

FAIR TRADE FOR WOMEN PRODUCERS

"I started knowing nothing and today whatever I am, whatever work I do is because of the enormous help and support I received on the way."
Alpana, Artisans Association, Kolkata, West Bengal

Partner: Fair Trade Forum – India (FTF-I)

MISSION & MEMBERSHIP

Registered in 2000, FTF-I is the national network for Fair Trade. Its mission is poverty eradication by "creating visibility, acceptability, adaptability, marketability and sustainability to the Fair Trade Movement and its member Fair Trade organizations." It works with 100,000 grassroots artisans and farmers, and in its last financial year, members reported a total turnover of US\$40 million, the majority of which was export sales.

Three women's organizations that belong to FTF-I and have more than 2,000 women members between them were involved in this project.

The Artisans Association (AA), consists of 15 women's self-help groups and has strong links to the marketing organization Sasha and its sister development organization Sarba Shanti Ayog (SSA). The shared mission of these independent organizations is Fair Trade and livelihood promotion among marginalized craftswomen (and men); each focuses on a particular area of competence:

- AA focuses on order execution, sharing, co-ordinating and monitoring work among the textile producers.
- Sasha focuses on business development, ordering, and supply chain management; its community development work includes health, education and the promotion of organic agriculture.
- SSA focuses on capacity building for its producer members, many of whom are self-help women's groups specializing in textiles, garments and embroidery.

The groups elect representatives to the central committee that runs the Artisans Association.



Photo by Carol Wills

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Launched in 2009, the Women's Economic Empowerment project is funded by the MDG3 Global Fund by the Government of the Netherlands. Through the project, WIEGO and its partners are advocating for the needs of informal workers, especially women. The project seeks to promote the voice, visibility and validity of working poor women across different countries, sectors and issues in the informal economy. As part of this project, WIEGO's Global Trade Programme, in partnership with leading Fair Trade organizations in seven countries, initiated *Fair Trade for Women Producers* with a focus on documenting, analyzing and disseminating key success factors of fair trade by involving women producers in all stages of development.



SABALA's vision is the empowerment of women and marginalized communities through access to sustainable livelihood opportunities. Working in 60 villages in Karnataka, it focuses on enabling village women to organize themselves into self-help groups. SABALA also lobbies against child marriage and abuse of women. It advocates for improved housing and "housing for the houseless." It has its own bank, run by women for women, with US\$4.5 million capital and 25,000 clients.

Sadhna is a women's handicraft enterprise aiming to provide an alternative means of livelihood and income for disadvantaged rural, tribal and urban women in Rajasthan. Starting with one small group of 15 women, today the Sadhna "family" has grown to nearly 700 women organized in 49 self-help groups. Sadhna helps build secure futures for its members in terms of health, children's education and family security. Various social security mechanisms have been introduced. Each woman is part of the Government's Provident Fund pension scheme, which ensures some savings at retirement plus a regular pension. The women benefit from other government run schemes for medical and life insurance.

LOCAL AND GLOBAL FAIR TRADE CONNECTIONS & MARKETS

FTF-I is affiliated to WFTO Asia which is the regional network of the WFTO (World Fair Trade Organization).

SSA/Sasha, SABALA and Sadhna, all members of FTF-I, are innovative organizations looking constantly for new ways to market their members' products. They export, they use the Internet for selling and they have their own retail shops. They maintain links with designers, photographers and other creative women and regularly take part in exhibitions.

CURRENT CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

FTF-I has highlighted a lack of government enabling mechanisms in India. Their members would like to see the government open up and create more space for the voluntary sector.

Key challenges for women producers in India are declining export markets for Fair Trade textiles and

handicrafts as the recession bites, and supporting women's self-help groups to find new markets.

Needs assessment carried out with all three women's organizations indicated that at the organizational level, the major concerns were growth and development, while at the individual level they were financial security, retirement, health and emotional support.

FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

The India study provides evidence of the significance of women's associations and networks in weathering the recession by helping provide regular work and income. The Artisans Association, SABALA and Sadhna all juggle to achieve a balance between paying the highest possible rates to women workers and the price their buyers are prepared to pay for products. They also provide vital coordination; for example, AA ensures that the weaving, embroidery and tailoring groups' final products meet quality standards and are delivered on time.

Across India, the researchers met women who had been lifted out of poverty by connecting to a group where their skills were valued and they were trained in new ones. Women who once had little opportunity became leaders and office managers; others who had been earning a pittance sewing or embroidering on their own had begun to make a decent wage as their well-crafted products found markets.

MOVING FORWARD

A key policy request that the FTF-I is making is for more government support to nurture Fair Trade institutions.

One of the essential goals of Fair Trade organizations and women producers in India is finding ways to tap further into the growing domestic market of tens of millions of high earning, high spending Indian middle-class professionals.

"Things have changed now. I have begun to look with hope to my children's future."

Somibai Chawan, SABALA, Karnataka



Fair Trade Forum - India



Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global action-research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy by increasing their representative Voice through more and stronger organizations and their official Visibility through better statistics and research. The individuals and institutions in the WIEGO network are drawn from three broad constituencies: membership-based organizations (MBOs) of informal workers; research, statistical, and academic institutions; and development agencies of various types (non-governmental, governmental, and inter-governmental). For more information see <http://www.wiego.org>