

DISADVANTAGED MALAYSIAN WOMEN USE ECO-BASKETS TO TAKE THEIR MESSAGE TO THE WORLD

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Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and Washington, DC: Scores of poor and disabled women from Malaysia are hoping to use "eco-baskets" - hand-made baskets made from recycled paper - to promote their model of women's empowerment in the United States and build a business.

The eco-baskets went on sale June 22 in Washington at the Pangea Artisan Market and Café, a new store for community businesses that has been established at the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank group. This is the first time the baskets have been offered for sale outside Malaysia.

The baskets are produced under Salaam Wanita, a project of eHomemakers, a community group in Malaysia and partner of The Advocacy Project (AP) that seeks to help disadvantaged Malaysian women work from home.

The Pangea connection was arranged by Stephanie Salazar, an AP staffer who cashed in her frequent flyer miles to visit eHomemakers in December and helped the Salaam Wanita weavers to develop a promotional plan. Chong Sheau Ching, the founder and director of eHomemakers followed up with a visit to Washington last month at the invitation of AP, and left basket samples with Pangea.

AP intern, Melissa Muscio, from Tufts University, is helping Anna Robless, the Administrator at eHomemakers, to work with the weavers on basket production in Malaysia itself. Ms. Muscio is also doing an assessment of the group's IT needs and profiling the weavers.

eHomemakers hopes that by selling eco-baskets in the US it will publicize the ingenuity and hard work of its members while also helping them to earn a living. Many of the Salaam Wanita weavers struggle against chronic illness and discrimination, and it is almost impossible for disadvantaged minority women to get micro-credit or secure a loan.

Ms. Chong acknowledged that it will be hard for eHomemakers to make the shift from a social support group to a business, but said that her group's history has been one of perseverance and pragmatism. "eHomemakers believes that when one faces a big mountain, one has to go around - not over," she said.

Salaam Wanita has a network of around 100 women, or "rollers," who collect recycled paper and roll it into strong thread. The actual weaving is done by a smaller number of skilled weavers, who wrap the paper around one or three coconut leaf veins, or lidi, from the inside of a coconut, then pull the lidi out of the rolled paper slowly, and apply glue made from rice.

The "one-lidi" technique was developed by Ng Kar Cheng, who suffers from degenerative brain damage and is now too ill to weave. Ms. Ng is dependent on the charity of her fellow eHomemakers for help with medical expenses.

eHomemakers does not receive core funding from donors but has won several prizes for its innovative use of information technology. It used the money from one prize to develop new software (known as Dawma) that allows administrators like Ms. Robless to send electronic text messages from her computer to the cell phones of poor network members who do not have computers.

The group is working with a Microsoft Unlimited Potential grant to train 70 members in IT so that they can work from home as administrative assistants. eHomemakers has also been approached by community advocates in Nigeria and Indonesia about replicating its model.

AP's support for the Malaysian weavers is modeled on AP's work with the Bosnian "Weavers for Hope," who use carpets as a tool for advocacy, to keep the memories of the 1995 massacre of Srebrenica alive while also trying to build a business

- [eHomemakers.](#)
- [Salaam Wanita.](#)
- [Melissa's blogs](#)