

Women fund boosts Koboko crafts

By Frank Mugabi

At the verandah of a grass-thatched house in Raki village, Nyoriceku parish in Abuku sub-county, Koboko district, a group of 15 women assemble.

Their work is to weave multi-coloured household artefacts that are mostly associated with the Nubian cultural heritage.

Under their group name Alio Atizu, a Lugbara phrase that literally translates as "curing poverty," the women use pointed knives and needles to neatly weave beautifully coloured mats known by the Nubian name *Biris*.

They are made of dry palm leaves and fibre from a riverine plant they say grows in swamps in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, but are sold in Koboko town and other emerging trading centres in the district.

Special skill

This particular mat weaving technic has been passed on for generations with the skill usually passed on from mothers to daughters as part of home education.

In the northwestern district of Koboko, the craft is making added commercial importance with the implementation of the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP) commonly known as the Women Fund.

UWEP was one of the key campaign promises of President Yoweri Museveni during the February 2016 re-election bid.

The money is given to women groups free of interest charges in order to provide the much needed capital to start up or boost women-owned micro, small and medium-sized businesses.

Beatrice Lekuru, the Alio Atizu Women Group's secretary says they started out as Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) programme learners in 2009. By that time no one envisaged that they would one day turn into an organised group of people doing joint business.

"Our aim was to make sure we all knew how to write our names and read what other people write," she says.

The need to venture into trade arose last year when the community development officer brought the news about UWEP. The programme requires women to be organised in a group of 10 to 15 people and they must be residents of the same sub-county.

Lekuru's group took up the opportunity to apply, but as they waited for the Government's verification procedures, they pooled sh300,000 from membership



Members of Alio Atizu Women Group in Koboko district weaving mats. Photo by Frank Mugabi

THE WOMEN POOLED SH300,000 TO START THEIR BUSINESS BY PURCHASING RAW MATERIALS

contribution to get to work. They spent the money on raw materials and when they sold their products worth sh1.4m, it was clear that they had made the right choice of enterprise.

In January 2017, the sh1.6m UWEP financial support arrived, giving the women additional impetus for the craft-making business.

Stocking material

Lekuru says they have used all the money to stock raw materials and started making the products in mass numbers. Market for their products has been easy to come by as the mats are hugely popular in the region. The distinctively patterned mats are among the key items used in Nubian cultural marriage ceremonies. So the orders keep coming in.

The group has already started making repayments. In their first instalment, they were expected to pay sh130,625 but they rounded it off to sh150,000 to the surprise of the district officials. Their plan is to expand their business into an events management company.

Their gradual progress has left their class teacher Rashid

Andabati impressed.

"These are my learners from functional adult literacy class. So, I am proud that they can read and write and now have a business venture to make money to support their families. They are even now teaching me how to make mats," he said.

Alio Atizu is one of the 34 groups that pioneered UWEP in Koboko, where up to sh61.5m was injected to benefit 444 people.

For this financial year, the Government has budgeted sh174m for Koboko and an additional sh148m for Koboko municipality alone under UWEP.

For Rahima Adraki, a single mother of three children, the programme came as a timely rescue.

"I was getting defeated in supporting my children in school. I know that next year all my children will go to school because I will have saved enough money to support them," she confided.

Adraki belongs to Okubani women's group that comprises 15 members crafting mats and cone-shaped food covers called *kuta*. The items sell between sh80,000 and sh120,000 a piece, according to Rukia Ayiku, 32 who is the Okubani group chairperson.

They rely on group members who take their products for sale to Arua and around Koboko where there is a big Muslim population that identifies with the Nubian tradition.

Kasfa Bako, one of the members, says their products are also gaining popularity with non-Muslims due to their convenience and durability.

On the day we interviewed the group, one of the members had gone to make a delivery of 15 mats to a client in Arua. They

were to be used at a traditional marriage ceremony. To balance between household chores and group

craft works, the women have selected two days every week where they meet at a specific place and dedicate three hours to weave.

Bako who has dealt in selling silver fish and beans said her joining of the Okubani group and ultimate switch to mat-making business was prompted by both the desire to access government support and to offset the adversities of the biting draught that has led to scarcity of food supplies.

She said their group received sh1.5m which was spent on purchase of raw materials and they are expecting to make 50 mats and food covers that would fetch not less than sh4m for the group.

Richard Dieudonne, the Koboko district community development officer in charge of the programme urged the women to work towards sustainability of their enterprises while ensuring that they repay the government credit for expansion of the programme. He also called on the men to support the women so as to achieve joint success at household level.

He lauded the programme, saying supporting women directly translates to supporting the entire family because women nowadays bear the burden of responsibility of looking after families.

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OFFICE OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL



HAPPY WOMEN'S DAY



The Auditor General Mr. John F.S. Mwangi (centre) alongside staff of the Office of the Auditor General handing over items worth 5 million Ushs contributed by staff to Ms Sandra Komuhimbo a representative from Uganda Women's Network in commemoration of the 3rd National Women's week.

The OAG is an equal opportunity organization which supports women in their efforts to assume responsibilities in the public realm, working alongside their male counterparts.

Best wishes to the women of OAG, Uganda and the world over their continued success.

OAG VISION:
To be an effective and efficient Supreme Audit Institution (SAI) in promoting effective public accountability.

The Office of the Auditor General (OAG) applauds all its female staff and women of the Republic of Uganda upon marking yet another International Women's Day.

Women are the pillars not only of families, but also of our society as a whole.

On this women's day, we therefore celebrate and recognize the contributions and immense achievements of women in the OAG and the entire country towards the development of Uganda.

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