

There is an old proverb in Papua; Nyeki Awa Loh Halok, Nyape Awalok Hat, or "If the hand does nothing, the mouth will be not chewing".

It is a saying Serlina Wenda knew only too well - with a husband, a grandmother, a sister, and six children to feed. As an indigenous Papuan woman she was expected to focus on providing food for her children and serving her husband. But - like many women in traditional, patriarchal societies - her low status in the tribal hierarchy and poor education meant she was treated as second-class member of society, playing no part in decisions or her community's development process.

Serlina's inability to fulfill her family's basic needs made life seem hopeless, unbearable, but most of all, frustrating. "Everyday, I went out to meet the new neighbours, crawling. I told them that I wanted to start a business making coffee, but my coffee was scattered. I did not know how to manage it. They only said how pitiful I was," she recalls.

Despite being one of the richest regions in Indonesia, Papua has one of the poorest economies and more than 41 per cent of its 2.3 million people live below the US\$1.25 extreme poverty line.

Indigenous Papuans account for an estimated 66 per cent of the region's population and indigenous women are the worst affected by this endemic poverty - which stems from the cumulative effects of underdevelopment combined with very poor gender equality (according to the Human Development Index). For example, although some women have tried to generate income through agricultural activities, because of their poorer education levels most do not even know the value of vegetables or understand how to set reasonable prices for the market.

But two years ago, in January 2009, things began to change for Serlina. A new project began that aimed to channel poverty reduction efforts in the area through indigenous Papuans women. Bearing in mind their low status this might seem strange. But a specific decision was made to emphasize their role. Women "are at the core of the family's economic livelihood in the Papua highlands," said Tauvik Muhamad, Programme Officer for the International Labour Organization (ILO), the UN agency dealing with work and work-related issues. "The reason is because women are very productive".

The programme paid specific attention to women in the three regencies of Jayawijaya, Lani Jaya and Yahukimo in the Papua Highlands, one of the poorest regions in Papua. The programme focused on developing basic business skills, such administration, finance and marketing. Importantly it also provided opportunities for women to learn speak out, hence giving them a voice in their communities. The Entrepreneurship Skills Development (ESD) programme was run by the ILO in collaboration with the UNDP through its Community Centre Development Programme (CcDP). It used the principles of a tried-and-tested ILO's training package, Gender and Entrepreneurship Together or GET Ahead.

By the time the project ended, in September 2010, 625 budding entrepreneurs had been trained in basic business skills, exceeding the original target of 250. 70 per cent (or 437) of these were women. 137 people were also trained as trainers, ensuring that the information continues to spread.

"To ensure sustainability the project provided hands-on entrepreneurship training, with special attention to marketing and coaching to both new entrepreneurs and relevant [local] NGOs including Yasumat and Ekonomus which serve as business development service providers," said the ILO's Tauvik Muhamad.

Serlina is among those whose lives have changed; she is now a coffee milling entrepreneur. "The programme not only gave me knowledge, but it also gave me a chance to expand my business by helping me with a loan and access to finance providers," said Serlina. "I am grateful for this help. This is real".

Yulia Waliho, from Lani Jaya, is also a different person compared to two years ago. She used to run a small stall, selling candy, soaps and cooking oil. However, few buyers paid in cash and her business went broke. Today, she is a honey bee entrepreneur. Her newly-acquired financial and management skills have given her confidence in her ability to run her enterprise. She is not only able to meet her family's daily needs and even save some money for her children's education, but also for her own continued education. "I went back to college, continuing my study on finance. I just recently graduated," she said with smiling eyes.

In Jayawijaya, progress is also evident. Women are breaking traditional barriers and increasingly engaging in paid business activities. "There have been changes happening," confirms Christian Sohilit, Head of Provincial Planning Development Agency of Lani Jaya. "Women from the Papuan Highlands live in a patriarchal society and have not been empowered for a long time. Anyone in the region can now hear women talk about how they can knit wool using machines".