

Mutekanga uses crochet to empower women

Ireen Samalie Mutekanga's journey began in 2020 after the Covid-19 lockdown when she witnessed school-going girls falling pregnant. She teamed up with her cousin and they trained people interested in crochet. Today, they boast more than 230 members.



BY GLORIA IRANKUNDA

On a hot afternoon in Kasangati, Wakiso District, Ireen Samalie Mutekanga sits with five women, their hands skillfully knitting, and crocheting colourful patterns from yarn. Around them, a stand holds ponchos and wooden organisers neatly arranged with handcrafted bags, earrings, clothes, and sandals, all made of yarn.

They are part of Crocheters' Association Uganda, a group of 59 women dedicated to transforming yarn into art and, in the process, changing their lives.

Genesis

Mutekanga's journey began in 2020 after the Covid-19 lockdown when she witnessed school-going girls in her community falling pregnant.

"I was staying on Salaama Road and saw boys loitering in my neighbourhood. This lifestyle led to girls falling pregnant. I knew I had to do something," she recalls.

Determined to create a meaningful solution, she teamed up with her cousin, who was already making crochet bags. They gathered nine girls from their neighbourhood, designed a flyer, and posted it on Facebook, inviting trainees to learn the craft.

Mutekanga, who was then working as an information management officer at the Milton Obote Foundation, had last done crochet work in primary school. She hoped to relearn the skill from her cousin and make an impact.

Challenges, turning point

Mutekanga and her cousin rented a space at Nommo Gallery in Nakasero, Kampala, using participant fees to cover trainer and venue costs.

While excited about the growing interest, Mutekanga soon realised the transport and rent costs which quickly consumed any potential profits.

"We paid Shs 20,000 per day for rent. My husband supported me financially, though he initially questioned the sustainability of the initiative," she recalls.

Juggling her job and her growing brand was challenging. However, she found strategies to reach more women, the most effective being social media.

"To maximise my time, I stopped driving to work and started using public transport, allowing me to work on projects during the commute. I also used my lunchtime to complete tasks, and I dedicated two hours at night to ensure I met my commitments," she recalls.

During the 2021 Covid-19 lockdown, Mutekanga came across the Academy for Women Entrepreneurs' Dream Builder course. At the end of the programme, participants had to pitch their business ideas, and she emerged third, winning funding for her initiative.

She initially planned to register Youth Dream Up as a social enterprise but was advised to register it as an NGO instead. Determined to press on, Mutekanga founded Ireen Samalie Dream World Limited, an NGO under which the Youth Dream Up Initiative would operate.

"I could not let go of the initiative because people already knew it. I also wanted to earn some money as I impact women's lives," she explains.

Expanding vision

Mutekanga continued her entrepreneurial journey, joining programmes such as the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders, a flagship programme of the US government's Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI). She leveraged these opportunities to expand her skills and reach out to more communities.

During a YALI business course in Nairobi, she received game-changing advice.

"I was told to step out of production and focus on the market as my products were good and would attract customers," she recounts.

Inspired, she returned to Uganda, determined to grow the initiative. Realising the need for a structured network, she posted on Facebook, calling for fellow crocheters. This led to the forma-

Some of the members of the Crocheters Association working the yarn. PHOTOS/ISAAC KASAMANI

tion of a WhatsApp group, which quickly grew to 16 members. They held a meeting, defined their objectives, and agreed on a membership fee. The first 10 members became the founding team of Crocheters' Association Uganda, they officially registered the association in November 2021.

"We started training in schools and refugee camps. We have worked with five schools, including Bigyera Junior School and two schools in Kyegegwa Refugee Camp. We also trained women's groups in Kakiri, Wakiso, Entebbe, and the Milton Obote Foundation," she explains.

Creating thriving community

The association's WhatsApp group membership has grown to more than 230 members with 59 committed, paying members. The group collaborates on bulk orders, attends exhibitions, and collectively secures market opportunities.

Apart from membership fees, the association sustains itself by deducting 10 percent from every sale. These funds are deposited on the association's account for operational costs. Additionally, they sell branded T-shirts and other merchandise to generate revenue.

"We now have meetups, where members come together to network and share ideas. Some members have even started exporting their products," she shares proudly.

In November 2024, Crocheters' Association Uganda secured a permanent space for the association, marking a new chapter.

Juggling work, business

At Milton Obote Foundation, Mutekanga has transitioned from the information management office to the marketing department as she felt she had more to offer in the business field.

Managing work, business, and personal life remains challenging, but she has established boundaries. Week-ends are reserved for family, and during school holidays, she takes days off to

spend time at home.

"I have structured things to ensure smooth operations. We have a committee with directors and founding members, each assigned a specific role, such as finance, membership, marketing, and execution," she explains.

She has also benefited from other opportunities. In June last year, she traveled to the US and was assigned to Jackson State University in Mississippi for a business and leadership course.

"My employer supported my participation since it aligned with my role in marketing and business investment," she shares.

Navigating the market

One major hurdle has been the undervaluation of handmade products. Mutekanga and her team are now focused on branding and educating customers on the effort and craftsmanship involved.

"Accessing quality materials on the local market remains a challenge. The yarn available on the market such as Robin and Winter Queen, does not meet international standards since most clients prefer 100 percent cotton. However, pure cotton yarn is scarce and costly. Yet, the customers are not willing to pay as much," Mutekanga explains.

To navigate this, the crocheters educate clients. They present different yarn options: one of superior quality and another more affordable. This way, customers make informed decisions. They also label products clearly, indicating whether they are 100 percent acrylic or contain cotton. Despite members of the association being scattered across the country, they send their products through bus services.

"We carefully track every product that comes in, noting the colours, quantities, and creators. If a customer buys a scarf, for example, I know exactly who made it and ensure they receive their payment," Mutekanga shares.

Road ahead

Looking ahead, Mutekanga envisions



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