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Tejiendo conocimiento a través de las
culturas
Feminist Mosaic
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Human Trafficking in Indonesia: Feminist Reflections on the East Nusa Tenggara Case

Lani Both

*She clawed into the depths of her soul
Into the darkness that plagued her
She searched for a marble
A sparkle of joy and light.
They had put her down,
Stripped her of her purity
Chartered her like an object
Sold her to the highest bidder
Her identity lost in more ways than one.
She'd survived, she'd escaped.*

Debra Ayis, She Lives

Introduction

Back in 2018, I was involved in a local initiative called *Jaringan Perempuan Indonesia Timur* or JPIT (Women's Network of East Indonesia). Being involved with this organization was an eye-opening experience for me. I learned a whole lot about the prevalence of the issue of human trafficking both nationally and locally, more specifically in my province. I was absolutely appalled by the scrutiny the one faced as a human trafficking victim, the horrible ways they were treated as well as how the reports were handled. This was the moment that I was released from the bub-

ble of cluelessness and uncover the harsh reality of the issue of human trafficking against women in my own land, East Nusa Tenggara. Working with JPIT inspired me to look beyond what the number represents, to look at the legacy of trauma of violence across time and space against the bodies of the victims of human trafficking, that each tells a whole different story. Challenging working situations including physical and sexual violence, as well as difficulties in accessing health service, many times lead to the death of migrants. That moment was the beginning of my journey of answering my own curiosity about the multiple aspect that affect the life of the women within the circle of human trafficking and how their families deal with the sadness of losing their loved one.

In Indonesia, human trafficking is a pressing problem. With the total population of about 270 million people, the Asian Development Bank (2024) estimates that 9.5% of the country's population lives below the poverty line. While in my province, East Nusa Tenggara, about a third of East Nusa Tenggara's population live below the poverty line, and thousands of them are forced to find work in areas associated with human trafficking. Right now, there are many efforts initiatives by the government and private entities in eradicating the issue of human trafficking in Indonesia. NGOs and academia provide a greater understanding of the vast number of victims of trafficking and their story of resistance, survival, and the battle to regain the freedom that has been taken from them as Indonesian workers in places where they wish to have their dreams realized. The government, through policy making and regulations focuses on providing safety nets and assisting the victims of human trafficking to return home safely. For instance, the anti-trafficking law of Indonesia (Art 27/2007) provides healthcare, psychological support, counseling, as well as temporary housing and legal aid for workers who are returning home. However, in reality, returning them home is a daunting process. Even with the existing legislation and support program, many people in Indonesia do not receive the care and assistance they needed to recover. As a result, they find it hard to reintegrate into family life and their communities. Moving on with life as victims of human trafficking becomes their ongoing story of vulnerability.

A wide corpus of documents and research are able to explain the degree of seriousness in the area of human trafficking. These texts enclose different layers of problems, depending on each individual or organization's takes on the issue. International trafficking experts Wijers and Lap-Chew (1999) emphasized the importance of the works of academia to provide the definitions of human

trafficking; each different definition will then provide different measures on how to fight or prevent trafficking. As I looked through the research in human trafficking in Indonesia, I realized that there is a gap within this issue that needs to be further explored. In this writing, I am going to center the experience of female migrants' bodies with violence. I argue that the waves of violence against the body of female migrants is a direct result of exclusions of persons by the state institutions, the communities, and families across time and space. Furthermore, this process is accentuated by the structural inequalities of economic, political, legal, gendered and social nature, which have deemed them vulnerable to violence.

This critical essay will look at a broader definition of violence embedded in the issue of human trafficking that breadth across time and space (Smith 2021). By examining the violence across time, this essay will look at a broader historical context of violence, starting from the Dutch colonization (early 17th century - 1949), Japanese occupation period (1942 - 1945), modern national government (1950 onwards), and how it has shaped the communities and individuals (Pradjoko 2006).

In addition to time, I also look at the geographical span or the space. East Nusa Tenggara, with a total size of 47,931 km² is a diverse region, consisting of seven larger ethnic groups and five religions. I argue that space is closely related to individuals' cultural perception and agency. The context of time and space will reveal a better understanding of the local dynamics and highlight the key moments within Indonesian modern history in relation to the issue of human trafficking and specifically gendered violence against the body of human trafficking victims. In the end, I am looking to demonstrate how various types of violence cannot be viewed separately. They are rather rooted in structural inequalities that are caused by colonialism, occupation, violence by the state, discrimination, and patriarchy.

Throughout this writing, I transition from examining individual to group experiences of violence and pay attention to gender and multiple structures of power. This writing then aims to: (a) examine the root causes of human trafficking in East Nusa Tenggara; (b) look closely at the physical and sexual violence across time and space against the women migrant's body, and what it says about human trafficking issue in East Nusa Tenggara; and, (c) to look at the impact of the violence against the body of the human trafficking victims in East Nusa Tenggara on their families.

Literature Review

East Nusa Tenggara is situated in the southernmost part of Indonesia. It consists of 500 islands, with Timor, Flores, and Sumba being the biggest islands in the province. The total territory of all these islands together is 47,931 km². There are 7 ethnic groups, (*Dawan, Manggarai, Sumba, Belu, Lamaholot, Rote, and Lio*) are living in this area and speaking 6 local languages (*Kupang Malay, Bunak, Lamaholot, Lio, Tetun, and Uab Meto*).¹ There are other different sub-languages that are not being mentioned, not to be exclusionary but because of the cultural diversity and geographical breadth. East Nusa Tenggara has a population of over 5 million and it is the only province in Indonesia with an important Catholic presence: more than half of the population are Roman-Catholics, which is the result of Portuguese colonization since the 17th century. The Portuguese invaded this region of Indonesia in early 15th century and had its colonial decline in 1859. This demography describes the complex cultural and religious context in the area. As a democracy, Indonesia is relatively young, it became independent as a nation in 1945. While as a province, East Nusa Tenggara was officially recognized by Law No. 69/1958, in 1958 (Raharjo et al. 2013).

Definition of Trafficking

The term “trafficking” was coined as a response to the issue of white slavery in the United States within the 1904 International Agreement for the Suppression of White Slave Traffic and the 1910 Convention on White Slave Traffic (Bonilla and Mo 2019, 204). Its main objective was to counter the exploitation of *white* women and girls by *force, deceit, and drugs* for sexual exploitation. Interestingly, throughout its history, trafficking has had a very limited scope as an idea. The early conventions of trafficking focused merely on the coerced movement of women across multinational borders, especially for prostitution. In 2000, the term was expanded across any border of age, sex, race, and ethnicity. The United Nations *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children* in 2000 defines trafficking in persons as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other

forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

In Indonesia, the discussion on the trafficking of women and children began as early as 1929 during the first congress of Indonesian Women's Association. One of the key agenda of the congress, as mentioned in Indonesian Women's Congress literature, was the development of the Eradication Agency of Trafficking of Women and Children, following the report of kidnapping of some children from Magelang to Singapore. This discussion continued during the Japanese occupation, where many women were forced into sexual slavery by Japanese army, also refer to as *Jugun ianfu* or "comfort women/girls." Later, the term was expanded to incorporate the movement of persons (especially women and children) with or without their consent, within or across national borders, for all forms of exploitative labor, through violence, abuse of power or authority, debt bondage, deception, or other forms of deceptions (Rosenberg 2003).

Forms of Trafficking in Indonesia

Like many countries in the world, the trafficking of women and children comes in many different forms. The most recognized sectors in Indonesia include: migrant work (restaurant helper, factory and plantation work, and entertainment industry), domestic work, sex work, servile marriage in the form of mail order brides, and child labor (Rosenberg 2003). Different government initiatives and programs have been implemented to combat the issue of human trafficking in Indonesia. One such initiative is through collaboration with the United States government through the Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP Report).² TIP report is a US government initiative, aiming at providing governments of different nations with data they need to increase the persecution of traffickers, provide victim-centered and trauma-informed protections for victims of trafficking, and finally prevent the crime altogether. For Indonesian contexts, however, the governmental institution is proven inadequate, as the report suggested that the government does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, despite making an increasing effort compared to the previous report-

ing periods. The report suggested 14 prioritized measures for the Indonesian government to combat the national issue of human trafficking, some of them include: (a) increasing efforts to monitor labor recruitment agencies; (b) completing the implementation of the 2017 law on migrant workers protection; (c) developing and implementing mandatory pre-departure and post-arrival orientation; (d) training for migrant workers; and (e) increasing the awareness among local village chiefs about the trafficking trends.

Unfortunately, these measures are based upon several key areas that the Indonesian government is still lacking. Some of these include but are not limited to: (a) the lack of robust and systemized victim identification procedures or conviction of officials allegedly involved in trafficking, and (b) the lack of coordination between national anti-trafficking force and the provincial and local governments which in result, has negatively impact the nationwide implementation of central government policies. A decrease in funding for victims' protection, as well as its budget allocation to the coordinating office of the national task, also directly impact the effectiveness of the government's effort in combating human trafficking.

Aside from the 2020 TIP report, finding the most current information relating to the issue of human trafficking in Indonesia is not an easy task. I argue that the lack of data in the field reflects the level of unpreparedness of the Indonesian government in combating the issue of human trafficking. In addition to the problems on the TIP report, the lack of government tracking and reporting, may result in more exploitation against trafficking victims and migrant workers to continue unchecked. Seen in this light, a new and more robust approach toward data analysis is necessary to raise awareness around the issue of human trafficking in Indonesia.

According to BP2MI (Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Board) over the period of 2020-2021, there are over 100 migrants of East Nusa Tenggara who did not make it home alive while coming back from different Asian countries where they have been working undersigned contract (Sucahyo 2023). Although the highest number of victims are men, women's experiences of physical abuse, harassment, and sexual violence happen at a higher frequency. This frequency is higher for women because of the multiple layers of violence they have to endure in daily life, through the systemic marginalization, in addition to the physical, sexual, and psychological terror they experience. Higher frequency also pertains to the (potential) violence in varying spaces, such as public and home; the sexual and physical violence that a woman experi-

ences at the workplace illustrates this condition of risk. The long history of patriarchy in Indonesia positions a woman within the society to be under the men, as a direct result of the culture, custom and religious belief systems among people of Indonesia. In sum, although more men are exposed to violence vis-à-vis women, women are exposed to a higher frequency and more brutal acts of violence. That is, even though more women are less targeted than men, when they become the target, misogyny exposes their bodies to a higher frequency and more brutal acts of violence.

Furthermore, I also look at the government naming practice, that categorizes migrants into a dichotomy: procedural migrants and non-procedural migrants. This categorization has been widely criticized by human trafficking organizations and activists as the government seemed to be giving condition to providing equal access to care and protections for their migrant workers. I argue that this naming practice denies the coercive and abusive nature of the recruitment process. Local traffickers, whose work is to recruit women from their areas of origins are familiar to the women or their families, which makes it easier to gain these women's trust. Moreover, in many cases, these women can be easily deceived and get trafficked into work that she has voluntarily chosen. Domestic work is a good example of this point. Domestic work is not generally considered exploitative, and many women voluntarily choose to migrate for work as domestic helpers, as they are generally assumed to have the capability and experience in this area. However, the way in which women are recruited for the work and the conditions under which they work can turn domestic labor into forced labor. Generally, it is not until they arrive at their destinations that the exploitative nature of the work and conditions become apparent. In Indonesia, the most common pattern to recruit women into domestic work is through social networks.

Another theoretical framework worth exploring is the critique of Qwo-Li Driskill in the *Doubleweaving Two Spirit Critiques* (Driskill 2010), about how feminist studies should centralize the relationship between theory and practice. Many feminist scholars have a history of "theorizing" themselves away from grassroots communities. She quoted two feminists of color, bell hooks and Aurora Levins Morales to support her argument. Both scholars similarly argue that although feminist thinkers have worked hard on the advancement of feminist thought, the excessive use of jargon and the use of high theory offers another set of difficulties for general audiences whose limited knowledge of exclusive jargon inhibits them from working toward liberation. In order that the research

can be properly utilized by non-academic communities, the language and terms should also be considered for practical use. Most of the discourses around human trafficking in Indonesia are written by English-speaking scholars, which make it inaccessible for people working around the issue of human trafficking and for people in general. Clearly, intellectual colonization is further marginalizing these communities, keeping them deprived from the knowledge they so desperately need. As a feminist born and raised in Indonesia, I am committed to conducting research that reflects the actual needs of these communities, and to writing and sharing my work with them in an accessible, respectful, and culturally sensitive ways.

The East Nusa Tenggara Case

In this essay I share the initial steps of my journey as a feminist researcher interested in examining the primary data from a local NGO in East Nusa Tenggara. The data describes the number of deaths among the victims of human trafficking, along with the causes of demise. This given data is expected to explain the degree of urgency of this research. In addition to the data, I also look at the existing rhetoric and discourses surrounding the issue of human trafficking in Indonesia, provided by Nexus Institute. Nexus Institute evaluates many issues of human rights, specifically the issue of human trafficking in the region and other parts of the world. They have conducted a project called *Going Home*, which explores the process of reintegration of human trafficking victims. This project is able to depict the difficult path of reintegration process faced by the victims of human trafficking. The research also explains how women in East Nusa Tenggara are at higher risk of falling into the painful cycle of human trafficking, where they experience the unimaginable terror of violence and torture.

Furthermore, I will also conduct a semi-structured interview with human trafficking survivors and the family members of the victims of human trafficking I worked with in East Nusa Tenggara to explore the complexities of this sensitive topic. These women: workers, daughters, and mothers of another human being live the unspeakable in the flesh. Their humanity is being taken away from them while they face the brutal torture and disdain that many times leads to their death. I will also look closely at additional dimensions of violence affecting the well-being of the families of the victims of human trafficking in East Nusa Tenggara. I wonder:

How is the death of a trafficked woman of any age survived by her family? What do her parents, children, and/or spouse have to go through? How do they cope? How do they continue living with the trauma and tragic loss of their loved ones?

Final Reflections

The existing discourses around the issue of human trafficking in Indonesia lack a feminist perspective that is sensitive to gender inequality and cultural sensitivity. In her book *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Sara Ahmed stated that feminism is a collective work and that we become feminists in dialogue with others. Feminism becomes necessary because of the problems that have not ended: sexism, sexual exploitation, and sexual oppression, all of which cannot be separated from how our life is shaped by structural marginalization, colonial histories, and the exploitative nature of labor under capitalism.

To better understand the problem of violence against the women migrants of East Nusa Tenggara, we need to weave together an intersectional approach. We need to find a critical, caring and respectful feminist method of studying various forms of violence as multidimensional social problems. These realities are not separable, random, and isolated events. Violence is embedded in structural inequalities brought about by intertwined layers of invasion, colonialism, occupation, state violence, power and control, and complex patriarchal cultures (McGregor et al. 2020).

Violence against girls and women is especially important to consider in this region because of its complex history of colonialism, armed conflict and authoritarian rule, the diversity of people affected by violence, as well as the complex religious, and cultural communities involved. Considering the political climate in Indonesia today, which includes decreased tolerance of ethnic, religious, and sexual diversity, we must pause to reflect upon what we can learn from historical and contemporary cases of gendered violence. Excavating the historical context of gendered violence will help us generate responses to such violence in the future.

As I run through the selection of the theoretical framework, I noticed the lack of representation from an insider's perspective. Most of the discourses are dominated by people from the Western part of Indonesia, which are geographically and culturally distinct from the East Nusa Tenggara context. This research will put me in a unique position, both as an insider and an outsider. As an insider,

I have the advantage of belonging to the same community, which will be an important part of my ethnographic study. I speak the language and have deep familiarity with the social and cultural context. As a scholar with graduate training in the United States, I come to the study with a Western perspective. As a feminist, however, I am keenly aware of my positionality and privileges, and I am committed to being alert to any Western biases in the process. In addition, I might be perceived as an outsider by the people participating in my research project. Nevertheless, I will embrace the experience of the women migrants with deep respect and care, and as distinct and new.

As a feminist born and raised in Indonesia, I hope to contribute to the eradication of human trafficking in Indonesia. I realize that the scope might be limited to the East Nusa Tenggara context, but a similar approach can be utilized to measure the violence against women migrants in any given geographical area in Indonesia.

Human Trafficking and COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia

The COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly transforming the global social landscape (Stephens et al. 2020, 428). An investigation about the impact of the global pandemic on human trafficking is essential, as many women are found in difficult situations, such as poverty and unemployment, which are the two major causes of exploitation and human trafficking. People who have been trafficked or abused in Indonesia may suffer long-term harm because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the World Health Organization, in Indonesia, from early January 2020 to late June 2022, more than 6 million cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed, with more than 150,000 COVID-19 related deaths.³ Indonesia is the fourth largest most populous country in the world, with more than 270 million people living across the geographically complex and rich nation. Although the immediate extent of the COVID-19 outbreak on human trafficking is still unknown in Indonesia, it is evident that its social consequences are already making marginalized people more susceptible to trafficking and abuse (Asongu and Usman 2020).

In recent time, the pandemic intensified the decline in the global economy. The declining global economy created hardships for human lives, educational systems and heightened the threats of human trafficking due to the extreme financial difficulties faced

by families, mass migration, and school closures. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), almost 2.2 billion workers, or 68% of global workers, live in nations that are compelled to shut down activities. Migrants account for 4.7% of the worldwide workforce, or around 164 million people, about half are women (International Labour Organization 2020). A huge portion of these migrant workers concentrated in sectors which are temporary (such as first responders or farm workers) or informal, or without security, marked by low-wage-earnings and lacking social security, especially among care workers that in many countries are mostly provided by women.

Although the reflections I offer in the last section of this essay are not necessarily specific to the Indonesia case, they help me be aware of what I will find in my own research in East Nusa Tenggara. Migrants, for example, belong to the most susceptible groups. Reports show that during the pandemic, migrants faced several challenges, including discriminatory practices due to food scarcity, work termination, payroll deduction or at worst not receiving wages, crowded or inadequate living conditions, and forced repatriation (because of the assumption that they are the carrier of the virus). The latter condition is especially hard for domestic workers, that is dominated by women, who are living in a high level of intimacy with their employers. In addition, migrants often times become the ones to be terminated from work, but the last to receive the nation's COVID-19 response policies, such as government subsidies, unemployment benefits, or any medical service. Especially for the non-procedural migrants, the fear of deportation inhibits access to the needed assistance.

Women workers are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Chuang 2006). ILO also stated that women workers in many destination countries are highly vulnerable because they are hired as the first responders and domestic workers. These women are placed in many informal sectors, and many are undocumented. Consequently, many women migrants face violence and assault in their workplace, quarantine facilities in destination countries and in Indonesia, and they are left without access to support services.

A gender-sensitive approach in government response to the challenges facing Indonesian migrants is required in seeking best practice in migrant's protections. It is necessary to establish the protection of their basic human rights as well as their labor rights. The government should be able to provide policies that support their ability in maintaining their livelihood and support themselves

and their families in the long run. In addition, government's initiative is necessary in three actions: (a) to strengthen the bilateral agreement between Indonesia and the destination country; (b) to facilitate discussions between migrants, employers, and workers unions in developing the government's response to COVID-19; and (c) to expand access to information, medical support, and legal protection for all Indonesian migrants.

I close this essay with the hope of giving life to a moving project, one that can touch people's hearts. Contemplating the journey ahead of me is becoming my feminist killjoy moment in more than one way. Realizing the complexity of the human trafficking issue in Indonesia through institutional silence and neglect, historical state violence, this study will be my feminist intervention and a site of resistance. It will give voice to the forgotten. They, who lost their lives as human trafficking victims, have never had the chance to defend their hopes, dreams, and dignity. The story will be a letter to confront the people in positions of power, whose silence and indifference give rise to the violence and simultaneously denies the struggle and the oppression against the powerless.

Next, I share the above paragraph in Indonesian, to honor my mother tongue:

Akhir kata, saya menutup esai ini dengan harapan bahwa usaha ini akan terus bergulir dan menyentuh hati pembacanya. Terus berkontemplasi tentang perjalanan saya di masa mendatang akan menjadi momen “feminist killjoy” bagi saya dalam beragam makna. Menyadari kompleksitas masalah human trafficking di Indonesia yang disebabkan oleh pengelakan dan penelantaran oleh lembaga negara, sejarah kekerasan negara, penelitian ini bagi saya secara pribadi akan menjadi sebuah intervensi feminis dan situs perlawanan. Tulisan ini juga akan memberikan suara bagi yang terlupakan; mereka, yang terenggut oleh kekejaman perdagangan orang, yang tak pernah mendapat kesempatan untuk memperjuangkan mimpi, harapan, dan harga dirinya. Tulisan ini akan menjadi surat bagi para pemeluk kuasa, yang kebungkaman dan ketidakpeduliannya kian melenggangkan kekerasan dan mengingkari perjuangan serta penindasan terhadap yang lemah.



Notes

1. Wikipedia, s.v. "East Nusa Tenggara." Last modified January 3, 2024, 7:30 pm.
https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=East_Nusa_Tenggara
2. See *2020 Trafficking in Persons Report*, United States Department of State.
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/>
3. Visit the *World Health Organization* (WHO) Internet sites for more information on Indonesia and The current COVID-19 situation: <https://www.who.int/countries/idn>; and, WHO COVID-19 Dashboard: <https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/id>

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