
Yohana

*YABIKU Founder and Former District Parliament Member
North Central Timor, East Nusa Tenggara*

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Yohana

YABIKU Founder and Former District Parliament Member
North Central Timor, East Nusa Tenggara¹

In discussions about violence against women and women's empowerment in North Central Timor, one name nearly always emerges: Yohana. Yohana is the founder of the Amnaut Bife Kuan Association. Since 1999, she has been working in women's empowerment with YABIKU, and from 2014 to 2019 she served as a member of the North Central Timor House of Representatives and led the formation of District Regulation on the Implementation of the Protection of Women and Children. Yohana – or Mama Yohana as she is known – has a deep connection to Timorese women and feels that there is still so much more which needs to be done to improve their welfare.

Mama Yohana's motivation to join the women's movement began when she was in high school. As her father worked as Head of the Service Division at the State Detention Centre, Yohana frequently interacted with female prisoners. This shaped her understanding of the problems which led to women being imprisoned. In many cases, Yohana found out that women were not the primary perpetrators of violence, but rather victims of violence.

“By the time I was in high school I understood and had found some cases in which women committed violence, but not because they wanted to. They committed violence because they took out their uncontrollable emotions on her husband. Women live under pressure because of their husbands who cheat, get drunk, and don't provide for their families. From their stories I knew that they were actually victims of exploitation.” (Yohana, Kefamenanu, 26 June 2019)

These interactions with women at the detention centre inspired Yohana to work for women in North Central Timor who feel oppressed, so much so that this sometimes results in violence. Yohana understood how Timorese women were burdened with societal expectations and economic and cultural burdens. After seeing the suffering experienced by women, Yohana wanted to help them and ease their burdens.

When, in 1999, thousands sought refuge in North Central Timor from Timor Leste, Yohana joined as a volunteer in the West Timor Humanitarian Team, together with Oxfam Australia, to help women and children in refugee barracks. She worked to support refugees and always tried to be their friend. After working together in the program for two years, many women asked Yohana to advocate against the violence they experienced. This is how YABIKU was born.

In 2000, Yohana established YABIKU with friends and started supporting women victims of violence: “Yabiku was my dream. This organisation is for women and children, to improve their welfare” (Kefamenanu, 26 June 2019). In 2001, YABIKU was officially established and was recognised and recommended by the district government.

YABIKU has worked for the empowerment and protection of women and children for nearly fifteen years. Under Yohana's leadership, YABIKU prioritised advocating and supporting women and children victims of violence. At the same time, through this work Yohana and YABIKU began to realise the necessity of pushing for pro-women policies to create structural change.

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.

“We reflected from our journey that we can’t just come in to handle cases, it has to start from prevention.” (Yohana, Kefamenanu, 26 June 2019)

YABIKU then began to advocate and form strategies to influence policy. To do so, YABIKU began to build networks with policy makers to give them an appetite for producing pro-women policies.

“I saw that YABIKU was already twelve years old. I felt that I trusted my friends in the organisation. So, with their approval, I wanted to leave the front line and enter parliament.” (Yohana, Kefamenanu, 26 June 2019)

Yohana experienced difficulties in getting through to and shaping policy makers decisions. This motivated her to run for parliament and continue the struggle for women’s rights from within. One of Yohana’s dreams was to create a gender responsive budget, so it could inspire pro-women policies.

This was the starting point of Yohana’s journey to nominate for the North Central Timor House of Representatives. She competed in two elections. The first was in 2009, but she failed to win a seat, for factional political games and Yohana’s position as a woman were not in her favour. Then, she tried for the second time in 2014 and successfully was elected.

Yohana was then selected to become the Head of Commission C because of her a strong education background and knowledge about how to prepare the District Budget and District Regulations. This was an important steppingstone to fulfill her dreams of formulating pro-women policies.

“I felt so lucky to have an NGO background. I had already learned how to put together the budget and back District Regulation with YABIKU. So, while others were learning for the first time, I already understood and knew how to do it. That was my advantage, when I entered parliament, I wasn’t a blank slate at all. I was well prepared.” (Yohana, Kefamenanu, 26 June 2019)

Yohana explains that bargaining for a leadership position was very difficult. She had to fight to get through to lots of male members of parliament, especially as there were only two other female members. This made Yohana work hard to make friends with and influence these two other women.

“Frankly speaking, getting to a leadership position is very difficult, and we have to fight to get through the many men, and there were only two other female members. I first tried to influence my friend, one of the women by motivating her to work for women. I said, ‘we are from different factions and parties, but we are both women. So, we have to be able to do something for women.’” (Yohana, Kefamenanu, 26 June 2019)

During her time in office, Yohana relied both on her skills and personal networks. She tried to demonstrate her skills in small forums, to prove herself as a strong competitor. Capitalising on this support and opportunity, Yohana began to formulate District Regulations on the Implementation of the Protection of Women and Children. Throughout its history, the North Central Timor House of Representatives had never before produced a single district regulation initiative on the protection of women and children. To make this dream a reality, Yohana tried to become a spokesperson and influence all factions through a personal approach.

With YABIKU, Yohana formed a strategy and collaborated with other NGOs to get a public hearing at the House of Representatives to produce the District Regulation on the Protection of Women and Children. It was here that MAMPU’s partners and Oxfam played an important role in advocating to the District House of Representatives that this regulation be realised. Yohana advocated for gender-sensitive district regulations

and was responsible for the technical drafting of the District Regulation with the District House of Representatives. At the same time, YABIKU and other partners focused on strengthening support for the District Regulation on the Protection of Women and Children at the grassroots level. YABIKU gathered support and prepared the community for this policy change, while Yohana lobbied members of the North Central Timor political elite.

“A year after I was inaugurated, I often bothered other members by talking about initiatives for regulations. In the history of the North Central Timor House of Representatives, it has never produced an initiative at all. So, I tried to be a funnel to influence all the factions through personal relationships. And then I held events to gather all the politicians and my friends from women’s NGOs to discuss a district regulation on the protection of women and children.” (Yohana, Kefamenanu, 26 June 2019)

Finally, the District Government passed the two regulations which Yohana had initiated and YABIKU supported: District Regulation No. 14 2016 on the Protection of Women and District Regulation No. 15 2016 on the Protection of Children. Both regulations relate to preventative measures to protect women and children from violence, as well as handling and protection of women and children after they have experienced violence.

Yohana hopes that the two district regulations can protect women and children from violence. These two district regulations have created a significant deterrent to perpetrating violence. The government community education about these regulations included explaining that acts of domestic violence cannot be tolerated and outlining the punishments for perpetrators of such violence. This district regulation is thus like a shield for women. Conversely, for potential perpetrators of violence, the district regulation classified these acts of violence as a crime and this has made men more reluctant to offend. Seeing these changes has made Yohana proud and eager to continue to fight for women's rights.

2019 was Yohana’s final year as a member of the House of Representatives. She stood for re-election for another five-year term but was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, Yohana states that she was not scared to leave her position as a Member of Parliament as because of her personal approach and the relationships she has built, she will continue to be active in the North Central Timor women’s movement and fight for pro-women and children policies.

Yohana is an example of how politicians and women’s activists advocate for and with women. As a Member of Parliament, she never forgot her constituents and the village women YABIKU supports. In fact, she often spends her own money to help women in villages and uses her network with government agencies to provide them with assistance. Many women from villages also come and visit her at her house in Kefamenanu city. Going forward, Yohana will always work for Timorese women.



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