

The Maasai Women Development Organization Teaching Case

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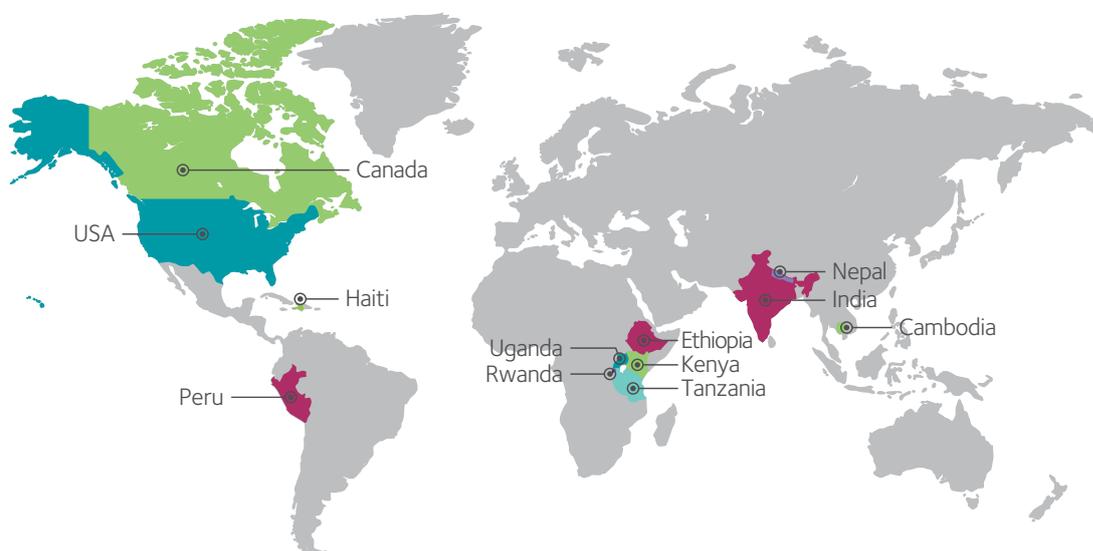
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Setting the scene

Kathleen McLaughlin, President of the Walmart Foundation, looked over the final numbers for the Empowering Women Together project and prepared to make her decision. Four years earlier, Walmart had undertaken several women's empowerment programs: a training program for retail workers in Asia, a support program for women farmers in Africa and Central America, and an active encouragement effort to support the women-owned businesses already supplying the world's largest retailer. Nearly all had been successful, some of them surprisingly so. However, the small Empowering Women Together project, which had first seemed to promise an innovative way to help women struggling in every corner of the earth, might need to be shut down, despite intensive effort.

Empowering Women Together (EWT) had been envisioned as an incubation system that would help women ramp up small businesses by selling their wares through an online portal marked especially as a women's effort. In the first few months, the EWT team had enthusiastically recruited more than 30 small businesses in 12 countries across four continents. The companies thus collected produced a range of products from baking mixes to earrings to toys, but most of the objects were in the highly seasonal and style-conscious apparel and housewares categories.



A few of the EWT businesses in North America had proven successful and were already selling in stores. However, integrating the developing country businesses into the Walmart system had proven extremely difficult. Merely bringing operations up to a level that could meet the Walmart ethical audit, which sets safety and labor standards for all suppliers, had put a serious strain on some of the businesses. Most of the producers had little experience with the American market and therefore found it difficult to design products that would appeal to Walmart's consumers. Those who could design stylish goods often found it impossible to produce a timely shipment that would meet quality standards, even for a small order. EWT's tiny staff had worked long hours trying to solve problems thousands of miles away and they were often exhausted—the time crunch for managing this program had been severe. In the end, though Walmart's low price point placed added pressure on the transaction, the design and production problems were the main barrier.

Looking down a list of EWT's unsold inventory, Kathleen's eyes came to rest on several sets of necklaces from the Maasai Women Development Organization (MWEDO) in Tanzania, still sitting in the warehouse after two years, even though the price now offered was below cost. Somehow, those necklaces seemed to summarize the whole EWT story.

The Maasai

The Maasai are a semi-nomadic pastoralist people who live in and around some of the most important wildlife preserves in eastern Africa. Indeed, because of the prodigious tourist traffic in the area, the image of the tall Maasai warrior, wrapped in a red cloth, carrying a long spear, and festooned with beads, is well known to many in developed countries. In truth, however, the Maasai live in desperate poverty. The advance of modern notions of property ownership and land use has destroyed their livelihood, in which they grazed cattle across open pastures.

Historically, the Maasai were a fierce and proud warrior people who considered themselves superior to all the other tribes in the region. They have maintained their culture despite hardship and actually led the effort in the United Nations to provide protection for the cultures of “indigenous peoples.”¹ A particularly important aspect of Maasai culture is the elaborate beading they produce for rites of passage. The bead trade, which is the oldest form of exchange in human history, once wrapped the globe, and much of the traffic went through eastern Africa. Some of the oldest archaeological finds of beads are near the Maasai lands and the Maasai women, who do the beading, have long been known for their exquisite work, admired as much by other local tribes as by foreigners.

The culture of the Maasai, however, includes practices that treat females poorly, often posing human rights violations. The Maasai practice polygamy, with the men living together in a separate dwelling and the women living in very small satellite huts nearby. Men control all cattle, the tribe’s main store of wealth. Women own nothing and are kept close to home, punished with violence for straying or failing to perform their allotted tasks, which includes doing all the building, milking cattle, and minding children.

Besides cattle, the Maasai value children and so their practices are designed to maximize fertility. Maasai males marry fairly late, in their mid-20s, but females are married as soon as they menstruate. Unmarried men are allowed to have sex only with girls who have not yet menstruated. The Maasai practice female genital cutting, a practice that is now illegal, but has gone underground and continues in secret. Some Maasai hide girls to cut them, at ever earlier ages, in order to avoid detection. First pregnancies come to girls when they are very young and their husbands are, always, much older. Repeated pregnancies then pose mortality risks to both the adolescent mothers and their children.

The males of the Maasai are increasingly alienated by their advancing impoverishment. Many mothers have been left to feed their families in whatever way they can manage. While men migrate with cattle or leave to find employment in towns, many Maasai women stay in the rural areas, managing the household by tending cash crops and selling food, charcoal, livestock, milk or beadwork. As one woman told us, “Mostly nowadays it’s women who take care of the family, very few men do take care of their children and give them food.” Women often turn to petty trade in order to provide food, going into the local market to sell small items that they grow, make, or buy. Yet because the Maasai have not supported female education, the women are often illiterate and innumerate.

¹ The Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007. The Declaration protects the rights of indigenous peoples to hold values and maintain practices that are different from others and unique to themselves without intervention from the state and without intrusion from propaganda that would incite prejudice against them. Under the Declaration, nations have an obligation to protect indigenous peoples from interference in the practices of their culture. However, the Declaration also insists on the human rights of individuals, even within indigenous groups, and, specifically states that “States shall take measures, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, to ensure that indigenous women and children enjoy the full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination” (Article 22) (www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf).

Most important, they usually do not speak the local lingua franca, Kiswahili, which makes them vulnerable to being cheated in the marketplace. They have no assets and no business skills. They do not know the few rights they have.

Maasai Women Development Organization (MWEDO)

As with other indigenous populations, such as the Native Americans in the US, a few Maasai have become educated and migrated into the cities. Three women who had acquired education and skills, but who wanted to give back to their community, founded the Maasai Women Development Organization (MWEDO). With significant assistance from international investors and charities, a collective of Maasai women was formed and programs begun in literacy, health, legal rights, and girls' education. However, after several years it became clear to the founders that the most crucial element, economic empowerment, was still missing. So, they began a number of income-generating activities.

The most obvious place to start was the beading. While many of the women had been trying to sell beads to tourists for years, their designs were still very traditional and the market for such handicrafts was saturated. Further, the path of the international bead trade has long since bypassed the Maasai, so the supply of beads was limited to a very small variety.

Slowly, the MWEDO founders formed relationships with small retailers in other countries, but they learned early that the product ideas coming from the international marketplace were often strange to the eyes on the ground, a challenge to the local beading techniques, and a puzzle for materials procurement. The designs could be adapted and materials procured with difficulty, but then trainers would have to circulate among the collective, who lived up to eight hours' drive away, and show the women how to make the fanciful objects.



Women would walk hours into village centers to learn the technique and collect the supplies. If they could, the women would stay and chat, but many had to return home quickly, so as not to face beatings when chores were not done or childcare lapsed. When a job was done, all the pieces would be collected and the women paid a price that had been agreed by the collective. The distances were so long, the hours so uncertain, and the process so scattered that MWEDO learned to build in long lead times so that shipment dates could be made.

Global Goods Partners

At a trade show in New York, MWEDO connected with Global Goods Partners, a nonprofit social enterprise that specializes in assisting grassroots women's organizations in learning to design and produce products for Western retailers. Global Goods Partners emphasizes the importance of making designs that appeal to a contemporary buyer, not just trying to force traditional crafts into a market that doesn't want them, and also of creating systems that will meet both quality and time specifications. To work with Global Goods, an organization must have a mission that empowers women, but they must also be serious about business.

When EWT met Global Goods Partners, they saw a partner who could supply beautiful goods, but also meet the intense challenge of mentoring and assisting distant craft groups. The three groups began working together on a product that could be made by the MWEDO artisans, but would appeal to American consumers at a price they would be willing to pay. In the end, the team produced a boxed set of earrings and a necklace, each priced at \$30.



The designs were simplified and updated versions of traditional Maasai beading, which tends to use closely set, uniform beads in primary colors. Though EWT felt the objects would appeal, they did have concerns that the price was too high for the Walmart shopper. Nevertheless, they kept the agreed price because it allowed the Maasai women to be paid at a pre-determined "fair rate" according to Global Goods Partners and agreed by the collective in Tanzania. However, Global Goods Partners took a cut to their usual margin in order to keep the final price down, in hopes that a successful transaction would lead to more work, not only for MWEDO but also for the many other organizations they represent around the world.

The Audit

Before the order could proceed, however, the scattered rural outposts of the Maasai Women Development Organization had to pass the Walmart ethical audit. The audit requires basic safety precautions, such as lighted exits and fire extinguishers. It also requires that all workers be documented to be of legal age to work, that hours and pay rates are standardized and recorded, that no children be present at work, that beaders use thimbles, and that workplaces have toilets.

As happened in developing country businesses throughout the system, the well-intentioned requirements of the audit brought the transaction to a full stop. Most of the Maasai women were meeting in open community shelters with thatch roofing. Many were working from home. The villages themselves had no electricity for a lighted exit or plumbing for a toilet. The Maasai simply go out into the wilderness when they need to go to the bathroom. The women have produced elaborate beading for thousands of years without thimbles and they do so while they watch children and cattle.

Fortunately, the third party auditors exercised judgment and required only the installation of fire extinguishers and a portable toilet. However, they were immovable when it came to documenting the ages of the workers. None of the women had identity cards and most did not know their own birthdate. Eventually, voting cards were used to document most of the women. However, many vulnerable mothers had to be turned away because they were not of age.

The Beads

Eventually, a shipment of boxed earrings and necklaces made it to the fulfillment center in San Bruno, California and appeared online for sale, each for \$30. And there they sat. For months. Through various promotions, the price was lowered and lowered again, to no avail. Two years later, the MWEDO jewelry still has not sold.

A quick look at the market for beaded jewelry online provides some insights. The pricing of the MWEDO beads was not particularly high, compared to similar objects available from other sellers, like the Women's Bean Project, another EWT business. And, actually, there are quite a number of beaded jewelry items available through outlets like J. Jill, Anthropologie, and Sundance that sell for ten times what EWT was asking for the MWEDO beads.

The differences between the MWEDO products and the others online are several. First, there is an ineffable difference in the design sensibility between even the low-priced beaded earrings and necklaces on, for instance, Etsy, and the ones made by MWEDO. Second, the higher-priced objects tend to use novelty beads, silver or gold beads, or semi-precious stones in a very limited way that adds to their appeal, but probably does not account for very much of the additional price. Such beads are not available to MWEDO. Third, each of the objects, again whether from Etsy or Anthropologie, is pointedly branded as a handcrafted item with a story and a name and even an ethos. The MWEDO story could produce a compelling brand, if product design could be brought in line with market tastes. While it is true that the shoppers on sites like Sundance are accustomed to paying more for the things they buy, the MWEDO goods are not moving at Walmart, even when deeply discounted, and the items seem unlikely to do better on a more fashion-oriented site.

Decision Point

The developing country suppliers in the EWT system all have a story similar to this one. The goods either don't sell, regardless of price, or cannot be produced to standard.² EWT has absorbed many losses as a result, but even these do not take into account the employee time, often done voluntarily on top of a "day job," to try to make the system work. Throughout the system, businesses come and go, churning because of failure to meet the audit, failure to produce the product, or failure to sell. The time has come for Kathleen to decide the fate of Empowering Women Together.

1. Is this program just a bad fit for Walmart? Should Kathleen shut it down?
2. Are there other ways to manage EWT that would allow it to continue?
3. What might Global Goods Partners do to help MWEDO ready their products for global markets?
4. Should MWEDO change its products and practices to better align with the tastes of international consumers?
5. Should MWEDO, Global Goods Partners, or Walmart be interfering in the culture of the Maasai by trying to empower the women?

This teaching case is taken from a research initiative undertaken by the University of Oxford to develop measurements for evaluating the impact of Walmart's Empowering Women Together (EWT) program.



² In the companion case study on Katchy Collections of Nairobi, we discuss the production difficulties in some detail. In that case, every product that was successfully produced and shipped to the US sold out very quickly. The problems were all about production difficulties.

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