

Women Beekeepers for Life

By Jane Ridler, Master Beekeeper, Essex BKA and Bees Abroad Partnership Manager



Bees Abroad

Relieving Poverty for 21 years

This article presents the case for beekeeping being a great way for women in developing countries to improve their life chances. It coincides with the UN's International Women's Day on 8 March.

Beekeeping seems a fairly gender-neutral occupation in the UK today. It is true that the average man can carry more supers than the average woman, but we have all heard the maxim that 'women make the best beekeepers because of their gentle handling techniques'. In Essex BKA these days, about half of our members are women, and I expect that is the picture around the UK. Currently, women also hold the positions of both President and Chair at the BBKA.

Historically, beekeeping in Britain has involved both men and women to different degrees. The monks of the Middle Ages are widely reported to have tended bees primarily to harvest pure beeswax for sacred candles, perhaps culminating in the activities of one of our most famous British (even if not born here!) beekeepers and researchers of the twentieth century, Brother Adam of Buckfast Abbey. Is there any similar chronicling for nuns?

The big names early in the history of the BBKA, founded in 1874, were also men; well-known names to us like TW Cowan and W Broughton-Carr. The first fifty years of the BBKA saw only one woman as President, Baroness Burdett-Coutts, but were the majority of rural beekeepers men? Certainly, theirs was the voice. Recently, I was sent an article from the *Chelmsford Chronicle* of 1886, in which an irate Daniel Spooner was, via the editor, berating another unknown beekeeper, for his 'bar framed' hives, whose bees were robbing out his skeps: 'An honest man should feed

his bees, not send them a-robbing other men's skeps like a dog thieving in a butcher's shop.'

William Herrod-Hempsall, author and important player in British beekeeping in the early twentieth century, claimed in his *Bee-Keeping New and Old, described with Pen and Camera*, published by the *British Bee Journal* in 1930: 'Sex is no bar to bee-keeping. It is an occupation for which women are eminently suited, and the work will make them healthier and stronger, as it provides them with an incentive to get out into the open, instead of being continually cooped up indoors.'

The women beekeepers in the very few photos of them in this 772-page tome do not look to me as though they lack the benefits of fresh air! It was frequently the women in Victorian times, who were at home with the bee skeps at the bottom of the garden, who rushed out to claim swarms, chasing them down the lane and tanging the pots and pans as they ran.

In the developing world the domination of men in beekeeping remains the case today. Now the opportunities for women are increasing, but they desperately need further boosting. John and Mary Home, previous Chair of Bees Abroad and Project Manager in Kenya, respectively, suggest: 'In the past, with larger forests and log hives high in the trees in Kenya, traditionally only men undertook beekeeping', but they add that, 'It became obvious that the women, who were good at other livestock management took readily to beekeeping. Their calm approach, methodical manipulation, and working in small groups, gave them incentive.'

Skills and protective equipment empower women across Africa

Bees Abroad projects in many African countries reflect the same observation. In giving women the skills to make top bar hives, management is made easier even though the hives are more expensive than local type. Easier management and having their own bee suits opens up the world of beekeeping for talented groups of women.

Christine Ryumugabe Kamanzi, the leader of Jireh Women Beekeepers in Kisoro, South Western Uganda tells us: 'Africa is a beautiful place with a bee-friendly climate and friendly people, but the majority of the people in Kisoro do not earn \$8 a week, yet they have families to feed, send to school and to hospital when they are sick. The challenges faced by women are the same challenges shared by the community. However, women suffer more because they do not own land and therefore have no say, even when husbands want to



A meeting of The Jireh Women's Group. Photo by Richard Ridler, Bees Abroad.



Christine Ryumugabe Kamanzi in her apiary in Kisoro. Photo by Richard Ridler, Bees Abroad.

sell it. When it comes to local unskilled labour, like working in gardens, employers prefer to hire men because they are stronger than women. Many women head single parent families. Their husbands have died of AIDs, been killed in conflicts, or just died. In underprivileged families, if there is enough money for school, male children generally are chosen to attend. If a girl is lucky enough to be sent to school, domestic responsibilities such as fetching water and farm work prevent focus on schoolwork.” Women face gender bias.

“In Kisoro, beekeeping is dominated by men. Sometimes when women have lost their husbands, they have lost their bees too because they have no idea how beekeeping is done. It is therefore important to introduce women to beekeeping and expose them to the advantages and benefits.

The majority of women here are uneducated and unemployed and most agricultural work is done by women. Beekeeping does not need much land or time since it can be done in the evenings or early in the mornings, so it is a venture through which they can be self-sustainable and financially independent.”

Jireh Women Beekeepers

Thirty-nine-year-old Christine is one of the few people in her Ugandan community who has a bachelor's degree. She studied Community Leadership and Development and has been a beekeeper for three years. As an educated woman in a society where women are marginalised, she feels strongly that beekeeping and women are a perfect match. Jireh Women Beekeepers currently consists of 54 women, and Christine contacted us at Bees Abroad through another project that my husband, Richard, current Chair of Bees Abroad, and I were monitoring in nearby Kabale, on the Rwandan border, in 2018. Jireh is now a thriving, lively and dedicated organisation. Besides learning and improving their beekeeping and hive product processing skills, they coach a group of high school-aged girls.

Christine's aspiration is impressive: “Until recently I did not know educated beekeepers. I thought that beekeeping was done by illiterate old men. I put it upon myself to introduce beekeeping to as many schoolgirls as I can. I want to see a generation of educated female beekeepers in future. A future of women who know the importance of beekeeping and bees.”

Emmanuel International Beekeepers, Tanzania

Another trailblazer for women beekeeping is from Tanzania. Trekking at night through the Tanzanian bush in boots and a bee suit is all part of a day's work for Bhatendi Mwandandila. This brave and determined young woman is now the Beekeeping



Bhatendi Mwandandila, Beekeeping Manager for Emmanuel International Tanzania. Photo by Rachel Monger.

Manager for Emmanuel International Tanzania, setting up and training community beekeeping groups across the Mwanza region. While supporting her mother in Mbeya and caring for her sick brother, she is encouraging and helping women in rural villages to train as beekeepers, and women who produce beeswax handicrafts in the city to manage a Honey Centre. Coming alongside women, sharing love and hope with them, she is making a difference in the lives of many.



Women of the Levite Beekeepers in Ghana making top bars. Photo by Trisha Marlow, Bees Abroad.

Women Agricultural Development Forum in Nigeria

In Nigeria, Sakina Adamu Ahmad is a young academician from Sokoto. She shares multiple family and health challenges with fellow women, yet is also a Senior Lecturer at Sokoto State University. Women Agricultural Development Forum was founded in 2018 with the aim of empowering women with multi-dimensional problems such as widows, divorcees and disabled women. Sakina says: "In our bid towards supporting the women, Bees Abroad supported us in beekeeping for twenty-four women."

A few comments from members show just how empowering beekeeping is for some women:

"Even though I am a PhD holder, my participation in beekeeping is giving me better status in my community."

"As a divorcee, because I now have a source of income and because it is unique (beekeeping) am now being approached by suitors."

"I am now called mai zuma (honey woman)."

"As a disable woman, I now see myself as able through beekeeping."

Acknowledgements

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Bees Abroad 2021 campaign

Bees Abroad has launched 'Beekeepers for Life', an initiative focussed exclusively on creating communities of women beekeepers in Africa. Its aim is to empower by providing financial independence, education, self-esteem and community cohesion. Find out more at www.beekeepersforlife.org



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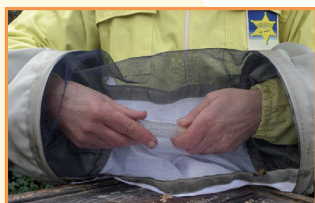
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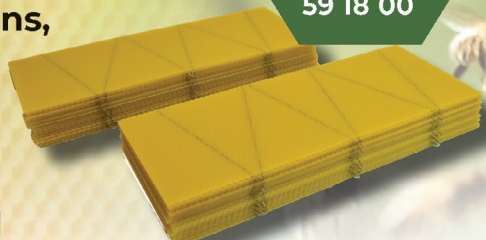
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