NEW STRAITS TIMES

#TECH: Women contributing to the community

By Izwan Ismail - March 8, 2024 @ 8:17am



The MY Bamboo flagship project's pilot initiative saw a team of six academics and 100 students, along with external experts and industry partners, build five unique structures for the purpose of observation, relaxation, and storage at USJ2 Community Garden within five-weeks.

AS we celebrate International Women's Day 2024 today (March 8), let us recognise the inherent worth and dignity of every woman and their ability to affect change on the world, one community at a time.

Professor Anindita Dasgupta grew up in an environment where she witnessed the annual floods that devastated the homes and livelihoods of impoverished communities living along the riverbanks. These experiences fuelled a deep sense of empathy and a desire to make a positive impact.

Upon moving to Malaysia, Dasgupta's perspective expanded as she observed different forms of hardship and struggle faced by socio-economically marginalised communities here, women especially. This inspired her to kick-start and lead the Ibu.Niaga project at Taylor's University.

For budding micro-entrepreneurs

Ibu.Niaga is an ongoing project that is committed to providing crucial support and resources to budding micro-entrepreneurs, especially women from the underserved community, enabling them to elevate their businesses from the ground up.

Through tailored multidisciplinary workshops, personalised mentorship, and networking avenues, Ibu.Niaga fosters a nurturing environment conducive to the sustainable growth of micro-enterprises.

Since its inception in August 2022, 110 women micro-entrepreneurs from the underserved community in Klang Valley have been trained and the project is currently recruiting 70 participants for the next phase which starts April this year.

"I strongly believe that a 'hand-up' instead of a 'hand-out' is what is needed," said Dasgupta.

"The energy and eagerness to grab opportunities exist among Malaysian women, all they need is an opportunity. I still recall their immeasurable joy in being able to learn pastry-making from the professional chefs of Taylor's Culinary Institute.

"These women were curious, smart, and eager as they asked questions and learned more about the possibilities of creating something themselves," said Dasgupta.

Closing the gap in architecture industry

In the field of architecture, Associate Professor Dr Veronica Ng Foong Peng believes in beating a path for not just yourself, but for others around you as well.

Despite being a trailblazer in her field, Ng noticed a male-dominated gender disparity in architecture education.

Reflecting on personal and observed challenges faced upon entering the architectural profession, she highlights the importance of empathy and inclusion in leadership.

Assuming the position of Head of the School of Architecture, Building & Design in 2020, she emphasises the need for diversity and gender equity at all levels of academia and practice, highlighting the ability to understand diverse perspectives, providing equal opportunities, and build trusting relationships with each other despite gender or background to facilitate optimal performance and support.

Her advocacy for more women architects in the field is further reflected through her future aspirations, which might also be one of her most ambitious projects till date – authoring a book on Southeast Asian female architects.

"Empowerment through mentoring and community support is crucial. However, the lack of female mentorship in male-dominated leadership positions poses challenges," said Ng.

"It is the experiences and the environment which shapes a person, their motivations and ultimately their futures. Let's dispense with the gender focused practices and focus on being inclusive of all who have potential to lead and change others for the better," she said.

Drawing from her experience, Ng has actively engaged in various initiatives to bridge the gap between education, practice, and research in architecture.

One of them being the MY Bamboo flagship project whereby its pilot initiative saw a team of six academics and 100 students, along with external experts and industry partners, build five unique structures for the purpose of observation, relaxation, and storage at USJ2 Community Garden within five-weeks.

This project has subsequently been replicated and scaled to bamboo structures built in the Dusun @ Kompleks 3C and P3KU. The project intends to incorporate the promotion of mental health and is considering structures that benefit specific groups such as children and the elderly communities in the future.

Empowerment with the power of words

Hema Letchamanan believes in literacy as the cornerstone for women's empowerment, encompassing language, digital, and financial realms.

Mastery of these literacies not only facilitates professional advancement but also serves as a lifeline for women, ensuring their ability to navigate the complexities of modern life and provide for their families.

This is Hema's inspiration as the project leader of Projek BacaBaca, an initiative that pairs volunteers referred to as 'reading coaches' with primary school students from underserved communities who are affected by learning poverty and the Covid-19 learning gap, in order to improve their reading.

To date, the project has collectively reached over 300 children who are at risk of falling into learning poverty.

Acknowledging the barriers of limited internet access and home environments, Hema then initiated Projek BacaBaca Komuniti to engage local communities as allies.

Through this initiative, stay-at-home mothers are empowered with the necessary skills to teach reading to children in their communities, while also receiving training in digital literacy, communication, and language skills.

To date, five women from the community have received training sessions led by a team of teacher-training and early literacy experts from Taylor's.

"It is imperative to prioritise comprehensive education initiatives, ensuring accessibility and affordability, to equip women with the essential skills needed to thrive in society today," said Hema.

"Additionally, initiatives such as mentorship programs and robust care infrastructure play pivotal roles in fostering women's progression in their respective roles, providing invaluable support and guidance along their journey towards success. By collectively emphasising these pillars of empowerment, we can pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable society where every woman can realise her full potential", she said.