

# A TRAINING PROGRAM FOR RURAL WOMEN IN SUMATRA, INDONESIA

*Margaret Gayfer*

*Margaret Gayfer, rédactrice de Convergence (publication trimestrielle du Conseil international d'éducation des adultes), nous parle d'un programme de formation à l'intention des femmes du milieu rural au Nord de Sumatra en Indonésie. Ce programme, qui montre bien les nombreuses activités de la base dans les pays du Tiers-Monde, veut aider les femmes à améliorer leur situation socio-économique grâce à une action collective communautaire.*

"How I wish Paulo Freire was here to see how these rural farmer women in the training program analyze and discuss topics and issues in small groups, comment on thematic drawings of village life and activities, present their results on posters, and each day evaluate what they have learned through role-playing dramas."\*

This comment by Marinette Oomen, one of the coordinators of a training program for rural women in Northern Sumatra, Indonesia, illustrates how women can gain confidence in their own strengths and ability to learn new skills through programs developed by and for women, and that centre on participation, dialogue, analysis of issues and problems and on self-help ways to take action on solutions.

The Sumatra program is typical of the many grassroots activities going on in Third World countries. In these programs adult educators are involving groups of women in learning how to recognize and use their own knowledge and experience so they can stimulate themselves and other women to improve their socio-economic positions through community-based collective action.

## Step-by-Step Approach

The overall objective of the Rural Women's Extension Program in Kano and Simalungun areas of Northern Sumatra is to enable rural women to organize, implement village-level projects, and be self-

reliant in the administration and coordination of their own activities.

The planners realistically know that a program with such a process-oriented goal – developing women's self-confidence for activities to improve their lives – is a long-term investment in 'human development' and requires a step-by-step approach.

Thus, the Rural Women Development Project was started with two sub-programs and goals. The first stage was a four-month Training Program (November 1983-February 1984) to train some twenty-four women to work in villages as community development catalysts. The next stage (March-December 1984) is the Extension Program for Village Women which centres on planning and organizing specific projects in some ten target villages. These programs are sponsored by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Federal Republic of Germany, in cooperation with thirteen local and area community organizations who send their workers for training.

The project resulted from several months of field study and consultation to assess the needs and problems of rural women. It showed the lack of women trained in agricultural and community extension work and of materials relevant to the realities of women's lives. The study also showed that, whereas rural women give first priority to their roles as farmers, most existing extension activities for women are geared mainly to their family and household roles.

## Emphasis on Participation and Dialogue

In responding to these needs, the Training Program has developed a specific emphasis and methodology, seeing its work as part of overall rural and community development. Since the program aims to serve women in their multiple roles as farmers, members of the community, housewives and mothers, the direction the training takes is worked out in consultation with women at all levels. The methodology of participation and di-

alogue means that the target groups are involved in the project at each stage, formulating needs, problems and priorities and taking part in evaluation.

By using the learner-centred approach of nonformal adult education, the focus is on the project being developed by and for women, and on the kind of learning that raises the consciousness of women about how they can take hold of their own lives. It is not just training for women to become better at their traditionally-assigned roles, but the kind of training that works to move women toward the longer-term goal of bettering and changing their social and economic position. To make this happen, specific and related skills must be supported by self-management and leadership skills.

For a personalized sense of what 'participatory training' means, I quote again from Marinette's letter several weeks after the program started:

"The prophecy of the disillusioned 'experts' (men) is not fulfilled! The women came, they react positively to the dialogical approach, and work very hard. A nice example: We work a lot with simple visual aids for which material is always available. The third day of the training, one woman wanted to make her point clear. She took a marker and started to draw a situation on a big sheet of paper. It was only when she had finished that she looked, amazed, at her 'piece of art', started laughing, and said: 'I didn't know I could draw . . .'

Just as the training started, I collapsed . . . para-typhus! The other women of the project organized themselves, and all goes well. They panicked at the beginning, and were a little afraid of these new methods. 'What you mean is that we should not act as teachers . . . but how are they going to learn anything?' They now enjoy the workshops and are amazed to hear and see so much from the trainees. It is beautiful to listen to them. I am convinced they will learn and dare much more, now that they have to carry on on their own. And, it now has become more fully 'their project'."

## What Was Learned

The Progress Report of the training program (March 1984) points out the positive response of the twenty-four trainees to the participatory-dialogue method and to their fieldwork in villages. It notes how

hard they worked – along with “jokes, songs and teasing.” There were, of course, difficult aspects, such as the need of the participants for a great deal of stimulus and encouragement before they dared to start an activity on their own. “We cannot do that” was heard throughout the training, although each time they followed through they enjoyed the results. On the whole the training reached its objectives, particularly since the women seem to have understood and enjoyed the participatory methods used.

“To choose this type of training means a lot of work,” the report states. “It is not always easy, as very often instructors must experiment and take into consideration the views, reactions and background of the trainee.” The change in the thinking process of the participants can best be illustrated by their opinion on their future work. During the first week they said they would “help village women because they were *bodoh* (stupid).” At the end of the training they expressed their role as extension workers “to work with village women.”

The assessment of the training program also acknowledges what organizers of any

first-time women’s project have found: it takes more time and patience than anyone realizes. The report describes it this way:

“A project which aims at training female extension workers and at organizing village women’s activities with the trained workers means a long process of awareness, first by the extension workers themselves, and then by the village women through their contact with the extension workers.

A project which aims at stimulating women to decide for themselves and to administrate their own activities means a lot of patience and time. It is true that concrete grassroots projects should be implemented quickly in order to raise motivation and self-confidence. But if these projects are suggested from outside the group and implemented by extension workers, there is a great risk that activities will fade out when the extension worker leaves the village.”

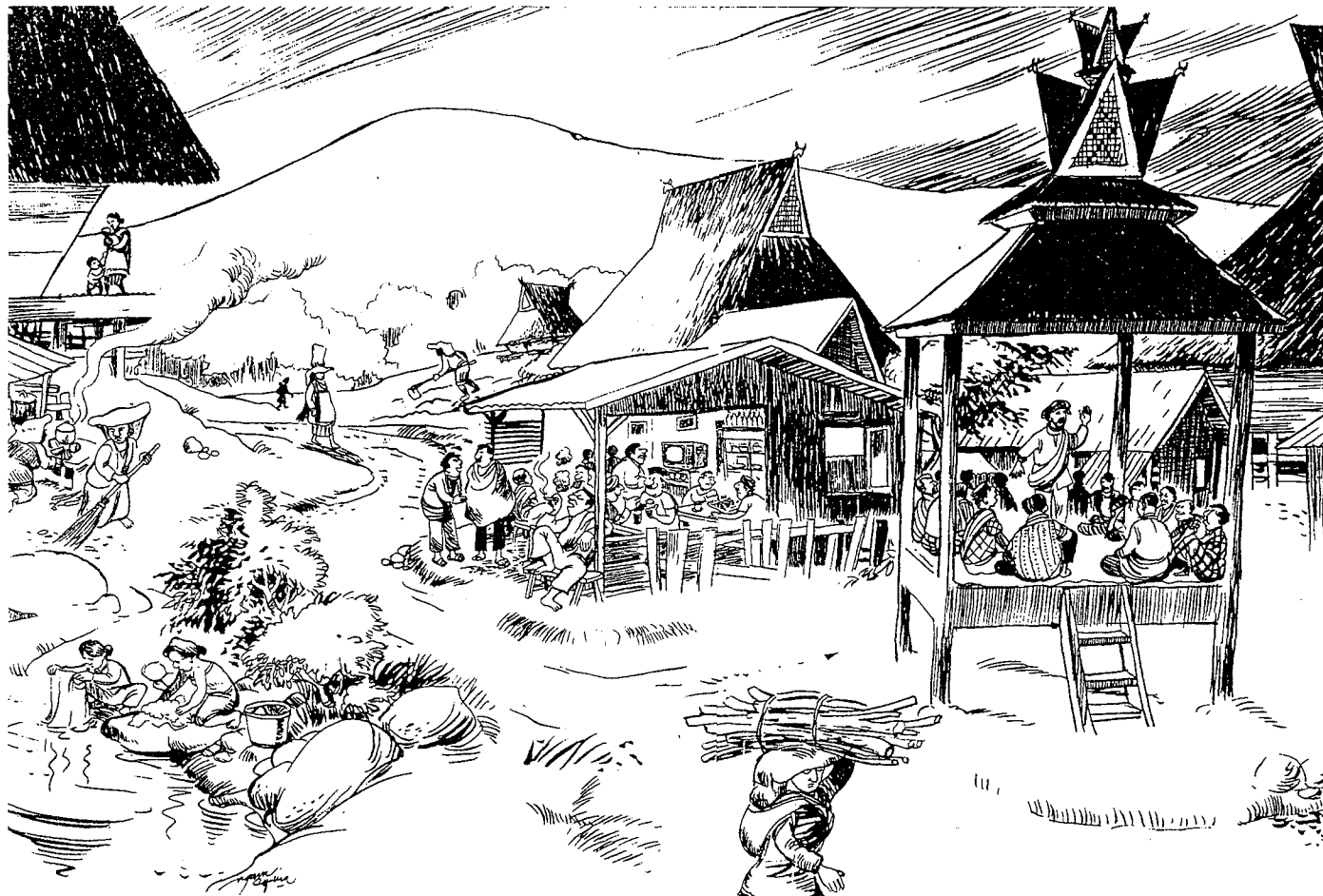
These realities are echoed in a June 1984 letter from Marinette Oomen:

“The trained extension workers have started their work in the villages. It goes slowly as these women lack ex-

perience and need a lot of assistance. There are also some (predictable) problems with a few local authorities who feel ‘threatened’ . . . a normal process for such a new program which doesn’t follow the ‘normal’ path. I feel quite happy with this slow process; the small problems the women meet in the field push them to formulate better their goals to the people, and to review and improve their approach constantly.”

\*The letters from which Margaret Gayfer quotes extensively throughout her article were written by Marie Antoinette Oomen-Myin (referred to here as ‘Marinette Oomen’) – who is also the author of “The Involvement of Rural Women in Village Development in Tanzania,” which appears in this issue of CWS/cf.

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Thematic drawings of Indonesian village life were used for discussion and analysis during the training program for rural women. Credit: Supplied by Margaret Gayfer