

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

2002

MarketPlace Handwork of India: Impacts on Artisan Capabilities

Mary A. Littrell
Iowa State University

Marsha A. Dickson
Kansas State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Littrell, Mary A. and Dickson, Marsha A., "MarketPlace Handwork of India: Impacts on Artisan Capabilities" (2002). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 398.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/398>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

MarketPlace Handwork of India: Impacts on Artisan Capabilities

Mary A. Littrell, Iowa State University
Marsha A. Dickson, Kansas State University

At the 1998 TSA Symposium in New York City, we presented a paper that documented the work of three textile artisan enterprises. All embraced a fair trade approach to their work. Known as Alternative Trade Organizations (ATOs), these enterprises are deeply committed to a mission of sustainable, people-centered development (Littrell and Dickson 1997). More specifically, this fair trade partnership between textile artisans and retailers involves joint commitment to:

- paying fair wages within a local context,
- providing healthy and safe working conditions,
- sustaining the environment,
- promoting capacity building through business and technical training, and
- honoring cultural identity as a stimulus for textile product development.

Following from that paper, in our 1999 book, *Social Responsibility in the Global Market* (1999), we boldly contended that as a philosophy, fair trade fosters empowerment and improved quality of life for artisans through an integrated and sustained system of trade partnerships. However, since 1999, as we became more engaged in broader issues of corporate responsibility, particularly as related to apparel sweatshops, we began to question whether goals of worker empowerment were in fact being reached among textile artisan enterprises organized under a fair trade philosophy.

With a grant from the Earthwatch Institute and the assistance of 24 Earthwatch research volunteers from around the globe, we are in the process of assessing the impacts of artisan work on women's capabilities, livelihood, and quality of life for the textile artisans involved with MarketPlace: Handwork of India, an ATO and one of the three groups described at the 1988 TSA symposium. The insights we offer in this paper come from our initial interpretation of the interviews with approximately 100 of the women.

As a part of the research process, 30 of the MarketPlace artisans used cameras to photo-document and discuss their daily lives and work. Through many of the photos the artisans took, the women offered a pictorial perspective of their households and their work. The research tool of photoelicitation has been employed as a valuable field research tool for informants to produce images of themselves that introduce their own criteria for self-assessing their lives (Roncoli and Sendze 1997). Through photos, informants offer a voice that might not be heard in shaping how their quality of life is discussed and analyzed (Karp 1999).

This paper focuses on artisan work as it impacts artisans' skills and capabilities. Robert Chambers (1997), an international development scholar, contends that for women to improve their quality of life, enhancing current skills or acquiring new capabilities are a critical first step to advancing their economic livelihood, which in turn contributes to

enhanced quality of life. After briefly introducing MarketPlace and providing a context for the artisans' daily lives, we turn to discussion of these capabilities.

MarketPlace: Handwork of India

MarketPlace grew from roots in a modest sewing project for impoverished women founded by Pushpika Freitas and Lalita Monteiro, sisters who had grown up in Mumbai, formerly Bombay. Initially, women sewed patchwork quilts, drawing inspiration from their long-standing practice of recycling clothing for younger family members and of using patchwork to sew household bedding filled with old sarees as batting. The women's well-honed embroidery and sewing skills, learned as part of growing up in an Indian family, served as the initial resource for income generation (Littrell and Dickson 1999).

Today over 350 MarketPlace artisans, nearly all women, live and work in the Mumbai slums of Golibar, Thane, and Bombay Central. The seven artisan workshops produce Western-style apparel and household textiles that incorporate dyeing techniques (hand block printing and various forms of resist dyeing), embroidered embellishment, and garment forms native to India. The India-inspired clothing, with its intense colors and dramatic motifs, is marketed in the United States through specialty retail stores and MarketPlace's mail-order catalog.

MarketPlace, an Alternative Trade Organization, practices social entrepreneurship with a dual focus on the profit-driven global marketplace and the empowerment of low-income artisan members. Two separate organizational arms, MarketPlace Bombay and SHARE, provide direction to the business and social thrusts, respectively. With goals beyond that of income generation, MarketPlace promotes worker empowerment at individual, household, and community levels.

First, to introduce the MarketPlace textile artisans, the women are 33 years old on average, but range from 18 to 55 years. Two thirds are married; marriage age averaged at age 17 but varied from marriage at age 10 to marriage at age 30. Nearly all have children (93%) with an average of 3.3 children. Standard 6 is the mean education completed; however, about 20% have no formal schooling. The women are primarily Hindu (50%) or Muslim (40%). The women's work at MarketPlace spans 5.5 years on average.

Integrating Work and Family in a Typical Day

How do the women integrate their textile work with their household responsibilities? As context for our focus on artisan capabilities, it is important to understand the daily conditions in which the women carry out their artisan work. Through their photographs and ensuing discussions, the women illuminated their typical days of 18-20 waking hours, on average. Early morning, a three-hour period, beginning between 5:00 and 6:00 am, was devoted to prayer, bathing, and stockpiling the family's daily water supply. Gathering water from a neighborhood tap occupied an average of 40 minutes, but ranged up to two hours for some women. Because water is available in each

neighborhood of the slum for only a few hours a day, women's daily regimen exhibits little latitude during the early hours of each morning.

Across the next six to seven hours, women focused exclusively on their families, devoting significant time to cooking, washing clothes and scrubbing floors, bathing children, and walking them to and from school. Particularly salient was the average of five hours per day spent in food-related activities, including shopping for ingredients, cutting vegetables and grinding spices, forming and heating chapattis, stirring sauces, serving and eating meals, and finally washing dishes and cooking utensils.

Only then, between 10 and 11 am for half of the women and not until 2 or 3 pm for the others, were the women free to walk to their nearby MarketPlace workshops to pick up bundles of fabric for sewing and embroidery. At-home textile work, alone or in small groups with other MarketPlace neighbors, averaged 5.6 hours and continued well into the evening. During this time, artisans intermingled their sewing and embroidery with supervision of children's games and schoolwork, while also stopping to serve and eat the evening meal. Women finished their embroidery at 8 or 9 pm; however, some continued on up to 11 pm or midnight if completion of a large order was urgent.

The analysis of artisans' typical days provided a variety of insights about their daily life. First, the photographs placed in perspective the approximately 9-10 hours per day that were essential to Indian women for completing the critical tasks that provided for their family's most basic needs. In particular, Indian food preparation is time-intensive, and without refrigeration, required daily shopping for essential ingredients. Interestingly the average of 5 hours per day that women were able to devote to their textile work correlates positively with what other researchers have identified that Guatemalan artisans, with equally time-intensive domestic duties, devote to their weaving business (Lynd, 2000). This commonality of approximately 5 hours per day warrants attention in future comparative research on artisan work and quality of life.

In a second insight, as with poor women globally, MarketPlace artisans are part of a gender ideology in which they assume major responsibility for mobilizing household resources for survival (Rosenbaum, 2000). These daily tasks are not linear in nature but rather jump back and forth from one activity to another across a day, leaving a limited number of sequential, uninterrupted hours for MarketPlace textile production. MarketPlace, in recognizing this dilemma, offered flexibility to the artisans such that their at-home textile work could be interspersed with cooking, childcare, and other tasks. Even for those women whose household responsibilities were very time intensive, MarketPlace work of only a few hours a day offered these women some opportunity to generate income. For most women, leaving the home for an 8 am to 5 pm job was out of the question.

Artisan Capabilities

As a part of working at MarketPlace, the women have acquired a broad range of new skills that, in addition to textile-related skills, range from using the telephone to

conduct business, keeping records and planning production, using public transportation to pick up supplies and deliver orders, opening bank accounts, to speaking opinions openly in a group.

These capabilities have carried over from work and have catalyzed women toward *“taking decisions”* in their homes. Women, who rarely left their homes except to accompany their children to school, now are speaking up and taking control in their households. Women are walking to neighborhood markets to buy vegetables, selecting a new sari, sending their children to a better school, adding a cement floor or second story to their one-room houses, or going to the hospital for their own medical needs. As a result of their MarketPlace work the women described,

“Now I provide food and security for my family.”

“Now I can pay for my children’s education and I don’t have to fear for their future.”

Finally, a woman elaborated on a photo she took of preparing her daughter for school.

“Getting my daughter ready for school is important because my daughter’s schooling will change her life and allow her not to have to face the same life I have faced.”

As the women have gained confidence and skills, they have begun to assist other women, many of whom live in households permeated by physical abuse, alcoholism, and drugs. Over and over, in response to the interview question, *“what are the most important changes in your life as a result of working with MarketPlace,”* the women rarely answered with discussion of their increased incomes. Rather, their simple response of *“I can talk about anything here”* speaks to the relief from tension and worry women feel when at the workshops. As women stated,

“I had no one to talk with for confronting my problems before I came here.”

“I have the capacity to talk to people about their sorrows, which I didn’t have before.” At Udan Mandal [workshop name], the women all share their problems and I can speak to them about how to solve them. I have an identify of my own now.”

“I am very courageous now. I don’t think I’m weak anymore. I can face anything.”

For many women, joining MarketPlace represented a first step outside the household and toward an independent identity. As such they began to perceive of themselves as part of a shared struggle with other women. Clearly the women of MarketPlace are acquiring the skills for reaching out to be part of something larger. Initially that larger world has encompassed their neighborhoods and other women of

Mumbai. Each workshop has taken on a “social action” project that has led to the acquisition of still other capabilities. For example, the 28 members of Pushpanjali, disgusted with the terrible sanitation conditions in their slum, initiated a two-step program for cleaning up the alleys and pathways near their homes. Women first went door-to-door asking their neighbors to halt the common practice of throwing garbage directly outside their doorways. As they visited with their neighbors, the women provided information about the health advantages for depositing refuse in trash containers. They then went as a group to municipal authorities demanding that the trash be picked up regularly and that the sewage drains be sprayed and covered. The Pushpanjali members wore matching saris to call special attention to their group effort.

In a second example, the members of WARE focused their “social action” on women’s and children’s health issues. The women first sought health care training offered through a social service agency in Mumbai. With training completed, members divided into seven teams with names such as the Capsules, Vitamins, Injections, and Surgeons. Equipped with a set of hand-drawn posters, essential for teaching illiterate women, WARE teams visited the other MarketPlace workshops to educate on health issues such as the importance of teaching children to not eat dirt, taking the prescribed dosage of medicine rather than the common practice of over-medicating, and giving special attention to fevered children as a warning that something is wrong.

Conclusion

In this panel on “Textile Artisans, Global Markets, and Sustainable Development in Africa and Asia” we have been privy to discussion of catalysts and constraints to artisan enterprise sustainability. The artisans of MarketPlace share many of these business challenges in carrying out their work. Yet, the MarketPlace artisans, who have been privy to the social entrepreneurship approach of an Alternative Trading Organization, have acquired a set of important capabilities that support the contention, set out at the beginning of this paper, that income generation can be realized while also achieving broader social and cultural goals.

The importance of MarketPlace artisan work carried out under a flexible framework of work hours is particularly salient for women who, in many cases, are solely responsible for managing their households, a task that can consume up to ten hours a day. These women simply are not free to leave their homes for the long periods of time that would be demanded by other forms of employment such as domestic or factory employment. In contrast, the option to walk a short distance to a MarketPlace workshop, pick up the allotted supplies, and return to sew or embroider at home in the mid-afternoon and evening, appears to be one of the only income generation alternatives open to many of the MarketPlace artisans as an avenue for enhancing their capabilities and livelihood.

References

Chambers, R. C. (1997). *Whose reality counts? Putting the first last*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

- Karp, D. A. (1999). Social science, progress, and the ethnographer's craft. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 28(6), 597-609.
- Littrell, M. A., & Dickson, M. A. (1997). Alternative trading organizations: Shifting paradigm in a culture of social responsibility. *Human Organization* 56(3), 344-352.
- Littrell, M. A., & Dickson, M. A. (1999). *Social responsibility in the global market: Fair trade of cultural products*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lynd, M. (2002). The international craft market: A double-edged sword for Guatemalan Maya women. In K. M. Grimes & B. L. Milgram (Eds.), *Artisans and cooperatives: Developing alternative trade for the global economy* (pp. 65-83). Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Roncoli, C., & sendze, M. (1997). Visions and voices of Donsin: How farmers of Burkina Faso participate as photographers. *Practicing Anthropology*, 19(3), 26-30.
- Rosenbaum, B. (2000). Of women, hope, and angels: Fair trade and artisan production in a squatter settlement in Guatemala City. In K. M. Grimes & B. L. Milgram (Eds.), *Artisans and cooperatives: Developing alternative trade for the global economy* (pp. 85-106). Tucson: University of Arizona Press.