

OLIVESEED WOMEN'S WORK CENTER

Empowering Women & Educating At-Risk Girls in the Maasai Mara

Barb Mackraz

Executive Director, Oliveseed

barb@oliveseed.org

November 2025



Why a Center for Women?

In the rural Maasai Mara of Kenya, almost all adult women are not educated, lack marketable skills, and have no economic opportunities, as they did not have the chance to go to school when they were young. And yet, they are eager to work and to help their families through meaningful employment. We have worked in the Maasai Mara since 2017 on educational enrichment for the poorest rural schools. While working here, we saw how difficult life is for women and found a way to address it.



In early 2023, we built the Oliveseed Women's Work Center, where women are now earning an income for the first time in their lives, learning vocational skills, keeping their kids in school, helping 1000s of local girls stay in school through the Period Project, and supporting their extended families through this enterprise. When you see the joy on their faces, you quickly realize how this has transformed their lives and sense of purpose. And when a woman earns an income, she uplifts her family and whole community. There is nothing else like this in the region, and it has been ground-breaking. The families and elders are fully supportive.

The Women's Center Today

The Women's Work Center is in the middle of the most wildlife-rich area of East Africa, with 1000s of international visitors coming on safari each year. This proximity to visitors gives the women a ready market for selling the items they make.

We built the Center from the ground up, with participation from the local community and full blessings from the elders. It sits on an acre of land we purchased and is walking distance from Emarti Village, where the women live. The Center is powered entirely by solar, and water is available from the Talek River close by through our pumping system and through a rainwater catchment system we installed at the Center. We have an office as well as indoor and outdoor work spaces, and latrines with showers for the women.



Today, 18 women from the local community work at the Center, plus the manager and trainer. Each extended family selected a woman to represent their family, as the income they earn helps the whole family. Women can come and go part-time as they please, mostly doing traditional beadwork — unless we have an order for a sewing project that requires more hours. Many more women are anxious to join this enterprise.

We Began with Traditions: Beadwork



We began by supporting the women's gorgeous traditional beadwork, as these artisans are born with extraordinary skills in this. There are over 150 safari camps in the Maasai Mara, with visitors eager to buy high-quality beaded jewelry, belts, and household items. The Center has its own gift shop, and we currently sell through a safari camp next door. Our goal is to expand this to many more camps.

For the first two years, the supplies, labor, and operations for beadwork were donor funded, as we needed to build inventory, improve skills, and establish sales channels. We have now evolved to a model where the women are paid for their items that sell, with 75% going to the

woman and 25% supporting the overhead of the Center including the purchase of more beads and supplies to enable more work.



No specialized equipment is needed for beading; this part of the enterprise is largely about shared supplies, the work space, and distribution. Beading is a common activity for women, but no other workshops are nearby. They would not be able to afford to buy high-quality glass beads and leather on their own, market their work, and develop sales channels, so this Center is a real boon to their beautiful beadwork. It turns what they already know into an enterprise. Also, the women enjoy the camaraderie of doing beadwork together in a cooperative environment, sharing ideas, and collaborating on projects.



Women's Center 2.0: Sewing

In early 2024, we introduced sewing and built out a robust sewing workshop. The women quickly embraced sewing and mastered it, which is remarkable because none of the women had ever touched any kind of machine before. (There is no power or light in their homes.) We engaged an experienced sewing trainer, and she is still a vital part of the Center. Over time, we have equipped the Center with 2 treadle sewing machines, 3 large robust sewing machines (including one capable of sewing leather and canvas), a serging machine for finishing edges, cutting tables, a fabric-cutting machine, leather and snap tools, and other supplies. All of this is powered by solar, and all put to good use.



The Main Sewing Enterprise to Date: Sanitary Kits for Girls

In this region, only around 10% of girls are attending high school. One of the main reasons is that girls drop out of school when they get their period, as they have no way to manage it. Even if disposable products were available here (which they aren't), families have no money to buy them. And when girls drop out of school here, they very often go through FGM and early forced marriage to a much older man. Our goal is to help girls stay in school at least through high school. We have found that the schools and families we work with are very supportive — and the women at the Center are especially passionate about keeping the area's daughters in school. This is an opportunity they didn't have when they were young.

These high-quality sanitary kits can help a girl stay in school for 3 years. We distribute them at rural boarding high schools and middle schools for teen girls, where there is water for washing and the support of teachers to assist. We provide a health and hygiene training session for the girls when we do the distribution. As of November 2025, we have made and distributed 4000 sanitary kits, and the schools in the region are asking for many more.

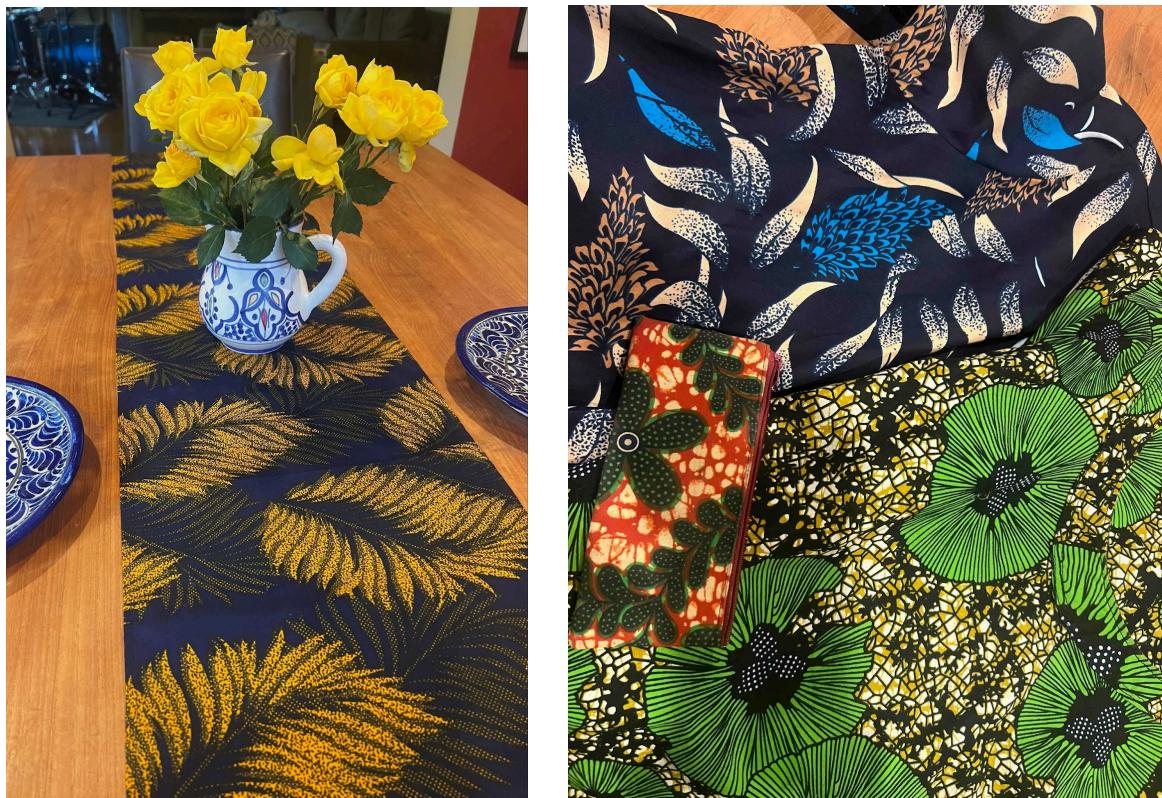
To learn more about the kits, please see <https://www.oliveseed.org/keep-girls-in-school>. Currently this is a donor-funded program, and we are exploring opportunities for schools and education organizations to purchase them from the Center.



Other Products for the Sewing Enterprise

With 1000s of safari visitors in the immediate area each year, there is a promising opportunity to market sewn gifts, household items, and clothing made from beautiful African kitenge fabrics to these visitors. In our research at local safari camps, we have found that beadwork is carried everywhere but sewn items are rarely found in gift shops.

The women are already making and selling simple items like pillowcases, table runners, and napkins in kitenge fabrics. We are exploring adding other items like dresses, tote bags, dolls, and stuffed animals. An experienced seamstress from California is volunteering her time and resources in March 2026 to spend the month at the Center and work with the women to develop more products to sell in local camps. The items below are examples of popular items made in Kenya from kitenge fabrics.



Popular kitenge fabric items: On the left is one of the runners made by women at the Center; on the right are other items made by women in Nairobi

The women also have an opportunity to make school uniforms for children in the area, and schools are requesting this. Uniforms are compulsory at Kenyan schools, but for many families the cost for uniforms (usually made in Nairobi and other cities) is prohibitive and so the children drop out of school. Economical, locally made uniforms would be welcomed in our Impact Zone, the villages alongside the Maasai Mara National Reserve. There are 9500 primary school students nearby. Patterns for uniforms are available.

Future Milk Sales Enterprise

There are many more opportunities for enterprises here, with ideas and energy provided by the women. One of the enterprises we're considering is **milk delivery to a cooling center**. Women here milk their families' cows early each morning. In their family economy, "women own the milk." They may sell some of their milk by carrying a bottle 10km (6+ miles) to the regional cooling center, where a dairy distributor picks it up and pays the women. The milk is then processed by the distributor and sold in other markets in the country. In this initiative, we will purchase 2 electric motorcycles and outfit them with panniers or carts on the back, so that women can quickly transport multiple bottles of milk each day to the cooling center. This way, they will save time and effort (freeing up time for other activities like the Women's Center programs), make much more money because they can transport 4 bottles rather than 1, and no milk will be wasted.

We also have the opportunity and great location for building a **cooling center of our own**. We have already determined that the distributor can extend their pickup to our location.

When we conducted our initial research on needs, selling milk was one of the top requests from women in the community. They understand the inherent value of this product that they are currently unable to get to market, and they see their surplus going to waste.

About Oliveseed

Oliveseed is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit based in California, with grassroots teams in rural Kenya and Morocco. Palo Alto resident Barb Mackraz is the founder and executive director; she left her tech career in 2014 to devote her life to these initiatives. We are co-registered as a community-based nonprofit in Kenya, led locally by Amos Kipeen and Hellen Nchoko. Our mission is to empower youth and women in the most underserved areas through literacy, education, and sustainable livelihoods. Oliveseed was founded in 2014, first as Morocco Library Project. Since then, we have led innovative programs including the first English libraries in rural Morocco, nationwide youth writing programs in Kenya and Morocco, the first children's libraries in traditional Maasai villages, and now this Women's Work Center, the first in its region.

We have earned the Platinum Seal of Transparency from Candid GuideStar (their highest rating); have collaborated with the Peace Corps in Morocco multiple times by invitation; have been vetted by Benevity, Bright Funds, and other corporate giving programs; and have earned grants from Rotary, Kiwanis, Africa Publishing Innovation Fund (for grassroots African organizations), and twice from the U.S. Embassy in Morocco. We are funded mostly by private donations, and at our scale, every donation makes a real difference.

www.oliveseed.org



Hellen Nchoko manages the Women's Center, including beading arts and sales of beadwork to safari camps.



Kitango Karia is the lead seamstress and sewing trainer at the Center, and runs the sanitary kit program to keep girls in chool.



WHAT IS NEEDED MOST

Turning This Asset into a Self-Sustaining Enterprise for Women

Our goal in 2026 is to make the Oliveseed Women's Work Center a self-sustaining enterprise. With a few improvements to infrastructure and an outreach program led by these burgeoning women entrepreneurs, this goal is within reach.

Expanding the Market for Product Sales

Runway support and marketing outreach to safari camps for 6 months

- Why: Monthly support covers the salaries for Hellen and Kitango (manager and sewing trainer), food, and other operations. As well as managing the enterprise, Hellen and Kitango are doing outreach to safari camp shops in Q1/Q2 to expand the market for their beadwork and kitenge fabric product lines. This includes the startup costs of purchasing beads and fabrics in Nairobi and paying the women to create more items to add to the inventory. We already have volunteers in the U.S. providing support on product planning and marketing collateral, with this team visiting the Center in March 2026.

Improving the Infrastructure of the Center

We can provide the design and detailed breakdown of costs for these items.

Two additional solar panels, including batteries and installation

- Why: We currently have 8 panels, which is not quite enough for the number of machines we have. Plus, we have an electric motorcycle for running errands such as groceries, and charging it saps the power we currently have.

Multi-purpose kitchen, garden, and eating area

- This includes an indoor cooking area with fridge, stove, prep table, and storage; and a paved outdoor table area with half walls for eating. It is based on a style of indoor/outdoor kitchens at small local camps.
- Why: Hellen (the manager), Kitango (the trainer), and two guards live on site most of the time and need to prepare and eat their meals here. (The guards are here mainly because of wild animals, and they also take care of the grounds.) Women working on projects also need snacks or a mid-day meal. We currently have only a small cookpot inside a metal shed, and this is a daily challenge. A decent kitchen would enable more women to work here and longer, improve health outcomes for the women, and facilitate visitors and buyers.

Staff sleeping quarters: 2 tents and latrines

- Why: Hellen, Kitango, and guards live here most of the time. The women are in one metal shed (hot), and the men in another. They deserve to have decent housing.

Access road and signage for the Center

- Why: We have a gift shop and are encouraging visitors from dozens of nearby camps to visit the Center, learn about traditional arts, and purchase items. Currently people have to drive through a grassy area to get here, and it's not clear how to reach the Center. This is an important step to building our sales enterprise.

Ongoing Program in Need: Sanitary Kits for Girls in School

<u>What</u>	<u>Why</u>	<u>Cost</u>
400 more sanitary kits. Or any number of kits at \$12 each.	Making sanitary kits provides employment to the women and keeps local girls in school. We have distributed 3000 so far, and the local schools are asking for many more.	\$4800

We make kits wherever we have the funds for them and are always thankful for donations. This supplements income the women make from products to sell. Each kit costs \$12 and helps a girl stay in school for 3 years:

- \$7 makes the kit itself, including buying the materials and paying the women a fair wage.
- \$2 purchases extra items for the kit: a towel, 2 pairs of panties, and soap.
- \$3 helps support the Women's Center: paying the manager, sewing trainer, and guards; maintaining the equipment; meals for the women; and keeping the lights on.

How You Can Help

Whether you can help the Women's Center with infrastructure, expansion of the market to more camps, sanitary kits, or new enterprises such as milk sales, you may give online at:

<https://www.oliveseed.org/donate>

If you'd like to learn more or discuss ways to partner or give, please contact Barb Mackraz:
barb@oliveseed.org

Thank you. We are very grateful for your interest and support.

Meet Two of the Women



Kisiong'u Kasoe

Kisiong'u is mother to eight children, and with her earnings from the Women's Center she is putting six of them through school. She's saving part of her income toward building a better house for her family and plans to purchase cows of her own so she can sell milk at the marketplace.

Kisiong'u, like many Maasai women, learned beading from her mother. She enjoys teaching other women at the Women's Center and training in new techniques like sewing sanitary kits.



Nkoiseli Kasoe

Nkoiseli uses her earnings from the Women's Center to pay school fees and buy uniforms for six of her seven children. She, like many other women here, also uses her earnings to feed and clothe her family.

Nkoiseli aspires to open a pharmacy for animals. The Maasai people are stewards of wildlife and co-exist with them in small villages throughout the Maasai Mara. They effectively guard against poaching. Rather than hunting, they raise and herd domestic animals for food.

Find more profiles at <https://www.oliveseed.org/meet-the-women>

More Photos



