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Literacy Opens Doors For Moslem Women

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COTABATO CITY: Babo sends her daughter to get 54 guava leaves. When the daughter gets back, Babo tells her she needs 45 more. How many leaves does Babo need in all?

A group of colorfully clad middle-aged Iranon women, some with their bare feet pulled up and resting on the wooden benches, hurriedly count, their fingers, and after some buzzing chorus "Siaw pologo siaw (99)."

Many of the women are just beginning to read and count. They also have not ventured beyond their village to visit nearby Cotabato City for fear of the unfamiliar and indecipherable road signs, billboards, jeepney signs, store prices, addresses.

It is commonly thought that illiteracy exists only in far-flung or insurgency beset areas of the country where government services are scarce. But it does in the not-too-remote fishing village of Katuli in Sultan Kudarat town, Maguindanao province, peopled by the Iranon tribe.

It is not distance that isolates the Iranons, especially the women, as the community is very accessible from the highway. It's tradition and poverty.

Moslem tradition used to shelter women from the outside world, to keep them from adopting modern ways which are taboo in their reli-

gion, and to prevent contact with the men outside their cloistered world, says Education Superintendent Bai Tanto Sinsuat.

Or, as student Hadja Sapia Guianadin says in the dialect with a tinge of regret, "Since our family was poor, our parents did not think of sending us to school. They only wanted us to help with the housework. They said girls should stay home since we would eventually be married off anyway."

Today, literacy classes if not formal education are opening doors for Moslem women to play more visible roles. One programme that is making this happen is the Female Functional Literacy (FFL) programme, funded by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

FFL reaches out to women in selected areas in the southern provinces of Ifugao, Maguindanao, Lanao del Norte, Sulu, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi and Negros Occidental. The themes running through the five-month literacy course are breastfeeding, immunization and common childhood illnesses, nutrition, first aid, herbal medicine, water and sanitation.

Breaking ground for the project was not easy, villagers being doubtful that the project, like so many others in the past, would do them any good. Women asked to join found excuses

like having to sell the husband's catch or do housework, or simple being too old to learn.

"You have to be very patient. And you will have to work hard to win their trust and respect. I had to visit the women and again. I had to down several cups of very strong coffee which I normally cannot take," says Nora Nunez, the para-teachers assigned to the village.

But what convinced the women to join the programme?

Halja Sitti Haron, a frail woman who cannot tell her exact age, says almost inaudibly: "Paran mangosyo, matuu ako makuenta, did ako marugi sa mga isda. (To learn to count, so I could do business and not lose money when I sell fish)."

Linggawang Lumundao, fiesty-looking in a white blouse and red malong pants, complains she can't read very well because she does not have teeth anymore. But "we should go to class to learn and not stay ignorant." She wants to come to Manila to see the President so he could give her money to start a business and later buy herself a good set of dentures.

Others wanted to learn so they could read the letters from their children who are working abroad and write back.

Being able to relate the lesson with

personal experience helps the women to learn fast. The day's lesson on herbal medicine, for example, was particularly significant to Aiza, five of her 10 children having died from diarrhoea. She cannot tell the year they died because "I didn't understand the 19-s then." Now she wants to be able to use herbal plants to cure illnesses.

The women use to be unable to relate unsanitary surroundings to the high incidence of disease among children, like diarrhoea. They also stubbornly refused to be examined during pregnancy by a doctor, preferring the hilot (traditional birth attendant), who attends 80 per cent of births.

Maguindanao had a mortality rate of 95.1 per 1000 live births, and 29 per cent of preschool children suffered from second and third degree malnutrition, in 1985.

FFL has gone beyond teaching the three Rs to liberating women in the sense that they are becoming more confident of themselves as individuals, more aware of their rights and of their role as mothers, and more active in community activities.

Sapia's words sum up the women's sense of achievement. "Now we see the value of having even a little education. At last we know how it is to be a learner."

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