

Lifestyle

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A couple sit on the terrace of a cafe in Istanbul as seagulls fly over them on September 10, 2019.— AFP

Indonesian storytellers spread 'mighty girls' message to fight male dominance

From a schoolgirl who fights plastic pollution to real-life heroines, 800 Indonesian women are telling stories to change beliefs about girls, the project's organizer said on Tuesday.

The Southeast Asian country has one of the world's highest numbers of child brides, with one in four girls wed before the age of 18, United Nations' figures show, as old-fashioned social attitudes persist despite recent economic advances. From next month, the women will read a series of illustrated e-books to local boys and girls in a bid to smash stereotypes and male dominance in the world's most populous Muslim country.

"It will open their eyes to all the possibilities they can have as girls," said Morgan Belveal from the US-based charity The Asia Foundation, which runs the project as part of its free, digital library for children in local languages. "It starts a conversation in society that it is no longer acceptable that women are restricted to traditional roles," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

A 2017 government survey found one-third of Indonesian women have faced physical or sexual violence, with cases most common among those with higher education and in urban areas. The books were written in collaboration with Asian writers and illustrators as part of an Asia-wide collection known as the "Mighty Girls", which features fictional and real-life stories, such as that of Indonesia's first female journalist.— Reuters



The cover of Indonesian language book Luh Ayu Manik Mas which features a superheroine who campaigns to save the environment. — Photo by The Asia Foundation

PUPPET REBORN: INDONESIA PULLS STRINGS TO REVIVE NEAR-DEAD ART FORM

It's a warm night in Indonesia and the air is filled with excitement as villagers watch a puppet show accompanied by traditional music. To the rhythmic beat of cymbals, drums and a bamboo harmonica, the hand-held puppets wearing brightly coloured batik headdresses and sarongs fight, and one gets flung off the stage. This vivid performance is the brainchild of Drajat Iskandar, who has been lending a hand to revive the near-extinct art of "wayang bambu," or bamboo puppetry. Once enjoyed by generations of Sundanese, Indonesia's second most-populous ethnic group who originate from the central island of Java, the delicate art has almost disappeared from modern stages.

Iskandar, 47, has updated his bamboo puppets by making them three-dimensional, unlike conventional two-dimensional ones. This is done by weaving bamboo strips together to form an intricate head and torso fixed over two perpendicular bamboo sticks. The puppet is then dressed in a headdress and sarong. The narratives Iskandar's puppet troupe perform are also updated to reflect modern society, instead of the usual stories from Hindu epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

"I try to portray local stories and folklore from our community with bamboo puppets," Iskandar said. "The stories

we perform are also inspired by current issues, like brawls between students, drug problems, sexual freedom, and politics." Iskandar learned the art of "wayang bambu" from his father, who was also a puppeteer. A former artist, he started developing his own "wayang bambu" style of performance nearly two decades ago.

Now he has a full puppet troupe, along with an orchestra of twelve musicians that accompany each show, and has been training pupils to preserve the art form. Iskandar and his pupils regularly visit a bamboo grove near his home to gather materials to assemble new puppets and make the minor repairs needed after the sometimes frenetic shows.

He says bookings for his troupe's performances have steadily increased over the years. They're also a hit since they perform in the Sundanese language. "Members of the community, from children to the elderly, can understand and enjoy this new form of Sundanese culture, and the storyline is also very interesting," said Pupung Syaiful Rohman, a resident of Ciapus village, in West Java province, where the recent performance was staged. — Reuters



Bamboo puppets are pictured during a training session in Bogor, West Java province, Indonesia.



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Pupil of Drajat Iskandar Jamaludin Syam makes a puppets in Bogor, West Java province, Indonesia.



Puppeteer Drajat Iskandar holds bamboo puppets during a training session at his house in Bogor, West Java province, Indonesia. — Reuters photos



Puppeteer Drajat Iskandar performing puppets show at his house in Bogor, West Java province, Indonesia.