

When Cyclone Haruna devastated Toliara in SW Madagascar, an extremely poor part of a country where 70% of the population live under the poverty line of a dollar a day, most humanitarians were not aware of the devastation it caused in the lack of basic human needs - clean water, food, health care and shelter. The poverty was startling. And unfortunately, with poverty, comes abuse, sex-trade and trafficking.

Previously there was a billboard for anti sex-tourism at the exit of Antananarivo airport picturing a young child, crouching, with the words 'I am not a souvenir.' The Miraka Community became more aware of the situation in southwest Madagascar and for the need to awaken world-wide consciousness of global issues; poverty, trafficking and prostitution. Women came into the office, asking for help to get off the streets, to feed their children, to have a roof over their heads, if even a grass hut of barely two-square metres. One woman needed to sleep with two men to be able to purchase one yoghurt. Another made and sold unpasteurised yoghurts to supplement prostitution in order to give her children one meal of rice and *loka* (whatever green edible leaves there is available, boiled in water.)

Hearing these women's stories moved us to do something. A few *ariary* was used to buy some supplies and women were encouraged to gather under a tree and roll airplane magazines around a toothpick, recycling paper into beads, which could then be made into necklaces and sold to bring income for themselves and their families. Hungry for knowledge, they learned quickly, and soon progressed to other areas of handicrafts, including recycling paper for greeting cards and learning how to use a sewing machine.

Several women walk over an hour to come and work at the women's centre hoping that their creations will generate income to feed and educate their families.

At 17, Lucia, a young girl with a 3 year-old child, looked at a pair of scissors and wondered what she could do with such a tool. Workshops were organised to teach simple handicraft skills as well as basic personal hygiene.

When asked later what she would do with the money made from the sale of the crafts, Lucia replied that she would buy a mattress so that her daughter and her would no longer need to sleep on the dirt floor. As the women worked together, some showed others how to do things. A beaming Lucia one day cried out in awe, '*I didn't know I could be a teacher!*'

Josiane, ill-treated in her former living situation and forced to hide any money she did earn from her family of traditional 'spirit' dancers, now lives a purpose-filled life focusing on hospitality of local and international visitors at the Women's Centre.

In anticipation of working her way out of poverty, Tantely makes cards and jewellery, using the money to finish her secondary degree and start her studies as a mid-wife.

Knowing the need for women's education we realised that young girls were not going to school and many women could not work because of the lack of supplies when they had their period. If and when sanitary napkins are available, they are far too expensive.

Every girl and woman has an inherent need and right for dignity and self-worth. Through this need, the Women's Centre was able to start Days for Girls washable sanitary napkins, providing washable feminine menstrual hygiene solutions and kits. Sewing machines and materials were donated and an international volunteer came to teach women how to make and use these sanitary napkins, giving them back at least 180 days of education, work, health and dignity over the three year usage of the Days for Girls product.

The Women's Center transforms unjust structures of society, touching lives of women across all races, cultures, social sectors and religions. By empowering women, we change the lives of a whole family, creating a ripple effect on families, communities and generations.