

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

A JOURNEY TO THE WORLD WITHOUT HUSBAND

By: Nani Zulminarni

“You are a divorced?? So, how can you possibly be the coordinator of this national program if you can't even look after your own husband? Look at you, your husband divorced you”. *This sentence was expressed very blatantly and insultingly by Pak Kecik (the Village Head) at a meeting with members of the women headed households (Pekka) in a village in Kecamatan Idi Rayeuk, Nangroe Aceh Darussalam, when they found out that I was a divorced widow with three children.*

It hurts, of course. In the past, I didn't believe that people in general would look down, despise and tend to blame women who became single parent due to a divorce. But my status as a divorced and my job as coordinator of an empowerment program for women headed households, a majority of the members being widows, have proven that these things do happen. Being a widow is a disgrace, because the status of a widow means that she had weaknesses as a woman and a wife in her marriage. People never want to look at the various factors that were the reasons, as well as the condition of the women who became widows. People tend to judge them and cruelly put a bad label on these widows. It is no surprise that a lot of women work so hard to make their marriage work, in spite of the violent and unfair treatments they had to endure. A friend of mine was even willing to keep her bloody marriage going – her husband beats her up regularly – simply because she feels that she can't bear the status of a widow. Many other widows are also ashamed to mention their status, and so they try to hide it. Although people more understand and respect women who became widows because their husband had died, however, people make the same demands from them and expect likewise, i.e. they should not remarry – because getting remarried means that the woman is “cheap”, so people expect that they behave “properly” like the traditional image of women.

So it is indeed *totally wrong* to be a widow. Even women in general frequently sense that having a widow around them means a threat, because they are afraid that their husband might be attracted to the widow, particularly if the widow is young and attractive. Men, on the other hand, tend to regard widows as weak and lonely creatures who should be seduced or even utilized to satisfy their libido. Some people even look at a widow as a used item which has no value. Therefore, it is not surprising that we often hear the word “widow” used as a topic for people to laugh about in many formal as well as informal discussions. Just look at the cynical laughs that we often hear when people hear the words in the “Cucakrowo” song that has become so popular these days.

Kucoba-coba melempar manggis (I tried to throw a mangosteen)

Manggis kulempar, mangga kudapat (I threw the mangosteen, but got a mango instead)

Kucoba-coba melamar gadis (I tried to propose to a girl)

Gadis kulamar, janda kudapat (I proposed to a girl, but got a widow instead)

My interest in the life of widows began in mid-2000, when Kamala Chandra Kirana, whom I usually call mbak Nana – then the Secretary General of the National Commission on Violence against Women (Komnas Perempuan) – asked me to coordinate a program to document and empower widows in the conflict areas. It took me nearly a year to think before I decided to accept the responsibility. My considerations of the objections then were more in terms of the character of the activity which had more the nature of a project and the source of the fund was a grant from the Japanese Government which was managed via the World Bank, and the mechanism of the project was through the Government. I imagined the complications I had to deal with in terms of the future financial administration of this program. In addition, there was the possibility of the different vision and ideology between me, the World Bank and the Government, in treating their approach to a program for the poor.

However, the idea of this program had very much disturbed my conscience, i.e. to help the poor widows in the conflict areas, to overcome their economic problems and trauma, as well as to document their life for various advocacy attempts. I, who am also a widow, could imagine and feel how hard their life must be. Therefore, I began to enrich myself with trying to read various documents and books in order to more understand the life of the widows, and the kind of assistance that had ever been given to them.

Indeed, not many materials were available. If any, they were in general written by experts based on their study or activities in an attempt to overcome an emergency through human activities in the war zone areas. In the various reading materials, I found the term ‘female headed household’ to illustrate the position and status of widows in a large number of countries. The term is also used officially, for example in the documents of the United Nations institutions. With these materials, I developed an initial idea of activities initiated by this Komnas Perempuan, as a comprehensive program with a more empowering approach. Fortunately, the Komnas Perempuan and the donor gave me full liberty to make various alterations to the original idea, in accordance with my previous experience to empower poor women for more than 15 years.

The first thing that I did was to change the theme and the title of the program from the “Widows Project” or “the Project for Widows” to a more provocative and ideological one. I want people to look at the widows more for their position, role and responsibilities as head of their family, rather than as poor, humble, helpless and useless women. Apart from this, I also dream that the activities of this program should be able to me social changes to the status of widows in the society. It was with these things in mind that I decided to choose the title Empowerment Program for Female Headed Households or abbreviated as the Pekka Program, which was unanimously agreed by all parties. The use of the term Pekka, also opened wider the community of poor women who can be facilitated by this program, such as the single/unmarried women who carry the burden of their family and the wives of husbands who have physical disabilities or who are permanently ill. These two groups of women also have to face the stigmatization and problems that are similar to those of the widows.

Perhaps only a very few people realize the large number of women in Indonesia who are widows and play the role of head of their family. Officially, the statistics of 2002 show that 13.4% of the households in Indonesia are headed by women. However, this figure could be much higher, taking into account the obscure status of a lot of women, e.g. they are not a widow, nor a wife, because of the high migration rate of men in several poor stricken areas, who leave their wife and children for years. This figure also tends to increase on an annual basis, because of the high divorce rate and the social conflict that have caused men in a lot of families to be killed. In addition, the bad condition of our economy has increasingly motivated the male headed households to leave their family to make a living in other countries as migrant laborers. Hence, it is only natural that a program like this should indeed be developed.

From the time that we began to organize them in the field in the early 2002's, we got many reflections and valuable lessons relating to their position, status and problems in the society. Apart from this, various strategies to survive and to come out of their crisis are applied and these have become a valuable lesson that is worth to note. Their life is an open book that people can use as study material to develop a more equal and fair relationship pattern in the family. In my opinion, it is time that they write down these experiences in life, so that more people will be able to read and learn from them. I believe that science is not produced and developed from a "scientific" work of the "scholars". It is the empiric experience of men in their daily life that are told, that can also be the source to develop a theory as well as a new science. I feel that a lot of human social sciences could be developed from the experience and the course of life of men, specifically women, in order to be able to contribute to the development of human civilization. Culture that has shackled women to express themselves more freely should be battered by giving women more space, an opportunity, and time to write a book about their life.

This idea was then put into action by seeking several potential people from their circle to write the story of the life of the pekka members. It was not easy to do it. A majority of these women have only been to school for a limited period. They did not even graduate from elementary school (SD), and part of them are still illiterate. With a lot of effort, we finally chose 10 people from East Flores (East Nusatenggara), Aceh, West Java, and Buton (Southeast Sulawesi) to be writer cadres. Some of them have graduated from senior high school (SMA), however, some only graduated from elementary school or junior high school (SMP). They were then trained intensively by a senior writing instructor from the University of Indonesia, i.e. Pak Ismail Marihanan, to express their thoughts in popular writing, in April, 2003. Although the training did not directly turned them into professional writers, the result was relatively sufficient as an attempt to develop the writing culture in women. For their training, a bulletin was made to publish their initial writings. The bulletin was named "Cermin" which means mirror. They tried to utilize the Cermin bulletin for more than six months before they were asked to write an essay about Pekka life. They were given the freedom to choose, whether to tell about their personal life or the life of their fellow friends. To enrich the collection of articles, several field advocacy staff were also asked to write an article about Pekka.

Of the ten persons who were trained, only three didn't write for various reasons. Apart from the field advocacy staff, two other Pekka staff didn't join the training, however they wrote a story that was worth to make a book. Within three months, we managed to collect 18 true stories written by the writing cadres, members of the Pekka group, and the field advocacy staff. "Don't be too harsh with the editing, if necessary just publish them in their hand written form", said mbak Nana. I understood what she meant, that this book should be published in its original form (as it is). However, after reading their stories, I felt that I need to do some simple editing, so that they can be understood by the public. It was necessary, because I found that they were using their local dialect and style in their writing. Therefore, I did the editing process by putting more emphasis on correcting the structure of words in the sentences, placing and using punctuation marks, and using the right words, as close as possible to follow the norms of proper Indonesian language. I also made minor alterations to the title of the writing and gave the untitled articles a title. I agree that their naïf style of writing the story of their life is a strong factor of this book.

At a glance, all of the stories seem to be sober and sad, because that is in general how they started their story. However, let's look carefully at each story in this book. The description of a life that is sober, full of tears, regret, despair and powerless, was not in the conclusion. Their life is neither describes them as pitiful, chatty, weak women who mourn their fate, or lonely women who seduce men. When we read this book, it gives us some light about a very realistic life that is full of energy, the energy to work hard, be patient, be strong and extremely tough, nearly with no limits. In spite of the poverty, isolation, loneliness, trauma and sadness, that still dominate the story of the life of the pekka members, their sacrifice as well as their willingness to lead their life sincerely, adds color to the soul that is clearly described in each of their stories.

I hardly found any complaint, regret or slander in those stories. At the end of each story, they are always thankful for having found happiness amidst their suffering and their messy life. The description of women who are very responsible towards their children are felt explicitly when we read each story. They do anything; even sacrifice their life, to lead their children to live a better life. They are also forgiving, which is shown by their willingness to welcome their husbands who have hurt them when they were having problems. As bitter as it may be, it seems that their suffering has been like medical herbs for their life.

The social cultural condition also marks the characteristics of their story. The illustration that we get from Aceh as a zone of an on-going conflict, is that the Aceh people must make sacrifices, and especially the women in this region have to use tactics to deal with the hard life they have to lead due to the conflict, e.g. the story of Rawana written by Ratnawati, or the story of Hendon written by Ratna Fitri, tells us about widows whose husband had died in the conflict. The messy social economic condition in this region is clearly described by the hard life of the women who have to feed their family. Wars indeed always end up in bitterness ... Despite the very hard life that these widows lead in a condition of war, I hardly ever found a widow in this region who remarried, not even in their stories. It is like a social consensus that their status as a widow who doesn't remarry is more noble.

Of the large number of widows whom I had met in this region, only once did one of them confided her desire to remarry. “Mbak (sister), I am not asking you anything, except just this one thing, help me find another husband. It is my sincere wish to get married again.” That’s what she told me when we were resting during a Pekka training in Desa Tanah Ano village, Kecamatan Mutiara Timur, Aceh. I guess that she must be in her thirties. Then I asked her where her husband was, and she sadly told me that her husband was shot dead by the military apparatus four years ago. “And why haven’t you got married again?” “It is difficult here to remarry again, because people would think that I am immoral. Besides, we don’t see a lot of men in this region, either they had been killed, they ran away into the forest, or to they went to other areas. If I want to remarry, where then should I go to ...” asked the widow who is the mother of three children. There are probably quite a lot of other widows who have the same desire as Irma, although the applicable values prevent them from expressing their desire.

This is in big contrast with the life of the widows in West Java. In this Pasundan land, it is a common thing for a widow to get married again. In fact, it is strange when a widow, especially a young widow, has not remarried within a year after she gets divorced or is abandoned by her husband. Therefore it is no surprise that in the stories written in this book, we will be exploring the dynamics of the seasonal marriage of the women in this region. Just mention a few names, such as Alisah, Oon, Imas, whose story was written by the field advocacy staff, and Carwis who had written her own story about her three marriages, at least. In addition, the underage marriages (13 to 14 years), are also a common culture in this region, as experienced by Carwis and Alisah. Love affairs and polygamy have added color to the marriage of the prominent figures in the stories written in this book, with no sense of responsibility of the men for their family. Meanwhile, the awareness of refusing to share their husband with another wife was felt quite intensely when Carwis, for example, chose to leave her husband who had remarried. To get divorced legally or simply split up is frequently an alternative.

The sad thing about this condition is the burden that the women have to carry. Usually, there are children are born in each marriage. And when the couple split up, the children will be put in the care of their mother, so the father is free to go and remarry in some other place or in another area, and simply ignore all of his responsibilities. Don’t expect that the husband would share the financial burden of raising the children, because frequently the wives don’t even know the whereabouts of their husband. The legal aspect is very far from their dictionary of life. To Carwis, Alisah, Oon, Desty, and Isni, a divorce with its consequences means the fate that they must accept and thus carry out firmly.

From the asphalt island of Buton, Southeast Sulawesi, we are invited to see the weak position of a widow that has been utilized by a man to satisfy himself irresponsibly. The story of Azizah can be a reflection of the vulnerable position of a widow in the eyes of a man. In addition there is another example of a family problem due to the conflict, which we can also read in the collection of stories from this asphalt island. Baralia – a field advocacy staff in Batauga, wrote the story about ibu Hartina, who was compelled to be

separated from her husband in exile from Ambon – a region in turmoil – in Maluku. Economic problems had then forced her husband to return to Ambon, where he got married again to another woman, thus leaving behind Hartina and her children to lead a very hard life in exile. It is like falling down and then being hit by a ladder. This seems to be the fate of Azizah and Hartina, they had hardly been relieved of one suffering, when they already have to face a new problem. However, their toughness is increasingly felt in spite of the frequent emotions of anger that still mark their souls, respectively.

These two stories from East Flores and East Nusatenggara, gives us an idea of how weak the position of women is in the values and traditions (adat) system in this region. It seems that men can very easily be freed of their responsibilities as a husband and father, after they had tied the knot in an official marriage as well as when their love did not get the official blessing, but children are born from their relationship. The story of Theresia who wrote the story herself, gives us an idea how women are given no choice but to be the one who loses, simply to save the life of the male members of the family. Theresia had to willingly accept her obscure status and bear the consequences of the fruit of her love affair with “nana”, a man who was by rank supposed to be an uncle in their clan system, because he is a married man. Meanwhile, Magdalena, has to endure the bitterness of poverty with her three children, because her husband simply left them. There was no news, he gave no reasons, and he just left Magdalena in uncertainty. Now is she a widow, or is she still somebody’s wife.

I still remember clearly the speech made by a member of the Pekka group in a forum agenda in this region, some time ago. “East Flores men are cold blooded murderers”, she said in her speech. I shuddered when I heard it. I saw several young men in the vicinity laughing bitterly. I felt that the expression was a reflection of anger addressed to the majority of men who treat women in this region badly. The rate of female headed households in this region is so fantastic – in several villages, more than a half of the households is headed by women. However, unlike in other regions, the status of most of the family heads there is obscure; it means that their status is neither that of a widow nor of a wife. For the reason to find a job, the men prefer to leave their home town and go to other places, thus leaving behind their wife and children in poverty and uncertainty. And if they would eventually come home, they usually find themselves another woman from that region or beyond. Because the rule of the church prohibits them to get divorced, so they don’t divorce their wife, but neither are they a husband and father in their family.

When one reads these stories it is like exploring a colorful no husband world. I felt that being in a no husband world seems to be much better than being the victim of violence in a marriage. Indeed, no woman in this world dreams of becoming a widow. But who can refuse fate, when death separates a woman from her husband, or when a divorce and separation are the only solution? Although the stories are written in a very naïf and simple style, they give us a relatively complete illustration of the various characters and dynamics of the life of the widows, the female headed families, in four different regions. I am sure that if I had continued my exploration to four other Pekka program regions – Central Java, West Kalimantan, West Nusatenggara, and North Maluku, I would

definitely have found similar stories, but with their typical characteristics. But let's put it aside for the collection of my next stories

Several stories about the life of widows, other female headed households from these four regions have been recorded and documented in video form. In addition, several pekka members have been trained to take pictures of the pekka life, with a simple pocket camera. The pictures taken by them also tell us a lot about this no husband world. I have put some of these pictures in this book, to enrich the story of their life.

Wherever they come from, whatever the reason they end up as a widow and become the head of their family, there are these similarities that unite them in a bond. Poverty is what they experience every day. If we look directly into their life, we will be surprised that after enjoying our independence for more than a half century, we still find members of this nation who live in extreme poverty ..., far below the poverty line set by the authorities of this country. They are also united as victims of injustice/unfairness of a system of values and laws that put women as something that deserve to be treated as if they are worth nothing. Various forms of violence also mark the life of part of them, either domestic violence in households—physically and psychically – as well as violence by the state and the society, without them ever knowing and realizing that it was violence and that they have the right to be freed of any form of violence. And we see in these stories that they were also united by their desire to safe their family, safe their children, as to put anything at stake.

Space, time, and the opportunity to be treated as human beings are the things that they desire and expect the most of all. We clearly notice that most of the stories written by them are always ended with their very high appreciation for the Pekka program, which actually contributes only a little to the changes in their life, i.e. by giving them the space, time and opportunity to gather, to share their love and stories, and to build a common force for a better life.

Please read this book with an open and healthy mind, then ask your conscience, are we still going to look down and belittle these widows who are female headed households? Are we still reluctant to join hands and slowly but surely make social changes, and build a man and woman relationship in a more just and equal manner?