

The Island Women Beekeepers

By Rachel Monger, Bees Abroad



This is the first of a four-part series on Bees Abroad beekeeping projects, which were introduced for sponsorship in the World Bee Day 2022 celebrations in May.

The women at the hives could not stop laughing! Theopister could not even stand up and Zawadi had tears streaming down her cheeks. Have you ever known beekeepers to have this much fun on the job? This is the Jikomboe ('self-liberation') Women's Group in Nyamkolechiwa on Kome Island. Kome is an island on Lake Victoria in northern Tanzania with very limited infrastructure. Most of its people (the 'Wazinza' tribe) are subsistence farmers who are faced with a continual decrease in their crop yields and degradation of their natural ecosystem along with other poverty-related issues affecting health and education.

Faced with this, this fun-loving group of women has come together to learn how to become beekeepers, something that traditionally has only been done by men. The group includes some mamas with their grown daughters, who are carrying their own children on their backs. The women are all farmers, working incredibly hard to produce enough food from their small piece of land to feed their children. Last year they asked if they could learn how to become beekeepers in order to profit from honey and wax



A selection of photos of the Jikomboe Women's Group in this article are by Rachel Monger, Bees Abroad.

sales and so now Bees Abroad, with local partner, Emmanuel International, are training and equipping them.

The women have hung their first forty locally-made top-bar hives in the trees, and received training in basic beekeeping skills and how to integrate beekeeping with conservation agriculture techniques which, when combined with bee pollination, will increase their crop yield and food security. They are receiving training and support to establish tree nurseries to improve their environment and raise extra income through sales. And they will be learning business and marketing skills as they move into selling honey and value-added beeswax products. *"The women didn't have any knowledge of beekeeping and were afraid of the bees, but now, they are very bold and are ready to work very hard to ensure the project is successful,"* said Justina Nswilla, a local trainer for the Jikomboe Group.

They are a resilient group of mamas and just so much fun. I had the privilege of visiting them in the spring and there was so much laughter in the few days we shared together. Plans were upset by a long, hard rain on the first morning, but, as soon as they could, they worked together to produce a feast of rice and beans and local chicken for all twenty-five of us, laughing all the while. They laughed and sang as they came together for an official group meeting. And it was at their top-bar hives that they laughed particularly hard. We had just walked for over half an hour with our buckets and suits through fields of maize, and picked our way precariously across rice paddy ridges to get to the hives. We finally arrived as the sun was beginning to go down; it was time to get the suits on and get our red torches out. This was a first-time experience for the women, as it was the first hive check since the bees had arrived. Here in rural Tanzania, once the hives have been baited with wax, the lesson is patience as they wait for the bees to make the hive a home. These women had been waiting five months, an unusually long time! For women who wear flip flops



and khangas (a cloth wrap) the thick suits with zips, made by another women's group on the mainland, head veils, gumboots and gloves are all very foreign and difficult to figure out. Women were rolling on the ground in laughter as they tried to put on the strange items! Then when they all stood up and looked at each other in this new apparel, it was completely hilarious for everyone!

But for these mamas, life has not been easy or full of laughter. Nyabwire, shared her story of how as a child, she had dropped out of school due to constant illness. She entered a forced marriage at a very early age, but after the birth of her daughter, her husband died. Later she married again, but he also died before she bore another child. Her late husband's parents took everything, leaving her and her daughter grieving and destitute. With her daughter, Nyabwire moved to live with her brother, but lost everything again when his house burned to the ground. One of the women said she had never seen Nyabwire laugh as she did on the day we shared and, at the end of that day, Nyabwire said that she had never been so happy. The benefits of being part of a group like this are more than we realise.

Anastazia is 57 years old and has seven children and four grandchildren. She works hard, growing food for her family to eat. Before joining the beekeeping group, she relied on selling 'pombe', which is homemade beer, in her village. But she was unhappy, knowing the pombe was leaving women vulnerable and unsupported by alcoholic husbands. She is now looking forward to raising her own capital through selling honey. From this income, she is already planning to start other small businesses and her hope is that it will enable her children and grandchildren to go to school.

Another grandmother in the group is struggling to care for the eighteen grandchildren in her care. Life is not easy; she has been tired and burdened. She stood to speak at the meeting and her joy was in her smile. In coming together and learning together, these women are finding so much joy. And there was more joy at the hives that evening as, for the very first time, the women saw honey on the comb in their hives. We look forward, with them, to future harvests of honey which will help them pay for medical and school expenses, helping the health and education of their children. We look forward to celebrating greater yields of crops in their pollinated fields. We look forward to the start of a second women's



beekeeping group on Kome Island as more women are trained through this project which will extend to many villages on the island.

Want to get involved?

Think about these fun-loving women becoming beekeepers the next time you put your bee suit on. If you would like to support this project working with the women on Kome Island, or another Bees Abroad beekeeping project, visit the Bees Abroad website www.beesabroad.org.uk or get in touch: info@beesabroad.org.uk. In next month's *BBKA News* we will tell you about another group of beekeepers working with Bees Abroad in Kenya.

This project is being delivered by Emmanuel International, the local delivery partner for Bees Abroad in Tanzania. Rachel Monger has worked for many years in community development in Tanzania. She now lives in Bath and is the UK-based partnership manager.