
Laila

*Head of Women's School Group
Pangkajene and Islands, South Sulawesi*

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Laila

Head of Women's School Group

Pangkajene and Islands, South Sulawesi⁴

Thirty-year-old Laila is an empowered woman leader in her village in the Pangkajene and Islands district who heads one of the Island Women's School groups. In 2016, following strong advocacy from the Women's School, the government officially recognised Laila as a fisherwoman, which means she is entitled to the same services and protections as her male counterparts.

Laila lives with her mother, as her father died in 1999. After finishing primary school, Laila became the family's primary wage earner after her older sibling got married. Laila helped her uncle work as a fisherman from an early age. However, as the income she earned was not enough to support herself and her mother, Laila decided to use her father's small fishing boat, known as a *bala-bala*, and fish herself. Everyday Laila crabs and farms seaweed. Seaweed farming has been a new venture for Laila for the past four years. From crabbing, Laila can earn one hundred thousand rupiah per kilo (10 AUD) depending on the market; as the market is currently unpredictable, sometimes she can only earn about sixty thousand rupiah for two kilograms. Laila sells her catch to an agent, called a *punggawa*, who then sells it in another region.

"At the start I went with my uncle. I learned from him, then I had my own punt [sampan] and I started to work by myself. I used the punt to go out on the sea near the mainland. I nearly drowned with that punt. A big wave came and struck the boat which sunk. I screamed but there was no one around me. Luckily there was my uncle and man who saw me from afar and they came ... After a while I could work for myself and I was confident to leave my uncle." (Laila, Pangkajene and Islands research village, 25 February 2019)

As Laila started fishing and working when she was small, she was not taught domestic tasks. When Laila came of age, she replaced her father and supported the family by fishing because she had the capacity and skill to work as a fisherwoman and to cultivate seaweed.

"When I am at home, I don't cook. Only my mum cooks. My work is at sea. I only work in the kitchen if my mum is out. Mum cooks and my aunt cleans the house and I am out at sea all the time. All the time. I eat as soon as I get home." (Laila, Pangkajene and Islands research village, 25 February 2019)

Laila was first invited to join Women's School activities in 2014 by her niece. She initially wanted to join as she thought she could get help to buy a boat to support her profession.

"We were invited to a meeting. Then we were told to draw a picture of the island, and I didn't know how to draw the island when I was told. Then I thought hopefully here I can broaden my thinking and complain about why I have never received financial assistance. I wanted to join to try. I wanted to leave my comfort zone. Maybe this was the only path I needed to take. Because before I wasn't confident to tell my story, not to the Village Head and I was even scared to talk with the Hamlet Head, scared to be blamed and that they would be angry. I was scared, really scared." (Laila, Pangkajene and Islands research village, 25 February 2019)

⁴ **Authors:** Ulya Niemi Efrina Jamson and Hening Wikan Sawiji. **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.

After the initial meeting, Laila began to be active in the Women's School. She keenly participated in training and discussion sessions. In large and formal forums, Laila shared her life story of being a fisherwoman and the challenges she faced. At the time, the Women's School met three times a month in the middle of the day or afternoon as not to disrupt her work. As she was so active and had many leadership traits, Laila became the head of the Women's School in her village – the Rakkang Jaya Women's School – which has approximately 40 members.

Under Laila's leadership, the School regularly holds meetings and discussions. At these events, members learned from YKPM (Foundation for Community Studies and Empowerment⁵) facilitators about gender justice. These meetings usually took place at the house of the Women's School coordinator on another island. To get there, Laila used transport money from the savings and loan group's joint funds to pay for a boat ride. These discussions expanded Laila's skills and built her critical awareness about rights which encouraged her to be more confident in voicing her opinion in public.

“Before the Women's School, I wasn't confident. If I went out of my house and saw someone wearing an official uniform walking on the pier, I hid. I was scared, scared to say something, scared to be wrong. After one year of going to the Women's School, my courage emerged. I realised that I have a place here, I have rights here. I already knew that I had rights here, but I didn't fully comprehend who should fulfil my rights, who would we talk to about our rights? We met [at the Women's School] three times a month and discussed materials about gender. It broadened our perspective. Before, I didn't have the courage at all to speak in front of men, I wasn't confident, I didn't have the courage. But since I became a member of the Women's School, thank God, we have made ourselves confident to convey what we think.” (Laila, Pangkajene and Islands research village, 25 February 2019)

Since 2015, Laila has served as a Neighbourhood Head (Ketua Rukun Tetangga – RT) on her island. Laila was selected by the Village Head and continued by the subsequently elected Village Head. Laila agreed to take on this role after being convinced that she should take this opportunity to have formal responsibility, especially after Laila had learned about women's leadership in Women's School materials.

This new position, however, was not without challenges. The Hamlet Head, who is related to Laila, did not accept her appointment because women are often considered unsuitable to hold a leadership role. These relationships gradually improved because they recognised that Laila was good at performing her duties and coordinating with others.

“Before I became Neighbourhood Head, the Hamlet Head was unsure about my appointment but Pak Bahrudin [The Village Head] and Women's School members said why are you underestimating her? She hasn't done anything yet so why are you doubting her? See first, if you're not happy with my work then I'll stop. After a year the Hamlet Head seemed satisfied that my work was good, which I was pleased with.” (Laila, Pangkajene and Islands research village, 1 March 2019)

Laila felt that she had a moral responsibility to apply the knowledge she had learned at the school. She was increasingly concerned about women's issues and needs in her local area. Laila identified that women really needed water tanks, public bathrooms, and electricity. Water tanks were important because residents often had difficulty accessing clean water, particularly in dry season. Without tanks, women had to search to find water for the household every day, a task made harder if the family boat was taken by men for fishing meaning that the women could not travel to purchase water. As such, many women had no other option than to use sea water.

⁵ Yayasan Kajian dan Pemberdayaan Masyarakat.

“Water tanks were needed so that women don’t have to think about where to get clean water, especially in dry season there isn’t any water, and if our children go to the other island to get water, that makes it harder for women. So, if we had water tanks we wouldn’t have this difficulty. It’s clear that water issues are women’s issues, because men go to sea early in the morning. If kids are willing, they can go with their dad to other islands and get water, but if they can’t it gets hard and the water can run out.” (Laila, Pangkajene and Islands research village, 1 March 2019)

At the 2017 village Musrenbang, Laila proposed that twenty-five water tanks be purchased. Her island ended up receiving fifteen as other islands also made the same proposal. The next year, Laila again suggested that 20 water tanks be purchased.

Another key need for women in Laila’s community was public toilets, as many residents do not have toilets in their houses. Because of this, many women use the sea to wash and defecate, even at night. The construction of three public toilets means that women no longer have to go to beach in the pitch black of night. Laila and other Women’s School members proposed their construction at the village’s Musrenbang.

“Before the village Musrenbang, we had a hamlet Musrenbang first and invited community members to attend. We asked what they needed. [We said] even if they ask you later, answer like this because we know what the Village Head is like.” (Laila, Pangkajene and Islands research village, 25 February 2019)

Solar power infrastructure to supply the island with electricity was another priority for women in the village. With access to electricity, women could have adequate rest and finish housework at night. Advocacy for solar panels began with discussions at the Women’s School. Members then proposed the purchasing of solar panels to the Village Head on a neighbouring island, both through informal lobbying and at Musrenbangdes. As a Women’s School representative, Laila also conveyed the importance of solar panels directly to the Pangkep District Head who visited her island during his re-election campaign in 2015. Eventually, this advocacy was successful and solar panels were installed on the island in 2017.

Laila, who has inspired many other women, then had the opportunity to talk about challenges she has faced to the District Head during a women’s leadership training event in Makassar. A few months later, Laila received assistance from KAPAL Perempuan which enabled her to buy her own fishing boats. However, despite the group’s advocacy, Laila did not have a fishing licence or insurance. In 2016, when the Marine and Fishing Office was gathering data at the Head of the Hamlet’s house, Laila’s name was put on the list of fishermen and women. One month later her licence was issued and five months later she received insurance. These documents are important steps toward fisherwomen on this island having their rights fulfilled.

After the 2016 Village Head election, the Hamlet Head retained his position as he was friend of the successful candidate. However, as the new Village Head did not like the Women’s School as he regarded it as supporting his political rival in the village election, he sought to remove Laila as a Neighbourhood Head. Nevertheless, because of the strong relationship Laila had forged with the Hamlet Head, he stood up for Laila and she retained her position.

“He said that I am easy to communicate with and that I’m not shy and that he feels fine asking me to help him to go to the Village Office, for instance, that he doesn’t feel reluctant to ask for my help. It’s also because I have my own boat, so if someone is sick, I can take them to the health post, it’s not hard for me, so I just do it.” (Laila, Pangkajene and Islands research village, 1 March 2019)

The challenges Laila has faced during her role as a female leader and Neighbourhood Head have been influenced by her involvement with the Women’s School. Her fellow islanders often blame her if they feel that

they do not receive a fair share of financial assistance from the village or district government. This made Laila feel like stepping down from her position in 2018, but she was supported by her School friends.

Laila is a resilient woman, who even though she is sometimes seen as stubborn, has worked hard since she was a child. Her journey is inspirational because she always wants to, as she said herself, “leave her comfort zone”. She has courageously claimed spaces and gained knowledge which has made her a prominent woman in her community. Laila will always strive for poor women through the Women’s School. She hopes that through this School women will educate themselves.