

## Political Empowerment of Village Women and the Role of Civil Society Organizations

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### Abstract

This article reviews the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in collective empowerment, in order to encourage women to transform their gender roles, especially in the political field. Various studies on women's political empowerment have been carried out, but most of them still focus on the issue of participation and not much has discussed women's collective action. Therefore, political empowerment in this study is seen in a more comprehensive manner by referring to the conception of Sundstrom et al. (2017), namely from the dimensions of choice, agency, and participation. This article is more based on a literature review which is supported by the results of a case study at Yayasan PEKKA, known as a CSO which focuses its activism on women, especially in rural areas. The findings of the study show that the empowerment process in principle begins with strengthening individual capacity, but women's critical power and ability to articulate the interests of women and other marginal groups is still questionable (choice dimension). This is a modality for strengthening group and institutional capacity (agency dimension), so as to be able to encourage the active role of women in various stakeholder forums both at the village and district levels (participation dimension). An integrative and sustainable model of empowerment is needed to strengthen women's political position, including encouraging women's power-within-based leadership, namely leadership that promotes collective action, or what is known as social power.

Keywords: collective political empowerment, women empowerment, civil society organization, choice, agency, participation, power within, bargaining position

### Introduction

The importance of women's empowerment, as an effort to promote women's political participation, is a concern on an international and national scale. At the international level, this is included in the fifth point of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on gender equality through the empowerment of women and girls. In relation to this, the Government of Indonesia has made this issue a priority in the 2020-2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (*Rancangan Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Nasional, RPJMN*).

Following the issuance of Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages, the empowerment of women in rural areas requires attention. When villages gain autonomy as a result of decentralisation, it is assumed that democratisation will also take place. It is hoped that village communities in general, including women, will have the space to actively participate in both decision-making and development. Law No. 6 of 2014 states that women have the opportunity to participate in the management of village governance and development, from the planning process to monitoring. This means that this policy

promotes and facilitates women's political participation. Referring to the statement of Tokan et al. (2020) that women's participation in village development needs to be encouraged. According to her, women should be involved in all stages of development so that they can be directly involved in the realisation of their rights.

For some, the Village Law not only reflects an inclusive policy, but is also seen as pro-women. However, according to Diprose et al. (2020), in order to strengthen the implementation of the Village Law, structured support for village women is needed, which can be promoted and facilitated by civil society organisations (CSOs). Since the Village Law is a form of structural intervention, its implementation faces socio-cultural aspects that tend to position women in the private or domestic sphere. Women's participation in politics is still often considered taboo. Stereotypes of domestic roles are still associated with women's participation in decision-making (Lopata 2006; Amponsah & Boateng 2021; Longwe 2000). Even when there are women in public positions - as in Watoone Village, East Flores Regency, where 65 per cent

of public positions (neighbourhood association and BPD members) are held by women - they are perceived as not understanding their position and are less able to play a strategic role. This assessment may be due to gender bias, despite the fact that village women need to be empowered and encouraged to actively participate in village development (Tokan et al. 2020).

According to Seda (2016), the low participation of women in the public sphere is due to: (1) patriarchal values in society, (2) various policies that are not yet women-friendly, and (3) interpretations of religious teachings. There is also a stereotype that women are less capable than men. Specifically in the political sphere, women face challenges or constraints of social structure, institutional constraints, and cultural constraints. Social structural constraints relate to the status and position of women. In general, their socio-economic, educational, and occupational status is lower than that of men. Institutional constraints refer to the political systems and mechanisms in Indonesia. Finally, cultural constraints refer to the values and norms that still dichotomise the public and private spheres. This is the background to the development of cultural perspectives or attitudes in society that view women's public roles as taboo.

CSOs in developing countries play an important role in promoting change, particularly women's empowerment, in part because of their networks (Moser 1993; Odera & Mulusa 2019). In Indonesia, women's CSOs developed rapidly in the 1990s and 2000s (Aripurnami 2013). CSOs not only provide capacity building and improve women's quality of life, but also promote women-friendly policies (Mandinyenya & Nyandoro 2017; Boang Manalu & Aprilia 2022). In addition, CSOs play an important role in promoting women's bargaining power so that they can play an active role as subjects of development (Saptandari 1999).

CSOs are the embodiment of civil society that functions to bridge, fight for, and defend the interests of the people against the domination of capital interests and practical politics. Herdiansyah's (2016) study argues that CSOs are not only a link and counterweight to the power of the people vis-à-vis the state, but also make a positive contribution as government partners in implementing development and efforts to improve community welfare. CSOs themselves are used to interacting with communities, understand policies, and have the networks, resources, and knowledge to carry out empowerment. Therefore, the presence of CSOs is important because they have the capacity and experience to empower women both individually and

in groups. At the individual level, CSOs build capacity by raising women's awareness and enabling them to develop themselves independently. At the collective level, they are encouraged to form groups so that they can voice common interests. Women also feel that they have institutional support to fight for their rights (Diprose et al. 2020; Sherlock 2020).

### Research Methodology

This study of women's collective political empowerment uses a qualitative approach, specifically case studies. The case in this study is a single case, which according to Stake (1995) in Creswell (2007) allows researchers to focus on one issue, including setting case boundaries as an illustration. This means that the main issue of this study is rural women and politics, while the case is used as a basis for reflection. PEKKA Foundation, known as a CSO that pays special attention to women heads of households, is used as an illustration of CSO work. In line with Neuman & Robson's (2014) view that one of the strengths of case studies is that they allow researchers to calibrate abstract concepts with real experiences or empirical conditions as evidence. In this study, abstract ideas refer to theories as well as previous studies, while empirical evidence is based on secondary data, including various documents, which are then validated by primary data. The primary data was collected through in-depth interviews conducted at the end of 2022 with seven interviewees selected using purposive techniques. The interviewees were divided into three groups, the first being the programme managers, namely the programme administrators of PEKKA Foundation. The purpose of gathering information from the programme administrators was to get information about PEKKA Foundation, especially in terms of empowering women in the village, from planning, implementation, evaluation to decision making. Interviewees from programme partners are intended to obtain information and validate information about PEKKA Foundation's work in women's empowerment, including the promotion of women's political participation in the village. Meanwhile, the researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with programme beneficiaries to find out about the benefits of PEKKA Foundation's empowerment activities.

### Women's Collective Empowerment: Empirical Conditions

Referring to a number of village empowerment studies, such as those conducted by Handy & Kassam (2006), Foilyani et al. (2009), Ruwaida (2016), and

Kotte (2021), it is reflected that women have basically participated in various empowerment programmes, but they have not benefited from the existing programmes. Therefore, empowerment-based programmes need to be studied in depth to analyse their processes and

approaches, including identifying the background and causes of women's weak conditions and positions, such as: discrimination from different fields, economic pressure, inequality, and subordination. This is illustrated in Table 1 below, which is drawn from various studies.

**Table 1. Challenges to Women's Empowerment**

Challenge	Kotte (2021)	Cahyaningrum (2020)	Ahmad (2019)	Migunani (2017)	Ruwaida (2016)	Foilyani et al. (2009)	Handy & Kassam (2006)
Persistent discrimination against women	x	x	x	x			x
Lack of access to basic services for women		x			x	x	
Social stratification of women below men	x		x	x	x	x	x
Lack of stakeholders support		x	x	x	x	x	
Lack of policies that support women			x	x		x	

Source: Processed by the author from various sources

From the table above, it can be concluded that there are 5 (five) challenges to women's empowerment which, when sorted by the number of study findings, are as follows: (1) social stratification of women below men; (2) discrimination against women that is still entrenched in society; (3) lack of or minimal support from stakeholders, especially the government at both regional and national levels; (4) it is still difficult for women to access basic services; (5) there are still very few policies that support women's empowerment. The findings of these studies at least indicate that the main challenges are more structural, because they are related to gender stratification, which leads to discrimination. This cannot be separated from the way society views the position and role of women (cultural aspects).

Foilyani et al (2009) describe women's empowerment in Samboja Kuala Village, East Kalimantan. The situation of women there reveals the existence of social constructions that exclude and subordinate women, limiting their access to various opportunities, especially economic opportunities. The marginalisation of women in the economic aspect makes them trapped in the poverty line. Nevertheless, women have the will to improve their quality of life. This is evidenced from their enthusiasm to participate in various organisational activities as well as trainings organised by the government. However, the programmes offered by the government are more oriented towards an economic approach without considering other aspects, including cultural ones. The government's empowerment programmes, such as the

provision of capital and grants on a fixed or revolving basis, have not been able to increase women's empowerment. This shows that village empowerment programmes have not been able to keep up with women's enthusiasm to improve their quality of life. In their study, Foilyani et al (2009) found that women need to prove that they have equal capacity and rights to access different types of resources.

Meanwhile, Kotte's (2021) study in Telangana, India, shows that women's empowerment is a necessity and a must. However, the empirical reality shows that women are often undervalued in terms of access to resources, even though in principle they have the right to own assets. The control and management of assets and resources by men keeps women economically dependent and poor. For this reason, empowerment must be carried out in groups in order to promote social change among rural women. Kotte shows that efforts to empower women through self-help groups can promote the strengthening of women's status and role in the village. The strategic steps that need to be taken are to increase women's basic knowledge and awareness of their capabilities. With a strong and positive self-image, women are empowered. Interestingly, in Telangana, India, women who participate in self-help groups are dominated by illiterate women.

Ruwaida's (2016) study in Bima and East Lombok districts reflects that the main problem in women's empowerment is the structure and culture of the community, which does not provide space for women. The unequal structure is reflected in the lack of

optimal government support, including the absence of responsive policies to promote women's empowerment. Moreover, efforts to empower women in the village are still characterised by dominant individual figures as agents of change. The lack of collective representation is due to the fact that most groups are only represented by the main actors (or in this case, the group leaders). Culturally, women's political involvement as members of organisations is still based on economic motivations, as is the formation of groups. However, with the existence of groups, women not only begin to participate in various activities within their groups, but also to build a sense of togetherness.

The importance of women's collective action is also explained by Migunani (2017) as a process towards positive change that is consciously and collectively undertaken by groups. The study finds that collective action is dependent on intergroup relationships, which influence the focus of activities, group identity, models of engagement, and so on. The study also notes that it is difficult to distinguish between individual and collective empowerment. In addition to highlighting the importance of women's collective action in empowering village women, Migunani (2017) also explains that CSOs play an important role in empowering village women. CSOs are one of the main drivers in promoting women's collective action. The study also explains that women's political participation is an important component in empowering women in the village.

Similarly, Handy & Kassam (2006) explain that low self-efficacy leaves rural women with limited opportunities and a less favourable position in society. CSOs are key actors in helping women in the village to increase their self-confidence and decision-making ability. This is done in groups through activities structured by CSO programmes.

### **The role of CSOs in Women's Empowerment**

Several studies confirm that collective empowerment makes women more confident and empowered to face the challenges of discrimination, economic pressures, and gender inequality. Women's collective action is a conscious and collaborative process towards positive change, although in practice this collective empowerment is often still based on the dominant role of individuals and the established forms of social relations. For this reason, the presence of third parties, especially CSOs, is important and strategic, given that the government's approach has so far failed to empower village women both individually and collectively.

Efforts to promote women's political participation cannot be separated from the active role of CSOs. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2021), the term "CSOs" generally refers to organisations that have the following characteristics: (i) are non-governmental; and (ii) are not for profit. ADB (2021) defines CSOs as non-profit organizations that are independent of government and operate on the basis of common interests. They vary in size, interests, and functions. CSOs include non-governmental organizations (NGOs), youth groups, community-based organizations, independent academic and research institutions, professional associations, foundations, faith-based organizations, people's organizations, and trade unions. CSOs represent the interests of their members or others. The definition of CSOs discussed by ADB is consistent with the definition of CSOs provided by Suharko in Januarti (2015), who sees CSOs as having a primary focus and concern for public rather than private goals. According to Januarti (2015), this concern is a tangible manifestation that is really needed by the community to provide solutions to various areas of life problems they face.

A review of a number of studies on the role of CSOs, including that of Diprose et al. (2020), shows that CSOs play a role in promoting women's collective influence and improving gender equality in villages. This study shows that CSOs are key actors because they have experience in forming women's groups and helping them to build their capacity and promote women's independence in the village. In addition, CSO networks are a strength in fighting for women's basic rights to reduce inequality. In line with Diprose et al. (2020), Sherlock (2020) also explains the success of CSOs in promoting women's political participation in villages through legislative institutions. In doing so, CSOs need different strategies, such as supporting village women to advocate and negotiate with stakeholders, and helping them to develop networks.

The study by Sauki & Hidayat (2022) describes the role of CSOs in strengthening the political efficacy of women in villages in order to increase their public participation. In this study, raising awareness of women's political participation is important. The aim is to reduce the vulnerability of women in the village and achieve inclusion in village development. Strengthening this political efficacy is done by strengthening the capacity and development of community independence through activities/programmes carried out by CSOs, in this case the Institute for the Study and Development of Human Resources (*Lembaga Kajian dan Pengembangan Sumber Daya Manusia, Lakpesdam*) PCNU of Bima District.

Regarding the success of the work of CSOs, it is interesting to note that Sitorus' study (2015) finds that CSOs have not been successful in promoting women's political participation. In her study on the role of *Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia* (KPI) as a CSO, she shows how difficult it is to raise awareness among women in Semarang to participate in politics. One of the reasons is the highly patriarchal culture, which makes women feel

taboo to participate in KPI's activities. Although KPI has developed various training and mentoring activities to promote women's political participation in Semarang, in practice, this work has not been optimal, including in building networks between CSOs.

Referring to the studies described above, the role of CSOs in encouraging and/or facilitating village women in their public roles can be summarised in Table 2 below:

**Table 2. Role of Women's CSOs in Women's Collective Political Empowerment**

Researcher/Role of CSO	Sauki (2022)	Diprose et al. (2020)	Sherlock (2020)	Tokan et al. (2020)	Bargain et al. (2019)	Sitorus et al. (2015)
Strengthening collective (group) capacities and skills	x	x	x	x	x	x
Development of social and economic independence	x	x	x	x	x	x
Strengthening women's political capacity	x		x	x	x	x
Policy advocacy		x	x	x	x	x
Raising awareness about the importance of women's leadership		x	x		x	x
Assistance in decision-making forums		x	x		x	
Facilitating networking		x	x			

Source: Processed by the author

Referring to Table 2, CSOs generally empower women not only at the individual level, but also at the group level. Interestingly, there are CSOs that empower women politically through economic empowerment programmes. This means that CSOs address women's practical needs, as well as address their strategic needs, especially in terms of strengthening women's bargaining power both individually and collectively.

Various studies have attempted to uncover the role of CSOs in empowering women, including Cahyaningrum's

study (2020) on the role of PEKKA Foundation in Batangan Village, Bangkalan Regency, which finds that PEKKA Foundation as a CSO has become a driving force for women in the village to gain political and economic rights. PEKKA has developed various efforts, including assisting village women to obtain identity documents so that they can access facilities and services provided by the government. PEKKA has also formed women's groups, which have become the main engine of its women's empowerment activities.

**Table 3. Benefits of Women's Empowerment**

Challenge	Kotte (2021)	Cahyaningrum (2020)	Ahmad et al. (2020)	Migunani (2017)	Ruwaida (2016)	Foilyani et al. (2009)	Handy & Kassam (2006)
Reducing poverty	x			x	x		x
Improving social status	x		x	x		x	
Increasing awareness and knowledge of women's rights	x			x	x		x
Being involved in decision-making	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Source: Processed by the author

The table above shows that the main benefits of women's empowerment are: (1) increasing women's decision-making power; and (2) increasing awareness and knowledge of women's rights. These benefits have an impact on strengthening women's social and economic status. This reflects the fact that women's empowerment is a multidimensional process. In an effort to open up women's access, their skills and abilities must also be strengthened so that they are empowered to compete with male groups. Thus, if we borrow Samperompon & Mahbub's (2021) concept of 3 (three) forms of women's empowerment, namely economic empowerment, social empowerment and political empowerment<sup>1</sup>, then all three need to be done.

### PEKKA Foundation's Women's Political Empowerment Model

Women's political empowerment is a process that takes place over time, as a transition and an effort to move out of powerlessness. Therefore, empowerment must demonstrate change. Like other definitions of empowerment, Sundström et al. (2017) emphasise women's political empowerment as a process. From this explanation, it can be seen that PEKKA Foundation's goal of increasing women's empowerment is not done instantly, but through a series of long processes. These processes can be seen in the statement below:

PEKKA's initial strategy was to strengthen the head of the family... In 2001, we organised savings and credits activities, some at the village level, some at the *dusun* level. Initially in Aceh, we worked with the World Bank and *Komnas Perempuan*. At that time, many women were widowed because of the Aceh conflict. The conditions were difficult because first we had to overcome their trauma and then we had to help them access the economy through savings and credit activities... we called it the "Widows Project"... from there, it grew into PEKKA group, which expanded to East Nusa Tenggara (NTT)... Then, because what was done was considered successful, the project was transformed into PEKKA Foundation... From here, it continued to grow until finally PEKKA Union Federation can be independent and PEKKA Foundation is no longer the parent organisation (Co-Director of Institutional Strengthening of PEKKA Foundation 2022, interview 17 November).

In the 10 years that PEKKA Foundation has been carrying out empowerment work, many changes have taken place in the lives of women heads of families. These changes were noted in the following interview:

In its second decade, PEKKA saw that women were also facing legal problems. Together with the World Bank, PEKKA implemented a legal empowerment programme

after the Domestic Violence Law was enacted. It was found that women did not have important documents such as marriage books, divorce certificates, and birth certificates. PEKKA shifted to supporting women's legal rights. From here, it moved from economic advocacy to advocating for identity documents for women in the village. This became the entry point for developing groups to gain legality. From helping PEKKA women to access government assistance to working with the Supreme Court to create an integrated service. PEKKA then worked with the Civil Registry (Ministry of Interior) through KLIK PEKKA. The women organised the establishment of legality (Co-Director of Institutional Strengthening of PEKKA Foundation 2022, interview 17 November).

In the context of women's political empowerment, the reflection is based on the definition in this paper, namely: the process of increasing women's ability to make the best choices, their capacity as agents, and their participation in public decision-making. Thus, according to Sundström et al. (2017), the key to women's empowerment is when they reach the stage of independence, namely when they are able to determine their own steps to improve their lives.

### Strengthening of Women's Choices

In developing an empowerment programme, the fundamental issue is that programme designers and managers need to ensure that the programme will have an impact on increasing women's ability to make choices. This means that women are able to make choices and decisions based on their rights. According to Sundström et al. (2017), one of the measurements of increased choice is the freedom to make choices and decide what is good for them in their daily lives. One of the interviewees' expressions below shows that increased choice, in the form of freedom to make choices, is one of the characteristics of women's empowerment.

... I was left dead by my husband. But it is as if as women we are weak... we know what is good for us and what is not; we have the freedom to determine our own direction but with the help from CSOs we know what is good (Member of Women's Union in North Lombok District 2022, Interview 23 November).

The interviewees further emphasised:

*Alhamdulillah*, the impact is great. The good thing is that I am more confident, more able to deal with problems. Before, if there were problems, because we are women, we were quick to take offence and get angry. But after we know how the problems are solved, we know better how to deal with problems (Member of the Union in North Lombok District 2022, Interview 23 November).

...how to teach women to be critical, so that women can (solve problems). Even if we stay at home most of the time, if there are problems, we can solve them. Sometimes women are afraid, if there are problems, they are afraid to say it even if they are right (Member of the Union in North Lombok District 2022, interview 23 November).

Based on the interviewees' explanations, in line with Ahmad et al. (2019), Foilyani et al. (2009), Handy & Kassam (2006), Kotte (2021), Migunani (2017), and Ruwaida (2016), the benefits of women's empowerment are to reduce poverty and improve women's social status. With the knowledge and ability to think critically, women can solve the problems they face independently without the intervention of other parties that make them seem helpless (Sundström et al. 2017; Samperompon & Mahbub 2021).

The various impacts of the programme are felt not only by the women supported by the CSOs, but also by other communities, as expressed by the interviewee below:

Many people then saw that these CSOs were also good, like what Hj Saodah in Woja Dompus says. I am sorry, many people wondered at the time, how did this widow manage to make her son a teacher? It turned out that she joined the union. This means that women must and indeed can choose and determine their own lives. Hj Saodah, for example, founded "*Berkah*" Union, whose activities include savings and credits. The rest is motivation and education to make them see that this is empowerment, so that women can choose their options (Co-Director of Institutional Strengthening of PEKKA Foundation 2022, interview 17 November).

Through the development of autonomous unions, women union members are trained to determine the strategy and direction of the desired change. Finally, the union can become a federation of unions. In this case, PEKKA supports and facilitates the unions and federations.

It can be seen that the programme gives women the ability to make choices. This ability is what Kishor in Sundström et al. (2017) describes as a reflection of women's critical power in making decisions, including those related to their survival.

I joined PEKKA in 2005, I had a husband, but he emigrated. I was invited by a friend who had already joined, but I did not know much about it at the time. In 2006, I got divorced, and in Cianjur there was an administrative data collection programme, so I knew the procedure for getting divorced. I went from not knowing and feeling excluded because of my status as a widow. From there, I helped women to understand how to get a marriage certificate, a divorce certificate... I was given legal training, women's leadership

training... I started as a secretary in Cianjur... Women have to go from not being brave to being brave, from not being confident to being confident (Secretary of the Union Federation 2022, interview 22 November).

According to the interviewees, the programme has led to changes at the individual level, namely the building of self-confidence and courage. There is also a greater willingness and ability to organise. Basically, CSO programmes are aimed at: (1) women's freedom of action; (2) freedom from slavery; (3) property rights; (4) access to justice.

### Strengthening of Women's Agency Capabilities

Malthotra in Sundström et al. (2017) states that the second element of empowerment that distinguishes it from other concepts is agency, namely that women must be key actors in the process and direction of the expected change. Agency is the ability to exercise basic rights, interpret, and articulate the interests of the goal. The main principle is that women have the freedom to express their opinions, to participate in civil society organisations, and to be represented in various strategic groups, including the media.

In the case of PEKKA, the programme focuses on building the capacity of members, organisational and leadership development, and policy advocacy. This means that women's capacity as an agency is built through the "academy" programme, which aims to build the capacity of women in the village so that they are able to act as mobilisers. This goal is in line with one of the efforts to empower women described by Sundström et al. (2017), one of which is to increase women's ability of agency in order to realise women's empowerment. With the ability of agency, women become active agents of change through the ability to "determine their own goals" (Kabeer in Sundström et al. 2017).

...*Alhamdulillah* many have succeeded. At first, women were rarely invited to the Development Planning Meeting (*Musyawarah Perencanaan Pembangunan, Musrenbang*), but now they are forced to attend because we know such a meeting should be open so that everyone can participate. From there we can communicate what is needed and we also have data on the condition of the community. In Lombok, women, who were previously considered taboo are now champions in the village, who often work with the government. The challenge is that women are sometimes limited by administrative constraints, such as minimum education. The reason for the lack of education is that these women were married off at a young age, especially in regions such as Bali, NTB, and NTT... PEKKA is an influential and dominant group in the village as a mobiliser (Co-Director of Institutional Strengthening of PEKKA Foundation 2022, interview 17 November).

The interviewee's statement above shows that the presence of CSOs with their programmes has brought about significant changes and created women as mobilisers at the village level. In other words, agency is gained through the presence of CSO programmes. This expression is in line with one of the beneficiaries' expressions as follows:

...since 2014, every month we have been visited by facilitators and other cadres from West Lombok about PEKKA's activities... I am proud because I can be more confident and have the opportunity to do many things. At first, I was told to get together and was confused about what to do... It was just a gathering, but it went on and PEKKA explained what it was. Finally, after the meeting, we formed a group, which was difficult at first because people did not believe in joining a group. In North Lombok, PEKKA is in 3 sub-districts, before the earthquake there were 600 members. Some died and some moved away. Now, there are 3 sub-districts, 8 villages, 21 groups, 304 members (Member of PEKKA Union in North Lombok District 2022, interview 23 November).

Based on the above quote, the capacity building of women, especially programme beneficiaries, is inseparable from the existence of PEKKA Foundation as a CSO. Referring to PEKKA's Annual Report, there has been an increase in knowledge and advocacy skills in North Sulawesi, so that they can help people in their neighbourhoods to get identity and social assistance. As mentioned by Sundström et al. (2017), identifying problems and communicating them to relevant stakeholders is part of empowering women as agents so that they can advocate for problem solving for the community. The success of the programme is also demonstrated by the presence of women who have the courage to run for village head.

The contribution of PEKKA programme is significant as it enables women in the village to have the capacity and ability to understand village governance. Formation of special meetings for women, which are socially accountable through KLIK PEKKA activities, can be a bridge between the community and stakeholders. From administrative services to advocacy for complaints of violence against women... With the academy, there are regional networks through unions... they are still operating in Pekalongan, Pacitan, Trenggalek (Senior Manager for the Strengthening of Sub-districts and Villages, KOMPAK Programme 2022, interview 16 November).

From some of the descriptions and reflections above, women's freedom to discuss, women's participation in CSO activities, and the existence of women journalists, have become a means of enabling women as agency. This finding reinforces the various studies that women's empowerment efforts have been able to increase

women's awareness and knowledge of their rights and gain decision-making power (Ahmad et al. 2019; Cahyaningrum, 2020; Foilyani et al. 2009; Handy & Kassam, 2006; Kotte, 2021; Migunani, 2017; and Ruwaida, 2016). According to Sundström et al. (2017), the agency aspect is closely related to voice when women are able to express their needs and build bridges with those who can provide resources (in this case, the government).

### Increased Women's Political Participation

Sundström et al. (2017) note that the third aspect emphasised in efforts to empower women is participation. Participation is not only about listening and voting, but also about being involved in the promotion and implementation of governance in the community. In the context of PEKKA, participation is related to the nomination and election of women to political office. This is the ultimate reflection of political empowerment. A member of PEKKA in North Sulawesi, who became the first village head in her village, explained that the *Paradigta Academy* gave her the courage to enter village-level politics. Before joining PEKKA in 2013, she was only involved in domestic activities.

In addition to participating in politics, many female academy graduates participate in village activities. In West Kalimantan, academy graduates, who are active in village activities, contribute greatly to the implementation of village programmes. These alumni are actively involved in the Family Welfare Development (*Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga, PKK*) activities and the Integrated Service Centre (*Pos Pelayanan Terpadu, Posyandu*). One person becomes a board member of a Village-owned Enterprise (*Badan Usaha Milik Desa, BUMDes*) and 2 (two) people become members of the Village Consultative Body (*Badan Permusyawaratan Desa, BPD*). The participation of women PEKKA members at the village level is not only in the village government (village officials), but also as Heads of *Dusun*, and some even become members of the BPD. In 2019, 42 PEKKA members from different regions were elected as BPD members; 3 became village heads, 21 became BUMDes managers, 64 became village officials; 741 became village mobilisers; and 49 women even ran for parliament (PEKKA Report 2019). This active participation is based on good communication skills and high self-confidence.

Women's participation in government and community activities at the village level has also increased. Women are actively involved in determining the direction and policies that affect their lives (Govindasamy and Malhotra in Sundström et al. 2017). The KLIK PEKKA programme

has empowered women in the village to understand how village governance works. This was stated by an interviewee:

PEKKA's contribution to the programme is significant as it enables village women to have the capacity and ability to understand village governance. Formation of special meetings for women, which are socially accountable through KLIK PEKKA activities, can be a bridge between the community and stakeholders. From administrative services to advocacy in cases of violence against women. PEKKA also has a legacy in *Paradigta* Academy, which was established with KOMPAK. The *Paradigta* Academy is currently being legalised as an informal education programme. With the *Paradigta* Academy, PEKKA can expand the regional network of PEKKA unions still operating in Pekalongan, Pacitan, Trenggalek (Senior Manager for the Strengthening of Sub-districts and Villages, KOMPAK Programme 2022, interview 16 November).

From the above reflection, participation is in the form of women's involvement in village government and various community activities. The ability to express and participate in politics reflects what is conveyed by Bollen in Sundström et al. (2017) as political empowerment. Women, like men, must have the freedom to express their political interests through any medium, including participation in any political group. This is also reflected in the statement below.

...the Village Law sets a quota of women for BPD members, which is usually filled by PEKKA members... After the enactment of the Village Law, PEKKA women became more courageous, especially in becoming members of the village council and even village heads. In the legislature, they compete with other relatives who are running for the legislature... PEKKA members who became village heads were initially only additional candidates, but they won. The women were not confident at first, based on their experiences in the PEKKA unions/groups. PEKKA women face challenges on village funds (Co-Director of Institutional Strengthening of PEKKA Foundation 2022, interview 17 November).

### Reflections on the Political Empowerment of Village Women

From various studies on empowerment, as well as reflections on the case of the PEKKA programme, it is clear that empowerment refers to a process that starts from a situation where women or groups are powerless and lack the ability to make decisions, lack the capacity, and are unable to actively participate. In other words, empowerment is a movement in the direction of change and away from powerlessness (Sen & Mukherjee in Sundström et al. (2017).

Referring to the experience of one CSO, PEKKA Foundation, empowerment efforts are carried out through the following process:

<b>Control</b>	Be in a position to negotiate through active networking and participation in forums.
<b>Participation</b>	Members recognise the importance of taking strategic positions to influence policy.
<b>Conscientization</b>	Forming groups and providing leadership training to women through <i>Paradigta</i> Academy.
<b>Access</b>	Civil registry consultation services through KLIK PEKKA.
<b>Welfare</b>	Strengthening of economic movement at the group level through savings and credit cooperatives and other tailor-made activities.

Figure 1: Stages of Women's Empowerment

Source: Processed by the author, adapted from VeneKlasen & Miller 2002

It is reflected that empowerment begins with the strengthening of economic movement at the group level aimed at improving welfare levels. After the strengthening of the economy, the next step is to open access to various government services, ranging from population legality to other issues. The next step is to raise awareness with leadership programmes through education. This is followed by encouraging active participation, on the assumption that women

are ready and able to enter the public sphere. The final stage is control, where women, as beneficiaries, have a high bargaining position and can make decisions independently.

Basically, the process of women's political empowerment is a process that starts from the individual level to the collective level. At the individual level, empowerment is carried out through basic education in the form of equality awareness. The next

process is collective empowerment, which is done by strengthening the group so that the group can run the organisation, such as developing and implementing programmes. Once the group is running, the next process is institutional strengthening through group training,

capacity building, and mentoring. Once the group is considered independent and has formed a union, the final stage is to strengthen political power by helping the union to develop networks and access to stakeholders such as government and other institutions.

<b>Political Power</b>	Be actively involved in decision making forums and be part of the selection of strategic positions.
<b>Empowerment</b>	Participate in and create the necessary trainings, develop networks, build capacity, and receive support from the facilitator.
<b>Collective Consciousness</b>	Form a savings and credits group then create a group structure and programme/ activities to be implemented.
<b>Individual Consciousness</b>	Group members initially consider their poverty as fate, and it was taboo to be active in associations.

**Figure 2: Political Empowerment Process**

Source: Processed by the author, adapted from VeneKlasen & Miller 2002

The role of CSOs is very important in the empowerment process. Yet, achieving empowerment is highly dependent on the approach and strategy. In the process of empowering women, CSOs also face challenges. Referring to the experience of PEKKA Foundation, the challenges and obstacles faced in women’s empowerment programmes can be divided into 3 (three) sources of challenges, namely:

*Participants or Beneficiaries*

According to PEKKA’s programme monitoring and evaluation data (2021), about 20 per cent of the participants were unable to complete and graduate from PEKKA’s *Paradigta* Academy. The reasons were that they often left training activities, did not carry out field work, did not develop action plans, and/or did not implement action plans that have been developed. This busyness was usually triggered by domestic tasks that are perceived as time-consuming. In addition, there were participants who receive benefits from other programmes (including from the government), which sometimes required beneficiaries to participate in various activities.

In addition, women’s understanding of problems and needs is still limited, so they have not been able to identify them, let alone prioritise them. Not to mention the perspective of the women themselves who still support values and norms that domesticate women.

Internal and external challenges... Internally, PEKKA women are strongly influenced by values, both formal and non-formal. The most difficult thing is about values, it is hard to

change even if you have been told about gender equality... (Co-Director of Institutional Strengthening of PEKKA Foundation 2022, interview 17 November).

**Internal Challenges for Programme Implementers**

The internal challenges faced by programme implementers relate to the issue of human resources and the competence of programme managers. Fundamentally, the success of programme implementation and outcomes cannot be separated from the role of facilitators, mentors, and field assistants. Every programme/activity requires the expertise, skills, and creativity of its implementers. Implementers have the knowledge and skills, but they may not always be able to respond to challenges in the field. Therefore, the creativity of mentors in responding to challenges is key to the programme. In addition, mentors’ understanding of women’s issues, gender policies, and policies related to empowerment and women is still very limited.

We have to adapt to local conditions. The basis is not individuals with certain criteria, but individuals who want to. Peer-to-peer empowerment. There should be specialisation. Strong in empowerment and organisation, but not strong in the mastery of a subject. For example, in relation to the Village Law, knowledge of the content of the law is still lacking, so they often lose arguments in the village and in public (KOMPAK Programme Facilitator Brebes District 2022, interview 29 November).

In addition to knowledge and understanding of women’s issues, another challenge is the lack of

networking skills. Although the facilitators are usually local activists, they do not have a wide and strong network, especially with other organisations or the government at the district level. It takes time to build networks, including gaining the trust of stakeholders, especially for coordinative or collaborative work.

In the age of technology, facilitators need to be competent and knowledgeable about information technology. This is because they will be helping the women they support to become technologically literate so that they can keep up with developments quickly.

As the organisation has grown, it has become more complicated, with macro challenges and a dynamic changing environment. The digital age requires women to be able to use mobile phones, even though many women in the group do not have one. In the past, mentoring was done through direct visits, but now it can be done online (Co-Director of Community Organising 2022, interview 22 November).

#### *External Challenges to Women's Political Empowerment in Villages*

Efforts to empower women, particularly in politics, face external challenges. One of these is a lack of understanding among stakeholders of the importance of strengthening women's capacity and role. Many do not understand the concept of empowerment, gender issues, and how CSOs work. Not to mention the understanding that programmes are always associated with physical, financial assistance, and even tend to be instant, whereas empowerment programmes require a long process.

... The challenge is to build coordination between these organisations and to understand each other's functions. How to understand each other's mandate and how to collaborate, that is the internal challenge... Externally, the dynamic changes in the environment, the Covid-19 pandemic, inflation, are inevitable, so we need to continue to develop strategies (Co-Director of Community Organising 2022, interview 22 November).

In addition to the challenges above, another challenge is that not all village governments support the programme. There are still a number of village governments that do not have a commitment. In addition, the aspirations of the village communities focus heavily on physical and infrastructural development, resulting in minimal budget allocations for women's empowerment programmes. Moreover, in PEKKA's experience in several villages, the village governments' support for PEKKA's empowerment programmes has created social jealousy among other organisations, such as *Karang Taruna* and

*PKK*, that have long existed in the villages. This is in line with the findings of Ahmad et al. (2019), Cahyaningrum (2020), Foilyani et al. (2009), Migunani (2017), and Ruwaida (2016) that the lack of stakeholders' support is a challenge in women's empowerment, as is the lack of policies that favour women.

The lack of commitment and support from the village directly or indirectly undermines women's interest and willingness to participate. Women's participation in village meetings and village-level decision-making processes is highly dependent on the political will of the village head. However, community support organisations (e.g., LPSDM, BPD and others) can encourage village leaders to involve women in village-level activities, such as village development planning meetings (*Musrenbangdesa*). In some villages, women's participation is often only represented by *PKK*, which generally does not understand women and gender issues. As a result, the proposed programmes do not address the needs of women in the village.

Internal and external challenges... Internally, PEKKA women are strongly influenced by values, both formal and non-formal. Talking about values is difficult even though they have been told about gender equality... Externally, the change of leaders (*bupati/kades*) is also a challenge. For example, when the village head changes, the managed *PAUD* is taken over by the new village leader. Change of strategy to approach the technical section instead of the head (section head) (Co-Director of Institutional Strengthening of PEKKA Foundation 2022, Interview 17 November).

#### **Closing**

Based on the results of the discussion, it can be concluded that CSOs are very instrumental in empowering village women so that they are able to prioritise collective action in an effort to fight for common interests. This is what this study refers to as women's political empowerment. In this regard, the ideas of Sundström et al. (2017) are used to reflect on the work of PEKKA Foundation - as a CSO - by exploring whether the women supported have been able to participate substantively (participation dimension) and demonstrate their capacity as agents of change. This is possible when women are able to create spaces of choice, at least for themselves (the choice dimension). Ideally, women's empowerment is approached not at the individual level, but at the collective level, up to and including the institutional level. Women's empowerment programmes should not only provide training, but also holistically promote women's leadership that prioritises solidarity-

based togetherness. In other words, women's collective empowerment is a form of social transformation that not only encourages women's active participation, particularly in public spaces, but also has a substantive meaning.

If we refer to Stuart's idea (2019), empowerment encourages women to be able to recognise their potentials and even their capabilities (power to), moreover, they can also recognise their strengths and believe that they can make breakthroughs (power within). In this context, the dimensions of choice and agency can be indicative of both forms of 'power'. Meanwhile, the participation dimension is characterised not only by the active role of women, but also by the existence of women's leadership that prioritises togetherness (collectivity) and solidarity (power with). This is what Stuart calls 'social power', a power that can facilitate the building of 'bridges' between various differences for the sake of common interests in the economic, political, social, and cultural spheres. It also bridges different interests from the village level to the national and even global levels. With these indications, the transformation of women's gender roles, especially in the political sphere, is real. In other words, women's empowerment is not about 'power over'.

In this context, CSOs are positioned as agents of change because they promote women's empowerment. CSOs are therefore called upon to develop gender-responsive programmes in different regions. The existence of programmes that favour vulnerable and marginalised groups, have a participatory approach, are integrated and sustainable must and should be the principle of CSO activism. This is because women's powerlessness is rooted in multidimensional issues, which are sociologically referred to as societal problems. In this context, CSOs are expected not only to stimulate the development of collectivity and solidarity among women (sisterhood) including the promotion of women's leadership, but also to break through structural and cultural challenges. In principle, the work of CSOs faces challenges that are multidimensional and multi-level. On the one hand, CSOs have to deal with a culture that does not allow or even limits women's access and participation, and even marginalises women as beneficiaries of programmes. On the other hand, structurally, various policies and institutions are still not sensitive and responsive to women's issues. In fact, some still reinforce the socio-cultural factors that underlie and cause women's powerlessness.

For this reason, it seems that CSOs also need to develop power-based leadership in their work. CSOs

should not only act as facilitators, but also be able to collaborate by strengthening CSO networks. They are also able to bridge the interests of different parties, especially between women's groups and other strategic parties. The spirit of solidarity among CSOs must colour the work of CSOs so that it is possible to build a common agenda for the transformation of gender roles, especially for women.

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## Endnotes

- 1 According to Samperompon & Mahbub (2021), women's economic empowerment includes women's ability to participate equally in existing markets; their access to and control over productive resources; access to decent work; control over time, their own lives and bodies; and increased voice, representation and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels, from the household to international institutions for economic and business growth. Women's economic empowerment ensures participation in household decision-making; encouragement to participate

in politics. While social empowerment includes equal access to education and health care for women. This social empowerment reduces and minimises the gender gap in human development in all countries. Political empowerment includes women's representation in representative bodies such

as legislatures. Political empowerment is the path to women's equality, rights and fulfilment, and participation in political affairs and processes. It is the main route to women's political participation and decision-making (Samperompon & Mahbub 2021).