
Lastri

*District Women's School Coordinator
Gresik, East Java*

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Lastri

District Women's School Coordinator

Gresik, East Java²

Thirty-year-old Lastri is the Gresik District Women's School coordinator. She was born into a poor family and is the youngest of three children. Lastri, who is from this village, married a man from a neighbouring village and now has a son and a daughter.

Lastri finished her education at the middle school level, like many women her age. As Lastri's family works as farm labourers who earn a low wage, they often found it difficult to pay for everyday needs, let alone for her education. As a result, after finishing primary school, Lastri's parents did not allow her to continue her schooling because of their economic circumstances. Both of her older siblings were also unable to continue their education for financial reasons: one graduated from primary school and the other from middle school. Lastri was able to continue her education to middle school as she found a school which would provide her with a scholarship. However, her dreams to continue learning were of going to school was cut short after economic reasons prevented her from continuing to high school.

"At the start of middle school I really wanted to go to school. But my parents didn't allow me. I had already finished primary school and initially I wasn't allowed to go to school because my parents couldn't afford it. But I desperately wanted to go to middle school, so I found a school that had a scholarship. Then, it came time for high school, and I thought high school would be more expensive. And it dawned on me, the anxiety that my parents really couldn't afford it. So, I worked." (Lastri, Gresik research village, 22 February 2019)

In 2004, at the age of fifteen, Lastri decided to find work to help her family. She worked as a day labourer in a bread factory where her wage was determined by how much bread she packed, rather than a set daily wage. Every day Lastri took home between fifteen and twenty thousand rupiah (1.5-2 AUD). After a while, she decided to stop work because her hours were too long – from early morning until nine o'clock at night – however, eventually Lastri returned to the factory. It was here in 2008 that Lastri met the man who would become her husband.

When the part of the bread factory where she worked burnt down, Lastri was moved by the company to another area. As a result, Lastri had to start at the bottom of the pay scale as a day labourer rather than as a worker with a daily wage. Lastri did not agree with this decision that the company had made without consulting her. Lastri met with factory management to convey her complaints, however, management rejected her claims. In the end, Lastri decided to leave the factory in 2013 and become a vegetable seller at the market.

In the same year, Lastri became involved in an informal Women's School, after a staff member from KPS2K (Women's Groups and Sources of Life³) visited her house and invited her to attend the first meeting of the Women's School. This invitation made Lastri feel very confused as she had never been invited to attend a meeting at the Village Office. She had only attended the Village Office to receive financial assistance and vote.

²**Authors:** Galih Prabaningrum and Norin Mustika Rahadiri Abheseka. **Editors:** Bronwyn A. Beech Jones and Annisa Sabrina Hartoto. **Disclaimer:** The views expressed in the analysis are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the supporting governments or organisations. All names have been anonymised.

³ Kelompok Perempuan dan Sumber-Sumber Kehidupan.

Lastri's friends from the factory suggested that she should not attend the meeting, but after a KPS2K staff member visited her and called back afterwards, Lastri decided to attend because she wanted to know more about what this event involved.

"Then I felt confused and so did my husband, that's the word for it: confused. I asked my friends at the factory and told them that someone came to my house and invited me to go to the Village Hall, and what did they think...should I go or not? They said, 'don't go, Las, you're being taken in by spies, don't go'. So, I decided I wouldn't go. Then I kept being called by the KPS2K staff member, are you coming or not? Are you coming or not? Ok, I felt in my heart, I'll just go. I'll see what the meeting is like." (Lastri, Gresik research village, 19 February 2019)

After the meeting, Lastri told her husband that the Women's School was going to be formed. Her husband and parents did not give permission for Lastri to join because they felt that the Women's School was not a way for her to earn money. Lastri felt torn. While they were not allowing her to get involved for financial reasons, she had never had the experience of being in an organisation and had not been able to continue her dream of going to school.

"The first obstacle [was one] I faced myself. How could I make a decision which was in conflict with my family and my husband who were not letting me join. It was how I could continue my schooling. That's what I had convinced my heart for a long time, it was between doing it or not, like when I didn't continue school. It turns out at the Women's School I had the opportunity to continue school. Because I thought the Women's School was the same as high school. I had a desire to learn, I still have the desire." (Lastri, Gresik research village, 22 February 2019)

Lastri does not have a lot of time to participate in the Women's School because she works in the market. Nevertheless, she participated in the first training session on Women's Leadership and Social Protection in 2014. At the training, Lastri was given information on gender equality, especially about women's rights in families.

"Women have the right to make decisions about what is right and wrong, like in the family environment. We have social protection, rights to be fought for. When I got home, I put them into action." (Lastri, Gresik research village 19 February 2019)

Lastri's husband felt outraged when she explained to him about the information she had gained at the training. He asked her to choose between the school and her family. Instead, Lastri chose both. For her, this was a valuable opportunity to prove women's strength. Lastri's husband often asked her to do extra work when she asked him to allow her to go to activities, like finding fodder, washing, and cleaning out the pen of their animals. Sometimes, Lastri decided pragmatically to let her husband be mad when she returned from Women's School activities. This did not make her feel disheartened but, on the contrary, was Lastri's strategy to negotiate with him and continue to be involved in the Women's School. When she finished all the work he had told her to do, there was no reason left for her husband to not let her participate in the School.

Lastri feels fortunate to have friends from the School who support her and understand if she comes late to events. Her friends even delay activities and wait for Lastri to join them after she has finished her work. The Women's School has made Lastri closer with her friends who share each other's happiness and sadness, so that one person's burden can be shouldered together.

Since taking part in training and attending activities at the Women's School, Lastri feels that she has increased her understanding of gender equity as well as her strategies and capacities. She increased her understanding of how to negotiate with her husband after sharing her experiences with friends and together building their critical awareness at the Women's School.

"If he gets angry it's not like it was before. Now I can negotiate. Before if my husband was angry, I would also get angry and we would fight. Now if my husband is very angry, I let him be angry first and then later when he has calmed down, I will explain." (Lastri, Gresik research village, 22 February 2019)

Gradually, Lastri's husband became more willing to help with household tasks, like sweeping and washing dishes. More importantly, he also began to realise his wife's capacities and strength. Lastri continued to become more attuned to women's issues and share the knowledge and experiences she had gained with other women in her area. At any opportunity, Lastri invites women to join the Women's School. Many village women initially labelled the Women's School an improper organisation which taught women to go outside their homes and disobey their husbands, and even thought that members were "district spies". Lastri and her friends have worked hard to counter these accusations and have proved the School's value by working together with the National Insurance Scheme (BPJS) to help community members process cards needed to access the scheme, Healthy Indonesia (Indonesia Sehat) programs, and other forms of government social protection.

In 2015, Lastri had the opportunity to represent the Women's School at a training session in Jakarta. Before she departed, Lastri thought she was pregnant after taking a home pregnancy test and experiencing bleeding. While in Jakarta, the bleeding continued and Lastri had to be taken to hospital for treatment, and the event organisers covered the costs. Later that year, Lastri was diagnosed with cervical cancer. Despite having had symptoms since she worked in the factory, including discharge and constant itchiness, she had not followed this up with a doctor. Before her diagnosis, Lastri's husband had encouraged her to be treated in traditional ways, like drinking a herbal remedy (*jamu*) made from lime powder. Through her experience at the Women's School, Lastri understood women's rights to healthcare and common conditions. She also processed a Healthy Indonesia Free Recipient card with which she could access free health checks at hospitals which partnered with the Women's School.

Lastri had this health check because of her networks and friends who helped her and other community members to process their cards. Although her husband's opinions about the importance of health checks had not changed, Lastri was able to access the services to which she was entitled.

"In the end it was at that second [check]. From the discharge it was clear that I had cervical cancer. My husband was still very angry. I was told to just drink jamu. I wasn't allowed to go to the hospital. But I went by myself with Mbak Indah and Mbak Nurul [Women's School leaders]. For the paperwork they needed my husband's signature and said that he needed to be unemployed [for me to access to services], the woman at the hospital got angry at me, and when I got home [he] got angry at me. 'I don't need your signature [her husband's] and I'm not asking for it', I said. Then, the second time, I took control and went to the hospital by myself on a public minibus." (Lastri, Gresik research village, 22 February 2019)

After this experience, Lastri and the Women's School initiated early detection checks for cervical cancer and other health conditions which commonly affect women in the village. Many women felt that they did not want to get the checks because their reproductive organs were taboo. Yet, through the free check program in 2015, 2016, and 2017, and awareness raising activities, women in the village have become more confident to get checked. This initiative is the result of cooperation between the Women's School with Ibnu Sina Hospital in

Gresik, the Gresik District Office of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, and other government agencies. This program became a turning point for women in Lastri's village to pay more attention to their health.

One aspect of herself which Lastri feels has changed since joining the Women's School is that she has gained confidence in public speaking. While she felt nervous and anxious sharing her opinions in forums, slowly, Lastri began to believe in herself and eventually became a speaker at a national event.

"When I was invited, I thought it was just gathering at the Village Hall. I was asked to introduce myself. For people who are not used to it and who are usually at home, being asked to introduce yourself alone is enough to tremble like you're terrified." (Lastri, Gresik research village, 22 February 2019)

Lastri's commitment to put into action the insights she has gained through the Women's School has resulted in her becoming increasingly confident to speak at events in the village, subdistrict and beyond. Lastri and her friends' efforts have resulted in the Women's School being included in Musrenbangdes (Village Development Consultative Meetings) and being annually allocated ten million rupiah (10,000 AUD) from the Village Fund. Lastri is now the Gresik District Coordinator of the Women's School. She hopes that she will always continue to put into action her commitment to other women, particularly poor women, and represent them so they can claim their rights and obtain equality.



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