

Maasai women reap from beadwork, Kenya.

From Olkiombo airstrip, my journey to Basecamp Maasai Mara has just began, I am not on holiday, but the wild and spectacular environment sets in the feeling. In a green land cruiser, open tented windows, together with other guests who have just landed from US, we drive through the a conservancy bordering the famous Maasai Mara National reserve. Beautiful landscapes of the savanna, River Talek and the tented atmosphere gives us a nice relaxing feeling with a close view of different species of wildlife. Here I get to feel different adventure of the wild, birds of different colours, gazelles, impalas, Elephants, Giraffes and lions give me a warm welcome. I am on a mission to meet these women who are changing the Maasai community in a very special way, through their dedication by working as artisans.

We are lead through a trail that leads us to a grass thatched house which shares a compound with Basecamp Maasai Mara camp; famously know for hosting Barrack Obama, current president of US. Open, spacious and full of beads, leather and plastics materials. Women gathered, talking in low tones while seated on floor with their legs stretched, all busy working on their products. I get to understand how the Maasai community places women in the society.

A community that gives a woman no opportunity to own anything, women are meant to give birth and take care of their husbands and livestock. Women undergo Female Genital Mutilation in this type of community. There are early and forced marriages which some people here still hold on. Girl child issues have taken a different turn, according to these aged women who call themselves Basecamp Maasai Brand. Women education is still a luxury; they are believed to be a source of wealth through pride price. However, from different villages in the Mara, women who belong to different self – help groups have come together with one mission and goal-empower themselves economically. Women from 30 years

and above, all seated down, with beaded bracelets, necklaces and bald heads welcome me with a smile. Among them is a very old lady on her late seventies, she smile and greets me in Maasai , “Supai” .I get very curious about what exactly these women are doing, beads, leather materials and different types of materials are displayed down. Ambience of beads and other materials they are working with can only be heard. Through a translator I get to introduce myself to Nareyio Koshal, a widow and a mother of four. She is beading a bracelet and she smiles as we start our conversation. She tells me she comes from a neighboring village and she has come to do the bead work which earns her some money for a living.”I have benefited a lot through this project, as a woman I had nothing of my own, since I joined these group of women, I have bought twenty goats and ten more Nkishu (Nkishu – maasai name for cattle) of my own”. She happily tells. She further confirms how she has managed to take her kids in a boarding school. Something she is very proud of as a Maasai woman. Next to her is Nesalye Murunya, in her early 50’s, a mother of nine from Kolong village. She shyly greets me in Swahili holding a leather beaded belt which is decorating with Kenyan flag colours – Red, Green and Black. I ask her who she is making the belt for. She tells me they have an order from the Czech Republic, which is due in the next two days. She similarly adds how she has managed to educate five of her kids, who are in a secondary boarding school. “Basecamp Maasai Brand has helped me get my own money through the beading project, I have my own livestock I bought and have my own money now”. Several women in the group share the same sentiments about their economic growth in the tough cultured Maasai Community. It was very challenging when the project was initiated; men could not allow their women to join. A strategy was used to bring the men on board to do the beading. Jemimah Sairowua, project Manager, Basecamp Maasai Brand, confirms. She says the men came on board and it dint take long before they gave up on it. They were not patient, as beading needs a lot of patience. They left and allowed their women to start working on the beading .The project was started in 2003 with the aim of empowering disadvantaged women’s groups in the Talek Region of Maasai Mara. They maintain and enhance handicraft skills,

knowledge and designs of the Maasa's famous bead and leather work .The group works with over 100 women drawn from Ntipilikwani, Kolong, Kimunyak, Eleleru and Olekosoe villages.These women belong to six women groups, the highest having 36 and lowest 18 members. The groups are divided to come once per week at the Basecamp Maasai Brand centre. They also have a day set for the group to go to the local market to sell their products. Products made range from laptop bags, wallets, beaded bracelets, belts, pencils cases, necklaces among others. They use strings from old wires, recycled tins of insecticides and strings from food bags. According to Jemimah Sairowua, manager, eighty percent of their sales are made online. They have a working website which links them with customers from Norway, US, Sweden, S.Africa, UK, Germany and Czech Republic. Each product is tagged by the artisan, name and group . Each member gets 75% cost of each item they have made, less the production cost . For example, a bracelet goes for 700 ksh . Basecamp Explorer, who manage the Basecamp Maasai Brand are in charge of the sourcing of materials and managing the entire project. This strong working relation has managed to allow Basecamp Explorer to monitor mothers who have girls and has helped them improve on girl child education. They now boast of having the highest number of girls enrolling in school through their efforts. Women are also encouraged to save money and borrow through microfinance institutions.Petronillah Gichimu, Marketing and Sales Manager, Basecamp explorer , says women have the power to use their money. They have been advised on how to invest in projects like solar energy which helps them in the villages. She notes of how women get to network and share ideas when they come together, this has helped improve on social empowerment. Maasai culture has be strengthened too. The women don't know how to read and write but through the help of Jemimah, they have an online platform which has a catalogue which allows to place orders." At the moment we are working on an order from the Czech Republic, worth 140, 000ksh", she says. They send the products via DHL and EMS courier service. They get opportunities to attend international exhibitions, where they get to display their products and sell their Maasai brand. Basecamp Maaasai Brand is visible internationally,

they are members of Cooperation of Fair Trade in Africa (COFTA) since 2006 and full members of World Trade Fair Organization since 2011. The women get to mitigate on climate change effects by planting trees in their homes.

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