

Grassroots women's advocacy programme

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Background

During the last 15 years, NGOs and women activists in Indonesia have brought much attention to the issue of gender inequality. As a result, there has been some improvement at the macro level, through changes in laws and public policy, and the ratification of international conventions against discrimination against women.

However, a more egalitarian society – where women and men have equal rights, status, and roles – is still far from becoming reality. We see that policy on paper does not necessarily reflect or transform practical reality. Policy implementation is always influenced by people's cultural and religious beliefs and values. Independent of laws and policy, these social constructions strongly influence gender inequality in society, from the household to the state.

One of the main obstacles to increasing gender equality in Indonesia is the low level of participation by grassroots people as agents of change. Public dialogue and advocacy on gender issues is mostly carried out by elite groups such as NGOs, women activists, mass organisations, political parties, or government institutions. Grassroots people are not actively engaged in these processes. They are more often seen and treated as an object to be benefited by the advocacy process but not to play an active role in it. Many NGOs work directly at the grassroots, doing community organising, but this has not been translated into large-scale advocacy efforts. The division between advocacy and community-organising activities has slowed the process of social transformation on gender inequality.

A grassroots women's network is urgently needed as a major force for social transformation. Grassroots women can play an important role as leading agents of change in their respective areas to develop a more democratic and egalitarian society. Especially now, as the Indonesian government decentralises, the empowerment of grassroots women to enable them to do their own advocacy must become a priority.

PPSW approach and strategy

Pusat Pengembangan Sumberdaya Wanita (PPSW) is a women's NGO based in Jakarta that has worked since 1986 for the empowerment of women and a more democratic society. PPSW works with women to enhance their standard of living, knowledge, and skills to develop

local women's institutions and leadership, and to promote understanding of gender equality at all levels. PPSW understands women's empowerment processes as a community-organising (CO) strategy for women at the grassroots level that involves training, technical assistance, research, seminars, and workshops, as well as documentation and publications.

Currently, PPSW works with close to 160 community-based groups with a total membership of approximately 5600 people throughout five provinces: DKI-Jakarta, West Java, Banten, Riau, and West Kalimantan. Almost all of the groups consist of women. More than 50% of the members engage in economic activities through micro businesses. The others are housewives who dedicate most of their time to managing their households and taking care of children. The majority are married. Most of the members have some elementary school education, and many have advanced beyond elementary school. Only 7% have never had any formal education.

PPSW uses different issues as entry points to work with the community, depending on local conditions and the needs identified by the women themselves. These are:

- Economic activities. We organise women to increase their capacity to generate income, because power in the family usually comes from money. Men often claim that they have authority because they are income earners. If women have income, they may have more control over decision making.
- Literacy programmes to teach women how to read, because many women are deceived by their husbands. Husbands have been known to have them sign something they cannot read, and it turns out they have agreed to let the husband take another wife without realising what they are doing. If women can read, they are more able to bargain with their husbands.
- Health issues, especially reproductive health.

With the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, there were suddenly huge opportunities to talk about anything we wanted to. So, we started talking about bigger power – the role of the government and other players that control regulations directly affecting women. We started what we called political education – training women on how to

analyse political party platforms, how the voting process works, what happens after elections, the importance of Parliament, and other issues.

The grassroots advocacy programme

In 1997, PPSW launched an intensive grassroots advocacy programme to link the empowerment of grassroots women with advocacy. The overall objective of the programme is to contribute to the process of building a new Indonesia where women and men can enjoy a more democratic and egalitarian society. The specific objectives are to:

- develop critical awareness among grassroots women about their status and position in Indonesia's socio-political system
- promote an understanding of grassroots advocacy
- equip grassroots women with tools to organise their own community
- develop grassroots women's understanding of politics in Indonesia from the local to the national level
- develop grassroots women leaders
- facilitate regular dialogue between grassroots women and decision makers (members of parliament and related government bodies) to advocate on women's issues

The activities are conducted at two levels: community and institutional (within PPSW). Work at the institutional level is important to enable staff to facilitate and support grassroots activities.

Community level

Developing the community's vision and mission

Through intensive discussion during formal and informal meetings with the community, field workers facilitate a critical analysis of their social, political, and cultural condition, and help them to see their position and status in the system. This process has helped communities understand the power that influences their lives directly and indirectly. Based on this analysis, the facilitators help them to develop their own vision and mission to develop a better society.

Training, education, and technical assistance for grassroots capacity-building

PPSW conducts trainings and workshops for grassroots women to improve their knowledge, skills, and capacity. Training is conducted using different methods such as courses, field work and exposure to address social, political, economic, health, and education topics. In addition, PPSW provides technical assistance to the women according to their particular problems and needs. In turn, the women share their new knowledge with other community members.

Developing local organisations

The women develop their own organisations such as cooperatives, informal groups, religious groups, and traditional groups. PPSW helps to equip them with the

skills and tools to manage their organisations. Through this experience, women learn to work together, to become leaders, and to mobilise resources for their activities. As leaders of organisations, women are more recognised and appreciated by other community members including formal and informal leaders who are mostly men. Women use several strategies such as savings and credit, group businesses, and charity to mobilise local resources. The organisations become the centre of women's activities. Here they can have regular meetings, peer learning and teaching, and they can support and help each other.

For example, women's groups in Jakarta, that have been established longer than groups in outlying areas have been asked to provide management training for their newer counterparts. In one case, three women leaders from Jakarta went to Karawang (a two-hour drive from the capital) to offer training in management and organisational development. In this sense, the local women's organisations no longer depend on PPSW, but look to each other for support and technical assistance. They raise money for these activities through the income from their savings and loan activities. They remain in contact with PPSW, occasionally seeking out new ideas and assistance.

Leadership and local cadres development

PPSW identifies potential women leaders in the community and regularly conducts an intensive leadership and facilitation skills training course. The participants are initially assisted by PPSW field workers. After women have gained confidence and trust from their own community, they become local cadres who voluntarily organise the



Organising process



Expressing ideas with drawing

community on a daily basis. As described above, some women also work with other neighbouring communities. This strategy has helped PPSW make programmes sustainable.

Through this programme, PPSW has also motivated and organised several strong potential women leaders to move up to become formal leaders in their respective areas, such as the Head of the Village, and the Village Board.

Women are excluded from many social and political spaces. PPSW builds their leadership skills for what we call 'moving up' – up out of the house, to the village level, then to the district level, the provincial level, on to the national level, and even to the regional level. We encounter a lot of resistance to this work. People accuse us of trying to break up homes, but we believe it is important for women to know that they can break out of the routine of their house. This is a process that takes a lot of time. It's very, very difficult to encourage women and facilitate a process where they can question their own beliefs and their own fears in order to take advantage of opportunities. Women have a hard time overcoming their belief, for example, that they cannot become leaders. The work we do is really about reconstructing the way people, and especially women, think so that they do not feel guilty about being active outside their home and they are able to face the stigma that comes from fighting against these kinds of values. The government has policies that explicitly work against women and reinforce these social values. In National Development Guidelines, for example, the government lists five roles for women – partners, educators for children, additional income earners, part of social activities, and household managers – whilst men are regarded as leaders and income earners.

Networking and cooperation

PPSW organises women to develop their own networks to strengthen their movement. The first stage is to develop networks among grassroots organisations starting at the district level, and then move up to the national and regional level. Networks meet regularly to discuss their internal development strategy and link with other organisations, including NGOs and people's organisations, in their respective areas. Networks also cooperate with other organisations, such as mass media, to gain coverage of their issues.

Regular hearings and policy dialogue with decision makers, both formal and informal

PPSW works with women's groups and networks to identify and document their local issues and bring them to decision makers and leaders in the relevant areas. PPSW facilitates regular meetings and dialogues for the groups not only with formal leaders in government and Parliament, but also with informal leaders such as religious leaders, who have decision-making power. This activity is launched with a national meeting of grassroots women's groups with members of Parliament and several related



Network building among the groups

ministries. During the dialogue, women's groups present their problems. Because they start this activity at the national level, it is easier for them to do it regularly at the village, district, or provincial level. This process has helped both sides to learn. Women become more confident and understand the power dynamics that affect their lives, while decision makers slowly understand women's concerns and are increasingly aware that the power of grassroots women cannot be ignored or denied.



Policy dialogue with parliament members

For example, one group of women in Pandeglang, West Java invited their local parliament to a dialogue. During the dialogue session, they discovered that the local government did not have a clear programme for women's empowerment, so the women asked many critical questions and demanded change. At the end of the dialogue the parliament members commented to PPSW that they were surprised by the critical comments of the women. They had never expected such progressive views from women in a village famous for being conservative.

Regular reflection and action planning

PPSW facilitates regular processes of reflection where women draw out their experiences and lessons learned from their activities to improve their future action.

Institutional level (PPSW)

Reflection on PPSW vision, mission, strategy, and approach to working with the grassroots

This reflection is done through intensive discussion with resource people, regular internal discussion among all PPSW staff, and workshops. Through this process, PPSW is able to sharpen its vision and mission, and develop its new strategy, approach and method for working with the grassroots, always within a women's empowerment

framework and using participatory approaches.

Capacity-building of PPSW field workers and staff

PPSW conducts a series of training of trainers for its staff to improve their community organising and advocacy skills. In addition, PPSW holds discussion groups by inviting resource people to speak on different topics related to women's issues. Exposure to other organisations and community-based groups both in Indonesia and elsewhere is also part of the training process for staff.

Developing a support system for the field workers

Media and information units produce different kinds of creative and popular media and communication tools to be used for grassroots organising, such as photos, video, success stories, and others. Different kinds of modules are also developed as guidance for staff to share knowledge, skills, and information about women's issues.

Networking and cooperation

Networking with various organisations including other NGOs, community-based organisations, mass media, donors and government is done at all levels (local to national) in order to get different kinds of support and resources.

Successes

This process is clearly one of long-term social change so it is important for us to find ways to measure our successes along the way. At the community level, there is increased awareness of women's rights and citizen's responsibilities to develop a more egalitarian and democratic society. We also see that the women who participate are more self-confident as leaders, community facilitators, and agents of change. They also have more knowledge, skills, and experience in facilitating and organising the community. They have improved their capacities to conduct a policy dialogue with decision makers and leaders. We estimate that through this project, we have developed 160 grassroots women's organisations and 350 women leaders. Some specific cases help to illustrate what this project has meant for some women.

Siti from Pejaten and Bu Sabar from Penjaringan, Jakarta were the first women elected from their communities as *ketua RW* (an elective office of local leadership at a sub-village level in an urban area). Since their election, they have received extensive support from their communities. Community members have found them to be effective leaders and are pleased that these women have brought many positive changes: mobilising people to clean the streets, establishing programmes to combat drugs, and developing a social support system for community members by collecting funds.

Genduk from Riau Sumatra has been elected several times as government programme leader in her area. In this position, she manages aid money allocated for poor farmers in her community. Community members strongly

support her and have encouraged her to run for the village leader position. Genduk has refused saying she believes she can do more for her community informally – and that is what she does.

Lessons

We have also learned many valuable lessons from this experience.

- The capacities of facilitators and local leaders are key in grassroots advocacy. That is why we invest in the development of PPSW staff and in women who are strong candidates for sharing what they learn with others.
- Popular communication methods and creative media in the organising process are effective tools to encourage the participation of grassroots women.
- Social analysis and power analysis have helped women to see and understand their status, position and condition, and critically examine the various dynamics of power that control their life.
- Grassroots women's organisations and networks are an important place for women to build friendships and solidarity so that they can develop collective power for change.
- A social transformation process facilitated by women on a daily basis is as important as a policy dialogue for advocacy.

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Note

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