

Kenya: strengthening the export competitiveness of women bead workers

This is a Results-Based Initiative which UNIFEM is implementing in partnership with the World Bank and the International Centre for Research on Women. It is one of three economic empowerment projects which the UK National Committee for UNIFEM is supporting this year.

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Zainab talks about how the project in Kenya is improving her business

In March, UNIFEM UK President Jan Grasty heard Zainab Salib Likama, the leader of a small group of Maasai beadworkers, speak in New York about how the Results-Based Initiative in Kenya is helping to develop her community.

During her visit to New York in March to attend the 2010 Commission on the Status of Women, Jan was invited to a working lunch addressing the philosophy, aims and objectives of the Results-Based Initiatives (RBI) programme. Speakers from UNIFEM, the World Bank and the Norwegian Government explained that the fact that gender equality makes economic sense is increasingly acknowledged. When women have the chance to earn decent incomes the benefits accrue not only for themselves but for their families and communities, helping economies towards sustainable development. Measuring and evaluating the outcomes of the RBI projects will be critical in determining which type of support works best.

“One of the projects UNIFEM UK is supporting is in Kenya where women beadworkers are helping to develop a small business sector”, said Jan. “We were very pleased that Zainab Salim Likama, the leader of a small beadworkers group had been invited to speak at the lunch. She was wearing a specially designed dress decorated in beadwork and stressed how important this project had been to her community.”



Zainab lives in and owns a small shop in the corner of a building in the Kajiado District of Kenya, known for its Maasai beadwork. The women who are traditionally involved in this craft work have little, if any, access to markets.

Zainab is the elected leader of the Mwereri Women's group, one of several participating in training undertaken through the RBI programme to improve their productivity as well as the quality and marketability of their beadwork. “We learned that we have to use our skills,” said Zainab. “When it comes to earning money there is nothing you won't try; you will do everything possible.”

The women produce beautifully patterned bracelets, necklaces and earrings and they work together to provide valuable support to each other. “If you know something, you show it to them,” explained Zainab. “If they know something, they show it to you. You get ideas from others.”

As part of their training, the women travel to large handicraft markets in Nairobi and exhibitions in neighbouring countries to see which patterns and styles are selling and to tailor their work accordingly. “In Nairobi we learned that people other than Maasai are doing the work and making money at it. That makes us want to do better, always.”

Zainab is eager to increase her production and spends more time than ever making beaded belts, jewellery and elaborately patterned shirts for special occasions.

Through hard work and more aggressive marketing of the beadwork, Zainab is helping to increase the income of her group members, economically empowering them and improving their livelihoods.

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