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ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF DISABLED WOMEN THROUGH CREATIVE INDUSTRY: A PERSPECTIVE ON CREATIVE COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

*The majorities of disabled women in this world lives in developing countries and are the most marginalized group. The scarce opportunities for higher education and employment in the formal sector cause disabled women to have the lowest literacy rate. This brings about a high unemployment rate and economic dependency. A large number of disabled women remain hidden and their capabilities unknown. By excluding disabled women from development opportunities, the society neglects a rich source of talented and creative women with expertise. Disability is not only a matter of rehabilitation and medical aid, but also of developing skills. In urban areas this negative image is changing. Today, many disabled women are inspired to appear in public and are determined to take an active role in the society. They are eager to sustain themselves economically, despite the barriers of the built environment. In the booming creative industry of today, there are disabled women who can contribute significantly to the city's economy. But, the process of expressing their talent and creative skill are done in isolation. The limited financial resource is a constraint to transform the artistic products into marketable commodities. It is strongly recommended these disabled women set up a business association where they can find ways to sell their products. A possible option to improve disabled women's life is the internet service that empowers them through the electronic community. They remain stationary when communicating in the virtual realm. To materialize the above-mentioned ideas, the government and private sector have to be supportive by providing opportunities for higher education and training, and creating barrier-free environments and public transport. The government ought to enact strictly the law and guidelines on the concerns of disabled people. Most of all, disabled women must be self-motivated if they want a qualitative change in their lives. **Keywords:** disabled women, creative industry, internet, independent mobility, barrier-free environment*

DISABLED WOMEN

According to the United Nations (UN) about 80% of the disabled people in this world live in developing countries (Priestley, 2001). They face social and physical oppressions that are barriers to taking an active role in society (ibid.). Of course, all disabled people, whether women or men, have issues in common which affect them equally. Mostly, these

concern the barriers in the built environment, such as lack of access to buildings and public transport (Radtke, 2001). Among the disabled people, disabled women are the most marginalized group in a society. They even experience discrimination against disabled men. Besides inaccessible buildings and public transport, disabled women have important concerns that have to do with education, employment, and achieving determined lifestyle (ibid.).

In Asia and the Pacific, a large number of disabled women and girls, particularly in poorer countries, remain hidden, silent, their concerns ignored, and their rights disregarded. They have to face triple discrimination by society, because of their disability, female gender, and poverty (UNESCAP, 1995). They do not get equal opportunities for education and employment as disabled men do and thus, disabled women are less educated and poorer. This marginalization put them into extreme poverty and they become an economic burden for the family. Most people also think that disabled women are unfit for a marriage, as they will not be able to fulfill the traditional roles of being a capable housewife and mother (UNESCAP, 1995; Priestley, 2001).

Many disabled women are unable to enhance their own situation because of their low self-esteem. Particularly in uneducated families, they may constantly be reminded of their disability through neglect and over-protection. In the family, they are not given the opportunities and choices that suit their capability. They are treated as if they cannot do anything worth. Because of their low self-esteem, which is cultivated by their own family since they became disabled, disabled women will have low aspirations and few demands. Accordingly, they need a supportive psychological environment and barrier-free physical environments (UNESCAP, 1995).

The above negative image of disabled women is gradually changing to a better self-image of themselves. In urban areas, many disabled women are inspired to appear in public. They are determined to participate actively in social life. Particularly so, because disabled people have set up an association in which they can regularly interact with each other. In this community, they share the challenges of marginalization from formal education and formal employment, and conduct meetings with authorities of the local government. The ultimate goal of the meetings is to be able to support themselves economically.

Whereas in developed countries disabled people demand for more individual choices, in developing countries disabled people are dealing with coping and surviving which is far more essential than issues of equality. Survival is their main problem.

With a focus on disabled women, this study discusses their hidden potential in creative undertakings. Among them are women who paint with her foot, who does embroidery, or used to be a seamstress. A possible solution to remain stationary is the creative industry of the internet service. When people socialize, physical appearance, body language, voice, and attitude form the first impression which may last as a like or dislike of the other person (Komardjaja, 2001). The internet has a non-discriminating impact on people, because of its potential for personal communication without the users having to meet face to face (ibid.).

THE PROBLEM

In general, disabled people are perceived as incapable to make a significant contribution to society, particularly in the economic sector. Most people are more impressed by physical appearance than helping disabled people to achieve their full potential. Society shuns humans who do not meet the standard of normalcy.

Because of their limited formal education and limited mobility, disabled women stay home, even though they are eager to work and have their own income. Some of them take the initiative to do craft work. This kind of work doesn't need much physical mobility. Nonetheless, they still need to be mobile to do their creative work, for example to choose and purchase raw materials. The largest obstacle is the barriers in the built environment which impede their limited mobility. Often, they have to cope with the physical barriers of steps, staircases, narrow toilets, heavy doors, and so forth.

Sardono (in Pambudy, 2008) emphasizes that creativity can only thrive if people have freedom to express themselves. For disabled women, the limited freedom to express and project their creative ideas is a challenge to produce the kind of product they want to create. For example, a woman with very short arms and legs paints with her foot. To accomplish the painting, she needs a varying degree of colors to transfer her imagination onto the canvas. When she runs out of some colors, she may get stuck and frustrated, because she needs human assistance to choose and purchase the color paints. Even if a caretaker is available to help her with pushing the wheelchair, the caretaker has to cope with the barriers of the city's infrastructures: rough roads, steps, narrow pathways, and inaccessible transportation. The next challenge of the art work is the marketing of the paintings. She needs a large amount of capital to run a showroom, whereas in fact the majority of disabled women are not better off. The problem becomes complicated and possible solutions and strategies have to be thought of to foster the creative work.

To wrap up the above explanation of the challenges that confront disabled women and their creative work, following are the questions that need clarifications:

People are creative by nature (Pangestu, M. E. in Pambudy, 2008) and so are the disabled women. Therefore,

- ◆ What are the social and physical barriers to the freedom of expressing their imagination and ideas?
- ◆ How determined are they to be independently mobile? What is the purpose of independent mobility?
- ◆ What are the barriers to forming a community of disabled women with similar interest in the creative industry?
- ◆ What kind of barriers do disabled women confront in transforming their artistic work into marketable commodities?
- ◆ Who else benefits from barrier-free environments, besides disabled women?

THE AIM

This study aims:

- ◆ to describe the situation of disabled women and their creative undertakings;
- ◆ to inform builders of the urgency to construct barrier-free infrastructures of the city. Even though this sounds like a mantra, the importance of "barrier-free environment" has to be reminded again and again in all studies and decision-making until the current built environments have been transformed into disabled-friendly environments. Ototake (2000), a man born without arms and legs, said "For us, this one step is not just a step, it's a wall". A raised floor of three cm paralyzes disabled people who are already limited in their mobility;
- ◆ to suggest strategies in which disabled women can handle by themselves the transforming of their creative work into marketable commodities;
- ◆ to raise public awareness that disabled women have the potential to contribute significantly to the creative industry and the city's economy. Accordingly, they should get the full support from the public and private sectors.

LITERATURE STUDY

The Economic Situation of Disabled Women

Today, work and employment are the main characteristics of "independent adulthood" (Priestley, 2001). For most disabled people, independent adulthood seems out of reach, as they have little or no access to employment. The exclusion of disabled people from paid employment means that they suffer from social and economic deprivation. Their basic needs remain unmet due to lack of income. Many of them are unemployed, underemployed, and underpaid and thus, they live in extreme poverty (ibid.).

Paid work has a strong impact on the lives of disabled people; it affects their relationship, self-autonomy, and participation in society (Turmusani, 2001). For disabled women, paid work is central in their lives, as they have always been marginalized from education and job opportunities. Paid work determines their level of inclusion in a society, particularly the adult status attached to it. Without paid work, disabled women are at the mercy of others and have no control over their own life (ibid.). With no economic power, disabled women lose their social status and self-confidence, and are more vulnerable to mistreatments (Ghai, 2001).

An inevitable factor that improves the lives of disabled women is the need for mobility. It helps them to get and sustain a paid job which often takes place outside the home. Disabled women, however, experience additional restriction on their mobility because of the male-dominated values in society. Family restrictions are also barriers in their public activities (Turmusani, 2001). In other words, disabled women are discouraged to go out of their house and be independently mobile.

To get a decent job, not only do disabled women face social barriers, but also physical barriers. Inaccessible transport and the city's infrastructures are impediments to their mobility. But, as consumers and legal citizens, disabled women have the right to be involved in policies and decisions pertaining to their lives and the built environment.

THE CREATIVE INDUSTRY

(the following explanation of the creative industry is taken from the national daily of Indonesia "Kompas" and written by Pambudy, 2008).

In many countries, the creative industry or creative economy has made a remarkable contribution to the nation's economy. The creative industry has contributed to the country's export, creating job opportunities, and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). A positive aspect of the creative industry is that it does not depend so much on the natural resources and that it is an environmental-friendly activity.

The Department of Commerce of Indonesia has formulated "The development of creative economy in Indonesia 2025" (Pengembangan ekonomi kreatif Indonesia 2025). This development encompasses 14 kinds of creative industry, i.e.: 1) architecture, 2) design, 3) craft, 4) computer service and software, 5) fashion, 6) music, 7) art market and antiques, 8) publishing and printing, 9) advertisement, 10) interactive games, 11) research and development, 12) the art of performing, 13) television and radio, and 14) video, film, and photography. The fourteen kinds of creative industry have contributed remarkably to the country's GDP between 2002 and 2006, according to the "Study of creative industry in Indonesia 2007" by the Department of Commerce.

Creative industry is defined as "a process that increases and transforms the added value of the exploited intellectual resources, which take the form of creativity, productivity, and individual talent, into a commercial product. This will increase the wealth of people who are involved in the creative industry".

The key persons of the creative industry are the intellectual community, who are the cultural observers (who write about art, drama); artists; educators; researchers; pioneers of art studios; and prominent persons in art, culture, and knowledge; and business people who transform a creative product into a commercial commodity. An important aspect in the creative industry is the individual liberty to express her/ himself, says Nobel prize winner, Amartya Sen (quoted in Pambudy, 2008). Many disabled women and men are in this creative community too, but they are often overlooked because of the assumption that being disabled equals uselessness and non-productive.

DISABLED WOMEN AND THE INTERNET SERVICE

One way to empower disabled women to be economically independent is through the information and communication technology of the internet. In using the internet, physical disabilities and personal shortcomings are not exposed to the interlocutors. This gives the users the liberty to express themselves without fear of rejection. Nonetheless, it does not mean that disabilities and shortcomings have to be covered up (Komardjaja, 2001).

The internet enhances interactions among people and social groups from all areas of life.

Intensive communication can be done via email, in spite of the geographical distance between the users. Information is power and the internet empowers individuals by giving access to more information and opportunities to develop useful contacts (ibid.).

In the midst of the current economic crisis in Indonesia, it can be costly to create environments that are free of physical barriers and ensure the independent personal mobility of disabled women in public spaces. Accordingly, the internet technology could allow them to work in a safe and convenient environment (Komardjaja, 2001).

THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND INDEPENDENT MOBILITY

Physical barriers are not a gender issue, because both disabled women and disabled men are affected by the impediments. Physical barriers are external and easier to recognize than social barriers. For disabled people, physical barriers reject the full use of the environment. Pedestrian walkways, building entrances, building corridors, stairs, elevators, toilets, and public transportation are filled with barriers that are a mobility hardship for disabled people. They are in dire need for barrier-free infrastructures of the city. These barriers are created by builders, knowingly or unknowingly. As such, creators are also in the capacity to remove the barriers. Barriers do not easily affect the non-disabled population, but disabled people are instantly aware of the existence of barriers (Bednar, 1977). Barriers prevent them from participating in social life and hence, they become more isolated. In the past, planners and designers paid little attention to the special need of disabled people.

Women in general, because of their roles as housekeeper and nurturer, use a wider spectrum of the built environment and are more mobile than men. They are, therefore, more affected by the physical impediments of the environments (Komardjaja & Parker, 2001). This points out that disabled women, if given the chance, may be more mobile than disabled men. With independent mobility they are at liberty to decide for themselves.

Today, one or two building(s) apply the principle of barrier-free in the planning and construction phases. Outside the building, the public open spaces, such as sidewalks, parking areas, green parks, and public transport remain difficult to access. The Department of Public Works issued in 2006 the "Technical guidelines on the facilities and accessibilities of the building and the environment" (Pedoman teknis fasilitas dan aksesibilitas pada bangunan gedung dan lingkungan). On the sites, however, builders disregard the application of these technical guidelines.

Some people are of the opinion that disabled people should cure themselves by living in an environment that is planned and designed for the majority of the non-disabled. By so doing, disabled people are compelled to find ways to negotiate the physical barriers. Challenging disabled people like this, will inspire them to make greater effort in their education, work, and day-to-day chores.

Others argue that all citizens, whether or not disabled, have the right to use the built environment equally. It should not be planned and designed to suit the majority of the non-disabled people. A population is plural by nature and builders have to realize that pluralism is a relevant factor in designing the built environment. Citizens always consists of toddlers, elderly people, pregnant women, people recovering from an illness, people pushing carts, travelers drawing their luggage, and people carrying loads. Builders have to heed the special needs of the disabled people. Moreover, they should be aware that each citizen go through different stages in their lives with varying degrees of ability and disability. Barrier-free environment is the answer to the human needs in all phases of their lives.

THE SHORT INTERVIEW

To get an idea of the real condition of disabled women and the creative industry, I conducted an informal and short interview via telephone with one disabled woman, named Tinsi (not her real name). I did the interview twice. I needed clarification of her embroidery work, its marketing, and

her mobility. The questions were about her formal education, financial condition of her family, the reasons of taking a sewing course, the tools and materials for the work, the clients, the community of disabled people doing art work, and the marketing.

Apart from this short interview, I decided to include in this article my talks with and observations of two other disabled women that I did several years ago. One woman was born with almost no arms and legs. She paints with her foot. Occasionally, with the assistance of her relative, she held an exhibition of her paintings. The other woman uses a wheelchair which she maneuvers by herself. She used to be a seamstress and bought the sewing materials by herself. To do this, she sat on her wheelchair and wheeled it from her house to the shopping center which distance is quite long. The hilly geography of the city of Bandung turned the travel into an agony. She complained about having pain in her shoulders.

Following is the description of the interview:

Tinsi contracted polio when she was two years. She uses a wheelchair for mobility. She has completed her Senior High School. Due to the limited financial resource of her parents, she could not continue studying for a higher degree. But mostly, she was concern about the barriers of the university building. Instead of having to deal with the difficulty of traveling, and getting in to and out of the classes, she decided not to study further. She realized that she could not remain idle and did not want to be an economic burden for her parents. She would like to have her own pocket money and to buy things that she needs and wants. For the cost of living, such as food, clothes and housing, she continues living with her parents.

By word of mouth, she knew about a sewing course run by the Group of Corporate Business (Kelompok Usaha Bersama) where the students and workers were deaf women. The location of this Group is far from the place where she lives and so, her father brought and collected her to and from the course by his motorcycle. She finished the sewing course within one year. In the same period, she learned embroidery.

After completing the course, she joined an art gallery allocated for disabled people who could exhibit their artistic work. The owner of the gallery was the woman with very short arms and legs, who paints with her foot. After a while some disabled people withdrew from the gallery and finally, the gallery was no longer in function. In this gallery, visitors could purchase paintings, embroidered bed sheets and table cloth, and other handicrafts.

Since then, Tinsi has been doing her own business at her parental house. Her first clients were her friends from the gallery who ordered new dresses and embroidered cloth. Gradually, other women come to her place and order things they need. Thus far, she has work to do and this means that she earns some money. To buy the embroidery threads and other materials, she will go out by herself and takes a taxi to go to the shop. If a friend accompanies her, they will go by public transport where Tinsi must sit in the front next to the driver, because this part of the vehicle is easier to access. In many cases she would ask her mother to buy the colored threads or sewing things, but in fact she prefers to choose and buy the materials by herself.

She is eager to form a group of disabled people who do craft and open a gallery to exhibit the products, but can't afford it. She needs a capital and strategic location to run a gallery.

INTERPRETATION AND CONCLUSION

Each disabled individual woman has the potential to create products that can be transformed into commercial commodities and be thrown into the market. To reach the level of marketing, there are two obvious barriers that hamper their efforts in the creative industry. One is internal, which is the psychological barrier within the person. The other is the economic, social, and physical barriers of the environment which is not easy to control and to change. Many disabled women come from the middle- and lower-income groups. The limited financial resource of the family makes it unlikely for them to continue their formal schooling or to take a course on a certain skill. If they are skilled in one of the fourteen items of the creative industry, as developed by the

Department of Commerce, they need to raise a capital to transform the products into marketable commodities. In addition to this gloomy outlook, people in general are ignorant of the disabled women's capability. On account of their physical limitations, society may assess the products of low quality and not monetary worth. When disabled women are positive about themselves and determined to take an active part in social life, they confront the barriers of the built environment. Many disabled women are eager to be independent in their personal mobility and want to have a choice in purchasing materials that they need for their work.

From the short interview, we can interpret that internal (within the person) and external (the environment where they live) changes ought to happen if disabled women want to improve their quality of life. If they live and work in isolation, they will not have the chance to share and exchange their experiences and perspectives. The best answer to the complex problem, is that disabled women ought to gather together frequently. Being together will create a sense of solidarity and commonality across disability. They can develop their leadership skill and bring about a sustainable network among disabled women. Tinsi made personal and financial progress when she joined the gallery, because she could exhibit and sell her embroidered work.

Regarding the internet, it helps to engender teleworking, which empowers disabled women. However, only disabled women from the middle and upper class can afford the internet service at the moment. Many of them have received higher education and professional training and are likely to be independent in thinking. They could form an electronic community to exchange information and experience without having to meet each other. As social and emotional beings, they still need to meet people with whom they can express and receive positive and negative emotions of joy, friendliness, sadness, anger, etc. The internet is not the only means that empowers disabled women, but it certainly provides an empowering result.

For a conversion to happen, first and foremost is the disabled woman herself who must be determined to change. Tandon (1995 quoted in Komardjaja, 2001) believes that "The force of change is inside oneself; outsiders can only provide enabling condition. No more". In spite of the many limitations that disabled women encounter, they are in the capacity to move forward. "Where there is a will, there is a way", says the known proverb.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In promoting the creative capabilities of disabled women, two actions need to be carried out, i.e.:

- ◆ to provide opportunities for self-development through higher education, skill courses, and training, and
- ◆ to create built environments that are barrier-free.

Highly recommended is to conduct an in-depth study about the participation of disabled women in the creative industry. The ultimate goal is to make "qualitative changes" (Ghai, 2001) in the lives of disabled women through their involvement in the creative industry.

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