Refugees target global markets with luxury crafts

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Rwandan refugee Anita Claudine knows the odds are stacked against her, but the fashion designer is unfazed in her ambition to one day see her dresses in the window displays of the luxury department stores of London, Paris and New York.

The 22-year-old woman, whose family fled to Kenya almost two decades ago, has no formal training in design and tailoring, no experience in sales and marketing - and certainly no contacts in the haute couture realms of Gucci and Jean Paul Gaultier.

Even the small room on the outskirts of Nairobi where she and 18 other refugees gather to learn how to measure, cut and stitch is a far cry from the glitz and glamour of legendary stores like Selfridges, Galeries LaFayette and Barneys.

But a new luxury brand - Made51 - which brings high quality refugee-crafted home decor and accessories, from cushion covers and lampshades to scarves and bracelets, to global markets - could empower Claudine and thousands of refugees like her.

“I know how to sew, but have only managed to sell a few small pieces - it’s difficult to find proper work as a refugee,” said Claudine, carefully threading the needle of her sewing machine during her Made51 training session.

“Now I am learning to make things more precisely for foreign customers and understanding about design and quality. I can earn money and it will help me when I start my own fashion label.”

Launched by the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) in 2018, and named after the 1951 Refugee Convention. Made51 links refugee artisans with social enterprises - that seek to do good and make a profit - which
Convention, Made51 links refugee artisans with social enterprises - that seek to do good and make a profit - which help them create high-end products.

More than 1,500 refugees from 15 countries such as Burundi, Afghanistan, Syria and Myanmar have so far been recruited to create a stylish collection of Made51 products, from cashmere throws with crochet insets to hand-knotted sheep’s wool rugs.

“When refugee artisans flee their countries, they flee with their skills - and that is something that can be built upon in their host countries where they often have to stay for many years,” said Heidi Christ, Global Lead of Made51 at UNHCR.

“We are still creating and building the brand and face challenges such as finding international retail partners, but we are promoting the Made51 products at major trade fairs like Ambiente in Germany and the feedback has been positive.”

In fact, the brand has already attracted some high profile players - with Britain’s Prince Charles purchasing Made51 carpets crafted by Afghan refugees, and the exclusive store Harrods of London showcasing their throws by Syrian refugees.

UNTAPPED TALENT

More than 25 million refugees across the world have fled their countries due to conflict, disaster or persecution, UNHCR data shows.

Many are unable to return home for years due to prolonged conflict or drought and languish in camps, where they depend on meagre foreign aid handouts and are often perceived as a burden.

While many refugees bring embroidery, weaving, wood carving and pottery skills to their host nations, they face barriers in getting jobs - from outright bans on working to bureaucratic bottlenecks in attaining work permits.

Kenya, for example, hosts about half a million refugees from countries such as Somalia, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia, but most are confined to camps and prevented from accessing the labor market.

One solution could lie in tapping into refugees’ existing artisanal skills to create authentic, high quality and sustainably sourced hand-made products for the mushrooming global handicraft market, say industry experts.

International trade in artisanal crafts has more than doubled over the last decade - generating $35 billion in export earnings in 2015, latest U.N. data shows.

“Refugee artisans have the potential to be incorporated into the global artisan sector if they are assisted,” said Sarah Abdella-El Kallassy, research consultant at the U.S.-based Artisan Alliance, hosted by the Aspen Institute think-tank.

“Long-term market access is a major challenge for all artisans. For refugees, especially those in refugee camps, this challenge becomes even more formidable.”

OPPORTUNITY

With greater awareness of ethical consumerism, increased tourism and travel, and rising demand for unique products, this could represent a sizeable opportunity not just for refugee artisans - but also for their host nations.

Social enterprises like Kenyan firm Bawa Hope, which exports brass jewelry made by artisans in Nairobi’s slums to countries like Germany and the United States, say working with refugees under initiatives like Made51 can also boost their business.

“We gain a new line of products to sell, get technical expertise from Made51’s designers and support with product
visibility, with UNHCR promoting our products at international trade fairs,” said business development manager Andrew Mutisya.

“We will be able to scale up and train more local and refugee artisans. They will also learn skills and start their own businesses, and this will be a boost to the local economy.”

So far, 26 social firms have joined the Made51 initiative to build a collection which ranges from handwoven sweetgrass and raffia baskets made by Burundian refugees in Tanzania to handloom woven scarves by Myanmarese refugees in Thailand.

Refugees like Claudine - who are being training by Bawa Hope to create a line of handbags and beaded jewelry to add to the Made51 collection - are hopeful.

“We are still finalizing our product - but I think international customers will like it,” said Claudine.

“I will use this experience and make my own exclusive fashionwear collection one day. It will be called Anita’s Kollection - that’s Kollection with a ‘K’.”