

# Can we hear their voice?

by Desy Ayu Pirmasari



I have covered war and conflict in many place around the globe, from Southern Thailand, Mindanao in Philippine, Basque in Spain, Sri Lanka, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia and North Korea. All those experiences help me to realise that women are not one single category. They are not merely as victims in time of war or the aftermath. They do not silence but why does their voice cannot be heard? Narrative in the media and report from conflict zone are usually dominated by story of women as victims. I started to think, maybe we, who always talk about gender equality also fail to see women agency. We are trapped in generalising all women experiences and make them only seen as victims, especially during insurgency.



Libya uprising for example, I heard many people said 'there is no women at the frontline, which means they are not involved in the revolution'. For me, I refuse to see war and conflict only from what happen at the front line as many other aspects surround it. Before coming to Libya, I stereotyped Arab women as oppressed and victims of Arab patriarchal culture, just like those I watch in many movies and books. So, back at that time I tried to fight against my own prejudice, I put stories of women roles during Libya uprising in my coverage list.

During my coverage in Libya, yes, it is true that I have never seen women at the frontline, but it does not mean they do nothing. I met many women joining public rallies in Benghazi, asking for democracy and international intervention. It cannot be denied that NATO and its allies played important roles during the uprising, even though I also believe their military campaign in Libya need to be criticised. In Benghazi, I saw women and men gathering in public rallies that were held almost every day. I talked to few of them and they told me, this is people's fight either male or female. This was a turn back point for me, it shattered my stereotype of Arab women. Since then I realised that women's experiences are different - women are not one single category but many, and even in the most patriarchal societies many women perform within their agencies.



I also remember when I was in Southern Thailand, I met a female human rights defender who fights for justice regarding Takbai incident in 2004 that killed more than 80 people in Narathiwat Province, Thailand. Her name is Yaena Salamae, she got lot of threats and intimidation. In 2007 her husband was assassinated in their village and she told me it was a warning for her to stop her struggle. But she never retreated, she said she will keep fighting to ask for justice, she is one of the bravest person I have ever met in my life. Her story taught me that we all need to open our eyes so we can see women agency. Yaena's story is one out of many that might have been unheard because of our ignorance regarding their active roles in the society. I believe by raising their voice and agency, they can be an example for everyone to follow. If before, Spivak asked can the subaltern speak? Maybe it's time for us to ask can their voice be heard?