



FHAIDA'S JOURNEY

Promoting Population, Health, and Environment Interventions in a Muslim Community

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Development practitioners must often develop strategies to work within constraints posed by traditional and cultural beliefs that may affect the progress of community projects. This case study is a fictional story that synthesizes many of the challenges and obstacles that two real development NGOs—the Tawi-Tawi Marine Research and Development Foundation and the Tarbilang Foundation—faced in mobilizing women to address population, health, and environment issues. The story demonstrates strategies that were used to advocate change while also respecting the religious values of a Muslim community in the Philippines. While the events of this case study occur in a Muslim religious and cultural setting, the lessons the case study contains may be usefully applied in a variety of settings.

community health worker seldom reports to her work. There are no medicines and facilities.

Islam is a way of life in the community. The people hold the local Muslim religious leaders (MRLs) in very high regard, seeking their advice and guidance on religious and personal matters.

Fhaida's life has been easier than most in her community—and, at age 21, she has just returned to live with her family after completing college. She is betrothed to Nashier, a boy she barely knows. As family friends, Fhaida's and Nashier's parents found it easy to arrange the wedding. Upon the insistence of Apoh Usman (the local leader, who is also Fhaida's grandfather), the ceremony is to take place in a few days.

Part 1: Fhaida's House

From afar sounds of *kulintang* and *agong* (traditional musical instruments) could be heard. They announced Fhaida's wedding.

"*Inah*, I don't want to get married yet," pleaded Fhaida with her mother. "I am still young. I still have ambitions."

"Oh yes, you are marrying Nashier," Apoh Usman roared with authority. "Your father and mother already agreed to marry you off to Nashier next full moon. What will the people in the community say if this wedding is not pushed through? It would bring so much embarrassment to me. Remember, everyone in the community knows about the event."

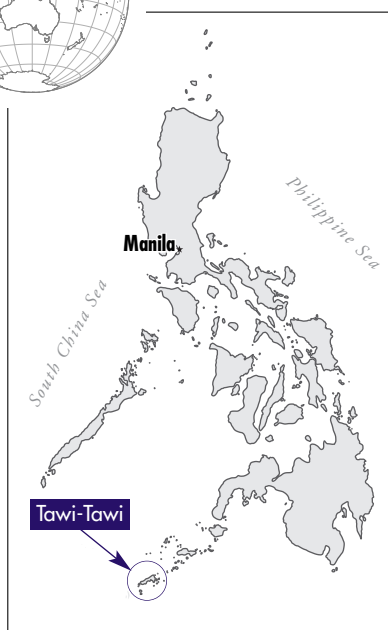
"Fhaida, don't anymore argue," said Abdul, her father. "Nashier is a fine man and you will be in good hands." Fhaida, afraid to show her feelings, went into her room furious. She vowed nothing would stop her from realizing her dreams.

Background: Fhaida and Her Life in Tawi-Tawi

The story starts with the impending wedding of Fhaida, a young woman living in a poor coastal community in Tawi-Tawi, an island province in the southern Philippines.

The people in Fhaida's community live below the poverty line. They rely mostly on local marine resources, which are steadily declining. Meanwhile, the area's population is one of the fastest-growing in the region.

The community lacks potable water and electricity. The school lacks teachers and facilities. The



Fhaida's Wedding Day

"*Assalamualaikum* (peace be upon you)," Zenaïda and Rasuol chorused as they entered the bride's family home and embraced Abdul and Fatimah, the bride's parents. Zenaïda, who was Fhaida's aunt, went straight to the bride's room. She found Fhaida lying in bed. "Is there anything wrong?" she asked. Fhaida tearfully told her that she was not yet ready for marriage. "What would you like to do then?" Zenaïda asked.

"*Baboh* (aunt), as a girl, I witnessed the difficulties our neighbors were experiencing, and vowed to make a difference," blurted Fhaida. "I would like to help the community. Look at Tahira: She's my age, but she looks older. She has trouble enough taking care of her children. How can I help them, now that I'm to be married myself?"

"You can still do it," replied her aunt. "If you work on your marriage, it can be your source of strength."

After talking to Fhaida, Zenaïda went out worrying about the young woman's dilemma. It was then when she met a woman. "*Salam*, remember me? We were together at a party about five years ago," said the woman.

Zenaïda could not recognize her. "Oh, how are you?" she said.

"I got married after that party. I have four children now," answered the woman. Zenaïda then remembered the woman to be Mariam, her classmate in school. She wondered why Mariam seemed sad and why she looked old. "What about you?" asked Mariam. "We heard you married a businessman and had a son. What is your secret in maintaining such a young look?"

"I don't have any secrets," replied Zenaïda. "I'm just contented with my life, I guess. Please visit me in my house so we can share experiences." Zenaïda thought that perhaps the woman's case could shed light on some of Fhaida's concerns.

The Beginning of a Dream

Fhaida was indeed married. But not long after her wedding, she was still worried about finding a way to fulfill her dream of helping her community. Not knowing what to do, she visited her aunt Zenaïda, who related Mariam's case to her. "*Baboh*, these are the people that I would like to help, but I'm not sure how to get started," said Fhaida.

"Count me in, Fhaida," said Zenaïda. "Maybe we can get started by involving others."

This promise inspired Fhaida. And her determination to introduce reform became stronger when she saw the poor economic condition of their community and the increasing number of street children. She believed that poverty was driving the people to extract so much from nature, and that without family planning, there would be more mouths to feed. The people would be poorer as the resources were further stressed, and this would mean increasing undernourishment and poor health.

Often, Fhaida would wonder: "What hope have I to introduce reforms? Will the community ever prosper? Will the people cooperate? How will I make them see my point?"

One day, when asked by her friend Tahira about having children, Fhaida responded: "Nashier and I agreed to have kids after some time."

Tahira was amazed with her answer. "How can you postpone having children?" Tahira asked.

Tahira's question ignited something in Fhaida's mind. Perhaps she had just discovered an approach toward the attainment of her goal. Inspired, Fhaida said: "We will ask Baboh Zenaida's advice, and we will solicit help from our community health worker." Tahira was surprised. "You mean we can decide on the size of our family?" she asked. "Is it not un-Islamic?"

Fhaida smiled and cited a verse from the Qur'an that she had learned from her aunt: "*Wa amruhom shura bainahum*" (those who conduct their affairs by mutual consultation).¹ Fhaida thought this idea (pertaining to the right of an individual—man or woman—to decide their affairs for themselves, in consultation with others) could become her conceptual and religious entry point for advocating birth spacing and "responsible parenthood" (a parenting style in which the parents sufficiently provide for the needs of their children) within her community. "Maybe Tahira can be one of my partners in this endeavor!" thought Fhaida.

Although Fhaida was beginning to understand how she might talk with women in her community about family planning, she wondered how she could broaden her message. How could she introduce the idea that the environment would be stressed by increasing population, and how people's health could suffer as a consequence of dwindling resources? And would she be able to carry this message within the context of not only religious but also cultural and traditional beliefs?

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Fhaida feel that her marriage would interfere with her ability to pursue her ambitions? In your experience, have you observed additional ways that gender roles/societal expectations inhibit or support women's sense of empowerment?
2. If you were in Fhaida's position, what kinds of strategies would you employ to begin to reach out to this community with population, health, and environment messages, given the constraints posed by religious, cultural, and traditional beliefs?

Part 2: Toward the Realization of a Dream

Tahira's question about birth spacing being un-Islamic was only the tip of the iceberg in terms of community resistance to Fhaida's ideas. Fhaida was surprised to learn that there are so many traditional beliefs that hinder people's acceptance of any development work. Changing the people's mindset is difficult! She knew she would need to build alliances. To be most effective, she would need the help of her grandfather, a local leader. But how would she be able to convince him? Could anyone influence his decision?

"But of course!" thought Fhaida. "I am not likely to be able to influence him directly, but he listens to my *amah* (father) and *inah* (mother). I'll work my way through them." At the same time, Fhaida realized she also needed to identify other "influentials" in the community such as the MRLs and the community health worker.

To that end, Fhaida and Tahira agreed to seek out the community health worker to learn more from her about birth spacing. At the end of their discussion, they asked the health worker if she would be available to the community every day so that more women could learn family planning methods. Their questions and encouragement made the health worker feel her importance in helping improve these women's lives. She became a member of Fhaida's circle of friends, advocating for women's reproductive health and children's protection and development.

Fhaida was also helped by a declaration from Muslim leaders on family planning. The National Fatwa (rules/guidelines) on Family Planning was adopted on 27 Ramadhan, 1324 Hijra (Nov. 22, 2003) in agreement with Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama (one of the largest independent Islamic organizations in the world) and other scholars from other Muslim countries. The declaration encourages its people to populate Earth with the proviso that their quality of life is not compromised.

Even with the *fatwa*, however, many in the community were still resistant to the idea of family planning—especially modern methods of family planning—due to longstanding cultural traditions.

However, the fact that Fhaida had a university education gave her significant status and respect within the community; and more and more women learned through the community grapevine about what came to be known as "Fhaida's beliefs."

One of these women was an *aleema* (a female Muslim religious leader) who initially questioned Fhaida's advocacy. As with some *ulama* (male Muslim religious leaders), the *aleema* had the tendency to "hide" the verses of the Qur'an that support reproductive health advocacy. Fhaida decided to engage the *aleema* in a woman-to-woman talk—admitting that she did not really know what the Qur'an has to say about family planning.

As with the community health worker, Fhaida played the role of the learner, eager to learn from the teacher. Surprisingly, it worked! The *aleema* first lectured to her about what Islam says on birth control. Fhaida listened attentively and kept on asking relevant questions. Disarmed, the *aleema* became more open. As their discussion progressed, the *aleema* acknowledged that there was no specific verse in the Qur'an—nor was there a strong *hadith* (any saying by or action attributed to the Islamic prophet Muhammad)—that prohibits birth spacing. Instead, a verse in the Qur'an says "*wala tulqu bi aidikum ila al tabluka*" (do not let yourselves fall into destruction).² The *aleema* explained that this verse is supportive of family planning. Eventually, the *aleema* agreed to advise Fhaida and her group in their advocacy to ensure that they "stay within the context of Islam."

Aside from the *aleema*, Fhaida thought of approaching the *panday* (traditional midwife) in the community for some advice related to birth spacing. Together with the *aleema*, Fhaida went to the *panday*'s house. "*Assalamualaikum*," Fhaida greeted Baboh Alma, the *panday*. "Can you help me advise the women to practice birth spacing?"

"Indah Fhaida, birth spacing is against the teachings of Islam," whispered the *panday*.

"But is it not that you did something to Aunt Zen's tummy so she won't get pregnant two months after she gave birth to Yusuf?" Fhaida whispered back.

“Yes, I did, but we don’t talk about it publicly because we might antagonize some sectors,” answered *baboh* Alma, with a glance at the *aleema*.

Fhaida said: “Don’t worry, we got the support of the Muslim Religious Leaders through our good *aleema* here. In fact, we have the National Fatwa on Family Planning for the Muslims.” And the *aleema* nodded her head.

The Unbelievers and the Supporters

Slowly, Fhaida won the support of more influential members of the community. To build her critical mass of supporters, she started organizing informal meetings for women. Some willingly participated, while others remained passive observers. These meetings caught the attention of development NGOs working in the area, and soon Fhaida joined the staff of the Tarbilang Foundation as a community organizer. Rumors spread like fire about Fhaida getting so much money from funding agencies to do her work.

Tahira confronted Fhaida about the rumors, which Tahira’s husband had heard. Fhaida explained that her services were voluntary. “I’m happy to help you plan your family,” she told Tahira. “If you space your pregnancies, you are better able to raise healthy and smart children. With fewer children, you will have time to take care of your husband, your children, and yourself and have fewer mouths to feed. You can even help your husband earn a living.

“Don’t you know that as Allah’s trustees, we need to protect our Earth’s resources to ensure better quality of life?” Fhaida continued. “The Qur’an states: *Dar-ul mafasid muqaddam ‘ala jalb al masalih* (To avoid loss is given priority over the pursuit of profits).³ We need to control extraction from nature, and to do that we must manage and educate our respective families.”

As Fhaida’s circle widened, the rumors and challenges grew. She started to feel the strain, so she confided to Nashier about the rumors. Nashier unconditionally offered his full support, saying: “I believe in your intentions. Just persevere. I will always be here.” Touched, Fhaida praised Allah for the blessings.

True to his word, Nashier explained to the other members of her family—including Apoh Usman—the nature and importance of Fhaida’s advocacy. As a male, Nashier found it easier to gain their attention than Fhaida had. His eloquence and faith in his wife slowly began to convince Fhaida’s parents, but Apoh Usman remained staunchly opposed to his granddaughter’s advocacy. Even in the face of this opposition, Nashier was steadfast in his support for Fhaida, and encouraged her to persevere.

With Nashier on her side, Fhaida couldn’t ask for more. But what other strategies could she employ to sustain her advocacy?

Discussion Questions

3. What kinds of strategies did Fhaida use to reach out to community members? Were these the strategies you suggested in response to question 2 in Part I? What were the differences?
4. What kinds of alliances did Fhaida build? How did she go about doing this?
5. What did Fhaida do to try to overcome the mistrust felt by some members of her community? What other kinds of strategies would you suggest?
6. The *panday* acknowledged that she was helping women use family planning, but was fearful of talking about it publicly. Why? In what other contexts have you seen this kind of fear?
7. How realistic do you find Fhaida’s efforts? Which elements do you think could be replicated in other contexts where religious, cultural, and traditional beliefs are important? Give specific examples of such settings and strategies that could be used to advance reproductive health advocacy in those settings.

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Community meetings in which men and women could discuss issues related to the long-term well-being of the community were an important component of Fhaida's work.

Part 3: The Strategies

Most of the residents of Fhaida's community were illiterate, so Fhaida knew she would need to rely on spoken communication to carry out her work. She developed simple and clear messages, disseminating them through an informal, person-to-person "grapevine" approach and community meetings. Some women were not convinced of her good intentions, but Fhaida resolved to win them over.

With the help of other NGOs, she sustained her advocacy by focusing on food security—arguing that more people need more food, and that those foods are extracted from the environment. Increased extraction, Fhaida said, leads to environmental degradation and eventually poor health for

the people. Little by little, talk about Fhaida using the women for her own interest vanished.

From her experience with Nashier, Fhaida realized that she should involve the husbands of her female friends in her discussions. Already heavily involved in his wife's advocacy work, Nashier had invited a biologist to a community meeting during which fisheries management was discussed. The biologist explained the importance of the reproductive cycle of marine organisms and the protection of their habitats (such as mangroves, seagrass, and corals). The discussion developed into an examination of how the marine resources that supported the community could be sustained for future generations.

"Since I am in the buy-and-sell business of marine products, I suggest that buyers should specify sizes of harvested fishery products," said Rasuol, Zenaida's husband. "The marine environment gets polluted by the liquid and solid wastes we dumped into the seas," one of the wives piped in. "I love my children and I want to raise them properly," another wife said. "That is why I planned to space my pregnancy."

Pah Hadji Faizal, an MRL, was listening thoughtfully throughout the discussion. "They have a point," he thought. "Islam supports environmental conservation."

"Pah Hadji Faizal, can you talk about reproductive health and care for the environment during our Friday prayer breaks?" requested Fhaida after the meeting.

"Okay, I will bring up these topics this Friday," said the good *ulama*. That signaled the beginning of the MRLs' involvement in Fhaida's advocacy.

A Growing Circle of Advocates

Not long after the meeting with the biologist, Fhaida was walking near the shore when she saw a small boy cleaning his catch. “Why did you gather the small ones?” she said. “If you keep on harvesting these animals, there would come a time when you won’t get anything from the sea.”

“There are plenty of these animals in the sea,” answered the boy.

“*Utoh* (little boy), natural resources can get depleted,” said Abdul, walking up behind Fhaida. “Fishes and shells are getting scarce nowadays. During my younger days, I saw big fishes, crabs, lobsters, and many others. Now what we see in the market is getting smaller everyday.”

Fhaida was surprised to hear her father. “*Amah*, you’re here!” she said. “When did you become an environment advocate?”

“Oh my child, the moment you dreamed of improving the community’s quality of life, I became one,” answered her father. “I always believed in you.” His remark energized Fhaida.

“You have been talking to people about good parenting, the environment, and its resources,” her father continued. “Why don’t you invite me to the meetings so I can also share my experiences?”

“That’s a very good idea, *Amah*,” Fhaida said. “You will be our resource person.” Her eyes sparkled.

Her father was now an advocate! God willing, Apoh Usman would be too one day. She couldn’t wait for the day when Apoh Usman would be directly addressing a crowd as an advocate. That would make three important men in her life—her husband, her father, and her grandfather—advocating for better quality of life.

Teary-eyed, she praised God Almighty.

Sensing that her father was about to leave, Fhaida embraced Abdul and said: “*Amah*, I am very thankful that you married me off to Nashier.”

Discussion Questions

8. Who were Fhaida’s target audiences? What kinds of messages did she develop for each audience? Who helped her convey these messages?
9. How did Fhaida begin to reach out to men in her community?
10. At the end of the story, Fhaida expresses gratitude for her arranged marriage, which she strongly resisted at the beginning. Why did her views change? What are your views on arranged marriage or other traditional practices that affect women’s lives?
11. What kinds of challenges and opportunities are presented by approaching community development through an approach that integrates population, health, and environmental concerns in a community that has strong religious and traditional beliefs?

References

¹ al-Shura, Qur'an: 42:38; quoted in Masdar Mas'udi, "Islam and Women's Reproductive Rights," in *Islam Reproductive Health and Women's Rights*, ed. Zainah Anwar and Rashidah Abdullah (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Sisters in Islam, 2003).

² al-Baqarah, Qur'an: 2:195, quoted in Mas'udi, "Islam and Women's Reproductive Rights."

³ Qur'an, quoted in Mas'udi, "Islam and Women's Reproductive Rights."

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