Non-Formal Education (NFE) for a Society's Well-Being: A Special Focus on Women's Empowerment at the Kesennuma Knitting Company in Japan

HSU MON PYAI SONE

Abstract

For this study, the Kesennuma Knitting Company was chosen as one of the good practices of non-formal education and it was found to be a very impressive operation. Kesennuma Knitting is a company that is owned, run, and staffed by mostly women. One of the advantages of this company is that it is introducing a system that enables employees to work at home; this represents a great benefit for women who are caring for their children and managing household chores.

Initially, the thesis introduces the literature in the field of the well-being of a society and uncovers the theoretical perspectives that have influenced the empowerment of women through NFE. Data analysis provides research presentations, the writings, research observations and interviews. The results of these analyses are provided along with a critique of the analysis tools used. The last part discusses the findings presented in data analysis in light of the theory and literature presented in introduction and the recommendations of the study. This part also provides a review of the results in relation to the empowerment of non-formal education to women, the impact of women's empowerment for building a well-functioning society and lessons learned from the Kesennuma Knitting Company for the purpose of empowering Myanmar's women.

The findings of the study are that despite being at a retirement age (60-70 years), the knitters at the Kesennuma Knitting Company enjoy knitting and actively and eagerly do it as professionals despite facing many challenges. Instead of feeling like outcasts from society because they are older and female, the knitters found friendships and a lively society with other women of their age. In addition, they had opportunities to continually learn new skills and generate income for the community. Knitters developed new goals in their lives and able to build self-confidence from their successful work.

The thesis recommended that, in searching for a non-formal education project in Myanmar, it is crucially important to consider the context, particularly what women in Myanmar love to do. At the same time, Myanmar needs to focus explicitly on creating a second home (*Ibasho*) for adult women to nourish their mental growth in order to build a well-being of society. This second-home idea is believed to trigger women's empowerment by giving them relevant knowledge about gender roles and offering them opportunities. Lessons learned from the

Kesennuma Knitting Company are strongly recommended for starting a pilot project in the most-disadvantaged areas. The necessary cooperation between social activities and entrepreneurs in the marketplace is reflected as well.

I. Introduction

The primary aim of this study is to explore the significant contribution of non-formal education to women's empowerment and, thereby, its contribution to a well-being of society. In order to build a well-being of society in Myanmar, learning environments that emphasize non-formal education, especially the aspect of human happiness, are important.

In Kesennuma Knitting Company, despite being at a retirement age (60-70 years), the knitters enjoy knitting and actively and eagerly do it as professionals despite facing many challenges. They found friendships and a lively society with other women of their age and developed new outlooks and goals in their lives associated with their work. In brief, according to the findings, there are many lessons that Myanmar can learn and adopt in the country to have a well-being of society.

Keywords: Non-Formal Education (NFE), Well-being in Society, Women's Empowerment

The purpose of this study to explore the significant contribution of non-formal education to women's empowerment and, thereby, its contribution to a well-being in society. In particular, I will focus on the practices and activities of non-formal education, and I aim to study how a well-developed vocational-training project should be prepared to empower women by selecting one successful vocational-training program in Japan as a model for my study.

This research also aims to clarify the importance of the empowerment of women for a successful society. In the case of the Kesennuma Knitting Company, I elucidate on how non-formal education contributes to women's empowerment by examining the success of its non-formal educational projects, which can then be used as a model for other countries, such as Myanmar.

Learning in the field of education can be mainly classified into three types: formal, non-formal and informal education. Non-formal education can be described as "any organized educational activity outside the established formal system – whether operating separately or as an important feature of some broader activity – that is intended to serve identified learning clienteles and learning objectives" (Coombs, et al., 1973, pp.10-11). NFE began to be discussed first in the context of developing countries (often newly independent nation states) since 1960s, where access to formal schooling was limited.

Education is the most effective instrument in countering against poverty. One of the important strategies for alleviation of poverty and lifting people out of their hardship is education and training. (Palmer et al.,2007). "Educated and skilled parents are generally seen to produce healthier children with potential consequences for preventing poverty in the next generation" (Preece, 2010, p.482). For Myanmar (as discussed below) and other developing countries, non-formal education is a must for the push to uplift its economy and to alleviate poverty.

Well-Being is "living and faring well", "flourishing", "bound up with ideas about what constitutes human happiness and the sort of life it is good to lead". *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Due to its organizational structure and its multiple functions, non-formal education can be adapted to provide educational solutions for concrete and tangible problems. Because of the participant functionality, non-formal education brings direct benefits for its participants, such as skills, experience and personal networking (Willems, 2015).

Empowerment may be seen as a process where individuals learn to see a closer correspondence between their goals and a sense of how to achieve them, and a relationship between their efforts and life outcomes (Mechanic, 1991). Non-formal education empowers women to have the right to practice household decision-making, giving them self-confidence and respect and supporting their participation in non-family groups and organizational meetings (Moulton, 1997). Therefore, the empowerment of women through education certainly leads to the well-being of the whole society.

In order to build a well being society in Myanmar, learning environments that emphasize non-formal education, especially the aspect of human enjoyment, are important. Women's empowerment is effective in improving situations where women are generally most vulnerable to poverty and social inequality. I would like to suggest that women's empowerment would help alleviate gender-based inequality in my home country.

Based on the above reasons, a series of research activities performed under the following essential questions and research method.

Research Questions

1. How can non-formal education empower women?
2. How important is women's empowerment for building a well-being in society?
3. What kind of learning has emerged from the Kesennuma Knitting Company for the purpose of empowering Myanmar's women?

Research Method

This paper conducted research on women's empowerment and the application of a non-formal educational system using English and

Japanese as well as Burmese as the media for instruction. A field survey on non-formal education and its relationship to the empowerment of women was conducted at the Kesennuma Knitting Company in the city of Kesennuma, Miyagi Prefecture. A semi-structured interview for the survey target and observation method were adopted in the research.

The time span for participation and observation was six months in total, although it did not involve staying in the prefecture for the entire time; instead, I did research trip to Kasennuma City five times in total. For the first two trips, I spent five days for research observation each time. In conducting research interviews, I visited three times and spend a day each time in order to clarify what "grappling" means for participants and for a "knitter gathering" to discuss women's empowerment. I participated in a Kesennuma knitting gathering to acquire deeper information about the process. Interviews and surveys were conducted mainly in Japanese.

II. Data Analysis

Profiles of Interviewees

No.	Name	Age	Work Experiences	Working Hours	Responsibility
1.	Knitter A	58	5 Years	Nonspecific	Knitter
2.	Knitter B	73	2 Years	Nonspecific	Knitter
3.	Knitter C	68	5 Months	5 Hours	Knitter
4.	Knitter D	61	6 Years	2 Hours	Knitter (Knitting Master)
5.	Knitter E	44	2 Years	5 Hours	Knitter
6.	Instructor	61	6 Years	Nonspecific	Instruction

Among the respondents, four of five do not have supplementary work; only one is working at another job. In regard to the number of working hours, almost all of them work an average of two to five hours a day. Knitter B has two jobs and said, “I do not have a fixed schedule for knitting time; it depends solely on my available free time.” The system for Kesennuma Knitting involves correspondence learning (Dib,1988); this is an individualized learning system and is not aimed at earning a degree but rather at learning specific skills. A high level of motivation is required to study the courses and learn the material.

Gap between Individual Satisfaction and Social Recognition

In regard to feedback and responses from their family members about their knitting work, surprisingly, not all of the women received significant moral support. Many of them said they did not receive any special recognition. Although these knitters gained enormous benefits and great satisfaction from their work, the society saw them as doing casual work that they have been involved in. In the worst case, I found that some family members of the knitters wanted them to prioritize their household chores over their knitting. Likewise, even the instructor sometimes faced complaints and blame from her family for putting too much focus on this work as a priority. In brief, participants feel empowered where many family members have opposite views at times.

Therefore, the suitability of the work for the society’s well-being and impact on this city is questionable. McGregor (2008) said the idea of well-being is not preoccupied with the individual but rather focuses on the interdependence of people and the society. Based on this theory, the social well-being impact of the company on the society, particularly on the knitters’ surroundings, is questionable.

Women’s Empowerment in Kesennuma Knitting

Women’s empowerment is a process through which women elaborate and recreate what it is that they can be, do, and accomplish in a circumstance to which they were previously denied (Kabeer, 2005). Alternatively, it is a process whereby women redefine gender roles and that allow them to acquire the ability to choose between known alternatives from which they would otherwise be restricted (Mosedale, 2005).

When I asked about satisfaction in relation to their work, three of the five respondents reported feeling satisfied. Knitter D said, “I am fully satisfied as I am doing my hobby and earning money from this knitting work.” Knitter A said, “I feel satisfied with this work; however, I am still curious to try other work.” The instructor said, “Despite my family asking me to give more time to family matters, I could not quit this work as I love it and [I am] fully satisfied with the work.” These answers meet the definition by McGregor (2008) of well-being resulting from action that meets a need and satisfaction in achieving goals.

The instructor became more capable of managing problems as a result of the day-to-day experience of problem solving at the knitting company. Knitter E, who has not had any knitting product reaching the sale quality yet since joining the company two years ago, said, “If I only look at the money benefit I have earned, I am not satisfied yet from this work. However, I am determined not to give up on this work.” Knitter B said, “Because of my age, I wish to retire and rest from work. However, because of various reasons, I still have to continue working. This made my satisfaction level reduced.” Knitter C said, “I cannot comment on anything yet since I am still very fresh at this work, with only five months of working here. But I wish to do this knitting as long as I am allowed to be a part of this company.”

Changes and Challenges in the Empowerment Process

The instructor, however, sees new improvements in mindset changes among the knitters. Previously, knitters were at the amateur level without any systematic techniques. Therefore, they often complained when they were ordered to improve their work more technically and systematically. It took a lot of effort to polish the knitters. After a number of working experiences, they came to realize the importance of this training process and became more receptive to improving the quality of their products. This knitting company utilized the project-based learning theory (Conlan, 2003) since students work in groups to solve challenging problems that are authentic and involve adult skills. The results are also evaluated by the measures they have achieved.

The instructor said, “In overall observation, I can confidently say this kind of project empowers women, especially those who cannot work outside the home. They now have opportunities to earn money, to be paid while at home doing business and daily household work.” Indeed, almost all the current knitters came from this kind of family background where they were required to stay at home and take care of a family.

According to the instructor, the most challenging and stressful time is when she has a new sample of knitting provided by the designer. Before advertising the new sample on the company’s website, she has to finish knitting the sample of that new design first so that the employees can learn from that sample. Concerning the most challenging time for knitters, knitters A, B, and E said, “For many years before joining the company, we did knitting without any systematic and methodical way. However, since becoming a knitter for the company, we have to strictly follow the exact rules and systematic methods, which is sometimes too demanding for us. When we have to follow the sizes, such as small and medium size, we have to rigorously check even a single centimeter." Knitter A continued, "I find it difficult especially when I have to change the design of knitting from one design that I am familiar with to a new one."

In overall patterns of the Kesennuma Knitting Company, I witnessed the presence of two basic elements of a non-formal educational system as discussed by Dib (1997). First, the processes of the knitting company centered on the needs of Kesennuma's natives, victims of the disaster, and second, the immediate applicability of the knitting education regarding knitters' personal and professional development was noted. Moreover, the process utilized by the knitting company was found to produce four empowerment outcomes (Bandura 1997): a sense of control, increased self-efficacy, increased knowledge, and competence. This suggests that an individual's self-efficacy beliefs influence the choices they make and the actions they pursue (Ginige & Richards, 2012).

The Kesennuma Knitting Company met the standards for different types of NFE as discussed by Lafraya (2011). First, the company's work falls under the category of sociocultural activities and community development as the knitting company has raised the social development of Kesennuma's residents and enhanced the community's social development. This company has also met the standards of many other types of NFE, such as occupational education, education in democratic values (in addition to values such as equality, respect for diversity, and participation), education for development (to counteract poverty), and education for equal opportunity (improving opportunities of women and men).

III. Finding

Despite being at a retirement age (60-70 years), the knitters at the Kesennuma Knitting Company enjoy knitting and actively and eagerly do it as professionals. Instead of feeling like outcasts from society because they are older and female, the knitters found friendships and a lively society with other women of their age. They had opportunities to continually learn new skills and generate income for the community. Knitters developed new goals in their lives and able to build self-confidence from their successful work. The findings highlight two outstanding educational systems embedded in the Kesennuma Knitting process. The first one is an individualized learning system, and the second is a lifelong learning system.

Individualized Learning System

Individualized learning is another term for correspondence learning. There are many advantages of an individualized learning system as it is highly flexible and incorporates all the useful concepts known to enhance the learning process. A learner is an individual and must be taught accordingly. Innovations such as small-group work, audio- and video-tape lectures and demonstrations, and teaching machines and programmed instructional materials have all helped, to a certain degree, to improve education and training.

The student is given substantial responsibility for planning and carrying out her or his own organized program of studies, with the assistance of the teacher, and the student's progress is determined solely in terms of those plans. Success depends upon an optimal balance between the student's own self-appraisal and the teacher's counsel; the student does not progress autonomously in the learning program (Baker et al., 1970).

Lifelong Learning System

Lifelong learning is described as providing conditions that enable the individual to continue learning from childhood into old age in all the contexts where he or she may find himself or herself. Lifelong learning is seen as important for the individual's continued growth and development, for the development of democracy and social life, and for ensuring that humanistic values are upheld in the work place (Soni, 2012).

Lifelong learning's core values of learning, exploring and serving, coupled with benefits for the mind, body, and spirit, make it an incredibly powerful tool for personal transformation and enhancement (Nordstrom et al., 2006). According to the Education 2030 Framework for Action, providing flexible lifelong learning opportunities for all involves ensuring "equitable and increased access to quality technical and vocational education and training and higher education and research" and "the provision of flexible learning pathways as well as the recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal education" (UNESCO, 2015, p. vi).

Recommendations for Myanmar

1. Generate Income Based on Interests

By engaging in their hobbies, women do not feel like they are being pressured to work, but they can still earn economic rewards from their work. This kind of non-formal educational system is urgently needed in Myanmar, where many women are unable to find work they truly love.

Many of Myanmar's women enjoy cooking various kinds of meals; engaging in different types of weaving; sewing, tailoring, and knitting; and other kinds of handcrafts.

In spite of this, many women weave and knit clothing in their homes just to enjoy their hobbies. By contrast, most workplaces in Myanmar need women to work as typists, salespersons, and secretaries. This situation forces Myanmar's women to learn skills that are very different from their hobbies. In the worst cases, many young women's lives are destroyed when they go to work as entertainers in nightclubs and become victims of human trafficking. Therefore, in searching for a non-formal education project in Myanmar, it is crucially important to consider the context, particularly what women in Myanmar love to do.

2. Creating a type of 'Second Home' or '*Ibasho*' in Japanese

The Kesennuma Knitting Company created a new and productive environment for women where they could build a mutual-learning system, mutual understanding, and group work. This environment even provides something beyond a mere working environment. This is a second family-like environment for aging women. Traditionally, as a patriarchal culture, considering it women's work, women were put in the kitchen in Myanmar. As a result, women feel isolated and outside of the society. The Kesennuma Knitting Company provides opportunities for women to meet, discuss, and learn together at least once a week. It is an environment where they can share their feelings.

The knitting company has been hugely helpful for women; as breadwinners and caregivers to family members, no one has enough time to undertake formal educational courses. Because of these burdens, women feel isolated from learning environments, and these kinds of situations fuel emotional loneliness and stunt intellectual growth. Psychological empowerment connotes a "feeling of self-esteem," as Stromquist (2002) has suggested (p.23). It is related both to sharing and to an increase in self-esteem. In Rowland's (1997) research, women's speaking out led to an increase in self-confidence and, relatedly, being able to speak up more. Self-esteem through power within is seen as a crucial step for women to take action and start the empowerment process. Therefore, Myanmar needs to focus explicitly on creating a second home (*Ibasho*) for adult women to nourish their mental growth in order to build a well-being in society.

3. Empowering Dignity

People build self-confidence through experiences and achievements, and this applies as well to the Kesennuma knitters; the more they are able to accomplish, the stronger their confidence becomes. This hunger for new knowledge and instruction refreshes their minds and makes them young in mind and heart. Moreover, the Kesennuma Knitting Company has made a significant impact on the mindset-change process. Women begin to love their work even more when they produce quality products.

They become more serious and more careful about their work and see it as more than a hobby or at an amateur level. When they are rewarded according to their skills, they become proud of their work and motivated to be more competitive in positive ways, such as improving the quality of their products. When given opportunities to learn new lessons and techniques, they become more aware of managing their time in their daily routines and more self-disciplined and productive. Myanmar government and all stakeholders need to provide opportunities which are not against any gender discrimination.

4. Creating a Learning Society

The company represents a vital community within the City, and its members are useful and productive in the society. One of the reasons for this is the ‘ubiquitous learning opportunity’ offered by the company.

The Kesennuma Knitting Company’s system is not only highly beneficial to the women who work there but also to adults and elderly people who are still healthy and fit. The retirement age in Myanmar reflects the significant needs for such kinds of NFE in a country where thousands of people reaching the age of 60 years are removed from the working society each year. Starting a pilot project in the most-disadvantaged areas in Myanmar is highly recommendable.

5. Social Transformation, Social Entrepreneurship and Women’s Empowerment

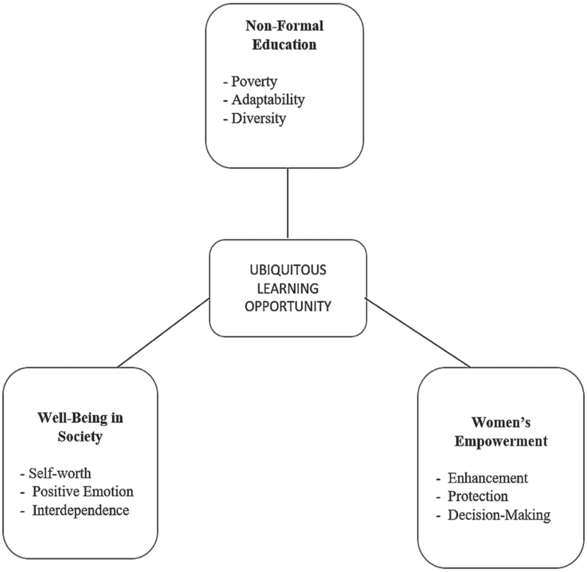
The traditional view that women should prioritize household work is no longer predominant among younger generations in Japan. Such outdated views need to be challenged and changed by adopting comprehensive strategies in Myanmar (e.g. Awareness Campaigns). Cooperation between social activities and entrepreneurs in the marketplace is necessary to empower women (e.g. Microfinance).

According to Reeves and Baden, women’s empowerment is a “bottom up process for transforming gender power relations, through individuals or groups developing awareness of women’s subordination and building their capacity to challenge it” (Reeves & Baden, 2000, p. 3).

IV. Conclusion

NFE is an effective tool for reducing poverty as the system is adaptable to the learner's situation and improves the capacity to absorb diverse skills. NFE combines the learner's self-worth together with positive emotion. Nevertheless, NFE also creates the space for an interdependence among learners. NFE especially enhances women's potentiality, which protects women from the vulnerability caused by social needs. This situation empowers the role of women in decision-making regarding their individual life and their social life. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind the social benefit of women empowering themselves and bringing their community to a state of well-being by making the most of the "ubiquitous learning opportunity" of NFE.

The words in this diagram are selected from the research literature and the most commonly found theoretical reviews. The meaning of "ubiquitous" is captured in the expression "anytime, anywhere", that is, learning occurs not just in classrooms, but in the workplace as well as at home and in our daily interactions with others (Burbules, 2009, p.15-20).


Non-Formal Education
- Poverty
- Adaptability
- Diversity
UBIQUITOUS LEARNING OPPORTUNITY
Well-Being in Society
- Self-worth
- Positive Emotion
- Interdependence
Women's Empowerment
- Enhancement
- Protection
- Decision-Making

A diagram of Relatedness between non-formal education, well-being in society and women's empowerment

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