

## Case Studies



Mama Oca with members of her farmer's group.  
(Photo: Nina FitzSimons)

# Mama Oca Finds Her Voice

How an Australian  
Government program is  
changing gender roles in  
East Nusa Tenggara

by Nina FitzSimons

Maria Yosefat Daos is greeted warmly as she walks into the room of the Oelkofin Farmer's Group. Mama Oca, as she is affectionately known, is chairing the meeting today. While this may not be considered significant in other parts of Indonesia or in the West, in the small village of Manusasi in West Timor, this is truly remarkable.

Women in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) play an important role in the family. They bring up the children, take care of the home, cook, work in the fields, forage to feed the livestock, and collect water daily—walking several kilometres a day to do so. “Our place is considered to be in the kitchen,” says Mama Oca, as the other women in her group nod. “Women are in the background. We have no say.”

Women in the rural areas in NTT face additional challenges. There are high levels of maternal and infant mortality rates and child malnutrition. The stunting rate for children is as high as 58%. Access to education is limited for women and most only complete a few years of primary school. Domestic violence against women is endemic. These pervasive issues are exacerbated by high levels of poverty, with government estimates indicating at least 80 percent of rural households in NTT are living on less than two dollars a day.

“Things began to change for us when Yayasan Mitra Tani Mandiri (YMTM) came to our village in 2007,” says Mama Oca. YMTM is a local NGO that received support from the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The program they implemented focussed on improving the livelihood of the rural poor. The program reached 90 villages throughout NTT.

The program paid close attention to gender equality. “The roles of men and women are not discussed in the villages,” says Josef Maan, the Director of YMTM. “It’s just given that women are not active participants in village decision-making. We have to engage specific measures to ensure women are included and are listened to.”

One such measure is a quota for women within the Farmer Groups established by the program. “YMTM wouldn’t start a meeting or technical training unless there were at least 30% women present,” explains Mama Oca. “But then it was even worse – they made at least one of us speak at the meeting,” says Mama Oca smiling. “This was very hard for us because we had never spoken in public before. But the field officer always encouraged us and we gained our confidence. I feel indebted to them,” says Mama Oca solemnly.



Women from the Farmer's Group making their way home after a meeting.  
(Photo: Nina FitzSimons)

“In the past we always thought we were not worthy, but now I no longer feel lower than others. My place is to be an active member of this village. One day I even hope to lead it.”

- Maria Yosefat Daos, farmer

In 2008 Mama Oca and women representatives from each of the 13 farmer groups in her village were given the opportunity to attend a gender training workshop held by Oxfam in nearby Soe. “The workshop taught me so much. As well as the technical stuff, it taught us how to prepare mentally to speak in front of people. We had speech practice. I came home immediately and told my husband all about it,” Mama Oca married in 2000 when she was 19 and now has two children of primary school age.

“When YMTM came to our village my husband told me I could not join the meetings. He told me I had to stay home and look after the children. But when he realised we were being trained in home industry and I could make some money for the family, he relented.” Mama Oca and four other women from her farmer group are now making snacks from the produce in their gardens. They sell the goods at the market and village kiosk. “I am an income earner now,” says Mama Oca proudly. “I contribute to my children’s school fees.”

From someone who felt she would never be able to speak in front of her peers, Mama Oca is now making up for lost time. She is the lead community development cadre in her village. She is also the secretary for the government Village Readiness (*Desa Siaga*) committee. She has been chosen to be

part of the village planning team that advocates the village plan to the district government for funding consideration. Mama Oca has also been voted head of the village saving and loan group established with the support of YMTM. More than 30% of leadership positions in village institutions are now held by women. It is a remarkable achievement.

The most significant achievement for Mama Oca, and what makes her the proudest, is she passed her high school certificate at the age of 37. “My dream is one day to be the Village Head or a member of the local House of Representatives,” says Mama Oca, “But for that you need your high school certificate.” In her effort to reach her dream, Mama Oca convinced nine other women from the village to register with the National Government’s adult education program. They began studying together. In April they sat for the national school leaving exam and passed. It is a moment that brings a tear to Mama Oca’s eye.

“In the past we always thought we were not worthy,” says Mama Oca, “but now when I go to a forum or meeting I no longer feel lower than the other attendees. Our place is no longer in the kitchen. We have too much to offer to be stuck stoking the fire,” she says. “My place is to be an active member of this village. One day I even hope to lead it.”

## AIP-Rural

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AIP-Rural is a suite of programs that improves smallholder farmers access new markets, better inputs, knowhow and technology, irrigation and small loans. Its goal is to achieve a sustainable 30% increase in the net incomes of 1,000,000 male and female smallholder farmers in eastern Indonesia by 2022. AIP-Rural operates in East Java, West Nusa Tenggara, East Nusa Tenggara, Papua and West Papua.

The program focuses on agricultural sectors that have strong growth potential and are the main source of income for a large number of smallholder farmers. All of this is done through co-investing in new business models with local, regional, national, and international market players to create business models that improves the agriculture sector’s competitiveness, especially smallholder farmers.