in Aceh to political empowerment. Even those who are very active in civil society movements²⁶ shun the pursuit of practical political careers. Most women’s organizations offer support to one or the other political parties in electoral campaigns, but fall back to their non-political activities once the elections are over.

²⁵ Interview conducted in 2010.

²⁶ The consequence of this is that when the funding dried up when the large international NGOs through which the funds were channeled to Acehnese implementer organizations left in 2010, most of them, especially the women organizations, collapsed. While it is normal that funding availability will invite local donor-driven civil organizations to grow, even to spun into an "industry".

International Economic Assistance and its effects on the position of women in Aceh

The International community has invested billions of dollars in supporting Aceh's transition toward peaceful democracy. At the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders' Special Summit held in Jakarta in 2005, two weeks after the Indian Ocean tsunami, the leaders of international organizations agreed to donate four billion U.S. dollars in aid to further rehabilitation and reconstruction (East Asia Forum, 2011). The Multi-Stakeholder Review, a partnership between the Indonesian Coordinating Ministry of Legal, Political and Security Affairs, The National Development Planning Agency and the Aceh Peace Reintegration Agency, reports that the total amount of funds committed to the process of reintegration (economic facilitation) and peace building is \$895 million, which is one seventh of the tsunami reconstruction funds. The Acehese government will receive \$7.9 billion in special autonomy funds²⁷. Although this paper does not include studies on the tsunami related projects, the massive funds circulating in this relatively small area with a population of less than five million cannot but affect positively its post-conflict economy.

Today, those who did not see Aceh soon after the tsunami disaster would not believe Aceh had indeed suffered such massive destruction. Former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, flying over Banda Aceh in January 2005, said the city looked like it had "just been hit by a nuclear weapon. Completely flattened." In fact, registering a 9.15 on the Richter scale, the earthquake was the second-most powerful ever recorded in the history of the world; the impact hit with a force equal to 1,500 times the Hiroshima atomic bomb. "I would say that on balance we did **build back better**, and I think they [the Achenese] are better positioned to face the future," said former U.S. President Bill Clinton, the U.N. special envoy for the tsunami recovery effort, in an interview in New York City, echoing his own call of *build back better* when he first came to Aceh before the rehabilitation and reconstruction work started.

²⁷ East Asia Forum 2011, Badrun Shaleh, Deakin University

If the long-lasting conflict has brought down the economic capacity of practically everyone in Aceh, male and female, the peace and the tsunami projects have only improved the lives of the men. Both the government and international donors have failed to recognize and acknowledge the importance of improving the economic position of women. While aware of the need to build gender equality in their programs, they often interpret this in the form of providing ad-hoc and unsustainable livelihood assistance, failing to understand the socio-political role of women in the society and their position in the power structure they depend on for their economic independence. Almost all of the aid programs were designed in the form of livelihood skill training, home industry capacity building and other similar short-term and ad-hoc measures. This is the case for example, of USAID,²⁸ which has given millions of dollars in support of the peace process in Aceh. USAID does oblige those entrusted to implement its programs to be “gender sensitive,” the term popularly used in designing programs these days, but without exception it has materialized as providing livelihood programs for women. There is a deliberate and total exclusion of any request for funding by NGOs that deals directly with political education of women in Aceh.

“Gender Sensitive Programming,” “Gender Mainstreaming” and other catchwords have resulted in the “feminizing” of assistance programs: training in handicrafts making, baking and cooking, sewing, embroidery and other “women’s activities.” In one such case in a small North Aceh village, 30 women were trained by a European based NGO in embroidery with instructors brought in from Jakarta and using the latest model of sewing machines. The training lasted three months and is considered a big success, as all became capable of producing quality products they were trained for. But what would these housewives do with this newly acquired skill? Where would they work, where would they get the capital to start a business, where would they sell their products? Even in cases where some of them were able to continue selling their products in the local market, it was never sustainable for a long time. The local markets very soon became saturated. The funds spent in training them, which could have been used for the funding of a sustainable project are thus wasted. Indeed, in a post conflict society, these kinds of

²⁸ USAID is the government agency providing U.S. economic and humanitarian assistance worldwide for more than 40 years.

activities will not lead the women to the stage of “real empowerment,” but only gain them short-term economic benefits. The women who are engaged in these types of activities become less interested in moving forward; they are stuck with the idea of home/cottage industry and have no motivation to be an agent of change in their community. They have no interest to join social/political meetings, no interest in participating in the decision making process in their village. The little economic successes that they have attract others to do the same and eventually the women become too busy in such activities, they are no longer concerned with or have the time or the inclination to progress to a higher level. They are trapped in their own villages helping their husbands earn a little more income for the household. They become, unwittingly, imprisoned within the unseen walls and under the perpetual cycle of male domination. Such a situation fits nicely in the post-conflict arrangement where men go for “bigger things” while their wives hold the fort at home.²⁹ The men consider their women as being in need of protection and therefore it is best if they do not go out of the house on their own and by their own free will. It is for their husbands to think about the more serious things like politics, labor activities, civil society activities, and other social obligations. Women have their noble place at home, raising and educating their children.

The aid programs are still very much following the traditional “economic empowerment” system. There is no attempt to encourage the two sexes to become interdependent. Creating such mutual dependence is the key to overcoming gender separation. There is indeed a working example of such a program which could serve as a model. A Japanese NGO trained a few women in a cacao-producing area in the District of Pidie to produce chocolate powder for cake making and chocolate bars. The cooperative society running this production project is now in its fourth year and has started to market its products outside of Aceh. While no data is available on this enterprise, it is immediately recognizable that the women in this area are running the business without any interference from the men. The reason for this is evidently because the men who work and own the plantations now can sell part of their cacao kernels to the women, making the men less dependent on middlemen. The women are wives of some of the plantation

²⁹ Interview with women economic beneficiary in Pidie, 2010

owners. Above all, the men do not feel threatened by the success of the women, as they do not encroach on their “territory,” the plantation. Gender equality and emancipation cannot always mean “on par” in everything, especially in traditional Islamic societies. This is by far not a perfect set-up, as the cooperative society is still governed by a committee that may not yet be free from the male domination. But at least, the women are participating in meetings and contributing in decision making, due to their control of the production and marketing sectors. It is a start; and above all, it has demonstrated not only its sustainability but also its potential to grow.

From my observations, I surmise that foreign donors and international organizations have, for the most part, not been very effective in raising the standard of living of women in the real sense of the term, in the post-conflict transitional era in Aceh.

Acehnese Women in the Post Conflict Peace Process

Since the signing of the peace accord, Aceh has emerged as a very peaceful post conflict area. On December 15, 2006, the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM)³⁰ came to an end. All tasks assigned to AMM and as specified in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), signed in Helsinki on August 15, 2005, have been completed. The peace in Aceh is re-established, it is irreversible and self-sustaining. There is complete freedom of movement and speech in Aceh and on December 11, 2006 the province held its first direct and democratic local elections. In addition to modeling a successful peace transition, Aceh has also been a model of successful disaster management as demonstrated with the great success of rehabilitation and reconstruction following the 2004 disaster through (The Aceh Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Board) BRR³¹. This natural disaster, in fact,

³⁰ The AMM was established on September 15, 2005 and its overall aim has been to monitor the implementation of the MoU agreed by the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). The peace process belongs to the people of Aceh and the signatories of the MoU, together with the newly and democratically elected Governor, and with the support of the EU, ASEAN and the wider international community. Their continues support is necessary for the long term implementation of the MoU (Aceh Monitoring Mission, 2006)

³¹ Because of the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Executing Agency for Aceh (BRR) more than 100.000 houses were built by the end of October 2007 for the victims of Tsunami and earthquake in Aceh. Compared with other achievements in rebuilding other disaster areas in the world, the achievement in housing developments in Aceh was much faster. As comparison, it took four years to rebuild 48.000 houses that were destroyed by typhoon Mitch in

alarmed both sides of the conflict so much that it jolted them into a determined desire to end the conflict as soon as possible and concentrate on rebuilding and rehabilitating the country³². These last five years have shown clearly the success of trust building between the Government of Indonesia (GoI) and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). During the initial peace process, 3000 GAM combatants had received “economic facilitation” as part of the reintegration program stipulated in the Helsinki MoU. Many problems occurred during this process as GAM refused to reveal the real number of its troops³³ during the negotiation in Helsinki, which created complexity in distributing the funds and designing other assistance programs for them.

Although a number of issues have been addressed in the reintegration program, they are not effective because many local and central government officials simply do not really understand the process of reintegration. The central government views reintegration purely as an economic problem, thus after having funded the construction of around 28,000 houses to replace some of those burnt down during the conflict, and paying token compensations for the 3,000 ex-combatants and 6,200 non-combatant GAM members, it considers the matter of the reintegration completed.³⁴ Such a policy naturally excludes

Honduras in 1998. While in Bam Iran, it took three years to rebuild 25,000 houses that were destroyed due to the 2003 earthquake.

³² While on the GAM side the absolute necessity of letting the aid through without hindrance was the decisive factor, the imposition of the martial law that had run for four years had also weakened its armed capacity significantly and the presence of some 50,000 Indonesian troops with their brutal actions against civilians did in fact play a big role in forcing its leadership to return to the negotiation table immediately; on the Indonesian side, crushing economic situation, international pressures, democratization process and the weakening of the military influence after the fall of Suharto, all helped the GoI to reconsider its strict insistence of maintaining the unitary philosophy of the Republic. Indeed, on this last point, decentralization was the order of the day, allowing the Indonesian negotiators in Helsinki to respond positively to GAM's demands for more self-rule authorities.

³³ GAM had given the number of 3,000 based on its acknowledged possession of around 1,000 pieces of weapons, as it is known that most guerillas share one weapons for three combatants; in reality, GAM had around 25,000 fighters, including those active in such work as intelligence, health, administration, logistics and other support activities.

³⁴ The part of Reintegration in the DDR process has been problematic from the start. Stipulated under Article 3.2 of the MoU it stresses upon “economic facilitation” for the ex-combatants and victims of conflict. This has led to misinterpretations of the real and broader meaning of the Reintegration process. There seems to be a tendency on the part of the Central Government to want to close the book on this issue as soon as possible. It set the policy of calibrating everything on the basis of cash compensation. This includes the implementation of the MoU stipulations concerning the provision of lands and jobs for the ex-combatants, which were substituted with a one off cash payment. Such approach, seemed practical at the time, has resulted in creating many serious problems and disagreements between the Central Government and the current popularly elected Aceh government who has to face the landless and jobless thousands of ex-combatants, not to mention the tens of thousands of victims of conflict.

most of the other groups like the women and youth who are not listed officially as ex-combatants, even if some of them were. During the six years after the signing of the MoU, many foreign donors funded programs to support the peace process, but these too were short-term economic assistance programs lasting only up to the departure time of the implementing NGOs, mostly after the legislative elections in 2009, when the central government decided that foreign assistance was no longer needed and refused to extend their visas.

Economic assistance during the peace process is intended mainly to return the conflict-affected people into a normal situation. What is overlooked in Aceh throughout this process is taking into consideration the local context before and after the conflict in relation to male and female contributions to economic growth. Most donors only consider and support projects that fall into the category of “female activities,” finishing one project as soon as possible to move to another without bothering to monitor its effectiveness and sustainability. The assistance is impressive in terms of quantity but not in quality.

In general, neither the language nor the process of post war reconstruction sufficiently acknowledges the changes and crises in gender roles and identities that situation of war can effect. Former combatants are demobilized without first retraining them in civilian skills of their choice and helping them find employment. These men are generally left with few alternatives to militarized masculinity, and in real terms they very often have neither the skills nor the opportunity to play a role in the reconstruction of their communities (Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay, 2002). In the case of Aceh, the MoU does mention specifically this issue but it was not followed up correctly in the implementation.

Economic facilitation to ex-combatants without stipulating the inclusion of women affects gender relations in the economic competition. It is exacerbated in cases like that with GAM, where the structure of leadership is totally male. It was impossible for women to compete for a share in the economic assistance provided by the State in implementing the clauses of the MoU. The economic facilitation is part of the political, economic and social concessions granted by the Central Government as GAM gave up its long and determined fight for independence. These concessions are embodied in the Self-Government understanding, which granted greater political and economic autonomy than

the Acehese had ever obtained before, even on paper, let alone in reality, within Indonesia and in comparison with other provinces of Indonesia. However, far from making GAM disappear, the peace process provides its members with strong incentives to expand their movement's political coherence and influence (Aspinall, 2009).

Realizing that they had given up the idea of independence, the GAM fighters moved quickly to the economic and social spheres, preserving their command structure to develop a new relationship with the people. With the new economic and social capacities in their hands, they have a great advantage over the other sectors of the population in gaining political power in the elections. GAM members, from the highest-ranking leadership of the movement down to the ordinary individual ex-combatants in the villages, use their new legal influence over the ordinary people. It is natural that they should maintain this advantage in the strictly hierarchical territorial organization developed during the war years (Aspinall, 2008). The quasi-total male dominance in this peacetime structure pushes women aside, making them unable to compete against aggressive combatants in benefiting from the economic and political power structure. Compared to the situation prevailed during the war, today women are no longer considered "relevant". During the conflict, the women had essential roles to play in decision-making, they served specific needs in support of the struggle, such as providing logistics, intelligence, and healthcare and above all, taking care of the family. Today, these needs can all be carried out by the men themselves who are no longer occupied with combat. The women thus serve only, at best, as family minders and at worst as underling components of the society. The women lost their voices and their significance along with their economic independence.

When the peace process brought in a lot of cash aid, it created another problem. In assisting tsunami victims, immediate donations are necessary given that people lost everything within minutes. The situation is different with victims of a conflict that lasted 30 years. The key objectives of international assistance when countries are most vulnerable are to save lives and keep the peace (Castillo & Myers, 2010). However, more creative and sustainable economic assistance is required when dealing with long-lasting conflicts. With short term and ad-hoc economic assistance, the community becomes

dependent on external aid. Yet, this need not be the case. Women may have undertaken roles and developed skills in conflict which could be well used in the peacebuilding period when people need access to income, opportunity and to the market to survive. Planners at the government level should take into account not just their needs but their vital potential roles as economic contributors (Potter, 2011). Programs should adopt affirmative action strategies to actively and consistently support improved gender equality in all areas where they have influence. For example, staff recruitment, selection of service provider, local Civil Society Partners, the capacity building strategy and individual capacity building activities are all areas in which women should be effectively integrated into action learning/planning activities (LOGICA 2, 2009).

Another reason for gender inequality in the peace process is introduced during project designing because international NGOs tend to adopt a safe and complicated attitude toward programming. During the discussion with women activists and former combatants in 2009-2010,³⁵ women expressed their disappointment and criticized donors for their unwillingness to deal with anything remotely related to politics. Is it possible to address post conflict situations without dealing with political issues when conflict itself is a political issue? What the women need is not direct support to enter into practical politics, such as in direct financing of their campaigns. What they need is to be prepared with skills, such as through courses on democracy, political party formation, governmental systems and fundraising methods. However, most donors are not prepared to go beyond their mandate of providing livelihood skills. Anything to do with politics is taboo; it is an area where they simply will not get involved, therefore it is difficult to see if there is a link between economic empowerment and socio-political improvement of women in the post conflict situation. Worse, in reality in most part of the world women still remain underrepresented in political and decision making positions, a phenomenon which perpetuates policy and practices that do not serve women's needs equally to those of men. This disparity is especially dangerous in post-conflict settings, where the voice of women must be heard in order to ensure equitable and sustainable reconstruction (Almirzanah, 2010). Women as well as men, sometimes limit opportunities for other

³⁵ Shadia Marhaban interview with former combatants in Bireun and Pidie, 2009-2010

women by citing their “lack of training” or education. This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that many women, particularly in rural areas, have low levels of awareness of their right to equality and participation. As a result many women are not familiar with political issues, nor do they see it as a domain they should, or could be, involved in (Rohaiza Ahmad Asi, Irine Hiraswari Gayatri, Akiko Horiba, & Angelita, 2011).

The Women's View of Politics in Aceh Today

Discussions about women’s political participation are focused on leadership positions or, rather the lack of women’s presence in decision-making positions, and not on the weakness of the grassroots movement. The issue of women and politics in Aceh is more concentrated on the relationship between female and male institutional power structures. Women who wish to enter this world of modern politics in Aceh face a vicious cycle that is very hard to break (Affiat, 2011) :

- The need for big campaign money that is supplied by the business sector has formed a solidified *clientele* system dominated by “men's domain” (construction contracts, mining projects, import/export licenses)
- The uncertainty of the political situation is disruptive to family life. This forces women to opt for a more stable career in the civil service. They demonstrate the “good life” in the civil service, which makes it more attractive to the younger women. Many activist female among students end up entering the civil service upon graduation.
- The lopsided interpretation of the Sharia law discourages women from pursuing political activities, resulting in very few women elected to parliament. This has the unintended consequence of strengthening this law under male domination of the house of representatives.

Many women in Aceh are still trapped within the narrative of their past glory, of the time when Acehnese women ruled as Sultanahs, when they commanded glorious naval fleets as admiral and when the war produced more great heroines than heroes.

They grew up with these historical facts, not legends, the stories that they can verify in the academic literature, and in national commemoration events. The narratives are not only “stories of us” but also “their stories of us,” and difficult to put aside. This glorious past serves not as encouragement for them to believe in themselves, but as the basis for lamentation of the cruel oppressions that they are facing today.

Conclusion

Socio-cultural factors are the strongest influence over women in Aceh in determining their position in the society. In general they have the tendency to adopt a more conservative view regarding their roles in society. Whenever the notion of women’s participation and leadership arises, the discussion is directly framed to be about “gender equality,” and about the dichotomy between “Western” vis-à-vis “Eastern’/’Islamic’/’Acehnese” ideas. Talking about women’s participation and leadership can thus also be perceived as criticism or offense against the *adat*, Acehnese tradition,³⁶ values that are integral to Acehnese identity in tandem with their religion. However, this view often fails to consider that *adat* itself as a social norm is changeable, and that it must change over the course of history. Otherwise there will be no progress. An understanding of this will improve women’s participation in the decision-making process, which will not only lead to better development in Aceh, but will also enrich the *adat*.

Using the traditional system of economic empowerment will not have any significant impact for women in Aceh without the existence of political power in the community. Medium sized industries should be seen as an ideal entry point for women, rather than

³⁶ "*Adat*" is a Malay word, the lingua franca of the region that generally means tradition or custom. However, for the Acehnese, whose language is not Malay based, this term has a much more significant meaning. It is their way of life, their identity; *adat* is what makes Acehnese, Acehnese. It is the glue that holds them together. The Acehnese system of governance is based on theocracy and secular powers running in tandem as embodied in the saying: "*Adat bak Po Teumeureuhom, Hukom bak Syah Kuala*" (The *adat* is with the King and the law is with Shah Kuala). Anything that is not religion is *adat* and is the purview of the ruler, while the interpretation of the Koranic law and the Hadith (sayings and deeds of Prophet Muhammad), that even the king has to obey, is the purview of Shah Kuala (religious leader).

cottage industries. Donors may find this solution problematic in the beginning but in the long run, these women-run medium enterprises will become relevant, and encourage women to participate in political activities and increase their bargaining power with men. This development is necessary in a post-conflict society as healthy competition allows women to work outside the house and to introduce them to the community as a valuable work force. The expansion of medium sized industry would also encourage the formation and the strengthening of trade unions, the introduction of a women's workforce into the labor law in Indonesia, and a more positive environment for women's activism.

What we can learn from these women who have endured war and suffering throughout their lives is how to be resilient and persevere to seek a better life. Their negative experiences with political parties and the general political system have led them to place their hopes on the business and industrial sectors, but their lack of capital and knowhow means that they can only deal with small businesses and cottage industries. There is a sense of fatigue among them in depending on the "outsiders" to help them overcome this weakness and thus many of them who are conducting business believe in self-reliance and in "delayed gratification." If they are willing to suffer today, they will be able to improve the lives of their children tomorrow, who in turn will take care of them when they are old. Although many of them are disappointed they have not been able to participate in political activities due to their own economic situation, they believe the sacrifice is worthwhile.

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