

The Story of Siti Tarwiyah: Beaten to Death in Saudi Arabia; Blood Money Is All That Remains of a Mother's Love

"I'm still so traumatized. I can not forget my late wife. Her body was covered in wounds as a result of regular caning," recalled Hamid, the husband of Siti Tarwiyah who died in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, three years ago. Her body was bruised everywhere because members of the employers family used to smash her up against walls. She was only 32 years old when she died.

"They abused all the migrant domestic workers working in the house, not only Tarwiyah," said Hamid, a 39-year old resident of Macanan village, Jogorogo district, Ngawi regency, East Java, while his daughter plays at his feet. The employer's family consisted of four married children who had offspring of their own. The four families lived together in a two-story house and employed four migrant domestic workers: Tarwiyah, Susmiati, Rumini and Tari.

During the investigations, the Saudi Arabian employers accused the migrant domestic workers of witchcraft, and claimed that they beat them up and tortured them in order to punish them and exorcise their evil spirits. Tarwiyah was then locked up in a room on the first floor along with Susmiati, while the remaining two migrant domestic workers, Rumini and Tari were confined in a room on the second floor of the house. A member of the family seemingly felt sorry after seeing the condition of the domestic workers after the torture and urged the family to take them to the hospital.

As a result, Tarwiyah and Susmiati were hospitalized in a critical condition, while Rumini and Tari were sent to jail for witchcraft, although severely injured. "A migrant worker who had just been deported back to Indonesia told me that Tarmiyah was hospitalized in a serious condition," Hamid said. "She was imprisoned in the same jail as Rumini and Tari, and from them heard about the critical condition of Tarwiyah and Susmiati." In spite of their severe injuries, Rumini and Tari had been caned 150 times before being deported, just like all other migrant workers that were held in the prison.

Hamid said that the deported migrant worker also reported the condition of Tarwiyah and Susmiati to Migrant Care. The organization then sought information about them and discovered that the two workers had died after a few days in the hospital. "An officer from Migrant Care visited my house and told me that my wife had had an accident. I contacted the employment agency, PT Prima in Jakarta, but they said my wife was okay," he said.

Not satisfied with the answer, Hamid, accompanied by a Migrant Care officer, went to Jakarta. He visited several government institutions, such as the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Board for Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (BNP2TKI). He was informed that his wife had passed away while in hospital. "My wife passed away and Susmiati died two days later," he said.

Hamid remembered his wife asking for his permission to go overseas to work as a migrant domestic worker three years ago. "She wanted to renovate our house. She wanted to improve the economy of our family," he explained. Many of their neighbors who worked as domestic workers in the Middle East earned a good living there. Tarwiyah's mother then gave her Rp. 1 million to finance her plan. "I did not have any money. I'm just a blue collar worker," he said.

When Tarwiyah left home to work overseas as a migrant domestic worker, her daughter was two years old. She asked Hamid to take care of their daughter. "She once phoned me to ask me to take care of her and to fulfill my daughter's needs," he said. After working for three months, Tarwiyah sent Rp. 3 million home. "That's all the money she ever sent home," Hamid said.

Following the death of his wife, he received an insurance payout of Rp. 40 million and condolence money from various institutions amounting to Rp. 35 million. Six months after the burial of his wife, Hamid was approached by a representative of her former Saudi employer. The man, a resident of Jember, said that the employer was prepared to give Hamid "blood money", a traditional Saudi means of compensation, of Rp. 400 million if he was prepared to forgive the employer who was being tried for his wife's murder in court in Saudi Arabia. This forgiveness in writing was a requirement for the employer to get a light sentence by the courts in Saudi Arabia.

"I was confused at that time. Migrant Care had told me that the money would be processed later. For me, the important thing was to return the body of Tarwiyah and to take care of it. Migrant Care did not know that I was approached by the man. I agreed to forgive Tarwiyah's former employers, but only on the condition that the two other domestic workers, Rumini and Tari, who were still in jail, would be released and returned home," he said.

Hamid and the man then went to an Indonesian court to seek a letter stating that he was the husband of Tarwiyah. The letter was then translated into Arabic. "Once the two domestic workers, Rumini and Tari, had

been released and returned home, I signed the statement of forgiveness and accepted the “blood money”.” Hamid spent some of the money on religious alms and a donation on behalf of his late wife. He also gave his mother-in-law Rp. 100 million and the representative of the employer Rp. 25 million. He used most of the “blood money” to buy a palm oil plantation and some dry land.

“It is for the future of our daughter, for her education. I do not want my daughter to become a migrant worker like her mother,” he said, adding that he was only an elementary school graduate while Tarwiyah a junior high school graduate.

When he eventually told Migrant Care that he had received the “blood money” in return for granting forgiveness to his wife’s former employers, the organization informed him that he was, in fact, entitled to a compensation of more than Rp. 1 billion. “I could have demanded much more than what I received. But at the time, I knew nothing. Yet, money is not everything. It did not bring my wife back. If you see my home, it is still the same. I am still traumatized. I haven’t gotten married again although it has been three years,” Hamid said while hugging his little daughter.

To avoid further losses to the victims of abuse, Hamid suggested that the government should inform families of migrant workers about their rights when losing their loved ones overseas. “I did not know about the “blood money”, and neither do most other families of migrant workers.”

He also suggested that the government should provide scholarships for children of migrant workers in order to relieve the hardship of their families. “My daughter will grow up without ever seeing her mother again. Yet, at least I now have money to pay for her education. Many other families who have lost loved ones overseas have received nothing.” (*)