

Handicraft Training Center
Moramanga, Madagascar
Middlebury Institute of International Studies
Kimberly Arevalo – USA, Middlebury Institute of International Studies

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. Due to a culture of promiscuity among men many women are left to care for their children on their own, leaving many vulnerable women and children. Building the Handicraft Training Center will provide a safe space where women of Moramanga, Madagascar will be able to learn crafts and sell their work at local markets. It will teach women entrepreneurial skills, leadership, and business literacy that could be transferred in other ways, skills that will increase their household income and make them employable in ways that are not only relevant to this project.

The plan was to complete the construction of the training center and have about 20 women, most of which are single mothers, working and learning by the end of Summer 2021. We raised an additional \$1400 through crowdfunding so from the beginning of the project we had a total of \$11400. The idea of this project was inspired by my aunt who sells handicrafts in Guatemala and works with different women in diverse regions to supply her business. Coincidentally, I had met a Peace Corps volunteer in South Dakota that had just returned from Madagascar. She talked about the gender inequalities in Madagascar and she mentioned her host mom was a community leader and activist for women in Madagascar named Malala. Malala is a single mother who made a living by selling her crafts at a market in Madagascar. Together, we brought the Handicraft Training Center idea to life.

The issue that the Handicraft Training Center hopes to address is the inaccessibility to employment and resources to women that are deemed unemployable by Madagascar standards. The Handicraft Training Center will provide a chance to a better life for themselves and their children. In Madagascar, women are not perceived to be good leaders or capable to hold high positions in jobs. A large percentage of women are married by the age of 18 and only a small percentage complete secondary education. Women in Madagascar are also having children at a very young age, stunting the possibilities of continuing their education. Lastly, it is common for men to have multiple partners in Madagascar, however, there is no expectation that they must care for their partners and various children, leaving women at a disadvantage. I believe all of the reasons listed are the primary reasons for the need to address this issue.

I chose Moramanga, Madagascar because of Malala. Malala had recently quit her job to help the women in her community. She is very passionate and ready to work. I met Malala through the returned Peace Corps volunteer named Mackenzie. Malala was ready to work on the ground and she already had the land to start construction right away. I also chose Madagascar because I knew with the uncertainty in a pandemic I did not know if I would actually be able to travel anywhere so I knew I needed someone reliable and responsible that could help me on the ground.

I did feel as if my project was not going to work, especially at the beginning of summer. Malala lives in Moramanga which is a very small and impoverished village. They struggle with obtaining electricity, running water, and using the internet is a new concept for them. At first, we were meeting with Malala's sister-in-law named Mialy. Mialy was very helpful and most importantly, she spoke English and Malagasy perfectly so she served as a translator and interpreter throughout the project. Mialy lived in the capital, Antananarivo, Madagascar which is about three hours from Malala. I got in contact with Mialy because of Mackenzie, the Peace Corps volunteer who knew her personally and assured she would be an asset to the team. We agreed that Mialy would be the point of contact because there was no way for us to connect with Malala in Moramanga due to the lack of a cellphone and internet service. Mialy was also to receive the money sent and we agreed she would travel to give the money to Malala.

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Mialy was receptive and ready to help however she could. We sent two money transfers to Mialy and it seemed everything had gone smoothly but one day we got an unexpected call from a lady named Fafa who is Malala's friend. She mentioned that Malala was in her office that day very upset. It turns out Mialy had given the money to her husband, Malala's brother, to give to Malala but he was refusing to give her all the money and wanted to do as he pleased with the project. This is when we also found out that the land we were told we could build on belonged to Malala's brother not to Malala. I asked for construction to be halted until we could figure out what to do. It turns out that piece of land was a part of an old family feud. We asked Malala to get the land title under her name. She sent us a document that her brother gave her that supposedly mentioned her ownership of the land. However, Mackenzie and I had it translated through a third party and the document stated that Malala only had permission to build but that the land was still not technically hers.

We knew we could not trust her brother to fully allow Malala to use that land, which we explained to Malala. Malala agreed to have the building built on a lot of land next to her house, so we moved all the supplies to that area. We also bought Malala a phone and a phone plan and found a bank close to her that we could do money transfers to. After this, Mialy was only used for interpretation and translation but no longer as a point of contact for the project. This was probably the biggest challenge we faced and I thought the project was not going to work, this challenge is also a great example of the challenges in communicating with people. There were other times that were difficult throughout the summer but we have successfully been able to overcome them.

In addition to defining peace as a place or period without war, I would define peace as also being a state of feeling tranquility. A person cannot be tranquil if they feel insecure; for example food insecurity, safety, or continuous violations of their human rights. I like to believe my project will contribute to peace in the long-term. This building is here to stay and we are trying to train and educate women on how we can do that. One example is having democratically elected leaders in the training center so if women leave their can be someone to replace them. We also instill the need for open communication so the women want to continue using the space and equipment without conflict.

Major changes were not able to be implemented this summer because we were busy with the construction of the building. Since I was leading this project remotely we made sure to sign Malala up for leadership training classes that have gone very well and I have enjoyed seeing how much she has evolved, she is even learning English. With the new phone that has internet she now has a plethora of information at her fingertips which I have seen her use to her advantage. Once the construction is completed, which we hope will occur in the next two weeks, we will start helping around 20 women at the training center to learn new techniques and also be a resource for the community. I hope to see more female entrepreneurs and in the long-term I hope to see them grow into leaders outside of the handicraft training center.

This project made me realize that there are true activists all around the world even in a small village like Moramanga. Many times people think of citizens in developing countries as defenseless, however, that is not the case, there are great leaders and activists all around the world. Malala has been a great inspiration, quitting her job to help the women around her even though she has few resources is admirable. I also think I have become a better leader and more patient and understanding. I have learned what style of leader I am which has been incredibly rewarding.

My project was most significantly impacted by the pandemic. Materials were a lot more expensive than was initially accounted for because building supplies have surged in price. Mackenzie and I were also unable to travel to Madagascar because of closed borders so we had to do everything remotely which added a barrier to the project. On the bright side because it was done remotely we had enough money to cover the construction costs that were about three times the initial quote. Because everything was done remotely we had to ensure that the community leader had the necessary technology. We also had to

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depend on Malala much more than we had anticipated which was difficult. Moramanga was so rural that communicating with Malala was hard and was only possible when Mialy was available. The time zone was also a challenge because we had to account for three different time zones.

We were able to advance by setting up goals for the week and setting deadlines for certain things. We also had open communication and I always kept my phone close by to be available for questions or guidance. What I did notice is that Malala felt as though she had to solve everything on her own because she was the only one there which I am certain was difficult for her. We had to explain we were here to help and give ideas to solve different problems that arose.

My advice to leading remote projects would be to have a community leader as passionate and trustworthy as Malala. There is no possible way this could have been done without her. I would also recommend establishing open communication with your team. Most importantly, I would recommend you have an interpreter at every meeting so nothing is missed in what was said.

Within the next couple of weeks we hope to install the windows and doors of the building. Moramanga is a very rural area so there is not enough electricity to power the tools needed to install these items. We are in the process of acquiring a generator. Once the doors and windows are installed, we can move forward with finishing the floor which should not take more than a couple of days. We hope to have the place fully furnished with tables, chairs, and all the supplies needed to sew. I hope to send updated pictures of the completed project within the next three weeks.

Update October 2, 2021

The project has been completed and we have high hopes for the long-term effects of this center. We have set up both long-term and short-term goals. It is a difficult time for everyone globally given the pandemic and closed borders, however, we are strategizing to think of ways to stay afloat and positive during this time. For many women this is a dream come true and they are so excited to start learning and creating. Everyone in the community is still in shock and everyone has so many questions but our team will be available for guidance or advice as long as is needed.

Team Leader: Kimberly Arevalo, arevalokis@outlook.com

“My experience in Madagascar gave me hands-on experience on international development and the opportunity to implement what I am currently learning in my master’s program. This training center will educate and positively impact the lives of women by teaching them valuable skills that they can hopefully use in areas outside of this project.”

Team Member: Mackenzie Lien, m.lien@gmail.com

“I’m so excited that this project was able to come to fruition! Because of the funds, we are not only going to start changing the lives of these 20 women and their families but for Moramanga and surrounding areas in Madagascar. Hopefully creating a wave!”

Team Member: Malala Rakotondramanana, asmafproject@gmail.com

“Through this project we are supporting more prosperous and equal societies. It creates jobs for myself and women in my community which is part of my vision to contribute to the development of women in Moramanga.”

Team member: Mialy Rakotondramanana, mialysoeursule@gmail.com

“I really want to empower Malala and her team till my last breath because it is near and dear to Malala’s heart and she mentions great things and the lessons she has learned.”

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