



Annie Pohlman

Women, Sexual Violence and the Indonesian Killings of 1965–66

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reviewed by [Charley Sullivan](#)

1. Writing about historical violence takes a special touch. Straying too close to or getting mired in difficult materials carries the risk of creating pornography, even if unintentionally. Keeping too much distance from the subject matter and sources risks dehumanising people who have already been supremely stripped of their personhood, transforming them into data rather than seeing them above all as humans. Finding a balance between exposure and analysis is tricky business, particularly when the stories are little known, and analyses of the case have been few.
2. Annie Pohlman has taken on this challenge with great skill in her important new book, *Women, Sexual Violence and the Indonesian Killings of 1965–66* (Routledge, 2015). Based on over a decade of engagement with her subject, and on over 150 first-person interviews with survivors of the political violence that wracked Indonesia in 1965 and beyond, Pohlman treads important new ground. Superbly, she both stares down and exposes the horrific details of these episodes of violence without ever once moving into exploitation, and analyses and organises them theoretically in a critical feminist frame without losing sight of the women whose lives and experiences she discusses. This balance makes her book a significant new title in feminist discourse in both Indonesian studies and in the comparative history of sexualised and gendered violence in the twentieth century.
3. To write this book, Pohlman confronts two critical problems. First, as with all historical work on 1965 and its aftermath in Indonesia, she is faced with the historiographical vacuum imposed by Indonesia's New Order regime, which overwrote history and enforced silences on its victims for well over three decades. The most basic sources that exist in comparative cases—pictures of Nazi death camps, portraits of Khmer Rouge prisoners just prior to execution—and the exhaustive documentary evidence of many other such cases simply are not available in the Indonesian case. As filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer reminds us in his recent documentaries about this era, we should imagine what it would be like to write the history of the Holocaust if the Nazis had won World War II and ruled Europe until the 1970s.
4. Second, Pohlman takes important steps to argue that the violence in these cases is fundamentally gendered at its core, an important point building on the writing of Saskia Weiringa and in line with the emerging work of other feminist scholars of the period.^[1] Unfortunately, Weiringa's heavily detailed work is often dismissed by Indonesianists because of its explicit Marxist and feminist lenses, which at times leads her into what can appear to be a less than even-handed use of her sources. Pohlman,

on the other hand, takes explicit pains to cover some of the same materials in ways that contextualise them more evenly. She is careful not to claim more than her sources permit, but this historiographically 'conservative' approach also allows her to introduce her emotionally difficult primary source materials with the care they clearly demand. This reflects an academic modesty that I find most welcome, particularly in works exploring morally difficult subjects.

5. One element I wish Pohlman had addressed more explicitly than she does is that much of the theory she must engage with on these issues is based largely in western contexts and from western thinkers. This is not to say Pohlman is not thinking carefully about the cultural specificity of the Indonesian case, much to the contrary. But coming at the book from my own Indonesianist background, I kept wishing she would interrogate whether there is something that this specific set of circumstances could bring to expand broader theoretical discussions. In particular when dealing with experiences of peasant women (rather than Communist Party cadres), Pohlman is correctly attuned to the importance of local geography and body politics. She is aware that Javanese, Sundanese or Balinese local cosmologies and magical understandings and body politics were at play. She gives us a fascinating discussion, for instance, of the increased cultural shame involved in Javanese women who were raped standing up rather than lying down, a discussion I have never seen in any other context. Looking more closely at these elements, including various Indonesian understandings of identifying marks that are said to appear (magically) on bodies of Communists, will undoubtedly enrich future iterations of this work.
6. But, that said, this is clearly a first major step in what I hope will be an on-going project. Pohlman clearly cites the appropriate sources to allow both herself and others to mine this territory further. Whether that be the classics such as Benedict Anderson's 'The idea of power in Javanese culture,' [2] or the less well known but critically insightful work of Laine Berman on gender, emotion and violence in Java, [3] the material is there for deep and profitable future engagement on what might be universal and what might be more local in the histories of sexualised and gendered violence still to be produced.
7. It is important to note that Pohlman came to this particular work with a very clear objective—to tell women's stories. In the words of one of her principal informers, Ibu Lia, 'people must know what happened.' And Pohlman's deft use of survivor interviews and testimony is the star of this book. In the often too illusive goal of many authors, she lets her subjects' lives and words speak. Over and over again, the reader is drawn to the details of these women's testimony, not only as it was spoken, but often, and particularly when discussing the sexual nature of violence, in their gestures and facial expressions. At times, these stories are completely horrific, and the reader is left wondering if indeed she has just read what she read. But it is Pohlman's skill that keeps even the most explicit details from seeming gratuitous. Rather, these stories are deftly interwoven as examples of specific types of sexualised and gendered violence that Pohlman is careful to distinguish and discuss in separate chapters covering sexual assaults, mutilation, humiliation, and sexual slavery and forced marriages, even where these different experiences overlap.
8. This specificity of analysis is a great strength of Pohlman's book. Unlike too many authors on sexualised violence, Pohlman gets the problem of scale correct.

Each of these [150] women [I interviewed] ... experienced these events in both unique and common ways. As will be shown throughout the book, commonalities amongst women's experiences only emerge when balanced by numerous, individual stories of great exceptions, unexpected consequences and moments in which situations changed in an instant. In short, while patters of how women experience the aftermath of the coup do emerge, these cannot be essentialised in any way (p. 3.).

In keeping this question of scale always present in her writing, Pohlman does the women she writes about the ultimate service of allowing them to speak their own lives while connecting them to an

emerging larger theoretical exploration that still has room for growth and debate. As a result, this book strikes me as being an excellent source for university graduate and undergraduate courses on women and violence. It is one that can be read for both content and theory, and how the two can interplay profitably. It is one that raises important methodological questions for feminist research in accessible ways without either losing or exploiting the power of its sources.

9. Slim, sparely written and elegant, *Women, Sexual Violence and the Indonesian Killings of 1965–66* should become a critical source in the emerging literature on women and the gendered and sexualised experience of mass violence.

Notes

[1] Saskia Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave/Macmillan: ISS, Institute of Social Studies, 2002.

[2] Benedict R.O'G. Anderson, *Language and Power, Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990. See in particular, 'The idea of power in Javanese culture.'

[3] Laine Berman, *Speaking Through the Silence. Narratives, Social Conventions and Power in Java*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

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