

## **MPU UTEUN: THE ROLE AND CHALLENGES OF FEMALE INITIATORS IN PRESERVING FOREST FUNCTIONS**

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**Abstract:** Forest degradation in Aceh, particularly in Damaran Baru Village, has triggered ecological disasters that directly affect the lives of local communities, especially women. Motivated by environmental concern and a sense of responsibility, a group of women led by a female initiator established *Mpu Uteun*, a community-based forest protection initiative. This study aims to examine the roles and challenges faced by female initiators in preserving forest functions through the activities of *Mpu Uteun*. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, with informants selected purposively. The findings reveal that *Mpu Uteun* plays a vital role in forest conservation through regular patrols, legal advocacy for social forestry permits, and community empowerment initiatives. However, their efforts are confronted by structural challenges, including gender bias, limited resources, and inadequate governmental support. This study highlights how women's leadership in environmental conservation not only overcomes social and institutional barriers but also redefines gender roles in sustainable natural resource governance.

**Keywords:** *Women, Mpu Uteun, Forest Conservation, Leadership, Gender Roles*

**Abstrak:** Kerusakan hutan di Aceh, termasuk di Kampung Damaran Baru, telah menimbulkan bencana ekologis yang berdampak langsung pada kehidupan masyarakat, khususnya perempuan. Berangkat dari kepedulian terhadap kondisi tersebut, sekelompok perempuan yang dipimpin oleh seorang inisiator membentuk *Mpu Uteun*, sebuah komunitas perlindungan hutan berbasis perempuan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peran dan tantangan yang dihadapi oleh perempuan inisiator dalam upaya pelestarian fungsi hutan melalui kelompok *Mpu Uteun*. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus. Teknik pengumpulan data meliputi observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi, dengan informan yang dipilih secara purposif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kelompok *Mpu Uteun* memiliki peran strategis dalam menjaga hutan melalui kegiatan patroli, advokasi perizinan hutan sosial, dan pemberdayaan masyarakat. Namun, keberhasilan mereka tidak lepas dari berbagai tantangan struktural, seperti bias gender, keterbatasan sumber daya, dan minimnya dukungan pemerintah. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan perempuan dalam konservasi hutan tidak hanya mampu mengatasi hambatan sosial, tetapi juga merekonstruksi peran gender dalam tata kelola sumber daya alam yang berkelanjutan.

**Kata Kunci:** *Perempuan, Mpu Uteun, Pelestarian Hutan, Kepemimpinan, Peran Gender*

## A. Introduction

Forest damage, fires, mass deforestation, and other ecosystem disruptions severely impair forest functions (Adiwjaya, et al. 2020). Aceh, ranked as the tenth-largest forest producer in Indonesia, has experienced more than 60% forest degradation, covering 3.2 million hectares. This vast area has led to an increase in illegal forest encroachment. In 2018, 2,418 cases of illegal logging were reported in Aceh (Dewi, 2023).. Forest degradation is indirectly influenced by the daily lifestyle of local communities.

Damaran Baru Village, located in Timang Gajah Subdistrict, Bener Meriah Regency, is one of the areas in Aceh severely impacted by forest destruction (Dewi, 2023). In 2015, the village experienced a natural disaster in the form of a flash flood, causing significant losses to its residents. Several houses were destroyed, and many coffee plantations were damaged. Illegal logging activities around Mount Burni Telong were the primary cause of this damage, which had a serious impact on the ecosystem. This ecological crisis not only devastated the environment but also significantly affected the lives of women.

Forest degradation threatens food security and other vital resources that women depend on to meet daily needs. Moreover, the residents of Damaran Baru Village face a worsening environmental crisis. The once lush forests are now severely damaged due to excessive exploitation by irresponsible parties. The flash floods that hit the village are clear evidence of the severe damage to the forests in Damaran Baru. This event raised awareness among residents, particularly women, to take action to protect the environment and prevent similar disasters from occurring again.

Out of this concern, a female initiator named Sumini took the initiative to form a forest protection group composed of the women of Damaran Baru Village. This group, known as "Mpu Uteun," was established to take concrete actions in forest conservation. The formation of this group was a response to the ongoing environmental destruction, as well as a critique of the government's lack of attention to forest conservation in Damaran Baru.

In 2019, with support from CSO (HAKA) and the SETAPAK TAF program, Sumini and her colleagues applied for a social forestry permit through the Village

Forest (HD) scheme. They were involved in various stages, from mapping, identification, submission of Decrees (SK), to forest management after the permit was issued. However, obtaining legal recognition for forest management rights proved to be challenging. One of the main obstacles was the strong gender bias that still prevails in society. Although the decree was eventually issued, the application process for the Village Forest Management Institution (LPHD) in Damaran Baru was delayed at the village level due to the gender bias of village officials (Gina et al. 2022). Based on the above explanation, the existence of the Mpu Uteun group in Damaran Baru Village has attracted the attention of researchers to study it from a sociological perspective. This research aims to specifically explain the roles and challenges faced by the Mpu Uteun group in their efforts to preserve the environment.

## **B. Method**

This study employed a qualitative research method with a case study approach to explore the role and challenges faced by female initiators in forest conservation efforts in Damaran Baru Village, Bener Meriah Regency. The case study method was chosen to allow an in-depth and contextualized investigation of a single social unit—namely, the *Mpu Uteun* group—as a unique and significant phenomenon in gendered environmental activism. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement or substantial knowledge of the *Mpu Uteun* group's activities. The primary informants consisted of four key individuals, including the founder and core members of *Mpu Uteun*, while additional insights were obtained from village stakeholders and related institutions to enrich the contextual understanding. This selection strategy ensured that the data gathered would be highly relevant to the research objectives, namely to understand the strategic roles played by female forest defenders and the sociocultural, institutional, and material challenges they confront.

Data collection techniques consisted of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of personal experiences, motivations, actions, and perceptions of the women involved. Participant observation enabled the researcher to witness directly how the group carried out forest patrols, public engagement, and

advocacy efforts, while documentation included analysis of relevant legal documents, forest patrol reports, community maps, and digital media content produced by or about the group. The data collected were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This method allowed the researcher to continuously refine the focus of inquiry while identifying emerging themes and patterns related to gendered participation in forest governance. Special attention was paid to how the women navigated gender-based barriers in bureaucratic procedures, overcame community skepticism, and integrated local knowledge with legal environmental frameworks. Through this analysis, the study aims to illuminate the transformative potential of grassroots female leadership in the conservation of natural resources.

### **C. Results and Discussion**

#### **1. The Role of Women Initiators in Mpu Uteun in Preserving the Function of Forests**

The roles of women initiators in preserving the function of forests in Kampung Damaran Baru are as follows:

##### **a. The Role of Female Initiators in Forest Protection Efforts through Forest Patrols**

In conducting forest patrol activities, Mpu Uteun actively performs patrols once a month, during the second week, for five days. The patrol is divided into two teams, each consisting of 8 members: 5 women and 3 men. Before carrying out the forest patrol, the Mpu Uteun group first reports to the village head about the patrol activities that will be undertaken. During the patrol, Mpu Uteun documents the flora and fauna and monitors all activities within the Damaran Baru forest area. In addition to monitoring forest conditions, Mpu Uteun also actively plants trees during the patrols. When illegal activities occur in the forest, which could lead to conflict, the leader of Mpu Uteun recognizes that these situations could worsen. Therefore, she encourages group members to use a constructive, persuasive approach when communicating with forest encroachers. By applying empathy and understanding to explain the negative impacts of their activities on the environment and community, they have successfully prevented further encroachment. This approach is similar to what Sumini has emphasized.

"So we think that if women don't get involved, nothing will change. And for those who are encroaching on the forest, maybe hearing it from women will make them understand. There's a sense of shame because the women have stepped in, and with women, it doesn't trigger emotions. It's different with men; sometimes they get emotional, especially when money is involved in forest transactions. If it's men, it could lead to a fistfight. So when we explain things to them calmly, they understand, and little by little, they avoid hunting activities." (Interview with Sumini, April 23, 2024).

The involvement of Mpu Uteun can bring change and open new perspectives for forest encroachers. By using a more holistic approach to understanding the environment and the issues related to forest resources, the encroachers tend to consider various aspects such as economic, environmental, and household resource needs. Additionally, through more effective communication, they can convey information about the negative impacts of illegal activities on the forest and the environment. This approach has proven effective because the communication is calm, avoiding emotional conflicts or physical confrontations.

#### b. The Role of Female Initiators in Obtaining Forest Management Permits

The social forestry program provides legal access to village communities near the forest to utilize state forest areas through a permit mechanism issued by the minister in the form of a decree. The goal of social forestry is to promote economic equity within communities and reduce economic disparities through three main pillars: land, business opportunities, and human resources (Wasongko, Tafalas, and Watunglawar, 2024). Environmental law enforcement is a very important aspect of environmental law itself. Clear law enforcement can encourage people to comply with the law. The enforcement of environmental law can increase public legal awareness, prompting them to better adhere to existing regulations (Muhlizar, Joharsah, and Warman, 2023).

Mpu Uteun not only plays a role in raising public awareness about the importance of environmental conservation, but also has a crucial role in environmental law enforcement. It proves that women can be agents of change in environmental law enforcement. Through long struggles, Sumini and the Mpu Uteun group succeeded in obtaining a forest management decree. They have influenced policy through actions aimed at protecting natural resources and reducing negative impacts on the environment. When the forest management decree was enacted, the

voices of women were heard more by all relevant parties. They brought wisdom, courage, and commitment to protect the forest and the environment for future generations. This achievement represents a milestone for the women of Kampung Damaran Baru and serves as tangible proof that women's voices can be heard and recognized in decision-making regarding natural resource management.

Through an approved decree, the Mpu Uteun group has the authority to conduct regular forest patrols to monitor activities within the forest area to prevent any illegal activities. Additionally, they have the power to impose sanctions on those who violate the rules, such as verbal warnings, written warnings, or even fines. Sumini and other members have shown that women are capable of carrying out law enforcement tasks with determination and fairness. The humanistic approach they have applied has successfully built trust within the community and reduced conflicts related to forest management. This effort has also proven effective in increasing compliance with regulations and reducing the rate of illegal activities in the Damaran Baru forest. Although illegal logging in Damaran Baru forest had already been reduced before the formation of Mpu Uteun, the presence of this group remains crucial in ensuring the sustainability of environmental conservation efforts. Mpu Uteun plays a role in preventing legal violations and ensuring that the forest is well-preserved. Thus, in every protected forest, there are traces of women fighting to protect it. They are not only guardians of the forest but also custodians of values such as justice, sustainability, equality, and responsibility, which are upheld based on local wisdom.

#### c. The Role of Female Initiators in Community Empowerment

Empowerment is a phenomenon in the form of a process that brings benefits both to individuals within the organization itself; helps the community gain greater control over their own activities and environment; strengthens the capacity of individuals to perform their respective duties; and expands opportunities for members of the community to grow, develop, and become self-reliant (Dewi, 2020). The role of the Mpu Uteun leader in community empowerment has had a significant impact on the sustainability of the forest in Damaran Baru. Through various

programs she initiated, Sumini successfully involved the community directly in environmental conservation efforts

In an effort to broaden the community's understanding of the importance of forest preservation, community empowerment related to forest damage prevention is carried out through educational pathways. However, this program has not been fully implemented, as to date, the institution working in the village forest protection field, LPHK Damaran Baru, has not yet touched on educational aspects. Additionally, LPHK Damaran Baru lacks the expertise to develop learning models related to environmental conservation.

In addition to empowerment through education, another empowerment program being implemented is the socialization of land clearing for agriculture in forest areas. This socialization aims to provide the community with an understanding of the rules and proper procedures for clearing land for cultivation, ensuring that such activities do not harm the forest. Using simple and easy-to-understand language, Mpu Uteun has successfully instilled awareness in the community about the importance of preserving the forest. The socialization efforts have encouraged the community to abandon unproductive land in the forest that has the potential to cause flooding. In addition to socialization regarding land clearing, they also provide education about database management and the use of equipment during patrolling activities. Mpu Uteun Group is taking structured steps to preserve the forests of Damaran Baru. Funding from the NGO is utilized to conduct training for its members, ensuring they have the necessary skills to effectively patrol the forest. The training covers various important aspects of forest patrolling, such as data processing, the use of patrol equipment, photography, and data measurement. This shows that Sumini is committed to ensuring her members possess the knowledge and skills needed to gather accurate and useful data for forest conservation efforts. Additionally, the recording and storage of patrol data in a database demonstrate their commitment to monitoring and evaluating conservation programs, as this data can be used to identify high-risk forest areas.

Mpu Uteun's concern for the surrounding community through empowerment efforts will positively impact the sustainability of the forest. Here are some of the potential impacts:

- a) Increased community awareness about the importance of forest conservation
- b) Enhanced community participation in forest preservation efforts
- c) Decreased levels of deforestation
- d) d. Improved quality of life for the community

However, the role of women in this regard needs to be supported and strengthened through financial assistance from the government, as well as the necessary infrastructure for sustainable environmental management empowerment activities. Mpu Uteun has inspired the community to actively participate in environmental conservation efforts. One of Mpu Uteun's programs is the tree planting initiative. By involving the community directly in tree planting, Sumini has not only succeeded in increasing land cover but has also fostered a sense of responsibility among the community towards the environment. The role of the Mpu Uteun group as facilitators in tree planting activities is very helpful for the community in understanding the importance of nature conservation. The tree planting initiative is divided into two sessions: the first is conducted by the Mpu Uteun group during their patrols in the forest. The second session involves tree planting together with the residents of Kampung Damaran Baru, which takes place around the village area, specifically near the Weh Gile River.

## **2. Challenges Faced by Female Initiators in Preserving Forest Functions**

### **a. Licensing for Protected Forest Management Permits**

The process of obtaining forest management permits is generally complicated and bureaucratic, which often becomes a barrier for women who are working to protect forests. In addition to limited access to information, gender stereotypes also pose a significant challenge, as women are still frequently underestimated and perceived as incapable of performing physically demanding tasks, such as forest patrols.

Gender Equality as a Highlight in Advancing Women's Role in Development. From an intellectual capability perspective, men and women have the same capacity and potential. Therefore, men and women can be viewed as equals. However, when looking at specific abilities, there are differences due to femininity, making equality

inappropriate if seen as requiring exact sameness (50:50). If equality is understood in this way, it will never be achieved. This concept of equality suggests that men and women must have the same capacities, preferences, and needs, meaning they should ideally attain the same level of health, education, income, and political participation. Implicitly, this notion fails to acknowledge the differences between men and women. (Wibowo, 2011 in (Suarmini, et al. 2018).

Based on the interview results, it shows that gender stereotypes can be a barrier for women. However, due to their strong concern for the environment, Sumini was able to prove that they are also capable of performing the same tasks as men, even in fields traditionally considered to be male-dominated. After the issuance of the decree (SK) from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (KLHK), Sumini and her members now have official authority to patrol the forest and prevent illegal activities that could damage it. This broader access enables them to work more efficiently in forest conservation. The decree not only grants physical access but also recognizes the important role of women in protecting the forest. Therefore, legal recognition and formal support from the government are crucial for women who wish to engage in environmental efforts. With broader access and acknowledgment of their roles, the government can help communities like Mpu Uteun to reach their full potential in preserving nature.

#### b. Limited Resources

Mpu Uteun has successfully built a community that cares about environmental conservation. However, in running their programs, they often face limitations in resources. The lack of adequate logistical support, such as patrol equipment, food, and shelter, presents a major challenge for Mpu Uteun. Considering that Mpu Uteun conducts five-day forest patrols and stays overnight in the forest, the lack of equipment and logistical support can hinder their ability to conduct patrols and handle emergency situations. Sumini herself has voiced the need for logistical support, hoping that the government will pay serious attention to their struggle to improve their performance, but there has yet to be a response that shows high enthusiasm from the relevant parties. Therefore, logistical support from the government is needed as a form of backing for Mpu Uteun. The government can

ensure access and build adequate infrastructure, such as guard posts, to support their work in the field.

### c. Lack of Government Support

The lack of government support for forest protection communities is a complex issue that requires comprehensive solutions. The role of the Mpu Uteun (forest guardians) in safeguarding forests remains underappreciated, with minimal financial support, training, and capacity-building provided by the government. This limitation hampers their ability to effectively carry out their responsibilities. This lack of support affects the overall effectiveness of forest conservation efforts. However, despite these challenges, the commitment of the Mpu Uteun to protect the forest has never wavered. Their strong sense of responsibility toward forest sustainability demonstrates their dedication, even in the absence of adequate backing.

To date, local village governments have yet to introduce any policies regarding financial incentives for activities like forest patrols and other related initiatives by the Mpu Uteun. The lack of financial support from the village government poses a significant challenge for Sumini, the leader in running forest conservation programs. Funding is a crucial resource necessary to support various activities, such as training, forest patrols, and the procurement of essential equipment. In addition to the lack of financial assistance, there is also insufficient government support in the form of training and capacity-building for the Mpu Uteun. In every activity they undertake, the Mpu Uteun must possess a broad knowledge base and skills to identify and address various issues in the forest. Furthermore, there has been a noticeable lack of response from the government in supporting eco-tourism initiatives at the village level.

## D. Conclusion

This study concludes that the *Mpu Uteun* group—led by a female initiator—plays a transformative role in preserving forest functions in Damaran Baru Village. Through structured actions such as forest patrols, community education, and legal advocacy for social forestry permits, these women demonstrate a capacity not only to participate in environmental protection but to lead it. Their work illustrates the

critical role of grassroots female leadership in sustaining ecological integrity while simultaneously challenging gendered assumptions in natural resource management.

Analyzed through the lens of Giddens' Structuration Theory, this study reveals the dynamic interaction between agency and structure. While institutional barriers such as gender bias, inadequate legal support, and limited government recognition initially constrained their participation, the *Mpu Uteun* members actively reshaped these structures through persistent advocacy and local mobilization. Their agency redefined the norms of forest governance, proving that women can effectively operate within—and even alter—structures that have historically marginalized them. The implications of this research are twofold: first, it underscores the importance of integrating gender perspectives into environmental governance; second, it highlights the need for systemic support from state institutions to amplify the impact of community-based environmental initiatives. The awarding of the Kalpataru Prize in 2023 affirms that female-led environmental movements are not peripheral, but central to the achievement of sustainable forest management in Indonesia.

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