



DESIGN INTERVENTION FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN WOMEN'S CRAFTS IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Women in Kenya and the world over engage in craft design using traditional skills passed on from one generation to the other. These are mainly inspired by motifs and designs obtained from nature and items within their surroundings. Knowledge is in this content mainly shared by observation. The case is no different for marginalized women in Kenya who engage in craft design in the areas of beadwork, basketry, and pottery among others. A study was conducted to identify the design interventions in improving the livelihoods of women through crafts. Designers have been part of the women's programs through the extension of their services at different phases of the production process. This is done by co-designing and collaborating with the women in production. Empirical research shows that these products are more often than not identical with minimal to no variation hence they aren't competitive and this limits the returns from the crafts. The main objective of this study was to explore the design interventions in women's crafts in Kenya and how they can be utilized for more economically sustainable crafts practice. The study was qualitative and applied a multiple-case study approach. Setting: the study was conducted in women's crafts groups located in Machakos and Kajiado counties in Kenya. The respondents in this study were women in crafts production aged between 23 and 70 years. The results revealed that 100% of the respondents were of the opinion that design is key to improved products and improved services. They however were cognizant of the fact that it would be expensive to have a designer attached to the group on a full-time basis and therefore felt that it would be more viable to seek design extension services in their processes. The study concluded that every women's craft initiative needs to have access to design extension services that would help in improving knowledge and skills, give technical design input and trigger the creativity of the artisans, motivate them through co-designing and boost their self-confidence which would lead to improved productivity and better returns.

Keywords; design, crafts, co-design, design extension services, women empowerment, sustainable livelihoods.

INTRODUCTION

Women have played a significant role in the development of Kenya's handicraft industry, creating unique and culturally diverse products that have gained global recognition (Mwobobia, 2012; Boserup, 2007). However, the sustainability of these crafts is under threat due to various factors, including the use of unsustainable materials, a lack of access to markets, and poor working conditions (Grigsby, Jeanetta, & Jivetti, 2015). Despite the quality of the products produced by women in Kenya, they face difficulties in accessing local and international markets. This is due to a lack of exposure, limited market knowledge, and lack of access to appropriate marketing channels. The result is that many women sell their crafts at low prices, which makes it difficult for them to earn a decent income and invest in the development of their businesses.

Many women in Kenya are skilled in traditional crafts such as weaving, beading, and pottery, which may not necessarily be suited to modern design trends. Finding the right balance between traditional and contemporary design elements can be a challenge. There is a growing need to create products that are functional and meet the needs of consumers. This requires a deep under-

standing of consumer preferences and trends and the ability to create durable and practical designs. Women in Kenya face challenges in accessing design resources and tools, such as design software, prototyping equipment, and materials and therefore engage in design in its most basic form.

To overcome these design challenges, women in Kenya require access to training, resources, and networks to help them develop their skills and knowledge (Matayo, 2016). This includes access to design software, workshops, and mentorship programs that can help them to create new designs and expand their market reach. By addressing these challenges, women in Kenya can continue to create beautiful, functional, and marketable crafts that are valued both locally and globally.

Addressing the challenges facing the industry will improve the lives of the women who are the backbone of the handicraft sector. By promoting the use of sustainable materials, improving access to markets, and investing in social services, we can ensure that women's crafts in Kenya are sustainable, and profitable, and contribute to the overall well-being of the country.

THEORY

Design and craft

Design is usually associated with mass production and high-end markets and some scholars criticize designers for not devoting their time to the world's real problems (Papanek, 1971; Fuad-Luke, 2007). There are, however, several instances of design interventions that have had a positive impact on the lives of those who are less fortunate. (Pilloton, 2009)

Design for social impact, or design for development, has been around since the 1960s, and "since the 1960s, it has been introduced sporadically to the development process, although it is yet to earn itself a permanent place in that process" (Margolin, 2007). However, designing for developing contexts usually happens from afar and designers tend to invest their free time or pro bono activities around this concept (Fuad-Luke,

2006)

According to Manzini (2007), design is at the core of the problem of the world's situation today. Though it can also become the answer to contemporary issues since "it [design] is the social actor that above all others, by its very nature, has to do with the everyday relationships of human beings with their artefacts" (ibid.). As Pilloton (2009) is of the opinion that: "By adding design to the social entrepreneurship equation, we form a symbiotic relationship between people, product, and profit, bringing design to more socially and fiscally sustainable arenas while giving enterprises a tangible and deliverable tool around which to structure production, job creation, and economics."

The use of bottom-up approaches in the design of crafts has been found to be one of the most effective tools in designing. This is because the respondents are well aware of their problems and more often than not tend to have ideas on how to solve the same problems. Designers are therefore urged to apply the design thinking approach in co-designing solutions for craftswomen in Kenya.

The Co-Design Process

Burkett (2014) explains that the process entails keenly involving diverse individuals clearly concerned on a matter, place, or process in its design and, in certain cases, enactment. It's about including people in the development of improvements, innovations, and impacts, and drawing on their combined experiences to provide the best possible services and outcomes. Co-design isn't only about including end-users views; it's also about fostering mutual understanding across the service system. To address complicated and entrenched societal issues, all

persons concerned must contribute their talents, knowledge, and experiences. As a result, it is a design-led process that employs creative participatory methods, yielding a set of patterns and principles that can be applied in various ways with different people. Co-designers make decisions rather than simply making suggestions.

Power sharing is emphasized in co-design, as well as building lasting relationships, and participation by all to build capabilities and realize sustainable solutions to societal issues. Many people need encouragement and support to adopt new ways of being and doing, to learn from others, and to have their voices heard. The designer must provide a conducive environment for co-design. Empirical research shows that it is essential to involve communities in designing solutions to their problem (Osanjo & Ambole, 2016) and thus co-design is a key aspect of sustainability.

Sustainable Communities

A sustainable community, according to the Institute for Sustainable Communities, is one that is economically, environmentally, and socially healthy and resilient. It approaches challenges inclusively rather than exclusively. Its solutions are long-term rather than short-term. The success of such a community is dependent on the commitment and involvement of its members through keen, organized, and knowledgeable citizens and efficient leaders, as well as establishing community institutions that are people-centered. Sustainable communities, therefore, manage their resources to enable them to meet their needs in the present day while making certain that the same will be available in an equitable manner for posterity (Scoones, 2015).

Sustainable communities therefore seek the well-being of the entire community without endangering that of other communities, ecosystems that are functional, efficient governance coupled with significant public participation, and economic security. It is critical to create more inclusive initiatives that empower individuals to control their own development in order to foster a more democratic and participatory society. Through

this study, the researcher shall co-create a framework for the social design approaches for sustainable livelihoods and propose the framework for initiatives that focus primarily on empowering women. The research will highlight the key technical, educational, and organizational elements that must be considered when implementing social design for sustainable communities.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study was qualitative and applied case study approach (Yin, 2009) where three women groups based in Machakos and Kajiado County, Kenya, engaged in beadwork and basketry were selected. The study applied semi-structured interviews, observation to establish their processes and products, and photography to capture the craft items made by the women. For this, a set of open-ended interview questions with themes like identifying crafts produced, the income

earned from the crafts, the challenges and opportunities, and their perceptions on what they think would help improve their products and processes, in general, were posed. Specific questions were posed to investigate the extent to which professional design input had been sought in their processes. Purposively selected craftswomen, along with key informants from the industry, made up the bulk of the respondents.

RESULTS

The Design Process

The researcher sought to understand each group in terms of procedures and processes and the players in each stage to establish the processes as well as the efficiency of the processes. From the research, it was found that in Kithoni Women Group, new orders were acquired through the chairlady of the group. Most orders were from the Machakos Cooperative Union, and a few orders from different individuals. The chairlady received the request/order which was then processed into a sample by the master weavers. The master weavers played the role

of the designer through their acquired skills and expertise over many years of experience. This brought to light the fact that the definition of a designer is not limited to the professionally trained person, but also people who have acquired special skills in creating and evaluating products within an informal design set-up and perfected it over time.

The sample would then be shared with the client who upon approval would authorize the women to produce the order in the required pieces. The women would then sit together and work on their first baskets collectively to enable each one to understand the design de-

tails and product specifications. When each of the women had understood the above, they were allowed to weave subsequent pieces from the comfort of their homes. When the order was done, the women presented the baskets during group weekly meetings on Thursday where they assessed the quality. The baskets were thereafter delivered to the client.

Osiram Women Group mostly produced beaded items for individual clients on a pre-order basis. They sometimes produced while anticipating to sell during the peak tourist season in the nearby Amboseli National Park Lodges which is characterized by a number of tourists visiting their cultural boma and sometimes purchasing their products. The women explained that most of their designs are influenced by what they see on their friends as well as images shown to them by their clients on WhatsApp/internet as 90% do not own smartphones. They would study the image keenly and then produce the item. The women also explained that they sometimes came up with original designs as they manipulated the beads. Once the products were ready, they were presented to their clients, and those who liked them ended up purchasing.

Ubuntu Maker Mums in Kisamis mainly produced orders for export through Ubuntu Life Foundation. The foundation helped in sourcing markets by finding clients who placed orders for products. The client could share the product required as an image by email and in some cases, they could send a physical sample of the product. Upon receiving the request, Ubuntu Life Foundation's sample makers came up with a sample that was assessed by an in-house designer as well as a production manager and then sent to the client upon approv-

al. Sometimes, the in-house designer came up with original designs that were designed based on anticipated market needs. Once the sample was made, it was sent to the client and if he/she approved the sample, it was shared with the women for production. During their weekly meeting, the women were briefed on the product specifications and design details. The sample was left in the hands of the group leader for ease of referencing. The women made the first pieces together as a group to ensure uniformity in design and specifications and then they were allowed to make subsequent pieces from their homes. Once the order was done, the group leader, conducted quality control and if the products met the standards, they were sent to Ubuntu Life Foundation offices for packaging and dispatch to the client.

Design and Creativity

The researcher sought to understand the design process in a move to understand the design and creative aspects the women's work. It was established that master craftswomen (weavers and bead-ers) play the role of the designer through their acquired skills and expertise after many years of experience. This brought to light a different angle to design in that the definition of a designer is not limited to the professionally trained person, but also people who have acquired special skills in creating and evaluating products through practice and/or apprenticeship within an informal design setup and perfected the same over time.

All women expressed that unique products that are well designed, packaged, and sold would help them be more profitable in their business which would translate to better meals, better health, better education, and improved liveli-

hoods for them and their families. They, therefore, felt that a designer would play a great role in the success of their ventures. Differences were seen in the groups in that they were able to come up with more creative designs with quality finishes, and these sold out faster. Due to their geographical location and the number of products they are able to move at any given point in time as a factor of access to markets and partnerships, the group was seen to be doing much better than the other two groups under study. The production manager at Ubuntu Life Foundation associated the success of Ubuntu Maker Mums with the presence of a team dedicated to design and sampling at the Foundation saying that it has helped them produce products that meet market standards and are able to be exported at fair prices.

Income from The Craft

Although all groups under study were located in rural areas, they all faced unique working environments and this was also evident in the differences in the markets for their products. On average, a woman in Kithoni would be able to weave one 12inch by16inch basket (Figure 1) per week and a maximum of 5 pieces of the same per month. Each of these baskets would be sold at Kshs. 600 after incurring a cost of production of Kshs. 200 on materials. This would amount to an income of Ksh.2000. the women would then have to substitute this with income from poultry, goat keeping, and farming. Occasionally they would get orders of smaller items such as wine holders where they would make up to 3 pieces per day. These would be sold for Kshs.500 each after a cost of Ksh.100. It would mean that in the course of that order, the women would earn approxi-

mately Kshs.1200 per day. The challenge was however consistency in the orders as there are times the women would have no order to work on. During these times they stitch items for sale to their friends.



Figure 1 : Woven products by Kithoni Women Group Source: Author

Ubuntu maker Mums were found to be the most successful of the three groups the group is made up of women who work with Ubuntu Life Foundation, an NGO based in Kenya, to produce bead-work for both local and global markets. The designs are created by the women in collaboration with the project's designer and once approved they are reproduced. The women would be paid on a piece-rate at Kenya shillings 100 (\$1.38) per bracelet (Figure 2) with materials provided. 80% of the women earn up to 5-10 times the minimum wage in Kenya as they are able to make between 10-15 bracelets a day. This means their income from bead-work is between Kshs. 1000-1500 per day.



Figure 2: A woven bracelet by the Ubuntu Maker Mums Source: Author

Osiram Women face challenges in selling their products as they currently rely on individual buyers and no consistent market. The partnerships they had become dormant and they were not getting any support as like did in 2017. The

women approximated an income of 1000 (\$7.2) per month. From these findings, it is evident that with proper strategies, the design of crafts may contribute greatly toward livelihoods.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Sustainable livelihoods as inspired by the Sustainable Development Goals, Agenda 2030 seeks to improve people's lives by reducing their vulnerabilities and improving their capabilities. Poverty alleviation is key in this agenda as it is one of the main reasons people are often in a position of powerlessness. While women have taken the bold step to take charge of their lives and founded groups with the aim of improving their lives, there is still a need to make their work more meaningful and successful.

Design can drive positive change and has the potential to improve people's lives by outing their needs and aspirations at the center of any national development process (Mwiti, 2020). It plays an important role in the lives of people on a day-to-day basis starting from their way of dressing, to how they do things, and their means of earning an income. It is therefore an essential tool in solving societal problems and can therefore be applied in different ways depending on the scenario.

Craft design remains one of the key activities used as a source of income by many women in marginalized communities (Marchand, 2016). It is therefore essential that as designers seek to empower women and improve their lives they consider ways of making women's crafts more meaningful. This is possible through evaluating their products as well as their processes and working hand in hand with the women to implement

strategies that may help achieve sustainable livelihoods through their practices.

In this context, designers play a key role in ensuring that women's crafts aren't just basic but have a competitive edge. In this research, the women groups under study engaged designer expertise on different occasions. However, only one seemed to have a permanently attached to the groups due to the cost implication of maintaining a designer on a full-time basis. The women expressed that the designer's input helped in improving their products and consequently their sales. They expressed interest in engaging designers at different points in their work but felt that they would appreciate terms that weren't costly to them.

The results, therefore, point to potential avenues for collaboration between professional designers and craftswomen, including advice on materials and methods, assistance with production through co-creation of the initial design and letting them manufacture accordingly, and/or watching and learning from these non-designer makers. To do this, it may be possible to collaborate with designers and/or design institutions to extend their skills whenever necessary.

The design extension services could be a range of activities that have the potential of helping the craftswomen to develop new product lines, improve their existing products, and adapt to changing market demand. These services can include design workshops, product development support, market research, and

business training. By providing these services, designers and design experts can help craftswomen to improve the quality, functionality, and appeal of their

products, making them more competitive in domestic and international markets and thus improving their incomes and livelihoods at large.

CONCLUSIONS

Any account of problem-solving in crafts design that exclusively focuses on the technical dimensions of the craft without focusing on its social dimensions and environment within which the practice is conducted results in solutions that are deemed not sustainable (Marchand, 2016). In view of this, a designer should therefore find ways of helping craftswomen align their craft with the changing times, technologies, and markets among other factors. The women in the cases under study acknowledged the fact that they would need the input of design professionals to help make their practice more profitable and sustainable

Some of the design interventions applicable to craft design initiatives include collaborations with the craft groups in their design and production, co-designing with them, training on design skills, and establishing lasting markets for their products. This can be in the form of design extension services as the services of professional designers are not necessarily affordable to most women craft groups. The designer's input is therefore very important as it helps in the improvement of products and the betterment of processes. The cases under study revealed that they would greatly benefit from design services extended to them and were confident that this would improve their products and processes and consequently improve their revenues.

Despite their talent and hard work, many of these women face significant

challenges in accessing markets for their products, and in scaling up their businesses. It is therefore recommended that craft groups employ design extension services that can play an important role in enabling these women to grow and succeed. This could be achieved by partnering with individual designers, design schools, and institutions that offer design education and training. By partnering with these institutions, craftswomen can access design expertise and knowledge, as well as learn new skills that can help them to improve their products and businesses.

In conclusion, design interventions such as offering extension services can play a critical role in supporting craftswomen in Kenya by providing support in areas such as product development, marketing, and access to finance and markets, designers and design experts can help these women to improve the quality and appeal of their products, as well as grow and sustain their businesses. It is therefore recommended that design should not be viewed as just the creation of the product, but also ensuring that the entire product cycle from conceptualization to retail and after-use is well thought through and optimized. This would result in solutions that are more sustainable coupled with highly competitive products that would yield better returns thus enabling the women to live better, access better health, access better healthcare, and provide better meals for their loved ones.

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