



Faith Kabaguma, head of production at Texfad, displays ready to wear wigs. PHOTO/JESSICA SABANO.

Why wearing banana fibre wigs makes sense

From farm waste to fashionable hair, the innovation demonstrates how sustainability and creativity can transform an entire sector, and potentially become one of Uganda's most remarkable exports.

BY JESSICA SABANO

Maria Maureen Nabuule, a hairdresser and resident of Galilaya Village in the riverside district of Kayunga in Central Uganda, says most of her clients prefer hair extensions made out of banana fibre because it is light and does not irritate the scalp.

The 26-year-old first encountered the product during a visit to the eastern city of Jinja for hairstyling training about a year ago, and has been using it in her salon for the past 10 months.

"At first, clients had a bad impression of it because they thought it was of poor quality. But when it was promoted at Shs1,500, many tried it and realised it was more comfortable and met their expectations better than synthetic hair."

However, she notes that the cost remains high for many Ugandans. A hairstyle using banana fibre extensions can cost between Shs50,000 and Shs300,000, depending on the style and whether

wigs are included.

"With wigs, someone may even think it is natural hair because it blends very well," she says. "You do not need much effort to braid it because it holds firmly, unlike synthetic hair, which keeps sliding."

Nabuule adds that hairdressers often share knowledge about the product during training sessions to expand the market.

She also warns about counterfeit products.

"We buy the hair from licensed shops or factories to avoid counterfeit products because some people copy brands and confuse customers."

From waste to global market

The push to standardise banana fibre hair extensions follows pioneering work by Texfad, a Ugandan company established in 2013 in Kyampisi Sub-county in Mukono District.

Initially known for producing crafts and carpets from banana waste, the company has expanded into the beauty industry by developing biodegradable hair extensions.

After years of research and innovation, the company has created extensions that mimic the appearance and texture of synthetic hair.

"We sell a kilogramme at \$200 (about Shs752,000 internationally and \$150 (Shs564,000) locally," says Texfad

founder Muturi Kimani.

Farmers also benefit by supplying banana stems, earning about Shs100,000 per truckload.

"This is not just fashion; it is a new green industry," Kimani says.

The company sources raw materials from Mukono, Wakiso and Kampala districts, mainly using mature banana stems from harvested plants.

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Expansion plans are underway through a partnership with Busitema University and several international organisations such as the Shs3b from the UK government.

Dr Edwin Kamara from Busitema University says the innovation could expand beyond beauty products.

"This innovation could move beyond crafts into mainstream clothing. With standards in place, banana fibre can become Uganda's next export success," he says.

Growing consumer interest

Bridget Nansubuga, a customer initially hesitant to try banana fibre hair, was persuaded by her hairdresser.

"I felt so comfortable after braiding it. It was light on my head, unlike synthetic hair," she says. "In fact, I like it so much that I even use it for my daughters at home."

Nansubuga says she spends about Shs50,000 on braiding and has grown accustomed to the product.

Dorothy Nakanya, who has used banana fibre hair for nine months, says the extensions are extremely light.

"Sometimes you feel as if it is your natural hair," she says.

However, she notes that fibre strands can sometimes be uneven.

"When braiding, some strands are shorter, and others longer, so the hair dresser has to adjust them."

Ronah Ndagire, another user, says banana fibre extensions are environmentally friendly and safer than synthetic alternatives.

"With the increasing demand, counterfeits are also flooding the market. Their weight and quality are different from certified ones, but if you have used the original for a long time, you can tell the difference," she says.

She adds that the hair is biodegradable and reusable.

"You do not need to wash it like synthetic hair. However, when water touches it, it takes a long time to dry, sometimes a whole day, so you must protect it."

Margaret Nakuya, who has used the product for six months, says she no longer experiences the itching associated with synthetic hair.

Improving quality

Ugandans are increasingly adding value to banana fibre hair through mechanised fibre extraction, fibre treatment, dyeing, styling, quality control, innovation by local companies and product standardisation.

These improvements are enabling the product to meet premium beauty industry standards and access international markets.

The innovation uses discarded banana stems and is currently being formalised through a new standard under development by the Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS).

Hairdressers describe banana fibre hair as a healthy, eco-friendly and lightweight alternative to synthetic hair. It is less likely to cause scalp irritation and has no unpleasant odour.

Production and standards

Faith Kabaguma, head of production at Texfad, says black remains the popular colour for banana fibre hair, though other colours can be produced depending on demand.

"Brown and blonde are the colours customers ask for most," she says.

She adds that the hair is easy to style and does not require oils or conditioners.

"It is non-toxic and suitable even for people with sensitive skin. It has a natural sheen and is soft to the touch."

Levi Brian Kaneene, a standards officer at the Uganda National Bureau of Standards, says the bureau began engaging manufacturers after they started producing hair extensions from natural fibres such as banana stalks.

"We are testing requirements such as tensile strength, colour fastness and pH to ensure the product is durable and safe for consumers," he says.

He adds that the standards will help local producers meet international requirements and compete in global markets.

Looking ahead, Texfad plans to scale operations through a mechanised plantation covering one square mile, potentially creating up to 3,000 jobs in agriculture, manufacturing and distribution.

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Bridget Nansubuga, customer.

