



NJOKI KARUOYA } GENDER AGENDA

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Women Empowerment

How more shoes equal more cash

When people talk about Masai Mara, topmost on our minds is the human-wildlife conflict. The roaming Maasai and their livestock have to contend daily with hungry roaming predators that are just too eager to sink their sharp teeth into their vulnerable herbivores.

For years, the Kenya Wildlife Service and friends of wildlife conservation has fought to protect their animals, while the pastoralists vow to do whatever it takes to protect their cows and goats.

I was at the Masai Mara over the long Jamhuri weekend where I met William Kikanoi ole Pere, a community leader. He told me that when a lion or any other predator attacks their livestock, they men go out, look for it and when they find it, kill it.

JUNGLE COUNTRY

This is jungle country, where the maddening destruction of civilisation has not yet descended. The Maasai continue with their lives just as they have for decades, with their livelihood still revolves around livestock and tourism, when they are lucky. Sadly, this does not do much to remove them from the cycle of desperate poverty that grips most of them.

So I was pleasantly surprised when I met Rosa Escandell Almecija, the president of AdCam, a Spanish organisation that mainly works in developing countries. Rosa first came to Kenya at the invitation of Ann Njogu, the chairperson of Centre for Rights Education and Awareness (Creaw).

The two women met in New York about six years ago. Ann had gone there for a meeting while Rosa was working on a project with the



Pikolinos Shoes President Juan Peran (left) with William Kikanoi and Rosa Almecija. INSET: A Maasai woman beads a leather strap for a shoe. (PHOTO: MARCOS VEGA/COURTESY)

United Nations. They got talking and the germ of an idea to work with Kenya's Maasai community was born.

Today, that idea has grown into a phenomenal project and it is taking place right in the middle of the Masai Mara Game Reserve, at a place one would be tempted to call "the middle of nowhere".

In there, a new school — Adcam Mara Vision School — has been built for the children. It stands on ten acres donated by Kikanoi. Currently, the classes go up to Standard Three, and the plan is to gradually build more classes up to Standard Eight, and hopefully a secondary school.

This will undoubtedly equip the children of the Mara with education they much need for their own development, and keep them away from the fields by occupying their time and energy.

I was happy to see as many girls as there are boys, which goes to show that despite being true to their culture, the Maasai have come to appreciate the importance of education for all their children.

INSPIRATIONAL PROJECT

The most inspiring project by Adcam, however, is the empowering of the Maasai women by getting them to own their own money. While Rosa was in Kenya, she marvelled

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at the intricate beadwork common with the Maasai. She was also moved by the way women tended to sit together in groups to do the beadwork.

This activity is a social pillar of the Maasai women and she wondered how she can find markets for their work, preferably a foreign shop in Europe. She returned to Spain and identified one outlet and came back to Kenya to train groups of women living in the Mara how to craft beadwork for shoes that would meet international standards.

The training was intensive as it required the women to be extra careful and pay particular attention to detail — a single mistake would cause their work to be rejected.

For this initial training period that lasted two years, Rosa spent her own money, to the tune to about 10,000

EMPOWERMENT

Adcam is most active in the field of women and micro-credits through aiding production co-operatives in developing countries, where women are trained for a trade and given a new opportunity in the way they work using micro-credits.

Euros (Sh1 million), but just before the consignment could be shipped out, the owners of the shop who had agreed to buy and sell the merchandise backed out, leaving Rosa with hundreds of disappointed women — and merchandise.

Down but not out, Rosa went back to Spain to seek another partner. And she did, the form of Pikolinos Shoes President Juan Peran.

In brief, the women are provided with the leather of which they sew the beads with intricate detail. Once complete, the leather straps are shipped off to Spain where the final assembly is done and the shoes made and sold.

Each shoe bears the label of the woman who designed it, and she is paid handsomely for it. So more shoes equal more money.

Catch up with me next Wednesday to know more. ■