Adult learners' barriers of learning: the world of married women

Toni Ariwijaya[1*], Lale Fatma Yulia Ningsih[1]

[1]Universitas Islam Al-Azhar Mataram, Indonesia

*)Corresponding author, ✉e-mail: toni.ariwijaya@gmail.com

Abstract

The composition of university population has prompted researchers to examine the barriers of learning non-traditional students, typically 24 years old or older, encounter in their pursuit of a college education. The purpose of this study is to examine the live realities of six selected female adult learners in Universitas Islam Al-Azhar Mataram, Indonesia, as the institution provides programs for adult learners. Specifically, the study focuses on three types of barriers; situational, institutional and dispositional. In doing so, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions had been conducted for two academic calendars. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and individual transcriptions were checked for clarity. The findings of this study reveal that cultural and personal aspects were strongly correlated with academic and non-academic struggles. Meanwhile, it is suggested that, for female adult learners to successfully overcoming the barriers, there is a need from college institutions to create more avenues of support.

Keywords: Female adult learners, dispositional barriers, institutional barriers, situational barriers.

Introduction

Adult learners, frequently categorized as nontraditional students, are typically defined as those age 24 years or older (Kasworm, Polson & Fishback, 2002; Hardin, 2008). Nowadays higher education has shifted, in terms of the ages of the learners, from between 18 to 22 years old to a far more diverse age groups (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). The learners have also typically identified as those having families, working part-time or fulltime, as well as having limited involvement activities on campus (Kasworm 2010; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011).

When it comes to female adult learners, some might wonder as to why those having jobs, families and/or having been away from campus for a long time want to pursue a university degree? It means that not only that the variation comes from the chronological perspectives but also in terms of gender and social background (Miles, 2009). Schools of research have suggested that administrators, faculty, advisors and other parties in higher education institutions are required to understand the reasons behind adult learners participate in higher education (Tinto, 1987; Merriam et al., 2012). Through examining their reasons, to enter higher education, it will pave the way for universities to improve their services for the student population (Rifenbary, D, 1995; Merriam et al., 2012).

Research on Indonesian adult education has mainly emphasized on teaching practices and pedagogical aspects of the practices (Fauziati, 2011; Esley & Omarova, 2017). The majority of the research has also focused on the so-called traditional learners as research participants. Little has been done when it

comes to barriers faced by the female non-traditional learners of the country. In fact, in the global and local cases, adult learners have become a primary target market for college (Compton et al., 2006) struggling with enrollment declines due to increased in competition from for-profit colleges (Ruch, 2003). Concomitantly, the trend of high school graduates transitioning directly to college has been decreasing (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Such trend has prompted universities, especially private universities, to compete for non-traditional student market which could increase higher education enrollment number. Therefore, this research will examine barriers of learning and participating in academic-related activities that female adult learners might face.

In the review of women's participation in post secondary education, Ekstrom (1972) classified the barriers of learning as institutional, situational and dispositional. Situational barriers, including family life, finances, health, transportation and work conflict (Gotto & Martin, 2009; Flyn, Brown, Johnson, & Rodger, 2011; Hostetler et al., 2007). Both men and women have domestic roles and responsibilities (caring for aging parents, child-rearing, and household chores) which could influence their decision to return to college. Maintaining the upkeep of their home, the adult learners require a significant amount of financial resources (Home & Hinds, 2000; Genco, 2007; Elman & O'Rand, 2007). International research conducted recently has consistently identified finances as a barrier for the adults (Goto & Martin, 2009; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011).

Institutional barriers encompass procedures and policies which are enshrined within universities preventing the adult learners from participating in many several educational activities (Flynn et al., 2011; Cross, 1981). Institutional barriers tend to be considered as one of the culprits affecting degree completion of the learners (Bergman et al., 2014). Those policies and practices that have been considered to limit the adults' participation in academic settings include lack of night and online classes, the availability of faculty (Hardin, 2008) as well as difficulties in reach out academic support from faculty (Kasworn, 2010; Compton et al., 2006). Meanwhile, dispositional barriers are characterized as person-specific characteristics including the learners' perception about ability to succeed, fear of failure and attitude towards intellectual-related activities (Ekstrom, 1972). Unlike situational and institutional barriers, dispositional barriers often require the individual to resolve the barriers (Cross, 1981). The solution is often found through self-determination and self-reliance (Goto & Martin, 2009; Kasworm, 2010; Crozier & Garbert-Jones, 1996).

Method

In this research, Ekstrom's model of triangulated barriers are used to identify barriers of learning the female participants encountering. This is a qualitative case study of six female adult learners attending a private university in Mataram, West Nusa Tenggara of Indonesia. This study aims to illuminate the field of female adult learners at the expense of representing a wider population from a sample (Stake, 2005). It draws upon data collection over two academic years (2018/2019 and 2019/2020) and eight focus group discussions. The data was gathered through semi-structured conversations, both individually and through FGD. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and individual transcriptions were checked for clarity. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that data are trustworthy.

The six female adult learners whose stories appear in this article were recruited during their first semester in 2018. This university, one of private universities in Lombok providing special classes for adult learners, was the research site because it offered access to a heterogeneous, bound sample of Sasak native female adult learners, whose identities, roles and culture were the subject of the larger study from which this data is drawn. The biographical data of the quoted participants appear in Table.1; all names are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Participants' bibliographical information (at August 2018)

Name	Age	Biographical notes	Interviewed (years)
Amira	*32*	Married; having 1 child; student of law faculty, working full-time in a government office.	2018-2019-2020
Dina	*36*	Married; having no child, student of economic faculty, working full-time in a private-owned business.	2018-2019-2020
Wita	*34*	Divorced; having 1 child, student of law faculty;	2018-2019

Name	Age	Biographical notes	Interviewed (years)
Baiq* A	*35*	working full-time in a government office. Married; having 1 child; student of law faculty; working full-time in a local NGO.	2018-2019-2020
Baiq B	*35*	Divorced; having 2 children; student of economic faculty; working full-time in a private own-business.	2018-2019
Baiq C	*39*	Married; having 3 children; student of economic faculty; working full-time in a government office.	2018-2019

*Baiq is the first name given to a Sasak female indicating that the woman is part of a noble Sasak family

Results and Discussions

Situational barriers

The focus of this study is not the causes of female adult learners' struggle during the first two years of their study but in the experiences of the participants themselves. However, it is useful to begin with a brief examination of the participants' perceptions of several situational barriers they have encountered. Three participants in a focus group discussed this notion; mostly on how cultural aspects gave a strong pressure to their intention to enroll in a university:

Dina: *Menurut saya alasan terberat saya untuk melanjutkan kuliah adalah meninggalkan suami hingga malam. Takutnya, kalau makanan habis nanti tetangga bisa 'ngomongin'* [For me, one of the hardest part of me choosing to continue my study was to leave my husband from sunrises to sunsets. I am afraid of when no food left, our neighbours would talk behind my back].

Baiq A: *Kalau saya kurang peduli tetangga bilang apa, toh juga kerjaan memang pagi sampai malam. Yang jadi masalah justru jarak rumah ke kampus yang terlampau jauh.* Tentunya capek ya? [Well, I did not bother with someone's opinion as before going to university I always back home lately. In fact, I mostly think that my hometown is too far from university which is tiresome, isn't it?]

Baiq C: *Saya setuju sama Dina. Apalagi anak saya tiga. Suami juga kerjanya di luar kota. Tentu nitipin anak sama mertua akan lebih lama. Awal-awal sih mertua nanya kenapa saya harus kuliah sih. Tapi toh juga ini buat mereka kan?* [I agree with Dina since I also have three children and my husband works in another town. Having my mother in law take care of the kids longer that before, she once asked my reasons of continuing my study. But in the end, this is for the sake of their future too].

Dina: *Iya bener. Dilema juga sih sebenarnya. Suami saya cuma tamat SMA jadi praktis nanti tamat kuliah saya dapat promosi dan kemungkinan gaji lebih tinggi dari suami. Alhamdulillah sih, tapi kasian juga suami beban moral.* [That is absolutely true. This is so problematic. My husband is just a high school graduate. Obviously, upon finishing my study I might be promoted which means that my salary will even be bigger than him. All praises to God, but I am aware that it will be a moral burden for my husband].

Baiq A: *Menurut saya sih nggak apa-apa ya kalau gaji kita lebih tinggi asal kita sama-sama pengertian aja.* [I think it is fine, for women, to earn much more money as long as we and our partners are in agreement].

Baiq C: *Kita sih nggak apa-apa, tapi akan selalu ada omongan ya.* [We both will be fine with that (the salary), but there will always be gossips out there]. (Focus Group, 2018).

Stereotyping about females being the secondary bread winner of their family among local communities have been the center of this discussion. In one hand, the modernization has led to women being urged to contribute as much as they could but on the others some women try to avoid to take a step forward due to the risk of they over-powering and over-shadowing their partners (Fisher, 1984). Apart from 'disobeying' the culture, yet breaking the stereotype, the women were more focusing on giving the best for their family. In this case, while some research claim that these types of situational barriers could be demotivating, in this study the three participants seemed to turn these obstacles into a positive force, motivating them to go on. This is parallel with the study by Elman and O'Rand (2007) in which they assert that although situational factors served as hindering educational progression temporarily, they could be served as a platform to increase the likelihood of women's college entry.

In some cases, a strong external factor which could come from situational barriers can also lead to psychological burden for the women. In this stage, situational barriers can be transformed into a long-life threat for some women. Wita expressed her perception and mental struggle:

> *Menjadi janda satu anak, hidup dengan orang tua setelah percerain menjadi beban tersendiri buat saya. Saya berpikir, akankah saya bertahan sampai wisuda nanti. Terutama secara finansial saya harus menanggung semuanya sendiri.* [Being a divorced with one kid and living with my parents after the divorce are pressuring for me. I question myself, could I touch the finish line of this study? Especially, I have to financially responsible for everything by myself]. (Wita, Interview, 2018).

> *Persepsi tetangga tentang saya menjadi janda yang pulang larut setelah kelas malam membuat saya ragu bisa menyelesaikan kuliah ini. Beban moralnya adalah setiap pulang malam mungkin mereka pikir kalau saya baru pulang kencan. Kasihan ibu saya harus mendengar itu.* [The neighbours' perception about me as a widow, frequently coming home lately after nigh classes, leads me to doubt to myself whether I could finish my study or not. The moral burden is that every night they might think of me back home lately as if I was on a date. I am afraid of my mom if she ever has to hear it all]. (Wita, Interview, 2019).

Building on both of Wita's interviews, the impact of unequal distribution of benefits and burdens between husbands and wives is mostly felt by women and children whose families are no longer intact. Marital disruption through the death of a spouse, divorce or separation is consistently rated as the most psychologically stressful event for both genders. However, in women's cases, the personal disruption caused by these events is frequently bigger exacerbated by serious socio-economic and cultural dislocation accompanying them (Fraser, 2007).

Institutional barriers

As all of the participants are still in their degree completion, the findings in this section might be partial. However, through the researchers' continuous teaching practice in this university, they have been able to track some changes over time. There are doubtless some positive inputs given by the participants to the institution, and these were frequently articulated in interviews:

> *Saya agak jetlag di minggu-minggu awal kuliah. Punya dua kelas tanpa jeda dan tanpa ada waktu makan malam kadang menyulitkan saya konsentrasi. Kantin harusnya buka sampai malam.* [During the first few weeks, I had been so jetlag. Having two evening classes in a row without allocated a specific time for dinner made me could hardly concentrate. I wish our canteen will be opened until late night]. (Baiq B, Interview, 2018).

> *Saya bayangkan di kampus ada semacam tempat penitipan anak, jadi saya bisa bawa anak saya ke kampus. Tanpa harus berpikir kalau teman-teman akan terganggu. Konsentrasi saya juga akan lebih baik.* [I imagine in this campus we are provided with childcare services so that I could bring my child with me without bothering my classmates. It could also boost my concentration]. (Amira, Focus Group, 2019).

The above conversations and suggestions by the interviewees are consistent with the calls made by many scholars worldwide that increased levels of supports are needed to help the adult learners to progress toward their degree completion (Compton el al., 2006; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Also, it indicates that emotional support should be put in place by the institution as so far the students tend to find emotional supports from their closer ones. This is so essential for any institution to assist students academically, financially and emotionally (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002).

Amid the Covid-19, our interviewed were conducted online since March-April 2020. In the online session the participants mostly emphasized on how online learning could be a surprising barrier for them leading to they questioning the effectiveness of online classes:

> *Meski keuntungannya adalah bisa belajar dari rumah dan urus keluarga, tapi otak ini masih kaget dengan sistem belajar daring. Tatap muka dengan Zoom tidak akan pernah seefektif biasanya, saya harap bapak-ibu dosen bisa mengerti kondisi kami.* [Apart from taking care of my family easier than before, the disadvantages of learning from home sometimes outweigh its advantages. Having a face-to-face meeting via Zoom will not be as effective as that of offline, I hope that the lecturers could understand our circumstances]. (Baiq C, Interview, 2020).

Such a special, yet more challenging, institutional barriers might have not been expected before. Therefore, throughout our 2020 study, most of the highlighted barriers have been the institutional barriers.

Dispositional barriers

Dispositional barriers tend to affect the female adult learners during their first academic year, namely in their first and second semester. While it might be true that in some cases, women tend to slowly adjust to a new situation, this is not to assume that the females require much more time to academically adjust compared to their male counterparts. Instead, the findings throughout this study rather found that the females encountered much more psychological barriers and inner forces prior to enrolling in university.

> Amira: *Waktu semester satu dulu, saya pesimis bisa bertahan lebih dari satu tahun. Saya juga merasa kalau susah menemukan teman yang pas untuk diskusi. Ini cukup berpengaruh di nilai saya di semester-semester awal. Kalau sekarang sih saya merasa nyaman dan tidak terlalu pesimis. Semoga tetap bisa begini.* [When I was on my first semester, I was so pessimistic that I could go on more than a year. Thinking about difficulties to find a friend on campus was very costly affecting my grades during the time. But now I am comfortable enough and not that pessimistic. Hope that I can keep maintaining this performance].
>
> Dina: *Awalnya saya bingung akan memulai dari mana dan seperti apa. Tapi lama-lama saya sadar bahwa saya harus percaya diri dan mengandalkan diri sendiri. Pernah sekolah 12 tahun, ya sekarang harus mengulang proses itu lagi. Sama saja.* [At first, I was confused how to start this journey. But little by little, I realized that I had to be confident and self-reliant. Having spent 12 years on compulsory education means that I have to repeat the process now. Nothing different]. (Focus Group, 2019).

The above conversation is parallel with the finding in MacAri, Maples and D'Andrea's (2005) study which conclude that adult learners who have been separated from academic lives for numerous years require a longer period than the younger learners to develop a sense of self-efficacy and autonomy. Therefore, beside academic support, tertiary institutions had better provide psychological and mental supports for the adult learners, females especially.

Conclusions

This study offers an updated synthesis of empirical finding to later offer potential solutions to colleges, institutions and students encountering the challenges. This is also to assist higher education institutions to understand certain groups' motivation on attending college after and/or during their workload as well as to find ways to improve universities' services and administration efforts.

Although the lived experiences of the six participants differ, the phenomenon of female adult learners returning to school seems to lead to several patterns. First, situational barriers the females encountered, mostly come from their culture and environment and can cause them to be psychologically pressured. Second, institutional barriers were seen as minor challenges compared to the other two, especially during the first two years of the study. However, do to the university's response to the corona virus, some found it difficult to adjust to online mode of learning. Third, institutional barriers were seen as obstacles which normally come from inside and appeared as part of the females' adjustment to their early university lives.

To advance further knowledge in Indonesian context of adult learning, future research could consider analyzing these barriers in different cultural setting. This information could assist in the development of even more targeted programs and policies to address the needs of adult learners in general as they pursue their college degree.

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