



Personal Leadership-in-Action Report: *CraftHER by Swara*

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Photographs by Durgambika P Varma

Introduction to CraftHER 2025

As a scholar in the CraftHER cohort 2025, I spent six weeks in rural Kerala working with four women's organisations, spending a week getting to know the structure and ethos of each company and meeting some of its members. At the end of the week, we worked as a group on different aspects of the company and compiled actionable advice in a presentation and document, which we gave to senior members of the organisation. We travelled around the state, staying in various areas, such as Thiruvananthapuram and Cochin, which allowed us to learn a lot about different areas and lifestyles in Kerala. The four organisations we spent time with:

- 1. Forest Post:** an organisation that employs tribal women to produce household products and toiletries such as soap, balms, honeys, and bamboo weaves.
- 2. The Self-Employed Women's Association Kerala:** a Keralan women's entrepreneurial collective founded by Nalini Nayak.
- 3. Archana Women's Centre:** a women's collective that gives its members vocational training in fields such as bricklaying and welding.
- 4. Swara Voice of Women:** an organisation that employs women to produce sustainable fashion products.

CraftHER's SDGs

The project addressed SDGs 5, 1, and 8. We supported women's organisations which work to financially empower women through business support and vocational training. They educate women on their employment rights. A further SDG which was central was SDG 12, responsible consumption and production, as many of the organisations, such as Forest Post and Swara, used sustainable and eco-friendly production methods for their products.



Challenges Faced

The main aim of CraftHER was to encourage the women's organisations we worked with to progress and strengthen by sharing our observations in actionable advice; we applied our knowledge and external perspectives to give sustainable, long-term recommendations. This was challenging because it required considering multiple aspects of the companies and utilising a wide range of skills through observation and analysis.

Another challenge was communication. The project required us to communicate with the organisations to understand their internal structure, outputs, and core values; this involved carefully planning questions and topics to discuss with them. And meeting different women who were involved in them, learning more about their roles. The consulting presentations needed to be informative and clear to ensure that they had the best impact.

Another challenge which I faced as a CraftHER scholar was the weekly consulting presentations given to the organisations we worked with. In writing my script, I had to ensure my research was clear and understandable for the presentation. I also had to communicate this through my slides, including the diagrams and photos I chose to include.

Leadership Skills Applied and Developed

(1) Collaboration

CraftHER allowed me to practice collaboration in various ways. Primarily, this was through working with the other scholars in the cohort in the weekly consulting projects. At the beginning of the trip, we had a meeting to review the brief and decide what each of us wanted to work on; this often involved compromise to allow everyone to have a chance to work on at least one of their preferred projects during at least one of the weeks. We also collaborated on projects such as the fashion design challenge for Swara and developing recommendations for the future of CraftHER. Within the group, there were many good ideas for the projects, which required lots of flexibility to ensure everyone felt they had a fair say. However, our group bond was

strong, and through weekend excursions and other evening activities, we were able to learn about and understand each other better, making collaboration much easier.

(2) Courage

Throughout CraftHER, I pushed myself out of my comfort zone to strengthen my courage. I told myself that I would try to say ‘yes’ as much as possible to stretch myself and extend my limitations. I began the trip feeling quite shy and finding social interactions quite difficult, but by the end of it, I was much more talkative and loved meeting new people. I put in a lot of effort to learn as much Malayalam as I could to communicate with the local people, and that meant saying things even if I didn't have perfect pronunciation. Even though I struggled with it at first, when I realised how important it was to show that I was making an effort, I continued, and my confidence grew.



I pushed myself to do things which I initially found daunting, such as using the power tools in Omana Chechi's carpentry workshop or frying snacks with the snack-making unit. Where I was quite uncertain at the beginning of the trip, I surprised myself with how much more confident I became in trying new and uncomfortable things. Moreover, I found the consulting presentations were a good marker of my progress in being courageous. I thought they were quite nerve-wracking at the beginning, but after a few, my mindset shifted. I was excited to share my ideas with the organisations and felt much more confident due to the support of the CraftHER team and the other scholars. During CraftHER, my courage was also improved through giving 'Take the Mic' talks to the other scholars on various topics which interested me, such as 'consumption' and 'community'. These were important topics to me, and sharing them was initially quite scary, but through practice, I felt much more comfortable and confident getting up to speak.

(3) Drive

One of my biggest struggles during the experience was my drive. At a few points, I felt overwhelmed by the amount of work and was unable to complete the projects or give my full energy when engaging with stakeholders. However, I overcame that by breaking down the work into more manageable chunks and communicating about it with the rest of the group and the coordinators. The group's infectious enthusiasm and positivity refilled my motivation. I also felt empowered to take myself away from the group to rest and recharge after the strenuous days. Another factor that really helped my drive was focusing on my goals for the trip: making a positive impact on the stakeholders we met and making the most of the unique opportunity I had been given. By reminding myself of those, I felt refocused and reenergised.

(4) Humility

Having cultural humility was essential to me as I wanted to show respect for the stakeholders and community members we met. As I have mentioned, I partly achieved this by learning some Malayalam, rather than relying on translators or them to speak English. I also did this by immersing myself in cultural experiences, for example, trying food that was offered to me, and respecting rules such as those that prevented tourists from entering sacred spaces. When we were working with Forest Post, we all sat on the floor together, sharing our lunches and chatting, which allowed us to grow closer to the members by showing that we were there to learn from them, too and did not feel superior. I enjoyed being open and curious about the different communities and cultures which I encountered, and I feel so grateful to have been welcomed by their members to learn more about them.

Humility also meant being attentive and diligent when I was taught something by a craftswoman, as a way to show my respect for their trade. During the project, I gained a deeper appreciation for the effort that goes into producing handmade crafts that can often be overlooked during the age of fast fashion and overconsumption.

Throughout the experience, I reminded myself of my gratitude for having the privilege of visiting Kerala and meeting such inspirational women. Another thing that reminded me of my gratitude was a conversation we had with a laundry unit

from the Archana Women's Centre, who shared that they were unable to pursue higher education due to familial obligations. This deeply resonated with me and made me reflect on how fortunate I am to have the opportunity to pursue my own education and dreams. It served as a powerful reminder of the different challenges others have to navigate and the strength that many women exhibit in the face of such obstacles.

(5) Integrity

I also developed my integrity while I was in Kerala. This manifested in me being candid with the rest of the group when I was struggling with energy or homesickness. Throughout the experience, I felt more comfortable relying on the other members of the group to support me, which was out of my comfort zone, as I am quite an independent and self-reliant person. For example, I had food poisoning at the beginning of the experience, and I felt incredibly looked after by all the other scholars and coordinators. I also felt that I could be honest when we were working on the mini-consulting project, especially if I believed a topic was being overlooked and needed to be included.

(6) Research and reporting

I was able to improve my research skills through the weekly consulting projects. I was challenged to explore each organisation in the limited timeframe of a week. I conducted multi-pronged research, speaking with stakeholders such as employees and senior members of each organisation, analysing social media, and using internet sources. I also developed my reporting skills by writing about my experiences in weekly Laidlaw blogs and creating daily posts for the CraftHER Instagram page. Through these, I practised reflecting on my experiences and synthesising them into various media and outputs.



Conclusion

Through my experiences as a CraftHER scholar, I developed my leadership skills in various ways. The opportunity for cultural immersion in Kerala, as well as meeting such inspirational companies, honed my skill set in an unconventional setting. I learned that I was more capable and productive than I believed. It gave me the chance to reflect on my leadership style while learning how to be a conscious and ethical global citizen.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Asha Scaria-Vettoor for organising the experience, connecting us with all the organisations. I am also appreciative of Preetha Matthews and Durgambika P Varma, who were by our side throughout, supporting our consulting projects and cultural immersion experiences. I am grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation, whose funding was essential in facilitating this experience, and to the Oxford SDG lab team, especially Ruby-Anne, Tanyawadee Chalmers, and Kerri-Louise Howard-Slaughter, for their invaluable support in preparing for and reporting on my experiences in Kerala. Lastly, to the other CraftHER scholars, Maisy, Elizabeth, Isabel and Maggie, who were great company and team members throughout.

