

Travelogue book brings local women entrepreneurs in full view

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Written by IMAN MANI

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SINCE its launch last month over 250 copies of the book, “The World of Women”, have been sold.

This news has obviously pleased the publisher, “Mkuki Na Nyota”, editors Carin Salerno and Elisabeth Thorens-Gaud, together with all others concerned with this travelogue, which started with a printed stock of 800.

Knowing that half of this sale is outside of the country, through various women networks, has widened its international aspect and brought even greater joy to all concerned with it. All of these above mentioned points came out clearly when conversing with local businesswoman Pooja Lalji earlier this week.

She played a crucial role in planning the logistical arrangements from when the idea for the book started, over the three years ago. Now, apart from the local market, copies of the book are being sold in France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Switzerland and Germany.

Looking back over the three years passed, Lalji can now reflect on when Salerno shared her feelings of what she saw as a need for such a travelogue, written by women, with her. She now shares some of these memories with ‘Woman Magazine’. “Carin (Salerno), a former director of the Swiss Development Cooperation here, is well known to my mother and myself.

I can remember very clearly when she approached us with the idea of starting a guide book project, which is more focused on women. Being in the travel business for over 28 years now, we thought it would be a great fit to promote women's ideas, empowerment and just support what they do as people," Lalji said earlier this week.

If nothing else, she maintains the simple fact that this book brings together a committee of local women who might never have met before, is one of the credits she believes cannot be taken away from the book.

The 18 to 20 women featured in the book all come from different walks of local business circles and backgrounds, so apart from watching how it sells, they also have to keep an eye out, to see how best they can work together to promote local culture.

Salerno, a diplomat in the international cooperation, who is also an author, said that after going through many travel books and talking to many friends they discovered that existing travel literature is "mostly silent about the realities of women".

Added to this they had observed that both women and men travellers wish to know more about the world of women. This gap they wanted to fill, hence the book.

"The image that many Western people have about African women or Tanzanian women when they visit here is often negative: they think that they are poor and oppressed. However, there are many successful, dynamic and creative women out there, women whose realities need to be known and voices heard.

Our aim is to give a voice to these women and give readers a better idea of how they live," Salerno added. The first twelve months was enough for the idea to get off the ground, the next two years went towards selecting and interviewing local business women, who contributed stories in the book.

The book she maintains is really to invite travellers to get into the written women's stories, which will help them get to know the size and nature of the country better. At last month's launch Salerno told the 'Woman Magazine' both her and coeditor, Thorens-Gaud, a teacher and communication specialist, have much to gain from their involvement with this book.

This not only comes from the "fantastic exchanges" they are able to make with all the local women on the project; they also get the chance to share familiar challenges. Having seen the positive response this book has received the two editors are working on producing another one of this sort in Switzerland.

The difficulties encountered when working on, "The World of Women", due to them not being native English speakers, in which language interviews were conducted, will not apply this time, they say. However, those encountered when raising funds for the project remains the same.

"I was very moved by all of these women, who I asked questions, which I thought were relevant and important to me. I must say that I really admire these entrepreneurial African women, who are audacious, powerful and so creative," Thorens-Gaud admitted,

as if to bring out in the open a secret she had kept for many years.

One of these local women who she was referring to and is featured in the book is the tour operator, Mary Kalikawe. When approached by "Woman Magazine" this confident and composed lady said that she likes the idea of having a book whereby a visitor can experience their destination through the eyes and voices of the women in that place.

This would produce a very different product as opposed to the usual travelogues that are being produced, through men's perspectives. The endproduct, she added, apart from supporting her business, has inspired her greatly. "Among its many objectives, this book aims at elevating the Tanzanian woman entrepreneur.

I am highly impressed by the arrangement that has provided the opportunity for us to network and pull together, establish a mentoring program and a scholarship fund.

If I pick a leaf from the environment of doing business here, I can say our Government has taken significant steps in the effort to strengthen private sector participation, as the engine of economic growth, together with elevating the level of participation of women in the decision making process," Kalikawe said.

However, she also continued saying that the environment for a business woman is still very difficult and there are cultural obstacles including male chauvinism, where male-owned companies are significantly more than female owned ones, because of difficulties in accessing capital and business networks. She maintains that most local women lack influential clients and partners.

On local women being able to influence in the decision making process, she says that the percentage of advisory and executive board members is still seriously skewed towards men.

Women face many more challenges that affect the local businesses generally, including exorbitant business fees coming from multiple regulatory authorities.

Government chooses in many cases to block its ears from cries to be listened to, coming from the private sector as it grapples with its own administration and financial challenges. The viability of "The World of Women" book, she believes will help rectify the balances.