

Name:	Megan Shaw
Faculty:	Social Sciences
Email address:	Ss22m2s@leeds.ac.uk
Title of LIA Project:	CraftHer



CraftHER by SWARA – Leadership in Action 2024
Kerala, India

When I was accepted into the CraftHER programme for my 6-week Leadership in Action, I was not completely sure what I was getting myself into. As the departure date drew closer and closer and I found out more and more about what this experience would entail, so many thoughts and emotions bubbled up, including an interesting mixture of nerves and excitement.

Getting to meet the amazing women I would be working with completely eased my nerves, as they were (and are!) so friendly, genuine and supportive. Grace, Lucia, Ellie, Lily, Yoshino, who are the other scholars, and Asha and Preetha, the project's founder and facilitator, remain some of the most amazing, inspiring women I have met. They taught me so much, and I feel a more confident and determined person after meeting and working with them all.

CraftHER is a project ran by the ethical, women-led clothing brand SWARA, focusing on amplifying women's voices and rights, alongside learning from, and working with the craft sector. Throughout the project, we worked with several organisations who focused on supporting women into employment, uplifting the craft sector, or fighting for women's rights in Kerala and beyond.

Save the Loom

In the first few days of the project, we had induction sessions. This was vital in gaining an introduction into the craft sector and planning what we wanted to get out of the project. I found it daunting at first, as I was eager to learn but did not have much experience in entrepreneurship or building a brand and 6 weeks away from home began to feel like a long time. What helped was the support from Asha and Preetha and the rest of the scholars, as I had so much to learn from everyone and the induction sessions allowed me to ask any questions I had.

The first collaboration was with Save the Loom, an organisation aiming to preserve the hand looming sector. Founded in 2018 after floods devastated communities that relied heavily upon hand looms for their livelihoods, Save the Loom worked to rebuild and repair the



damaged looms, generating support from across India and the globe. Now with a store named One Zero Eight that allows customers to buy stylish handcrafted products, Save the Loom pushes to reinstate dignity and respect for the hand loom industry, which is largely made up of women artisans.



Collaborating with Save the Loom was such an eye-opening, inspiring few days. I was extremely grateful to be able to visit the clusters of women artisans, who weave using the repaired hand looms. We had the opportunity to speak with the weavers and learn from them the process of weaving, but more importantly, their stories of how they became weavers and how they feel about their craft. There are so many more people that

work on one piece of clothing than I could have imagined- dyers, weavers, designers. Hand looming is not respected as a craft and the women we met saw their work as only work, not as a dignified craft, and did not wish for their children to follow in their footsteps, as the pay is low and the work is difficult. What struck me was the women's resilience and openness to share with us and I learned how best to communicate through a translator but also how body language, tone of voice and expression are just as important and are beautiful ways of communicating. I would love society to value these women and for the women to have pride in their work and themselves.

Before working with each organisation, they were asked what they would like our support with, to ensure our work was focused on what the organisation needed, rather than what we thought they needed. Save the Loom asked for our help with social media to spread their story to more people. We worked to come up with a list of recommendations, including using Instagram stories for more engagement. I worked on writing an article of our experience with the organisation, describing the weaving workshops and how it felt to speak with the women artisans. Since this was our first piece of work together and we had a brief time to complete it, I quickly learned the importance of pulling together as a team, communicating strengths and areas I needed support on. These tasks also tested my public speaking, as I had to present what I had completed to Save the



Loom, with little rehearsal. Although feeling nervous due to lack of practice, I clearly and confidently explained my output and actually enjoyed showcasing my work. This put me in good stead for the several other presentations we completed, where I implemented what I had learned with Save the Loom.

Collaborating with Save the Loom made me really aware of how important organisations such as this are in amplifying women's voices and ensuring women's independence, while also restoring dignity to the craft so the world sees the creativity, beauty and hard work that goes into handwoven clothes.

SEWA

We arrived to our next location, Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala, by train, boasting stunning views of the backwaters.

This week, our main focus was to work with the Kerala branch of the all-female trade union SEWA. The branch, founded in 1983, has over 35,000 members and focuses its efforts on pushing change for women members working in the informal sector. This sector includes domestic workers, fish workers, reed and bamboo weavers, street vendors and craftswomen, all of whom before becoming members of SEWA were not formally organised so could not have their voices heard or push for change. Their leadership structure, from the grassroots upwards, means that any member can have their voice heard. The work of SEWA is invaluable to these communities, especially as all leadership and members are women, so they understand women's challenges, ensuring women recognise their labour as work.



We had the opportunity to work with some of SEWA's key members, including Nalini Nayak, one of SEWA Kerala's founders. Her decades of extensive work in

forming a feminist perspective on fish workers and shaping SEWA into the force of nature that it is today means that she is one of the most knowledgeable, inspiring women I have ever met and her perspective on patriarchy as intertwined with capitalism transformed my outlook on feminism.



The highlights of the week for me were visiting units of reed weavers and pottery workers. The reed weavers had such quick skill in weaving baskets and fans in intricate patterns and I immediately could see the impact of earning an independent livelihood and community amongst the women, who weave together. What struck me was their joy

and pride in their work and they were so kind and eager in teaching us how to weave a simple pattern. Even though we do not speak the same language, their warmth, vibrant spirits and humour shone through. I am so grateful for the women in sharing their stories, many of whom learned the skill from family and continued to weave after marriage and unlike the fabric weavers, they really took pride in their work. They were kind enough to cook us the most delicious traditional lunch, which I ate with my hands. I felt so grateful and joyful to embrace their cuisine and culture and I think about that meal on a daily basis.

We also had the chance to see how the pottery pieces are made. On a sweltering, hot day, we were shown in the pottery workshops how they use the potters wheel and I volunteered to give it a try! I tried to say yes to as many things as possible on this trip. It was difficult but so much fun to make it into a shape with the help of potter Vijay. We also met Suma, who proudly told us that her daughter works in craft, making souvenirs out of pottery. Her story shows how crafts can be updated and reinvigorated to continue with the next generation.

After much discussion and listening to their concerns, we agreed that we would set up an Instagram account for SEWA Kerala. This was a big achievement as they were resistant at first, because they had reached so many women without it, but as they wanted to reach a younger audience, they agreed if we set one up for them. I created a brochure and product guide for their reed products, which was a huge learning experience as these would be sent to businesses who we thought should carry these products. I developed skills in marketing, storytelling and pricing and really did enjoy being creative and collaborating on the final

product, before presenting it to the team! Working with women from SEWA to refine the brochure and product guide enabled me to cross-culturally communicate, constantly learning from them and tailoring my design so it would be useful for them. I have become more confident in putting my ideas forward and actively taking on feedback.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the amazing women working at our accommodation, the SEWA Rural Centre. From cooking delicious, home cooked meals to making paper in their recycled paper making unit, they were always so warm and there was always laughter with them, especially at mealtimes. They shared with us their achievements with SEWA, such as protesting every evening for years against truckloads of rubbish being dumped next to the village, stubbornly laying on the ground and refusing to be moved! The centre is eco-friendly, surrounded by nature and was so peaceful, which made me rethink my impact on the environment and how feminism, capitalism and environmentalism are intertwined. Their resilience and tirelessness in campaigning and protesting is truly inspiring and their commitment to feminism made me want to implement these values into my life.



SWARA

Founded by social entrepreneur Asha Scaria Vettor in 2018 at only 22 years old, the brand provides employment opportunities for rural women in tailoring and designing clothes. It was incredible to work with a brand that not only creates such high quality, beautiful apparel, but one with a continued social impact. Asha recognised that rural women lacked supported opportunities for employment, so made that change and founded SWARA. I completely admire her self-belief and ability to pursue her goals. We were welcomed into the team with open arms. It was incredible to be in a room filled with women from different walks of life, sharing stories and being able to relate to one another.

The women we met in the tailoring unit, completely set up and ran by women, are such powerhouses! They are driven, patient, incredible at what they do and so open to sharing their stories with us. I felt so inspired by their hard work and independence in a climate where there are endless barriers to women's employment and financial independence. Discussions around marriage were very eye-opening, as in Keralan culture, getting married young and having to rely on the husband financially is common. It was inspiring to see these women of all ages challenging these norms and we were encouraged by all to become financially independent and provide for ourselves, as many were only recently gaining this. I reflected on how privileged I am to have choices and freedom to carve out my life, something that I previously took for granted, but am now very conscious of when presented with opportunities.



We spent the week learning the process from design to a completed product of a fashion collection. This proved to be quite the challenge for me, as I have no experience in this area, let alone ever thinking of myself as doing anything with fashion. However, this proved to be such a fun experience in learning new skills in design, communicating with tailors and perseverance.

Although I had done a rough drawing of my design, I naively assumed the tailors would immediately grasp my design and begin to create it. However, with a language barrier and no experience in communicating a design, I had to be patient and quickly adapt my communication style, using reference images and clearer sentences to successfully get my idea of a wrap skirt across. I am so grateful to the tailors for being patient and persevering with our designs, as everyone's was crafted so beautifully and it was such an amazing opportunity to be creative. Seeing what goes into making one piece of clothing will certainly make me think about who has made my clothes and how I shop in the future. I felt so energised and uplifted after working with Asha, as she is such a role model for young women. For me, having someone as a guide and mentor, who nurtures and supports, is vital in developing leadership qualities. I am so grateful that Asha and Preetha were able to show me what a driven, compassionate leader looks like.

Archana Women's Centre

Archana Women's Centre began as a project to increase women's skills, with the aim to become as financially independent as possible. In 1989, Miss Thressiamma found through speaking to women construction 'helpers' found that they were being paid half of what the men 'helpers' were being paid for the same job. Furthermore, all of the skilled construction workers were men and women were not encouraged to become skilled. They accepted being paid 25 rupees, compared to the men's 50 rupees a day, because other traditionally female work, such as cooking, paid much less than that. These women were seen as double deviants, as they had a job and were working alongside men, considered to be 'enjoying' men's company too much. The women did not even wish to become skilled, as they would become further excluded from society. After 8 months of building trust, the women decided to pursue the free training, offered alongside a stipend so they could still provide for their families.

12 women masons were trained, some of the first women to be trained in this skill in India! And so the Jeevapoorna Women Mason's Society was born, later in 2004 becoming Archana Women's Centre.

Working in the centre, almost entirely built and designed by women, I could feel



the history and stories pouring out of the walls. Each and every element was so beautifully crafted, from the bamboo technology to the painted walls to the immense statue outside the building. Every single woman we encountered across the week was so driven, decisive and dedicated to the cause of women empowerment and challenging norms and stereotypes. It was incredible to hear stories of women riding scooters to work and starting their own enterprises, things that I may have before taken for granted that are accessible to me. But these women are continually smashing cultural and economic barriers.

Throughout the week, we visited some of Archana's enterprises: rural mart, e-mithram centre, carpentry workshop, mill, bakery, fish farm, beauty parlour and home crafting point. What stood out to me at each location was each woman's pride in themselves and their enterprise, which was so joyful and inspiring to see.

Many of the women had completed education until age 16 or 18, with lots having degrees in areas such as economics and social work. However, it is custom for women to stop working or studying after marriage, although becoming increasingly less common. Therefore now, the women are proud and appreciative to become skilled and are grateful for the opportunity of the job they have.



I could go on for days about each woman, their stories and aspirations, as they deserve to be shared with the world. One woman who particularly had an impact on me was Omana, a home-crafter who at 72 is still creating and selling her own products. She designed a folder made of cardboard and fabric, woven together using her skills in stitching and basket weaving and was so kind in welcoming us into her home. Her advice to us was to be brave and courageous, as she has been, and

she provided a learning curve for me, that success can come at any age.

At the end of the week, we sat down with ten members of the Archana team to present our output for them. I had taken many photos and videos throughout the visits to the different enterprises in order for them to be used on their social media pages, alongside information and notes that could be collected together into social media post captions and marketing materials. I created two flyers to be handed out at Archana's groups and to the public for their e-Mithram centre (for government documents and printing services) and rural spices mart, with Ellie. I loved getting to be creative while giving something back to the women and the organisation for their time and energy they spent with us. Detailed recommendations, a social media bank of posts and captions and a post detailing their enterprises' addresses was also created by our wonderful CraftHER team. This reflects the impact of my experience overall, which to me



was about creating and documenting the incredible work these organisations do, that they may not have time for.

The women we met and worked with this week are only a fraction of the women supported by Archana and it fills me with hope and happiness that so many women are accessing their potential. Archana's approach to women employment differs from other organisations we worked with, as they promote non-traditional jobs for women and extensive training, with a more individual approach. It was so interesting to be able to see how feminism is interpreted and applied across organisations and how this shifted my own perspective of feminism, which I have completely welcomed.

Forest Post

As the last organisation we worked with, I was feeling quite tired and unsure of how our one day experience with Forest Post would unravel. Forest Post, founded by Manju, promotes and utilises the skills of tribal communities, while giving them a sustainable, fair wage. These communities create products using their specific knowledge of the natural environment, such as beeswax lip balm, woven mats and seed necklaces, preserving their cultural heritage.



The tribal women had travelled over five hours to meet us, hiking in the night, before a two hour bus journey. We were not allowed to enter their space in the forest, due to being tourists, and their willingness to meet us after that long journey put things into perspective for me. Hearing about their lives, that have core elements of community and sustainability, made me realise how much my corner of the world revolves around consumerism. They did not need to 'become more sustainable', as their practices already are, living off the forest and connecting to nature.

They were so open to us asking questions and they chatted so candidly, while showing us how they weave bamboo mats. I had learned throughout the experience how to best ask questions without leading or alluding to anything, so I could put this into practice. It felt almost magical, the way they spoke about the

forest. I continue to be filled with immense gratitude to these women and Manju, for letting us catch a glimpse of a more content and environment-focused way of living.

Each of our team were given a leadership project, to further develop our skills. I became in charge of our morning and evening huddles, aiming to set our daily intentions and reflect on the day at the end. This felt really daunting at first, as these huddles were so important in allowing us to share any worries or discover improvements and feel proud of what was achieved. I knew I had become more self-assured throughout the experience and so led the huddles in this way. One particularly moving huddle was after working with Forest Post and Manju was invited to join. Asking the question 'What are you proud of yourself for?' created some beautiful discussions and I feel was a pivotal moment for me to realise how far I had come. Asking that question in a group of women further made the moment poignant, as too often, women are not encouraged to congratulate themselves or feel pride within themselves.



Overall, my CraftHER experience was the most incredible learning experience of my life. Directly seeing the impact that these organisations had on women empowerment and how important they are in making women visible and encouraging women to recognise their own talents has completely inspired me. I know my future career will centre around these issues and I would love to be able to create these spaces for women in the UK, in whatever form this may be. Advocating for women's rights in social policy will certainly shape my career path, whether that be working with the government or for a charity. The organisations taught me so much about our collective social responsibility and courageous leadership.

I faced challenges both personally and professionally and these have embedded resilience and perseverance firmly within my character. I carry with me empathy, respect and the uplifting of others into my leadership style and personal life, forged from witnessing this in the incredible women I met. I hope I will take forward their kind and generous spirit, imparting this on people I will meet and collaborate with. This journey has made me more committed to ethical and

sustainable practices and I know the lessons I have learned and the people I have met will stay with me for life.

