Fair Trade and Fairness in the Artisan Sector

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Fair Trade in the Artisan Sector

The global indigenous and traditional artisan sector is comprised of craftspeople practicing often centuries-old techniques to create various personal and home goods, and a range of people and organizations who intend to expand and support a global marketplace for said goods. Recognized by USAID as the second-largest rural employment activity in "many regions of the world" (Hnatow/Aid to Artisans 2009: 1), the artisan sector is said to thrive because it offers several advantages: minimal start-up capital, flexible work hours, the ability to work from home and the freedom to manage one's own business. However, this optimistic view is contrasted by Timothy J. Scrase's (2003) assertion that artisans often live precarious, marginalized lives, facing challenges such as unpredictable global market demands, repetitive tasks and intense competition. In fact, analysing the sector through the lens of the gig economy (Chappe/Lawson Jaramillo 2020) reveals the inequities that motivate labour-related initiatives across the globe such as increased efforts of unionization (Office of Public Affairs 2022), lobbies for universal basic income (Dyer 2020) and policies increasing required minimum wages (Nkuna 2022).

The fashion industry plays an important role in the artisan sector as one of the outlets through which craftspeople seek to generate additional income (Winn 2013; Rashid et al. 2021) [see Hock and Kenel's chapter in this volume]. However, despite the growing interest in ethical and sustainable fashion (McNeill/Moore 2015), consumer demand has not consistently aligned with these market trends [see Hofmann and Yildiz's chapter in this volume]. Frey et al. (2023) highlight that consumer interest in ethically crafted products remains insufficient to drive significant changes in purchasing behaviour. This well-studied "ethical purchasing gap" (Bray et al. 2010: 597) explains consumers' behaviour who, while stating an interest in ethically-produced products (which include Fair Trade-certified), decide otherwise due to a variety of concerns including price and perceptions of inferior quality [see Lefoll et al.'s chapter in this volume]. Additionally, brands and buyers either engage in one-off orders (Chappe/Lawson Jaramillo 2020) which do not create sustainable income for artisans, or profits are maximized through a 'labour squeeze' – reducing labour costs in terms of wages as well as related benefits (Standing 1989; Huang 2011; Anner 2019).

In needs assessment workshops led by *Parsons School of Design's Development through Empowerment, Entrepreneurship, and Design Research Lab* (DEED Lab, co-founded and directed by the author) in Guatemala, Colombia and the United States between 2008 and 2019, artisans consistently stated that the most pressing barrier to sustainable income generation is a lack of market access. However, the persistence of poverty and marginalization stems from deeper systemic issues which Frías et al. (2023) characterize as new forms of colonization. The Fair Trade movement, with certification generally obtained through organizations like *Fairtrade International* or the *World Fair Trade Organization*, promotes a trading partnership that centres dialogue, transparency and respect. This approach aims to foster sustainable development by providing more favourable trade terms and safeguarding the rights of underserved producers [see Anderson at al.'s chapter in this volume]. Fair Trade operates as a market-based model, relying on consumers' willingness to pay higher prices for ethically produced goods. These higher prices are intended to provide workers with a fair wage, while a portion of each sale often goes back to the producer organization as a social premium for community projects.

Due to the artisan sector's precarity, fairness is the biggest concern as it relates to craftspeople livelihoods. What are the prevalent business models in the artisan sector, and how does fairness play a role? Is there evidence that Fair Trade certifications are structured in a way that can positively impact artisans and their families? And if not Fair Trade, then how might fairness be defined, assessed and scaled across artisan communities?

'Made By' Models

The main income generating activity for craftspeople within the artisan sector is via the sale of their handmade goods. Almost always relying on middle people including brand and store owners, entrepreneurs and designers, there are two primary models of engagement – 'Made By' and 'Designed By' (Lawson 2010). The 'Made By' models are by far the most prevalent, and they point to a craft good *designed* by people distinct from (and often external to the community of) the *makers* [see Ladiges's chapter in this volume]. In industries such as Fast Fashion, the design is typically handed over to a low-wage manufacturer in a developing country.

This model (adapted to an artisan situation) describes the underlying premise of myriad collaborations and companies, from collections of large brands to smaller artisan enterprises such as Brooklyn-and-Guatemala-based non-profit *Mercado Global*. From their website, "We provide women with the tools they need, like sewing machines and foot looms, to not only work on orders for international retailers […] but also to start their own local businesses." Here, design is not an intrinsic part of the making process for the artisans. Instead, it is a service that is given to the weavers by the organization's creative team which hands over designs, albeit often inspired by the local culture and craft traditions.

In such a scenario, artisans are confined to the role of a manufacturer who creates handmade items. These women (in artisan communities, *Mercado Global* employs only women) have relatively small input into what product is made, its design characteristics and the order quantities. The advantage of this model is a guarantee that what is produced has a buyer market and is therefore most appropriate for initiatives in which the priority is income generation and not necessarily education or preservation of cultural heritage. This model at a larger scale, however, runs the risk of resembling a factory floor, except for marketing materials that display seemingly happy artisans working from their home. In fact, the issues of exploitation across the sector are well covered by Frías et al. (2023).

What might a Fair Trade certification guarantee in these 'Made By' models? In the case of the *Fairtrade* label, it is evident that "a range of economic, environmental and social criteria [has been] met by producers and traders" (Fairtrade International 2024) [see Anderson et al.'s as well as Lefoll's chapter in this volume]. However, because artisan labour is only part of a larger ecosystem that often includes middle people in the community, at a national level and across borders, these criteria may not necessarily significantly impact artisans directly. In fact, in interviews with more than 40 artisans in Guatemala, Colombia and the United States between 2008 and 2019 with the DEED Lab, they shared that their number one priority is an increase in sustainable income generation. Furthermore, when there is no evidence of sustained impact, the concern is that the literature on Fair Trade in agriculture may hold true – that "unambiguously (…) Fairtrade has made no positive difference – relative to other forms of employment in the production of the same crops – to wage workers" (Cramer et al. 2014).

The Issue of Fairness in Pricing and Wages

On the matter of worker compensation, *Fairtrade International* explains that there are "explicit requirements that wages should increase over time to reach a living wage" while at the same time accepting that "large-scale producers may themselves be struggling with low profit margins that leave them unable to afford to pay a living wage right away" (ibid). *Fairtrade* certification, therefore, is simply evidence of wages increasing, even if not yet at the level of a 'living wage', defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "the wage on which it is possible to meet basic needs." Until a living wage is attained, Fair Trade-certified brands are simply held to minimum wages which, in 147 countries out of the 173 that have one, are lower than the living wage (WageIndicator 2024). As an example, a Fair Trade-certified hand-woven Indian silk scarf for sale at the trade show NY Now in 2018, had a wholesale price of U$1.00. With an average living wage of $1.01/hour (calculated from Global Living Wage Coalition's data for India [2024] and assuming a 40-hour work week), we can easily conclude that the weaver did not receive a fair wage. After covering the cost of shipping, export fees, middle-people involved and of course the trade show booth, that weaver most likely received a few cents for a scarf that takes at least two to three hours to complete. The importance of ensuring a living wage is central to the issue of fairness, as in many developing countries (which constitute the geographical regions of most concern for this chapter), minimum wage policies are often insufficient to ensure a decent standard of living.

Across several Fair Trade certification systems, there's great potential in the 'Fair Trade Minimum Price (FTMP)' (Flocert 2024), which is the price established for every certified fruit and vegetable, for example, to attain Fair Trade goals. At the time of this chapter's writing, however, there was no such publicly available pricing for handicraft goods, in which case certification systems indicate that the "Price paid for Fair Trade Certified product [be] at least the relevant market price" (Fair Trade USA 2021). Paradoxically, if one of the primary purposes of a Fair Trade certification is precisely to increase the potential consumer base of craft goods, then using "relevant market prices", especially those local to artisan producers, will do little to create sustainable financial benefit. A pricing workshop facilitated by the DEED Lab team in 2010 with the artisan community *Ixoki A'J Quiemo L'* in Santiago Zamora, Guatemala offers an illustrative example. The artisans calculated that a backstrap loom woven table runner takes approximately 360 hours to make. If we set aside the academic literature on the challenges of quantifying indigenous and ancestral knowledges (Posey 1990; Daes 1993; Agrawal 1995), a fair price valuation of hours worked, in U.S. dollars, would need to be at least $360 (to guarantee a $1/hour fair wage, suggested at the time by Global Living Wage Coalition's online calculator). However, the artisan group knew that in their local market, even though replete with foreign tourists motivated to purchase local craft, the average price for similar goods was around $38.

Across definitions of Fair Trade, one key question is who gets to define what is considered 'fair' [see Boța-Moisin and Winkler's chapter in this volume]. While artisan brand founders, in semi-structured interviews with the DEED Lab, claim certainty about the fairness of their compensation because they allow artisans to establish the price, academic literature confirms that simply asking the worker is an insufficient methodology to confirm fairness. Citing Marie Christine Renard's (2005) findings, in reference to certifications like these for Fair Trade, Mark Moberg writes, "the alternative trade organizations and auditors who control these processes wield exceptional power as 'gatekeepers' over the [workers] who produce for those markets (...)" (Moberg 2014). Additional factors that suggest workers, especially those in informal sectors, are not well poised to advocate for the wages that will benefit their livelihoods are well documented, and include a lack of agency (Breman 2013) and bargaining power (Carr/Chen 2004) and little knowledge about the concept of a living wage and its potential benefits (Werner/Lim 2016).

Additionally, the certification process itself is often too expensive for small artisan enterprises. Motivated by these limitations, the DEED Lab's 2014 'Fair Craft'[1] initiative studied the sector's practices of employment, pay and wages; with the goal of recommending an improved framework towards fairness for artisans.

Fair Craft

In October 2014, the DEED Lab surveyed artisan sector companies affiliated with the Lab, the conscious consumerism-focused event series *EcoSessions*, and/or the UK-based non-profit organization *Ethical Fashion Forum*. A total of 103 responses were received, and 17 additional semi-structured interviews with artisan enterprises were conducted over the phone and one in person. Nine of these respondents had already completed the online survey, and either they or the research team wished to expound on certain topics of interest. The other eight interviewees preferred to complete the survey over the phone rather than online. Important to note is that online survey participants were prompted to answer questions keeping only one artisan group in one country in mind, while the interviewees were invited to share insights regarding multiple groups and countries, when applicable.

The 103 respondents to the online survey are companies that work with artisans in 37 countries: 43 per cent in the Americas, 35 per cent in Asia, 19 per cent in Africa and 3 per cent in Europe. The products made by these artisans can be classified as accessories (a majority of respondent selected this option), homewares, fashion and beauty products; a small number of respondents also mentioned toys and children's products, jewellery, ornaments, textiles (such as weavings and fabrics) and promotional materials.

About a quarter of the organizations claim to work with between 100 and 500 artisans and 8 per cent indicated that they work with anywhere from 700 to 4000 artisans. Almost 75 per cent of respondents are micro-enterprises – as defined by the European Commission (2024), they have less than ten employees. They contract production out to artisans, who in turn usually sell their products collectively through

1 'Fair Craft' was co-led by Cynthia Lawson Jaramillo (Director, DEED Lab) and Kelly Burton (Founder/Creator, Ecosessions). Research assistants Daphna Lewinshtein and Nicole Bohrer conducted the survey, interviews and analysis; and Bohrer developed a literature review and summarized the findings.

cooperatives and who are most often located in a different country than the enterprise. Even the small percentage of survey respondents who do not fall within the micro-enterprise classification – because they either employ only volunteers or have a workforce far greater than ten – fail to consider their artisans as employees. Regardless of size, respondents represented a full range of organizational structures: non-profits, NGOs, social enterprises with profitable ends and for-profit businesses.

The data regarding how much artisans are paid was too variable to be able to report any findings; in fact, the Fair Craft team was surprised to learn that some enterprises had very little idea about the level of remuneration received by the artisans with whom they work. What was very clear, however, is that an overwhelming majority of organizations (73.6 per cent) pay artisans a piece rate for their work. Only 12.6 per cent of organizations pay artisans an hourly wage and the remaining 13.8 per cent are divided up between a daily wage, a monthly wage and an hourly-piece rate combination. Many respondents were uncertain about artisans' wage rates, for two main reasons. First, because they buy products not directly from their producers, but rather through a representative of the producers (i.e., the cooperative president or the NGO that supervises the artisan group) that have been contracted to complete the work. Second, a product may have gone through many hands, each adding a specialty component (i.e., weaving, embroidering, sewing), before considered finished. With so many artisans involved in the supply chain, it is difficult for the buyer to determine the final wage paid to each person.

The difficulties associated with lengthy and complex supply chains become obvious in the following example, shared by a Fair Craft survey respondent, of a bed sheet made in India for a buyer in the United States. The supply chain begins in a cooperative in the state of Karnataka, where the silk is grown and spun into thread. This thread is sent to a second enterprise in Varanasi whose artisans weave it into fabric on a hand-loom. The fabric then travels to a third destination, an embroidery cooperative in Patel Nagar, East Delhi, to be hand-embroidered. The embroidered fabric subsequently makes its way to a fourth enterprise in Sangam Vihar, South Delhi, to be cut and sewn into the final product. The American buyer deals directly with this fourth enterprise and pays Fair Trade prices. She knows that the South Delhi factory pays its workers a living wage and that the embroidery is performed at Fair Trade pricing. With so many players in the game, however, no one is fully informed about how much money is earned by each artisan involved in the bed sheet's production from start to finish.

The level and rate of pay received is of paramount importance to the artisan. While there are clear advantages to receiving a time-sensitive wage rate (i.e., hourly, daily, monthly) in terms of income stability and any fringe benefits provided, it is possible that a piece rate is more advantageous for more skilled artisans. This would particularly be the case if all artisans in the enterprise are producing the same good, and the skilled artisan is able to produce a greater quantity than a less skilled artisan in a given period of time, thereby earning more money. However, it is also important to note, as does Scrase (2003: 452), the issues with paying artisans a piece rate. "As the artisan is paid per piece, and as the market is demanding more, the artisans themselves are becoming de-skilled, only bothering to learn one or two popular stitches." Furthermore, where the artisan sector is most challenged is in the prevalent one-off collaborations and partnerships between brands and artisan communities. Fair Trade within the artisan sector can only sustainably benefit craft communities if there are long-term commitments.

Another area of interest in the survey was how payment to artisans is decided and made, and the responses confirm the abovementioned findings from DEED Lab interviews with brand founders. In 26 per cent of survey replies, the artisans themselves decided the price paid to them, while 60 per cent of survey respondents claimed to collaboratively decide the price paid to artisans, which was generally explained to mean a negotiation between the artisan and co-op or NGO leadership, artisan enterprise management, business partners or company representatives such as production managers, including input from an in-country coordinator or advisor or from a fair/living wage study undertaken in that country.

As stated in survey responses, the following factors are taken into account almost equally when deciding artisans' wages: the minimum wage in the country of operation, Fair Trade requirements, fluctuations in the price of raw materials, a competitive wage landscape, economic equity across the country of operation and a combination of other factors, including the value of labour; artisans' request, work experience, transportation costs and cooperative or community needs; the basic market basket; salaries of other local professionals; and business' profit margin. Two-thirds of respondents indicated that they utilize additional resources to calculate wages, which they identify to be wage calculators (e.g., the now-defunct Good World Solutions' Fair Trade Wage Calculator), cost of living in the country of operation (determined through interviews with select artisans), environmental indicators, economic indicators (i.e., inflation, exchange rate fluctuations), value-based pricing models and the demand for the finished product. The latter two 'resources' imply a more traditional, commercially-oriented business model (Hutchens 2010), in which artisan wages are determined by the final product price.

When it comes to paying artisans, 39 per cent of enterprises do so via a bank transfer, whether to the cooperative's account or to individual artisans' accounts, the latter being widely accepted as a very progressive model due to the challenges of banking in developing countries. Two-thirds of respondents pay the artisans directly via Western Union, mobile payment systems, PayPal or Xoom.com, Money Gram, international wire transfers, credit card, check and cash; and the rest pay them through a middle person, which could be the artisan cooperative, the NGO or non-profit entity that works directly with the artisan contractors, a co-op representative, head artisan or commercial agent.

Because of the risk involved with allowing the payments to flow through a broker, 85 per cent of survey respondents stated that they have mechanisms in place ensuring that their artisans receive full remuneration. As some of those enterprises who count on mechanisms implemented them upon discovering that their artisans were being paid less than what had been specified, it is safe to assume that the artisans producing for the 15 per cent of respondents who have no mechanisms in place may not be receiving their full remuneration.

While an updated Fair Craft survey would provide an invaluable additional snapshot of the artisan sector, especially after Covid-19 related disruptions, the findings thus far point to concrete improvements for the Fair Trade model. These include requiring proof that workers earn at least a living wage, mandating long-term employment for certification eligibility, promoting supply chain transparency to ensure that brokers prioritize artisans' interests and enforcing the reporting of social impacts. Instead of a Fair Trade Minimum Price relying on market comparables, it could ensure artisan wages are a percentage of the final price. Additionally, the model should prioritise providing artisans with the education necessary to actively participate in negotiating their working conditions. Ultimately, for the artisan sector to thrive in a way that is truly fair and just, a shift in both mindset and practice is required.

Conclusion

The artisan sector represents a complex intersection of creativity, cultural heritage and global economic forces. While it provides significant employment opportunities in rural areas, its sustainability is undermined by systemic inequities and the precarious nature of artisanal work [see Boța-Moisin and Winkler'as well as Sark and Gotthardsen's chapter in this volume]. Fair Trade initiatives aim to address these challenges by promoting fairness and transparency, yet the evidence suggests that existing frameworks often fall short of delivering meaningful benefits to artisans. Issues such as inadequate wages, the high cost of certification, lack of supply chain transparency and short-term collaborations impede the effectiveness of these models.

For the sector to truly advance, a re-evaluation of what constitutes fairness is essential. This includes ensuring artisans receive living wages, fostering long-term commitments between brands and artisan communities and empowering craftspeople to participate in decision-making processes [see Marina et al.'s as well as Ladiges's chapters in this volume]. Additionally, Fair Trade certification systems must evolve to account for the unique challenges of the artisan sector, such as developing specific pricing guidelines for handcrafted goods and enforcing mechanisms to prevent exploitation by intermediaries.

Ultimately, fairness in the artisan sector is not only about economic equity but also about recognizing and valuing the cultural and social contributions of artisans. A reimagined Fair Trade model – one that emphasizes education, collaboration and shared ownership – has the potential to transform the sector into a space of empowerment and sustainable growth. By addressing these systemic issues, the artisan sector can move closer to a future where traditional craftsmanship is not only preserved but also celebrated and fairly compensated.

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