News



Holy Spirit Sr. Frederika Tanggu Hana speaks with female survivors of violence at St. Theresa Shelter in Labuan Bajo, eastern Indonesia. Accompaniment and trauma-informed care are central to daily ministry at the shelter, founded in 2018. (Ryan Dagur)



by Ryan Dagur

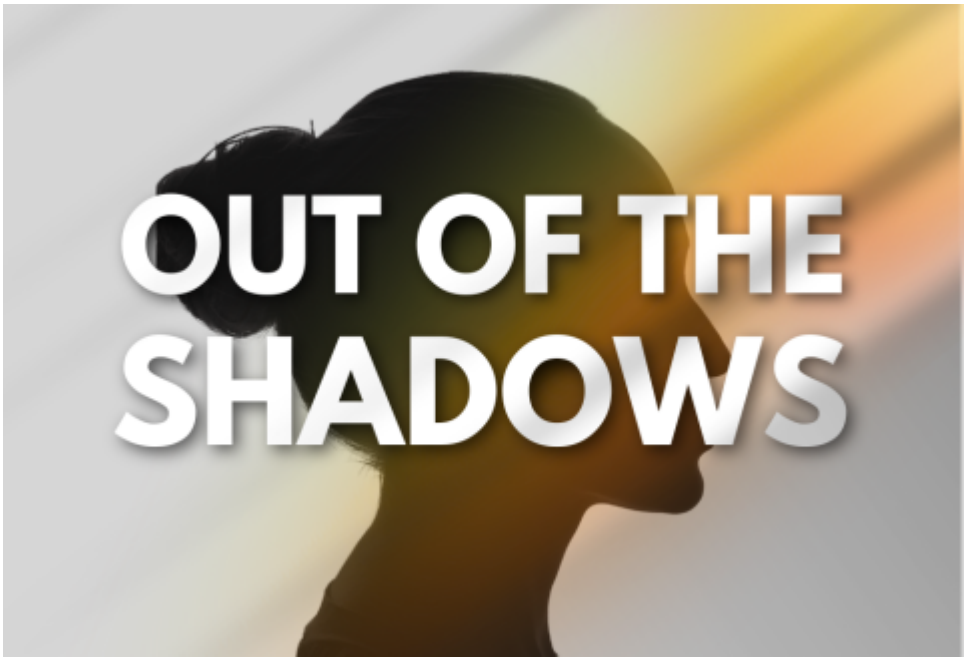
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Labuan Bajo, Flores — June 22, 2026

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Editor's note: This story is part of Global Sisters Report's yearlong series, "Out of the Shadows: Confronting Violence Against Women," focused on the ways Catholic sisters are responding to this global phenomenon.



(GSR logo/Olivia Bardo)

The house, almost at the end of a narrow road, bears no prominent sign. Near the gate, a black stone plaque affixed to the wall has an inscription in the local language that reads: "St. Theresa Shelter Home."

It sits quietly among a cluster of schools and residential homes in Labuan Bajo, a quickly growing port town at the western tip of Flores, a predominantly Catholic island in Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara province.

"Usually, the people who come here are already at the end of the road," said Holy Spirit Sr. Frederika Tanggu Hana, who manages the shelter.

"If they had safety at home, they wouldn't come here," she told Global Sisters Report on April 22.

The nun, known as Sister Rita, runs the only shelter for women and children who are survivors of violence in the capital of West Manggarai Regency, a tourism gateway to Komodo National Park, home to the Komodo dragon, an endangered reptile.

Labuan Bajo's transformation into a flagship destination has been swift, as it has increasingly attracted tourists over the years, with some 500,000 people visiting it in 2025.

Facilities serving tourists have also increased, with hundreds of local people migrating to work in the booming hotels, markets and transportation systems, including the city's expanding airport.

"Tourism is growing fast, protection is not. And, those who suffer most are the people who were already vulnerable," Sister Rita said.

A shelter born from rising need

The house, founded in 2018, serves women and children who have survived sexual violence, domestic abuse, neglect and exploitation. It currently houses 21 people, including children.



St. Theresa Shelter in Labuan Bajo is about 50 meters (55 yards) from the main road and intentionally unobtrusive within the neighborhood in eastern Indonesia (Ryan Dagur)

Sister Rita links many of the cases she sees to rapid social change, including internal migration and insecure housing.

"Young workers arrive seeking jobs in the tourism economy, but many struggle to find stable accommodation," Sister Rita said.

"Teenagers sometimes end up living with adult partners in rented rooms, leaving them exposed to sexual and physical exploitation. Many of these children are groomed slowly over the years, through attention, money or promises of work."

A 17-year-old girl at the shelter illustrates that pattern, Sister Rita said. She was brought there by her family when she became "uncontrollable," the nun said.

"She started going out at night when she was only 13, spending time around entertainment venues. She became trapped in a pattern in which she lived for years," Sister Rita said.

"I've had to seek police help more than once to search for her at midnight," she said.

"Many parents feel more shame than anger," she added. "They worry more about what people will say than about their child's safety."

> 'Tourism is growing fast, protection is not. And, those who suffer most are the people who were already vulnerable.'
> —Sr. Frederika Tanggu Hana
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The internet can deepen the trap, Sister Rita said. The victims are threatened online, photographed or asked to send photos, then blackmailed with threat of exposure if they resist exploitation or complain.

Sister Rita describes herself as a survivor — referring to an experience in which she narrowly escaped sexual violence by a lecturer during her university years.

"I know what it feels like to have no one," she said. "That's why I can't turn away."

Offering legal support

For Sister Rita, shelter is only the first step. She also helps survivors through the legal system — work she calls "exhausting and deeply uncertain."

"Some cases stall for years. Investigators are replaced, and case files move between officers, endlessly."

"I can't prove bribery," she said, adding "But delaying justice is also a form of violence."

She said seven cases involving survivors from the shelter are currently in court proceedings.

In one case, a 17-year-old who gave birth in December said her pregnancy was the result of her uncle's sexual violations that continued for about four years, Sister Rita said. The victim and her mother came to the shelter for help navigating the legal process, months after the case was reported.

"What hurts most is that the family is divided," Sister Rita said, noting the teenager must face her own relatives in the court, who support the 60-year-old accused abuser.

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Sister Rita said court outcomes also feel uneven.

In one case, an adult convicted of raping a 15-year-old girl received an 18-month jail sentence. The ruling said he "behaved well and did not disturb society." "It is ironic," the nun said.

Another girl, now 12, was abused at age 5 in 2019. The abuser was sentenced to 10 years in jail but was released after four years; the victim's family did not know the reason, but alleged financial influence.

Now, the victim's mother, who still stays in the shelter with her daughter, told GSR that she was "overwhelmed by frustration and thought of violent retaliation."

Patriarchy and gender misunderstanding

Sister Rita said that most in Indonesian society view sexual violence against women and children as a matter of shame for the victim and family, rather than as a serious crime that demands accountability.

For most, "what needs protection is not safety, but family honor," the nun said, adding that social biases against women forced her to take on gender education.

Sister Rita said misunderstandings about gender equality are widespread, as some view it as rejecting women's roles and responsibilities.

"Gender equality is about equal relationships between men and women. It's not about reversing domestic roles," she said.



A grandmother holds her 5-month-old grandchild, born after her daughter experienced sexual violence by a close family member, at St. Theresa Shelter in Labuan Bajo, eastern Indonesia. (Ryan Dagur)

In patriarchal cultures, women traditionally take on cooking and cleaning without question. But the lesson "is simple," Sister Rita said, "If your wife is sick, then you cook."

However, conversations about gender equality are not easy. Many men decline invitations to participate, the nun said.

Still, she integrated gender education into marriage preparation courses and parent meetings. "That only made me realize how important the gender issue is," Sister Rita said.

"There's no real effort to see this as a serious problem."

Sister Rita is chair of the Gender Commission of the Diocese of Labuan Bajo, Indonesia's newest diocese, established by the Vatican in June 2024.

She said the diocese implemented safeguarding policies this year and has formed a response team to handle cases of sexual violence. But she also voiced frustration about how abuse allegations involving clergy are handled.

For example, a diocesan priest, also a university lecturer, was accused of sex abuse, and the university fired him in November 2025. The diocese began an investigation against him soon after.

However, Sister Rita said the diocesan curia neither involved her in the case nor informed her of the developments.

"I feel ashamed when injustice inside the church is not treated with the seriousness it deserves," she said.

Sister Rita said she takes such experiences as "a personal challenge," but that the hierarchy often "applies double standards," and becomes lenient when "clergy are the perpetrators" of violence.

"No priest is above the law," she said. "The wound is the same. Why should it be treated differently?"

She said the church's hierarchy, which speaks about zero tolerance of sexual violations, must show courage to "truly practice it."

A shelter for all

Although the shelter is based on Flores Island, where Catholics make up 85.49% of its 2 million people, it welcomes anyone in need.

"We welcome all, whether they're Catholic or Muslim, because this is a home for women and children who have survived violence," Sister Rita said.

She recalled a pregnant Muslim woman, abandoned by her partner, who gave birth at the shelter three years ago.

"We continue to care for both the mother and the child," Sister Rita said.

The spiritual needs of those in the shelter are met in accordance with their faith. Islamic counselors visit regularly.

During the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan, the shelter provides predawn meals and arranges evening meals to break the fast. Pork is not served at the shelter.

"We pay attention to these small things. So parents won't be afraid their children will be forced to convert," the nun said.

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The shelter considers itself a place of empowerment rather than a permanent refuge.

Children are enrolled in a school run by Sister Rita's congregation, and women have the opportunity to work at the school canteen for a monthly wage.

"Some also join sewing and dressmaking courses, or other skills training, through government vocational centers," she said.

"We don't want survivors to return home empty-handed," she said. "If they do, they're likely to fall back into toxic environments."

Labuan Bajo will continue to grow. New hotels will rise. Tourists will arrive. Investment will flow in, adding to the city's glitter.

But Sister Rita insists that the true glitter and advancement of a city is "not looking beautiful in photographs, but in protecting those in the margins of society."

At the gate, near the black rock plaque bearing her shelter's name, Sister Rita bid goodbye, stressing: "A world-class tourist destination is not only about beauty. It is about humanity."

This story appears in the **Out of the Shadows: Confronting Violence Against Women** feature series. View the full series.