

## **Ubud Women: Honoring Tradition, Roles and Global Opportunity**

Envision an expanse of scenic rice paddies surrounding a town center of busy streets and welcoming locals. People walk amongst dodging cars and motorbikes, men travel with long wooden planks on their head, and chickens freely wander. Lively arts, dance and music abound. Active traditional markets with handcrafted items and room after room of colorful fabric up to the ceiling draw crowds. Craftsmanship and Hindu symbolism tell the story of history and culture. These are the images of Ubud, a town in the middle of the island of Bali, Indonesia.

On its outskirts you will find luxurious five star resorts, spas, and rambling mansions. Each enjoys gorgeous views of the lush hillsides and steep ravines. Visitors from around the world are drawn to this tranquil and tropical paradise. But move away from the tourists, along the back roads and into the small villages, and it is there that you will find the heart and soul of real Ubud; its women.

Amongst very basic living conditions (people from more developed countries might feel discomfort if it were not for the generous and welcoming nature of the Balinese women who want you to feel at home) traditional Balinese culture and the force of globalization intersect. The home is the hub of women where production, domestic, and social roles come together to sustain community.

Globalization has created an environment in which mass production, focus on the individual and pressure to leave villages in search of jobs forces traditional cultures to rethink their norms and values in order to benefit from the homogenized global culture.

In many cases, this leads to families being broken apart, communities being weakened, and loss of traditional language and culture. Indonesian women, through their hard work and commitment to creating harmony and balance, have figured out a way to embrace the benefits of globalization while maintaining their three roles (production, domestic, social/culture/religion/ritual). Ironically, ancient artisan techniques have become the tool to strengthen their Balinese identity amongst the force of globalization.

So, how do these women bridge the divide between their small traditional community and the rest of the world? Arum DaluMekar. This small organization with four full-time employees was founded in 1991, working directly in the field with over 40 producer groups to support local culture through the distribution of traditional hand crafted items. A member of the World Fair Trade Organization (formerly IFAT), Arum DaluMekar is committed to improving gender equality, working conditions, fair price exchange, and no child labor for artisans in Bali villages.

This is achieved by respecting the multiple roles that Balinese women play. For example, a range of hand woven clutches and handbags are made in an Ubudfactory (a striking building with a wall that opens up like a garage door). Natural light shines through, highlighting the rich hues, textures, and materials used to make a bag. Women can bring their children to work.

More often however, women can be found in their homes sewing, cutting, and stitching. This flexibility allows them to generate an income, care for children, and the household, and be available for traditional ceremonial and communal duties that are part of village society. It's a win-win situation.

As the main source of these Ubud women's income, the success of their process and quality of their artisanship has generated much needed resources. In some cases, enough money has been earned to build a home big enough for a family and a workshop area so women can work together to craft more items. Women apply traditional weaving techniques to create hand dyed, hand loomed Ikat. They also use ancient crocheting techniques and sustainable materials such as Agelfiber, hand woven Pandanus leaves, upcycled leather remnants, and canvas. The batik used in the bags is made from artisans in Java.

Each Indonesian village specializes in a different craft. A local village that specializes in leather for example is the source for material used in the bags created by these women. The local supply chain for materials minimizes the energy impact of these pieces. This compares to a more mechanized approach of outsourcing which requires moving materials around the globe for each stage of the manufacturing process. Arum DaluMekar now focuses on materials available in Bali villages to further ensure that costs remain low enough for the producers to remain competitive in the global marketplace.

Balinese women are the heart and soul of their communities. They don't want handouts. They want to earn the financial contribution they make to their families. Ubud women collaborating with Arum DaluMekar work hard, are deeply committed to their families, communities and cultural history, and have created a way to earn an income in the global economy in a way that honors and preserves their traditional techniques.

They are a reminder to us all that it is important to know where things come from, to consider the impact that our purchases can have, and to believe that there is a better way to respect cultural diversity in a globalized world.