

Safe houses towards gender equality

Location

Kupang, NTT dan Soe
Kab. Timor Tengah Selatan
NTT

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Beneficiaries

Since its founding in 2000,
Rumah Perempuan
has been involved in 1239
cases in 32 sub-districts
in Timor Tengah Selatan
and 10 sub-districts
in Kupang

- Women constitute more than half of the Indonesian population (50.1%) but struggle hard in order to overcome poverty, violence and injustice in their daily lives.
- Women have active roles in livestock production, forestry and the environment, but their needs are not fulfilled.
- Improvement of women's living conditions are relatively slow compared with that of the other community members (literacy rate for women is 82 percent and while 50 percent of Indonesian women are economically active, only 30 percent constitute salaried employees outside the agriculture sector)

"Over and over I was asked to prove my love but I always refused. Maybe I was weak, but just that one time I couldn't reject his request. Now I'm pregnant and he has changed, become coarse, he gets angry and likes to hit me. What should I do?" asks Bunga, a teenage girl, as tears run down her face. Sarci Maukari listens carefully to Bunga's story. As a counselor of victims of domestic violence, Sarci is always ready to listen to women brave enough to come to the Sanggar Suara Perempuan office for protection.

"For me, this is my calling in life, no matter what sort of resistance I get from the partners or clients, or disparaging opinions of the community," said Sarci, who is also a mother of two, as she explained why she continues to strongly support the clients of Sanggar Suara Perempuan. More than ten years ago, women's groups in Soe, Kupang, and in other other areas of Nusa Tenggara Timur, had no choice but to silently receive ill-treatment. Mothers, sisters, and even good friends all experienced or heard the stories of violence, only to seal them and bury them deep to avoid becoming a disgrace to their families.

The dry villages of Nusa Tenggara Timur become even drier without the smiles of women. Even the laughter the children can't lighten the atmosphere. 100 kilometers from Soe, in Penfui Timur, Kupang district, Venty Sabaat recalls the conditions of women in her village, "Happiness was once far removed from our lives. We had problems and only problems. Beginning with not enough money to buy food, sick children, and then adultery." This 43 year old mother was very aware that the women in her village were embarrassed and scared if anyone found out that they had been abused. "Because they had lots of children, most women just stayed at home, they were often moody and then angry with their kids and then fought with and were hit by their husbands," she explained.

The conditions faced by Bunga, Venty Sabaat, and many other women in Timor, encouraged Sanggar Suara Perempuan in 1996 to focus their work on efforts to reduce the level of violence against women. At that time, there was no community organization or government agency that was concerned with this issue. Often the group was seen as interfering in domestic affairs and looked at sideways because they were dealing with women who were considered to be disgraceful or revealing family disgrace.

The scorn of the community did not lessen their spirits. Their awareness raising activities slowly gathered support, beginning with community organizations in the humanitarian field. In 2002, Sanggar Suara Perempuan founded Rumah Perempuan (Women's House) as a safe house for victims of domestic violence in households in Kupang city. This increased the working area of Sanggar Suara Perempuan, which before only covered 30 sub-districts in Timor Tengah Selatan district, to 40 sub-districts, including ten more in Kupang district and the city of Kupang.

The experience of battling on their own for ten years to support victims of violence has made Sanggar Suara Perempuan and Rumah Perempuan more open and more accepting to initiatives from other organizations doing similar work. "Sanggar Suara Perempuan and Rumah Perempuan are very open in relation to our activities. They are not mean in sharing their secrets to success in the hope that others will replicate them. We learn from each and undertake initiatives together, such as legal services for victims of violence that are integrated between the Women's Empowerment Bureau, the courts, the police and NGOs," said dr. Yovita A. Mitak, Head of the Women's Empowerment Bureau NTT Province.

Sanggar Suara Perempuan in Soe City has handled 987 cases and Rumah Perempuan in Kupang City has had over 1,329 cases of violence against women, including domestic violence, rape, engagement breaking, and trafficking. "We believe that the true number of violence against women cases is much higher than we see, because many victims are too frightened to report it," explained Filpin Therik, Deputy Director of Sanggar Suara Perempuan.

"Of all the cases we see, our biggest challenge are the emergency medical cases in isolated rural areas," she added, referring to clients who are in dire condition and need medical assistance immediately, but are far from such services. Learning from these

experiences, Sanggar Suara Perempuan and Rumah Perempuan created village-level task forces including counselors and paralegal at the community level. "The task forces are able to provide a fast response to reports and also raise awareness and encourage change in violent behavior to prevent violence against women," said Filpin.

The many cases handled by Sanggar Suara Perempuan and Rumah Perempuan doesn't stop them from continuing to innovate. In 2009, Rumah Perempuan had one domestic violence case that encouraged them to adopt a new approach, one that involved men.

"We tried mediation for the husband, but it was very hard for him to be open to our counselors, who are all women," said Libby SinlaeLoE, Coordinator of Rumah Perempuan in Kupang. "Then, an activist, who was also male, became involved in the process. It helped change the atmosphere, which before had been tense and awkward. The spouse of our client became more relaxed and open to inputs from our male counselor," she added.

This inspired Rumah Perempuan to begin a program for abusers of women and begin recruiting male counselors. "After a year, there are 7 male counselors who are active in engaging spouses of clients in cases of violence against women," said Libby proudly. "We are convinced that this can change violent behavior of men towards women. The masculine approach in awareness raising efforts spread more quickly to men. If when we evaluate the program, we find good results, we will invite the Women's Empowerment Bureau NTT to work with us for this initiative," said Libby optimistically.

Not only focusing on victims of violence against women, Sanggar Suara Perempuan and Rumah Perempuan also seek to address the roots of the problem of violence against women. Reduced economic activity and a lack of perspective regarding gender equality in the family and community are major factors causing different types of violence.

Venty Sabaat, and the women of Penfui Timur, Kabupaten Kupang can now smile because they can help their families by weaving, sewing, and running small warung from their homes. The Rindu Sejahtera group, led by Venty, routinely meets to discuss their activities in a meeting place they built themselves. This group is also active in encouraging women to join family planning programs and coordinates with sub-district staff to participate in free contraception programs. In the end, they are convinced that they will then have more time for activities, including those that increase their capacity.

This is also the case with women and teenage girls in Kesetnana village, Soe, Kabupaten Timor Tengah Selatan, who have created the Oenunu Farmers Group for their economic activities, including weaving and embroidery. Their meeting place doubles as a family health information center where health checks for pregnant women and child immunization are routinely carried out.

"My dream is that NTT women can come together and be counted for their amazing work in developing this region," said Sarci Maukari with shining eyes. Smiling, Sarci walked away from the Sanggar Suara Perempuan office to head home to her husband and two daughters. One day, one step towards a better future for Indonesian women, determining the future of their children, husbands and nation.

Notes
