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Ati

*Pekka Village Coordinator
Bangkalan, Madura, East Java*

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Ati

Pekka Village Coordinator

Bangkalan, Madura, East Java¹

Thirty-eight-year-old Ati has been Pekka group coordinator in her village in Bangkalan since 2015. She is also principal of a kindergarten, which she established in 2013, and runs her family household. Ati married at the age of eighteen and currently has two children. Together with her husband from the same village, Ati owns a marquee and sound system rental business which is well known in the area.

Ati's involvement in Pekka began with the encouragement of her cousin, Mukti, who is a local community leader. In 2015, PEKKA² began running activities in Ati's village and requested the assistance of the Village Head to find women to join a women's group. The Village Head then requested that Mukti, who is known as being skilled in *silat* martial arts and as a Qur'an teacher, ask Ati to help with Pekka's activities. Ati was trusted to take on this role because of her experiences as a Posyandu cadre and a leader in the Nahdlatul Ulama women's organisation Muslimat. Ati accepted this nomination to join Pekka as she felt that it showed how village leaders believed in her. Moreover, the Village Head at the time was the step-son of Umi, Ati's Qur'anic studies teacher when she was a teenager.

Ati recounted, in the Madurese dialect of Indonesian, how when the village group was formed, she was regularly visited by PEKKA fieldworkers from the Bangkalan subdistrict. As well as visiting Ati's house, these fieldworkers invited Ati to join cadre meetings. At the time, PEKKA did not yet have a permanent office, so these meetings rotated between cadres' houses in Bangkalan.

"[At first] I didn't understand what PEKKA was, but I was always visited by Mbak Fat [PEKKA leader at the subdistrict level]. Every time there was a meeting, she visited. Then, in the end, I understood what PEKKA was and that there was a monthly cadre meeting [I could go to]. But there wasn't an office then. The meetings sometimes moved. I was called when there was a cadre meeting and sometimes when I tried to find it, [I was like] 'where is it?', I looked but couldn't find it. I can read and write, but not really well." (Ati, Bangkalan research village, 25 February 2019)

The trust placed in Ati to become a Pekka cadre also stemmed from the networks she had formed since the 1990s. When PEKKA entered her village in 2015, Ati was a Posyandu cadre. She has a strong relationship with the village midwife and organises the maternal and child health group (Posyandu) for under five year olds, pregnant women, and the elderly. Likewise, Ati is well known by mothers as she and her niece, Mita, founded the only kindergarten in her hamlet. She also leads a forty-member strong Muslimat Qur'an recitation group (*pengajian*) which includes both young and older women. This strong network places Ati at the centre of women's activities and organisations in the village. This network meant that, not long after being selected as a Pekka cadre, Ati successfully recruited approximately twenty five members to the newly formed Pekka union.

Ati began to understand the PEKKA movement after she was invited to assist the Service, Information and Consultation Clinic (KLIK – PEKKA) in a neighbouring village. Ati assisted people as they arrived and helped

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² PEKKA refers to the organisation whereas, Pekka refers to the grassroots organising of women lead by village women.

establish the order in which people would be seen – an experience which made a large impression on her about how PEKKA assists the community.

“There were ustad [Muslim clerics], community, leaders and the Village Head. It was there that my knowledge continued to expand.” (Ati, Bangkalan research village, 25 February 2019)

As the group’s leader, Ati plays a crucial role in organising its activities. Ati’s husband supports this work, upon the condition that her activities do not take a whole day or involve overnight stays.

“My children have already grown up, they are independent. When I participate in Pekka activities, they [often] go all day... One time there was a three day training session at the Head of the Pekka union’s house until Maghrib prayers at about seven in the evening. My husband gets angry at me for going to those all-day activities... Yeah, I get pretty scared. If I went to the training all day, then my children would want to get ready for school and who would take care of them? ... But now the latest time training finishes is 4pm in the afternoon. We all make a schedule.” (Ati, Bangkalan research village, 25 February 2019)

Ati drew upon her experience of forming a Muslimat *pengajian* group in the newly established Pekka union. She invited members to save money together in a savings and loans group based on their own financial capacities, which became a major drawcard for new members to join.

“[Members saved] individually, sometimes the individual savings totalled 200 thousand rupiah a year while other people saved 500 thousand rupiah a year. Members contributed 5,000 rupiah twice a month and some people contributed 10,000 [once a month]. The point was to save hundreds of thousands.” (Ati, Bangkalan research village, 25 February 2019)

Access to loans for household necessities is a major need for women in Ati’s village. The Pekka savings and loans group was different from the Muslimat NU group which deposited its savings in a bank managed by a *pesantren* in the subdistrict. Pekka’s savings and loan group contributions are deposited to Pekka’s Marlina Union cooperative in Bangkalan. Annually, Ati’s twenty-five member strong Pekka group saved five million rupiah (500 AUD). In 2017, an issue occurred with the cooperative’s finances and to this day Ati remains unsure about what caused it. As the Pekka group’s leader, Ati used her own money to repay savings and loan group members to prevent their disappointment, and she was later reimbursed by PEKKA.

Later in 2017, Ati decided to reduce her involvement with Pekka. Ati says that she decided to step back from her leadership position because it was difficult for her to travel to activities. Ati cannot drive a motorbike and many Pekka group activities take place at the subdistrict PEKKA office which is approximately ten kilometres from her house. As there is limited access to public minibuses (*angkutan*), Ati found it difficult to visit the centre without someone driving her there. When Ati stepped down from her leadership role, the Pekka group also began to wane as members decided to stop attending activities until Ati returned.

“I didn’t have a companion, so I said to [the subdistrict Head of Pekka] in 2017 and 2018, ‘I want to stop, I’m stepping down.’ She said, ‘you can’t step down, you can’t step down Ati.’ I stepped down, I didn’t have a companion, or friends, I was just facing problems alone. She said, ‘you can’t step down but it’s okay if you have a break if no one can drive you here.’ So, I wasn’t active, and my groups weren’t either for a year.” (Ati, Bangkalan research village, 25 February 2019)

Ati became active in Pekka again in 2018 when her niece, Mita, completed her university studies and returned to the village. As a Pekka cadre, Mita successfully assisted Ati in reviving one of the hamlet-level Pekka groups

which Ati had founded which now has forty members. Ati revived another hamlet Pekka group and successfully recruited one hundred members to join it.

These groups' activities, notably Qur'an recitation, were integrated with materials about women's empowerment and equality. At least once a month, Pekka union officials from the district take it in turns to visit the group and raise awareness about the importance of legal identity documents. Through these discussions, PEKKA supports group members learn to understand their civic rights so that they can access basic health and education services as well as government social protection programs. At the same time as participating in these empowerment activities, group members manage their collective funds, and each member contributes two thousand rupiah (0.20 AUD) and voluntary extra savings at their weekly meetings.

Ati's leadership has successfully created change for herself and the women's group. Despite these changes, Ati's village does not yet fully support the inclusion of women in the public sphere as social norms tend to assign public roles to men, while women are limited to the domestic sphere. As Ati explains, many people in the village believe that:

"There is no point in girls going to school because it will leave families in debt. [They say] there's no need to go to school. Mita was told by the extended family to stop attending school from middle school. Many people still say, 'my child has graduated, so they will study. The most a woman can become is a cook, so what do they want to become?' Mita was the first woman from either the west or east hamlet to study at university. That's why the head of the PEKKA union said to other women, 'let's go, prove to the community, develop yourself, join Pekka to prove yourself to the community.'" (Ati, Bangkalan research village, 25 February 2019)

Together with her niece, Ati remains committed to providing a space and opportunity for women to meet, save, and share their opinions together. Through these hamlet groups, women in Ati's village have started to understand their rights and position at the centre of their community.