Change Starts With Us

Mama Cash grantee Aceh Women for Peace Foundation reflects on the ingredients for impact
Aceh Women for Peace Foundation (AWPF) was established in 2009 to address gender inequalities and injustices resulting from the Aceh conflict and insurgency which took place from 1976 to 2005. AWPF’s mission is to mobilise women and work with them to understand their social, economic, and political rights; demand access to justice; and become key players in the peace-building process.

The challenge

The 2005 peace agreement ended armed conflict in Aceh and gave it the status of special autonomous region of Indonesia. Since the peace agreement, a series of qanuns, or regulations, have built the framework for sharia law in the region. In September 2014 the Aceh provincial administration and legislative council approved the Qanun Jinayat which obliges every Muslim and non-Muslim in Aceh to follow sharia. This is considered the final step in the full introduction of sharia, which now exists side by side with national law and customary law.

AWPF believes that sharia law, if interpreted and implemented properly, can provide the legal framework to restore peace and justice after the 30-year-long conflict. But, they say, it is not being implemented properly. They point to article 231 of law number 11, adopted in 2006, on the protection of the rights of women and children. “Despite article 231 we have no equality,” the group explains. “Sharia police controls the way we dress, the way we behave. But not the way men dress and behave. It’s unequal. It’s not just.”

AWPF activists see both the aftermath of the independence struggle and the 2004 tsunami, which resulted in the deaths of 226,000 people and left another 500,000 homeless, as contributing to marginalisation of women and violation of women’s rights in Aceh. Women have never been part of decision-making bodies. Because of this, post-conflict and post-disaster recovery and reconstruction programmes have not really been effective. Moreover, early and forced marriage are common practice in Aceh and there are many unreported cases of domestic violence. In cases of rape, abortion, and divorce, women are denied justice and protection: the legal system, especially at the village level, does not support women’s rights.

Raising the questions, changing the system

AWPF works to promote community women’s engagement in public life. In 2010 the group started local women’s forums in three villages. The members are educated in human rights, women’s rights, and the law. The goal of the women’s forums is to influence decision-making, and change the way laws are understood and implemented. “We want to see women in Aceh accessing rights and peace,” explains the group. “During the conflict, so many women were living in isolation, not involved in any public activity. It is still a struggle to get women involved. The history is not easily erased; thirty years of conflict are not removed from the system overnight. When we focus on the local, women engage. Many cannot move outside their villages. So we start there.”

By 2013, the local governance bodies of each of the three villages had, for the first time ever, a woman member. Having women committed to women’s rights on the local legislative bodies, while it will not change sharia law, has great impact on the interpretation and
implementation of the law. AWPF has since initiated women’s forums in another three villages, hoping to build on its previous success.

The group also supports women’s political activism at the provincial level. As AWPF describes: “There’s progress. Last year three women from our network stood as candidates for the provincial elections. They were not elected. There was a lot of competition. Men have more resources for their campaigns, and people still do not believe that it’s women’s role to engage in politics. But they stood. Even the fact that three women were willing to do this—to face the fear, the threats, to break the norms. It felt like victory. We set a precedent. The women candidates encourage other women to engage. They were role models. We strengthened our strategy to support women candidates in election. They need lots of support, as they face lots of resistance. The women’s forums form a base of strong women, women who had education in women’s rights, women who want to see change.”

Women not only hold positions in governing bodies such as local government and agricultural forums, they are also acting as the representatives of those bodies. AWPF sees success in the fact that these women are visible: others have to interact with them, to negotiate with them. In one of the local agricultural forums, a woman became head of the forum. “She is now the face of the community, representing both women and men,” the group explains. “She appeared on television so many times, was interviewed—a woman! This was absolutely unthinkable before. She is responsible for communication with the department of agriculture on provincial level. She did the negotiations on compensation with the government after the bad harvest of last year. It’s her that people have to rely on now.”

Women’s influence on local decision-making has already led to improvements directly affecting women’s daily lives. In the communities where AWPF works, agriculture is the main source of income for women and men alike. Almost everyone works the land. Until 2013, men used to get paid double what women received. As AWPF describes, “It was seen like this: Men work. Women come along to help their husbands, so we don’t need to pay them a full salary. It is men who are the providers for their families. But of course that’s not true. There are women with no husbands who have to provide for their families . . . women who lost their husbands in the conflict. They have to take care of their families. So even in reality it is not true. And it is, simply, not fair: we work the same hours, we do the same work. Why should we get paid less?”

In 2013 women’s wages were raised to 75% of what men earn. A wage gap still exists, but it has decreased. “It’s progress, but we will not stop here,” states the group. “Women were happy with the increase in pay. Some of the husbands responded that it is right that men earn more. They have financial responsibilities. They have to buy more. We joked: yes, cigarettes. But it’s good: men start to think about inequality, and talk about it with their wives, and amongst themselves. That’s change, too—something that no one ever questioned is on the table, and suddenly people start questioning why, actually, it is done like this.”

Another important change can be seen in women’s access to justice. The leaders of the village women’s forums and the women representatives in the village governing bodies have together taken up the responsibility to support women in accessing justice. The
women’s forum leaders are the go-to persons if a woman wants to report violence. Women face sexual and domestic violence, and are frequently arrested by the sharia police—one of the law enforcement bodies of the Aceh provincial government, responsible for enforcing the qanun. In the hands of the sharia police women face sexual harassment and physical punishment, either publicly or at the police station. AWPF works together with other organisations to fight these violations of women’s rights.

Reporting to the village leader, the police, or even going to their families is still not an option for many women. According to AWPF, women will hear: “It’s your own fault, you have not obeyed your husband.” The women’s forum leaders act as a third party in support of women. They make sure the woman gets counselling, accompany her in the process of reporting to the village leadership, and make sure there is appropriate follow-up. AWPF notices a significant change: since women have been educated, and feel supported and strengthened by the local forums, they recognise violence as violence. They will no longer accept abuse as a fact of life. This does, however, sometimes lead to confrontations with husbands, families, and the police: “This is why we educate the community as a whole. This is why the women’s forum leader accompanies women through the full process.”

In 2011 and 2012, AWPF received 1,060 reports of cases of violence. “We know there are many more. But having these cases reported, having them documented, noticed, is already a big change. And we see more and more convictions of perpetrators. That shows us that not only women, but also the system is changing.” The group will soon organise an "Acehnese Women Award" competition, which gives recognition to women who have dedicated themselves to the prevention and handling of cases of violence against women in Aceh. The aim is to increase awareness and responsibility of the government of Aceh to give recognition, protection, and support to women who have been fighting for the rights of women victims of violence.

The factors behind change

AWPF is a women’s organisation, empowering women to take up the struggle for their rights collectively. Given the context in Aceh, the fact that an organisation led by women engages politically and claims seats for women in decision-making spaces is significant in and of itself. In 2010 AWPF’s board of five still had two male members, and only one representative village woman, although they were the focus of AWPF’s work. In the process of strengthening the organisation and the community, AWPF changed its board structure. The male board members stepped down and the board expanded to 17 members, including staff, volunteers, and lead community organisers. This reflects the shift in ownership of the organisation—it is no longer carried by a few, but by many determined women, rooted in the spaces where the organisation is seeking change. “The history of conflict has made women in Aceh victims. Women are destroyed by the conflict. The belief that change is possible, the spirit to make change happen, has to be brought back. These women activists, together with many, primarily young women that have joined us since we started our work, do exactly that.”

Mama Cash was AWPF’s first donor in 2010, and it remains the group’s only institutional donor so far. The group’s only other income is from membership fees. “We have started approaching other donors. The resource mobilisation training [organised in May 2014 by Mama Cash with the South Asian Women’s Fund and HER Fund] is something we really needed at this stage.”

In 2010 AWPF had no paid staff members. By 2014, it had grown to three staff and 120 members in six local women’s forums. In each village many more women join the forum meetings. Each of the forums is gradually growing, as is their influence on local politics and decision-making. “The work is all done by common village women. The group leaders are village women,” AWPF explains. “No one has a lot of formal education. Education is key in our programming. We cannot send women to school, but we can offer informal education—conflict resolution, peace, human rights, gender equality, political education. The change is huge: women built confidence . . . they built
community together, support networks. The spirit is high, women want change. They act, and see change happens. This is encouraging, this makes all of us continue.”

AWPF is an active member of the Aceh Women’s Movement (GPA), which is a network of women’s organisations in Aceh that wants to establish a new Aceh based on justice, peace, and dignity, with policies that favour women and the political participation of women at all levels. AWPF is also closely connected to the Aceh Women’s Council (Balai Syura Ureung Ingong Aceh) which serves as an umbrella for women’s organisations in Aceh province. AWPF is also part of the Network for Civil Society Concerned with Sharia (JMSPS) in Aceh, and connected to organisations such as Aceh Judicial Monitoring Institute (AJMI) and the Coalition of Public Information Disclosure (KKIP).

The role of Mama Cash

AWPF describes the role of Mama Cash as critical. “What has been the most important for us is the trust that Mama Cash showed in us as young activists, as a young organisation. We know where we are going. We are building our capacities—as an organisation, as staff and board, as community leaders, as a women’s rights community. Society needs education to change, and we provide that. Society at large, women in Aceh, and we ourselves—we are all learning. Having a supporter like Mama Cash in this process has been crucial. Knowing that we are trusted to accomplish what we set out to do is so important. And we see change, so we know what we are doing is right.”

AWPF had been in existence for just one year when it received its first grant from Mama Cash. “Mama Cash’s support has been important because it enabled us to really take off, to do our work, and to grow and strengthen as an organisation. Meeting other grantees at the Mama Cash meeting in May 2014 in Chiang Mai, being able to share our work with them, learning from organisations that are more experienced, is really important. The fundraising training Mama Cash organises, we really needed it. And we will be participating in the Feminist Forum, with hundreds of feminists from the region—a first for us. We are building our community, our movement at home, and now we are expanding our world. Mama Cash opens these doors for us.” AWPF welcomes any opportunity for learning, for connecting with other women’s rights groups, especially outside Aceh and Indonesia.

“Mama Cash’s support allowed us to bring a mind shift in society here. It’s a different kind of support. After the tsunami many foreign donors came with support. They went door to door. They offered money. This has been destructive for activism in a way. People came to expect money. But we do not bring money—we bring education, we bring the possibility of joint action. Having the funding from Mama Cash has allowed us to build our agenda, to pursue our strategy, to pursue what we believe in. It has given us the time and space to build credibility, relationships, and community trust. This is a big shift.”

From 2010 to 2015, Aceh Women for Peace Foundation received a total of €140,000 from Mama Cash.

[This story of change is based on documents AWPF submitted as part of Mama Cash’s monitoring and evaluation during the grant periods; notes of progress review conversations conducted over skype; and an interview with Irma Sari and Rita Junia Sari of AWPF. All quotes are theirs. The original case study was researched and compiled by Esther Vonk.]
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