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Organizing Clothing and Textiles Outreach to Ghanaian Women and Girls

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The purpose of this paper is a call to action for clothing and textiles scholars to aid Ghanaian women and girls in achieving more income and education through a connection with university Family and Consumer Sciences' (FCS) students, faculty, and homemakers. We are proposing that a consortium of clothing and textile specialists with interests in Ghana be organized to create an ongoing and sustainable effort in Ghana to benefit women and girls. To become part of the consortium, one must commit to travel to Ghana at least once in a five year period (this is an example; actual time commitment to be determined) and report their experiences/findings to the consortium chair with implications as to how to continue to move this effort forward. One of the challenges in the developing world is to meld crafts (i. e., apparel, accessories, and home goods) from artisans into a wearable/useful item that is marketable outside of Ghana.

Ghanaians have a distinctive cultural aesthetic of bold, bright, and colorful fabric designs (such as Kente cloth and adinkra cloth). These beautiful fabrics are not widely available outside of Ghana and there is a peculiar lack of availability of these fabrics in the U.S. How is it that these exceptional fabrics have not found a niche market in the US? One reason may be that Ghana's patriarchal structure and low status of women discourages women from becoming the main wage earners and recognized heads of households. Another challenge are high tariffs on exported garments (Binby-Aidoo, 2006).

According to the 2008 *Ghana Demographic and Health Survey* (GDHS), women have less education than men. Only 4% of women and 8% of men, age 15-49, have more than a secondary education (p. 4). Men and women age 15-49 are employed almost equally (men=99%, women= 91%) but women who earn cash generally earn less money than their husbands (p. 15). According to the World Bank, "gender is an **economic** issue in Ghana, not just a social issue. Improving labor productivity and access to and control of economically productive assets, especially for females, is important for growth, agricultural performance, food security, household welfare, and poverty reduction" (The World Bank, 2002, p.5). In this paper we propose ways in which US universities can help improve labor productivity of women in Ghana.

There are several ways that FCS professionals in the US can assist Ghanaian women. One example are annual Education Abroad programs that spend 2-3 weeks in Ghana and include faculty, students, and homemakers (or other interested citizens). If your university doesn't have a study tour to Ghana, you can join or partner with programs at other universities. These tours can often change people's lives. Once individuals experience firsthand a developing country, they will never be the same. Donations of cash, books, and sewing supplies can be hand delivered to women in need through these programs. Delivery of sewing/dying/designing instruction can also take place while there.

It is imperative that Education Abroad programs be assessable to FCS students. This responsibility falls on FCS faculty and administration. For instance, at one university, the

Education Abroad Office offers scholarships in the amount of \$1,500 while the FCS unit offers scholarships up to \$2,000. Combined these scholarships come close to covering the cost of a trip to Ghana (typically \$4,000). In order to graduate students who are global citizens, FCS needs to insure that these opportunities are available to all students regardless of financial standing.

Engaging FCS students is an important part of a C&T consortium in Ghana. Students need opportunities to use their subject matter expertise and to be engaged in meaningful outreach in other cultures. Providing students with real world problem solving experiences will bolster their self-esteem and feelings of job readiness. In addition, students need opportunities to develop a global perspective that can lead to global citizenship.

Women in Ghana, especially village women, need training and supplies to build on basic skills. Given their unique cultural aesthetic (Kente cloth and adinkra cloth), women generally need access to a larger market. FCS researchers can help Ghanaian women by identifying through research which aspects of Ghanaian fabrics have the most appeal. Marketing surveys in university towns would tap into a young and international market. But consumers beyond college age need to be surveyed as well. In addition, research is needed to determine why some consumers do not like “ethnic” prints and to problem solve how to make these prints more desirable.

FCS professionals can also assist Ghanaian women with connections to organizations that target fair trade and handmade goods from artisans. Global Mamas is one such organization in Accra, the capital city of Ghana. That organization could be a crucial link between female entrepreneurs and a global market. Faculty at the University of Ghana would be an excellent resource for this type of effort and should be interviewed by Consortium members as part of an overall needs assessment in Ghana. ITAA will have a Ghana Tour in 2014 which will be a great introduction to the area and the challenges in connecting village women to the global market. Once the consortium has a successful track record, it could serve as a model for similar efforts in other places. There are several rural, low income areas in the US that could benefit from a similar effort.

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