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## **Uganda: Orikiriza's Beads Turning Lives of Peasant Women Around**

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Kampala — It is rare to find university students who look beyond themselves to do good for others after graduation. However, Rusia Orikiriza is one of a kind among her peers.

After she excelled in her UACE examinations which earned her government sponsorship, you would imagine she would have a worry-free three years at university, spoiling herself and being the student everyone expected her to be. But there was more to this young lady than just meets the eye.

In 2007, while still a first year student at Makerere University, Orikiriza felt the need to contribute to other people's social development. "I grew up in a simple, peasant family. When I joined S1, I was adopted by a humanitarian family following my parents' inability to pay for my

education. That act of kindness inspired me to give back to my community, back in the village," says Orikiriza.

She believes that people have many resources but cannot do a thing about them. There are lots of untapped opportunities everywhere, which means that there are many gaps to be filled.

"In Kabale district where I come from, the level of education is very low. I had to be a role model and do my best to stop the vicious cycle of poverty," she says.

She always had avenues of getting money, considering the natural talents she possesses. "I started by making jewellery, which was very lucrative and so earned me some money," she says.

Most girls at university look to their parents for financial support while others lean on their boyfriends. But Orikiriza, now a finalist of library and information science at Makerere University, did not have any of that to count on.

During the holidays, she trained women in Kabale to make glass and bead necklaces for sale. She also taught them how to weave baskets.

She subsequently penetrated Kanungu, where she got a call from Amama Mbabazi, security minister, who had heard about

her activities in his constituency and was interested in facilitating her classes.

"I aired radio programmes for those who didn't have the opportunity for a one-on-one training. I have since finished working in Kanungu, especially in Kinkizi, Butoguta and Bwindi among the Batwa people," says Orikiriza.

She, thereafter, proceeded to Mbarara where she met and trained a women's group for two weeks.

"Aside from teaching them how to use glass, paper and banana fibre beads, I also tutored them on how they can start small businesses to generate income. In Kiboga, Naguru and Nsambya barracks, I trained CMI, ESO, UPDF and policemen's wives," she says. Sometimes she charges for the materials used when she is not well facilitated.

A small charge, according to her, adds value to the classes as she is not taken very seriously if everything is free of charge.

Orikiriza started a company called Olibags Innovations which does packaging. Industrial Research Institute became interested in her work, especially her product development, which utilises the whole banana stem.

"I make bags out of organic

waste like banana fibre, cotton waste, sugarcane remains and from recycling printing paper like newspapers and manila paper," Orikiriza says.

One of the girls working with Orikiriza, an orphan who completed S6 and had nowhere else to go, was trained to make crafts.

"We started supplying our products to different places like Entebbe Airport, Kitooro and to other individual sellers," says Orikiriza.

The girl can now support herself and is one among many women whose living standards have improved, thanks to the classes.

Women in Kanungu and Bwindi have seized the opportunity to sell their merchandise to tourists who visit the area for gorilla tracking.

"Some women don't do exactly what I taught them but rather have ventured into other businesses and are doing a great job," she says.

Orikiriza's mother, who taught her to make the beads, did not reap much from them until her daughter made her realise it could make a potentially lucrative business.

"My mother, essentially a peasant, is now financially independent, making crafts and selling them - who can ask

for more?" wonders Orikiriza.

She has trained over 5,000 women and 500 youth in making beads and setting up small-scale businesses.

The handiwork is good, ideal for decorative products for weddings and introduction ceremonies. These women earn a good income from selling these products to clients within their localities.

In future, she hopes to become a leading producer of environment-friendly products and to influence a bigger number of lives in self-motivation, hence contributing to improved standards of living.

She won an award from International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the African Women Business Network as the youngest Innovative Entrepreneur in Uganda

She owns a charitable organisation, United Foundation of Entrepreneurial Skills for Development (UFED), that promotes the development of entrepreneurship and innovations among women and the youth

She has trained over 100 Police women in Nsambya, Mbuya and Naguru barracks. She makes paper packaging bags out of banana fibre, pineapple crowns, agricultural waste and other waste materials. This has great

potential for Uganda as a good environmentally-friendly alternative to kaveera Her outreaches to secondary schools (Pride Secondary School in Mityana) have seen her donate sanitary pads to schools.

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