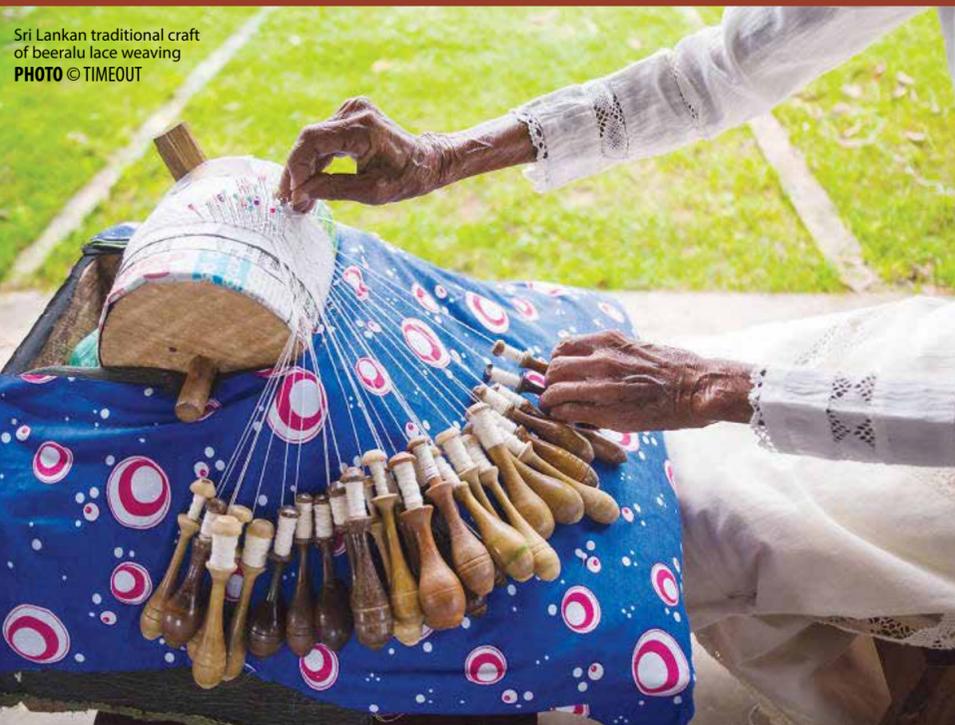


Are the women propping up our craft sector being adequately supported?

Sri Lankan traditional craft of beeralu lace weaving
PHOTO © TIMEOUT



MSME women entrepreneurs in craft

BY NAVEED ROZAIS

Sri Lanka's heritage is so incredibly rich that it makes its way down into almost all our industries. This is most clearly evident in our textile and fashion industries, with our heritage craft textiles being something we are known for internationally – handloom, batik, beeralu lace, leather, knitting – there is so much that our local craft entrepreneurs can do.

These craft entrepreneurs, of course, largely operate outside the export-oriented garment manufacturing sector which Sri Lanka is also world-famous for, and interestingly, the majority of the craft businesses are women-owned and often employ women around them as well, with each of these businesses being Micro-, Small- and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs).

This sector of craft businesses is fast-growing, and as per the Export Development Board in 2021, has the highest number of women entrepreneurship engagement. However, when compared to other sectors in the industry, the craft-based fashion sector shows low dynamism, slow growth, and a limited contribution to the economic development of the country.

There are many reasons for this vibrant sector of the industry underperforming – from practical reasons like high labour and time intensity, lack of raw materials, high production cost (all of which have been made that much more difficult by the ongoing national crisis), to larger more systemic reasons like the unavailability of stable marketing platforms for entrepreneurs and limited design and product variations, to societal

limitations like male-dominated structures and systems and the pressure to conform to gender roles.

“Business knowledge, starting up, identifying your strengths and that of your market and building around them, how to finance a venture – all these things need to be taught to young women in a practical way. Not just theoretically, but in a way they can learn how to apply these things in real life and to their businesses”

*University of Moratuwa
Senior Lecturer
Dr. Achini Ranaweera*



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So, how can women entrepreneurs in this burgeoning sector be given their best chance? And what does it take at an individual level to be a successful entrepreneur in this sector? *The Sunday Morning Brunch* chatted to Eshani Jinasena, an MBA candidate from the University of Moratuwa Department of Management of Technology who has, over the past year, been researching what female MSME entrepreneurs in the craft sector need to be able to make their businesses thrive.

The gender divide and craft entrepreneurs

When it comes to entrepreneurship, especially in the MSME sector, it can always be argued that all entrepreneurs need to be given the tools to thrive. Moreover, the concept of equality versus equity needs to be considered too, and Jinasena noted that men faced fewer barriers than women did when it came to building businesses of their own, especially in the craft sector. While this divide was not often seen in the number of men entrepreneurs versus women entrepreneurs, it did manifest in the plans of these entrepreneurs.

“When comparing male and female entrepreneurs, you can often see that women entrepreneurs don't form long-term business plans and often this is because they prioritise their families and family responsibilities over their businesses, satisfying themselves with businesses that can produce a daily income that is enough for their needs,” Jinasena said, adding: “They keep their businesses at the domestic level and a large reason for this is a lack of support from their families to take their businesses to the next level, to increase their operations and their number of employees, or to find investment for growth.”

“There is a clear lack of encouragement for female entrepreneurs to grow their businesses because of the belief that a woman can't be a successful entrepreneur or that she cannot be both a successful entrepreneur and a good mother,” Jinasena shared. She added that bias towards women also played a part here because of the perception that women were too emotional to be

good business owners – something Jinasena firmly disagreed with because in her research and experience she had found that women had a greater capacity to handle emotions and stress and to multitask than their male peers.

However, especially in the craft sector, women are the lifeblood of the industry – they themselves are craftswomen and artisans, they employ other women and men, they form networks, and when allowed to build businesses that can scale, uplift their communities as well as themselves because of the work and income that they create for themselves and those around them, which is why it is so important to nurture female entrepreneurs.

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*University of Moratuwa
MBA candidate
Eshani Jinasena*



The external limitations craft entrepreneurs face

The social limitations that female entrepreneurs face are far-reaching and are tied inextricably to their access to resources. Getting loans and support from investors is often more challenging for women entrepreneurs. There is Government support as well as other systems that strive to

provide support, but this is also limited given the scale of female entrepreneurs in need of support, not just within the craft sector but as a whole.

Additionally, you have other more practical limitations – the national crisis, for one, has seen many entrepreneurs across all sectors suffer because of changing market levels, changing prices, ballooning labour costs, scarcity of raw materials, and so on.

So how can this be addressed? More Government support was crucial, Jinasena explained, not just in terms of financial support, but in other ways such as building opportunities for these entrepreneurs, especially craft entrepreneurs, who made products that had clear marketing potential, to reach international markets. This needs to go hand in hand with policy reforms that will make it easier for these entrepreneurs to get support like loans to allow them to take this step.

“There are institutes like the National Crafts Council that look into this kind of thing,” Jinasena said. “But this should be expanded more to form a proper long-term plan in Government agendas to nurture female craft entrepreneurs.”

University of Moratuwa Department of Textile and Apparel Engineering Senior Lecturer Dr. Achini Ranaweera also weighed in on the importance of nurturing female MSME craft entrepreneurs, noting that the scale of gender diversity in this sector needed to be considered.

“If you consider the fashion sector in general, the trend is more women than men. Even at the university this year in our fashion programme, we have approximately 75 students, only six of whom are boys. The trend is 20:2 and this continues to apply to other areas and sectors within the fashion industry. The main human power is women, and so, from a woman's point of view, we need to embrace those differences and provide systems that give moral support to these entrepreneurs.”

Dr. Ranaweera also noted that the education system needed to encourage more young women to study and pursue entrepreneurship

and understand both how to start a business and to sustain one. “Business knowledge, starting up, identifying your strengths and that of your market and building around them, how to finance a venture – all these things need to be taught to young women in a practical way. Not just theoretically, but in a way they can learn how to apply these things in real life and to their businesses.”

What about the mindset?

A core component of Jinasena's research also deals with the soft skills and the characteristics that a woman needs in order to be an entrepreneur.

“I was able to identify certain characteristics that entrepreneurs need in general to be successful. Personality is one of those things, and to be successful, entrepreneurs need to have an achievement mindset and high risk tolerance since building a business is a risk. There is risk at every stage and you can never guarantee if a venture will be successful or have sales, but in order to get to that point, you have to take a risk and invest, get some products out to the market, and see how you're going to manage it.”

Some other key characteristics Jinasena was able to identify that define entrepreneurs include optimism, self-efficacy, and stress tolerance. “I identified four key aspects – motivation to achieve, which is self-efficacy; entrepreneurial spirit, which is the ability to spot opportunities and solve problems; resilience, which is to persevere despite challenges; and emotional stability, which is to be able to manage emotions and balance the different roles that female entrepreneurs have to juggle in addition to building and growing a business.”

In conclusion, Jinasena stressed that when looking at our local craft industry, it was vital that women be encouraged not just to go out there and build businesses, but that they be given the tools to do so effectively, both from the State and from society. As the old adage goes, helping women is helping communities, and nowhere is this easier to illustrate than in the craft sector.

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