

UDRUŽENE, Bosnia and Herzegovina

<http://udruzene.org/bs/>

[Nadira Škaljić Mignasson]



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The non-governmental organization “UDRUŽENE” is a voluntary association of women whose aim is protection, promotion and preservation of Bosnia Herzegovina handicrafts, preservation of dignity of women knitters, transmission of traditional skills to the younger generations, and creation of favourable conditions for the creative work of women knitters. Our goal is to gather women through knitting and creative work, advance their knitting skills to the professional level, and to introduce handmade knitting products to Western markets.



Our mission is to enable, through the design and handicrafts, Bosnian women victims of war and / or violence, women from marginalized social groups, as well as all women with no income or low income to re-engage in everyday life through creative work and personal engagement. Within our program, women from Bosnia and Herzegovina have the opportunity to, at least for a moment, forget their dramatic past and the difficult everyday life and through socialization and creative work socialize again and become active members of Bosnian society.

I started this project when I was a refugee in France and my main motivation was to try to rebuild the links with my country of origin, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2000, as a young mother, I was extremely touched by stories of displaced women from Bosnian villages who lost their sons and husbands and who could not go back to their home villages because of ethnic cleansing. I was a refugee in France, and they were refugees in their own country, and we both needed to restart our lives, the process which includes economic independence and empowerment.



I had some contacts and experience in fashion industry in France and they had an exceptional talent in handicrafts. Starting from this point we had to go through different phases and difficulties inherent to each phases, me in France and they in their own country where they were considered strangers.

But the biggest challenge for me was to turn these traditional skills into economic activity and after 5 years of intensive work, with lots of mistakes and successes, we can finally say that we managed it. Our biggest success is that we have managed to prove to the knitters that they are still capable to learn new things and to take their lives into their own hands, and to be back to our centre, this time not as victims but as protagonists. On the other side, we proved to customers from the international fashion industry that their creations and ideas can become reality thanks to hand-knitting and that each of these hand-knit fashion items has its own personal story.



We managed to unify creativity, humanity, business and psychotherapeutic practices in a highly balanced and outstandingly successful manner. Since then, all the members are working towards the creation of the business opportunities (including foreign markets) for women through the valorisation of traditional handcrafts and the introduction of innovation.

It is important to emphasize that the key aspect to assure a sustainable development for the Association was to set the capacities and the mechanisms for a complete value chain approach: from the product quality to market access.

We believe that our business idea seeks innovations that deliver more development impact per produced product than other ways of achieving the same development goals that other businesses possibly use.

The fact that the products that our knitters have produced with their hands are sold in luxury shops is a motivation for them to

keep improving their skills and at the same time, it is giving them a much-needed sense of empowerment that they are worthy and much more than just a statistical marginalized group. At the same time, being the ones who are the source of the knowledge on traditional crafts for the younger generation gives them the sense of self-worth. So our main challenge in daily work is to keep the knitters motivated, to maintain the quality and to satisfy our customers.



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