



The women-led Damaran Baru Forest Management Group ranger team involves both women and men. Photo: HAKA

Empowering women-led grassroots groups in Aceh Province, Indonesia

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Women-led efforts on the ground have resulted in collective action and inclusion in environmental conservation.

Introduction

This article explores the successes and challenges of establishing women-led groups for sustainable forest management, focusing on Aceh. Communities in Aceh, the westernmost province of Indonesia, have historically utilized *adat* (customary) values for forest conservation (Muslihin and Yani, 2022). Women tend to be on the periphery of forest conservation efforts, focusing on meeting household needs from forest products such as food and water (Suganda, 2024). Despite the social barriers that also exclude women from higher-level decision-making, local organizations such as Forest, Nature and Environment Aceh (HAKA) have undertaken initiatives that led to the emergence of women-led grassroots environmental groups to advocate for environmental conservation. HAKA is an Aceh-based organization focusing on the protection of the Leuser Ecosystem in Aceh Province (Figure 1) through community empowerment, policy advocacy,

and forest monitoring. The authors of this article provided technical assistance to the community organizers who implemented the activities in their respective villages.

Empowering women-led forest management groups

This article examines two women-led groups supported by HAKA:

- the Damaran Baru Forest Management Group (LPHD Damaran Baru) in Bener Meriah District; and
- United Women Beutong (PBB) in Nagan Raya District.

Both groups were established to respond to local environmental degradation. LPHD Damaran Baru was the first women-led group that HAKA supported, beginning in 2018 and ending in 2023. Damaran Baru is a village

located in the central highlands of Aceh province. The village is located close to the forest that is home to one of the headwaters of the Wih Gile river that flows to the surrounding villages. Understanding the importance of protecting the forest and headwaters, men regularly patrolled key areas to reduce illegal logging activities, and also started to invite women to join them and understand the forest ecosystem. However, in 2015 flash floods swept through the village, destroying homes and temporarily displacing the community members to evacuation camps. People's experiences as a disaster refugee were not equal; large disparities were apparent, especially for the women, such as lack of access to clean water and sanitation. This experience inspired the women to play a more active role in forest protection through restoration and to conduct patrols to persuade illegal loggers and encroachers to leave the forest (Farhan and Sambodho, 2022).

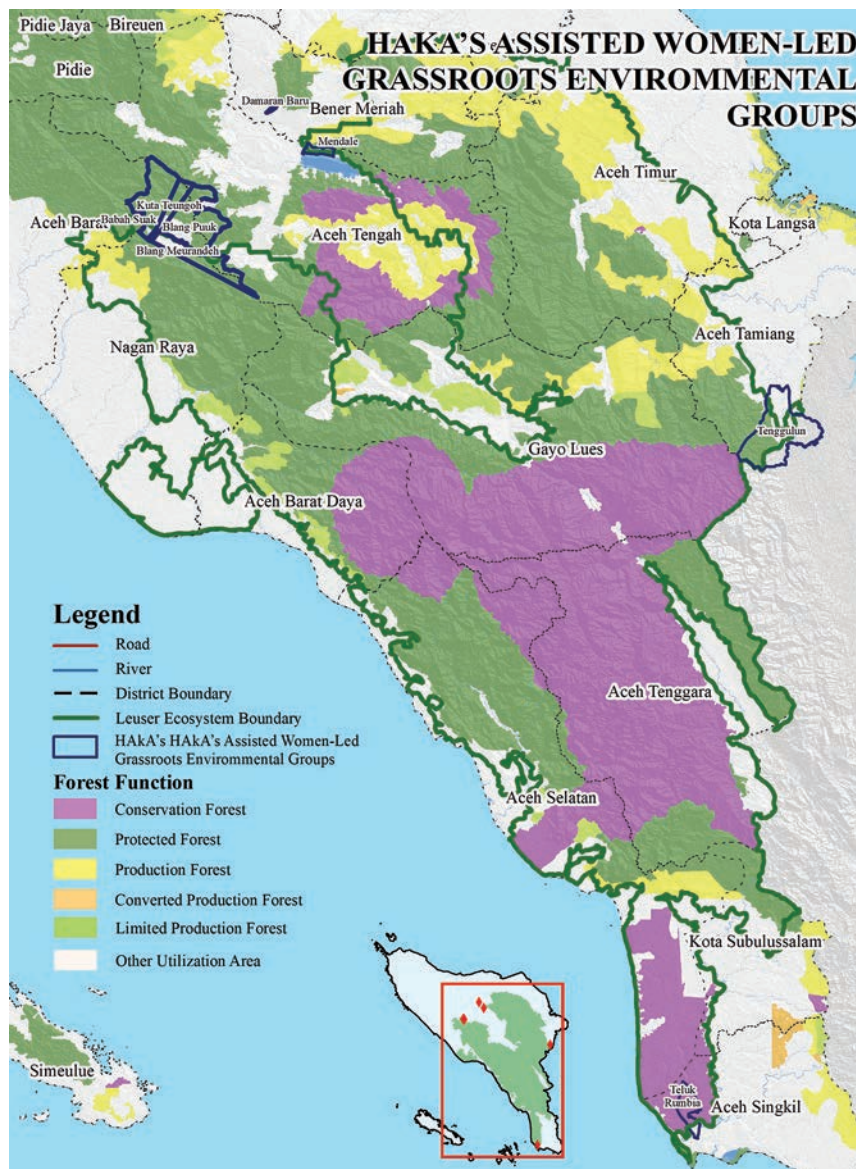


Figure 1. Map of women-led grassroots environmental groups assisted by HAKA
Source: HAKA

HAKA's support for PBB began in 2023 and is ongoing. The women's group comprises communities in Beutong Ateuh Banggalang, a subdistrict in Western Aceh consisting of four villages. The villages are surrounded by pristine forest and are located between two crucial forest areas: the Ulu Masen Ecosystem and the Leuser Ecosystem. The communities made headlines for their protests against PT Emas Mineral Murni, which began gold-mining exploration work in 2018. Although a Supreme Court ruling later annulled the company's permit, the threat of new mining operations loom over the communities. This renewed threat has catalyzed more community-organized protests, and opposition continued with HAKA's initiative to train 50 women in basic paralegal knowledge to assist with their advocacy efforts (HAKA, 2024).

This article highlights how HAKA has applied the learning from its previous experience in Damaran Baru village to Beutong Ateuh Banggalang in order to develop better methods to enhance the resilience of women-led groups. These methods include improved approaches to three different objectives: institutional development of women-led grassroots movements; engaging men as allies; and creating awareness of women's role in conservation.

Approaches

Institutional development of women-led grassroots movements

HAKA first identified the opportunity to strengthen grassroots women-led forest management in 2018 after supporting a group of women in Damaran Baru village by providing a workshop on basic paralegal knowledge. The workshop amplified a common desire among the women to gain management rights over the forest area, and they sought support from HAKA to apply for a social forestry permit; specifically, the Village Forest scheme, from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry. In 2019, after a year of verification and processing, the application was approved and LPHD Damaran Baru became the first women-led community organization to obtain a social forestry permit in Aceh. The group subsequently established the first women-led ranger team in the province, comprising 18 women and 12 men. They patrol the forest area for five days every month. The ranger team members regularly use persuasive methods to engage with potential illegal loggers and instill a



HAKA provided paralegal training for 50 women in Beutong Ateuh Banggalang. Photo: HAKA

sense of responsibility in them to collectively protect the environment (Suhartono, 2023).

The women-led approach was instrumental in building collective action through raising awareness of women-environment relationships within the community. The approach ensured that the development agenda considers the needs of women, while also being willing to compromise by consulting with men to include their concerns. Such compromise rarely occurs in a men-led approach. The women's leadership also played a key role in negotiating for a reallocation of Village Funds to build two rest areas near their restoration sites (Farhan and Sambodho, 2022). Village Funds are allocated by the central government; they comprise approximately IDR 1 billion (USD 80,000) every year to be used for village development, including implementation of social forestry. The Village Funds alone do not support social forestry; it is often funded mostly by HAKA. However, the women's enthusiasm caught the attention of district and provincial governments, resulting in additional financial and capacity-building support.

After three years of strong support from HAKA, the communities expressed their interest in increasing the independence of the group in managing funds and deciding its future direction. This initiative was tested through a sub-grant of IDR 100 million (approximately USD 6,000) from The Asia Foundation, channelled through HAKA. During the process of project management, HAKA provided training and support to empower LPHD Damaran Baru to prepare a satisfactory financial report, as The Asia Foundation had strict financial accountability standards. However, LPHD Damaran Baru perceived these standards as an approach to further control the group's independence, because they deem it unfair that community organizations have to meet those standards. Despite difficulties with this transition, the sub-grant project was implemented successfully, and met the financial accountability standard. LPHD Damaran Baru (who hold the village forest permit for another 30 years) continue to protect their forest area without financial support from HAKA. The group continues to collaborate with HAKA on other efforts, however, such as women forest defender networks and other emerging opportunities.

Similar to the case in Damaran Baru, HAKA's approach to institutionalize the women-led grassroots movement in Beutong Ateuh Banggalang began with basic paralegal knowledge with 50 women from four villages in the subdistrict. Through the paralegal training, the women expressed a wish for further support to establish a women-led group to advocate for forest

protection and management, specifically to make the area less attractive to mining companies. They drew inspiration from the previous support of environmental organizations such as the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (WALHI) Aceh, who successfully organized the communities and campaigned for the cancellation of PT Emas Mineral Murni's permit through a lawsuit in the State Administrative Court. The Court ruled against the community, but on appeal their lawsuit was granted by a decision of the Supreme Court. The women, together with HAKA, decided to establish PBB as a foundation instead of pursuing a social forestry permit. This strategy provides the group with more freedom to engage in environmental advocacy to protect their forest, including the ability to file lawsuits.

In respect to traditional wisdom and local knowledge, HAKA supported PBB's initiative to document the communities' environmental knowledge as the basis for advocacy against mining exploration and exploitation. So far, their efforts have focused on documenting stories of the community-nature relationship, as well as recording environmental practices in written format. As with many communities across Aceh, oral tradition is the format in which knowledge is usually transmitted. The group hopes that capturing these stories and practices in written and visual format will strengthen the core mission of the movement while also maintaining the collective memory of environmental advocacy. Furthermore, HAKA continues to strengthen PBB by linking the group to networks of other women-led groups and environmental defenders in the area. Their advocacy work extends beyond protests against mining companies; it also explores the development of community-led ecotourism destinations and other sustainable forest management initiatives.

Engaging men as allies

Women in grassroots groups face myriad challenges to becoming environmental defenders — conservative and patriarchal communities are part of their daily realities (Ernanda, 2023). Each conversation with them was filled with details of their relationship with the environment, along with the pressure of the expectations they face on a daily basis. Furthermore, the women always try to include the men (usually their husband) in their efforts and give them credit for their achievements, in order to maintain broad support for and harmony in their collective mission for forest protection. Educating and empowering women without including the entire community can bring potential disruptions that could be counterproductive to the movement.

That was evident in the case in Damaran Baru. The team members engaged the communities with the assumption that strong, women-led groups could be achieved only with an explicit focus on educating and empowering women. At the beginning, the process was relatively successful. The local communities (men and women) unanimously selected a woman named Sumini, who had previously organized women in the community to plant trees in degraded forest area and engaged with illegal loggers, to lead LPHD Damaran Baru. The group collectively conducted a wide range of activities, such as forest patrols to identify wildlife and plant biodiversity, and explored innovative livelihood opportunities such as honey cultivation. The group's skilful communication and negotiation also increased local understanding of the need for forest protection within the community, while inspiring others.

However, gradually the group faced conflict due to weak organizational management and mismanaged expectations over how to define success. In supporting and celebrating LPHD Damaran Baru, and Sumini as its champion, HAKA failed to understand the perceived contradictions between her role as a leader and as a wife and mother. And although Sumini was democratically elected, and her leadership was vital in engaging and including men to implement activities, HAKA did not

address men's expectations about deciding the direction of the organization. The expectations of the men involved in LPHD Damaran Baru, whose wives graced the front cover of newspapers and magazines, eventually played a catalytic role in shifting the group towards organizational independence from HAKA. This shift was also motivated by the wish to secure more power and leverage in the strategic decisions of the organization that related to men.

The experience in Damaran Baru was a hard-learned lesson in the importance of women-led groups engaging with men in the communities. Men should not only be involved with implementing conservation activities, but also in strategic organizational decision-making. This was carefully considered during the formation of PBB in Beutong Ateuh Banggalang. The process of establishing PBB included having Abu Kamil, a man who is a community and religious leader who has organized and held protests for environmental protection, as an advisor to the organization. For the women in the subdistrict, obtaining his approval and having him as an advisor is essential, as Abu Kamil is an influential figure within the communities whom they regularly seek advice from. Abu Kamil's involvement also led the way for other men in the communities to assist women in implementing their ideas, such as documenting environmental knowledge.



Pristine forest in Beutong Ateuh Banggalang. Photo: HAKA

Thus far, PBB is healthy from an organizational management perspective; strategic decision-making considers the input of and feedback from influential leaders as well as other men community members. Although the members of the group are all women, they do not exclude men's voices and they are embedded within the wider communities.

Creating awareness of the movement

HAKA primarily utilized social media platforms such as Instagram, which is popular in Indonesia, as well as connections with journalists, in order to create extensive coverage of LPHD Damaran Baru. The tagline, “The first women-led ranger team in Aceh” garnered major interest from local and international news organizations. The launch of the team took place a few months prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, however, which limited patrols and regular community discussions. Although the lockdown temporarily halted on-the-ground activities, the women's stories were frequently shared through social media, leading to repeated media visits once the lockdown eased and face-to-face contact began again. The extensive media coverage shaped a critical discussion on attitudes about women as change agents in environmental conservation. Although women had been involved in environment and development issues, their importance to environmental concerns became more evident through the work of LPHD Damaran Baru (Qabilla et al., 2024).

The extensive media coverage also led to the group, and Sumini, gaining international recognition. LPHD Damaran Baru received the prestigious Lotus Leadership Award in New York in 2023, and Sumini was named as one of the BBC's 100 Women in the same year (BBC, 2023; The Asia Foundation, 2023). This recognition, which the group deserved, strongly focused on the innovative women-led approach in improving village-based forest conservation, which aimed to be replicated in many countries. The recognition, however, also led to an unintended consequence: the increased resistance of some of the men in the group. They strongly questioned the coverage and recognition as being a tool for HAKA to gain additional funding, rather than to actually empower the local communities to improve conservation. Although this was suspected by only a few individuals, they were influential in convincing key figures in the group to question HAKA's motives. By that point, it became difficult to reassure people and restore community trust.

Learning from this experience, HAKA opted to not profile PBB and its efforts for women-led forest conservation in social media. Instead, the focus has been to ensure that

the group members can develop a strong capacity to manage the organization and carry out collective action. In the process, HAKA has identified key individuals who have the potential to become the spokesperson for PBB, and to be considered for public speaking training in the future. HAKA is more cautious in increasing the recognition of these individuals in order to prevent or mitigate the unintended consequences experienced by LPHD Damaran Baru. PBB has not been significantly covered in the media, apart from occasional quotations used in articles on mining advocacy in Beutong Ateuh Banggalang and on advocacy to improve education in the village. The effort to minimize public coverage was met with a positive response by PBB, who also expressed the importance of developing their presence as an organization before garnering increased recognition.

Conclusion

The process of capacity building over the last five years has provided HAKA with a range of experiences in strengthening women-led groups in Aceh Province, and the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned. HAKA's first experience, with LPHD Damaran Baru, showed the high potential for success for women-led grassroots environmental movements, but also revealed that appreciation for and the involvement of men must also be included. These lessons were applied to HAKA's efforts to strengthen the women-led movement in Beutong Ateuh Banggalang, and have shown positive early results.

Institutionalizing a women-led grassroots movement was sparked by community interest in increasing women's role in environmental conservation and advocacy, namely through paralegal training by HAKA. Women-led efforts on the ground have resulted in collective action and inclusion in environmental conservation. However, it became evident that the communities will desire organizational independence after a few years. Training to manage and develop organizational skills is needed in order not to weaken women-led institutions.

Furthermore, involving men as advisors and supports for women to implement decision-making is crucial. This contributes to harmony within women-led movements and reduces conflicts due to power dynamics. The sole focus on strengthening women individuals in LPHD Damaran Baru was perceived by some men as excluding them from decision-making, despite the women's collaborative engagement with men to implement patrols and explore alternative livelihoods. Early signs from the women-led movement in Beutong demonstrate potential harmony through involving men leaders as advisors, and

obtaining their influence in organizing support from other men.

Social media and news coverage has the potential to change attitudes about women's involvement in conservation. The story of Damaran Baru quickly became well-known nationally and internationally because

of the group's tenacity in increasing women's role in conservation, especially in patriarchal societies such as Aceh. However, this resulted in the increased resistance of men, especially since the story was told through the eyes of a third-party organization. Capacity building for communities to be their own storytellers is an important consideration.

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