



THE SAVANNAH FRUITS COMPANY REPORTS ON THE

WIDOWS & ORPHANS

MOVEMENT

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SAVANNAH
FRUITS
COMPANY

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HOW IT BEGAN

On July 28th, 2021 SFC traveled north to Bolgatanga to meet our baobab oil suppliers, the Widows and Orphans Movement and their social enterprise, Attarah. We met with the Executive Director, Fati Abigail Abdulai and her team to learn more about WOM's mission and approach.

Fati generously shared with us that the Widows and Orphans Movement (WOM) was established as an NGO in 1993 by her mother, Betty Ayagiba. Betty was a widow herself and worked as a nurse in a hospital. During her shifts caring for patients she noticed that many widows and orphans could not afford to pay for their medical bills. Unfortunately, due to the stigma around widows no one wanted to financially or emotionally support these widows and orphans. This left them in desperate situations to manage on their own. Betty aspired to create a women's rights organization which addressed changing generational attitudes towards widows roles in their communities. She also saw the need to create skills training and economic empowerment opportunities for widows to become self-sufficient, which is the inspiration behind WOM.

Today WOM has over 13,093 members over 6 regions and 154 widows groups they work with. Over 400 widows are directly working in baobab oil processing under Attarah Ltd.



Widows Helping Widows

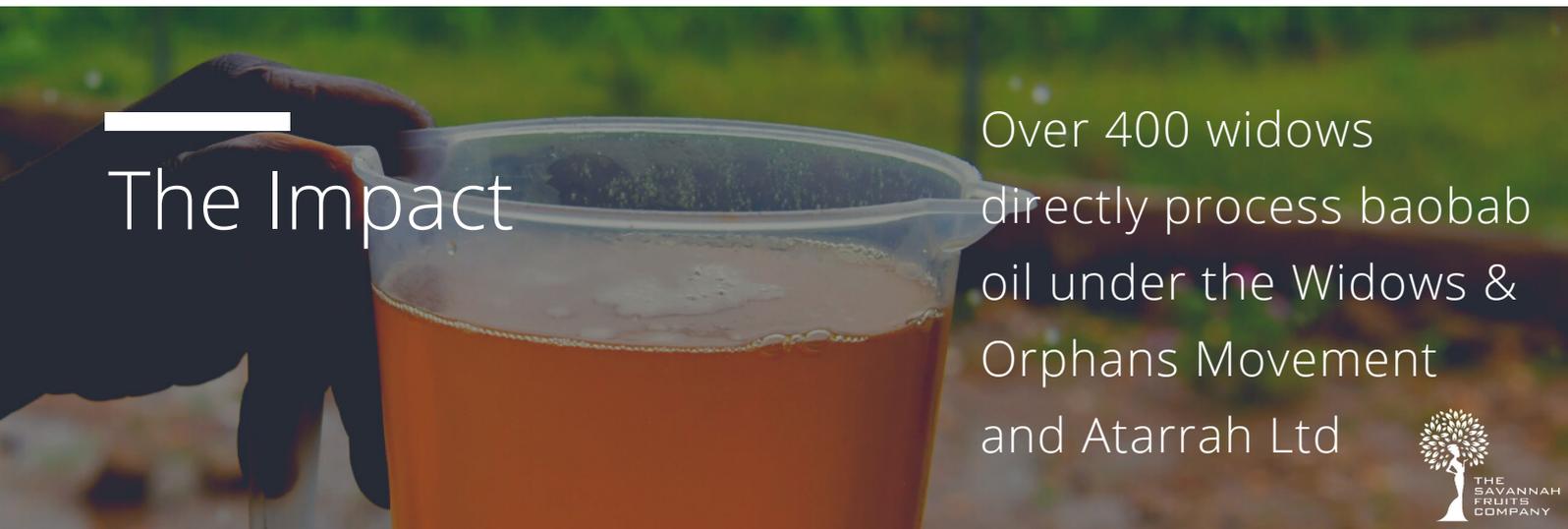
To fully understand why widows and orphans are marginalized in northern Ghana we need to look at the cultural context around death within a community in the two most northern regions of the country.

In these indigenous communities, deaths of any kind are viewed as “unnatural” and no cause of death is considered to be normal. Deaths are regarded as a premeditated event by someone no matter the age of the deceased's passing.

Widows are often suspected of being responsible in some way for the passing of their husbands. This causes the community to test the widows by subjecting them to dehumanizing practices to see if they are guilty of their spouse's death. Traditions include such as completely shaving off a woman's hair, having her strip naked and bath in rubbish, being forced into confinement, forbidden from eating particular food or forced to eat concoctions. They are often coerced to select a husband from the deceased husband's family for remarriage. These practices inflicted upon widows are seen as routine all in the name of tradition.

One might wonder why there is a disproportionate percentage of widows (93%) as to widowers (7%) in the Upper East and West regions. Due to polygamy, which is commonplace in traditional practices, a man can have as many as ten wives. If he passes away, he is leaving behind ten widows. Whereas if a married woman passes away, she could only plausibly leave behind one widower and any children she may have. **These two regions alone have 102,394 widowed persons, 95,353 being women.**

WOM recognizes this disproportionate discrimination and addresses both the socio-cultural and economic challenges widows face. The small team of 12 staff at WOM works directly with widows to educate them in understanding their rights. Explaining that they have the power to choose not to perform these humiliating traditional rituals. WOM also connects with traditional leaders to help them understand the negative implications of these rituals and why there is a need for a change in the perceptions around widows and orphans. This exchange allows WOM an avenue for the leaders to become open minded to positive change and the need to eliminate and discourage these practices.



The Impact

Over 400 widows directly process baobab oil under the Widows & Orphans Movement and Atarra Ltd



WOM works under the premise that women who are economically empowered are better able to resist these practices. Throughout the years WOM has made it part of its mission to teach and train widows on how to create livelihoods, who come through its doors.

By identifying skills that WOM women are already familiar with WOM avoids spending time starting the training process from scratch. They focus on trades that a larger number of women are familiar with, so they can create a more viable value chain and in turn benefits a higher number of women rather than specializing on a bespoke skill that is unique and only a few would be able to profit from. WOM began by teaching how to turn basket weaving and cloth weaving into a business. It wasn't until 2013 that baobab powder and baobab oil production came to fruition. The Savannah Fruits Company began our relationship with WOM in 2014 and have purchased over 7 metric tons of conventional baobab oil from them over the years. WOM has been able to provide 3000 widows with microcredit loans to start small businesses. In the future WOM would like to establish another sustainability project teaching widows how to plant baobab gardens for their edible leaves.

In 2017, WOM realized that they were limited by their ngo status. This inspired them to formally establish a social enterprise arm called Atarrah Ltd. Atarrah uses local natural resources such as baobab and shea to create cosmetic products for sale. The social enterprise encourages widows to build an entrepreneurial mindset. This empowers widows to feel dignified by earning their own money. Being entrepreneurs gives them a voice in their community. **As a social enterprise, Atarrah only buys its raw materials from widows groups. If an individual or vendor wants to sell to WOM or Atarrah, they are told to sell to the widows groups instead. In turn WOM/Atarrah buys from the widows. This allows the community members to interact with the widows groups and ultimately change their perception that widows are bad luck.**



WOM is looking to end this generational cycle of thinking. It's easy to think that these practices might be experienced only by older generations, but unfortunately these practices are experienced by younger women as well due to the practice of early marriage. The issue of marginalizing widows cuts across generations.

Elderly women that lose their spouses are considered a burden since no one wants to marry them. However a young widow of child bearing age is still deemed attractive. There is a financial advantage to marrying a widow as well. The man who marries a widow inherits the property that her husband left behind. It's financially beneficial for men to marry a widow. However this puts young widows at a risk of being taken advantage of or even raped.

Interacting with youth helps communities ask critical questions since the youth are exposed to different ways of thinking. Older widows are more likely to accept these practices as fact and don't question their reasoning. WOM also conducts workshops to educate communities on how to address gender based violence.

The Savannah Fruits Company is proud to partner with WOM and Attarah Ltd and support the widows that work tirelessly processing organic baobab oil. We encourage the innovation used by Attarah Ltd in the various baobab related livelihoods they offer. While we visited the baobab processing center the WOM team shared handmade baobab candy that they make and sell, which was delicious. We were happy to see that the widows had used extra land where the baobab processing center is located to plant and harvest maize. We look forward to continuing to support the WOM and Atarra mission by working with Atarra for our organic baobab oil orders.

