

DESIGN FOR IMPROVED LIVELIHOODS; THE CASE OF UBUNTU MAKER MUMS IN KENYA

^{1*} **Coletta Ruth Matayo**
coletta.matayo@gmail.com

^{2**} **Lilac Osanjo**
lilac.osanjo@uonbi.ac.ke

^{3***} **Francisca Odundo**
fodundo@uonbi.ac.ke

^{1, 2, 3} *University of Nairobi, Kenya*

Abstract: *Women living in the rural peripheries shoulder the burden of the world's poverty as most cultures of the world and especially in Africa look down upon them as the lesser gender. This research sought to explore the role of design in improving the livelihoods of such women. Case study approach was used to study Ubuntu Maker Mums Women Group based in Kisamis Area of Kajiado County in Kenya. A sample size of 10 respondents was obtained purposively from the case and it included the chairlady of the group, a production manager of the group, and eight women who are engaged in the production of beaded products. Data was collected through observation, photography and face-to-face interviews. The data collected was qualitatively analyzed by clustering thematically based on the research objectives. The findings of this research led to the development of several conclusions in regard to the role of design in empowering women and improving livelihoods. Design is a tool for sustainable development and thus its uptake in women's crafts should be encouraged. The researcher recommends the adoption of the strategies discussed in this research in an effort to apply design to improve the livelihoods of women. Most of the strategies are relatable to the plight of women in Kenya and can also be applied to majority of groups involved in the empowerment of marginalized persons.*

Keywords: *design, social design, improved livelihoods, wellbeing, empowerment*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Design in its most basic form has been in existence mainly at the craft production levels where products were made for everyday use by various communities. Pottery, basketry, and beadwork were some of the most common crafts among the traditional Kenyan women. The skills were inherited from their elders and most women would engage in the crafts during their free time. Product design has in the recent past developed from the design of goods and services that improve human life; it is now a tool for national and economic development universally. This has resulted in a goal in product design towards achieving sustainability. In a thesis research on the quality of handicraft products in Kenya, (Kamuiru, 2015) states that issues such as global climate change, depletion of natural resources, behavioral changes and different materials all have positive and negative design implications. This has resulted to the need for designers mitigate these problems by designing sustainably.

A sustainable product or process is one that constrains resource consumption and waste generation to an acceptable level, makes a positive contribution to the satisfaction of human needs, and provides enduring economic value to the business enterprise (Bakshi & Fiksel, 2003). Sustainable design processes create products that enhance human welfare both socially and economically as well as in their environments. Many

of world's developing nations are adopting sustainable design strategies for empowering women through their informal initiatives in craft production.

Design as a tool for development and empowerment or for the alleviation of poverty has received little or no attention. Various experts in design such as Victor Margolin and Angharad Thomas point out in their studies that design has the power to change the world. According to Thomas (2006), there is a general sense that the world is facing massive problems, and that the design community is not addressing them accordingly. However, the situation has gradually changed with the emergence of social design concept as advanced by Margolin & Margolin (2002) which has resulted in collaborations between designers and other professionals to drive development.

In this sense, design is portrayed as a possible tool for development that is yet to be exploited. It is through social design initiatives that we have seen the rise in the number of NGOs interested in empowering women through design. For Instance, the Ethical Fashion Initiative, which empowers women through fashion, was founded in 2009 and has grown to having 90% of their team as women and about 10% men. It has its presence in East Africa, having two hubs in Nairobi within the slums, (www.ethicalfashioninitiative.org). This has been a revelation to the communities in which it is present and helped people realize just how much design can be an effective tool in empowering women. Kenya has a high number of women self-help groups that suffer from poor leadership and lack of sustainable solutions for their problems.

1.1 Study Objective

The objective of this study was to establish the role of design in improving the livelihoods of women in Kenya

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Design and Development

In order to understand the context of this study, there are three key issues that guide this research; design, women, and development. The development discourse is a rule-governed system held together by a set of statements that the discursive practice continues to reproduce- whether such practice refers to industrialization, agriculture, peasants or women and the environment (Escobar, 1995 pg 154). This therefore means that we cannot talk of development that excludes women as they are an essential tool in development. Women can only contribute to development if they are economically, socially, politically and culturally empowered. According to Escobar (1995), the need for development resulted in efforts to empower women and other disadvantaged persons so as to achieve sustainable development in disadvantaged countries.

In order for a woman to be empowered, she needs to have access to the material, human, and social resources necessary to make strategic choices in her life. Not only have women been historically disadvantaged in access to material resources like credit, property, and money, but they have also been excluded from social resources like education or insider knowledge of some businesses (Cheston & Kuhn, 2002).

The direct empowerment of women through design, therefore, takes place when women engage in product design with the support of others around them as a source of livelihood. It is however perceived that collaboration with professional designers could make the practice sustainable and more successful. The Kenyan government recognizes that women entrepreneurs have not been on an equal footing when it comes to their access to opportunities and assets but it has yet to effectively address the barriers facing women in business (Athanne, 2011). Production of crafts is one of women's socio-economic practices in most developing

countries. Though the practice has been informal for a long time, it has been used in various parts of the world as an economic tool to empower communities in Indonesia, Malaysia, Egypt, Ethiopia and other parts of the world.

2.2 Design for sustainability (D4S)

Design for sustainability is an eco-design concept that has been widely used to refer to Sustainable Product Design (SPD). In the 1990s, concepts such as eco-design and green product design were introduced as strategies companies could employ to reduce the environmental impacts associated with their production processes, (Clark, Kosoris, Hong, & Crul, 2009). One eco-design methodology, Design for Sustainability (D4S), has evolved from general Cleaner Production methods to focus on products and to include social, economic, and environmental elements of production; the United Nations Environmental Programme, Division of Technology Industry and Economics (UNEP), is a key player in this field, partnering with various institutions to produce publications and collaborate on product sustainability projects.

Sustainability also requires taking into account the needs of future generations, meaning that current environmental, social and economic impacts should be reduced as well as those impacts on future generations. D4S encompasses the three pillars of sustainability (people, profit, and the planet), and is applicable to supporting sustainable production capacity in developing countries, (Clark, Kosoris, Hong, & Crul, 2009). In product design, D4S involves increasing energy efficiency, using recycled materials, designing for recyclability, reducing toxic materials as well as extending product life.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The research design employed in this study is the exploratory study which is geared towards finding out the role design plays in the realization of sustainable livelihoods for women in Kenya. The study was qualitative in nature and the target population was the 28 members of the Ubuntu Maker Mums Women Group in Kisamis. Purposive sampling technique was applied to select respondents and this is due to the small population and known characteristics of the population. The sample consisted of the chairperson of the group, a production manager in charge of the group's products and eight women in the group who were all subjected to interviews. Therefore, the sample size was 10 respondents. Interviews from the respondents were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The goal of the analysis was to identify emerging themes and the relationships between the themes.

4.0 DISCUSSION ON RESULTS

4.1 FINANCIAL BENEFITS

4.1.1 Improved incomes for the women

Before joining the group most of the women were poor with little or no income but have been empowered them through their work to earn an income. They are now able to live better lives with their families as they now have finances to cater for their meals, health, and education among other needs. For instance, Miriam, the group leader, had her income increase from USD 30 per month to approximately USD 200 per month. With these increments in their income, the women are able to live better lives than before by providing better meals, shelter, and education to their children.

4.1.2 Funding the women

The initiative supports the women in acquiring finances from financial institutions. From this, the women are able to acquire loans to start small businesses such as *kiosks* (small retail shops) as well as acquire property such as plots of land and *bodabodas* (motorcycles).

Ubuntu Life Foundation acts as a guarantor for the women to acquire loans from banks and microfinance institutions. This makes it easy for the women to acquire loans as the foundation supports them and facilitates the payments. The organization also founded an umbrella SACCO for its employees where members can save as well as borrow funds.

The women have also formed merry-go-round *Chamas* in which they are able to save and borrow money. From the *Chamas*, they have managed to take loans that have helped them meet their different needs.

The funds acquired as well as the women's savings have been used to improve their lives in a number of ways. Through sensitization from their management, the women have been able to invest their money in different ways which have resulted in better lives for them and their loved ones.

4.2 APPROACHES TO DESIGN

4.2.1 Outsourced Designers

The group does not have a resident product designer in its production process. It however employs the services of a designer based in Ubuntu Life Foundation, who liaises with the production manager and the client to come up with designs and design specifications that are then relayed to the women for production of bracelets, necklaces and belts.

4.2.2 Raw Material Sourcing

The Maker Mums use raw materials that are purchased from shop in River Road area of Nairobi. Others are imported by the foundation especially for export orders. The engagement is economically sustainable as the manufacturers are always assured of markets for their products.

4.2.3 Tools and Equipment

The women use hand tools acquired from shops within their environs. This include needles, scissors, pliers and a recycled old slippers as padding to protect their finger as they work.



4.2.4 The Products

The researcher noted that most of the products which included bracelets, belts, necklaces, anklets, earrings, coin purses, among others, were small in size and appropriate as gift items. It was confirmed to the researcher that the clients for the products prefer gift products as they are fast-moving and have good returns. It is also favorable to women as they are able to produce more units and export more in less bulky packaging. This means that the women are engaged in the production of more units thus ensuring regular income. The products included bracelets, necklaces, and beaded belts.

4.3 LIVELIHOOD OUTCOMES

4.3.1 Free Formal Education/Skills Training

According to Ruth, a production manager at Ubuntu Life Foundation, all Maker Mums were selected from a pool of needy women who had low literacy levels. 8 out of 10 representing seventy-seven percent (80%) of the women were primary school dropouts while only 20% of the women had secondary school education. This was mainly attributed to the culture which is strongly patriarchal hence the education of women was a bit undervalued. The women were trained in various skills such as business management, bookkeeping as well as vegetable farming. All women had learned beadwork from their friends and family member through apprenticeship and were great at their craft.

4.3.2 Access to equipment

The women used simple and easily accessible hand tools for their craft including pliers (for manipulation of the metallic parts), hand needles (for stitching the beads onto the base fabric as well as webbing the beads together), and old rubber sandals (used to protect one from pricking herself with the needle as they work). This made it easy for women to engage in the craft as the equipment were cheap and available therefore each member was able to acquire their own set.

4.3.3 Access to markets

The foundation sources markets for the women's products and keep them in operation. The women have also been encouraged to explore different avenues in marketing their products for better returns. Locally, the women sell their products in the Maasai Market and also to their friends and family. The foundation has previously linked the women to markets through partners such as the Love is Project, Kendra Scott's beaded collections, American Eagle among others. All the women that have been trained have been empowered through the creation of jobs and markets for their products through Ubuntu Life Foundation.

4.3.4 Access to Finance

The women access loans from banks such as EQUITY and KCB with the help of the Foundation which acts as a guarantor when the women are seeking loans. The women have also received training on business management, financial investments as well as customer care through such organizations.

The initiative has been supportive to its members and encourages them to be employers and agents of change in the society. It advocates for independence and personal growth as well as having multiple sources of income.

4.4 DIRECT OUTCOMES ON THE WOMEN

4.4.1 Improved standards of living

Before joining Ubuntu Maker Mums, 9 out of 10 representing ninety-two percent (90%) of the women could only afford one meal per day, were fully dependent on their husbands and lived in absolute poverty. Their incomes improved upon joining and they can now afford two to three meals a day and spare some money for educating their kids.

4.4.2 Confidence levels

As a majority of the women in the groups were semi-literate, they faced challenges in communication which resulted in low confidence levels. However, upon receiving training from the initiative they were able to communicate better and fluently which resulted in increased confidence levels. The women now believe in their ability to make decisions that involve their lives and those of the people they love. All of them can also express themselves in Kiswahili unlike before.

4.4.3 Creation of employment

Before joining Ubuntu Maker Mums, all representing a hundred percent (100%) of the women were housewives and did not have stable incomes and jobs. Through the group, they are now able to earn an income that has given them better access to education, healthcare, and decent meals.

4.4.4 International Exposure to markets for their products

The products from the women have found markets in big brands in the US such as American Eagle and Kendra Scott. This has helped in creating awareness of their brands internationally thus increasing potential markets for women's products.

4.4.5 Improved incomes

The women are no longer reliant on their husbands and are now able to chip in on the family's expenses. All the women have experienced significant rises in their monthly incomes.

The strategies identified through this research give a framework on how to employ design to improve the lives of women in Kenya.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

Some of the strategies applicable in product design are subjective depending on the environs within which the group is based. The Ubuntu Maker Mums are Maasai women who are conversant with beadwork which is popular in their cultural dress. The community does not also allow women to have a voice in decision making yet their men are reckless, jobless, and addicted to illicit brews leaving their families to languish in poverty. These are key consideration areas when addressing the plight of women in different communities.

The findings in this research have led to the development of several conclusions in regard to design in women groups, raw material acquisition, as well as design skills acquisition for women toward sustainable livelihoods.

Most of the women groups in Kenya do not practice sustainable product design in their craft production. This has resulted in a lack of access to external markets due to the production of items that do not meet World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO) standards for export purposes. However, the women in Ubuntu Maker Mums

have significantly benefited by having a marketing team to network them with external markets while branding their products as 'Made in Kenya'. The collaboration of professional designers with marketing teams has also seen them design their products sustainably.

Design plays a critical role in improving the well-being of people and therefore women groups should embrace it. Attention should be paid to the quality of their products and the approaches towards making their practices sustainable. More efforts need to be put into collaborations with women groups as well as co-designing processes/systems in place for the improvement of the lives of women in Kenya.

REFERENCES

- Bakshi, B., & Fiksel, J. (2003). The Quest for Sustainability: Challenges for Process Systems Engineering. AIChE Journal, 1350.*
- Cheston, S., & Kuhn, L. (2002). Empowering women through Microfinance. UNIFEM.*
- Escobar, A. (1995). Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.*
- Isaboke, P. K. (2016). Women Self Help Groups Enhancing Women's Development Processes in Kenya. International Journal of Research in Sociology and Anthropology Volume 2, 18-25.*
- Kamuiru, J. (2015). Quality of Handicraft Products in Kenya; A case study of leather and sisal bags. Nairobi: University of Nairobi.*
- Manzini, E. (2015). Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation. Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.*
- Margolin, V., & Margolin, S. (2002). A 'Social Model' of Design: Issues of Practice and Research. Design Issues, 24-30.*
- Petermans, A., & Cain, R. (2019). Design for Wellbeing: An Applied Approach. London: Taylor & Francis.*
- Scoones, I. (2015). Sustainable Livelihoods and Rural Development. United Kingdom: Practical Action Publishing.*
- Thomas, A. (2006). Design, Poverty, and Sustainable Development. Design Issues, 54-65.*
- United Nations. (2015). Women. Retrieved January 2015, from United Nations: <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/women>*