



SUCCESS STORY

Stronger Voices Bring Better Lives

Public speaking class inspires broader community action

When she started the public speaking class in her village, Juanina Marques didn't know where it would take her. The class was part of a program supported by USAID to help women gain confidence in voicing their ideas and opinions in public settings.



Photo: NDI/Jay Belo

Together, these women harvest a larger cotton crop and more dye plants for making traditional cloth in the village of Ira-ara, in the eastern Lautem district.

Marques and the other women are proud of their achievements. They now harvest enough cotton to weave and sell high-quality traditional cloth.

The program teaches rural women basic public speaking techniques. The women also learn about civic participation, community interaction, and advocacy, and practice organizational and leadership skills. These new skills and tools boost their self-confidence. In fact, several participants even ran for office — and won — in East Timor's local elections in 2004-2005.

After completing the class, Marques decided to use her new skills to encourage her community to move in a new direction. Together with several other women in her village, Marques founded an organization called *Feto Faluk Moris Kia*, or Widows Living in Poverty, to teach women how to help themselves. The group has 52 members, 30 of which are widows.

The group is organized around an economic activity — growing cotton. Cotton is used in East Timor to make a traditional cloth, *tais*, which is usually woven and dyed by skilled women. Good quality *tais* commands a high price, but cotton is a scarce commodity. The resources needed to buy seeds and expand planting areas have always been beyond the grasp of the ordinary woman. With their newfound confidence, the women established a formal group with the goal of pooling resources and skills to grow and harvest cotton. Together, they approached donors and the government for support. Now the group grows a large cotton crop and dye plants, and has hired a tractor for plowing. They are also planting more cassava, sweet potatoes, and other vegetables.

Marques and the other women are proud of their achievements. They now harvest enough cotton to weave and sell high-quality traditional cloth. The vegetable crop is also helping them improve their families' nutrition and earn extra income to send their children to school. All the members of Widows Living in Poverty are enjoying a better quality of life. As their incomes increase, perhaps they will need to think of a new name for their group.