



Batsiranai dolls are sold exclusively through Oxfam shops in Australia. Photo courtesy Oxfam Australia Trading.

My twin is in Zimbabwe

They are small, cute and always smiling and have touched the hearts of Oxfam Shop customers across Australia. Just who are the Batsiranais?

If Maidei could talk you wonder what she would say. Her country, Zimbabwe, is in deep crisis: more than half the population face hunger as a result of severe food shortages, inflation is running at 231 million per cent and the economy is in freefall. Lucky she's a doll.

With her small, red embroidered mouth and bright orange polka-dot costume, she's a beautiful one, too. She's been lovingly made by one of the women from the Batsiranai Craft Project — a cooperative of marginalised women in Dzivaresekwa, Zimbabwe, who have children with complex medical, emotional and educational needs. Some of the mothers are widowed, others are unmarried or have husbands who are unemployed. All of them are exceptionally nimble with a sewing needle.

The women use their craft skills to make their colourful collection of Batsiranai dolls which are sold for income to support their families with food, schooling and healthcare. Some of their earnings have also been used to build an activity centre, where the women work, receive management, business and marketing

training and get day care and physical therapy for their children.

The 12 individually named and decorated boy-and-girl dolls are made from cotton fabric and dressed in traditional African costumes. In a unique twist, every doll bought at an Oxfam Shop in Australia results in a twin doll being given to a Zimbabwean child from a family affected by HIV and AIDS.

The dolls have been a big hit in Australia, with more than 35,000 dolls being sold over the past two years. The project has been so successful over the past three years that the group has grown from 26 members to 140 in September this year. And they have just expanded their product range, adding a "mother with baby" doll to the collection. For each mother and baby doll sold, Oxfam shops will give a dollar to Zimbabwe breastfeeding clinics to support HIV and AIDS education.

The women have gained enormous esteem from the project, which has enabled them to earn an income for their families, learn new skills and reach out and train other women.

"The only wish I have now is for Batsiranai to grow bigger, and become an even stronger business so that we will be able to help others," Batsiranai member Mai Chiedza says, "because there are many people out there, just like us, wishing."

Despite the deepening crisis in Zimbabwe, the women are determined to continue making the dolls in preparation for the festive season in Australia. Lynn Poole, who has played a pivotal volunteer role in getting this project off the ground, says it's a case of triumph over adversity.

"It is heartbreaking — there is no food in the shops, close to full economic collapse ... but I am so proud of the women coping in this unbelievably difficult situation. The women have just ordered five tonnes of maize for the 140 women in the project — none have any at home. I will be working with them over the next few weeks to find things we need for our production. The twin doll supplies are fine."

So Maidei will soon have company it seems. As will her twin, Monica, who is in Zimbabwe somewhere being cared for by a delighted child. If dolls could talk? There's no need; their sweet, red embroidered smiles say it all.

Story by Oxfam Australia Communications Editor Melanie Scaife and Oxfam Shop Product Manager Linda Chalmers.



See the complete collection of Batsiranai dolls in Oxfam shops or online at www.oxfamshop.org.au