



CraftHER

Leadership-in-Action Reflections

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2023 Cohort

Dear Future Me,

I can't wait to experience all the amazing things you have.

As you embark on this journey, I hope that you have immersed yourself fully in this opportunity. I envision you engaging deeply with an inspiring group of women, each bringing their own stories, strengths, and wisdom. May you grow into a better, more empathetic, and knowledgeable version of yourself through these interactions.

I hope this experience provides you with a unique perspective on the importance of social responsibility and ethical business practices and social responsibility. I hope that it has ignited your passion to create a positive impact in the world and will give you the skills and knowledge to become an advocate for others in every aspect of your life.

I hope you will have had the chance to learn new skills and insights from your peers and the amazing women you are working with. There is so much to learn and I hope that you make the most of the people around you.

Finally, I hope that you have pushed yourself to meet and connect with people outside of your existing network. I want to look back on my experience having a multitude of new connections and experiences to guide me in my future.

Yours,

Grace

Timeline

Week One – Save the Loom

Week Two – SEWA Kerala

Week Three – Swara

Week Four – Archana

Week Four / Five – Personal Project

Week Six – Forest Post

Introducing CraftHER

Six months ago, I made the decision to sign up to the CraftHER program in Kerala. CraftHER aims to amplify the voices of female artisans while championing ethical fashion and traditional craft. On a more day-to-day basis it involves working with organisations working in these areas to learn from them and offer to help with certain areas of their business.

When I was first sent an email about the central LiA projects, I was sat in a restaurant for purely Keralan cuisine in Leeds. I also always loved fashion so that aspect came as a brilliant surprise. I couldn't quite believe it when I read the description of the project. The CraftHER program immediately had my heart (and stomach).

Before coming, I didn't quite know what to expect. But, as we began our induction and found out more about the program and what we would be doing, it all started to piece together. We were to be taken on a completely transformational journey, working and learning from a diverse range of people and organisations while developing our leadership skills and attributes. And this would start with a yoga session in the morning.



As someone who struggles to wake up for a 9am lecture, 7am yoga was a painful start. Stretching muscles that had never been used before and channelling my breathing through each nostril (with my deviated septum) proved to be a struggle but one week later I surprised myself with starting my non-yoga days with a sun salutation. I can't say that I've quite gotten used to the early start but I am feeling more in touch with my inner yogi.

I've continued to practice yoga, and it has become a vital part of my morning routine. It helps ground me and brings a sense of calm, allowing me to approach the day's tasks with a clear, focused mindset. During the program, it was especially helpful in easing my nerves, most impactfully before starting our work with the first organisation...

Save the Loom



Save The Loom aims to preserve traditional weaving practices. It was initially founded in response to the 2018 floods in Kerala which devastated much of the state and disproportionately affected the community of handlooms in Chendamangalam. Save the Loom initially started as an initiative to support weavers impacted by floods but its founder, Ramesh (pictured above), recognised that many weavers did not go back to this profession. This underscores a wider decline in the workforce of weavers. Save the Loom seeks to continue this tradition.

During our time at Save the Loom, we learnt about the rich history and context of Kerala's craft sector. Our journey included tours of several weaving workshops, providing an eye-opening experience which contextualised the issues and challenges faced by this industry. This experience not only deepened our understanding but also inspired me to become a more conscious consumer.

At the end of our project, we were tasked with producing a document for recommendations to improve Save the Loom's marketing and outreach. As our first project, we were all rather apprehensive about what we would be able to produce but managed to rally our efforts together to produce a comprehensive social media plan with example images and recommendations for future content.

This process helped me confront my inner perfectionist, which typically wouldn't allow me to leave a task unfinished. At Save the Loom, however, we had very limited time to produce a report, so we had to complete it to the best of our abilities and then present it. This experience taught me that it's possible to produce valuable work even when it isn't meticulously refined. It also reinforced the importance of perseverance, even when time feels short or you doubt the quality of your work. At the end of the day, something is always better than nothing.

SEWA Kerala

The start of our project with SEWA marked a significant shift in our program as we moved to Kerala's capital, Thiruvananthapuram. We stayed at SEWA's rural centre in

the mountains which set the scene for the spiritual and educational journey we would embark on with this organisation.

SEWA, the Self Employed Women's Association, has a deep-rooted history dating back to 1972 when it was founded by Ela Bhatt. She recognised that a large portion of women in India were working in informal, unorganised sectors, often without job security, benefits, or any formal recognition for their labour.

With over 92% of India's workforce currently in the informal sector, SEWA's mission remains ever relevant. The organisation was established as a trade union, giving these women a platform where their voices could be heard and their concerns addressed. SEWA's impact has been enormous—it now has 3.1 million members across 23 Indian states, including 35,000 women in Kerala alone. It has created an extensive network, helping women gain access to essential services like healthcare, childcare, insurance, legal aid, and financial services, while also providing training and income opportunities. SEWA plays a crucial role in preserving the rich craft traditions of India, creating sustainable livelihoods for women across various sectors.

Our project with SEWA was focused on exploring three different craft sectors—reed weaving, paper making, and pottery. Each of these crafts offered unique insights into the skills and dedication of the women involved. However, my biggest takeaway wasn't just about the crafts themselves, but rather the immense dedication of the SEWA women who have invested their time and energy into supporting others in the informal sector. I witnessed an incredible sense of sisterhood, where the organisers - many of whom work on a purely voluntary basis - run the organisation driven by passion and an unwavering commitment to feminism.



This experience has inspired me to rethink my own career path. I've never encountered such selflessness before, where helping others is not just a job, but a way of life. The level of commitment and care these women demonstrate has left a profound mark on me. I find myself wanting to follow in their footsteps, to channel my own career toward something that creates a lasting impact, much like SEWA has done for millions of women.

Nalini Nayak, SEWA Kerala's founder, was particularly inspiring. She has a remarkable history, having been at the forefront of the student revolution in the 1960s. Spending just a few days with her caused me to reevaluate not just my career goals, but my entire outlook on life. The way she speaks, her tireless activism, and her influence on the women around her were truly transformative for me. She

made me reconsider how I interact with the world and the kind of impact I want to leave behind.

Overall, working with SEWA was an absolute joy. I feel incredibly lucky to have met such an extraordinary group of women, each of whom embodies the spirit of resilience, sisterhood, and empowerment. Their work is a testament to the power of community and the incredible things that can be achieved when women come together to uplift each other.

Swara



On week three of the CraftHER program, we had the opportunity to work with Swara, an ethical clothing company dedicated to amplifying the voices of rural artisans and providing them with sustainable income opportunities. Interestingly, Swara is also the organisation that curated the CraftHER program, so there had been a big build-up to our time there. I had many expectations, but the experience far exceeded them.

Swara's founder, Asha Scaria Vettoor, launched the brand after her transformative journey through the Gandhi Fellowship program. During her time in rural Rajasthan, Asha was sent to help improve the education system in a local school. While

there, she was struck by the spirit of the community and the immense potential of the women who lived there. She realized that these women had a great capacity to work, but lacked access to meaningful opportunities. This insight compelled her to make a change. Asha saw the potential in the traditional indigo dyeing craft that was local to Rajasthan and envisioned its use in creating sustainable, ethical clothing. At the age of 22, the same age I am now, she took the leap and founded Swara—a brand that now creates clothing for young, conscious buyers who care about the ethics behind what they wear.

Since then, Swara has achieved incredible success, gaining over 30,000 followers on Instagram, receiving numerous accolades, and even being endorsed by influencers like Priyanka Chopra. Hearing about Asha's story and her journey left me feeling a bit intimidated, to be honest. She had launched Swara at 22, and in just a few years, built it into a thriving, impactful company. I couldn't help but reflect on my own journey, wondering if I could ever achieve something so significant at this stage in my life. My mind was filled with preconceptions and self-doubt, but at the same time, I was deeply inspired by what she had done.

When we finally arrived at Swara, we were welcomed with open arms. The warmth and sincerity of the team made the experience feel personal and connected. Meeting the women artisans who worked there was a humbling experience. Many of them had studied in fields similar to mine, but due to societal expectations, they were forced to leave their education behind to get married. The differences between their lives and mine were striking. It really hit me when one of them asked if I was married, as if that was the inevitable next step in their eyes.

I couldn't help but reflect on how different my circumstances are. I have the freedom to pursue my education, career, and passions without the same societal pressures they face. I was left in awe, not only by the strength of these women but also by the opportunities I've been given. I am amazed by the lives of the women at Swara, their resilience, and the transformative impact of Asha's vision. But more than anything, I am amazed at my own circumstances and the privileges that allow me to carve my own path freely.

Archana

Archana Women's Centre (AWC) was one of the most inspiring parts of our journey. Archana echoed the ethos of SEWA but with a distinct focus on the entrepreneurial empowerment of women. This is done through skills development and investment into women-run ventures. Through doing so, Archana provides its members the tools to advance gender equality in their personal and professional spheres.

Unlike other organisations we encountered, Archana was entirely run by women, from top to bottom. This stood in stark contrast to some of the other organisations we encountered in Kerala, where women often worked under the supervision of men. At Archana, women were fully empowered to take on leadership roles in their ventures, whether it was in rural centres, millet marts, coir-making, or even fish farming. This all-women leadership model was a profound departure from what we had seen elsewhere and reinforced the centre's commitment to fostering equality at all levels.

Our project at Archana involved producing a social media content catalogue to help them showcase their incredible work online and attract more women to join their initiatives. The experience opened my eyes to how these women, despite facing



significant societal and personal adversity, managed to push back against the norms and excel in fields traditionally reserved for men.

The entrepreneurial spirit of the women at Archana left a deep mark on me. Their courage and resilience has inspired me to pursue my own enterprising ventures, reminding me that with determination, it's possible to overcome even the most deeply entrenched societal barriers.

Personal Project



After working with Archana, we returned to Swara, where the focus shifted more towards personal development. Over the past few weeks, alongside my work with the organisations, I had been pursuing my long-standing dream of setting up a fashion company. In every spare moment, I was visiting fabric shops, sketching designs, communicating with tailors, reviewing samples, and calculating costs. It was the first time I'd had the freedom to explore something entrepreneurial, and I poured my heart and soul into it.

Unfortunately, I hit a major roadblock when the fabric I wanted for my collection ran out, and the shop couldn't confirm if it would be restocked. Completely devastated, I scrambled for solutions and even spoke with the shop owner about ordering the fabric in bulk to be shipped to the tailor. But despite all my efforts, the designs didn't turn out as I'd envisioned, and I couldn't justify investing more of my own money, especially since I wouldn't be able to oversee operations once I returned to the UK.

This experience taught me an incredibly valuable lesson: sometimes it's okay to let go. At first, I felt like I'd failed and that everything was falling apart. But I worked through those feelings and realised this wasn't a defeat, but an opportunity for growth. Instead of viewing it as failure, I chose to see it as a learning experience that will ultimately help me in future endeavours.

Even more importantly it helped me to realise that I didn't want to open up a fashion company. Actually setting it up made me realise how unprofitable it is to run without cheap labour. Even with the tailors being paid a healthy wage in Kerala but a fraction of the minimum wage in the UK, it would have generated a very small profit. It is something I have always been aware of but it was different understanding it from a

manufacturers perspective. The whole thing put me off the industry and had since then made me a more conscious consumer. Seeing the lives of people who are affected by these schemes to produce fast fashion was truly abhorrent and I am so glad to have distanced myself from that industry.

Forest Post

Forest Post was the perfect conclusion to our program, embodying the essence of everything we had worked on. Founded by Manju, an entomologist who studied insects in forests, the initiative was born out of her interactions with tribal communities who knew the landscape intimately. Over time, she saw the economic struggles they faced and wanted to help them earn a sustainable wage, leading to the creation of Forest Post. The organisation now sells traditional and forest-based products made by these communities, providing them with income while preserving their cultural heritage.

All throughout the programme we had heard bits and pieced about Forest Post and we were excited to meet the women involved. But by this stage of the program, we were all feeling pretty exhausted, and the long journey into Kerala didn't help our energy levels. When we finally arrived at the meeting point, I was feeling exhausted and demotivated. We made our introductions and began to hear more about the stories of the women involved in Forest Post.

As we began our conversations, we quickly found out that they had trekked five hours to meet us. Waking up at the crack of dawn, they had walked from their tribal community to the edge of the forest where they then had to take a two hour bus to our meeting place. As we were tourists, we weren't allowed to visit their community, so they had come to meet us, making the effort all the more significant.

I was overwhelmed with gratitude, especially when I reflected on how tired I had been feeling. It put everything into perspective. This experience filled me with overwhelming gratitude and perspective. It wasn't just about the products or the work we were there to discuss, but the immense kindness and generosity these women



had shown us. At each organisation we had been treated with such kindness and respect. Since then, this has pushed me to be more empathetic, patient, and open-hearted. The respect and kindness I was shown throughout the journey are values which I now endeavour to bring into my everyday life, making me not only a better leader but, I hope, a better person.

In conclusion, my CraftHER journey has been one of profound learning and self-discovery. Each experience, from the early days of 7am yoga sessions to the deep connections forged with remarkable women across multiple organisations, has reshaped my understanding of leadership, community, and social responsibility. The challenges I faced, both personally and professionally, have taught me resilience, the value of imperfection, and the importance of embracing failure as a stepping stone to growth.

Above all, this journey has solidified my commitment to ethical practices and creating positive change in the world. Whether through my future career or personal life, I carry with me the lessons of empathy, respect, and empowerment that these incredible women have imparted. As I move forward, I hope to continue fostering the spirit of collaboration, support, and kindness that I witnessed and experienced firsthand. This journey has not only made me a better leader but also a more conscious, empathetic individual, ready to advocate for and uplift others.