

Her Hands: Images of Craftswomen in Uganda, Bolivia and India

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Abstract

Throughout the world, women employ their craft skills to contribute to their economies and gain financial independence. This photo essay exhibits craftswomen in Bolivia, Uganda and India, and reflects on the economic and social benefits they reap as a consequence of the art they produce. The featured photos examine art production by women as a catalyst of economic development, women's social and financial empowerment and independence, and positive social change within economically lesser-developed communities.

Author's Note

Shaina graduated from George Washington University in 2010 with a degree in fine arts and international affairs. After graduation, Shaina moved to Kutch, India to work for one year at a grassroots women's empowerment NGO as a World Partners Fellow, through the American Jewish World Service. She is working on expanding promotional materials for the organization's handicraft initiative. She is from Birmingham, AL.

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1. Introduction

These photos exhibit women who contribute to social change within their country's developing economies through art production. Working with craftswomen in Bolivia, Uganda and India, I witnessed the powerful impact of art on both the support of cultural traditions and the promotion of new industry in developing countries. I saw the economic and social benefits the artists reaped as a consequence of the art they produced. They found their voices in their art. But the ultimate gift of self-sufficiency was obtained as a result of being a part of a supporting organization that offered skills training, design consultancy, support groups, and/or basic security for its participants, in addition to a forum for the production of art. The featured photos examine art production by women as a catalyst of economic development, women's social and financial empowerment and independence, and positive social change within economically lesser-developed communities.

2. Photos

2.1 Kampala, Uganda



Photo 1. Women stand hip-to-hip on the grass lawn in front of the BeadforLife center in Kampala, Uganda. They are learning how to make school chalk with simple, cheap ingredients during a skills-training session sponsored by BeadforLife. Hands begin to shoot up as the lesson shifts into a discussion about marketing strategies. As they focus their attention to lessons about entrepreneurship, some women eagerly take notes while others keep their hands busy rolling beads.



Photo 2 and 3. BeadforLife is poverty eradication program in Kampala, Uganda. Leaders recruit vulnerable women and train them to make beads from recycled paper. The women join the BeadforLife program for two years during which they create and sell beads to initiate income generation. As participants, women learn how to manage money, open savings accounts and develop entrepreneurial skills.



Photo 4 and 5. Cissy, a woman in her mid forties, smiles widely and talks fast, “I had no hope in life, but when I came to BeadforLife, now I have hope. Ever since I was born, I had never opened up any account in any bank, but when I came to Bead for Life I have opened an account and after 6 months I am sure I am getting my own house. And my children are going to school and even the feeding is good. I have future plans and I have living hope.” Cissy’s beads are distinguished from the others by her unusual blend of colored paper and tightly rolled pieces.





Photo 6, 7 and 8. “When we want to go somewhere and we don’t have a boat, BeadforLife is like a boat. We are stuck somewhere and I know some of us, if it is not the grace of God, some of us we would have died, because so many of us are living positive [with HIV/AIDS]. And positive living means money. And how can you gain money? When we are working, they separate us by ignoring us. When you become sick once, they send you away” – Sophie, BeadforLife participant, 37 years old.

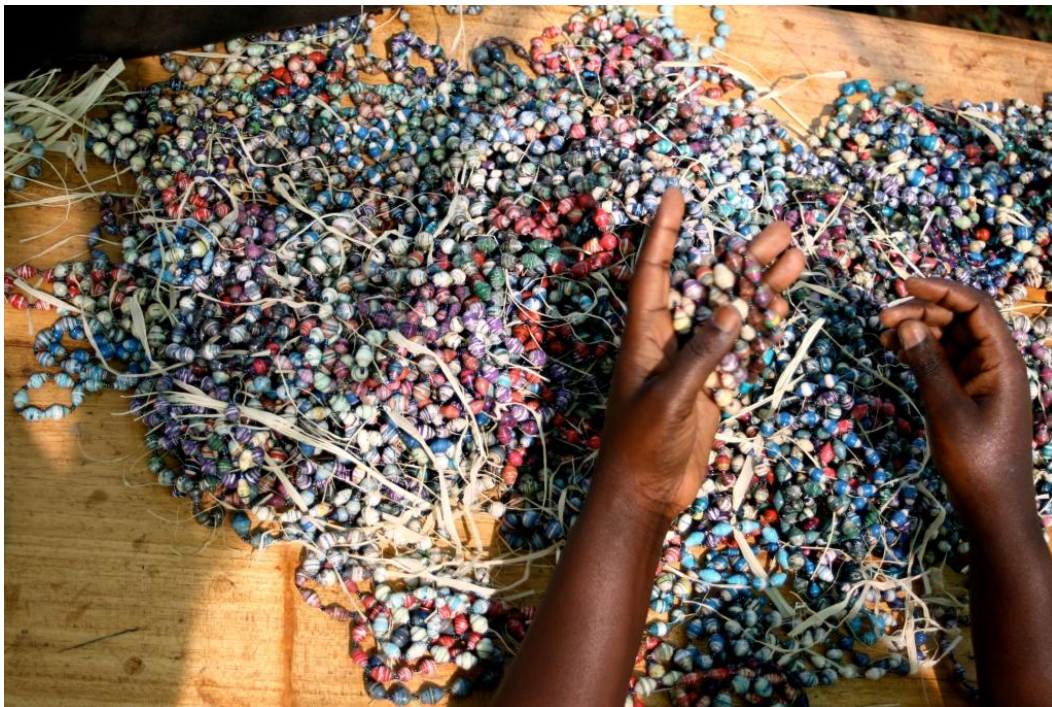






Photo 9, 10 and 11. “ In Uganda, Many women, when they fail to make money, they go and smoke the wind pipe to charm men to give them money. But, I tell them that you can roll such a single paper and get money out of it.” — Cissy , BFL



Photo 12.

2.2 Gulu, Uganda



Photo 13. In 2008, One Mango Tree consisted of a handful of women pumping manual sewing machines in a stall hidden deep within the crowded market of Gulu's center. The tailors sat among heaps of fabric, giggling as they transformed bold East African prints into lunch bags and clutches.



Photo 14. Now, One Mango Tree has its own building in the outskirts of Gulu and the tailors sew on updated machines. It has impacted over 65 women tailors, most of whom have been displaced from the 20 years of civil war northern Uganda faced with the Lords Resistance Army.





Photo 15 and 16. The tailoring tradition of northern Uganda is apparent by the manual sewing machines and bright East African textiles that clutter Gulu's central market. With One Mango Tree's influence, these tailors have shifted their traditional designs as yards of bold prints are stitched into skinny yoga bags.

“The war in northern Uganda has spoiled everything... all the people are frustrated. People can plan to do bad things instead of good things. That is why I have the interest. I have the skill, though I’m not highly educated, but I have also the interest of helping others.” -Lucy, head-tailor at One Mango Tree



Photo 17. Lucy recognizes the importance of employing vulnerable women in northern Uganda. She told me that “In this area of Uganda, if a woman does not have an income, she is not far from dying.” Lucy works to help women gain skills to generate an independent income.

2.3 Tiquipaya, Bolivia



Photo 18. Two jet-black braids fall against Carlota's back as she sits on the floor, grasping bright colors of yarn with her big toes. Carlota weaves with her whole body, each tendon part of a unified machine that makes it look easy. When I asked Carlota what she would do if she could do anything, she casually responded, "I am always going to make weavings." Carlota is the care-taker and weaving instructor at Kusi Kuma – a Montessori style school situated among the eucalyptus trees of Tiquipaya, outside of Cochabamba, Bolivia.



Photo 19. By the time she was 12, Carlota was a master weaver. Due to poverty and homelessness, Carlota was forced to leave her village and relocate in Cochabamba. She prides herself on making beautiful pieces and avoiding synthetic materials (“only pure llama wool!”) and fears that the art of hand-made weavings is disappearing.



Photo 20. “I weave because things that are made by hand are beautiful!” Carlota



Photo 21. Carlota partners with her friend and neighbor, Leticia to create weavings and instruct courses. Meters away from Carlota and Leticia, their children throw balls of yarn back and forth and get tangled in the strands that unravel. The two are almost always together laughing about which of them is the better skilled, confiding in the trials of motherhood, and conversing about which colors will sell best in the coming months.

“When I sell weavings I can buy sugar, rice, oil... It has really helped us a lot.”
Carlota’s craft skill has allowed her to generate income to provide basic necessities for her family.





Photo 22 and 23. When Carlota left her village, she was without a stable source of income. Her weaving practice that she learned as a child in her village was a skill that she was unsure she could rely on. She remembered, “I had nothing. Only two children. How can I live? How are we going to live? With food, without food. Little by little I understood. Now it is much calmer. We are better. But before we suffered a lot.” Eventually, she capitalized on her traditional skills and Kusi Kuma offered her the market that she needed to support herself with her craft.

2.4 El Alto, Bolivia



Photo 24. In a workshop of 12 women, Bertha smiles as she looks at each woman's muñeca (doll). The women laugh as they pass the dolls around and admire the quality work, bright colors, and details that the dolls illustrate. Bertha leads doll-making workshops at an organization (*Centro de Investigaciones de Energía y Población (CIEP)*), which employs vulnerable women in El Alto, La Paz. As the room calms, Bertha hands each woman a certificate with an arbitrary name on it. Each woman presents a certificate to a receiver coupled with brief comments about artistic strengths and potential improvements.



Photo 25. Bertha leads doll-making workshops at the NGO Centro de Investigaciones de Energía y Población (CIEP). She came to CIEP as a dolls maker and, now, at age 26, Bertha leads doll-making workshops for women in El Alto, a lesser developed area of La Paz. She incorporates local materials into the making of the dolls and teaches the women how to make quality products. CIEP facilitates the selling of the products, mostly to foreign markets.



Photo 26 (previous page). The women chat as they pass around bottles of glue to decorate their dolls. One woman stops to stretch her hands and others tell her how they've dealt with sore hands. The women giggle as they piece together dolls from a mound of colored fabrics.



Photo 27. “Since joining CIEP, my mind has been broadened. Now, I learned to highly value my culture, my customs, the place where I am, todos... this is what artisan work can do – teach you how to value your culture.” -Bertha



Photo 28 and 29. Bertha spoke to me about crafts' place in Bolivia's economy, "Some people say Bolivia is a sleeping mine, but everyone knows that it's a very rich place, with many resources. But there's so much poverty! And this poverty is because we don't have the creativity to use what we have. Bolivia has natural fibers, wool, seeds, land... Bolivia has a lot!" The crafts of Bolivia are embedded into its culture and economy.



Photo 30 and 31. Working in a craft collective has challenged Bertha to reframe her own perceptions of development and her country. “From working with CIEP, I have learned that development isn’t individual. It’s social. It’s to think in a group.”



Photo 32.

2.5 Kutch, India



Photo 33. Women of a small village in Kutch gather on a colorful Dhadki (quilt). They have come to get feedback from other artisans and to exchange their embroideries for rupee notes. Kutch is a drought prone district in northwest Gujarat

freckled with small villages that mostly rely on cattle breeding and farming for income. Income generation remains unsteady as Kutch suffers the consequences of climate change, and many of the women have begun to rely on embroidery for income.



Photo 34 and 35 (previous page). Qasab, meaning *craft skill* in Kutchhi, is a collective of Kutchhi craftswomen. Qasab enables a secondary source of income to Kutchhi craftswomen, creates a forum for craftswomen to express their creativity through embroidery and helps to preserve the craft of Kutch by giving value to high quality embroidery.



Photo 36 and 37 (previous page). There are over 1,200 craftswomen affiliated with Qasab. Qasab promotes embroidery activity in over 42 villages throughout Kutch, where eight distinct ethnic communities each have their own embroidery heritage and style.



Photo 38. Above, a woman from the Sodha Rajput community shows her work to an artisan. The Sodha Rajput community is a Hindu community that migrated to Kutch from Sindh. This embroidery was done in the *neran* style, meaning *eyebrow*, a style often used by Sodha Rajput craftswomen. If you look closely, you can see the tiny motifs resembling the shapes of eyebrows. Each community of Kutch has its own embroidery style and heritage. When worn as part of traditional dress, embroidery styles act to identify the marital, social, religious and age status of women.



Photo 39 and 40. Kutchi embroidery is labor intensive. Most of the embroideries contain hundreds of cracked pieces of glass, which are sewn into the cloth as small mirrors. The final pieces dazzle in the light.



Photo 41.

3. Conclusion

Women's income generation leads to a multiplier effect in their respective communities. Art production is a feasible income generating opportunity for women who lack mobility, often due to their lack of land rights and many household responsibilities. Employment opportunities are crucial for women in developing regions, but not all employment opportunities are accessible to them. Craft production is notable for its accessibility to women: it does not require access to land or literacy, and isn't physically demanding labor. It is available to the disabled, it allows women to work in their homes, offers flexibility in hours, and often incorporates traditional skills that women already possess.

The most obvious advantage of art production is income generation, yet art production yields more. Art production increases women's sense of self-worth and independence, it allows opportunities for creative autonomy and expression, and it heightens the roles and status of women within their communities. Furthermore, as women are more likely to invest their money in their children than men, art production allows women to promote positive social change within their communities. At its best, women's art production may contribute to a revitalization of local design and the sustainability of traditional livelihoods.

For women in lesser-developed communities, art production often leads to income generation and improved quality of life. Yet, the role of art production within economic development has created much debate: some argue that using art for development sparks a loss of tradition as artisans alter their products for foreign markets. Yet, in order to sustain income generation, artisans must make designs informed by market demand.

The women featured in this essay have maximized economic success through product design and cooperative structures. With the help of intermediaries, within their respective artisan cooperatives and group structures, they have achieved a balance between traditional autonomy and relevant design and function.

The women at Bead for Life in Kampala, Uganda have abandoned yellow beads (“they look horrible on white skin!”) and have started making pink ones (“Can you believe how many American women love the color pink?”) In Gulu, Uganda at One Mango Tree, Lucy learns about yoga bags and lunch boxes. While Bertha in El Alto, Bolivia thinks of more innovative ways to build her dolls, Carlota in Tiquipaya, Bolivia adds new colors of wool to her collection. Women in rural villages of Kutch embroider their traditional stitches onto cloth that will be used for clutch bags. The global connection and interaction that the artists participate in enrich us all.