



Threads of change

Rural women in Pakistan and
the International Textile Market



Introduction

Rural women artisans in Pakistan are the custodians of some of the most exquisite textile embroidery skills in the world. However, these women are often left without the monetary returns to reflect the high level of their craft when producing items for the local and domestic markets. Despite their talents, the economic situation for them and their families remains difficult and often harsh.

The Commonwealth Secretariat, in collaboration with the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) in Pakistan, have started an initiative aimed at opening direct market access opportunities for rural women artisans, with a focus on the high-end textiles goods industry at the international level.

The objective of the initiative is to ensure these women artisans are em-

powered to access international markets directly without reliance on local supply chains that are often fragmented and agents who do not always offer a fair reward. This includes developing their capacities in two ways: a) by giving them the skills to both respond to professional design briefs, and to generate simple innovation within their own local markets, alongside the importance of correct costing, finishing standards and quality assurance and b) to develop them organisationally into functioning enterprise cooperatives that will in time be able to communicate directly with designers and the market.

In September 2007 master-class design workshops were held in Pakistan with selected women artisans from both the north and the south of the country. Professional international designers were given the opportunity to work directly



with the women, initiating a process of the development of products for their own collections utilising these unique skills, thereby giving the artisans an opportunity to access, high value international markets directly through the designer. Showcasing these products for the textiles industry and development sector – along with traditional items and audio-visual testimonials of the women's lives – is the purpose of this exhibition. It is hoped that this will stimulate interest from high end markets which will lead to direct links with the women artisans in Pakistan.

Rural Support Programmes Network

The women involved hail from Rural Support Programmes in some of the most remote areas of Pakistan: The Sindh

Rural Support Organisation in the south east of the country; the Thardeep Rural Development Programme, encompassing those in around in the Thar Desert region; and the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in the Karakorum mountain range of the northern areas.

Rural Support Programmes work towards involving poor communities (mainly but not exclusively rural) in improved management and delivery of basic services through a process of social mobilization. They are involved in a variety of assistance programmes at the community level, including gender, micro-enterprise development and income generation, micro-credit schemes, natural resource management, and health and education.

The RSP's have been instrumental in supporting the formation of women's groups around the existing production of



textiles mainly for traditional products. The work with the RSP's is coordinated at a national level by a specially created Enterprise Facilitation Unit, (EFU) within RSPN in Islamabad. This provides a focal point for communication between overseas buyers and the local RSP's, who are in direct contact with the women artisans in the remote areas.

The process

The Commonwealth Secretariat has provided technical assistance including design, quality and market awareness and training on cooperative values and principles (with funding support from The Cooperative Group.) During the run up to the designer master classes in September 2007, a series of workshops were held with the women artisans, supported by design interns from Central Saint

Martins (University of the Arts London) and University of Creative Arts, Epsom. The students have undertaken 3–6 month placements within the EFU to support the training programmes with the artisans. These focused on familiarizing artisans with higher value international and local markets, as well as the concept of social enterprise and cooperatives. The students have also been instrumental in the continuing function of the EFU since the master classes and are invaluable in their role of supporting the project in a variety of ways, including design communications and business development.

The women have seen the positive advantages of working collectively where they have the opportunity to support and learn from each other. 'Before, we didn't know anything about profits and prices until Samina, (from SRSO), came and ex-



plained. We never paid any attention to the cloth or keeping things clean. Working together has made a difference. Now we correct each other and compare our work.' (Rural artisan from Sind).

The designers

Cressida Bell specialises in textiles and interiors. From her London studio she produces a wide range of products including accessories for men and women and artefacts for the home, many hand printed. For *Threads of change* she has produced a stunning wall hanging that uses her typical jewel like colours. It is reproduced in the traditional fine cross-stitch typical of the artisans in the Karakorum mountain range of the northern areas of Pakistan.

Natalie Gibson has been a successful textile print designer for over 40 years.

As Head of Fashion Print at Central Saint Martins she has been able to share her experiences with generations of fashion students. For *Threads of change* she worked with women in the Thar Desert region, adapting the traditional 'patch-work' appliqué technique of the region to create a series of home furnishings that use her distinctive brightly coloured style.

Sue Holt has worked with artisans in both the Thar Desert region and the Karakorum mountain range of the northern areas to produce for *Threads of change*, a series of products that capture the spirit of the women and their traditional textiles. She has worked with the women to produce a series of shawls that narrate through the textile, the women's stories.

Antony Knight is a couturier who works from his atelier in Venice. For



Threads of change, Antony has produced a collection of products that draw on the traditional patchwork skills seen in the regions around the Thar Desert. He has innovated on the usually brightly coloured patchwork used in tribal products by limiting the swatch selection to black tussah silk. The result is an elegant cocktail dress and a series of accessories.

Mo Tomaney is a textile and fashion designer who is known for her unique brightly coloured textile and ceramic pieces for fashion and home. For the past 15 years, Mo has been working with development of market access and technical support for socio-economic development and has been closely involved in the *Threads of change* programme development, working with the Commonwealth Secretariat. She is a Research Fellow at Central Saint Martins, and Course Leader in the MA Ethical Fashion at UCCA. For

Threads of change she has gone back to her first love, textile design, and the result is a rose embroidered bed spread using the cross-stitch of the Karakoram mountain range.


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