

IMPLEMENTATION OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (EL) AS A LEARNING APPROACH IN EMPOWERING WOMEN FORMER MIGRANT WORKERS: A CASE STUDY OF THE DESBUMI COMMUNITY

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Abstract: Former women migrant workers have great potential from their work experience abroad, but it is often not utilized optimally. The existing empowerment tends to focus on technical training without considering their unique needs and experiences. As adult individuals with diverse experiences and knowledge, former migrant workers have the capacity to empower themselves if supported by an experiential learning approach. This research analyze the application of Experiential Learning (EL) in empowering former women migrant workers in the Desa Peduli Buruh Migran (DESBUMI) community. With a case study design, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The results show that experiential learning helps participants integrate personal experiences into a relevant and contextual learning process. This approach effectively enhances entrepreneurial skills, business management, financial decision-making, and strengthens community economic networks and social solidarity. Reflection and direct application are key in contextualizing knowledge. These findings offer a replicable experiential learning model and recommend the integration of the EL approach into empowerment programs to drive sustainable social transformation.

Keywords: Community-based education, Experiential Learning (EL), community, empowerment, women former migrant workers

Introduction

Law Number 18 of 2017 on the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers is a significant milestone in ensuring the rights and welfare of Indonesian migrant workers at every stage of migration: before departure, during work abroad, and after return *kepulangan* (Kementerian Ketenagakerjaan RI, 2018). One of the crucial aspects emphasized in this regulation is the importance of empowering returned migrant workers so that they can adapt socially and economically upon their return to the homeland (Hadi & Setiawan, 2020).

The phenomenon of labor migration in Indonesia is still dominated by women. Data from 2023 shows that 61% of the total Indonesian migrant workers returning are women (BP2MI, 2023). However, their return does not always align with an improvement in living standards. Many of them face serious challenges in the reintegration process, such as limited access to education and decent jobs, low work skills, lack of social support, and negative stigma from society that restricts their social and economic mobility (Saleh et al., 2022).

On the other hand, former women migrant workers have great potential. The cross-cultural experiences they have during their work abroad have shaped their character, such as a strong work ethic, discipline, adaptability, and good time management and communication skills (Dewi & Yazid, 2017). They also build social networks that can be integrated into local economic development. This knowledge and practical skills can serve as a strong foundation for empowerment if developed through the right approach (Andriani et al., 2024; Wahyono et al., 2019; Yuniriyanti et al., 2020).

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A number of empowerment efforts have been made, both by the government and non-governmental organizations. One of the notable initiatives is the establishment of Migrant Care's Migrant Workers Care Villages (DESBUMI). This community has become a space for collective learning for former migrant workers, providing skills training, alternative education, and strengthening local economic networks. DESBUMI has proven capable of building social solidarity and increasing women's participation in village development (Migrant CARE, 2019).

To optimize that potential, a learning approach is needed that can connect the real experiences of former migrant women workers with a meaningful educational process. One of the relevant approaches is Experiential Learning (EL), which emphasizes learning through direct experience, critical reflection, and practical application. This idea is grounded in the thoughts of John Dewey (1938), who emphasized the importance of experience in education, and Paulo Freire (1970), who highlighted the role of critical reflection in the liberating learning process.

In the context of adult learning, EL is very suitable because they tend to learn more effectively when the learning material is directly related to their experiences and needs (Mau et al., 2022; Sujarwo, 2007). This approach has also been successfully implemented in various contexts of community education and empowerment (Gunawan et al., 2019; Lena Nuryanti, 2016). However, in-depth studies on the implementation of Experiential Learning for the empowerment of women returnee migrant workers are still very limited.

Based on this gap, this research aims to explore how the Experiential Learning approach is applied in empowerment programs for women returnee migrant workers, as well as how their experiences while working abroad can be integrated into a more contextual, critical, and sustainable learning process. This research focuses on the DESBUMI community in Jember Regency, with the hope of providing practical and theoretical contributions to the development of a women's empowerment model that can be replicated in other regions with similar characteristics. In addition, the results of this research are expected to enrich the literature on community-based education and experiential learning approaches in the context of women's empowerment.

Research method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the application of Experiential Learning (EL) in empowering women former migrant workers in the Desa Peduli Buruh Migran (DESBUMI) community in Jember Regency, East Java. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and the social context that shapes the dynamics of experiential learning within the community (Assyakurrohim et al., 2022).

The total number of participants in this study is 17 people, consisting of: 12 women former migrant workers who are active in empowerment activities in four DESBUMI communities, 3 community facilitators, and 2 village officials. All participants were selected through purposive sampling techniques, with criteria of direct involvement in the planning, implementation, or evaluation of EL-based activities. The duration of involvement of women former migrant workers in the community varies, with most having joined between 2017 and 2020.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: (1) in-depth interviews to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and learning processes; (2) participatory observation in training activities, group discussions, and community economic activities; and (3) document analysis, which included training modules, facilitator notes, and community activity reports. All data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, through the process of open coding, theme categorization, and interpretation of emerging meaning patterns in the context of EL implementation.

To enhance the validity and credibility of the results, this study employs source and method triangulation, conducts discussions among researchers, and verifies findings through member checking with key informants.

Results and discussion

Characteristics of former women migrant workers

Based on research, former women migrant workers in the Desa Peduli Buruh Migran (DESBUMI) community in Jember Regency have various potentials that can be optimized in community-based empowerment. These potentials include:

Social Capital

Former women migrant workers have strong social networks, both among themselves and with the local community. This network facilitates knowledge transfer, experience sharing, and access to economic opportunities. The trust and solidarity that have been established serve as the foundation for various community-based economic initiatives, such as joint business groups and cooperatives. Additionally, the experience of working abroad enhances independence, resilience, and decision-making courage, which encourages their participation in social and economic activities. Putnam (2000) asserts that social capital plays a crucial role in enhancing individual well-being and strengthening engagement in the community economy. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) argue that social capital plays an important role in community economic development, where access to extensive social networks allows individuals to obtain the resources, information, and support needed to develop their businesses. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) also mention that communities with high social capital have a greater level of economic success.

Practical and technical knowledge and skills

Former migrant women workers possess knowledge and mastery of domestic skills such as cooking, childcare, house cleaning, and elderly care, which can be developed into home-based businesses. In addition, they also possess technical skills in using international standard technology. In addition to technical skills, proficiency in foreign languages becomes a significant cultural asset. This ability opens up career opportunities as a translator, language teacher, or tour guide. Silvey (2004) shows that the knowledge and skills acquired during migration can be adapted to local needs, supporting the informal sector in rural areas. Bayu Laksono's study (2019) also revealed that migration experience enhances

their financial literacy, supporting the management of small and micro enterprises (Buchdadi et al., 2022; Yusuf et al., 2024).

International experience

Experience working abroad brings a new perspective that drives social and economic change. They implement more disciplined parenting styles and more efficient elderly care systems. In addition, the technological skills they acquired help them contribute to the technology-based economy sector. They also have a broad perspective, interesting experiences, and exceptionally advanced knowledge. Studies show that retired women migrant workers can play a role as agents of change in improving community welfare.

Good self-management

Former women migrant workers demonstrate high levels of discipline, agility, time management, resilience, and perseverance. Adaptation to multicultural environments strengthens their professional capacities in the global labor market (R. Saleh, 2023; Universitas Indonesia, 2023). Living and working abroad without family support strengthens psychological resilience and decision-making abilities. The discipline habits formed during migration support career sustainability and endeavors after returning to the homeland.

This potential can serve as capital in community-based empowerment in DESBUMI, using a contextual and experience-centered approach. One of the approaches used is Experiential Learning (EL), which integrates their experiences and skills as the main materials in the learning process.

Implementation of Experiential Learning (EL) in the DESBUMI Community

Based on the research findings, the potential of former women migrant workers can be utilized as a primary asset in community-based empowerment, particularly in the context of the Desa Peduli Buruh Migran (DESBUMI) community. An empowerment approach oriented towards their real experiences allows the process to become more contextual, relevant, and aligned with their specific needs. By making overseas work experience the primary source of learning, empowerment programs can be designed more effectively to enhance their capacity, independence, and economic resilience after returning to their homeland.

Experiential Learning (EL) is an approach that has proven effective in community-based education and socio-economic empowerment (Dewey, 1938; Kolb et al., 1999). In the context of empowering women former migrant workers, EL allows participants to build deep understanding through a cycle of direct experience, critical reflection, and practical application (Boud et al., 2013). This approach is supported by Malcolm Knowles' andragogy theory (1980), which states that adults learn more effectively when learning is connected to their life experiences.

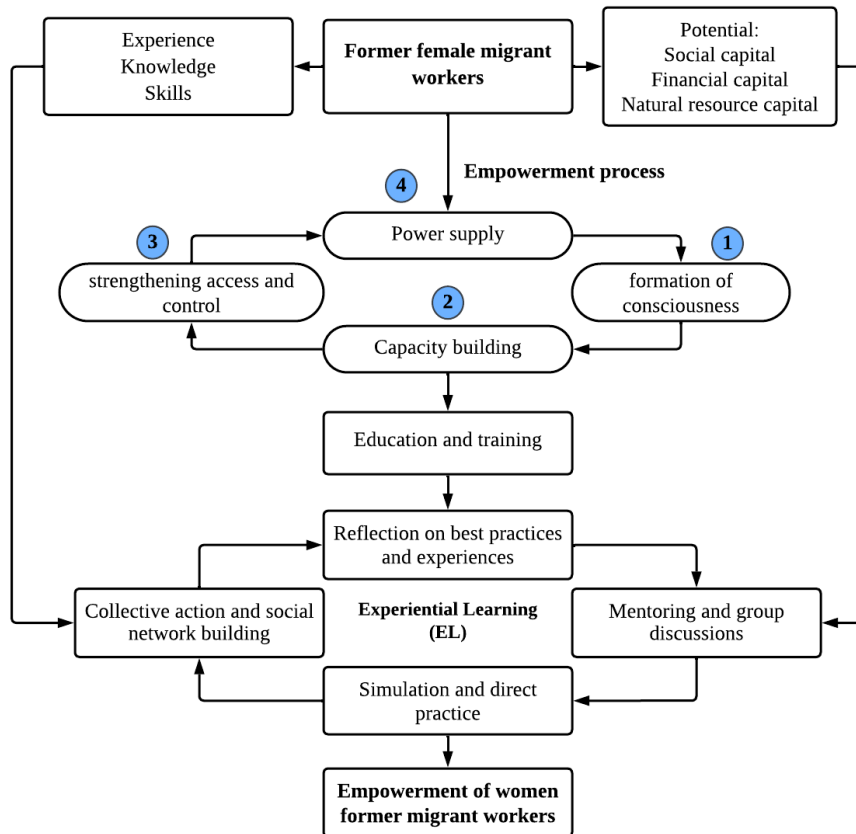


Figure 1: Mindmap implementation of EL in the DESBUMI community

The EL model in empowerment within the DESBUMI community not only helps former migrant workers' women reflect on their experiences but also integrates the skills acquired while working abroad with the economic and social needs of their community. This empowerment program not only focuses on enhancing technical skills but also on building confidence, leadership, and adaptability in a dynamic social and economic environment. Based on the research findings, here are the stages of Experiential Learning in the DESBUMI Community:

Reflection on good practices and experiences

At this stage, former migrant women workers utilize their experiences while working abroad as the main foundation in the learning process. They discuss the skills acquired, the socio-economic challenges post-migration, and the potential use of those experiences to start independent businesses. Group discussions focus on exploring business opportunities based on migration experiences, analyzing case studies of successful former migrant workers, and identifying barriers and business adaptation strategies. The methods used include journaling, group discussions, brainstorming, and case studies to explore collective perspectives and enrich reflection. This approach aligns with Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1991), which emphasizes the importance of critical reflection in developing new perspectives, and Sen's capability approach (1999), which highlights the importance of opportunities to develop capacities based on skills acquired during migration (Walker & Unterhalter,

2007). Previous research supports this finding, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2020) study, which found that post-migration reflection training enhances women's entrepreneurial skills. Hennebry et al., (2019) also emphasize that mapping migration experiences can boost women's confidence in entrepreneurship.

Mentoring and group discussions

This stage aims to develop experience-based economic empowerment strategies through social interaction and collective mentoring. Through mentoring and group discussions, women returnee migrant workers in the DESBUMI community can share experiences and gain new insights. This model reflects the informal learning theory of Marsick & Watkins (2001) as well as the situated learning concept from Marsick & Watkins (2001), which emphasizes that individuals learn more effectively when engaged in social practices within a community that shares common values and goals. Billett's (2012) research emphasizes that work experience can be distributed through communities, while Bandura's (1986) concept of collective efficacy shows that collective belief within a community can enhance the effectiveness of social and economic change. Additionally, at this stage, a learning process occurs where there is a mutual sharing of knowledge among members or peer teaching. In the empowerment process, this learning process is very characteristic, where adults have diverse knowledge, skills, and experiences, allowing them to share and learn from each other.

Simulation and hands-on practice

Based on the research results, participants apply the developed concepts in real practice, such as starting independent and joint ventures, as well as community training programs. Participants receive mentoring from successful entrepreneurs and attend exhibitions to market their products or services. The study by Pittaway and Cope (2007) shows that experiential learning enhances participants' problem-solving skills, creativity, and adaptability in facing challenges in business. Simulations and hands-on practice are also supported by the study by Neck and Greene (2011), which emphasizes that real-world engagement builds a stronger entrepreneurial mindset. Rae (2010) also explains that direct involvement in business practices enhances confidence and understanding of market dynamics. The experiential training approach that combines simulations and hands-on practice has proven effective in enhancing entrepreneurial skills and small business management. This program provides participants with the opportunity to engage directly in various aspects of business, such as production and marketing of local products, financial management, and the implementation of sustainable business strategies. This approach aligns with the experiential learning theory developed by Kolb (1999), which emphasizes that effective learning occurs through a cycle of concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Kolb asserts that "learning by doing" allows participants to build a deeper understanding and more applicable skills compared to conventional theoretical learning methods.

Collective action and social network building

The experiential learning approach also contributes to the formation of collective action and the strengthening of social networks within the community. The interactions that develop during the learning process allow participants to share experiences, build solidarity, and create more sustainable

joint initiatives. This is in line with the concept of situated learning developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), where learning occurs in communities of practice that enable individuals to acquire knowledge collectively through active engagement in relevant social contexts. In the context of economic empowerment, the formation of cooperatives or joint ventures becomes one concrete form of collective action that arises from the dynamics of experiential learning. Previous research shows that involvement in practice communities can enhance the social and economic capabilities of individuals, especially in vulnerable groups such as former women migrant workers. For example, Putnam's (2000) study on social capital emphasizes that strong social networks can strengthen trust and cooperation within communities, which in turn enhances economic opportunities and collective well-being. In the context of women returning from migrant work, collective action through cooperatives or joint ventures not only provides economic stability but also creates a space for mutual support in facing post-migration challenges, such as difficulties in accessing markets, business capital, or limited managerial skills.

Experiential Learning in the DESBUMI community proves that an experience-based approach has a significant impact on empowering former migrant women workers. By integrating critical reflection, mentoring, hands-on practice, and collective action, this program not only enhances individual skills but also builds a sustainable empowerment ecosystem.

The Impact of Implementing Experiential Learning in the DESBUMI Community

The results of this study indicate that the implementation of Experiential Learning (EL) in the DESBUMI community has a significant impact on the empowerment of former migrant workers' women, both at the individual and collective levels. These findings illustrate that EL not only strengthens the practical capacities of individuals but also encourages increased social solidarity and collaboration within the community. Based on the research findings, here are the impacts of implementing Experiential Learning (EL) in the DESBUMI community:

Impact at the individual level

At the individual level, the implementation of EL has led to an increase in entrepreneurial skills, financial management, and the confidence of former women migrant workers. This is reflected in their statements that they now feel more prepared to manage small businesses, understand aspects of family financial management, and are more confident in facing socio-economic challenges. Training on product quality improvement and financial management from remittances provides practical experience that enriches participants' understanding of entrepreneurship and fund management. They reported being able to manage household budgets more systematically and starting to plan long-term investments. These findings are in line with Anggreni's (2017) research, which shows that experiential learning can strengthen individuals' capacity to face practical challenges in their lives.

Additionally, through group reflection, participants expressed that this process helped them understand potentials and strengths that were previously unrecognized. In experience-based discussion sessions, former migrant women workers were given space to share their concerns, hopes, and solutions to the problems they face. This process enhances their self-awareness and strengthens their ability to see themselves as individuals with the capacity to change and grow. Some participants reported a significant

increase in self-confidence, which serves as a foundation for them to take further steps in their social and economic lives.

Impact at the collective level

Collectively, the implementation of EL in the DESBUMI community strengthens social solidarity among participants. Group discussions, collaboration in active experiments, and involvement in the Bakti Migran Bersinar Producers' Cooperative create a support network that motivates women to actively participate in decision-making and community development. The results of this study support the findings expressed by Rofiuddin and Ruwaida (2020), which state that a participatory learning approach can enhance social cohesion and community sustainability. Through collaboration in active experiments, such as managing cooperatives, former migrant workers' women successfully formed joint business groups focused on the production and marketing of local products. These activities not only enhance their entrepreneurial skills but also build the mutual trust and support that are crucial in establishing sustainable businesses. Additionally, the success of several groups in launching local products and introducing their products to the market demonstrates that the social solidarity built through EL contributes to better economic outcomes in the community.

Overall, these findings support existing literature, which states that experiential and participatory learning can strengthen individual and social capacities in vulnerable communities. Thus, the implementation of EL in DESBUMI can serve as an effective and sustainable empowerment model for former migrant workers, and is relevant for application in other communities.

Opportunities and challenges in the implementation of Experiential Learning in the DESBUMI community

The Experiential Learning (EL) approach has great potential in empowering women returnees of migrant workers in the Desa Peduli Buruh Migran (DESBUMI) community. One of the main advantages of EL is its ability to utilize real experiences as the primary source of learning. Former women migrant workers have work experience, migration experience, and social adaptation that can serve as key assets in the learning process. Through the application of EL, they can analyze those experiences, draw relevant lessons, and use them to design sustainable survival and economic improvement strategies.

The study conducted by Mezirow (1991) on Transformative Learning Theory shows that critical reflection on life experiences can encourage changes in perspective and more independent actions. In the context of the DESBUMI community, this reflective process can enhance the critical awareness of former migrant workers, particularly women, towards various structural issues they face, such as economic injustice, labor exploitation, and gender inequality. This awareness can equip them with a stronger understanding in taking concrete actions, whether through establishing independent businesses, engaging in cooperatives, or advocating for migrant workers' rights.

Furthermore, the implementation of EL can also strengthen solidarity and social networks among former migrant women workers. Experience-based learning conducted in discussion groups or

communities allows them to not only learn from personal experiences but also from the experiences of others. This process creates a stronger support network, reinforces a sense of togetherness, and enhances collective capacity in facing social and economic challenges (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The Communities of Practice (CoP) approach proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) shows that learning within social groups can create a sustainable and empowering knowledge ecosystem. Therefore, EL in the DESBUMI community has the potential to create a mutually supportive learning community, where former migrant workers can share strategies and experiences in facing various challenges after returning from abroad.

However, despite offering many opportunities, the implementation of EL in the DESBUMI community also faces several challenges that need to be addressed. One of the main challenges is the conventional mindset among the participants. Some former women migrant workers still have a passive mindset in the learning process, being more accustomed to one-way instructional approaches such as lectures or module-based training. This aligns with Freire's (1970) findings in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which highlight that traditional education systems often place learners as passive objects rather than active subjects in the learning process. Therefore, time and effective facilitation strategies are needed to build awareness that their own experiences are a valuable source of learning.

In addition, time constraints and participant commitments also become factors that can affect the effectiveness of EL implementation. Many former migrant workers have domestic responsibilities or other jobs, making it difficult to find time for reflection and experimentation in the learning cycle. A study by Hooks (1994) on *Feminist Pedagogy* highlights the importance of flexible and community-based learning approaches to reach women in complex social conditions (Duncan, 2023). In the context of DESBUMI, more adaptive learning strategies are needed, such as periodic meetings that do not disrupt their economic activities, as well as learning methods that are more practice-based rather than purely theoretical.

Another challenge is the limited number of facilitators who have the skills to effectively implement EL. Experience-based learning requires facilitators who can help participants delve deeply into their experiences and connect them with new concepts (Jarvis, 2006). If facilitation is less than optimal, then the process of reflection and experimentation in EL can become less effective. Therefore, training for facilitators is very important so that they can develop skills in managing reflective discussions, asking questions that encourage critical thinking, and helping participants design experience-based strategies.

Lastly, the challenges in evaluating learning outcomes also need to be considered. Unlike conventional learning methods that can be measured with tests or written exams, EL is more qualitative and behavior change-based. Therefore, more participatory evaluation tools are needed, such as the Most Significant Change (MSC) method, field observations, or in-depth interviews to measure the real impact of the learning process (Samad, 2023). This narrative-based evaluation can provide a more holistic picture of the changes experienced by participants and the program's effectiveness in enhancing their capacities.

By understanding these opportunities and challenges, the implementation of EL in the DESBUMI community can continue to be developed to be more inclusive, effective, and sustainable in supporting the empowerment of former migrant women workers. With a more flexible, community-based

approach, supported by skilled facilitators, EL can become a powerful instrument in building the economic and social capacity of former migrant women workers, while also strengthening solidarity among them in facing various post-migration challenges.

Conclusion

The results of this study affirm that Experiential Learning (EL) is an effective approach in empowering women former migrant workers in the Desa Peduli Buruh Migran (DESBUMI) community. By making real experiences the primary source of learning, EL enables participants to develop practical skills, enhance critical awareness, and build collective capacity within their communities. At the individual level, EL contributes to the enhancement of entrepreneurial skills, financial management, and the confidence of women returnee migrant workers. The process of reflection and group discussions provides them with space to identify previously unrecognized potential and develop sustainable survival and economic improvement strategies. This proves that experiential learning can be a powerful tool in enhancing the economic independence of former migrant workers. At the collective level, the implementation of EL in the DESBUMI community strengthens social solidarity through community-based learning and collaboration in various economic initiatives. The group's success in forming cooperatives and joint ventures shows that this approach not only impacts individuals but also contributes to the broader economic development of the community. With strong social support, former migrant women workers are better prepared to face socio-economic challenges upon returning to their homeland. However, this study also reveals several challenges in the implementation of EL, such as the still-dominant conventional mindset, limited time and commitment from participants, and the lack of trained facilitators. Therefore, more flexible, community-based learning strategies are needed, supported by facilitators who have the skills to effectively implement EL.

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