

Kazakh women demand financial support

RFE/RL (09.06.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3egDBJW> – Women from lower-income families are continuing to demand government assistance as coronavirus restrictions in the Central Asian state are eased.

Some 20 women on June 9 resumed their so-called “silent protest” after spending the night in front of the Ministry of Labor and Social Support.

The women were wearing sanitary masks marked with an “X” on them, which they said symbolized “the fact that we are not allowed to speak up.”

They also held posters saying: “Cheap mortgages for families in need,” “Financial support for each child,” “Amnesty for poor families’ bank credits,” and “We are on a hunger strike.”

Rallies and pickets by poor women have been held regularly in Nur-Sultan and other Kazakh cities since February 2019, after five children from a single family died in a fire at night when their parents were working.

The tragedy triggered anger across the country and demonstrations where protesters demanded increased government support for families that have several children.

The protests were held periodically until restrictions to slow the spread of the coronavirus were introduced in mid-March.

Dauren Babamuratov, an adviser to Nur-Sultan's mayor, and Arman Qurbanov, a representative of the city's health authorities, met with the women on June 9 and attempted to persuade them to leave the site, but the women refused.

Since the protests began last year, the government has announced a special program to support families with more than three children.

Initially, such families were provided with an additional monthly allowance of 21,000 tenges (\$50) per child. However, the sum has since been cut twice. From January, the allowances were given only to families officially recognized as living in poverty.

The protesters are demanding a return of the benefits to initial levels, as well as for more benefits to be given to all families with more than three children.

MOROCCO: Meet Mushima: Women

weaving ethics into fashion

A social mission brand with a passion for traditional artistry, Mushmina is helping Moroccan women to achieve financial independence and personal empowerment one handmade carpet at a time.

By Morgan Hekking

Morocco World News (08.02.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3bwsY4n> – In a world that seems to be dominated by fast-fashion giants like Forever 21 and Fashion Nova, it can be easy to get wrapped up in a culture of constant trend-chasing.

Growing alongside the thundering tidal wave of cheap materials and underpaid labor, however, is a strong undercurrent urging consumers to consider thrift-shopping, upcycling, and seeking out “slow” fashion brands that emphasize sustainable, ethical practices over profit.

One such brand is Mushmina.

Mushmina, a family nickname meaning “little sister,” is the brainchild of New Jersey-born sisters Heather and Katie O’Neill.

Sitting at a cafe in Fez in 2004, the O’Neill sisters decided to start a business with the ultimate aim of empowering local

artisans in Morocco, specifically rural women artisans.

Their dream became a reality in 2009, and Mushmina celebrated a decade in business in 2019.

At the mercy of middlemen

Heather first came to Morocco in 2003 as a 25-year-old Peace Corps volunteer with the US government.

“I left a design job in New York City and everyone thought I was crazy,” she told MWN. “It was a leap of faith that I’m so glad I took.”

Heather was assigned as a small business volunteer with the artisan sector in Boujad, a small town near Beni-Mellal in central Morocco. With her background in design, the assignment was a perfect fit.

She quickly picked up Darija and began forging meaningful connections with the artisans she worked with, taking a particular interest in women weavers, many of whom she is still linked to today.

Perhaps the most profound experience Heather had during her term with the Peace Corps was in Boujad’s souk, an open-air market that takes place every Thursday starting at 5 a.m.

“One morning, I went with the women [weavers] to see how they sell [their handmade rugs], and that was my epiphany moment,” she recounted. “I realized how at the mercy they are of the middlemen that come in from Marrakech and Fez.”

She described seeing hundreds of women sitting on the ground with their carpets rolled out in front of them, waiting to make a sale. If hours pass and a woman has not sold any carpets, she may become desperate and take any price offered to her—even if it is well under what her product is worth.

“They had no bargaining power,” she lamented. “That’s when I decided that I wanted to help.”

Mushmina: Made with love in Morocco

Heather wrapped up her three-year term with the Peace Corps and went on to graduate school. After completing her thesis on women’s development, Heather moved back to Morocco—this time with a concrete plan to act on the revelation she had that day in the souk.

Heather and Katie launched Mushmina in 2009 with a clear vision: To empower Moroccan women and connect creators with US markets. Ten years later, the sisters still see the US as their main market but are looking beyond into more opportunities elsewhere.

Thanks to the duo's extensive background in design and retail, and with Heather's connections forged during her time with the Peace Corps, the sisters were able to launch Mushmina with only a shoestring budget.

"Our vision for the brand has always been colorful, creative, and discovering craft in rural regions. This is what we love most."

To get started, Heather reached out to the director of the Peace Corps, who connected her to current volunteers in Morocco in the small business sectors. The volunteers held focus groups with artisans who then crafted some of Mushmina's first orders.

The Peace Corps played an essential role not only in introducing Heather to Morocco and its colorful world of artisans but also in offering her an anchor of support upon her return to the country years later.

"I fell in love with Morocco—it's magic, its people, and the artisan craft," she said of her initial stint in Boujad. "I guess you could say Morocco called me back."

"I feel blessed to be able to live and work in such a creative and colorful country. Each day is different and some of my best days are those spent exploring new regions and working with rural women."

Morocco's family-oriented business model

While Katie fulfills her role as Mushmina's creative director from the US, Morocco has become home for Heather. She lives in a rural region outside of Casablanca with her Moroccan husband and their two children.

Her fluency in Darija has certainly given her a leg-up in handling business in the country. She personally finds and buys all of Mushmina's materials, trains and instructs her team, and hosts workshops for local women artisans.

"So much of working in Morocco is about personal connection," Heather explained. "People want to do business with people they like."

"We share tea, we know each other's families, and my children are often along with me for the ride," she said of her business partners and team members. "That is what I really appreciate about working in Morocco. It's a family-oriented place, even in business."

While Heather sees tough prospects for small businesses in the US, she is hopeful about Morocco. "The good news is that small business in Morocco is still very vibrant and the future is global."

Mushmina's social mission

Mushmina is arguably more of a social mission than a fashion brand, with Heather herself more interested in empowering women to perfect their craft rather than making profits from sales.

Unlike fast-fashion companies, Mushmina's success directly benefits the Moroccan men and women working for the small business.

"Our artisans are well-paid for their work because we believe in investing in handmade goods that have cultural integrity and intrinsic value," Heather maintained.

"We have seen artisans open bank accounts and buy land. Our metalsmith moved from a rooftop home studio to a full workshop with employees and a retail space. We have seen women gain confidence, finish training programs, and become businesswomen themselves."

A case in point is Halima, Mushmina's lead weaver.

Since working with the business, Halima has been able to buy land with her husband and become a businesswoman in her own right. Having made a name for herself in the local artisan community, Halima is often approached by women looking for work as weavers. Halima doles out order assignments to these women, and through offering them avenues for personal empowerment, she has become a local leader.

“Our customers feel connected to our brand as it is owned by women and our mission is helping women and artisans,” Heather said.

“At the end of the day, we hope that we can continue to inspire the people who work with us and the customers who buy from us to think consciously about what we buy and who made it.”