

# The Power of Women Powering Up in Indonesia<sup>1</sup>



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It's always a wonder how stories and lived realities shape one's perception about power and its impact on people's lives... on women's lives.

Meeting the women “widows” of PEKKA in Indonesia was a year-long curiosity of mine, and this was fueled by the many stories I've heard from colleagues of the great [Yayasan PEKKA](#), a [Power Up! consortium](#) member which work is focused on empowering women head of household in 27 provinces in Indonesia.

Celebrating PEKKA's 22nd anniversary in person in Jakarta, I've been privileged to witness and experience **power from within** in all its greatness and diversity. Women powering up with each other does change and transform lives.





## PEKKA's main constituency are women heads of households in Indonesia.

These include widows, women who are divorced, single and abandoned, women with very old and disabled spouses, women who have husbands away from home and women who are the main breadwinner of the family. In a country where many women-headed households live in extreme poverty, PEKKA uses a grassroots economic and political organising strategy to equip women through a combination of feminist popular education, leadership development, community organising, income generation, and cooperatives. PEKKA's grassroots movement of women-led economic cooperatives empower women individually and collectively to transform their lives and their communities, and to challenge the structures and belief systems that breed inequality, discrimination, and poverty.

## Picking up the pieces and becoming stronger together

Despite the stigma that comes with being single and women-head of households, PEKKA women are showing strength in numbers and group solidarity. Being alone and unorganized, many of the women I've interviewed have explained, "it was a difficult journey of not being in control of our lives, of feeling powerless and less of a person". Through joining the PEKKA women groups in their communities, women found strength and belongingness. They discovered that each other's struggles are connected and rooted in a patriarchal and unequal society where they live but they feel they don't belong because of stigma and extreme poverty.

In PEKKA's Academy Paradigta, women learn that their lives are centered on the **Me, We, and Us**.

The Academy convenes women twice a week for three months and engage them in reflections, conversations and actions about:

**ME** Learning about the importance of cultivating women leadership, building on internal potentials and convincing that women's experience is a source of knowledge

**WE** Focusing on family and transforming the power relation, gender roles that affect women and girls within family and community.

**US** Encouraging women to reach out to their wider community and convers/engage with youth, adult and other community members.

In Melti's (PEKKA Mentor) community in Adonara district, she observed that women whom she mentored were able to free up time from household chores, they become active in their communities and have contributed to solving problems as well as advocate towards the local government to fund and sustain the Paradigta classes.

**“I'm proud as a PEKKA mentor because I help women discover that they can do more. After they graduate from Paradigta classes, women believed that they are **change makers** in their communities and even after they graduated, they do continue to exist as women groups and become involve in their community activities”.**

In Ovi and Astini (Bu Bro)'s communities in Karawang district in Java, through their joint efforts and commitment, they were able to revive the PEKKA cooperative, thanks to the leadership of Astini who also managed to partner with BRI national bank to digitalise key operations of their cooperative, leading to less transaction costs for cooperative members.

**Ovi:** “I've seen great leadership potentials from Astini, she is a friend of mine and I convinced her to join PEKKA and to help revive the cooperative which has been struggling for many years”.

**Astini:** “Ovi was my mentor. The Paradigta Academy has shown me that women can teach and learn from each other. That each woman has something to bring in. I joined PEKKA because women don't only help themselves, they also reach out to their communities and make a difference. They are real change makers”.

For **Rahmawati** (PEKKA Association leader in Bima District in NTB), “What I like about PEKKA is that the women are in the center of whatever we do: we embrace the problems of women and we provide and sustain a space for these women to solve problems together, inspire and support each other.”

## Reclaiming control over our lives

Self-organisation has proven to be an empowering means for women-headed households. Through PEKKA women group's savings and lending and cooperative activities, women are able to not only meet their family's basic needs but they are also able to invest in other economic activities.

However, increased in income was not highlighted as the biggest achievement in joining in the PEKKA cooperative. Most women who I interviewed referred having voice, representation and more control over their economic future and creating better (economic) opportunities as more meaningful impacts of becoming part of the PEKKA women movement.

In Bima district where money lenders (loan sharks) trap women in a cycle of indebtedness, the PEKKA women waste pickers feel proud of being able to pay their debts, to try new business activities (by recycling waste products) and that they are in control of decisions regarding how and when to ask for extra help.

For example, although the local governments offered the PEKKA association in Bima district with 200M IDR (13,000 USD) to extend its plastic waste management activities to six other districts and another 50M IDR (3,250 USD) to help promote food security, the PEKKA women refused these funds.

**“We want to be strong first as a collective. We need to get better first in organizing and be stronger and capacitated so that we are able to manage the funds confidently and spend them wisely”.**

Currently, there are 35 women’s groups which are involve in waste management. And PEKKA is already expanding the waste management activities in two additional districts where PEKKA associations are already established.

PEKKA women believe that it is more important to start from within the women’s groups through self-organisation and through teaching each other, and foster cooperation, trust and a healthy mindset that they can conquer their ambitions jointly if they support and work together. Support from external actors is appreciated, but the principle and practice of promoting self-sufficiency bring more strength and independence to women collectives.

## So how do more women become interested in waste management?

**Rahmawati** replied, “One woman from another district has lent money from four money lenders. She was in a deep debt burden. When she found out that PEKKA women groups are collecting and selling plastic wastes, she found this as a way out of her debt problem. And the neighbors in her community also gave/donated waste to this woman. For just one week, she got 800,000 IDR (52 USD) and in October she repaid all her loan! This is such an inspiring story and we use this story to motivate other women.”

**Siti** (PEKKA member) also testified that she is now earning 200,000 IDR (13 USD) per day by collecting and selling waste, and she can now help put food on the table and help her parents and two sisters. Before, she was fully dependent on her family to feed her.

Convincing other women indeed works better if lived experiences are shared and women are connecting directly with each other. From my conversation with four of these PEKKA women in Bima district, the pride and joy of converting waste into gold, of helping women overcome their struggles, is a dignified work worth teaching and benefiting other women.

## I'm very proud of myself, I become a woman leader

When women dream to lead, I figured, from listening to the conversations with PEKKA women, it is dreaming amidst a huge storm. Cultural and patriarchal systems made leadership for women something to claim for, to defend, to prove instead of a right that every individual is entitled for.

As **Nela** (Village Head, Adonara District, East Nusa Tenggara) shared, “In 2020, I ran as a village head together with six others. During the campaign a lot of people came to me and told me what I am lacking, but I realized that their feedback is a motivation to improve. People kept saying: young people and women cannot be leaders. In the end, I got the most votes (unanimous vote); I want to challenge these opponents and show that women can lead. I got support from the village head at that time and other government institutions because I have a good rapport with them even before I was elected. We are now managing 300M IDR (USD 19,500) village funds.”

“Religion in my community is strong, it can limit women. But when I became a leader, I was able to see society in my overview and see issues that we need to tackle. I am a leader, a village head in Adonara, culture and tradition differentiate the role between men and women. I am still following this culture when I am leading the village (e.g. eating sirih (herb) is a tradition and women should serve this sirih) I am doing that, but it does not negate that I am a leader.”



The leadership journey of Peni, on the other hand, began with a discovery that PEKKA exists and her self-realization that she needed other women to fight for her battles because her own battles are the same battles that other women face.

“Widows are being harassed in Indonesia. And I realized that I will not be able to provide for myself and for custody of my child because I am a divorcee and I don’t have an income. And then I stumbled upon PEKKA. The woman leader in PEKKA did not know how to write so I decided to mentor the woman, and I went to several trainings with the national PEKKA association trainings. Back then, we didn’t have a federation. I found out that PEKKA women, though they don’t have education, are very smart and I was inspired. So, I continued to be with PEKKA women, I was actively involved in district forums, and district advocacy. In 2009, the PEKKA federation was established and I was elected as the first leader. Despite my many struggles, from being a survivor of gender-based violence, I became a PEKKA leader.”

When asked why women should lead, PEKKA women leaders emphasized:

“Women know what is happening at the smallest unit in the community (family). The issue of women and economy is not separate: in the household level economy, it is the woman who knows best and because of this, women should be involved in village activities” (Kandida, PEKKA Association Leader, Lembata District, East Nusa Tenggara).

“The people have voted for me again because I demonstrated good work. Women have been managing the budget for the family, women have that skill and when I became a female village head, I managed to allocate the budget well because I’m quite used to it. There was a programme from the governor that provided 250M rupiahs (16,200 USD) and to use the money to power the village economy. We got the money because I know how to prepare budgets, and we use part of this money to empower women” (Nela, Village Head, East Nusa Tenggara).

“If it is not us, who else? That’s why I wanted to be nominated. I want to fight for the rights of female widows. What makes me proud is that I keep on working with PEKKA. I was most proud of the PEKKA facilitators, and people know their names my name too and the women ended up following my actions too”. (Peni, first PEKKA Federation Leader).

For the most part of the conversation about how to be a village leader, it was apparent that while women across Indonesia are aware of the stumbling blocks of becoming a formal leader, they also thirst for knowledge, wisdom and inspiration on how to overcome these challenges.

## So how do women convince others to believe in them, to get them elected?

**Nela** (Village Head, East Nusa Tenggara) shared: “We need to be able to present in a way that people will accept us. Our background is our main foundation, our identity. Sometimes I use stories about my family..stories about families are relatable, people understand about families.”

The combination of government and mixing this with religion is the hardest. As a village head, I need to manage the way I speak, I need to be able to convey my position that it is not hurting specific parties. Challenges are always there when we are living in a patriarchal environment”.

Listening to Nela advising a room full of women (both online and offline and representing the different provinces of Indonesia) is a true testimony of a great leader who also strives for other women to thrive and conquer their dreams of becoming leaders in their communities.

An online participant from Aceh asked Nela and Sartika on how to convince the people that women can lead, considering the conservative Islamic religion that they have.

**Sartika** (Village Leader, Bolaangmongondow District, North Sulawesi) was quick to emphasize:

“Just grab the opportunity, nominate yourself, run for the position. It depends on you, you don’t need money as a start. You have to first believe in yourself”.



**Nela:** “If you are running for a position, be yourself, use your confidence. Through you, they will see your potential”.

“We have to show them, to do things, we have to show through our actions, to embody them...these are important for us as leaders. When there is an opportunity, take that opportunity, don’t hesitate, make use of this opportunity. We are all members of PEKKA, and PEKKA will be supportive. During the first year, it was difficult...but PEKKA women always encouraged me to go on they have confidence in me.”

“We have to believe in ourselves. When tackling cultural barriers, PEKKA facilitators will help accompany the local women to become leaders or to be a leader.”

Indeed, for most of the women’s testimonies, their journey of becoming PEKKA leaders started with somebody expressing their belief and support that she can be leader. The space where women converse and cooperate as a PEKKA women group or Association or Cooperative, is a space where women start believing that they can do more, that they can become leaders in their own right. Some of them self-nominated themselves, others needed a push and encouragement.

As **Maryam** (Cooperative Head, Mamasa district, West Sulawesi) shared, “Since 2018, I’ve been a Cooperative Leader. At first, I kept rejecting the offer as Head of Cooperative because I don’t have prior experience on running a coop, but the women convinced me. And no one else is willing. For me, I want to learn, I want to know more about what PEKKA does and becoming a coop leader provided me with this opportunity. I’m able to learn, and I’m proud of it. And I am able to advocate to the government because of my position.”

**Nela:** “How to convince women starts with you nominating yourself take the opportunity...it will be easy for us to convince other women. take the opportunity, then think about other things later”.

## Celebrating and sharing knowledge together

PEKKA’s national forum is a testimony of how women celebrate the diversity of knowledge that they hold and recognizing that each woman has something to bring to the movement, either as a learner or a teacher or both. The PEKKA forum held different “classes” on topics ranging from how to become a village leader to setting up/ managing savings and loans and cooperatives, promoting food and livelihoods security and on how to be community paralegals.

The Forum is a testimony of the power of knowledge coming from diverse groups of women who shared different cultures, backgrounds and life journeys but united with a common purpose of claiming power from within, and using collective power to influence others.

**Kandida** (Dida) shared, “PEKKA teaches us again and again even if we are illiterate. The national forum is important given that Indonesia is a diverse nation (with literate and educated people) but we need to be united. The forum provides us with a chance to exchange knowledge and accept this knowledge as a gift from each other and bring them back to our community.”

In the panel discussion with village leaders, women learnt about how to be leaders, on how to acquire this formal village head position. Women also listened to stories about village councils and about the PEKKA associations. All through-out the Forum, PEKKA women shared their stories, their histories, about how they are able to achieve leadership positions. Women needed to be provided with space to develop themselves and PEKKA provided that space, facilitated knowledge exchange, opportunities, and experiences.

Women also exchanged stories on how PEKKA facilitated women’s economic empowerment and discussed the role of PEKKA cooperatives (coops), the details about managing coops, and the mechanics. PEKKA facilitators also shared their stories, about how hard it is for them to be mentors because of the stigmas in the communities where they work. There were also sessions when the PEKKA women met with government ministry representatives. Through these interactions, PEKKA women were able to have a dialogue with decision makers and ask the Ministries to do something at national level. This has been a very important experience for women: when they are back in their village they can tell that they have shared the community problems to the government ministries and this is one of the many ways that PEKKA women fulfill their role as advocates.





## Moving forward

PEKKA has been working for 22 years and throughout these years, PEKKA women become leaders, resource persons and great sources of inspiration for the next generation of women in Indonesia.

Along this journey is the key role of the PEKKA foundation which supports the PEKKA associations, cooperatives and federation in their development. Although the national forum takes place every five years, the PEKKA Foundation supports and facilitates capacity building, training and leadership programmes for PEKKA women across the 27 provinces in Indonesia.

Core to PEKKA's values is the belief that transformative change starts within the family. As Nela shared, "If the family is willing to create change, then we also can change the community". The PEKKA movement has claimed and demonstrated the important role of women head of households to make this change happen.

Peni's dream for PEKKA is to make PEKKA as a whole to be developed – that each aspect (associations, cooperatives and federation) collaborate closely with each other.

Indeed, this year's theme for the national forum focused on collaboration.

As **Nana** (PEKKA Board of Directors) eloquently closed the Forum's 5-day sessions:

"PEKKA's own position is a unique position on the matrix of movement positions. The PEKKA movement needs to find a new form of knowledge, new ways of thinking that responds to changing contexts this movement is for our family, and our nation... the concept of family is about female family heads, we are shouldering all these challenges. It is important for us to question what we are collaborating for: to take care of nature and the earth, to establish/build alternative economies, systems that do not destroy nature to not be content with the knowledge that we have right now. We need to keep analysing, knowledge from the past and present need to be contextualized we need to ensure that we are really transformative: to transform systems and ourselves. Building alternative economies needs collaboration - we need to be creative, have a broader mind, and an open heart. We need to find fellow allies and people fighting for the same cause and forge internal and external collaboration. We need to keep learning from each other, acknowledge and understand about our diversity. PEKKA is one but we are also diverse we need to understand our context, and the differences of our contexts and gather our collective strength."

In closing the Forum, the women representatives from Aceh and Sumatra shared the Islamic writing, "When you educate a man, you're educating an individual. When you are educating a woman, you're educating one community".

"Our hope is to relay the knowledge shared in this Forum to the other women in our communities. We encourage all women in Indonesia to create their own women's groups, as strong as ours so we can help develop our own communities. If we create a strong PEKKA in each village then we can contribute to our prosperous nation".