

THE HEART OF LEADERSHIP: RIRIS AND THE FLOWER ACEH JOURNEY

In the landscape of humanitarian work in Aceh, the name Riswati, also known as Riris, stands as a testament to the power of local women's agency. As the Executive Director of Flower Aceh, an organization she formally joined in 2015, Riris has navigated the complex intersection of cultural patriarchy, post-conflict recovery, and disaster response. Her leadership is not merely about managing projects; it is about fundamentally shifting power dynamics to ensure that those most impacted by crisis are the ones leading the way out of it.



Photo: Reza Maulana/
Comm Lifeguards Aceh



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Comm Lifeguards Aceh



Photo: Lena/Flower Aceh

RIRI'S STORY

A Path Forged in Activism

Riris's journey didn't begin in a boardroom. It began in the streets and classrooms as a student activist in Jakarta. During the height of the Aceh conflict in the late 1990s and early 2000s, she was a vocal advocate for peaceful resolution through organizations like the Student Solidarity for Aceh Cases (SOMAKA) and the Acehnese Students Association (IMAPA). Her academic pursuit of a Master's degree in Gender Studies at the University of Indonesia, where she focused on women in conflict areas, provided her with the "feminist goggles" necessary to identify the structural inequalities that kept women on the sidelines of decision-making.

Returning to Aceh after the 2004 Tsunami, she witnessed a troubling trend: while women were the backbone of community survival during the conflict, they were often pushed back into domestic roles when formal aid and peace processes arrived. This realization fueled her mission. After years of working on labor rights with the KSBSI and various inclusion programs, she joined Flower Aceh in 2015 as a Program Manager. Her dedication to grassroots empowerment led to her election as Executive Director in 2018, where she began transforming the organization into a leading force for Gender and Disability Social Inclusion (GEDSI) and Feminist Local Humanitarian Leadership (FLHL). Joining the Feminist Humanitarian Leadership Program with Oxfam in 2025 is another milestone that bridge her feminist perspective in humanitarian context.



Photo: Reza Maulana, Comm Lifeguards Aceh



The "Power With"

Leading a local NGO in a patriarchal society means constantly proving that women can manage large-scale humanitarian operations. Riris often notes that the biggest challenge is the "mindset", the double burden of domestic duties and professional expectations that often prevents talented women from rising. Furthermore, she has fought against "brain drain," where local expertise is frequently siphoned off by international agencies, advocating instead for the professional recognition of local activists.

In response, Riris champions the concept of "power with." Instead of a top-down hierarchy, she focuses on collective strength and partnership across sectors and actors. Her leadership is rooted in the "Community Organizer" model, strengthening networks of young women and human rights alumni in villages to build a sustainable ecosystem. In her humanitarian work, she intentionally disrupts traditional roles: encouraging men to support communal kitchens while women lead technical assessments and data collection. This subtle shift transforms how a community views "women's work" and "leadership" simultaneously.



Photo: Reza Maulana, Comm Lifeguards Aceh

Reflections on the Foundation of Change

For Riris, leadership is a political act of reclaiming space. She maintains that women are constantly demanded to be strong within unfair systems, yet are rarely given the space to change them. Her life's work is a critique of the structures that normalize gender inequality and violence. She believes firmly that the lived experience of women is valid political knowledge; therefore, women must seize space, voice their experiences, and refuse to remain silent.

"Change only happens if women are present as subjects and decision-makers, not just objects of policy," Riris asserts. Her journey proves that when local women leaders are trusted and autonomous, they don't just provide aid, they transform the social fabric. For Riris, leadership is not about standing at the top of a pyramid; it is about opening the door so that every woman in the village has the courage and the opportunity to walk through it. Her courage remains the foundation of social change in Aceh, proving that nurturing solidarity is the most strategic way to resist injustice.



Photo: Reza Maulana, Comm Lifeguards Aceh



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About SHIFT Asia

SHIFT Asia (Supporting Humanitarian Initiatives for Transformation in Asia) is an initiative that advances women's local humanitarian leadership and drives gender-transformative change across Asia, working specifically in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines.