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Making Methodologies: Comparisons across the north-south divide

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Northern consumers' growing interest in sustainability and social justice has created an increased demand for "ethical" craft, which is proliferating craft livelihoods projects in the global south. There is much criticism of neo-colonial divisions of labour involved in typical projects, in which northern designers create designs, often based on traditional aesthetics, and local makers engage in repetitive hand production. The removal of all traces of the maker from the work, in terms of creativity, autonomy, variation and cultural authenticity, is increasingly being challenged.

Design and participatory design approaches seek instead to provide the tools to enable makers to engage in the whole creative process. While this may increase ownership of products, it nonetheless applies a methodological toolkit based on northern understandings of making and creativity. Economic and hegemonic inequalities, even in the most collaborative approaches, can result in markets, rather than marginalised makers, dictating outcomes and processes. What is the impact of shifting traditional, local modes of craft thinking towards a design centric perspective? Is there a risk of undermining local understandings of cultural identity, materiality, and the meaning of both making and makers? How do northern understandings of making, guiding both development actors and consumers, compare with southern understandings?

This research investigates reflections on making from two groups of female makers: embroiderers in Madagascar involved in a livelihoods intervention, and textile crafters in the UK. It explores shared and differing relationships between making and notions of identity, process, gender, geography and economics, and examines the renegotiation of these connections as individual making methodologies evolve. A visual elicitation methodology drawing on art and design pedagogy and traditions of women's social making was used in individual and paired informal interviews, which were thematically analysed. The research is a methodology pilot for a PhD examining the tensions between approaches to craft in international development and women's experiences of making in the global south.