

Happy returns: embellishing a new future

Supporting the development of artisanal and traditional crafts presents a unique opportunity for livelihoods generation and for changing perceptions about the capacities of some of the most marginalized segments of the Pakistani population, in particular the poorest youth and women. Pakistani women are disadvantaged vis-à-vis their relationships to men, their households and communities. They face significant barriers and constraints, which impact their ability to benefit from economic activity. Rural women are further marginalized by limited mobility, feudal and tribal customs and difficult living conditions. Embracing these communities' handicraft practices provides an opportunity to portray their experience and voices and create cohesion and value for people facing barriers in joining the formal workforce. This presentation explores the potential offered by participation in handicraft production processes as a means of empowerment, inclusiveness and facilitating craft preservation. It does so by drawing on years of in-field experience to create an extensive case study that supports current understanding of the issues as well as extends experience on what is previously known.

Globally, exports of handicrafts grew by over 100% between 2002 and 2010 alone – to a whopping USD 29.8 billion . Pakistani craft has all the elements required for a strong global brand with a unique competitive advantage including heritage, scarcity, artistry, empowerment and craftsmanship. This presentation details why despite this demand, rural female producers are unable to benefit from international commerce as converting the skills of traditional artisans into modern products that can compete in the mainstream marketplace requires significant investment, patience and expertise. It shares ECDI's work with over 30, 000 women producers across Pakistan to address this gap by creating safe, culturally appropriate spaces for artisans and producers to become self-reliant. By modernizing products and skill-sets and creating an efficient production or value chain as well as training small producers, ECDI utilizes market mechanisms to integrate disenfranchised producers into sustainable industries and connects them with mainstream markets such that craft skill-sets become a reliable source of income for poor rural and peri-urban producers.

A key element of this work involves training to foster business and design skills to enable artisans to run productive enterprises and learn critical information on markets and buyers to create the right products for national, international and online markets at a fair price. A related facet is the fact that while colours, patterns and other techniques represent skills that have been passed through generations, ECDI has needed to focus on product innovation to support the survival of traditional techniques. The presentation identifies the role of rapidly changing consumer tastes and a more discerning consumer preference which necessitates continuous design intervention and product innovation. It highlights entrepreneurship as a key driver for women's empowerment, particularly with respect to leadership abilities and confidence. Leadership development is essential for local institutionalization of greater access to and control over assets and productive inputs for women, thereby boosting productivity and increasing employment opportunities.