

Curios and handicrafts not the way to equality in Africa

By [Devan Moonsamy](#)

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In an interview earlier this year, Jessica Horn, director of programmes at the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) voiced concern about the type of work African women are involved in, or, rather, the type of work that is thought to be suitable for them and into which they are often drawn due to low education levels.



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Jessica Horn said that economic empowerment initiatives too often teach women to make handicrafts such as cheap beaded jewellery. The same may be said for men who make wooden carvings which they try to sell on the roadside. These women and men tend to make low-priced goods and work for relatively low pay. They often also rely on seasonal work, only making sufficient income when enough tourists are around. They are thus stuck in informal and unprotected employment, or in the so-called 'gig economy'.

Echoes of colonial exploitation

The market is flooded with African curios and artworks made by the nameless or, sometimes, they may even be sold for high prices under someone else's name. Of course, the real creators aren't credited for their creations, and a fair income doesn't find its way to the creators either. If artworks don't sell, it is also the creators who end up taking the blame, and sometimes they are forced to pay for this, and even to dismantle their unappreciated artworks. This problem echoes colonial exploitation and disparities in power.

As an example, one South African has other artists paint for them and then their signature is stamped on each painting. The real artist remains nameless. In other cases, it may be, for example, rural women who are taught to bake cookies or recycle materials into artworks for sale in the cities. On the surface, there is nothing wrong with this. Teaching baking and craft-making can mean some income for a person who had no chance at education and very few employment prospects.

However, as Jessica Horn emphasises, worthwhile projects must lead to increased income generation and greater political participation. They must have large-scale potential, and they must lead to women having significant economic and political power, enabling them to advocate for their political rights and engage on various platforms. Women must be able to grow their income over time, not remaining stagnant and stuck on low-wage work which benefits others more than it does themselves.

Fighting for artists' rights

Kabelo Malatsie, director of Visual Arts Network of South Africa, fights for artists' rights and is working to end the exploitation of struggling artists. She says that exploitation is rife and, in the fine art world, that there may be a mere 15 'good' galleries in the whole country.

Among the concerns of activists like Horn and Malatsie are that artists need to be creative, working very hard to be original, have good administrative skills, and time to dedicate to both, as well as a support structure, and funding to get their artworks in the public eye. They also need to be adept in the use of social media, have good interpersonal skills, networks and confidence. Many artists can't manage all this, they lose hope, and end up leaving the industry altogether, especially if they are tired of being invisible. Partners, commissioners, and employers of artists who do have certain other skills and funding end up taking all the credit for the artists' work.

Horn thus wants to change the traditional development model which is intended to promote women's equality and empowerment. She explains: "Nobody likes being oppressed, but sometimes resisting carries too much loss, stigma, so a lot of people fear that." On the other hand, those who need to be resisted are more confident and have no qualms about using others. She thus concludes that "it's about being able to meet that attitude". This requires completely different skills to those traditionally taught to women. Rather than teaching handicrafts (alone), women need confidence-building, administrative and business skills, entrepreneurial skills, job skills to help secure employment, and social media, communication and technology use skills. Training may need to begin with literacy and numeracy in some cases as well.

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