
Mia

*Secretary of the Regional Representative Council,
Prosperous Homeworkers Union
Deli Serdang, North Sumatra*

Authors

Devy Dhian Cahyati and Bellicia Angelica Tanvil

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

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Mia

Secretary of the Regional Representative Council, Prosperous Homeworkers Union
Deli Serdang, North Sumatra¹

Mia is a woman homemaker who has been influential in the establishment of a homeworkers' union in Deli Serdang. Mia, who is in her forties, is currently the secretary of the Regional Representative Council of the Prosperous Homeworkers Union (Serikat Pekerja Rumahan SPR – Sejahtera). She was born and grew up in Serdang Bedagai district where she began working as a homemaker in middle school. At that time, Mia shucked shellfish and fastened sandal straps, amongst other tasks, for a company. In 1990, Mia moved to this village and married her husband in 1990.

Mia's husband used to work as a *becak* driver. To supplement her husband's wage, Mia weaves wire grills at home. While she does not earn a lot, her wages pay their children's school fees. In 2002, for instance, Mia earned only three hundred thousand rupiah (30 AUD) a month.

Mia's family is very active in labour organisations. Her husband, who currently works as a loading foreman at a factory, is active in the All-Indonesian Employee Union (SPSI), and their daughter has also been involved in SPR Sejahtera. This involvement in the worker's movement has provided them with significant knowledge of employment issues. But Mia, in particular, only started understanding her labour rights after she joined SPR Sejahtera. Previously she and other women homeworkers were not aware that they had rights as workers, and that corporations must be obliged to protect and educate them about the risks associated with weaving wire grills.

"We need the Draft District Regulation to gain work rights. This type of work uses sharp tools and you can hurt your hands. We are pursuing the Draft District Regulation to provide us with protection and a legal framework to guarantee our health and safety at work. Your hands can get stabbed or scratched. The risks are really high." (Mia, Deli Serdang research village, 8 November 2019)

Mia's wages do not take into consideration how risky her work is. Mia's hands are often injured because the weaver and wire she uses are potentially dangerous. Despite Mia's hard work, she only makes about five thousand rupiah (0.5 AUD) per bundle of wire and ten thousand for a larger sized grill. In a day, Mia can finish around two bundles, depending on the size of the wire.

Mia's life as a homemaker turned a corner when she met Diah, a BITRA staff member. Diah invited Mia to talk about being a homemaker and through this discussion, Mia realised that the company she worked for did not adequately protect her rights. Mia's new awareness laid the foundation of her determination to deepen her knowledge about the world of industry by attending training sessions and seminars. Diah also invited Mia to be involved in the establishment of a homemaker group and join the Prosperous Homeworkers Union. Mia was initially reluctant to join the union because of her responsibilities at work at home, but eventually joined in June 2014.

¹ **Author:** Devy Dhian Cahyati and Bellicia Angelica Tanvil. **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.

At the beginning, Mia's husband did not let Mia participate in union group activities or training sessions which were supported by BITRA. He was uncomfortable that BITRA's activities were generally held in hotels – places which some conservative groups deem unsuitable for women. Nevertheless, Mia attended these sessions and demonstrated the benefits of union membership to her husband. At every session, Mia learned new information about gender, work health and safety, law, and employment regulations. In addition, her practical skills were enhanced through training in sewing and cooking. Mia's persistence, perseverance, and the positive effects she was bringing home shifted her husband's point of view and eventually he fully supported her participation in the union.

"If something goes wrong [between us], he says 'but you've learned about gender,' he's always reminding me like that. I have to apply all that I have learned. Sometimes us women can go too far when we talk. Sometimes we raise our voices, when this happens, he reminds me and says something like, 'why are you doing this? You have already learned about gender.'" (Mia, Deli Serdang research village, 8 November 2019)

After she gained the full support of her husband, Mia became more active in the union and wire weavers' group. In fact, over time, Mia's membership was supported by everyone in her family. She also began to share the knowledge she was gaining from SPR about rights and work status to other women homeworkers. To do this, Mia took a personal approach and often visited homeworkers at their houses, before inviting them to come to a discussion session with other women at her house. Mia really cared about the women she invited to her house and, over a short period of time, those who had initially been unfamiliar with each other became closer with each other. On the fifth meeting, these women houseworkers formed their own workers' group.

"I think that the first time the eleven of us met we were still naïve and full of ourselves. And it was the same the second time we met. As time went by, we became closer and closer with each other. In the second meeting we gathered data. In the third meeting we already wanted to start it. Our fifth meeting was after the Members Conference. The point is that we were visiting each other back and forth." (Mia, Deli Serdang research village, 8 November 2019)

Mia became one of the most active members of the Homeworkers Union. In June 2013, she joined the homeworkers group at the village level – in which she is the village's group leader. Within six months, Mia had become a member of the village group for wire workers. In 2015, she was selected to lead this group. Her organisational career continued to flourish after she was selected as the Head of the Branch Managers Council for the Deli Serdang district Prosperous Workers' Union from 2016 until 2019. During her tenure, Mia was also selected to become the Regional Network Coordinator for Indonesian Homeworkers for the province of North Sumatra. In 2019, Mia was elected by members as secretary to the Prosperous Homeworkers Union Regional Representative Council.

Mia is a fast learner and has high commitment to everything she undertakes. This is demonstrated in her organisational work in which she, for instance, pays her own transport costs when she attends SPR meetings in other areas. She also always uses any leftover money from the transport money she receives through the BITRA-MAMPU partnership to pay for group activities which are not funded directly.

Mia reflects that since she became active in organisations and other activities, she has made significant changes in her life, particularly in working toward gender equality. Before becoming engaged in organisations, Mia believed that only men were suitable to become leaders, a perspective common in her community.

"Villagers don't feel that women are suited to being leaders, they tend to [support] male leaders." (Mia, Deli Serdang research village, 8 November 2019)

Before she participated in a gender training session, Mia was afraid of public speaking. She was also nervous when she met, spoke to, or was at events with government officials. However, Mia's nervousness gradually dissipated after she participated in classes and training sessions run by BITRA. These classes made Mia realise that leadership ability knows no gender or age. Mia is now sure that women can be exceptional leaders. Day by day, Mia's capacities grew fast and she was no longer anxious about voicing her thoughts in public. She later became a facilitator to create another homemaker group. Mia wanted to keep learning and to give things a try, which pushed her to fight her fears and become a more confident person.

"There are always challenges [in the learning process], as we sometimes don't believe in ourselves. I remember one time, we weren't confident meeting officials. I was trembling, like when I first joined the union and was a training facilitator for the first time. Then I also trembled when I was at the front, but I kept trying. I kept trying and trying, and I made myself confident. I hadn't ever given a welcome speech, but I tried. I kept going and didn't care even if what I was saying was wrong in some people's opinions. I said what I wanted to say. Who knows if what I said was right or not, I don't know. The point is that I tried." (Mia, Deli Serdang research village, 8 November 2019)

The skills Mia developed have opened opportunities to contribute to many important events. Mia was involved in an academic discussion forum convened by the University of North Sumatra to draft an academic paper on the status of homeworkers in district regulation. She also participated in public hearings and revision forums for the drafting of district regulation with SPRI, BITRA and the district government. She is even more proud that she was requested to attend a public hearing with the Ministry of Manpower about employment regulation. Mia says she was always prepared and willing to share her experiences in these public spaces.

"[When I was asked if I was scared], I said, 'everyone eats the same rice.' That was my guiding principal. Bu Rina said to me a lot, 'even though this isn't the head of the Local Leaders Council, it's the same, the District Head has his position. If it's the District Head's government or the Local Leaders Council, it's all the same.' We think that we are all the same, why should there be different levels of people." (Mia, Deli Serdang research village, 8 November 2019)

Mia wants to continue to grow her abilities, learn and participate in as many training sessions as possible. She will continue to fight so that homeworkers' rights and status are officially recognised by the government through district regulation. Mia hopes that instead of only a few women, all women homeworkers can apply the knowledge they have gained through BITRA trainings in village decision-making meetings. For the future, Mia hopes that women homeworkers will gain the attention of the district government and higher levels of government and, in her local community, the Village Head's attention. Mia also hopes that homeworkers who have not yet joined a union will do so, so that they can grow together with the Prosperous Homeworkers Union.