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Moramanga, Madagascar

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In Madagascar, women face economic and political exclusion, and too often bear the weight of stereotypes and socio-cultural norms that hold them back.

Madagascar has one of the highest rates of sexual violence in the world: a third of women aged 15 to 49 have experienced at least one form of gender-based violence. In addition, almost four in ten women marry before the age of 18. In terms of work, men earn 37% more than women. Women are also more affected by unemployment than men: they are 20% more likely to be unemployed than men. At a young age girls are expected to offer sex to village men and passing strangers as a “right of passage.” Men will pursue these young girls because they are considered “fresh” or “new” and “untouched,” consequently, the number of single mothers with many children conceived with different men who do not help raise them, are startling. It is not uncommon for mothers to turn to exchanging sexual favors for money to feed their families.

In conjunction with Malalatiiana Rakotondramanana (Malala), a community leader and activist in her village, Moramanga, we have designed a future Handicraft Training Center. This center would reinforce the technical skills in crafting (braiding the rope, construction of baskets, sewing, embroidery, woodwork, handbags etc.) and business management skills. The workspace of 10m x 20m, will be fully equipped with the necessary materials, and provide enough space for women to gather and work on their crafts. The completed crafts will then be sold at markets around Madagascar, offering women a sustainable and entrepreneurial option to provide for themselves and their families. This center will teach the skills necessary to increase their household income, and skills that make them employable in ways that are not only relevant to handicrafts.

Malala has gathered a group of 20 women that call themselves ASMAF. These women have agreed to donating, preparing, and caring for the land in which the workspace is to be built also, to maintain the building and workspace through regular cleaning, waste management, and machinery upkeep. They will assist with the construction of their workspace. The appropriate permits have been obtained and the community and local government fully support these efforts. The group was named to create anonymity for the safety of the workers.

This space will not only benefit the 20 talented and inspired women, but they also plan to give back to the community in a variety of ways such as trash clean up, tree planting, etc. The training center will be a space for women to participate in classes that will provide them with practical skills in improving crafts, English language, math and business taught by volunteer teachers. Given that the women of this

organization were young mothers and were unable to pursue their education, this will not only be a space to help women provide for their families, but also to empower them in their studies and create a support system. This opportunity will empower the youth of this community, as these mothers will be able to spend money on their children's' education so that their daughters can become strongly independent and educated women, and their sons, educated, respectful and responsible young men, breaking the vicious cycle of promiscuity among men and teenage pregnancy in Moramanga.

Upon receiving the grant, the workspace will be prepped and constructed, while simultaneously ordering the furniture and gathering the necessary equipment to be put into the workspace following the completion of the construction. Once the space is created, these women will commence their crafts and selling as soon as possible. The location of the future training center is ideally located between many tourist destinations and ASMAF has transportation plans to transport their work between various locations. Moramanga itself is visited regularly by foreigners ready to spend their money on handicrafts.

As an organization, they strive to improve their skills in their crafts, which they will do through various classes to enhance their technique. However, the biggest skill we hope to improve is financial management. We will be teaching the women simple business skills such as budgeting and which they can implement to their finances at home.

ASMAF has a budget laid out and they have predicted sales numbers by comparing them to vendors that sell similar products. As a maintenance plan, ASMAF has planned to clean the workspace daily, mend broken furniture promptly, and call on the masons should there be any structural damage. Malala, a successful handicraft business owner who closed her business to focus on serving the women of Moramanga in a greater capacity, will be the primary person in charge of financial management, along with two additional women to create checks and balances. Malala's success in her handicraft business of over a decade, provides the money management skills necessary to ensure the long term sustainability of this project.

Overall, by empowering women you transform a community. This building will create a place of hope and happiness. Women will have the opportunity to improve their skills and learn new things like math and English. They will learn the importance of giving back to your community. This project is sustainable not only for the women but also for their children. By offering their children a chance at education and a world outside of their small village, it gives children the luxury of dreaming their wildest dreams. As we all know, there is no greater investment than pursuing the equality of women around the world.