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Author : Lestari Dara Cinta Utami Ginting, dkk
DOI : 10.32734/lwsa.v8i3.2513
Electronic ISSN : 2654-7066
Print ISSN : 2654-7058

Volume 8 Issue 3 – 2022 TALENTA Conference Series: Local Wisdom, Social, and Arts (LWSA)



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The Impact of Colonial Aggression on Women's Mental Health in Indonesia (1890-1942)

Lestari Dara Cinta Utami Ginting¹, Lila Pelita Hati¹, Liandra Khairunnisa², Tengku Afifah Luthfia¹

¹Undergraduate Program in Historical Studies, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, University of Sumatra Utara

²Undergraduate Program in Psychology, Faculty of Business and Humanities, Tjut Nyak Dien University

lestaridaracinta@usu.ac.id

Abstract

This paper analyses the effects of aggression on women's mental health in colonial Indonesia (1890-1942). Colonial violence took the form of sexual violence, domestic violence, and genocide. Despite its commonness, women are rarely studied in research that addresses the effects of aggression on people, especially as it relates to work done on men. This study, employing historical methods, follows a systematic process, including topic selection, source collection (heuristics), source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. Women in colonial Indonesia experienced both considerable physical and psychological violence and often had serious problems with mental health, the results show. It included conditions including trauma, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This awareness highlights the necessity of investigating gendered patterns of experiencing aggression and the curvilinear interplay between mental health, social stigma, and cultural determinants, contributing to women being at a greater risk of experiencing aggression. The intent is to illuminate how these issues may still resonate today, underscoring the relevance and importance of the study for contemporary problems.

Keywords: Women in Colonial Indonesia; New Navigations of Trauma; Power; Pain

1. Introduction

The Dutch colonial power had a profound impact on the lives of the local population of Indonesia, predominantly female. Between 1890 and 1942, Dutch control was tightened with strict and far-reaching colonial policies that sought to maximize the economic benefits flowing to the colonizing country. Dutch colonial government adopted forced labor, resource subsumption, and social control policies that directly or indirectly compromised the welfare of the Indonesian people, especially women. The two noteworthy phases in the colonial policy during this period were the end of the Cultuurstelsel (Forced Cultivation System) and the beginning of Ethical Politics, which did not change the positive direction for women. In 1890, the forced cultivation policy started to turn to Ethical Politics (ethics of reciprocity), which is an effort to improve the welfare of natives but still leave much exploitation. During this era, the Dutch also exploited Indonesia's natural resources and labor force under strict constraints. General Political and Ethical policies were drawn for natives, encompassing education and health, but they mainly helped men (Ricklefs, 2001).

Women had to overcome new levels of economic and social oppression due to this inequality. This research set the year 1942 as the cut-off point because, in that year, the Japanese occupation was considered to replace that of the Dutch, significantly changing Indonesia's social and economic structure. Finally, 1942 marked the end of Dutch colonial authority in the archipelago. Hence, scholarship from 1890 to 1942 gives a holistic overview of this critical moment in the history of Dutch colonial rule and, more so, the narrative across episodes of aggression and mental health among women (Stoler, 1989).

Women suffered the greatest from the physical, verbal, and emotional violence meted out by the colonial overlords during this period. Not only did the Dutch colonialists control resources and labor, but they also impacted the social structure of local communities. Faced with prohibitions in social roles, forced labor in plantations, and menacing physical and sexual violence that often was unexplored in the colonial office records (Reid, 1993).

While men were often engaged in militant resistance or struggle movements, the domesticity of women made their resistance more invisible in the face of colonial violence as they frequently struggled to maintain their dignity and mental well-being. This research looks at an aspect of women's mental health that largely remains uncaptured in colonial studies: women's psychological experiences that mattered in making sense of a part of Indonesia's colonial history.

This time frame was selected explicitly because it encapsulates the shift from the forced cultivation system to the "Ethical Policy" that upheld the inequitable colonial structure, even though it promised progress (Elson, 1994). Moreover, 1942 was also the end of Dutch colonial domination after the Japanese occupied it. This paper seeks to examine the effects of colonial aggression on women's mental health, with attention to how the prevailing societal norms of the time compounded the trauma.

2. Literature Review

This part will provide an overview of the concepts forming the basis of the research, which are women, aggression, and mental health, viewed through the lens of Indonesia's colonial history.

- **Women in Colonialism**

White women are a target in patriarchal societies, but in the colonial period, colonial rule also sought to constrain women. According to Nugroho (2008), women have the opposite biological and psychological characteristics of men, both nature and nurture, which are more character, empathetic, and sensitive than men. They were reduced to economic objects of colonialism, where their roles and movements were determined by colonial power during colonialism. At that time, Indonesian women felt marginalized in social, educational, political, and economic modalities, which were reinforced by cultural and religious roles that legalized male supremacy.

- **Aggression as an Idea in Colonial Society**

Aggression is behavior directed towards another individual intending to cause harm or injury (Baron & Basch, 1977). Under colonialism, this aggression proved to be verbal and emotional as well as physical, deployed in acts designed to uphold the supremacy of colonial power. According to John Braithwaite (1990), aggression can be direct as well as indirect, and both were experienced in Indonesian women during Dutch colonialism. Direct aggression involved forced labor, sexual harassment, and physical abuse. On the other hand, indirect aggression involved verbal abuse, threats, and insults that often portrayed women as less than human and could impair their mental well-being.

- **Psychology and Trauma**

Mental health is a state of emotional and psychological well-being that allows a person to meet the demands of life, work productively, and contribute to their community (WHO, 2013). Study by Ayuningtyas et al. In Indonesia, a study by Resmallings et al. (2018) found that stigma surrounding mental health prevented women from accessing help. Such conditions, particularly for women who have survived violence or trauma, may increase in severity without access to adequate health services. Such stigma remains influential in the colonization of the body, experience, and national identity, for women not just face physical trauma but also psychological trauma, which society seldom recognizes in that period.

3. Research Methods

This study reveals the benefits of using historical approaches to reveal the influence of colonialism on the mental well-being of Indonesian women during the colonial period 1890-1942. Analyze and consult a historical source base that is consistent with narratives around aggression and the effects of women on mental health.

- **Topic Selection**

The topic was selected due to the lack of historical research connecting colonialism and its psychological effects on women. This study focuses on 1890-1942, during which the Dutch colonial rule in Indonesia peaked, and the social structure underwent significant transformations.

- **Heuristics (Data Collection)**

The sources employed in this research project involve official colonial records, personal archives, newspapers, and secondary literature concerning the condition of Indonesian women under colonial rule; some permanent documents, like colonial government reports and private letters, also directly provide clues to some women's experiences of aggression.

- **Source Critique**

It involves a critical assessment to ensure the validity and reliability of the data, called source criticism. External criticism deems the sources authentic. On the other hand, internal criticism scrutinizes what these sources are saying, verifying clear interpretations of the materials.

- Interpretation

This data was analyzed primarily through a psychological lens, examining women's emotional response to colonial aggression and identifying feelings of fear and upheaval. This process was conducted to explore the long-term impact of colonialism on Indonesian women's mental health.

- Historiography

The results of the data interpretation process are an extraordinarily nuanced and comprehensive narrative about Indonesian women's mental shifts and psychological experiences throughout colonization, found in the last primary research method, that is, historiography or historical writing.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Roots of Colonial Violence in Indonesia

The facts about the ideology of colonial attitude of the Dutch government's response to this hegemony of Indonesian women then must be understood based on the colonial nature of the conditions and policies of the Dutch government put in place about Indonesian women in constitute the state of hegemony during the colonial period 1890-1942. This period was marked by Dutch colonialism in Indonesia itself, where the emphasis was on exploiting natural resources and labor and limited channeling of social rights in favor of the indigenous population.

- Forced Colonization System & Ethical Politics

At the close of the 19th century, the Dutch authorities adopted a new policy that would eventually supplant the *cultuurstelsel* or forced cultivation system that had inflicted great hardship on the indigenous population over the years. Though intended to raise local communities' living standards, this policy has much more to offer to the colonial side. Women in this time were driven to work in plantations, homes, or factories, all under oppressive conditions and little safeguard; an atmosphere of physical and mental strain was prepared.

- Attitudes Toward Women in Society and Culture

Colonial norms protected women's subordinate status, morphing into a patriarchal culture within local communities. In addition to physical abuse, women in high-risk sectors such as plantations or domestic workers for colonial families also suffered social and economic abuse. They forfeited control over their bodies and identities in cramped quarters and were forced to undergo pervasive surveillance that restricted their ability to engage in social life.

4.2. Colonial Forms of Violence Against Women

Time order and Evolution of forms of colonial gent populations — Three forms of aggression techniques Colonial aggression to women have // Based on their study, researchers found that there are three standard methods of colonial gent populations that they can use against women to do the colonial activity as physical, verbal, and emotional aggression. What differed between these forms was their psychological effects on women's psyche, which were substantially aggravated by the latter.

- Physical Aggression

Indonesian women were frequently coerced into working on plantations under challenging conditions. They deal with extended working hours, low salaries, and the danger of getting harassed by colonial supervisors (Elson, 1994; Reid, 2011). Up until the early 20th century, the forced cultivation system put a significant drain on women who were forced to give up their physical and mental health to achieve colonial targets.

Case in point: On the tobacco plantations of Sumatra, female workers were subject to overwork and strict discipline, where even a minor infraction could result in physical punishment. It rendered them susceptible to anxiety and despair. These incidents sapped their good mental health and were followed by depression lasting for months and even traumatization.

- Verbal Aggression

There were also verbal offenses and derogatory words toward women in addition to physical abuse. They were also reinforced by stereotypes that the Indigenous women were lower class, both racially and by sex (Stoler, 1995). It creates emotional grief that worsens a feeling of helplessness and inferiority.

For example, servants in Dutch households were frequently treated with slurs and insulting phrases that linked them to poverty or race. These insults were not only a psychological blow to them; they internalized a sense of inferiority that became a psychological burden.

- **Social and Emotional Aggression**

Sexual violence against Indigenous women is a type of colonial aggression that all too often goes unreprimanded. Colonial authorities exercised their power to take advantage of Indigenous women, resulting in significant trauma and social stigma (Cribb, 2008; Stoler, 1989).

Those bodies were not only affected by verbal and physical aggression; colonial women underwent emotional and social trauma as well. They were often separated from their families and communities, especially if they were domestic workers or held laboring jobs on nearby plantations. This isolation left them without the social support that was so important to their psychological health, and they felt abandoned with nowhere to go.

Case in point: You add to the problem when you force these women into social isolation where the sense of anxiety and helplessness bears down on them. Women who work outside the home lose their social connections with family or the community, often the primary way to receive emotional support.

4.3. *The Psychological Effects on Women's Mental Health*

These multiple forms of aggression have significant effects, creating psychological settings that can result in anxiety disorders, depression, and PTSD (Summerfield, 1996). For example, women who are obliged to work in dehumanized conditions frequently report depressive symptoms stemming from a chronic sense of helplessness.

- **Anxiety Disorders**

Women suffer from various forms of aggression, which means that many women re-live the fear for long periods. Stressful working conditions gaslight chronic anxiety and the threat of violence (Ayuningtyas et al., 2018). Many women are afraid of physical punishment or harassment, which affects their daily lives.

- **Depression**

The rage of the powerless, the effect of colonial occupation and social subordination, and the powerful few reinforce multiple layers of depression in women. Their mental condition is worsened as they lose hope of changing their fate.

- **PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder)**

Exposure to sexual abuse and physical violence has a generational impact, leaving lasting trauma symptoms, including flashbacks, nightmares, and hypervigilance (Summerfield, 1996). Many women lack access to psychological support, so these infections remain untreated.

4.4. *Factual and Fictional Character Examples of Women's Experiences*

Whether in historical facts or fiction, more information on the psychological state of women under colonial rule can provide a clearer picture. Some female figures in real life, such as Raden Ajeng Kartini and Rohana Kudus, along with characters in fictional works like Nyai Ontosoroh in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Bumi Manusia*, symbolize resistance and mental resilience even in oppressive situations.

- **Raden Ajeng Kartini: Women's Mental and Emotional Resistance**

Raden Ajeng Kartini is an Indonesian female figure who fought for women's rights in the colonial era. Although she was born into a noble family, that did not exempt her from a social and heart-breaking reality for women of her era, an era dominated by masculine values that restricted education and social roles. In letters she wrote in Indonesian to an acquaintance, as collected in the book *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang*, Kartini articulated her fears about gender injustice and the limitations imposed on Indigenous women. Kartini's ideas, wrote (Kartini: 2005) This once again reflected upon the emotional damage caused by a process of cultural hegemony exerted over classes and races that is willing to sacrifice women's subjects to patriarchal and colonial norms.

Kartini can be seen as a woman who received 'emotional aggression' as a result of a social atmosphere of limited 'think and speak.' The demands of following tradition and social norms ended up generating a lot of psychological disorders full of stress and anxiety. Kartini displayed mental and emotional resilience by penning her ideas in black and white as a secure method to overcome her limitations. Kartini's struggle also significantly raised awareness of Indonesian women and the importance of their rights and dignity.

- **Brave Women in Colonial Journalism: Rohana Kudus**

Another real-life character who battled colonialist oppression and media strife is Rohana Kudus. She established the first girls' school in West Sumatra and became a journalist who challenged the social injustice of the colonial era. Rohana experienced discrimination based on her gender, and society impeded women's right to education, but she never backed down from the battle for proper education for women.

Rohana wrote that in the middle of social aggression, like Kartini, she was also "blocked" from participating in public spaces. Rohana went through several challenges that caused her stress and potentially impacted her mental health. However, she wrote and taught women as a rebellion against colonial domination and patriarchy. Women, as the most oppressed group in this land,

have been mentally tortured and threatened, and Rohana's struggle reflects the mental resilience of women and their courage to resist colonial oppression.

- **Nyai Ontosoroh: The Fictional Figure That Represents the Psychological Resistance**

Modeled on a character from *Bumi Manusia* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Nyai Ontosoroh is a native woman who becomes a Dutchman's mistress and is subject to all types of social stigma and discursive and emotional violence. Nyai Ontosoroh is a character that combats colonialism but also the patriarchal culture that downgrades the status of indigenous women.

Nyai Ontosoroh represented a woman who grappled with emotional turmoil stemming from the degradation of her social status by colonial society and their environment. Despite the odds, she fights for her children's rights and keeps her business afloat. This character personifies the psychological defiance and resilient spirit of women in the colonial regime. Even though women are marginalized, Nyai Ontosoroh has proven that they can adapt, manage their emotions, and mentally resist oppression.

- **Dewi Sartika: Fighter, Women Educator**

One notable female figure born in Indonesia in the Dutch colonial period is Dewi Sartika, a Sundanese woman. Sekolah Istri was founded in Bandung in 1904, and she is known as a pioneer of women's education in Indonesia. Dewi Sartika's Mission for Women's Education and Agricultural problems in the important agricultural region of West Java led to the establishing of a school to educate women. Dewi Sartika founded one of these schools to provide women with access to more formal education because, in the past, women did not have the same opportunity as men to get formal education in a different environment. The school flourished, providing women with the skills and knowledge necessary to become self-sufficient.

Dewi Sartika faced many obstacles in the patriarchal society and colonial government. However, she founded a girls' school to resist gender subjugation (Blackburn, 2004). The struggle represents education as a device of mental and emotional resistance for women. For many women who wanted to attain knowledge amid oppressive social conditions, Dewi Sartika became a symbol of mental resilience.

- **Maria Walanda Maramis: An Advocate for Women's Rights in Politics and Family**

She was a women's activist from Minahasa, North Sulawesi, who fought for women's rights in politics and the family. She established an institution named Persatuan Ibu Kendal Keperasan Tiga (PIKAT), which cared for the welfare and education of women in their roles as mothers and teachers of future generations. Maria aims to empower women to fulfill their roles as teachers to their children, as home managers, and as active members of society through PIKAT.

Maria Walanda Maramis tried to swim against the tide in a society that put social pressure on women to stay out of the public eye. Despite the backlash, her efforts made women realize their potential and the value they provided to society. Although it made for psychologically demanding conditions, Maria Walanda stood by her beliefs, showing incredible mental fortitude. She encouraged other women to assume a more significant role in society.

- **During Colonization, Queen Kalinyamat: A Reward for Javanese Women**

Although Ratu Kalinyamat lived long before the age of deep Dutch colonialism, she remained one of the icons of the women's movement figures of the colonial period. As the queen reigning in Jepara, she famously opposed the Portuguese invasion and was among the Javanese-born female figures admired for her fighting spirit. Ratu Kalinyamat led a strong resistance against the Portuguese, who wanted to dominate the trade on the shores of Java.

It embodies influential female figures in Java who resisted foreign domination as Ratu Kalinyamat did, even though she was not alive in the era of Dutch colonialism. She also had importance in history for many women who dreamed of finding a symbol of resilience in the face of oppression. Her fighting spirit is often linked to women's mental toughness and courage in the face of foreign powers and has become an "archetype" for women fighting against colonialism.

- **Gadis Pantai: Fictional Characters (Woman) Depicting Class and Gender Oppression**

In the novel of the same name by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Gadis Pantai is the heroine. Because she is a penniless fishing family's young woman, Gadis Pantai is married off against her will to a Javanese nobleman. Gadis Pantai faces different kinds of oppression, such as emotional and social violence, during her lifetime in her husband's house, as expressed in the story. When she is rejected for bearing a daughter, Gadis Pantai returns to her village broken and traumatized.

However, in the hands of Gadis Pantai, this is the story of a woman who suffers from class and gender oppression in the colonial era. The emotional trauma of losing a child and being unable to fight against her fate is in line with the mental agony of many lower-caste women in the colonial era. Kanguni is known entirely as Gadis Pantai, a name that represents an insightful manifestation of both the psychological harms of forced marriages and the establishment of women's subordination by the tyrannical social system and colonialism.

4.5. Impact of Female Figures as Sources of Inspiration and Representation of Shared Experience

Through characters like Dewi Sartika, Maria Walanda Maramis, Ratu Kalinyamat, and made-up ones like Nyai Ontosoroh and Gadis Pantai, the author reveals the psychological condition of women during colonial times. They demonstrate the different

ways Indonesian women confronted the social and structural pressures and resisted the violence wrought by colonialism. The characters embody women's collective experiences — educational deprivation, emotional abuse, marital oppression, and resistance to foreign rule.

These authentic and fictional characters demonstrate how Indonesian women build psychological immunity in stressful events. Moreover, while they suffer from different types of oppression and aggression, they survive through education, activism, or mind struggles to keep their sense of self-worth. What this meant for themselves became an example for the young generation to stand up against the wrong norms.

The results also show that colonial violence not only directly affected women physically but seriously disrupted women's mental health. Historiographically, the work provides a fresh angle on colonialism's impact on mental health, particularly within an underrepresented group: women. It highlights the importance of considering gender asylum seekers through the lens of colonialism and the impacts on mental health. During the colonial period, women lived a different psychological experience than men, influenced by gender norms and colonial social structures, which restricted their space.

The way women's experiences of trauma during Dutch colonial oppression still resonate today. The cycle of these mental health impacts, as described below, continues to influence the perceptions among Indonesian communities and men, in particular, towards women and mental health. By getting a sense of this mental health history, we can better understand modern efforts and impact in addressing mental health issues within Indonesia — especially taking into consideration women who continue to face stigma about their mental health.

Through this inspiration, women today can understand that the fight against oppression is a physical struggle and a mental and emotional battle. By learning about these figures, their psychological and social experiences make sense of the importance of mental health and equality against social pressures that are still relevant today.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that the colonial terror imposed by the Dutch on Indonesian women between 1890 and 1942 profoundly affected their minds. Physical, verbal, and emotional abuse led to significant psychological trauma, including anxiety disorders, depression, and long-term effects such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In a country adhering to patriarchal social norms, this significantly exacerbated physical abuse against women and denied them their fundamental rights to autonomy over their bodies and identities.

Accurate female figures, such as Raden Ajeng Kartini and Dewi Sartika, and fictional characters, such as Nyai Ontosoroh and Gadis Pantai, embody struggles against colonial and patriarchal oppression. They represent how mentally resilient Indonesian women are and motivate them to challenge unfair norms and strive for equity.

This research highlights the importance of providing a gender perspective in historical studies, in particular about the psychological effects of colonialism on the female population. Such understanding is still relevant, especially in creating awareness regarding gender equality and mental health in Indonesia.

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