

Sri Lanka Lace and Craft Project

Background:

Power of Hands Foundation was set up to provide impoverished female craft workers and survivors of the Tsunami, with facilities and training, to help them out of the poverty and to become self sufficient. It also strived to preserve the traditional crafts and skills that are dying out so that they will be preserved for generations to come.

Aims of the Project:

- To assess women and their skills in craft making (especially those making Berelu Lace in the southern Galle area of Sri Lanka).
- To provide women craft makers with better facilities and improved environments in which to do their work and to support their basic living needs.
- To help the women form a co-operative of crafts people in order that a network could be used to fulfil orders for lace and share workloads whilst giving the women a centralised point to share and exchange knowledge and skills.
- To create a better indication and understanding of the time frames involved in the creation of various styles of lace and other craft pieces. This would then allow for a fair rate of pay to be applied to such work that would be deemed ethical and fair and the women would be better supported financially for this intricate and time consuming skill.
- To use design skills from the west to help the women create a product that was of a high standard and suitable for international sale.
- To apply for international funds from larger charitable organisations and governmental bodies to support the POHF to be developed and support this project.
- To market the lace in Europe/Western countries to provide the women with orders so they can sustain themselves and preserve skills.
- To use this project as the basis for helping other impoverished crafts people with similar issues and form an international network to support ethical craft and preserve skills into the future.

‘Shortage of skill in traditional crafts debilitates the textile industry: The POHF project offers sustainable livelihoods to impoverished but highly skilled craftsmen’

Summary of what happened in Sri Lanka.

Assessment of the women:

Over 80 women were assessed including their skills, general health and their living conditions in the southern area of Galle. Many women had lost their husbands and sons in the Tsunami (as fishermen made up a large percentage of the local workforce) so were hugely affected not only in physical devastation to their homes but also in financial loss of income to support their families (psychological damage goes without saying).

The idea of the assessment was to glean a deeper understanding of the women’s needs from an assessment carried out by an expert in the textile design and implementation team from the UK. It was important to assess all areas mentioned above as many women had children and worked from

their family homes. And it was important to ensure the women had adequate environments from which to work from as well as having good general health, including eyesight.

All women lived in unsuitable conditions to varying degrees of disrepair and poverty. Some had issues with cleanliness within the home due to a lack of running water and most properties were poorly lit, making lace making a straining and uncomfortable for their eyes outside of daylight, when many women would try to sit outside in the shade to make lace. In making lace that is of a high enough quality to sell to the lace it is important the environment is clean and that the women have clean hands.

The older women all had issues with their eyesight and some had glasses that were actually not the correct prescription for their eyes – adding further problems to their eyesight. Some women had more serious health issues with no way of receiving proper treatment.

Across the board a whole host of issues were presented and it was clear that each woman must be treated individually to try to prioritise her issues and look for a means to give her some support.

Forming a co-operative was the next step to facilitate the women getting the most from their skills and offering them a way to share skills and have a network in place that could be utilised at a later date.

The actual assessment of the 'making' skills was crucial to try and define a fair wage for the work, that was deemed to be ethical and that took in to account average time frames for production for the lengthy work that the women did. It then led the way for some orders to be placed for lace to be used in some film and TV work – this was a testing opportunity to see how the women responded to creating work that was of a high enough quality and standard whilst working to an western deadline expectations.

Working with the Women:

The charity was able to support 6 women in full time in a workshop in Galle, providing them with a fair daily wage, tea and coffee on a daily basis. So while there was no active order these women made small lace hearts and other small motifs that were used by the charity to sell to provide income to support the women, these were sold in the UK.

The conclusions of actually fulfilling the orders correctly proved difficult without someone from the west to be in Sri Lanka to offer support, quality control and generally oversee the project and adequately run and manage the project. It was made apparent that there was not suitable local expertise or fundamental local understanding of what needed to be done to reach the charities wider goals.

When orders for the lace were made they superseded the charity's role in supporting the 6 in-house ladies and the women received ethical trade orders via Power of Hands Limited and The London Film Fashion Centre Limited to allowed for the wider community of lace makers in the community to work as outreach workers on specific projects. These women were sourced through the co-operative.

International Funding

The overall business plan was always connected to receiving international funding from charities aligned to the ethics and beliefs in the project. The business plan enabled western expertise to be on the ground in Sri Lanka as well as a budget to better enable the international marketing and sale of charity goods and promoting the service facility of buyers wishing to place orders.

Unfortunately support for the project failed to deliver the funds needed to adequately put the proper support systems in place to effectively run this project. The budget and business plan was based around gaining support and funding from larger aid organisations, Sri Lankan government and local corporations in the textile business. A large aid agency had made overtures that the project would be supported unfortunately this was not to happen. It was made clear that a project of this nature would not be able to work properly without the funds to support the business plan.

Conclusion

The charity was able to support women for a medium term time frame and for multiple reasons the project was no longer sustainable. Donations from the UK were not enough to keep the project running in the way that we had envisaged as a larger investment had been needed. However the charity supported 6 women for a medium time frame providing them with a regular ethical income.

The charity was also able to provide some support to women by fixing and repairing damage to some women's homes, providing support for eye care and other small projects to help improve the women's lives.

The charity facilitated the co-operative to be created and undertook the assessment of the women, which would be an interesting leaning and development tool for any future projects that may arise in supporting impoverished crafts people to support them and improve their lives.

Examples of the lace can be seen on the website (enter link) so it is clear that the project was able to provide design skills to the women and for them to be able to create lace of a high quality that could be sold to the west.

Without all the support of funding to get a project like this off the ground and wider acknowledgment and involvement from governments and local business it difficult for the project to gain sustainable cash flow projections and ultimately to survive and really fulfil every aspect of what was intended.

POHF is happy to discuss to any benefactors about how they may facilitate this project to once again breathe life and offer a future to the lace makers in Galle.