



PETRINA NDAPANDA MATHEWS,
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WOMAN WOMAN

With the AWOME initiative to train and support female micro-entrepreneurs, UN Women and De Beers Group are helping transform local economies while giving financial freedom to women.

By JOHANNA LENANDER

“There’s an African proverb that says: ‘When you educate a woman, you educate the nation’,” says Beatha Muhimba, master trainer for Accelerating Women Owned Micro-Enterprises, (AWOME), an initiative that provides mentoring, network, business and life skills training for female micro-entrepreneurs

in Namibia, Botswana and South Africa. “When a woman is able to grow her business, it directly benefits her community. She’s able to take proper care of herself, send her children to school, and employ other women. And a woman who’s making her own money doesn’t have to be stuck in an unhealthy relationship, so empowering female

entrepreneurs helps reduce gender-based violence. All of this really gives me joy.”

AWOME is run by UN Women in partnership with De Beers Group. While the UN provides the training models (based on programs by its International Labor Organization ILO), De Beers Group funds the project and supports its infrastructure, which is built on partnerships with local non-profits or government agencies that are already embedded in the targeted communities. Educators like Muhimba, who works for Namibia’s Ministry of Gender Equality, Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare, have a deep understanding of the needs of female business owners in their area, making the training as relevant and productive as possible.

For De Beers Group, AWOME is just one arm of the company’s partnership with UN Women, which started in 2017 as part of the company’s public commitment to improve internal and external gender representation. De Beers Group aims to achieve gender parity in its own corporate

leadership by 2030 while simultaneously supporting inclusivity and equity in enterprise development programs in its producer countries. The UN Women collaboration also includes the HeForShe alliance and initiatives that support women in STEM. What makes AWOME unique, however, is that it wholly focuses on the informal business sector.

“The program is really targeted at that micro level of businesses where women are over-represented,” says Shahila Perumalpillai, head of Equity and Inclusion at the De Beers Group. “Once you get into the formal business sector, it’s much more male-dominated. By supporting the informal sector we hope to slowly shift this landscape.”

Even though micro-entrepreneurship provides a crucial lifeline in the local economy by keeping a large part of the population from falling into poverty, it is, like so many other typically “female” sectors, underfunded and underserved. Helping women grow their small enterprises creates new jobs,

regular wages and fosters a wider range of businesses in their communities.

Cynthia Mokgobu’s story shows how empowering one woman can benefit an entire village, and beyond. Based in the Limpopo village of Bochum, South Africa, Mokgobu grew up with a passion for growing vegetables that was passed onto her from her parents. And while she was well equipped to figure out the challenges of agriculture, she struggled with the logistics of running a business. “I didn’t know about costing and how to plan my budget,” she says. “Participating in the AWOME training program has helped me develop my business, management and marketing skills beyond what I could have dreamed of. It has allowed me to give back to my community.” Not only is Mokgobu’s Mosibudi Trading Enterprise able to improve livelihoods by employing people from her village, it has also helped improve the local quality of life. “People used to have to travel to other areas to get fresh produce, which was expensive and very time-consuming. Now they can get

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affordable vegetables from me.” Growing her business—from a backyard patch to 7.5 acres—has also inspired Mokgobu to pay her success forward beyond her own community. She has built a social media platform where she shares her entrepreneurial skills with other small farmers across sub-Saharan

Africa. “The AWOME program gave me the tools to create this amazing opportunity,” she says, “and I don’t take it for granted.”

While AWOME’s model doesn’t explicitly teach students to become trainers themselves, it does encourage shared knowledge between trainees. “The women are trained as groups. And when they work on a project, they work on it together. We identify a manager who leads the others, but they all take advantage of each other’s knowledge,” says Muhimba. That’s why it’s important to select trainees that are good fits for the program as well as compatible with each other “It’s really key to be able to match up the business owner’s experience with the maturity of the business training on offer. When interviewing entrepreneurs, the trainers will do a baseline assessment of their business and identify which kind of program they need,” says Perumalpillai. “You’re bringing people together that have a lot in common, which then evolves into a sort of peer network. It’s definitely encouraging for us to see how that shared expertise scales.”

For Petrina Ndapanda Mathews, a jewelry designer from Windhoek, Namibia, the communal exchange was one of the highlights of her training. “You’re not just learning from the trainers but you’re also learning from the other ladies in the program, some of whom have been in business for several years. And there’s nothing as amazing as knowledge from experience. Just the fact that you can sit with all these women and be able to learn from them—I felt like I was with my mothers and aunts who were saying, ‘Don’t worry, I’ll hold your hand—let’s go!’”

Another important aspect of the AWOME model is that the relationships don’t end after the training is over. “When the training is complete, the trainer converts into mentoring mode,” says Perumalpillai. “They develop an action plan with the students and then they go back to do check-ups on their progress against that plan.”

“This is something that is unique with our packages,” says Muhimba. “Most other programs have you come in Monday through



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Friday and get a set of slides and then you're done. We continue to follow up through WhatsApp groups, asking them how things are going, if they're implementing the action plan and if they're not, we try to identify why and explore if they need different training or some other kinds of support. And, yes, you get a small percentage of women who are uncomfortable and want to run away from you, but then you have other ones who will actually send you a text before you go to see them to tell you what they have implemented and what they need guidance on. It motivates them to keep going, because they know that we're not letting go of their hands."

And that support is sorely needed. Besides financial and logistical difficulties, female micro-entrepreneurs also battle a culture of deeply ingrained sexism. "Being a woman business owner is really, really challenging," says Mathews. "There are a lot of people who try to undermine you." She describes belittling experiences that range from customers in her shop refusing to believe that she's the proprietor, to having

to fight haggling suppliers, to being sexually harassed by men in positions of power. "People are constantly trying to talk you down, telling you that a woman with her own business can't survive. But I think that all these challenges shape your character. Because when you decide to go ahead and

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do it anyway, it gives you a lot of integrity."

The AWOME program models have been carefully designed to help the trainees push back on this kind of discrimination and sexism. "The training isn't just about the technical side," says Perumalpillai. "It's not just about how to do accounts and learning about costing and stock taking. It's also about boosting confidence and life skills. One of the things we have worked really hard on is making sure that the leadership training is done through a lot of interactive role modeling. And that does build people's belief in themselves and enables them to come out of the program with tools to not only promote themselves and their products, but also to stand up for their interests. How do you negotiate, how do you push back on people who are trying to take advantage of you?"

In a climate that is less than encouraging for female entrepreneurship, having a passion for your work is an important success factor according to Muhimba: "One thing I tell the

students is that it is advisable to start your business in something that you're passionate about. You shouldn't decide that you want to do, for example, brickmaking, just because you saw another person doing it. When you start in a field that you're passionate about, it guides you, it leads you, and it helps you want to keep going when you don't have backup support."

Nevertheless, to Mokgobu and Mathews the rewards of entrepreneurship are far greater than the costs. "I would tell any young woman who wanted to be a farmer to believe in herself, to go for her dream and that women can do anything. We don't need men to be successful," says Mokgobu. Mathews' passion for her work has even given her a side career as a motivational speaker. "I tell young people that if you dream it and you desire it, you can achieve it. There is nothing that is impossible. If God gave you the idea, it means he has also given you the ability to realize it. So if you can think about it, you will have the potential to do it."

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