The Entrepreneurial Success of Women Artisans in Developing Countries

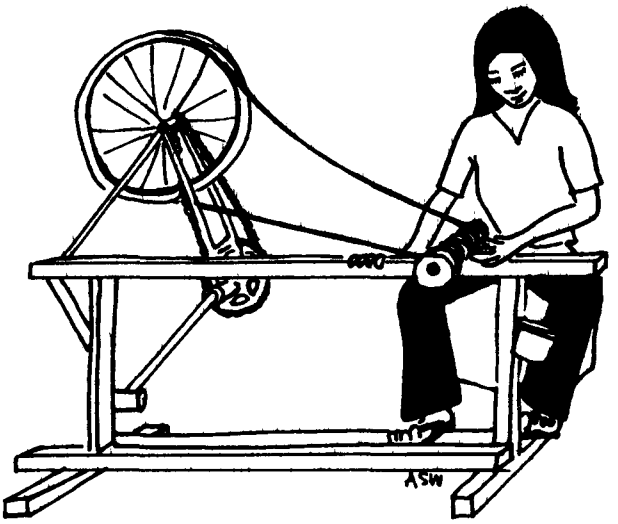
by Kristine Culp

Cet article examine l'esprit d'entreprise des artisanes de pays en voie de développement qui exportent leurs produits à l'étranger ainsi que les efforts de «SELFHELP», un organisme commercial alternatif qui opère à partir du Canada et qui encourage la vente canadienne de ces produits faits à la main.

Take a quick look around your home. Do you see any handcrafted items from developing countries? The handblown glass jug on the kitchen table, the woven basket filled with fruit, the African wood carving on the fireplace mantel... attractive imports like these find a place in many of our homes.

Western consumers are showing increased appreciation for the traditional wares of other cultures. Our purchase of these items is a vital link in an economic chain that stretches around the world, connecting buyer and craftsperson. Not infrequently, the artisan is a woman in a developing country who depends on the sale of her handicrafts for income to support her family. Our dollars support these women when we buy their products from an alternative trading organization (ATO). ATOs are committed to paying a fair price to the producer by purchasing directly from that person, not a third-party exporter.

Let's take a look at how low-income women in developing countries are tapping into their entrepreneurial energy to export crafts to Canada through SELFHELP Crafts of the World, Canada's largest ATO with 55 shops and more than 4,000 volunteers. SELFHELP is a non-profit program of Mennonite Central Committee, an international relief and development agency of the Mennonite church. The backbone of SELFHELP's producer network is the grassroots crafts cooperative, whether in India, Haiti, the Philippines, or any of the 35 countries linked with this "fair trade" agency. About 70 per cent of SELFHELP's producer partners are women. Their stories underline the theme of the International Conference on Population and Development held this year in Cairo, Egypt: help women and you help society.



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Christmas ornament by Christmas ornament, Mahzabi Khan fashions a better life for her three daughters. Mahzabi often works as her husband and daughters sleep, crouching on the cement floor of the 1.5 x 4.5-metre room that is their home in Calcutta, India. By the light of a fluorescent tube, she glues sequins to cardboard-backed velvet cutouts of trees, bells, and stars.

Mahzabi's dreams of an education were cut short when her parents arranged a marriage for her at 15 and she became a mother at 16. She is determined that her own daughters will have more opportunities. Her earnings help cover their school fees. "I want my girls to stand on their own feet," she says. "With a good education they can become teachers or secretaries."

Mahzabi works with Ashirwad, a group of ten Calcutta women who make decorative ornaments and mobiles and sell them to SELFHELP. The women work at home, snatching minutes between household chores. Many are married, but their families have little income. Mahzabi's husband earns the equivalent of $23 (Cdn.) monthly, not enough to feed, clothe, shelter, and educate their children.

Mahzabi's earnings doubled the family income and allowed her family to move out of her in-laws' home into their own small room. At first, she says, they had to borrow cups, saucers, and bowls from neighbours at mealtimes. Now she proudly displays the cupboard and household items she has purchased (Mennonite Central Committee News Service).

A group of 25 illiterate women living in the slums of Jakarta, Indonesia make greeting cards while their husbands try to earn a living by collecting garbage. Using a stamping dye, the women cut out designs in the cards and glue pieces of colourful batik on the back. These cards are sold in hotels in Europe and North America through ATOs. When there are sufficient orders, the women often earn more than their husbands, and there is enough income for food, clothing, and maybe even some extras (MacBride).

Josefina is an Aymara Indian, a descendant of the Incas. She lives in

the Peruvian highlands. Many of her farming neighbours have turned to growing coca for cocaine production in order to survive their country's civil strife and grinding poverty.

Josefina and her family live in an adobe house overlooking Lake Titicaca. They raise a few sheep and grow yucca, a staple root vegetable. To supplement their income, Josefina creates wall hangings for a local crafts cooperative that sells to SELFHELP. Wall hangings are a traditional Peruvian art form, a colourful way to depict daily life and celebrations. Josefina is skilled at producing *arpillera* wall hangings—appliquéed and quilted scenes of village life adorned with numerous stuffed figures. She embroiders tiny details on the *arpillera* to complete the picture and neatly finishes the edges with crochet. No two *arpillera* wall hangings are alike.

Over the past 20 years, the traditional creations of Peruvian artisans have enjoyed recognition and a surge in popularity that has greatly increased the self-esteem of their producers while providing an alternative to the cocaine trade as a means of earning income (SELFHELPa).

In Sri Lanka, about 25 women, concerned about their families' well-being, organized themselves into a cooperative called the Eksath Pubudu Rural Development Women's Society. The women decided to begin making crafts out of *mattalu*, a fibrous cloth-like material from the coconut palm. They cleaned and straightened the *mattalu* by soaking it in water, and then dried, sanded, and varnished it to a smooth finish. They then cut the material into the desired shape and sewed it together with piping to make bags, wall hangings, and various other products which they sold to SELFHELP. The women instituted a system whereby anyone who designs a new product receives a two per cent royalty on each item that sells. The royalties, as well as indicating respect for intellectual property, serve as an incentive to artisans to continue creating new designs to meet the ever-changing tastes of the western market.

In not much more than five years, the women were able to start a savings program for each woman to save Rs.100/month (about $3.33 Cdn.) establish a community credit union, and set up a team to present workshops in other villages on launching a cooperative, craft skill training, and business management training (SELFHELPb).

Female entrepreneurship in developing countries has a different flavour than we are accustomed to in the West. It needs to be viewed against the backdrop of women's economic contributions in general. In highly traditional societies, women's participation in the paid work force is limited. Cultural norms keep most women at home. Women in developing countries bear more children than women in the West and have greater parenting responsibilities, especially in rural areas. The husband may migrate to the city for a job and return home only on weekends (as is common in parts of Africa). The wife's workload grows markedly heavier under this arrangement, as she picks up duties formerly assumed by her husband.

Factory work is making inroads as an employer of female labour, but the rewards are not equally distributed between men and women employees. In Morocco, the phrase "working for lipstick" is used to explain the rationale behind starkly differing wage levels for men and women.

> Women workers, they say, work only to add a little to the household income which is brought home by the man of the house. They do not need to support a family, but work only to provide a little extra money for small personal luxuries...There is no such thing as labour pure and simple in this situation: there is male and there is female labour; the two are not the same. (Afshar 183)

For the low-income, rural, uneducated woman, even factory work is out of the realm of possibility. Her daily routine remains the same as that of her mother, grandmother, and female ancestors for generations preceding: caring for children, growing food, preparing meals, making the daily trek to the local well for water, doing housework, sewing, spinning, weaving, and so on. These vital but unpaid tasks form the bulk of women's economic contributions in the developing world.

In many countries, self-employment remains the only "wedge of opportunity" for women. Excluded from most wage labour positions because they are occupied by men, or unfairly paid when they do enter the labour market, many women turn to their own skills and resources.

> The informal (self-employment) sector is often essential for the economic survival of women—particularly poor women who work in petty trading or such home-based industries as beer brewing, soap making and tailoring. (UN 92)

Entrepreneurial activities in this setting are small-scale by necessity. These women lack the resources, capital, and marketing expertise of their female counterparts in the West. Without title to land, they have no collateral with which to negotiate bank loans or credit.

Furthermore, isolated women lack clout when dealing with buyers. The crafts-making cottage industry, writes Paul Harrison in *Inside the Third World*, is

> dominated by middlemen who supply the raw materials at excessive prices and buy back the finished work at too low prices, squeezing the poor worker in the middle to the margin of survival. Again and again one is astonished by how little home-workers—often women and children working in spare moments—earn for considerable amounts of work. The wife of a landless labourer in central Java took two weeks to make a floor mat of

> palm leaves, working an hour or two every day. The selling price: just 300 rupiahs (40 pence or 80 cents). In north-east Brazil, women hand-sew entire tablecloths, or patiently crochet complex lace patterns with half a dozen needles at once, for the equivalent of 5 pence or 10 cents an hour or less. (197)

When last year's crops are gone and this year's harvest is weeks or months away, the artisan's bargaining power is reduced to zero.

> Middlemen can force home-workers' incomes down by their superior organization. They control the sources of raw materials and the market outlets. They act in collusion. The artisans or home-workers are scattered and unorganized. They have no contacts of their own to buy supplies and sell their product. They need the money immediately and cannot hold back their goods to push the price up. Indeed, they are often in debt to the middlemen. (Harrison 197-98)

Against this backdrop, the alternative or fair trade philosophy stands in contrast. SELFHELP's trading practices include:

•Buying directly from producers rather than from a third-party exporter whenever possible. When not, working with intermediaries that share the agency's philosophy.

•Paying a fair price for the product based on local wages and economy. Sensitivity to the local social and economic structure is important. Producers negotiate fair compensation with SELFHELP, comparable to a teacher's wages, for example.

•Paying half the purchase price when the order is placed and the balance when goods are received for shipping. This gives producers the freedom to go ahead and buy materials without having to wait for goods to sell abroad.

•Working with established local crafts-making collectives. (Even the best-established groups are vulnerable; cooperatives may break up when purchase orders wane, leaving individual artisans subject to exploitation by commercial traders (Coorespondence with Richard MacBride).

•Providing free services to producer groups when appropriate, such as product development, marketing advice or business assistance.

•Promoting ancient arts and indigenous crafts whenever they are marketable.

•Caring for the environment through sound purchasing and packaging decisions.

•Fostering international partnerships to help North Americans better understand the causes and realities of global poverty and injustice.

•Using mainly volunteers in SELFHELP retail stores in order to keep prices low and generate the maximum sales for producers.

•Keeping overhead low, so that 20 to 25 per cent of the final retail price remains in the country of origin.

•Working in partnership with the most underprivileged members of society, such as those who are living in poverty, uneducated, physically handicapped, single mothers, or struggling in some other way.

Appropriately, SELFHELP was formed by a woman. Edna Byler, a Mennonite Central Committee worker, visited Puerto Rico in 1946. She met several students who were skilled embroiderers but had no local market for their crafts. Byler brought their embroidery back to her home in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where she sold it to appreciative friends and neighbours. From those humble beginnings—the trunk of Byler's car for a warehouse and the pocket of her apron for a cash register—grew the present-day program (SELFHELPc) .

Choosing to purchase from an alternative trading organization such as SELFHELP isn't enough to change the causes of poverty and injustice in developing countries, but it can make a significant difference to the lives of many women and their families until major structural reforms take place.

The woven rice basket on your kitchen counter takes on new meaning when its purchase signifies an act of solidarity with a struggling crafts producer in a developing country. By buying strategically, western consumers have the satisfaction of knowing that we are helping to strengthen grassroots groups and to support their quest for self-reliance and social reform.

For more information on SELFHELP Crafts of the World, call the Toronto office at (416) 932-8638.

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