



International  
Labour  
Organization

Decent Work in  
Garment Supply  
Chains Asia



## ▶ Women entrepreneurs leading the way:

Promoting a circular economy and more  
sustainable practices in the garment sector



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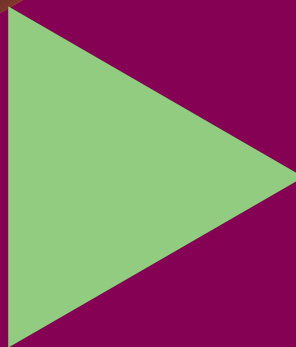
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# Introduction

Globally, an estimated 80 per cent of garment workers are women. In Asia and the Pacific, the garments, textiles and footwear sector is the largest manufacturing employer of women, with a total of 35 million women working in the industry (ILO, Better Work and Cornell University 2020, as cited in ILO 2021a). The garment and textiles sector has contributed significantly to women's formal employment. However, a significant part of the sector model has relied largely on low-cost and low-skilled labour (ILO 2021b). Before COVID-19, the sector saw strong growth, but manufacturing, especially the garment industry concentrated in low- and middle-income countries, was one of the sectors most impacted by the pandemic (ILO 2021c). The disruptions in working hours and job losses have disproportionately impacted women garment workers in the region, many of whom may not return to the workforce (ILO and Better Work 2020).

The ILO has documented the adverse short-, medium- and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on women garment workers in Asia and the Pacific – impacts that have exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in the sector (ILO and Better Work 2020). The recent ILO (2021b) report Moving the

Needle: Gender Equality and Decent Work in Asia's Garment Sector has further expanded upon the several challenges faced by women garment workers, including those being intensified by the accelerating climate crisis. The ILO contends that environmental sustainability, gender inequality and the future of the garment and textile manufacturing during and beyond COVID-19 are all interconnected, and must be addressed in concert in order to ensure a sustainable and successful global garment sector.

With COVID-19, persisting gender inequalities and an aggravating climate emergency, the garment and textiles sector have reached a pivotal crossroads (ILO, Better Work and Cornell University 2021). A sustainable and inclusive COVID-19 recovery must be gender-responsive and contend with the sector's responsibility in addressing the climate crisis. Simultaneously, the garment sector both contributes to and is vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. The ready-made garment sector, in particular, has been criticized for its overproduction, underutilization and contributions to the carbon footprint. On the other hand, emerging literature has found that the impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels and heat stress, will have an adverse effect on production, factories and workers in the region (Judd and Jackson 2021). However,

## ► Box 1. Interconnected dimensions of climate change, environmental sustainability, and gender in the garment industry.

First, climate change will likely have increasing actual and potential impacts on the industry and its predominantly female workforce. Heat stress, for example, is already taking a toll across the region on the health and welfare of women workers, their families and communities, among other things adding to women's unpaid care burdens (Kjellstrom et al. 2019, as cited in ILO 2021a).

Second, the industry itself, one of the most polluting on the planet, will have an impact on climate change

and the environment, as both a major source of global emissions and as an important consumer and contaminator of often fragile water resources.

Third, the fashion industry's global "fast fashion/throw away culture" exerts unsustainable pressures on the environment, including that of unnecessary waste. Recent studies have found that an increasing proportion of European and North American consumers see the sustainability of the products they buy as an important factor in purchasing decisions (Sharpe et al. 2022).





Better Work Programme, Bangladesh. A supervisor interacts with a sewer. (ILO December, 2013)

the sector is promoting diverse models, some of which are seldom referenced. The purpose of this research is to shine light on some positive models of women entrepreneurs leading the way on circular economy and gender equality through their businesses.

The garment and textiles industry has transformative capacity for women, inclusive economies and society more broadly “due to the scale and the profile of workers employed, the sector offers great potential to contribute significantly to economic and social development” (ILO, n.d.). **Women’s leadership is a driver for more sustainable business practices and gender equality in the workplace, especially in Asia and the Pacific’s garment sector.** Research has shown that women’s leadership is central for the promotion of a circular economy.<sup>1</sup>

Women are not only differentially impacted by globalization and unsustainable production and consumption patterns, but are more likely to be sustainable consumers and be more attuned to ecological concerns (OECD 2020). For example, studies have shown that women are more likely to recycle, minimize waste, buy locally and eco-labelled products, and engage in water and energy saving initiatives at the household level (Yaccato and Jaeger 2003; Bulut, Kökalan Çimrin, and Doğan 2017; Khan and Trivedi 2015). “Systematic incorporation of a gender lens in the circular economy design – understanding consumer behaviours, integrating lessons learnt from traditional sustainable practices, of which women are often knowledge holders, and leveraging local value chains for sustainability – would not only ensure a ‘just transition’ for

<sup>1</sup> A “circular economy” is a model for sustainability in resource use and consumption which supports moving away from an extract-manufacture-use-discard model and embraces the recycling, repair, reuse, remanufacture, rental and longer durability of goods (ILO 2019).

all, but would also inform how to make the new economic paradigm operational and sustainable” (OECD 2020, 2). A Just Transition entails achieving sustainable climate action in a way that is “just” to the workers and communities involved, ensuring no one is left behind (ILO 2022). Recognizing and uplifting women leaders in the garment sector is an important foundation for enabling a Just Transition and cultivating a world of work that is sustainable and equitable for all.

**The ILO and EWC profiled four women leaders in Asia and the Pacific’s garment sector who are making positive contributions to sector-specific challenges related to gender equality, environmental sustainability and industry recovery from COVID-19.** The women profiled are conducting business successfully by promoting sustainable enterprises and driving transformative change in the sector. By introducing circular economies<sup>2</sup> in their businesses and communities, their leadership has paved the way for enterprises that are positive for people and the planet. By exploring alternative leadership styles aimed at making an impact socially, economically and environmentally while strengthening communities, the profiles intend to highlight the pivotal role of women’s leadership and entrepreneurship in promoting a Just Transition while initiating conversations on recognizing, supporting and growing effective leadership in the garment sector and in the region.

**In contrast to the mass production of textiles and garments, the four profiles presented showcase a pattern of women’s entrepreneurship and leadership dedicated to circular economy business models.** The social concerns of each leader combine an element of cultural preservation together with business savviness and commitment to social and environmental sustainability. The low environmental impact of the craftspeople that they work with, the majority of whom are women, received a new life through design innovations that serve as models for the industry. For

example, in one example, the enterprise decided not to hold inventory and instead work only from orders to avoid waste while still making a profit. This enabled them to honour their core business values while spreading sustainable practices to other social and commercial partners.

**These profiles highlight the importance of looking at alternative leadership styles in Asia’s garment sector. These leaders are making an impact on social, economic and environmental levels, strengthening communities, and working towards gender equality.** These leaders are leading and doing business differently by running more sustainable enterprises and working directly with local women and men. While profit is necessary, these women have defined their own criteria of success by examining how sustainable practices and business revenues can go hand-in-hand. By introducing circular economies in their business and in communities, the women profiled are role models and serve as examples of the value of fostering alternative leadership styles in the garment sector.

The following profiles were collected through an open call for submissions. Thirteen respondents reached out by filling out a standard questionnaire. Companies answered questions related to the circular economy, their business model and their relationship with workers and the wider community. The questionnaire aided the selection process for a more extensive profile to be included in the publication. The four profiles below were selected based on subject availability and ensuring a diversity of countries of origin and experiences. Interviews were conducted with founders of the four companies, and these are outlined in the sections below.<sup>3</sup>

It is hoped that their stories will both shine light on women entrepreneurs’ contributions towards more sustainable models in the garment sector and inspire others to follow their lead.

<sup>2</sup> The circular economy elements that were specifically looked for in the case of textile and garment production were: choice of fibres; choice of dyes; use of recycled materials; traditional/low-impact production processes; life of the product is longer; waste management (recycling, disposal, others); water management (recycling, discharges, others); enabling circular processes/collaborations.



## ► Ruby Ghuznabi and Nawshin Khair, Aranya Crafts, Bangladesh

**Name:** Ruby Ghuznabi<sup>4</sup> (founder) and Nawshin Khair (CEO)

**Company:** Aranya Crafts

**Products:** Hand woven and dyed fashion

**Headquarters:** Dhaka, Bangladesh

### Leadership in sustainable clothing and textiles

Ruby Ghuznabi's entrepreneurial path has been guided by her social vision, leading her to create a viable company based on her belief in the importance of using local, naturally dyed textiles. This aim led her to work alongside artisans in villages across Bangladesh and to train people, in particular women, to become artisans in this field. Through her company, Aranya Crafts, Ghuznabi created a space for learning, experimentation and collaboration that has produced an award-winning and internationally recognized brand. Aranya defied industry convention to create a palette of unique colourfast dyes made from natural materials previously thought of as waste, and has not only revived natural dyes and made them competitive through standardization, but has gained international recognition for their products, including by the [Textile Society of America](#). Aranya have further shared their knowledge of natural dyes among other countries, such as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Turkey, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Malaysia and Nepal. Ghuznabi has also published the *Encyclopedia of Natural Dyes* in Bangladesh and is the Chairperson of

### ► Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a developing economy with a growing textile and clothing sector at the forefront of its manufacturing industry, and which it relies on for job creation and exports. Bangladesh's textile and clothing sector is the second-largest in the world (only China's is larger) and represents 80 per cent of the country's exports, totalling US\$47.2 billion.

According to the ILO (2016), 4.9 million people are employed in Bangladesh's textiles, garment and footwear industry, and women represented 69 per cent of total manufacturing employment in 2012 (latest available figures).

Bangladesh first proposed environmental impact assessment guidelines in 1992, which ultimately resulted in the passage of the Environmental Conservation Act (1995) and the Environmental Conservation Rules (1997) (ILO 2021). These pieces of legislation marked the start of environmental regulation applicable to the country's garment and textile industry.

the World Crafts Council-Asia Pacific Region's Natural Dye Programme.

Ghuznabi was equally committed to building young talent and leadership while modernizing Aranya. This motivated her decision to hand over the company to Nawshin Khair, a young CEO who is similarly committed towards the communities Aranya works with. This handover is also a component of Ghuznabi's unique leadership

<sup>4</sup> Ghuznabi has been a member of Naripokkho since 1986, and was its convener from 1999–2001. Naripokkho, a women's activist organization formed in 1983, undertakes advocacy, research and training on various issues related to women's rights and development. Ghuznabi has also been member of the Board of Trustees of the Bangladesh chapter of Transparency International since 1995 and served as its Secretary-General in 2004–06. The aim of Transparency International is to curb corruption and build support for anti-corruption programmes through strengthening civil society activities and promoting good governance. From 1975 to 1992 Ghuznabi had been the Bangladesh Delegate for Terre des hommes, a Swiss NGO working with underprivileged children in rural and urban areas of Bangladesh.

style – she became aware that the digital world held a promising path for Aranya’s future, but realized that she lacked the knowledge needed to pursue this path. Khair came in to make the digital leap and also deepened the circular economy aspects of the enterprise, such as improving water management among Aranya’s network of artisans.

Today, villagers are still Aranya’s leading suppliers, and the company has successfully continued to focus on quality rather than quantity. Aranya considers environmental sustainability and providing fair wages as part of cultivating a viable and profitable company, showcasing that the two can go hand-in-hand.

“I consider it my life’s achievement to have made this a profitable activity and show the artisans how far their products have reached and how widely they are admired. For the craftsmanship, for the beauty, for their creativity,” Ghuznabi said. “We worked hard, and once we established the production processes, we tolerated no mistake because it jeopardized the possibility of selling and making profits all around. This was true especially for the women, since they had no public presence before this initiative. Their husbands or families would be representing them – but not here. Here they are fully responsible for their production and are the income recipients.”

### How and why was Aranya Crafts started?

Ruby Ghuznabi created Aranya Crafts to empower local artisans to revive and popularize the use of natural dyes and to promote Bangladeshi eco-sustainable products worldwide. Ghuznabi’s initial inspiration had come from the prominent Indian activist and social reformer Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. A promoter of traditional arts and handicrafts, Kamaladevi offered workshops on natural dyes back in the 1980s. Ghuznabi recalls that at one of those workshops Kamaladevi told her, “‘Now here you are, you have learned, I don’t want to hear “no” from you. You must take it up and take it to Bangladesh.’ Honestly, without her support, I do not know if I may or may not have been successful.”

Armed with this inspiration, Ghuznabi approached some craftswomen in a village in Bangladesh

with the idea, and they became interested. This show of interest was what sparked the creation of Aranya in 1990, and it ultimately took roughly three years to train the village women on the whole dyeing process. Within the first year, other village women who had nothing to do with crafts became interested because they realized it was something they capable of doing and could make income doing. Ghuznabi allowed mistakes and experimentation at first. This approach is how investing in the capacities of the workers/artisans and also encouraging them to innovate on the colour schemes became a central part of the company’s image. She got trainers to come from India, and the craftswomen also travelled to India to learn from craftspeople there, many leaving their village or region for the first time. Waste from agriculture or festivities was used to make the colourfast dyes: “It was amazing to see all of the colours that we could obtain from plants, leaves, flowers, even twigs,” Ghuznabi recalls. As the dye development process progressed, Aranya began to develop its sense of style through designs created in a collaborative effort between Ghuznabi and the women she helped train. Eventually, prominent people started wearing their clothing to events, and they would get noticed as an Aranya product. “The colours were unique”, Ghuznabi said of Aranya’s creations, “Some tried to repeat the colours chemically; it didn’t work.”

### What vision did you have for this business, and for yourself as the founder/leader?

Aranya’s vision was to establish a sustainable and green fashion value chain that equally values people, the planet and profit. Making all-natural products that were colourfast and cost-effective was deemed impossible in the industry. Still, Ghuznabi achieved this in collaboration with the women in the villages. “This gave everyone more confidence to continue in the path of using natural processes for dyeing.” The results negated the idea that the venture was not commercially viable. This determination speaks to Ghuznabi’s unique vision and leadership to challenge what was deemed impossible and to achieve fair-trade and community development goals.

Direct contact with communities, including

indigenous communities of Bangladesh in the Chittagong region, has also revived the cultivation of plants that had almost disappeared, such as indigo. “I never thought that a small initiative with women and my interest in reviving the natural colour dyes would grow into such a big organization. I knew that if I had their support, the idea would have a future.” Ghuznabi’s buyers have included Selfridge’s, one of the largest department stores in the United Kingdom, as well as local customers. “At the beginning, people were very pessimistic about the idea as a business. Even people from India warned that it is charming, but it will not make a profit. But we managed to standardize the process, not me alone, but the women who gathered the materials together, who put the designs together, and me creating the support for them to do that. In the beginning, we established Aranya as a private limited company. Fair trade had just started, and it seemed to us that it was essential to have fair sharing with the artisans. Otherwise, it would not work; they put their hearts in it. So every product that came out would be special.”

Through decades of intensive research and development, Aranya has extended its colour repertoire and refined production techniques. This path led to cutting down production costs and gave Aranya products a competitive edge in the mainstream market within Bangladesh and abroad. Ghuznabi’s in-depth research and experimentation with the rich repository of dye plants in Bangladesh yielded 30 colourfast dyes that are eco-friendly and non-pollutant. For three decades, Ghuznabi has been a catalyst for the resurgence of natural dyes and has conducted many workshops to promote their use.

In recent years Aranya has grown under the leadership of Nawshin Khair, CEO since 2018. It now has an ecosystem of 3,000 weavers, embroiderers, jewelers, printers, craftswomen and craftsmen who work from their homes or in small-scale community factories, and also employs 70 people to produce and research natural dyes at their workshop in Dhaka. Khair’s mission is to manufacture designer craft products using natural dyes, fibres, textiles and biodegradable materials. Like Ghuznabi, Khair is equally dedicated to establishing the commercial

viability of eco-friendly products. She is also committed to creating new opportunities for artisans and women in living in poverty. The company recently established a foundation for the development of project work at the community level. The Aranya Foundation is currently a separate entity from the company.

## Production process and products

Aranya’s main raw products come from local artisans and producers, and the company then further transforms them into specialty goods. The raw products include: fabrics made from natural fibres; embroidery or various special finishing; the design of clothing or materials (which is a collaborative effort); and naturally dyed textiles.

## Circular economy

Aranya started as a personal venture to “revive natural colours” through the use of traditional techniques and products to dye fabrics. In some cases, the raw materials used to produce dyes are recycled items or waste products, such as marigolds that had been used to decorate weddings and other festive occasions, or even onion skins: “The skin of onions from various establishments like restaurants is reused in Aranya dyes. So instead, what would have been wastage is reborn into beautiful, natural colour!”

Aranya favours traditional weaving, dyeing and wax printing techniques (and have expanded to other crafts such as brassware and silver jewellery): “Hand-dyed yarn in silk, cotton and other blends are woven and embroidered into traditional saris, ready-wear, fabrics, accessories and a wide range of home textiles. However, Aranya’s special achievement has been its revival of two distinct craft techniques: the traditional *jamdani*<sup>5</sup> and *nakshi katha/kanthas* textiles<sup>5</sup> and the *shibori* dyeing technique. (UNESCO considers the production of *jamdani* to be a heritage craft).

The choice of dyes, the use of recycled materials to create the dyes, and the use of traditional/low environmental impact production processes firmly showcase Aranya as a company led by environmental and social objectives. Furthermore,

<sup>5</sup> These are all specific textiles of Bangladesh.

this approach – combined with human resource and community development – lead to better management of water resources.

Interest in Aranya’s natural dyes revived the demand for indigo cultivation in Bangladesh. Ghuznabi’s visits to villages revealed that indigo had almost disappeared, but some villagers were still using it locally for dyeing. The designs that Aranya and the women in the villages subsequently developed created a specific demand for indigo, both from Aranya as well as from other textile producers inspired by Aranya’s use of natural dyes. Six or seven years after Aranya started working in the villages, the landowners where indigo cultivation had survived were able to sell locally and even export their crops to Japan and India. In addition, according to Ghuznabi, Aranya has generated an appreciation for nature in rural Bangladesh that was not there before. “I tell you, 30 or 40 years later, it sounds like a dream now, but working with products from nature made everyone realize its value and have a higher appreciation for nature. We could see our trees and fruit gardens destroyed because people needed the land for something else. The people in the village we worked with realized the value of what they had. It was important to get peasants, farmers and growers involved with our work. And they could hardly believe what the results were.”

As Aranya produces their own natural dyes, in some cases from recycled materials, they do not need to look for dyes elsewhere. Concerning other primary resources, Aranya prefers local suppliers with social, sustainable and responsible practices that abide by fair working conditions, ensure equal opportunity for their employees and produce high-quality products.

Shortly after Aranya’s inception, Ghuznabi joined the fair trade movement, which she considered to be wholly consistent with what was already being practiced by Aranya.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the company has reported a wide range of equality practices in the human resources area while taking into consideration the needs of their employees; these include equal opportunity and treatment in hiring and in accessing promotions and training; equal pay policies; and pay transparency practices to address pay equity. Aranya also reports

supporting care duties for retention; helping staff to reintegrate workers who went on leave to care for family; supporting pregnant workers and maternity leave; providing flexible work schedules; and instituting policies to support victims of domestic violence while prohibiting all forms of violence and harassment in the workplace. In addition, local development work at the community level has been carried out using the proceeds from the sale of products.

## Navigating COVID-19 and what lies ahead

COVID-19 has impacted the business and the community work at Aranya. The lockdown measures have meant that while women artisans continued to do their work, their products could not go to market, and they could not meet with their customers (which include more buyers than just Aranya). “The world that they knew suddenly became very distant,” Ghuznabi said. As far as the workshop workers in Dhaka, production shifted to workers homes as far as was possible, and upon return to the workshop, masking and distancing measures were put in place. As with the broader garment sector, cutbacks in production were inevitable, but support to Aranya’s network of more than 3,000 artisans continued by placing orders and paying them on time. Cooperation among like-minded social enterprises and NGOs has been one strategy to maintain business by sharing sales and promotional work in a single platform (Aranya’s website) and by continuing to create work at the community level. The pandemic has also provided space for the company to reflect and make some fundamental changes to ensure the continued viability of both the business side and the community development side. These changes include the establishment of the Aranya Foundation as a separate entity to continue carrying out the local development community work that connects craftspeople to local and international markets.

<sup>6</sup> Aranya is a member of the World Fair Trade Organization and one of the earliest Bangladeshi members of the World Crafts Council.



## ► Karishma Shahani Khan, Ka -Sha, India

**Name:** Karishma Shahani Khan

**Company:** Ka-Sha

**Products:** Hand woven and dyed fashion

**Headquarters:** Pune, India

### Leadership in sustainable clothing and textiles

Karishma Shahani Khan created Ka-Sha as a way to use clothing as a medium for celebrating handicrafts. Khan views the work of her employees and the wide network of artisans she collaborates with as a celebration of life “and all that we see and seek around us”. As a young businesswoman, she is now mentoring other like-minded young designers/entrepreneurs, mostly women. Her business is profitable and contributes to environmental and social sustainability goals, and Ka-Sha has represented India at trade shows and Fashion Weeks around the world. Ka-Sha’s approach of producing custom-made products in small quantities and good use of social media platforms, particularly Instagram, have allowed the company to continue thriving throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The company’s additional initiatives – like [Heart To Haat](#), which is “inspired by the indigenous custom of reusing, repurposing and reclaiming”, and a collaboration with the Together Ek Saath Collective Foundation – further underline this entrepreneur’s commitment to both environmental and social sustainability.

“The first time that I went to the small villages when I returned from [studying in] London, here I was this relatively big town girl with big ideas, and I sat down to preach to everyone on how things need to be or should be done, and someone told me very simply that ‘this is the life that we lead, this is the life that we understand, and this is the life that we want to build for ourselves’”, Khan said. “And this really taught me a lesson: You might think that you know everything, but you don’t. And I think that these are the kind of teachings that I put into my business, because

#### ► India

The textiles and clothing industry in India is considered the second-largest employer in the country. An estimated 50 million workers are expected to be part of the sector by 2025 (CII 2016). Ready-made garments accounts for 15 per cent of the country’s total export earnings, standing at USD 14.15 million in August 2021 alone (IBED 2022). The sector contributes four per cent of India’s GDP and 27 per cent of the country’s foreign exchange inflows (ILO 2015).

India’s first environmental protection laws focused on water and date from the early 1970s, and the Environmental Protection Act of 1986 provided a comprehensive framework, including water and air legislation and additional provisions related to emissions, discharges and waste, among other matters.

it is a simple thing of being sensitive to different points of view. From the point of view of how I built the business, it has to do a lot with people and where they are at.”

While Ka-Sha has found success through savvy business practices related to pricing, quality and payment options, Khan still considers other aspects of the business to be just as important, such as dealing only with local suppliers, businesses or partners that follow sustainable and socially responsible practices; aiming to act with solid business ethics; and offering fair and equal opportunity conditions to employees.

### How and why was Ka-Sha started?

Khan started Ka-Sha with the belief that positive change could be made in the lives of suppliers, workers and consumers through design. “Clothing and textiles engage so many hands, and being able to support these is crucial”, she said. “We work with artisans to produce our

fabrics that we buy bulk undyed. We produce garments for women ... that are ready wear, but made in very limited productions; there are no sales or inventory of the products, which is part of the circular economy approach that avoids any waste."

Khan is a young entrepreneur who is married with children and shares control of the company with her husband. Ka-Sha has a lean management structure where each person takes on multiple roles, and the primary focus is on production. This structure allows Khan to be directly available to most of the workers without them having to go through a heavy multilevel system, reflecting the type of leadership that she exercises daily. She comes from a family with a business background, which has helped her in starting and growing the business – although her family has not always agreed with her decision to integrate profitability with social and environmental goals. Even so, she has persevered on her own unique path: "I studied in the London College of Fashion, and typically as a design person from India, the path is to leave and never come back. But in London, I realized the value of India's crafts as a country, and it made me realize that I wanted to do something back in India. It was important to me to work with crafts in the area I work in. I make clothing and textiles, and I realized the kind of value and impact of the sector has in the country and globally."

The craft textile sector is a source of livelihood for many people in India, and Khan saw in this an opportunity to create high quality products in her home country and to make them available to a global audience. "Competition at home and abroad is intense; there is a constant revision of pricing. Here, our goal is to increase the awareness of the consumer, for them to be more mindful of the product they are wearing. My journey has made me aware of the need to grow organically. This growth must be mindful of not only how we produce, but who is producing, from the material we source and the artisans who make it to the artisans in our workshop."

## What vision did you have for this business, and for yourself as the founder/leader?

Creating a business that employs many hands creates a circular ecosystem through design and production. Ka-Sha generates a broad collaboration with many weavers and studio artisans across India, from the initial design all the way through to the production of the final products.

Khan considers Ka-Sha and her other initiatives as being human-centred. This focus on people was at the heart of her initial idea, as was the progression of the business towards zero-waste and sustainability. "[T]he first thing that I did when I came [back] to India was to work with craftspeople in very remote places, and it opened my eyes to the type of business I could be doing. Typically, the business in this sector finds a source and then uses it and puts the product out there. But in my case, I base the business model on people. So, for me, it is important to meet them face to face, to see their workspaces, how they live, how they eat. I feel that that builds in a lot of trust. It is, in a way, an 'old-school' kind of relationship with suppliers, seeing faces and talking to them. For me starting a business meant that I could impact many more people. It meant that I could take a product from an inspirational country that I love and put it across a larger audience at the global level." After an initial in-person visit, the relation with the artisans is generally maintained through electronic or telephone communication. During the COVID-19 lockdown, online workshops were held to help suppliers adapt to new regulations and to keep workers safe, reflecting Ka-Sha's commitment to the people who make their products.

The company has fewer than 25 workers and works with a network of artisan weavers across the country. Khan is the Creative and Managing Director. She employs two managers who run production, merchandising and administration, as well as a head of design. The rest – around ten employees, both women and men – are artisans who work with Ka-Sha in Pune and with the network of craftspeople in villages all across India. The company is divided into departments to keep the work focused, but the structure is kept lean so that top management can be communicated

with directly when issues arise. This approach denotes Khan's leadership style as being open to ideas from her team but never losing sight of the enterprise's vision and her strategic leadership role. There is a lot of collaborative work among members, but the artisan team is the core team that makes all the products from start to finish. Ka-Sha works with a local dyer in Pune who is not far away from the studio.<sup>7</sup> As for the weavers, they are located all across India. Khan does not recommend that craftspeople come to Pune because she does not think that taking people away from their community and their land is a feasible and sustainable way of working. The partnership is one where the designs are by Ka-Sha, and the craftspeople custom make materials for the company in alignment with Ka-Sha's design language.

### Production process and products

Ka-Sha uses artisanal techniques such as appliqués, hand-embroidery, hand-painting and several dyeing techniques to produce ready-to-wear fashion for women.

The main inputs for the production are fabric made from natural fibres, which are dyed, embroidered or embellished and processed at the Ka-Sha studio, and the outputs are ready-made garments for both sexes and all ages. The design of clothing or fabrics is also done at the Ka-Sha studio in Pune.

### Circular economy

Among the circular economy-friendly processes implemented at Ka-Sha, the most important would be the choice of fabrics, which matches Ka-Sha's appreciation for traditional crafts and processes, and the use of recycled materials. "We aim to enable collaboration on circular processes being established also among our partners particularly in relation to water management; we seek to reduce our own waste by upcycling/repurposing materials, with a longer life than those of automated production."

The circularity in this instance comes from the

choice of fibres and dyes, as well as the use of recycled materials and traditional/low-impact production processes. The high quality of the products also means that the life of each product is longer. At the Ka-Sha studio, waste management (recycling, disposal, others) and water management (recycling, discharges, others) has been implemented. But circularity also comes from the fact that Ka-Sha makes limited editions of products and there is no inventory to speak of. There is also upcycling within the production line and the new materials (all natural fibres) are locally sourced through artisans, mostly women, who use traditional methods. All of the dyeing takes place in Pune, and therefore all purchased materials are made in a neutral white colour. This also allows for the financial and environmental sustainability of the company, as it means that essentially all purchased materials can be reused/repurposed if the company decides to change colour palettes or develop new collections.

From the social perspective of the circular economy, which Khan believes cannot be disassociated from the financial and environmental, Ka-Sha engages in enabling circular processes/collaborations with artisans and focuses on community development efforts through women's empowerment and artisan group support. This is mainly in the form of skills capacity-building and awareness-raising, as well as directing artisans to existing information or initiatives on water management. Khan is also a founding member of the Together Ek Saath Collective Foundation, which carries out community development initiatives and was born out of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on livelihoods.<sup>8</sup>

### Navigating COVID-19 and what lies ahead

"I am most proud of the team that we have built. We are a self-funded business. As there was no government support to these small businesses during COVID so everyone had to be flexible. Some salary adjustments had to be made, but only temporarily." Sourcing locally and spreading

<sup>7</sup> The company does work with other dyers, but their partner dyer in Pune handles the majority of these tasks.

<sup>8</sup> More information is available at: <https://together.org.in/>.

the clientele base online and through social media allowed the company to survive the economic effects of the pandemic. Although delivery times took longer, the customers were willing to wait. In addition, through the Together Ek Saath Collective Foundation, Ka-Sha started to produce face masks, pouches and home items from scraps and remnants. The time was also used to continue keeping in touch with Ka-Sha's crafts network: "We did workshops on-line and the company was able to run again within four months of the shut-downs in India due to the fact that as retail opened up in other countries where our products are sold, orders began to come in again."

Khan believes that reaching financial sustainability has been an organic process. Made to order links better with environmental sustainability as there is no unnecessary production. The next steps are to sell directly to the public in physical stores and also to offer immersive experiences in their studio at Pune. Ka-Sha's organic growth principle shows an alternative business model that is friendly to the planet while maintaining sustainability. This shows how Khan embraces new technologies and interaction with customers as well as with anyone who is interested in how the products are made and sold, from conception right through to managing the customer experience.



## ► Dinny Jusuf, Founder, and Aparna Saxena, CEO, Torajamelo, Indonesia

**Name:** Dinny Jusuf (founder) and Aparna Saxena (CEO)

**Company:** Torajamelo

**Products:** Design of hand-woven natural fabrics and production of clothing and other textile-based products

### Leadership in sustainable clothing and textiles

Dinny Jusuf founded Torajamelo based on a vision and mission aimed at addressing the complex and often difficult situations of indigenous women and other women in Indonesia. In her previous work as a government official, Jusuf had witnessed the poverty that drove Indonesian women – including indigenous women – to migrate overseas under difficult circumstances, as well as the violence and trauma that many of these women experienced. Jusuf also saw the intrinsic value of a traditional handicraft style that was slowly dying in an indigenous area in Indonesia. Here was an opportunity to address both simultaneously, which served as the inspiration to create Torajamelo – a company that would support indigenous backstrap loom weaving through a combination of traditional and modern design aimed at a global audience.

Jusuf's knowledge of business and finance was used to strategically grow the company, which now includes over 1,000 weavers and attracts investors and corporate clients. "My proudest moment has been to see how Torajamelo has given women back their dignity," she said, relating weavers' stories of being able to do everything from contributing to community ritual ceremonies to sending their daughters to university.

Torajamelo's leadership in reducing the environmental impact of garment and textile

#### ►Indonesia

In 2019, Indonesia was the number 16 economy in the world in terms of GDP (current US\$), and the textile and garment industry exports add up to US\$14 billion, or 7 per cent of the total GDP (ILO 2017). As of 2016 the textiles and garment industry employed 4.2 million people, 69.5 per cent of whom were women (ILO 2017).

On the environmental front, the country's main legislation is 2009's Law No. 32 on Environmental Management and Protection, which is administered by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry. This law includes the "AMDAL" (Analysis Mengenai Dampak Lingkungan, or environmental impact assessment) and the requirements for businesses to obtain an environmental license to operate. The Government in 2020 put forward and approved changes to legislation that were seen as negative by environmentalists and labour unions, which spurred massive protests in the country because of perceived threats to forests and labour conditions.

production and ever-widening positive social impact can serve as a lesson in an industry that often appropriates indigenous patterns while continuing to deny decent work conditions to workers. Indeed, this is literally the case, as Torajamelo Limited has a consultancy arm that advises corporations on how to approach corporate social responsibility with gender and community sensitivity, as well as providing pro-bono support to other social enterprises. The consultancy's motto: "Do no harm."

The handover to Aparna Saxena, a young CEO with digital e-commerce experience, during a global pandemic also speaks to the leadership style of Jusuf, who wants to ensure Torajamelo's vision and mission continues. This continuation is based on expanding commerce to ensure

that textile-producing communities continue to receive orders from Torajamelo (although not as an exclusive buyer); expanding community collaboration by introducing other elements, such as farming natural fibres and community tourism; and the aforementioned consultancy to corporations and pro-bono advice to other social enterprise initiatives in Indonesia.

### How and why was Torajamelo started?

Dinny Jusuf owns the company with her sister Nina Jusuf, who serves as Head of Design and Production. Jusuf had been working for financial institutions when she became an activist for women's rights, specifically in the area of violence against women.<sup>9</sup> This activism culminated in her position as the Secretary-General of Komnas Perempuan (National Commission on Anti-Violence Against Women) and part of the investigative committee on sexual crimes and femicide against ethnic Chinese women in Indonesia under the Suharto administration (1968–98). According to Jusuf, the idea for Torajamelo suddenly came to her in 2008 as she was thinking about leaving the National Commission. Her time as a commission member had left her with a heightened sense of what violence against women entailed and how it was being approached by the Government and by civil society. According to her, these actors did not always consider the material conditions in which survivors lived.

The inspiration for the company came from engaging in Commission work in the Toraja region of Sulawesi Island. Jusuf noticed that many older Toraja women were caring for children that did not look like ethnic Toraja, and she asked them about it. She was told that these were the children of Toraja mothers who had migrated abroad to work as domestic workers in Singapore

and Malaysia and had become pregnant, which meant they had to leave their jobs and come back home.<sup>10</sup> The region's lack of economic opportunities, compounded by a lack of access to infrastructure (including water and energy), education, individual agency, entrepreneurial self-development, and maternal healthcare had become push factors in prompting these young women to migrate as domestic workers.

But many of the older women of Toraja were skilled weavers, and were preserving the cultural heritage of indigenous backstrap loom weaving. The younger Toraja women, however, were not interested in continuing this weaving heritage, as it did not offer them any income earning opportunities. Jusuf, however, saw otherwise, and Torajamelo was founded in 2010 as both a foundation and as a limited liability company. The Torajamelo Foundation would cover community action;<sup>11</sup> while the company had the core purpose of providing livelihoods for rural indigenous communities and alleviating systemic poverty through preserving the cultural heritage of indigenous backstrap loom weaving in Indonesia. This activity would also help prevent the breakdown of families and communities by reducing the push factors driving outbound migration of rural women. The activities that supported these objectives were capacity-building (weaving skills) and giving their products a market outlet through Torajamelo, which has now gone international. The name of the company speaks to its origins, as it means "Beautiful Toraja" in the Toraja-Sa'dan language.

### What vision did you have for this business, and for yourself as the founder/leader?

Most of the more than 300 ethnic groups who live in Indonesia have a weaving heritage dating back hundreds of years, especially in the poorest and

<sup>9</sup> Jusuf was one of the founding members of the movement Suara Ibu Peduli (The Voice of Concerned Mothers), which joined in push to depose the Suharto regime.

<sup>10</sup> A number of countries in South-East Asia, including Malaysia and Singapore, prohibit pregnancy among migrant domestic workers. Migrant domestic workers who do become pregnant lose their right to work in these countries and consequently lose their visa status (ILO 2021d).

<sup>11</sup> This entails a number of initiatives in collaboration with donors and other actors.

most remote areas<sup>12</sup> where there are few other alternative income opportunities. Consequently, hand-woven textiles are an integral part of the ceremonies and life rituals of these Indonesian ethnic groups. However, with the pressures of the modern world, this heritage was dying.

Torajamelo's mission to create a better life for the weavers and to preserve and rejuvenate Indonesian hand-woven textile art and culture was always at the heart of the business. These goals are achieved through three main elements or pillars: First, by never compromising the weavers' integrity or faltering in the company's commitment to improving the livelihoods of weavers in the name of achieving exponential growth. Second, by setting the highest circular economy standards internally in Torajamelo and externally in the industry. And third, by challenging and changing communities' mindsets and the ecosystem at large to strive for self-sufficiency and to limit over-dependence on donors and development organizations.

By 2012, however, the need to shift the focus to community development was becoming very urgent as the older weavers were dying. Traditionally, weaving knowledge was only transmitted to daughters or granddaughters, many of whom had already left Toraja. This practice pointed to the need to create communities of weavers and a formal structure. This led to the development of cooperatives where all the weavers would have equal rights in the decision-making processes that affected their production and income. By 2019, in collaboration with the women's association PEKKA<sup>13</sup>, four cooperatives had been established in other islands with other indigenous and non-indigenous groups of women. Torajamelo sources its materials from these four cooperatives.

## Production process and products

Torajamelo has six lines of products: women's and men's wear, accessories, bags, art cloths, and home décor. The production is based on woven or knitted fabrics from the villages Torajamelo works with on different islands. While working

for Torajamelo, weavers and other artisans are free to sell to other customers once the work to improve their products has been completed. The main activities for Torajamelo are to design patterns for the fabrics to be woven and then to create ready-made clothing and other textile products from the fabrics.

Torajamelo's designs have been crucial to the success of the endeavour, as has the choice of materials, which prior to the company's involvement tended to be synthetic and with colour schemes that were not to the taste of a broader market. Under Jusuf's leadership and input from Nina as designer changes were introduced that combined classic indigenous patterns with new ideas through a collaborative effort between the weavers and Torajamelo. Importantly, Jusuf was also able to influence the upstream suppliers, as indigenous communities had previously been provided only synthetic threads and yarns of unbecoming colours – the result of a monopoly in the supply chain. To address this matter, Jusuf traveled to Jakarta to speak directly to the yarn distributors and

## Torajamelo – Vision, mission and values

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**Vision:** Alleviating systemic poverty by creating a sustainable ecosystem for women artisans.

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**Mission:** Collaborate with women-led weaving communities and offer market access sustainably via 3Cs – Commerce, Community collaboration, and Consultancy.

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**Values:** Collaborate with Community, Uphold Quality, Practice Integrity, take actions with a Purpose and Believe in Compassion.

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<sup>12</sup> At present Torejamelolo works in Toraja, Mamasa, Adonara and Lembata, all remote islands or remote locations within islands in Indonesia, more information is available at: <https://torajamelolo.com/impact/>.

<sup>13</sup> Perempuan Kepala Keluarga, or Women-Headed Household Empowerment.

convinced them to provide better quality yarn and colours to the weavers.

## Circular economy

The central circular economy components of Torajamelo's production are found in the choice of fibres and dyes; use of recycled materials; support of traditional/low-impact production processes; producing high quality products to ensure they have a long life; as well as a focus on waste management (recycling, disposal) and enabling circular processes/collaborations with the suppliers (weavers and dyers). As part of its vision to support indigenous communities in Indonesia, Torajamelo is currently strengthening circular economy processes in the communities it works with, and is also investigating their end-to-end supply chain to identify areas where "it can act more responsibly, build transparency, and achieve 100 per cent product traceability". With United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production – and SDG 13 – Climate Action – guiding their way, Torajamelo's objective is "to set a sustainability standard for fashion brands and social enterprises globally, starting with Indonesia. We are striving to exemplify the importance of circular practices in the industry and show that operating as a sustainable business should be the norm."

The company has reported a wide range of equality practices in the human resources area, taking into consideration the needs of their employees, including equal opportunity and treatment in hiring and accessing promotions and training, as well as equal pay policies and pay transparency practices to address pay equity. The company also has in place measures to support care duties for employees. They also support pregnant workers and maternity leave, flexible work schedules, and policies to support victims of domestic violence, and prohibit all forms of violence or harassment in the workplace. This approach extends to their work with communities, having helped women set up cooperatives that strengthen their market position and reduce individual risk.

These efforts also highlight the objectives Jusuf

has had since the beginning of the venture: to support women in indigenous communities so they do not have to migrate. The status of women in their communities has risen, and Torajamelo has also done researched how incomes have increased and out-migration has slowed.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that the local government has recognized the value of the revival of handloom textile production in the Toraja area. It now receives support in local development plans, including developing community tourism, which further diversifies activities for the whole community and increases resilience against different situations.

## Navigating COVID-19 and what lies ahead

The communities that work with Torajamelo have other activities, such as farming, as part of their livelihoods. This means that during the COVID-19 crisis they were not depending solely on the work they produced for Torajamelo.

Torajamelo as a brand will continue to work with weavers in the different locations where it has been partnering with PEKKA. Global consumer access to the company's products will be primarily through the Torajamelo website, which is being rebuilt more as a platform for collaboration with any artisanal, environmentally conscious businesses seeking access to global markets. Having this collaboration will increase volume without a mass production impact, an idea that both Jusuf as founder and now Saxena as CEO continue to move forward.

As far as community work is concerned, the idea is to continue expanding to work with many more indigenous communities in Indonesia. The foundation side of Torajamelo is also seeking to expand the model to other countries, such as Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic. It will seek to apply the same collaboration model with local partners already working with rural women to strengthen their livelihood capacities and ensure cultural continuity, particularly among indigenous communities. Certification for articles made by these communities protected through

<sup>14</sup> The data from this research can be found at: <https://torajamelo.com/an-assessment-of-the-impact-of-torajamelo/>.



geographical indication<sup>15</sup> is in the works, and is hoped to be a reality within two years. That future might mean bringing on board women with more comprehensive, global experience but keeping the same initial vision to build sustainable ecosystems for women artisans based on the lessons learned about local ownership, knowledge management and enablement, and environmental and social sustainability.

A third element would be developing the consultancy side to help businesses apply circular economy principles and use their money and power the right way and in different areas. The work at the community level should now be more comprehensive and be part of indigenous and rural decentralized economies creating diversified employment sources. Both Jusuf and Saxena feel that this future work will continue to be carried by women and that men will continue to be partners. Still, the main activities and initiatives will continue to have women at the centre and as leaders.

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<sup>15</sup> A geographical indication is a name or sign used on products that correspond to a specific geographical location or place of origin. The use of a geographical indication, as an indication of the product's source, acts as a certification that the product possesses certain qualities, is made according to traditional methods or enjoys a good reputation due to its geographical origin. This also helps reduce cultural appropriation and illegal use of the patterns and ideas by the mass production textile and garment industry.

## ► Anya Lim, Anthill, Philippines

**Name:** Anya Lim

**Company:** Anthill (Alternative Nest and Trading/ Training Hub for Indigenous/Ingenious Little Livelihood seekers)

**Products:** Design of hand woven and dyed fabrics and ready to wear clothing and other textile products

### Leadership in sustainable clothing and textiles

Anya Lim has led since the beginning with the explicit intention for Anthill to become a market outlet for products made from almost extinct cultural traditions in villages pressured by social, economic, and environmental phenomena. Migration to urban or foreign lands has meant that entire villages in the Philippines were becoming ghost towns, and the cultural heritage was being destroyed. Since the beginning, Anthill has focussed on community development to bring market and income opportunities to the communities Anthill has partnered with since 2012 has also had the intent to reduce dependency on donors and grants and increase capacity on cultural continuity with innovation in design and colour schemes. Environmental sustainability has also been a hallmark for the initiative, which is now a value shared with other similar social enterprises. "Our weavers now want to weave tradition and technology. For Anthill, it is important for them not to be intimidated by digitalization to compete in global markets based on quality, not quantity. What matters most to the indigenous communities is grounded in their communal values. They have adapted to the changes. However, they are still inspired by their environment, and Anthill has helped conserve their craft skills to strengthen that community spirit under pressure to migrate and break the community." The collaboration to update designs and colours to create products that had not been seen in the fashion industry has been an evolution that can now be built on to strengthen

### ► Philippines

Although the textiles and garment industry is not one of the major economic activities in the Philippines, the Observatory of Economic Complexity (n.d.) reports the country produced US\$1.85 billion in textiles and apparel exports in 2019. The textiles, garment and footwear industry employed 611,000 people, and women working in this sector represented 30.8 per cent of total manufacturing employment in 2016 (latest statistic available) (ILO 2021).

From the legal environmental perspective, the first laws adopted to protect the country's environment were the Philippine Environmental Policy (Presidential Decree 1151), and the Philippine Environmental Code (Presidential Decree 1152), both from 1977. One year later came the Environmental Impact Statement (Presidential Decree 1586), which established the Environment Impact Assessment System.

the local economy and stop migration. Working with indigenous groups and their wisdom and the inspiration they get from the environment shows that we have to accept changes to grow while at the same time culture is protected. These changes include the effects of climate change, extinction of livelihoods, and social pressures derived from these more significant changes.

As Lim put it, Anthill was created "to address social gaps in cultural continuity and lack of long-term economic opportunities for women, especially in the craft and weaving sector".

### How and why was Anthill started?

Lim's love of the indigenous cultures of her country was instilled in her by her parents. As a child her family travelled through indigenous communities of the Philippines, and she came to appreciate their way of life and the crafts

they produced. Many years later, a visit with her brother to one of the villages made Lim realize that the community's way of life and their crafts were disappearing. The village had almost become a ghost town, which deeply disturbed her. The few remaining villagers explained that many people had left because they did not have any means of livelihood. This situation repeated itself in other villages Lim visited. The artisans, particularly the older weavers, were not passing on their knowledge. This is particularly the case among women who, because of social and economic circumstances out of their control, were experiencing identity poverty and could not appreciate these crafts as having an intrinsic value in themselves. "They did not see it as a good future," Lim said. "They preferred to migrate to urban areas or abroad, leaving their homes and shunned learning the craft [in order] to become a domestic or factory worker." That realization, again, disturbed Lim, as she could see how this could disrupt family and community dynamics. Lim wanted to do something about it, and started asking her friends about the possibility of using traditional woven textiles for clothing, but they answered that those kinds of textiles were only used for curtains or tablecloths. In Lim's mind, the disconnect between supply and demand was all too evident.

Still, Lim saw a potential niche market for well-designed clothing and home decor that showed pride in Philippine culture. Her mission was now to rethink how to revive traditional weaving and craft activities to get younger women to stay in their communities and to update designs and colours to appeal to the market. To choose the villages that she would work with, Lim used her academic background in community development. She started researching the status of the crafts and indigenous people in the country. She contacted the Philippine Textile Research Institute, the National Commission of the Arts, and the National Commission of Indigenous People to see if any indigenous people already had ongoing initiatives to preserve or continue weaving activities, but ended up with no concrete results. Lim's mother, at this point, became a key supporter, and it was through her that the first community was identified and contacted. There were six weavers in this village in Abra in the north of the country, and they did not have market access – it took them a whole day of travel, including a barge,

to take their vehicle to the closest market on the mainland. A specific commitment to finding out how these indigenous people structured their livelihood/business led to identifying their material sources, their assets, and how they produced the crafts. In another indigenous village in the south of the country, there was only one elderly weaver left, so it was more difficult to recuperate the skills. But Lim achieved this by establishing a weaving centre and obtaining some funds to start the first summer weaving course among the village's young women. One year after meeting with the community in Abra, Anthill was founded. By 2020, partnerships with 50 villages produced independent and market-connected businesses that Anthill could continue sourcing from while continuing to move to more villages that needed this market support. Lim owns the majority of the company, while sharing ownership with her mother.

### **What vision did you have for this business, and for yourself as the founder/leader?**

Anthill envisions being able to establish a business that will provide enabling environments for artisans to become successful entrepreneurs. "As for myself," Lim said, "I anticipated being a leader/founder that facilitates a space where others can discover their full potential and rise in their power."

Threat to livelihoods, undervaluation of indigenous crafts by potential consumers and by indigenous people themselves led to the realization that there was a chance to revive crafts if a socially-oriented business could bridge the cultural gap between weavers and potential consumers. The vision to support communities and bridge the gap between hand-woven crafts produced and the market became more apparent as Lim visited indigenous villages. "At the beginning, we focused on cultural continuity, and then we elevated the mission to provide a sustainable livelihood for indigenous women." This shows the evolution of Lim's vision since the initial steps of Anthill.

Following Anthill's work with the first two villages, more and more villages were introduced to Lim organically as word of the company's activities

got around. She now had a better picture of the problems communities have with market access and what skills and capacities needed to be installed in the villages. The process is participatory as the communities also became involved in setting up what is now the Anthill business model ecosystem (weavers, designers, production partners, and weave wearers). These first communities have achieved more self-reliance and have expanded to other markets, which was one of the goals that Anthill proposed since the beginning. An interesting point is that many of these weavers were already part of farming or crafts cooperatives or under the direction of community leaders or elders, but there was still little market access or modernization of the crafts for the markets that were available. The support provided by Anthill through a community enterprise development programme therefore includes strengthening leadership and governance structures that would support self-reliance and take better advantage of the newly found demand for their products. At the heart of the enterprise is an appreciation of weaving as having cultural value in and of itself, couple with communities coming to realize they can provide livelihoods intrinsically linked with pride in who they are.

## Production process and products

Anthill sources fabric made from natural fibres from the weavers in the communities that it collaborates with and also uses material made from synthetic fibres to make ready-made garments and accessories. The company's primary input is the design of clothing or fabrics to suit the market and providing a market outlet.

Anthill supports the communities through a community enterprise development programme that focuses on incubating and installing management capacity for these community businesses. Most of them were already working as farmer/craft cooperatives, but they were facing problems accessing markets and updating their crafts to the tastes of urban and international markets. In other villages, much more potential was identified, as the weaving tradition continued

in people's homes, often with antique looms handed down through generations. However, these efforts had to be formally structured to become a sustainable livelihood. In addition, Anthill's master-apprentice programme incentivized older weavers with an extra 20 per cent in their income if they would teach another woman to weave.

## Circular economy

Anthill has introduced recycled materials and traditional/low-impact production processes. As a result, their products are of high quality, which means that the product's life is longer. In addition, they have introduced waste management (recycling, disposal, others).<sup>16</sup> They are also enabling circular processes/collaborations with their supply chain, mostly with the craftspeople in the villages they work with.

In addition, under Lim's leadership, Anthill has also launched zero-waste experiments with other partners, which has paved the way for Anthill to gain support from conscious consumers and partners.<sup>17</sup> In 2018, for example, this experiment led Anthill to work with Healthy Options to upcycle their discarded uniforms, transforming them into new fabrics they can potentially integrate back into their supply chain. Anthill has also partnered with Capital, a sportswear brand in Manila, for their promotions selling handcrafted fanny packs with accents of black zero waste weaves. Lim has also explored the use of discarded linens and towels from The Peninsula hotel in Manila, transforming them into wearable weaves. Anthill has also supported another socially focused textile producer, Bayo, in upcycling their textile waste through the Bayo Foundation.

"To me, circularity is rooted in how our elders and ancestors have lived and their way of life", Lim said. "Circularity has a social impact in that what before could be considered waste is now a source of livelihood. We have built our business model in an ecosystem where, if one of the stakeholders is not growing, the rest of the system falls apart."

<sup>16</sup> For more information, see: <https://anthillfabrics.myshopify.com/blogs/fabrics/weaving-waste>.

<sup>17</sup> For a full list of zero waste partners, see: <https://anthillmarkets.com/pages/partner#zerowaste>.



## Navigating COVID-19 and what lies ahead

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, it was clear to Lim that Anthill would choose people over profits. Although transport to get weavers' products to the Anthill workshop was interrupted, the company's inventory helped keep the business side afloat so that the community interventions could keep going.

Digitalization is the next aim in the next five years, with the same approach being applied but instead of Anthill being at the forefront, it will now be at the back end, giving more support to the artisans and making them the visible face of their products. "Our theme for 2022 is 'Paving the way to independence'", Lim said. "It was apparent to us from the beginning that the measure of a successful business model is when our presence is obsolete. However, another characteristic is replicability and scalability. In this sense, [Anthill's] online platform aims to give our network of artisans access to a broader market as solo entrepreneurs using the leadership and management skills that have been installed through our community programs." Ultimately, the weavers will begin to weave together tradition and technology, because they do not wish be left behind in a digital world. "I have learned that indigenous culture and indigenous practice are reflected in the knowledge of the materials making up our traditions," Lim stated. "They are constantly evolving. Their weaving was inspired by nature, events, and other people they came into contact with. Their crafts reflect how they have continuously adapted to the times. Their belief systems and traditions remain grounded in their communal values, but this practice is also ever-evolving. Evolution is a sign of growth, and indigenous peoples of the Philippines have taught me that their respect for nature comes from accepting the constant change that needs to happen for forests to grow, for oceans to thrive."







# Conclusion

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**The profiles above showcase the transformative agency of women leaders in Asia's garment sector, an industry historically dominated by male owners and managers.** All four women are not only exercising sustainable business practices that are in line with their business and communities, but are also leading the sector to progress towards a more inclusive and sustainable industry. A theme emerges wherein the focus on community and solidarity presented in these profiles often outpaces the current legal frameworks in their countries, and consequently these enterprises serve as examples for the sector through their efforts to standardize innovative practices.<sup>18</sup>

**The introduction of circular economy elements at the production level extends beyond the business to the community and local development level.** By incorporating resilience and financial instruments into these initiatives, both the businesses and their affiliated communities had an avenue for survival during and beyond COVID-19. This resilience came from a number of factors: diversified activities in the community and at the household level; sales of products through the Internet, which allowed for some continuity of operations; quick pivoting to other products being demanded, such as masks; ability to return to production quickly as soon as restrictions were lifted; diversified the customer base for craftspeople, as they never entered in an exclusivity agreement, but rather were encouraged to find other clients; and savings schemes that were allowed to be accessed during the crisis, which allowed craftspeople to engage in other activities to support their livelihoods.

**Women leaders are seeking ways to leverage digitalization and social media towards socially responsible and sustainable business enterprises.** Social media and e-commerce have become important means in sustaining and growing the markets of these entrepreneurs

in order to adapt to COVID-19. Businesses have shown a pattern of prioritizing digitalization for the future of their business, either through upskilling training or hiring young women as leaders. Leaders have expressed the crucial role of digital platforms not only in the survival and growth of their businesses, but in order to expand their social impact to other localities and to raise awareness of communities' cultural contributions.

**Creation and cultivation of local networks have proven key for sustainable business and community building.** Although the scale of these businesses is small (less than 100 people), the network of craftspeople, in particular women crafters, with whom they collaborate is much larger. In three of the above profiles the companies have been offering community support through various initiatives. Capacity-building elements, such as training and collaboration on craft development, have proven to have added value and improved the lives and skills of the weavers, embroiderers, dyers, dye makers and other people who make up the ecosystems of these enterprises. Notably, in two of the cases, halting migration patterns that may put women's lives at risk and have a negative impact on their communities has been one of the main motivations to implement these entrepreneurial ventures.

**The women leaders profiled have started and grown businesses with women's lives and experiences at the heart of their ventures.** This extends to protecting inter-generational indigenous garment and textile practices, placing workers first during COVID-19, and implementing gender-sensitive workplace policies. Men have also benefitted from these initiatives, but the main concern in most cases was to improve the lives of women and the communities in which they live. These companies differ from the larger ready-made garment and textile sector, where women are less likely to have leadership positions and decision-making powers. In garment factories men are overrepresented as factory owners and in managerial roles. These profiles showcase companies that are not following the traditional growth and profit-driven trajectory, as they

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<sup>18</sup> According to the Cooperatives Unit of the ILO Enterprises Department, the Philippines is undergoing a revision of its present legislation to align it to ILO's Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 (No. 193). In the case of India, the Government only actively targets social enterprises in healthcare, affordable housing, agriculture, education, clean and off-grid energy, water and sanitation through a number of schemes.

have wider goals. Garment sector leaders, men and women alike, can learn from the companies profiled in promoting sustainable solutions that empower women and gender equality at their workplaces.

**The profiles outlined contextualize the importance of supporting women's leadership for a more sustainable, inclusive and just garment sector in Asia.** The four profiles indicate a pattern of female leadership and sustainable business practices that contributes to a circular economy. Gender equality and environmental sustainability go hand-in-hand where supporting women to achieve leadership roles enables more sustainable enterprises in the sector. The interviews and profiles conducted are a key step in acknowledging the role of women's leadership in achieving a Just Transition while advocating for further inclusion and support of women in decision-making positions.

**Recognizing women leaders who are paving the way for sustainability and equality is a key step in advocating for further action across the sector.** The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare many of the inequities persisting in the garment industry. These profiles aim to provide guidance and inspiration for the garment sector to promote change in regard to environmental sustainability, gender equality and crisis recovery. As the garment sector in Asia and the Pacific begins to recuperate, industry leaders and stakeholders should bolster collaboration and recognize women leaders who are championing the way towards a more resilient sector.



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## Women entrepreneurs leading the way: Promoting a circular economy and more sustainable practices in the garment sector

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to adverse impacts on Asia and the Pacific's 35 million women garment workers. With COVID-19, persisting gender inequalities and an aggravating climate emergency, the garment and textiles sector have reached a pivotal crossroads.

The report outlines four women leaders in Asia's garment and textile sector who are making positive contributions to sector-specific challenges related to gender equality, environmental sustainability and industry recovery from COVID-19. The entrepreneurs share their personal and business experiences showcasing sustainable enterprises, introduction of circular economies and adopting alternative leadership styles at work.

Through the entrepreneurs' accounts, the report highlights how women's leadership is a driver for more sustainable business practices and gender equality in the garment sector. In contrast to the mass production of textiles and garments, the profiles emphasise a pattern of women's entrepreneurship dedicated to circular economy business models that are kinder to people and the planet. The report highlights the importance of looking at alternative leadership styles in Asia's garment sector for a more inclusive and resilient industry.



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