
Veronika

*Head of the Fauana Women Farmers Group
North Central Timor, East Nusa Tenggara*

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Veronika

Head of the Fauana Women Farmers Group
North Central Timor, East Nusa Tenggara¹

Mama Veronika is forty-two-years-old and a courageous leader in her village in North Central Timor in East Nusa Tenggara. Since 2013, she has been active in women's empowerment activities as the Head of the Fauana Women's Farmers Group. Her involvement in prevention of violence against women and championing women's rights increased when the Amnaut Bife Kuan Association (YABIKU) entered the village and began to support the Women Farmers Group in 2014. Mama Veronika has persistently advocated for women's rights and against a perception of women which has been shaped by *adat* (customary) values and conservative interpretations of Catholicism.

"We want to change the perception, so that women will not always be shackled by patriarchal culture. We want women to be given opportunities and space to be more actively involved in the community. So that in the future women will have the same knowledge and experiences as men and can avoid violence." (Mama Veronika, East Nusa Tenggara research village, 30 June 2019)

Mama Veronika herself was once influenced by the social expectation that women primarily support their family and are obliged to carry out all the housework. But with education, Veronika's perception changed. She feels fortunate to have been born in a family which values education and that gave her a good understanding of the importance of female education and the fulfilment of women's rights. Veronika's family's support of her education is rare in the village, where in general families only support boys' education. Of her two siblings, Veronika was the only child given the opportunity to complete higher education and with the full support of her mum and at a family member's suggestion, completed a Diploma II in Primary School Teaching. Veronika also emphasises how her husband supported her to complete her diploma. In fact, she had made completing her diploma a condition of them getting married. She is one of three women in the village with higher education qualifications.

Mama Veronika thinks that school and higher education has opened doors of opportunity for her. She is a reliable community member and decision maker and is trusted as the Head of the Fauana Women Farmers Group since its establishment in 2013. In 2014, she also had the opportunity to further develop her skills when YABIKU entered the village. Veronika's husband did not agree with her desire to get involved in YABIKU's program as he thought that such public roles should be reserved for men only. Timorese *adat* organisations or bodies are usually only made up of men and very rarely include women, even for matters related to women's issues. Through perseverance and good communication, Veronika was able to change what her husband thought and successfully got his support to become active in the paralegal group.

This process took quite a long time as she shared the experiences and new knowledge she obtained about the importance of the organisation and how it worked toward justice for women. This approach increased her husband's understanding of her activities and eventually he supported her work with YABIKU.

"I told him that women are not like they were before. Women must be more active and participate in the community. I developed good communication with my husband. It was really important so I could get his

¹ **Authors:** Longgina Novadona Bayo and Smita Tanaya. **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.

support to do the activities I want to do.” (Mama Veronika, East Nusa Tenggara research village, 30 June 2019)

The activities she participated in, including discussions about gender equality, educating the community about violence against women, and training in women’s leadership with YABIKU, all contributed to Veronika becoming more active and helping women in her village. She also feels that Yohana, YABIKU’s founder, inspired her to develop her capacities.

“Yohana proves that when women are given training and broad education and opportunities to advocate, then we can produce change. It’s true that it might not happen immediately. It needs a long time, but Yohana proves that women can do it.” (Mama Veronika, East Nusa Tenggara research village, 30 June 2019)

Veronika is the Head of the Fauana Women’s Farmers Group, after being chosen by its members, even though she has suggested on multiple occasions that she be replaced. Fauana Women’s Farmers Group is one of three Women Farmers Groups that are active in the village, while there are ten others which are not currently active. Nearly all villagers agree that leadership is key to the success of these groups. Members of the Fauana Women Farmers Group believe that Veronika is a young and courageous leader who is assertive and protects her group’s members. She cares deeply about all its members.

“We unanimously elected Mama Veronika as Head because she is a courageous person who can talk in public. We are also pleased because Veronika is a really good person and not angry when she talks to us who don’t feel like we can do anything.” (Member of the Fauana Women Farmers Group, East Nusa Tenggara research village, 1 July 2019)

Mama Veronika is a leader who always focuses on developing herself and putting her community first. At the beginning of her leadership, Veronika found it hard to manage her time and did not feel confident in her public speaking abilities. But gradually, after she participated in YABIKU’s public speaking and leadership training, Veronika felt more confident. She also is a proactive person and determined to learn, so she often asked questions in training sessions and then put into practice what she had learned in the group. This knowledge transfer developed and led to the success of the Fauana Women Farmers Group.

“Veronika is someone who when she went to our training, immediately put into practice what she had learned in the group. That’s why the Fauana Women Farmers Group has progressed so much further than the other groups. They are determined to make progress.” (YABIKU Staff Member, Kefamenanu, 4 July 2019)

As well as the Head of the Women Farmers Group, Veronika is also secretary and a victim of violence support companion in the Village Paralegal Group. Veronika and ten community representatives also took part in YABIKU paralegal training in 2015 in Kefamenanu. This training aimed to prepare the Village Paralegal Group to offer support for victims of violence and, through it, Veronika gained basic paralegal and counselling skills and procedures for handling cases of domestic violence.

One of Veronika’s largest achievements as a member of the Paralegal Group was when she had to respond to a case of violence involving her own family. Veronika upheld her sense of integrity, professional competence, and commitment to women’s safety. She paid no attention to the pressure from her family to not report the violence.

“When the perpetrator was in my family, my position was clear. I explained to my family that it must be handled by and reported to the police. These actions cannot be hidden and cannot be handled by the family. If the violence has happened multiple times and the woman has been hit a lot, then it has to be immediately reported to the police.” (YABIKU Staff Member, Kefamenanu, 4 July 2019)

The severity of the victim’s injuries in this case shocked the village. Mama Veronika and other members of the paralegal group were fearless in helping bring this case to court. They monitored the perpetrator and were determined to oversee the case until it was fully finished. When Mama Veronika was told that the perpetrator had reoffended, the paralegal members decided to try other methods to deter him.

“We bought a new phone card and at night we would call him. His wife had told us that he usually hit her at night before they went to sleep. The violence happened at night. So, with the new number, we called them like we were the police. We asked him where he was and reminded him to not commit any violence. After we called two or three times, he was scared and didn’t want to do it anymore.” (Mama Veronika, Kupang, 11 July 2019)

With the other paralegal members, Mama Veronika was able to oversee this case from beginning to end. She feels very proud that she was able to deter this perpetrator and emphasises how even if perpetrators are in one’s family, there must be no tolerance for violence against women.

“I thought I am a paralegal. Justice has to be upheld, what’s wrong is wrong and what is right has to be defended. That means I will not defend the perpetrator, even though he is in my family. I am on the victim’s side and will prioritise the victim because there has to be justice.” (Mama Veronika, Kupang, 11 July 2019)

Mama Veronika explains that she felt proud to be part of the discussions and training workshops with YABIKU. Every day she becomes more determined to put her knowledge to work to help and protect women in her village.

“I am proud. I am proud because I have gained knowledge and experience. And proud to be able to help other people, particularly women to handles cases [of violence]. Before being involved with YABIKU I thought that it [domestic violence] was normal, but now after I gained knowledge and skills from training, I am proud that I can help.” (Mama Veronika, East Nusa Tenggara research village, 30 June 2019)

Veronika’s eldest daughter, Vania, says that since her mother became active with YABIKU, the division of work at home has changed drastically. Now, Veronika’s husband and son help her with household chores.

“When Mum comes home from YABIKU training workshops, she likes bringing books and notes. Usually, Mum tells me to read them too, that’s how I’ve learned about gender equality. Mum has also started to apply it at home.” (Vania, East Nusa Tenggara research village, 10 July 2019)

Veronika thinks that her journey to develop herself and advocate for women still has a long way to go. She continues to work toward the promise of women’s empowerment and advocate to the village government. Veronika often asks officials directly about the progress of women’s empowerment programs and funds. She further demonstrated her leadership skills as the Head of the District Paralegal Group.

Mama Veronika dreams of becoming the first female Village Head. She is sure that her village will have many female leaders in the future. Although the journey to break through patriarchal cultural norms and social structures will be difficult, she is determined to keep working to uphold and improve the dignity of women in the village.