

Bangsamoro women craft their dreams

One shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands; one needs to throw something back. – Maya Angelou, poet

Two kids were playing with scraps of cloth beside the sewing table in one of the training rooms of the Ittihadun-Nisa Foundation – Bangsamoro Women Skills Training Center (INFo-BWSTC) in Simuay, Sultan Kudarat in Maguindanao. The 18-square meter room has become a playground for these young children, while their mother, Rashiya Compet puts together her sewing portfolio for the day.

A high school graduate, Rashiya is only 30 years old yet she was left to take care of her two children when her husband passed away. In the same square room, she finds a bright spot to provide for her children by training to become a seamstress and eventually an entrepreneur.

Such is the stuff of dreams of some 20 other Bangsamoro women receiving continuing training on embroidery and formal dress or apparel making under the Community Empowerment Program (CEP) of Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in Mindanao. The trainees have passed the assessment of the government's training arm, Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) and they have now graduated to upgrading their dressmaking skills to include more intricate embroidery and dresses.

The training center, donated by the Embassy of Japan, was also the venue for other skills training activities such as *likus* (a traditional Muslim home décor) and *pandala* (festive flags) making, baking, packaging, and enterprise development with marketing strategies trainings.

"Our training focuses on enhancing the dress making and entrepreneurial skills of our women participants. We want to teach them that being a woman that has to take care of her family is not deterrent to learning or being trained," said Ruby Andong, chair of the Board of Directors, Ittihadun-Nisa Foundation.

Andong said they have allowed women trainees to actually take along with them their children so they need not worry who will take care of their kids while they finish their course.

This is mirrored in the scenes in the training center with children gathering in the backyard and a trainee breastfeeding her newborn.

In the words of a Chinese saying, women hold up half the sky. Unfortunately, in poverty stricken areas such as Maguindanao, women are left bare with skills and most of the time, opportunities to earn are wanting.

A silver lining, however, is evident in the growing number of women participants in the livelihood skills training under CEP. The powerful truth remains that: women in marginalized areas could also become solutions to poverty.

"From zero livelihoods, they could now earn up to seven thousand pesos from sewing. What makes these trainings different is we are also teaching them on entrepreneurship and marketing including how to package their products for selling. Eventually, we want to organize them into cooperatives to sustain their livelihood," said Julie Maliga, president of INFo.

"By uplifting their livelihood, these women are now empowered to make a living on their own, while sending their children to school," Maliga added.

The center also houses the trainees in the dormitory adjacent to the training center to save on transportation costs from their twenty peso training allowance each day.

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Skills training helps Bangsamoro women overcome poverty

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Sapiya Panimbong, 42 years old and among the Center's current batch of women participants, travels from Ligawasan, North Cotabato to attend the training sessions. Women like her benefit from these projects not merely in terms of skill sets, but as well as in being confident in what they are capable to do. Sapiya said it best when she shared the training's impact on her: "*Gusto din naman naming umunlad ang buhay namin.*" (We also want our lives to improve.)

What makes these trainings different is not just teaching participants sewing skills but also entrepreneurship and marketing.

