

CRAFT **HER**

 **LAIDLAW**
FOUNDATION

SWARA
VOICE OF WOMEN

Impact Report CraftHER LiA 2026

Leadership In Action

01 July to
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How to Read This Report

Every year, the Laidlaw Foundation asks us two honest questions. What happened to the scholar, and what happened to the people the scholar worked alongside. This report is built around those two questions, because they are the only two that matter to us as well.

CraftHER exists at the meeting point of two kinds of growth that are usually measured separately. One is the growth of a young leader who is asked, for six weeks, to trade the safety of theory for the discomfort of practice. The other is the growth of a grassroots women's organisation that gains, for six weeks, hands, skills, and attention it could not otherwise afford. This report tries to hold both of those stories honestly, including the parts that were difficult.

Six Laidlaw Foundation scholars spent six weeks in Kerala in the summer of 2026, living and working alongside four grassroots organisations: Forest Post, SEWA Kerala, Archana Women's Centre, and Swara. What follows is the story of what that time actually produced, for the scholars and for the women they worked with.



Acknowledgements

This report would not exist without the trust the Laidlaw Foundation has placed in Swara & CraftHER for three years running now. That trust is not abstract to us. It is the reason six young women had the chance to sit on the floor of a forest production unit peeling shatavari roots, to learn to weave a bamboo mat next to a waterfall, and to fail at something and be allowed to try again.

We are grateful beyond what fits on a page to the craftswomen, families, and organisations across Kerala who opened their workplaces and homes to six strangers from the other side of the world, and who gave their time freely to women who could offer very little in return except effort and attention. Manju of Forest Post, the women of SEWA's Reed Workers Federation, Thresiamma Mathew and the tradeswomen of Archana Women's Centre, and Omana, Maya, and Kanakamma of Swara's tailoring team taught our scholars more in six weeks than most classrooms manage in a year.

To Abi, Alba, Erin, Lorelai, Maria, and Paris: thank you for showing up, for being honest when honesty was uncomfortable, and for doing the actual work.



Program Overview



CraftHER is a six week leadership-in-action program for Laidlaw Foundation scholars, hosted by Swara in Kerala, India. It asks scholars to do something unusual for an undergraduate leadership programme. Instead of studying leadership, they practice it, under real conditions, for the benefit of people who are often overlooked.

In 2026, six scholars, from Oxford, Durham, Imperial, and UCL, spent one week each embedded with four different organisations. Forest Post supports indigenous forest communities. SEWA Kerala is the state chapter of India's largest trade union for informally employed women. Archana Women's Centre trains women in trades like carpentry and masonry that Kerala has traditionally reserved for men. Swara is the slow fashion social enterprise that founded CraftHER itself. Ahead of arriving in Kerala, scholars completed seven online workshops between March and July covering topics such as purpose driven business, public speaking, and cultural preparation. Once on the ground, each week combined a live consulting brief for the host organisation with a self directed personal project that scholars carried, in parallel, across all six weeks.

Six scholars. Six weeks. Four organisations. More than one hundred and fifty hours of direct, on the ground engagement, and more than ninety community members met along the way.

The programme did not go entirely to plan, and that is worth saying plainly rather than glossing over. Kerala's monsoon arrived unexpectedly hard, and scholars were evacuated from their accommodation with a few hours notice. One week tested scholars' physical resilience in ways nobody had planned for. None of that is a footnote to this report. It is part of what made the leadership real rather than simulated, and we have tried to reflect that honestly in the pages that follow.

Program Timeline



At a Glance

6 Scholars engaged

6 Weeks of Immersion

4 Organisation Partners

20+ Knowledge Transfer Workshops

150+ Hours of on-ground Engagement

29 Blogs Written on Laidlaw Scholars Network

90+ Community Members Interacted

4 Mini Consulting Projects delivered

6 Personal Entrepreneurial Projects pitched

12 TED-style talks given

Theory of Change

Kerala's grassroots women's organisations, Forest Post, SEWA, Archana Women's Centre, and Swara, hold real skill and real knowledge, but rarely the marketing capacity, financial planning, or funding networks that would let more of that skill turn into income and reach. Laidlaw Foundation scholars are trained in exactly those skills, but rarely under the constraint, ambiguity, and consequence that real grassroots work involves.

CraftHER's bet is that six weeks of direct, working contact between the two groups can close both gaps at once. Not by making scholars volunteers and organisations grateful recipients, but by giving each organisation a live brief it will actually use, and each scholar a deadline, a client, and stakes she cannot walk away from.

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES	IMPACT
• Scholars • 4 partner organisations • On the ground CraftHER team	• Weekly org placements • Live consulting briefs • Personal projects	• Strategy & content • Fashion collection • Funding pathways	• Scholars lead for real • Orgs gain usable skills, tools & strategy	• Durable capacity for women's enterprises • Empathetic Leaders who listen first

Each week, the team is embedded with a different organisation on a real consulting brief. Alongside it, each scholar carries a self directed personal project across all six weeks, setting her own direction and finishing something with no one else enforcing the deadline. This gives the scholar leadership practice she cannot get anywhere else, and gives the organisation something durable: a skill a staff member keeps using, or a strategic option it never had time to consider.

We are honest about where this can fail. It depends on a brief being genuinely well scoped, on placements being safe and well run, and on young scholars finding a way to function as a team under real pressure. More on all three in *Looking Back*.



The Multiplier Effect

Most funding produces a single, contained return: a grant pays for training, and a fixed number of women receive it. CraftHER's structure compounds in at least three directions at once, from a single six week input.

The first multiplication happens inside the scholar

A financial model built for Archana Women's Centre is not just a document the organisation can use in a grant application. It is also the first financial model a twenty year old has ever built for a real business, under a real deadline, and she carries that competence into every future job and every team she leads. Maria Chow's honest conclusion that she is not yet ready for grassroots work straight out of university is itself a form of this multiplication: a clearer sense of her own path, reached years earlier than it otherwise would have been.

The second multiplication happens inside the organisation

The skill a scholar brings rarely stays contained to the week she is there. When SEWA Livelihood's Nimisha took over her organisation's Instagram midweek and grew it from fifty six views to over four thousand six hundred, she gained the ability to run that account herself, indefinitely. That kind of skill compounds rather than fading the way a one time grant does.

The third multiplication happens across the wider network

A pilot proposal connecting Swara to international fair trade importers is not a guaranteed outcome, but if even one door opens, the capital it brings will likely exceed the cost of the six weeks it took to produce the proposal many times over. The same logic applies to the scholars themselves: a generation of Laidlaw scholars who have seen what modest seed funding can do for a woman with no other access to capital is more likely to direct their own future careers, and eventually their own capital, toward exactly this kind of work.

None of this shows up in a single number, which is why we think a narrative matters more than a statistic here. But we believe six weeks of CraftHER produces value that keeps compounding for years after the scholars have flown home.

What Grew in the Scholars

The themes below were not chosen in advance. They came directly out of what six scholars actually wrote, in weekly reflections, blog posts, and their own exit interviews with us, across six weeks.

Leadership as listening, not directing

Across every organisation visited, when scholars were asked to name the best leader they had encountered that week, they rarely described someone who gave the most confident instructions. They described someone who listened first.

"A leader that listens to all, making decisions based on what the community needs, not personal greed, and above all, kindness, quiet strength, resilience, and the ability to make everyone around you feel valued."

–Lorelai, reflecting on Manju of Forest Post

Leadership under real failure, not staged failure

Case competitions and university societies rarely put a twenty year old in a position where she genuinely cannot deliver and has to hand the work to someone else. CraftHER did. In the programme's final week, a scholar's ambitious fashion brand concept fell apart the night before her presentation, and she chose to present the failure honestly rather than hide it, framing it instead as a starting point that still needed solving.

What Grew in the Scholars

The discipline of unlearning

Several scholars wrote about having to actively dismantle an assumption they had arrived with. One scholar's original personal project idea, built around positioning older craftswomen as feminist role models for younger women, had to be rebuilt from scratch after a conversation at Save the Loom revealed how many young people in Kerala now actively avoid handicraft work, a reality her original framing had not accounted for. Another scholar wrote about generalising, after meeting several women who spoke warmly about self sacrifice for their husbands and children, that this reflected some universal quality of the community, only to have that assumption quietly corrected when she later met a different group of divorced women who spoke just as passionately about independence.

Comfort earned inside real discomfort

The physical and emotional discomfort of six weeks abroad, insects, homesickness, unfamiliar food, disrupted sleep, was not incidental to the programme. Several scholars described a direct link between facing that discomfort and their growth as leaders.

Career and self clarity that could not have come from a classroom

Not every outcome was a confidence boost, and we think that is a strength of the programme rather than a weakness. One scholar concluded, honestly and in real time, that she does not believe she is ready for a career in grassroots social enterprise straight out of university. Another decided, just as clearly, that she wants to build her career around exactly this kind of work. Both conclusions are valuable, and neither could have been reached as quickly anywhere else.

What Grew for the Organisations and the Women They Serve

Informal and undervalued work made visible

SEWA exists because roughly ninety four percent of India's workforce works informally, without contracts or recognition. Reed weavers, palliative care workers, and food cooperative members that scholars worked alongside this year are all part of that informal economy, doing skilled work that rarely receives formal acknowledgement. The content and strategy scholars produced this year gave several of these initiatives a public presence they did not have before.

Real economic security for real women

Chandrika's income from Forest Post supports her own children as well as her younger sister's studies. Omana Chechi's carpentry income put both of her sons through university. A women led hair oil business supported through Archana Women's Centre's revolving fund, built on an eighty year old family recipe, will now be introduced to new customers through a website scholars helped shape. All of them were made a little more visible, and in some cases a little more durable, by the work scholars did this year.

Skill and confidence that outlived the scholars' visit

The most durable outcomes this year were not the documents scholars left behind, but the capabilities certain women now have that they did not have six weeks ago. Nimisha at SEWA Livelihood now runs her organisation's Instagram account herself, at a level of skill she built in a single week.

What Grew for the Organisations and the Women They Serve

Fragile traditions under real pressure

Archana Women's Centre trains women in carpentry that, for reasons of changing preferences, fewer women now choose to practise once trained. Forest Post's own communities described a rising number of dangerous encounters with wildlife, driven in part by tourism disrupting habitats those communities have coexisted with for generations. CraftHER did not solve any of these pressures this year; but it brought six scholars into direct contact with these realities, giving the organisations an opportunity to share their work, challenges and knowledge with a new generation of potential advocates and contributors.



Case Studies

FOREST POST

Chandrika



Chandrika lives in the Anapantham community, one of the tribal communities Forest Post works alongside inside Kerala's forest belt. Her father was killed in an elephant stampede, one of a rising number of violent encounters between elephants and forest communities that Forest Post's staff link directly to tourism and habitat disruption pushing the animals into unfamiliar aggression. It is the kind of loss that could easily define a life, and in a different story it might have.

Instead, when scholars sat with her for two hours peeling shatavari roots during their first day at Forest Post's production unit, what came through, translated patiently by their programme coordinator, was a woman who had built a stable income from her work with Forest Post and now used it to support her own children as well as her younger sister's studies. She also told scholars about an afternoon in the forest with her husband, when they came across a tiger bathing in a river. Her husband did not run. He raised a hand and told the animal, quietly, that they meant it no harm and were only passing through. The tiger settled back down and let them pass.

One scholar wrote that the story stayed with her as a reminder that nature does not ask for dominance, only respect, and that harmony with the world around us is built on the understanding that we are visitors in it rather than owners of it.

Chandrika's story became one of three short films scholars produced for Forest Post's social channels that week, alongside a written feature for the Forest Post website. Both are now permanent assets the organisation can use with donors and customers, a way of showing plainly exactly whose life is supported when someone buys a bottle of Forest Post's hair oil rather than a mass produced alternative.

Case Studies

SEWA KERALA

Nimisha and the SEWA Livelihood Instagram



SEWA, the Self Employed Women's Association, was founded in 1972. Scholars spent their third week living at SEWA's Rural Centre, which turned out to be one of the more physically demanding parts of the programme. The building's design, deliberately unglazed and open to the surrounding forest, meant that scholars shared their dormitory with more insect and reptile life than any of them had planned for.

One of the organisation's initiatives, SEWA Livelihood, runs an Instagram account meant to showcase the women running SEWA's food stalls, retail outlets, and cooperative businesses. Before scholars arrived, the account had drawn fifty six views across the previous thirty days. A SEWA team member named Nimisha worked alongside the scholars that week to learn how to plan content, use hashtags effectively, and cross post between related accounts. By the time scholars handed the account back to SEWA's own team at the end of the week, its thirty day view count had risen to over four thousand six hundred.

The number itself matters less than what it represents. Nimisha did not receive a report telling her what to post. She learned, over five days, how to do the work herself. That is the difference between a deliverable and a capability, and it is the kind of outcome CraftHER is built to produce. Not a document that sits in a folder, but a skill that keeps earning its keep long after the scholars have gone home.

Case Studies

SWARA

Woven TogetHER



The Woven TogetHER collection, produced during the scholars' final organisational week at Swara, belongs to all six scholars and to the tailors who worked alongside them.

Each scholar was asked to design a piece using Swara's traditional hand printed indigo fabric, aimed deliberately at a younger, more fashion forward market than Swara's existing range. What came back from that brief were ten finished garments, each named after a woman who had shaped the scholars' six weeks in Kerala, among them the Asha Top, the Preetha Skirt, the Manju Dress, the Chandrika Dress, and the Omana Skirt.

Turning a hand drawn sketch into a finished, sellable garment meant working with tailors who spoke a different language. With a translator's help, scholars explained proportions, seams, and details. Once the garments existed, scholars styled and photographed the collection and wrote its marketing copy themselves, alongside a separate diagnostic of Swara's existing fit and returns data, identifying which kinds of garments were most likely to come back from a customer and recommending specific changes to reduce that going forward.

The week produced a piece of strategic retail work Swara can apply across its whole product line, delivered by scholars who had to earn a tailor's trust and understanding without a shared language to do it in. That is the same exchange this report has argued for from its opening pages: real leadership, practiced under a real constraint, in service of a real business need, with a woman on the other side of it who had every right to expect competent work rather than good intentions.

The name carries a double meaning scholars chose deliberately. The garments were made by two groups of women working together. And by the time the collection launched, CraftHER's six weeks had woven the scholars' own lives into those of the women across four organisations in Kerala, closely enough that they wanted every one of those women named on a label.

Overall Impact



The overall impact sits in two places.

The first is inside six young women who each had to lead through some version of a genuinely hard moment: illness during a deadline, fear in an unfamiliar environment, a personal project that had to be rebuilt from nothing, an assumption that turned out to be wrong in front of the people it was about. None of that can be manufactured in a classroom, and all of it is the kind of leadership practice that tends to stay with a person long after the specific memory fades.

The second sits inside four organisations and, more specifically, inside individual women within them. Chandrika has a permanent piece of content telling her story to the world. Nimisha has a skill she uses every week to run an account that used to sit nearly dormant. Archana Women's Centre has a fundraising pipeline and a business case for an online shop that did not exist six weeks ago. Swara has a tested route into international markets and a mapped list of funders it did not have time to research on its own.

We do not think either of these outcomes is more important than the other, and we would be suspicious of any version of this programme that treated them as separable. The reason a financial model for AWC is good leadership training for the scholar who built it is precisely that AWC will actually use it. The reason AWC gets a usable financial model at all is precisely that a twenty year old was made to treat the work as seriously as her own future depended on it, because in a real sense, it does.

Looking Back

Reflection is central to CraftHER's spirit of learning. We acknowledge what worked especially well in shaping meaningful experiences for scholars and partners, while also identifying areas that call for refinement. Both have shaped our understanding, giving us clarity on how to grow and deepen the programme in years to come.

What Worked Well

- **Structure & Pacing:** A different organisation and brief each week kept scholars engaged without the programme ever feeling repetitive.
- **Responsive Team:** Programme staff acted quickly on feedback, including evacuating scholars within hours during flooding.
- **Rotating Leadership:** Every scholar led a team and a client relationship at least once, not just the most confident ones.
- **Strategic Work:** Scholars who worked on financial models or funding proposals rated these as the most valuable part of the programme.

Areas to Improve

- **Accommodation Standards:** Week 3's rural housing did not meet the standard scholars expected.
 - **Solution:** Under review for 2027.
- **Brief Clarity:** The word consulting oversold how strategic the work actually was, versus content and social media.
 - Every 2027 brief will pair strategic work with tangible outputs.
- **Rest & Pacing:** Scholars asked for more protected time and earlier notice of schedule changes.
 - Weekends stay protected, with 24 hours' minimum notice for any change.
- **Skill Distribution:** Higher level work like financial modelling was not evenly distributed across scholars.
 - **Solution:** Group leaders will be briefed to rotate financial and strategic work across the team.



Conclusion

CraftHER's 2026 program reaffirmed its alignment with the Laidlaw Foundation's values of ethical leadership, women's empowerment, and global citizenship.

CraftHER 2026 asked six young women to stop studying leadership and start practicing it, in a place, and among people, who had every right to expect real work rather than good intentions. We think the evidence in this report shows that most of them did exactly that, not by arriving as finished leaders, but by being willing to be changed by what they saw, corrected by the people they met, and tested by circumstances nobody had planned for.

We think the same six weeks also left something meaningful behind in Kerala: content, strategy, funding pathways, and in at least a few cases, a skill that a specific woman will keep using for years. We are proud of both halves of that outcome, and we do not think CraftHER would be worth running if it only achieved one.



Next Steps



Looking toward 2027, four things we're committing to:

We will inspect Week 3's rural placement in person and relocate it if needed. The accommodation standard we owe scholars is not negotiable.

We will make sure every Mini Consulting Project brief includes real strategic work, alongside tangible outputs like content that organisations can use right away.

We will protect personal time in the daily and weekly schedule. Six weeks of close quarters living asks a lot of six young women, and rest is part of what makes good leadership possible, not a distraction from it.

And we will keep our 2024, 2025, and 2026 scholars involved in CraftHER, as speakers at future Laidlaw Foundation gatherings and mentors to the scholars who follow them. Several are already active in our alumni reunions, which is the clearest sign this programme is working.

Appendix

I. Program Schedule Summary

The six-week program combined immersive field visits, skill-building sessions, and reflective spaces. The schedule balanced structured learning with hands-on engagement, offering scholars a holistic journey through craft, culture, and leadership. Here's the program schedule summary, capturing key moments week by week.

29	30 Arrival COCHIN	01 Induction COCHIN	02 Upskilling workshops COCHIN	03 Upskilling workshops COCHIN	04 FREE day	05 Travel COCHIN - CHALAKKUDY
06 Production unit FORESTPOST CHALAKKUDY	07 Craft Connection ATHIRAPPILLY	08 Production unit CHALAKKUDY	09 Hair oil unit visit CHALAKKUDY	10 Presentations CHALAKKUDY	11 FREE day	12 Travel CHALAKKUDY - TRIVANDRUM
13 Orientation SEWA TRIVANDRUM	14 Reed cluster TRIVANDRUM	15 Community Visits TRIVANDRUM	16 Rural Centre TRIVANDRUM	17 Presentations TRIVANDRUM	18 FREE day	19 Travel TRIVANDRUM- KOTTAYAM
20 Orientation AWC KOTTAYAM	21 Field Visit KOTTAYAM	22 Field Visit KOTTAYAM	23 Field Visit KOTTAYAM	24 Presentations KOTTAYAM	25 Travel to Vagamon	26 Travel back from Vagamon
27 Welcome Swara KOTTAYAM	28 Fabric sourcing KOTTAYAM	29 Weaving unit MULANTHURUTHY	30 Design & Tailoring KOTTAYAM	31 Shoot & Present KOTTAYAM	01 FREE day	02 FREE day
03 Personal Project	04 Personal Project	05 Personal Project	06 Personal Project Presentations & Farewell	07 FREE day	08 Flying back	09

	Induction		Arrival & Departure
	With Organisations		Personal Project
	FREE days		Personal Project Presentations & Farewell
	Travel days		

II. List of Core Partners

FOREST POST

Forest Post is a grassroots collective that collaborates with rural and forest-based communities to build sustainable livelihoods while preserving traditional knowledge and crafts with a community-first approach.

[Forest Post](#)

📷 [forestpost](#)

SEWA

SEWA Kerala, or the Self Employed Women's Association in Kerala, is a member-based organization that aims to empower women in the informal sector. SEWA Kerala is a federation of various member-based organizations.

[SEWA](#)

📷 [SEWA Kerala](#)

AWC

Archana Women's Centre (AWC) empowers women through small collectives that foster economic selfreliance, social equality, and gender justice by providing the skills and solidarity to transform their lives and communities.

[AWC](#)

📷 [archanajjpt](#)

SWARA

SWARA is a women-led e-commerce platform for contemporary apparel that blends modern design with traditional fabric printing and dyeing. By partnering with skilled women in Dungarpur, Rajasthan, SWARA creates sustainable fashion that values dignity, care, and community while making slow fashion accessible to a wider audience.

[Swara](#)

📷 [swaravow](#)



Thank you, Laidlaw Foundation, for
your trust, generosity, and support.
It has made CraftHER possible, and
with it, real growth for our scholars
and real change for the women
and organisations we work
alongside.

We're excited to keep building this
together.

With gratitude,
Team CraftHER



SWARA
VOICE OF WOMEN