

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training  
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program  
Fulbright Stories Project

**VIRGINIA GUNAWAN**

*Interviewed by: Fran Leskovar  
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**INTERVIEW**

*Q: All right. Today is May 8th, 2025. This is Fran Leskovar for ADST. Can you state your name for the record? And just spell it out.*

GUNAWAN: My name is Virginia Gunawan, last name G-U-N-A-W-A-N.

*Q: Great. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up?*

GUNAWAN: Well, right now I'm working with Voice of America for the Indonesian service. I am from Indonesia. I was born and raised in Indonesia, but I come from the minority of Chinese Indonesians. It's quite tough being a Chinese Indonesian as a minority over there. There have been limited opportunities in certain sectors, including becoming a journalist, especially if you're a female and you're trying to break through that glass ceiling, I guess. To be able to do that, it's a difficult challenge.

*Q: How did you learn about the Fulbright program?*

GUNAWAN: Well, I learned about Fulbright because I wanted to get out of the country. I wanted to be a journalist. I wanted to be a female journalist in the family, and I searched for scholarships somewhere in the United States that gave me the opportunity to learn more about being a female journalist, as well as being able to exercise the things that I want to do as a woman.

*Q: So where did you go when you got your Fulbright? Or which school and where in the United States?*

GUNAWAN: I did my master's in journalism at New York University. That was in 2014. That was my first experience going out of Indonesia. That was also my first experience being in an English-speaking country, which was very hard at the time because I wasn't sure that I'd be able to communicate with the people that I wanted to talk to or communicate the ideas that I wanted to talk about, because I know inside I have the instinct and the ability to talk and to express myself, especially when it comes to the stories that I want to talk about.

I wrote stories about abortion. I wrote stories about sex-selective abortion in New York. Those are the stories that I'm interested in. Those are the stories that I want to talk to my audience about and the people that I want to inform about, and Fulbright gave me the opportunity to actually live through the lives that I want to live.

*Q: What did you learn about America from your Fulbright experience?*

GUNAWAN: It's an interesting place where I'm able to exercise my free speech, my freedom of speech, and be able to do the things that I want to do, regardless of my background and regardless of, I shall say, my race and ethnicity. In Indonesia, if you're a Chinese Indonesian, you become a minority. Therefore, you aren't allowed to speak your language. You aren't allowed to show your identity because there's a lot of fear about communism at that time.

When I came here, I felt liberated in the sense that people are able to show their identity and to show who they are, especially when it comes to freedom of speech. That's something that I don't experience back home in Indonesia. And, if you're a female, that's also another second- or, probably, third-class citizen when it comes to countries like Indonesia. So even though there's democracy in the country, it's a flawed democracy. It's a very young and budding democracy. So it's a different situation where we try to learn from America, we try to understand the system, but it's so young that it doesn't have the ability to understand it just yet.

*Q: Great. So how did your Fulbright experience make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous? What do you think?*

GUNAWAN: Later on, after my Fulbright years, I became a journalist at Voice of America. And I began sending news to Indonesia, especially when it comes to U.S. policy regarding the Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asia and understanding the analysis of U.S. policy to the region coming from the U.S. government or coming from the context of the U.S. Being a correspondent in Washington itself gives the context to be able to tell the story to the countries in Southeast Asia and Indonesia, especially. So, therefore, giving that context— and giving the—

It's so hard for me right now because VOA is nonexistent. I'm so sorry.

*Q: Yeah, no worries. We can move on, if you want.*

GUNAWAN: You can come back to that later if you have another question now.

*Q: Alright, I'm going to ask, what is your hope for Fulbright's future?*

GUNAWAN: For me, personally, Fulbright gave me an opportunity that I would never have had. If it weren't because of Fulbright, I would not be able to study journalism; I would not be able to do the things that I want to do to understand global context and send

it to my home country in a way that they open up to the ideas of globalization.

There are a lot of noises out there. You can count on so many other different countries sending information to countries in the Global South. It can be very noisy in those countries. The disinformation and misinformation that go into those countries are different. When it comes to American values, when it comes to press freedom, when it comes to freedom of speech, America has its ways of leading its position to those countries. So Fulbright gave me the opportunity to come here and talk about that and report about the situation in the world freely and objectively. That is something that I am always grateful for about Fulbright.

*Q: Anything else to add?*

GUNAWAN: No. Thank you.

*End of interview*