

Reality Bytes: On drugs in Southeast Asia
A podcast series on experiences of drug treatment and rehabilitation
Episode 1: On women who use drugs
Transcript

Gloria (Interviewer):

Good day everyone. Welcome to our first episode for the “Reality Bytes: On drugs in Southeast Asia” podcast. In our first episode, we're going to meet an expert on drug treatment and rehabilitation. We're very honored to have with us Ms. Rosma Karlina. She is the women's coordinator at an NGO called Indonesia Act for Justice. Indonesia Act for Justice is also known as AKSI and they're an NGO set up to provide support for people who use drugs and vulnerable people who are looking for justice. They work to provide legal education and legal assistance, with the aim of advancing social justice for all people in Indonesia. In particular, Rosma works as a paralegal to provide legal assistance on drug cases in the city of Bogor. For more than a decade she has focused on the situation of women who use drugs who have a very specific experience and perspective on these issues but not often heard. Thank you, Rosma, so much for joining us today and we're keen to hear from you about your experiences of drug treatment and rehabilitation in Indonesia. How are you today?

Rosma:

I'm good. I feel great because I can share my experience. I want everyone to know about this story. I've been focusing on women who use drugs because I have had a bad experience about it. And I don't want anyone to go through the bad experience like I did.

BECOMING DEPENDENT ON DRUGS AS A TEENAGER

Gloria:

Thank you for taking the time, Rosma. Would you like to maybe share a bit about the time before you started going into drug treatment and rehabilitation, what kind of circumstances were you facing and what was it that led you to make the decision to seek out drug treatment?

Rosma:

It started as an accident when I was nine years old. My father and my brother also drank alcohol. I went to take some water out of the freezer, but I didn't know that it was vodka. So I drank the vodka and I got drunk. After that, I tried not to drink again. But when I was in junior high school, my friend drank alcohol, and then I tried drinking it too. I was thinking that it's fine if I drink alcohol because there is alcohol in my house. I drank the alcohol and then I tried to use marijuana and then tried smoking. It was cool and nice. I tried to use marijuana until I finished my junior high school. When I was at the high school, my friend asked me to try heroin and then I also tried to use ecstasy. I felt like I can express myself; it was like I was free but I didn't realize that I'm getting high until it became an addiction.

My dad was violent towards me. When I was in high school, my parents knew that I was using drugs and then they tried to hurt me. They tried to punish me to make me realize that what I'm

doing is very bad. When I was a child, my mother and my father had a problem with their marriage. So, they tried to get a divorce but in the end they didn't. Because of the problem in their marriage, I lost attention from my parents. I also lost confidence in myself, so I chose drugs to release my lonely feelings. Because my parents didn't pay attention to me, I tried to gain their attention by using drugs, but the problem was they gave me attention in the wrong way. They pushed me to the rehabilitation center and pushed me to marry. They also tried to hurt me and became violent with me. I was thinking that no one understood why I became a drug user; they were thinking that I'm the one who was dirty. I am the one who was the bad person. I'm the one who was naughty. It was because of myself.

EXPERIENCES WITH DRUG TREATMENT AND REHABILITATION PROGRAMS

1) AT A BOARDING SCHOOL

Rosma:

When I was using it never occurred to me to undergo rehabilitation, but then my parents forcefully took me to a rehabilitation center. At the time it was very difficult to get rehabilitation center access for a woman who is using drugs because there were not many programmes for women at the time. I wanted to enter a rehabilitation programme in the hospital outpatient section and with a doctor. But my parents also took me to see a hypnotist to stop me from using drugs, and then I was more often put into the boarding school because my parents thought drugs were a moral issue not a health problem. This is the problem in Indonesia. Most people think that addiction is about morals not a health problem. I will talk about my experience at the beginning of entering drug rehabilitation center: I was locked up in the isolation room without any treatment for my withdrawal symptoms, for 2 weeks.

Gloria:

You were locked up in the drug treatment center.

Rosma:

Yes, it's called the isolation room. Because I often rebelled and tried to escape the place. At the time when I was using heroin, it was very hard. I felt very sick when I (was going through) withdrawal. They didn't understand, so they just put me into a locked room. They didn't give me any medicine, or anything, they just locked me up. They treated me like I was a bad person. They locked me up for two weeks in the room with my pain. I was so angry with that so I didn't want to listen about anything they thought about drugs or how they viewed drugs because my anger was more heightened.

Gloria:

Why were you angry?

Rosma:

They locked me up and I was hurt; I was in so much pain. They had just left me in the isolation room alone. I was scared, I was hurt, and I was so angry. They just asked me to take a shower,

and it can heal you. It was a bad experience that I had. I am happy to be telling everyone about this because I want everyone to know about treatment for people who use drugs because they are human. So you have to treat them like a human also. What I want is, I want to get out from that place immediately. It was not helping my addiction. After I came out from that place, I started using crack again. My parents then took me to a place in Kalimantan to a psychic to get hypnotized to eliminate my desire of drugs.

2) AT A HOSPITAL

Rosma:

My parents thought that if I got hypnotized, I can remember the drugs. It worked when I was with the psychic but after I went home, I started using drugs again. It did not help me out. My parents also took me to the hospital to get treatment for my addiction. I liked the treatment because they gave me a medicine for my withdrawal. But it became a big problem because I changed my substance from heroin to medicine. It was a pill and I liked the medicine. It made me high as well. I couldn't stop using the medicine. I was supposed to drink the medicine three times a day, but I finished it in three days.

Every time I went to treatment center my parents always took me. They pushed me to. But the problem at the time was I didn't have any support from people close in my life like my mother, my father, my brother, and my community. I did not have enough support to handle my addictions you know what I mean? Because everyone would think that yes, you are a naughty girl. Yeah, you are a bad girl, this is your problem. So, you must go to the rehabilitation center. I thought when my parents took me to rehabilitation, it was like when something is wrong with your car, and you take it to the service center. When your car comes out of the service center, the car will be good. That's what happened to me. I was also working and I was a drug dealer for my addictions. I was selling drugs because I have to find drugs to use every day. If I'm not selling it would be hard for me to cover my addiction. I was not selling drugs to make me rich but to be able to support my dependence.

3) AT A SPIRITUAL CENTER

Gloria:

Yes. Thank you, Rosma. What was it about the drug rehab that you think was not useful or was not good?

Rosma:

This one is harder for me because I was taken to this one place in the interior of West Kalimantan. They thought there was an evil spirit in my body that made me use drugs again. I went because my parents heard that it was a good place to heal addiction. In that place, they bind my arms, my legs to each tree and they tied me. I tried to get them to let me out because it hurt. I was very sad and very mad at my parents. Why did you treat me like this? I'm not a bad person. I just need help for my addictions. But they didn't listen.

Gloria:

Do you think that they just really wanted to help you but they didn't know how to?

Rosma:

Yes. They wanted to help me, but they didn't know how because there was not a lot of information about treatment centers at the time, you know? The problem did not finish when I was married because my husband loved to go to the club. He went to the club and used meth and ecstasy while I was still using heroin. And then I asked my husband to try heroin. Our marriage collapsed because we couldn't handle our addictions. That's why I lost custody of my son. My mother in law was thinking that I can't be a good mother for my son. In my life I have been a woman who uses drugs for around 20-25 years. At the time I couldn't stop my addictions because there was no support group. A lot of women are quiet so they become a hidden population because it's embarrassing to be a woman who uses drugs.

CHALLENGES OF BEING A WOMAN WHO USES DRUGS

Rosma:

When people saw men smoking cigarettes, they will think: Yeah, it's a man. You can smoke everywhere. But if you saw a woman smoking a cigarette in public, people will think she must be a cheap woman. She must not be a good woman and then all this stigmatizes and dehumanizes them. This also happens for women who use drugs. When people think that addiction is a moral issue, there is a double embarrassment, for the parents as well. If everyone knows that your daughter is an addict, they will think, you can't marry that girl. Even now in my country, there are not a lot of drug rehabilitation centers that understands about women's problems. It's harder to be a woman drug user because we face more violence. I already faced violence from my dad or from my brother because I was using drugs; they always hit me. They think I'm really bad, that I'm evil and when I was married, my husband was also violent to me. He thinks he was not violent because I deserved it as a drug user. That's why I still resorted to using drugs for another 10 years.

DRUG TREATMENT IN PRISON

Rosma:

I don't understand why my parents kept forcing me to undergo treatment that I didn't really need until finally I went to prison because I was using drugs and was involved with drugs. I had to stay in prison for 2 years.

Gloria:

For two years so is that for using and for selling drugs?

Rosma:

Yes, but I only stayed for 18 months. In the prison there is an institution in Bogor that comes and visits. They come 2 times a week to the prison and they have a program for people who use

drugs. There is counseling and sharing program. It worked for me so I finally I found my treatment (laughs) in prison. In prison I received treatment to overcome my addictions. I felt comfortable with the program because there is no compulsion in staying. If I don't want to attend there is no penalty. You have a free choice if you want to take this program or not.

Gloria:

It's amazing how important it was for you to feel like you had a choice in whether to do it or not.

WHAT GOOD DRUG TREATMENT CAN LOOK LIKE

Rosma:

Yes, it was important for me because when I feel that it's good for me, I can follow it with my heart. I personally think that not all drug users require inpatient rehabilitation. Because undergoing inpatient rehabilitation will actually hamper their career and business. I think this support group really helped with my problem.

Gloria:

So you're saying that if it was inpatient, then you have to go there every day. And then you wouldn't be able to do other things in your life. If you had a job, you wouldn't be able to do that job. You wouldn't be able to go to school since you just had to be in program every day. You're saying that not everyone needs that kind of program?

Rosma:

Currently in Indonesia, there is not a lot of rehabilitation centers, especially one that can provide health services for women. So, support from the closest people and the community is also needed for people who use drugs. From my experience as a woman who use drugs, when I finish my recovery, I would like support from my family and also my community. If you want to take someone to a rehabilitation center, or if you want to go to a rehabilitation center, please ask the person using drugs about the program. I should choose because only I know what a good program for me. Not everyone who uses drugs is treatable or needs the same methods to overcome their drug problem. So, before the parents decide to take their son or daughter to a rehabilitation center, please check if that rehabilitation has a good method and that the method is the right method or ask them first to understand.

Gloria:

That's a great message to end on in this little chat and such an important message. Thank you Rosma for sharing your experiences and your wisdom and your advice for others too.

End of Interview