

Anatolian Artisans' Soma Microenterprise Project

By SUSAN BOYETTE

In May 2014 the whole world witnessed the worst industrial disaster of Turkey's modern history when a mine exploded near Soma, in the Manisa region of western Turkey. Over 300 miners died and many more lost jobs when the unsafe mines were shuttered. The tragedy had both environmental and economic implications as once-fertile farmland areas, devastated by the mines, provided no means of income generation for newly-unemployed miners, or for widows in this poor working-class region where women do not traditionally work outside the home. The disaster left the whole community destitute.

Partnering with the CYDD, a nationwide NGO in Turkey, AnART developed a local microenterprise project in Soma funded by the Poverty Alleviation Fund and the Turkish Philanthropy Fund. In late March a group of 24 women took part in a two-week initial workshop on production of contemporary crafts using their traditional skills. The two international designers leading the training have worked on similar projects in Gaza, Nepal and India.

An innovative project brings hope:

The March workshop resulted in a new women's enterprise. **Soma Artisans** create and market unique handmade products using their traditional crochet and needlelace (oya) skills. Their stock include beautiful, useful objects in traditional styles with a modern flair. In one of their most popular lines, children's lively drawings are adapted with embroidery by their mothers. The children's creations not only decorate a range of bags and purses, but also inspire designs for toys and puppets. Features of the toys, such as eyes and ears, are made with crochet.

The profit from sales both locally and internationally will enable these women to earn a steady income while extending the opportunity to a larger number of participants. Participation has been highly competitive; there is currently a waiting list of 185 women.

The second workshop will be held in November. It will include more women, and a wider range of products will be developed.

Here are life stories of some of the participants in the microenterprise project:

Soma Artisans come from a variety of diverse backgrounds, but most of them are very poor. 34 year old Aysu Yilmaz has been married for 15 years; but since they eloped, they get no financial help from their parents. When she is with her 4 year old, she avoids passing toy stores, so he won't ask for a toy. Funda Kirimli's mother left home when Funda was 6 months old. She recalls a difficult childhood with her step-mother. The most influential person in her life was her grandmother. Hatice Aslan was also raised by

her grandmother; her parents had no money to take care of her so her grandmother raised her until age 14. Havva Karatepe comes from Ordu, where her family worked as hazelnut farmers but had to leave because they couldn't make a living farming. She'd like her children to go back one day.

Lack of education is another problem these women face. Kadriye Balkan wanted to be a teacher, but couldn't get educated beyond elementary school. Havva Karatepe says she never lived her childhood. She worked ever since she was little: at age 12 she would make and sell oya to buy school supplies. She finished elementary school and one year of quran teachings. Sultan Nazlier wanted to be a teacher or a seamstress, but her parents couldn't afford to send her past elementary school. Hanife Caglar had an unhappy childhood; she never went to school at all, but learned reading and writing by watching her siblings doing homework. She took an outside exam to get her elementary school diploma. Fatma Demirel's father helped educate the 3 sons of his brother, but wouldn't let Fatma or her sisters go to school. She would like her children to finish school and have good careers.

Following the custom, these women are heavily dependent on their husbands for their well-being. Sevgi Balkan's husband is a driver for the mine company. In the early years of their marriage he was bankrupted and had to pay debts; she reports domestic violence during these years. Zehra Islek and her husband are both from Manisa. He has worked with a mining company for 11 years and earns 1150 lira a month. Sometimes he is laid off, and sometimes he doesn't get paid for awhile. Before this workshop she cleaned apartment stairs until 11 pm, and she works in tobacco farms in the summer. Nurcan Solak's husband is a carpenter, but his business went bankrupt and they lost everything. She doesn't like to be dependent on him, and feels very insecure in case her husband can't manage his business again. Husniye Aydin's biggest frustration is in being dependent on her husband ; she reports that there are no jobs for women. Havva Karatepe's husband works at the mine off and on. He is on medication for psychological problems but doesn't always take it. She has experienced domestic violence; and she doesn't want to depend on her husband because he is unpredictable. Hanife Caglar also reports domestic abuse. Her husband used to beat her a lot but now he uses abusive language and never gives her any money. He even buys her clothes and other basic needs. Hatice Toprak's husband is a mechanic and worked for the mining companies but can't always find work. Her dream is to be financially self-sufficient and not dependent on her husband.

Despite the hardship they face, these women have all sorts of dreams. Muserref Kaya dreamed of a career where she'd wear a uniform. Hatice Aslan and Zehra Islek both wish brighter futures for their children; Ms Aslan would like her oldest son to go to the university, and Ms. Islek would like to educate her daughter so she can have a better life. Funda Kirimli would like a place where women can go and hang out by themselves. Husniye Aydin's 2 children are aged 14 and 22; if she could she'd move with them to Izmir. A few of these women dream of doing something with their needlework. Melek Cikarci has sewed since she was in 3rd grade. She went to a vocational school to become a tailor. She would become a fashion designer if she could go to higher education. Ilkay Il's dreams are different: if she could go to school she would become a doctor so she could take care of her health. Her wishes are for better health for herself, better income for her family, and sobriety for her father.

One of the biggest problems in Soma, remarked on by almost every participant, is the pollution. Derya Kocabiyik says it put her in the hospital for two months. Hatun Ay reports that her two children, aged 8 and 4, are always sick. Husniye Aydin says it aggravates her daughter's asthma. Sevinc Tavukcu says both her parents died of cancer. Aysun Aksut's husband was a cook, but in 2008 became a miner to earn more money. But he has developed bronchitis and can't work more than a few days a week. She doesn't like Soma, but all her relatives are here working as miners. AnART President Yildiz Yagci can attest to the problem. One of her souvenirs of her 3 week stay during the pilot program was a bronchial infection that persisted for weeks after her return to the U.S.

As for how the mine disaster affected their lives: Aysu Yilmaz says a neighbor insists the disaster could have been prevented. It was obvious, he told her; rats started leaving the mine 2 weeks before it happened. Fatma Demirel also thinks the mine incident wasn't an accident, but could have been prevented. Her uncle died at the accident, and several of their friends became disabled and can't find work.

Some people suffered political consequences from the aftermath of the accident. When the President came to visit the mine, an aide kicked a worker who was protesting the government's slow and inadequate response. The incident was captured on TV and played on news shows around the world. His wife, Derya Kocabiyik, a workshop participant, reports that now nobody will employ him out of fear; he can find only menial work. They can't leave Soma because their families live here.

Hatice Aslan's brother in law died in the mine accident. His family waited in front of the hospital for hours to learn if he were dead or alive. She feels happy when her husband comes home from work in the mine. If he is a little late, she worries that there has been another accident and he got trapped. Sevinc Tavukcu's husband was saved after spending 10 hours in the collapsed mine. Since then he's been unemployed. He collected benefits from May until August, and nothing since that. Ilknur Alkan's husband has been a miner for the past 8 years. It was his day off when the mine collapsed; he was saved, but several of his close friends died. He still has nightmares about it, reports his wife.

Participants' reactions to the workshop have been universally positive.

The most commonly cited responses to this project involve the opportunity to make a decent living, to be financially self-supporting and to work from home. Aysu Yilmaz found the instructors "very tolerant, understanding and supportive." Says Sati Demirel, "I'm ready to work very hard to make this a success". Derya Kocabiyik tried to sell Avon at home but couldn't make enough money. She much prefers this work and a steady income. If she can earn some money through our program, she'll do a distance learning program at Eskisehir University in business management. She says, "I'm so happy to be part of this group. After so many months of going through hell because of the accident, this is like a dream come true." "You opened a door for us to have hope for the future," says Hatice Aslan. "I don't want this workshop to end," says Hatun Ay.

Zehra Islek says, "You have been so kind to us, more than our mothers and fathers. If this workshop continues, I'll do anything: making oya, washing dishes, making tea – whatever is necessary [to be a part

of it].” Says Nurcan Solak, “This is our only opportunity. When I work in the fields they treat us very badly, but here you are all very friendly and patient with us.

Havva Karatepe, the one with the unpredictable husband, loves this workshop: “You treat us like one of you; you sit down and eat lunch with us and treat us well.” Hanife Caglar reports that this is the first time she has been paid for her work. She desperately needs this workshop to continue so that she can earn her living. Says Melek Cikarci: “Since you are working hard to give us this opportunity, I’ll also work hard for this workshop to be successful.”

Aysun Aksut and her friends have dreamed up many new ideas, but to date she hadn’t been able to realize them. She very much wants this project to last; she loves the teachers and how good and patient they are. Hatice Toprak wants to improve herself and learn new things. She loves doing the handiwork; this workshop is a dream come true. She loves the teachers and how tolerant they are. “Even if we make a mistake they smile and show us how to fix it.”