
Hj. Nisa

*Head of the La Tansa Migrant Worker Observer Group
Central Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara*

Authors

Mustaghfiroh Rahayu and Norin Mustika Rahadiri Abheseka

Volume Editors and Reviewers

Ken M.P. Setiawan

Bronwyn A. Beech Jones

Rachael Diprose

Amalinda Savirani

Copy Editors

Bronwyn A. Beech Jones

Annisa Sabrina Hartoto

*This research was supported by the Governments of Australia and Indonesia and was conducted in consultation with the civil society organisations involved. We would like to thank these organisations and the Australia-Indonesia Partnership for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality (MAMPU) for their support, as well as all participants in the research, in particular the countless village women who shared their experiences and views with us. The views expressed in the analysis are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the supporting governments or organisations. Future iterations of this case study might reflect further research and analysis over time. For a more extensive and comparative analysis of the case studies, Diprose, R., A. Savirani, K.M.P. Setiawan, and N. Francis, 2020. *Women's Collective Action and the Village Law: How Women are Driving Change and Shaping Pathways for Gender-inclusive Development in Rural Indonesia*. The University of Melbourne and Universitas Gadjah Mada. <https://doi.org/10.46580/124326>. Available at: www.mampu.or.id and www.demisetara.org.*

To cite this life story: Rahayu, M. and N.A.R. Abhesekai, 2020. "Hj. Nisa". In Setiawan, K.M.P., B.A. Beech Jones, R. Diprose, and A. Savirani [Eds], *Women's Journeys in Driving Change: Women's Collective Action and Village Law Implementation in Indonesia*. The University of Melbourne, Universitas Gadjah Mada and MAMPU, pp. 44-46. <https://doi.org/10.46580/124331>. Available at: www.mampu.or.id and www.demisetara.org.

Hj. Nisa

Head of the La Tansa Migrant Worker Observer Group
Central Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara¹

Hj. Nisa is the head of the La Tansa Migrant Worker Observer group. Nisa has her own experience as an ex-migrant worker who was employed in Saudi Arabia. She left for Saudi Arabia for the first time in 2005, when her first child was four years old. This first contract was for two years in Riyadh. Nisa's primary task was to take care of two children who, when she arrived, were four years old and six months old. After finishing this contract, Nisa returned home to Lombok for a year and then departed again with her husband for four years. While she had requested to return home after this contract finished, her employer promised to pay for Nisa to go on the *hajj* pilgrimage if she committed to another contract. To realise her dream of completing the *hajj*, she persisted and agreed to a second contract. Nisa went on *hajj* in 2012 and now uses the title "Hajjah" or "Hj". In March 2013, she decided to return to Lombok permanently and not work as a migrant worker again.

While she was working in Saudi Arabia, Nisa thought that her employer was treating her unfairly. In Saudi households there are often multiple house assistants charged with their own specific tasks. These workers come from a variety of countries, including Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan and the Philippines. In Nisa's experience, each worker was treated and paid differently, and other domestic workers were able to choose their own tasks, such as cleaning or taking care of young and old family members. Conversely, Nisa was paid less and her work constantly changed. This made her wonder about her position in the household and her rights. Once, she asked her employer why they were treating others differently. Their response implied that they assumed that migrant workers from Indonesia, like Nisa, only deserved a low wage.

"But I asked my employer, why is that so? [They said] 'We don't get our own workers, we pay for them. We pay a lot for Indonesian domestic workers.' I got the impression that we had already been paid for, so I was tied to them and however they treated me I had to obey them. Sometimes if they didn't want to, they would tell me to look after their parents, only occasionally they cooked. [Then I said], I don't want to do just this. If you don't change this, I'll go home.' And, in the end, I went home." (Hj. Nisa, Central Lombok research village, 8 July 2019)

This experience made Hj. Nisa decide to return to Lombok and work in her village. But this decision made her Nisa feel uncertain about how she would support her family in the future, a feeling shared by many of her friends who also used be migrant workers.

"Even though I had already been to Saudi Arabia and earned a lot of money and bought a motorbike and a house, in the end it went back to how it was before. Back to the start.² In the end the same economic problems came back." (Hj. Nisa, Central Lombok research village, 8 July 2019)

With the help of cadres who are involved in DESBUMI, a Migrant CARE initiative at the village-level to support migrant workers and their families, Nisa and thirty other former women migrant workers established the Migrant Worker Observer Group La Tansa.³ Nisa suggested this name to the group because she remembered that her employer in Saudi Arabia often said '*la tansa*' which means 'don't forget'. This group was established

¹ **Author:** Mustaghfiroh Rahayu and Norin Mustika Rahadiri Abheseka. **Editors:** Bronwyn A. Beech Jones and Annisa Sabrina Hartoto. **Disclaimer:** The views expressed in the analysis are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the supporting governments or organisations. All names have been anonymised.

² Nisa used the popular phrase "back to the laptop" which means "back to basics" or "back to the start". This phrase was popularised by the host of the television show *Empat Mata*, Tukul Arwana.

³ See also the story of Gita, the Chairperson of DESBUMI, in this Central Lombok village.

primarily so that former women migrant workers and their families could establish livelihoods from activities like crafts and making traditional cakes.

“It was to change our financial situation. Because it is hard here. At the time, I didn’t know how to make these things. So that [migrant work] was my only option to change my difficult financial situation here.” (Hj. Nisa, Central Lombok research village, 8 July 2019)

The group gathered their initial funds for activities through a savings and loans group. Each member had to donate ten thousand rupiah (1 AUD) at the start, and then five thousand a month at meetings. This money was then used as capital for member’s businesses, on a rotating basis. These economic activities took place in groups of four or five people. In La Tansa, there are several groups, such as those who make puddings and biscuits, weaving, and process fish; although the cake and cracker making groups developed the quickest. All groups help each other when they receive orders.

“This group just made us practice. For instance, now we have this group and lots of our friends make cakes. If there is an order and I can’t make it, I can ask another member.” (Hj. Nisa, Central Lombok research village, 8 July 2019)

Hj. Nisa enthusiastically takes part in the La Tansa group’s activities. The savings she and her husband had earned in Saudi Arabia paid for land, building their house, and provided the capital for their chicken farm, but then ran out. These group activities can support her family’s daily needs. Daily orders of puddings for celebrations and gifts, as well as the income from chicken farming provide her with additional sources of income.

Discussions between women in the group also have led to innovative ways of marketing their products. In addition to selling them in conventional ways, now Nisa also takes orders through Facebook and WhatsApp. All of La Tansa’s members try to use their social media accounts to maximise their advertising.

“Yes, I take orders on WhatsApp too, people from outside the village also order during Ramadan and Eid-al-Fitr, we can get a lot of orders then. I also sew if there are orders. During the day, I make snacks and at night I sew. Now I also sew school uniforms.” (Hj. Nisa, Central Lombok research village, 8 July 2019)

Hj. Nisa is now economically independent because her pudding and cake catering company receives a lot of orders. After she returned home from Saudi Arabia, she was blessed with a daughter who is now four-years-old. Everything she has now means that Nisa no longer wants to work overseas. There is one reason in particular why she is certain that she does not want to go overseas again: her difficult relationship with her first child. She does not want her second child to be left behind if her mother worked far from the village.

“Yes, I am scared, my daughter is so young. That’s why I don’t want to go back. Now I only want to make a living here. That’s what makes me sad, I have to hear from other people what my own child wants. Sometimes I am jealous when I see my neighbour with their child. That’s why my little girl can’t go far from me. That’s why I stopped. Even though he [her eldest child] is close with his grandma, I don’t have that. I sometimes cry, why doesn’t my child want to be close to me.” (Hj. Nisa, Central Lombok research village, 8 July 2019)

As well as developing their livelihood skills, Hj. Nisa and other La Tansa members often discuss and share their experiences of being women migrant workers. These sharing sessions take place once a month. Sharing these experiences means that people, especially women, who want to work overseas get to know each other and become aware of how to safely engage in migrant work.

“For those who leave, come home, or have problems, we get told. Our members give information to their neighbours, for instance, if someone wants to go to Saudi Arabia, they will tell them here is safer and that all requirements need to be complete, so don’t fake them [the documents].” (Hj. Nisa, Central Lombok research village, 8 July 2019)

Nisa and her friends in the women’s group have become village ‘ambassadors’, who inform others about the dangers of working overseas without complete and valid documents. Nisa admits that when she left for Saudi Arabia, she did not know anything about official processes. While she went there twice, she did not know who to contact if she experienced any problems. It was only after joining the organisation and advocating for migrant workers that she realised all of the shortcomings and mistakes in her own experience as a migrant worker.

La Tansa now represents the voices of people in the village, especially women, who are currently working overseas. Through the organisation, Nisa hopes she can help the DESBUMI assist migrant workers who experience injustice, violence and other migration problems. Nisa and other La Tansa members report all information they get about villagers overseas to DESBUMI who then offer assistance.

“In the end we let the cadres know and they are the ones who take the next step. We just give them the information we have and then they act. We speak and listen to the community, to our neighbours. If someone comes home with and talks about a problem, we let the group know and then our friends the cadres will take it from there.” (Hj. Nisa, Central Lombok research village, 8 July 2019)

As an association in partnership with DESBUMI, Panca Karsa and Migrant CARE, La Tansa is often invited to meetings with other organisations who focus on migrant workers issues, at the local, regional, and even national levels. At the local level, Hj. Nisa played a role in the allocation of village funds (from the Village Budget) to DESBUMI, and advocating for the District Regulation on the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers from Central Lombok. Nisa has been invited to national forums, but as her daughter is still young she chose to be represented by another La Tansa member. Nisa is also active in other community work as a Posyandu cadre and with the Family Planning Village project.

Nisa and other women have benefited in many ways since they established La Tansa. They have economically empowered themselves by creating livelihood opportunities which not only help fulfil their everyday needs, but also strengthen the financial situation of many families in their village. By attending training sessions, Nisa deepened her understanding of how to migrate safely. Through La Tansa, Nisa shares this knowledge to the wider community who intend on becoming migrant workers and those who are currently overseas. Nisa’s knowledge and leadership in La Tansa has also enabled her to participate in decision-making forums at the village level and beyond.

Before Nisa’s active community spirit was only known by her neighbours, but now village officials value her suggestions and input. Nisa and other women from La Tansa have requested that the Village Head provide space to promote their products in the Village Hall. She hopes that the village government will always support the group’s activities so that women in her village gain confidence and financial stability.