

## **Empowerment through Village Religious Schools for Women in Cianjur, SCN Indonesia** (Associate Partner WEMC–Rahima)

*“Thanks to Rahima, I understand a lot that I did not understand before; before, I didn’t think I have the power but now I know that it is possible to become powerful” (Nining).*

### **Background**

Mulyasari Village in the Regency of Cianjur, has a strong Salafi tradition, with strong antimodernisation sentiments. However, we found traces of women’s self-empowerment in Mulyasari despite of their disadvantaged socio-economic positions in the community and poor education background. A significant institution in Mulyasari Village is the Majalis Taklim (MT). Established at the community level with the support of religious leaders, it originally served as a forum for people to increase their religious knowledge and strengthen the bonds of union among Muslims.

For women in Mulyasari Village, the Majalis Taklim, which is gender segregated, provides one of the few public spaces where they can socialize with other women outside their homes, and thus, can potentially be a strategic forum for motivating social changes in the community. In this context, we attempted to explore the challenges women face when they attempt to fulfill their wish to be empowered; and thus how they deal with these challenges on their road to empowerment.

**The Initiative :** Fatimah was originally an informant and later became a researcher for WEMC. She offered to give talks at a local branch of Majalis Taklim, called Albidayah. After entering the Majalis Taklim as a religious teacher, she taught her class using an interactive teaching method. Students learnt about various gender and social issues interactively through discussion and activities. In the process many women have become braver to express themselves and no longer feel embarrassed to ask questions in the Majalis Taklim’s forums. They built up solidarity which planted the seeds for collective women’s movement and the success in Mulyasari Village also strengthened their wishes to promote the reformation in other Majalis Taklim’s groups in the area. More religious teachers have started to select teaching materials according to their students’ needs and concerns. The experience of women discussing social problems in Majalis Taklim of Albidayah gatherings has led to changes of the teaching method in Majalis Taklim religious study groups from passive learning to problem-solving model. Majalis Taklim is now not only concerned with religiosity but also pushed forward the social transformation in the local community.

**Women enabled to share power in the family:** Some women have changed their attitudes and views and their relationship with their husband is improved, taking initiative to share their aspiration with their husbands and to talked about how their capacity was strengthen through participating in WEMC’s activities. Some have begun to put gender perspective into practice: they now no longer think that domestic work is only women’s work. The husbands also begun to understood gender equality and justice in the family and are willing to share the work burden with their wives. At the beginning of our research, our informants did not view that women have equal rights to make autonomous decisions and express their views and aspiration as their

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male family members. They never thought that these are part of their rights as human being. During the course of WEMC activities, they become increasingly confident to express their views, to question and challenge men’s dominations in their families.

One unforeseen result is that the women’s alternative education in Majalis Taklim has generated much interest among the men in Mulyasari Village. Men village leaders, husbands of the

informants and other men villagers requested the researchers to carry out the same workshops and trainings for the men's groups in the village.

**An emerging local issue:** In the focus group discussions, women brought up the issue of high infant's mortality rate in the village. Some informants initiated an investigation into this problem together with the WEMC research team. The findings were shocking: 50% of the women on average have had one to six children dying under the age of 5. Poverty, people's lack of knowledge about reproductive health, inadequate access to health facilities, and insufficient supply of clean water had constituted the problem. Another factor is that people in Mulyasari believed mother and children's health is not related to the above factors but to faith and supernatural power. Action is thus necessary on two levels: the first level is formulation of policies that are designed to reduce high infant mortality rate in Mulyasari, the second level is to increase people's awareness and knowledge of reproductive health.

**Potential long term impacts:** Our researcher's teaching approach had transformative impacts on the Majalis Taklim. The management is supportive to and willing to adopt this teaching method in other classes. The class has changed its focus to problem solving of the daily-life problems women encountered. Thus, teacher no longer only disseminate religious curriculum, but assist the community to overcome social problems. We see a significant change of people's perceptions of women's role; in the family, women's school and community, people have started to hear women's voice, and at the same time, women have started to believe in themselves, that their opinions deserved to be heard and to recognize that they have equal rights as men. They now question and challenge the gender inequalities in their community and their religious and cultural justification. The potential long term impact we foresee is that Majalis Taklim can be reoriented as a forum for women's empowerment in which women can gain knowledge and confidence to make autonomous decision and to negotiate for a more favourable position in the family and community. Besides, we can normalize women's active engagement in the community.