

Capable Women To Improve Women's Lives

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Bringing pieces of fabric together with the aid of her sewing needle and thread has helped Tsholofelo Semauswane put food on the table for three decades.

While fabrics and garments generally present sad moments for those whose immediate skin companions had been nothing better than thread bare rags, they have played an innumerable role in her life.

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Hand sewing German print garments; widely known as leteisi and selling it to women in her home village was her form of supplementing her husband's meagre income. Through Batswana's self acclaimed national dress, money was transferred into her wallet which translated to food on the table and it enabled her to buy necessities for her school going children.

While the colours white, grey, navy and sky blue might not mean anything to many people; they mean a large-scale production for Semauswane. She started eking a living from the cloth in the 1980s. In 1993 new hope was vested into the business when she received a grant to buy machinery from the then Financial Assistance Policy- a government financing intervention. The intervention meant a graduation from using a domestic machine to an electric sewing machine and an expansion from being predominantly leteisi making to wedding gowns. Like other small businesses Dee Bee Fashions, as the business is called, has never seen much growth in terms of having profits being translated into investment.

"Yes, I have been in the business for quite some years now but I can't say there has been any progress, besides that I can buy food and other necessities," she says.

But can it be said that Semauswane, and the other six women who under the assistance of government have formed a cluster that will pilot the 2011 school uniform project are living in poverty? Theirs is yet another form of poverty. Michael Schmidt of frayintermedia said in a two days workshop on covering poverty, food security and social protection that, "their poverty might not be visible, but there is a poverty as Tsholofelo (Semauswane) and the other women are stuck. She doesn't have any investment from the profit generated by the business."

The seven women who were tailoring individually heeded the Trade and Industry ministry's plea for women in the garment business to form clusters or companies that would benefit from the government's move of consolidating the junior and senior secondary school uniform colours by 2011.

Capable Women, the group that Seamuswane and the other six women formed is still in a process to get registered. There is no doubt that Semauswane and her companions are indeed the capable women they call themselves, but lack of education is one of the major problems that loom above the 'unregistered business'.

"One of the delays in registering this company is that we have engaged somebody else who is well informed to go about the registration process," she alluded.

Yet another dimension of poverty, lack of education hampers this woman from fully participating in the country's social life.

These women who operate from the South East district Council stalls in Tlokweng believe the partnership is a good idea compared to individualism. As the group spokeswoman, Semauswane said with a collective effort they are going to produce on a large scale because through specialisation and division of labour the work can be done faster than at an individual level. Moreover, Semauswane said the company will also help fight poverty, as it will create employment opportunities for other citizens. Most interestingly, is the fact that the women are keen to transfer their sewing skills to the younger generation. Asked what the criterion for training will be, she said they will consider those who have interest in the craft. The biggest advantage she said is being a part owner of the company as it is also a long-term investment.

"Above all, the advantage of the company is that as shareholders we will have life long investment for ourselves and our off springs, it means a lot," she said. Capable Women is one of the 10 clusters countrywide that will benefit from the 2011 school uniform project. About 100 to 200 people are to benefit from this project. Principal Industrious Officer, in the Department of Industrial Affairs Banusi Mbaakanyi Jallow says they have met relevant stakeholders and agreed to reduce the colours that are being worn in junior and secondary schools from 16 to four, that is white, grey, navy and sky blue. Jallow said they selected the clusters through enquiring from school headmasters who their suppliers are mostly; from there they consulted the people and sold the idea of forming groups to produce school uniforms.

She said the government will help them set up, but ultimately leave the companies to the shareholders to run.

Asked how many are going to benefit from the project, Jallow said they are looking for about 10 to 20 people in each cluster.

"About 100 to 200 people I think," she says. Semauswane and other members of the 10 clusters will receive assistance from government in the form of training in areas of business management. They are also advised to state in any other form of assistance they require in their business plans.

"They have to state whether they need assistance in paying the staff, getting a manager or anything else," she says.

Jallow said they hope to start circulating the new uniform late 2010, and that in future they will look into consolidating the primary school uniform as well.

It remains to be seen whether Naledi Senior Secondary School and other senior and junior schools in Botswana will have a uniform by 2011. If the project sees the light of the day, the colours white, grey, navy and sky blue will be money for Semauswane and fellow Capable Women.