

Becoming Solar Lamp Entrepreneurs: Adult Education among Rural Women in Indonesia

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Children come to mind whenever we talk about education. Educational initiatives such as Teach For America and its equivalent in Indonesia, Indonesia Mengajar, for example, groom bright talented recent college graduates to serve for one to two years as primary school teachers at their countries' underprivileged schools. Barring some criticisms, such initiatives are largely welcomed as a great leap forward in molding the minds of the young, our future generations.

But the onus to shape children's personalities does not lie solely upon schools. Informal education starts at home, which means that parents—especially mothers—play an even more significant part in educating their children.

Having a positive role model they can look up to at home is the key to nurturing the healthy psychological and moral development of young children.

For these reasons, adult education is no less important than child education. Unfortunately, the former is typically neglected. Adults are assumed to have already passed their learning age and saddled with responsibilities such as making ends meet and childcare, no longer have time nor interest to learn. Adult women are doubly marginalized, especially in the context of patriarchal societies in Asia and Africa, where women are given a role of homemakers and caregivers—neither of which requires much 'education'.

Besides, in remote villages where resources are scarce and patriarchal values are not yet diluted by modern and Western ideas of gender equality, and the concept of lifelong learning for rural adult women are practically nonexistent.

But how hungry they are for knowledge! In the past three years, Nusantara Development Initiatives: NDI (www.ndi.sg), the social enterprise I cofounded, has been working in remote rural areas in Indonesia with no access to electricity. We aim to end energy poverty by training rural women to become solar lamp entrepreneurs.

We encourage these women to



NDI Fellows

start a small business selling good quality environmentally-friendly solar lamps to their communities.

These women are housewives aged between 30 and 60 years old with little education. Some are elderly women who do not know how to write and read very well, others are divorcees who have to be the sole breadwinner for their families, yet others are enterprising young women who want to try their hands at business. But one thing remains the same: these women have strong desire to learn and broaden their horizons, especially when we bring new knowledge right to their doorsteps.

“I want to learn,” one fifty-year-old woman said shyly, “when else will I get such an opportunity, since I am already so old?”

Of course teaching older women demands different pedagogical strategies as compared to teaching children. To train these women, NDI has developed our own entrepreneurship module which encompasses product knowledge, communication skills, marketing skills, sales techniques and book-keeping. As literacy level is relatively basic in these villages, we have to devise creative ways to prepare these materials to engage the women, such as having less words and more attractive visuals, doing interactive hands-on activities and playing games, doing sing-along sessions and drama skits.

We also have an out-of-class practical session, where we bring these women out to another village to practice directly what they have learnt in the classroom. We encourage them to apply their newly-acquired communication, marketing and sales skills to sell the solar lamps to ‘familiar strangers’.



Solar Lamp

You know what joy is when you see their expressions shown after having successfully made their very first sale. The apex of the training program is the graduation. This is a momentous occasion for the women entrepreneurs, who have never been to a graduation ceremony before—let alone starring in one. Each woman is given a graduation certificate and a Business-in-a-Bag kit, comprising five lamps as a starter kit. They can then proudly embark on their journeys as solar lamp entrepreneurs.

Many of us take education for granted, because it is so commonplace where we come from. But to these rural middle-aged women, learning means having someone who spends time to guide them, root for them, and believe in them—for the first time in their

lives. And sometimes, that is all they need.

An elderly woman proudly displayed her certificate of graduation and our class photo in her humble 2mx2m living room. Her youngest son smiled proudly at his mother, a woman who only studied up to Primary 4, as we congratulated her for being our best-performing entrepreneur.

“I am happy that you came to our village,” she said, “Teach me more, I want to learn more.”

She was 68 years old.