



Ahead of the International Women's Day, **New Vision** will celebrate individuals and community-based organisations that are transforming women's and girls' lives

The distinct echo of sewing machines can be heard from a distance at Ngangali village in Iganga district. The smell of new fabric fills the air as a handful of women cut up textiles to make clothes. A variety of finished products are set aside in heaps.

Jane Batwala, one of the women, narrates that they meet twice a week to learn basic tailoring skills to boost their household incomes.

However, this type of meeting may never have materialised had it not been for the selfless and committed efforts of Sarah Olumbe, a vocational school tutor.

A total 92 women have been trained of Olumbe over the last four years.

"There is no specified period for the training. Once one acquires the skill she is good to go. In the second batch of trainees, the four most skilled were offered further training at Pioneer Technical Institute in Iganga," Olumbe reveals.

How she started

Olumbe argues that women are increasingly becoming the sole breadwinners of the family given the cases of single mothers on the rise.

"Since I was aware of their plight, our years ago, I approached a well-wisher who donated 10 new sewing machines for the noble cause. The idea is to empower these women participate in this self-sustaining venture," she explains.

Olumbe says she encouraged women in her village to converge at her home for free training in vocational skills that would help them improve their lives.

She says it was not an easy task since some could attend and then skip lessons for days or weeks, which affected their concentration. "After getting tips on crafts work, sewing and other skills, each woman makes and sells her own products. Some of the profits are banked on each member's account," Olumbe says.

She adds that four of the women have since purchased their own sewing machines using their savings.

Savings scheme

Olumbe says she encouraged the participants to set up a savings scheme three years ago and it is now worth over sh20m.

She adds that group members are encouraged to interest-free loans from the scheme.

At Tibenkana, a beneficiary from Ngali village, says the savings are in handy when purchasing

Sarah Olumbe has dedicated her life to train Iganga women in tailoring and crafting. She believes this will reduce their dependence on men for everything, writes George Bitu

Olumbe equipping Iganga women with tailoring skills



Sarah Olumbe (holding dress) gives free training to women in Iganga district. Photos by George Bitu

WHAT BENEFICIARIES SAY

Helen Nalweyiso, Bulowooza village

Before I enrolled for the tailoring training two years ago, I had no vocational skill at all. I am very happy to say that I am empowered to take care of myself.



Numu Nabukwe, Bukoyo village

I am greatly indebted to Olumbe. I can now make clothes for sale. I use the proceeds from my products to buy essential commodities such as soap and paraffin at home.



Women during training at Ngangali village in Iganga

materials both for training and personal work.

"The burden of buying materials for training or crafts is on the individual. Luckily, all of us have savings," Tibenkana says.

According to Abdullah Balunywa, the Bulamagi LC3 chairman, these women have been able to improve their household incomes.

Challenges

Olumbe says they face financial

challenges, especially when it comes to repairing sewing machines.

"Such moments demand contributions from our own savings, which is not good," she says.

Olumbe expresses concern over some trainees who think she gets donations to conduct the training. They are also unhappy when she asks them to buy study materials.

She adds that there is limited market for their products. However, Olumbe says the women sell their products from their homes, as well as mend clothes for fellow residents for as low as sh200.

Rehema Bakaki, a trainee, says domestic chores often interfere with her training time, which affects her concentration.

WHO IS OLUMBE?

Sarah Olumbe attended Buwongo Subgrade School up to Primary One. She then joined Magogo Primary School for Primary Two and Three. Afterwards, she joined Iganga Boys' Boarding Primary School.

She went to Iganga High School in 1976 for O'level. Afterwards, Olumbe joined the Jinja-based British American Tobacco sports team as a netball player.

In 1977, she got married to Joash Olumbe and settled in Iganga five years later as a tailor on Main Street.

In 1990, Olumbe became a treasurer for the local branch of Uganda Small-Scale Industries and subsequently won a scholarship for training in promotion of self-employment in 1992. The three-month course was undertaken in India.

Since her return, she has invested most of her energy in helping rural women get self-employed to boost their incomes.



Sarah Olumbe

Prospects

Olumbe hopes to bring more volunteers on board to pass on more skills to the local women.

"They need skills in gardening, beekeeping, hairdressing and cosmetology," she says.

Local leaders speak out

Muhammad Senfuma, the Buki village LCI chairman, praises the initiative saying it is better to see someone how to fish than giving them fish.

Peter Mugema, the Iganga Municipality MP, commends Olumbe for helping women grasp new

Esther Mbayo, the Minister for Presidency, lauds Olumbe for the good work done saying her training skills should be extended beyond villages.