



# Not My Mother's Path

*On the collective strength of Tambunan's daughters*





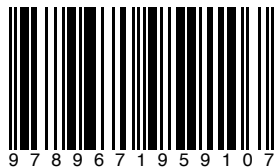
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# Foreword

*by Shahira Ahmed Bazari*

*Managing Director*

*Yayasan Hasanah*


YAYASAN  
HASANAH

 A foundation of Khazanah Nasional

Hasanah's partnership with Good Shepherd Services (GSS) began in 2017 and I am proud of what GSS and especially the people of Tambunan have achieved. All the struggles and wins are encapsulated in this book in the form of stories from the community.

One of the reasons we chose to partner with GSS is their holistic approach to tackling issues that are deeply ingrained in the community. Beyond raising awareness and educating the affected women and girls, GSS ensures the involvement of all members of the community, including their men and youth.

We have witnessed throughout the partnership that the women in Tambunan are visibly committed to improving theirs and their communities' lives by taking ownership of their aspirations and taking leadership roles. The dedication amongst the youth is also inspiring, as they took it upon themselves to organise concerts and online campaigns




in order to help their peers understand the negative impact of gender-based violence on themselves and their communities.

Words cannot describe how satisfying it is when beneficiaries take ownership of a programme. From six villages in Tambunan, GSS has now expanded the programme to 18 villages in seven *mukim* to build safer communities, providing a framework for nurturing better leaders amongst them.

But behind these community run programmes, the gist of it all is that the community is upholding their right to feel safe and empowered to make a sustained difference independently. This is exactly what underlines the importance of human rights based approach to philanthropy.

I would like to congratulate GSS and the people of Tambunan for making this happen. These stories are more than just stories. They are a living documentation of the power of change when communities work together with one focus, drive and inclusive participation.



# Message

*by Anita Ahmad*

*Lead, Community Development*

*Yayasan Hasanah*




I made my first trip to Tambunan in 2017 while in Sabah looking in on some of Hasanah's projects, and decided to visit GSS' projects in several districts including Tambunan. My first impression was how green and spacious it was compared to Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu, with its serene and gently undulating landscape.

During a meeting with the district office, GSS introduced the project that Hasanah would eventually support. It was there that I heard in detail some of the gender-based challenges faced by the community and the plans GSS had to overcome them. It was heartening to hear that the district office acknowledged the issues and was on board to collaborate with GSS. They were also appreciative that a Foundation had come all the way from KL to understand the project better.


A few years later I returned to Tambunan. As the project progressed, it was time for me to meet with our beneficiaries to hear for myself how the project had impacted their lives. Sitting in a village community hall, where





the women attend GSS workshops and cultivate ginger products as part of the project, I listened to their stories being relayed one after another. I remember one lady telling me that she initially had challenges convincing her husband to let her be a participant in the project but she quietly attended the GSS workshops and meetings anyhow. But over time, the husband recognised that she was becoming more confident and learning new skills that was ultimately not only benefitting her, but also her family and so encouraged her to continue her participation. Others shared similar stories, but also their daily challenges of making that extra effort to be part of the project, because as full time farmers, wives and mothers, they truly needed to find the extra time and energy to learn ways that would resolve a systemic problem within the community.

I walked away, admiring the strength and determination of the women, as I usually do after talking to Hasanah's beneficiaries. These are the people who we think are left behind both socially and economically, yet time and time again, when given the right opportunities and support, they rise, and they rise above to greater heights. To all the ladies I met, and to all the participants of our project, be you women, youth, men, local authorities and also to the GSS team—thank you for your commitment, hard work and tenacity to making your community safer, stronger and empowered.





*Children of Kampung Mangi Pangi during participating in the Family Building and Reconciliation (FBR) programme, 2018.*

# Tambunan and her people

Approximately 80km eastwards of Kota Kinabalu is Tambunan, a valley district that sprawls over 1,347 square kilometres of verdant land. Spread across these jewel-toned fields of padi and lush vegetation are some 88 villages divided into seven counties, home to 42,600 (approximate population size) Kadazan-Dusun people—the largest native group of bumiputera in Sabah.

Beneath its picture book perfect portrayal of rural living lies a troubled culture and history of violence against, and the suppression of women. In a place where time moves slowly, Tambunan and its inhabitants have lagged in establishing systems that would protect and empower the unfairly disadvantaged. But like a sleeping giant being roused from its slumber, the womenfolk of Tambunan are beginning to take a stand, to fight for their right to independence, autonomy and choice. They rise arm in arm, a band of sisters in battle not only for themselves but for those who came before and for those yet to come. Theirs are voices that must be heard and within these pages are some of their stories.

◆  
◆  
| **“Alone we can do so little;  
together we can do so much.”**

*Helen Keller*





**Women Support Group (WSG) workshop on the procedures of making a report to help victims of violence.**

# I am woman, hear me roar

They are called meddlers and busybodies, often spoken of with disdain for sticking their noses where it doesn't belong. But no revolution can occur without a band of brave troublemakers who dare to make their voices heard. What these nosey parkers strive to do is change generations worth of systemic abuse and the enforced silencing of its victims: they are women for women, tired of being forced to sit in the back; moved to recognise the injustices faced by their mothers, sisters and their daughters, and hopeful enough to be the necessary catalysts for change. "My first wish for the Women's Support Group (WSG) is to spread awareness of sexual gender-based violence (SGBV) within the community. There is a long-standing culture of silence and avoidance, and it needs to change," says Felicia Onsodon, the Chairperson of the WSG in Tambunan. The 47-year-old Narayat native was a former Wakil Ketua Anak Negeri and has been a tireless warrior and advocate in the efforts of the WSG.

As a mother of three children—one of which is a daughter—Onsodon is calm and assertive, speaking with a voice that is used to being heard. "It is frustrating to be met with anger and derision when all we want to do is help. Some sneer at us, saying 'Let's see how long this will last' but I never allow it to faze me. I can ignore all provocation because I know exactly





*Felicia Onsodon, Chairperson of the WSG*

what my mission is." These missionary seeds of the WSG are beginning to take root. Beyond spreading awareness, a significant accomplishment of the women on ground has been the awakening of a cultural shift towards the reporting of instances of abuse. Onsodon has seen firsthand not just what the victims suffer at the hands of their abusers, but the aftermath of the community's culture of silence and the very small confines the women are forced into. Options are a luxury not easily afforded and it is something that the WSG is working hard to alter. "There is a deep-seated fear of retribution. Women who are being abused are often too afraid to report their abusers let alone receive help, fearing repercussions not only from the perpetrators but the people around them. Our first steps then must be to empower the individual, which in turn empowers the family that surrounds them and eventually, the community," she continues.

**"There is a long-standing culture of silence and avoidance, and it needs to change."**

**Felicia Onsodon**  
Chairperson of the WSG

Her challenges are echoed by Leney Kuling, the 34-year-old Secretary of the WSG in Kampung Kirokot. She too has been on the receiving end of contempt from a community she only seeks to serve. "My purpose within the WSG is to offer support to the women and children of my community, to spread awareness and to be a port of call. I do this because I want my sisters to know that they are not alone, that there is always someone who is willing to listen and help. In the end, knowing I did the right thing





*Leney Kuling, Secretary of the WSG (right)*

is all the payment I need," says Kuling. It is because of the endeavours of such brave women that the WSG's message can take effect. Kuling says that the members of her community are becoming increasingly receptive to the WSG's intent, no longer viewing them as an intrusive threat and getting more comfortable utilising their services. These may seem like small steps, but they are steps in the right direction—an indicator of what can be achieved through the fortitude and resilience of women. "Women are always more hardworking and tougher than men," says Onsodon with a laugh. "Apart from being child-bearers and having to keep home, cook and watch the children, we also tend to the animals and farm alongside our husbands. Everything men can do, we do and more."

**"I do this because I want my sisters to know that they are not alone, that there is always someone who is willing to listen and help."**

**Lenny Kuling**  
Secretary of the WSG



**Dialogue with key stakeholders (Native Court of Tambunan & Tambunan Registration Department) at Kampung Rompon, 2019.**



**WSG Kg. Geras and Kg. Kirokot during the workshop on SGBV, titled "Knowing Self and Trauma".**









*International Women's Day celebration 2017 - 2020.*





*Members of WSGE's pilot phase monthly meet up at Balai Raya Kg Lubong, 2019.*





*Members of EngageMENT gather at Kg. Tombotuon for a meeting, 2018.*





DARE TO STAND UP

29 September 2018  
Pisompuruan Square  
Tamu Ground Tambunan  
10.00 AM - 12.00 PM

Interesting activities

ART MUSIC FORENSIC

Free Entry

Powered by YOUTH PREP

VOICE  
OUT 8

Voice Out 2018 at Pisompuruan Square with the theme "Dare to Stand Up".

# Fire starters

Any seismic change begins with the stirring of the voices of a disaffected youth. They are the inheritors of our successes and our sins and when their world and future is in jeopardy, the power to shift the narrative and affect change must lie in their hands. Dissatisfaction and a refusal to accept the status quo are their spurs for action: from the Arab Spring, Tiananmen Square and the Vietnam War, young people have risked life and limb in their fight for the greater good. These sons and daughters are exactly the kind of firebrands to transform life as Tambunan knows it. There is a marked difference in the way the younger folk responded to issues surrounding SGBV, a confidence and earnestness not yet beaten back by the toil and drudgery of life. Advances in technology and ready access to the internet has made them into a woke generation: more worldly, more informed and outspoken. Merrylove Glory Albert began her journey in advocacy against child marriage and SGBV two years ago, when she was invited by a teacher from her school to attend Voice Out, an annual youth festival for raising and discussing social issues. Now aged 18 and about to embark on a degree in architecture, Albert is an impassioned activist with exactly the kind of verve and tenacity to inspire her community.

“I have an aunt who would pressure me to marry from when I was 11. She tried to discourage me from pursuing an education and told me I should learn to



cook and to stay in the kitchen; to perform wifely, 'womanly' duties. It really irritated me. We live in an evolving world and the older generation are of the mindset that girls are only able to be secure if they marry," she says, wise beyond her years. "It wasn't until I became involved with GSS that I began to learn that this issue is a form of exploitation and it limits the possibilities and potential of girls. There was a resigned acceptance, the same tired diatribe of: 'This is normal, this is how it has always been, marrying young is normal, we've done it and turned out fine.' Are you though? I began to realise they were living miserably but didn't even know how to recognise their misery. That was when I knew it was not the life I wanted for myself or for the people I love, and I realised I had to speak up."

Albert's opinions are not shy dips to test the temperature; she plunges in with fully-fleshed opinions delivered in quick-flowing bursts and an ease of conviction that belie her young age. She is optimistic and resilient—traits that work well in her favour particularly when dealing with detractors. "Criticism

**"Criticism is a consequence of advocacy, particularly when the battle involves trying to adjust mindset and culture."**

**Merrylove Glory Albert**  
*Children Representative Council*

is a consequence of advocacy, particularly when the battle involves trying to adjust mindset and culture," she says. "I have accepted that as fact, and found that the best way to respond is to not play the blame game. The best way forward is through education which takes time and effort, but you have to remember what makes it all worthwhile in the end."



*Merrylove Glory Albert, Children Representative Council*



Deeply ingrained in the cultural mindset is a blind and unquestionable deference to your elders, which is all too conveniently repackaged as 'respect'. An individual's place in the familial or social strata is often determined by age and gender, and it goes without saying that children are meant to be seen and not heard. "It's a difficult thing to break out of," says Adriano J Vitalis, an 18-year-old in his final year of high school. He has five brothers and just one sister, and knows how important it is to fight for the rights of his womenfolk. He recalls an incident during which he witnessed a young friend being sexually harassed in broad daylight: "A much older man approached a group of my friends, who were all females. He began to touch them inappropriately and one of the girls ran to me to ask me to help. I approached the man and told him to stop, telling him what he was doing was wrong but he was completely unbothered and said that we were unlikely to report him anyway."

**"We have been given a platform and allowed a voice and for the first time, our voices are being heard. We have to use it to protect our women and children."**

**Adriano J Vitalis**  
Member of the YCC

The perpetrator's arrogance and remorselessness struck a chord in Adriano, making him more determined to speak up and to be a catalyst for change. "We are taught from an early age that we are supposed to listen to our elders and to not talk back," he says. "This is exactly why it is so important to create and spread awareness of the issues surrounding SGBV. We have been given a platform and allowed a voice and for the first time, our voices are being heard. We have to use it to protect our women and children."





***Adriano J Vitalis, Member of the YCC***

Breaking the cycle of generations worth of privilege and bias is no mean feat but Tambunan's youth are taking it in stride. Every morning, Prisanshawn Kanduat picks up the local kids and drops them off at school. The 34-year-old lives and cares for her aging parents, helping to tend to the family's land and cultivating their rice and vegetable crops. Kanduat is also a member of Youth Connect Circle (YCC) and an active participant in the Tambunan Agronomic Enterprise, which provides young people in the area with the necessary skills and means to be able to provide for themselves through the farming of ginger. She picks the kids up in the afternoon and drops them home; and it is during the to and fro of the school run, in the close confines of her vehicle, that Kanduat does her most important work. Beyond lending them a listening ear and advising them in all manner of quandaries from affairs of the heart to family feuds, she speaks to her wards of the plight of the girl-child and the ramifications of sexual gender-based violence. "The kids open up

and share their problems with me... their trust is a huge responsibility," she says. Kanduat is kind and earnest and if her school runs are a form of evangelism, she is a rightful message bearer. "I do my best to advise them and to impart lessons on what is right and wrong. I want to be a role model for them—to show them what you can achieve if you work hard and do the right thing."



**Shawn with the local children at Kg. Toboh.**





*Prisanshawn Kanduut, Member of the YCC*







***With their mothers at an SGBV workshop, children are given sessions on "Keeping Me Safe", which promotes Safety and Self Protection.***

Albert furthers this sentiment with her three golden rules: "Accept, Care and Respect. Society must learn to accept that children are children—they are vulnerable. We must care for the future and happiness of each child and respect their rights not only as investment of tomorrow's world, but because we are all equal. And the main thing is to never stop... Don't stop. Sometimes it may seem that the effects of our work may be slow to make waves but if we hold on to our beliefs and keep moving forward, we can achieve anything." The fate of Tambunan's future lies in capable hands.



Merrylove with her friends from SMK Tambunan







**International Day of the Girl Child (2017) conducted at Kg. Tombotuon.  
As part of the activity, children held up placards with their hand-written wishes on them.**





*Members of Youth Connect Circle (YCC) Phase 1, during their capacity building exercise at Kampung Natai Telipok.*





*Group photo after the children's programme on "Keeping Me Safe" at Kg. Bambang, 2019.*





**Production on ginger flakes and powder during the pilot phase of WSGE. The production centre is located at Balai Raya Kg Lubong. (2019)**

## On our own two feet

Consider the collective wisdom and strength of women: moulded by a shared history of struggle and oppression and built upon resilience, grit and perseverance. Consider also the fact that in a first world country, women earn an average of 80cents for every dollar a man makes, less still in developing countries and lesser still within rural communities. It's difficult being a woman in a man's world, and attempting to break free of an oppressive system is made all the more challenging when you are expected to forego education in order to marry, procreate and then later, to cook, clean and care for the family. It is a system that binds women to both hearth and husband, allowing limited opportunity for any form of independence.

The concept of freedom is all too easily taken for granted which is something that the WSGE is working to fix. The Tambunan Ginger Project is a self-sustaining agronomic model that allows women like Yibit Garinis the opportunity to improve their living conditions and to ameliorate the powerlessness of financial dependency. "Our ginger-planting programme is the first step women can take towards earning their own money in order to stand for themselves and not have to rely solely on their husbands," says Garinis, a member of the WSGE from Bambang. The 38-year-old housewife was used to relying on her husband's monthly pension of





*Yibit Garinis, Member of the WSCE*

RM2,500 to keep both husband and wife, their six children (five of school age and one baby) and her *nenek moyang*. In between balancing her busy family life and household duties, Garinis works with WSGE to supplement her husband's pension. "It's the main reason I got involved with WSGE, as the programme provides me with the opportunity to add to household earnings, but also gives me something to call my own," she says. "Women shouldn't have to be wholly dependent on their partners to subsist—this allows us to build on our skillset and to provide for ourselves."

**“Women shouldn’t have to be wholly dependent on their partners to subsist—this allows us to build on our skillset and to provide for ourselves.”**

**Yibit Garinis**  
Member of the WSGE

The empowerment gained by the beneficiaries of WSGE's programme are immeasurable, going far beyond mere financial gain. Hailing from Lubong, Rosa Payak understands how much more there is to profit from economic independence. The chairwoman of WSG Tambunan Enterprise is a mother of 11 children, though her eldest nine have since flown the coop, unable to resist the draw of city life in Kota Kinabalu. During padi season, the smiley 58-year-old works alongside her husband at their *tabasan*, helping him to plant padi. Once the rice has been harvested, Payak turns her attention to her ginger crops for WSGE. "I am very grateful to GSS for their efforts," she beams. "Not only have they created awareness about the issues surrounding SGBV, they have given us the opportunity to provide for ourselves and to empower our community."





*Rosa Payak, Chairwoman of the WSGE (center)*

Payak trails off and her gaze turns serious. "I used to be such a fearful person... I struggled to talk to people. But now, I feel as though I have purpose, a voice, a new-found confidence. I have learned so much about myself... This project has affected so many aspects of my life in such a positive way. I have been on a journey of self-discovery, learning to accept my weaknesses, to embrace my strengths and through it all, my confidence

**"I am proud of our ginger powder and ginger flakes—they were huge achievements. But I think most of all, I am proud of all the ways in which I've grown."**

**Rosa Payak**  
Chairwoman of the WSGE

and self-belief has grown. I am proud of the fact I can add to my family's earnings," she states. "I am proud of our ginger powder and ginger flakes—they were huge achievements. But I think most of all, I am proud of all the ways in which I've grown."



**Ginger is cut, peeled and chopped before it is put to dry under the sun. The shared work allows the women to form strong bonds.**













# Acknowledgement

**by Chin Poh Choo**

*Executive Director*

*Good Shepherd Services*

*Not My Mother's Path* speaks loud about breaking the cycle of gender inequality, and represents the change process experienced by women in the rural indigenous district of Tambunan, Sabah. For such change to be meaningful, it necessitates community engagement along with mutual respect and trust-building. Like a dance, engagement with communities is about participation, connection and movement; creating new rhythms to the pulsating heartbeat of these communities that has made this experience impactful and life-giving.

Our initial entry into Tambunan for this project on the "Protection and Empowerment of the Girl-Child against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) in Tambunan" was daunting for a variety of reasons. This three-year project required more than gut-feel, and was our first district-wide community-based project. At the point of entry, our on-ground engagement in Tambunan could best be described as fleeting. The undertaking of this project was a steep learning curve that exposed our own vulnerabilities and inadequacies. The audacity to attempt to shift the dominant thought surrounding issues on gender—particularly in Tambunan where cultural and traditional practices remain strong—was an arduous task requiring strength, courage and zeal. Like many other communities, SGBV was and remains a taboo: a veiled secret with no voice, strictly confined to domestic realms. Nevertheless, we persevered and held on to the belief that as long as the spirit was willing and the flesh determined, things would work out. We were determined to stay tuned in to the community and create new rhythms that would progressively bring a tide of change in community life. We were not disappointed. This book stands testimony to our collective efforts and speaks volumes of our journey achievements, imparting a message of strength and empowerment.

Among the outcomes of our collective effort is a network dubbed 'Women Support Group' (WSG), established in 18 villages who have been trained on critical aspects of SGBV as well as the sensitive nature of managing disclosures. WSG is pivotal to ensuring the continued enhancement of community protection and advocacy for gender equality in Tambunan. It is expected that by Year 2024, WSG will expand this web of support to all villages so that as a collective force, women in Tambunan can organise, mobilise and advocate for a more equal future. This project has also empowered WSG to establish two interim shelters to support women and children experiencing abuse in their communities.



We are also proud of the establishment of a functioning district level council against SGBV headed by En. Jumain Abdul Ghani, the District Officer of Tambunan, with members comprising key stakeholders from relevant government agencies and representatives from WSG.

Throughout the project, we were very blessed to enjoy the unwavering support and collaboration from the District office and the various government agencies. We also wish to acknowledge En. Thomas Logjijin, the former District Officer of Tambunan, who paved the way for our entry into Tambunan during the onset of this project. To all key stakeholders who have supported and contributed to the cause of this project, we wish to express our deepest gratitude.

To Yayasan Hasanah, our key funding partner for this project, we are humbled by the opportunity that has enabled us to take the first steps in crafting our community development experience. We value the confidence, belief and mutuality experienced throughout the three years which has strengthened our shared belief towards gender equality and poverty reduction. We believe that our partnership stands firm and tall on a common ground of trust and empowerment.

Personally, I am deeply indebted to my fellow colleagues whose resolve, patience, trust and strength of conviction has helped to steer the course towards our shared belief for empowerment and equality. Also to our volunteers, Arthur Lee and Jason Lim, for their patience and tireless efforts in helping us put together this immensely inspirational book.

All our experiences would not have been possible without the welcome and participation of the communities involved in this project. We deeply value their trust and honour their willingness to take risks with us in unravelling and giving a voice to the issue of SGBV prevailing in Tambunan. Through this journey, we have all become beneficiaries of the project. *Pounsikou!*

We hope you are empowered by these stories of real-life people.

"Gratitude is the memory of the heart."

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