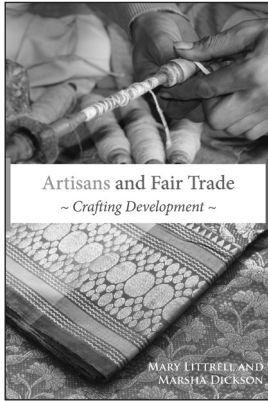


Reviews and resources



Artisans and Fair Trade: Crafting Development

Mary Littrell and Marsha Dickson

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During the 1980s and 90s many major apparel companies woke up to the fact that their customers are concerned about the conditions in which the products they purchase are made. This trend towards increased consumer social awareness is seen in other industries as well. In 2004 a multi-year study of US consumers found that 86 per cent of respondents are willing to switch purchases to companies that support important social causes. In response to this growing consumer concern, companies are increasingly interested in demonstrating fair trade practices as part of their corporate social responsibility programmes.

Meanwhile, since the 1950s fair trade enterprises have been purchasing and promoting the products of artisans and farmers around the world, using market mechanisms to reduce poverty and provide an alternative to inequitable trade relations. In a world in which 'fair trade' has become commonplace, these enterprises identify themselves as '100 per cent fair trade' to differentiate themselves from corporations for whom fair trade

practices apply to a select part of their business.

Many labelling initiatives have emerged during the past few decades with the goal of establishing standards for fair trade certification. While most have focused on food commodities, in late 2009, TransFair USA released a draft set of standards for apparel and home goods certification. These standards focus on larger, centralized workshops and factories as opposed to small artisan enterprises, leading to questions about their relevance for smaller 100 per cent fair trade companies.

It is in this context of growing interest in fair trade and unresolved controversy over what constitutes 'fair' that the authors of *Artisans and Fair Trade: Crafting Development* set out to 'contemplate essential components for the practice of fair trade in both small artisan groups and large multinational corporations'. In addition the authors point out that despite the long track record of 100 per cent fair trade organizations, there has been little empirical analysis of their impact on the lives and well-being of artisans. The book brings these many themes together through a detailed analysis of one fair trade company, MarketPlace: Handwork of India.

MarketPlace began in the early 1980s when Pushpika Freitas and

Lalita Monteiro began working with a few women in a Mumbai slum. The goal was to help the women provide for their families through marketing their hand-stitched products. Today the company has its marketing centre in Chicago and remains focused on promoting and selling the apparel and home textile products of now more than 450 women in Mumbai. These artisans are organized in seven independent enterprises all producing MarketPlace products. The enterprises are organized along different models. Some are financed and led by a single individual. Others are organized more cooperatively. Women participate in all aspects of the business from product design to production planning and management as well as the hand embellishment and tailoring. Through more than two decades of growth and change MarketPlace has retained its focus on the dual goals of income generation and social development for the women who make the products they sell.

The authors' study of MarketPlace is rooted in in-depth interviews conducted with 161 artisans over a three-year period. A subset of interviewees were given cameras and asked to document their daily lives. These photos, included in the book, present the reality of the multiple demands, housework, cooking, child care and artisanal work these women manage each day. Data collected regarding

household expenses and income were used to calculate a basic minimum needs ratio to assess the impact of the income earned through work for MarketPlace. On average, when combining MarketPlace earnings with all other income sources, the families interviewed were able to cover their minimum household needs. When interview respondents were asked whether the pay they received for their work was fair, 80 per cent agreed that it was.

Recognizing that income is only one indicator of well-being, the authors drew on the work of quality of life scholars and on input from the artisans to establish a range of indicators. Their findings present a picture of women who place high value on the social and psychological benefits they experience in addition to the increased income they gain from their work.

Presenting the experience of these artisans in their own words gives a directness and authenticity to the book's findings. The conclusions clearly describe the benefits of the multi-dimensional approach of 100 per cent fair trade companies such as MarketPlace in which income increase is one element of people-oriented development. The authors describe the observed process by which artisans acquire technical skill, apply these new capabilities within their group and, through use, internalize them as expanded personal resources that build self-

respect and confidence. Through her work, an artisan participates in and helps manage a small business and simultaneously becomes part of a supportive environment in which she is free to test her abilities.

In the initial chapters the book appears to be pursuing a range of disparate themes that, while all relevant to the development of fair trade, seem overly ambitious for this slim volume. The author's stated objective to provide the first in-depth critique of social and economic impacts of fair trade artisan work would seem a worthy goal on its own. However, in the final section of the book the authors succeed not only in summarizing their evaluation of fair trade impact, but also make recommendations regarding certification and assess the viability of artisan work.

The authors present a strong case for developing separate standards for apparel produced in small enterprises such as those supplying MarketPlace. Demonstrating the burden that would be placed on MarketPlace and its suppliers if they attempted to meet the current draft standards developed by TransFair USA, the authors urge that a more appropriate set of standards be developed 'reflecting the workers' current economic and social situations and what would move them toward greater empowerment, expanded earnings, and taking more meaningful roles in their families and communities' (p.176).

The authors also recommend that 100 per cent fair trade companies like MarketPlace learn from the experience of the larger apparel brands. As the codes of conduct established by these companies have evolved, they increasingly align with internationally recognized labour standards and human rights. The authors urge fair trade companies to follow this example and establish clear and measurable standards that will move artisans working in small and informal workplaces towards better working conditions.

Finally the authors briefly discuss the question of whether artisanal work provides the opportunity for asset building. They summarize in this section the many ways that engagement in MarketPlace enterprises provides opportunities to women who, because of family responsibilities, would not be able to work in a factory and for whom the small size of their enterprises provides the chance to take on new responsibilities and build critical assets in the form of new skills and confidence.

Consumers, fair trade companies and those who are developing standards and certification protocols will find value in the authors' clear description and analysis of MarketPlace, its impact on the lives of artisans and the lessons that can be extrapolated from this case study.

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