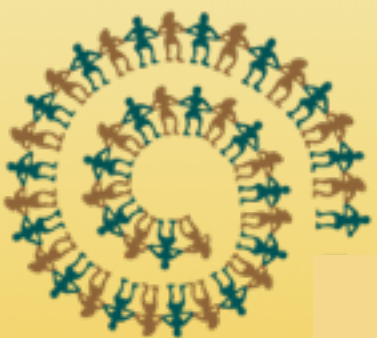


# 2009-2015 Report



## Ubuntu at Work

Empowering Women, Transforming Communities

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Report Credits: Matthew Rudolph, Avital Datskovsky, Kaavya Raman, Darlene Currie, Vibha Pingle

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Released date: 12/1/2015, Cambridge, MA





*“The expansion of women's capabilities not only enhances women's own freedom and well-being, but also has many other effects on the lives of all.”\**

\* “Many Faces of Gender Inequality,” Amartya Sen, *The New Republic*, Sept 17, 2001



Tut Ayu, Batuan, Bali



## Ubuntu at Work in 2015

Ubuntu at Work was born out of research on women micro entrepreneurs in South Africa, Nigeria, Indonesia, Egypt, India and Nepal. The research was focused on understanding the strategies women living in poverty used to escape poverty.

The research suggested that while micro loans helped women manage their poverty, it rarely helped them escape poverty. Likewise, support from neighbors and family helped them survive, but it almost never helped them out of poverty.

The women micro-entrepreneurs who had escaped poverty were supported by information about, and access to, markets and networks *beyond* their community, and the skills to take advantage of these opportunities. Unfortunately, women micro-entrepreneurs had gained such access and information serendipitously - a tourist connecting a woman selling baskets to an international market or a researcher connecting a woman micro-entrepreneur to a national retailer.

The challenge then, was to find a way to make these serendipitous extra-local connections available systemically to women micro-entrepreneurs. Ubuntu was created as a response to precisely this challenge.

Ubuntu began in 2009 with 25 women in one community and 125 beneficiaries. Since then, it has grown to 5,000 women and 25,000 beneficiaries in 30 communities across 4 countries and three continents. Ubuntu at Work has helped women in remote villages gain confidence, skills, and increase their income.

In South Africa, Mavis observed that Ubuntu at Work helped her and others in her community learn new skills and get experience. “I like [Ubuntu at Work] because I can’t sit at home now and say I learned nothing. I learned to do something with my own hands, so now I have something to show for myself. ...I have new skills.” Mahadevi in India echoed Mavis’s sentiments. Ubuntu members, Mahadevi added, who had only known how to work as farm labor, had gained extensive sewing skills, learnt how to operate cutting and advanced sewing machines, and screen print.

Ubuntu’s global network of volunteers and staff have reached out to women in India, South Africa, Indonesia, Uganda, and Jamaica, and worked with them to enhance their capabilities, increase self-confidence, and produce sustainable and green products for global markets.

And our emerging collaborations with other global NGOs such as WIEGO will help us expand our impact and reach thousands and thousands more in the coming years.

As we look back on these past six years, we are thrilled to see the achievements of our women members. Our goal is to reach 200,000 members and 1 million beneficiaries by 2020. We’ll get there!

Vibha Pingle  
Cambridge, MA  
12/1/2015





## Mission

To offer women living in poverty opportunities to expand their capabilities and skills, leverage global resources, access global markets, and escape poverty.



Seethamma, Kaigal, India



5

Women  
Members

2009



125

BENEFICIARIES



Shanti making recycled jewelry, Bomanahalli, India



5,000

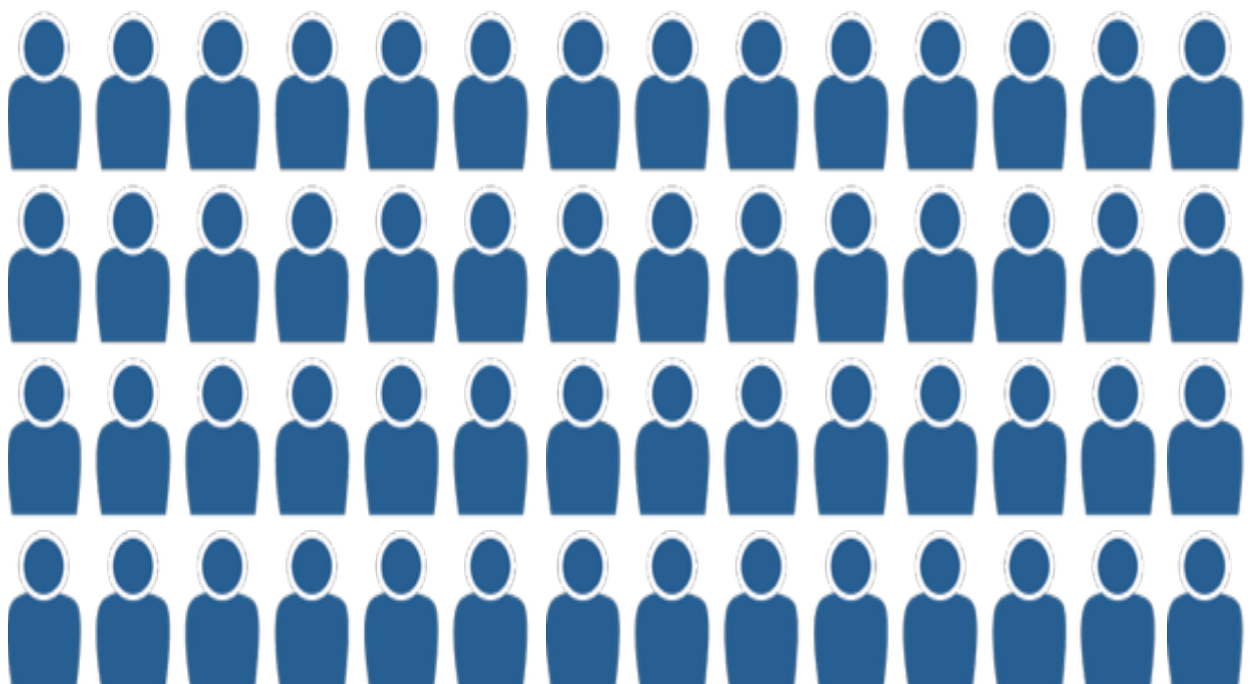
Women  
Members

Today



25,000

BENEFICIARIES





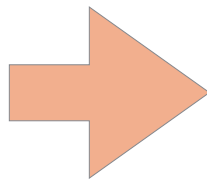
# Inputs, Outputs, Outcomes, and Impact

## Inputs

Global Community

Ongoing Volunteer  
Support

Infrastructure



## Outputs

Learning@Work  
Training

Baobab Workspaces

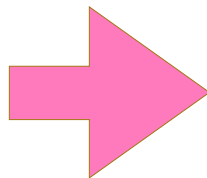
Production Orders



Increased Self-  
Confidence

Increased Skill &  
Capabilities

Increased Income &  
Economic Opportunities



Gender Justice for  
Rural Women

## Outcomes

## Impact



# Inputs

## **A Global Network**

The Ubuntu at Work network consists of rural women micro entrepreneurs who join Ubuntu as members, global retailers, volunteers, and professionals from around the world. Together, they form an ecosystem that helps Ubuntu members overcome challenges such as weak marketable skills, poor access to market information, and non-existent access to wider markets.

With the help of the Internet Ubuntu has connected its members in over 25 rural locations to each other, and to its marketing, production, and training teams around the world. Ubuntu at Work's network also includes global retailers who buy products made by Ubuntu members at our various rural locations.

## **Baobab Workspaces**

Ubuntu at Work has established workspaces in the rural areas. Workspaces are equipped with laptops and wifi so Ubuntu members can connect to the internet. Workspaces also have facilities for conducting training sessions and community meetings.

Finally, Workspaces contain production equipment such as sewing and apparel making equipment and printing machines. Where possible, Workspaces seek to use solar energy for its operations.

Ubuntu at Work's Workspaces are called Baobab Workspaces, because like the tree, they serve multiple purposes - space for training, production, community events.

## **Ongoing Volunteer and Staff Support**

Ubuntu at Work has created support infrastructure consisting of both staff and volunteers at the local level. Local staff and volunteers are supported in their efforts by Ubuntu's global teams and by Ubuntu's professional volunteers. Global volunteers include professionals such as designers, production, IT, and logistics consultants.

Ubuntu at Work also recruits student interns with backgrounds in public policy and development studies. Interns support Ubuntu's global teams and/or spend time at one or more Workspaces supporting Workspace operations.





# Outputs

## **Baobab Workspaces**

Rural women living in poverty are unable to take the risk of learning new skills. Regular manual work in rural areas offer women with limited marketable skills avenues for surviving - even though such manual (mostly laborious agricultural) work pays just about enough for the women and their children to survive.

Even if rural women living in poverty saved enough money to venture to a nearby town to learn new skills, the time commitment required to travel there is an additional discouraging factor.

Baobab Workspaces respond to these challenges. They provide a space for the women to learn new skills and make products in the village itself.

Baobab Workspaces are run collaboratively. Ubuntu women members manage the workspaces themselves, learning managerial and leadership skills along the way.

## **Learning@Work**

Learning@Work is Ubuntu at Work's unique approach to communicating production and technology (including computer) skills necessary for participating in global supply chain

opportunities. Members also learn financial skills and basic management tools for managing production processes and operating their Ubuntu Workspace.

The Learning@Work training program also helps women-members acquire skills essential for launching their independent small business after 'graduating' from Ubuntu at Work if they choose. Members are offered long-term mentor support after they "graduate" and are encouraged to mentor new members in turn.

## **Production Orders**

Ubuntu at Work's global team generates orders for products members can produce after they complete the training program. Women are paid per piece for the items they produce and payments are made via bank transfer.



## 2009 - the launch



Lakshmi making recycled jewelry, Bomanahalli, India



Gowri selling coconut in Anandapuram, India



Radhika and kids, Anandapuram, India

- Ubuntu at Work is launched as a 501(c)3
- Ubuntu at Work Trust is set up in India to operate as Ubuntu at Work's Indian partner organization
- 25 women at one community in Ramanagar (a small town outside Bangalore, India), join Ubuntu as members

A second Ubuntu at Work workspace is set up in Bomanahalli (a slum on the outskirts of Bangalore)

- Women are given training with producing eco friendly jewelry made out of used plastic bottles
- After a few months, the rapid economic growth in the area around Bomanahalli and the increasing economic opportunities available to the women of Bomanahalli leads Ubuntu to focus on developing rural workspaces and/or workspaces in socially disadvantaged communities within Bangalore

- An Ubuntu at Work workspace is set up in Anandapuram (a lower caste slum in Bangalore)
- Women from Anandapuram (mostly vegetable sellers) are offered help with accessing markets that would offer higher margins
- Again, within a couple of months, the availability of increasing economic opportunities leads Ubuntu to help women even more disadvantaged
- The Anandapuram Workspace operations are discontinued as Ubuntu turns its attention to launching workspaces in rural areas





## 2010 - fine-tuning our model



Bassamma and Ubuntu members, Banwadi, India

- Ubuntu continues its operations in Ramanagar
- Ubuntu members in Ramanagar gain sewing and embroidery skills
- Ubuntu also sets up a screen printing unit in Chennapatna
- Ubuntu helps members get bank accounts and gain financial skills
- Women members are paid for the pieces they produce via bank transfers
- Ubuntu begins recruiting and mentoring summer interns from Georgetown University



Farzana, Manju and other Ubuntu members, Ramanagar, India





## 2011 - focus on 'Remote Women'



Punnamma, Vijayanagar, India



Francinah Ndebele, Gauteng, South Africa

- Ubuntu India launches additional workspaces in villages in Karnataka
- The women, who have for generations been agricultural day laborers, gain sewing and screen printing skills
- Ubuntu India gets orders from Greenpeace to produce organic cotton bags, jackets, and banners
- The items for Greenpeace are sewn and screen printed at Ubuntu's workspaces
- The regularity of Greenpeace's orders helps Ubuntu India develop and test its production models
- Ubuntu India members gain self-confidence and increase their income
- Ubuntu launches a workspace in Soshanguve, South Africa
- Many Soshanguve members are skilled at sewing with some members producing elaborate garments including wedding dresses
- Remote location and inadequate public transportation are clearly factors impeding the Soshanguve women's entrepreneurial efforts
- Ubuntu begins exploring how Soshanguve women might be connected to global markets
- Marianne Fassler joins Ubuntu as our legal representative in South Africa





## 2012 - growing orders



Neela, Shalini and other Ubuntu members, Kodagahalli, India



Sazana Jayadeva with Bengaluru Airport bags

- Ubuntu India gets orders from the Nuance Group to produce cotton and paper bags for its duty free stores in India
- Ubuntu's workspaces around begin producing cotton cloth and recycled paper bags for the Nuance Group
- The Nuance order, along with the orders from Greenpeace help Ubuntu India women members earn a regular income
- Ubuntu India welcomes summer interns again
- Interns play a key role in helping Ubuntu's rural members produce quality products and more importantly gaining confidence
- Summer interns also launch Ubuntu's computer skill and English language training programs in rural India
- Additional Workspaces are set up in remote villages in Chamarajnagar district in India
- The training programs are expanded to help women with no sewing skills gain the confidence and the technical abilities to sew quality products





## 2013 - pilots in South Africa, consolidation in India, outreach in Bali

- Ubuntu's third annual batch of summer interns arrive in India
- This is the largest group of interns Ubuntu has had thus far, they live at Ubuntu's Workspace in the village of Kodagahalli and eat meals provided by Ubuntu members in the area
- Outreach efforts in Bali are launched



Outreach meeting in Batuan, Bali

- Ubuntu India's production operations are consolidated
- Staff training programs are enhanced
- Efficient logistical plans are launched for delivering cut fabric to Ubuntu members in remote rural areas and collecting sewn bags



Elizabeth and other Ubuntu members with the dresses they stitched, Soshanguve, South Africa

- Ubuntu South Africa launches its pilot production operation
- Marianne Fassler designs children's frocks and skirts
- Soshanguve women learn to sew hi-end apparel
- The frocks and skirts are available for sale at Ubuntu's head office in the U.S.
- This pilot helps Ubuntu Global understand how its production operations need to be tweaked to adapt to in-country challenges





## 2014 - search for global orders, pilot in Bali

- Ubuntu India's Paper bag production expands
- Ubuntu India members start cutting and printing paper bags in addition to folding, sticking and finishing them
- Ubuntu India receives additional orders for bags

- Ubuntu explores markets for paper beads made by rural women in Uganda
- Ubuntu offers training and support to a group of rural women in Uganda

- A core group of Ubuntu members in Bali is formed
- Volunteers in Bali coordinate with the Ubuntu Bali members
- Ubuntu Bali members gain initial training in sewing and paper bag production



Outreach meeting, Batuan, Bali



Paper beads made by Ubuntu members in Uganda

- Ubuntu Bali members produce pilot orders
- Pilot orders help fine-tune Ubuntu's production model and adapt it to Bali
- Ubuntu Bali members begin preparing for possible large paper bag orders
- Ubuntu India members begin computer training
- Ubuntu India members who have 'graduated' get support with managing and completing independent orders



Outreach meeting, Batuan, Bali

Sample paper bags, Batuan, Bali







## 2015 - orders, outreach, and online operations



Ubuntu members, Chamarajnagar, India

- Marketing efforts ramp up as the skills of Ubuntu members increase
- Ubuntu seeks large orders for uniform, apparel, and shopping bags as Ubuntu members gain additional training and acquire necessary skills
- Ubuntu India partners with apparel manufacturers to provide high end training to its members
- Ubuntu at Work Inc collaborates with WIEGO to reach rural women across the globe

- Bali operations develop as legal formalities are completed
- Bali women receive preliminary computer and internet-use training



Outreach meeting, Strawberry Fields, Jamaica



Ubuntu member meeting, Batuan, Bali

- Rural women in Jamaica reach out to Ubuntu seeking to participate in Ubuntu's global network, gain training and support
- Volunteers provide laptops and wifi to a rural community in Jamaica
- Ubuntu launches computer training and data entry and data management training modules for Ubuntu Jamaica





# Outcomes

Three primary questions frame how Ubuntu at Work evaluates its Outcomes:

- Have women micro entrepreneurs gained confidence to expand their aspirations?
- Have women micro entrepreneurs gained the skills and capabilities to think entrepreneurially?
- Have women micro entrepreneurs increased their income and their assets?

Together, these three questions help us understand whether Ubuntu women have moved further along on the path toward Gender Justice.

## Gaining Confidence

From our conversations with Ubuntu members it is clear that Ubuntu has had significant impact in raising the confidence of its members. Ubuntu women from South Africa, India, and Indonesia all observed that they felt so much more confident after engaging and working with Ubuntu at Work.

Manjula, an Ubuntu member in India, observed that she has become “independent and bold when it comes to dealing with matters outside the home and especially when dealing with banks.” Where earlier, she hesitated entering banks or talking to bank tellers for fear that they would mock her ignorance, she now walks into the bank confidently and feels comfortable asking bank tellers for help.

Elizabeth in Soshanguve noted that working with Ubuntu “allowed us to do positive things for ourselves and our community.”

Elizabeth’s friend Mavis observed that Ubuntu members felt better about themselves after their engagement with Ubuntu. They felt good that they were using their time productively. Elizabeth added that “we were ... women who were sitting at home doing nothing. In the morning we would take our kids to school and after a cold drink and sandwich, we would while away our time. Then in the evening we would get our children from school.” Mavis continued that “through Ubuntu we were still able to take care of our kids and also get some money and experience.” Bilkis Banu echoed Elizabeth and Mavis’s comments that they “were able to gain self-confidence instead of idling their time at home.”

Latha and Sudha, Ubuntu members in India, observed that people in the village respect them much more now. Ashwini, another Ubuntu India member also noted that she and the other members had gained confidence, respect in the village and financial confidence after working with Ubuntu. Rajini added that because of their involvement with Ubuntu, “we don’t waste time; we learn new things.” And because the workspace is conveniently located, they are able to work easily, combining household chores and Ubuntu work. Consequently, they now lead freer, more secure lives, with the opportunity to learn new skills and develop expertise.

What appears to have also helped them gain confidence is Ubuntu’s collaborative model. Members from Ubuntu India noted that they became more confident as they had the support of other women in their village.



The “sense of bonding” helped us enormously, they noted. The “feeling of oneness and friendliness” helped a lot. As they put it, with others’ support they were able to address their concerns and overcome their anxieties: “together, we could make it happen, we could support each other and become confident.”

Ubuntu women in all locations further observed that they “share ideas with each other and help each other learn.” This helps them learn new skills faster and complete larger and larger orders. One Ubuntu Indonesia woman remarked, the “best thing about Ubuntu was how they worked collaboratively (“kolaboratif”) with other women.”

The clearest evidence of the women’s growing self-confidence is the election of two Ubuntu India members, Shalini and Jyoti, to their local village council (‘panchayat’).

The rise in Shalini’s self-confidence has been truly remarkable. It took Shalini two weeks to feel comfortable with sitting on a stool at a sewing machine when she first joined Ubuntu in 2010. As Shalini saw it, only rich people and powerful people sat on a chair or stool. Poor women, farm labor like her, sat on the floor. Today, Shalini feels entirely comfortable interacting with senior politicians at both the village and district level.

As Ubuntu members have grown confident, they have become much more

comfortable with sitting on chairs (rather than on the ground) and making eye contact. They are comfortable carrying themselves as ‘professional’ women and wear Ubuntu uniforms and IDs with pride and confidence.

Ubuntu members in Indonesia, India and South Africa have all offered evidence of a significant growth in their self-confidence. In the initial years, Ubuntu women members in all three countries would barely speak to Ubuntu volunteers and staff. They answered questions in monosyllables. Today, they feel comfortable discussing their concerns and achievements both in their local language and increasingly in English.

## **Gaining Skills and Capabilities**

In South Africa, Mavis observed that Ubuntu at Work helped her and others in her community learn new skills and get experience. “I like [Ubuntu at Work] because I can’t sit at home now and say I learned nothing. I learned to do something with my own hands, so now I have something to show for myself. ...I have new skills.” Mahadevi in India echoed Mavis’s sentiments. Ubuntu members, Mahadevi added, who had only known how to work as farm labor, had gained extensive sewing skills, learnt how to operate cutting and advanced sewing machines, and screen print.





Famida in India added that her group of women had learnt embroidery, cutting, and basket making skills. Mahadevi, Famida and others in India continued that their involvement with Ubuntu has led them to continually gain new skills, not just attend a one-off training program.

Along with specific production skills, women involved in Ubuntu at Work's operations in India, Indonesia, and South Africa have gained operational management skills. They have learnt how to manage their production units, to oversee quality control processes, and to maintain records of their expenses and production. In Indonesia, India and South Africa, Ubuntu members have also gained skills necessary to interact with government officials, and with buyers and suppliers.

Ubuntu women in Indonesia, India discussed the computer skills they had gained as a result of their involvement in Ubuntu. They noted that they have been getting comfortable with typing on the computer and with using email. Marta and Budi from Indonesia are delighted to be able to communicate with other Ubuntu members and staff using their Ubuntu email accounts. They have also learned how to use 'Google Translate' so they could translate their emails between Bahasa Indonesia and English. As members' confidence and computer skills have increased, they have become increasingly

eager to learn more 'advanced' skills such as data entry and management.

A review of the learning curve among women members suggests that women members who had greater levels of self-confidence to begin with (though not necessarily greater familiarity with technology) are faster learners.

Women in both rural India and rural Indonesia live in poverty, both have only have middle or high school education, both speak little or no English, and without Ubuntu's support, both groups of women have minimal opportunities for gaining new skills and escaping poverty. However, the higher level of confidence among rural Balinese members compared to members in India at the start of their engagement with Ubuntu at Work has meant that the former have been quicker learners.

Given that confidence development is critical for speeding up the skill learning process, Ubuntu's training programs have focused on enhancing the confidence levels of the trainees. This has been done in primarily two ways: 1) developing training materials that are deeply integrated with local cultural practices and traditional women's activities; 2) encouraging collaborative learning and working.

Our conversations with Ubuntu members in all three countries revealed that both these approaches have been significant





in helping women members enhance their self-confidence.

Members in South Africa commented on how collaborating with other Ubuntu members has helped them feel comfortable with taking on more risk and venture into new pathways.

Attending training sessions with other members, likewise, was more effective at enhancing their skills than attending a training session by themselves.

Moreover, they commented on how collaborating with others during the production process, also helped them take on new production opportunities. Where earlier, they might have shied away from such production opportunities, they now eagerly sought them, given the support they knew they would get from other Ubuntu members at their workspace, and from the Ubuntu network in general.

### **Opportunities for Increased Income**

In all three countries, Ubuntu women-members remarked that what they valued about their engagement with Ubuntu is the opportunity to increase their income. Women engaging with Ubuntu India have clearly had the most opportunity to increase their income (given that Ubuntu India members have been received support from Ubuntu longer than other Ubuntu South Africa or Ubuntu Bali members.

Mahadevi mentioned how the money she earns from Ubuntu has been very helpful to her and her family. It helped with her children's school fees, with her granddaughter's doctor's bills and hospital costs. Lata mentioned how her increased income has helped her buy land and build a house — something she could never have imagined before.

Bhagya talked about how she used her increased income to ask her bank for a loan to build her house. When her husband and his friends tried to frighten her about the risk of taking on a loan and falling into debt, she remarked that she informed them that her income from Ubuntu would help her cover her monthly loan payments, and that they need not worry.

Neela discussed how her husband does not support their household financially and it is only through her income from Ubuntu that she has been able to raise her children somewhat comfortably. Without the Ubuntu income she remarked, she'd have been dependent on menial farm work which was back-breaking, monotonous and paid a pittance by comparison. Kumari observed that she has been able to not just support her family and raise her children, but also plan for her/their future by taking out life insurance policies.





Famida remarked that working with Ubuntu at Work has helped her and her friends in her neighborhood pay for their children's education. Her friend Sakena added that they no longer have to depend on their husbands for financial support. This is a very significant change for women like Sakena and Famida living in a socially conservative community that discourages women from working outside their homes. The Ubuntu production model has helped them overcome these social pressures and work on making their futures better.

Elizabeth and her friends in Soshanguve in South Africa expressed similar sentiments. Income from Ubuntu had helped them buy food for their households and pay for their children's education. Sizo commented that Ubuntu's orders helped her family as well and she hopes the orders keep coming so she can continue to support her family.

Budi and Megawati in Batuan, Bali Indonesia are also eager for large continuous orders from Ubuntu so they can continue paying for their children's education and saving for their future.

Mariani welcomed the opportunity to earn while producing. Feeling comfortable with larger orders, however, took time. And the comfort level increased as the women's self-confidence grew.

The greater self-confidence among Ubuntu members has also helped them seek out access to wider and wider markets. The initial reaction among Ubuntu members when they see samples of products from potential global buyers is to express awe at the quality of production and anxiety about their ability to ever produce such products. However, as their confidence and skills have increased, Ubuntu members become not willing to produce global quality products for global buyers, but also eager for such orders.





# Impact - Gender Justice

Gender justice is a basic right. Its also a means of addressing poverty. Policies and practices that benefit women will also have positive outcomes for the economy and society as a whole.

Women form the a huge proportion of those living in poverty, and have fewer resources, less power and less influence in decision making when compared to men. They are exposed to various forms of violence and exploitation and, in addition, experience inequality because of their ethnicity, age, (dis)ability, caste, and/or religion.

Moreover, a number of factors - all with gendered roots and implications - are likely to create additional challenges in the 21st century for women living in poverty:

- Global food, financial and climate crises
- Global competition for natural resources
- Inadequate healthcare and frequent pandemics
- Manipulation of cultural/religious ideologies for political purposes

Increasing gender justice requires empowering women. To meaningfully promote empowerment, programs must contribute toward all aspects of empowerment. They must help women increase:

- 1. Their critical awareness of their capabilities and social situation and they must help women gain the self-confidence to make desired changes.**
- 2. Their economic power within their household, community, and markets in areas traditionally regarded as women's realm and also in areas regarded as men's areas.**
- 3. Their ability to join others to challenge and transform their rights, capabilities, and social situation.**

Have Ubuntu at Work's activities contributed in these three areas and thus increased women's empowerment and improved the possibilities for gender justice?

Our conversations with Ubuntu members strongly suggests that women's self-confidence increases as they engage with Ubuntu at Work. Women's participation in Ubuntu's production activities is helping them accumulate, access, and control financial and knowledge-based assets. It offers them employment and opportunities to launch their independent income-generating ventures.

Ubuntu's collaborative model helps the women develop mutually-beneficial relations with both familiar and previously unknown women in their community and elsewhere. This appears to encourage the women to share ideas, partner with others, and to organize locally and beyond.



Such social interaction contributes toward the reduction of domestic violence against women, strengthening women's leadership and participation in their community, while it encourages and supports the ability of women to become aware of and responsive to their needs and their rights.



Shalini, Mahadevi, and Bhavana making samples in Kodagahalli, India

Ubuntu at Work adopts a bottom-up approach toward gender justice insofar as its focus is on helping women gain the capabilities they need to fight for greater gender justice. Such an approach allows women to engage with their culture as they negotiate pathways out of poverty and disempowerment. It allows them to define empowerment and prioritize its dimensions.

This approach can, however, lead to undermining women's rights to the extent that it might encourage local cultural traditions that weaken a rights-based view of women's empowerment.

And this approach steps right in the middle of debates between advocates of multiculturalism and women's rights; a debate with entrenched positions discussed in Susan Okin's landmark book: *'Is Multiculturalism bad for Women?'*

So how does Ubuntu at Work negotiate this debate between multiculturalism and women's rights? Given that Ubuntu at Work works with women in a variety of cultural contexts, does this lead Ubuntu to strengthen the hand of patriarchal local cultures at the expense of its stated mission to 'empower women'? or does it 'impose' a top-down women's rights framework implicitly?

Ubuntu at Work does neither. It encourages dialogue and debate among its various members. Conversations among rural women in Bali, India, and South Africa help them all. These conversations encourage the women to place their positions and understanding of the negotiation between culture and women's rights in a global context. It encourages them to negotiate positions that work best for each of them.

As Sarah Song observes in her book *Justice, Gender, and the Politics of Multiculturalism*, the "best way to achieve rights-respecting results is through a deliberative process that includes the voices of all those affected by the rules or traditions in question" (p. 171).





The collaborative operating processes at Ubuntu at Work encourage women members to engage in precisely such a deliberative process, not just among members at any one workspace, but with members at other workspaces as well. It has helped women members learn how other women deal with domestic violence, with patriarchal demands, with constraints on their choice and freedoms, and negotiate responses and strategies for themselves. And it does this not by leaving every woman to herself, but by creating support groups that help the women create alternative communities for themselves.

Ubuntu at Work members are aided in this deliberative process not just by the presence of women from other cultures and with other experiences. They are also encouraged to negotiate an optimal pathway for themselves by the demands of producing for global markets. Global markets make few accommodations for its workers.

When women negotiate with the global marketplace as individuals, they face onerous challenges. The challenges faced by uneducated poor women are significantly worse than the challenges faced by professional women in the West.

However, the fact that Ubuntu at Work is the entity negotiating the terms of their engagement with the global marketplace, and the fact that Ubuntu at Work is a collaborative group of women makes this

negotiation work that much better for Ubuntu's members.

Ubuntu women do of course face many of the challenges that working women everywhere face - childcare dilemmas, family dramas. However, the support Ubuntu members get from other members appears to make the challenges more manageable. And the possibilities for workplace harassment are greatly reduced, given that the women manage their workspaces themselves.

A deliberative process without the transformative power of a production operation and income generating process is unlikely to lead to the kind of empowerment that their combination can. Moreover, when the deliberation accompanies the collaborative support, and the income generating production opportunities, the results appear to be striking.

Ubuntu members are moving further along the path towards gender justice. Their daughters are growing up in households where mothers are respected within the family and outside. They are growing up in homes where mothers are conscious of their rights and speak up for them. They are being raised in families where learning and education is encouraged and valued and in families where they can receive greater gender justice than do girls in families where mothers are repressed and compelled to follow traditional patriarchal and misogynistic familial patterns of behavior.



Kids near Ubuntu Workspace, Banwadi, Chamarajnagar, India



Change is slow, but it is taking place. Ubuntu women are getting empowered and they are moving themselves and others in their communities along the path toward greater gender justice. And the change is not ignoring local cultures, and nor it is accepting local practices are supreme. The change is a process of at least some accommodation between tradition, global production demands, as viewed through a lens of women's needs and rights.

Ubuntu at Work's impact in the area of gender justice suggests a number of comparative questions. Answering these questions would not just contribute to debates about gender justice, but will help Ubuntu fine-tune its model and inputs and possibly deepen their impact.

### Questions Raised:

1. Do these conclusions hold up when compared to similar women's empowerment inputs elsewhere?
2. What features might alter these gender justice outcomes?
3. At what point will this impact taper off or plateau?
4. How would involvement in this model affect buyers (global corporations) and their employees? Would gender justice percolate upwards?
5. What broader lessons might be drawn from this experience to improve gender justice programs in general?





## A word about Ubuntu

“As an African, I find it interesting whenever I see the word Ubuntu being used. Given that Ubuntu is seen in Africa as the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity" or the idea that "I am because you are" or "a person is a person only through other people", it is both inspiring and sometimes unsettling because sometimes the people or organizations that use this do not reflect the core central idea of compassionate citizenship.

In the work that Vibha and Ubuntu have been doing over the years I have been deeply inspired and believe its work affords the respect and dignity to the original idea behind the important philosophical notion of Ubuntu.”

**Kumi Naidoo**

International Executive Director  
Greenpeace



# The Ubuntu at Work Inc. Team

**12/1/15 -12/1/16**

## **Board Members**

Vibha Pingle  
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Ashutosh Varshney

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