



Creative Skills Training to Increase Income and Independence of Rural Women

Cindy Prastika Putri¹, Zora Jilva Triyanti²

¹⁻² Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES), Indonesia

Article History:

Received: May 12, 2025;

Revised: May 29, 2025;

Accepted: June 13, 2025;

Published: June 30, 2025.

Keywords: *Creative Economy; Income; Independence; Skills Training; Women Empowerment.*

Abstract: *This creative skills training program aims to improve the income and independence of rural women through economic empowerment based on local potential. The main problem faced by rural women is the limited access to training, resources, and economic opportunities that support financial independence. The implementation method used a participatory approach through several stages: socialization, skills training, production assistance, and evaluation. The skills developed included creating creative products from local materials such as bamboo crafts, patchwork, and simple processed foods with economic value. The results showed a significant improvement in participants' ability to produce marketable products and their confidence in independently marketing their creations. Furthermore, participants began to manage income more productively and build community-based marketing networks. Thus, creative skills training proved effective as an economic empowerment strategy for rural women in fostering sustainable financial independence.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural women play a vital role in supporting household welfare and local economic development. However, in many rural areas, women still face various socio-economic challenges, including limited access to education, skills training, capital, and markets. These conditions have contributed to the persistence of economic dependence and restricted opportunities for women to develop self-sufficiency. The community selected as the target of this empowerment program consists of rural women engaged in small-scale household production who lack sufficient entrepreneurial skills and marketing knowledge to increase their income. The situation analysis revealed that most of these women rely on traditional production methods and have minimal access to information technology, which limits their competitiveness in today's digital economy.

The primary issue addressed in this community service activity focuses on improving the creative and entrepreneurial skills of rural women to enhance their financial independence. The training activities were designed to empower participants to transform local materials into high-value creative products, enabling them to generate sustainable income. The selection of this target group was based on their potential to develop locally based creative industries and their strong motivation to improve family welfare. This initiative is expected to bring social change by fostering self-reliance, improving economic resilience, and encouraging gender

equality in rural communities.

This study draws on relevant literature in the field of community empowerment, women's entrepreneurship, and creative economy development. According to Kabeer (2012), empowerment involves expanding women's ability to make strategic life choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Similarly, Mayoux (2018) emphasized that economic empowerment through skills training and market access can lead to broader social transformation. Based on previous research, skill development programs combined with mentoring and marketing support have proven effective in enhancing women's participation in local economies (Rahman & Idris, 2020; Sari & Nugroho, 2021). Therefore, this community service program seeks to contribute to sustainable rural development through creative skills training that strengthens women's economic roles while promoting inclusive growth.

2. METHOD

This community service activity employed a participatory action research (PAR) approach that emphasized collaboration, inclusivity, and empowerment among the target community. The program was designed not merely as a one-time training, but as a continuous empowerment process aimed at enhancing the creative and entrepreneurial capacity of rural women. The main subjects of this activity were 25 women living in Sukamaju Village, an agricultural area located approximately 15 kilometers from the city center. Most participants were housewives with additional income from small-scale craft production or local food processing. However, limited marketing knowledge, inadequate business management skills, and low access to technology had constrained their ability to expand their businesses. Therefore, this empowerment program was initiated to address those barriers and to develop a sustainable model of community-based entrepreneurship.

The planning process began with an in-depth situation analysis and community mapping. The research team conducted interviews with local leaders, representatives of women's groups, and several households to gather data on the existing socio-economic conditions. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were also organized to identify the aspirations, needs, and challenges faced by rural women in developing their creative enterprises. The data revealed that most of the women possessed strong creativity and craftsmanship but lacked access to market information and digital platforms. Many of them had never participated in formal training related to product design, packaging, or digital marketing. These findings served as the foundation for designing a training model tailored to the local context and participants' abilities.

The community organization process was conducted collaboratively between the facilitators, local government, and village women's groups. A core team of community representatives was established to help coordinate activities, mobilize participants, and ensure the program's sustainability after the formal intervention ended. During the preparatory phase, several coordination meetings were held to align the objectives and identify resources that could support the implementation. The participatory nature of the planning process encouraged ownership among community members, ensuring that every stage of activity was based on mutual understanding and shared goals.

The implementation method followed a multi-stage structure consisting of five main phases: (a) socialization and motivation building, (b) training and capacity enhancement, (c) mentoring and production practice, (d) marketing simulation, and (e) evaluation and reflection. Each stage was interconnected to ensure continuity and gradual improvement in participants' competencies.

During the first stage, a socialization meeting was conducted to introduce the objectives, expected outcomes, and benefits of the program. The session also aimed to strengthen participants' self-confidence, motivation, and awareness of the importance of economic independence. Through motivational discussions and testimonials from successful women entrepreneurs, participants were encouraged to view entrepreneurship not merely as a financial necessity but as an opportunity for self-actualization and empowerment.

The second stage, which involved training and capacity building, was the core of the activity. Participants were divided into small groups based on their interest areas—handicrafts, processed foods, and digital marketing. In this stage, facilitators provided hands-on workshops focusing on creative product design, innovation using local materials, production efficiency, and packaging techniques. The workshops were designed to be interactive, emphasizing practical experience and peer-to-peer learning. In addition, a session on entrepreneurship fundamentals was provided, covering topics such as financial literacy, simple bookkeeping, cost analysis, and pricing strategies. These training sessions were supported by visual demonstrations, worksheets, and discussions that encouraged participants to apply new knowledge immediately.

The third stage involved mentoring and product development. After acquiring the necessary skills, participants received continuous assistance in developing and improving their products. The facilitators helped participants identify market trends, design appealing products, and evaluate the quality of their creations. This stage also included one-on-one mentoring sessions where facilitators provided feedback and guidance tailored to each participant's needs.

The mentoring process was essential for translating theoretical learning into practical entrepreneurship capabilities.

The fourth stage, marketing simulation and promotion, focused on enabling participants to introduce and sell their products. Participants were guided on how to use social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp Business to promote their products. They also learned to create simple promotional content, take product photos, and engage customers online. In addition, a local exhibition was organized at the village hall, allowing participants to display and sell their products directly to the public. This event not only provided real-world marketing experience but also helped build participants' confidence and expand their customer network.

The fifth and final stage was evaluation and reflection. The evaluation process consisted of both quantitative and qualitative assessments. Quantitatively, pre- and post-training questionnaires were distributed to measure participants' improvement in knowledge, confidence, and income levels. Qualitatively, interviews and group reflections were conducted to gather feedback on the training effectiveness and areas for improvement. The results indicated that the majority of participants demonstrated significant progress in their ability to innovate, market, and manage their products. More importantly, participants expressed greater enthusiasm and confidence in pursuing small-scale business ventures independently.

Throughout the program, the facilitators adopted the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approach to ensure that community members were actively involved in every decision-making process. This approach emphasized learning by doing, mutual respect, and empowerment, aligning with the principles of sustainable community development. By positioning women as active agents rather than passive recipients, the project successfully nurtured a sense of ownership and accountability among participants.

Each phase was cyclical and adaptive, allowing continuous reflection and improvement throughout the project's duration. The process ensured that the learning outcomes were not only measurable but also sustainable, fostering long-term behavioral and economic change.

In summary, the method used in this community service project integrated participatory action research with community-based entrepreneurship training. This methodological design allowed for flexibility, inclusiveness, and active participation, ensuring that the empowerment process was both transformative and sustainable. The emphasis on practical application, continuous mentoring, and reflective learning became the key to building the participants' capacity for economic independence.

3. RESULTS

The implementation of the community service program produced significant results, both in terms of skill enhancement and social transformation among the participants. The dynamic process of mentoring and capacity building revealed not only technical improvements in creative product development but also profound changes in attitudes, behaviors, and community structures. The activities were carried out in several stages over a three-month period and involved a combination of workshops, mentoring sessions, group discussions, and exhibitions.

During the initial stage, participants showed enthusiasm but also hesitation, particularly in terms of confidence and self-expression. Most participants admitted that they had never been involved in formal training or public events. Through the motivation-building and socialization sessions, participants gradually developed a sense of belonging and collective purpose. They began to recognize the importance of working together as a community to improve their economic conditions. The establishment of a small working group, called *Kelompok Perempuan Mandiri Sukamaju* (Sukamaju Independent Women Group), became one of the most important outcomes of this stage. This group functioned as a local platform for coordination, peer support, and decision-making, marking the emergence of a new social structure that empowered women to lead their own community initiatives.

In the training phase, participants demonstrated a high level of engagement in learning creative skills such as product innovation, packaging design, and simple marketing techniques. Several workshops focused on transforming locally available materials—such as bamboo, banana leaves, and leftover fabric—into marketable products like decorative crafts, tote bags, and snack packaging. Participants who initially lacked confidence in their manual skills gradually began producing creative works that reflected both cultural identity and market trends. The diversity of training activities encouraged creativity and peer learning, while fostering collaboration among participants.

The mentoring and production process showed remarkable progress in terms of product quality and innovation. Facilitators provided individualized assistance, helping each participant refine their product design and enhance the aesthetic and functional aspects of their creations. The women's ability to manage production schedules, calculate material costs, and evaluate product quality improved significantly. Moreover, participants began to adopt more efficient and hygienic production methods, indicating behavioral changes aligned with business professionalism. The mentoring process also encouraged participants to experiment with branding strategies and basic financial management techniques.

A notable outcome emerged during the marketing simulation phase, where participants practiced selling their products using both traditional and digital platforms. Many participants successfully created promotional content using smartphones, designed simple product catalogs, and managed social media pages to promote their businesses. Several participants reported making their first online sales through WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages during the program period. This achievement not only increased their income but also strengthened their confidence in engaging with broader markets.

In addition to technical skills, the program generated meaningful social and behavioral changes. The participants began to demonstrate higher self-esteem and a stronger sense of community solidarity. Group discussions revealed that many women, who previously depended entirely on their spouses for financial decisions, had begun to contribute actively to family income and planning. The creation of a cooperative savings initiative among participants further reflected a shift toward collective economic empowerment. This new practice encouraged financial literacy and introduced a form of social capital that promoted trust and cooperation within the group.

Another significant result was the emergence of local leadership among participants. Several women who exhibited strong communication and organizational skills were appointed as coordinators of the training groups. These local leaders played an essential role in sustaining group activities and motivating others to continue their learning beyond the program. The presence of these leaders represented a tangible form of social transformation — moving from dependence to self-governance. Their involvement in decision-making and coordination processes strengthened community cohesion and ensured the continuity of the empowerment movement.

The program also succeeded in creating a new awareness toward innovation and self-reliance. Participants became more open to adopting new technologies, exploring new markets, and engaging in entrepreneurship as a long-term livelihood strategy. The sense of pride and accomplishment observed during the final exhibition event was a clear indicator of this transformation. Products displayed during the exhibition attracted attention from local visitors and small business networks, leading to several partnership offers for future collaboration.

From an economic perspective, the impact of the program was measurable. Based on post-training surveys, 80% of participants reported an increase in their monthly income by 15–30%, primarily due to the sale of new creative products. Furthermore, participants expressed a significant increase in their motivation to continue developing their skills and expanding their business activities independently. The qualitative data collected through interviews indicated

that participants experienced enhanced decision-making capacity, self-confidence, and recognition from their families and local community.

From a social perspective, the program succeeded in initiating a collective transformation process within the community. The women's group evolved into a support network that fostered cooperation, information sharing, and mutual assistance. This transformation illustrated a shift from individualistic household-based work to a cooperative community-based production model. The sense of solidarity, shared learning, and joint action became the foundation for building a sustainable local creative economy.

In summary, the results of this community service activity demonstrated that creative skills training can effectively promote both economic empowerment and social transformation among rural women. The development of new social institutions, the emergence of local leaders, the adoption of innovative practices, and the increase in income levels collectively represent the success of this empowerment model. More importantly, the program proved that when women are given opportunities, resources, and encouragement, they can become key agents of change capable of driving inclusive and sustainable community development.

4. DISCUSSION

The results of this community service program demonstrate that participatory and skills-based empowerment can effectively enhance both the economic capacity and social agency of rural women. The findings align with theoretical perspectives emphasizing that empowerment is not a linear process, but rather a transformative journey involving psychological, social, and economic dimensions (Kabeer, 2012). The improvement in participants' creative, managerial, and marketing skills indicates that access to knowledge and opportunities plays a critical role in shifting women's roles from passive economic actors to proactive agents of change within their communities.

The process of community organization and participatory learning adopted in this program is consistent with the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which emphasize collaboration, reflection, and mutual learning between facilitators and community members (Reason & Bradbury, 2011). Through this approach, participants were not treated as objects of training but as partners in problem-solving and co-creators of solutions. This participatory framework enabled them to develop self-awareness, confidence, and collective identity, leading to greater social cohesion. The establishment of the Sukamaju Independent Women Group serves as a manifestation of what Freire (2000) termed conscientization—the process through which individuals become aware of their socio-economic conditions and

mobilize collective action for change.

The emergence of local leadership among the women further supports theories of transformational empowerment in community development. According to Cornwall and Rivas (2015), empowerment becomes sustainable when individuals within the community begin to assume leadership roles, initiate new ideas, and sustain networks beyond external interventions. The appearance of local coordinators within the group who continued mentoring and organizing peer activities after the formal program ended illustrates this dynamic. It reflects a transition from dependency to autonomy—a critical element in achieving long-term social transformation.

From an economic perspective, the training program validated the concept of entrepreneurial capacity building as proposed by Yunus (2017), who argued that micro-entrepreneurship can be an effective mechanism to alleviate poverty and empower women in rural settings. The increase in participants' income levels and their ability to manage finances responsibly demonstrate the tangible outcomes of economic empowerment. Moreover, participants' adaptation to digital marketing platforms aligns with current discussions in the field of rural development that emphasize digital inclusion as a pathway to bridge socio-economic gaps (Rahman & Idris, 2020).

The program's outcomes also resonate with the theory of social capital by Putnam (2000), which emphasizes the importance of networks, trust, and reciprocity in fostering collective development. The creation of cooperative saving initiatives and group-based product promotion among participants illustrates how trust-based networks can function as an informal institutional framework supporting community resilience. These new forms of social capital not only improved participants' financial management but also enhanced their ability to cooperate and share resources.

In terms of behavioral change, the program confirms Bandura's (1986) social learning theory, which suggests that individuals acquire new behaviors through observation, imitation, and modeling within social contexts. The women in the program learned not only from facilitators but also from one another, as peer learning became a central feature of the training process. The observed changes in confidence, communication skills, and self-expression among participants can be attributed to this social learning mechanism, where mutual encouragement and shared success stories functioned as behavioral reinforcement.

Furthermore, the findings contribute to the theoretical discourse on gender and

empowerment, particularly the argument that empowerment involves both internal transformation and external opportunities (Rowlands, 1997). The women's growing sense of agency, reflected in their ability to make financial decisions and initiate collective business actions, signifies a shift in gender relations at the household and community levels. This supports the notion that gender empowerment cannot be separated from economic participation and access to productive resources (Sen, 1999).

The process of transformation observed in this study—from dependency to self-reliance—also mirrors the stages of community empowerment proposed by Chambers (1997), which include awareness, capacity building, participation, and sustainability. Each phase of the program—from needs assessment to evaluation—reflected these stages in action. Participants' awareness of their economic potential, the capacity built through skills training, active participation in mentoring and decision-making, and the emerging sustainability through local leadership collectively demonstrate how empowerment evolves into social transformation.

Another important implication lies in the integration of creative economy principles into rural community development. As noted by Howkins (2007), creativity is an economic resource that can generate value, identity, and sustainability when managed effectively. The success of this program in developing creative products from local materials aligns with this concept and highlights the potential of creative industries as a tool for inclusive development. By combining creativity with entrepreneurship, rural women not only enhance their income but also preserve cultural identity and local wisdom.

This discussion also highlights several challenges and lessons learned. Although the program achieved notable success, sustaining motivation and ensuring long-term continuity remain ongoing challenges. Similar studies (Mayoux, 2018; Sari & Nugroho, 2021) suggest that empowerment programs must integrate continuous mentoring, market linkage, and institutional support to prevent regression after the intervention period ends. Thus, future initiatives should focus on developing partnerships with local cooperatives, government institutions, and private sectors to strengthen the women's business networks and expand market access.

In conclusion, the discussion of this program reinforces the theoretical understanding that community-based empowerment is most effective when it integrates participatory methods, skill development, and social capital formation. The transformation of the Sukamaju women's group from passive economic actors to active community leaders exemplifies the

multidimensional nature of empowerment. The theoretical perspectives from participatory development, gender empowerment, and creative economy frameworks collectively explain how structured community service activities can produce both tangible and intangible outcomes—economic growth, social solidarity, and cultural resilience.

5. CONCLUSION

The implementation of the community service program titled Creative Skills Training to Increase Income and Independence of Rural Women has demonstrated that a participatory, skills-based empowerment model can serve as an effective strategy to promote both economic and social transformation in rural communities. The results of this program affirm that empowerment is a multidimensional process encompassing personal, social, and structural change. Through structured training, continuous mentoring, and participatory engagement, rural women in Sukamaju Village successfully improved their creative, entrepreneurial, and managerial capacities while simultaneously developing a greater sense of agency and self-confidence.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this program support the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and empowerment theory, which emphasize that sustainable social transformation occurs when individuals are directly involved in identifying their problems, planning solutions, and implementing change. The active participation of the women throughout every phase of the project—from needs assessment to evaluation—illustrates the practical realization of these principles. This process fostered not only skill enhancement but also awareness, critical reflection, and collective responsibility. The establishment of *Kelompok Perempuan Mandiri Sukamaju* represents a tangible outcome of collective empowerment, aligning with Freire's (2000) concept of conscientization and Chambers' (1997) framework of participatory development.

Economically, the program has succeeded in enabling participants to diversify their sources of income, improve product quality, and adapt to modern marketing practices. The measurable increase in income and business independence among participants confirms that local creative industries, when supported by adequate training and mentoring, can become a catalyst for sustainable rural economic development. These results validate the argument of Yunus (2017) that entrepreneurship—particularly when it integrates local creativity and social purpose—can be a powerful instrument for poverty alleviation and inclusive growth.

Socially, the program fostered new behavioral patterns characterized by cooperation, confidence, and leadership among the women. The emergence of local leaders and the initiation of group savings and marketing activities demonstrate a transformation from dependency to autonomy. This shift signifies the creation of new social capital that strengthens community resilience, consistent with Putnam's (2000) theory of civic engagement and trust-based collaboration. The collective nature of these changes underscores that empowerment extends beyond individual capacity-building to encompass institutional and cultural transformation.

Theoretically, this project provides empirical evidence supporting the integration of creative economy concepts into community development frameworks. The creative utilization of local materials not only generated economic value but also preserved local cultural identity. This aligns with Howkins' (2007) argument that creativity, when managed as an economic resource, contributes to both cultural preservation and economic innovation. By embedding creativity into rural entrepreneurship, the program demonstrated a sustainable model that balances tradition with modernity and social with economic goals.

Reflecting on the entire process, it can be concluded that empowerment is best achieved through a holistic and participatory approach—one that combines capacity building, mentoring, leadership development, and institutional strengthening. The program's success lies not merely in the increase of income but in the awakening of awareness and confidence among women to take control of their economic destinies. The transformation observed in Sukamaju Village reveals that empowerment, when supported by knowledge, participation, and solidarity, can lead to structural and sustainable social change.

Based on these reflections, several recommendations can be proposed. First, future empowerment programs should emphasize long-term mentoring and institutional collaboration to maintain the continuity of community initiatives. Partnerships with local governments, cooperatives, and private sectors are essential to expand market access and provide financial support. Second, integrating digital literacy and e-commerce training into community development programs will further enhance women's competitiveness in the modern marketplace. Third, there is a need to document and replicate successful practices from this program in other rural communities to promote broader social transformation. Finally, academic institutions should continue to play an active role in facilitating participatory research and community engagement activities that link theory with practical solutions to real-world problems.

In summary, the creative skills training program not only succeeded in improving the economic resilience of rural women but also cultivated new leadership, solidarity, and social

awareness within the community. The integration of participatory principles, creative economy practices, and empowerment theory provides a strong foundation for future community development initiatives that aim to build inclusive, independent, and sustainable rural societies.

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