
Sulis

*FAKTA-DAMAR Member
Tanggamus, Lampung*

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*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: Astrina, A.R. and N. Ulfa, 2020. "Sulis". 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. 61-63. <https://doi.org/10.46580/124331>. Available at: www.mampu.or.id and www.demisetara.org.

Sulis

FAKTA-DAMAR Member

Tanggamus, Lampung¹

Forty-five-year-old Sulis is the eldest of three children and grew up in the research village in Tanggamus district. Sulis worked to help her family earn a living from a young age by caring for their goats, selling coconuts, and farming cassava and sago. While at school, Sulis was also active in the Islamic youth organisation RISMA (Muslim Teenagers of the Mosque).

After graduating from high school in 1994, Sulis decided to move to Tangerang and work at an electronics company. Sulis remembers that moving away from the village, and especially to Jakarta, was popular at the time and usually happened when one person moved first and then invited others to join them. Moving away from the village was popular because of the limited employment options in the village. In 1997, Sulis returned to the village with her child, two years after she got married. The distance between Sulis and her then husband proved to be a strain on their relationship and ten years later they divorced. Sulis later remarried with a man from her village.

Upon her return to the village, Sulis started organising music activities for children at a prayer house. This commitment to village youth led the Village Head, who had been elected in 2006, to select her as Head of the Community Welfare Section.

“After he saw me showing children how to play the tambourine for hadroh and rebana, seeing me teach the children at the prayer house for the first time, he [the Village Head] approached me. I didn’t know him before.” (Sulis, Tanggamus research village, 12 July 2019)

The Village Head asked whether Sulis’ husband was prepared for her to take on this responsibility and emphasised that her role would mean she would come face to face with both women and men’s issues. Sulis’ husband gave his permission and support for her to work as a village official. Since her appointment, Sri thinks she has learned a lot from the Village Head.

“If I was aware of it or not, I have been given a lot of knowledge by the Village Head. The conscious learning has been about how to carry out my duties, but unconsciously I have also learned from chatting because, thanks be to God, I am often invited to chat and when chatting I pick up information like my business, my basic food supplies stall, it is the product of chatting with the Village Head.” (Sulis, Tanggamus research village, 12 July 2019)

By the time of research in 2019, Sulis had been in her position as Head of the Community Welfare Section for thirteen years, despite having asked on multiple occasions to be replaced because of the workload. This reluctance to replace her is because the Village Head trusts Sulis and also does not think that there are others who can fulfill the role.

¹ **Authors:** Azifah R. Astrina and Nadlirotul Ulfa. **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.

“I said to the Village Head a few years ago that I wanted to be replaced. I said, ‘please replace me, I am too busy.’ He said, ‘you’re just joking, I also feel like that ... you do it.’” (Sulis, Tanggamus research village, 12 July 2019)

As a village official, Sulis is entitled to a wage every six months. All village officials agreed to be paid every six months as to prioritise spending on village development, but if needed Sulis can ask to be paid earlier. Sulis is known in her community as a trusted person to confide in, which helps in her role as she must be in close contact with residents.

“People started confiding in me in my first period in office with the Village Head. Because that’s my job for the community. I have built this trust with the community. Imagine if we just worked in the office and didn’t pay attention to people who really needed our attention. I get close to them. Thanks be to God, for the thirteen years I have been part of the community team, I haven’t had my role changed by the Village Head.” (Sulis, Tanggamus research village, 12 July 2019)

Sulis has also been a key contact point to explain to the community about government health insurance. Her experience of taking care of her mother, who was diagnosed with breast cancer and died in 2015, made Sulis diligent in finding information about health services.

“I willed myself to find for information about government health insurance, because there wasn’t any information immediately available in the village. If people asked for the village government to explain, they would. From there, I knew how to process my application. But lots of people in the community are still scared to come to the hospital and ask about government health insurance, so they come to me.” (Sulis, Tanggamus research village, 12 July 2019)

Sulis promotes village and community health centre programs, including working together with the village midwife for a Blood Bank to provide much needed blood transfusion supplies, as many residents do not know their blood type. This Blood Bank was funded by an allocation from the Village Fund and other funds. The largest challenge faced by this program is that many members of the community are afraid of injections.

Sulis’ concern for her community led to the Village Head selecting her to take part in DAMAR’s program. Like many villagers, Sulis was open to new information – an attitude shaped by their background as transmigrants. Since the first training in 2007, Sulis has often participated in DAMAR activities, both in the village and in Bandar Lampung.

“I give DAMAR the thumbs up. They were really patient teaching us about gender. Participants started to really understand, I am so happy that I was a participant, I give my thumbs up to DAMAR.” (Sulis, Tanggamus research village, 12 July 2019)

Sulis created change for herself and her husband after participating in DAMAR workshops, on topics including gender awareness and women’s health. The most fundamental change was Sulis’ understanding of gender equality and its importance. Previously, Sulis says that her husband regarded men as being on the top and then women below them.

“There are a lot of changes and there were many things which I didn’t understand before. Before, I thought that men really were number one, that there were men and then there were women. But thanks be to God, my husband supported me. He works in education, reads, and knows a lot. He gave

permission to me to go to any activities, anywhere. If we wanted to go somewhere, we went. He always let me.” (Sulis, Tanggamus research village, 12 July 2019)

Sulis’ perspective on this hierarchy changed with the materials given by DAMAR. Over time, Sulis – supported by her education background and love of reading – felt able to talk to her husband about how to understand gender equality. She explained to him how community notions of women’s roles and importance were social constructions and that women and men both have important roles in society. Over time, her husband supported her participation in DAMAR, as long as the activities had positive effects.

“The impact on me was that I understood that the work of women and men was the same, you know? The only difference is that we breastfeed, give birth, etc. For me personally, because maybe I am a tomboyish girl, so many people say that I can easily do men’s work. I take care of the house, [get involved] at the village meeting hall, and if I shop a lot, I still carry it myself.” (Sulis, Tanggamus research village, 12 July 2019)

Apart from expanding her understanding of gender, Sulis’ leadership capacities also grew. Even though she had participated in organisations for a long time, Sulis thinks that the DAMAR leadership training has made her more confident to share and work to create positive change in her community.

“[DAMAR training] really influenced me. What I mean by it influencing me is that I feel more confident to share with the community, to work for the community. This is what DAMAR has done for me and what I learned from DAMAR.” (Sulis, Tanggamus research village, 12 July 2019)

For Sulis, DAMAR’s training has enhanced her leadership capabilities. It was the catalyst for her nomination for the 2020 Village Head election, in which she will compete against the Village Head who selected her as Head of Community Welfare. Despite this election being delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Sulis remains determined. She is a trusted source of advice for village social services and advocate for greater understanding of health. Sulis’ desire to become Village Head demonstrates how she has further progressed along a path of political empowerment. In the future, Sulis aims to continue to share her understanding of gender equality and serve her community.