The Role of Religious Public Spaces in Transforming Private Issues into Community Issues

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The Majlis Taklim and Women: Communiazing Private Issue Through Religious Public Space

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An Abstract

Women community Islamic prayer group of *Majelis Ta’lim* often used by certain political interests to mobilize votes during elections. However, this study shows that at the village Mulyasari, Cianjur regency in Indonesia, the limited space for women to access knowledge places the *Majelis Ta’lim* as very vital in women lives.

This paper shows that religious institution built by people at the micro level is possible to empower women. Through research program on Women Empowerment in Muslim Context (WEMC), *Majelis Ta’lim* in Mulyasari village does not only gives benefit to gain religious knowledge. Through a two-way learning process and design of special materials related to various real problems faced by women, *Majelis Ta’lim* may encourages women to empower themselves and to challenge public authorities and religious leaders.
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**MAJELIS TA’LIM AND WOMEN**

The Role of Religious Public Spaces in Transforming Private Issues into Community Issues

I. Introduction

This paper explores grass-roots women’s empowerment strategies via *majelis ta’lim*. Although *majelis ta’lim* are often considered political, this paper illustrates that from another perspective, the *majelis ta’lim* in Mulyasari Village, Cianjur, constitute a safe space for women to escape from their routines in the domestic sphere. Via the WEMC program, *majelis ta’lim* provide a space for women to discuss a number of problems providing a medium for women’s empowerment.

*Majelis ta’lim* literally translates to ‘place of study’, meaning any place where a group of people (male or female) meet to study and explore religious teachings. *Majelis ta’lim* are informal in nature and have emerged in every corner of the nation via the facilitation of religious or social organizations. A number of studies claim that *majelis ta’lim* are Islamic non-formal educational forums open to all regardless of gender, age, marital status, or social position (Weix 1999). *Majelis ta’lim* can be defined as ‘forum or place of learning’, ‘teaching sessions’, or ‘learning space’ (KBBI, 2005:699).

*Majelis ta’lim* are an important part of social life within Indonesian communities. *Majelis ta’lim* are the most flexible form of Islamic religious forum unrestricted by considerations of time and place. *Majelis ta’lim* are open to all ages, social class, and genders. The time of activities may occur morning, afternoon, evening or night. The place used may be a private home, mosque, place of prayer, building, hall, park, etc. *Majelis ta’lim* have two functions, one as court, and the other as an informal educational forum. This flexibility of *majelis ta’lim* is a strength that has allowed *majelis ta’lim* to become the closest Islamic educational forum to where people live.

*Majelis ta’lim* represent a strong forum of communication common people and *mualim* (Islamic teachers), and between the congregation of the *majelis ta’lim* itself without regards to time or place. In this way *majelis ta’lim* have become an alternative forum for religious education for those who do not have the energy, time, or opportunity to progress their religious education through formal means. This is one advantage that *majelis ta’lim* have over other religious organizations.

*Majelis ta’lim* fulfil four functions, (1) a place to spread the Islamic way of life, (2) a place of spiritual communion, (3) a place where good relations are fostered amongst the congregation or community, and (4) a place to disseminate valuable ideas for the development of the religious community and the nation.

*Majelis ta’lim* are not limited to teaching religion, and generally use teaching methods similar to formal Islamic teaching organizations such as *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools). These methods may involve *halaqah*, a presentation or lecture that includes a recitation of a religious texts followed by a translation and discussion of meaning.

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2 Encyclopedia of Islam, 1994, Volume 3, p.120

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Majelis ta’lim are generally not orientated towards a particular gender, however the format of majelis ta’lim may be more appropriate for women’s lives rather than men’s lives. This has resulted in a greater number of women frequenting majelis ta’lim compared with men. The leadership of majelis ta’lim is similarly often dominated by women.

National Recognition of Majelis Ta’lim

The presence of majelis ta’lim has been formally recognized by government and the state awards legal recognition for majelis ta’lim as an alternative educational forum under law number 20/2003 on the National Education System. Article 26, point 4 of this law states that “non-formal education consists of special organizations, training organizations, study organizations, community education centres, and majelis ta’lim as a particular group of education providers.”

According to this law, majelis ta’lim are an informal educational forum under the direction of the Department of Religion. This department is also responsible for the Contact Body for Majelis Ta’lim, that was responsible for establishing the majority of majelis ta’lim throughout Indonesia. Majelis ta’lim are also regulated by Government Regulation no. 55/2007 on Religious Education. This regulation asserts that majelis ta’lim are limited to strengthening faith and piety (mahdzah), not by providing comprehensive religious education, but rather by teaching the proper relations between people (ghairmahdzah).

A wide variety of majelis ta’lim exist and continue to grow within Indonesia. They may be categorized by the following methods used to recite and interpret religious texts:

1. Majelis ta’lim that use a sermon or presentation which takes one of the following forms:
   a. A general sermon, in which an Islamic teacher speaks and the congregation listen passively and absorb the material being disseminated.
   b. A short sermon, usually followed by questions from the congregation, in which both the Islamic teacher and the congregation actively participate.

2. Majelis ta’lim that use the halaqah method. Usually this involves the Islamic teacher giving a sermon via a particular text. The congregation listens whilst scrutinizing the same text or reading from a board in which the Islamic teacher has written the message that he or she wishes to deliver.

3. Majelis ta’lim that use the muzakarah method. This involves an exchange of opinions related to a specific problem under discussion.

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3 Ibid
4 The Department of Religion is a government department that oversees religious affairs in Indonesia. It has several divisions including the Directorate of Religious Education to the People and Empowerment of Mosques. This department conducts the main tasks of the Directorate General of Religious Organizations in the field of Religious Education and the Empowerment of Mosques. In summary this directorate assists the director general in managing education outside of schools.
5 This organization was established by Ms. Hj. Tuti Alawiyah on 1 January 1981 and initially consisted of 732 majelis taklim leaders
6 Article 21 (point 1) Non formal education run in the form of interpreting religious texts, majelis tak’lim, education of the Qur’an, Diniyah Takmiliya, or similar
   Article 23 (point 1) ‘majelis tak’lim’ have a similar aim to increase faith and piety to Allah SWT and to educate and bless noble participants in this transitory world.
   Article 23 (point 2); the majelis tak’lim curriculum is open and targeted at understanding the Qur’an and Hadith as the basis to raising faith and piety to Allah SWT.
   Article 23 (3); majelis tak’lim are run from mosques, places of prayer, or other locations that fit the criteria.
4. Majelis ta’lim using mixed teaching methods in which many different methods may be used within the one session.

Majelis ta’lim can also be categorized based on the type of management structure possessed which may include (1) A single leader who owns the majelis ta’lim and acts as its permanent teacher; (2) A single leader assisted by family or students; (3) A leadership committee selected by the congregation to serve for a two to three year period; (4) A leadership committee selected by a single leader of a majelis ta’lim (usually the teacher); and (5) a structured leadership committee with specific duties with or without a term of service that has been officially selected by a relevant department.

The Political Function of Majelis Ta’lim in Indonesia
The growth and development of majelis ta’lim in Indonesia is an interesting phenomenon. Although majelis ta’lim existed during the New Order, they were increasingly visible after the fall of Suharto. During Suharto’s rule, the existence of majelis ta’lim were tightly controlled, and their purpose was to support the political interest of the New Order regime. However since the political reformation following the fall of the New Order, majelis ta’lim have continued to be used for political aims. They are no longer controlled by a single regime, but rather are utilized by various elite actors in different political and social contexts.

Following the fall of the New Order, majelis ta’lim had more freedom within activities conducted. In the face of political, social, and economic pressures, people sought new ways to obtain peace and a sense of meaning. Majelis ta’lim gained prominence. As a result majelis ta’lim that had far reaching, measurable, militant audiences, were considered to be strategic commodities in general elections in Indonesia, not only during, but also and following the fall of the New Order. Majelis ta’lim have been used by legislative candidates from various political parties to secure votes from within the congregations of the majelis ta’lim themselves. Many political parties specifically cultivate good relations with the leader(s) of majelis ta’lim to gain the sympathy of congregations. Some political parties even go as far as establishing majelis ta’lim with the purpose of generating political support amongst congregations.

During the New Order, the ruling Golkar party, created majelis ta’lim named Al-Hidayah alongside courts named Majelis Dakwah Islamiyah (MDI) to generate political support. Al-Hidayah and MDI grew and held influence right down to the village level. However now majelis ta’lim Al-Hidaya in villages are no longer influenced by the Golkar party.

Susilo Bambang Yudoyono (SBY) the president of the Republic of Indonesia elected to serve for the 2004-2009 term and re-elected to serve as president for the 2009-2014 term had the initiative of creating the Majelis Dzikir SBY named ‘NarulIslam’ or ‘light of salvation’. This majelis formed by SBY during the 2004 presidential elections was

9 Additionally, the presence of Al Hidayah and MDI are still considered to hold some power within Golkar. As an example when the provincial Regional Representatives Council (DPD) convention was held from 7 September to 15 October 2003 potential candidates were selected through a closed vote in which the provincial DPD had three votes, each region or city had one vote, DPD AMPG, KPPG, Soksi, Kosgoro, MKGR, AMPI, HWK, Al-Hidayah, MDI and SATkar Ulama all had one vote. The five potential candidates obtaining the highest number of votes continued to the national level. To read further see http://www.tokohindonesia.com/majalah/04/berita.shtml
10 See the report inception phase by AD Kusumaningtyas in the publication Inisiatif-inisiatif untuk Pemberdayaan Perempuan Melalui Ranah Pendidikan Transformatif Keislaman di Kabupaten Cianjur (Women’s Empowerment Initiatives Through Transformative Islamic Education in the Cianjur Region)
managed by an independent foundation. Now this majelis has branches in almost every province. A number of SBY’s relatives and colleagues hold positions of power within the foundation, and the financial backers are business people close to SBY.11

Another party leader, Wiranto from the People’s Conscience Party, also saw that majelis ta’lim administered by the Contact Agency for Majelis Ta’lim were a strategic targets. The Contact Agency for Majelis Ta’lim in Indonesia was established by Dr Hj Tutty Alawiyah AS on 1 January 1981 and originally included 732 majelis ta’lim leaders. The People’s Conscience Party was targeting women, and majelis tak’lim were an effective way to approach women. Good relations with the leader of the Contact Agency for Majelis Ta’lim, Tutty Alawiyah were established by a meeting in Jakarta (Tuesday, 24/2). This meeting, was suspected to be aimed at obtaining the votes of women within the majelis ta’lim. “Ms. Tutty was one of the founders of the People’s Conscience Party and it was hoped that she could help to gain the support of women”, Wiranto said.12

Another Party, the Justice and Prosperity Party had a similar strategy, via their women’s wing “SALIMAH” that approached and influenced the majelis ta’lim in every region to the village level.13

Majelis ta’lim are also frequently used to raise awareness of government programs. One example is the majelis ta’lim managed by Titik Sitirohana in Cianjur, the capital city of the province in which Mulyasari Village is located. During the reign of New Order, Titik Sitirohana oversaw the Al Ikhlas community health post.14

The majelis ta’lim also raised awareness of the government’s People’s Berakhlakul Karimah Development Movement in Cianjur. This movement was initiated by Ir. Hj. Wasidi Swastomo Msi, as a campaign slogan for the mayoral election in 1999. Initially this movement emphasised Islamic law and aimed to promote Islamic law as the foundation of the nation, however due to criticism, this movement was re-orientated towards a public moral and cultural movement in the context of a united Indonesian republic. This movement was implemented by Wasidi when elected as the Mayor and became a government program in Cianjur Region.15

*Majelis ta’lim and Salafi Culture in Mulyasari Village*

The daily lives of people in Mulyasari Village are based in Islam. This is reflected in the presence of a number of various religious institutions such as majelis ta’lim, pesantren, and Islamic schools. There are twenty-nine majelis ta’lim in the village. If prayer groups held in the homes of religious leaders are included this figure would be even larger. There are eight pesantren6 that subscribe to the salafi7 tradition and these have a

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11 See the 2007 report p. 28 or http://www.rusdimathari.wordpress.com
13 For more see the 2007 WEMC RAHIMA report
14 Result of interview during the inception phase of WEMC 2007
15 Via the opportunity created by the People’s Berakhlakul Karimah Development Movement several policies reflecting Islamic law were passed in Cianjur. These included Circulation Letter 551/2717/ASSDA.1/9/2001 on the Apparature Berakhlakul Karimah Movement and the Public Marhamah. In 2003, the Circulation Letter 025/3643/org on Muslim Work Uniforms on work days and 061/2896/org on Working Hours and Uniforms
16 In the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (Big Indonesian Dictionary) pesantren are defined as boarding homes for students or places for students to study recitation of holy texts and the like, however pesantren are the oldest form of Islamic educational institution that have experienced a number of developments from the design of building to the system of teaching used. For this reason the number of Islamic teaching institutions that call themselves ‘pesantren’ are many, yet pesantren can generally be identified by the presence of a religious or school leader, boarding house,
Majelis ta’lim in Mulyasari Village fall into two categories: male majelis ta’lim and female majelis ta’lim. In contrast to the general majelsi ta’lim, male and female majelis ta’lim are separated both in physically and also in terms of lesson material and teaching methods. Majelis ta’lim originally ran forums for males and females together, but over time a division between male and female majelis ta’lim occurred. This meant that men and women were taught by different people on different themes. For women, themes taught are general themes of religious practice, the obligations of a wife towards her husband, and the consequences for behaviour that conforms to or violates these obligations (the concept of merit and punishment for wives). Meanwhile the themes for men at the majelis ta’lim are the obligations and roles of men in upholding faith and income generation in the family. Although the themes taught are different, both men and women’s majelis ta’lim aim to teach and spread Islam to the community.

This paper specifically looks at women’s majelis ta’lim in Mulyasari village. Mulyasari Village was chosen as the location of the research of its uniqueness. Approximately seventy percent of the twenty-nine majelis ta’lim are for women. Women may participate five to six times per week and become members of several different majelis ta’lim congregations. Men generally only participate once a week. Women’s majelis ta’lim are generally based in schools, whereas men’s majelis ta’lim are usually based in mosques. This is because there is a view that women are not allowed to enter mosques during menstruation. Mosques are still regarded as places for men.

In Mulyasari Village it was found that majelis ta’lim were strategic places for women to access the public sphere. Because of the majelis ta’lim, women were able to temporarily leave their daily routine and duties as housewives. Women could socialize with other women outside of the home in majelis ta’lim. Majelis ta’lim became a safe space for women influenced by the social and cultural context of Mulyasari Village where

and the subject ‘Islam’ as the principle study material. The number of pesantren in Indonesia, and the number of students in each place pesantren in a position to be regarded as a legitimate institution providing general and moral education. In addition pesantren have an important role in developing Islamic education, as they have a wide reach due to their close proximity to Muslim people around the Islamic boarding house. See also Widyastuti Purba in the paper presented as discussion material in the workshop “Pendidikan untuk Perempuan: Belajar from Pengalaman Pesantren (Education for Women: Learning from the Experience in a Pesantren)” in Jakarta 7 January 2005. In this paper Purba also adds to the view of Imam Tholkhah. See Tholkahah et al. (2004) Membuka Jendela Pendidikan (Open the Window of Education, Jakarta: Raja Grafindo Persada, that states that pesantren must fulfil the following functions (1) an educational institution that transfers religious knowledge (tafaqquh fi al-din) and Islamic values; (2) as a religious institution that implements social control; and (3) as a religious institution that conducts social engineering and community development. In his opinion this can only be done if Islamic boarding schools can maintain good traditions whilst adopting beneficial new knowledge, to fill the role of an agent of change.

19 In pesantren that follow a traditional system, students only study religion. Usually salafi pesantren have an anti-modernisation stance.

20 Yellow texts are traditional texts that constitute the study material for religious education at pesantren. Traditional texts have been used for decades, or even centuries, and usually have yellow pages. Now, traditional books may be printed on white paper, but because they are classic works they are still referred to as yellow books.

21 This includes rejecting anything considered modern such as televisions, trousers (rather than the traditional sarong), not recommending formal education, rather prioritizing religious education to the point that traditional pesantren are used by people as a form of alternative education. This tradition has been passed down for generations, although there are also people who are open to technological change and other social changes. See the 2007 report, p. 11

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understandings of gender are standardized views of the role of men and women legitimized by religious interpretations and cultural systems.

Understandings that women’s roles are in the domestic sphere and men’s roles are in the public sphere are entrenched in the public mind of Mulyasari Village. Based on the results of interviews, a number of participants in Mulyasari Village said that men dominated the public sphere and women worked in the domestic sphere. This system was considered to be normal and based on natural roles. These views indicate the lack of women’s access to the public sphere to achieve self actualization. Although the majority accepted this as natural, one participant questioned whether this role was appropriate as a woman’s task.

The view that men were leaders and women were followers was strongly entrenched. One female participant who earned a higher income than her husband said that although she had a higher income and was more active, she still placed her husband as the head of the household.

This understanding is based on a verse in the Qur’an (Surah An-Nisa: 34) “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means...”. A number of Islamic leaders queried by the researchers interpreted this verse to mean that women were not allowed to hold a position of power over men in any type of work. Female Islamic leaders also shared this view. In the view of female Islamic leaders women would never have more than men. This was often expressed using the Sundanese saying “taktak moal bisa ngalewihan hulu” (no matter how long the neck, it will never surpass the head) that was often repeated in majelis ta’lim in the village.

II. Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah

This section describes the Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah as a case study conducted by the WEMC research team. The WEMC originally entered Mulyasari Village via a contact Fatimah, one of the researchers who was also the first child of KH Hasan Basri, the leader of Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah. Fatimah had previously participated in training for Women Islamic Leader Cadres run by RAHIMA, a women’s organization that focuses on the Islamic education and rights of women.

Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah was established in 1953 as the first majelis ta’lim in Mulyasari Village and was aimed towards both men and women. For this reason Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah had an important role in the establishment of subsequent majelis ta’lim. As the oldest majelis ta’lim, Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah would train Islamic leaders that would then go on to establish and lead new majelis ta’lim. From the twenty-nine majelis ta’lim in Mulyasari Village, twenty-three are led and managed by alumni from Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah.

At the time of research Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah was led by KH. Hassan Basri. He inherited the leadership of the majelis ta’lim from his father KH. Zainal Arifin since the

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22 Interviews with a number of men and women in Bendungan Village, Mulyasari when filming for a participatory film project, December 2008.
23 Words of Ms Ai when reflecting with the WEMC RAHIMA team, February 2009.
24 Words of Ms Nining, Ms Dian, et al.
25 This was said by a religious leader when delivering material on majelis ta’lim January 2009, and reflected in the self-reflection with the WEMC RAHIMA research team in February 2009.
26 From an interview with KH Hasan Basri
The image he wishes to portray is that of a majelis ta’lim as a second home for members.

KH. Hasan Basri is a unique public figure. He has two daughters and one wife. Although his extended family hoped that he would produce a male heir to continue the family lineage, and even advised KH Hasan Basri to wed again. KH Hasan Basri rejected their advice. He said that he taught his daughters well so that they would continue his legacy. He sent his two daughters to receive a higher education at university. His first-born daughter, Fatimah, also a member of the research team, was the first member of her extended family to attend university, and the first women in the village to undertake post-graduate studies. KH Hasan Basri did face criticism for his actions, however he did not budge from his decision.

The Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah is run by four women. One of these women is Fatimah. This is uncommon as other majelis ta’lim in Mulyasari Village are generally run by men without any role for women.

The Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah has a forum for men and a forum for women. For men the forums are conducted on Friday morning and attended by approximately thirty men. There are forums for women almost every day. Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah has approximately sixty to seventy women members. The teachings for men are delivered by KH Hasan Basri himself, assisted by religious leaders who are alumni from the majelis ta’lim. The teachings for women are delivered by the female leaders of the majelis ta’lim and KH Hasan Basri.

Originally Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah combined teaching for men and women in one room where the teacher was in the centre, men were on one side of the room, and women were on the other side with no physical barrier between them. However, over the course of time, and as membership grew, and a new room was added, the male members were separated from the females.

Initially the Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah did not have a fixed curriculum, however usually the majelis ta’lim would teach the following Fiqh, Akhlak, and Tauhid, material:

- Fiqhul Ibadah, material related to spiritual practice such as Thaharah (purity), prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage. This material was delivered to men as well as women members.
- Fiqh Jinaayah, Islamic law: ‘legal principles in the Al-Qur’an and Hadith regarding crimes committed by Mukallaf and punishments’. An example is the Qishas law that states that punishment should be of equal value to the murder or injury committed. This material was delivered to both men and women members.
- Fiqhul Munakahah (marriage); although this material was delivered to both men and women, the focus was different. Men were taught to take responsibility as the head of the family, and to guide their children and wife in faith. Women, however were taught to ta’at to their husband, to not become a nusyuz (rebellious) towards her husband and to be sholehah.
- Fiqh Muamalah including discussion on property and ijab qabul (trade); this material was generally provided only to men with the rational being that women did not have many dealings with property and trade.

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27 Monday afternoon is for prayers, Tuesday afternoon for reciting the Al-Qur’an, Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning is for teaching material.
The material came from the book Madzahibul Arba’ah. However the Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah was more influenced by teachings from Mazhab Imam Syafei, although this other Islamic scholars were referred to according to the context.

Alongside Fiqh, Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah also taught about Akhlak (rules of behaviour) originating from the book Ta’lim Muta’allim. This material could be divided into two categories:

1. Akhlak Mahmudah (Good behaviour that should maintained); how to treat one’s parents, teachers, respect elders, love those younger than us, and respect and obey husbands.
2. Akhlak Madzmumah (Bad behaviour that should be avoided); behaviour that is not respectful such as adultery, drinking alcohol, not covering your genitals, and other immoral acts.

Faith in Allah including knowing about Allah, and his prophets was also taught at the Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah, making reference to the Ad-Daruri. For women, the teaching method used was sermons, where the Islamic teacher delivered the material in a one-way forum without any questions from the audience. However for men, the material was delivered by a sermon from the Islamic teacher, followed by the opportunity for questions. According to KH Hasan Basri, generally women members did not ask questions, and the religious leaders assumed that the reason for this was that the women already understood, so they did not pressure the women to ask questions. This is different to men who usually asked questions of their own accord.

III. Majelis Ta’lim as a Public Arena for Women; Religion and Religious Institutions as a Medium for Women’s Empowerment

Mini-skirts do not constitute development
Also it’s not see-through (clothing) that is meant by modernity
But technology and knowledge
Together with akhlakul karimah
We see so many teenagers today
That think they’re advanced and modern
But it is only extravagance and shouting
They don’t want to study, they don’t want to pray
This is truly a violation of religion

(a Qasidah song sung by women from the Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah 23/04/2010)

For the women in Mulyasari Village, knowledge and education are considered to be very important in their lives. Almost half of the participants in focus groups or interviews said that the most important source of power for women was education and knowledge, either formal or informal. The source of this education and knowledge could come from anywhere, including knowledge and education from formal education, education from the family, as a living close to a pesantren, or other religious education forums such as majelis ta’lim, pesantren, and Islamic schools. Others also felt that education and knowledge could come from government sponsored activities, run through the village governance such as KF, PKK, and health post programs.

We conducted in-depth interviews with more than twenty-four participants. We also conducted observation of the daily lives of women there. Participants said that during
their childhood and adolescence, between 1970 and 1980, formal education (primary, junior high school, senior high school) was not easy to access. The majority of them stated that graduating from primary school or lower was their highest formal educational attainment. Majelis ta’lim have been used by women as an easily accessible places to obtain religious education for a long time. There have been many opportunities to gain other knowledge (apart from religious knowledge) at the majelis ta’lim also. The ability to access this knowledge is due not only to the close physical proximity of majelis ta’lim, but also because women do not have to gain the permission of their husbands to go to the majelis ta’lim as they would to go to other places. This provides an opportunity for women to escape from their routine duties as a wife or mother.

Women have learnt from their own experiences of not obtaining a tertiary education. Although they have a low levels of formal educational attainment, they wish for their children to receive good educations. A number of initiatives to achieve this were explained by the participants.

“Education for my child should be maximal, as high as possible. I hope that I can afford it, and that my children will become pious, desires to learn, however possible, my children should continue their education as far as possible” (NN)

“I don’t want my children to experience the same, I encourage my children to get a higher education. I want to find funding in the near future to open a small canteen so that I can further the education of my children. I also want to find a scholarship for my child, because my child is the star of the class and is never surpassed by classmates. I don’t want the my bitter experience to be repeated again” (Sn)

After starting a family, children became women’s first priority. This meant that women made personal sacrifices in terms of education for the sake of their children. Strategies used by the women included educating their children first, to a certain age, so that they themselves could further their education without the burden of leaving a young child.

“Maybe after my second child is grown up, I can continue schooling. I have an unfilled desire to go to university, because previously I decided to immediately marry” (Yl, Wednesday 8 August 2007 9:30-10:30)

There were also participants that wanted to further their education despite having children, by following the packet B education program.

“Because education is so important, regardless of my age I want to have graduated from junior high school, so that when my children go to school they will be enthusiastic. So that they know the importance of education, and even people my age can attend school. This will give them more motivation. Actually I often encourage children who are reluctant to attend school, my neighbours. So if they see me, someone who once dropped out, is now going to school again”

For them education and prayer are two related concepts and are regarded as important to fulfilling their religious duties.

*Majlis Ta’lim as a Place for Women to Obtain Knowledge*
For women who have missed out on obtaining formal education, majelis ta’lim are an easily accessible forum for study, especially for studying religion. The word tholab (searching for knowledge) is often used by research participants who feel that majelis ta’lim are accessible to them even though they are already old or already married.

“Because I’m maybe already old, so, maybe I will just go to the majelis ta’lim” (Sn)

“But I’m old, so it is not possible anymore to obtain formal education, I can still seek knowledge through the majelis ta’lim because my husband never forbids it. As long as I want to. Because apart from the majelis ta’lim, what else is there oohhh. Here there is nothing else” (Sn, Yt, Heni).

ASR for example said that going to the majelis ta’lim is for her a chance to obtain tholab (knowledge). She even searches for knowledge in majelis ta’lim outside of Mulyasari Village to increase her overall knowledge. Although she does have to divide her time so that she can finish the housework before going out.

“If Ms Mah, for example has an activity at the Islamic school that is in a different village and some distance away, I must wake at three in the morning. Sometimes at three in the morning I will tidy, wash, cook, doo the dishes, and then go to the school at nine or ten o’clock. When I return from the school I cook again in the house, so that if my husband comes home the cooking is done. Sometimes if he has not come home, I go out again, to the school again, I might meet with my husband again at maghrib (afternoon prayers). Then at night he asks me, where did you go before, and I say to the school in Ciroyom or Babakan (outside of Mulyasari Village). Because my husband never forbids me to go and is not angry.” (Thursday, 23 August 2007).

Majelis ta’lim may influence the daily life of research participants as was illustrated in the following statements:

“It’s like I was ignorant and now I know” (Sn)

“If we go to the majelis ta’lim then automatically we gain new knowledge” (Hn)

“Yeah, to increase our knowledge” (Yt)

Majelis ta’lim also become a source of knowledge for them in conducting their duties as wives.

“One advantage of the majelis ta’lim is that we try to be pious wives that respect our husbands, that can educate our children in religion, and what else... according to religion pious women should respect their husbands, pray five times a day, fast during Ramadan, these are obligations” (ESJ)

“There is an influence, so it balances, mutual respect, mutual understanding, so if we talk about that, the rights of women and men are discussed. Also in the male group, women’s rights are discussed” (NN)

“...Mutual respect. Because if you go to the majelis ta’lim you maybe already know, or if the majelis ta’lim teaches it that men discuss the rights of women, and also the opposite is true, there is no chance of dispute between the rights of men and husbands. This we know. But even though ,the rank of men is higher than that of women, maybe like that.” (Et)
The views on the rights of men and women gained from the majelis ta‘lim were still traditional. Majelis ta‘lim also provide religious knowledge.

“About praying, charity, fasting, pilgrimage etc. We learn about the way to pray, the method, way to read, and types of prayer. There is the fardu prayer, sunnat prayer, also about thaharoh, like ritual washing, there is lots, just talking about fiqh there is a lot of material. (Sn)

“And how to perfect our praying, especially prayer, washing, how to be pious to Allah, that can’t be seen with the naked eye. Akhlak such as when a mother gives advice to her children.” (NN)

Almost all of the women respondents participated in majelis ta‘lim in their own areas. There were activities almost every day, although research participants only went once a week. However there were also women who always visited a number of majelis ta‘lim because they had spare time, like ARS. In addition to filling her time, she also provided an example to other women around her to follow her footsteps in studying in majelis ta‘lim that she visited. Her position as a public figure made other women imitate her actions as illustrated in the following words:

“the Majelis Ta’lim Alhamdulillah is also active, even as far as in Ciroym, Babakan (outside of Mulyasari Village), before I was reluctant to invite neighbours, I went alone. Then the other women started to say, Ms Lurah (title for a village leader or wife of a village leader) you often go to Ciroym, to Babakan, we want to go too. Soo, now there are many who go along to the Majelis Ta’lim outside of the village too. The main point I’m making is that Alhamdulillah is beneficial. (ARS. Thursday, 23 August 2007)

Not only are majelis ta‘lim the closest and most easily accessible places to obtain knowledge, they are also a place of social interaction with other women. In addition, according to the stories of women, majelis ta‘lim are a place for women to move freely outside of the home. The routine activities at the majelis ta‘lim mean that women do not have to obtain the permission of their husbands to go out to the majelis ta‘lim. This is different from other activities in which women must communicate with their husbands first, so that their husbands are not inconvenienced.

“He provided his consent from the beginning. My husband also lets me go wherever I want. Like now my husband is in Jakarta, because he already knows, I don’t have to ask permission again. Except if there is a new thing, like now, where do I want to go, something new. Like to the government health post I don’t have to ask permission either, because he already knows my activities. (Eet Nurhayati, Sunday, 8 February 2009 11:00-14:00)

“My husband never forbids it, he will even sometimes remind me if I forget. Like now, today is Monday, isn’t there a prayer, oh yeah, I will say. But if I’m busy, or can’t be bothered, even though my husband reminds me, I just say, look I’m not going to the school today because I can’t be bothered or I have a lot of work to do, like that.” (Siti Rokoyah, Sunday, 7 September 2008 6:00-7:30)

“Sometimes I say, sometimes I don’t. The thing is my husband never tells me to go, or forbids me from going to the majelis ta’lim.” (Eni Suhartini, Sunday, 28 July 2008, 17:00-19:30).
“It’s not like that...it’s like, it’s already a habit” (Hayati, Wednesday 11 March 2009 13.30 – 16.20)

“Yeah before maybe, but now I don’t have to ask permission every time I go to the majelis ta’lim because my husband already knows” (Uus Darusiyah)

*Majelis ta’lim* were considered to be an appropriate and positive activity for women so husbands did not have the ability to forbid their women from going to the *majelis ta’lim*. They were more likely to question why their wives had not gone to the *majelis ta’lim*. This is because in traditional Islam it is the role of the husband to lead the family and to direct his wife and family to be pious and gain religious knowledge. By providing permission for wives to go to the majelis ta’lim, husbands were actively directing their wives to gain religious knowledge, so that the burden of teaching religion to their wives was lessened. Yet the permission from a husband was often only in the form of a wife telling her husband as a token of her respect for him, because in actual fact this activity is already a routine activity of women in Mulyasari Village. This is what one participant said:

“Yes, I asked for his consent. But it is like this, if I want to go anywhere, within one month, he also understands, but I always ask permission not because it is my religious obligation but because I respect my husband, because my husband, although he is a man and does not have to ask the permission of his wife to do anything, also always asks permission. Because of this it is easy if something has to be done. So he, wherever he goes always asks my permission, and in return I also ask his permission.” (Nining)

“Yes I agree. The thing is that women firstly have to respect their husbands, if they don’t ask permission this becomes something to be questioned. So I always ask permission, even though the aim is good. So that there nothing will happen, it is a sign that I respect him. And if I want to go out I always say Assalamu’alaikum, dear... I want to go to the majelis ta’lim, this is already asking permission.” (Nining, Wednesday, 28 January 2009, 11:30-14:30)

IV. Action Research that Brings About Change: *Majelis Ta’lim* that Empower Women

*Majelis ta’lim* in Mulyasari already had a place in the hearts of women before the existence of the WEMC program. *Majelis ta’lim* were already an alternative space for women to find knowledge, socialize, and escape from their daily routines. The WEMC team saw this as an opportunity to raise women’s empowerment from within; by the community itself, namely through the pioneering of Fatimah as a women who lived in the area and through an institution that was already an integral part of their lives.

WEMC activities through the Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah were fully supported by its leader, KH Hasan Basri. The Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah became a centre of WEMC activities conducted by Fatimah. Fatimah conducted the role of WEMC researcher attempting to expose a number of women’s views about empowerment and discussing a number of issues related to the empowerment of women in Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah. In quickly taking the initiative to investigate information to document she also attempted to change the pattern and materials taught at Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah.
After consulting with the WEMC research team, Fatimah suggested the possibility of changing the material taught and teaching methods in the Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah to her father, KH Hasan Basri. Fatimah also showed some new information sources to KH Hasan Basri. Because of the close relationship between Fatimah and her father, and also because of the open-mindedness of KH Hasan Basri, Fatimah’s idea to try new methods, a more fluid sermon, and the opportunity for two-way dialogue, were received. These suggestions arose from the results of interviews Fatimah conducted with women participants where Fatimah sought the views of women members of many majelis ta’lim, not only Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah. Fatimah asked the women if they could follow the lecture at the majelis ta’lim and whether they understood what was explained by the Islamic teacher. Generally they said that they understood, but they felt dissatisfied with the explanations and wished that they could ask questions. They wanted to ask about the lesson given to them and how it was related to the problems that they faced in their daily lives. However they did not ask questions. Fatimah asked them why they did not ask questions and they replied that they were never given the opportunity to ask questions. Fatimah thought that this was an important issue and talked with the other members of the WEMC research team. The result of these discussions was that they would attempt a more participatory method (providing an opportunity for questions and discussion). The team knew that the participatory method with two-way conversation was not a new innovation, but was already widely known in the field of religious education as muzakarah.

After convincing KH Hasan Basri of the importance of a change in teaching methods, KH Hasan Basri prepared the next session of the majelis ta’lim using participatory methods. This was followed by Fatimah, when it was Fatimah’s turn to teach. The response from the members was positive. On the first occasion only two members were confident enough to ask questions, however in the next sessions increasingly more women gained the confidence to ask questions too.

Fatimah and KH Hasan Basri did not only trial participatory teaching methods, they also added additional teaching material about the high rate of maternal mortality in Indonesia, the danger of HIV/AIDS, and reproductive health. This material was obtained by Fatimah from leaflets published by Yayasan Kesehatan Perempuan (The Women’s Health Foundation) and from other WEMC researchers. Fatimah delivered this material taking into account the context and realities faced by the people of the area. This was not related to religious knowledge. However KH Hasan Basri, explored the issue from the perspective of religious texts on Islam and health. Fatimah and KH Hasan Basri even suggested that Fatimah research the existing texts to illustrate and explain the reality Fatimah wanted to address. KH Hasan Basri and Fatimah even mutalaah (explored in depth) the Hadith together until they found references from a religious perspective. This ensured that teaching was still related to religious values. Fatimah felt that people had more respect and were more willing to listen to her when she mastered and used religious references, as suggested by KH Hasan Basri.

Table 1: Changes in the material taught in Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah before and after interacting with WEMC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Before WEMC</th>
<th>After WEMC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Fiqh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiqhul Ibada</td>
<td>Mahdzah worship: practices that focused on the relationship with God</td>
<td>Ghair mahdzah worship: religious practices that focused on the relationship with God and with other people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fiqhul Munakahah (marriage)</strong></td>
<td>Explained to men and women with the emphasis: Men are responsible for leading the family, and guiding their children and wives in religion. Women are to be respectful to their husbands, not rebel, and become pious women.</td>
<td>Discussed with men and with women but with a different emphasis. Whereas before there was a different emphasis for men and women’s groups, now it is the same. The material emphasises how husband and wife can work together in the home to create a home that is sakinah, mawaddah, and warahmah.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fiqh Muamalah including a discussion of ijab qabul (trade)</strong></td>
<td>Only discussed with men</td>
<td>Discussed with men and women with the assumption that women needed to know Fiqh Muamalah so that this knowledge could be used by women according to the reality that they were already involved in the economic sphere.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>References</strong></td>
<td>Madzahibul Arba’ah, I’anatutthalibin, Fathul Mu’in</td>
<td>Madzahibul Arba’ah, I’anatutthalibin, Fathul Mu’in, Fiqh for women, general books and leaflets (from the organizations Swara Rahima and The Women’s Health Foundation), WEMC literature reviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Akhlak</strong></td>
<td><strong>Akhlak Mahmudah (Positive Akhlak/Praised)</strong></td>
<td>Explanations emphasised that women must shalehah. Explanations were more general, not only women but also men must shalehah (there is equality between men and women).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Akhlak Madzmumah (Negative Akhlak/Condemned)</strong></td>
<td>Rebellious women, Perempuan, Nusyudz, and the punishment for women who are rebellious and Nusyudz</td>
<td>The concept of rebellion is not only applied to women, but also to men who commit domestic violence, and who don’t support their wives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>References</strong></td>
<td>Sullamuttaufiq</td>
<td>Shahih Bukhari, Shahih Muslim, Ihya Ulum al-Din Al-Ghazali</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strong opposition was encountered from another leader of Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah who did not agree with the changes to teaching methods and materials. Fatimah, and the material she presented were criticized in front of members of the majelis ta’lim, however KH Hasan Basan was not openly criticized. The members were momentarily confused and unsure of who to believe. Fatimah consulted again with KH Hasan Basri and the WEMC research team. KH Hasan Basri became a mediator between the two, and explained that the new methods should have been implemented from the beginning because they bring greater benefits to the members. Prior to this Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah did not have a curriculum, leaving the teaching material to the discretion of individual teachers. The WEMC ran a program that involved all of the religious teachers in Mulyasari Village. In addition to increasing the reach of the program, this was an indirect way of addressing criticism faced in Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah by systematically assisting them to create a curriculum.

The WEMC held the Workshop on Developing Methods and Curriculum for majelis ta’lim. It was attended by twenty-three male religious teachers and two female religious teachers, a total of twenty-seven teachers from Mulyasari Village. The outcomes of this workshop was the increased awareness that methods used until that point had not provided an opportunity for women to actively participate and ask questions, which had
resulted in limiting the effectiveness of women's sessions in *majelis ta’lim* to increase the knowledge and understanding of women. The religious teachers then developed a curriculum for the *majelis ta’lim* throughout Mulyasari Village including materials, methods, and references. The curriculum included two sections, classical and actual.

1. The classical section included material related to *Tauhid, Fiqh, and Akhlak*. This was designed to be taught separately to men and women. The difference within this material is especially apparent in the *Akhlak* (behaviour) section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Akhlakul Karimah; Good behavior</td>
<td>Manners, Obligations of children to their parents, Shodaqoh, Respect for others, Helping others, Fostering good relations with others</td>
<td>Sincerity, Patient/Kind thoughts, Trust in God, Khauf/Tawakkal/Welas, Syukur/Rahima, Tawadhu/Dermawan, PKK, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Akhlakul Madzmumah; Behaviour that should be avoided | Envy, Arrogance, Polythesism, Riya, Swearing, Gambling, Drinking alcohol, Adultery | Ujub/Bahil/Kikir, Pride, Unkind thoughts, Vanity, Jealousy, Envy/spite |

| Social Activities | Helping your neighbours, Arisan (a type of savings club), Working together, Community health post |

2. The actual section of the curriculum also showed a difference between men and women. For women, the material reflected issues that directly affected the lives of women based on the need to fulfil women's rights. Whereas for men, the material focused on avoiding behaviour that would endanger women.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Workers (ie. maids)</td>
<td>Reproductive health, family planning, assistance during childbirth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contractual marriages, marriage over the telephone</td>
<td>Domestic violence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is interesting that in the material for *Akhlakul Madzmumah* there was still a tendency to emphasise the role of gender on men and women. Existing stereotypes can be seen in the way that men were viewed as the ‘protectors’ of behaviour, and that social activities only applied to women.

In addition to different material, the references used were also different. A number of references have been taken from general books related to themes discussed. Differences have also emerged in the methods used. Previously, methods used at women's *majelis ta’lim* were limited to sermons, however the new curriculum uses a variety of methods, not only one way sermons, but also opportunities for questions, discussions, and practicals where needed.
At Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah there was a significant change. Now all material delivered involves two ways dialogue and the opportunity for anyone to ask questions. Not only this, but members are also able to suggest themes they wish to discuss. One teacher, who initially refused to allow questions, has now changed their gender based assumptions and has begun to change their methods. Now they are open to a two-way dialogue.

Another difference is in the congregations themselves. Prior to working with WEMC, the congregation of Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayaya were all married women, now there is a tendency for unmarried women and teenagers to also attend. Teenagers are interested in joining the majelis ta’lim because they find that the information gained at Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayaya is relevant to themselves as women. The majelis ta’lim is not only used for religious activities but has also become the place for focus group discussions, gender workshops, and other activities.

This is what some research participants thought about the new teaching methods at Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah.

“It feels like normal, but there is also a change. Now we have the opportunity to ask questions to those who are brave enough to answer, but yesterday also if they are already used to discussions, but for those that aren’t or are not confident enough, we just follow along. For the methods, yeah they are great, so there is an opportunity for people in the congregation not to be shy forever, because if we have the chance to discuss, our horizons will widen because it adds a new skill, the confidence to ask and answer questions” (Enung, Member of the Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah congregation)

“It’s great in my opinion, but I don’t know why I am still too shy to participate in the discussion, but when I hear other people discussing, I feel happy” (Uus Sofiyah, research participant)

“It’s fantastic, we have many opportunities to ask questions, and we have the space to ask questions, for me that is really great yeah” (Nining, research participant)

“It’s really good, so if we still don’t quite understand we can ask directly, yeah, although we don’t have to lose the sermon. But it’s good to have the sermon first, and then questions, so it’s complete” (Een Siti Jenab, research participant)

The change is not only in the method of delivery, but also in the material itself, not only religious knowledge, but also knowledge about raising children, self-confidence, and expressing an opinion.

“…..like increasing our knowledge about religious activities, now we can teach our children to also be more patient and to direct our children. Especially now as children today have been bombarded with all types of information from outside, like what is on TV. Because my knowledge is very limited, adding to it with what I learn at the majelis ta’lim I think it’s better” (Nn)

“…for example when we teach our children, it can be better” (Rk)

“…finally we can talk together with the other mothers, usually we just chit-chat, without any direction or purpose. We just gossip about celebrities, films, and the
like. But now...I feel that mothers are happy with activities like this. So we can all share our experiences..."

V. The Result of Changes at the Majelis Ta’lim for Women

The researchers identified that the changes that have occurred at majelis ta’lim have had an effect, primarily on the ability of women to assert themselves and negotiate within the family, community, and local government. The majelis ta’lim also raised issues in the community that had previously been considered personal problems that were played down, such as high infant mortality rates. The issue of infant mortality was explored by the community of Mulyasari Village and there was a growing awareness that this was a community issue. There was awareness that children grow not only individually, but also as part of a community.

Raising the Ability of Women to Assert Themselves and Negotiate within the Family

When the researchers entered Mulyasari Village and conducted interviews to discover the views of research participants on gender roles and relations, they discovered, women generally had the opinion that men made decisions in the home. Husbands were leaders, and for this reason whatever was decided by the husband had to be obeyed. Over time we saw that the roles and views of research participants were not static, but dynamic. This was analysed as a result of the discussions researchers had via the Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah.

One researcher from WEMC SCN CREST, Fatimah, conducted change from the inside. As one of the teachers there, she had direct access to the Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah. She didn’t only try to change the way in which teachers delivered material, but also changed the material being delivered. Fatimah was supported by the WEMC SCN CREST research team who invited members of the congregation to discuss problems faced by women in majelis ta’lim. This occurred on many occasions with discussions on various different themes, such as a discussion on infant mortality rates, women’s health, women’s leadership, and women as good community cadres.

Usually Fatimah began by explaining the material on themes suggested by members of the congregation. After the explanation, the researchers continued with discussion and dialogue. Explanations and discussions were conducted in Sundanese language because many of the women present did not fully comprehend Indonesian. Fortunately three of the researchers spoke Sundanese. In addition to the explanation in the form of a sermon or presentation, the researchers also acted as facilitators, guiding the flow of discussion between those with questions and those who had the answers. It was not only the teacher that had answers.

In addition, the team ran gender training sessions and made a film with the research participants. This exercise was planned to document if there was a change in the understandings of gender when women received different information. A number of changes were noted as a result of our interaction between women members of the majelis ta’lim.

Firstly, participants became more confident in expressing their opinions and discussing issues with their husbands. They discussed whatever they learned at the majelis ta’lim with their husbands.
“When I return from any activity I share with my husband. And he generally understands, sometimes he doesn’t quite get it, but I keep talking and eventually he connects...” (Nining)

“If I follow a gathering like this, he likes to ask ‘what did you discuss?’ Then I say, this, this, and this, and he says ‘ooooohhh...now I get it’ Yeah like that”.

The husbands who were participants in the research also followed the WEMC activities at the majelis ta’lim intensively, and began to ask about the themes discussed. This created an opportunity for women to discuss these themes with their husbands. Consequently, they felt that communication with their husbands had improved.

“When my husband asks like this ‘what do you talk about, isn’t that like women’s empowerment, if at the school like that?’ and I say ‘yeah that too’, and after following like this, yeah, thanks be to God, my husband also supports it. Yesterday he asked Fatimah, ‘tomorrow Lely will be there too right’ she said ‘yes, she’ll be there’, so he already knows, and I thank God that he knows”

Nining, for instance, already felt that she could communicate and did not always accept her husband’s views as absolute. She expressed the view that decisions are not absolute if they are made by the husband without consultation with his wife. The same view was expressed by Eet when she said:

“Sometimes my husband, sometimes he agrees with me. If I respect him, he asks me first, he says it like that, and I agree with him, then we agree, so there is discussion first.” (Eet Nurhayati).

Secondly, from the process of discussion and increased ability to communicate, women began to gain more self-confidence to negotiate with their husbands and other members of their families that previously had held special rights within the family. They also became aware that there were legal rights to protect women. They felt as if they had the foundation to express their opinions and negotiate with their husbands and other family members. A number of women were successful in increasing their husbands willingness to help around the house.

The story of Uus Darusiyah: Negotiating with her Husband and Sons

In the beginning she obeyed whatever her husband commanded, including when her husband decided that their first child would not continue his school studies. Yet after participating in gender training, she gained confidence to express her opinion and argued with her husband that their second child should continue to attend school until graduating from junior high school. Eventually her husband agreed with her decision.

Within the home Uus was exhausted by having to wash the clothes of her husband and her sons, even though her sons were already adults. After participating in gender training she became aware that washing did not have to be done only by women, men could also wash. She asked that her sons wash their own clothes, and they agreed.

“Yeah, we like to work together, help each other out. Sometimes if I get home from school, just in time to cook rice, it’s already done. Or sometimes in the
morning it’s already cooked, that rice is there, the rest too, so I don’t have the hassle anymore” (Hayati)

Women felt content and happy to participate in activities at the Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah and not only to talk about knowledge and religion. According to them they obtain new and different experiences and knowledge. The women felt joy at being released from their duties and problems at home.

In addition, they gained new friends and were able to foster good relations with the other women of Mulyasari Village. A number of activities conducted at the Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah also raised the interest of men who also hope to gain similar knowledge and skills. A number of the husbands who were participants in this research and a other men who communicated their views through Nining’s husband, noticed that different activities were being conducted at the majelis ta’lim and expressed a desire that similar activities be arranged for men.

Transforming Private Issues into Community Issues

The researchers observed a growing awareness amongst the members of the majelis ta’lim. This occurred not only at an individual level, but also at a community level in relation to a number of issues, especially the high rates of infant mortality and the role of men within the household. This awareness also encouraged women to negotiate with the public authorities (religious leaders and village governance).

In one lecture, Fatimah explained her own experience, and the experience of her family to the congregation. Fatimah was the first child to live after her mother was pregnant and gave birth five times. The siblings that came before her all died in infancy. Fatimah also shared information that she had obtained from the Public Health Foundation (an NGO in Jakarta) that gave particular attention to reproductive health issues. Basically Fatimah explained to the members that the infant mortality rate was a national issue. Fatimah, through her lecture, invited women to pay attention to the facts and realities that influenced such a high infant mortality rate in Mulyasari Village. Those who attended became aware that they had almost all experienced the loss of an infant. This included Oom, who had become pregnant and given birth six times, but not one of the babies had survived. Siti Rokoyah had given birth five times, but only two of those children had lived.

During the discussion, one member, Uus Darusiyah asked how many infant deaths had been experienced by other women in Mulysari Village. She later met Fatimah and they decided to conduct a simple survey together. Fatimah and Uus agreed to conduct interviews with fourteen women and the results surprised them both. The rate of infant mortality reported was very high. When Fatimah shared her experience with members of the research team from outside of Mulyasari Village, the research team suggested making a systematic record to further the work initiated by Fatimah and Uus.

Fatimah and Uus then collected data in four neighbourhoods named RT01/RW03, RT02/RW03, RT03/RW03, and RT02/RW01 as an initial sample.

Survey Results and Experiences of Infant Mortality Amongst Women in Mulyasari Village
RT 01 RW 03: houses forty-three families with approximately twenty women who had experienced a death of their infant or child. On average one child had died in each family.

RT 02 RW 03 (Sukamanah village); from the twenty women in this neighbourhood, twelve had experienced the death of their infant. Approximately forty-eight infants and children had died in the neighbourhood meaning that on average each of these women lost one to four children each. The most dramatic tale was of one woman, Uneh, otherwise referred to as Uun, who had given birth twenty-five times and had twenty-one children pass away. Only four of her children remain. Yet only two women in this neighbourhood had experienced miscarriages.

RT 04/RW 01; housed seventy-one women that had married and given birth, yet only twenty-four children had survived. There was a total of one-hundred-and-ten infant deaths in this neighbourhood. This dramatic figure was the worst of all the neighbourhoods surveyed.

“The results of this data collection were conveyed to the WEMC research participants who interacted intensively with the WEMC program. They were shocked at the reality of high rates of infant mortality in Mulyasari Village. Initially there were unaware that similar fates had been experienced by other women in Mulyasari Village. We felt confused. Why were the rates of infant mortality so high? And what could we do about it? We made an agreement to take action. We wanted this problem to be brought to the attention of many people, so we raised awareness throughout the majelis ta’lim, because the majelis ta’lim provided access to the majority of the public of Mulyasari Village. We made a schedule of awareness raising activities to majelis ta’lim outside of the Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah. (Fatima’s story, one of the research team and also a citizen of Mulyasari Village).

The researchers then compiled the data into a power point presentation to make it easier for the women to communicate their findings. because the women themselves wished to present the data to other majelis ta’lim in Mulyasari Village. They conducted awareness raising to a number of different majelis ta’lim including, Majelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah (Bendungan village 04/01), Majelis Ta’lim Roudlotus-Shibyan (Cipeujeuh Kaler village 02/04), Majelis Ta’lim Al-Balad (Cipeujeuh Kidul village 01/04), Majelis Ta’lim Al-Ikhlas (Kebonkalapa village 02/02), and Majelis Ta’lim Roudlotun-Nisa (Sukamanah village 02/03).

In addition to distributing information regarding the infant mortality rates amongst majelis ta’lim, the research participants also wanted this information to be heard by greater numbers of people, including the citizens of Mulyasari village, local government officers, and citizens of other villages. So they discussed and determined that the most effective means of communication to spread the message to a wide number of people would be via film. Producing a film was agreed to by Fatimah and gained the assistance of the WEMC SCN CREST and RAHIMA teams together with research participants. The next step was to run a film making course, this course aimed to teach participants how to use film as a media for communication as well as the technical aspects including how to shoot using cameras, and design scenarios to film that would be an appropriate way to convey their message. WEMC assisted to create a good quality film. When the film had been completed and the women had viewed the result themselves, they wished to show the film to the village governors.
Increased awareness and a desire to work together to address high infant mortality rates did not occur automatically. Shortly after the issue had been raised, and during the data collection, various conflicts arose.

**Firstly**, conflict between the participants of WEMC research themselves. A number of the participants had a role as health cadres or at the local government health posts. They felt cornered and threatened by this issue. The felt that this issue could cause people to think that they were not doing their jobs effectively and had failed. They also didn’t agree that a film about infant mortality be shown widely within Mulyasari Village. Yet other participants who were not cadre of the health posts wished for the film to be shown widely. They began to feel frustrated with the cadre whom they felt often pressured women to go to the health post to the point that women began to actively avoid the health post.

**Secondly**, conflict arose between the participants and government authorities, the authorities felt that the participants had defamed the good name of the village that until then had been considered an ‘alert village’ meaning that they provided good health services, particularly to women and children.

In regards to this conflict, Fatimah often had to act as a mediator and facilitate meetings. Meetings to overcome conflict were usually conducted in two stages. Firstly, Fatimah would approach the individuals engaged in conflict, explore the problem, and then try to clarify and confirm what was really happening and then try to make the person aware that the issue of infant mortality rates was everybody’s problem, and that only the people of Mulyasari Village could change the problem for the better. After individually approaching each cadre, Fatimah arranged a meeting for the two sides involved in the conflict. In this meeting Fatimah, assisted by the WEMC SCN CREST and RAHIMA facilitated the meeting, inviting the two sides to speak frankly, explain how they were feeling, and to find the best strategy to overcome the problem of infant mortality that was being experienced by the people of Mulyasari Village.

Fatimah’s efforts were successful, and the two quarrelling parties reconciled. Not only this but they realized that the problem of high infant mortality rates was a problem they shared together and must work together to overcome.

Meanwhile in regards to the village authorities, a number of participants obtained information that village authorities, in particular the village head and his wife were feeling wary of the research activities and agenda of WEMC in the Mejelis Ta’lim Al-Bidayah. The village head warned the health cadres not to provide information to the WEMC team. Fatimah was suspected to be a ‘journalist’ who would provide information to third parties. This made Fatimah nervous, but she gained confidence from the support of her father, KH Hasan Basri and the WEMC team. Other WEMC researchers reminded her that in the process of women’s empowerment there were always going to be setbacks. This occurred because questioning and re-evaluation of power relations is often met with resistance from those who benefit from the status quo. Fatimah had received information from the health post cadre that 2009 funds for the health post had been divvied up between the village head and village authorities at the beginning of the year. The village head and his authorities were worried that Fatimah’s research would uncover this corruption.

Fatimah gained confidence from the WEMC research participants who desired that that issue of high infant mortality rates be raised, and were not afraid of the village head’s
anger. They felt that risks and efforts must be undertaken to reveal the truth. To support these women, WEMC invited a qualified doctor to explain issues of reproductive health. This increased the women’s knowledge of reproductive health issues and behaviours that influenced infant mortality rates. The team also invited a representative from the health department to inform residents directly of government programs related to health that could be accessed by women in Mulyasari Village. During this meeting with the regional department of health, women heard directly that there were free family planning programs available, free medicine and free healthcare, especially for maternal health and child delivery, that could be accessed by women via midwives, local health centres, or local public hospitals. This knowledge became a source of ammunition for WEMC research participants to access their rights.

At the same time, to reduce the tensions between the village leader and Fatimah and the research participants, RAHIMA supported Fatima and the women to hold an activity that would unite and involve many parties from within the community. They held a *qasidah* contest where contestants performed songs about women’s rights. The contest was enjoyed by the community, and attended by the village head and authorities. The judges were religious leaders from the area. Following the *qasidah* contest, the *majelis ta’lim* became more lively, with women always creating opportunities to sing songs with tambourines. The relationship with the village head also improved. The village head attended, and also opened the event in which women held discussions with doctors and the Cianjur health department.

**Negotiating with Public Authorities**

The research participants began to gain confidence in negotiating with public authorities, religious public figures, and village governors. Previously these women were seldom involved and rarely communicated with religious public figures and village governors. They were housewives that spent their time doing housework. The new awareness raised in the *majelis ta’lim* with WEMC on the issue of high infant mortality rates had transformed them. They were confident in meeting with the management of *majelis ta’lim* to ask for rooms to hold meetings and give presentations.

One woman in particular, Uus, went to the village government and requested that women be involved in the MKP (Special Women’s Consultation) forum as part of a national program that was currently being run in the village, the People’s National Empowerment Program. Uus, suggested that it was important to place the issue of infant mortality rate as a priority within the village program. Her suggestion was not accommodated by the committee of the Mulyasari Village program as they had already decided that the program would focus on improving the road in Sukamanah village, however it is significant that she raised her opinion. The WEMC research participants did not support upgrading the road, as they felt that health was a more urgent concern for the people of Mulyasari Village.

**VI. Conclusions**

28 The discussion was run in April 2010 as an event signalling the conclusion of the WEMC program in Mulyasari Village

29 The *Qasidah* contest was run during March 2010

30 This discussion was run in April 2010 as stated in the previous paragraph
This research proves that religious spaces can be used and redefined for the interests of women. Majelis ta’lim, although vulnerable to political co-optation and often internalize traditional gender roles, can be used for the purpose of women’s empowerment.

Before the WEMC action research program, majelis ta’lim had some benefits for women. Majelis ta’lim provided a safe space for women to study religion, an important element of their lives. Yet through the WEMC, majelis ta’lim were not only used for the development of religion, but also for the development of knowledge that benefits the whole congregation, particularly the female congregation.

Introducing the perspectives of women’s rights and justice to the majelis ta’lim empowered women to gain additional bargaining power with those in a position of authority: the men in their homes, local government, religious leaders. They were even able to take a problem from the private sphere and transform it into a public issue that deserved attention from a variety of actors.
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