

Empowerment through Elegant Designs: Perspectives inside a Bag Manufacturing Business by Some Batswana Women

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ABSTRACT

This chapter illustrates that self-empowerment cannot be achieved with strong doubts about capability or confidence. Rather, self-initiative is facilitated by 'power-within' that is, self-acceptance and self-confidence or the 'Yes-I-can-do-it' attitude. Having being laid off at work, women in this case started their own business of making elegant bags using skills they gained from the company that laid them off. These women were creative and had the right skills to make elegant bags. They also employed the right processes, structures and rationalities for the project to succeed. In sum, this chapter demonstrates that empowerment would not be effected in a vacuum; it always has to be backed up by policies, processes and rationalities for capacity-building, funding and other factors that can defeat project sustainability and success.

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment remains a complex issue throughout the world and especially in some developing countries like Botswana. The term empowerment is broadly defined here as "having ability to shape one's life" (Stern, Dethier & Rogers, 2005:102). Women's ability to shape their lives has been compromised by a number of factors like cultural norms (the burden of bringing up children especially for single mothers and ownership of properties like homes for married women, especially home-stay wives. These examples are true for most of patriarchal societies of Africa. However, in Botswana the situation is slowly changing as policies of equal access and empowerment are increasingly being attended to. Unrestricted, some women do struggle to work for some decent living even if it means engaging in informal employment sector or working odd jobs. These sometimes even involve moving from house to house doing some of the home-based chores like cleaning, washing and hair-do. There are some other women who due to personal reasons or circumstances beyond their control like cultural norms of being a home-stay wife taking care of children and husband restrict self-empowerment/improvement in life. Regardless of these different circumstances, one thing is true about all people and this includes women; they need to feel respected, valued, participate and be empowered in all life activities that affect them.

Empowerment takes different forms depending on specific contexts. Of the many dimensions of empowerment, the case presented in this chapter, *Elegant Design business*, illustrates three broad shades of empowerment as espoused by Moffat, et al. (1995 cited in Rowlands (1997) and Karl, 1995), namely, 'power-within' like having self-confidence, being assertiveness and persevering; 'power-with' as ability to work as a team (collectively) to maximum the benefits of an empowerment project and 'power-to', in terms of being able to make the right/fruitful decisions, to be creative and to mobilize resources for personal and communal benefits.

The decision to embark on an empowerment project for women owning *Elegant Design business* started when these women were retrenched from their jobs in factory making bags of different types, luggage, hand, and others. Not all of them could immediately see the 'light at the end of the tunnel'. It took one woman with an attitude of "Yes-I-Can" (be independent, be productive and start own business). She looked for complementary expertise from those who were also laid off from the same bag factory and mobilized other key resources like finance to kickstart the business. She was confident that with the skills they acquired as workers in a bag manufacturing company, they could start their own, doing what they know best, that is, making elegant designed bags, hence the name of the business, *Elegant Designs*.

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