

## Rediscovering Slow Fashion: The use of Traditional Crafts to Encourage Sustainable Practices

Subthemes: Slow Fashion, Ecological Literacy, Craft-Fashion Linkages, Experiential Learning.

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### Introduction:

This paper describes the background and teaching strategy for a planned four-week project that partner's university students with local Somali refugees in Buffalo, New York. Its aim is to establish a socio-cultural exchange between project participants that combines experiential transfer of traditional craft-fashion skills and commercial fashion expertise. Sustainable livelihoods and eco-design will be encouraged through the production of craft-fashion merchandise that creates new enterprise opportunities. Through development of a cooperative curricula designed to enhance knowledge exchange and skills development, the student/refugee teams will be encouraged to use their creativity to make traditional craft-fashion concepts for a contemporary market. Creating narratives that illustrate cultural craft origins that have an implicit sustainability. The refugee/student teams will be designing culturally valued, high-quality apparel or accessories with extended life-cycles, targeted at specific customers and retail stores in Buffalo that have established markets for craft-fashion merchandise.

Buffalo, New York is the second largest city in New York State into which approximately 500 refugees are integrated every year. The inflow of immigrants is largely responsible for Buffalo's annual population increase. Indeed, since 2003, Buffalo has welcomed more than 10,000 refugees to the area. In 2015, the second largest group of refugees originated from Somalia (Fike, Chung & Riordan, 2017).

Somalis have only had a written language since the 1970s; and this was used only by the most elite in society (Warsame, 2001). They have been immigrating to Buffalo since the late 80s; with current immigrants being poorer and less educated than those welcomed previously. Like many immigrants, they are eager to preserve their culture in relation to dress, food and ethics; yet want to integrate into their new home city as well. Employment is an important element for their successful integration, increasing their self-esteem and language skills as well as their economic and social position (Bloch, 2004). However, this necessitates the need for access to education and skills training that enhances employability.

## **Project Background:**

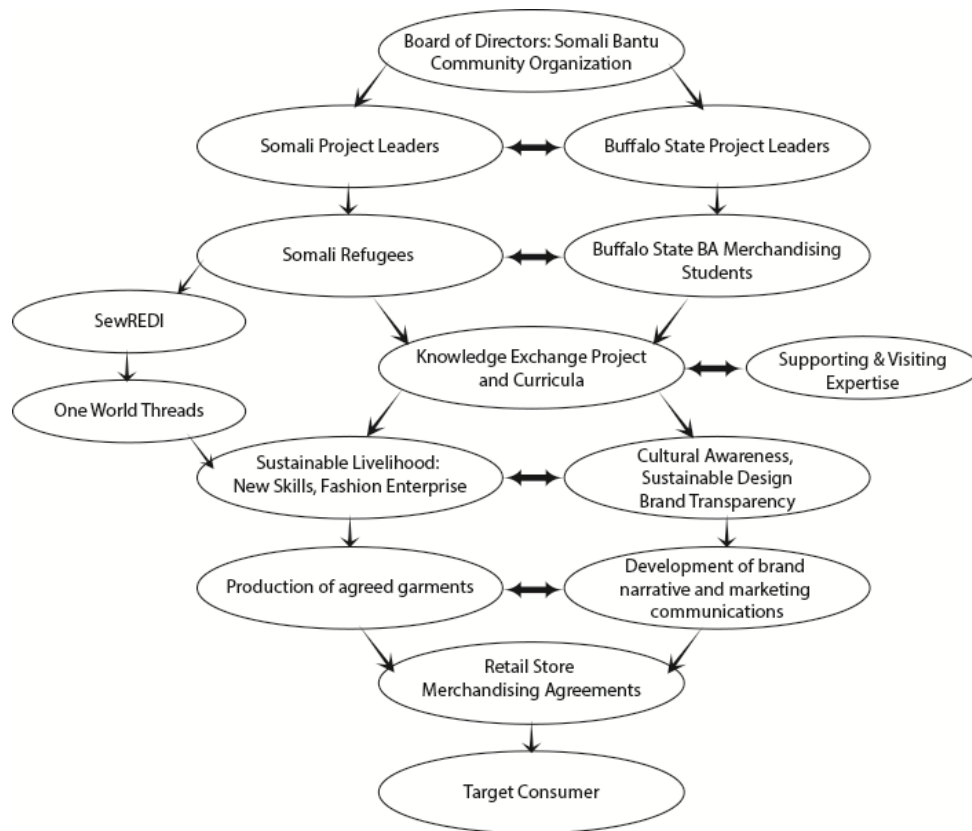
In early 2017, we were approached by a Somali refugee group in Buffalo that needed help to develop and sustain their work in teaching refugees to sew garments in small production settings. Many of the refugees had rudimentary knowledge of textile production based on sewing at home or embellishing garments with embroidery and repairs, by hand. Few had any formalized experience with sewing machinery and the associated technical skills used in contemporary fashion production settings.

In need of jobs to support themselves in their new country, the Somali refugees sought avenues by which they could gain skills and experience toward their employability. The local Somali refugee group had previously received grants which allowed them to purchase home sewing machines and a few other necessities but they were concerned about the time it took to write the grants and the funding for grants being reduced or unavailable. The Somali refugee group wanted to establish new projects that would generate opportunities and revenue streams for their community. They wanted to up-scale their existing production and expand the potential market and range of goods they produce.

The faculty members met with the head of the Somali group and a member of their board of directors. Guidelines were established for potential projects based on the refugees sewing capabilities, funding availability and likelihood of profitable enterprise. Our approach to the project follows the Sustainable Livelihood model for poverty eradication (Krantz, 2001) which includes economic, ethical and ecological considerations.

Entry barriers for small scale garment production are low as not much capital equipment and relatively low skill levels are required. Apparel production has long been used as the stepping stone for low wage countries to enter the world economy (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003). The ability to sew is easily adapted to different modalities, meaning our refugees can direct their skills to where the need is, in order to withstand variances in the marketplace. See Figure 1 for the organizational structure of this project.

**Figure 1: Project and Stakeholder Structure**



The Sustainable Livelihood model also looks at the importance of refugees' community integration, as being excluded from social interactions is a root cause of poverty (Krantz, 2001). The cooperative aspect of a knowledge exchange project helps bring the refugees together to share their experiences but can also be the catalyst for new enterprise.

Slow fashion enterprise, comprising of culturally authentic fashion apparel and accessories (Fletcher, 2010), is well established in Buffalo, and local demand is good. There are a number of stakeholders that make up a cooperative network around this enterprise which the Somali refugee group already works with.

SewREDI is a charitable organization which helps all refugees in Buffalo develop and orientate their skills and expertise toward slow fashion enterprise. Their model is to train the refugees to sew with their local refugee organization providing the raw materials. Refugees make small items such as pouches, purses and potholders, then sell them on Etsy or at local festivals. All the profits go to the individuals sewing the product. The average Etsy shop makes about \$40 a month, so local festivals are a needed summer mainstay. This creates a seasonal selling period and limits the amount of money a worker can earn.

To continue refugees' development, 'One-World Threads', a spin-off of Sew REDI, teaches intermediate sewing skills to refugees who want to open their own sewing business making clothing and larger items. Additional classes in English as a second

language and financial literacy are also offered. This organization also uses festivals to sell their products. (Nussbaumer, 2014)

Stitch Buffalo has about 40 women refugee members who hand stitch prayer pouches, decorative pins and ornamental hanging birds. These items are sold in yoga clubs and health related stores (organic food stores, vitamin supplement stores). Makers receive 70% of the proceeds. These items are sold for US\$10 - \$20 and are something that most people would purchase as a one-off novelty item (Stitch Buffalo).

This project focuses on handcrafted items that are more likely to be of high quality. Artisan skills are often passed down through generations and children start learning the craft when young, giving them decades to achieve a high level of skill. Quality factors affect the consumer demand for cultural handcrafts – low quality items would not sell and therefore the artisan would not be able to earn money (Durham & Littrell, 2000). Learning to recognize quality is an important part of the handicraft trade. Indigenous crafts, which possess traditional or ethnic qualities signifying a particular group are most common and give the feeling of ownership to the producer and an emotional attachment to the purchaser.

Handcrafted items are more likely to create a positive emotional attachment to the item, possibly due to the consumer knowing that they have purchased something that will directly help someone, and this attachment promotes extended wear and thus, sustainability (DeLong, Casto, Lee & Min, 2015). Indeed, if a person is deeply attached to an item, they are more likely to take better care of it (mending, washing) in order for it to last longer (Mugge, Schifferstein, & Schoormans, 2010).

### **Project Outline:**

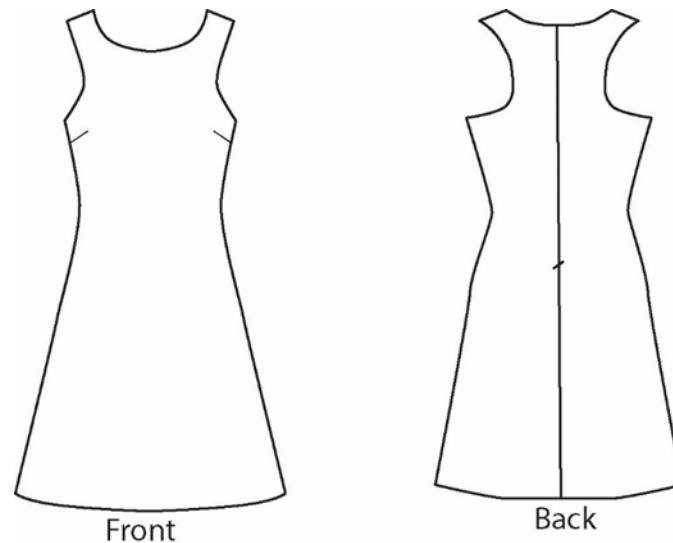
The first determination from the initial meeting was to develop a business model that focused on slow-fashion, craft and cultural heritage and transparency in how the items are sourced and produced by their maker. Then provide the teaching, support and facilities the refugees need to apply this business model to a venture of their own.

While other organizations focused more directly on the refugees and the creation of small ‘traditional’ items, we felt that if we kept the item basic but fashionable to broaden market appeal, we could make items that would sell at a higher price point to a specific target market.

Recent trends in the apparel industry, such as the Fashion Revolution’s focus on who makes the clothing we wear, show that consumers are interested in the welfare of others (Fashion Revolution, 2017). The intrinsic value of a garment is increased when the wearer has a positive attachment to the items. Through purchasing items which help their neighbors and the local community, consumers feel a sense of equity. Their purchase directly helps to support the livelihood of a specific person, creating an attachment to the item (Jung & Jin, 2014).

It was decided to create a basic garment, such as an A-Line dress that could be changed easily into a top, a tunic or a longer garment (See Figure 2). It could also be made out of a variety of fabrications to allow for the use of second hand textiles. Details could be added to further the variability of the garment based on trends, seasonality and maker's cultural heritage. Refugee woman with embroidery skills could be utilized to add value to the garment. Keeping the garment basic allowed the seamstresses to start producing with minimal additional training and therefore we were able to bring the items to market faster.

**Figure 2: Garment Design**



The target market is professional middle class women that visit locally owned retail shops in Buffalo's well known craft-fashion retail areas. These consumers are aware of fashion trends but choose unique fashion pieces over mainstream items based on their (1) Equity, (2) Authenticity, (3) Functionality, (4) Localism, and (5) Exclusivity (Jung & Jin, 2014). This type of consumer has above average income, college level education and is defined as a 'global citizen'. They like to support causes they believe in. They are often a strong supporter of women's issues and female entrepreneurs (Brennan, 2011). It is felt that these women will pay more for unique but fashionable garments made by refugee women and its associated narrative, personal attachment.

Once the basic concept is developed, students will be introduced to the project to support the refugees learning about their marketplace. The students will be challenged to develop the product designs based trend reports for the spring summer 2018 and 2019, determining the style and type of garment that should be planned and how it would resonate with the target market. Students will also create the final garment design, create the pattern and grade it out to 5 sizes (XS, S, M, L, XL). Students will work with the refugees to determine sewing operations for both woven and knit fabrics as the finishing of the necklines will vary according to the fabrication.

No start-up capital will be made available in order to challenge students and refugee teams to focus on sustainability, upcycling and their resourcefulness. It is expected that textiles will be donated by a local thrift shop. A local dry cleaner has offered to wash all the garments before we bring them to the production center. The refugees will sort through the tee shirts to separate by color and determine garment structure. Small stains will not be considered a problem as they could be covered with an embroidery design. The use of textile waste will reduce the investment in order to bring additional profit to the upcycling process and add to the sustainability implicit in the business model.

Garments will be placed in small locally owned retail locations either through a wholesale purchase or commission basis. Stores will be approached based on their target market and suitability of brand and existing fashion merchandise. Marketing the items may include a sign above the garment rack which introduces the refugee maker and the use of textile waste. Hang tags on the garments will reiterate the use of textile waste and include a short informational paragraph about the Somali refugees and our collaboration to add value to the garment and enhance their emotional appeal to the target consumer. These must be designed by the student/refugee teams.

### **Project Curricula:**

We wanted to use the projects focus on sustainable livelihoods to remove our students from a focus on commercial fashion merchandising and design and offer them a project where they could learn about the social entrepreneurship and responsible business approaches encapsulated in slow fashion (Fletcher, 2010). We also wanted to establish a useful knowledge exchange between students and refugees to provide the social contexts that generate exciting new craft-fashion linkages and enterprise ideas, as well the benefits of a shared cultural experience.

Additionally, it was a chance for students to apply their commercial merchandising and design skills to a start-up fashion business concept that examined sustainable design, local production, retail, associated sourcing, lead-times, production requirements and negotiate sale agreements. The brand messages of transparency, authenticity, equity and upcycling were the key to a value-added fashion enterprise focused on sustainable craft-fashion product.

The curricula for the students and refugees is focused on developing their understanding and capabilities based on the following themes as defined by Jung and Jin (2014): (1) Equity, (2) Authenticity, (3) Functionality, (4) Localism, and (5) Exclusivity. We plan to use these themes to create a positive environment for learning that fosters creativity, personal investment and expression in the creation of the project outcomes and the emotional attachment associated with the process of creating handicrafts connected to a philanthropic cause. The following project outcomes were defined as the challenge for the students to connect their creativity with the pre-determined business model.

The outcomes of this project will be as follows:

1. Conduct and write a market report of local trends in the craft-fashion marketplace for professional female consumers aged 35-55.
2. Create trend reports and mood boards based on S/S 18-19 trends in apparel design, culturally originated fashion, including cultural meaning research and cultural appropriation avoidance.
3. Describe how the business model addresses the requirements of a sustainable livelihood.
4. Create technical specification package for production of range of upcycled clothing, local production orientated based on machining capabilities of refugees.
5. Develop a brand theme, rationale and associated sample marketing materials to launch and sell the range in a retail environment.
6. Negotiate and present evidence of sale agreements with local retail organizations
7. Write a learning reflection document including a self-evaluation of knowledge transfer.
8. A final presentation of each craft-fashion enterprise concept must be presented to the project stakeholders.

The one week project consists of all-day workshops themed on the five curricula areas defined above. The workshops are structured as open sessions that debate the issues of each area to allow the project participants to explore the challenges and issues in each area and make their own interpretations for what each one meant to them. This is then translated into their research and design phase, in studio sessions, where they will actively engage in experimentation and creation of the project outcomes in a supported and resourced environment (See Table 1). Key staff and visiting professionals involved in the sessions will offer their expertise in design, production, merchandising and small business management to build a cooperative incubator for new craft-fashion start-up concepts that generates sustainable livelihoods for the refugees involved. The concept is that the participants can learn through knowledge exchange and streamline their ideas rapidly; designing relevant, realistic outputs that are market ready.

**Table 1: Planned Workshops/Project Activity**

	<b>Day one: Equity</b>	<b>Day two: Authenticity</b>	<b>Day three: Functionality</b>	<b>Day four: Localism</b>	<b>Day five: Exclusivity</b>
<b>Visiting Expertise and Mentorship</b>	<b>Workshop:</b> Generating equity as a currency for craft-fashion business	<b>Workshop:</b> What is cultural Authenticity and how is this communicated through design?	<b>Workshop:</b> Design for small-scale production: Materials, quality, scaling, costing and sustainability.	<b>Workshop:</b> Local business, benefits, challenges and how to start-up a small enterprise.	<b>Workshop:</b> Transparency marketing: Sustainable narratives in craft-fashion businesses
	<b>Studio:</b> Market report research & development Business Models for Sustainable Livelihoods	<b>Studio:</b> Trend analysis, mood board generation, value added-authenticity.	<b>Studio:</b> Technical specification, design development, machining and making training and experimentation	<b>Studio:</b> Developing sourcing, sale and production agreements in a localized supply chain.	<b>Studio:</b> Developing and designing brand themes, marketing materials and customer information for Point of Sale.
	<b>Reflective Document:</b> Students review their learning activities and comment on their activities, professional development, benefits and difficulties in the project.				
	<b>Final presentation to project stakeholders. (Video Recorded)</b>				

Additionally, to develop students and refugees core skills in the information technology, it is expected that the reflective document will assess a project diary that is kept in the form a blog and photo gallery, online, that is used to illustrate the developmental stages of the project, the problems solved and lessons learned. The videos of the final presentations would also be uploaded here.

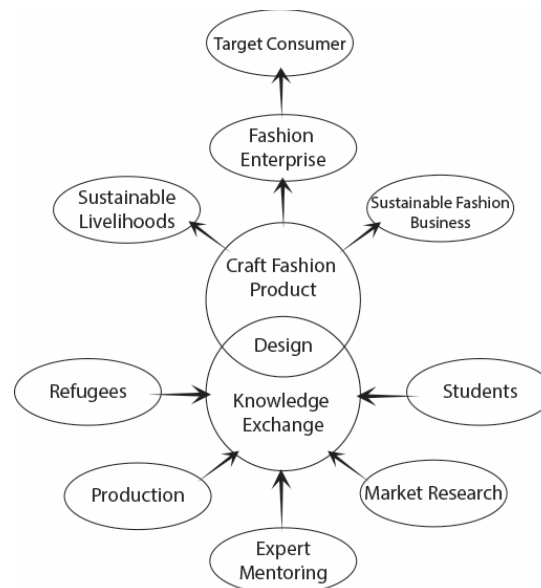
**Conclusion:**

Overall, the purpose of this project is to give all participants a meaningful and useful experience that generates a series of educational, experiential and enterprise based outputs. The project focuses on the benefits implicit in slow fashion orientated modes of business that have broader socio-economic implications; embracing the social inclusion and integration of refugees as contributors to their local economy, generation of sustainable, high quality products that generate emotional attachments for their purchasers, reduces the reliance of charitable organizations and public funding to generate enterprise opportunities. The development of a real-life project within which students and refugees can apply their skills and expertise toward developing a sustainable fashion business solutions provides a rich educational



experience. The knowledge exchange being the key to creating the learning environment for the project (see Figure 3)

**Figure 3: Summary diagram of knowledge exchange**



The net effect of this project is the establishment and access to cooperative networks in which craft-fashion enterprise can be explored and new opportunities generated and launched. Through focusing on the message of sustainability into on trend garments that are locally produced in order to give an income to the refugee population, we anticipate continued success with this business model and feel that it can be duplicated in other cities with similar populations.

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